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Paper Ghosts: Reading the Uncanny in Alice McDermott

"May had pinned a paper ghost to the mirror above the sealed fireplace."
(*At Weddings and Wakes* 63)[1]

Set among the New York Irish during the twentieth century, Alice McDermott's novels *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992) and *Charming Billy* (1998)[2] are widely acknowledged as works of great aesthetic and emotional power which also deliver exceptional insights into the character of ethnic culture and identity. In this essay, I explore the role of scenes and motifs involving literal and symbolic haunting and uncanny effects in McDermott's 1990s writing of ethnicity, with a primary focus on *AWW* and a briefer discussion of *CB*. In these, her two finest novels to date, McDermott skillfully combines symbolist and realistic storytelling, subtle management of viewpoint and deft use of flash-back and –forward, to show the psyches of second- and third-generation Irish Americans born up to the early 1950s, as a ground of struggle. An ever-present past reaches out to haunt possible futures with, in *AWW*, its burden of loss and mourning and, in *CB*, a constricting system of Irish and Catholic beliefs, psychological formations and cultural practices, imperfectly modified in the process of integration. I argue that her writing of the uncanny, and in particular its gendering, constitutes a resistance to the dominant values of inherited Irish cultures and a way toward different futures.

McDermott's work is rightly admired both inside and outside Irish America. Fanning's fine and canon-constituting *The Irish Voice in America* develops discerning and nuanced interpretations of her novels, according them high praise and incorporating them as the culmination of its own literary-historical narrative.[3] However McDermott's work sits uneasily with any consolidating strategy simply to memorialize and valorize Irish Catholic ethnicity, creating a certain dissonance

[1] London: Bloomsbury, 2003. First published 1992 (subsequently cited as *AWW*).
[2] London: Bloomsbury, 2003. First published 1998 (subsequently cited as *CB*).
[3] Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America.* 2nd ed. (Lexington: U P of Kentucky, 2000). 385-91.

between writer and critics: she has herself often gestured toward universality in her aims, insisting that she wrote about the Irish of the five boroughs because this was the material that fell to her hand, and sedulously disclaiming any intention to be the laureate of this ethnic group, still less to attribute exceptionalism to it.[4] McDermott needs to be considered as a contemporary American novelist, not merely, perhaps scarcely at all, as a dutiful daughter of Catholic Irish America. Her work is indeed a sympathetic fictional realization of New York Irish worlds, but it is also a searching critique of a white ethnic group and its inherited values.[5]

McDermott has often in interviews defined the process itself of story-telling as a dominating concern of her work (see Osen 113-114). The primacy of storytelling also, albeit partly in a different sense, characterizes those major canonical fictions – especially by Emily Bronte and Faulkner – which she repeatedly cites as important antecedents. A key feature of both is that within their fiction, different stories clash and contradict one another, so that no single verifiable truth emerges. Particularly relevant to *CB* is Faulkner's interest in passionate but subjective versions of the truth which make it a plural, not a singular category. This is both constitutively modernist and deeply rooted in his white Southern ethnicity with its constant backward look to fateful past moments. The nested but mutually disruptive stories narrated in *Absalom, Absalom* (which McDermott nominates as among her favorite novels) make it an important predecessor to her own project in these novels: "There's nothing more passionate in that book than the relentless demand that the story must be told, again and again." (Osen 115)

Another characteristic is closely bound up with storytelling in her vision. If the classic project of the predominantly realist bildungsroman is the achieving of

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[4] In a representative instance: "Writing about Irish Catholics in New York is writing about material at hand; I don't have to consult with anyone to find out what jokes they would tell... But I have no inherent interest in Irish Catholic families in New York as such." Interview with Diane Osen. *The Book that Changed My Life.* Ed. Diane Osen (New York: Modern Library, 2002). 109-120. 118-9.

[5] Two excellent recent essays have helped me develop my interpretation of McDermott: Sinéad Moynihan, "'None of us will always be here': Whiteness, Loss and Alice McDermott's *At Weddings and Wakes.*" *Contemporary Women's Writing* 4.1 (2010): 40-54, which reveals *AWW's* deeply critical representation of Irish ethnic prejudice, and Mary Paniccia Carden, "Making Love, Making History: (Anti) Romance in Alice McDermott's *At Weddings and Wakes* and *Charming Billy*," in *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, eds. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2003, 3-23.

autonomous selfhood, McDermott directs attention, though far from uncritically, toward family and community as the crucible of individual identities. Such absorbing, often deforming, family milieus have their avatars in Bronte and Faulkner too, but the oft-alleged tribalism of Irish culture, so effectively adapted politically in America, is obviously relevant here.[6] McDermott's work is placed at the intersection of two largely incommensurate influences: New York Irish Catholic immigrant culture, and the skeptical perspectives of urban modernity, inaugurated by modernism and fostered by the secular vision of much twentieth-century art and thought. In *CB* especially, an implicit but powerful tension arises between modernism's characteristic, even constitutive vision of the unsustainability of totalizing explanations of the world including that of religion (a vision anticipated by Emily Bronte's radical antinomianism), and the faith-irradiated worldview underlying the Catholicism of ordinary Irish Americans - insistently characterized by historian Daniel Patrick Moynihan as non- or even anti-intellectual – rendered in fiction both by McDermott and, before her, in powerful work by Elizabeth Cullinan.[7]

Set mainly between the 1920s and the 1980s, both novels trace the trajectory of the New York Irish from city neighborhoods to modest suburbs. McDermott shows an ethnic, originally immigrant, community unified by stories including faith and Irish history itself. However, the predominant viewpoints are those of characters born in the early 1950s, absorbing the stories of their grandparents' immigrant generation and their parents' experiences (including men with World War 2 service, giving them "a part in the general history" of their American generation (*AWW* 125)). The novels' perspectives belong to the 1990s historical moment, when ethnic Irishness among the third or later generations became more a thing elected for as a

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[6] See Hugh Brogan on American urban politics: "The system was wonderfully adapted to the needs, and even more so the experience, of... immigrants. They came from a world where the state was little more than a distant instrument of oppression which taxed them heavily, punished them brutally... and gave them little or nothing in return. In such a world the only reliance was on family and neighbours... The Irish did it best. They brought a literate knowledge of English... substantial experience of electoral politics... a spontaneous clannishness and a useful strain of Catholicism." *Penguin History of the United States of America* (London: Penguin, 1985), 411.

[7] See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Irish (1963, 1970)." *Making the Irish American. History and Heritage of the Irish in the United* States. Ed. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York UP, 2006), 514, and Elizabeth Cullinan, especially *House of Gold* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). I am grateful to Maureen Murphy for introducing me to Cullinan's work.

set of cultural practices than an inescapable way of being. Kerby Miller noted the growing distance of Irish America from actual, real Ireland: this was "ethnicity by memory, more symbolic than existential", as Jules Chametzky called this phase of optional ethnic identification.[8]

It is not surprising, therefore, that while McDermott tends to be read within the category of Irish-American literature, her work significantly troubles assumptions about ethnic identity. *CB* effectively undermines identitarian positions, and *AWW* critically anatomizes the persistence of ethnicity as mourning and victimhood, with particular applicability to exceptionalist representations of Irish historical experience.[9] Her work reveals American Irishness as a set of constructions – indeed, in *CB,* lies – which have a vital role in constituting meaning but not a truth-function. A radical implication is that Irish-American difference was or is itself a socially useful invention, albeit one which, come prosperity, suburbanization and diffusion into the white mainstream, was outliving its own original principal functions and perhaps, in the age of white anxiety, redeploying these in disturbing ways.[10] McDermott's fiction, however, withholds unequivocal valorization of such Irishness, while tenderly acknowledging the felt realities of ethnic beliefs and practices in American Irish lives.

Kathleen Brogan observes in her remarkable study *Cultural Haunting* (1998) that ethnicity itself can be a "bewildering, mysterious heritage."[11] Brogan cites

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[8] Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (London: Aurum P, 1994) 121. Jules Chametzky, "Beyond Melting Pots, Cultural Pluralism, Ethnicity or, Déjà Vu All Over Again." (*MELUS* 16.4 (Winter 1989-90): 3-17. Qtd in June Dwyer, "Unappealing Ethnicity Meets Unwelcoming America: Immigrant Self-Fashioning in Mary Gordon's *Temporary Shelter.*" (*MELUS* 22.3 (Fall 1997): 103-11). Karen Caplan represents ethnic identities as less a willed and more an involuntary matter: "identities cling to us, or even produce us... the fragments and multiplicities of identity in postmodernity can be marked and historically situated." *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 1996), 47.

[9] On Irish exceptionalism see Liam Kennedy, "Out of History: Ireland 'That Most Distressful Country.'" *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996), 182-223.

[10] See Sinéad Moynihan essay cited above, as well as the growing literature on Irishness and whiteness stemming from, and contesting, Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1996). *CB* shows an unedifying series of inter-ethnic encounters that also call for critical attention.

[11] Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: U P of Virginia, 1998), particularly Ch. 1, "Haunted Tales of Heirs and Ethnographers," 1-29.

Mexican-American writer Richard Rodriguez's remark that "the past survives in my life, though in mysterious ways, deeper than choosing", and Michael Fischer's characterization of ethnic identity as "potent even when not consciously taught", and transmitted "through processes analogous to the dreaming and transference of psychoanalytic encounters."[12] I now turn to considering McDermott's novels as explorations of the problem of dealing with the dead in Irish-American ethnic culture, how this gives rise to literal and symbolic haunting effects, and what it might reveal about the character of that culture from the 1990s onwards, 150 years on from the post-Famine mass Irish migration to the US.

Abraham and Torok's concept of the "transgenerational phantom" offers suggestive perspectives on uncanny effects in writing ethnicity.[13] Flouting the classical understanding of psychoanalysis as applicable only in the individual psyche, their theory is not that the dead literally return, but that "their lives' unfinished business is unconsciously handed down to their descendants" in the form of survivals of past suffering, trauma and other forms of collectively significant experience. Especially useful when considering the ethnic cultures of immigrant and displaced people is Abraham's argument for "laying the dead to rest... cultivating our ancestors... uncovering their shameful secrets" and "understanding their nameless and undisclosed suffering." (Abraham 167) This is distinguished from any notional superstitious ancestor-appeasement, but motivated by the view that "the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us" unless their experiences are brought to consciousness. Their defining of the role of performances in "relieving the unconscious" is productive for thinking about literary texts. Descendants, they argue, can and should find a way of establishing "shared or complementary" phantoms

> as social practices along the lines of *staged words*… To stage a word… constitutes an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the

[12] Richard Rodriguez, "An American Writer". *The Invention of Ethnicity*. Ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 8; Michael Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory". *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986), 195, 197. Both qtd. in Brogan, 19.

[13] N. Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: a Complement to Freud's Metapsychology." Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis.* Vol. 1. Ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 165-177.

> unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm. (Abraham 176)

At Weddings and Wakes

"The city, it sometimes seemed to the children, was full of ancient, buried things struggling to resurface."

(*AWW* 81)

"Just to prove, perhaps, that... like the dead their presence would be all the more inescapable when they were gone." (*AWW* 116)

AWW is all about dealing with the dead. In the opening chapter it's July 1963 and Lucy Dailey is bringing her three children to visit their great-aunt Momma, the stepmother who has raised her. The story is told almost entirely from the children's viewpoint, so we see everything vividly and naively, through their innocent eyes. Topographically the crossing is from suburban Long Island to Brooklyn; emotionally it's a visit to the past, and one which takes place twice weekly all summer; symbolically it's a journey underground, to the land of the dead. McDermott's combination of realist detail and mythic resonance is a tour de force: Lucy places a Life Saver candy on each child's tongue ahead of the under-river subway crossing, echoing the coin placed on dead people's tongues to pay the ferryman in classical mythology: one among many motifs of ordeal and passage to another realm. At the end of each sweltering interminable day their father will "deliver" them from their confinement in the apartment, out of the city and back to their cooler green home. As they drive home the youngest fears being alone on a dark street and "hearing at her feet the rattle of bones", and as they pass the graveyard, their father repeats a joke meant to avert such terrors: "You know, people are dying to get in there." As they arrive, weary, they are "only vaguely aware that for now they have left the dead behind them." (39)

Yet their deliverance is also, in a paradoxical way neither they nor the reader yet recognize, a bringing-forth in the sense of birth: the children are reborn each visit as out of the dark womblike containment of an Ur-Mother, embodied in Momma's formidable figure, Presiding over the apartment and everyone in it, she is a threatening presence, scarcely loving: "[h]er eyes didn't change to see them, only her

mouth smiled" (17), an effect made more frightening by their awareness that in a mysterious way they cannot concretely grasp, she represents their own origins and they cannot simply shake themselves free. Momma is both a vivid fictional character and a quasi-mythic cultural type.

In this novel McDermott's vision of Irish-American Catholic formation – imaginative, emotional, and metaphysical – has a twin focus. One is on destructive obsessions with the past and what has been lost. But there is also a reforming project: to be true to the dead, recognizing their claim on one's own being, yet to leave them behind so as to allow one's future life to emerge without distortion. Bob Dailey endures his wife's gloomy family because he understands that his attention to them fulfils a deep obligation to give "some constant acknowledgment of the lives of the dead" (211); but he always faces, and struggles toward, the future, and the children, at least the girls, follow his lead and seek ways to shed the haunted life. McDermott uses flashback and -forward powerfully to enact this contention between past and future. In this way her story dramatizes the psyche of Irish Americans formed before the 1960s as a ground of perpetual struggle where the past is constantly present, reaching out to haunt possible futures with its burden of loss and mourning.

Momma, elderly aunt of Lucy and her three sisters, migrated from Cork in 1921 to join her sister Annie, who in 1913 fled to America from their violent, drunken stepfather, marrying Jack Towne after a "shipboard romance" (77). Momma (then simply Mary) has had to postpone her own eager departure for seven years till the stepfather dies. While still a new immigrant she loses Annie her beloved sister. Later she marries Jack, but he too dies even before their son is even born. She has raised five small children alone in the harsh '20s and '30s. This litany of griefs leaves her always turned toward death: oppression by her stepfather, early loss of country, double bereavement and the sheer struggle to survive have been the defining experiences of her life. Surrounded by attentive though mutually resentful daughter-figures, she is at odds with her son John, an alcoholic, who has moved to Staten Island and barely keeps in annual contact. Momma's unrelinquished sense of injury and constantly performed devotion to the dead makes her a deadening presence. Harsh and emotionally ungiving, she holds onto her anger, not forgiving either John

or Veronica, Annie's last child, facially disfigured by medical negligence and also alcoholic.

It is true that Momma's severity and the aunts quarrelling in undertones cannot altogether disenchant the childhood magic of the apartment decorated for Christmas, its shining silverware and home-made ice-cream, the attention of the three aunts, each favoring a different child, or the grace of Aunt May's wedding as choreographed by aesthetic, Manhattan-savvy Agnes. The pleasure and familial love granted the children in this feminine milieu remain unattenuated, despite the aunts' own mutual contentions and disappointed lives.

It is only Momma we ever witness as harsh or reproachful toward the children. The reader gradually recognizes the real tragedy of her life, not in the succession of her deprivations, but in the hardness of the carapace which she has formed, her inability now to express or experience empathy, for instance with the not so dissimilar experiences of Aunt May's fiancé Fred. The children's mother Lucy brings a similar disposition of joylessness and suppressed rage to her own marriage, whose unhappiness she laments twice weekly to her sisters in the apartment's inner room, but never transacts face-to-face with her husband. She has learned from Momma to dwell in constant sorrow, whose signs the children faintly overhear and normalize without consciously comprehending. We learn in a flash-forward that the Dailey parents eventually divorce, an outcome further enhancing McDermott's theme of emotional impairment passed on through generations. The book as a whole is a critique of the values prevailing in Momma's place and the way of life there, founded as it is in mutual resentment and competitions for Most Wronged.[14]

In a painful scene when the aunts are out buying wedding clothes, Momma seizes her opportunity to rant at the children about her life's torment; they are terrified by her naked rage, apparently aimed at them. She has merged her personal history with the rhetoric of exceptionalist Irish victimhood, throwing off major catastrophes in world history: "don't tell me about your camps and your refugees," she tells her nieces (93). She seems determined neither to relinquish the children

[14] As shown, for example, in the tense encounter where brittle, scornful Agnes sneers at the roses Fred brings May as a Christmas gift (76).

unscathed into their own futures, nor grant the potential difference of those futures: for their part they feel "swept into that current of loss after loss that was adulthood." (151)

Momma's sense of injured superiority also orphans her from communal solidarity and exacerbates her isolation. An iron determination has enabled her hard-won ascent above "shanty-Irish" relatives such as the McGowan sisters who stood by her in her hour of need; she is haughty toward the priest and, consumed by her private sense of injustice, skeptical of Irish sentimentalism. In the wedding episode, a great set scene, funny and touching, she has handkerchief in hand during the emigrant anthem "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen", but as the narrator tartly observes, her tears are "theoretical" because neither she nor the others singing "would have gone home again – across the ocean wild and wide – for anything" (200). The sentiment is socially appropriate, but performative. She savagely rejects the Ireland she left more than four decades before:

> an awful place... dirt and mud and dumb animals... nights black as pitch, and illness and accident as common as the cold rain." (149)

While Momma has ample cause to mourn, her abiding sense of loss exceeds even her harsh experiences: her ceaseless citations of death assume the character of a cultural trait. There are intriguing parallels with the widow Maurya in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, suggesting an invocation by both writers of the underlying, quasi-mythic Mother Ireland familiar from literature and historical rhetoric. This figure derives mythically from the sovereignty goddess of Irish mythology and avatars such as the *cailleach* or telluric Magna Mater.[15] It has become entwined with the stern unexpressive mother common in Irish ethnic representations. and commonly either excoriated from misogynist perspectives or sentimentalized in ethnic writing. Such strong, forbidding women were indeed formed in the terrible crucible of family

[15] See Patricia Lysaght, "Aspects of the Earth Goddess in the Tradition of the Banshee in Ireland," in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1996), 152-165, and Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer* (Cork: Cork U P), 2003, 25-52.

disintegration and destitution in and after the Famine and carried along in the mass exodus to America.[16] Elizabeth Cullinan's fine *House of Gold* offers the most memorable, and negative, elaboration of this figure in Irish-American literature before McDermott.[17] McDermott's Momma, however, maintains a milieu which is generative as well as threatening: like Great Mother archetypes, she faces two ways, and McDermott's underlying symbolism productively maintains this doubleness. The difference in perspective from Cullinan may arise from generational distance. Brogan, discussing Ania Yezierska's early twentieth-century work, identifies a "crushingly proximate culture", from which the second-generation writer's urgent task is to seek liberation. The Dailey children, and McDermott herself, are further removed from the brute facts of immigration (Brogan 24).

AWW does suggest other more decisively future-oriented ways of being. Two adult characters most clearly embody hope. One, the children's father Bob Dailey, himself directly acquainted with death in the war, annually draws his family to the eastern tip of Long Island and away from purgatorial Brooklyn, much as he contends with Lucy for the reciprocal love it seems she cannot give. The other is May, the ex-nun aunt with the most loving heart, nurtured, significantly, in the convent, away from the simmering apartment. It is her astonishing romance with middle-aged Fred the mailman that leads to the wedding of the title. If her three sisters have each her share of resentment, anger and scorn, May lives out her capacity for joy. Her sudden death after barely crossing the threshold of marriage – echoing her father's, literally in the apartment doorway – is an ultimate irony, displacing her wedding with her wake and seeming almost to justify Momma's pessimism about human wishes after all.

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[16] In a controversial argument, Tom Inglis suggests that Irish post-Famine society developed a system of emotional control and coldness by mothers toward children, most of whom would be forced to migrate by altered economic circumstances involving impartible inheritance (*Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland.* 2nd edition (Dublin: University College Dublin P, 1998)).

[17] See Maureen Murphy, "Elizabeth Cullinan: Yellow and Gold", in Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes, ed. *Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism* (New York: AMS P, 1979), 139-152, and Charles Fanning, "Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold*: Culmination of an Irish-American Dream." *MELUS* 7, 4 (Winter, 1980): 31-48. Mary Gordon's powerful but flawed *The Other Side* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), an ambitious historical novel, develops a feminist interpretation of the emotional crippling of women like Ellen McNamara, her version of the dominating mother, by patriarchal and superstitious Irish communities.

AWW's uncanny motifs resonate powerfully with the quasi-mythic significance of Momma, combining to generate the novel's larger meanings. Brogan notes that haunting in women's texts tends to attach to reproductive issues, which so palpably involve women's bodies (25); in *AWW* one of the two literal ghostly manifestations occurs precisely in this context. It is 1921. The young Mary, three weeks in Brooklyn and not yet "Momma", stands by the bed where her sister lies feverish after four childbirths in seven years. It is a hot still night, but Mary sees "the curtain move, although I can tell you there was no breeze" and "the light just flattened out," then hears "one sound," the banshee's unearthly cry, in the air four storeys above the street (86, 89-90). This omen of Annie's imminent death is then delicately echoed twice in the final chapter. It is 1964, at that year's rented beach cottage, three days after May's wedding. Bob Dailey reads aloud a *Reader's Digest* story about an eldest sister heroically sacrificing her life for two siblings; he skeptically pooh-poohs the tale but everyone else is moved, and the boy Bobby, himself an eldest and preoccupied with leadership and manliness, is "more affected... than he wanted to admit."[18] He follows his father's lead, proclaiming "you can't know what she was thinking... Not after she's dead." But at his own mention of death, unconsciously echoing the young Mary watching Annie die, he sees "the kitchen curtain move with the breeze from the bay", and pulls himself "closer to the center of light." (203) It is the eve of May's death. That night a "horned, devilish" slug crawls like a death-bringer out of the cracked baseboard of the girls' room. They shriek "like a couple of banshees," unwitting heralds of May's passing, and this time it is Lucy's future-facing, death-resisting husband who unwittingly hears in his daughters' cries the doom awaiting the innocently vacationing family (21, 206).

Between these two banshee-moments, McDermott places a schoolyard ghost-story which, though apparently tangential, enacts the theme of the whole book: that on the one hand the past is inexorably taken from us, like May from Fred, and must willy-nilly be relinquished, while on the other it is always there like a trace that can never be completely shed. A classmate tells Bobby Dailey the story. This boy's aunt,

[18] On the subway journey, "in the lead", he "yanked open each door" and "faced the rush of heat and sound with a determined nonchalance that might have served him well in war had he ever been asked to serve." (9)

who lives in suburban Cambria Heights, sees in her landing stained-glass window a young man's silhouette, sitting motionless in her neighbor's front room, but this turns out to be empty. The priest she calls is evidently himself spooked, "almost shouting 'knock it out!'", adding "get something clean and modern." (121)

This incident of a phantom surfacing in the aspiring suburbs feeds the book's insistent concern with dead souls and the haunted consciousness. The chapter is pervaded by traces of things which people have tried, but not fully succeeded, to get rid of: everything is dusted with residues, seen and unseen, like the warmth of the schoolchildren's bodies lingering on the wool of their shed coats (119). Back in the classroom, Bobby sees the "thin skim of dust and hair and dirt" covering the floor and the calf of the girl in front of him. Framing the ghost-anecdote are descriptions of the school incinerator which burns "every botched effort of the day" and all manner of small items, producing "gray smoke" with a "damp and earthy odor" (118). The "small flakes of black ash... a dark, dusty stain" subliminally connote the Holocaust, with terrible human traces in its smoke (124). Twelve-year-old Bobby fantasizes that, had *he* been the priest, he would have spoken bravely to the (supposed) ghost: "Are you a ghost? Can't you escape?" (124) He thinks he would emulate the "manly tone" his father had finally used to the widowed Fred who came to the Daileys' house and sat silently through dinner "all those Sundays" after May died: "Fred, what is it you want us to do for you? Fred, what is it you want us to say?"

Bobby aspires to a masculine bravery linked with his dreams of priestly power (83). His father's brave campaign to free Lucy from her ancestral melancholy and from the living death of the Brooklyn apartment is, however, doomed. McDermott's conjunction of persisting physical and metaphysical traces which cannot be braved away – the ash flakes and dusty stains, the apparition in the window, Fred's lost love – suggests that many or perhaps all souls are trapped as if inside stained glass, and no amount of manly heroism can overcome grief, loss and the haunting legacies of the past. The adult Bobby no longer puts his faith in masculine determination and drive to get answers from ghosts: the chapter ends with his melancholy recall of the episode as: "[a] scent, a scene, a story from his

brave youth; from a time when he had believed himself to be holy, and mortal." (124)

The newly bereaved Fred, rendered silent as a phantom by his loss, echoes his shadow-double caught and stilled in the stained glass, another poignant instance of the whole book's concern with spirits trapped in unfreedom. In the design of the novel Fred's happy meeting with May parallels Momma's hopeful recovery, with Jack's love, from the loss of Annie, only to face Jack's own death, equally sudden as May's, equally devastating, returning both Momma and Fred to the place of souls ensnared in sorrow. McDermott links this with the Catholic devotional practice of liberating souls from purgatory by energetic prayer, in which the older girl has shown prowess at Hallowe'en (86). Happily picturing "her" fifty souls freed dove-like into air, she sees Aunt Veronica ghostly pale by the window as if "one of the souls she'd freed... had, on the way from purgatory to Paradise, revisited the earth" and begins to realize that nothing can free the still-confined aunts from the grip of their familial-ethnic past of deracination and hardship (87).

Yet, bearing witness to these sad pasts, the girl-children also set out inventively to transform the causes and signs of mourning into celebratory offerings. It is true that the sugared almonds from the wedding turn out bitter inside, and their pretty violet and pink ribboned bags impossible to reassemble (52); but this foretaste of disillusionment fails to nullify their hopes. Margaret, the elder, helped by Bobby, innocently gathers gladioli off a grave to give her teacher, hoping to alleviate this glum woman's dourness (160). The teacher, learning their provenance, is appalled and angrily rejects them, but Margaret's thinking – what will the dead want with gladioli? – shows her looking, appropriately, forward.[19]

Still more creatively, the younger girl Maryanne tells her new teacher May's sad story, longing to impress pretty, kind Sister Miriam Joseph and having only this tale to do it with (60). This idea of the power of a story has strong resonances with

[19] This echoes Agnes' sneering at Fred's gift of roses to May. The scorn about flowers is paralleled in Anna Quindlen's *Object Lessons* (New York: Random House, 1991), a lively study of ethnic interactions and Irish-American culture contemporary with McDermott's, where the Irish-Americans strongly disapprove of how the Italian-American cemetery-keeper grandfather maintains the graveyard as a beautiful garden.

CB, where stories, lies, religious faith and romantic feeling are all interwoven in structuring and sustaining Irish-American culture, and perhaps also in keeping it damagingly unchanged. But where in *CB* both an over-protective lie and an over-receptivity to romance and sentiment prove destructive, we see Maryanne offer her sensational story as something precious: not a ghost but a gift.[20] By its means she transforms the loss of the loving and beloved ex-nun aunt into something which can be refashioned, almost cherished, no longer merely or mainly a thing at whose mercy Maryanne was. This suggests an understanding that storytelling carries out positive psychological and cultural work, as it did in traditional societies including rural Ireland in living memory (and may continue to do, in modern or postmodern urban milieus, in the form of literature and the other arts). Traditional cultures deal obliquely with the forbidden, unspeakable and excluded, by means of stories, in particular involving the uncanny, the spectral world of predatory other beings.[21] Maryanne's disclosure is a creative act which also prefigures the imagining into being of the novel itself.

Charming Billy

"Only mortals, only the living... can bury the dead." (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 174)

In *CB* McDermott's deployment of the uncanny is focused on women and acts as a counterweight to dominant Irish and Catholic discourses of faith, romance and idealization. The book interrogates these psychological and cultural structures which underpin Irish masculine roles, especially in the form of those notably gendered romantic aspirations and illusions which characterize Billy, attracting the admiration of his community as quasi-heroic or saintly.[22] Considering why so many

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[20] Prefiguring the teenage narrator Theresa in *Child of My Heart* (2004), of whom McDermott says she has been "a storyteller and a liar since she was fifteen" and that "this story is her special work of art… this is how she stops time. This is how she takes a stand against those songs about the deaths of children." (Reilly interview 565)

[21] See Angela Bourke, "Fairies and Anorexia: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Amazing Grass'." (*Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*. 13 (1993): 25-38)

[22] His alcoholism is intimately bound up with these grand aspirations: see Mariana Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 106-9. At Billy's wake a wrangle takes place about whether his alcoholism is a disease, or a decision made in response

stories of "cultural haunting" are written by women, Brogan suggests that intersections between ethnicity and gender find especially full articulation in the telling of ghost stories (24-5), and this is often connected with women's traditional placing more in domestic, not public, contexts. *CB* opens with the funeral of its title character. The uncanny effects, concentrated in the evening after Billy's burial, are all experienced or invoked by women, who play the "staging" role, recalling Abraham's formulation that "to stage a word… constitutes an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm."[23] Furthermore the first two of the three chapters set on this evening, while starting with Maeve at her lowest point, show her coming round and, despite her lifelong meekness, assuming the narrator's role to tell her own story of her life with Billy.

The first haunting-encounter is based on a misapprehension, but is none the less startling for that. Billy, winning and lovable but alcoholic, has consumed his life away in romantic longing. His young love, Irish girl Eva, has jilted him and Dennis, his cousin and best friend, has told him Eva died in Ireland. After this fateful lie which comes near to destroying Dennis himself as well as Billy, Billy married plain-looking Maeve, who already cared for her alcoholic father and was good at coping.[24] Now after thirty-odd years, neighbors and relatives are at Maeve's house to keep company with her after the funeral. She is resting upstairs when Dennis, who has been walking Billy's dog, lets himself in by the back door. Mistaking his step for the just-buried Billy's, Maeve appears ashen-faced in the other doorway as if indeed to encounter the dead. This eerie merging of Billy and Dennis is a misapprehension rather than an apparition, but it shocks Maeve so profoundly that she vomits,

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to what he believes is the death of his young ideal beloved (19). Billy's poetic or priestly asceticism is often remarked: he is said to look like an "aesthete priest." (63)

[23] N. Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom", Abraham and Torok 176.

[24] This includes keeping quiet about Billy's uglier side: his hands at her throat, barricading the bedroom door, "things he had said to her, terrible things he had done, ways she had seen him (toothless, incoherent, half-clothed, bloodied, soiled, weeping) that she couldn't begin to tell." (157) The community fosters, even tacitly enjoins, Maeve's silence. A growing literature examines the role of denial and suppression of feeling in Irish culture and specifically in Irish alcoholism. See Richard Stivers, *Hair of the Dog: Irish Drinking and its American Stereotype* (2nd edition. New York: Continuum, 2000), Monica McGoldrick, "Irish Families," in McGoldrick et al., ed. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (3rd ed., New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 595-615; see Maureen Dezell for a perceptive summary of these discussions in *Irish America: Coming into Clover* (NY: Anchor, 2000), 117-132.

repeating five separate times that she thought Billy was downstairs (168-9). She turns finally to Dennis to acknowledge: "he's gone... our Billy" (170), and begins to come back to herself. At the book's dénouement we learn that Maeve and Dennis eventually marry: the doubling of the two men haunts this eerie moment when the phantom of the first husband starts to fade, supplanted by the foreshadowed second.

The ensuing conversation is pervaded by ideas about the supernatural, dreams and omens. In traditional Irish and other cultures, the souls of the newly dead are felt not to have yet left their familiar haunts: people experienced the days after a death as a hinge phase between this and the other world.[25] Although this is Queens, 1983, the talk implicitly expresses the feeling that Billy's spirit, too, still hovers about his house. The women mention a *piseog* or superstition about widows seeing their dead husbands – "always three times" – in dreams, and how this helps the living to relinquish the dead (172). Then just as personal experience of such dream-visions is recounted, the priest is heard knocking on the door. The narrator's cool amused irony – "…three short raps that might have come from beneath a conjuror's table" – distances her with its suggestion of melodramatic fakery, but her reaction is as much self-protective as safely skeptical: she occupies a position part inside and part outside Irish ethnic culture (Dennis' grown daughter, married "out", living on the West Coast). At the priest's knock the women abruptly switch modes from their absorbed dwelling on otherworld messages. Dennis – once more, notably, opening a door – says "Monsignor" in greeting: immediately "a single look went around the women in the room, you could feel the subject changing" and Rosemary "leaned over and turned on another light," as if to perform a transition from the shadowy – and feminine – realm of dream-visitants (172).

By their stated belief in these dream-communications the women in McDermott's scene – including a "Legion of Mary woman" who helps out in the parish – half-consciously invoke another world. The women take a lead role, bearing out the association of female storytellers in Irish tradition with supernatural

[25] This is vividly recounted by Eibhlís Ní Shúilleabháin: "Since the Shea man died we are afraid to stir any night unless three or four of us together... Everyone is frightened until he is buried a month or so" (*Letters from the Great Blasket*. 1978. 2nd ed. (Cork: Mercier P, 1988, 37-8)).

material, in what might be a vestigial remnant of Irish death customs.[26] Brogan observes that "...certain associations between the feminine and the ghostly tend to reappear," arguing that "as an absence made present, the ghost can give expression to the ways in which women are rendered invisible in the public sphere." (25) In *CB* Dennis's admission of the priest, quintessential public regulator of otherworld belief, banishes dream-visits by the dead with suave words of consolation and leads everyone in a decade of the rosary, "staged words" which reassert Catholic orthodoxy. Subdued irony pervades the passage: this worldly Monsignor's throat, chest and thighs strain against his clerical garb and his smooth consolatory patter meets a surprising recoil of raw unreconciled grief from the normally docile, handmaidenly Maeve (177-8).

Indeed once he leaves, her resistance to his professional counsel seems to embolden her to recover further from the horror of thinking Billy's ghost has walked in; surrounded by the other women as chorus, she becomes able to play out her love for Billy and her loss by herself inaugurating a third phase of ghost-talk, now invoking an omen. She and her neighbor recall how, on the night Billy died but before they knew of the fact, both felt spooked and Dorothy crossed the road to sit up with Maeve: "there was a wind… it pulled at the windows… something weird about the night. The wind and the warmish air…" (189) This eerie wind suggests Billy's already-wandering spirit, and possibly the *séideán sidhe* or *sí gaoithe* believed in Irish vernacular tradition to carry souls away.[27] This third spectral instance poetically registers the felt disturbance in surface reality caused by Billy's death and how the women feel and can talk of this: their talk is itself doing cultural work to accommodate that death and make it bearable, in this case by the retrospective noting of their own premonitions.[28] The women's openness to the uncanny in this

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[26] Kathleen Vejvoda notes women's association with "tales about fairies and ghosts" ("Too Much Knowledge of the Other World": Women and Nineteenth-Century Irish Folktales." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32.1 (2004): 41-6).

[27] Compare Jenny McGlynn, "Gush of Wind as Omen of Death" in "Legends of the Supernatural," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 5: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork U P, 2002), 1309. On the fairy wind, see Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (New York: Prentice Hall P, 1991), 190.

[28] Ellen Badone notes that omens bridge time-dimensions (present and future), and levels of reality (natural and supernatural). Part of a worldview denying rigid "boundaries between these domains",

whole scene is connected with their felt subalternity in a distinctly male-dominated community. Their self-censoring reaction to the Monsignor's arrival indicates popular supernatural beliefs half-secretly maintained alongside official Catholic ones, all of a piece with a more intuitive understanding of the order of things.

This gendered credence in a hidden order is also shown as classed. Billy's upwardly-mobile sister Kate, a wealthy lawyer's wife, has made it to suburban affluence in Rye, and she demurs at the others' account of the spooky premonitory wind – "no doubt it was the hour, too." (190) But McDermott ironically undercuts Kate's liberal self-positioning. She may aspire to cultural sophistication but has not got beyond blue-collar culinary caution: dubiously sniffing the "some kind of chicken with rice" left by Maeve's solicitous Indian neighbors, she fears it is "something spicy." Maeve's countering commendation – "Lili's a wonderful cook" and "they're fine people" (189) – further registers Maeve's growth in confidence.[29]

Consistent with McDermott's deployment of the uncanny for symbolic force, in a spirit neither credulous nor dismissively skeptical, is an earlier reported incident when Billy's mother cites another *piseog*, in this case a presentiment about birth, not death. Shaking Eva's hand on meeting, she feels "four quick pulses" in her own stomach, and recognizes a sign that Eva and Billy will have four children (23). Eva does indeed bear four children, but not with Billy: an ironic outcome only half discrediting the prophecy.

The evening at Maeve's house is followed by a further scene where McDermott uses a ghostly motif, this time to counterpoint the complacency of the twenty-eight-year old savvy Seattle-dwelling narrator. After the wake she and Dennis stop off for a drink at their unmarried Cousin Dan's, Billy's long-time drinking companion, to help assuage his loneliness. In his drab apartment, "pre-war Queens... forlorn and hopeless as a penitentiary", he pours three glasses of whiskey

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they are interpreted as proof of a larger force predetermining and controlling events in human lives ("Death Omens in a Breton Memorate," in *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader,* ed. Antonius C.G.M. Robben (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 66.)

[29] In terms of ethnic or racial boundaries, however, this may rather maintain ethnic difference than dissolve it, by protesting too much. In *AWW* Fred twice uses the same verbal formula. Of his mother's Jewish employers on Central Park West he says "you couldn't have asked for nicer people," the phrase he also uses about the Cuban family, topically named Castro ("wouldn't you know it?") living in his mother's former apartment (101).

(202). Dan has meant one for Billy, thereby symbolically including him, in what is perhaps an extension of the "kind of sacred communion" at Irish wakes, expressing "the heightened sense of community… in the liminal wake-house."[30] But Dennis hands it to his daughter in a gesture which both disrupts such attention to the dead and breaches felt gender appropriateness (registered in Dan's "Would you rather a ginger ale?") Dan is the quintessential older Irish blue-collar migrant, admiring of the smooth Monsignor, known for publicly combating anti-Irish prejudice, dwelling amid World War 2 memories and indignant about attacks on priestly celibacy. While she sips "Billy's drink", there is a repeated "splatter of rain – like fingertips tapping against the windowpanes." (206) Then as Dan tearfully reminisces about Maeve's and Billy's early-'50s married life, "a bit of wind picked up some raindrops and hit them against the glass, like pebbles thrown by a persistent suitor." (209) This half-uncanny wind sets up resonances with both *Wuthering Heights*, where Cathy's child-ghost assails Lockwood's sleep, and Joyce's "The Dead", recalling Gretta Conroy's tale of her forsaken suitor Michael Furey, also shut out in a storm, the thought of whom haunts Gabriel Conroy. He and Lockwood have in common their smug self-satisfaction, in each case radically undermined by experience. For McDermott's narrator the whiskey "raised a kind of veil... both a warmth across the cheeks and a welling in the eyes." This controlled, even impassive young woman, in from the West Coast for the funeral, has hitherto seemed scarcely moved by the poignant story she both hears and tells. Now, as if Billy's spirit is knocking at the closed windows of her self-assurance while she holds "his" drink, she sees for the first time that for the ruined and now dead Billy, whiskey was "a way of seeing, perhaps…" and, paradoxically, this veiling and welling "the very thing [he] would have found so appealing, had the drink been his."

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[30] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, "The Production and Consumption of Sacred Substances in Irish Funerary Tradition." *Etiäinen* 2 (Turku: Finnish Society for Celtic Studies, 1993), 46. He describes such wake-customs as a "ritual intensification of experience in the liminal domain of the laid-out corpse by means of the communal ingestion of tobacco and alcohol." Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier P, 1967), cites a 1683 report of expectations among Irish country people that "the departed soul will partake" of the food and drink set out (17).

This motif of watery veiling and blurred sight pervades the novel, triggered here by the hint of Billy's ghostly presence in the uncanny wind and rain; it thereby links the uncanny with the longed-for transfiguration or transcendence of reality by romantic love and religious faith. Billy's myopia has rendered Eva ravishingly beautiful at his first glimpse of her on a beach, and he can retrieve this indistinct luminosity ever thereafter only at the bottom of a glass, in the "dark and sparkling places" where he drinks with boon companions such as Dan Lynch and Mickey Quinn (212).[31] Now Dan begins accusing himself and their whole community of not responding sufficiently to Billy's need for support in his terrible loss (as he believes); Billy's suffering was heroic, transcendent, quasi-saintly, and he says they should have taken drink for drink with him and not tried to intervene in his alcoholism. Dennis cannot abide this: at the scene's climax he follows up the initial disruptive gesture of giving his daughter the whiskey with brusque rejection of Dan's *pietas* toward Irish tradition and in particular his colluding with Billy's stereotypical ethnic drinking patterns. Angrily rebuffing such sentiment, he comes close to disclosing the delusion – created by himself – on which Billy's whole life of mourning has been premised. This powerful passage makes explicit the destructive intertwining in Irish-American culture between romantic and religious idealism, the imperative to suppress emotional expression, and the opiate uses of alcohol:

> "Billy didn't need someone to pour him his drinks, he needed someone to tell him that living isn't poetry. It isn't prayer. To tell him and convince him. And none of us could do it, Danny, because every one of us thought that as long as Billy believed it was, as long as he kept himself believing it, then maybe it could still be true. Jesus Christ, Danny", he said, and then stopped. (224)

The narrator adds: "In the silence that followed, I fully expected him to say, *It was a lie*. It was a lie and Billy knew it." Dennis saves his own reputation along with old Dan's illusions by stopping short of the key admission that he was first among those who deceived Billy and enabled him to continue deceiving himself.

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[31] Billy's regard for Eva has an enchanted quality, drawing him away from his actual life. The narrative signals at his first glimpse of her, holding an infant, that this idealization is distorted: he enshrines her as Madonna- or saint-like, even perceiving her pushed-back swim-cap as a halo (80).

Billy's self-deluding faith, maintained by means of his alcoholism, parallels Momma's clinging to her grief and her obsessive self-assertion in victimhood. Dennis too is flawed, by emotional withholding and incapacity to shatter Billy's illusions with the painful truth. But McDermott grants Dennis the recovery both of his good faith, in his lifelong care for Billy and then love of Maeve, and of the Catholic belief he loses when his wife Claire dies, though when he claims he now believes again, the narrator thinks "...there was no way of telling if he lied."(245) In *AWW* the children refashion their gloomy inheritance from Momma, their mother and the aunts by turning it from death toward life (taking flowers from a grave, fashioning loss into a beautiful tale) though in Bobby's case his success in doing this by the application of manliness is a good deal more equivocal.

In *CB* the uncanny faces in two different directions. One reveals, in the women's creative wake storytelling, an undertow to official Catholicism, to the masculinist complexion of Irish culture's romanticism. The other works to school the narrator, despite her part-detachment from her own ethnicity, in the struggles and compulsions of the lives of previous Irish generations. At the end of the book when she sees Maeve and Dennis reconstructing their lives and starting from where they are, she finally understands that the dead are "there with them, just outside the circle of light." (279)

With its gendered inflections, McDermott's ethnic uncanny offers significant resistance to the domination of Irish-American cultural narrative by stereotypes both feminine and masculine: the revered matriarch, the lovable drunk.[32] I have been observing how, in the uncanny episodes and transactions of both novels, McDermott discloses emotional truths which at once point to realizable futures and, stemming from half-submerged, subordinate understandings, offer the hope of psychological transformation to those trapped in sclerotic old emotional and cultural patterns, releasing, as it were, trapped souls from their stained-glass confinement. Her writing of the uncanny thus performs "staged truths" which pay homage to the

[32] Billy can, however, still charm critics as "the lovable romantic" with "annoying foibles." (Daniel J. Casey and Robert E. Rhodes, "The Tradition of Irish-American Writers: The Twentieth Century", in J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey, ed. *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* (New York: NYU P, 2006), 649, 650).

"transgenerational phantoms" of the New York Irish, while refusing ceaselessly to mourn for or memorialize lost pasts.

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