CHAPTER 5

Ritualized Silence and Secret Selves: The Seal of the Confessional in Nineteenth Century Ireland

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Abstract

Catholic clerical abuse scandals in Ireland have recently sparked animated media discussion over the secrecy at the heart of the Catholic sacrament of confession. The arguments strikingly reproduce debates in the 1820s, when the British State sought access to this most secret of spaces in modern Irish history. The fixation on the confessional is part of the attempt after the Act of Union to transform Ireland from silence and superstition to transparency and reason. A close examination of works by Gerald Griffin and the Banim brothers, John and Michael, in the 1820s/1830s, suggests that freedom and identity are not inimical to secrecy and silence, but intimately related. The confessional becomes the emblem of this paradox, whereby a space that is most secret is seen to enable a transformation of the self. This problematic fiction comprehends the power of a ritualized, secret self. In this aspect, the novels of Griffin and the Banims stand at odds with the progressive, Reformed selves in their surface narratives.

There are no secrets in the world today, except those of the confessional, and the States of the world will soon endeavor to penetrate even these.

Canon Sheehan, The Graves at Kilmorna (1915)

Recent reports into clerical child abuse in Ireland have sparked animated media debates over the Catholic sacrament of confession, and in particular the silence and secrecy at the heart of that ritual. In 2011, the Irish government outlined legislation that would impose a five-year prison sentence on priests who failed to report cases of child sexual abuse, even if revealed in confession. Church officials were quick to denounce the law, arguing that “the sacramental seal is infinitely more likely to be an ally than an enemy of child safety,” and that they had no intention of complying with the state (Hayden: 19). “Ireland can pass whatever law it wants,” pronounced the Regent of the...
Apostolic Penitentiary dismissively, Archbishop Gianfranco, “but it must know that the Church will never submit to forcing confessors to inform civil officials” (“Vatican”: 1). Primate of Ireland Cardinal Sean Brady added that “the inviolability of the seal of confession is [...] fundamental to the very nature of the Sacrament” (“Cardinal”: 4). Meanwhile, the government insisted that “everybody is under an obligation to report [such abuse]” (White). In another instance of the past revisiting the Irish present, the form of this debate strikingly reproduces the discourse swirling around the confessional in the early nineteenth century, when the British state also sought access to this most secret of Irish spaces. With its claims to divine authority and its inviolable secrecy, confession seemed to present “the Irish Problem” in distilled form. Here was a shadowy corner of Irish life beyond the reach of progressive reformers, sealed off from the eyes and ears of Dublin Castle. Here, it was believed, Catholic ritual and Irish rebellion formed a dangerous combination. This fixation on the confessional is part of the attempt after the Act of 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 silence is a country enslaved to rebellious and superstitious ways. Only an Ireland unsealed will ever be free, for emancipation and secrecy are understood to be opposing values.

The literary fiction of the 1820s and 1830s is often read as forming part of the cultural wing of the political campaign for Catholic Emancipation, an attempt to demonstrate Catholic respectability and transparency, and at the same time offer outside readers an insider’s perspective on Ireland. As David Lloyd has pointed out, the inventors of the Irish novel are involved in a kind of public relations campaign, managing violent material through fiction, softening scandalous Irish behaviour through narration, lightening a dark and dense landscape through a discourse of reason and openness (Lloyd: 125–62). The hidden Ireland and the emancipated Ireland are thus frequently understood to be conflicting forces in such fiction, and the inability to resolve that tension is seen as an artistic failure (Dunne: 64). Divided between dazzling London and defending Ireland, between waxing cosmopolitan and going native, such writing ends up, in John Cronin’s view, with a “bifocal vision” (Biography: 59). Emer Nolan has recently re-examined the contradictions at work in such writing, arguing that the effort to combine a “folklorist impulse” with an “attempt to emulate the progressivist individualist forms of the English realist novel” might be understood as articulating “the strains involved in identity formation” (Nolan: 48–51). In her study, A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, Claire Connolly has also unearthed the persistence of folklore and superstition in early nineteenth century Irish writing, demonstrating the ways in which it attempts to “restrain” these elements of popular culture for an English readership, resulting in a kind
of psychic splitting or doubleness (Connolly: 169–73). The dusky matter of Ireland that such writers want to dispel, the secrets they hope will disappear to make way for a new and improved nation, are the very elements that vitalise this fiction.

This chapter explores the contradiction at work in the writings of Gerald Griffin and John and Michael Banim, whereby freedom and identity are not inimical to secrecy and silence, but intimately bound up with it. Narrative voices in this fiction keep more secrets than they share, drawing the reader into a world not of transparent objects and knowable subjects, but of deep and dazzling darkness. The confessional might be read as an emblem of this contradiction—only in a space so secret that one becomes anonymous can one be without secrets. Like those secret societies that offered members a new identity through masks and obfuscation, the confessional allows a transformation of the self through concealment. Emer Nolan has argued that Thomas Moore’s transhistorical, communal figure of Captain Rock offers an alternative to the transparent, individualist self (Nolan: 48–51). A similar case might be made about the counter-Enlightenment energies of this problematic fiction, which comprehends the power of the ritualized, secret self. Novels and tales of this period offer, between the lines, an Irish Catholic identity at odds with the progressive, reformed, Protestantised self that inhabits their surfaces.

In 1825, while Gerald Griffin was in London writing his Tales of the Munster Festivals (1827), parliamentary select committees were gathering evidence for an exhaustive Report on the State of Ireland. Among the witnesses questioned were a host of Catholic priests, whose testimonies were directed again and again to the practice of confession among Irish Catholics. The lengthy minutes of evidence, the scores of witnesses questioned, and the excavation of Catholic ritual in this official discourse, is testimony to the anxious years leading up to Catholic Emancipation in 1829. For certain clergy of the Established Church, the confessional was both the emblem and the epicentre of Irish benightedness. This dimly-lit space, they argued, encouraged not only a habit of secrecy among the Irish, but also a very real indifference to the law. Rev John Burnett insists in his testimony that:

[... the confidence of the people in the absolution which follows confession, is such as completely to destroy in their minds any fear of future punishment [...] which I conceived arises solely from the conviction that the absolution enjoyed at the hands of the priest will do everything for them.

REPORT 15 April, 1825
And Rev M. O'Sullivan states the following in his testimony:

The system of auricular confession, renders the obtaining of evidence and discovery of crimes in Ireland, much more difficult. The pain of mind attendant on being the confidant of a guilty secret, is completely removed by having an opportunity of communicating the secret to the priest in confession.

*(Report 27 May, 1825)*

What frustrates authorities is not only the seal of secrecy itself, but the existence of an unofficial authority operating behind it. Earlier, during Robert Emmet's rebellion of 1803, Dublin Castle considered penetrating the seal of the confessional to discover the identities of those plotting against the state. In the words of the Lord Lieutenant, "it is generally understood that the confession to the priest answers every purpose and every duty, and supercedes the necessity of any confession to the Government [...] I cannot help considering it as a question of State" (qtd in McDonagh: 378–79). Like the fairies of Irish folklore, the Catholic confessional gripped the imagination of Protestants on both sides of the Irish Sea, as S. J Connolly has observed (*Priests*: 121).

The questions put to Catholic priests during the parliamentary proceedings reveal a suspicion on the part of the government that the confessional operated as part of the network of rebellion in Ireland. From the muttered sins of the faithful, it was believed, confessors enjoyed unlimited access to plots against the state. For some landlords, Catholic priests were all but honorary members of secret societies, absolving rebels from violent sins, and breathing never a word of warning to landlords or local authorities. These "secret enemies of the government," insists one magistrate in his testimony, are "inducing, as far as ever they can, the people to maintain the present quiet, with a view to future mischief" (*Report* 25 Feb., 1825). One witness suggests that the confessional could become the most effective tool for scrutinising and policing the Irish people, if only it could be harnessed by the state: "it is a medium," argues Burnett, “through which every species of information could be obtained by the priesthood; and any use [...] could be made of the information so received from the people" (*Report* 15 April, 1825). Burnett's comments express the general view informing the proceedings that to break open the seal of the confessional would go some way towards solving the problem of Ireland (Bartlett: 277).

Like much of the discourse on Irish secrecy, that associated with the confessional is one of both allergy and allurement. On the one hand, this closet of superstition and formulaic ritual is renounced as a breeding area for Irish social
ills. On the other, as a zone cordoned off from government jurisdiction—and where British subjects share their secrets—it is invested with an authority and power. The “Irish Question” or “Catholic Question” addressed in this extensive parliamentary report and elsewhere, hinges on the anxiety over an empire within an empire. The confessional of the Established Church, in contrast, as the Archbishop of Dublin points out in his testimony, shares its secret knowledge with the state:

The only doctrine that we have laid down respecting secrecy in confession, in the canons of the church of England and Ireland, as far as I know, is one that requires that in the case of offences, which by the law of the land it is capitally criminal to conceal secrecy shall not be observed.

REPORT 3 May, 1825

He goes on to warn the committee that the Catholic priest, conversely, is “bound to conceal every design communicated to him.” The examination of Rev James Magaurin, titular bishop of Ardagh, articulates the anxieties of the government over the closed confessional:

Are not the parties, who commit a murder, generally known to the priest?—I do not think they are.

Supposing it were said to him in confession, would the priest think it consistent with his duty to divulge any part of a communication which was made to him in confession?—I do not think he would.

[...]

Would he be authorized to give notice to the party whose life might be in danger?—No, I do not think he would; we believe it is of divine institution, and as such inviolable in its secrecy.

REPORT 25 March, 1825

The “question” of Ireland contains, as Foucault points out about the “question” of sexuality, the double sense of interrogation and problematic. The hundreds of pages of testimony in these investigations bespeak a certain pleasure in chasing down the secret of Ireland, drawing it out of the mouths of priests and tenants, magistrates and landlords, and so translating its silence into words. As Joep Leerrsen has argued, Ireland is at once endlessly, anxiously explained, and also exploited as the secret that will never give itself up (Leerrsen: 38). This tension is clear in the testimonies. The confessional hides valuable information that might be put to the state’s use. But it is also a place that operates in
a kind of extra time, beyond either public or political space. The testimony of Rev James Doyle supports this idea:

—I think if the faithful were not fully and entirely satisfied, that the priests could not, under any circumstances, make use of the knowledge which they acquire by confession, the faithful would abstain altogether from frequenting that rite.

*report* 21 April, 1825

In response to a suggestion that priests should take an oath swearing “that they will make known to his Majesty any treason or treasonable designs which they may know to be meditated against him,” Doyle responds as follows:

The secrets communicated in confession are such as we are supposed to become acquainted with as ministers of the sacrament of penance; and in that capacity we do not consider ourselves bound, by the oath of allegiance which we take, to reveal secrets committed to us in that way.

*report* 21 April, 1825

For Doyle, the priest operates in a different time and place when he sits in the confessional. He is, in a sense, not himself, but a minister of a sacrament: not an individual but a representative of the church. This same point was made during a famous case in New York in 1813, when former United Irishman Wil-liam Sampson successfully defended the confidentiality of the confessional, and the right of the priest not to testify against one of his parishioners. During his questioning, Fr Kohlmann explained the case as follows:

Were I summoned to give evidence as a private individual [...] and to testi-fy from those ordinary sources of information from which the witnesses present have derived theirs, I should not for a moment hesitate, and should even deem it a duty of conscience to declare whatever knowledge I might have; [...] But if called upon to testify in quality of a minister of a sacrament, in which my God himself has enjoined on me a perpetual and inviolable secrecy, I must declare to this honorable Court, that I cannot, I must not answer any question that has a bearing upon the restitution in question [...] This obligation of inviolable secrecy [...] naturally flows from the very nature of this sacrament; and is so essentially connected with it, that it cannot subsist without it.

*SAMPSON: 8–10*
While the state places value on the possibility of the broken seal of secrecy, the priest asserts that the value lies in direct proportion to the tightness of the seal. To lose its secrecy, the confessional would lose its very essence and efficacy. In a sense, the State and the Church are literally talking past each other in these reports: from the State’s point of view, confession is a conversation between two individuals, and one that the State would like to overhear; from the Church’s point of view it is a ritual, the parties to which are not two individuals but the penitent and the Church itself.

The truth about Irish confession in this period turns out not to live up to the gothic fantasies of some Protestant clergymen. In fact, most Irish Catholics failed to make even the minimum yearly requirement of two confessions. And those most involved in agrarian unrest were the least likely to enter the confessional. According to a Skibbereen parish priest, questioned by the committee in 1825, persons involved in recent disturbances had been bound by their oath of combination not to attend confession, “first, lest the consciences of those going to confession would be acted upon by the priest; secondly, as it would be altogether useless to them whilst they were in that state” (qtd. in Connolly: 122–23). But those who worried about what went on in the confessional were right to sense that more was at stake than the inner lives of individual Catholics. For all of its secrecy, confession is a communal sacrament, forgiving sinners to welcome them back into full communion with the Church. It is not, in the end, about private contrition or a buried interior life, but about communal ritual and group identity. Its secrecy has less to do with shame than with protecting members of a community from exposure to openness and transparency (Bok: 78).

The fixation on the confessional in these reports is part of the attempt after the Act of Union to transform Ireland with the light of reason and reform. 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 (Short History: 62). What it articulates are the conflicting desires on the part of the government to solve the problem of Ireland, and at the same time to discover that the problem is without a solution. The testimony of Rev James Magaurin expresses something of this double bind:

[Irish Catholics] have a feeling that they are belonging to an excluded caste, and that they are not treated like other subjects; that there is something wrong with them, and they are very anxious to be relieved of this kind of slavery, which they are not able to explain.

Report 25 March, 1825
The perspectives of post-colonial theory are crucial in reading this evidence. Partha Chatterjee, for example, has pointed out that the state desires to normalise the colony but not completely, since its power is founded on that difference (Chatterjee: 21). The confessional is a fitting object of this ambivalent desire to discover the secret of Ireland and yet to preserve it. As a space sealed off from public scrutiny, it offers the State endless opportunities for speculative discourse. And so it becomes invested with paranoid fantasies of the dark unreality of Ireland. The confessional, by its very imperviousness, offers a factor of irreducible otherness. We might read the Report on the State of Ireland as playing both sides of the secret: the same discourse that means to expose the secrets of the confessional also exploits the confessional as the secret that will never be fully exposed.

The hidden places of John Banim’s early life in Ireland punctuate the novels and tales that he wrote in collaboration with his brother Michael. Covert distilleries, underground forts, haunted caves, hidden cupboards and cellars, buried treasure and smugglers, illegitimate births, illicit love, secret passwords: the number of secrets in his writing is perhaps outnumbered only by the number of watchful eyes. Glowering, squinting, glaring eyes, lazy eyes, even eyeless sockets stare up from the pages of these tales. These are not unconnected details, given that Ireland during the early nineteenth century was one of the most observed societies in Europe, the British state uniquely adept at knowledge production. In one sense, the Banims form part of the attempt to regulate and reform Ireland in preparation for Catholic Emancipation. Their writing strives to supervise and civilize the native Irish, to translate these unrepresentable subjects into words. But the Banims’ fiction also suggests that secrecy is the gelling agent of unofficial Ireland. More than anything else, it is secrecy that defines the subjects of these tales, offering them a communal identity. “The secrets of his inner heart, the Irish peasant keeps concealed to the present hour,” explains the narrator of *The Croppy* (1828), “as well from the oppressors he hates, as from the friends who, if they knew him better could better serve him” (*The Croppy*: 280). *The Tales by the O’Hara Family* (1825) might well be taken as an attempt by those who do know him better to better serve the Irish tenant. These novels and tales recognize the power of the secret to protect the identity of supervised subjects. Secrets form a protective shell for the Irish tenant classes. The Banims’ narrative voice speaks the language of a mass-based mystery that allows the subaltern, if not to speak, then at least to whisper. The colonial subject speaks in a tongue that is secret, but not altogether silent.

Many critics have dismissed the cryptic elements in the Banims’ writing as mere melodrama, pandering to an English audience’s appetite for the gothic and sensational. But secrecy is central to their narrative strategy, and not
simply in the interests of indulging in melodrama. Their writing at once presents and preserves; shows and screens off the Irish cabin community. It shares a mouthful of secrets with English readers, but keeps quiet about a good deal more. The same tongue that breaks a literary silence also creates a deeper one. This double impulse, to expose and to hide, is well articulated by the narrator of *Crohoore of the Billhook* (1825), who addresses the reader in a lengthy aside:

> Indeed, when, as voracious compilers of our history, we are admitted as witnesses where others would be unwelcome, we dislike to reveal all we see and hear [...] In this case, it is plain [the reader] must be content with what we choose, or, after due reflection, deem advisable to give him; seeing that we might keep it all to ourselves, were we so inclined, or did it suit our purposes.

*Crohoore of the Billhook*: 306

In this instance secrecy becomes a display of membership, a bulwark between the reader and the Irish people. The first person plural places the narrator firmly on the side of the crowd, an insider with powerful knowledge that he may be willing to share. Then again, he may not. The same narrator who beckons us to enter the inner circles of Irish life ends up shutting the door on his readers, giving us the status of unwelcome non-members standing outside of a meeting of the secret society known as rural Ireland. A secret must be hidden but not completely: otherwise it disappears. Beryl Bellman has argued that secrecy is founded on the paradox that “the proscription ‘don’t tell’ is at odds with the fact that secrets are constituted precisely by the way they get told” (Bellman: 1). The Banims’ tales make countless references to acts of clandestine communication—knowing smiles, sardonic looks, nods and winks. Those who know the secret form a community: the same secrecy regarded by rulers as a problem or illness becomes a source of vitality for those ruled. John Nowlan, the invalid son hidden in the back room of the family cabin in the opening of *The Nowlans* (1826), is described as seeming to be at once the “shame and affliction,” but also “the only hope” of his family (*The Nowlans*: 10). Secrecy is where the Irish tenant lives and moves and has his being. Whereas in Maria Edgeworth’s fiction, secrecy is figured as a contagion spreading dangerously through the Irish peasantry, threatening to worm its way into the servants and children of the Big House, here a community based on secrets is alive and well. In its very form, their writing attests to the material force of the secret—their plots move forward by hearsay, gossip, rumour, bits of information pieced together by whispering servants and tenants. The narrator is often keen to present himself as an insider, a link the anonymous chain, an alert listener. This vast network
of termite-like peasantry, who seem like Rory na-chopple, the rapparee of *The Boyne Water*, to “wind like an eel through an[y] orifice,” (*The Boyne Water*: 361) is a threat to the ruling order. Their narrative spotlight shines more often on the anonymous populace than on the alleged protagonist, and is less interested in elucidating the interior struggles of the individual than the collective force of the community. Secrets shared have the power in these tales to gather mobs, convict men of murder, steal property, imprison housewives, move settlers to suicide, or burn infants alive. Rory na-chopple is the arch-secret keeper, seemingly capable of “whispering” his enemies “to death” (*Ibid.*: 528). His well-nigh supernatural abilities, taken in the context of a secret’s power to solidify a people against their rulers, are not altogether incredible. Secrets in these tales assert what Bellman describes as “an alternate version of reality,” a claim that another version of history exists alongside the official story (Bellman: 14). Or, as Teresa de Lauretis has argued, the secret contains a constant potential for opening “a view from elsewhere” (de Lauretis: 25). Enlightenment epistemology presumes that realities lie behind appearances, that surfaces conceal depths, that secrets can be rooted out and dragged into the light. Viewed from the elsewhere of Ireland, however, secrets take on quite a different aspect. Two definitions of obscurity operate the Banims’ writing: obscurity in the sense of something determinate being concealed, and the inherent obscurity of indeterminacy. Rory na-chopple shuttles between these two meanings, making the latter often appear to be the former. The Banims’ style itself exists in this ambiguous space, disturbing readers as effectively as Rory disturbs his rulers.

In Gerald Griffin’s short gothic tale “The Brown Man,” Nora Guare’s shadow, sensing danger, “slowly [rose] from the ground, and [...] walked rapidly off,” abandoning its owner (“The Brown Man”: 302–03). The young bride dies at the hands of her vampire husband, while her shadow survives. Griffin is fascinated by this 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 the Limerick writer’s project stand such shadows, and characters like the eavesdropping priest in “Card Drawing,” who urge us “[not to] imagine that open-heartedness is a virtue” (*Tales*: 71). Far from being simply the cultural wing of the political Emancipation campaign, Griffin’s writing suggests that freedom and identity might emerge also through those darker places.

*Tracy’s Ambition* explores these conflicting tendencies in Griffin between modernising 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 first-person narrative (rare, for
Griffin)—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 (Tracy’s Ambition: 203). Dalton encourages Tracy to emulate his brutalist 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 Dalton and his anti-history are the Shanahans, a tenant family whose identity is bound up with the memory of family secrets and past crimes. Tracy is agitated by the Shanahans, who represent everything that he is attempting to shake off in his quest to attain Dalton’s status. “Though I’m weak,” Old Mrs Shanahan warns Tracy, “I have strong friends, and they have you marked” (Ibid.: 211).

“When you tell one story,” Tracy’s tenant Moran advises him, “don’t forget the other” (Ibid.: 6). And the novel itself is in one sense a refusal to let Tracy forget this view from elsewhere. Tracy’s ambition becomes Tracy’s tuition, as Shanahan himself reads the Irish landscape to Tracy, narrating its subterranean histories, its invisible connections, its secret genealogies, its linked lives, and its cycles of violence. Both Dalton and Tracy fail to see that, in Moran’s words, “a man’s life is not in his own hands” (Ibid.: 2). Tracy’s ambition to become a new creation, and Dalton’s attempt to live a life untainted by those below him, both end in failure. Tracy’s wife is murdered by his tenants; Dalton’s affable son Henry is murdered by Shanahan in revenge for his dead twin. The past and the people that Tracy and Dalton try to forget remember them. 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 (1827) is a further exploration of self-transformation and self-deformation. Eugene Hammond is trapped between social stations—cursed by a low birth, but made wealthy by a tobacco-king uncle, he is one of the in-betweener of Ireland, “disowned by the class to which [he] would aspire, and disliked by that which [he has] deserted” (Tales: 235–36). “What’s he but a bit of a half-sir?” the tenants mock, ‘A made man—not a born gentleman” (Ibid.: 201–02). The loss of his fiancé Emily—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, 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 Hammond chides his nurse:
Murphy

Taunt him with his lowliness—with the station of life in which the mighty 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? (Ibid.: 141-42)

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. (Ibid.: 198)

The miserly Hammond refuses to join in the custom of receiving the boys on their Christmas call: “What [...] have I to do with Saint Stephen?” (Ibid.: 198). 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 let, that is. An old custom, sir. (Ibid.: 198)

Tucking itself inside the wing of the eagle, the wren defies its place in the pecking order through secret cunning and roguery. It is not insignificant, in a novel about the possibility or impossibility of leaping one’s station, that Griffin should bracket his narrative with this image of the wren. This smallest of birds outwits nature, outdoes the powerful eagle by placing himself “a-hide under his wing.” It is through the secrecy of hiding that the wren is able to become “king of the aigle an’ all” (Ibid.: 198). 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.¹ 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” (Tracy’s Ambition: 211).

Hiding—or being masked—allows for a certain anonymity, and so strengthens the group even as it diminishes the individual. Both Wrenboy and Whiteboy might find themselves less inhibited by the landlord when they confront him in disguise, during that carnivalesque “extra-time” when they are ritually entitled to do so. 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.

In his preface to The Christian Physiologist (1830), Griffin argues that human beings cannot change “by the discovery of new truths” or by pursuing “new facts and systems,” but by “being guided by the secret history of [their] own mind[s]” (The Christian Physiologist: vi–vii). Griffin’s counter-Enlightenment statement is explored in his fiction, which insists that the transformation of human life is effected through such “secret histories.” For Griffin, emancipation is not simply a matter of forsaking secrecy for transparency. The confessional becomes for Griffin an emblem of this contradiction. “There is only one state of perfect confidence on earth,” he writes in his notebook:

> 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.

qtd. in Cronin: 95

These notes were written during what John Cronin has described as Griffin's period of heightened religious “scruples” (Cronin: 35). Nevertheless, Griffin's comments on confession might offer a way to read his fiction, steeped as it is in secrets buried and secrets shared.

None of Griffin’s narratives are so complete an exploration of secrecy, perhaps, as The Collegians, in which the young bride Eily O’Connor is hidden

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¹ Kevin Whelan and H.R. Beames discuss the use of disguise by the Whiteboys and other agrarian secret societies in rural Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Whelan: 93; Beames: 64).
away by her husband, Hardress Cregan. Convinced that “plain human nature is enough” for him (*The Collegians*: 124), Hardress chooses the simple daughter of a local rope-maker for his wife, but then goes about turning the plain and open Eily into a secret; concealing her in a remote mountain cottage and maintaining complete silence on her existence when with his family and friends. Increasingly bored and horrified by Eily’s artlessness, Hardress begins to pursue the elegant Anne Chute, whose charm and wealth shatter his undergraduate theories of nature and culture. When his mother, the chief architect of the Cregan-Chute match, threatens to withhold his inheritance if he marries below his station, Hardress feels compelled to bury his secret forever. His hunchback servant, Danny Mann, drowns his bride.

“My mother,” remarks Hardress Cregan, “is a great secret hunter.” And 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 was a secret, although I was far from suspecting its nature” (*Ibid.*: 132). Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argue that the silence of secrets is foundational to individuals, families, and even to nations. As the unutterable trauma or shame of a family, the secret gets “entombed” in a psychic crypt, where “unspeakable words are buried alive and held fast, like owls in ceaseless vigil” (Abraham: 180). We are constituted and colonized, then, by the secrets of others, which take the form not so much of silence as of obfuscation. The thing that must not be said is yet “precisely a matter of words” (*Ibid.*: 167, 159). Like the layers produced by the oyster to cover the grit at its centre, our language 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” (*Ibid.*: 188). 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 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” (*Ibid.*: 100). The secret that Hardress Cregan 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” (*The Collegians*: 282). 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!” (*Ibid.*: 339). Meant to protect the body of his wife, his words expose instead his own need for concealment.
Though she is a skilled secret-hunter, and makes it “the study of [her] life to win the confidence” of her son, Mrs Cregan is defined also by the desire not to know his secret. Mrs Cregan 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, averts 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” (Ibid.: 222). Mrs Cregan is a good example of this dialectic of allergy and allurement, or of what Bok calls the tension between “acknowledgement and avoidance” (Bok: 36). 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 might also mean dashing the Cregans from their high place in society. Hardress becomes wildly animated in his concealment of the crime that defines his life, so that 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” (The Collegians: 232). And Mrs Cregan is similarly described as “a fair tower sapped in the foundation” when the secret of Eily is disclosed (Ibid.: 251). Just as Hardress buries his secret with manic talk, so the secret of Ireland is precisely a matter of communication, a deluge of discourse of the kind that we witness in the successive parliamentary reports on the state of Ireland. The conflicting desire to chase down the secret of Ireland and keep it hidden finds a fitting image in Mrs Cregan’s eyes—at once fixed and averted—seeking after the secret of Eily, and looking away lest the revelation sap her foundation.

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” (Ibid.: 284), 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” (Ibid : 294). Looby is described early in the novel as “thoughtful and deliberative,” the smiling servant who whose “disguise of simpleness” gives him “a wonderful efficacy” (Ibid : 19). Griffin’s detail concerning Looby’s vote is not insignificant, for it suggests that his success has depended in part on silence and secrecy. While officially consecrating the “milk and water” Kyrle Daly as the future of Ireland, the novel offers Looby also as an alternative figure of emancipation—the wily Catholic who leaps his station, like the wren, through hiding. The novel closes by asking readers to examine their “own heart[s]” and see if they “hide nothing” (Ibid.: 437). 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 forbidding efficacy.

Works Cited


*Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland, with the four reports of minutes of evidence*, HC 1825 (129) vol. 8.