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## **Home and Away: Imagining Ireland Imagining America**

***Shaun O'Connell***

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Fintan O'Toole says, "'Home' is a word that has no meaning without 'away.' . . . The further away 'home' is, the larger it looms. Home was not the place you were living in, but whatever was least like it."<sup>1</sup> Applied to both Irish émigrés and Irish Americans, these important concepts of place are at once determinative, dialectical, and irresolvable.

Henry James, whose paternal grandfather emigrated from County Cavan, found, "It's a complex fate, being an American, and one of the responsibilities it entails is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe."<sup>2</sup> It is even more complex being Irish in a land divided against itself in so many ways. For Daniel Corkery, "the hidden Ireland" is located in its suppressed Gaelic tradition; for Thomas Kinsella, lost language and political occupation created Ireland's "divided mind." For Declan Kiberd, "the English helped to invent Ireland," and it was the post famine émigrés who carried "a burden which few enough on native grounds still bothered to shoulder: an ideal of Ireland."<sup>3</sup>

This compound, complex sense of native and foreign place is illustrated and illuminated in two recent works of fiction that dramatize transnational, conflicted consciousnesses among the Irish who cross the Atlantic to seek the promise of American life and among nostalgic Irish Americans who look across the seas to their lost land of memory and desire. But O'Toole's neat division between "home" and "away" blurs in the lives of representative fictional characters who crisscross between Ireland and America and end up neither here nor there; they become men and women without a country to call home.

Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy* (1998) and Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn* (2009) offer revealing parallels and contrasts that enrich the discussion of Irish and Irish American identities.<sup>4</sup> In each work an ambitious Irish lass comes to America in the pursuit of happiness in the mid-twentieth century; each finds love on Long Island in the arms of a likeable American lad; but each buys her American happiness at the price of a deceit that turns her fleeting American dream into a nightmare from which she never wholly awakes; both return to Ireland, at once enriched by experiences and depleted of ideals after their American adventures; one remains, unhappily enmeshed in Ireland's nets of habit and duty, while the other sadly returns to America to fulfill her obligations.

In each novel the young Irish woman's dark deed is revealed, for these works of fiction are shaped by Catholic consciousnesses, that is, by writers who know that passionate actions have moral consequences and sins must be confessed. Toibin, an Irish writer, posits an America, land of the free, as an open, inviting place but exacting in redeeming promises made; McDermott, an American writer, portrays an Ireland that is magical, a little bit of heaven, but finally a closed, bitter place.

Each author reveals how an imaginary landscape across the sea affects the sense of place, how "away" redefines "home."

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Toibin's novel, told in a detached, omniscient voice derived from Henry James's "third person intimate narrator," is concerned with status and stunted growth in both nations, illustrated by his representative young woman, Eilis Lacey, who leaves behind comfort and confinement in an Irish town and discovers discomfort and freedom in Brooklyn: employment as a salesgirl, opportunity for self-development at Brooklyn College, and fulfillment in the love of Tony, an Italian American plumber.<sup>5</sup> McDermott's more oblique novel—narrated by a young Irish American woman, whose evocation of lost raptures echoes Nick Carraway, Gatsby's ghost writer, for she is trying to piece together the story of Billy Lynch, who died of drink and disillusionment—is less concerned with status and more engaged with issues of faith, religious and personal. The Irish young woman in *Charming Billy*, Eva Kavanaugh from Clonmel, is marginal to the novel's plot, making a brief but dramatic visit to the Long Island shore, working as a nanny; she serves as a catalyst for the novel's Irish American concerns, while her counterpart in *Brooklyn*, Eilis Lacey from Enniscorthy, remains the central focus of the plot. Despite these differences, however, both Irish women find America a land of great expectations where their dreams are fulfilled, but also where they become subsequently disillusioned; there they experience realizations of love and loss; there they initiate deceits that alter many lives in two countries; there their actions convey each author's sense of what it means to be Irish and Irish American. Through the travels and trials of these young women, both authors show that "home" and "away" are ambiguous and shifting terms.

Both writers have wandered from their original home grounds, but they return in memory and in fiction. Alice McDermott was born in Brooklyn and came of age in Elmont, on Long Island, in the late 1950s, a place, as she remembers it, of wholesomeness and innocence, symbolized by the dairy where they went to refill their milk bottles. Half a century later, McDermott, who lives in Maryland and teaches at Johns Hopkins, has a more comprehensive perspective on her family's background. "As an adult and as a writer, I've come to realize that children of immigrants like my parents moved out to Long Island because they were yearning for something better." Her Irish American family invested little in the dream of Ireland. "I had friends who did step dancing and their families longed to return, but we were middle-class Americans in the suburbs first and foremost, far before we considered ourselves Irish." Indeed, when she finally traveled to Connemara, her daughter said it reminded her of East Hampton. The Long Island shore, the East End for McDermott's Irish Americans, was a "magical place," a version of heaven here on earth, just as it was for F. Scott Fitzgerald, who portrayed it as "the fresh green breast of a new world."<sup>6</sup>

Colm Toibin came of age near another shoreline—the Wexford coastline along the Irish Sea, where he has recently built a house, timber-clad with an iron roof and large windows looking across fields to the sea. The house is not far from Enniscorthy, where he grew up and where much of *Brooklyn* is set. "One of the advantages of being down here now is that I can see this place much more clearly—different weather or even the way people talk, I can get that better than I could just working from memory." Toibin has frequently drawn on Enniscorthy and the Wexford landscape in his fiction, but as an aspiring artist as a young man, particularly as a gay young man in the locked-down Irish social atmosphere of the 1960s, he yearned to fly past its nets of conventional expectations. Like young Stephen Dedalus, Toibin considered the priesthood as a way up and out, and like Stephen, young Colm rejected this option and studied at University College Dublin. Then Toibin traveled to Spain, where he found freedom of self-expression, "cruising ground of the highest order," in Barcelona. His first work of fiction, *The South* (1990), traces the quest of a Wexford farmer's wife who leaves her family to start a new

life in California. *Brooklyn*, some twenty years later, pursues the same theme: escape from Ireland's dark provinces to the bright promises of American life. Reflecting on the theme of exile in his stories, Toibin says, "All of them I think are about people who are uncomfortable with ideas of home and who are in one way or another alone."<sup>7</sup> That said, Colm Toibin is happy to return to his new home, midway between Enniscorthy and the Irish coastline, just as Alice McDermott finds solace in her returns to the Long Island shore. For both writers, standing on coastlines looking east, youthful aspirations meet with adult achievements in the art of fiction. That is, for both writers, the intersection of land and sea embody a place somewhere between home and away.

In Toibin's *Brooklyn*, Eilis Lacey, a timid young woman, comes of age in Enniscorthy, in the era of Eamon de Valera's "Catholic nation," bound in by lower middle-class conventions and low expectations. Toibin's Enniscorthy is yet another Irish "valley of the squinting windows," as Brinsley MacNamara titled his 1918 novel about just such a fictionalized village, Garradrimna (based on Devlin), in Westmeath. Enniscorthy, however, is a real enough town in County Wexford, with considerable historical resonance. Its castle, built by Norman settlers in 1205, was once inhabited by Edmund Spenser, a gift, suspect legend has it, from Queen Elizabeth for composing *The Fairie Queene*. Nearby looms Vinegar Hill, site of nationalist rebels' defeat and slaughter at the hand of British troops in 1798. During the 1916 Rising, the Irish Republican Army reoccupied Vinegar Hill and cut the rail lines to Dublin. Thus Enniscorthy is defined by its history of occupation and resignation. Though this burdened past is not part of the Lacey family's consciousness, it is evident in the names of the streets that enclose Eilis's fixed place. Friary Street, Church Street, and Castle Street lead to shops in Market Square and to the Athenaeum, where young women like Eilis attended dances to meet their future husbands. Saint Aiden's Cathedral stands as a sentry, overlooking the town and the River Slaney.

Eilis's father has died and her three brothers have gone off to work in England. Only she and her outgoing older sister, Rose, remain at home to care for their aging mother. Eilis has learned accounting at the vocational school but cannot find work for which she was trained in Enniscorthy, so she takes a part-time job as a Sunday clerk in Miss Kelly's shop in Market Square, where she is schooled in humility and in invidious distinctions, since Miss Kelly caters to the wealthy and the clergy but cannot give the time of day or sell put-aside bread to the common folk who shop after Sunday Mass. With her friend Nancy, "who worked in Buttle's Barley-Fed Bacon behind the counter," Eilis goes to a dance at the Athenaeum, where Nancy meets George, her intended, and Eilis is given a cool look-over by Jim Farrell, whose father owns a pub in Rafter Street (B 18). Eilis's fate seems determined: life (marriage, children, the Church) in her perpetual place, Enniscorthy.

Toibin's vision of 1950s Ireland, however, is dour but not determinative, since Eilis finds a way out. Rose, who accepts her fate as the unmarried daughter who stays home to care for her aging parent, invites Father Flood, a priest born in Enniscorthy and now returned on a visit from America, to tea. With his "mixture of Irish and American accent," Father Flood excites Eilis with the prospect of work in Brooklyn. "Parts of Brooklyn are just like Ireland. They're full of Irish." Indeed, Father Flood portrays Brooklyn as an idealized, fully realized version of Ireland: communal, pious, and prosperous. "A lot of life centres round the parish, even more than in Ireland. And there's work for anyone who's willing to work" (B 24). Eilis is drawn to this paradoxical prospect of a cohesive Irish community combined with American individualism.

She is quickly caught up in the plan to forget Ireland and to seek riches and happiness across the Atlantic. "While people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one

who went to America missed home. Instead, they were happy and proud. She wondered if that could be true” (B 26). Eilis’s middle passage to New York is a trial of discomfort and seasickness, a kind of rebirthing rite, though she is buoyed by advice from her brother Jack, imparted before she sails from Liverpool: “time and patience would bring a snail to America” (B 35). Toibin’s *Brooklyn* tests Eilis Lacey’s Irish pursuit of happiness in mid-twentieth-century America.

With the help of Father Flood, Eilis settles into a rooming house and takes a job as a clerk in a department store. Walking the streets of Brooklyn, from Atlantic Avenue to Fulton Street, “she knew she was getting close to the real world” (B 61). Still, she suffers from homesickness, at first reconstructing an idealized counterimage, an Ireland of the imagination, “walking with her mother down by the prom in Enniscorthy, the Slaney River glassy and full, and the smell of leaves burning from somewhere close by, and the daylight going slowly and gently.” But then she is visited by disturbing dreams of a harsher Ireland: at the courthouse at the top of Friary Hill “sometimes the court ordered children to be taken into care, put in orphanages or industrial schools or foster homes because they minched from school or caused trouble or because of problems with their parents” (B 66, 70). Seen from afar, Eilis’s homeland offers mutually exclusive myths of family nurture and public imprisonment. Her own conflicted future is thus prefigured.

Brooklyn offers Eilis the gift of an ideal Irish ritual when Father Flood enlists her to serve Christmas dinner in the parish hall to “leftover Irishmen,” men who “built the tunnels and the bridges and the highways” (B 88). She happily thinks “it could have been a parish hall anywhere in Ireland on the night of a concert or a wedding” (B 93). When a man who reminds Eilis of her father takes her hand and sings, in Irish, “If you’re mine, treasure of my heart,” it is as though her lost Ireland had been magically restored, or, better still, fully realized (B 94). But actual Ireland remains three thousand miles, a long imaginative leap, away from Brooklyn.

Father Flood—a version of the 1950s cheery, secular, Bing Crosby priest of film fame—enrolls her in bookkeeping and accountancy classes in Brooklyn College, so Eilis puts aside Irish things and begins to create her identity as an Irish American. Though shocked by Brooklyn’s frigid winter, she loves her warm room in her boarding house—America, a land of extremes. Her world view widens when she hears about the holocaust from her Jewish instructor.<sup>8</sup> When she meets Antonio Giuseppe Fiorello, a young plumber from Bensonhurst who likes “Irish girls,” Ireland slips far over the horizon for Eilis (B 142). He furthers her Americanization by taking her to see *Singin’ in the Rain*, then to Ebbets Field with his four brothers, and then by themselves to Coney Island, where she gets over her bodily self-consciousness.

“In Ireland no one looks,” Eilis said. “It would be bad manners.”

“In Italy it would be bad manners not to look.” (B 158)

Tony wants to marry Eilis, to raise a team of Dodgers fans, and to develop with his brothers a plot of land on Long Island, where they all plan to live. Eilis resists but yields to Tony’s wishes after she gets the news that her sister, who had a weak heart, has suddenly died. Eilis makes plans to return to Ireland, but only for a brief visit, to console her mother. “Why did I ever come over here?” Eilis asks herself, as though her emigration to America had somehow caused Rose’s death (B 179). Perhaps there are lethal consequences inherent in the act of overreaching, in abandoning home for away.

Back in Enniscourty, the noose of familiarity and responsibility closes gently around Eilis’s neck. She cannot bring herself to tell her mother about her American marriage, so its reality begins to fade. Worried about her mother and pressured by her brothers to stay, Eilis puts off her

return. When Jim Farrell, the highly eligible and now eager pub owner's son, reenters her life, drawn by the glamour she has acquired in America, Eilis loses a sense of who and where she is. Her Brooklyn life—her job, her studies, Tony—seemed “a sort of fantasy, something she could not match with the time she was spending at home. It made her feel strangely as though she were two people” (B 226). When she picks up a temporary accounting job at the plant where Rose had worked, she contemplates her limited options: marriage and child care in either nation. Both Tony and Jim are naive young men who want to fit Eilis into their marital and career designs; gender roles circumscribe free choice in both nations.

Married to an American, who seems “part of a dream,” but now falling in love with an Irishman, Eilis is caught in a vise of conflicting visions of self and place. “No matter what she decided, she thought, there would not be a way to avoid the consequences of what she had done, or what she might do now” (B 246). Toibin's plot resolves her choice for her. Word of her American romance with Tony gets back to the meddlesome and moralistic Miss Kelly, who threatens exposure. “The world, as the man says, is a very small place,” Miss Kelly warns Eilis (B 255). She sadly accepts her destiny and leaves Enniscorthy, her Ireland forever lost and her American dream circumscribed.

Toibin's representative young woman traded her Irish innocence for enlightening American experience, only to realize that she cannot go home again, indeed that she now lacks any true sense of what home means. Jim would never understand her American marriage and Tony will never know about Jim, so their marriage will be based on another deceit. Eilis keeps the photos taken of her and Jim, on a romantic outing, at the Irish Sea. She will hide them away from Tony. “Some time in the future, she thought, she would look at them and remember what would soon, she knew now, seem like a strange, hazy dream to her” (B, 261). Carried away, she has no home.

While Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn* examines the transforming impact America has on an Irish young woman, Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy* examines the devastating impact an Irish young woman has on Americans. In both novels the effects are traumatic, yet enlightening journeys of lost innocence, gained understanding, and ultimate resolution. For both authors Ireland and America are at once actual places and imaginary visions that undergo radical and cautionary revisions.

Eva Kavanagh is something of a chimera in *Charming Billy*: at first an apparition of earthly, even heavenly delights; then a destructive presence who rises from the dead to spread the bitter wisdom of disillusionment to dreamy Irish Americans. That is, McDermott's novel is marginally about an actual Ireland but obsessively about what an Irish American imagines a personified version of lost Erin to be.

In 1983 a widow, Maeve Lynch, presides over an after-funeral meal at a Bronx restaurant “that, lacking only draught Guinness and a peat fire, might have been a pub in rural Ireland. Or, lacking dialogue by John Millington Synge, the set of a rural Irish play” (CB 4). There an Irish American clan gathers to raise drinks, without conscious irony, to commemorate the passing of Billy Lynch, a drunk who ripped apart “the emotional life, the life of love, of everyone in the room” (CB 6). Everyone knew that his life was ruined by his love for “the Irish girl,” as Billy's sister puts it (CB, 8). They recalled how Billy had fallen in love with Eva in 1946; how Eva had returned to Ireland to tell her family she planned to marry Billy; how Eva had died suddenly of pneumonia, leaving Billy bereft, awash in booze.

McDermott's subtle novel is narrated by an unnamed young woman, the daughter of Dennis Lynch, Billy's friend. She casts a cool, spectatorial eye over her kin and kind, seeing how they mythologized Billy's two women: Eva, the Irish beauty who died, and Maeve, the plain

American who married Billy on the rebound in 1953. “If Eva had been the beauty—then Maeve was only a faint consolation, a futile attempt to mend an irreparably broken heart. A moment’s grace, a flash of opportunism, not enough for a lifetime” (*CB* 16). The narrator is most concerned with the story her people will put together, the parish-constructed, useful fiction that will reconcile them to, perhaps even explain, Billy’s death. Did he die of love, disappointment, or drink? Billy had gone to AA and quit drinking but fatally took it up again after visiting Ireland in 1975. But why? What did his life mean to him and to his community? The narrator, a visitor from faraway Seattle, wryly wonders what difference any interpretation might make, since all earthly choices lead to death, offering the example of “Ted from Flushing, who went to AA in order to die of cancer, not cirrhosis” (*CB* 29). Her faith in the redemption myths of her Church and her people have waned, but they will be revived by Billy’s sacrificial tale.

Billy’s familiar, Irish American story of doomed drinking, however, takes a dark, intriguing turn when Dennis tells his daughter the truth: that he knew Eva lived and had married her Irish sweetheart, Tom; that Eva used the five hundred dollars Billy sent her not to buy passage to America but to make a down payment on a gas station outside Clonmel. Though he knew all this in 1946, Dennis decided to tell Billy that Eva died. His shocked daughter understands that her father had wanted Billy to keep his faith in Eva and not learn that he had been a fool. “It was an audacious, outlandish thing he was doing, and he knew the workaday world, the world without illusion (except Church-sanctioned) or nonsense (except alcohol-bred) that was the world of Irish Catholic Queens New York, didn’t much abide audacious and outlandish. Not for long, anyway” (*CB* 38–39). Billy learned the hard truth in 1975, when he traveled to Ireland to visit her grave but instead encountered a living and unrepentant Eva in a Clonmel tea shop next to a gas station. Dennis in 1983 wishes he had told his friend the truth in 1946, but he is glad Billy finally learned and “didn’t die thinking about some lovely reunion in the sweet hereafter” (*CB* 42). Audacity and faith yield to candor and disillusionment, the ways of the world. With that knowledge, the bemused narrator is prepared to tell her version, clearly McDermott’s version, of Billy’s story.

As the narrator sees it—shaping her own sense of the past and its meaning, a parable far richer and more complex than her clan’s version—Billy was overwhelmed when in 1946 he first came to the sumptuous Long Island shoreline to help Dennis clean the beach house owned by Dennis’s stepfather. Both of these working-class war veterans were struck by the sudden sight of such felicity. “This has been here,” stunned Dennis says. Billy expresses his sense of wonder: “I had no idea those places were out here. . . . It almost makes you wonder what else you don’t know about yet” (*CB* 75–77).

Billy, already prepared to be transfixed and transported, learns soon enough when he catches sight of a distant girl on the beach. It is, of course, Eva, but, as the narrator believes, Billy sees “a mirage that perhaps only wild hope and great imagination could form into a solid woman.” The “blur of colored light” on the blanket seems “the one for him.” His life is set. “It was there, that life, that future. It had been there all along. . . . That this golden future, this Eden, had been part of the same life he’d been living all along. Wasn’t that something?” (*CB* 85–89).

“Something,” indeed; something previously seen by another Long Island visionary, Jay Gatsby. Alice McDermott, like F. Scott Fitzgerald before her, articulates a prospect of felicity that explains the Irish American dream of transcendence and secular salvation: an apparition of heaven, an ideal woman created out of a dreamy young man’s creative imagination and then worshiped, a graven image. Billy half senses he had fallen in love with love when, after meeting Eva, he recites Yeats’s “Down by the Salley Gardens” to the child Eva cares for. The poem

nicely glosses Billy's overreaching imagination and his eventual disillusionment: "But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears" (CB 92).

Both of them standing over a beach fire, Eva, a Celtic brooder, says she imagines herself in hell, but Billy, ignoring this warning sign, says he imagines himself a saint, for in Eva he sees nothing less than the promise of salvation, which he also found in the Catholic Church. At Sunday Mass Billy is reassured that fulfillment, physical and spiritual, promised by his Irish girl, is certain. "Unwavering faith: This will not change. I am still here" (CB 133). His friend Dennis is doubtful that Billy's hopes will be rewarded, for Dennis is ready to settle for far less, but he also sees that the "consummation" of Billy's blind faith "would be a small redemption for all of them," that is, for his second-generation Irish American clan (CB 139). Dennis borrows five hundred dollars from his new stepfather, money Billy sends to Eva in Ireland.

After Eva betrays Billy's faith for a husband and a gas station in Clonmel—unsentimental Irish practicality versus American romantic idealism—and after Dennis tells Billy that Eva has died, Billy takes second best and marries Maeve. At a small gathering after Billy's funeral, the narrator muses on this choice: "After the Irish girl, after that other future, the brightest of them, had shattered in his hand: Here was safety, here was compensation." But Maeve weakened his resolve "to be true to his first intentions." Billy thought he betrayed his faith, so he found release in barrooms: "What he sought, what he longed for, was universal and constant." He sought redemption, nothing less than salvation. "Drunk, when Billy turned his eyes to heaven, heaven was there." And Eva was in it (CB 208–16). This Irish American dreamer-drinker becomes a low-rent Gatsby who wills the impossible, refusing to let go of the past. Billy calls one night to tell Dennis we all must rail against the awfulness of death. He will not go back to Long Island because, he says, "I won't be placated by that beauty." Reconciliation to death, Billy says, is a pact with the devil. "Life goes on, Billy," Dennis insists. "I won't let it," Billy replies (CB 238).

After his brief encounter with the embittered Eva in Clonmel, however, Billy finds more substance in his enmity than in his lost love. He resumes drinking, seeking oblivion. "Nothing, when you came right down to it, was unbreakable, unchangeable, under threat of eternal damnation. Who was kidding whom?" (CB 257). This is the narrator speaking for herself as much as it is an expression of her sense of Billy's view of human and religious disbelief. Billy's life, after all, comes to nothing less than a tale of the betrayal of a naive and loving American young man by a calculating and desperate young Irish woman; in a sense it is a parable of mutual misunderstanding and the betrayal of Ireland and America for each other, since neither nation, personified by its representative characters, can possibly live up to the great expectations of the other.

Billy's story is revised by Dennis's daughter, who drinks "Billy's drink" after the funeral, with her father, who knows the true tale, and Dan Lynch, who does not know the hard truth about his former drinking buddy. When Dan says they should have let Billy drink and find his release from pain, Dennis argues that Billy sober might have lived another twenty years. While her elders talk, the narrator "moved the ice around in Billy's drink. Give the man that much credit," she says. But silence, apart from the sound of ice at the bottom of their glasses, filled the room as they concentrated on "a way to make sense. Or else a way to tell the story that would make them believe it was sensible" (CB, 220–22).

McDermott's narrator, like McDermott herself, seeks to make her Irish America story sensible, believable, giving "that much credit" to her own kind. The Irish woman Billy thought his savior damned him with her desperation and greed, so he drank to insulate himself from the horrific truths of this world. Yet those around him believed enough in Billy and retained enough

hope for themselves to try to make a redemptive myth out of his sad life. As does McDermott. At the end of the novel—at the end of the day, as they say in Ireland—Dennis and Maeve marry, at Most Holy Trinity, East Hampton, no longer called Saint Philomena's, for she had been removed as a saint, the narrator notes.

“As if, in that wide-ranging anthology of stories that was the lives of the saints—that was, as well, my father's faith and Billy's and some part of my own—what was actual, as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed, made, when you got right down to it, any difference at all” (*CB*, 280).

*Charming Billy*, Alice McDermott says, is “about faith, and what we believe in, and above all what we choose to believe in.”<sup>9</sup>

Alice McDermott is somewhat uncomfortable being categorized and thus limited as a chronicler of Irish American life.<sup>10</sup> The material, she admits, was “readily at hand to me,” so she used it.<sup>11</sup> Yet McDermott uses it not grudgingly but beautifully, capturing the nuances, speech rhythms, and underlying values of this postwar community that ranges from Manhattan to Queens and Long Island. Her focus is communal and regional, her important places are sited within working-class communities, the Irish American boroughs of Gotham, where Ireland is a buried memory—perhaps reduced to a framed image of the Irish West or a pub ballad.

*Charming Billy* is an achieved fictional revision of Irish American myths, an informing parable of destructive and redemptive elements in Irish American life and attitudes toward Ireland, themes explored in some of her earlier novels. In *A Bigamist's Daughter* (1982) McDermott portrays a postparish Irish America in the person of a young woman who lives beyond the pale of her family and community, though she is “still Irish enough and Catholic enough” to mourn the loss of childhood certainties (*BD* 191). In *That Night* (1987) no identifiable Irish Americans appear; all ethnic communities have seemingly blurred in the larger American middle class after World War II. But then McDermott returns to the map of her native ground. *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992) is a moving parable of Irish American life and death that traces the physical and spiritual journey of the Dailey clan: first from Ireland to America, then from Brooklyn to Long Island, where her characters undergo visionary experiences; more important, from assured ethnic identity to cultural ambivalence, from Catholic certainty to secular doubt. *Child of My Heart* (2002) explores the coming-of-age of an Irish American young woman on the ever-enchanted shores of Long Island. In *After This* (2006) McDermott dramatizes the loss of Irish American, Catholic community and coherence in her dramatization of the disintegrating Keane family during the closing decades of the twentieth century. To be Irish, American, and Catholic for McDermott is to live in a secular world of transience and loss while retaining the elusive vision of some unattainable absolute, hinted at only in memory and desire: a religious vision sometimes linked to Ireland.

Alice McDermott's Irish Americans are less defined by history (by memories of their Irish past) and by community (by parishes) than by their strained attachment to the Catholic Church and their desire to translate a Catholic vision of salvation into images of secular transcendence. Take for example, Michael, the second son of Mary and John Keane in *After This*. Unlike for his meek and pious older brother, Jacob, the Catholic Church holds no meaning for Michael. “You gotta have a church,” Jacob says before Saint Gabriel's is rebuilt in a modernist design. “Why?” Michael asks. Because “people need a place to go,” Jacob says. “Bullshit,” Michael concludes (*AT* 115).

After Jacob is killed fighting in Vietnam, however, Michael goes to college and takes up with a young woman who draws in chalk on his bedroom wall “a kind of Eden” of entangled greenery

and bodies: “Something you could dismiss as a joke as readily as you could claim it as the precise illustration of everything you wanted” (*AT* 185). Inevitably, Michael marries this secular visionary. That his life turns out to be brief and unsatisfying—as McDermott reports in cold summary—does not negate his desire to seek salvation, a kind of Eden/Heaven, just as he was taught at Saint Gabriel’s.

While Alice McDermott is American and Catholic in her fiction’s focus, Colm Toibin is more Irish and familial in his journalistic and fictional concerns. While McDermott is nostalgic for the lost certainties of her Catholic childhood, Toibin’s interests in many essays reflect the aftershock of the abuse scandal that released the grip the Church has long had on Ireland. In one essay on the topic Toibin notes, “It is clear that the Catholic Church will not go away; the vast majority of citizens of the Republic are likely to remain Catholic. It is useful to remind them now and then of the people they have for so long sought to exclude and marginalise.”<sup>12</sup> Toibin, himself marginalized in Ireland by his homosexuality and his lapsed Catholicism, takes on the task of the reminder.

Toibin, an expert reader and critic of Henry James, underscores the master’s rejection of America for Europe and, in particular, his hatred for New York City, where James was born. A “terrible town,” James calls it in *The American Scene* (1904). “A vast crude democracy of trade,” he writes, a “heaped industrial battlefield.”<sup>13</sup> In his introduction to *The New York Stories of Henry James*, Toibin locates James’s anger at his birthplace in his larger sense of lost home. “James’s writings about New York disclose, more than anything, an anger, quite unlike any other anger in James, at what has been lost to him, what has been done, in the name of commerce and material progress, to a place he once knew.”<sup>14</sup> To be American, it seems for both McDermott and Toibin, is to feel somehow homeless, lost.

In a novel on James, *The Master* (2004), Toibin makes his most subtle points about the many ways Ireland and America are imagined by the English in Ireland. In 1895 Toibin’s James leaves London for Ireland, agreeing to spend a week with Lord Houghton, the new lord lieutenant of Dublin Castle. Unrest, resulting from post-Parnell divisions over Home Rule, make many Anglo-Irish big-house owners boycott the castle, so James and other guests are imported from England. James wearily attends four balls in six days and a banquet every evening. At one banquet he is told by an English grand dame, in full hearing of the assembled guests, that he, an American, has an advantage as a castle guest because “nobody knows who your father was or who your grandfather was. You could be anybody.” James, who yearned to be somebody among the English aristocracy, is deeply humiliated, though the English lady adds, “I don’t mean any offence,” thus compounding her offense.<sup>15</sup> Toibin’s invented scene dramatizes the “complex fate” of national identity for James; his émigré grandfather made his fortune in New York City, the city James later repudiated for his siege of London, a phrase he used for the title of a novella. Though, early in the Great War, James would become an English citizen, he could never shed either his family’s Irish past or his burdensome American identity.

For Alice McDermott, being Irish American is a complex fate, for her characters are pulled one way by their American dreams of success, at least for security, and another way by the demands and promises of Catholic spirituality, which at once repudiates such material reward and holds out the promise of eternal life after death. Ireland, their lost home, remains an earthly confirmation that such a home once existed for them, somehow repressing memories of the desperation (poverty, famine, persecution) that drove their ancestors out of Erin in the first place. That is, Ireland is a dream of deliverance until Billy Lynch, the American innocent from Queens, meets Eva Kavanaugh, the Irish reality instructor from Clonmel. Eva, seen by Billy at a distance

along the lush, Long Island shoreline, at first embodies his faith, his will to believe in deliverance from earthly ordinariness, indeed from death itself, but then she illustrates how little his faith was worth. Ireland, overestimated by their diasporic American descendants as a land of saints and scholars, turns out to be a desperate and craven country: Eva, symbolic woman of Ireland, is found fumbling in a greasy till.

For Colm Toibin, being Irish means never being content with where you are, home or away. Eilis Lacey moves from Enniscorthy to Brooklyn, back to Enniscorthy, back to Brooklyn, all in search of who she can become and where she belongs, finally finding herself nowhere. In the process her Irish town moves in her mind from a place of confinement to a lost paradise; her America moves from a land of individual opportunity to a place of confinement as she keeps the vows and takes up the marital obligations she hoped to escape during her brief return to Ireland. Eilis cannot go home again. Eva does return to Clonmel, trading her American dream for Irish security. Neither sad young Irish woman ever gets away, ever finds a true home.

In Robert Frost's "Death of the Hired Man" a husband and wife argue over whether they should take back Silas, a hired man who abandoned them but now wants to return. Kindly Mary says Silas has come home to die, but bitter Warren says, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." But her reply wins the argument: "I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve."<sup>16</sup> In Colm Toibin's *Brooklyn*, Eilis Lacey from Enniscorthy is fated to end up as wife, mother, and part-time accountant in a housing development on Long Island, a home she neither desires nor deserves. In Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy*, Eva Kavanagh from Clonmel repudiates America's promises and settles for a safe haven in Ireland, but she becomes an embittered woman by her choice. Neither author holds out much hope for transcendence and salvation through an ocean crossing. Ireland or America, seen from afar, experienced at hand, remains an unattainable dreamland.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), 134–35.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James to Charles Eliot Norton, February 2, 1872, in *Henry James Letters*, vol. 1, 1843–1875, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 274.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (1924), cited in *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, ed. David Pierce (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 288–90; Thomas Kinsella, "The Divided Mind," from *Irish Poets in English*, ed. Sean Lucy (1971), cited in Pierce, *Irish Writing*, 810–14; Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Alice McDermott, *Charming Billy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998); Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Susanna Rustin, "A Life in Books: Colm Toibin," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2010,

[http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/25/colm-toibin-brooklyn-family-interview?CMP=tw\\_t\\_fd](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/25/colm-toibin-brooklyn-family-interview?CMP=tw_t_fd).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ramin Ganeshram, "A Long-Ago Island Inspires Her Fiction," *New York Times*, February 23, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/23/nyregion/arts-entertainment-a-long-ago-island-inspires-her-fiction.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Rustin, "Life in Books."

<sup>8</sup> The Irish American novelist Maureen Howard finds this scene "eerie, falsely naïve." She adds, "We may accept what a village girl from Ireland, which remained neutral during the war, may not have known, but Tóibín's delivery of the racial and ethnic discoveries of a clueless young woman are disconcerting." Maureen Howard, "Colm Toibin's 'Brooklyn': Best of the Month at Amazon," *Publisher's Weekly*, cited in *Eirebooks's Blog*, July 30, 2013. Eilis, a muffled young woman, is plausibly disconcerted by encountering such information, along with ethnic and racial diversity.

<sup>9</sup> Alice McDermott, interview by Elizabeth Farnsworth, *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, November 20, 1988, PBS Newshour, podcast audio, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/mcdermott\\_11-20.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/mcdermott_11-20.html).

<sup>10</sup> Alice McDermott's other novels include *A Bigamist's Daughter* (New York: Random House, 1982); *That Night* (New York: Random House, 1987); *At Wakes and Weddings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992); *Child of My Heart* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); *After This* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> McDermott, interview.

<sup>12</sup> Colm Toibin, "He'll Have Brought It on Himself," *London Review of Books*, May 22, 1997, 9–11.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Dinitia Smith, "A Writer's Ambiguous Love Affair with New York," *New York Times*, November 25, 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B07E2D61631F936A15752C1A9639C8B63>.

<sup>14</sup> Colm Toibin, Introduction to *The New York Stories of Henry James* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), viii.

<sup>15</sup> Colm Toibin, *The Master* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 24.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 34–40.