

CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE SEAFARER*: TINKERING WITH TRADITION

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*Everything here is shame and reproach: Satan saying that the fire is
worthless, that my anger is ridiculous and silly.*
(Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, Translated by Paul Schmidt)

Abstract:

A reading of *The Seafarer* (2007), the last published play by the Irish playwright Conor McPherson (1971-), which aims to investigate the rich intertextuality that the work presents. The text echoes both canonic and popular renderings of the Faustian myth, those of Christopher Marlowe (c. 1564-1593) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), as well as its folk rewritings. In *The Seafarer* McPherson conveys a complex portrait of a group of Irish working-class mates, who are enthralled in existential and gender conflicts. In this his fourth full-length ensemble play to reach both the London West End and New York Broadway (the first being *The Weir* of 1999) McPherson critically dialogues with the modernist and post-modernist dramatic tradition mainly through the works of John Middleton Synge (1871-1909), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Harold Pinter (1930-

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2008) and David Mamet (1947-), without losing, however, a genuine sense of deep Irishness.

Keywords: Conor McPherson (1971-), *The Seafarer* (2007), Intertextuality, Modern and Post-Modern English-speaking Drama, Contemporary Irish Drama, Popular Irish Culture.

Nothing more challenging than writing about the work of a contemporary dramatist. One has to explore a region which has not been mapped yet. There are few signposts to indicate where one is exactly; the borders that mark the limits of the new territory are not properly established yet, and to describe it one has to take hold of few previous well established facts at hand. Some of those descriptive tools, however, give only an approximate idea of the new features one faces every now and then.

The metaphor used in the previous paragraph is not entirely accurate to describe the hermeneutic situation I am facing, though; for every new work can only be written taking into consideration a discursive genre to which it must necessarily belong, and it will either reinforce the inherited genre's formal characteristics, or renew them, or simply eschew them in order to establish and explore the limits of new artistic territories. In this essay I want to pursue an investigation of Conor McPherson's dramatic work having as my starting point his last published play, *The Seafarer* (2007). Taking a comparative stance I will then see whether that play differs from both his previous dramatic work and the Irish modern and contemporary dramatic tradition, or continues them.

Conor McPherson is still a young man (he was born in 1970, in Dublin); however, he has so far put forth a considerable amount of dramatic work in relatively short time. His plays can roughly be divided into two dramatic modes: monologues (both solo and group) and ensemble pieces. *The Seafarer* belongs to the latter group. In the monologues the locale the dramatist's characters inhabit is continuous to that of the audience, whereas in the ensemble pieces a strict separation between the fictional universe and the "real" world is firmly established.

In plays such as *Rum and Vodka* (1992), *The Good Thief* (1994), *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995), *Saint Nicholas* (1997), *Port Authority* (2001) and *Come on Over* (2001), the characters are expected to talk to the public directly, abolishing the convention of the fourth wall and thus incorporating the spectators into the fictional world they inhabit; the borders that divide fiction from reality are thus blurred, or rather, the dialectics of fictional representation and actual performance, typical of the theatrical event, is made explicit. This sense of intimacy between performer and audience is further enhanced by the use of the bare stage. The time and space of the play is the here and now of the performance.

In both *Rum and Vodka* and *The Good Thief*, no reference is made to the setting and the characters are not given a name. *This Lime Tree Bower* has got three characters, Joe (seventeen), Ray (early thirties) and Frank (twenties). The initial stage direction of the play reads, "All remain on the stage throughout, and are certainly aware of each other" (134). The second, and last, stage direction of *This Lime Tree Bower* just indicates that Frank makes a short remark to Ray in the single brief moment of direct interaction between two characters in the entire play (185). And the only information about character and setting in *Saint Nicholas* are two laconic phrases: "A man, late fifties; a bare stage" (77).

McPherson's monologues have been compared to two important plays by Brian Friel (1929-), *Faith Healer* (1984) and *Molly Sweeney* (1995). But there are important differences between the works of the two Irish dramatists in this dramatic mode. Whereas in McPherson the story told is a means to reveal the deepest conflicts of the teller or tellers, in the two group monologues by Friel, the conflict is between the points of view of the narrators in telling the same story. Second, no matter how fantastic the stories of McPherson can be, the audience believes in the sincerity of the narrators, even if what they tell may sound like a delusion. In Friel, it is the reliability of the narrators' voice that is challenged. To Friel, language is an imperfect tool to reveal reality, so that full communication is a fallacy. The total meaning of what the

characters have experienced escapes them, and to the audience the characters in Friel's plays maintain an aura of mystery even after the performance is over.

In contrast to his monologues, McPherson's ensemble plays present a much more "classical" construction. In *The Weir* (first performed in 1997 and first published in 1999), the play that made McPherson a successful playwright in the English speaking theatrical world, the action takes place in a small rural Irish bar. Although the dialogue follows the realistic convention of the colloquial conversation, the strong speeches in the play are ghost stories told by the characters: four local men and a woman from Dublin who has recently moved to the small village.

The action of *Dublin Carol* (first performed in 2000) takes place in an undertaker office "over one day, 24 December" (77). Its three sections are called parts, not acts, maybe because each of them maintains certain autonomy in relation to the others. Although the set is the same throughout, the action does not follow a rigid structure of cause and effect. As the parts of the play succeed one another in the three parts of the day (morning, afternoon and evening), readers and audience get acquainted with the personal drama of the hero, John, a man in his late fifties with serious drinking and affective problems, through the encounters he has in the office with a younger man, Mark, and Mary, his daughter by a woman he had abandoned long before. The play ends with a hint of redemption and reconciliation. Two themes already appear here that reappear in *The Seafarer*: alcoholism as a way of evading a harmful reality, and the possibility of settling the accounts with the past.

Although the setting is again the same throughout, the time span of *Shining City* (first performed in 2004) is more elastic. The play has five scenes, and the author informs us that "about two months elapse between each" (5). The main action is the psychological treatment that John, a man of fifties, undergoes with Ian, a counsellor, in his thirties. As in *Dublin Carol*, an older and a younger man stand as counterparts.

Their life experiences run in parallel, although only Ian actually acts out his conflicts. John, on the other hand, only reports them to Ian during the therapeutic sections.

Narrative is the discursive genre that dominates both the monologues and ensemble plays by McPherson. When the plays start, the characters have already undergone an experience. Their action consists mostly of telling the audience, in the case of the monologues, or the other characters on stage, in the case of ensemble pieces, what has happened.

The function of the narrative mode is a bit different in the ensemble pieces, however. It helps to explain the existential situation the characters are immersed in at the moment the play starts. The strength of McPherson's dramatic writing lies mostly, then, in the performers' ability to convey meaning and emotion when telling their own life-stories. Like most of the best drama ever written, McPherson's work deeply depends for its concretization as a genuine theatrical event on the art of the actor. Differently from the monologues, however, the ensemble pieces do not present a final resolution; what is important here is the situation created by the different stories and the existential impact they have over the teller and the other characters. The typical McPherson hero tries to make sense of his life through the stories he tells. *The Seafarer* at first sight seems to follow the ensemble pieces that preceded it.

***The Seafarer* and the Theatrical Tradition**

The Seafarer seems to follow the conventions of both classical drama and naturalistic theatre to a greater extent than the ensemble pieces mentioned above. The unities of space and time are maintained. There is a time gap between the two scenes of act one, and act two is made of a single scene. But the entire action takes place on a Christmas Eve. Christian symbols and references abound in McPherson's plays. More than one play takes place on Christmas Eve (*Dublin Carol* and

The Seafarer), whereas in *Shining City* church spires are visible through the windows in the setting.

In contrast with the rarity and paucity of the stage directions of his (solo and group) monologues, in which, like in Shakespeare, the audience has to imagine the locale of the action and mood of the play through the characters' speeches, in *The Seafarer* McPherson minutely describes the setting and even the physical appearance and psychological traces of the five male characters. The playwright goes to great pains to describe not only the actual setting of the action—"The grim living area of a house in Baldoyle, North Dublin" (7)—but its surrounding area as well. On the page where traditionally the list of characters appears, there is also a section called "Time and Place", where more information about Baldoyle is given. It is a "coastal settlement", an old area "which could hardly be called a town these days". And the text goes on, stating that

It is rather a suburb of the city with a church and few pubs and shops at its heart. From the coast here one is looking at the north side of the Howth peninsula. Howth Head (Binn Eadair) is a hill on the peninsula which marks the northern arm of Dublin Bay. Due to its prominence it has long been the focus of myths and legends. (3)

One may wonder why the playwright has decided to describe an area that does not even appear on stage. A possible answer lies in the cultural symbolism that that particular part of Dublin carries. It is a "focus of myths and legends", which has to do with traditional stereotypes of Irishness still very much alive in the contemporary world. This short description not only gives the reader geographical information, but sets the text deeply in a precise national tradition.

The description of the setting continues in the same realistic tenor, which conveys the fullest possible description of place, time of day, and atmosphere intended:

The main entrance is down a flight of stairs from the ground floor, giving a basement feel to the room [...]. The place lacks a woman's touch. It has morphed into a kind of bar in its appearance. Those who live or pass through here are so immersed in pub culture that many artefacts in the room are originally from bars [...]. As the play begins, the room is more or less in darkness [...]. There doesn't appear to be anyone here. A scrawny artificial Christmas tree haunts one corner. (7-8)

Following the aesthetics of theatrical realism, McPherson creates on the stage a fictional universe closed in itself, where the performers only address themselves, never acknowledging the presence of the public. Their main task is to imbue their performance with verisimilitude, not to share their experience directly with the public. The performer disappears almost completely behind his role, and stage and the auditorium become two separated universes. The main consequence of this theatrical practice is that the sense of participating in a theatrical event is substituted by the identification with an illusion.

If we compare the "*écriture*" of the solo and group monologues with that of *The Seafarer*, the first look like a first person narrator short story or novella. The paragraphs, however, are very short, some of them consisting only of one line, like a very long poem, or rather, a poetic dramatic monologue. There is an extra space between the paragraphs, perhaps to stress the pauses in the speech graphically. The use of the past tense also indicates that this is a narrative text. Another feature of the monologues' text style is that it is more straightforward; even if at the end the characters cannot find a solution for their inner conflicts, and they cannot really learn from their experiences, they at least can give to what has happened to them a sense of completeness.

In *The Seafarer*, on the other hand, the dialogue is full of non-sequiturs and its main rhetorical device is the anacoluthon. Dots, used as the visual signs of the gaps in the text, appear abundantly. The

characters always seem to keep something unsaid, whether because they feel guilty of what they have done in the past and do not want the others to know about it, or to block out a harmful and shameful remembrance from their conscience, or even to avoid an open conflict with the other characters. And although the action ends with provisional resolution, not all the cultural and personal conflicts shown at the beginning of the play are actually overcome.

In *The Seafarer*, differently also from the so called “well-made-play” (*la pièce bien faite*), conflict and its resolution do not develop from the action (mainly spoken) of the characters. When the play starts, there is a conflict already established, but it is not immediately apparent to readers and audience. The darkness with which the play starts is perhaps a powerful visual sign of this ignorance. It is through the interaction of the characters that one gets to know what is going on. The action of the play is, then, not the cause of the conflict, but it reveals it, and up to a certain point untangles it. Whatever has happened before the play starts, or takes place outside the limits of the stage, is as (or perhaps even more) important as what is seen by the audience.

The following extract from the very beginning of the play already shows this movement from ignorance to knowledge:

Sharky comes down the stairs [...]. He opens the curtains to allow in the morning light, which reveals the squalor [...]. He then realises the phone is ringing. He lifts the receiver [...]. He hangs up. As he does so, Richard, his older brother, stirs awake. He has been asleep (passed out) on the floor where we didn't notice him (or took him for a bundle of rags). He wears a black suit, one slipper and a filthy white shirt. He is unshaven and looks terrible. He has recently gone blind. (8)

The blind Richard taken for a “bundle of rags”, and thus unrecognizable by the audience, is a strong visual symbol of a play about destitute men unable to see the real causes of their existential troubles. Moreover, it is

symptomatic that Richard will only reveal that he became blind when he fell into a dumpster in Halloween to a complete stranger, Lockhart, who is actually the Devil (41). In one of McPherson's monologues this accident would be one of the first to be informed to the audience. At the beginning of *The Seafarer*, however, the characters on stage are Sharky, his brother, and Ivan, an old acquaintance; so it seems logical that Richard would only refer to such traumatic incident again to someone who cannot know anything about the cause of his blindness.

In the list of characters, one gets to know that James "Sharky" Harkin is an "erstwhile fisherman/van driver/chauffer", and that he is in his fifties. The first thing to call one's attention in this short description of the character is the number of jobs he has had throughout his life. He has once been a fisherman, a man of the sea. One cannot help to connect this job to the title of the play itself. Moreover, *The Seafarer* is also the title of an important work from the very beginning of the English literary tradition, the anonymous eighth-century Anglo-Saxon elegiac poem. McPherson himself openly refers to this tradition when he chooses an extract from the poem (lines 11-16) as one of the two epigraphs to the play. The lyrical "I" in the poem is a *wraecca* or *wrecca*, the Anglo-Saxon word for exile, stranger, wretch, miser; as an adjective the term also carries the meanings of banished, laborious and revengeful (Bosworth 477; Alexander 40-55). Sharky's two other occupations, van driver and chauffer, are related to the ideas of movement and displacement.

As the plot develops readers and spectators get to know why McPherson states that Sharky is an "erstwhile fisherman": he is not allowed to work as one anymore. Almost at the end of the play Richard reveals that Sharky is "barred out of nearly everywhere. He can't even get a job on the fishing boats anymore... they won't have him" (89). So before the play starts, the reader (but not a spectator who has not read the play text) may have formed an idea of Sharky as someone who has been estranged from his first job, and consequently was obliged to find jobs in places far from his hometown, and where he was considered a

stranger. However, as the play develops one gets to know that this strangeness is an intrinsic feature of the character.

Now Sharky is back to his older brother's house. The relationship of the two men is a mixture of mutual interdependency and antagonism. Sharky is back home explicitly to take care of Richard. But it is difficult to know who is taking care of whom. When Nicky, a friend of Richard's and the actual partner of Sharky's former girl-friend, asks Richard how Sharky is doing, Richard expresses his view of his brother in the following terms: "He claims he's here to look after me, but between ourselves, he's an awful useless fucking eejit, God help him. I don't know who's looking after whom" (43-44).

The kind of relationship between the two brothers is already made clear in a scene at the very beginning of the play. When Sharky first appears, the text informs that "[he] has a small plaster at the bridge of his nose and a few plasters on the knuckles of his right hand" (8). The reader or spectator gets to know about Sharky's condition not through any confessional monologue delivered by the character, but rather through the narrative of recent experiences. However, this deliverance looks like a secret being unveiled, for Sharky does not want his brother to know what has happened. Actually, it is due to a misguidance of Ivan, Richard's boozing companion, who has spent the night in the house, that Sharky is forced, rather unwillingly, to tell the incident that caused the bruises on his nose and knuckles. The use of *anacolutha* throughout the dialogue makes the passage an example of the linguistic humour typical of the play. The constant use of this rhetoric device has also the function of highlighting the unarticulated speech of some of the characters, which signals their difficulty in communication, due to shame, guilty, heavy drinking, or the three at a time (16-18). Later, in a stage direction, McPherson describes Richard's ambivalent personality as that of someone who can "lurch from sentimentality to vicious insults within seconds" (56). The motivations for Richard's constant teasing and Sharky's avoidance of a direct confrontation are only disclosed at the end of the play.

A clutch of modern dramatic styles can be noticed in the dialogue exchanges between the two brothers. First, the roughness of the dialogue (permeated with slang and strong language) seeks to reproduce as precisely as possible the spoken discourse of homosocial milieu of the (Irish) working class; the emphasis is on verisimilitude achieved mainly by the avoidance of any artificiality of language, through the intensive use of colloquialism. Second, the character's thoughts and utterances waver (here it is mostly noticed in the case of Sharky); the repeated sentences, non-sequiturs, and hesitations express not only the characters' tense anguish, but also the complexity of the situation. In this respect one can ponder on the words of August Strindberg (1849-1912) in the "Preface" he wrote for his best known play, *Miss Julie* (also known as *Lady Julia* or *Countess Julie*, 1888), one of the masterpieces of Naturalistic drama:

[W]here the dialogue is concerned I have somewhat broken with tradition by not making my characters catechists who sit around asking stupid questions in order to elicit a witty reply. I have avoided the symmetrical, mathematical artificiality of French dialogue and allowed my characters' brain to work irregularly as they do in real life, where no subject is ever entirely exhausted before one mind discovers by chance in another mind a cog in which to engage. For that reason the dialogue also wanders, providing itself in the opening scenes with material that is later reworked, taken up, repeated, expanded, and developed, like the theme in a musical composition. (63)

Third, the lack of proper communication, or rather a decision of keeping aloof from the others, in order to avoid revealing their real intentions and motives (which are for some of them unconscious, and so cannot be expressed openly), relates this text to a certain type of the absurdist style, the one with a tinge of realism, whose unsurpassable master was the late

Harold Pinter (1930-2008). One can notice in both McPherson's and Pinter's text a special kind of humour, derived from the characters' unarticulated speech. Paradoxically, it is the extreme anxiety born of the difficulty or unwillingness to express clearly what one wants or is demanded to say that provokes laughter. As Nell, in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, says, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that" (14).

Two other experiences will surface in the first scene of the play to complete the portrait of Sharky as a destitute middle-aged man. First the fact that his ex-partner, Eileen, whom he has left for motives unknown, is now living with Nicky, which causes much pain to jealous Sharky, besides being a further motive for his low self-esteem. The topic is raised in a dialogue between Ivan and Richard, when Sharky is out in the kitchen, but the conversation is interrupted when Sharky comes back from the kitchen (19). He goes back to the same issue in the second scene of the first act, when he complains to Richard for having invited Nicky to drop by during Christmas Eve (32). As their conversation develops, we get to know what is really bothering Sharky: the fact that Eileen has lent Sharky's car to Nicky Giblin (32-3). Sharky feels depressed not only because he has lost his woman to another man, which deeply hurts his sense of masculinity, but he also sees his rival using his car (another powerful symbol of an accomplished manhood) to shop while he, like a tramp, a vagrant or a wino has to walk in the rain to the nearest railway station. But the full story of Sharky's relationship with Eileen will only be revealed in his final confrontation with Nicky, which results in an explosion of verbal and physical violence that marks the climax of the play that antecedes its rather ironical resolution:

Sharky enters an inarticulate rage and throws a punch at Nicky. Nicky defends himself, pushing Sharky backward. Ivan manages to get a hold of Sharky and restrain him. (87-88)

At the last part of the third act, when tension reaches its highest peak, the family conflicts of Richard and Sharky are revealed in an atmosphere of great verbal and physical violence. Seeing that, after two consecutive days of abstinence, Sharky has started to drink perfunctorily again, Richard blunders back to his acidly critical remarks. "I believe in Sharky", he says. "He can change. I believe that he can change to [...]" (85). To which, Sharky immediately retorts by asking, "Back to what?" Richard's answer is a string of accusations against his brother:

RICHARD. Well... How about back to the little fella that always had a tune on his lips, and had integrity, and wasn't a sneaky little fucker who broke his mother's heart. How's that for starters?

Back to that! You see, I remember, Mr Lockhart, when it was all fields alls arounds here... all around all up to Donagmede, all up to Sutton, all up to Howth. All fields, Mr Lockhart. All farms, Nicky. Our mother was a wonderful woman! (*Suddenly stands up*) Our father was a fine man. A tough man. He was devoted to his greyhounds! He lived for them! Great with his fists.

LOCKHART. That's fascinating... (85-86)

Richard talks of an idealized world and an idealized family; of a Sharky who was happy, honest and virtuous. Lockhart's ironical comment is the touch of humour which tinges Richard's discourse with a trace of equivocation (the Devil being "the great equivocator"), and makes the reader and spectator aware that Richard may have drawn a distorted image of the past. And Sharky is the one who has stained this serene image of the past. Richard's anger against him issues from Sharky's rebellious view of their past family life and "Sharky throws a chair across the room" (87). Is Sharky throwing the chair back to his mother? Is he trying to smash definitely the false image of the past?

In 2002, McPherson directed *Endgame* (1957) for the Anglo-Irish TV project "Beckett on Film", which comprises 19 films of Beckett's plays done by different film makers. The influence of Beckett's play is clear in *The Seafarer*. Richard and Sharky maintain a relationship that is in several points similar to that between Hamm and Clov, the two protagonists of *Endgame*. Since the very beginning of *The Seafarer*, one can note that McPherson may have Beckett's play in mind to parody it. In the first reference made to Richard, he is barely recognizable by the audience: we should take "him for a bundle of rags" (8). Likewise, when *Endgame* starts the blind Hamm is in his chair "covered with an old sheet" (5). And most important of all, both Hamm and Richard are blind. Like Clov, Sharky spends most of the time attending Richard, while the latter distils his acid humour mostly against his brother. Being older, and behaving as if he was the owner of the house they live in, Richard acts like a patriarch toward Sharky, pointing out incessantly his shortcomings, thus, to some extent, mirroring the father-son relationship of Hamm and Clov. And finally, also like Hamm and Clov, Richard and Sharky maintain a mutual dependency.

In a passage close to the end of the play, when Sharky is leaving with Mr Lockhart, to pay the debt he contracted twenty-five years before, after Lockhart has (apparently) won the last poker game of the night, Richard, afraid that Sharky may not come back, offers his money to pay for Sharky's debt with Lockhart. And the dialogue between the two brothers conveys Richard's sense of despondency at the possibility of never seeing his brother again (99-100). The pathos of the scene, which is a good example of McPherson's extraordinary grip on dramatic dialogue writing, lies mainly on the fear that remains unsaid, the suspicions that are not fully verbalized in the interchanges between the two brothers, which contrast harshly with the irony that pervades Lockhart's straightforward but equivocating lines, which in turn signal his detachment from any sort of sympathy with the fragility of the human condition.

Male Sense of Freedom: from Synge to McPherson

Sharky is not the only character to be faulty in his family dealings, mainly towards his partner. The first to express a gender conflict in the play is Ivan, when he tells his friends why he can only spend Christmas Eve with the two bachelor brothers, Richard and Sharky. His wife Karen has run him out of the house (36-7). As for Nicky, he also complains against the way he is treated by Eileen (89).

Women, thus, haunt the lives of the men in *The Seafarer*, although, they never actually appear on stage, Sharky's, Nick's and Ivan's partners and wives are a constant and menacing presence, or rather phantasms, in the psychoanalytic sense of a mental representation of a real object, constructed out of the fear of losing the emotional and psychological shelter that the family household represents. The three men are torn between the love they devote to their women and the desire to exchange it for the promise of unrestrained pleasure that the pub culture seems to offer. Thus, McPherson's men feel towards their women a mix of attraction, repulsion, love and guilt. Women for them represent what in the Freudian jargon is called "reality principle", which bars the immediate and irresponsible satisfaction of desires. McPherson's war of sexes is stirred up by the fact that men insist as much as they can on living permanently under the aegis of the "pleasure principle", by keeping drunk as long as they can, in order to forget their familial and social responsibilities, thus creating an insoluble conflict that generates an ever increasing amount of humiliating confrontations with their partners.

Gender conflict is the kernel of McPherson's male characters' sense of their masculinity. On the one hand, they want to fit their roles as husbands, breadwinners and breeders; on the other, they long for a life of radical individualism, free from any social tie, like the vagrant figures of the tramp or tinker so popular in the Irish stage since J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). As a matter of fact, in *Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*

(1911), Synge (1871-1909) himself idealizes them when he describes them as “what is superb and wild in reality” (qtd. in Henn 39). In the beginning of the chapter entitled “The Vagrants of Wicklow” from Synge’s travelling book referred to above, one can indeed read that

[s]ome features of County Wicklow, such as the position of the principal workhouses and holiday places on either side of the coach road from Arklow to Bray, have made this district a favourite with the vagrants of Ireland. A few of these people have been on the roads for generations; but *fairly often they seem to have merely drifted out from the ordinary people of the villages, and do not differ greatly from the class they come from.*

In this life, however, there are many privileges. The tramp in Ireland is little troubled by the laws, and lives in out-of-door conditions that keep him in good-humour and fine bodily health. (202, emphasis added)

It is interesting to notice that Synge’s vagrants are kin to the ordinary inhabitants of the country villages. However, in modernized Ireland, which has been considered a model of social and economic success according to the patterns of development established by the EEC (European Economic Community), that spirit of unrestrained freedom no longer has a place. In the country’s new social reality, where cell phones and euros have become part of everyday life, the true tramps, tinkers and vagrants are turned into winos, the homeless alcoholics whom Richard is constantly chasing out of his yard with his stick. The irony here is that, by attacking the winos, Richard and his companions are combating something that they themselves cultivate: heavy drinking as a way of avoiding confronting their own internal demons and their inability of dealing sober with the plain responsibilities of adult life. Nevertheless, the five male characters of *The Seafarer* insist on keeping up this spirit of freedom alive with heavy alcohol drinking,

through which they believe they can still experience the atmosphere of cordial conviviality, companionship and camaraderie linked to an imagined sense of Irishness, which several cultural products, like folk tales, ballads, plays, songs and films help to propagate both inside and outside national barriers.

So, contrary to the idealized view that the Irish tradition presents of tramps, tinkers, and vagrants, McPherson portrays the destructive side of this yearning for a non-conventional way of life that dares to face authority and all restraints which society, when it organizes itself, imposes upon the individual. Synge, in his travelling books, could still idolize the almost suicidal courage of the ones that choose to live in the margins (*Collected Works, Prose II* 206-7).

But McPherson's tramps and tinkers, are more Beckettian and Pinteresque than Syngean. The world of healthy freedom described in *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* is now in ruins. McPherson's lost souls inhabit the waste lands of the society of control described by Michel Foucault in his last works. In an article published in *The Chicago Tribune* blog, "Theatre Loop", by Chris Jones, entitled "Conor McPherson: The agony of conscious souls", the author, referring to several of McPherson's plays, but mainly to *The Seafarer*, writes that

[f]or audiences in London, New York and Chicago, McPherson delivers commercially recognizable Irish dramas—replete with enough wit, booze and florid storytelling to get the shows to Broadway—and yet also socks people in the face with a level of raging existential angst as potent as anything by Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter.

In the same article, McPherson declares,

I've always had an existential darkness [...]. An awareness of the predicament of being alive. We're alive in this cold

and mysterious universe, and we're only very small. That seems to me to be a stunning predicament.

In an earlier article, "From Dublin to Broadway, Spinning Tales of Irish Wool", written by Mel Gussow, McPherson is more explicit on how much he owes to Beckett:

Looking back on the Irish playwriting tradition, Mr. McPherson expressed a particular affinity to Samuel Beckett: "What we perceive is very limited, and to watch us walking around like peacocks expounding our theories is comic. That's why I think Beckett was brilliant showing people right at the edge looking into absolute meaninglessness. How do you face the fact that you might not know anything and you're completely lost"? And yet, as with Winnie in Beckett's "Happy Days," he said, one goes right on through the rituals of daily life.

A Season in Hell

Reviewers have also pointed out the affinity of the plot of *The Seafarer* with different daemonic stories, be this folkloric, Marlowian or Goethian. Trey Graham, of the *Washington City Paper*, refers to "Faustian bargains", and Jayne Blanchard, of *The Washington Times*, writes that "[t]his mingling of the supernatural and the prosaic is one of the lovely flourishes of Mr. McPherson's Gaelic spin on the Faust legend". Matthew Gurewitsch, in an article entitled "The Devil Went Down to Broadway", points out that "in tone Mr. Lockhart's monologue recalls the mournful Mephostophilis in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*". Indeed, the rich fabric of McPherson's text weaves different kinds of verbal discourse; intertextual echoes of canonical literature and drama, folk tales and contemporary songs pop up here and there in the play.

It is in the second act that pure dramatic action takes hold of the play. McPherson reworks a traditional and folkloric story to build up the plot of the play. In Matthew Gurewitsch's article quoted in the last paragraph, one can read that

[t]he immediate inspiration for *The Seafarer* is Celtic folklore. "There's a myth in County Wicklow about the Hellfire Club", [McPherson] said. "It's just a ruin now. But it was a place where the English aristocrat landlords would go and be debauched. The story is that they were playing poker one night when a stranger knocked and came in. Someone drops a card, and when he bends down to pick it up, he notices the stranger's cloven foot. At that, the stranger disappears. Just when the story's getting good, it stops."

Russell Shortt tells the story of the Wicklow Club in more detail. In his article one learns that

[i]t was built in the 1720s by William Connolly, the speaker of the Irish House of Commons, as a hunting lodge. Originally called Mount Pelier, it consisted of two large rooms and a hall on the upper floor and kitchen and servant's hall on the ground floor. The original Hell Fire Club was established at West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire in 1741 by Sir Francis Dashwood. It soon became infamous with rumour of pagan rituals, sexual orgies and devil worship.

McPherson, however, seems to follow another version of the story. In an anthology entitled *Irish Folk and Fairytale Omnibus*, by Michael Scott, there is a tale called "The Card Player." Its plot is similar to the County Wicklow legend of the Hell Fire Club; however, its ambience is completely different. It is a working class milieu, more exactly a country pub, or shebeen, and the Devil's partners in the card game are three peasant brothers. In the tale the devilish figure seems to belong to a

higher social class than the brothers, and in McPherson's play, more sophisticated than the other characters both in his way of dressing, and in the language used. Mr. Lockhart is thus described by McPherson:

Lockhart is a larger man in his fifties perhaps. He is well-dressed in a camel-hair Crombie overcoat, a silk scarf, a fine trilby hat and an expensive-looking suit. He looks like a wealthy businessman and bon viveur... [He glows] warmly with festive indulgence. (40)

Maybe Lockhart is thus described in reference to the aristocratic members of the Hell Fire Club, or as a symbol of the new Ireland of the economic boom from the late 1980s onwards, the period of massive EU aid and low-taxes policies, and when the country got the epithet of Celtic Tiger.

As Mephostophilis in the end of Marlowe's play, Lockhart has come to collect the debt Sharky owes him. Twenty-five years before, Lockhart was beaten by Sharky in a poker game in the prison, "We met in the Bridewell, Sharky", Lockhart says (48). At that time Sharky promised Lockhart a chance to play him again. Besides, Lockhart took Sharky out of prison, although the latter had beaten a man to death:

His name was Laurence Joyce. [*Lockhart tells Sharky*]. He was sixty-one. He was a vagrant. He said he was trying to get to Cardiff?... Said he had some family there? Said his wife was once the Cardiff Rose?... You beat him up in the back of O'Dowd's public house in the early hours of the twenty-fourth of December 1981. You killed him. (*Short pause*) I let you out. I set you free. (49)

This speech contains a very revealing intertextual resonance. The name Cardiff Rose is also the name of a song by Roger McGuinn, American singer, main vocalist and lead guitar player of The Byrds, a band which became famous for mixing rock 'n' roll with folk elements in their songs.

"Cardiff Rose" (also known as "Jolly Roger") is a pirate song (Jolly Roger being the traditional pirate flag, the one with the smiling skull over two crossed bones or swords). It appeared in the 1973 Roger McGrimm solo album of the same name. The song is about the life of pirates, always looking for adventure and freedom:

Our homeland far behind us
Being hunted by the King's Navy
But sure he'd never find us

Pull away me lads of the Cardiff Rose
And hoist the Jolly Roger

The counter-culture flavour of the pirate's life depicted in the song is similar, in mood, to that led by Synge's idealized vagrants. Sharky's violence against the vagrant, however, shows an ambivalent attitude towards this style of life. Beating Laurence Joyce (the literary overtones of the name are pretty obvious) to death, Sharky seems to show hatred against a life-style that would eventually be his own. The irony is that the life led by Sharky from that moment on is very close to the winos chased by Richard.

Lockhart wants to take Sharky with him to hell: "[Y]ou're coming through the old hole in the wall with me tonight, Sharky", Lockhart announces threateningly. "Because we're gonna play for your soul and I'm gonna win", he boasts triumphantly (51). But when the latter asks him what is hell, Lockhart answers:

What's hell? (*Gives a little laugh*) Hell is... (*Stares gloomily*).
Well, you know, Sharky, when you're walking round and round the city and the streetlights have all come on and it's cold. Or you're standing outside a shop where you were hanging around reading the magazines, pretending to buy one 'cause you've no money and nowhere to go and your

feet are like blocks of ice in those stupid little slip-on shoes you bought for chauffeuring. And you see all the people who seem to live in another world all snuggled up together in the warmth of a tavern or a cozy little house, and you're on your own and nobody knows who you are. And you don't know anyone and you're trying not to hassle people or beg, because you're trying not to drink, and you're hoping you won't meet anyone you know because of the blistering shame that rises up in your face and you have to turn away because you know you can't even deal with the thought that someone might love you, because of all the pain you always cause. Well that's a fraction of the self-loathing you feel in hell, except that's worse. (80-81)

This passage of course reminds the famous words of Mephostophilis in *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592), by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593). When the astonished Faustus asks Mephostophilis – “How comes it then that thou art out of hell?” –, he answers matter-of-factly:

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.
 Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,
 And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,
 Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
 In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?
 Oh, Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
 Which strike a terror to my fainting soul.
 (Act 1, scene 3)

Hell is not a place, but a state in which man experiments an acute feeling of deprivation and pain, which probably means, then, that Sharky has always been in hell.

In a formidable *coup de théâtre*, Richard and Ivan, unaware that they have done so, beat the devil. The play ends so with a note of hope and words of reconciliation. If the play is about redemption, it seems to

me that the author has great doubts about its possibility in the state we live. The play ends with such a large chain of questions unanswered and paradoxes unresolved that one can imagine that the greatest joke of all is really its end, like a morality play in which the author was more interested in the immanence of life than the transcendence of the salvation of the soul.

McPherson's *The Seafarer* can be seen as a study of the importance and the role of the daemonic drive in human existence. Lockhart is there to utter what is deep inside Sharky, to paint the picture of his sufferings, his incapacity of loving and being together, the terrible conflict he lives between the longing for a free and unconventional life and the price one needs to pay when the world has become "a hole in the wall", through where Lockhart wants to take him if and when he finally beats him (80). This word play between "if" and "when" is probably the most succinct expression of the tragic, or rather tragicomic, sense of life that McPherson depicts in his play.

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