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Post-revisionism: Conflict (Ir)resolution
and the Limits of Ambivalence
in Kevin McCarthy's *Peeler*

ABSTRACT

This essay considers a historical novel of recent times in revisionist terms, Kevin McCarthy's debut novel of 2010, *Peeler*. In doing so, I also address the limitations that the novel exposes within Irish revisionism. I propose that McCarthy's novel should be regarded more properly as a post-revisionist work of literature. A piece of detective fiction that is set during the Irish War of Independence from 1919 to 1921, *Peeler* challenges the romantic nationalist understanding of the War as one of heroic struggle by focusing its attention on a Catholic member of the Royal Irish Constabulary. In considering the circumstances in which Sergeant Seán O'Keefe finds himself as a policeman serving a community within which support for the IRA campaign against British rule is strong, the novel sheds sympathetic light on the experience of Catholic men who were members of the Royal Irish Constabulary until the force was eventually disbanded in 1922. At the same time, it demonstrates that the ambivalence in Sergeant O'Keefe's attitudes ultimately proves unsustainable, thereby challenging the value that Irish revisionism has laid upon the ambivalent nature of political and cultural circumstances in Ireland with regard to Irish-British relations. In the process, I draw attention to important connections that McCarthy's *Peeler* carries to Elizabeth Bowen's celebrated novel of life in Anglo-Irish society in County Cork during the period of the Irish War of Independence: *The Last September* of 1929.

Keywords: Royal Irish Constabulary, detective, war, revisionism.

Kevin McCarthy's debut novel, *Peeler*, received enthusiastic praise from the Ireland correspondent for *The Observer* newspaper, Henry McDonald, when it was published in 2010. Reviewing the novel in *The Belfast Telegraph*, McDonald considered it "a brilliant first novel . . . that rescues from the margins of Irish history a group that the future Free State and official Ireland airbrushed from national memory: the Royal Irish Constabulary" (38). The novel deals with the experiences of officers serving in the Royal Irish Constabulary (hereafter, RIC) during the course of the Irish War of Independence, 1919–21. The title is deceptive in its simplicity: "Peeler" was a derogatory term for Irish-based officers of the Metropolitan Police Force, founded by Sir Robert Peel in 1829. The term "Peeler" was commonly used by Republicans and some Loyalists in Northern Ireland for the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) up to the 1990s, until the force was reformed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) under the terms of the Patten Report as part of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Considered in this context, the title of the novel creates the expectation of a narrative that will be inflected with a Republican perspective of the old RIC as part of a repressive colonial state apparatus in Ireland under British rule. However, the title also names the protagonist of the novel, RIC Sergeant Seán O'Keefe. The novel traces a murder investigation that O'Keefe leads in the West Cork region in 1920 at the height of the guerrilla war that the Irish Republican Army (hereafter, IRA) were then fighting against the RIC and the British Army. The story of this investigation is pursued under the shadow of O'Keefe's emotional de-sensitization, having been exposed to the horrors of trench warfare during the First World War; de-sensitization exacerbated by the death of his brother when serving with the 16th Irish Battalion of the British Army.

In many respects, McCarthy's novel answers to a central tenet of Irish historical revisionism as inaugurated by historian T. W. Moody and developed most influentially in the work of R. F. Foster. This concerns the need to de-mythologize Irish history as it has been perceived in nationalist terms, bringing to light the wide spectrum of Irish historical experience—particularly at local level—that has been silenced or suppressed in the interests of retaining a public official consensus concerning the political legitimacy of the war fought for an independent Irish Republic in the 1919–21 period.¹ In the critical spirit of historical revisionism, historian Peter Hart has made one of the most distinctive interventions in showing just

¹ Regarding the revisionist approach, see essays by T. W. Moody, R. D. Edwards, R. F. Foster and Alvin Jackson in Brady (*Intepreting*). For criticism of revisionism, see pieces by Desmond Fennell, Seamus Deane, and Anthony Coughlan in the same volume.

how dirty the Irish War of Independence actually was. In his introduction to *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies*, "The Killing of Seargant O'Donoghue," Hart presents the case of an old-time RIC officer from County Kerry who was murdered one evening in Cork, provoking a murderous backlash from a British Army Auxiliary unit that left three people dead in the Marshes district of Cork city, including one of those involved in the attack on O'Donoghue. Hart proposes that the case shows how civil war had already started in Ireland during the years of the Irish War of Independence:

It was a civil war, fought not just between Irish people, but between rival visions of Ireland. James O'Donoghue loved and served his country. He was a good Catholic and good Irishman. The same can be said of the O'Briens. The sergeant's death represented a clash between the old loyalties of the policeman and the new certainties embraced by the gunmen. (18)

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McCarthy's novel centres on the figure of RIC Sergeant Seán O'Keefe as he investigates a sex-crime murder in the west Cork region just as the IRA were consolidating their control of the area in late 1920. In this aspect, the novel addresses in its crime-fiction form some of the real-life historical events that Peter Hart's studies have brought to light. Of course, there is an extensive number of works of literary fiction over the past forty years that have challenged the traditional nationalist ethos of the Republic of Ireland, particularly as it was consolidated under the rule of Éamon De Valera from the 1930s. One need only consider such celebrated novels as Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, John McGahern's *Amongst Women* or Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* by way of example. McCarthy's novel, however, is distinguished by the crime fiction genre that the author adapts in creating what Edna Longley has identified as a revisionist form of literary work.² Addressing deeply fraught political and historical considerations through the medium of crime fiction, *Peeler* lies open to the objection that the genre may not be sufficiently capable of addressing the complex range of emotional and psychological layers that literary revisionism peels off (excusing the pun), particularly through the ambivalences and complexities of modern Irish poetry as Longley discusses it. Reviewing the novel in *The Irish Times*, Declan Burke hints at this when he comments that McCarthy "hasn't made things easy for himself in choosing for his protagonist an RIC sergeant who is a veteran of the Great War and who works alongside Black and Tans" (49). Yet Burke regards the novel as a success, praising the characterization of Sergeant

² See, in particular, Longley's reading of poetry and revisionism (50–68).

O’Keefe as sympathetic “in a compelling narrative” (49). In this essay, I argue that *Peeler* represents a post-revisionist moment in contemporary Irish writing. In the sympathy that the novel engenders for its protagonist, *Peeler* contributes to the ongoing recovery of personal historical memories that had been effectively rendered subterranean in much of Irish society from the 1930s to the 1990s. In this respect, it can be located within a general context of historical and cultural revisionism. However, it is also a novel that steps beyond the revisionist pre-occupation with the repressive or distorted nature of traditional Irish nationalist narratives, as revisionists have regarded them. It does so in two ways. First, *Peeler* brings to the surface the limitations of ambivalence, a central aspect of the revisionist critique of nationalism in Ireland, as an ideology that demands certitude (see, for example, Hart’s reference to the “new certainties” in the quotation above). Second, in its crime fiction form, the novel stretches beyond the ethno-religious framework through which intellectual alliances and enmities have been sustained in various guises over many decades in Irish political and cultural debate.

The narrative of *Peeler* gives rise to two questions of legitimacy. The first of these concerns how a crime can be investigated by the police when the forces upholding law and order have lost the consent of the communities to which they are assigned, whether that loss derives from the sympathy for, or the threat from, an organization such as that of the IRA. The second question relates to this in raising the issue of the conditions under which the role of the police is transferred from an existing civic administration like that of the RIC to an organization that was founded to overthrow it. By highlighting the politicized nature of policing in the context of a state of guerrilla warfare, the novel tests the genre limits of crime fiction itself. In so doing, it diverges from the major works in the tradition such as Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* or the *Sherlock Holmes* series of Arthur Conan Doyle. Having said this, *Peeler* contains all the elements of a crime thriller. The narrative includes a gruesome murder, a scattering of clues, the digression of “the wrong suspect,” and the case of a serial sex killer. As a consequence, the novel is more concerned with character-type than the evocation of affective complexity. It presents to the reader the “old-timer” RIC-man Logan reminiscing about the good-old days; the seedy brothel-keeper Barton; the stereotypical Anglo-Irish gentry-type Major Wallace Burleigh; the clinical gentleman-surgeon Matthew-Pare; the knowingly brutal barmen operating under the protection either of the IRA or the RIC Special Branch; most of all, the serial killer Bill “Birdy” Cole. The eight sections of the novel correspond to the eight-day time span of the events that it addresses. Each of these sections is concluded with some discreet passages describing the growth of a pathological mind. Apart from these

passages, McCarthy foregoes the highly interiorized narrative form that readers encounter in John Banville's major work of crime fiction, *The Book of Evidence* (a form that Banville abandons for the most part in his crime fiction written under the name Benjamin Black). Nevertheless, the typological conventions of the crime fiction form are undercut from behind and from before in *Peeler*: from behind, in the backdrop of generalized brutality arising out of the human slaughter of the First World War; from before, in the immediate crisis of civil society in Ireland during the course of the War of Independence.

Particularly given the County Cork setting of *Peeler*, there is one very important precedent for McCarthy's novel: Elizabeth Bowen's 1947 novel, *The Heat of the Day*. Bowen's novel is regarded primarily as a treatment of London society during the Blitz in World War II and also as part of literary modernism in Britain. However, it is essentially concerned with a criminal investigation of Robert Kelway passing information to Germany. From this perspective, it shares with *Peeler* a concern with the problem of legality and the operation of systems of justice during the course of a state of emergency. In contrast to Bowen's work, *Peeler* presents a relatively conventional narrative form that does not test the limitations and possibilities of language itself as a medium of representation in the fashion of early to mid-twentieth century literary modernism. McCarthy's narrative approach is justified by the fact that, unlike *The Heat of the Day*, he is dealing with an additional element: guerrilla warfare. To some extent like the Northern Irish Troubles of the 1970s–1990s, the Irish War of Independence was a war that was not quite a war, in the sense that it operated on a fault-line between the maintenance of civil society and the imposition of military control. Considered in this aspect, it could well be argued that if the backdrop of the First World War to the Cork setting for the Irish War of Independence in *Peeler* carries the influence of *The Heat of the Day* in the connections that Bowen draws between the London of the Blitz and rural Cork, McCarthy's novel carries a deeper relation to Bowen's earlier work *The Last September*, set predominantly in Cork during the 1919–21 period. Undoubtedly containing Bowen's distinctive stylistic features that place her writing in relation to Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett, *The Last September* is nonetheless a more conventional narrative than *The Heat of the Day*. In the concluding scene of an RIC barracks in County Cork burning down at the end of McCarthy's *Peeler*, there is a palpable reminder of the Naylor's Anglo-Irish residence at Danielstown in Cork burning to the ground at the end of *The Last September* (Bowen, *Last* 206).

Peeler begins with a crime scene: a woman's dead body on a country roadside near Ballycarleton in west Cork, her legs wide apart, her arms

in the posture of an embrace, one breast cut off and the word “trator” marked in tar across her chest. She is later identified as Deirdre Costello, a young woman who had dated an IRA member, Seamus Connors—with a reputation for brutality—before becoming involved with an affluent English gentleman resident in the up-market Montenotti area of Cork city. The location of the body is open to IRA sniper-attack so O’Keefe and his colleague require a team of Auxiliary soldiers (infamously known as “the Black and Tans” because of their uniforms) to secure the area before the location of the body can be secured in turn as a crime scene. From the outset, therefore, the narrative inaugurates a field of conflict and interaction between three autonomous ideological spheres through which plot, topology and characterization are developed: the sexual, the legal and the political. This is made evident immediately in the connection that is drawn between posture and photography, a connection that will lead the narrative into the realm of the sex industry as it opens out the ambivalent juxtapositions between state power and cultural allegiance. While the narrative in its entirety might be taken as an account of the last days of the RIC, the opening murder scene announces a whole new form of evidence-gathering that would change the nature of police investigation and legal process in the early-twentieth century through the mass production of cameras:

Not every murder scene in Ireland was photographed, but it was becoming increasingly common. Juries and coroner’s courts were requesting photographic evidence on a regular basis and O’Keefe, a keen amateur photographer, could not imagine examining a crime-scene—particularly a murder—without his Kodak Box Brownie (McCarthy, *Peeler* 12)

Photographing the semi-mutilated body of a woman to the end of identifying the culprit, O’Keefe throws into relief the contradiction that is triggered by a new confluence of visual technology and state power. Born from the voyeuristic gaze of the sex-criminal “Birdy” Cole—through which the female body is made into an object of desire through distance rather than intimacy—the crime demands the same representational form through which it is to be solved. In other words, a level of de-sensitization is necessary for a proper collation of evidence. In contrast to the rookie RIC officer Keane, Sergeant O’Keefe’s capacity to study the dismembered body dispassionately has been formed through his exposure to widespread bodily mutilation during the battles of the trenches in the First World War. In this respect, he shares one thing in common with the perpetrator of the crime, “Birdy” Cole: de-sensitization as a result of traumatic experience. Watching his mother work as a prostitute while his

father was away fighting in the British Army during the Boer War in South Africa, forced to scavenge for food around a hen-house, Cole has been subject to regular violent beatings in his childhood. He has withdrawn into a voyeuristic gaze upon women working as prostitutes as a result, a habit that becomes compulsive in adulthood. Ironically replicating “Birdy” Cole’s depersonalized observation of these women, Sergeant O’Keefe’s capacity for calculating observation—amplified by the technology of the camera—enables him to recognize that the posture of Deirdre Costello’s body was arranged in such a manner that it was deliberately intended to be photographed:

Too much care had been taken in the positioning to be the random work of gravity or rigor mortis. The pose reminded him of the French picture postcards of whores or North African harem girls that soldiers had bought and traded during the war (*Peeler* 12).

This association of a forensic with a pornographic image develops in the novel through its exploration of the underworld of a Cork city brothel and a private club styled in the manner of the infamous Hell Fire clubs of which commanding officers like Major Burleigh and Detective Inspector Masterson were members.³ The intrigue that this generates recalls the late-nineteenth-century sensation crime-fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle, particularly Doyle’s story, “The Sign of the Four,” but the crime-narrative format is troubled throughout *Peeler* by the political context of the murder investigation with which Sergeant O’Keefe is engaged. Indeed the sexual aspect of the murder of Deirdre Costello straddles the border between sexual violence as a criminal offence and as an act of war. Early into his investigation, O’Keefe comes across the case of Katharine Sheehan, an egg-woman who had been warned on several occasions by a local IRA unit to stop selling eggs to the police at Bandon RIC barracks and to members of the local British Army garrison in the town. After refusing to stop, Katharine Sheehan was assaulted by two men and a pig-ring was inserted into one of her buttocks. The doctor’s report indicated that she had been raped (*Peeler* 63). Reading this report, a feeling of self-disgust wells up in O’Keefe as he confronts the inability of the RIC to offer protection or justice for people like Katharine Sheehan, a woman violated for continuing her business of selling eggs to local police and soldiers: the only means of earning a living that was available to her. However, when he enquires

³ The first Hell Fire club in Ireland was founded in Dublin by the 1st Earl of Rosse, Richard Parsons, around 1737. For a history of the clubs in Ireland, see Ryan (*Blasphemers*).

of surgeon Mathew-Pare as to whether or not Deirdre Costello was raped before she was murdered, O'Keefe is reminded of the prevalence of sexual violence in war:

The surgeon said, "I'd lean more towards a sex-crime than execution, myself. But there's no reason to say that it wasn't both. Rape and war have come as a matched pair for as long as they have existed. Sometimes, I imagine, it's rather difficult to separate the two." (*Peeler* 129)

16 In this aspect of the narrative, McCarthy probes something other than the Irish War of Independence as the consequence of circumstances of generalized brutality emanating from the horror of the First World War. More immediately, *Peeler* brings out the distorted loyalties that turn the order of emotional value on its head. This makes itself most manifest in the mutual suspicion of the state and individual families. When Deirdre Costello's parents come to the RIC barracks to identify her body, Constable Keane offers her father a glass of whiskey. He stubbornly refuses "to take soup from Crown spies like yerself." This is a reference to those instances of starving Irish Catholic children during the years of the Irish Famine (1845–48) who were fed in schools set up by Protestant Bible societies on the condition that they received Protestant-based religious instruction.⁴ O'Keefe is left with a feeling of intense anger at the father's response: "The man's ignorance angered O'Keefe. He was trying to help him and his wife, and all the farmer could do was dredge up the rebel posturing of his youth" (*Peeler* 183). Deirdre Costello's father undoubtedly regards his distrust of the police as consistent with a need to protect his family during a period of guerrilla warfare. However, Sergeant O'Keefe sees his attitude as an example of putting loyalty to the Irish nation above any concern to find justice for a murdered daughter. From this perspective, the exchange between Mr Costello and Constable Keane exposes the same contradiction evident in the violation of Katharine Sheehan. In fighting for the rights of Irish people against British domination, the IRA violently degrade members of the community that they claim to be defending.

The circumstances in *Peeler* are complicated even further by a piece of news that is passed on to Sergeant O'Keefe by Detective Inspector Masterson. 'T Division has received information that the Sergeant's sister is to marry into one of the most well-known Republican families in County Dublin. The intrigue of the narrative involves Detective Masterson as an ally of the culprit "Birdy" Cole in the Deirdre Costello murder-case. In confronting

⁴ For a consideration of soupierism in the cultural memory of the Famine, see, for example, Ó'Gráda (*Black* 212, 221).

Sergeant O'Keefe with the disclosure that the security services are aware of a family-member association with the IRA, Masterson sets O'Keefe up. If the Sergeant's investigation strays away from the IRA as the chief suspects, then O'Keefe himself lies open to the suspicion that he is engaged in a cover-up in order to protect his sister. This circumstance highlights the precarious nature of kinship ties that both the insurrectionary guerrilla army of the IRA and the state security force of the RIC proclaim to protect and defend. As a police officer, O'Keefe feels a duty of obligation to bring the killer of Deirdre Costello to justice, if only for the sake of her grieving parents (despite what her father thinks of the RIC). Yet Detective Masterson's intimidating disclosure raises in O'Keefe a fear for the welfare of his sister. It is a circumstance that underlines the Civil War aspect to the Irish War of Independence that Peter Hart brings to light: a circumstance that presages the divisions that occurred within Irish families during the War of Independence that followed the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. Through Masterson's role in this aspect of the narrative, however, it also points to a feature that Hart's study overlooks: the degree to which these family and community divisions within Irish society were amplified—even engineered in some instances—by members of the British state security forces.

The structural ambivalence of Sergeant O'Keefe's performative identity in *Peeler* carries three conflicting dimensions: 1) fidelity to his role as a police officer providing the state's guarantee of protection against the violation of citizens' inalienable rights; 2) tacit recognition that the state apparatus within which he functions as a police officer finds itself in a situation of crisis: one that demands that Sergeant O'Keefe suppresses any regard for the political grievances that motivate support the IRA guerrilla campaign; 3) further recognition that to switch his allegiance to the Republican cause, in the process of solving the Deirdre Costello murder case, would involve betraying those RIC colleagues of his who have been killed by the IRA. The narrative is sustained by the tension between these aspects of O'Keefe's position. The story of Lieutenant Smyth, veteran of the King's Own Scottish Borderer, is a case in point. Appointed Divisional Police Commissioner for the province of Munster early in 1920, Smyth provokes the only-recorded mutiny in the RIC during the Irish War of Independence. During a speech that he delivered to RIC officers in Listowel barracks in County Kerry, Smyth declared that it would please him mightily the more Irishmen they shot. A month later, Smyth himself was shot dead in the City and County Club in Cork. The story is based on the facts of the Listowel mutiny of RIC officers that began on 17 June 1920.⁵ O'Keefe's feelings about the execution capture the conflict in

⁵ For a witness-based account of the Listowel mutiny, see Gaughan (*Memoirs*).

loyalties very precisely: “O’Keefe wasn’t alone in the Constabulary in that the man might have had it coming, but he kept such thoughts to himself” (*Peeler* 213).

The ambivalence of O’Keefe’s feelings and circumstances endures right to the end of *Peeler*, when the RIC barracks at Ballycarleton comes under attack from an IRA “flying column” and is burnt down as a result. As noted earlier, this conclusion is strongly reminiscent of that of Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* of 1929, a novel also set in County Cork in 1920. As a contemporary work of crime fiction, McCarthy’s *Peeler* is vastly different in style and tone from *The Last September*, a novel bearing strong affinities with the fiction of Virginia Woolf and, in some respects, a work that anticipates Samuel Beckett’s obsession with negation in his fictional works of the 1950s. Having said this, both *Peeler* and *The Last September* draw the reader’s attention to the impact of the Irish War of Independence on women. In stark contrast to *The Last September*, all the characters in *Peeler* are men. Yet the novel pivots on one woman, the murdered Deirdre Costello. She haunts the narrative, her death provoking a race between the RIC and the IRA to claim that she had been murdered by the other side. *The Last September* examines Irish-English relations at the time through interactions between Anglo-Irish landowning society and members of the English upper middle-class. While Bowen’s focus on character is more widely and deeply distributed than that of McCarthy, it is plausible to contend that the central figure is Lois Farquar, the eighteen-year old daughter of Laura Naylor Farquar—sister of Sir Richard Naylor, owner of the estate at Danielstown. In observing a correspondence between the ambivalence in loyalties and attitudes that we encounter in *Peeler* with the ambivalence in feeling that we find in *The Last September*, it is notable how important women are to its generation.

In *Peeler*, O’Keefe’s growing doubt that Deirdre Costello has been murdered by the IRA derives from his knowledge of the fact that she had not only been intimate with IRA man Seamus Connors, but also with Major Wallace Burleigh of the First Royal West Kent Regiment. In the course of *The Last September*, Lois Farquar explores an old abandoned mill in the Cork countryside with her friend Marda Norton while out on an afternoon walk. Here they are surprised to come across a sleeping man. He is armed, and evidently an IRA member. When he asks them where they are from, Lois tells him that they belong to the estate at Danielstown. This disclosure may be the piece of information that leads to the burning of Danielstown estate at the end of the narrative. The man tells them that they shouldn’t be out walking and that if they “had nothing better to do, you had better keep in the house while y’have it” (*Last* 125). Hearing this, Lois feels that she has nowhere to go now, given how restrictive she

feels society at Danielstown to be. As a consequence, upon hearing the IRA man's threat, the first clear thought that comes to Lois's mind is that she must marry Gerald. This is Gerald Lesworth, a British soldier from Surrey: marriage to Gerald would mean a new life in England for Lois away from the pressures of Anglo-Irish decorum and the tensions of political insurrection in the country. The trouble for Lois is that she finds Gerald to be uninteresting. In a way, her predicament is the same as that of a much less sympathetic character, Major Wallace Burleigh, in McCarthy's *Peeler*. When Sergeant O'Keefe comes to question him about the Deirdre Costello case, he finds Burleigh with the blinds down pouring himself a whiskey, denouncing "Shinners" (Sinn Féin rebels) with a tear in his eye about the state into which Ireland has fallen. This prompts in O'Keefe that thought that the time would eventually come "when pulling the shutters over and drinking himself senseless just wouldn't do any more and Major Burleigh too would have to pack himself off to England" (*Peeler* 313). The thought might well be read as a blunt appraisal of the determination in the Anglo-Irish society of Bowen's novel to ignore the IRA threat as much as possible and carry on with social gatherings.

There is another aspect to Lois and Marda's encounter with the gunman in *The Last September* who is hiding in the abandoned mill. As the man looks at the two young women, they "feel framed, rather conscious, as though confronting a camera" (*Last* 125). In view of the fact that it is a man in hiding who is staring at the women, Bowen's way of describing the circumstance is deeply prescient of the opening to McCarthy's *Peeler*. As noted above, when Sergeant O'Keefe first observes the dead body of Deirdre Costello at the crime scene, he gets the distinct impression that she has been positioned as if for a photograph. This lends a deeply unsettling aspect to O'Keefe photographing the body at the crime scene as part of his investigative duty. Thus we find a congruence between *The Last September* and *Peeler* on the topic of women in situations of threat or violation that are framed through photography. The feeling of the two women being photographed in the scene inside the old mill in *The Last September* is also strongly reminiscent of the opening act of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. In the drawing room of Prozorov's house, Fetodik, a second lieutenant in the Russian Army, photographs the sisters when he enters with his fellow lieutenant Rodè (Chekhov 92–93). The gesture is significant in capturing the sense that the sisters feel being trapped in the boredom of life at Prozorov's estate far from the glamour of Moscow. However, it also captures a moment of Russian history that is about to disappear with the loss of Prozorov's estate by the end of the play. Historical change is represented through the camera as a new technical instrument replacing older artistic forms of representation in painting. In a strikingly similar

fashion, the women's feeling of being framed by the gaze of the gunman in *The Last September* captures the sense of entrapment that Lois Farquar feels generally at Danielstown estate. The simile of being photographed that Bowen uses to communicate the women's unease also presages the passing of the old Ascendancy world of Danielstown with the arrival of new technologies like that of the photograph. In this respect, the encounter with the IRA gunman links to a wider decline in the stature of the English aristocracy during the years immediately following the First World War.

Considering this precedent of the scene at the old mill in *The Last September* and the current of *Three Sisters*' influence in the figures of Lois and Marda, the significance of photography in *Peeler* becomes palpable. The opening to McCarthy's novel captures the paradox in the nature of the photograph that Roland Barthes identifies. Apart from the social and cultural means of transmitting a photograph, Barthes sees the photograph in itself as carrying a denotative and a connotative aspect. As a purely technical means of capturing a moment, a photograph is devoid of any code through which it may be interpreted: Barthes calls the photography "*a message without a code*" (17). It is precisely this aspect of the photographic image that Sergeant O'Keefe tries to capture through his Box Browning photograph of the dead Deirdre Costello. Devoid of any aesthetic dimension in its scientific configuration of light in real-time, the photograph carries the potential to be received as a piece of judicial evidence (in a way that an artist's sketch of the scene could not). However, O'Keefe is also alert to the connotative aspect of the same photograph when the scene that he photographs reminds him of those French erotic picture-postcards that soldiers had traded during the First World War, as noted earlier. This carries what Barthes describes as a "historical grammar" through which a photographic image carries connotations because of the existence of a host of stereotypes and associations (22). In this instance, we might think of the panoply of paintings, drawings, poems, novels and plays within which the prostitute or the Arabic harem girl has been represented erotically. It is likewise with Lois and Marda before the gaze of the gunman in *The Last September*. They are literally framed by his look, without any recourse to the poses or disguises practiced as part of the decorum of Anglo-Irish society. In this sense, the photographic quality of their circumstance in the old abandoned mill gives the impression of a return to nature (an effect of the photographic in its denotative aspect, as Barthes understands it) (20). Yet in this apparent simplicity of actual circumstance, the denotative aspect of the image generates a series of connotations: Lois and Marda representing feminine nature at odds with masculine order; the decayed mill a backdrop that insinuates the dislocation that both women feel in the society of Danielstown; Marda's curious desire to remain before the man and Lois's desire to flee immediately.

Both *The Last September* and *Peeler* conclude with the burning of buildings that are associated with the British governance of Ireland up to 1921. Bowen's novel ends with a description of the Big House at Danielstown in flames on the same night that Castle Trent and Mount Isabel have also been burnt down by IRA flying columns. *Peeler* ends in the RIC barracks at Ballycarleton coming under IRA attack just as RIC Sergeant O'Keefe is in the process of confronting Detective Inspector Masterson with the evidence that he covered up the murder of Deirdre Costello. Apart from the generic differences of style, both novels are also set apart in the attitude to these events that is imparted to the reader. Sir Richard and Lady Naylor are so horrified at what they witness that they dare not look at one another as the house burns (*Last* 206). In contrast, Sergeant O'Keefe watches with indifference as Ballycarleton police barracks burns, more preoccupied with those involved in the Deirdre Costello cover-up having made their escape. In *The Last September* Lois is sent off to England following the killing of Gerald Lesworth in an ambush on his army patrol in the local area. Sir Richard is horrified at the thought that friends of Peter Connors, a son of the Connors couple with whom he has been on friendly terms but who was captured by Gerald and his comrades, might have had some involvement in the attack (*Last* 203). By an odd coincidence, Connors is also the name of the chief suspect in the Deirdre Costello murder-case. Knowing that he is not guilty, Sergeant O'Keefe has him imprisoned in Ballycarleton RIC barracks to protect him both from the agents within British security who were involved in her killing, as well as from the local IRA brigade who regard Connors as the culprit. In the melee of the attack on the barracks, Connors is shot dead by one of the agents. The conclusion to *Peeler* carries no sense of the unspeakable that we are given in *The Last September*. McCarthy's novel concludes with Sergeant O'Keefe conversing in a *laissez-faire* manner with local IRA commander Liam Farrell concerning what transpired following the attack on Ballycarleton barracks.

While both novels bring ambivalent attitudes to the surface during the course of the Irish War of Independence, their conclusions also identify the limits of this ambivalence. In this way, they move beyond Irish historical and literary revisionism, concerned as revisionism has been with the simplification of Irish history in nationalist narratives. In *The Last September*, the reader sees ambivalence reach its limit with news of the killing of Gerald Lesworth. Denise Rolfe, who had organized a dance in the hut where her father was stationed, struggles to express her outrage in conversation with her closest friend, Betty Vermont. Saying that the killers of Gerald should be tortured rather than simply shot or hanged, she becomes inarticulate: "Oh, I do think, I mean, I do think when you think—" (*Last*

199). The unspeakable in this instance serves three functions: it indicates the incomprehension of the women at the news of Gerald's violent death; the willingness of Denise to break all lady-like decorum in speaking of a need to torture the local native Irish who were guilty of the killing; the end of the cultivated ambivalence through which Anglo-Irish society sought to sustain its relation to England during the course of guerrilla warfare in Ireland. Yet the women's horror is also undercut by the seeming indifference that Betty Vermont (or possibly Lois Farquar) voices later to the loss of Gerald (surprising even herself). The manner in which the sentence is written leaves it unclear whether the thought is that of Betty or Lois: "What I mean is, it seems so odd that he shouldn't really have meant anything" (*Last* 200). This indifference relates back to enormous loss of life suffered by British regiments in the First World War, atomizing the significance of a single soldier's death. Yet it also anticipates the burning of Danielstown at the novel's end as inevitable, however incomprehensible it might seem to its owners and to the guests who stayed there. Betty's (or Lois's) sentiment expresses surrender to the course of history, both local and international, with a note of resignation. However much the burning of Danielstown leaves Sir Richard and Lady Naylor speechless at the end, the final two chapters of *The Last September* (beginning with the news of Gerald's death), carry the same indifference that Sergeant O'Keefe displays at the very end of *Peeler* to the course of events as they have unfolded. The momentary indifference of Betty or Lois to the death of Gerald is felt more expansively and obviously in *Peeler* in the image of O'Keefe watching Ballycarleton barracks burning while he smokes a cigarette. The novel concludes with banter among the policemen as to where they will be transferred or whether they would be pensioned off. Officer Daly offers to buy O'Keefe a drink, to which O'Keefe responds: "at my funeral" (*Peeler* 479). Calling O'Keefe "a jammy bastard" for having survived all that he has, Daly ends the narrative by declaring that O'Keefe will outlive them all.

Particularly when considered in the light of Bowen's fiction, *Peeler* is important as a novel that recovers the personal histories of members of the RIC, histories that were neglected at official levels in Ireland through the course of the twentieth century. It testifies to the complex nature of policing in Ireland during the years of the War of Independence, exploring the issue of betrayal on many levels. These include the perception of IRA supporters in the local area that O'Keefe himself is a traitor in working for the British Government as an Irish policeman. O'Keefe himself feels that Deirdre Costello has been betrayed by her local community in their refusal to help with the investigation of her murder. There is the ultimate betrayal of discovering that the killer is a member of the Black and Tans who is being protected by a secret, powerful cabal of Englishmen within

the upper-ranks of the police-force in Ireland, the force for which he himself works. All of this is encapsulated in the misspelt word “trator” that has been tarred on the body of Deirdre Costello. By the end, these conflicting senses of betrayal, coupled with the loyalties that they employ, prove unsustainable. Watching Ballycarleton police barracks burning as so many other police barracks have been burnt, O’Keefe’s resignation is a sign that the circumstances of the RIC in places like West Cork could not be sustained indefinitely. His conversation with local IRA leader Farrell points already to McCarthy’s sequel to *Peeler*, *Irregulars*, in which O’Keefe is now a demobbed RIC man working alone on a missing-person case in the early years of the Irish Free State. Set in relation to the killing of British soldier Gerald Lesworth towards the end of Bowen’s *The Last September*, Lois Farquar being packed off for a Tour abroad in consequence, and the final burning of Danielstown house, the conclusion to *Peeler* presents the reader with a narrative that finally extends beyond the revisionist frame of interpretation. Neither McCarthy’s novel nor Bowen’s long before it endorse a rebel nationalist account of Irish history by which British rule in Ireland was considered oppressive and undemocratic. Yet both works suggest that, however important the ambiguities in Irish-English relations were right into the War of Independence, circumstances as they emerged in the 1920s rendered inevitable the end of the Anglo-Irish Big House as a force of social significance, just as they also made it impossible for the RIC to function as a regular police force any longer. Describing this as a moment of decolonization erases the range of emotions that an RIC constable like Sergeant O’Keefe experiences, a range that reminds us of Lois Farquar’s conflicting feelings about Ireland and Irish-English relations in *The Last September*, particularly through her dissatisfaction at the prospect of married life with Gerald in England. Yet to describe *Peeler* as a revisionist literary work of historical recovery is to neglect how ambivalence itself goes up in smoke in the conclusive burning of Ballycarleton RIC barracks. It is a moment in which revisionism itself reaches a terminus as a frame of historical understanding, from within rather than from without.

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