A Message from France : Jean Sulivan and Post - Catholic Ireland

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Modernity and Postmodernity in a Franco-Irish Context

Studies in Franco-Irish Relations
Edited by Eamon Maher, Grace Neville and Eugene O’Brien
Introduction: Postmodern Conditions – The Conditional Postmodern

Eamon Maher, Grace Neville and Eugene O’Brien

Like so many words that originally had their origin in the rather arcane world of French literary theory, postmodernism, similar to deconstruction, structuralism and post-structuralism, has become an almost portmanteau term signifying everything and nothing. It has been associated with different theorists, across different academic disciplines and assumes varying connotations in all of these different contexts. So, while defining one’s terms is a necessary academic task, in this case it is fraught with problems. Postmodernism can hardly be defined without reference to modernism, which immediately raises the question as to whether modernism is the same as modernity and whether postmodernism is similar to postmodernity. We will seek to illustrate in this Introduction that the relationship between modernity and postmodernity is analogous to that between modernism and postmodernism.

The term ‘modernity’, more recent critics now suggest, should be used to signify the historical, cultural, economic and political conditions of the time and ‘modernism’, the literary and aesthetic representations of, or responses to, those historical conditions. Modernity defined in this way becomes the historical and cultural conditions of possibility that make modernism both necessary and possible in the first place. Similarly, ‘postmodernity’ can be seen as the cultural and technological context for the emergence of ‘postmodernism’, as a form of response to, and analysis of, these conditions. To further complicate matters, postmodernism can also be seen as an ongoing critique of, and reaction to, modernism.

In terms of postmodernism in general, its eschewal of grand narratives makes the task of defining it difficult, as to do so would risk the establishment of yet one more grand narrative. So any definition must be particularist in terms of looking at specific aspects that we can designate as postmodern. Some writers see it as sequential to modernism, whereas others, Jean-François Lyotard for example, see modernist confidence as
always counterinstanced by postmodern scepticism.\textsuperscript{1} It especially looks at the givens of modernism and subjects these to critique. Postmodernism, therefore, splices high with low culture and, as Peter Brooker notes, it raids and parodies past art, it questions all absolutes, it swamps reality in a culture of recycled images, it has to do with ‘deconstruction, with consumerism, with television and the fall of communism.’\textsuperscript{2}

It is the very amorphous and paradoxical nature of postmodernism that makes it so apt to question constructions of identity. Despite the capitalistic element of the postmodern, namely the aspirations of multinational corporations that disseminate what is called ‘global’ culture in a hegemony Jameson refers to as ‘a purer form of capitalism’\textsuperscript{3}, assisting in the construction of ‘a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world’,\textsuperscript{4} as an artistic movement, postmodernism remains ideologically open, principally through its self-conscious ambiguity. The mainstream, monolithic ‘high’ culture of Modernism has been replaced by ‘marginality’ and the ‘periphery,’ an accentuation of polyphony, heteroglossia, difference.\textsuperscript{5} And it ranges across the genres and fields of knowledge from literature to science. Two of the seminal figures in postmodern theory demonstrate this.

Firstly, there is Ihab Hassan, whose \textit{The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature} examines the development of what he called the ‘literature of silence’ through de Sade, Kafka, Hemingway and Beckett. The contradiction between literature, traditionally seen to have an enunciative function, and Hassan’s ideas about silence, embody the postmodern critique of the modern. Secondly, in the field of science, Thomas Kuhn, suggested that paradigm shift was the major epistemological factor in contemporary science and knowledge. He stressed the notion of subjectivity and disagreement as part of the process of scientific progress: ‘crisis is always implicit in research because every problem that normal science sees as a puzzle can be seen, from another view-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Jean-François Lyotard. \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge} (Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 10). Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984), pp.75-79.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Peter Brooker (ed.) \textit{Modernism/Postmodernism} (New York: Longman, 1992), p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Frederic Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, p.5.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, p.3.
\end{itemize}
point, as a counterinstance and thus as a source of crisis. For Kuhn, epistemological progress always involves such counterinstances and sees paradigm shifts as a ‘transition between incommensurables’ which means there will always be contestation. Postmodernist writers and theorists suggest that a global, decentralized society such as currently prevails in the Western world inevitably creates responses/perceptions that are described as postmodern – for example, the rejection of what are seen as the false, imposed unities of meta-narrative and hegemony; the breaking of traditional frames of genre, structure and stylistic unity; the overthrowing of categories that are the result of logocentrism and other forms of artificially imposed order. While the characteristics of postmodern life are sometimes difficult to grasp, most postmodern scholars point to concrete and visible technological and economic changes that they claim have brought about these new types of thinking.

Such a philosophy allows for an increased awareness of ‘cultural complexity’ to take place, that, in its turn, allows the integration of the local and the international, which, rather than succumbing to new forms of hierarchy and uniformity, creates a ‘contra-modernity’, consisting of a hybrid, syncretic, borderline culture. Peter Brooker provides a useful account of the value of such thinking:

For if the features of postmodernism [..] are historically specific, they are not culturally hermetic. Indeed, one of the most convincing descriptions of postmodernism is of a shift, prompted and enabled by social, economic and technological change, into the heteroglossia of inter-cultural exchange, as idioms, discourse across the arts and academy, and across these and mass forms, are montaged, blended or blurred together. ‘Postmodernism’ becomes its own best symptom of dissemination and difference.

As further evidence of the postmodern being its own best symptom, even at the level of nomenclature, there is dissemination and difference. In The Consequences of Modernity, Anthony Giddens makes a case for a distinction between ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity.’ The former, for Giddens, ‘is best kept to refer to styles or movements within literature,
painting, the plastic arts, and architecture. It concerns aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity. The latter, on the other hand, concerns ‘a new and distinct type of social order,’ characterized by the collapse of epistemological foundations, the exposure of history as being devoid of any meta-narratives (or in Giddens’ term ‘grand narratives’), and an increasing awareness of ecological ways of thinking. Postmodernism represents a trend within the cultural sphere, and the trend might or might not be a part of a postmodern society. For Giddens, postmodernism in the arts might point to some sort of actual social change, but it need not necessarily do so.

So the very question of defining our terms is problematised by the terms themselves: ‘postmodernism’ and/or ‘postmodernity’ – the constative definition of postmodernity/postmodernism is deconstructed by its performative dimension. One of the most telling attempts to define postmodernism, by Lyotard, avoids the pitfalls of this Scylla and Charybdis by being phrased in the future perfect tense. In moving to define postmodernism this way (performatively rather than denotatively), the ‘truth’ about postmodernism is preserved (or manufactured) as being unpresentable and hence sublime:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces, are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (misc en oeuvre) always begin too soon. Post modern

12 Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity, p.46.
would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post)
antity (modo). 13

At a further level of paradox, the role of representation and the presentable, raised here by Lyotard, becomes central to the work of Jean Baudrillard on the postmodern. For Baudrillard, it is the image, the simulation of the real, the hyperreal, that are the most important aspects of the postmodern. Baudrillard’s most explicit theorization of the term ‘hyperreality’ that defines the postmodern experience is provided in Simulations, published in 1983, where he talks about ‘the four successive phases of the image.’ These phases have to do with the sign or image’s distancing from the object of representation, and are enumerated as follows:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. 14

In his influential S/Z, where he develops a form of critical commentary that is highly ‘creative’ in its reading of a classical work of literature (‘Sarrasine’, a short story by Honoré de Balzac from 1830), Barthes introduces a distinction between what he calls ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts, a distinction which has strong points of connection with Lyotard’s idea of the writer as philosopher, inaugurating his or her own rules, and Baudrillard’s idea of the sign as creative of different levels of reality. For Barthes:

the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore. Further, its model being a productive (and not a representative) one, it demolishes any criticism which, once produced, would mix with it: to rewrite the writerly text would consist only in disseminating it, in dispersing it within the field of infinite difference. The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed: the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism)

14 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations. Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York; Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 11.
which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.\textsuperscript{15} 

The performative nature of the postmodern, and the relative nature of truth, means that this theory offers strong possibilities for social, cultural and political change. If paradigms can be changed and if all grand narratives are now micro-narratives, then change is part of postmodern epistemology. In terms of politics and ethics, the interfusion and difference of these micro-narratives allow for structures of difference to be set up which interact and meld in an egalitarian manner. The structure of such postmodernism is what has been called rhizomatic by Deleuze and Guattari.

A rhizome is any plant, like ivy or grass, with a subterranean stem, commonly horizontal in position, that usually produces roots below and at the same time sends up shoots progressively from the upper surface. There is no single root, and the origin cannot be identified or traced. As Deleuze puts it: ‘[...]there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree or root. There are only lines.’\textsuperscript{16} Hence for Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome becomes the figure of what they call ‘acentered systems.’ Trees, then, are structured and hierarchical, whereas the rhizome is nonhierarchical, structureless, open, consisting only of ‘multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.’\textsuperscript{17} It is our contention that the contemporary culture of Ireland resembles these postmodern structures – not structureless, but very different in structure from the tree-like hierarchy that characterised the Ireland of previous decades.

Given that much of the analysis of postmodernity and much of the theoretical framework of postmodernism derives from French writers and thinkers, it appears logical to set up a series of Franco-Irish adequations whereby the current postmodern Irish socio-cultural paradigm is interrogated through the insights of French thought. Similarly, Irish contexts can help shed light on French writing as we are now going through the processes of secularisation and multi-ethnic cultural changes that have been part of the French experience since the 1950s. The interchange is


\textsuperscript{17} Deleuze, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, p. 21
fruitful to both cultures, as we hope, will be this collection of essays. The current volume, rhizomatic in structure, examines different strands and themes in the discourse of the postmodern across a Franco-Irish axis.

The first section of the book deals, appropriately enough, with two of the names regularly associated with postmodern thought, Beckett and Lacan. Helen Astbury displays how ‘Beckett’s theatre and his self-translation would eventually lead him in exactly the same (post-modern) direction his prose had taken him.’ In an elegantly argued chapter, Astbury posits the view that in switching from prose to theatre with the deliberate aim of producing a less post-modern textual universe, Beckett ‘underestimated his own creativity, and in fact created theatrical pieces which owed a lot to his prose writing, and a dramatic universe no less post-modern than the textual universe had been.’ Fabienne Dabrigeon-Garcier concentrates on Beckett’s short fiction, distinguishing between the ‘short story’ and the ‘nouvelle.’ In the stories of the collection More Pricks than Kicks, Dabrigeon-Garcier notes, ‘c’est par l’excès, l’exubérance baroque que se produit le naufrage du sens’, whereas the Nouvelles ‘s’orientent vers la littérature du « non-mot. »’ The Nouvelles still related a story, albeit it in a disjointed form, while the Textes pour rien show words degenerating into a morass of absurdity and incomprehension. Adrian Millar provides a Lacanian take on some of the blind-spots of the postmodernist project in Ireland. Having provided a cogent résumé of the main facets of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, Millar illustrates how third millennial Ireland is living a type of socio-ideological fantasy: ‘The Other that we live or die for is no longer the great industrial machine, the Church, the State or nationalist ideology, it is the semi-solid wooden floor in the lounge, the decking in the garden, the kitchen extension, the three toilets, the foreign holidays and the best childcare that money can buy.’ Postmodernism therefore fails to deliver any more meaning than modernism did. Rather, it merely offers more of the same. Peter Guy concludes this first section with an interesting application of Lacan’s Nom-du-Père theory to two very different Irish novels: Roddy Doyle’s The Snapper and John McGahern’s Amongst Women. Guy’s thesis is that these novels, both published in the 1990s, ‘set about promoting anti-logocentric discourse that would transgress and undermine the tyranny of unitary meaning inherent in a phallogocentric system.’ The issues of power, the undermining of the patriarchal system, the castration complex, the mirror, are all discussed in what becomes a lively and informative comparative study. In the end, one is left with the impression
that Lacanian theory is indeed a useful tool in critiquing contemporary Irish society.

The second part of the collection demonstrates the manner in which some of our contemporary poets grapple with issues of modernity and postmodernity. Mary Pierse dwells on how the poetic voices of Dennis O’Driscoll and Cathal Ó Searcaigh may be in tune with Jean-François Lyotard. Drawing on the latter’s correspondence, Pierse underlines the philosopher’s theory of how the postmodern implies ‘a responsibility to investigate assumptions’, something both Irish poets set about doing in diverse ways. In particular, they ‘could be deemed postmodern in their overall variety’, but Pierse rightly throws cold water on the notion of how useful the application of such labels to works of poetry in particular, or to literature in general, is: ‘I am not convinced that Postmodernism has proved to be a label under which one can securely, satisfactorily and meaningfully locate many of the literary works that have been given the tag.’ She concludes by declaring that it may well be time to ‘launch a new taxonomy.’ John McDonagh begins where Pierse signs off by enumerating the various reactions the term ‘postmodern’ can evoke when it appears in a book title or as a conference theme. However, he then states that its usefulness can be found in its heterogeneity. What follows is a snapshot discussion of how contemporary Irish poets like Michael Hartnett, Paul Durcan, Brendan Kennelly, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Rita Ann Higgins and Michael Ó Siadhail engage with the modern state. Ireland’s recent transformation in the wake of the unexpected arrival of the Celtic Tiger has had an unmistakeable impact on the approach of our poets. McDonagh concludes: ‘What can be said with certainty is that contemporary Irish poetry is marked by a broad range of confident voices articulating a tentative recognition of the complex nature of major shifts in the traditional markers of Irish identity.’ Joan Dargan searches for traces of French thought in Paul Muldoon’s collection, Horse Latitudes (2006). She reveals the poet’s attraction to literature and recent theory from France, illustrated in a comment he made in an interview to the effect that ‘we live in a post-Baudrillardian world!’ Poetry, for the French philosopher, was an ‘enchanted alternative to the linearity of history.’ Brian Walsh concludes this section with a discussion of the postmodern epiphany in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Walsh argues that French theory, as revealed in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida in particular, ‘provides Irish studies with interpretative resources to identify the shadow of the Other dividing the subject from its central Self.’ Heaney’s poetry provides glimpses of a postmodern epiphany situated somewhere
between the ‘two conflicting centres of the real and the ideal, the body and the subject, form and content.’

Part III concentrates on fiction. The title of Eugene O’Brien’s chapter suggests an articulation between James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Patrick McCabe’s Winterwood. Looking at these works through the lens of Derrida’s notion of the frame (parergon) and the work (ergon), he examines the way that modernist notions of the Bildungsroman are deconstructed by postmodern readings of the same genre, and goes on to trace an epistemology of the subject in postmodern Ireland as a changing and fluid construction. He sees postmodern theory as providing an appropriate framework through which to analyse the current paradigms of subjective identity in an Irish context. Paula Murphy deals with Dermot Bolger’s Trilogy of plays dealing with the Dublin suburb of Ballymun. Murphy puts forward the argument that although the nation during the period covered by the plays ‘would not have described itself in the context of postmodernism’, there is something about the subject matter and the methods through which he articulates it that makes such a thesis defensible. Using Lyotard’s theory that the grand narrative has lost its credibility and may be replaced by new languages being added to the old ones to form ‘suburbs of the old town’, Murphy maintains that Bolger holds out hope for the future ‘in his charting of the vacillations and tensions between Ireland’s modernity and its postmodernity.’ Sylvie Mikowski supplies an insightful reading of another novel by Patrick McCabe, this time The Butcher Boy, where the style resembles in her view that of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s, described by Julia Kristeva as an example of ‘une écriture de l’abjection.’ The raw descriptions of sex and the bodily functions, the macabre, unreal atmosphere of their novels, the difficulties their characters have in communicating their emotions, the fragmented and disjointed language, generously spliced with curses and colloquialisms, offer the scope for an enlightening comparative study of the social and emotional turmoil that frames the fiction of McCabe and Céline.

The final part of this study concentrates on religion and society. Yann Bévant presents Ireland at an interesting crossroads which sees it searching for a way of reconciling increased cultural diversity with traditional national identity. By proposing a re-examination of the myths surrounding cultural specificity in a progressively more globalised world, Bévant offers an excellent overview of how France and Ireland are facing up to the problems caused by the ‘évolutions idéologiques considérables de ces dernières années.’ Jean-Christophe Penet, in a clever juxtaposition
of how the Irish use the greeting, Nollaig Shona and the French, ‘Bonne Année’, demonstrates the cultural differences revealed in such practices. The Gaelic language is heavily laden with religious references which would not be acceptable in a robustly secular French Republic. It is therefore somewhat paradoxical to note that at the same time as An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was unashamedly appearing at State functions with his female partner (not his wife), the French Head of State, François Mitterrand, steadfastly kept his extramarital affair private. Analysing the contrasting reactions to ‘la laïcité’ as it impacts on political and social life in France and Ireland, Penet maintains that although Ireland has experienced a massive secularisation since the 1980s, it still has not completely caught up on France or the rest of Europe. France is undergoing a period of ‘hypersécularisation’ while Ireland has entered an ‘ultramodern’ zone which leads Penet to conclude with the following question: ‘A défaut d’une forte tradition du discours républicain, la crise du discours laissera-t-il l’Irlande sans foi ni voix ?’ Eóin Flannery deals with two cinematic productions, the French film Hidden (Caché) and the Irish production Zulu 9, in order to supply an analysis of the representational legacies of French colonialism and ‘the complex transhistorical correspondences and hypocrisies of the Irish colonial experience.’ The result is an illuminating chapter outlining the manner in which both films challenge the viewer by offering him/her ‘a looking-glass through which they can confront conscious and submerged prejudices.’ The final essay in the collection offers an examination of how the writings of the French priest-writer and philosopher, Jean Sulivan, might be useful in the context of what has been referred to as ‘post-Catholic’ Ireland. Sulivan maintained that the French Church of the 1970s and 80s, which had seen a massive fall-off in attendance at religious services and a drop in vocations, was more in conformity with the wishes of its founder. Writing in his spiritual journal, Matinales, Sulivan described how this apparent ‘crisis’ held out great possibilities for renewal: ‘Aujourd’hui, telle la nuée de l’Exode, son visage (celui de l’Eglise) est plus lumineux que lors qu’elle semblait ré­gner. C’est dans son humiliation qu’est sa gloire.’ Maher argues that, in a similar way, the seeming demise of organised religion in Ireland could merely be a way of purging all traces of an oppressive authoritarian structure in order to replace it by a more humble, human and genuinely Christian model of Church.

Ainsi se termine le deuxième volume de la série Studies in Franco-Irish Relations. Nous sommes particulièrement heureux, en tant qu’éditeurs, qu’il y ait davantage d’articles écrits en langue française
cette fois-ci et que les sujets traités offrent une perspective très variée du thème choisi. Nous tenons à remercier tout particulièrement l’Institut de Technologie Tallaght (ITT Dublin) et l’Université de Cork (UCC) d’avoir assuré les frais associés à la publication de ce livre. Le Service de Coopération et d’Action Culturelle de l’Ambassade de France en Irlande nous a également octroyé une subvention généreuse qui a été indispensable pour l’organisation du Colloque dont cet ouvrage est issu. Finalement, les membres de notre comité de rédaction ont lu et corrigé les articles avec soin et efficacité et nous leur sommes fort reconnaissants.

Bonne lecture et vive l’amitié franco-irlandaise !
Eamon Maher

A Message from France: Jean Sulivan and post-Catholic Ireland

The French priest-writer, Jean Sulivan (1913-1980), suffers from an unforgivable neglect in his country of birth for reasons that are difficult to decipher. He published his first book, *Le Voyage intérieur*, in 1958 and some commentators reasonably expected that he would continue the genre of the 'Roman Catholique', which experienced a flowering in France at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Such an ambition was very far from Sulivan’s thoughts, however. He wrote at a time of great spiritual upheaval, particularly acute in France in the wake of the Second World War, a period when existentialism, structuralism, postmodernism, the Nouveau Roman, were all calling into question traditional interpretations of long-held beliefs in relation to society, the Church, philosophy and literature. It is strange to think that a priest-writer like Sulivan should be so in tune with this ambience, which he did not hold to be at variance with his priestly vocation.

In their Introduction to *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli note the difficulties one encounters in defining exactly what postmodernism means. They put forward the following tentative definition: 'Postmodernism denotes a set of philosophical propositions that are centred around the rejection of Realist epistemology and of the Enlightenment project that builds upon that epistemology.'¹ Their postmodernism would include: denial of the transparency of language, impossibility of the accessing the real, and rejection of the so-called grand narratives that underpinned and legitimised modernity. Writing some 40 years earlier than the date this study was published, Sulivan was quite comfortable working within such a framework, even though some of its tenets would be seen as undermining the religious project. The more one reads Sulivan, in fact, the more one has the impression that his writings reflect a deep distrust of all thought systems and institutions, all

grand narratives, and in this regard he would appear to be reasonably at one with the postmodernist project. Nevertheless, he manages to retain hope in a revitalised religion, stripped of the trappings of power and closer to the thinking of the founder of the Christian enterprise. He explained his particular vocation in *Petite littérature individuelle*:

L’explication dans l’ordre spirituel est toujours une forme d’annexion et de domination qui fait barrage et par là rassure. Le langage synthétique, parole parlante non déjà parlée, c’est-à-dire le langage ‘poétique’ au sens original du mot, pauvre en communication immédiate parce qu’il plonge ses racines dans l’expérience intime, peut seul ouvrir à une rencontre dans les profondeurs de l’existence.  

From these lines, it can be seen that Sulivan had no intention of being an apologist for the dogmatic Catholic Church. Rather, he saw his literary task as an attempt to continue the Word, with all its calls for uprooting and rebirth. Also, through the poetic quality of his style, he sought to imbue his work with the ‘breath’ of the Gospel – the word ‘souffle’ recurs in an almost obsessive manner in his books. Such an evolution took a while to come into being. At the beginning of his literary career, he admitted to being primarily concerned with producing polished prose.  

With time, however, he found that his style was becoming fragmented and the syntax disjointed, as he attempted to describe characters who were undergoing intense mystical transformation. In his spiritual *Journal, Matinales*, he acknowledged his fascination with social misfits and outcasts who, although living at a remove from organised religion, still appeared to enjoy a rich inner life:

Du coup je me sens proche des marginaux, clochards, drogués, tous les tor-dus, comme des hommes de l’establishment’ vidés de substance spirituelle et qui commencent à le savoir. Ils vivent parmi les tours d’acier, de verre, acci-

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3 In an interview shortly before his death, for example, he said: ‘Quand j’ai commencé à écrire, chez Gallimard, j’étais un paysan qui a découvert tard la culture [...] Et quand j’ai commencé à écrire [...] forcément je n’avais qu’un modèle, le modèle que j’avais devant moi, c’était l’écrivain, le grand écrivain, plus ou moins notable, qui est porté par les siens, par les catholiques s’il est catholique, par les protestants ou par d’autres, par les athées, par d’importants militants.. Donc j’ai choisi d’exceller, je me suis appliqué à faire beau.’ “Interview avec Alain Saury”, in *Rencontres avec Jean Sulivan I*, 1985, pp.13-21, p.13.
dents, cimetières de la folie des routes, sex-shops, tous les détritus de la défaite humaine. Mais en même temps je m’aperçois avec stupeur que le chant d’une liberté circule à travers tout, une joie paradoxale plus forte que les blessures de ma médiocrité, l’Espérance que ceux qui la portent disent reconnaître.

Tramps, drug addicts, prostitutes, rebel priests, people with psychological problems, Sullivan’s novels are populated with this type of marginal individual. In his view, it is when one moves away from the centre of society, dominated by appearances and the pursuit of social and economic advancement, that one has the best opportunity to truly ‘see’ the world and reassess one’s role in it.

In this chapter, I shall confine the focus to one of Sullivan’s novels, *Mais il y a la mer* (1964), and some of his prose essays in an attempt to illustrate their relevance to the spiritual climate of postmodern Ireland. In *Mais il y a la mer* we come across a fairly typical Sullivanian depiction, the Cardinal Ramon Rimaz whose career mirrors closely that of many Irish clerical figures. *Mais il y a la mer* won the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature and the Prix de l’Académie de Bretagne on its publication in 1964, which proves that it was acknowledged as having literary merit as well as being acceptable to the Church establishment. It relates the conversion of a cardinal living in an unspecified Spanish-speaking country, who in his retirement villa beside the sea begins a re-evaluation of his life as a priest, bishop and cardinal. With time to reflect on his career, he realises that all his so-called triumphs amounted to very little indeed. As he comments to himself towards the beginning of the novel: ‘Incroyable. Tout s’est passé hors de moi. J’étais en représentation.’ Through a series of imagined flashbacks, conversations with people who knew him, like his niece Merche and his personal assistant, Campos, the narrator begins to flesh out the events that resulted in Ramon’s fateful decision at the end of the novel to take the place of a political detainee, Monolo Vargas, who escapes dressed in the cardinal’s clothes. What brought about this dramatic decision? Why would a prince of the Church put himself in jeopardy for the sake of a misfit whom he barely knew?

Certain hints of a conversion are given in the course of the novel. For example, the cardinal is disgusted one day as he flicks through press cuttings and photographs capturing various stages of his career. How

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could he have not known how far he had strayed from his initial vocation of serving the poor, in order to become a functionary? He is ashamed of his vanity, his worldliness, when he sees himself through others’ eyes. The narrator interprets his feelings thus: ‘Tu mentais, Ramon, tu mentais et tu n’en savais rien’ (M, 58). In a fury, he turns to his housekeeper and tells her to burn the photos, symbols of a futile past. Change becomes possible as soon as Ramon realises that he was suffering from what he describes as ‘la pétrification’, a numbing of the soul. After the incident with the photos, and to everyone’s amazement, he begins to dress in a fisherman’s clothes and to avoid all social gatherings. During the rare sermons he gives in the church of the local village of Noria, his words are halting and enigmatic: ‘Ainsi butait-il sur les mots. De longs silences ponctuaient sa méditation. Les silences parlaient, car on avait le sentiment qu’il luttait avec et contre quelqu’un’ (M, 234).

By facilitating Monolo’s escape from the local prison and taking his place in a prison cell, Ramon Rimaz felt he was following a genuine Christian path for the first time in years. He was distancing himself from the political and ecclesiastical authorities in order to experience the fate of the poor and the marginalized with whom he wished once more to be associated. When asked what could have inspired such a gesture, his niece Mercé replies: ‘Je crois, pour rien. Il était au-delà de toute démonstration. Quelqu’un avait besoin de lui. Il y est allé naïvement... A moins que ...’ (M, 275). As can be seen from the conjunction ‘à moins que’, followed by the ‘trois points’ or ellipses that are associated with this strange and mysterious decision, doubt surrounds the motivation of a gesture that goes beyond the scope of human understanding. On the threshold of death, Ramon Rimaz came to the conclusion that his life as a priest had been at variance with the Gospel message of love. After all: ‘La puissance et ses prestiges, Jésus les avait crucifiés.’ (M, 258) That being the case, how could his representatives on earth cover themselves in the same vestiges of power and prestige?

*Mais il y a la mer* is a book that asks many questions of the Catholic Church and in that sense it is somewhat surprising that it won a prestigious prize from a jury representing its establishment. It is true that Sullivan’s friend, Daniel-Rops, a member of the Académie Française, had a major role in the decision. Nevertheless, one wonders how carefully the jury read the book, which is designed to make many Catholics feel decidedly uncomfortable. It condemns those who opt to make a career out of Christianity, those who prefer comfort to poverty, power to humility. It proclaims that, in order to survive, the Catholic Church will need to re-
discover the humility of its origins. In his memoir, *Devance tout adieu* (1966), Sulivan would castigate himself for having accepted the Grand Prix catholique, which brought with it a certain amount of celebrity and financial security, when the hero of his book pointedly turned his back on this type of self-glorification. The memoir provides a stinging attack on the so-called literary experts who make appreciative sounds about talented writers without ever going beyond the surface of what they put down on paper:

Where are the prophets, I ask myself? In truth, literature has become a career for many writers. There is an obvious contradiction between pursuing a career and living out the paradoxes of the Gospel. I keep on waiting to hear a breath, a voice of rebellion. Instead, all we're treated to is writers playing around with political or moral ideas and telling us about their pious aspirations. All I hear are well-rounded, balanced truths that will not upset the apple cart.\(^6\)

He is no way considered himself exempt from this stinging critique. He acknowledged that his main reason for accepting the Grand Prix catholique was a desire to enhance his literary status in France:

When I began writing, I did not know that the literary world was composed of little cliques and idols; I was perfectly content to be ignorant of this fact in the beginning. I very quickly came to realise, however, the difficulty my marginal position posed if I wanted to enlarge my readership. The Catholic press totally ignored me, the non-Catholic press paid scarcely any attention to books that dealt with themes that were obviously Christian. (4, 85-6)

But, of course, recognition by the Establishment comes at a price and, as he was being photographed after the awards ceremony, Sulivan felt like an ‘impostor’, someone who had prostituted himself for the sake of literary recognition. I have always maintained that he was too hard on himself in this regard. After all, the novel is not in any way a pious or edifying account. The cardinal is someone who at the end of the book is shunned by both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Nevertheless, the discomfort would always remain with Sulivan who, following the ceremony, walked around Paris for a long time and made the resolution ‘that I would keep my distance from the literary establishment by adopting the

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\(^6\) *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p.82. Translation by Eamon Maher of *Devance tout adieu*, hereafter cited as *A*. 
means that would allow me to talk freely’ (A, 89). This resolution was realised with his subsequent novels, which are characterised by a breakdown of traditional punctuation and syntax, and by characters who are more radically marginal than Cardinal Ramon Rimaz.

All of which brings us finally to the link with Ireland. Sulivan formulated a radical type of Christianity that attempted to come to grips with a much-changed religious climate in post-World War II France. It can be argued that the spiritual climate of France at the end of the 1970s closely resembles that which characterises third-millennial Ireland: a massive fall-off in vocations to the priesthood and religious life; an all-pervasive and aggressive secularism that is being fuelled by certain interest groups for many different reasons; and a despair that is being engendered by the void created by the demise of a once extremely powerful Catholic Church. We are entering a ‘postmodern’ phase when it comes to religious practice in particular. The Church of Ireland bishop, Dr. Richard Clarke, in a book of essays on post-Catholic Ireland, maintains that ‘the Irish Church is now discredited and moribund in the eyes of many detached onlookers.’ The reasons for this, in Clarke’s view, are manifold, but two of the main ingredients are pride and complacency, qualities that Ramon Rimaz detected in himself. Clarke writes: ‘The primary offence of the whole church, and certainly not the Roman Catholic tradition alone, was to believe that it was somehow above and beyond accountability, perhaps even an accountability to God himself.’ The sociologist, Tom Inglis, in his ground breaking study Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society (1987), argued that in the past adherence to the Catholic Church helped people ‘attain and maintain power, particularly economic possessions, occupational positions and social prestige.’ This access to power, more than the Church’s teachings and practices, or its role in signalling a path to salvation, was what primarily motivated Irish people to appear outwardly religious. As soon as the ‘social capital’ that was associated with being pious or spiritual began to dissipate, so too did the levels of religious practice, according to Inglis. In a chapter dedicated to this issue in a book of essays entitled Engaging Modernity (2003), Inglis remarked how far Ireland had travelled down the path of secularism. Religion had become ‘a private affair’, he noted:

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‘It is becoming more of an end in itself rather than a means towards other ends, that is material or worldly success. This is what is at the heart of Ireland becoming a secular society.’

In the following chapter from the same book, Catherine Maignant remarked the succeeding development: ‘Following the recent collapse of the Irish Church as a credible institution, Ireland appears to have warmed to the ideals of the post-modern world, which were latent since the 1960s, but only reached their full expression in the past ten years.’

Maignant quotes the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli who maintained that what characterises post-modern times is ‘the irrepressible growth of multiplicity in all its forms.’ Organised religion depends on unity and stability to flourish, and the narcissism that permeates post-modern societies, the tendency to seek one’s salvation through the channel of self-examination, is particularly injurious to Church as a communal institution. The message of Christianity is undoubtedly better received by people who enjoy fewer material possessions and who are reassured by the knowledge that one of the obligations of a Christian is to accept one’s suffering with equanimity. A lack of education will also lend itself more readily to a blind acceptance of decrees handed down by priests and religious. With free education, the advent of radio and television, increased prosperity (all of which were evident in the 1960s), Irish people began to assert their independence in a more forthright manner. The church rituals became less of an essential social outlet. Instead of kneeling down to say the rosary, families now sat down around the television. On the little screen, they saw lives depicted which were rarely marked by religious constraints, where sex was not a taboo subject, where people unashamedly pursued wealth as well as sexual pleasure and fulfilment. The winds of change were blowing strongly. Compare the role of the Church in the Ireland described by the writer John McGahern and the situation that pertains today:

The breaking of pelvic bones took place during difficult births in hospitals because it was thought to be more in conformity with Catholic teaching than


Caesarean section, presumably because it was considered more ‘natural.’ Minorities were deprived of the right to divorce.\textsuperscript{11}

McGahern, while resentful of the oppressive nature of Church influence on the lives of ordinary men and women, still admitted that he always got pleasure from the symbols and imagery associated with the religious ceremonies of his youth which introduced him to ‘an indoor beauty, of luxury and ornament, ceremony and sacrament and mystery.’ (Mr, 201) He ended up being estranged by the contradiction he detected between the Gospel message of unconditional love and the harshness of certain stances adopted by the Church, especially in the sexual realm. He recognised his mother’s acceptance of all the Church’s pronouncements, right up to the last pregnancy that would lead to her untimely death from cancer. Louise Fuller argues that: ‘Catholicism in the pre-Vatican II era placed a very heavy emphasis on duty, self-sacrifice and mortification, and fearfulness in relation to threats to sexual morality was ever-present.’\textsuperscript{12} The fact that such a moral climate could put women’s lives in danger did not prevent people from generally following its dictates. The move from such an overtly religious society to the post-Christian Ireland of today took time to develop and there were many significant turning points along the way. Some would say that the Irish never totally eradicated their pagan roots. In McGahern’s view, the Irish had the unique ability to outwardly conform to the dictates of the Church while following their individual beliefs:

Most people went about their sensible pagan lives as they had done for centuries, seeing this conformity as just another veneer they had to pretend to wear like all the others they had worn since the time of the Druids. (Mr, 211)

But it was more complex than this. There was the rash of clerical sex abuse revelations, the stories of what happened in the religious-run orphanages, industrial schools and in places like the Magdalen Laundries. Writing about the new stance adopted by the Irish public to the Church in the wake of these revelations, Eugene O’Brien argues that the political and clerical abuses were revealed at around the same time, thus

\textsuperscript{11} John McGahern, \textit{Memoir} (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.210, hereafter cited as \textit{Mr.}

\textsuperscript{12} Louise Fuller, \textit{Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture} (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), p.227.
compounding the scepticism of people. The moral fibre of the former pil-lars of Church and State were seen to crumble, as commentators, some of whom were products of a university system in which French theory was taught, began to question and deconstruct former givens. O’Brien writes: ‘a new openness has begun to dawn, an openness where the old centres have not been demolished, merely decentred, deconstructed in the sense that they are no longer beyond the power of critique.’ Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, shortly after his appointment to the Dublin archdioceses a few years ago, said that he wanted to see a humbler Church emerging in Ireland, a listening Church. Such a position may well be forced on the institution, as it deals with the reality of being a minority concern in a rapidly secularising Ireland. There is a clear echo of Sullivan who wrote of the French Church of his time: ‘Aujourd’hui, telle la nuée de l’Exode, son visage est plus lumineux que lors qu’elle semblait régner. C’est dans son humiliation qu’est sa gloire’ (Ml, 303).

Sullivan captured the postmodern malaise that accompanies the breakdown of grand narratives and the consequent doubts that emerge in relation to institutions like the Catholic Church. The latter became, almost without realising it, another power bloc whose feet were seen to be made of clay. But instead of bemoaning the collapse of a glorious edifice, Sullivan sought a renewal of the Church from the margins. I sense that a similar move may be afoot in Ireland at present. To illustrate this point, I would like to refer briefly to a talk given by the Archbishop of Armagh (recently appointed cardinal) at Knock, where the most significant shrine of Marian devotion is located, on Friday the 17th of August 2007. Gesturing towards the new ‘Ireland of stocks and shares’, he noted: ‘The truth is that many of those who claim to have set Ireland free from the shackles of religious faith in recent years are now silent in the face of the real captivities of the ‘new’ Ireland.’ In the wake of the revelations of clerical sex abuse in the 1990s, there has been a strange silence from the Irish Bishops, who seemed to feel that whatever they said in relation to any topic would be misconstrued by the Irish public because it would be mis-


14 I am indebted to the report by Patsy McGarry, “Back with a Belt of the Crozier” (The Irish Times Weekend Review, August 25, 2007), for quotations from Archbishop Brady’s speech.
represented by the media. It is refreshing to see some unequivocally comments such as those that characterise the Cardinal’s address: ‘I believe there are increasing signs that the secular project in Ireland has failed. It has failed to bring the happiness it promised or the answers to the really important questions of people’s lives.’ People may agree or disagree with this assessment, but I think that his comment that nothing has yet emerged to replace the cohesion and stability of institutions such as the Church in Ireland is beyond doubt. This resulted in a spiritual void in the lives of many people for whom religious observance and ritual were essential ingredients of a happy life. The Archbishop echoes Sullivan’s earlier assertion when quoting the words of Cardinal Daneels of Brussels: ‘Now that we are weak and humble of heart we have greater freedom to do the real work, unshackled.’

Speaking from a lay person’s point of view, Declan Kiberd recalled a liberal priest’s comment to him in 1980: ‘Religion will go in Ireland. And when it goes it’ll go so fast that nobody will know what is happening.’ Coming the year after the highly successful visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland, this observation initially struck Kiberd as ill-conceived. But looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight, he realised that the priest’s words were prophetic. Rather than providing concrete evidence of the enduring Church triumphant in Ireland, the papal visit was a sign of crisis and uncertainty. Vocations had been in sharp decline for more than a decade and people were adopting a more independent line when it came to sexuality and general morality. Kiberd maintains that the changed Irish attitude to religion is similar to its decision to jettison the Irish language when it no longer seemed useful. On closer analysis, he notes: ‘it may be safe to say that it is not religion which has declined in large sections of Tiger Ireland. What is dying, rather, is a Victorian ecclesiology in its institutional forms. The ‘underground’ church of local saints and popular devotionalism, a church which celebrates ritual and life, may already be re-emerging to displace an autocratic institution based on external rule-keeping and social fear.’

Kiberd’s analysis is astute, but its author did not have time in a short newspaper article to demonstrate the many ways in which it has now become somehow taboo or anachronistic for an Irish person to talk about his or her religious beliefs. One more article from The Irish Times, reputedly Ireland’s most ‘liberal’ or anti-clerical newspaper, shows how there

is an uneasy tension in Irish society concerning faith. It surprises commentators when a famous composer, writer, singer or sports star acknowledges unambiguously his or her attachment to religion. The unnamed author (only the initials FmacE are provided, as is normal in this column) writes:

Personal faith is still an important part of many of our lives. We are often expected to keep it private but we often choose to make it public. Weddings, funerals and Sunday practice are still popular and although there is a tendency to talk it down, there are significantly more people practising their faith than there are people attending sports events on any given weekend. Yet sport and issues associated with it play a disproportionate role in our conversion.

In France, where a strong tradition of ‘laïcité’ has attempted to avoid any infringement by the religious domain on the business of state, this type of inability to speak openly about matters pertaining to faith is not nearly so prevalent. Ireland’s particular form of aggressive secularism has meant that a once extremely powerful Church has now been pushed to the margins along with anyone who adheres to what are generally perceived to be its anachronistic values. While it did flex its muscles at times and interfere excessively in the matters of State, while it undoubtedly did also make some awful mistakes in how it dealt with clerical sex abuse, the good done by the Church in the areas of education and health are too often conveniently forgotten. Also the work of people like the Jesuit priest Peter McVerry and Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy in defending the poor and the marginalized provides a Christian witness that is recognised and appreciated by people of all religious persuasions, and none. Jean Sulivan’s writings are of particular relevance to a society like Ireland where an anger at the wrongdoings of a formerly powerful Church has given way to a desire to live a closer relationship with God outside of the bounds of organised religion. The French writer doesn’t see the point in apportioning blame for the decline of religion to the representatives of secularism:

Ce n’est pas le laïcisme qui a bloqué le message. II faut renoncer à cette idée. C’est le rationalisme qu’on y a introduit, une pensée abstraite et impériuse,

Furthermore, Sullivan states his belief that issues of faith are not rational: ‘Mais enfin le sens ultime du christianisme n’est pas dans un monde d’idées : il est dans la précarité, quelque chose de faible et d’huiîlié qui appelle’ (Ml, 69). Ultimately, what is important in Sullivan’s view is to follow as closely as possible the example of Christ:

Because he possesses such a prophetic voice, one that resonates across continents and cultures, Sullivan has a clear message for the Irish Catholic Church: it is, seize the moment, cherish your lowly position because it is the one that may best suit the flowering of an authentic spirituality. Richard Clarke certainly sees this to be the case. Rather than proclaiming itself as victim of the secular media that took, in its view, a distasteful glee in exposing abuses within the Church (especially in relation to the sexual abuse of children), the Catholic hierarchy in his estimation might be better advised to ask themselves why was the reaction to these scandals so vitriolic. They might then see that it stemmed, to a certain extent, from the control the Church exercised both over its members and within the government of the state: ‘The exposure of scandals gave free rein to a rage that had been waiting for the opportunity to explode.’ Sullivan was always prepared to engage with those whose opinions differed from his own. He often found more Christian values in atheists than in those who professed undying loyalty to the Church.

To conclude, I would like to quote the French philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, who, in his book, L’ère du vide, captures the type of ambience evident in Sullivan’s work and whose comments have great relevance for the Ireland of today. Lipovetsky talks about how, in postmodern societies, everyone demands ‘le droit et le plaisir narcissique à s’exprimer pour rien, pour soi, mais relayé, amplifié par un médium. Communiquer pour communiquer, s’exprimer sans autre but que de

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17 Clarke, A Whisper of God, p.127.
s’exprimer et d’être enregistré par un micropublic, le narcissisme révèle ici comme ailleurs sa connivence avec la déssubstantialisation post‐moderne, avec la logique du vide.  

Postmodernity and religion are not very compatible bedfellows according to Lipovetsky, but Sullivan would argue that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive either. The trick is to adopt a new approach to the Christian experience, one that is less concerned with outward appearances and more attuned to what makes a deeper spiritual experience possible. There is more than a little food for thought in this philosophy for the Irish Catholic Church.

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