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"I Remember!": Irish Postcolonial Memory in the Early Short Stories of Seán O'Faoláin

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Chapter 1: Seán O'Faoláin and Ireland of the 1930s

Seán O'Faoláin wrote extensively throughout the twentieth century until his death in 1991, making him one of Ireland's most prolific writers across genres. This project, however, will focus specifically on his short fiction published in the 1930s, those stories collected in *Midsummer Night Madness* (1932) and *A Purse of Coppers* (1937). I chose to narrow my focus in this way in part due to the content and quality of these early short stories, but also out of an interest more generally in the 1930s. The 1930s is often glossed over in both political and literary histories of Ireland, overshadowed by grand stories of revolutionary fervor during the Literary Revival and the War of Independence. This project will seek to situate the early work of Seán O'Faoláin within the context of this turbulent post-independence period, illuminating the role of the postcolonial short story in the construction of a new Ireland.

I. History of Colonialism in Ireland

Ireland was England's first colony, remaining under some form of colonial control for over 800 years beginning with the Norman Invasion in 1169. While initially Ireland remained decentralized and kept its native Gaelic character, England tightened its hold over the island in the 16th century, with King Henry VIII declaring himself King of Ireland in 1541. Slowly, English Protestants settled in Ireland, and the land became dominated by a so-called "Protestant Ascendancy" that exercised control over the native Irish Catholic majority. In 1800, colonial control tightened with the abolition of the Irish Parliament and the establishment—under the Acts of Union—of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Anti-colonial discontent began to stew, heightened by the decimation of the Irish population during the potato famine of the 1840s. Nationalist leaders such as Charles Stewart Parnell fought for Home Rule, or self-

governance, which was granted briefly prior to the outbreak of World War I. However, Home Rule was suspended during the war, and public opinion slowly shifted in favor of complete revolution (Carroll 3).

The Irish War of Independence, fought primarily through guerrilla warfare, began with a Proclamation of the Irish Republic during the Easter Rising of 1916. The war ended in 1921 with the settlement of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which established the Irish Free State as an autonomous dominion of the British Empire and led to the partition of Ireland in 1922. Although the treaty ensured self-governance, the terms were objectionable to many Irish nationalists, who felt that it disappointed hopes of a truly independent Irish Republic that would include the northern six counties. O'Faoláin himself, after serving in the Irish Republican Army (IRA), was "outraged by the perceived betrayal of republican ideals and indignant that anything less than total freedom had been secured" (Delaney 16). The dispute led to the outbreak of civil war, a bitter and bloody conflict that started the new nation's period of relative independence on rocky footing.

Although the war ended in 1923, Ireland's leaders spent the 1930s still grappling with its aftermath and searching for a way forward. The pro-treaty and anti-treaty sides of the war were represented in governance as Cumann na nGaedheal—now Fine Gael—and Fianna Fail. In 1932, Eamon de Valera, the founder of Fianna Fail and a militant republican with strong conservative leanings, was elected as President of the Executive Council. De Valera remained in power throughout the 1930s, overseeing the adoption of the Constitution of Ireland in 1937 and becoming the new Irish Republic's first Taoiseach (Prime Minister). The 1930s in Ireland was thus defined by political strife, a situation complicated by external factors such as the global recession and the slow escalation towards a second World War.

The 1930s also saw the rise in influence of the Catholic Church, which stepped in to fill the power void left by British imperial structures even before the achievement of full independence. As Britain's power waned globally and in Ireland, "the political aspirations of the Catholic Church were intimately intertwined with the attainment of Home Rule government by the Irish Parliamentary party at Westminster" (O' Driscoll 121). This power only increased following independence. Clare Carroll describes post-independence Ireland as "a Free State that imitated colonial institutions more than it lived up to the revolutionary ideals of 1916," relying on a "state-sponsored Catholicism" to exercise its newfound power (Carroll 1).

The Church's power in the 1930s manifested itself largely in the social and cultural realms with significant literary censorship. In 1929, the Censorship of Publications Act made provision for the "prohibition of the sale and distribution of unwholesome literature" and created a Censorship Board to review such "indecent" literature (Riordan 107). The Church was concerned about the lack of an "orthodox Roman Catholic national literature," and the work of many Catholic-born and Catholic-educated writers—such as O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor—further threatened "an acceptable intellectual expression of the Catholic faith" (Riordan 107). It was not enough to simply be Catholic; in order to stay on the Censorship's Board good side, writers were required to conform to a particular vision of the Irish Catholic writer. The Board twice banned O'Faoláin's work, and O'Faoláin wrote extensively on the limitations of the Irish writer in this period because of this censorship (Delaney 148). These writers whose works were targeted "were frequently portrayed in the Catholic press as enemies of the Irish way of life" (Riordan 109), and such censorship "divide[d] the liberal and the Catholic intelligentsia" (Riordan 107), creating an environment of cultural backwardness and intellectual stagnation that writers such as O'Faoláin spent their careers battling.

Because of this stagnation, the 1930s is often passed over in literary and cultural histories of Ireland, regarded as an anomalous blip or an unfortunate blight on an otherwise illustrious history. However, I argue here that studying the literature of the 1930s closely within this context offers valuable insights into a nation in the early stages of shaping its post-independence identity. Particularly, I am interested in the way that the literature of this period interacts with Ireland's colonial history and specifically the memory of the War of Independence and the Civil War but also looks forward to the hope of a new Ireland, one no longer shaped by the legacies of colonialism.

II. Post-Independence Writing in Ireland

The literature of the 1930s receives little critical attention in part due to the quality and sheer mass of literature produced during the Literary Revival of the early 20th century. As Paul Delaney notes in his introduction to *Seán O'Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s*, scholars often draw an unfounded binary between "Revival highs versus post-Independence blues" that results in the dismissal of an entire body of literature produced following independence (Delaney 26). This attempt at "neat historical symmetry" inhibits an understanding of the role that literature of the 1930s played in shaping post-independence debates and conceptions of Irish identity. Delaney describes Ireland of the 1930s as a "place where vital debates about identity, art, censorship and politics were produced, notwithstanding official pressures and institutional hypocrisies" (Delaney 26). These debates unfolded in the literature of the decade, a literature described by Neil Corcoran as one of "process and becoming" (Corcoran vi). For the purpose of this project, I take this description to suggest the constantly self-reflective nature of this literature, as it sought to define both itself and its context—that of the new Irish

state—through extended conceptualization and reconceptualization. This characterization shapes much of my framework for examining O'Faoláin's work and my conception of the work as postcolonial.

Generally speaking, I take a broad view of postcolonial writing as writing that "does not begin only when the occupier withdraws: rather it is initiated at that very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance" (Kiberd 6). Within the scope of this project, however, I am interested in the specific aspect of postcolonial writing that *does* occur when the occupier withdraws. This is perhaps better termed post-independence for the purpose of specificity, but I use postcolonial and post-independence interchangeably for the sake of remaining grounded in the theoretical tradition of postcoloniality. The term "postcolonial" has received warranted criticism from scholars for its implication of a clear divide between the colonial and the postcolonial and thus linear progress; in this case, however, I am concerned with questions of chronology and linearity. Although some colonial structures remained in place in post-independence Ireland—with the Catholic Church arguably recolonizing Ireland internally—independence did also mark a major historical shift, the aftereffects of which warrant closer study via the study of literature.

I use also as a conceptual starting point the notion of "minor literatures" as coined by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minor literatures are those literatures written by minority groups in a majority language; while not all minor literatures are colonial or postcolonial, colonial literature written in the language of a colonial power can nearly always be classified as "minor." Deleuze and Guattari identify three main characteristics of minor literatures: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of an individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari 18).

Minor literatures also follow a different path of expression distinct from "major," i.e. imperial literature, which follows a traditional path from content to expression. Minor or revolutionary literature, on the other hand, "begins by expressing itself and doesn't conceptualize until afterward" (Deleuze and Guattari 28). This literature is responsible for reshaping the majority language to fit an alternative purpose; as Deleuze and Guattari note, minor literature must therefore always be political, unorthodox in both its language and its content.

As Declan Kiberd explains in *Inventing Ireland*, this conception of Irish literature as a minor literature "explains why in Ireland the cultural renaissance preceded by many years the declaration of political independence" (Kiberd 117). This conception is also helpful in understanding the pressures on an Irish writer to be a "national writer." Any writer of a minor literature must answer the question of "how to express life which has never yet found full expression in written literature" (Kiberd 117). In Deleuze and Guattari's conception, "because collective national consciousness is often inactive in external life and always in the process of breakdown, literature finds itself charged with the role of collective enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari 7). The writer of minor literatures cannot write only with an individual voice; they must instead speak on behalf of a people finding its voice. Kiberd explains:

> The pressures on such an author are immense. A writer in a free state works with the easy assurance that literature is but one of the social institutions to project the values which the nation admires, others being the law, the government, the army, and so on. A writer in a colony knows that these values can be fully embodied only in the written word: hence the daunting seriousness with which literature is taken by subject peoples. (Kiberd 117-118)

This mantle of an "Irish national writer" was taken up most obviously by W.B. Yeats during the Literary Revival, but the pressures on any Irish writer to shape the future of a nation have bearing also on my consideration of O'Faoláin's work.

The Literary Revival is often regarded as the era in Irish literature when the "collective enunciation" of the Irish people found its voice. W.B. Yeats serves as the principal example for

this literary golden age, but other writers and public figures such as J.M. Synge, Sean O'Casey, and Lady Augusta Gregory all contributed to a flowering of Irish literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Revival was closely tied to a nationalist celebration of native Irish culture—via, most notably, the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association—and an increasingly powerful push towards political independence. The work of the era was romantic and idealistic, instrumental in shaping a conception of a free Ireland. As Kiberd notes, the Literary Revival is particularly noteworthy because "the cultural revival preceded and in many ways enabled the political revolution that followed" (Kiberd 4). This consideration allows for a fuller understanding of the sheer power that the Revival had in shaping Ireland both culturally and politically for many years to follow.

Because of the power and influence of the Revival, Irish leaders and writers following independence struggled to match that era's excellence and energy caused by revolutionary fervor. Josh Whelan notes that "the new state lived within the paradigms created by the gifted generations of ideologues between 1880 and 1920—notably Cusack, Hyde, Pearse, Yeats and Corkery—who created the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League, the Irish Literary Revival, the Abbey Theatre, and a Catholic nationalist version of Irish history" (Whelan 94). Whelan characterizes this pre-independence national construction as an "invention of tradition," when these leaders defined national identity around an imagined ideal of Irishness. This pre-independence construction created problems for the emergent state, which was then left in a state Whelan terms "postcolonial paralysis." Whelan defines this term as "the ossifying orthodoxy of the emergent nationalistic state which retains the institutional and ideological apparatus of the prior colonial state" (Whelan 94). I use the term in this context but also more broadly as a way of understanding the cultural position of the new Irish Free State, one defined by a look back to the

Revival as the model for a national Irish culture but also by the limitations of this backward-looking perspective.

Writers of the post-independence period were caught in this postcolonial paralysis, as they sought to redefine Irish identity in an Ireland that had greatly changed following the War of Independence and the Civil War. Despite largely having grown up amidst the Literary Revival, writers of this period overtly distanced themselves from the romanticism of the past. As Joe Cleary notes, O'Faoláin conceived of his generation as "more worldly and tougher-minded than its predecessor because it had not only fought to realize a national dream but had also lived to outgrow that phase of its life" (Cleary 52). The ideals of the Revival seemed to no longer apply to the war-torn Irish Free State, when the Irish were confronted with the more concrete and perhaps more daunting task of shaping a post-independence culture. The series of wars crushed the idealism of an entire generation of Irish writers and thinkers, who turned to the Revival as an easy target for this disillusionment.

O'Faoláin in particular extensively criticized his Revivalist predecessors, especially Daniel Corkery and W.B. Yeats, who he viewed as "revolutionaries and romantics who thought of art and society exclusively in terms of politics and nation and who, consequently, could never adapt themselves to the post-revolutionary world or to the post-revolutionary tasks that O'Faoláin and his peers had inherited" (Cleary 52). In his 1949 book *The Story of the Irish People,* O'Faoláin specifically references the Revival's influence: "In the most creative period of Anglo-Irish literature (from about 1890 to about 1920) the writers saw Irish life, in the main, romantically. It was as a poetic people that they introduced themselves to the world, and it is as a poetic people that we are still mainly known abroad" (O'Faoláin, *The Story of the Irish People* 164-165). He draws an explicit contrast between this pre-independence romanticism and post-

war malaise: “When the revolutionary period of 1916-1922 ended miserably in a civil war, romance died completely. Most Irish literature since 1922 has been of an uncompromising scepticism, one might even say ferocity” (O’Faoláin, *The Story of the Irish People* 165). This skepticism, especially in relation to the Revival’s idealism, was to define the literature of the 1930s.

Deleuze and Guattari’s framework of minor literature as a literature that begins with expression and conceptualizes later has particular bearing on the 1930s. Revival literature was pure expression; it left the work of conceptualizing to the writers of the next generation. In the 1930s, then, writers were left with the task of defining more concretely the nature of Irish identity and culture within an unfamiliar, newly independent Ireland. The Revival created one idea of Irish identity; this idea no longer held up following the internal strife of the War of Independence and of the Civil War in particular. As Neil Corcoran explains, Irish literature has always been “a literature in which ideas of Ireland—of people, community and nation—have been both created and reflected, and in which conceptions of a distinctively Irish identity have been articulated, defended, and challenged” (Corcoran vi). Nowhere is this more true than in the 1930s—a period defined by its own acute political turmoil but also by an intense reckoning with both a literary and revolutionary past. O’Faoláin himself explained the condition of the post-independence Irish writer in his 1947 study *The Irish*:

> We lived under the hypnosis of the past, our timidities about the future, our excessive reverence for old traditions, our endemic fear of new ways, of new thinking, the opiate of that absurd historical myth, and the horror of the feeling of solitude that comes on every man who dares push out his boat from the security of his old, cosy, familiar harbour into unknown seas. (O’Faoláin, *The Irish* 162)

A man alone on a boat is an apt metaphor for the Irish writer of the 1930s and for O’Faoláin in particular. Without guidance or any rule book to follow—or an international model, given

Ireland's political neutrality and isolationism—they pushed forward blindly towards a new Irish literature fitting for a post-independence era.

The project of the post-independence writer was further complicated by the political and cultural conditions of 1930s Ireland. Most often defined by the word "stagnation," the 1930s saw a noticeable decline in intellectual energy from the previous decades. Many writers of the period, O'Faoláin included, had served in the War of Independence and thus had a complex relationship with the new nation. As Heather Ingman notes, "since many of them had participated in the nationalist movement they did not want to turn their backs on their country; at the same time, they felt that independence had only been partly achieved and they became disenchanted with the political rhetoric they had imbibed and acted upon" (Ingman 116). The revolutionary fervor and intense intellectual energy of the pre-independence period was replaced by "civil war, censorship, a deep social conservatism, a puritanical religion and … narrowly defined nationalism" (Ingman 116). This resulted in a period of disillusionment, complicated further by extensive censorship, that was reflected in both the quantity and quality of literature produced.

In his own writing, O'Faoláin bemoaned the apparent decline of culture after independence. In his essay "The Dilemma of Irish Letters," he laments the "falling-off" of Irish literature following the Revival, noting that "to-day we have nobody in Ireland of the stature of Joyce, Moore, Synge or Yeats … it is difficult to see any budding grove to alter the impression that the two outstanding marks of Irish literature to-day are exile and lack of originality" (O'Faoláin, "The Dilemma of Irish Letters," 392). O'Faoláin further argues that the revolution and the Revival are partly to blame for this dilemma, given that they, in the long term, created "the conditions in which Irish writing would begin to wilt" (Cleary 63). While mourning the end of the golden age of Irish letters, O'Faoláin was also deeply critical of Revival writing for not

building a lasting foundation for future Irish writing. His critique of his contemporaries is scathing, and while he does acknowledge the successful careers of writers such as Frank O'Connor and Elizabeth Bowen, "it is one of the ironies of O'Faoláin's career as a critic that he should have become the severest assessor of the historical moment or generation of which he himself was one of the most distinguished literary representatives" (Cleary 69). O'Faoláin is perhaps then the clearest example of the sheer level of disillusionment in the 1930s—despite an incredibly prolific career, O'Faoláin always regarded his own position as a writer as overshadowed by the past.

III. Seán O'Faoláin: Life and Career

Seán O'Faoláin was born John Francis Whelan on February 22, 1900, in Cork, in the southwest corner of Ireland. He was the youngest of three boys born to Denis Whelan and Bridget Murphy, lower middle-class Catholics (Bonaccorso 2). His father was a political loyalist and a constable in the Royal Irish Constabulary, a man described by O'Faoláin in his autobiography, *Vive Moi!,* as one who "embodied all the accepted and respected values and conventions of what we would nowadays call the Establishment" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 28). O'Faoláin grew up under the influence of a strict, puritanical sort of Catholicism, via his parents and his education at the Lancastrian National School and the Presentation Brothers Secondary School. He bemoaned "the delicate-mindedness, or over-protectiveness, or mealy-mouthedness, whichever it was, of the Irish Church, and the sentimentalized picture of life, especially in relation to sex, that it presented" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 21), and would grow increasingly critical of the Church's influence throughout his career.

Despite the loyalist Catholic orthodoxy that surrounded him throughout childhood, the young John Whelan became enveloped by the rising tide of cultural and political nationalism in his teenage years. He first became interested in the Irish language because of the influence of a schoolteacher and began attending Gealic League classes, eventually gaelicizing his name to Seán O'Faoláin in 1918, like many others of his generation who renamed themselves in an effort to reclaim Ireland's native tongue (Delaney 18). O'Faoláin's early politics were shaped profoundly by two transformative events in his youth. The first, in 1915, was his viewing of a play written by Lennox Robinson, a playwright with the nationalist Abbey Theatre in Dublin, entitled *Patriots*. The play told the story of a Fenian rebel named James Nugent who, after release from a long prison sentence in England, returns to an Irish countryside characterized by "political lethargy and material self-interest" (Delaney 9). The play's nationalist spirit revealed to the young Whelan a glimpse into another world, "a world that was partially hidden or hushed from him, but that was part of his inheritance even though it was in conflict with all that he had been brought up to believe" (Delaney 10). The play, with its mundane setting in a rural Irish home, also served as a literary revelation for O'Faoláin, who realized then for the first time that "literature could describe a world that was local and commonplace" (Delaney 10), with themes rooted in a familiar Irish context. The themes of *Patriots* would continue to influence O'Faoláin's fiction throughout his life.

The second event that shaped O'Faoláin's youth was the Easter Rising in 1916. This rising, the first armed insurrection of the Revolutionary period, resulted in the execution of 16 nationalist leaders. This harsh crackdown on the part of the British imperial state lent further weight to the rebels' grievances, and support for Irish independence increased dramatically. O'Faoláin initially felt betrayed by the rebellion, given his loyalist upbringing, but after

witnessing the brutal execution of the insurrection's leaders, his allegiances began to shift. In his autobiography, he notes that as the leaders were shot "in ones, and twos, and threes, everybody and everything I had believed in began to tumble about me" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 131). As his biographer, Maurice Harmon, remarks, this influence turned O'Faoláin away from the loyalist naïveté of his youth to a "romantic identification with the oppressed people of Ireland and with the surviving relics of native culture and tradition in the Irish-speaking sections of the West" (Harmon xv), a romanticism that would persist throughout the early stages of his life and career.

O'Faoláin entered University College Cork in 1918, where he was a student by day and a budding revolutionary by night. He joined the Irish Volunteers—an early nationalist military organization—the same year, and then the Irish Republican Army (IRA) when the War of Independence broke out in 1919 (Delaney 13). Though a fervent nationalist, O'Faoláin remarked in his autobiography that he saw very little fighting during this period: "In my six years as a rank-and-filer of the IRA, I shot nobody and I was briefly under fire once. I have no war memories to record" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 139). Although he was not much of a fighter, the war and its romanticism had a profound impact on his life and writing. He continued to write about the wartime period throughout his life, most notably in *Midsummer Night Madness*, which I examine here. As Delaney notes, O'Faoláin's representations of the War "frequently depicted it as a struggle for personal as well as national and generational autonomy" (Delaney 14). He described in grand, transcendent language the experience of standing with his fellow revolutionaries in the War's early days, noting the "gaiety, this liberation of the spirit, [that] was to stay with us all through the exciting years to come" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 137). In retrospect, O'Faoláin recalled a wartime Ireland that was transformed by hope, revolutionary fervor, and intense feelings of "camaraderie and oneness" (Delaney 15).

This picture of idealism did not last long, however, and the events of the years following the War of Independence would complicate O'Faoláin's romantic view. The Civil War broke out in 1922 and O'Faoláin joined the anti-treaty side, outraged by the perceived betrayal of the Irish cause. During the Civil War period, he served as a bomb-maker, a guerilla fighter, a propagandist, and, finally, the Director of Publicity for the entire Republican movement (Harmon xvii). He was involved in the production of Dublin-based Republican newspapers *An Phoblacht* and *Sinn Féin*, serving for a time as editor of both, his first foray into the role of a public intellectual (Delaney 17). While he at first maintained a public image that remained committed to the anti-treaty cause, he grew increasingly disillusioned and embittered by the brutality he witnessed on both sides. His time during the Civil War had a profound impact on him; he wrote in *Vive Moi!* that it continued "to oppress me traumatically for many years" (O'Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* 145). He returned to his wartime experiences many times over the course of his career, and they provided the basis of several stories—most notably "The Bombshop," about four IRA bomb makers—especially in *Midsummer Night Madness*.

After the Civil War ended with Republican defeat, an even more disillusioned O'Faoláin returned to Cork, where he pursued an M.A. first in Irish, then in English, at University College Cork, with a brief stint as a teacher in County Clare in between. In this period, he renewed his friendship with Frank O'Connor, whom he had served alongside in the Irish Volunteers in the early stages of the War of Independence. After finishing his second M.A., he left for the United States to study at Harvard in 1926. He taught Anglo-Irish literature at Boston College briefly and spent a short period in England before returning to Ireland in 1933. During this phase of his career, he adopted the sentiments of an "Irish writer in exile," developing an "attraction to, and

simultaneous repulsion from, the codes of Irish life" (Delaney 33) that would shape the tone of his writing for years to come.

In the meantime, his disappointment with the outcome of the nationalist effort fueled the early stages of his career as he began composing essays, biographies, and short stories. As Delaney notes, O'Faoláin came to believe that the revolution had produced only a superficial transformation and had resulted in a society characterized by "narrow-gauged definitions of identity, self-congratulating myths of origin, cronyism, caution, and 'a new, native, acquisitive, middle class intent only on cashing in on the change in governments'" (Delaney 20). This bitterness found its voice in O'Faoláin's early contributions to George Russell's *The Irish Statesman*, a weekly journal associated with the Irish Dominion League. Essays such as "A Plea for a New Irish Scholarship" and "The Gaoltacht [sic] Tradition" criticized harshly the romanticization of Irish language heritage and called for a closer bond between Ireland and continental Europe as a means of moving Ireland beyond its apparent cultural backwardness. O'Faoláin's opinions were controversial, and he established himself quickly as a writer willing to take risks and contradict prevailing narratives.

This risk-taking characteristic is apparent in the sheer quantity and diversity of works that O'Faoláin produced throughout his career. In the 1930s alone, O'Faoláin published two biographies, *King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O'Connell* (1938) and *De Valera* (1939); two novels, *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1934) and *Bird Alone* (1936); and three short story collections, in addition to countless letters and essays. In 1940, he became a founding member and editor of *The Bell*, a literary magazine that became known for being perhaps the most outspoken liberal voice in an otherwise conservative era. *The Bell* featured contributions from other notable contemporaries, such as Patrick Kavanagh, Elizabeth Bowen, and Frank O'Connor, and, like

O'Faoláin's individual writing, it was critical of Irish intellectual stagnation, censorship, and the domination of the Church. It was notable also for its incorporation of work by writers outside of Ireland in a deliberate effort to expose Irish society to international influences (Carson 176). O'Faoláin's leadership of *The Bell* is perhaps what first cemented his fame in Irish society. At the same time, however, he established a reputation as a leading short story writer of his generation.

O'Faoláin's stories are often anthologized—for example, in Ben Forkner's *Modern Irish Short Stories* and *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*—and his name appears frequently in overviews of the form in survey texts and college courses. Despite this, however, most of his works are now out of print, and his stories as a cohesive body of work have received surprisingly little critical attention. As Delaney notes, this may be in large part due to the argument that "O'Faoláin's writings have not aged well, and that much of his work is over-determined by the context in which it was first produced" (Delaney 3). O'Faoláin's unrelenting focus on the disillusionment of the immediate post-War of Independence moment, with its overwhelming malaise, perhaps makes his stories difficult to relate to in the modern era. Additionally, Delaney points out, the strongest elements of O'Faoláin's oeuvre—journalism and short fiction—are those that are particularly "vulnerable to the vicissitudes of taste and time" (Delaney 4). O'Faoláin's novels—the novel being perhaps the most enduring literary medium—never matched the quality of his short stories, and so much of his work has been allowed to fade into obscurity. Other critics of O'Faoláin argue that his work lacks the narrative creativity necessary to sustain it over time; that his stories, embedded as they were in a seemingly realist, traditional heritage, were perhaps outdated even at the time of writing. Like Delaney, I am skeptical of this criticism; O'Faoláin's work has a much more complicated relationship to realism and to

modernism than these critics seem to recognize. As Mark Quigley argues in *Empire's Wake: Postcolonial Irish Writing and the Politics of Modern Literary Form*, O'Faoláin's early work was actually quite innovative in its attempt to draw upon Ireland's postcoloniality to construct a genre of "republican realism" distinct from both traditional realism and the early modernism of James Joyce (*Empire's Wake* 84).

The argument about O'Faoláin's work being overly reliant on the context and period in which it was produced perhaps has more merit, but my project seeks to emphasize the importance of this period in the formation of the Irish state and thus, by proxy, the importance of O'Faoláin's work as it both responds to and shapes its era. O'Faoláin's brilliance lies precisely in his ability to register the debates of his day and participate via fiction. By telling the stories of everyday figures such as Protestant landowners, parish priests, and schoolteachers, O'Faoláin made the political situation of his time intensely personal and familiar. He played a vital role in the early construction of the new Irish free state, taking the established form of the short story and transforming it to fit his own purpose and vision. My project calls for a closer examination of O'Faoláin's work within the genre and within Irish society and culture more broadly.

IV. The Irish Short Story

The modern Irish short story emerged in the 19th century, combining legacies of folk storytelling in Ireland with the modernizing urge of a nation in transition. As Heather Ingman notes in *The History of the Irish Short Story*, "short narratives dealing with Irish themes began to emerge in the nineteenth century in large numbers at a time when the country was going through one of its most traumatic periods" (Ingman 15). As Britain tightened its colonial hold over Ireland, Irish writers turned to the short story amid the rise of a new Irish national consciousness.

The short story's capability for representations of everyday life, yet in a more fragmented and narrowly focused manner than the realist novel, found voice in "depictions of Irish life and customs and collections of folklore and travelogues, often wrapped up in a quasi-fictional form" that became immensely popular in the early nineteenth century, especially for English audiences who took pleasure out of the reinforcement of stereotypes about the backwards Irish peasant (Ingman 16). The realist novel, despite its popularity in England and on the continent at the time, never took significant hold in Ireland. As Ingman argues, "Ireland's turbulence could not easily be contained within the conventions of European literary realism" (Ingman 24). The short story offered an alternate form for expressions of political turbulence, of communities and identities in transition.

In the 20th century, the short story gained definition and took on a solidified role as the predominant Irish prose form. George Moore's *The Untilled Field*, published in 1903, is often singled out as the first significant modern short story collection in Ireland. Its portrayal of the daily rhythm of Irish peasant life, rather than infantilizing the Irish peasantry for the entertainment of an English audience, revealed the brutalities of the Irish countryside while also relying on distinctly Irish themes such as Catholicism, nationalism, and exile (Averill 41). Moore combined the influences of Irish folk storytelling—with its anecdotal, conversational voice—and Russian writers, particularly Ivan Turgenev, in a model that would be emulated by many future writers including O'Faoláin. Both Moore and O'Faoláin bemoaned the cultural backwardness of Irish society and, in particular, the dominance of the Catholic Church. Despite this clear influence, however, O'Faoláin did not particularly admire Moore; in a 1936 essay entitled "Pater and Moore," he criticized Moore's apparent deficiency as an observer of life, a result of paying

too much attention to style and not enough to reality (Bonaccorso 111). This resulted in an over-inflated style that, to O'Faoláin, was not true to the Irish experience.

O'Faoláin also had a complicated relationship with the other pioneer in the short story of this era: James Joyce. Joyce's 1914 collection *Dubliners* built on Moore's model of a prose realism tradition in Ireland but departed from Moore's reliance on an oral storytelling heritage. Richard Thompson, in *Everlasting Voices: Aspects of the Modern Irish Short Story*, draws a distinction between Moore as a "story teller" and Joyce as a "story writer." Further, he argues that O'Faoláin follows more in Joyce's footsteps as a story writer, whereas Frank O'Connor follows in the story teller's mode (Thompson 10). Joyce's influence is seen particularly in O'Faoláin's first four collections and in O'Faoláin's shift towards the city as an object of narrative focus. In a 1932 *New York Times* article, John Chamberlain referred to *Midsummer Night Madness* as "the most worthy successor to date of *Dubliners*" (Thompson 31). Joycean imagery is apparent in stories such as "A Broken World," which explores the fractured nature of Irish society. Like Joyce, though to a lesser extent, O'Faoláin approached his stories with an international outlook that sought to combat the provincialism of Irish society at the time. Despite the influence of *Dubliners* on O'Faoláin's writing, O'Faoláin soured on Joyce as Joyce's writing grew more experimental. Though he wrote favorably of *Ulysses*, in a 1928 essay he publicly criticized Joyce's "maltreatment of language" in the work in progress that would later become *Finnegan's Wake*, arguing that his writing "comes from nowhere, goes nowhere, is not part of life at all" (Delaney 23). O'Faoláin ultimately sought to distance himself from Joyce, finding his niche instead in a voice that, while to an extent experimented with new narrative structures to articulate "the historical rupture of postcoloniality" (Quigley, *Empire's Wake* 77), remained firmly grounded in the contemporary and historical experiences of the Irish people.

Moore and Joyce laid the groundwork for the development of the Irish short story in the early twentieth century, a period that would be followed by what Heather Ingman characterizes as “years of transition” for the form in the 1920s and 1930s. Seán O'Faoláin emerged as master of the short story in this era, alongside Frank O’Connor, Liam O’Flaherty, and others. Both he and O’Connor published full-length studies of the form, further securing its significance within the Irish canon. O'Faoláin’s study, *The Short Story*, focuses extensively on the convention, subject, construction, and language of the form, illustrating arguments with examples from the work of Anton Chekhov, Henry James, and others. In line with O'Faoláin’s own conception of the short story’s purpose, the form was particularly well suited to the historical moment O'Faoláin was writing in and to his postcolonial nation-building project. O'Faoláin’s preferred Chekhovian-style “slice of life” story enabled representations of identities in transition that offered a contrast to the officially approved version of Irish history and identity post-independence (Whelan 96). Short stories in this period reflected an “uncertain relationship between modernity and tradition, between the international and the local,” giving voice to a historical reckoning and sense of disillusionment that permeated post-independence society (Ingman 116).

Distinct from the Literary Revival’s romanticism of history, the literature of this era grappled with the past with “a realistic awareness of the limitations of the Irish nation as embodied in the Irish state” (Ingman 116). Writers in this troubled era, O’Faoláin included, were presented with a daunting task: continuing the legacy of excellence in literature achieved during the Literary Revival while simultaneously grappling with the existence of a new Irish nation that failed to live up to revolutionary expectations. To answer this call, O’Faoláin aimed to develop “a radically new aesthetic” distinct from both traditional realism and modernism, a form of Irish

postcolonial realism that would be “responsive to the new political and social realities of Irish postcoloniality” (Quigley, *Empire’s Wake* 66). O'Faoláin’s stories from this period—collected in *Midsummer Night Madness* and *A Purse of Coppers*—reflect post-independence disillusionment and draw a desolate picture of a nation at a crossroads. At the same time, however, the stories draw upon revolutionary memories to construct a vision of a new Ireland, one that might eventually be freed from its “postcolonial paralysis.”

Chapter 2: *Midsummer Night Madness*

I. Historical Fiction and Historical Memory

Seán O'Faoláin published eight collections of short stories over the course of his career, the first of which—*Midsummer Night Madness*—was published in 1932. These seven stories take place between 1919 and 1923, the violent period of the War of Independence and the Civil War, and center around the experiences of, primarily, rebels and revolutionaries. O'Faoláin frequently revisited the War of Independence across genres, most notably in his autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, but also in essays and criticism throughout his career, as he continued to reckon with both its national legacy and its impact on his own life.

O'Faoláin was frequently critical of the Irish intelligentsia's tendency to idle in the "hypnosis of the past" (O'Faoláin, *The Irish* 162), disparaging the version of Irish identity that seemed to him backward-looking and static. This criticism did not manifest itself in an avoidance of the past, however; instead, both O'Faoláin's fiction and nonfiction present a continual addressing and reckoning with this history. The War of Independence in particular is a locale that O'Faoláin revisits again and again, a kind of "lieu de mémoire" that undergoes transformation each time it is retold and reconceptualized. Pierre Nora's framework for *les lieux de mémoire* as sites that "only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (Nora 19) is particularly useful here in reference to the War of Independence in Irish history and memory. In the unstable period of the 1930s, history—and revolutionary history in particular—offered a reference point to which questions of Irish identity and the future of the Irish nation could be directed.

Attempts at representation of these sites of memory, Nora argues, are symptomatic of attempts to grapple with a fractured past. Although Nora was writing in the context of late 20th

century France, his conception of uncertain pasts and futures has an obvious bearing on this moment in Irish history:

> Just as the future—formerly a visible, predictable, manipulable, well-marked extension of the present—has come to seem invisible, unpredictable, uncontrollable, so have we gone from the idea of a visible past to an invisible one; from a solid and steady past to our fractured past; from a history sought in the continuity of memory to a memory cast in the discontinuity of history. Our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of a representation—in the original sense of the word—radically different from the old ideal of resurrecting the past. (Nora 16-17)

Memories of the War of Independence were scattered and discontinuous in the postwar period, as Ireland sought to simultaneously construct a nation and a narrative about itself. As Kevin Whelan points out, for the postcolonial Irish state, "the nation existed essentially as a narrative strategy" (Whelan 95). Writers like O'Faoláin had a particular power to shape the nation *via* narrative, constructing and reconstructing the War of Independence to tell a story about their present moment.

The positionality of the writer of historical fiction is particularly important for my discussion of O'Faoláin's work. The treatment of the War of Independence in *Midsummer Night Madness* is not a bare representation meant to be taken at face value but a representation determined in large part by the moment in which O'Faoláin was writing. If we take as a starting point Michel-Rolph Trouillot's contention that "pastness is a position," it becomes clear that *Midsummer Night Madness* "might be considered less a representation of the Troubles *per se* and more a reflection on this period from the vantage point of the mid-to-late 1920s and early 1930s" (Delaney 171). Historical fiction, therefore, in my framework, is less a mere recounting of history than it is an attempt "to interrogate the act of writing history" (Delaney 171) as O'Faoláin sought to make sense of his relationship, in the 1930s, to the period ten years prior.

The title of the collection further emphasizes the retrospective nature of these stories. Writing from the 1930s, O'Faoláin is able to diagnose the upheaval of the revolutionary period as a form of "madness" that he and his countrymen could not see while living through it. The allusion to Shakespeare's classic *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also suggests that, in the 1930s, the War of Independence existed in memory as a dreamlike, even supernatural, period detached entirely from present realities, an in-between space in which individuals acted according to a different set of rules and logics. O'Faoláin's title thus encourages us to confront this "madness" fully. He rewrites the War of Independence through this specific lens, aiming to understand the realities of the war and how it shaped the postwar period.

This act of rewriting, a kind of "rememorative" history, is distinctly postcolonial in that it is "seeking to write back that which had been erased or submerged" (Whelan 96). Whelan, looking specifically at postcolonial Irish writing, suggests the possibility for "ethical memory" when "narrative enables choice in the creating (or fusing) of personal and collective identity" (Whelan 93). This "ethical memory" is rooted in a "desire to open the past to the future, to help construct that future through recourse to the exemplarity of the past. Ethical memory is directed towards the future not the past. It avoids the entropy of the traumatic horizon of justice, seeking a memory which is just to the victims as well as the victors, while it seeks to inaugurate new institutions which guard against recurrence" (Whelan 93). O'Faoláin's "rememorative" history in *Midsummer Night Madness* is thus a form of ethical memory in its attempt to construct the future via revisiting the past.

Memory is everywhere in *Midsummer Night Madness*—while the collection is as a whole rememorative, the characters too engage in acts of remembering and rewriting. Most stories are told from "some vaguely defined, but historically posterior, vantage point" (Delaney 145). Many

feature narrators who, at a later point in the conflict, reflect on an earlier part of the same conflict from a changed perspective—most often, a sense of disillusionment and lost passion. Acts of reckoning and revisiting are everywhere. Through the form of the short story cycle, O'Faoláin examines the diversity of experiences throughout the revolutionary period, shifting between perspectives of interconnected characters as they traverse the same landscapes and face similar challenges. Each story alone can thus perhaps be seen as a rewriting of the previous story; the stories layer over each other, superimposing contrasting narratives and viewpoints to create a complex picture of the war's place in Ireland's collective memory that complicates conventional histories.

Although, as Paul Delaney notes, the characters in these stories may be "indistinguishable" (Delaney 154) at a surface level, the subtle differences in their experiences and perspectives reveal much more about the condition of both wartime and postwar Ireland. Revisiting this period via the short-story cycle allows O'Faoláin to fully consider these nuances, adding a critical level of depth to Ireland's collective memory of the war. *Midsummer Night Madness* is a collection that thus seems to stand on shaky ground; it explores complicated themes of relationship to land and desire, most often for companionship and freedom, and navigates ever-changing feelings towards the ongoing conflict. Rather than offer a cohesive message about the War of Independence or its bearing on the 1930s, the collection sits in its own unsettledness, portraying a wide variety of identities in transition and reckoning with the complexity of memory and its uncertain role in shaping the nation's future.

II. Landscape and Desire

The stories in *Midsummer Night Madness* take place in a wartime setting recreated by vivid landscape descriptions and deep explorations of characters' relationships to place. The "romantic temperament" (Harmon 68) that characterizes these stories is largely found in the characters' profound love for their Irish homeland. Nostalgia and the idealization of the Irish countryside is a persistent motif in Irish literature across centuries, particularly in the period of the Irish Revival, when figures such as W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge projected the cultural ideal of the budding Irish nation onto its physical landscape. However, as Oona Frawley notes in *Irish Pastoral: Nature and Nostalgia in Irish Literature*, the idealization of the pastoral became increasingly complicated in the 20th century, "as the natural world became, more and more, a site within which to express the loss of the Irish culture, a representation of the control which had been lost due to colonial rule, the initial imposition of the Church, and the eventual forbidding of the Irish language under English rule" (Frawley 12). The love for landscape in this collection is thus politically complicated, rooted in a long tradition of pastoralism and the idealization of the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht, but, simultaneously, attempting to combat this idealism and reckon with a changing society.

Characters' relationships with land are also complicated by the dangers found across the Irish landscape during the War of Independence. O'Faoláin's rebel characters respond by expressing a yearning for some other version of this landscape—one drawn from personal memory, or from an idealized vision of the Irish countryside found in the literature of the Revival. There is an overwhelming sense of confinement in these stories, as characters are restricted in their movement by their revolutionary duties or by military-imposed curfews. The Irish landscape—and the countryside in particular—thus becomes a stand-in for the freedom that

the characters so desperately crave. This often unattainable desire for peace and comfort within a hostile landscape is reflective of not only the wartime setting but also the vantage point of the 1930s—a period that should have been peaceful but was instead characterized by a sense of paralysis, stagnation, and continued tension. By revisiting the landscapes of the wartime period, O'Faoláin suggests a continuity between the desires of guerilla fighters in the War of Independence and those of the builders of post-war Ireland.

The collection begins with movement away from the city and into the countryside in the title story, "Midsummer Night Madness." The narrator, John, a rebel fighter, embarks on a mission to the countryside to check on a battalion under the command of Stevey Long, a character who appears in stories throughout the collection. John, a "city boy," savors being able to leave the city behind for the hope of some respite in the country:

> Then I turned to the open fields and drew in a long draught of their sweetness, their May-month sweetness, as only a man could who had been cooped up for months past under one of those tiny roofs, seeing the life of men and women only through a peep-hole in a window-blind, seeing these green fields only in the far distance from an attic skylight. Mounting my bicycle I left the last gas-lamp behind, and the pavement end, and rode on happily into the open country. (*Midsummer Night Madness* 9)

This first story is at once a kind of looking backwards, as John reckons with the relationship between his past (in the city) and his future (in the country). He has come from a place of confinement, and the countryside—despite his trip being driven by responsibility—holds endless possibilities for imagination and potential liberation. John's vision of the future, however, is constructed through his sense, however deluded, of the past. He yearns to leave behind "the last gas-lamp" and "the pavement end," drawing on a deep sense of nostalgia for an imagined history, a pre-modern, fully rural Ireland.

John's trip to the countryside also contains an element of revisiting the past in the later revelation that his family originates from this rural landscape. His trip is guided by his own

childhood memories of the area—in particular, the powerful stories of Henn Hall—and by the sense that he has a claim to this place by virtue of his lineage. When John arrives at Henn Hall and sits down to talk with the inhospitable old landowner, he recoils from the old man's accusation that, as a city boy, he "'know[s] nothing of the people. It's people like us who know Ireland. We belong to it—we who've grown up on the land and know it and the people on it'" (22). John chooses this moment to reveal his roots to the area: "'I was born in the country and born right here in this townland. My mother was born and is buried and my grandmother and all her people before her down there in Kilcrea churchyard. I lived in the townland of Farrane myself, as a child and my father lived there before me'" (24-25). Henn's accusations damage John's pride; his family history forms the basis of much of his love for Ireland and his revolutionary fervor, and remembrance for a collective past is presented as a key qualification for belonging to the Irish nation. By revisiting this area of the country, John seems to be attempting to reclaim some of this love for the nation and reassert his position as a fighter for Irish freedom.

John's grand visions and expectations for his trip do not come to fruition, however, as he finds that life in the countryside is much more complicated than the vacation he had imagined it to be. The first person he encounters in this landscape is Gypsy, the "rough, passionate creature" who mistakes him for her lover, Stevey Long. John immediately becomes a witness to their dispute, a heated conflict that is a far cry from the pastoral calm he had expected. As Gypsy leaves, John is left with "the feeling that this Hall and estate and countryside had an unpleasant, real life of its own, a life that would spoil for me the few days of quietness that I had been dreaming of this last hour" (15). This disappointment of expectations so irritates John that he begins to regret his journey: "I was wondering if I should really have come to this house at all, or

if I was to have any pleasure in my few days of freedom" (17). The intensity of John's disappointment and surprise that there is "real life" in this place casts substantial doubt on his claims to Henn that he knows Ireland. He has a quite simple view of the Irish countryside, one peppered with old stereotypes and clouded by rosy childhood memories.

The peace and comfort John so intensely desires remain even further out of reach when wartime violence makes its way to this rural landscape. He leaves Henn Hall to go for a walk, attempting to clear his head, when he catches sight of another large country house on fire in the distance. He must then instantly return to his soldier role, as he attempts to alert neighbors and criticizes Stevey Long's carelessness in setting the fire. Having been stationed in the city, John seems not to grasp how widespread such violence is and foolishly thinks that the war will pause long enough for him to take a vacation in the countryside. In this disappointment of expectations, O'Faoláin highlights the naïveté of the wartime period.

Desires for peace and freedom are apparent also in "Fugue," where they are further complicated by the potential for romantic love. "Fugue" is an early example of experimentation with narrative techniques that would characterize O'Faoláin's work later in the decade; as Deborah Averill notes, the recurring motifs and counterpointed voices in this story suggest the musical form of the fugue, a form that Joyce also drew on in *Ulysses* (Averill 172). Unlike "Midsummer Night Madness," this story begins in the countryside, with two guerilla fighters, an unnamed narrator and his companion Rory—another recurring character—"retreating from Inchigeela by the back-roads" (49). This narrator has a somewhat less rosy view of the Irish countryside, as he observes the "barren and rocky place they call the Rough, a difficult place by day and almost impassable by night" (49). Rather than seeking a vacation in the countryside, Rory and the narrator are on the run, aware of the danger at every step. Their goal is "to get away

from the danger of an encounter, to get across the river and the main road before the dawn, and up to the higher mountain on Ballyvourney beyond" (50). They crave comfort and the company of others, as the narrator observes "the most lonely sight" of "the odd twinkle of a light, miles away, one dot of light and all the rest of the land in darkness. The little light meant friends, a fireside, words of advice, comfort" (50). Unlike John in "Midsummer Night Madness," who goes to the countryside in search of solitude and respite from the city, the characters in "Fugue" are accustomed to solitude; they are confined by their wartime duties to a lonely lifestyle.

Although the narrator of this story does not hold the same kind of delusions about the countryside as John, the landscape still becomes a site reflective of his desires. He and Rory stop for the night in a country home, where he meets a young woman in a black cloak who sends his imagination running. As he leaves the house the next morning on horseback, he finds himself recalling the looks they exchanged: "I longed for an end to this vagabond life, longed for I dare not think what; but there was in it the scent and light of flowers and the scent of woman and her soft caresses" (52). Exhausted by his guerilla lifestyle and the constant movement associated with it, he is accustomed to craving comfort and rest—but now, for the first time, he is able to pinpoint a deeper desire for romantic love and companionship. The discovery of this desire is directly related to the rural landscape around him: "Excited by danger, and by the beauty of this calm place, the falling stream beside me, the trees moving all around, I began to think again of the young woman in the black cloak" (55). Despite the danger of this environment, this narrator still finds romance in the beauty of his surroundings—and the landscape still holds for him the possibility of transformation.

There is also an element of mystery in the narrator's relationship to the land in this story. At the end of the day, after a long twelve-mile journey on horseback and by cart, he comes to a

house where he again meets the young woman from the previous night. He is perplexed and enchanted, but when they begin talking, it becomes apparent that the romance he sees in the land is much more complicated. He says: "'I shouldn't mind if I lived here—the mountains and the valleys….'" (61), suggesting an ability to look past the immediate danger and see the beauty within. The woman, however, sharply disagrees: "'You would soon tire of these mountains! The city, though, that's where I'd like to live. There's company there, and sport and educated people, and a chance to live whatever life you choose!'" (61). The narrator feels himself confined by his wartime duties and desires the freedom he thinks he sees in the countryside. The woman, too, feels confined—restricted to a certain way of life by the lack of opportunities available to her. The characters' contrasting views of the countryside also reflect the tensions of the 1930s, as fundamental debates about Irish identity and values continued to persist.

Like in "Midsummer Night Madness," the solace the narrator craves in the countryside—and in the company of this woman—is just out of reach. He finds rural life more complicated than he had expected, and the mystery of the woman in the black cloak cannot stand upon closer inspection. Violence disrupts the illusion in this story, too, as news of Rory's death sends the narrator running from the woman's home, back into the perilous landscape surrounding. The romance disappears: "The dawn moved along the rim of the mountains and as I went down the hill felt the new day come up around me and felt life begin once more its ancient, ceaseless gyre" (64). This clear reference to W.B. Yeats's iconic modernist poem "The Second Coming"—a poem written with an apocalyptic view of the Irish War of Independence at the war's beginning—hints at the daunting prospect of envisioning a peaceful future in Ireland. Our now disillusioned narrator finds that, in wartime, true respite is impossible—and more hardship always lies ahead.

The countryside is a site of both comfort and danger also in "The Small Lady," the odd story of a brief romance between a treacherous Englishwoman and the young rebel fighter who serves as a guard in the monastery she is held captive in. The action of the story follows the Englishwoman, Bella, as she is carried through the mountains to her eventual execution. Despite this impending danger, Bella still finds joy in both the beauty of the landscape and in the sexual release of her affair with Denis. She insists that before her death "she must have a few more hours of beautiful and passionate life, and then, 'O Goddam all, good-bye green fields, blue sky; off I pop into the great Has-been!'" (68). How Bella chooses to spend the last moments before her death is telling—at each step of her journey she pauses to take in her surroundings:

> As she stood listening to the silence and watching the dark sky grow grey she heard faintly the distant sound of the falling waters, and from a distant cock there came echoing through the valley a long forlorn crow. As she leant her forehead on the cold pane the inevitable repetition came trailing and wavering as if the morning mist choked it. Everything looked bedraggled and shaggy after the storm but indifferent and timeless as the stones of the hills, indifferent, deathless, going on and on without end. (94)

Bella finds in the surrounding countryside both comfort for her troubles and reflections of the brutality she is facing herself. Similar to the "ancient, ceaseless gyre" the narrator of "Fugue" sees in the mountains, the "indifferent and timeless" landscape reflects the apparent senselessness of the story's violence. Bella's relationship to the land is complicated by her Englishness; to the other characters in the story, she is considered a danger to this very land, an unwelcome presence. This complexity adds another dimension to the hostility of landscape found in each of these stories; Bella loves the countryside and tries to connect to the nature around her, but it ultimately does not pay her the same love in return.

Bella's narrative is coupled with that of Denis, her unexpected lover, who is a much more standard character within this collection. Unlike "Midsummer Night Madness" and "Fugue," "The Small Lady" is told by a third-person narrator who switches between Bella and Denis's

perspectives in a rare use of stream-of-consciousness techniques in this collection (Ingman 136). Though they come from different worlds, Bella and Denis have a shared love for the Irish countryside: “The countryside was very dear to him too, and for so long wandering about in it his body and mind had become as it were soaked and bathed in its beauty, and all physical desires dropped away leaving behind only a calm, placid, thoughtless mind” (77). Bella admires how close Denis seems to the land; how much it is a part of who he is, despite being from the city. To Bella, Denis can perhaps even be viewed as an extension of the Irish landscape; much of her attraction to him lies in her own romantic view of the countryside. As in “Fugue,” nature becomes somewhat of an aphrodisiac, as her desire and appreciation for beauty is transferred from the natural world to this young Irish boy.

While Bella and Denis initially form a connection based on their shared love for the countryside, Denis’s own relationship to the land as the story develops is quite different from Bella’s. Their narratives alternate, allowing us to see the complexity and variety in how characters relate to the same landscape. Denis is a much less enthusiastic participant in the affair with Bella; he is enchanted by her charms but, after sleeping with her, finds himself feeling deeply guilty. Denis confesses his transgression to the priest at the monastery, after which he feels his guilt subside: “As he walked back in the teeth of the mountain wind he felt like a colt turned loose from a stable; he almost choked with happiness; he actually laughed out at the crying wind, and the night and the mountains were clothed in beauty without end” (87-88). As opposed to Bella, who finds in her surroundings sources of romance and desire, Denis turns to the natural world as a site of absolution and solitary comfort. His confession, and the cleansing of the wind, grants him the feeling of freedom that remains impossible to reach for Bella. He must share the memory of his transgression with the priest, but, after doing so, he is able to

discard the memory entirely and move on. While Bella is sent to her death, the end of the story finds Denis, along with his companion Rory, "in a gay mood, rejoicing in the loveliness of the night, and their own youth, and the promise of infinite days yet to come" (101). At first glance, this ending seems to reflect the fulfillment of freedom and comfort that is so difficult to obtain in these stories. However, Denis's joy in his surroundings comes at the expense of Bella's life and freedom, forcing us to confront the sacrifices that must be made in order to become free.

"The Bombshop" is a story that takes place almost entirely indoors—but these characters, too, feel the pull of the countryside and a deep desire for the freedom associated with it. The setting is a makeshift bombshop in a house in Cork, where Leo, Caesar, Sean, and Norah must stay hidden at all times, with only their work and each other's company to keep them occupied. In this confined space, they begin to dream of the outside world: "They talked of the spring while they worked, Leo speaking often of the beechwoods of Kildare, Norah of the smell of the furze and the bracken hot and damp in the mountains" (113). Thoughts of the natural world provide a temporary escape from the confinement of their day to day lives, a source of comfort in a difficult period.

However, it soon becomes apparent that the comfort sought in the natural world is merely a stand-in for deeper desires of freedom and liberation. As they remain confined, both physically and to a way of life created by wartime:

> the very thought of the streets tormented them. In this way they discovered something that nobody else could have taught them—that it is easy to do anything at first, no matter how difficult or dangerous, but the inevitable desires of the heart swell and burst in the end like a well gathering beneath the surface of the earth. (102)

This story, too, is told by a third-person, even omniscient, narrator, who observes the characters within the story from a future vantage point and makes judgments about their actions. The narrator in this case seems to be another former patriot who lived through similar experiences

and, in telling the story of the bombshop, remembers the lessons learned from his own experience. For the characters and the narrator both, the pull of the outside world becomes so strong that there is little they can do to resist it; they crave freedom so desperately that they become willing to risk their lives and safety for even the smallest taste. The relationship between indoors and outdoors in this story thus mirrors the relationship between wartime Ireland and post-war Ireland. During wartime, one is tormented by dreams of life after war has ended—a life here exemplified by the open space and freedom of movement seemingly available in the Irish countryside.

But as in the vast majority of stories in this collection, escape is never quite so simple—suggesting that the transition from wartime to the postwar period is not so simple, either. The characters in "The Bombshop" each reach their breaking point at which they can no longer tolerate the confinement of their existence: Sean leaves first, followed by Caesar, and eventually Leo and Norah must run too. This escape also follows the senseless, accidental death of the old lady to whom the house belongs. Unable to move her body or alert authorities without arousing suspicion, the workers in the bombshop simply leave her sitting in the chair she died in. Although Leo and Norah do manage to leave the house eventually, the story's ending—like in "The Small Lady"—again asks us to consider the sacrifices required for such an escape. Leo and Norah, standing above the city at the story's end, should be able to see the entire city, but "where they could smell the country smells of building-time they had no wish to look down into that dark hollow with its thousand blinking eyes" (123). The city is haunted by the presence of the dead old lady they have left behind to rot, and so instead of looking squarely into their reality they merely avert their eyes. Focused only on escaping further into the countryside, they are unwilling to grapple with the unpleasant details of their situation. O'Faoláin thus suggests that

while one should not be inhibited by memory or trapped in the past, *refusing* to remember entirely is perhaps just as dangerous.

The old lady returns in the next story, "The Death of Stevey Long." At an unspecified later date, we find the destructive commandant from "Midsummer Night Madness" now held captive in Macroom Castle, a sixteenth-century fortress "not a suitable place to imprison anyone" (124). Stevey, tormented by the "unattainable freedom of the hills" (127), hatches a plan for escape and makes his way back to the city. In the city, however, he finds himself unknowingly in the treacherous world of "The Bombshop"—a world where curfew is in effect and danger is everywhere. Although he relishes the "ring of the pavements instead of the pad-pad of the mud roads" (135), Stevey is unnerved by the emptiness of the streets. He again must escape—this time to escape the curfew patrol—and finds himself in the house abandoned by the characters of the "Bombshop." This house proves to be Stevey's downfall, when, the next morning, the raiding patrol catches him leaving and charges him with the murder of the old lady. Stevey's attempt at escape, though perhaps the most "conventional" escape narrative in the collection, is also the most unsuccessful. Both the countryside and the city are sites of danger for Stevey; there is nowhere left for him to go. While these stories seem to romanticize the Irish landscape, the landscape ultimately does not hold the liberatory possibilities the characters project onto it. Instead, how the characters view their environment is almost always tinged with a deluded sense of nostalgia for an imagined past that has little to do with their present realities. The landscape serves primarily as a surreal space or a memoryscape, merely a placeholder for the greater desire for freedom—a desire that O'Faoláin suggests remains far from reach even in the divided postwar period.

III. Fighting, Nationalism, and Disillusionment

The stories of *Midsummer Night Madness* vary in the extent to which they portray fighting and violence, but all take place within a context determined by the realities of the War of Independence and the Civil War. Each character in each story has a complicated and personal relationship to the war and to the Irish cause; by positioning these stories in a connected short story cycle, O'Faoláin pushes us to consider the wide variety of experiences during the war. Violence is rarely directly represented; Delaney argues that this omission is because "O'Faoláin's focus in the collection is less on the representation of such acts, and more on the narrativization of these incidents and the way that they are filtered through the perspective—and sometimes the memory—of certain characters or narrators" (161). This variety in narrative experience—and in particular, characters' complex memories and feelings towards the cause—presents a challenge to traditional narratives about the war, which presented it as a necessary stop along the way to the inevitable achievement of Irish independence. In contrast to the romance characters afford to the Irish landscape in these stories, there is little romance surrounding violence or patriotism. Instead, we meet these characters at moments when they begin to reconsider their values and reckon with the disappointed hopes of the war, clear evidence of the postcolonial short story's powerful and unique ability to portray identities in transition . There is a distinct sense in these stories that characters *used* to be hopeful, with romantic dreams of freedom and what it means to fight for such freedom. The collection forces us to look back at such romantic hope and reconsider it in light of the stagnation of the 1930s: from this vantage point, such romance looks merely like naïveté.

The opening story immediately calls into question these how committed these rebel characters are to the cause. While excited about his journey to the countryside, John's actual

responsibility in “Midsummer Night Madness” is to “see why to all appearances the local battalion had been completely inactive for the last three or four months,” a portion of the task he “did not relish” (10). Despite this, John notes that at the time of the story’s writing, “there was enough romance left in the revolution for me to be excited at the thought that I was to stay at a house I had known and wondered at since childhood” (10). This line suggests that such romance must inevitably fade; John’s retrospective account allows him to reconsider his wartime attitudes through the lens of his later disillusionment.

Disillusionment has already made its way into John’s view of the war at the time of the story’s setting. John’s encounter with old Henn is the most indicative of this; in conversing with this old Protestant landowner on the other side of the struggle, John is forced to answer questions about his motives and, in the process, reflect on his own role in the conflict. In response to Henn’s question of “‘Why are you in this business?”’ the narrator responds: “‘I…I believe in it,’ I said awkwardly” (22). Henn immediately scorns this youthful hope: “‘I believed in things once’” (22). John cannot muster up a more significant explanation for his involvement in the war, suggesting that it perhaps has more to do with naïve excitement at being involved in a movement rather than a thoughtful, mature consideration. Henn’s response also seems to indicate his quick judgment about John’s youth; when John ages, Henn implies, he, too, will shed this pointless “believing.”

No actual fighting occurs in “Midsummer Night Madness”—the fire Stevey Long and his battalion set is the closest that harm comes to John. As the stories progress, however, we begin to see more of the realities of everyday violence and can make sense of the atmosphere of danger and fear that overwhelmed this troubled period. In “Fugue,” Rory and the narrator must dodge shots fired at them while on the run:

> Heart-leaping, we doubled our pace and fell upon our bellies in the moss, squirming around like legless things to face the road. In a moment more the shots began to whine away over our heads, and I saw two awkward figures firing at us as they ran: I fired wildly in reply until my bolt jammed, and then rolled away into a hollow that by the fortunes of war lay behind me. (54)

This chaotic scene is one of the only true pictures of conventional "war" we see in this collection, and it immediately calls into question the romantic, idealized vision of the War of Independence that persisted in official post-war narratives. Rory and our narrator are not mature, experienced guerilla fighters; they are young men—barely adults—terrified by the threat of real violence and reliant only on their instincts in life-or-death situations. The description of the narrator firing "wildly in reply" conjures a terrifying image of a child with a rifle, forced to defend himself in a cause much larger than him. The picture does not look too much better on the other side of the fighting, however; the British soldiers in this scene are also "awkward figures" who apparently have no more experience than the Irish rebels.

Worn out by the threat of violence, the narrator of "Fugue" starts to question his purpose in the conflict. Much of this has to do with his encounter with the mysterious woman in the black cloak; his wartime duties begin to feel ridiculous in comparison:

> Surely life had a less miser purpose in this encounter than in the thousands and thousands of meetings when men cross and recross in towns and country places? Time and again they had appeared barren and futile, but rather than believe them fruitless, rather than feel as a spool revolving in a shuttle, I had lived instead in the unrest of a chessman fingered by a hesitant player. (55)

The encounter with the woman pushes the narrator to look backwards at everything he has done during the war, leaving him grasping at straws to try to find meaning in all these "thousands and thousands of meetings." As in "Midsummer Night Madness," the retrospective view suggests a romantic patriotism that has already begun to deteriorate before the story even begins. Though these meetings "appeared barren and futile," the narrator used to refuse to "believe them

fruitless," to "feel as a spool revolving in a shuttle." Now, however, he questions his faith that these encounters had some larger purpose. The unrest of being a guerilla fighter now seems entirely meaningless, his own role negligible.

At this stage of the war, however, there is nothing our narrator can do to change his position. He has a moment of respite in his brief romance with the mysterious woman, but as soon as he kisses her, they are interrupted by "a rush of feet" at the door and a cry that "Rory was shot dead; they were coming West for me!" (62). We do not see Rory's death directly, but the news shakes up the narrator, who is intimately familiar with the brutalities of such deaths: "Full of terror for such a death as I knew Rory's was I filled every house with armed men, fierce men to whom killing was a little thing and torture but little more, and my imagination and the stories I had heard drove me blindly on through the sodden night" (62). The end of the story finds the narrator entirely alone—without the comforts of the mysterious woman or the company of his friend—disillusioned, and afraid.

"The Bombshop" again paints a dreary picture of the realities of revolutionary fighting, to an extreme extent. Trapped within their hidden workshop, the characters in this story are no longer even afraid but rather simply worn out from the tedium of their work and driven to outbursts of boredom and frustration. Tensions arise within the group, leading to a struggle between Sean and Caesar that results in the accidental firing of the two shots that kill the old woman—a huge consequence from a minor spat. After the discovery of the old woman's death, Caesar tells the others that "'The work must go on at all costs … Unless she can be removed secretly she stays where she is'" (110). While this command, on some level, reflects an admirable commitment to the mission of the bombshop, it still is a far cry from the kind of bravery and heroism that the revolutionary ideals initially aspired to. Norah—the outsider of the

group—sees this hypocrisy, cursing Caesar "and all of us for a pack of cowards" (110). The bombmakers, confined as they are, are so detached from the broader conflict and its ideals that, at this stage, all that matters is the bombshop.

This commitment, however, does not last. Sean and Caesar both depart without much explanation, leaving Leo and Norah to clean up after the damage they have done. Norah is the unlikely hero of this story, the one who calls attention to the men's idleness and lack of faith: "she said passionately that [Leo] seemed not to care whether Caesar returned, and called them cowards again, and wished Ireland were better served than by such soldiers" (116). Like the narrator and Rory in "Fugue," these bombmakers are far from experienced military professionals. In this story, we get a glimpse of the consequences of such inexperience: in Norah's view, Ireland has been let down, the ideals of the revolution abandoned.

Leo, although he stays longer in the bombshop than the other men, begins to lose hope almost entirely. The events of the story force him to question the purpose of his role: "What a small business they were engaged in! A dirty business" (119). Like the narrators in "Midsummer Night Madness" and "Fugue," Leo seems to be—for the first time—thinking critically about his position in the war and examining why he became involved in the first place. Once again, retrospect reveals the naïveté and hopeless romanticism that clouded these fighters' early perceptions of the conflict. Norah tries to plead with Leo to stay committed: "She laid her hand gently on his shoulder. He could not bear that—after all he was only a boy. 'Leo,' she pleaded. 'I know you dearly love Ireland….'" (121). Leo's youth, in Norah's view, makes him unable to understand the consequences ("the men on the hills waiting for the stuff" (121)) of him abandoning his duties in the bombshop. Her pleas do little to sway him, however: "'Oh, vomit on Ireland,' he cried. 'Vomit on her'" (121). Leo no longer sees the value of fighting for Ireland

after the hardships he has endured; ultimately, his disillusionment grows so much, even spreading to Norah, that the pair leave the bombshop—and their ideals—behind.

"The Patriot" is explicitly told by a third-person narrator from the vantage point of the post-war period and thus, even more than the other stories in the collection, has the advantage of retrospect in its assessment of wartime idealism. The story is less about the war itself and more about the progression of the relationship between Bernie and Norah, as it progresses over an extended period of time that includes both the War of Independence and the Civil War. The pair meet for the first time at an unspecified date in Youghal in County Cork. When they meet again years later, Bernie was "an Irregular guerilla—doubly a rebel—seated high up on a lorry, with his rifle across his back and his coat-collar turned up, and his cap thrown back and upwards from his forehead to let his curls free to the wind" (145). At the initiation of their relationship, Bernie exists squarely within the realm of passionate rebel fighters; he is indistinguishable from his fellow patriots in his fervor and commitment to the cause.

The story also centers around the figure of Edward Bradley, a passionate local character, who speaks at a local public meeting that Bernie and Norah attend. Bradley perhaps exemplifies the ideal of revolutionary commitment; he spoke "with a terrible passion against England, and against the Irish traitors who had been cowed by her, and his passionate words caught and flared the temper of the people" (146). At the story's beginning, Bradley has a powerful impact on Bernie, who "cheered like the rest where he stood beside Norah, proud to be that man's friend" (146). The story follows the evolution of Bernie's attitudes towards Bradley; during the war, Bernie hopes to find Bradley in the mountains so that Bradley "would persuade him that this struggle of theirs was not hopeless, that all their humiliation of poverty and hunger was not, as he had long since begun to feel, a useless and wasted offering" (149). At this point in the story, the

gap between Bernie and Bradley has seemingly widened, as Bradley has maintained his fierce passion, while Bernie has slowly become tired and disillusioned.

The gap between these two characters only continues to widen through the rest of the story. Bernie does actually encounter Bradley in the mountains, but instead of reviving his revolutionary passion, Bernie instead tells Bradley about "the state of the men among those hills, all of them weak and scabby and sore, not a penny in their pockets, not a pipeful to smoke, nothing to do from one week to another but run when danger approached, never together, badly led, beaten all but in name" (154). Bernie's idealism has entirely vanished by this stage. Far from the proud, high-seated rebel of the opening pages, he seems to have lost faith in the nobility of the cause. Even Bradley's energy cannot bring him back from this disillusionment; during his address to the rebel meeting in the mountains, Bernie stays back, apparently unimpressed.

The characters meet one last time, at a Sinn Fein meeting after the end of the war. Bernie and Norah—finally together after a long separation caused by the war—see Bradley's name advertised on a poster for the meeting and, rather than genuine political interest, attend for the sake of seeing their old friend. Bradley has aged significantly, both by the actual passing of years and by the stress of the wartime period, but "the terrible passion of the man blazed like the fire of burning youth" (161). This time, however, Bernie and Norah, together in the audience once again, "did not join in the cheers of the audience" (161). No longer a fighter, Bernie shifts his priorities by the end of the story fully to his relationship with Norah. The pair have significant memories associated with Bradley, but his political passion no longer speaks to them or brings them together. Instead, at the story's end, they return to their hotel room, where Bernie, from the window, sees "their orator-friend, the old bachelor, the patriot, driving out of the town into the country and the dark night" (162). However, Bernie's contemplation of Bradley—and any

revisiting of the revolutionary past it may entail—is quelled by a quiet beckoning from Norah. Bernie closes the blinds and goes to Norah, signaling a definitive shift away from the firebrand politics of his past and towards a more personal, intimate life that is no longer dictated by a nationalist commitment. This gentle ending could, in one reading, create a vision of hope in this otherwise desolate collection, a respite from the challenges posed by the construction of a new nation. However, Bernie's closing of the blinds and turn away from national commitment signals also to a refusal to remember the realities of war and to the stasis that characterized the post-independence period—a phenomenon explored in much more depth in *A Purse of Coppers.*

Chapter 3: *A Purse of Coppers*

Seán O'Faoláin's second short-story collection, *A Purse of Coppers*, published in 1937, jumps forward from the War of Independence to a more contemporary post-independence context. Containing 14 stories that vary widely in their geographic settings and the types of characters they feature, *A Purse of Coppers* is demonstrative of O'Faoláin's increasing experimentation with modernism and his general growth as a writer. O'Faoláin's adherence to modernist techniques, however, is uneven at best, and his stories occupy an uncomfortable position between the realist tradition and the work of more experimental Irish writers like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. *A Purse of Coppers* clearly indicates the widening gap between O'Faoláin and the burgeoning modernist movement; although it experiments more with narrative technique and the omission of plot details than *Midsummer Night Madness*, the stories remain mostly grounded in a mimetic tradition that sought to reflect everyday life in Ireland. Instead of grand tales of revolutionary Ireland, *A Purse of Coppers* features a mundane cast of characters—teachers, priests, manual laborers, nuns, and even young children—as they navigate the day-to-day experience of living in a newly independent Ireland.

O'Faoláin lived outside of Ireland between 1926 and 1933, and upon his return, "quickly became disillusioned by what he felt was the stifling of intellectual life in Ireland by such forces as the Gaelic League and the Catholic church" (Ingman 138). This sense of disillusionment is of course present also in *Midsummer Night Madness*, but in this collection expands beyond the temporary chaos of the War of Independence as O'Faoláin sought to grapple with larger questions about Irish identity and the future of the Irish nation. *A Purse of Coppers* more directly addresses the specific political context of the 1930s, a decade that—with the election of Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil party in 1932—was characterized by "deepening conservatism shaped by

an economic nationalism, a Catholic social policy increasingly enshrined in the country's legislation, and a religious and cultural protectionism stimulated by the activities of the Censorship Board" (Ingman 138). De Valera's government sought to incorporate Catholicism directly into the laws of the new state, allowing for the Church's domination of nearly all areas of life throughout the 1930s.

O'Faoláin was critical of the Church's extensive power and influence over the Irish people throughout his work, most notably in his 1937 essay "The Priests and the People." However, he was certainly not anti-Catholic by any stretch; instead, he drew a distinction between the conservative leadership and more "moderate elements within the Church, amongst the clergy and laity" and argued for the formation of a "liberal, religious-minded intelligentsia" (Delaney 228) that would steer the new nation in a more modern, cultured direction.

The all-encompassing nature of the Church in this period is apparent in the stories of *A Purse of Coppers*. Paul Delaney argues that though this collection is less cohesive than *Midsummer Night Madness*, "The principal link is the Church, as all of the stories bar one ('A Meeting') either include clerical characters or contain mention of priests, and each carries references to Catholic devotions, symbols, rituals, inhibitions, idioms, spaces or practices" (229). While this is certainly a unifying strand, there is much more to these stories beyond their reflection of the Church's domination.

The stories of *A Purse of Coppers* reflect the particular context of Ireland in the 1930s, but they grapple with much larger questions of identity and state formation shared across the postcolonial world. While minimally and unevenly modernist, O'Faoláin's work navigates the fragility of identity in the post-independence period, a question that is at once modernist, postcolonial, and, according to Heather Ingman, "particularly Irish, the consequence of

prolonged imposition of alien identity" (Ingman 13). While the stories perhaps fall short of Joyce or Beckett's in their narrative experimentation and sophistication, Ingman notes that "after independence, the short stories of even a supposedly realist writer like Seán O'Faoláin dwell on the suppressed desires, buried fears and haunting memories of their protagonists" (Ingman 13). O'Faoláin may have been hesitant about the intrusion of modernism into Irish letters, but the postcolonial nature of his work forced him to confront many of the same questions as his contemporaries. As Mark Quigley argues, O'Faoláin's work sought to develop a "radically new aesthetic" separate from both the Revival and from the direction heralded by Joyce (Quigley, *Empire's Wake* 66). *A Purse of Coppers* is clearly reflective of this model of "postcolonial realism"; the stories feature characters who feel trapped in their current situations, discontented with both the state of the nation and the condition of their personal lives. Like *Midsummer Night Madness*, these characters also constantly engage in acts of remembering and rewriting, as they attempt to make sense of their current position. Caught in the stasis of the 1930s, these stories are haunted by the memory of better days—and unable to move forward to a better future.

I. Entrapment and Enclosure

Throughout these stories, characters encounter the restrictive culture of post-independence Ireland, created both by the Catholic Church, as an institution, and by an increasingly conservative public opinion. Such is the case in "The Old Master," the story of John Aloysius Gonzaga O'Sullivan, impressively named after the Italian Jesuit saint Aloysius Gonzaga. The unnamed narrator—one of many in this collection—describes John Aloysius as "a parabola of pomposity in a rectangle of gaslight" (174), an apparently infamous figure who celebrates the coming of a Russian ballet to the city of Cork. However, to John Aloysius's distress, the ballet is met with protests and accusations of indecency. As he enters the theatre, he

discovers two men—including his friend, Peter Cooney—"'taking down the name of every man who enters the theatre tonight'" (177). Peter Cooney defends his involvement in the protests by deferring to the position of the local Canon: "'I'm in this all on account of Canon Paul. As you know, what he says goes'" (178). Though perhaps an easy deflection, this appeal to authority is indicative of the sheer power and universal influence of the Catholic Church. We have not yet met Canon Paul in this story, but already he has a powerful presence.

John Aloysius thus immediately finds himself in an uncomfortable position: he wants desperately to see the ballet, but publicly opposing the position of both his friend and the clergy brings with it a slew of other dangers: "He thought quickly of his job. It was a nice job. But it had to be renewed by the County Council every year, and that was sometimes a delicate business" (178). It is not merely peer pressure causing him to think twice about seeing the ballet, but rather real implications about the stability of his job and his livelihood. John Aloysius attempts to resist and stick to his principles, telling a dancer in the company who asks about the protestors that they are "'Worse than Communists! Perhaps you might call them Fascists. Or Nationalists. It's very complicated'" (180). De Valera's post-independence government established itself as firmly anti-Communist, generally falling into a right-wing Catholic nationalism. However, the allusion to fascism is perhaps extreme and reveals more about John Aloysius's lack of understanding of the intricacies of post-independence politics than it does about the actual identities of these protestors. His angry outburst, broadly targeted, reveals a general frustration at the restrictions imposed by conservative ruling forces, and the fragility of Irish identity in the face of such divergent political labels.

Although John Aloysius continually reiterates his values and his support for the ballet—at least in his own head—he becomes unable to resist the pull of his community and the clergy as

the protesters begin to rally. Canon Paul subtly ropes John Aloysius into the fray of the protest: "Gently but firmly he took John Aloysius by the arm, saying something about the value of educated men, and about ending this sort of thing, and before he could get out of it John Aloysius found himself beside Cooney in the procession with a hymn-book in his hand" (181). He winds up in the middle of the protest, literally trapped between Canon Paul on one side and Cooney on the other, unable to escape or speak up. The Canon pleads gently with John Aloysius, urging him subtly to take their side: "'We're going to hold a protest meeting in the Grand Parade. You'll say a few words, of course?'" (181). Resistance seems impossible; John Aloysius is compelled to agree even as "He felt he was going to assassinate the canon, pull out his lean neck the way you pull the neck of a hen" (181). John Aloysius imagines himself as the righteous defender of culture and a free society, using violence to achieve his ends.

In the end, however, John Aloysius does not fulfill any of his grand dreams of resistance. He temporarily escapes the fray, but while he practices "the phrases he would use tomorrow to denounce Cooney" (183), he never has an opportunity to use these phrases: "He got his death of cold out of it, and within two weeks pneumonia had him whipped" (183). The last lines, apparently shifting the perspective back to the present-day narrator who begins the story, eulogize John Aloysius: "But the strange thing is that, somehow or other…John Aloysius had a good time…amused everyone…enjoyed life…but nobody ever thought of him as anything but a free, public show while he was alive, and we only began to think of him as a human being when he was gone" (183). The ellipses in this passage suggest a strange hesitancy in acknowledging the past and a distinct sense of regret towards the impossible situation John Aloysius was placed in, as a defender of culture in an incredibly limiting society. Trapped in the stifling cultural environment of 1930s Ireland, John Aloysius's choices are conform or die.

The encounter between Pat Lenahan and Trixie Flynn, two music lovers, in "A Born Genius" further reveals the overwhelming sense of being trapped in Ireland's confining culture. Pat spends his days working as a clerk in a vinegar factory, but secretly dreams of being an opera singer. There are no opportunities in Ireland, so Pat is left envying Trixie's adventures: "'Ah!' he cried miserably. 'It's all very well for you, Trixie. You caught the tide. You've been to Paris and Milan. I read about your concert last March, below in the Opera House'" (242). To Pat, Trixie's success in the music world can be equated to sheer luck—luck at getting out of Ireland. Trixie attempts to console Pat by telling him he can sing in a choir in Cork, an offer he mocks: "'And what would I sing in a choir?' Through his nose he began to intone horribly: 'Tantum ergo Sacramentum Novo cedat Ritui…'" (243-244). Pat, despite his hostility to the Church, is intimately familiar with this opening passage to the Eucharistic Hymn and suggests that there is no music in Ireland apart from Catholic ritual. His opposition to singing Church music wanes, however, when "he found himself being intrigued into giving a half-promise to sing the *Adeste* with Trixie at the parish choir next Sunday, though it enraged him to see his half-promise passed on at once as if it were a personal gift of Trixie's to the parish" (257). As hostile as Pat is to the Church's dominance, there is no other opportunity for him to sing, and so he is willing to make the sacrifice for the sake of his love for music.

Although Pat temporarily escapes the restrictive environment of Ireland for the United States, he returns to Cork after an uncomfortable encounter with his father disappoints his hopes. Back in Cork, his only companion is Trixie, but even this relationship begins to sour as their attraction to each other grows. They continue to sing together, breaking free of clerical music and sharing such an intense passion on stage that Trixie's husband "implored her to be careful—the Bishop was in the house and Shanahan was somewhere on the stage … By the prompter's

box Father Shanahan looked on with tightened lips and disapproving eyes" (259). Under the surveillance of Trixie's husband and the clergy, Pat and Trixie cannot carry on seeing each other or even singing together. Pat finds himself again alone in the "boredom of the empty days and nights" (260) and without opportunity to sing or ever leave Cork again.

The collection does not draw a clear line between clergy as oppressors and laypeople as oppressed, however. Instead, O'Faoláin explores the complex feelings and relationships of clerical figures as they, too, navigate the changed world post-independence. "Sinners," in particular, negotiates the tension between priests as individuals but also as components of a domineering institution. The canon in "Sinners" knows the sins of the young girl in his confessional box before she begins her confession, courtesy of the girl's employer. Despite this, he must slowly elicit the confession from her and admonishes her (not for the first time) for not having been to confession for five years: "'My dear child, how much over three years is it? Is it four years? And would you mind calling me *canon*?'" (185). The canon is frustrated by the apparent futility of administering confession to the girl, but still demonstrates his power over her, repeatedly frightening her with accusations of sexual impropriety, among an array of other sins. He finally elicits from her the confession that she stole a pair of boots from her employer, but continues to berate her for being a "bad" Catholic: "'It's the law of the Church, and the law of God, that you *must*, you *must* go to confession at least once a year. Why did you stay away? Look at the way your mind is deformed so that you can't even recognize a sin when you commit it'" (188). The canon, behind the shield of the confession box, assumes the authority of the Church seemingly for the sole purpose of terrifying and oppressing his parishioners.

The ritual of Catholicism seems to oppress the canon, as well, however. He is daunted by "the long queue on each side of Father Deeley's box, all still as statues in the dusk of the aisle"

and exhausted by the uselessness of the ritual: “Seeing them he groaned again as much as to say, ‘What’s the use? They all deceive themselves. They all think everyone is sinful but themselves only. Or if they say they are sinners, and feel it—it only lasts while they are in the church. Then they go out and are filled with envy and pride and they have no charity’” (187). The canon, despite his repeated efforts to make the young girl confess something—or anything—does not seem to believe in the ritual of confession as a meaningful route to being a better Catholic or more moral individual. Instead, he is weary of his job and tired of the long lines of “sinners” who disturb his peace and keep him confined to the confession box. O’Faoláin seems to suggest that the increasing power and influence of the Church has consequences for the clergy, too: they must bear the weight of their parish’s guilt.

The canon attempts to elicit guilt from the girl; however, in the end, he is the one left feeling the most guilty. Exhausted by the number of sinners, he leaves the box and “stalked up the dim aisle, and when he met two urchins gossiping in a corner he banged their little skulls together, and at once he became disgusted with himself to see them cowering from him in fright” (191). The canon has been given the power to exercise the Church’s authority, but he seems increasingly wary of this power and its consequences. At the end of the story, he sees the girl who earlier confessed to him pleading with her tyrannical employer, Mrs Higgins, and the guilt he imposed on her comes rushing back to him: “The canon felt the hound of his stomach jump from the kennel again. His entrails came bodily up to his neck. He marched by, blowing and puffing. ‘Oh, my God!’ he whined. ‘Have pity on me. Oh, my God! Have pity on me!’ He turned towards the dark presbytery deep among the darkest lanes” (193). This ending scene mimics the girl’s confession from earlier: like the dark, anonymous confinement of the confessional box, the “darkest lanes” allow for the canon to access the depths of his own guilt, as he pleads directly to

God for absolution. There is no escape for the canon or for any of his "sinners." The characters in all three of these stories—as disparate as their life experiences may be—are all trapped by the stifling culture of the post-independence world.

Perhaps the most trapped characters in these stories, however, are the women. The haunting story "Kitty the Wren," about a woman exiled from her community after she has an illegitimate child, suggests that the conservative, Catholic culture of 1930s Ireland took its greatest toll on Irish women. The narrator of the story, a French sailor passing through Ireland, hears tale of the woman who lives "'twelve miles away. Behind in the hills'" (214) and assumes her to be a "loose" woman who will provide him companionship. When he arrives, however, he finds a lonely, poorly educated woman who never leaves her glen even to go to the village or to Mass. He questions her about her activities in this isolated place, and she tells him that she reads but has only one book: "Leaning forward under the tarred, soot-caked log that was the chimney-tree, she drew, from a clevvy in the wall, a book with black shamrocks printed all over the green cover. It was a school-reader with her name inside, in childish handwriting" (219). Kitty asks the sailor to bring her books with "lots of pictures"; while she has a desire to read and learn, her limited education and lack of access to reading material has kept her trapped in a childish state.

The French sailor is determined to rescue Kitty from her situation. He pleads with her: "'I come tomorrow, and I bring you shoes. I bring you clothes. That is Saturday. I bring you all the bloody shoes in Croghanbeag. Then, on Sunday, you go to Mass! It is settled? Yes, it is settled!'" (220). As an outsider, he seems to not understand Kitty's position within her community; he assumes that her isolation is a choice she made herself rather than one imposed on her. On return to the village, however, the sailor begins to learn more about Kitty's past. A man at a shop tells him: "'She's sound enough in the head. But she got into trouble, thereabout ten years ago. There

was a child. One of the lads from around this place it was, as a matter of fact. He ran to America'" (221). Despite the distance from this event, the man at the shop still seems angry at Kitty: "'Women like that,' he muttered, 'should be hunted out of the country'" (221). This hostile muttering suggests that Kitty's countrymen view her as an embarrassment, as such a blight on Irish morals that she should be forced out of the country or, at the very least, forced out of the public eye.

The parish priest further explains her exile to the French sailor; he explains that he visits her once a year to hear her confession and give her Holy Communion, but that she is never to come into the village to go to Mass: "'The poor girl will never enter this village again … And 'tis better that way'" (223). The priest seems to be sympathetic to Kitty, but explains that her banishment from Mass is "'the least part of her punishment'" (223). He implores the sailor to "'leave her … to her solitude. It's a lonely glen, but it can be lovely'" (223). Kitty's exile to the glen is explicitly a punishment, but the priest attempts to sugarcoat this reality by suggesting that the isolation is what is best for her. The French sailor is baffled and enraged by this injustice:

> he cursed, dreadfully, Jamesy, and the priest, and the barmaid, and Connemara, and he tried to understand why the priest should be so lenient with him and so stern with Kitty, and he ended by cursing the whole of Ireland, lock, stock and barrel, and he went down to the pub, where he drank himself into the darkness of the night. (223)

As an outsider, the sailor sees the community's prejudice towards Kitty for what it is. However, there is nothing he can do to change the situation; the tide of popular opinion is turned too much against her, and the priest, as always, has the last word. At the story's end, the sailor breaks his promise to Kitty to return to the glen and leaves Ireland, but she remains forever trapped there, in permanent exile. Like the father of her child who "ran to America," the French sailor leaves Kitty to bear the burden of her community's hatred.

II. Decay and Discontent

The story "A Meeting" begins with the damning evaluation that "Many towns in Ireland, after fifty or sixty years of prosperity, suddenly begin to decay; and 'decay' is the word for it, because they become not so much old as, in literal truth, decayed" (273). Beyond the restrictive environment that holds the characters of these stories captive, the collection portrays a desolate picture of decay in 1930s Ireland that is accompanied by a complicated sense of nostalgia for a better period. Physical decay and artistic and intellectual decay go hand in hand in the collection, reflecting, broadly speaking, the feeling that Ireland had fallen from some greater past. This sense of decay was personal for O'Faoláin, who, in the essay "The Dilemma of Irish Letters," argued that the achievement of Irish independence "had actually swept away whatever social complexity there had been in Ireland and had replaced it by a socially-much-simpler republican society" that quelled literary and artistic production (Cleary 62-63). However, in both this essay and the stories of *A Purse of Coppers,* it remains unclear what exactly this imagined better past is. Instead, characters remain haunted by their memories and imaginations, certain that the world around them has worsened but without the power to change it.

The opening story, "A Broken World," is perhaps the clearest example of this decay—beginning, clearly, with the title. "A Broken World" tells the story of an encounter between an unnamed narrator and a priest on a train passing through the Irish countryside. Looking out on the landscape, the priest describes isolated communities as lacking "moral unity." While the priest formerly believed "'that every parish is a world in itself,'" he has come to believe that "'where there is no moral unity there is no life'" (163). This lack of unity, the priest argues, is paramount to "a broken world" (164). The priest supports his argument with anecdotes from his time working in a similar parish that he perceived as "'too incomplete'" (167) to be a world in

itself. However, he then describes his experience of visiting a neighboring parish—a much wealthier, more "cultured" community composed of Ascendancy settlers. With this parish, the priest argues, "'It was like putting two halves of a broken plate together … That parish and my parish made up a world, as neither did by itself, rich and poor, culture and…'" (169). While this argument begins from individual experience, the priest begins to make a much larger claim about the incompleteness of Irish society post-independence.

This claim does not sit well with our proud nationalist narrator, who begins to push back against the priest's implication: "'But now that the gentry are gone, won't the people, the mountainy people, and so on, begin to make a complete world of their own?'" (169). He starts gently but slowly becomes much more aggravated, refusing to accept that Ireland is somehow "incomplete"—or that such incompleteness is permanent or untreatable. Eventually, he takes his anger out on the farmer in their train carriage: "'But damn it all, don't you mind, or is it that ye don't want to stir, ye're too damn lazy to stir?'" (171). Perhaps things are not as good as they used to be, the narrator acquiesces, but he suggests that if the people simply work a bit harder, the fragments of a fractured society can be put back together. The farmer has little patience for the narrator's appeal:

> He took the butt-end from his mouth, and he looked at me, and by the way he looked up and down at me, I was hoping he would say something bitter and strong. But his stare was childish, and the eyes wavered, as if he was very tired. He just dropped one last, vast spit on the wet floor, snuggled into his corner, and went to sleep under his hat. (171)

Neither of the narrator's companions seem up to the challenge of repairing this broken world—instead, they are content to sit by and watch it decay.

Alone at the end of the story, the narrator tries at first "to refute the talk of the priest, thinking that he had merely spoken out of the snowy landscape, which above all other conditions of nature is so powerful to make life seem lonely, and all work futile, and time itself a form of

decay" (172). However, as he continues thinking, the narrator finds himself unable to refute "that under that white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing" (173). This clear reference to the ending of James Joyce's "The Dead" suggests that Ireland is caught in an eternal winter, with no hope of a "resurrection call" that would "fire and fuse us all" (173). Instead, such decay will only accumulate, and "in the morning, Ireland, under its snow, would be silent as a perpetual dawn" (173). Rather than a promising start to the building of a new nation, the image of a "perpetual dawn" here suggests instead that Ireland remains cemented in its infancy, unable to come together and form the "moral unity" necessary to revive itself and create its own world. The fractured dialogue in this story, one of many hints of modernist experimentation throughout the collection, further suggests the fragmentation of Irish society.

A similar bizarre, tense encounter occurs in "Admiring the Scenery," a story of three men waiting for, and eventually boarding, a train in the Irish countryside. Unlike in "A Broken World," these men know each other—they are all teachers at the same school—but they, too, struggle to reach each other and form meaningful connections. Much about each of these men's individual stories is left to the imagination of the reader; the emotional state of the priest is described only in relation to his physical features: "there was in his heavily-lidded eyes a look that was sometimes whimsical and sometimes sad, and that look, with the gentle turn to his mouth when he smiled, gave him the appearance of a man who had gone through many struggles and finally solved his problems in a spirit of good-humoured regret" (194). We know very little about this priest, who remains unnamed, but his history of struggle is visible on his face and lends weight to Heather Ingman's diagnosis of 1930s Ireland as "a country exhausted" (Ingman 138).

The three men in this story seem to represent the range of emotions in response to the decay that defined the period. The small dark man, Governey, expresses mostly anger, beginning with a violent outburst about the lateness of the train: "'Why on earth is this ten-thousand times accursed station three miles from the village? What's it here for at all? My God, what a country! What—is—it—for?'" (195). Like the narrator in "A Broken World," he is so frustrated with the state of his nation that his anger is somewhat arbitrarily targeted, directed at the first object he is able to criticize. The third man, Hanafan, is deeply melancholy, with a bitter outlook: "his eyes were lined with a myriad of fine wrinkles. They were cranky, tormented eyes, and his mouth was thin and cold and hard" (194). The men debate the obviously absurd question of whether the "common people" admire scenery, sending Hanafan into a long story about Boyhan, the old station-master. Throughout the entire conversation, however, the men do not seem to understand each other. Each of them is individually discontented with their situation, and the bonds that tie them together have seemingly frayed so much that they cannot communicate even the most basic of ideas. The "moral unity" aspired to in "A Broken World" is here, too, far out of reach.

In "The Old Master," much of John Aloysius's feeling of being trapped in his current condition stems from the decay he sees in the city around him. In a tirade railing against Cork's lack of culture, John Aloysius invokes a nostalgia for "'the good old days, before these yahoos from the heath, these bog-trotters of Gaelic Leaguers, these bag-men, these Attacotti, these tin-pot patriots with the smell of dung on their boots, set the grass growing on the streets'" (175). He attributes the decay—both cultural and physical—of his city to the post-independence leaders, who are so caught up in grand ideas of patriotism that they neglect the realities of Irish life. Now, because of this poor leadership, John Aloysius sees himself as left "'like an old master, lying forgotten in a deserted mansion'" (175). The "deserted mansion" of Cork, in John Aloysius's

view, holds the potential for something much greater, and he is ashamed of its decline. He pleads with one of the dancers that Cork is not "'an ignorant city, or a boorish city. It is a most cultivated centre of the arts. It always was'" (179). John Aloysius's sense of his city—and of his role within this city—is firmly rooted in a particular vision of the past. This vision is not specific; it does not seem to refer to any particular time period, but rather draws a vague line between a "cultured" past and a decaying present.

The decay of Cork, in particular, is explored also in "A Born Genius." When Pat Lenihan returns to Cork after his brief adventure in the United States—much like O'Faoláin himself, in 1933—he is disgusted by the apparent decline of "this rat-eaten place" (254). Unlike John Aloysius, however, who searches for Cork's redeeming qualities, Pat wallows in his hatred: "Everywhere he went he sought with deliberate malice for the signs of decayed grandeur" (254). After seeing more of the world outside of Ireland, Pat becomes disgusted with his country's inability to maintain this history of supposed "grandeur." As in "The Old Master," this sense of the past is unspecific. The nostalgia in all these stories seems ultimately to have little to do with factual history at all; instead, it is rooted much more in a strong sense of general discontent. Memory thus plays a complicated role in this collection: often unreliable or vague, it serves primarily as a mechanism for understanding the present.

III. Encounter and Memory

Several stories in *A Purse of Coppers* portray encounters between characters that, in spurring conversation, encourage the revisiting of both personal and collective memory. These memories have a powerful influence over characters, but the process of addressing and reckoning with them is often painful. No matter whether the memory is specific—as in "Sullivan's

Trousers" or "A Meeting," which both deal directly with the War of Independence—or vague, as in "A Broken World" and "Admiring the Scenery," there occurs in all these stories a sort of haunting, as characters feel unable to fully reckon with the past or move into the future.

"Sullivan's Trousers" is perhaps the story most indicative of the haunting effect of Irish history. This bizarre story about Roger Sullivan, a disgruntled Irish businessman enraged by the isolationism of Eamon De Valera's trade policies, navigates the delusions about the past that characterized public opinion in the post-independence period. The story begins with a memory of Roger's role in the War of Independence, when he housed patriots on the run but also began peddling English goods forbidden in the country at the time. This business endeavor put Roger at the center of public criticism, as patriots accused him of seeing "revolutionary politics in terms of hard-cash" (262) and thus becoming "a danger to the State" (263). Roger's economic views turn him into an outsider in his community, and, in the post-war period, become the subject of intense debates about the history and future of the Irish nation.

Roger's countrymen base their support for the "New Economic Policy" on a specific vision of Irish history. McCarthy tells Roger: "'Our forefathers … were happy, and they had no canaries. They had no parrots. They lived simply and they were happy'" (265). Another man takes this argument even further, noting that "'Our forefathers had no buses, and they were happy. If I were the President I'd pass a law forbidding the use of all motor-vehicles'" (266). Roger is baffled by this view, arguing that a return to how "our forefathers" lived is a return to barbarism. He says: "'I know the sort of Ireland ye want. We'll all be going around living in beehive huts and wearing kilts and having our newspapers like the Book of Kells on goatskin'" (266). On the surface, this debate is about the intricacies of De Valera's economic policies, but it goes much deeper to essential questions about Irish history and tradition. The men Roger argues

with truly believe that their forefathers lived happily with their simple lifestyles, despite the brutal legacy of colonialism that actually characterized this history. This is primarily a dispute of remembering; Irish history is contested and apparently up for grabs in this story.

The contested nature of memory and history is further demonstrated by Roger's slow descent into madness, as he appears to take the men's arguments seriously and throws out his pants for the sake of wearing only kilts. He becomes somewhat of a local legend, a reputation that grows even more when rumors surface that Roger gave his life defending the president from an attack. When "remembering" Roger, the men seem to forget about their bitter arguments and instead choose to remember only a rosy version of the events of Roger's life. For example, McCarthy glorifies Roger's madness: "'I say here and now, without fear of contradiction, that when Roger Sullivan took off his trousers the course of Irish civilization was changed. It was an historic date. And an historic spot. He was a pioneer'" (269). The men even agree to erect a monument in Roger's honor and in "'the spirit of Irish tolerance'" (271). This spirited commemoration is disrupted when Roger, alive and even wearing trousers instead of the infamous kilt, appears and continues to argue against the President's economic policy. Roger thus resists the rosy rememoration that his countrymen attempt to impose on every facet of Irish history. While they remain firmly rooted in a deluded idealization of the past, Roger attempts to view this history clearly in order to shape a better future—a view that eventually exiles him from his community and condemns him to madness.

"A Meeting" also deals directly with the memory of Irish history, specifically the War of Independence. The narrator "re-meets" Sally Dunn, an old acquaintance, who, at their last meeting, "was up to her eyes in the Revolution" (273). Sally's reputation during that period as "the tomboy, the dare-devil, the travelled woman, and the best story-teller I ever met" (274)

earned the narrator's admiration, and he is excited to encounter her again in the post-independence period. Sally, too, seems eager to recapture this old dynamic, and talks enthusiastically about the war and about their shared history. However, the narrator begins to observe "a lack in her talk" (275), a decline in the excitement of her stories. He repeatedly draws her back "to the old rebelly days and nights" (276), but he finds that revisiting these memories does not have the powerful impact he expected it to have. Instead, their talk "was like the dusty smell of the boreens—a musk—hardly a scent, something so faint and slight that it really hardly touched the senses. It was just pleasant, companionable talk—getting its meaning from old memories—nothing more. We might otherwise be strangers" (277). The encounter between Sally and the narrator serves as an invocation to memory, but the digging up of these memories is ultimately unsatisfying. Both Sally and the narrator seem unable to reconcile these grand wartime stories with their present condition. The pair never meet again: "I doubt if either of us wanted it or expected it. You cannot have your memories and eat them" (277). This ominous final line warns against the expectation of memory to serve as a cure-all for present ills. The question of what to do with these memories instead, however, remains unanswered. The narrator remains stuck in the position of being unable to fully reckon with both his personal and national past.

The narrator's bizarre encounter with a priest on a train in "A Broken World" also serves as an invocation to personal and collective history. The narrator does not truly want to listen to the priest's stories; he is forced to because of the confinement of the train carriage, but he regards the priest as nothing but "a bloody bore" (164). As the priest continues telling the story of his old parish, however, the narrator makes eye contact with a farmer seated opposite him, who, with a wink, indicates that the priest is something of a "local 'character'" (165). At this indication, the

narrator begins to listen more closely, apparently seeking entertainment. The priest's tale has an unexpected effect, however: he evokes "a most powerful sense of comradeship in that carriage, whether he meant to or not" (169). Eventually, though, this comradeship shatters, and the narrator becomes angry at the implications of the priest's claims. Memory does not allow these three characters to connect to each other; instead, it only divides them further. Here, too, memory serves as a contested site for debates about the truth of Irish history and identity.

Memory draws characters further apart also in "Admiring the Scenery." The question about whether common people admire the scenery stems from a collective boredom and desire for conversation, and it serves as an invitation to revisit memories. Hanafan's tale about the old station-master initially is intended to answer this question, but as the story progresses, Hanafan is drawn further into his own memory. The memory begins to transform him as he speaks: "his eyes dilated under his black hat with the image of his memory. His eyes were not cranky now, but soft and big" (199). Hanafan does not reveal all of the details of his memory to his companions; he says: "'I was here with a—a—I was here with a—a friend'" (199). He seems hesitant to revisit this memory himself, much less invite the other characters in. The small man "saw at once a piece of Hanafan's secret life revealed … something or somebody that made the memory of that night so precious to Hanafan that he could not speak of it openly" (199). The memory is precious to Hanafan, but also deeply painful to access and revisit—raising the question of why he began telling this story in the first place. The story ends with an image of Hanafan "in his corner … weeping to himself, the drops creeping through his tightly closed eyes" (202). We never learn the full details of the story; Hanafan is left to sit alone in his own memory, haunted by a past that cannot be shared or fully reckoned with.

Conclusion

Midsummer Night Madness and *A Purse of Coppers* are uncomfortable, uncertain collections. They bear the mark of a young writer haphazardly experimenting with form and with content, grappling with the complicated legacy of Irish writing and beginning the process of navigating his own position within this history. Despite this developing voice, however, the collections are remarkable in how they reflect the particular period of the 1930s. O'Faoláin was a writer who fully lived in and was absorbed by the world around him—as demonstrated by his long career as a critic and essayist—and his observant eye towards Irish society is readily apparent in his fiction. In these stories, he captured the uncertainty of a nation in flux, gracefully illustrating the impact of drastic national change on the lives of diverse characters and allowing for an unusual level of nuance that questioned prevailing narratives of Irish history and identity.

O'Faoláin's fiction illustrates the complicated role of memory in this post-independence national reckoning. In *Midsummer Night Madness*, the writer himself revisits wartime Ireland and retells stories of fighting—or, more often, running from fighting—from the disillusioned vantage point of the 1930s. In *A Purse of Coppers*, characters in the post-independence world attempt to reckon with their own memories but remain debilitatingly haunted by the legacies of the past, stuck in the stasis of their present reality. Taken together, the collections demonstrate that memory can be constructive; Kevin Whelan's premise of a future-looking "ethical memory" offers the possibility of retelling and rewriting histories in a way that is fruitful and productive. However, memory can also be inhibitive, as demonstrated in the stories of *A Purse of Coppers*. Dwelling too much in these histories—both personal and national—can create a haunting, stultifying effect, as characters are unable to fully reckon with their own memories or move forward. O'Faoláin's diagnosis of the 1930s in these collections is certainly a dire one—Irish

society seemed stuck in an uncomfortable, stubborn stasis, unwilling to move forward—but it is not entirely without hope. Instead, he offers memory as a site for answering essential questions about Irish history and identity and thus shaping the future directions of the new nation.

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