Incomparable Poetry
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Published by Punctum Books

Kiely, Robert.  
Project MUSE.  

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On May 20, 2009 the report on the Commission to inquire into child abuse, also known as the Ryan Commission, offered a dev-astating insight into the scale of abuse of children in Ireland from 1936 onwards. It was followed a few months later by the Murphy Report. It was a strange time, and I remember acutely the upset around me and the prevalence of debate in the media about the abuse scandals in pubs and workplaces. Four years later Enda Kenny apologizes to victims of the Magdalene Laundries, saying the government and citizens of Ireland “deeply regret and apologise unreservedly to all those women for the hurt that was done to them.”¹ (The Magdalene Laundries in Ireland were institutions usually run by Roman Catholic orders, which operated from the eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries, ostensibly to house “fallen women.” They and their children were typically buried in unmarked mass graves on the grounds, which continue to be

¹ Miriam Lord, “I, as Taoiseach, on behalf of the State, the Government and our citizens, deeply regret and apologise unreservedly to all those women for the hurt that was done to them,” The Irish Times, February 20, 2013, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/i-as-taoiseach-on-behalf-of-the-state-the-government-and-our-citizens-deeply-regret-and-apologise-unreserv edly-to-all-those-women-for-the-hurt-that-was-done-to-them-1.1313278.
uncovered.) The scandal is merely another in a litany. In 2014, a year after Kenny’s apology, an essay came out in an academic publication which was unreservedly on the side of the Church. In it, Brendan Geary points out that the Irish state and Catholic morality are yoked together in the Irish habitus. Geary gives a narrative of the financial crisis in Ireland which sets it side-by-side with the “agonies” of the Church, punished both by secularism’s cruel tendencies, revelations about the sexual abuse of children, and the long-known Magdalene Laundries. For Geary, the revelations prompted critical reflections in formerly passive participants (i.e., the wider community), and in turn Irish people apparently turned to the Celtic Tiger for solace, having been hidden under a rock on the Blasket Isles beforehand. And yet, relishes Geary, this Celtic Tiger would also turn out to “have feet of clay.” Geary implies that being a child-rape-apologist is defendable. Is Cardinal Brady, Geary pines, not “by all accounts a good, compassionate, pastoral man”? Can we not forget that all he did was neglect to inform parents or secular authorities of the abuse of children? Is this, he asks us in a tone of disbelief, all it takes to drag a perfectly reasonable man through the dirt? Out of the frying pan, into the fire, apparently. Geary’s argument moves dizzyingly between the moral reprobation of situations in which the economy and abuse of individuals seem distant, such as under capitalism, and closer, as in the observation that Irish Catholics must have “colluded” with this abuse in smaller communities. This is simultaneously absurd and unavoidable.

4 Ibid., 50.
5 Ibid., 57.
It is absurd because we know that although our lives are predicated on the suffering and exclusion of others, we feel it to be the case that this suffering is frequently at such a distance that we cannot do anything to counteract it. Geary is a Marist Brother (a monk, a member of an international community of Catholic Religious Institute of Brothers) and hence much more complicit than you or I in the systematic rape of children, and in writing this defense of the Church, is certainly an apologist-cum-colluder-extraordinaire to said rape. Geary’s claim that many people colluded in this abuse is of course true, but the jumps between this and his observations about the Celtic Tiger as some kind of collective moral failing prompt confusion. In what sense are any of these distinct categories, that is, sexual abuse and economic power, relatable? The position that Geary occupies assumes the economy to have a moral basis. If we retreat from that assumption, we will wonder on what order we can appeal for justice, both from the failures of capitalism and the Church to offer a just life. These same dizzying switches in Geary’s account, which are indefensible, unavoidable, and upsetting, are evoked to a lesser degree by the work of Dave Lordan that compares the financial crisis to situations of sexualized violence.

A multi-genre writer, performer, editor, and educator, Dave Lordan has taught creative writing across Ireland. His poem “A resurrection in Charlesland” figures the Celtic Tiger and subsequent economic crash as sexual abuse. Charlesland is a high-density development located on the southside of Greystones in County Wicklow, Ireland, about twenty-five kilometers from Dublin city center. Charlesland has about 1,500 houses and apartments and a neighborhood shopping complex with a supermarket. The poem has twenty-one sections demarcated by currency symbols that cut across the poem. The first break is signaled by six dollar signs, the next seven pound signs, the next six euros, then seven dollars, then six euros again, then dollars, pounds, pounds, dollars, euros, dollars, pounds, euros, six Xs, dollars, pounds, euros, pounds, dollars, then euros, striating the poem’s continuous emission. It may be that Lordan is saying that these currencies simultaneously unite and divide the poem.
These currencies are surely the loudest language we now have, the only language we speak to each other. Speaking to this point, in the essay “A History of Separation,” the Endnotes collective claims that “the communist horizon of the present” is not “class consciousness” but rather

a growing consciousness of capital. At present, workers name the enemy they face in different ways: as bad banks and corrupt politicians, as the greedy 1%. These are, however, only foreshortened critiques of an immense and terrible reality. Ours is a society of strangers, engaged in a complex set of interactions. There is no one, no group or class, who controls these interactions. Instead, our blind dance is coordinated impersonally, through markets. The language we speak — by means of which we call out to one another, in this darkness — is the language of prices. It is not the only language we can hear, but it is the loudest. This is the community of capital.6

While Lordan and Joyce decry fat cats or estate agents, they are very conscious of prices and currencies, as is clear in the currency symbols of “A resurrection in Charlesland” and the Foreign Domestic Investment of Joyce’s “Capital Accounts.”

Lordan’s poem is free verse and clearly exhibits the influence of the Surrealists and the Beats. “A resurrection in Charlesland” describes a state of affairs in which the media has turned against the public, putting it under a “siege,” and also mentions “a brutal commentariat” (“all the high-toned Pinochets / on the Radio”) calling for “slashing” of the public sector via cuts to funding.7 Under the influence of the free-market-oriented neoliberal Chicago Boys, the military government of Pinochet implemented economic liberalization including currency stabilization, re-

7 Lordan, Invitation to a Sacrifice (Clare: Salmon, 2010), 108.
moval of tariff protections for local industry (as in Whitaker’s plan), and the banning of trade unions, privatized social security, and hundreds of state-owned enterprises. These policies produced what has been referred to by right-wing libertarian Milton Friedman as the “Miracle of Chile,” which was, for most of the 1990s, the best performing economy in Latin America. In Lordan’s poem, one of those “Pincohets” is almost certainly the “Friedmanite” Colm McCarthy from University College Dublin, who appeared regularly on Irish Radio during the composition of this poem. The “Nation” is “For Sale” and although the populace repeat the “neoliberal prescriptions” they are offered — people were swindled out of money for houses, but also enjoyed being swindled. Drugs and entrepreneurship are intertwined as the poem discusses various forms of abuse and “solicitors” with penchant for stimulants, punning on “Charlie” as cocaine and Charlie McGreevy, minister for Finance during the Celtic Tiger years. It offers Bertie Ahern, Tony Blair, and the “mid-fall USA” as the cause of the crisis. The poem describes the lead-up to the financial crisis like this:

Estate agents casinoed our existences
spun a wheel with only one bright number on it,
Looking-After-Number 1
kept plying the line that everyone
was guaranteed to be a millionaire,
for starters,

till we were hot-cheeked with money lust
and then they swayed their magic keys in front of us
like hypnorpists goofing us
for all possible advantage.

Bankers brought the kinky costumes and equipment.

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 114.
10 Ibid., 116.
Adpimps supplied the glitterdust and lube.
Channel 4 filmed every oiled up inch and second of it
flatscreening it back to us
as we squatted

on the chaise-longue for years
to watch ourselves being screwed
while being screwed
on the chaise longue for years…

and most of us knew what was happening
and some of us truly were hoodwinked
and nearly everybody wanted it never to stop.

Thus were we rightly sodomed here and dumped
two million life-indentured gimps
stuck without an exit plan
in one of time’s bogged-down pauses,
history’s less-interesting amber phases […]

Lordan’s poetic voice here rails against an immorality — “casino” is made into a verb to describe what estate agents have done, and selfishness, sexual passion, and “money-lust” are joined together. The public are “screwed” on a chaise longue by these estate agents, who are assisted by bankers and “Adpimps.” The “amber phases” are the moment on a traffic light where you pause to give way to others. In the twelfth section a character named “MBA Tina,” and of course TINA is the acronym for the neoliberal slogan daily chanted by politicians, “There Is No Alternative,” holds a Masters in Business Administration. This character watches porn, no doubt the porn made by the estate agents. The fact that the poem claims “we” were “sodomed” and then “dumped” implies that those doing this are murderous rapists.

Another of Lordan’s poems which describes sexual abuse is “Nightmare Pastoral.” The poem is incredibly prosaic; it deliv-
ers information clearly. The poem introduces something that is “too absurd” to be considered a “rumour,” and so the poem designates it a “lie.” The lie is that Chilean Roberto Bolaño visited a village in the “west of ireland” in 1969. On July 20, 1969 the Eagle landed on the Moon as part of the Apollo 11 mission, and three months later on November 19, 1969 the Intrepid on the Apollo 12 mission landed. Bolaño was journeying from a riot in Mexico to one in Paris. The poet pretends to have access to Bolaño’s diaries and mentions how Bolaño writes about his time in Ireland. Bolaño is in a pub in a village on the day of the moon landing, and he gets very drunk. That night, in a dream, “two pissed priests are raping / a nine year old girl / up a boreen (he says ‘grassy lane’).” The brackets posture the diary as primary source. The content is shocking and the language banal, the unimportant brackets coming in again in a manner reminiscent of Flynn’s poem, to put us slightly off kilter. The priests then “strangle and dump / her out the back door” of the van. Two guards in the dream investigate the crime and are about to arrest the priests, when they “are told / in no uncertain terms / by the powers that be / to close the case / and forget all about it.” A bishop orders the priests to go and convert people in “remotest Africa.” Bolaño describes the nightmare the next day to his fellow drinkers in the village pub, and they claim that Bolaño must have had a bad pint. Bolaño gets “very, very drunk” and is arrested “for his own safety / and to preserve public order.” The poem ends: “This is the kind of thing / he would later go on / to write about.” The poet-activist Sarah Clancy has a similar poem, noting that Bolaño “stole” her “best lines / and binned them / before I’d invented them.” Binning, dumping, extraneous refuse.

Why do these poets feel so close to Bolaño? One way to answer this would be to think about what this poet-novelist later went on to write. 2666 is the last novel by Roberto Bolaño. It was released in 2004, a year after Bolaño’s death. It revolves around

12 Ibid., 43–45.
13 Sarah Clancy, Truth & Other Stories (Clare: Salmon, 2011), 77.
an elusive German author and the unsolved and ongoing murders of women in Santa Teresa, a violent city inspired by Ciudad Juárez in Mexico and its epidemic of female homicides. “The Part about the Crimes” in Bolaño’s 2666 chronicles the murders of 112 women in Santa Teresa from 1993 to 1997. In the real Ciudad Juárez, the shockingly high murder rates of women began in 1993, one year after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. This agreement led to the creation of many US-owned maquiladoras (manufacturing plant that imports and assembles duty-free components for export) in new Export-Processing Zones. The femicides testify to the disposability of certain forms of labor. Bolaño links neoliberalism and patriarchy with sexualized violence against subaltern women through “impassive repetition of horror,” thereby showcasing a system that privileges profit over life. “The Part about the Crimes” describes the apathy of state authorities. It also highlights asymmetry by introducing the figure of a “church desecrator” who is pursued much more assiduously than the murderers of women. The novel follows the police force in their mostly fruitless attempts to solve the crimes, as well as giving clinical descriptions of the circumstances and probable causes of the various homicides. These are those who are ignored because of their worthlessness in terms of class and race in the current neoliberal arrangement.14 The subaltern Third World is a key component to the functioning of the global economic order. Both Mexico and Ireland, as abstract and real entities, know what it is to be subservient to a nearby economic power, as well as the experience of dealing with a powerful class of priests.

What I have been trying to limn here are the ways in which different species of violence — pedophilia, rape, or other forms

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of sexual violence — are pulled into discussions of the financial crisis with furious affect. We saw inklings of this in the discussion of the figures of the prostitute in Joyce’s poem. In Lordan’s “A resurrection in Charlesland,” the Irish public (“we”) take the place of the young girl in the poem “Nightmare Pastoral” and are dumped in Charlesland. But the poem resurrects them.