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## **‘I Do Repent and Yet I Do Despair’ – Faustian Allusions in the work of Conor McPherson and Mark O’Rowe**

In a press interview in April 2007, Conor McPherson correctly anticipated the imminent conclusion of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period – the decade-long economic boom that had transformed Ireland into one of the world’s richest countries.<sup>1</sup> ‘We’re not comfortable with success in this country,’ he claimed. ‘It’s post-traumatic stress from our colonial past or whatever. As Irish people, we’re not able to celebrate what’s good about Ireland. Ireland is going to get back to what it knows now – hardship. That’s where we’re more comfortable. We can’t wait for it to start.’ (qtd in O’Regan)

What is notable about McPherson’s remarks – aside from the fact that he was proven right when the Irish banking system collapsed in September 2008 – is that he seems to believe that the Celtic Tiger period led to the suppression of an authentic Irish identity. ‘We’, he says, are ‘not comfortable’ with success, but are (perhaps paradoxically) ‘comfortable’ with hardship – because it is familiar. Far from fearing economic ruin, the Irish people ‘can’t wait for it to start’, says McPherson: the loss of prosperity thus represents something of a return to the country’s roots, to its essential self.

It would be wrong to place excessive emphasis on an apparently off-hand remark, but McPherson’s words offer one example of an attitude towards contemporary Ireland which is widely held. My suggestion here is that many contemporary Irish dramatists believe that the Celtic Tiger years represented a betrayal of (or departure from) an essential and/or authentic form of identity. That conviction is being expressed in many ways, but the one I want to focus on here is the frequent use of the Faust motif in Irish drama since the early 2000s. I wish to show that, both before and after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy, Irish dramatists sought to characterize the nation as having entered into a Faustian pact – as having sold its soul, exchanging its ‘true self’ in return for economic success. By focusing on two plays – McPherson’s *The Seafarer* (2006) and Mark O’Rowe’s *Terminus* (2007) – I wish to explore how these Faustian allusions are developed, and to consider how Irish readers and theatergoers might read them.

It is worth observing immediately that the use of the Faust story is a longstanding tradition within Irish drama. It appears most famously in Yeats's *Countess Cathleen* (1892), in which the eponymous heroine sells her soul to protect her people. 'How,' she asks, 'can a heap of crowns pay for a soul?' (11). Here is the response she receives:

*First Merchant.* Some sell because the money gleams, and some  
Because they are in terror of the grave,  
And some because their neighbours sold before  
And some because there is a kind of joy  
In casting hope away, in losing joy,  
In ceasing all resistance, in at last  
Opening one's arms to the eternal flames ... (49)

There are obvious differences between the Ireland of 1892 and the Ireland of 2007, but Yeats's description of the 'joy/in casting hope away' is not very different from McPherson's suggestion that the Irish are 'comfortable' with 'hardship' and 'can't wait for it to start'. Yeats's play (in common with many works on Faustian themes) suggests that the Irish peasantry are willing to sell their souls because they fear themselves already damned – or, perhaps, like Marlowe's Faustus, because they do not believe that they had a soul to save in the first place. Yeats's Cathleen sacrifices herself: she 'sells her soul and yet escapes damnation', as Yeats puts it (678), in what is clearly intended as an emphatic metaphor for national renewal. It is not individual Irish people but the entire nation that has sold its soul, he suggests. Yet redemption is still possible.

The use of the damned or redeemed individual as an emblem for nation persists in Irish drama, being deployed in many different ways. Tom Murphy's 1983 masterpiece *The Gigli Concert* is, as Fintan O'Toole remarks, 'almost certainly' indebted to Jung's insight that 'Faust and Mephistopheles are different sides of the one being' (168). That dual identity is represented through the figures of J.P.W. King, an Englishman who earns his living as a quack psychotherapist, and a character known only as 'the Irishman'. Insofar as redemption is available to either man – and Murphy shows some

ambivalence about that possibility, at least in relation to the Irish character – it can be found through the merging of apparently opposite traits: speech and song, melodrama and tragedy and, most significantly, Irishness and Englishness. So again, one individual's Faustian experience operates as a metaphor for nation here – and in that context, it is interesting to observe that *The Gigli Concert* enjoyed three distinct productions in Ireland during the period 2001 to 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous other examples may be mentioned. Zoe Seaton brought the Faust story explicitly into an Irish context in 1998, with a comedy entitled *To Hell With Faust*. Marina Carr drew on the motif in her 2002 play *Ariel*, which is about a politician who enters into a pact with God in return for political power; there are also touches of the relationship between Faustus and Mephistopheles in the characterization of the eponymous heroines of Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* from 2006. Murphy would return to the Faust story in his 2009 adaptation *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant*. Inspired by the 1880 novel *The Goloviyov Family* by Mikhail Saltykov-Shcherdrin, Murphy's play is about a powerful woman called Arina, whose tragedy is that (as her son Peter claims) she cared only about 'Property, land, money. That's all she ever thought of. She sold her soul' (41). We have also seen Satan on the Irish stage before, in Joseph Tomelty's 1953 comedy *Down the Heather Glen*. And there have been plays about such themes as demonic possession and exorcism, most notably Frank Carney's *The Righteous are Bold*, which was an enormous success at the Abbey Theatre in 1946, and later on Broadway in 1955-56 (when the other Irish play in New York was the considerably less popular *Waiting for Godot*). All of those plays are very different from each other, but all seek to present the narrative of the damned individual in a national context.

Despite the relative frequency with which this story is presented, it is nevertheless interesting that, in the final months of the Celtic Tiger era, we saw the appearance of two Irish plays that presented characters who are engaged in a modern-day version of the Faustian pact. McPherson's *The Seafarer* premiered in London in September 2006, transferring to Ireland in 2008; it concerns a game of cards for the soul of a washed-out Dubliner. And in June 2007, Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus* premiered, presenting three

characters, one of whom is a serial killer who has sold his soul to the devil in order to be able to sing beautifully.

In both plays, an immediate point of comparison is not with Marlowe or Goethe, however, but with Samuel Beckett (a writer who himself was preoccupied with the Faust story, as Dirk Van Hulle has recently shown). *Terminus* clearly owes much to Beckett's *Play* (1963), presenting a trio of inter-connected characters who provide what O'Rowe calls 'the illusion of presence through voices' (9), in a purgatorial space of some kind. Like Beckett, O'Rowe gives us two female characters, named A and B where Beckett's are called W1 and W2; and he also gives us a male character, who is named C in *Terminus* where Beckett's character was called M. Similarly, McPherson's *Seafarer* appears to have been strongly influenced by *Endgame* (1957), a version of which McPherson directed for the *Beckett on Film* project in 2000. His main characters are a pair of brothers, one of whom is blind (like Hamm in *Endgame*) – and the interaction of the pair with each other involves a carefully balanced combination of interdependency and power struggle that mirrors the relationship of Hamm and Clov.

Those Beckettian allusions are intriguingly welded into retellings of the Faust story. McPherson's play combines the old Dublin tale of the Hellfire Club with elements of the Faust legend,<sup>3</sup> appearing particularly indebted to Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. McPherson brings the Faust story into the present day, setting it a house on Dublin's northside on Christmas Eve, where a group of men have gathered to play poker. They are joined unexpectedly by a stranger called Lockhart – who, it emerges, is the devil in disguise. The prize that Lockhart hopes to win in the card-game is the soul of the play's protagonist, Sharky. 'I'm the son of the morning, Sharky', he says. 'I'm the snake in the garden. I've come here for your soul this Christmas, and I've been looking for you all fucking day!' (47)

Sharky, we learn, had bartered his soul in a game of cards twenty-five years previously (sometime in the early 1980s), when he was arrested after a drunken brawl that resulted in the death of a homeless man. Because he won that game, Sharky was never charged with his crime, but Lockhart demanded the right to play him again. This presentation could be seen as a slight inversion of the characterization of Marlowe's Faustus, who sold his soul in

exchange for twenty-four years on Earth with Mephistopheles as his servant, at the end of which time Lucifer returns to bring him to hell. Sharky has spent a quarter-century trying to forget what he did: he drinks heavily, has separated from his wife and children, has lost one job after another, and his only hope of an improvement in his circumstances is a falsified compensation claim for a back injury incurred when he fell down the stairs of a Dublin bus. Like Marlowe's Faustus, Sharky's deal with the devil has led him to spend a quarter-century trying to forget who he really is. As Faustus must ask, 'Where are thou Faustus? Wretch, what hast thou done?' (V, I, 51), so must Sharky finally confront the truth about himself, and accept his culpability.

While *The Seafarer* takes place in a world that recognizably corresponds to contemporary Dublin, O'Rowe's play is considerably more fantastic. McPherson's play is presented naturalistically, but *Terminus* places three characters in spotlights, each of them directly addressing the audience in rhyming verse. The play's male character, we learn, has sold his soul in order to be able to sing beautifully – not for a love of art, but because he wants to impress women. He was, we're told, 'a virgin verging on giving up the ghost, who, like Faust, was offered a pact which lacked a certain clause, which caused him to be deceived and not to receive what he believed he would: that is, to become, through song, some kind of stud.' (12) That is, Satan granted the man the ability to sing beautifully – but also ensured that he was so shy that he would never actually have the courage to sing in front of anyone else.

Like Yeats's *Cathleen*, Sharky in McPherson's play is redeemed through his willingness to be damned. But O'Rowe's character ultimately suggests that his deal with the devil was worthwhile. The play concludes with the character hanging by his own innards from a crane over a Dublin construction site, singing Bette Midler's 'Wind Beneath My Wings' before he is dragged away to Hell.<sup>4</sup> He tells us, though, that the opportunity to sing means that 'I'm overwhelmed with exultation, but also stunned by the realisation that what I've just done is, without question, what's worth to come' (48). That is, the opportunity to perform before a group of awestruck Dubliners is adequate compensation for an eternity of hellfire. For O'Rowe, then, his character's bargain was worthwhile, giving him a moment of happiness which will sustain him during the agonies to come. There is a clear parallel, therefore, between

the selling of his soul and artistic achievement, something that makes *Terminus* seem closer to Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* or Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* than to Marlowe. But there is an apparent allusion to *The Gigli Concert* too: that play also concludes with a man singing, in an act of spiritual transcendence that blurs the distinction between the aesthetic and the sacred.

Notwithstanding the use of popular culture, it is surprising that in a supposedly secular age, McPherson and O'Rowe have written plays that treat issues of divinity and damnation as if audiences will accept them as real. One of the strategies used by McPherson to deal with this problem is his employment of financial rather than religious language to convey the Satanic elements of his plot. For instance, if Sharky loses his game of cards, Lockhart promises to take him to hell through what he calls 'the hole in the wall' (76, 96) – a rather sinister sounding phrase which also happens to be a colloquialism for an ATM (a cash machine). And when he is asked to describe what it is like to fall from heaven into hell, Lockhart replies as follows:

Well you know, Sharky, when you're walking round the city and the street lights are all come on and it's cold. Or you're standing outside a shop where you were hanging around reading the magazines, pretending to buy one 'cause you've no money and nowhere to go and your feet are like blocks of ice... And you see all these people who seem to live in another world all snuggled up together in the warmth of a tavern or a cosy little house, and you just walk and walk and walk and you're on your own and nobody knows who you are. And you don't know anyone and you're trying not to hassle people or beg, because you're trying not to drink ... Well, that's a fraction of the self-loathing you feel in Hell, except it's worse. (77)

To be in Hell, that is, is much the same as being penniless in contemporary Dublin.

There are clear parallels between Sharky's situation and Lockhart's – both men have fallen from a state of grace, and both are tortured not just by the harshness of their circumstances, but also by the memory of what they

have lost. The Dublin audience at this play are the very people whose 'cosy little homes' Sharky gazes into; they are the people from whom he tries not to beg. It is the awareness of those audiences' lives that makes Sharky's existence so intolerable. But it is also notable that Lockhart's contempt for Sharky arises because he *identifies* with him – but knows that Sharky may be granted the second chance which has been denied to him. And it is notable too that the only language available to either man to discuss the spiritual is the language of finance: an Irish audience watching or reading the play might easily form the impression that McPherson is suggesting that they have replaced God with money.

O'Rowe's play is both more complex and less optimistic than *The Seafarer*, but he too seeks to show how religious language and its associated forms of rhetoric have become unmoored from their original meanings and contexts. Throughout *Terminus*, we see characters deploying religious images or motifs in situations that are almost entirely divorced from the spiritual. The first lines of the three characters' monologues make this clear. 'This Samaritan shit's the pits', says A as the play begins, as she tries to 'talk a guy from the brink of suicide' on a phone helpline, only to discover that he'd been playing a practical joke on her (5). That character is a volunteer with the Samaritans, a charitable organization dedicated to helping people at risk of suicide – which takes its name, of course, from the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke. What had been an emblem of charity and neighborliness is here trivialized, rendered as 'shit' – as a waste of time. Similarly, B begins her monologue with an ending: 'At five o'clock... I finish work...' she says '...and head to McGurk's; sink one, sink two, then bid adieu to the barman – his reply, "God Bless" – depart then, head to the M&S, my dinner to purchase' (8-9). C's introduction of himself to the audience emphasizes the infernal over the divine. 'Having pulled in... ... before I get out ... I pop a locket into my mouth, then bite into the shell and – fucking hell – the honey! *Always* yummy' (13).<sup>5</sup>

In all three cases, O'Rowe is showing how signifiers with religious or biblical origins have become separated from their original meanings. For A, being a Samaritan is 'shit', an activity that causes other people to laugh at her expense. For C, the expression 'fucking hell' is used to signify pleasure rather



than pain. Only in B's 'adieu' and 'God Bless' do we have a sense a genuine blessing being shared between the barman and his customer (indeed, that link between alcohol and religion recurs later in the play, when the Irish virgin saint and missionary St Ives gives her name to a brand of wine [19]).

That disjunction between signifier and signified persists throughout O'Rowe's play. It affects the presentation of gender and race, for instance. Early in the play, a woman is told 'it's your life, *man*' (7, emphasis added). Later, A is called a 'nigger' (35) by a woman who refers to herself as 'the alpha nigger' (8), yet it is almost certain that both women are intended to be seen as Caucasian. C calls a group of men 'whores' shortly before he murders them (15) – he needs to use that word to feminize his victims before he can kill them. So Ireland is presented as a place where words defining identity – a person's essential characteristics – have become separated from their original sources. This disjunction begins with religion or the spiritual, and seems to work its way outwards into other realms of being and identity.

O'Rowe relates that confusion between meaning and reference to his use of the Faust myth. As mentioned earlier, his serial killer – the male character called C – has sold his soul. In the course of the play, that soul escapes from hell to get revenge on his bodily host – that is, both C *and* his soul appear in the play, but as separate, antagonistic, characters. The soul explains its reasons for wanting revenge. 'Because it's wrong we both exist except within a single space. Because I'm pissed. But mostly to save face in the face of his disgraceful crimes, the many times, since he sold me, he's butchered women up and down the country' (25). The soul and the body ought to exist in one space, states O'Rowe – the crisis of his play is caused by the separation of the object from its essence. This spiritual crisis is also expressed through O'Rowe's use of language, as we can see from his character's statement that he wants to 'save face in the face of his disgraceful crimes'. Just as soul and body might be seen as two signifiers for one individual, so is the word 'face' used here as one signifier for two things.

This spiritual and linguistic malaise is clearly related to the play's Dublin setting. As in many Irish plays (Friel's 1979 *Faith Healer*, McPherson's 2002 *Port Authority*), there is a moment when the names of places are invoked like words in a religious service. The city's biggest shopping centre,

the Jervis Centre, is described as a 'tomb' (44); a view of the city itself is described as having a 'sullied magnificence' (42). And the play's conclusion – its terminus – the moment when O'Rowe and his characters 'reach the end of the line' (42) – is particularly important in this context. As mentioned above, it concludes on a building-site where C's song is delivered to a crowd of Dubliners: 'they're mesmerised' says C. 'man, look at their eyes! – enraptured, captured, enchanted, transplanted by my voice to a better place' (48). C is very pleased with his performance of Bette Midler's song: 'consummate as it is', he says, 'my execution' is 'the business'. The work of art, in this play, is something that should be *executed*, just as C's murder of a group of men earlier in the play is described as 'over-balletic' and 'pathetic' because it relied 'so much on aesthetics' (16). And just as McPherson uses the phrase 'hole in the wall' to describe hell, O'Rowe concludes his play with a moment of awesome transcendence, the significance of which is shown by C's use of a word associated with economics: it is, he says, 'the business'. Art, violence, religion, and money are all intertwined here – and it is left to the audience to attempt to disentangle one from the other, a task that must force them to consider how the confusion between them all arose in the first place.

These writers are not simply borrowing the plot of the Faust story for their plays; they are also drawing on a feature of many treatments of the Faust myth: namely, a focus on a crisis of value – that is, the plays' dramatic power arises when something that should be free from the economic is suddenly turned into a commodity. That dynamic has allowed many writers to explore anxieties about real social developments: Goethe, for instance, writes extensively about the idea of paper money in *Faust Part Two*, asking how something apparently valueless – paper – can act symbolically as a sign of wealth. Similarly, both Irish plays show a preoccupation with signifiers, particularly in *Terminus*, which finds its dramatic power by mining the space that exists between an object and the words used to describe it.

McPherson's play in particular can speak to the preoccupations and concerns of audiences in Ireland today. Its message is that the spiritual or the transcendent can survive in an excessively materialistic culture, which is exactly the kind of thing that people facing economic uncertainty have always wanted to hear: *The Seafarer* therefore can be seen as an Irish *It's A*

*Wonderful Life* (1946), concluding with John Martyn's 'Sweet Little Mystery' just as Capra's movie finishes with 'Auld Lang Syne' – though of course the use of music to conclude the play must again be seen as a nod to *The Gigli Concert*.

O'Rowe's play, however, has broader resonances. Its central concern is with the clash between free will and determinism: just as the direction of O'Rowe's script is pre-determined by the rules of rhyme and rhythm, so are his characters preoccupied with the belief that they have no control over their own destinies. 'If you think you can hinder fate, you're dreaming' (39), they are told – and indeed, there are moments when all of them are forced to accept certain realities that they cannot change. But what emerges most clearly from O'Rowe's play is that moral responsibility does exist, and that life is not a linear descent – a fall from heaven to hell – but a cycle, in which good will inevitably follow the bad. So in a rhyming sequence, a positive word - 'good' - may be followed by a violent one - 'blood' – but so too will the word 'bitter' be followed by 'titter'. Likewise, A will state that 'I believe the crime I did engendered good' while C's singing will compensate him for being damned: 'its bliss-inducing memory will do more to ease whatever suffering is in store for me when I enter into Hell... I mean, I've heard tell that even the Devil remembered Heaven after he fell'. (48-9). If McPherson's play seeks to comfort, assuring us that better days will come, *Terminus* makes a similar point. But it also seeks to impose a sense of responsibility upon audiences, who must acknowledge that a feeling of powerlessness can be overcome by an acceptance of one's ethical responsibility.

Whether they comfort or challenge us, it is fascinating that both McPherson and O'Rowe deployed the Faust myth at a time when Ireland was struggling to come to terms with the consequences of rapid enrichment. That, after all, was a time when the words 'wealth' and 'prosperity' had become confused – a time when Ireland itself was often spoken of as a country that has entered into a Faustian pact. As the Celtic Tiger period came to a halt less than two years after these works premiered, both works suddenly seemed prophetic in many ways: both McPherson and O'Rowe had asked questions that now dominate Irish life. What happens when you place a monetary value on something that should never have been sold or gambled away? And what

happens when a debt that you have spent years building up and ignoring suddenly falls due?

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of the 'Celtic Tiger' period vary, but it is generally taken to refer to the period of rapid growth, falling unemployment, net migration, and economic enrichment that occurred in Ireland between 1995 and 2007. The country entered a severe recession in 2008, when the government was forced to provide a unilateral guarantee of the five Irish banks in order to prevent their collapse. The country was forced to accept a bail-out from the International Monetary Fund and the European Union in November 2010 – representing an acceptance that the nation was effectively bankrupt.

<sup>2</sup> The productions took place at the Abbey Theatre in 2001 and 2004. Druid Theatre produced it in 2009. Each production incorporated revisions by Murphy to the original 1983 script.

<sup>3</sup> The story of the Hellfire Club dates to the eighteenth century, and concerns the arrival of a stranger to an isolated house in the Dublin Mountains. He joined in a game of cards already underway but, when one of the players dropped something on the ground and bent down to retrieve it, he discovered that the stranger did not have feet but cloven hooves – that he was, in other words, the devil. The stranger disappeared in a puff of smoke upon detection. The ruins of the house still stand, and various superstitions continue to be associated with the location.

<sup>4</sup> Midler's 'Wind Beneath My Wings' is the best known version of a song that has been recorded many times. It featured prominently in the 1988 film *Beaches*, in which Milder plays a character called CC (note the resemblance to the name of O'Rowe's character). O'Rowe doesn't allude directly to it, but it is worth pointing out that the final words of the song carry a religious dimension: 'Thank you, thank you, thank God for you, the wind beneath my wings.' Hence, just as the first line of the play mentioned a Samaritan, its conclusion returns us to religion – if, of course, we remember the words of the song.

<sup>5</sup> 'M & S' stands for Marks and Spencers, a British chain of department stores that also sells convenience food. Locketts are a brand of throat lozenge. Irish audiences would have been aware that these references signify the social class of the characters: someone who shops at M&S would be likely to be relatively well off, probably from a middle class background. In contrast, the northside setting of McPherson's play, added to some other indicators (such as the brand of alcohol consumed by the men), marks the characters out as working class. Issues of social class may have an impact on audience reception, determining the extent to which an Irish audience will see the characters onstage as similar to or different from themselves.