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Consuming Pleasures: Felicia's Journey in Fiction and Film

By CHRISTINE ST. PETER

WILLIAM TREVOR'S prizewinning novel, *Felicia's Journey* (1994), may share a title with Atom Egoyan's Hollywood-financed film (1999), but each artist gives his text a distinctive artistic trajectory. In general narrative movement they resemble each other; in both, the audiences witness the journey to England of an unmarried pregnant seventeen-year-old Irish girl who is seeking the absconding Irish father but falls instead into the hands of an English serial killer of homeless young women. In neither novel nor film does Felicia find the father and in neither is she murdered. So far the texts are parallel. Moreover, both artists focus on the redemption of the protagonist, but here the texts begin to diverge. In Trevor's novel the eponymous heroine is the protagonist, while Egoyan's film centers on the killer, Mr. Hilditch, a reading of the film supported by Egoyan in numerous interviews in which he discusses his screenwriting and directing of the film. From this distinction, others may be ventured. To be sure, both texts are so rich that they escape my schematic positioning, yet I would suggest that Trevor's novel, locating Irish exiles in 1990s Britain, has a postcolonial orientation or subtext, whereas Egoyan's film is more usefully examined under a poststructuralist lens that examines fragmented subjectivity and the discourses that organize the emotional and psychic capacities of the individual. That said, I would argue that a comparative study foregrounding the differences between novel and film creates opportunities for understanding each on its own terms. In the discussion that follows, however, I resist the literary critic's urge to argue the superiority of the urtext, a tempting trap when considering film adaptations of brilliant novels.¹ Both, I would say, are remarkably successful on their own terms.

Canadian filmmaker Egoyan did not discover the novel himself. Rather, the film rights to the novel had earlier been purchased by Mel Gibson's Icon Production company, and it was Icon that offered Egoyan the text and a budget of \$10 million to write the screenplay and direct the film. Although this is a hefty amount for an independent filmmaker, Egoyan's work as director and auteur had already earned him international acclaim, garnering an Oscar nomination for his earlier film, *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) as well as several

1. I would like to acknowledge the help I received from Brian McIlroy and particularly from Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt who shared with me the unpublished manuscript of her excellent paper delivered at the 2001 meeting of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 2001).

Cannes Film Festival awards for both that film and *Exotica* (1994). But Icon as the source of interest in Trevor's novel is already enlightening: hard to imagine a Hollywood firm eager to promote an unhappy movie about a lost, bumptious, pregnant girl who never finds her caddish lover and ends up homeless. Far more appealing is the possibility of a psychological thriller starring Bob Hoskins as the mad Hilditch entrapping an unwary and desperate girl in order to add her to his videotaped "memory lane" of victims and her grave to the six others dug in his suburban garden in Birmingham.

Reviewers were quick to focus on the intertextuality of this film and those of Alfred Hitchcock (e.g., von Busack 2), a reasonable interpretation given Egoyan's appreciation of Hitchcock and his own previous use of the thriller genre. But Egoyan himself claims that the film is "anti-Hitchcockian" because "Hitchcock is all about making the viewer privy to something the characters aren't aware of ... whereas my approach is about trying to enter into the characters' experience, about how they would see themselves" (Porton 39). This topic of intense self-reflexivity is one I return to below.

If Egoyan did not discover the novel himself, he did put himself to work studying it.² He describes Trevor as a "master writer working at the top of his form"; "I apprenticed myself, almost as a pupil would to Trevor's vision of the world.... I sought him out. I got to know him and I got to understand.... I showed him tapes of the various 'Felicias' we were thinking of, to get his input. I need the author's approval" (Sheehy 19). I was unable to find any published reaction to Egoyan's adaptation from Trevor himself, but one disagreement between them that Egoyan describes is particularly revealing of the latter's lack of interest in the Irish-British political contexts of Trevor's novel. Egoyan's original intention was to have Felicia come from a small town in Quebec and arrive in a city on the west coast of Canada, indeed his own childhood city of Victoria, which was "this parody of an English colonial outpost." Trying out the idea with Trevor, he learned that the author was determined to preserve an important "subtext," that is, "the history of violence between Britain and Ireland which is something you could not just transpose to Canada" (Dwyer 5).

Egoyan may have acquiesced in Trevor's insistence on the rural Munster and the industrial British Midlands settings, but he eliminates significant features of that subtext, replacing them with his own characteristic artistic concern: the deforming effects of media on the human psyche. Egoyan describes Hilditch as a "person who is all about media, even though he seems fussy and old-fashioned. The only way he can have his mother's gaze is electronically, off a television screen. He's been completely transformed by the lack of oral tradition" (Lacey C-2). This quotation points to Egoyan's major addition to the screenplay, the creation of a television celebrity mother for Hilditch, pre-

2. Contrary to the assertions of some of the film critics of *Felicia's Journey*, this was not the first time Egoyan had directed a film on foreign location, nor was it the first film based on Irish content. In 1985 he directed a made-for-television movie commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Company, *In This Corner*, a political story concerning an Irish boxer.

served after her death in the 1950 videotapes of her French cooking show for British television, a media event in which the young, obese, and clumsy Hilditch is forced to play a humiliating supporting role as comic *sous*-chef. The outrageous "Gala," played by Arsinée Khanjian, is a careless and manipulative mother, but, surprising for those familiar with the novel, not necessarily a sinister one. Indeed, in an interview with Cynthia Fuchs who asks him if he has not succumbed to "one of the clichés in serial killer imagery—from *Pyscho* to Ted Bundy—the bad mother," Egoyan insists that it is not the mothers but the "fathers [who] are awful in the film"; both he and (his wife) Khanjian thought Gala was not so much bad as preoccupied and neglectful, driven to succeed in her own career and as a result inattentive to her son's life and needs (Fuchs 3). Thus we see the importance of Egoyan's decision to have Hilditch re-create nightly her cooking lessons forty years later, as he watches her taped image, cooking with her as she performs for the camera. Hilditch has learned his mother's lessons well, effortlessly producing each night for himself superb meals of huge crown roasts or delicately trussed chickens, meals for one served at an empty table for twelve. Trevor's Hilditch, in contrast, favors such fare as "mushy peas, French fries, Brussels sprouts, slices of Mother's Pride 'on the side,' grilled steak, and for dessert—at the same meal—trifle, raspberry cream biscuits, coffee cream biscuits, chocolate digestives, fig rolls, a couple of KitKats" (Trevor 52, 124). Egoyan creates "a ritual where Hilditch can command Gala's full attention. He can play her films and redirect her gaze electronically, to be watching him. He can pretend this relationship is completely nurturing. And that ritual has perverted him more than anything she ever did or didn't do" (Fuchs 2).

In this same interview, Egoyan also explains his rejection of Trevor's creation of a mother who preys incestuously on her son, seeing this sexualization as a motivator for Hilditch's later crimes as "reductive." Instead he offers his "belief that some of us are genetically encoded or hardwired in a certain way that manifests itself at a young age," in this case presumably exacerbated by being cut off at the root from an organic, human connection. But it is the "tape as a way of representing the archiving of reality ... that subjective, fetishized moment" that creates a "behavioral pattern. He's a product of technology as a means to memory. He's of the first generation who would have been brought up by and in mass media" (Fuchs 2).

Egoyan's creation of a character who "has no organic memory of his experiences at all ... except as it's all called back on tape" (Sheehy 20) at first appears ironic given that the subject of Gala's show is food, the primary sustainer of life and the traditional locus of community through commensality or food-sharing (Counihan and van Esterik 2-3). In his treatment of food and food preparation, however, Egoyan evokes the negative power of food in cultural colonization and family power relations when he stages Gala as a French chef—bringing the good news of fine cuisine to a 1950s British audience badly in need of culinary enlightenment. But Gala as message-bearer of French civilization is a confusing mixture of culinary expertise and sexy flir-

tatiousness, breathlessly seducing her audience with such girlish touches as her “o-o-o-h, the needle looks so-o-o scary,” as she plunges it through the prime ribs. The confusing gender messages in this public display are also enacted in the mother-son relationship as Gala carelessly exposes her child’s incompetence to public ridicule and pity. Thus we see the logic of Egoyan’s screenplay when he has the adult Hilditch demonstrate mastery and public power by becoming a catering manager for a large factory where a hungry audience of hundreds can appreciate his skill. (In Trevor’s text, Hilditch stumbles into the post because the factory management had noticed his “interest in meals and comestibles” and needed to fill a vacancy from within [Trevor 6]). But Egoyan’s Hilditch does not cook the food for the factory workers; he is the provider and judge of the food and plays an assertive role assisted by an adoring female acolyte-cook.

In this way Egoyan has Hilditch, feminized as a child in both novel and film, attempt to reassert the traditional gender relations in which men control food but women provide it; “...food is associated with those who are weak in the power grid. They provide food to those who are stronger, who can coerce them to provide it. Indeed the weak are often food for the strong in the world of ‘dog eat dog’” (Nicholson 50). The obsessive care that Hilditch pours into his catering work offers a cover of respectability and community-building. But it also serves to disguise his deeper psychic needs—the entrapment and consumption of young women who do not have communities, who are without home or resources. More specifically, Hilditch reenacts Gala’s control of him and her audience by snaring his victims through their need for food and shelter. Felicia’s situation is different; she turns out to have enough money not to need his care because she “borrowed” from her senile, Irish-speaking great-grandmother who has no need of her cache but guards it nonetheless, a painful commentary on intergenerational relations. So Hilditch in turn steals Felicia’s stolen money in hopes of making her vulnerable, these transgressions a feature of novel and film. While Hilditch does not actually eat his prey in Egoyan’s film, he does archive their video representations, recorded by means of a secret camera in his car, among the food shows of his mother’s videotaped programs. With this video-blending he visually consumes all these women, captured on tape, as he eats his mother’s dinners nightly.³

Egoyan’s refusal to make a villain of Hilditch’s mother, and his complex play with gender—the feminized Hilditch needing to restore his sense of masculinity through his consumption of helpless women—reveals an auteur more interested in gender politics than in the postcolonial politics of British-Irish relations. Critics looking for that aspect of the novel will be disappointed because the creation of Gala and the French-British relationship dramatically defuses the British-Irish subtext of Trevor’s novel. The military imagery and war stories that fired the imagination of Trevor’s Hilditch from

3. The inventiveness of Egoyan’s television-video motif is strikingly clear when one reads in the novel that: “Mr. Hilditch doesn’t have a television himself. He hired a set once, but found he never turned it on” (Trevor 10).

childhood until his death are somewhat muted in the film. Moreover, in the novel, Hilditch's obvious physical deficiencies account for the impossibility of a heroic military career like the one claimed by his "Uncle" Wilf and narrated to the worshipping boy. In the person of actor Bob Hoskins we find no evidence of the fictional Hilditch's grotesque physical presence, whereas Trevor's Hilditch, weighing "nineteen and a half stone" [273 pounds] with insect-like eyes behind pebble-glass spectacles and tiny, childish hands, appears much less a "normal" man than the dapper Hoskins-Hilditch. This means that the young victims in novel and film would have very different responses to the respective Hilditch characters. Would Hoskins's attractive older presence make him acceptable as a kindly father figure proffering aid to lost girls? Or might Trevor's obese and timid figure make him seem less a possible predator? One disarming thing both men share, however; the "innocence" of a lady-like little car, a green Morris Minor that scuttles about like a beetle stalking the victims, and is the site of the actual murders.

Egoyan's fascination with this serial killer he thinks capable of redemption leads him to make another fundamental revision to Trevor's novel, this one erasing Trevor's quasi-feminist treatment of Felicia. When Hilditch finally manages to imprison Felicia in his house in preparation for her murder, Egoyan has him make the decision to let her go at the last moment. Musing on the message of redemption delivered by Miss Calligary, an itinerant Christian missionary whose obsessive pursuit of Hilditch's soul echoes his own madness, he unlocks the door for Felicia and thereby creates for himself a "moment of redemption." "Hilditch," says Egoyan, "actually looks at himself and sees what he has done.... He knows at that point that he can't live anymore. There's no one who can forgive him, he has to judge himself. There is something profound that happens there, at the end. There's a communion, but it's one that these characters devise through their own making, and it's quite inadvertent." Then, he adds, "I'm quite convinced those moments are found by a process of personal investigation.... Maybe the films are an attempt to create their own churches, their own systems of belief" (Sheehy 18-20).

I find problematic Egoyan's redemption of the serial killer. Trevor's decision to give this possibility to Felicia at the end of the novel is more convincing, given their respective characterizations. For one, it is difficult for the film, without the resource of the interior monologue available to the novelist, to present Hilditch's suicide as anything other than an act of despair. More importantly, in the context of the argument about predator and prey, the focus on Hilditch's self-redemption denies the remarkable agency Trevor gives Felicia, who, after an initially supine response to her danger, finally seizes the chance to save herself when she figures out what Hilditch is planning for her. And this argument about the loss/recovery of agency connects to another plot element that is shared by both texts: Hilditch's success in convincing Felicia to undergo an abortion he ghoulishly calls his "treat."

As soon as Felicia has done the deed, she regrets it, seeing it, in the light of her own traditional Irish-Catholic moral formation, as murder. This gives

the film the appearance of what Ruth Barton calls a “deeply conservative message”—“no pro-abortion arguments on offer here and not much good to say about career mothers either” (Barton 33), especially as it is Hilditch who proffers the feminist argument of self-love and self-care. Several film critics were sensitive to the apparent effects of this device. As Richard von Busack puts it, “from some angles, the film could look like an anti-choice horror story” (4)—an observation that would apply equally to the novel. Egoyan admits his unease: “You’re the first journalist to ask me about that and I thought it would be a much more explosive issue. [It’s an] extraordinary scene in the film [and no less so in the novel], because everything [Hilditch] says makes perfect sense, and yet it’s coming out of the mouth of a psychopath. I think the film is really about the nature of choice and determination, regarding how far we go” (von Busack 4).

The abortion scene is so layered with contradictory implications that precise interpretation seems inconsistent with the overdetermined aspect of the choice. But one thing seems clear: Felicia’s acquiescence to Hilditch’s will in this serves as the trigger that awakens her at last to the sinister control he is exerting over her. His colonization of her pregnancy, as he pretends to be the father at the clinic, and pretends to be her surrogate father in private, becomes clear as the act of cannibalism it represents. Felicia finally understands how much of her power she has given away, both to him and to her earlier seducer Johnny Lysaght, the Irish lad who joined the British army in a perennial feature of British-Irish relations—the need of impoverished Irish exiles to seek employment from their former colonizer.

And yet in another fashion one might argue that Egoyan’s characteristic focus on the perverting effects of media leads him to misread the Irish context from which Felicia emerges. Using her innocence as foil to Hilditch’s media-induced perversity, Egoyan asserts in several interviews that Felicia’s way of being presents a nineteenth-century version of traditional “oral memory” in action. He goes so far as to suggest that her relationship to her Irish historical context is unmediated,⁴ thus failing to credit not just the possibility of television in 1990s Munster but, more importantly, to consider how highly mediated is the fossilized republican rhetoric Felicia is fed. Trevor takes pains to list the lessons:

All her life, for as long as Felicia could remember, she had been shown.... newspaper clippings, photographs, and copies of documents that had been tidily glued into place [in wallpaper pattern books]. At the heart of the statement they made—the anchor of the whole collection, her father

4. Egoyan makes the distinction between “oral memory” and “mediated memory” thus: “[*Felicia’s Journey*] is a story about the contrast between oral tradition against the mediated image. Felicia is a person who comes from a place where the father still tells her stories from history and repeats them verbally. Her grandmother is still speaking Irish, quoting De Valera. She’s expected to carry on a tradition which has been passed on to her orally and she meets this man who has no contact with an oral tradition at all, where his sense of history is served to him by mediated gestures, either electronic or culinary” (Sheehy 19-20). But Hilditch has also been on the receiving end of oral transmission, however dishonest the stories of Uncle Wilf’s military heroism. Still, it is the memory of these stories of Britain’s imperial conquests that shape his life and desires, just as the mediated stories of Irish revolutionary heroism shape those of Felicia’s father.

had many times repeated to her—was the combined obituary of the three local patriots.... Next in importance ... a handwritten copy of Patrick Pearse's proclamation of a provisional government.... columns of newsprint told of [the 1916 Easter Rising].... Mass cards ... letters ... an article about the old penal laws.... Patrick Pearse's cottage in Connemara was on a postcard; on another the tricolour fluttered from a flagstaff. The Soldier's Song in its entirety was there. (26)

As Ruth Barton in her review puts it, the film offers a "quaint, unconvincing excursion into Irish national territory." But Barton argues that the "original novel needs to take the blame for the latter—Trevor's depictions of small town Ireland and its thrall to the memories of 1916 have evolved little since his early stories and there is something unbelievable about the Irish scenes in the film...a tourist's eye view of Ireland" (Barton 33). While the bucolic scenery of the film makes this a fair assessment, it does not adequately credit the novelist's skill in building his political subtext; while the creation of a hundred-year-old Irish widow of a 1916 Easter Rising hero (Felicia's great-grandmother) is a stretch for a 1990s context, Trevor's evocation of British-Irish power relations plays out in the novel convincingly, not because of young Felicia, but because of Hilditch who has created a false identity for himself based on stories of British imperial power colonizing Ireland, a narrative he seizes as a boy in the 1950s as a way of creating a modicum of personal power.

Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt describes this dynamic in her analysis of the novel as she considers the furnishings Hilditch installed in his house from second-hand stores after his mother's death:

At once monstrous and pathetic, Hilditch has constructed his sense of self around England's imperial past. His vast home is located at #3 Duke of Wellington Road—named for the Irish-born yet Irish-scorning military defender of British colonial interest. The house itself ... once belonged to a tea merchant, and its furnishing include "ivory trinkets," "secondhand Indian carpets," "elaborately framed portraits of strangers," and "twenty mezzotints of South African military scenes." (1)

Fitzgerald-Hoyt deepens her analysis of Trevor's subtext when she points out how "Felicia herself has been victimized by myth—in her case, the Irish nationalist myths about women. The reality of her life is that her town's economy is so depressed that when the meat-processing factory in which she works shuts down," her only "choice" is to become a domestic servant for her father, brothers, and bedridden great-grandmother (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 2). Her father is "passionate about Ireland's struggle for independence but oblivious to his daughter's domestic oppression" (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 3). But Felicia's state is even worse in England, she adds, because there Felicia "is in effect colonized by Hilditch" until "Trevor turns the tables on this latter-day colonizer" by having him become obsessed with the "Irish girl" after she disappears temporarily from his sight and neighborhood. "Hilditch describes his feelings for her in marked colonial terms: '...he awakes with the eccentric notion that the Irish girl has invaded him, as territory is invaded'" (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 3, Trevor 179).

Liam Harte and Lance Pettit also read the novel as a postcolonial narra-

tive; they argue that with “each successive meeting [Hilditch] becomes more contemptuous of the cultural background of this ‘runaway from the Irish bog-lands’” (Trevor 127) whose threatened return to her family is a “fate which is, literally, worse than death and one from which he, the enlightened colonial redeemer, must deliver her, the misguided postcolonial victim.” Felicia’s final escape, they assert, “precipitates the collapse of Hilditch’s colonial identity” (Harte and Pettit 75). These critics argue that a postcolonial reading foregrounds two aspects of Hilditch’s violent psychosis, which they see as “the product of thwarted imperial ambition and psycho-sexual abuse” (74). Hilditch’s imperial focus was directed toward the Irish by his mother’s lover, Uncle Wilf, who posed as a soldier and inculcated anti-Irish prejudice in the boy with such statements as “the Black and Tans should have sorted that island out, only unfortunately they held back for humane reasons” (Trevor 149). In his first encounters with Felicia, Hilditch boasts of his military lineage: “Two relatives went down to the Boers.... I’ve had a regimental career myself. The army’s in my blood as you might say” (63). This delusion, in combination with his mother’s incestuous abuse of the boy when abandoned by Uncle Wilf and her other lovers, accounts for his perversion. Although in his review of the film Tony Tracy suggests that “in Trevor’s novel we are given little explanation as to why Hilditch is a serial killer, beyond the fact that he is lonely” (Tracy 14), I find more convincing the arguments advanced by Harte and Pettit and Fitzgerald-Hoyt. The actual description of Hilditch’s mother in action is so elliptical that it may be missed, perhaps. But even as a trace it evokes the image of a vampire-like consumption of the boy. This is a detail the very alert Egoyan would have responded to in his own characterization of that mother-son relationship even if he did not exploit it as cause of Hilditch’s madness:

Had she always known that she would turn to him when there was no one else?...Had she foreseen it when first she said, “Just you and Mamma in their own little nest”? Or was it all different, the spur of the moment when she woke him up ... a shred of tobacco on her teeth when she smiled down at him, her ginny breath: in his private life, the occasion has always been there, never lost—not for a moment—in the oblivion that kindly claimed the other. Like a tattoo, she said, the lipstick on his shoulder. (Trevor 195)

Dragging his marked body through life, Trevor’s Hilditch assumes everyone knows the precise nature of his childhood shame. “In the imagination [of the missionary, Miss Calligary] there is the lipstick tattoo [he thinks] ... and the little-boy hands that always have remained so, clothing falling from a woman’s body, the nakedness beneath. There is that odour of [his mother’s] scent in [Miss Calligary’s] nostrils ... and it’s there among the employees, in the canteen and in the kitchen and the painting bays and the offices. There’s the whisper going on and on, the words there were, his own obedience.... It never was his fault that there was prying later on, after years and years; that there is prying still. Each time [he murdered a woman] he hoped there wouldn’t be. Each time he hoped that a friendship would last for ever ... ” (Trevor 200).

Despite Hilditch's delusional sense of being under everyone's gaze, the omniscient narrator remarks that no one "passing by in Duke of Wellington Road ... has reason to wonder about this house or its single occupant. No one passing is aware that a catering manager from a factory, well liked and without enemies, is capable of suffering no more" (Trevor 200). And it is precisely here in the novel that Trevor has Hilditch hang himself from "a ham hook" in his own—and his dead mother's—kitchen (201). Ironically it is Felicia, survivor of Hilditch's last attempt at murder, who remembers him as the seasons change and the years pass. And while there may be pity in her thoughts about him, the theological implication of her statement does not grant him redemption: "Lost within a man who murdered, there was a soul like any other, purity itself it surely once had been" (212).

In Egoyan's film the last scene has Felicia planting flowers in a London park in the company of others, perhaps as part of a youth employment scheme. While she looks a bit longingly at children playing nearby—that abortion still regretted—she is well fed, well clothed, and apparently at peace under a beautiful summer sky. Trevor's Felicia is also at peace but in a much more troubling way. The homelessness she experienced after Hilditch stole her money continues; she does not return to Ireland, although her father and her village await her return. Instead she continues her journey within England, from city to city, town to town, falling in with homeless people wherever she goes. From these she acquires her adult education and her habit of contemplation. Why go home? There is still a harsh and needy father there whom she remembers as "standing still as a statue" for the Soldier's Song (Trevor 206), and the village inhabited by Johnny Lysaght's mother who refused to tell her how to find her son, and her brothers, willing to avenge her deflowering (or their honor?) once, but stolidly returned to their silence, their selfish neglect, and their habitual places in the pub (202).

Trevor's unredeemed picture of Felicia's Irish home stands alongside a view of England which is as damning. At the novel's close she finds herself at Notting Hill, London, under the statue of "Charles James Napier," a nineteenth-century British general and conqueror of India—the kind of man Hilditch longed to be—put on a "pedestal on account of he had a way with soldiers" as Tapper, another homeless wanderer, explains to Felicia (Trevor 210). Instead, Hilditch resembles another Englishman, John Reginald Christie, who is described by Tapper as being "on no pedestal, a different bag of tricks on account he had a way with women" (210). Another serial killer of women whom he buried in his own home, Christie was arrested at the very bridge where Felicia and Tapper stand—and like Hilditch, Christie ended as a hanged man. "This city's full of sights," says Tapper, philosophically, "All human life" (210).

But it is not the sight of the living that propels Felicia from place to place. "She seeks no meaning in the thoughts that occur to her, any more than she searches for one in her purposeless journey, or finds a pattern in the muddle of time and people" (Trevor 212). But a journey without a purpose is not

without content or meaning, and hers is pursued “with the insistence of the grateful... [that in the midst of “odour, filth” and “evil”] “there will be charity and shelter and mercy and disdain; and always, and everywhere, the chance that separates the living from the dead” (213).

It is at this final point that the novel and the film reconverge in a remarkable way. Egoyan, with his insistence on the importance of Irish oral memory, speaks in an interview of the importance of Felicia’s witness to the lost lives of Hilditch’s victims. Her recitation of their names in a litany of remembering keeps them alive (Porton 40). Trevor makes no claims about a peculiarly Irish cast to the recollection, or indeed to the notion that the postcolonial Irish are peculiarly vulnerable in this English demimonde of the homeless. But he can do in prose what Egoyan cannot do so directly on film: focus in on Felicia’s inner state and her post-escape reflections. She keeps the memory of the names and lost lives of the dead women alive, thinking that “if it had happened” she might be together with the murder victims and her dead mother in heaven. And yet Trevor’s close focus is not on the macabre but on Felicia’s serenity, and her satisfaction in the certainty of being alive, simply alive and moving in the sun after a wet night, “a happiness in her solitude at dawn” (Trevor 213). Promises of heaven from her Irish Catholic childhood notwithstanding, “the certainty she knows is what she would chose” (213).

It is here, I imagine, that Trevor began, not with the desire to understand a murderer’s pathology, or indeed to explore the Irish search for identity in postimperial Britain, but rather with a desire to give a life and a history to a homeless girl and all those nameless, homeless folk whose tragedy it is to have no place, no name, no identity to those who pass them by, averting their gaze. “Chosen for death because no one would know when they were there no longer. What trouble made victims of them?” wonders Felicia. “Her mourning is to wonder” (Trevor 209). Egoyan’s is a characteristically generous approach, but Trevor’s is astonishing in its compassion for the people few of us even think about, much less seek to understand. And while this exploration is rooted narratively in the asymmetrical linkages between England and Ireland, its meaning surely encompasses the damage, the evil and—occasionally—the salvation in all human relations.

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