

Portrait of the Critic as a Young Man

The artist telling how he or she came to be an artist is a well-established genre, crowded with both fictional and nonfictional examples. But what about the story of the making of a critic? One version emerges in these scenes of a Northern Irish childhood, recalled by one of our foremost literary scholars.

by Denis Donoghue

I think of Warrenpoint as a town, not as a village. In my private dictionary a village is a community surrounded by fields: The people are farmers, or they serve farmers and their families as shopkeepers, nurses, doctors, teachers, priests. At Sunday Mass the men wear caps, not hats, and after Mass they stand around the church to chat, gossip, or stare at the hills. A town, small or large, is not dependent on the land that surrounds it; it opens on a different world. Tullow, in County Carlow, where I was born on December 1, 1928, still seems to me a village.

Warrenpoint is a town because one side of it opens upon the sea. If you look at a map of Ireland, find Belfast, come around the Ards Peninsula and Strangford Lough, and mark Ardglass, Newcastle, Kilkeel, and Rostrevor, you'll find the next town is Warrenpoint, where Carlingford Lough narrows till it ceases being a lough at Narrow Water and becomes the Newry Canal; not much of a canal these days. Warrenpoint looks across the lough to Omeath, a meagre town, though it has Newry on one side and Carlingford on the other and the Cooley Mountains behind it,

and one of the mountains is called the Long Woman's Grave. Warrenpoint is in Northern Ireland; Omeath is in the South.

As a seaside resort, Warrenpoint relied not upon laughing girls or golden weather but upon three more reliable considerations. One: You could get to the place easily from any part of the North by train, since it was the terminus of the Great Northern Railway's branch line from Newry. No longer; the train is gone. Two: Warrenpoint has the largest square in Ireland, a great place for amusements, circuses, swings and roundabouts, ice-cream carts, parades, celebrations. The square was promiscuous in the wiles of display. Three: The licensing laws for the sale of alcohol are stricter in the North than in the South, mainly because Presbyterians keep the Sabbath more severely than Catholics do. If you came to Warrenpoint for a Sunday trip, you would find the public houses shut, but you could go by ferryboat across to Omeath, an open town on the Sabbath, for drink and noise.

I remember nothing before Warrenpoint.

Tullow comes into reckoning because my father, a policeman in the Royal Irish

Constabulary, was stationed there when he met my mother, a girl named Johanna O'Neill. Her father, too, was in the RIC, stationed in Clonmel. My father was promoted to the rank of sergeant in Tullow when the reigning sergeant, named Morris, went mad and ran from the barracks, for reasons known only to himself. My father was the man in the gap and he got the job, the only preferment he ever enjoyed. When the Government of Ireland Act (1920) divided Ireland into two parts, with a Parliament in Belfast to govern the six northern counties, it was ordained that any member of the RIC would have the right to go North and take up the same rank in the newly formed Royal Ulster Constabulary. My father, having seen enough of Ireland and of police work in a violent time, spent three months trying to find an alternative job. He and my mother went to Chester, where he tried to establish himself as an insurance agent, till someone started a rumor that he had murdered a man in Ireland and was "on the run." My father gave up and went to Northern Ireland to take up his rank in the RUC. He always maintained that the lapse of three months in his official career, taken in association with his Catholicism, made any further promotion in the RUC impossible. I believe him. During his years in the RUC it was not yet necessary for the authorities to show goodwill toward Catholics or to promote them above the rank of sergeant. If my father had been 20 or 30 years younger and in the same profession, he would probably have been selected as a token Catholic and raised perhaps to the rank of Head Constable or even District Inspector to placate the natives. In the event, he retired on pension before such a concession became necessary. "Too late, too



The future critic, Denis Donoghue, at about age 10 (above). The critic's father (right), Sergeant Donoghue, in the uniform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.



late," he cried in vain.

In Warrenpoint we lived in the police barracks, or rather in half of it, the other half being given over to the business of the police, centered on what was called the Day Room. There was a concrete wall about six feet from the building, protecting it against an attack or a riot. By locking two small gates and one large one, you could close off the barracks and hold out against a siege. The barracks had two cells, or lockups, as they were called, one for men, one for women. I remember my father lifting me up to look through a metal slit at a man he had arrested.

Our half of the barracks, the "married quarters," had a parlor, a kitchen and scullery, three bedrooms, a bathroom, and an outhouse. The parlor had a black upright

piano, a circular mahogany table, and a trolley for the wireless. The married quarters were different in certain respects from the ordinary working-class home. The kitchen and the parlor were in the front, equally in view if they could have been seen behind the barrier of the wall. The common life was conducted in the kitchen, and the parlor was reserved for special occasions. But many activities constituted a special occasion. Listening to the radio was special; so was the formal occasion of schoolwork. I did my lessons on the parlor table, which gleamed in preparation for the social life we rarely had.

Do I remember accurately that our kitchen had brownish-red stone tiles, a gas cooker, an old cast-iron range, a wooden box for holding odds and ends, a sofa with the horsehair stuffing falling out of it and the springs sagged, a Singer sewing machine, four wooden chairs, and a linoleum-covered table with one corner of it broken or hacked off? Is that likely? What would make me certain of these things, as certain as I am that in the scullery my father always kept a bottle of cod-liver oil and drank from it twice a day? And when I refused to drink the stuff, he compromised by buying a bottle of Kepler's malt, which contained enough cod-liver oil to appease him and enough malt to remove the vile taste. I'm not sure about the table, and yet I feel that I'm merely introducing a doubt as if miming a scruple I'd like to be seen showing. The corner of the table was broken or hacked. Which, I can't say.

About the linoleum, I'm sure enough. There is a curious passage in Nabokov's *Transparent Things* where he says that "when we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of that object":

Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want it to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines.

I am not sure that I understand him. What is that past which shines through transparent things if it is not a sense or a recollection of those things? And if it is, how can it be other than their history? I can't distinguish between the past and my sense of those objects which detain my mind. The difficulty is that the more I concentrate my mind on a particular object, the more opaque it seems to become, as if it developed its own personality by virtue of being noticed. This is what Hopkins means when he says, in one of the journals, that what you look hard at seems to look hard at you. If I believed Walter Pater, I would expect to find that when I think of the kitchen table, I see it dissolving before my eyes into flickering impressions, gone as soon as they come, till nothing remains but my sense of myself, my mind. But I don't find this at all. The table becomes opaque, almost sullen under my attention, as if it wanted nothing of my mind or interest. It's like taking a word, any word, and speaking it aloud, and repeating the word 15 or 20 times, and then you find it recoiling from you as if your voice were a blow, and the meaning of it goes dead on you. Thinking of the table, I recall the linoleum, and the wetness of it when my mother cleaned it after a meal, and the stickiness of my hands on it, and my thumb as it traced the line of the broken part. Is that what Nabokov means by sinking into the history of an object? All I know is that the table doesn't dissolve into my impressions of it but seems to return my stare, without welcoming my attention.

I have tried to recall my father's conversation, but little of it survives, and I conclude that there was never much of it. Speech was not his medium. His silence was not gruff or nasty: It did not betoken a scene. Indeed, I surmise that most of his expressiveness was physical; it took the form of his dress, the precision of his shave, the way he walked. My father gave me an impression of concentration; I

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never saw him loose or wayward, but he implied that whatever had to be said was already said, already embodied in its entirely sufficient forms: law, custom, the daily routine. He lived as if speech were rationed and you had to save up coupons for it: There was no place for extravagance. If a new situation arose, requiring comment, one was free to speak, but sparingly. As wartime posters noted, careless talk costs lives.

We were a Catholic family, and thus we bought our groceries at Catholic shops—Curran's, mostly, and the butcher Fitzpatrick—and were on speaking terms only with Catholics. My mother was an exception: She was friends with Mrs. Harper, wife of one of the policemen, a Protestant. They lived in Slieve Foy Place.

The population of Warrenpoint was about two thousand in my time: a thousand Catholics, a thousand Protestants. There was no enmity between them; it was necessary only to keep your distance. My father, not given to phrasemaking, told me once that my dealings with other people should be "civil, but strange." Power, such as it was, was in the hands of the Protestants: That was all a Catholic needed to know. My father, a splendid policeman, could not be promoted: He was not a Protestant, therefore he was not a Unionist, therefore he was not a member of the Loyal Order of Orangemen, therefore . . .

The ability to tell a Protestant from a Catholic, in Warrenpoint, is not a skill I'm proud of, but it was a social necessity in those years. Necessary more than ever now. It was prudent to look at a man or woman, boy or girl, before leaping to the notion that you could speak. Names were a help but were not decisive. Dr. O'Tierney was a Catholic, Dr. Glenny a Protestant. Newell and Chew were Protestant names, O'Neill—the family owned the Crown Ho-

tel, now long gone, bombed—a Catholic name. But the telling detail was the first, or Christian, name. Isabel, as I knew to my cost and pain, was a Protestant name. Denis, Timothy, Kathleen, and Mary couldn't be anything but Catholic. Patrick was an awkward case, because at a certain level of social standing and grandeur, it was a common name among Protestants. At a lower level, it was standard Catholic.

Sometimes, and especially now, it is necessary to hear the full name before deciding where you stand. Murphy is generally a Catholic surname, but not always. The leader of the infamous Shankill Butch-



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ers was a man called Murphy, and he spent his time kidnapping and torturing Catholics. His inventiveness in that occupation was extraordinary; it is fully documented in Martin Dillon's *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study of Mass Murder* (1989). His full name was Lennie Murphy, and anyone in Belfast could tell you that Leonard is a Protestant name. You have to learn such things, watch for signals, in Seamus Heaney's "land of password, hand grip, wink and nod."

The Penny Catechism disposed of every ethical issue in questions and answers. Question: Who is my neighbor? Answer:

My neighbor is all mankind and without any exceptions of persons, even those who injure us or differ from us in religion.

Where, I neglected to ask, did that put Protestants?

In winter, when the tide was high and the waves broke over the road between Warrenpoint and Rostrevor at Sea View Terrace, it was possible to catch fish by shooting them. Possible and illegal. You stood on the wall and waited for the precise moment when a mullet swam up to the surface between two waves, and with a "point 22" rifle you shot it. If his body turned over and you saw the white of its belly, you waded out to retrieve it. Gerard Heatley owned the rifle and let me use it now and again. Why did I want to shoot a mullet or anything else?

A strange phrase: to kill a fish. I assumed that one caught a fish or, as in this case, shot it. But many years later, when I was in Sligo to give a lecture at the Yeats Summer School, I was silently corrected in a matter of usage by T. R. Henn, an Anglo-Irish Protestant scholar who spent his childhood in a manor house called Paradise. Henn mentioned that, after the school was over, he was going fishing. "Will you catch salmon or what?" I asked him. "I hope to kill salmon," the author of *The Lonely Tower: Studies of the Poetry of W.B. Yeats* answered. A Catholic wouldn't be expected to know the right word. Henn was a decent man, a good scholar, and a hospitable Fellow of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge. He was responsible for inviting me to Cambridge to give the Judith E. Wilson Lecture in Poetry and Drama, and then to take a permanent job, a university lectureship, in the English Faculty. He evidently approved of me and didn't hold my origin or my upbringing against my record. But when it came to the propriety of a verb, as a sign of one's social bearing among words, he was implacable.

I had no difficulty with the doctrine of Original Sin. My body was sufficient evidence for it. I saw no discrepancy between the ungainliness of my body and the supposition that the human body as such came already corrupted into a world dis-

figured by its presence. That there were beautiful bodies in the same world seemed to me not to incapacitate the doctrine but to intimate the presence of divine grace. Isabel Bridges was the visible sign of one, as I of the other. That a certain few people were saints or geniuses held out the possibility of salvation, but it didn't remove my conviction that to be a body was to be constitutionally and categorically polluted. The question was: How to act in the light or the shadow of that fate? My father's way of being in the world seemed to me to offer the best hope of salvation.

I had a good boy-soprano voice. I sang solo in the choir at Mass. *O salutaris hostia. Pange lingua. Ave Maria*. Before my voice broke, my father decided to have it recorded in some form. We cycled to Dublin, where we sought out Walton's Musical Store, 90 Lower Camden Street. We had no accompanist, but it happened that a man called Chris Sylvester, who played piano and accordion in his brother Ralph's dance band, was in Walton's when we presented our case. A wax recording was made of my performance of "Silent Night" on one side and "Panis Angelicus" on the other. I broke down on the first attempt at "Silent Night," but the second attempt was deemed satisfactory. And it was. I was not the finest boy soprano of my time or later—that Welsh boy Jones or Evans or whatever he is called is of a different order of sweetness and range—but I was good.

There were no books in our house, apart from schoolbooks and the few morally inspiring tracts and novels I got from my uncle. The only book I recall my father owning was *Guide to Careers*, a book that told you how to apply for a job, what the qualifications for the job were, and the address to which to write for an application form. My father had confidence in this work and regularly consulted it to see the jobs for which his children might be qualified. He was not otherwise a reader, having left school when his father died.

I worked hard at school without thinking of it as work. I was not conscious of being ambitious, or of wanting to do well, or even of imitating my father's zeal in the

knowledge that he would be pleased. Whatever the motive was, it had already settled itself in my daily life; a habit, it didn't need to be interrogated or kept up to a mark. I was content to let my life have its definition as work, so that intervals between bouts of study came to appear as lived in the service of work.

There were several subjects at school for which I had little capacity: the mathematical subjects, mostly. But I worked at these, too, and recognized only that my habit had to take a grim turn or enter upon an especially dogged mood before I could take out the textbook in, say, algebra or trigonometry. It didn't occur to me to ask why I should be studying these subjects for which I had no natural talent. One day a boy asked what was the use of studying geometry if you didn't intend being an engineer. The teacher answered: to develop that part of your brain. I found the reason sufficient.

I was a good reader, or at worst an energetic one. But I see now that my reading was opportunistic: not in the sense of reading one book in preference to another, but in my way of reading. I can't recall a time when I read disinterestedly; I always had a pen and a notebook at hand. If I found something interesting, I'd want to make a note of it. But "interesting" isn't the truth. I went through books looking for whatever I needed. I was never free of purpose. A phrase or a sentence might come in handy for an essay I was writing, some clinching quotation which I could almost fancy, while quoting it, that I had written. If I was not imaginative, I was notionally in the company of those who were: writers, poets especially.

Even now, detective stories are the only fictions I can read without pen and notebook. I am always on the lookout for phrases, as if I lived for the opportunity of using them. "The ministry of carnal perception": It is unlikely that I will have occasion to use that one. On the other hand, Frank Kermode made a distinction, in *The Genesis of Se-*

crecy, between carnal readings of a text, which are all the same, and spiritual readings, where differences enter. If I could find an occasion for "ministry," I could slip the whole phrase into an otherwise pedestrian sentence. I always suspected, even at school, that this was a pretentious way of reading and that reading was raiding. But nonchalance was hard to acquire.

At the Christian Brothers' School in Newry, I sensed that I differed from my colleagues, but I did not feel that the difference amounted to much in my favor. I knew that my intelligence was not of a creative kind. I did not even try to write a poem or a story. My mind was usually engaged in considering the work or bearing of someone else; my father in the first instance, certain writers thereafter. My stance was retrospective. If I formulated an idea, it seemed merely to name feelings that hardly went in need of naming. The best fortune they aspired to was adequacy: They were good enough if they were justly responsive to something someone else had done. They did not compel into existence any feelings otherwise silent or repressed. Many years later, I recognized this limitation so frequently that I believed it decisive; it is a limitation in discursiveness itself, that it comments on everything and has nothing better to do. There is a passage in Paul Klee's diary where he talks about the empty spaces left to chance:

It is necessary never to work toward a conception of the picture completely



The harbor in Warrenpoint. A British naval ship now patrols the waters off Warrenpoint to prevent the Irish Republican Army from bringing weapons from Ireland into Ulster.

thought out in advance. Instead, one must give oneself completely to the developing portion of the area to be painted. The total impression is then rooted in the principle of economy; to derive the effect of the whole from a few steps.

A few steps, a hunch, a swift stroke, not the whole canvas filled with forethought. It is the distinction between *conchetto* and *immagine*: *conchetto* is a free act of creation, full of confidence in possibilities at any moment undefined, a notion, an idea for a poem, trusting to the future; *immagine* is the idea which identifies something already complete except for the formulation; it merely annotates something that sustains the annotation without needing it. I would like to have lived with *sprezzatura*, cutting a dash: My talents are such as to express themselves in circumspection.

I transcribed fine sentences and stanzas so that I might the more thoroughly remember them, but also for the satisfaction of embodying a privileged relation to their merit. I had not composed any of those splendid pieces, but at least I could claim the distinction of having appreciated them. They were, in that limited but not disgraceful sense, my property. I had a better claim to them than anyone else had, apart from the author in each case. I could even fancy that everyone in the world had read them and failed to see their magnificence. So I labored over the transcriptions as if I were a scribe bent over his vellum, tracing the characters and adorning them. Besides, penmanship was a skill in high repute during those years, presumably for the last time.

I have never been able to tell a story or even to recall one. Jokes fall out of my

mind almost as soon as I have heard them. Plots of the novels I have read, studied, and written about are the first parts I forget. Chapters stay in my mind, fragments of conversation, a descriptive passage here and there, but I would be hard put to recite the plot of even the standard masterpieces. Don't ask me to recall the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Do parents still tell their children bedtime stories? I doubt it. I never told any of my children a story or read to them a chapter of a novel. To think of all the things I haven't done. I wonder have I lived a life without air, not enough oxygen or light or ease or fantasy. Isn't it silly that opera means nothing to me; that oratorios seem alien to me because most of them are Protestant; that I have only once, and recently, seen *The Wizard of Oz*? What am I preserving my *gravitas* for?

It did not grieve me that I lacked inventiveness, could not make up a story or imagine a sequence of thoughts requiring rhyme. All I wanted was to observe a relation between myself and structures I had not invented. Tolstoy says somewhere that freedom consisted "in my not having made the laws." Presumably he was free to obey them or, at his risk, to reject them. When I think of my early years, I find myself always in relation to something I revered precisely because its existence and force were independent of my will. I sang and played music, observed the score, attentive to the composer's will as the form of the music embodied it. I liked poems more than novels because their formal character was more completely in evidence. I admired the dogmas and doctrines of the Church all the more because they did not consult my interests. I revered the law because my father administered it and bore witness to its integrity. Mine was the intelligence that comes after.