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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin

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Squinting Windows in Millennium Light

EAMON MAHER

I read Brinsley MacNamara's novel of provincial Ireland, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, for the first time a number of months ago. Like most other Irish people, I had often used the phrase that was born of the title to describe a certain insular, hypocritical and vicious mind-set that seemed to dominate in the Ireland of the first decades of the twentieth century. I found that the Athlone novelist, John Broderick, captured many similar characteristics to MacNamara in the characters he created in his books.

It was only when I read through *The Valley* from beginning to end that I began to appreciate a number of facts. Firstly, to have written such a pitiless chronicle of Irish provincial life in 1918 was an extremely bold step. What was even more audacious was the decision of MacNamara to situate his novel in a village, Garradrimna, which had so much in common with Delvin, Co. Westmeath, where he spent his youth and where his father was Principal in the local primary school. To compound matters even further was the facility with which the local people recognised barely fictionalised representations of people living in their midst or who had previously lived in Delvin.

To those who wish to know more about the boycott of MacNamara's father's school, the public burning of the book in Delvin, and the court case which his father pursued in relation to his persecution by elements of the local community, I recommend Padraic O'Farrell's objective record of the events, *The Burning of Brinsley MacNamara* (1990, Dublin, The Lilliput Press) – it's a fascinating read.

So what I have to say that is new or original about this *succès de scandale*? Firstly, let me point out that my desire is not to

Eamon Maher, lecturer in French at the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, is author of *Crosscurrents and Confluences: Echoes of Religion in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Veritas, 2000).

His lecture series, 'Catholicism and Literature', starts on 18 September in the Diploma in Theology course at the Dominican Study Centre, Tallaght, Dublin 24.

determine the literary value of the novel (which I don't think merits much discussion) or to trace its roots back to nineteenth century realism. Neither will I enter into the debate about the freedom of the artist to describe reality as s/he sees fit.

To me, the most interesting aspect of *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* is the manner in which it demonstrates a marked unwillingness among Irish people to view themselves objectively, to look on the dark side of their character. This was particularly true of the Ireland of the early decades of the twentieth century. Eavan Boland, in a radio interview with Benedict Kiely, made the point that for the century preceding the twentieth, Irish writers had had as their clients British readers. As such, they had no experience whatsoever of the upheavals and frictions and irritants that gradually built a rapport between the writer and his community. Boland went on to quote MacNamara himself who stated:

When a country has made a long fight for freedom, there is a feeling, pardonable enough, that it is in a sense traitorous to delve too deeply into the frailties of one's own people.¹

He was correct in saying that there was a feeling abroad that it was not acceptable for a writer to present an unsavoury picture of Irish society just prior to, and after, Independence. The fact that O'Casey and Synge were reviled for their representations of the Dublin working class and the people of the West of Ireland shortly after the publication of *The Valley* shows us the suspicions that existed between the artist and the ecclesiastical and political (it was difficult to distinguish between them at times) hierarchy in this country during the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. One has only to think of the Censorship of Publications Board, which saw fit to ban the novels of Kate O'Brien, John Broderick, John McGahern, Brian Moore, none of whom would immediately strike you as likely to corrupt the social or moral fabric of Irish society.

UNDERWORLD FORCES

Mark Patrick Hederman, in his excellent book, *Kissing the Dark: Connecting with the Unconscious* (1999, Dublin, Veritas), says that many of the problems that assail us in Ireland today are the result

1. In Padraic O'Farrell, *The Burning of Brinsley MacNamara*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1990, p. 81.

of our unwillingness to embrace our dark side. At the beginning of the last century the Church and government in Ireland were obsessed with warding off the constant threat to Catholic purity from foreign, most especially English, influences. They saw the emerging state as a haven for saints and scholars and were unwilling to allow artists the freedom to put forward a contradictory view. Hederman, one of a long line of thinking Benedictines to have emanated from Glenstal Abbey, recognises why art in this country was seen as a threat by our political and ecclesiastical leaders:

Art is also a way of gaining access to this underworld. The novel, at its most subtle, is able to give utterance to such depths in ourselves, which we hardly recognise until we see it before our eyes in writing. But once we see it and read it we recognise that this was something lurking at the back of our minds which we were never able to identify or articulate for ourselves. Sometimes, indeed, we were quite unaware of it at all until the novel jolted us into recognition of its presence.²

Power of this nature is a potent means of moulding public opinion and it is perhaps not strange that the Church and State viewed art in general, and the novel in particular, with some fear and suspicion. For this reason, MacNamara would almost certainly have had his novel banned had it been published a couple of decades later.

But, in spite of all the controversy it evoked and the pain it caused so many people, the simple fact remains that it is not a good novel. What prevents it from achieving greatness is its failure to portray a balanced picture of human nature or of society. There is no counterbalance to the evil of the inhabitants of Garradrimna, apart from the kindness of the local school principal who gives money to the disgraced Rebecca Kerr after her removal as a teacher. Many commentators point to the fact that this man represents the author's own father and that he is a strange exception in a community where avarice, hypocrisy (especially religious hypocrisy) and over-indulgence are the norms. To illustrate this point we will have a brief look now at the novel and its characters.

Nan Brennan is the proud mother of a son, John, who is going on for the priesthood. Her marriage to a drunkard, Ned, is made

2. *Kissing the Dark*, p. 95.

endurable by the thought that she will one day see her son say Mass and be a figure of respect in the community. She has suffered much in life. As a young and beautiful woman, she attracted the attention of a wealthy farmer, Henry Shannon, who began courting her. A regular visitor to her house, where Nan's parents were less than vigilant guardians, Henry enjoyed sexual relations with his girlfriend before marriage. Nan found to her shame that she was with child.

CUNNING AND EXILE

On discovering the news, Henry was not at all angry, as she expected him to be, but rather invited her to spend a weekend away with him. Innocently she accepted the invitation, thus ensuring her moral collapse in the eyes of the local community. What self-respecting woman would consent to going away with a man before marriage, her neighbours will ask? To her horror, Nan learns that going away together was a ruse on the part of Henry's solicitor to enable his client to escape from a 'bad marriage'.

ESure enough, the local community, on finding out that Nan is pregnant, immediately assume that the coupling occurred during her weekend away with Henry, and rejoice in criticising her conduct. She is condemned from the pulpit and her child is taken from her straight after being born – she is told that it was a stillbirth and will be ignorant of the fact that the baby was in fact sold by her mother to Henry Shannon. The latter's wife – a marriage arranged quickly after the end of his fling with Nan – was unable to undergo the rigours of a full-term pregnancy. She would actually die in an attempt to give birth a short time afterwards. Nan went to England to start a new life and met her husband there.

She then took the fatal decision to return to live in the valley where numerous people were anxious to rid Ned of his ignorance with regard to what happened between his wife and Henry Shannon. Unable to forgive her, he devoted his life to drinking a lot and working very little. He even went so far as to beat Nan occasionally and was impervious to her attempts to evangelise him through reading long passages from pious magazines.

All Nan's hopes thus rested with their son, who was studying for the priesthood in England. John is a fairly sympathetic

portrayal of a victim of heredity who never really possessed a vocation so much as being forced to live out his mother's. On listening to Nan's character assassinations of various inhabitants of the valley, he begins to realise that she is not the paragon of virtue he had once considered her to be:

Now he was listening to one most subtly different, to a woman who had been suddenly metamorphosed into the likeness of something primeval and startling. And she was oh! so bitter. 'It is good, mother, that we are not as the rest of these.'³

His irony completely escapes his mother. The novel revolves around John's gradual discovery of his family's secrets and of his own weaknesses. During his holidays from the seminary, Myles Shannon, Henry's brother (Henry is now dead) encourages a friendship between John and his nephew, Ulick. His reasons for doing this date back to his aborted attempt to know love. He was courting a lady in Dublin and was on the threshold of marriage when Nan's venomous plot with the local postmistress conspired to dash his hopes. She wanted to hurt the Shannons at all cost and he now sees his chance for revenge:

'In the desolation of her heart through the destruction of her son', he muttered to himself, not without a certain weariness, as he moved away from the mirror. (p. 136)

The two young men did, in fact, become friends. Ulick, a dilettante student whose chances of ever completing his university degree seemed slim, spoke openly to John about the foibles of women, an area in which he was well-versed. They were seen in each other's company many evenings in the local pubs. John began to seriously doubt his vocation. He realised that he spent so much time in the church out of a desire to please his mother: 'When his lips moved, in mechanical mimicry of the priest, he felt that the way of the hypocrite must be hard and lonely.' (p. 83) It has to be questioned in the quote above to whom the voice belongs. MacNamara appears to be placing his own opinions in the mouth of his character. Would a young man, who was struggling with his vocation and who had little experience of the real world, be capable of such an insight? I doubt it. Throughout the book, the intrusions by the author serve to annoy the reader who

3. *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, Tralee: Anvil Books, 1964, p. 32. All references will be from this edition.

sees them for what they are – heavy-handed and didactic.

Religious hypocrisy is a favourite target of MacNamara. So it is that the local priest, Fr O'Keeffe, is pilloried for his worldly ways. His business interests are more important to him than the spiritual well-being of his parish. He is a wealthy man in his own right and sees no contradiction between this fact and his proclamation of the Gospel message of poverty:

Thus, while publicly preaching the admonishing text of the camel and the rich man and the needle's eye, Fr O'Keeffe was privately engaged in putting himself in such a position that the task of negotiating the needle's eye might be as difficult to him as to the camel. (p. 91)

I consider such authorial commentary unnecessary, as it doesn't even give the reader credit for being able to read between the lines. Everything is spelled out for us in this novel. Religion is nothing more than a sham, a mechanical observance of laws and obligations that never goes beyond the superficial. Even the atheists are clichéd in their anti-clerical attitudes. Nan is tireless in her attempts to put down her enemies and there is constant back-stabbing and character assassination going on in the valley. This is the same woman who glories in the fact that her son will one day be an anointed servant of God. Commerce is vilified in the persons of the local dealers who greedily covet their profits and who are always ready to make a quick buck, irrespective of what laws, moral or legal, they have to break to achieve this objective. (Maybe things haven't changed too much today when one considers the revelations by various tribunals of long-standing connivance among the political and business communities in our country.)

FULL CIRCLE

There is an inevitability about what is going to happen when John meets the newly appointed national school teacher, Rebecca Kerr, who, to her credit, is a decent sort and who treats John as an equal. However, she falls in love with the philanderer, Ulick, who, like his father before him, woos and then abandons the young woman. Being pregnant, she has no choice but to leave her employment. Ulick does nothing to stop her leaving. John, crazy with passion for Rebecca and knowing that Ulick has mistreated her abominably, thinks back to a conversation the two

men had some months earlier about women when Ulick made the following statement:

'I have learned a lot from them [women], and let me tell you this – it has been my experience that you could not trust your own mother or the girl of your heart. They seem to lack control, even the control of religion. They do realise religion at all. They are creatures of impulse.' (p. 66)

Since he has such a low opinion of womankind, it does not surprise us when Ulick abandons Rebecca in her hour of need. The latter is nobody's fool and harbours no false hopes about her fate: 'The offence she had committed was unnamed, too terrible for words. She was being sentenced like an Easter rebel.' (p. 175) When visiting the local chapel for the last time, Rebecca sees the place for what it stands in relation to her:

It was the place where, on Sunday next, mean people would smirk in satisfaction as they sat listening in all their lack of charity and fullness of pride ... The realization brought the pulsing surge of anger to her blood and she rose to come away. But when she turned around abruptly there were the two curates with their eyes still fixed upon her ... She did not meet their looks full straight, for they turned away as if to avoid the contamination of her as she ran from the House of God. (p. 177)

Worse than the cowardly reaction of the curates is the glee with which Nan Brennan greets the news of the departure of the schoolmistress. She, of all people, should have been sensitive to her plight, having been the victim herself of hypocritical condemnation from both the clergy and the local community.

Despite this, she reacts as though she has forgotten all that went before. But her son is not left in ignorance about his mother's past as Marse Prendergast, the local gossip, reveals to him not only the affair his mother had with Henry Shannon but also the fact that Ulick, whom he has killed in a cold fury, was his half-brother. Even his mother was not aware of the fact that the man whom she reviled so bitterly was her own flesh and blood. John holds on to the secret but has been changed utterly by events within the valley.

The end of the book sees him falling drunk into his mother's arms prompting her to remark to herself: 'There were two of them now.' (p. 199) The other drunkard to whom she is referring

is, of course, her husband.

The whole narrative is exaggerated and unreal. As a paradigm of provincial Ireland in 1918, it certainly does not present a true and accurate picture.

And yet there is something in the book that captures the imagination, almost a century later. It is probably the naked satire on gombeenism that appeals most to me. How starkly different is MacNamara's portrayal of a hidden Ireland from that put forward by the 1916 rebels (who had only been executed two years previously) or by the Celtic Revival.⁴ There is no honour among the Irish people to whom MacNamara gives life. It is this that gives the novel a unique flavour. Nowadays we are used to attacks on the Catholic clergy and their one-time abuse of power. We have seen that absolute power in political as well as religious leaders can lead to untoward corruption.

A TRUER IMAGE?

But this author was not writing from the comfortable vantage of the twenty-first century. He was living in an Ireland that was just beginning to feel its way towards independence after centuries of British rule and where putting forward such a negative picture of an Irish community was unthinkable for any self-respecting Catholic. It took bravery to do what MacNamara did, even if it was his family, and not he, who had to bear the brunt of the negative reaction of the Delvin community.

What surprises me is not so much that the people of Delvin burnt the book but that several other communities didn't follow suit. Because the image portrayed of Ireland and Irishness is an extremely negative and hurtful one. Benedict Kiely has been a loyal supporter of *The Valley*. In his Preface to the Anvil edition, he wrote:

Brinsley MacNamara had grown tired of the portraits of his countrymen as a lot of cheerful buffoons whose main function was to entertain the tourist, the more civilised fellow who bought colour postcards of the Irishman with the caubeen and the shillelagh and huroos in his mouth.

I think we would all agree that this stereotypical image of Irish-

4. It is worth noting that a couple of years previously, MacNamara himself had played the role of Robert Emmet in an amateur drama society's representation of his life and death. He had apparently delivered the speech from the dock with much feeling.

ness was in need of redress (even if, in 1918 there cannot have been too many tourists coming to Ireland) but I still wonder if it was necessary to go so far down the opposite path and to show Irish people as completely devoid of redeeming qualities. I incline rather to the view expressed by Seán McMahon, writing in *Éire-Ireland* (Vol.3, No. 1, Spring 1968):

Though his castigation of the hypocrisy, the malevolence and the narrowness of the valley people is perfectly proper, it is done in such loving detail that the moral attitude of the author becomes questionable. The book lacks detachment and, in spite of an apparent sympathy, mercy.

MacNamara challenged an idealised view of Ireland that most Irish people of the time were happy to accept. He chose instead to expose the Minotaur that lies within each of us and which emerges at ill-guarded moments. I agree with his distaste for cant and humbug but as an artist I have to agree with McMahon's assessment that his detachment is questionable and that he almost takes pleasure in debunking the myth of romantic Ireland. His lack of mercy and objectivity is all too visible. He has nonetheless left behind him an important landmark in Irish cultural and literary history and an expression that is still widely used by English speakers all over the world. Not a bad testament to a flawed work of art!

Community in grace However spread out they are in different local communities, and despite internal tensions and external harassment, early Christians are conscious of being really one communion, one koinonia through the waters of baptism and the shared bread and cup of salvation. As with the Jewish sense of being a holy people, their community's centre of gravity is not located in itself but in relation to a divine gift and claim. They interrelate as a community of the friends of God and prophets in the risen Christ by the power of the Spirit.

The net effect of being part of this community is that all members are considered participants in the holy life of God. This comes about not because of a state of life they choose or set of virtues they practise, not because of their innocence or perfection, but because of the gift of the Spirit who is given to all. As always, this is a gift freely given. Its effect is to create a community in grace.

Elizabeth A. Johnson, in *Friends of God and Prophets: a Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (SCM Press)