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Irish Identity and the Myth of Filiation in Desmond MacNamara's The Book of Intrusions

By JEFFREY ROESSNER

[...] to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. To leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences like *negritude*, Irishness, Islam, or Catholicism is to abandon history for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

IN A DISCUSSION OF W. B. Yeats's poetry, Edward Said raises the complex and disturbing issue of nativism as a response to colonial rule. Celebrating indigenous, precolonial culture and an idealized vision of national identity, nativism seems to arise almost inevitably as an initial step in the process of decolonialization. As one example, Said suggests that such an investment in Irishness might help us interpret disturbing elements in Yeats's later verse, particularly his "outright fascism, his fantasy of old home and families, his incoherently occult divigations" (228). So while this drive to recuperate local identity is an almost predictable corollary of the attempt to throw off the shackles of empire, it raises unsettling, often violently divisive political issues. By constructing a sense of national identity as a reaction to colonial rule, the discourse of nativism risks simply inverting the logic of imperialism and thus reaffirming troubling racial and political divisions. And as Said warns, such essentializations have consistently revealed their "power to turn human beings against each other" (228).

It should be no surprise that the nativism Said identifies in Yeats's work remains a temptation for contemporary Irish writers. In fact, the issue of Irish national identity continues to be linked to a mythology of Irishness, a celebration of Gaelic origins consistently revitalized as attempts to move forward in the process of decolonialization fail. As long as Irish history is narrativized as a perpetual struggle against the colonizer, Irish identity will be constructed largely as a reaction to British identity. And as long as Northern Ireland remains a last fragment of empire, the vision of a precolonial nation and the idealization of indigenous culture will hold a strong appeal.

Describing trends in contemporary Irish culture, Patrick O'Mahoney and Gerard Delanty have identified two distinct responses to this idealization of history. The first is what they call a "new cultural nationalism" that celebrates contemporary cultural productions in an attempt to "overcome the plural identities bestowed by history" (8). Such a nationalism relies on a faith that

social and religious strife, with origins in the colonial past, can best be healed by focusing on the shared culture of the present. In contrast, the second emerging trend in Irish history comes in the form of "historical revisionism," which takes aim at the heroic myths of Ireland and is based on the recognition that the nation "internally, must accept cultural heterogeneity and, externally, must understand itself as placed in a larger context" (11). Ultimately, though, neither cultural nationalism nor historical revisionism adequately addresses the appeal of Irish nativist discourse, especially one grounded in a "conservative nationalism that believed itself to have ultimately succeeded only through violence" (13). Indeed, any successful challenge to Irish nativism must also challenge the nationalist fervor of those who envision Irish history as a violent, heroic campaign to safeguard Gaelic culture.

It is in this context that we can see Desmond MacNamara's novel *The Book of Intrusions* (1994) as an important critique of conservative Irish nationalism. Although it never explicitly addresses the political division of the island, the novel does, in Said's terms, attempt a return from the metaphysics of essences to the world of history. Adopting tactics associated with historical revisionism, MacNamara stresses the ethnic diversity of Ireland's past and lampoons the quest to locate the pure Gaelic origins of Irish culture. Ultimately, he takes this challenge a step further as he satirizes the violent attempts to impose a common culture on people of different races or religions. Moreover, the history told here works to subvert essentialized notions of individual as well as national identity. The narrative culls its characters from a complex intertextual web of references and thus never grants them a stable or unconflicted sense of self. It's in this way—by undercutting idealized visions of cultural homogeneity and unified subjectivity—that *The Book of Intrusions* imagines an Irish identity grounded in a shared but heterogeneous past rather than in a nativist mythology of Irishness.

* * *

THE BOOK OF INTRUSIONS is the first novel by Irish sculptor Desmond MacNamara, whose previous publications include a guide to the use of papier-mâché in sculpture, a book on puppetry, and a biography of Eamon De Valera. Although widely regarded for his extensive work designing theatrical sets and as an artist, MacNamara perhaps remains most well known for the salon he kept in his Dublin studio in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Along with providing a space for the practice of his art, this studio and the pub next door to it on Grafton Street became a meeting place for a diverse group of writers, artists, and intellectuals that included Brendan Behan, J. P. Donleavy, Patrick Kavanaugh—even physicist Erwin Schrodinger.¹ The eclectic range of these Dublin acquaintances attests to MacNamara's gener-

1. For a more detailed treatment of this period in MacNamara's life, see his interview in the *Journal of Irish Literature*.

ous, sociable nature and indicates the stunning variety of his intellectual interests. Both traits are amply reflected in *The Book of Intrusions*, especially in the encyclopedic range of literary, artistic, historical, and mythological references that pervade the novel.

Although one early reviewer of *The Book of Intrusions* compared it unfavorably with Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953), the dense layer of allusions, jokes, and arcane references in MacNamara's novel clearly distinguishes it from the attenuated universe Beckett imagines.² A more appropriate comparison is with the work of mid-century newspaperman-cum-novelist Flann O'Brien. His comic masterpieces *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) and *The Third Policeman* (1967) are prime examples of metafiction, offering multiple narratives-within-narratives replete with a dizzying array of allusions to Irish mythology, history, and popular culture. In *The Book of Intrusions*, MacNamara adopts a similar style for his own wry commentary on Irish national identity at the end of the century. Specifically, the novel consists of a series of episodes in the metafictional lives of characters drawn from a diverse group of unpublished novels, short stories, and epic poems. The main characters are Mountmellick and his manservant, MacGilla, taken from a work by Charles Lever, and Loreto, the daughter of a couple depicted in a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. These characters are refugees from literary Limbo, the dwelling place of souls who never ascended to Parnassus with those whose lives are recorded in published works. To become corporeal, they invade the brain of a hapless scribe and force him to record their exploits. While attempting to avoid publication, which would release them from mortal existence, they form a publishing company to help discover manuscripts and send other lost literary souls from Limbo to Parnassus. Ultimately, the characters kidnap the author in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent publication of their story and forestall their ascent to the literary afterworld.

MacNamara introduces the issue of national identity early in the novel, when Mountmellick—newly arrived from Limbo—takes a job in the film industry writing a script called *The Walls of Mankind*. Obsessed with them because of his incarceration in Limbo, he studies various walls in disparate civilizations only to conclude that

certain cultures carry the logic of privacy and protection beyond the limits of military and social strategy. On another Irish island cyclopean walls built by forgotten hands guarded a few acres of thin grass against marauders whose nearest parish would be Boston, Mass. (8)

Built not simply to defend valuable land, these walls represent the enclosure of a culture: Mountmellick suggests as much when he speculates that "this vast fortress was probably the shrine of a dark Formorian god" (8). This fortress stands as a symbol of devotion and as a sign of difference that represents an ancient attempt to maintain the unsullied common identity of a people.

2. See the unsigned review of MacNamara's novel in *Publisher's Weekly*.

This desire to define one's identity against an "other" reflects a long-standing drive to preserve the ethnic purity of the Irish nation. Mountmellick locates early attempts to maintain this purity in the Norman founders of Galway, whom he charges with promulgating "Europe's first apartheid laws: the Statute of Kilkenny, in 1363. All intercourse with the natives, marital, musical, poetically and generally cultural, was forbidden" (12). Later in the novel, this fear of cultural miscegenation is updated in a reference to the present division of Ireland: after a cast of patriots from Richard Murphy's poem *The Battle of Aughran* invades a saloon, the local police sergeant exclaims, "Black Tories or Green Tories [...] we should have a double partition in this country, with barbed wire and landmines to stop them contaminating the decent citizens of the Republic" (123). For the sergeant, the answer to the conflict is to construct a newer and more lethal wall, and his reference to barbed wire and landmines calls to mind the violent history of a religiously and politically divided nation racked with terrorism. The novel presents the sergeant's suggestion as but the latest example of the attempt to shape a national identity uncontaminated by religious or ethnic difference.

As if in reply to the sergeant's desire for a better wall, *The Book of Intrusions* repeatedly suggests the absurdity of past attempts to maintain rigid barriers between people of disparate races and religions. MacNamara expresses his distrust of the longing for an unmixed national lineage as Mountmellick discusses the arbitrary and ephemeral nature of the ancient walls. At one point, he travels to Mayo to examine some newly discovered remains. He accounts for the walls briefly by saying that "the neolithic people who built them for farming cut down the trees, overgrazed the lands and then abandoned them. The bog mosses crept up and smothered them" (15). Constructed, abandoned, and ultimately reclaimed by nature, these walls reflect a human attempt to impose order on a recalcitrant landscape: the effort to ensure social and cultural homogeneity has been all but erased by natural forces. And as for the first apartheid law, proposed by the Norman founders of Galway, Mountmellick dismisses it succinctly: "It didn't work, of course. Never does" (12). In fact, the failure of such apartheid laws becomes a theme of the novel as it dramatizes the various invasions and cultural clashes that comprise Ireland's history.

The novel's emphasis on the heterogeneity of Irish culture is established in its very title, which MacNamara claims inspired the work (211). *The Book of Intrusions* is a pun on the common title of the *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, which is frequently rendered the "Book of the Taking of Ireland," or more simply "The Book of Invasions" (Carey 1). Assembled by an unknown scholar in the eleventh century, the *Lebor Gabala* collects a series of poems from a variety of writers and fits them into a "prose framework" that creates "a sweeping, unified account of the origins of the Gaels, extending from the creation of the world down to the time of writing" (Carey 1). Mythologizing the foundations of Irish culture, the *Lebor Gabala*, particularly in its prose framework, creates a unified narrative out of its disparate sources and links the history of

early Irish settlements with the history of the Gaels—stories that had traditionally been distinct (Carey 5-6). By titling his novel after this mythical tale of Irish origins, MacNamara reveals his impious attitude toward a work that literally imposes textual order on the multifarious, disconnected strands of Irish history.

To ensure that his send-up of the Gaelic descent recorded in the *Lebor Gabala* hits its mark, MacNamara emphasizes the importance of lineage for an Irish person's identity: put simply, lineage is identity for the Irish. At one point, Mountmellick explains this to Loreto, the Irish-American imported from a story by Fitzgerald:

I know where I came from and I know where he came from and when I met you I knew where you came from. That's how Irish people, Jews, Assyrians, and other national fragments uneasily classify each other as they meet in odd corners of the world. It is not a sympathy or even a fellow feeling, just a national compulsion to recognize by smell and then to categorize. (17)

This urge to “classify” and “categorize” betrays a penchant for building walls and exposes the impulse to untangle the confused threads of Irish national beginnings that gave birth to the *Lebor Gabala*. In the suggestion that identity can be recognized by smell, the novel simultaneously acknowledges the desire to locate a shared identity and comically deflates the belief in a common Irish culture and ethnicity. Ultimately, this challenge to the grand story of Irish cultural origins is accomplished through the novel's genealogical method, an approach to history theorized by Michel Foucault.

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault outlines a method of genealogy that he proposes to counter the traditional historical quest for origins. Drawing on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly *The Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault describes the search for origins as an “attempt to capture the exact essence of things [...] and their carefully protected identities,” for the search “assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession” (142). Opposing this desire to locate a metaphysical foundation, the genealogist reveals the historical circumstances surrounding what Foucault calls the “beginnings” rather than the “origin” of a people or culture. Genealogy thus discloses the accident, disparity, and disjunction that belief in a metaphysical origin conceals; moreover, Foucault's genealogist stresses the resolutely temporal aspect of history—those factors that signal the past's difference from rather than continuity with the present.

Critiquing the view that history reflects a coherent, linear progression from the past to the present, Foucault develops a notion of genealogy as a record of descent. He explains that traditionally the concept of descent has signified “an ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by the bonds of blood, tradition, or social class” (145). In other words, the focus has typically been on establishing a shared sense of identity by tracing a continuous line of development and positing a common inheritance. In contrast, Foucault invites the reader to reflect on the connotation of descent as a downward turn or dispersion. This is not to imply that he sees history as a record of decline; in

fact, he criticizes any effort to locate an uninterrupted pattern or sequence of development in history, whether it be a pattern of progress or decline. He claims that rather than strengthening the foundations of a group's identity, the study of descent "fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (147). This reconception of descent as the fragmentation and dispersal of unified identity is a crucial aspect of Foucault's critique of origins, and it helps illuminate MacNamara's parodic take on the Gaelic ancestry of Ireland.

Revealing the cracks, fissures, and discontinuities of Irish history—the very seams that the *Lebor Gabala* tries to conceal—*The Book of Intrusions* presents a comic venture into genealogy in the story of the poets Liadin and Curither. In deciding what literary characters could help locate unpublished manuscripts, Mountmellick recounts the story of the two famed poets, as related in a missing work by George Moore. In this version, Liadin and Curither fall in love and dream of having a child who could reconcile the warring factions of Ireland: "a child of our two spirits might be foremost of all filihides: Master Poet to Gael and Gall, Norseman and Saxon, Frankish and Romish" (50). With this vision of cultural unity guiding him, Curither sets out to learn the verse forms of the disparate tribes of Ireland. This pursuit clearly links him to the unknown author of the *Lebor Gabala*, also driven by the desire to connect the cultures of the land. As MacNamara relates it, however, Curither's travels to gain this poetic understanding thwart his hopes of reconciling the warring factions, for they expose him to the seemingly irreconcilable social and religious customs practiced by the early settlers of Ireland.

The most vivid evidence of cultural heterogeneity is presented through the diverse tribal languages Curither encounters. As he relates the story of the poets, Mountmellick claims that although Gaelic was "almost universally understood," the country contained at least three tribes with distinct languages: the Leginian (or Norsemen) in Connaught, the Bolgic in parts of the north, and the Crinoch (or Picts) north of Antrim, the "oldest inhabitants, still holding out against the rest of them" (47). Liadin and Curither eventually encounter all three tribes, each with its own language, poetry, and religion. As they explore the sagas and magic spells of the Leginians (63-65) or participate in the violent mating ritual of the Crinoch (89-95), the poets have vivid experiences of what Foucault describes as the external world of accident and succession. Far from locating the common Gaelic roots of the Irish, Liadin and Curither canvass an island that MacNamara suggests was from its beginnings inhabited by distinct tribes with unique languages and rituals.

Through the story of Liadin and Curither, MacNamara also lampoons the Gaels for the petty violence they display in their attempts to impose a common culture on the various tribes. Mountmellick insists that the Gaelic ancestors linguistically triumphed through spreading "their tongue and their way of life by various wars and cattle raids" (69). MacNamara here satirizes the triumph of the Gaels by depicting its foundation in bloodshed to acquire livestock. In these references to the brutality and randomness of the Gaelic

ascendancy, *The Book of Intrusions* reflects Foucault's concept of genealogy as a record of descent: the novel fragments the imagined unity of the Gael's lineage by emphasizing their savage struggle to propagate their language by imposing it on other tribes. The novel finally suggests, however, that successful cattle raids alone would not ensure their cultural dominance.

Although they subdued neighboring tribes with force and thus spread their language, the Gaels needed a story of origins that would bolster their claim to authority: as Mountmellick explains, "the Gaelic cattle-rustling aristocracy were in bad need of a history to justify themselves as soon as they began to learn civilized ways" (69). In other words, these cattle thieves had no historical record they could use to support their cultural authority. In order to produce such a history, the Gaels had to invent a narrative of origins, one that would both absorb and neutralize the stories of their enemies and ultimately serve to underpin a mythic vision of Ireland's Gaelic heritage. Far from being a heroic people whose vision and determination led to conquest, the Gaels as the novel portrays them were petty thieves who appropriated the customs of other cultures and rewrote history to legitimize their claims to power.

In particular, MacNamara's novel exposes the integral role of the Celtic Church in contriving the pseudohistory that legitimized Gaelic rule. The Church helped assure the success of the Gaels by employing monks to compose a coherent history of the state: during his travels, Curither gains some insight into this process as he sees "the beginnings of the *Lebor Gabala*, the Book of Invasions, which set out to construct a spurious Gaelic history starting with the flood [...]" (69). The novel here challenges the authority of the *Lebor Gabala*, a book that MacNamara claims is still known to every Irish schoolchild (212). The novel suggests that the Gaels, with the aid of the Church, appropriated the religious icons of tribes they colonized and cobbled them together into a linear story: the *Lebor Gabala* thus transformed "every decent Belgic and Amorican tribal deity and executive god into an Irish king" and changed Leginian tribal ancestors into "Gaelic-speaking kings in an improbable and ridiculous line of succession" (69). According to Mountmellick, by subsuming these distinct tribal legacies into a myth of national origins, the Church here helped secure the Gaelic conquest through a "monkish bowdlerization" of Ireland's historical beginnings.

Exposing the Church's part in rewriting history, *The Book of Intrusions* suggests that genealogy does not represent an exact science concerned with objective facts. Instead, devising a genealogy is a tactical maneuver employed to negotiate a terrain marked by bloody tribal rivalries. Although the Celtic Church revised tribal history, Curither himself was not above modifying genealogies to suit his needs. For example, he offers a "diplomatic genealogy" to the Crinoch in which he underscores his allegiance to foes of the Gaels, and in giving Liadin's background he stresses "certain ancestors more than others" (79). Later when the Crinoch ask him to convince another tribe to side with them in a coming conflict, Curither believes that he could "act as ambassador and compose flattering genealogies in the Christian man-

ner" (99). The record of descent here proves malleable as it is interpreted to suit the context of enunciation: not an immutable chronicle of lineage, the characters' heritage can be modified by emphasizing certain ancestors. Reflecting Foucault's claim that knowledge is not made for understanding but for cutting, the genealogies constructed by Curither—and by the *Lebor Gabala* itself—do not represent a value-neutral record of facts (154). In depicting Curither's failed attempts to save Irish genealogy from monkish bowdlerization, the novel foregrounds the powerful interests—or in Foucault's terms, the play of dominations—that helped mythologize a pure and unbroken lineage for the Irish. *The Book of Intrusions* thus disrupts the pretended continuity of the *Lebor Gabala*'s narrative of origins and restores the very gaps and fissures that the prose legend sought to elide.

Along with its critique of the myth of national origins, the novel goes on to challenge the foundations of a coherent self-identity as well. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault suggests that an important second use of the historical sense is to upset traditional concepts of a stable, unified self. Specifically, he defines effective history as a challenge to a pretended continuity or stability: he claims that history exists not to help "discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation" (162). Calling this project the "systematic dissociation of identity," Foucault argues that the quest for an origin not only imposes a false sense of linearity and succession on a complex series of events, but also gives coherence to a self that is conflicted and in flux. The work of the genealogist unmask this conflicted self—or rather, exhibits identity as a series of masks adopted to fit particular social contexts; the dissipation of a coherent or unified self thus helps "make visible all the discontinuities that cross us" (162).

In *The Book of Intrusions*, the discontinuities that cross the characters are textual. Based on appropriations from earlier works, the characters from the outset exist in a complex relationship with literary history and are never simply depicted as individuals capable of freely deciding their own fate. Instead, MacNamara's novel presents characters who are already written and who are to some extent constrained by the discourse from which they have been adopted. The novel here directly links the position of agency imagined for characters to one particular strain of intertextuality identified by Jonathan Culler in his work *The Pursuit of Signs*. Culler distinguishes the work of French theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes from adaptations of this theory by American critics such as Harold Bloom. According to Culler, Barthes proposes an "infinite intertextuality where convention and suppositions cannot be traced to sources" (102). In marked contrast, Bloom recasts intertextuality "from an endless series of anonymous codes and citations to an oedipal confrontation" that marks a "heroic struggle between a sublime poet and his dominant predecessor" (111, 108). Bloom's emphasis on individual struggle with the influence of a precursor aptly describes works that uphold a filial myth—one that often reflects the drive to conserve a particular tradition or canon of texts. MacNamara's novel, however, reflects a concept of intertextuality more closely allied with the work of Roland Barthes.

In his essay "From Work to Text," Barthes carefully distinguishes a text from a "computable object" or a thing found in "bookstores, in card catalogues, on examination syllabuses" (57). Insisting that it is not an object but an activity, he defines the text as a true representative of intertextuality, for it is "entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes: cultural languages [...] antecedent or contemporary, which traverse it through and through, in a vast stereophony" (60). The references that compromise such a stereophony reflect an intricate web of linguistic threads that cannot be reduced to a single origin or source: the references are "anonymous, irrecoverable, and *already read*" (60). Stressing the anonymity of these intertextual threads, Barthes claims that the quest to identify quotations is a hallmark not of the text, but of the work, and that such a quest upholds a "myth of filiation" (60). Calling a work that supports filiation a "source study," Brenda Marshall explains that it "provides a place of homage to representations of the father—be it author or previous work. In short the work and its filial position belong to a logic of origins [...]" (128). In contrast to the text, the source study advances a concept of reading as a search to identify allusions. Marshall offers Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* as an exemplary instance of such a study. Focusing on how the poet engages in an Oedipal struggle with his predecessors, Bloom presents literary history as a succession of powerful fathers and resistant sons and so treats all works as source studies that support the myth of filiation.

In contemporary fiction, Peter Ackroyd's *English Music* (1992) provides a prime example of a work that reinforces this process of filiation. In mystifying English national identity, Ackroyd locates the spiritual essence of Albion in classic works by Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Charles Dickens, and others. By constructing his novel as a series of appropriations from these writers, Ackroyd attempts to reconstitute a grand literary tradition, or in Marshall's psychoanalytic terms, to pay homage to the English fathers. Supporting the myth of filiation, the novel functions as a source study in that it will be best read by those who "get" the references: Ackroyd makes this clear in the epigraph by remarking that the "scholarly reader" will identify the appropriations while the "alert reader" will understand why he has used them. Ultimately, Ackroyd goes so far as to mystify the filiative process—in his novel, the characters cannot escape their inheritance of this spiritual English tradition. Far from invoking the complex sense of intertextuality as Barthes defines it, Ackroyd's work functions as a tribute to the English fathers and attempts to promote an essentialized vision of national identity.

In sharp contrast to the source study model epitomized by Ackroyd's novel, *The Book of Intrusions* reflects Barthes's notion of intertextuality and satirizes the very process of filiation that Ackroyd treats with such solemnity. Not simply refusing to draw on a canon of established national "classics" for his appropriations, MacNamara ridicules this tactic by taking his characters from the fictitious unpublished works of famous authors. While Ackroyd demands an "alert reader" to catch his allusions, *The Book of Intrusions* presents quotations without quotation marks: they are not identifiable because

the sources are fabrications—they literally do not exist. In this way, the novel reflects Barthes's assertion that "The restoration of the intertext paradoxically abolishes inheritance" (61) because to successfully read MacNamara's text does not require specific knowledge of the works of the father. Instead, the novel itself, through its references, supplies the intertextual competence and the sense of literary history necessary to successfully read the narrative. While the reader literally cannot identify the nonexistent sources of characters such as Loreto and Eevel, he or she can infer from the text that F. Scott Fitzgerald and Brendan Behan are famous authors. Refusing to require the reader to spot any specific allusion, the novel presents appropriations whose sources need not be identified and thus emphasizes its distance from the works of the father. The anonymous references at once abolish inheritance and point to the larger web of textuality, or the "already read," that both allowed the text to be written and makes it readable.

For Barthes, intertextuality also necessarily involves a shift away from the concept of an author as "the father and owner of his work" (61). This shift represents the dissipation of the concept of an author as one who controls or directs the text's meanings. In terms of filiation, this critique of the author's position of control assures that the text exhibits a true plurality since it can be read "without its father's guarantee" (61). Moreover, Barthes suggests that a text will explicitly acknowledge this critique of intentions: he claims that if the author does revisit the text, "he inscribes himself there as one of his characters," and "his inscription is no longer privileged" (61). Just as intertextual references do not point to a stable source, neither does the idea of an author provide an extratextual foundation of meaning. Becoming a reference in the intertextual play of his or her text, the author no longer occupies a position of mastery over it—"the *I* that writes the text is never anything but a paper *I*" (62).

Offering a similar critique of the "I" that writes the text, *The Book of Intrusions* inscribes its author as a character in his own fiction. Having had his brain invaded by characters who force him to record their tale, the author is referred to as a "host" or "scribe" throughout and from the beginning senses his loss of control. At one point, Mountmellick lectures Loreto about freedom: "'That fellow up there'—and he indicated the sky above him—'he has absolutely no power to shape your actions'" (24). The characters believe that they have subverted the host's power so that he no longer directs them but is forced simply to record what they do. Along with this loss of control over the characters' actions, the scribe ultimately cannot maintain his aloof position. Late in the novel, when the author sees the other characters in a bar, he realizes that he and they inhabit the same world: "it was something of a shock to discover that they were now neighbors, breathing the same air and sharing part of his environment" (138). The author here does not retain the position of outsider, as does John Fowles, for example, when he enters *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) as an observer of the action. As a character, Fowles remains aloof and still in some sense exerts control over the nar-

native: for example, he sets the second ending in motion by turning his watch back, thus turning back the time of the story. In contrast, the author of *The Book of Intrusions* does not simply enter the novel to acknowledge his perspective or undercut any pretense to objectivity. Rather, he fully participates in the novel's action: he becomes a thoroughly "paper I" as the novel undercuts the ontological distinction between the reality he inhabits and the fictional world of the characters.

As he is absorbed into the text, the author not only loses control of the characters, he also forfeits his position as a unified subject. The novel splinters the author's self in one sense through the parallel it draws between the myth of an uncontaminated national identity and the coherent subject. MacNamara mocks the story of origins that the *Lebor Gabala* or "Book of Invasions" attempts to impose on the diverse tribal ancestry of Ireland. Through the pun in the title, the "Book of Invasions" becomes the "Book of Intrusions," and MacNamara thus compares the tribal invasions of ancient Ireland to the characters' intrusions into the brain of the author. Just as the novel sends up the notion of a shared cultural origin, so it satirizes the concept of self-identity uncrossed by conflicting impulses. Specifically, the author surrenders his unified subjectivity as he enters the textual world of the novel: realizing that he does not completely control them, the characters tell him, "you never invented anything [...] you are only a vehicle for our energy" (173). The characters' energy represents the vital force of the intertext out of which MacNamara constructs the novel; their intertextual intrusions fracture the author's subjectivity. That the scribe himself is absorbed into the intertext is clear at the conclusion of the novel. After the characters ambush him and hold him hostage in their house to prevent publication of their tale, he attempts to escape by sending out the manuscript in milk bottles. The freedom he hopes to achieve, however, is ironic given the premise of the novel: once the manuscript has been published, the author will presumably ascend to literary Parnassus with the other characters. Consequently, the author's scheme to escape actually ensures that his life will be forever and inescapably textually bound with that of his characters.

The characters and the author also intrude upon the consciousness of readers, and the novel thus invites them to recognize their implication in the intertext as well. As Barthes notes, the text "solicits from the reader practical collaboration" (63). Not simply offering an interpretation, the reader participates in constructing the text's meaning and in this way collaborates on or coauthors it. While underscoring the author's lack of control of the meaning of the text, Barthes does not simply endorse the opposite extreme by positioning the reader as a unified subject who has complete control over the production of meaning. Instead, the text undercuts the distinction between the subject and object, the reader and the work, as it abolishes "the distance between writing and reading [...] by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice" (62). Barthes here hints that the spaces of the page widen to include not only the author but also the reader: the writer and reader

meet in a signifying practice—in other words, they meld when we recognize their coexistence in the web of textuality. So while the intertextual references in MacNamara's novel do not demand that readers identify their sources, these references encourage readers to acknowledge the intertextuality that allows for the existence of both the text and themselves as readers. Ultimately, then, just as the author's subjectivity is crossed by his characters, so we as readers are asked to consider, in Foucault's terms, the intertextual discontinuities that cross us.

Through its genealogical method and intertextual references, *The Book of Intrusions* launches a sustained attack on the quest for origins, whether it be to uphold an ethically pure national identity or a singular, coherent subjectivity. MacNamara's novel refuses to sanction a nativist attempt to conserve a sacred canon of national literature or the spirit of the culture that such a tradition supports. Instead, it focuses on the invasions and intrusions that doom all attempts to impose laws of apartheid and ensure cultural homogeneity. For MacNamara, the walls of barbed wire are a method of exclusion—a desperate attempt to safeguard a shared identity. By presenting Irish history as a record of accident and succession, MacNamara suggests that such walls inevitably prove temporary: no identity stands as absolute or permanent. Furthermore, the novel intimates that readers themselves, like Barthes's texts, are always already read, always already inscribed into the intertext. Encouraging them to become aware of this inscription will not allow them to step outside the web of textuality. But the novel does challenge the desire to locate an essential national or self-identity and so takes a stand against those who, like MacNamara's police sergeant, would partition Ireland with a barbed wire fence.

Throughout, *The Book of Intrusions* exposes the ideal of national unity as an often deadly fiction resting on a belief in a shared ethnic or racial heritage. The novel undercuts such assumptions primarily through the vision of intertextuality it develops. Refusing to base his novel on identifiable appropriations from a restricted canon of Irish literature, MacNamara critiques parochial visions of a national tradition. Stressing the idea that a nation always has a history that can be contested, MacNamara's novel employs an intertextuality that neither supports the myth of filiation nor strips the characters of agency. In the novel, the characters are conditioned by the sources from which they are appropriated. But in conceiving of intertextuality as a broad web of anonymous quotations, MacNamara refuses to depict characters whose lives are simply determined by the works of the father. In its challenge to essentialized notions of the self and nation, *The Book of Intrusions* reflects a drive to formulate a contestatory tradition. For although it undercuts the notion of collective identity based on racial purity, the novel does not dismiss the possibility of collective action. From their diverse sources and sundry histories, the characters come together to form a coalition in an attempt to

resist the author's control of their lives. MacNamara here models the position of agency that can be assumed by an ad hoc community to address a specific problem. In so doing, he suggests how textual discontinuities—crossing both the characters and Irish history itself—open a space in which to forge a contestatory tradition.

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