The Religious Sensibility of William Trevor (1928-2016)

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Such too, therefore, are the archetypal motifs which underlie Mark’s story of Jesus. If we do as the Church recommends us at this time, and read through the Gospel according to Saint Mark, we might find that it is not as outdated as we had imagined and, having also gone to see the latest Star Wars movie: The Last Jedi, filmed in part on the Skelligs Rocks off the coast of Kerry, we might end up asking ourselves who was influencing whom?

The Religious Sensibility of William Trevor (1928-2016)

Eamon Maher

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William Trevor belonged to a golden generation of Irish prose writers that includes Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney and John McGahern – one could add the living authors Jennifer Johnson, Tom Murphy and Edna O’Brien to that list – who managed to capture in a succinct and revealing manner uncomfortable elements of Irish identity and culture during the post-Independence era. A common thread running through the work of these writers is the depiction of a repressive society tightly controlled by a Catholic Church whose main pre-occupation appears to have been ensuring its dominant position in the newly established State and the protection of its members from the dangers of easy pleasures, and of sexuality in particular. Born into a Church of Ireland family (his father worked in the bank), Trevor was quick to grasp that he was something of a marginal figure because of his background. He acknowledged this in an interview with Mike Murphy:

We were naturally outsiders because we were different. We didn’t go to Mass. As a family we were caught between De Valera’s new Catholic Ireland and the old Anglo-Irish culture of Georgian and country houses. We were ‘lace curtain’ poor Protestants until my father advanced in his career.

Although he didn’t belong to the Catholic tradition (in fact, he attended Sandford Park, St Columba’s and Trinity College, Dublin, all of which were staunchly Protestant establishments in those days), Trevor was very attuned to the role the majority religion played in the lives of Irish people. His father’s work as a bank official meant that the Trevors spent time in various parts of Ireland, mainly Cork,
...he also demonstrated an admirable understanding of priesthood... 

Tipperary and Wexford, all of which are wonderfully evoked in his work. Trevor is a skilled chronicler of the customs and practices of his native country, of its landscapes and people. As we shall see, he also demonstrated an admirable understanding of priesthood and some of his most memorable characters are men of the cloth.

In this article, I propose to discuss some of Trevor's best-known Irish fiction (a lot of his work is situated in England, where he lived for the majority of his life) with a view to conveying what I regard as a keen religious sensibility. I will concentrate on the short stories, a genre in which Trevor excelled and where religion is dealt with in a revealing manner. Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, in her 2003 study of Trevor's writings, notes that Trevor's understanding of Catholic Ireland was evident and that there is a timelessness about his work and the dilemmas it presents:

Religion's psychological grip upon the Irish may have diminished; economic hardship may have released its stranglehold; yet even in the provincial stories with contemporary settings, characters are often incapable of extricating themselves from stultifying lives. 2

Irish society may have been completely transformed during the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, but one has the sense that — and this is also true of John McGahern — Trevor's Ireland remains one in which people are still tied to the past and cannot escape from its caprices.

THE BALLROOM OF ROMANCE

'The Ballroom of Romance,' first published in 1972 and made into a successful film with Brenda Fricker in the main role, is possibly one of the best examples of how difficult it can be to find solace in a provincial Ireland which affords few opportunities for love or personal development. The main protagonist Bridie is a woman in her thirties whose main role is to look after her invalided father and run the family farm. One of the few pleasures she allows herself is a trip to the local dancehall at the weekend, where she meets a group of people who are in the same sort of impasse as herself. The women, getting on in age, are keen to find husbands and the men, many of whom are hard drinkers, are viewed with suspicion by the ballroom owner, Justin Dwyer:

It was the middle-aged bachelors who required the watching: they came down from the hills like mountain goats, released from their mammies and from the smell of animals and soil. 3

The drummer in the band that plays in the ballroom, Dano Ryan, is different. He works with the County Council and displays a gen-
tleness and sensitivity not evident in the other males one encounters in this location. Bridie entertains the hope that she and he might eventually become a couple; she imagines him working on the farm, thus allowing her more time to make the house more homely and suitable for a family. All prospects of such an arrangement are dashed, however, when the widow with whom Dano has lodgings cashes in on his daily presence in her home to secure him as a husband and father to her young son. There is desperation in the way the women attending the ballroom cling to the faint hope of meeting someone with whom to share their lives. Bridie’s strength resides in her stoicism, her firm grasp on the reality of her situation. Her father knows that his dependence on her is damaging her chances of marriage, but consoles himself with the thought that she appears relatively happy with her lot. She hides her suffering from him, believing that, having lost a leg, his plight is far worse than hers:

In her life, on the farm and in the house, there was no place for tears. Tears were a luxury, like flowers would be in the fields, where the mangolds grew, or fresh white wash in the scullery. (55)

The ability to appreciate the small things is what allows Bridie to get through the drudgery of her days. At the end of the story, she makes the decision to stop attending the ballroom, realising that she is too old for romance, and resigns herself to marrying Bowser Egan, one of the hill bachelors, in a few years’ time, at which stage her father and his mother will most likely be dead. The decision is a pragmatic one; she will accept Bowser, ‘because it would be lonesome being by herself in the farmhouse.’ (60) Her fate was sealed by the premature death of her mother, which made it necessary for her to stay at home. Her father is intuitive enough to know that it is not right that a young woman should be ‘tied up to a one-legged man’ (40), but equally admits to Canon O’Connell, a regular visitor to the house, that he would be dead without Bridie to assist him. The Canon’s view seems to be that a life spent tendering to the needs of an invalid will bring about happiness in the next world, a philosophy of self-denial that formed an essential part of religious belief in Ireland at that time.

DEATH IN JERUSALEM

‘Death in Jerusalem’ examines the predicament that confronts the devout Francis Daly when his brother Paul, a priest in America, invites him to come on one of the regular trips he organises for well-to-do Catholics from San Francisco, where he carries out his ministry. The two brothers display differing personality traits, Fr Paul being outgoing and affable, whereas Francis is self-retiring and dutiful. He had always wanted to visit the Holy Land, so when Paul
... he is uneasy about leaving his elderly mother behind...

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tells him that is the destination for his next trip, Francis is tempted to go. However, he is uneasy about leaving his elderly mother behind, believing that she might be confused by his absence. These concerns are brushed aside by Father Paul, who mentions that their sister Kitty can look after their mother for the two weeks Francis will be absent, an argument that proves decisive.

As Father Paul stands on the platform of the Tipperary station before boarding the train to Dublin after a trip home, he shouts that the next time they will see each other will be in Jerusalem. Francis imagines how his brother will spend the night in the Gresham Hotel, where he will probably fall in with another priest, play a game of bridge after his meal, and have a few drinks: ‘That was his brother’s way and always had been – an extravagant, easy kind of way, full of smiles and good humour.’ (72) There is clearly a tinge of unease in Francis’ description of his brother’s behaviour: Paul’s ‘way’ would certainly not be his. And yet the bond between the two is strong and Francis’ admiration is clear to see. It was probably his ease with people and his gregariousness that ensured Paul’s great success in America. His parishioners and fellow priests were very fond of him, as well as being impressed with his energy and organisational abilities.

In the course of the fateful trip to the Holy Land, news reaches Father Paul that their mother has passed away and, partly out of a desire to allow his brother to enjoy his trip away, and partly for selfish reasons, the priest decides to keep the bad news to himself for a while. When he finds out what has happened, Francis is distraught, as well as being resentful of his brother’s ability to continue drinking and socialising as if nothing had happened:

As long as he lived, Francis knew he would never forgive himself. As long as he lived, he would say to himself that he hadn’t been able to wait for a few years, until she’d passed quietly on. (86)

Tension enters into the exchanges between the brothers, with Father Paul arguing that there’s no point in rushing home, as there’s nothing they can do at the moment about their mother’s passing. Francis cannot excuse his brother’s deceit, the endless glasses of whiskey in his hand, the seeming lack of remorse about their mother’s death. Surely devotion to one’s mother is at the core of the Christian faith? How then could his brother be so unaffected by what has just occurred in Tipperary? At the end of the story, Francis persuades Paul to book them on the first plane home the following day. Even before the news of his mother’s passing, the trip had been a disappointment to him – the armed soldiers on the streets and at the main landmarks a reminder that it was a site of conflict; the sights and landscape bearing
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... a powerful examination of the role religion plays in the existence of two men who have chosen different paths.

It is not clear which of the brothers has drawn the short straw, as they both look as if they are destined to endure unhappy lives, without even the comfort of sibling love to sustain them. 'Death in Jerusalem' is a powerful examination of the role religion plays in the existence of two men who have chosen different paths. It is likely that Francis would have opted for the priesthood had Paul not announced his desire to attend the seminary first. The solitary, prayerful life would have been more amenable to his temperament, whereas Paul could have done well in business and been happy in a marriage. In Trevor’s fatalistic world-view, people often end up in situations that do not suit them. They regret decisions from the past and can do nothing to redress the consequences they bring in their wake. Religion in this story is more of a cross than a comfort, and being a priest does not automatically offer any worthwhile answers to the questions existence throws at us.

OF THE CLOTH

'Of the Cloth' tells the story of the Reverend Grattan Fitzmaurice, Church of Ireland Minister at Ennismolach Rectory, and his relationship with the surrounding Catholic community. When a local man, Con Tonan, loses his arm in an accident, Grattan agrees to hire him as a gardener, in spite of the man’s handicap and his almost complete ignorance of the work he will have to perform. This proves a huge boost for Con, as it gives him a purpose and feeling of self-worth, along with earning some money (probably more than Rev. Fitzmaurice can afford) for his family. Con is a Catholic and the local Catholic priests, Father Mac Partlan and Father Leahy, are greatly impressed by this charitable gesture towards one of their flock. After Con’s funeral many years later, the younger priest comes to visit the rectory to express his thanks:

Father Mac Partlan looked over the table tonight after he’d put his
sugar in his tea. What he said to me was you’d given Con Tonan his life back. Even though Con Tonan wasn’t one of your own."4 Fitzmaurice realises that this visit is motivated by a genuine sense of appreciation for a kind gesture towards a man who was not even a member of the Church of Ireland, a tradition which Fitzmaurice’s father, also a minister, described as a ‘remnant.’ (23) The opening lines of the story reveal how Fitzmaurice feels ‘out of touch with the times and what was happening with two generations of change, with his own country and what it had become.’ (21) The ‘once impregnable estates’ have disappeared, their former occupants gone, and the Protestant community has become all but irrelevant: ‘... there was a withering within that Church that seemed a natural thing.’ (23) Alongside the fading structures of his caste, during the early years of his work Fitzmaurice had noted the emergence of the Church of the Holy Assumption, which was ‘alive and bustling’, with long lines of cars parked on the grass verges and the gateways during Sunday Masses. This instils a natural feeling of envy: The simplicity of total belief, of belonging and of being in touch, nourished – or so it seemed to Grattan – Father Mac Partlan’s ruddy features and Father Leahy’s untroubled smile. (27) And yet appearances can be deceptive and glorious eras inevitably come to an end. The funeral service for Con Tonan is attended by Grattan, who cannot fail to be impressed by the confidence of the ceremony and its ritual. The priests’ gestures, their hands raised to give the blessing at the end of Mass, the coffin being carried to the grave, the solemnity of the occasion, all seem to indicate that the Catholic Church is still in rude good health. But the reality is somewhat different, as is clear from Father Leahy’s admission that Father Mac Partlan’s eyes are red from crying when he comes to breakfast in the morning. This is as a result of the clerical abuse scandals, after which the Catholic Church found itself under siege from all sides. Indeed, when Father Leahy visits the Rectory, Grattan discreetly turns over the front page of The Irish Times with the headline, ‘Paedophile priest is extradited’, under a picture of a grinning Father Brendan Smyth being taken into custody. Undoubtedly, the Catholic Church was undergoing its own dark night of the soul at this time, something which was not immediately obvious during the funeral Mass. Father Leahy admits to Grattan how ashamed he and Father Mac Partlan are about the awful disclosures while they stand in the dark outside the Rectory:

Why did it seem he (Grattan) was being told that the confidence the priests possessed was a surface that lingered beyond its day?
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Why, listening, did he receive that intimation? Why did it seem he was being told there was illusion, somewhere, in the solemn voices, hands raised in blessing, the holy water, the cross made in the air? (35)

Even in times of disenchantment and crisis within religious institutions, the attachment to the rituals remains strong. So Con's funeral is a celebration of a life of dedication to family and Church; it is a coming together of the local community to show solidarity with his wife and children. It takes more than revelations of heinous crimes committed by a few priests to dispense with centuries of attachment to Catholic identity and culture: these persist long after faith has gone. Grattan has read articles outlining the fall-away from Mass attendance and the sacraments, describing how the teachings of the Catholic Church are blandly ignored by huge swathes of the population: 'A different culture, they called it, in which restraint and prayer were not the way, as once they had been.' (36) Such developments are not viewed positively by this Church of Ireland Minister, who feels for his priest confreres of the Catholic tradition. Soon organised religion, once the cement that kept Irish society together, could well become an anachronism relevant to only a small number of people. For someone with an innate love of 'the sound, the look, the shape of Ireland, and Ireland's rain, and Ireland's sunshine, and Ireland's living, and Ireland's dead' (37), a future in which men and women of the cloth would be an irrelevance is a forlorn prospect for Grattan, who knows what it is like to operate without a community. He cherishes the words of his former gardener's wife, who tells him how Con came to believe that his accident was a good thing in the end, as it allowed him to get to know Ennismolach Rectory and its sole occupant. The solidarity he feels with Catholic priests, who would have in the past viewed him as their enemy, gives his ministry a renewed relevance, as he comes to see that there is more to bring them closer than to separate them.

I trust that this brief review of some of William Trevor's short fiction will show readers of Spirituality the degree to which he understood the religious mind-set of Ireland, something that would have been difficult, if not impossible, if he did not possess a sensibility that lent itself to such a world view. This aspect may also explain the degree to which the fiction he set in Ireland has so many religious references. After all, religion, be it Protestantism or Catholicism, or both, was the language of his youth and it moulded his personality and character. Like Joyce, exile only heightened Trevor's preoccupation with the people, culture, landscape and language of Ireland. On that point, let me conclude by saying that I am in full agreement with Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt's assessment:

Though Trevor has never returned to Ireland to live, feeling that the same distance that enabled him to first write about his homeland may have become a necessity in that writing's continuation, Ireland remains the inspiration for his best writing, and he considers himself to be an Irish writer. 5