Richard Kearney, *Salvage: A Novel* (Boston: Arrowsmith Press, 2023), 289 pp.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a retired professor, enjoying leisure at last, must harbour the dangerous ambition of publishing a novel. Well, Richard Kearney is one of the world's busiest professors, but nonetheless he has found the leisure to publish three novels, outdoing himself in the present one, an elaborate, many-layered composition. Mark Patrick Hederman has reviewed it in daring style in the *Japan Mission Journal* (vol. 77.2, June 2023), going into personal, psychological, and spiritual aspects. I would also like to comment on it in a personal way, but from the more mundane viewpoint of another professor who has long meditated a novel set in Victorian Cork. Professors tend to try their hand at historical novels, a genre dismissed by Henry James as 'humbug,' but Salvage, set in West Cork 1939-1942, fits within the 'visitable past' beloved of James, so the author can convincingly reach back to that past, touch it, and bring it to life. Born less than seven years after the end of the novel's period and less than six years before the author's birth, I have the strange experience of meeting a world that is at once familiar and foreign. Sometimes in reading the tale I forgot its pastness and was startled by references to a World War going on in the background. How, indeed, would the story differ if set in the present day? Unlike professors who write novels of influence, generated from their reading, Kearney writes of what he knows. The book is the fruit of many summers with his family in Union Hall, a peculiarly lovely part of County Cork. His relatives have helped him create the density of local reference, his wife Anne and daughters Simone and Sarah providing the illustrations that are integral to the skein of the work.

The entertaining central plot concerns the rivalry of Maeve Sullivan and Helen Flynn for the attentions of one boy. But sadly, of this trio only Maeve shows any feeling for ancient Ireland, its language and its healing practices that everyone else in the novel dismisses as *piseógs* even when benefiting from them. Helen first appears as a nasty bully, then rather suddenly becomes Maeve's close friend, grateful to her for making the warts between her fingers vanish by telling them '*Imígí libh, imígí libh*' (90). The novel teasingly lets an indefinable tension and unease subsist between the two girls, intensified by the Séamus factor. Maeve bravely stifles her feelings of jealousy and envy towards Helen, and cultivates blind devotion to her Mr Darcy, though he so often leaves her guessing, suddenly taking off to study at Belvedere College (the Jesuits!), and later to join the naval war effort (for King and Country!), leaving the damsels dolorous to console one another.

Helen and her family are posh by local standards and smart, polite Séamus, a doctor's son, is an upper middle-class Dubliner who has spent years in no less a place than London! All of this leaves freckly Maeve (no cure for the freckles, alas!) somewhat downtrodden. Generally made to feel by all that she is a witch and cracked, her struggle to affirm herself is an important theme of this *Bildungsroman*. At the nadir of her fortunes, she is all alone on the island with her demented mother, and tries to find emotional sustenance in Séamus's unromantic letters. It all ends with 'the most unkindest cut of all,' one of the many neatly timed plot twists in the story. Successor to a long line of abandoned island women, Maeve is in danger of becoming an Antigone, sole bearer of ancient values, or an Electra, devoted to vindicating her dead

father (blamed for a drowning tragedy). If a film is made of *Salvage* I hope that the star will be plain and clearly outstripped by a dazzling Helen, so that she must triumph by her sterling moral qualities as in the novel. But let her also find a more satisfying soulmate. Séamus's blank character is a missed opportunity to load every rift with Irish ore. Let him be upstaged in the movie by stalwart Irish-speaking Peadar, champion of a sheep-shearing competition, and let the couple thrive not in Dublin but in the nearby Gaeltacht of Ballingeary, where Maeve can run a dispensary and be celebrated for her traditional cures.

The novel's intense recreation of a young girl's anxieties and desires is an exceptional feat of empathy, rare among male novelists. In addition to being able to create character, a novelist must have powers of observation (though astonishingly, and encouragingly to the aspirant novelist, Proust's narrator claims to be bereft of such powers). More prominent than the story just sketched is the world in which it is set, a world glowingly evoked, with a fund of empirical knowledge. A landlubber (even if once a paddler on West Cork beaches) will be thrown by the nautical vocabulary of this sea-drenched novel: 'Michael hoisted the mainsail, reefing it close to ease the gusts' (26); 'Mainsail flapping, he skulled windward' (140); 'The ketch was soon tacking from Glandore harbor onto open sea, mainsail, mizzen and jib all stretched taut before an easterly breeze' (168). Maeve herself is an encyclopedia of local flora and fauna, of the sea, and of herbal remedies, somehow woven into her conversations with Séamus, of which it provides the chief substance, with some comic effects.

The style of the novel has (at least) two registers: an objective one and one matching Maeve's consciousness, then her inner voice. Like all Irish novelists Kearney is haunted by Joyce, to good effect in the objective register, with its flow of shapely sentences, prose-poem 'epiphanies' perhaps collected over years. But despite the bell-like recurrence of runic phrases in Gaelic Maeve's voice lacks a distinctive colour. I realized by contrast the genius of Joyce in giving every scrap of inner monologue a pungent *haecceitas*, as he conjures up the inner mindscapes of Bloom, Stephen, Fr Conmee, and Mr Kernan in turn. The injections of Irish (and even of Old Scots on p.24!) have a hypnotic effect, and the healing powers claimed for the language are quite believable. Rats and even bulls obey Maeve's commands delivered in Irish, when she is regal like her legendary namesake: 'She sprinkled drops of well water onto the floor, repeating three times, '*Amach libh anois*.' Then she stood back and watched as an entire family of rats stole silently from the shadows and scuttled out the door' (85).

Philosophers who write novels are bound to explore a philosophical theme (think of Sartre or Iris Murdoch). Kearney has a rich theme to hand, for his recent work has centred on 'carnal hermeneutics' and on recovering the sense of touch in our 'excarnate' world. This gives philosophical depth to scenes such as the parting hug to the mother: 'Maeve clasped her loosely at first, inhaling the damp aroma of her coat, the uncombed hair, the stale whiff of illness, and then tighter until she could feel her thin shoulders, tucked in like a goose, and the tiny nubs of her sloping spine' (229). Maeve's frisson in an Austenesque-cum-Lawrentian dancing similarly enriches the phenomenology of touch with references to the natural world: 'It was all in the pulse, at once taught and given, directed and graced—like divining for water or fishing for trout... perfect focus, rapt, keen, attending to the very next turn, the short quick curve of shoulder and wrist' (157-8). A swimming scene goes further: 'They were both in

their element, fearless and free, their bodies buoyed by the current, their faces flushed by the breeze' (185).

The story is also undergirded by a theological vision, and here I think an opportunity has been missed. Having followed the trajectory of Richard's reflections on God from the early focus on eschatology and imagination, and on the Possible and the 'God who may be,' through his mapping of the presences and absences of the divine in contemporary culture, culminating in the notion of 'anatheism,' widely greeted as naming the essence of the religious situation of humanity today, I can see that the much more affirmative notion of 'panentheism' has come to the fore here: God is in all things and all things are in God. The God in question is not so much the God of Abraham, central to other of Kearney's works, but rather 'Brigid,' more the Celtic goddess than the Christian saint, or rather something much more elusive than that, a Shelleyan 'presence to be felt and known/ In darkness and in light, from herb and stone.' More than that, according to Maeve's father 'she is the wind and rain, the very power of land and sea' (32). The novel is structured around an opposition between Maeve's ancient integral Celtic Christianity and the dreary, soulless, Anglicized mainland church. Maeve's petulance against Fr Kehoe, who is little better than a caricature (and priests of any kind have long ceased to carry their former aura as saints or villains in Irish fiction), is of a piece with a current urban legend to the effect that the Church suppressed St Brigid as a pagan influence.

In fact, Brigid was never given the Philomena treatment of total suppression on the grounds of non-existence, a heavy-handed Vatican decision of 1961, which did not succeed in ending Philomenalogical studies. Brigid was removed from the universal Liturgical Calendar in 1969 in order to make room for others (it can hold only about 170 saints), but this was with no prejudice to the honour in which the Irish Church has always held her or to her feast of February 1, attested since the seventh century (and from 2023 a national holiday in the Republic). The Church's integration of the lore of the goddess Bríd and the feast of Imbolc is regarded as a triumph of inculturation. The novel's picture of two hostile camps seems to be a modern *idée reçue*. Remembering the pious mornings in homesteads down remote boreens at Station Masses in the summer of 1976, in the parish of Kealkil (full of Sullivans), with its views plunging down on Bantry, my ancestral home, I suggest that pre-critical 'Holy Ireland' was imbued with love of neighbour, of nature, and of God.

At Mass on the Feast of the Annunciation Maeve likes the mystic sound of Latin, fantasizes about Séamus and Douglas Fairbanks when hearing of the angel Gabriel, and takes a very patronizing view of the eucharistic elements: 'Water and wine. Poor ingredients. No maidenhair or fungi. Poor priest... Poor people. If they knew what they were missing' (125). Earlier her father calls these poor people 'a load of holy Joes' (22). Listening to the sermon—"'Immaculate!" repeated Father Kehoe, brushing a speck of spit from his lip. "Mary is pure. She preserves morals and wards off temptation'" (123)—Maeve muses compassionately on all the women abused by the Church: 'If only they'd turned to Brigid instead. *Muire na nGael*... Yes, she must have been there, warming their bodies with her woolen shawl' (124). Maeve is both the Church's sharpest critic and the truest Catholic in the congregation. At Communion she is rewarded by finding Séamus beside her—'Their eyes met. Her heart flared'—and by having a mystical experience to knock all clergy into a cocked hat: 'Jesus

pulling a heart from his chest and placing it deep within hers' (126). Maeve's religiosity connects with the doubts and ambiguities pervading Irish Catholicism today, and may propose a nostrum for salvage of a broken tradition.

A novel of quality is one that must be reread, and no doubt there is much more in this dense work than I have brought out. *Salvage* sets the bar very high for any who would emulate it, but it also encourages a bold plunge into the fascinating human texture of the place or places called Cork.

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