

Heterotopic and Funerary Spaces: Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara*

Eamonn Jordan

Digging up the dead

Traditionally, the west of Ireland has been framed more often than not as a potential pastoral space, one of refuge, sanctuary and belonging, as well as a place where individuals can reflect, mature and heal. Pastoral spaces are also ones of grief, where death is accommodated and eulogized (See Gifford 7-8). Pastoral is often aligned with an utopian trope. Michel Foucault's ideas on heterotopic spaces offer a very apposite addition to discussions on the pastoral and they also link in with the notion of funerary practices, allowing one to interlink the transcendent, and its opposite, the sanctified and the de-sanctified, the notionally sociologically real and the imaginary. Writing in 1967, Foucault speaks of the fact that "contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely de-sanctified (apparently unlike time, it would seem, which was detached from the sacred in the nineteenth century)" and that oppositions between "family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work" . . . remain inviolable," as that inviolability is still "nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred" (23). While pastoral spaces notionally can be some of the better examples of idyllic sanctified spaces, that sense of "inviolable" divisions seems to no longer stand in relation to McDonagh, as he is both evoking but also disputing that "hidden sense of the sacred" in *A Skull in Connemara* (1997).

Foucault distinguishes between real, "utopian," and "counter-sites," which can be, in his terminology, "spaces of illusion and of compensation" (24). He then identifies "Crisis heterotopias," which he aligns with primitive societies; these are "privileged or sacred or forbidden spaces, reserved for individuals who are . . . in a state of crisis"; however, these "crisis heterotopias" are disappearing and are being replaced by what he calls "heterotopias of deviation" (24). Applying this terminology, Foucault notes specifically in relation to graveyard spaces that:

Basically it was quite natural that, in a time of real belief in the resurrection of bodies and the immortality of the soul, overriding importance was not accorded to the body's remains. . . . [But] from the moment when people are no longer sure that they have a soul or that the body will regain life, it is perhaps necessary to give much more attention to the dead body, which is ultimately the only trace of our existence in the world and in language. . . . The cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but "the other city," where each family possesses its dark resting place. (25)

Foucault is suggesting how the nature of graveyard spaces changes over time, in terms of significance, centrality and displacement, as the values of what these cemeteries house alters with time. McDonagh frames this through, as Foucault identifies, the “juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25). Central to *Skull* are the disinterring activities carried out annually by Mick Dowd, in order to clear an over-crowded graveyard on a rocky landscape.¹ In its blending of domestic and cemetery spaces, and in its enactment of a form of perverse, second wake or deviant non-wake, this play sets out to interrogate, de-substantiate and de-sanctify the significance of the Irish funerary tradition and perhaps its destructive hold on the imagination.

A funerary consciousness

Whether it is characters inhabiting graveyards awaiting the dead to rise in Frank McGuinness’s *Carthaginians* (1988), stories about grave digging experiences and paedophilia in *The Weir* (1997), the haunting presence of a long dead child in Marina Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* (1996) or Dermot Bolger’s *The Passion of Jerome* (1999) or the dead coming back to life as in Hugh Leonard’s *Da* (1978), Irish theatre displays an obsession with death and dying, more than with living. “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more,” is an often quoted line by Pozzo from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and the remark itself is central to the Irish cultural imagination. Jonathan Swift’s fascination, as Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran argue, with the “morbid, the bleak and the repellent established Ireland as a pathogenic zone, as a ‘good place to die in’” (72), something which Brian Friel exploits satirically in *The Mundy Scheme* (1969), where there is the idea of selling plots of land out west for the re-burial of the global dead.

Central to this positioning, is a “vernacular funerary code” which has effectively and pejoratively “reproduced and perpetuated the construction of Ireland as a place of death and fatality,” according to Witoszek and Sheeran (41). This funerary tradition is shaped by “folk representations, popular rituals, the rhetorics of the Irish media,” and by a “funerary mythology and experience” which underlies “the Irish construction of place and landscape” (Witoszek and Sheeran 13). This funerary tradition is, also, Witoszek and Sheeran continue, “reinforced by the memory of the Great Famine” and its “accompanying horrors” while “[i]t has also been further solidified by the response to the spiritual death in its various forms (despondency, resignation, passivity),

1 Maureen Murphy suggests, “*A Skull in Connemara* also has much in common with Máirtín O’Cadháin’s *Cré na Cille* (*Churchyard Clay*), a 1949 novel set among the dead in a Connemara cemetery—where the deceased natter about life and question each new arrival about the goings-on in the world above. Whereas McDonagh’s dialogue is comic in its repetitions and banalities, O’Cadháin’s characters speak in the richly nuanced local Irish dialect from a generation ago. Yet both works subvert traditional romantic attitudes toward the west of Ireland with portrayals of the mean-spiritedness and petty jealousies below the surface of rural Irish life—which even reach beyond the grave.”

threatening the Irish through the centuries of colonial oppression” (38). The two authors add that “[t]he loss of land and the displacement of the chief was very early on encoded in the metaphor of widowhood and conveyed through elaborate tropes of lamentation. It may well be that the anthropomorphization of the country as a woman in Bardic poetry lies at the basis of the funerary tradition” (38).

Imbedded in almost all societies and cultures are strategies and rituals to deal with death and the remains of the dead, including last rites, prayers over the dead, wakes, cremations and burial ceremonies. However, in some countries due to spatial restrictions, corpses are exhumed and stored elsewhere in an ossuary, without compromises to the dignity of the dead. However, most cultures are generally resistant to the notion of exhumation and disinterment and usually one needs a court’s permission to disturb a resting place. Generally, the digging up of the dead carries with it all kinds of connotations and taboos and is often sensationalized by television and cinema in terms of autopsy scenes central to many cold case investigations. It is to be noted that disinterment is not a routine practice even in rural and rocky areas of Ireland as Joan Fitzpatrick Dean observes, regarding the action of the writer as motivated by a need “to distort any easy alignment with the real” (38).

“The owl bones and the whatnot”

In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mick Dowd, seven and a half years on from his wife’s Oona’s death, faces the task of disinterring her remains, amongst many from the local graveyard. Mick supposedly had caused a motor accident which led to the death of his wife Oona, and he has served a jail sentence on a drink driving charge. Although having long completed his sentence, still hanging over him are rumours and innuendos that effectively maintain that his wife’s death was not accidental, but that he purposefully drove a car into a wall in order to disguise the fact that he had previously fatally assaulted her. However, what the gossip, the innuendo and accusations establish is the mythology surrounding her death.

In the Druid production (video courtesy of Ruth Gordon) the exchanges in scene 1, between Mick (Mick Lally in one of his great performances) and MaryJohnny (Anna Manahan, who also starred in Druid’s production of *Beauty Queen*) in particular display a mixture of combativeness and defiance, which have a certain kind of shrillness to them, with status shifting regularly between the characters. Accusations are habitually fired at each other, of cursing, of cheating at Bingo, of conning tourists, of misinformation about John Ford’s *The Quiet Man*’s film location, and of wife murder. Manahan’s Maryjohnny is a wonderful presence, defiant and naive on the one hand with a simplistic view of the world around cursing and urinating on consecrated ground, but, on the other, hugely exploitative and manipulative. For instance, the smile that Maryjohnny has for the audience at the end of the scene shows that while she is trying to settle Mick’s anxieties about local gossip and intends somewhat to placate him with her words, her facial expression suggests that she knows more; even,

perhaps, that she is the source of those aspersions, whilst remaining ever willing to drink his poteen, as some kind of perverted recompense.

Part of the challenge with this McDonagh work is to get the tone right, but also to have audiences accept the curious darkness of the piece. Strangely, the dark revelations about digging up ancestors, and about the Hanlon family feasting on meat from a cow dead for years in their field did not draw the laughter that I had anticipated, in the recording of the production I have seen. (I say this in no way suggesting that such a single recording offers any sort of conclusive proof). The action of disinterring is not only somewhat of a taboo violation in terms of the task itself, but one also finds something more sinister in the fact that Mick is to dig up the bones of his own wife. Maryjohnny, calls it a “filthy occupation” and Mairtin, her grandson, calls it “The Graveyard Shenanigans” (71). Both remain obsessed and voyeuristic, regardless of their tendencies to see it as morbid. The disinterring chore is also an opportunity for Tom Hanlon, the local police officer, to re-visit the circumstances surrounding Oona’s death, as he is hoping to unearth some evidence to charge Mick belatedly with his wife’s murder.

Although Mick explains that the disinterring activities are overseen by both the church and the law, and makes clear that what he does is carried out with sensitivity, however, what happens to bones after disinterring remains a mystery, as Mick offers differing accounts as to what he does to dispose of Maryjohnny’s ancestors. Mick settles on an account that appeases her; namely, exhuming, followed by bagging, and the sinking of the bones to the bottom of the lake, accompanied by a “string of prayers,” and not submersion in the slurry pit that he had indicated previously. Ultimately, he is bound by oath to both the police and the clergy not to divulge what he does with the bones once they are removed from the graves.

If audiences are unsure as to what they are being prepared for by all this talk about disinterring, then scene 2 opens, with Mick half way down into a grave at night time, with the remains of two corpses already extracted and bagged. In the initial Druid production, designed by Francis O’Connor, openings in the stage floor serve as two graves. The stage is darkly lit to give the impression of night time, yet there remains on stage in the darkness, the dresser, stove, kitchen table and the sink and presses underneath, whose presences are there not as shadows or as dimly lit objects, but simultaneously as strange, almost spectral presences of domesticity. David Gallo’s

design for the play's Broadway production² is significantly different to that of Francis O'Connor, but what both do is to provide a space that can cater for the play's dramatic action and for performance idioms. Ben Brantley describes Gallo's design:

That a classy warped cartoonishness is the aim here is signaled by the first glimpse of David Gallo's set. Granted, the scene on the stage itself is what we have by now come to identify as standard-issue Leenane: a simple, shabby room with desolate-looking furniture and the requisite central crucifix. But look up and you'll see, mounted upside down on the ceiling, rows of turfy grave plots with classic spookhouse tombstones. It's hard not to grin, like a child anticipating Halloween, at this inversion of the sacrosanct.

The dark play imperative of Mairtin is seen in his ghoulish and puerile fascination with skulls, in his wish to contrast the newly uncovered skull with one already in the bag, and in his comparing two skulls and holding them to his chest as if they were two breasts. He then places together the two skulls as if they were kissing one another and pokes a finger into an eye socket. The sexual dimension to such a gesture is further elaborated on when Mick talks about Mairtin inspecting the genital areas of both male and female deceased. Mairtin enquires as to what happens to the penis after death and Mick explains: "Isn't it illegal in the Catholic faith to bury a body the willy still attached? Isn't it a sin in the eyes of the Lord?" (86), and then goes further, stating that the penis is snipped off in the coffin and sold to the Travellers as dog food (87). He adds that during the Irish Famine of the 1840s, the Travellers stopped feeding them to the dogs and started "sampling the merchandise themselves" (87). Mairtin is both a fool and trickster figure, evident in the fact that when a local woman died, he put a werewolf comic alongside the body in the coffin.

This cemetery scene of course evokes the gravedigger's scene in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Roland Mushat Frye proposes that

2 David Gallo states: "I think design should speak for itself on some level, but essentially we tried to preserve the sense of isolation. The perspective is forced to give a sense of depth or endlessness to this bleak landscape. There's a murky sky-surround which will be lit a number of different ways to give it various kinds of character. The living room floats in the middle of this landscape, with no walls and no particular architecture. When it becomes the graveyard all the props go away and a series of tombstones pop up—again in perspective so there's a sense of depth. The doors on the sides vanish. Hopefully the graves floating on the ceiling above complete the idea that we're in this scary graveyard. They are a dominant motif for the piece. We wanted them to give it a feel and texture and quality without turning them into giant eye magnets. In Seattle we did the production in the round and you could actually touch the gravestones from your seat. Here they're no closer than 17 or 18 feet, and the perspective continues: as the house rakes back, the graves rake back as well. You can even read some of the names on the tombstones, including that of Mag Folan." For images of the set design also see Edelstein and Gallo.

Not only was there a broad tradition of showing a gentleman reflecting on a skull, there was even a visual tradition of setting that reflection specifically within a cemetery. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, visual representations usually show the encounter of three living men and three dead. Sixteenth-century treatments come closer to Hamlet's exchange with the Gravedigger. . . . If we view the graveyard scene in *Elsinore* only or even primarily in terms of those typically twentieth-century attitudes which seek to ignore or euphemize death, we may regard Hamlet at this point as morbid in soul and sick in mind. But if we re-establish the sixteenth-century context and recall representative examples of the raw materials upon which Shakespeare's imagination worked, we see a Hamlet here thinking through the ultimate realities of death to arrive at what becomes, for him as it had for others, a new sanity and even serenity. (26, 28).

Along similar lines Richard Fly suggests that in *Hamlet*: "The clownish gravedigger is a most formidable spokesman for the vanity and ephemerality of all human endeavour, and as Hamlet watches him working at his venerable trade he experiences in a new way the single irreducible fact of certain oblivion and general dissolution" (266).

While Hamlet's consciousness is further provoked by his experiences during the grave digger's scene, the same cannot be said of Mairtin. McDonagh's very obvious utilization and transgression of the funerary tradition is very apparent here, and he is not only confronting the centrality of death through the Famine to the Irish psyche generally or its specific hold over communities of memory, but also bringing with it a dark consideration of sexuality, death, and Catholicism, as Mairtin's innocence and naivety are exploited to the full. In the video recording of the play, little laughter greeted Mairtin's playing with skulls and holding them as if they were breasts, but the audience did laugh when Mick says it is hard to believe that Mairtin had a skull and a "brain to go with it" (85). When Mairtin pokes his finger into the eye socket of the skull, again there was little or no laughter in response, but when and during a non-scripted moment, Mairtin pretended the skull to be a bowling ball and gestures to throw it towards the audience, there was a loud laugh. Transgressive humour can be sometimes more obvious on the page than on stage, or at least easier to respond to when reading the work. Audiences can get confused by the darker implications of some comments, like the one about Fred and Rosemary West in McDonagh's *Six Shooter* (2004), when a grieving couple, who have lost their child to cot death, are compared to the notorious serial killers by the psychotic Kid character. However, the discussions around castration and the extraction of genitals from corpses did bring a good deal of laughter. Mick's comment that "the trouble with young people today, is they don't know the first thing about Irish history" (87) is warmly responded to by the audience, in part comfortable with the exploitation of the cliché and the inter-generational comment, but all the more importantly, it is a response to the fact that what he is saying is a huge lie in the first place—tinkers eating phalluses removed from corpses before burial during the Famine.

If as Witoszek and Sheeran suggest: “The Irish omphalos is the graveyard, the centre of continuity and the meeting place between the worlds” (78), it can also be equally argued that the pastoralized Irish kitchen space is just as central. It is McDonagh’s meshing of both which becomes evident and so significant during the remaining of the play. Scene 3 brings the play’s action back from the graveyard to Dowd’s living space, so that the remains can be disposed of, as a more complex reality emerges. But, having dug up the dead, Mairtin and Mick move onto the next phase of the work, which is in effect a sort of bizarre second wake for the skeletal remains of those who have been disinterred. Both men carry out their activities, smashing up the remains with mallets, with the knowledge that the remains of Oona have been stolen from her resting place. Mairtin claims that none of his friends would be body snatchers. Mairtin wonders if it was Travellers who did it: “Maybe they were expecting another prairie blight and felt like something to be munching on ahead of time” (102). Again, there is evidence of prejudice and intolerance towards Travellers, but also something sacrilegious around the mentioning of eating dead flesh, which obviously hints at an extreme form of cannibalism. In some cultures it is acceptable to eat dead flesh, but not remains that have been seven years in the ground. In the Druid performance, the audience seems by this point to have been more prepared for the details and is therefore now more comfortable with laughter. This scene opens with skulls on the kitchen table, with only Mairtin’s head visible, at the same level as the table, so that his head is effectively amongst the skulls. In this performance, two drunken men smashing the skulls is now deemed to be especially playful, and is not framed as sinister or desecrating in any way; it is only Mairtin’s fears of being alone with the remains that offers any sense of transgression of the sacred. Lally’s Mick is very aggressive with the malleting and justifies his approach by suggesting that if the community gossips about him in the way that it does over the years, what more should they expect when they wind up in his hands other than a “batter” (103).

Yet, there is something perversely de-ritualistic about this scene, something deviant is being revealed in their obsession and indifference towards the dead. By the end of the scene there are pieces of shattered bone everywhere, and Lally’s Mick also stamps on the bits of bone that have fallen on the ground. Fragments at times have the potential to fly into the audience. Ben Brantley opens his *New York Times* review of Roundabout Theater Company’s production of the play directed by Gordon Edelstein, at the Gramercy Theater, tongue in cheek: “Excuse me, but is that a piece of tibia that’s just landed in my lap?” He reports: “it’s only natural that some of those soiled white fragments would fly beyond the proscenium arch. Audience members should be prepared to duck,” adding, “Who could possibly take his eyes off such a mordant, morbid and oddly ecstatic spectacle?” Overall, this particular scene suggests a sort of deviant, de-sanctified second or even a non-wake that flies in the face of tradition.

“The Second Coming”

Traditionally in Ireland, alongside Christian rites, pagan or indigenous practices of funeral wake games were enacted in such a way that the dead are grieved and celebrated, respected and disrespected, feared and embraced, during a period of time which eased the passing of the spirit from one dimension to another and also accommodated a fear of the returning from the dead of those who have recently passed away. Wakes are in part to help “alleviate the pain of bereavement” as Witoszek and Sheeran suggest (28), and they add: “While attempting to explain the eschatological basis of the wake, Seán Ó Súilleabháin has argued that its original purpose was not only to alleviate the pain of bereavement by means of a riotous feast but also to ‘bribe’ the spirit of the dead person, to keep him/her quiet and safely out of the way of the living” (27). They suggest that the wake also served as “a theatre of social rehabilitation in which useless praise was expended on those who are denied a good word during life. The wake had the power to transmute, to bring the dead person out of anonymity, disgrace even, and transform him/her into a local legend” (28). Of the one hundred and thirty wake games and amusements documented by Ó Súilleabháin, of this “ludic constellation” as Witoszek and Sheeran name them, “the most prominent include story telling, singing, dancing, card playing, athletic competitions, verbal sparring and fighting,” which go back to pre-Christian Ireland and the games of lamentation or “cluiche caointech” celebrated to mark the death of a warrior (27-28). Mairtin’s stories include a drunk in Salthill that drowned in his own urine, and Mick tells that he had three uncles who “drowned on sick” (106).

Quoting Lawrence Taylor, Witoszek and Sheeran observe that “the Catholic Church’s domestication and control of the libidinous and pagan element of the wake was a way to establish the Church’s cultural hegemony in the nineteenth century” (28), but also “wakes, viewed as folk spectacles that competed with church ceremonial for the control of death, may be interpreted as spasmodic acts of resistance to church hegemony” (9). The wake’s “countercultural function as a “ritual of the people,” in contra-distinction to official ecclesiastical ceremonies, has proved irresistible to pupils of Bakhtin and Foucault alike” Witoszek and Sheeran claim (28). Traditionally, watching over the dead, and the “blasphemous revelry with which the corpse was surrounded, launched a comic, even strangely alluring, *ars morierendi* [sic],” Witoszek and Sheeran note (26). Witoszek and Sheeran also utilize Arnold Van Gennep’s notion of liminal rites to suggest that the “mourning process involves an identification between the bereft and the deceased in that both are situated ‘between the world of the living and the world of the dead,’” and “given this unresolved state, there are two choices. The mourners can either kill the dead a second time, so as to remove themselves from the realm of liminality, or preserve the dead and prolong their stay in the intermediate world” (Van Gennep qtd. in Witoszek and Sheeran 8). The texts Witoszek and Sheeran examine indicate a cultural reluctance to “kill the dead a second time,” who instead remain in a state of inbetweenness (8-9).

Funerals and deaths are commonplace across all of the McDonagh work. Although *The Lonesome West* (1997) opens just after Coleman's and Valene's father's funeral, what is remarkable is the indifference towards the dead and the absence of signs of bereavement on their part. The "riotous feast" associated with the wake is swapped for a concern over *vol-au-vents* and the keeping of greedy locals away from the "afters" of the funeral. Van Gennep sees such meals after funerals as "rites of incorporation" (164). However, there is no need to "bribe" the spirit to keep out of the way of the living and the notion of "re-habilitation" of those just dead, does not seem to apply. Later the deaths of Tom Hanlon and Fr Welsh additionally challenge the brothers to encounters with grief, but there is neither real fear nor celebration of the dead, just tokenism. Equally, in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), Maureen's slaying of her mother leads not to her release through the conquering of the ogress, but to her entrapment in madness, in her becoming like her mother or filling the void left behind by her.

In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) there is the blatant dismemberment of the bodies on stage, with no sense of a wake, no sense of trauma, just shallow indifference both to the task meted out by Mairead and Padraic, and towards the bodies that Donny and Davey are forced to desecrate (however unreal and mechanical they are), and even if it occurs under the rubric of farce. In relation to *Inishmore*, it is vital to keep in mind that in Ireland from the nineteenth century forward, "funerary symbols were increasingly used in political contexts" (33) as Witoszek and Sheeran suggest, since funerals were seen as ways of performing protest, grouping dissent and resistance, and of consolidating political solidarity. In Northern Ireland in particular the marking of funerals has been central to both republican and loyalist communities over the last decades. McDonagh, however, does the opposite in *Inishmore*; the dead bodies are denied their funeral rights, and instead the bodies are hacked to pieces, so that the deaths are provided with no symbolic resonance, as notions of martyrdom and self sacrifice are not afforded to McDonagh's terrorists. The political/paramilitary motivations of the main characters are found only in the guise of self interest, sadism and self-destructiveness.

Additionally, although the film *In Bruges* (2008) is set in a purgatorial/ fairytale/ medieval space of the Belgium city of Bruges, it does not have the same symbolic potential as the film upon which it is so dependent, Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973). In Roeg's work there is the infamous love scene which seems to suggest the possibility of pregnancy and the idea that the couple's dead child can be replaced or brought back to life, but in *In Bruges* the murdered child cannot be resurrected. Even his death is not redemptive, as it leads only to further death, namely that of the character Jimmy, who dies while dressed up as a school-child from a ricochet bullet. Throughout *In Bruges*, Ray is haunted by memories and flashbacks, thoughts of his own suicide, and he is troubled in Groningen Museum by one of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, which contains images of punishment and retribution, of final judgment, and of death nullifying life. What McDonagh creates is not generally a "revival of

corpses,” but the inability of the corpse to be revived, even through memory, with *In Bruges* serving as the exception, putting the work generally somewhat at odds with the Irish funerary tradition. (Ken’s self-sacrifice does tie it into the tradition in a slightly different way).

In J. M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904), those who die are victims of the sea or nature, and here the storytelling associated with wakes, is non-traditional in its focus on transgression. It is not so much a refusal to kill the dead a second time, while in *Skull* the remains are strangely waked or non-waked, and destroyed in such a way that they are not afforded a dignified re-location, but scattered unceremoniously in a slurry pit, along with the waste from farmyard animals. The grinding of the remains to dust also means that the skeletons are no longer individualized. Further, the removal of the bones from the graveyard to this domestic place complicates not only the liminal relationship between public and private, but also between the living and dying, and more importantly between the sacred and the un-consecrated, in line with Foucault’s suggestions.

However, it is Mairtin’s inability to control his own tongue which catches him out when he declares that the rose locket with a picture of Mick inside that Oona was buried with “wouldn’t fetch you a pound in the Galway pawn” shop (109). Mairtin is unaware that he has revealed too much, and staggering drunk he is readying himself to drive Mick’s car. Mick leaves the scene carrying a mallet and the spectator wonders what fate awaits both men. Later that evening, with a bag in hand, containing Oona’s skull, Tom Hanlon comes round to get a confession from Mick to Oona’s murder, in breach of all standard procedures in terms of evidence and arrest. Tom claims to have found the skull at the bottom of their family field, the same place where Mairtin supposedly came across the bones of a dead cow. Hanlon informs his police work by television series like *Petrocelli*, *Quincy*, *Starsky and Hutch*, priding himself on his detective’s instincts and on clear-cut differentiations, but still cannot tell the difference between circumstantial and hearsay evidence. This police officer is always on the look-out for problematic cases, having previously investigated the death of a fat man, found naked in front of the television in his apartment, and his fridge only had a pot of jam and a head of lettuce, details which call to mind the film *Seven* (1995) written by Andrew Kevin Walker and directed by David Fincher. Later, in the same vein, Mairtin accuses him of not being able to arrest a shoplifting child, whose face is covered in chocolate and that if he did arrest him “you’d arrest him for killing the Kennedys” (121). So, Thomas like the policemen in McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003) makes almost all the wrong assumptions.

In the Druid production, Brián F. O’Byrne is stiff in body and presents an affected voice, displaying the poise and status of what he expects a detective to be, driven by a confidence in his own analysis of things, and calmly assertive over distinctions between “insults” and “vague insinuations” (95). Tom Hanlon as a character is less like Columbo, mentioned by Mairtin in performance, but not in the script, and more like the corrupt but finally stupid detective Truscott in Joe Orton’s *Loot* (1965). The

deliberateness of his actions is very different to the shrill naivety, puerile defiance and delight in deviance of David Wilmot's Mairtin. O'Byrne's slowness of body matches a lethargy of mind, and what he wants to pass off as measured deliberateness and deep consideration of facts and information, comes across as the opposite.

Mick is ready to make an admission, to sign a confession to murder, but not to the murder of Oona but to that of Mairtin, having left him for dead, for his part in taking Oona's remains from her grave. While Mick agrees to a confession, there is no pen readily available, and, in terms of grotesque humour, Maryjohnny produces one of her fluorescent bingo pens to solve the problem. Instead, Mick provides his own pen, his lucky lotto one, in order to complete the task. However, just like the father of Christy Mahon in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), a concussed Mairtin re-enters the living area, all the while claiming his injuries were as a result of an accident and not assault. (Surreptitiously, Mick sets the confession alight, which is a repeated trope across McDonagh's work, whether it is Mag's burning of Pato's letter, Valene's setting alight of Fr Welsh's suicide note or the setting fire to Katurian's manuscripts in *The Pillowman*). Mairtin is then struck by Tom on the head, once Mairtin admits to Tom's role in the tampering with evidence, carving a hole in the skull, the day after they had dug up Oona's remains.

While it looks as if Mick's innocence is affirmed by Tom's corrupt policing practices, nevertheless, during the final moments of the drama, Maryjohnny maintains to have seen something on the night of Oona's death, claiming that Oona will drag Mick's soul to hell after he dies as a consequence. Again suggestion is not backed up by fact. As she leaves, Mick caresses the cracked skull of his wife, kisses it gently and audiences are left without any confirmation as to how Oona died. As Roland Mushat Frye notes, the dramatization of the *Memento Mori* in *Hamlet* "did not trap a person in the spiritual cul-de-sac of a sterile preoccupation with death. On the contrary, one was directed toward life—toward the effective living of life which must, in every case, be lived under the shadow of death, and which, should be lived without anxiety, without dread, and without a preoccupation with transiency" (28). Mairtin is no modern-day west of Ireland Hamlet, and Mick is no Shakespearean gravedigger, as neither experiences any real sense of a *Memento Mori*. Their digging brings no encounter with a metaphysical ephemerality and there is no new "sanity" in the face of death.

Susan Letzler Cole suggests, "The grave is the birthplace of tragic drama and ghosts are the procreators," adding that "tragedy is the performance of that ambivalence: the kind of ambivalence which ghosts emblemize." She means that the ghost returning to haunt is "the extending of life beyond the moment of death" (4-7). If "*Hamlet* is the tragedy of a mourner in a world which provides no context for mourning," as Susan Letzler Cole suggests (6), then *Skull* equally provides neither "the extension beyond the moment of death" nor a "context" for mourning. The grave may be the "birthplace of tragic drama," yet in *Skull*, although the deceased may haunt, they are no ghosts, and no "procreators." Whilst *Hamlet* does foreground the maimed rite, for Mick Dowd there is no closure by digging up the remains of Oona, the digging

up is not a “maimed ritual,” a non-event on the metaphysical level, a non-wake. The caressing of the skull may raise all kinds of interesting suggestivities around the erotic and death, even hinting at something unsavoury. In the Druid production, Mick Lally holds the skull for a long time, but it is less incisively sexual in its focus, and more to do with loss, absence and perhaps guilt, and is more Grand Guignol than necrophilic in its tendencies.

The Anglo-Irish McDonagh’s dramaturgy can also be seen as a diasporic challenge to the funerary tradition and its hold over the Irish consciousness. The exhuming and the irreverent smashing of the bones suggest resistance to it, as does the use of a non-wake. This strategy brings to mind both Joe Orton’s *Loot*, where there is a de-sanctified approach towards human remains, and also John Arden’s *Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance: An Unhistorical Parable* (1959). In Arden’s play a group of soldiers brings the bones of a soldier Billy Hicks back to his home place and hang his remains for public view in order to display the carnage of war and even more so symbolically the bones of imperialism and the community’s complicity in colonization. Musgrave and his troops’ pacifist inclinations, rage at war and at soldiering, prompt plans of a bewildering and gross retaliatory violence against a community. *A Skull in Connemara* is McDonagh’s “Un-historical Parable,” where he deploys an anarchic and unsanctified approach to Irish traditions of the dead, to obsessions with death and dying and to the debilitating hold of a funerary imaginary on a populace.

Conclusion

McDonagh’s realignment of the ritual of the wake, through morbid, communal self-absorbing and self-defining narratives, transgressive disinterment, and quasi-sacrilegious destruction of bones ensure the juxtaposition of “incompatible” spaces” that Foucault mentions, as well as the mingling of discordant sensibilities. It could be argued that the Irish tradition of waking rituals constitutes a form of “crisis heterotopia” which is a strange alignment of the sacred and the pagan, with a consistent belief in an afterlife. In McDonagh’s work generally, however, wakes are very much akin to “heterotopias of deviation,” where the belief in an afterlife is abandoned and the remains of the dead have no sacred or symbolic value, or are either there to be smashed as part of a routine disinterment, or else to be violated by a policeman as he tampers with potential evidence. Van Gennep regards funerals as rites of separation, and survivors or the living emerge through rites of reintegration into society (rites of the lifting of mourning). Often the dead do not pass to the afterlife, until they have being cremated or are decomposed and without flesh. Sometimes putrefaction can be accelerated by fire, and followed by “a second series for the burial of the skeleton” (Van Gennep 149). Death and rebirth, death and resurrection, dismemberment and reconstitution that Van Gennep identifies in traditional rites of passage are disavowed in the instance of this play. Both the rite of separation and passage into another

dimension is interfered with by the digging up of the dead. It is as much a “maimed rite” as it is a deviant one.

In *Skull* the dead are exhumed and despoiled to undermine their significance. It is not the past, the draw of the grave or the call of eternity which matter, but the present. McDonagh’s approach confronts the future and utopian orientation of the Irish imaginary and the utopian reverie associated with Irish pastoral spaces. In the Druid premiere, such challenges are further complicated when deviancy is offset by stupidity of the characters (as O’Byrne and Wilmot play them). The macabre becomes undermined by the flippancy of the characterizations generally, the morbidity by the casual incongruity of the way that theatrical space functions and the grotesque is counterbalanced by the ridiculous fixations on the characters on quest for truths and facts in the face of fictions, lies, and rural myths. Finally, the play’s premiere situated the drama beside and against these debilitating Irish funerary practices in Irish playwriting more generally, as Hynes’s *mise-en-scène* achieved the necessary irreverent and sacrilegious vigor.

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