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On murder, mourning and melancholia

John Kenny

The Semantics of Murder

By Aifric Campbell

Serpent's Tail

249pp, £9.99

The second-greatest story ever told is the work of Sigmund Freud. Even the shortest of his case narratives can still astonish with the audacity of analogue and symbol, the sheer speed of transference from small areas of significance to paradigmatic pronouncements. Even if not taken as pure fable, for their own purposes prospective novelists should have these narratives on their shelves beside the great literary fictions because they are a sustained lesson in the inventive examination of individuals and human types.

Irishwoman Aifric Campbell has surely observed this. In a high-flying variation on the bio-note, we hear that Campbell has worked as an investment banker, has studied semantics, psychotherapy and creative writing, and has lectured on logic. Only the banking, it seems, has just yet proven unserviceable, for in her first novel she deploys her other four areas of expertise so cohesively that they must already be closely aligned in her sensibility.

Set in contemporary London with some retrospective scene shifts to California, *The Semantics of Murder* is a psychiatric drama-mystery told in the third person, from the point of view of one Jay Hamilton, about the complexities of sibling rivalry and the relative claims of analytic logic and psychotherapy.

After major publishing success in the psychoanalytic area in the 1970s, Jay moved in the early 1980s, at the age of 33, from the West Coast to Britain where therapy was new and rich territory. It is now twenty years later, and he is worrying over a letter from an author named Dana Flynn who has unearthed some information about Jay's much older brother, Robert, a famous Professor of Philosophy at UCLA who was found murdered in his luxury home back in 1971.

As the Acknowledgements indicate, Robert is closely modelled on the life and work of Richard Montague (1930-1971), an American philosopher-mathematician whose "Montague grammar" was an important instalment in formal semantics and whose murder by strangulation, usually linked with his apparently risky homosexual cruising, is filed as unsolved by the LAPD. In Campbell's version, the cold-case file on Robert is reopened and the family's tragedy is again bared for Jay's own reaction and analysis. We are taken back to the unexplained early disappearance of their father and the later death of their mother not long after Robert's murder, and it turns out that there are very precise reasons why Jay has never properly been able to heal himself of these traumas.

Campbell shows a light and conciliatory touch in presenting the youthful ideological tensions between Jay's emergent devotion to psychoanalysis and Robert's pragmatist hard-headedness. She is excellent on the symptomatic one-upmanship of academia, and many intellectual luminaries are referenced without at all weighing down the storyline.

The storyline overall is not great, however, and the end seems particularly unsound structurally. And for the present, Campbell's prose style is rarely more than, well, prosaic. But she clearly has a talent for direct and uncompromising character portrayal. She constructs Jay's external and internal formation in detail, from his facility when young for listening endlessly to the stories of destitute men to his "hunt for stories" in the work of the great fictionists, to the honest explicitness surrounding his discovery of Robert's homosexuality.

For all his concern with surface trappings (Corbusier furniture, L'Occitane bathroom), Jay becomes a likeable and depthful case study of the dissatisfied creative-compulsive. He is unconscious of some of the damage he both suffers and inflicts, but is fully aware of his "fractured heart, its missing beat", and of the coldness inscribed in his own version of science: "We are all each other's experiments in an encounter". The real interest of his story is his parasitic use of his therapy files as subject matter for his parallel pseudonymous career as a fiction writer, especially when his stealthy copying from life is suddenly complicated by a wayward patient.

Categorically, *The Semantics* succeeds nicely on its own terms because, as a novel of ideas, it does just that: it presents a range of frequently surprising ideas and encourages thought. Campbell at one stage provides the vertiginous treat of a section of mathematical equations, or "transformational tree", for a Montague quantification of a fragment of English. And if we suggest, as we regularly do in this increasingly interdisciplinary age, that our scientists should also have some acquaintance with literature and humanities thinking, the incapacity to even begin to translate a phrase of logic might suggest that we should also feel the imperative in the opposite direction. If Montague's constructs look to most of us like impenetrable hieroglyphs (<e,t>,<<e,t>,t>>), then perhaps we should feel obliged to go study.

John Kenny lectures in the English department at NUI Galway. He is academic director of The John McGahern International Seminar and Summer School and is currently editing the first number of The John McGahern Yearbook.