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"The conversion of William Kirkwood"

Arthur Broomfield

- 1 McGahern's short story "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" (1992, 331-349) is interesting from a theoretical studies point of view as it responds, especially, to post-colonial reading before going on to seriously critique such an approach. Yet even, then the assumptions that post-colonial studies brings to a text, especially in the Irish situation, are subverted. "Conversion" asks pertinent questions as to who are the colonialists/imperialists, and who is the subaltern? In his response to these questions in "Conversion" McGahern rejects the stereotypical: he locates the story in post 1922 Ireland, the Ireland that he knows, his Ireland. Because he comes from the gene pool that constructed the ideology of post 1922 Ireland – rural, lower middle class, Catholic – his subversion of that ideology is all the more remarkable; out of the quarrel with himself he makes art. But "Conversion" refuses to allow itself to be limited to a post-colonialist approach. Even as it subverts the assumptions read into modern Ireland, the text of the story is subverting these subversions. The demands of the text compel us to engage in the performative act of reading, where the text itself is read closely, rather than being read through external events that coincide with the period. It is thus released from any presuppositions the reader may bring to the text, language is freed from the tyranny of fixed meaning.
- 2 The story tells of the conversion to Catholicism of an isolated, cultured Protestant farmer and amateur astronomer, William Kirkwood. The early moves towards Catholicism begin with him enlisting in the wartime local defence unit, where he displays a natural ability to lead that causes him, after conversion, to arranging to marry a local Catholic nurse, Mary Kennedy.
- 3 A post-colonial reading of the "Conversion of William Kirkwood" would see Kirkwood as a remnant of pre-colonised Ireland, the anachronism that unsettles the colonialists self-satisfied, homogeneous, cultural identity. He is the other to the Roman Catholic colonisers of Ireland, whose lifestyle and culture marks him as inferior to the progressive, industrious culture of the new coloniser. He has "become a mild figure of

fun out watching the stars at night." (McGahern 1992, 334). His father had been dispossessed of his wealth "the pick of the Kirkwood cattle." (332) by the burgeoning colonisers, through Eddie Mac, the herdsman, who sold them and absconded with the proceeds of the sale. Kirkwood's cultural identity, his Protestant religion, is even sneered at by schoolboys well-indoctrinated in the superiority of the dominant culture "he doesn't even go to his own church." (335) (because, we read, his own church is closed). So colonisation has reduced William from the "position that the Kirkwoods had held for generations." (336) to subordination to the Catholic coloniser. He is "poorer than some Catholics already on the rise" (333-334). He is not just different, though equality of difference is not tolerated by the coloniser, cultural identity needs to be homogenous "[o]nly for you being a Protestant there'd not be the slightest difference now between you and the rest of us." (338) His culture, because it is different, is not acceptable in a homogenous society. That which distinguishes Kirkwood as being different must first be branded inferior before being destroyed. Its destruction is confirmed and celebrated in William's engagement to Mary Kennedy. The ensuing get together becomes "more of a political celebration than a family evening" (348).

- 4 The irony of the story, as a post-colonialist reading shows, is that the imposed cultural identity of the coloniser, though believed by them to be superior is, in fact, greatly inferior to the culture of the Kirkwoods, which it displaces. Where Kirkwood is interested in astronomy, has a library with "many books" and an "insatiable appetite for theological speculation" (340), the colonialists appear to be incapable of rising above Maslow's primary stage on the hierarchy of needs. They are the foot soldiers in the local defence force where he, with ease, assumes the role of commanding officer. Even the schoolmaster's home is noted for its "absence of books".(344) William's zeal for learning is unmatched by Canon Glynn who has "never seen much good come from all this (theological) probing." (340).
- 5 A post-colonialist reading of "The Conversion of William Kirkwood" can be further justified through William's involvement as an officer in the local defence force. His knowledge of the colonised people is being used to serve the colonialists interests, for William is a "crack marksman (and) can read field maps at a glance." (334). In addition his grandfather, Colonel Darby, had followed in a long family tradition, "the Darbys had been British officers far back and once William Kirkwood put on uniform it was as if they gathered to claim him." (334). William's knowledge of leadership and military matters is being used to train a defence force that is hostile to the interest and preservation of his cultural identity. The most telling example of the appropriating of his knowledge in the service of a hostile cause can be seen in the following extract:

On certain Sunday mornings the force assembled in full dress at the hall, marched through the village to the church, where they stood on guard in front of the altar during the sung Mass, presenting arms before and after the consecration. Captain Kirkwood marched his men through the village on these Sundays, but at the church door turned over his command to the school-teacher, Lieutenant McLoughlin, and remained outside until Mass had ended. Now that he had become such a part of the people it was felt that such a pointed difference was a little sad. (337-338)
- 6 The force, through standing guard in front of the altar during Mass is clearly seen to be not just identified with the culture of the colonialist but the defender of its essence, its belief system. The hostility of that belief system to William's crystallises when he, at the church door, turns over command to the Catholic, Lieutenant McLoughlin. He cannot be, or be allowed to be, part of the system that is hostile to his own; his

"command" of the force has created a defence force that is at the key moment expropriated from his control. Now an embarrassment, no longer useful to the colonialist cause, his services are arbitrarily dispensed with. We can say that his knowledge, once employed to defend his people, is now used to subjugate them. His expertise has created what colonial powers need most, a disciplined military force that will carry out its orders without question. "Men who had joined for the free army boots and uniform... got an immediate shock. The clipped commands demanded instant compliance. A cold eye searched out every small disorder of dress or stance or movement." (334). Here too we see the representation of total control in the misappropriation of the sacred texts, and their misuse as an instrument of political and military control, not dissimilar to Moran's appropriation of the Rosary in *Amongst Women* (1990). No dissenting voice is raised or can be tolerated, hence William's exclusion from his command. His cultural identity is driven to the marginalized outside, it is the other; "colonialism has become nature itself" (Ashcroft *et al* 57), and that which it cannot tolerate is subordinated to the unnatural.

- 7 McGahern has given us a text that reverses the stereotypical depiction of Irish Protestants being the acquisitive colonialists, repressors of Catholic Irish culture; instead it sees them as the "old ascendancy (whose tradition goes) far back" (McGahern, 1992, 334). They are the victims of a totalising Roman Catholic imperialism. "It is our day now" (339) the new convert stresses. He succeeds in accomplishing the reversal by refusing to resort to the handed down histories of the past, those "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found*." (White, 1985, 82) [italics original]. He, instead locates the story within the time span of his memory and sees it through his perceptions of an Ireland that he experiences directly.
- 8 If we look beyond the text of the story, to the political events that chronologically parallel the period, we will see plenty of evidence of the new state's re-colonisation by acquisitive Catholicism. The Cosgrave government established "diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1930" (Lee 1989, 170); Mr. Sean T. O'Kelly, a leading Fianna Fáil member and later President of Ireland, is quoted as saying "the Fianna Fáil policy (is) the policy of Pope Pius XI." (170). The Fianna Fáil newspaper, "*The Irish Press*", even envisaged "the conversion of the Anglo Irish" (170). Perhaps the most telling evidence of colonisation is the infamous Dunbar-Harrison case of 1930-31. Ostensibly Letitia Dunbar-Harrison's appointment as County Librarian in County Mayo was overturned because her knowledge of Irish was inadequate. However, "Miss Dunbar-Harrison suffered from the dual stigma of being a Protestant and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin." (163) while the eventual appointee, Miss Ellen Burke, though equally handicapped in her knowledge of Irish, she "neglected to take the elementary precaution of passing her Irish test." (162), and had been rejected by two different boards, was pushed into the job through the prominent intervention of the Catholic cleric, Dean E.A. Dalton, of Tuam. These events, and this rhetoric, all pointed to the sanctification of Roman Catholic authority in Ireland through the triumphalist Eucharistic Congress of June 1932. Involved in it were the full resources of the state, including the military; the President Eamon DeValera, reminded "the Papal Legate in his feline way, that he was a loyal son of Rome." (177).
- 9 It is tempting to read "Conversion" through the historical events of the period in which it is set, to see William Kirkwood representing the subaltern who is forced into conversion by the political weight and cultural unity of the burgeoning ruling powers.

Subaltern groups "are always subject to the activity of ruling groups." (Gramsci 1971, 55). The parallels between Kirkwood's predicament and O'Kelly's declaration of subservience to the policy of Pope Pius XI are obvious. Pius XI's policy would have included the infamous *Ne Temere* decree, under which the other than Catholic partner to a marriage is compelled to sign a pre-nuptial document permitting his/her offsprings to be brought up in the Catholic religion. "[T]he only reason a Protestant was ever known to turn was in order to marry." (McGahern, 1992, 338-339). It is Garda Sergeant Moran who first raises the matter of William's religious difference and, implicitly, his conversion, "[n]ow you're in with everybody. Only for your being a Protestant." (338), and Lieutenant McLoughlin who raises the possibility of his marriage: "[e]verything has gone wonderfully well and it would complete the picture if we were to see you married." (342). And we can see the triumphalism.

- 10 Of the Eucharistic Congress represented in the "political celebration" (348) that marks the announcement of William and Mary Kennedy's marriage, as we can relate the victimisation of Letetia Dunbar-Harrison to the displacement of William, as commanding officer, by Lt. McLoughlin in the church incident.
- 11 To read "Conversion" thus however, is to privilege the historical events of the time over the text of the story and in so doing to limit our reading of the text to the judgement of the narrators' of the historical events. It is, in Derrida's words, to go outside the text of the story to the perception of reality in the privileged "thing", the actual "truth" to which the text, being its poor imitation, must refer. But the truth, and the only conditions under which the term "truth" can be definitely used, is that language/text is privileged over the perception of thing. Therefore, to talk of language representing thing is one of, if not the, great misnomer of literary theory. It is a position that essentially argues for the *perception* being the certain thing, the stable power against which language must readjust, must correct itself. Therefore language is reduced to a subordinate relationship to the perception of the "certain" thing and its inherent will to freedom that is its essence, is dominated by a theoretical approach – that when challenged, cannot itself go beyond the textual – that represses its text to compliance with an idea believed to be beyond it.
- 12 For McGahern to position a cultured Protestant as the subaltern is in itself subversive of the post-colonialist approach to Irish studies which normally sees the oppressed Irish as the victims of British colonialism. Having set up a radical opposition on which his approach is based, by situating the Protestant as the victim, he then proceeds to undermine the ground on which that opposition is built. A passive reading of the story will squeeze the narrative towards compliance with the "thing" the parallel history of the time. Kirkwood will be shown to be the victim of the Roman Catholic colonialist oppressor, to which he is forced to conform through conversion and marriage. His culture mocked and denigrated, economically and socially marginalized, he provides a satisfying base from which to justify such a theoretical reading.
- 13 It is only when one challenges the philosophical presupposition that privileges thing over word, and the ideological implications that distort the text, in such a theoretical approach that one is free to engage with the text through the performative act of reading. Such a reading will open the text, through a concentration on its language, to its numerous possibilities and will see that it challenges all positions.
- 14 Close reading of the text will show that William Kirkwood is not forced to convert to Catholicism, he is the first to announce his intention to the stunned and embarrassed

Moran and McLoughlin. "Actually... I'm seriously considering becoming a Catholic, but not, I'm afraid, in the interests of conformity." (338). He is even aware of that which provoked his initial interest: "[h]elping Lucy with her school exercises." (339) is his response to McLoughlin's tentative probe. William presents himself as the self-assured man who has come to the decision to convert of his own volition. He is in command of the situation. Throughout the process of conversion, it is he who pushes his facilitator to exasperation. Canon Glynn "soon began to be worn out by his pupil's seemingly insatiable appetite for theological speculation." (340). Canon Glynn, on the other hand, is not at all the acquisitive proselytiser – "[w]e cannot know God or Truth. It is shut away from our eyes." (340), and would prefer to talk about his Shorthorn cattle than theology. Even William's intended assimilation into the dominant ethnic group, through marriage to Mary Kennedy, is negotiated *after* his conversion. It thus avoids the humiliation of the *Ne Temere* process. Alas, William Kirkwood is in command of his situation only in so far as he is in command of the defence force which he turns over to McLoughlin at the church door. Kirkwood's search for the truth is as unfulfilled as is his authority over his troops. The colonised cannot be entrusted either with power or knowledge.

- 15 The irony of his "[n]ot if one is convinced of the truth" (339) is found out in Canon Glynn's "[w]e cannot know....Truth" (340). The exchange reduces the narrative to its core irreducible, language itself, language as referent. William's efforts to represent the stable thing "truth" in language that refers to an external idea, can be seen to break down within the text because such an imagined perception cannot be universally perceived. His perception is "the truth" in lower case, while Canon Glynn's is "Truth" in higher case, which, like the other of language, we cannot know. Both men perceive different things in "the truth" and "Truth", both are speaking of different things; hence their different representations of unstable, external ideas in words. Both try to invest meaning into word that, in its originary state, is "present" only as an empty configuration. The origin was "never constituted except reciprocally by a non origin, the trace." (Derrida 1974, 61). Both try to represent, to give presence or meaning to a word, an empty configuration, that in its originary state is unconstituted in terms of meaning (but, perhaps, not in terms of shape, or form). The referent, therefore, cannot be the perception of an unstable entity outside the text because that entity cannot be universally perceived as stable, it is the word itself that both Kirkwood and Glynn mould and represent in the image of their different perceptions, the word which defers to different perceptions, the word which defers to thing, and frustrated by the unfulfilled exercise refers back to itself to engage with the process of liberating itself from subordination to the thing. Therefore, within the text, the referent is unreliable because once it is broken from the assumed stability of perception, now shown to be unstable, it is moving towards its originary state, the free 'unconstituted', word in which no perception of stable thing can be represented because no such thing can be clearly perceived. Neither Kirkwood or Glynn can justify the truth of a referential thing outside the text – both are in disagreement – consequently the textual referent within the story cannot prove the stability of the thing (truth). The word is prior to and privileged over the perceived thing that seeks to re-present it, to reduce word to name. Name, it is presupposed, will articulate the perception of thing. Yet we see with William's "the truth" and the Canon's "Truth" two different perceptions of the thing truth seeking representation in two different sets of terms now reduced to names to accommodate that which cannot be conclusively and independently proved to exist

beyond our perceptions, perceptions that William and the Canon show to be variable. Hence it is the originary, unconstituted terms that are shown to be prior to the thing. The terms that are being appropriated by the perception of thing, and reduced to names, will stand as representations of perceptions and mark the violation of the free word. In the process of appropriation the empty vessels, the words, through naming, are reduced to complicity with the perception of the thing. But because perception is variable (William sees it as "the truth", the Canon sees it as "Truth" that is "shut away from our eyes" (McGahern 1992, 340) the perceived thing cannot be proffered as a stable referent. The active reader will thus retreat from the illusion of stability in the thing, to the word itself which, as void, will now be identified as privileged over the perception of thing. In "Conversion" the word is not an optional substitute for the thing, it does not stand in its absence, it does not represent the absent thing. The story cannot be told, or that telling be challenged, without using words. William or the Canon cannot talk about their perceptions of the thing, truth, in any way other than through words. The thing "Truth" is "shut away from our eyes"; the Canon admonishes William's insistence and stresses the privileged state of word over thing.

- 16 The notion of re-presentation is again challenged through the undermining of the title term "Conversion" by William's use of "perversity" in "[i]t seems almost a perversity" (331). The reading that represents Kirkwood, instead of being the victim of Roman Catholic colonialism /imperialism, as having freely arrived at the decision to convert of his own free will is now put into question by the inclusion of the word "perversity". It is that word, as Derrida says that "dismantle(s) the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in the text.", (Derrida 1982, 256). Every reading is a misreading; the reading of "Conversion" that justifies the application of Post-Colonial theory, and the reading that renounces it, are misreadings because they both attempt to appropriate the text in their own cause, i.e. the reduction of the text to saturable meaning, whereas they are mere strands of interpretation that will, in turn, be subverted by the performative act of reading. The latter may be a higher quality reading because it relates more closely to the text, but in each case the claim to unity is disrupted by the refusal of the word to submit to its appropriation by the perception of stable thing. Both readings are "metaphysical structures", because both ignore the unresolvable contradiction that lies in the to convert/to pervert conundrum. Because pervert may be read as a pun on convert we can neither fully accept nor fully reject the colonial subjugation of Kirkwood in a Post-Colonial reading. Where he says it is "almost a perversity" can he possibly mean that Lucy's claim to be no good at maths can be perverse? His accusation cannot be justified by the order of commentary of the narrative. In Freudian terms it seems to be a slip of the tongue. "The ideas which transfer their intensities to each other stand in the loosest mutual relations.... In particular we find associations based on homonyms and verbal similarities treated as equal in value to the rest." (Freud, 1976, 755). In this slip William's distinguishing feature, his self-assurance, is seemingly questioned. It subverts his claims of being "convinced of the truth" (McGahern 1992, 339) and queries his decision to convert having been arrived at freely. It reveals, beneath or behind that over stressed self-assurance, a disgust with the idea of converting to Catholicism – to convert is to pervert. William, in the slip, is confronting his greatest fear.
- 17 We can also treat the verbal similarities in both terms as parts of the chain of signifiers that undo the implications of binary opposition in them and instead release them into the system of differences. From this perspective we again see language being reinstated

in its primary position over thing. The things "to convert" and "to pervert" are losing the certain identity that fuels the wonder and embarrassment William's intention to convert awakens. They are now words whose complexity is enhanced because of the certainty of their existence, that attention is drawn towards because of the new context, compared to the Freud reading, in which we find them. They are now words – of which there is no doubt – but words grown tired of being represented as the binarist things con- and pervert; con-version can be a confidence trick that perverts. They have now moved towards the process of proclaiming themselves free words and by so doing case doubt on the supposed certainty of those things. To be "convinced of the truth", as William claims he is, is shown to be doubly ironic. His conscious self-assured decision to convert, and his unconscious disgust towards the prospect, are both seen to be based on the flawed concept that things are fixed entities that are re-presented by words rather than the reverse. Our perception of things is constantly in flux, either waxing or waning in confidence, depending on its relation to the thetic moment. But the word itself does not enjoy any stability other than in its instability. It is "fixed" in its refusal to grant to the thing the assuredness of absolute reality. It is the thing, not the word, that is iterable because the word is privileged over the thing. On the chain of signifiers words are divested of the fixed association to things or "meaning", we invest in them. "Meaning" is shaken free, as apples are shaken off a tree; yet the tree and the word remain to grow more apples and to be reinvested with new "meanings", changed perceptions. Understanding the chain of signifiers proposes "the representation of a different relation to natural objects.... the linguistic network does not represent something real posited in advance." (Kristeva 1984, 126) but rather, in focusing on words certain existence over doubt of the existence of "something real", as we do when reading the text of "Conversion", helps us towards asking the questions of that relationship to natural objects, the relationship of language to "ourselves"

- 18 "Conversion" in playing with, or indulging theoretical readings, defers to the notion of the external referent, then, unsatisfied by the exercise, refers back to that which is privileged, its own text. In questioning the "what is" it shakes all perceptions of "sness", save that in which it asks the questions, language itself.

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RÉSUMÉS

This essay explores the position of Protestants in post-independence Ireland, as seen through McGahern's story of a Protestant bachelor landowner who decides to convert to Catholicism. The essay reads McGahern as reversing the stereotypical assumptions of the relationship between Protestant and Catholic that sees the Protestant as the colonial oppressor and the Catholic as the victim. Despite his cultural isolation Kirkwood resists both the imposition of Catholic culture and dismisses the label of victim. It shows McGahern to be sympathetic to the plight of Protestants, who, through Kirkwood, are seen to be loyal, serious thinkers, with a sense of duty and argues that they are the independent minded Irish.

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Arthur Broomfield has had papers and essays published on a number of Irish writers including Beckett, Maria Edgeworth and the Romantic-age poet, Mrs Eliza Ryan. He is a regular contributor at international literary conferences. Dr Broomfield is a graduate of The National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He was awarded his Ph.D. degree by Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. He writes poetry and has been published. Dr Broomfield teaches English with County Offaly V.E.C.