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Ritual and the Rhetoric of Repetition in Angela's Ashes.

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Frank McCourt's memoir of his poverty-stricken childhood in Ireland, *Angela's Ashes*, testifies to the ability of beautiful prose to house terrible stories. Although the author himself describes his book as "an epic of woe," reviewers are quick to cite the striking dualities in *Angela's Ashes* (Sullivan 1996, 26). Mary Gordon, quoted on the book's jacket, finds McCourt's tale both "somber and lively." John Elson calls it "spunky" and "bittersweet" (74). Malcolm Jones, Jr. locates much of the book's appeal in the author's exquisite sense of timing: "The genius of the book is that the tears and laughter are rarely separated by so much as a comma" (67).

Perhaps nowhere in the memoir is the pairing of heartbreak and humor more evident than in the passages where Frank McCourt recounts a strange nightly ritual. A drunken Malachy McCourt (Frank's father) routinely awakens his children and orders them to march around the kitchen, pledging allegiance to Ireland. The groundwork for this ritual is established in the book's first chapter where references to Malachy McCourt's drinking number more than thirty. It was hardly surprising, then, to hear author Frank McCourt pronounce at the Dogwood Fine Arts Festival in Dowagiac, Michigan, "The central event in my life is my father's alcoholism." [1] Reviewer J. R. Cusack, writing in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, concurs with Frank McCourt's assessment. Cusack examines Malachy McCourt's "addictive irresponsibility" and notes that his "severe alcoholism [was] underpinned by ironclad character pathology" (Cusack 1997, 1774).

The first chapter of *Angela's Ashes* shows that alcoholism manifesting itself in what will soon become family tradition. Malachy McCourt has been working at a new job for less than a month, and instead of bringing home his wages at week's end, he

rolls up the stairs singing Roddy McCorley. He pushes in the door and calls for us. Where are my troops? Where are my four warriors? ... He comes to the bedroom door. Up, boys, up. A nickel for everyone who promises to die for Ireland. Deep in Canadian woods we met

From one bright island flown.

Great is the land we tread, but yet

Our hearts are with our own.

Up, boys, up. Francis, Malachy, Oliver, Eugene. The Red Branch Knights, the Fenian Men, the IRA. Up, up. (25)

At least seven such episodes are recounted in the memoir. Initially they may strike the reader as problematic, eliciting an odd and unsettling combination of amusement and distress. But after encountering several retellings, the effect can shift to boredom, annoyance, and even puzzlement. What purpose do so many retellings serve? One assumes they provide an accurate approximation of reality: these events happened frequently in the McCourt household, therefore some retelling is in order.

But to leave it there would be to miss the powerful rhetorical impact these episodes provide. These retellings serve as a bitter chorus in the family drama. They underscore the poverty and futility circumscribing the McCourt family's existence, and they acquire the status of ritual. The nocturnal disturbances acquire the status of ritual not just by frequency and regularity but by the predictable elements present in each telling. Their initiator intends that the ritual foster and refine confraternity, but ultimately it provides the arena for confrontation. Father and sons meet repeatedly in these episodes, and eventually the ritual is challenged and shattered. Only then can the next generation of McCourts begin to hope for, envision, and build new lives. The ritual serves then as an important dual marker of family tradition and family emancipation. And Frank McCourt's repeated recounting of the ritual becomes an essential refrain in his hymn of survival.

Before examining the centrality of the ritual in the text and its eventual disruption, an exploration of the key term--ritual--and a delineation of its separate components are in order. Eric W. Rothenbuhler (1998) builds his impressive study of ritual on the following definition: ritual is "the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life." He reminds us that rituals cover the widest range of behavior, "from handshakes to coronations" (ix). He is quick to point out that although they are often used synonymously, ritual means more than habitual action: "Habits lack what energizes rituals: the purpose of symbolically effecting the serious life" (28).

Rothenbuhler lists fifteen characteristics of ritual. Many of them are easily recognized outside of the boundaries set by those disciplines where ritual studies are most frequently studied: anthropology, communication, religious studies, and sociology. Ritual, according to Rothenbuhler, is a form of action. It involves doing something. It contains elements of performance and the expectation of an audience--participants in their own right, but often at a different level. Ritual expresses social relations. The participants acknowledge what is binding them together, and they accept their role in this shared cause.

Ritual also recurs according to some pattern or cycle. Rothenbuhler further explores some of the more complex aspects of ritual, including what he calls stylization, the arational or irrational, a preference for the subjunctive over the indicative with a focus on what could be, might be, or ought to be; the use of effective and condensed symbols, the presence of aesthetic excess, and the delineation of the sacred--to Rothenbuhler "whatever is treated as unquestionable" (8-24).

While the McCourt family nightly ritual would certainly measure well against Rothenbuhler's catalogue of defining features of ritual, such an analysis would be

laborious, lengthy, and beyond the scope of this paper. Janine Roberts (1988) provides a condensed and more workable set of characteristics for this paper's purposes. The placement of her list in a work dealing with rituals in the family makes the application all the more fitting for an examination of McCourt family behavior as seen through Frank McCourt's recounting of that behavior. Roberts lists what she calls "six key aspects to ritual":

1. Repetition, which includes not only action but also content and form;
2. Acting, in which the essential element of doing is added to saying and thinking;
3. Special behavior or stylization, where behaviors and symbols are set apart from their usual uses or contexts;
4. Order, in which there is some recognizable beginning and end and containment for spontaneity;
5. Evocative presentational style, where through staging and focus an "attentive state of mind" is created;
6. Collective dimension, where social meaning is stressed [1]

Looking first at the repetitive aspects of the ritual, we see that one of the main areas of predictability has to do with timing. Author Frank McCourt goes to considerable lengths to establish the hour of these occurrences, which correspond always with Malachy McCourt's drinking:

The darkness comes down and the lights come on along Classon Avenue. Other men with jobs are home already and having eggs for dinner because you can have meat on a Friday. You can hear the families talking upstairs and downstairs and down the hall and Bing Crosby is singing on the radio, Brother, can you spare a dime?

Malachy and I play with the twins. We know Main won't sing Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss. She sits at the kitchen table talking to herself, What am

I going to do? till it's late and Dad rolls up the stairs singing Roddy McCorley. (25, emphasis mine)

In subsequent accounts, the hour is also stressed. We learn, "It's the middle of the night... it's three in the morning"; "... before the night is over all the money is gone and Dad comes home singing ..." (39-40, 170). That the children are already asleep also marks the hour: "he is now falling down drunk and ready to get us out of bed"; "He still gets Malachy and me out of bed" (95, 42). The lateness of the hour forms a constant in the chaos Malachy McCourt regularly ushers into the home. The darkness and disturbance add a nightmarish quality to the ritual as it is anticipated and enacted by the drowsy players.

The second and third elements of ritual as outlined by Roberts refer to acting, special behavior, or stylization. Action adds the element of doing to simply saying or thinking. Richard Schechner (1994) stresses that "Rituals emphasize efficacy." Their acting

serves some particular purpose. A specific outcome is foreseen and sought. He lists situations in which the action of ritual is readily observed: "healing the sick, initiating neophytes, burying the dead, teaching the ignorant, forming and cementing social relations, maintaining (or overthrowing) the status quo, remembering the past, propitiating the gods, exorcising the demonic, maintaining cosmic order" (613).

The McCourt family ritual for Ronald L. Grimes (1995) would undoubtedly fall under the category of "ceremony." (Other forms of ritual he lists include magic, liturgy, and celebration.) Grimes sees ceremony as having a frame of reference that is political, a dominant mood of contentiousness, a voice that is imperative, a basic activity that is competing, and its motivation enforced (57). Such ceremonial action is frequently accompanied by a state of agitation, urgency, or expectation. In *Angela's Ashes*, the call to action is issued when Malachy McCourt "rolls home singing and crying over Ireland and his dead children, mostly about Ireland" (95). He "rolls up the stairs... pushes in the door and calls for us..." (25). When a neighbor intervenes and tries to dissuade him, Malachy McCourt replies, "'Tis urgent, Dan, 'tis urgent" (40). Malachy McCourt will not be moved. In his mind, his cause must become his children's cause. He insists on the enactment of family ritual, in the words of Steven J. Wolin et al. to "clarify family roles, delineate boundaries, and transmit information about family identity across generations" (230).

The call to awaken and the call to action are closely linked and form two of the most consistently present elements in the evenings' disruptions. "Up, boys, up," Mr. McCourt orders his sleeping children (25). "He still gets Malachy and me out of bed..." (42). The father issues a call for support: "Where are my troops? Where are my four warriors?" (25). There is little question as to the nature of the action expected. Malachy assembles his troops and prepares them for inspection. Young Frank tells us, "He has us stand at attention in the kitchen"; he "line[s] us up" (39, 95). Repeatedly the twinned calls to awaken and to prepare for battle are played out.

Implicit in the call to action is the acknowledgment that the ultimate action, martyrdom, may be required of the young troops. The tiny boys are linked by their Father with bands of fighters: "Up, boys, up. Francis, Malachy, Oliver, Eugene. The Red Branch Knights, the Fenian Men, the IRA" (25). "We are soldiers," young Frank acknowledges at one point. "He tells us we must promise to die for Ireland" (39). The absurdity of the senior McCourt's demands is underscored by the boys' tender years: "He still gets Malachy and me out of bed to stand in our shirts promising to die for Ireland. One night he wanted to make the twins promise to die for Ireland but they can't even talk..." (42).

We find the ritual enacted frequently not only in the early pages of *Angela's Ashes*, but throughout the rest of the memoir as well. Just before the family's first Christmas in Limerick, Frank describes an episode where his father "rolls home singing and crying over Ireland and his dead children, mostly about Ireland" (95). Years after that first Christmas, little has changed:

There are Thursdays when Dad gets his dole money at the Labour Exchange and a man might say, Will we go for a pint, Malachy? and Dad will say, One, only one, and the man will say, Oh, God, yes, one, and before the night is over all the money is gone and Dad comes home singing and getting us out of bed to line up and promise to die for Ireland when the call comes. He even gets Michael up and he's only three but there he is

singing and promising to die for Ireland at the first opportunity. That's what Dad calls it, the first opportunity. (170)

As well as providing important markers of the special behavior or stylization required by the McCourt nightly ritual, pageantry and song also help to provide an order to the proceedings, Roberts' fourth category. Although chaos is the inverse of order, chaos is all that can be achieved given the drunken state of the commanding officer. If the children owned so much as a change of clothing, we might expect some sort of uniforms to be improvised as part of the nightly mania. But in the absence of essentials, not to mention finery, marching and singing must suffice. Frank McCourt records a number of the lyrics sung, most commonly songs about Roddy McCorley and, as noted here, Kevin Barry:

On Mountjoy one Monday morning,

High upon the gallows tree,

Kevin Barry gave his young life

For the cause of liberty.

Just a lad of eighteen summers

Sure there's no one can deny

As he marched to death that morning

How he held his head on high. (40)

The inclusion of songs also can be seen as an attempt to achieve evocative presentational style, Roberts' sixth category. At its most basic level, singing in unison suggests one voice, one mind, one message, one mood. These songs and their images of "the gallows tree" and "the hemp-rope on his neck" mark a strong contrast with one of the few songs we hear from mother Angela's lips:

Oh, the nights of the Kerry dancing, Oh the ring of the piper's tune,

Oh, for one of those hours of gladness, gone, alas, like our youth too soon.

When the boys began to gather in the glen of a summer night,

And the Kerry piper's tuning made us long with wild delight. (168)

Of the sixth feature of ritual, its collective dimension, Catherine Bell notes that "ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations." She sees ritual as "a functional mechanism or expressive medium in the service of social solidarity and control" (197). Ritual's collective dimension in Angela's Ashes can be seen in the call issued to the children to come together in a common cause, to respond with a set litany of songs and pledges, to be willing to pay together the ultimate price, or, perhaps if they

are luckier, to enjoy together a reward. For participating in the pageantry and song, the children are occasionally promised a coin: "A nickel for everyone who promises to die for Ireland" (25). But even the promises ring hollow. The narrator tells us, "He'll give us a nickel for ice cream if we promise to die for Ireland and we promise but we never get the nickel" (42). What little faith the young troops may have in their paternal leader is strained as their anticipations are first aroused and then dashed.

A collective dimension of the nightly ritual also includes facing together the opposition. Ronald L. Grimes notes that some ritual can be "manifestly competitive, sometimes conflict-laden, and often divides the world into 'us' and 'them'" (48). In Angela's Ashes, the opposition comes not in the form of enemy armies, as predicted by Malachy McCourt; instead, this voice of opposition belongs to the boys' mother. Punctuated by instructions to her children to return to bed, Angela McCourt chastises her husband:

Can't you leave them alone?... Jesus, Mary and Joseph, isn't it enough that you come home without a penny in your pocket without making fools of the children on top of it? ...

Don't cross me ... for if you do it'll be a sorry day in your mother's house You're pure stone mad. (25)

It should not surprise us to hear Angela McCourt elsewhere adding her own distinct prelude to the McCourt family ritual. Especially noteworthy is the acknowledgment of repetition and the religious imagery in Wendell Barry's observation: "Again and again, McCourt's mother, Angela of the title, sends her eldest son on fruitless pilgrimages, tavern to tavern, to bring home Malachy before his earnings are spent" (xxxviii).

While one ritual is played out repeatedly in the text, Frank McCourt also records its eventual disruption and disintegration. In one scene, described fittingly as occurring "Before Easter," Malachy McCourt bursts onto the scene, not as his family's savior but rather as the voice of chaos, perhaps even an antiChrist. Particularly noteworthy in this scene is the introduction of a new prop, a candle. The image created by an "illuminated" Malachy McCourt is far from inspiring:

He calls from the bottom of the stairs, Angela, Angela, is there a drop of tea in this house?

She doesn't answer and he calls again, Francis, Malachy, come down here, boys. I have the Friday Penny for you.

I want to go down and get the Friday Penny but Mam is sobbing with the coat over her mouth and Malachy says, I don't want his old Friday Penny. He can keep it.

Dad is stumbling up the stairs, making a speech about how we all have to die for Ireland. He lights a match and touches it to the candle by Mam's bed. He holds the candle over his head and marches around the room, singing. ...

Michael wakes and lets out a loud cry, the Hannons are banging on the wall next door, Mam is telling Dad he's a disgrace and why doesn't he get out the house altogether.

He stands in the middle of the floor with the candle over his head. He pulls a penny from his pocket and waves it to Malachy and me. Your Friday Penny, boys, he says. I want you to jump out of that bed and line up here like two soldiers and promise to die for Ireland and I'll give the two of you the Friday Penny.

Malachy sits up in the bed. I don't want it, he says.

And I tell him I don't want it, either. (111-12)

The young boys' rejection of the Friday Penny signals their rejection of their father, his values, beliefs, and rituals. They stand up to him and refuse to play his demented game any longer. They take their refusal a step further, however. During Malachy McCourt's final attempt to rouse his troops, this time at Christmas, the boys echo their mother and in so doing defiantly rewrite family liturgy and disrupt family ritual:

Mam asks him if he brought any money. He tells her times are hard, jobs are scarce, and she says, Is it coddin' me you are? There's a war on and there's nothing but jobs in England. You drank the money, didn't you?

You drank the money, Dad.

You drank the money, Dad.

You drank the money, Dad.

We're shouting so loud Alphie begins to cry. Dad says, Och, boys, now boys. Respect for your father.

He puts on his cap. He has to see a man. Main says, Go see your man but don't come drunk to this house tonight singing Roddy McCorley or anything else.

He comes home drunk but he's quiet and passes out on the floor next to Main's bed. (270)

The Easter and Christmas disruptions mark both real and symbolic turning points in the family's life patterns, in their rituals. By refusing their father's bribes, by challenging his rhetoric, the boys in effect issue their emancipation proclamation. Young Frank in particular will no longer accept his father's call to become a martyr. The rallying cry to die for Ireland is replaced by a resolve to begin a new life elsewhere. Though it will be years before he can bring his plan to fruition, Frank begins to plot his departure for America.

Angela's Ashes ends with the author's arrival on American soil. In breaking free of the destructive family legacy, including its rituals and restrictions, Frank travels to a new place. He steps off the boat and is greeted by a party in Poughkeepsie. Here he exchanges the tears of his mother and the drunken rhetoric of his father for the sounds of "women laughing, tinkling and bright in the night air." The weak tea of home is replaced by "a strange beer like Rheingold." The nightly calls to rise up and sacrifice his life give way to Frieda's invitations to lie down and celebrate life. Finding himself, at last, in "a great country altogether," the adult Frank has at once left home and come home

(361-62). Clearly, any rituals established and practiced on these shores will be new and of his own devising.

(1.) October 1997.

(2.) Roberts cites as her source for this list R. A. Rappaport, "Ritual sanctity and cybernetics," *American Anthropologist* 73.1(1971): 59-76.

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