Millenarianism and utopianism in the new Ireland: the tragedy (and comedy) of accelerated modernisation

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There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience ‘modernity’. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’.¹

Thus begins one of the most influential books of the last quarter century, Marshall Berman’s *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Developing Berman’s theme, other authors have described the contemporary zeitgeist as ‘late-modern’,² emphasising the intractability of modernity’s ambivalence and paradox, or ‘postmodern’,³ pointing to the intensification of the experiences of social fragmentation and individuation, the continuation of modernity, but without the utopian hopes and dreams that made the experience bearable. Beck, Giddens and Lash⁴ use the concept of ‘reflexive modernisation’ to describe an acceleration of the processes of transformation in contemporary society, intensifying and accentuating the experiences Berman describes in a second wave of modernity, driven by the generation of risk and the unforeseeable consequences of technological development. In addition, all of these authors, as well as Bauman, Beck, Giddens and Jameson,⁵ have used the term ‘globalisation’ to reiterate the transnational, world-scale nature of these collective social historical experiences, experiences that are ‘shared by men and women all over the world today’.

We in Ireland are also caught up in these world historical processes of modernisation and experiences of modernity, all be it modulated and mediated by our own histories, our own insertion into the global political economy, and our own particular experiences as members of different socio-economic classes, religious and political persuasions, as men and women, as urban and rural dwellers, as native born and as newcomers, as Travellers and minorities. Furthermore, the unprecedented economic boom of the mid-1990s, the period of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’, short-lived, uneven in its effects, unstable and insecure, has amplified and exacerbated the experiences of accelerated modernisation. We are caught up in a world historical process. We are forced ‘on pain of extinction’ to adapt to the new mode of civilisation.⁶ As Walter Benjamin puts it, the tragedy of development is that ‘we are propelled along the road to catastrophe’. We cannot foresee this, Benjamin says – we can only see retrospectively the damage already done as we are thrown backwards into the future: ‘The Angel of History stares in horror at a pile of debris heaping up before him as he is propelled backwards by a storm blowing out of heaven. This storm is what we call Progress.’⁷

The Faustian tragedy of development

One of the most perceptive accounts of the deep origins of the experience of modernity is the epic *Faust*, by the German poet/philosopher Goethe. Berman shows how Goethe’s tragic story of Faust is the prototypical formulation of the paradoxes of modernity and modernisation, which, although written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, is still pertinent to Irish experiences today. In Goethe’s epic, when the Devil first tries to tempt Faust, he finds that Faust’s wants are not the usual fare of money, power and sexual conquest that the Devil deals in. Sure, I would like these, Faust says, but these are merely means to greater ends, means to satiate desires that are higher, deeper and infinitely more expansive. What I want, Faust says, is to experience the outer limits of the realisation of human potential. He says to the Devil:

Do you not hear? I have no thought of joy!

The reeling whirl I seek, the most painful excess

Enamoured hate and quickening distress

... My mind

Shall not henceforth be closed to any pain, and what is portioned out to all mankind,

I shall enjoy deep within myself, contain within my spirit summit and abyss, pile on my breast their agony and bliss, and let my own self grow into theirs unfettered

’Til as they are, I too, at last, am shattered.

Like Goethe's Faust, many of the actors in the contemporary Irish tragedy of development are driven by noble aspirations and high ideals. Our Faustian desire for development is not just for wealth but for the freedom from want that wealth can bring about: freedom from ignorance and also from innocence; freedom of expression and riches of knowledge; cultural and emotional development; a quest for transformative experience, of ourselves, of others, of the world. This utopian dream is ambivalent and paradoxical: it is both emancipatory and megalomaniacal, for, as Marx says, we become like 'the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the netherworld whom he has called up by his spells'.⁸ Although modernisation is foisted upon us from outside by the experience of imperialism and colonisation, and in a postcolonial era through exogenous forces of globalisation, we should not delude ourselves, as we so often do, that we are innocent victims of history. We are like Faust: the desire for development is our own desire, and that desire is for full and unlimited development, wherever it may lead us, even up to and including our self-destruction. Part of the tragedy of development in the magical/terrible Faustian world of contemporary Ireland is that the casualties of accelerated modernisation are swept away by a tide of events that they themselves have helped to set in motion. As Berman says, 'The deepest horrors of Faustian development spring from its most honourable aims and its most authentic achievements'.⁹

Goethe's Faust symbolises the aspirations of modern people for full and unlimited development and their often terrible and beautiful unforeseeable consequences. Homer Simpson sells his soul for a doughnut to the Devil in the form of Ned Flanders, and Irish people are at times happy to trade everything, if not for a doughnut then for designer clothes and a dormer bungalow with an unobstructed view. Our public representatives seem like so many cartoons: former Prime Minister Charlie Haughey, who liked to ape the lifestyle of a debauched minor aristocrat – a mansion, a yacht, horses, sex, drink and extravagant clothing; former government minister Michael Lowry, the price of whose corruption was no more than an extension to his house. But collectively, historically, modern people strike a better bargain with the Devil.

Faust sells his soul for knowledge and power, and this is what his Devil, Mephistopheles, grants him, but the catch is – the Devil, as always, is in the detail! – that he can never trade them back. Faust becomes damned to perpetual striving. He can never again say, 'Ah, linger still! Thou art so fair' or, as we might say in our own vernacular idiom, 'That's grand now. That'll do fine!' The desires of modern people are insatiable and, as Durkheim shows, 'insatiability is a sign of morbidity'.¹⁰ Unlimited horizons and insatiable desires are the conditions of egoism, delusions of omnipotence, psychosis and anomie.¹¹ The ability to limit ourselves, to govern our individual and collective desires, collides with the Faustian

spirit of the Celtic Tiger, whose appetites and desires can know no limit. As Berman so eloquently demonstrates through his interpretation of Goethe's Faust, modernisation comes at a price: the thorough penetration of the commodity form (Marx), the dominance of instrumental rationality (Weber), the ascendancy of individualism and egoism (Durkheim). Ironically, the Faustian bargain that we made to extricate ourselves from the state of nature throws us back into that same state. The Devil wins; we end up in Hell. We are condemned to 'a perpetual and restless pursuit of power after power, ceasing only in death'.¹² Power, which began as a means to an end, is now an end in itself, the only end. Weber's critique of the irrationalism of rationalised acquisition,¹³ and Marx's critique of capitalism's reduction of all value to a 'cash nexus', the 'bottom line',¹⁴ is that these are forms of modern nihilism, the catastrophe at the end of the road to development.

In Berman's account, the paradox of modernity is represented as the ambiguous spirit of the Devil. On one hand, Mephistopheles is the personification of evil: his name spells corruption, destruction, death and decay – Lord of Flies, Prince of Darkness, Father of Lies, with associations of insatiability, lust, envy, pride, gluttony, sloth, avarice, wrath, the seven deadly sins of excess and boundlessness which the children of the Celtic Tiger commit freely and gladly. On the other hand, the Devil is the Fallen Angel, Lucifer, the Bearer of Light, the Morning Star, who does the work of God and has a positive role in creation by paving the way for more creation and redemption through his destruction and corruption. This ancient paradox that lies at the heart of Christian cosmology is fundamental to understanding the zeitgeist of contemporary Ireland.

Ireland's 'Great Hunger' for development

We can see this deep paradox of modern Irish life in Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'The Great Hunger'.¹⁵ What is 'great' (positive) about the Great Hunger is that, in Lacanian terms, it is the original collective traumatic experience, the constitutive Lack that makes us what we are.¹⁶ The Famine (in Irish *an Gorta*, meaning 'hurt', 'injury', 'wound') is the collective historical mortal wound that killed 'traditional Ireland', and at the same time *an Gorta Mór* – the great wound – is the primal scene of pain, horror and torment that gives birth to 'modern Ireland'. It is the constitutive moment, the point that collects us as a society: it is the death of the collective mythic father and mother, the ancestors from whom we are all descended. It creates and recalls generations of emigration; it collects the diaspora. It is the great agony that underpins modern Irish religiosity and legitimates the moral authority of the Catholic Church. It collects the various strands of national consciousness, from the lost

motherland of romantic sentimentality, to the betrayal of reason that animates rational Home Rule,¹⁷ to the murderous genocide that must be avenged that has inspired militant Republicanism. The Great Hunger lies at the heart of modern Ireland. The ambivalence which contemporary Irish people feel towards the Great Famine is apparent in President Mary Robinson's 150th anniversary Famine commemoration as *celebration*: the recollection of the Famine became the affirmative moment of historical continuity and the primal scene of the new birth, a second birth of modern Ireland, the birth of the Celtic Tiger.

Kavanagh's 'The Great Hunger', written one hundred years after the Famine and fifty years before the birth of the Celtic Tiger, pokes at and reopens this constitutive primal wound by showing how the 'Great Hunger' takes on different forms in changing historical contexts. The Great Hunger is usually taken to refer to the Famine of the 1840s, but for Kavanagh the famine is a scarcity of spirituality in the 'modern Ireland' of the 1940s. As Kavanagh sees it, the promise of modernity has been broken and instead of being a bright morning, modern Ireland is dark and dreary. He depicts the terrible world after independence but when the progress promised by independence had already become antiquated and ossified. Kavanagh depicts an Ireland that is spiritually stifling, intellectually dead and emotionally crippled; a world of hunger and scarcity – not just of material poverty in an underdeveloped political economy where people spent a lifetime not living but merely existing, scratching a living from peasant holdings – but of spiritual poverty in an underdeveloped libidinal economy, of emotional and sexual underdevelopment. 'Life dried in the veins of these women and men', Kavanagh says. 'There is no future but time stretched for the mowing of hay.' In this static world, a man's act means 'nothing, not a damn thing'. Ireland is a closed, narrow parochial world of ignorance and prejudice, where 'the chapel pressed its low ceiling' over the bent backs of a servile congregation.

For Kavanagh, the dreamer, the Great Hunger is the expression in his time and place of the modern Irish Faustian desire for change, progress and development. As soon as this process is set in motion and people begin to emerge from the shackles of a world that has become antiquated, the stage is set for an explosive confrontation between modern desires and sensibilities and the old, antiquated and outmoded world. Bearers of avant-garde cultures in backward societies, as Kavanagh was, experience the Faustian split with particular intensity. Their inner anguish has often inspired revolutionary visions, actions and creations, and no doubt this is the fissure that has produced talents ranging from Joyce to U2, from Flan O'Brien to Brian Friel. That Westlife or Meave Binchey should be seen to be the bearers of this torch should be a cause for concern, as it may herald that what was fraught, and fecund, in Irish culture is becoming scarred over, dead and insensitive.

But as people are torn and tear themselves free from traditional worlds, they are also free to fall in love with them again. The new virility, liveliness, awakening that accompanies the lifting of traditional morality, sexual freedom, hedonism rather than denial of the body and the mortification of the flesh, provoke ambivalence. We are thrilled by the new eroticism evident for the first time in the reawakened, reworked and reinvigorated traditional content of *Riverdance* but we are uneasy of Flatly's excess, and as it suits us we disavow him as an American. When freed from tradition we gain the ability to see good in it – integrity, solidity, stability, continuity, groundedness. This nostalgia for a lost world is very obviously the basis of the emigrants' desire and romantic yearning but it is also the basis of the modern continentals' interest in rural Ireland. The modern metropolitans would, as it were, trade in their cosmopolitan worldliness for a quiet retreat in the west of Ireland, where they fantasise that the authentic, the pure, somehow still resides: English New Age Travellers in West Cork and East Clare, spiritual refugees from post-industrial society; cynical, disillusioned Germans who come to Ireland in search of authenticity but who are let down by the modernity of the natives they hoped would be naive, and are now too long gone from German industry to get back into the business; Dubliners who become chronic 'weekenders', in Galway, Westport, Clifden, pushing westwards until they fall into the Atlantic or, exhausted from the eight-hour drive, collapse in the door of the suburban house in the private development of exclusive holiday homes that they have relocated from Dublin to Achill island. In this movement, Marx says, peasants are 'rescued from the idiocy of rural life' and metropolitans force villagers 'to adopt what it calls civilisation into their midst'.¹⁸

Asymmetrical love affairs between worldly metropolitans and innocent (or at least who are imagined to be innocent) country folk frequently end in disillusionment and tragedy. During the 1970s and 1980s, the tiny village of Doolin on the west coast of Clare became the object of desire for modern urban Irish people and continentals, who imagined that they saw in its pubs, its musicians and 'local characters' something essential, authentic that, if they could get close to it and possess it, might save them from transcendental homelessness, the spiritual vacuousness, cultural amnesia and loss of particularity characteristic of modern life. Within a short time, the car park at Gussie O'Connor's pub was crowded with Dublin- and European-registered cars, and fifteen- and twenty-roomed bed and breakfasts, Tourist Board approved, hot and cold TV en suite, all mod. cons., burgeoned like mushrooms on horse manure as investors and locals cashed in on the interest. The biggest mod. con. turned out to be the complete destruction of the original cherished object. Doolin was emptied out of any particular local content, characters elevated to minor celebrities, only to be discarded as fashions changed and small farmers

transformed themselves into petty-bourgeois hoteliers, speculators and property developers. After the brief but intense fling, Doolin is left today a tawdry, desolate, debauched cultural wasteland. 'The good is gone out of it', people say, a pithy figure of speech that applies to so much in Ireland today. The epitaph to life ruined by modern black magic is graffiti on the toilet door of a Doolin pub: 'Musicians turn publicans into millionaires, and publicans turn musicians into alcoholics.'

Goethe's Faust has three incarnations, the Dreamer, the Lover and the Developer. Kavanagh represents the Faustian incarnation of the Dreamer. He expresses the hunger and dreams for development, affluence, and the power and freedom that accompany them that lie in the hearts of modern Irish people, desires that are intolerable to repress, but when released are insatiable and impossible to fulfil and end in death and catastrophe. The nativists who search for the vestiges of traditional Ireland – the imaginary 'Real Ireland'¹⁹ – represent Faust's incarnation as the Lover, who romanticises and yearns for a lost innocence. But the Real Ireland of the postcard is the Lacanian 'Real': the void in the symbolic order of modern Ireland, into which the lover projects his own romantic fantasy, and through pursuing the fantasy of the Real, succeeds only in destroying the imagined thing he thought he loved.

Irish incarnations of the Developer are similarly fraught with tragedy. Goethe's Faust becomes the Developer when he turns his attentions away from romance, the pursuit of pleasure and experience, to the transformation of the material world, and he systematically sets about building an enormous commercial enterprise. He pursues his own desires for wealth, power and fame, but this has the consequence of transforming – for better and for worse – the lives of others around him. Some are bulldozed out of the way but many others become employees and collaborators and find vitality and meaning through their activity. Idleness is transformed into thriving enterprise, waste ground bristles with new houses and communities, and bustles with business. Contemporary Ireland is swarming with Developers, and we celebrate and idealise dream development projects like Dublin's Temple Bar as material evidence of the Faustian self-transformation of our society and portents of what we may do in the future.

Such a Faustian Irish Developer is Brendan O'Regan. Beginning as a caterer to transatlantic flights refuelling at Foynes in the 1950s, O'Regan established the world's first duty-free airport shop. Later, at Shannon, he developed the world's first tax-free export processing zone, an initiative that has since become not only the cornerstone of Ireland's economic development strategy over the past fifty years but also a model for economic modernisation and development throughout the world. In addition, O'Regan initiated the restoration of Bunratty and other castles and national historical and heritage sites. A key adviser to Sean Lemass,

the Prime Minister who oversaw the end of protectionism and the opening of the Irish economy in the 1960s, O'Regan has been a leader driving industrial and tourism development in Ireland for half a century. At least two generations and several hundreds of thousands of Irish people directly and indirectly owe their present affluence and prosperity to his vision and energy. In addition to his role in economic modernisation, in the 1980s, at the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, O'Regan founded Co-operation North to foster cross-border community relations. O'Regan's life's work is that of a true Faustian Developer: his goal has been not simply profit as personal gain, but, in so doing, to transform and to improve the world for a broader public, to whom he remains largely unknown.

But Irish developers and their schemes are mostly pseudo-Faustian opportunists and speculators, exploiting the moment for a strictly personal profit, rather than, as Faust is, committed to a lifelong quest to transform the world and everyone in it and to build a future for all. Johnny Ronan, the brash young would-be Faust driving the Spencer Dock project in Dublin, is a typical Irish developer: the son of a farmer who moved to the city, whose vision of the city remains that of a farmer in its sense of space.²⁰ His Spencer Dock proposal is for a vast 'groundscraper', taken from a catalogue of global 'anywhere architecture', masked with the façade of a conference centre by a celebrity architect, concerned solely with exploiting to an absolute maximum the rentable square footage of office space: the same instrumental-rational calculus that a modern Irish pig-farmer would bring to the layout of farrowing pens for breeding sows. An older, mature Faust is represented by a builder whose construction company has become practically synonymous with suburban housing development in Ireland, a giant man, whose huge hands and lined face tell of a youth of physical labour as he built his empire up through lean years. This Colossus sat through a meeting of architects, planners and citizens convened by Cork City Hall to share views on the future development of their city. Dreams and schemes and talk of the future ground to a halt when the developer interjected, stating:

Whatever about what the city needs, I'll tell you what people want. They want a three-bedroomed semi-detached house on a nice estate in the suburbs, with a patch of grass front and back. That's what they want, and that's what I'll give them.

Irish pseudo-Faustian Developers aspire to being high-flying global visionaries, but their visions are still bounded by the farmyard gate and the parish pump.

The globalisation of Irish culture by Irish cultural developers and entrepreneurs all too often produces cultural homogenisation that reduces Irish culture and identity to a repetitive, simplistic formula easily consumed

on the global market. Oscar Wilde famously said, 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are gazing at the stars', by which he means that what distinguishes visionary leaders from the ordinary masses is idealism. The Irish pseudo-Faustian Developer is the inverse of this and represents the disparagement of idealism and the cynical debasement of action to the lowest common denominator. A prominent Irish culture industry Developer, Louis Walsh, exemplifies the thorough penetration of the commodity form that globalisation entails, and the concurrent emptying out of any creative impulse from visionary ideals. Walsh, originally from rural Mayo, moved to Dublin, began his career as a booking agent for show-bands on the circuit of dancehalls in Irish provincial towns, and in the 1990s developed the boy-bands Boyzone and Westlife. Walsh's vision is unabashedly cynical: 'Catching sight of East 17 and Take That, he made the obvious observation, "They're getting away with it. Why can't we?" The next step was Boyzone'. His products are substitutes for the global culture industry, in the same way as Supermacs (founded by a schoolteacher from a small town in county Galway) copies the formula to substitute for McDonald's. Boyzone, Walsh says, 'are past their "sell-by" date', but 'Samantha Mumba could be the next Jennifer Lopez, Onera Mumba is the Irish Michael Jackson.' In the pipeline are two new tasteless and fattening fast-culture products: a new Irish 'rock band' 'in the style of Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet', and Bellefire, whom Walsh describes as 'Corrs lite'. Like Ronan, and a cohort of pseudo-Faustian business heroes of the Celtic Tiger, true to Wilde's definition of the cynic as 'one who knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing', Walsh says: 'I'm not interested in what people think. I just do what I do and it's very successful.'²¹

The Irish apocalypse and intimations of redemption

In the premodern cosmology of traditional Irish Catholicism, the interior that matters is the interior of the soul. In modern Irish consumerism, it is the interior of the house. Walter Benjamin says, 'The bourgeois interior is a dialectical image in which the reality of industrial capitalism is represented visibly.'²² For Benjamin, the combination of clutter and fastidiousness characteristic of the turn-of-the-century living room was symptomatic of the crisis of overproduction at the heart of modern society, reproduced in the microcosm of the interior as a hysterical cycle of production and consumption. The bourgeois interior is 'apocalyptic', Benjamin says. The 'apocalypse' means to 'open the curtains', to 'reveal' the end of things, the final judgement.²³ Hence the Apocalypse is the Book of Revelation. By this analogy, Benjamin means that written in the interior of the modern home is a cryptic eschatology and teleology of modernity. By a

cultural analysis that Benjamin likens to detective work, a ‘hermeneutics of the profane’ and ‘a physiognomy of the interior’, we can find ‘traces’, clues that foretell the end of modern forms of life. By the eschatological and teleological ‘ends’ of modern life, Benjamin means the goals it strives towards, which, when achieved or fully realised, mark the End: Hell and damnation, but also the possibility of salvation and rebirth. The damnation(s) foretold for modernity which Benjamin has in mind here are various forms of nihilism – the reduction of all value to cash (Marx), the iron cage of rationalised acquisitiveness, wherein the pursuit of wealth, stripped of higher religious goals and resting on mechanical foundations, becomes a form of mechanised petrification (Weber), the egotistic anti-social cult of the individual (Durkheim). If we take the Irish interior as such a microcosm of dialectical images that reveals the nihilistic pathologies of the broader social metempsychosis, what clues can we find that, in their ends (their goals), reveal the ends of contemporary forms of Irish life, and the end of Irish history?

James Joyce’s interiors in *Dubliners*, especially and typically in the stories ‘The Sisters’, ‘The Boarding House’, ‘Clay’ and ‘The Dead’, are microcosmic representations of paralysis, darkness and death, the closed inner worlds characteristic of Dublin crushed and squeezed by the British Empire, the Holy Catholic Church, nationalism and commercialism.²⁴ More recently, the London-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh has provided a paradigmatic representation of the interior of the Irish house as a dialectical image indexing the pathologies of contemporary Ireland. *The Lonesome West*²⁵ is set in a contemporary kitchen in Connemara, the *locus classicus* of the Irish spirit in the symbolic order and imaginative structure of Irish culture and identity. Connemara is the heartland of traditional Ireland, as it is where the Irish survived, having been cleared and beaten westwards by successive colonial plantations – ‘to Hell or to Connaught’; a heartland romantically imagined by Irish revivalists and global primitivists, but in reality a vast refugee settlement, filthy, hungry, teeming, demoralised, seething with resentment and violence. This is the kitchen of contemporary culture represented by McDonagh. The *mise-en-scène* consists of condensed hybrid fusions of forms of life from dialectically opposed worlds: traditional and modern, global and local. Two bachelor brothers, brutish Coleman, who has murdered his father, and avaricious Valeen, who blackmails Coleman to sign over his inheritance, occupy the house. The light is dim, although there is a profusion of electrical outlets and power-points, their orange ‘live’ lights glowing with potent malevolence.²⁶ Modernisation has been through here and has left its mark, but the old hobgoblins are still alive, too. Although meanly furnished, it is untidy; the most prominent objects amid the clutter are old religious icons juxtaposed uneasily with new and spotless appliances; these objects – religious and commodity fetishes – and the

antithetical forms of life that they represent – traditional religious and secular modern – are locked in conflict in the Irish interior.

The material and libidinal economy of the household circulates between the claustrophobia of community, family, Catholic sexual morality and modern materialism, commodity fetishism – the brothers' neurotic fixations on a fashionable shirt and a hair-do, plastic holy statuettes, new kitchen appliances. The drama unfolds as an endless and pointless exchange: of insults between the two equally frustrated and impotent bachelor brothers, who homophobically call each other 'virgin gay-boys'; of vol-au-vents pilfered from wakes, weddings and local community functions, traded for potato crisps and *poitín*,²⁷ the commerce between the global and the local represented in their barest meanness and excess. The tragedy is that action is frozen; colliding forms of life are locked in static conflict, generating murder and suicide. There is no transcendence, no redemption, no third moment of dialectical reconciliation, no movement or progress in any direction except eternal recurrence, circularity, spiralling downwards into petty recrimination, pointless violence and meaningless catastrophe. This conflict/stasis of *The Lonesome West* is a metaphor for the interminable cycle of violence and recrimination in Irish history in general, and Northern Ireland in particular. Mirroring the Northern Irish Peace Process, in which politics is the continuation of war by other means,²⁸ at the end Coleman and Valeen go off to the pub for a drink together but, as they go, they are already gathering ammunition for the renewal of hostilities and the continuation of their conflict.

McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*²⁹ represents the same theme of dialectical conflict degenerated to static eternal recurrence in Irish culture and identity. Again the time/space of the play is an undefined 'contemporary' interior, but frozen in an ever present past. The old mother sits in a rocking chair, passively absorbing television. The rocking chair is emblematic of Ireland's paradoxical experience of accelerated modernisation and stasis – in motion, but going nowhere. The formulaic drama of soap opera flickers on the television, reminding us that the stasis of reflexive modernisation is a global problem, albeit accentuated in this local setting. She is just waiting for the news, she says, but it never comes. Time passes but there is nothing new in Leenane. The interior of the house in Leenane represents continuity despite apparent transformation. The walls are adorned with icons in niches, both sacred and profane. There are statuettes of the Virgin and a framed portrait of JFK and Bobby, the Irish American Holy Family. A flashy radio-tape deck plays a mix of schmaltzy modern Irish traditional muzak. The television soaps are Australian. The mother's daughter/carer/bonded labourer is depressive: on the threshold of old maidenhood, with frustrated dreams of marriage and escape. An electrical conduit runs around the walls, terminating in power-points with glowing 'live' lights. This is an old

Irish home, a traditional house rewired. But modernity is an overlay, tacked on, not fully integrated. A chip-pan stands on the electric cooker. Their diet is Irish fast food, a sickening mixture of fats and sugar – tea and fancy biscuits, chips, Complian, causing clogged arteries, obesity, sluggishness, deadening the life process. The house reeks of the mother's urine. She deliberately neglects her infection to annoy her daughter by reminding her of infirmity, decrepitude and death. Her cruelty is reciprocated: boiling fat from the chip-pan is used to torture and eventually murder the domineering mother. But even matricide is not enough to break the torturous stasis. Escape to Boston is the Beauty Queen of Leenane's psychotic delusion, and she eventually takes her mother's place rocking in the chair in front of the television.

That the 'D'unbelievables' comedy duo of Pat Short and John Kenny³⁰ produced McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* is perfectly apt, as McDonagh's work is black tragicomedy, and their own comedy plays on the grotesque, tragic and darkly comic forms that are produced by cultural collisions: vanishing giants and trolls from our collective cultural childhood; the fanatically parochial GAA coach;³¹ the sadistic and fatherly schoolmaster; the 'gombeen man'³² – the megalomaniacal, obsequious 'cute hoor' local county councillor with his eye on the Dáil seat. But the utopian gesture of D'unbelievables is that these social types, who represent the shades of the past that still haunt contemporary Irish culture, are also hilarious caricatures, exaggerated to absurdity. The target of comedy, Samuel Johnson says, is 'the bad humour of the Father that keeps us in a state of bondage', that makes us slaves to the conventions of his house.³³ D'unbelievables target such 'Fathers' – priests, teachers, guards, councillors and minor 'offeicals' of all sorts, the 'little men' who constitute authoritarian and oppressive forms of Irish life. Freud says that comedy targets:

people and objects that lay claim to authority and respect and are in some sense sublime. The degradation of the sublime allows one to have an idea of it as though it were something commonplace, in whose presence I need not pull myself together, but may, to use the military formula, 'stand easy'.³⁴

The double action of comedy, according to Freud, is that it frees us from the tyranny of the Father, but without 'killing the Father'. Through comedy we renegotiate our relations with cultural authorities; we try to come to new terms with our inherited traditions. D'unbelievables' comedy enables us to free ourselves from the life worlds where priests, schoolmasters and minor 'offeicals' wield power and simultaneously allows us fondly to remember those worlds as real and meaningful. The interiors and dream sequences constructed by D'unbelievables – ideal homes and fantasy dream sequences used in television advertisements for the National Lottery;

satellite dishes made out of wheelbarrows propped outside red-brick, palisaded, galvanised-roofed monster houses; De Valera-esque comely maidens chasing through meadows with a hurley in a surreal fantasy of a feminised, eroticised GAA meets *Riverdance* scenario – comes very close to capturing the bizarre imaginative structure of the current Irish phantasmagoria: elements drawn incongruously from the symbolic registers of the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, dialectical images juxtaposed in an extravagant pastiche of hyper-real, postmodern contemporary Ireland.

Kenny and Short say that their comedy is inspired by the forms of life they are familiar with in Ireland's 'in-between' towns (Kenny and Short are from middling-sized towns in Limerick and Tipperary, between the city and the country, the global and the local), the places all over Ireland living through the experience of accelerated social change as well as the persistence of older forms of life; the same theatres of acceleration, stasis and cultural collisions where other young people, unable to laugh, or to laugh any longer, choose instead to cry and to die.³⁵ D'unbelievables test their new material in theatres in county towns, Tralee, Kilmallock, Tuam, before staging them in Dublin, saying that if they find resonance with audiences there, then they know it will work in Dublin. In other words, the secret of D'unbelievables' comedy is not that a city audience laughs at a caricature of a rural 'other', as North American and continental comedy plays with the radical alterity of the bumpkin, the peasant or the hillbilly. In Irish comedy, the rural other is close to us and familiar: we are laughing at, and with, an aspect of ourselves. A large proportion of the population in Dublin is from the rural hinterland, and those who are not are intimately, nostalgically connected with it, as the symbolic order and imaginative structure of contemporary Ireland are still very much rural.

Comedy has two distinct moments: a critical disruptive moment that frees its audience from the tyranny of the dominant culture, lets us see the absurdity of the in-between culture that is our habitus; and it also has an affirmative moment that, as it estranges us from our habitus, simultaneously reconciles us with that world as familiar and continuous. In Ireland we need both, and the comedic art of Kenny and Short throws open the grotesque horrors of accelerated modernisation in contemporary Ireland, and simultaneously gives us the gift of laughter that shows colliding worlds – traditional and modern, global and local, past and future – in moments of fleeting reconciliation. Kenny and Short show us that what is unbelievable about contemporary Ireland is that people manage to live enjoyably in the liminal spaces typical of a strange and paradoxical world in which Irish people presently find themselves.

Conclusions

As we have shown above, the experience of modernity and modernisation in contemporary Ireland is illustrative of the end of history as interpreted by the Hegelian/Marxist dialectic, and its decomposition into eternal recurrence and stasis, a Nietzschean/Weberian end of Irish history. But, Beck asks, what of other possibilities? What has become of politics – ‘the art of making oneself at home in the maelstrom, as Marshall Berman put it so nicely?’³⁶

The development of contemporary Irish society is characterised by increasing fragmentation and individuation, but these processes themselves are historical and social (that is to say collective) experiences, experiences that cut across differences of class, gender, ideology, region and so on. Individuation and fragmentation of collective identities are perceived from within the interpretive horizons of particular life worlds to be unique and irreducible and entirely different from others’ experiences. But that perception is itself a social phenomenon, and one with profoundly political implications to boot. It was Margaret Thatcher who said, ‘There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.’ One of the great dangers facing those of us who are interested in a politics that would make us more at home in the maelstrom of accelerated modernisation, that would, as Marx says, help us to ‘make our own history with will and consciousness’ rather than simply have it happen upon us, is that the scepticism towards unifying projects and the emphasis on the particularity of identity eschew the notion of collective experiences, the interdependency of identities, the reciprocity of their material and symbolic exchanges, and even of society as such. Against this, we hold to the notion that there are experiences that are highly generalised and dispersed and that are shared – perhaps not by everybody, and certainly not experienced in precisely the same way by everyone – but generalised nonetheless.

Globalisation is experienced very differently in New York and Ballyhaunis, but if we want to speak meaningfully of the ways in which culture and forms of life in Ireland are asymmetrically interdependent with political economic and cultural processes in the United States, then notions of collective historical experiences of modernisation at a global level remain essential and indispensable. The effects of ‘instrumental rationalisation’ (the organising principle of discursive practices of individuation and totalisation now operating at a global level) in contemporary Ireland, for example, are experienced very differently if you are a 200-acre dairy farmer applying for a European Union milk quota, or a single mother from Ballyfermot applying for Supplementary Welfare Allowance, or a Romanian Gypsy applying for asylum. These experiences are starkly differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, language, culture and

so on – even the outcome of the cases may be completely different; one successful, one endlessly frustrated, one routinely rejected – or, indeed, perhaps not. But what collects them? On what basis could we say that they have something in common? They are all processed by an impersonal legal-rational, rule-governed administrative apparatus called modern bureaucracy. Despite the fragmentation of identity and the individuation of experience in contemporary Ireland, Weber gives us a bead on and an understanding of an experience that is common to the differentiated identities that constitute modern Irish society.

While recognising the fragmented identities and differentiated experiences of contemporary Irish life, we must retain the ability to perceive and potentially to recover the basis of unity in the diversity. Christians used to believe that the basis of unity in human diversity was the soul. Marxists used to believe that the basis of unity in diversity was our capacity to produce and our relations to the means of production. Liberals used to believe that the basis for unity was our capacity for reason. Irish and other nationalists used to believe that the basis for unity lay in our shared ethnicity, and so on, in the same vein for feminists and a host of others. And many continue to hold these beliefs as self-evident truths. Against this orthodoxy, and against the position of other contemporary theorists, including Chomsky and Habermas, who ground society in the deep structures of communication, the most advanced schools of philosophy today hold that there is no preordained or fundamental ground of social unity. But that is not to say that there is (or are) no unity (or unities). Rather, the point is that whatever unities exist in any society at a particular historical time are solidarities: social and political collective identities whose ideologies are linked together, articulated with one another in ways that are contingent and transitory.

The absence of a ground of the social means that whatever form of social articulation exists is going to be the result of a laborious process of political construction which creates new habits, new forms of thought, new forms of relation between people. It means the creation of a political tradition.³⁷

The painstaking work of bringing together different ideologies and discourses of identity from a great diversity of points on the social fabric of contemporary Ireland is called ‘hegemony’. To engage in hegemonic articulatory practices, to attempt to constitute a solidarity that would formulate values, norms and principles to guide collective action in a time of hyper-individuation and the fragmentation of a political imaginary, to create a new political tradition in Ireland after ‘the end of Irish history’, is to presuppose the possibility of forming a ‘we’. To invoke such a collective subject of contemporary Ireland rhetorically, before that

subject has appeared on the historical stage, is to make such a strategic utopian political assumption. And to provide a critical hermeneutic analysis of the forms of Irish culture under conditions of accelerated modernisation is to contribute towards setting that stage.

Notes

- 1 M. Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1982), p. 15.
- 2 Z. Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).
- 3 F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Durham University Press, 1991).
- 4 U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (London: Polity, 1994).
- 5 Z. Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (London: Polity, 1998); U. Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); A. Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Shaping Our Lives* (London: Routledge, 1999); F. Jameson, 'Globalization and political strategy', *New Left Review*, 4 (2000), pp. 49–68.
- 6 K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1985).
- 7 W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 249.
- 8 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 86.
- 9 Berman, *All That is Solid*, p. 72.
- 10 E. Durkheim, *Suicide* (New York: Free Press, 1966).
- 11 S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961); Durkheim, *Suicide*.
- 12 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914).
- 13 M. Weber *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 71.
- 14 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 82.
- 15 P. Kavanagh, 'The Great Hunger', in *Patrick Kavanagh: The Complete Poems* (New York: Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972), pp. 79–104.
- 16 The constitutive Lack is a central Lacanian concept, present throughout his oeuvre. For example see 'In you more than you', in J. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1977). For a thorough exposition of the ideological function of the Lack, see S. Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).
- 17 A fundamental tenet of the Liberal parliamentary Home Rule movement in nineteenth-century Ireland was that British administration of Ireland from London was inefficient and irrational. The abject failure of the English government and its offices in Ireland to respond adequately to famine conditions in the 1840s was one of the main proofs of the argument for Home Rule.
- 18 Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 84.
- 19 'Real Ireland' is the leading range of commodified images on postcards, calendars, and coffee-table books – photographs of 'traditional Ireland' showing houses, landscapes, shopfronts, farm animals and country folk.
- 20 For a full account of Dublin's developer culture see F. McDonald, *The Construction of Dublin* (Dublin: Grandon, 2000).

- 21 Louis Walsh, 'The starmaker', interview, *RTE Guide*, 21 April 2001.
- 22 W. Benjamin, 'Paris: capital of the nineteenth century', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1978).
- 23 W. Benjamin, 'The interior, the trace', in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 24 J. Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1976).
- 25 M. McDonagh, *The Leenane Trilogy* (London: Methuen Drama, 1999).
- 26 Although not part of McDonagh's original set directions, this has become a common feature of subsequent productions.
- 27 Illicit whiskey (moonshine).
- 28 In Carl von Clausewitz's famous formulation, war is the continuation of politics by other means.
- 29 McDonagh, *The Leenane Trilogy*.
- 30 The 'D'unbelievables' duo of Kenny and Short do surrealist and absurdist comedy, akin to *Father Ted*, in which they frequently played cameos.
- 31 The GAA is the Gaelic Athletic Association, the national body promoting the Gaelic games of hurling and football.
- 32 The gombeen man (from 'gambín', interest on a loan; from Middle English 'cambie', exchange, barter; from Latin 'cambium') is a village usurer, usually a shopkeeper, publican, merchant or estate agent, a native Irish petty bourgeois.
- 33 Samuel Johnson, cited in R. Corrigan (ed.), *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
- 34 S. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 261–2.
- 35 K. Keohane, and D. Chambers, 'Understanding Irish suicides', in M. Peillon and M. Corcoran (eds), *Ireland Unbound* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002).
- 36 Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Reflexive Modernisation*, p. 32.
- 37 E. Laclau, 'God only knows', *Marxism Today* (December 1991), p. 59.