Bridget Cleary Speaks!

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Bridget Cleary's death in 1895 at the hands of her husband, in the presence of several of their neighbours and relations, became enmeshed in a web of public narrative as it was recounted in courtrooms, reported in newspapers worldwide, and debated in scholarly and popular journals. Angela Bourke's *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (1999) demonstrates, however, that this event emerged from another type of narrative web, the folk beliefs which provided Michael Cleary and his neighbours with an explanation and rationale for her murder and a course of action for 'driving out the fairy' which they believed had taken over Bridget's body. Meanwhile, in other discursive networks, this same fairy lore was also providing data for the emerging science of folklore, and at a further remove, inspiration for the aesthetics of the Celtic Twilight. It also functioned negatively as an image of superstitious primitivism — fodder for Unionist mistrust of the Irish peasantry and a foil for both the modernising Catholic church and the belief in rational progress which guided Irish civic nationalism. Bourke shows the dialogic interrelationships between all these discourses, not least in the way that fairy lore was both believed and doubted by its carriers, and the intense conflicts about belief and superstition that informed Michael Cleary's actions.

That a person could be killed for being possessed by a fairy in supposedly 'modern' times caused a sensation and spurred debates, informed by concurrent political questions such as the Land Act and the prosecution of Oscar Wilde, as to whether the Irish were fully 'modern' or capable of self-rule. As Warner (2002) has shown, texts and their circulation are an essential part of what establishes and reinforces modern publics. Significant sociocultural events feature recontextualisations and realignments of prior texts. Bridget Cleary's murder inspired an intense flurry of such recontextualisations, whereby the voices and testimony of local people were reported by neighbours, relations, and local authorities, transcribed and retranscribed by court stenographers, published in newspapers, debated by 'experts' and discussed in journals. They take their place alongside and in dialogue with other discourses, many of which in turn compared the people of rural Tipperary to 'Hottentots,' identifying them with the archaic past and with colonised and 'uncivilised' peoples. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* seeks to untangle these skeins of discourse, trying not so much to resolve as to reveal the contradictions and paradoxes of Bridget Cleary's death, and thus demonstrate the complexity of Ireland in the nineteenth century. Like Hubert Butler's earlier essay, 'The Eggman and the Fairies' (1960), Bourke attempts to understand [the] what Butler termed the 'sophisticated and civilised background' to the tragedy.

II.

The publication in 1999 of *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* took its place among a series of further recontextualisations of discourses about the Irish past and present, most notably those surrounding the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine and the ongoing series of revelations of institutional abuse of children. The book received considerable media attention, as did the debut of Tom Mac Intyre's play, *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*, produced at the Abbey's Peacock Theatre in April 2005. While Bourke and Butler leave Bridget Cleary as a blank and almost voiceless figure, keeping a respectful distance from the victim of the events of 1895, Mac Intyre's play brings her to life, giving her a face and a voice, although both her 'voice' and the 'life' she is given are enigmatic and fragmented. Most notably, her voice, along with that of her husband and to a lesser extent that of William Simpson, the boycotted landlord's agent she was said to have had an affair with, is presented in what one critic described as 'a tangy, ripe Hiberno-English' (O'Toole 2005). As Bakhtin has pointed out, the 'taste' of speech is a product of 'stratifying forces in language,' for which 'there are no «neutral» words and forms – words and forms that can belong to «no one»' (Bakhtin 1981: 293). Speech is always heard through the echo chamber of social difference. But in contrast to Bourke's demonstration of the multilayered nature of these 'voices' from the past, Mac Intyre's personation (Coleman 2004) condenses once again the social distance between we the listeners and the speakers of Ballyvadlea in 1895, along with everything we tell ourselves or are told about that distance or the lack of it, back into the sound of those voices — we *hear* our own distance from Bridgie and Michael as if it was an inherent property of their own voices. As an enthusiastic theatregoer proclaimed on the play's opening night, 'Instead of victims, he presented lovers and instead of social documentary he gave us mesmeric poetry' (*Irish Times*, 30/04/2005). That the voices of Bridgie, her husband and her lover, as embodied in the performances of Mac Intyre's gifted cast, can become both mesmeric poetry and an object of sophisticated connoisseurship and good taste, speaks volumes, as it were, about where we as members of Irish society think we have arrived.

III.

What Happened Bridgie Cleary is set in an ambiguous afterlife, a mysterious howling otherworld about which the characters themselves know little or nothing. This post-life is strongly reminiscent of the setting of Beckett's plays,

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Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel, *Cré na Cille*, and Brian Friel's *The Faith Healer*. Mc Intyre's austere Otherworld, lacking the elaborate furnishings of either Christian or pagan cosmology, resembles most of all the placeless places depicted in folk legends where the deceased endure liminal centuries 'between the bark and the tree' or in middle of streams, waiting for the sins or omissions of their lives to be redeemed. In the case of *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*, such a setting ingeniously turns the tables on her husband and lover, who find themselves literally thrown into the void which she populates, a 'perilous region of half-belief' (Butler 1986: 72). *There is another world.* Bridgie teases the two men with half-expressed accounts of her experiences with the supernatural, as if to make them doubt the very doubts and regrets they clung to in a lifetime of remorse after her murder. But here in this void there are no fairies, just a dubious existence and a space to confront one's own destructive desire to possess the object of one's love. Bridgie had seemed taller and more beautiful to her husband during her final illness, evidence to him that she was indeed a changeling and not his wife. The need to confront the delusions brought about by love and jealousy must surely have been a motivating factor in the folklore of changelings; today the nagging suspicion that we kill the things we love is almost our only way into the psyche of Michael Cleary, who in Mc Intyre's play, discovers along with Bridgie's lover that she has got away from them. 'The fairies' are a figure of escape, a line of flight from an increasingly restrictive society. Yet Bridgie is burdened by her own longing for Phildy Reddan, the mysterious eggman, a free spirit, and the man she 'really loved.'

In Bourke's reading, Bridget Cleary is a modern, independent, progressive and powerful young woman who becomes the victim of a local community's prudery and resentment. In Mc Intyre's account, Bridgie Cleary is 'feisty, beautiful, daring' but 'didn't get out of there fast enough' (*Irish Times* 30/04/2005). For Mc Intyre, it is a man, the eggman, who is the ultimate figure of the Outside, a Blazes Boylan for Bridgie's Molly Bloom. Mc Intyre's elevation of the eggman from rumour to prime mover blunts the feminist edge of Bourke's analysis, bringing the social drama of Bridgie's life and death back into the Oedipal fold, a drama of 'lovers' for which even the otherworld can only provide atmospherics.

IV.

Progressive scientific theories of fairy-lore have seen it in essentially cognitive terms, as a set of beliefs about, and descriptions of, the social and moral universe of the 'folk.' Angela Bourke has most eloquently described fairy-lore as a system of metaphor, a 'virtual reality' (Bourke 1997) and an elaborate figure of the imagination as well as an archive or database of knowledge. This otherworld, as a system of knowledge and belief, operates 'as if.' Functionalist accounts of folk-belief emphasise what could be called its metaphorical pole, the separateness from the world which gives it descriptive and analytical power. But any system of knowledge or belief, to be useful, must have a metonymic pole as well: not 'It is as if...' but 'My wife has been taken!' The fact that relatively educated and progressive rural proletarians were able to *identify* a fairy in their midst, with such tragic results, presents a challenge to any purely cognitive theory of folklore, which can only see such tragic events as a misfire of the system, as the delusions of an irrational peasantry, as the tragic consequences of a collision between social worlds, or as an example of psychological derangement and *folie à deux* (Irish Times, 28/8/99). The cognitive view of folk-belief is a mainstay of narratives of tradition, progress, and scientific method, just as the preservation, study and archiving of 'folk' and 'primitive' voices underpins narratives of modernity (Bauman & Briggs 2003) — the mis-location of fairies and fairy-lore as part of the past rather than as part of the future. The death of Bridget Cleary threatened to unsettle belief in progress, especially in Irish progress; thus it had to be analysed, sensationalised, explained. For the contemporary valuation of folk discourse as an endangered species of thought, as a scarce cognitive resource potentially of value to us all, Bridget Cleary's death presents an equal challenge. What Bourke's investigations turn up is evidence pointing perhaps to a slightly different view of fairy-lore: one in which the otherworld is real, where fairies exist and are part of everyday life as the Outside of the social and psychological realm and as a repository of rejected history (McLean 2004: 127). Social science and even art have not taken these Outsides seriously enough. What can one accomplish by claiming that oneself or another has been 'with the fairies'? The mischief of fairies provides rationale and cover not only for real attacks on transgressors but for real transgressions of personal, social and political orders. That these latter transgressions were practical and essential for the birth of the conditions we call 'modern' is the subversive insight glimpsed briefly at the heart of Tom Mc Intyre's play.

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