



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Troubled Formations
Sexuality and the Irish Catholic
***Bildungsroman*, 1916-1965**

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Summary

This dissertation studies the historical development of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* from James Joyce to Edna O'Brien and John McGahern. Specifically, this study is focused on the construction of sexuality in this genre. The novels are therefore read in conjunction with those discourses of sexuality that were circulating in Irish Catholic culture between the First World War and the Second Vatican Council.

The first chapter reconsiders the concentration on issues of public morality that characterised Irish Catholicism in the early twentieth century, and most acutely in the two decades after independence. In the second chapter, I discuss the epistemic shift in the understanding of modern sexuality that was occasioned by the historical emergence of sexology and psychoanalysis, before moving on to develop a close reading of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916). The third chapter contains close readings of two novels by Kate O'Brien, and locates O'Brien's narrative aesthetic, and the conception of sexuality that informs that aesthetic, within the broader historical context of Irish intellectual and political culture in the 1930s and 1940s.

The next chapter analyses advice literature produced for Irish teenagers between the 1940s and 1960s and I argue that this literature exemplifies a significant shift in Irish Catholic thinking on sexuality. The writings of Maura Laverty and Patrick Kavanagh are discussed in Chapter Five. Their rural *bildungsromane* are read as innovative permutations within the development of this genre and as complex interventions into mid-century debates about sexuality and Irish underdevelopment. Finally, Chapter Six offers close readings of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-64) and John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965). This chapter locates the distinctive narrative aesthetic and plotting of these *bildungsromane* within the history of the genre, and also reconsiders the critical consensus about the relationship between these novels and Irish modernisation.

Contents

- Introduction: The Irish Catholic *Bildungsroman*, 1916-1965 1
1. Growing Pains: Sexuality, Irish Moral Politics and Capitalist Crisis, 1900-1940 39
2. Going to Tara via Vienna: Joyce and the Freudian *Bildungsroman* 85
3. Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent 124
4. Married Bliss: Sexuality, Catholicism and Modernisation in Ireland, 1940-1965 166
5. Sex and the Country: the rural *bildungsromane* of Maura Laverty and Patrick Kavanagh 203
6. Arrested Development: Sexuality, Trauma and History in John McGahern and Edna O'Brien 241
- Bibliography 282

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Introduction

The Irish Catholic *Bildungsroman*, 1916-1965

1. Breaking the Silence: Sex, Repression and the Irish Writer

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) Joyce describes Stephen Dedalus leaving his family home to begin the slow perambulation through Dublin's city streets that will take him to the university. As he walks away from the house, Stephen "heard a mad nun screeching in the nun's madhouse beyond the wall: 'Jesus! O Jesus! Jesus!'" In response, the young man "shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on...his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness."¹ This brief encounter, in which the embryonic consciousness of a young writer registers the cries of "an unseen maniac" sequestered in an institution that is both religious and psychiatric, can serve as a parable for the prevailing conception of the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland. Given the novel's meticulous elaboration of the psychic effects which his religiously-inspired sexual guilt has on the teenage Stephen, it is inevitable that most readers will read the nun's insanity as a function of her enforced celibate state. The novel invites us to assume that she had to so thoroughly repress her sexual instinct, in pursuit of her religious vocation, that she was driven into this inverted mental world where she has become a parody of a nun, a woman whose prayers are desperate cries. If the figure inside the walls embodies the dysfunctional fusion of religion and repression that has characterised Irish sexuality, the figure outside can stand for the relationship of Irish literature to that history. Because of his own state of alienation, "his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness," the young artist feels himself to be in an analogous position to the physically and psychically entrapped nun. He hears her demented cries more acutely and perceptively than others, and is then able to creatively channel those cries into artistic expression. This will be his contribution to freeing himself and his society from the nun's fate.

The object of this dissertation is to investigate the construction of sexuality in the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* in the period between the First World War and the Second Vatican Council. During this time the genre, one of the most prominent

¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [ed. R.B. Kershner] (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993 [1916]), 154.

and consistently popular forms in twentieth-century Irish writing, undergoes a number of significant mutations as it is taken up by successive generations of leading Irish writers. From Joyce to Edna O'Brien, this genre holds an especially prominent place in Irish culture. Notable versions of the *bildungsroman* have been produced by both women and men and by writers from the urban bourgeoisie and from the rural small farmer class. And in the queer *bildungsromane* of Kate O'Brien and Brendan Behan one finds the literary precursors of the lesbian and gay 'coming out' novel of more recent times. One rather crude measurement of the genre's historical centrality is its prominence among the most controversial book bans imposed by the post-independence state. The banning of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941) for a brief, allusive reference to homosexuality, and the struggles of Edna O'Brien and John McGahern in the 1960s are defining moments in the dismal history of Irish literary censorship. Looking beyond censorship by the state to those historical instances of local communities reacting angrily and imposing guerrilla censorship on books, the *bildungsroman* is again to the fore: the local controversies generated by Brinsley McNamara's *The Valley of the Squinting Window* (1918) in Delvin, County Westmeath, by Maura Laverty's *Never No More* (1942) in Rathangan, County Kildare and by Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) in Tuamgraney, County Clare are all cases in point.² We might also note the irony that Patrick Kavanagh's tragic epic of sexual torment and rural decay, *The Great Hunger* (1942), was never proscribed under the literary censorship, but his more comic rural *bildungsroman*, *Tarry Flynn* (1948), was briefly banned.³

Thematically, the *bildungsroman* has been to the fore in the exploration of human sexuality by Irish writers. Formally, this genre symbolically connects a narrative of

² Padraic O'Farrell, *The Burning of Brinsley MacNamara* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1990). Catriona Clear, "'I can talk about it, can't I?': the Ireland Maura Laverty Desired 1942-46", *Women's Studies*, 30 (2000), 819-835, 820. Julia Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990), 72.

³ The first published extracts of *The Great Hunger* appeared in a special Irish issue of the English literary journal, *Horizon* in January 1942. Copies of the journal were seized by the Gardai. However, this was done under the political censorship enacted by the government as part of its policy of wartime neutrality, rather than under the literary censorship laws. When the full poem was published by Cuala Press a few months later it escaped the literary censorship. Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 183-189. See also, Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007), 184-186. See Chapter Five.

self-development with a narrative of historical development and therefore foregrounds those critical ideological connections between sexuality, subjectivity and modernity. In the *bildungsroman* Irish writers have regularly deployed sexuality as a symbol of alienation and of the disjunction between individual freedom and an oppressive social order. As Seamus Deane has observed, Irish writers in the twentieth-century characteristically turned to sexuality as the crucial site on which to wage the battle for individual freedom against the suffocating conformity of the post-independence society.⁴ This figure of the alienated Irish writer struggling to give voice to that which is silenced and charting with melancholy precision the psychic damage wrought by a repressive culture looms large in the narrative of twentieth-century Irish literary history. In particular, the imposition of literary censorship by the state between 1929 and 1967 has contributed hugely towards shaping this conception of the relationship between literature and sexual freedom in Irish culture. Marjorie Howes argues that one of the effects of the censorship on Irish writing from this era is that "sexuality is often represented in indirect and coded form, and is allied with secrecy and silence. At the same time, explicitness as such becomes an important issue, on both a formal and psychological level, particularly in prose works."⁵ The principle hermeneutic of Irish literary scholarship in relation to sexuality in twentieth century Irish writing has therefore been investigative; critics have conducted a process of decoding and deciphering to reveal how Irish writers negotiated and subverted this oppressive drive to stymie sexual discourse.⁶

In this thesis I intend to adopt a different approach to this history by locating the *bildungsroman* within a wider and shifting field of discourses of modern sexuality. Broadly, the discourses that I will discuss can be divided into two categories: those

⁴ Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 217. Seamus Deane, 'James Joyce' in Deane et al., (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Vol.III* (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 3.

⁵ Marjorie Howes, 'Public Discourse, Private Reflections 1916-1970' in Angela Bourke et al (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions, Vol. IV* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 2002), 929.

⁶ Eibhear Walshe, 'Introduction', in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 1-15. Gerardine Meaney, 'Engendering the Postmodern Canon? *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes IV and V*' in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St. Peter (eds.) *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), 15-30.

developed by the Catholic Church, which during the period concerned was the leading moral authority on sexuality in southern Ireland, and those that took their co-ordinates from psychoanalysis and the libidinal model of sexuality. Over the course of this historical period in Ireland, neither of these categories was fixed, monological or impermeable to the other. A conception of sexuality articulated in terms of an overriding need to preserve public morality dominated Roman Catholic conceptions of sexuality from the foundation of the state until the 1950s and beyond; however, in the period after World War II that discursive regime is increasingly contested by new Catholic discourses which stress the importance of intimacy, individual fulfilment and healthy sexual relationships so long as these are realised within marriage and family life. Similarly, just as Catholic discourses slowly evolved over the century, Irish novelists sought various means to merge the libidinal conception of sexuality and subject formation with an ethical framework that was distinctively indebted to Catholic theology. Charting the evolution of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* across the early and mid-twentieth century should therefore be a fruitful route into reconsidering both the history of sexuality and the relationship between literature and sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland.

2. Ireland, Catholicism and Sexuality: The Repressive Hypothesis

The work of the sociologist Tom Inglis offers what is widely regarded as the most sustained and theoretically developed account of the historical relationship between Catholicism and sexuality in modern Ireland. Drawing on the theories of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias, Inglis's *Moral Monopoly* (1987) charted the rise and decline of the Catholic Church as the hegemonic arbiter of Irish sexual morality from the mid-nineteenth to the late-twentieth century. More recently, his work has analysed the displacement of this earlier hegemonic regime by the forces of late capitalism and the repercussions of this seismic shift for Irish sexual culture in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century. This latter work includes: his study of the controversial introduction of a new sex education programme in Irish schools during the 1990s, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (1998); his analysis of one of the most infamous incidents in recent Irish history, *Truth, Power and Lies: Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies* (2003); and *Global Ireland*

(2008), which is an ethnographic study of the impact of globalisation on an Irish town.

In Inglis's account, the sexual culture that prevailed in Ireland for most of the twentieth century had its origins in an uneasy alliance between the British state and a resurgent, Ultramontantist Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. By conceding Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the British State had effectively admitted the defeat of one civilising mission, the desire to convert the Irish populace to Protestantism inaugurated in the era of early modern plantations. The introduction of the policy of denominational national education in the 1830s, through which control over primary education for the majority of the population was given to the Catholic Church, signalled the switch to a different approach to civilising and pacifying Ireland. Then, out of the catastrophe of the Famine and the decimation of the landless labouring class, on one side, and the collapse of the hegemony of the Ascendency landlord class on the other, a resurgent Irish Catholic petit-bourgeoisie began to mould itself into a ruling class. Adapting Elias's theoretical framework from *The Civilising Process* (1982), which had examined the role of this quest for bodily discipline and civility in the rise of the bourgeoisie in early modern Europe, Inglis argues that the assertion of hegemonic authority by the Irish Catholic petit-bourgeoisie primarily entailed a rigorous process of disciplining the minds and bodies of this newly dominant class. The pattern and texture of daily life were transformed, as new forms of diet, dress, popular culture and religious observance were introduced. The linguistic shift to Anglophone monolingualism, along with different ways of structuring time and space, all produced new patterns of regulation and new forms of subjectivity.⁷

Above all, as Inglis argues, clearly echoing Bourdieu and Elias, the formation of this new *habitus* involved "a transformation from open passionate bodies to closed, restrained bodies."⁸ He identifies two principle agents of this transformation. One was the Catholic clergy – the nuns and brothers who operated the education system and, most particularly, the priests who worked in parishes. The priest,

⁷ Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), [2nd edition], 102-157.

⁸ *Ibid*, 137.

whose own training now involved acquiring civility and manners, served as an exemplar of civilised deportment, and the plethora of new devotional practices were considerably more restrained and disciplined than the discredited wakes and patterns of the pre-Famine era. Most crucially, the Church sought to impose changes in marriage and sexual behaviour through “instilling shame and guilt about the body.”⁹ The chief mechanism for achieving this goal was controlling sexual knowledge. The Church developed a monopoly over such knowledge because of the grip it held on the education system and through the confessional. Sexual discourse was confined to an abstract, highly formalised language which prevented the laity from acquiring any “communicative competence” about sexuality. Thus, in Catholic Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century, “sexual morality became a major issue, but it was wrapped up in a veil of silence.” The other significant agents in this transformation were Irish mothers. In Inglis's view, the mother was the “organisational link between the Catholic Church and the individual. It was she who carried through the new moral and civil code from the church and school into the home. It was she who, through a variety of social and cultural practices which were handed down through generations from mother to daughter with the support of priest and Church, produced the Catholics of modern Ireland.”¹⁰ In this way, mother and priest formed an alliance, through which the civilising process was furthered and through which Irish women gained within the domestic realm the respect and prestige which they were denied in the public sphere.

Once the Catholic Church had consolidated its hold over Irish sexual morality in the mid to late-nineteenth century, this dominance remained largely unchallenged until the 1960s when Irish society began to secularise and embrace capitalist development. For Inglis, then, the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland is a narrative of two regimes. The distinguishing feature of the earlier regime was “a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed.” From the 1960s onwards, this was gradually replaced by an entirely different dispensation characterised by “a culture of consumption and self

⁹ Ibid, 138.

¹⁰ Ibid, 179.

indulgence in which the fulfilment of pleasures and desires is emphasised.”¹¹ There has been a subtle shift of emphasis in Inglis's account of this seismic shift. In his earlier work, particularly *Lessons in Irish Sexuality*, he foregrounded the role of the media in breaking the Church's monopoly over sexual knowledge and providing an alternative location of sexual discourse; “ending the silence on sex,” as he puts it.¹² As the language of his 2005 article suggests, Inglis has more recently stressed the role of late capitalist consumerism in radically reconstituting the Irish Catholic *habitus*. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, he contends, “the Irish way of being in the world is now structured by market and media forces which emphasis the importance of difference, self-realisation and continual self-transformation and which rarely emphasise the importance of self-denial and self-surrender.”¹³ Crucial to this metamorphosis of self-denial into self-realisation has been a transformation of the body, and how it is cared for and displayed. Irish people have, according to Inglis, “increasingly left aside their shy, awkward, demure, chaste bodies and embraced strong, confident, sexualised, disciplined bodies.”¹⁴

In *Global Ireland*, Inglis shares the unease common to most contemporary liberal commentators about the rampant materialism and the decline in social cohesion that has characterised Irish society in the past decade. There is a certain irony here since such concerns – as we will see in later chapters – had always been to the forefront of the Catholic discourses on sexuality throughout the twentieth century. In other words, the apparently anti-modern, illiberal Catholic discourses on sexuality that Inglis analyses register concerns about early twentieth-century capitalism of a kind that Inglis himself registers about the later twenty-first century ‘globalised’ version. The paradox for Inglis is that while late capitalism has liberated the Irish from older repressions the positive growth in “self-belief” has simultaneously made the Irish “more selfish.”¹⁵ Woven through his ethnographic account of a globalising society is an autobiographical account of his own struggle with the legacy of being raised in an emotionally repressed and physically

¹¹ Tom Inglis, ‘Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland,’ *Éire-Ireland*, 40 (2005), 9-37, 11.

¹² Tom Inglis, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), 38-39

¹³ Tom Inglis, *Global Ireland: Same Difference* (London: Routledge, 2008), 6-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 257-258.

undemonstrative Irish Catholic family in the 1950s, and in particular the effects of his difficult relationship with his devoutly religious mother.¹⁶ This painfully honest meditation on his own life story casts a revealing light on the passion that has driven Inglis's career as a historian of Irish sexuality. But weaving this confessional narrative through his account of recent Irish history also serves to mitigate any critical analysis of Irish capitalism. It means that a therapeutic narrative of history, in which modernisation has delivered enormous benefits in psychological and emotional well-being, is invariably delivered with a degree of emotional force that makes any political analysis of the potential costs of modernisation seem distinctly pallid and secondary.

Inglis's account of the history of sexuality in modern Ireland generally follows the contours of the developmentalist model of Irish modernisation, in which the comparatively smooth trajectory of the Anglophone metropole is contrasted with Ireland's jerky pattern of stagnation interspersed with bouts of accelerated change. In Inglis's historical narrative, Irish Catholicism was an agent of bourgeois development and modernisation in the mid-nineteenth century. However, he argues that in the twentieth century almost precisely the same ideological formation effectively acted as a stubborn brake on modernisation. Until the society and the economy were opened up in the 1960s, the effects of a puritanical and repressive attitude to sexuality were not confined to the realm of private and emotional life since these attitudes also informed an Irish Catholic *mentalité*, which in turn produced a society averse to risk-taking, entrepreneurship and economic development. In other words, the overdetermined repression of sexual desire generated a more pervasive repression of all desires and drives. As Inglis argues, "the traditional absence of entrepreneurs and people taking risks with capital in Ireland may be linked to...a morality propagated by the Church, in which individual satisfaction and pleasure were subdued through an inculcation of humility, shame and guilt."¹⁷

In *Preventing the Future*, Inglis's colleague Tom Garvin deploys the same explanatory model of Irish underdevelopment in the twentieth century. Garvin

¹⁶ Ibid, 1-5.

¹⁷ Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, 75-76.

blames a fusion of repressive Catholicism and 'redistributivist' nationalism for the peculiar psychological and cultural determinants of failed modernisation during the post-independence era.¹⁸ Politically, he argues, the new state, particularly once Fianna Fáil came to power, was primarily committed to a hopelessly traditional goal of an equitable, rural land-holding economy rather than to the dynamic pursuit of development through industrialisation. The economic effects of this failed policy, from the 1930s to the 1950s, were propounded by the inability of the political elite, predominantly educated by Catholic clergy, to recognise this failure for such a long time. This ideological blindness was rooted in a prevailing Catholic *mentalité* that was anti-modern and anti-development. The political inability to change tack, despite the obvious failure, was also due to this same *mentalité*, which inhibited the capacity to take risks and to make decisions at both an individual and a collective level.¹⁹ Historically, this is not a new argument. This idea that Irish Catholicism has undermined the formation of the psychological and cultural prerequisites required for capitalist development has been current among Irish intellectuals at least since Horace Plunkett's *Ireland in the New Century* (1905).²⁰

The significance of Inglis's work lies in its pioneering theoretical framework. Inglis combined Foucauldian concepts (discourse, the deployment of sexuality, the formation of the bourgeois subject) with Bourdieu's emphasis on social fields, cultural capital and the embodiment of power, the concept of *habitus*, to develop a new hermeneutic for studying the history of sexuality in Ireland.²¹ The value of this framework is that it allows us to think of sexuality in modern Ireland politically and historically, rather than as a 'natural' drive that was suppressed by a puritan 'culture'. Inglis's paradigm has been valuable to Irish studies because it allows scholars to locate sexuality within a complex amalgam of different fields: knowledge production, colonial and post-colonial state-formation, the pursuit of class hegemony and the formation of modern subjectivity.

¹⁸ Tom Garvin, *Preventing The Future: Why was Ireland so Poor for so Long?* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 25-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 104.

²⁰ Plunkett's views were challenged by a Catholic cleric, Michael O'Riordain, in his *Catholicity and Progress* (1906). On this controversy see Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 67-68.

²¹ Inglis discusses the theoretical co-ordinates of his work in his 'Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sexuality,' *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 7 (1997), 5-28.

However, one of the shortcomings of Inglis's work is that in some instances he seems to take too much from Foucault and in others he does not fully enough pursue the Foucauldian implications of his own model. Thus, while he offers a Foucauldian analysis of sexuality as productive and regulatory in nineteenth-century Ireland, he effectively returns to a repressive hypothesis to explain the twentieth century. In nineteenth-century Catholic Ireland, in Inglis's account, sexuality was being actively produced within a project of shaping modern bourgeois bodies and minds; sexuality was a function of power. However, in the twentieth century, until the 1960s, sexuality was repressed as part of a drive to restrict the formation of modern subjects; sexuality was the victim of power. In the first era, Catholicism actively moved to generate new discourses of sexuality and new locations of sexual knowledge. The distinguishing feature of Catholicism in the second era is its creation of a deafening silence on sexuality. In the earlier era, Catholicism is viewed as one of the primary agents for creating modern Irish sexual subjects whereas in the later one it functions only to repress sexual discourses and subjects and thus to impede Irish modernity.

But in other respects, Inglis follows too closely to the Foucauldian approach to sexual history. In particular, like Foucault, he plays little attention to the question of gender and to the possibilities of resistance. Inglis's conception of pre-1960s sexual repression and of post-1960s sexual liberation is equally dependent on a homogenising narrative of modernity and modernisation as a unidirectional force. Thus, in his account, the fundamental generator of social change in Ireland since the 1960s has been global capital, working through such cultural institutions as the media, and he accords little significance to the power of social movements, pre-eminently feminism but also the lesbian and gay rights movement, in driving such change.²²

²² On the women's movement in Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century, see Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003). For an account of the lesbian and gay rights movement, see Kieran Rose, *Diverse Communities: The Evolution of Lesbian and Gay Politics in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

Likewise, as the phrase 'moral monopoly' suggests, Inglis's version of the earlier part of the twentieth-century is remarkably unvariegated. As recent work by Catriona Clear on women and housework and by Clair Wills on the Second World War and Irish neutrality demonstrates, careful attention to the texture of social and cultural life, and to the discordant political currents of the era, yields a more complex picture of Irish society in the mid-century decades than the bleakly uniform vision of stalled development and political myopia projected by Inglis and Garvin.²³ In her *Women of the House*, Clear combines oral history evidence with archival sources to recreate the material conditions confronted by the majority of Irish women who worked in the home during those decades. This is in part an account of hardship and struggle, particularly for working class and rural women contending with unequal access to healthcare provision, poor housing and sanitation and neglectful husbands. It is also an account of women being actively discriminated against by the state, as exemplified, for instance, by the decision in 1943 to pay children's allowance to fathers rather than to mothers.²⁴ But domesticity and housework were also the focus of intense political activism in those years, by such organisations as the Irish Countrywomen's Association and the Irish Housewives Association, as well as a crucial site of class divisions, predominantly that between the women who were middle-class employers and the working class women who were their servants.²⁵ Clear argues that domesticity was the object of diverse discourses in the mid-century decades; not only those of 'traditional' morality and Catholic familist policies, but also those of modernisation, improvement and self-cultivation.²⁶ Irish women may have been constrained and impeded by domesticity, but many of them also experienced it as a source of empowerment and increased expectations. As Clair Wills observes, "the hegemony of the Catholic-nationalist ideology of the family in the middle years of the twentieth century is in danger of obscuring the contest and resistance that were part of its making."²⁷

²³ Wills, *op cit.* Catriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 44-45.

²⁴ Clear, 51-56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-95.

²⁷ Clair Wills, 'Women, Domesticity and The Family: Recent Feminist Work in Irish Cultural Studies,' *Cultural Studies*, 15 (2001), 33-57, 38.

In a similar vein, Inglis's focus on the 'Irish mother' as one of the principal agents maintaining the hegemony of traditional Catholic morality, but as a disempowered junior partner to the priest, ignores the other potential avenues to power which were open to women in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland. The 'nun' features remarkably little in Inglis's historical account, though this complicated and ambiguous figure has been of sustained interest to Irish feminist historians precisely because religious vocation offered many Irish women a compromised route to a form of independence and empowerment during this historical period.²⁸ Those women who actively participated in feminist, socialist and nationalist politics in Ireland during the early decades of the twentieth-century likewise disappear from view in Inglis's account of this 'traditional Ireland', as do those women writers, such as Dorothy Macardle and Kate O'Brien, who were dissenting voices in the post-independence years.²⁹ Nor does Inglis make much reference to other authorities in the area of sexuality, such as the medical or psychiatric professions, since these are allegedly entirely under Catholic control. The sexual discourses stemming from domestic popular culture or from international mass culture, which the Catholic Church railed against presumably only because it felt such threats to be significant, also find little place in Inglis's history because he evidently feels that Catholicism's 'moral monopoly' was so tightly secure that such challenges scarcely mattered before the 1960s.

Some of the aporias in Inglis's model are also the result of subordinating the radical theoretical framework, adapted from Elias, Bourdieu and Foucault, to the liberal and revisionist historical narrative of modernisation. Thus, his version of Irish modernisation in the nineteenth century, for instance, gives no space to the type of

²⁸ Catriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987). Margaret McCurtain, 'Godly Burden: The Catholic Sisterhoods in Twentieth-Century Ireland' in Anthony Bradley and Maryann Valiulis (eds.), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 245-256. Yvonne McKenna, *Made Holy: Irish Women Religious at Home and Abroad* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006). For an overview of the different feminist interpretations of this history of Irish women religious, see Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "'Our nuns are not a nation": Politicising the Convent in Irish Literature and Film', *Eire-Ireland* 41 (2006), 9-39, 11-15.

²⁹ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1995 [1983]). Gerardine Meaney, 'Aesthetics and Politics, 1890-1960' in Angela Bourke et al (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions, Vol. V* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 2002), 1069-1073.

complex interactions between gender, class, tradition and modernity that are disclosed in Angela Bourke's reading of the tragic case of Bridget Cleary, a young woman burnt to death, on the grounds of being a witch, by her husband in County Tipperary in the 1890s.³⁰ Nor does Inglis analyse the history of sexuality in early twentieth century Ireland in relation to wider currents within Western culture in those decades because, in keeping with the modernisation narrative, Ireland's defining characteristic in that period was its failed modernity and its deviation from Western norms. Inglis's conception of the history of sexuality in the early twentieth century is encapsulated in his observation that, "the long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism meant that not only did Catholic sexual attitudes penetrate more deeply and last longer [than similar 'Victorian' attitudes did elsewhere in the Anglophone world] but that it is difficult to find any traces of resistance or challenge to the existing normative order."³¹ Inglis's coinage, "the long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism," telegraphs notions of silence, the suppression of dissent and discourse, divergence from a putative Western standard and the historical peculiarity of belated development as the defining attributes of Catholic hegemony in Ireland from the 1920s to the 1960s, and it is here that his work, for all its theoretical sophistication, rejoins prevailing and much more conventional liberal discourses of modernisation. Inglis also maps this temporal and geo-cultural disjunction onto a neat division between Catholicism and capitalism that underpins his model, as it does that of revisionist historians such as Garvin. In this view, Ireland was a 'Catholic society' until the 1960s, and since then it has been a 'capitalist society' (or, in Inglis' more recent work, a 'globalised' society).³² This precludes the possibility that 'Catholic' Ireland prior to the 1960s was as much shaped by the currents and crises of international capitalism and modernity, as 'globalised' Ireland has been shaped by late capitalism and postmodernity.

As I outline below, the theoretical co-ordinates of this dissertation are drawn from the same source as Inglis – and indeed I also share Inglis's sense of caution about adapting Foucault's Franco-centric model to the history of a peripheral society like Ireland, as well as a sense of unease with Foucault's tendency towards reducing

³⁰ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999).

³¹ Inglis, 'Origins and Legacies,' 13.

³² Inglis, *Global Ireland*, 6-7.

all history to discourse.³³ However, I want to argue that it is possible to radically historicise sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland, and to do so while avoiding either of two pitfalls. One pitfall to be avoided is to deny any distinctiveness to the Irish situation and to entirely collapse the history of sexuality in Ireland into some larger current of 'Western' sexuality. The other trap, which I believe Inglis falls into, is to effectively use Foucault's model to set up a standard or norm from which Irish Catholic sexual culture deviates and to locate this deviation as the defining characteristic of that culture. This thesis will argue that to fully understand how sexuality was controlled and regulated in twentieth-century Ireland it is first necessary to move beyond the dyad of speech and silence that governs the current intellectual consensus, as exemplified most fully by Inglis's work. This requires mapping with greater care the complex, polyvalent field of discourses and the contesting epistemologies of sexuality that were actually at work in that society. In a similar fashion, we must also interrogate Inglis's distinction between strategies of self-denial or self-abnegation and those of self-realisation and self-transformation. My study will show that the crucial feature of early and mid-twentieth century Irish culture in this regard was not the absence of discourses on sexuality save for Catholic ones but rather a contest of discourses. The advocates of Catholic ideas on sexual morality and purity were not so much imposing self-denial as promoting an ideal of self-cultivation and, in turn, the novelists – as we will see in later chapters – were also promoting different ideals of self-development and self-formation in their *bildungsromane*. Finally, is the geo-temporal mapping of these distinctions between silence and speech, self-abnegation and self-realisation onto the historical narrative of belated Irish modernisation tenable or persuasive? In this study, I suggest that we need to be more alert to the intersections and homologies between the crises of sexuality and modernity that beset the Western world during this period and those that unfolded in Ireland. Viewed thus, the complex field of sexual discourse in Ireland appears less as an aberrant deviation than as a distinctive current within a wider capitalist modernity. In this view, categorising the various models of sexuality and subjectivity to be found in that field as either defensively anti-modern or proactively modernising formations would also become redundant – each of these models were providing symbolic solutions to the same quandaries of national development. In short, recalibrating those

³³ Inglis, 'Foucault, Bourdieu,' 15-17.

divisions of silence and speech, self-denial and self-realisation, repression and freedom, gives us access to a more complex understanding of Irish history in the twentieth century.

3. History and Theory of the *Bildungsroman*: Crises of Modernity and Sexuality

In his essay, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism,' Mikhail Bakhtin argued that in the *bildungsroman*, "time is introduced into man."³⁴ This, in his view, is the genre's major and most striking innovation in the history of the novel. According to Bakhtin, genres that pre-dated the *bildungsroman*, such as the novel of travel or the novel of ordeal or adventure, have a "ready-made hero" moving as a fixed point through space and time. However, the *bildungsroman*, or novel of formation, that emerged in the late-eighteenth century presented for the first time "an image of man in the process of becoming." This earlier ready-made hero had been a constant in the novel's formula, while the surrounding variables (changes in the hero's spatial environment, social position, fortune and so on) were the drivers of the plot, but in the novel of formation changes in the hero acquire plot significance, and thus, in Bakhtin's view, "the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed."³⁵ What further distinguished the realist *bildungsroman* from other types of formation narrative – the novel of education exemplified by Rousseau's *Emile*, or the biographical novel exemplified by Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* – was that "man's emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature."³⁶ In the *bildungsroman* the narrative of self development proceeds in conjunction with the narrative of historical development. Thus, in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, generally acknowledged as the prototypical instance of the genre, Wilhelm is "no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two

³⁴ M.M. Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Towards a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* [trans. Vern W. McGee] (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 21.

³⁵ Ibid, 22.

³⁶ Ibid, 23.

epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him."³⁷

Historians of the *bildungsroman* have charted the specific political and cultural conditions of late eighteenth-century Germany that produced this particular melding of the concept of *bildung* with the aesthetic form of the novel. Originally a religious term developed within Protestant Pietism to describe the work of moral and spiritual development performed by God on the individual, in the course of the eighteenth century *bildung* was reformulated as a process of aesthetic and spiritual growth – one that was now driven by the individual themselves rather than by a higher power.³⁸ This secularising and humanising trajectory marks the *bildung* ideal as a distinctly Enlightenment concept, and its evolution proceeded in conjunction with that other notable category of German Enlightenment thought, the concept of the aesthetic.³⁹ One argument to explain why these categories of the aesthetic and of *bildung*, and their entwinement within the novel form through the emergence of the *bildungsroman*, were so prominent in German bourgeois culture was that the peculiar resilience and longevity of German Absolutism meant that the German middle-class had considerably less scope than its English or French counterparts to exercise political power.⁴⁰ Viewed thus, the aesthetico-spiritual cultivation of the self narrated in the *bildungsroman* served as a displacement for the thwarted pursuit of political hegemony. Through the *bildung* narrative, the bourgeois subject could symbolically become a subject of history, as “personal destiny ultimately aligns itself with historical destiny in the dialectical harmonies of *bildung*.”⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid, 24.

³⁸ Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1993), 2-3.

³⁹ On the historical and philosophical relationship between *bildung*, aesthetics and the *bildungsroman* see Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5-22.

⁴⁰ Kontje, 18-20.

⁴¹ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 9.

Some historians of the *bildungsroman*, such as Martin Swales and Michael Minden, define the genre as one that existed exclusively within German culture.⁴² More radically circumscribing still, Marc Redfield argues that “as soon as one takes a serious look at the *bildungsroman* it begins to unfold such extravagant aesthetic promises that few if any novels can be said to achieve the right to be so defined.”⁴³ By contrast, in his landmark study of the genre, *The Way of the World* (1987), the Marxist critic Franco Moretti expanded out the range of his analysis geographically to encompass French and English literature, and chronologically to argue for the preeminent place of this form of the novel in nineteenth-century European literature.

Conceptually, Moretti took forward Bakhtin’s insight into the dynamic relationship between the narration of epochal historical transformation and the narration of self-formation that defined this genre. For Moretti, the birth of the *bildungsroman* was called forth by the traumatic birth of modernity in the French and Industrial revolutions. As he argues, “the *bildungsroman* comes into being...because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to modernity.”⁴⁴ With its young protagonist who is painfully negotiating the journey of self-formation, while simultaneously struggling to find a place in the social world, the *bildungsroman* gave narrative shape to the crucial ideological problematic of liberal, bourgeois society – the need to find some sort of resolution to the relationship between the individual and modern society. The genre represents an attempt to find a symbolic resolution to a socio-philosophical conundrum.

The crux of this problem is the tension that arises in a capitalist culture between the ideal of self-determination, and the boundless pursuit of self-fulfilment this implies, on one hand, and the structural necessity of conformity and social stability on the other. Nineteenth-century European culture therefore placed two requirements on the realist *bildungsroman*. This narrative form was expected to

⁴² Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Weiland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Michael Minden, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Redfield, 40.

⁴⁴ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 5.

represent and celebrate the boundless, disruptive energy of modernity; the thematic of youth, which is “modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past,” achieved this first goal.⁴⁵ But European culture simultaneously looked to the *bildungsroman* to transform all that was threatening and alienating about this constitutively unstable and anti-foundational modern world into an experience that was palatable, purposeful, humane and stable. This second goal was achieved thematically through the plot of socialisation, in which the protagonist strove for fulfilment through locating his or her place in the social world. As Gregory Castle argues, in its nineteenth-century English and French incarnations, this pragmatic pursuit of social mobility displaced the quest for aesthetico-spiritual development that had been central to the original Enlightenment concept of *bildung*.⁴⁶ Formally, the achievement of this second objective was encoded in the novel’s ending. Moretti identifies two patterns of plot development in the nineteenth century novel of formation: he terms these a ‘classification principle’ and a ‘transformative principle’. In the first type of plot the meaning of the narrative is located in a particularly strong or marked ending. The emphasis in this mode is on the maturity attained by the protagonist and the establishment at the novel’s end of the protagonist’s stable position within the social order. In the second type of plot the narrative remains open-ended. The attainment of maturity and stability is eschewed in favour of an unending youth with its potential for unceasing formlessness and change.

As we will see in Chapter Two, which reads Joyce’s *Portrait* in the wake of Freud, sexuality is central to these different resolutions to the ideological problem confronted in the *bildungsroman*. For Moretti, the classificatory principle is exemplified by the novel of marriage, such as Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The marriage plot, which is an especially notable feature of the English novel of formation, produces a symbolic act of compromise through which the young hero or heroine exchanges freedom for happiness. As it does for Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett, the choice of a marriage partner furthers the protagonist’s own desires and his or her achievement of self-fulfilment, but does so within a stable institution of social reproduction. On the other hand, the transformative principle is

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Castle, 13-20.

exemplified by the novel of adultery which is more prominent in the French tradition. Fredric Moreau, in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), restlessly eschews the happy stability of marriage for the recurring excitement of an adulterous affair. In other words, he strikes a different balance than Elizabeth between freedom and happiness.

It is worth noting though that the meaning of sexuality in both of Moretti's categories of realist *bildung* narrative is reproductive. Sexuality is conceptualised as being primarily a mode of biological reproduction which, through the institution of marriage, is translated into a mode of social reproduction; even in the novel of adultery sexuality is still defined by its deviation from a reproductive ideal. But what happens to the *bildungsroman* as a literary form when the meaning of sexuality changes? The historical emergence of the libidinal model of sexuality in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, in which sexuality was re-conceptualised as a drive towards pleasure, was not just an epistemological change in the understanding of human sexuality but one element in a larger transformation in the Western conception of both subjectivity and modernity as well – that is, all three terms which were being symbolically negotiated in the *bildungsroman*. Moretti's argument is that this shifting of the ideological ground in which the form was rooted leads to its demise as the pre-eminent genre in European literature. After Freud, in short, the genre simply loses its social significance and with it its centrality to European literature.

However, in *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, Gregory Castle counters Moretti's claim by arguing that, at the beginning of the twentieth century "it is precisely the breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialisation that gives the *bildungsroman* a new sense of purpose."⁴⁷ That is, the structure of the *bildung* narrative, Castle argues, was adapted and rejuvenated to meet the changed historical conditions and the realist *bildungsroman* gave way to its modernist successor. Since the intellectual crisis that generated modernism made itself felt as a profound confusion and anxiety about the possibility of historical progress and linear development, inevitably the modernist *bildungsroman* emphasises the impossibility or intractability of achieving

⁴⁷ Ibid, 5.

bildung and attaining maturity. Moreover, as Jed Esty argues, since the problematic of uneven development and the complex, staggered temporality of modernity is experienced most acutely in a colonial society, the most distinctively modernist *bildungsromane* are either given a colonial setting, such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), or are created by writers from colonised societies, such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Joyce's *Portrait* or Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929). According to Esty, the protagonist in the colonial *bildungsroman* "acts as a frozen-adolescent figure whose own uneven development seems to correspond to the temporal oddities of the surrounding colonial history."⁴⁸

In this light, we can begin to appreciate the extraordinary centrality and durability of the *bildungsroman* in twentieth-century Irish writing, and the strategic position which it occupies in the Irish canon. This genre negotiates both individual and cultural crises of sexual formation and the historical crises of modernisation. It has, moreover, the capacity to connect these crises in symbolically powerful ways. When older solutions to the contradictions of modernity have shown themselves to be no longer tenable, this genre has had the flexibility to give symbolic shape to emergent solutions. From *Portrait*, set in the period of cultural nationalist ferment between the defeat of Parnell and 1916, to the works of Kate O'Brien, Lavery and Kavanagh, who all grappled with the realities of a new post-independence state, the genre mutates as writers experiment from one generation to the next with different solutions to problems of national development or stasis and to problems of individual sexual formation or deformation. Later, in the period after World War II, the controversies surrounding Edna O'Brien's trilogy and McGahern's *The Dark* (1964) become part of a wider narrative that defines the 1960s as a turbulent hinge-era when the old sexual taboos of 'de Valera's Ireland' are finally overthrown and an antiquated censorship regime collapses under modernising pressures that can no longer be resisted. Viewed thus, the cultural significance of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* in the twentieth century stems from the fact that it has provided Irish culture with a narrative form with which to grapple with the

⁴⁸ Jed Esty, 'Virgins of Empire: *The Last September* and the Anti-developmental Plot,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57 (2007), 257-275, 258. See also, Jed Esty, 'The Colonial Bildungsroman: *The Story of an African Farm* and the Ghost of Goethe,' *Victorian Studies* (2007), 407-430.

symbolically entwined problems of sexuality, subjectivity and post-colonial development.

4. Reading the Catholic Archive

As already indicated, this dissertation has two main objectives. One goal is to trace a history of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* from the early twentieth century to the 1960s. The second is to identify the various discourses of sexuality that were mobilised by Irish Catholic intellectuals in this same historical period. The most elementary finding of this dissertation is that silence, the absence or suppression of sexual discourse, is not the salient feature of this era. There was instead a number of Catholic and secular models of human sexuality competing within a discursive field. For this reason, it is not useful to consider the literary texts as dissident or subversive attempts to break the silence; it is better, rather, to see them as interventions in an ongoing dynamic of discursive activity. Hence the basic strategy of this study is to bring the literary texts into dialogue with those forms of writing associated with the articulation of 'traditional' and 'repressive' Catholic views on sexuality, such as journal articles, pastorals and avowedly Catholic advice literature for teenagers. The corollary of this strategy is to also bring the methods of formal literary analysis to bear on these non-literary texts in an attempt to identify their characteristic narrative structures, tropes and figures, and thereby to capture something of the ways in which they produce meaning.

Just as the dyad of speech and silence is unhelpful, dividing the discourses of sexuality into those directed at repressing sexuality and promoting 'self-abnegation' and those concerned with challenging this repression and promoting liberation and freedom – an ideological division that would map onto the taxonomic textual division of pastorals, articles, and advice literature, on one side, and literary texts on the other – is also not useful. A more fruitful approach is to track the ways in which various sexual discourses are being productively used across all these different types of texts. These discourses were being used to foster different regulatory norms and ideals of human sexuality, but they were also being used to articulate different models of human subjectivity. For this reason, Inglis's characterisation of the dominant Irish Catholic model of sexuality during this period

as encouraging 'self-abnegation' obscures the degree to which the cultivation of the self, and a self that was distinctly modern and bourgeois, formed a significant part of how this model of sexuality was promoted. Along with sexuality and subjectivity, the third category in play in these discourses was history. Symbolically, these models of human sexuality and of self-development also offered narratives of historical change and of national development.

While the division of these sexual discourses into those that were repressive and those that were liberationist, or between religious and secular, or traditional and modern, and so on, may be unproductive, there is one useful distinction that one can apply to these discourses. This is the distinction between two *epistemes*: one in which sexuality is primarily conceived of as reproductive, and another in which sexuality is primarily conceived of as a drive towards pleasure and self-fulfilment. The first of these has its historical roots in theological thought, in which reproduction is the primary criteria for distinguishing between lawful and sinful sexual acts. But this reproductive *episteme* also underpinned the scientific distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' sexual activity that held sway well into the twentieth century. The second *episteme* took shape at the beginning of the twentieth century with the emergence of psychoanalysis and the libidinal theory of subject formation. However, we cannot assume that in twentieth-century Ireland these two *epistemes* fall neatly into different ideological and textual categories, with the reproductive confined to the 'repressive,' non-literary texts and the libidinal confined to the liberationist, literary texts. On the contrary, one of the most significant features of the Catholic advice literature analysed in Chapter Four is the drive towards finding a successful Catholic fusion of these two *epistemes*. Similarly, while the *bildung* narrative of *Portrait* may be mapped on to the historical and conceptual movement from one of these *epistemes* into the other, in the novels of Kate O'Brien, Laverty and Kavanagh we see a complex oscillation between the two. And in the later novels, those of Edna O'Brien and McGahern, both *epistemes* are coming asunder and both are equally failing to be meaningful. As well as providing an overarching framework for this study, this notion of two *epistemes* also provides the rationale for the dissertation's chronological boundaries. As outlined in Chapter Two, the crucial, formative articulation of the libidinal notion of sexuality was provided by Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of*

Sexuality (1905) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* marks the point at which this *episteme* made its most dramatic entry into Irish literature and sexual discourse. At the other end, the novels of O'Brien and McGahern do not mark the decisive ascendancy of the libidinal over the reproductive models, as most critics have hitherto assumed, but the beginning of the end of both. In the 1970s an entirely different sexual *episteme* rose to dominance in Irish life. This new *episteme* resulted from the historical conjunction of two currents. Second-wave feminism and the lesbian and gay movement introduced into Irish culture a new political discourse in which sexuality was conceptualised in terms of identities and rights.⁴⁹ Contemporaneously, new spheres of human experience were being intensively commodified within late capitalism, producing distinctive new regimes of regulation over the human body.⁵⁰ Those older reproductive and libidinal models of sexuality that had regulated sexuality in earlier decades were still present in a residual form, but this new concatenation of sexuality, pleasure and subjectivity was something distinct from the older libidinal model.

Clearly, my working premises in this study are indebted to Foucault's theory of the relationship between sexuality and modernity. Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality in the West took its co-ordinates from his earlier analysis of power, and particularly his argument that power in the modern world was not primarily prohibitive but productive. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault repudiated the conventional liberal approach to the history of ideas, with its progressive narrative of knowledge and 'objectivity' increasing and improving from the Enlightenment onwards. Instead of examining the evolution of modern scientific and economic ideas in terms of ideas and facts being uncovered, Foucault concentrated on identifying the various discursive and institutional processes through which scientific truth was established. The object of his analysis was not knowledge but what he terms the "epistemological field, the *episteme*, in which knowledge ...

⁴⁹ Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (London: Palgrave, 1999). See also Ursula Barry and Clair Wills, 'The Republic of Ireland: The Politics of Sexuality, 1965-2000' in Angela Bourke et al (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions, Vol. V* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 2002), 1409-1415.

⁵⁰ For an account in an American context of such developments, see Donald M. Lowe, *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), 117-132.

grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility.”⁵¹ Where his post-structuralist contemporaries pursued similar ideas about power and modernity in the realm of subjectivity and consciousness (as Althusser did with his concept of ‘interpellation’) or the realm of language (as Derrida did with deconstruction) Foucault focused his attention on the human body as a crucial site on which the modern nexus of power and knowledge operated. For Foucault, one of the defining characteristics of the modern era was “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’.”⁵² In this respect, Foucault’s history of modern sexuality can be seen as a continuation of his work on the history of mental illness and its treatment, in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), and of crime and its punishment, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Each constitutes a different dimension of the same phenomenon within modernity – that historical movement from the pre-modern exercise of power as ‘sovereignty’ to the modern diffusion of power through society as ‘governmentality’.⁵³

As is generally known, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was intended by Foucault as a schematic overview to a projected six-volume history that would extend from the ancient Greek and Roman world to the contemporary era. As it transpired, he became heavily involved in his research for volumes two and three, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, on the classical world and only these were completed at his death in 1984. While the first volume contains some useful, if at times sketchy, analysis of the most salient medical, theological and pedagogical discourses of sexuality from eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, this volume is chiefly important for Foucault’s exposition of his theoretical framework.

Foucault’s initial impetus is a polemical attack on Herbert Marcuse’s Freudian-Marxist celebration of sex as liberation from the repressive power of capitalism,

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Routledge, 2002 [1966]), xxv.

⁵² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 - The Will to Knowledge* [trans. Robert Hurley] (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 140.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977* [ed. Colin Gordon] (Brighton UK: Harvester Press, 1980), 48.

which had been so influential on the 1960s counter-culture in the United States. For Foucault, the question that needed to be asked was not 'why are we repressed?' but rather, "why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?...what led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence?"⁵⁴ Foucault argues that this "repressive hypothesis" had dominated liberal and leftist thought on sexuality in the twentieth century and underpinned a progressive historical narrative whereby silence gave way to speech, repression to liberation and oppression to freedom. But this, in Foucault's view, was to fundamentally misunderstand the way in which power, and sexual discourse as a regulatory vector of power, functioned in modernity – just as it misunderstood how resistance to power, and sexual discourse as a medium for such resistance (a "reverse discourse"), also functioned in modernity. In repudiating this repressive hypothesis, Foucault did not, as Ann Laura Stoler points out, reject the fact of repression, "but the notion that it was the organising principle of sexual discourse, that repression could account for its silences and prolific emanations."⁵⁵ In Foucault's view, the modern regulation of sexuality has not primarily operated through the repression or containment of a natural, disruptive drive but through the discursive production of sexuality as a regulatory ideal through which the individual subject knows and experiences their sexuality, and indeed their self. Once viewed through the prism of bio-power, the relationship between sexuality and power in modern culture no longer appears as that of a "stubborn drive" standing in opposition to the prohibitive demands of power; instead, modern sexuality is "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power."⁵⁶

Foucault's critics have identified a number of weaknesses in his theory. From an Irish Studies perspective, his very strictly delimited focus on the Francophone bourgeoisie in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* is a reason for considerable caution when adapting his theories to a society that is European and Catholic but also an Anglophone, decolonising society on the European

⁵⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 8-9.

⁵⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

⁵⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 103.

periphery.⁵⁷ Foucault's work on sexuality radically historicised and politicised the human body and thus it provided a valuable resource for feminism. However, the absorption of Foucault's insights and theories into feminist scholarship has been fraught and complex.⁵⁸ Firstly, Foucault's analysis generally fails to address the gender specificity of the various political technologies of the body which he describes. Secondly, his approach is to emphasise the reactive strategy of resistance over the more constructive project of envisioning alternative orders. As Lois McNay observes, Foucault's "lack of a rounded theory of subjectivity or agency conflicts with a fundamental aim of the feminist project: to rediscover and re-evaluate the experiences of women."⁵⁹ Foucault's work concentrates on the local micropolitics of power and resistance and underplays, or even repudiates, the emancipatory narratives of history. This does not just undermine the liberal narrative of progress, but also the more radical narratives of feminism and marxism.⁶⁰

Therefore, one of the potential structural tension points in this dissertation, but hopefully a fruitful one, is the merging of Foucault's analytical tools with the analytics and the critical perspectives of feminism and marxism. One of my strategies for pursuing this theoretical synthesis has been to adapt to Irish conditions a number of theoretical frameworks which have been developed by historians of sexuality who combine Foucault's insights with a materialist attention to the gender and class ideologies underpinning capitalism. These include Thomas Lacquer's history of modern discourses concerning masturbation, Alan Hunt and

⁵⁷ For an insightful discussion on the problem of adapting the *History of Sexuality* to the study of colonial societies, see Stoler, 1-18.

⁵⁸ For useful discussions of the early relationship between feminism and Foucault's legacy, see Kate Soper, 'Productive Contradictions' and Susan Bordo, 'Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body' in Caroline Ramazanoğlu (ed.) *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 29-58 and 179-202. See also, Jana Sawicki, 'Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity' in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 286-313, 308.

⁵⁹ Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and Self* (London: Polity Press, 1992), 5.

⁶⁰ For cautious appraisals of Foucault's politics, see Michael Walzer, 'The Politics of Michel Foucault' and Edward Said, 'Foucault and the Image of Power' in David Hoy (ed.) *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1986), 51-68 and 149-156. For a more sympathetic account, see Wendy Brown, 'Genealogical Politics' in Jeremy Moss (ed.) *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 33-49.

Lucy Bland's studies of late-nineteenth-century social purity movements, and the sociological and cultural histories of twentieth-century marriage produced by Eva Illouz, David Shumway and Goran Therborn.⁶¹ Conceptually, this strategy provides a broader historical canvas on which to locate the specific history of sexuality in early and mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Secondly, the work of these historians offers a range of conceptual tools for thinking about the relationship between sexuality and modernity that have been under-utilised in relation to Irish history.

One of these tools is the concept of moral politics, which is outlined in Chapter One. This provides a useful framework for thinking about the drive towards controlling sexual behaviour that took place in southern Ireland during the two decades after independence. The widespread demands that the new state enforce what was termed 'public morality' through restrictive legislation were not propelled by a univocal Catholic concept of repressive sexual 'purity'. Reading journal articles and pastorals from the era, it becomes clear that these demands were being articulated through a fusion of different discourses of sexuality. These can be grouped into three categories: theological, scientific and legislative. These discourses were diverse in their provenance and make-up, but they were all firmly situated within a reproductive *episteme*. Moreover, while these discourses were periodically mobilised in opposition to capitalist modernity none of them – including the Catholic theological discourse – represented residual features of a 'traditional' formation. These diverse discourses shared a distinctively modern concern with subjectivity and sexuality, with agency and control and with the relationship between individual conduct and the collective.

Moreover, these discourses were also conceptually modern in so far as they conformed to the liberal capitalist view that individual self-regulation is the best route to achieving social order. However, the inherent instability generated by the

⁶¹ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* [2nd edition] (London: Tauris, 2001[1995]). Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: University of California Press, 1997). Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999). Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex* (New York: Zone Books, 2003). David R. Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Goran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900-2000* (London: Routledge, 2004).

dizzying pace of capitalist development has recurrently produced acute collapses of faith in this dogma. The prism of moral politics allows us to understand how these discourses of sexuality have been politically mobilised around calls for greater regulation, by individuals of their own behaviour and of individuals by the state, during those unstable and anxious periods of history. The newly independent Irish state found itself in just such a maelstrom of instability when belief in individual self-regulation is at a low ebb. This was a period when Ireland's own descent into violent civil war coincided with the more general collapse of liberalism across the Western world in the wake of the First World War. Invariably, the dynamics of moral politics combine sexuality with gender, class and race to generate specific figures and groups against whom the demand for regulation is intensively directed during such unstable periods. In post-independence Ireland, the young unmarried mother and the left-wing Republican were two exemplary figures associated with the threat of social disorder. Thus, the concept of moral politics allows us to reconsider the prevailing historical account of the public morality discourses as a traditional or pre-modern Irish Catholic puritanism which was politically enforced in the nativist project of state formation. Viewed through the prism of moral politics, the public morality discourses instead appear as one element of the Free State's counter-revolutionary pursuit of liberal capitalist modernity.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s the discourses of public morality were superseded by an alternative Irish Catholic model of sexuality. As Chapter Four will outline, this involved a strategic shift away from a concern with regulating conduct and towards promoting a marital ideal in which reproduction and sexual pleasure were equally valorised. The primary medium for promoting this ideal was advice literature directed at Catholic teenagers. Again, contemporaneous developments in the Western world offer a useful framework for assessing these changes in Irish sexual culture. In the inter-war years, the advice writer and 'agony aunt' emerged within Western culture as a figure of non-medical expertise on human sexuality. This broader trend in capitalist societies created the possibility for a reconfiguration of authority on sexual matters in Irish Catholicism. In the case of the public morality discourses, bishops and clerical intellectuals asserted their authority to speak about sexuality on the basis of their specialised training in moral theology. In

contrast, clerical writers of advice literature did not ground their authority to dispense advice on their training in moral theology but on their pastoral experience. This emphasis on experience in turn facilitated the move from a register of injunction and warning towards an approach based on 'helping' young people to conduct their sexual lives more 'successfully'. The measure of this success was the achievement of a happy marriage. The marital ideal that was being constructed for Irish teenagers in the Catholic advice literature combined elements from conservative and liberal strands of Catholicism, along with some of the prevailing secular currents within liberal capitalist culture. Chief among the latter were the discourses of marital romance and marital intimacy that evolved as part of the cultural response to a perceived 'crisis' in Western marriage in the early and mid-twentieth century. In the first of these discourses, marriage was invested with all the thrill and excitement that had previously been culturally ascribed, particularly in romantic fiction, to courtship and adultery but not to marriage itself. By contrast, the discourse of intimacy framed the 'problem' of marriage within the psychoanalytic therapeutic model and urged the importance of 'communication' within a 'relationship'. There was a new emphasis on the psychological compatibility of the two individuals and on the attainment of personal fulfilment through the reciprocal achievement of intimacy.

This transition from public morality to a companionate, sexually rewarding marital ideal involved a change in tone and strategy, the transition from injunction to advice, and also involved weaving together the reproductive and libidinal models of sexuality. Ideologically, this transition produced a conceptual realignment in the relationship between the individual and society. The public morality discourses had operated on the assumption that individual self-regulation of behaviour was an attractive ideal but a shaky foundation on which to build a stable social order. By contrast, the marital ideal proceeded on the basis that individuals rationally pursuing their self-interest would, with some helpful direction, successfully maximise their self-interest in a way that also contributed to the maintenance of stability and order. The idealised marriage, combining procreation with sexual and emotional intimacy, served as both an allegory of this successful alignment and also as the chief mechanism for achieving it. In other words, the marital ideal did not just promise young Irish Catholics sexual and emotional fulfilment as a reward

for avoiding sex outside of marriage, it also charted a course for the cultivation of a fully modern liberal bourgeois subjectivity. As we shall see in Chapters Four and Five, this marital ideal evolved in Irish Catholicism during a period between the 1930s and 1950s when both liberal and conservative commentators, exemplified by the contributors to John A. O'Brien's *The Vanishing Irish* (1953), focused particular attention on the question of marriage as an explanation of Irish underdevelopment. In this view, a new sexual culture and a new model of self-development was a prerequisite, not a happy consequence, of successful national development. Since the marital ideal conforms to this view of modernisation, this discourse within Irish Catholicism complicates the received view of both the relationship between Irish Catholicism and modernisation and the temporality of modernisation in twentieth-century Ireland.

5. Episodes in the History of the Irish Catholic *Bildungsroman*

Delineating the distinct epistemologies and the historical mutations within this field of Irish Catholic sexual discourse brings into sharper relief the significant characteristics and the evolution of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* as a genre. One must, of course, be careful not to produce a base-superstructure model where the novels appear as merely reactive counter-expressions to these non-literary historical currents. Joyce and Kate O'Brien, in particular, certainly reacted against the regulatory drive of moral politics. Joyce took issue with the fusion of Catholic and Protestant 'social purity' movements that had brought about Parnell's defeat, while O'Brien was determined to dispute the upsurge of public morality discourses in the first two decades of the independent state. However, while both novelists satirise and repudiate these public morality discourses what is of most interest about their novels is their active pursuit of alternative models of sexuality and self-development. Those formal innovations that make *Portrait* a seminal work in the history of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* spring from Joyce's epochal fusion of the nineteenth-century realist narrative of *bildung* and the twentieth-century Freudian reformulation of the narrative of subject formation. As we will see, Stephen Dedalus's journey from childish incoherence to coherent self-narration hews closely to the trajectory of ego formation mapped by Freud in *Three Essays*. The novel dramatises a historical clash, between a concept of sexuality as

reproductive and a concept of sexuality as a pleasure-oriented quest for individual fulfilment, by reproducing that collision within Stephen's own psyche. But this libidinal concept does not just structure Stephen's sexual development since it also frames his vocational formation as an artist; in other words, the drive towards sexual fulfilment, the drive towards aesthetic creation and the drive towards individual freedom are all conceptually affiliated in Stephen's *bildung* narrative. With its dialectic of intellectual rebellion and commitment, *Portrait* rewrites the nineteenth-century narrative of socialisation, through which the complex relationship between individual and society was symbolically negotiated, as an oedipal narrative of identification and separation.

Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* has generally been interpreted as a woman-centred re-writing of the *Portrait* ur-text; or as a portrait of the artist as a young Irish girl. The constraints and vicissitudes which shaped a young woman's formation in early-twentieth century Ireland are foregrounded in O'Brien's fiction, as are relationships of solidarity between women, such as that between Mary and Agatha in *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and between Anna and Helen in *The Land of Spices*. However, as will be outlined in Chapter Three, O'Brien's divergence from the *Portrait* model of *bildung* extends beyond the incorporation of these feminist concerns into this narrative. While her novels may be less formally innovative than Joyce's, her narrative of sexuality and self-formation involves engaging with the Catholic idea of sexuality as a moral problem rather than following Joyce's emotionally fraught but conceptually straightforward repudiation of this concept in favour of the libidinal model. Sexuality confronts O'Brien's heroines with fundamental and decisive moral challenges that in turn produce opportunities for moral growth and the cultivation of an ideal of liberal subjectivity. Structurally, O'Brien's narratives of sexuality and self-formation affirm the central precept of the public morality discourses – the link between private conduct and public good. But where the advocates of public morality worked with the assumption that the collective had to regulate individual conduct to ensure the public good, O'Brien's novels argue in favour of trusting to the individual's capacity for moral self-regulation.

A number of common tropes emerge from a reading of Joyce and O'Brien's *bildungsromane*. One is the notion that even when sexuality is not primarily reproductive it is still productive. Sexual desire and sexual pleasure are never merely sensual in these novels because desire and pleasure invariably generate self-development and moral growth. In the early twentieth century, this idea of sexuality as a motor propelling self-formation was obviously rooted in a Freudian narrative of ego-formation driven by the libido. In British modernist literature, most notably in Lawrentian literary erotics, this idea took on spiritual and pedagogical dimensions. In this view, to honestly engage with the reality of sex through writing and through reading serious sexual literature was an educative quest for truth and as such an act of self-cultivation that could also have utopian potential.⁶² However, in Joyce's and O'Brien's novels, these psychoanalytical and literary currents were interwoven with Catholic theological currents, in which sexuality conceptualised as a moral problem was also a vehicle for self-development and moral growth. In their *bildung* narratives, the ground on which sexuality is most intensely generative of development is that of vocation, and in particular the young hero's or heroine's vocation to be an artist. Those dark, troubling impulses and pleasures of erotic experience fuel the processes of aesthetic creativity; conversely, sexual desire and the drive towards artistic creation are simultaneously figured as analogous impulses under the sign of the libido. Illicit sexuality and the quest for artistic freedom are further allied since they each place the young person at odds with Irish society. Hence, the tropes of departure, of exile and of a moral geography in which Ireland is invariably found wanting in relation to an idealised 'Europe' feature prominently in the novels of Joyce and O'Brien. In short, for both writers the narratives of self-development and of collective or national development are always mutually at odds with each other.

The rationale behind the selection of novels discussed in the dissertation is partly canonical; it would be an odd history of the twentieth-century Irish *bildungsroman* that did not include *Portrait*, *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, *The Country Girls* and *The Dark*. However, the narration of youth and of sexuality in these novels also captures something distinctive about Irish culture during the different decades

⁶²Ian Hunter et al., *On Pornography: Literature, Sexuality and Obscenity Law* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 96-102.

of the twentieth century in which they each emerged. This historical and chronological rationale explains Chapter Five's engagement with two less canonically-central novels, Maura Laverty's *Never No More* and Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*. These are significant works in the history of the Irish *bildungsroman* since they represent an attempt to narrate self-formation differently to earlier versions of the genre by aligning the individual and the collective narratives in less starkly oppositional terms. Laverty and Kavanagh each try to find a narrative form through which *bildung* can be imagined as a process of accommodation and integration between the young character's desires and the demands of their society; this stands in contrast to Joyce and O'Brien's antagonistic sense that *bildung* must, by definition, require some sort of rupture or conflict between self and society. Formally, to achieve this goal Laverty and Kavanagh merged the novelistic tradition of the realist *bildungsroman* with other modes of writing – notably the anthropological, autobiographical and folkloric modes of writing about rural Ireland that had become fashionable in the 1930s. Conceptually, Laverty brought a version of the liberal Catholic marital ideal into her fiction to create a symbolic integration between self-fulfilment and collective good, as well as between tradition and modernity. Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* expresses a more satirical scepticism as to whether any such imaginative resolution can be achieved. However, his autobiographical and novelistic *bildungsromane* are equally sceptical of the bleakly determinist conceptualisation of sexuality and rural development offered in his most famous work, *The Great Hunger*. Nevertheless, despite the reconciliatory drives of their *bildung* narratives, the trope of departure re-emerges in the endings of both Laverty and Kavanagh's novels, signalling that self-development and collective development ultimately remain at odds with each other. Still, the curiously potent mixture of sentimentality, nostalgia and melancholy in these works, as well as their variously utopian and dystopian visions of rural Ireland, were important innovations in the history of the Irish *bildungsroman*.

This study closes with two of the more famous and controversial *bildung* narratives of the nineteen sixties. Like the protagonists in historically earlier versions of the genre, Edna O'Brien's Cait/Kate Brady and John McGahern's young Mahoney also leave rural Ireland in their novels; Cait for Dublin and then London, young Mahoney for university in Galway and then to take up a job in Dublin. But if the trope of

departure remains a constant in these later novels its meaning has now significantly altered. O'Brien's trilogy will see Cait leave one hopelessly dysfunctional family in Ireland, only to find she is painfully immersed in another equally failed family in London. Young Mahoney chooses his ESB job over university, but only once he realises the essential existential futility of choice as such. In these works, departure is a submission to fate rather than an act of hopeful investment in the future. In the same manner, the hero and heroine of these sixties novels find themselves at odds with Irish society, just as their fictional predecessors in Joyce and Kate O'Brien's novels had done. Joyce's Stephen and O'Brien's Mary left Ireland to remake themselves as emancipated selves in Europe. However, unlike their predecessors, the alienation of Cait and young Mahoney is primarily cast as a state of traumatised injury that cannot be helped by relocation abroad or be imbued with any elevated purpose. In particular, their alienation cannot be mined for the raw material out of which to forge an artistic vocation. Cait will not become a writer and young Mahoney settles for a clerkship, since the university is only a means to 'security' not an intellectual career. While this disappearance of the trope of artistic ambition is itself an interesting development, it is most significant as a symptom of the more general disappearance of *bildung* from these late *bildungsromane*.

The sixties novels offer narratives of development which insist on the difficulty of achieving such development due to the intractability of the past. Formally, they each achieve this goal through juxtaposing the forward movement of the *bildung* narrative with the backward orientation of a narrative of irreparable childhood trauma, loss and family collapse. Re-orientating their *bildung* narrative in this way required that O'Brien and McGahern also re-write the meaning of sexual experience, and redefine the relationship between sexuality and subjectivity that had prevailed in the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* since the start of the century. In contrast to all of the earlier novels, sexuality in the sixties novels is starkly realised, powerfully associated with traumatic loss and punctuated with sensations of masochistic abjection. However much experience they accumulate, however much they venture away from Ireland and out into the world, Cait and young Mahoney's sexual experiences always return them to a space of trauma and paralysis instead of propelling them into any open-ended future. Therefore, the crucial difference

with the earlier novels is that sexuality undermines rather than underpins the central character's formation as a coherent, active subject.

In Irish cultural criticism, *The Country Girls* trilogy and *The Dark* are generally associated with beginnings. Reading them in the light of their authors' biographies, these are narratives of origin and also important early works in two long careers that will unquestionably feature prominently in any history of late-twentieth-century Irish writing. Since they also generated controversies that helped precipitate the reform of the censorship regime in 1967, these works are also historically associated with that larger sense of epochal transformation commonly ascribed to the 1960s in Irish history. Viewed thus, their publication is taken to register the commencement of Ireland's accelerated Lemassian-inspired modernisation in the late-twentieth century – or, if one follows Inglis's and Garvin's chronology, the real start of the twentieth century in Ireland. However, a closer look at these novels of thwarted development reveals a much more searching critique of their historical moment. The irredeemably tragic vision of history which underpins *The Country Girls* trilogy and *The Dark*, insistent as they are on the difficulty and intractability of the past, cannot be easily reconciled with the confident belief in progress that is central to the liberal ideology of capitalist modernisation.

Contrary to received literary history, and viewed from the perspective of a history of the Irish twentieth-century *bildungsroman*, these novels appear more as an ending than as a beginning. Despite the generic mutations manifest in their work, the earlier generations of novelists all shared an essentially religious and ethical conception of sexuality, which in turn served to reinforce a liberal notion of *bildung* as both a model of subject formation and as an allegory of history. The sixties novels register a loss of faith in this conception of the relationship between sexuality, subjectivity and history. O'Brien and McGahern refused to endorse that optimistic assumption about the essential productivity of human sexual experience shared by their predecessors. These novels secularise sexual experience, since neither the Catholic conception of sexuality as a moral problem nor the liberal Catholic marital ideal carry any purchase in these narratives. But they also disenchant those secular literary idealisations of sexuality as a libidinal force with the potential to transform the subject and their society. However, while refusing the

older models of sexuality and subjectivity, McGahern and O'Brien do not present any fully realised alternative. Therefore, as my reading in Chapter Six will demonstrate, even though they refuse the older models of sexuality and subjectivity made available by earlier Irish *bildungsromane* they ultimately do not move into that potentially radical space for re-imagining sexuality, subjectivity and history which was opened up by this act of refusal.

6. Beyond the Repressive Hypothesis

In this dissertation I want to rethink the idea that twentieth-century Irish sexuality was uniquely dark and troubling. There are, I believe, compelling reasons to move beyond the current narratives or conceptions of modern Irish sexuality, governed as they are by the 'repressive hypothesis,' and much to be gained by working towards an alternative understanding of Irish sexuality. Viewed through this alternative paradigm, we would recognise how Irish sexuality was produced and regulated by different epistemologies of sexuality that were always internally self-contradictory and that also shifted and mutated over time. In some respects, the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* may appear as a rather odd route to bring us forward to this new perspective. As a genre, the *bildungsroman* tends to confirm for most readers the idea that the Irish were a people who suffered from an exceptional kind of sexual repression – an idea that I want to query here. From Joyce's *Portrait* and Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* all the way to McGahern's *The Dark* what the genre offers its readers is a vision of young people riddled with confusion, uncertainty and guilt and struggling to achieve a coherent identity against the incessant pressures of an oppressive and puritanical clerical society. My intention in this thesis is not to suggest that Irish people in those decades were not sexually troubled, and did not feel the pain and emotional pressures of living in a repressive, clerically-dominated culture. What I do want to challenge, rather, are some of the received ways in which we have understood that history; I want, that is, to scrutinise modes of understanding that the *bildungsroman* has done much to articulate and legitimate. The version of Ireland offered to us by the *bildungsroman* genre is not 'false' or even 'distorted', but it is a partial and an aesthetically determined one.

This dissertation is concerned with Irish literature, but also with sexuality, with Irish Catholicism and Irish modernisation; these are not, it must be said, topics on which most potential Irish readers are likely to be neutral or disinterested. In that respect this dissertation addresses, what Alan Sinfield terms, faultlines in our culture. The most salient reason for the resilience of the *bildungsroman* in Irish culture is that the genre has always camped out on this fraught territory and “faultline stories”, as Sinfield reminds us, are “ones that require most assiduous and continuous reworking; they address the awkward, unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute.”⁶³ Perhaps the greatest danger of applying the ‘repressive hypothesis’ to the history of sexuality in Ireland is the intellectual and political complacency this can produce about the present. If we affirm the liberal view that modernisation and globalisation present us with some new problems, but have essentially solved this older one for us – unshackled repressed sexuality, sutured this faultline – then the study of the history of Irish sexuality risks becoming little other than a more finely tuned elaboration of what we already know and a search for further evidence to discredit an already discredited Catholic nationalist formation. But should not the study of history combine an alert respect for the essential difference of the past with a keen eye for those continuities that stretch into our contemporary times? In the case of the history of sexuality, shouldn’t our efforts to understand more fully exactly how human sexuality was regulated and controlled in the past give us some clues as to how it is regulated and controlled in the present? For example, uncovering the shameful and tragic story of those women incarcerated in Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries in the twentieth-century is a necessary act of commemorating and honouring those women’s lives and bringing church and state to account for what happened. But perhaps it should be possible to do this work in ways that can also help us to understand why so many women are being trafficked into Ireland to meet an endless demand for commercial, exploitative sex among ostensibly ‘liberated’ Irishmen at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

In contesting the repressive hypothesis, this study is not dismissing or denying that people suffered sexual oppression in twentieth-century Ireland. And it is by no

⁶³ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47.

means denying that this oppression fell with far greater and more terrible severity on certain groups. But what it does strive to do is to open up new ways of thinking about the history of twentieth-century Irish sexuality and of the ways in which Irish literature and Irish sexuality inform each other; those new ways of thinking that can help us grasp more fully the workings of oppressive ideologies in the past – and their resilience in the present.

Chapter One

Growing Pains: Sexuality, Irish Moral Politics and Capitalist Crisis, 1900-1940

1

In 1927 the bishops of the Irish Catholic Church held a national conference at Maynooth. Afterwards, they issued a lengthy statement with instructions for this document to be read at all Catholic churches. The statement extends beyond strictly theological or religious matters and effectively gives the bishops' assessment of the social and economic condition of the newly independent southern Irish state. One of the first sections in this statement is entitled 'Perils in our Path,' which appears before the sections on 'Justice and Charity,' 'Our Social Obligations' and 'The Condition of Labour.' These 'perils' in the path of the Irish people, as identified by the bishops, were: "the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress – all of which tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race."¹

It does seem extraordinary that the Catholic hierarchy should deem these the most pressing 'perils' facing Ireland in the 1920s. After all, the people of the island were just recovering from years of war – the First World War and then the bloody struggle for independence, followed by the trauma of partition and the Civil War. Poverty was endemic in both parts of the island and the southern state faced the challenge of rebuilding its war-damaged infrastructure with slender resources. The bishops' flock in the new northern statelet was facing into an uncertain future as a vulnerable minority in a sectarian state. Yet the 1927 statement was not unique in its focus on those questions which during those years became encompassed by the term 'public morality'. In 1925, just two years after the ending of the civil war, the bishops had issued a joint statement condemning dancing and dancehalls.² They also issued instructions for this statement to be read in all churches one Sunday in every quarter as a continuing discouragement against the holding of dances in the parish. These joint statements were augmented during these years by numerous statements about the same topics, issued by individual bishops in

¹ 'Pastoral Address issued by the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland to their flock on the occasion of the Plenary Synod held in Maynooth,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 30 (1927), 526-544, 528.

² 'Statement of the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland on the Evils of Dancing,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 27, (1926) 91-92.

their own dioceses.³

The bishops were not alone in the attention they paid to these questions of public morality. Clerical and lay intellectuals frequently wrote articles on these matters in Catholic theological and popular journals.⁴ The issues most commonly discussed in these articles included censorship of literature and cinema, preventing access to birth control and information about it, a perceived rise in the numbers of births outside of marriage and the dance-halls. Alongside this discursive activity, individual Irish Catholics, lay and clerical, were involved in different forms of social activism and much of this was directed in various ways at these same issues of public morality. The campaign for state censorship of film and literature (especially imported newspapers and magazines) accelerated in the period directly after independence. The key organisations involved in this campaign, the Irish Vigilance Association and the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, pre-dated independence but from 1923 began to remobilise after the interruption to their activities created by the years of war. The subsequent years also saw a gradual switch in their main activity away from 'vigilance' directed at the activities of individual importers, publishers and newsagents, and towards campaigning and lobbying for action by the new state.⁵ Other pre-independence organisations also expanded their membership

³ The statements of individual bishops were recorded in the annual *Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac*. The principal form these statements took was the annual Lenten Pastoral issued by a bishop and read in each church in his diocese at the beginning of Lent. Some of the bishops' sermons at confirmation ceremonies, held annually in May, are also recorded along with more occasional speeches.

⁴ The main scholarly Catholic theological journal in Ireland at this time was the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. First published in 1864, this was the official organ of the Irish Catholic Church. In later decades, its predominant place would be taken by other journals, such as *Doctrine and Life* and *The Furrow*, more in tune with the changes taking place within Roman Catholicism, and the *IER* ceased publication in 1968. The more popular Catholic publications included *The Irish Rosary*, published by the Dominicans from 1897 until 1961, and *The Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, first published by the Jesuits in 1888 and still in circulation. Another Jesuit publication, *Studies*, which has been in continuous circulation since 1912, would have had a smaller but disproportionately powerful and influential readership in academic and political as well as religious circles. On the *IER* see Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin; Gill and MacMillan, 2002), 32 and 202-203; on *Studies* in this period see Bryan Fanning, *The Quest for Modern Ireland: The Battle of Ideas 1912-1986* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), 67-113.

⁵ The Catholic Truth Society of Ireland was founded in 1899 and the Irish Vigilance Association in 1911. On their history and their activities in the post-independence state see

and activities in this period; these included the St Vincent de Paul Society, through which middle-class lay Catholics did voluntary charitable work with the poor, and the 'Pioneer' temperance campaign.⁶ Alongside these, a number of organisations first came into existence in the 1920s and were more directly concerned with 'public morality' questions. Chief among these was the Legion of Mary. Founded in Dublin in 1921, in its early years membership was only open to women though the organisation was led by Frank Duff. This new organisation dramatically asserted its Catholic social activist intentions when its members effectively closed down the brothels in 'Monto', Dublin's notorious red-light district, in a campaign that ran between 1922 and 1925.⁷ While the Legion of Mary went on to play a major part in Irish Catholic life in the twentieth century, one of the more unusual of the organisations founded in this period has left little historical trace. The Mary Immaculate Modest Dress and Department Crusade was founded at the Mary Immaculate teacher training college in Limerick in 1927, partly in response to the publication of the bishops' views on "immodest dress in women's fashion" in their post-Synod statement. The idea of the crusade was that women would sign up to a pledge to avoid 'immodest dress'; among other things, the pledge committed women to a minimal length of dresses and sleeves, the avoidance of trousers and that "stockings should never be dispensed with unless one is too poor to purchase them."⁸

Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922-1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006). The CTSI, in particular, went from a point of near bankruptcy in 1918 to seeing a major upsurge in its membership and in the quantity of the publications it produced and distributed in the 1920s. The number of its publications distributed in Tralee, for instance, rose from 9,628 in 1926 to 62,698 in 1929. At the same time, the organisation also embraced its new lobbying and campaigning activities and became the leading organisation in the pro-censorship movement. See Martin, 57.

⁶ The Society of St Vincent de Paul was founded in France in 1833 and introduced into Ireland in the 1840s. On the history of the organisation in Dublin and especially its activities in the early independence period, see Eamonn Dunne, 'Action and Reaction: Catholic Lay Organisations in Dublin in the 1920s and 1930s', *Archivium Hibernicum*, 48 (1994), 107-118, 112-115. The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart was founded in Dublin in 1898; see Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation of Extremes: The Pioneers in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999).

⁷ On the early activities of the Legion of Mary, see Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214-219.

⁸ Miriam T. St Clair, *The Vice of Today* (Limerick: City Printing, nd), 45.

This concern with questions of public morality was not exclusively confined to the Catholic Church and its adherents in the newly-independent state. "Has not the time come for a frank discussion of Irish Morals?", a leader writer in the *Irish Times* asked in 1929. The writer goes on to argue that "the strict supervision of dance-halls, and the banning (by law if need be) of all-night dances would abolish many inducements to sexual vice."⁹ The Protestant churches were included in the consultations that took place before the framing of legislation on 'moral' issues and broadly supported these changes; there was, for instance, a Church of Ireland clergyman, as well as a Catholic clergyman, on the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Act and Juvenile Prostitution, which was formed in 1931.¹⁰ In his speeches to the Free State senate on topics such as divorce and censorship, W. B. Yeats argued that these drives towards legally enforcing public morality represented an assault on the rights of the Protestant minority in the southern state, and one that would have the effect of frightening Northern Protestants and reinforcing partition. However, this political argument merged into a cultural argument which rested on the assumption that Irish Protestantism was in its essence liberal, more humane in matters of human sexuality and impervious to the sort of irrational impulses exhibited by the Catholic public morality campaigners.¹¹ But the Yeatsian idea of a Protestant identity that was open, liberal and cultured was essentially defined by class, and was based on his idealised aristocracy and landed gentry, rather than by religion. In reality, many middle-class and working-class Protestants had given their support to the Irish branches of English social purity organisations, such as the White Cross League, which had been active in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹² These, or similar, Protestant organisations were no longer active after independence for the same reason that

⁹ *Irish Times*, 2 March, 1929.

¹⁰ Mark Finnane, 'The Carrigan Committee of 1930-31 and the 'moral condition' of the Saorstát', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32 (2001), 519-536, 523.

¹¹ W.B. Yeats, 'An Undelivered Speech', 'Divorce' and 'The Irish Censorship' in Colton Johnson (ed.), *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume X* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 182-185, 186-191 and 214-223. In his biography of the poet, Roy Foster demonstrates that the most famous of these speeches, 'Divorce' delivered in 1924, elicited as much anger and embarrassment as fellow-feeling among leading Irish Protestants. See R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life. Volume II: The Arch Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 297-300.

¹² On Protestant social purity campaigners in late-Victorian and Edwardian Ireland see Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce and Social Purity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 19-21.

the Irish Catholic church had been ambivalent in its response to those early twentieth-century campaigns. Such campaigning involves a degree of engagement with the state and an endorsement of the state's legitimacy. In the case of the Irish Protestant churches after independence, as for the Irish Catholic church earlier in the century, the political position was one of accommodation with the state without wholly acknowledging its legitimacy.¹³

This engagement with the state to incorporate the public morality framework into social policy and legislation was one of the primary objectives of those who became active in these movements. In the first two decades after independence their mobilisation and lobbying bore fruit as both the Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments established a number of commissions and made legislative changes regulating private conduct. In 1926 the Free State Minister for Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, established the Committee of Inquiry on Evil Literature. On foot of its report, the Censorship of Publications Act was introduced in 1929 and this augmented the Censorship of Films Act which had been in place since 1923.¹⁴ A significant objective of the 1929 censorship legislation was the prevention of access to birth control information. The remit of the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor, established in 1927, included an examination of the issue of single mothers. Between 1930 and 1934 different pieces of legislation were enacted to allow unmarried mothers to claim maintenance from their child's father, to make children legitimate if their parents married, and to regulate private maternity homes.¹⁵ The most far-reaching of these statutory bodies of inquiry into the regulation of sexual behaviour was the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Act and Juvenile Prostitution, which is commonly known as the

¹³ For a quite sympathetic account of the Protestant churches' ambiguous attitude to the new state in the years after independence, see R.B. McDowell, *Crisis and Decline: The Fate of Southern Unionists* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1997) and Kenneth Milne, 'The Protestant Churches in Independent Ireland' in James P. Mackey and Enda McDonagh (eds.) *Religion and Politics in Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2003), 64-83.

¹⁴ On the 'evil literature' commission, the lobbying of the commission by the pro-censorship campaign and the consequent legislation, see Martin, *Censorship*, 60-69 and 81-91.

¹⁵ Sandra L. McAvoy, 'The Regulation of Sexuality in the Irish Free State 1929-1935' in Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm (eds.) *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940* (Cork, CUP, 1999), 253-266, provides a comprehensive overview of the legislative changes in relation to unmarried mothers, legitimacy and contraception.

Carrigan committee after its chairman, William Carrigan. The findings of the Carrigan committee led to the 1935 Criminal Law Amendment Act. Among other things, this legislation raised the age of consent and outlawed all forms of artificial contraception. In 1935 the Dance Halls Act was also introduced to regulate dance halls.¹⁶

2

As recent historians have pointed out, these new laws were the result of a conceptual and political decision to frame social policy in terms of public morality rather than in terms of health, education and welfare. As Sandra L. McAvoy observes, in the debate on the 1935 contraception ban, “the women's health issue was perceived as subordinate to the public morality question and the long-term impact of the ban on women's lives is immeasurable.”¹⁷ Similarly, Mark Finnane argues that the adoption of a public morality framework which targeted ‘permissiveness’ directed political attention away from the task of introducing legal reform and improved policing to tackle the actual problem of sexual violence and abuse.¹⁸ Why did this phenomenon of public morality emerge in the Free State era, and how were its promoters so successful at getting their views incorporated into the laws of the new state – sometimes overcoming the initial reluctance of civil servants and politicians to do so?¹⁹

Irish historians have generally cast this development as the new state giving legislative force to Catholic moral teaching and safeguarding “traditional moral values.”²⁰ John Whyte, the pioneering historian of church-state relations in the post-independence era, acknowledges that there may be historical and cultural variations in the expression of these Catholic moral values. He outlines, for

¹⁶ For a detailed examination of the background, workings and findings of the Carrigan committee, see James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 5-20. The work of the committee is also examined by McAvoy and Finnane. On the introduction of the dance halls legislation see, John Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923 - 1970* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), 49-50.

¹⁷ McAvoy, 257.

¹⁸ Finnane, 529.

¹⁹ Officials in the Department of Justice, for instance, produced a scathing rejection of the Carrigan report recommendations. See Smith, 7.

²⁰ Whyte, 37.

instance, K.H. O'Connell's socio-economic argument that Irish Catholicism became more intensively puritanical on the question of sexual morality from the mid-nineteenth century as part of a larger post-Famine anxiety about land, inheritance and maintaining the family farm intact.²¹ Whyte also argues that "Irish Catholic preoccupations with sexual morality in the twenties, thirties and forties of this century was only an extreme example of a trend to be found among the more traditionally-minded people all over the world."²² Nevertheless, the alignment of these traditional moral values with the power of the state in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s was essentially opportunistic, in so far as these moral values were a pre-existing entity and what changed was the creation of a new state with an overwhelmingly Catholic majority. The new state was not a theocracy, there was a fairly strict formal division between the powers of church and state, but this was of less importance than the shared culture that united the political elite and the Catholic hierarchy. In Whyte's view, "ministers were products of the same culture as the bishops, and shared the same values. There was only one Protestant in the government, Ernest Blythe, and his austere Ulster outlook seems to have fitted in well with the Catholic puritanism of his colleagues."²³ There was, therefore, no real divergence between politicians and priests on these questions of public morality and "there is no evidence that pressure from the hierarchy was needed to bring these legislative changes about: it appears to have been spontaneous."²⁴

While Whyte's culturalist analysis tended to emphasize the psychological over the political – the idea of a puritanical *mentalité* that was more likely to affect certain types of people (Catholics, Presbyterians and 'Ulster' folk) more than others – other historians offered more robustly political versions of the culturalist argument. For F.S.L. Lyons, the new state's willingness to legislatively underwrite Catholic morality was the twin of the government's Irish language policy. Together, these formed the crucial nucleus of nationalist state formation in the Free State.

²¹ Ibid, 32-33. K.H.O'Connell, *Irish Peasant Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 113-161. For other perspectives on this argument see Emmett Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997 [1976]) and Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* [2nd ed] (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998 [1987]).

²² Whyte, 34.

²³ Ibid, 36.

²⁴ Ibid, 60.

Comparing the results of these dual policies to make the state Gaelic and Catholic, Lyons observes that the latter was considerably more successful and did more “to give the new state its distinctive character.”²⁵ In Lyons’s view, one of the consequences of the 1922 settlement was that it focused attention on questions of sovereignty and physical boundaries and diverted attention away from any serious consideration of the cultural differences that underlay the partition of the country. The governing principle shaping *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland* is that the clash of these cultures precipitated the country’s descent into anarchy and this was the prime motor of Irish history in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.²⁶ The Free State’s enforcement of Catholic moral values is therefore situated as the final phase of this conflict between cultures. In this view, the decisive faultline in the post-independence state was not the political division between Free State supporters and Republicans or between Left and Right, but between a majority preoccupied with “Gaelicism and Catholicism” and a “few representative figures” of the new state’s Protestant minority. However, the front on which this struggle was fought was not religious or sexual freedom but artistic freedom, which was promoted by those, such as AE and Yeats, who warned “against the intellectual and artistic sterility which a too intense concentration upon Gaelicism and Catholicism was liable to induce.”²⁷

In his cultural history of the post-independence state, Terence Brown adopts a similar framework to analyse the campaign for literary censorship. He argues that in the decade after independence cultural nationalism and the ‘Irish Ireland’ movement lost the “attractive humanism” that had distinguished it earlier in the century and became narrowly exclusivist and authoritarian.²⁸ A creative desire to forge a Gaelic Ireland descended into a merely reactive impulse to keep Anglophone culture out of the country. The sectarianism of some elements of the movement, particularly associated with the *Catholic Bulletin*, suggests less of an interest in cultural renewal than in advancing “Catholic power and social policy in

²⁵ F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 150.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 2-26.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 163.

²⁸ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper, 2004), 57.

the country through the defeat of Protestant Ireland and the anglicised culture associated with it."²⁹ For this reason, the Irish censorship differed from those forms of censorship that were then becoming common internationally, in so far as the Irish policy laid greater emphasis on the objective of cultural protectionism than on regulating the quality of publications. Moreover, the pursuit of cultural purity merged with the pursuit of sexual purity in the new state, as "the interests of those who sought censorship from moralistic impulses alone, and the interests of those, like the Irish Irelanders, who desired cultural protectionism met and overlapped."³⁰

Maryann Valiulis combines the basic elements of this current in Irish historiography – Catholic moral values, cultural nationalism, state formation and a reactionary response to modernity – and combines them with an analysis of gender ideology. She argues that the Free State government compensated for its lack of control over so many aspects of the new state's development, such as its monetary policy, its constitutional status as a dominion and its lack of resources, by exercising control over its women citizens. This included restricting women's participation in the public sphere through, for instance, removing their right to sit on juries and limiting their access to employment in the civil service. In this regard, its response was "typical of post-revolutionary societies, which often consolidate their power by enacting measures against women."³¹ The ideological ballast for these attacks on women's liberty by the post-independence state was provided by the Catholic

²⁹ Ibid, 61. For a critique of the 'clash of cultures' model as it was developed by Lyons and Brown, see Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Language, Nationality and Cultural Identity in the Irish Free State, 1922-7: the *Irish Statesman* and the *Catholic Bulletin* reappraised,' *Irish Historical Studies*, 24 (1984), 226-45. In particular, O'Callaghan argues that both writers relied too heavily on their analysis of marginal publications like the *Catholic Bulletin* and ascribed a more representative role to the extreme and sectarian ideas expressed there than those views enjoyed at the time.

³⁰ Ibid, 59.

³¹ Maryann Valiulis, 'Power, Gender and Identity in the Irish Free State,' *Journal of Women's History*, 6 (1995), 117-136, 127. Valiulis does not acknowledge the degree to which post-revolutionary societies have also expanded women's freedom. In the context of Irish history, it is especially noticeable that she takes no account of the complex relationship between feminism and nationalism that has been a consistent feature of anti-colonial struggles globally. National liberation movements have usually created opportunities for securing feminist objectives, even while post-colonial states have invariably failed to fulfil the emancipatory hopes which their women citizens invested in them. See Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Post-Colonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 2-3.

Church. Irish Catholicism promoted an ideal of womanhood, and the constitutive elements of this ideal were domesticity, motherhood, sexual purity and modesty. This Catholic gender identity, she argues, served to legitimise the legislative changes which confined women to the private sphere and which restricted their control over their own fertility. However, the ideal of femininity was not a specifically Irish Catholic formation; on the contrary, Valiulis argues that both the Irish Free State and Fascist Italy “took their gender ideology from the same source – the papacy.”³² But it was “the ideal of a pre-modern society” and formed one element of Irish Catholicism's opposition to the forces of modernisation that the institution saw as a threat to its power and influence.³³

Other feminist scholars have approached this period with a more nuanced approach to post-colonial history. Published in 1991, Gerardine Meaney's LIP pamphlet was primarily an intervention into debates about feminism, revisionism and nationalism precipitated by the ongoing war in Northern Ireland and the victories of the Catholic Right in the abortion and divorce referendums during the 1980s. While critiquing the anti-feminist strands in Irish nationalism, Meaney equally rejected the appropriation of feminism by revisionists as a “convenient cover for those who wish to attack any attempt to understand Ireland's past and present in terms of colonisation and decolonisation.”³⁴ In a brief sketch of the post-independence decades, Meaney drew on the post-colonial theorist Ashis Nandy who had argued that the hierarchical relationship between coloniser and colonised is always ideologically gendered, with the colonised marked as weak, submissive and ‘feminine’. In the nativist stage of decolonisation, when genuine liberation has not yet been achieved, the aspiration towards freedom among a formerly colonised people overlaps with the aspiration towards the traditionally masculine role of

³² Maryann Valiulis, ‘Neither Feminist nor Flapper: the ecclesiastical construction of the Ideal Irish Woman’ in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds.) *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1995), 168-178, 177.

³³ *Ibid*, 175. Caitriona Clear has challenged the view that an identifiable gender ideology or ‘domestic ideology’ prevailed in Ireland during the post-independence decades. She argues that such a unifying concept simplifies the actual diversity of views on gender in the writing about, and by women, from the era. See *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 3-8.

³⁴ Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1991), 10.

power. Hence, the tendency in decolonising societies to impose strictly differentiated gender roles as a means to assert the masculinity and right to power of formerly colonised male subjects.³⁵ Meaney argues that the drive to regulate and control women's bodies, and the general intensification of sexual conservatism, in Ireland during the post-independence era can be analysed in these terms as a reaction on the part of the newly emergent nationalist elite against their symbolic emasculation under colonial rule.³⁶

Most recently, James M. Smith has merged the mode of post-colonial analysis outlined by Meaney with elements of the Foucauldian approach to sexuality to frame his history of Magdalen Laundries in twentieth-century Ireland. Though institutions of this kind had been operated by both Protestant and Catholic religious organisations since the eighteenth century, Smith argues that in the post-independence decades the Laundries run by Catholic religious were used much more widely *in lieu* of welfare provision by the state. The women confined in these institutions were no longer those who worked in prostitution, but potentially any woman who found herself pregnant outside of marriage – or indeed was perceived to be 'at risk' of becoming pregnant. But there was also a fundamental change in the purpose of these institutions from welfare and reform to incarceration. Smith begins his history with the legislative measures to regulate sexual behaviour which were introduced in the first two decades of independence, focusing especially on the findings of the 'Carrigan Committee'. These actions by the new state, he argues, provided the ideological context in which the expansion of the Laundries, and the qualitative change in their purpose, came about. The introduction of this legislation marked a decisive and formative moment in the development of the new nation's "architecture of containment". That architecture encompassed the physical infrastructure of Magdalene Asylums, mother and baby homes and industrial schools where those in breach of the strictly Catholic sexual ethic of the post-independence society could be confined and kept out of view. But ideologically this architecture also included the "official and public discourses that concealed the

³⁵ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

³⁶ Meaney, 6-7.

existence and function of these facilities.”³⁷

In Smith’s analysis, as in the earlier historiography, the creation of this architecture of containment was propelled by the historical imperatives of state formation during the nativist stage of decolonisation. A repressive, puritanical Catholic sexual morality provided the new state with the fabric from which to stitch a coherent, if oppressively homogenising, national identity. In Smith’s view, the intensified legislative regulation of sexual behaviour in the early decades of independence represented “Ireland’s partnership of Church and state to effectively criminalise sexual relations outside of marriage and thereby inscribe moral purity into the project of national identity formation.”³⁸ Thus, “the discourses of sexual immorality enabled, even as it was perceived to threaten, post-independent Ireland’s nativist national imaginary.”³⁹

In these various explanatory models offered by Irish historians and critics, the Free State’s public morality phenomenon is primarily conceptualised as reactive. For Whyte the creation of the new state presented a historical opportunity for an already existing *mentalité* to be given legislative force, while for Brown and Valiulis this development represented a reaction against the modernising currents represented by, respectively, Anglophone culture and the emancipatory Enlightenment discourses exemplified by feminism. Alternatively, the drive to enshrine Catholic sexual morality in state policy is conceptualised as a reaction against the historical legacy of colonialism. This argument is set forth in culturalist terms in Lyons and Brown’s account of a Gaelic and Catholic culture striving to supplant an Anglophone and Protestant culture, while Meaney and Smith employ post-colonial theory to describe a nativist stage of decolonisation characterised by a reactionary drive for legitimacy that is shaped by the symbolic emasculation of the former colonial era.

³⁷ Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, 46.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

However, we can begin to see this historical phenomenon in a different interpretive light if we consider it as being primarily productive rather than reactive. In this view, public morality is still conceived as a function of the counter-revolutionary drive to re-create a stable social order in the wake of decolonisation, and the material effects of this regulatory drive, especially on some of the new state's women citizens, would appear no less oppressive. But this alternative hermeneutic would reveal that the defining features of the public morality phenomenon owe less to either Catholicism or a nativist confection of Gaelicism, than to the pursuit of a liberal capitalist version of modernity. In this view, the Free State was not giving legislative power to a traditional, puritanical psychosis concerning human sexuality but promoting a regulatory ideal of sexual behaviour and a norm of bourgeois subjectivity. In the wake of the revolutionary energies released by the struggle for national independence, public morality represented less a quest for sexual purity than a quest for hegemony. After the 1922 settlement and the subsequent Civil War, the social order, in class and political terms, was in a state of flux. The morality campaigns served as a means of constructing and cementing new class identities and extending the hegemony of the newly-empowered Catholic middle-class. This regulatory ideal of sexuality allowed the middle-class to define themselves as bearers of stability and order in a new moral economy, while also producing an ideological framework for defining the manifest class divisions of the new state in terms of social delinquency and moral incompetence rather than in political and economic terms.

Despite the different theoretical approaches, the unqualified use of terms such as 'moral values' and 'moral purity' across the Irish historiographical writing on the 1920s implies that these concepts are an essentially ahistorical and non-political given, which were incorporated into the historical and political process of state formation. Most importantly, this suggests that Catholic sexual morality can be conceived of as a static and homogenous ideological formation. However, a closer analysis of the discourses of public morality circulating in 1920s Ireland indicates that the discussion of human sexuality by Irish Catholic intellectuals at this time was actually structured by three distinct discourses. As illustrated by the reading of the debates about unmarried mothers below, these discourses were: a juridical discourse of criminality, legislation and regulation; a theological discourse of

personal morality and sin; and a discourse of medicine and health. These discourses did not function discretely but in a dynamic relationship with each other. At times they reinforced and amplified each other, and yet at other times the different discourses operated in divergent or contradictory ways.

None of these discourses were unique to Irish Catholicism since they were all part of the repertoire of the modern 'power-knowledge' nexus, as Michel Foucault has termed it.⁴⁰ This raises another assumption that underpins the various accounts of the post-independence era, which is the idea that the moral values being incorporated into public policy represented a 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' formation and were being mobilised to generate a protective shield against the forces of modernisation. However, one of the distinguishing features of these discourses of sexuality that were being mobilised in 1920s Ireland is their engagement with one of the key political problems of modernity. That is the question of how power functions in a modern, liberal capitalist society where coercion has substantially given way to a regime where discourses of knowledge function to produce self-governing subjects. These discourses construct human sexuality as a problem; that is, as an object of scientific inquiry, of ethical thought and of political concern. This problem of sexuality has been one element of the ideological construction of the human body, or more precisely a proliferation of discourses about the body, as a strategic site for the operations of power in modern society. This is the historical development that Foucault termed 'bio-power'.⁴¹ The instability and the rapidity of social change that is systemic to modern liberal capitalist societies periodically produce points of crises where the question of individual self-regulation is culturally and politically foregrounded. Moral politics describes this process whereby certain aspects of private or 'moral' conduct are configured as the objective of political mobilisation and state regulation.

The discussion of public morality by Catholic figures in the early years of the Irish

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* [trans: Alan Sheridan] (London: Penguin, 1977), 28.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 - The Will to Knowledge* [trans: Robert Hurley] (London: Allen Lane, 1979), 138-143. See also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136-138.

Free State combined these three types of discourse to produce a particular model of human sexuality, but also a particular narrative of subject formation and of the relationship between the individual and society. The crucial element running through this was the question of control. Human sexuality was conceptualised as a particularly volatile natural force that needed to be carefully managed and directed towards its only legitimate end, namely human reproduction. In Catholic thinking, as well as in secular liberal capitalist thinking generally, the ideal mechanism for exercising such control was the rational and ethically well-developed self-governing subject. But the collapse of state authority represented by the Civil War, along with the more general weakening of liberalism across the advanced capitalist societies in the wake of the First World War, meant that belief in the self-regulating capacity of the individual subject was at a low ebb. It was this conjunction that produced the emphasis on developing collective rather than individual mechanisms of control. These collective mechanisms were of two kinds: those of a 'voluntary' nature typified by the Vigilance associations, the Legion of Mary or the Modest Dress and Deportment Crusade, or those enforced by the state through the passage of legislation regulating different aspects of private conduct. Driving this formulation of collective rather than individual mechanisms of control was the belief in a fundamental connection between private behaviour and the public good. In this view, sexuality was not primarily understood as an aspect of individual psychology but as a public concern crucial to the maintenance of social order. This idea is encapsulated in the term 'public morality' itself; it is also encapsulated in the language and syntax of the Catholic bishops' warning about the 'perils' before the Irish people in 1927. A list of examples of what might be thought of as modes of private amusement or self-presentation ("the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress") is immediately followed by a reference to the collective ("our race"). Again, we should note that historically there is nothing peculiarly Catholic or Irish about this conceptual link between sexuality, private behaviour more generally and the stability of the social order.

One unexpected feature of the Catholic public morality discourses in the Irish Free State is that the incapacity of the individual to exercise control over their sexuality and to regulate their behaviour was not generally expressed as a question of

sinfulness or moral depravity. Again, the discussion of the 'problem' of unmarried mothers illustrates this conception of the individual as being vulnerable and in need of 'protection' rather than being morally culpable. In particular, these public morality discourses emphasised the volatility and vulnerability of youth. As it does in the literary *bildungsroman*, youth in the public morality discourses provided an important symbol for thinking about the relationship between the individual and modern society. But where literary youth emphasised the value of self-cultivation and the troubled pursuit of freedom, youth in the moral politics paradigm was distinguished by instability, danger and the need for protection. Thus, the relationship between youth and age came to stand for the political relationship between the citizen and the state, with the citizen needing to be protected from themselves as much as from any external forces. In a further permutation of this trope, youth also provided a symbol of the new state in all its freshness, vulnerability and reckless instability.

3

The theological discourse of sexuality on which Irish Catholic intellectuals in the early twentieth century were drawing had its foundations in the Counter-Reformation movement of the late sixteenth century. Among the initiatives of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) was a new system of seminary education for the clergy. As well as being compulsory and standardised for the first time, this lengthy new form of clerical training was far more rigorous than that which had existed before. There was also a reaffirmation of compulsory clerical celibacy in response to the rejection of this rule by the Reformed churches. The Council also introduced new regulations governing marriage. The rules on consanguinity, rules about who one could and could not marry, were made more rigorous and it became necessary to have witnesses for a marriage to be performed. Priests were not only required to enforce these rules but were also obliged for the first time to keep records of all marriages.⁴²

In these Counter-Reformation drives towards the standardisation, regulation and measurement of individual life we can identify the lineaments of modernity. This

⁴² Merry E. Weisner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2000), 106-109.

foreshadowing of modern life is perhaps most apparent in the greater emphasis placed on confession, which for lay Catholics was probably the most significant of the regulatory practices initiated by the Council of Trent. The new architectural space of the enclosed, darkened confessional exemplified how this mandatory new form of confession became an intensely personal experience, in comparison with older public forms of confession. This new confessional practice initiated a new type of dialogue between a Catholic penitent and his or her confessor, along with an internal process of self-examination and self-scrutiny.⁴³ The centrality of confession and penance in Catholicism after the Counter-Reformation, and the emphasis on training priests as confessors in the new seminary system, was accompanied by the development of a new form of Catholic moral theology. In this new system, the concerns and methodology of moral theology overlapped with those of canon law. The objective became not the articulation of what constituted a good or ethical life for a Christian, but a legalistic calibration of degrees of sinfulness.⁴⁴ Sexual sin held a primary place in this new confessional regime. As Foucault has pointed out, from the Counter-Reformation onwards, the Catholic Church "attributed more and more importance in penance – and perhaps at the expense of some other sins – to all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and the soul; henceforth all had to enter, in detail, into the process of confession and guidance."⁴⁵

This so-called 'manualist' system of moral theology was to be the dominant theological current in Roman Catholicism from the Counter-Reformation until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).⁴⁶ There were three concepts underpinning the discussion of sexuality in this system of moral theology; reproduction, agency and society. The primary dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate sexual activity was whether or not it was directed at reproduction. In the words of Henry Davis, author of a moral theology textbook used at the Maynooth seminary, the

⁴³ Foucault, *History*, 18-21 and 58-61.

⁴⁴ David Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), 70-71.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *History*, 19.

⁴⁶ Bohr, 70.

only legitimate reason for sex was "the orderly propagation of the race."⁴⁷ All other forms of sex were illegitimate and sinful. These sexual sins were divided into those considered "in accordance with nature", which were fornication, adultery, incest and rape, and those "contrary to nature", which were masturbation, sodomy and bestiality.⁴⁸ The main objective of moral theology in relation to sexuality was calibrating the degree to which these acts were sinful. As the initial classification of these sexual acts indicates, the primary criteria for establishing the seriousness of a sexual sin depended on the relationship between that act and reproduction, or 'nature'. Some sexual acts were sinful because reproduction was being actively avoided; in this regard 'fornication' effectively covered any heterosexual sex where conception was not the objective. Other sexual acts, such as masturbation and homosexuality, were sinful because reproduction was impossible.

The second criteria in determining the sinfulness of an illegitimate sexual act was agency. Sexual pleasure was designated as being more or less sinful according to the degree that one consented to it. The notion of consent that Davis uses when discussing rape in his textbook is recognisably that of legal consent. The sinfulness of the act on the part of the aggressor lies in the absence of consent by the victim.⁴⁹ In other instances, however, the text specifies that it is the presence rather than the absence of consent that can lead to an act becoming sinful. In the discussion on masturbation, for instance, there is a very detailed distinction drawn between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' masturbation. The potential sinfulness of the 'involuntary' type is calibrated by the extent to which one consents by taking

⁴⁷ Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* [4 volumes] (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), Vol. 2, 172. The textbooks on the moral theology syllabus at Maynooth in the early and mid-twentieth century (until Vatican II) were all in Latin and have not been translated into English. Davis's four volume text was an English-language synthesis of the manual theology corpus as it stood at that time. From the late 1930s seminary students would have had access to that book, though it was not prescribed on their course reading. In an interesting illustration of that interconnection between the control of sexuality and the control of knowledge which Foucault identified, those sections dealing with sexual sin were still written in Latin by Davis. I am greatly obliged to Gordon Campbell, Department of Classics at NUIM, for the translation of these sections. I am also indebted to Mgr. Patrick Corish for alerting me to Davis's work, and for information and personal recollections on the teaching of moral theology and, more generally, the training which seminarians in Maynooth received at the time.

⁴⁸ Davis, 207.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 210.

pleasure from it and by knowingly putting oneself in a position of 'danger' where it may occur.⁵⁰ This is a notion of consent as a moral and psychological rather than a legal category. It is not a matter of giving or withholding consent to another person but to oneself. The human body, and human sexuality, is thus constructed as a site of struggle between a volatile and disruptive natural force and the mastering and controlling power of reason and the will.

The third factor in this agon between natural instinct and the will was society. Through exerting the will and exercising self-control in sexual matters, the individual was protecting his or her physical body and ensured salvation. But through this assertion of self-control the individual was also contributing to the maintenance of social order. In the synthesis of sexual moral teaching offered by Davis, this imperative to ensure social stability through controlling the sexual instinct is the fundamental basis of sexual morality. Or, as he puts it, in a striking phrase, "unchastity is subversive of both the essential and necessary order of society."⁵¹ So, sex outside of marriage, for example, is wrong because, "it leads to doubtful paternity of offspring, and consequently to a lack of interest in the education of offspring, physical, moral and intellectual, and from this the necessary propagation of the human race is opposed."⁵² For an ostensibly religious text, this argument is predicated on a remarkably unchristian and bleakly social Darwinist vision of human society. However, it captures vividly the conjunction between sexual control and social order, and between uncontrolled sexuality and social anarchy, that animates the entire structure of this theological discourse of sexuality that prevailed in the pre-Second Vatican Council era.

Several of these key features of the Catholic theological discourse of sexuality were shared by the scientific discourses of health and sexual purity that were developed in Western medicine from the eighteenth century onwards, and on which the Irish Catholic writers of the 1920s also drew. Until the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality emerged around the turn of the twentieth century, these medical and scientific discourses of sexuality shared with the Catholic theological discourse

⁵⁰ Ibid, 211-215.

⁵¹ Ibid, 181.

⁵² Ibid, 208.

the principle of reproduction as the benchmark of legitimate, or healthy, sexual activity.⁵³ Moreover, as Thomas Lacquer has shown in his history of medical writing on masturbation since the eighteenth century, there was an equally strong concern with the relationship between sexuality and social order in the scientific discourse as there was in the theological discourse.⁵⁴ There was in this period, therefore, no rigid philosophical or conceptual wall or dividing line separating off 'premodern' Christian or Catholic conceptions of sexuality from 'modern' post-Enlightenment normative medical discourses. In general, the two regimes of discourse, theological and medical, corroborated and supported each other.

Lacquer argues that three aspects of the practice of masturbation were central to the medical and pedagogical invention of this new 'problem' in eighteenth-century Europe. These were imagination, desire and privacy.⁵⁵ The reason why the construction of masturbation as a problem emerges at the beginning of the modern age is that these three concepts were also of central importance in the transition from an absolutist to a liberal capitalist social order. Creativity, inventiveness and entrepreneurship, in other words imagination, were becoming highly prized as the motors propelling production in an emerging capitalist economy. However, increased production needed increased consumption and therefore desire was an equally important element of this new economic order. Lacquer refers to the decline of sumptuary laws and the reorientation of 'luxury', from being a signifier of vice to a being a legitimate pursuit, as the salient elements of this reformulation of desire.⁵⁶ Masturbation also takes place in private and in secret. In the eighteenth

⁵³ The 'epistemic break' that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century when psychoanalytical theory posited sexual pleasure rather than reproduction as the primary objective of the sexual drive is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

⁵⁴ Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex* (New York: Zone Books, 2003). On the intersection of theological and medical discourses of sexuality in nineteenth century England specifically, see Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830* (London: Routledge, 1987), 13-59.

⁵⁵ Lacquer, 214-231.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 205. On the emergence of a consumer culture in the eighteenth century, and the historical connection with evolving ideas on human subjectivity and desire in religion, philosophy and art in the period see Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (London: Blackwell, 1987), John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.) *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993) and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: The Emergence of English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

century the idea of 'privacy' began to be ascribed a positive connotation as a site of truth and as the foundational space of an authentic self. The concept of the private was also particularly significant in the development of the marketplace and its relationship to civil society. The idea that the pursuit of private interests – wealth and profit – could also generate public good was a significant element in the historical triumph of capitalism

In Lacquer's view, then, the 'problem' of masturbation produced in medical discourse encapsulated one of the dilemmas of modernity. It was, he argues, "the vice born of an age that valued desire, pleasure and privacy but was fundamentally worried about how, or if, society could mobilise them."⁵⁷ Here was a developing social and economic order that was predicated on the incitement and cultivation of imagination, privacy and desire in the individual subject. But this development simultaneously generated considerable uncertainty in the society as to the point at which an excess of these things could prove destructive of that social order. The problem posed by masturbation was therefore a problem of limits. But if the issue of masturbation encapsulated the problem, it also suggested the solution. Ultimately, the most important person in the control of the problem of masturbation was not the priest, the doctor or the teacher but the self-regulating individual. While these three figures could police the individual's actions, the most important element of their work was the use of theology, medicine and education to inculcate a capacity for self-control and self-discipline in the individual. The emergence of the problem of sexuality was therefore structurally linked with the emergence of another problem. That was the problem of the relationship between the individual and modern society, and in particular the necessity for the individual to be capable of setting his or her own limits and to police the line between individual freedom and the maintenance of social order.

However, despite an ideological commitment to individualism, modern liberal capitalist societies have never been entirely satisfied that the individual's capacity for self-control is a trustworthy basis for social order. On the contrary, as modern society grew more complex the repertoire of regulatory mechanisms governing

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 210.

personal conduct expanded proportionately. As Foucault has shown, the growth of medical and scientific discourses of sexuality in the Western world during the nineteenth century was as much a function of this expanding regulatory framework as it was a growth in 'knowledge' about human sexuality.⁵⁸ Moreover, these scientific discourses came to be combined with more directly juridical discourses in campaigns for 'social purity' in which the legal power of the modern state was to be the ultimate enforcer of such purity when individual self-control failed.

As historians of the British and Irish social purity movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have shown, there was a series of distinctive 'waves' in this phenomenon. The first was a move directed by the British state, in conjunction with the male-dominated medical establishment, to regulate prostitution; this was done primarily as a means of safeguarding the country's military forces from the depredations of sexually transmitted diseases. From 1864 onwards a series of Contagious Diseases Acts were passed which effectively allowed the police in designated garrison towns to forcibly detain women working as prostitutes, or, as it unfolded in the subsequent years, women even suspected of being prostitutes.⁵⁹ This move on the part of the state was countered by the emergence of a mass protest movement demanding the repeal of the CDAs. Headed by the feminist campaigner Josephine Butler and her Ladies National Association, this repeal campaign drew together an alliance of feminists, working-class socialists, middle-class liberals and religious philanthropists. The campaign gathered momentum during the 1870s, and achieved its goal of full repeal in 1886. By that stage, however, this repeal campaign had transmogrified into a third movement which, by contrast, was seeking greater rather than less regulation of sexuality by the state. Focusing on issues such as the age of consent, juvenile prostitution, trafficking of women ('white slavery') and male homosexuality, the first major success of the social purity campaigners was the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act. As with the repeal movement out of which it emerged, the social purity movement was a

⁵⁸ Foucault, *History*, 53-73.

⁵⁹ Edward Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 77-93, and Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), 55-70. See also Mort, 69-76. On the application of the CDAs in Irish garrison towns and the activity of the repeal and social purity campaigns in Ireland, see Luddy, *Prostitution* (2007), 142-155.

politically diverse amalgam of forces, drawing on science, religion and a spectrum of political views from feminism and socialism to conservative reaction.⁶⁰ The tensions generated by this political diversity within the broad social purity platform were particularly manifest within Feminism. Lucy Bland has argued that while feminists pursued a unified vision of “an emancipated femininity and a moralised masculinity” and an end to the sexual ‘double standard’ in the decades between 1880 and 1914, there were serious divisions among them as to how to achieve this goal.⁶¹ Those in favour of increased intervention by the state in pursuit of ‘purifying’ both the public and private sphere were opposed by those, such as Butler, who condemned these ‘statist’ and ‘repressive’ tendencies; the suppression of artificial methods of birth control, and information on them, by the state was a particularly problematic issue since many feminists supported the campaign for this.⁶²

Alan Hunt has argued that the late nineteenth-century social purity campaigns should be viewed within a broader history of movements based on moral politics.⁶³ These movements have been a recurring feature of modern Western society since the eighteenth century, and continue to be so. Hunt's examples range from the Society for the Reformation of Manners, founded in 1691 in London, to late twentieth-century anti-smoking campaigns. For Hunt, the anxiety generated by the instability endemic to capitalist society is connected to personal behaviour or ‘morality’ through the dynamics of moral politics. The material form that this ideological development takes is the mobilisation of mass campaigns directed towards solving these moral problems. The strategies deployed in these campaigns range from inculcating self-control and self-discipline in individuals to policing the behaviour of individuals and groups, and lobbying the state to give legislative force to such policing. The long-term result of such movements is usually an intensification of regulation of private behaviour by the state.

⁶⁰ Bristow, 95-21; Walkowitz, *Prostitution* (1980), 90-110.

⁶¹ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* [2nd edition] (London: Tauris, 2001[1995]), 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 95-122 and 189-197.

⁶³ Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999). James A. Morone has pursued a similar approach in his study of the relationship between politics and morality in the history of the United States; see *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

As Hunt points out, when analysing these different historical movements it is important to attend to the specifics of each one while also understanding their underlying structure and, as he puts it, "the location of moral regulation within the field of governing others and governing selves."⁶⁴ There are two key dimensions to the underlying structure of these movements. Firstly, it is necessary to remember that that which is designated as 'moral' in these campaigns is not a pre-existing set of standards which is being reaffirmed and bolstered. Instead, we have to understand the 'moral' as being constituted by the campaign itself. "There is no set of issues that are necessarily moral issues," according to Hunt, "rather the moral dimension is the result of the linkages posited between subject, object, knowledge, discourse, practices and their projected social consequences."⁶⁵ The second, and related, point is that while these campaigns of moral politics arise as responses to modernity they cannot be understood as straightforwardly anti-modern or reactionary attempts to place a bulwark of traditional values in the path of modern development. Moral politics is itself a modern phenomenon.

This is again illustrated by the British and Irish social purity campaigns of the late nineteenth century. At the level of strategy, these campaigners were entirely modern in the techniques they employed. Technological developments in mass communication, in particular the increased number and volume of cheap newspapers and magazines, played an essential role in the success of their campaigns; though as Judith Walkowitz points out, there was always an ambiguously troubling similarity between the rhetoric of exposure in these publications and the new forms of mass-produced pornography that were also expanding in volume.⁶⁶ Politically, the social purity campaigners used the mass mobilisation strategies which had been pioneered by evangelists, abolitionists and temperance campaigners earlier in the nineteenth century (the same methods used by Daniel O'Connell to advance the Catholic Emancipation and repeal movements in Ireland). Indeed, Hunt argues that sexual purity was a vehicle for a significant broadening of democracy in the late nineteenth century. The campaigns originated among groups – the lower middle-class and, in particular, women – who

⁶⁴ Hunt, 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁶ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delights: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 121-134.

were without institutional power and outside of the mainstream of official politics.⁶⁷

But along with being modern in their techniques, these campaigns were also engendered by the conditions of modernity, and in particular the currents of industrialisation and urbanisation that were transforming nineteenth-century British society.⁶⁸ The concern about changes in sexual behaviour was inextricably linked with concerns about maintaining social order, and more particularly with middle-class concerns about the social threat represented by the urban poor and militant workers – the spectres that haunted the imagination of the Victorian middle-class. It was for this reason that there was such a strong overlap between the ranks of social purity activists and philanthropists. The social purity objective of regulating sexuality, through inculcating self-regulation in men reinforced by regulation of sexuality by the state, was interlinked with the political objective of regulating the working classes, again through inculcating 'respectability' among working-class individuals and families reinforced by more coercive policing where necessary. As Bland argues, "Victorian moral and social reform converged, with the desire for moral reform present even in the pursuit of what might appear to us today as essentially material reform."⁶⁹ Bland suggests that the cyclical economic depression that beset world capitalism in the 1880s, which generated high unemployment, chronic housing shortages and increasing labour militancy, was the primary motivator of this middle-class attempt to 're-make' working class culture, and hence that the more 'interventionist' social purity movement that emerged in the decade was one part of this. This is a crucial feature of moral politics as a recurring pattern in modernity. It is a phenomenon that arises in response to crises in the social and economic order which precipitate a loss of belief in the capacity of the individual to exercise self-regulation, and the concomitant identification of this incapacity as the source of social disorder and instability. Moral politics comes to the fore when the contract between the individual and society that underpins liberal capitalism is perceived to be an inadequate basis for social order.

⁶⁷ Hunt, 79-80.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Bland, 97.

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How did the fusion of these historically-available theological, juridical and scientific discourses by Catholic activists operate in 1920s Ireland? One of the clearest illustrations of this is offered by the discussion of unmarried mothers in a series of articles by various authors, some clerical and some lay but all male, which appeared in the theological journal, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, between 1921 and 1928.⁷⁰ As Maria Luddy has shown, during this period there was a growing perception that the rate of 'illegitimate' births was rising and this produced a great flurry of discussion and charitable activism directed at the 'problem' of unmarried mothers. Luddy points out that while complex representations of the unmarried mother figure abounded, the material conditions of those women who became pregnant and destitute were not significantly improved by this.⁷¹

The 'unmarried mother' figure constructed by the *IER* writers was a young, single Catholic woman who found herself pregnant. She was 'respectable' (though the exact level of her respectability was connected to her class) and could therefore be distinguished from an unmarried woman who became pregnant through prostitution. The 'problem' presented by the 'unmarried mother' was constructed at one level as a question of public policy. What was the best method of providing welfare services to the respectable unmarried mother and her child? The debate among the writers centred on whether the approach should be what they termed 'individual' or 'institutional.' The advocates of the former, such as the anonymous 'Sagart', recommended a system where charitable groups provided a woman with a place to live in the period leading up to, and for a time after, giving birth. After the

⁷⁰ M.H. MacInerney, 'The Souper Problem in Ireland,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 18, (1921), 140-156 and 'A Postscript to the Souper Problem,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 19, (1922), 246-61. Joseph A. Glynn, 'The Unmarried Mother,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 18, (1921), 461-467. 'Sagart,' 'How to Deal with the Unmarried Mother,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 20, (1922), 145-153. R.S. Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem'[2 parts], *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 22, (1924), 55-68 and 172-88. R.S. Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother and the Poor Law Commission,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 31 (1928). Jim Smith explains the political background to this discussion, which included negotiations between the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin and the new government about the state providing payment to the religious orders for running mother and baby homes. See Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 48-53.

⁷¹ Maria Luddy, 'Moral Rescue and Unmarried Mothers in Ireland in the 1920s,' *Women's Studies*, 30 (2001), 797-818, 798.

baby was born, the organisation placed the baby with foster-parents or helped the mother to look after the baby herself. Opposing this fairly informal system other contributors to the debate argued the merits of a system of 'Rescue Homes' and 'Foundling Homes.' The advocates of this included the Dominican priest M. H. MacInerny, who was the editor of the *Irish Rosary*, and Sir Joseph Glynn, the president of the St Vincent de Paul Society. There was a further debate among the advocates of this system as to the advantages of a small number of large and centrally-run institutions or several, smaller and locally-run ones.⁷²

It should be said that what was best for the mother and her child does not emerge as a primary concern in this discussion, and the working out of the debate shows that this 'unmarried mother' figure was constructed as presenting a more fundamental problem than that of welfare policy and strategy. On one hand, the 'unmarried mother' presented a theological problem. If she was to resort to prostitution to support herself and the baby her soul would be in peril and, as 'Sagart' insists, all Catholics would have an obligation to prevent this.⁷³ Moreover, for MacInerny (and the other contributors agreed with him but gave less prominence to this matter), the fundamental reason for acting on this issue was that the main existing source of help for such girls was Protestant-run institutions that, he claims, offered help on the condition that the child be raised as a Protestant.⁷⁴ Invoking cultural memories of evangelical Protestant activity during the famine of the 1840s through his insistent use of the phrase 'souperism', MacInerny's stance demonstrates a certain paranoid sectarianism indicative of the wider political climate of the era. The crucial conceptual point, however, is that welfare provision is envisaged as a battle between competing forces for the soul of the young mother and her child, rather than as being primarily a response to their material needs. In this vision, the young mother and her child are characterised as vulnerable figures, prey to the machinations of external forces, in need of protection.

⁷² On the merits of locally-run institutions see MacInerny, 'The Souper Problem,' 147; for the contrary argument for larger, centrally-run institutions, see Glynn, 465-466.

⁷³ 'Sagart,' 146.

⁷⁴ MacInerny, 142.

This vulnerability of the young woman's soul was considered to extend to her body and her mind as well, and it is in this regard that a juridical discourse came into play. It is worth distinguishing between two levels at which this criminalising and regulatory discourse operated in the discussion on unmarried mothers. At a rhetorical level, the writers make frequent use of the language of criminal justice when describing the situation of the unmarried mother. There are routine references to her "wrongdoing" and her "guilt." Her stay in the projected institutions is referred to as her "detainment" and one of the considerations in deciding how to run these institutions is how best to provide a "deterrent" against women getting pregnant in the first place. One of Joseph Glynn's arguments for using the institutional system to make the young mother, rather than foster parents, responsible for her child's welfare is that "her love for the child will be a powerful deterrent to further wrongdoing."⁷⁵ Through rhetorically conflating sinfulness, a moral category applicable to individual conduct, with criminal behaviour, a legal category in which individual conduct is identified as injurious to others and to collective well-being, the writers situate the sexuality of young women as something potentially disruptive to the social order.

However, when Catholic writers came to discuss this matter as an actual legal issue, as opposed to using language from the criminal justice system to describe 'immoral' behaviour, the young woman moves from being the locus of a threat to social stability to being someone in need of protection from society from various internal and external forces that threaten her. Framing the issue of the unmarried mother as a legal and regulatory issue was the subject of Richard Devane's contributions to this discussion; he wrote two articles in response to the debate between MacInerney, Glynn and 'Sagart' in 1924, and returned to the issue again in 1928 in response to the report of the Commission on the Sick and Destitute Poor. In 1931 he reiterated his arguments about the age of consent, this time in the context of the Carrigan Commission being established.⁷⁶ A Jesuit priest, Devane was one of the most active figures in the public morality campaigns of the post-independence decades; as well writing on the age of consent and other elements

⁷⁵ Glynn, 463.

⁷⁶ R.S. Devane, 'The Legal Protection of Girls,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 37 (1931), 19-40.

of the legal regulation of sexual behaviour, he also wrote extensively on dancehall regulation and censorship, and was a leading participant in the pro-censorship campaign.⁷⁷ As well as being a prolific writer on such issues, he also gave evidence to the 'Evil Literature' Commission and to the Carrigan Committee and contemporary historians, such as Peter Martin and Jim Smith, agree that he was the most intellectually able proponent of the public morality position.

A striking feature of Devane's articles is the degree to which his style and approach encapsulates most acutely the fusion of theological, scientific and legal discourses. The fundamental belief underpinning his work was that the demographics of the new state, with its overwhelmingly Catholic majority created by partition, meant that the legal system of the state should enforce Catholic moral teaching. As he wrote in 1924 in relation to the unmarried mother, he hoped that in the new state there was "every probability of fixing the legal standard of morality in true consonance with the ideals set before them by the teaching of the Catholic Church."⁷⁸ So while consistently using religious terms such as "immorality" and "sin" to describe sexual activity, his concern in his writing is never with theological or pastoral issues about how individual Catholics are behaving but always with political issues of legal reform. Moreover, the methodology that he uses to put forward his arguments for legal change is rigorously scientific; he accumulates a large mass of factual evidence which he then presents as proof of the rational argument for whichever change he is proposing. Interestingly, despite his stated belief in the superiority of Catholic moral teaching, he never gives more than a cursory mention to the views of Catholic authority figures, such as the bishops, but instead draws on legal reports and on the writings of experts in jurisprudence, psychologists, sociologists and journalists. The bulk of the material from which he cites originated outside of Ireland, primarily in Britain, and, as he frequently points out, comes from figures who are not Catholic or writing from a Catholic viewpoint. This is just one of the contradictory aspects of Devane's writing. Another is his routine disparagement of

⁷⁷ On the significance of Devane's role in the pro-censorship campaign, see Martin, *Censorship*, 60-61. Jim Smith highlights Devane's contribution to the Carrigan committee and argues that he was unique among his clerical colleagues in incorporating a sociological perspective on sexual regulation and questioning the pervasive sexual double standard that cast all blame for sexual immorality onto women. See Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 10-11.

⁷⁸ Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem I,' 58.

'the English mind', with its pusillanimous and often hypocritical approach to sexual morality, of which the Irish legal system can now free itself and embrace a superior Irish Catholic moral sensibility, while at the same time insistently calling for Irish lawmakers to bring the laws on sexual regulation into line with what he considers progressive changes recently made to the laws on sexual consent in England and Northern Ireland.

In relation to unmarried mothers and the legal regulation of sexual behaviour, Devane argued for two basic changes to the law. One was that the age of consent for girls should be raised; Devane's preference was for the new age to be set at nineteen but he argued that at the very least it should be eighteen.⁷⁹ The second was the introduction of provisions to give an unmarried mother "legal redress...against her betrayer" through reforming the so-called 'Bastardy laws' to make a man legally responsible for financially supporting his illegitimate child.⁸⁰ Curiously, while Devane briefly digresses in one of his 1924 articles to recommend that those running institutions for unmarried mothers should always arrange for the mother to have a religious retreat before leaving, so as to "impress on her in no superficial way the guilt of her sin", the main thrust of his argument presents young women as beset by threats on all sides and to a large degree not culpable for their own "ruin".⁸¹ Instead, young women are in need of protection, from themselves and from men, and the state cannot presume that parents will provide this protection – on the contrary, "the too frequent neglect of unnatural parents" may be the very thing from which a young woman needs protection.⁸²

Devane constructs this vulnerable figure from an odd compound of class and gender prejudice, certain strands of early twentieth-century feminist thought and the prevailing theories of adolescent psychology. Thus, for instance, he reiterates middle-class assumptions about the moral ineptitude of the working class and the poor when he argues that,

we do not ask that the daughter of the well-to-do man, who leaves a secondary school at seventeen and then lives under her father's roof until marriage,

⁷⁹ Ibid, 67.

⁸⁰ Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem II,' 172.

⁸¹ Ibid, 179.

⁸² Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem I,' 60.

should be protected by law...but we demand that the ignorant, the innocent, or the silly girl, who is forced to go out to make a living in conditions dangerous to her virtue, whether she be a domestic, or farm hand, or shop assistant, should be safeguarded against her own inexperience and the insinuating advances of dangerous men.⁸³

Along with the ideal model of a woman's life, passing seamlessly from the control of her father to that of her husband, which is implicitly valorised here, there is also the conflation of intellectual incompetence with being of the working class. Devane, for example, doesn't trouble to pause and clarify if he means that *some* girls who have to go out to work are "ignorant" or "silly" or if this is an essential characteristic of all working girls. Protecting young girls from their own "silliness", "vanity" and even "stupidity" is a recurring concern in Devane's argument on the age of consent. Yet this demeaning and patronising view of femininity is combined with Devane's insistence that what he is seeking is "justice" for women. In calling for changes to the illegitimacy laws, for instance, he argues that this merely involves accepting the obvious fact that "where there is a mutual act involving the mutual consequences of the birth of a child, there should be mutual responsibilities. This is but mere justice."⁸⁴ In particular, Devane reiterates the arguments of the British and Irish social purity feminists active between the 1880s and the First World War when he condemns the sexual 'double standard' which excused extra-marital sexual activity by men as an inevitable product of their nature but punished it in women.⁸⁵ For Devane, the establishment of the new state created a world-historical opportunity for Ireland to "lead the way to the overthrowal (sic) of the 'double standard' that has polluted the social life and legislation of all civilised States, from which arises an unchristian severity to the immoral woman and a lenient tolerance to the man, the partner, more than likely the instigator, of her sin."⁸⁶ Devane seems unaware that he appears to be setting up a different double standard here, one in which the man may be more guilty but is also therefore more morally responsible and capable, while the young woman is less guilty but also less in control of her moral actions and her sexuality.

⁸³ Ibid, 67-68.

⁸⁴ Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem II,' 172.

⁸⁵ On the rejection of the sexual 'double standard' as one of the foundational premises of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Feminism, see Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, xiii.

⁸⁶ Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem II,' 180.

However, this absence of control is not only a function of her gender but also of her youth. In defining the age of consent issue as a matter of 'protecting' young girls, Devane drew on the work of the American psychologist, and theorist of adolescence, G Stanley Hall to underline the turbulent instability and irrationality of youth, and in particular the almost unfathomable crisis that a young girl experiences in adolescence and which is "hidden, not only to herself but to others."⁸⁷ This crisis, Devane argues, is worst between the ages of sixteen and nineteen or twenty, proving the illogicality of the age of consent as it then stood since, "we withdraw protection just when protection is most needed, not only against others, but also as regards herself and her own turbulent emotionalism and instability."⁸⁸ Thus youth is defined as a time when the struggle to contain the potentially disruptive natural force of sexuality within its legitimate groove is most crucial since it is then that the rational will is least able to exert itself and maintain control. Devane's solution to this dangerous moment of passage is a collective intervention, by the state, to ensure victory for the rational forces of control. Conceptually, Devane's argument rests on a similar evaluation of youth to that found in the literary *bildungsroman* – youth as tumultuous and fluid but also as a crucial, decisive point in the trajectory of self-development – while reaching different conclusions on the implications of this for both the young person and for society.

While Devane was drawing on scientific theories of adolescence in his articles, his fellow contributors to the debate on unmarried mothers were also invoking the language of science and medicine. But as with their use of the language of the law to describe immorality, their use of medical terms was equally rhetorical. The language of medicine was not being used to discuss the health of individual

⁸⁷ Devane, 'The Legal Protection of Girls,' 34. Active from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s, Hall was one of the leading figures in the development of the discipline of psychology in the United States. His two volume *Adolescence: its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904), from which Devane quotes, is credited with developing and popularising the modern concept of adolescence as an autonomous age group, and this work continued to be influential in the field of adolescent psychology until the 1950s. See John Springhall, *Coming of Age: Adolescence in Britain 1860-1960* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 28-37.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

mothers and babies, but to frame sexual immorality as contagious, or what MacInerny calls "moral pestilence".⁸⁹ On one level, this concept of moral contagion was localised and contained within the discussion of how to provide welfare services for young mothers. For those opposed to the 'institutional' solution, one of the chief objections to the development of large 'Rescue Homes' is that the "less guilty" who have become pregnant for the first time, "more through folly than vice", will come into contact with "hardened" women who have become pregnant more than once.⁹⁰ The proponents of the institutions, such as MacInerny and Glynn, were equally keen that any system put in place should be able to distinguish unmarried mothers according to "age, degree of guilt and social station". In MacInerny's view, there were those women from "respectable" backgrounds who "fall more through folly than vice" by being "betrayed by some rascal." But then there are those girls and women, "drawn from tenements, where privacy is almost impossible, girls who come from a rather low stratum of society and are rude and ignorant" and who should be "detained for a year or more."⁹¹ Identifying and isolating the young woman whose age and class made her less culpable in her "fall" was the equivalent of Devane's argument for getting the state to 'protect' young women. Moral contagion among unmarried mothers served as a metaphor for a particular configuration of individual moral responsibility and capacity, age and experience, and class which underpinned this discussion. In the struggle between the dangerous force of sexuality and the controlling power of the will, these were the factors that could indicate those whose defences were weak and where collective intervention was thus most urgently needed.

But beyond the debate about welfare provision the metaphor of moral contagion also served as a figure for the relationship between individual moral conduct and social order. Through the imagery of contagion sexual misbehaviour was conceived as a virus that could spread out from the individual to infect the whole society. The most direct means through which the behaviour of the unmarried mother could become a social problem was that she would have to resort to prostitution. All the contributors to the *IER* debate go to some lengths to define the

⁸⁹ MacInerny, 'The Souper Problem in Ireland,' 143.

⁹⁰ 'Sagart,' 148.

⁹¹ MacInerny, 'Postscript,' 252.

'unmarried mother' in opposition to the 'prostitute'; the object of their concern was "girls who 'get into trouble' not habitually or by way of livelihood, but through weakness, credulity or folly".⁹² Yet there is a pervasive sense among these writers that the boundary between the "respectable" unmarried mother and the prostitute cannot be securely drawn; the first is always liable to descend to the status of the latter and this, as they see it, is one of their primary reasons for taking action on this matter. In an article encouraging lay Catholics, especially women, to get involved in various types of Catholic social work, MacInerny describes unmarried mothers as a supply of recruits for prostitution, what he euphemistically terms the 'underworld'. Becoming involved in welfare work with unmarried mothers, therefore, is a way of doing something to "stop the channel that feeds the underworld of Dublin."⁹³ MacInerny's view that the number of women who might be forced into this work, rather than the demand for such services from men, was the main driver of prostitution in Dublin is a clear example of what his colleague Devane would describe as a 'sexual double standard'. This construction of the 'respectable unmarried mother' as somebody always in danger of becoming a 'prostitute' embodied for these writers that fundamental connection between individual 'vice' and social order that underpins their work. For them, the problem of redeeming and protecting individual souls was something indistinguishable from the social problem of preventing prostitution and protecting public morality, an idea structurally manifest in the interweave of various discourses of theology, criminal regulation and medicine in their writing. Moreover, the image of the young unmarried mother as somebody incapable of controlling her fate, anymore than she can control her sexuality, and drifting automatically into prostitution unless there is some collective intervention to prevent this happening, encapsulates that concept of the youthful subject as rudderless, adrift and vulnerable – and in need of protection and regulation.

One striking feature of this discussion, however, is that for the advocates of both the 'individual' and the 'institutional' systems of welfare provision the objective of the intervention is that the young women, and not the state, should take responsibility for themselves and their babies. The type of institution being outlined

⁹² 'Sagart,' 145.

⁹³ M.H. MacInerny, 'A Plea for Social Service,' *Irish Rosary*, 24 (1925), 162-175, 169.

in this discussion is quite different in this regard from the system of Magdalen Laundries. As the contributors to *IER* debate point out, the Magdalen system was in place for women who had become pregnant through prostitution. In subsequent decades those Laundries would come to play a much larger role as 'respectable' women were confined in them in large numbers. Operating on the 'contagion' principle, the writers in the early 1920s all insist that the figure they define as the 'respectable unmarried mother' should not end up in the Magdalen system. Work in the Laundries was a form of punishment and penance; an arduous expiation of sins.⁹⁴ In the type of institutions being advocated by Joseph Glynn, work was a means to responsibility, self-discipline and self-sufficiency. The institutions he outlines would comprise a Home, where the women lived with their babies, and a Factory, where the women worked during the day. From their wages the women were supposed to pay for their keep while in the Home and begin to make savings for when they left. Their work in the factory was also meant to give them training for finding work afterwards.⁹⁵ Similarly, Devane's argument for making men legally responsible for their illegitimate children was in part motivated by the conviction that this would have the double effect of shifting the financial cost of caring for these children from charitable institutions and the state to the individual, thus also discouraging other men from fathering children.⁹⁶

Clearly, there was a strong class element to these arguments. As well as being a question of public morality, the problem of illegitimacy was being framed by these writers as one of financial concern to middle- and lower middle-class ratepayers. If a young pregnant woman became destitute at this time she was forced to go into the County Home, where, as the writers point out, she would be looked after at the ratepayer's expense. Even laying aside the ethical and religious reasons for doing so, their argument ran, it was in the economic interests of the Catholic ratepaying classes to promote and help finance, through charitable contributions, the establishment of an alternative welfare system for these women. This construction

⁹⁴ On the Magdalen system see Frances Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15-19. See also Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, 23-84 and Luddy, *Prostitution*, 76-123.

⁹⁵ Glynn, 466.

⁹⁶ Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: some legal aspects of the problem II,' 173.

of the young and poor unmarried mother as a parasite on the hard-pressed taxpayer is, of course, by no means a rhetorical figure confined to Ireland in the 1920s.⁹⁷ But it is also worth noting the contrast here between the ideal of a self-sufficient, self-regulating subject posited as the outcome of this intervention, and the figure of vulnerability and moral incapacity, beset by the dangerous currents of sexuality and in need of protection and regulation by the state, that is also being discursively produced in this discussion. In essence, moral politics and the drive towards the regulation of private conduct comes into force in a liberal capitalist society when the chasm between these two figures is perceived to be impossible to breach without some political action; when the ideal of a self-regulating liberal individual gets undermined by the fear and the threat of social instability. Why did this particular historical conjuncture arise in Free State Ireland?

5

The 'nativist' interpretations of the Free State's legislative drive to regulate sexuality, such as Meaney's contention that this regulation was conditioned by a compensatory masculinity in reaction to colonial history, suggests that such regulatory drives have historically been confined to former colonial societies. However, looking beyond the Free State to metropolitan societies in the 1920s demonstrates that the regulation of private conduct by the state was not confined to a post-colonial state like southern Ireland. Moreover, contrary to Vailulis's connection of the Free State to Fascist Italy via Catholicism, the imposition of such regulation was not restricted to totalitarian regimes either. We might recollect, for instance, that between 1920 and 1933 the government of the United States attempted to legally prevent its adult citizens from drinking alcohol and this legal regulation of private conduct was the result of lobbying by a vocal minority of temperance campaigners.⁹⁸

⁹⁷James Morone, for instance, discusses the particular focus on denigrating young, African-American single mothers, so-called 'welfare queens,' within the larger neo-liberal attack on the welfare system in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. See Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 485-487.

⁹⁸ On the politics of prohibition in the United States during the early twentieth century, see Morone, *Politics of Sin*, 318-343.

Perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, the sociologist Goran Therborn has argued that all Western countries moved to prevent their populations having access to the more reliable methods of birth control that became available in the late-nineteenth century. The United States was the first country to outlaw the distribution of information on contraception in 1873, and most European countries followed suit in the early twentieth century. In 1908 the Anglican Church led an unsuccessful campaign for such a ban in Britain, and the country remained relatively anomalous in not having such a prohibition.⁹⁹ Controlling the flow of information on contraception was but one aspect of the efforts to regulate sexuality on the part of western countries, particularly in the decades between the two world wars. In his global history of the family as an institution in the twentieth century, Therborn outlines the range of 'natalist' policies that existed across the European political spectrum in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰⁰ These state policies directed at regulating and promoting population growth combined various elements of coercion and inducement. Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan each adopted policies to promote the rapid expansion of their populations. These policies were rooted in a crude equation between the power of a state and the size of its population, and were part of the larger goal of imperialist conquest. In Nazi Germany this pursuit of population growth was modified by the pursuit of racial purity and the implementation of eugenicist practices to achieve this. In other European countries opposition to birth control and the promotion of familist policies was grounded in more traditionally right-wing political formations. In particular, France outlawed 'propaganda' about birth control in 1920 and this was followed by a series of anti-contraception laws in the following years.¹⁰¹ The enormous and traumatic population losses experienced by the country during the First World War, and the concomitant belief that this left the nation vulnerable, contributed to the

⁹⁹ Goran Therborn, *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World 1900-2000* (London: Routledge, 2004), 252.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 253-254.

¹⁰¹ Anne-Marie Sohn, 'Between the Wars in France and England,' in François Thébaud (ed.) *A History of Women Volume 5: Towards a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 92-119, 11-113. On European birth control policies in the inter-war decades see also François Thébaud, 'In the Service of the Fatherland' and Gisela Block, 'Poverty and Mother's Rights' in the same volume, 111-113 and 422-431.

particular strength of the anti-contraception movements in inter-war France.¹⁰² Therborn argues that a third category of natalist policies were also pursued by left-wing governments. Most notably, in the 1930s Sweden's Social Democrats introduced a range of policies which were aimed at population management and social engineering. Some of their innovations, such as the introduction of paid maternity leave and other benefits, still remain part of the welfare system in most Western countries. However, the coercive use of sterilisation for eugenicist purposes also featured in Sweden's social democratic version of natalism, as it did in totalitarian Germany's version.¹⁰³

The Irish public morality campaigners were not oblivious to these international developments. On the contrary, whether they were arguing for changes to the criminal law regarding sex, censorship legislation or state regulation of dancehalls the proponents of public morality invariably provided examples from other countries as models for how the Irish State could proceed. As we have seen, Richard Devane was particularly diligent in this regard. In his articles calling for the introduction of literary censorship and the imposition of tariffs on imported publications, for instance, he discusses the Second International Convention on Obscene Publications signed by the League of Nations in 1923 at length and gives a summary of those actions to censor and control publications which were being taken by different countries.¹⁰⁴ He was especially impressed by the Canadian government's imposition of a tariff on newspapers and magazines imported from the United States and thought it an excellent model for the Free State to follow. When he came to write about what he considered the dancehall 'problem' in Ireland, Devane again gave an exhaustive account of recent statutory regulations imposed on the holding of commercial dances in countries as diverse as Holland, Weimar Germany, Hungary, Britain and (unlikely though it may seem) Cuba.¹⁰⁵

As noted earlier, this general trend towards greater regulation of private conduct in

¹⁰² Nicky Harte, 'Of Procreation and Power,' *New Left Review*, 35 (2005), 84-85.

¹⁰³ Therborn, 254.

¹⁰⁴ R. S. Devane, 'Indecent Literature: some legal remedies,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 25 (1925), 187-189; 'The Committee on Printed Matter: some notes of evidence,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 28 (1926), 373-375. See Martin on the international movement towards legal control over publications in the 1920s; *Censorship*, 31-32.

¹⁰⁵ R. S. Devane, 'The Dance Hall,' *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 37 (1931), 170 -194.

the advanced liberal democratic states can be attributed to a larger collapse of faith in liberalism precipitated by the unprecedented catastrophe of the First World War. This weakening of liberal certainty was accelerated by the success of the communist revolution in Russia in 1917, along with the failed attempts at revolution in other countries, notably Germany, in the immediate wake of the World War. The subsequent rise of different forms of totalitarian and fascist regimes introduced another, and more extensive, threat to democracy from the right.¹⁰⁶ As Eric Hobsbawm argues, the vulnerability of liberalism was exacerbated even further by the Great Depression; the conditions of what he calls the "Age of Catastrophe" made liberal politics seem increasingly inadequate and unviable as a means of governing states.¹⁰⁷ In this context, even in a society where the institutions of representative democracy remained strong, such as the United States, there was an intensification of state intervention in matters of individual behaviour; not just what people could drink (Prohibition) and view (the 'Hays Code' was introduced to regulate the 'moral' content of cinema in 1924 and strengthened in 1927) but also whether or not they could live there, as the country introduced restrictive limitations on immigration for the first time in its history.¹⁰⁸

Hunt's moral politics paradigm allows us to connect the emergence of the public morality discourses in post-independence Ireland synchronically with this wider international movement in the capitalist democracies, and also diachronically with the recurrence of such discourses and political movements in response to the periodic crises generated by the inherent instability of industrial capitalism across its history. Moreover, since the concept of moral politics allows us to identify the generic features of such movements while also concentrating on what is distinctive about each one, this framework serves to mediate between the broader international crisis and the more distinctively local set of conditions in which the Irish public morality discourse was being produced. In this way, it should be possible to avoid conceptualising the Irish public morality discourses of the 1920s

¹⁰⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), 109-141.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰⁸ On the introduction of the 'Hays Code' in the United States, along with an outline of the film censorship regulations introduced in Europe, and internationally, in the period, see Martin, *Censorship*, 55-56. For an account of the 'moral politics' of immigration in the United States in this period, see Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 338-339.

as the manifestation of a peculiarly Irish Catholic and nationalist *mentalité*, one of the limitations of the 'nativist' interpretations, without reducing these Irish discourses to the status of a derivative local version of what was happening elsewhere. Similarly, situating these developments in the Free State within the historical context of the 1920s and 1930s avoids conceptualising events in twentieth-century Ireland as being essentially a form of delayed Victorianism.

If the First World War instigated the crisis gripping liberalism internationally in this decade, the Civil War of 1922-23 played a similar function in generating the concern among Irish Catholicism's leaders and intellectuals about public morality, and the anxiety about this issue that was diffused more widely across the society. Clearly, the anarchy and internecine violence of that period shook the Irish Catholic Church's belief in the efficacy of self-regulation as a means to achieving social order. In Margaret O'Callaghan's view, "the ferocity of the Civil War made the hierarchy suspicious of their people's moral calibre, wary of their inclinations, determined to keep them under control."¹⁰⁹ Some individual members of the Catholic clergy supported the Republican side in the Civil War. But, as Patrick Murray has shown, these were mainly younger and less senior clerics living in poorer parts of the country; the majority of the Catholic clergy, and the church as an institution, came out strongly in favour of the Treaty and the Free State government.¹¹⁰ In October 1922, the bishops issued a joint statement about the war in which they vociferously denounced the Republican position. Those atrocities that had been committed by the Free State army were either ignored or excused as inevitable consequences of provocation by the other side. The bishop's threat of excommunication against those involved in the anti-treaty side was one particularly controversial aspect of their statement and one consequence of this rule was the refusal of Catholic funeral services to Republican prisoners who died on hunger strike.¹¹¹

The key strategy of the bishops' statement was to interpret the war as an upsurge

¹⁰⁹ Margaret O'Callaghan, 'Religion and Identity: The Church and Irish Independence,' *The Crane Bag*, 7 (1983), 71.

¹¹⁰ Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics 1922-37* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2000), 67-92.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 79-81.

of criminality and anarchy rather than as a political struggle over the Treaty. In the bishops' view, the military actions of Republicans had led to "a campaign of plunder, raiding banks and private houses, seizing the lands and property of others, burning mansions and country houses, destroying demesnes and slaying cattle."¹¹² This stress on property illustrates the class values underpinning the bishops' position. With a degree of puzzlement, the bishops' speculate on how "Irish boys could degenerate as tragically", suggesting that the "strain on our country in the last few years" is partly to blame, along with a degree of "vanity", "self-conceit" and "greed for land, love of loot and anarchy." But, they argue, the "main cause for demoralisation is to be found in false notions on social morality" which they also link to a "weakened respect for civil authority in the national conscience".¹¹³ As Margaret O'Callaghan points out, this narrative of the war, in which political struggle was reformulated as a breakdown of authority, order and control stemming from individual moral failings, provided useful ideological ballast for the Free State government.¹¹⁴ For instance, in one of his Dáil speeches the Free State minister Kevin O'Higgins deployed the same rhetorical and conceptual approach used by the bishops when he described the war as the "moral disintegration" of the country.¹¹⁵

There are two different points of connection between the bishops' ideological formulation of the Civil War and the discourses of public morality that were evolving at the same time. On one hand, there was a literal intersection between the two in so far as the bishops expressed particular anxiety about the effects of the political violence and instability on the youth, who were also the primary objectives of the concerns about public morality. In their October 1922 statement they voiced their concern about the "demoralisation especially of the young, whose minds are being poisoned by false principles."¹¹⁶ In their 1927 statement they returned to this theme as they lamented that "these latter days have witnessed ... a loosening of the bonds of parental authority, a disregard for the discipline of the home, and a

¹¹² *The Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac 1923* (Dublin: Duffy and Co., 1923), 608.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 609.

¹¹⁴ O'Callaghan, 'Religion and Identity,' 67.

¹¹⁵ Kevin O'Higgins, Dáil Eireann, 11 September 1922, cited at O'Callaghan, 'Religion and Identity,' 69.

¹¹⁶ *ICD* (1923), 609.

general impatience under restraint that drives youth to neglect the sacred claims of authority.”¹¹⁷ As in the public morality discourses, the young here are associated with turbulence and in need of strong guidance and protection from themselves. Interestingly, in 1927 the bishops take a wider view, arguing that this intolerance of authority is “a reaction from a period of great strain and stress which has tried the patience of mankind to snapping point. Ireland appears to have been affected by some such disturbing force, as well as by its own troubles.” Moreover, the bishops connect this anarchic tendency among the young with sexuality when they go on directly to discuss the importance of “chastity” and “purity”, especially among young women. As we have seen, they identify the main locus of the threat to “chastity” among the young in popular culture and leisure activities such as cinema, fashion, reading and, especially, dancing. Again, one feature of the responses of individual bishops to the Civil War had been to shift directly from discussing the war to discussing what they saw as the related moral problems thrown up by these changing patterns of leisure. The editor of the *Irish Catholic Directory* had summed up the twin themes of the 1923 Lenten Pastorals as “the political situation” and “the social state of the country”, the latter meaning that the bishops “condemned illicit distillation, intemperance, immoral literature, foreign dances and other social evils”.¹¹⁸

Along with this literal overlap of worry about revolutionary politics and public morality, there was also a significant conceptual overlap between the two. Describing the teenage years of a young girl, Richard Devane writes that it is difficult to “appreciate the tumultuous upheavals of the growing girl’s emotional nature, and as a consequence her instability and abnormality.”¹¹⁹ The rhetoric of Devane’s description of youth is strikingly similar to that used by the bishops in their description of the country a few years before during the Civil War. In his 1923 Lenten Pastoral, the leader of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Cardinal Logue, referred to the “distracted state of the country” and claimed that “never before in the world’s history did such a wild and destructive hurricane spring from such a

¹¹⁷ ‘Pastoral Address’, 528.

¹¹⁸ *ICD* (1924), 553.

¹¹⁹ Devane, ‘The Legal Protection of Girls,’ 34.

thin, intangible, unsubstantial vapour."¹²⁰ A few months later, delivering a speech during a prize-giving ceremony in Maynooth, he argued that "latterly the people of Ireland were running wild after visions, dreams and chimeras, and turning the country upside down in the process."¹²¹ The country is conceived here as being in a condition very like that of Devane's adolescent girl – unstable, gullible, confused and lacking in self-control. This analogy between the new state and youth recurs a few years later in one of Devane's own articles arguing for tariffs to be imposed on imported newspapers and magazines. While detailing the volume of imported reading material coming into the country, Devane draws particular attention to the high number of such publications aimed specifically at young people and asks, "are we to look on in despair while our children are being fed on the ideas and ideals of another nation?"¹²² In keeping perhaps with his different audience, the article appeared in *Studies*, Devane primarily gives a national developmentalist rather than a public morality argument for the tariff. In his view, protecting the Irish press was a necessary precondition for the development of the new state, since the production of new ideas was a crucial part of independence. He argues that "in Ireland today there is a stirring of the waters, a revival of economic and literary thought. It is the natural concomitant of political freedom, and it is the duty of the state to foster it."¹²³ Devane therefore connects the need to protect young people and their intellectual and moral development with the need to protect and encourage the development of the Irish press, and in turn links this with the cultural and economic development of the new state. 'Protection', in this view, is not a repressive or oppressive measure but necessary for the achievement of freedom and development. Moreover, if the new state is analogous to a youth, that which threatens to waylay the youth – the disruptive force of sexuality – is also analogous to that which threatens to disrupt the state – the disruptive force of revolutionary politics. As Marjorie Howes has written of this period in Irish history, "in a society preoccupied with establishing and maintaining order, sexuality constituted a

¹²⁰ *ICD* (1924), 564.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 577.

¹²² R.S. Devane, 'Suggested Tariff on Imported Newspapers and Magazines,' *Studies*, (1927), 547.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 548.

principle of chaos."¹²⁴

But along with figuring the new state as a vulnerable adolescent, the Cardinal's rhetoric also produces a second analogy in which Republican opposition to the Free State becomes something like the activities of a rebellious teenager – impetuous, mischievously destructive and inherently irrational. This, of course, was of a piece with the logic of the joint statement issued by the Cardinal and his colleagues a few months before, in which the roots of the political struggle about the Treaty lay in the moral failure of individual republicans to exercise their rational will and maintain control over their instincts towards greed and anarchic destruction. Just as the failure of the young girl to successfully exert control over her sexuality was fraught with dangerous implications for her society as much as for the girl herself, so too the analogous failure of the Republicans to control their revolutionary desires, their strange longing after those alluring 'chimeras', had plunged the country into the orgy of criminality and instability so luridly portrayed by the bishops in their statement. In the counter-revolutionary imaginary of 1920s Ireland, the 'unmarried mother' was situated on a spectrum with the revolutionary republican 'gunman' as figures whose moral incapacity threatened the social order. The crisis of the civil war, and the counter-revolutionary project that followed it, produced the conditions where a particular model of sexuality, as a human instinct that needed to be carefully trammelled within its reproductive function, and of youth, as a period of irrationality and vulnerability, were politicised. Through the discourses of public morality the anxieties, uncertainties and ideological contradictions attendant on creating a bourgeois liberal democratic state were projected onto figures like the unmarried mother and the political revolutionary. But the legislative and regulatory changes that came into existence as a consequence of the mobilisation around these discourses were built into the laws of the new state which governed everybody living there. The result of this politicised configuration of sexuality and youth produced more than just a model of how the state should regulate sexual behaviour and private conduct generally, since it also

¹²⁴ Marjorie Howes, 'Public Discourse, Private Reflections 1916-1970' in Angela Bourke et al (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, vol. IV (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day, 2002), 923.

produced a model of the relationship between the state and its citizens. It led, in short, to a political framework in which all citizens came to be conceived of as unstable adolescents.

In the public morality paradigm sexuality was considered to be primarily a question of control. The problem of maintaining this human drive within its normative reproductive channels presented a pressing issue in itself, but more crucially this challenge was located as the focus of another political challenge – that of maintaining a stable social order in the face of capitalism's endemic instability. The public morality discourses operated on the assumption that individual self-regulation of sexuality was an attractive ideal. But the essential instability and vulnerability of the individual subject made this a shaky foundation on which to build collective stability. These discourses therefore encapsulated the central problem of the Free State's political elite – pursuing the goal of a liberal capitalist bourgeois society while doubting the essential soundness of their building materials. But while encapsulating the problem, the public morality paradigm also presented the solution. Through collective interventions, most notably legislative action by the state to promote a regulatory ideal of moral behaviour, well-ordered and self-regulating subjects could be husbanded and cultivated. Thus, collective and individual development were on a self-reinforcing loop, in which maintaining a well-regulated state ensured the maintenance of effective self-regulation, which in turn contributed to successful collective regulation.

Within the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland, this public morality framework constitutes one current, and quite a powerful one in the first two decades after independence. Some of the legislation introduced in those decades, such as the ban on contraception, persisted until the closing decades of the century and it required considerable political mobilisation and effort, especially by the Irish Women's Movement, to remove them. But as an ideological formation the public morality discourses lost much of their force from the 1940s when an alternative Catholic discourse of sexuality began to emerge. In this model, the pursuit of sexual pleasure was combined with reproductive sexuality within an idealised concept of marriage. The concern with individual control gave way to a concern with individual fulfilment, and the pursuit of self-cultivation replaced the

goal of self-regulation as the royal road to social stability and collective development. However, developing this marital ideal was only made possible through fusing the reproductive concept of sexuality, central to the public morality discourses, with an alternative concept of sexuality as a drive towards pleasure. And this is the other crucial strand in Irish sexual history – the elaboration of this libidinal sexual *episteme* within Irish literature, and most notably within the *bildungsroman*.

Chapter Two

Going to Tara via Vienna: Joyce and the Freudian *Bildungsroman*

1

In his 1908 essay, 'Civilised' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,' Freud argued that people were presenting to psychiatrists with nervous disorders at increased rates because of the conditions of modern life. He begins by quoting from the writings of various colleagues in the psychiatric field who had, in the preceding decades, been making the same argument. One of these writers, the Swiss psychiatrist Robert Binswanger, writing in 1896, had described 'neurasthenia' as "an essentially modern disorder".¹ In the extract quoted by Freud, Binswanger goes on to observe that it was no coincidence that this disorder was first diagnosed by an American physician since experience indicates, "the close connection between it [neurasthenia] and modern life, with its unbridled pursuit of money and possessions, and its immense advances in the field of technology which have rendered illusory every obstacle, whether temporal or spatial, to our means of intercommunication". Freud does not disagree with this idea that there is a connection between the anxiety inherent in modern capitalist society and psychological well-being. However, he argues that his colleagues have ignored the significance of sexuality to this process. According to Freud, "the injurious influence of civilisation reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilised peoples (or classes) through the 'civilised' sexual morality prevalent in them."² He then goes on to outline how "our" civilisation (that is, European bourgeois society) produces nervous disorders and neuroses in so many of its citizens, particularly women, through restricting legitimate sexual activity within the institution of monogamous marriage.

The basic premise on which Freud's argument in "Civilised' Sexual Morality' rests is the concept of a triangular relationship between modernity, subjectivity and human sexuality; or, to re-phrase this, a relationship between historical development, the development or formation of the individual, and the development or formation of our sexual desires and experiences. As we have seen, one particularly influential account of this conceptual relationship in early twentieth-

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [ed. and trans. James Strachey] (London: Penguin, 2001 [1953]), vol. 9, 184. No citation is given for the quotation from Binswanger.

² *Ibid*, 185.

century Ireland was that offered by the discourses of public morality. A fundamental tenet of these discourses, in which the collective control of sexuality was deemed necessary for the maintenance of social order, was adherence to an essentially reproductive model of human sexuality. But from the beginning of the twentieth century, with the emergence of sexology and Freud's psychoanalytical theories, a different model of sexuality was made available to European culture. In this framework, sexuality was conceptualised as a psychic drive directed towards the attainment of pleasure rather than a biological instinct directed at human reproduction. Reformulating the concept of sexuality in this way formed a critical part of a larger reformulation of modern subjectivity, and therefore opened up new ways of thinking about that relationship between modernity, subjectivity and sexuality. In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, beginning with James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* functioned as a crucial site on which Irish culture thought about, worried over, and negotiated this conceptual relationship. At crucial moments across that period, the *bildungsroman* was the significant cultural vehicle through which the implications of the Freudian model of sexuality were brought into contact, in various ways, with the reproductive model that was principally mediated through Catholicism.

Positioning Joyce's *Portrait* at the beginning of this history is not merely a question of chronology. A decade before the publication of Joyce's novel, George Moore's *The Lake* (1905) had woven an anti-clerical critique of Irish Catholicism, in which mindless adherence to religion is the chief obstacle to the modernisation of rural Ireland, into a narrative of self-discovery through the honest acknowledgement of sexual desire. The novel begins with a parish priest in the west of Ireland, Father Gogarty, condemning from the pulpit the local teacher, Rose Leicester, who has become pregnant while unmarried. On hearing this condemnation she immediately leaves and makes her way to England. In a process that is facilitated by the correspondence that subsequently begins between him and Rose, Gogarty becomes aware of the true motivation for his actions in condemning her. This was not really, he realises, about protecting the standards of morality in his parish but rather jealousy of Rose's lover because of his own feelings for her. This realisation, along with Rose's arguments about personal freedom in her letters from England,

leads to a crisis of faith for Gogarty and a deepening disillusionment with his religion and his country. Ultimately, Gogarty fakes his own death by drowning and flees to America.³

Already we can see the contours of the Joycean narrative, and a narrative that will reappear in Irish literature across the coming century: the connection between sexual desire and individual freedom; the struggle to wrest this freedom from the suffocation of conformity, most acutely conformity to a religious faith that is inherently inimical to both sexual and individual freedom, and the flight into exile when success in this struggle proves impossible in Ireland itself. Nevertheless, there are some crucial differences between the Moore and Joyce narratives, and it is these differences which underpin the status of the latter as the progenitor of a different conceptual framework for writing about sexuality and subjectivity. Moore's novel is heavily invested in the notion of authenticity. The plot turns on Gogarty seeing through his own hypocrisy and lack of self-knowledge and grasping the reality of his situation. This self-discovery begins with him understanding what his real feelings are for Rose but extends out from that to encompass his religious belief, his status as a parish priest, and the cultural and economic life of rural Ireland. The prominence of passages describing Gogarty walking in isolated natural settings, especially around the eponymous lake, serve as stylistic reinforcement for this thematic dyad of appearance and reality: Gogarty's observation that Rose "was more than anyone else what the primitive woman must have been" is one of the more explicit expressions of the novel's investment in a concept of natural authenticity corrupted by culture.⁴ By contrast, *Portrait* is not predicated on the existence of a real or authentic Stephen Dedalus that emerges in the course of the novel. Instead, the narrative is itself formed out of the process through which a coherent 'Stephen' is created. This formation of Stephen as a subject is convoluted and fraught, with a less stable or pre-ordained endpoint. Stephen Dedalus, in short, is a post-Freudian subject.

³ George Moore, *The Lake* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1980 [1905]). For a reading of Moore's novel which positions the work in relation to the history of the nineteenth-century Irish novel, while also tracing how the novel's thematic concerns would be taken up in Irish writing during the twentieth century, see Emer Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 146-149.

⁴ Moore, 237.

This crucial conceptual difference gets expressed formally in the different relationships between Moore's and Joyce's novels and those inherited generic conventions in which the authors were working. Moore conforms quite closely to the aesthetic conventions and diagnostic impulses of naturalism, since the novel forms part of his project of adopting and adapting to Irish conditions the formal innovations of that movement's French pioneers, pre-eminently Emile Zola.⁵ With *Portrait*, Joyce takes a genre of considerably older vintage, the realist *bildungsroman* that had been one of the most prominent forms in European literature since the late eighteenth century, and does more than simply adapt this genre to Irish conditions. Instead, he radically alters the formal structure of the *bildungsroman* by re-shaping the *bildung* narrative. Contemporaneously, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) was producing a similar transformation in the English *bildungsroman*. With his depiction of the Morel family, Lawrence elaborates a version of the oedipal narrative that was crucial to the newly-emergent psychoanalytical account of subject formation. Paul's intense attachment to his mother, Gertrude, is at once sustaining and damaging, while he fails to fully identify with his father, Walter. The novel situates these relationships as foundational elements in Paul's emotional and sexual life as an adult.⁶ But while *Sons and Lovers* engages with Freudian ideas at this level of content, formally the novel remains more securely within the classical *bildungsroman* tradition than *Portrait* does. Specifically, in his depiction of the relationship between Clara, Baxter and Paul, Lawrence retains a version of the marriage and adultery plot that was a distinctive element of the realist *bildungsroman*. In *Portrait*, this essentially reproductive sexual plot is effectively side-lined in favour of a different sexual plot predicated on a libidinal model of the sexual drive towards pleasure and a conceptual economy of repression, separation and identification. While Freudian ideas are at work in Lawrence's novel, it is the Freudian narrative form that is most significant in Joyce's novel. Indeed, Wolfgang Streit even argues that Joyce

⁵ On Moore's relationship to French naturalism, see Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007), 124-128.

⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995 [1913]). For a psychoanalytical reading of Lawrence's novel, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* [2nd ed.] (London: Blackwell, 1996), 154-155.

“completely ignored the contents of psychoanalysis and focused exclusively on its form.”⁷

This structural interaction with the psychoanalytical formation narrative produced dividends aesthetically for Joyce, allowing him to create a radically innovative, even epochal, version of the *bildungsroman*. However, this relationship also generated a crucial contradiction between the intention of his narrative, which was to narrate the formation of a young Irish intellectual at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its final meaning. Structuring Stephen's narrative of formation around the libidinal pattern of identification means that the novel ends with a highly ambiguous, indeterminate exile. Is Stephen's departure from Ireland a necessary pre-condition for a more sustained and productive artistic engagement with his society, or is it a necessary rejection of all commitments to that society as inherently inimical to self-formation and *bildung*?

2

The triangular relationship between modernity, subjectivity and sexuality which underpinned Freud's argument in his 1908 essay was not a product of psychoanalytical theory, nor was it a new problem of modernity in the early twentieth century. On the contrary, as Thomas Lacquer has shown, this conceptual relationship has been a central concern of European culture since the emergence of capitalist modernity because it has served as a means of thinking about another fundamental problem of that epoch: that is, the relationship between the individual and modern society, and the contradiction between the valorisation of individualism as the motor of capitalism and the structural necessity of maintaining and reproducing a stable social order.⁸ In Franco Moretti's view, the 'classical' *bildungsroman* emerges as the primary cultural form of the early nineteenth century precisely because it worked as a space in which to create a symbolic resolution to this contradiction. The novel of formation came to dominate European literature in the nineteenth century because it served, in Moretti's phrase, as the

⁷ Wolfgang Streit, *Joyce/Foucault: Sexual Confessions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 1.

⁸ Thomas Lacquer, *Solitary Sex* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 248-249.

"symbolic form of modernity."⁹

Essentially, nineteenth-century European culture placed two requirements on the *bildungsroman*. This narrative form was expected to represent and celebrate the boundless, disruptive energy of modernity, and to simultaneously make this threatening and alienating flux palatable, purposeful and humane. The main protagonist of the *bildungsroman* is a young person, which was a significant break with previous cultural forms, such as the epic, in which the hero is a mature adult. The youth of the central character in the *bildungsroman* is not incidental for in the transition from 'traditional' or status societies to modernity youth has become problematic. In a status society, the culture attaches no particular significance or value to youth, which merely designates biological difference and a prescribed period of initiation into social roles. However, in modernity, youth is, as Moretti puts it, "no longer the slow and predictable progress towards one's father's work, but rather an uncertain exploration of social space."¹⁰ Youth is problematic in modernity but it is also valorised. This is because those elements of youth which modern culture isolates as most significant (uncertainty, mobility, an orientation towards the future rather than the past) are also those elements of modernity (its dynamism and instability) which are most exciting and most troubling. A narrative form organised around the representation of youth, and more specifically the representation of the mobility and interiority which are the hallmark of modern youth, is thus the ideal form to represent the excitement and risk of modernity.

But just as biological youth is finite and leads to maturity, so cultural youth finds its endpoint with the young person establishing a place in the social order. Since the realist *bildungsroman* narrated the process through which youth is socialised, the form could reassure European culture that the risk and uncertainty of modernity could be channelled into productive social forms. Moretti identifies two patterns of plot development through which the socialisation of youth was narrated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel of formation. What he terms a 'classification principle' was strongest in the German and English novel, from

⁹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London; Verso, 1987), 5.

¹⁰ Moretti, 4

Goethe and Austen to Dickens and Eliot.¹¹ In this type of plot the meaning of the narrative is located in a particularly strong or marked ending. The emphasis is on the maturity eventually attained by the protagonist, and the establishment at the novel's end of the protagonist's stable position within the social order. 'Happiness' is the prize offered to the individual in exchange for the limits placed on his or her self-determination by the requirements of living in modern society. On the other hand, the French *bildungsroman*, from Stendhal and Balzac to Flaubert, is dominated by what Moretti terms a 'transformative principle'. The meaning of the story is generated by the process of narrating it and the definitive ending is avoided in favour of the narrative remaining open-ended. The attainment of maturity and stability is eschewed in favour of an unending youth with its potential for unceasing formlessness and change. In those plots shaped by the transformative principle the central character gains 'freedom' in exchange for refusing to compromise on his or her individual autonomy. For Moretti, the classificatory principle was an attempt to intellectually contain and moderate the effects of modernity, while the transformative principle reflected a more enthusiastic embrace of the dynamism promised by modernity. He specifically identifies the prominence of the classificatory principle in German and English literature with the more reformist political culture in these countries, and connects the dominance of the transformative principle to the revolutionary political culture of France.

A notable feature of both types of plot development is the central role of the sexual contract of marriage. In the English novel, marriage is the principal form through which the symbolic exchange of freedom for happiness is managed; Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and Jane's marriage to Rochester in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) are exemplary instances. Austen's novel neatly illustrates how the marriage plot functions to effect the compromise between individual desire and social responsibility. When Elizabeth refuses Mr Collins's marriage proposal, the reader is encouraged to share Mr Bennett's thorough rejection of his wife's view that Elizabeth should have accepted the proposal for the common good of the family. Her marriage to Darcy, on the other hand, is figured as an appropriate and welcome climax to the narrative, since Elizabeth's decision is based on the realisation that she and Darcy are emotionally compatible and will

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

make each other happy. However, Darcy is extremely wealthy, considerably more so than Collins, and so the marriage still accomplishes Mrs Bennett's goal of securing the family's fortune – in fact, the marriage achieves this end to an even greater degree than the earlier, ridiculed marriage option. Here we see marriage being reclassified as bourgeois and companionate rather than feudal and dynastic, and we simultaneously see the exercise of individual choice serving to uphold rather than run counter to the maintenance of social order.¹² In novels dominated by the transformative principle adultery rather than marriage organises the plot. In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), Julien Sorel's affairs with Madame de Renal and Mathilde de la Mole precipitate the tragic ending of the novel. Executed for attempting to kill his married lover so as to make possible his social-climbing marriage to the girl he has made pregnant, Sorel's death symbolises the impossibility of attaining that freedom promised by the Revolution in the corrupted and degraded modernity of the Restoration.¹³ As Moretti argues, the narrative form based on the unhappy ending, "helped European culture to adjust to the fortuitous-yet-inexorable nature of nineteenth-century capitalism; a combination foretold in the tangle of great promises and great tragedies of the revolutionary and Napoleonic years."¹⁴

In Moretti's view, the dominance of the *bildungsroman* in European literature came to an end in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In English literature, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) was, he argues, the last, failed, attempt at this form. The genre could not, as Moretti argues, "outlive the fall of its foundations".¹⁵ European culture had attempted to wrestle with the relationship between the

¹² Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin, 1972 [1813]). Susan Fraiman reads Austen's novel within a tradition of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century English *bildungsroman* novels by women writers in which the marriage plot serves to stymie, rather than complete, the young heroine's *bildung* narrative. The marriage ending heightens the novels' critique of the classical concept of *bildung* as an essentially masculine ideal and one impossible for a woman to achieve in that restricted society. In Fraiman's reading, Elizabeth's marriage does serve the purpose of creating a cross-class alliance (between the world of trade, represented by her uncle Gardiner, and the gentry) but this comes at the cost of reducing Elizabeth to a token of exchange between her father and Darcy. See Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 59-87.

¹³ Stendhal, *The Red and The Black* [trans. Roger Gard] (London: Penguin, 2002 [1830]).

¹⁴ Moretti, 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 228.

individual and bourgeois society in this genre, but by the second half of the century the terms of that problematic had been radically altered. The social and economic processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and the beginnings of mass society were combined with epochal intellectual shifts in fields from biology, history and political economy to psychology and sociology (from Darwin and Marx to Freud and Simmel). Not only was society transformed, the conception of the relationship between individual and society had also been fundamentally reconceived. However, as Gregory Castle argues, these historical developments did not so much bring the *bildungsroman* to an end, as Moretti contends, as produce a new permutation of the form. The realist *bildungsroman* gave way to its modernist successor. In Castle's view, modernist writers returned to an original Enlightenment ideal of *bildung*. This conception of *bildung* as an aesthetic and spiritual work of self-cultivation that was directed inward had been supplanted in nineteenth-century realism by a more pragmatic, externally-directed concept of *bildung* that was essentially concerned with social mobility. Rejecting this socially pragmatic formation narrative was part of the larger modernist repudiation of Victorian liberal humanist ideology, and of realism as its characteristic aesthetic. Thus, while the modernist *bildungsroman* narrates the failure to achieve this originary aesthetico-spiritual ideal of *bildung*, this failure does not represent a critique of the ideal itself but of the historical conditions of modern society which make this impossible to achieve.¹⁶

For Castle, the most searching and radical versions of this critique are produced by those writers who narrate the failure to achieve this *bildung* ideal in a colonial society (namely, Oscar Wilde and Joyce) or because of the constraints placed on women by gender ideology (namely, Virginia Woolf and Joyce.)¹⁷ Whereas the classical *bildungsroman* envisions a symbolic reconciliation between self and society, a colonial *bildungsroman* such as *Portrait* insists on the impossibility of this harmonious reconciliation. More crucially, the colonial *bildungsroman* further insists

¹⁶ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 62-72.

¹⁷ Castle's reading of gender in the modernist *bildungsroman* concentrates on Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs Dalloway* and, rather oddly, on what he terms Gerty MacDowell's "foreshortened" *bildung* narrative in the 'Nausicaa' chapter of *Ulysses*. See Castle, 197-248.

that the formation of a coherent self is equally impossible in a colonial society. The colonial *bildungsroman*, Castle contends, “isolates and splits the subject” and narrates a “consciousness of non-identity, a condition in which the colonial subject’s rage for change is directed not simply against a given norm – in this case of *bildung* or socialisation – but against normativity as such.”¹⁸ In Castle’s reading, *Portrait* represents Stephen’s non-identification with the political and religious symbols of patriarchal authority, and also with both gender and sexual identity. Nevertheless, these “subversive strategies” at the thematic level, which are directed at both colonial Irish society and at the inherited tradition of the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*, co-exist with a formal adherence to that literary tradition; as Castle puts it, *Portrait* “hews closely to generic conventions.”¹⁹

Yet, from the opening lines of *Portrait* it is clear that formal innovation is central to this novel. Joyce eschews directly narrating Stephen’s earliest memories in favour of immersing the reader into the inchoate consciousness of a child who is becoming gradually aware of the objective world and his uncertain relationship to it. He achieves this through the linguistic playfulness (the story of baby tuckoo and the moocow) and the associative, non-linear pattern of the narrative, which moves randomly from detail to detail (Betty Byrne and her lemon platt; the song; the bed-wetting, and so on).²⁰ For Derek Attridge, the crucial formal innovation in the opening sections of *Portrait* is this recreation of the linguistic world of childhood where the link between the word and that which it represents is always uncertain and unstable. Through young Stephen’s perplexed encounter with language, the novel foregrounds what Attridge, adopting the term from linguistic theory, calls the ‘remainder’, that aspect of language “which imparts to utterances powerful effects of various kinds, though they cannot be described in purely conceptual terms.”²¹ By placing the reader in the child’s position *vis-à-vis* language, Joyce challenged the realist assumption that to draw attention to language as such is to divert attention away from the reality it is trying to represent, and he “showed that an even stronger

¹⁸ Castle, 162.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [ed. R.B. Keshner] (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1993 [1916]), 19-20.

²¹ Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

sense of the physically and emotionally real can be created in language that foregrounds its own materiality."²² Certain moments in *Portrait*, most notably the opening pages, are precursors of the more fully realised exploitation of this linguistic potential in the more radical formal innovations of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*.

Along with the linguistic originality of the opening, we might also notice the similarity between Joyce's imaginative reconstruction of childhood experience and the conception of childhood that underpins the Freudian narrative of ego formation. In this vision of childhood what we see is, as Terry Eagleton describes it, a subject which "has yet no centre of identity and in which the boundaries between itself and the external world are indeterminate."²³ Centred as it is on a distinctively Freudian child, that is a Freudian proto-subject rather than a traditional literary 'character,' the beginning of *Portrait* suggests that the modernism of this novel may reside less in its insistence on non-identity, *pace* Castle, than in its narration of a historically specific early twentieth-century model of how a coherent identity is formed.

The ideal of bourgeois subjectivity cultivated and socialised in the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman* (both in the novel's representation of *bildung* and by the novel as a cultural form) was structured by ideas of reason and autonomy, tempered by sensibility and a sense of the aesthetic. The relationship between this subject and the social world was problematic – arguably *the* problem of modernity – and the *bildungsroman* offered a diversity of imagined solutions to this problem. But the inner coherence and stability of that subject was not in doubt. It was precisely this inner coherence and stability of the subject which Freudianism threw into question at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the psychoanalytic narrative of subject formation the vision of the rational bourgeois subject central to the realist *bildungsroman* has given way to a vision of the human mind as a site of struggle and conflict between the libidinal anarchy of the pleasure principle and the imperious demands of the reality principle. This fraught and complex struggle works itself out through the evolution of childhood sexuality and, most crucially, in the drama of separation and identification enacted in the Oedipal stage. This

²² *Ibid*, 72.

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* [2nd ed.] (London: Blackwell, 1996), 133.

drama of subject formation has tremendous consequences for the individual. Since the development of either perversions or neuroses later in life depends on a delicate economy of desire and repression at this early stage, the production of a functioning, healthy ego hangs in the balance. But the consequences for modern society are also great, since, for Freud, the successful repression and sublimation of our desires is vitally necessary for the development of a healthy and functioning civilisation.

Rita Felski has observed that the most significant contribution of psychoanalytic thought to modern culture is its conviction that the self is ontologically rooted in the libido.²⁴ In this regard, the psychoanalytic framework was both a continuation of, and a radical break with, the sexological analysis of sexuality that emerged in the late nineteenth century. As Lacquer's work on eighteenth-century medical treatises about masturbation illustrates, human sexual biology had been an object of scientific study prior to the emergence of 'sexology' as a new field of intellectual inquiry in Europe from the 1870s onwards.²⁵ The work of the key figures of this new field, such as Richard von Kraft-Ebbing, Albert Moll, Iwan Bloch and Havelock Ellis, is distinguished from that of their predecessors in the field of medicine not by its subject matter but by its aim and direction. Jeffrey Weeks argues that, "the most significant point about the new sexology was its assumption that sexuality deserved serious study not just as an aspect of the treatment of moral laxity or disease but because of its significance for the whole existence of the individual and society."²⁶ Sexology did not just represent a new approach to sexuality but the historical development of the notion of sexuality itself. This new science did not involve a move into a previously uncharted area of knowledge so much as the emergence of a new way of producing knowledge, a new way of knowing. Arnold Davidson uses the term "styles of reasoning" to describe this epistemic shift. Prior

²⁴ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 177.

²⁵ On pre-sexological medical and scientific theories of human sexuality see also Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge, 1987), 13-59.

²⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* [2nd edition] (London: Longman, 1989), 142. For an evaluation of the historical significance of sexology, and detailed considerations of the work of individual sexologists, see Rita Felski, 'Introduction' and the essays collected in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998).

to the late nineteenth century the anatomical style of reasoning prevailed in the medical study of human sexual biology. This approach was focused on the internal and external genital organs, took sex as its object of inquiry and concerned itself with diseases of structural abnormality. The development of a psychiatric style of reasoning was necessary for 'sexuality' to become an object of knowledge. In this new style of reasoning, sexuality was not linked to the anatomical structure of genital organs but was "a matter of impulses, tastes, aptitudes, satisfactions and psychic traits."²⁷

Crucially, the psychiatric style of reasoning proceeded on the assumption that there was a constitutive link between sexuality, understood in this way, and human consciousness. For sexologists, "to know a person's sexuality is to know that person. Sexuality is the externalisation of the hidden, inner essence of the personality."²⁸ This new way of understanding sexuality is exemplified in the new meaning of the word 'pervert' in sexological discourse. The notion of perversion had been used in theological discourse as far back as Augustine, but it had a conceptually much less central place than it came to occupy in nineteenth-century medical and sexological thinking. More significantly, in the field of theology, perversion – as used by Augustine for instance – had described wilful acts of evil. In sixteenth-century English, 'pervert,' used as a noun, had functioned as an antonym for 'convert'. One described the turning from good to evil and the other the reverse; the important feature of this is that perversion described a deliberate ethical choice.²⁹ In sexological thought, sexual actions which ran counter to 'normal' sexual activity and which were therefore perverse were not conceptualised as conscious actions but as the distinguishing characteristics of a 'type' of human being. Perverse sexual actions were the manifestation of the innate essence of the pervert. One of the most significant of the sexological texts, Kraft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1893), outlined in scientific detail a wide range of perverse forms of sexual activity but it also discursively constituted four new types of

²⁷ Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001) 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁹ On the history of the concept of perversion, see Davidson, 57-65. Jonathan Dollimore analyses Augustine's use of the term perversion, as well as what he terms the "hidden history of perversion," in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103-228.

character: the homosexual or invert, the sadist, the masochist, and the fetishist. It was an example of what one historian of science, Ian Hacking, has termed, "making up people."³⁰

The other significant development which sexology set in motion, but did not itself complete, was the conceptual separation of sexuality from reproduction. In both the theological discourse of sexual morality, and the pre-sexological medical discourse of sexual biology, the distinctions between sexual acts which were pure or impure and healthy or unhealthy were underpinned by the fundamental distinction between reproductive and non-reproductive sex. Sexology laid the groundwork for challenging this foundational binary through using the notion of 'instinct', as it had developed in the biological sciences after Darwin, to develop the idea of a 'sexual instinct'. The main thrust of the sexological project was, in Jeffrey Weeks's words, to "define the nature and characteristics of the specifically sexual instinct or force, and to delineate its social effects."³¹ This gave rise to the great sexological endeavour to label and classify the diverse manifestations of this instinct and the sexual types it produced, exemplified in the encyclopaedic work of Krafft-Ebbing in Germany and Havelock Ellis in England. However, even those sexologists, such as Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany, who advocated a more 'progressive' and 'enlightened' approach to the perversions, in particular 'inversion' or homosexuality, still operated on the assumption that the sexual instinct was fundamentally an instinct towards reproduction. Indeed, as Jonathan Ned Katz points out, the term 'heterosexual' was initially coined by early sexologists not to designate the 'norm' but any sexual intercourse between a man and woman that was perverse in the sense that conception was deliberately avoided. In this schema, 'heterosexual' was not the healthy opposite of 'homosexual' but another category of the perverse, because it designated non-reproductive and pleasure-oriented sex.³²

³⁰ Ian Hacking, 'Making Up People' in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E Weller (eds.) *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222-236.

³¹ Weeks, 143.

³² Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (London: Penguin, 1996), 1-33.

The historical significance of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) is that it radically actualised these nascent developments within sexology: the formulation of 'sexuality' as something distinguishable from a biological instinct towards reproduction and the positioning of sexuality thus conceptualised in relation to human consciousness. The decisive move towards conceptualising the 'sexual drive' as something entirely autonomous from the reproductive instinct was made by Freud in the first essay, 'The Sexual Aberrations'. There, he makes an innovative distinction between the "sexual object," the "person from whom sexual attraction proceeds," and the "sexual aim," the "act towards which the instinct tends".³³ Freud's analysis of the sexual aberrations proceeds by distinguishing between deviations in respect of the sexual object (in particular homosexuality or 'inversion') and deviations in respect of the sexual aim (mainly any sexual interest in, or fetishising of, non-genital parts of the body). His primary concern in this essay is to refute the various explanations of the aberrations and perversions as innate, which had been put forward in sexology. These included attributing sexual aberrations to heredity, degeneracy, or what was known as 'psychical hermaphroditism'. In place of these theories, Freud begins to formulate the idea of the sexual instinct as a drive which is aimed primarily at the objective of satisfying a desire for pleasure rather than the objective of reproduction. Later, in 'Civilised Sexual Morality,' he states this more explicitly when he writes that "in man the sexual instinct does not originally serve the purpose of reproduction at all, but has as its aim the gaining of particular types of pleasure."³⁴

The Freudian libidinal theory radically re-conceptualised desire by detaching it from any object or subject. The 'libido' named an immanently powerful drive; the objective of this drive was unrelated to anything beyond itself, such as human reproduction, and was solely focused on its own, always impossible, satisfaction. This drive is, moreover, situated at the centre of the psychoanalytic narrative of subject formation. At the core of this model is a conception of human subjectivity as the product of a struggle between opposing forces of sexual desire and sexual repression. For a functional ego to be created, the anarchic, dispersed and auto-erotic libidinal desires of the pre-oedipal child must become organised and centred

³³ Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 136.

³⁴ Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 9, 188.

on genital sexuality. The libido gets contained and redirected in this way through the workings of the Oedipal complex.³⁵ In this crucial stage of development the child psychically separates from its mother. The boy child represses his incestuous desire for his mother's body and redirects this desire towards the bodies of other women, while also submerging the anxious rivalry felt towards his father in his new identification with this masculine embodiment of his own future self. The girl child must re-direct her libidinal desires away from her mother but simultaneously effect an identification with her, while replacing the mother with the father as her 'love-object' and sublimating her desire for a penis into her desire for a baby. For the girl child, the operations of the Oedipal stage are, notoriously, more complicated.³⁶ The consequences of the successful working out of the Oedipal complex are a stable gender and sexual identity, and this stage is fundamental to the Freudian theory of subject formation. As Terry Eagleton points out, the Oedipal complex is "the structure of relations by which we come to be the men and women that we are. It is the point at which we are produced and constituted as subjects...It signals the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle; from the enclosure of the family to society at large, since we turn from incest to extra-familial relations, and from Nature to Culture."³⁷

This understanding of human sexuality is sharply different from that which underpinned the classical *bildung* narrative. The meaning of sexuality in the nineteenth-century realist *bildungsroman* is essentially reproductive; sexuality is conceptualised as being primarily a mode of biological reproduction which, through the institution of marriage, is also translated into a mode of social reproduction. Even in the novel of adultery, such as Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the meaning of the sexual experience is still located in its divergence from a marital norm. Moreover, while the experience of sexual desire may be a constitutive element of the young person's formation, this experience is fundamentally relational; it takes place on a plane *between* two

³⁵ On the evolution of Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex, see Bennett Simon and Rachel B. Blass, 'The Development and Vicissitudes of Freud's Ideas on the Oedipal Complex' in Jerome Neu (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 161-174.

³⁶ On the Freudian model of female subject formation in early childhood, see Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Penguin, 1977), 96-119.

³⁷ Eagleton, 135.

people, rather than *within* an individual subject. In the nineteenth-century novel, sexual desire may be irrational (we might think of Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*), but it is still imagined within the realm of meaningful actions performed by a coherent subject; one falls in love; one marries; one has affairs. In the sexual imaginary of the realist *bildungsroman*, the subject is an actor; in the post-Freudian sexual imaginary, the subject is a product, the result of a complex maelstrom of libidinal desires coming into conflict with reality. In Joyce's *Portrait*, this radically new conceptualisation of sexuality and subjectivity is productively fused with the *bildungsroman* to generate a new type of *bildung* narrative.

3

For Richard Brown, it is precisely Joyce's intellectual and artistic engagement with those contemporary transformations in European thought about sexuality that make him an exemplary modern writer. In Brown's view, Joyce's fiction would "have less stature, less of a sense of centrality, less 'modernity' in our estimation, did it not respond to this felt importance of sexuality and sexual change."³⁸ Drawing on the details of Joyce's own reading, along with the biographical details of his social milieu, Brown traces the writer's consistent interest in a constellation of what were, at this time, live questions related to sexuality. These ranged from the critique of marriage in the plays of Ibsen and Shaw to the emerging scientific theories of sexual perversity in the work of Havelock Ellis and other sexologists, and from the Freudian model of the non-reproductive sexual drive to the feminist politics of sex radicals, birth control campaigners and 'New Women', such as Harriet Shaw Weaver, founding editor of *The Egoist*, originally titled *The Freewoman*, in which *Portrait* was first serialised in 1914. Brown also shows how these intellectual and political concerns and interests are manifest throughout the fiction; instances include the portrayal of the Conroy and Bloom marriages in 'The Dead' and *Ulysses*, and the assorted 'perverse' passions and pursuits of Bloom and others. In Brown's reading of *Portrait*, Stephen enunciates both his aesthetic modernity and a modern understanding of sexuality as something autonomous from reproduction in, for instance, the Venus of Praxites episode. This takes place in the final section of the novel, as part of the conversation with Lynch during which

³⁸ Richard Brown, *James Joyce and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

Stephen explains his theory of aesthetics. Stephen outlines, and rejects, a reproductive explanation for Lynch's attraction to the naked form of a woman (in this case, a statue in the National Museum). In opposition to this, Stephen argues for sexual attraction as an aesthetic experience; in the beauty of the object of desire the desiring subject apprehends "relations of the sensible."³⁹ In Brown's view, Stephen's "rejection of a reproductive utilitarianism...if applied not just to artistic questions but to questions of sexual-object choice, make a convincing parallel to twentieth-century notions of sexuality."⁴⁰

There are two limitations to Brown's analysis of the relationship between Joyce's fiction and the energetic and diverse production of sexual discourses that was taking place contemporaneously. One is that his reading lacks a dialectical view of either the history of sexual discourse or of modernity – and especially of the relationship between these two. His mode of analysis combines a historicist approach, situating the fiction in the historical context of new ideas being produced about human sexuality, with a largely ahistorical and essentialist view of human sexuality. 'Modern sexuality' does not, in this view, describe a discursive and ideological configuration, which shapes the actual experience of 'sexuality' by individuals and which is produced in specific historical conditions. Rather it describes a positivist discovery, or uncovering, of a more accurate and authentic understanding of human sexual experience; in tandem with this essentialist view of sexuality there is an adherence to a wholly progressive teleology of modernity. Secondly, in his reading of the fiction Brown concentrates exclusively on representation and language. He analyses the characterisation of Bloom and Molly, for instance, and he identifies a dense network of allusions and parodies in the fiction. However, Brown does not incorporate questions of form into his analysis, even though Joyce's engagement with these new intellectual approaches to sexuality is equally manifest in the narrative structure of his fiction, such as the plotting of the *bildung* narrative in *Portrait*.

As Moretti has shown, the relationship between the individual and modern society produced in the realist *bildungsroman* was one governed by the logic of

³⁹ Joyce, *Portrait*, 182.

⁴⁰ Brown, 53.

compromise and exchange, with happiness and freedom as the currency of this symbolic economy. In the Joycean *bildungsroman*, this governing logic has been replaced by the oedipal logic of separation and identification. The *bildung* plot in *Portrait* is constructed out of Stephen's struggle to forge and construct his own identity in opposition to the various social and cultural forces through which a set of pre-determined identities are being foisted on him by his historical conditions. As a Catholic, an Irishman and a subject of the British Empire, the most salient of these identities are those of religion and politics. In the realist *bildungsroman*, the narrative mechanism for enacting this logic of compromise and exchange was the marriage plot; a plot predicated on an essentially reproductive model of sexuality. In *Portrait*, the logic of separation and identification is equally dependent on a sexual plot, but a plot generated by a libidinal rather than a reproductive model of sexuality. This libidinal plot takes two distinctive forms. In the early and middle parts of the novel, Stephen's schooldays at Clongowes and Belvedere, this struggle about identity is narrated as Stephen's struggle against the ideological forces of sexual purity. This is an internal battle in which Stephen has to resist those cultural and psychic forces through which he is being constituted as a victim of 'sexual vice'. In the latter part of the novel, narrating his student days at the university, Stephen's articulation of his aesthetic and political ideas – through which he explicitly identifies himself in opposition to church, nation and empire – is equally eroticised. Here Joyce creates a fictional equivalent of the Freudian sexual drive, which imbues the narrative of self-formation with a surge of libidinal energy while also standing as an analogue for the drive to aesthetic creativity and intellectual and political freedom.

This division of the novel runs across Joyce's own pentagonal arrangement of the text, and hinges on the point, in the second half of part four, when Stephen realises that he will not become a Catholic priest but a "priest of the eternal imagination."⁴¹ However, there are a number of reasons for arguing that the plot pivots on this point. There is, for instance, a definite alteration of tone between these two parts of the novel. In the earlier part, the plot is primarily composed of a series of intense crises in Stephen's life: the Christmas dinner scene; being bullied and unfairly punished at Clongowes; the declining family fortunes; Stephen's social alienation

⁴¹ Joyce, *Portrait*, 192.

and sexual guilt precipitated by his existential crisis in the Cork lecture theatre; the temporary turn to extreme religious piety. The plot in the second part is dominated by Stephen's successive conversations with Lynch, Davin and Cranly. There, Stephen's own voice comes to the fore, confidently, albeit at times rather pompously, outlining his political and aesthetic theories. (The tone here is also enlivened by the interjections, anecdotes and, in Lynch's case, the comedy of his interlocutors). This growing centrality of Stephen's voice ultimately issues in the transition to the first-person narration of the diary entries; as Seamus Deane describes it, "the narrated Stephen becomes the narrator Stephen."⁴² Clearly, the emergence of this coherent subject, the ego embodied in the 'I' of the diary entries, is the ultimate destination of a formation narrative. The spatial transition that takes place between the two parts of *Portrait* further augments this narrative trajectory. Most of the crucial episodes in the first part of the novel take place indoors. The plot unfolds in various educational buildings (the Clongowes playground being physically outdoors but contained within the regulatory ambit of the school), though also in religious and domestic spaces – and, in the instance of the brothel bedroom, a space that is an ambiguous combination of domestic and public. In the second part, we chiefly see Stephen walking, either alone or in the company of his student companions, around the city. This increasing emphasis on Stephen's mobility (one of the hallmarks of modern youth in the classical *bildungsroman* tradition) presages how the novel ends with the definitive act of mobility, the flight into exile. Finally, this bipartite division has the novel turn on the point where Stephen makes two decisions: first, that he will not be a priest; then, that he will be an artist. Both of these decisions concern the choice of vocation, which is a defining thematic of the classical *bildungsroman*.

In the early and middle part of the novel, young Stephen struggles with his own self-conception as, first, a 'masturbating boy' and, later, as a 'vice-addicted man'. Joyce narrates that complex process of interaction, between Stephen's psyche and his historical and cultural conditions, which forms this self-conception. The novel places particular emphasis on two aspects of this dynamic intersection. One is the fundamental and generative role of language. The absorption into Stephen's mind

⁴² Seamus Deane, 'Introduction' in James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1993), xvi.

of a vocabulary created by the historical discourses of sexual purity is the crucible of this process. As Joyce depicts in *Portrait*, these sexual purity discourses are not descriptive but productive. Secondly, the novel draws our attention to the considerable overlap between Stephen's self-conception as a 'masturbating boy' and a 'vice-addicted man' and his simultaneous self-conception as a 'sinner' and 'penitent'. A young Irish Catholic at the turn of the twentieth century, like Stephen, had to contend with a discursive framework of sexual purity that was compounded of an unlikely, for historical reasons, amalgam of Irish Catholicism, Anglo-American Protestantism and science (specifically moralised medicine).

As Katherine Mullin has demonstrated, throughout his fiction Joyce manipulated the language and imagery of the social purity discourses to radically subversive ends. In *Dubliners*, for instance, figures like the 'queer old jossler' in 'An Encounter' and the eponymous 'Eveline' represent Joyce's complex response to social purity anxieties about homosexuality and 'white slavery'. Similarly, Stephen and Bloom's visit to the red-light district of Dublin in *Ulysses* plays with the hypocrisies and erotic ambiguities of anti-prostitution campaigning or 'vice-crusading'; what Mullin terms the "pornographies of reform."⁴³ In *Portrait*, one of young Stephen's first encounters with the discourses of social purity takes place in Clongowes. He listens to a group of his schoolmates discuss some of their fellows who were caught running away from the school and punished. Stephen is appalled, and slightly thrilled, as he hears the various conjectures about what the boys are supposed to have done, such as stealing money from the rector and drinking altar wine from the sacristy. Finally, an older boy named Athy reveals the actual cause of their attempted escape and punishment; they had been caught in the school toilets 'smuggling' with two other boys. Stephen is mystified. What is this thing? And why would you have to go to the 'square' or latrine to do it? Does it involve drawing the graffiti he has seen on the toilet walls? But because "it was queer what Athy said and the way he said it," and because the boys had fallen silent in response, Stephen realises that whatever this smuggling is, it is much more serious than a "cod" like drawing on a wall. As he becomes aware of this, Stephen "began to feel

⁴³ Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 171. For Mullin's reading of 'An Encounter' and 'Eveline' see 28-82, and for her reading of the 'Nighttown' episode, see 171-202.

afraid.” And rightly so, since the seriousness of what has happened is further impressed on him when he later hears about the flogging which the miscreants are to receive and which he fearfully begins to visualise in his mind.⁴⁴

Joyce never actually reveals to the reader what ‘smuggling’ is. As Attridge observes, this is of a piece with his strict adherence to the child’s point of view and serves to heighten the physical suggestiveness of the word for the reader. We share young Stephen’s puzzled and unsettled response to this talk of ‘smuggling’.⁴⁵ However, as Mullin points out, it is very likely that ‘smuggling’ is schoolboy slang for masturbation. Between the 1880s and the outbreak of the First World War, there was an upsurge in the production of literature about the psychological and physical dangers of masturbation for adolescent boys.⁴⁶ This cultural anxiety about young boys and masturbation formed a central element of what Mullin terms the “policing of masculinity” woven into the social purity discourses. Boarding schools, like Clongowes, became a particular focus of attention about this dangerous activity. It was in such schools that various practices of surveillance and discipline were developed to prevent masturbation; hence, the severity with which Stephen’s school fellows are punished. In these institutions the future members of the elite were being educated and so what was at stake in this drive to control masturbation was not just the physical and psychic health of individual men but of a ruling class. This link between maintaining individual sexual order and maintaining social order was a fundamental element of social purity discourses. That Clongowes is a Catholic institution run by Jesuit priests reiterates that overlap which Joyce saw existing between an Irish Catholic version of social purity and the version articulated by Catholicism’s ostensive ‘others’, Protestantism and science.

However, even before the ‘smuggling’ incident young Stephen had uncomprehendingly been exposed to this historical conjunction. The Clongowes episode is directly preceded by one of the novel’s most famous and dramatic episodes. During the Christmas dinner row about Parnell’s fall, Dante describes the

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Portrait*, 49-51.

⁴⁵ Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, 73.

⁴⁶ Mullin, 92-94. See also Alan Hunt, ‘The Great Masturbation Panic and the Discourses of Moral Regulation in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8 (1998), 575-615 and Lacquer, *Solitary Sex*, 302-358.

late leader as a “public sinner” and commends the Irish Catholic clergy as guardians of “public morality”.⁴⁷ As Mullin argues, the crisis about Parnell’s leadership in the wake of the O’Shea divorce case was in part the result of an unlikely ideological alliance.⁴⁸ In England, he became a target of the late nineteenth-century Anglo-American social purity movement. This movement represented a complex amalgam of forces, which drew on religion (mainly, but not exclusively, evangelical Protestantism), medicine and politics. One of the movement’s objectives was that all men in public life should exemplify an ideal of sexual purity. Elements of the social purity movement in England overlapped with the support base of the Liberals, the party of then Prime Minister William Gladstone. This contributed to Parnell’s political predicament, since Gladstone had been one of his chief political allies in England. In Ireland, it was the Catholic Church which primarily articulated the argument that Parnell’s private sexual conduct made him unfit for political leadership. Since the Irish Parliamentary Party was, like the Liberals in relation to the social purity movement, also dependent politically on the Catholic Church, Parnell’s political fate was sealed.

As the victim of this alliance of ideologically diverse forms of social purity, encoded in Dante’s language, Parnell prefigures how Stephen will also become ensnared by the same forces. This parallel is reiterated by the flow of the narrative since we see the process of Stephen’s induction into these discourses begin immediately afterwards. The juxtaposition of the Christmas dinner and the ‘smuggling’ episodes situates sexuality – and the ideological struggle over the meaning of sexuality – at the intersection of the psychological narrative of individual formation and the historical narrative of national formation. The ‘smuggling’ episode also introduces

⁴⁷ Joyce, *Portrait*, 39-40. Suzette Henke argues that Dante’s articulation of the Catholic view on Parnell and sexual morality emphases in young Stephen’s mind that “in the battle between male and female, Mother Church emerges as a bastion of sexual repression defended by hysterical women.” Dante is therefore one of that series of female characters – his mother, EC, the prostitute, the ‘birdgirl’ – who are “everywhere and nowhere” in the novel. In Henke’s analysis, the formation of Stephen’s identity is founded on his developing immersion in a radically dualistic and misogynistic gender division, and “Joyce makes clear to his audience that Stephen’s fear of women and his contempt for sensuous life are among the many inhibitions that stifle this young man’s creativity.” Suzette Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1990), 57, 50 and 84.

⁴⁸ Mullin, 85-91. On the ideological and political diversity of the British late nineteenth-century social purity movements, see Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 77-78. See also Chapter One.

one of Joyce's salient themes in the novel, the performativity of sexual purity discourses. It is their teachers' determination to punish and suppress 'smuggling' which leads to the conversation among the boys, and it is through hearing this conversation that Stephen becomes dimly aware that such a thing exists long before he 'does' anything. It is the discursive act of naming him as a 'masturbating boy' rather than anything he actually does which makes him one.

This linguistic dynamic reoccurs later in the novel when the adolescent Stephen experiences the beginning of the extended existential crisis that runs through the middle of the book, from the trip to Cork with his father through to his conversation with the Director of Vocations at Belvedere. On the visit to Cork with his dissolute father, Stephen goes to the university as part of Simon Dedalus's sentimental pilgrimage around the places of his youth. In a lecture hall Stephen reads a piece of graffiti, the word 'foetus' etched on to a desk. Reading this word, and imagining the group of students watching the word being cut into the wood:

It shocked him to find in the outer world a trace of what he had deemed till then a brutish and individual malady of his own mind. His recent monstrous reveries came thronging into memory. They too had sprung up before him, suddenly and furiously, out of mere words. He had soon given into them and allowed them to sweep across and abase his intellect, wondering where they came from, from what den of monstrous images, and always weak and humble towards others, restless and sickened of himself when they had swept over him.⁴⁹

Stephen's insight into the power of language, the generative connection he is suddenly aware of between "mere words" and his sexual fantasies, gets reinforced by the novelistic discourse. The only language to which Stephen has recourse to describe his own sexual feelings is that of moralised medicine and degeneracy: "malady," "abase his intellect," "weak," "sickened," and so on. The proposition which this linguistic insight raises, that sexuality is not a given but generated by the interaction of the individual mind and the culture, raises the problem of originality for Stephen. To what extent is he a unique individual subject? Part of his initial shock on reading the graffiti comes from realising that his sexual deviance is not unique to him. Thus, sexuality muddies the disjunction between "the outer world"

⁴⁹Joyce, *Portrait*, 87.

and "his own mind" so that reading the graffiti precipitates a crisis which quickly extends beyond sexual guilt to encompass a more generalised sense of alienation. First, there is his growing disillusionment with his father. The Cork episode contains the lengthiest description of Simon in the novel and is the only time that the reader is aware of Stephen studying his father closely. The suave, bourgeois *paterfamilias* of the earlier Christmas dinner scene is now a memory, replaced by this still charming but vain, irresponsible, drunken failure. Simon's disastrous mismanagement of the family fortune leads to the Dedalus's steady descent from relative wealth to poverty, a downward spiral that unfolds simultaneously with Stephen's development in the narrative. Interestingly, Stephen's concern about this reversal of class mobility is to the fore as he experiences his crisis in the lecture theatre. One of his first thoughts on reading the graffiti is to recollect his "equivocal position at Belvedere, a free boy."⁵⁰ His scholarship gives him access to those privileges that are the property of a male child of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie but denies him the social, political and existential security that should come with that. From being initially focused on his sexual guilt, Stephen's anxiety in his moment of crisis extends to his ambiguous class status.

This agon between the homogenising effects of society and the distinctiveness of subjectivity, which Stephen becomes aware of in the lecture hall, is forcefully dramatised in the next episode in the narrative when Stephen makes his first trip to a Dublin brothel. Walking in the gathering Autumnal gloom through "a maze of narrow and dirty streets" that make up Dublin's red-light district, Stephen congeals into a 'type' out of the taxonomical imaginary of the social purity advocates.⁵¹ Moaning "like some baffled prowling beast," he is impelled, animal-like, by an instinct over which he has no rational control. He appears powerful and frightening, since he wants "to force another being to sin with him and to exult in her sin", yet he is also enfeebled and pitiable. The debilitations that beset his body, "a trembling seized him and his eyes grew dim," prove that he has been physically as well as morally weakened by "the wasting fires of lust". In this luridly Gothic description, Stephen conforms to the social purity characterisation of the 'vice-addicted man.' This figure encapsulated the contradictory conception of male sexuality that

⁵⁰ Ibid, 88.

⁵¹ Ibid, 95.

underpinned the social purity discourses, which viewed men as being both powerful and weak – as both the perpetrators and the victims of 'sexual vice.'⁵²

But once Stephen sets foot inside the brothel bedroom he no longer conforms to this discursive figure of the 'vice-addicted man'. In the arms of the young prostitute, "he felt that he had suddenly become strong and fearless and sure of himself."⁵³ The 'type' who was prowling the street is now a distinctive, autonomous individual, and this transformation from 'type' to 'character' is fuelled by an erotic encounter. Notably, this transformation is achieved through an erotic encounter that is the antithesis of biologically and socially reproductive marital sexuality. This is sexuality entirely removed from the domestic sphere of marriage and re-situated in the market sphere of financial transactions and commodities. Ironically, along with being paid for in cash, Stephen's experience of self-power also comes about through a masochistic act of submission on his part. It is he who plays the stereotypically 'feminine' role of the reluctant maiden in this seduction scene; having "all but burst into hysterical weeping" he refuses to kiss the young woman but wants to be "held firmly in her arms". It is she who assertively "bowed his head and joined her lips to his", which leaves him "surrendering himself to her, body and mind." As Suzette Henke observes, the prostitute, "functions as an ambivalent figure of masculine aggression and feminine nurturance."⁵⁴

One of the interesting conceits of *Portrait* is that when Stephen is apparently disavowing his sexual life, in the next part of the novel, precisely the same dynamic is at work. Attending the retreat and hearing the sermons on hell at Belvedere, going to confession and entering his period of hyper-pietistic practices, Stephen turns from sex to religion. Ironically, though, his religious practices are equally masochistic. There is the exquisite terror of listening passively to the mesmerising, frightening rhetoric of Father Arnall, looming over him at the altar.⁵⁵ This is followed by his abject submission, "blinded by tears," to the representative of God the

⁵² Lucy Bland discusses late nineteenth-century theories on male sexuality in *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* [2nd edition] (London: Tauris, 2001[1995]), 14-25 and 54-58.

⁵³ Joyce, *Portrait*, 96.

⁵⁴ Henke, *Politics of Desire*, 67.

⁵⁵ Joyce, *Portrait*, 108-123.

Almighty in the confessional and the blissful state this induces as he returns home “not daring to speak for happiness.”⁵⁶ And, most overtly, there are the elaborately conceived games of sensual punishment that he enacts repeatedly on his body in the course of his intense piety; it was “to the mortification of touch that he brought the most assiduous ingenuity of inventiveness.”⁵⁷

Emer Nolan has observed of *Portrait* that “Stephen's oscillations between self-loss and self-containment are played out in the intimacy of the brothel or the confessional.”⁵⁸ In this first part of the novel, the structure of Stephen's *bildung* narrative is essentially molecular. Whether in the brothel bedroom or the confessional – or indeed earlier in the lecture hall and the playground – the same dialectic of identification is at work. It is not that Stephen's essential self is struggling to emerge, in opposition to those identities that are being culturally imposed on him by the discourses of sexual purity. The novel does not posit a ‘real’ Stephen in contradistinction with Stephen as ‘masturbating boy’, ‘vice-addicted man’, ‘sinner’ or ‘penitent’. Rather, the logic of the oedipal complex governs Joyce's narration of Stephen's development. Stephen's subjectivity is formed in a complex process where the growing boy simultaneously identifies himself with and against these discursive figures. The comparatively brief brothel episode contains an especially dense concentration of the dynamic that propels the overall *bildung* narrative. Joyce's initial juxtaposition of the discursive ‘type’ of sexual purity rhetoric and the individualism of the novelistic ‘character’ central to the *bildungsroman* is both reinforced and destabilised by the description of what subsequently happens in the bedroom. His encounter with the young woman erotically facilitates the solidification, albeit briefly, of Stephen's distinctive

⁵⁶ Ibid, 130-131.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 135. Critics have also highlighted how the act of confessing is itself written as a sexual, specifically a masturbatory, act, with Stephen's sins trickling from his lips “in shameful drops...the last sins oozed forth, sluggish, filthy, ” (*Portrait*, 130). Through eroticising confession in this way, Joyce highlights the complicity between erotic pleasure and those discourses and disciplinary strategies which are ostensibly preventing such pleasures. This is foregrounded again when Stephen, in the course of his conversation with the Director of Vocations, imagines himself as a confessor, hearing “sinful longings...murmured into his ear in the confessional under the shame of a darkened chapel by the lips of women and girls.” (*Portrait*, 140). See Mullin, 105 and Castle, 172. See also, Mary Lowe-Evans, ‘Sex and Confession in the Joyce Canon: Some Historical Parallels,’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 16 (1990), 563-76.

⁵⁸ Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995), 39.

individuality. But since the encounter also reverses those gendered stereotypes of activity and passivity, it suggests that this process of individuation is not merely the coming into being of a stable, active, coherent subjectivity, of the sort embodied by the hero of the realist *bildungsroman*. The erotics of submission and domination reiterate this sense that subject formation is more complex than just asserting mastery over the self, which then is reiterated by the quality of erotic submissiveness imbuing Stephen's religiosity.

But Stephen's intensive devotional and penitential practices are not just motivated by an attempted reconciliation between his soul and God, or between himself and the Church. He also considers his devotional period as an attempt "to merge his life in the common tide of other lives," something that for Stephen was "harder...than any fasting or praying."⁵⁹ His religious practice is not just an attempt to assuage his sexual guilt, but is also an attempt to overcome his antipathy towards conceiving of himself as part of collective and social formations. The problem of originality which confronts Stephen sexually, the sense that his sexuality, and therefore his subjectivity, is not distinct and unique but forged out of the dynamics of identification and repudiation with the social purity discourses, is the same problem that confronts him on the plane of social and political identity. In Joyce's *bildung* narrative, the logic of identification and separation governs the formation of sexuality and subjectivity, but it also governs the relationship between the narrative of self-formation and the narrative of national formation.

4

Stephen's phase of extreme piety comes to an end with his conversation with the Director of Vocations at Belvedere and his decision not to become a priest. This clearly marks a turning point in the novel because, for one thing, the hero's decision about his vocation is a crucial point in a *bildungsroman* and, secondly, because in Joyce's version of the form it marks a transition in Stephen's attempt to work through that agon between self and society. He moves from the rather hopelessly misguided attempt to subsume himself in communal formations enacted in his hyper-piety towards the conception of critical distance between the

⁵⁹ Joyce, *Portrait*, 135.

intellectual and his society, which he articulates in the conversations and diary entries later in the novel. And the first step he has to take towards this understanding of the relationship between subject and society is to begin to conceive of himself as an intellectual or artist.

Stephen's decision about his future is not, of course, a decision at all. Instead this shift is dramatised in the form of a Joycean epiphany, a moment of intense revelation which, in keeping with the religious tradition from which Joyce drew the idea, cannot be considered a fully rational experience.⁶⁰ Stephen's moment of insight into his future vocation, as Joyce describes it, is distinguished by the extent to which it is a bodily rather than a mental experience. It comes about during his walk on Dollymount strand, after he grows tired waiting for Simon to emerge from a pub.⁶¹ Simon is inside arranging for Stephen's admission to the university, and so we learn that he has left Belvedere but has not yet begun at his next educational institution. His epiphany is precipitated by meeting two groups of men. As he crosses over the footbridge that takes him onto the beach he passes a group of Christian Brothers walking in formation from the other direction. The patrician Jesuits, whom Stephen has just been invited to join, were drawn from the Catholic bourgeoisie and were entrusted with the intellectual formation of the Irish Catholic elite. Christian Brothers, however, were mainly drawn from the lower middle-class and had the less prestigious task of delivering a more rudimentary education to their own class and to the poor. Hence, Stephen guiltily responds to seeing them with a certain hauteur and condescension, "a faint stain of personal shame and commiseration."⁶² In this group of young clerics, with their simple piety, "uncouth" faces and ill-fitting "humble" uniform, Stephen is physically confronted with what had most horrified him about joining the priesthood; the homogenising and self-effacing effects of being subsumed into a group.

⁶⁰ On the religious origins of Joyce's literary formulation of epiphany see, Roy Gottfried, *Joyce's Misbelief* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 18-21. Gottfried argues that Joyce's appropriation of religious concepts, specifically from Catholicism, was a "schismatic" strategy that enabled him to gain artistic possibilities and freedoms.

⁶¹ Joyce, *Portrait*, 146.

⁶² *Ibid*, 147.

On the beach he then meets a group of his former schoolmates from Belvedere playing naked in the sea. While he manages to banter with the boys, he actually experiences a similarly visceral reaction to them as he did with the Brothers. Oddly enough, while it was the Brothers' uniform clothing that denoted their homogeneity, now it is the boys' nakedness that emphasises theirs. He notes how "characterless" they looked without the distinguishing marks of different coats, belts and so on, and their idiosyncratic style of wearing them.⁶³ As in his encounter with the prostitute, there is the same dynamic of aversion and attraction at play here, and it has the same productive effect on his self-formation. While, "the mere sight of that medley of wet nakedness chilled him to the bone", it is nevertheless this group of naked young men, shouting their Greek joke on his name, that ignites the vision of his future as an artist.⁶⁴

Hearing it being called out by these boys "his name seemed to him a prophecy," and Stephen imagines the original Dedalus of Greek mythology and of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a "hawklike man flying sunward above the sea". He interprets this as a symbol of "the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being."⁶⁵ Stephen's response to this vision of his future as an artist is remarkably physical:

His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight ... an ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes and wild his breath and tremulous and wild and radiant his windswept limbs.⁶⁶

This decision about his future, or more accurately this epiphany, is something that Stephen experiences in his body, as much as in his mind or his soul. If we look closely at the description of this physical experience we notice that more specifically it is written as a moment of orgasm. The highly-charged language

⁶³ Ibid, 149.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Joseph Valente reads Stephen's response to the nakedness of the boys as a symptom of 'homosexual panic', one of a number of such incidents in the novel. Joseph Valente, 'Thrilled by His Touch: the Aestheticizing of Homosexual Panic in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*' in Mark A. Wollaeger (ed.) *James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 245-280, 265.

⁶⁵ Joyce, *Portrait*, 149.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 149-150.

stresses the effect on his body: the trembling of his heart, his breathlessness, the surge of ecstasy, the "lust of wandering" that takes hold of his feet. The syntax of this passage is rhythmically propulsive as Stephen pledges himself to a life of artistic creation, swearing that "he would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable."⁶⁷ Like Molly at the end of *Ulysses*, Stephen's mind exclaims "Yes! Yes! Yes!" to the vision of himself as an artist. Reversing Freud's distinction between the pleasure of excitation and the pleasure of satisfaction, Joyce has Stephen ravished by these ecstatic sensations just *before* he is aroused by the girl wading in the sea.⁶⁸

With her "long slender bare legs" and "her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory", this girl is an object of desire for the entranced Stephen and for the reader. Elsewhere, the novel makes a fairly conventional connection between sexual desire and creativity. Stephen desires EC, which inspires him to write poetry; she is the "temptress of his villanelle." While he composes, "a glow of desire kindled again his soul and fired and fulfilled his body" and so the act of writing is itself an erotic experience.⁶⁹ But in the Dolymount epiphany, we see something other than this traditional idea of sexual desire fuelling creativity at work. Here, sexual desire, or more precisely the libidinal drive, serves as an analogue for the drive to creativity. Stephen's exhilarating moment of decision is subtended between the naked bodies of the Belvedere boys and the minutely described body of the wading girl. His epiphany does not spring from sexual desire for any particular body but is buoyed up by a current of erotic energy that ebbs and flows like the tide in which the girl stands. Like the libido, the artistic vocation is polymorphous, unfixed, and unbound by any specific commitment to being 'productive' or to any social or political objectives. The artistic vocation requires untrammelled freedom, and the structure of Stephen's epiphany emphasises the co-relation between artistic vocation, erotic experience and freedom. The wading girl, who remains nameless and silent, offers the most condensed symbol of this connection. She is an object of desire, her appearance coincides with Stephen's vocational epiphany, and she is also a

⁶⁷ Ibid, 150.

⁶⁸ Freud discusses what he terms the 'problem' of pleasure in the third of his *Three Essays*, see Freud, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 210.

⁶⁹ Joyce, *Portrait*, 188 and 193.

symbol of freedom. A “strange and beautiful seabird” whose legs are “delicate as a crane,” this analogy between girl and bird is but one instance of the profusion of flight imagery.⁷⁰ The sky and the clouds over the beach are repeatedly described, and Stephen’s imagination is ignited by the image of Dedalus, the “hawklike man”, asserting mastery over the elements and soaring to freedom from the island of Crete using the wings he crafted. Freedom, flight and creativity merge in Stephen’s ecstatic response to his artistic vocation, as his “soul soared in an air beyond the world” and an “ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes”.

This analogy of freedom and flight prefigures the ending of the novel when Stephen will attempt to “fly the nets” of religion and race by going into exile. Departure from Ireland is already encoded into the decision to become an artist; the narrative registers this as an inevitable outcome even before Stephen becomes consciously aware that he will have to go if he is to attain the freedom to pursue his vocation. In the last pages of the novel Stephen, in the diary entries, maintains that his departure in pursuit of individual freedom is not an act of escape from his commitments to the collective, but a necessary precondition to a deeper engagement with it. To serve the collective, he must first escape it. To be an artistic priest to his nation, he must first elevate himself above it, not abase himself to it. In the two most famous phrases from the novel, he reports telling Davin that “the quickest way to Tara was via Holyhead”, which implies that he is leaving Ireland as an attempt to understand its condition more fully, and this is echoed in his closing grandiloquent declaration that he is going away the better to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”.⁷¹ For Stephen then, the project of individual development and the struggle for individual freedom are not inimical to the project of national development and the struggle for collective freedom; rather the first represents an essential precondition to any achievement of the latter goal.

However, while the content of *Portrait* may point to this symbiotic relationship between the *bildung* narrative and the narrative of national history, its structural investment in psychoanalysis creates a more antagonistic relationship between the

⁷⁰ Ibid, 151.

⁷¹ Ibid, 216-218.

personal and the national. Joyce's deployment of the Freudian formation narrative constitutes Ireland as a site of unhealthy repression where the libidinal drive to creativity and freedom is constricted, with potentially injurious effects for the self. Again, the narration of Stephen's decision about his future vocation makes this aspect of the novel most apparent. His epiphanic realisation that he will be an artist is preceded directly in the narrative by his decision that he will not become a priest, which he reaches after his conversation with the Director in his office at Belvedere. As with the subsequent epiphany on the beach, Joyce places a remarkable emphasis on Stephen's visceral experiences of this decision. As he takes his leave of the director, he looks at the priest's face, and is troubled by this sight of a "mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day."⁷² This triggers an image of the ordered, daily routine and the "passionless" life that would await him as a priest. In turn, this ignites memories of his time in Clongowes – memories which are most fully felt in his senses than in his mind:

The troubling odour of the long corridors of Clongowes came back to him and he heard the discreet murmur of the burning gas flames. At once from every part of his being unrest began to irradiate. A feverish quickening of his pulses followed and a din of meaningless words drove his reasoned thoughts hither and thither confusedly. His lungs dilated and sank as if he were inhaling a warm moist unsustaining air and he smelt again the warm moist air which hung in the bath in Clongowes above the sluggish turfcoloured water.⁷³

It is logical that Stephen should think of Clongowes at this point, since it was his first experience of a clerically-run institution and his first insight into the way of life which he is now considering for himself. But the sensation of panic which these memories induce in him suggests that something else is going on. Clongowes was a frightening, disorientating place for young Stephen where the threat of violence, from other boys or from masters, constantly hung in the air. It was a traumatic place for Stephen, first when he was pushed into the pond by a boy and subsequently when he was unjustly punished by the prefect of studies. But it is also where he first associated history with trauma – his own illness and morbid

⁷² Ibid, 143.

⁷³ Ibid.

death fantasies occasioned by his immersion in the pond coincided with hearing the news of Parnell's death.⁷⁴

As is common with traumatic experiences, Stephen's memories of Clongowes recur throughout the novel at particularly crucial moments of crisis. They resurface at the moment of decision about his future, during his crisis in the Cork lecture theatre, and the sermons on hell at the Belvedere retreat are delivered by his former teacher from Clongowes, Father Arnall. It is also at Clongowes that Stephen first learns to 'read' from a master's face if he is in a "wax", or temper. He looks, for instance, at Father Arnall's "dark face" and sees that "it was a little red from the wax he was in."⁷⁵ Could these "dreadful waxes" to which a priest was unpredictably prey, and which were inscribed in his facial features, originate in that same "passionless" life that made itself manifest in the director's "mirthless" face? This correlation between neurosis, sexual repression and religious forms of life is most acutely apparent during Stephen's period of extreme piety as a teenager. Precipitated by hearing Arnall's sermons, Stephen begins his intricately worked programme of hourly, daily and weekly routines of prayers, devotions and penitential practices to expiate the guilt he feels because of his sexual life.⁷⁶ But the expiation of that sexual guilt, through sadomasochistic bodily practices and an endless rhythmic round of confessing, becomes, in Joyce's way of writing it, an erotic experience in itself. The sexual drive is not extinguished so much as re-directed and, as Mullin observes, "self-restraint becomes a form of auto-eroticism."⁷⁷ His programme of religious practices is also a very elaborate and strenuous piece of work and therefore an outlet for his creative energies as much as his sexual desires. As in the later epiphanic moment on Dolymount, the drive to creativity and the libidinal drive are here shown to be intimately linked and Stephen's piety involves the repression and sublimation of both these drives. That this repression is inherently unhealthy to him becomes manifest in the irritability which Stephen notices in himself, as he becomes increasingly prone to irrational feelings of anger disproportionate to their cause. Moreover, his awareness of this brings to his mind, "images of the outbursts of trivial anger which he had often

⁷⁴ Ibid, 36.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 132-137.

⁷⁷ Mullin, 106.

noted among his masters, their twitching mouths, closeshut lips and flushed cheeks."⁷⁸

Thus the resurgence of his Clongowes memories at the point where Stephen is deciding about the priesthood casts his decision about his vocation as a choice about sexuality, freedom and psychic health. But when he decides that he will not become a priest Stephen also grasps that "his destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders."⁷⁹ This expansion outward from religion to a wider sphere of social commitments is also encoded in his visceral recollection of life at Clongowes. The specific memory that comes to his mind is of the communal baths that he had to share with the other boys there and his physical response to this memory is very similar to the panicked state of somebody drowning, "a feverish quickening of his pulses followed...his lungs dilated and sank as if he were inhaling a warm moist unsustaining air." The prominence of water, moisture and wetness here stands in an interesting contrast with the profuse imagery of birds, flight and air in the subsequent epiphany on the beach. If the element of air suggests flight, escape and freedom, water is the element in which one can become submerged and risk becoming drowned. Stephen's decision not to become a priest becomes more than a question of religious vocation, or a question of healthy sexuality as opposed to unhealthy celibacy, but is also a decision about engagement in all types of communal and social formations since these are inherently perilous for the development of the self.

Because it is communal and over-used, the bathwater at Clongowes which Stephen so vividly recollects has taken on a particular hue; it is "turfcoloured."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Joyce, *Portrait*, 135.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

⁸⁰ This particular formulation is again repeated at the beginning of section five when Stephen, about to leave for his walk to the university, looks at the dregs of tea in the jam jars that the family has been reduced to using. Again, this calls to his memory, "the dark turfcoloured water of the bath in Clongowes." (*Portrait*, 153). It is noticeable that this second reference to the Clongowes bathwater comes when there is a marked shift from the libidinally charged excesses of the epiphany on the beach to the prosaic, naturalist description of the squalor of the family kitchen. This suggests that the erotically charged image of individual freedom, glimpsed just before on the beach, is still only an image and an aspiration at this stage, and stands threatened by the pervasive, suffocating power of communal formations.

Stephen's aphorism about the quickest way to Tara being via Holyhead, meaning that the best way to understand Ireland is to leave it, depends on the idea of Tara as the symbolic centre of Ireland because of its political significance in the pre-Norman era. However, the geographical centre of the island is the midlands where one of the significant features of the landscape is extensive bog lands. Along with being an economically significant source of fuel, Irish bogs have also been a rich source of archaeological material due to peat's highly preservative quality. Because of this, bogs have also featured as a potent literary symbol of Ireland and Irish history. In this light, Joyce's unusual and repeated choice of this adjective to describe the Clongowes bathwater adds a further symbolic layer to this image. The bathwater stands as a metonym for Clongowes, and this clerical and pedagogical institution in turn symbolises the sexually repressive and psychically unhealthy religious vocation that Stephen repudiates in favour of the possibility of freedom and individual development. But that the bathwater is communal, which is partly why the memory of it induces such visceral disgust in Stephen, would imply that it stands as a symbol not just of immersion in a specific Catholic religious form of life but of all types of commitment to social and communal formations as such. However, describing the water as turfcoloured would appear to narrow down the focus of his repudiation again; is it commitment to collective formations *per se* which he must reject if he is to attain freedom or is it the specific commitment to Ireland? Moreover, the symbolic association of Clongowes and Ireland that is at work here implicates the nation in the same unhealthy, neurosis-inducing repression of the libidinal and creative drives that is attributed in the novel to the Catholic *mentalité* of which the school is the institutional manifestation.

The symbolism of the turfcoloured bathwater, and the strategic position of this symbol in Stephen's *bildung* narrative, therefore casts his flight from Ireland in a different light. Stephen's own interpretation of his departure, as a necessary strategic step in both individual and national development, now exists in conjunction with this other notion of exile as a necessary act of repudiation and escape from the unhealthy location of that which threatens the very possibility of individual development. Rather than being the first step towards a more rigorous intellectual engagement with the country, leaving it becomes indispensable for the healthy formation of the self. In this way, the objective of the narrative, to chart the

formation of an Irish intellectual, is undermined by the structure of the narrative and its formal adherence to the psychoanalytical model of ego formation, with its logic of separation and identification. Beginning with an entwinement of the subjective and historical narratives, encoded in the figures of Parnell and young Stephen as parallel victims of sexual purity discourses, the novel ends with an act of departure and separation that sets these narratives in opposition to each other.

5

Joyce's erotics of exile and alienation initiated a current in Irish fiction that was to intensify in the next few decades. It was to find a particularly strong expression in the work of those writers who produced narratives not of literal departure but of internal exile from the newly-formed independent state. As Ireland went through a crucial stage of formation and development, the country's leading writers emphasised the most negative interpretation of Joyce's ambiguous ending and their work insisted on the insurmountability of the disjunction between self-development and national development.

In this regard, the stories and novels of Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin are exemplary. O'Faoláin's *Bird Alone* (1936) is a *bildungsroman* narrated retrospectively by the hero who is now elderly and looking back on his youth in the late nineteenth century. This retrospective time is alive with that period's historical and political controversies. Young Corney's youth, and much of the novel, is dominated by the Falstaffian figure of 'Grander', Corney's anti-clerical, Fenian and pro-Parnell grandfather. Corney begins his account of his youth with a comic (though also rather anti-Semitic) description of accompanying Grander as he goes around Cork trying to find a burial place for his friend who had been excommunicated for his Fenian political activities.⁸¹ Later Corney is arrested and charged for helping Grander to shelter two dynamiters who are on the run, and the novel features a more rambunctious version of the Joycean Christmas dinner when Grander gets into a fierce row about the Parnell controversy at a family gathering.⁸² By contrast, the novel's present, from which the elderly Corney narrates his story, is remarkably drained of any historical drama and lacks any temporal or

⁸¹ Seán O'Faoláin, *Bird Alone* (Dublin: Millington, 1973 [1936]), 18-27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 99-111.

geographical signposting. This is because Corney is now a misanthropic recluse for whom "Time's wheel is stopped."⁸³ His *bildung* narrative is thus shaped as an explanation as to why his life seized and froze in this way – the crucial and life-defining event being the death in childbirth of his lover, Elsie, who had to conceal her pregnancy because the two young lovers were unmarried. Money, religious conformity, politics – the enmeshed narratives of family and national history – blight their relationship, leave Elsie and the newly-born child dead and Corney in a death-like state of alienation. Elsie's attempted suicide and subsequent death in labour are narrated in vivid detail, while any description of Elsie and Corney's sexual relationship is entirely absent.⁸⁴ Thus, we see the painful, tragic consequences of sexuality corrupted by society, but nothing of the experience of intimacy and pleasure. As Clair Wills has argued, the mid-century liberal realist writers such as O'Faoláin and O'Connor used stories of sexual corruption as a vehicle for their critique of the new state. The implication of such stories is that "Ireland has stifled creativity and intellect to such a degree that only corrupt versions of sexuality thrive."⁸⁵

Among these mid-century Irish writers, Kate O'Brien stands out as one of the more distinctive figures. A generation younger than Joyce but from similar Catholic bourgeois origins, O'Brien re-worked the Joycean *bildungsroman* in the changed historical conditions of the new state. Most obviously, she situated a young woman as the central character of these novels of formation, but she also subjected the *bildungsroman* to other significant formal innovations. The Joycean thematics of exile and alienation, and of the disjunction between self-development and national development, remain, but in O'Brien's work she fuses the libidinal model of sexuality, which so informed the Joycean *bildung* narrative, with the prevailing Catholic model of sexuality to produce a quite different type of literary erotics – different from those of Joyce, but also different from those of her male contemporaries. O'Brien thus produced a new type of *bildung* narrative, and offered to the new state an ideal in which liberal subjective development and liberal national development were deemed compatible.

⁸³ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 254-266.

⁸⁵ Clair Wills, 'Women Writers and the Death of Rural Ireland: Realism and Nostalgia in the 1940s', *Éire-Ireland* 41 (2006), 192-211, 193-194.

Chapter Three

Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent

1

In November 1942 Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices* (1941), which had been banned by the Irish Censorship Board the previous year, was the subject of a debate in the Irish Seanad. The novel had been banned on the basis of one line and this action reignited Irish intellectuals' opposition to the literary censorship. For Sean O'Faoláin, the banning of O'Brien's novel exemplified the fundamental illogicality of how the Irish Censorship Board reached its decisions. In an editorial in *The Bell*, he illustrated this view by contrasting the reviews of the novel which had been published in the Irish daily newspapers, in which the book was praised for the depth and accuracy of its portrayal of Catholic religious life, with the view of the five-person Censorship Board that the novel was "in its general tendency indecent".¹ O'Faoláin argued that this divergence of views proved the degree to which "standards and tastes" were not properly established in Ireland. The underdevelopment of such standards and tastes created a cultural situation where "one man's opinion is as good as another's, and the Censors, certainly, cannot be taken as authorities."² During the same period, the board had also banned Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942), a quasi-anthropological biography of two West Cork 'characters', and a book on birth control, Haley Sutherland's *Laws of Life*, which had been approved for publication by the Catholic hierarchy in England. In the Seanad debate, Sir John Keane, a director of the Bank of Ireland and member of the Senate since the inception of its Free State predecessor, presented the banning of these two books and O'Brien's novel as evidence that the Censorship Board had lost the confidence of the public and should be reconstituted. After a four day debate, in which Keane and Senator William Magennis, professor of metaphysics at UCD and a member of the Censorship Board, were the chief protagonists, Keane's motion of no confidence in the board was defeated. However, the controversy initiated a more sustained and organised

¹ The Editor, 'Standards and Tastes,' *The Bell*, 2,3 (1941), 5-11, 8.

²Ibid.

anti-censorship campaign which resulted in the limited reform of the censorship process in 1946.³

The literary censorship apparatus that was under discussion in the 1942 debate had come into being in 1929, and had been a product of the intensive mobilisation of public morality campaigns in the first decade of the Free State. The parameters of the public morality position were still clearly in evidence in the pro-censorship side of the debate. O'Brien's novel had been deemed obscene because of a "commendably short", in Senator Keane's view, and oblique reference to homosexuality, while the ribald sexual frankness of the eponymous Tailor and his elderly wife, Ansty, had brought the same judgment down on Cross's book.⁴ *Laws of Life* was deemed by the board to have broken the interdiction on the promotion of birth control, which was the other criterion of the censorship legislation. However, the crucial feature of the public morality position is not a puritanical aversion to sexuality as such, but the conceptual and politically charged link which these discourses posit between sexuality and social order. In the Seanad debate on censorship this was most evident in the discussion on Cross's book, in which the main objection of the pro-censorship speakers was less to the depiction of sexual frankness than to the depiction of Ireland; as one senator described it, the book made "an utter travesty of the Irish country."⁵ As Caleb Richardson argues, while the 1942 debate was concerned with literary censorship rather than the political censorship that had been put in place to maintain Ireland's neutrality in the world war, the war nevertheless created a charged context in which this debate took place. The war, and the adoption of neutrality, had brought Ireland and the question of Irish identity into sharp relief, and so what took place in the Seanad was "an argument not just about morality or Catholic power, but also about Irishness itself carried out through the medium of literature."⁶

³ For an account of the Seanad debate in 1942, its historical context and its aftermath see Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Sceptre Books, 1968), 84-95. See also Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper, 2004[1981]), 184-186, and Caleb Richardson, "They are not worthy of themselves": The *Tailor and Ansty* Debates of 1942', *Éire-Ireland*, 42 (2007), 148-172.

⁴ Keane's comments on *The Land of Spices* from his Seanad speech are quoted by Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 90.

⁵ Senator Goulding quoted in Richardson, 160.

⁶ Richardson, 151.

While the pronouncements of some of the pro-censorship speakers in the Seanad debate may certainly have "revealed the attitude of mind – intolerant, paternalistic and blustering – which apparently governed the board's activities", as Terence Brown argues, the controversy also revealed lacunae in the arguments of the anti-censorship intellectuals.⁷ O'Faoláin and other writers, such as C. B. Murphy who also defended O'Brien's novel in *The Bell*, adopted what Michael Adams termed a pragmatic 'liberal-orthodox' rather than a libertarian position on censorship.⁸ They did not object to the idea of people's reading being controlled but to how that control should be exercised and by whom. Given the prevailing climate of political and popular opinion on the matter, this may very well have been a strategic position to adopt, but it does also give the impression of an unseemly and rather Patrician tussle taking place over who has the 'authority', in O'Faoláin's phrase, to decide what is culturally best for the masses. In his June 1941 editorial, O'Faoláin moved from discussing the state of 'standards and tastes' in the country to citing the banning of O'Brien's book as indicative of the more general problems with the operation of the literary censorship, and from that to a reiteration of *The Bell's* mission to promote an improvement in such standards and tastes. By yoking these points together, O'Faoláin appears to be countering the authority of the censorship board with an alternative, equally minoritarian and vanguardist, location of such standard-setting in his own publication. In his article, 'Sex, Censorship and the Church,' which appeared in a subsequent issue of the journal, C. B. Murphy made a similarly vanguardist argument in relation to sexuality. In Murphy's view, the perverse decisions of the censorship board were not the consequence of its members' Catholicism but "the attempt of Victorianism to survive in Ireland long after the English people, including the English Catholics, have very sensibly dropped it."⁹ The only convincing argument for this grim situation that Murphy can find is that "the average Irish mind has not, and perhaps never had, a properly balanced outlook upon sex. Either it runs away from sex, or it runs after it: it never seems able to stand and look at it objectively."¹⁰ Arrayed against this lack of

⁷ Brown, 185.

⁸ Adams, 82.

⁹ C. B. Murphy, 'Sex, Censorship and the Church,' *The Bell*, 2,6 (1941), 65-75, 73. See also C.B. Murphy, 'Censorship: Principle and Practice,' *The Bell*, 3,4 (1942), 293-301.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

objectivity on the part of the “average” Irish mind is the “sane” force of writers like Kate O’Brien. In Murphy’s view, O’Brien writes of life “in a sane and noble tradition of thought and speech” but he worries that “there are yet unfortunately too few like her for us to feel sure it is a native Irish tradition.”¹¹ Thus, whether they are talking about the problem of cultural “standards and tastes” or attitudes to sexuality, O’Faoláin and Murphy look towards the same solution; the enlightened individual or group of individuals, specifically intellectuals and writers, who can show everybody else with “average” tastes and attitudes the way forward.

Interestingly, the other potential source of ‘objectivity’ in relation to Irish sexuality that Murphy identifies is Catholicism itself; or more specifically, ‘Roman’ Catholicism, which is a term Murphy uses to highlight the need for Irish Catholicism to look outward to European Catholic culture and therefore avoid being co-opted by ‘the Victorians’. This contrast between ‘Irish’ and ‘European’ Catholicism was a characteristic trope used by mid-century Irish intellectuals, pre-eminently O’Faoláin, for whom this ideal of a democratic Catholic European worldview offered a sustaining alternative to both Irish Catholic nationalism, in which the individual is suffocated by the imperatives of collective development, and Anglo-American secular liberalism, in which the individual is rootless and alienated without the co-ordinates of a collective, historical tradition. The political and cultural cartography of ‘Ireland’ and ‘Europe’ is a crucial trope in O’Brien’s fiction, though, as we will see, O’Brien worries less about the limiting and disabling effects of ‘Victorianism’ than of Irish nationalism. More significantly, her *bildung* narratives offer complex attempts at symbolically reconciling liberal individualism with an ethical and collective dimension, provided by Catholicism, within this ‘European’ frame. This helps to explain why the banning of her novel more than others of the time relit the censorship debate and why O’Brien’s work took on such totemic value for her fellow Irish intellectuals.

Through aligning O’Brien’s novel and ‘Roman’ Catholicism, Murphy was pursuing a similar strategy to O’Faoláin, and to that adopted by Senator Keane in the Seanad. Highlighting how a book largely in sympathy with the Catholic perspective of the board could be banned for one reference to sexuality pinpointed the absurdity of

¹¹ Ibid, 75.

the Censorship Board's decisions. In this view, the banning of O'Brien's novels, both *The Land of Spices* and *Mary Lavelle* (1936) a few years earlier, was an example of the puritanism and prudery of the censors being provoked by her depiction of illicit sexuality, which led to an irrational misreading of her fiction by those censors. But, arguably, O'Brien's real challenge to the public morality discourses that underpinned the censorship lay less in the depiction of sex in her fiction than in her formal adherence to the notion of sexuality as a moral problem that shapes her *bildung* narratives in both of these novels. As it is in *Portrait*, sexual desire and sexual pleasure are a vital principle of transformation driving the formation of O'Brien's heroines. However, unlike Joyce's explicit repudiation of the Protestant, Catholic and scientific discourses of sexual purity, O'Brien retains some of the distinguishing features of the theological model of sexuality. Her work, for instance, entertains a certain suspicion of the uncontrollable, disruptive and irrational quality of the libido in ways that are very resonant of the theological model and of the public morality discourses. However, the really significant element of the theological framework which O'Brien retains is the notion of sexuality as a moral problem. It is this ethical challenge that the individual's sexuality poses to him or her, rather than any inherent quality of desire, which provides the mechanism for sexuality to become a transformative experience. Her heroines' response to the ethical problem with which sexuality confronts them is the defining experience of their development and the pivotal point in O'Brien's plots. This means that Joyce's and O'Brien's novels also offer different solutions to the conflicted relationship between individual development and historical development, between self and society. In the Joycean *bildungsroman*, the psychoanalytic dynamics of sexual repression served as a complex device for narrating that agon between freedom and commitment which shapes the *bildung* narrative, and which finds an equivocal resolution in Stephen's departure into exile at the end of the novel. For O'Brien, sexual experience is also where the ideal of individual freedom is brought into contact with a collective dimension. But she eschews the concept of repression as a means of giving narrative form to this crux, opting instead for the more traditional device of a moral test. Formally, O'Brien draws on the romance genre to introduce this element of a test into the *bildungsroman* in *Mary Lavelle*. In *The Land of Spaces* she entwines two *bildung* narratives to produce a temporally complex plot in which the test is first 'failed' and

then 'passed'. In this way, O'Brien refuses to cede the ground of sexual morality to the proponents of the public morality discourses, and instead offers an alternative solution to the problematic articulated in those discourses. For the adherents of the public morality model, the control of sexuality had implications for the collective good and the social order, and sexuality must therefore be regulated by collective action since it was far too important to be resolved by individuals alone. O'Brien's work counters by asserting that the collective good can only be guaranteed if it is resolutely founded in the freedom of the individual subject to regulate his or her own moral conduct. Where sexuality for the adherents of public morality is the ground on which the ideal of liberal individualism fails, for O'Brien sexuality is the testing fire in which the ideal of liberal individualism is forged and has its mettle proven.

O'Brien's supporters in *The Bell* and elsewhere in 1942 were right, then, when they identified a significant strand of Catholic thinking in her work, but wrong to assume that this should logically have saved the work from being censored. Her real challenge to the ideological position underpinning the censorship was not contained in the depiction of sexuality in her work, the notorious one line, but in her use of the same conceptual framework as her opponents to produce an alternative narrative of subjectivity, sexuality and society. Of course, her censors, with their focus on the one line, also missed the more serious assault on the template of public morality discourse. Interestingly, this misidentification of the political and historical significance of O'Brien's fiction continues among contemporary critics. Typical of this is the opening assertion by her most recent biographer, Eibhear Walshe, that, "in her fiction, Kate O'Brien was a subversive. She created novels that were deceptively traditional in form but radical in content – each novel a Trojan horse smuggling in forbidden topics, such as adultery, lesbianism and venereal disease through the medium of her civilised, graceful narratives."¹² An even stronger claim for O'Brien's radicalism was made by Ailbhe Smyth when she declared of O'Brien, "to write this, of this, like this – to refuse the solutions of the system – is a radically subversive act which undermines the bases of the

¹² Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 2.

Establishment, its values and practices."¹³ The evidence for these assertions about the political radicalism of O'Brien's work is partly biographical and partly literary. O'Brien was a lesbian, and illicit sexuality is a salient theme in her fiction and led to her novels being banned in Ireland. O'Brien was also unquestionably courageous as a writer; her indictment of Franco and the Falangists in her travel book *Farewell Spain* (1937) meant that she was excluded from that country for over twenty years.¹⁴ But to describe O'Brien's politics as radical or subversive is to seriously under-estimate the strength of her commitment to bourgeois liberalism. What she offered to Irish society in her *bildungsromane* was an ideal of liberal individualism, and a liberal model of historical development as gradual, progressive change, that could be productively fused with a commitment to a Catholic worldview. Clearly, the meaning of this political position alters as historical conditions change. O'Brien was writing at a time when European politics was dominated by totalitarianism and the struggle against it, and her attachment to an essentially nineteenth-century model of ethical liberal individualism was at once nostalgic but also pertinently resonant. But in a late-twentieth and early twenty-first century political conjunction where the neo-liberal ideology of individualism is now dominant, the political significance of O'Brien's model needs to be conceived in a historically considered manner rather than merely applauded and seconded by the critic.

The object of this chapter is neither to dismiss O'Brien as a conservative nor to construct her, in the manner of most recent commentary on her work, as a radical subversive. Instead, the objective here will be to locate O'Brien's narrative aesthetic, and the conception of sexuality that informs that aesthetic, within the broader historical context of the 1930s and 1940s. In many respects, O'Brien's fiction offered a courageous challenge to the prevailing political orthodoxies of Ireland in that period. But assertions such as Gerardine Meaney's, that O'Brien's "marginality is almost excessive," underplay the degree to which her fiction was entirely in step with the gradualist, counter-revolutionary value-system shared by

¹³ Ailbhe Smyth, 'Counterpoints: A Note (or two) on Feminism and Kate O'Brien' in Eibhear Walshe (ed.) *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), 24-35, 33.

¹⁴ Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 72-75.

many liberal and conservative intellectuals at that time.¹⁵ O'Brien, in this view, cannot be conceived of as a twenty-first century secular lesbian feminist *avant la lettre*, nor even as an entirely dissident anti-establishment figure. Instead, she is conceived here as a figure who, both in her commitment to the realist aesthetic and to the ethical agon of public morality discourses, is deeply committed to and enmeshed in the value-systems of her epoch and whose work is best understood in this context. Any comprehensive assessment of her liberal politics needs to register the attractiveness and strengths of her model of self-formation and historical development, while also acknowledging its limitations. Reflecting on the politics of O'Brien's fiction, one is reminded of Terry Eagleton's argument that, "what is wrong with middle-class liberalism is not on the whole its values, most of which are entirely admirable, but the fact that it obtusely refuses to recognise the depth of social transformation which would be necessary for those values to be realised in universal form."¹⁶

2

O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* begins and ends with Mary alone on a train. In the opening pages the young Irish woman is crossing the border into Spain. It is 1922, and she is on her way to take up her post as a governess, or 'Miss', to the three daughters of the Areavaga family.¹⁷ The novel ends with Mary leaving Spain a few months later. Though our last image is of Mary in anguished tears for the recently dead father of her charges, and for her married lover and the friends whom she is leaving behind, we also learn that she now has an entirely new plan for her life. When she arrived there, her year in Spain was intended to be a "tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife."¹⁸ Her intention as she leaves Spain is to return only temporarily to Ireland. She will stay long enough to break off her engagement to be married, collect a small inheritance and then leave again.¹⁹ There are clear echoes

¹⁵ Gerardine Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction,' *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, 2 (1997), 77-92, 81.

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, 'Revisionism Revisited' in *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 320.

¹⁷ Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 1984 [1936]), xix-xxii.

¹⁸ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 344.

of *Portrait* here; a *bildung* narrative that reaches its endpoint in a planned departure into exile from Ireland and where the meaning of *bildung* is defined by this act of departure. Just as Stephen must leave to fully realise his distinctive identity uninhibited by the demands of family, religion and nation, so Mary must leave if she is to attain a measure of autonomy and freedom unshackled by the constraints of family, class and gender – those genteel but firm limitations encoded in the “accepted phases” of being a dutiful middle-class daughter and wife. What happens to Mary during her months in Spain that transforms her projected ‘tiny hiatus’ into this permanent breach between how her life was meant to be and how it will be? To put it simply, falling in love – love that is either unrequited or impossible in some other way. One of the other Irish ‘Misses’, Agatha Conlon, declares that she loves Mary, “the way a man would”.²⁰ Meanwhile, Mary has met Juanito, the married brother of the girls in her charge, and they have fallen for each other.

While *Portrait* and *Mary Lavelle* share a common narrative conclusion and a similar dialectic of exile and identification, the novels reach this shared endpoint through alternative routes. A fusion of the realist *bildungsroman* with the formation narrative projected in psychoanalytical theory gave Joyce's novel its innovative and distinctively modernist shape. O'Brien creates a different type of merger between the *bildungsroman* and an equally venerable literary form, the romance. As Ann Fogarty observes, “by bringing the *bildungsroman*, a literary genre which is a product of high culture, into contact with women's romance, a form of popular fiction, O'Brien creates an idiosyncratic literary space of her own.”²¹ Choosing the

²⁰ *Ibid*, 285.

²¹ Ann Fogarty, “The Business of Attachment’: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O’Brien’ in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People*, 101-119, 104. In her early novels, Fogarty argues, O’Brien places a narrative of romantic desire in conjunction with a narrative of the ‘family romance’ to animate her characters’ struggle against the conventions and expectations of their society. The outcome of this struggle is, at best, mixed. In her earliest novels the characters lose their struggle and submit unhappily to the demands of the family romance. While Mary Lavelle appears to have escaped the confinements of bourgeois marriage, the masochistic quality of her relationship with Juanito means that this comes about only through submitting to “an equally limiting version of the family romance in which power still remains in male hands.” (113). In Fogarty’s view, the immersion of O’Brien’s characters in the suffocating dynamics of the family is a reflection of her historical era since “the familism of her novels acts as a commentary on the closed and hierarchical nature of Irish society in the initial decades of the Free State.” (103). The clash

romance as the generic raw material out of which to produce a distinctively woman-centred narrative of subject formation was a propitious choice on O'Brien's part. At its most practical, this enabled her to insert herself into a tradition of women novelists and to find a place for her novels in the literary marketplace. In her analysis of the romance in twentieth-century French literature, Diana Holmes offers a succinct history of the emergence of the popular romance as a culturally denigrated genre, and one culturally designated as a feminine form of writing, in the late nineteenth century. This history was shaped through the interaction of the ascendant bourgeois ideology of gender – the radical separation posited between a public sphere gendered as male and a 'feminine' domestic sphere – and technological and economic developments in publishing and the literary marketplace.²² The history of the romance genre offered a writer of O'Brien's generation an ambiguous inheritance: the opportunities of an achieved and ready readership for a particular type of women's writing; the constraints imposed by established conventions and the cultural politics of literary distinction.

Though the romance and the *bildungsroman* can be separated into 'high' and 'low' literary modes, they also share significant conceptual ground. There is, for instance, the shared thematic of mobility. One of the distinguishing structural features of the popular romance plot, as identified by Janice Radway, is that it begins with the heroine's removal from a familiar, comfortable realm usually associated with her childhood and family. Deprived of her familiar supports and her connection to a particular place, the heroine's identity is imperilled. As Radway describes it, "the mood of the romance's opening pages is nearly always set by the heroine's emotional isolation and her profound sense of loss."²³ Likewise, Franco

between the narrative of romantic desire and the narrative of the family desire thus amplifies how O'Brien's protagonists "define themselves in opposition to the stifling and conventional Irish society from which they stem." (102). The ambiguous outcomes of this clash means that no matter how much O'Brien's heroines "succeed in dissociating themselves from the story of the Irish family romance they remain lodged within its confines." (116).

²² Diana Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9-14. The complex relationship between the ascendancy of bourgeois gender ideology and the history of the English novel is notably analysed in Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²³ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 135.

Moretti has observed that the connection between youth, travel and *bildung* has been a motif of the European *bildungsroman* since its beginning with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1796); the title of one of the Wilhelm Meister books, *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre* can be translated as either Wilhelm Meister's "apprenticeship" or as his "years of wandering".²⁴ Like Mary on a train in a foreign country where she doesn't speak the language, both the *bildungsroman* and romance plot place their central character on the move, distant from all that is known and safe, and thus all the more susceptible and receptive to potentially transformative experiences.

Holmes also identifies a deeper structural homology between the symbolic function of both genres. Her explanation for the continuing appeal of romance novels to women readers in the contemporary world is that these plots perform "an imaginary replaying of the fundamental drama of female selfhood."²⁵ The romance narrative begins with an act of separation, the heroine cut off from all that is familiar, which creates a loss of identity. But this is followed by encountering, and negotiating a relationship with, a male Other and this interaction leads to the re-establishment of identity. All of this follows the contours of the primary dynamic of separation from the mother followed by identification with the father, as experienced by the girl child in the Freudian theory of her development. However, feminist psychoanalytical theorists, such as Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, have challenged the universalism of the initial Freudian account of this process and pointed out the historical and social determinants of this particular configuration of early development. In particular, they argue that Freud's conception of the mother as an undifferentiated unity that must be left behind for individuation to occur, and of the father as representing escape and adventure, is strongly shaped by the patriarchal culture of his time. Countering Freud, feminist theorists argue that the relationship with the mother is much more interactive and inter-subjective, offering both the security of belonging and the pleasure and urgency of discovering the external, independent reality of another person. In the romance, the necessity of separation is represented through the heroine's initial solitude but the selfhood she achieves is

²⁴ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 20.

²⁵ Holmes, 16.

defined by her relationship with another. The romantic hero functions as both the father whose approval confers this sense of identity on the heroine, and the lost mother returned in a socially acceptable adult form. Viewed thus, the genre, as Holmes argues, "does not merely replay but also contests and reworks the classically gendered version of the Oedipal narrative."²⁶

However, as Holmes acknowledges, reading the popular romance as performing this type of symbolic work for its women readers is fraught with complex problems. Feminist critics of the form, such as Radway and Tania Modleski, have untangled the ideological contradictions encoded in the diverse proliferations of this genre in literature and other media. In the popular romance novel, Modleski argues, the contempt and rage which the heroine invariably expresses in her first encounter with the hero, who is inevitably more socially powerful than her, gives pleasurable expression to the anger and discontent the reader herself feels towards the prevailing gender ideology.²⁷ As the hero gradually falls for the heroine and realises his need for her, the romance enacts a type of 'revenge fantasy' for women readers as this arrogant and powerful embodiment of patriarchal authority submits to the power of a woman. But since the hero is also an object of attraction, for the reader as well as for the heroine, the reader inevitably finds his growing attraction to the heroine pleasurable and satisfying – even though the conversion of their initial hostility into attraction involves the heroine's anger being re-interpreted by the hero as 'funny' and attractive, a process in which the heroine becomes complicit. This dissipation of the heroine's anger by the structural trajectory of the plot towards its resolution is reinforced by the necessary revelation that the hero's arrogant and contemptuous exterior actually masks a kinder, loving and more affectionate 'real' self. As Janice Radway suggests, "the romance expresses women's dissatisfaction with the current asymmetry in male-female relationships but, at the same time, by virtue of the early presentation of the hero, represents the necessary and desired transformation as an already accomplished fact."²⁸ In sum, the romance animates and gives expression to its women readers'

²⁶ Ibid, 19.

²⁷ Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Conn.; Archon Books, 1982), 35-58.

²⁸ Radway, 129.

discontented awareness of their subordination while simultaneously working to 'inoculate' them, in Modleski's phrase, against that awareness.²⁹

Along with this complex mediation of its women readers' relationship to gender ideology, the popular romance also rehearses one of the crucial symbolic operations of the *bildungsroman*. Both literary forms give imaginative shape to the problematic relationship between the individual and modern society. The crux of the romance plot is the question of whether and how the lovers can overcome the obstacles to their union. In this view a happy or tragic ending are equally pleasurable for the reader and of equal import to the plot. The actual *dénouement* of each story, a joyful union if the obstacles are overcome or separation and loss if they are not, is less significant than these plot-defining obstacles. It is the clash between the desires of the individual protagonists and the demands of social regulation that drives the romance plot. As Holmes argues, "romance provides a narrative form in which to address the difficult reconciliation of personal desire with social imperatives, and the particular form that this takes for women."³⁰

Thus, the formal aesthetics of modern popular romance allowed O'Brien to situate her narratives of self-formation in relation to the history and politics of gender, and to foreground the specific dimensions of a woman's narrative of development. At the same time, O'Brien was also drawing on an older, pre-modern form of the romance. One of O'Brien's earliest critics, Vivian Mercier, argues that her scrupulous elaboration of "the conflict between love and Christian duty" made O'Brien "in our day, the ablest practitioner of Romance in the English language."³¹ Mercier drew on Denis de Rougemont's 1939 work *L'Amour et L'Occident (Love in the Western World)* to locate O'Brien's fiction in the long history of the romance form, with its medieval origins in the archetypal *Tristan and Isolde*. One of the salient structural features of this romance tradition is the moral test which the hero or heroine must undergo. Using this formal device allowed O'Brien to introduce an

²⁹ Modleski, 42. Modleski does reiterate that "even though the novels can be said to intensify female tensions and conflicts, on balance the contradictions in women's lives are more responsible for the existence of Harlequins than the Harlequins are for the contradictions." (57).

³⁰ Holmes, 16.

³¹ Vivian Mercier, 'Kate O'Brien,' *Irish Writing*, 1(1946), 86-100, 87.

ethical and spiritual dimension to the formation narrative, and to the problematic relationship between individual desire and social conformity that is the crux of the secular *bildungsroman* and popular romance. In O'Brien's novels this ethical dimension is invariably framed by Catholicism.

If we take this notion of a moral test as the principle structuring O'Brien's plots, we can identify three such tests in *Mary Lavelle*. One of Mary's tests is her response to being loved by Agatha Conlon. Agatha is one of the older Irish 'Misses', and has been living in Spain for twenty years. As Emma Donaghue and Katherine O'Donnell have shown, O'Brien drew on the expanding range of historically-available lesbian imagery when shaping her portrayal of Agatha.³² Agatha's 'queerness' in the eyes of the other 'Misses', her mannishness and her ascetic, nun-like quality would have registered with a 1930s readership conversant with the popular versions of sexology, and more especially with the lesbian figure that was becoming increasingly common in literature. The best-known contemporaneous example of the literary lesbian was Stephen Gordon, the self-styled 'invert' heroine of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's book had been tried for indecency in England on its publication in 1928 and subsequently banned, which had brought the novel to popular notice.³³ Agatha's expressions of guilt about her sexual feelings should also confirm her status as an example of the anguished and tortured literary lesbian. However, Agatha describes her own guilt with a cool detachment that places it at a distance from her. Having declared that she likes Mary, "the way a man would ...I can never see you without – without wanting to touch you," she observes that "it's a sin to feel like that."³⁴ She goes on to explain that "lately I've been told explicitly about it in confession. It's a very ancient and terrible vice." That she laughs "softly" while recounting this judgement emphasises her awareness of the ironic juxtaposition between the delicate, humane scale of

³² Emma Donaghue, "Out of Order": Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions' in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People*, 36-58, 41-47. Katherine O'Donnell, "But Greek...usually knows Greek": Recognising Queer Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*, in Patricia Boyle-Haberstroh and Christine St Peter (eds.) *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), 74-91,84-85.

³³ On the historical significance of *The Well of Loneliness* trial in the evolution of twentieth-century lesbian cultural identity see Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1-30.

³⁴ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 285.

her feelings for Mary and the ponderous melodrama of this ascription. Agatha, in other words, draws a subtle distinction between her desires as such and the theological nomination of them as sinful. She acquiesces to this theological model for framing her feelings while simultaneously holding fast to those feelings, and actively keeping them aflame. When Mary is about to leave for Ireland, Agatha insists that Mary send her back a photograph of herself – a poignantly stoic gesture yet hardly one conducive to her forgetting or abjuring her desires.³⁵

Crucially, the import of Agatha's desire for her within Mary's *bildung* narrative is not whether Mary reciprocates or does not reciprocate those desires, but her realisation of the essential similarity between Agatha's position and that of herself and Juanito. Their love is impossible because of his marriage, and Agatha's because it is unrequited. Mary realises this as she and Agatha sit together outside a church, just after Agatha has declared her feelings. Watching "the baize door swing and swing again in the porch of San Geronimo," Mary thinks of the people "going in incessantly to pray, as Agatha did so often, as she did, as Juanito too, perhaps. Seeking strength against the perversions of their hearts and escape from fantastic longings."³⁶ As the rhythm of O'Brien's sentence establishes an equivalence between the three characters, the meaning of their common 'perversion' is clearly no longer defined by the logic of heterosexual and homosexual, or natural and unnatural. Instead their desires are perverse in their waywardness, their divergence from and incompatibility with reality. It is this perversity which also makes their longings 'fantastic', quixotic and utopian. As Fredric Jameson observes, it is precisely romance's intimation of the fantastical, "the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic and Utopian transformations of a real now unshakeably set in place" that distinguishes this form.³⁷

To describe Agatha's, Mary's and Juanito's desires as perverse because they are in conflict with reality is, of course, to invoke the Freudian agon of libido and reality principle. Strikingly, O'Brien elects not to employ this *episteme*. She draws instead

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1981]), 91.

on a much older theological conception of perversity, not as a psychological or physiological category but as an ethical orientation. Illicit sexual desire is perverse and potentially utopian because it is conceptualised within a moral paradigm which such desire disrupts and transcends. But while conceptualising sexual desire in this way involves imagining the subversion of this moral framework, hence the utopian potential, such a conceptualisation simultaneously affirms or validates that framework. In *Mary Lavelle* this moral paradigm is specifically denominated as Catholic. Hence, the identification of Mary, Agatha and Juanito is struck through Mary's image of each of them praying. Mary's perception of their "tangled longings" as a moral problem is framed by her Catholic religion, just as her view of the candlelit interior of the church is framed by the doorway. But while a frame shapes perspective it doesn't entirely determine the meaning of that which it holds. Agatha's, Mary's and Juanito's longings may be perverse because they are disruptive, disorderly and will cause pain to each of the three as well as to others. But the perversity of their desires is not limited or contained by this negative quality; the perversity may simultaneously contain some positive, "fantastical" as Mary perceives it, potential

Since Agatha's characterisation involves a complex oscillation between the categories of 'type' and 'character,' she stands as a figure for this doubleness. Her isolation, irascible misanthropy and "queerness" stem from her figuration as an instance of the literary lesbian 'type'. But it is also her difference from the other 'Misses' that makes her a distinctive character. In comparison with these deracinated expatriates living in a country they hate and refuse to engage with, Agatha has learned the language, knows Spanish history and is passionate about the landscape and, especially, the bullfight. Thus, while Agatha's declaration of love for her produces an opportunity for Mary to develop morally, Agatha also provides Mary with an example of a cultured and sturdy individualism. Hence Mary too demonstrates an idiosyncratic curiosity about Spain, its language and culture and is open to being transformed by her experience of the country. But perhaps the most striking similarity between the two women is their complex negotiation of sexual morality. In her relationship with Juanito, Mary performs a sort of mental acrobatics through which her inherited moral framework gets bracketed and placed to one side. As Juanito is making love to her, she "thought of school and home, of

John, of God's law and of sin, and did not let herself discard such thoughts. They existed, as real and true as ever, with all their traditional claims on her – but this one claim was his, and she would answer it, taking the consequences.”³⁸ Like Agatha, Mary wilfully adheres to a religious notion of morality that situates sexual transgression as socially disruptive, while simultaneously recognising the inadequacy of that framework. For O'Brien, illicit sexual desire is perverse because it overflows the boundaries imposed by that framework and casts those caught up in it out into an unchartered moral territory where they must ascertain their coordinates using their own conscience.

Feminist critics have been troubled by Mary's characterisation of her decision as a response to Juanito's 'claim' rather than the pursuit of her own desires and pleasure. If Mary, rather than Juanito, making the decision to consummate their relationship is to be read as a mark of her developing autonomy, what is the reader to make of this idea of her fulfilling a duty owed to a man? This troubling ambiguity is further exacerbated by O'Brien's description of Mary during sex, “flung back against the moss ...her set teeth and quivering nostrils, beating eyelids, flowing, flowing tears.”³⁹ As Patricia Coughlan argues, this description “dwells in an undeniably sado-masochistic way on images of Mary's specifically feminine vulnerability and pain as themselves erotic and constitutive of Juanito's pleasure.”⁴⁰ As a result, O'Brien, Coughlan contends, “gives far more imaginative energy to the relinquishing of agency to which Mary is moved by her awakened passion for Juanito, than to the representation of Mary's making of her own life that is the larger concern of the novel.” In Coughlan's view, we can see two kinds of liberationist imperatives colliding in this episode of the novel. One is what she terms, “the recognition, after Freud, Havelock Ellis and D. H. Lawrence, of the central importance of sexuality in personality and the determination to speak it, not to let it go unrepresented in novelistic discourse.” The other is a narrative of

³⁸ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 308.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Patricia Coughlan, 'Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role' in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People*, 59-84, 68. Gerardine Meaney disputes this reading, arguing that “the text's emphasis on the wilful nature of Mary's passion and her insistence on taking the sexual initiative makes this impossible to characterise as masochistic surrender.” Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression,' 90.

specifically female self-development, which, as Coughlan points out, "comes off worse than the other."⁴¹

However, it is not entirely obvious that O'Brien is as wholly invested in the post-Freudian model of sexuality, subjectivity and freedom as Coughlan makes out. Clearly, sexuality in her fiction is conceptualised as libidinal energy rather than reproductive instinct. And, as with Joyce, while sexuality may no longer be considered as primarily reproductive it is still expected to be productive in the sense that the experience of sexual desire and sexual pleasure is expected to generate development and transformation in the individual subject. However, in O'Brien's fiction this experience of transformation through sexual pleasure is not mapped according to the psychoanalytical model of an agon between desire and repression but according to a theological model of an ethical challenge. It is not so much that O'Brien denies or repudiates Freud's concept of libidinal sexuality, as that she is less convinced than her male literary contemporaries of the liberationist implications of this concept for the individual.

Most obviously, O'Brien uses a pre-Freudian grammar to give imaginative shape to this experience of transformation and she draws this grammar from the realms of classicism, aesthetics and Catholicism. Thus, classical antiquity, aesthetics and the erotic are entwined when Juanito compares Mary's naked beauty to Greek statuary: "Aphrodite!" he said, when she gleamed white and shivered in the moonlight."⁴² Soon the narrator is describing Mary as "no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian."⁴³ Here the sexual masochism of Mary's physical pain at Juanito's hands is overlaid with a notion of violence and pain as purposeful and transformative derived from the Christian notion of martyrdom. As they reach the climax of their lovemaking, the two lovers are described as "emotionally welded, not by their errant senses which might or might not play in unison, but by a brilliant light of sympathy which seemed to arise from sensuality and to descend from elsewhere to assist and glorify it."⁴⁴ Notably, O'Brien characterises physical pleasure, the "errant senses", as an unreliable

⁴¹ Ibid, 70.

⁴² O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 308.

⁴³ Ibid, 309.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 309-310.

means of achieving intimacy, and this suspicion of sexual pleasure is manifest throughout this episode of the novel. As he looks at Mary in pain while they make love, Juanito thinks “how grotesquely we are made...how terrible and insane are our delights and urgencies.”⁴⁵ Desire and the pursuit of sexual pleasure are irrational and disruptive. Rather than leading us to the fullest expression of our individual personality, as sexuality is imagined to do in Lawrentian literary erotics, O’Brien suggests that sexuality threatens to rob us of our humanity and transform us into monstrous, driven monads.

To redeem the errant and always potentially destructive dimensions of sexual experience, it has to be converted into a secular form of religious transcendence. Hence the romantic excess of a moment of orgasm is written as something analogous to a Christian sacrament when a “brilliant light of sympathy” is felt to “descend” from “elsewhere”, just as some Christians believe the body of Jesus descends onto bread and wine during the Eucharistic service and the Holy Spirit descends onto the married couple during the Christian wedding ceremony. In other words, the merely physical experience of pleasure is invested with a metaphysical and spiritual import. Crucially, the effect of this is to redirect one from the monadic, libidinal pursuit of pleasure towards the attainment of relational connection and solidarity – the achievement of “sympathy” with another human being. This, for O’Brien, is the decisive question to demand of sexual experience – to what degree does this experience further our ethical development? Emma Donaghue has observed that O’Brien’s characters can be divided into those, “who take moral responsibility and step back from sin and ...those who are equally morally responsible and walk into sin from motives of love.”⁴⁶ She goes on to note that there is no great difference between these two types of characters. The point is not whether they commit the sin or not “but the responsibility and integrity they show in the choice.” In this regard Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* (1934) and Mary may be thought of as mirror images. By refusing to elope with her sister’s husband, with whom she is in love, Agnes makes a decision that is ultimately tragic but for reasons that are scrupulously morally commendable – she does not want to cause pain to her sister. Our sense of her at the novel’s end is that she is deeply unhappy

⁴⁵ Ibid, 309.

⁴⁶ Donaghue, 37.

but morally strengthened.⁴⁷ Conversely, by choosing to make love to the married Juanito, Mary takes an important step on her path to achieving the eventual autonomy that is the telos of the novel. There is no question of reading Agnes's choice as an effect of repression, and of Mary's choice as a victory over such repression. Moreover, Mary's decision to embrace sexual desire does not mean she rejects her inherited moral framework, any more than Agnes's refusal of such desire involves an endorsement of that framework. Rather that system is placed to one side as insufficient to the ethical task at hand.

With both Agatha and Juanito then, the content of Mary's choice when confronted with sexual desire is of less significance than how she makes the choice. She cannot reciprocate Agatha's desire for her, but Agatha's declaration of love elicits from Mary solidarity, an empathetic insight into the perverse and utopian quality of desire. With Juanito, her own desires meet with his, but her decision to consummate their relationship is not cast as the impetuous pursuit of sexual pleasure. It is, instead, a carefully considered decision to take a "risk", as Mary describes it.⁴⁸ She is consciously placing herself outside the bounds of what she knows to be the parameters of her inherited morality, parameters that she still believes in even as she transgresses them, because of what she hopes such an act of estrangement will achieve – namely, that experience of "sympathy" with another person and the development of her own moral capacity. As she explains her decision to Juanito, she places it within the larger trajectory of the changes she has experienced in herself during her time in Spain. "It's been fantastic, my time in Spain," she tells him, "it's been a mad, impossible thing dropped into my ordinary life. Tomorrow it will be over, and although it has changed all my plans, life will have to be ordinary again, in some way that I know nothing about yet. So before it's over – finish it for me, Juanito."⁴⁹ Mary's final demand of Juanito is ambiguous. Does "finish" mean bring to a conclusion or bring to completion? Will making love to Juanito, submitting to his "claim", reinsert Mary into patriarchal subordination and negate the small measure of autonomy she has achieved in the last few months? Or will this act of transgression round off and make complete Mary's

⁴⁷ Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (Dublin: Arlen House/The Women's Press, 1980 [1934]), 258-273.

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 307.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 305-306.

phase of accelerated self-growth? As O'Brien's description of their actual love-making demonstrates, and as Coughlan has argued, this ambiguity is never resolved.

Interestingly, Mary describes her time in Spain in similar terms to her earlier description of the "perversions of the heart"; it has been "fantastic" and a "mad impossible thing." The equivalence between Mary's experience of Spain and her experience of sexual desire is reiterated throughout the ensuing episode of her love-making with Juanito. This connection is mainly created through the echoes and parallels with the earlier bullfight episode, since the bullfight stands as synecdoche for Spain – or more accurately 'Spain', the constellation of ideas and values which O'Brien affixes to that word, as O'Faoláin, in a similar vein, was to do with 'Italy'. The bullfight gets recalled explicitly by the narrator during the love-making episode. But it is most vividly present metaphorically, and in a particularly troubling form, when the description of Mary's physical pain invokes the earlier bloody image of the violent death of the bull. The episodes are further linked through O'Brien's use of the same combination of aesthetics, classicism and eroticism in each. The bullfight is, in O'Brien's version, an aesthetic ritual of cathartic violence that gives expression to the human encounter with mortality. She describes a man slowly killing a bull as an elaborate and darkly sensuous dance, and unmistakably erotic; "the matador drew his enemy to his breast, and past it, on the gentle lure; brought him back along his thigh as if for sheer love; let him go and drew him home again ...the sword sank where the stud ribbons fluttered, in to the hilt, as bravely driven as if the dealer believed himself to have been dipped in Achilles' river."⁵⁰

For Mary, the bullfight is, "more full of news of life's possible pain and senselessness and quixotry and barbarism and glory than anything ever before encountered by this girl...more symbolic, more dramatic, a more personal and searching arrow to the heart than she had ever dreamt of."⁵¹ O'Brien's resort to these rather baroque effusions indicates her attempt to convey a sense of the bullfight as a metaphysical and transcendent experience for Mary. More concretely,

⁵⁰ Ibid, 114.

⁵¹ Ibid, 116-117.

there is much emphasis in this section of the novel on how Mary is “growing up fast in this foreign soil” and, particularly, how she is “beginning to put two and two together with more method and detachment than John, for instance, might have thought quite necessary.”⁵² By the end of the chapter she is in tears due to her growing awareness of the gulf that is opening up between herself and her fiancé back in Ireland. Clearly, this growing estrangement from John helps to push forward the romance plot as it prepares the ground for Mary’s first meeting with Juanito, while also contributing to the plot of woman-centred *bildung* since it emphasises the degree to which Mary’s attainment of autonomy can only take place away from the “dominating authority” of John.⁵³ O’Brien also uses the bullfight episode to elaborate her concept of *bildung* as a narrative of ethical development. As she enters the bullring before the fight, Mary “had never felt so much ashamed of herself as she was feeling now.”⁵⁴ When they are leaving afterwards, Agatha comments that she wonders why “the Church doesn’t make it a sin to go to the bullfight.” Mary replies that, “I think it is a sin.”⁵⁵ The references to “shame” and “sin” indicate that similarity between the bullfight and illicit sexual desire that O’Brien will seek to create in the rest of the novel. Mary’s nomination of the bullfight as sinful, although it is not technically so, is a rhetorical equivalent to her original decision to go to the bullfight. It is an assertion that the ultimate arbiter of her moral actions, the authority to nominate what is moral or not, must be Mary herself. It is only through placing herself directly in the midst of potentially sinful or immoral experience that she can reach such decisions. As in her encounters with Agatha and Juanito, the content of Mary’s experiences – whether of unrequited or fulfilled sexual desire, or her intense if rather opaque emotional and intellectual response to the bullfight – is less crucial to her development than the moral decisions that she makes around those experiences.

The bullfight is therefore one of the three moral tests that structure Mary’s *bildung* narrative, and is also chronologically the first and sets the pattern for those two erotic tests that are the more familiar and conventional material of the romance. The narrative significance ascribed to the bullfight, combined with its uniquely

⁵² Ibid, 105-106.

⁵³ Ibid, 106.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 102.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 119.

Hispanic cultural location, inevitably draws our attention to O'Brien's setting of her novel. As her friend and early critic, Lorna Reynolds, points out, O'Brien "never uses a foreign setting for mere decoration or trimming: it always plays an organic part in the total design."⁵⁶ The Spanish setting of *Mary Lavelle* has its origins in biography, and in Irish social history. O'Brien had made a similar journey to Mary's when she worked as a 'Miss' and an English literature tutor to the son and daughter of a wealthy family near the Basque city of Bilbao in 1922 and 1923.⁵⁷ As the 'Prologue' to the novel suggests, it was a journey made by many young Irish Catholic women of her class and generation.⁵⁸ Perhaps because of this encounter with the country in her formative years, Spain is the country outside of Ireland to which O'Brien returned most often in her writing. Along with the two novels, *Mary Lavelle* and *That Lady* (1946), which are set there, she also wrote two non-fiction books on Spanish subjects, her biography of the sixteenth-century mystic, *Saint Teresa of Avilla* (1951), and her travelogue *Farewell Spain* (1937).

The choice of Spain as the setting for a novel by an Irish writer in 1936 could not be a politically neutral or innocent decision. O'Brien was to respond more directly to the Spanish Civil War in the travelogue the following year. That book is an entertaining and idiosyncratic account of O'Brien's travels in Spain in the 1930s, which combines architectural and political history with art criticism and personal reminiscences (including of her time as a governess and of attending the bullfight). But there is also a pervasive nostalgia that such travel is no longer possible and bitter sorrow at what Spain and its people are going through. O'Brien expresses her dismay at the attack on the democratically elected Republican government and her fierce opposition to Franco and the Falangists. The book ends with a pungent denunciation of Fascism and a striking defence of democracy. O'Brien distinguishes a war waged "on the clear insistence that government of the people

⁵⁶ Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1987), 112.

⁵⁷ Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 29.

⁵⁸ The cookery writer and novelist Maura Laverty also went to work in Spain as a governess and as a journalist later in the 1920s, and she also wrote a novel, *No More Than Human* (1944), based on those experiences. See Chapter Five. In her work on the Irish magazine *Women's Life* in the 1930s and 1940s, Caitriona Clear also notes a fiction serial about an Irish girl working in Spain. The serial, 'Girl on Her Own' by Deirdre O'Brien, appeared in the magazine during 1938. Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 85.

by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth” from “a war such as General Franco’s, openly aimed at the murder of every democratic principle, and for the setting up of his little self as yet another Mussolini – such a war strikes not merely for the death of Spain, but at every decent dream or effort for humanity everywhere.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, O’Brien repeatedly emphasises that she is not a Communist but a pacifist opposed to all war and thus draws back from articulating any direct commitment to the beleaguered Spanish Left. She also begins the book expressing her regret for, what she terms, “two thousand years of individualism”. In her view, both Right and Left in the 1930s were in the process of bringing into creation a routinised, modern world and the best that can be hoped for after the current crisis in Europe was that the future would be “uniform and monotonous. That is what the maddened world must now seek, the justice of decent uniformity”.⁶⁰ While accepting that this future is “elementarily necessary,” she confesses to having no “personal desire to see it”. O’Brien’s reference to “two thousand years” forges an interesting alignment between Christianity and liberal individualism, which eschews the usual historical narrative in which individualism is the offspring of capitalist modernity. Moreover, her sense of the individual as being crippled rather than empowered by the forces of modernity – whether of the right or the left, capitalism or communism – was an instinct shared by those other Irish intellectuals, such as O’Faoláin, who were striving after an ideal of liberal Catholicism, while a version of it also features in some strands of European Marxism, notably the Frankfurt School.

For O’Brien, then, the crucial issue at stake in the Spanish war appears to be this larger civilisational struggle between ‘individualism’ and modern political systems of whatever hue. In the novel, Mary travels into this symbolic ‘Spain’ as much as the geographical and national entity. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that finding a way of making her living is not Mary’s primary objective in going to Spain to be a governess. The narrator describes her choice of job as an “expedient” and this choice, “however enforced-seeming, reveals her as an individualist ...capable of dream and unfit to march in the column of female breadwinners, or indeed in any column at all. She becomes a miss because not her wits but her intuitional

⁵⁹ Kate O’Brien, *Farewell Spain* (London: Virago, 1985 [1937]), 221.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

antennae tell her that it is an occupation which will let her personality be."⁶¹ The distinct note of social disdain and *hauteur* in the reference to the "column of female breadwinners" indicates one of the significant defects of O'Brien's individualist ideal. While a highly developed capacity for ethical conduct and the attainment of "sympathy" with others is a defining feature of this ideal, the practice of political or social solidarity is considered entirely inimical to it. In the travelogue, O'Brien interprets the Spanish civil war as symptomatic of this conflict. In the novel, Spain, in contrast to Ireland where political and familial commitments make such development impossible, is symbolically mapped as the space where a narrative of ethical individual development can unfold unhampered by political commitments. *Mary Lavelle* maps a geo-moral division between those spaces that are fertile for *bildung*, and those that are not – and the newly-independent Irish state comes out the worse in this mapping process. Just as publishing a novel set in Spain in 1936 was politically charged, beginning a novel with an Irish woman leaving the country in 1922 was also symbolically laden. O'Brien's historical setting suggests that it is not only the confines of family and gender ideology from which Mary must escape to develop into an autonomous moral agent. Like Stephen Dedalus, she must also escape the political demands of nation-building to guarantee her own *bildung*.

As in *Portrait*, national development and self-development are once again set at odds. However, in Joyce's novel exile remains an abstract, unrealised goal – we witness Stephen's imminent departure for Paris at the end of *Portrait* and his recent return at the beginning of *Ulysses*, but we never see him there. By contrast, O'Brien's novel begins and ends with Mary on the Spanish border; our only glimpse of her life in Ireland comes in the brief retrospective chapter at the beginning of the novel. The absorption of other modes of writing, notably the travelogue, into the aesthetics of O'Brien's novel goes some way towards explaining this difference. O'Brien lyrically conjures the peculiarity and strangeness of this foreign land for her Anglophone readers and she elaborates most fully the effect which this landscape and culture has on the estranged Northerner. In this respect, O'Brien was writing within a long tradition of Mediterranean Orientalism in Northern European culture: from the Italian travel writings of Winkelmann and Goethe in the eighteenth century through to the various instances of this current in

⁶¹ O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, xxi.

fiction, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), in which Dorothea has a crucial moment of self-awareness during her honeymoon in Rome, Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902), Forster's *A Room With a View* (1908) and Mann's *Death in Venice* (1913).⁶² O'Brien's fascinated description of the bullfight, and its pivotal role in the plot, shifts this Orientalist impulse towards Iberian culture but, more significantly, connects O'Brien to her closer contemporaries, notably Hemingway and Lawrence, whose novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) opens with an extended description of a Mexican bullfight.⁶³

But the contrasting representations of exile in Joyce's and O'Brien's novels can also be traced to historically different responses to Irish nationalism. While Ireland places boundaries on Stephen's *bildung* narrative, and his departure into exile is the only solution to the impasse, the country is also the place where he reaches this critical point in his formation. Moreover, a complex dynamic whereby he identifies himself both with and against the nation propels his formation up to this point of departure – a departure which, Stephen stresses, is not a rejection of the goal of collective liberation but a necessary step towards a deeper engagement with that project. In *Mary Lavelle* Spain is more 'real' than Ireland, since it is the elaborately realised ground on which Mary's accelerated narrative of formation takes shape. But Spain is also more symbolically fertile than Ireland. 'Spain' comes to stand in the novel as a geo-political representation of that synthesis of self-fulfilment and ethics, autonomy and sympathy, liberal individualism and Catholicism which forms the goal of Mary's *bildung* narrative. After the early retrospective chapter, which explains why Mary felt compelled to escape, even temporarily, from the genteel but oppressive *ennui* of her life there, the only presence which Ireland has in the narrative is in the letters from her fiancé, John. The nation, in short, becomes synonymous with the injunctions of patriarchy. Since exile is the 'real' and Ireland the abstract 'other', the novel also suggests that no negotiation is possible between the individual and the nation. The young subject's distance and alienation from the collective is more definite and has none of the productive grit which such alienation has in *Portrait*. For Gerardine Meaney, gender

⁶² On the cultural politics of 'improvement' and 'leisure' in late-nineteenth-century tourism to Southern Europe, see John Preamble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

⁶³ D.H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (London: Wordsworth, 1995[1926]), 1-17.

is the principle source of this difference, since O'Brien's novel asserts that "feminine sexuality is political, is indeed the key to a different politics and a different history." Thus, in Meaney's view, "Mary's 'adultery' is a rejection of an Ireland which has not fulfilled the promise of independence."⁶⁴ However, this also reminds us that the different valuation of the relationship between individual development and national development in Joyce and O'Brien is also generational. As the controversy about the banning of her novels illustrates, O'Brien was a prominent figure among those Irish intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s who were profoundly disillusioned with the degraded reality of the post-independence state. Joyce, by contrast, was writing his *bildungsroman* during one of the most fertile and formative decades for Irish cultural nationalism, when the nation was not a reality but in a ferment of creation. Significantly, O'Brien returned imaginatively to that same decade in *The Land of Spices*, and in that novel it becomes apparent that her critique of Irish nationalism runs deeper than disillusionment with the post-independence failure to live up to its promises.

3

In *The Land of Spices* O'Brien's major formal innovation was to construct a double narrative of *bildung* that is dependent on a complex temporal plotting. The novel's present is between 1904 and 1914, the years which the younger of the two main protagonists, Anna Murphy, spends as a schoolgirl at the expensive Irish convent boarding school in which the novel is set. The novel follows Anna from her arrival at the convent aged only six through to the point when she is about to leave for university. The narrative is composed of a number of crucial experiences, 'Some Lessons' as the title of one of the books' chapters has it, which Anna undergoes. These include: being unfairly punished at the hands of one of the senior nuns, Mother Mary Andrew; witnessing one of her schoolfellows humiliated because of her social background; watching her parent's deeply unhappy marriage disintegrate; and losing her beloved younger brother, Charlie, in a drowning accident.

⁶⁴Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression,' 90.

Anna learns some of her most important lessons from the other chief protagonist of the novel, Helen Archer, the Reverend Mother of the convent. The Reverend Mother makes a strategic intervention that is crucial to helping Anna overcome her family's opposition to her attending university, and her "slow, unhurrying help about Charlie" is the best support which the grieving Anna receives.⁶⁵ Along with this practical and emotional help, we can also see the Reverend Mother offering Anna a model of a strong, independent woman exercising authority, and also a model of a just, fair-minded liberalism which stands in stark contrast to the narrow-minded vindictiveness of Mother Mary Andrew – the latter is also a passionate advocate of Irish cultural nationalism. Woven through the narrative of Anna's *bildung* are the Reverend Mother's ongoing clashes in the novel's present with those zealous Irish nationalists like Mary Andrew, and also incidents from Helen's earlier life. These latter incidents constitute a significant part of the plot and are framed as Helen's memories, mainly of her girlhood in Brussels in the 1870s and 1880s. These memories are particularly focused on her relationship with her father, the most significant figure in her early emotional and intellectual formation. From Helen's memories we learn that in the 1860s Henry Archer had suddenly left England, and abandoned his promising academic career, to move to the Continent with his wife and baby daughter. In the course of the novel it becomes clear that a scandal due to his sexual relationship with another man may have led to this move. In one of the novel's pivotal episodes, her father's sexuality inadvertently alters the shape of Helen's life. In reaction to accidentally seeing her father "in the embrace of love" with another man, the eighteen-year-old Helen had "turned her back upon herself, upon talents, dreams, emotions – and undertaken the impersonal and active service of God."⁶⁶

To use the terms developed in Russian Formalism, we can say that Anna's narrative of *bildung* is plotted consistently with the *fabula* of the narrative, the order in which events unfold in the novel, while Helen's *bildung* narrative is revealed within the *sujzet*, the order of events presented in the narrative discourse.⁶⁷ So, for instance, Helen's memories of her early years as a nun in her twenties appear at

⁶⁵ Kate O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London: Cedric Chivers, 1970 [1941]), 266.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁷ These terms are drawn from Peter Brook, *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 12

an earlier point in the novel than the memories of her childhood, or her memories of the crucial incident with her father. Plotting the novel in this way introduces a strong degree of tension into the narrative as there are various references to some trauma that lies behind Helen's decision to become a nun, but the narrative itself is well advanced before that traumatic formative episode is disclosed to the reader. We also get an interesting contrast between two types of *bildung* narrative. In Anna's case we see the young protagonist undergoing her formative experiences blindly, as it were, and groping emotionally and intellectually to discern the meaning of events as they unfold. With Helen, we see the protagonist's older self retrospectively organising her formative experiences into a narrative, while observing and commenting on her younger self. The juxtaposition of the younger woman struggling towards her future and towards maturity with the older woman reflecting maturely on her past allows O'Brien to convey a temporally and emotionally complex sense of the process of female self-definition. Therefore, a significant effect of this temporal plotting is the transmission of educative experiences across generations, as Helen passes on to Anna the lessons she has learned from her relationship with Henry.

On one level, this transmission of experience is pedagogical. Anna first comes to Reverend Mother's notice when the newly-arrived six year old recites a poem by Henry Vaughan at a school gathering. Since Henry Archer was a scholar of seventeenth-century English poetry, hearing the poem evokes memories of her relationship with him for Helen. Anna, we are told, "quickened something of her father" in Helen, "something erratic, speculative and quick on the wing."⁶⁸ Under Reverend Mother's tutelage, little Anna recites a poem for the school every other Sunday night during her first year. In this pedagogical relationship Helen recreates one of Henry's salient virtues, since he had taught her with "an exacting vigour, method and love which she received from no other teacher...he poured imaginative knowledge all about her; he gave her an individualistic, sunny access into life, and so, as she thought, into herself."⁶⁹ From her father's lessons on literature and history, Helen had also imbibed Henry's values, and especially his "obsession" with "the beauty of personal freedom, and the human obligation of

⁶⁸ O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 226.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 142.

non-interference."⁷⁰ Helen's encounter with Anna not only reconnects her with a nurturing parent, it also forces her to reconsider her future. On the day when Helen first meets Anna, she had decided to resign her post as Reverend Mother. Weary of her position as the English-born head of an Irish convent, Helen is depressed by what she sees as the inward-looking parochialism of the narrow cultural nationalism displayed by those around her and feels harassed by the bishop, the chaplain and the other nuns who want to modify the school's 'European' style of education so as to bring it into line with local needs. But the urge to watch over Anna, and to protect her from her hopeless parents and the cruelty of Mary Andrew, prompts Helen to destroy her letter of resignation.

However, Helen also passes on to Anna the other legacy of those lessons learned painfully in the years after the incident of seeing her father with his lover. Helen was in her last term at school in Brussels, where the Archers finally settled, and she and her father had plans for her to go to university in the coming autumn. While helping a nun to prepare the altar for a feast day, Helen offers to run to her father's house nearby to bring back some roses from his garden. As she passes the window of her father's study she sees that "two people were there. But neither saw her; neither felt her shadow as it froze across the sun...she saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love."⁷¹ Helen's reaction is to run away, both literally by running back to the convent immediately and more permanently by deciding in the following weeks to become a nun. She chooses the highly disciplined and regulated life of a nun over the world of a cultured, free-thinking intellectual offered by her father, because she now sees, or believes she sees, "the sort of thing the most graceful life could hide...in her father, in the best person she had known or hoped to know."⁷² As well as rejecting Henry's values and world-view in her decision to become a nun, she also makes a more fundamental rejection of his prized ideals of "personal freedom" and "non-interference" by judging him for his sinfulness and, as she painfully realises, hating him. She punishes him further by never telling him what she saw on that afternoon or explaining fully her decision to become a nun, and even on his deathbed years later he is left still wondering about

⁷⁰ Ibid, 151.

⁷¹ Ibid, 157.

⁷² Ibid, 159.

her reasons. Like her shadow, which “froze across the sun” on that day, Helen’s mind and soul freeze and this “hardness” remained with her for the next few years as she trained to be a nun in France and worked as a teacher in various convents around Europe.

After eleven years she returns to the convent in Brussels and spends time with her father again. Seeing her father “visibly happy, guiltless and good – who was guilty and evil, theology said” poses a challenge to Helen. This challenge “roused all the Protestant in her – she was a grandchild of English rectories” and leads her to understand that “a soul should not take upon itself the impertinence of being frightened for another soul; that God is alone with each creature.”⁷³ Thus Helen returns to that ideal position of liberal detachment which was her inheritance from Henry. The crucial difference is that in the process of having her liberalism so acutely tested, she has learnt about the pain which even the most scrupulously kind and sensitive, such as Henry, can cause to others. She realises this not only through being aware of the pain which he is ignorant of having caused her, but through retrospectively understanding that the source of her late mother’s pervasive melancholy was her marriage to Henry. In the novel’s progressive narrative Helen improves on Henry’s liberalism through her development of a more refined ethical understanding of the individual’s relationship with, and obligations to, others.

There is, however, a significant ambiguity about the novel’s presentation of this process through which an ethical liberal subject is formed. Its complex temporal plotting means that in the *fabula* of the novel we see the second stage of the process happening first. That part of the narrative framed as Helen’s memories of her return to Brussels in her late twenties and her reconciliation with her father occupies the second of fourteen chapters. Her memories of her childhood and adolescence, and of the crucial incident of discovering her father’s homosexuality and its aftermath, are narrated in the eighth chapter, about two thirds of the way through the novel. We read this latter incident, and Helen’s subsequent descent into a hateful illiberalism, already knowing that she will, as it were, come out the

⁷³ Ibid, 21-22.

other side. Moreover, the recounting of this incident is followed directly by the very moving and loving last letter from the dying Henry to Helen. All of this works to frame and structure our reading of this incident in Helen's life as being traumatic but ultimately morally strengthening. Nevertheless, the incident of Helen's discovery is given a particular vividness and forcefulness that comes not only from how it is written but also by being withheld from us until this late stage in the narrative. There are, therefore, two competing interpretations available of how Helen fares in the moral test presented by her discovery of Henry's sexuality. One conclusion would be that she is ultimately successful in achieving moral development, and another is that this incident is a deeply traumatic experience from which she never fully recovers and which would "always leave her limping, no matter how she strove with wisdom."⁷⁴ The novel is taking a gamble here and it is uncertain which conjecture the reader will find most compelling; a difficult and testing but ultimately constructive formation of an ethical liberal subject, or a more dramatic descent into moralising hatred to which a liberal subject can easily succumb when confronted by taboo sexuality.

The climax of Anna's *bildung* narrative, an epiphanic moment about her future vocation, serves as a crucial counterpoint to the climactic point of Helen's narrative. As with Stephen Dedalus on Dollymount strand, Anna's epiphany takes place in a pastoral setting, the convent garden, and on the cusp of the same transition in her life. Anna is preparing for a series of exams which will guarantee her entry into university and the scholarship which will give her a living while there. Her maternal grandmother, who has financial control over the family because of Anna's father's alcoholism and who uses this power to bully her daughter and granddaughter, is opposed to Anna's plans. However, Reverend Mother manipulates the older woman's vanity, her ambitions for her brother who is a priest and the enthusiasm of the local bishop about Anna's educational career, to successfully defuse this opposition. This crisis has come to a head in the preceding chapter and now Anna is looking forward securely to the challenge of the exams and the life at university that awaits her.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 20.

As she sits in the garden ostensibly reading, Anna is reflecting on the tussle with her grandmother and particularly on the character of the Reverend Mother. Anna acknowledges that the common perception of Reverend Mother as a “cold fish, dark horse and queer one” has some small element of truth in it. But Anna had also “noticed originalities which were more interesting than queer”.⁷⁵ She observes that Reverend Mother, unlike the other nuns, never snubbed or lectured the girls and never meted out punishment. She is also capable of unexpected indulgences and kindnesses. Thus we can see the more subtle impact which Helen is having on Anna. This goes beyond the practical help of overcoming family opposition and extends to implicitly providing a model of behaviour. Anna's reflections are interrupted by one of her less assiduous fellow pupils, Pilar, asking for help with her schoolwork. Pilar is reading Milton's ‘Lycidas’, and struggling to understand it. As they talk about the elegy, which Anna who is still grieving for her brother finds painful to read, Anna experiences what O'Brien describes as a “translation of the ordinary.” She sees Pilar:

in a new way. She became aware of her and of the moment on a plane of perception which was strange to her, and which during its visitation she did not understand but could only receive—delightedly, but without surprise in fact, and as if she had been waiting for the lead it was to give. She saw her, it seemed, in isolation and in a new sphere, yet one made up of broken symbols from their common life...So Anna beheld her; something that life can be about, something with power to make life compose around it. She stared at her in wonder, hardly seeing her any more, but realising her lustrous potentiality, and feeling that for her, the watcher, this moment was a long-awaited, blessed gift; that in seeing this transience, this grace, this volatility, flung in a sweet summer hour against great ilex-trees, against the evening star, she was encountering, alone and in terms of her secret need, a passage of beauty as revelatory and true as any verse of the great elegy.⁷⁶

Before this, Anna's ambitions for her future have been either glamorously unrealistic or vague and undefined. Through her response to Pilar's “lustrous potentiality”, Anna finds her vocation, “something that life can be about.” Her capacity to transform Pilar's beauty into a symbol indicates that this vocation is artistic, and since Anna, like young Stephen Dedalus, has been deeply interested in words and language from when we first see her aged six we can assume this

⁷⁵ Ibid, 267.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 271-272.

means a life as a writer. Her response to Pilar's beauty and her "new way" of seeing is also cathartic since it leaves her feeling "emptied of grief."⁷⁷

Once again O'Brien deploys the discourses of aesthetics and religion to merge eroticism and *bildung* into a transformative experience. In Anna's eyes, Pilar becomes a "symbol as complicated as any imaginative struggle in verse...as a motive in art." O'Brien then reiterates this erotic-aesthetic fusion in a rather heavy-handed fashion by listing a series of painters. In an awkwardly constructed passage, the narrator acknowledges that Anna at this age is wholly unfamiliar with art history, but that if she were to know these things she would be reminded of Mantegna's paintings by reading 'Lycidas' and of Giorgione's paintings by the summer light in the garden. Above all, she would see the beautiful young Pilar, who is from South America, as the girl in Goya's *La Vida Espanola*. But Anna's experience is also an annuciatory "visitation" and "revelatory". She "receives" her vocation without rationally understanding it; her experience of seeing Pilar's beauty in a new light and the glimpse into her future as an artist this vision offers is a "blessed gift" and a "grace." By combining these two types of rhetoric O'Brien is also invoking two distinct models of individual development. One is a secular concept of art as 'improving' that is central to the liberal theory of culture, and that can be traced back through figures like Mathew Arnold in the nineteenth century to the related origins of *bildung* and aesthetics in eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Romantic thought.⁷⁸ The second is a notion of spiritual transformation occasioned by violence or ecstasy drawn from the Catholic tradition of martyrology and mysticism. O'Brien's fascination with this tradition is manifest throughout her work; we will recall the image of Mary Lavelle as Saint Sebastian and also O'Brien's biography of St Theresa.⁷⁹ While these distinct models are being rhetorically and conceptually merged in the narration of Anna's epiphany, Helen's double identity makes her a correlative figure for this merger. As 'Helen Archer' she is the offspring and pupil of the prototypically Arnoldian figure of Henry. But as 'Reverend Mother,' and a member of a French Catholic order of nuns, she is immersed in a historical tradition of Catholic religious life.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 273.

⁷⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 1990), 13-30.

⁷⁹ On O'Brien's writings on Theresa and another Spanish Catholic mystic, Saint Francis Xavier, see Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 118-119.

Anna's epiphany is the lynchpin of her own *bildung* narrative, but this episode also gives structural cohesion to the narrative of Helen and Henry. Anna's musings on Reverend Mother directly before she is interrupted by Pilar and the strategic place of the Milton poem mean that the presence of father and daughter hover over her transformative experience. Inevitably, this suggests that Anna's capacity to respond imaginatively to Pilar's beauty, and her emergent creative powers which are signalled by this, are due to the influence of Helen and, through her, of Henry. Anna is the flower of all that is best about the cultured bourgeois life embodied by Helen and Henry. But Anna's response to Pilar's eroticism also signals an improvement on the moral capacity of the Archers. Helen's encounter with sexual desire precipitated a moral and emotional collapse. The moral test provided by this painful experience ultimately strengthened Helen's liberalism and gave it an ethical dimension. But the novel suggests that the real beneficiary of this experience was Anna, rather than Helen herself, and the most compelling evidence for this is that electrifying spark which erotic desire gives to Anna's creativity and ambition. The aesthetico-spiritual and vocational quality of Anna's erotic encounter also stands in contrast to Henry's relationship with Etienne. Henry's absorption in his sexual relationship, oblivious to his daughter outside the window, wreaks painful havoc in both his and Helen's lives. Thus Anna's exhilarated transformation by an erotic encounter demonstrates that she can successfully evade the polar extremes of Henry's unthinkingly selfish sensuality and Helen's damaging recoil from human sexuality.

As O'Brien's critics have observed, *The Land of Spices* can be read as a portrait of the artist as a young woman.⁸⁰ Anna Murphy, like Stephen Dedalus, is from the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie and is formed in the same social, religious and educational milieu. These are also similarities shared by their respective creators. James Cahalan has identified gender as the key difference between what he considers to be the two foremost *bildungsromane* in twentieth-century Irish literature. He contrasts *Portrait's* "glorification of separation and individuality –

⁸⁰ Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 59-72 and James M. Cahalan, *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 105-108.

ideals which are peculiarly Western and male, but which are taken to be normative and universal" with the "attention to how Anna and Helen depend on each other for their mutual growth" in *The Land of Spices*.⁸¹ He concludes that the two novels "provide bipolar models for coming of age: male versus female."⁸² One clear problem here is that an interpretation, like Cahalan's, that starts from a fairly solid feminist base starts to veer perilously close to essentialism. There is rather a fine line between arguing that the two novels capture something specific about the experience of growing up male or female, and the idea that the authors' gender in some way determined the type of narratives they created. The implication that mutuality and nurturing are significant features in novels by and about women because these are in some way innately female characteristics is equally problematic; in a rather imaginative leap Cahalan asserts that O'Brien's novel is closer to more recent work like Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* than it is to *Portrait*.

An alternative way to view the difference between the *bildung* narratives offered by the two novels is to see them as two ways of narrating history. The temporality of *bildung* in *Portrait* appears to be analogous to that of revolution. It requires a wholesale rejection of the existing state of things and of the pervading social and political formations. However, as we have seen, this is ultimately illusory as the revolutionary impulse in the novel is defused by Joyce's structuring of the narrative within the parameters of the Freudian model of psycho-sexual development. This casts history as a trauma to be resolved rather than a set of conditions with which to engage dynamically. O'Brien's *bildung* narrative in *The Land of Spices* suggests a more Whiggish model of historical development. Through her painful experiences, and her ability to learn from them, Helen Archer improves on the model of the ideal liberal subject offered by her father. In her shock at discovering his homosexuality, Helen rejects both Henry and the valuable cultured liberal inheritance she has received from him. Learning to see him in a more forgiving and appreciative light involves more than reconciliation between daughter and father. It is a story of how liberal subjectivity can be placed in peril by illicit sexual desire, but can then be reassembled in a more ethically robust manner by having undergone

⁸¹ Cahalan, 106.

⁸² Ibid, 108.

but then worked through that near-shattering experience. By the novel's end, we are left with the impression that Anna, absorbing by example and osmosis those lessons learned by Helen, will be an even further improved liberal subject. Anna takes into the future all that is best of the Archers' liberalism, but her liberalism is refined and made ethically stronger by the lessons drawn from their mistakes.

That the Archers happen to be English and Anna, the soil on which their lessons in how to be a civilised liberal subject bear fruit, happens to be Irish means that geography as well as history is at play here. Helen's *bildung* narrative, her attainment of an ethical liberalism in the wake of the crisis precipitated by Henry's sexuality, is mapped geographically and culturally as the fusion of nineteenth-century English liberalism, with its Protestant roots, and the purposeful collectivism offered by Catholic faith, and especially the religious life. It is the merger of rectory and convent that, paradoxically, makes Helen such a good nun.⁸³ As the plot of Reverend Mother's ongoing clashes with her Irish nuns and the local bishop reiterates, this 'European' Catholicism is not the Catholicism of the Irish. Unlike her defender in *The Bell*, C. B. Murphy, O'Brien does not believe that Irish Catholicism has been corrupted by 'Victorianism' (on the contrary, her characterisation of Henry Archer suggests a very positive valuation of a certain kind of 'Victorian' liberalism) but by Irish nationalism. It is her opponents' commitment to the politics of cultural nationalism, to introducing the Irish language into the curriculum of the school for instance, that Helen finds so objectionable. She can find a productive reconciliation between her commitment to the liberal values of personal freedom and "detachment", inherited from Henry, and the collective commitment of being part of a religious order. Yet, she finds the idea of commitment to a project of national development entirely anathema to her liberal values. For the Irish, "about Ireland there was no appeal to the comparative method; no detachment was regarded as just." But for Helen this is intolerable since she could "no more forgo the latter in her thought as undertake to live without sleep."⁸⁴

⁸³ O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 21.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 75. O'Brien's critics have been entirely sympathetic and unquestioning in their reading of O'Brien's critique of Irish nationalism. Adele Dalsimer, for instance, describes Helen's position thus, "in her confrontations with the Irish, she loses the generosity of spirit she felt for her father. Her soul withers, her humanity dissolves, and having known the fullness of human acceptance, she cannot tolerate losing it again." Dalsimer, 67.

After writing her letter of resignation in a mood of frustration with the clerical supporters of cultural nationalism around her, Helen considers that she has “given them up to that narrowing future of their own”.⁸⁵ This “narrowing future” prophesied in the novel's narrative is clearly the “narrowed present” of the novel's publication. As in *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien uses her historical setting to articulate the radical counter-revolutionary position that the roots of Ireland's failures in the 1930s and 1940s do not lie in a ‘wrong turning’ sometime after 1922, but were inherent in cultural nationalism from the outset. The characterisation of Mary Andrew indicates more precisely the class dimension of this historical error. Along with her commitment to cultural nationalism and the Irish language, Mary Andrew's other distinguishing feature is that she is the daughter of a shopkeeper, unlike the other nuns who are of more stoutly bourgeois or Catholic gentry stock. Mary Andrew's “erratic and cruel” behaviour is explicitly linked to her “status uneasiness” within the convent.⁸⁶ This suggests that the origins of post-independence failure lie in the earlier eclipsing of the Catholic bourgeoisie, either Unionist or Irish Parliamentary Party in their politics, by the *arriviste* lower middle-class supporters of Sinn Féin. Interestingly, Mary Andrew is also from Tyrone, which suggests that southern Irish liberal repugnance at the innate ‘extremism’ of Northerners pre-dated 1968.

4

O'Brien's fiction is enlivened and energised by those divergent currents of utopianism, liberalism and conservatism that run through it. For her, it is not sensual and emotional pleasure that makes sexual desire so thrilling and exciting but that such desire is “fantastical”. Desire disrupts and confounds those parameters that order the world as one finds it. As Terry Eagleton observes of O'Brien, “sexual love for her is a kind of delicious insanity, a wayward unmanageable, implacable force which disrupts all settlement and involves an ecstatic casting loose of one's moorings.”⁸⁷ In O'Brien's fiction, sexuality is so

⁸⁵ O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 75.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

⁸⁷ Terry Eagleton, ‘Home and Away: Internal Émigrés in the Irish Novel’ in *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 242.

disruptive because it throws one onto an ethical plane where the inherited criteria and models for assessing what is moral prove of only limited use. The only adequate resource available is one's own conscience, and one must draw on this to adjudicate between competing desires, demands and obligations. A potential reward for plunging bravely into this uncharted space full of challenges and risks is the attainment of "sympathy". Wrestling with the demanding ethical challenges of sexual desire generates bonds of understanding, attachment and solidarity. These bonds may be erotic, as they are with Mary and Juanito and with Anna's response to Pilar, but are not necessarily so, as with Mary's feelings towards Agatha, or the relationships between Helen and Henry, and Helen and Anna. The other potential reward for such ethical risk-taking is growth, development and new, exhilarating possibilities: Mary leaves Spain with a very different future before her than that with which she arrived and Anna has attained a vocation on which she can fruitfully expend her talents.

Sexual desire is utopian in O'Brien's fiction then since it suggests the possibility of ordering the world differently – if morality can be re-made anew since the current way of doing things is unworkable why not political and economic systems as well? Sexual desire is a means by which more sustaining and less atomised relationships are made possible, and better futures are glimpsed. But O'Brien draws back from these radical suggestions as soon as she raises them. The utopian potential of sexual desire is simultaneously revealed and then contained within the gentler parameters of liberal pluralism. Mary glimpses the "fantastical" quality of the "perversions" she, Agatha and Juanito share. But this is then dissipated by the lesson she takes from this insight, which is an understanding of the common humanity that subtends their apparent differences. Directly after the narration of Anna's encounter with Pilar, *The Land of Spices* concludes with a conversation in which Helen advises Anna to, "be the judge of your own soul; but never for a second, I implore you, set up as judge of another. Commentator, annotator, if you like, but never judge."⁸⁸ There is a striking contrast between the exhilaration and exuberance of Anna's epiphany and this elegantly-phrased reiteration of the gospel injunction about throwing the first stone. O'Brien's fiction exhibits a paradoxical drive to give birth to radical suggestions just before cloaking

⁸⁸ O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 284.

them in liberal aspirations.

O'Brien believes in the possibility of historical change and progress. Her plots are propelled by her heroines' attainment of moral growth and autonomy, as well as cultural refinement and educational accomplishment. In the novels, these different forms of development are distinct but entwined, and are also enmeshed in the heroine's sexual experiences. The trans-generational narrative of the Archers and Anna Murphy expands the scope of such development beyond the span of the individual subject, and suggests a trajectory of continual improvement that lends itself to being read as an allegory of history as progress. But if O'Brien's narration of how an ideal liberal individualism can be cultivated suggests that historical change is possible and welcome, this narrative is simultaneously predicated on the impossibility of achieving such change. Her novels contrast two kinds of relationships. There are those relationships of "sympathy" – composed of love, of nurturing and of understanding – that can unite lovers, but can equally unite friends, parents and children, siblings, mentor and pupil and so on. The quality of such relationships is evidence of one's capacity to attain an ethically well-formed individualism. But then there are those relationships based on the bonds of solidarity that have the potential to become the fuel of political commitment, such as anti-colonial nationalism, socialism or feminism. By contrast, these relationships are toxic to the ethical individual ideal since they make it impossible to achieve that "detachment of spirit" which is so crucial to its attainment.⁸⁹ Hence, Mary's moral development in the course of the narrative is predicated on maintaining her distance from that bleakly homogenising column of female breadwinners registered at the beginning. From a feminist perspective, this fissure between the ideal of

⁸⁹ Ibid, 210. Ironically, this phrase is coined by Miss Robertson, the English suffragist whom Anna meets on holiday. It comes up in her conversation with the bishop, when Miss Robertson criticises Irish nationalism for being inimical to this spirit. When the bishop retorts that she has not displayed that spirit in her own political activism, Miss Robertson describes her politics as "an accident of time and place". Some critics, such as Elizabeth Cullingford, read this set-piece dialogue between an Irish nationalist bishop and an English suffragist as O'Brien contrasting the narrow limitations of nationalism with the broader, internationalist scope of feminism. However, Miss Robertson's belief in the "accidental" quality of her politics would appear to undermine feminist as much as anti-colonial nationalist politics, since both are emancipatory interventions to change history rather than accept its "accidents." Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "'Our nuns are not a nation': Politicising the Convent in Irish Literature and Film', *Eire-Ireland* 41, (2006), 9-39, 26.

ethical individualism and solidarity based on gender is deeply problematic.

In addition, O'Brien's plots invariably distribute the desire for *bildung* and autonomy unevenly across class lines among her female characters. Her central female and middle-class characters are usually surrounded by lower-class women whose physical labour sustains these women materially and whose emotional labour sustains them psychologically. These women are represented as unfailingly devoted to their mistresses and their employing families, and to the hierarchical structure of the convent in the case of the lay-sisters. Neither they, nor the narrative voice of the novels, questions their role and place within a highly stratified social order. Paradoxically then, while the attainment of O'Brien's ideal of ethical individualism is imperiled by commitments of gender, class and nation, achieving the ideal is equally impossible without belonging to a quite narrowly defined class formation. The values of tolerant detachment and ethical courage always co-exist with an aesthetic sensibility that is dependent on being immersed in a specific type of cultural knowledge and cultural values. Being an ethical liberal individual in the O'Brien mode requires the prior accumulation of extensive quantities of cultural capital.

If O'Brien's model of *bildung* suggests that historical progress is desirable but impossible to achieve, post-independence Ireland suffers particularly acutely from this condition. In the novels, O'Brien launches an assault from within on the prevailing public morality discourses with her narratives of sexual moral tests and her ideal of ethical liberal individualism. The historical setting and geo-moral cartography of the novels locate the public morality discourses within the larger project of anti-colonial nationalism. Public morality is a symptom of how the prevailing model of national development has failed and, crucially, was always constitutionally destined to fail. But if this model of national development is a failure, what are the alternatives? From C.B. Murphy to Eibhear Walshe it has been a shibboleth of O'Brien criticism that her fiction posited a sophisticated, enlightened European Catholicism as an ideal contrast to the insularity of the Irish Free State.⁹⁰ The deference shown to O'Brien's imaginative construction of an idealised European Catholic bourgeoisie has occluded a number of flaws in that

⁹⁰ Murphy, *op cit.* Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 77.

construction. The most banal of these flaws is timing. O'Brien was articulating this European ideal in her fiction just as Europe was in the depths of a historically unprecedented era of barbarity, and swathes of the most cultured members of the European bourgeoisie actively contributed to this barbarism. O'Brien's construction is also structurally unsound since it is not entirely clear if her liberal bourgeois ideal is actually 'European' or 'Catholic' at all. In a review of O'Brien's *The Flower of May* (1953) John Jordan argued that "however Catholic may be the world in which they move, Miss O'Brien's heroines, without exception, may more easily be described as *protestants*."⁹¹ O'Brien takes great delight in evoking textually the sensual experience of Catholic religious practice, and was especially interested in the potential empowerment and fulfilment which religious life offered to women. Her *bildung* narratives are fundamentally shaped by the conception of sexuality as a moral problem, and her characters view this problem through the prism of Catholicism. Nevertheless, the resolution of these moral problems, and the ethical individualist ideal projected in the narrative through this resolution, is fundamentally underpinned by nineteenth-century bourgeois liberalism. As the characters of Henry and Helen Archer particularly illustrate, O'Brien primarily associates this political position with Protestantism and with the cultured English middle-classes. O'Brien's vision of Irish modernisation involves looking outward to a narrowly-defined sphere of metropolitan culture. But along with going outwards, the culture must also go backwards. The 'wrong turn' of independence must somehow be undone and the hegemony of an idealised bourgeoisie – Catholic in formal religious adherence but politically and philosophically liberal and Protestant – must be restored. Since the gracefully elegiac tone of O'Brien's fiction admits that this return is impossible, Irish culture is stuck fast – incapable of reversing so that it can go forward.

⁹¹ John Jordan, 'Kate O'Brien – a note on her themes', *The Bell* 19,2 (1954), 53-59, 57. [Emphasis in original.]

Chapter Four

Married Bliss: Sexuality, Catholicism and Modernisation in Ireland, 1940-1965

1

In February 1963 *The Sunday Press*, the largest selling national newspaper in Ireland at the time and one closely associated with the de Valera family and with Fianna Fáil, began publishing a series of articles by Angela MacNamara. MacNamara had begun her career writing for a Catholic magazine, *The Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, where her articles on motherhood and child-rearing had drawn on her own experience as a young middle-class mother in Dublin in the late 1950s. Subsequently, she had started to give talks on marriage and sex to groups of Catholic schoolgirls in the early 1960s, and had also written a number of pamphlets aimed at teenage readers for the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) and similar organisations. In response to those newspaper articles published in early 1963, both MacNamara and *The Sunday Press* received a huge amount of correspondence from readers seeking her advice. This prompted the newspaper's editor to offer MacNamara an advice column in which she could respond to these queries. Between late 1963, when she began writing this column, and 1980, when she stopped, MacNamara became one of Ireland's most famous and influential 'agony aunts.' Through her column, and her appearances on Irish television and radio, she became a public figure in Ireland, and a recognised authority on questions of sexuality, and particularly on Catholic sexual morality.¹

For the first few weeks, those *Sunday Press* articles had the headline 'Youth and Love' and were aimed at the parents of teenagers. MacNamara wrote in alarmist terms about what she claimed was a growing problem of teenagers having sex. She attributed much of the blame to working mothers but also to the failure of parents to inform and educate their children about sex. After six weeks the title was changed to 'Teenagers – a new series for you' and so, obviously, the intended readership was shifted from the parents to the young people themselves. MacNamara's purpose in these articles, as outlined in the first one, was to give teenagers advice on making oneself "a fine individual personality."² Over the next few weeks the articles delivered advice on 'How to be an interesting person' and

¹ These articles appeared in the *Sunday Press* between February 24 and May 19, 1963. For her own account of her career (including her objection to the use of the term 'agony aunt' in relation to her work) see MacNamara's memoir, *Yours Sincerely* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2003).

² Angela MacNamara, 'How to Develop Your Personality,' *Sunday Press*, April 7 1963, 23.

'How to develop your character,' leading ultimately to advice on 'How to behave on that date'. After several weeks on this topic of dating and how it should be done, MacNamara turned, in a comparatively cursory fashion, to the question of 'Finding happiness together for life'. Her key point was that these two issues, teenage dating and life-long happiness, are fundamentally connected. Dating should be a time for getting to know one's potential partner and building up connections of the heart and mind. Sex should assiduously be avoided during the dating period as this would get things in the wrong order and so destroy that promise of life-long happiness since "in order to raise our enjoyment of sex to a higher plane than the animal, we love before we indulge in sex."³

MacNamara's articles appeared in that part of the newspaper that we would now describe as the 'lifestyle section,' one comprised of weekly columns on books, films, travel, fashion and cookery, along with a 'society' page and television and radio listings. MacNamara's articles were surrounded by advertisements for clothing, cosmetics and household appliances, most explicitly directed at women readers. On the opposite page to MacNamara's articles each week was 'The Bríd Mahon Page.' Mahon's page had four or five short articles each week, along with a photograph of a model. A description of what the model in question was wearing introduced Mahon's weekly "fashion tips". Mahon often had longer articles on fashion as well, such as her article on May 5 with the headline, 'Twenty Questions - presenting what the young perfectionist should and should not wear'. Usually the "fashion tips" described what was currently happening in the Paris, occasionally New York or London, fashion world and was "on its way here." She also wrote about the latest developments in cosmetics and household furnishings, and gave weekly recipes – though even these could be imbued with glamour since they sometimes came from "the executive chef" at Dublin Airport. Mahon occasionally recounted sentimental incidents from 'real life,' but mostly she wrote humorous and self-deprecating anecdotes that gave her reflections on contemporary (leisured) urban life. Into these she invariably managed to introduce an inordinate number of allusions to her, or her friends', foreign travels; casual references were made to "skiing in Austria" or "driving in the Riviera" or spending "last St Patrick's Day in Rome."

³ MacNamara, 'Finding Happiness Together for Life,' *Sunday Press*, 19 May 1963, 31.

It might be tempting to see those *Sunday Press* pages in early 1963 as an allegory of Ireland in that period. Viewed thus, 'Bríd Mahon' and 'Angela MacNamara' would be seen as totems or symbols of two contrasting and competing versions of the country. In this reading, Bríd Mahon would be taken to represent the modernising Ireland ushered in by the Fianna Fáil government's change of economic policy in 1959, that had opened the economy to foreign capital, since her page is animated by the supposed attributes of a modernising culture. Her articles express a sense of dynamism, a celebration of the new and an aspirational endorsement of affluence. There is also an easy cosmopolitanism and openness to the refreshing influences of the outside world (albeit that tiny part of the world that constituted the metropolitan West). In contrast, Angela MacNamara's reassertion of Catholic sexual morality, including her fondness for the term 'purity,' would be taken to represent a rearguard action by the forces of traditional Ireland to maintain the status quo of an inward-looking and illiberal stasis.

Matters were, however, considerably more complicated than any such crude allegory of 'Bríd Mahon' and 'Angela MacNamara' would suggest. There was, for instance, the irony of Mahon's own biography. Behind the leisured persona of the *Sunday Press* column was a hard-working and underpaid folklorist, whose 'day job' was with that most 'traditional' of institutions, the Irish Folklore Commission.⁴ On the other hand, MacNamara's promotion of purity, chastity and marriage is wholly entwined with a rigorously individualist rhetoric of self-development and cultivating 'personality'. Since the ultimate reason for maintaining one's purity seems to be the promise of maximising one's pleasure and fulfilment in marriage, her logic is not at all that dissimilar from the aspirational and consumerist values or from the prevailing model of modernisation of which Mahon's column was an expression. To see Mahon and MacNamara simply in terms of a clash between 'tradition' and 'modernity,' therefore, would only be to simplify what was in fact a much more complex and interesting history. In their different ways, both of these working

⁴ Bríd Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows: Memoirs of a Folklorist* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), 188.

women were agents of social change, both mediating new values to Irish society in a rapidly changing post-war world.⁵

During the 1940s and 1950s an epistemic shift took place in Irish Catholic sexual discourse, and MacNamara's work in the early 1960s represents an innovative development within this longer term trend. In those decades, the discourses of public morality, discussed in Chapter One, were eclipsed by a marital discourse which placed individual fulfilment rather than regulation and control as central to the problem of sexuality. Through the medium of advice literature directed at a teenage readership, Catholic writers offered young Irish Catholics an ideal of marital intimacy which promised sexual pleasure and personal fulfilment. This marital ideal posited marriage as a social good, a stable form of social reproduction, while it also situated marriage as the defining objective, the reward, in a narrative of individual development. Conceptually, these Catholic advice writers were fusing the reproductive sexual *episteme*, derived from theology and medicine, with the libidinal *episteme* that had taken its co-ordinates from psychoanalysis. In this new Irish Catholic paradigm, sexual pleasure was no longer threatening or dangerous but useful. Within marital sexuality, the pursuit of sexual pleasure was as important as the goal of reproduction since such pleasure contributed to the creation of intimacy, and it was intimacy, rather than duty or obligation, that provided the most effective means for maintaining stable and secure marriages. In contrast with the public morality discourses, the pursuit of sexual pleasure by the individual did not, in this new discourse, represent a destabilising threat to the social order which required collective action to keep that threat in check. Instead, the individual's pursuit of sexual pleasure, when contained within a broader programme of self-cultivation and the achievement of self-fulfilment through marriage, could actually underwrite the objective of a dynamic but stable social order. In short, promoting and cultivating self-realisation replaced the imposition of collective regulation as the ideal route to the same goal.

⁵ On the aporias of modernisation ideology in twentieth-century Ireland, see Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press/Field Day Publications, 1996), 82-94, Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 15-38 and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, 'Discrediting De Valera: Tradition and Modernity' in *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Cork: Field Day/Cork University Press, 2001), 213-233.

Historically, we can locate this transition within Irish Catholicism at the nexus of two related crises of modernity – one that was taking place within Western capitalism generally, and one that was more specific to Ireland. The seismic dislocations, instability and political ferment generated by the two world wars, and the intervening two decades of crisis in global capitalism, precipitated, among other epochal transformations, a shift in the cultural meaning ascribed to marriage within liberal capitalist societies. Bourgeois marriage came to be conceived of less as an ideal state of life or as a rite of passage conferring status and more as an ongoing project at which one had to strive to achieve success. Hence, in those decades, new modes of advice and new forms of expertise emerged to confront this 'crisis' in marriage, and a distinctly new cultural grammar of 'intimacy' began to evolve. Therefore, before moving on to examine the Irish Catholic advice literature in detail in section three, it will be useful to first map out these broader transformations, which were taking place simultaneously within Catholicism and secular capitalist culture, from which the advice literature drew its formal and epistemological coordinates.

The final section will explore why this epistemic shift concerning sexuality and marriage was particularly charged in Ireland. During these decades, marriage was serving as a complex signifier within ongoing debates about the future of the independent Irish state. As the impoverishment wrought on the new state by the global capitalist crisis of the 1930s was worsened by war-time isolation, and the policy of neutrality meant that the country failed to benefit from the post-war 'lift' in the other Western economies, Irish intellectuals, and outside observers, debated about the post-independence state's failure to achieve economic development. In particular, this debate about national development focused on the demographic crisis, as emigration soared in the post-war years and the population declined. One especially vibrant strand in this discussion on demographics focused not on emigration but on the low marriage rates that were especially prevalent in rural areas. In this view, the crucial factor underpinning the country's underdevelopment was not economic or political but cultural, and most specifically the country's sexual culture. For these analysts, the condition and fate of the country seemed to be intricately bound up with the condition and fate of Irish marriage, and both were

considered to be in a state of terminal crisis. In this light, the Catholic advice literature appears as a contradictory phenomenon, and one that complicates our received version of the relationship between Catholicism and Irish modernisation. A discourse that was ostensibly reactionary, conservative and promoting a traditional standard of sexual morality was simultaneously setting out a model of youthful formation and development that was also symbolically elaborating a modernising model of national development.

2

For the historian Louise Fuller, the titles of the Irish Catholic advice pamphlets, “conjure up an era which was innocent and much less complicated – an era when the whole area of sexuality was viewed with great caution, not to say suspicion.”⁶ But, in fact, the writers of this material were actually engaged in quite a complicated and dynamic project. While maintaining their stance of protecting an inherited model of sexuality and marriage and promoting adherence to traditional Catholic sexual morality, they were also negotiating a significant transformation in that inherited model. On one level, their project was connected to a specific epistemological change that was taking place within Catholicism generally. In the ‘manual’ tradition of Catholic moral theology, which was dominant from the Counter-Reformation of the late-sixteenth century to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), marriage was defined as having a primary and a secondary purpose. The primary purpose was the procreation and education of children. The secondary purposes were the support and companionship which a husband and wife gave each other in their life together, and what a moral theology textbook describes as, “the allaying of, or lawful outlet for, concupiscence.”⁷ In this view, ‘original sin’ had left most humans with a desire for sexual pleasure that extended beyond the desire to have children, and sex within marriage provided a legitimate means for satisfying this. These purposes were arranged on a firm hierarchy and this definition of marriage had been codified in canon law in 1917.

⁶ Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 30.

⁷ Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), vol. 4, 65

In the 1930s, this conception of marriage began to be challenged from within the Catholic Church, mainly by a group of German moral theologians. The most significant figure in this movement was Herbert Doms, whose book *The Meaning of Marriage* was published in German in 1935 and translated into English in 1939. This alternative understanding of marriage became known in theology as the 'personalist' approach. In this view, marriage provided a man and a woman with the opportunity for achieving psychological and emotional wholeness. Marriage was a process of unification through which each partner simultaneously kept their individuality and subsumed it into a new entity, what Doms called a "two-in-oneness". Procreation was still important, but the main purpose of marriage, its meaning, lay in the capacity to fulfil this individual need.⁸ After a period of prevarication, the Vatican condemned Dom's theories in the 1940s and reaffirmed the primacy of the reproduction and nurturing of children as the main purpose of marriage. However, with the epochal reorganisation of the Church's theology and liturgical practice in the Second Vatican Council, the 'personalist' definition of marriage was incorporated into mainstream Catholic thinking. Companionship and sexual fulfilment were now given an equal place with procreation and child-rearing in the discussion of marriage. Sexual pleasure and sexual intimacy began to be described in much more positive terms as valuable in themselves, rather than as merely an unfortunate side effect of 'concupiscence'.⁹ What took place was not so much an abolition of an old *episteme*, but a redistribution of stress and emphasis which in itself brought about a paradigm shift. A constituent element that had been peripheral in the older *episteme* acquired a new centrality in the emergent one, thus generating a new configuration of things.

The effects of this institutional change on Irish Catholicism can be gauged from some pamphlets produced in the late 1950s and the 1960s. In 1958 the Catholic

⁸ John M. Haas, 'The Contemporary World' in Glenn W. Olsen (ed.), *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001), 332-358, 341-342.

⁹ For a conservative account of the changes in Catholic marriage theory in the mid-twentieth century, see Haas, *op cit.* For a liberal interpretation see Brennan R. Hill, 'Reformulating the Sacramental Theology of Marriage' and Michael G. Lawler, 'Faith, Contract and Sacrament in Christian Marriage: A Theological Approach,' in Michael G. Lawler and William P. Roberts (eds.), *Christian Marriage and Family: Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 3-21 and 38-58.

Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) published a pamphlet called *Christian Marriage* by Jeremiah Kinane, the Archbishop of Cashel. The legalistic and rather grimly dogmatic style is in marked contrast to the counselling styles and personas adopted by the contemporary Catholic advice writers, and Kinane presents an uncompromising assertion of the theological definition of marriage. There is a "primary" purpose for marriage, which is the procreation and education of children, and there are "subordinate" purposes, which include marriage being "a remedy for concupiscence."¹⁰ Just over ten years later the CTSI published another pamphlet with the same title. This joint statement from the Irish bishops defended the controversial papal encyclical, *Humane Vitae*, which had firmly blocked the efforts of those within the church who were advocating a change of position on birth control. But a striking feature of this statement is the bishops' use of the language of sexual intimacy to affirm a procreative definition of marriage. The hierarchical structure of 'purposes' is gone. Reproduction, sexual pleasure and intimacy are instead entwined together as inseparable and equally valuable aspects of married life. It is, in fact, the proponents of birth control who are accused of separating procreation and sexual pleasure from each other, and thereby diminishing the potential intimacy of marriage. According to the bishops, "it is only by viewing sex in its natural integrity that we come to see marriage as the only adequate expression of sexual love."¹¹

The most notable institutional manifestation of this transition in Irish Catholic thinking on marriage was the founding of the Catholic Marriage Advisory Centre (now known as Accord) in the early 1960s.¹² The transition can also be seen in the emergence of a type of advice literature which, in contrast to the material discussed in this chapter, was aimed at married adults rather than at teenagers. In booklets such as Eamon Gaynor's *One in Love* and P. A. Baggot's *Unspoken Problems in Married Life* one finds the same emphasis on the importance of communication within marriage, and the same synthesis of procreation, sexual pleasure and intimacy that one finds in the bishops' statement. As Eamon Gaynor asserts, "perfect love requires that sex be a true communication of love, that in

¹⁰ Archbishop J. Kinane, *Christian Marriage* (Dublin: CTSI, 1958), 5-11.

¹¹ Conference of the Irish Bishops, *Christian Marriage* (Dublin: CTSI, 1969), 22.

¹² www.accord.ie (accessed September 22 2008).

particular it be at least open to the creation of new life.”¹³ The rather indefinite locution, “at least open,” has the effect of substantially downplaying the significance of reproduction. The implication is that procreation does not have to actually result for sex to be allowable and meaningful, and the value of reproduction is not as an end in itself but the degree to which being open to it makes intimacy possible.

A striking feature of the advice literature for Irish teenagers is that this transformation in the meaning of marriage is already being negotiated in the material published in the 1940s and 1950s; that is, while the new conception of marriage had yet to be officially endorsed by the Church. It is also notable that the creation of the Marriage Advisory Centre and the type of literature produced by Gaynor and Baggot are all predicated on the assumption that marriage is no longer a ‘solution’ but a ‘problem’, an ongoing project that needs to be continuously worked at. In this respect, the transformation in the meaning of marriage within twentieth-century Catholicism mirrored the contemporaneous development within secular bourgeois society through which marriage became an especially dense focus point of the modern dynamic of knowledge and sexuality.

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously argued that there was an expansion of discourse about sexuality in Western society, which began in the eighteenth and accelerated in the nineteenth century. This new mode of knowledge about sex, what Foucault terms a *scientia sexualis*, invested expertise on human reproduction and sexuality in various figures, such as the demographer, the doctor or psychiatrist and the sexologist.¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, particularly in the period after the First World War, the producers of a new type of popular advice literature on marriage and sexuality joined the ranks of sexual experts in Western culture. Since the emergence of sexology in the second half of the nineteenth century, the books published within the discipline had been expensively produced and written in an inaccessible style (with quotations from Latin left in the original, for instance). This was done deliberately to ensure the

¹³ Eamon Gaynor, *One in Love* (Maynooth: The Furrow Trust, 1963), 32. See also, P.A. Baggot, *Unspoken Problems in Married Life* (Dublin: IMP, 1964).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol.1: The Will to Knowledge* (trans. Robert Hurley) (London: Penguin, 1979 [1976]), 63-73, 81-91.

discipline's credentials as a respectable, authoritative science. Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918) was the first 'serious' text on sexual matters to be marketed and consumed in popular print media culture. With this and her subsequent book, *Enduring Passion* (1931), Stopes achieved enormous sales in Britain and the United States, as did Theodore H. van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage*, originally written in Dutch and translated into English in 1926.

Stopes and van der Velde initiated a new genre of popular writing on sexuality, the 'marital manual', in which the objective was not the scholarly elucidation of human sexuality as a scientific problem but the provision of useful advice on improving the experience of sex within marriage. It was, in the words of Stopes' sub-title to *Married Love*, "a new contribution to the solution of sex difficulties." Other contributors to this genre in the mid-century decades included, in Britain, Helena Wright's *The Sex Factor in Marriage* (1930) and *More About the Sex Factor in Marriage* (1947) and Eustace Cheeser's *Love without Fear: How To Achieve Sex Happiness in Marriage* (published in Britain in 1942, when it was unsuccessfully tried for obscenity, and published in the United States in 1947), and in the United States, *What is Right with Marriage* (1928) by Robert and Frances Brinkley, and *A Marriage Manual: A Practical Guidebook to Sex and Marriage* (1952) by Hannah and Abraham Stone.¹⁵

The writers of this material included medical doctors, psychiatrists and sociologists, but Stopes is also a pioneering and illustrative figure in this regard – "the sexologist as agony aunt" as Lesley Hall describes her.¹⁶ Stopes was a doctor, but of paleobotany rather than of medicine and her research on sex was initiated by the unhappy experience of her first marriage rather than being related to her professional life as a scientist. As she wrote in the preface to *Married Love*,

¹⁵ On the development of the marital manuals in Britain see, Lesley Hall, "The English have hot-water bottles': The Morganatic Marriage between Medicine and Sexology in Britain since William Acton,' in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds.) *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 350-366 and Lesley Hall and Roy Porter, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 202-233. On the history of this development in the United States see, M.E. Melody and Linda M. Peterson, *Teaching America About Sex: Marriage Guides and Sex Manuals From The Late Victorians to Dr. Ruth* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 73-125.

¹⁶ Hall, 358.

"knowledge gained at such a cost ought to be deployed for the greater good."¹⁷ Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange have pointed out that Stopes probably reached many more readers with her columns in the mass circulation magazine *John Bull* than she did with her books. Advice columns in magazines and broadcast on radio, by 'agony aunts' such as Stopes in Britain, Dorothy Dix in the United States and Norman Haire in Australia, became a staple element of popular culture in the mid-century decades and probably played a more decisive role in the dissemination of information about sex than those manuals published in book form.¹⁸

Michael Melody and Linda Peterson distinguish between these marital manuals of the mid-century decades and the sex manuals, most famously Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1972), which appeared in the post-1960s era. The marital manuals "restrict legitimate sex to marriage. Sex manuals, on the other hand, primarily focus on erotic techniques without much concern for legal formalities...sex manuals focus on pleasure as an end in itself."¹⁹ Marriage rather than sexuality was the primary focus of the advice literature that began to appear in the 1920s, and its emergence was part of the cultural response to a widespread perception in the United States and Britain that marriage as a social institution was in crisis. This perception was grounded in reality, as the rising divorce rates in the United States clearly illustrated. The social upheavals and dislocation generated by the First World War, followed by the economic boom in the mid-1920s, shifted the expectations placed on marriage, and particularly the expectations of women. As Eva Illouz argues, "the expansion of the labour market contributed to the dislocation of marriage as an economic unit and made it possible for working

¹⁷ Cited at Hall, 358.

¹⁸ Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, 'Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Communication in the Mid-Twentieth Century,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13 (2004), 71-99, 78. On the history of sexual advice literature and 'marital manuals' in the twentieth century see also, Jessamyn Neuhaus, 'The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 9 (2000), 447-473. On the later generation of sex advice manuals, see Meryl Altman 'Everything They Always Wanted You to Know: The Ideology of Popular Sex Literature' in Carole Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger* (London: Harper Collins, 1989), 119-140.

¹⁹ Melody and Peterson, 2.

women to follow the emotional rather than economic definitions of marriage."²⁰ But the crisis also stemmed from the failure of marriage to live up to the heightened, utopian expectations that had been heaped on the institution since the turn of the century. Marriage had failed to live up to its billing as a shelter from the fragmentation and alienation endemic in twentieth-century capitalist society. This intensification of expectation was the product of what Illouz terms an expanding "romance-consumption nexus".²¹

According to Illouz, between 1900 and 1940, American culture's dominant ideas about romance, love and marriage were increasingly imbricated with the expanding sphere of leisure and consumption. The emergent methods of advertising and mass media imbued consumption with the aura of romance; images of couples in romantic and intimate settings became a significant aspect of the new visual culture of advertising and of film, which was reinforced by the new phenomenon of celebrity couples, such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Those cultural ideals of love and romance, inherited from the nineteenth century, were transformed into "a visual utopia that combined elements of the 'American dream' of affluence and self-reliance with romantic fantasy".²² But this "romanticisation of commodities" was inextricable from the simultaneous "commodification of romance". Courtship moved from the domestic sphere, where it had taken place under the supervision of parents and family, to an anonymous public realm of leisure and consumption; dancing, cinema-going, eating out and so on. This shift from 'calling' to 'dating' marked the effective penetration of romance by the market.²³

Dating involved an apparently contradictory move that saw courtship become less controlled and more private through being moved away from the family and into the public realm of leisure. Working-class styles of leisure consumption merged with middle-class standards of behaviour in these new courtship practices. This construction of courtship as a public activity was accompanied by a simultaneous

²⁰ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: University of California Press, 1997), 49.

²¹ *Ibid*, 14.

²² *Ibid*, 31.

²³ *Ibid*, 26-39.

privatisation of the experience through the idealisation of the couple as a unique site of fulfilment.²⁴ Hence, the commodification of romance produced not just a practical alteration of courtship patterns, but also a symbolic transformation in the cultural conception of middle-class marriage. The ideal marriage was imagined as a stable, permanent union into which the intensity of the transient romantic experience had to be constantly infused through consumption. Hedonism and self-discipline merged in this romantic ideal as the pleasure of romance became something one had to work at. The ideal marriage was also disinterested. Reciprocal romantic love was the sole criterion for choosing a partner; economic or familial considerations in this choice were now marginalised. This romantic narrative emphasised the autonomy of the couple and the primacy of individual choice in questions of sexuality and marriage.

According to David Shumway, "it was only when marriage became a choice that expectations of it radically increased...The new desire for intimacy is both an expression of these new expectations of marriage and a response to the crisis that they in part evoked."²⁵ The marital manuals that emerged in the post-World War One era offered a two-fold solution to this crisis, which Shumway identifies as a discourse of romance and a discourse of intimacy. In the first, marriage was invested with all the thrill and excitement that had previously been culturally ascribed, particularly in romantic fiction, to courtship and adultery but not to marriage itself. In the work of advice writers like Marie Stopes and the novelist turned 'agony aunt' Elinor Glyn, "romance is no longer merely presented as a fantasy or diversion; rather it is endorsed as an appropriate image of married life."²⁶ A cultural example of this romanticisation of marriage was the Hollywood screwball comedy of the 1930s in which marriage is represented like an adulterous affair.

²⁴ Ibid, 49-66.

²⁵ David R. Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 22. See also, Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980* (London: Routledge, 1991) 66-91. On the changes in American social policy and law in relation to marriage in these decades see Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 156-179.

²⁶ Ibid, 65

By contrast, the intimacy discourse frames the 'problem' of marriage within the psychoanalytic therapeutic model. Where the discourse of romance valorised 'love' and 'passion' that of intimacy urges the importance of 'communication' within a 'relationship'. The centrality of the 'relationship' within the discourse removes the couple from any of the familial, social and economic functions that are inherent in marriage as an institution. The emphasis is on the psychological compatibility of the two individuals and the attainment of personal fulfilment through the reciprocal achievement of intimacy. The discourse of intimacy did not emerge as a distinctive discourse until the 1960s, since when this paradigm has dominated the cultural understanding of marriage in Western capitalist society. However, the essential co-ordinates of this discourse were already present in an emergent form within the transformation of marriage initiated by the marital manuals of the 1920s. By making marriage as a relationship the object of discussion, and emphasising the fundamental centrality of reciprocal sexual pleasure in an ideal of companionate marriage, the earlier marital advice literature created the template for the later conceptualisation of intimacy. And despite the quasi-scientific rhetoric of the post-1960s therapists, and their claims to be looking at relationships 'as they are' rather than in terms of the illusory idealisation of romance, the rather transcendental quality of 'intimacy' made it as ill-defined and as difficult to attain as 'true love'. In Shumway's view, "both discourses promise a great deal in the name of love. Romance offers adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding a perfect mate. Intimacy promises deep communication, friendship and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love."²⁷

It is these diverse transformations in both Catholic and secular thinking on sexuality in the mid-twentieth century that generated the Irish Catholic advice literature for teenagers. Formally, the emergence of the advice writer and 'agony aunt' as a figure of non-medical expertise on human sexuality created the possibility for a reconfiguration of authority on sexual matters in Irish Catholicism. In the public morality discourses bishops and clerical intellectuals asserted their authority to speak on sexuality on the basis of their specialised training in moral theology and their position in a divinely-ordained hierarchy of bishops, clergy and laity. In contrast, clerical writers of advice literature did not base their authority to

²⁷ Ibid, 27

dispense advice on their training in moral theology but on their pastoral experience. The new significance of 'experience' in asserting expertise meant that it was no longer necessary to be a cleric to occupy the role of expert in relation to Catholic sexual morality. Nor, as the history of Angela MacNamara's career illustrates, was it necessary to be male. Crucially, the prevalence of the marital advice genre and of the agony aunt figures in popular culture also facilitated the different structure and tone of this new discourse, and the move from a register of injunction and warning towards an approach based on 'helping' young people to conduct their sexual lives more 'successfully'. In its content the marital ideal that was constructed for Irish teenagers in the Catholic advice literature was a *bricolage*, combining elements from conservative and liberal strands of Catholicism, but also from the prevailing secular currents within liberal capitalist societies – which included, of course, adapting assumptions and ideas about subjectivity, sexuality and marriage from the very sex educationalists and cultural sources, chiefly Hollywood, that are regularly condemned in the literature.

In this regard the marital ideal produced in the Irish Catholic advice literature was anything but 'traditional' – if by traditional we mean of long standing, static and resistant to change. On the contrary, the most distinctive feature of this advice literature is the dynamic synthesising of a wide range of religious and secular discourses and rhetoric that was actually directed at constructing an entirely new model of marriage rather than protecting an existing one. What makes this advice literature modern is not so much the novelty of its ideas on sexuality, marriage and self-development as this complicated, energetic and often contradictory project of fusion and synthesis.

3

The principle format for this Catholic advice literature directed at Irish teenagers was cheaply-produced pamphlets that were distributed through the Catholic parish network that covered the country. Irish Messenger Publications (IMP) and The Catholic Truth Society of Ireland (CTSI) were the main producers of these pamphlets. IMP is a Jesuit-run organisation that was, indeed still is, best known for

the monthly magazine, *The Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart*.²⁸ The CTSI was established in 1899 and was modelled on the English CTS, which had existed for a number of years and on a similar Catholic organisation in Germany.²⁹ The founding of both organisations at the end of the nineteenth century was a response to the steep rise in literacy, following the passing of the Education Acts in the 1870s, and the concomitant rise in the production and availability of cheap reading materials. According to an official history of the organisation, the CTSI was founded to protect Irish Catholic values from “the cheap and dangerous reading that was coming in increasing quantities from England.”³⁰ As we have seen in Chapter One, the CTSI became active in the campaign for censorship legislation in the 1920s.³¹ The organisation also diversified into areas other than publishing and book-selling, which included setting up a travel agency to organise pilgrimages to Lourdes, Rome and Jerusalem.³² In 1969 the CTSI was amalgamated into a new organisation called The Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland. This initiative was part of the Irish bishops’ response to the changes set in play by the Second Vatican Council, as well as to developments in Irish culture, predominantly the wider availability of television after the founding of RTE in 1961.³³

The advice literature for teenagers was but one part of a diverse variety of topics covered in the pamphlets published by both organisations. The main thrust of these publications was accessible explanations of various topics in theology, liturgy and church history. The topics included *How to Pray the Mass*, *Scruples: How to Avoid Them*, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin*, *Catholic Answers to Questions Posed by Protestants*, and the helpful *Escaping Purgatory* – along with the rather baldly-titled *Hell*, which featured luridly red flames on its cover.

²⁸ *The Messenger*, which is still in publication, was founded in 1888 by a Jesuit priest, James Cullen. Cullen, a teacher at Joyce’s *alma mater*, Belvedere College, was also the leading figure in founding the ‘Pioneers’ temperance movement ten years later. Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 30 and 56.

²⁹ Patrick J. Corish, *The CTSI: The First Fifty Years 1899-1949* (Dublin: CTSI, 1949), 11-13. Fuller, 30-31.

³⁰ Corish, 11.

³¹ Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922-1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 57-58.

³² Corish, 22. The first of these pilgrimages was organised in 1925.

³³ Fuller, 135.

There were also short biographies of saints and historical figures whose lives were considered notable or exemplary. The CTSI also published some short fiction, though even its own official history admits that much of this was quite didactic and of poor quality. However, it did also include work by some well-known writers such as Canon Sheahan, Katharine Tynan and Rosa Mulholland.³⁴ As an official organ of the mainstream church, the CTSI also reproduced pastorals, sermons, lectures and articles by bishops and clerical academics in pamphlet form. Joint statements from the Irish bishops, such as that issued after the 1927 Synod in Maynooth, were reproduced in pamphlet form. In the 1930s and 1940s the pamphlets were used to popularise Catholic social theory, with titles such as *A Christian Alternative to Communism and Fascism*, and in the post-Second World War period pamphlets such as *The Individual and the State* articulated church opposition to socialism and the welfare state. Sales of CTSI publications reached one million in 1925, dropped slightly in the 1930s and peaked during the early 1940s, when they reached two million a year.³⁵

The advice literature for teenagers first began to appear in the 1930s, but its heyday was in the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s. As with all of the publications from these organisations, the authors of the advice literature were clerical and lay, men and women, but the majority were priests. Both organisations reprinted writings by foreign authors, including some in translation, and a notable feature of the pamphlets for teenagers is that a high proportion were first printed in the United States. The work of a group of American priests, especially D. A. Lord, particularly dominated the CTSI's output of this literature. The range of Lord's output reproduced by the CTSI in Ireland between the mid-1940s and early 1960s offers an indication of the diverse forms in which this advice literature was presented. Pamphlets such as *Fashionable Sin, Divorce: a Picture from the Headlines* and *Love's All That Matters* are essentially polemical essays which offer a critique of contemporary cultural attitudes to sexuality and marriage. These are illustrated with references to statistics, newspaper articles and literary and popular culture – the latter references range from Oscar Wilde's "cult of sin" to the on-screen and off-screen antics of Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles.

³⁴ Corish, 42.

³⁵ Corish, 20-21.

Lord's tone is generally quite bitter and grimly sarcastic in these short essays. The title of *Love's All That Matters*, for instance, is meant sarcastically since the pamphlet is actually a denunciation of the modern "romantic nonsense" that crassly and short-sightedly neglects both the practical and spiritual elements that are the basis of a lasting marriage.³⁶ Set firmly against the "modern," which he often confusingly conflates with the "pagan," Lord is resolutely reactionary and unrelentingly anti-feminist – repeatedly it is the "modern young emancipated lady going at a wild and furious pace" who is to blame for the failings of modern society.³⁷ Such views were also articulated by Irish writers, such as Mary R. Swanton in her *Modesty and Modernity*. Swanton's pamphlet illustrates an interesting merging of the advice literature and public morality frameworks since she is offering young women advice on how they should dress properly, but also arguing that this apparently insignificant action has repercussions for the social order as a whole. Dressing immodestly is the first step on the way to graver sexual sins, since "the future adulteress – appalling word, but why not call a spade a spade – starts in much the same way as the fibber or the pilferer."³⁸ However, the woman is not the only one at risk in this spiral of sin. "But does she injure no one except herself?" Swanton asks, "does she not besmirch the fair name of Catholic womanhood and drag down those ideals of honour and decency which have always been the pride of our race?"³⁹

These polemical essays contrast the vacuity, impermanence and disorder of modern life with the solid, secure co-ordinates offered by Catholic sexual morality. This contrast can work negatively, as it does in Swanton's condemnation of women who fail to live up to these moral precepts. Lord's theology also has a strong strain of punitive Darwinism running through it. Thus, when discussing "sins of the flesh," he observes that "God and nature have seen to it that this sin should not await its punishment in eternity. The easily read story of divorce and infidelity, the unhappiness that reeks in our modern pagan literature, quite as much as the sad

³⁶ D. A. Lord, *Love's All That Matters* (Dublin: CTSI, 1956), 2-4.

³⁷ D.A. Lord, *Fashionable Sin* (Dublin: CTSI, 1944), 17.

³⁸ Mary R Swanton, *Modesty and Modernity* (Dublin: CTSI, 1938/1951), 4. [Two dates indicate a reprint.]

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5. Swanton also offers the clinching argument for modesty that "girls, like salads, look best when 'dressed.'"

little idiot children in our foundling homes are answers enough for those who call this sin a joy."⁴⁰ However, this 'stick' approach is less prevalent in the advice literature than the 'carrot' strategy of presenting an idealised version of Catholic marriage. The main vehicle for this is those pamphlets written in an instructional rather than a polemical register. Again, Lord was a prolific producer of this type of work, with pamphlets such as *What To Do On a Date, Your New Leisure Time And How to Use It, M is for Marriage And More, The Man of Your Choice and They're Married!*. This same instructional register frames the work of other American priests, such as John A. O'Brien and Godfrey Poage, whose pamphlets were also reprinted for an Irish readership by the CTSI.⁴¹ The Irish and English authors of this type of pamphlet sometimes styled their work as 'talks.'⁴² This appellation probably indicates the original provenance of some of this material in classrooms or sermons to school retreats, and it also signals the tone, a blend of informality and expert authority, for which the authors of this instructional literature were generally aiming. A variation on this instructional type of pamphlet is those advising parents on how to educate their children about sex and how to guide them through their difficult teenage years.⁴³ These included printed versions of public lectures delivered by Peter Birch, Professor of Education at Maynooth between 1954 and 1964.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, Birch's style and tone differs from most of the other writers, hewing closer to a detached position of expertise and drawing on biology, psychology and sociology to discuss "adolescence" rather than on pastoral or

⁴⁰ Lord, *Fashionable Sin*, 13.

⁴¹ Godfrey Poage, *What You Ought To Know Before Marriage* (Dublin: CTSI, 1950) and John A. O'Brien, *Falling in Love* (Dublin: CTSI, 1948) and *A Chaste Courtship: The Safest Way to Love and Marriage* (Dublin: CTSI, 1965).

⁴² For example, Aloysius Roche, *Talks for Girls* (Edinburgh: Sands & Co, 1932), M. J. Scott, *Courtship and Marriage: Practical Talks to Young Men and Women* (Dublin: Irish Messenger Publications, 1934) and Dom Peter Flood, *Early Manhood – Commonsense Talks With Boys in their Teens* (London and Dublin: Campion Press, 1949). Other examples of this mode of instructional literature written by Irish authors include, May Foster, *I Have a Soul to Save* (Dublin: CTSI, 1956), R. Brennan, *What a Boy Should Know* (Dublin: IMP, 1960), Richard Nash, *Between 13 and 20* (Dublin: IMP, 1958) and *Can I Keep Pure?* (Dublin: IMP, 1938/ 1951) and Angela MacNamara, *Living and Loving* (Dublin: CTSI, 1964). Like MacNamara, Richard Nash, a Jesuit priest, was also a *Sunday Press* columnist.

⁴³ Francis L. Filias, *Telling Your Children: A Moderate View* (Dublin: CTSI, 1954) and Los Angeles Archdiocese Council of Women, *Code for Parents* (Dublin: CTSI, 1955).

⁴⁴ Peter Birch, *The Adolescent in the Modern World* (Dublin: CTSI, 1957) and *Who Should Tell Them? A Talk on Sex Instruction* (Dublin: CTSI, 1959)

parental experience to talk to, or about, "youth". In this regard, Birch may be counted among the producers of this advice literature, but also among that group of clerical academics, such as Peter McEvitt, Peter Connolly and Jeremiah Newman, whose interventions in Irish public discourse in the 1950s and 1960s were based on their academic roles within non-theological disciplines rather than on any authority as theologians or bishops.⁴⁵

Those instructional pamphlets directed at a teenage readership also included a subset in which the advice is placed within a fictionalised framework. Again, the American priest D.A. Lord was a prolific producer of this type. Several of his pamphlets are framed as short stories involving the teenage Bradley twins, Sue and Dick, and their family friend, Father Hall. Thus, in one instance when Father Hall overhears Sue gossiping about a schoolmate this leads into a discussion on the sinfulness of gossiping, and in *I Can Read Anything* Hall explains to Dick the danger of "evil literature" and especially the "systematic attack on religion called Modernism."⁴⁶ After the initial scene-setting, the dialogue between Father Hall and the twins becomes rather perfunctory, with the priest essentially delivering the material from other Lord pamphlets in a more "chatty" style. In *The Pure of Heart*, Mrs Bradley asks Father Hall to have a chat with the twins after she finds them sitting on the veranda with a neighbouring brother and sister of whom she disapproves.⁴⁷ Hall then takes the twins for a walk into the suitably pastoral setting of the woods where he can usefully illustrate his points about the naturalness of the sexual instinct, and why it should only be exercised within marriage. This device of

⁴⁵ Peter Connolly was Professor of English at Maynooth from the mid-1950s until 1985, and was an active opponent of literary censorship in the late 1950s and 1960s. See James H. Murphy (ed.) *No Bland Facility: Selected Writings on Literature, Religion and Censorship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1991), 1-33. See also Chapter Six below. Peter McEveitt was appointed as the first Professor of Catholic Sociology and Catholic Action at Maynooth in 1937, and Jeremiah Newman later succeeded him as Professor of Sociology. See Patrick J. Corish, *Maynooth College 1795-1995* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995), 315-16 and Fuller, 142-143. In the 1950s and 1960s, Newman made a number of significant interventions in debates about rural depopulation and secularism. See Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-2002* (London: Harper, 2004[1981]), 286-7, 290.

⁴⁶ D.A. Lord, *Don't Say It!* (Dublin: CTSI, 1949) and *I Can Read Anything* (Dublin: CTSI, 1950).

⁴⁷ D.A. Lord, *The Pure of Heart* (Dublin: CTSI, 1957), 2. Father Hall also delivers advice about dating and courtship to the Bradley twins in *So We Abolished The Chaperone* (Dublin: CTSI, 1945).

a priest talking with teenagers is also used by another American pamphlet writer, J.T. McGloin; Father Robin's advice to a group of teenagers on *What Not to Do on a Date* includes the helpful formula F.E.A.R. – “if kisses are Frequent, Enduring and Ardent there can hardly be any just Reason for them.”⁴⁸ Irish advice writers, such as John J. Gorey and Leonard Gallagher, also produced fictionalised forms of advice literature; Gallagher uses an epistolary format in his matching pamphlets, *What a Girl Should Know* and *What a Boy Should Know*, based on the conceit of a priest writing a series of letters to his niece and nephew, Moira and Fergus, at various significant junctures in their lives.⁴⁹

Like their American counterparts, the Bradley twins, Moira, Fergus and their family are firmly situated in a middle-class milieu. Fergus goes from boarding school to university where he trains as a doctor before going overseas to gain specialist experience.⁵⁰ Moira's trajectory takes her from her convent school to a 'commercial college'. However, her uncle is very insistent that she doesn't take this secretarial career too seriously as it will only be an interlude before her real career as a wife

⁴⁸ J.T. McGloin, *What Not To Do On A Date* (Dublin: CTSI, 1950), 8.

⁴⁹ John J. Gorey, *May I Keep Company?* (Dublin: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1943). Leonard Gallagher, *Specially for Men* (Dublin: IMP, 1942), *What a Girl Should Know* (Dublin: IMP, 1942) and *What a Boy Should Know* (Dublin: IMP, 1942). Anon., *Say Lads!* (Dublin: CTSI, 1937/1958). Perhaps the most bizarre of these fictionalised advice pamphlets is Richard Stevenson's *Pure of Heart* (Dublin: IMP, 1957), which combines a full exposition of the advice literature concerns about pre-marital sexuality and marriage, with some Cold War anti-communist paranoia and a warning about the problems of religiously 'mixed marriages'. Stevenson begins his trans-national romance in a post-war Soviet prison camp. An improbably unlucky Irish priest finds himself imprisoned there because he inadvertently went for a walk too close to the border between the British and Soviet zones of occupation in Germany, where he was based as a British army chaplain. Father Jim befriends a Russian teenager who is a prisoner in the camp and is soon explaining to him the seriousness of “sins against purity”. Not put off converting to Catholicism by these warnings, Andrei returns to Ireland with Father Jim and is soon living with the priest's parents on their farm in Wicklow. Having proven himself hard-working and an exemplary Catholic, at the end Andrei, now known as Andy, has bought a nearby farm and is married to a local farmer's daughter, Nora. Before this can take place, however, Nora has to realise her error in getting engaged to the son of a local Protestant family – presumably any Catholic, even a Russian ex-con, being better than a Protestant.

⁵⁰ Gallagher, *Specially for Men*, 4. In the late 1940s less than two per cent of Irish children advanced to third level education. In 1961 a survey of education in Ireland found that just under half of the children, aged 15-19, of professional parents were in full time education, while this was the case for only ten per cent of the children, in the same age group, of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004) 532, 597.

and mother begins.⁵¹ Mary R. Swanton is also quite explicit in her assumptions about the class of her readers. She refers to “Ladies Day at the Horse Show” and “a point-to-point meeting” as occasions when the typical woman should dress appropriately. She also asks the ‘immodestly’ dressed girl to bear in mind “the effect of her conduct on those below her in station, [those] who are especially likely to be influenced by her moral outlook.”⁵²

Moira’s uncle also tells her that he “would rather you became interested in the theatre than the cinema.”⁵³ In their advice on how to conduct a date, the writers were primarily concerned with discouraging young people from extra-marital sex; the approach which they take to this matter is not to condemn such sexual behaviour but to offer young people advice and useful strategies on how to date more ‘successfully’. But there is also a palpable concern about young people’s patterns of leisure consumption and, more specifically, the fear of a concomitant dilution of distinctively middle-class norms of behaviour. The writers are keen that young people make use of their leisure time purposefully, in pursuits that are ‘improving’ and educational rather than pursuing wasteful and purposeless pleasure; the concert-hall rather than the cinema, the museum rather than the dancehall. As D. A. Lord writes in *Your New Leisure Time and How to Use It*, “badly used leisure makes loafers, drunks, prodigals and wastrels. Out of well-used leisure come cultured and cultivated men and women.”⁵⁴ This anxiety is equally detectable in Peter Birch’s ‘objective’ sociological discussion of ‘adolescence’ where he focuses particular attention on the problem of ‘teddy boys’ and other aspects of 1950s popular culture.⁵⁵

There is an obvious continuity here with the public morality discourses of the 1920s and the opposition to cinemas, dancehalls and the popular press. But Birch’s analysis indicates that a significant conceptual shift has also taken place. His objection to teenagers spending too much time at the cinema is not framed in terms of a threat to public morals and social order, but on the grounds that so

⁵¹ Gallagher, *What a Girl Should Know*, 10-11.

⁵² Swanton, 5.

⁵³ Gallagher, *What a Girl Should Know*, 14.

⁵⁴ Lord, *Your New Leisure Time And How to Use It*, 5.

⁵⁵ Birch, *The Adolescent in the Modern World*, 16-17.

much time spent in a world of fantasy “hinders the development of personality.”⁵⁶ This shift to a psychological paradigm is most explicit in Birch’s work given his academic mode of writing, but the same recalibration underpins the emergence of this genre of advice writing in its various forms. The literature offers young Catholics advice about dating, sex and marriage, but this advice is woven into a valorised narrative of individual development that prizes restraint, self-discipline and self-control. Young people are encouraged to practice these in the realm of sexuality, but in all other areas of their lives as well. The writers encourage restraint and discipline in such diverse aspects of life as personal hygiene, social manners, choosing one’s friends, managing one’s money and choosing a career. Behaving ‘modestly’ involves exercising control over one’s body in ways that are only tangentially related to sexual behaviour. This encompasses dressing (avoiding ‘immodest’ dress) but also looking (at ‘immodestly’ dressed girls, at the bodies of other boys in changing-rooms, at advertisements and films), talking (in a ‘clean’ or ‘dirty’ manner), listening (to ‘good’ or ‘bad’ companions) and reading (‘bad’ or ‘good’ books).

Furthermore, the model of development involves adhering to an established order of both class distinctions and gender differences. The pamphlet writers proceed on the assumption that there are innate or ‘natural’ differences between men and women. As the *Code for Parents* published by the Los Angeles Archdiocese puts it, “we cannot overlook the difference that exists between girl and boy natures; the former more psychological and the latter more physiological”⁵⁷. One aspect of this innate difference is that a young woman’s ambitions and desire for fulfilment are chiefly focused on motherhood and domesticity, not because of any social restraints or expectations but because, as Leonard Gallagher asserts, these are what a woman really wants “deep down in her soul.”⁵⁸

However, for the advice writers the more serious manifestation of this innate difference is that girls are more ‘emotional’ and boys are more ‘sexual’. In his talk directed at young men, Flood argues that men and women are equal but different

⁵⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁷ Los Angeles Archdiocese Council of Women, *Code for Parents*, 6.

⁵⁸ Gallagher, *What a Girl Should Know*, 14.

and outlines to the young man reading the pamphlet how a girl's nature differs from his own. This includes explaining that so long as girls "remain without the full sexual experience that belongs properly only to the married state, they are less directly sexual than he is."⁵⁹ According to Angela MacNamara, it is "in the nature of a man to be the aggressor – the one who initiates."⁶⁰ The reason dates go 'wrong' is that boys fail to 'control' themselves while girls fail to 'refuse'. Nevertheless, while boys may be expected to be the more active agents in seeking sex, it is girls who are expected to be the active agents in controlling sexual behaviour. Those pamphlets aimed specifically at adolescent boys are very keen on promoting self-control, self-regulation and the exercise of will as an essential element of becoming a middle-class man. This exercise of self-control ranges from the intimate "habit" of masturbation to the broader matters of education, career-choice and managing personal finances.⁶¹ Yet the writers unanimously concede that where sex is concerned such self-control will inevitably founder on the immovable rock of the man's nature. However, while a girl's subjectivity is apparently equally determined she is expected to be better able to exercise rational control over this nature. Richard Nash, for instance, asserts that, "it is very hard for him to resist: the girl is always the one who is to control the situation."⁶²

Clearly, a hypocritical and misogynistic double-standard is at work here. Almost the entire responsibility for maintaining 'purity', and avoiding pre-marital sex and pregnancy, is shifted unfairly onto young women. MacNamara's chilling assertion that "if a girl will not control her craving for affection she cannot then blame him if his nature propels him in passion to seek the ultimate closeness of sexual intercourse" encapsulates this double standard.⁶³ But MacNamara's claim also points to a striking feature of the narrative of development contained in this literature, which involves both conservation and innovation – the stable maintenance of a self that is prescribed by biology and history, and the energetic production of an entirely new and distinctive self. When advising her young *Sunday Press* readers on how to develop a "fine individual personality", MacNamara

⁵⁹ Flood, 19.

⁶⁰ MacNamara, *Living and Loving*, 9.

⁶¹ Flood, 10. Gallagher, *Specially for Men*, 2-13.

⁶² Nash, *Between 13 and 20*, 12.

⁶³ MacNamara, *Living and Loving*, 9

encourages them to think about an adult that they especially admire and to realise that "people are not just born that way: they have fashioned their personalities that way using the raw materials God gives each and every one of us."⁶⁴

One of the ironies here is that it is young women who are expected to be particularly diligent innovators and producers of personality. To assume their 'natural' and 'traditional' role as wives and mothers, subordinate to men and confined to a 'feminine' domestic sphere, they must be even more adept than young men at those defining attributes of the 'masculine' public sphere – being active, rational and productive. Gallagher's fictional priest character advises his niece, Moira, that "you must try to do the ordinary things now not because of others but because of yourself. You must begin to assume mastery of your life."⁶⁵ Furthermore, the most important reason why a girl should assert control over herself in this way does not lie in innate, gender differences that make it 'natural' for her to do so. Nor does it lie in the cultivation of virginity and the imitation of the Virgin Mary for the sake of her soul, though this conceit is used by some of the writers.⁶⁶ The fundamental reason is rational self-interest. Failing to maintain 'purity' puts a girl's chances of attaining the ultimate goal of marriage and motherhood in jeopardy. In the advice literature, girls are routinely reminded that a man will not marry a girl who will have sex with him outside of marriage – just as boys are warned against marrying a girl who does not 'respect' either herself or him. A curious feature of the warning to girls is the frequent use of commercial or business terminology. A man will not want "bargain-counter" or "shop-soiled goods," as both Mary R. Swanton and MacNamara put it.⁶⁷

The model of sexuality and marriage offered in the advice literature is inextricable from this model of individual development, with its conservative adherence to traditional morality combined with an endorsement of the modern values of innovation and rational self-interest. Like gender, sexuality also involves a complex negotiation of 'nature'. The advice writers invariably emphasise that sexual desire

⁶⁴ MacNamara, 'How to Develop Your Personality,' *Sunday Press*, April 7 1963, 23.

⁶⁵ Gallagher, *What a Girl Should Know*, 2.

⁶⁶ May Foster, *I Have a Soul to Save* (Dublin: CTSI: 1956), 2.

⁶⁷ Swanton, 18. MacNamara, 'That First Date: How to Avoid the Pitfalls,' *Sunday Press*, May 12 1963, 25.

is 'natural' and an 'appetite'. We noticed, for instance, how Lord's Father Hall took the Bradleys for a walk in the woods to have a conversation with them about sex. In particular, the writers reiterate the place of sexuality within a divine project of creation. Peter Birch, for instance, urges parents to give their children "a proper notion of the place of sex in God's plan for the world."⁶⁸ On the other hand, these natural desires, 'appetites' and 'passions' are precisely what are problematic and 'dangerous' about sexuality. As Richard Stevenson puts it, "with this holy instinct the reins must be held tightly."⁶⁹ Sexuality is divine ('holy') and natural ('instinct') and therefore good. But simultaneously sexuality is a potential source of disruptive and destructive energies, which must be controlled and stabilised by the application of reason.

This conception of sexuality as the site of an agon between nature and reason has its origins in the Counter-Reformation Catholic theological discourse of sexuality, which also informed the twentieth-century Irish Catholic discourses of public morality.⁷⁰ Where the advice literature diverges from the public morality discourses is in the argument for exercising such rational control. All of the pamphlets certainly warn against the consequences of sex outside of marriage, and, as we saw with Swanton's and Lord's polemics, these include social consequences. Extra-marital sex leads to illegitimacy and the 'blighted' lives of illegitimate children, along with promiscuity, adultery and divorce – which M.J. Scott describes as a "cancer" that "destroys the social body which it infects."⁷¹

The writers also give some fairly cursory attention to the consequences which engaging in such sex might have for one's soul, but this is surprisingly limited. Far more attention is given to the consequences for one's physical wellbeing, which include sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy (which is routinely described as a 'tragedy') and, according to D. A. Lord anyway, even infertility. However, the real focus of this discourse is on one's emotional well-being. As the American priest, Francis L. Filias argues in *Telling Your Children: a Moderate View*:

⁶⁸ Birch, *Who Should Tell Them?*, 7.

⁶⁹ Stevenson, 5.

⁷⁰ See Chapter One.

⁷¹ M. J. Scott, *Divorce is a Disease* (Dublin: CTSI, 1957), 10.

Sexual acts outside of marriage are evil partly because they have no meaning. The misuse of sex leads to a disquieting sense of emptiness and frustration because a mechanism has been abused contrary to its in-built purpose. On the other hand, sex properly used is sublime. It is something that is good only at the proper time and in the proper relationship.⁷²

His observation encapsulates the multiple ideas about sexuality which the advice writers attempt to combine. The “meaning” which sex is expected to have is twofold. As a “mechanism” with an “in-built purpose,” sexuality is defined as reproduction. All of these advice writers enthusiastically endorse Catholic moral teaching on procreation and birth control. Parenthood is valorised as a responsibility to God and society, and also as deeply fulfilling to the individual. The authors of the Catholic pamphlets also routinely criticise their non-Catholic contemporaries in the field of sex education and sex expertise for advocating the use of birth control and a ‘destructive’ separation of sexual pleasure from reproduction. But when sex is used “properly” it is not just biologically reproductive, it is also “sublime”. Nor are the consequences of misplaced sex measured using the rubric of reproduction and the social effects of either birth control or illegitimacy. The measure of ‘improper’ sex is the toll it takes emotionally on the individual because of that “disquieting sense of emptiness and frustration.” So while maintaining the primacy of reproduction projected in the Catholic theological definition of sexuality, the writers are also incorporating sexual pleasure into their paradigm. But, as with their advice on dating, this requires translating mere pleasure into something purposeful. Hence sex is expected to be not only reproductive but also ‘meaningful’, ‘sublime’, ‘spiritual’, a ‘mystery’.

A crucial element of the advice writer’s strategy is to not dwell on the “disquieting sense of emptiness and frustration” caused by sex outside marriage, but on the tremendous benefits of ‘meaningful’ sex within marriage. As the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Council of Women recommended to parents, “we must concentrate on developing a positive, attractive approach to moral goodness. It is not sufficient to warn or guard against evil ... it is necessary to demonstrate the happiness residing in a good life.”⁷³ In the view of the advice writers the “good life” is, of course, synonymous with marriage; in M.J. Scott’s opinion, “the greatest of life’s

⁷² Filias, 8.

⁷³ Los Angeles Archdiocese Council of Women, 4.

blessings is a happy marriage.”⁷⁴ While conveying a sense of marriage as a spiritual and social good, the advice writers never lose sight of the foremost benefit yielded by married life. What distinguishes the marital ideal from the discourses of public morality is that in this advice literature marriage principally satisfies needs that are individual rather than social, and emotional and psychological rather than spiritual. As D.A. Lord puts it in *They're Married!*, “marriage promises to the young couple happiness in abundance.”⁷⁵ The chronological structure of the advice pamphlets – moving from advice on relationships with parents, on how to behave at school and with friends, through puberty and adolescence and onto dating and marriage – situates marriage as the endpoint and climax of this narrative of development. The happiness offered by marriage is the goal and prize motivating the assiduous work of self-development invested in the production of ‘personality’. The attractions of this prize include the security of a stable place in the social order along with the emotional and spiritual rewards of childrearing and fulfilling one’s social obligations – and the importance of this is particularly emphasised in the advice to young women. However, the defining feature of a successful, happy marriage is the achievement of sexual intimacy. According to MacNamara, “in marriage the deep understanding and friendship developed during courtship is translated into physical terms by the act of sexual intercourse.”⁷⁶ This is why she warns teenagers who may be tempted to “steal the pleasures intended only for married people” that “you can never steal the joy and satisfaction they have. You may have temporary natural excitement and pleasure but no lasting happiness and much remorse to follow.”⁷⁷

In this discourse then, sexuality is a strategic calculus of immediate pleasure and eventual loss or deferred pleasure and greater gain; have sex before marriage and suffer the loss of all that potential fulfilment and happiness, or wait and reap the long-term benefits of connubial bliss. Hence sexuality and marriage are principally matters of rational choice. The advice writers urge parents to give children and teenagers both factual information about sex but to also give young people an expectation that sex should be ‘meaningful’ and that meaningful sex within

⁷⁴ Scott, *Courtship and Marriage: Practical Talks to Young Men and Women*, 10.

⁷⁵ D.A. Lord, *They're Married!* (Dublin: CTSI, 1957), 9.

⁷⁶ MacNamara, *Living and Loving*, 5.

⁷⁷ MacNamara, ‘How To Behave On That Date’, *Sunday Press*, April 28 1963, 27.

marriage will deliver them the ultimate fulfilment and happiness. In the logic of the pamphlets, therefore, sexual morality is less a question of choosing between right and wrong than a question of how one uses those choices to maximise the attainment of one's personal interest.

This arithmetic of choice is applied most crucially in marriage. The advice writers emphasise the enormous significance involved in choosing a partner, since what is at risk is one's 'lifelong happiness'. A substantial element of the advice being offered by these writers concerns how to go about making this choice. Hence the importance of dating 'successfully', since dating is a crucial time for assessing the quality, as it were, of a potential partner. Pamphlets such as Lord's *The Man of Your Choice*, Poage's *What You Ought to Know Before Marriage* and O'Brien's *Falling In Love* are explicitly structured around the idea of courtship as a process of selection and choice. Young people are particularly urged to find somebody with whom they are 'compatible'. Compatibility has various different meanings in this literature, which reflects the diverse formulations of marriage with which the advice writers are juggling. Compatibility can signify the practical choice of a fellow Catholic, while also serving as a code for staying within one's own social class. Thus, one should select a marriage partner "of the same background and tastes."⁷⁸ But the 'softer' implication of the term, finding someone with whom one is emotionally and temperamentally complementary, is also at work here. And since sexual intimacy is such a defining element of a happy marriage finding someone who is sexually complementary, "sexually responsive" in Angela MacNamara's phrase, is vitally important.⁷⁹ Thus, Godfrey Poage advises his young readers that,

the external manifestation of love, affection, is a necessary quality in husband and wife if they are to become, as God intends, one flesh and one spirit...You should try to find someone who has the same emotional temperament that you have. A girl who is simply bubbling over with affection should never tie herself down to an unresponsive iceberg. Nor should a warm-blooded young man give himself to a girl who becomes a bundle of nerves at the least manifestation of tenderness.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ D.A. Lord, *M is for Marriage and More*, (Dublin: CTSI, 1956), 2.

⁷⁹ MacNamara, *Living and Loving*, 4.

⁸⁰ Poage, 9.

Poage's idea of the pursuit of pleasure as godly encapsulates the synthesis that is being attempted in this marital discourse. On one hand, the meaning of marriage is still conceptualised within a religious and moral framework which emphasises its collective purpose. We notice that the active agent here is 'God' not the young couple and so their desires and choices would appear to be subordinate to this larger 'intention' – which invariably we will read as procreation but also, given the stress on social collapse in this literature, as the stable reproduction of the social order as well. In other words, the 'primary' reproductive and collective purpose of marriage is still at work here. However, the achievement of intimacy is not now 'secondary' to this purpose but a "necessary" element in its achievement, and sexual pleasure is equally vital, the "external manifestation," if this intimacy is to be successfully created. Sexual pleasure is no longer conceptualised as a salve for disordered bodies that pose a threat to the social order. On the contrary, the body as a force field of libidinal drives, "bubbling over" and "warm blooded," provides a crucial stimulus to the generation of the social order, since the young individual actively and strategically pursuing their bodily pleasures and striving towards self-realisation and self-fulfilment is the ultimate guarantor of the collective good.

4

As this discourse of individual fulfilment within marriage took shape in Irish Catholicism in the 1940s and 1950s, the public morality discourses that had been dominant in the 1920s and 1930s did not disappear. In the early 1950s the Irish Catholic bishops in their Lenten Pastorals were still exercised about dancing, 'evil literature', drinking and "the dangerous allurements that lie in the path of youth."⁸¹ Nor should these different discourses be thought of as radically different or divergent. Many of the same concerns about the relationship between sexuality, leisure and social order were present in the advice literature, and in some cases, such as the writings of Lord and Swanton, the same rhetoric was also deployed. The crucial difference between the two is not so much a difference of objectives as of strategy, the transition from injunction to advice, and a conceptual realignment in the relationship between the individual and the society. The public morality discourses operated on the assumption that individual self-regulation of behaviour

⁸¹ Bishop Quinn of Kilmore in 1952, quoted in Fuller, 54.

was an attractive ideal but a shaky foundation on which to build a stable social order. The marital ideal proceeds on the basis that individuals rationally pursuing their self-interest will, with some helpful direction, successfully maximise their self-interest in a way that also contributes to the maintenance of stability and order; the idealised marriage, combining procreation and intimacy, being at once an allegory of this successful alignment and also the chief mechanism for actually achieving it. Epistemic shifts at this level of discourse take place incrementally, and do not involve a sudden break so much as a gradual and complex process of synthesis and re-calibration. Previously residual or subordinate elements are brought forward, reconceptualised and now appear dominant, thereby producing an alternative paradigm. Nevertheless, as we have seen, these epistemic shifts can be accelerated socially by some sense of crisis and in post-Second World War Ireland the displacement of the public morality discourse was precipitated by an economic and demographic crisis and the failure of national development. In these conditions, the marital ideal could be advanced as both a private individualised good but also as a social good, and indeed as a national imperative.

One of the most salient indicators of Ireland's dire economic situation in the late 1940s and 1950s was an ongoing population decline, particularly in rural areas, due to the high and accelerating rates of emigration from the country. According to Enda Delaney, between 1951 and 1961 over 400,000 people left southern Ireland, which was nearly one sixth of the population as recorded in the 1951 census.⁸² This represented the acceleration of an existing trend that had been ongoing since the 1930s, and had been fuelled by the demand for labour in Britain during the Second World War and in the re-building of the country in the post-war period. Britain was the destination of the majority of Irish emigrants, and the main areas of employment were nursing for Irish women and construction for men. As Delaney points out, Ireland's experience of mass emigration in these years was not unique. Irish emigration was part of a pattern of large-scale European-wide migration from underdeveloped agricultural regions to the rapidly expanding industrialised economies, particularly from Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece to France, West

⁸² Enda Delaney, 'The Vanishing Irish?: The Exodus from Ireland in the 1950s,' in Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O' Shea and Carmel Quinlan (eds.) *Ireland in the 1950s: The Lost Decade* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004), 80-86, 81. See also Tracey Connolly, 'The Commission on Emigration, 1948-1954' in the same volume, 87-104.

Germany and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, relative to the size of the population the scale of Irish emigration in the decade was especially severe.

In 1954 a group of Irish and Irish-American intellectuals responded to this situation in a collection of essays edited by John A. O'Brien, an Irish-American priest and sociologist.⁸³ As its title suggests, *The Vanishing Irish* took a somewhat alarmist approach to the declining population and the impending 'extinction' of the Irish. One of the most striking features of the analysis offered by the contributors to the book is that emigration is generally conceived as a symptom rather than as a cause of the population decline. In the view of O'Brien and his contributors, the primary cause of that decline in population was the very low marriage rates in rural Ireland and the prevailing pattern of late marriages caused by the system of inheritance. On the title page O'Brien placed a quote from Bishop Lucey of Cork lamenting that, "rural Ireland is stricken and dying and the will to marry is gone." Some of the contributors, such as the American clerical academic Edmund Murray, even claimed that emigration was actually caused by the low marriage rate, and that the reason more women than men were emigrating was because the former couldn't find husbands in Ireland. This was something of a reversal of logic since the low marriage rate was partly the result of the high number of young women emigrating, and also migrating from rural areas.⁸⁴

The trajectory of Murray's article also exemplifies the other striking feature of the analysis offered in O'Brien's volume. Murray put forward various suggestions for how the government could stimulate economic development in rural Ireland, such as promoting the mechanisation of agriculture and offering incentives for industrial

⁸³ John A. O'Brien (ed.), *The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World* (London: WH. Allen, 1954). Among the Irish contributors were the writers, Sean O'Faolain, Bryan MacMahon, Maura Laverty and Paul Vincent O'Carroll, and the journalists Aarland Ussher and John D. Sheridan. The American contributors included clerical academics like O'Brien and Edmund Murray, but the inclusion of the others seems to be based primarily on their Irish-American ancestry rather than any other criteria. O'Brien was also the author of the advice pamphlets, *Falling in Love* and *A Chaste Courtship: The Safest Way to Love and Marriage*, re-printed by the CTSI.

⁸⁴ Edmund J. Murray, 'The Key to the Problem', in O'Brien (ed.), 71-83, 72. For an analysis of Irish women and emigration in this period, see Catriona Clear, "'Too Fond of Going': Female Emigration and Change for Women in Ireland, 1946-1961', in Keogh et al. (eds.), 135-146.

development around the country. He also identified opening up the economy to “American capitalisation and investment in Irish production” and increasing trade with the United States as a significant prerequisite for economic development. However, Murray ended his essay by highlighting that what could be achieved through the government’s economic policies to stop the population decline was limited since, “in the final analysis, who’s going to force Erin’s stubborn bachelors to be less mis-informed and less marriage-shy? That’s the key to the problem.”⁸⁵ Similarly, Sean O’Faolain offered a persuasive critique of how Irish governments had neglected the social fabric of rural Ireland. He highlighted the poor standards of living in rural areas, the lack of water, sanitation, electricity and leisure facilities, and the more general failure to build a strong welfare state in the country. O’Faolain notes the paucity of social services, the low rate of social welfare payments such as the childrens’ allowance, the absence of a comprehensive free health care service (he condemns the role of the doctors and the Catholic bishops in bringing down the Mother and Child scheme a few years before) and the chronic shortage of affordable housing in the country.⁸⁶ However, he ends this analysis of the political situation with the argument that, “the term ‘living conditions’ involves far more than physical limitations. The whole question of sex in Ireland is dominated also by profound psychological repressions.”⁸⁷

Indeed, the page and a half where he outlines the failings of government policy and the absence of a welfare state – without ever actually explicitly using that term – are surrounded by nine pages mainly given over to illustrating this latter point. He claims that young Irish women complain that young Irish men are “cagey, spiritless, selfish and spoiled by their mothers”; they have no interest in, or capacity for, passion and romance but are looking for two things in marriage. One is “the plain, homespun qualities of housekeeper and mother”, which they do not believe most young Irish women can deliver, and the other is a dowry.⁸⁸ A particularly perplexing question for O’Faolain is how “any normally sexed man” can wait as patiently for marriage as many young Irish men do. Among the plausible reasons which he claims to “have heard” for this situation are “that sexual desire is sublimated by

⁸⁵ Murray, 77.

⁸⁶ Sean O’Faolain, ‘Love Among the Irish’ in O’Brien (ed.), 111-122, 119-120.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 120.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 116.

religion, exhausted by sport, drugged by drink or deflected by an innate or an inculcated Puritanism.”⁸⁹ In common with several of his fellow contributors, O’Faolain points to a contradiction in the Catholic Church’s position on marriage in Ireland. While actively encouraging young people to get married, the church has also “unconsciously”, as O’Faolain puts it, fostered an anti-sex culture that has left Irishmen “conditioned into a frustrated terror of women.”⁹⁰

O’Faolain’s appalled description of the average young Irish man’s sexual nature is insistently repeated by his fellow contributors, albeit without his comic verve. Mary Frances Keating claimed “that the Irishman hates marriage” and “loathes responsibility”.⁹¹ However, she is quick to shift the real responsibility for this on to women, since sons are infantilised by their mothers and daughters are discouraged from marriage and encouraged to become nuns. Along with mothers, the other guilty party are Irish educationalists and “the sort of education which has tended from the beginning to create an illusion of voodoo where sex is concerned.”⁹² When not attributing the population problem to the Irish psyche, the writers blame the structure of the Irish family. Parents hold too much control over their adult children, instilling sexual repression in them and refusing to yield them the financial security they need to marry. Rather than idealising ‘the Irish mother’, a surprising amount of angry and misogynistic blame gets heaped on to this figure. She is accused of being in thrall to a celibate clergy and encouraging her children towards this life.⁹³ The older generation of farmers are especially blamed for not passing control of the family farm on to their inheriting son at an early age. This means sons put off getting married until late in life, or if they do marry the young farming couples have to share a home with the extended family. Again, the older

⁸⁹ Ibid, 117.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 120. This argument is also made by Bryan McMahon, ‘Getting on the High Road Again’ and Shane Leslie, ‘Romance Frowned Upon’ in O’Brien (ed.), 208-225 and 85-87.

⁹¹ Mary Frances Keating, ‘Marriage-shy Irishmen’ in O’Brien (ed.), 170-181, 174. Similar arguments are put forward in Maura Laverty’s almost identically-titled essay, ‘Women-shy Irishmen,’ 50-59.

⁹² Keating, 175.

⁹³ This argument is particularly foregrounded by Keating and Laverty.

generation of farming wives are accused of being hostile towards their daughters-in-law, with whom they have to share the family home.⁹⁴

All this opprobrium heaped on the older generation suggests that the cause of the problem is a blind and steadfast adherence to the traditional way of doing things. However, the actual root of the issue is not so much tradition as a failed or botched modernisation. When discussing the relationship between living standards and the low marriage rate, O'Faolain argues that the main obstacle to marriage is not absolute poverty. As he points out, Irish people were much poorer in pre-Famine Ireland when the population was rising. The issue is relative poverty and the higher expectations which young Irish people have for their life and which getting married, in the prevailing economic conditions, makes difficult to achieve. O'Faolain celebrates these higher expectations as a measure of progress, "our young people are developing a proper concept of what constitutes decent living conditions, and until they get them they are on strike against marriage. We are rearing generations in Ireland that have ten times more pride and ambition than their parents ever had and good luck to them", and deplores the failure of the state to allow them to meet their higher expectations.⁹⁵ In his essay, Bryan MacMahon offers a striking connection between sexuality and a view of Ireland as 'stuck' in a state of failed modernity. As he saw it, one of the reasons for the low marriage rate in rural areas was that the traditional system of arranging marriages had disappeared but nothing had replaced it. From the 1920s onwards, young people gave up on matchmaking because of the new ideas of romance and love that came from abroad, mainly through the medium of popular culture. But they were not confident enough, or were in some way unable, to fully embrace these modern forms of courtship. "Thus it was that the young Irish found themselves poised between two worlds", MacMahon observes, "magazines, popular songs, plays of an outmoded English vintage, the talk of returning emigrants – all poured scorn on the old ways of finding a life partner. Thus, semi-ashamed of matchmaking and complete neophytes in the art of love, the Irish sit glowering in their chimney corners."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Patrick Noonan, 'Why Few Irish Marry,' and John D. Sheridan, 'We're Not Dead Yet,' in O'Brien (ed.), 42-49 and 184-196. O'Faolain and MacMahon are also very critical of the older generations and the inheritance system.

⁹⁵ O'Faoláin, 118.

⁹⁶ MacMahon, 209.

For *The Vanishing Irish* contributors, the economic and political causes of the population decline were epiphenomena. Ireland's peripheral position within the global economy, a supplier of cheap food and labour to its wealthier neighbours on either side of the Atlantic, was not considered to be a determinant of the country's underdevelopment. Nor were domestic politics, especially the lacklustre attempts by successive governments in the post-war years to shift their policies to the left and develop a welfare state, considered of any real consequence in interpreting the population crisis.⁹⁷ Instead, O'Brien and his contributors believed that the real crux of the issue was cultural, and the crucial sites requiring transformation were the Irish family and the Irish mind. Keating, for instance, argued that the economic argument only shifted the blame from the real source of the problem, which was "a culture that is anti-marriage and anti-sex."⁹⁸ What was first required for Irish modernisation was not the building of factories and the inflow of foreign investment but a new sexual culture. The country's outmoded extended family system needed to be overhauled and replaced with a model of the nuclear family predicated on companionate marriage and liberal individualism. In other words, a new model of self-development was a prerequisite, not a happy consequence, of successful national development – and just such a model of self-development and just such an ideal of modern companionate marriage were being offered to Irish teenagers in the Catholic advice literature.

In the next chapter we will see that this culturalist interpretation of Irish underdevelopment was not unique to O'Brien's contributors. On the contrary, by the time they were writing in the early 1950s the idea that Ireland's sexual culture and family system was at the root of the country's failed modernisation had been well established in Irish intellectual and political discourse for almost two decades. In particular, this current of thinking was especially prominent in any discussion of the 'problem' of rural Ireland. If we can locate the transformations within the Irish

⁹⁷ On the history of welfare and public health policy in this period see Eamonn McKee, 'Church-State Relations and the Development of Irish Health Policy: the Mother and Child Scheme, 1944-53,' *Irish Historical Studies*, 25 (1986), 159-194 and Susannah Riordan, 'A Political Blackthorn': Sean MacEntee, the Dignan Plan and the Principle of Ministerial Responsibility,' *Journal of Irish Economic and Social History*, 27 (2000) 44-62.

⁹⁸ Keating, 176.

Catholic discourses of sexuality in relation to this crisis of modernisation, what of the history of the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman*? The displacement of the public morality discourses by the marital ideal involved the infusion into Catholic thinking of the libidinal sexual *episteme* and the re-evaluation of sexual pleasure as productive. It also involved reconceptualising the relationship between self-development and the collective good, between the individual and their society. Ostensibly then, the narratives of subjectivity and sexuality offered by Catholicism and the Irish literary *bildungsroman* were coming into closer alignment than had previously been the case. The *bildungsromane* of Maura Laverty and Patrick Kavanagh offer contrasting responses to this permutation in the history of Irish sexual discourse, as well as each being significant literary interventions into the mid-century Irish 'crisis' of marriage and modernisation.

Chapter Five

**Sex and the Country:
the rural *bildungsromane* of Maura
Laverty and Patrick Kavanagh**

1

Speaking to the Agricultural Science Society at UCD in December 1943, Taoiseach Eamon de Valera proposed a scheme of government grants to help farming families build a second house on their land for their inheriting son or daughter. The Taoiseach believed that providing this second house might encourage earlier marriage among the adult children of farming families, since the reluctance of young couples to continue the traditional practice of sharing a house with older parents was perceived to be a cause of the low marriage rate in rural areas. He subsequently set up a government committee to examine the feasibility of this 'dower house' scheme, but he was surprised when his proposal was generally met with apathy and it never got beyond this early stage.¹

Earlier that year, on St. Patrick's Day, de Valera had also spoken about rural Ireland and its development in his famous radio broadcast that has, as Diarmaid Ferriter observes, over time come to be "lazily sneered at as the 'comely maidens' speech".² This broadcast was not primarily concerned with rural development but with commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Gaelic League, and de Valera encouraged his listeners to work harder at making Irish the spoken language of the country. However, de Valera begins his speech by asking his audience to "turn aside for a moment" from the "desolation in which the greater part of the world is plunged" to consider "that ideal Ireland that we would have". For de Valera,

that Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of serene old age.³

¹ Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the Life and Legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 282. De Valera's proposal is also discussed by Catriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 44-45.

² Ferriter, 363.

³ Eamon de Valera, 'The Undeserted Village Ireland' in Seamus Deane et al, (eds.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volume 3* (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 747-749, 748.

By contrast with the practical tone of the 'dower house' speech, the rhetoric of the St Patrick's Day broadcast is self-consciously utopian. However, a common feature of these two speeches is the idea that rural Irish development and the question of sexuality were fundamentally linked. In the 'dower house' proposal, this connection is quite literal. The plan combined practical attention to improving the housing stock in rural areas with an underlying notion that modernisation cannot be confined to this infrastructural plane but must also take place in more intimate spheres of life as well. De Valera's scheme involved building new houses – but those new houses would also create new types of families, nuclear rather than extended, which would in turn produce new types of individual subjects. Similarly, one of the messages of the St Patrick's Day vision is that pleasure is as necessary as hard work to the achievement of progress. There is a remarkably sensual quality to the rural *Gemeinschaft* miniaturised in those familiar lines. From the brightness of the window lights to the laughter of the young women and the warmth thrown out by the old folk's fire, de Valera's rhetoric works on the senses as much as on the rational mind. There is a libidinal energy coursing through his imagined society; this is not a depopulated rural arcadia but a landscape vibrantly inhabited by those 'athletic' and 'comely' bodies which are foregrounded for our attention. And all those sturdy children suggest a society that is not only industriously productive but reproductive as well.

By 1943 the idea that the fundamental cause of rural Ireland's dire economic situation and declining population was cultural, rather than economic and political, had been given intellectual credence by the work of two American anthropologists, Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball. Arensberg's *The Irish Countryman* (1937) and their jointly-authored *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) were based on the fieldwork which the two men conducted in County Clare during the 1930s, as part of the Harvard Irish Survey.⁴ A basic premise of their work was not to conceive

⁴ In 1931 the Department of Anthropology at Harvard launched the Harvard Irish Survey under the overall direction of Ernest Hooton. There were three strands to the study, which was carried out between 1931 and 1936: seventeen excavations of prehistoric sites directed by a group of Harvard archaeologists, working in conjunction with Irish archaeologists and the National Museum of Ireland; a project to 'racially profile' the Irish using 'anthropometric' measurements which was undertaken by a team of physical anthropologists; and Arensberg and Kimball's ethnographic fieldwork in County Clare. Hooton originally planned that the findings of the three branches of the project would be

of the 'small farmer' class whom they studied as a class at all, struggling to defend its interests against those of the richer, 'strong' farmers, but as a distinctive culture. In this view, the crucial difference between the strong and small farmer is that where the former operated on the basis of rational calculation as an individual, the latter obeyed a different calculus based around kinship, marriage and reproduction. As Arensberg described it, "the countryman at work is little concerned with the usual economic categories. He is a family man...his activities, incentives and rewards take shape within the habitual expectancies and mutualities which make up the pattern of his family".⁵ The fulcrum of this 'familist' social system was marriage. Marriage was the crucial point of transition in the life cycle of the individual, the family and the society. At marriage the inheriting son became a social adult (regardless of his biological age) and the older farming couple lost control in the household but gained the prestige that came with age. The non-inheriting children either married out or emigrated – a process funded by the dowry brought in by the inheriting son's marriage. Thus, one family was dispersed and another one formed to take its place but the reproduction and continuity of the family farm as a social unit was maintained. Crucially, this 'familist' social structure depended on a highly orchestrated system of arranged marriages in which individual choice was allowed some place but was certainly not a decisive factor.

However, the two anthropologists argued that while this system was perfectly functional at producing a stable society it was also producing a precipitous decline in the population. Using the post-Famine census figures, they identified an ongoing decline in the rural Irish population caused by emigration and the exceptionally high rates of non-marriage or delayed marriage. In the anthropologists' view, the statistics for the marriage patterns of the Irish country people, "present features

combined in an integrated work which would provide a broad historical, racial and sociological survey of the country. However, this plan never came to fruition because it was delayed by the outbreak of the Second World War, and this delay combined with developments in the social sciences to make the idea less intellectually compelling. The results of the archaeological work were published in various articles, and those involved in the anthropometric measurements project published *The Physical Anthropology of Ireland* in 1955. Only the ethnographic work of the social anthropologists has had a lasting impact on Irish scholarship. See Ann Byrne, Ricca Edmondson and Tony Varley, 'Introduction to the Third Edition' in Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* [3rd edition] (Ennis: CLASP Press, 2001), i-ci.

⁵ Conrad M. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 38.

which are unique among civilised people".⁶ Rural depopulation was therefore a systemic consequence of the 'familist' mode of social organisation, in which the pre-eminent social status of marriage could only be maintained through denying access to marriage to a high proportion of the population. This situation had arisen out of the particular way in which rural Irish society, specifically its smallholder class, had responded to modernity. This response had been neither to embrace nor resist the social and economic effects of modernity, but to attempt to integrate these changes within the traditional social structure. As Arensberg and Kimball describe it, "the mobility of a changing, democratised social order, capable of recruiting the ranks of one class from the children of another, has been combined with the fixity, the conservatism, and the rigidity of an ancient and still vital familism."⁷ So, while acknowledging that there may have been larger historical currents at work in those demographic trends charted in the census figures, such as the seismic shift from tillage to pasture that took place in Irish agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century, the two anthropologists concluded that "the kernel of the problem lies, of course, in the behaviour of the country people."⁸

Though Patrick Kavanagh's long poem *The Great Hunger* (1942) was first published a year before de Valera's St. Patrick's Day broadcast, it has become a standard gesture in Kavanagh criticism to situate the poem as an excoriating riposte to the speech.⁹ The poet's surgical realism and starkly realised portrait of a rural community mired in economic and cultural poverty is placed in reproachful contrast with the politician's arcane rhetoric and myopic failure to confront reality, while the crippling sexual starvation of Kavanagh's embittered, aging anti-hero mocks the delicate, genteel virginity of de Valera's athletic youths and comely maidens. But this distinction between the unhealthy romanticism of an outdated

⁶ Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* [2nd edition] (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1968 [1940]), 99.

⁷ *Ibid*, 220.

⁸ *Ibid*, 103. On the economic and social effects of the shift from tillage to pasture in nineteenth-century Irish agriculture see Kevin Whelan, 'The Modern Landscape' in F.H.A. Aalen et al, (eds.) *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 90-94.

⁹ See, for instance, Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: Born Again Romantic* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1991), 154-155 and Jonathan Allison, 'Patrick Kavanagh and Antipastoral' in Mathew Campbell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 67.

nationalist pastoralism and the brutal but vital vigour of realist anti-pastoral underplays the full complexity of Kavanagh's struggle to create a mode of writing about the rural Irish experience. To draw out this complexity, in this chapter I will read Kavanagh's long poem in conjunction with his two prose works, the autobiography *The Green Fool* (1938) and the novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948). *The Great Hunger* conjures a dystopian vision of Arensberg and Kimball's familist rural society and produces a powerful and tragic affirmation of the association between sexuality and rural underdevelopment. By contrast, while *Tarry Flynn* creates an equally unappealing vision of sexual, cultural and economic impoverishment in rural Ireland it does so in a comic mode. Ostensibly, the absurd failure of the novel's marriage plot and its pitiless burlesque of rural match-making are a darkly comic commentary on the impossibility of rural development. However, one of the most notable effects of Kavanagh's shift to a comic register is that the novel's satire is promiscuous. It strikes at the meanness and hypocrisy prevalent in rural Irish life but also at urban representations of rural Irish life – the unrelenting bleakness of *The Great Hunger*, as much as the pastoralism of de Valera. In other words, the novel bawdily rejects the culturalist account of history, sexuality and underdevelopment that had found its most compelling literary expression in Kavanagh's long poem.

Furthermore, since *The Green Fool* and *Tarry Flynn* are both *bildungsromane*, the relationship between the narrative of individual formation and of collective development is a complex problem driving both plots. In each of these texts, Kavanagh works at finding a narrative mode in which individual and collective experiences can be satisfactorily woven together. This problematic is not at all present in *The Great Hunger* where the scrupulously 'objective' realist aesthetic, and the rather scopic narrative perspective, places both Maguire and his community at a distance from the reader. However, this also means that the question of rural underdevelopment is settled in the poem – the narrative explores the lineaments of this underdevelopment while essentially accepting it as a 'given.' In the *bildungsromane*, the incessant friction between the young character's quest for personal fulfilment and their desire to be part of the collective quest for modernisation produces a more ambiguous and complicated view of rural life. In both the autobiography and the novel there is a volatile combination of satire and

nostalgia, naturalism and pastoralism which inevitably generates diverse and contradictory effects. Most notably, while Kavanagh's long poem dwells exclusively on the sterility and atrophy of rural life, his two prose works emphasise those modernising currents that are shaping his young character's rural community. In both works, Kavanagh's ambiguous response to rural modernisation is to the fore. On one hand, he appears to chide rural Ireland for its failure to conform to a bourgeois ideal of modernity, but, on the other hand, any signs of the pursuit of capitalist development are treated with a grim suspicion worthy of de Valera and his yearning for 'frugal comfort'. Indeed, his two *bildungsromane* suggest that Kavanagh's response to de Valera's pastoral utopia is less the straightforward rejection manifest in *The Great Hunger*, and more of an oedipal confusion of repudiation and desire.

In the fiction of Kavanagh's contemporary, Maura Laverty, one finds a similarly complex literary response to the association between sexuality, rural life and Irish underdevelopment that was so prominent in Irish public discourse in the 1930s and 1940s. At the time of her death in 1966, Laverty was best known as a cookery writer, a radio broadcaster and playwright, and as the writer of *Tolka Row*, the first drama serial or 'soap opera' on the newly-founded RTE television station.¹⁰ However, she had first come to prominence in the 1940s as a novelist. Her first novel, *Never No More* (1942), was published to considerable popular and critical acclaim and this was followed by *Alone We Embark* (1943), a romantic novel set in rural Ireland, and *No More than Human* (1944), which formed a sequel to her first novel. Laverty's last novel, *Lift Up Your Gates* (1946) is notable for the switch in setting from rural Ireland to a Dublin slum and she was to publish no more fiction for adults. Laverty subsequently turned her final novel into the first of her trilogy of Dublin plays – *Liffey Lane*, *Tolka Row* and *A Tree in the Crescent* – which were popular and critical successes in the early 1950s.

¹⁰ On Laverty's biography and career, see Catriona Clear, "'I can talk about it, can't I?': The Ireland Maura Laverty Desired 1942-46,' *Women's Studies*, 30, 6 (2000), 819-835, and also Maeve Binchy, 'Introduction' in Maura Laverty, *Never No More* (London: Virago, 1985 [1942]), xi-xix. On her career as a playwright, see Christopher Fitzsimons, *The Boys: A Biography of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards* (Dublin: New Island, 2002 [1994]), 169-176.

As a banned novelist, a contributor to *The Bell* and, like Kavanagh, a recipient of Sean O'Faolain's patronage, Laverty was obviously allied with de Valera's liberal critics. Extracts from her then unpublished first novel appeared in *The Bell* in May and June 1941, along with an editorial inspired by them, and O'Faolain provided a glowing introduction to the published novel.¹¹ More significantly, and in contrast to all the other Irish writers discussed in this dissertation, Laverty was very actively committed to progressive causes, such as improving nutrition, the eradication of tuberculosis and the provision of public housing. As a member of the national executive of Clann na Poblacta, the reformist party of former republicans that enjoyed a brief ascendancy in the late-1940s, she wrote the script for the party's innovative campaigning documentary film *Our Country*.¹² While Laverty's political concerns, especially with nutrition and tuberculosis, have a very strong presence in *Never No More*, what is perhaps more surprising is the novel's vibrant commitment to de Valera's style of pastoral utopianism.

In her first novel, Laverty attempts to redraft the bourgeois Irish Catholic *bildungsroman*, shifting the balance between the individual and collective narratives of development. In contrast to Joyce and to her contemporary, Kate O'Brien, Laverty tries to find a narrative form through which *bildung* can be imagined as a process of fusion and integration between the young heroine's desires and the demands of her society, rather than as a process that must, by definition, require some sort of rupture or conflict between self and society. While aiming to create a different type of Irish Catholic formation narrative, Laverty was also striving to create an allegory of rural modernisation and progress in her *bildungsroman*. To achieve both of these ends, Laverty elaborated in her fiction a version of the Catholic marital ideal discussed in the previous chapter. Through this marital ideal, the individual's desire for pleasure and fulfillment could be symbolically aligned with a social form that guaranteed collective stability and continuity. However, Laverty did not turn to the traditional romance or novel of

¹¹ The Editor, 'Provincialism,' *The Bell*, 2,2 (1941), 8. Sean O'Faolain, 'Preface' in Maura Laverty, *Never No More* (London: Virago, 1985 [1942]), 46-55.

¹² Clear, "'I can talk about it, can't I?': the Ireland Maura Laverty Desired 1942-46,' 821. For a discussion of this film and its place within the development of Irish documentary filmmaking in those years, see Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber, 2007), 298-304.

marriage in pursuit of this symbolic resolution; while the marital ideal is frequently described and illustrated in the novel, this is not a narrative of the young heroine's journey towards marriage. Instead, Lavery turned to various other forms of writing about rural Ireland: the nineteenth-century Irish Catholic novel of rural life, but also those 'scientific' modes of writing about rural Ireland, such as anthropology and folklore study, that had come to the fore in the 1930s. This narrative strategy has paradoxical effects. By eschewing the romance, Lavery avoids the impression that she is 'importing' a bourgeois marital ideal into rural Ireland. The whole thrust of the novel is towards creating a vision of rural Ireland as an intricate, complicated and vibrant society which can draw on its own intellectual and cultural resources to fuel its development. In this way, Lavery was challenging the prevailing anthropological account of an atrophied society. But since launching this challenge involved using some of the narrative methods used in those same accounts, the novel also reproduces the distancing effect that is pervasive in those writings. The complicated temporality of the novel wraps its utopian vision of rural Ireland in nostalgia and a sentimental story of lost childhood, and the novel ends with the heroine's departure from her now 'lost' community.

In his analysis of the historical relationship between Indian nationalism and the country's peasant communities, Partha Chatterjee distinguishes between what he terms 'peasant consciousnesses' and 'bourgeois consciousnesses.'¹³ He argues that the peasant uprisings which took place in India in the nineteenth century illustrate that the peasant political consciousness evolved out of a particular understanding and experience of community and solidarity, in which "individuals are enjoined to act within a collectivity because, it is believed, bonds of solidarity that tie them together already exist."¹⁴ Bourgeois nationalist politics, on the other hand, was founded on the primary unit of the individual and political mobilisation was understood as "an aggregative process by which individuals come together into alliances on the basis of common interests." Indian nationalist leaders, in the colonial and post-colonial eras, worked to mobilise the peasantry as part of the nation building project, but always remained distrustful of the consequences of

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 163.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

peasant political action. The different forms of consciousness underpinning the different types of political action meant that peasant political mobilisation always threatened to overflow and breach the parameters established by the bourgeois political framework. The nationalist political establishment's approach to the peasant communities was to be "careful to keep their participation limited to the forms of bourgeois representative politics in which peasants would be regarded as part of the nation but distanced from the institutions of the state."¹⁵

To assume that such a 'peasant consciousness' existed in precisely this form in rural Ireland in the 1930s and 1940 would be to endorse the exoticising anthropological perspective of Arensberg and Kimball. Nevertheless, the history of rural political mobilisation in those decades does suggest a strong degree of alienation among rural dwellers from the urban political elite.¹⁶ On the other side, urban intellectuals and politicians, from the American anthropologists to de Valera to *The Vanishing Irish* contributors in the early 1950s, insisted on analysing rural Ireland's economic crisis in terms of culture and sexuality and propounded this alienation through reiterating a concept of rural Ireland as a place where things were done differently, and where people inhabited their subjectivity and their sexuality in some peculiar, pre-modern style. Biographically, Lavery and Kavanagh were well-placed as writers to intervene into this debate among the urban elite about the causes of rural Ireland's failed modernity. Lavery was the daughter of a relatively prosperous farmer in County Kildare who had squandered the family fortune, while Kavanagh spent his early years struggling to make a living from a small farm in the drumlin country of County Monaghan. Both attempted, with mixed success, to pursue a career as a writer and intellectual among Dublin's literary,

¹⁵ Ibid, 160.

¹⁶ Clann na Talmhan/ The Farmers' Party was founded in 1938 through the amalgamation of already existing farming groups. Its creation represented a belief among farmers that direct political participation, rather than lobbying, was needed to get their dire economic problems addressed. The party won ten seats in the Dáil elections of 1943, and participated in the Inter-Party government of 1948-1951. However, it was already in decline by then. This was partly due to the rise of a new generation of activists, who founded organisations like the Irish Farmer's Association and Macra na Feirme in the 1950s and who had a renewed faith in non-party political action. The other chief reason for the decline of the party was that it had always struggled to hold together under one umbrella the divergent class interests of the 'big' and 'small' farmers. See Tony Varley and Peter Moser, 'Clann na Talmhan: Ireland's last farmer's party,' *History Ireland* 3 (1995), 39-43.

cultural and political establishment (which had also been the trajectory of de Valera's career a generation earlier). In short, their own consciousness straddled the boundary between 'peasant' and 'bourgeois' that was being so actively reinforced by Irish intellectuals during those years. Thus, Laverty and Kavanagh's rural *bildungsromane* comment on, while also being aesthetically determined by, the contradictions and lacunae of this discourse on rural Ireland, marriage and modernity.

2

Set in the 1920s, Maura Laverty's *Never No More* begins with Delia Scully, the novel's thirteen-year-old narrator, returning home with her family from her father's funeral. Her father's gambling, followed by his years of illness, have left Delia's family in straitened financial circumstances, and her mother announces that she plans to move the family from Ballyderrig, the Kildare village where they live, to Kilkenny city where there will be more opportunities for her to pursue her drapery and dressmaking business. Delia is distraught at the thought of leaving her maternal grandmother, to whom she is much closer than she is to her mother. She is delighted then when Gran suggests that Delia should come live with her on her farm outside Ballyderrig rather than move to Kilkenny. The rest of the novel charts the years which Delia spends living with Gran, but this happy phase in her life comes to a close with Gran's sudden death. The novel ends with the grieving Delia, now aged seventeen, bidding farewell to Ballyderrig before setting off to take up a job as a governess in Spain. Laverty's readers would later be able to follow Delia to Spain in the sequel, *No More than Human* (1944).

Ostensibly, Laverty's narrative has the makings of a straightforward *bildungsroman*. There is a plot that begins and ends with two transitional moments in a young heroine's life and there is a nurturing relationship with an older woman who can guide her through her moral, intellectual and social formation. Some of the plot's momentum does come from the sequential narrative composed of incidents from Delia's emotional life: grief and loss, her first romance, her unhappy time away at boarding school, and the anxieties attendant on her body maturing physically. But unusually for a *bildung* narrative, Delia's life constantly struggles for significance against the much more elaborately plotted and more compelling

stories involving the various inhabitants of Ballyderrig. Laverty's novel is subtitled "the story of a lost village," and 'The Lost Village' was the title given to the extracts from the then unpublished manuscript which appeared in *The Bell* in May and June 1941. The story of Delia's formation and development is thus contained within a larger portrait of a whole community, and Delia the 'character' becomes somewhat marginal in the text relative to Delia the 'narrator'. In Laverty's novel the production of interiority and psychological realism that was central to the classical realist *bildungsroman*, and which also underpinned Joyce and O'Brien's modernist narratives, clashes with a different type of narrative device – the anthropological 'native informant'.

For long stretches the novel swerves away entirely from Delia's formation narrative and becomes an ethnographic account of the rhythm of social life in a rural Irish community. Turf-cutting and pig-killing, weddings and wakes, local customs and superstitions, craftwork and cookery are all described in detail in the novel. As a typical example, the novel's fifth chapter begins with the departure of Delia's family for Kilkenny and with the arrival from there of the news that her infant brother has died two months later. Having helped to take care of this boy, Delia is grief-stricken at his death. All of this is briskly dealt with in three pages. Delia explains that her baby brother died in May, and that helping Gran to cook for the extra labourers employed at that time of year for the turf-cutting helped her to get over her grief. This then leads into a lengthy description of the beauty of the bogland landscape in the early summer, and we are introduced to the Reddin family who work at the turf-cutting. Mick Reddin and his sons are widely admired for their skill, strength and diligence at this work. But they are also held in some suspicion by the local community for their republican politics and anti-clericalism. The Reddins' politics and anomalous position in the community are illustrated with comic stories which recount Mick's arguments about religion with the pious local barman, how he outwitted the arrogant new parish priest in their first exchange, and the unorthodox answers which the boys gave to the priest when they were being examined on their religious knowledge at school.¹⁷ After this, there is a brief description of how turf was cut and saved, and this is followed by a long, detailed description of the rather improbably lavish dishes which Gran prepared for the labourers. The chapter ends

¹⁷ Maura Laverty, *Never No More* (London: Virago, 1985 [1942]), 46-55.

with a description of one of the Reddin sons playing the fiddle for those gathered in the kitchen after supper. According to Delia, the other neighbours invariably found the young man's playing of old Irish airs and tunes beautifully done but unsettling. She concludes the chapter by linking this aesthetic experience of unease with the Reddins' political views and marginal position in the community; "the unrest of the Reddin clan that made them despise our apathy and our contended acceptance of whatever government was in power, that drove Willie and Joe to fall fighting on the edge of the Curragh a few years later, had disturbed our quiet kitchen while the boy played, and comfortable peace came to us once more when his footsteps died away down the boreen."¹⁸

Laverty's style of plotting owes as much to the narrative patterns of oral storytelling as it does to the conventions of literary realism. Her endless digressions and her stories within stories mean that the framework of a sequential, linear narrative is retained in only the most tenuous form. The individual chapters of the novel form self-contained plots, and there is often little or no connection between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next. Within the chapters there is a fluid temporality to the plotting. As with the comic tales of the Reddin's anticlericalism, the narrative frequently moves backwards to tell an incidental story within the central incident that is being narrated in the novel's 'present', moves forward to relate some future outcome or resolution of that secondary story (in this case, the death of the Reddin sons in the Civil War), and then moves back to continue relating the 'present' incident. Several chapters also contain the oral storytelling technique of opening with a dramatic *précis* of its contents.

The novel is compounded of diverse modes of writing. It is a fictionalised autobiography, though Laverty at the time exaggerated the extent to which it was actually autobiographical.¹⁹ Laverty's style was also indebted to the ethnographic and folkloric methods of narrating Irish rural life that had come to the fore in the 1930s. According to the memoirs of her friend, the journalist and folklorist Bríd Mahon, Laverty was a frequent visitor to the Irish Folklore Commission offices in

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 58-59.

¹⁹ Clear, "'I can talk about it, can't I?': the Ireland Maura Laverty Desired 1942-46", 820. Binchy, xii-xiii.

Dublin.²⁰ This Commission had been established by the government in 1935 and, under the direction of Séamus Ó Duilearga, employed a team of folklore collectors who travelled around the country, predominantly to the Irish-speaking areas of the West, recording folk tales and other information on 'folk' life. Between 1935 and 1971, when it was disbanded and the archive moved to UCD, the Commission amassed a huge quantity of transcriptions, sound recordings and photographs.²¹ In his assessment of the Folklore Commission, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin describes it as "one of the most important cultural projects in Irish history." He argues that "the scope and ambition of the work of the Folklore Commission was immense and the result an extraordinarily rich archive of international importance".²² Nevertheless, he also argues that Ó Duilearga and his colleagues conceived of the 'folk' culture of Ireland as a priceless but essentially residual archaic culture that needed to be rescued and preserved. Their aim was, as Ó Duilearga wrote, to "save this valuable heritage from death."²³ As with the Harvard project and Arensberg and Kimball's research in Clare, the valuable scholarship achieved by these endeavours was underpinned by a tendency to constitute rural Ireland as an inert object of study rather than as a viable, functioning entity.

Many of the customs, superstitious practices and recipes Laverty claimed to be recollecting from memory were actually taken from the Folklore Commission archives and from other publications, such as Florence Irwin's *Irish Country Recipes* (1940) and Josephine Reddington's *The Economic Cookery Book* (1905, reprinted in 1927).²⁴ Clair Wills also notes that the novel continued, in a different mode, the work of Laverty's government-sponsored cookery book, *Flour Economy* (1941). That pamphlet had been designed to encourage Irish housewives to use flour more carefully and imaginatively as the country, cut off from its normal supplies by the Second World War, experienced chronic wheat shortages. As the

²⁰ Bríd Mahon, *While Green Grass Grows: Memoirs of a Folklorist* (Dublin, Mercier, 1998), 120-126.

²¹ Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 25-27. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 128 -141.

²² *Ibid*, 141.

²³ Quoted in Ó Giolláin, 131.

²⁴ Clear, "'I can talk about it, can't I?': the Ireland Maura Laverty Desired 1942-46," 829-830.

cookbook communicated the government's message that saving wheat while maintaining an output of nutritious cooking was a woman's duty in a time of national emergency, the novel also worked to foster the government's goal of national consensus. In Wills's view, "Laverty's sentimental writing was one answer to the search for a language and a literature that could reflect "Irish life" in a realistic, matter-of-fact, even pragmatic manner – and at the same time encourage a sense of community and civic identity."²⁵

But while *Never No More* is shaped by these contemporary political and intellectual currents, its structure also conforms to a longer standing tradition of the rural Irish novel. Laverty's pluralist, anecdotal and rather anarchic plotting, along with the novel's elaborately woven temporality, particularly recalls Charles Kickham's *Knocknagow* (1873), the best-selling Irish Catholic novel of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One of the chief effects of Kickham's style was that it foregrounded the communal rather than the individual narrative. As Emer Nolan argues, through exchanging "analysis for a loyally affectionate report on the foibles of the community... *Knocknagow* gives to the emerging nation a previously unavailable sense of its own interiority".²⁶ The stylistic similarities between her novel and Kickham's indicate the degree to which Laverty was motivated by a similar desire to give literary expression to a communal Irish rural experience. In this light, it is notable that Laverty abandoned fiction relatively early in her career in favour of the theatre and, subsequently, her television work. In many respects the 'soap opera,' with its precisely defined communal setting, open-ended temporality and multiple narrative strands, gives greater scope than the novel for just this fusion of individual and collective narratives for which Laverty was striving.²⁷

So while Laverty may have been following intellectual fashion with *Never No More*, she was also attempting to produce a different type of Irish Catholic *bildung* narrative. For Joyce and O'Brien, *bildung* is characteristically defined by the young

²⁵Clair Wills, 'Women Writers and the Death of Rural Ireland: Realism and Nostalgia in the 1940s', *Éire-Ireland* 41, (2006), 192-211, 209.

²⁶Emer Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 124.

²⁷ For an interesting analysis of *Tolka Row* see Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press/ Field Day, 1996), 51-57.

person's struggle to locate a site of original individuality and a space of freedom against the pressing demands of society. In their novels, this space of individual freedom is figured socially as the artistic vocation (cast as a secular version of the religious vocation), geo-culturally as 'Europe,' and politically as 'international Catholicism' and 'Liberalism' (in opposition to 'Ireland' and 'Catholic Nationalism'). Just as Delia's story becomes submerged within the plenitude of other plot lines involving the wider community of Ballyderrig, *bildung* is conceived in Laverty's novel as a process of moral and emotional growth propelled by the young person's deepening absorption in a flawed but organic community that is rich in examples of how to live one's life well. While Joyce and O'Brien produced narratives in which going 'away', either literally or imaginatively, was a prerequisite for attaining *bildung*, Laverty tries to imagine a way of achieving *bildung* at 'home'.

The earlier *bildungsromane* eroticised the drive towards freedom and towards achieving a distinctive subjectivity in opposition to the homogeneity and conformity of society. In *Portrait*, sexual desire infused the *bildung* narrative with an invigorating libidinal energy that fuelled the drive towards freedom, whereas in O'Brien's novels a disruptive moral crisis provoked by illicit sexual experience produced fertile conditions for her heroines' emotional and moral development. Unsurprisingly then, as Laverty sought to re-formulate the available literary model of Irish Catholic formation, redistributing the symbolic weighting assigned to the individual and to the collective, she also had to create a different erotics of development, and to recalibrate the conceptual relationship between sexual pleasure and reproduction. To achieve this goal Laverty, who worked as an 'agony aunt' with Radio Eireann, produced in fiction a version of the marital ideal which, as we saw in the previous chapter, was formulated during the 1940s and 1950s in the Catholic advice literature for teenagers.

In *Never No More* Gran is the chief spokeswoman for this marital ideal, which she outlines most fully in a conversation she has with Delia when she finds the girl sitting in fear after having her first period. To begin with, she makes some passing criticism of Delia's mother for not having prepared Delia for this event, as Gran had done for her daughter; it was a staple part of the Catholic advice literature to criticise parents who kept their children ignorant of sexual matters, whether through

shyness or through a misguided notion of protecting their children. Gran goes on to explain menstruation and reproduction to Delia, using a rather mystifying analogy involving a nearby waterway. This stream, she says, appears to flow on uselessly most of the time, but when their neighbours dammed it last month it proved very useful for their sheep-shearing. Similarly, Delia's periods may seem like a terrible nuisance now but one day, when she is married and becomes pregnant, she will realise the true purpose of them. Gran then employs another farming analogy, the farmer sowing seed on the soil, to explain reproduction. She emphasises that the farmer with his seed and the fertile soil are both necessary for the crops to grow, just as a man and a woman are equally necessary for reproduction. In Gran's view, God deliberately designed things this way to give women and men an equal stake in the creation and rearing of children. Delia then asks why it is a sin for a girl to have a baby before she's married. Gran explains that, firstly, having sex outside of marriage is adultery and therefore a sin and, secondly, that children are better off when they are brought up by two parents. This is why a girl should "keep herself to herself and wait for the right man to come along – the man who'll love and respect and marry her."²⁸ When Delia asks why people don't always wait, Gran explains that "the wanting of a man for a woman and a woman for a man is a craving in our poor bodies", and that it is something like the appetite for drink. But just as "decent" people control their craving for drink and don't "make beasts of themselves", so too should they control their craving for another body. Delia then notices that Gran looks across at a picture of her late husband before going on to say that "done in love and with the blessing of God on it, there's no joy to come near it. It is being lifted right out of the world and into the next in the arms of the person you love more than yourself. But done in lust, it is nothing but brute drunkenness with a disgust and a shame and a vomit after it."²⁹ To emphasise the Catholic orthodoxy of Gran's view on these matters, she finishes the conversation by teaching Delia a prayer to recite every night in which Delia will ask God to protect her 'purity'.

In her conversation with Delia, Gran employs the familiar tropes of the Catholic advice literature. These include the pastoral analogies to demonstrate that sex is natural and therefore good, but also the contradictory idea that it is precisely this

²⁸ Laverty, *Never No More*, 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

natural quality of sexuality, its tendency to turn us into “beasts,” that makes it so vital that our sexuality be held in check by our reason. While the moral imperative – God has ordained things that way – is given a sort of formal primacy it also seems the least compelling motivation for doing this. Gran dwells at much greater length on the practical reasons why marriage is necessary for raising children securely and effectively, and is at her most poetic when describing the physical and emotional pleasure to be had from sex within marriage. In other words, Gran employs the same stick and carrot logic offered by the advice writers to their young readers: give way to your desires at the wrong time and place and you will be miserable, but wait until you’re married and incomparable happiness and fulfilment will be your reward. A distinctive feature of Laverty’s fictional version of the Catholic marital ideal is the emphasis she places on sexual pleasure. There is the striking image of an elderly lady, whose orthodox Catholic piety is well attested throughout the novel, animatedly remembering the pleasures of her marriage bed. Indeed, Gran is associated with sensual pleasure throughout the novel because of her cooking. Rapturous descriptions of the tastes and smells of her food, and of her neighbours delightedly eating at her table, punctuate the text. As Maeve Binchy puts it in her introduction to the 1985 edition of the novel, Laverty was a “food pornographer.”³⁰

Moreover, while Gran and Delia’s conversation ends on the pietistic note of the prayer for purity, this is not the end of the chapter. Next morning grandmother and granddaughter go out early to gather mushrooms. This first precipitates an ethnographic turn in the narrative, an explanation of the seasonal availability of wild mushrooms and recipes for mushroom-based dishes and herbal remedies, and then the narrative takes another digression into the story of the “Shift Carrolls,” a local family whose house Delia and Gran pass on their way to the mushroom field, and the origins of their unusual nickname. Years before, Dennis Carroll and Maggie Doyle had fallen in love. However, his strong farmer parents had forbidden Dennis to marry Maggie, who was the daughter of a labourer, and insisted on sending him to England. While nursing her broken heart, Maggie and her mother received one of the parcels of clothes her sister periodically sent from America.

³⁰ Binchy, xi.

This parcel included a silk chemise, which Maggie decided to try on late one night. Maggie was enraptured by the effect which the silken garment had on her body: "in spite of the ache in her heart for Dennis Carroll, she was young enough and woman enough to feel exultant that her limbs were white and slim against the sapphire of the silken chemise and that her small breasts pushed trim and pointed under the creamy froth of lace edging."³¹ In her distracted, blissful state Maggie walked out of the cottage and stands under a tree in the moonlight. Coincidentally, Dennis was just passing by the house, to say a last farewell before leaving for England the next day. Overwhelmed by the sight of Maggie's beauty he decided to go against his parents' wishes. In the face of his determination the parents relented, and now, many years later, Maggie is the wife of a prosperous farmer and the mother of a large family. So the story of Delia learning about sex does not end with the prayer for purity, but with an image of a thoroughly respectable marriage that has a deep sexual passion at its heart.

Indeed, wherever she looks in her community Delia sees instances of happy marriages built on similar foundations of love and passion: her grandmother's servants, Judy and Mike; Bids Mullen and Ned Reddin, Molly Nolan and John Kehoe. She also sees instances of marriages that were unhappy because of mismatched personalities and because too much rational calculation went into the choice of partner: her parent's unhappy marriage, and the tragic stories of Miss Derrigan, whose misguided thriftiness makes her wait for years before marrying her fiancé, and Bella Hetherington, who refuses to disobey her bigoted father and waits until he dies before marrying her Catholic boyfriend. When the two women finally marry they both die soon afterwards in childbirth. Laverty's novel generally distributes the rewards of a happy, fulfilling married life to those who fail to protect their 'purity,' and denies such happiness to those who stick too rigidly to the rules. By contrast with their tragic, over-cautious sisters, the various young women in the community who become pregnant outside of marriage, such as Bids, or are themselves illegitimate such as Judy, all find loving young men to marry.

Interestingly, Gran is both the most articulate exponent of the marital ideal in the novel, and also the leading practitioner of toleration towards those who break the

³¹ Laverty, *Never No More*, 72.

precepts of sexual purity. Along with employing Judy in her household, she also employs Sarah Gorry on a more casual basis. It is well known in Ballyderrig that Sarah supplements what she earns as a labourer through working as a prostitute. She has four children and is unmarried. We are told that in the community, "we accepted her for what she was, and that was all there was to it."³² However, Gran's relationship with Sarah extends beyond mere acceptance or toleration. In particular, she is exceptionally supportive, emotionally and financially, when Sarah's young daughter dies. Gran's tolerant attitude extends beyond forgiving those guilty of sexual misconduct since it also incorporates a pluralist acceptance of ethnic and religious differences; there is a lengthy account of her generous help to a Traveller family, and one of her closest friends in the village is Hope Leadbeater, who is a Quaker.

In Laverty's marital ideal then the community's need for social reproduction and stability is united with the individual's need for sexual and emotional fulfilment. The *bildung* narrative of subject formation can be successfully interwoven with the narrative of communal development, and the goal of selfhood can be achieved within, rather than without, the sphere of the collective. But Laverty also uses the marital ideal to map out a modernising project for rural Ireland. The crux of this project is to forge a society that is progressive, tolerant and pluralist without undermining its prevailing class structure, and to enlarge the scope for individual fulfilment without threatening the organic basis of the community. Idealised marriages, such as that between Maggie and Dennis Carroll, provide both an allegory for such a project and an actual means to its achievement: in such a marriage the individual can fully pursue his or her own desires and exercise agency but do so while adhering to inherited social formations and furthering the collective goal of stable social reproduction. As with Maggie and Dennis, marriage can also suture the class divisions running through the community without fundamentally altering their structure, much as Gran's benevolence towards her servants ameliorates their particular troubles while morally securing her own position as landowner and employer. The novel's domestic ideal, with its stress on the moral value of good housekeeping, fulfils a very similar function. Rigorously efficient standards of modern hygiene and nutrition are combined with an approach

³² Ibid, 39.

to cookery and health that is apparently steeped in traditional recipes and beliefs, while sensuous pleasure (the rhapsodic descriptions of the smells and tastes of food) co-exists with hardworking industry (the detailed descriptions of the labour that goes into producing these sensual pleasures).

Gran is not just the advocate and prime exponent of these marital and domestic economy ideals; she is also an embodiment of Laverty's ideal rural Irish society. She is a strong, independent woman who is nevertheless deferential towards patriarchal ideas of gender roles. A strict advocate of traditional marriage, she also extols the importance of sexual pleasure and is exceptionally tolerant of those who breach her own ideals on sexual purity. Her commitment to 'improvement' and to high standards of domestic economy is exemplary, and yet she bases much of her domestic practice on inherited 'folk' knowledge. Gran's friendship with Hope Leadbetter is primarily based on their shared belief in the value of domestic economy and good cooking, and so Gran is a devout, orthodox Catholic who has 'Protestant' standards of rigorous hard-work and efficiency. Her exacting domestic standards and high level of culinary achievements are, we are repeatedly told, exceptional among her Catholic neighbours. So she is at once the matriarchal lynchpin of the community, but also a pioneer of development in that community.

But the novel ends with Gran's death, and with Delia's departure for Spain. This ending clearly destabilises Laverty's project to re-write the Irish Catholic *bildung* narrative. Her attempt to re-imagine the relationship between subjective and collective development is undermined with the re-emergence of the trope of departure and the lapse back into the type of ending characteristic of the Joyce and O'Brien *bildungsgromane*. The marital ideal offers Delia a route towards integrating her quest for fulfilment into the collective drive towards stability and social reproduction. While the novel valorises this option at length, it cannot finally show Delia pursuing it. Essentially, Delia neither accepts nor rejects the fusion of self and collective offered in the marital ideal. As the novel ends, she is leaving Ballyderrig in grief because she is forced by circumstances to go and she leaves bearing no tremendous expectations of her future. As the novel's subtitle indicates, the emphasis at the end is not on Delia's future but on what she has 'lost' – Gran, but also Ballyderrig. Therefore the ending also undermines Laverty's use of the

marital ideal as an allegory of rural development. The novel offers us a utopian vision of what rural Ireland could be like, but it gives us no incentive to work towards bringing it about. Gran, the embodiment of this utopian ideal, is dead and nobody can resurrect the dead. Nor indeed would we as readers want to since Gran's death gives the otherwise chaotic narrative some semblance of a satisfying structure and Delia's mourning provides an abundance of sentimental pleasure.

But even aside from the ending, the novel's idiosyncratic temporality also reveals the unstable contradictions inherent to Laverty's pursuit of a model of how rural Ireland could become modern without ceasing to be traditional. As we saw with the account of the turf cutting and the Reddin family in the novel's fifth chapter, the narrative is marked by a distinct slipperiness about time. The ethnographic register in which the cooking and turf-cutting are described, and the fluid temporality of the oral story-telling narrative technique – in which the stories within stories shift us around between past, present and future – situate this 'lost' community in a sort of archaic 'folk' time outside of history. But then the brief reference to the killing of the Reddin sons in the Civil War means that historical time with all its tragic complexity reasserts itself in the narrative. While the narrative is structured temporally by a 'natural' calendar of changing seasons which is registered in the recurring description of the landscape and of farming and domestic practices connected to the seasons, Laverty also explicitly identifies two historical dates at the beginning and end of her narrative. We are told that Delia moved in with Gran on "October 4th, 1920" and that Gran "went to Heaven on the twenty-third of September, nineteen hundred and twenty eight."³³ However, we are also told that Delia is "nearly fourteen" at the beginning of the novel, and seventeen at the end. While we shouldn't read too much into this sloppiness on the part of Laverty and her editor, this odd mixture of precision and inaccuracy is nevertheless revealing of a deeper structural disjunction in the novel between a realist attempt to accurately capture a historical rural community that is now 'lost', a folkloric tendency to situate this community in a 'traditional' temporal plane outside of history, and a utopian gesture towards imagining an ideal rural community that is not so much lost as yet to be created. This profusion of narrative forms and temporalities is also an expression of Laverty's liberal politics and her desire to make things better while avoiding

³³ Ibid, 15 and 280.

radical change. Just as her ideal of marriage combined the fulfillment of individual desires within the framework of a collectively useful and stable institution, her technique of presenting a utopian ideal of what rural Ireland should be that is wrapped in a nostalgic account of what rural Ireland was provided Laverty with the means to imagine that change for the better could be brought about without fundamentally changing very much at all.

3

Where Laverty's novel envisioned a rural utopia of plenitude and erotic fulfilment, Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* envisioned a rural dystopia where "life is more lousy than savage."³⁴ At the centre of the poem is its portrait of Paddy Maguire, a lonely, elderly 'small' farmer and bachelor, who has been defeated by a life of unceasing labour and unthinking subservience to the demands of family and religion. The narrative shifts around chronologically to track Maguire's life and to diagnose how he came to be in this wretched position. But the poem also moves outward from its portrait of Maguire to encompass his whole community. In the poem's vision, this moribund society is hopelessly mired in a poverty which is economic, but also cultural and spiritual. The poem ends by registering a final movement outwards, from Maguire to his community to rural Ireland as a whole; in the words of the poem's closing lines, "the hungry fiend/ screams the apocalypse of clay/ in every corner of this land."³⁵

Kavanagh's long poem is composed of a series of interwoven narratives. One is a narrative which frames the story of Maguire as the defeat of a life force by a more powerful death drive that pervades his culture. In a parody of traditional marriage vows, Maguire is "faithful to death" and towards the end of the poem we get a prophetic description of Maguire in his grave. Images of the ceaseless and at times anarchic fertility of the natural world are juxtaposed with images of the mortality and sterility of the human world. Directly after their mother dies, for instance, Maguire's sister goes to prepare the calves' feed.³⁶ Thus the cyclical fertility of the farm animals is contrasted with the deathward trajectory of the Maguire family. The

³⁴ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* [ed. Antoinette Quinn] (London: Penguin, 2004), 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

complex temporality of the poem's structure reinforces this idea. The poem sets a number of temporal cycles in articulation with each other: the cycle of a working day, the cycle of a year composed of farming seasons and the cycle of one man's life. This juxtaposition of activity and stasis – things are constantly moving but going nowhere, apart from death – acts as a rebuke to Maguire and his neighbours as their sterility is contrasted with the fertility of the natural world.

This narrative is fundamentally theological and spiritual. For Kavanagh, the life force that pervades nature, and which is suppressed and deformed in the humans, is a manifestation of the presence of God in the universe. Like the sunlight on the river, the fertility of nature is “a slice of divine instruction” that stands in contrast to the false, death-dealing instruction which Maguire receives during his weekly attendance at mass.³⁷ In this narrative, sexuality is primarily a reproductive rather than a libidinal drive and the image of Maguire masturbating over the kitchen fire late at night encapsulates the idea that this drive has been hopelessly misdirected into futile sterility in this rural world. That spiritual narrative, with its Romantic and religious underpinnings, co-exists with two other narratives that are essentially psycho-sexual and socio-historical. Maguire's timidity, lack of courage and neurotic anxiety about sexual sin are identified as the reasons behind his life of loneliness, self-denial and sexual frustration. However, these psychological determinants of his behaviour, and of the dreadful state in which his behaviour and decisions leave him, are in turn shown to be determined by human relationships and social conditions. The psycho-sexual and the historical intersect most sharply in the portrayal of Maguire's relationship with his mother, which the poem repeatedly identifies as the predominant cause of his problems. In describing this mother-son relationship, Kavanagh merges Freud with Arensberg and Kimball to show Maguire as the victim of a perverse deformation of the Oedipal process, but also as the victim of rural Ireland's peculiar familist system of social reproduction.

Mrs Maguire is Kavanagh's anti-Gran; where Laverty's Gran is a pioneer of rural development, Mrs Maguire acts to impede and nullify any moves towards such development. The exponent of a narrow, mean and pleasure-denying world-view, she hypocritically proclaims marriage to be an ultimately desirable goal but in

³⁷ Ibid, 76.

practice obstructs and prevents any marriages coming about. The priest is her ally and she uses the Catholic religion to provide ideological ballast for her life-denying position. However, this “religion” is not the authentic spirituality which can be intimated in the numinous landscape but is a type of sacred marketplace in which salvation can be bartered for purity, or failing that can be bought for cash – “five pounds for Masses – won’t you say them quick.”³⁸ Mrs Maguire is a product of the familist system. Her absolute power over her children derives from the culture which denies them the full status of adulthood until they marry and from her ability to prevent their marriages coming about. But, as a woman and an older person, she is also vulnerable to the changes within the household which marriage would bring about and so has an added incentive to use the system to her advantage. This might suggest a degree of sympathy on our part with her position. However, the narrative works hard at making such sympathy impossible. With her “venomous drawl” with which she ceaselessly harangues, bullies and belittles her two children, even from her deathbed, she is an irredeemably unattractive character. Indeed, the poem is unrelentingly misogynistic in its portrayal of Mrs Maguire and her daughter, with its bestial comparison between Mary Ann and a sow and its description of Mrs Maguire’s witch-like “wizened face”.

This portrayal of Mrs Maguire introduces an element of confusion into the poem’s diagnosis of the rural condition. Being so luridly nasty, she inevitably ceases to be a symbol of the familist social system and becomes instead a ‘bad’ mother who bullies and dominates her children. In this way the narrative oscillates between identifying his historical environment and his unhealthy relationship with his mother as the chief determinant of Maguire’s unhappy fate. Is it familism or family romance which is the cause of Maguire’s tragedy? This indicates a more fundamental disjunction within the poem’s historical narrative, and Kavanagh’s mapping of a relationship between sexuality and development. This disjunction is first intimated in Kavanagh’s unfortunate choice of title, which draws a connection between the catastrophic Irish famine of the 1840s and the economic stasis, low marriage rates and depopulation characteristic of rural Ireland a century later. It is not entirely clear if this gesture is intended to heighten the tragic dimension of the historical predicament embodied by Paddy Maguire or to mock the apocalyptic warnings

³⁸ Ibid, 84.

about rural Ireland's terminal decline from the likes of Arensberg and Kimball and the Folklore Commission. But even while the poem ironises the discourses of the urban elite directing its gaze at rural life, those for whom the 'peasant' is "the source from which all cultures rise," the narrative voice is also complicit with the scopoc stance of these observers.³⁹ As Joe Cleary has argued, "however angrily the poem excoriates the middle-class's fatuous ignorance of the realities of the rural world it loves to idealise, it is still the implied middle-class reader that is engaged in intellectual dialogue, over the heads of Maguire and his kind, by the narrator".⁴⁰ Adopting the vantage point of the theorists of rural decline also involved adopting the perspective on rural life which identified culture, and specifically sexuality and marriage, as the fundamental source of rural Ireland's underdevelopment. Just as the title of the poem collapses the distinction between the historical tragedy of an economic catastrophe and the individual tragedy of sexual frustration and loneliness narrated in the poem, the interplay of spiritual, psycho-sexual and sociological narratives produces a confusion of cause and effect; the poem rests on a tautological assertion that a sexually repressive culture is producing an economically depressed society, which is in turn producing a sexually repressive culture.

The Great Hunger is an example of a work where an atrophied historical imagination is offset by the verve and brio of its formal brilliance. As Cleary has demonstrated, its vision of rural life is rigorously pared down to exclude any suggestion of collective or individual agency on the part of the rural inhabitants and its sense of history is essentially immobile and static. Yet this poem about sterility and stasis is remarkably fertile and energetic in its deployment of Modernist poetic technique; both Antoinette Quinn and Cleary argue that Kavanagh's composition drew very effectively on the legacy of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).⁴¹ Kavanagh's application of cinematic techniques – distance shots, tracking shots and montage – to poetic narrative was a particularly powerful innovation. This camera-like movement of the narrative perspective is especially effective at situating Maguire

³⁹ Ibid, 85.

⁴⁰ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), 151.

⁴¹ Cleary, 152-153. Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001), 182.

within his community, and thereby connecting the individual and collective narratives. But this technique also propounds the distance between the peasant consciousness of the poetic characters, whose lives are laid out for our examination, and the bourgeois consciousness of the readers. Thus, the observed object is distinguished from the observing subject.

It is one of the ironies of Kavanagh's *oeuvre* that *The Great Hunger*, which is probably his most formally sophisticated work, in many respects produces a less sophisticated account of the historical conjunction of sexuality, development and rural Ireland than his formally less innovative *bildungsromane*. Kavanagh produced two versions of a rural *bildungsroman* during his career: his autobiography, *The Green Fool* and his novel, *Tarry Flynn*. The generic dynamics of the formation novel requires a different degree of identification between the reader and the central character than that required by the naturalist aesthetics of Kavanagh's poem. For the *bildungsromane* to work, Patrick and Tarry have to take shape for us as exceptional *characters*; for *The Great Hunger* to work, Paddy Maguire has to function most effectively as a *type*. Where the narrative voice of the poem operates as a lens through which Maguire and his neighbours are observed with detachment, the narrative of the prose works captures the formation of a consciousness that is both within and without the rural community; or both observer and observed at once.

The shape of Kavanagh's autobiography was partly determined by the conditions of the literary marketplace in which it was commissioned. Since his first poems had appeared in AE's *Irish Statesman* in the early 1930s, Kavanagh had excited a degree of interest in London and Dublin literary circles as a "peasant poet". Here was a poor farmer with little formal education who nevertheless managed to produce poetry from some authentic spring of natural talent. Looking back to eighteenth-century writers such as Stephen Duck, John Clare and, most famously, Robbie Burns, literary history offered a readymade template into which Kavanagh's story could be placed. But in the late 1930s one did not have to go so far back in literary history to find evidence that an autobiography about growing up in rural Ireland could be a commercially viable proposition. Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Blián ag Fás (Twenty Years A-Growing)* and Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An*

tOileánach (*The Islandman*) had been published in English-language translations in 1933 and 1934 and these autobiographical accounts of life in the Irish-speaking Blasket Islands had been very successful with the English reading public.⁴²

Written in the first-person, *The Green Fool* is shaped by the autobiographical events of Kavanagh's life. It begins with his birth, and ends with his return from London after the summer he spent there in 1937. In between there are various other specific biographical events, such as births and deaths in his family and the family's gradual increase in relative prosperity and social status from artisan to small farmer class. In its latter part Kavanagh outlines the beginnings of his publishing career and his encounters with the Dublin literary establishment. But this autobiographical narrative is interwoven with another narrative that is based around the economic and social lifecycle of a rural community. There are descriptions of Patrick and his neighbours working at seasonal occupations like pig-killing, ploughing, going to cattle fairs, thinning turnips and turf-cutting. In one chapter he attends a wedding and in another a wake, and there are several narrative set pieces where Patrick is the interlocutor of one of the locals telling a story that forms the substance of that chapter. These stories feature fairies, banshees and other supernatural happenings, and there is a lengthy description of a communal overnight pilgrimage to a local 'holy well'. Like Laverty's *Delia*, Patrick's role as narrator and native informant tends to sideline his role as subject of his own autobiography. His own narrative of *bildung* struggles to emerge out of the more vivid colour and comedy of the ethnographic details of rural life and the Robbie Burns narrative of the budding peasant-poet comes into collision with the Blasket Island narrative of a primitivist, archaic civilisation.

As well as describing such 'folk' events as the pilgrimage and the wake, *The Green Fool* also has accounts of 'modern' social events like Gaelic football matches and political meetings. Through his description of the political meetings, Kavanagh charts the decline of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the rise of Sinn Féin in the local area, which he glosses as "the battle of youth and the New Ireland against the old men and the old servitude."⁴³ However, this is followed by an account of blatant

⁴²Quinn (2001), 93.

⁴³Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool* (London: Penguin, 1975 [1938]), 105.

electoral forgery by the local Sinn Féin activists and the subsequent Civil War is presented through a series of anecdotes proving that this conflict was really about robbery and criminality rather than politics. There is a similar fusion of optimism and pessimism about development when Patrick describes the land redistribution that follows the decline of the local 'Big House'. What starts out, in his telling, as a significant opportunity for justice, quickly becomes an illustration of the pettiness and greed of the small farmers and Patrick drifts into a nostalgic reverie for that better time in the past when the 'Big House' and its graceful culture was still a powerful force in the locality.⁴⁴

This ambiguous response to historical change is encapsulated in the image of the family clock; there is an unusually lengthy description of the clock and its provenance at the beginning of the book.⁴⁵ This clock was remarkable because it was still relatively unusual to have one during Patrick's childhood and people in the locality still largely depended on the position of the sun to judge the time. A material artefact of modern manufacturing, the clock also serves as a metonym of modernity and the imposition of structured routine on a looser, traditional temporality. One of his father's prized possessions, the clock is just one indication, such as the value he places on scientific knowledge, that the father is an agent of modernity. The family story in Patrick's childhood is generally a narrative of progress; they build a new, improved house and they accumulate enough money to buy some land. Thus, Patrick registers his emotional approval of modernisation through associating it with his admired, beloved father and with the family achievements of which he is proud. Yet this co-exists with his nostalgia, not just for childhood but also for some more unspecified archaic 'past' that precedes his own biological existence, and his belief that the modern world is crass, instrumental and degraded. When explaining the etymology of a local place name, for instance, he comments that the name served as a reminder of "the days when there was poetry in the land."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid, 61-63.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 62.

Since this is the story of a farmer-poet's formation, the adult Patrick has to make a living out of the land while also striving to reinvest the land with that poetry it once had. In the latter part of the book, the narrative of Patrick's formation comes to hinge on his growing perception that these objectives are in opposition. Farming the land successfully will involve committing himself unambiguously to the instrumental rationality and pursuit of progress pioneered by his father. Not only is this instrumentality inimical to a poetic response to the landscape but the situation is further complicated as he notices that the quality of his poetry improved significantly the more he moved away from mimicking inherited poetic styles and instead sought to develop a fusion between his life as a farmer and the modern poetic techniques to which publications like the *Irish Statesmen* exposed him. His poetry needs the land, but living on the land makes the writing of poetry impossible. In *The Green Fool* this problem is formulated as Patrick's struggle with the question of staying or leaving: he is "caught between the two stools of security on the land and a rich-scented life on the exotic islands of literature."⁴⁷ Towards the end of the autobiography this quandary appears to have been resolved in favour of leaving, but the final lines suddenly introduce an element of doubt about this. Having returned from his sojourn in London, Patrick "wandered over my own hills and talked again to my own people [and] I looked into the heart of this life and I saw that it was good."⁴⁸

Thus, the ending of *The Green Fool* leaves unresolved those questions which Kavanagh's autobiography raises. Not just the specific question of Patrick remaining or departing, but those other problems that are encapsulated within this personal dilemma: the relationship between individual and collective narratives of development, and that ambiguous view of rural modernisation and progress. Unsurprisingly then, Kavanagh returned to this same problematic ten years later in *Tarry Flynn*. In the intervening years he had left Monaghan for Dublin and, spurred on by the prevailing Counter-Revival aesthetic favoured by his literary patrons there, he had produced *The Great Hunger*.⁴⁹ Comparing *The Green Fool* with *The*

⁴⁷ Ibid, 239.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 262.

⁴⁹ On the complicated history of the publication of extracts from *The Great Hunger* (with the title of *The Old Peasant*) in *Horizon*, the British literary magazine, and later in a Cuala Press edition, see Quinn (2001), 183-189. This special 'Ireland' edition of *Horizon* was one

Great Hunger, Quinn notes Kavanagh's "dehyphenation of the farmer-poet into two distinct characters" in the latter.⁵⁰ Tarry is the result of an interesting realignment of these two figures. He is a farmer and a poet, but the third-person narration places him at a distance from us in comparison with Patrick in *The Green Fool*. Yet the detached narrative voice of the novel is more that of an amused ironist than the angry diagnostician of *The Great Hunger*. While Tarry's writerly ambitions are exposed to this irony, the comic tone also extends to the portrayal of the community and, paradoxically, this comedy helps to produce a more complex perspective on rural life than that which had emerged in the tragic vision of the poem.

In contrast with the ahistorical, cyclical temporality of *The Great Hunger*, the novel is firmly established in historical time, in the summer of 1935. The narrative is composed of three intertwined plots: the land deal involving Tarry and his family, Tarry's failed attempts at courting and seducing some of the local young women, and Tarry's pursuit of a writing career. There is much evidence to support Tarry's sister when she claims that "the parish of Dargan, and the people in it, was no place for a civilised man or woman."⁵¹ The place is chronically poor, and its inhabitants are mean, cynical hypocrites engaged in a constant competitive struggle. However, the strategising and machinations of Tarry's mother and his neighbours does generate a sense of rural society as a much more dynamic place than the immobilised world represented in *The Great Hunger*. As in his earlier autobiography, the land deal plot illustrates Kavanagh's complicated response to rural modernisation. There is a similar emotional and oedipal investment in the narrative of a family striving after petty accumulation and improvement since the project is primarily driven by a powerful parent. If the figure of Mrs Maguire dominates Kavanagh's long poem and is crucial to the tragic vision it unfolds, Mrs Flynn is an equally dominant figure in the novel. Like Mrs Maguire, his mother hectors and bullies Tarry and his sisters, and she refuses to treat him like a full adult in the running of the farm. But she is also a more active character, physically

of John Betjeman's projects, in his role as cultural attaché in the British embassy in Dublin, designed to promote pro-Allied sentiment in Ireland. See Wills, *That Neutral Island*, 184-186.

⁵⁰ Quinn (2001), 170.

⁵¹ Patrick Kavanagh, *Tarry Flynn* (London: Penguin, 1980 [1948]), 180.

and intellectually, than the bed-bound Mrs Maguire; we see her constantly moving around her farm, noticing everything and giving instructions. The relationship between mother and son in the novel is more rounded than in the poem, as her bullying and humiliation of Tarry is interspersed with encouragement, affection and kindness. As the narrator tells us, "she loved the son more than any mother ever loved a son".⁵² Above all, Mrs Flynn appears as much less monstrous to the reader than Mrs Maguire because of the verve and humour of her dialogue, with its pungent and acerbic language, elaborate turn of phrase and her ability to pursue several trains of thought at once.

But, in contrast to the enterprises of Patrick's father, Mrs Flynn's pursuit of progress ends in failure – Tarry becomes involved in a violent dispute with his neighbour about the boundaries of the land, two of his cattle get sick and die when grazing there, and it then transpires that two brothers owned different parts of this farm and so the Flynns do not legally own the most fertile part of their new parcel of land. The land deal plot offers a parable of rural modernisation that implies that any scheme for improvement is doomed to failure. But this plot also generates an impression of rural society as active and dynamic – even if the narrator disapproves of the particular type of instrumental, capitalist activity in evidence. Indeed this satire of the hopelessly petty and morally dubious activities of the peasants exposes a crucial contradiction in Kavanagh's critique of rural Irish society. He condemns rural Ireland for its failure to deliver material, emotional and sexual fulfilment to its inhabitants. The standard by which this failure is measured is implicitly that of modern, urban, bourgeois society. And yet when his rural Irish characters, such as Mrs. Flynn and her neighbours, operate the rational logic of capitalist modernity they are castigated for their moral, emotional and aesthetic bankruptcy.

Similar contradictions beset Tarry's pursuit of sexual satisfaction. There are, as it were, structural dimensions to Tarry's sexual frustration, which is an inevitable result of living in a depressed and repressed society with a low marriage rate; the parish "was comprised of old unmarried men and women."⁵³ The familist system

⁵² Ibid, 9.

⁵³ Ibid, 28.

means that Tarry's three sisters have to be dowered and married off before he can marry. In another instance of the Flynn family's failed attempts at capitalist development two of his sisters leave to set up an 'eating house' in the local market town, with capital invested by their enterprising mother, only for the business to fail and the sisters to return home. To hasten the day when his own marriage will be possible, Tarry is also keen to encourage the potential match between his other sister and an older bachelor. In the novel, Kavanagh produces a parodic version of the ritualised matchmaking system which Arensberg and Kimball presented in a rather more antiseptic and formulaic style. The anthropologists' outlined a process of established negotiations progressing smoothly towards the successful outcome of social reproduction. In Kavanagh's comic version, the attempted matchmaking becomes a series of painfully embarrassing and shambolic encounters that end in predestined failure. Petey Meegan is a pretty unattractive marriage option; in Mrs Flynn's view he is "another slack gelding."⁵⁴ Mary is unsurprisingly dismissive of his vague overtures and emphatically declares that she wouldn't marry him, "even if his bottom was paved with diamonds."⁵⁵ It becomes clear that all concerned are going through the motions and nobody at any point actually believed that a marriage would come about.

This failed marriage plot appears then to act as a comic confirmation of *The Great Hunger's* tragic account of repressed sexuality and a culture in thrall to Thanatos. Except that Tarry cannot walk outside his door without meeting young women, such as Molly Brady and the more genteel Mary Reilly, who are keen to encourage his advances. On a regular basis he also practically falls over, literally at one point, numerous courting couples. On one of these occasions, after seeing his sister courting with 'the expert dancer' from Dundalk, Tarry launches into a speech about "ancient Gaelic civilisation and how it gave honour to women's virtue" and declares that "all this foreign dancing and music is poison."⁵⁶ According to the narrator, Tarry was essentially repeating one of the parish priest's sermons. But earlier in the novel we see the local congregation listening to one of those sermons on moral collapse, enjoying it enormously as a sort of theatrical performance but then

⁵⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 131.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 78.

instantly forgetting about it as they leave church and start to talk about farming. When a mission is held in the parish, ostensibly to stamp out lust and to encourage purity, Mrs Flynn actually hopes that all the talk of sex in the mission sermons will have the opposite effect on the local men and will “stir up the pack of good-for-nothing geldings that’s on the go in Dargan.”⁵⁷ Tarry’s fantasy strategies about how to seduce young women shows his own investment in the rhetoric of purity and public morality to be very slight indeed, and his concern for his sister’s purity is entirely self-interested since any talk about her morals might hamper a potential match and delay further the possibility of his own marriage. The novel’s comic pastiche of public morality discourse, as well as its bawdy and ribald tone throughout, works to subvert *The Great Hunger’s* indictment of Catholic nationalism as the source of sexual repression in rural Ireland.

Thus the novel recreates a comic version of a community where the promise of continuity and progress symbolically represented by marriage is impossible, but it simultaneously satirises and rejects the culturalist theories that implicate familism or Catholicism in this tragic predicament. But why then is Tarry’s native place a “townland of death”?⁵⁸ The contrary view, that the causes of Irish rural underdevelopment were rooted in larger, global circuits of power and economics, does not arise in the novel either – simply because the novel is uninterested in answering the question of why these things are the way they are. To answer that question Tarry’s predicament would have to become typical, but the narrative drive is towards delineating how untypical he is. Hence the notion that his sexual frustration stems from the peculiarities of the familist social structure is raised in the failed marriage plot but at the same time contradicted by the repeated scenes of his comic failures at courtship and seduction with the willing and able Mary Reilly and Molly. As the narrator observes of Tarry, “there was something in him different from other men and women.”⁵⁹ His maladroit behaviour with Mary and Molly is connected to this state of being different, which is also connected to his interest in what his mother angrily dismisses as “the curse-o’-God books”. The crux of the novel is not therefore the absence of collective development, or the communal

⁵⁷ Ibid, 28.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 68.

stasis lamented in *The Great Hunger*, but the clash between different forms of development: the narrative of collective improvement and progress exemplified by the land deal plot and the narrative of individual development exemplified by the plot of Tarry's formation as a writer.

The failure of the marriage plot is a rejection of the type of compromise between these competing drives that Laverty was imaginatively pursuing in her fiction. This conflict between collective and individual development is not resolved in an easy way for Tarry, and its complexity gets figured through the competing responses to the landscape that co-exist within his psyche. At certain times, he shares his mother and his neighbours' rational and instrumental view of the land as a resource to be exploited in the pursuit of profit. This can take the benign form of satisfaction and pride when he looks at the fruits of his own skill and hard work. But it can also take the more insidious form of his satisfaction at seeing his neighbour's poorly growing field of oats, for instance, or his pleasure when he looks at his newly-acquired fields and a "powerful selfishness filled his mind."⁶⁰ But the novel is also punctuated by moments when Tarry is captivated by the inherent beauty of even the most unspectacular aspect of the physical environment, such as "the rich beauty of weeds in the ditches." Tarry translates this aesthetic apprehension of the landscape into an emotional and intellectual experience; "something happened when Tarry looked at a flower or a stone in a ditch."⁶¹ In other words, Tarry sometimes looks around him with the eyes of a farmer, and sometimes with the eyes of a poet. Throughout the novel these instrumental and aesthetic modes of apprehending the world jostle each other in Tarry's consciousness; in the same moment, and in the same paragraph on the page, his mind will move back and forth between one and the other. This oscillation between the two modes is routinely exacerbated by the narrator's ironic undercutting of Tarry's poetic sensibility. A description of his poetic experience focalised on Tarry is juxtaposed with a mundane detail or with an observation by the narrator which illustrates the inherent banality or superficiality of Tarry's thoughts.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 102.

⁶¹ Ibid, 60.

Nevertheless, Tarry's departure at the end of the novel would appear to affirm the primacy of the poetic over the instrumental sensibility. In the face of his mother's heartbreaking distress, Tarry justifies leaving by assuring himself that the endless scheming and confrontations of life in a farming community will inevitably mean that "the magic of the fields would be disturbed in his imagination."⁶² As they walk away from the house his uncle advises the anxious Tarry to "shut your eyes, you'll see it better".⁶³ Formally, the novel reiterates the uncle's paradoxical observation by not ending with the prose narrative of Tarry's departure, but with the poem about the threshing day. This formal arrangement suggests that leaving rural Ireland is a necessary first step in successfully translating the rhythm and texture of the landscape and the culture into art.

Should we then read *Tarry Flynn* as a portrait of the artist as a young farmer? Is it a rural or 'peasant' version of the Catholic bourgeois novel of formation exemplified by Joyce and Kate O'Brien, in which *bildung* only becomes possible when the narrative of individual formation is accorded primacy over the narrative of collective development? These are tempting readings, but the conclusion of Kavanagh's novel provides an exceptionally weak ending for this type of narrative. Tarry's departure is entirely reactive and circumstantial. Rather than making an active choice about leaving, he passively accepts the random opportunity provided by his uncle's offer. In doing so, he is motivated less by a desire to leave than by the pressure of events: the collapse of the land deal, soured relations with the neighbours and a false accusation of being responsible for Molly's pregnancy. Where Tarry's departure should be the one decisive action that gives the *bildung* narrative shape, and which stands in contrast to the vacuum of individual autonomy and energy in the rural society he leaves, his departure is a passive reaction to a flurry of activity in the locality. In addition, the powerfully affecting poem generates a pervasively nostalgic structure of feeling at the end of the novel. As with Laverty's *Never No More*, this leaves us at the end with a *bildungsroman* in which the imaginative energy is invested in the past and in what is being left behind rather than in the exciting future that awaits the young hero or heroine.

⁶² Ibid, 187.

⁶³ Ibid, 188.

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There is, therefore, a discrepancy between the passive and regretful, even mournful, endings of Lavery and Kavanagh's *bildungsromane* and our expectations of a decisive and forward-looking conclusion to such narratives – the expectations met by the Joyce and O'Brien versions of the genre. One way to read this discrepancy would be to conclude that Lavery and Kavanagh had tried and failed to transplant the novel of formation to a rural Irish setting and that their failure to do so provides evidence that the cultural conditions found there were simply inimical to the forms of subjectivity and the pursuit of autonomy and individualism on which this type of narrative is predicated. Were one to pursue this reading, one would have to conclude that they were sowing the seeds of liberal individualism on inhospitable 'stony grey soil.' A further elaboration of this argument would contend that this culture's prevailing forms of sexuality were equally inimical to the production of this form of subjectivity; in other words, the failure of their *bildungsromane* affirms the truth that, in the conventional reading, *The Great Hunger* delivers. As we saw with his 'dower house' proposal, even de Valera, the archetypal voice of conservative rural Ireland, appeared to share this view. Of course, to read these *bildungsromane* as faulty or failed imitations of some standard original would be to reproduce in aesthetic terms the political and cultural logic that explains underdevelopment as the failure of the periphery to conform coherently to the model of modernity provided by the metropole. In short, it would be to apply to the rural *bildungsroman* the kind of political analysis applied to rural Ireland.

But as we have seen, a distinguishing feature of Lavery and Kavanagh's writing was their spirited challenge to just this type of logic – even while their work was also shaped by this same logic. An alternative view of their *bildungsromane* would not so much see them bringing the novel of formation to rural Ireland as bringing rural Ireland to this genre in an attempt to produce a different kind of formation narrative. Despite their differences, both Lavery and Kavanagh were trying to find a way of narrating self-formation in which the individual and the collective could be aligned in less starkly oppositional terms than those delineated in Joyce and O'Brien's versions of the form. One of Lavery's approaches to achieving this symbolically is through a version of the Catholic marital ideal; for this reason her

novel is the point at which the history of the *bildungsroman*, and the literary discourses of sexuality, comes into closest alignment with the discourses of sexuality promoted by Irish Catholicism. Kavanagh expresses a vigorous scepticism of any such symbolic resolution to the disjunction between individual and collective development, yet the prevailing undercurrent of pastoralism and nostalgia in his *bildungsromane* indicates a regretful desire for such utopian possibilities.

As we will see in the final chapter, this idea of an unbreachable disjunction between individual and collective narratives re-emerges forcefully in the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* with the work of Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, and with this idea there also comes an even more profoundly tragic sense of history than that which is first glimpsed at in Kavanagh's work. Thus, in literary historical terms the ending of *Tarry Flynn* represents the ending of Laverty and Kavanagh's experiment with the *bildungsroman*. By then, Laverty was still trying to find forms to successfully fuse individual and collective narratives of development, in her plays and later in her television soap opera, but this work was based in an entirely urban milieu. After writing his novel Kavanagh went through a bout of serious illness and then entered the very fertile period of his writing career which yielded the outstanding lyrical poetry of the 1950s. The numinous landscape of these poems was now that of urban Dublin rather than rural Monaghan, but perhaps more significantly these lyrics represent a move away from the struggle to find a mode of narrating the complex activity of collective experience towards the beautifully realised but solipsistic spirituality of this poetry. The endings of *Never No More* and *Tarry Flynn* suggest that their authors' experiment ended in conceptual defeat. The re-emergence of the departure trope and the enveloping nostalgia foreground the narrative of individual formation, while also removing the rural community to a distant state of hazy unreality; like Tarry in the threshing day poem, the country people walked "through fields that were part of no earthly estate".⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ibid, 189.

Chapter Six

Arrested Development: Sexuality, Trauma and History in John McGahern and Edna O'Brien

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Writing in *Studies* in 1965, Augustine Martin described Ireland as a country “in a ferment of change and development.”¹ In his view, Irish writers were not keeping pace imaginatively with this rapidly evolving society because they were too heavily invested in a redundant conception of the Irish writer as an embattled critic of a moribund culture. Though Martin includes John McGahern and Edna O’Brien in his critique, their most famous novels of the 1960s actually complicate his argument. Since O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* trilogy (1960-1964) and McGahern’s *The Dark* (1965) were all controversially banned they served to reinforce just the conception of the writer’s relationship to Irish society which Martin was keen to consign to the past. Yet, formally these are novels of a society in flux. As *bildungsromane* the novels foregrounded youth at a historical moment when Irish social life was being vibrantly altered by what was now called “youth culture.” Perhaps the most salient demonstration of this was in music – the great crowds that thronged the Irish concerts of The Beatles in 1963 and The Rolling Stones in 1965, for instance. But the phenomena of the Irish showbands, the emergence of the folk scene and the enormous popularity of the annual *Fleadh Cheoil* were also manifestations of this new youth culture, and arguably had a more geographically dispersed and socially diverse impact on the country.² Youth has always been symbolically associated with modernity – instability, mobility, and an orientation towards the future being commonly ascribed to both conditions. It is unsurprising then that a society undergoing a phase of accelerated capitalist development, as Ireland was in the sixties, should view this energetic youth culture as a signifier of how the country was negotiating its modernisation. In this regard, the showbands and folk scene are particularly interesting phenomena since they can be read as an attempt to produce something distinctive from the melding of metropolitan and local cultural forms and energies.

¹ Augustine Martin, ‘Inherited Dissent: The Dilemma of the Irish Writer,’ *Studies*, 54 (1965), 1-20, 11.

² On music and youth culture in 1960s Ireland see Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004) 603-606.

Youth was also a crucial concern of public policy and elite discourse in this decade since reforming the country's education system was considered a priority for national development. In 1962 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report on the Irish education system entitled *Investment in Education*. This drew attention to the poor physical conditions in Irish schools, haphazard provision, class inequalities and the dearth of technological and vocational training. Subsequently, the state began a programme of educational reform which included increasing the statutory school leaving age and establishing the first comprehensive secondary schools. In 1967, secondary school fees were abolished and free school transport was introduced.³ Philosophically, the school curriculum was fundamentally reformulated to become more child-centred, but to also be more responsive to the labour requirements of foreign capital which the prevailing policy of economic development hoped to target. At the latter end of the decade, university students would play a prominent role in the upsurge of radical politics that was most acutely manifest in the Civil Rights protests in Northern Ireland that began in 1968. Again, this was an instance of youthful adaptations of international models (the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements in the United States; the student and worker uprisings in Paris, Prague and elsewhere; Mao's Cultural Revolution) to local conditions.

Within the more specific realm of Irish literary history, O'Brien and McGahern are significant figures in the reform of the literary censorship. As the novels of O'Brien's trilogy were published in the early 1960s they were each banned, as were her two subsequent books, *August Is a Wicked Month* (1965) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966). The controversies which surrounded the repeated banning of her books gave renewed impetus to the anti-censorship campaign and O'Brien frequently returned to Ireland, from her home in London, to lend her public support to this campaign. She took part in a much publicised public meeting with the anti-censorship campaigner and then Professor of English at Maynooth, Fr. Peter Connolly, in Limerick in 1966, and was involved in the founding of the Censorship

³ Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002* (London: Harper, 2004 [1981]), 235-245. Tom Garvin, *Preventing the Future: Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 125-167.

Reform Society in Dublin later that year.⁴ McGahern was less publicly involved in this campaign. But since he had received both of the State's only literary prizes for his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), the banning of *The Dark* in 1965 inevitably incited controversy.⁵ Subsequently, McGahern was sacked from his job as a teacher in a Catholic primary school in Dublin, because of the banning and because he had married a woman who was not a Catholic in a registry office. The ensuing public controversy about McGahern's representation of adolescent sexuality and the banning of the novel therefore generated discussion about the future of the literary censorship. But the affair also struck at other tension points in the society, namely the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church and the long-standing policy of denominational education.

In 1967 the censorship laws were amended and a twelve-year limit placed on the length of time for which a book could be banned; this had the immediate effect of lifting the ban on several thousand books.⁶ As with the *Lady Chatterley* trial in Britain in 1960, the banning of O'Brien's and McGahern's books, and the legal reform stimulated soon after by the controversies which these bans provoked, forged a cultural connection between artistic freedom and individual and sexual freedom. The strength of this connection was reinforced by O'Brien's active participation in the anti-censorship campaign, the effect of the bans on the writers' personal and professional lives and the expanded media production which ventilated these issues in new ways. Arguably then, the novels contributed to the broader cultural configuration of sexuality and social change that was underway in Ireland. Even if Irish sexual values and behaviour did not undergo the kind of transformation that became known as the 'sexual revolution' in the more advanced

⁴ For an account of the Limerick meeting see 'Edna O'Brien Faces Limerick Audience', *Irish Times*, April 23, 1966; for an editorial on censorship in response to the meeting see *Irish Times*, April 25, 1966. O'Brien's attendance at the launch of the Censorship Reform Society, and the new group's decision to legally challenge the banning of her novel *Casualties of Peace*, is reported on the front page of the *Irish Times*, December 5, 1966. A selection of Peter Connolly's articles on censorship from the period are collected in James H. Murphy (ed.) *No Bland Facility: Selected Writings on Literature, Religion and Censorship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1991).

⁵ Julia Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990), 55.

⁶ Carlson, 4-5. See also Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Sceptre Books, 1968), 199.

metropolitan societies, sexuality was nevertheless foregrounded in public discourse in that decade. The Vatican Council (1962-65) initiated significant changes in Irish Catholicism and created an expectation that the Church's position on the use of artificial birth control within marriage would also change – an expectation shared by some Catholic priests, as indicated by the writings of theologians such as Denis O'Callaghan and James Good.⁷ These expectations were dashed in 1968 by the papal encyclical *Humane Vitae*, which led to considerable anger and disillusionment among many Irish Catholics, particularly middle-class Catholics who were, according to estimates by medical doctors at the time, making their own decision to make use of such contraceptive methods anyway.⁸ The debate about birth control also generated a wider discussion of marriage and gender. In Michael Viney's television documentary *Too Many Children*, broadcast by RTE in October 1966, a number of middle-class and working-class Dublin women recorded their views on birth control, including their demands for access to it, but also discussed their experiences of marriage and child-rearing. In his newspaper articles, Viney wrote about the problem of marital breakdown and separation, and the effect this was having on Irish women. Dorine Rohan's *Marriage: Irish Style* (1969) continued this journalistic investigation of Irish women's anger and resentment about their experience of marriage. By the end of the decade, the broader question of women's rights in marriage but also in the workplace had begun to be incorporated into public policy with the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1969. These were all precursive currents that would find more fully developed, and more radical, expression during the 1970s through the Women's Liberation Movement and, on a smaller scale, the Gay Rights Movement.⁹

In 1969, Benedict Kiely wrote that,

in her own sweet way Edna O'Brien has been as brutally direct, and it would seem that those moles the censors, or whoever eggs them on in their idiocies,

⁷ Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), 195-207.

⁸ Fuller, 199. Ferriter, 573.

⁹ On the emergence of second-wave feminism in Ireland during the 1960s and early 1970s see Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), 30-154.

are not able to take it...those holy Joes that hide behind the doors and never want their whining and snivelling brought out into the light of day, may have caught a tartar; and the convent girl with her temper riz may yet do what the strong argument of Seán O'Faoláin failed to do."¹⁰

Kiely's encomium manages to combine effusive admiration with the sort of overt patronisation that now dates his article as irredeemably pre-feminist. He also trades in the ciphers of O'Brien's public image in the sixties – the flame-haired Irish colleen, the high-tempered 'tartar,' and the titillating 'convent girl' turned naughty writer. In O'Brien's hands that public image served as a useful tactic to gain recognition and readership and to rejuvenate the anti-censorship campaign, while also hampering and limiting the critical reception of her varied and formally diverse work in the subsequent decades. Rebecca Pelan argues that O'Brien's persona – as Irish, as a woman and as a popular 'romantic' novelist – explains her marginalisation and critical neglect; she was, in Pelan's view, "too 'stage-Irish' for the Irish, too Irish for the English and too flighty and romantic for feminists of the day."¹¹

Kiely's lines in praise of O'Brien, which are part of an article charting the relationship between the Irish writer and his or her society in the twentieth century, illustrate how the connection between sexuality and a progressive historical narrative has shaped the reception of Irish writers, and in a particularly marked way the reception of O'Brien and McGahern. In later works of Irish literary history, far more authoritative than Kiely's high-spirited polemic, the sixties novels of O'Brien and McGahern are still read as barometers of social change. In volume five of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* the first chapter of *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964), the third novel in O'Brien's trilogy, is included in a section on 'Women and Politics in Independent Ireland, 1921-68.' Similarly, an extract from *The Country Girls* (1960), in which Cait and Baba begin boarding school, features in the section

¹⁰ Benedict Kiely, 'The Whores on the Half Doors or, An Image of the Irish Writer' in Owen Dudley Edwards (ed.), *Conor Cruise O'Brien Introduces Ireland* (London: Andre Deutch, 1969), 148-161, 159.

¹¹ Rebecca Pelan, 'Reflections on a Connemara Dietrich' in Kathryn Laing, Sinéad Mooney and Maureen O'Connor (eds.), *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives* (Dublin: Caysfort Press, 2006), 12-37, 24.

on 'Education in Twentieth-Century Ireland.'¹² In both instances, O'Brien's are the only examples of fictional prose anthologised in these sections. That line which Kiely draws between writing that is sexually frank, "brutally direct," and the struggle for progressive change – not only the specific struggle against censorship but the broader struggle to spread "the light of day" over the country – also reappears in later criticism. For Declan Kiberd, the salient feature of O'Brien's sixties novels was her focus on "the sexual passions and betrayed emotions of a whole generation of Irishwomen".¹³ While he is highly appreciative of O'Brien as a stylist, Kiberd's brief assessment of O'Brien's early work is included in one of his 'interchapters', where he summarises and discusses political and social changes; her work is, tellingly, not included in one of the literary chapters that concentrate on the more notable writers. For Kiberd, her work is illustrative of the rapid pace of modernisation that overtook Ireland in the sixties and he positions O'Brien among those "challenging voices", such as those facilitated by the creation of RTE, confronting the hegemony of an older generation. More recently, Norman Vance and Pádraigín Riggs read O'Brien's trilogy as an indication of the impact, "eventually", of the sexual revolution and feminism on Ireland, and interpret the controversy over the banning of McGahern's *The Dark* as a brief regressive stage in the gradual acceptance of a "new frankness in sexual matters".¹⁴

However, when we disentangle the content of *The Country Girls* trilogy and *The Dark* from the books' extra-textual history it is clear that these novels have a quite complicated relationship to their historical moment, and offer a more searching critique of the prevailing modernisation ideology that they are usually given credit for. It is not just that these novels about youth remain entirely untouched by the Dionysian energies of showbands and the *Fleadh Cheoil*. When, for instance, O'Brien's Cait and Baba "set out to be deliberately wicked in Dublin" this happens

¹² Angela Bourke et al. (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volumes IV&V: Women's Writing and Traditions* (Cork: Field Day/Cork University Press, 2002), 171-174 and 675-676.

¹³ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 566.

¹⁴ Pádraigín Riggs and Norman Vance, 'Irish Prose Fiction' in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 245-266, 263.

in a very staid and 'adult' world of receptions and dinners in hotel restaurants.¹⁵ This absence can be explained by chronology since O'Brien and McGahern are children of the 1930s. When they are writing about youth they are not writing about that of the 1960s but about that of an earlier generation. However, the most crucial element of these novels' relationship to history is not that their young hero and heroines inhabit an object world that has been rapidly superseded. More fundamentally, these novels offer narratives of development which insist on the difficulty of achieving such development due to the intractability of the past. The forward movement driving the *bildung* narrative is insistently stymied by the backward orientation of the narrative of childhood trauma, loss and family collapse. Sexuality is positioned at the intersection of these two narrative trends. On one side, sexuality is part of a romance narrative that is oriented towards the future, and that fits within the novel's broader *bildung* narrative. On the other side, sexuality in these novels is invariably masochistic and gloomily enveloped by the repercussions of childhood trauma, and particularly the death of the hero or heroine's mother. In each case, the narrative contains an erotically-charged libidinal drive to attain *bildung*, which is checked by an erotically-charged powerlessness that makes the attainment of *bildung* impossible.

Quite clearly these novels take the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman* in a distinctive direction. We can see the difference between what McGahern and O'Brien are doing in their coming-of-age novels and those of an earlier generation if we compare them to those of Lavery. Lavery, like McGahern and O'Brien, sets her fiction in a rural world; unlike them, however, her works attempt to reconcile tradition and modernising forces in allegories of cautious modernisation premised on a liberal Catholic marital ideal. No such reconciliations are attempted by O'Brien and McGahern. In stark contrast, the protagonists of O'Brien and McGahern's novels are shell-shocked survivors surrounded by the emotional debris of collapsed families. O'Brien and McGahern create marital dystopias in their novels, narratives in which the family is a site of terrible cruelty, failure and trauma. To the extent that an ideal of intimacy hovers in phantom form over the novels, inspiring

¹⁵ According to the blurb on the cover of a 1965 Signet paperback edition of *The Country Girls*, it is "an impudent novel about two Irish girls who deliberately set out to be wicked in Dublin."

the romantic aspirations of the young characters, the co-ordinates of this ideal are thoroughly secular, and ultimately discredited. In this regard, the sixties novelists carry out, in a more through-going fashion, the critique of the marital ideal begun by Kavanagh in *Tarry Flynn*.

Equally, the concept of sexuality as a moral problem, adapted by Joyce and Kate O'Brien from the Catholic public morality discourses, now longer holds any sway in the sixties novels. One symptom of this is that Edna O'Brien and McGahern's novels lack the baroque elaboration of sexual guilt and moral challenge dramatised in *Portrait*, for instance, or in *Mary Lavelle*. But the difference goes further than this because a wholly new relationship between sexuality, agency and self-development is asserted in the sixties novels. The sense of erotic intensity and the reaching towards self-transformation through illicit sexual activity that propels the narratives of Joyce or Kate O'Brien is not to be found in the novels of McGahern and O'Brien. Stephen Dedalus and Mary Lavelle are rebels against the social and sexual norms of their societies who are working their way towards new models of selfhood associated with Continental Europe. McGahern's young Mahoney and O'Brien's Cait are also at odds with the Irish Catholic world in which they grow up, but in their case sexuality generates little sense of an achieved alternative value-world and little sense of successful self-transformation. Sexuality is still an expression of rebellion and refusal, but it tends to be powerfully associated in both McGahern and O'Brien with feelings of abjection, alienation and ultimate failure. Above all, sexuality is associated with trauma, grief and loss. If the early Freud, mapping out the libidinal ego in the *Three Essays*, is a significant cultural co-ordinate for reading *Portrait*, it is the later Freud whose presence is more strongly detectible in *The Country Girls* and *The Dark*. In his post-World War One works, such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Freud envisions a ceaseless, tragic agon between the pleasure seeking but creative energies of Eros and those darker energies of Thanatos, the death drive. Stricken by the early loss of their mothers, Cait Brady and young Mahoney are consistently tormented by a libidinal drive towards life and a melancholy absorption with death.

One explanation for these differences between the sixties novelists and their predecessors is that O'Brien and McGahern were working within various currents in post-Second World War Western culture. Chief among these is the prominence of the alienated adolescent as a cultural archetype in the post-war era; the prototypical figures being J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jim Stark, as played by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). By contrast, Stephen Dedalus is a rebel with a cause. He may be rejecting his inherited religious and political beliefs and values, but he constructs a highly elaborate intellectual rationale for this rejection using the very tools which are also part of that inheritance – he uses Thomist philosophy to articulate his aesthetic ideas, for instance. More crucially, Stephen's alienation is moulded into a vocation as artist and intellectual through which he plans to re-engage with his society. The same sense of purposefulness animates the heroes and heroines of the other Irish *bildung* narratives. For instance, Anna Murphy, Delia Scully and the farmer-poet Tarry Flynn all express some form of aspiration towards a writerly life. While Cait and young Mahoney are bright, academically accomplished and dedicated readers there is never any suggestion that they want to become writers or intellectuals. If Joyce and Kate O'Brien were the only comparisons here this could be explained as a function of class. O'Brien and McGahern's characters move in a very different social world to the upper-class Catholic bourgeoisie securely inhabited by Kate O'Brien's heroines, and inhabited less securely by Stephen Dedalus. However, the intervening rural *bildungsromane* of Laverty and Kavanagh complicate this; being of the rural lower-middle classes and small farmer class does nothing to prevent either Delia or Tarry from having ambitions to write. The rudderless lack of purpose that distinguishes Cait and young Mahoney from their fictional Irish predecessors may instead be attributed to a cultural shift in the meaning of youthful alienation which took place in the 1950s. Such alienation was no longer understood as an attribute of the exceptional individual, as it is with Stephen, but as an inherent function of youth itself. Moreover, this youthful lack of purpose had a very specific cultural purpose. As with Holden Caulfield's crusade against all that was 'phoney' about the adult world, the alienated youth acted as a timely Cassandra warning adults about the dangers of inauthenticity and conformity. As Kirk Curnutt argues, adolescent rebellion served as "a conscientious guard against attenuating

values...motifs of teen discontent cautioned adults against reveling too intently in material pleasures".¹⁶

The pervasive mood of disenchantment and disillusionment in O'Brien's trilogy also has another set of historical co-ordinates. Amanda Greenwood has described *The Country Girls* as a 'negative romance'; these are novels which "examine the conditions of women under patriarchy by subverting 'romance' while conforming superficially to the genre".¹⁷ O'Brien's tragi-comic subversion of the inherited conventions of romance places her novels within a cluster of contemporaneous fiction which interrogated the narrow, stifling and contradictory ideal of femininity offered to middle-class women in the burgeoning post-war consumer society. These novels would include, in the United States, Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and in Britain, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962).¹⁸ The synchronicity of these novels by women writers can be understood retrospectively as a pre-second wave feminist attempt to render in fictional form what Betty Freidan, in 1963, termed "the problem that has no name".¹⁹ O'Brien's trilogy can also be situated within the specifically British development of social realism, the so-called 'kitchen sink' and 'social problem' aesthetic, in the late 1950s.²⁰ Her early fiction shared common features with the work of that movement's women writers, such as Lynn Reid Bank's novel *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) and Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Specifically, O'Brien's trilogy foregrounds similar subjects to those explored by the 'social problem' women writers – young working women, pregnancy, marital breakdown, abortion – while also sharing their formal and stylistic adherence to a realist and naturalist aesthetic.

¹⁶ Kirk Curnutt, 'Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s,' *Critique*, 43 (2001), 93-111, 96.

¹⁷ Amanda Greenwood, *Edna O'Brien* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2003), 23.

¹⁸ On this historical clustering of novels, in which she doesn't include O'Brien's trilogy, see Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34-36.

¹⁹ Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Norton, 2001[1963]), 2.

²⁰ John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 5-34.

While these historical developments in Western culture go some way towards explaining O'Brien and McGahern's innovations to the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman*, the bleak turn which their novels take cannot be fully accounted for by those wider international currents. In a startling departure from their Irish predecessors, McGahern and O'Brien created *bildung* narratives about the impossibility of achieving *bildung*. Towards this goal, they effectively upended the model of sexuality and subjectivity that had prevailed in Irish literature since the start of the century. They refused that optimistic assumption about the essential productivity of human sexual experience that the earlier novels, for all their variety, took for granted; an assumption that had its roots in both Catholic moral thought and in Freudian psychoanalysis. In short, O'Brien and McGahern's *bildungsromane* secularise and disenchant sexuality. That earlier model of sexuality and subjectivity had produced moments of radical utopianism in the hands of their predecessors, but it had simultaneously served to underwrite an essentially bourgeois ideal of liberal individualism and a cautious approach to history: the exilic retreat in Joyce, the Whiggish notion of progress in Kate O'Brien, the compromise between tradition and modernity in Laverty and Kavanagh's solipsistic turn towards a spiritual cultivation of the self. Sexual experience in the sixties novels is starkly realised and stripped of that aesthetic and moral overdetermination with which it is layered in the earlier novels. McGahern and O'Brien's less poetic and more melancholic form of sexuality undermines rather than underpins the central character's formation as a coherent, active subject. Rather than propelling them into the future, their sexual experiences return the young character to a space of trauma and paralysis where the drive to action withers.

On one hand, then, the sixties novels generated a crucial challenge to the earlier model. These novels sharply challenged their reader's faith in an essentially religious and ethical conception of sexuality and the concomitant belief in a liberal notion of *bildung* (as a model of subject formation and as an allegory of history) that had shaped the novels of earlier generations. This opens up a potentially radical space for re-imagining the concatenation of sexuality, subjectivity and history. However, while refusing the older model of sexuality and subjectivity, McGahern and O'Brien do not present any fully realised alternative. Like Kate Brady and young Mahoney at the end of the novels, these *bildungsromane* are

unable to take any sustenance from the past but are equally unable to imagine any different future and thus occupy a sort of limbo-like temporality. Their rigorously disenchanting and darkly complex understanding of sexuality and subject formation is purchased at the cost of that belief in the inherent plasticity of both individual subjectivity and of history that had animated the earlier novels. In sum, O'Brien and McGahern's tragic narratives of trauma and blighted development provided a significant counterweight to the superficial belief in progress that underpinned the modernisation ideology prevalent in 1960s Ireland. But their repudiation of one narrative of historical change is coterminous with a disabling loss of any imaginative sense that transformative change of any kind is ever possible.

2

O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) begins with Cait Brady, who is fourteen, waking up on the morning of the day that her mother will die. The first five chapters, over one quarter of the novel, are dedicated to the narration of this day and the structure of this section prefigures the trajectory of the novel, and indeed of the trilogy as a whole. The narrative is propelled forward by Cait's first-person narration and the relative banality of the initial sequence of events – rising and having her breakfast; walking to school through the village; going to her friend Baba's house and to a play in the evening – is enlivened by the naïve and quirky quality of Cait's narrative voice.²¹ Cait appears to us as a rather awkward and gauche young woman, who is nevertheless facing into her future with a lively and intelligent perceptiveness. This day is first marked out as exceptional when Cait hears the news that she has won a scholarship to the secondary school.²² With this guarantee of access to a good education, Cait's future looks promising. However, running parallel to this is a distinctly less optimistic narrative. In the opening paragraph we read that Cait wakes "anxious" and it takes her a few minutes to realise that this is for "the old reason. He had not come home."²³ Downstairs she sees her mother looking exhausted after a sleepless night and preoccupied with worry about where her husband has been for the last three days and what state he will be in when he returns home from his latest drunken binge. Mother and daughter's shared anxiety

²¹ Edna O'Brien, *The Country Girls* (New York: Signet Books, 1965 [1960]), 7-46.

²² *Ibid*, 20.

²³ *Ibid*, 7.

makes it clear to the reader from the outset that this is a family in jeopardy, threatened by the father's alcoholism, violence and neglect. What sends Cait's family into terminal collapse is her mother's death in a drowning accident – the second event which marks as exceptional this day in Cait's life, "the last day of childhood."²⁴

The juxtaposition of these two formative events in Cait's life (winning the scholarship and losing her mother) in the opening section establishes the parameters for the narrative arc of the novel. The future-oriented *bildung* narrative, prefigured in the scholarship, continues with Cait and Baba going to the convent school and, after their expulsion, embarking on their picaresque adventures in Dublin. Cait's romance with Mr. Gentleman, the decidedly creepy, older married man who carries out a low-intensity seduction of Cait throughout her teenage years, is a significant strand of this optimistic, forward-looking narrative. However, *The Country Girls* ends with Cait heartbroken at the sudden end of this romance. In a characteristically pathetic pose, she is left drenched in the rain on a Dublin street when Mr. Gentleman does not show up to take her away on the planned holiday during which they will finally sleep together. Returning home, she finds a telegram from Mr. Gentleman explaining that Cait's father has been threatening him and that his wife is having a nervous breakdown.²⁵ Cait's misery, and the dashing of her romantic aspirations, is therefore precipitated by the actions of her father. Thus, at the novel's end her life is still being determined by that narrative of family dysfunction which overshadowed her waking thoughts at the beginning.

O'Brien's sequel, *Girl with Green Eyes* (1962), is set two years later, when Baba and Cait are still living in Dublin and Cait is still working as a grocer's assistant. This novel begins with Cait accompanying Baba as she inveigles her way into a public relations reception at which Cait meets a Franco-Irish film director called Eugene Gaillard.²⁶ Baba, and the girls' comic adventures in Dublin, quickly recedes from the narrative as Cait's relationship with Gaillard is foregrounded. Mostly set at Gaillard's farm in rural county Wicklow, the novel is primarily concerned with

²⁴ Ibid, 46.

²⁵ Ibid, 156-159.

²⁶ Edna O'Brien, *Girl with Green Eyes* (London: Penguin, 1964), 11-15. This novel was first published as *The Lonely Girl* in 1962.

charting the fluctuating anxiety and occasional pleasure that Cait derives from this difficult relationship. As with Mr. Gentleman, this romance also ends in failure and misery for Cait, and again her father is instrumental in this. Her father is opposed to the relationship because Gaillard is older and the separated father of a child. Having effectively kidnapped Cait, he takes her back to the family home. When she manages to get away from there her father, accompanied by various male relatives, neighbours and even a clergyman, follows her to Gaillard's house in a series of shambolic attempts at confronting Gaillard and 'rescuing' Cait. Ultimately, the father's intervention is futile and Cait's relationship with Gaillard collapses of its own accord. However, the novel reiterates the degree to which Gaillard is like a father-figure to Cait. For instance, on her first encounter with him she notes that he "was about the same height as my father."²⁷ Cait finds herself almost entirely dependent on Gaillard materially, and there is much emphasis on his cultural sophistication and his *Pygmalion*-like drive to 'improve' Cait. Above all, Gaillard proves a rather dislikeable character and emotionally, if not physically, he is as much of a bully as Cait's father. Yet again, that ordinary failure of her parents' marriage hovers over the failure of Cait's own relationship. After yet another humiliating social experience engineered by Gaillard, Cait leaves him and then agrees to accompany Baba when she emigrates to England. Crucially, Cait does not make an active decision here. Instead, she leaves Gaillard hoping that he will try to woo her back and one of the most painful episodes in the novel is her hysterical collapse when she learns that he does not intend to do this.²⁸ Nevertheless, the novel ends with an optimistic short chapter in which Cait briefly describes her new life in London, including her night classes at university, and her growing confidence.²⁹ The narrative of education and self-improvement seems here to offer a basis for satisfaction and hope that the romances with older men do not.

However, this optimism has vanished at the beginning of the third novel, *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). This novel's change in geographical setting, from rural Ireland and Dublin to London, is accompanied by a significant alteration in

²⁷ Ibid, 13.

²⁸ Ibid, 200-201.

²⁹ Ibid, 212-213.

narrative technique and a considerable darkening in emotional tone. The first two novels are narrated by Cait, while the third combines two forms of narration. Some chapters are narrated by Baba, and the others are focalised around Cait, whose name is now anglicised to Kate, but are narrated from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator. At the beginning we learn that Kate and Gaillard had resumed their relationship in London, had married when she became pregnant and that she had given birth to their son, Cash, who is now four.³⁰ All of this is related in Baba's concise and acerbic retrospective summary, and the marriage is already on the point of collapse when the novel begins. It is this intensely bitter collapse, and its deeply painful effect on Kate, that shapes the plot of the novel, in which Kate suffers a breakdown and eventually loses her son to the manipulative and bullying Gaillard. Running parallel to the story of Kate's collapsing marriage is Baba's account of her own opportunistic marriage to the wealthy but drunken, brutal and sexually inadequate Irish builder, Frank Durack. Both women make parallel attempts at finding some emotional and sexual satisfaction in casual affairs that are either comically disastrous or dishearteningly desultory, mainly because of the vanity and misogyny of the men they choose as partners.

Along with moving Baba to a more central place in this novel, O'Brien also shifts the tone from the earlier two novels by giving Baba's first-person narration a breezy, wise-cracking cynicism. Due to her breakdown Kate has to attend a psychiatrist, and the novel shows her beginning to critically analysis her own experiences as a consequence of the therapeutic process. This thematic idea is echoed structurally, since Kate's misguided hopes and illusions are laid bare by the 'objectivity' of the third-person narration, and made vulnerable to the corrosive effects of Baba's dismissal of romance as so much 'puke' and 'dope'. In the final words of the novel, Kate is described by the narrator as someone "of whom too much had been cut away".³¹ In response to the painful stripping away of her illusions about romance and intimacy, and to the loss of her son, she chooses to undergo a sterilisation procedure. Kate's symbolic renunciation of motherhood resurrects the memory of her mother, that anxious and distressed figure from the first novel, and the traumatic loss which shaped young Cait's life.

³⁰ Edna O'Brien, *Girls in their Married Bliss* (London: Penguin, 1967 [1964]), 7-9.

³¹ *Ibid*, 160.

Indeed, the third novel suggests that while Kate may have been able to free herself physically from her father's house, she was unable to do so psychologically. The first symptom of Kate's breakdown is when she hears the speaking weighing machine on a railway platform announce her weight with a "rich, Irish, country accent". Her "conversation" about Irish origins and Christmas with this mechanical Irishman leads her to remember her father, and she realises how rarely she thinks of him anymore. It strikes her as "barbarously unfair that someone could have had such a calamitous effect on her and still not pop up in her mind once or twice a day".³² Then, as Kate begins to narrate her life to her therapist, she also begins to radically re-evaluate her relationship with her mother. The "mantle of perfection" that had always enveloped the memory of her mother in Kate's mind slips and she becomes angry at her for "smothering her one child in loathsome, sponge-soft pamper love." We are told that, "for days she went around hating her mother."³³ Twenty years after its first publication, O'Brien added an 'Epilogue' to a new edition of the trilogy. This epilogue is narrated by Baba as she waits at Waterloo station (the site of Kate's breakdown years before) for a train carrying Kate's body back from the health farm where she has died. Like her mother, Kate has drowned, officially while swimming, but Baba suspects that her death may have been suicide.³⁴ This new ending gave a distinctly circular shape to the overall narrative arc of the trilogy, and attributed an even greater significance to the death of the mother in the first novel. From the perspective of that final epilogue, the death of her mother now seems to have exercised a determinative influence on Cait's whole future.

Cait's memories of her dead mother form a rhythmic pattern throughout the trilogy and resurge especially at points of stress. In the second novel, for instance, when she is dismayed to discover that Eugene Gaillard is married, Cait "remembered that night my mother was drowned and how I had clung to the foolish hope that it was all a mistake".³⁵ Later in this second novel, she also thinks of her mother after

³² Ibid, 99-100.

³³ Ibid, 123.

³⁴ Edna O'Brien, 'Epilogue', *The Country Girls Trilogy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 511 and 524.

³⁵ O'Brien, *Green Eyes*, 43.

she has had sex with Gaillard for the first time: "I thought of Mama and of how she used to blow on hot soup before she gave it to me and of the rubber bands she put inside the turndown of my ankle-socks, to keep them from falling".³⁶ That Cait's post-coital thoughts turn to her mother is a symptom of how this sexual experience does not yield the emotional fulfilment which Cait had been led to expect from it. As Patricia Coughlan observes, the emptiness of her sexual experience leaves Cait "longing for her mother's nurturing love".³⁷ A group of women – Baba, Martha, Cait's aunt – along with her mother occupy Cait's thoughts and place her in a web of identification and solidarity with other women who have shared this unsettling, defining experience. This is one of the few moments of such solidarity in the novel, since Cait usually finds herself consumed with feelings of bitter rivalry towards other women, such as Gaillard's ex-wife, Laura.

The juxtaposition of the profound (memories of her dead mother) and the banal (the minutiae of soup and ankle-socks) is a notable feature of O'Brien's style in this episode of Cait's sexual initiation. As Eugene Gaillard is making love to her for the first time, Cait reflects that,

It was very strange, being part of something so odd, so comic: and then I thought of how Baba and I used to hint about this particular situation and wonder about it and be appalled by our own curiosity. I thought of Baba and Martha and my aunt and all the people who regarded me as a child and I knew that I had now passed – inescapably – into womanhood. I felt no pleasure, just some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do. My mind dwelt on foolish, incidental things. I thought to myself, so this is it: the secret I dreaded, and longed for...all the perfume, and sighs and purple brassieres, and curling-pins in bed, and gin-and-it, and necklaces, had all been for this. I saw it as something comic, and beautiful.³⁸

The 'beauty' and 'comedy' of sexuality jostle with each other in Cait's perception. She has an expectation that the erotic will be, or should be, transformative and lead to some grand alteration of things. What she hopes for, perhaps, is the sort of epiphanic moment in which an erotic encounter delivered an artistic vocation to Stephen Dedalus and to Anna Murphy, or the type of moral challenge which

³⁶ Ibid, 150.

³⁷ Patricia Coughlan, 'Killing the Bats: O'Brien, Abjection and the Question of Agency,' in Laing et al. (eds.), 171-195, 190.

³⁸ O'Brien, *Green Eyes*, 149.

allowed Mary Lavelle to attain her autonomy. But Cait is reduced to figuring this transformation in the received, patriarchal cliché of sex 'making' a woman out of her and this is the first indication that sexuality will not deliver such an exhilarating metamorphosis for her. The best she can achieve is a "strange satisfaction" as she resigns herself to her fate. Distracting herself from this deflation through her characteristic attention to "foolish, incidental things" only serves to reinforce the effect. She lists a whole series of 'feminine' commodities that are understood as an elaborate preparation for a climactic sexual initiation that is in the end conveyed in a deadpan, deflated manner – "this particular situation". The commodification of femininity via these items ought, Cait implies, to issue in some great experience; instead, there is a rather ironic sense in which the commodification process – the wearing of the purple brassieres or necklaces, the drinking of the gin – *is* effectively the experience. Means and ends, the commodification of femininity and sexual satisfaction, become comedically conflated, even ironically muddled together. At the very moment when we might expect Cait to be emotionally transported by her sexual initiation she remains instead contemplatively detached and ruminates wryly on the theatrical dimensions of sex rather than on any metamorphoses of the self.

Rather than yielding the originality and authenticity of a new self, in the Joycean and Kate O'Brien mode, here sexuality is a matter of simulation and repetition. Cait seems to be trapped in a repetitive cycle rather than on the trajectory of self-development and self-discovery associated with the classical *bildungsroman*. Instead of producing a transformation, sexuality reiterates how Cait is immobilised by her history. Her first sexual experience is subtended between the symbolic presence of her mother and the literal presence of her father. Cait's instinctive recollection of her mother in her post-coital loneliness is especially piquant because it invokes the tragic opening of the first novel. In the months after her death, young Cait is revisited by the image of her mother's face on her pillow, looking "reluctant and frightened as if something terrible was being done to her. She used to sleep with me as often as she could and only went across to his room when he made her".³⁹ Cait and Gaillard first make love a few days after the second visit by her father and his entourage, and after the couple go through a fake marriage. Cait's first sexual experience is therefore the proof of an exchange in

³⁹ O'Brien, *Country*, 50-51.

which Cait is passively passed from her father to Gaillard. There is also ample evidence that Cait may have merely traded one relationship with a domineering, difficult older man for another. Even as Cait interprets her sexual experience as a passage from girlhood to womanhood, the novel ironically emphasises how her relationship with Gaillard is actually infantilising her. She is staying in his house having escaped from her father's; she no longer has a job and has no money. As Gaillard arrogantly reminds her, "I give you everything - food, clothes - ...I try to educate you, teach you how to speak, how to deal with people, build up your confidence".⁴⁰ If Cait's sexual experience fits within a narrative of transformation then it is one in which Cait is a passive object being developed rather than an active subject directing this development.

Cait invariably inhabits a state of fretful and anxious abjection in which the masochism of her relationships with Mr. Gentleman and Gaillard is matched by the alternating rhythm of humiliation and emotional sustenance that underpins her relationship with Baba. As Kate begins to realise consciously in therapy, her mother provided her with an early exemplar of such masochism. Female masochism is a recurrent preoccupation in O'Brien's fiction, and it is also explored through the characterisation of her other sixties heroines, such as Ellen in *August is a Wicked Month* (1964) and Willa in *Casualties of Peace* (1965). Her insistence on mapping female subjectivity in such unrelentingly masochistic terms, along with the ambiguous distance she herself maintained from the women's movement, provoked some early feminists to critique O'Brien's fiction for its dearth of strong women characters and the absence of women-centred consciousness and solidarity.⁴¹ In more recent years, it is precisely O'Brien's exploration of the psychology and politics of masochistic female desire and abjected female subjectivity that has made her work attractive to a new generation of feminist critics. Shirley Peterson charts a series of sadomasochistic relationships that runs across the generations in the trilogy: the marriages of the Brady and Brennan

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *Green Eyes*, 193.

⁴¹ On O'Brien's reception among early feminist critics see Lisa Colletta and Maureen O'Connor, 'Introduction' and Kristine Byron, 'In The Name of the Mother...' Reading and Revision in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue* in Colletta and O'Connor (eds.) *Wild Colonial Girl: Essays on Edna O'Brien* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 4-5 and 16-17.

parents; Cait's relationship with Mr. Gentleman and Gaillard; Baba's marriage to Durack; Cait and Baba's friendship. Peterson uses a concept of sadomasochism that is political as much as psycho-sexual. The type of power dynamics operating in sadomasochistic sexual relationships, she argues, can be detected in all capitalist social relations, marked as they are by inequality and discrepancies of power. O'Brien's trilogy, Peterson argues, is important because it elucidates both the psychic and political impact of this sadomasochistic cultural logic for women in the specific historical context of mid-century Ireland. In Peterson's view, "as Kate seeks acknowledgement of herself through male approval and Baba denies her own feelings of dependency by abusing Kate, both characters seek to attain an elusive female subjectivity that is ultimately impossible at this point in Ireland, structured as it was around a patriarchal and nationalist agenda".⁴² Peterson follows Heather Ingman in identifying Irish nationalism and its post-independence alliance with Catholicism as the primary target of O'Brien's subversive critique. Ingman contrasts Julia Kristeva's "nation of the future" which will be "polyphonic, flexible and heterogeneous", with the "homogeneity" that the Irish nation-state sought during its early years.⁴³ Catholicism and the construction of "national norms of gender" were the means deployed by the post-independence nation to achieve this homogeneity. Thus, in Ingman's view, "Ireland authenticated its Catholic identity largely through its women, and nationalism in Ireland became the language through which sexual control and repression of women were justified".⁴⁴ It was, Ingman asserts, this ideological configuration to which O'Brien laid siege, in her fiction and in the very act of being a writer. O'Brien, she writes, "challenged the notion of a homogenous national identity; indeed by the very act of taking up her pen she was subverting the political and ecclesiastical definition of Irish womanhood as confined to domesticity."⁴⁵

Cait and Baba are in London in the third part of the trilogy, and in O'Brien's next two novels, Willa and Ellen are Irish women living abroad and their connections

⁴² Shirley Peterson, '“Meaniacs” and Martyrs: Sadomasochistic Desire in O'Brien's *The Country Girls Trilogy*' in Laing et al (eds.), 151-170, 152.

⁴³ Heather Ingman, 'Edna O'Brien: Stretching the Nation's Boundaries,' *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (2002), 253-265, 253.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 254.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 255.

with the country are frayed. Nevertheless, in Ingman's view, these Irishwomen are still crippled by the damage inflicted on them by an Irish nationalist formation and she detects no indictment in O'Brien's writing of whatever alternative metropolitan identities may be on offer.⁴⁶ However, as Patricia Coughlan argues, the third novel of the trilogy demonstrates that O'Brien is no more enthusiastic about the promises of individual and sexual freedom asserted by metropolitan culture than she is about Catholic and nationalist Ireland. Coughlan uses the dialectical conception of abjection developed by Kristeva to read the frequency of "bodily scenes and items eliciting disgust" in O'Brien's fiction.⁴⁷ This concept of abjection was central to Kristeva's re-writing of the Freudian and Lacanian models of psychological formation. For Kristeva, the rejection of the abject, of all those objects associated with bodily necessity, is the crucial entry point into the Symbolic Order and subjectivity; the mother, as caregiver, is the first facilitator of abjection but the maternal body is also the first object that has to be abjected. Beyond the sphere of individual development, abjection also functions as a social-structural phenomenon. The cultural designation of some groups (the poor, other races and so on) as 'dirty' and abject is a central mechanism through which power operates and through which cultures maintain their ideological systems. Crucially, in Kristeva's theory the process of abjection is always volatile and potentially never complete; those who struggle but fail to successfully perform abjection themselves become abject persons, who desire fusion with the Other rather than sustaining the more difficult state of subjectivity and difference from the Other.⁴⁸ Yet this state of abjection can be enabling as well as disabling; abjection carries with it the potential to glimpse the pre-Symbolic and the sublime, most especially when it is distilled into the aesthetic, as, Coughlan argues, it is in O'Brien's fiction.⁴⁹ Paradoxically then, abjection is both constitutive of the Symbolic Order, and potentially disruptive of that Order.

In Coughlan's view, judging O'Brien's fiction for the absence of strong female characters is beside the point. O'Brien's importance lies, she asserts, in the rigorous delineation of the condition of abject female selfhood in her work,

⁴⁶ Ibid, 256-257 and 258-259.

⁴⁷ Coughlan, 173.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 176-179.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 180.

beginning with Cait's abasement before the 'god-like' figures of Mr. Gentleman and Gaillard and her conflicted relationship with her mother, and the specific form this took in mid-century Catholic Ireland. Analysis is not the same as endorsement, and O'Brien "does not celebrate the abjection of the maternal and of Ireland in her work; she rather chronicles, agonises and mourns over it".⁵⁰ Thus, Coughlan's position differs from that of Ingman and other recent critics, such as Kristine Byron and Rebecca Pelan, who concentrate on O'Brien's repudiation of Irish Catholic nationalism.⁵¹ Coughlan argues that O'Brien demolishes any reductive distinction between the 'freedom' proffered by the metropolitan and the 'modern' and the 'repression' characteristic of the local and the 'traditional'. In the trilogy, Coughlan argues,

the real struggle ...is not between, on the one hand, repression, regulation, the alcoholic father, prudery, coercive virginity, the Irish countryside as a cultural and emotional nowhere and, on the other, urban modernity, relative anonymity, apparent freedom and sexual opportunity. It is between the different forms of alienation represented by *each* of these opposites, which are both still under the Law of the Father.⁵²

Kate Brady, she concludes, is "not less, merely differently, regulated and abject in her Dublin or London lives than in the west of Ireland, and she has escaped one controlling father-figure only to find another".

In the novels Cait's state of anxious abjection has social and political as well as psychological dimensions. She regularly frets about her lack of cultural and practical knowledge and is awkward, unconfident and easily embarrassed socially. In particular, this anxiety about her personal and social ineptness fuels her masochistic fear that Gaillard is always about to reject her. In another instance of O'Brien's strategic use of comic and banal details to scramble her reader's romantic co-ordinates, she has this exchange taking place between Gaillard and Cait as they lie in bed after they first have sex:

'Well, a new incumbent, more responsibility, more trouble.'
'I'm sorry for coming like this, without being asked,' I said, thinking that 'incumbent' was an insulting word; I mixed it up with 'encumbrance'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 182.

⁵¹ Byron, *op cit*. Rebecca Pelan, 'Edna O'Brien's "Love Objects"' in Coletta and O'Connor (eds.), 58-77.

⁵² Coughlan, 189.

'It's all right; I wouldn't throw a nice girl like you out of my bed,' he joked, and I wondered what he really thought of me. I was not sophisticated and I couldn't talk very well nor drive a car.

'I'll try and get sophisticated,' I said. I would cut my hair, buy tight skirts and a corset.⁵³

Gaillard does nothing to reassure Cait; his 'jokes' serving as cheerful outriders for his more sadistic and deliberate cultivation of her anxieties. Just before they make love, he jokingly warns her to take care of the ring he has given her because it has to last a long time and when she asks how long, he replies "as long as you keep your girlish laughter". If Cait wants stability or security in this relationship the onus is on her to remain 'girlish', not on Gaillard to be loving or reassuring. To add to Cait's insecurity, he is also sending her contradictory messages. He wants her to remain youthful, childlike and underdeveloped, yet he gets exasperated at her recalcitrant incapacity to respond properly to his project for 'improving' her. He expresses a very similar variety of responses to the Irish countryside. His Lawrentian abandonment of the city for a rustic life of wood-chopping and gentleman farming in Wicklow overlaps seamlessly with his dismissal of his neighbours as "Stone Age people".⁵⁴ Cait's social ineptness and gaucheness also has a geo-cultural dimension since, in Gaillard's view, it is partly traceable to her origins among these same "Stone Age people". This is luridly dramatised when her father and his various hangers-on come to 'rescue' Cait. Tramping into Gaillard's carefully rusticated sitting room and smelling of cow dung (one of the men is a cattle dealer) they present an unsavoury sight: the pathetic and somewhat delirious alcoholic father, the servile and ridiculously pretentious Jack Holland, and the others, who are stupidly belligerent, racist, misogynist and nationalistically chauvinist to a ludicrous degree, with their talk of "foreigners" who'll be "running this bloody country soon".⁵⁵ To complete the line-up of stock characters, on Mr. Brady's next visit he is accompanied by the bishop. In her analysis of the trilogy, Ingman reads this episode 'straight', as it were, for the evidence which it provides of O'Brien dissecting the narrow sectarianism, misogyny and xenophobia which, Ingman holds, was the defining characteristic of mid-century Irish Catholic

⁵³ O'Brien, *Green Eyes*, 150.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 174.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 131.

nationalism.⁵⁶ However, this reading risks losing sight of the comedy generated by O'Brien introducing a kind of satirical burlesque of 'rural Ireland' into a larger realist-naturalist frame. To ignore the bizarrely comic effect of this is to endorse Gaillard's metropolitan condescension, yet the cartoonish quality of the father's party suggests that Gaillard's views are just as much in O'Brien's satiric sights here. But to stress the satire and comedy risks making light of Cait's entrapment within the absurdly archaic and oafish world to which her father wants to return her. One effect of the episode, therefore, may be to juxtapose the grossly inflated patriarchal self-satisfaction of both worlds. The comedy, in other words, cuts both ways: it is directed not just at the retrograde misogyny of the rural Irish 'rescue party' but also at the smugly conceited 'cosmopolitan' Gaillard. In this view, O'Brien positions Cait as the victim of Catholic and nationalist Ireland, while also allegorically identifying her with that Ireland as the passive and abject target of a self-consciously metropolitan project of development.

Thus, Cait's *bildung* narrative is impeded by the insurmountable trauma of her mother's death and her failed family, but it is also impeded by a particular vision of the future, encapsulated in Gaillard's attempts to impose improvement on her. While O'Brien's trilogy therefore diagnoses the disempowerment of femininity under patriarchy, her narratives of failed *bildung* also indict the liberal model of progressive historical development and modernisation with which her work is commonly associated. In one respect, Cait is the most 'modern' heroine of the *bildungsromane* we have read. In the earlier novels, those nurturing relationships between an older and younger woman, between Anna and Helen and Delia and Gran, rooted the young heroine in a tradition from which she drew sustenance. By contrast, the past has nothing to offer Cait. She is rootless, alienated and free to make her world anew. But from another perspective, Cait is also the least 'modern' of these heroines. Anna and Delia's *bildung* narratives are buoyed along by a progressive teleology grounded in a variety of 'grand narratives,' such as Catholicism, liberalism and artistic vocation, and a subterranean current of feminist solidarity. By contrast, the tempo of Cait's *bildung* narrative is not progressive but repetitive as she is continuously forced to return to the past and confront its painful legacies. Where sexuality, either the libidinal surge of erotic desire in Kate O'Brien

⁵⁶ Ingman, 256.

or the projected pleasures of marital intimacy in Lavery, appeared to offer the earlier generation of heroines a well-spring into their future, sexuality presents Cait with a route back to confront the past.

O'Brien's astringent and anaphrodisiac style of sexual writing offers a riposte to the delusional exuberance provided by her literary antecedents – both the 'low' version of romantic fiction and the 'high' literary erotics practiced in the Irish *bildungsroman* by Joyce and Kate O'Brien. But the erotics of powerlessness and immobilisation in her narratives also repudiate her culture's cheerful belief in the connection between sexuality, freedom and capitalist modernisation. O'Brien's trilogy seems in some ways to confirm Theodor Adorno's assertion that "sexual liberation in contemporary society is mere illusion...the neutralisation of sex even where it is believed to be unabashedly satisfied".⁵⁷ For both, the modern late twentieth-century subject is an inherently damaged one, trapped between old-fashioned bourgeois repressions and the empty stimuli of the modern culture industries and commodified society. Nevertheless, Coughlan's assessment, that O'Brien "chronicles, agonises and mourns over" the condition of masochistic abjection, does let O'Brien off rather lightly. The damaged lives of O'Brien's heroines bear witness to one crucial element of late modern feminine experience. However, contrary to O'Brien and Adorno's view, the modern subject is not wholly defined by the damage inflicted on it. The sixties was a period when oppressed modern individuals came together collectively to challenge the conditions that made them so. As her participation in the anti-censorship campaign demonstrated, O'Brien understood the power of such action. Yet, any sense of collective agency is precisely what is missing in the trilogy. Cait is left stranded, without the glimmer of any alternatives or possibilities on her horizon. Carefully elaborating this state may induce both sorrow and anger in O'Brien's readers, and such anger may fuel a commitment to transforming the historical conditions illuminated by Cait's predicament. But the melancholic stasis animated by Cait's failed *bildung* narrative can just as easily produce a sense of hopeless resignation when confronted by the overpowering determinism of history.

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sexual Taboo and Law Today' in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* [trans. Henry W. Pickford] (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 72-73. This essay was originally published in German in 1963.

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In some respects, the pairing of O'Brien and McGahern in Irish literary history is little more than an accident. Aside from the chronological synchronicity of their emergence on to the Irish literary scene and their controversial conflicts with the censorship, there are considerable differences between the trajectories of their careers. O'Brien's critical reception and position in the canon has always been fraught. Marginalised or condescended to as a 'romantic' writer, by both Irish and early feminist critics, she has more recently been incorporated into the newly-defined tradition of Irish women's writing, albeit less securely than figures such as Eavan Boland or Medhb McGuckian. From the outset, when his first novel, *The Barracks* (1963), was awarded the AE and Macauley prizes, McGahern has been more feted as a 'high' literary figure and more securely placed within the Irish canon. His critics have routinely connected his work to late modernism (particularly to Beckett) and existentialism – literary categories to which considerable cultural distinction accrues. After the trilogy, O'Brien's prolific output included fiction with varied geographical and cultural settings (England; France; New York) and different stylistic features (the stream of consciousness narration used in *A Pagan Place* (1970), for instance). More recently, she produced a quite different trilogy (*The House of Splendid Isolation* [1994], *Down by the River* [1996] and *In the Forest* [2002]) in which she fictionalised a series of recent historical events in Ireland to engage with diverse questions, such as political violence and republicanism, incest and domestic violence and childhood abuse. Aside from those sections of his seventies novels, *The Leavetaking* (1974) and *The Pornographer* (1979), set in Dublin and London, McGahern's fiction never departed from the specific locale of rural Ireland, specifically the Roscommon and Leitrim area. From his first to his last novel, McGahern's fiction meticulously charted a very precisely delineated physical, social and emotional terrain; even in the seventies novels the use of a different geographical setting left unaltered the crucial emotional connection to rural Ireland that underpinned the narrative. McGahern's precisely demarcated geographical and thematic co-ordinates was mirrored by his career-long fidelity to the naturalism of his first novel; the very sparing use of formal innovations – shifting narrative perspective in *The Dark*, pastiche in *The Pornographer* and the carefully constructed plotlessness of his elegiac final novel,

That They May Face the Rising Sun (2002) – serving to underline that overall consistency of his aesthetic.

As his *Memoir* (2005) made clear, McGahern hewed remarkably closely to his biographical raw material, most especially when writing about the childhood loss of a mother in *The Dark* and *The Leavetaking*.⁵⁸ Here again is a difference with O'Brien, whose mother was alive and well in County Clare for many years after the publication of *The Country Girls*.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, this rather remarkable structural and thematic similarity, the mother's early death as the fulcrum of a plot, points towards a shared structure of feeling that unites these sixties *bildungsromane*. Like O'Brien's trilogy, *The Dark* is a structurally bifurcated *bildung* narrative. The narrative moves relentlessly forward taking the reader from young Mahoney's early education, through a series of decisions about his future life (the possibility of becoming a priest; choosing between university and an ESB clerkship) to his final departure to Dublin to take up that clerical job. But, simultaneously, the narrative constantly looks back, suggesting that the boy's whole formation, or deformation, has been tragically predetermined by the traumatic death of his mother and the emotional tyranny of his father. Events move chronologically forward, but the 'meaning' of events seems to be firmly located in a maimed and mauled childhood. It is as if the forward-thrust of the classical realist *bildungsroman*, in which one develops through experience and adversity, is arrested or overwhelmed by a tragic Freudian trauma-narrative in which the early years stamp a temperament indelibly.

The circular shape of the narrative reinforces this determinist tendency. Notoriously, the novel opens with a viscerally realised scene of sadism, terror and humiliation. The first words of the novel are the father's enraged demand to "say what you said because I know".⁶⁰ His tautological logic is the first indication of the elder Mahoney's tyrannical hold over the household, his claim to already know everything that happens, but also the first indication of the older man's paradoxical vulnerability, particularly his manic, futile efforts to maintain control over himself as

⁵⁸ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber, 2005) 122-136.

⁵⁹ O'Brien spoke publicly about her adult relationship with her mother in the interviews publicising her novel *The Light of Evening* (2006). See Julie Wheelwright, 'Edna O'Brien: the Mother of Invention,' *The Independent*, 29 September, 2006.

⁶⁰ John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber, 1965), 7.

much as over his family. His father forces young Mahoney to strip naked before his sisters, prepares to whip him with a belt but then doesn't actually hit the boy, who nevertheless wets himself in fear. The boy's loss of physical control over his own body is the abject nadir of his humiliation but it is also a visceral correlative of the father's own struggle to maintain control.⁶¹ While this opening episode establishes the boy's relationship with his father as one significant co-ordinate of the narrative, it also establishes the relationship with his dead mother as another. Old Mahoney invokes the respect due to her memory as a justification for his violence, and as the boy recovers after the attack he comforts himself with his memories of her. His mother had "gone away years before and left him to this," and her death is thus situated in the narrative as a primal trauma.⁶² If their mother had lived she could have either reined in the old man's violence or at least provided comforting emotional ballast for the children. Were it not for her death, the family would not have descended to the abysmal depths of dysfunction in which we see it. The boy's mind instinctively returns to her memory during other traumatic experiences, such as the beating, which are thereby configured as reverberations of that primal loss.

It is symptomatic of the pessimistic conception of *bildung* underpinning McGahern's narrative that the novel does not actually end with an image of the young hero about to make his way in the world. We know, of course, that the next day young Mahoney will head off for Dublin and his job with the ESB. But our last sight of him is in a bedroom with his father, which is exactly where we first saw him at the beginning of the novel. We are in a different bedroom (in a Galway boarding-house rather than the family home), the elder Mahoney is not on his own tyrannically-governed territory, and the emotional tone of the episodes is considerably different. The novel ends with an awkwardly mawkish apology and embarrassed declaration of love between father and son. However, Mahoney's apology for his brutality over the years is equivocal and self-exculpating: "things happened in all that time, none of us are saints. Tempers were lost. You don't hold

⁶¹ See Joe Cleary's analysis of the thematic of control in the opening chapter, and in the novel as a whole, in *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006), 122-124.

⁶² McGahern, *The Dark*, 10.

any of that against me, I don't hold anything against you".⁶³ The son's responses are confined to tritely and passively confirming Mahoney's self-serving mood: "No, I wouldn't have been brought up any other way or by any other father...and I'll always love you too. You know that." The cyclical movement suggested by the recurrence of the bedroom setting reiterates the narrative movement in which there has been neither an irreparable break nor any genuine reconciliation but a type of emotional stalemate; this quality of immobilisation is reiterated by the narrator's observation that "it seemed that the whole world must turn over in the night and howl in its boredom."

Yet there has been some movement between these two points. Young Mahoney has grown older and has navigated his way successfully through the education system, winning scholarships and getting a place at university. He has grown physically stronger, as he finds out during his last summer working on the farm with his father. He has also stood up to Mahoney, to defend his sister as she is being beaten by her father, and he had helped his sister to escape from her sexually-abusive employer. But this progressive narrative of achievement, and of physical and moral growth, is insistently punctuated by reminders that such development is impossible or illusory. This rhythm of action followed by stasis is generated by the episodic narrative structure, composed as it is of short chapters which descriptively compress the passage of chronological time (the school year, the farming seasons, the exams) while focusing very minutely and intensely on the effect which a singular experience has on young Mahoney. The vividly realised, dark intensity of these experiences creates the effect of isolating each such episode rather than channelling them into a developmental sequence. There is a repetitive pattern to these episodes: a recurring thematic concern with control and choice, and a recurring structure that places young Mahoney in a humiliating encounter with an older, more powerful man. The novel's beginning serves as a template here: after that beating there is the episode in which the son is sexually abused by his father and this is followed a few chapters later by the boy's bedside conversation with Father Gerald. These humiliating private encounters are paralleled by episodes of public humiliation as, for example, when father and son meet with the secondary school principal and later with the University Dean.

⁶³ Ibid, 191.

In the novel, young Mahoney's erotic fantasies about women are interwoven with his fantasies about an idealised petty-bourgeois life that his dedication to the drudgery of school work and educational achievement may yield. Along with fantasising about Mary Moran and her cycling-strengthened thighs, he also dreams of "the sound of *wife*, a house with a garden and trees near the bend of a river...winter evenings with slippers and a book, in the firelight she is playing the piano."⁶⁴ More prosaically, one of the attractions of university life for young Mahoney is the possibility of meeting young women there. But when it comes to actually attending a dance during the first week he turns away from the door at the last minute in a paroxysm of embarrassment and fear. This failure compounds his disillusionment with the university, as "the dream was torn piecemeal from the university before the week was out".⁶⁵ Earlier, the boy had also recognised the trite and vacuous materialism of his ersatz vision of domestic happiness; its tawdry allure paling before the ultimate reality that "death would come. Everything riveted into that."⁶⁶ Young Mahoney's libidinal romance about his future is torpedoed by this neurotic awareness of the ultimate horizon of mortality and by the pervasive disillusionment and powerlessness that consequently beset him.

Just as the narrative drive towards the future is eroticised in the novel, the obsessive return to the past, to trauma and to loss which jeopardises that future is equally eroticised. In particular, sexuality serves in the novel to reiterate the boy's paralysis. For young Mahoney, sexuality is invariably intertwined with humiliation and powerlessness, and this is first established at the beginning of the novel where he is the object of his father's hunger for sexual contact. This episode returns us to a bedroom, where in the first chapter we saw the boy prostrate as the humiliated object of his father's anger and violence. Bedrooms are a remarkably significant motif in this novel. Along with the beginning and the ending, several of the other key incidents in the plot – the disturbing description of young Mahoney sharing a bed with his father; the notorious masturbation episode; the encounter between young Mahoney and Father Gerald – take place in this setting. The repeated

⁶⁴ Ibid, 82-83.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 172.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 83.

bedroom settings contribute to the remarkably intense and claustrophobic emotional tone, and the motif of the bedroom also produces a type of spatial homology in the novel. Young Mahoney may move from his father's house to Father Gerald's house to Galway; he may circulate between different emotional and social environments, and between apparently different ranges of possibility. But wherever he goes there is always a bedroom, and the appearance of choice and of diverse possibilities is inevitably reduced to the same singular fate.

Old Mahoney's touching and stroking of his son until he brings himself to climax is accompanied by an incessant stream of platitudes and endearments. McGahern uses the rhythm of Mahoney's speech as a metonym for what the father is physically doing to the boy, "the words drummed softly as the stroking hands moved on his belly," and the most vividly and minutely-realised description of what takes place between father and son is reserved for the kissing: "the sharp stubble grown since the morning and the nose and the kiss, the thread of the half-dried mucus coming away from the other lips in the kiss". What really angers and upsets the boy is less the physical degradation and humiliation to which he is being subjected than the wretched parody of intimacy that is being enacted. The boy's powerlessness, "there was nothing to do but wait", is fatally and inescapably connected to the failure of the family and to the trauma of the mother's death. Hence the episode begins with two key echoes of the first chapter. As he lies in bed waiting in dread for his father to arrive one of the boy's ploys to distract himself is to dream "of the dead days with her in June", and when his father does arrive the older man inflicts an act of sadism, putting a lighted match close to the boy's face, that recalls the earlier threatened whipping.

Sexuality is further linked with his mother's death in the subsequent masturbation episode. That chapter is book-ended with the description of a photograph of a woman; the woman pictured in the ad from the *Irish Independent* that the boy fantasises about, and the photograph of his mother in her memoriam card which he finds in the book that he picks up afterwards. McGahern's description of the boy using a "tattered piece of newspaper" with an ad for a hair-removal product as a piece of pornography and the exact reproduction of "REMOVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR" from the ad on the page of the novel both serve to undercut very sharply the

erotic fantasy, the “dream of flesh in woman”, that young Mahoney is creating.⁶⁷ This reiterates the banality and squalor of his sexual experience. Moreover, that double movement of the *bildung* narrative gets neatly encapsulated here. At the outset, there is the future-orientation of the sexual fantasy of the woman who would “one day...come to me”. But the chapter ends with a decisive orientation towards the past embodied in the figure of the dead mother. Crucially, this generates a sense of defeated resignation about the future in young Mahoney, who declares in shame: “I’d never be anything. It was certain”.⁶⁸ In these two episodes, the father and then the masturbating boy compulsively seek sexual satisfaction; they act determinedly on their impulses but their actions are squalid failures of control. Empty simulacra of intimacy, their actions are meaningless and futile, hollowed out by the implacable reality of death.

The episode with Father Gerald repeats this same pattern of a humiliating, intimate encounter with a powerful older man, the corruption of intimacy and the connection between sexuality, control and choice. The priest is a relative of the boy’s mother, and his annual visits are an implicit act of surveillance by her family on old Mahoney, who resents them. Since the boy is very promising academically, Father Gerald takes a particular interest in his plans for his future and particularly in the boy’s possible vocation to the priesthood. During the summer holidays before his last year at secondary school, young Mahoney travels to stay in the priest’s house to consider his possible vocation. On his first night there, the priest comes to the boy’s bedroom because, as he puts it, it might be “a good time for us to talk”.⁶⁹ Father Gerald’s appearance immediately ignites Young Mahoney’s memories of his father, but initially this serves to reassure him, since there is “not the goodnight kiss your cursed father took years ago now on his priested mouth”.⁷⁰ The priest never initiates any sort of sexual contact with the young man. Their encounter is, nevertheless, given a distinctly erotic edge because of the peculiarly intimate bedroom setting and the unusual degree of physical contact: “his body hot against yours, his arm about your shoulders.”⁷¹ In addition, the reader is already primed to

⁶⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 67.

⁷¹ Ibid, 74.

suspect the priest of being sexually attracted to the boy since, in the preceding few pages, Father Gerald had explained that, most unusually, his housekeeper is a teenage boy.⁷²

But what turns this encounter overtly sexual is not action but talk. This chapter is primarily written as a dialogue between the younger and older man, and becomes increasingly interrogatory. To begin with, the priest questions the boy about his potential clerical vocation: Has he reached a decision? Does he want to be a priest? What troubles him most about his decision? The boy gives brief, tentative answers. He says that he worries about whether he has a vocation or not, and if he is good enough to be a priest. The priest offers various platitudes about the nature of a priestly vocation, but then very abruptly changes the direction of his questioning: "have you ever kissed a girl?".⁷³ In an echo of his father's violence, the priest's question "came with the shock of a blow." Father Gerald fires a series of increasingly detailed and specific questions about his sexual fantasies and masturbation at the boy: Have you ever wanted or desired a kiss? Did you take pleasure in it? You caused seed to spill in your excitement? How often did it happen? How many times a week? Did you bring one woman or many into these pleasures? Were they real or imaginary? Painfully embarrassed by this, the boy nevertheless answers all of these questions truthfully. Father Gerald's frankness and the new level of confidentiality that has apparently been forged between them emboldens the boy to ask the priest if he struggled with his sexual desires as a boy. The priest blankly ignores his question. The boy is silently enraged by this refusal, and scarcely registers the priest's departing platitudes. In the priest's house there is a collection of clocks inherited from his predecessor. After the priest leaves him, the clocks begin to strike the hour. But the clocks are out of sequence with each other and from listening "you couldn't tell the hours, none of the clocks struck alone or together, just one broken medley".⁷⁴

The style and language of the priest's questions, and the rapid tempo of the dialogue, echo the novel's earlier description of young Mahoney in the confessional

⁷² Ibid, 64.

⁷³ Ibid, 72.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 75.

and the boy's initial response to this line of questioning is also remarkably similar to his earlier elation after confession.⁷⁵ Being forced by Father Gerald's quizzing to voice his shameful sexual secrets leaves him feeling humiliated, but this degrading humiliation is paradoxically cathartic and incites a kind of euphoria: "you still felt a nothing and broken, cheap as dirt, but hope was rising...joy rose, the world was beautiful, all was beautiful".⁷⁶ But these masochistic feelings of renewal through degradation are abruptly dashed by the priest's refusal to reciprocate. It is not the priest's wayward intrusion into his bed, nor the intrusion into his thoughts and desires, that really upsets the boy. Instead, it is Father Gerald's refusal and betrayal of intimacy that leaves young Mahoney feeling degraded, humiliated and enraged. The priest's offence is to reassert his power as priest by transforming the space of intimacy, the bedroom, into the institutional space of the confessional. Humiliated, the boy casts around in his mind for a comparable experience and inevitably his thoughts turn to those "cursed nights" with his father. This confirms for him precisely the degree to which things do not change: that difference which he initially thought lay between "years ago" and "now" is, in fact, meaningless. The jarring and muddled ringing of the clocks serves as an image of this temporal indeterminacy.

Left alone in the room, the boy finds relief from his anguished rage at the priest through masturbation. Unable to sleep afterwards, he goes out in the early morning to the garden of the priest's house, which borders onto a graveyard. Gripped by a visceral anger at his humiliation, the boy reaches a decision about his future:

You ground your teeth, your hands clenched and unclenched, the mind bent on destruction of the night before, but only managing to circle and circle on its own futility. You couldn't be a priest, never now, that was all. You'd never raise anointed hands. You'd drift into the world, world of girls and women, company in gay evenings, exact opposite of the lonely dedication of the priesthood unto death. Your life seemed set, without knowing why, it was fixed, you had no choice. You were a drifter, you'd drift a whole life long after pleasure, but at the end there'd be the reckoning.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid, 41-42.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 77.

In McGahern's description the boy's decision about his vocation is hardly a decision at all but a resigned acceptance of fate. The loose syntax and anarchic rhythm of the writing reinforces the sense of this unstoppable and uncontrollable fate, which is also encapsulated in the repetition of 'drifting'. It is not that the boy will not be a priest, but that he cannot become one. Not that either becoming or not becoming a priest are especially great alternatives: a secular life offers 'gay evenings' and 'pleasure' but these are curiously hollow and lacking in any real joy, while the priesthood offers a 'lonely' life. The determining factor for choosing the latter, if one could choose, is the ultimate horizon of death that determines the meaning of all actions. But, of course, one cannot choose because one cannot exercise any control over one's life – any more than old Mahoney could exercise any control over his terrifying temper, and the physical description of the young man's anger is strikingly reminiscent of his father's rages.

Young Mahoney's 'non-decision' in the morning gloom is like a photographic negative of Stephen Dedalus in the sunshine on Dollymount Strand or of Anna Murphy in the convent garden. Stephen and Anna's euphoric affirmation of an artistic vocation was propelled by a transformative moment of erotic desire. Because young Mahoney's fatalistic renunciation of the priesthood takes place after the humiliating bedroom encounter with Father Gerald, and the subsequent lapse of control when the boy masturbates, his change of mind is generated by a sense of nauseated sexual perversion and by a humiliating loss of power. For the earlier hero and heroine of the Irish *bildungsroman* illicit sexuality unlocked a utopian sphere of possibilities; for young Mahoney sexuality reveals all alternatives and possibilities as passing illusions, transitory evasions of the ultimate reality which is death.

But grasping the essential futility of choice is not a negative achievement in McGahern's fictional universe. On the contrary, the novel reaches its version of a climax when young Mahoney attains a Joycean epiphany about precisely this matter. After the decision about the priesthood, the second major choice which the boy has to make about his future is that between staying on at the university, with which he has become rapidly disillusioned, and following the safer but less challenging route of a clerical job. To 'help' with the decision his father descends

on Galway, and both men go, at the father's insistence, to seek advice from the Dean of Residence. Rather than offering young Mahoney any direct advice, the priest probes and challenges the young man's reasons for staying at university or leaving for the ESB. In this way he effectively forces young Mahoney to acknowledge that it is cowardice and fear of failure that makes him want to take the safer option of the clerkship. The boy reads in the Dean's arrogant summation of his predicament a disdainful dismissal of himself and his father, and their shabby, servile anxieties. For a moment the boy grasps the priest's contempt in terms of class; he realises that "you and Mahoney would never give commands but be always menial to the race he'd come from and still belonged to...you were both his stableboys and would never eat at his table".⁷⁸

Once again in the novel, young Mahoney has a psychically bruising encounter with a more powerful older man; not his father this time, with whom he now feels briefly united, but with another clerical figure of authority. And again, as with Father Gerald, he is utterly humiliated and overcome with impotent, suppressed rage. However, this time the novel's concatenation of control and choice reaches a different conclusion. As he walks away from the Dean's office his anger very quickly dissipates, to be replaced by a calm moment of insight. He tells himself that "one day, one day, you'd come perhaps to more real authority than all this...an authority that was simply a state of mind, a calmness even in the face of the turmoil of your own passing". He will leave the university and go to the ESB, and if that does not work he can leave again since "it didn't matter, you could begin again and again all your life, nobody's life was more than a direction." This realisation incites a muted euphoria in the young man: "you could walk through the rain of Galway with your father, and you could laugh purely, without bitterness, for the first time, and it was a kind of happiness."⁷⁹ Thus, one of the remarkable features of this *bildung* narrative is that it does not offer an account of the young hero overcoming or escaping that position of powerlessness and resignation in which we continuously see him. Instead, by the end of *The Dark* this position has been converted from a negative to a positive value and is situated as the essence or apogee of *bildung* itself. It is not that the boy learns through bitter experience how

⁷⁸ Ibid, 188.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

to decide between the routes before him and to assert some control over his destiny, or indeed learns how to gamble with his destiny and risk making a wrong decision. Instead, the knowledge he acquires is that the process of making choices and decisions is itself fundamentally futile.

For McGahern's admirers, such as Denis Sampson and Stanley van der Ziel, his fictional elucidation of this philosophical position is one of his strongest achievements. In his reading of *The Dark*, Van der Ziel analyses the constant shift in narrative perspective that takes place between the chapters, which is the novel's most distinctive formal feature. The narrative voice moves between first, second and third person pronouns ('I', 'you' and 'he') and van der Ziel argues that young Mahoney is both the narrator and the main character in each of the episodes. The shifting perspective, in van der Ziel's view, signals his "search for a way of seeing himself: a search for his own identity".⁸⁰ Highlighting the similarity with Beckett's use of a similar narrative strategy in his trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnameable*), van der Ziel situates McGahern's fictional concerns with the unstable and uncertain quality of identity within the currents of late modernism and existentialism, and in contrast to Joyce's *Portrait* which, van der Ziel argues, has mistakenly been taken as the prototype of which *The Dark* is a flawed variation. John Cronin, one of McGahern's early critics, had regretted that the novel had no equivalent to that "splendid and absurd" assertion of Stephen's voice in the diary entries that end *Portrait*.⁸¹ But for van der Ziel this is "McGahern's triumph". In his view, *The Dark* effectively overturns the Irish Catholic *bildung* narrative constructed by Joyce: "by accepting his own limitations and rejecting the validity of the traditional goal of his old aspiration young Mahoney is liberated from the Dedalesque need for endless achievement". In van der Ziel's view, young Mahoney's epiphanic moment and the subsequent disappearance of any discernible narrative voice in the concluding chapter, is an "exploration of the possibility of not needing to say 'I' in order to establish a sense of self" and "a celebration of life in

⁸⁰ Stanley van der Ziel, "'All This Talk and Struggle': John McGahern's *The Dark*," *Irish University Review* 35 (2005), 104-120, 105. See also Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 61-84.

⁸¹ John Cronin, '*The Dark* is Not Light Enough: the Fiction of John McGahern,' *Studies*, 58 (1969), 427-432, 430. Cronin also points out that this absence of a distinctively youthful voice, in all its egotistical self-consciousness, leads to a deficiency of irony in McGahern's novel.

its purest form”.⁸² The Joycean hero wishes to rise above his ‘race’ the better to represent that race. He strives to be the potent, God-like expressive conscience of his people. The hero of the McGahernesque *bildungsroman*, made more from the mould of Beckett, makes a virtue of necessity and learns to be at peace with his own futility. He has no great expectations of either himself or his people, whose hopeless impotence is embodied by his father.

Van der Ziel’s reading presumes that the type of coherent self attained at the end of *Portrait* is unequivocally retrograde. But might not that identity also be a ‘necessary fiction’ that allows the subject to be an active historical agent? McGahern’s novel prosecuted a searching indictment of the hypocrisy and cynicism that underwrites a certain type of progressive historical narrative and its promises of individual advancement and embourgeoisment – and the specific form this modernisation narrative took in mid-century post-independence Ireland. The unrelenting grind of young Mahoney’s Leaving Cert preparations reveals the education system to be an unedifying and intellectually bankrupt cramming apparatus, while the university fails to deliver on its promise of excitement and fulfilment since the atmosphere there is dominated by a meanly materialistic pursuit of ‘security’. Father Gerald’s life shows the priestly vocation to be that of a local fixer rather than a spiritual leader, the priest being merely a county councillor with a Roman collar. The novel’s *bildung* narrative reiterates this thematic indictment since this narrative is predicated on the insurmountable difficulty of achieving development. In the narrative of young Mahoney’s formation the appearance of forward movement is invariably unmasked as an illusion by the powerfully immobilising force of the past. However, in contrast with the libidinal drive towards “endless achievement” embodied in Stephen Dedalus or Anna Murphy, young Mahoney’s traumatised and masochistic journey towards the attainment of “a calmness even in the turmoil of your own passing” is remarkably passive and quietist. As John Cronin observed about the novel, “all vistas close in sour disappointment” and young Mahoney’s sharp disillusionment with his available routes to advancement can also appear as mere resignation and defeat.⁸³ Just as young Mahoney’s anger about class quickly gives way to his

⁸² Van der Ziel, 115-116.

⁸³ Cronin, 428.

epiphany, *The Dark* paradoxically engages in critiquing one historical narrative while also counselling the wisdom of retreating from any engagement with history.

4

If O'Brien and McGahern's endings leave their heroine and hero suspended in a limbo-like space between the past and the future, it is clear that their novels inhabit a similar space in the history of sexuality and the Irish Catholic *bildungsroman*. Just as Cait and young Mahoney can draw no emotional or intellectual sustenance from what went before, their creators found the received models of sexuality and subjectivity to be exhausted. In these sixties novels, Catholicism has been hollowed out. In O'Brien's trilogy, religion has become merely a source of dark comedy – the luridly Gothic nuns in the boarding school, and the priest and bishop who appear briefly in the grotesque struggle between Gaillard and her father over control of Cait. At best, religious practice can serve as an opiate of the middle-aged, as Baba's mother, Martha, turns from drink to church-going in search of comfort. For young Mahoney, religion occupies one of two poles. As embodied by Father Gerald, the school principal and the Dean, Catholicism is a pillar of the system that keeps people like him and his father subservient. Young Mahoney could allow himself to be co-opted by this politico-religious power structure and accept the crumbs of advancement and class mobility provided by a religious vocation. The other form which religion takes in the novel is the quietist philosophy of resignation and acceptance revealed to the boy in his epiphany outside the college gates.

What is absent in O'Brien's and McGahern's *bildungsromane* is the Catholic intellectual and ethical hermeneutic that, even when the institutional superstructure is being rejected, can still fuel the attainment of *bildung* in Joyce's and Kate O'Brien's novels. Thus, sexuality does not present Cait and young Mahoney with a moral problem in any productive way. Sexual guilt in the sixties novels, most overtly in *The Dark*, is a symptom of the tortured anguish that more generally envelopes sexuality. Such guilt is an epiphenomenon of the psychic damage wrought on the young characters and there is none of that dialectical understanding of moral transgression, as something that is at once challenging and liberatory, that one finds in the earlier novels. As for the Catholic marital ideal

pursued by Lavery in her fiction, and rejected regretfully by Kavanagh in his, the entire thrust of the sixties novels is towards proving the impossibility of this ideal. The failure of marital intimacy, and the descent of the family into abysmal dysfunction, is profoundly linked with the death of the mother and, thus, crucial to the plot. This is the primal trauma from which the young characters never recover and, in Kate Brady's case, the tragedy which she is irrevocably fated to repeat. O'Brien's and McGahern's repudiation of the Catholic ideal of marital intimacy is paralleled by their anti-developmental *bildung* plots, which equally repudiate that modernisation narrative of which the marital ideal was a crucial component.

But if the Catholic discourses of sexuality no longer have any productive capacity in the sixties *bildungsromane*, neither does the literary discourse of libidinal sexuality. In these novels, erotic desire and pleasure do not generate a surge of energy that can spark the fuse of *bildung*, as it does for Stephen Dedalus and for Kate O'Brien's heroines. Nor, as Kate and Baba's failed marriages prove, can sexual pleasure and reproduction be combined in marriage and thus offer a symbol of the utopian reconciliation between individual fulfilment and collective development sought after by Lavery and Kavanagh. In the earlier novels, most especially *Portrait*, the *bildung* narrative followed the contours of the psychoanalytical narrative of subject formation sketched in the *Three Essays*. Sexuality was the site of a dynamic interaction between libidinal drives and repression, and from this agon a coherent subjectivity was forged. In contrast to the movement from third to first-person narration in *Portrait*, O'Brien's trilogy moves in the opposite direction and in McGahern's novel the narrative perspective shifts around before finally settling on the indeterminacy of the final chapter. In short, it is the impossibility of an articulate, coherent subject emerging that is being narrated in the sixties novels. Thus, Cait and young Mahoney are melancholics. Unable to mourn for their dead mother, they instead experience her loss as a profound loss of self; as Freud observes, in mourning "it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."⁸⁴ Their masochistic sexual experiences

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [ed. and trans. James Strachey] (London: Penguin, 2001 [1953]), vol. 14, 246.

invariably return Cait and young Mahoney to that primal state of maternal loss, and therefore reinforce this melancholic paralysis of self-formation.

As we have seen, O'Brien and McGahern's *bildungsromane* about the impossibility of attaining *bildung* offer interesting critiques of liberal historicism, and its Whiggish belief in progress and development. In particular, these bleak tales of traumatised sexuality and irreparably damaged subjectivity question the efficacy of sexual liberation as a personal and political objective. In these works, the Lawrentian struggle between the bourgeois drive to repress sexuality and the avant-garde drive to liberate sexuality has given way to a more tragic and intractable agon between the libidinal drive and the death drive. For McGahern and O'Brien, the trauma of history cannot be so easily 'overcome' but must be constantly confronted, and, therefore, their sixties novels are far less easily accommodated to the modernising narrative of recent Irish history than their critical reception would suggest. But since the novels end with a sense of torpor or impasse – with the suicidal dénouement in O'Brien, with the desire for resigned calm in McGahern – they challenge one historical narrative without seeking out any alternative ways of thinking about history. And while *The Country Girls* trilogy and *The Dark* foreground the exhaustion of the inherited sexual *epistemes*, those of Catholicism and those of psychoanalysis and modernist literary erotics, these novels give no sense of whatever emergent *epistemes* may have been coming into view.

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