

THE GATEKEEPER

A MEMOIR

TERRY EAGLETON



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Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Dedication

1. *Lifers*

2. *Catholics*

3. *Thinkers*

4. *Politicos*

5. *Losers*

6. *Dons*

7. *Aristos*

Copyright

In memory of Norman Feltes

Lifers

The convent was a squat, ramshackle building, its roof more corrugated iron than Gothic pinnacle. It was set among high walls spiked with shards of glass, forbidding enough to repel voyeurs, religious obsessives, nun-stalkers, sex offenders, militant Protestants, enraged atheists. But the walls were also there to keep the occupants in. For this was a convent of enclosed Carmelite nuns, who once the gates had slammed behind them would see nobody but their fellow nuns and a few priests and altar boys for the rest of their lives.

I was the gatekeeper. As a ten-year-old altar server in the convent chapel, I had to be on hand when a novice, perhaps nineteen or twenty-one years old, took the veil and disappeared into the place for good. She would first be dressed as a bride to symbolize her marriage to Christ, her hair cropped almost to a crew-cut beneath the white lacy veil. In some cases, no doubt, the honeymoon would prove something of a disappointment. Then she would be ushered away by her fellow nuns to return decked in the black veil and rough brown habit of the Carmelite order. I heard later of a young woman who had turned down the Carmelites and opted instead for a religious order which allowed you to wear Marks & Spencer knickers. Though I myself had no personal acquaintance with the knickers-wearing Carmelite nuns, I feel sure that they were forbidding, skin-chafing affairs, slid into place with steel bolts, as the order never missed even the mildest chance for mortification.

The bishop, an old codger from Kildare with the walk of a navvy and the face of a wino, would arrive to officiate at the ceremony. One of us altar boys would be appointed to carry his mitre, the high plush hat he wore on such occasions, while another boy would bear his crosier or symbolic golden staff. We would hold these props through white silken bands draped around our shoulders, the grubby fingers of boyhood being judged too profane. The bishop would require this stuff at various particularly sacred moments in the proceedings, and since these moments were hard to predict we would be on watch for our cue from the master of ceremonies, who had to be deft enough to help the bishop on with his hat without knocking off his skullcap.

We had to look sharp, since at one such clothing a minuscule altar boy, bewildered by the MC's impatient gestures to his temples, threw the last vestiges of secular rationality to the winds and ended up solemnly placing the richly embroidered mitre on his own head, in a surreal parody of the proceedings. The boy with the crosier had the ticklish task of handing the bishop this ornate, outside version of a shepherd's crook while simultaneously going down on one knee and kissing the Episcopal ring. Later in life, describing this piece of acrobatics to some agnostic friends, I realized from their ribald laughter that the phrase 'going down to kiss the bishop's ring' had a rather more salacious meaning than had occurred to me at the age of ten.

Once the *Te Deum* had been sung and the ceremony was ended, the newly clothed sister would be taken on hand in the convent parlour to say a last goodbye to her family. The parlour, a kind of no man's land or air-lock between the nuns' enclosure and the outside world, was a completely bare room bisected from floor to ceiling by a black iron grille. There were closed doors behind the grille on the nuns' side, and symbolic spikes jutted ominously from it at the visitor. The nuns' side of the parlour connected with the intricate bowels of the convent, while the other side opened through a double door on to the outside world. Both these external doors had to be closed before the door behind the grille could be opened, one of the many arcane rules of the house.

It was my job on these occasions to conduct the young woman's parents into the parlour to see their daughter for the last time. They would kneel shyly on the profane side of the grille, partly out of piety and partly because there was nowhere to sit, while their newly-wed daughter knelt smiling on the holy side, her veil thrown back, chaperoned by a kneeling reverend mother whose veil would be lowered. Catholicism seemed to be mainly a matter of kneeling. There was a touch of the zoo about the scene, as though the young creature behind the bars was some exotic, well-nigh extinct species, the reverend mother was her proud keeper and her parents a couple of venerating animal enthusiasts. Then, after a few shambling, perfunctory words had passed between parents and child, the reverend mother would nod discreetly to me, like an officer giving the go-ahead to an execution squad, and I would hold the door of the parlour open for the mother and father to leave, shutting their daughter from their sight for ever as they groped their way sniffing from the room like a couple of blind beggars. Somebody had to do the shit jobs.

For all its drab outer appearance, the convent was Gothic enough in its own way. It was really two separate spaces hinged cunningly together: the sealed interior of the nuns' quarters, and then, outside the enclosure, a few public rooms, a small chapel open to local people, and the lay sisters' dingy apartments. These two spaces met in a kind of faultline of turntables, concealed doors, secret compartments, small cupboards accessible from both sides, so that the whole building was a sort of *trompe l'œil*, like a crazy house at a fairground or an Escher drawing. It was as though the familiar world could open at any moment on to an alternative universe, only inches away from it yet incomparably remote. It seemed a reasonable image of the religious life.

It was also an image of my fissured life as a child. One moment I would be playing tag outside the corner shop, and the next moment I would slip through a black hole into a realm unimaginably remote where my Protestant friends could not follow and where secular reason slithered to an abrupt halt. The convent was both drab and outlandish, mundane and full of mystery, as the odour of incense mixed with the smell of cabbage water and young women with flat Mancunian accents, whose real names were perhaps Mary O'Connor and Agnes Byrne but who were now Sister Teresa Maria of the Holy Cross or Sister Francis Josepha of the Little Flower, slept on wooden planks, rose before dawn to pray and were constantly hungry.

That the place was set on the fringes of Manchester made it seem even more bizarre, as though one were to stumble on a genuine moated castle in the middle of Memphis. There were drawers which slid

noiselessly inwards when pulled from behind a wall, turntables which spun spookily without apparent human agency, and the eyes of immured virgins observing you through one-way screens. The drawers and turntables were to be found mostly in the sacristy, another place of passage between inner and outer worlds. Here the priest and altar servers donned their robes for Mass, while the sister sacristan spectrally concealed on her side of the wall, placed vessels for the Mass in a drawer which would slide suddenly open like something in an inept horror movie. One or two of the more roguish priests would amuse the altar boys by feigning terror when the drawer shot out, pulling imaginary pistols or staging grotesque coronaries.

There was also a turntable in the wall for larger items to be passed in and out of the enclosure, and from time to time this would include the convent watchdog, Timothy. Watchdogs are as necessary to convents as wimples. Sometimes I had to lug Timothy on to the turntable so that he could be taken into the enclosure, as though required for some secret bestial rite. I would hear the sister sacristan murmur '*Deo gratias, Terry*' through the wall, which was really a holy way of saying 'Hi', to which I would reply, '*Deo gratias, sister, Timothy is coming in now.*' Then I would heave the dog on to the splintered wooden turntable and crank him round from my side while she tugged away from hers. He would disappear from sight, lugubrious and rheumy-eyed, the only male creature ever to penetrate the enclosure. Perhaps they blindfolded him when he reached the other side. Once or twice I had to repress a mad urge to leap on to the turntable myself, hands lolling and tongue drooping, growling and slavering as I was hauled in.

One whole wall of the chapel sanctuary was another grille with more symbolic spikes, and from behind this the sisters heard Mass through a one-way screen of faded black cloth. This meant that they could see the altar servers as we pottered around the altar; in fact we were the only males, however mildly so, they ever saw. They did not regard the priest as a man. We, however, could not see them. (At least I saw only their mouths, when they received communion. I would stand beside the priest at a small hatch in the grille, and as one mouth after another presented itself fleetingly in this dark space I would hold the heavy silver communion plate beneath it like a solid napkin, ready to catch any sacred host that fell. After a time I became as familiar with these thirty or so mouths, some puckered and sparse-toothed, others moist and well-furnished, as I was with the letters of the alphabet.

None of the mouths seemed adorned by a beard, which struck me as strange. For I was convinced that there was a ginger-bearded nun in the place, having caught an appalling glimpse of her on one of the rare occasions when I was allowed into the courtyard leading to the enclosure. An elderly nun was sick, and I accompanied the priest as he took the blessed sacrament to her, swinging a thurible and carrying a lighted candle, I can't remember which. There were two large garage-like doors which led into the depths of the convent, and as the priest and I approached them they glided mysteriously open from the inside, as gates sometimes did in the movies. As we passed inside them, I could not resist the Lot's-wife-like temptation to turn and look at whoever was behind one of the doors. I saw, or thought I saw, a plump, middle-aged nun with the standard-issue peaches-and-cream complexion, but with coarse, hog-like ginger bristles sprouting from her chin. Maybe this moment of hermaphroditic horror

is a false memory, or maybe not: if a nun did have facial hair, it would have been a sinful act of vanity for her to pluck it out.

The only time I actually spoke to a nun was when Sister Angela taught me the Latin I needed to serve Mass. I would meet her for an hour a week in the parlour, she kneeling on her side of the grille and I kneeling on mine, and her veil would be lifted since I was only eight or nine years old. Her pubescence suddenly seized me like a fit of the shakes, cracking my treble and pimpling my cheeks, and the veil would have clamped down like a safety curtain. Once I had hair on my own chin, I was no longer allowed to see the hair on theirs. Mother Angela had the regulation-issue flat Mancunian accent and peaches-and-cream complexion, like a cross between *Coronation Street* and *The Sound of Music*. She was shrewd, forthright, and I suspect, in some other life altogether, a good laugh. Years later when I had some reputation as a leftist theologian, I came back to see her, and despite my undeniable post-pubescence she lifted her veil. But this was because the Catholic Church was now awash with a tide of reform which was lapping up even against this outpost of ascetic traditionalism. She greeted me with her usual dry friendliness, but expressed the hope that I was not 'too radical', though I am sure she knew that I was. The pale-faced urchin whose pronunciation of 'laetificat' she had gently corrected was buried for ever beneath a truculent intellectual with a Julius Caesar haircut. At this turbulent time, all the religious orders were struggling to recruit and losing members hand over fist, monks and nuns hopped one after another over the glass-spiked walls to find spouses, jobs in social work and Marks & Spencer knickers. It was like an ecclesiastical version of *Escape from Colditz*.

There were two lay sisters in the convent, one dumpy, deaf and sardonic and the other asthmatic, obsequious and permanently flustered, who did the shopping, ran the errands and acted generally as a link between inside and outside worlds. Otherwise, the nuns were linked to the outside world only by the sun and rain. The enclosed sisters would have had no idea who the prime minister was or what a television set looked like, since they read no newspapers except a papist rag modestly entitled *The Universe*. (It is said of the Catholic author Hilaire Belloc that he once obtained admission as a press correspondent to a high-level conference by loftily informing the doorman that he represented *The Universe*.) If a clutch of atomic bombs had laid waste Europe, the nuns would have known nothing of it until the fall-out began to drift their way. Indeed, some of them would never have heard of atomic bombs or Elvis Presley or washing-up liquid, used a telephone or been aware that India was no longer part of the British empire. What limited truck with the secular world they needed to survive was delegated to the lay sisters. My mother, who was a kind of convent groupie, was assured by one of these sisters that when she arrived in heaven, the two sons whom she had lost as infants would come to her as grown men. Even my pious mother saw fit to wonder how she had come by this remarkable piece of information.

My father sometimes did odd jobs around the convent, and once dashed into the sanctuary during Mass when a candle keeled over and set an altar cloth alight. For a few dramatic moments he was in full view of the sisters behind their screen, no doubt the first male animal apart from Timothy and the altar boys that some of them had clapped eyes on for thirty years. As I have mentioned, they did not

regard priests as men. Some of the senior altar servers did not quite regard themselves as men either at least in the stereotypical sense of the word. There was a lantern-jawed Irishman with a mild touch of religious mania who always seemed reluctant to take off his vestments when Mass was over, and spent a little time admiring himself in the window before doffing his cassock with a sigh. There were of course, no mirrors in the convent. The nuns were Dracula-like in their distaste for them.

One elderly nun was said to be afflicted with the stigmata, though 'afflicted' is perhaps too impious a word. Like most stigmatists, her anatomical knowledge seemed less than accurate, since she was said to bear the marks of Christ's wounds in her palms, whereas crucifixion must surely have been through the wrists. I have no doubt that a convent full of permanently immured celibates could breed the odd miracle, given the long-range psychical havoc that a single disturbed adolescent could wreak. The greatest miracle to its credit, however, was the reclaiming of Tom McCormack.

McCormack was an Irish navvy who lived close to the convent, and a notorious lapsed Catholic. Even in those pious days, being a lapsed Catholic was almost acceptable; it was rather like being a country rather than a city member of a club, still on the books but less in evidence around the joint. 'Lapsed Catholic' was a convenient label for ensuring that you never actually left the Church; it simply shifted you from one ontological category to another, rather like resigning your peerage but staying on in politics. In any case, it put you in some remarkably distinguished company. Better to burn with Graham Greene than share paradise with Bing Crosby.

McCormack had not been to Mass for years, and was a boozier to boot. One Christmas Eve however, as midnight approached, he and his wife heard the convent bells tolling as they lay in bed. They were actually ringing for midnight Mass, a practice which had recently been reintroduced. But McCormack's wife concluded that the convent was on fire, and got her husband to dress and run down to help. He stumped down on his stiff leg to find the congregation filing dutifully into the chapel, and was greeted like the prodigal son by the enraptured lay sisters. Unable to back out, he stayed for Mass and from then on ritually returned every Christmas. He did not, however, go to Mass on Sundays, no doubt judging this to be a little immoderate, as well as detrimental to his mildly louche status as a lapsed Catholic. His wife had had her own miracle some years before, when her son's ship had gone down in the Atlantic during the war, and she heard him calling to her. It seems a lot more credible than the Immaculate Conception.

People sometimes talk of the monastic life as escapist. Never to handle money is a privilege reserved for royalty and ascetics. But while not knowing that Europe has just been wiped off the map is a luxurious kind of ignorance, there is another sense in which being in a convent is about as escapist as being in Wormwood Scrubs. True escape would mean getting out, not staying in. The late-night drunk who once clambered over the Berlin wall from west to east in a fit of absent-mindedness was not trying to escape. The life of these young women was harder than a Victorian housemaid's. Most of them, no doubt, were too young when they signed up to have much to sacrifice in the first place; it was not as though they were abandoning rock-star boyfriends or glamorous careers as neurosurgeons. Most of them would have known scant comfort at home: the majority of English Catholics, then as now

were of Irish working-class stock rather than cronies of Evelyn Waugh. Their renunciation of the world was perhaps as much ignorance as courage; they could be free of it because they were already like a teetotaller taking the pledge. Taking the veil was a way of quarantining oneself from occasions of sin, since a convent offers few opportunities for really spectacular vice.

It may be that the corridors of the place surged with lust and bile, strewn with the detritus of lesbian orgies and sour with the stench of spiked ambitions. Perhaps those ghostly turntable conceals murderous rivalries and libidinous rituals, unspeakable rites in which cockerels were drained of their blood and some plump young postulant was held down on the altar to have her gizzard slit, while her weird sisters blasphemously gabbled snatches of the Mass backwards in their cracked Northern voices. One kind of postmodernist would be interested only in whether they were having sex with each other. Even if they were not, there would certainly have been some bickering and bitchery, cussedness, sour temper and erotic entanglements, a whole complex micro-politics.

Even so, it is hard to organize genocide or refugee-running from a convent cell, or force Burmese children into slavery. These pious late adolescents did not take the veil because they abominated the world and abjured the flesh, since they knew too little of such things in the first place. The world from which they abdicated was mostly one they cherished, a place of parents and siblings, not of greed and exploitation. Only some obscure impulse of love could have driven them to this joyless existence, as tough as a goldminer's and as thankless as a bum-bailiff's. They rose to pray several times during the night, ate like birds, had no personal possessions, and needed enough forbearance to spend the rest of their days confined with a bunch of crankish others within the same bleak walls. It was rather like opting to be banged up in a broom cupboard by Hezbollah.

Most of them, then, were probably somewhere midway between martyrs and suicides. The martyr freely surrenders a life which is precious, whereas the suicide shucks off an existence which has become worthless. Suicide is also usually a private affair, whereas martyrdom is a kind of socializing of one's death, placing it at others' disposal so that, to adopt a phrase of Auden's, it may be modified in the guts of the living. Choosing to repudiate what you cherish may be foolish, but at least it is not suburban. These women deliberately threw their lives away, a gesture which requires the defiant absurdism of the Dadaist rather than the calculations of the actuary or the zeal of the do-gooder. In refusing the powers of this world, their existence became as pointless as a work of art. It is true that in the 1950s women they would not have enjoyed much worldly power in the first place; but their lives were religiously plucked a public point from this impotence, converted it to a collective symbol.

Timorously conservative as they were, like almost all English Catholics of their day, they would not have regarded the religious life as in the least political. Indeed, it was not, at least in any orthodox sense of the word, which was just what was political about it in a more subtle sense. They prayed for the conversion of Russia yet were communists themselves, who ritually avoided the first-person pronoun and spoke instead of 'our (reverend) mother', 'our dog', 'our dustbin'. No doubt they each owned a toothbrush, but they had no clothes of their own, not even underclothes, and no need of a comb. They believed fervently in wives being submissive to their husbands, and were radi-

separatists long before the phrase was invented. Their vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience left them as free from material encumbrances as a guerrilla fighter, who can ill afford to be hampered by mortgage. There was plenty of common-or-garden, non-optional poverty in the area around them. It was my home town of Salford, which even today is rated the unhealthiest city in the United Kingdom and which in those days could hardly boast a lower middle class, let alone an opera house. But by freely assuming what for others was a fatality, perversely choosing what for the rest of us was just to be endured, the nuns turned it into a symbolic statement, raised it to the second power. In living their own lives, they were saying something about ours. In divesting themselves of the world they were prefiguring their own deaths, dying every moment; so that the ultimate self-abandonment of death which for the rest of us is a matter of coercion, would become in their case a kind of free act.

What was most subversive about them, however, was their implacable otherworldliness. There are tough-minded types who believe that this world is the best we can muster, some of whom are known as materialists and the rest as conservatives. Whatever they call themselves, the hard-nosed realists who claim that there is no need for another world have clearly not been reading the newspapers. The nuns, by contrast, acknowledged in their own eccentric way the wretchedness of human history, which they would no doubt have called the sinfulness of the world, and were thus the reverse of the bright-eyed liberal modernizers.

Preposterous as it may seem in these pragmatic days, they clung to the quaintly outmoded view that there was too much cruelty and aggression in the world for it to be merely accidental, or solvable by piecemeal reform. They were thus freaks and deviants, at least from the standpoint of those moderate, reasonable folk who suspect that there is nothing much awry with the planet which a touch of more mutual understanding, a spot of civil rights or a few more bags of grain might not patch up. Nothing could be more extravagantly idealist than such streetwise realism. It is rejected by most intelligent conservatives, though not for the same reasons it is spurned by the left. Like socialists and nuclear physicists, but unlike pragmatists and positivists, the nuns were never so parochial as to believe that what they saw around them was all there could ever be. For them, the flaw of the world ran so deep that it cried out for some thoroughgoing transformation, known in their jargon as redemption. Short of this, things were likely to get a lot worse.

Their view of human history, whatever one might say of their solutions to it, was thus entirely realistic. Inventories of carnage are usually suspect. But it was reckoned in 1970 that the number of humanly caused deaths in the twentieth century, by far the bloodiest of historical epochs, stood at about 100 million. Thirty years later, countless more massacres would need to be added to that figure. The story of humanity has been one unbroken din of hacking and gouging, as any history of the world will confirm. Few narratives are more grossly improbable. For the first few aeons, hardly anything of interest happens, and the characters are mere sketches for credible, well-rounded human beings. Then, as if desperate to sustain the reader's drifting attention, the author throws the last shreds of realism shamelessly to the winds, brazenly squeezing his storyline for every last drop of sensationalism. A dwarfish Corsican corporal conquers a large slice of the globe, while a demented Georgian peasant

butchers millions of his own countryfolk. In a absurdly extravagant flight of fantasy, the joint wealth of the three richest men in the world is said to equal the combined wealth of 600 million of the poorest. A sickly sentimental twist of plot has no less than an implausible 200 babies in the world's poorest countries die every hour. As the fable lurches erratically towards its later stages, the last semblance of narrative unity shatters into a mish-mash of wars, famines, tyrannies and revolutions, with sub-plots left hanging carelessly in mid-air, the same incidents mindlessly repeated, characters hastily recycled and potentially fruitful storylines casually aborted. Nobody would believe a word of it for a moment.

Certainly my Carmelites did not. In their own way they would have agreed with Henry Ford that history is bunk, which is why they were where they were. Not to escape from history; the convent was not a life-raft in a storm. But not to change it either; they could hardly reform a world they never set foot in. Their role was to symbolize the kind of drastic self-abandonment which the world would need if it were to become just. They were a sign not of what was to be done, but of how much it would take. And this, no doubt, is one reason why right-thinking liberals, along with a good many socialists, would think them a little over the top. So, no doubt, would some feminists, since self-sacrifice has traditionally been a woman's speciality. From this viewpoint, the only redeeming feature about these nuns was that they were not in the service of men. Or at least they were in the service of one man only, and he, being conveniently absent from earth, required no cooking, laundry or sexual comfort.

They did not, of course, believe that history was *just* bunk. That would have been an excessive Protestant point of view. Indeed, it would have been heretical. If humanity was beyond hope, why get up several times a night to pray for it? Raymond Williams, writing in his book *Modern Tragedy* about those for whom the death camps signal the blasphemy of all hope, declares this, too, to be blasphemy in its way; for if there were those who built the camps, there were others who died trying to destroy them. Marx called history a nightmare, but he thought there had to be a way of dreaming which might allow you to wake up. The worst nightmare, of course, is to think that you have woken up only to discover that you are still dreaming, and there are plenty of political examples of this. But if history was to be undone, it could only be from the inside. The Christian gospel invites us to contemplate the reality of human history in the broken body of an executed political criminal. The message this body proclaims, as the theologian Herbert McCabe puts it, is uncompromising: if you don't love you're dead, and if you do love you'll be killed.* Here, then, is the pie in the sky, the opium of the people, the sentimental twaddle of salvation.

I was to study tragedy later, at Cambridge. But by then I had already known one broken, despairing body.

This creed contrasts with the delusions of those who imagine that the future will be pretty much like the present, only rather more so. 'The present plus more options', as someone remarked of postmodern pluralism. Whether or not the future will be worse, it will certainly be hard to recognize. The seriously bizarre idealists, those with their heads buried most obdurately in the sands, are the hard-nosed fantasists who live their lives as though the IMF, Clint Eastwood movies and chocolate

chip cookies will still be up and running in 3,000 years time. Compared to this crazed common sense the hairiest, most wild-eyed apocalypticist looks like a tepid liberal. Equally science-fictional is the belief that capitalism will finally get round to feeding the world. If the political left had promulgated such a transparent absurdity for as long as its opponents have peddled this lie, it would have been howled down without mercy.

These Carmelites lived as though history could disappear down the plughole at any moment, which is the simple truth. But if it did, then it would find them with empty hands, bodies cleansed as far as possible of desire, and so would not catch them napping. They could pull a fast one on death by acting it out in their lives, performing their own demise and thus cheating it of its terrors. By being in but not of the world, their existence was a kind of irony; but in courting one form of irony they needed to avoid another. They were not to strive to make life sweeter by political action or works of charity since this would bind them to the very world they repudiated. Instead, their role was to bear witness to the passing away of that world, prefigure in their own lives the death of history, by proclaiming in an eye-catching theatrical style how little really matters in the end. Their business was simply to take pity on the plight of humanity, and to intercede ceaselessly on its behalf. No anodyne whiff of social hope, no square-jawed ideology of progress, was to be allowed to obscure the truth of just how dire things were with us, and of just how much it would take to repair them.

* * *

Years later, I was to encounter a very different set of nuns. They were American sisters from various religious orders, 200 or so in all, and I was teaching them on an MA course near New York. It was the fag-end of the 60s, and the air was effervescent with insurgency. These were new-style nuns of a distinctly non-penguin appearance, devotees of mascara and Che Guevara, full of psychotherapeutic wisdom and fatiguing American zest. There seemed nothing they did not find exhilaratingly positive from a plug of matted hair in the sink to a rusty hubcap, and when we trooped off to Broadway to see *Hair*, with its ten seconds of furtive nudity, a few of them had to be restrained from climbing on stage and cavorting around. They could sense the Holy Spirit stirring in a corkscrew or a bag of chips. Unlike Sister Angela, they turned somersaults at Mass, and occasionally turned up at class dressed like the *New York Times* to highlight the importance of human communication. They sang a strange blend of Joan Baez and Gregorian plainchant and enjoyed Being Themselves.

They were not ascetics, but modish young women in lipstick and high heels who smoked and drank, as Americans still did in those days, and seemed to regard religion as a free form of psychotherapy. There was a Dutch psychiatrist teaching on the course, who made the disastrous misjudgement of allowing one of the nuns to consult him privately. Before the week was out there was a queue of them of Yankee stadium proportions outside his door. They submitted MA theses which consisted of video film of themselves in touch with Nature, scampering around the campus lawns in profanely tight shorts, running barefoot up tree-trunks or listening intently to what the grass was murmuring. I soon learned that it was not really done to refuse anyone the MA, since the sisters

provided a lucrative source of income for the college. At Mass, an orgy of hugging and Dylanian croaking from which they reeled away tearful and semi-orgasmic, they filed up to the altar one by one and squirted wine into the chalice from a lemon squeezer, to demonstrate the sacredness of the commonplace. In place of more traditional religious greetings, they murmured slogans to each other like 'The bread is rising' or 'He's coming, He's coming!', which I took to be eschatological rather than erotic, and gave each other hamfisted versions of the Black Power salute.

We went to visit a Headstart programme for pre-school children in a deprived area of Manhattan and one of the sisters took a black child on her knee and asked effusively for a needle and thread to mend a rip in his jeans. This seemed embarrassingly like trying to fix a busted rib with a band-aid, but the African-American running the programme wandered off instantly to fetch a sewing kit. It was more sensible to make use of these women than self-indulgently denounce their liberal delusions. They were hot for redemption, but lived in a Woodstock-like world where there was no need for it. Their government was meanwhile busy butchering the Vietnamese. Everyone seemed to feel comfortable in their bodies, except perhaps for the Vietnamese. One of the nuns wrote me a paper comparing *Coral Island* with *Lord of the Flies*, observing as she handed it to me that she had not actually been able to read *Coral Island*. Since knowledge in those days was oppressive and uncouth, this made the essay well worth an A. Most of them probably went over the wall a few years later, and are now social workers or business executives. Since they believed in anti-élitist spirit that nobodies should be different from anyone else, they ended up doing themselves out of a job, like those radical 60s professors who ought logically to have sat at the back of their own classes and barracked.

Some years later, I encountered a similar kind of culture when I was a visiting professor at San Diego. My first undergraduate class seemed to consist almost entirely of half-naked young people who had just wandered in off the beach. One or two of them seemed to be wearing flippers, and I caught sight of what looked suspiciously like a snorkel. There was a general air of wetsuits and surfboards. I delivered a robust, impassioned first lecture, which they seemed to appreciate in their sun-dazed, slily-eyed way. After class, one young man dressed only in a pair of vermilion-coloured knee-length trousers padded across to the podium and thanked me for the session. 'But d'ya know what professor?' he said. 'You're trying too hard.' He went on to confide with touching concern for my welfare that most of his fellow students were either drunk or doped, and were really not worth the energy I was misguidedly lavishing on them.

These were heady times for Catholics. In the wake of the second Vatican Council, a surge of spiritual renewal had seized the Church. Bishops were mocked and heckled, while lay people clamoured to hear their own confessions and took to curing anyone they could lay their hands on, diseased or not. Priests who had kissed one another in private for decades began to do it in broad daylight. There were some startling overnight changes of personality, as aloof, ascetic monks suddenly reinvented themselves as raucous thigh-slapping Trotskyites or threw aside their habits for shaggy sweaters and bellbottomed trousers. Sometimes they would appear with one arm slung defiantly round a liberated nun decked out in a sack dress, beads and sandals, but still unmistakably

clerical around the pink cheeks, sensible hair and cheerful countenance. The kiss of peace during Mass, when you would turn and embrace the stranger beside you, began to last so long that priests wondered whether to break it up by ringing a handbell.

Just as the Bolshevik artists had taken drama out of the élitist theatres into farms and factory yards, so Mass was now being celebrated in pubs, kitchens, car-parks, swimming-pools, perhaps even the occasional telephone box. Some enthusiasts wore wooden crosses around their necks so cumbersome that it was hard to know whether they were practical or ornamental. Young men foamed brownly at the mouth during Mass, while downtrodden housewives who had previously been heard to say little except 'Your dinner's getting cold' began babbling deliriously in tongues. It sounded to the sceptical ear suspiciously like a garbled version of Home Counties English. Everywhere people were meditating, levitating, joyfully masturbating. Nobody was making dogmatic moral judgements any more. One liberal-minded bishop, asked in public how he would judge a couple engaged in extramarital sex, replied that rather than condemn them from some lofty vantage-point he would like to 'get alongside them'. A fellow prelate, faced with a similar query, responded that he would like to 'expose himself to them'. The English Catholic Church's leading theologian, gradually persuaded that the Church was about as charitable an institution as San Quentin, threw it all up in disgust and ran off with a woman called Florence. 'Pope to Visit Florence' threatened the headline of the papist press, but it turned out to mean the city. While students were organizing sit-ins, progressive Christians were staging pray-ins.

Catholics who organized their own Masses tended to use cheap sliced bread for the eucharist, in a gesture of solidarity with the underprivileged. More upmarket Masses would go in for brown wholemeal or a few tasty croissants. A few feisty Young Turks, eager to get in touch with the masses, clamoured to use hamburger and Coke for the eucharist, but were slapped down by others who insisted that these were unacceptable not because they were untraditional but because they did not constitute food and drink. Then, in a revolutionary move, the Vatican decreed that wine as well as bread could now be used for the eucharist. There were teething troubles with this visionary new dispensation. One elderly priest at Westminster Cathedral, shaking with nerves at his first Mass with wine for the people, grotesquely overdid the supply and filled several large chalices with the stuff. It proved however, to be a sparse congregation that morning, and since each of them took only a shy sip of the unfamiliar liquid, the priest found himself bearing six and three-quarter chalices of consecrated wine back to the altar after communion. Since this was now the blood of Christ, he could not of course pour it down the sink or lay it aside for a booze-up later. Instead, he began dutifully quaffing it off, chalice by chalice, until he was clutching on to the altar to keep himself upright. After the ceremony a group of altar servers carried him off into the sacristy and deposited him in a chair, where he could sleep his eucharist off.

* * *

The *éminence grise* lurking behind the more political currents of this resurgence was a Dominican

friar named Laurence Bright. It was several years after we had become friends that I learnt that his name was actually Ronald, and that Laurence was his religious name. This came as a mild version of the jolt one might experience in discovering that one's wife was a professional assassin, or that one's aunt was really one's mother. He was a tall, willowy man, part cherub, part satyr, with an improbably large, grey-thatched head, huge, *faux-naïf*, absurdly erotic blue eyes, flaring clown-like nostrils and a pouting sensuous mouth. He cooed rather than spoke, and his body was so long, knobbly and rubbery that he seemed to have permanent trouble in keeping its various stray bits and pieces reasonably united. He was a connoisseur of small absurdities, and would pounce on them with the delighted eye of a botanist discovering a rare species of plant. He had something of a camp, suavely malicious manner, though its origin – if the two could be distinguished in those days – was less queerness than the quadrangle, and he would lounge sardonically down a snow-bound street wearing only a shabby clerical suit and his trademark, surreally long blue scarf. The suit was too short in the sleeves, so that there was a touch of an overgrown Dickensian orphan about him. He looked like a cross between an Edwardian roué and Dr Who, and how he had washed up as a friar seemed only slightly less of an enigma than cosmic wormholes or the Bermuda triangle.

He had, in fact, started out as a card-carrying agnostic. He had been a nuclear physicist at Oxford and at the time was evidently well to the right of the Tory Party. But at some point he became an Anglican, perhaps, so some speculated, in reaction to some of the military uses of his scientific work. He was, in effect, working on the atomic bomb. Then, somehow, he drifted from high-Tory Anglicanism into the Catholic Church and left-wing politics. This was perhaps partly because of his relentless intellectual clear-sightedness: once he had persuaded himself that capitalism was morally disreputable, he put his unsavoury past behind him with characteristic briskness and never looked back. But there was also, despite his air of a spiritual *flâneur*, a strain of going the whole hog about him, which might help to explain some of these otherwise eccentric shifts of allegiance. Roman Catholicism was a kind of logical step from Anglicanism, and getting himself ordained rather than just cheering from the back pews was another such pushing of the matter to its inexorable limit.

Something of the same aversion to the middle ground maybe accounted for his curious trek from far right to far left, though this had its logic too. In a sense, he transferred his Wildean disdain for the suburban masses from élitist contempt to revolutionary politics, as indeed did Wilde himself. Being a radical socialist simply supplied Laurence with a whole new set of reasons to find the middle class irresistibly amusing. Patrician *hauteur* could thus be converted into radical courage. I have seen this over the years with a number of public-school Marxists, who are brought up to be afraid of nobody and can then place this enviable insouciance at the service of the political left. It is the ex-working-class radical who wonders whether he ought to wear a tie to the left-wing book launch. Perhaps Laurence was conscious of his incongruity, as a bizarre blend of Brideshead and Bolivia, Evelyn Waugh's Anthony Blanche and a guerrilla fighter. He knew, no doubt, that his incessant cooing and camping and satiric chortling would have been grotesquely out of place in a trade union meeting, but the qualities these things reflected also meant that he wouldn't have minded. Anyway, the British

Communist Party at the time, with whom we Catholic leftists had a brief, uneasy association, was still with types who would have been filed by Central Casting for walk-on parts as country squires, scoutmasters or classicist dons. In fact quite a few of them *were* scout-masters and classicist dons.

Laurence may have been an oddball on the left, but he was nonetheless granted the accolade of the other man who influenced me most at the time, Raymond Williams. Williams met him briefly, and commented to me later that he was 'a real man'. Since Williams was reluctant to concede reality to most of the people he encountered in Cambridge, this was a genuine compliment. Like myself, Williams felt ill-at-ease with the flamboyant semiotics of English upper-class life. Indeed, the fact that he did depressed me, since I hoped that by the time I reached his age I might have outgrown the impulse to smash in the face anyone who brayed rather than spoke in restaurants, sported a cravat and said 'rarely' when they meant 'really', and Williams was ominous evidence that I might not. But he was shrewd enough to see through Laurence's Mertonian mincings to the unswerving commitment beneath. He could see that he belonged with the class of foppish secret agent who fusses over his brand of mustard but could kill you with a matchbox. Certainly Laurence could give people a nasty knee-jerk in the ideology while seeming only to pass the time of day, from which it would take them weeks to recover.

Anyway, Williams himself knew all about the crossing of class signals. He was a source of perpetual faint bemusement to his Cambridge colleagues, since though he clearly had a world-class mind he also wore his hair at collar-length, rolled his 'r's' like a Cornishman, wore roll-neck sweaters and looked more like a farmer than a don. He had the wrong voice for his placidly authoritative air and the wrong face for his superbly unruffled poise. His very presence deranged the conventional categories, and his fellow dons gathered inquisitively round him like zoologists around a dolphin whose low droning might just be a recitation of the *Iliad*.

Despite his mildly raffish air, Laurence lived a threadbare, hand-to-mouth sort of existence. He had no real function within the Dominican order, but this meant that he could live the on-the-hoof life of a friar to the full. As a cross between Oscar Wilde and a footloose cleric, he made himself up as he went along, sauntering from pray-in to anti-war demo in a scintillating piece of self-improvisation. His upper-class grit allowed him to live without anchorage or nostalgia. Though he seemed extraordinarily self-sufficient, he must surely have been lonely, but he remained suitably stiff-lipped about it. Like a lot of clerics, he compensated for the loss of his traditional comforts by being a highly skilled scrounger, who could relieve you of the price of an upmarket meal as fast as he could save eschatology; but Catholics understand that their clergy need to be consoled for their fleshly deprivations, and are not averse to tipping them a few bob. When I travelled on a bus as a child with my father, and a brace of priests or clutch of nuns clambered on board, my father would always pay their fare for them, and signal shyly to them that he was doing so, though they were almost certainly a good deal better off than he was.

Laurence, to be sure, was somewhat selective in his fleshly deprivations, ending up in a cover relationship with a young woman who had come to him to take instruction in the Catholic faith.

knew of several examples of this kind of spiritual backfiring at the time. It was a bit like consulting a psychiatrist for alcoholism and finding yourself having a glorious piss-up with him. Another priest who found himself in this situation, a former scientist like Laurence, told me with grave irony that since he and his client had been discussing the Church's teaching on sexual morality, he regarded the subsequent sexual congress as 'practicals'. It reminded me of the time when I was about to get married to a Catholic, and was told by the local curate that since I had been brought up in the Church I 'wouldn't need all twelve lessons, just the six'. The idea that one could have lessons in being married seemed strange, and I wondered what they might consist in. Surely not trial sex in the sacristy? Cookery, perhaps?

It turned out to be instruction in the theology of marriage, though I had scant faith in the theological credentials of the curate. On my first visit to him, I passed a young man, evidently under similar instruction, walking away from the priest's room with a bemused, faintly desperate expression on his face, while the curate stood at his door bellowing after him in a broad Northern accent: 'Don't worry, it's all a mystery! It's all a mystery!' These words were the standard formula for explaining away any patent absurdities or illogicalities in Catholic doctrine. If you couldn't quite bring yourself to believe that God wore a tartan jockstrap, you could console yourself with the reflection that how why he did so was all a mystery. I had once heard this same curate give a sermon on the ascension of Jesus into heaven, which began with the words: 'There are a lot of things we'd like to know about Our Lord's ascension, such as how did he manage it?' It was not quite the high theological tone of Laurence Bright.

It was at Laurence's suggestion that a group of us, mostly Catholic undergraduates at Cambridge, launched a left-wing Catholic journal called *Slant*, which ran throughout most of the 60s and caused something of a fluttering in the cloisters. The name of the journal, indeed the very same design, was finally adopted by a porno magazine, which Laurence spotted one day in a Soho shop-window and gleefully circulated to the former editors. Nowadays people write the odd doctoral thesis on the Catholic left, which I suppose is one up from oblivion. But it was Laurence Bright who finally liberated me from my stiff-necked papist correctness. I was a socialist, to be sure, but I was anxious to know how far to the left a Catholic could go without falling off the edge. So I asked Laurence, who replied with a coo and a cavalier gesture, 'Oh, as left as you like.' It seemed there was no edge at all. The New Testament's answer to David Lodge's question 'How far can you go?' is, of course, never far enough. And only a Catholic would think it was about sex.

Laurence died of stomach cancer while still fairly young. He died in his brave, brisk, thorough commonsensical way. Not long before his death he visited me in Oxford with his partner, an accomplished organist. I watched him standing by himself in the college chapel as she played one of his favourite organ pieces for him, head bowed, shoulders hunched, still in his tattered clerical suit despite his errancy, looking as usual like an elongated question-mark. He knew he was dying, though I did not. He shall always stand like that, listening with head bowed, in my mind.

Catholics

The boy who first revealed to me the facts of life was clearly a Protestant, since he seemed to have read a little scripture. As the hair-raising news of human reproduction assaulted my scandalized ears, I resorted to the only defence available to me. 'Well,' I rounded on him, 'maybe that's how *Protestants* do it...'

Just as the convent bore only a tenuous relation to reality, so did Catholicism as a whole. Its esoteric doctrines seemed no more applicable to everyday life than trigonometry was applicable to pressing your trousers. Like magic, it was a highly determinate system but entirely self-confirming with all the exceptional clarity of an hallucination. Catholicism was less about good deeds than about how to keep the charcoal in your thurible alight or knock another fifty years off your allotted time in purgatory. It was less about charity than candelabras. We were pious and heartless, strict-minded and mean, pure-living and pagan. There was a crazed precision about the Church's doctrinal system, rather like those geography textbooks which record the height of Mount Everest as exactly 29,006 feet, or railway timetables in some ramshackle region of the world which announce the departure of a train at 11.03 a.m. It resembled the insane exactitude of the psychotic whose mathematical calculations are impeccable, but who is carrying them out perched on a window-ledge thirty floors up. For some, this might sound a reasonable description of literary theory.

All this bred a peculiar kind of intellectual neurosis, such as wondering whether the Pope's declaration of his own infallibility was itself infallible. Like most Catholic children, I made my first confession at the age of seven, which the Church judged in its pre-Freudian way to be the age of reason. But I was worried about how far back I had to go in recalling my sins, since I was not certain exactly when, scientifically speaking, my seventh birthday could be said to have begun, or whether a act committed on the very dot of becoming a rational entity could be sinful. It was a Beckettian universe, at once rigorous and absurd. Everything was both definitive and elusive, in a strange blending of mystery and transparency.

In that sense, perhaps, it was the usual world of childhood writ large, since childhood is a mixture of self-evident truths with an alarming inability to grasp what is going on. Like Beckett, too, it was a world of compulsive rituals, not of agonized inwardness. In soundly anti-Cartesian spirit, you did the proper thing and the appropriate state of mind would follow. As with the acting technique of Laurence Olivier, you built from the outside inwards, and so were at odds with a social order which made a fetish of interiority. You kept your charcoal alight and your incense dry and trusted that the rest would thereby be given unto you.

You were raised, then, to be suspicious of the warm glow, the intuitive certainty, the ineffable

private experience. Truth had to be publicly argued for, reasoning was to be respected, and the criteria for inner states lay in what you did. You could baptize a baby dying in the womb by inserting a water-filled syringe into its mother's vagina, since what mattered was the action itself, not human relationships or contexts of meaning. The magical and the materialist were thus closely allied. On Easter Sunday, a Catholic priest of my acquaintance encountered on the street his Anglican opposite number, who raised his hand in greeting and called out to him joyously: 'Christ is arisen.' The priest's comment in private later was unequivocal: '*Silly bugger.*' Religion was not something to get sloppy and personal about; it was more like launching a ship than falling in love, a set of public rituals to be precisely executed. Unlike the Anglican clergy, you did not clasp someone's hand in both of yours on first meeting and stare meaningfully into their eyes.

A Catholic aversion to subjectivism went along with a working-class allergy to emotional ostentation, and both were underpinned by an Irish devotion to the tribe rather than the individual. Going to confession was about as emotionally stirring as buying a pound of carrots. It was certainly not confessional in any sense that Oprah Winfrey would recognize. A radical stress on material practice, on the public, collective, symbolic dimensions of selfhood, was entwined with a callous impersonality which could make even Stalinism seem sentimental. The Church set its face against a phoney subjectivism, and was as indifferent to individual feelings as a psychopath. One of the few attempts to humanize religion I recall was the priest who tried to argue us out of impure thoughts by reminding us that 'the Blessed Virgin has breasts too'. This was about as effective a remedy for adolescent lust as urging a drunk to bear in mind the tawny sheen of a glass of Glenfiddich.

Catholicism was a world which combined rigorous thought with sensuous symbolism, the analytical with the aesthetic, so it was probably no accident that I was later to become a literary theorist. You did not see reason and mystery as incompatible. There was no danger that you could murder God, or a poem, by dissection. If the universalism of your faith encouraged you to ride roughshod over the particular, all those garish icons recalled you to what could be seen and handled, to the material world as signifier or sacrament. Yet it was a deeply un-English culture even so. To be Catholic was not really to be English, rather as being a Jew was not. They were both alternative cultures, as opposed to being, say, a Congregationalist, which hardly seemed a culture at all.

But though you were a minority yourself, you were not brought up to prize the crankish or lovable idiosyncratic, to rejoice in the thought that there's nowt so queer as folk, or clamorously approve of him who stands alone. You were rather more English in not particularly admiring innovation, since what millions of men and women had found fit to believe over the centuries seemed a surer guide to the truth than the fancy notions some eccentric loner had dreamt up overnight. But you were not an English liberal in relishing plurality as a virtue in itself, or thinking that it would be a funny world if everybody thought the same. On the contrary, you considered that it would be a splendid world if everybody thought the same. You knew that it took all kinds to make a world, but regarded this as a misfortune rather than a virtue.

This is not, perhaps, as Neanderthal an attitude as it seems. If cultural diversity is part of what

makes life worth living, it has also brought a great many lives to a bloody conclusion. The call to celebrate such diversity is nowadays the merest cliché in the mouths of theorists and politicians; but it is only when cultural difference can be taken for granted, rather than defiantly affirmed, that it will have ceased to be a source of conflict. It is also likely that far fewer people would have been slaughtered and abused if all human beings had been black, gay and female from the word go, apart from a few males and heterosexuals here and there to keep the species ticking over. To affirm human difference without reckoning the terrifying price we have had to pay for it is the kind of liberal sentimentalism which Catholics, for all their aberrations, were trained to sniff out.

You grew up as a Catholic, then, lacking all instinctive feel for the liberal sensibility. If this was a grievous loss, it also allowed you to see what was wrong with it. Conversations were not strewn with nervous qualifiers or mined with self-doubting disclaimers. There was no particular virtue in not being certain. You did not doubt your faith for a moment, not because you were magnificently steadfast but because it was not the kind of thing that could be doubted, any more than one might query the existence of pubic hair or prime numbers. Faith is a cleaving to whatever you find you cannot wade away from, however hard you try. What we find ourselves unable to relinquish even at the point of death, when it is ourselves that we relinquish, is definitive of who we are; and this is not on the whole something we can choose, like a hat or a hairstyle. But you cannot have faith in what cannot logically be denied. You could not doubt your personal commitment to God because you had no personal commitment to him, any more than you had a personal commitment to the Panama Canal or the concept of near-sightedness. You did not value something because you had chosen it, but chose it because you thought it valuable. Later, as a student at Cambridge, I was to flirt briefly with existentialism, but this was just a high-falutin way of announcing that I was a depressed, disoriented late adolescent, as post-structuralism was to be for some of a later generation.

One can move fairly freely, then, from Catholicism to Marxism without having to pass through liberalism. The path from the Tridentine creed to Trotskyism is shorter than it seems. My own school involuntarily produced a distinguished socialist barrister, a full-time organizer of the International Marxist Group, the most left-wing member of the executive of the National Union of Teachers, a clutch of radical philosophers and economists, and myself. Friends who discover today that we all attended the same school imagine that it must have been the kind of place where doped-up pupils swing barefoot from trees all day, vote to abolish physics lessons, couple openly on the lawn and call their teachers Jane and Sam. But it was simply an obscure Catholic grammar school which was unwittingly transmitting a sense of cultural alienation to its students, along with some of the conceptual tools by which they might make sense of it.

Despite the benighted autocracy of their church, Catholics are prime candidates for the political left. They are, at least in Britain, usually of working-class immigrant stock, are taught to value systematic thought, feel at ease with the collective, symbolic dimensions of human existence, and are wary of subjectivism. They also understand that human life is inherently institutional, prize communal tradition over individual inspiration, and believe that things are alarmingly bleak but could be

unimaginably better. Like socialists, they are far too down-beat for progressive-liberal taste, and far too hopeful as well. They also inherit a fertile tradition of ethical and political thought, and are not afraid to think ambitiously. As the most enduring cultural institution which history has ever witnessed, surviving across the farthest-flung pockets of space and time, Catholics know a good deal about historical change, but a lot about continuity as well. In all these ways, few types could be less easily recruitable to the ranks of postmodernism. Being expected to believe in papal infallibility and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, not to speak of learning to excuse torture and moral brutality, being sexually assaulted by priests or battered by sadistic nuns, was admittedly a high price to pay for this schooling, but one had to take the kicks with the ha'pence.

But Catholics also tend to the left because of their instinctive aversion to liberalism, which is both admirable and disabling. They make good authoritarians, a species which socialism has attracted in plenty. It is one of the left's embarrassments that its eminently reasonable project exerts an irresistible fascination for those who need to work out their father-complexes or resolve their Kleinian ambivalence. Any socialism which fails to base itself upon the great liberal inheritance, for which Marx had such profuse praise, is likely to prove bankrupt. So Catholics and leftists need to learn from liberals about the mixed, ambiguous nature of things, the charm of nuance and singularity, the difficulty of determinate judgements, the preciousness of the fleeting and fragile, the pathological shyness of truth. Liberals, for their part, need to learn that when it comes to the major political conflicts which rive our world, there is no standing judiciously in the middle. In each of these cases someone is roughly in the right of it and someone else in the wrong of it; and in clinging to this faith non-liberals are in the right of it.

We Catholics were of course a minority in England; but we did not value the marginal or the minoritarian, in the manner of a later postmodernism. On the contrary, it was we who had a monopoly of truth, and the majority who were out of line. They were the deviants from our orthodoxy, the bulging periphery to our slim centre. While we rested calmly upon metaphysical certitudes, they blundered around in the outer darkness spouting such absurdities as religious tolerance and the notion that Jesus might not have been an only child. Like many a minority group, we combined arrogance with paranoia, the self-satisfaction of the elect with the malicious anxiety of the insecure. We also combined the dissidence of the outsider with a conservative will to belong. It was rather like being a homosexual Tory or an *haut-bourgeois* black. Or, indeed, like being an Ulster Unionist. The Queen was never as much ours as she was the Protestants', and there was always a hollow croak in our patriotic cheering, a mild sense of duplicity.

My North-of-England grammar school was almost wholly populated by Irish teachers and clerics along with second-generation Irish pupils. But I was unaware that names like Doyle or Farrell or O'Dwyer were in any sense out of the ordinary, since I have no memory of the words 'Irish' or 'Ireland' being used throughout the whole of my school career. Naturally not: the task of these raven-boned, huge-handed Brothers, themselves refugees from small farms in Clare or Kerry, was to wipe the last traces of bog from our souls and pack us off into middle-class England. It was not wise

these circumstances to tout an intimate knowledge of hurling, or betray the fact that one returned home in the evening to parents with Waterford accents. We were Irish, but we did not know we were even if most of us came from families embarrassingly larger than the English sociological norm.

The school launched us out into bourgeois Britain with enviable success. It had an especially distinguished geography master who infiltrated a bit of geology into us on the side, and one day he was busy informing us that a particular piece of rock was so many millions of years old. A small boy at the back of the classroom, with a rural Lancashire accent so thick that he sounded like an Albanian hot-foot from his very first English lesson, put up his hand and asked: 'Please sir, 'ow do we know?' Gratified that he had sparked a rare flash of intellectual interest, the master explained a little about carbon dating. The boy in question, now based in the USA, is one of the world's leading vulcanologists, and when I once happened to fly near an active volcano in the States, I could be sure that he was perched in one of the small scientific aircraft which were darkening the sky around us. Now, no doubt, he knows all about how we know.

The headmaster of the school, Brother Damian, was a white-haired career sadist from an undistinguished Irish town called Ballyjamesduff, whose only other achievement had been to produce Henry James's grandfather. Helping to nurture one of the world's great novelists, however, was hardly sufficient compensation on the town's part for bringing forth Brother Damian. He ought certainly to have been strangled at birth, or buried alive in infancy in some desolate stretch of bogland. He had the solid physique and florid complexion of an Irish farmer, but was to exert his muscular energy on maiming small boys rather than digging potatoes. Another Irish-peasant Brother, with a passing resemblance to a psychotic turkey, taught woodwork, and rumour had it that the floorboards of the woodwork room concealed a number of fresh young corpses, their flesh carved by chisels into occult designs familiar to Freemasons or Knights Templar.

Damian spent his life in charge of the spiritual development of children, and had about as much human understanding as a tortoise. Though he did not actually lower the trousers of his teaching staff and beat them strenuously on the bottom, he treated them in every other way as he treated the first-formers, so that teachers and pupils were thrown together in an unspoken pact of loathing and dread. It was a point of pride with him to discourage sinful individualism by not knowing a single one of his pupils by name. Since several thousand pupils must have passed through his hands, most of them literally so, this was an achievement on a level with discovering a new galaxy or biological species. He was as indifferent to individuals as a lavatory attendant, and regarded his students simply as potential sources of academic glory. Anxious to inculcate English ways into his Gaelic flock, he made us play rugby, sing the national anthem, and meticulously recorded our fathers' occupations. I remember my father's sudden choked silence as, sitting to obedient attention before this monstrous monstrosity in his study, he was asked abruptly what he did for a living, and responded in an unnaturally loud voice with the only lie I ever heard pass his lips.

It was a morally bankrupt, superbly successful school, packing off the odd pupil to Cambridge, as high-risk a business then as a moon-shot in the early days of rocket science, and generally grooming

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