



impure thoughts

SEXUALITY
IN TWO

AND LITERATURE
IN IRELAND

MICHAEL G. CRONIN

Impure thoughts

Sexuality, Catholicism and literature in
twentieth-century Ireland

Michael G. Cronin

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Contents

Acknowledgements	page vii
Introduction	1
1 Going to Tara via Vienna: Joyce and the Freudian <i>Bildungsroman</i>	22
2 Growing pains: sexuality, Irish moral politics and capitalist crisis, 1920–40	48
3 Kate O'Brien and the erotics of liberal Catholic dissent	82
4 Married bliss: sexuality, cautionism and modernisation in Ireland, 1940–65	114
5 Sex and the country: the rural <i>Bildungsromane</i> of Maura Laverty and Patrick Kavanagh	147
6 Arrested development: sexuality, trauma and history in Edna O'Brien and John McGahern	176
Conclusion	210
Bibliography	222
Index	240

Introduction

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) James Joyce describes Stephen Dedalus leaving his family home to begin the slow perambulation through Dublin's city streets that will take him to the university. As he walks away from the house, Stephen 'heard a mad nun screeching in the nun's madhouse beyond the wall: "Jesus! O Jesus! Jesus!"' In response, the young man 'shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on ... his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness'.¹ This brief encounter, in which the embryonic consciousness of a young writer registers the cries of 'an unseen maniac' sequestered in an institution that is both religious and psychiatric, can serve as a parable for the prevailing conception of the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland. Given the novel's meticulous elaboration of the psychic effects which his religiously inspired sexual guilt has on the teenage Stephen, it is inevitable that most readers will read the nun's insanity as a function of her enforced celibate state. The novel invites us to assume that she had to so thoroughly repress her sexual instinct, in pursuit of her religious vocation, that she was driven into this inverted mental world where she has become a parody of a nun, a woman whose prayers are desperate cries. If the figure inside the walls embodies the dysfunctional fusion of religion and repression that has characterised Irish sexuality, the figure outside can stand for the relationship of Irish literature to that history. Because of his own state of alienation, 'his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness', the young artist feels himself to be in an analogous position to the physically and psychically entrapped nun. He hears her demented cries more acutely and perceptively than others, and is then able to creatively channel those cries into artistic expression. This will be his contribution to freeing himself and his society from the nun's fate.

Impure Thoughts addresses the knotty historical problems telegraphed in this brief allegorical reading. As Jim Smith and Elizabeth

Cullingford have demonstrated, Joyce's unhinged nun has returned as the spectre that haunts contemporary Irish culture.² In the wake of the 2009 *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (generally known as the *Ryan Report*), and the inquiries into the cover-up of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests, the relationship between Catholicism and Irish sexuality is profoundly vexed and troubling. Ryan catalogued systemic levels of brutal violence, inhuman physical and emotional neglect and sadistic sexual abuse – repeatedly described in the report as a ‘chronic problem’ in the boys’ institutions – in Reformatories and Industrial Schools run by Catholic religious orders. This abuse did not represent a failure of the system but was endemic to it; as Ryan observes, ‘abuse occurred in the Institutions’ and ‘the Institutions in themselves were abusive’.³ Likewise, the three reports on the failure of the Catholic Church to adequately confront the sexual abuse of children by some of its priests, along with the testimony of their victims, have thoroughly discredited the Irish Catholic Church as an authority on human sexuality.⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, as Ursula Barry and Clair Wills note, ‘the Catholic Church in Ireland played a leading role in reinforcing the link between religious morality and social order’.⁵ Irish society’s sexual culture was significantly shaped by an institution whose formation of its own personnel, we now know, produced many damaged and damaging individuals. This situation confronts Irish scholars with a challenge: providing Irish society with a coherent, persuasive account of how the Catholic Church’s hegemonic position as the arbiter of sexual morality was maintained for so long in a modern, liberal democratic state. This is not an easy task. It requires confronting the full implications of the repression and abuse, but without simply demonising a whole epoch and producing a narrative that merely confirms what we already knew. We need to acknowledge the dark and terrible events revealed in personal testimony and in the various reports, but the force of these revelations cannot paralyse our critical capacity to understand these issues historically. To examine the historical formation of ideas about sexuality in modern Irish culture, as this book attempts, is not to dismiss or deny the experience of sexual oppression in twentieth-century Ireland; as Ann Laura Stoler points out in another context, this mode of analysis does not reject the fact of repression, ‘but the notion that it was the organising principle of sexual discourse, that repression could account for its silences and prolific emanations’.⁶

Engaging with the troubled field of Irish Catholic sexuality, this book obviously builds on the pioneering work of Tom Inglis. Drawing on the

theories of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias, Inglis's *Moral Monopoly* (1987) analysed the Catholic Church's regulation of Irish sexuality from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century. The significance of Inglis's work lies in its pioneering theoretical framework. He combined Foucauldian concepts (discourse, the deployment of sexuality, the formation of the bourgeois subject) with Bourdieu's emphasis on social fields, cultural capital and the embodiment of power – the concept of *habitus* – to develop a new hermeneutic for studying the history of sexuality in Ireland.⁷ The value of this framework is that it allows us to think of sexuality in modern Ireland politically and historically rather than as a 'natural' drive that was suppressed by a puritan 'culture'.

However, while analysing sexuality as productive and regulatory in nineteenth-century Ireland, Inglis effectively returns to a repressive hypothesis to explain Irish sexuality in the twentieth century.⁸ In nineteenth-century Catholic Ireland, in Inglis's account, sexuality was being actively produced within a post-Famine project of shaping modern bourgeois bodies and minds; sexuality was a function of power. However, in the twentieth century, until the 1960s, sexuality was repressed as part of a drive to restrict the formation of modern subjects; sexuality was the victim of power. In the first era, Catholicism actively moved to generate new discourses of sexuality and new locations of sexual knowledge. The distinguishing feature of Catholicism in the second era is its creation of a deafening silence on sexuality. In the earlier era, Catholicism is viewed as one of the primary agents for creating modern Irish sexual subjects whereas in the later one it functions only to repress sexual discourses and subjects and thus to impede Irish modernity.

For Inglis, then, the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland is a narrative of two regimes. The distinguishing feature of the earlier regime was 'a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual pleasure and desire were repressed'. From the 1960s onwards, this was gradually replaced by an entirely different dispensation characterised by 'a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfilment of pleasures and desires is emphasised'.⁹ As Inglis vividly summarises this transformation, contemporary Irish people have 'increasingly left aside their shy, awkward, demure, chaste bodies and embraced strong, confident, sexualised, disciplined bodies'.¹⁰ But *Impure Thoughts* demonstrates that even in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, sexuality was not regulated through silence in Ireland but through a complex, polyvalent field of discourses and contesting epistemologies

of sexuality. Moreover, contrary to Inglis's distinction between strategies of self-denial and those of self-realisation, we will see in the following chapters that advocates of Catholic sexual morality were promoting a regulatory ideal of bourgeois self-cultivation just as much as the novelists were – we may not now find the Catholic moralists' concept of personal development, with its restrictive notions of purity and conformity, remotely sympathetic but this does not alter its essential structure.

Inglis's history of sexuality in modern Ireland generally follows the contours of a model of Irish modernisation, in which the comparatively smooth trajectory of the Anglophone metropole is contrasted with Ireland's jerky pattern of periods of stagnation interrupted by bouts of accelerated change. In this account, Irish Catholicism was an agent of bourgeois development and modernisation in the mid-nineteenth century. However, in the twentieth century almost precisely the same ideological formation effectively acted as a stubborn brake on modernisation. Until the society and the economy were opened up in the 1960s, the effects of a puritanical and repressive attitude to sexuality were not confined to the realm of private and emotional life since these attitudes also informed an Irish Catholic *mentalité*. This in turn produced a society averse to risk-taking, entrepreneurship and economic development. In other words, the overdetermined repression of sexual desire generated a more pervasive repression of all desires and drives. As Inglis argues, 'the traditional absence of entrepreneurs and people taking risks with capital in Ireland may be linked to ... a morality propagated by the Church, in which individual satisfaction and pleasure were subdued through an inculcation of humility, shame and guilt'.¹¹ However, as *Impure Thoughts* demonstrates, 'Catholic' Ireland prior to the 1960s was as much shaped by the currents and crises of international capitalism and modernity as 'globalised' Ireland has been shaped by late capitalism and postmodernity.

More recently, Diarmaid Ferriter's ground-breaking, monumental *Occasions of Sin* maps the range of official attitudes to sex during the twentieth century through an extensive study of archival sources; chiefly court records but also government documents, collections of official and private correspondence and the archives of social movements, notably the Irish Queer Archive. The range and volume of material examined in it makes this work an indispensable starting point for studying the history of sexual discourse in Ireland. As Ferriter points out, this quantity of material also refutes Inglis's argument that the imposition of silence was the critical instrument of sexual regulation.¹²

However, while it offers a wealth of fascinating detail, *Occasions of Sin* is considerably weakened by its unrelenting adherence to a rather narrow empiricism. Analysis and narrative are consistently subordinated to description and survey. Paradoxically, since the book relies so heavily on court records for its account of the first half of the century, this approach has the effect of confirming precisely the type of one-dimensional, linear historical reading Ferriter warns against at the outset. Any reader must surely be depressed by this catalogue of rape and incest cases. The effect is to confirm the belief that this was indeed a sexual dark age, against which the present can only appear unambiguously liberated. Ferriter is aware that this focus on court records skews his historical account and he notes the 'absence of accounts of the joys of sex'.¹³ He therefore leavens his reliance on the court archive by making use, though less extensively so, of memoirs, published diaries and novels. However, this does not solve his methodological problem. For one thing, the novels are handled much more carelessly than the archival material.¹⁴ More seriously, this approach presupposes that diverse forms of writing offer interchangeable sources for studying history and that their primary value is merely as transparent accounts of social reality. Ferriter disregards sexual discourse as a location of ideological struggle and a mode of power in itself. As Siobhán Kilfeather observed, a history of sexuality is always a 'history of meanings'.¹⁵ Ignoring this, Ferriter does not develop any theoretically informed narrative for understanding the history of sexuality in Ireland; narrowly focused on uncovering the 'facts', his study yields little insight into the deeper structures of this history.

Looking again at Joyce's nun we will notice that this is, of course, a literary representation, not a documentary account, of a suffering woman. More precisely, this figure was fashioned as an artistic response to a woman's distress in a narrative of masculine self-definition. How can the study of such literary representations move us towards a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the history of Irish sexuality? Clearly the most notable evidence of what Irish literary studies can achieve in this regard are volumes four and five of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, published in 2002. The controversial origins of these two volumes, collectively edited by the most distinguished Irish feminist scholars then working, is now well documented.¹⁶ The editors' most significant innovation was to not restrict their project to adding more women writers to the framework created by the original three-volume anthology, but to radically expand the diverse types of writing included in the anthology.¹⁷ In the sections devoted to sexuality this wide-ranging

approach yielded a rich trove of material, 'chosen as much on the basis of form as of content, so that each piece might raise questions about the materiality of the body and how that takes shape in language'.¹⁸ As Kilfeather observes about these sections of the *Anthology*, 'the major revelation about sexuality in Ireland is not what happened but how it was cast into words'.¹⁹

One of the questions presented by anthologising this material within a project of canon formation, or re-formation, was 'Does sexuality have national characteristics?'²⁰ Obviously, this book contends with a related question. How does one avoid interpreting the history of sexuality in twentieth-century Ireland in rigidly insular terms or as a deviation from some imputed European or Western norm or standard developmental trajectory? Additionally, as the *Field Day* volumes four and five project demonstrates, Irish feminist literary studies tends to be heavily invested in its interrogative relationship with the idea of a 'national tradition'. Consequently, most analysis of gender and sexuality in Irish literary and cultural studies invariably takes nationalism rather than capitalism as its key problematic. Thus, for instance, Jim Smith in his landmark cultural history of the Magdalen Laundries in twentieth-century Ireland argues that 'the containment of embodied sexuality [was] crucial to the project of national identity formation'.²¹ Likewise, Gerardine Meaney in her recent study of gender and race in twentieth-century Irish culture asserts that 'any analysis of gender, culture and Ireland must perforce analyse the role of nationalism'.²² However, as Emer Nolan argues, Irish feminist critiques of nationalism are often rigidly dismissive and intellectually indebted to thoroughly conservative strands of Irish revisionism and Irish modernisation theory; this, she warns, can only produce a 'dubious conception of what a radical twenty-first century Irish feminism ought to be about'.²³

As this book demonstrates, the oppressive drive to regulate sexuality was certainly connected to the process of state formation in the early decades of Irish independence. But for all the deference shown to Catholic teaching, the formal and constitutional structures of the state were steadfastly liberal democratic and the post-independence elite was committed to creating a state that was both Catholic and capitalist. The independent state was a small, economically dependent Anglophone society and its cultural and economic boundaries were, of necessity, remarkably porous. Cultural historians have made us familiar with mid-century intellectuals regretting their cultural isolation, but emigration painfully exposed the great majority of Irish families to a transnational, global reality. Moreover, Irish cultural criticism has chiefly examined

literary fiction and other forms of elite culture – a focus this book does little to supplant, it must be acknowledged – so we have little historical sense of the country's popular culture: the Westerns and romances people were actually reading, the Hollywood films they were watching, the dances they were enthusiastically attending. Above all, the history of the Magdalene Laundries, Reformatories and Industrial Schools is also a history of the iniquities and injustices endemic to the modern capitalist class system. In short, what is required is an interpretive framework that allows us to apprehend the complex field of sexual discourse in Ireland as a specific, distinctive permutation within a wider capitalist modernity. For that reason, this book tries to carefully situate the various sexual discourses historically confronting each other in Irish culture within a broader frame, since we need to be much more alert to the intersections between the crises of sexuality and modernity that beset the Western world during the twentieth century and those that unfolded in Ireland.

Underpinning the selection of material on sexuality in *Field Day* four and five is an investigative hermeneutic and a transgressive idiom. This process of searching out, decoding and deciphering aims to uncover how Irish writers negotiated and subverted an oppressive drive to stymie sexual discourse and locates 'examples of transgressive behaviour that defied or subverted the conventions of each period'.²⁴ In this respect, *Field Day* is the most accomplished example of the predominant approach to the study of sexuality in twentieth-century Irish writing, not only in feminist scholarship but also in the related field of gay and lesbian studies.²⁵ However, the novels discussed here hardly require this type of decoding and *Impure Thoughts* does not privilege literature as an exemplary site of transgression. This study takes for granted that literary or novelistic discourse is one discourse among several; not necessarily more or less transgressive or subversive but engaged instead in an intellectual and political contest over what it means to be human.

We now know that during the twentieth century Irish society incarcerated in Magdalene asylums, Industrial Schools and Reformatories those bodies – of poor and working-class women and children – which were designated as deviant and beyond the bounds of respectability. The confined and abused body of the young working-class woman or orphan silently but powerfully affirmed the healthy respectability of their youthful middle-class compatriots pursuing fulfilment and happiness outside, while serving as an equally powerful warning that the privileges of middle-class youth were always provisional and that

maintaining healthy respectability required constant and anxious endeavour. What is at stake when we read literary fiction is the construction of a normative subjectivity – an ideal of the normal and the healthy to which those outside the walls of those institutions could aspire and by which they were regulated. By mapping the imaginative space, created by the novel, in which Irish culture contended with the question of sexuality, this book charts the evolution of a discursive struggle about what constituted that regulatory ideal in twentieth-century Ireland.

A first premise of this book is that the study of a literary genre, the *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation, offers one route towards critically engaging with these vexed questions about the history of Irish sexuality. Why this genre? As its notable theorists have demonstrated, the *Bildungsroman* attained its significance in European culture because of its capacity to forge a dynamic relationship between the narration of epochal historical transformations and the narration of self-formation. In his essay, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism', Mikhail Bakhtin argued that in the *Bildungsroman*, 'time is introduced into man'.²⁶ This, in his view, was the genre's major innovation in the history of the novel. What distinguished the realist *Bildungsroman* from other types of formation narrative – the novel of education exemplified by Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), or the biographical novel exemplified by Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) – was that 'man's emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature'.²⁷ In the *Bildungsroman* the narrative of self-development proceeds in conjunction with the narrative of historical development. Thus, in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795–6/1829), generally acknowledged as the prototypical instance of the genre, Wilhelm is 'no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him'.²⁸

In his landmark study of the genre, *The Way of the World* (1987), the Marxist critic Franco Moretti developed Bakhtin's insights. For Moretti, the birth of the *Bildungsroman* was called forth by the traumatic birth of modernity in the French and Industrial revolutions. The *Bildungsroman*, he argues, 'comes into being ... because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to modernity'.²⁹ With its young protagonist who is painfully negotiating the journey of self-formation, while simultaneously struggling to find a place in the social world, the *Bildungsroman* gave narrative shape to a crucial problematic

of liberal, bourgeois society – the need to find some sort of resolution to the relationship between the individual and modern society. The genre represents an attempt to find a symbolic resolution to a socio-philosophical conundrum. The crux of this problem is the tension that arises in capitalist culture between the ideal of individual self-determination, and the boundless pursuit of self-fulfilment this implies, on one hand, and the structural necessity of conformity and social stability on the other. Nineteenth-century European culture, therefore, placed two requirements on the realist *Bildungsroman*. This narrative form was expected to represent and celebrate the boundless, disruptive energy of modernity; the thematic of youth, which is ‘modernity’s “essence”, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past’, achieved this first goal.³⁰ But European culture simultaneously looked to the *Bildungsroman* to transform all that was threatening and alienating about this constitutively unstable and anti-foundational modern world into an experience that was palatable, purposeful, humane and stable. This second goal was achieved thematically through the plot of socialisation, in which the protagonist strove for fulfilment through locating his or her place in the social world. As Gregory Castle argues, in the genre’s nineteenth-century English and French incarnations, this pragmatic pursuit of social mobility displaced the quest for aesthetico-spiritual development that had been central to the original Enlightenment concept of *Bildung*.³¹ Formally, the achievement of this second objective was encoded in the novel’s ending. Moretti identifies two patterns of plot development in the nineteenth-century novel of formation: he terms these a ‘classification principle’ and a ‘transformative principle’.³² In the first type of plot the meaning of the narrative is located in a particularly strong or marked ending. The emphasis in this mode is on the maturity attained by the protagonist and the establishment at the novel’s end of the protagonist’s stable position within the social order. In the second type of plot the narrative remains open-ended. The attainment of maturity and stability is eschewed in favour of an unending youth with its potential for unceasing formlessness and change.

Sexuality is central to these different resolutions to the ideological problem confronted in the *Bildungsroman*. For Moretti, the classificatory principle is exemplified by the novel of marriage, such as Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The marriage plot, which is an especially notable feature of the English novel of formation, produces a symbolic act of compromise through which the young hero or heroine exchanges freedom for happiness. As it does for Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett, the

choice of a marriage partner furthers the protagonist's own desires and his or her achievement of self-fulfilment, but does so within a stable institution of social reproduction.³³ On the other hand, the transformative principle is exemplified by the novel of adultery which is more prominent in the French tradition. Fredric Moreau, in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), restlessly eschews the happy stability of marriage for the recurring excitement of an adulterous affair. In other words, Fredric strikes a different balance than Elizabeth between freedom and happiness.

Feminist critics have argued that most literary criticism of the *Bildungsroman* presupposes a universal subject that was in fact distinctively male. The physical and social mobility which facilitates the classical *Bildung* plot was largely unavailable to women, and their access to education, for instance, was much more restricted. In other words, the tension between individual autonomy and social conformity at the core of the *Bildungsroman* was not directly symmetrical for men and women. As the editors of *The Voyage In: fictions of female development* note, 'critics have assumed that society constrains men and women equally. In fact, while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever.'³⁴ Abel, Hirsch and Langland's volume charts the progress of a woman-centred *Bildungsroman* tradition, from Frances Burney to Doris Lessing and the emergence of lesbian fiction in the 1970s, which gave narrative form to the same ideological conundrum identified by Bakhtin and Moretti but mapped a distinctively female experience of modernity. Drawing on the feminist model of object-relations theory, the editors argue that in this tradition, 'the heroine's developmental course is more conflicted, less direct: separation tugs against the longing for fusion and the heroine encounters the conviction that identity resides in intimate relationships, especially those of early childhood'.³⁵

It is also worth noting that the meaning of sexuality in Moretti's theory is always reproductive. Sexuality is conceptualised as being primarily a mode of biological reproduction which, through the institution of marriage, is translated into a mode of social reproduction; even in the novel of adultery sexuality is still defined by its deviation from a reproductive ideal. But what happens to the *Bildungsroman* as a literary form when the meaning of sexuality changes? As we will see in Chapter 1, the historical emergence of the libidinal model of sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which re-conceptualised sexuality as a drive towards pleasure, was not just an epistemological

change in the understanding of human sexuality but one element in a larger transformation in the Western conception of both subjectivity and modernity as well – that is, all three terms which were being symbolically negotiated in the *Bildungsroman*. Moretti argues that this shifting of the ideological ground in which the form was rooted led to its demise as the pre-eminent genre in European literature. After Freud, in short, the genre simply lost its social significance and with it its centrality to European literature.

However, Gregory Castle counters Moretti's claim by arguing that, at the beginning of the twentieth century 'it is precisely the breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialisation that gives the *Bildungsroman* a new sense of purpose'.³⁶ That is, the structure of the bildung narrative, Castle argues, was adapted and rejuvenated to meet the changed historical conditions and the realist *Bildungsroman* gave way to its modernist successor. Since the intellectual crisis that generated modernism made itself felt as a profound confusion and anxiety about the possibility of historical progress and linear development, inevitably the modernist *Bildungsroman* emphasises the impossibility of *Bildung* and of attaining maturity. Moreover, as Jed Esty argues, since the problematic of uneven development and the complex, staggered temporality of modernity is experienced most acutely in a colonial society, the most distinctively modernist *Bildungsromane* have a colonial setting – Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915) for instance – or were created by writers from colonial societies, such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Joyce's *Portrait* or Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929). According to Esty, the protagonist in the colonial *Bildungsroman* 'acts as a frozen-adolescent figure whose own uneven development seems to correspond to the temporal oddities of the surrounding colonial history'.³⁷

In this light, we can begin to appreciate the extraordinary centrality and durability of the *Bildungsroman* in twentieth-century Irish writing, and the strategic position which it occupies in the Irish canon. This genre negotiates both individual and cultural crises of sexual formation and the historical crises of modernisation. It has, moreover, the capacity to connect these crises in symbolically powerful ways. When older solutions to the contradictions of modernity have shown themselves to be no longer tenable, this genre has had the flexibility to give symbolic shape to emergent solutions. Viewed thus, the cultural significance of the Irish Catholic *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth century stems from the fact that it has provided Irish culture with a narrative form with