Eating in Remembrance of Themselves: Mythic Saints and Martyrs in Two Stories by Julia O'Faolain

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> Woman ought to be able to find herself among other things, through images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, and not on the basis of his work, his genealogy.
>
> *Luce Irigaray*
> **An Ethics of Sexual Difference**

Introduction

Like her compatriots Edna O'Brien and Jennifer Johnston, contemporary Irish author Julia O'Faolain has consistently engaged with the dominant myths that have informed Western culture, placing especial focus on detrimental myths of femininity. The bulk of her existing oeuvre was produced between the late 1960s and early 1980s—arguably the most volatile period of the Troubles when the Irish Republican Army waged a guerrilla war against the British government to end some seven hundred years of occupation. Many of O'Faolain's works focus specifically on the ways in which the Republican myth of a pure and unadulterated Ireland encouraged the strict surveillance of behaviour that was deemed to be

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non-traditional or deviant. Several critics have noted how such ideals were embodied in the myth of "Mother Ireland," which, especially through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prescribed feminine behaviour based on old legends about beautiful, loyal, and passive women who would *inspire* war and revolution but not actively engage in such activities. "Throughout the history of its colonization," C.L. Innes has argued, "Ireland has been represented by British imperialists as well as Irish nationalists and artists as female: she is Hibernia, Eire, Mother Ireland, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Dark Rosaleen" (2). These very distinct manifestations of a mythical feminine Ireland have been subsumed in the rhetoric of andocentric militarism (the IRA) and patriarchal religion (the Catholic Church) for the purpose of disseminating feminine passivity and subservience. To be sure, women traditionally served as activists within paramilitary organizations "as symbols of an oppressed nation" and as models of republican morality, yet they were discouraged from participating actively in the actual rebellions (Curtin 133).

The broader focus of O'Faolain's work, elaborated most prominently in her celebrated novel *No Country for Young Men* (1980), is the transgenerational impact of such feminine myths, which are transmitted by an older generation and instilled in the minds of the young. Laura B. Vandale argues that such myths generate in the character of Judith, the old convent nun in *No Country*, "two intertwining and destructive forces—her passion for Ireland and her passion against her sexual awakening and attraction to men" (22). As it turns out, Judith is the aunt of the story's other female protagonist, Gráinne, who has been catechized by a "monastic tradition" that "had described woman as a bag of shit"; "it [therefore] followed that sexual release into such a receptacle was a topic about as fit for sober discussion as a bowel movement" (O'Faolain, *No Country* 155). O'Faolain's typically acerbic humour responds to the combined forces of Irish politics and religion and underscores what Thomas R. Moore calls a "paradigm of control and entrapment of women throughout Irish history" (9). Such a paradigm demanded that women adhere to an established order based on inherited myths about women who willingly sacrifice their bodies for the nourishment of the nation.

As in much of O'Faolain's longer fiction, her short stories critique the legacy of a paternally endorsed mythology that confines "woman" to the restrictive categories of saint and whore, martyr and malefactor. While her best known work explores how mythological traditions resonate in contemporary Irish society, O'Faolain devotes just as much time to the wider European traditions of Christianity, which helped to shape what

became known as "Irish Catholicism."[1] By focusing on one story from each context (sixth-century Gaul and twentieth-century Ireland), I intend to show how the larger body of O'Faolain's work contributes to the task of what Judith Butler calls a "feminist genealogy" (9, 165, 188), which uncovers and exposes women's disfigurement (Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation* 166) and traces the various ways in which women's bodies have functioned historically and mythically as sites of religious martyrdom. "This is My Body" (1974) is set in a convent of sixth-century Gaul, where women are encouraged to renounce the world of the flesh and offer themselves as Brides of Christ. This piece was eventually incorporated as a chapter in a larger historical novel, entitled *Women in the Wall* (1975), which chronicles the life of Radegunda, the Queen of Poitiers, who leaves her tyrant husband, King Clotair, for the sanctity and security of the convent. The short story focuses on one day in the life of two main characters. One is Agnes, the child put into Radegunda's care and who eventually becomes Abbess of the Convent of the Holy Cross. The other is Venantius Honorious Clementianus Fortunatus, the poet-priest commissioned by several bishops and two kings to write the biography of Radegunda and the man who will make her a saint (O'Faolain, "This is My Body" 50). As one woman walls herself up in order to draw closer to God, another questions the system that thrives on the starvation of its women. "Daughters of Passion" (1982) is set in 1970s Ireland, when Irish women are still taught by the Catholic hierarchy to sacrifice their bodies for the promise of spiritual sustenance. O'Faolain uses the theme of hunger to draw connections between the interlocking ideologies of fasting for one's religion and starving for one's country. Revisiting the images of sacramental communion explored in "This Is My Body," the story takes us into the mind of Maggy Cashin, a modern Radegunda walled up in a Brixton prison for the bombing of a British police station. The twentieth-century convent school student turned political revolutionary reflects on her own motives for going on a hunger strike as she awaits trial, noting how Roman Catholicism and Irish Republicanism have each appropriated her story of martyrdom.

Within the space of these two stories, O'Faolain explores several manifestations of myth. First, she considers how "Woman" is sublimated to the universal "man" and how "I" is effaced in the presence of an omnipotent "God." Second, she reconsiders the traditional dichotomies of private/public and domestic/political by exploring the political resonance of female

1 That is to say, a country like Italy established early versions of a Catholic Christianity that the bishops of Ireland would emulate but also modify through their own Celtic traditions.

martyrdom in latter-day and contemporary sainthood. This is to say that O'Faolain appropriates otherwise disparaging myths for positive effects, underscoring the resistance that can occur within the stifling space of religious institutions and the empowering possibilities of food and sex. As an illustration of O'Faolain's talent for eroticizing the mundane, simple activities like preparing and receiving communion are charged with sexual energy. Her strategy, then, is to read her religious and cultural heritage irreverently by exploring the sensual appeal of the otherwise *holy* body and its passions. Moreover, while O'Faolain uncovers and exposes the disparaging images of women through a genealogical exploration, she also, in a certain sense, refigures woman through the process of what Drucilla Cornell calls "remetaphorization," which celebrates the "spillover" effect inherent in the creation and use of metaphorical language and myth (*Beyond Accommodation* 168). It seems appropriate to elaborate upon the theoretical grounding of such feminine writing strategies (genealogy, remetaphorization) before fleshing out the ways in which these processes are at work in O'Faolain's fiction.

I.

Cornell herself makes the argument in her significant study *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* that challenging women's containment within male-dominated discourse is not possible without recourse to myth and mythical language. She, in fact, cites Roland Barthes's argument that the "best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn" (Barthes, quoted in Cornell 165) or to expose the constructedness of myth. While Cornell does not elaborate further on Barthes's role in developing the *feminine* strategy of "remetaphorization," I would suggest that one place to begin is his discussion of myth as a "reserve" containing unspecified sustenance. As he argues in the initial section of *Mythologies*, the notable feature of myth is that it presents itself as something natural but does so first by concealing all the elements that contribute to its artificiality (Barthes 41–42). Myth relinquishes the nature of one item and superimposes on it an invented meaning. The result of such an imposition is that a product or process gains a new aura: it ceases to be natural and becomes mythical. The possible feminist implication here is that, in Barthes's critical reading, myth favours the universal over the particular, the timeless over the contingent, and the ideological over the political. Myth, in other words, *presences* itself by concealing the historical processes that have made myth possible and provided it with useful narratives. Such a reading of myth, then, amounts to what has been

identified as a genealogical exposure of (male) discursive practices; except, in the present case, my focus is on the specific removal of the parentheses, which would continue to conceal the patriarchal system that enables myth to function negatively in the first place. While Barthes himself does not go so far as to identify the mythification process in such terms, his elaboration of his argument in the theoretical section of his book (109–59) underscores the possibilities of finding new uses for old metaphors:

> [T]he essential point in all this is that the form [of a myth] does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses it value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nourishment; above all, it must be able to hide there. (118)

As it turns out, then, Barthes's writings can also be viewed as a sort of "reserve."

On the one hand, myth "impoverishes" when it possesses human subjects and re-creates symbolic figures in their place, thereby exchanging political agency for ideological function. On the other hand, this mythification process does not eradicate meaning and agency completely but merely stores it *elsewhere*, in the realm of signification, where the original meaning—say, *woman*—is concealed behind a new concept—say, *woman-as-goddess* or *woman-as-saint*. It is not a matter of finding the essential nature of the original concept but of reimagining—through language, through myth—new ways of describing that concept. Exposure is the first rather than the final strategy; remetaphorization is the second. My examples, of course, anticipate the specific feminist strategies offered by Butler, Cornell, and others, but they also reveal how Barthes's description of the "reserve of history" as a "tamed richness" modifies the assumption that myth cannot function as a valuable strategy for women and feminine writing. As it turns out, then, Barthes's writings can also be viewed as a sort of "reserve"—a muted acknowledgement of the powerful potential of mythifying myth or, in Cornell's terms, "remetaphorizing" male mythologies.

Some feminist critics have been rightly suspicious of myth since it often participates in the subterfuge of corrupt political systems. The "colouring of a world," Barthes says, "is always a means of denying it" (94), a means of blotting out the more unpleasant details, like poverty, political

corruption, and sexual repression. Modifying slightly here, with respect to Judith Butler's analysis of identity politics in *Gender Trouble*, political representation operates as a "foundationalist fable" since it claims to merely represent the subject but effectively conceals the ways in which the law actually *produces* subjects (Butler 5). As Butler elaborates, this "formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation" (9). To return to Barthes's initial arguments, myth is itself a kind of foundationalist fiction, holding its subjects at a distance in order to better manipulate them (Barthes 118). While Butler's critique does not explicitly depend upon Barthes's discussion of myth, it at least obliquely relies upon a similar strategy of exposure, which Butler identifies as a "feminist genealogy." As she elaborates in the conclusion of her book, a feminist genealogy demands a "reconsideration of the figure of the body as mute, prior to culture, awaiting signification, a figure that cross-checks with the figure of the feminine, awaiting the inscription-as-incision of the masculine signifier for entrance into language and culture" (Butler 188). Such a strategy seeks to probe the myths that have contributed to restricted notions of femininity, including the so-called feminine "instinct" to gravitate toward the domestic rather than the public sphere or to be caring and maternal rather than aggressive. Myths that have risen up around these behavioural descriptions—or, rather, myths that have been called up, evoked from the available collection passed down through Western history—include that of the pure, virginal woman or the maternal woman whose symbolic function as caregiver effectively desexualizes her. One finds an immediate paradox in the figure of Mother Mary who "gives birth" and yet remains "pure," suggesting that female sexuality is significant inasmuch as it is *useful*: it serves the purpose of bringing forth the "Christ-child." As Luce Irigaray notes in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*,

> Women take part in the divine becoming, in the engendering of "God." But that mediation is often forgotten. Women serve the apparition of the god but do not appear themselves as divine. As mothers of God, as servants of the Lord, yes. As consorts of the god, as incarnations of the divinity, no. (106)

In response to this contradiction, myths have yielded the useful, if refutable, dichotomy of saint/whore, specifying restricted boundaries for female agency: if a woman is considered too "loose," then she loses her right to sainthood (as if that is where she belonged in the first place) and degenerates to the level of whore. If this first strategy is to expose the historical predominance of feminine myths, the second strategy, which

Cornell identifies as remetaphorization, would be to operate within these myths in order to subvert them—in Barthes's terms, to exploit myth's operation as a "second-order of signification" (114) that distorts rather than hides female identity. A "feminist genealogy," Cornell elaborates, should be combined with a strategy of remetaphorization, which, through the "reworking of myth," subverts any attempt to fully capture "Woman" (*Beyond Accommodation* 171). To remetaphorize means to consider alternate interpretations of or uses for figurative language, which, by definition, has variable meanings. Because this strategy constantly requires the writer to return to previously articulated myths and metaphors, remetaphorization is not really separate from the strategy of genealogy but, rather, is one component in the task of *rewriting myth*. For Butler, genealogy is not simply a history of constitution and restriction, nor is it a search for a recoverable feminine subject. As she describes in *Gender Trouble*, the project of "critical genealogy of the naturalization of sex and of bodies in general" (188) holds out for the possible and the redeployment of possibilities for the future (189–90). Again, genealogy implies repetition and revision. Furthermore, repetition enables an otherwise negative myth to assume a new significance, especially if that story is told from the perspective of another culture.

One example that comes to mind here is the way in which Toni Morrison uses the Medea myth in her novel *Beloved* not to refute or alter the position of "woman" as inherently infanticidal but, rather, to demonstrate how an already "universal" myth invites all women to place themselves in the Medea role. What effect does this have? It allows specifics—such as the enslavement, abuse, and distortion of black identity—to operate in tandem with a general framework of a threatening femininity, and asks, What are the circumstances for infanticide when any woman is placed in Medea's position? The "general framework" remains the same, but the repetition of it produces new "effects": Sethe's murder of her child, Beloved, is a tactical strategy for survival rather than a monstrous or animal act, as Preacher and even Paul D interpret it. As Cornell argues in her illuminating analysis of the novel, the "meaning" of the Medea myth, the "deep significance of killing one's children, is problematized [...] by the slave 'reality' in which the mother is allowed to bear the children but not to 'raise' them" (*Beyond Accommodation* 194). The point here is that enacting the myths (genealogy) and actively engaging with them (remetaphorization) can provide a way out: "stories" can be turned into "*sorties*." "The appeal to the mythic," Cornell says, "heightens the intensity associated with [women's] struggles to survive within patriarchal society and to find our ways out, our *sorties*"

(173), for if we accept Barthes's claim that myth parasitizes history (presumably, the "first-order of signification") by drawing nourishment from it, we must also acknowledge that history provides the very condition for myth and is therefore a rich and multi-layered substance.

On the other hand, we should ask, What happens when we feminize a typically male character?

Employing some of the strategies of "feminine writing," as described by Butler and Cornell, O'Faolain has consistently made it her task to trace the role of myth in the representation of different sorts of women (Gaulish, Irish) down through history. In the midst of her literary output, for example, O'Faolain edited, in collaboration with her husband Lauro Martines, the non-fiction work *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* (1973), in which she explored, through the words of saints such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux and philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel, the manner in which fantasies frequently functioned as surrogate realities for women. In one of their editorial comments, O'Faolain and Martines state:

> The woman who believed she was a witch, the bride of Christ who keenly imagined his embraces and smelled his presence, the nun subject to ecstatic seizures, the barbarian queen (Radegonde) who burned Christ's initials into her flesh, the ladies who spent years discussing the refined and over-refined subtleties of Platonic love—each of these, in her own way, is a female Don Quixote. (xviii)

These fantasy worlds are frequently the product of men's imagination, superimposed over actual feminine experiences. Don Quixote is the prototypical figure of uncritical idealism, a character who absorbs myths of male chivalry without actively thinking for himself. On the other hand, we should ask, What happens when we feminize a typically male character? The "female Don Quixote," employed self-consciously, works for a satirical purpose—just as the male Don Quixote did for Cervantes in the sixteenth century. In an interview with Ann Weekes, O'Faolain insists that myths are not solid but are intricately segmented structures. They are tricky and seductive but also vulnerable: "Myths like Lego constructions can be taken apart: a double bonus for the writer, the magnifying effect of invoking myth in the first place, plus the energy involved in revoking its agreed values. Destruction releases energy" (quoted in Weekes 176). This double strategy of invoking/revoking is consistent with Cornell's assertion that we cannot critique myths by simply ignoring them since they inform our understanding of the world (*Beyond Accommodation* 172). As O'Faolain suggests, there is a certain "energy" produced in the discovery of how a

myth is working, in the dismantling of its layers, and in the subsequent release of the myth's potential to create significance in its appeal to metaphor and symbol. Myth, moreover, is a source of nourishment, a reserve where women, like the protagonists in O'Faolain's fiction, can take part in the construction of their own identities, their own bodies, their own desires.

II.

A number of O'Faolain's short stories are characterized by the linked tropes of food and sexual desire. In "The Knight" (1974), for example, the puritanical ex-soldier Condon attempts to eliminate his mortification following sexual intercourse with his wife by breakfasting alone at a nearby hotel, where "he could eat all he wanted without hearing remarks about calories" (103). "This Is My Body," which comes from the same collection, *Man in the Cellar*, reminds us that this religious form of self-abnegation derives from the Christian tradition of martyrdom and, specifically, from the passage in 1 Corinthians in which Christ breaks bread during the last supper and commands his disciples to "Take, eat; this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me" (11:24). The scripture is the inspiration for O'Faolain's brief sketch of a religious order structured upon the belief in non-physical communion: just as Christ sacrificed his body for his disciples, so should his disciples (and Christians generally) sacrifice their bodies to the glory of God. As the ensuing passage warns, any who partake of such communion "unworthily" "eateth and drinketh damnation" (1 Cor. 11:27–29). And yet, the very notion of supping on another's body implies a sensual activity. Accordingly, O'Faolain's story explores the erotic undertones of the scripture and of the ritual of sacrificial communion. The story's third-person limited perspective shifts between Fortunatus and Agnes, following the poet's philosophical meanderings as he composes his "Life" of saint-to-be Radegunda and the abbess's spiritual meditations as she completes her daily tasks in the convent, until the two paths ultimately cross. Their initial relationship hinges on their mutual friendship with Radegunda. As a "Bride of Christ," Radegunda has, of her own will, retreated to a tower where she awaits a holy union with Christ. In Christian terms, this union is a metaphorical representation of the Holy Church's devotion to a three-personed God and its ultimate reunion with Him on Judgement Day. Both Radegunda and Agnes have chosen to sacrifice the temporary physical pleasures of life on earth to ensure an eternal spiritual salvation in Heaven. As the ensuing narrative indicates, however, the two women differ in their *degree* of devotion. Parallel scenes where both For-

tunatus and Agnes contemplate the limitations of religion underscore the possibility of an understanding between sensual poet and pious nun.

In the first brief section of the story, Fortunatus explores the dynamics of sainthood and the difficulties of expressing spiritual love within the limited taxonomy of Christian rhetoric. At first undaunted, Fortunatus imagines Radegunda's communion in human terms as a "love-transaction with the Great Lover," and in the intensity of his writing he becomes physically excited by the prospect of participating "in the power which must […] be emanating from the nun at this moment" ("This is My Body" 51). Realizing, however, that her "rapture obliterated her individuality," Fortunatus feels "suddenly bereft." He struggles with the fact that the Christian faith requires humans to somehow restrain their bodily urges, to refuse what otherwise keeps them alive. Ultimately, he works himself into a sexual frenzy attempting to articulate Radegunda's rapture—"'As Danae received Zeus in a shower of sunlight, so Radegunda was receiving Christ.' No … Pagan imagery. Dangerous" (51)—only to discover the workings of his own lust: "The images before his inner eye were unmistakable" (52). Radegunda herself is not a virgin, as Fortunatus tells Agnes later on (60), but her sexual experience does not prevent her from becoming a Madonna figure, or one who receives and conceives Christ, for the faithful flock. Fortunatus is embarrassed by the perversity of even this traditionally religious image, just as he understands that pagan rituals of sacrifice have been made "holy" and pure under the writ of Christianity. Moreover, the poet-biographer's representation of the saint reveals the complexity of a mythology that, as Lorna Rooks-Hughes suggests, sublimates the body and codifies the maternal (87): women in the convent are to be inspiring, inspired, and exploited for poetic imagery. As far as Fortunatus is concerned, Radegunda fails "to appreciate" her celebrity status of sainthood ("This Is My Body" 50), an observation that also indicates how she is perhaps unaware of the mythic assemblage that her religious act evokes. Fortunatus exposes this mythification, which occurs within the confines of Christianity, as much as he advances it in his own metaphorical presentation. Nevertheless, in his attempt to claim Radegunda for his own poetic sensibility, Fortunatus eroticizes his saint whose seemingly arid tower flows with a womb-like current (Rooks-Hughes 94).

In the lengthier section of the story that follows, we find Agnes contemplating this same poetic sublimation but with what at first appears to be relative meekness. She understands the need for humility and silently scolds herself for using "I": "It was a forbidden vocable. Her 'I' *should* long since have been merged and lost in God. The brief character *should* have

been erased by her monastic vow, leaving her blank as a fresh page or her own white habit" ("This is My Body" 52; emphasis added). The conditional nature of Agnes's monastic vow indicates her position in the hierarchy of the convent: as a subordinate to the saintly Radegunda, she cannot attain the same purity. All the same, the passage reinforces the rebellion built into an institution that is, after all, woman-centred. A nun *should* become merged and lost in God, a nun *should* become absorbed, but the paradox of non-physical communion and of spiritual transubstantiation disallows the full realization of such rituals. O'Faolain foreshadows Agnes's resistance through the subtle use of word choice and grammatical transitions, such as when Agnes follows up her reflection on her monastic vow with the sudden admission: "*Meanwhile* there were things to be done" (emphasis added). There is a certain, significant irony in the notion that, while sublimation was important, *real* work had to be done. A little later, Agnes unconsciously repeats the "forbidden vocable" three times to the hen-pecking old nurse Fridovigia—"*I* can't listen now [...] *I* have to see how the bath-house is coming along. *I* want the masons out of there by Easter" (53; emphasis added). As a woman, Agnes must deny her Ego, and yet, as Abbess, Agnes maintains a certain degree of authority. In other words, purity and servitude must always remain *in theory only*: Fortunatus's earlier reflection surely reveals this fact. In a scene that parallels the poet's sensual meditation, O'Faolain underscores Agnes's sexual awakening through a lengthy description of sensualized convent rituals, including in particular the preparation of the "blessed bread." Her kneading of the dough elicits the thought, "Oh the relief of what was purely physical!" (56), a notion that foreshadows the later discovery of some novices who build a dough sculpture of a naked man (58–59).

Given the repressive nature of her religion, these seemingly quotidian physical tasks have the capacity to constitute minor rebellions. Consider the following passage: "She liked the elastic quality of the damp dough, enjoyed pummelling and slapping it down, feeling it yield then slowly swell back, arching into the palms of her hands and muzzling upwards through the slits in her fingers" (56). The language here indicates a sensual act of creation but also suggests the initiation of a sexual act where a body responds to touch, arches in ecstasy, and finally yields to penetration. Given Agnes's continued devotion, however, this passage comes off as relatively innocent: she is still unconscious of the rebellion brewing in her, swaddled as she is in the same rhetoric of self-sacrifice that keeps Radegunda (who never leaves the tower for the duration of the story) from exploring the nature of her womb-like power. As a consequence of such repression at

a community level, the other nuns in the convent are constantly finding abandoned babies—some of them dead, blue with cold—on the basilica steps, the "sinners" too afraid of being found with the product of their sensual sin (54, 57). Moreover, convent life requires the dreary repetition of mortifying the flesh in the hopes of renewing the spirit.

In this world that views all women as "fallen," with a line of descent back to Eve, Radegunda and Agnes are seen as the ideal figures of purity: they are vessels, or blank pages, empty and available for the divine mark of God. The ultimate example of such a sacrifice is Radegunda, who has been in "retreat," enclosed within a bricked-up tower of her own design, for three weeks, awaiting moments of religious ecstasy. Once a queen, Agnes reflects, Radegunda now lives a life below the standard of a beggar: for while beggars at least attempt to sustain themselves through the offering of a pittance, Radegunda refuses to eat, drink, speak, or to have contact with anyone except God. Moreover, unlike Agnes, who works within the convent, Radegunda's isolation is two-fold: she is cut off from both the world outside the convent and the stifled but living community within the convent. Her only physical sustenance includes the lepers' sores, which she has kissed on numerous occasions ("This is My Body" 57). She is the saintly example to which Agnes aspires. Despite the rebellious aura surrounding her sainthood—she defied the patriarchal authority of her husband Clotair by retreating to the convent—Radegunda has relinquished all ties to her own sensuality and to the community of women outside her tower. This aridity is symptomatic of Radegunda's attempt to create a "reverse world" where men would not hold any rule (*Women in the Wall* 24). Indeed, as Radegunda notes continually throughout *Women in the Wall*, her retreat signifies a refusal to acknowledge the authority of men: the female body is hidden away, preserved for the Holy Groom. Yet, this "regimentation of desire" (Rooks-Hughes 94), which prevents all physical contact, ultimately hinders the women from making the convent a healthy place of prayer and from convincing others that such sacrifice is worth the effort.

The narrative in "This is My Body" becomes more insistent, more interrogating, as it moves forward, and as Agnes walks through her daily routine she silently begins to critique convent life: the useless fasting, the futile attempts to offer comfort to lepers (58), and the delusive efforts to prevent procreation. Starvation, infant mortality, and disease are the products of a mind-numbing, contradictory belief system that encourages physical torment, in the form of penance and fasting, and discourages all human contact. Fortunatus initially believes that "the Christian's was a more ethical experience. The enraptured woman's will became absorbed

into the Divine one. Radegunda became one with God" (51). As Cornell notes, however, "ethical" indicates "the aspiration to a non-violent relationship to the Other and to otherness in the widest possible sense. This assumes responsibility to struggle against the appropriation of the Other into any system of meaning that would deny her difference and singularity" ("What is Ethical Feminism?" 78). Union with God, as described by Fortunatus, denies woman her difference and singularity since she is ultimately absorbed. The unethical nature of this relationship is analogous to women's relationship with history and myth: both work toward describing woman through restrictive categories—good or bad women, saints or whores—and pre-determining her fate through a narrative based on men's experiences. Furthermore, the *wall* performs the function of myth, as described by Barthes: it does not suppress a woman so much as it puts her "at a distance" and "holds [her] at one's disposal." While the woman still thrives, she is "impoverished" in this distanced and disposed state, a starved creature that is, for poets and priests, "an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness" (Barthes 118). But "woman" remains, nevertheless, a flesh-and-blood entity that is only partially captured by mythology.

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Ultimately, Agnes understands religion to be a "channelling of dangerous passions into safe celebrations" ("This Is My Body" 60), and she concedes that the rigid interpretation of potentially sensual language cannot always be maintained. This realization is brought home to her when she discovers some eastern Frankish novices preparing the "blessed bread" for communion in the bake house:

> [S]he saw what was on the table. For a moment she thought it was a corpse: a man's. But it was only dough. They had moulded it into the shape of a life-sized […] naked man. With some skill […]
>
> "What," she managed to control her voice, "in God's name is that?"
>
> "The Easter Christ," said the elder novice in her thick dialect […]
>
> Agnes's eye bounced off the generous penis and testicles of powdered white dough. (58–59)

"'[W]e do not eat our God,'" Agnes tells the young girls with measured restraint and a great deal of embarrassment, knowing full well the ironies of the belief, as disseminated in Biblical scripture: "'Eat me,' said Christ, 'and do not eat others. Love me so as not to love other men. Let your mind dwell on me and lust will leave you'" (60). Agnes may flinch at

the sight of Christ's genitals, but she must admit that Christianity offers up the temptations it also seems to condemn. The erotic undertones of Christianity are revealed in the everyday practice of convent rituals and in the admission that without the "purely physical" (56) no communion is possible. If the mythology of the rejuvenating Christ is practically unrealized, so then must the mythology of the rejuvenating saint. As O'Faolain suggests here, Christianity supplies only empty metaphors with no sustenance, and Agnes can only hold this contradiction at bay for so long until the language breaks down. It is precisely at this moment—where mundane and sacred rituals are transformed into erotic activities—that the process of remetaphorization is most apparent. Following a logic that Radegunda fails to acknowledge, Agnes refuses to starve in a convent that offers real bread.

Being a learned man, Fortunatus finds Radegunda's "story" adaptable; he is able, at least initially, to look past the morbid nature of her self-mortification—her starvation, her thirst, her swollen and scarred legs, her repressed sexuality—and find a certain kind of beauty that can satiate his own sensual needs. As his path brings him closer to Agnes, a tangible "woman in the wall," he comes to believe that divine union is impossible without human volition, or a secular kind of empiricism: "'Knowledge comes to us through the senses only'" ("This is My Body" 61). This is his refrain as he encounters Agnes during her "spasm of self-distrust" (60) and then, with her exhausted consent, pulls her down into some bushes just outside the bake house in an impassioned embrace. Despite his decision to act on his lustful thoughts, his spiritual piety has remained consistent. He has simply followed through on what is already written: "woman" is for the taking, and it is her role to submit. Agnes yields to this occasion of sin, feeling an exhilarating thaw begin at the core of her being. Fortunatus is not so much the source of her ecstasy as he is the trigger of a sexual awakening that is inevitable. The link between food and desire, begun within the bake house, is further apparent in this closing love scene where Agnes is "rolled […] on the crumbly earth releasing smells of crushed kale and parsley" (61). Here we find a rebellion against both imposed fasting and chastity as Agnes finds in this otherwise insipid convent a rather aromatic soil. Like the dough that yields to Agnes's kneading, Agnes herself lays back, "arched on the thick bundle of clothes gathered in a wad under her backbone" (62). If this parallel scene suggests sexual penetration, it does not necessarily signify *domination*, especially considering the symbolic "release" when she both sheds her constricting habit and reaches orgasm. Completing the religious food imagery, Agnes insists that they "'make a

sort of communion out of [their] love'" (63). While she wilfully submits to the erotic encounter, the meaning of *this* "ecstasy" overflows the vessel meant to contain it: *this*, the cherished and caressed skin underneath the confining habit, is indeed Agnes's body.

The "ethical" part of re-writing myth, as Cornell describes, is in the belief that "woman" is not something that can be fully captured: "There is always more to write" (*Beyond Accommodation* 171). Moreover, the feminine strategies of genealogy and remetaphorization are not part of some linear progression but rather counterparts in an oscillating process. What is, at the beginning of the story, a "thrilling mystery of existence" ("This Is My Body" 51)—Radegunda's holy union with God—turns out to be merely a "poem," a concept to be worked and reworked, as it is necessary with any tricky and pliable substance. Exposing the myth does not simply eradicate it, and evoking it cannot exorcise its negative power. As Fortunatus explains, in panting punctuated breaths, the poem is "a construct. Myth. Heady. Useful. Edifying. Forget it" (61). The point is not that one can simply "forget it" but rather that *it* can be turned against itself, analyzed for its constructed, segmented nature. Surely Agnes understands this as well as Fortunatus. Despite the belief that religion suppresses desire, O'Faolain's early modern convent is a teeming reservoir of energies.

In her discussion of the novel *Women in the Wall*, Lorna Rooks-Hughes makes the dual claim that, in the "reverse world" of the convent, O'Faolain "problematize[s] but also replicate[s] the structures of cultural misogyny [she] expose[s] by [her] embrace of the defining structure of the family as the arena of the feminine" (83). To be sure, Agnes's fate is much darker in the novel: her own illegitimate daughter Ingunda, whom she conceives after her encounter with Fortunatus, willingly incarcerates herself in a cell in order to forgo the temptations of the flesh; Agnes ultimately relinquishes the world of the flesh and takes her daughter's place in the wall of martyrdom where she spends her final days. It is significant, however, that "This Is My Body," which ends on a positive note, was written as a separate story before being incorporated as a chapter in the larger novel. Indeed, the short piece underscores O'Faolain's original vision of a sensual rebellion. That being said, even the bleak conclusion of the novel does not eliminate the subversive power of Agnes's original resistance. For this reason I would assert that O'Faolain *ironically* embraces the defining structure of the family *in order to* more successfully problematize these same structures. In other words, Rooks-Hughes seems almost to disavow O'Faolain's critical strategies after she has acknowledged them. The dominant myth of women's domesticity is all the better parodied when it operates front

and centre in a text. This is precisely what Butler calls a "subversive repetition" of the foundationalist fiction (188), which claims the notion that the body "awaits signification." Rooks-Hughes's investment in Kristeva's notion of the "abject body" (see 90–93), which states that "*the abjection of the mother* is necessary for the rise of subjectivity" (Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation* 69), predetermines the necessary failure of O'Faolain's critique. O'Faolain's texts certainly contain their share of women whose freedom often comes at the expense of either sublimation (to the Christian God and/or a desiring male figure of authority, as in "This Is My Body") or violence (against the oppressive forces of the State, as in "Daughters of Passion"). Particularly in *Women in the Wall*, O'Faolain carefully traces three or four generations of women who reject their own bodies *as abject* in order to fulfil the role of their martyrdom to a decidedly male deity. However, I would suggest that O'Faolain's fiction attempts to construct a genealogy in order to expose the myths that have helped to construct negative images of women. Surely we cannot ignore the parodic potency of Agnes's dreary repetition of the convent's futile rituals—a subversive repetition of the whole mythic assemblage of female martyrdom.

The dominant myth of women's domesticity is all the better parodied when it operates front and centre in a text.

III.

As an indication of O'Faolain's gradual development of her feminist genealogy, "Daughters of Passion" provides an updated sketch of the religious mythos encountered in "This Is My Body," exploring the significance of the communion ritual in contemporary Irish culture. As the title story of a collection dubbed by the Penguin editors as "Nine elegantly disconcerting glimpses into love," "Daughters of Passion" features a protagonist whose apparently failed First Communion leads her to believe that she had been "rejected by her maker" and was therefore unable to have successful relationships with men (55). It is immediately evident, then, that O'Faolain is rewriting the myth of the female martyr, for Maggy Cashin appears to be an agnostic suffragette. The conflation of food with desire is complicated in this story since hunger itself is understood as a strategy of resistance rather than disempowerment. Maggy's wilful starvation in the British prison would then be comparable to Radegunda's "retreat" or at least her attempt to create a "reverse world" that excludes men. On the other hand, the story explores how twentieth-century Irish Republicanism co-opts the medieval Christian practice of fasting and refashions it in the politicized gesture of hunger striking. Employing the genealogical-metaphorical strategy, O'Faolain demonstrates how Irish nationalism finds new uses

for religious mythology. The first issue to tackle, then, is to consider what new effects are produced as a result of this apparent remetaphorization.

While it is true that the rituals of fasting and hunger striking differ in that the former is religious and the latter political, George Sweeney has noted that

> the hunger strike is an integral part of Irish history and mythology. Thus for the Irish, especially the Northern Catholic Republicans, the hunger strike, linked as it is to religio-political martyrdom and the pantheon of Irish heroes, is another means, possibly a weapon of last resort, of those nurturing a sense of oppression and frustrated in their attempts to resist. (421)

After the failed Easter Rising of 1916, Ireland gained an independence of a sort in 1922, when the British agreed to sign a treaty to establish the Irish "Free State" and grant a belated "home rule." However, this political freedom was granted on the condition that a gerrymandered Northern Ireland remain a British colony. A subsequent debate over the treaty caused a violent rift in the Republican movement and led to a civil war between the opposing sides. As Sweeney notes, the Irish Civil War marked a shift in the clerical response to the practice of hunger striking in the 1920s. In the pre-treaty period Catholic priests generally supported hunger striking since they had little influence on political matters and did not want to alienate themselves from the nationalist cause. However, once they had been granted a position of authority in the Free State government, they were able to condemn the practice of hunger striking outright and thereby remain consistent in their Christian opposition to self-immolation (431). This seems to suggest a significant break from the tradition—represented in "This Is My Body"—of Christian hagiography. Further, Sweeney's historical description helps to show the philosophical differences between fasting for religion and starving for political redress. In many cases, hunger strikers were "gnostics" who invoked Republican rather than religious martyrs as their legitimizing heirs. While the Catholic Church voiced its support for hunger-striker Terence Mac Swiney, whose death in 1920 was commended by Reverend P. J. Gannon as a just cause (428), it quickly changed its tune after the treaty was signed, going so far as to deny burial for hunger-striker Denis Barry who died in 1923 (430–31). On the other hand, the language used to describe hunger striking employed a rhetoric of self-sacrifice that resembled the older tradition of fasting, as imagined in the sixth-century context of "This Is My Body." As Paige Reynolds has recently argued, the hunger striker, like the religious martyr, finds in the

emaciated body a "purifying ritual" that can be contrasted with the corruption of English imperialism (537). So, whatever the original motives of the MacSwineys or Barrys or, for that matter, the female suffragists of the early 1900s, hunger striking could be viewed as part of a tradition of self-sacrifice. Paige's assertion that MacSwiney's sacrifice was meant to—and likely *did*—appeal to a "mass public" rather than the religious segment of Irish society (537–39) confirms rather than refutes the argument that hunger striking was represented in mythological terms.

As O'Faolain's story reveals, then, one of the effects of mythic revision in contemporary Irish culture is the transformation of the martyr-saint's wall or tower into the political prisoner's jail cell. As Seán McConville has argued in his recent study, *Irish Political Offenders, 1848–1922: Theatres of War*, "A large part of modern Irish republicanism is the assertion of claims of legitimacy based on historical continuity. The history of Irish political imprisonment is central to the education of republican activists and their self-assumed obligation to keep faith with the past" (10). We might elaborate on this point by suggesting that European Catholicism, and its iconography of martyrdom and wilful incarceration, was a significant—if unacknowledged—part of this past. Another effect of the mythic revision was the recourse to specifically Irish myths and mythical personae. The land wars and resulting political unrest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led the Irish literati (Lady Gregory, Yeats, Synge, and others) to reach back into the Gaelic past in order to celebrate the great heroes of Celtic legend, including especially Cuchuláin and Fíonn Macumhail. These figures came to represent an ideal Irish identity whose notable traits included purity, self-sacrifice, and national loyalty. Most notably, these national figures, who were adopted by the rebels of the 1910s and 1920s, were decidedly *male*, and so we might say that the previous tradition of female martyrdom was modified by this newly genderized mythology of masculine sacrifice. It is well known, for example, that Pádraig Pearse, one of the most celebrated of twentieth-century Irish rebels, based his romantic notions of a blood sacrifice on the popular legends of Cuchuláin, who was said to suffer six wounds before he finally perished. This incorporation of Irish martyrdom was immortalized in Oliver Sheppard's bronze statue of the dying Cuchuláin, which was placed in front of the General Post Office in Dublin to commemorate the executed rebels of the 1916 Easter Rising; the GPO, of course, was one of the key headquarters for leaders of the rebellion, which was quickly suppressed by the more powerful British Army.

The statue is a perfect representation of myth's impoverishment of meaning: Cuchuláin is more potent as a reserve of memory than as a living person; the mythological figure is itself a martyr *for* memory—a sacrificial death (Cuchulain's imprisonment in bronze) for the living who then feed on him, as Morrigu, the Goddess of War, perches on Cuchulain's shoulder in the form of a raven (Miller 129). As Nicholas Andrew Miller argues, the prominent portrayal of Cuchulain's sacrificial death in this bronze statue commemorates the mythological martyrdom in "the explicit terms of Christian devotion. Indeed, to say that the figure's features and posture are Christlike is to understate the obvious. In a Catholic country, the image of the sacrificial hero, bound and dying, is hardly ambiguous" (129–30). So while it is true that O'Faolain's female martyr, Maggy, is also based on the historical continuity of female Christian sainthood, which is reinforced by her illustrious birth name of "Magdalen Mary Cashin" ("Daughters of Passion" 46), her position as an *Irish* woman rebel and martyr disrupts the predominantly male character of her country's nationalist politics.

As the first indication of her disruption of traditions, O'Faolain employs a stream-of-consciousness style of narration so that Maggy's thoughts flow back and forth, from her past experience in the convent school and then in university up to the present when she finds herself linked to the IRA and a whole tradition of political and religious martyrdom. The sudden shifts back and forth in time enable us to witness the process of her mythification: by exposing significant tidbits about Maggy's childhood, religious experiences, relationships, and politics, the flashbacks reinforce the fact that, while they seem difficult to "adjust," the Republican myths "didn't fit her" and were "inaccurate" ("Daughters of Passion" 49). Maggy's two friends, Dizzy and Rosheen, contribute their own voices to her meditation on myth, martyrdom, and politics, enriching O'Faolain's critical reappraisal of woman's so-called "inscription" down through history. According to official discourse, Irish women enter the language of myth as *Magdalens* and *Rosheens*, carrying with them a whole genealogy of beautiful and passive women, idealized in Christian and Celtic pagan iconography.

The first stream of thought that begins the story is Maggy's meditation on her own "political act" and its relation to her religious experiences in the convent. Like the myths that surround it, the Convent of the Daughters of Passion is "constantly being remodelled" ("Daughters of Passion" 39), refashioned from old materials as a way of maintaining the authority of tradition. The "change" the convent pretends to encourage does not reach the deeper level of human relations but only the ideological level of artificiality,

of selling the Church as *new and improved*. And like those of the Convent of the Holy Cross in "This Is My Body," the nuns of this modern convent are "great builders," constructing walls around themselves like a "collective shell." Yet, the cell and the convent, now called the "nun's hall," are once again structures of imprisonment that hold reserves of energy. As Maggy reflects on her condition after the twelfth day of her hunger strike, she finds herself afflicted by ecstatic visions of food: "Bricks and mortar from the nuns' hall had turned into butcher's meat [...] Images decomposed and went edible, like those trick paintings in which whole landscapes turn out to be made up of fruit or sausages." Here O'Faolain converts the bland and malnourished atmosphere of the convent into a sensual feast. Even Maggy's evocation of Holy Communion is distorted into a riotous buffet: "She could smell sausages [...] Could we have the sausages nice and crispy [...] A dab of mustard. Jesus! Eat this is remembrance. Oh, and three rolls of French bread. Thanks. Christ-the-pelican slits his breast to feed the faithful" (40). This is the first of two references to transubstantiation, which, in this scene, is altered through the process of remetaphorization: perversely, Christ's sacrifice is reimagined here as a cannibalistic gesture, which is, nevertheless, one of the suggested interpretations of the Eucharist. As a *re*visionary flashback, Maggy is metaphorically eating in "remembrance" of herself, that is, before she was contained by this mythic assemblage; additionally, she is metaphorically eating her way out of the past that has shaped her life. Unlike Radegunda, then, whom we never see in "This is My Body," Maggy explores the "porous" (39) nature of her containment and of the myth constructed around her martyrdom.

Yet, what appears in the rhetoric of the Catholic Church and the IRA to be a sacrifice for God and country turns out to be something altogether different, something rather accidental.

Like the nuns who believe that Radegunda will be filled with an invigorating Holy inspiration, those of the Convent of the Daughters of Passion teach the adolescent Maggy that "strength will flow into [her]" ("Daughters of Passion" 42). Her actual experience of First Communion, as disclosed in her next stream of thoughts, is disappointing: she experiences no ecstasy, while her fellow sister, Rosheen, resembles a "drunk or a painted saint" (43). Maggy discovers that a saint is not an actual person but a guise one assumes, a made-up or painted identity. Yet, what appears in the rhetoric of the Catholic Church and the IRA to be a sacrifice for God and country turns out to be something altogether different, something rather accidental, as we eventually discover. As she becomes atrophied, Maggy confesses that food "could drive any other consideration from her mind" (40). Both religion and politics, then, become rituals that attempt to channel "dangerous passions into safe celebrations" ("This is My Body" 60) and contain the unpredictable drives of the human body. As a way of

exploring what the uncritical press denigrates as the "'twisted logic of the terrorist mind'" ("Daughters of Passion" 39), O'Faolain presents Maggy's story in terms of her conflicted relationship with two other "women in the wall," Rosheen and Dizzy.

Rosheen, whose name (literally translated from the Irish) signifies "little rose," is described by Maggy as "unmodulated and unskinned: an emotional bomb liable to go off unpredictably" (53). A bundle of nerves, Rosheen throws herself down into a puddle to pray to Saint Anthony when she loses her confirmation medal (46), leaves her abusive husband Sean and irrationally returns to him, and then retreats back to her friends only to wallow in the melancholia of old Irish ballads (54–55). Discussing Rosheen's inability to leave Sean for good, Dizzy says, "'She has to be protected from herself! From the old Irish death wish. Surely you can see that she's better off with me'" (45). The "old Irish death wish" likely refers to the mythology of martyrdom celebrated by Irish nationalists. Rosheen has the perverse belief that she, too, must sacrifice herself for the cause, that she, too, must become a vessel for God and Holy Ireland. Her name recalls one of the mythical personae of Mother Ireland, *Róisín Dubh*, or the "Dark Rosaleen," the celebrated "saint of saints" in James Clarence Mangan's translation of the traditional lyric (Mangan 273, 274). Like other depictions of Mother Ireland, in the *aisling* tradition of the Bardic school (roughly 1600 to 1800), or in the plays of Yeats and Lady Gregory (early 1900s), Rosaleen is a beautiful but helpless maiden, an embodiment of Ireland's woes as an imperial colony. "Locked into confrontation with Britain and contestation over the mother land," Innes argues, "Irish literature and Irish history have created males as national subjects, woman as the site of contestation" (3). So it is that O'Faolain's Rosheen finds her very body the site of her husband Sean's war with England. Radiating the energy of her namesake (dark and bloody or blood red), Rosheen commits herself to martyrdom only in pathetic gestures. Yet, there is energy in Rosheen's unpredictability and in her unintentionally comic repetition of the narrative of the martyred saint. The peak of her parody of the woeful saint is reached during a shower when, in the middle of her wailing ballad ("Mother of Christ, / Star of the sea, / Pray for the wanderer. / Pray for me."), she drops a glass bottle of shampoo: "'*Sta-a-a-r of the …* Fuck!' Rosheen had dropped the shampoo. Now they would all get glass splinters in their feet" (55). What begins as a pious song ends in an indecorous burst of profanity. She may shed blood for her country but only through accident. Furthermore, Rosheen's mythical identity provides nourishment for her, whatever we might say of her melodrama: "She was slurping out feeling

now, steaming and singing in the shower while the other two ate breakfast." The success of her First Holy Communion, however ridiculous it appears to Maggy, gives us a sense of Rosheen's hungry tenacity.

Dizzy, whose name seems to contradict the fact that she is made of hardier wood than Rosheen, is "of Anglo-Irish Protestant stock," and had "gone native [that is, Irish Catholic] in a programmed way" (41), eventually joining Irish Republican political clubs. She refuses to let her Protestant background keep her out of a largely Catholic organization, quickly assuming the gestures and language of a revolutionary, keen to offer an opinion on political matters. She has the ability to shift perspectives, having *assumed* the native one already; "poor Rosheen," on the other hand, "was stuck in one register" (42). Yet, unlike Maggy, Dizzy is not content to weaken the "resolve" of her newly formed political position and is virulently opposed to negotiation and discussion. "'The trouble with you, Maggy,'" Dizzy complains, "'is that you're an adapter,'" which means that Maggy "listened to the other side" (41). Yet, it is this adaptive position that allows Maggy to evaluate Dizzy's hard-line beliefs in sanctimonious violence and Rosheen's nervous clinging to a "ballady," mythological Ireland.

Like Agnes, Maggy is a collection of contradictions, pent-up desire under a layer of icy cold logic. She begins to feel that Rosheen and Dizzy signify these two versions of her personality: Dizzy is her pragmatic anti-self (51), the forthright individual who favours actions over words, while Rosheen represents that romantic tendency to hide in the comforting gauze of language. Yet, history and myth attempt to turn the collectivity of *women* into the monologic category of *woman*, so that the trio, Rosheen-Dizzy-Maggy, is reduced to a description of *all* women, of what women are supposed to be like. To be sure, O'Faolain deliberately presents these three women as various "types" of femininity, but they each, in turn, resist the characteristics associated with their names, asserting an "I" where modesty and passivity are expected. Rosheen's inelegant performance as the bloody "little rose" mocks the mythical overlay of her name and its association with the "saint of saints" in Mangan's poem. Even Dizzy turns out to be something other than she appears—more of a flake than a "pragmatic" decision-maker but also more *her*self than the one she feels she should perform: in response to Rosheen's comment that someone "gets [her] goat," Dizzy quips, "He gets on my tits" (42). The numerous examples of immodest, inelegant, or simply crude behaviour suggest that these women are a less-than-holy trinity. Moreover, it is only in the moment of her own initiation into Irish politics that Maggy is able to comprehend the degree to which her judgement of her friends is based on a set of

predetermined roles. Maggy's own conflicting motives—saintly? political? pragmatic? romantic?—are narrowly interpreted by her Republican allies. After she is arrested, Maggy finds herself "boxed in by her ballady story" (49), which tells of an orphan who was raised by nuns, "had lost her faith, found another, fought for it and been imprisoned" (50). As she reflects, her memory of her actual mother is somewhat hazy, but it is clear that the "orphan" bit is an embellishment; indeed, Maggy's IRA supporters probably hear the story about the nuns of her convent school who tell her that "she had forty mothers: their forty selves" (50)—a figurative way of telling her that they will take care of her from the spiritual side of things. When Maggy's aunt hears this story from the four-year-old Maggy, she scoffs, "Frustrated old biddies!" Maggy admits that the ballady story "didn't fit her, was inaccurate but couldn't be adjusted" (49). Her proper name, Magdalen, is itself an incarceration, something she is locked into from birth. In the same way that Fortunatus tries to sublimate Radegunda to the status of goddess (Danae) or saint (Virgin Mary), so, too, do the Republican nationalists attempt to elevate Maggy to such mythical heights, casting her in their narrative as a holy matriarch, the supreme disciple—or indeed *Mother*—of Christ, and a martyr-saint. As far as her "ballady story" goes, Maggy is illegitimately born, and yet she is an orphan with a ready-made narrative. The IRA man with the glass eye who visits her believes he is freeing her by superimposing over the narrative of the "woman in the wall" the narrative of the *political prisoner*. But neither "Glass-Eye," as she comes to call him, nor the taunting British "screws" understand her motives for planting the bomb. After she agrees to claim "political status" (60), Maggy's acute hunger betrays even this earnest attempt to fit the mould of history and myth. But, as the Old Irish proverb says, "Hunger is a good sauce." It is this prospect of resisting the authority over her story, of undermining the rigid doctrine of religious martyrdom, that turns Maggy's hunger into a strength rather than a weakness.

Perhaps it is Maggy's intellectual interest in semiology ("Daughters of Passion" 53) that allows her to recognize and critique the language systems that formulate these myths in the first place. As Ferdinand de Saussure defined it, "semiology" is the "science of signs," the study of the structures of language and what Barthes calls "signification." Language can be broken down into three parts: a signified (often identified as *form*), a signifier (often identified as *concept*), and the sign (often identified as *meaning*). These make up the "language-object" or "semiological chain." Myth, Barthes says, "is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological*

system" (114). The peculiarity is also a certain kind of slyness, as myth is a *form* that remains hidden in multiple layers of prior *meanings*. Noting this secondariness of myth, Cornell argues for the feminist reliance upon myth to defend the feminine (*Beyond Accommodation* 165). Expanding upon Barthes's theory of myth as a "second-order semiological system," she develops the collective concept of "feminine writing, metaphor and myth" (the title of a core chapter in *Beyond Accommodation* 165–96), which holds out for the possibility of refashioning or remetaphorizing the mythological images that have already been deposited by men. Myth, then, is not rejected but redeployed from a feminine perspective: the "only option is to work within myth to reinterpret it" (196). Thus, Maggy's cell of martyred sainthood is also a reserve full of nourishing energy.

Dizzy goads Maggy for an intellectual preoccupation that seems out of touch with reality: "I do think semiology is the wrong thing for you, Maggy. You should put your energies into something more practical" (55), which means that she should stop being an "adapter" and should just "*Be* Irish" for once (41). In an unexpected turn of events—the discovery that one of Dizzy's pub friends is a detective from the "Special Branch," the British intelligence division which recruited most of Northern Ireland's informers (Toolis xvii)—Maggy follows her friend's advice and makes what appears to be a "practical" decision. As Rosheen tells her, this detective intends to coerce Sean into becoming a police informant on the IRA. Convinced that Rosheen is too emotionally helpless and Dizzy too much the "eejit" and "play-actress" (58), Maggy pragmatically assumes the role of an IRA militant and plants the bomb. Before she reaches the exit, the bomb goes off and puts "an end to [the detective's] smile, his assurance, his smug, salary-drawing, legal murder" (60). Despite Maggy's assertion that she planted the bomb for "personal reasons" (59), her "act" is co-opted (58) through the ideological rhetoric of the IRA and drained of its original connotation. Once again, to quote Barthes, it is the nature of myth to "impoverish" the meaning of language (118). There is the act—Maggy's planting of the bomb—and there is the interpretation—Maggy's affiliation with a particular politics based on a "semiological chain which existed before" (114). We might imagine this original chain rather as an empty or enclosed wall. The myth—of the Irish martyr, of the Irish female saint—uses this convenient space (Barthes's sign) as the basis for a "second-order semiological system": *woman imprisoned* becomes *religious martyr* or *IRA political saint*. This new signification, itself a composite of two systems (old and new), we might imagine as a cell with a hidden chamber, or one secretly adjoined to the original cell. The myth, then, signifies *two* gestures, but only the most

attractive one is important to the mythologizers who overlay the previous signification or meaning with a new one.

If a woman appears mad, she is said to be in "ecstasy." Radegunda's faithful cult and Maggy's political allies derive perverse pleasure from acts of self-degradation. Here, imprisonment is cast as ecstatic possession; Radegunda may be described as a "caged mouse," but she is wilfully submitting "to a stronger one" ("This is My Body" 50–51). As another "woman in the wall," Maggy is not satisfied with such an interpretation. She understands that the "grief throbbing through" Rosheen's "wailing song" has nothing "to do with politics" ("Daughters of Passion" 53). It has more to do with the frustration of being full to the brim and still unsatiated, of being a *myth* first and a *woman* second. If the body betrays the mind (and the soul) by giving in to sensual desires, the mind also betrays the body by trying to deprive it of sustenance. Maggy's catechism has taught her to be divided in such a way, but it still fails to account for the psychic wound that such sacrifice inflicts. Evoking images of healing and nourishment, Maggy recalls one of her convent prayers—"*May thy wounds be to me food and drink by which I may be nourished, inebriated and overjoyed!*" (55)—and how the promise of finding "men like Christs who'd provide all that" is never fulfilled. In the final scene of the story, Maggy reimagines the Christ figure in terms of a lover, which recalls Radegunda's supernatural union with the "Great Lover," noting that his wounds "were dry and not as food and drink to her at all" (61). This subversion works on the level of blasphemy and irreverence: Christ is figured here as physical lover—as a *male* lover who cannot, in the end, satisfy her needs. Like Agnes, then, Maggy imagines the religious ritual in its mythologized state as empty, as impoverished. However, she is also perceptive enough to exploit the imagery for its sensual appeal, seeing no reason to view it otherwise. For if we follow Barthes's description, as Cornell evidently has (165), meaning of a myth is never eliminated but is kept in reserve. Myth needs this nourishment in order to function. Women are not the cells in which they are placed, although myths are better defined this way. The IRA man's belief that Maggy's story is "inexact but serviceable" ("Daughters of Passion" 50) admits a flaw in the reality of the myth and reveals the ulterior motives of deriving a profit from a woman's malnourishment in a prison cell.

Conclusion

In "This Is My Body" and "Daughters of Passion" there is a complex web of relations between religion and politics where the language of the one, while it appears to condemn the other, merely alters and, in fact, often reinforces

the power of the other. As part of her feminist genealogy, O'Faolain demonstrates that while Radegunda appears to rebel against the patriarchal system she nevertheless follows the medieval monastic tradition alluded to by Gráinne in *No Country* (155). She despises her own body as a receptacle of filth. In this particular circumstance, Fortunatus may condemn the repressive nature of the Church, but he also clearly *gets off* on the idea of sublimation. Similarly, the twentieth-century Catholic Church's contradictory position that arbitrarily distinguished between good and bad forms of hunger striking (Sweeney 431) indicates, as Barthes has shown, the ways in which myth itself co-opts political acts for ideological purposes. Consider Sweeney's conclusion: "Ireland possessed a rich ascetic tradition that encouraged deprivation and suffering and [...] the severity of this ascetic practice in the Celtic period *found expression in* Irish Catholicism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (435; emphasis added). An act that may have been an archaic or pagan practice could gain new prominence in religious ideology; an act that was ultimately rejected by the Catholic Church could gain new prominence in political ideology. But it is crucial to remember Barthes's distinction between politics and ideology: the former indicates the construction of a world by those living and working in it, while the latter indicates the rhetorical mystification of that world through ideal images and universalist principles (Barthes 143). In the context of Ireland in the early twentieth century, the myth of the hunger striker was employed as a means to construct an ideal image of Irishness, and this identity politics was to remain a dominant force in Republican ideology up until the most recent Troubles that erupted during civil rights marches in the late 1960s.

But it is crucial to remember Barthes's distinction between politics and ideology.

The difficulty in determining a political act, at least in Barthes's terms, lies in the fact that a practice must always *find expression in* some other language, that is, in a representation. One language co-opts a part, or all, of another language. We discover that the seemingly political acts of Radegunda and Maggy are actually part of the "foundationalist fable" (Butler 5), which has predetermined feminine roles and then disseminated them through the institutions of Church and State. As I argued in my opening remarks, O'Faolain explores this figuration of femininity as part of a transgenerational transmission of myths. Indeed, what Weekes says of *No Country for Young Men* may equally apply to her stories: "O'Faolain uncovers a destructive pattern that, despite its inevitable trail of personal and political disaster, persists through myth and history into the present time" ("Diarmuid and Gráinne Again" 90). Agnes is brought up to believe in the sanctity of bodily sacrifice; as the embarrassing scene with

the dough sculpture reveals, she has the naiveté of a child. The trio of girls comprising Maggy, Rosheen, and Dizzy are clearly inheritors of this mythic assemblage, and they are encouraged by the adult women (nuns) and men (priests, Republicans) to embrace these martyr roles.

As I argued in my brief debate with Rooks-Hughes and her Kristevan reading of *Women in the Wall*, O'Faolain's depiction of repressive religious institutions in pre-modern Europe serves the purpose of a "subversive repetition," which is evident in the eroticization of convent rituals and in Agnes's own erotic encounter with Fortunatus. Subversion and remetaphorization are at work in the little turns of phrase where Agnes asserts her Ego—despite her best efforts to suppress such an act. One additional passage that deserves brief mention reinforces Agnes's departure from the saintly path that Radegunda travels. (Again, such an argument could not really be made about the Agnes of *Women in the Wall*, but I am concerned with the short story here.) After reprimanding her old nurse Fridovigia for accidentally toppling a pile of embroidered sacred cloths onto the ground, Agnes reflects that her "mind and temperament felt like one of the hair shirts which Radegunda wore constantly next her skin. Agnes seemed to have an internal one: all the parts of her sensibility rubbed abrasively against each other" (56).

In this brilliantly comic reduction of saintly self-abnegation, O'Faolain suggests that what is presented to the public as selfless piety is, in Agnes's case, an annoying ritual. As the language suggests, if Agnes is a martyr, she is an *irritated* one. On the other hand, there is something both grotesque and pathetic in the images of Radegunda's self-mortification; while these descriptions do not come first hand, they nevertheless serve the purpose of critiquing the detrimental effects of mythologized martyrdom. Maggy's similarly grotesque rituals of self-deprivation are perhaps more powerful as they are performed by a woman who is squeezed between both politics and religion; unlike Radegunda, Maggy is imprisoned for a criminal act and held against her will. This important difference serves to offer a further critique of the older tradition of religious martyrdom, especially as it is naively accepted by Radegunda and, for a time, by Agnes. Even *eating* is not such an obviously rejuvenating ritual when Maggy discovers that her consumption of food will be a victory for the British "screws" who likely feel guilty about her starvation. For this reason—for the reason that so much food appears throughout the story and yet no morsel is ever consumed—"Daughters of Passion" remains one of O'Faolain's most complex explorations of religious and political fasting.

"Daughters of Passion" may be interpreted here as an extension of the critique of myth begun in "This is My Body." After all, the cell is revealed to be more "porous" than it originally appeared. Myth does not hide Radegunda's, Agnes's, and Maggy's starvation, nor does it suppress their bodies or voices: it puts these gestures in its service; it incorporates them and gives them a new meaning. Moreover, as Cornell stresses,

> [T]he inability to simply escape our genderized context explains why the role of myth in feminist theory is essential to the reclaiming, and retelling, of "herstory" through the mimetic writing that specifies the feminine. I am [...] emphasizing the word "myth" deliberately, to emphasize the hold that myths of Woman and the feminine have over both individuals and cultures. (*Beyond Accommodation* 172)

Myth-making involves the superimposition of one narrative over another. A myth never dies; it has always existed in the sense that its raw materials are composed of language which it keeps in cold storage. Names may be "language-objects," as Barthes describes, but in the "second-order" system of myth they assume a new form. "Herstory," a feminist pun favoured by Irigaray, Hélene Cixous, and others, is discovered in an abbess's re-interpretation of Holy Scripture: "This is my body," to be caressed and pleasured, not to be sacrificed for an arid ideal. "Herstory" is also discovered in a twentieth-century convent student's conversion of Holy Communion into a sensual feast of the *mind*. These women, once starving, discover that their hunger is a sauce for the Catholic Church and the IRA, even as it also serves to satisfy the British authorities who believe that "the system didn't change just because some little Irish terrorist wouldn't eat her dinner" ("Daughters of Passion" 41). The "system" changes nevertheless since Maggy is, like a number of O'Faolain's female protagonists, a "source of disorder," "related to that aspect of the country that resists control" (Weekes, "Diarmuid and Gráinne Again" 91). For hunger, Maggy's best and last strategy, cannot be fully eliminated but only temporarily held at bay. Finally, hunger is the nourishment that allows Agnes and Maggy to search for the images of themselves "already deposited in history" (Irigaray 10) and to "eat" in remembrance of them.

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