

# William Carleton's literary religion

MARJORIE HOWES

This essay will examine Carleton's representations of religion in *Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry*, situating them in relation to conceptions of Irish culture on the one hand and literary tropes and forms on the other. Carleton is a fascinating figure through which to examine these relationships for several reasons. He is widely acknowledged as one of the founders of modern Irish literature. Yet we have relatively few sustained scholarly examinations of Carleton's work. In addition, scholars tend to locate Carleton's importance to the subsequent development of a national imagination and a national literature in Ireland in his ethnographic approach to the Irish peasantry. And critical debates about the meaning, value or validity of Carleton's representations of folk life and folk culture often hinge upon religion, in particular, upon Carleton's complex, and often confusing, relation to Catholicism. Finally, *Traits and stories* raises a series of difficult questions for scholars that have to do with literary form: the volumes are characterized by wild inconsistencies of tone, a mix of sympathy and condescension towards the peasantry and Catholicism, an extremely varied set of narrative voices and styles, and a combination of competing literary genres and vocabularies. I will argue that Carleton's representations of religion can best be understood, not in terms of his ideological or emotional relation to Catholicism, but through their relation to these formal and literary questions, and I will sketch some features of what I call his religio-literary imagination.

Scholars repeatedly cast Carleton as a central figure in the development of Irish literature. Terry Eagleton, for example, calls him 'the finest nineteenth-century novelist of all' and says that *Traits and stories* 'can surely lay claim to the status of premier work of the century's literature.'<sup>1</sup> Carleton is often cast as an important precursor of Joyce,<sup>2</sup> and Roy Foster has recently written an essay arguing his importance for the early Yeats.<sup>3</sup> His centrality for later writers and the problems his work raises are most often formulated through references to ethnogra-

<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the great hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 207. <sup>2</sup> Seamus Deane comments that 'the beginnings of the Joycean complex are discernable' in Carleton's representations of the Irish peasantry (*A short history of Irish literature* [London: Hutchinson, 1986], p. 112), and Paul Muldoon asserts that 'Carleton contains a powerful combination of intimacy with, and enmity towards, his subject matter that would not be seen again until Joyce' (*To Ireland, I* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000], p. 25). <sup>3</sup> Roy Foster, 'Square-built power and fiery shorthand: Yeats, Carleton and the Irish nineteenth century,' *The Irish story: telling tales and making it up in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), pp 113-26.

phy, religion, and literary form. Most critics agree that the importance of *Traits and stories* is primarily ethnographic, and that the two major problems that hindered Carleton's project, and the capacity of later readers to appreciate it, are his vexed relation to Catholicism and his formal unevenness. Seamus Deane claims that the tales in *Traits and stories* were 'truly memorable for the power with which they evoked the life of the Irish peasantry' but that 'most of Carleton's writings are miscellanies of prose styles, with stylistic breaks even in the midst of a single sentence'.<sup>4</sup> Declan Kiberd remarks that 'part of Carleton's achievement as a writer would be his rendition of a social panorama, a cross-section of peasant types', but also comments: 'it is sometimes said that a single Carleton sentence seems to have been written in two very different styles by two very different men'.<sup>5</sup> And Barbara Hayley characterizes the tales as 'a mixture of folklore and melodrama'.<sup>6</sup> Scholars may be fairly united on the subject of Carleton's formal fragmentation, but they are more divided on the subject of his religion and its impact on his role in the creation of an Irish national literature. I now turn to that subject more specifically, beginning with Carleton himself.

*Traits and stories* first appeared as an anonymous collection of eight stories in 1830. The critical reception was overwhelmingly favorable,<sup>7</sup> and the book was admired by many readers, from Karl Marx to Crofton Croker. It proved very popular, going through a number of editions, often expanded, re-arranged, and/or revised, over the next years.<sup>8</sup> By the time he wrote the preface to the 1842 edition, Carleton was explicitly casting his work as part of a burgeoning effort to create a truly national literature for Ireland. He lamented in particular the 'political' effects of the stage Irishman found in English letters, which, he said, 'passed from the stage into the recesses of private life, wrought itself into the feelings until it became a prejudice'.<sup>9</sup> He connected the literary situation with much-discussed political problems, claiming that previously Ireland had been laboring 'under all the dark privations of a literary famine'<sup>10</sup> and that Ireland's literary men had, by writing for the English market, become literary and intellectual 'absentees'.<sup>11</sup> He claimed that greater mutual knowledge between Irish and English was already leading to mutual respect, and praised the *Dublin University Magazine* as a 'neutral spot in a country where party feeling runs so high, on which the Roman Catholic Priest and the Protestant parson, the Whig, the Tory, and the Radical, divested of their respective prejudices, can meet in an amicable spirit'.<sup>12</sup> He predicted that 'Ireland in a few years will be able to sustain a native literature as lofty and generous, and beneficial to herself, as any other country in the world can boast of.'<sup>13</sup>

4 Deane, *History*, pp 108–9. 5 Declan Kiberd, *Irish classics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), pp 266, 274. 6 Barbara Hayley, *Carleton's Traits and stories and the 19th century Anglo-Irish tradition* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983), p. 1. 7 Eileen A. Sullivan, *William Carleton* (Boston: Twayne, 1983), p. 59. 8 Barbara Hayley's book offers a definitive account of this process. 9 William Carleton, *Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry*, 2 vols (1842; Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), i, p. iii. 10 *Ibid.*, p. v. 11 *Ibid.* 12 *Ibid.*, p. vii. 13 *Ibid.*

Several features of Carleton's argument in the preface – his integrationist bent, his project to rescue the Irish from detractors and misunderstandings and to exhibit their positive characteristics, his belief that literature could heal the rifts of the political world, his determination to help establish a national literature, and the fact that he addressed himself, at least partly, to a non-Irish audience – mean that his work has something in common with the national tales written by authors such as Sydney Owenson or Maria Edgeworth. But if, as Ina Ferris and Joep Leerssen suggest, such tales in the early nineteenth century treated Ireland as an exotic, unknown place, in which the protagonist is nearly always an outsider who learns to put aside previous prejudices and forges a sympathetic connection to Ireland,<sup>14</sup> Carleton's work oscillates between the perspectives of insider and outsider. The preface to *Traits and stories* goes to some lengths to establish Carleton's status as an insider or native informant, claiming, as many later commentators would, that Carleton can accurately describe the Irish peasantry because he knows them and is one of them.

Carleton bolsters this claim to authenticity by recounting his biography and using his parents as exemplary figures for the peasantry as a whole. The parents embody different conceptions of the peasantry and Irish folk culture, however. In a famous passage, which Carleton reproduced in his autobiography, his father represents Irish country people as an inexhaustible mine of cultural vitality, perpetually available, co-existing comfortably with English language and culture. He knows the Old and New Testaments by heart, and

his memory was a perfect storehouse, and a rich one, of all that the social antiquary, the man of letters, the poet, or the musician would consider valuable. As a teller of old tales, legends, and historical anecdotes he was unrivalled, and his stock of them was inexhaustible. He spoke the Irish and English languages with nearly equal fluency. With all kinds of charms, old ranns, or poems, old prophecies, religious superstitions, tales of pilgrims, miracles, and pilgrimages, anecdotes of blessed priests and friars, revelations from ghosts and fairies, was he thoroughly acquainted.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, Carleton says, he never came across a bit of Irish popular culture that was completely new to him. Carleton's mother, on the other hand, represents a conception of Irish peasant culture as fading, inaccessible, and incompatible with English. She was especially good at keening, 'had a prejudice against singing the Irish airs to English words' and some of her untranslated songs 'have perished with her'.<sup>16</sup> Those that were not lost with her are only partly known

<sup>14</sup> See Ina Ferris, *The Romantic national tale and the question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) and Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and imagination: patterns in the historical and literary representations of Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Cork: Cork UP, 1996). <sup>15</sup> Carleton, *Traits*, i, pp vii–ix. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

and interpretable: 'At this day I am in possession of Irish airs which none of our best antiquaries in Irish music have heard, except through me, and of which neither they nor I myself know the names.'<sup>17</sup>

Carleton's father represents retention and accessibility; through him, Carleton possesses the secrets of Irish culture before he goes looking for them. On the other hand, his mother is organized around loss and obscurity; even the cultural artifacts – the songs – he possesses directly through her cannot be fully known or accessed. Both conditions are the condition of an insider, but the latter is that of an insider who has been dispossessed of something that properly belongs to him. In one the insider's culture is vigorous and living, in the other, it is fractured and dying. This division bears a family resemblance to a dilemma that Joep Leerssen has argued was central to the language revival later in the century: 'the choice between the return to the pristine example of antiquity, or the vigour of the living demotic tradition'.<sup>18</sup> When Leerssen, in his extremely accomplished and wide-ranging account of how various thinkers represented Ireland in the nineteenth century, mentions Carleton, which is not very often, he sees him as part of the Romantic tendency to take the peasantry out of the present and the political realm and to locate them in various timeless realms, such as the past or folklore.<sup>19</sup> I would add that Carleton carefully constructed his own claims to authenticity and attached those claims to two competing (and equally Romantic) conceptions of the national, folkloric past: one that saw it as continually available for salvage and another that saw it as constantly slipping away.

Debates over the extent to which the authenticity Carleton claimed was genuine have often centered around his relation to religion. Born Catholic, Carleton converted to Protestantism, married a Protestant, produced some extremely anti-Catholic works early in his career, and moderated his views later, adopting a more liberal Protestantism and expressing considerable sympathy and admiration for Catholics. In 1826, before he began publishing his short stories, he wrote a letter to his friend William Sisson, deputy librarian of Marsh's Library in Dublin, and included a memorandum to be forwarded to Robert Peel, who was then home secretary. The memorandum is an argument against Catholic emancipation, which was of course then being hotly debated. Carleton draws connections between terrorist violence and the movement for Catholic emancipation, says he could prove a link between O'Connell's Catholic Association and illegal secret societies, and accuses the Catholic clergy of condoning, or at least tolerating, those societies.<sup>20</sup> In the cover letter to Sisson, Carleton once again offers to provide proof, and says: 'according to the present operation of Roman Catholic politics, the question of Emancipation is singularly mixed up with the immediate and personal interests of its most violent and outrageous supporters.' And later he comments:

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi. <sup>18</sup> Leerssen, *Remembrance*, p. 196. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164. <sup>20</sup> See Robert Lee Wolff, *William Carleton, Irish peasant novelist: a preface to his fiction* (New York: Garland, 1980), p. 20.



But the Priests are those whom I principally fear, not more from the habitual dissimulation of their character, than from my knowledge of the unforgiving fire which burns within them. Black, malignant, and designing, systemically treacherous and false, [they] are inherently inimical to Protestants, they brood over their purposes with a hope of revenge sharpened by the restraint which compels them to conceal it, and concentrated within their souls from want of expansion.

Carleton goes on to say that he would rather see his children dead than 'under the dreadful yoke of Romish influence'.<sup>21</sup> This was two years before he began writing for Caesar Otway's anti-Catholic *Christian Examiner*. Later in life, and after the debate over Catholics had died down in the wake of emancipation, Carleton seems to have moderated these views, though Barbara Hayley cautions us against exaggerating this change.<sup>22</sup> Carleton did expunge some particularly virulent passages from early anti-Catholic stories when he reprinted them,<sup>23</sup> wrote sympathetically of the plight of the Irish Catholic country people, and harshly criticized Protestant landlords. In his autobiography, begun when he was seventy-four and never completed, he recalled that in Co. Tyrone of his youth 'there was then no law against an Orangeman, and no law for a Papist', and he claimed 'although I conscientiously left the church, neither my heart nor my affections were ever estranged from the Catholic people, or even from the priesthood.'<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly, given these contradictory views, arguments about Carleton's role as a founder of modern Irish literature have always been troubled by the question of his relation to Catholicism. When Yeats edited *Stories from Carleton* for the Walter Scott publishing house in 1889,<sup>25</sup> his introduction took up the problem of Carleton and religion. Yeats acknowledged that Carleton had 'drifted' into Protestantism (though the Peel memorandum hardly suggests 'drift'), but claimed that 'his heart, anyway, soon returned to the religion of his fathers; and in him the Established Church proselytizers found their most fierce satirist.'<sup>26</sup> This did not stop the *Nation* from reviewing the book negatively on account of Carleton's apostasy. A small controversy ensued, in which Yeats tried to intervene by reviewing his own book in the *Scots Observer*, which, not surprisingly, did not really work. Yeats had the sense to print the review anonymously, but scholars agree that there is sufficient evidence that he wrote it. As Foster points out, Yeats 'steadfastly argued that Carleton remained

**21** See David Krause, *William Carleton the novelist: his carnival and pastoral world of tragicomedy* (New York: UP of America, 2000), p. 69. **22** Hayley, *Anglo-Irish tradition*, p. xi. **23** Hayley points out, however, that he did not expunge them all, and that he even added some anti-Catholic passages to early stories for re-publication (Hayley, *Anglo-Irish tradition*, p. xi). **24** William Carleton, *The autobiography* (1986; Belfast: White Row Press, 1996), pp 37, 92. **25** The volume included 'The poor scholar', 'Tubber Derg', 'Wildgoose Lodge', 'Shane Fadh's wedding', and 'The hedge school'. **26** Foster, *Irish story*, p. 117.

essentially Catholic; and that this was somehow part of his essential authenticity,<sup>27</sup> a view of the relationship between Irishness and Catholicism he would later abandon. For Yeats, Carleton was above all an ethnographer and a social historian – as part of this controversy, he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Nation* called ‘Carleton as an Irish historian.’ Foster argues that Yeats’s work in the 1890s contained a surprising number of echoes from Carleton, and that Yeats found in Carleton’s work the ‘clarity and lack of sentimentality’ that he was trying to establish in his own poetry. Yeats claimed that ‘[t]here is no wistfulness in the works of Carleton. I find there, especially in his longer novels, a kind of clay-cold melancholy.’<sup>28</sup> In this way, Carleton was the imperfect precursor of Synge for Yeats: ‘On one level, he might seem to come within Yeats’s imposed ban on stereotypical and unsubtle national image-making. In another way, however, Carleton was capable of his own version of the uncompromisingness, originality, rigour, “salt and savour” which Yeats missed in the Davis school and found in Synge.’<sup>29</sup> In a later review of Carleton’s autobiography Yeats explicitly cast Carleton as a founding figure of Irish national literature, calling him the ‘creator of a new imaginative world, the demiurge of a new tradition.’<sup>30</sup>

Current scholarship on Carleton, somewhat surprisingly, often feels compelled to take up the question of Carleton, authenticity, the national tradition, and religion in similar terms. This means that often critics treat Carleton as an ethnographer and pose the question of religion in his works in terms of his criticisms of, or loyalty to, Catholicism. Robert Lee Wolff, for example, asserts that Carleton’s ‘attacks on the faith and its clergy were by no means ‘very little’ or even all ‘early’<sup>31</sup> and emphasizes the Protestantism of the early works in particular. David Krause’s recent book goes out of its way to refute such claims, arguing that Carleton ‘paradoxically and emotionally remained loyal to his Catholic heritage’.<sup>32</sup> And Krause criticizes scholars like Wolff who, he says, assess Carleton’s work in religious rather than fictional terms.<sup>33</sup> Critics have continued to debate the issue in these terms, I think, because what is at stake is Carleton the ethnographer – his authenticity in terms of representing the peasantry, folk culture, and a foundation of the national tradition. If scholars conclude that Carleton is in some fundamental way an anti-Catholic writer, then his portraits of the Catholic country people begin to look increasingly like condescending stereotypes. If, on the other hand, scholars argue that he remained loyal to Catholicism on some essential level, a level usually characterized as emotional, unconscious, or paradoxical, it becomes possible to recuperate a kind of anthropological accuracy in his works.

27 Ibid. p. 118. 28 Ibid., p. 119. 29 Ibid., p. 124. 30 John P. Frayne (ed.), *Uncollected prose by W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia UP, 1970), i, p. 394. 31 Wolff, *Carleton*, p. 5. 32 Krause, *Carleton*, p. 77. 33 Ibid., p. 37; other examples include James H. Murphy, who observes ‘Carleton was not strongly religious, was never part of the establishment and always retained a sense of Catholic grievance’; James H. Murphy, *Ireland: a social, cultural and literary history 1791–1891* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), p. 83.

I want to propose a different set of terms for thinking about Carleton's representations of Catholicism and folk culture. These terms owe something to contemporary research into popular religion, and something to current thinking about popular literary genres. Rather than acceding to the opposition between the religious and the fictional proposed by Krause, I want to sketch some features of an imagination that is at once literary and religious. Both the novel in its classic form and efforts to chart the contours of Catholicism as a belief system emphasize interior states of mind. In contrast, the approach I will pursue is better suited to the relative lack of interiority or psychological complexity in Carleton's stories, a trait they share with much sentimental fiction and melodrama. It also treats popular religion as 'lived religion' rather than ideology, and focuses on externals like practice rather than interior states – on what people do, rather than what they 'believe'. It sees faith and materiality, the sacred and the profane, as intertwined rather than separate realms. This approach to a religio-literary imagination gives particular emphasis to two things that I will focus on: bodies and rituals.

I will examine bodies first, in relation to Carleton's most famously anti-Catholic text. 'The Lough Derg pilgrim' was Carleton's first publication; as is well known, it appeared in 1828 in Otway's *Christian Examiner*. Later, when Carleton reprinted it, he expunged some of the more offensive passages, but plenty remain. The story is a Protestant parable, full of the vocabularies and images that were standard in anti-Catholic discourses, narrated with irony and condescension by an older and wiser speaker looking back upon a period of youthful folly. One of Carleton's arguments is that the pilgrimage and Catholicism as a whole are hypocritical and fraudulent, that they are composed of a series of empty forms and bodily gestures that are devoid of meaningful content or true religious consciousness, and that conceal human weakness and immorality – like the dissimulating priests in the letter to Sisson. In his autobiography, Carleton recounts an incident when, temporary down and out in Dublin, he spent the night in a cellar inhabited by beggars: 'Crutches, wooden legs, artificial cancers, scrofulous necks, artificial wens, sore legs, and a vast variety of similar complaints, were hung up upon the walls of the cellars, and made me reflect upon the degree of perverted talent and ingenuity that must have been necessary to sustain such a mighty mass of imposture.'<sup>34</sup> For Carleton, the Catholic body is like the bodies of these beggars. It is a kind of prosthesis, a deceptive shell that performs ritual falsehoods.

In the story, Catholic bodies have an independent existence that reveals the impostures of the pilgrimage. Before he goes to Lough Derg, the narrator, who is, he says, 'completely ignorant' of religion,<sup>35</sup> acquires a reputation for piety by praying louder and fasting longer than his competitors. Once he begins the stations, bodily pain strips the ritual of genuine religious significance: 'I was

<sup>34</sup> Carleton, *Autobiography*, p. 165. <sup>35</sup> Carleton, *Traits*, i, pp 240.

absolutely stupid and dizzy with the pain [...] I knew not what I was about, but went through the forms in the same mechanical spirit which pervaded all present.<sup>36</sup> He occupies 'an inverted existence, in which the soul sleeps, and the body remains awake',<sup>37</sup> and his body produces involuntary groans and shrieks. We are also told that 'the language which a Roman Catholic of the lower class does not understand, is the one in which he is disposed to pray'.<sup>38</sup> By the time he confesses, he says he could not remember 'a tithe of my sins' and that 'the priest, poor man, had really so much to do, and was in such a hurry, that he had me clean absolved before I had got half through the preface, or knew what I was about.'<sup>39</sup> The narrator has also been impersonating a priest; his two traveling companions take him for one (or, rather, they pretend to), and he does not deceive them. Catholicism is a religion of false exteriors, mechanical rites performed in ignorance of their meaning. The interior states it does foster are morbid manifestations of a gothic imagination worthy of Maturin's *Melmoth the wanderer*. Carleton knew Maturin's works, and even met him once in Dublin. During the vigil, the speaker has been told that pilgrims who fail to stay awake will be damned in the next world and go mad in this one, and his body prays while he sleeps: 'After all, I really slept the better half of the night; yet so indescribably powerful was the apprehension of derangement that my hypocritical tongue wagged aloud at the prayers, during these furtive naps.'<sup>40</sup>

In 'The Lough Derg pilgrim' the body functions as the site where the cruelty and emptiness of Catholic doctrine and Catholic rituals reveal themselves. The narrator comments, 'I verily think that if mortification of the body, without conversion of the life or heart – if penance and not repentance could save the soul, no wretch who performed a pilgrimage here could with a good grace be damned.'<sup>41</sup> But the body is also the site of unconscious resistance to those doctrines and rituals, and the foundation of a superior religion. The battle between the forces of Catholic superstition and Protestant rationality is fought out on the level of the body, between, for example, the body's natural and beneficial urge to sleep and the hypocritical tongue's mechanical delivery of prayers that mean nothing. As the speaker walks towards the lake, his body rebels against the unnaturally somber and morbid frame of mind he is forcing himself into with Catholic prayers:

Despite of all the solemnity about me, my unmanageable eye would turn from the very blackest of the seven deadly offences, and the stoutest of the four cardinal virtues, to the beetling, abrupt, and precipitous rocks which hung over the lake as if ready to tumble into its waters [...] I was taken twice, despite of the most virtuous efforts to the contrary, from a *Salve Regina*, to watch a little skiff, which shone with its snowy sail

36 *Ibid.*, pp 256–7. 37 *Ibid.*, p. 261. 38 *Ibid.*, p. 262. 39 *Ibid.*, p. 263. 40 *Ibid.*, p. 261. 41 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

spread before the radiant evening sun, and glided over the waters, like an angel sent on some happy message. In fact, I found my heart on the point of corruption, by indulging in what I had set down in my vocabulary as the lust of the eye.<sup>42</sup>

This lust of the eye, and the obstinacy of the body generally, signifies an alternative religion, one that is in accordance with nature rather than violating it. In a common literary formulation, it is connected with the beauties of the natural world. Earlier in the walk, the speaker describes the beauties of the natural setting: 'The rapid martins twittered with peculiar glee, or, in the light caprice of their mirth, placed themselves for a moment upon the edge of a scaur, or earthy precipice, in which their nests were built, and then shot off to mingle with the careering and joyful flock that cut the air in every direction. Where is the heart which could not enjoy such a morning scene?' But the speaker's 'mistaken devotion' has rendered him immune to what he calls 'those sensations which the wisdom of God has given as a security in some degree against sin, by opening to the heart of man sources of pleasure, for which the soul is not compelled to barter away her innocence, as in those of a grosser nature.'<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, it is the speaker's body, and in these passages especially its pleasures, rather than his mind, that is naturally Protestant. While this aligns Protestantism with a natural world obedient to God's plan, it also threatens to open Protestantism to the treachery and falsehood of the Catholic body. Interestingly, Carleton's autobiography recalls that Sisson, to whom he sent the Peel memorandum, 'in consequence of some dreadful accident, lost the greater portion of one leg and thigh; but so admirably was this replaced, that to an ordinary eye he looked like a man afflicted only with slight lameness.'<sup>44</sup>

So bodies need to be read carefully; the ordinary eye might miss their true meaning. How does one distinguish between the beggar impostures in the cellar and the upstanding librarian? This issue is taken up in 'The Lough Derg pilgrim' in several scenes illustrating what is perhaps best thought of as the question of Catholic versus Protestant readership or spectatorship. To the discerning eye, the speaker's body and clothing indicate the ludicrous nature of his quest, his pretensions, and his religious imagination. It is an index to the kind of knowledge that the older narrator has and the younger self lacks; his body tells us what he does not yet know – that his quest is ridiculous. 'I [...] cut an original figure, being six feet high, with a short grey cloak pinned tightly about me, my black cassimere small-clothes peeping below it – my long, yellow, polar legs, unencumbered with calves, quite naked; a good hat over the cloak – but with no shoes on my feet, marching gravely upon my pilgrimage.' Some people he passes smile or laugh at his appearance, and he concludes that these were 'Protestant grins',<sup>45</sup> while Catholics read his exterior differently, taking him for

a priest and showing respect. The story contains an implied Protestant spectator/reader, who coincides with the educated, older and wiser narrator. And the narrator explicitly contrasts the reader's 'free, manly, cultivated understanding' with the feelings of his younger self upon reaching the site. A related instance of Catholic credulity leading to misreading of the body occurs in 'Phelim O'Toole's courtship', in which Phelim's besotted parents are convinced that the ravages of small pox have made his face more rather than less attractive.

In Carleton's religio-literary imagination, then, bodies figure in several ways: as the deceptive exteriors of Catholicism, as the natural, God-given foundation of rational Protestantism, and as objects that demand interpretation and therefore provide indexes that separate the discerning from the credulous viewer or reader. Much of Carleton seeks to unmask their deceptive appearances, to point to the fake wens and artificial legs hanging on the wall. But he also suffers from the apprehension that appearances, bodies, and clothing, and perverse readings of them, contain a slippery truth and power of their own. 'In such a world as this, where outsides are so much looked to', he muses in his autobiography, 'What good was my intellect to me when in shabby apparel? What person could discover it in a man with a seedy coat upon his back, when that man was a stranger? We ought not to expect impossibilities.'<sup>46</sup> In 'Phelim O'Toole's courtship', Phelim O'Toole is actually irresistible to the women he courts. He becomes engaged to three of them; his parents' fond reading of his exterior is correct in a sense.

Much previous criticism has treated Carleton's bodies (often more or less by implication) in the context of a combination of the carnivalesque and the tragic. They function as evidence of a living, vital, community and tradition, eating, drinking, fighting, courting, while, in other moments, they register the maiming of that community by poverty, famine, and ill-governance. John Wilson Foster, for example, comments that '[f]or all the deprivation suffered by Carleton's people, they are a rich and lively assortment, even in the throes of hunger and sickness they have a feverish energy.'<sup>47</sup> I am arguing that if we attend more specifically to Carleton's representations of religion on the one hand, and to their relation to the literary (as opposed to the ethnographic) features of his writing on the other hand, a related but somewhat different picture emerges. Carleton's Catholic body is a sign of corruption, of a dying culture, but it is also the sign of a culture that survives by imposing its appearances on reality in a wily and sometimes unsettling fashion. It reasserts itself, not in the religious realm, but in questions of readership and audience, and in plot structures that illustrate the power of exteriors or the power of a Catholic reading of the body. Carleton embeds that distinction embodied by his parents between folk culture as vital and folk culture as fading in representations of the body, and the body is a source, not simply of vitality or impoverishment, but of ambiguity.

Turning to ritual, I will argue that Carleton's religio-literary imagination combines a focus on the externals of appearances and lived religion with questions of literary form and readership. Carleton takes two important Catholic rituals – marriage and pilgrimage to a holy well – and evacuates their sacred meaning. But he does so only to recreate and re-figure these rituals, and their status as set apart from the profane world – as sacred – in other, cognate objects and occasions. And he invests them with this new kind of sacredness by using the tropes of melodrama and sentimental fiction.

Unlike 'The Lough Derg pilgrim', 'Shane Fadh's wedding' (first published in 1830), is narrated by one of the country people – Shane himself – rather than by an educated Protestant observer. Much of the interest of the story revolves around Carleton's comic, ethnographic exploration of Irish country wedding customs. But the story also displays an interest in marriage as a sacrament. Shane and Mary want to get married, but Mary's father opposes the match. So they decide to run away together in order to force his consent, a practice that, Carleton tells us, is common in the Irish countryside. And he bears this out by delineating the customs surrounding it in much the same humorous, ethnographic mode that he uses to describe the wedding itself. When the couple are about to go to Shane's uncle's house to spend the night, however, the tone shifts abruptly into a different register, and the following scene takes place:

'Well, Mary,' says I, 'a-cushla-machree, it's dark enough for us to go; and, in the name of God, let us be off.'

The crathur looked into my face, and got pale – for she was very young then: 'Shane,' says she, and she thrimbled like an aspen leaf, 'I'm going to trust myself with you for ever – for ever, Shane, avourneen,' – and her sweet voice broke into purty murmurs as she spoke; 'whether for happiness or sorrow God he only knows. I can bear poverty and distress, sickness and want with you, but I can't bear to think that you should ever forget to love me as you do now; or that your heart should ever cool to me: but I'm sure,' says she, 'you'll never forget this night, and the solemn promises you made me, before God and the blessed skies above us.'

We were sitting at the time under the shade of a rowan-tree, and I had only one answer to make – I pulled her to my breast, where she laid her head and cried like a child, with her cheek against mine. My own eyes weren't dry, although I felt no sorrow, but – but – I never forgot that night – and I never will.<sup>48</sup>

This exchange constitutes the sacred aspect of the marriage, set apart from the profane festivities that surround it in situation, tone, and vocabulary. It solemnizes their union in much the same way a church wedding would. It echoes

the ceremony fairly directly – ‘in poverty and distress, sickness and want,’ and it is here, not at the actual wedding ceremony, that we see Shane make a solemn promise to Mary before God. The scene connects their union to the sacred by using the language and imagery of sentimental fiction. Yeats may have found the later Carleton unsentimental, but this story combines Carleton’s humorous, ethnographic mode with some of the classic tropes of sentimentality. Shane and Mary’s hearts are so full that words are inadequate, as evidenced by Mary’s inarticulate murmurs and Shane’s wordless response. In sentimental fiction, the language of the body – turning pale, trembling, weeping – signifies deep emotion and moral worth, and the tableau of Mary with her head on Shane’s breast, her cheek to his cheek, employs the kind of suggestive but controlled eroticism that characterizes many of the discourses of feeling.

By way of a brief comparison, I want to observe that all these characteristics are also found in Sydney Owenson’s *The wild Irish girl*, but there is a difference between the two texts. In Owenson, Catholic ritual is picturesque and seductive but to be rejected, a beautiful set of exterior forms concealing interior corruption and danger. Horatio muses:

What a religion is this! How finely does it harmonize with the weakness of our nature; how seducingly it speaks to the senses; how forcibly it works on the passions; how strongly it seizes on the imagination; how interesting its forms; how graceful its ceremonies, how awful its rites [...] Who would not become its proselyte, were it not for the stern opposition of reason – the cold suggestions of philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, the romance between Horatio and Glorvina is frequently cast in religious terms, and his romantic devotion is explicitly described as religious devotion. On May day, for example, Horatio and his ‘lovely votarist’<sup>50</sup> participate in a kind of natural marriage ceremony, in which she gives him a rose and he pledges to her. He later refers to the occasion as a ‘sacred covenant’.<sup>51</sup> A few pages after the ceremony, Horatio and Father John witness an old woman performing the pattern at a holy well, and Father John describes to Horatio Lough Derg and the ‘votarists’ who visit it.<sup>52</sup> The connection here between two kinds of devotion is explicit – and purely metaphorical. Owenson uses the vocabulary of religion to describe Horatio’s romantic commitment and the transformation Glorvina causes in him, rescuing him from his corruption and ennui.

In contrast, Carleton uses the language of sentimental fiction in order to recreate the sacred aura that he has expunged from the actual wedding ceremony. He does not make religion a metaphor for romantic love. In many of his stories, he represents Catholic practices in a manner that we might think of as

<sup>49</sup> Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), *The wild Irish girl* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999), p. 50. <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154. <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.



revising Victor Turner's formulation of the 'liminal' – a rite or condition which is removed from everyday life and in which established social rules and hierarchies are temporarily suspended. Liminality produces what Turner calls *communitas*, an unmediated, egalitarian community among participants. Obviously there is a connection to a Bakhtinian carnivalesque here, too. Several scholars, including Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, have read patterns at Irish holy wells partly in these terms.<sup>53</sup> Carleton's popular festivals do display these features to some extent. But the actual religious rituals themselves are often stripped of their associations with the sacred. That is to say, they are stripped of their associations with whatever enables them to offer access to the liminal. Instead, they usually replicate the hierarchies and conflicts of the profane world. Another example is to be found in Carleton's story, 'The station,' which, in its original form in particular, gave Carleton the opportunity to denounce the practice of confession and to illustrate the myriad class and social distinctions in the rural community.

In 'Shane Fadh's wedding,' when the narrative arrives at Shane and Mary's actual wedding ceremony, Carleton takes pains to include it, but to barely narrate it at all, and to completely overshadow it with Shane's anxiety to prevent the other men present from beating him to the first kiss. Shane recounts:

While the priest was going over the business, I kept my eye about me, and, sure enough, there were seven or eight fellows all waiting to snap at her. When the ceremony drew near a close, I got up on one leg, so that I could bounce to my feet like lightening, and when it was finished, I got her in my arm, before you could say Jack Robinson, and swinging her behind the priest, gave her the husband's first kiss.<sup>54</sup>

The next man to get a kiss is the priest, who shoves back the other participants bodily to claim his privilege. The sacred element of the marriage has been transferred to the sentimental language of the scene under the rowan tree, so here the ceremony appears as 'going over the business,' and as part of the profane world. This transaction between the sacred and the profane, the ethnographic and the sentimental, is also evidenced by Carleton's revisions over time. Barbara Hayley shows that many of the sentimental passages were added or augmented as part of the revisionary process Carleton undertook as, over the years, he sought to moderate some of the anti-Catholic tenor of his work.<sup>55</sup> So adding sentiment and looking upon Catholic ritual more tolerantly advanced in his writings together.

We find a similar transfer of the energies of the sacred to the realm of domestic affections and family life in 'Tubber Derg; or, the Red Well.' We also

<sup>53</sup> See Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The pattern', in J.S. Donnelly, Jr, and Kerby Miller (eds), *Irish popular culture, 1650–1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 1999), pp 201–21. <sup>54</sup> Carleton, *Traits*, i, p. 65. <sup>55</sup> Hayley, *Anglo-Irish tradition*, p. 43.

find a similar substitution of a partially secularized ritual for an explicitly Catholic one. This story first appeared as 'Landlord and tenant in 1831' in the *National Magazine*. It is a story about bad landlords, tenant rights and the virtues of industriousness, faith, and charity. In the text, Tubber Derg is not, or not explicitly, a holy well where one would make a pattern. But I think it is clear that Carleton wants to suggest holy wells in 'Tubber Derg', and he gives an extended description of a pattern at a holy well in 'Phelim O'Toole's courtship'. Most holy wells in Ireland were named after saints, but not all of them were,<sup>56</sup> and Carleton's name – the Red Well – and the description of the water invoke the penitential aspects of the pattern as well as foreshadowing Owen McCarthy's trials and hardships: 'as the traveler ascended [...] towards the house, he appeared to track his way in blood, for a chalybeate spa arose at its head, oozing out of the earth, and spread itself in a crimson stream over the path in every spot whereon a foot-mark could be made.'<sup>57</sup> A chalybeate stream contains iron, so the water turns red. This also provides an echo of Carleton's description in 'Phelim O'Toole's courtship', a large part of which is disapproving. That description includes the sight of 'men and women [...] washing the blood off their knees, and dipping such parts of their body as were afflicted with local complaints into the stream.'<sup>58</sup>

But the well in 'Tubber Derg' is a different kind of sacred site – one that represents the prelapsarian domestic bliss in which Owen McCarthy and his family live when the story opens, and which is ruined by the economic collapse that occurred after 1814 and the by callousness of Owen's landlord and the landlord's agent. The story opens with an idealized description of the valley containing the well and Owen's house, and with the domestic tableau of a contented Owen surrounded by his family: 'a little chubby urchin at his knee, and another in his arms [...] whilst Kathleen his wife, with her two maids, each crooning a low song, sat before the door, milking the cows.'<sup>59</sup> Then it documents the decline of the family's circumstances, a function of the 'national depression',<sup>60</sup> to the point where a desperate Owen decides to travel to Dublin to beg his absentee landlord for clemency in person. At the start of this secular pilgrimage, his favorite child runs after him and asks for another kiss. His quest is described in terms of a popular religious pilgrimage – 'He had done his duty – he had gone to the fountain-head, with a hope that his simple story of affliction might be heard',<sup>61</sup> and it even suggests the penitential nature of such pilgrimages because he is pushed down the stairs by the landlord's servant and gets a wound on his head. But it is not successful, and while he is away, his family is evicted and the child dies. He is haunted by her request for a last kiss, which he takes as a prophecy or foreshadowing of her death.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Michael P. Carroll, *Irish pilgrimage: holy wells and popular Catholic devotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), p. 25. <sup>57</sup> William Carleton, *Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry*, 2 vols (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), ii, p. 364. <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194. <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365. <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372. <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379. <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 381, 399.

Carleton spends a lot of time describing Owen's grief over the loss of his home and his child – and, because she is buried at Tubber Derg, they are metonyms for one another – and his continuing determination to find a moral, respectable, and financially secure life for his remaining family. The main point I want to make is not simply that Carleton employs the languages and tropes of sentimentality, which he does, but that they have a particular relation to religion here, signified by the fact that the story re-writes the holy well into an emblem of a sacred domestic space, and sends Owen on two journeys that are profane, but are also imbued with the religion of domesticity. This conjunction of the religious and the domestic is also indicated, for example, when his wife Kathleen wonders whether their luck has turned for the better because Alley, the dead child, is interceding for them in heaven, and the narrator comments: 'there was something beautiful in the superstition of Kathleen's affections; something that touched the heart and its dearest associations'.<sup>63</sup> The superstition of the affections is an apt phrase for this kind of re-writing of the sacred as the domestic. We might also call it a species of syncretism that is both religious and literary.

Owen's second pilgrimage takes him back to Tubber Derg, and to the girl's grave, where his neighbors, grateful for his charity and help in earlier days, have put up the grave stone that he could not afford when she was buried, turning a private burial site into a public sacred space. Owen asks at the grave for the dead child to 'pray for us before God, an' get him an' his blessed Mother to look on us wid favour an' compassion.'<sup>64</sup> This pilgrimage is successful. Immediately afterwards, Owen is given the chance to rent a farm nearby the well. He builds a new house on it that resembles 'that of Tubber Derg in its better days' as nearly as possible<sup>65</sup> and concludes his life happily, surrounded by his family, in a repetition of the original tableau: 'Kathleen and two servant maids were milking, and the whole family were assembled about the door.'<sup>66</sup> The moral of the story, according to him, is never to give up one's trust in God, and he is contrasted to 'many of his thoughtless countrymen' who should learn from his example.

I have been arguing that the religious ambiguity of bodies and the re-writing of Catholic ritual and the sacred in sentimental and domestic terms is characteristic of Carleton's religio-literary imagination. In sketching some of the features of this imagination, I hope to shift the ground of critical discussions of Carleton and religion, away from questions of authenticity and his loyalty (or lack thereof) to Catholicism. I think this shift can also help us account for some of the formal divisions and transitions that characterize Carleton's writing in *Traits and stories*, such as the combination of the carnivalesque and the sentimental, or Carleton's uncertainty about whether the culture he sought to document was fading away, or whether it was re-inventing itself in new forms and new practices. And it can help us understand why he

was an important predecessor to the ethnographic modernism of Yeats and Synge, while also working in the popular modes of religious and sentimental sensibility. The difficult and obscure interior zones represented by Carleton's views on religion or the question of his authenticity are still worthwhile subjects of study and debate. But I hope now scholars will also begin to examine the fascinating exteriors, bodies, and rituals that preoccupied his religio-literary imagination.