

‘Sligo made me and Sligo undid me’: Mental Health, Coercive Confinement and Repression in Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*

Åke Persson, University West

Abstract

In recent years, the institution of the mental asylum in Ireland has been given much attention. For example, the TV documentary, *Behind the Walls* (2011), focused on mental health care in post-independence Ireland. It brought up the often gruesome conditions under which the asylum forced the patients, or inmates, to live. It also revealed how the mental health regulations were misused by doctors, priests and families at the local level to get rid of individuals who in various ways did not conform to the community’s norms; indeed, it was not uncommon that once a person had been committed to an asylum, he or she had to remain there for a very long time, sometimes for many decades. This is the fate of the protagonist Roseanne Clear/McNulty in Sebastian Barry’s novel *The Secret Scripture*. Towards the end of her life, still in the Leitrim psychiatric hospital after several decades, Roseanne writes her own story. What emerges is that she has been the victim of external forces and harsh sociocultural norms dominant in the Irish Free State. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas in *Madness and Civilization*, as well as research on Irish mental asylums, this article examines how a repressive system uses mental health and the mental health care system as a tool to excise an individual perceived to be a threat to the social order, an order carefully policed by the Catholic Church, mainly represented by the priest, Father Gaunt.

Keywords: *The Secret Scripture*; Sebastian Barry; Irish mental asylums; Michel Foucault; women in the Irish Free State

Introduction

Much attention has recently been given to widespread abuse that took place in various Irish institutions over several decades, for example, industrial schools often run by the Catholic Church. Further evidence of such abuse was revealed in a TV documentary, *Behind the Walls* (2011), which focused on mental health care in post-independence Ireland. Not only did it reveal the often-gruesome conditions under which the asylum forced the patients, or inmates, to live, with a stern and monotonous regime and in buildings badly maintained, but it also revealed how the mental health regulations were misused by doctors, priests and families at the

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local level to get rid of uncomfortable or unsettling individuals who in various ways did not conform to the community's norms or who were an embarrassment to families. Indeed, it was not uncommon that once a person had been committed to an asylum, he or she had to remain there for a very long time, sometimes for many decades. This is what happens to the protagonist Roseanne Clear/McNulty in Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* (2008), which is the focus of this article. Towards the end of her life, close to her hundredth birthday and still in the Leitrim psychiatric hospital after several decades, Roseanne writes her own story, and we understand that she is one of those who for social, political or economic reasons were ostracised in the Free State. Drawing on, for example, Michel Foucault's ideas in *Madness and Civilization* (1989) as well as research on Irish mental asylums, this article seeks to examine how in the novel a repressive system uses mental health and the mental health care as a tool to excise an individual perceived to be a threat to the social order, an order carefully guarded, or policed, by the Catholic Church, represented among others by the priest, Father Gaunt.

Sebastian Barry's Literary Landscape

It is often pointed out by critics that Sebastian Barry's writing is characterised by a deep poetic quality. John Wilson Foster (2009), for instance, identifies three main qualities in Barry's writing: 'Sebastian Barry's perhaps most characteristic idiom, in novel, poem and play, is a gravid lyricism. This idiom is admirably suited to his most characteristic discourse: the monologue or soliloquy, to his most characteristic note: the elegiac, and to his most characteristic device and dimension: the flashback, recollection or vision. All are expressions of a long suspiration' (72). In a similar vein, Derek Hand (2011) contends that '[t]he use of lyrical language touches all Barry's writing, in prose as well as his drama' (259). It was as a poet he began his literary career, and according to Christina Hunt Mahony (2006), he 'remains a poet' (1). However, until the novels *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008) appeared, both of which were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, 'Barry's most acclaimed achievement,' Hunt Mahony (2006) suggests (4), was the play *The Steward of Christendom* (1995), which became an 'international success' (Butler Cullingford 2006: 124).

If many critics see lyrical qualities in all of Barry's writing, significantly they also seem to agree that it is permeated with certain

central preoccupations. Nicholas Grene (2006), for instance, asserts that Barry wishes ‘to re-imagine the larger history of the nation and the parts of that narrative that have tended to be forgotten or suppressed’ (168). Discussing Barry’s 1998 novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, he goes on to state that ‘Barry [...] is also writing back into the story of Ireland those parts of it that our master-narrative has most signally left out, the pieces of our past that do not fit with the way we want to imagine our history’ (2006: 169). Similarly, Roy Foster (2006) identifies certain dominant themes in his work, such as ‘people left over in the margins and interstices, through religious exclusion, or a change of regime, or a redefinition of loyalty’ (183), and he firmly argues that the author is ‘bent upon redeeming the forgotten, marginalized and awkward minor actors of Irish history [...]’ (196). Many of these characters are in fact loosely modelled on Barry’s own extended family, who were loyal to the Crown and who worked for the Empire, as policemen or as soldiers and officers in the British army, and in Derek Hand’s words, the writer ‘wants to uncover those silenced stories of Irish allegiance to Empire’ (2011: 260).

That this project is contentious and by no means uncontroversial, as it is perceived by some to be, in Hunt Mahony’s words, ‘at variance with the main nationalist narrative’ (2006: 5), becomes evident in Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s exploration of *The Steward of Christendom* and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* which, she holds, are informed by ‘contemporary anti-Republican politics’ (2006: 125). Although sympathetic to Barry’s ‘desire to restore [the stories of the displaced and defeated policemen] to the national memory’ (2006: 144), she concludes by stating that ‘both texts would have been more powerful had they been less driven by their anti-Republican thesis, less concerned to refute a one-sided version of history by offering an equally one-sided and sometimes factually misleading rebuttal’ (2006: 144). Commenting on *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, Derek Hand seems to agree, arguing that ‘[w]hat is being implied is a return to a colonial pre-independent Ireland’ (2011: 260).

While aspects of Barry’s artistic project are seemingly provocative to some critics, by zooming in on a previously ignored and arguably shamed part of the Irish population, Barry’s writing, I would hold, participates in opening up Irish history and the notion of Irishness, who is in and who is out, as it were. Of course, inclusion and exclusion are, literally, a central concern in *The Secret Scripture*, dealing as it does not only with different

political loyalties and religious creeds but also with the issue of mental health and mental asylums in post-independence Ireland, which will be the main focus here.

Asylums: Separating the Morally Unsound from the Morally Sound

In his *Madness and Civilization* (1989), Michel Foucault examines how madness was perceived and constructed in the age of reason and subsequently. From the very beginning, the institutions that housed those considered unable to live in society, such as Hôpital Général in France, were not hospitals in the modern sense, that is, medical establishments, but places designed to separate those of little value to society from those who contributed to society in various ways. Hôpital Général and, we learn later, other such places, were part of what Foucault calls 'a sort of semijudicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes' (1989: 37).

As Foucault shows, very early the principal function of such places was confinement of, for example, the poor, the elderly, beggars, 'the unemployed, the idle, and vagabonds' (1989: 47), as well as 'the debauched, spendthrift fathers, prodigal sons, blasphemers, men who "seek to undo themselves," libertines' (1989: 60). To these should be added, for instance, "the insane," "demented" men, individuals of "wandering mind," and "persons who have become completely mad." Between these and the others, no sign of differentiation' (1989: 60); anyone who was deemed unfit to live in society and who did not seem to follow established norms and expectations, be they criminals, insane, poor or old, could be subject to confinement.

That this kind of confinement had clear moral overtones becomes evident from Foucault's examination. Society had to be cleansed of unwanted elements who did not manage to live up to society's demands or who did not contribute to society's well-being. Therefore, such places, and later asylums, became correctional; not least was moral correction one of its most important tasks: inmates should be guided in the right moral direction. As Foucault demonstrates, this task was central in times of economic stagnation, when being out of work was perceived as idleness and idleness, in turn, part of a behaviour 'belonging to evil' (1989: 57). These places, then, were instrumental in separating the bad and morally

unsound from the good and morally sound. Leaning on Foucault's ideas, Damien Brennan (2014) writes:

Order, rationality and consistency are a prerequisite of capitalism and are therefore constructed as core features of a sane individual. Disorder, irrationality and inconsistency are constructed as insanity and individuals embodying such traits are portrayed as a threat to a progressive capitalist society. The removal of insane individuals from the public sphere is therefore perceived as justified for the better good of capitalist society as a whole. (66)

Moral correction as a central aspect of asylums was further emphasised as the Catholic Church saw this kind of policing as part of improving people's virtues, that is, making them more compliant with spiritual matters (Foucault 1989: 58-59). It is not a big step from this notion to a general moral discipline of unwanted behaviour, not just at the societal level but also at other levels, especially at the family level, so that very early in the history of such places, family members perceived to be an embarrassment or troublesome in different ways could easily be committed to such institutions for longer or shorter periods in order to remove the cause of the embarrassment or trouble. As Foucault writes, '[i]n its most general form, confinement is explained, or at least justified, by the desire to avoid scandal' (1989: 62). Although both men and women were committed to asylums, this kind of treatment was, perhaps not surprisingly, given their subordinate position throughout history, quite often directed at women, for example, when it comes to sexual behaviour, domestic matters or marriage.

Lisa Appignanesi, in her *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (2009), examines how women have frequently been the target of society's condemning views on what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, or indeed normal or abnormal behaviour. By going through a vast number of cases, she shows how women have often been seen to deviate from the norm, a norm that is defined by men and from men's perspectives and realities. Throughout history, therefore, it has been argued that women have had a greater propensity for deviant behaviour, indeed insanity, and have been given a wide variety of diagnoses, often originating in women's biology. In other words, there is something in women's bodies that makes them more prone to madness, it has been argued by male doctors, be it the womb, menstruation, the brain, hormones, and similar biological phenomena.

Frequently, too, madness is historically ‘in one way or another [linked] to [women’s] sexual relationships to men’ (Appignanesi 2009: 50). This, in turn, opens up to arbitrary and prejudiced treatment of the woman concerned. ‘Patients,’ she continues later, ‘could well find themselves the victims of a doctor’s prejudice about what kind of behaviour constituted sanity; this could all too easily work against women who didn’t conform to the time’s norms of sexual behaviour or living habits’ (2009: 96). Moreover, as Appignanesi argues, not only does it make possible prejudiced attitudes, it also opens up to abuse of power in the shape of corruption: ‘Corruption—in the form of medical collusion with strict or cheating or abusive fathers and husbands—could also ensure confinement well beyond need [...]’ (2009: 96). It seems fair to argue, then, that women have been the victims of arbitrary policing, resulting in confinement, based very much on norms and conventions as to what womanhood entails and how a woman should act.

Mental Health Care in Ireland: Getting Rid of the Unwanted

On close examination, the situation in Ireland has not been much different. If anything, it has arguably been even harsher and was so even before Independence. In *Coercive Confinement: Patients, Prisoners and Penitents* (2012), Eoin O’Sullivan and Ian O’Donnell alert us to the fact that Ireland, from the mid-nineteenth century, relied heavily on incarceration in various forms through a network of institutions; as they put it, ‘a large infrastructure of social control existed outside of the formal criminal justice system [...] used extensively as a mechanism to contain and discipline poor children and “fallen” or “hysterical” women’ (2012: x). Part of this infrastructure were ‘industrial and reformatory schools, Magdalen Homes, Mother and Baby Homes and district mental hospitals’ (2012: x), apart from prisons and youth detention centres known as borstals. At Independence, O’Sullivan and O’Donnell state, ‘some 129 institutions of confinement dotted the Irish landscape’ (2012: 258); indeed, commenting on the vast number of mental asylums in Ireland, Brennan (2014) argues that ‘[i]n practice these institutions were established, expanded and extensively utilised in response to a wide array of social processes. Rather than being austere and isolated institutions on the margins of communities, asylums were in fact closely intertwined with the fabric of Irish social life at the national, local and individual level’ (1).

Thus, such institutions were deeply embedded in the Irish cultural fabric long before Independence. In the nineteenth century, attempts were made to improve the generally appalling mental health care situation in Ireland. As Brendan D. Kelly (2008) informs us, records show that there were ‘substantial deficiencies in the provision of medical, psychiatric and social care in workhouses in the latter part of the nineteenth century’ (53). In order to decrease the number of people in these institutions it was decided that asylums would be built, which would be better suited for these patients and to which they could be transferred, and around 1830 ‘asylums had been built in Dublin, Derry, Belfast, Limerick and Armagh [...]; further asylums had soon opened at Killarney in 1852, Kilkenny in 1852, Omagh in 1853, Mullingar in 1855 and Sligo in 1855’ (Kelly 2008: 55).

If the conditions in the workhouses had been dismal, the conditions in the asylums were not much better around the turn of the century and into the twentieth century. ‘The overall impression,’ O’Sullivan and O’Donnell contend, ‘is of dreary places, where lonely people spent long periods of their lives, some of them emerging unchanged and others seeing out their days there. These were forgotten people living bleak lives’ (2012: 12-13). As Aíne McCarthy (2004) writes, not much money was spent on maintaining these institutions, which, she argues, ‘translated into a bare, unadorned environment, with few comforts. Basic neglect was sometimes in evidence: unpainted walls, worn floors or bedsteads which needed cleaning and enamelling. Diet was basic, mostly bread and potatoes, and followed the usual practice in rural Ireland of giving more food to the men’ (106). An even more damning assessment of the public psychiatric care was given as early as 1924 by an E. Boyd Barrett, SJ, who wrote:

Apart from the many hardships that the unfortunate patients have to put up with—the poor and monotonous diet, the repulsive prison-like surroundings, the dreary exercise yards, the hideous clothing, the punishments for refractory patients, the uncongenial associates, the nerve-racking cries, the dirt and general gloom, the almost total absence of amusement and recreation—there is this appalling difference between the mental hospitals (as an asylum should be) and the ordinary hospital, that in the latter each kind of disease is carefully treated by the best modern methods, whereas in the former no type of mental disease is fully treated ... To put it bluntly, the patients committed to asylums are condemned to a degrading and miserable imprisonment for life. (qtd in Kelly 2008: 54)

It is interesting to note, as Dermot Walsh (1987) does, that ‘Irish psychiatric hospitals have traditionally been catch-alls, receiving the

rejects of society. These include the demented elderly, the behaviourally disturbed and the inebriate' (111). Since, as Kelly contends, there was 'widespread abuse' (2008: 52) regarding committals, it seems likely that these institutions were also used for getting rid of uncomfortable and embarrassing individuals, not least women. Pauline M. Prior (2003), for instance, demonstrates that committals under the category of 'dangerous lunacy,' under the Dangerous Lunatics Act (1838), were often misused, and individuals whose behaviour could perhaps be regarded as 'unruly, uncomfortable and inappropriate [but] hardly dangerous' (535) were nevertheless often classified as dangerous and hence committed. Brennan holds that the Act 'provided very limited protection against inappropriate utilisation' (2014: 84), as 'no criteria for insanity were set out in this legislation' (2014: 79). Basically any individual, then, ran the risk of being admitted to an asylum, frequently based on social considerations rather than anything remotely close to health reasons. 'Asylums,' Brennan holds,

provided a convenient local solution to a spectrum of social issues. Social deprivation was a wide scale and harsh reality throughout nineteenth century Ireland [...]. Other examples of social problems included family disputes, unemployment, behaviours that challenged sexual norms, pregnancy outside of marriage, a lack of care facilities for the elderly and homelessness. The existence of large local asylums provided a solution to such social problems, which had little or nothing to do with the mental state of the individual admitted. Insanity was a vague, changing and all encapsulating concept which could be applied to most social difficulties so as to facilitate and rationalise the admission of a family member to an asylum. (2014: 91)

In this elaborate network of coercive confinement, women were arguably particularly vulnerable. McCarthy contends in her exploration of 'Gender Ideology and Women's Committal to Enniscorthy Lunatic Asylum 1916-1924,' that it becomes clear from the records 'that many casualties of [Ireland's] strict gender ideology ended up in the asylum' (2004: 104). Insanity was frequently used as a label for behaviour perceived as being in conflict with accepted norms. McCarthy offers a range of examples of this kind of 'unacceptable' behaviour classified as mad. For instance, 'illegitimate' pregnancies often 'cast [...] daughters from their homes' (2004: 104) and according to McCarthy, '[m]any of these castaways ended up in the workhouse or worked in prostitution. Another option was the asylum' (2004: 104). A woman, Joan McCarthy, 'described as "flighty, cheeky and resistive" on admission, who had "threatened violence to her husband" and "will not mind her children" was

committed for “trying to get away from home” (2004: 105). Similarly, ‘[c]onflict between spouses could also lead to committal’ (2004: 105); an Anastasia Hogan, for example, ‘alleged that her husband beat her, called her names and was unfaithful’ (2004: 105), while her husband ‘claimed that she had attempted serious assault on him, struck her child and accused him of unfaithfulness “without any cause.”’ As McCarthy puts it, ‘[i]t was a case of his word against hers, but it was she who was committed’ (2004: 105).

What McCarthy and others find is that the term ‘mad’ and subsequent committal to asylums were often used as a tool for a kind of moral cleansing where ‘uncleanliness, slovenliness, disorderliness, bad sexual habits and destructiveness were all to be eradicated’ (McCarthy 2004: 107). In a society with a rigid gender ideology, ‘which emphasised the “natural” female virtues of obedience, servility and self-sacrifice for women and repressed the reality of female sexuality,’ women’s bodies being ‘a source of sin’ (McCarthy 2004: 105-106), little consideration, if any, was given to these women’s often harsh life situations; or what McCarthy refers to as ‘the struggle endured by so many of these women who were labelled mad, as they tried to cope with familial misfortune, with economic insecurity and powerlessness in a society that allowed them little scope for independence or autonomy, with a gendered code of behaviour which was, for many, impossible to sustain’ (2004: 108).

It seems beyond dispute that the collusion between the state and the church, between doctors and husbands as well as parents and priests, created a system of coercive confinement, to which a vast number of individuals, the majority of them women, ran the risk of being admitted, if for some reason they were perceived as troublesome or different, hence morally inferior. While capitalism was not influential in Ireland, what O’Sullivan and O’Donnell term ‘[r]ural fundamentalism’ (2012: 272) had a similar function in that this socioeconomic system had to find ways in which to ‘manage those members of the family who were surplus to economic requirements’ (2012: 272). Thus, they establish that ‘there can be little doubt that [such institutions] served as repositories for the difficult, the disturbed, the deviant and the disengaged’ (2012: 5). Commentators seem to agree that the family, in tandem with the Catholic Church, had a particularly important role to play in the high rates of admissions to mental asylums and similar places, especially in relation to women and unmarried mothers, whose moral purity was blemished and

had to be restored. For example, Maria Luddy (2001) argues that ‘[l]ike other “undesirable elements” within Irish society, unmarried mothers were expected to be hidden from public view [...]. Unmarried mothers remained social deviants often cast out from hearth and home’ (813).

Mental Health and Repression in The Secret Scripture

I have spent some time on outlining these rather disturbing features of the mental health care in Ireland before and after Independence, since it is through this reality, I would suggest, that *The Secret Scripture* could fruitfully be read. The fate of Roseanne Clear/McNulty is closely interlinked with this kind of deficient, inadequate and coercive mental health care system that to a considerable extent was used as an instrument in a repressive and intolerant society. Discussing the novel, critics find a plethora of concerns to zoom in on, signalling that the text operates at several levels. The centrality of history in Barry’s texts seems to be of particular interest to most critics. In that vein, Neil Murphy (2014) suggests that the novel represents, among other things, ‘[t]he fluidity of historical reconstruction’ in the many written documents presented, which in turn problematizes ‘[o]ur capacity to reconstruct past experiences’ (179). Similarly, Beata Piątek (2011) holds that this text shows ‘considerable scepticism about the possibility of objective history and historical truth’ and that it tries to ‘deal with the taboos of the past before embarking on the problems of the present’ (157). Echoing Piątek, Carmen Zamorano Llena (2016) argues that the novel ‘establish[es] a dialogue between history and the present in order to learn from past mistakes and thus “move on”’ (122), while Robert F. Garratt (2011) points to Barry’s portrayal of ‘individuals whose lives and stories have been underrepresented or even written out of standard histories of Ireland,’ and *The Secret Scripture*, he suggests, ‘is perhaps the most powerful and poignant in this regard’ (136-37). Touching on readings in which history is at the forefront, Karen McCarthy (2017), too, views Roseanne’s secret testimony as an ‘alternative history to the more official version of events that record her sectioning and its justifications,’ opening up to a sense of grace and forgiveness (37). In arguably one of the most perceptive studies of the novel to date, Tara Harney-Mahajan (2012) explores how the personal history of Roseanne is censored and suppressed by official history but how ‘[i]n conflating official history and personal story, Barry represents Roseanne’s official archival documentation alongside her

struggle to narrate her account in order to rewrite the grand narrative of history, and to remind us of the uncounted women that were forced into asylums in Ireland in the twentieth century' (70). Largely through a questioning of historiography, then, the novel invites multiple readings and brings up wounds that are yet to be healed.

The secret scripture of the title refers to Roseanne's own story, written in the first years of the twenty-first century, in secret in her room at the Leitrim mental hospital, where she has been a patient for several decades. However, her story, 'The Testimony of Herself,' signalling that we should read this narrative as her account of events, is interspersed with her psychiatric doctor, Dr Grene's, comments on her in his task to assess her status as the hospital is to be demolished and the patients either to be moved or to go back into society. As Garratt writes, '[t]hese two separate but interrelated accounts that comment one upon the other provide the action of the novel [...] and offer a window onto the events of the early years of the Irish Free State' (2011: 137). Moreover, he suggests that '[s]trategically placed as interruptions to Roseanne's narrative, Dr Grene's written responses to Roseanne's story in his "Commonplace Book" serve as a counter weight to her story [...]' (139). It is, for example, from Dr Grene, not Roseanne, that we learn that the hospital, built in the late eighteenth century, is in an appalling condition, damp, rat-infested and on the verge of collapsing. Arguably, Roseanne's testimony and Dr Grene's diary-like journal engage in a dialogue to which the reader is privy and which makes the reader a co-interpreter of Roseanne's life as it unfolds.

As with Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and its sequel *Paula Spencer* (2006) as well as his more recent novel *Smile* (2017), Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and Sara Baume's *Spill Simmer Fautler Wither* (2015) and *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), to mention but a few Irish novels that allow protagonists, many belonging to previously silenced and marginalised groups, to voice their own stories, the very fact that Roseanne writes her own story is of course crucial, since that could be read as an act of empowerment, or indeed resistance. As Harney-Mahajan puts it, here 'Barry invests in the cathartic nature of writing' (2012: 70), and the reader slowly begins to understand that Roseanne's fate is similar to that of many women in the past, as the findings of Foucault (1989) and Appignanesi (2009) demonstrate. In the beginning of her account, Roseanne indicates that she has a strong need to tell her story since, as she writes, '[n]o one

even knows I have a story' (Barry 2008: 4). And she goes on: 'For dearly I would love to leave an account, some kind of brittle and honest-minded history of myself, and if God gives me the strength, I will tell this story [...]' (5). From Roseanne's introductory words, the reader also understands that this story is a dark and disturbing one, containing, as she states, 'terror and hurt,' in which she has been the victim of forces beyond her control, as 'others were the authors of my fortune or misfortune. I did not know that a person could [...] be the author of themselves' (4). Sligo, the town on the Irish west coast where she grew up and lived, 'was a cold town' and 'had no grace for mortal beings'; 'Sligo,' she writes, 'made me and Sligo undid me' (3), suggesting that a rigid and stifling small-town atmosphere crushed her.

What follows in her testimony, then, are her perceptions of her life and how she was undone by powerful external factors. Interestingly, despite the terror and hurt she refers to in the beginning, according to her story, Roseanne had a happy childhood and her father was the hero in her life. She remembers her father's uniform, worn at his job as a gravedigger, and that the First World War brought soldiers to the town; she remembers the time when her father climbed an old tower to demonstrate that feathers and hammers fall at the same pace, and she remembers the outbreak of the Civil War. Significantly, too, she is aware of Catholic/Presbyterian differences, but her recollection is that the father was above those things, as he 'was deeply liked in the town' (Barry 2008: 19). Her childhood happiness is brutally interrupted, though, when one night in the graveyard she witnesses a vicious incident where Republican soldiers are shot and taken prisoners by Free State soldiers in the presence of both her father and the priest, Father Gaunt. Not only is this a traumatic event in itself for Roseanne, but it is also the beginning of her family's unhappiness, as she perceives it. After this event, the father is forced by Father Gaunt to take a demeaning and badly paid job as a rat-catcher, one consequence of which is the gradual break-up of her family: her mother's deteriorating mental health and her father's death, as he is found hanged.

However, as several commentators have pointed out, her childhood memories are not fully accurate, and we realise from Dr Grene's findings about her that Roseanne's life is more complex. For example, her father wore a uniform because he was a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary and as such he helped tracking down enemies to the state, not least Republicans and IRA members, which in turn meant that he was

a target; in fact, he was brutally murdered by the IRA, who hanged him after beating him with hammers in the tower of Roseanne's memory.

What interests me here, though, is the arguably even more chilling aspect of Roseanne's story as a young woman, and the ways in which she is excised from society and subsequently committed to an asylum. I would suggest that what ultimately emerges through the novel's treatment of the use of the mental asylum is a devastating critique of the stifling mentality in the first few decades of de Valera's Ireland, as outlined above. When Dr Grene begins to understand how Roseanne has been treated by the local powers, including the Catholic Church, he views her as a kind of treasure that speaks of a shamefully hidden and unknown Ireland yet to be discovered:

Of course Roseanne's life spans everything, she is as much as we can know of our world, the last hundred years of it. She should be a place of pilgrimage and a national icon. But she lives nowhere and is nothing. She has no family and is nothing. [...] The fact is, we are missing so many threads in our story that the tapestry of Irish life cannot but fall apart. There is nothing to hold it together. (Barry 2008: 190-91)

Still, holding it together, it is implied, are all the suppressed stories that keep surfacing and that need listening to, such as those of Roseanne and countless others who, as McCarthy (2004) and others have shown, fell victims to systemic coercive confinement.

Therefore, it is important how Roseanne chooses to represent herself as well as the social and cultural environment which she was born into, how she behaves and how she is perceived by those around her. For example, she describes herself as a vibrant young woman, going to the cinema, 'saw a thousand films' (Barry 2008: 140), going swimming and dancing with female friends, aware of and flaunting her beauty and awakening sexuality, flirting with boys but 'rebuff[ing] all offers to go "steady" with anyone, danc[ing] with anyone in particular more than once or twice.' As a young woman in her late teens, she displays a positive attitude to life, full of possibilities, finding ways around society's control: 'Oh, it is girls of seventeen and eighteen know how to live life, and love the living of it, if we are let' (140). 'Happy,' she writes, 'Just straightforward ordinary girls we were. We liked to bring as much despair as we could to the lads. Who watched on the sidelines of our happiness like sharks, devouring our attributes with their eyes. [...] It was lovely to snuggle up to a lad at the end of a dance, you sweaty and him all sweaty

too, in the summer, the smell of soap and turf off him' (146-47). Furthermore, interested in popular music, she is good at playing the piano and is sometimes asked by father and son McNulty to play in the band at the Plaza ballroom, as they played 'jazz tunes of the twenties and thirties' (18). In other words, she is an attractive young woman who is noticed by the male population in the community.

However, through her story we also realise that it is this very attraction that constitutes a potential threat to the accepted codes in this small-town community, rigidly policed by Father Gaunt, who becomes the main antagonist in Roseanne's story. His attitude to her, and to the status of women more broadly, as well as to her Presbyterian background, becomes evident after her father's death, when he claims to have a perfect husband for her, a much older widower. In his attempts to persuade her, he says: "Roseanne, you are a very lovely young girl, and as such I am afraid, going about the town, a mournful temptation, not only to the boys of Sligo but also, the men [...]" (Barry 2008: 98). When she does not seem very keen to listen to his advice, he goes on:

"You will be aware, Roseanne, of the recent upheavals in Ireland, and none of these upheavals favour any of the Protestant sects. Of course I will be of the opinion that you are in gravest error and your mortal soul is lost if you continue where you are. Nevertheless I can say I pity you, and wish to help you. I can find you a good Catholic husband as I say, and he will not mind your origin eventually, as, as I also have said, you are graced if I may say again with so much beauty. Roseanne, you really are the most beautiful young girl we have ever seen in Sligo." (Barry 2008: 99)

Thus, because of her erotic magnetism, and her religious creed, she is perceived as a potentially disruptive force and needs to be contained at all cost, which reflects Appignanesi's exploration of how women, in particular, have been seen as threats to stability and moral order (2009: 96). In order to control Roseanne, Father Gaunt even wishes to be her substitute parent, '*in loco parentis*' (Barry 2008: 100), which she turns down, an act which does not please the priest and which is held against her later. Roseanne perceives a coldness and an insensitivity in the priest, a lack of empathy, as she writes in her testimony: 'Fr Gaunt himself was young and might have been expected to feel a special kinship for the slain. But Fr Gaunt was so clipped and trim he had no antennae at all for grief. He was like a singer who knows the words and can sing, but cannot sing the song as conceived in the heart of the composer. Mostly he was dry. He spoke over young and old with the same dry music' (Barry 2008: 38).

Despite her rejection of Father Gaunt's offer and despite her mother's deteriorating mental health, everything seems to work out well for Roseanne, when she does get contained, after some courtship, by marrying the popular Tom McNulty, a musician at the dance-hall and an up-and-coming politician in Sligo. The novel strongly shows, though, that the repressive nature of small-town Ireland at this time is impossible to get away from; at one point in her story, Roseanne even compares the restrictive situation for women to that of Muslim fundamentalism: 'Mind you, I was not at the [dance-hall] as often as in the old days when I was a single girl and could play the piano without comment. But married women never worked in those days. We were like the Muslims in those times, the men wanted to hide us away [...]' (Barry 2008: 182).

Significantly, this restrictive mentality is further signalled in the novel by the open hostility towards Roseanne by Tom's mother, a devout Catholic woman, who seems highly reluctant to accept Roseanne as a daughter-in-law. Mrs McNulty's rigid Catholic view of life seems to be taken for granted and unquestioned by her sons; Tom simply tells Roseanne that '[t]he mother is very religious. [...] That's the real difficulty' (Barry 2008: 168), suggesting that she does not tolerate Roseanne's Presbyterian belief. Nevertheless, despite the mother's hostility, they do get married, but in Dublin, away from the family. Back in Sligo, Tom's political involvement is further indication of the reactionary atmosphere in the community Roseanne inhabits, as he joins the fascist blueshirts and participates in violent rallies, once coming home with blood on his shirt (202-203). A supporter of Mussolini and Franco, he later goes to Spain to fight for Franco. It becomes clear that a conservative and intolerant value system is deeply embedded in the small-town life of Sligo.

Therefore, in such a stifling sociocultural system, a woman going for a walk on her own is perceived as a severe breach not only of decorum but also of a higher law where women should be controlled. If, in addition to that, she is seen on that walk together with a man of dubious repute, it is an enormous scandal. On such a walk, Roseanne meets John Lavelle, one of the Republican soldiers at the graveyard incident during the Civil War, and she is seen by a group of priests, including Father Gaunt. Nothing has happened, but in the stern eyes of Father Gaunt, her husband and her mother-in-law, Roseanne is now damaged goods, as it is believed that a woman seeing a man on her own like that must be sexual in nature; in

short, in the eyes of her community she becomes a fallen woman. After this incident, her life as she knows it is over, as others now control her destiny. Although she cannot fully believe it, lying in bed that night Roseanne still senses that a life-changing event has taken place, making her an unwanted creature, pushed out: 'Like my father's poor rats. I was lying in a bed of clean sheets, but I felt like them. Like them, I wasn't grateful enough, and had fouled my own nest. I knew that in the eyes of Tom's friends outside, gathered in the Plaza, if they knew everything about me, they would want to—I don't know, extinguish me, judge me, put me outside the frame of the photographs of life. The delightful landscapes of ordinary life' (Barry 2008: 202).

Given the intolerance that governs this community, it may not come as a surprise that following the event, her husband refuses to see her and when she tries to see him at the ballroom, his brother Jack physically prevents her from doing so. Asking her icily "What have ya been up to?," it is clear that Father Gaunt has given a report to the family:

"Can I go back and see Tom?" I said.

"Tom doesn't want to see you."

"Of course he does, Jack, he's my husband."

"Well, Roseanne, we'll see about that." (Barry 2008: 215)

Not only has the priest given his version of the event to the family; based on his encounter with Roseanne, he has also set in motion a questioning of her marriage to Tom, which results in her being cut off from the family and the community at large. What makes this part of her story highly disturbing is the way in which people she formerly trusted conspire against her in order to make her disappear, vanish, since she is clearly seen as an uncomfortable burden. Significantly, in her testimony, Roseanne refers to it as a '[d]eath sentence' (Barry 2008: 214); crucially, too, she views the priest as an executioner, writing 'he moidered me, as the country people used to say' (35). Again, the novel makes it clear that Father Gaunt is the driving force behind Tom's decision not to see her, and it is Father Gaunt who acts the prosecutor as well as judge by condemning her to a life in a kind of exile:

"I need some time in which to find the boundaries of this problem," said Father Gaunt.

"In that time I want you, Roseanne, to remain where you are, here in this hut, and when I am able to bring things to a resolution, I will be better able to inform you of your position, and then make arrangements for the future." (Barry 2008: 221)

This state of forced and uncertain exilic existence, we learn, lasts for several years, and all the while she only stays ‘in that hut without event, collecting [her] groceries every week, saying nothing to no one [...]’ (Barry 2008: 228).

One could perhaps be justified in thinking that this would be enough, but Father Gaunt and the Catholic Church have not yet finished with her. What is in effect the biggest, although not the final, nail in Roseanne’s coffin is delivered in what I read as arguably the most central passage in the novel. After many years, Father Gaunt visits her in the hut, and it is here that the full extent of the repressive and inhumane system, of which the priest is a powerful instrument, is laid bare. Here he reveals, for example, without any sense of guilt, that “‘I have had my spies keep an eye on you,’” suggesting that this coercive social system is a kind of warfare, relying on surveillance and strategies such as secret intelligence to police its citizens and to remain in power. In fact, according to Foucault (1989), this kind of control was central at the very outset of asylums, arguing ‘Surveillance and Judgment: already the outline appears of a new personage who will be essential in the nineteenth-century asylum’ (238). In their exchange, Father Gaunt also reveals that in this system, he has acted on her husband Tom’s behalf, for his well-being, conspiring with Tom and his mother, while she is seen as unimportant, a second-class citizen, the problem that must go away. Even more importantly, of course, is the official verdict he brings to her, namely that ‘[her] marriage is deemed null [...],’ due to her ‘nymphomania’ (Barry 2008: 231). Here, it seems important to quote at some length, since the priest’s words illustrate much of the harsh reality and lack of understanding at the core of Irish society at this time, as O’Sullivan and O’Donnell (2012) and McCarthy (2004), among others, have established, discussed above:

“I have been successful,” he said, “in my efforts to free Tom.”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“If you had followed my advice, Roseanne, some years ago, and put your faith in the true religion, if you had behaved with the beautiful decorum of a Catholic wife, you would not be facing these difficulties. But I do appreciate that you are not entirely responsible. Nymphomania is of course by definition a madness. An affliction possibly, but primarily a madness, with its roots possibly in a physical cause. Rome has agreed with this estimate, in fact the department of the Curia that deals with these thankfully rare cases not only agreed, but also posited the same theory. So you may rest assured that your case was seen to with all the thoroughness and fairness of minds well-informed, disinterested, and with no bad intention of any kind.” (231)

When she does not understand, he goes on:

“We do not believe that your indiscretions are confined to one instance, an instance you will remember I was witness to with my own eyes. It was not thought probable that that instance did not have a history, given of course your own position vis-à-vis your early years, not to mention of course the condition of your mother, which we may assume was hereditary. Madness, Roseanne, has many flowers, rising from the same stem. The blooms of madness, from the same root, may be variously displayed. In your mother’s case an extreme retreat into herself, in your case, a pernicious and chronic nymphomania.” (Barry 2008: 232)

Not surprisingly, Roseanne objects, insisting “I never had relations with another besides Tom” (233), but he refuses to listen, firmly set on his judgement: “Of course, you may take refuge in an atrocious lie, if you choose that” (232). The fact that she is enraged by Father Gaunt’s pronouncement, which she sees as her second ‘death sentence’ (234), seems to be interpreted by the priest as further evidence of her madness, as he becomes afraid of her reaction, stating “You are menacing me, Roseanne. Step back away from the door, there’s a good woman” (234). From her testimony, it becomes clear that this episode has haunted her all her life, as her fury made her want to kill him; although she did not act on her instinct to do so, part of her seems to regret her inaction: ‘I would have if not happily, at least gladly, openheartedly, fiercely, finely, murdered him. I don’t know why I did not’ (Barry 2008: 234).

She is, then, officially defined as mad and condemned to live her life in her hut, excised from social interaction by the priest, sanctioned by the high and mighty in the Vatican. The community sees her as ‘[t]he fallen woman. The mad woman’ (Barry 2008: 235), and Roseanne feels its enormous power: ‘I felt all about me the whole hinterland of Strandhill speaking against me, the whole town of Sligo murmuring against me. [...] Perhaps they would come out and burn me in my hut for a witch. Truest of all things, there was no one to help me, no one to stand at my side’ (235).

Admittedly, she is not committed to an asylum here, rather to what could be called the ante-room to the asylum and it is, therefore, a kind of coercive confinement administered to her by a higher authority, in Foucault’s words, ‘to avoid scandal’ (1989: 62). However, getting pregnant after a one-night relation, with Tom’s brother Eneas, also an outcast due to his fighting for the British, she seeks help towards the end of her pregnancy from her ex-parents-in-law, only to be met by hostility

and unfriendliness, making it even clearer that she is a *persona non grata*; Tom's mother coldly states "[y]ou're nothing to do with us any more [...] Nothing," and the father fills in, equally dismissively, "[t]here's no one to help you. [...] Go back the road [...]. Go on" (Barry 2008: 266; 268). Thus, being rejected by those supposed to be closest to her, she has the brutal insight that 'I wasn't to be helped, that priest and woman and man had put out an edict that I wasn't to be helped, I was to be left to the elements, just as I was, a walking animal, forsaken' (269). Receiving no help whatsoever, she is forced to give birth on her own, on the beach, losing a lot of blood which nearly kills her, arguably a reference to all the young women in Ireland who have been forced to give birth on their own, with no help given. This is the final nail in her coffin. As she is in hospital, more dead than alive, Father Gaunt simply informs her that she will be committed, but putting it as if he helps her. As she writes, 'Father Gaunt coming in and telling me that I was going to be taken care of, that he knew where he could put me for my own safety, and that I would like the place [...]' (275). To put it bluntly, order is thus restored and society has one disruptive, or 'mad,' element less, because of the priest's diligent moral policing. Deemed unfit to be a part of society, a principal reason used for confinement, as Foucault argues (1989: 60), Roseanne is committed to an asylum for, it will turn out, the rest of her life.

Significantly, as Zamorano Llena (2016) argues, Roseanne's testimony and Dr Grene's journal-like account are in dialogue with each other, offering complementary insights into a past that gradually emerges as deeply unsettling, like a photo that is gradually being developed. Through Dr Grene's discoveries of Father Gaunt's documented account of Roseanne's situation, are shown the priest's attitudes to women, bordering on misogyny, which seem to be guiding his decisions, resulting in devastating effects on individuals' lives, as Dr Grene reflects on the priest's writing:

It is like a forest fire, burning away all traces of her, traversing her narrative and turning everything to ashes and cinders. A tiny, obscure, forgotten Hiroshima. [...] Fr Gaunt is almost clinical in his anatomising of Roseanne's sexuality. [...] It feels sometimes highly voyeuristic, morally questionable to read it. Partly because Fr Gaunt's own morality is of an old-fashioned kind. He betrays at every stroke an intense hatred if not of women, then of the sexuality of women, or sexuality in general. [...] It is also crystal clear that he regards her Protestantism as a simple, primal evil in itself. His anger that she would not let herself be made a Catholic at his request is absolute. (Barry 2008: 238-39)

Summing up and reflecting on Roseanne's case, Dr Grene concludes that Roseanne did not stand a chance against the dominant norms at the time. The chilling consequences of a repressive moral system in the Free State that viewed those perceived as failing to conform to this system as mad are reported almost matter-of-factly, as if the full extent of them is too hard to comprehend: 'Morality has its own civil wars, with its own victims in their own time and place. But once she became pregnant she was utterly doomed. A married woman who had never been married. She could never have won that one' (Barry 2008: 289). Seeking to understand Roseanne's fate, Dr Grene can be read as a historian who tries to unravel and make sense of the many facets of the past, and in that act the reader, I would suggest, becomes a co-historian, in turn attempting to stitch all the threads together to make a fuller fabric. In that fabric emerges a woman as a victim of repression and exclusion in a state seemingly at war with its own citizens.

Conclusion

In his book *Occasions of Sin: Sex & Society in Modern Ireland* (2012), the historian Diarmaid Ferriter aptly describes the harsh reality facing women in the first few decades of independent Ireland. The country's mental health care was a particularly stern phenomenon, and coercive confinement seemed to be an integral part of policing and controlling the citizens. As Ferriter writes:

The development of medical history has served to shine a light on the practice of the committal of women to lunatic asylums and the extent to which their committal had to do with sexual transgression. In truth, evidence of female 'madness' was often scant; asylums sometimes served as another way of silencing and hiding women who did not conform, particularly when it came to sexuality. Some were committed after they had been cast out by their families due to illegitimate pregnancies. (202)

As many commentators, in several disciplines, have established, the mental health care system in Ireland was very much an instrument of getting rid of members of society who were seen as transgressing boundaries of acceptable behaviour in various ways. Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* zooms in on one such case in the fate of Roseanne Clear/McNulty, who is coercively sentenced to decades of confinement as she is wrongly accused of engaging in an extramarital affair and later getting pregnant as a single woman. In this article, I have

examined how Roseanne is a victim of prejudice and intolerance, represented mainly by the Catholic priest, Father Gaunt, but also by a community steeped in a rigid and repressive value system. Roseanne, it is implied, is only one of many victims of such a value system in the first few decades of independent Ireland, and as I have tried to show, Barry's novel, largely through Roseanne's own story, participates in confronting an Ireland that deserves recognition and badly needs healing.

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