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Frank O'Connor's Lost Fatherlands: Displaced Identity

By MARILYN THRONE

1.

FRANK O'CONNOR'S short story, "Lost Fatherlands," is about a runaway monk, a publican named Tommy Hanagan, and the sympathy between them because of their shared experience of exile. Published in *A Set of Variations* in 1969 but actually begun in the early thirties (Matthews, 305), the story is told from the point of view of Spike Ward, a taxi driver who was given the task of transporting the unnamed monk from the "gaunt Victorian barracks" of a mountainy monastery. When three evenings later he learns that his fare has never boarded the train, Spike sets out to find him, taking along the fat policeman Linehan and Tommy Hanagan, who has returned home from Boston.

Spike's fare has been a monk for fifteen years, but he has developed "some nervous trouble. . . . A sort of mental blackout" (268) and is therefore being sent to Canada, "somewhere he wouldn't be known" (268), where his malady will cause no scandal. But instead of boarding his train, he has taken to the mountains where he haunts about, "staring at the monastery and the monks working in the fields" (267). Although the taxi is crowded with Spike and fat Linehan, it is the retransplanted publican, Tommy Hanagan, who approaches the sad, furtive runaway and brings him back. As the publican and the monk talk, Tommy admits that in all the eighteen years he was in America he never spent a day without thinking of home. He confesses, "there were nights I cried myself to sleep" (271). Tommy's spirit rouses when he talks about America, "the finest Goddamned country on the face of the earth," and he delights in enumerating Ireland's faults—especially the Irish lack of responsibility and the way the Irish men treat their wives—but he has been drawn back by his need for the place that gives him identity.

O'Connor says candidly that the monk's anguish was beyond Spike, as was the ambiguity of Tommy's praise for America and abiding need for Ireland:

Spike had never stood on the deck of a liner and watched his fatherland drop away behind him. He didn't know the sort of hurt it can leave in a boy's mind, a hurt that doesn't heal even when you try to conjure away the pain by returning. Nor did he realize, as Hanagan did at that moment, that there are other fatherlands, whose loss can hurt even more deeply. (271)

The "lost fatherland" embodies both the ghost-ridden past and the unattainable future; it is simultaneously memories of a childhood that cannot be eradicated,

the realization of the poverty of the present, and a despair about the future.

It is a theme Frank O'Connor returns to again and again in his short stories and in his second novel, *Dutch Interior*. It is an examination of orphaned hopes and dreams and of confrontations with misplaced potentialities; even success is different and less fulfilling than one expects. In each instance of the theme O'Connor reiterates that the only inheritance of those characters displaced either by physical migration or by their rejection of the values they encounter in post-revolution Ireland is this very displacement of identity.

2.

PERHAPS none of O'Connor's stories has received as much critical attention as the classic study of character displacement he called "Uprooted," the story of two brothers—Ned, who has become a schoolteacher in the city, and Tom, who has become a priest. They are the sons of a randy, comic peasant named Tomas Keating, whose triumph is the success of his two sons; with them he pays a visit to the O'Donnells' island, which becomes a lesson for Ned that indeed you can't go home again. As the brothers are feted by the various relatives and neighbors, they are touched by the simplicity of such people as their friend Sean's young wife, who gushes enthusiastically, her speech crowded with "ejaculations of tenderness, delight, astonishment, pity, and admiration," (90) while Sean's three small children play undisturbed on the cabin floor. At the cottage of their Uncle Maurice, while the family takes tea and the girls "hoosh" the intruding chickens outside, Tom's jokes are relayed to Maurice's old bedridden father by Niall, his favorite grandson. Ned notices something "timeless, patriarchal, and restful" (91) about the whole scene. And he notices a natural, unspoiled beauty about the girl Cait Deignan: "her complexion had a transparency as though her whole nature were shining through it" (93).

Certainly the greatest contrast in the story is between the sons and their father. Tomas Keating is described as "fresh-complexioned," and "stocky and broken-bottomed." He and his household—his wife and Little Brigid, a girl who helps out with chores—are intensely interested in the drama that goes on around them, little incidents like whether or not it is Thade Lahy's car going past and why a neighbor boy named Teig is sleeping at Ned Willie's and how Murphy the moonshiner got away from the police. Tomas likes the drama he himself can create; he is a consummate actor, he is an orator, he is the once landless man who had the "gumption" to win the daughter of the propertied O'Donnells. On the return from the island, happily drunk from O'Donnell hospitality, he asserts it was "the best day I ever had" and speaks of his triumph with the sort of hyperbole from which legends are spun: "I went to seven houses and in every house I had seven drinks and with every drink I got seven welcomes" (96).

But sadly, as Murray Prosky has said about the sons, "Both Ned and Tom suffer because by choice and chance they lead lives that contradict the laws of their own being" (318). Revealing his own abiding love for the girl, Tom urges Ned to marry Cait, but Ned cannot. He understands that he has cast his lot with

teaching, with the city he lives in, his bed-sitter, occasional movies, and vague intentions about marrying a nurse described as his "only" friend and as a "lighthearted, lightheaded girl" (83). It is clear that O'Connor attributes more than just simple values to the old and disappearing life of the peasant; that life had a power derived from belonging to the land and to a particular group of people, allowing the individual to draw identity from that environment, even as did the ancient Irish heroes.

And O'Connor draws on the Irish legends. Illuminating the theme of lost fatherlands in at least two short stories, "Darcy in the Land of Youth" and "The Late Henry Conran," is the ancient legend of Oisín, spelled out in the first of the stories. There, Mick Darcy, who has left Ireland to work in the English factories during World War II, carries from his native culture the singular legacy of the tale of Oisín, who fell in love with Niamh and followed her to the Land of Youth. When Oisín returned—to him just a few days later but in reality several centuries later—he found "his pals" gone and St. Patrick in charge; and, falling to the ground as he tried to help the now weakened Irish men move a boulder, he was transformed into an old man "with nothing better to do than get converted" and rue the passing of the days of his youth. Mick Darcy thinks Oisín "a bit of a mug" (262).

But Mick's experiences in England and on his return to Ireland parallel Oisín's. Mick has difficulty accepting the sexual freedom of the English; he is shocked to learn that his office mate, Mrs. Penrose, is sexually interested in him, and when a girl named Janet frets that they cannot have her flat to themselves because of her dateless roommate Fanny and that Fanny's problems all result from her still being a virgin "and that this was a complaint she did not suffer from herself" (267), Mick argues, as he has been taught, that if sex is "no more than a roll in the hay. . . there's nothing in it for anybody" (269).

But now Mick is dissatisfied with what he returns to in Ireland, including Ina, his steady; he hastens back to England with a friend named Chris in tow for the lovelorn Fanny. The foursome weekend at a country pub; Chris goes to his duties with Fanny "with a face like death on him," while Mick is awakened in the night by the sound of Janet's crying. It seems that she has taken to heart his earlier pronouncements about sex and wants to be a decent girl for him; she wants any future daughter of hers to be raised with the Irish values. There is nothing in it for Mick except to propose. Before he falls back to sleep, he feels "lonely. He would have liked to remain a man of the world for just a little longer, to have had just one more such awakening to assure him that he had got rid of his inhibitions" (282).

For Mick Darcy England is the Land of Youth, a fairy tale come true where sex is without inhibition or prohibition; whereas Ireland, the land of his actual youth, is under the auspices of St. Patrick, which enfeebles and ages men. He thinks: "You never knew what powerful morals the old legends had till they come home to you" (276). Unlike Oisín, Mick makes it back to his *Tír na nÓg*, only to discover that he hasn't really escaped: his Irish values have infected the English girl and trapped him into a marriage he doesn't really want. It is evident

that Mick Darcy can never become a “man of the world,” can never wholeheartedly embrace the culture he encounters in England; and at the same time, just because he has questioned the values of his home, those values no longer possess immediacy for him. He is ready to, but unable to, discard them. He winds up a man without a heritage.

The short story “The Late Henry Conran” is both more playful and more subtle in its use of the legend of Oisín. Told by one Larry Costello, the story is about Henry “Prosperity” Conran, “Six foot three he was, and he filled it all” (13), with porter, of course, to such an extent that his wife Nellie sends him to America to get work while she takes in laundry to raise their six children in one room. Costello skips blithely over that good woman’s twenty-five years of struggles and comes to the point where her older son Aloysius has taken the reins. This one cold-shoulders the older sisters who “were tied to two poor boozy sops that weren’t half nor quarter the cut of their father” (14), but he gets good jobs for the other two sisters and his brother, buys a motor car, and establishes the family in a house with an electric doorbell. The good fortunes of Aloysius are not, however, the product of his own hard work; Costello informs us that Aloysius was mixed up “in the troubles,” where he kept “his eye on the main chance” (14), avoided any of the fighting, and promoted himself through clerical and committee work.

So far has Aloysius slipped from any heroic values that he chooses a bride who actually wears pajamas, “new fangled sleeping things with trousers” (14), and, when he puts the wedding announcement in the paper, he mentions his mother, but not his father Henry, which infuriates Nellie. The new young wife proposes a solution, and the next announcement says “nothing about Nellie this time only plain ‘son of the late Henry Conran’” (15). And that brings Henry Conran home, first to the house of his friend Larry Costello and then, with Larry’s help, because he is monumentally drunk, to Nellie where he must be put to bed after roaring the rest of the house awake. This is not Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Wakefield, meekly reentering his house after a twenty-year absence because the wind got up his coat; this is an heroic homecoming, almost worthy of Odysseus.

Old Prosperity wants to fling a brick at the All-for-Ireland headquarters, he sings out for the Mollies, and he is consternated to learn that they are all gone.

“Merciful God! I must be an ould man then, huh?”

“’Tisn’t younger we’re getting,” says I.

“An ould man,” says he, puzzled-like. “Maybe I’m dead after all?” (16)

But he’s not dead, though he says it over and over. “‘I’m dead, dead, dead, dead,’ says he” (18), but while he says it, while Larry Costello and Nellie are undressing him to put him to bed, “he began to kick his feet up in the air, laughing like a kid” (18); he calls Nellie to his bed, insisting that she not let him sleep alone; and even while she chides him for saying such things with the children listening and even while she calls attention to “his ould gray pate,” “the eyes in her head were shining with pure relief” (19), and, we surmise, with something more.

The epic themes are clear enough; the bigger-than-life drunk goes away for

twenty-five years to a Land of Youth called America and comes home to scotch rumors that he is dead, expecting to find things as he left them. He hasn't changed, and so he calls for the old political groups, he calls for his wife Nellie, and he laughs and kicks his feet in the air like a boy. But, of course, the moment he touches Ireland he encounters the enfeebled world made by Aloysius, a man who has never put himself in peril and who is eager to live a respectable middle-class life, even if it means fattening on the labor of his younger siblings. Henry's old world is gone, and suddenly his hair is gray; he is not dead, but his mortality is poignantly clear.

The motifs of these three stories—the experience of the exile, the loss of identity caused by a shift of class within the Irish culture, the heroic and vain attempt to locate values within the culture that will obtain and give definition to the individual—all of these come together in O'Connor's second novel, *Dutch Interior*, where the “lost fatherland” is at once the tragedy of emigration and of unfulfilled dreams within the Irish society.

3.

DUTCH INTERIOR follows two sets of brothers, Peter and Gus Devane, the sons of a peasant charwoman, and Ned and Stevie Dalton, the sons of a petty middle-class man who proudly and tediously traces his name back to the “Dee Aaltons . . . an ancient family of title and property in the Isle of France” (50). Beginning with young Peter Devane, huddled in the lumber room of the house where his mother works and conscientiously memorizing the French phrase *le bateau part*, the novel is filled with intimations and actualities of departure, with trams, trains, and boats leaving the city and harbor of Cork.

Ned Dalton departs the scene early, dying with bloodstained bedclothes, one assumes the victim of a tubercular hemorrhage. He has been an heroic figure; with a sardonic sense of humor and a paternal affection for his little brother, he has protected Stevie from their father's arbitrary cruelty, like the time the father caught the boy with a drawing book and threatened to throw it into the fire.

Gus Devane also departs the scene early, but his going is not heroic. At age sixteen he is arrested in the company of prostitutes. Peter gives money to him to leave for America, an irony because Gus once told John Joe Lyons, the partner in his crime, that he wanted never to leave Cork. For Peter, Gus represents the wild geese, the Irish who have made their escape to other cultures, especially to the freethinking cultures of the Western world. Although he censors Gus's letters for their peasant mother who would not understand her son's living with a woman who escaped from the Russian Revolution, Peter enumerates to Stevie the things that Gus has become involved in: “Psycho-analysis, Walt Whitman, Buddhism, Mass Production” (165), and his own reading of Russian history indicates that Peter is trying to keep up with his brother's experiences. But Peter tells Stevie that Gus has forgotten “what life is like here” (165) in Ireland, which is “a puddle for tame geese like ourselves” (165).

It is Gus's return that brings the conflict to its crisis. He has been forever

marked by his sojourn in America. To Stevie Dalton, he appears “youthful for all the experience on his weather-beaten face; lean, clean-shaven, wiry, spruce; a face stripped for action with a pair of fine grey eyes, piercing and clear; emotional features and a firm chin” (173). He is ambitious, intending to invest his American savings in some Irish enterprise and to build a house on a high hill in Cork; intoxicated with the joy of his return, he invades a classroom at his former school and tells the amused brother to tell the boys to stay at home. He says “that all the happiness beyond the sea is bunk. There’s no such thing” (184). When he finds the manuscript music of the beginning of an opera, written years before by his brother Peter, he brings it along to an evening at the house of the curate, Father Lynnot. He even harbors intentions of running for Parliament.

But Gus’s ambitions are as doomed to failure as Oisín’s attempt to help the enfeebled Irish move a boulder. Unable to find a legitimate businessman to invest with him in a chain of hotels, he becomes a partner to Joseph Ivers, a former guerrilla hero who has turned his glory into buffoonery and chicanery. Peter understands that the partnership is a gamble and that Gus already knows the gamble has failed. Nor can Gus hope for political place in Ireland; not only is he still tainted by his boyhood “crime,” he is also politically objectionable because he has married the divorced Russian emigre. And instead of being grateful to Gus for finding his opera and bringing it to the attention of Father Lynnot and Stevie and others, Peter is wounded. He cries out to Stevie:

“Why didn’t he leave me alone? . . . I didn’t want to be reminded of my youth. All I want is to be left [to] forget. . . . You can’t turn back—at my age.” (266)

In anger Peter tells Gus that the money that got him away in the first instance came, not from their mother as he was told, but from Peter himself, that it was what he had saved to go to France to study music. With no hope, money, or pride remaining, Gus leaves Cork and Ireland again; this time for good.

During the book we watch Peter Devane turn from a sensitive, dreamy boy to a bitter man whom O’Connor increasingly likens to Mephistopheles. Like Goethe’s Mephisto, he is logical, intelligent, able to see the folly of mankind, and able to perceive his own damnation and lack of soul.

Stevie Dalton is a softer character. He has no thwarted musical talent and no peasant mother to encourage him; indeed, after the death of his brother Ned, Stevie Dalton does not even seem to have a sense of direction. He is content with his clerical job; he is content with his affair with Eileen Soames Donoghue, who has married for security and finds her husband repugnant. Stevie is content, that is, until Eileen tells him that she is pregnant with his child, but that she has gone back to Ed Donoghue’s bed rather than accept any of the possibilities Stevie can offer—especially rather than accept exile from Ireland, an English divorce, and a marriage the Church would not recognize.

Throughout his life Stevie has typically played the fool, hiding behind a mask in order to keep even his friends from seeing what haunts him. For what haunts him, what has haunted him all his life, is the ghost of his brother Ned who was fortunate enough to die young before life in Ireland could defeat him:

silently he would have pleaded with Ned not to judge him too harshly, for, struggle how we will, life batters us into its own crude shapes; . . . all wearing us down day by day while Ned lived on, released from the grip of circumstances, fixed in the eternal gesture of the rebel. (271)

Through his early death, Ned has escaped the mundane circumstances of Ireland, the loveless marriages, the purposeless jobs, the stifled talents, the petty concern with tradition and propriety and name. None of the other three has escaped. Like Oisín, like Mick Darcy, Tommy Hanagan, or the monk being sent to Canada, Gus is a man without a country—unable to give up his Irish roots, and spoiled by his encounter with the freer, younger American culture so that he can never again fit into the world of his boyhood though, like Henry Conran, he is dead to that world. Peter Devane, like Ned and Tom Keating, has left behind the peasant culture that might have tied him to the land and given meaning to his life. He tells Stevie: “In my part of the country girls were married off to men they never met till they met them at the altar. And they were the happiest marriages, because people’s imaginations were healthy” (272).

Stevie’s fate is more insidious because he has found within his culture and within his class nothing at all to believe in and nothing at all to hope for. It is Stevie who articulates for us the horror of the lost fatherland:

The past that will not be quiet; the dead who will not rest; images of desire and loss that rise for ever on our paths; lost fatherlands. He could understand why Devane sought refuge in history books. The dead there are quiet enough; they do not clutch at the heart. (266)

When Ed Donoghue comes to the Dalton house to announce the birth of his son—Stevie’s son—Stevie must watch him walk away “with a heart full of laughter” (276). Stevie, with a “heart full of tears,” can only return to the room where the Mephistophelean Peter awaits him, tormented by the thought of Gus’s final exile, even as Stevie is tormented by the ghost of Ned.

In all these works, Frank O’Connor’s message is clear. His characters are caught in a gray, unstructured, ill-defined world where there is neither continuity with the past nor hopeful ideations of the future. In post-revolutionary Ireland, O’Connor’s characters can find no time-honored system of values to give purpose to their lives. Those who emigrate, from despair or necessity, cannot make their own the vibrant values they encounter because they are unable to eradicate from their minds and their hearts the Irish cities and countryside of their childhoods, but once they have encountered those other cultures and those other values, they can never go home again.

4.

NOWHERE is this sad message more compellingly presented than in the short story “Ghosts,” where Ireland and her tormented, bitter culture is able to reach across three generations to an American grandson to blight the least hope of return of a poverty-exiled grandfather.

The story is told in the first person by a shopkeeper named Clancy, a man wise to the ways of the country people and alert to the history of his part of the world; his wife, Nan, on the other hand, is a kind, naive woman whose desire to make

things nice can be dangerous. They typically employ one of the Oorawn Sullivans to work about the house. Clancy explains that although Oorawn is Irish for spring, it is really poteen that flows from the Sullivan place. But the story isn't about poteen; it is about a Sullivan, cousin to the Oorawn Sullivans, who comes from America with his wife and mostly-grown son and daughter to see the place where his grandfather's cottage stood, the place from which the grandfather was evicted by a flint-hearted landlord.

Clancy and his motorcar are volunteered by Nan to meet the Yankee Sullivan at the station and take him to Oorawn; in the process she discovers that Jer Sullivan is "Sullivan Shoes," an American success story. The contrast of the nice, polite American family, including "Bob, the young fellow. . . writing a book on something" and the girl, Rose, "a real beauty" (696), with the primitive Oorawn Sullivans is fraught with tension from the moment the visitors in their car see "Bridgie, rising up like an apparition from behind a bush with her skirts held up behind" (697) to Nan's trying to avoid subjecting the Yankee Sullivans to tea in their relatives' cottage. But Clancy is equal to the challenge; he flirts and jests with Mary Sullivan and insists on having her tea and griddlecake, for "if the Sullivans' cousins had left that cabin without a meal, the disgrace of it would have driven Mary to her grave" (697), and he understands when Jer Sullivan stays behind a while in the ruin of his grandfather's cottage that "he was hoping for ghosts; ghosts of his grandfather's people that might be hanging round the old cabin so that they could see him there and know he had brought no disgrace on the name" (699).

Unfortunately, even Jer Sullivan is not allowed to come home again to set his grandfather's ghost to rest. Woven into the comedy of the story is a tone of inevitability: the catastrophe will happen and even Clancy will not be able to prevent it. He can only witness it. For there is too great a gap between Jer Sullivan and the ghost of the young grandfather who rode out of the valley sitting on a tin trunk at the back of the open cart, the grandfather who in another place, in another kind of life, "used to say that the first Sullivan to come back should lay a wreath on the grave of the landlord" (699) that evicted him. Nan Clancy, eager to make up to the wealthy Americans for the backwardness of the Oorawn Sullivans, makes her husband stop at the house of the local gentry, Major and Mrs. Hopkins and their daughter Bella, where they have a late supper.

Nan's instinct is right; the Yankee Sullivans feel at home with the Hopkinses. "The Americans were delighted with the big staircase and the plaster panel in the first landing with a big picture in the middle of it" (700), Mrs. Hopkins talks about "her club for peasant reform," and plans are made to take the daughter out when the family returns through London. But Clancy knows something Nan does not. As they roar back to town, "with the rocks rising up at me like theatre scenery, thinking of the couple that travelled the same road on their tin trunk so long ago" (701), Clancy tells the Yankee Sullivans that the Hopkinses were the evicting landlords, "and cruel bad landlords, too" (701).

The others are amused, but not Jer Sullivan. They could go looking for ghosts, but he had ghosts there inside himself and I knew in my heart that till the day he died he would never get over the feeling that

his money had put him astray and he had turned his back on them. (702)

The yearning of the immigrant for home, passed on from father to son to grandson, crashes against the rocks of that Irish night; it is circumstances that betray Jer Sullivan. The success of his family in the fluid American culture confronts the stagnation of the family and the culture that stayed behind. His desire to commune with his family ghosts confronts the reality that he and his family have more in common with the evil landlords than with Bridgie behind the bush or Mary making her griddlecake.

Over and over again in the works we have examined, Frank O'Connor probes the wound of the lost fatherland. Interestingly and despite all the traditional images of Ireland as female—a mother, a queen, the old woman of the roads—O'Connor uses the term fatherland, for it is male protagonists, sons, on whom he concentrates. It is the heritage from father to son that is sought in these stories and not found.

The men who leave Ireland, whether by choice or by chance, cannot come home again. They have forgotten how things are: Gus Devane expects to be treated as a propertied, hardworking man, but in Ireland he is still the boy picked up in the company of prostitutes. Or they return to a world they no longer fit into: Mick Darcy is neither the liberated Englishman nor the conservative Irishman; Prosperity Conran will look in vain for his old friends; Jer Sullivan is forever alien to the sort of life his grandfather lived. But those who have remained at home are no better off. Like Ned and Tom Keating, like Peter Devane and Stevie Dalton, they see themselves grown apart from the life that bred them, but without having reached to the more meaningful life they seek. Neither group—the emigrants or the stay-at-homes—has a clear identity. The land, the customs, the people that might give them identity are no more than ghosts—ghosts of the heroic past, ghosts of a life close to the land and to hearty, unthinking appetite, and ghosts of an unreachable future.

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