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William Trevor's Protestant Parables

by MARY FITZGERALD-HOYT

Whether he writes about a rural woman seeking unlikely romance in a remote dance hall, a self-deluded Ascendancy family during the Famine years, or an aging teacher trying to break the cycle of sectarian violence, William Trevor has contributed a rich array of characters and scenes to contemporary Irish literature. With impressive imaginative power, like a literary chameleon he takes on the coloration of Irish people far removed from his own experience: he is a Protestant who writes about Catholics; a man who writes about women; an expatriate who writes so convincingly about the country he left four decades ago that poet Eamon Grennan has commented, "... he picks up a stone and turns it over, and he knows the place."

Trevor is often elusive, and even his recent memoirs, Excursions in the Real World (199), though richly revelatory of his writing life, are reticent about his personal life. However, in these memoirs, in interviews, and in recent fiction, Trevor has turned increasingly to a world he knows intimately—middle-class Protestant Ireland. In two recent works of fiction, Reading Turgenev (1991) and "Lost Ground" (1992), that familiar world is rendered into Protestant parables of characters unwilling to extricate themselves from the past and take their place in Ireland's ongoing history. The price of this intransigence is extinction.

In an interview published in Paris Review, Trevor described the Ireland of his youth:

I didn't belong to the new post-1923 Catholic society and I also didn't belong to the Irish Ascendancy. I'm a small-town Irish Protestant, a "lace-curtain" Protestant. Poor Protestants in Ireland are a sliver of people caught between the past—Georgian Ireland with its great houses and all the rest of it—and the new, bustling, Catholic state. Without knowing any of this, without its ever occurring to me, I was able to see things a little more clearly than I would have if I had belonged to either of these worlds. (Stout, 131)

In "Lost Ground" and Reading Turgenev, Trevor plumbs this world of middle-class Protestant Ireland, revealing his increasing concern with his country's colonial legacy. The characters in both works are faced with the choice of clinging to an obsolete or even vicious past or reconciling themselves with their Catholic neighbors. Their failure to do so has tragic consequences.

The central characters of Reading Turgenev, the Dallons and the Quarrys, are Protestant families living in the Midlands. The novel has a dual time setting—1950s and 1980s Ireland. In the 1950s the Protestants in the townland of Culleen
are a dwindling lot, as is evidenced by the scanty congregation at their Sunday services. The Quarrys, Elmer and his sisters Rose and Matilda, continue to run the drapery shop that has been in the family for over a century. Yet they recognize that changing times are rendering the business obsolete; as the sisters reflect, "... already Quarry's was a relic from another age. If the line came to an end the business would pass to distant cousins in Athy, who would probably sell it" (7).

Elmer Quarry is unwilling to abandon hope, and proceeds to follow the patrilineal custom of marrying a younger wife to continue the family line. But times have changed, and Elmer has not fully realized that "all over the country wealth had passed into the hands of a new Catholic middle class, changing the nature of provincial life as it did so" (5). So he begins a passionless courtship of Mary Louise Dallon, one of the townland's few marriageable Protestant women.

The Dallons are likewise a family in decline, as is evidenced by the increasing dilapidation of their "modest" farmhouse. Mr. and Mrs. Dallon struggle to keep their unsteady son, James, interested in the family farm, for, like their neighbors, they fear the alternative:

At that time, from the town and from the land around it, young men were making their way to England or America... Families everywhere were affected by emigration, and the Protestant fraction of the population increasingly looked as if it would never recover. There was no fat on the bones of this shrinking community; there were no reserves of strength. Its very life was eroded by the bleak economy of the times. (14)

Mary Louise marries Elmer not because she loves him but because she desires a change from the dreary routine of farm life, having never set her ambitions higher than the prospect of working in a local shop.

The marriage is from the outset disastrous: though he secretly entertains sexual fantasies about some of the town's Catholic women, Elmer is shocked to discover that in marital relations he is impotent. His shame manifests itself in alcoholism. Mary Louise, assumed by the townspeople to be the reason for the couple's childlessness, must endure not only a loveless, sexless marriage but also the unrelenting criticism of Elmer's unmarried sisters, who bitterly resent their brother's marriage.

Mary Louise escapes her unhappy life through a rekindled interest in her frail cousin, Robert, her childhood love. Robert, a sensitive, romantic young man, is likewise part of a dying Protestant breed—literally so. Unable to have an independent life because of his poor health, he lives with his mother, spending his days recreating World War I battles with his toy soldiers and reading the novels of Turgenev. Though the relationship is unconsummated, Mary Louise learns for the first time what a tragic mistake her marriage has been, for Robert kindles her dormant passion. Ironically, she realizes her passionate feelings only after his untimely death.

Sexual incapacity and childlessness, then, accelerate the decline of this Protestant community. Mary Louise and Elmer remain childless, Elmer's sisters never marry. Robert dies prematurely. Only Mary Louise's sister, Letty, breaks this cycle of decline and she does so by marrying a Catholic.

Letty's relationship with the Catholic veterinarian Dennehy marks a turning
point in the Protestant community, for, though her parents secretly oppose the match, Trevor makes it clear that only through such unions will the Protestant community survive. Letty will not share her sister’s sexual shock and disappointment, for she and Dennehy consummate their relationship before marriage—and Trevor’s language is significant: “He took liberties she had not permitted Gargan or Billie Lyndon to take. In time she laid her head against the car seat and gave herself to them” (91). Symbolically, Letty’s sexual acquiescence to Dennehy reflects the reversal in power between Irish Protestant and Irish Catholic.

And in fact, the wedding marks a new, fragile alliance between Protestant and Catholic communities. That the reception takes place at the Dennehy family pub and one of the wedding gifts is a picture of the virgin and the Sacred Heart secretly offends Mrs. Dallon, but she and her husband publicly express joy about the marriage. Trevor describes the wedding reception with wry humor: catching sight of a vigil-lighted religious picture in the Dennehy home, “all of a sudden Mrs. Dallon found herself wondering whom [her son] would marry” (156). But though the alcohol-befuddled Elmer questions the match—“...poor Protestants for donkey’s years, why would they be pleased to see their grandchildren brought up holy Romans?” (146)—Trevor makes it clear that this is an auspicious event, for the Dennehy’s marriage is not only happy, but fertile: Letty is soon pregnant.

The Dennehys are likewise distinctive in the Protestant community for their attitude toward the past. Their rehabilitation of an abandoned farmhouse into a thriving home is in marked contrast to Elmer’s misguided attempts to continue a declining family business and Robert’s pathetic attempts to reenact past battles with his toy soldiers. Even Robert’s romantic trysts with Mary Louise take place in an overgrown graveyard.

But Mary Louise herself manifests the most disturbing inability to face the future. After Robert’s death she invents a fantasy life to assuage the very real misery of her marriage. She furnishes an attic room with Robert’s possessions and there indulges in an imaginary marriage with her dead cousin. So happy does this invented life make her that she feigns more madness than she suffers just to be committed to an institution, where she can escape Elmer’s seedy decline and his sister’s petty malice. She succeeds in this quest for 31 years, until the unthinkable happens: the institution closes, and a now-elderly Elmer arrives to take her home.

With age, and in now 1980s Ireland, Elmer acquires a new dignity. After decades of passivity in the face of his sisters’ bullying, he asserts his loyalty to his wife and his determination to bring her home. Mary Louise’s only wish—and Elmer grants it—is that she eventually be buried beside her cousin.

Three decades have solidified the decline of the Protestant community, a decline that was already apparent in the 1950s. The older Dallons have died, and their dream of keeping the farm in the family has withered: their son James discovers that his sons have no interest in the land. Elmer finally acquiesces to the fact that times have changed, and sells the family business. Only Letty and Dennehy thrive.

*Reading Turgenev* reflects some of Trevor’s personal reality: unemployment
drew him to reluctant emigration in the 1950s. As he once observed in an interview: “I hated leaving Ireland. I was very bitter at the time”; but significantly, he added, “But, had it not happened, I think I might never have written at all” (Bruckner C14). But what Trevor has created in Reading Turgenev is no mere reminiscence of the world of his youth. Instead, he once again draws on his early training as a historian (he received a B.A. in History from Trinity College Dublin) to create a symbolic reading of Ireland’s past.

The world of the Dallons and the Quarrys is a microcosm of post-World War II Ireland, and their pervasive inability to shake themselves loose from the past and locate themselves in Catholic Ireland mirrors the plight of those Protestants who saw themselves as dislocated by the political and economic changes wrought by Irish independence—as Trevor describes them in Excursions in the Real World, “smalltime Protestant stock, far removed from the well-to-do Ascendancy of the recent past yet without much of a place in de Valera’s new Catholic Ireland” (xiii).

“Lost Ground” is somewhat of a departure for Trevor in that its Protestant family, the Leesons, has been actively engaged in the suppression of Catholics. The family includes a thuggish son, Garfield, who, ironically, works as a “butcher’s assistant” but derives his greatest satisfaction from being “a hardman volunteer” who delights in boasting about killing Catholics. Every July the Leesons volunteer their lands for the Orange parade (celebrating the victory of Protestant forces under King William III at the Battle of the Boyne, 1690), while their Catholic neighbors stay indoors fearfully. Their political beliefs have caused a deep rift in the family, for though the Leesons express sorrow over their estrangement from their daughter Hazel, they have had a hand in causing it:

The tit-for-tat murders spawned by that same hard-man mentality, the endless celebration of a glorious past on one side and the picking over of ancient rights on the other, the reluctance to forgive—all this was what Hazel had run away from. (40)

In an incident recalling Trevor’s earlier ghost stories (“The Raising of Elvira Tremlett,” “The Death of Peggy Morrissey”—or “Peggy Meehan,” as it is named in the Collected Stories), the Leesons teenage son, Milton, encounters a mysterious woman whom he is convinced “wasn’t alive.” Asserting that she is “St. Rosa,” the woman kisses Milton—a “holy” kiss, she calls it—and urges him, “Don’t be afraid when the moment comes.... There is too much fear.” (38)

As in the earlier stories, whether this woman is a visitation, reality, or figment of Milton’s imagination, she has a profound psychological impact on the boy’s life. Haunted by her words, Milton unsuccessfully seeks advice, first from his dour brother-in-law, the Reverend Herbert Cutcheon, who chalks the event up to adolescent hormones, then urges the boy to keep silent. Milton then horrifies his family by confiding in a Catholic priest, but sees that Father Mulhall is struggling to contain his anger. The priest has heard of Garfield’s vicious reputation, rankles at the implicit threat of the annual Orange parade, and, in a touch of Trevor’s wry humor, wonders what business Catholic saints have appearing to Protestant boys.
But the new Milton feels compelled to justify the way of God to men and women. He cycles to neighboring villages to preach St. Rosa’s message of forgiveness:

St. Rosa could forgive the brutish soldiers and their masked adversaries, one or other of them responsible for each of the shattered motorcars and shrouded bodies that came and went on the television screen. (50)

He speaks of Hazel’s estrangement, the Orange Parade, and Father Mulhall’s anger.

Like those earlier figures whom Kristin Morrison christens “holy fools”—Cynthia of “Beyond the Pale,” and the title character of “Attracta,” for example—all of whom call for forgiveness and reconciliation, Milton preaches an unwelcome message. But unlike these women, whose punishment was to be ignored, Milton’s story has a more sinister ending. Embarrassed by their son’s notoriety, the Leesons put him under close surveillance. He eats his meals in solitude and is often locked in his room. Eventually he is murdered by two men, one of them his own brother, Garfield. And though there is talk of the Provisional I.R.A. in the neighborhood, Hazel, who returns home for the funeral, studies the faces at the graveside and realizes the shocking truth: “All of them knew.” Disturbingly, Garfield’s “hard-man reputation had been threatened, and then enhanced” (56) by the murder of his brother.

The Leesons’ desperate attempts to salvage their reputation result in a decidedly Pyrrhic victory. Their farm, which has been in the family since 1809, will become “lost ground.” Of their two remaining sons, Stewart has Down’s Syndrome, and Garfield has in the past declared his intention to sell the land should he inherit it. Noting the multiple puns of the story’s title, Morrison concludes:

The final and greatest lost ground is peace itself: instead of making progress toward recognizing their brotherhood and learning to live together, this community has lost ground by fostering and condoning fratricide. (167)

The Leesons—and their name itself is a pun—fail to learn the lessons of the past, and in their failure to escape their history they must live with its nightmares.

* * *

TREVOR’S IMPRESSIVE BODY of Irish fiction frequently grapples with the meaning of the past. His explorations of Irish sectarian violence assert urgently that the past must not repeat itself; his studies of Irish family life frequently reveal melancholy souls trapped by their own personal histories and relentless memories. Never sentimental about the past, Trevor insists instead on its crippling emotional power.

In Reading Turgenev and “Lost Ground,” as in Trevor’s earlier fiction, characters’ inability to free themselves from the past renders their lives sterile, both literally and figuratively. But in earlier works the power of the past seems more inexorable and individuals’ choices more circumscribed. We never expect the title character of “Attracta” to succeed in her saintly mission of ending the
violence in Northern Ireland. The butler Fogarty's wish (in "The News from Ireland") to stem the cycle of invasion and oppression that is Irish history is not one that he will ever see realized. For these Protestant characters, history is comparable to Stephen Dedalus's nightmare.

Reading Turgenev and "Lost Ground," despite their melancholy tone, are not quite so fatalistic. Letty Dallon Dennehy refuses to share the plight of her dying Protestant community. And as the heartbroken and guilt-ridden Leesons stand at Milton's grave, Hazel's thoughts urge us not to share their acquiescence:

The family would not ever talk about the day, but through their pain they would tell themselves that Milton's death was the way things were, the way things had to be. That was their single consolation. (56)

The Leesons do not have to accept Garfield's brutality; they do not have to cling to the traditions of the past. These two Protestant parables offer a more guardedly optimistic view of Ireland's history. Trevor plumbs the world of his own middle-class Protestant background, and the moral of his parables is that those who lock their identity in a vanishing past are doomed to exclusion from Ireland's future.

Works Cited