

A Slaughterhouse of a Story: *The Butcher Boy* by Patrick McCabe

Review Essay

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What is Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*? It is not just one story but many. It is the story of Ireland, invaded by the Normans; the story of the commonly-held propaganda that the Irish were feral animals – 'pigs in the kitchen Irish'¹ – portrayed in cartoons as pigs and boors; the story of poor parenting and abandonment; the story of institutionalism, of drunkenness; the story of what the Irish refer to as 'tuppence halfpenny looking down on tuppence'; the story of the effects of injurious gossip and the un-Christian behaviour of townsfolk in a Christian town; the story of rural, third-world, Ireland in the fifties and sixties – well before her entry into the EU; the story of the creeping Americanisation of Ireland via technology; the story of a boy, of a people, stuck – emotionally and developmentally – in familial and historical memories. (There's the joke about the pilot's announcement prior to landing at George Best Airport in Belfast: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, fasten your seat belts and put your watches back three hundred years.') It is the story of religious zealotry; the story about psychoses – of a boy, of a community, of a nation; the story of the relentless voice of madness; the story of a psychotic Peter Pan who whirls, manically, towards a revengeful and murderous act; the story of sly, literary, one-upmanship; the story of how to tell a story, Irish-style ... with Rabelaisian humour, bathos and pathos; it is the story of and by a descendant of the *fili*² and *seanachai*³ of Ireland.

Or is it a story of a psychiatric patient who has bad dreams or maybe one who invents gob-smacking lies? Whichever or whatever, it's all *mirabile dictu*.⁴

Many Irish have believed that the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 was the starting point of Ireland's territorial and economic woes. Could *The Butcher Boy* be viewed as the Irish man's/boy's revenge on the plunderer? In Francie's eyes (and note the diminutive use of the Catholic Christian name), the Nugents are the enemy. They originated in Normandy, accompanied William the Conqueror to England and fought in the Battle of Hastings.⁵ Nugents accompanied Henry II when he invaded Ireland. They became one of the most prominent Anglo-Norman families to remain in Ireland. Joe cautions: 'Watch out Francie we're in the wars with Nugent' (3). And later: 'If only the Nugents hadn't come to the town, if only they had left us alone, that was all they had to do' (167). Mrs Nugent's son is called Philip. Surely such nomenclature – albeit with two ls – is a fitting name for a Queen's consort (instance the current Duke of Edinburgh).

And in a final burst of insidious black humour: 'No more hanging? I says. For fuck's sake! What's this country coming to!' (9). The days of hanging Irish patriots are over. The Pig Toll Tax (11) is also reminiscent of a swathe of taxes and tithes the Irish had to pay to the English over the centuries, 'The Mrs Nugent and Nobody Else At all Tax' (14).

¹ Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy* (Picador, 2001) 3. All further references are to this edition of *The Butcher Boy* and in parentheses in the text.

² Irish for poets.

³ The *seanachai* were traditional Irish storytellers.

⁴ Latin for wonderful in the relating.

⁵ [www://liberty_chapel_cemetery.homestead.com/files/family_surname.html](http://www.liberty_chapel_cemetery.homestead.com/files/family_surname.html).

The Irish are also known to be great haters. Irish on both sides of the religious and partisan divide have been known to carry a grudges for centuries. McCabe puns and plays with this and also Ireland's sense of isolation and neglect by other nations. 'O, I says, powerful hate! Powerful hate altogether' (87). 'She said that was all there was in this world, people who let you down' (5). This, too, could be interpreted in the global, nationalist sense, for Ireland was indeed 'let down' by many over the course of her history – for example, by the French and the Spanish.

Pigs in the kitchen Irish. It's no exaggeration to say that for centuries the Irish were lampooned and referred to as pigs, internationally, and there could be many reasons for this. The Irish are renowned for their *Cead Mile Failte*.⁶ Perhaps an errant piglet or two was spied running through the door of a thatched cottage by an Ascendancy landlord?

A small selection of *Punch* cartoons is illustrative of depictions of the porcine Irish. A cartoon in *Punch* from 1877, 'Pigheaded Obstruction', is one such example.⁷ 'Second Thoughts' (depicts a pig trying to run away from Home Rule) and 'A Test of Sagacity' (Lloyd George presents a pig) are but two further examples, amongst many, on a website of *Punch* cartoons.⁸ Irish mythology and literature have focused, too, on the lowly pig. Angus Og, son of the Dagda, promised to send a pig to Finn and the Fianna. Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men – Part II Book IV: The Pigs of Angus* immortalised this turning of a boy into a pig, when Angus advises Finn, father of Oisín: 'It was no common pig was in it, but my own son.'⁹

'Do you know what Ireland is?' asks Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* only to answer 'Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow';¹⁰ this is repeated in the *Circe* scene of *Ulysses*.¹¹ And while Daedalus may have been referring to the Catholic Irish turning their backs on a political leader, the comment is worth recalling for the purposes of an analysis of *The Butcher Boy*.

James Joyce referred to pigs, pig-like behaviour, bacon, crubeens (boiled pigs' feet), sausages and so on in *Ulysses*, culminating in the *Circe* episode when Bella Cohen, the prostitute, turns Bloom into a 'perfect pig' in his imagination (the Homeric parallel being when Circe turned Odysseus' men into pigs). With mounds of latrinal wit, Joyce writes of pigs and poo in this section of *Ulysses* – Bloom with bowel trouble and the bucket (U 445), 'Li li poo lil chile' (U 446), 'The sty I dislike' (U 477), 'Dungdevourer' (U 488), 'This silken purse I made out of the sow's ear of the public' (U 502), says Stephen, later. And the brothel is a mess, a pigsty. In an earlier episode we see Bloom, 'and he breathed in tranquilly the lukewarm breath of cooked spicy pig's blood' (U 61) who later tries to catch up behind a girl's 'moving hams' (U 61). In *Lestrygonians II* we hear of 'eat pig like pig.' Did the Sassenach¹² turn the Irish into pigs? The Joycean influences on McCabe's work should be obvious.

Beckett's characters also engage in dysfunctional behaviour and use porcine references. 'Pig', 'hog', 'muckheap' and 'pigheaded' are all thrown into the trough of *Waiting for Godot* and in Beckettian philosophical terms life was 'a turd.' 'Pig in a poke' is another term used colloquially in Ireland to describe deception and the sexual act.

⁶ Irish for 'a hundred thousand welcomes'.

⁷ 'Pigheaded Obstruction', *Punch* Volume 73, July–December 1877, 7.

⁸ punch.photoshelter.com/gallery/Ireland-Cartoons

⁹ Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men, The Story of the Tuatha De Danaan and of the English by Lady Gregory with a preface by W.B. Yeats* (London: John Murray, 1904) 305.

¹⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Jonathan Cape, Illustrated Edition, 1956) 208.

¹¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1968) 524.

¹² The English.

Maybe it's all hogwash to the Australian reader, but the Irish were fascinated by pigs. They exported and ate them in all their various forms and culinary mutations. Pork, pork sausages, rashers, black pudding and crubeens were all part of the Irish breakfast and high tea menus of the fifties and sixties, the setting for this novel. 'You eat your sassige, an' never min' Th' Exile o' Sibaryia', says 'Captain' Jack Boyle in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*.¹³ James Plunkett, in his novel *Strumpet City* dubbed one of his characters Rashers.

Add a soupçon of cabbage and you've got yourself a national dish – Bacon and Cabbage. In the sixties, sure there was even a stamp commemorating a pig – *an muc*.¹⁴ A piece of philatelic muckracking?

For many years during my childhood and later, the *Irish Independent* newspaper ran the comic strip *Curly Wee and Gussie Goose*. One of its many readers was the novelist John McGahern.¹⁵

Madness is often associated with the arrival of a full moon. Beltane¹⁶ is an ancient Gaelic holiday celebrated around May 1. The holiday was often celebrated on the full moon nearest to the midpoint between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice. It was a day on which bonfires were lit. It was a day on which the Irish made pilgrimages to holy wells. Madness, fire, religious fervour ... paganism. God himself only knows that the Irish were up to in those pagan days but, for whatever reason, there's that quick association between madness and the Irish. 'I'm going mad' says Pozzo, and the aphoristic Estragon says: 'We all are born mad. Some remain so.'¹⁷

The Frenzy of Suibne: or The Madness of Sweeney is the last and best known of a trilogy about a seventh-century petty king who experiences a violent descent into madness at the Battle of Mag Rath in 637. Resisting Christianity, and having thrown Saint Ronan's psalter into a lake, he receives a curse from the saint who condemned him to wander the world naked. T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, Flann O'Brien – and I would argue McCabe too – have all been influenced by the incensed Sweeney. And weren't there mad monks living in their *clochans*¹⁸ since Saint Patrick's arrival?

Madness is undoubtedly one of the major themes of this novel. But whether it's about a young boy's rapid descent into mania, the madness of his parents or of many of the characters – the drunk, the publican's daughter, the detective, the priest, the gardener, the asylum inmate – or that of the cyclopean Irish who chose to live in the historical past and blame all their woes on the English, is conjectural. Or maybe it is all of the aforementioned ... Perhaps it's a madness brought about by the veneer of Roman Catholicism on centuries of paganism?

Jonathan Swift, too, discussed madness in *A Tale of a Tub*. Section IX starts satirically with 'A Digression Concerning the Original, the Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth'.¹⁹ The introductory and certain other chapters alone in *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* serve to confirm this epidemiological profile: 'Mental Illness and Irish Culture'; 'Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenia'; 'Problems in Rural Irish Socialising'; 'Breeding Breaks Out in The Eye Of The Cat'.²⁰ 'Such a daft place', says Francie (201).

¹³ Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock, The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 23.

¹⁴ Irish for pig.

¹⁵ John McGahern: *A Private World*, documentary directed by Pat Collins, 2004.

¹⁶ Beltane (/ˈbɛl.tən/) being the anglicised name for the Gaelic May Day festival.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Faber and Faber, 2006) 73.

¹⁸ Irish beehive-like huts.

¹⁹ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and other Satires* (J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1975) 102.

²⁰ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001).

Brendan Behan called the Irish ‘a nation of manic depressives’ and for those who subscribe to Freudian psychoanalysis, Freud is alleged to have said of the Irish: ‘This is one race of people for whom psychoanalysis is of no use whatsoever.’

One does not have to be wildly imaginative to recall that Bobby Sands, the Irish Republican activist, was condemned to solitary in the H Block of the Maze Prison in Belfast during the seventies. As an act of contempt for the British system of internment, he spread his excreta over the walls of his cell, as did a number of other Republican prisoners. This scatological exercise assured media headlines. Could Sands’ daubing acts and dirty protests in 1978 have also fuelled McCabe’s imagination?

Apparitions, sometimes, can bring insight to unbelievers and believers alike. An apparition on the road to Damascus was responsible for Paul’s conversion. Francie’s namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, heard voices and had visions of the seraph.

Marian shrines abound in Ireland. Statues of Our Lady kneading her rosary beads pray for the safety of drunken drivers at corkscrew bends. Trainloads of Irish visit Knock, in County Mayo, scene of a visitation from Our Lady, Saint Joseph and Saint John the Evangelist – witnessed by fifteen people – in 1879. Annual diocesan pilgrimages fly the sick and infirm to Lourdes and Fatima where Our Lady appeared to peasant children. Monday night devotions are still held in Ireland for Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, who first appeared in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, 140 Rue du Bac, Paris in 1830.

Yes, apparitions are newsworthy in rural Ireland and slops for an exploitative author like McCabe.

Nobel prize winner, George Bernard Shaw wrote about voices, too. In *Joan of Arc*, the young Joan hears voices – voices that command her to help the Dauphin of France oust the English occupiers and restore the throne that should be rightfully his.

Joan: I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.

Robert: They come from your imagination.

Joan: Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.²¹

Later, Ladvenu’s verballing of Joan is chilling: ‘I have pretended to have revelations from God and the angels and the blessed saints, and perversely rejected the Church’s warnings that these were temptations by demons.’²²

Joan, too, is deprived of her liberty and imprisoned by the English. Killed by the Church, she is burned at the stake. Coincidentally, Cauchon (cochon is French for pig) was the Bishop of Beauvais who was responsible for sending the girl to her incendiary end. In the epilogue to the play, she ascends into heaven where she chats cheerfully with her former enemies.

In McCabe’s tragicomedy, the saintly protagonist of the Shavian tragedy is upended and inverted as Francie burns his house and butchers his tormentor. As Joan of Arc said: ‘He gave us our countries and our languages, and meant us to keep to them. If it were not so it would be murder to kill an Englishman in battle.’²³

Maybe McCabe is conferring a literary canonisation on poor Francie – mad gobshite that he is. So, I submit that McCabe alludes and pays homage to all of the aforementioned and others.

²¹ George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue* (London: Constable, 1924) 11.

²² Shaw 90.

²³ Shaw 12.

The Butcher Boy is crammed, like a well-stocked abattoir, with carcasses of deceased Irish writers. His oeuvre is full of coy literary references and mnemonics, of which I can only mention a few.

The stream of the unconscious, the implied criticism of priests and the Church, the focus on garrulity, on defecation, on pigs, on political and religious myopia, are all reminiscent of Joyce. In Neil Jordan's 1997 film of *The Butcher Boy*, surely it's no coincidence that Philip Nugent bears an uncanny resemblance to the young, bespectacled Joyce. Attempts to impress through Bacchanalian behaviour, wild storytelling in a parochial voice, not to mention the gullibility of townsfolk, remind one of John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and his use of the Kiltartan dialect. Madness has been a familiar sub-theme for many Irish writers, most notably Samuel Beckett, John McGahern and the omnipresent Joyce. Boozers and bawdy characters, as well as prisoners, have been highlighted by Brendan Behan. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *School for Scandal* might have prompted Francie's 'school for pigs'. Charles Kickham's *Knocknagow* and Brinsley Macnamara's *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, with their depictions of the injurious effects of village-pump gossip, could also be considered. With a stretch of the imagination so too is Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* and *The Colleen Bawn* – colleen being the Anglicised diminutive of the Irish, cailín, or girl. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is not only named but evokes the creation of a monster and its creator.

The convoluted *Man Eats Dog* column in the Irish Times by Myles na Gopaleen,²⁴ which the novelist John McGahern and, no doubt, McCabe, liked reading, also comes to mind. In McCabe's inversion, however, it is the man – or rather the boy – who never grew up; who not only eats but kills pigs, who murders someone who called him a pig. Or, it could be argued, in a surrealistic twist, whom he imagined, in his paranoia, to have perceived him as being porcine.

Or perhaps it's yet another immodest twist, with McCabe trumping the satirist Dean Swift. In Kathleen Williams' introduction to *A Tale of a Tub and Other Satires*, she references Swift's surgical prescription for Ireland's overpopulation and economic problems: 'Let the Irish poor be slaughtered for food at a tender age, so that they may be as useful, and as well treated while they are being fattened, as any other cattle.'²⁵

The Butcher Boy is an Irish stew, cordon bleu style, a harsh commentary on parochial censure, an indictment of the effects of rural and emotional loneliness, a doff-of-McCabe's-hat to the extent of psychiatric disorder in his Celtic land, of literary one-upmanship extraordinaire, a paean to the Irish man's ability to tell a good yarn and a first-class lesson in how to do it.

'Th' whole worl's ... in a terr ... ible state o' ... chassis' mourns the drunken 'Captain' Jack Boyle in the last line of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, but Francie says 'All the beautiful things of this world are lies' (198). Maybe the whole story is a lie; maybe McCabe has been filling us 'full of lies' (215), as the bogman says; maybe it's the imaginary tale of a mad Irishman. Many inmates of asylums – suffering from personality disorders, dementia, schizophrenia – can adopt multiple personalities, can engage in long monologues, can fantasise and imagine visions and voices, can regress and/or never develop emotionally. Many daub themselves and their surroundings with excrement. Francie tells the bogman the fantastical story of the orphanage going up (210). It is conceivable, too, in yet another possible scenario, that the butcher boy (alleged main character) never existed; maybe it's all a bad dream: 'I never want to dream that dream again' (73). And, later, Francie says: 'I slept like a top. I went curving through my dreams yamma yamma yamma right over the rooftops of the town' (113). A whopping emerald gem of a nightmare,

²⁴ Irish for Myles of the little horses, one of the two pseudonyms used by Brian O'Nolan aka Flann O'Brien.

²⁵ Swift xxi.

perhaps? Or simply an imaginative metaphor for the dispatch of the invader? Enter the multiplier effect – maybe it's not a case of double but quadruple entendre.

'I have put in so many enigmas and puzzles it will keep the professors busy for years,' said James Joyce of his *Ulysses*. It could have been McCabe's slogan too, for this is a riddle of a book. Like the bogman, I could say 'And what else?' (210). Maybe it's not Mrs Nugent's leg but ours that's being pulled.

In conclusion, McCabe has shovelled up the ordure of Irish parochialism, nationalism, psychiatric and literary identity to create the unforgettable tale of Francie.

Shit! Shite? What a porker!

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