

# Confessing Ireland: Gerald Griffin and the Secret of Emancipation

*There is only one state of perfect confidence on earth—it is that which exists between a Catholic penitent and his confessor. Here alone there is no reserve—here alone the heart is truly laid bare—and the soul exposed in its true colours. The confidence of the most intimate friendship must still have some reserve and . . . a degree of secrecy.*

GERALD GRIFFIN, COMMON PLACE BOOK A<sup>1</sup>

IN 1825, while Gerald Griffin was in London writing his *Tales of the Munster Festivals* (1827), a Parliamentary select committee was compiling evidence for an exhaustive report on the state of Ireland. Among the witnesses questioned were a host of Catholic priests, whose testimonies were directed repeatedly to the practice of confession among Irish Catholics, and in particular to the secrecy at the heart of that ritual. With its claims to divine authority and its inviolable secrecy, confession seemed to offer in distilled form everything that was problematic about Britain's new "step-daughter" in Union.<sup>2</sup> Here was a shadowy corner of Irish life beyond the reach of progressive reformers, sealed off from the eyes and ears of Dublin Castle,

1. Unpublished ms. assembled by Griffin, c. 1829, quoted in John Cronin, *Gerald Griffin: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), 95. Griffin kept several notebooks after becoming a Christian Brother, only one of which remains. See Cronin, "Gerald Griffin's Commonplace Book A," *Éire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 4:3 (1969): 22–37, and Cronin, *Biography*, 16–36. For further biographical detail, see Daniel Griffin, *The Life of Gerald Griffin, Esq.* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1843), and Ethel Mannin, *Two Studies in Integrity: Gerald Griffin and the Rev. Francis Mahony* (London: Jarrolds, 1954).

2. Griffin refers in his tale "The Brown Man" to Ireland as England's "sister (or rather step-daughter) island," suggesting a dependent and, judging by the fate of step-children in his tales, dangerous relationship. *Holland Tide, or Munster Popular Tales* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1827), 292.

offering an alternative courtroom of judgment, punishment, and pardon. Here, it was believed, Catholic ritual and Irish rebellion formed a dangerous combination. From the muttered sins of the faithful, confessors might enjoy unlimited access to plots against the state. For some landlords, Catholic priests were “secret enemies of the government,” absolving rebels from violent sins and breathing never a word of warning to landlords or local authorities.<sup>3</sup>

The report, unsurprisingly, tells us more about certain Protestant gothic fantasies about Catholic ritual than about the actual Irish practice of confession.<sup>4</sup> Most Irish Catholics failed to make even the minimum yearly requirement of two confessions, and those most involved in agrarian unrest were least likely to participate in the sacrament.<sup>5</sup> The discourse swirling around the seal of the confessional is testimony rather to the anxious years leading up to Catholic Emancipation. The lengthy minutes of evidence, the scores of witnesses questioned, and the excavation of Catholic ritual in this official discourse suggest that the insecure voice was not unique to Irish fiction writers of this period. If Gerald Griffin struggled with how to write down the troubled matter of Irish identity, so too did Westminster. The report forms part of an ongoing enquiry—literary and political—into the possibility of normality in what Seamus Deane has described as the “dark, phantasmagoric unreality” of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> This fixation on the confessional is part of the attempt after the Union to transform Ireland with the light of reason and reform, to make the Irish fit for emancipation. For the sectarian state, a country of ritualized secrecy

3. *Report from the Select Committee on the State of Ireland*, p. 29, H.C. 1825 (129), viii, 1. For further instances of official anxiety over the Catholic confessional, see Michael McDonagh, *The Viceroy's Post-Bag: Correspondence, Hitherto Unpublished of the Earl of Hardwicke, First Lord Lieutenant of Ireland after the Union* (London: John Murray, 1904).

4. Emmet Larkin describes the actual practice of confession during this period as infrequent and far from sealed. The sacrament was offered during stations, in private homes, not in confessionals in churches or chapels. The lack of privacy meant that penitents could often be overheard. See Larkin, *The Pastoral Role of the Roman Catholic Church in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1750–1850* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006), 201–3.

5. See S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland 1780–1845* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1982), 122–23.

6. Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), 62. Deane expands this idea in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

is a country enslaved to rebellious and superstitious ways. Only an Ireland unsealed will ever be free, for emancipation and secrecy are opposing values.

Gerald Griffin's literary project is often read as forming part of the cultural wing of the political campaign for Emancipation, his novels an attempt to demonstrate Catholic respectability—not least in their lavish style and plush layers of deference to English readers. The product of a Catholic middle-class family, Griffin is keen to present his Catholic protagonists as calm, rational, honest, and upright. As Deane has pointed out, Griffin attempts to emancipate his characters from Ireland's murky past in order to make them ready for participation in the modern political world. Kyrle Daly, the composed Catholic hero of *The Collegians*, preaches that memory serves only to make us weak and effeminate, calling his equally bloodless bride Anne Chute to look only towards the future. Like much of Griffin's writing, this novel reads like a guidebook to Emancipation: a suitable subtitle might be "The Several Habits of Highly Acceptable Papists." Critics of Griffin have focused on this schizophrenic spectacle, this attempt, in John Cronin's words, to wed "a grand pseudo-Augustan style" to a "homey peasant discourse." Divided between dazzling London and defending Ireland, between waxing cosmopolitan and going native, Griffin ends up with, in Cronin's view, a "peculiar, penetrating, bifocal vision."<sup>7</sup>

The hidden Ireland and the emancipated Ireland are thus frequently understood to be conflicting forces in the Limerick writer's fiction, and his inability to resolve that tension—his unsuccessful abandonment of the former in favor of the latter—seen as an artistic failure.<sup>8</sup> But more recently, Emer Nolan has re-examined such contradictions at work in Griffin, arguing that his effort to combine a "folklorist impulse" with an "attempt to emulate the progressivist individualist forms of the English realist novel" might be understood as articulat-

7. Ibid.

8. In "Murder as Metaphor: Griffin's Portrayal of Ireland in the Year of Catholic Emancipation," Tom Dunne sees Griffin as writing the "dark underside of the Catholic mind," failing to "radiate the self-confidence, or the Catholic nationalism, of much of the campaign rhetoric." In *Ireland and Irish-Australia: Studies in Cultural and Political History*, ed. Oliver MacDonagh and W.F. Mandle (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 64.

ing “the strains involved in identity formation.”<sup>9</sup> Claire Connolly, too, has unearthed the persistent presence of folklore and superstition in Griffin’s tales. Her recent study of the Irish novel demonstrates how his writing attempts to “restrain” these elements of popular culture for an English readership, resulting in a kind of psychic splitting or doubleness.<sup>10</sup> The dusky matter of Ireland that Griffin wants to dispel, the secrets he hopes will disappear to make way for a new and improved nation, are the very elements that vitalize his fiction.

In Griffin’s short gothic tale “The Brown Man,” Nora Guare’s shadow, sensing danger, rises “slowly from the ground, and . . . walk[s] rapidly off,” abandoning its flesh-and-blood owner.<sup>11</sup> The young bride dies at the hands of her vampire-husband, while her shadow lives on. Griffin is fascinated by the autonomy and persistence of the shadow, by the hidden places that offer an alternative existence, by the secrets that might save us. Against the perceived liberal reformist values of his project stand such shadows—characters like the eavesdropping priest in “Card Drawing”—who urge us “[not to] imagine that open-heartedness is a virtue.”<sup>12</sup> Like the penitent in confession, Griffin’s novels and tales understand the emancipatory power of the secret. Far from being simply a cultural wing of the political campaign for Catholic Emancipation, his writing suggests that freedom and identity might also emerge through those darker places.

In his preface to *The Christian Physiologist* (1830), Griffin argues that changes in human history “cannot be made by the discovery of new truths” or by pursuing “new facts and systems” but by “being guided by the secret history of [our] own mind[s].”<sup>13</sup> He explores this counter-Enlightenment statement in a fiction that is fascinated by the connections between human transformation and secrecy. His comments on confession that begin this article hint at the peculiar contradiction in his work, in which secrecy leads to emancipation.

9. Emer Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 48–51.

10. Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169–73.

11. Griffin, *Holland Tide*, 302–3.

12. Gerald Griffin, *Tales of the Munster Festivals*, 3 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1827), 1:71.

13. Gerald Griffin, *The Christian Physiologist* (London: Edward Bull, 1830), vi–vii.

The confessional is a space so secret that it allows an authenticity unavailable in daily life; the darkness of the screened closet paradoxically affords a kind of illumination. Only in a space so secret that one becomes anonymous can one be free. Like those secret societies that offered members a new identity through masks and obfuscation, the confessional allows a transformation of the self through concealment. As Sissela Bok has argued, confession, through its ritualized secrecy, can be “a means for transforming one’s life” and “a chance to re-create oneself.”<sup>14</sup> Emer Nolan suggests that Thomas Moore’s transhistorical, communal figure of Captain Rock offers an alternative to the individualist self.<sup>15</sup> A similar case might be made about the energies of Gerald Griffin’s fiction, which comprehends the power of the ritualized, secret self. His novels and tales offer, between the lines, an Irish Catholic identity at odds with the progressive, reformed, Protestantized self that inhabits their surfaces.

In a letter to his confidant Lydia Fisher, Griffin makes the following confession: “I don’t know how you manage to keep what you don’t like to say . . . from slipping out upon your paper unawares. It is only when I have got a terrible thing half written that it hits me in the face.” The same letter is punctuated with scratched out words on matters Griffin had promised to remain “altogether silent,” with the comment, “You may see by what I have scratched out, how nearly I had broken my word.”<sup>16</sup> His fiction, I want to argue, contains similar instances of this “half-writing”—of what he doesn’t like to say slipping out onto his paper. In her recent study Connolly insists that “religion is at once a hidden and all too visible aspect of Irish fiction” and that early nineteenth-century Irish novels often contain a certain silence or hesitance over religion. “This does not mean religion is nowhere to be found,” she argues, “rather that certain narrative monoeuvres found in fiction of the period can be read as evasive or diversionary.”<sup>17</sup> Griffin’s own comments on confession in the epigraph might offer one way of interpreting the narrative strategies at work in his fiction. Following Connolly’s lead, this essay does not

14. Sissela Bok, *Secrecy: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 50–51, 76.

15. Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations*, 51.

16. Griffin, *Life*, 265–66.

17. Connolly, *Cultural History*, 127, 143.

suggest that Griffin offers a *literal* treatment of confession. Indeed, the practice is not described in any of his novels or tales. Rather, reading Griffin in light of his own comment on sacramental secrecy might reveal that the secret Ireland of the past and the saved Ireland of the future are perhaps not so far apart in his literary project. In the end, his writing is not so much the voice of the amnesiac Kyrle Daly, but one insistent that, as he writes elsewhere, “we are, and must always be, created and dependent beings.”<sup>18</sup>

Griffin’s *Tales of the Munster Festivals* asserts this idea of dependency and mediation in its very form: presented in the preface as the product of an oral tradition, the cycle of stories is linked to the feasts of the liturgical calendar. The tales themselves are steeped in genealogy and family histories, in which secrets and sins are passed on to children and grandchildren just as surely as physical features. What parents leave to their children are not tangible tracts of land or palpable possessions, but rather the psychological negations, linguistic gaps, and silent tombs of secrecy.<sup>19</sup> Griffin’s fictional world recognizes the power and presence of original sin, whereby the family and the hearth become twisted by inherited secrets and crimes into sites of gothic horror: “parents . . . handed down to their poor descendants that load of deformity and disease which they had brought upon themselves by their criminal excesses.”<sup>20</sup>

Worse than the load of deformity and disease that we inherit, however, is any attempt to deny or cast off that legacy. Griffin’s autobiographical comments identify his deepest sin with a rejection of dependence: during a period of “self-formed conscience,” he writes, “I thought, and walked, and conversed, and moved among men, as if I were something superior to them all.”<sup>21</sup> And his tales often begin with an aerial view of a place and its natural surroundings, focusing then on a throng of people, with the effect of diminishing the significance

18. Gerald Griffin, *Reasons for My Faith* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, 1934), 16.

19. See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) for a psychoanalytic account of the way in which secrets are passed down through family lines.

20. Gerald Griffin, *The Christian Physiologist*, 7.

21. Griffin, *Reasons*, 15.

of the individual.<sup>22</sup> When the narrative begins to present an individual character, it is usually within the context of a family history. The narrator of “The Aylmers of Bally-Aylmer” tells us that he will give an account of young William Aylmer, but he insists, “in order to do this the more fully and satisfactorily, I shall begin by telling who his father was.”<sup>23</sup> The magistrate in *Tracy’s Ambition* alerts Abel Tracy to the lethal legacy bequeathed to his tenant Shanahan with the warning, “You would tremble . . . if you knew the circumstances of this man’s story, or rather of his father’s story.”<sup>24</sup> Here, father and son become almost interchangeable, merging into a single history. For Griffin, secrets become an instrument of dependence and familial bonds rather than a means of solitude or privacy. Secret histories become a way for him to explore family relationships and the dependent, created nature of human beings.<sup>25</sup>

#### TRACY’S AMBITION: SILENCE AND POWER

*Tracy’s Ambition* (1830) explores these conflicting tendencies in Griffin between modernizing and memory, between forging a new identity and remembering the past. Abel Tracy, a Protestant land agent, enjoys popularity among his tenants, in part, as he tells us in this (rare, for Griffin) first-person narrative, because of the influence of his Catholic wife, Mary Regan. But a “secret ambition” in Tracy leads him to befriend Dalton, a corrupt local magistrate full of empty promises and a deep hatred of the Irish tenant class. When Dalton offers him a position patrolling the countryside, Tracy expresses an

22. See, for example, *The Half-Sir*, which begins with a procession of Wrenboys; *Tracy’s Ambition* opens with a throng on a hillside after the races; *The Collegians* begins with a panoramic view of Limerick and the communal festivities of Garryowen.

23. Griffin, *Holland Tide*, 20.

24. Gerald Griffin, *The Rivals. Tracy’s Ambition*, 3 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1830): 1:190.

25. Julian Moynahan, however, argues that Griffin overwhelmingly asserts the solitary nature of human beings, born out of his experience of parents who abandoned him when they emigrated to America. See “Gerald Griffin and Charles Dickens,” in *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*, ed. Zach-Wolfgang and Kosok Heinz, 2 vols. (Tubingen: Narr, 1987), 2:173–80. Cronin asserts that Griffin has an “absolute conviction of the essentially solitary nature of the human condition.” *Biography*, 97. But a consideration of his fiction’s many invocations of dependence and connection, both in its form and content, complicates this reading.

anxiety that it might jeopardize his affectionate relationship with his tenants. But Dalton insists:

“If you choose to retain an ideal popularity among a set of ruffians who would cut your throat or shoot you from behind a hedge after they have fawned and flattered you, rather than secure your family in affluence, and place yourself above the reach of their malice, why, I have not another word to say . . . I . . . neither love nor fear the people. I make no secret of it. . . . They are a disgusting horde, from first to last. I enquire not into causes and effects! . . . I look not into historical influence; I speak of the men as I find them, and act by them as such. I hate the people . . . as heartily as they hate me.”<sup>26</sup>

Dalton encourages Tracy to emulate his brutal creed to accomplish his ambition. To leap to a higher station means, for Dalton, placing oneself “above the reach” of the people and their history.

Standing against the magistrate and his anti-history are the Shanahans, a tenant family whose identity is bound up with family secrets and past crimes. Young Shanahan is the “child of a parricide,” one of twin sons born to parents who burned his grandfather alive in the cottage hearth. The grandson “inherits the gloomy spirit which his parent’s act originated” and becomes “a handmaiden of Captain Rock,” a member of an agrarian secret society. (His murderous father, meanwhile, roams the wild mountainsides in crazed guilt, choosing service in the British Army as his penance.) Tracy is agitated by the Shanahans, who represent everything he is attempting to shake off in his quest to attain Dalton’s self-deluded status. But even Dalton himself, who is responsible for the death of Shanahan’s twin brother, is ruffled by the family’s threats. The surviving twin’s menacing words defy the magistrate’s claims of existing above popular malice: “Look to yourself,” the Rockite threatens Dalton, “If I am to start up through the floor, or come in through some stone wall to you, I will be with you when you’re last thinkin’ o’ me.” And Shanahan’s mother warns Tracy, “You can’t shtrike a bush in the country from this day, but a friend of Shanahan will start from it against you.” Both comments suggest the inescapable reality of the secretive people Dalton and Tracy would try to deny—and their invisible power. “Though

26. Griffin, *Tracy’s Ambition*, 1:203.



I'm weak," Old Mrs. Shanahan warns Tracy, "I have strong friends, and they have you marked."<sup>27</sup>

Tracy fails to recognize this secrecy as a source of power in his drive for recognition by the official authority of the state. "I took it for granted," he says of his wife, "that she felt nothing more than she expressed." His inability to read his wife's silence is to some extent repeated in his bewilderment in the face of his increasingly reticent tenants:

My train of hereditary dependents disappeared at the sight of the Police, as fairies do at the sight of a priest, and began to look at their old master as an altered man. My tenants became more reserved and more respectful; and when I walked into the fields, to superintend my workmen, I perceived that the conversation was hushed, or the subject changed on my approach . . . They heard me now in silence, with dark and solemn countenances, and without any sympathy either of dissent or acquiescence.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage Tracy begins to recognize the power invested in silence, leading him to comment later that "the dreaded regions of the North, which give birth to those black tempests that fill the rest of the world with confusion, are themselves wrapt in an everlasting stillness and repose." The man who taught his daughter "to consider concealment as the most shameful of all offences" learns something from his tenants about the vitality and virtue of secrecy.<sup>29</sup> Tracy's own concealment allows him to discover the truth about Dalton when, like one of his own Rockite tenants, he pursues the magistrate in disguise and plots his murder.

"When you tell one story," Tracy's tenant Moran advises him, "don't forget the other." And the novel itself is in one sense a refusal to let Tracy forget the Ireland he is attempting to leave behind in his great leap upward and onward. His ambition becomes his tuition, as Shanahan himself reads the Irish landscape to him, narrating its subterranean histories, its invisible connections, its secret genealogies, its linked lives, and cycles of violence. As the unlikely pair views a neat and efficient farm, Shanahan insists that the scene before them is not merely the fruit of industry:

27. Griffin, *Tracy's Ambition*, 211.

28. *Ibid.*, 254.

29. *Ibid.*, 199.

“The man that own that house is a Palentin an’ a Protestant, he has his ground for five shillings an acre, on a long lase; he has a kind landlord over him, that will never distress him for a small arrear, he isn’t like a poor Catholic that has a mud cabin, an acre o’ pratie ground, an’ seven landlords above him, an’ that has no feeling nor kindness to look for, when times run hard, and poverty strikes him between the could walls. An’ with submission to you, sir, that’s the very thing that causes all the drinkin’ and the fighting.”<sup>30</sup>

Dalton and Tracy both fail to see that, in Moran’s words, “a man’s life is not in his own hands.” Tracy’s ambition to become a new creation and Dalton’s attempt to live a life untainted by those below him end in disaster. Tracy’s wife is murdered by his tenants; Dalton’s affable son Henry is murdered by Shanahan in revenge for his dead twin. The stupefied magistrate, still insistent on his “I take men as I find them” refrain, can only respond with, “What did *he* ever do to you?” The past and the people Tracy and Dalton try to forget remember them, and Dalton’s discourse about the individual is ill equipped to explain the communal system around him. In the end, Tracy is saved from ruin not by his self-made schemes, but by his dead wife’s long lost brother Ulick, a mysterious figure haunting the margins of the novel.

#### ***THE HALF-SIR: SECRECY AND TRANSFORMATION***

*The Half-Sir* (1827), a further exploration of self-transformation, focuses on Eugene Hammond, who is trapped between social stations. Cursed by a low birth but made wealthy by a tobacco-king uncle, he is one of the half-breeds of Ireland: “disowned by the class to which [he] would aspire, and disliked by that which [he has] deserted.”<sup>31</sup> Hammond lives in “the bitterness of dependance” on the uncle whose money has given him a big house but no home. “What’s he but a bit of a half-sir?” the tenants mock: “A man that’s got no blood in him . . . A made man—not a born gentleman”; “Betuxt and betune, as you may say.”<sup>32</sup> After failed attempts to “naturalize” himself among the ranks of the upper classes, Hammond curses “the original sin of his low birth” as “a wall . . . which, I cannot overleap.”<sup>33</sup> The loss of his fiancé Emily

30. *Ibid.*, 168–69.

31. Griffin, *Tales*, I:235–36.

32. *Ibid.*, 201–2.

33. *Ibid.*, 270, 286, 288.

Bury when she insults his humble pedigree convinces him to leave “a land which was, and was not, his home.” After a period of self-imposed exile, during which he embraces his “vulgar station” and accepts his “dependence as [his] fate,” he returns to Ireland determined to save his country from the rages of famine and fever. The rest of the novel follows Emily’s “stratagem” of “dissimulation” to win Hammond back. Disguised as “Miss O’Brien,” she nurses the fevered Hammond back to health, while sharing with him the story of losing the man she loved by scorning his low birth. The embittered patient chides his nurse:

“Taunt him with his lowliness—with the station of life in which the might Lord of life and nature had placed him? Did you tax that poor being with the will of Providence? Why do you not chide the wren that it cannot outsoar the eagle, or those dwarfish shrubs before us, that they do not uplift their boughs above that pine or oak?”<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, this is not the first invocation of the wren in *The Half-Sir*, which opens with a procession of Wrenboys outside Hammond’s window on St. Stephen’s Day, drunkenly singing:

*The wren! The wren! The king of all birds,  
St. Stephen’s day was caught in the furze;  
Although he’s little, his family’s great.*<sup>35</sup>

The miserly Hammond refuses to join in the custom of receiving the boys on their Christmas call, asking, “What . . . have I to do with Saint Stephen?” And his servant Remmy O’Lane answers him, explaining the ritual and the fable of the wren:

“Nothen, sure, sir, only this being his day, whin all the boys o’ the place go about that way, with the wran, the king of all birds, sir, as they say, (bekays wanst when all the birds wanted to choose a king, and they said they’d have the bird that would fly highest, and the aigle flew higher than any of ’em, till at last whin he couldn’t fly an inch higher, a little rogue of a wran that was a-hide under his wing, took a fly above him a piece and was crowned king of the aigle an’ all, sir), tied in the middle o’ the holly that way, you see, sir, by the leg, that is. And old custom, sir.”<sup>36</sup>

34. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

35. *Ibid.*, 198.

36. *Ibid.*, 222–23.

The wren, tucking itself inside the wing of the eagle, defies its place in the pecking order through cunning and roguery. Significantly Griffin includes this image of the wren in a novel about the possibility or impossibility of leaping beyond one's assigned station. Indeed, the parenthesized passage, "tucking itself into" the paragraph, relates the legend as a whole in condensed form. In this distillation of the folk tale, we learn that this smallest of birds outwits nature, outdoes the powerful eagle by placing himself "a-hide under his wing." And the Wrenboys, who have associations in Griffin's Ireland with agrarian secret societies like the Whiteboys, similarly hide behind ritual masks and costumes to express the strength of the tenant community, those weakest and smallest in the traditional order of things.<sup>37</sup> In the chant of the Wrenboys—"Although he's little, his family's great"—we hear echoes of old Widow Shanahan's Rockite warning to Abel Tracy: "though I'm weak, I have strong friends." And Griffin more than hints at the connection between Wrenboy and Whiteboy, between St. Stephen's Day and Rockite rituals, in his choice of a rather violent analogy to describe the traditional route of the Christmas pageant: "the little rustic procession turned aside into a decent avenue, which led [to Hammond's house] in the antique fashion (that is to say, by a line so direct, that if your rested a musket on the lock of the gate, you could put a bullet in the very centre panel of the hall door)." Griffin's frequent use of parentheses to tuck in such ethnographic and linguistic details is a significant narrative maneuver, carefully secreting violent material. He again quietly highlights this connection between secret terror and communal festival when in the conclusion to *Holland Tide* he writes, "the horn of the Whiteboy, or the yell of the more ferocious Rockite, has . . . warned the inhabitants to prepare for 'other than dancing measures.'"<sup>38</sup>

37. See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993), 147–49; and Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) for connections between communal pageants and agrarian unrest. Also see William Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions* (Dublin: J. McGlashan, 1852) and Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983).

38. See Luke Gibbons, "Between Captain Rock and a Hard Place: Art and Agrarian Insurgency," in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tadhg Foley and Sean Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts, 1998), 23–44.

Hiding or being masked allows for anonymity, strengthening the group even as it diminishes the individual. Both Wrenboy and Whiteboy might find themselves less inhibited by the landlord if they confront him in disguise during that carnivalesque “extra-time” when they are ritually entitled to do so. In such ritualized spaces the self is liberated from its assigned identity. The preface to Griffin’s *Tales of the Munster Festivals* describes the extraordinary time that frames the narratives: the pages will offer readers “a series of Tales, each of which shall fix its main action in one of the popular Festivals of the year, or days which are set apart.”<sup>39</sup> Although some critics understand the elements of superstition and folklore to be at odds with Griffin’s larger project of reform and emancipation, these energies are oddly interwoven. In this sense, hiding or losing one’s identity becomes a way of altering one’s relationship to power. The “old custom” celebrated by the Wrenboys marks a kind of reversal of traditional order. If the wren outwits nature, the Wrenboys outwit the traditional order that designates them as small and weak. The repentant and resourceful Emily, too, undoes the past by a cunning disguise. Only by hiding herself can she reveal to Hammond her true remorse and so create the possibility of their reunion. Like *Tracy’s Ambition*, *The Half-Sir* consecrates silence and secrecy as locations of power. Griffin’s own later retreat into monastic life is perhaps an interesting biographical counterpart to his fiction.<sup>40</sup>

### THE COLLEGIANS: HIDE AND SPEAK

None of Griffin’s narratives is as complete an exploration of secrecy, perhaps, as *The Collegians* (1829), in which the young bride Eily O’Connor is hidden away by her husband Hardress Cregan and, when he has tired of her, drowned by his boatman Danny Man. “My mother,” remarks Hardress, “is a great secret-hunter.”<sup>41</sup> The novel details the hounding down of his secret crime. “When we came here first,” confesses Mrs. Cregan to her son, “I could perceive that there

39. Griffin, *Tales*, ii.

40. For a detailed look at the origins of the Christian Brothers, see Dáire Keogh, *Edmund Rice and the First Christian Brothers* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).

41. Gerald Griffin, *The Collegians* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1992), 83.

was a secret, although I was far from suspecting its nature.”<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Cregan is a dealer in the currency of secrets; she knows when it is profitable to buy and sell, when to keep a secret, and when to trade it in. She makes it “worth” Anne Chute’s while to disclose her secret love for Hardress. “If I should entrust you with a lady’s secret,” she asks her son, “do you think you know how to venerate it?”<sup>43</sup> In her use of secrets to manipulate others, Mrs. Cregan shares something in common with the parenting styles of several other Griffin characters, not least Fitzmaurice in “The Aylmers of Bally-Aylmer,” who warns his daughter, “how intimately and perfectly your fate must become intertwined with that of him, into whose secret heart you are now about to penetrate.”<sup>44</sup>

It is helpful to consider these parents and children bound together by secrecy in light of the psychoanalytic theory of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, for whom secrets are foundational to the identity of individuals, families, and even nations. Central to their analysis is the understanding that we do not so much carry around our own secrets as we do those of others: “children acquire the father’s or mother’s unconscious, in which are inscribed the parents’ unspoken fears, their apprehensions, the reasons for their enslavement, their hidden faults.”<sup>45</sup> The secret operates as a stranger or “phantom” within us, haunting us, leading “a devastating half-life in us.” We are constituted and colonized, then, by the secrets of others, which take the form not of silence but of obfuscation. The thing that must not be said is yet “precisely a matter of words.”<sup>46</sup> Our language, like the layers produced by the oyster to cover the grit at its center, points to the existence of the secret, even in the act of denying it. As such, language creates “a two-fold and contrary effect—the prohibition of knowledge coupled with an unconscious investigation.”<sup>47</sup> To *secrete*, in other words, is at once to conceal and to create. We have a double desire to hunt down the secret that constitutes us, and to avert our

42. Ibid., 132.

43. Ibid., 130.

44. See, for instance, Gerald Griffin, *Card-Drawing; The Half-Sir; and Suil Dhuv, The Coiner* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1857).

45. Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 180–81.

46. Ibid., 159, 167.

47. Ibid., 188.

eyes, keep the secret buried. Because of this conflicting drive, “the secret . . . designates an internal psychic splitting; as a result two distinct ‘people’ live side by side.”<sup>48</sup>

Griffin’s own comments on his “half-writing” might be relevant to this discussion of psychic splitting, and Hardress Cregan makes an interesting case-study for Abraham and Torok’s theory of secrecy and language. The secret he buries results in a psychic splitting writ large—his schizophrenic marital status, in which by day he courts one woman and by night is already the husband of another. In his attempt to hide the trauma that defines his life, he becomes not silent but linguistically manic, swelling to what the novel describes as “a cascade of eloquence . . . bursting from his lip.”<sup>49</sup> Abraham and Torok read such linguistic symptoms to disinter the buried secret: “We may stop at a signifier if we can determine what it hides, how it hides it, and what drama might be linked to its process of hiding.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, language leaves traces of the secret in its very attempt to hide it. When Eily’s body is found washed up on the river’s edge during a foxhunt, Hardress offers a textbook case of linguistic slippage. Calling his fellow hunters to protect her body from the hounds, he shouts, “Stand close! Stand close, and hide me—*her*, I mean; stand close!”<sup>51</sup> His words, meant to protect the body of his wife, expose instead his own need for concealment.

Hardress’s desire to be hidden deserves attention, for it represents a need central to his character even before he has a secret to conceal. Early in the novel, the reckless collegian is described as the “darling” of the local Irish tenants, owing not only to his “unreasoning” generosity, but to “that natural tenderness which we are apt to feel towards any object that seems to require protection.”<sup>52</sup> They perhaps recognize something familiar in Hardress’s need to be sheltered. And just as the Irish tenant class develops strategies of concealment in response to the scrutinizing gaze of its rulers, so Hardress’s double life is a response to his mother’s watchful, intrusive eyes, which, he

48. *Ibid.*, 100.

49. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 282.

50. Esther Rashkin, “Tools for a New Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: The Work of Abraham and Torok,” *Diacritics* 18:4 (1988): 45.

51. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 226.

52. *Ibid.*, 38.

says, “did not encourage me to a confidence” but rather “repressed it.”<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Cregan herself voices Griffin’s sense that intense scrutiny and forced intimacy breed secrecy rather than openness: “We are an accursed and miserable pair for this world. I in you, and you in me! Most weak and wicked boy! It was the study of my life to win your love and confidence, and my reward has been distrust, concealment and—.”<sup>54</sup> For all her talk of confidence, Mrs. Cregan ends up teaching her son not intimacy but secrecy—or rather that intimacy and secrecy are bound up together.

More than once the novel suggests that Hardress is the creation of his mother’s intense passion and over-indulgence. And we learn that the secret of her intensity is the loss of her other children: “I have a claim independent of my natural right, to your obedience,” she tells her son, “I have no child but you. My other little babes are with their Maker. I have none left but you, and I think I feel my heart yearn towards you with all the love, which, if those angels had not flown from me, would have been divided amongst them.”<sup>55</sup> Hardress has overdosed on his mother’s concentrated affection<sup>56</sup>: “You, my mother! You have been my fellest foe!” he insists; “I drank in pride with your milk.”<sup>57</sup> He is fed not just on pride, but on a diet of secrets from his mother, who passes on to him the art of concealment even as she insists on his confidence. Sissela Bok argues that having a secret “is linked to the understanding that one can exert some control over events—that one need not be entirely transparent . . . or . . . at the mercy of parents who have seemed all-seeing and all-powerful.”<sup>58</sup>

Although she is a skilled secret hunter and makes it “the study of [her] life to win the confidence” of her son, Mrs. Cregan is also defined, as in her broken-off sentence quoted above, by the desire *not* to know his secret. She seeks to discover the “blue chamber” of her son’s heart, but at a certain point in her hounding down of the secret that defines his life, Mrs. Cregan calls off the hunt, averting

53. Ibid., 250.

54. Ibid., 235.

55. Ibid., 131.

56. For a discussion of representations of the dangers of a mother’s love in other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, see Julie Kipp, *Romanticism, Maternity and the Body Politic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

57. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 235.

58. Bok, *Secrecy*, 38.



her eyes from the secret she cannot bear to know: “from the moment on which she arrived at this discovery, she avoided as much as possible all further conversation, on those topics, with her son.”<sup>59</sup> She exemplifies what Abraham and Torok describe as a “prohibition of knowledge” coupled with an “unconscious investigation” at work in the approach to family secrets—or of what Bok calls the tension between “acknowledgement and avoidance.”<sup>60</sup> Both Hardress and his mother stand to lose more than they might gain by unveiling this secret, since to pluck the truth from its hiding place would mean dashing the Cregans from their high social position. Thus mother and son both draw vitality from keeping the secret of Eily just that. Hardress, for example, becomes wildly animated in his concealment of the crime that defines his life; when Eily’s body is found, he “is no longer supported by that hurried energy which he had shown before the revealment of his secret, but helpless, motionless, and desolate, as an exploded mine.”<sup>61</sup> His reaction to the discovery is “to find that all emotion came upon the instant to a dead pause within his breast. . . . It seemed as if the great passion, like an engine embarrassed in its action, had been suddenly struck motionless, even while the impelling principle remained in active force.”<sup>62</sup> And Mrs. Cregan is similarly described as “a fair tower sapped in the foundation” when the secret of Eily is disclosed.<sup>63</sup> A secret, as Mrs. Cregan herself declares, is like the “principle to an intricate and complicated system,” but the end of the secret can also mean the termination of the system it supports.<sup>64</sup>

Abraham and Torok insist that a secret is the means by which others colonize our psyches—that it is analogous to “a foreign body lodged within the subject.” For them, “the world and the psyche are the result of catastrophes whose fragmented remains survive the phenomena they engender.”<sup>65</sup> We are riddled, in other words, with the shrapnel of the secret traumas that created us, traumas sometimes so secret that we are unaware of the extent to which they define us. *The*

59. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 222.

60. Bok, *Secrecy*, 38.

61. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 232.

62. *Ibid.*, 226.

63. *Ibid.*, 251.

64. *Ibid.*, 132.

65. Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, 6.

*Half-Sir* identifies the power of women with “the secret recesses of the female heart” where “hidden feeling . . . does its work so privately, that even they . . . seem almost unconscious of its existence.”<sup>66</sup> If such language represents one of Griffin’s swipes against women, it also articulates his sense that power operates in hidden and silent places, sometimes hidden even from those who possess it. In other words, this foreign body lodged in me is not just a wound, but also a source of life; thus Hardress is most alive when he is concealing the secret of his life. Griffin’s fiction embodies this double-edged nature of the secret—its capacity to nourish and poison, the secret as saving wound.

Finally, Danny Mann speaks that secret that drives the novel. Often dismissed as little more than a collection of melodramatic attributes, Danny is another wounded, broken body, made unnatural, dependent, and bitter by Hardress Cregan. When they were boys, Hardress injured Danny in a fit of rage, leaving him a hunchback. But Danny transforms his injury into a zealous attachment to Hardress; indeed, the boatman’s cringing servility might be read as his way of obfuscating the trauma that defines his life. His hunchback is a physical witness of that trauma and might be read as what Bok describes as the “burden” of the secret. And because he has witnessed Hardress’s “bloody longing” first hand, Danny interprets his master’s words to read the secret they contain—a desire for Eily’s death. He describes the origin of his disfigurement to the magistrate:

“Do you see that mark?” he added, stepping into the light, and raising one shoulder so as to bring the defect in his spine more strikingly into view. “All my days that was my curse. Didn’t they give me a nickname for it, an usen’t some to laugh, and more start and shiver, when I’d come in sight of ‘em. In place of being, as I ought to be, fighting at the fair, drinking at the wake, an’ dancing at the jig-house, there’s the figure I cut all my days! An’ who have I to thank for dat? Mr. Hardress Cregan.”<sup>67</sup>

Danny’s secret rage and resentment become the source of his energy and eloquence; when he confronts Hardress he speaks “with a scorn that made him eloquent beyond himself” and “with an energy beyond

66. Griffin, *Tales*, 306.

67. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 272.

what he had ever shown.”<sup>68</sup> The vitality he discovers in himself is connected to the secret he carries, one belonging not only to him but to his master who has lodged it there. Just as Hardress carries around the secret grief of his mother, Danny is burdened with those of his foster-brother and master. All secrets, Abraham and Torok insist, are shared at the start and point to some original crime: Danny’s confession, his naming of the secret crime, is a naming also of Hardress Cregan.

The novel contains other unsuccessful attempts to deny the power of the secret. Tom Chute, Anne’s stepfather, builds a new wing onto Castle Chute to escape the ghosts that haunt the original fort.<sup>69</sup> His efforts are, in a sense, an architectural version of Hardress Cregan’s attempted erasure of Eily to make way for a respectable marriage with Anne Chute. The ghost of Castle Chute, however, is put to rest not by the construction of a new wing, but only by listening to that ghost’s story. Griffin himself attempts to paper over the ghosts of Ireland’s past with polished English. But his linguistically manic style points precisely to the secret histories that vitalize his fiction—and to what he is trying, perhaps, not to say.

*The Collegians* ends with a reference to the “late memorable election” in Clare, and the novel itself, published in 1829, the year Emancipation was granted, is often read as a fitting fictional counterpart to the O’Connellite campaign.<sup>70</sup> Daniel O’Connell was another witness questioned during the 1824–25 parliamentary enquiry into the state of Ireland discussed above—a politician who well knew the liberating power of the secret. His campaign for Catholic Emancipation is, in fact, a good example of the strategic uses of secrecy. The peaceful campaign for civil rights was welcomed by those middle-class Catholics attempting to prove their worthiness for emancipation and embarrassed by the millenarian elements of clandestine agrarian movements.<sup>71</sup> In a letter to John Banim, Griffin describes

68. *Ibid.*, 260–61.

69. *Ibid.*, 17.

70. O’Connell was the defense counsel for John Scanlan, the Limerick man tried and hanged for the murder of Ellen Hanley in 1820 and the figure on whom the character of Hardress Cregan is based. Griffin was present at the trial as a courtroom reporter. See W. MacLysaght and Siggerson Clifford, *The Tragic Story of the Colleen Bawn: The Facts and the Fiction* (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1982).

71. James S. Donnelly, Jr., “Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite Movement of 1821–24,” in *Irish Peasants: Violence and*

O'Connell's influence in Clare during the election he was to soon win: "The people have certainly proved themselves to be a most resolute set of fellows . . . They fill the streets more like a set of Pythagorean philosophers than a mob of Munstermen."<sup>72</sup> But the Liberator's real power sprang precisely from his ability to harness a darker past, for many believed O'Connell to be the fulfillment of Pastorini's prophecy that foretold the apocalyptic end of Protestantism. He was, in Fergus O'Ferrall's view, "conscious of the vast number of Irish Catholics and his ability to make their numbers count in politics."<sup>73</sup> O'Connell's discourse and the street rituals enacted during his campaign contain this unruly energy.<sup>74</sup> He condemns secret societies like the Whiteboys and Rockites, but is also their members' best defender in court. For Mary Helen Thuente, moreover, the popular image of O'Connell was not that of a plainspoken leader but of a cunning trickster, and "the threat of violence was his ultimate trick."<sup>75</sup> And as Thomas Bartlett has argued, what convinced government officials of the need for a change in policy was not the sobriety of the Catholic population or the soundness of O'Connell's arguments, but the specter of a massive popular uprising.<sup>76</sup> O'Connell's strength in London sprang from the solidarity of the Irish tenants behind him and Westminster's fear that he might unleash a mass Catholic rebellion on the scale of 1798. It was, arguably, the mob of Munstermen, not the Pythagorean philosophers, who moved Westminster. Paradoxically, the

*Political Unrest, 1780–1914*, ed. Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 102–39.

72. Gerald Griffin to John Banim, 4 July 1828, quoted in Griffin, *Life*, 242.

73. Fergus O'Ferrall, *Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy, 1820–30* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1985), 5.

74. D. George Boyce, in *Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1990), 45, argues, "O'Connellism could combine extreme agitation with disciplined behavior." See also Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780–1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 71–72.

75. Mary Helen Thuente, "Violence in Pre-Famine Ireland: The Testimony of Irish Folklore and Fiction," *Irish University Review* 15:2 (1985): 145, 147. For connections between Ribbonmen and nationalist movements, see Tom Garvin, "Defenders, Ribbonmen and Others: Underground Political Networks in Pre-Famine Ireland," and M.R. Beames, "The Ribbon Societies: Lower-Class Nationalism in Pre-Famine Ireland," in *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, ed. C.H.E. Philipin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 219–63.

76. Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1992).

newborn Catholic identity of the period—self-confident, politically conscious, and committed to open and non-violent reform—owes its existence to that less respectable parentage of the past.<sup>77</sup>

*The Collegians* ends with the good fortune of Lowry Looby, who “lived long enough to enjoy the honours of a freehold in his native County of Clare” and who, like Kyrle Daly, is rewarded with domestic happiness. As a freeholder, the former servant votes in the Clare election, but that vote, the narrator tells us, is shrouded in secrecy: “His name, I understand, was found upon the poll-books at the late memorable election in that county; but on which side of the question he bestowed his voice is more than my utmost industry has enabled me to ascertain.” Looby is described early in the novel as “thoughtful and deliberative; the effect in great measure of habitual penury and dependence.” He is the smiling servant who flatters his betters, and whose “disguise of simpleness” gives him “a wonderful efficacy.”<sup>78</sup> Griffin’s detail concerning Looby’s vote is significant, for it suggests that his success has depended in part on disguise and secrecy. Although officially consecrating the “milk and water” Kyrle Daly as the future of Ireland, the novel, as Emer Nolan has argued, offers Looby as an alternative figure of emancipation. He is the wily Catholic who leaps his station, like the wren, through silence and cunning. Griffin closes by asking readers to examine their “own heart[s]” and see if they “hide nothing.” Such an invitation echoes the examination of conscience that is the first step to confession—the ritualized space that, like Griffin’s fiction itself, uses secrecy with a wonderful efficacy.

77. After 1824, argues Donnelly, the O’Connellite campaign took hold at the grass roots level, and “energies previously channeled into a great clandestine movement . . . now came to be funneled into an open, non-violent campaign for civil rights,” in Clark and Donnelly, *Irish Peasants*, 135. A fitting image of this duality is to be found in Griffin’s description of the Daly middle-class Catholic home, a model of education and enlightenment values, but where above the library hangs “a gun rack, on which were suspended a long shore gun, a blunderbuss, a cutlass, and a case of horse pistols,” *The Collegians*, 11–12.

78. Griffin, *The Collegians*, 19.

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