

***A STAR CALLED HENRY
AND AT SWIM, TWO BOYS:
THE DECONSTRUCTION
OF THE TRAGIC
PARADIGM***

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A Star Called Henry (1999) and At Swim, Two Boys (2001) are two novels in which their authors try to demystify one of the crucial moments in the history of Ireland, the 1916 Easter Rising, and the circumstances that surrounded it by means of the subversive and liberating power of laughter. Both texts reveal the contradictions and absurdities of the whole process of independence and unmask the fanaticism, dogmatism and tyranny of the revolutionary leaders. Our aim here is not to analyse those aspects of the rebellion that are criticized in the two novels, but how both writers demystify the figure of the tragic hero by creating one that possesses the characteristic virtues of the comic hero: humour, generosity, flexibility, willingness to compromise, affection, love, sympathy, etc.

Scholars from a variety of different disciplines and areas – history, philosophy, literary theory, sociology, anthropology, psychology – have greatly contributed in the last decades to the deconstruction of one of the most pervasive myths, that of tragedy being profound, wise and sublime and comedy a trivial genre incapable of dealing with the great problems that preoccupy man. James Thurber has explained it very clearly:

Because we have learned (from the Puritans?) to assume that things that taste good are bad for us and that things that taste bad are good for us, and that things that amuse us and make us laugh are of minor concern, we assume that we only find out about life from serious works such as tragedies (and the tragic mode in other media) (cit. in Berger, 1995: 18)

There are two aspects of laughter that have been of special interest for critics. On the one hand, its role as an agent of transcendence, as a vehicle for coping with the hardships of life. In this sense, comedy is a valuable talisman which allows us to

survive in a world hedged with the threat of every horror and ignominy. Humour gives us the necessary distance and perspective to face and transcend the moments of anguish: “It endows human nature with the means to turn the corner, perpetually, on the disasters sown in its path by its own freedom from instinctual programming” (Gutwirth, 1993: 190). Because of its acceptance of the incongruities and tensions of life, comedy leaves us with a growing sense of freedom and a distinct sense of faith renewed: “The function of comedy is to sustain hope” (Galligan, 1984: 28) Humour does not blind us to the reality of suffering and failure in life “and yet...we can always step back a bit to enjoy the incongruity” (Morreall, 1983: 128). Comedy, then, is a way of coping with despair, mental suffering, guilt and anxiety and a superb way of transcending misery in joy: “When we get up tomorrow morning, we may well be able to do without our tragic awareness for an hour or two, but we shall desperately need our sense of the comic.” (Bently, cit. in Palmer, 1984: 141).

Very closely related to this coping function of laughter is its liberating and subversive power. Laughter profanes all categories and hierarchies, questioning and violating all absolute truths. Whereas official and serious culture represents the triumph of a truth already established, laughter leads to a temporary liberation from the sanctioned order and prevailing ideas. Mikhail Bakhtin was one of the first critics to point out the importance of comedy as a corrective and complement to seriousness:

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism, and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. (Bakhtin, 1984: 122-3)

Conrad Hyers, who in *The Spirituality of Comedy* approaches comedy from a mythological and religious point of view, has also argued that the tragic mode must be tempered and qualified by the comic mode if absolutism, dogmatism and intolerance are to be avoided: “Unqualified seriousness is dehumanizing and dangerous. It is the crucifier of freedom and the human spirit” (Hyers, 1996: 69). Humour warns us against idolatry and tyranny that lead to fear and lowly obedience.

John Morreall, one of the great defenders of the seriousness of laughter, agrees with Bakhtin and Hyers that humour is “incompatible with both hero worship and fear” (Morreall, 1983: 102) and Marcel Gutwirth contributes to the discussion by stating that laughter gives us the necessary freedom to undermine everything we value, fear or oppresses us, may it be dignity, social decorum or our adherence to a series of principles. By doing so, humour celebrates the victory of

the inferior over the superior, of the bad over the good. For a brief period of time, since the "Lord of Misrule, however, is king only for a day" (Gutwirth, 1993: 73) we rest from the daily struggle and occupations: "For a blessed moment we enter a godlike impunity, our foes disarmed, our fears stilled, our aggressions rendered permissible by a mutual compact of blamelessness" (Gutwirth, 1993: 130).

Northrop Frye in his well known *Anatomy of Criticism* has also defended the subversive character of comedy. The fact that the comic dramatist is on the side of the young hero that defeats the paternal figure and thus creates a new society, clearly shows the revolutionary essence of the comic genre. At the same time, Frye underlines comedy's rejection of any kind of dogmatism or single vision of life:

Thus the movement from *pistis* to *gnosis*, from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally, as the Greek words suggest, a movement from illusion to reality. Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation: whatever reality is, it's not *that*. (Frye, 1990: 169-70)

Dana F. Sutton has also pointed out that comedy is essentially subversive because of its demystifying function and criticism of society whereas in his controversial *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud has argued that jokes, especially the tendentious ones, allow human beings to break those social and moral chains that oppress them: "The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure." (Freud, 1991: 149).

Of all the scholars mentioned Hyers is the one who has most vigorously vindicated the subversive power of laughter in a world like ours so prone to great tyrannies and holocausts: "When the comic sense is, correspondingly, pushed aside as inappropriate and threatening, much that is human is lost. It is little surprise that the tragic spirit often results in such destructive consequences" (Hyers, 1996: 2). In politics as well as in science and religion the absence of a comic perspective has led to intolerance, dogmatism, violence, absolutism and fanaticism. According to Hyers, in order to fulfil its liberating function, comedy has created a kind of hero that contrasts totally with the tragic one. The latter is defined by his lack of flexibility and his commitment to a series of values such as courage, duty, loyalty, honour, pride, absolute devotion, uncompromising dedication, that have generated all kinds of evil. By putting their lives in the defence of some good cause or ambition, by their blind obedience to certain noble concerns and sacred principles, they have produced death and destruction: "In the name of duty and loyalty, honor or prestige, God and country, it sacrifices the very people involved on the altar of principle and virtue" (Hyers, 1996: 50). The comic hero, in contrast, incarnates other kinds of virtues and another scale of values: flexibility, freedom, compromise, celebration of life, playfulness, survivability. The comic hero celebrates life and the basics of life and does not try to reduce it to a set of abstract ideas. Whereas the

tragic hero is destroyed by his stubborn ideals, the comic hero refuses to get trapped in any kind of rigid principles and reminds us that freedom, flexibility and adaptability are an essential part of human nature: “Flexibility is, after all, the characteristic of life; rigidity is the sign of death” (Hyers, 1996: 55). Because of his commitment to life the comic hero will never sacrifice people’s lives in the name of political ideologies, religious doctrines, social hierarchies or moral codes. Comic heroism

is far more concerned with saving skin than with saving face. And its defense is of persons more than principles, the spirit rather than the letter. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” might well serve as a comic motto. The ethic of comedy is situational. Moral codes are in the service of people and their circumstances. (Hyers, 1996: 66)

His awareness of the ambiguity of truth and goodness makes the comic hero realize that people and circumstances are not just black or white, light or dark, right or wrong: “We are suspended, as it were, between heaven and earth, eternity and time, the infinite and the finite, spirit and flesh, rationality and impulse, altruism and selfishness, pride and insecurity, life and death” (Hyers, 1996: 60-1). Reality is perceived as contradictory and confusing rather than as unified whole and the function of the comic mode is precisely to reflect this incongruity¹.

A Star Called Henry (1999) and *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) are two novels in which their authors try to demystify one of the crucial moments in the history of Ireland, the 1916 Easter Rising, and the circumstances that surrounded it by means of the subversive and liberating power of laughter. Both texts reveal the contradictions and absurdities of the whole process of independence and unmask the fanaticism, dogmatism and tyranny of the revolutionary leaders. Our aim here is not to analyse those aspects of the rebellion that are criticized in the two novels, but how both writers demystify the figure of the tragic hero by creating one that possesses the characteristic virtues of the comic hero: humour, generosity, flexibility, willingness to compromise, affection, love, sympathy, etc.

Henry Smart, the protagonist of *A Star Called Henry*, is a very unconventional hero. Although he shares with the traditional tragic hero his beauty, strength and

¹ The flexibility of humour has also been pointed out by other critics, such as Asa Berger who states that “comedy is an argument for flexibility and openness to possibilities” (Berger, 1995: 87), but who, unlike Hyers, stresses that comic characters are defined by their rigidity. In his book on the tragicomic novel Randall Craig also acknowledges that humour expresses the contradictions of human experience, thus rejecting any pattern of coherence and closure. Harvey Mindess, one of the psychologists who has most defended the regenerative power of laughter as well as its philosophical depth, defines humour as a frame of mind which is free, flexible and kaleidoscopic and allows us to escape from rigidity, conformity, fear and overseriousness. As a matter of fact, Mindess, like many other psychologists, believes that humour should be used for therapeutic purposes, since people, by becoming aware of their own absurdities, achieve a more adaptable, uplifting and desirable outlook on life.

courage, he differs from him in very important and revealing aspects. He is of very humble origin, a child of the Dublin slums. Dublin slums were at the beginning of the twentieth century “an inferno of social degradation” (Tierney, 1992: 140) and, unfortunately, thirty per cent of the population were forced to live in such sub-human conditions. The death-rate from tuberculosis was fifty per cent higher in Ireland than in Scotland and England and people could not pay for medicines or proper food for the children, who were thus always undernourished. As the narrator says about his mother: “She was a child of the Dublin slums, no proper child at all. Her parents, grandparents, had never known good food. Bad food, bad drink, bad air. Bad bones, bad eyes, bad skin; thin, stooped, mangled” (5). In the first pages of the novel the narrator describes the terrible living conditions in the slums with great accuracy:

Decomposing wallpaper, pools of stagnant water, rats on the scent of baby milk. Colonies of flies in the wet, crumbling walls. Typhoid and other death in every breath, on every surface. Banisters that shook when held, floors that creaked and groaned, timber that cried for sparks. There was no rest, nowhere she could lie down and forget. Shouts and fights, rage and coughing, coughing – death creeping nearer. And the rooms behind the steps got smaller and darker and more and more evil. We fell further and further. The walls crumbled and closed in on us. Her children died and joined the stars. Rooms with no windows, floors that bred cockroaches. We cried at the smell of other people’s lousy food. We cried at the pain that burned through our sores. We cried for arms to gather and hold us. We cried for heat and for socks, for milk, and light, for an end to the itches that stopped us from sleeping. We cried at the lice that shone and curled and mocked us. (8)

But the most interesting point is that in the midst of so much misery, pain and poverty the narrator is capable of laughing at himself and the reality that surrounds him. In other words, the comic spirit gives Henry Smart distance and perspective and this allows him to face and transcend the hardships and misfortunes of life. Thus he presents himself as the Glowing Baby, “the wonder of Summerhill and beyond” (22), whom everyone wants to see and touch. We are even told that he has become a kind of local legend and, therefore, cannot help smiling when the narrator after this impressive description of himself that has us led to imagine that there is something really special and outstanding about him, gives us a very simple explanation for all the fuss he has created: “But that was all I was, a healthy, good-sized baby” (23). The contrast between the elevated tone in which the narrator describes his birth, explaining the reverential attitude of people, who treat him like a kind of god, even leaving “offerings” for the infant, and the down-to-earth fact that the only special thing about him is that he “beamed out good health and vitality” (22), allows the introduction of irony and humour. Henry is aware of the whirlpool of misery in which he lives but uses humour to cope with a situation, the memory of which would otherwise destroy him. We find another very good example when he

in a very “indignant” tone exclaims: ““Where were the three wise men? Where were the sheep and the shepherds? They missed it, the fuckin’ eejits. They were following the wrong star. They missed the birth of Henry Smart, Henry S. Smart, the one and only me” (22).

But although Henry may be the Glowing Baby, he very soon discovers that life is not easy for those born in the Dublin slums. At the age of five he already knows that he must use all his wit if he wants to survive in a world that is totally hostile to the likes of him. He and his little brother Victor do all kinds of jobs in order to survive. They become a beggar’s assistant, catch rats for the dog fights, sell newspapers they have stolen, steal flowers they sell back: “We slept where we fell and ate whatever we could find and rob. We survived... We were little princes of the streets, little packs of enterprise and cunning. We were often cold, always hungry but we kept on going going going” (63). At the age of 14 Henry decides to join those who are working for the independence of Ireland and it is precisely through his attitude towards the rebellion and his ideas about it that Doyle undermines the whole revolutionary process and, above all, the concept of the tragic hero.

Henry Smart does not, unlike most of the rebels, fight for the defence of a set of abstract ideas or principles, but for the people he loves, so that they will be able to live in a better world. So, for example, the first time he gets in touch with the rebels his answer to the question “Do you love Ireland?” is not that of fanatic or a patriotic man, but a very human and compassionate one: “I loved Victor and my memories of some other people. That was all I understood about love” (69). Years later, when he wonders whether all his revolutionary activity, which includes cycling all over the country through rain and wind, killing those who are a threat to the goals of the rebellion and training others to kill, makes any sense, he thinks of the people he cares or has cared for and decides that it is for them that he must go on:

But some memory of belief would calm me, a feeling of belonging that came when I thought of the people I knew and, always, it was parts of them that came to me - Victor’s hand, my father’s breath, my mother’s lap, Connolly at my shoulder opening the words, his finger following mine across the page, Annie and her singing, her dead husband’s empty sleeve, even Granny Nash’s whispering as she rode deeper into the stories in front of her on the table, Victor’s cough, my mother’s broken words, Paddy Swanzy’s back, him falling on Moore Street, Miss O’Shea running into the bullets on Henry Street. (227)

Unlike the tragic hero, Henry Smart does not sacrifice people in the name of truth or worthy causes. The tragic virtues of loyalty, duty, honour, passionate involvement, absolute devotion, etc., that so much suffering have caused throughout human history are unknown to him, who sees life through the eyes of generosity, love, compassion. He does not want to get trapped in the net of political

or religious ideas, but retain his freedom. Thus, when he reads on the banner that hangs across the front of Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, “We Serve Neither King Nor Kaiser but Ireland” he thinks: “If I’d had my way, *Or Anyone Else* would have been added, instead of *But Ireland*. I didn’t give a shite about Ireland” (91). As a matter of fact, when he and the other soldiers are told to fire during the Easter Rising, Henry’s targets are not military ones, but the windows of those shops –the baker’s, the shoe shop– to which, because of his poverty, he has never been able to have access to: “I shot and killed all that I had been denied, all the commerce and snobbery that had been mocking me and other hundreds of thousands behind glass and locks, all the injustice, unfairness and shoes” (105). After the firing there is a widespread looting of the shops and Henry Smart, instead of condemning it, as the tragic hero would do in the name of honour, celebrates the whole event because he is aware of the fact that for the first time in their lives people who have only known misery and pain may have all the goods that make man’s existence nicer, including the contents of a sweet shop. In this sense, it is interesting to point out how in *Ireland. A History* Robert Kee reproduces the words of a witness of the Easter Rising who viewed the looting in Henry’s terms: “although it was horrifying to see, the poor people of Dublin really had a ball” (Kee, 2003: 163). For Henry it is not a matter of being wrong or right, of being a sinner or a saint, but of feeling compassion for those people whose life has been and will still be a path of thorns. This attitude is very revealing because, according to Hyers, when the comic hero enlists the army he introduces a certain amount of chaos and confusion: “In the presence of such a figure, distinctions between friend and foe, the righteous and the unrighteous, generals and privates, tend to become fuzzy and confounded.” (Hyers, 1996: 64)

Like the comic hero, Smart is more concerned with saving skin than with saving face and that is why he does not hesitate to take advantage of the whole situation:

I was ready to die myself – I was banking on it – but I’d still been hoping to get a few quid into my pocket in case the worst came to the worst and I lived. We were locked into the biggest post office in the country and, even though it was now the centre of the new republic, it was still a post office, a land of opportunity, a great big building full of money. And I wanted some of it. My conscience wouldn’t let me ignore it. (89)

The narrator is being very ironic here because what we expect of a true patriot and nationalist is for his conscience to tell him that his duty is to respect certain principles of honour and not to misappropriate other people’s money. Henry Smart does not feel guilty for always keeping ten per cent of the money he gets or steals for the rebellion. Moral codes may be of use for the Christian Brothers’ boys that participate in the Easter Rising but not for a child of the slums whose main goal in life is to survive.

For Henry people come before principles or ideals. Thus when the wives of the soldiers who are in the British Army ask for their husband's salaries, Smart is the only one who does not care about Ireland having been proclaimed a Republic, but about these women having to feed their children and themselves. Doctrines must be ignored when they imply the sacrifice of the helpless and innocent.

And when after the Easter Rising he resolves that he is going to die for Ireland, he is not thinking of an abstract and symbolic entity but of a better world in which there will be fresh cabbage for all Irish people or fresh straw in every mattress. In other words, his commitment is to life and the basics of life. His is a continual celebration of existence and this becomes clear when Henry decides to leave his post during the worse moments of the Easter Rising to make love in the basement of Liberty Hall with the woman who will become his wife:

They're not the only ones, said Paddy.

What did I say back to Paddy? Nothing at all. Too scared? Too busy? No. I just wasn't there when he said it. I was downstairs, in the basement, in a hot little room with much more dust than air. ...I was stuck there with my britches nuzzling my ankles as Miss O'Shea grabbed my knees and climbed on top of me. (119)

A "real hero" would know better than forgetting what his real duty is, but Henry Smart, like the comic hero, knows that part of human happiness derives from the enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life.

The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath and that is why Henry tries to escape from any kind of dogmatism or fanaticism. When during the Easter Rising one of the Volunteers refuses to eat his dinner because it is meat and he will not eat it on a Friday, Henry, who is free of any religious prejudices, takes the plate and compliments the cook for such an excellent meal. Henry cannot help laughing at the scruples of the Volunteers: "They watched me, waited for God's bullet to send me down to hell. But, as two of the gawking Volunteers were hit by machine-gun spray and fell screaming onto the wet tiles, I lifted my head up, brought the empty plate up to my face and licked it clean." (130).

It is precisely when Henry Smart realizes that the leader of the rebellion has been using him to fulfil the most horrible tasks and that there is no future or hope for the likes of him that he decides to abandon the fight: the war is over for him. He discovers that he has been killing people not for the sake of creating a better or more egalitarian society, but for the sake of a minority who in the name of a series of dogmas is exploiting the rest of the Irish population. But even in this moment of defeat Henry Smart shows the capacity for adaptation and survival so characteristic of the comic hero. Although he is now considered a traitor and therefore his life is in danger, he faces the future with great optimism, not letting his adverse circumstances crush him down:

I'd start again. A new man. I had money to get me to Liverpool and a suit that didn't fit. I had a wife I loved in jail and a daughter called Freedom I'd held only once. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know if I'd get there.

But I was still alive. I was twenty. I was Henry Smart. (342)

At Swim, Two Boys is also set in Dublin and the time covered goes from 1915 to the 1916 Easter Rising. The novel tells the love story of two sixteen-year old boys, Jim and Doyler and it is precisely in their attitude towards both their personal relationship and the rebellion, that the former proves to be the true comic hero and the latter the tragic figure. In In "Pal o' Me Heart" David Halperin explains that O'Neill is following the path already taken by other gay male writers in the last fifteen years in his attempt to write a novel not only concerned with male homosexuality, but also with a certain moment in the history of Ireland. He further argues that O'Neill in *At Swim, Two Boys* is crossing "the codes of Irish identity and gay identity, making each into a figure for the other, thereby producing at one stroke a gay genealogy of Irishness as well as a specifically Irish image of male homosexuality – a romantic vision of the gay male world as 'a nation of the heart'" (2003: 32). Both Irishmen and gay men are looking for their self-definition, for their own nation, for their own independence, and it is precisely this search which is described in the novel. Halperin adds that O'Neill is concerned not only with portraying the lived experience of gay desire at that time, but also with the "enduring erotic and political realities" (32). O'Neill creates a series of characters, such as Anthony MacMurrough, his aunt Eveline and Mr Mack, by means of whom he points out the contradictions and absurdities of the Rising and unmasks the fanaticism and dogmatism of the revolutionaries. But only one of the fictional people of the novel fulfils the liberating role of the comic hero, Jim, in contrast to Doyler whose personal tragedies crush his spirit.

Interestingly enough, Doyler has many more affinities with Henry Smart than Jim. Doyler is also a child of the slums, whose father continually beats him and who has to start working at a very early age:

He was the rag-mannered barefoot boy who glowered at the back and never played games in the yard. He was mocked for a baldy peelo, for his hair would often be shaved against the itch, and his cap would slip and slide about his head. Every morning he was hauled for a thrashing because every afternoon he went working in the street. (77)

Since he has only experienced the darkest side of life, Doyler is looking for a better world in which there will be more opportunities for everyone, no matter their social background. For him, as for Henry, the struggle for the independence of Ireland is not a political or military event, but a class war. He declares himself a socialist and is not afraid of being caught reading forbidden books such as *Socialism Made Easy*, by James Connolly, or singing subversive songs against the Empire. When Jim asks him whether he has stolen the tulips he has given him from

the gardens of the well-to-do his reaction is very revealing: “Stealing, me arse. Redistribution if you must know” (67). He is proud of wearing the badge of the Citizen Army: “Sword and shield of the working man, the red-flag socialists of Liberty Hall” (139). His dream of becoming a Citizen soldier becomes true the days before the Easter Rising. He participates actively in all the preparations for the Rising, doing all sorts of jobs, from taking messages on an old bicycle to providing support during a strike. Because his main aim is to improve the situation of workers he, like Henry Smart, detests all those groups he thinks oppress them, that is to say, the upper class and the Church². He also despises the Gaelic League, the aim of which was to encourage the learning of the Irish language, Irish clothes, Irish dances, Irish poets and “every cultural detail that could be found to distinguish Irishness from Englishness was to be sought out and made the inspiration of the Irish people” (Kee, 2003: 141). But Doyler’s hatred is mainly aimed at the Irish Volunteers. Like Smart, he believes that they are on the side of the priests and the upper class and do not care for the workers like the Irish Citizen Army does³. Doyler believes that the Volunteers are not only on the side of the workers’ bosses and the priests, but have no knowledge of how hard life is for the likes of him:

Doyler wanted to spit. The Volunteers were a contamination. What did they care for the rights of labour? Was they born Englishmen, they’d be all for King and Empire. Their thinking was wool and dreams, whereas his was hard and severe, hard and severe as the lives of the people. (477)

He goes so far as to admit that he would prefer a rifle off a dead Volunteer than one off a dead British soldier or constable.

But if Doyler shares with Henry Smart the same economic and social background and some of the ideas on the revolution, he differs with him in his attitude towards life. He lacks the flexibility and adaptability of the comic spirit that so much defines Henry. Whereas Smart does not lose himself in absolute seriousness, rigid principles or stubborn pursuit of ideals, but is primarily enthusiastic about life and saving it, Doyler is ready to risk his job and life for something so abstract as Ireland, or, to be more precise, the working class: “Nor King nor Kaiser, we serve, but Ireland. Meaning the working man” (282). Henry Smart is ready to die for the people he loves, that is to say, out of compassion for them, but Doyler seems to be much more concerned with the defence of principles rather than persons. Doyler’s mother, a very wise woman who has only known the

² As a matter of fact during the famous 1913 Lockout, which made strikers and their families suffer great hardship being short of food and fuel during the long and cold winter months, the bosses had the support of the Irish Catholic hierarchy and many of the Catholic clergy.

³ The Irish Citizen Army was founded on 23 November 1913 by Connolly and Larkin. Both were very much concerned with social inequality and the way in which the working class was the victim of the capitalist system.

dark and miserable side of life, is very much aware of how limited her son's view of the rebellion is:

“Ah, Ma. I'm in the army. Aren't we training for war sure.”

“A whisper, son – if there's others unhappy, they won't be happier for your sorrow. You'd want a long arm and you putting it round an army. You're lonely to the world I think.” (479)

She wants to make Doyler aware of the fact that we must never hurt or sacrifice the people we really love in the name of duty or country.

But where Doyler reveals more affinities with the tragic hero is in his incapacity to accept his own vulnerability and limitations. Instead of celebrating and enjoying humanity as it is with its follies and successes, limitations and aspirations, tragedy praises exceptional individuals and exceptional acts, thus creating godlike figures that are far away from reality. Hyers explains this contrast between tragedy and comedy very clearly:

We prefer, of course, to flatter ourselves with images of idealized heroes, or at least tragic ones. And there is a certain inspiration and catharsis to be had from their heroism. Yet it has always been the task of comic heroes to identify our pretensions and self-deceptions, our inconsistencies and incongruities, if need be by exemplifying them. In their antics and adventures, their fancies and follies, were are gently reminded that, despite all the grandeur of our dreams and accomplishments, we are finite, fallible, mortal and frequently foolish creatures of the earth. Even when our heads are in the clouds, our feet walk on the ground and are made of clay. (Hyers, 1996: 61)

Because Doyler has not got the flexible attitude of the comic hero who admits that we are creatures of very diverse and often opposite tendencies and not god-men, he becomes totally frustrated when just before the Easter Rising he realizes that he is totally terrified: “But there it was: he was frightened. And it had come as such a revelation, he had wanted to stop people he knew in the street. You'll never guess – I'm not brave at all.” (493). Doyler is struck by this discovery because he has not yet learnt that people are not easily pinned down or classified, but are defined by their contradictions and ambiguities. The true heroic act is not to try, as Plato said, “to become like God, as far as this is possible for a mortal” (cit. in Hyers, 1996: 59), but to accept one's limitations and cowardice.

Since Doyler, although sharing certain aspects with Henry Smart, shows the rigidity and monologic vision of the tragic hero, we must look for the comic hero somewhere else in the novel. The character who best incarnates the flexible outlook of the comic spirit is Jim Mack. Unlike Doyler, he is not interested in the revolutionary process and it is precisely this detachment that allows him to see the contradictions and absurdities of the rebellion. Politics is just a puzzle to him and he never quite understands what Doyler means when he says he is a socialist, because

he is so trapped in his own ideals and aims that he seems to have lost touch with real life:

Shin Feiners, Leaguers, Volunteers. They stood for Ireland, that was much clear, Ireland her own. Doyler was a socialist. He liked the way he pronounced the word, without the expected *sh* sound, but he still had only the muzziest idea what it stood for. Doyler himself was small help. His talk was names and slogans. Citizen Army. Liberty Hall. Nor King nor Kaiser. (234)

He even laughs at the seriousness with which Doyler talks about religious and political matters:

“Curious things are brothers. Neither hay nor grass. They wear the uniform, but they’re sergeants really, not officer class.”

Jim smiled. Was this scandalous talk? With scandalous talk you did not argue but, silently invoking the aid of Mary, politely took your leave. “Matter of vocations, I should think.”

“Vocations me arse.”

Yes, definitely scandalous. (141)

Whereas Ireland for Doyler is the working class for Jim it is Doyler and MacMurrough:

“It’s silly, I know. But that’s how I feel. I know Doyler will be out, and where would I be but out beside him? I don’t hate the English and I don’t know do I love the Irish. But I love him. I’m sure of that now. And he’s my country.”

...

“I think a little bit of it too is yourself, MacEmm⁴.” (435)

Jim decides to join the Citizen Army and participate actively in the Easter Rising because of his deep love for Doyler. And, ironically enough, this young man who is not interested in politics and has not godlike aspirations to become a hero, proves to be one of the most useful and bravest soldiers:

And there he was, Jim Mack.

He was acting as a kind of rebel policeman, standing in the street, waving the groups to cross to the Surgeons – no wait a minute, halt, yes quickly now, safely now, don’t trip. It was quite possible his job was important. It was even possible he was doing it well. What was undeniable was, a foot or so closer to

⁴ MacMurrough is a very interesting character in the novel because although he feels close to that Ireland that symbolizes at the same time freedom and sadness and is proud of being Irish, he does not want to get trapped in risings or revolutionary ideals. If he decides to participate in the rebellion it is merely out of love for Jim: “See, I come to war because I love that boy. See how beautiful he is, see how fine. Here is his friend: he too is fine and beautiful. They go to war because they love, each his country. And I too love my country.” (630)

the park and he should perform the same duty in absolute safety – but no, he must venture this further foot where the military could just bother the brim of his hat. (629)

Because Jim, like the comic hero, is taking the Rising as he takes life, that is to say, as a game to be played and enjoyed, and not as a battle that will lead to death, he is capable of detaching himself from the political milieu and recognize its contradictions and absurdities: “At last word came of action. Action at last, for it was mad holed up in these slobby trenches. It was not a retreat. It was a withdrawal. They were to make a tactical withdrawal to the far corner of the Green where a hump in the ground would better give cover” (612). He also becomes a little disappointed when he joins a group of soldiers who he thinks are talking tactics to find out that it is the Rosary they are at. On the other hand, he gets a bit “worried” when a woman suddenly appears and with her rifle destroys one of the enemy’s machine-guns: “Oh boy, my gracious grief – they better come soon, Doyler and MacEmm. There wouldn’t be nothing left them to do.” (613-14)

Jim is fighting not for a series of abstract ideas but for what one of the characters in the novel calls “a nation of the heart”. In this new country nobody will go to jail or be executed for being homosexual. Everybody will have the right to express his or her own feelings no matter what their sexual option may be. In this celebration of life as it is, in this acceptance of his own homosexuality as something natural and not sinful or abominable, Jim proves to be the true comic hero. Here lies precisely one of the main differences between Doyler and Jim. It is true that from the very beginning of the novel Doyler does not hide his feelings for Jim. He is always calling him “pal o’ me heart” and whenever they are together he tries to be as physically close to him as possible:

Gently this time, though still the touch shot through Jim’s clothes, through his skin even. It was this way whenever their bodies met, if limping he brushed against him or laughing he squeezed his arm. The touch charged through like a sputtering tram-wire until it wasn’t Doyler he felt but what Doyler touched, which was himself. This is my shoulder, this my leg. And he did not think he had felt himself before, other than in pain or in sin.

“Are we straight so?”

“Aye we’re straight,” said Jim.

“Straight as a rush, so we are.” (97)

“Straight as a rush” is Doyler’s motto for their relationship. He repeats it again and again as if to make sure that Jim understands what is going on between them. But, paradoxically, this young man who seems to be sure about his feelings and even has the courage to admit to MacMurrough that he loves Jim, is incapable of accepting his homosexuality as something natural. He believes that MacMurrough, with whom he has had his first sexual intercourse, has tempted and perverted him

and that this is the reason why he has become an homosexual. This idea about homosexuality as a kind of perversion, as a kind of sexual behaviour you acquire by the bad influence of others, becomes clear in a conversation between Doyler and MacMurrough:

“Is it Oscar Wilde?”

“Yes.”

“He was a very bad fellow, they say?”

“Yes, they do.”

“They’d say anything against an Irishman, the English would.”

“They might tell the truth, too.”

“Aye, they might. They say he used to be very famous at one time.”

“He was. He stayed here, you know.”

“In this house?”

“Walked these very paths. It’s whispered some of his poems were, if not written, contemplated here.”

“Is that were you...?”

MacMurrough laughed. “I wasn’t thought of at the time. Or if I was, I was only an infant in your mother’s shawl.” (298)

The interesting thing about Doyler is that, although he is sure about his love for Jim, he does not want to be seen with other homosexuals or to be considered one of them. He seems to believe that his relationship with Jim is something exceptional that must not be accepted in other cases. This is why he feels embarrassed when in the days before the Rising he meets in Dublin a young man who has been forced to leave his home because of his homosexuality. He is very pleased to have met Doyler, because he thinks he will understand his plight. But not only does Doyler try to disassociate himself from the boy, but when he finally accepts to make love to him, he treats him in a very cruel and brutal way. And the worst of all is that he is afraid of not being able to control his anger and rejection of his own homosexuality when being alone for the first time with Jim: “Yes, he was scared. He was scared to be with Jim. And he wanted to hold him. He wanted so much just his arm round his neck. But he didn’t know could he be trusted. If he made Jim do what he made this boy do. And worse if Jim would let him.” (498).

Jim, on the other hand, seems from the very beginning to be free of the prejudices that torture Doyler. The first time he sees Doyler after some years he cannot help smiling all the way home remembering the way his old friend has cheered him. He does not get shocked or ashamed of himself when Doyler touches

him and he gets excited. He is even capable of detaching himself from what is happening and laughing at the Church's teachings on sexual matters:

Doyler's leg lay hard against his and his arm rubbed up and down with his whispery playing. Below Jim felt a familiar stir. Dispassionately he wondered was he an especially evil person.

Solitary vice he knew from confession. He would look out solicitation tomorrow in the school dick. (145)

Humour liberates Jim from all the religious forces that oppress man and allows him to accept his relationship with Doyler as something natural. This capacity for distancing himself from his personal situation and seeing the comic or absurd side of it is seen very clearly when he decides to miss mass in order to be with Doyler. Brother Polycarp, one of the brothers at school who is jealous of Doyler because of his close relationship with Jim, has warned his pupils of the dangers of choosing the "wrong friend" and has used the word "supercilious" to define such bad company. Jim realizes that Brother Polycarp is aiming his anger at Doyler and that is why out of loyalty for his "pal o' me heart" he decides to miss mass, although he does not tell Doyler the real reason. His thoughts are totally comic and ironic:

"What changed your mind?"

"My mind about what?"

"Coming swimming, you gaum."

Jim shrugged. That the brother had got it wrong about the root of supercilious did not seem adequate cause to miss Mass, skip his devotion and give over most likely a vocation to the brotherhood. "The day was sunny," he said. (159)

Doyler goes every afternoon to the Forty Foot for a swim and he decides to give Jim swimming lessons so that next year both of them will be able to swim together out to the Muglins. In order to seal their pact Doyler and Jim spit on their hands and rub their palms, but only Jim "sniffed his wetting palm. A private smell. Like leather, bodily, raw." (161). When Doyler decides to go to Dublin to join the Citizen Army Jim does not hide his willingness to kiss him because for him there is nothing shameful in his feelings. And when his father forbids him to go every morning to the Forty Foot to train for the Easter swim, he finds a way of keeping the promise he made to Doyler while at the same time not disobeying his father:

Every morning before school, he climbed down the ladder at the Forty Foot cove, and there he clung while the waves surged and swayed him against the rock. But he did not let go the ladder, so it could not be said he swam. It was designing of him, what Brother Polycarp would have called Jesuitical, and it troubled him, the deceit. Yet it was daunting to do and required a mighty determination: not thrashing your limbs, no release from your bounds, no reward at all, just the miserable freeze. He offered it up to the lost souls, in tenements of Dublin, in wastes of Gallipoli. (349-50)

The fact that Jim offers his sacrifice to lost souls is very revealing because it shows that Jim does not see any harm or sin in his relationship with Doyler, but the purest and deepest expression of love.

But Jim who so far has been free from any kind of fear or prejudices regarding his affection for Doyler, all of a sudden gets trapped in the religious teachings he has received and becomes totally intimidated and terrified. This happens after he has his first sexual intercourse with a soldier he meets just by chance while Doyler is away in Dublin. He is totally horrified by his own behaviour and believes that he has condemned himself. Jim's reaction is very easy to understand if we take into consideration what he has been told at school about the sins of the flesh:

He told Jim of the sins of the flesh, the horror of impure thoughts, the terrible consequences of the solitary vice. No sins destroy a soul so utterly as this shameful sin, he said. It steals the sinner from the hands of God and leads him like a crawling thing into the mire of filth and corruption. Once steeped in this mire, he cannot get out. The more he struggles, the deeper must he sink: for he has lost the rock of faith. My Spirit does not dwell in you, the Lord hath said, if you are nothing but flesh and corruption. And so God gives up the impure to all the wicked inclinations of his heart. Hear him laugh at the truths of religion. Delightful to him the stench of corruption. In the mire of passions he wallows. Yet even so he will seek to hide his shame, even from his confessor, as if by darkness or solitude heaven were deceived. Will such a one at the last moment give a good confession, who has from his earliest youth heaped sacrilege on sacrilege? Will the tongue, which has been silent up to this day, be unloosed at the uttermost hour? No; God has abandoned him; heavy are the sins that already weigh him down; he will add one other, and it will be the last.

This then was the spiritual sequel. The priest went on to tell the corporal sequelae, how God has set the mark of ignominy on the solitary sinner's face. The sickly pallor, the eyes darkened with the shadows of vice, the listless restless joyless posture. Where once the future shone brightly in his eyes, now but gleams the dark road to lunacy. In this life the asylum is his sole hope, in the next the fires of hell. (405-406)

Jim is totally devastated and fights with the weapons of faith to overcome his despair:

He found his Rosary beads. Quickly he prayed. So abandoned was he, the words would not come. He wound the beads round his hands. Let his beads now be the chains that bound him. Hindered in this way he dressed: he could not bear to be unclothed. He dug his fingernails into his palms. All night he prayed. (408)

He goes to confession, but even this act does not calm his conscience, particularly because the priest is incapable of understanding his plight. His suffering will not cease and he tries all kinds of ways of torturing himself in order to control his sexual impulses:

He kept pebbles in his boots. If he walked anywhere and there were nettles, he was careful to pass his hand through the leaves. Not to be ostentatious, during the day he wore his beads as a bracelet, high up his right arm, under his sleeve. The crucifix dropped so he might finger it if needed. (412)

He only eats bread and drinks water. He thinks that he has shamed the birth of his niece by being her godfather: “The poor thing with no father, and now no uncle worth the name. Sacrilege on sacrilege: when he stood godfather to her.” (413).

Before going on it is interesting to point out that, although Jim’s mental and spiritual condition as described in these pages cannot be more painful, O’Neill succeeds in playing down melodrama and false sentimentalism by mixing in a brilliant way the comic and the tragic. We find the first example in Jim’s reasoning about the way the Church classifies sins:

Time passed, and it was the discriminations and distinctions of sin, with regard to impure thoughts, that held Jim’s mind. That the Church should see so far ahead, so deeply inside the soul, that no contingency was overlooked but she planned for all the twistings and quibblings of conscience: it was a majestic thing to contemplate, a structure built of thought and logic, magnificent and complex as the cathedrals the Protestants had stolen from her. In the end, whether his hand moved to that solitary vice was neither here nor there. For already there was the sin of *desiderium*, which was the desire for what is sinful; of *delectatio morosa*, the pleasure taken in a sinful thought; of *gaudium*, the dwelling with complacency on sins already committed. (406-7)

O’Neill is using Jim’s innocence to expose how oppressing the Church’s teachings can be. Jim is really struck by the way in which the Church seems to control all possible sins and it is precisely this ingenuity and surprise which allows O’Neill to introduce the element of humour. We find the second instance of comedy in Jim’s confession. Here O’Neill exploits the narrow-mindedness of the priest to make the reader smile in the midst of so much suffering. The whole episode becomes hilarious because Father Taylor will not or does not want to understand that Jim sinned with a boy and not a girl:

Father, he was truly ashamed to tell it, but it was a soldier, Father. An English soldier? Jim didn’t know. Was it the English soldier who lured him to the girl? It wasn’t a girl, Father. With a testy shake of his head that had Jim cowering lest he should turn, Father Taylor gave him to know it didn’t matter her age but it was the sin he should mind... Was he sure she was not married? Father, please, it was a soldier. The soldier must look to his own salvation. Father Taylor did not doubt he was a Saxon and a heretic and was most like lost to God. Either that or an Ulsterman. However, that he led Jim to the girl did not lighten one jot the blame attached to Jim. (410-11)

Jim is so much overwhelmed by his sense of guilt that he falls seriously ill. But his sickness becomes a kind of catharsis, for when he recovers his health he is a

different person, more like the Jim of the first half of the novel. He is not any longer ashamed of his behaviour, but again accepts his sexual condition as something natural and good. As he himself explains to MacMurrough, he has liberated himself from that other self that was oppressing him with his religious ideas:

“I used always have this notion of being watched, you see. Not by other people. It was myself was watching me. Another me, a different fellow altogether. He never liked me. The way I behaved used truly annoy him. And I was scared of him too. It made me nervous, knowing he was watching me the while.”

...

“I don’t know, but after my fever everything changed. I doubt I’d be scared now, not of anything...” (433-4)

For Jim the only thing that matters now is his relationship with Doyler and MacMurrough admires “That loyalty which, given a cause, would be silently fanatic; that determination which, given a means, could be ruthless.” (432-3). Jim does not care about other people’s prejudices against homosexuality, he just wants to spend the rest of his life with Doyler. He expresses it in a very poetical way: “Doyler had not understood about the island. But that would come. Doyler had nothing to fear. Jim would swim him to the Muglins, he would swim him home again. There was not end to the swimming they would do.” (508). He not only believes that he and Doyler are extraordinary people who must do extraordinary things, but is convinced that he and Doyler can live like a married couple. He does not want to have to hide his feelings or to always meet Doyler in a clandestine way. He refuses to reduce his relationship with Doyler to sporadic sexual encounters and defends their right to lead a normal life. He wants things to be different for himself and Doyler and, as a matter of fact, when he explains to Doyler what their life is going to be like in the future, he seems to be describing that of an ordinary couple:

“And you know,” said Jim, exploring his fingers along Doyler’s arm, along the scrapes and grazes of the elbow, their mesmeric tactility, “you know, things won’t be like this then.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Listen to me. When you’d touch me, I won’t be jumping, I won’t be startled, won’t hardly show if I felt it even.”

“What about it?”

“I’m just thinking that would be pleasant. To be reading, say, out of a book, and you to come up and touch me – my neck, say, or my knee – and I’d carry on reading, I might let a smile, no more, wouldn’t lose my place on the page. It would be pleasant to come to that. We’d come so close, do you see, that I wouldn’t be surprised out of myself every time you touched.” (582-583)

He is so sure that there is nothing shameful or sinful in his love for Doyler that he is convinced that God approves of what they are doing. Doyler himself is struck with amazement when he and Jim go to mass and Jim receives the communion with no sense of guilt: "He was sure everything was right and square." (598).

It is precisely in his open rejection of the badges with which we try define ourselves and others that Jim proves again to be the true comic hero. The comic spirit allows the comic hero to perceive reality as contradictory and ambiguous and not as unified whole. His vision of life is inclusive and that is why he accepts the manyness of the self and other selves: "The result, in fact, is a renewed sense of freedom, a liberation of the spirit." (Hyers, 1996: 145)⁵. The comic hero subverts not only sacred acts, persons and believes but what is sanctioned as proper or correct behaviour, showing that nothing is completely finished or sealed. When talking about the fool Hyers explains that his main function is to profane the categories and hierarchies with which we try to domesticate life and classify human beings and in a sense this is what Jim is doing by openly challenging the dichotomy heterosexual = good / homosexual = bad. For him as for any other comic hero people or situations cannot be reduced to a set of principles or ideas, but accepted as they are. And above all, life must be affirmed, celebrated and rejoiced.

But although Jim is portrayed throughout the novel as a comic hero, at the end, and unlike Henry Smart, he becomes the tragic figure who is unable to transcend his suffering⁶. He allows his personal plight to crush his spirit and cannot distance himself from his predicament to see the absurd or contradictory side of it. When Doyler dies life also comes to an end for Jim in a metaphorical way. He wants to be shot by the British when he is captured by them, because he knows that "I'll be ruthless with them. I'll shoot them easy as stones. I won't never give up. I'll be a stone myself." (636). As a matter of fact, Jim's last years are "spilt with hurt and death" (643), being trapped in his pain and having lost that flexibility of perspective

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin expresses himself in similar terms when he says that whereas official and serious culture represents the triumph of a truth already established, laughter leads to a temporary liberation from the sanctioned order and prevailing ideas. Fear, violence, prohibition and limitation, the features of seriousness are defeated by laughter: "Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world" (Bakhtin, 1984: 47). Laughter offers us the possibility of having a new outlook on the world and allows the old order to be replaced by a new one.

⁶ Interestingly enough, Jim's father undergoes the opposite process, Mr Mack is a shopkeeper who wants to climb up the social ladder and a staunch defender of the established order, who is used by O'Neill to show how dangerous it is to get trapped in the net of principles. But when at the end of the novel he is caught by the constables during the insurrection because of his supposed connection with the rebels, no dogmas, no ideals or principles are any longer important to him, but life and the people who are dear to him: "He did not think of canon nor curate, of doors, tuppenny nor sixpenny. Not of Ireland nor Dublin, which both must surely be brought to ruin. His years with the Colours were nothing to him, his regiment might never have been. While the constables marched him away, he stared back up the road where the soldiers had gone, the first of thousands to come, thinking only, helplessly, Jim, my son James, my son, my Jim." (624).

that defines the comic hero. A stubborn affirmation of life is implicit in the comic vision and since Jim has lost it he cannot face these moments of anguish or experience a distinct sense of faith renewed and hope rekindled as it happens in the case of Henry Smart.

Both Henry Smart and Jim Mack incarnate the flexibility and adaptability of the true comic hero. Both refuse to fit into established conventions and human demarcations and celebrate the manyness of life. Above all, they demonstrate that laughter demolishes fear and piety before everyone or anything and allows us to be full and truly human.

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