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*"Bleak Splendour":
Notes for an Unwritten Biography of
William Trevor*

By DENIS SAMPSON

"LITERARY BIOGRAPHERS," William Trevor has remarked, "often make the mistake of choosing the wrong subjects. A novelist—or any artist—admired for what he produces, may not necessarily have lived anything but the most mundane of lives" (*Excursions* 176). His remark is a warning to any prospective biographer of Trevor himself, his way of implying that his own life has no worthwhile story. Yet the warning has its own paradoxical interest, for surely it is Trevor's particular gift to make literature out of the mundane. His refusal to dramatize the artistic self, to adopt heroic or romantic postures, somehow allows him to absorb and honor his mundane material, to find a tone that mirrors the inner lives of his unheroic characters. The consistency of that tone is his major accomplishment, according to John Banville: "his inimitable, calmly ambiguous voice can mingle in a single sentence pathos and humor, outrage and irony, mockery and love.... He is almost unique among modern novelists in that his own voice is never allowed to intrude into his fiction" (Paulson 166-67). Whether he writes of the melancholy introspections of provincial Irish characters or the dangerous fantasies acted out in shabby English circumstances, his primary preoccupation is to reveal the *modus vivendi* of unexceptional lives.

Excursions in the Real World, a collection of occasional essays, is probably the closest he will come to writing autobiography, and his choice of subjects and the arrangement of the essays in a sequence suggests his own development. Essays about his childhood towns in the south of Ireland—Mallow, Youghal, Skibbereen, Enniscorthy, and Cork—are followed by essays on family life and schooldays, university years, early teaching jobs, and then life in London and people he met there in the fifties and sixties, until writing became his life, and after that, the essays focus on a handful of writers. Places are as prominent as people, and time too is significant—historical time and personal time. "Time is the most interesting thing to write about besides people," he has remarked; "everything I write about has to do with it. Time is like air; it is there always, changing people and forming character" (Stout 137). Although the fragmentary nature of this collection prevents it from taking on an autobiographical shape, it is evident that his increasingly prominent preoccupation in stories and novels with the formation of character by events in childhood or early life has an autobiographical anchor.

Most of all, readers will recognize the settings of so many of the stories and novels, from "Teresa's Wedding" and "The Distant Past" to *Fools of Fortune* and on to *Nights at the Alexandra* and *Reading Turgenev*. Dolores MacKenna has already done some matching of people and places in the real world of his youth with their fictional equivalents (28-58). Even if the Troubles of the seventies and later enter the fictions, or technological and social changes, as in, say, the decline of the Catholic churchgoing population in the nineties, these essays confirm that his own fiction is anchored in memory, in an Ireland of the thirties and forties. "A huge amount of what I write about is internal, a drifting back into childhood, based on a small event or a moment.... Memory also forms character," he has said, "the way you remember things makes you who you are" (Stout 137). It is a remark which illuminates not only his technique for finding the inner shape of his characters in fiction but also his own nature as a writer of fiction in which the past is centrally important.

The short story writer's hand is revealed in the clarity and economy with which significant details are noted and not dwelled on. Many of his teachers are recalled with the kind of bemused dispassion that often finds its way into later stories; they might have been minor characters in fiction. Nostalgia for places and people that have disappeared is prominent, yet it is not allowed too strong a resonance; "going back is a lesson in proportion, an exercise in give-and-take, more revelation than *deja vu*" (*Excursions* 3). Detailed observation of change in the lives of towns and in the lives of individuals carries a weight of regret or sadness, yet this is counterbalanced with a delight in the recollection and in that earlier immersion in the world. A Dickensian delight in the textures of places—streets and cinemas, pubs and schools—is palpable, and any sadness about time's passage is briskly curtailed for, after all, as the closing words of the collection reiterate, "In Hickey's bakery, the real world presses its claims again, ephemeral, mortal" (192). That is the nature of things and of people in Trevor's world, to be "ephemeral, mortal," and that is the bittersweet texture of the tragicomedy that he records.

Nowhere is this economy of style and "proportion" more evident than in "Field of Battle," his brief history of his parents' marriage. He writes with affection and dismay, compassion and shock, admiring their honest acknowledgment of failure: "They were victims of their innocence when chance threw them together and passion beguiled them, leaving them to live with a mistake and to watch their field of battle expanding with each day that passed. They gave their love to their children and were loved in return, fiercely, unwaveringly. But not for a moment could that heal the wounds they carried to their graves" (*Excursions* 25). Elsewhere, Trevor dismisses the idea that his "sense of tragedy" may come from the Troubles and from Irish history and says it comes from his childhood (Stout 129). A biographer might want to make much of this failed marriage, of the pain shadowing the ordinary routines of domestic life, of the disruptive and alienating effect of the father's displacement from town to town, but it is surely striking that the future writer of realis-

tic fiction seems to have taken a moral yardstick for later life from the courage of his parents: "They did not cover up, there was no hypocrisy" (*Excursions* 24). They found a *modus vivendi*.

Since so many of Trevor's characters are consciously or unconsciously engaged in "cover up," in preserving "secrets," as Robert E. Rhodes has argued, it would seem that the artist's gaze is fixed on that parental state of endurance and painful honesty. The circumstances in which that marriage survived, during Trevor's formation, were the bleak economic and cultural conditions of provincial Ireland in the thirties and forties; the joyless truth of the marriage mirrored the repressed, unadorned life of the time with few but intensely imagined escapes, such as the cinema, reading, and religion. Trevor's characters reveal their inner lives in a plain, endlessly nuanced and ambiguous style, and this may also reflect an aspect of the wider culture absorbed in childhood.

Many Catholics, and Protestants of Trevor's class, lived out their lives in isolated villages and towns: the restrictions and sublimations of his characters and their search for a *modus vivendi* are a history of that Ireland. Trevor makes clear here that his own world was not the Ascendancy, Anglo-Irish world in decline, and although in a story like "The Distant Past" or a novel like *The Silence in the Garden* he reveals an elegiac empathy for the end of a way of life, as well as a critical reinterpretation of the imperial role of England in Irish history, his historical focus is not political. The history of the Ireland of his childhood and youth reveals a culture of marginal and abandoned individuals, for the most part trapped in provincial circumstances; if *The Cherry Orchard* comes to mind when he writes of middle-class Protestants, a poem studied in school, "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," may have been the template for the obscure lives he would later record.

While the essay on his parents grounds a voice and a moral stance in that enclosed provincial Ireland in the thirties and forties, the free urban world of London in the sixties represents its antithesis. His memoir of Assia Weevil, the woman who replaced Sylvia Plath in Ted Hughes's affections, and who later imitated Plath by killing herself, makes clear that she is a woman of her time, of the sixties. Trevor's opening paragraphs resemble many passages in his fiction in their technique of accumulating allusions to pop songs, advertisements, news of the day to invoke a climate, and Trevor's take on that decade is black: "The sixties in London had the flavour of a dream.... Fantasy arrived in London in the 1960s. 'It's fantastic!' was the cry as wives were swapped at parties and there was dancing without steps.... With half the decade to go yet, the fun fair was sleazy at the edges" (*Excursions* 109-13). Trevor's moral concern for the young woman who invented a dramatic pose and then destroyed herself illuminates a critical attitude to the culture that grew out of that decade and identifies a lasting concern with the distinction between "consoling lies" that destroy and those that enable life to continue.

The Children of Dynmouth, *Other People's Worlds*, and *Felicia's Journey* portray the terminal anguish and squalor of individuals who have been shaped

by the commercial and media-driven fantasies of that working-class culture in England. Timothy Gedge, Francis Tyte, and Mr. Hilditch, anguished predators, are possessed by fantasies that are mediated by that culture, their fantasies of identity masks for a deeper psychological condition of acute shame and alienation. The violence that eventually expresses their desperation is directed against conventional and well-meaning individuals who become objects of their will, but in each novel, a religious person, also somewhat desperate, develops another kind of fantasy, a mission to forgive and save her torturer. Their conventional religious belief, Anglican or Catholic, proves inadequate for confronting the apparent evil of the predators, but in the end, Lavinia Featherston, Julia Anstey, and Felicia become saintlike in their devotion to finding goodness in this wasteland world.

In the face of these mundane truths—that the real, historical, world “claims” people, perhaps in certain cases seduces and destroys them, and that the private belief that confers a kind of order and meaning may appear to others to be a form of madness—Trevor searches for the traces of what may not be “ephemeral, mortal,” what may be otherworldly. In a surprising closing essay, he takes a walk in the Nire valley which, in the opening paragraphs of the book, he described as “timeless,” contrasting this place with “the Dublin of several pasts” he had known as a student in the forties. He uses this isolated landscape to demythologize other places in Ireland that have come to symbolize the “Irish whole”: “No Mass was ever said here, no earls arrayed themselves in splendor, no different landscape can be regretted. Yet looking down from these modest heights at lush fields and managed forests, you feel that here, not there, the elusive spirit of Ireland might just possibly be—not packaged as Dark Rosaleen or Cathleen Ni Houlihan or the Old Woman of Beare, but in the chilly air and sheep scratching for nourishment” (*Excursions* 191). In its mundane character, its “bleak splendour,” this landscape is admirable in its enduring ordinariness; feet on the ground, the walker resembles the novelist in his desire to escape the pitfalls of Irish culture and history.

In the Introduction, Trevor had remarked that “born Irish I observe the world through Irish sensibilities” (*Excursions* xii), but these concluding thoughts suggest how uninclined towards the stereotypes of the political, the romantic, or the mythological he is. The only “wisp of romance” he will allow is the unchanging nature of this plain landscape; the “managed forests” sounds as if the hand of humans has indeed cultivated at least some of this valley, yet he persists in believing that there is something unique in this “timeless” place: “The secret of beauty may be here, and probably is, but it isn’t yours to discover either” (191). These final paragraphs in *Excursions in the Real World* suggest that however much Trevor and his fiction re-create the textures of that real world—of engaging distractions and of irresolvable personal and historical wounds—this solitary walker is more interested in the search for intimations of something permanent beyond this “mortal” world.

"I WRITE OUT OF a sense of curiosity," Trevor has said and provides the examples of wanting to know what it feels like to be old, or female, or a child, someone different from himself (Stout 141). The explanation seems to fit early novels like *The Old Boys* or *Elizabeth Alone* or *The Children of Dynmouth*, but it also might include other types common in his work, such as the religious obsessive, in *Miss Gomez and the Brethren*, or the deranged and predatory male in *Other People's Worlds* or *Felicia's Journey*, or the innocent, again in *Felicia's Journey* or *Death in Summer*, or the abused child who grows up to wreak havoc on himself and others in so many of the novels. The stories might be included too in this recognition that much of Trevor's work is focused on recurring character types and is given momentum, suspense, by the ways in which behavior is fundamentally unpredictable. In his best work, the understanding of these character types leads beyond the type, for what makes the behavior of others—whether benign or malevolent—fascinating is that their minds make sense of their needs in hidden and largely mysterious ways.

One aspect of his writing is, then, such a process of observation and discovery of empathy. The first decade of his writing career was grounded in his observation of English life: "I was writing about a country that was totally strange to me, and very fascinating to me. I didn't know England very well, so it was rather the same thing in reverse: I wasn't too close, I was at a considerable distance away" (Stout 131). He is alluding here to the fact that even though he says he feels Irish to the core, his familial Protestantism separated him from the mainstream of Irish society, although he also insists that his ancestry was separated by class background from the establishment, ascendancy class of Irish Protestants; growing up, he was doubly an outsider in Ireland, and so he was able to adapt his powers of curiosity and observation to English society when he emigrated there.

His focus on English society has an oblique angle, however, and if the foregoing remarks suggest that his interest is somewhat voyeuristic and that his choice of characters tends toward the caricature or stereotype—and in many of the earlier stories and novels this is so—he defends his interest in eccentric characters. "I think English eccentricity is what first attracted me in terms of writing—it was that that made me wonder and muse about this country" (Stout 134). He contrasts Irish and English eccentrics, the latter being more interesting to him because of the mysterious gap between appearance and reality: "you hardly notice until all of a sudden you realize that you are in the presence of an eccentric mind.... The marvel of the English version is that it's almost secretive.... What I do believe in is the person who scarcely knows he's eccentric at all. Then he says something so extraordinary and you realize he perhaps lives in a world that is untouched by the world you share with him" (135).

Such comments explain the selection of odd characters and the oblique picture of English society that he became so skillful at sketching in the first decade of his career, yet if he suggests that he is little more than a journalist taking notes, his curiosity about his characters goes deeper than observation.

The separation and alienation, the self-enclosure, of his characters indicate that there is a universal and almost metaphysical resonance to that sense of separate and ultimately mysterious worlds that the characters' minds inhabit. The eccentrics he observes are mysterious not in their English manners, finally, but in their individual natures, and in this, perhaps, they mirror a fundamental aspect of their observer. "We are outsiders; we have no place in society because society is what we're watching, and dealing with" (Stout 147). The realism or social comedy that he adopted as his medium was a discipline that masked a dramatization of his own introspective world, a world characterized by a sense of separation and self-enclosure.

A temperamental predilection for, and a training in, detachment and observation, were the essential part of the "apparatus" he brought with him to England, and exile intensified this aspect of his talent. This outer-directed attention, away from self, is something he stresses in his nature as a writer: "Personally, I like not being noticed. I like to hang about the shadows of the world both as a writer and as a person; I dislike limelight, and the center of things is a place to watch rather than to become involved in" (Stout 147). He disavows any interest in power or ambition in social terms, and any interest in his character as a writer is misplaced. "I get matters down onto paper and impose a pattern, and all that is a fairly ordinary activity, or so it seems to me" (147). Constantly turning attention away from how he does this or why, he claims to be the same as any other artist: "we are the tools and instruments of our talent.... I don't know how I do it. And I believe that mystery is essential" (147).

While Trevor has said that from early life he has always enjoyed detective fiction, and the elements of suspense and detection are certainly traits of his characteristic plotting, the desire to acknowledge and accommodate mystery is the spur that takes him beyond generic fiction. "It's almost like a stress in you that goes on, nibbling and nibbling, gnawing away at you, in a *very* inquisitive way, wanting to know. And of course while all that's happening you're stroking in the colors, putting a line here and a line there, creating something which moves further and further away from the original. The truth emerges, the person who is created is a different person altogether—a person in their own right" (Stout 142). The analogy with the painter is one that he has used more than once, the process sometimes associated with bringing a figure into sharper focus, as in a photograph; even when the former sculptor uses analogies with the building up and cutting away of his material to discover what its potential is, he is driven by curiosity, by a need to see more clearly, to allow the essential truth to declare itself.

"I'M A SHORT-STORY writer really who happens to write novels, not the other way round" (Stout 143). The first explanation he offers seems to be almost a matter of convenience in working. "A novel is like a cathedral and you can't really carry in your imagination the form a cathedral is to take. I like the inking, the shadow, of a new short story. I like the whole business of estab-

lishing its point, for although a story need not have a plot it must have a point" (143). But this sense of coherence or unity appeals to him, the unity inherent in one person's life, for he refers to a story as a portrait. By "isolating an encounter and then isolating an incident in the past you try to build up an actual life" (137). Even though his novels, especially the earlier ones, are populated by a great number of characters, a kind of improvised community in a boarding house or a hospital, for instance, it is the individual life that interests his imagination, not the community.

He goes on to say that the short story is the "art of the glimpse. If a novel is like an intricate Renaissance painting, the short story is an Impressionist painting. It *should* be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. It is concerned with the total exclusion of meaninglessness. Life, on the other hand, is meaningless most of the time. The novel imitates life, where the short story is bony, and cannot wander. It is essential art" (Stout 135-56). The contrast here, between the "essential art" of a story and the imitation of "meaninglessness" that a novel must take time to create, suggests that Trevor is impatient with the "intricacy" of representation, with plotting or character development, or perhaps it is with the intellectual self-consciousness that organizing and planning a novel requires. He prefers the single portrait because it can convey that "explosion of truth" in a single impression.

His preference for working on a story rather than a novel may be connected, then, to the freedom from the elaboration of surfaces that realism requires, when those surfaces represent "meaninglessness." These statements suggest that even though he is motivated by curiosity and is a skillful observer, a compulsive accumulator of "useless information," it is the discovery of order in his material, the exclusion of the meaningless, that is his goal. The short story allows him to discover order more easily or more quickly; it satisfies his need to work "instinctively," and he is more inclined to trust instinctive, "essential" art.

But apart from these preferences as a working writer, there is another aspect to his recognition in himself that he is, primarily, a short story writer. He associates "storytelling"—and that appears to be the "essential" art—with the cultural circumstances of Ireland, and therefore with his sense of himself as Irish. In his Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, he refers to "the civilized bookishness of writing novels, and reading them" which he associates with middle-class English life, while Ireland remains "an uneasy, still largely peasant society" (xiv). Apart from his declared appreciation of Dickens, his view of nineteenth-century English fiction is that it is the art of a privileged and imperial mentality and so is of little interest to him. His story of the Famine years, "The News from Ireland," might be seen as an oblique comment on fictions of privilege.

Turning aside from such fiction, he situates his work in an Irish tradition. "The Irish delight in stories, of whatever kind" he declares, "because their telling, and their reception are by now instinctive" (*Oxford Book* xv). This

"mode of communication" was, to begin with, part of "a pervasive, deeply rooted, oral tradition," and Trevor believes that modern Irish writers inherited the "receptive nature" of its audience. "Portraiture thrived within its subtleties," he suggests, bringing this tradition into his own practice as a storyteller; "it withheld as much information as it released. It told as little as it dared, but often it glimpsed into a world as large and as complicated as anything either the legend or the novel could provide" (xiv). Paying tribute in this way to the art and the scope of the medium he has embraced as his own, Trevor also gives the story and the society an additional dimension of meaning: "a willingness to believe rather than find instant virtues in skepticism" (xv). That freedom from skepticism, in addition to the temperamental orientation of his talent, offers him a confidence to think of himself as a storyteller working outside the generic conventions of the nineteenth-century English novel.

Frank O'Connor's approach in *The Lonely Voice* provided Trevor with his ideas about the provenance of the Irish short story, and he is content not to inquire further since his notions of genre are linked to a particular social outlook. In addition to emphasizing the cultural and historical circumstances that preserved the oral storytelling tradition, he repeats the observation that the genre "often dealt in underdogs—what Frank O'Connor called 'small men'—and increasingly as the century wore on, in hard-done-by women" (*Oxford Book* xiv). Even if the examples of O'Faolain and O'Connor have greatly influenced his practice as a storyteller, there are odd emphases and omissions here which suggest how much Trevor's critical thinking is limited by a somewhat old-fashioned view of the traditions of Irish writing. Although he allocates two stories apiece to the realists of the thirties, he gives one story each to Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, arguably the most significant influences on Irish fiction since the early nineteen sixties. He does not mention either of them in his introductory remarks, and so, as in reading *A Writer's Ireland*, one has to conclude that their presence as contemporaries and their fiction are difficult for Trevor to acknowledge, that he is more comfortable associating himself with the earlier generation.

One wonders if the difficulty is that O'Brien and McGahern were raised as Catholics and so have an intimacy with mainstream Irish experience that he could only know obliquely. This suspicion may be supported by the affinity he feels for Elizabeth Bowen. He has stated elsewhere that he prefers Bowen's short stories to her novels, but here in the *Oxford Book*, he alludes to O'Connor, O'Faolain, and O'Flaherty as "the three most influential writers in the genre since Joyce and Elizabeth Bowen established Ireland at the forefront of the modern short story" (xvi). This is a decidedly odd over-evaluation of Bowen's importance, not to mention her achronological placing, but the reason for Trevor's idiosyncrasy may be the following: "She saw the Ireland of William Carleton and Seamus O'Kelly from the same kind of distance as the one Joyce had to create for himself in order to dispel a certain claustrophobia. Synge and Yeats sought to reduce such a distance; Elizabeth Bowen simply accepted it. She did not patronize, but looked sideways rather than down; and

her affection for places and their people remains as the throb of vitality in all she wrote" (*Stories* 136-37).

The kind of "distance" he praises in Bowen is for him a key distinguishing feature of the writers he mentions, and in adopting it as a hallmark of his own fiction, he insists that she is as Irish as any of the others. In protesting so much, and in making McGahern and O'Brien invisible in his view of literary history, Trevor seems to want to avoid comparison on the basis of intimacy or distance and to escape from any stereotyping of his fiction as "Anglo-Irish." Implicitly, there is a crucial assertion of Irishness here, not in political or historical or ideological declarations but in the storyteller's sensibility and tone—beyond ancestry, sectarian affiliation, or political alignment.

A NOVELIST OF his own generation and nationality to whom Trevor does appear to feel a kinship is Brian Moore. Moore's fictional medium and methods may have interested Trevor for Moore is also a novelist of character who disappears with extraordinary skill into the lives of his creations, many of them female or priests or people who on the surface do not resemble him. In speaking of his own invisibility as a novelist, he speaks of an actor taking on a role, the living of a surrogate life, and he too has spoken of exile and distance as necessary to his art. The "lonely passion" of Judith Hearne, wandering in the city of Belfast, may have been a model for Trevor's observation of his lonely denizens of London. Undoubtedly, both writers read *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* with care, and Joyce's stories are probably the most important single influence on both. There are certain scenes in Trevor, in *Miss Gomez and the Brethren*, for instance, and again in *Other People's Worlds*, where Judith Hearne in her crisis of faith seems to shadow his own characters. Trevor was able to move from imagining the mind of an evangelical believer in Miss Gomez to that of a devout Catholic in Julia Anstey, and for one who was not raised in a Catholic home, Trevor's sustained, almost obsessive, interest in Catholicism is striking, more striking than the recurrent interest of the declared agnostic Moore.

An unusually admiring review of Moore's *No Other Life* appeared in 1993 when Trevor, presumably, had just completed *Felicia's Journey*; it throws interesting light not only on the saintly character of Felicia, in contrast to the deranged evil of her antagonist, but on this shared interest in Catholicism. The *New York Review* entitled the piece "Lives of the Saints," and Trevor begins with sketches of a number of saints' lives, Saint Patrick, Saint Ursula, and others, and concludes: "They are real because people have made them so, their long vanished features alive in the imaginations they nourish, their strength the faith of the faithful, the marvels of their lives an inspiration. And somewhere in the entanglements of exaggeration and myth there is a whispering insistence that human goodness is what matters most of all: however faint, it's a sound to honor with the benefit of the doubt" (3). Trevor reads the novel, set in a fictional Haiti during the revolutionary era of a priest/populist who resem-

bles Aristide, as a portrait of “a good priest’s vocation”—the priest in question being the narrator of the story, formerly the teacher and supporter of the revolutionary priest who became “an ersatz saint, flawed because he did not possess the gift of wisdom” (6).

Trevor admires Moore’s skill in creating a backdrop that is “believably snagged in the reader’s imagination ... before the search for truth begins in the make-up of fiction” (6). It is a search conducted by the narrator, the retired priest, who wishes to tell the story of his protégé, but he discovers that in his own life and belief he finds more questions than answers, questions that can’t be answered. What began by accumulating, in Trevor’s words for the beginning stages of all fiction writing, the “events and people gathered together in as higgledy-piggledy a muddle as they are in life,” reaches for some kind of order, “the trimming and shaping so that it takes the form of a story” (6). Moore’s novel in the form of a memoir is, in addition to being a moral fable, an allegory of the making of stories, and Trevor clearly responds to it on this level.

The review concludes with what might be a statement of Trevor’s own sense of life which is dramatized in many of his novels: “For the elderly priest pondering his life, there is no pattern, no gleam of illumination in his weariness, only confusion and bewilderment, and his own wild thought that, yes, perhaps his mother was right [in rejecting her lifelong faith on her deathbed]. In the midst of so much distortion and misreading of divine promise and intention, it seems more likely now that eternal life can only be begged for and is not guaranteed. He can be sure only of the story he tells, of the saint that never was and the drama of an innocence that ignominiously failed, leaving behind even less meaning than there appeared to be originally” (6). In praising the novel—“Moore has written nothing as subtle or as perfectly sustained”—he seems to suggest that the novelist has written a saint’s life for these times: this old priest, now tortured by doubt and confusion, manages to whisper that “human goodness is what matters most,” although the wisdom to recognize goodness may be universally lacking.

The paradoxes of eccentricity and saintliness, one of Trevor’s enduring preoccupations, is central to his first Irish fiction, at least the first one with an explicitly Irish setting. He has said that the story “Miss Smith” is set in a Munster town, although that is not evident, but in *Mrs Eckdorf in O’Neill’s Hotel*, he seems to have found a way to be both inside and outside the setting, for his protagonist is an outsider, a Londoner who has lived in Germany and has had a celebrated career as a photographer there. He uses the hotel and its assorted inhabitants and regular visitors as a kind of unacknowledged community, in the way he uses boarding houses, country houses, and hospitals and villages, and during her time there, Ivy Eckdorf realizes that she wants to be part of this community of strangers; at the end, as she slips into madness and is interned in an asylum, she expresses her newfound realization: “Strangers were the concern of strangers, she had repeatedly said, and she had proved it in a kind of way, for she, like an itching conscience, was his concern, in her

asylum room" (*Mrs Eckdorf* 264). Her visitor, at the end, is Father Hennessey, whose conventional Catholic beliefs are tested and challenged by her aggressive insistence on the power of imagination and its visions.

In the opening chapter, Ivy Eckdorf states regarding her profession as photographer: "The only light in my life is my camera" (*Mrs Eckdorf* 8), but by the end of the novel a new light has entered her life through the agency of Mrs Sinnott, a ninety-one-year-old woman who has been deaf and dumb all her life. She remembered photographing the dead Mrs Sinnott: "she had done that because the photographs might be useful in a book that had to do with forgiveness and the myth of God. The potency of the myth was what she had to show, how good could come out of people's delusions" (256). And the priest whose God and church she disbelieves in—"no God created a world like this one"—is moved by her delusion that she has died and is in heaven, that she is now completely happy: "all the pillars of the Church could not stifle her private, poor man's God.... when she talked about the hotel as it might have been he sometimes felt that he could listen to her forever" (264). Delusions, visions, may provide the only light in the "something like a night in her mind, a blackness she could not penetrate and must not ever again try to penetrate" (260). The photographer who had used her camera in a voyeuristic way to try to penetrate the darkness of other people's lives ends by accepting the mystery that cannot be penetrated.

This first Irish fiction of Trevor appears to be an allegory of his own art. The priest comments on her photographs: "In her beautiful documentary form she had shown the ugliness of people, their violence and their weakness, their viciousness, their agonies and their fears" (*Mrs Eckdorf* 264). This might be a recipe for Trevor's own arrangement of characters he has observed, but the priest realizes that she had seen this way because of her own bitterness "and with her camera had taken a kind of revenge ... cruelty coming from cruelty" (264). If her earlier eccentricity was motivated by hatred, her final eccentricity is motivated by a vision of goodness. Trevor's own art from this time on incorporates a perverted, exploitative vision of life arising from cruelty and ugliness, but set against it is an eccentric vision of saintliness. The momentary glimpse of beauty and order that art itself affirms is a gesture toward such a beatific vision.

Between *Mrs Eckdorf* and *Reading Turgenev*, more than twenty years later, there were novels and stories, such as "Mrs Ackland's Ghosts" in which the protagonist's private convictions, "artificial ghosts" or "consoling lies," become a *modus vivendi*. Their visions remove them from other people, even to the point of being confined to a mental hospital and being considered mad. In *The Children of Dymouth*, Lavinia realizes that she "must blow hope into hopelessness" for in the face of the malevolence of Timothy Gedge, her husband's faith crumbles: "God permits chance" (180-86). Her moment of "irrational joyfulness" leads her to a mission of "adopting" a sociopath, which parallels the turning point in Julia Anstey's life in *Other People's Worlds*: "Julia knelt also, addressing herself to to the emptiness where her childhood

image once had been" (195). The collapse of her faith leads to a new vision of caring: "she wanted to caress away the pain that she knew was there.... What concerned her was the untouchable person" (196). The renewal of purpose, the discovery of a new *modus vivendi* by all of these women, remains private and incomprehensible to others.

In *Reading Turgenev*, Mary Louise Dallon spends most of her adult life in an asylum, deemed mad, where she can preserve her memories of the dying cousin she had fallen in love with when her marriage became intolerable. "Inviting her into the world of a novelist had been her cousin's courtship, all he could manage, as much as she could accept. Yet passion came, like consummation in the end. For thirty-one years she'd clung to a refuge in which her love affair could spread itself, a safe house offering sanctuary. For thirty-one years, she passed as mad and lived in peace" (*Two Lives* 220-21). In her asylum, she continued to read Turgenev, having devised this means of escaping from the hatred of her unsuitable marriage. When she returns to the provincial town she had lived in, her Protestant community has almost entirely disappeared, but she goes to church where she tells the young clergyman about her life: "She has told him about reading the novels of Turgenev among the tombstones.... As she stands in the pew, smiling up at him, her life seems as mysterious as an act of God, her innocence and her boundless love arbitrarily there.... The distress engendered in him by these thoughts turns into an unfamiliar apprehension: contemplation of this woman's life could tease away his faith more surely than all his empty churches" (220). The challenge to conventional beliefs of the private vision of art and love is an enduring one in Trevor. The mystery of Mary Louise Dallon's life is no more than the endurance of her love and the endurance of art, Turgenev's fiction, which never loses its meaning for her.

From *Mrs Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel* to *Reading Turgenev* and on to *Felicia's Journey*, Trevor's interest in a primitive faith in miracle is clear, and while saintliness is a quality of character which inspires significantly irrational and alienated behavior, the moral center of these novels rests on such a mysterious quality. Trevor has commented that he thinks of himself as a religious novelist, and his interest in Mauriac is surely remarkable, for in so many of his fictions, the vicious muddle of life is the occasion for a search for the mysterious, underlying order; the talent of the artist is analogous to the operation of divine grace. Trevor, Protestant by formation, made it one of his biggest imaginative challenges to enter into the mind of a version of Catholicism which accommodates the miraculous. Sometimes he chooses Catholicism, as if it, unlike Protestantism, has preserved some primitive quality to move the deeper instincts for order, for beauty and goodness, but it also seems as if it is there to counterpoint the equally primitive powers of art itself and of storytelling.

Mrs Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel marks a turning toward Irish material and toward memories of the Ireland in which he grew up, and it would appear that his central inheritance of that time is "God-bothering" (Stout 133). In later novels and stories, even when the characters or the setting are English and

Protestant, it is clear that the deeper preoccupations, his characteristic way of seeing his characters and finding order in the muddle of their lives, derives from an earlier time. The matter of faith and the reality created by the imagination are, however, part of a more practical preoccupation: how to discover peace of mind in an abrasive world of chance and change. That is ultimately the mystery he sets out to fathom in the life of each of the characters he selects for observation.

IN AN ESSAY in *Excursions in the Real World*, Trevor writes of the celebrated moment one stormy March night on the East Pier at Dun Laoghaire when Beckett freed himself from the search for "meanings" and set the course for discovering the true expression of his artistic talent: "It had not before occurred to Beckett, as it instinctively does to many writers of fiction, that the truth offered by storytellers derives its potency from the unique nature of the human apparatus that has gathered it, and perhaps is best left at that. His intellectualism and severity had blocked from him the simple fact that his own introspections constituted the roots of the art he sought to express. Real people and real places got him going.... His memory, and what he does with it, is what matters" (*Excursions* 172-73).

Speaking of Beckett, Trevor suggests how his own work might be brought into focus. He values the "instinctive" knowledge of fiction writers more than "intellectualism"; he considers himself a "storyteller" who has a "truth" to communicate; the quality of that truth depends on the "uniqueness" of individual experience; whatever the direction the composition eventually takes, it begins with "real people and real places"; what Beckett suddenly realized is how memory might be exploited for writing, something Trevor identifies as a key turning point in his career. It is, of course, the turning point in Trevor's own work also, although this realization may have happened gradually during the seventies, as memory came to be more and more the moral and imaginative anchor of his writing.

Beckett and Trevor may appear to have little in common, other than the accidents of their birth in Ireland and a period of residence in Dublin, but Trevor's essay reveals a particular affection for Beckett and a detachment from Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce. The affection and respect is due to Beckett's refusal, unlike the others, to attend to his image as a writer. The reclusive Beckett was like other artists Trevor admires, Henry Moore and Thomas Hardy; he wished to be unknown apart from his writing and escaped from all "outward show."

In this same essay, the novelist comments on Yeats: "It's not the inspiration that's the heart of the matter, but the practical writing of the lines." In the end, whatever the "outward show," or the private drama of irrationality, self-delusion, or narcissism that accounts for the odd behavior of writers such as Yeats, the self-effacing Trevor believes that "the practical writing of the lines" is all that matters. The "potency" of "the lines" derives from that "unique

nature" that lies beyond scrutiny; neither the circumstances in which the writer's life is acted out or the secret contours of his introspections and inspirations account for the mysterious effects of style achieved on the page.

Given the opportunity to prepare a book on Irish writing, he chose the theme of landscape, although he is quick to say it is not "an academic investigation," simply "a writer's journey, a tour of places which other writers have felt affection for also, or have known excitement or alarm in" (*A Writer's Ireland* 8). The book is largely made of photographs and lengthy quotations from writers, with predictable linking commentary; there is little to be seen of Trevor in *A Writer's Ireland*, but this invisibility is entirely characteristic. What matters is that all of the writers felt affection for the place, and as he comments in *Excursions*, "it is affection ... that causes you to want to know what you never will" (191). His choice of "landscape in literature" for this book and his emphasis on "affection" for place as inspirational indicate that the realistic writer, disciple of the Joyce who wrote *Dubliners*, must also be seen as a Romantic. This last sentence surely echoes Keats's: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." Reminiscent of Keats too is his ability to disappear into his characters, his embrace of "negative capability," what has been called the "systematic self-effacement" of his style, the capacious, "ambiguous" tone that John Banville praised.

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