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PADRAIG KIRWAN

Transatlantic Irishness: Irish and American Frontiers in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*

It is no longer possible to sequester questions of race, class and gender within conventional national boundaries, Irish, American or otherwise. If the Atlantic is a frontier, it traverses time as well as space, as if oceans have memories of their own.

—Luke Gibbons, “Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory” 47

[Narrative] is simply there like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural.

—Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” *Image, Music, Text* 79

AN EARLY SCENE in Martin Scorsese's documentary *No Direction Home* (2005) features Tommy Makem and the Irish folk group The Clancy Brothers performing (in the 1960s) a version of the ballad known as “The Butcher Boy.” The song, which explores numerous themes—including innocence, remorse, loss, death, and masculine rapacity in a metropolitan setting—tells the story of a young girl who, having been made pregnant by a butcher's apprentice soon after her arrival in the city, commits suicide. For a viewer of the documentary the seriousness of the ballad and the grimness of the tale itself might be somewhat diminished by the now rather comical appearance of the balladeers, posed around a “traditionally Irish” kitchen table and garbed in stereotypical Aran sweaters. Beyond the rather stock representation of Irishness, the scene is a stark reminder of how an earlier generation of Irish émigrés actively availed themselves of such emblems to signal their ties to the Irish past and to mesh that traditionalism with the proletarian narratives of the American folk movement. In this way the band's performative gesture possibly exceeds any easy classification or definition. Furthermore, the staging of “The Butcher Boy” within Scorsese's documentary raises

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questions regarding purity, experience, and culpability in relation to Irishness in a contemporary context, thereby exposing a discursive space in which issues of migration, cultural maturity, and individual or collective self-awareness might be examined. It is remarkable, then, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) deploys the title to similar effect. As a fictional narrative that foregrounds the interconnected nature of national histories and cultural memory, this book facilitates a paradigmatic refiguring of the Atlantic as a frontier space. This essay examines the interconnections that the novel suggests and considers the various artistic, cultural, and narratological energies that both give rise to and stem from those interconnections.

Such an examination is entirely necessary. In adding to the seminal work of Paul Gilroy and others, Luke Gibbons has argued that we must continue to theorize transatlantic intersections if American Studies is to overcome "an isolationist tendency to construe" questions of race and gender "as interior histories whose range of reference stops at the checkpoints of various borders or at the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard" (47). The attention to the Atlantic frontier suggested by McCabe's work can in this light become a means to cross those artificial boundaries, thereby challenging what Gibbons calls "the received binaries" between notions of "insider versus outsider, white versus native, civility versus savagery, innocence versus inheritance, [and] modernity versus tradition" (47). While providing an opportunity to reconsider transatlantic exchanges in this way, *The Butcher Boy* also raises some key questions for scholars working in the fields of Irish Studies and Irish American Studies by undermining the widespread belief that an insular and regionalized Ireland has of late been replaced by a contemporized and modern one.

Consider, for example, the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney's suggestion in 2008 that "the water surrounding" Ireland only very recently "ceased to serve as a cordon sanitaire keeping Natives pure and foreigners out." In essence, Kearney portrays pre-1990s Ireland as a culturally unadulterated, ideologically restricted territory, situated in stark opposition to a culturally fluid "Global Ireland" of more recent times.¹ McCabe problematizes this easy categorization with a narrative that constructs a network of meanings that relate to a historical—and ongoing—international connection between Ireland and the United States. Moreover, by re-examining Irishness in a wider globalized frame, McCabe also reassesses traditional, perhaps iconic, definitions of Irishness and thereby challenges the notion that Irish identity is parochial or uncomplicated. Indeed, McCabe's characterization of the young Francie Brady can help us to (re)consider conventional conceptualizations of Irishness, both in Ireland and in America.²

Set in Ireland in 1962, McCabe's book opens with its narrator, Francie, recalling a time "twenty or thirty or forty years ago," when the inhabitants of the "town . . . were all after him on account of what [he] did to Mrs. Nugent" (1). Portentously

¹ Ironically enough, Kearney's subsequent reference to the Irish "tradition of migration" and the patterns of transnational voyage "known in Latin as circumnavigation" would appear to undercut his argument, as these crossings surely demonstrate that neither the Irish Sea nor the Atlantic Ocean was conceived of as "a cordon sanitaire."

² The act of mapping the novel onto the national space in this manner does, of course, hinge on the reader's preparedness to accept the claim that there is an interconnection between the two. I think it is fair to say, however, that both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Butcher Boy* generally comment on (inter)national territories via the complex construction of metaphorical spaces.

alluding to some terrible crime, these lines introduce an interior monologue that shapes the reader's perception across the length of the novel. The misdeed to which Francie refers, we subsequently learn, is the gruesome murder of a townswoman who unwisely refers to Francie's family as "pigs" (4). Blaming Mrs. Nugent for setting in motion a train of events that Francie, in essence, distills to two key occurrences—his mother's death and his abandonment by his one true friend, Joe Purcell—Francie violently enters Mrs. Nugent's home and tells the horrified housewife: "You did two bad things . . . You made me turn my back on my ma and you took Joe away from me" (195). Recounting this scene near the end of the novel, Francie describes how he "smacked her against the wall a few times there was a smear of blood at the corner of her mouth" and then shot her with a bolt gun ordinarily used for butchering pigs. "I lifted her off the floor with one hand," Francie gloats, "and shot the bolt right into her head thlok was the sound it made, like a goldfish dropping into a bowl" (195).

Described by *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani as "by turns lyrical and grisly, supremely ordinary and shockingly bizarre," *The Butcher Boy* essentially explores the extent to which fabulist storytelling can act as a temporary escape from life's often horrific realities. The inventive and increasingly unhinged Francie expresses his wish to "go off on our travels" whenever his grim and troubled home life becomes too threatening (9). Likewise, during his time in an industrial school he fantasizes about what he'd do if he were free. "I'd build a raft," he remarks, "and send her sailing down the river" (73). Many of the protagonist's phantasmatic reveries center on the river, which is for the young Francie both an idyllic space—somewhere he can flee the social norms and hardships of life onshore—and a site where he can enact various fantasies. Thus, he describes the "hide me and Joe made" on the riverbank as a site from which "you could see plenty . . . but no one could see you" (1). Ensnared in this protective lair, Francie idealizes the pastoral as an unparalleled source of independence. Yet the novel's shocking and grisly climax dramatically undercuts this escapism, and the storytelling in which Francie engages explores life's darker corners more often than it masks the gruesomeness we often find in the world.

Francie's romanticized individualism, along with his mounting sense of seclusion, loneliness, and a cathartic engagement with the pastoral, establishes an intertextual link between *The Butcher Boy* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). This relationship has been noted in passing, with early reviewers describing McCabe's protagonist as "part Huck Finn, part Hannibal Lecter" (Mahoney) and labeling the novel "a maddening ride with overtones of *Huckleberry Finn* and [James Joyce's] *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (Hemmingson).³

³ It is interesting to note the symbolic link between Francie, Huck, and Lecter. In Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*, the plot of which is based on the exploits of serial killer Buffalo Bill, the murderer "skins" his victims in a bid to reassign his own identity. Since Huck and Francie both cross-dress at times, Bill's actions might be said to recall their bid to find themselves or form their own identity. With that, the nickname given to Harris's serial killer is an echo of the tormented and violent history of the American West, with Buffalo Bill reminding us of the historical figure and the genocide of the American Indian. Furthermore, the fact that in the cinematic adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* one victim appears onscreen while Tom Petty's "American Girl" is playing on the radio possibly highlights the association between masculine violence and differentiated feminine presences in American narratives. One final, perhaps equally random, connection exists between the name of Twain's home town—Hannibal—and that of Harris's protagonist.

Marjorie Baumgarten describes Francie's "disconcerting . . . narration" as being "by turns ironic, naïve, and vicious," making the protagonist seem "both a sympathetic figure, a product of his environment, *and* a stone cold killer."⁴ This alternating characterization of Francie—psychotic juvenile, on the one hand, and blameless stray, on the other—allows sufficient scope for Francie to be compared to the Huck Finn that Sacvan Bercovitch depicts as an "Angel of Death," a boy who wears a "comic mask" (109) to conceal a "deadpan leer" (122), which makes Huck a character that both amuses and unsettles the novel's readers.⁵ Accordingly, Kakutani's description of Francie as a "strangely soft-hearted murderer, willing to commit unspeakable acts" might conceivably have also referred to Twain's protagonist.

In light of these confluences, I suggest that the relationship between *The Butcher Boy* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers what Julie Sanders calls a "dynamic intersection of textual surfaces" and corroborates Julia Kristeva's by now well-rehearsed observation that "tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte"; that is to say, every text is an absorption and transformation of another text (Sanders 3; Kristeva 146; my translation). More importantly, by bringing into play the "systems, codes and traditions" that Twain established in *Huckleberry Finn*, McCabe creates a mode of intertextual movement that facilitates a deeper understanding of the narrative exchanges that have historically occurred between Ireland and America (Allen 1). Thus, the transatlantic turn in American literary criticism is perhaps emblemized by the narratological association between Huck and Francie. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, critical attention to this linkage might therefore help us to reconsider the complexities of both texts—and particularly how each one locates what Shelley Fisher Fiskin calls "the vexed and often violent places" where the "borderlands [and] crossroads" of nation states and national ideologies meet ("Crossroads of Cultures" 19).

The Irish Voice in America

McCabe adopts a number of the narrative conventions deployed by Mark Twain. Where the American author insists in the preface to *Huckleberry Finn* that "persons attempting to find a motive" in the book "will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (title page), Francie proclaims that his story took place "twenty *or* thirty *or* forty years ago" (1; emphasis added). The effect in each case is to establish a sense of fabulist play that seems to disparage the truthfulness of the tale about to be told. Yet, if Twain's warning against interpretation *highlights* the need for careful and nuanced interpretation, as Bercovitch argues it does (116), then McCabe's temporally ambiguous introduction contradicts in a very similar fashion the stark realism of the events that unfold in the town. As a result, the reader is implicitly reminded that neither tale can be removed from its historical and social context, despite protestations to the contrary. Moreover, given that the

⁴ Baumgarten is referring to the voiceover in the 1997 film adaptation of *The Butcher Boy*, but it is closely linked to Francie's voice in the novel.

⁵ My comparative analysis of Huck and Francie is greatly indebted to Bercovitch's compelling "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny about Interpretation." For other stimulating discussions of Twain's novel see Derwin and Kravitz.

framing of both stories echoes the beginning of a fairy tale, it seems germane to bear in mind Bruno Bettelheim's theory that fairy tales are a form of literature that both relays "cultural heritage" and provides the child with the "resources he needs most in order to cope with his difficult inner problems" (4). Indeed, McCabe's "twenty or thirty or forty years ago" not only simulates the traditional Irish storytelling convention in which "fado, fado" means "a long, long time ago," but also suggests a further connection with a genre in which the death of a parent and the various "existential problems" that trouble Huck and Francie are basic narrative conventions.

Like Huck, Francie speaks in a rich vernacular that is in keeping with his unsophisticated, uninhibited version of events. When confronting Mrs. Nugent on the public footpath, Francie adopts the mannerisms of "a Western old timer," telling the confused housewife, "yup . . . ya gotta pay the old tax Mrs. Nooge" (12). Francie's likely pronunciation of "Missouri"—given his Monaghan accent—likewise links the two boys. Just as the Missouri river is the way to Huck and Jim's "freedom," so it was a particularly popular route for settlers from the northern counties of Ireland. In fact, developing Charles Grandgent's 1894 theory that the "general tendency . . . in the nineteenth century to retract and lower an unstressed syllable spelled with *i*" was an Irish "peculiarity," Donald Lance has suggested that "the final schwa sound in Missouri derives" from the arrival of "Scotch-Irish immigrants" (259). McCabe thus revisits Twain's sense of a native dialect and the cultural significances that this dialect connotes and also uses this connection to revisit Huck's marginality and rebelliousness. Both novels are inverted—or even intentionally failed—versions of the picaresque or Bildungsroman literary traditions. In each case the protagonist refuses to grow up, and the extent to which Huck or Francie makes a successful return to society is ambiguously dealt with at best. In truth, neither boy truly progresses during the course of the narrative. When from the confines of a mental hospital the adult Francie explains at the end of *The Butcher Boy* that "it was time to go tracking in the mountains, so off we went, counting our footprints in the snow" (215), his words poignantly echo Huck's fantastical wish to "light out for the territory" (321).

It is also important to note that in both novels the search for freedom occurs within the context of a traumatizing, dysfunctional familial space. These sites are created, or perhaps more properly *overshadowed*, by threatening and abusive father figures. Francie, again like Huck, is born into an "uncivilized house," where, according to the upwardly mobile Mrs. Nugent, "the father's never in, lying about the pubs from morning to night" and is "no better than a pig" (4). Spoken, as they are, by a matriarch of the community, these lines obviously intersect with the Widow Douglas's attempt to "sivilize" the filthy Huck Finn, Miss Watson's "pecking at" the young boy, and Providence's disdain for the repugnant Pap. The description of Francie's father, Bennie, likewise mirrors Twain's description of Huck's mean-spirited father, about whom the reader is told: "There warn't no color in his face . . . it was white; not like another man's white, but white to make a body sick" (21). The hideous corporeality of both men has been further underlined in their visual portrayals in the illustrated edition of *Huckleberry Finn* and director Neil Jordan's 1997 cinematic adaptation of McCabe's novel. In both renditions the fathers are a fetid, dormant presence, counterpoised to the youthful appearance of their sons (fig. 1 and 2).



Figure 1. *The Butcher Boy*. Copyright Geffen Pictures.
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Both Huck and Francie agonize over moral issues, with the latter determined not to let his mother “down like [his] da did” (5). The boys challenge the cycle of masculine violence within their respective societies and are subsequently torn between the social norms and their own (possibly fairer) sense of decency. That Francie’s time in the “house of a hundred windows” has been foreshadowed by Bennie’s time in a Belfast orphanage run by the Catholic Church (33, 83) suggests, tragically, that the legacy constructed by their fathers is insurmountable. Both novels thus make an allegorical association between masculinized, violent national narratives and the disturbing presence of dead or dying fathers. This association recalls in turn Derrida’s critique of conventional national narratives through his notion of spectralization, which, according to Pheng Cheah, is “the incarnation of autonomized spirit in an a-physical body that is then taken on as



Figure 2. Huck and His Father. Illustration by E.W. Kemble, provided by the University of Virginia Library.

the real body of the living subject" (241). Pap and Bennie essentially are spectral "a-physical bod[ies]" who quite literally haunt each text. The presence of these haunting fathers—particularly the violent menace associated with their brusque mannishness—places the performative gestures that shaped their nationalistic master narratives in stark relief. Through Huck's and Francie's anxiety over these disturbing presences, each book conceivably revisits, or perhaps continues, Nathaniel Hawthorne's concern with the "grey shadow of [our] forefathers" (9). Just as Hawthorne's allegorical engagement with his ancestral roots involves a reconsideration of what Teresa Goddu calls "the 'monstrous' relations of the [American] marketplace" (55), so *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Butcher Boy* associate the ghostly presence of absent fathers not only with the sins of the past, but also with the price that subsequent generations must pay for those earlier sins (see below).

There is in addition a "dynamic intersection" that links each novel's treatment of Irish and Irish American ethnicity. For his part, Twain explicitly noted that he borrowed extensively from the vernacular spoken by nineteenth-century Irish immigrants, even remarking that Huck's "mouth is a trifle more Irishy than necessary" (*Letters* 174). And as Noel Ignatiev reminds us, Finn is an Irish name "if ever there was [one]," and the *fabula* of Twain's novel "is very 'Irish'" (58).⁶ Ignatiev's scholarship does, of course, owe a considerable debt to Fisher Fiskin's examination of Huck's vernacular, and her argument that his voice was, in part,

⁶ Bercovitch also notes the possibility that at least some of Huck's ancestors were Irish and makes reference to what he describes as "ethnic Irish-Americanness."

inspired by African American idioms and dialect (see *Was Huck Black?*). The isolated and uncivilized Huck thus fits quite comfortably with Robert Nowatzki's account of nineteenth-century Irish immigrants "as racial Others in some ways similar to African Americans" (162). As a result, an Irish "blackness" becomes in the novel a metonym for various complex forms of alterity. Twain also at times correlates Irish and Native American identities—in the short story "Niagara," for instance, in which the figures that the narrator (ostensibly) takes to be "noble Red Man" and his "forest maiden" are, the reader learns, Irish immigrants called "Dennis Hooligan" and "Biddy Malone" (*Sketches New and Old* 60–62).

However, although Huck is quite literally the victim of "race prejudice," he also continually offers a dubious commentary on American race relations (see Camfield and Robinson). His references to Jim as a nigger and his decision not to "bother" about what is right or wrong but instead "always do whichever come handiest at the time" mark him out as a potentially racist boy, who by and large errs on the side of caution when it comes to matters of expediency and personal gain (*Huckleberry Finn* 85). Since Huck is both the victim of ethnic intolerance and, on at least some level, a racist, his characterization interrogates the Irish immigrant's rather paradoxical role in American nation-building during the 1800s by invoking both the history of anti-Irish racism in America and nineteenth-century immigrants' tendency to rationalize violence against other minority groups in order to prevail. *Huckleberry Finn* thus makes perceptible what Stephanie Le Menager refers to as "the intersections of U.S. race prejudice and international capital in fluid sites within the apparently domestic territory of the United States" (Le Menager 406). Moreover, since many of the Irish had fled their homeland as a result of the economic disaster surrounding the 1848 famine, Le Menager's point that Twain was concerned with the internationalization of Western economies in the nineteenth century seems particularly perspicacious. Irish immigration to America was, quite simply, an instance when the transatlantic flow of capital opened up complex questions concerning ethnicity and identity in the emerging Republic.

Patrick McCabe's contemporizing of this subject matter offers an opportunity to reconsider not just the relationship between Ireland and the U.S. during Twain's time, but also the modern reader's relationship to (and understanding of) both the economics of that relationship and the connection between historical transatlantic movements and recent forms of globalization. His decision to revisit the Irish/American connection by vigorously re-enacting Twain's narrative explores contemporary understandings of Irishness both within and beyond the nation. It at once constructs something of a revisionist understanding of the more conflicted nature of Ireland's historical bond with America and reassesses how the more celebratory narratives concerning Irish immigration continue to inform national discourse in Ireland. In essence, McCabe's fiction, like Twain's, might be said to reconsider the character of a nation by (re)locating it within an international and global context.

Francie's wildly optimistic narratives and fabulist self-immolation thus link him with the ideological principles that Bercovitch believes have led to the "consecration of Huck Finn as the quintessential American." However, whereas Twain satirizes the naive optimism that seems to characterize Americanness, McCabe's book

questions the popular conviction that “the history of the Irish in America’s formative years—‘in labor unions and party politics; in music, dance, theatre and popular entertainment; and in . . . the movement from penury and prejudice to economic and political success’—exemplifies . . . the American dream itself” (Wyndam), and does so on two levels. First, he recalls how the Irish were initially denied the equal rights on which the dream was founded and implies that the story of exclusion has itself become a defining narrative about cultural resilience. Second, he interrogates the morality behind the American Dream itself, as well as the pride that typically accompanies the memory of Irish involvement in the same. Given that the dream Huck latches onto is “the dream of domination in the guise of creating a new world, or settling a virgin land,” a dream that was, as Bennett Kravitz reminds us, made possible only by the “wholesale slaughter of the Native [American],” Francie’s subjective recounting of his own murderous behavior might be said to comment on the archetypal image of the Irish as colonial underdog (Kravitz). What develops through *The Butcher Boy*’s attention to Irish and American connections, then, is a sustained examination of a conflicted but intriguing narrative space, a space in which Le Menager’s notion that “Twain . . . successfully reimagined manifest destiny and U.S. emergence in terms . . . that *could not be contained as purely national space*” is effectively borne out (407; emphasis added).

Reimagining Ireland

Despite the extensive intertextual borrowing outlined above, and even though Joe Cleary has astutely reckoned that “Irish Catholic and British and American forms of pop-culture millenarianism promiscuously commingle” throughout McCabe’s novel (236), very little has been written about these dialogic and enlivening energies. There are, I suggest, two distinct reasons that these international gestures and transatlantic influences have gone unexplored. In the first instance, several readers have interpreted Francie’s hometown as being shaped mainly by Ireland’s history as a colonized nation. Tim Gauthier, for example, believes that Clones is a place where the “departure of the colonizer leads to a state of indeterminacy that is dictated by two conflicting impulses: to embrace the tenuous promise of prosperity left in the wake of the colonizer, or to imagine a unified past and reclaim a necessarily idealized ‘identity’” (196). Carole Zucker, meanwhile, describes the novel as a singularly “bleak portrait of neocolonial Irish life” and characterizes Francie’s homeland as a place where the people are “still dominated by archaic religious beliefs and superstitions”—their interest in the “A-Bomb and anti-Communist hysteria” notwithstanding (203, 208). Similarly, in an essay that deals with Neil Jordan’s cinematic adaptation of McCabe’s novel, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford argues that Francie’s grievances arise from the male-dominated nationalist master-narratives that are told *within* the nation (209). She also filters much of the dramatic action through the lens of an Irish “oppos[ition] to English . . . identity” in a bid to consider the potential “displacement, or . . . modification, of indigenous forms of religion and patriarchy” in the work of Irish artists like McCabe and Neil Jordan (185). As with Gauthier’s and Zucker’s essays, Cullingford’s perspicuous and stimulating study suggests that Francie’s hometown is “utterly remote and provincial in its concerns” despite being “linked with America

through [John F.] Kennedy's Irish bloodline, connected to the world by the mass media, and saturated with American popular culture" (200).

Each of these readings engage the Irish government's "tacit goal . . . to paper-over discontinuous or fractured, largely irrecoverable features of a lost national community" during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s by interrogating the extent to which certain nationalistic attempts to construct a coherent narrative of Irishness may have sought to reflect a "supposedly unbroken, rurally-based history" (Wyn-dam). As such, these critics attend to McCabe's authorial engagement with a representational pre-contact Ireland—one that is thought to be culturally unadulterated and ideologically restricted. However, if these examinations rightly suggest that McCabe's novel questions the formation of a representative identity, they perhaps underplay the extent to which it does so by reaching *beyond* the stable binarisms typically associated with Irishness. Indeed, by illustrating how Ireland has always existed within a global context McCabe's novel actively deconstructs the notion that Ireland was a homogenous, virginal territory prior to, during, or after colonization. Because they give virtually all of their attention to the binaries Ireland versus England, "old" Ireland versus "new" Ireland, and nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, readings such as the ones I cite above obscure the more unsettling and subversive aspects of McCabe's narrative. In this regard, Robin Lydenberg's observation also comes to mind: that Irish art is all too often codified by interpretative impulses that effectively sequester it within the predictable confines of Ireland's national borders. Lydenberg quotes a number of Irish artists on this issue, including Daphne Wright, who believes that "anything that's a peculiarity in . . . [one's] work will be put down as Irishness," and Alice Maher, who observes that an overbearing attention to the signifiers of Irish identity can be "a way of keeping [the Irish artist] on the periphery . . . [T]o contain you for your Celticness instead of making you part of the world" (157). An unbalanced concentration on the austere, regionalized qualities of McCabe's art thus risks concealing or masking as a national allegory the ways in which the story is concerned with metaphors that suggest transatlantic traffic and historical connection.

The other reason that moments of transatlantic interchange have not yet figured in critical readings of *The Butcher Boy* is that Irish American relations are complicated. Just as there has been a nationalist master-narrative concerning Ireland's "unbroken, rurally-based history," so there have been countless narratives that memorialize, and perhaps even reify, the connection between the "emerald isle" and America. The majority of these, whether generated in Ireland or America, treat the transatlantic historical link with great reverence. For example, on March 17, 2008, Bertie Ahern, then Taoiseach of Ireland, reminded the members of the House of Representatives that Ireland and the U.S. had a "shared heritage" that marked "interdependence" between both nations (Ahern) and presented to Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, a sword that was once owned by Thomas Francis Meagher. Meagher was an Irishman who served as a general during the U.S. Civil War, was the first Governor of Montana, and later acted as superintendent of Indian Affairs in the new territory. By presenting Meagher's sword to the Speaker, the Irish Premier not only called to mind the significant cultural, historical, and political connections between the two nations, but also gestured toward the generation of Irish American settlers that Theodore Roosevelt described in *The Winning of the West* (1889–96) as "the kernel of the distinctively and intensely American

stock who were the pioneers of our people . . . [and formed] the vanguard of the army of fighting settlers" (184).⁷ Ahern thus proudly underscored the Irish immigrant's historical influence in the United States' expansion during the nineteenth century by implicitly evoking the era in which Irish American John L. O'Sullivan argued that "the day is not distant when the Empires of the Atlantic and the Pacific would again flow together," General Philip Sheridan (the son of peasant farmers from County Cavan) led campaigns of unsurpassed viciousness against the Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, and Cheyenne, and John Mulvaney produced his enormous frieze "Custer's Last Rally."⁸ This fond remembrance notwithstanding, there are certain realities that might trouble this representation of the immigrant experience. As noted above, the Irish were not always a welcome presence in America. As early as 1633, John Winthrop, one of America's Puritan Fathers, declared that it would be "as much honor . . . to win" an Irish "soule" as it would be to win an "Indians soule out of the Diuells clawes" (Brooks 37), and Gibbons reminds us that, because the Irish Catholics who traveled to America during the mid-1800s had a "history of dispossession and rebellion," they were for this reason deemed "closer to the position of the American Indian" than that of the American settler (30).⁹ By 1854 the million Irish immigrants who lived in the "impoverished urban centres of the North [of America] . . . were the targets of prejudice against Catholics and foreigners," and "Anglo-American majority discriminat[ion] against the Irish" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been well documented (Nolan 597; see, also, Roediger, Ignatiev, Kenny, and Warren).

The twentieth-century legacy of accounts of the Irish as, on the one hand, wild and unwanted immigrants and, on the other, ideal frontier Americans has inevitably been an ambiguous one, and this ambiguity has in turn traditionally been resolved through a form of remembrance that melds accounts of repression and revalidation in order to construct a narrative of resilience and belonging. For instance, the deeply unsettling story of the Irish Famine has, Margaret Kelleher points out, gradually developed into a "charter myth" (144) for the Irish in America. A more recent example of such mythologizing is the Irish rock band U2's revision of their song "Hands that Built America" for the soundtrack of Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*. This adjustment involved omitting references to numerous ethnic groups who traveled to the city by replacing the lines "And these are the hands that built America /(The Irish, the Blacks, the Chinese, the Jews)/America/Hand/(Korean, Hispanic, Muslim, Indian)" with "These are the hands that built America/America."¹⁰ The omission seems to have been intended primarily to

⁷ Roosevelt's engagement with a mythic version of the West is comprehensively examined by Sarah Watts, who argues that Roosevelt's idealized prototypical cowboys were both "civilized warriors" and "capable of astonishing violence" (8). It is of no little consequence that Roosevelt's mother was an Irish immigrant and came from Antrim.

⁸ O'Sullivan's father was a naturalized American of Irish descent, and O'Sullivan himself was born on the North Atlantic. See Scholnick. Mulvaney's painting became one of the most popular bar-room illustrations of the 1800s, largely because of what Walt Whitman described as its ability to depict "a western, autochthonic phase of America, the frontiers" (qtd. in *Folsom* 62).

⁹ Huck's "savageness" and attempt to escape the civilizing influences of the town are thus very much in keeping with popular images of both Irish and Native American presences.

¹⁰ The longer version of the song appears on the *Best Of [U2]: 1990–2000* (2002, Universal/Island), while the second version appears on the *Gangs of New York Soundtrack* (2002, Universal International).

emphasize the Irish struggle against oppression and therefore offer a coherent narrative of adversity and triumph for Scorsese's film. It also had the effect, whether intentional or not, of accentuating Irish marginality and celebrating Irish American endurance above that of other immigrant groups. This move could be viewed in terms of what Charles Fanning calls "ethnicity as liberating doubleness"—that is to say, "a view of ethnic otherness not as a destructive self-estrangement but as creative expansion of possibility" (371). Under these terms the Irish mobilize their "doubleness" to allow them to exist both as a distinct ethnic group *and* as members of the New Republic. This, in turn, reflects a form of Irish American exceptionalism that potentially permits successive generations to access tales of adversity and resilience even as they become incorporated into national ideals of perseverance and determination.

Although there is some potential for a positive reading of this "liberating doubleness," it is also the case that Irish immigrants were at times given to ensuring their own liberation regardless of the cost to those around them, particularly the African American and Native American communities. For example, in "December, 1763, Scots-Irish settlers from Paxton," now known as the Paxton Boys, "killed twenty Conestoga Indians, took scalps . . . burned Indian settlements," and so consolidated their reputation as "fighting farmers" (Brooks 34–35). Their actions precipitated a long history of Irish American involvement in bloody, immoral campaigns against America's indigenous peoples and are but one aspect of what Kevin Kenny refers to as "earthier, more conflict ridden narrative[s]" about the "past" (809). Another "earthier" story of Irish American contact includes a large proportion of Irish settlers who saw the U.S.-Mexican War as "an opportunity to assert their allegiance to the American republic, and as a means of enhancing American power at the expense of their historic British adversary" (Nelson 77)—and this despite the fact that it meant fighting against the "half-Indians" whom Daniel O'Connell suggested the Irish should protect and support (the same Daniel O'Connell that Francie fails to recognize when he sees a "big gray statue mouth-ing about something in the middle of the street . . . [with] birds shitting all over his head" [37]).

Similarly, the infamous New York Draft Riots on Monday, July 11, 1863, viscerally underlined the anger felt by Irish immigrants living in the Northern states when it became widely known that they were to be compelled to fight against the Confederacy. An incensed "crowd gathered and hanged" from a lamppost an African American coachman named Abraham Franklin as they cheered Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president. Later, they "dragged the body through the streets by its genitals" (Harris 285). In general, Irish involvement with the politics surrounding the Civil War was often regulated by self-interest. Thus, the Thomas Francis Meagher whose sword Bertie Ahern presented to Nancy Pelosi saw the Civil War as an opportunity to hasten Ireland's liberation from the British and believed that "[t]rained, battle-hardened Irish regiments would make a formidable expeditionary force to free Ireland," a just "reason, in his view," "to fight for the Union" (Wiley 118). (It should be noted that the Irish fought for both the Union and the South during the Civil War.) While these examples are, to be sure, no more representative of the whole story of Irish American history than the master-narratives of suffering and triumph, they do make visible the need to re-examine the full com-

plexity of Irish cultural presences in nineteenth-century America. Because the story of Irishness and the story of the Irish in America resist easy categorization, a mode of interpretation that questions both the invented archetypes of national identity *and* skewed revisionist histories might prove to be indispensable.

Storied Frontiers

McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* suggests an interpretative framework of exactly that nature. I would even contend that the novel is part of an effort by Irish artists to "intentionally negotiate and transform . . . [the Irish people's] contemporary self-image" through a "dialogue with the past," thereby creating what Wyndham calls "versions of national identity that constantly *transcend* restrictive ideological impulses." Moreover, because the novel generates a portrait of 1960s Ireland in order to create a dialogue between that world and a modern-day understanding of Irishness in a national and global context, it not only reconsiders historical transactions but also draws attention to specific forms of cultural connection. By doing so, McCabe creates what Susan Castillo has elsewhere described as a "dynamic process of negotiation" (339). Re-reading the novel's intertextual energy can for that reason facilitate an appreciation of how, to quote Lydenberg again, "national and international, self and other come together in 'chiasm,' in an exchange in which 'each borrows from the other . . . , encroaches upon the other, intersects with the other' *without losing itself*" (164).

The clearest manner in which McCabe creates this "chiasm" is through the intertextual link with *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck and Francie are, as I have argued above, troubled by the horrors of a world in which masculine violence and fantastical storytelling "encroach upon one another" with unsettling consequences.¹¹ Both novels share symbols of death and decay, and these symbols could be considered emblematic of the "conflict ridden narratives" to which Kenny refers. Huck's reference to the settling of "the territories" also potentially recalls the grotesque historical narratives concerning groups such as the Paxton Boys. Perhaps this is why Bercovitch goes as far as to call him "a death-haunted young boy" who is attracted to images of putrescence and loss:

When I got there it was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny—the hands was gone to the fields; and there was them kind of faintdronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the leaves, it makes you feel mournful, because *you feel like it's spirits whispering spirits that's been dead ever so many years — and you always think they're talking about you.* (*Huckleberry Finn* 197)

Francie encounters corresponding images of loneliness, fatality, and physical disintegration throughout McCabe's fictional narrative. "Death-haunted" from the outset, the young Brady is, like his mother, preoccupied with failure and bleakness: "we'd just sit there for hours sometimes just staring into the firegrate only there never was a fire ma never bothered to light one and I wasn't sure how to go about it" (6–7). His lingering dread is reflected in, and emblemized by,

¹¹ The appositeness of the intertextual allusion increases when we recall that *Huckleberry Finn* was noted for telling one "bloodcurdling adventure after another" and presenting the reader with no less than thirty-three corpses. Twain did, however, omit the description of Pap's corpse, thereby allowing Huck to retain, unlike Francie, his relative innocence.

Annie's infatuation with the song "The Butcher Boy," which of course ends with the image of the young woman "hanging from a rope" (19). Although performed in what are, ostensibly, happy times, the ballad nevertheless reflects the underlying anxieties that torment Francie and unsettle the reader. The young boy even explains that he has "a hard time keeping all the flies away" from the cakes his mother stacks up in the kitchen as she manically bakes in preparation for her brother-in-law Alo's annual Christmas visit, while the song plays in the background (25). Upon his return from Dublin, and just before he learns of his mother's death, Francie finds Bennie surrounded by the discarded fish tins, the ruinous culmination of a drinking session, and yet more flies: "the back door was open and the sink was full of pilchard tins . . . The flies were buzzing around them. There was curdled milk and books thrown round all over the place" (43). The sense of foreboding that surrounds the crumbling domestic space quite possibly prepares the reader for the distressing scenes that follow, particularly Bennie's death in an armchair beside the fire, after which Francie casually complains that "[no] matter what I did Jeyes Fluid or anything there was still a bit of a stink and flies about" (120)—"flies" that here and elsewhere symbolize (among other things) a decaying social order, the protagonist's mental decline, and/or a haunting relationship to paternity and heritage.

In addition, Francie's fantastical desire to "build a raft . . . and send her sailing down the river" recalls not only the cultural and social fabric of Huck's floating home, but also the ethnic configuration of that earlier craft. The raft that Huck and Jim travel on is racially mixed, in so far as its African American and Euro-American passengers find shelter under the cover of a Native American edifice—"a snug wigwam" that Jim has built (*Huckleberry Finn* 71). In Twain's era this allusion possibly reflected the relationship between tribal lands, the American economy, and the continent's settlement. After all, the raft is, as Kravitz suggests, "recovered and reconstituted cultural material from the civilization that Huck desperately seeks to leave forever." McCabe's novel also raises the connection between these three racial groups. During one notably intense scene Francie and Joe ride "off out to the river" and begin "making plans," at which point Joe says that they should "pray to Manitou" and "ceremoniously" names Francie "Bird Who Soars." The boys become blood brothers and "blacken" their faces, painting "equals signs under [their] eyes." The episode ends with Francie describing Joe "hunched up in a blanket, paring sticks and saying yamma, yamma, yamma, praying to the Manitou" (49). This dramatic action carries numerous significations, all of which are important to an understanding of McCabe's interrogation of Irish identity. On one level, by echoing the exchange of rites that takes place near the beginning of Twain's novel (in which Huck, Tom, and others solemnly swear in blood), the scene possibly reinforces the notion that Francie and Joe are simply engaging in time-honored modes of child's play. On another level, the dialogical intersectionality among African American, Native American, and Irish identities could appear to be an instance of intercultural communion or a recognition of common experience through which Francie and Joe identify with positions of alterity or difference. Recent scholarship (Coleman, for example) appears to support this comparison by providing evidence suggesting that abuse in Irish indus-

trial schools was possibly akin to that suffered by Native American children in Christian schools during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Irish marginality thus forms a discursive territory in which Francie's experiences can be associated with the narratives of other oppressed groups.

When interpreted in a less positive light, however, the scene becomes yet another instance when African American and Native American experiences are either belittled or appropriated by European forces. The possibility of this second reading arises largely because an initial sense of intercultural understanding is progressively—and perhaps incurably—problematized by the fact that the type of play in which the boys engage effectively objectifies other minority cultures—and not least because Francie's and Joe's blackening of their faces recalls the progressively sinister effect of the Irish involvement in minstrelsy in America during the nineteenth century. As Robert Nowatzki points out, although “minstrelsy was [initially] a means for native-born white Americans to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the Irish (along with African-Americans and other ethnic groups), Irish-American minstrel performers gradually became more ‘white’ and ‘American’ as a result of denigrating (or at least differentiating themselves from) African-Americans—by performing their Irishness in ways that were less derogatory than the ‘stage Irishman’ stereotype and by asserting their American patriotism” (163). Within this context, the boys’ “blackening up,” although perhaps revisiting racist attitudes towards the Irish, conceivably underlines the occasions on which the Irish consciously (and paradoxically) chose to mimic the “Other” in American culture in order to move closer to a Caucasian mainstream, providing further evidence for Toni Morrison's claim that “the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony” (8).¹²

The fact that *The Butcher Boy* is set in the 1960s and was first published in 1992 further complicates the typical understanding of Irish alterity. Despite recent world-wide economic turmoil, Ireland has, since the early 1990s, become a more prosperous and confident nation than it once was. Consequently, Francie's “blackness” might be read in light of the rather bemusing cultural commentary offered by Jimmy Rabbit in Alan Parker's 1991 hit movie *The Commitments*. There, Rabbit proudly argues that “The Irish are the blacks of Europe. Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland. North Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin” in order to validate a Dublin band's appropriation of African American soul music. Even in the early 1990s this line was comedic, and Roddy Doyle (the Irish author of the novel from which *The Commitments* was adapted) explains that Rabbit's comparison was not intended to compare Irishness with African American alterity in a literal sense, even if the use of the taboo *was* intended to underline the socio-economic “reality” that during the 1980s Ireland was still the “poor man of Europe” and therefore marginalized.¹³

¹² Indeed, Morrison's latest novel, *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf, 2008), works, she argues, to dissemble the categories of race by presenting a time in America before color became the single greatest index of personal freedom. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU>>.

¹³ “The Commitments: Looking Back” (Parker). Rabbit's line in the novel states that “the Irish are the niggers of Europe” (13) and so on, but director Alan Parker felt that the use of the term was too insulting to use in the adaptation.

Yet, even if Francie is analogously deploying the trope of blackness, this does not solve the problem. Whereas *The Commitments* teasingly mobilizes blackness as a means to form an interracial understanding, the harrowing violence that concludes *The Butcher Boy* suggests a darker, more threatening exploitation of minstrelsy. Francie's "deadpan" ultimately masks a murderous intent. The horribly confused reference to Native American spiritualism that unfolds during the boys' games thus serves as a painful reminder of the American cultural commonplace of appropriating the other's identities—what Philip Deloria calls "playing Indian"—in order to construct an American self (17). McCabe constructs, then, moments that could, on the one hand, be viewed as positive instances of cultural fusion, but which, on the other hand, are as likely to appear to be instances of typecasting and misunderstanding.

What causes this parody to be particularly disconcerting is Francie's highly stylized references to the American frontier throughout *The Butcher Boy*, as well as the manner in which those references mesh with historical narratives of the Irish in America. Francie is the incarnation of both the "hordes of wild Irishmen" and the "army of fighting settlers" (Syndergaard 19–20). His wildness in Clones takes the form of the skewed, amoral narrative that once sanctioned the violence of the American West. He employs the celebratory vernacular of the frontier and at a very early stage in the novel utters the immortal John Wayne line "Take 'em to Missouri!" (8). Undoubtedly evoking Huck's intention to "light out for the territory," his infatuation with moving westward underscores the Irish role in settling the territory west of the Mississippi. Francie's reference to Missouri even recalls the fact that the Missouri River was vital to the settlement of the "territories"; indeed, that is why the Missouri is also the river that Twain's runaways hope to turn onto once they have followed the mighty Mississippi. The significance of this connection deepens when we recall that the Mississippi and the Missouri later served as important commercial avenues of transnational and international exchange.¹⁴ If there is a "transatlantic frontier," as Gibbons compellingly suggests there is, then the stream of exchange and contact also flowed through these great rivers. Moreover, as Bercovitch notes, Huck's immortal wish to flee towards freedom would have been read by a nineteenth-century audience as dependent upon the genocidal campaigns against the Native American during the 1880s. I suggest that this implied genocide is revisited by the "butchering" in McCabe's novel. More to the point, the Irish author's deployment of argot and imagery from the American West quite readily recalls the historical instances when the Irish—the formerly colonized—became the aggressors. Indeed, in spite of the seemingly harmless nature of Francie's waywardness, there is, then, a disturbing reality lurking behind the fabulism associated with Westerns and other mythologized accounts of the "territories." As a result, the novel also interrogates the extent to which the frontier in the United States "means (and always meant) not other land, but freedom . . . promise, opportunity, and hope" (Bercovitch 100). If Francie's tales about the Nugents are in part an instinctive reaction to accusations against his family, they are also an attempt to legitimize the violence that occurs at the end of the novel by echoing the rhetoric of nineteenth-century campaigns against the Native American.

¹⁴ Choctaw lands were first discovered by English merchants who landed in Florida and then availed themselves of the Mississippi as a commercial route.

New Frontiers

This stream of exchange and contact is also evident in the flow of time within, and between, both novels. Just as the “double time frame” of *Huckleberry Finn* compares the slavery of its “fictional time” to the Indian Wars of the time of its author, so *The Butcher Boy* constructs a temporal frame that examines patterns of international exchange during (and between) the 1960s and the 1980s/90s. Within this double time frame the Ireland of the novel’s “fictional time” is manifestly affected by John F. Kennedy’s administration, while the book’s earliest readership would have been concerned with Ronald Reagan’s international policies. Thus, while Francie’s Ireland is partly shaped by Cold War politics, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis and anxieties concerning the threat that nuclear and technological advancements pose to society, McCabe’s Ireland was affected by analogous fears of a Third World War in the wake of Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars program, a program that Stephen E. Miller has described as “an enormous U.S. military buildup to support an ambitious and aggressive military strategy” (19). By connecting these two presidents through its “authorial” and “fictional” times, the novel interrogates the extent to which Americans of Irish descent continue to shape foreign policy in the United States and considers how Irishness is fashioned in both a national and international context. The novel also draws attention to the fact that the political and economic justification for this “aggressive military strategy” during the 1980s borrowed heavily from the rhetoric fashioned by the American West.

The reader encounters Kennedy for the first time in chapter 3 of *The Butcher Boy*: “There was a wicker basket of lilies of the valley under the picture of John F. Kennedy. And on the music stand of the piano the ass and cart going off into the mountains of emerald gems of Ireland. It was a nice warm room with an amber glow that reached out to you and beckoned you in” (51–52). While this vision of the Nugent’s living room, in which contemporary America is encamped beside “the ass and cart going off into the mountains of emerald gems of Ireland,” might, as Cullingford has suggested, be intended to undercut the ideals espoused by Eamonn De Valera’s Irish government during the early twentieth century, it also highlights other complex interactions. In the first instance, the scene carries connotations of the globalized nature of culture. On at least some level, the Nugents have been Americanized and are a prototypical nuclear family. Indeed, Neil Jordan accentuates this point in his cinematic adaptation of the novel by clothing Mrs. Nugent in a predominantly green wardrobe. This color scheme not only associates her with the Martians and aliens so beloved by B-Movies of the 1950s and 1960s, as Laura G. Eldred sagely notes, but also links her to international capital exchanges by associating her middle-class existence with the greenback or dollar (58). In keeping with this economic theme, the proximity between Kennedy and the type of imagery traditionally associated with the Irish nation state also reflects the profoundly utilitarian nature of the link between Ireland and the United States after World War II, when a U.S. War Department Intelligence report cited “the fervent Catholicism of the Irish” as a potential “bulwark against communist influence.” By 1949 the C.I.A viewed Ireland as “a potentially valuable ally because of its strategic location” and emphasized “the need to incorporate the country into some kind of U.S.-sponsored security organization” (Whelan 68). Within this framework Kennedy’s reference to his grandfather’s “strong religious faith and a

strong desire for liberty” during his 1963 visit to Ireland easily meshes with the Cold War rhetoric that pitted Catholicism and Christianity against the communist threat. Other instances of an Irish American connection made visible in the space of McCabe’s narrative include a scene in which one of the townswomen reminds Francie that “President Kennedy was a lovely man and something would have to be done about the price of butter” (102), thereby linking the U.S. aid offered to the Irish economy through the Marshall Plan to Ireland’s support for the American president.

However, just as McCabe’s characters recognize that Irish identity is a commodity in and of itself, the novel also suggests that Irishness was of particular value to Kennedy. His position amidst the romanticized images of old Ireland underscores the diplomatic significance of the president’s visit to his Irish ancestral home in 1963, and the relaxed “amber glow” of Mrs. Nugent’s parlour offers a nonthreatening, cosy Irish setting that quite possibly elides fears created either by Cold War policy or by Kennedy’s increasingly incursive foreign policy in Indo-China. Kennedy thus benefits from his Irish heritage, and Irish morals are imbricated with profoundly American principles in a two-way stream of association. Yet, as the characterizations of Huck and Francie suggest, the fearful realities lurking behind this outwardly calm exterior are extremely difficult to contain. As a woman from Bundoran tells Francie, “I’m afraid its too late them hasn’t their peace made its no use them running whingeing now. I told them that below in the shop get out the beads now says I for this time next week it’ll be too late. We’re not afraid of Khrushchev they says. But be Christ they’re afraid now!” (171).

Nor is this apocalyptic vision simply a feature of Francie’s (fictional) time; it also would have been evident when McCabe started writing the book. Throughout the 1980s a spate of “nuclear war films . . . began adopting doomsday premises of gradual and irrevocable genocide” (Broderick 362–82).¹⁵ These narratives were in many instances a response to Reagan’s 1983 condemnation of “the Soviet Union as ‘the focus of evil in the modern world,’” wherein he “accused Communist leaders of perpetuating a ‘totalitarian darkness’ that sought the ‘eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth” (Suri 63). As in the 1950s and 1960s, then, a definite sense of apocalypse informed Irish culture during the 1980s and early 1990s. It is also noteworthy that Reagan, like Kennedy, emphasized his Irish American ethnicity in order to appeal to Irish American voters and appear more affable on the world stage. A central part of this political strategy was an “expedition” to his ancestral Irish home in July, 1984. Calculated to draw a veil over the political difficulties he had become embroiled in—both in Central America and in the nuclear stand-off with Russia—the trip attempted to present Reagan in a comforting and reassuring light. His advisors lost no opportunity to align their candidate with images of a charming and bucolic Irishness, largely in the hope of softening his hawkish image and gaining what one White House advisor called “some sort of blip on job rating” (Church). Not unlike the “deadpan leer” that both Huck and Francie adopt, the staging of Reagan’s visit was viewed by many as a cynical attempt to hide the terrible truth of the administration’s cavalier attitude toward international borders and American supremacy, with *Time* magazine describing the trip

¹⁵ A four-year period saw the release of *The Day After* (1983), *Testament* (1983), *Threads* (1985), *Population One* (1986), *When the Wind Blows* (1987), and *Miracle Mile* (1988).

as “a kind of visual metaphor for . . . [Reagan’s] foreign policy: placidity and fellowship front and center, tension and turmoil in the background” (Church). Francie’s infatuation with the American West, then, both scrutinizes the cowboy aesthetic and Christian ideals that Reagan invoked and suggests a link between those ideals and the nineteenth-century narratives created by Irish Americans such as General Meagher. Accordingly, Reagan’s mingling of frontiersman-like doctrine with references to his Irish heritage appositely forms a two-way connection between the deadly role-play in which both Huck and Francie engage, associates contemporary master-narratives of national identity, and links both to a transatlantic Irish/American space.

It is entirely fitting as well that the summer after Reagan’s visit became known in Ireland as “the summer of the Moving Statues,” when religious hysteria gave rise to “rumours . . . that statues of the Virgin Mary in grottos all around the country were seen to move and had given signs that they were about to speak” (McGahern 65). Conceivably mirroring the fervor surrounding the secret of Fatima and the supposed coming of the Virgin Mary in Francie’s hometown, this later “Moving Statues” episode can be interpreted as a response to the fear of global war—largely because of its propinquity to Reagan’s visit and the specter of nuclear holocaust to which his earlier policies gave rise. The religious hysteria evident within McCabe’s novel is thus not merely the result of small-town provincialism—as critics have argued—but instead reflects what John McGahern describes as a continuing, collective “human need” to construct folkloric or spiritual narratives that offer consolation in “an uncertain and terrifying world.” At the end of it all, McGahern writes, “Still sings the ghost, ‘What then?’”

My argument thus returns once more to the idea of spectral presences and fatherly ghosts. Francie and Huck are haunted by their inheritance of certain cultural and genealogical traits, by their place in society, by their nation’s actions towards others, by the deeds in which they themselves become embroiled, by their father’s sins. Pap and Bennie are archetypically associated with the horrors of the past and, as such, are extended metaphors for ideals that have become either eroded or unstable. Indeed, we have only to think of the dead, putrefying body of each man to confirm that connection. By interrogating the physical grossness of the “body politic” that is emblemized by the figure of the father, and by insisting that we remain cognizant of the ghosts of Meagher, Sheridan, and countless others, McCabe radically questions the narratives that frame not only our history but also our destiny. His novel both ponders this historical link and underlines the manner in which the transatlantic connection has shaped the Irish, the American, *and* the Irish American character.¹⁶ In other words, by generating an echo of Twain’s famous novel, McCabe connects transatlantic territories within a fictionalized space—largely by underlining the proximity between the two central protagonists—and makes discernible the complicated relationship between text and context, nation and world, Ireland and America. Through its intertextual connection with Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its intercultural and international association with America, *The Butcher Boy* suggests that we must rigorously and relentlessly confront the traditionally received borders that confine or limit our relationship to the past if we are to unfetter our future. Perhaps that

is largely why this essay has been intensely concerned with “the textual ghosts and haunting, both literal and metaphorical” (4), that Julie Sanders believes are present within every act of intertextual maneuver and seeks to understand their cultural, national, and historical significances. Storytelling, whether in the form of a novel or a ballad, is the ideal medium for this quest for cultural, historical, and expressive understanding. After all, McCabe explains in an interview for RTE Television, “fiction fills the gaps that continue to haunt us.”

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