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## Gleams of Life Everlasting in Alice McDermott's *Someone*

Paul J. Contino

In his December 2012 *New York Times* essay, Paul Elie briefly mentions “the complex domestic novels of Alice McDermott” and comments about her characters: “I have been to church with these characters, have stood at font and graveside with them. But when I close the books their beliefs remain a mystery. Not in the theological sense—a line going off the grid of cause and effect, a portal to the puzzle of existence. I just don’t know what they believe or how they came to believe it.” Just four months later, Elie interviewed Alice McDermott at a Georgetown Faith and Culture presentation.<sup>1</sup> Having just read the page proofs of her as-yet-unpublished novel, *Someone*, Elie declared it her “best book yet.” I suspect he found in it a fuller, more satisfying representation of what he called in that interview, “realism in the broadest sense,” the power of language to represent reality in both its physical and spiritual dimensions. In my own judgment, *Someone*, perhaps more than any of her previous novels, suggests the reality of “the hidden ground of Love” (Thomas Merton’s phrase), the transcendent Someone in whom we live and move and have our being. This novel meets Elie’s criteria for the kind of novel he seeks: “You hope to find the writer who can dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny, an account of our predicament that still and all has the power to persuade. You look for a story or a novel where the writer puts it all together. That would be enough. That would be something. That would be unbelievable.”

Elie’s essay inspired many responses, including a list posted by *Image* magazine of the Top 25 Contemporary Writers of Faith—a list that did not include McDermott, but did so a week later when the list was expanded to fifty (specifically, her novels, *At Weddings and Wakes* and *Charming Billy*).<sup>2</sup> Part of Elie’s dissatisfaction with the faith dimension in McDermott’s work, at least up to *Someone*, may be due to McDermott’s resistance to defining

faith beyond the analogical experience of human love. As she says in her interview with Elie, her understanding of herself as a Catholic/Christian writer is centered in “a sense in all I write that love redeems us. How does it redeem us? Is this true? These are the essential things to discover in art.”<sup>3</sup> Seven years ago, I interviewed Alice just after her previous novel, *After This*, had been published, and she also spoke of her purpose as an artist. I observed the rich irony in her work “the overturning of expectation that can, in itself, be gracious,” and she replied: “That’s the purpose of art. But you find it in the piece as a whole; it’s not in the single scene. It builds sentence after sentence, and then something happens that neither the writer nor reader expected, but that grows out of what came before. That’s so much more fascinating to me, and something I’m more willing to credit a superior being with, than something that happens out of the blue.”<sup>4</sup>

McDermott’s work, especially her most recent, does “dramatize belief” in the way Elie describes. However, she presents faith as almost integrally connected to doubt, much like the man who pleads with Jesus: “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.” Helpful here is a remarkable talk that McDermott gave at Fordham in April 2013, adapted and published in *Commonweal*, and entitled “Redeemed from Death? The Faith of a Catholic Novelist.” Near its conclusion, she states:

What makes me a Catholic writer, I think, is not that [my] characters belong to a certain church, or neighborhood or time or place. What makes me a Catholic writer is that the faith I profess contends that out of love—love—for such troubled, flawed, struggling human beings, the Creator, the First Cause, became flesh so that we, every one of us, would not perish. I am a Catholic writer because this very notion—whether it be made up or divinely revealed, fanciful thinking or breathtaking truth—so astonishes me that I can’t help but bring it to every story I tell.

The story called *Someone* dramatizes the faith of characters who yearn that Christ’s promise of everlasting life be true. Within the ordinary contours of they receive glimpses that it might be, that their loving Creator co-inheres in their ordinary lives. McDermott represents the drama of faith through echoing whispers, not shouts. Yet even the hard of hearing might hear her artful whisper.<sup>5</sup>

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The cultural context of *Someone* is familiar to McDermott's readers. Marie is a first-generation Irish Catholic who grows up in Brooklyn, born sometime in the 1920s and 30s. The novel is divided into three parts. In Part One, which develops chronologically, Marie describes her girlhood—her family, neighbors, and, finally, her romantic heartbreak at the age of seventeen. Her older, bookish brother Gabe is ordained a priest but, after a year, leaves the priesthood. (Part Three, which takes place many years later, suggests the possible motivations for his departure.) Part Two moves freely through time: Marie works for seven years in the local funeral parlor, meets and marries a World War II veteran and fellow Irish Catholic, Tom Commeford. The novel is told in Marie's first-person voice, and brings the reader into the new millennium, to a nursing home on the eve of Marie's death. In incantatory language, Marie recalls moments of coherence in her life, "yet another connection," in the words of her husband (162). She also discerns gleams of *co-inherence*<sup>6</sup>: moments in which the loving kindness of "someone," suggests, analogically, the loving presence of a transcendent *Someone*, one who offers, in McDermott's words "gifts from someplace we can't quite define."<sup>7</sup> While she is indeed a novelist with an "overriding sense of mortality"<sup>8</sup>, she hints, too, at the luminous possibility of the resurrection and life.

In Part One, a key moment occurs when her brother Gabe tries to make sense of the unexpectedly early death of a neighborhood girl, Pegeen Chehab, whose mother was born in County Clare and whose father, evocatively, was born near Mt. Lebanon in Syria. Only the day before, Pegeen had fallen on the subway and been helped up by "a very handsome man," and expressed to little Marie "her vision of some impossible future," her faith that when she falls again (this time on purpose), the man will catch her: "'We'll see what happens then,' she said, sly and confident, her thick eyebrows raised. She swung her purse slowly, turned to move on. 'That will be something to see,' she said" (*Someone* 6). In fact, the next day Pegeen falls down her basement stairs and is killed. After the wake, at the dinner table, young Gabe, still in high school, reaches for the family Bible, "worn and leather bound":

He began to read out loud. He did not read in the same clear voice he recited his poems, but softly, sitting hunched over the table, the words breaking here and there under the burden of his new, thickening voice.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin?” he read. “Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge. Even all the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

Into the silence that followed, I said, “Amadan.”

I said it as Pegeen had said it, ruefully, shaking my head as if speaking fondly of a troublesome child. . . . And then for good measure I said it again, into the teacup itself. “Amadan.” (25-26).

“Amadan” is the old Irish word for “fool,” and for her utterance—heard by her parents as a rude rebuke of Gabe’s scriptural consolation—Marie receives a glass of soapy water from her mother, and a memorable quip from her father: “‘One bishop,’ my father joked, his hand to the top of my head, ‘and one little pagan. We’ve run the gamut with these two’” (27).

Marie is not especially pious, but she’s no more a “little pagan” than Gabe is to be a bishop. For one thing, she never stops attending Mass. Her vision is poor (it worsens as she later suffers from a retinal detachment and a cataract operation on the wrong eye), but she sees glimmers of grace within the contours of her ordinary life. This spiritual vision, her receptivity to the reality of God’s sustaining love (although she wouldn’t use those specific words), grows keener as she ages. We hear this most clearly in the novel’s final words, as the elderly Marie describes walking slowly down the stairs of her own home, just after she has, possibly, saved the life of her broken, healing brother, and after Gabe himself, in a dream mysteriously linked to reality, has interceded to God to save the life of her firstborn son. In her final words, she remembers Pegeen:

I went down the stairs carefully in the dark, one hand on the banister, one hand on the wall. What light came from the lampposts outside the living-room window was pooled at the bottom of the stairs. I thought of Pegeen Chehab and her last fall. And then of the distance her parents had traveled to bring her to her brief life, sands of Syria and Mount Lebanon and the slick floor of the pitching [immigrant] ship, and then that brief flame in the parlor floor window.

On the day before she died, Pegeen leaned down to me, her eyes sparkling with her plan. She said, If I see him, I’ll get real close. I’ll pretend to fall, see, and he’ll catch me and say, Is it you again? Someone nice.

She told me, poor sparrow, poor fool, We’ll see what happens then. (232)

The silent white space that follows these lines—“the mystery of the silence at the end of the story”—bespeaks the mystery of the transcendent, of a Someone beyond our expectations who catches and sustains us, whose love saves us.<sup>9</sup>

The words of these final paragraphs are rich with echoes, rhymes of images and phrases that come before. In Elie's words, these rhymes formally “put it all together,” much like the recapitulations that sound at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and bring that open-ended Christian novel to its resonant close. Three things in the conclusion especially reverberate. First, scripture, specifically the image of the sparrow, and the poor fool. Their conjunction here recalls Shakespeare: “There's providence in the fall of a sparrow,” says Hamlet; yet “my poor fool is hanged,” keens Lear. Young Gabe's faith in God's sustaining love for the sparrow, and for us, and little Marie's rebuttal “Amadan”—“fool”—converge, like those lines in Shakespeare. The terrible sorrow of finitude, fully experienced, opens, unexpectedly, foolishly, to the possibility of more, that something that will happen only “then” (the novel's final, promising word). Earlier, Marie discerns an analogical image of such a convergence when she observes families reuniting at the local airport: “every anticipated crisis had been averted, and thus something celebratory and delightful about each ordinary reunion. ... something of the resurrection and the life all about this particular part of LaGuardia” (146). A breeze from the Holy Land, Mount Lebanon, blows through Brooklyn. Second, the image of light: the glowing lamp that appears in Pegeen's apartment suggests a luminous presence, that recurs throughout the novel. Third, McDermott's repetitive rhythms of language are incantatory. Here McDermott credits her life in the Church as an influence, especially the litany that is the liturgy, that gathering which analogically points, beyond space and time, to a communal beatitude where death is no more. Keeping this powerful conclusion, and the novel as a whole, in mind, *Someone* presents significant counter-evidence to Elie's diagnosis that “Christian belief figures into literary fiction in our place and time as something between a dead language and a hangover.”

I will now look at these three aspects—scripture, light, litany—in the novel as a whole. Another resonant passage of scripture is drawn from John 9. First, some context: At the age of seventeen, weeping after being jilted by Walter Hartnett, he of the wandering eye, Marie rages against her homely near-sightedness. She “raise[s] a fist against God for how He had shaped me in that first darkness: unlovely and unloved” (79). Gabe, no longer a priest,

hears her weeping, and suggests that they take a walk. Near its end, she pleads, "Who's going to love me?" and Gabe assures her, simply: "Someone will." (88). Just before this assurance, a young man had stopped Gabe in the street and awkwardly greeted him as "Father." This young man, Tom Commeford, works at a brewery, and during lunch breaks, had attended Gabe's noon Mass. Unbeknownst to near-sighted Marie, Tom will someday become her loving husband. Years later, at a homecoming party for World War II vets, Marie invites Tom to her home to visit with Gabe, whose sermons he still remembers—especially the one about the blind man in John 9. During his seven tedious months in a German POW camp, Tom had taken up painting, and recalls how one day he had spit into clay to make paint. Enacting that gesture, he remembered Gabe's sermon about the blind man. Gabe and Marie think he's referring to the neighborhood's blind umpire, Billy Corrigan, recently deceased, whom Gabe had mentioned in that sermon. But Tom "earnestly" corrects and "silence[s]" them: No, he insists, it was the story of the blind man healed by Jesus. Gabe too remembers, and Tom tells the story, "utterly delighted by yet another connection being made, between that lonely time in the prison camp and this homely one here at our dining-room table, between Gabe's words and his own":

He looked into his palm. "And I thought about what you said, how the guy's just sitting there, not asking, not wearing himself out with asking, you said, and, bingo, Jesus cures him. Just because he feels sorry for the guy. We had lunch together. We talked about it." He looked up. "I don't know," he said cautiously. "It was a good thing to remember, over there. That you didn't necessarily have to ask. Or even believe. It gave me hope." (162-63)

Tom breaks the uncertain silence that follows with a characteristic quip, "And I don't mean Bob Hope." Laughter breaks the tension, and Tom continues to tell his story of capture, and how he was almost killed by a bitter old German who had just lost his son in the war. Marie is "both embarrassed and dismayed to see the light [of the chandelier] reflect a sudden tear" in Tom's eye. Although put off by his "stream of talk," she feels "the unmistakable tug of sympathy for a guy who had been through so much" (166).

This image of light, suggesting the co-inherence of God's love and our own, appears throughout the novel. For example the wife of the undertaker, Mrs. Fagin, and her friends are kind of authors; they "weave a biography of sorts for the newly dead" and their third-floor room "always seemed

to [Marie] to be full of light and the aftermath of some laughter” (121). Long after their break-up, Marie meets a broken Walter Hartnett at Billy Corrigan’s wake, and sees him reach into his pocket, not for his flask, but for the remembrance card: “Just before he rounded the corner, I saw how the light caught it, cupped in the palm of his hand” (142). And as she nears death in a nursing home, her eyesight failing, her peripheral vision spies shimmering figures beside her caretaker: “strangers, children in old-fashioned clothes, sometimes nuns in long habits or women with babies in their arms. A clean and lacy light all about them” (176). When she had described this to her dubious children, she’d said impatiently, “Why do you think every mystery is just a trick of the light?” (177). Throughout the novel, the image of light suggests the mystery of love, the co-inherence of someone and Someone.

At the end of this brief chapter, the unnamed caretaker asks that Marie call her so that he can help her get into bed:

I said, “I will,” and the silence that followed told me he knew I lied. I saw the children move into the room.

“If you ask,” he said softly, “you know I will do it for you. You only have to ask.” And then he disappeared from what was left of my vision, because my eyes suddenly brimmed with foolish tears.

I suppose I stood then, because he caught me as I fell.

This passage reverberates with phrases and images that run throughout the novel: the reader recalls the kind stranger who catches Pegeen when she falls in the subway, and the story of Jesus’ healing of the blind man, who doesn’t ask to be healed yet is. The “foolish” tears that fill Marie’s eyes are likely triggered by her memory of Tom, now dead for years, who himself remembered her brother’s sermon, and told that story in her dining room. “Foolish” recalls her girlish taunt of “Amadan.” In her growing vulnerability, she accepts her own humble foolishness, maybe also recalling the first time she makes love with Tom after the difficult birth of their first child, after they were warned not to have any more children. “When he ran his fingertips over the scar that split my belly, he paused. I heard him catch his breath. ‘This is foolish of us,’ he whispered. I said, ‘I suppose it is’” (193). The folly of being receptive to the unexpected gift: a second son, James, and, in time, two daughters, Susan and Helen, follow the birth of Tom.

In the final pages of the novel, Marie has a terrible, terribly real dream: that her son, Tom has been killed, by drowning or drunk driving. Weeping,

keening, she pleads with Gabe—mysterious, angelic, yet of “ordinary flesh” (227)—to “Ask”: to “make it not real” (228), to intercede for her that Tom might be saved. She awakens. Tom is alive. It feels like a miracle: “I had asked and it had been given. His life restored” (229). She is “foolishly certain that it had not been a dream at all” (230).

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In our 2007 *Image* interview, Alice McDermott observed: “A real miracle is not an aberration, an intrusion, but a result of the confluence (Eudora Welty’s word) of time, place, character, nature, of ordinary circumstances—a confluence that produces something remarkable, something transcendent. This is what the artist does: takes the ordinary, finite, daily stuff of our condition and shapes and reshapes it until it goes beyond itself, until it yields a larger meaning” (71). When Christians profess their faith, they profess faith in the most impossible of miracles: in life everlasting. To read *Someone* contemplatively, attentive to its resonances and rhymes, is to experience the implications of that faith, even to foster it, to sense the presence of transcendence like Elijah’s gentle, whispering wind. Along with other contemporaries, especially David Adams Richards (whom I hope to discuss elsewhere) and, of course, Marilynne Robinson, Alice McDermott offers evidence of the continuing vitality of the Christian novel.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Paul Elie, “Faith and Culture” Lecture Series, Georgetown University, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KxeYW9IEAU>.

<sup>2</sup>See also Wolfe’s response to Elie, and his brief discussion of *Charming Billy*, in “Whispers of Faith in a Postsecular World.” For an essay akin to Elie’s, see Dana Gioia’s “The Catholic Writer Today.”

McDermott’s work is not mentioned in three recent critical works on fiction and faith: Thomas F. Haddox (*Hard Sayings: The Rhetoric of Christian Orthodoxy* [Ohio State UP, 2013]), Amy Hungerford (*Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* [Princeton UP, 2010]), and Andrew Tate (*Contemporary Fiction and Literature* [Continuum, 2010]).

<sup>3</sup>Elie interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KxeYW9IEAU>

<sup>4</sup>She works hard to fulfill her obligation to the character she creates, and to hone the language of that character so that it “points us to Something, but that we

can't define. ... There's more than ever be said" (from Elie interview, my capitalization of "Something").

<sup>5</sup>I am, of course, echoing here Flannery O' Connor's famous comments about her own work. Revealingly, McDermott admits to Paul Elie that while she loves O'Connor's essays and letters, she does not love her stories. See also Doris Betts' 1994 essay in *Image*, "Whispering Hope."

<sup>6</sup>In *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), Robert Barron employs the word "coinherence" to describe the way in which God's triune loving presence grounds the human capacity to know reality. In his chapter on "The Nature of the Christ-Mind," drawing especially on St. Thomas Aquinas, he writes of "the mutual illumination of meaning of both subject and object in the their coinherent act of knowing. The mystical dimension of ordinary knowing becomes clear when we recall that the mutuality between finite knower and finite known is a participation in the elemental mutuality between divine knower and creature that constitutes the very being of the creature. That is, the intellectual coinherence of God and creature—the relationality that the creature *is*—is mimicked in a real thought imperfect way in the coinherence between the ordinary act of intelligence and ordinary intelligibility" (157).

<sup>7</sup>Los Angeles Public Library, interview with Brighde Mullins, October 10, 2013.

<sup>8</sup>The phrase is McDermott's, from the "The Writing Life" interview with Ron Charles, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjld7236aHA>.

<sup>9</sup>The phrase is Isak Dinesen's, which McDermott quotes in the Elie interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KxeYW9IEAU>.

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