

‘Most foul, strange and unnatural’: Refractions of Modernity in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*

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In the foreword to the first volume of his collected-plays series, Conor McPherson recently acknowledged that, as a playwright who came to prominence during the Celtic-Tiger period, he belonged to a new wave of internationally acclaimed Irish dramatists who were considered representative of ‘a place where a horrendous past met a glistening future and where tradition evolved’.¹ Gothic scholars will scarcely need reminding that ‘horrendous pasts’ and ‘glistening futures’ make for eerie bedfellows; the gothic is, after all, a genre that draws much of its potency from the anomalous conjunctions that bind the future to its past. Indeed, Victor Merriman has cast a suitably suspicious eye over the neoliberal mechanisms that engineered the optimal conditions for these new Irish playwrights to produce their preferred image of a flourishing and vibrant Ireland. He argues that the State’s inequitable endowment of arts funding, coupled with soaring rent prices for rehearsal and performance spaces, especially in Dublin, bifurcated ‘drama itself into a theatre of social critique, and a theatre of diversionary spectacle’.² This ensured that plays seeking to critique contemporary Irish culture were shuffled to the margins, while the more diversionary spectacles continuously reproduced what Merriman calls ‘reductive stereotypes of Irishness’, which served only to alienate the population of Tiger Ireland from a ‘national past in which the correlatives of such figures presumably exist and make sense’.³

To illustrate this point, Merriman compares the plays produced by the Dublin-based, fringe theatre company, Calypso Productions, to those written by Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh during the mid-to-late 1990s: he proposes that Calypso’s *Hughie on the Wires* (1993), *Trickledown Town* (1994), *The Business of Blood* (1995), *Rosie and Star Wars* (1997), *Féile Fáilte* (1997), *Farawayan* (1998), and *Cell* (1998) all explored the ways in which globalisation affected those living on the margins. By contrast, he sees Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats ...* (1998), and McDonagh’s *Lennane Trilogy* (1996-97) as simply re-enforcing the prevailing perception that Ireland had suddenly become a

¹ Conor McPherson, ‘Foreword’, in *Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), pp. 1-5 (p. 3).

² Victor Merriman, *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), p. 209.

³ *Ibid.*

thriving, cosmopolitan nation.⁴ Christina Wilson has pointed out that Carr's work does not fit neatly into Merriman's equation, undermining its usefulness somewhat; I would argue that the Gate Theatre's 1998 production of *The Weir* also offered a point of critical resistance to this regressive, bifurcated mode of theatre production.⁵ This is not to suggest that the Gate's production points to a gap in the coercive socio-political structures that Merriman has identified, but rather that McPherson's play essentially manufactures this gap because it was written while the author was living in England in 1997.⁶ The play was first performed at The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London and appeared at the Gate Theatre only after it had received much critical acclaim in England. In this way, the staging history of *The Weir* illustrates how Irish plays at that time were often 'authorised', or somehow 'validated', by winning favour first in London, and only then 'returning home'. But this distance also afforded McPherson's work the opportunity to circumvent the neoliberal expectations foisted on Irish theatrical enterprises during the late 1990s, and to smuggle a 'social critique' onto one of Ireland's foremost theatrical stages, beneath the palatable veneer of a play that ostensibly appears to offer little more than a 'diversionary spectacle'.⁷

The Weir is a one-act play, set exclusively in a small bar in rural Ireland, and primarily structured by the sequence of ghost stories that its characters exchange over the course of a single evening. The play was originally commissioned for the Royal Court Theatre in 1997 at the behest of the then artistic director, Stephen Daldry, whose only stipulation was that it must not be another monologue drama – all of the plays McPherson penned prior to *The Weir* were monologue dramas: *Rum and Vodka* (1992), *The Good Thief* (1994), *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *St Nicholas* (1997). Scott T. Cummings has suggested that the play's structural configuration ought to be regarded as 'McPherson's characteristically cheeky response to the call for him to write characters who talk to each other instead of the audience. He has them tell stories.'⁸ But McPherson has more recently proposed that the prevalence of the monologue play during the Celtic-Tiger era may have

⁴ Merriman, p.209.

⁵ Christina Wilson, 'Review of *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s*', *Postcolonial Text*, 6.3 (2011), 1-4 (p. 2). Wilson notes that Carr's oeuvre is perhaps best characterised by its interrogation of received ideas about Irish womanhood. See also Mary Noonan, 'Woman and Scarecrows: Marina Carr's Stage Bodies', in *Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre: Populating the Stage*, ed. by Anne Etienne and Thierry Dubost (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 59-72; and Karin Maresh, 'Un/Natural Motherhood in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats ...*', *Theatre History Studies*, 35 (2016), 179-98.

⁶ Conor McPherson, 'Afterword – The Weir', in *Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama*, ed. by John P. Harrington (New York: Norton, 2009), pp. 559-63 (p. 559).

⁷ Merriman, p. 214.

⁸ Scott T. Cummings, 'Homo Fabulator: The Narrative Imperative in Conor McPherson's Plays', in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. by Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), pp. 303-12 (p. 308).

been a response to the radical cultural shifts that defined this period in Ireland's history. He argues that

[a]lmost every successful new play that emerged from Ireland at that time had an element of direct storytelling. It was as though the crazy explosion of money and stress was happening too close to us, too fast for us, making it impossible for the mood of the nation to be objectively dramatised in a traditional sense. It could only be expressed in the most subjective way possible because when everything you know is changing, the subjective experience is the only experience.⁹

These reflections suggest that the variations on the classic monologue that are embedded in McPherson's play might well be emblematic of a flailing Irish nation and its desperate endeavour to come to terms with the advance of modernity. These observations appear all the more germane to *The Weir* as each of its quasi-monologues move the audience through the historical phases of modernity in Ireland, until they arrive at the play's contemporaneous cultural context.

The cultural milieu from which *The Weir* emerged was largely dominated by the debates surrounding the impending referendum on the Treaty of Amsterdam, which was formally signed by the foreign ministers of the fifteen member countries of the European Union on 2 October 1997 and ratified in full on 1 May 1999. It is this critical juncture in Ireland's socio-political development that McPherson's play juxtaposes against the equally pivotal point at which the Irish Free State's Executive Council launched the Shannon Electrification Scheme in 1925. Although *The Weir* was partially inspired by an edifice located near the home of McPherson's grandfather in Jamestown, Co. Leitrim, whom the playwright visited during the 1970s, the Jamestown structure was not a hydroelectric dam, nor was it constructed in the twentieth century; in fact, it was built by the Shannon Commissioners in the mid-1840s to make Ireland's largest river more navigable.¹⁰ To reimagine this riparian structure as an extension of the Shannon Electrification Scheme as McPherson does, however, is to recast it as a highly charged emblem of Ireland's modernisation. Prior to the 1925 construction of the Ardnacrusa power plant, located just 2.4 kilometres from the Limerick border in Co. Clare, rural dwellers had only limited access to what was a very expensive supply of electricity, usually produced locally by small

⁹ McPherson, 'Foreword', p. 3.

¹⁰ Andrew Hazucha, 'The Shannon Scheme, Rural Electrification, and Veiled History in McPherson's *The Weir*', *New Hibernia Review*, 17 (2013), 67-80 (p. 78).

generating stations.¹¹ The national rate of consumption increased to 43 million kWh in 1930, and this figure more than quadrupled to 218 million kWh in 1937.¹² In this context, the hydroelectric power plant that lends McPherson's play its title stands as a testament to the mass illumination that forever transformed the complexion of rural Ireland. But this title also provides the first indication that all of the ghost stories recounted in *The Weir* draw much of their dynamism from a certain exploitation of the conflict that exists between the force of modernity and the ways of life that this force inevitably banishes. To illustrate this point, I begin by demonstrating how the first two of the play's four ghost stories trace the history of modernity in Ireland from the pre-Christian era to the late-nineteenth century. The second section considers the ways in which the play's third and fourth ghost stories speak to comparatively more recent developments in Irish culture, with specific reference to the child sex-abuse cases reported in the mid-to-late 1990s and the initial phase of the Celtic Tiger. The section that follows sets the play's allusions to the impending arrival of 'the Germans' against the concerns expressed by the then British Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, prior to the European Parliament's endorsement of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. In doing so, I demonstrate overall that the quasi-monological structure of *The Weir* captures the suppressed traces of a haunting that would only fully materialise in the wake of Tiger Ireland.

From Ancient Irish Folklore to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism

McPherson's penchant for all things phantasmagorical permeates his dramatic oeuvre, manifesting, for example, as a vampire in *St Nicholas* (1997), as an apparition of the co-protagonist's recently deceased wife in *Shinning City* (2004), as the devil in *The Seafarer* (2006), and as a haunted Anglo-Irish landed estate in *The Veil* (2011). In *The Weir*, the first ghost story draws its inspiration from Ireland's fairy folklore. In the context of the play, the tale is designed to function as a genial initiation for Dublin-born newcomer, and the play's only female character, Valerie. To begin, fifty-something year-old garage owner, Jack, recalls the fate of a local woman named Bridie Nealon, whose house was reportedly built on an old fairy road, and who claimed to have heard mysterious knocking at the doors and windows of her home while her daughter, Maura, was still a young girl.¹³ Crucially, these incidents

¹¹ Lothar Schoen, 'The Irish Free State and the Electricity Industry, 1922-1927', in *The Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of the Free State*, ed. by Andy Bielenberg (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2002), pp. 28-47 (p. 28).

¹² Brendan Delany, 'McLaughlin, the Genesis of the Shannon Scheme, and the ESB', in Bielenberg, pp. 100-13 (p. 19).

¹³ McPherson, 'The Weir', in *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2004), pp. 9-74 (p. 36). All additional references to this edition will be indicated by the page number in parentheses in the body of the article.

initially occurred prior to the 1951 construction of the local weir, at a time when there was ‘no dark like a winter night in the country’ (p. 36). Jack later explains that Maura also heard this peculiar knocking sometime around 1910 or 1911, and that the strange noises ceased only after ‘a priest came and blessed the doors and windows’ (p. 37). These mysterious occurrences can certainly be read as a relatively straightforward reappearance of the past; typically speaking, however, there are dualistic elements at play in Irish gothic fiction, in which the hauntedness traditionally ascribed to the return of the past more often materialises in conjunction with the promise, or indeed threat, of the future. Citing the Irish experience of the Cromwellian Wars and the Glorious Revolution as seventeenth-century precedents, Luke Gibbons has observed that Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* reconstitutes the gothic as a double-edged sword, one hung poised with the potential to strike from both the future and the past.¹⁴ Depending on the specificity of one’s religious and political affiliations, modernity itself might be perceived as the ghoulish spectre haunting each of these age-defining cultural moments. From the anonymous *Vertue Rewarded; or, The Irish Princess* (1693) to Brian O’Malley’s *The Lodgers* (2017), the ruined abbeys and mouldering landed estates that suffuse Ireland’s gothic tradition might initially appear symbolic of some strange and irrepressible past, but these architectonic cadavers are simultaneously emblematic of the peoples and traditions that were forever decimated by the blunt force of modernity.¹⁵

When *The Weir* is situated in this Irish gothic tradition, the exorcism performed in the Nealon home at the behest of Maura Nealon seems representative of a comparatively more recent cycle in the process of Ireland’s modernisation. In banishing these mythological fairies, the priest in Jack’s tale personifies the austere brand of religiosity that was implemented by the Irish Catholic Church during the late nineteenth-century Devotional Revolution. This post-famine period was marked by a concentrated effort to eradicate the practice of pre-Christian traditions; in Ireland, Catholicism became a modernising force. But Jack’s narrative also accentuates the correlation that exists between the modernising influence of Christianity and the early twentieth-century technological modernity represented by the local hydroelectric plant. When Jack tells his companions that ‘Maura never heard the knocking again except one time in the fifties when the weir was going up’ (p. 37), the cultural displacement triggered by the Devotional Revolution is aligned with the technological mode of modernisation that was initiated by the Shannon Electrification Scheme in the early-to-mid

¹⁴ Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization, and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen House, 2004), p. 15.

¹⁵ Gibbons, p. 11.

twentieth century. This alignment captures perfectly the duality of Irish gothic, insofar as it recognises the haunting remnants of a comparatively more recent past, while simultaneously conveying the magnitude of the modernising force that triggered their displacement. Although the chronological strata in Jack's ghost story establish Catholicism as a modernising influence, the Shannon Electrification Scheme is in turn established as a constituent of the mid-twentieth-century modernisation that would bring the Irish people further away from these pagan practices and indeed from the Catholicism that initially displaced these practices. The significance that *The Weir* ascribes to the conflictual correlations that bind these 'Old' and 'New' worlds is prefigured even in the play's opening stage directions, which indicate that the walls of Brendan's bar are adorned with '*some old black and white photographs: a ruined abbey; people posing near a newly erected ESB weir*' (p. 13). But these images further connect the modernity represented by the ESB weir to the nuanced historical narrative codified in the image of the ruined abbey, in which the gothic is at once emblematic of a pre-Cromwellian Ireland and of the modernisation that consigned this Ireland to its demise.

The chronological strata that constitute this first ghost story provide a microcosmic reflection of the circularity that McPherson uses to structure *The Weir* on a macrocosmic level. In the tale that follows, for example, the subject matter transports the audience from the pre-Christian age to a comparatively more recent cultural context. On this occasion, Finbar, a successful local businessman, and the epitome of Tiger-Ireland capitalism, recounts an episode in which a young neighbour, Niamh Walsh, claimed to have summoned up a spirit with a Ouija board (p. 41). Although variations of these 'talking boards' have existed for over two thousand years, the Ouija board was first produced commercially in 1892 and is therefore synonymous with late nineteenth-century spiritualism.¹⁶ Indeed, Finbar's description of Niamh's father seems to acknowledge the Ouija board's relationship to this cultural context as he name-checks one of the period's most famous literary characters, describing the garda in charge of the case as 'fifty-odd and still only a sergeant, so, like, he was no Sherlock Holmes' (p. 40). Holmes's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was in fact one of the foremost exponents of automatic writing in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ In the Irish context, spiritualism and occultism are equally synonymous with Yeatsian revivalism, but this sense of historical movement is further amplified by Finbar's description of Father Donal. He tells

¹⁶ Helen Sword, 'James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija', *American Literature*, 66 (1994), 553-72 (p. 555).

¹⁷ J. Godfrey Raupert, *The New Black Magic and the Truth about the Ouija-Board* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1919), p. 3.

us that the priest ‘came down and sort of blessed the place a little bit. Like he’d be more Vatican two. There wouldn’t be much of all the demons or that kind of carry-on with him’ (p. 43). This allusion to ‘Vatican two’ associates Father Dolan with the more modern and somewhat more progressive brand of Catholicism that emerged after the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, convened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962 and closed by Pope Paul VI in December 1965. The Council’s recommendations ushered in a host of sweeping reforms: masses were no longer celebrated in Latin, nor by a priest who stood facing away from the congregation; dietary restrictions were relaxed, as were the dictates regarding appropriate confessional attire for the laity; but perhaps most importantly, the Roman-Catholic Church also abdicated its claim to be the one true church. As Melissa Whyte explains, Vatican II forever altered ‘the way the Church understood itself, as its identity went from being a hierarchal authority to a church conceived as the people of God’.¹⁸

Finbar’s account of Father Dolan’s half-hearted intervention undermines the sacrosanctity of Ireland’s Catholic order, and by doing so he gives voice to the manner in which the Catholic Church’s power began to wane in conjunction with the acceleration of technological modernity in Ireland. In the broader context of play, the juxtaposition of the priests in these two initial ghost stories mirrors the expansion of modernity reflected in the cultural chasm that separates Jack’s pre-Christian fairies from the late nineteenth-century spiritualism that provides the catalyst for Finbar’s tale. But these are only the first steps in a journey that transports the audience through a series of milestones in Ireland’s cultural development until they are brought face-to-face with a final poignant snapshot of Tiger Ireland. And, much like the photographs that adorn the walls of Brendan’s bar, this journey demonstrates that these seemingly remote and unfamiliar pasts always linger in the background, perpetually inhabiting the future.

Twentieth-Century Spectres

While these initial stories operate at a comfortable distance from the play’s contemporary context, the story that follows is infused with the toxic atmosphere of child sex-abuse scandals that hung about Ireland in the mid-to-late 1990s. In this tale, Jim, employed by Jack at the local garage, recalls an episode in which he was asked to dig a grave in one of the nearby communities. While at the graveyard, Jim claims to have been approached by a man who insisted he was digging ‘the wrong grave’ and instead brought him to ‘a new enough

¹⁸ Melissa Whyte, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 1.

one. A white one with a picture of a little girl on it' (p. 50). In the end, Jim reveals that he later 'saw a picture of your man whose grave [they'd] dug', that it was 'the spit of your man [he'd] met in the graveyard', and that 'the fella who'd died had had a bit of a reputation for em ... being a pervert' (p. 50). The preceding ghost stories have primed the audience to think about the role performed by the Catholic Church in Ireland's cultural development. Although the abuser in this case was not affiliated with the Catholic Church, this organisation's name became synonymous with child-abuse scandals in Ireland during the mid-1990s.¹⁹ Between 1994 and 1997, Fr Brendan Smyth was convicted on 74 charges of indecent and sexual assault, but this period was also marked by a deluge of abuse allegations against other Catholic priests in Ireland.²⁰ Set against this socio-historical backdrop, the loaded phraseology that Jim mobilises to describe the events that precipitated his presence at the graveyard establishes a correlation between the horrific phenomena of child sex abuse in Ireland and the Irish Catholic Church. He explains that

[t]he priest over in Glen was looking for a couple of lads to do a bit of work. And he was down in Carrick in the Arms. He'd come over from Glen, you know? Which was an odd thing anyway. Like what was he doing coming all the way over just to get a couple of young fellas? (pp. 48-49)

It is not a coincidence that the Catholic Church features so prominently in each of the play's first two tales, nor is it insignificant that the figure of the priest appears here at the outset of Jim's narrative. In each of these instances, this prominence is indicative of the privileged position that the Catholic Church has long held in Irish culture and of the central role this organisation has played in moulding the shape of modern Ireland. However, Gibbons has observed a certain irony in the fact that the Catholic Church was charged with 'the task of modernizing Irish society after the famine'.²¹ As Terence Brown puts it, the Irish Catholic Church preached 'a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness, denouncing all developments in society that might have threatened a rigid conformism in a strictly enforced sexual code'.²² This chapter in Ireland's history provides a prime example of the ways in which modernity is invariably infused with discordant, or anti-modern, traces. McPherson's reflections upon this

¹⁹ Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), p. 216.

²⁰ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 19.

²¹ Luke Gibbons, 'Have You No Homes to Go To?: James Joyce and the Politics of Paralysis', in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 150-71 (p. 155).

²² Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History: 1922-2002* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 29.

phase of modernity in *The Weir* underscore exactly why the gothic mode is best equipped to illustrate that these modernising forces are always shadowed by some dark residue of the past. The legacy of this rigid sexual conformism is addressed most directly in Jim's tale, where the 'grave-digging' motif takes on a dualistic quality. From a formal perspective, the act of grave-digging mirrors the function performed by the gothic mode itself, as it allows us to sift through the many compacted grains that constitute the past and re-examine that which was established upon these seemingly solid foundations. And in the specific context of Jim's story, this grave-digging also facilitates the re-emergence of a contorted sexuality that festered for an age beneath the wholesome surface of a murky Catholic culture.

When *The Weir* was first produced in 1997, there was a growing sense that some correlation might exist between this 'strictly enforced sexual code' and the volume of child-abuse cases reported in late twentieth-century Ireland.²³ By 1996, the debate around obligatory clerical celibacy had advanced to the point that the then Bishop of Killaloe, Willie Walsh, claimed that celibacy would no longer be required for Catholic priests in the future. Although the article in which the interview was published did not credit the Bishop with drawing a direct correlation between clerical celibacy and child sex abuse in Ireland, it concluded by suggestively attributing the following one-line paragraph to Bishop Walsh: 'He also says it is clear that in the past the Catholic Church had not understood the problem of child sex abuse.'²⁴ Throughout this period, the majority of Ireland's Catholic clergy maintained that there was no connection between celibacy and the phenomenon of child sex abuse in twentieth-century Ireland. Speaking to RTE's Pat Kenny in June 1995, for example, the then Bishop of Ferns, Dr Brendan Comiskey, described the contemporary cultural climate as follows:

You would think that this was just a problem for the church. There is not a single profession in Ireland that has not been affected by this. But the notion abroad is that it is a particular problem for priests. It is not, it is less than one per cent. That is still a

²³ Between 1994 and 1997, the local and national Irish newspapers were awash with articles that addressed the issues of child sex abuse and clerical celibacy under the same headline. On 11 June 1994, for example, the *Irish Independent* published an article in which Peter de Rosa argued that 'the forced link between priesthood and celibacy in the western church has always led to immorality in holy places' (p. 30). On 19 October 1994, the *Irish Press* published a response to RTE Radio's *The Sunday Show* in which Seamus de Barra decried the panellists' treatment of this issue, calling it 'the worst example of anti-Catholic bilious bias [he] ever heard on radio or on television' (p. 18). On 26 November 1994, the *Irish Independent* reported that a spokesman for the National Conference of Priests stated that 'the church needed to discuss whether celibacy should be obligatory or whether it would be better to leave it optional' (p. 4). This is a small sample from the hundreds of such articles that appeared during this time.

²⁴ 'Celibacy Rule to Go – Bishop', *Irish Independent*, 5 April 1996, p. 1.

serious problem but to scapegoat one element of the community is to avoid accepting this is a very real and terrible problem that the whole society has.²⁵

The point is not whether one can categorically prove that a causal link exists between clerical celibacy and child sex abuse in Ireland, nor whether the broader sociological issue that Bishop Comiskey describes might be a dysfunctional by-product of the strict sexual morality relentlessly enforced by the Irish Catholic Church in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but rather that these correlations were established in the Irish cultural consciousness in the mid-to-late 1990s.

Jim's ghost story can therefore be read as a narrative that emerged from the shadows of the strict code of sexual morality that was first established in Ireland during the Devotional Revolution, much as the play's final ghost story explores the injurious potential of the radical socio-economic changes that swept across Ireland in the 1990s. This final story is told by the newcomer, Valerie, who provides these contextual details:

I mean. I'm a fairly straight ... down the line ... person. Working. I had a good job at DCU. I had gone back to work after having my daughter, Niamh. My husband teaches, engineering, at DCU. We had Niamh in 1988. And I went back to work when she was five, when she started school. And we'd leave her with Daniel's parents, my husband's parents. (p. 57)

Running from 1988 to 1993, this leave of absence maps onto the five-year period immediately preceding the Celtic-Tiger years.²⁶ The arrangements made when Niamh began school, with both parents working and Niamh's grandparents sharing the responsibilities of childcare, is a familiar story for many thousands of Irish people who lived and worked during this period of rapid economic expansion.²⁷ That Niamh and her husband both worked at Dublin City University makes them further exemplars of the modern Irish family unit; DCU first opened in 1980 and was officially recognised as a university in 1989. In addition to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ On 31 August 1994, the term 'Celtic Tiger' was used for the first time in an MS Newsletter entitled 'The Irish Economy: A Celtic Tiger'. See Gerard McCann, 'The "Celtic Tiger" in Hindsight', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 12 (2013), 109-25 (p. 111).

²⁷ Between 1986 and mid-1998, the number of Irish women in employment rose from 32 per cent to 44 per cent of the population. See Paul Sweeney, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* (Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 1999), p. 63. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of women employed in Ireland rose from 539,000 to 890,000. This acceleration was triggered by the State's introduction of tax individualisation for two-income married couples in 1999, which provided both partners with their own tax credit and boosted the benefits for dual-income couples. See 'Childcare Crisis: A Celtic Tiger Hangover', *Sunday Business Post*, 2 June 2013, p. 2.

being Dublin's newest university, the institute's name became synonymous with technological design and innovation in the 1990s.²⁸

In Valerie's tale, these technological advances act as a signifier for the phase in Irish modernity personified by Valerie and her husband, Daniel. In this modern configuration of the Irish family unit, the mobile telephone, arguably the most iconic symbol of late twentieth-century technological advance, performs something of an intercessory role, insofar as it mediates communication while family members are temporarily separated by the demands of work and school. This role comes most clearly into focus as Valerie makes the following recommendations to allay her daughter's separation anxiety:

So I told her after that, [...] if she was worried at all during the day to ring me, and I'd come and get her, and there was nothing to worry about. And she knew our number, she was very good at learning numbers off and everything. She knew ours and her Nana's and mine at work. She knew them all. (p. 58)

In Valerie's story, this new medium of telecommunication becomes a vehicle for the spectral element that materialises some months after her daughter dies in a tragic swimming accident. As Valerie explains, the incident was precipitated by a mysterious telephone call:

The line was very faint. It was like a crossed line. There were voices, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. And then I heard Niamh. She said, 'Mammy?' And I ... just said, you know, 'Yes.' [...] And she said ... she wanted me to come and collect her. (p. 59)

Much like the strange knocking described in the play's first quasi-monologue, this phone call captures the duality of Irish gothic insofar as it operates as an ambiguous signifier that contains multiple, irreconcilable meanings. In the most immediate sense, it appears to facilitate the return of Valerie's repressed grief, but here the telephone is also emblematic of the twentieth-century model of mourning that is foisted upon Valerie by her husband and his parents.

²⁸ When DCU was first established, the university's president, Dr Daniel O'Hare and his colleagues at DCU's sister university in Limerick wanted their respective institutions to be classified as 'technological universities'. See Michael Foley, 'An Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 13 October 1989, p. 13. Less than a week after the university's inauguration, the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, gave a speech at the annual dinner of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce, in which he urged the Chamber to develop a special relationship with this 'new university', which was committed to meeting 'the particular needs of business and industry'. See 'Haughey Warns of External Dangers for Economy', *Irish Times*, 21 October 1989, p. 8. By 1996, O'Hare was warning that 'the possibilities of the information age mean Ireland faces a stark and important choice about its future, and missing the boat could leave us stranded forever in an economic backwater'. See Daniel O'Hare, 'All Children Must be Equipped to Carry us into the Information Age', *Irish Times*, 28 October 1996, p. 14.

In accordance with the Freudian model, mourning can only be deemed successful after the survivor has ‘let go’ of their lost loved one.²⁹ In *The Weir*, the ubiquity of this Freudian model in contemporary Western culture becomes apparent as Valerie describes her family’s response to this supernatural experience. She tells her audience that ‘Daniel’s mother got a doctor and I ... slept for a day or two. But it was ... Daniel felt that I ... needed to face up to Niamh being gone. [...] He was insisting I get some treatment, and then ... everything would be okay’ (p. 61). The implication is that a medical approach, administered initially in the form of sedatives, and subsequently as a programme of psychological treatment, might ‘cure’ Valerie’s mourning in accordance with societal expectations. Indeed, Valerie begins her story by offering a colloquial reference to the label assigned to those who fail to comply with these standards: ‘[i]t’s important to me’, she says, ‘that I’m not ... bananas’ (p. 61). However, psychological theories such as Sigmund Freud’s are really a twentieth-century construct, and cultures had coped with bereavement in a myriad of diverse ways throughout the preceding centuries. Even in the mid-twentieth century, some psychoanalysts rejected the grieving process that Freud recommends. For instance, Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török have argued that successful mourning might also be achieved by a process called ‘introjection’ in which the survivor internalises the loss and uses their lost loved one as the primary support system for their mourning.³⁰ This is not to suggest that the survivor should entirely deny the reality of the loss, as is the case with the pathological condition Freud calls melancholia.³¹ Abraham and Török liken Freudian melancholia to symbolic acts of ‘incorporation’ in which the subject ingests food and ‘fantasizes swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost [...] in order not to have to “swallow” the loss’.³² These dysfunctional flights of fantasy stand in contradistinction to the ‘introjection’ process, which provides a middle ground between pathological denial and the severity of Freud’s ‘letting go’ by allowing the loss to be channelled through psychological topographies that ultimately expedite acceptance of the loss.³³ The ‘introjection’ process can therefore facilitate the possibility that the lost loved one might exist on some alternative spiritual plain.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1914-1916), XIV, pp. 243-58 (p. 244).

³⁰ Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Nicolas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), I, p. 128.

³¹ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 245.

³² Abraham and Török, p. 126.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Beliefs such as these were common in many pre-secular cultures, much as they were in Ireland prior to the Devotional Revolution. In fact, Bridget English has traced some aspects of the Irish wake tradition to paganism and pointed out that the ritual ‘offers the bereaved imaginative possibilities often denied by Western culture, creating a zone of contact in which living and dead, religious and secular, coexist’.³⁴ Valerie’s response to her daughter’s death suggests that she might have been better served by a process that allowed for these imaginative possibilities. For example, she tells her companions that ‘at the funeral I just thought I could go and lift her out of the coffin and would be the end of all this’ (p. 59). And in response to her husband’s insistence that she must ‘face up to Niamh being gone’, Valerie states, ‘I just thought he should face up to what happened to me’ (p. 60). In this exchange, Valerie and Daniel personify two disparate models of mourning; however, Valerie’s recollection exemplifies the doubly harsh aspect of her predicament: she is at once separated from her daughter and from the means by which she might best process this loss. Although Jack later recounts a second tale, in which we learn of a lost love that consigned the teller to thirty years of solitude and loneliness (p. 68), Valerie’s is the last traditional ghost story told in *The Weir*. Jack’s second story is significant inasmuch as it alerts the audience to the harrowing sense of cultural loss that unifies all of the previous tales, but Valerie’s story nonetheless marks the end of a journey that transports the audience from the annals of Celtic Ireland to the dawn of the Celtic Tiger.

The Germans are Coming

For McPherson’s audience, however, this is not strictly the end of the journey. Although Brendan does not tell a ghost story, the structure of the play implies that Brendan’s is a tale that is simply waiting to be told. Kevin Kerrane has observed that McPherson’s text relies on circularity as a key structural principle, as evidenced by the ways in which ‘the ending of *The Weir* mirrors its beginning, [when] again we hear the howling wind [and] McPherson’s stage directions describe a “slow fade”, an inversion of the play’s opening’.³⁵ But this structural circularity is further established by the many allusions to the impending arrival of the Germans that intersperse the characters’ quasi-monologues. Before the storytelling begins, for example, Jack muses, ‘[a]nother week or two now, you’ll be seeing the first of the Germans’ (p. 22). Likewise, after Jim’s story, Brendan tells Valerie of his plans to have the

³⁴ Bridget English, *Laying out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Irish Novel* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017), p. 189.

³⁵ Kevin Kerrane, ‘The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*’, *New Hibernia Review*, 10 (2006), 105-21 (p. 118).

ladies bathroom ‘fixed for the Germans like, but I haven’t done it yet’ (p. 52). As the play’s final moments gravitate towards this mirror image of the text’s beginning, it becomes clear that the term ‘German’ has been used throughout as a generic signifier for the plethora of European nationals that arrive in Carrick every summer. As Eamonn Jordan explains, the irreverence that Brendan and his peers express toward these European visitors conveys ‘a sense of a high disregard for outsiders, who seek the faux-authentic feel, believing themselves to be acting like locals’.³⁶ This antipathy is most lucidly articulated in Brendan’s final dismissive utterance: ‘Ah I don’t know where the fuck they’re from’ (p. 74). However, the phrase ‘the Germans are coming’ is laden with the cultural baggage of World Wars I and II, and these connotations were brought to the forefront of the British cultural consciousness while McPherson lived in the UK, prior to the European Parliament’s endorsement of the Amsterdam Treaty.

The Amsterdam Treaty was designed to develop the foundation for fiscal unity laid by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, by asking member states to devolve certain powers to the European Parliament. These powers related to issues concerning the legislation of immigration, the creation of criminal and civil laws, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).³⁷ In Britain, these proposed amendments raised some concerns about the direction in which the EU was moving, as evidenced by the following excerpt from an article published in *The Times* on 26 March 1997:

The government gave notice yesterday that it planned to block a new treaty on the future of Europe if other member states pressed ahead with plans to create a defence arm within the EU.

Malcolm Rifkind, the Foreign Secretary, thrust Europe to the centre of the election campaign in Rome as he accused his European partners of trying to ‘lurch into a federalist direction’ every two or three years. In London, a Franco-German proposal to incorporate the Western European Union defence organisation into the EU within the ten years was condemned as a ‘betrayal’ of agreements that had been carefully crafted over the past year.³⁸

In addition to this alarm at the prospect of a militarised Europe, the proposals for shared European policies on the subjects of immigration and the provision of asylum were also condemned by Britain’s Foreign Secretary. The article continues,

Mr Rifkind rejected the fresh proposals put forward by the Dutch presidency for the new treaty to be signed in June in Amsterdam. He said it would mean that

³⁶ Jordan, ‘Pastoral Exhibits: Narrating Authenticities in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*’, *Irish University Review*, 34 (2004), 352-68 (p. 357).

³⁷ ‘Fact Sheet on the European Union: The Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties’ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/displayFtu.html?ftuId=FTU_1.1.3.html> [accessed 16 February 2018].

³⁸ ‘Rifkind Threatens to Block New Europe Treaty’, *The Times*, 26 March 1997, p. 2.

immigration and asylum policy could no longer be determined by democratically elected parliaments, and the EU would for the first time be turned into an organisation of 'collective security'. He said the proposals had been tabled as a basis for negotiation, but they were not a basis for agreement.³⁹

These same fears were stoked during the recent 'Brexit' campaign – so much so, in fact, that Richard Dearlove, the former head of the British foreign-intelligence service, MI6, claimed that Britain's withdrawal from the EU might deter the threat of Isis.⁴⁰ And if the 'Brexit' campaign has revealed one single truth, it was that these fears are habitually boiled down to familiar, bitesize headlines, such as 'the Germans are coming', on the front pages of red-top newspapers and various media outlets less reputable than *The Times*.⁴¹ Much like *The Weir*'s engagement with the gothic, these tabloid headlines manipulate familiar cultural signifiers to suffuse the present with an aura of residual menace that looms large in the past.

By revealing that the term 'German' has been used throughout McPherson's play as a euphemism for the impending arrival of unwanted European guests, Brendan offers what is essentially the play's final denouement. Coupled with the manner in which this ending is contrived to point back toward the play's beginning in a fashion that amplifies the structural circularity of McPherson's text, this denouement implies that this European influence might well constitute the next episode in the cyclical expansion of a modernity that *The Weir* traces back to the pre-Christian era. Throughout the play, Brendan's bar appears to be the last vestige of a rural Ireland that is gradually disappearing as the twenty-first century appears on the horizon. As Jordan puts it, the 'pub functions symbolically as a fantasy and community locus and as a narrative space, where inebriation offers a sense of relaxation and gives a certain type of licence'.⁴² This communitarian function is stressed even in the opening stage directions, which provide a detailed account of Jack's entrance and the manner in which he casually serves himself in Brendan's absence:

He goes behind the counter. [...] He turns and takes a bottle from the shelf, awkwardly prising off the top. He pours it and leaves it on the bar to settle. He turns

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jason Burke, 'Post-Brexit Immigration Controls Would do Little to Stop Isis Attacks', *Guardian*, 24 March 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/24/post-brexit-immigration-controls-stop-uk-isis-attacks>> [accessed 13 August 2018].

⁴¹ This phrase was actually used as a headline in an *Irish Times* supplement section in September 1996. See Mary Dowey, 'The Germans are Coming', *Irish Times: Weekend Section*, 14 September 1996, p. 10. The phrase was also used as a by-line in *The Times* in May 1997. See Helen Mound, 'Journey of Eastern Delights on Classic Wheels', *The Times: Cars Section*, 17 May 1997, p. 10. It is difficult to access tabloid archives, but the *Daily Mail* certainly used militaristic rhetoric in their coverage of the Amsterdam Treaty. See 'Euro Army Rout as Blair Sticks to his Guns', *Daily Mail*, 18 June 1997, p. 2.

⁴² Jordan, 'Pastoral Exhibits', p. 354.

to the till which he opens with practiced, if uncertain, ease. He takes a list of prices from beside the till and holds a pair of spectacles up to his face while he examines it. He puts money in the till and takes his change. (p. 13, italics in original)

In this way, Brendan's bar embodies a rural utopian ideal; a place where the consumer-proprietor relationship is still principally mediated by goodwill and trust, to say nothing of Jack's familiarity with the workings of 'the till', which suggests a closeness more readily associated with the 'family home' than with the 'public house'. But there are indications that the globalising sprawl of the Celtic Tiger has already begun to mark the surrounding lands and businesses. In a world where a house now owned by Finbar is still called 'Maura Nealon's House' in memory of the family that originally lived there, the juxtaposed revelation that Jim 'met Finbar Mack down in the Spar' introduces the name of a Dutch retail franchise that punctures this otherwise idyllic rustic scene (p. 16). In the context of the play, Brendan's role is to serve as a pastoral foil to Finbar's personification of Celtic-Tiger values; he is content to leave 'the campsites to Finbar' and prefers to preserve his own piece of the surrounding countryside in all its natural splendour (p. 25). As he explains to Valerie, 'it's a grand spot all along ... for going for a walk or that, all down the cliffs' (p. 25). Crucially, the 'fairy fort' that is home to the supernatural beings at the centre of Jack's ghost story is located on Brendan's land (p. 33), and his reluctance to develop the meadow, or to sell it to appease the Celtic-Tiger aspirations of his sisters (p. 15), speaks to a certain affiliation with Ireland's fading cultural heritage. On the other hand, Finbar actively participates in this modernising process; indeed, when he tells Valerie that, '[y]ou get all the Germans trekking up here in the summer, [u]p from the campsite', Finbar openly acknowledges his involvement in this globalising process.

The impending influence of this modernising force also makes itself felt in McPherson's play at an intertextual level, as the contrasting values personified by Brendan and Finbar are in many important ways prefigured by the central characters in Denis Johnston's 1931 play, *The Moon in the Yellow River*. Set in 1927, Johnston's play dramatises a fictional IRA attempt to blow up a Free-State hydroelectric power plant. The IRA commander, Darrell Blake, acts as a pastoral foil to the modern globalising force embodied by the power plant's German engineer, Herr Tausch. In the kangaroo court martial that brings the second act to its conclusion, Blake expresses his contempt for this expansion of modernity:

Dearly beloved, the situation is a straightforward one. Our German brother stands indicted before the bar of this court on the gravest of charges. He has outraged the sacred person of our beloved mother – Cathleen ní Houlihan. I say let him be condemned and his works be deodand. In other words, I propose we blow them up.⁴³

Blake's bucolic nationalism provides a striking contrast to the modern idealism espoused by his German counterpart, for whom a modernised future is a future wrought by happiness:

Do not please think that I am preaching the doctrines of material prosperity. [...] I see in mind's eye this land of the future – transformed and redeemed by power – from the sordid trivialities of peasant life to something newer and better. Soon you will be a happy nation – free not by magic of empty formulae or by the colour of the coats you wear, but by the inspiration of power – power – power.⁴⁴

For all his enthusiasm to distinguish the plant's technological power from a vulgar materialism, Johnston's Tausch nonetheless echoes the principles espoused by McPherson's Finbar inasmuch as his vision of a modernised Ireland is conceived as an antidote to the 'pre-modern' principles that Brendan safeguards in his field.

In *The Moon in the Yellow River*, the engineer's role is not arbitrarily assigned to a German national. Although the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme was originally conceived by a young Irish engineer, Thomas A. McLaughlin, he was employed by the German Siemens-Schuckert engineering company in the early 1920s.⁴⁵ Paul Duffy has questioned the motivation behind Siemens-Schuckert's willingness to fund McLaughlin's studies on the potential difficulties that might arise in relation to large-scale regional electrification projects between 1922 and 1925. He writes,

[i]t is difficult to imagine any company in a post-war economic climate paying a highly qualified engineer to act as a decoration. Siemens obviously viewed Ireland as a possible source of new business and much-needed foreign exchange. Newly independent and poorly developed, the Free State must have appeared ripe for a new business company that badly needed foreign markets. No doubt Siemens also knew of McLaughlin's investigations into Ireland's water-power resources. They may well have known of his friendship, from his student days, with several members of the Free State cabinet.⁴⁶

Duffy's retrospective suspicions were shared by the Institution of Civil Engineers in the 1920s, which did not oppose the electrification scheme in principle, but queried the decision

⁴³ Denis Johnston, 'The Moon in the Yellow River', in *The Dramatic Works of Denis Johnston*, 3 vols (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smyth, 1979), II, pp. 79-162 (p. 133).

⁴⁴ Johnston, p. 109.

⁴⁵ Albert J. P. McCarthy, 'The Irish National Electrification Scheme', *Geographical Review*, 47 (1957), 539-54 (p. 539).

⁴⁶ Paul Duffy, 'The Pre-History of the Shannon Scheme', *History Ireland*, 12 (2004), 34-38 (p. 37).

to award the contract to a German engineering company; there were even protests after the government released the details of the decisive meeting, held on 26 January 1924, and these protests escalated after the international committee that was established to oversee the matter upheld the Siemens appointment.⁴⁷ The history of the scheme foreshadows the surreptitious Celtic-Tiger business dealings that became associated with the ‘brown envelope’ during the economic boom.⁴⁸ Alloyed with the nationalist fervour that coloured Irish politics during the Free-State era, the protestations and suspicions that surrounded Siemens’s involvement in the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme rendered the hydroelectric power plant the ideal symbol for the kind of globalisation that Blake resists in *The Moon in the Yellow River*. But the role that this power plant performs in Johnston’s text also renders it the ideal symbol for the accelerated march of globalisation that Brendan resists in *The Weir*. Much like Finbar’s touristic manipulation of the local landscape, the 1925 Shannon Electrification Scheme sought to modernise the nation’s natural resources for capitalist gains, and it is precisely this late twentieth-century chapter in the tale of Ireland’s modernisation that sits suppressed and haunting in the background of *The Weir*.

Conclusion

Patrick Lonergan has described *The Weir* as a play ‘dependent for [its] impact on audiences’ enjoyment of old-fashioned ghost stories’.⁴⁹ This is indeed the quality that creates the ostensible appearance of diversionary spectacle, but *The Weir* also draws a certain dynamism from the gothic’s potential to disrupt and subvert. In his analysis of nineteenth-century Irish gothic fiction, Jarlath Killeen points out that the gothic’s subversive potential encoded a revolutionary impulse that took aim at realist discourse and the hegemonic principles endorsed by realist fiction.⁵⁰ In McPherson’s hands, this subversive potential is harnessed to

⁴⁷ Duffy notes that the Irish Centre for Electrical Engineers did raise objections to the use of the Shannon. These objections were led by Sir John Purser Griffith, a leading Welsh-born Irish engineer, and Laurence J. Kettle, the chief electrical engineer for Dublin Corporation, who preferred to use the river Liffey in Co. Dublin as the primary locus for the electrification of Ireland. See Duffy, p. 37.

⁴⁸ The term ‘brown envelope’ became a synecdoche for commercial immorality and political corruption in Tiger Ireland. These issues were already at the forefront of the Irish cultural consciousness prior to 4 November 1997, when the ‘Flood Tribunal’ was established by Dáil Éireann to investigate matters pertaining to planning permission and land rezoning in Dublin during the 1990s. See Frank McDonald, ‘Flood to Preside over Dublin Planning Inquiry’, *Irish Times*, 3 November 1997, p. 7. The tribunal even outlived the Celtic Tiger, and by the time it published its final report on 22 March 2012, it had been renamed the ‘Mahon Tribunal’. Its findings eventually led to the resignation of then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who failed to ‘truthfully account’ for a number of cash deposits made to his bank accounts. See Stephen Douglas, ‘Mahon Tribunal Findings’, *Irish Times*, 23 March 2012, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Drama Era* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2009), p. 107.

⁵⁰ Jarlath Killeen, ‘Irish Gothic Revisited’, *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 4 (2008), 30-51 (p. 47).

manufacture a critique of the neoliberal phase of modernity that prevailed in Ireland during the Celtic-Tiger era. At the level of content, the play establishes this critique by identifying the various aspects of Irish culture displaced by the blunt force of modernity, and by exploring the various spectral guises in which these aspects later returned. However, this critique of modernity also operates in *The Weir* at the level of form, and the ways in which it does so make McPherson's reflections on the prominence of the monologue play in the 1990s appear all the more apropos to the quasi-monological structure of *The Weir*.

McPherson's contention that this subjective dramatic form became dominant as the Irish populace scrambled to establish a toehold in the rapidly shifting Celtic-Tiger era seems to resonate with the fact that the play's allusion to this phase of modernity appears only as a rather conspicuous absence, which is to say that it appears only in the spectral guise of a story that has yet to unfold around Brendan, who never offers one of his own. This provides a striking contrast to the play's fully articulated narratives, in which Jack sets out the impact made by the advance of modernity, both in pre-Christian Ireland and during the Devotional Revolution; in which Finbar describes the late nineteenth-century spiritualism that was in turn displaced by early twentieth-century modernity; and in which Jim and Valerie give voice to the adverse effects spawned by these cycles of modernity, with specific reference to the child sex-abuse scandals that rocked Ireland in the late twentieth century, and to Valerie's incapacity to mourn her daughter's death in the fashion most befitting her own inclinations.

Although Brendan's narrative is never explicitly articulated in the same way as these quasi-monologues, poststructuralist theorists have established critical frameworks to explore these kinds of textual absences. Roland Barthes, for example, has suggested that a writer's style is in essence the culmination of the many styles and genres that comprise the texts previously read by that author.⁵¹ Crucially, these intertextual relationships allow us to recognise certain meanings that lie buried beneath the surface of a text, much as some familiarity with *The Moon in the Yellow River* offers additional insight into the significance attributed to the hydroelectric power plant and the impending arrival of 'the Germans' in *The Weir*. This significance makes itself felt in a manner akin to those absent presences that Jacques Derrida describes as 'the trace' – that is, a presence which is 'not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself'.⁵² In addition to *The Weir*'s intertextual relationship to Johnston's play, however, such a spectral

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, from 'Writing Degree Zero', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 31-61 (p. 32).

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1973), p. 156.

presence is also manifested in the ellipses that punctuate the speech of McPherson's characters whenever something is implied, but remains unsaid, because it is somehow inexplicable or far too difficult to express. Like Jack's second story, these ellipses accentuate the overlaps that bind what is socially or personally uncomfortable to that which is supernatural or anomalous. When Jack explains that 'Maura Nealon's house was built on what you'd call ... that ... road' (p. 37), for instance, the supernatural element – the 'fairy road' – is signified by markings that identify its absent presence. These identifiers appear again when Finbar tells us that Niamh Walsh and her friends 'were after doing the ... Ouija board' (p. 41), and as Jack recalls that the figure who appeared in the graveyard 'had a bit of a reputation for em ... being a pervert' (p. 51). There is a similar process in operation when Valerie describes the mysterious phone call in which her deceased daughter 'said ... She wanted [her mother] to come and collect her' (p. 59) and when Brendan describes his land as 'a grand spot all along ... for going for a walk or that, all down the cliffs' (p. 25). But these absent presences do not appear only in these pivotal moments; in fact, they permeate the text with a regularity that suggests that some unacknowledged presence sits ever present in the background.

Although this spectral presence never quite comes into focus, the structure of the play suggests that this force will soon impact upon the way of life that Brendan personifies. For example, Brendan does not complete the cycle of ghost stories; instead, his final act is to close the communal space that has, throughout the play, fostered existing relationships and facilitated the forging of new bonds. It is also telling that the play's final denouement emphasises the text's circularity just as Brendan's resistance to the globalisation signified by Finbar and the local Spar is conflated with the menace that lies camouflaged beneath the play's allusions to the 'Germans' and the new European order that these figures represent. The impact that this globalising force might make upon the remnants of the gothicised past that Brendan embodies, indeed strives to protect, can only appear as a Derridean trace because, in 1997, this narrative existed only in its unarticulated infancy.

Killeen has more recently acknowledged that Irish gothic fiction has become rejuvenated in the wake of the Celtic-Tiger boom, as 'ghost estates' and 'zombie banks' now punctuate contemporary discourse, in the same way fairy roads and ruined abbeys mark the Irish landscape.⁵³ In *The Weir*, there is a certain suspicion of the neoliberal doctrines that

⁵³ Killeen, 'How Celtic Tiger's Death Led to a Gothic Revival', *Irish Times*, 28 April 2017 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/how-celtic-tiger-s-death-led-to-a-gothic-revival-1.3065069>> [accessed 27 February 2018].

became the mantras of Tiger Ireland. This suspicion makes itself most immediately felt through McPherson's characterisation of Brendan, but it also manifests on a structural level, as the play foreshadows the malignant forces that would emerge in conjunction with the economic downturn. Two decades on from the first production of *The Weir*, these anomalous forces appear to us now in the fully crystallised forms of austerity, emigration, and negative equity. And while the velocity of the Celtic Tiger might well have rendered it impossible for anyone to determine the shape of its legacy, McPherson's play nonetheless demonstrates that, much like the light generated by the edifice that lends *The Weir* its title, these advances of modernity always refract against the cultural mechanisms that are ultimately displaced, casting shadows that hang about for centuries, like signposts to roads that have long ceased to exist.