

CHAPTER I

‘*Gente Blanca*’ in the Green
Atlantic: Selfhood, victimhood,
whiteness, and early modern
Ireland

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In 748, Pope Zachary wrote to Boniface accusing the Irish cleric of ‘perverse and abominable teaching ... that there [is] another world and other men beneath the earth’. To believe that the Antipodes existed defied Catholic orthodoxy. Early Irish literature, however, imagined worlds beneath the sea. *Saltair na Rann* dared to wonder in the late tenth century:

Cialín nasluag, srethaib drong,
dosceil tonn muad mara mind,
ceti arbair trebait ann
dondleith tall dontalmain tinn?

What is the number of the hosts, with ranks of companies,
which the noble wave of the clear sea conceals?
What are the multitudes which dwell there,
on the other side of the solid earth?’

By the sixteenth century, of course, voyages to ‘the other side of the solid earth’ had passed from the realm of fiction into fact. (Three Galway cabin-boys rounded the Horn with Magellan aboard the *Trinidad* and *Concepción*).² This essay follows two other voyagers to South America, to a place where, narratively, fact shears off towards the fictional and events become unsteadied in the telling. But it brings us, also, to lives ignored by our texts but whose presence at their margins disturbs everything. Narratives framed as *rites* of passage have as their undersong a presumption that only certain groups of migrants enjoy the *right* to pass from abjection to mastery, from being colonised to colonising others.

In an important essay on *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, Pat Coughlan shows how the book's Paraguayan setting is central to Anne Enright's success in inserting a feminist postmodernism into the canon of contemporary Irish fiction. Paraguay provides the imaginative space for Enright 'to show the melting away of apparently solid European systems of order and belief in the utter difference of South America'; it provides, Coughlan argues, an analogue for 'a world in disintegration, of European values, knowledge, and order being tested to destruction'.³ By way of a prequel to Coughlan's essayist excursion to Paraguay, '*Gente Blanca*' tells the story of two earlier Irish migrants to South America.⁴ It suggests that while their identities were being 'tested' and rewritten in the contact zone, 'destruction' was reserved for those at the sharp end of the system of 'values, knowledge, and order' in which our two travellers found a berth. That unequal encounter forces us to rethink R.F. Foster's jibe that 'the old victim-culture ... was also, in its way, a culture of superiority', by setting it alongside Sara Ahmed's assertion that whiteness is 'a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience'. We need to keep Ahmed's suggestion that 'this disappearance makes whiteness "worldly"' in mind as we follow our two victims of colonisation in Ireland to the other side of the world.⁵

Undertaking to write a biography of Richard Creagh, archbishop of Armagh, the historian Colm Lennon remarks, 'Biographies of sixteenth-century Irish figures, lay or ecclesiastical, are rare.'⁶ Autobiographies are even rarer. Neither of the Irish exiles on whom this essay focuses – one rendered spectral by hagiography, the other made fantastical by his own picaresque travelogue – participates in the discourses of interiority which writers like Montaigne were contemporaneously making available.⁷ Tracing the emergence of a recognisably modern, Cartesian subjectivity in *The Tremulous Private Body*, Francis Baker distinguishes between the narrated self of *Le Discours de la Méthode* and earlier biographical and autobiographical writings. Whereas for Descartes, 'the narrated self becomes for the first time not only the exemplum but the ground of truth', earlier kinds of life-writing were mainly hagiographical. In hagiography, the self is not individual but exemplary, pointing to a truth beyond itself.⁸ This is certainly the case with Thomas O'Fihily, a Limerickman and a pioneer of the Jesuit mission to Paraguay. The difficulty with sketching even a brief life for him starts with naming. In his only autograph letter, he signs himself Thomás Philidius. Ruiz de Montoya SJ, whose labours in the Paraguayan *misiones* overlapped with those of O'Fihily, speaks of him, in a work written fourteen years after his death, as 'Father Toma Pildi, an Irishman by birth, a man of great age and

rare virtue'.⁹ His father, William Fihily, a doctor, was admitted to the 'English Liberty' of Limerick in 1555, in exchange for anglicising his surname to Field.¹⁰ His mother was Janet Creagh, possibly a sister of Archbishop Creagh.¹¹ He was educated in David Woulfe SJ's grammar school in Limerick and went to the continent in 1568, 'to avoid', as one Jesuit historian put it, 'the dangers of heresy'.¹² He studied in Paris and Douai, and took his master's in Louvain before entering the Jesuit novitiate in Rome in 1585.¹³ Shortly afterwards, he and the English Jesuit John Yates were selected for the Brazilian missions. Funding his journey with alms begged along the way, O'Fihily walked from Rome to Lisbon, detouring to Santiago de Compostela to kiss the relics of the apostle.¹⁴ After a year's study in Coimbra, he sailed for São Salvador de Bahia and served for eight years in Jose de Anchieta's Misión San Vincente.¹⁵ He is sighted only once in those years. John Yates reported condescendingly to Fr Good, one of O'Fihily's grammar-school masters, 'News of Father Thomas Felie ... he was very unapt to learn this Brazil speech, but he did always edify us with his virtuous life.' He assures his correspondent that he has sent 'Felie' 'his portion of the blessed grains and images that came unto my hands'.¹⁶ Then, in 1587, the Jesuits received an invitation from the province of Tucumán, in northern Argentina, to found a mission there. O'Fihily, along with four other Jesuits, sailed from Bahia for Buenos Aires.

We have four primary accounts of the voyage: Nicolás del Techo's *Historia de la Provincia del Paraguay de la Compañía de Jesús* (1673), condemned by its nineteenth-century editor for its 'inverosímiles y absurdas narraciones'; Pedro Lozano's *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Provincia del Paraguay* (1754) which filters the Jesuit 'Cartas Anuas' through a haze of awe and adulation; an anonymous Jesuit chronicle of 1600 which alludes to the episode; and a first-hand account by the bishop of Tucumán's agent.¹⁷ Lives get blurred in these tellings; in del Techo and Lozano, *historia* shades into fable. For both, the story comes alive as the ship transporting the Jesuits to Buenos Aires enters Rio de la Plata. Suddenly, English 'pirates' attack. Lozano introduces them as Queen Elizabeth's 'thieving vassals', robbing their way around the globe:

mientras su infame Reyna Isabela divertia en amores, y en derramar, qual Harpya cruelissima, sangre de Catholicos en su Reyno, teatro abominable de la Heregia.

while their infamous queen ... amused herself in amours and, cruel Harpy that she was, in spilling the blood of Catholics in the abominable theatre of heresy that was her realm.¹⁸

Once aboard the Jesuits' boat, the pirates pillage a cache of communion hosts blessed by the pope; one stomps on the *agnus dei*. Fr Ortega grabs the blasphemer by the leg who, unsteady with drink, slips and bangs his foot. His shipmates throw Ortega overboard and, outraged to find one of the queen's 'subjects' in the vestments of her *capitales enemigos*, they threaten to do the same with O'Fihily. But just then the 'malignant postule' that had formed on the drunken blasphemer's foot starts to spread through his entire body. In panic, his shipmates amputate the foot. But within twenty-four hours he is dead. This self-evidently miraculous intervention chastens the heretics and they tow the Jesuits south towards the Straits of Magellan. In those icy latitudes, they strip the evangelists' boat of tiller, riggings and sails and, in what could be a topos from an early Irish voyage tale, they set it adrift. In the manner of an *immram*, too, fate takes command and the little boat sails serenely into the harbour of Buenos Aires.¹⁹ In all this time we hear only one word from O'Fihily. The anonymous chronicler recounts that the pirates nearly hanged him from a yard-arm when they heard him speaking a word of English, *como el Padre era de Escosia* [since the priest was Scottish].²⁰ The bishop of Tucumán's agent never mentions him. He flickers into existence only as an essentially anonymous *exemplum* of Jesuit heroism.

After a crossing so saturated with the marvellous, re-entering the ordinary was never assured and accounts of the Jesuits' progress overland continued to participate in a discourse of wonder. Having arrived 'almost naked' in Buenos Aires, they walk 120 leagues to Córdoba, seat of the bishop of Tucumán. They traverse not so much a physical landscape as a world poised on the edges of extinction. They are given an escort because

à la sazón todo estaba poblado de Infieles, que consumieron después la codicia, y malos tratamientos de los Españoles, y no han quedado de aquellas poblaciones, ni vestigios, ni aun los nombres.²¹

in that time, the whole place was occupied by the Infidels, whom greed and the ill-treatment of the Spanish would afterwards consume [lit. the Infidels who consumed afterwards greed ...], so that nothing has survived of those people, no trace, not even their names.

This is a world not just at the boundaries of the known but at one of its vanishing points. Lozano's syntactical sleight-of-hand sets the reader's coordinates spinning. The original Spanish, reversing the conventional subject-verb-object word order, trips us into assuming that the *Infieles* will do the eating – that cannibals ply the road to Córdoba – only to up-end

such expectations: here, it is Europeans who eat Indians. This is a world upside-down, where ‘*Antipodes* in Shoes, / Have shod their *Heads* in their *Canoos*’.²²

The onward peregrinations of the Jesuits continued to press against the boundaries of the known. From Córdoba they walked to Santiago del Estero, to study the language of their new mission, Tonacote. But their instructor fell ill and O’Fihily and his companions sought permission to travel to Paraguay because the indigenous language, Guarani, was cognate with Tupi which they already knew *muito bem* from Brazil where they previously evangelised.²³ As O’Fihily and Ortega struck out north-east from Asunción, becoming the first Jesuits to enter the province of Paraguay, the sense of going beyond the known world intensified. They traversed the jungle on foot and paddled upstream in canoes; they went from village to Indian village, ‘to the ultimate bounds of the Crown of Castile’s dominions.’²⁴ After seven years on their own, O’Fihily and Ortega received a visitation from the mother-house in Peru: it took the visitants two months to travel the 200 leagues from Asunción to the two Jesuits’ *misión*, crossing swollen rivers, ‘an interminable lake, or an immense sea, from which nothing could be seen but water and sky ... marshes ... swamps in which the mules sank up to their ears’; they arrived on the feast of the Epiphany, to witness O’Fihily and Ortega’s *obras maravillosas*.²⁵

What the Jesuit accounts present – and from Córdoba on, we rely exclusively on them – is not just a geography of extremity but the performance of marvels commensurate with such physical exorbitance. O’Fihily and Ortega are merely ciphers in an eye-watering arithmetic of conversion: in forty days (Christological echoes abound) in 1590 alone, they perform 1,000 baptisms, hear 1,500 confessions, and celebrate 140 marriages.²⁶ The adulatory imprecision of hagiography privileges the after-sheen of achievement over the actual texture of what must have been profoundly complex processes; its recourse to metaphor abstracts not only the mechanics of catechesis but the humanity and agency of all the actors. The two missionaries, Lozano tells us, converted ‘innumerable Infidels, polishing minds that hadn’t been broken in, and domesticating the untamed natives.’²⁷ Apart from one cacique’s daughter rich enough to earn a fleeting mention for endowing the Jesuits’ first church, the Guarani are utterly undifferentiated. Only rarely do they achieve even the visibility of the exotic, as when the two Jesuits encounter a ‘barbarous’ tribe who ‘sing to the sound of instruments little pleasing to the ear’. They are ‘demented by the Devil with mad persuasion’; their cacique is ‘naked, made grotesque

by the various dyes and colours with which he painted his body and face'; his hair grows down to his knees and he wears a head-dress of feathers. But O'Fihily and Ortega

dieron à enterder la astucia, con que Satanàs los tenia reducidos à aquella vida de brutos, para tenerlos mas lexos de su mayor bien, y arrastrarlos al abysmo de penas sempiternas.

gave him to understand the trickery with which Satan had reduced them to that brutish life, to keep them away from their best interests and to drag them into an abyss of sempiternal pain.²⁸

This encounter, between Counter-Reformation militants and Guarani hunter-gatherers, brings us to a limit-point between two irreconcilable understandings of the world. In keeping with the adulatory narrative of inexorable conversion, Lozano says nothing about how, precisely, the cacophonous tribesmen were 'given to understand' the tenets of Tridentine Catholicism. All we know is that 350 Guarani shuffled off to take their place in a new *reducción* and the two priests 'made a short catechism which contained only what was strictly necessary for saving one's soul'.²⁹ The bare-bones instrumentality of the catechism is telling. Melià and Nagel show how the '*Reducción*' of the Guaranis was, above all, a huge linguistic enterprise which entailed the profound 'reduction' of the Guarani language itself, shrinking it down grammatically, syntactically, discursively and culturally to the evangelising needs of the missionaries.³⁰ The new converts appear, in their reduced state, like 'living portraits of death, or lively skeletons'.³¹ In her analysis of *Eliza Lynch*, Pat Coughlan shows how the novel's emphasis on food, eating and 'the irreducibility of the body', on moments of 'dissociated and discrete' sensation, power Enright's construction of a fractured, postmodern subjectivity.³² The construction of premodern, hagiographical subject-hood works in precisely the opposite direction. The wonder-tale quality of the Jesuit accounts means that there are no 'living portraits' of O'Fihily, no flesh-and-blood counterpoint behind the performance of the miraculous feat. He functions in these '*Historias de la Compañía*' like one of the emblematic characters in the didactic pageants which he himself used as a tool of evangelisation.³³ If, in the postmodern construction of identity, 'metonymy is always poised to become metaphor', in hagiography the subject is always already metaphorised.³⁴ O'Fihily's identity migrates onto a pasteboard stereotype of Ignacian Christian militancy. He and Ortega are '*Soldados de Christo*', two 'unbeaten champions to fight the battles of

the Lord'; 'like valiant soldiers, they return triumphant, rich in the spoils of so many heathens captured for the Gospel'.³⁵ Interchangeable ciphers in a godly conquest, they exist only by analogy: they are 'like two drops of water in dry land' or 'two Angels come from the sky ... flying from place to place like speedy seraphim'.³⁶

The O'Fihily who left Limerick in 1568 passed through successive *liminae*: through the Pórtico da Gloria of the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, through rites of spiritual passage in the South Atlantic, across the linguistic boundaries of Irish, English, Latin, Spanish, Tonocote and Tupi-Guarani, before being finally apotheosised through hagiography. He is like a figure deliquescing in the shimmers of a heat-haze. But just once, in 1601, in his fifty-second year, we hear from him directly. The occasion is a long, impassioned letter which he wrote to the superior general asking that the Brazilian province take over the Paraguayan mission from the Peruvian authorities who no longer have the manpower to administer it. O'Fihily writes from Asunción, in a time of dissolution and disillusionment. All the other Jesuits have been recalled from Paraguay. Only he, 'suffering from a painful illness', has been left behind by Divine Providence – left, Lozano complacently intones, to 'minister to innumerable souls and numerous tribes'.³⁷ But O'Fihily's voice, when it comes, is neither the voice of an angel nor of a champion in the lists. It is a voice of despair:

Así quedamos sin favor, remedio, sin ayuda, sin compañeros, desconsolados, tristes, que Dios sabe qué será de nos.³⁸

Here we are without favour or remedy, without help, without comrades, sad and disconsolate, so that God alone knows what will become of us.

His text continues to screen off the Guarani behind metaphors: they are 'ripe corn' (*mies*) or 'fruit' harvested by priestly labourers (p. 72). But in petitioning on their behalf, O'Fihily gives us the different perspective of one well advanced on what he calls 'this pilgrimage' (*esta peregrinación*). Left 'stripped of all human solace in this land' (*desamparados de todo consuelo humano en esta tierra*), he has come up against the limits of language. What he has to say cannot be conveyed:

hay tanto que escribir a V.P. de estas cosas, que había menester mucho papel y un buen escribano, y no se puede escribir todo: "quoniam dies mali sunt" y suceden naufragios a las veces, a las cartas. Y escribimos

unos y otros a los provinciales de Perú y no hay remedio, más que consolarnos con palabras.

there is so much to write about these things ... that it would need much paper and a good scrivener, and one cannot write everything: *quoniam dies mali sunt* and sometimes letters are shipwrecked. And we write to the provincials in Peru and [they offer] no solution, except to console us with words (p. 71).

He is so far away, unable to say 'face to face' ('*cara a cara*') what needs to be said. He has written often, never knowing whether his letters arrive. A sense of failure stalks his words: the enterprise to which he has given so many years 'is being lost' ('*se va perdiendo*', p. 71). His plea is bounded by an awareness of death: '*morir*' and '*muertos*' echo through his text. Even if reinforcements were to come from Peru, a five-month walk away, they would arrive 'already half-dead' ('*ya medio muertos*', p. 70); he himself may die ('*yo muriera*') before the hoped-for answer comes (p. 72).

In 1620, Thomas Shelton, a Dublin recusant who had fled, first, to Hugh O'Neill's protection in Ulster and thence into exile in Antwerp, published *The History of the Valorous & Witty Knight-Errant Don Quixote of the Mancha*, the first English translation of *Don Quixote* (Part 1). Shelton's translation is wry, lively and fast-paced, as we see from his telling of the deleterious consequences of Señor Quijada's addiction to chivalric romances:

In resolution, he plunged himself so deeply in his reading of these bookes, as he spent many times in the Lecture of them whole dayes and nights; and in the end, through his little sleepe and much reading, he dried vp his braines in such sort as he lost wholly his iudgment. His fantasie was filled with those things that he read, of enchantments, quarrels, battels, challenges, wounds, woings, loues, tempests, and other impossible follies. And these toyes did so firmly possesse his imagination with an infallible opinion, that all that Machina of dreamed inuentions which he read was true, as he accounted no History in the world to be so certaine and sincere as they were.³⁹

One of the Don's favourites – and, therefore, one of the principal villains of the piece – was Bernardo del Carpio who 'slew the enchanted Roland in Roncesvalles'. By a curious coincidence, one of Shelton's fellow exiles came to be known as 'Bernardo del Carpio' by the Portuguese whom he met

on the Amazon: this Bernardo del Carpio from County Clare returns us to South America as the site where ‘apparently solid European systems of order’ melt away; but, this time, it produces not a dissolution of the self but its reinvention. In the mid-1630s, one ‘Don Bernardo Obrien del Carpio of the noble house of Thomond’ petitioned the king of Spain.⁴⁰ O’Brien was a fabulist of the contact zone, a self-penned *picaro* who invented an identity for himself much more robust than the hagiographical commonplaces foisted on O’Fihily. In his *petición*, O’Brien recalls finding himself, aged seventeen, in London when he received news that his father’s three castles had been attainted and granted to English settlers. Reminding us that the push of exile and the pull of wanderlust can be hard to disentangle, O’Brien jumped at the chance which dispossession offered to travel and see ‘new things’ (*novedades*), sailing to the Amazon with Sir Henry Roe.⁴¹ O’Brien, eleven other Irishmen and four English-Catholic servants disembarked 60 leagues up the Amazon to establish a trading post. Joyce Lorimer, in *English and Irish Settlement on the River Amazon*, argues that ‘it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Irish were, on the whole, more efficient in their approach to exploiting Amazonia than the English’: whereas the English were intent on creating a monopoly, the Irish wove in and out between the many communities jockeying for position on its shifting frontier. They gained that mobility, she argues, by knowing the local languages and by being better attuned to the changing political realities of the region.⁴²

Pat Coughlan argues that Eliza Lynch’s experimental performances of identity are possible precisely because she is linguistically ‘unfixed [and] floating’:

She knows several languages, which gives her potential leverage in terms of her own identity and perceptions, making her an interpreter between forms of difference themselves irreconcilable and an expert at passing between systems.⁴³

O’Brien is a kindred linguistic chameleon. His *petición*, written in Castilian, testifies to the plasticity of reality for one inhabiting the borderland where fact met fantasy; as he crossed the borders between languages, solidities dissolved. Though he sailed to the Americas under an English flag, he returned, three years later, with 16,000-escudos worth of cotton and tobacco, on the Dutch fleet; he went back to the Amazon in 1629 as captain general, pilot and interpreter of a Dutch expedition. He then switched sides again, by signing over the fort and followers which he held for the

Dutch and English ‘heretics’ to the Spanish, drawing up the documents conveying ownership in Portuguese and Irish (p. 96). He hoodwinked the English by communicating in Irish with a compatriot in their ranks; and he acted as ‘*intérprete*’ between the Spanish and Portuguese (p. 99). But it was O’Brien’s command of Amazonian languages which secured his passage to a world stranger still. Sir Henry Roe’s ship had first made landfall at Sipinipoca on the mouth of the Amazon and O’Brien and his companions made friends (‘*amistad*’) with the villagers, using sign language until they mastered Arrua, and, subsequently, Arawak (p. 98). Encountering a canoe-load of fishermen off Surinam, he greeted them in ‘*diferentes lenguas de Indios*’ before conversing with them in Arawak (p. 98). Later, when an alliance of convenience with the Portuguese broke down, they sent him into exile (‘*destierro*’) among the Cururi cannibals (p. 97). He does no more than mention that they eat human flesh (‘*comen carne humana*’) and quickly settles in to learning their language and finding out all he can of their ‘*medicinas y secretos*’ (p. 97). (When, subsequently, he found himself in Caracas during an outbreak of the plague, he cured more than forty people with native herbs and drugs.)

After his first year in the Amazon, he and ‘four Irish scholars and Latinists’ and fifty Indian guides, helpers and interpreters (‘*lenguas*’) paddled 700 leagues up-river. They came to a region inhabited only by women. These were the *Cuña Atenare*, he told the king, the ‘manly women’ (‘*mugeres varoniles*’) whom the Christians called ‘Amazons’ (p. 92). A magic realist *avant la lettre*, O’Brien crosses between myth and truth-claims. The *Cuña Atenare* may be characters out of romance – they have very small white breasts like men, treated ‘*con artificios*’ so as not to grow – but they are real in his narrative. More importantly, these are not the Amazons of misogynistic European tradition.⁴⁴ South America, Coughlan argues, provided Enright with a perspective from which she can mount a ‘powerful interrogation ... of the gender-system of the West’. In one way, the ‘counterweighting’ of colonially inflected prejudice provided by Eliza Lynch’s ‘quickness of feeling’ is interestingly anticipated in O’Brien’s encounter with the Amazons.⁴⁵ Their right breasts may be doctored ‘in order to shoot arrows’ – he can confirm that ‘the left breasts are as large as other women’s’ – but these are not the belligerent harridans of legend. Instead, O’Brien recounts an irenic exchange marked by reciprocal courtesy and mutual self-interest. Hearing that their queen, *Cuña Muchu*, is ‘at that time on an island in the river’, he sends

in his canoe an Indian woman as an ambassadress (*embaxadora*), and she carried with her a mirror and a Dutch linen shirt as a gift and sample of the merchandise he was carrying, and orders that she should say that he had not gone to harm her; rather if it would please her that she should look at what he was sending to her, and if she was pleased, that he might go and speak with her; and that she should send him hostages.

With the courteous circumlocution of O'Brien's diplomatic language out of the way, they can get down to brass tacks. Cuña Muchu

sent him three of the most distinguished of her women and asked him to go and speak with her. He did so. She asked him if it was he who had sent a gift. He said yes. She asked him what he wanted. He replied peace and permission to pass through her kingdom and to trade in it. She replied that it was granted to him and gave three of her slaves in exchange for trade goods (*mercaderías*, p. 92).⁴⁶ He had her dressed in the Dutch linen shirt, of which she was very proud, and at the end of the week, when he took his leave promising to return, she and her subjects signified that they were grieved by his departure (p. 266).

While O'Brien gives us no sense that the 'grief' was reciprocal, there is a striking mutuality about their self-interest. Three slaves the richer, he moves on to spend a further three years exploring the Amazon and attracting 4,000 Indian warriors '*a su devoción*' ('under his control') (p. 93). When he sailed back to Europe with the Dutch flotilla, he used some of the profit from selling his cotton and tobacco to secure his father's release from prison and to buy back a sixth of his land.

In the end, the identity of the chameleon-exile, dispersed through so much role-playing, so many tall tales, hangs in doubt. His genius at navigating shifting alliances in the contact zone becomes a liability when petitioning Philip IV: a life of trimming had to be reinvented as a story of unwavering loyalty to Spain and the Catholic Church; his *petición* recasts his recent negotiations with the Amsterdam Company and, subsequently, the London Guiana Company as, in fact, manoeuvres designed to wriggle *out* of acting for heretics. So, he tells the king, he had been on the Spanish *flota* bound for Seville when he was captured by the Dutch. Examined by the authorities back in Holland, he escapes their further attention by pretending to be a Londoner. He walks around the streets of Amsterdam, conversing '*en Indio*' with, variously, a '*renegado*' and the Indian '*muchacho*'

(‘boy’) – the son of an Amazonian chief – who is his constant companion (p. 101).⁴⁷ He makes his way to London and is poised to lead another expedition to Guiana – until the English require him to swear allegiance to the crown. Unwilling to make a ‘conquest for heretics’, he is kitted out in the habit of Santiago by the Spanish ambassador and prepares to sail for Spain. He sends a Basque boy ahead with books and papers which include his ‘*descripción y cosmographía*’ of the Amazon, written in Irish (p. 105). But the boy evanesces and, with him, the cosmography of a realm situated half-way between exploitation and the imagination. If O’Fihily’s letter uncovers a redoubt of selfhood that resists inscription, hagiographic or otherwise, O’Brien’s lost ‘*cosmographía*’ perfectly emblematises the space which its writer himself occupied: a space of self-invention where identity is suspended between the colonial victimhood of a dispossessed Clareman and the voracious imaginings of a journeyman colonist on the make. Ultimately, the liminality that attaches to both O’Fihily and O’Brien is narratival as much as geographical: the spaces of expression available to – or about – both, whether hagiographic or picaresque, rendered the truth of their peregrinations inaccessible and accounts of two very real lives strangely fictional. But behind form lies politics and, so far, this essay has taken the form of a biographical quest. But, as we will shortly see, the biographical impulse – *Finding Fr Field*; the picaresque adventures of a mercantile freebooter with a *chanson-de-geste* name – privileges the life of the one over the lives of the many.

In the words of Fr Lozano, O’Fihily and his two companions struck out for the Paraguayan mission ‘like the greedy merchant who, weighing up the profit by sight, put more back into the business’ (*como el Mercader codicioso, que al ver al ojo la ganancia, se empeña mas en el negocio*).⁴⁸ To think about the Jesuits, in line with their own metaphor, as covetous merchants investing in ‘*el negocio de ... conversion*’, ‘the business of conversion’, allows us to move away from thinking, biographically, about the good – or bad – that they did and to consider instead the *goods* that they bore with them.⁴⁹ One of the things they carried was the miraculous severed head of one of St Ursula’s martyred virgins. Fr Lozano takes up the story in his account of the pirates’ attack:

Fue el caso, que entre las demás cosas dignas de veneración, conducian estos Misioneros una Cabeza de las once mil Virgines, para colocarla con la mayor decencia en el primer Templo, que erigiessen en el Tucumàn. Al reconocer, que las Naves de los Pyratas apressarian la

Nao Portuguesa, escondieron tan preciosa Joya en parte donde no la pudiesen encontrar los pèrfidos Hereges, y no quedasse expuesta à algún desacato, si cayesse en sus manos, ò la lanzassen al Mar, donde fuesse pasto de sus monstrous, tan estimable tesoro. No diò con el la diligencia codiciosa de los Pyratas: ya à la verdad ni podia dár, porque invisiblemente se desapareció la Reliquia ... sin duda no quiso el Cielo fuesse el despojo Sagrado de aquella Virgin testigo de los horrosos sacrilegious, que cometieron sus Compatriotas: con que al passo que les llegò al alma à los Missioneros pèrdida tan considerable, tuvieron materia de consuelo, venerando los profundos Jucios del Altissimo, que obrò tal maravilla.⁵⁰

It so happened that, among other venerable objects, the Missionaries carried the Head of one of the 11,000 virgins, planning to place it, with all due solemnity, in the first church which they would erect in Tucumán. When they saw the Pirates' carrack bearing down on their Portuguese *Nao*, they hid the precious Jewel where the perfidious Heretics couldn't find it and where it wouldn't be exposed to contumely of the kind that would happen if that inestimable treasure were to fall into their hands, or be thrown into the Sea as grist to their monstrous mill. For all their greedy diligence, the Pirates couldn't find it: nor, to tell the truth, had they any hope of doing so because, invisibly, the Relic had disappeared ... No doubt, Heaven didn't want the Sacred booty of that Virgin to witness whatever horrific sacrilege her Compatriots might commit: so that, despite the soul-destroying blow which such a loss entailed for the Missionaries, they had cause for consolation, seeing the deep judgement of the Most High who worked such a miracle.

With Lozano fixated on the miraculous, we have to go to the bishop of Tucumán's agent, our one contemporary source for the voyage, for a more materialist telling. He had sailed north from Buenos Aires to São Salvador de Bahia to collect the Jesuits. But he had other passengers and a substantial cargo to load onto the *San Antonio* and the smaller, thirty-five-ton *nao* which had been built to the bishop's specifications in Bahia. His inventory of the lading makes no mention of a virgin martyr's miracle-working death's-head; instead, he records only 'saints' relics, among them 'big bones'.⁵¹ Nor is that all he sees. Del Techo and Lozano focused exclusively on the Jesuits and their holy goods; the anonymous Jesuit chronicler mentions that,

eventually, the pirates cut the five Jesuits adrift ‘with the rest’, ‘*con los demás*’, but gives no hint as to the identity of those others.⁵² The bishop’s agent, however, keeps his eye firmly on the lading:

el padre armiño ... diose á cada uno de los padres á costa del Reverendisimo de Tucuman, trenta mill maravediz para el vestuario y caliz, y trayan muchos libros y muchos rreliquias de santos, entrellos huesos y muchos anusdeies, muchos ymagenes, y diego de palma carillo y el padre francisco salzedo trayan de las cosas de la tierra, las que heran menester para esta, como son campanas, yerro, acero, calderas de cobre vaçias, peroles para hazer azucar, y negros para el servicio del Reverendisimo Obispo; y finalmente venian en los navios cantidad de Hacienda, de mas de cinquenta mill pesos, asi de su Señoria, como de particulares, y de diego de palma como muy solene presente de esclavos y otras cosas que el governador general [Manuel Telles Barreto] enviaba al Reverendisimo de Tucumán.

Father Armiño ... gave 30,000 maravedis from His Reverence the Bishop of Tucumán’s account to each of the priests, for clothing and chalices, and they brought on lots of books and lots of saints’ relics, bones among them, and lots of rosary beads, lots of holy images, and Diego de Palma Carillo and Father Francisco Salzedo brought on farm produce which is necessary for where they’re going, as are bells, iron, steel, empty copper cauldrons, pots for making sugar, and blacks for the service of the Reverend Bishop. And finally, a quantity of revenue was brought on board, more than 50,000 pesos, both from His Lordship and other individuals and from Diego de Palma, as well as a very formal gift of slaves and other things which the governor general was sending to the very Reverend Bishop of Tucumán.

In this very different economy where miraculous relics become merely ‘bones’, a whole other ‘*negocio*’ takes shape in the hold – the terrible ‘*ganancia*’ of slavery. Bahia was not just a quayside where six expectant Jesuits waited for passage to their new mission; it was, along with Pernambuco and Rio de Janeiro, the centre of the Brazilian–Angolan slave trade.⁵³ In the hull of the *San Antonio*, the Green Atlantic suddenly comes face-to-face with the Black Atlantic; saving souls and enslaving bodies set sail in the same boat.⁵⁴ For Paul Gilroy, the ship is the ‘first of the novel chronotopes’ which enables us to ‘rethink modernity via the history of the Black Atlantic’; ‘concentrated within [the] timbers’ of the *San Antonio*,

we find, to paraphrase Peter Linebaugh, ‘all the contradictions’ of the intersecting *negocios* of mercantile capitalism and colonial conversion.⁵⁵ They are concentrated, too, in the person of the first bishop of Tucumán (from 1582–90), Francisco de Victoria, who, having failed as a silver merchant in Potosí, became a Dominican friar.⁵⁶ In one voyage, Bishop de Victoria brought together Jesuit evangelisation and the trade in south-west African bodies. If the bishop’s manoeuvring brought the institutions of *reducciones* and slavery to Argentina in the same boat, we have to ask how coincidental that simultaneous introduction was. Though the English pirates made off with pots, bells and dark iron, the agent tells us, they had, reluctantly, to leave the slaves behind with the Jesuits because they did not have food or water for them.⁵⁷ And while he later informs us that the bishop of Paraguay gave blankets to the Jesuits to cover their nakedness once they landed in Buenos Aires and that he donated sackcloth to two or three ‘decent’ men, we hear no more of the ‘*piezas de esclavos*’, ‘units of slaves’, as they make their unclothed way to Córdoba and the slave auction of Potosí and, ultimately, servitude in the bishop of Tucumán’s vast *encomienda*.⁵⁸

Later on, during an outbreak of the plague, O’Fihily and Fr Solano, his Catalan colleague, became ‘everyone’s slaves in order to save everyone’, ‘*esclavos de todos, para salvarlos à todos*’.⁵⁹ But they were metaphorical slaves in a world of real – and really occluded – slavery. O’Fihily himself would argue that the Jesuit mission in Paraguay provided the ‘only refuge and protection’ (*refugio y amparo*) for the ‘helpless souls of the pagans’.⁶⁰ But while the *reducciones* unquestionably saved countless Guarani from the excesses of Spanish colonisation, ‘*la Espiritual Conquista de las almas*’, ‘the spiritual conquest of souls’ which they advanced was inextricably bound up with the secular *conquista*.⁶¹ Meanwhile, further north, there was nothing in the least metaphorical about the three slaves which Cuña Muchú bestowed on Bernardo O’Brien in an island on the Amazon; and an acceptance of – and willingness to profit from – slavery is taken for granted in his text. When, for example, he negotiated the surrender of Tauregue Fort with Pedro Texeira, he requested that ‘the Irish and other foreigners with them should have the freedom of their lives, slaves (of whatever nation), free Indian servants and goods’.⁶² Moreover, when he ‘obliged’ (*obligó*) the Indians ‘*a su devoción*’ (which can be translated as ‘under his thumb’) ‘to cultivate tobacco and cotton for him, and to give him the food and drink of that country’; or when he offered Texeira ‘lands and Indians to cultivate tobacco’, we are left to wonder just how ‘free’ those ‘*Indios libres de su servicio y devoción*’ actually were.⁶³

When, years before, in the mouth of the Rio de la Plata, the English pirates found a cask of tin *ex votos* which the Jesuits intended for the ‘*yndios*’, they smelted them down and turned the holy images into shot for their arquebuses.⁶⁴ The distinction between the sacred and the profane melted very easily. The distinction between doing good works and turning people into goods, between fleeing oppression at home and imposing it overseas, was equally plastic. The ‘innocent’ ethnocentrism⁶⁵ behind Irish studies’ fascination with the Irish abroad is usefully challenged by an alertness to the unnarrated lives that intersected with theirs – lives which complicate and sometimes reverse the narratives (and the vector of victimhood) with which we are more comfortable. Bernardo O’Brien was very clear about why he first set out with the Amazon Company:

de la qual terra se tenía noticia, y mucha fama de ser buena y de muchos provechos, y no estava poblada antes por gente blanca.

that land had, by report, the reputation of being rich and very profitable and it had not been settled before by white people.⁶⁶

In the ‘Green Atlantic’, the Irish did not have to ‘become white’.⁶⁷ As Bernardo O’Brien knew from the outset, and Thomas O’Fihily was forcibly reminded on a hot quayside in São Salvador de Bahia, they were always, already, *gente blanca*.