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# Brigid's Peace: An Examination of the Influences of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition on One Writer's Creative Work

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Marie Hulme

Presidential Seminar

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Respectfully submitted to Dr. Michael Higgins and Dr. Anthony Ciorra, S.J.

*Brigid's Peace*: An examination of the influences of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition on  
one writer's creative work

The genesis of my novel, *Brigid's Peace*, which I began in the spring of 2013 coinciding with my studies in the Presidential Seminar, was an interest in examining the need for luminosity, for transcendence, for beauty in the face of dark despair and evil. My work centers on the story of an Irish Catholic family living in Belfast, Northern Ireland during the time of sectarian conflict known as "the troubles," but more specifically on the impact of events related to that time on one young woman, Brigid Donegan, an artist and one of seven sisters. Through a close, third person point of view, I examine how the creative process offers a place of reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable opposites as well as a vehicle for forgiveness of self and others.

I am also interested in exploring the broader concept of beauty as a path to the divine in this work, within the context of the idea of a Catholic imagination formed by centuries of ritual and tradition as expressed by writers and artists across centuries. The purpose of situating these ideas in the specific historical context of Belfast during "the troubles," stems from my own Irish Catholic background and memories of a trip to Belfast as a young girl. I am attempting to tell a story of complex, personal conflicts, both

internal and external, within the larger story of the Irish experience and one that examines universal themes of love and faith within the quest for reconciliation with a violent fractured past.

As a painter and writer, I have always been interested in the idea of the beautiful as a pathway to the divine, seeking union with the creator through the act of creativity. I have recognized that this is not easily mastered, that there are significant moments of impotence with words or images and that the path is never without disappointment with, and even disillusion about, my efforts. It is never comfortable to feel powerless or unworthy, but that is the point at which I empty myself into the work, allowing for whatever is possible to emerge. It is in that moment of giving over to something larger than myself, that I experience the unexpected. I have learned to be less fearful of hesitation, discontinuity, and doubt and to embrace the potential within them to reveal something worthy and, indeed, beautiful. A straight line to a place – whether it is a physical or metaphysical one – closes off too much, violates too many other ways of reaching the point one hopes to reach, the exact nature of and significance of which one is not yet aware.

Through my study of the Catholic Intellectual Life, I recognize this is a journey undertaken by many thinkers, writers and artists in the tradition, many whom have struggled and strayed along the path to unity with the divine. Wandering, it appears, is the central thread in the labyrinth of a real journey, the most important journey of one's life, the journey towards reunification with the divine. The meandering soul, one that stops frequently to sit beneath a beautiful tree or to hear the music of a bird's song, spends time in the company of strangers, apparently going nowhere, only then stumbles upon a

clearing with a lily standing erect at its center – it's destination all along, though unknown until that moment. In wandering, the soul finds the wonder of its true path. I think of Dante's rejection of a "straight way" to understanding the divine and am deeply affected by the notion of the spiral as a more satisfying movement – often requiring us to turn back before making progress forward. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante loses himself, even his external sight, in order to find his transcendent self through the power of his imagination: "Like one who dreaming sees, upon whom after dreaming a passion is left impressed, while the rest does not return to mind, so am I since my vision almost completely ceases, and still in my heart there continues to be distilled the sweetness that was born of it" (*Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII). It is through the experience of a dreamlike, imaginative state that one approaches deep understanding of what the classical, rational mind cannot, alone, comprehend.

I am most interested, as a result of my studies during the Presidential Seminar, in the idea of a uniquely Catholic imagination as reflected in a tradition steeped in sacred texts and iconic works of literature, art and music over two thousand years. I've have asked myself how does a Catholic artist, whether writer or painter, represent the beautiful and the grotesque within one work or even one life? How does art allow a place where the two can exist side by side and inform each other? How do the sensibilities of an artist allow for the co-existence of opposite ways of seeing, being and understanding?

In my novel, I am interested in exploring all those nuanced areas where love, family, loyalty, conflict, forgiveness and opportunity for transformation exist – the grey areas between certainty and doubt, love and hate, order and chaos, where the line between good and evil is blurred, which often contains the kernel of truth and the essence



of our humanity. Nothing it seems – in the context of a large family, particularly one situated in Belfast during “the troubles,” is every strictly one or the other. It is the place that eschews easy understanding and in so doing elevates the need for faith and reason to work together to attempt understanding. I am interested in examining the idea, as posited by Augustine, that it is precisely our flawed human nature that offers the starting point for the yearning for our journey towards our divinity. It is a yearning for the reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable differences or discordant qualities – the most profound being the Pascal mystery of God’s incarnation - that provides creative tension which allows for, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins might express, an admonition to the higher level of being, in union with God.

I examine all of these ideas within the life, work and relationships of the main character in my novel, *Brigid Donegan*. Brigid struggles with guilt from a violent past that intrudes upon her when she returns to Belfast after ten years of exile in the South. Brigid recalls her mother’s view on the imperfection in a white linen tablecloth that had become stained when her sisters were born into it: “The stains had set deeply into the fabric. Her mother had never been able to get them out, though their intensity had faded over the years. ‘It’s the stains that give some character to it,’ her mother had said laying the cloth over atop the dining room table for Sunday lunch. Brigid wondered at her mother’s ability to find virtue in imperfection” (9). In the novel, I examine the idea that falling from grace, failing, sinning and the suffering that comes from those experiences, are all necessary to discovering one’s life purpose and that perfection is in how we handle our imperfections. Although she outwardly rejects traditional Catholic beliefs, Brigid

feels remorse about many of her decisions and, despite her conscious rejection of her faith, hopes for forgiveness and mercy.

The idea of mother love, family duty, loyalty to country and religious affiliation are deeply rooted in the Irish and have been examined through their writers for centuries. A soul like Brigid's, sensitive and intuitive, molded by a loving if fractured family and in a faith that has shaped not only her spiritual but her political and social world, cannot remove what has been bred into her. Her involvement in external struggles for freedom is symbolic of an internal struggle for reconciliation for her sin and freedom from guilt and exile from her home and family. Brigid's journey is the journey of Dante who must first descend into a state of hell before being raised up, by the gift of grace, to return to a God to whom he belongs. It is the universal story of the redemptive power of love – love of neighbor, love of another, love of God - to transform the human heart and soul.

While Brigid, like all of humanity, is not free from sin, the shriving of that sin does not happen within the dark, acetic confines of a confessional booth, but rather in communion with her mother while kneading bread over a family table, through the love she feels for her sisters and the sacrifices she is willing to make for their happiness and safety, and in the acceptance of the beauty of unexpected grace given unfettered by a mother's love, love of family and in the moment of creation through her art. This is, as in the Ignatian tradition, a manifestation of God in and of the world. Further, it is a manifestation of God's grace and relational healing through others, as seen in the parable of Frances and the lepers and in the light of divinity reflected in Dante's Beatrice, which allows both searchers to see God through "the other."

### *Thematic Influences*

Any examination of “the troubles” necessarily centers on the notion of “the other”. This period was marked by horrific, often random acts of violence as well as political and social unrest resulting from the tension between a Catholic minority population seeking unity with the Republic of Ireland and a Protestant majority loyal to the established government of the United Kingdom. The conflict, beginning with the attack on unarmed Catholic marchers in the northern city of Derry in 1968 spanned thirty years until a tentative, and still fragile, peace accord was reached in 1998. The events of this time shaped the creative impulses of a generation and they continue to be the focus of the work of novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, painters and musicians, and perhaps most poignantly of all, of the Northern Irish poets. As one of the most notable of them, Seamus Heaney, has written, “the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament (Ormsby 17). Heaney, himself influenced by the great Catholic writers who preceded him in the tradition, particularly Dante, greatly influenced my understanding of an “imaginative sphere” from which to examine the incomprehensible and through which to seek reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable differences or the ineffable.

Central to the tenets of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is a fundamental belief of the presence of the divine in the human condition, as revealed in Genesis 2:7 “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Bible). Within this tradition, there is a fundamental unity of humanity that disavows any notion of “the other.” Dante furthers

this understanding in the seventh Canto of *Paradiso* when he learns from Beatrice that human life is breathed directly into it by God and so is intrinsically drawn to God and the divine by its very being – there is no separation, and always the hope for resurrection as a result. All of humanity shares in this hope as a result of being formed with the breath of the divine.

I'm interested in the idea of art as healing and I've thought about my character's continual return to her pure, white, unblemished, "full of unrealized possibility" canvas. "It was only when she was painting that she lost herself in that immediate moment, present only to form, texture, color. It was in the act of choosing which shade of green to best capture a field, or which brush would yield the proper stroke, that her mind and heart were arrested by the present enough to forget the past" (72). With each new attempt at a painting, she is entering that imaginative sphere in which to situate her feelings and create a new space, apart, as Heaney and the other Northern Irish poets do through their poetry.

One cannot be in the presence of a work of art, a thing of beauty, and not be transformed. She considers those who, from "the other side", she shares an aesthetic sensibility that transcends sectarian differences. "Brigid thought of all the murals she had painted. Belfast's walls were a visual history of hatred and violence rendered by artists like her and whoever her counterpart was *on the other side*. Someone, like her, who saw life through the lens of color and texture and form, and yet hated her because of her name, her school, the faith she no longer embraced" (35).

One of the most profound influences on my consideration of "the other" in my work is the poetic vision of Heaney who sought to reconcile the conflict of his time –both

personal and public - through his art. His famous theatrical work, "Cure at Troy," often quoted by politicians seeking elevated language with which to speak of political reconciliation, perhaps describes the poet himself even as it imagines the once abandoned Greek warrior Philoctetes returning to Troy "the heal the wound of the Trojan War." Though the piece qualifies the hope in the lines, "No poem of play or song/Can fully right a wrong/Inflicted and endured (4-5), it is seen as positing the poet's vision for sectarian reconciliation in the line "when hope and history rhyme" (18).

Many of his poems and essays reveal his argument with the attempted claim made upon the imagination by religiously and nationally charged politics, and his persistent yearning for imagined alternatives to the bitter conflict (Vellino 51).

Heaney, ultimately, seeks to understand both sides and continues to situate himself in that place of seeking reconciliation – if only an imaginative one. "It is because he is an inclusive, non-factual poet of second thoughts, of two minds, of the in-between and undogmatic, that he is so trusted whenever he adopts a firm stance on a public issue" (O'Donoghue 69). In the collection *Wintering Out*, published after leaving the North, he writes a compelling poem entitled, simply, "The Other Side" that examines the perspective of a Protestant neighbor, a gardener and like Heaney's own family, connected to the rural countryside they share. The narrator moves artfully between the two views of the relationship between Catholic and Protestant:

Then sometimes when the rosary was dragging  
mournfully on in the kitchen  
we would hear his step around the gable



though not until after the litany  
 would the knock come to the door  
 and the casual whistle strike up  
 on the doorstep. "A right looking night,"  
 he might say, "I was dandering by  
 and says I, I might as well call."  
 But now I stand behind him  
 in the dark yard, in the mourn of prayers.  
 He puts his hand in a pocket  
 or taps a little tune with the blackthorn  
 shyly, as if he were party to  
 lovemaking or a stranger's weeping.  
 Should I slip away, I wonder,  
 or go up and touch his shoulder  
 and talk about the weather  
 or the price of grass-seed? (34-52)

It is only through the lens of the imagination that Heaney gains the perspective he longs for, that which allows for the peaceful co-existence of two extremes. Heaney sits in the "intersection" of binaries that include being culturally Irish while a British citizen, a boy of the countryside who spent most of his life in cities, born in the North but finding his poetic voice and personal happiness in the South. His is a movement towards reconciliation in both a public and personal journey towards understanding. "Through the lens of imagination, Heaney may be able to make sense of the conflicts of his life



(Cusack 61). Heaney's vision of an "imaginative space" that he, and other Northern Irish poets such as Derek Mahon, Gerald Dawe, Seamus Deane, and Paul Muldoon, sought to create as a means for reconciling both personal and public conflicts related to the events of the time, provides a mode for my own character's need to remove herself from the realities of her circumstances and to situate them in a neutral, creative space. This is also the transcendent power of Dante's quest to make visible the ineffable through his imagination, his poetry.

### *The Sacramental*

If my novel has been influenced by a tradition that has examined the inherent movement towards reconciliation with discordant qualities or seeming opposites in its thematic considerations, it also reflects the place of the sacramental in seeking that reconciliation. My characters are surrounded by crucifixes, rosary beads, statues of Mary, holy water, paintings of the Sacred Heart, symbols of the trinity and the chalice – all the sacramental objects and icons traditionally associated with Irish Catholic families. "There had always been a statue of Mary on her mother's dresser and, every May, the daughters gathered together to decorate it with white roses and lilies. There was a small Pieta too, the ever present reminder of a mother's suffering" (36).

Through all of this, my characters are in relationship with God through representation of the divine. How do Catholics speak about what is unknowable, for example one God in the three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit - of the trinity? Through the representation of the divine in the material, in the beautiful, the sacramental objects and rituals, they are invited to ponder it, dwell in it and meditate upon it. The

aesthetic has, throughout time, played an important role in providing the metaphorical and allegorical tools with which to experience the divine. In the legend of St. Patrick, for example, the priest who would convert the pagan Celts used the simple shamrock leaf – concrete and familiar to the Irish – to teach his message of the Triune God. When Brigid stumbles upon the funeral while out walking, she observes familiar rituals: “The crowd grew, as onlookers paused; some removed their hats, others showed their respect by genuflecting as the coffin approached. Some of the women near Brigid were praying the Rosary quietly” (29). The aesthetic has provided humanity with the vocabulary with which to face suffering, understand the meaning of love, and how to face death itself.

In *Brigid's Peace*, community is brought together over ritual and objects rich in sacramental allusion. For the Northern Irish Catholics, in particular, there was a need to rely on ritual to reinforce tribal connections and loyalties, as much as ritual, in turn, requires community to instill meaning in inanimate objects and routine acts. For example, in the opening scene of the novel, Brigid watches as three – not an accidental number – women care for her mother's dead body, performing the ritual of bathing the body in preparation for burial. There is dignity afforded the human person, even after death. In performing the ritual, the presence of God's death and resurrection is implicit. It is a deeply intimate, highly symbolic act that recalls baptism and the hope for the dead entering a new life, being born into a new world:

The other women nodded and continued gently washing their friend, as if caring for a newborn, dipping their own cloths in and out of the bowl with a reverence for the act of cleansing another's body. There was a rhythmic pattern to the plunging and wringing out of the cloths, filling the room

with a familiar sound of ordinary life that Brigid welcomed, and was comforted by, after a long night had passed with nothing more than the sound of her mother's fading breath and then empty silence. They were sprinkling water on their friend, made holy by their love and devotion.

Mrs. O'Hara began to pray. *Hail Mary, full of grace* (4).

While the water cleanses the body, the imagination allows us to see the theological meaning of hope for new life. In pausing to enter into the rituals associated with death, the women understand the promise of their shared faith in the resurrection. In a corporeal act, they are transcending the unknowable and entering into the mystery of death through ritual and in community with one another.

In reading Heaney's poetry, as I have worked on this novel, I came across a reference to the symbolism of a white handkerchief from his catechism class that remained with him and that he used in his poetry. I understand, especially between women, the meaning of sharing or giving something beautiful with which to dry a tear, especially between mothers and daughters or sisters. It holds powerful associations, particularly, with important ceremonial events of the Catholic Church such as baptisms, communions, confirmations, weddings and funerals, when handkerchiefs are often needed and shared. Brigid thinks about the bonds of female friendship as she observes her mother's friends caring for her mother's body:

They were the sisters her mother never had, youthful friendships deepened over bus rides to visit sons or husbands at the Maze and at wakes and funerals. They had marched down the Falls Road together, in heels and printed headscarves, carrying banners protesting a curfew that kept them

from their factory jobs. They had stood, side by side, on the street banging dust-bin lids in the middle of the night to send neighborhood men on the run. They had held handkerchiefs at the ready by the side of open graves at Milltown Cemetery (19).

For Heaney, the whiteness of the unblemished handkerchief symbolizes the pure soul. When it becomes used and worn, it is in need of cleansing, much like a soul marked by sin within the traditions of Catholicism and the sacrament of reconciliation. Heaney's catechism teacher used the imagery to explain what occurred as a result of confession, or a cleansing of the soul. The purity of the soul was restored as the whiteness of the handkerchief returned after washing.

I am drawn to this image for a number of reasons but mostly because it uses a piece of cloth as symbolism for the soul. Though not considered a traditional sacramental – such as a rosary or crucifix – it holds meaning and association beyond its utilitarian purpose, in ways that evoke spiritual meaning. A soul is made up of the many threads that have shaped it, among them love, loss, pain and beauty. I use images of fabric to connect the sisters and their mother in my work and this imagery offers me another way to reference connection as intimately woven, inter-connected and interdependent, individual threads. Brigid remembers the morning that her youngest sisters were born: “They had been birthed into the white linen tablecloth that Brigid pulled from the dining room table in an effort not to leave her mother alone” (4). As Brigid goes to sleep on the night of her mother's death, she thinks about threads that connect the sisters who are left behind, “Her mind wandered as she undressed and then pulled back the worn coverlet that lay across the narrow bed. It was torn in places; large holes broke the crocheted

design that her mother had worked on lovingly at night after her daughters had gone to sleep. Eventually, over time, they each had one, slightly different in design but each woven out of simple white cotton thread by the same hands” (18). It is my hope that the reader also thinks of God, the creator, crafting each human out of the same breath of the divine yet unique.

The cloth imagery allows the imagination to understand interdependent unity, whether within a family of sisters or among all of humanity. Through the imagery of a patchwork quilt, pieced together from dresses worn by the sisters, I allude to colors and scents associated with Mary in order to construct a memory of a time when Brigid’s life was whole and held together by a mother’s love:

The bed had been stripped of its linens, but the blue-patterned coverlet that her mother had sewn from bits of old dresses was folded neatly across the bottom. Brigid stroked the cotton as she had her mother’s cheeks just the day before – slowly and tenderly, as if drawing something out of them through contact – a time before the death of her sisters. She recognized the remnants of dresses that had been handed down from sister to sister until nearly threadbare, their individual patterns and shades of blue refashioned by her mother’s hands. Brigid studied the coverlet’s varied hues, all faded from the original, trying to place the whole dress on one of her sisters on an Easter or Christmas past. Their mother had always favored blue on her daughters. ‘It’s a strong color, yet peaceful,’ she would say. Picking it up, Brigid held the fragile bed cover to her nose, inhaling the familiar scent of rosemary soap her mother preferred above all others for washing” (64).



Brigid's separation from her faith is also expressed in her response to sacramentals. She is at once so intimately familiar with them that despite any effort to exclude them from her life, they are intrinsically a part of her world and her sensibilities as a woman, daughter and artist. While sitting over her mother as she lay dying, Brigid is moved to sing her mother's favorite hymn and the words, quite surprisingly, come back to her:

While the distance between them seemed to be growing, as her mother moved away from life, Brigid pulled herself closer, drawing the chair nearer the bed. Old, long-held differences mattered little. When it was clear that her mother was nearing the end, Brigid sang her mother's favorite hymn, *Immaculate Mary*. Her mother had venerated Mary, prayed to her, sang of her, and had even named two of her daughters after the flowers most associated with her. *Maria* was the last sound her mother heard. How was it that the words of the hymn had come back to her when it had been over ten years since Brigid had been at Mass to hear them? They had reappeared on her lips with a kind of tribal familiarity that neither time, nor will, could erase from memory. Her mother would have assured it that it was grace (56).

In another scene, Brigid has entered a church in order to find refuge from the police. The images and traditions have left their mark on her, despite an effort on Brigid's part to leave them behind.

At the end was the large crucifix suspended over the altar, the figure of Jesus hanging limply. As a child, Brigid was frightened by it, wondered



why the Church imposed the sad story of the Savior's death on its parishioners rather than depict the miracle of his life and rising. It was the season of Lent, so the figure was draped in a black cloth, adding to the solemnity of the scene. Her eyes still drawn upwards toward it, she instinctively genuflected while crossing herself as she entered a pew and, almost immediately, thought how foolish she was for doing so. She wasn't sure why the rituals were still so instinctive, even after all the years of turning her back on them (78).

Brigid struggles with loyalties to a place and a cause that no longer holds meaning for her and that has cost her so much. Her connections to her faith are tribal and deep, proscribed in ritual and sacramental totems of faith, as they were for the poet Heaney. Like him, Brigid has inherited a "side" in the sectarian conflict that creates an internal conflict.

In another scene, I refer to a bowl that is used for mixing up the ingredients of the weekly bread. This is meant to evoke the communion bread in the chalice and the connections deepened as a result of sharing in it. It is the bowl used by the women cleansing their friend's dead body, as well:

"God rest her soul," sighed Mrs. Donnelly, quietly in response to Brigid's revelation, her tall slender figure stooped over, as if in prayer, while she dipped the cloth into a deep blue porcelain bowl filled with water. It was the bowl that her mother used for mixing up the ingredients for bread each day and Brigid saw its utilitarian beauty as if for the first time as it sat on the wood side-table next to where her mother lay. Out of its normal place

of use, she noticed its warm luster against the ivory lace curtains of the front bow window. Its rim was wide and braided like a rope, around a generous oval shape, allowing for several loaves of bread to be made from one batter (8).

The bowl is a recurring motif, used as a literary “echo effect” or a dramatic repetition in which an image reappears in such a way as to remind the reader of a moment that has already passed to add significance to it. In a novel, such as *Brigid's Peace*, in which a character's past has implications on her present would seem to necessarily call for some use of time reversal in the way of such an effect. A bowl can represent an empty space with the possibility of being filled or have associations connected to where one bought it or who gave it to a character or what it was used for. When the bowl reappears in a memory of her mother, the scene invokes the power of relational healing:

Slowly, reverently, Brigid moved her hand across the smooth surface of the bowl. In it, she had learned to mix the bread that was the staple of every childhood meal, working the dough around under her mother's approving eyes. Often, when her sisters ran out to the street after school, Brigid remained behind, the routines and rhythms of the kitchen replicating and replacing the rocking in her mother's lap as a source of comfort as she grew. They sometimes worked silently, side by side, each knowing that the silence signaled a tacit respect for what the other contributed to the meal, to that moment. It was a holy silence, more meaningful to Brigid than the quiet of the confessional booth, for any shriving of sins around that bowl would not be met with harsh judgment or

reprimand. In that silence, with her mother, she found an acceptance of who she was, as imperfect she knew, in many ways, as the final uneven shape of a loaf of hand-rendered bread (88).

I use the sacramental associations of the bowl to remind the reader that this is a novel about the complexities of faith, family, reconciliation and love. The image of a bowl is so ordinary and yet so rich in potential meaning as a vessel of religious significance such as a baptismal font or chalice. These associations are all significant to my work and, I believe, in the work of many Catholic writers within a tradition of a symbolically rich imagination.

### *Craft inspiration*

It would be a gross omission if I were to write of the influences of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition on my creative work without giving consideration to craft. A writer whom I admire for her mastery of language is the Irish Catholic novelist Anne Enright. There are elements in *Brigid's Peace* that have benefitted from my study of Enright's work, in particular her ability to draw complex characters within a family dynamic that often exposes incompatible ideas or values.

Enright, in *The Gathering*, writes "People, she used to think, do not change, they are merely revealed" (252). Enright's characters, and the family saga that she places them in, reveal universal fears, insecurities, longings and imperfections through the examination of three generations of one family. Her novel, exploring the complexities of family, love, sexual abuse, marriage and death, takes the reader on a journey that

sometimes feels like walking through a labyrinth, a slow reveal with turnings back upon itself as it takes the reader along. It is like the imposition of Yeats' gyre on literary fiction. It is rich in its exploration of unseen or unexpressed, yet deeply felt, emotions and thoughts – universal, yet particular to Enright's Hegarty clan, a contemporary, large Irish Catholic family. The female, first-person narrator observes a family member's revelation about the clan at a wake: "Family sins and family wounds, the endless pricking of something that we find hard to name. Nothing important, just the usual *You ruined my life*, or, *What about me?* Because with the Hegartys a declaration of unhappiness is always a declaration of blame" (Enright 120). A writer attempting to capture family dynamics at an Irish wake, and all the opportunities it holds for long-held resentments and family secrets to surface, need look no further than the masterful Enright. My novel opens with the death of the mother of a large Irish Catholic family, steeped in secrets, sins and regrets and, while I have not yet written the wake scene, I will return to Enright when I do.

*The Gathering* examines unrealized possibilities that exist only within the confines and quiet spaces of an individual's mind and heart. It dwells in and creates mysteries about love and life that cannot be fully understood. In some ways it is like a place the Northern Irish poet Paul Muldoon refers to as "walking on air," a place where the imagination transcends restrictive attempts at labeling. It instructs a novice writer, by exquisite example, the value of leaving out commentary and leaving interpretation and understanding to the reader. "I do not know why Ada married Charlie when it was Nugent who had her measure...we do not always like the people we love – we do not always have that choice. Maybe that was her mistake. She did not realize that every

choice is fatal. For a woman like Ada, every choice is an error, as soon as it is made” (Enright 110). Enright’s characters are compelling, complicated, reflecting the frailties in all of humanity.

Enright is masterful at compelling the reader to become fascinated with the strangeness of the ordinary, the absurdity of the rituals associated with coming to terms with death, familial relationships, and the excruciating loneliness of, for example, a loveless marriage. “The last time I touched him was the night of Liam’s wake. And I don’t know what is wrong with me since, but I do not believe in my husband’s body any more” (Enright 73).

It is, precisely, Enright’s ability to create a world and characters which reflect all of the messy, confusing and often contradictory emotions of the human heart which has been most inspiring to one who is just beginning a novel which attempts to “reveal” family saga. The perspective of Enright’s central female narrator is at once brutal and tender, complicated. I can only hope to reveal such subtleties in my own characters.

In one of her most poignant observations, Enright’s narrator states, “I look at the people queuing at the till, and I wonder are they going home, or are they going far away from the people they love. There are no other journeys” (258). This holds significant meaning to the life and choices of my main character who is caught between being with whom and what she truly loves and running from it. Enright also addresses a notion of the human journey that is universal. Brigid’s journey to the West is symbolic, in many ways, of an internal journey away from Belfast and her past and towards a future in which she is able to find forgiveness, rapprochement with her father for herself and her sister, and an opportunity to heal those she has hurt. The West, in particular, is significant



because of its Celtic associations with the “otherworld,” a place where if someone returns from a visit they are transformed by contact with it. Brigid’s journey to the West with her sister will fundamentally change her, her ideas about home, love, self. Her journey west will also take her to the sea with all the Christian allusions of water intimately connected to healing, forgiveness of sins, and rebirth.

I aspire to create the authenticity of character and place that Enright achieves in *The Gathering*. She seems, to me, to be adept at quietly telling one larger story even while moving in and out of different smaller ones that illuminate it. She is concerned, as I am, with the mysteries of the human soul and heart that have no easy resolutions or understanding. Enright’s *The Gathering* is a literary inspiration to me as I continue to work on my novel, for its carefully, honestly drawn characters, gracefully written prose, and its ability to complicate our understanding of life by its empathy and integrity about matters that truly matter.

#### *Personal motivation*

If some of my imagination is fueled by what I perceive as the enduring truths of the human condition, in part due to the influence of literature I have read and loved within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, another part of it is certainly, as with all artists, influenced by memory.

In the summer of 1966, following the death of my grandfather, my family traveled to Belfast to tell his sisters of his passing. My grandmother hadn’t ever met them and had never been back to the city of her birth after immigrating to America over forty years earlier. My grandfather had worked in the Harland and Wolff shipyard until thousands of



Catholics were forced out in the early 1920s. Both he and his future wife had traveled for three weeks towards the dream of a new life in America, in steerage aboard different ships, eventually arriving on Ellis Island and settling in Brooklyn. They met at an Antrim Society dance one night, shortly after arriving. We heard a lot about Brooklyn growing up, about the “Irish need not apply” signs, about the dances, the stickball games, the Dodgers. We heard less about Belfast and sometimes it was only in overheard whispered conversations or half stories about someone’s cousin not being able to go back to Belfast for a visit for reasons we were never fully told nor could have ever really understood.

I’ve wondered, over the years, about the children I met during that childhood visit to Belfast and about how their families were affected by “the troubles.” I shared ice cream with children on the streets outside my great Aunts’ non-descript row house on Cavendish Street in West Belfast. I don’t remember their names but I’ll never forget their big, round smiling faces and the girls’ mismatched knee socks that they wore in stark contrast to my new lacy anklets. I’ve wondered if their religious rituals served to comfort them or to enslave them and I’ve wondered about the close-knit community that sustained them through all of those years of violence and loss that erupted shortly after our visit. I’ve wondered about the children who lived on streets across town as well, in Protestant neighborhoods, most likely with the same big, round, smiling faces and mismatched socks, bound together in another tribal community with its own rituals and suffering. What else might they have had in common with those children I met on Cavendish Street that summer of 1966, if they had been able to share an ice cream with them once in a while?

This novel is my attempt, in Heaney's "imaginative sphere," to explore that question and not, of course, to discover any definitive or satisfactory answer, but rather to acknowledge its mysteries. This work reflects the questions of my own heart and soul to do with the mysteries of love and faith, as well as the role of art in the noble search for understanding them; as for many Irish Catholic writers, those ideas are intimately tied up with family, community, tradition and ritual through complex and twisted threads within a unique literary, aesthetic and philosophical tradition.

Brigid's innate impulse towards beauty and creation, as expressed through her painting, is often in tension with outward pressures encouraging ugliness and destruction as a result of her affiliation with the Irish Republican Army. Relationships with enemies or opposites are always complex. The triumph of the creative instinct is in recognizing the importance of opposites in creation, the generative, fallen world of sexuality and, by association mother, birth, life and death. Her painting is her movement towards the place of reconciliation and, ultimately, the divine. The idea of art as a vehicle for understanding tension, especially as a metaphor for reconciling seemingly irreconcilable opposites is not an original one. Light and shadow are often used to reflect good and evil, sin and redemption. This is the theological paradox of the incarnation, two complete natures--human and divine--in a single person (Christ). God in the world, as profoundly represented by Jesus, affirms the reconciliation between God the creator and his creation. The limitless, transcendent God is reachable through the Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The mind restricted by reason alone is incapable of reconciling this truth and it is only through the power of the imagination which allows for a more profound way of seeing and knowing that one is able to reconcile that seemingly opposite state.

It is why I chose to begin the work with the juxtaposition of seeming contraries - a first and last breath – and placed them in the context of a holy, sacred, profound movement from one life into the next:

“Her last breath was like a baby’s first,” Brigid said, as she poured tea from the small brown pot, her hands shaking slightly as much from fatigue as from a fragile state of mind and heart. “It was a bit of a gasp.” Her soft blue eyes settled on the silver spoon circling around in the cup she held, rather than on the three women who were preparing her mother’s body for burial (1).

There is great appeal in a notion of permanence that art offers in a society in which everything – loyalties, families, beliefs - appears to be constantly changing. For me, as for Brigid, the place to reconcile the complexities of the human heart and soul lies in the power of one’s imagination, visual or written.

Through the power of the imagination the divine finds material representation and the distance between the sacred and the profane is lessened in that moment when the view enters into a kind of communion with the creative work. Aesthetics ask us to dwell in the mystery of the sacred by meditating upon it and in so doing to reveal what is good and what is divine. This returns me to the idea of the mystic spiral, present in the opening scene of my work, “The tea turned like a gyre around a still center” (1), where I dwell in its mystery.

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