Matthews, Mark and Molly
Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52 in two contemporary Irish Dramas

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Two recent Irish dramas, Molly Sweeney by Brian Friell and Communion by Aidan Matthews, make use of the motif of blindness and allude to the Gospel miracles of healing. This paper will attempt to explore some elements of intertextuality between these three texts and suggest that the afterlife of texts is as much a dimension of the process of interpretation as is the exploration of the text's genesis and literary origins. If the term "intertextuality" is a relatively recent one, the process of reading one text in the light of others has probably been going on since the beginning of reading. Texts may "enter" other texts in a variety of ways: through direct quotation, discreet allusion, imitation or parody, to name but a few.

Blindness in the Gospel according to Mark

Readers of this journal need little reminding of how contemporary Marcan scholarship has alerted readers to the importance of the evangelist's technique of "intercalation" and to the significance of blindness as a metaphor for misunderstanding or failure in discipleship. The Gospel's central section, the journey to Jerusalem, is framed by two narratives of cures from blindness (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). For most of this section (except for a single healing story of the possessed boy in 9:14-27 and the controversy about divorce in 10:2-9), Jesus has

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1 Brian Friell, Molly Sweeney (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994); Aidan Matthews, Communion, (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Playscript series, 2000). References to page numbers of these editions will appear in the body of the text.
2 For an introduction to intertextuality from a literary critical stance, see Intertextuality: Theories and Practices (ed. Michael Wartof and Judith Still) Manchester University Press, 1990. That it has proved a companionable term in recent biblical studies might be judged by titles such as Dale Allison, The Historical Jesus: Scripture in Q (Harrisburg: 2000).
3 Most commentators discuss the significance of this technique, sometimes called the Marcan sandwich, see for example, J.R.Edwards; "Marcan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Marcan Narratives," N.T. 31 (1980) 193-216.
4 The excessively negative picture of T. Weeden (Mark: Traditions in Conflict, Philadelphia, 1971) has been balanced by a more literary reading which mirrors the reader's initial enthusiasm and fear of conflict (J.R. Donahue The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark (Milwaukee: 1983).
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

In the play itself, Frank, Molly's self-educated husband, will quote the debate between the philosophers Locke, Molyneux and Berkeley about vision and the reconstruction of reality which he discovered in a do-it-yourself magazine.\textsuperscript{13}

Friel is, at surface level, exploring the philosophical problem of how sighted and non-sighted people construct the world and whether tactile and other non-visual methods of perception can be translated ultimately into the language of vision. Language, translation and memory are recurrent themes in his work.\textsuperscript{14} As the play opens, Molly tells how "by the time I was five years of age, my father had taught me the names of dozens of flowers and herbs and shrubs and trees." Under the guidance of her father, she had learned how to order the world by the "same ritual of naming and counting and touching and smelling." From Mr. Rice the surgeon, we learn that Molly was not totally sightless for "she could distinguish between light and dark, she could see the direction from which light came, she could detect the shadow of Frank's hand moving in front of her face. But for all practical purposes, she had no useful sight" (17). She has, however, a profound capacity for joy, for the pleasures of work, radio, walking, music, and especially from swimming.

I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience -- every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone -- sensation that existed only by touch and feel, and moving swiftly and rhythmically through the enfolding world: and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it... (24).

In contrast to Molly's profound vision of the world and her place in it, both husband and surgeon are blind in a different way. Frank has taken on the restoration of Molly's sight as the latest in a line of worthy but misguided causes. Frank is an innocent enthusiast with the autodidact's smattering of information on the most unlikely subjects. He has built up a file on Molly's case, including a collection of extracts from various philosophers on "the relationship between vision and knowledge, between seeing and understanding." (28).

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Rice is an alcoholic surgeon in professional decline, drinking to forget the bitterness of betrayal by his wife's adultery with a colleague. Fantasy takes over when he finally decides to take on Molly's case. He contemplates advising his former glittering colleagues of the step he is about to undertake. He considers phoning his former professor:

Paddy Rice here, Professor. Of course you remember him! You called him a rogue star once -- oh yes, that caused a titter. Well he works in a rundown hospital in Donegal now. And I suspect, I think, I believe for no good reason, that Paddy Rice is on the trembling verge, Professor. He has a patient who has been blind for forty years. And do you know what? He is going to give her vision -- the twenty first recorded case in over a thousand years! And for the first time in her life -- how does St. Mark put it in the Gospel? -- for the first time in her life she will "see men walking as if like trees" (28).

Molly comes to realise that she is a victim of the ambitions of the two men, just as in her childhood she had been used by her father in a war against her mother. She wants to see, but only for a brief time

to be afforded a brief excursion to this land of vision, not to live there -- just to visit. And during my stay, to devour it again and again with greedy, ravenous eyes. To gorge on all those luminous sights and wonderful spectacles until I knew every detail intimately and utterly .... And then, oh yes, to return again to my own world with all that rare understanding in me forever (41).

That in fact is what happens. From her final monologue, we learn that Molly is been confined to a mental hospital. The final barriers of space and time appear to have collapsed "and anyhow, why my borderline country is where I live now. I am at home there. Well ... at ease! ... And why should I question it anymore?" (67). Richard Pine suggests that the play might be read as an allegory of colonialisation or as a feminist fable.\textsuperscript{15} There may be some truth in the suggestion, but perhaps, like all Friel's work, it might be also be read as a reflection on the profound issues, which trouble modern Ireland. Pine regards Dancing at

\textsuperscript{13}The debate is outlined in Sacks, op. cit. 164.

\textsuperscript{14}As might be judged from the titles of some of his plays, e.g. The Communication Cord (1982), Making History (1988), Translations (1991).

\textsuperscript{15}The Diviner, 288.
Lughnasa and Wonderful Tennessee as "allegories of a society which has lost its memory, its imaginative hinterland." Each of the characters in Molly Sweeney is in search of a lifting of the darkness and confusion of vision which threatens to extinguish even the rudimentary sight that can tell the direction from which light comes. Molly longs for a temporary visit to the land of vision, but the cost of that sojourn will be a blinding by the light. Frank is in search of one great cause that will replace all the ephemeral schemes that have ruled his life. Rice yearns for the single bravura performance that will redeem a career that has lapsed into self-pitying despair. In one sense, they are all blind with only enough sight to tell the difference between light and dark and the direction from which light comes. Friel has probed relentlessly the hidden places where pain lurks in contemporary Ireland. He distances himself from the traditional language of religion, yet his dramatic work consistently uses imaginative images of mythic scope to uncover something of the inner emptiness and blindness of a society that has broken from its spiritual and cultural roots under the pressures of modernity. The real questions Molly Sweeney probes are, in the end, less the philosophical issues of the correlation of sense knowledge and vision, but more those of deeper human mysteries of how one can negotiate a world when the traditional maps take no account of new features in the landscape, or to borrow an image from Translations, when once-familiar place-names are translated into a new language. Molly has found a kind of case in a borderland country and is reluctant to question it anymore. At the end of his first breathless monologue, Frank goes back to the debate between Locke and Moherne about whether people who knew a cube or a sphere by touch alone would be able to distinguish them by sight. Rice had given him the technical name for such a condition.

He said that neurologists had a word for people in that condition—seeing, but not knowing, not recognising what they see. A word first used in this context by Freud apparently. He said that people in that condition are called agnostic. Yes. Agnostic. Strange, because I always thought that word had to do with believing or not believing.
suicide by cutting his wrists. Felicity is a free spirit bringing something of the happiness her name implies to Jordan and for a brief moment weaving an enchanted spell around him. Arthur and Fr. Anthony have good Ulster Protestant and Southern Catholic names respectively.

The religious idiom through which Matthews explores the questions of life, death, suffering and relationships is uncompromising: but like the religious image near the sick bed, it is “modern and primitive at the same time” (stage directions, 7). The play opens with Marcus pretending to read to his brother. In reality, both are weaving a sexual fantasy about a priest and his lover that ends abruptly with Marcus’ musings on the modern canonisation process. He suggests that the only criterion for sainthood appears to be “an active hex on sex in order to achieve the state of holiness, alongside utter ignorance of the way in which ordinary human beings live and die in the dirty, fertile world that God looked at and thought was a good thing” (9). The celebration of the Mass which is the climax of the first act is cut short by a scream from Jordan as his tumour invades a nerve, the harbinger of death. In formal terms, it is a very accurate rendering of the liturgy, with the only difference from normal Catholic practice being that Fr. Anthony passes the stole to Felicity who wears it and then attempts to drape it around Martha, who, uncomfortable at this breach of her familiar boundaries, bundles it into her lap. The script passages chosen are a free form of Isaiah 43, Psalm 102 and Mark’s story of the cure of the blind man at Bethsaida.

Matthew’s characters speak in religious terms with fluency and lack of inhibition. One might detect in their discourse some common representative Irish religious types. Martha’s straight-laced traditional piety takes her to Lough Derg to pray for Jordan, but the clear boundaries of her acquired social world and status (she was born after all in Ballyshannon, just a few miles from Lough Derg, but now lives in Dublin 4) render her incapable of entering into the liminal communities of the pilgrimage. As she confides to Fr. Anthony, “Lough Derg is not really meant for people like us.... Very good people go... but you...” (Fianna Fail (61). She blames Marcus’ religion teachers for his mental illness and his preoccupation with God. The priests who ran the Dublin colleges for the sons of the professional classes knew what they were doing: “so it was one religion class per week and one maths class per day with a double period on Friday.” The arrival of young lay religion teachers with boards and banjos subverted that neatly ordered world with its claim of divine sanction:

They filled his head with all kinds of nonsense about solidarity and brotherhood and humpbacked whales and God only knows what else...

You can fall out of pride, you can fall out of favour with God himself but you can’t fall out of your social class (30).

Arthur claims to be just “a pavilion-member” of the Methodist Church, but despite his bumbling exterior, he has a practical, if at times awkward, love of neighbour. The heartbreak of estrangement from his only son for whom he endlessly photographs the neighbourhood and whose marijuana plants he keeps in his greenhouse simply because they are a reminder of him, mark him out as a tragic prodigal father who pours his affections on the McHenry boys.

Felicity whom Arthur describes as “the picture of happiness” is a more complex character than she may at first appear. She is adrift from her Church of Ireland moorings, consults a psychic regularly, has got drunk at Marcus’ party and shares a joint with Jordan in an act of secular communion. Her religion is uncomplicated — “where in the world is Jesus Christ not really present... I think that if God loves us as much as he says he does, then he won’t let any of us get lost in the darkness” (50-51).

The three younger men, Jordan, Marcus and Fr. Anthony are the most perplexing of all. They are children of post-modern Ireland, with neither the easy certainties of Martha and Arthur nor Felicity’s capacity for spontaneous joy. Through their painful and sometimes irrevocable self-awareness, the author articulates a sense of the precariousness of the contemporary Irish religious condition which is aware that it no longer has a firm grasp on its story but has no other ready to hand. Anthony is the most uncomplicated of the three. He claims that he entered his Order because he loved the sense of community, the prestige of ministry and the readiness of the missions it offered. He seems confused but not very bright, translating the story into a sentimental idiom of love: “Jordan dwells in the mystery of God, I live in the mystifications of theology” (63). As Martha acidly remarks, he loves everyone, “but the only people he cannot stand are his own religious superiors and of course, the Pope” (21). His articulation of the traditional truths of faith avoids the hard edge of intellectual engagement and so

Matthews has described the religious state of post-modern Ireland in a vivid paragraph. “A mystic said to me some years ago that the Catholic Irish had endured two haematomas in the last hundred and fifty years and that the blood-loss was such that it would require subtle transfusions to restore even a threshold well-being to a patient who was sick unto death. In the first instance, we had lost our language, he said, and so our stories were unintelligible to us. In the second, we had lost our faith, and had no tale manners accordingly for the right bread-breaking. This is a drastic shorthand for a complex narrative, but it may be true.” (“Altered State: Catholicism on a Cusp”, The Way Supplement, 98 (Summer, 2000) 15).
Conclusion

As technology advances and more people focus on this topic, the need for
these principles of ethical behavior in our work environment is more evident
today than ever before. In order to ensure that ethical behavior is practiced at
work, it is important for all employees to understand and adhere to the
principles outlined in this paper.

The use of accountability in the workplace is crucial to maintaining
a healthy work environment. By recognizing and holding ourselves
responsible for our actions, we can create a culture of ethical behavior that
benefits everyone involved. It is important for organizations to
emphasize these principles and encourage their employees to
practice them in their daily work.

In conclusion, the principles of ethical behavior in the workplace are
vital to maintaining a healthy and productive work environment. By
practicing these principles, we can create a culture of accountability
and responsibility that benefits our organizations and individuals alike.

References


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in the intertextual process or the way in which the biblical writers, consciously or unconsciously, are themselves readers and become echo chambers, so to speak, of existing texts. There is another dimension to the process. I have attempted to explore two contemporary texts in the light of a common biblical intratext. Both Friel and Matthews invite us to read our canonical text in a more provocative way, holding it up against the constantly shifting kaleidoscopic pattern of contemporary Irish culture. One of the gains of the recent interest in literary intertextuality has been the salutary reminder that "the text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole and so does not function as a closed system." This is true even when a text achieves the status of a classic, like the texts of scripture. The bible text must be allowed to enter into dialogue with other texts and not just those from which its creators are presumed to have borrowed. A reader who knows only the bible will remain less aware and less sophisticated as a reader. As a teacher of undergraduates studying theology as part of an arts degree, I am often struck by the poverty of their reading experience which prevents them from grasping much of what the text offers. Both Friel and Matthews have proved to be imaginative readers of Mark. They invite us as fellow readers to engage once more with the Gospel story, not as a dead letter or an archaeological artefact but as word and symbol that call us to explore something of the reality of our own time.