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## “Take and Eat”: Links between the Eucharist and Human Flesh in some Twentieth-Century Irish Texts

Eamon Maher

*Technological University Dublin*, [eamon.maher@tudublin.ie](mailto:eamon.maher@tudublin.ie)

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Given the strong influence of Catholicism on the Irish psyche and culture, it is not altogether surprising that it should feature strongly in the work of the country's writers and artists. This essay will concentrate on the extent to which the Eucharist, a central tenet of Catholic faith, is linked to a certain perception of the body as seen in the work of three well-known Irish fiction writers: Aidan Mathews, Frank McCourt, and John McGahern. Part of the process revolves around reverence for the Eucharist, which, in order to be properly received, demands a purity of mind and body that is difficult to attain. The Eucharist viewed as "food for the soul" is occasionally interpreted in a literal manner by the writers, with consequences that will be analyzed in the course of the article.

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# **“Take and Eat”: Links between the Eucharist and Human Flesh in some Twentieth-Century Irish Texts**

In a country like Ireland, where Catholicism has exerted such strong control over the nation’s psyche, it is understandable that the various rituals associated with the majority religion should find themselves embedded in its literature. At times, the representations can be negative, at others, positive, but whatever view writers have of it, one thing is sure: Catholicism is not something that twentieth-century Irish authors can afford to ignore. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, Irish people were constantly reminded of the importance of “bodily purity,” an idea closely aligned to the notion of the body being “the temple of the Holy Spirit.” Hence sexual continence was strongly encouraged at all stages of life, even within marriage. Improper or immodest dress, a tendency towards gluttony, inappropriate sexual behaviour, these were things that were regularly condemned from the pulpit, and for the same reason. In treating of literary texts which show links between the Eucharist and human flesh, these points should be kept in mind.

James Joyce’s disengagement with Roman Catholicism to espouse the religion of Art is well documented. However, his apostasy may not have been as complete as some critics aver. In a letter to Nora Barnacle on August 29, 1904, he made the following announcement: “Six years ago, I left the Catholic Church,

hating it fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature.”<sup>1</sup> His objection to the Church of Rome was inspired, according to Douglas Kanter, by the type of spiritual torpor “caused by what he perceived to be the oppressive religiosity of Catholic culture in Ireland.”<sup>2</sup> Joyce suspected that Roman tyranny may have been even worse than its British equivalent and yet his writings remained steeped in the vocabulary and ceremonies of Catholicism. In *A Portrait*, for example, we have the image of a girl coming out of Jacob’s biscuit factory who makes Stephen Dedalus ponder on the nature of women and beauty:

To him she would unveil her soul’s shy nakedness, to one who was but schooled in the discharging of a formal rite rather than to him, a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.

The radiant image of the eucharist united again in an instant his bitter and despairing thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

While Joyce does not form a major focus of this article, it is useful to observe that in spite of the fact that he abandoned the Catholic world-view and vowed not to serve it, Stephen’s own signifiers (and whose views does Stephen represent if not Joyce’s?) deliberately borrow from his knowledge of the religion in which he was reared and educated. In the passage just cited, there is an unmistakable nostalgia for a lost religious faith. Note the way in which Joyce equates the aesthetic in terms of the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, with the artist now a priest of a more secular movement towards transcendence. Stephen’s displeasure with the clerical caste is prompted in part by the undue influence a priest exercises on the object of his desire: “He had done well to leave her to flirt with her priest, to toy with a church which was the scullery-maid of christendom.”<sup>4</sup> Doubtless, his decision to give up on his religious vocation after discovering the joys of the flesh only serves to augment his agitation with the figure of the priest. Joyce’s lingering fascination with Catholicism is brought to the fore in an exchange Stephen has with an acquaintance later in the novel: “It is a curious thing, do you know,” Cranly said dispassionately, “how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.”<sup>5</sup>

This brief reference to Joyce serves to underline the degree to which many Irish writers of the twentieth century similarly became “supersaturated” with the

vestiges of their religious upbringing. While often railing against the negative aspects of repressive and regressive religiosity, there are times when they cannot escape its overarching influence. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the position adopted towards the body in the work of Aidan Mathews, Frank McCourt, and John McGahern, the sample writers dealt with in this article. Theirs is a position which is related, in my view, to the Catholic Church's teaching on the Eucharist, which insists on its being the *actual* body and blood of Christ. Writing about the religious significance of food to medieval women, Caroline Walker Bynum remarks:

when we look at what medieval people themselves wrote, we find that they often spoke of gluttony as the major form of lust, of fasting as the most painful renunciation, and of eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God. Theologians and spiritual directors from the early church to the sixteenth century reminded penitents that sin had entered the world when Eve ate the forbidden fruit and that salvation comes when Christians eat their God in the ritual of the communion table.<sup>6</sup>

These observations chime with many of the points that will be developed subsequently in this article. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a Christian was required by Church law to fast on certain days and to receive communion at least once a year. The fasting was invariably a prelude to the actual Eucharistic participation. Bynum further argues that "Food was, moreover, a central metaphor and symbol in Christian poetry, devotional literature, and theology, because a meal (the Eucharistic) was the central Christian ritual, the most direct way of encountering God."<sup>7</sup> This tradition lived on for a long time in Irish religious practice. A fixation on the doctrine of the Real Presence led to the imposition of fasting by the Catholic Church from midnight on the day prior to receiving Holy Communion and the emphasis on being in a state of grace so that God could be consumed in an act of love and absolute devotion. It is not hard to see how attitudes to sexuality might have been influenced by the reverence in which people held the Eucharist, especially the common belief in Ireland that the only truly acceptable form of flesh was divine in origin. As the anointed representatives of God and through the gift of celibacy, priests were elevated above the status of ordinary people, as they were not (allegedly) tainted in the same way by sins of the flesh. Revelations about clerical child abuse in Ireland

put paid to the notion that celibacy was always respected or that it insulated priests in some way from the desires and weaknesses that form a fundamental part of our humanity.

Sociologist Tom Inglis, a long-time critic of the skewed emphasis traditionally placed on the body in Irish society, draws on Michel Foucault, who reasons that if we want to understand the history of the West, we should begin by examining the ways in which the body became subject to power. Indeed, it is clear that various strategies were developed in order to create disciplined, docile, compliant bodies. Inglis observes that it was through the regulation of the body, including strategies of self-monitoring, that the modern self emerged, and concludes, “It may well be ... that if there is a cultural difference about the Irish, it lies in the way this process took place in Ireland and how the Catholic Church developed a monopoly not just over schooling and the discipline and punishment of bodies, but over the discourse and practice of sexualising bodies.”<sup>8</sup> Part of this discourse revolved around reverence for the Eucharist, which, in order to be properly received, demanded a purity of mind and body that was difficult to attain. It should not be forgotten that gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins, in second place after lust.

Aidan Mathews is a drama producer in RTÉ radio, as well as an award-winning poet, playwright, and short story writer. His story “Lipstick on the Host,” from the collection of the same name (first published in 1992), is one of the most interesting portrayals of the Eucharist one will find. It depicts a few days in the rather hectic life of Meggie, a middle-aged secondary school teacher who is having difficulties coming to terms with life after forty. She finds fulfilment in her relationship with Antony, a gynecologist, who becomes her lover and then is heartbreakingly taken from her in a tragic car accident. From the disjointed and non-linear narrative, it would appear that Meggie undergoes a nervous breakdown after Antony’s death, which can be seen in her erratic behaviour, especially evident in her decision one day as she is attending Mass not to receive the Eucharist because she is wearing lipstick. She feels that such a course of action would be disrespectful to God and so she puts the host in her handbag and brings it home. The host becomes a type of surrogate lover, as Meggie ponders over what would be a fitting way in which to “commune” with the Lord. In a conversation with the school chaplain, she asked him his opinion of the Anglican Eucharist—she was interested because Antony was a Protestant. The priest replied: “Personally, I wouldn’t be inclined to take an

Anglican eucharist quite as seriously as I would take a Roman Catholic eucharist ... If I received at an Anglican eucharist, well, I suppose I'd bow my head two-thirds as much as I would at mass; and I'd pray for, say, six minutes instead of nine.<sup>9</sup> This somewhat flippant reply does nothing to allay Meggie's confusion and reveals a mindset that is rather dismissive of the Anglican form of Communion, in which tradition there is no belief in the Real Presence. For Anglicans, the Eucharist symbolizes Christ rather than actually *being* His Body and Blood. When asked about the genesis of his story, Mathews replied:

Mothers in mantillas, wiping lipstick from their mouths in the queue for communion, was a standard sign in my childhood, same as Adam's apples we would press the paten against while the priest distributed the holy pellet to parishioners we disliked. At the time, of course, I thought "Corpus Christi" meant "Corpse of Christ." "Lipstick on the Host" originated in those faraway, fasting-from-midnight mysteries which I still hallow.<sup>10</sup>

He drew inspiration from his experience of serving Mass as an altar boy and observing the various mannerisms associated with people coming to the communion rail. The respect Mathews reveals for Holy Communion is reflected in the attitude of his female character, who finds herself mesmerized by having a host in her handbag: "I had never really looked at a host before. They are very delicate. They break at the wrong touch, even. If you dropped them, they would not fall; they would flutter, like flakes of snow" (288). The corporeality of the host, its fragility, are emphasized throughout the story. In some ways, Meggie comes to see it as a metaphor for Antony, whose body is crushed in the fatal car accident and yet who lives on through the re-enactment of the Eucharist she conducts in her house. She places the host on a clean napkin between two scented candles purchased for the dinner party she had organized for her lover. She reads a passage from the Bible which describes a woman drawing water from a well, who says, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" Afterwards, the ritual is completed: "I went to Holy Communion then, more than I have ever gone before in my life; and it was too late by the time I realised that I had completely forgotten to wipe the lipstick from my lips" (288). Lipstick is generally employed to draw attention to the wearer's lips, to heighten their desirability, from whence the

tendency among women to remove it before receiving communion. The sexual attraction Meggie feels for God is evident in this description. It is heightened by the phrase encountered earlier in the story: "... people receive each other like Holy Communion" (249). The "hunger" for the Body of Christ is not just carnal desire, according to Mathews: it is a seeking out of the transcendent in the physical. Thus we have the following description of Antony's lovemaking: "My body was Braille to his blindness. He read me everywhere. There are so many parts of my body I have never touched, unless they are ill. They are sick from not being touched. But his tongue toured me. He opened me like a book, and smelled the pages" (277). It is as though Meggie's lover is feasting on her body, tasting its most intimate corners, smelling its odours, communing with it in a special way. Mathews explains his particular view of the Eucharist in the following terms:

It would be many years before I began to understand that holy communion is what human beings at their very best do to each other in grief and intimacy; that my parents in the pews had fallen in love and risen in me; that the material world is the metaphysical realm to which we are called by the true tenderness of God; that eros is as Christian as agape; and that my own body, while a temple, is not a church.<sup>11</sup>

This helps to explain Meggie's strangely upbeat mood after the unusual ceremony in her house. Antony may be dead physically, but he remains present through her evocation of him in the Eucharist. He in turn becomes body and blood, the object of her strange hunger. She notes, "I can smell him on the side of the bed" (289). Later, she observes, "Why am I still so happy? Because I have passed the Why stage. I am not two-and-a-half any longer. I have arrived at the Yes stage. Yes is a much more interesting question than Why" (289). It is easy to think of *Yes* as acceptance rather than interrogation, but in Mathews's short story such boundaries are blurred. Having received the news that Antony is dead, Meggie phones her mother and says she would like to be back inside her womb, protected and safe. Her mother dismisses the comment, claiming Meggie has been drinking. The older woman does not realize that Antony has died, and hence fails to grasp her daughter's seemingly random comments: "I want to start from the beginning .... I want to be conceived. I want to be thistledown drifting inside you, picking my way on the wall of your womb"

(292). What the mother is witnessing unknown to herself is her daughter's mental disintegration. The mind is a strange thing: at moments of heightened grief and stress, one sometimes sees into the heart of things. At a certain point, Meggie comes to equate her lover with God: "At the weekends, I met God; always at his place, never at mine" (301). Then difficulties arise, as Meggie, clearly unhinged by the death of Antony, cannot accept the reality of what has happened: "Now he's broken the rules. Now he wants more. He wants more than my lips and tongue. He wants me. He has started writing letters. He has begun to ring the school. He has broken into my home, to search for me" (301).

"Lipstick on the Host" is a skilful evocation of how grief can lead a woman to assume a distorted view of reality, in which human and divine love become merged into one. Who is to say, however, that Meggie's experience is any less valid than that of so-called stable people? Mathews has personal knowledge of the murkiness of depression and admits to having lived "on bread and wine in the crisis of desolation for three years," an experience which ultimately helped him to discover "the darker side of flesh and blood." There is an obvious empathy between the author and his heroine:

My own consciousness, which is an electrical function of my brain, was not insulated at all, as I had always imagined, and it has relied on the kindness of chemicals for decades now to stabilise and sanitise it. Some of these ruminations may have leaked into my portrait of poor Meggie, whose rational breakdown may or may not mature into a mystical breakthrough.<sup>12</sup>

The Church has always been suspicious of mystics, of the way they burrow down the path of uncertainty, a path that sometimes culminates in that intimate knowledge of God's love that few ever experience. The Eucharist is a concrete sign of a relationship between the human and the divine, between what is consumable (bread and wine) and that which is ethereal. Meggie's struggles with life and death, her religious faith, her identification of God with her lover, all point towards an experience that has definite mystical overtones. What Mathews shows us in "Lipstick on the Host" is that there are no neat categories when it comes to spiritual enlightenment; everything is connected, though not in any logical way, and this can result in what some would consider mental disorientation, others, mystical awareness. Mathews has pondered

on these issues for many years and his story supplies a challenging artistic representation of something that is almost impossible to describe in words.

In the two other examples to which we now turn, there is a more traditional and less mystical view of the Eucharist, one that dwells more on the material side (i.e. food) and less on the transcendent. Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* enjoyed huge success in terms of sales on both sides of the Atlantic ocean when it was first published in 1996. Describing the trials and tribulations of an Irish emigrant family in New York and then in Limerick, McCourt managed to marry pathos and humour in his largely autobiographical account of how the wife and children of a feckless, alcoholic father struggled to make ends meet and to put food on the table. As one reads *Angela's Ashes*, the hunger pangs of the children are unmistakable, as are the indignities endured by Angela as she is forced to approach charitable organizations such as the Vincent de Paul for food vouchers and clothes. Many in Limerick took issue with McCourt's uncomplimentary portrayal of the city during the 1940s, claiming it to be one-sided and exaggerated; nevertheless it is hard to argue with the skilful manner the author gets inside the head of his younger self and allows the reader to share in what were by any standards rather grim circumstances. The opening page of the book leaves us in no doubt as to where the blame for his family's plight lies: "When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood."<sup>13</sup> McCourt goes on to talk about how people all over the world love to outdo each other with the miseries of their childhoods, but he feels the Irish version is rather unique: "the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years" (1). *Angela's Ashes* is particularly hard hitting when it comes to the Catholic Church, which is portrayed as aloof from the problems of the poor and operating a form of apartheid that ensured certain social structures remained in place. A boy from the lanes should not aspire to become an altar boy, as the priests did not want boys with scabby knees or snotty noses on the altar. The lay people controlling the Vincent de Paul never missed an opportunity to make mothers who were requesting help aware of how degrading it was to have to avail of charity. The children having been born in New York and with a father from Northern Ireland, these traits make the McCourt family an easy target for the snide

comments and put-downs in Limerick: “They say, Lord above, would you listen to the little Yankees, and they wonder why Mam in her American coat would be looking for charity since there’s hardly enough for the poor people of Limerick without Yanks coming over and taking the bread out of their mouths” (64). At Christmas, there is no money for a goose, a ham, or a turkey, and so Frank has to carry a pig’s head home to their rented accommodation, the downstairs section of which is uninhabitable in winter because it is submerged in water. The catcalls from his school companions ring out when they see what he is carrying through the torn paper around the head. The butcher does at least show some humanity by giving the family sausages free of charge, but they all know that it is not normal to have pig’s head for the Christmas dinner. For all that it looks horrible and that they are conscious of their sad circumstances, the McCourts eat what is put in front of them ravenously: “The cabbage is soft and hot and there are plenty of potatoes with butter and salt. Mam peels our potatoes and dad eats his skin and all. He says all the nourishment of a potato is in the skin” (110). Although he fails lamentably to provide for his family, the father will never stoop so low as to ask for charity or go to the docks to pick the stray pieces of coal that fall off the lorries so that his family can have a fire or cook food. An IRA veteran, he talks constantly about Irish freedom, but does nothing to extricate his family from the poverty trap in which they find themselves because of his failure to hold down a job.

There are a few key incidents in *Angela’s Ashes* pertaining to the Eucharist that I would like to discuss. One is the episode of the raisin that Frank finds in his bun and which assumes the status of a rare treasure. Everyone crowds around him in the schoolyard trying to convince him to give them the precious raisin. In a rare show of solidarity with the have-nots, the young boy makes what is by any standards an extraordinarily generous gesture:

I wanted the raisin for myself but I saw Paddy Clohessy standing in the corner with no shoes and the room was freezing and he was shivering like a dog that had been kicked and I always felt sad over kicked dogs so I walked over and gave Paddy the raisin because I didn’t know what else to do and all the boys yelled that I was a fool and a feckin’ eejit. (133–34)

The raisin here has something of the power and aura associated with the Eucharist. It comforts the poor and the downtrodden, and has the ability

to transform people. By depriving himself of this rare treat and giving it to someone even more wretched than himself, Frank shows himself in a vastly superior light to his schoolyard comrades. Transcendent moments like this are uncommon indeed in a book where, in order to survive, you must climb on top of other people, take what is on offer in terms of food and drink, or else risk dying of starvation. There are very few moments in *Angela's Ashes* when one is not conscious of the atrocious diet of the children. They eat whatever they can lay their hands on and are especially attracted to luxuries such as sugar and sweets—their rotting teeth are testament to a bad diet and a lack of dental hygiene.

The remarkable thing about McCourt's narrative, however, is that in spite of the obvious hardship the characters have to endure, they nonetheless manage to see the funny side of things. One such comical moment revolves around Frank's Holy Communion. The preparation by the teacher of the candidates for this sacrament is painstaking. The children are told repeatedly that they must under no circumstances touch the host, even with their teeth, when they receive the Body and Blood of Christ for the first time. The master gives the boys a number of trial runs with pieces of paper: "He shows us how to stick out the tongue, receive the bit of paper, hold it a moment, draw in the tongue, fold your hands in prayer, look toward heaven, close your eyes in adoration, wait for the paper to melt in your mouth, swallow it, and thank God for the gift, the Sanctifying Grace wafting in on the odor of sanctity" (134). The boys are acutely aware of the solemnity of what they are about to do: become full members of "that most glorious congregation, the One, Holy, Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church, that for two thousand years, men, women and children have died for the Faith, that the Irish have nothing to be ashamed of in the martyr department. Haven't we provided martyrs galore? Haven't we bared our necks to the Protestant ax?" (135). Because of the nervous excitement he feels about what is awaiting him, Frank cannot sleep the night before and only just manages to make it to the church in time to receive, thanks to his granny, who calls to the house to get him ready. He encounters problems when the host becomes glued to the roof of his mouth and the words of the master come drifting back into his mind: if he touches Our Lord or bites him in two, he'll roast in Hell for all eternity. Fortunately, the host melts and after Mass he is able to head to his granny's for a special breakfast. Possibly as a result of all the anticipation, he vomits up his food, much to the horror of his grandmother: "Look at what he did. Thrun up his First Communion breakfast. Thrun up the body

and blood of Jesus. I have God in me backyard. What am I goin' to do?" (143) So she brings him to the Jesuit church (in Ireland, the Jesuits were generally considered the best-equipped to answer the most complex theological problems) and he confesses what has happened to a priest. Highly amused by the tale, the Jesuit tells him to have his granny wash everything away with water. When his granny hears this, she wants to know whether she should use ordinary water or holy water and sends the boy back in to ask. The Jesuit says ordinary water and warns the child that he will not answer any more of his granny's silly questions. The old woman's anxiety provides a good example of the reverence (often based on ill-conceived reservations and superstition) the Eucharist inspired in Irish believers by dint of a religious conditioning through rules and regulations that instilled fear in young and old alike. The reaction of Frank's granny to his vomiting up the host is indicative of a mindset that emphasized the potential for sin in almost every aspect of life, but particularly in relation to the Eucharist. What makes McCourt's account so amusing is how radically different popular opinion now tends to be about what constitutes such a sin. Today Communion is normally received in the hands, without any fasting, apart from by older people, and hence the taboo is broken to a large extent.

John McGahern is in some ways closer to Mathews than he is to McCourt in terms of how he perceives the links between the human body and the Eucharist. Brought up by a pious mother and an authoritarian father who was a sergeant in the Irish police force, An Garda Síochána, in the northwest midlands during the 1930s and early 1940s, McGahern's youth was dominated by the Catholic Church. In an interview he gave in 2003, he mentioned how he was in a sense moulded by his religious upbringing: "I don't think it's possible for a writer of my generation born in Ireland to avoid religion, even if it has to be by the path of opposition. It was the dominant force in that society and, in any sense of the spirit, it was mostly all that was there, even if some of it was unattractive."<sup>14</sup> Catholicism was the language of McGahern's youth and while he ceased practicing during his early adulthood, he retained a reverence for certain Catholic ceremonies whose beauty was unmatched by anything else he would subsequently encounter in life. He singled out for special mention the Stations of the Cross during Lent, the Corpus Christi processions, the beautiful flowers that decorated the church altar, the priest's fabulous vestments, the smell of incense, all of which he associated with the gentle, spiritual side of his mother. The authoritarian, repressive, and rule-bound Church reminded McGahern of his father, who was forced to rear a young family when his wife

died from cancer at a time when John, the eldest of six children, was only ten years of age.

Given his background and education (he would become a primary school teacher like his mother, before losing his job after the banning of his second novel, *The Dark*, in 1965), it was in some ways inevitable that Catholicism should feature strongly in McGahern's work. In what many consider to be his most accomplished novel, *Amongst Women*, published in 1990, the writer drew heavily on his experience of living with a domineering, self-obsessed father, who was a veteran of the War of Independence. Like McGahern's own father, the fictional Moran, a widower with a young family, decides to remarry, this time to Rose Brady, an attractive local who had returned from Glasgow to nurse her ill father only to fall under the spell of the local farmer's charm. Life in Great Meadow, as the Moran house and farm are called, was no bed of roses for the new bride who is sometimes subjected to harsh comments from Moran: "Did you ever listen carefully to yourself, Rose? ... If you listened a bit more carefully to yourself I think you might talk a lot less."<sup>15</sup> Rightfully upset at being demeaned in this way, Rose excuses herself and retires to her room. The following day, to make amends, Moran suggests that they go away for the day. They end up in Strandhill, a journey that will subsequently be replicated by Michael Moran, the youngest member of the family, who travels there with Nell Morahan, a returned emigrant with whom he is having an affair, although he is still only an adolescent. When Rose asks Moran where they can go, he replies: "We can drive anywhere we want to drive to. That's the great thing about having a car. All we have to do is back it out of the shed and go" (56). The freedom a car affords a couple is borne out by how it enables Nell and Michael to have a full-blown affair that finds its true consummation in the dunes around Strandhill strand. Each couple parks their car near the old canon overlooking the beach and then goes for a walk beside the sea. The behaviour of the two couples is very different, however. After eating the tea and sandwiches prepared by Rose, Moran declares, "I feel like a new man" (59). His hunger before eating is mirrored by Michael's sexual appetite as he and Nell make love in the dunes:

When he entered her for the third time she was ready to search for her own pleasure and he was now able to wait. Such was her strength that he was frightened. She shouted, seized him roughly at the hips and forced him to move; and when it was over she opened her eyes

and with her hands held his face for a quick, grateful kiss he couldn't comprehend. (105)

Like his father, Michael feels like “a new man” after this interlude. The “grateful kiss” given to him by Nell is echoed by Moran’s recitation of the Grace after meals: “We give Thee thanks, O Almighty God, for all Thy bounty which we have received through Christ Our Lord who liveth and reigneth world without end, amen” (59). The parallels between the contrasting experiences of father and son are in no way coincidental. There are some slight differences in the way the couples gaze at the sea, pick seashells, meet other walkers on the beach, and have a meal (which, in the case of the younger pair, is a symbolic meal of the flesh), but the reader cannot fail to notice that the two trips to Strandhill have much in common. The traditional restraint that characterizes the exchanges between Moran and Rose (who would not even kiss outside the privacy of the bedroom) has been replaced by the carefree abandon with which Nell and Michael give free expression to their passion. Moran’s intoning of prayer as he starts and finishes eating is in stark contrast to Nell’s kiss of thanks to Michael for the pleasure he has given her. Social mores have definitely moved on, as there is no hint of guilt in either Nell or Michael for the illicit sex in which they have engaged. Like Meggie in Mathews’s story, there is something celebratory in the sensual enjoyment derived from what is a type of Eucharist for Michael and Nell. Granted, the body is celebrated in a way that is at variance with Church teaching, but it also causes the couple to grasp something beyond the terrestrial, something almost divine. It is “communion” in the truest sense of the noun. One does not encounter many descriptions of sex in McGahern’s work, with the notable exception of his 1979 novel *The Pornographer*, but on certain occasions, such as in the lovemaking scene just described from *Amongst Women*, one has the distinct impression that there is a melding of the mystical and the physical that is not too unlike what one encounters in “Lipstick on the Host.”

Aidan Mathews, Frank McCourt, and John McGahern do not have a clear common approach to the links between the Eucharist and human flesh; however, they nevertheless demonstrate enough similarities to justify the type of comparative analysis undertaken in this article. They also evidently share a genuine dislike of the way in which the Irish Church and, by extension, Irish society, imbued a stigma in relation to the body that caused much pain and suffering for many people and may have alienated a good number from all that

is most precious in the celebration of the Eucharist, a cornerstone of Catholic worship. Food is vital for survival—whether it be food for the body or for the soul—and the role it plays in the work of these three authors reveals perhaps an unconscious awareness of how influenced they were by the religious teaching they received from a young age, and which stayed with them throughout their lives. ¶

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Quoted in Douglas Kanter, “Joyce, Irish Paralysis and Cultural Irish Anticlericalism,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 381.
- 2 Kanter, “Joyce,” 382.
- 3 James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 252.
- 4 Joyce, *Portrait*, 250–51.
- 5 Joyce, *Portrait*, 273.
- 6 Caroline Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 121.
- 7 Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” 122.
- 8 Tom Inglis, “The Irish Body,” in *Are the Irish Different?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 89.
- 9 Aidan Mathews, *Lipstick on the Host* (London: Minerva, 1993), 251. All subsequent references will be to this edition, with page numbers in the text.
- 10 Aidan Mathews, email to the author, August 6, 2015.
- 11 Mathews, email.
- 12 Mathews, email.
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- 14 Eamon Maher, “Interview with John McGahern,” in *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003), 155.
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