

## Hangovers and Herring · Carlee Lippman

A MANX STORY? Is there such a thing? Aren't I thinking of a Manx cat, that little quadruped that resembles a cat in every particular, save that it lacks a tail? It is admittedly very difficult *not* to think of a Manx cat, once you have made the acquaintance of one. You never realize how much you take the tail of a cat for granted until you meet one (a cat) who lacks one (a tail). As Evelyn Waugh would put it, it is just too too shame-making, a cat lacking a tail.

Be that as it may, the Manx cat survives the trauma of its body to stroll in picturesque state across an island which is already much too picturesque. Tiny, gaudily colorful, with horse-drawn trams and a miniature electric railroad, elderly retirees and motorcycle races, mountains and palm trees, all superimposed on a brooding Celtic undercurrent—the Isle of Man defies easy classification. There is the Isle of Man of the Runic inscriptions and cold grey stone crosses; there is also the Isle of Man of the tea shops and cheap trinkets—a Manchesterian's paradise. The language of today is English; there are no known living Manx speakers. But the language of history, the yearned for, embattled language, is Manx. Brutally repressed by the British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Manx remains today the road to the Isle of Man's past. And possibly its future. A number of new books, articles, stories and accounts have been written in Manx in recent years by those who have inherited, if not the birthright, then surely an interest in their parents' and grandparents' tongue. In addition to their publishing activity, these revivalists have begun campaigns to have street signs written in Manx, and Manx language courses taught. Such activity, though relatively circumscribed, can't fail to have an effect on such a small island. As it is, the Isle of Man maintains its own postal and coinage systems, with brilliant stamps and boldly emblazoned coins. Not to mention the justly famed Manx kippers.

The literary output of the Isle of Man is idiosyncratic. Much of it consists of translations from the Bible, or Manx versions of classics such as *Paradise Lost*. But there is also quite a bit that departs from the orthodox, that enters the world of the *buggane*, the Manx fairy-bugbear, known to terrorize farmers living in isolated regions, or drunken men stumbling home after a night's indulgence. The 'little people' are never very far away

from the Manx spirit, and their potency is in inverse proportion to their size. On the Isle of Man, everything is scaled down anyway; size takes on new meanings. Tales and stories are also rather big for their size. They are generally invested with a richness of detail which spills over the stories' framework, making sometimes for tedium, sometimes for the surprise of additional, unexpected information.

Armed with this judgmental possibility, let's look now at a particular Manx story, written by "Neddy Beg Hom Ruy" sometime in the eighteenth or nineteenth century (the actual date is indeterminable) and brought to publishable state by Edward Faragher (1831–1908), his son. The story, bearing no title, deals with a night on the ocean and a drunken crew. That we should make no mistake about the story's subject, it is announced to us in the first paragraph:

Ta mee nish goll dy insh diu mychione oie ren mee ceau er y cheayn ayns baatey-eeastee, as va ooilley ny deiney agh meehene ny lhie scooyrit fud ny hoie nagh voddagh ad gleashagh, as ren mee streeu dy ghoostey ad ymmodee keayrtyn, agh va mee eignit dy lhiggey daue lhie. (*Skeeealyn 'sy Ghailck*, Neddy Beg Hom Ruy, Castle-town Press, 1973 [reprinted from the *Journal of the Irish Folklore Society*, 1948].)

I'm now going to tell about the night I spent on the ocean in a fishing boat, and all of the men except me were lying drunk through the night and could not move and I was trying to awaken them many times, but I was forced to let them lie.

What is this first paragraph doing? It is in some sense a *précis*, a one-sentence summary of what is about to follow. In another sense it is ceremonial—stories don't just happen, they are announced, framed, a special ontology created for them. This tradition feels as though it is coming directly from that of the bards and scops, whose arrival was indeed a special occasion, special enough to have a room set aside, and food and drink served. In a less gracious era, a prefatory statement must do the work of clearing out and setting aside space for the story-event to follow. The storyteller becomes his own host, invites himself to tell his own story, and prepares an imagined audience for it.

What is remarkable about this first paragraph is its manner of delivery. As we mentioned, the paragraph consists of one single sentence, and what a breathless sentence it is. In it we are told the time and place of the event (that it was night, the ocean, in a fishing boat), the circumstances that surrounded the story (that all the men in the boat were lying drunk, except the narrator), and the narrator's own involvement in the events (that he kept attempting to awaken the crew, with no success). All of this information is conveyed to us with the aid of a series of coordinate conjunctions, and is therefore rather rapid-fire.

After the initial situating, the story follows immediately, first with a paragraph on the scarcity of herring during that season, and then with the following, tenuously connected paragraph. In the interest of brevity, we will not present the Manx in this or in subsequent citations.

We got so much one night as did for one of the men, and when the herring was put away in the cart, the master said that it was all right for him to give a bottle of rum to the company, because he had got his stock home, and that every man would be forced to give a bottle also when he would get the herring home.

As readers, we can only conclude that getting enough herring for even one man in a time of herring scarcity is a feat noteworthy enough to justify some sort of compulsory celebration. As a man gets his 'stock' of herring, he contributes his bottle of rum. The concept is simple enough. But if the storyteller were actually present, we might want to ask him a question or two. For example, is giving a bottle of rum for successful herring fishing standard practice on the Isle of Man, or is it merely the brainchild of the skipper (master) of this particular ship? And how do the men feel about this requirement to give rum? Do they resent it, or acquiesce in the festive spirit? And what are the relative values of a bottle of rum, and a supply of herring? Does buying the rum involve a considerable sacrifice? These are a few of the questions that occur to us as we read this part of the account. They could be characterized as the normal concerns of a person from one culture who seeks to penetrate the mysteries of another. But they could also be the concerns of a more complexly trained mind faced with one whose relations to life are far simpler. This storyteller, whoever he is, is clearly very much on the inside of his tale. (We learn later he is the cook's

boy on that particular ship.) In spite of the fairly formal and self-conscious beginning, suggesting that the burden of storytelling has suddenly been thrust upon his unprepared shoulders, the narrator very soon resorts to an unselfconscious reportage, leaving much unexplained. This is not the minimalist style of the *nouveau roman*, but much more resembles the child's after-school account to his patient mother of the details of his day. Neither that, nor the cook's boy's tale invites questions.

In the larger framework of the tale, of course, the whys and wherefores of rum drinking with successful herring fishery become increasingly immaterial. Paragraph four tells us that the following night was so successful that enough herring was caught for the entire crew. In keeping with the rules of the catch, this meant that quite a bit of rum was distributed to the company, and dutifully consumed. (This after storing away the herring somewhere on shore.) The main enigma in this paragraph is why, instead of taking a well-deserved rest, "we set sail and went out again." (Remember that quite a bit of rum had already been consumed by this time.)

So now we have the boat well under way again, and after a time, the rum is brought out and shared around. No amounts are specified, but one suspects them to be considerable. It is only at this stage that the narrator feels compelled to describe himself, and even do some explaining:

I was the cook's boy in those days, and the boy was to go lie down every evening when the boat would leave the bay. In that way, I went to lie down and went to sleep for awhile, and when I awoke I listened to hear the men, but there was nothing to be heard. Then I came out of the cabin and there were no men to be seen but one man . . . but the others were gathered in the cabin lying like dead bodies; then I saw what had happened.

We know that more than a few days have passed between the events described and the actual telling ("I was the cook's boy in those days," giving us a vague but unmistakable impression that those events occurred a significant length of time ago). This temporal situating is only of interest to us in terms of the kinds of details the narrator will present. Either he has an unusually good memory, or what he witnessed that day and night impressed him deeply.

We may never know; the narrator permits himself few self-expressive flourishes. Even here, where he tells us he is the cook's boy and what the duties and customs of a cook's boy are, the information can hardly be accepted in a spirit of narrative adornment. Nor is it a way of putting in time, filling up space while he ponders where to go from there. It is rather, we are convinced, a necessary and integral part of the tale, without which the plot sequence wouldn't make sense. Why, we would otherwise have asked, should he have been sleeping in the cabin, while all the other men were elsewhere? We have to assume that the situation is adequately explained by his saying, ". . . the boy was to go lie down every evening when the boat would leave the bay." Was this his turn to sleep? Would this be the time that he wouldn't have to help with the cooking? These and other nagging doubts will have to remain unanswered. He was simply doing his job, as any good cook's boy would. He says, perhaps self-justifyingly, perhaps for the sake of syntax, "in that way, I went to lie down. . . ." (Can we ever recover the tone of, "in that way"?)

The over-abundance of "ands" and "buts" continues in this paragraph, and seems rather artless, more suited to the utterance of a cook's boy himself than to the more mature and reflective voice of the narrator. Why then this particular construction? We can think of at least two possible reasons, one naive, and the other somewhat more disingenuous. The first interpretation credits the narrator with thinking that the tale itself, with its novelty and excitement, is of sufficient interest to the listener or reader so as not to require anything syntactically spectacular. Somewhere in this view lurks the innocent desire for simple communication, instant transmission of experience, such as that in which bees and ants engage. No subordinate clauses for them!

The second possible explanation for this plethora of "ands" and "buts," is the kind a suspicious literary critic might propose. Simply put, this explanation involves the classical opinion that the style of a piece of work ought to be appropriate to its content. As we said earlier, many coordinate conjunctions, few subordinate relations, might very well reflect the style of your average, over-excited cook's boy. But since the cook's boy only lived through the tale, but is now telling it in some other persona, it would seem that, in order to be a sincere account, the diction really *ought* to change. Otherwise, a certain amount of artifice is to be suspected, as in the baby talk adults employ with small children. Surely the child is not

fooled into thinking he is getting the first fruits of a mature mind.

Here, though, the diction level is so perfectly maintained throughout the story that we readily accept this as a naive account. Up to this point, in any case, there are no discrepancies to make us wonder if the tale has been doctored in some way. We fashion in our minds an image of the cook's boy, now grown old and somewhat tired of the sea, but who has preserved throughout his life a cook's boy's view of things.

One of the worst things that could happen to a cook's boy would be to see the rest of the crew inebriated beyond redemption, while the ship was on the open sea. What had happened (as the narrator tells us in the next paragraph) was that with the unusually successful herring catch, each crew member had contributed his required bottle of rum, and each had drunk copiously thereof on the way to the sound. Once through the sound, the ship entered an area of calm, so the whole crew lay down and went to sleep. And that is the point at which the narrator woke up.

Somewhat confirming the tale's naiveté, there follows another paragraph which seems awkwardly placed.

When they were full of rum some of them put the shoes together in the fire and burned them, and there was a man in there and he didn't have any shoes to put on his feet to walk to his dwelling the next day, but they were all at peace when I came out of the cabin.

This paragraph seems to be an elaboration of the earlier one in which the narrator comes out of the cabin and sees all the men sleeping. It doesn't really follow from the paragraph which preceded it, which tells how the men became drunk. It is almost as if the narrator, while telling the story, suddenly decided to include this other description, even though he had already gone past the logical place for its occurrence. Certainly not the polished skill of the novelist. Again we are reminded of the child, whose attention has been caught by some trivial event in the outside world, and who feels compelled to describe it. Admittedly, this is strange behavior, even for intoxicated men. Why this attack on shoes? Why not just general brawling?

Considering the strangeness of the event, the narrator's response to it is even stranger. He doesn't make a moral judgment about how wrong it is to destroy private property. He doesn't issue a broad condemnation of ine-

briation and its effects. Instead he says, almost mournfully, “. . . and there was a man in there and he didn’t have any shoes to put on his feet to walk to his dwelling the next day. . . .” This seems to be one more example of the narrator’s fatal attraction to irrelevant detail. Speculating as to whether a man would have shoes to walk to his house the following day surely doesn’t hasten the plot along. If we didn’t believe the narrator was quite satisfactorily simple-minded, we might think this was some diversionary tactic, a stylish excursus into the psycho-sociological realm. As it is, at best he’s buying time; at worst he’s distracted. He does seem to come back to himself by the end of that paragraph, however. Realizing the story must go on, he concludes hastily with a “but they were all at peace when I came out of the cabin.” We’ve come to know his style, and his preference for paragraphs of a single sentence. In this way we have only a comparatively unilluminating “but” to hold on to, and we’re not sure whether peace was achieved through mutual apology or the gentle work of Morpheus. Whichever conclusion we choose, the “but” gives us an undeniable sense that what preceded it was parenthetical, when actually it was probably not. One of the signs of the naive in this piece of writing is the fact that the narrator gives equal weight to events which are unequal in importance. He knows not shadings.

But he does seem to know refrains. “When I came out of the cabin” begins to sound like a refrain. Just as a ballad is organized around the principle of expected repetitions of themes, so does the story at this stage fall into an historic division, a time before and after which the narrative conscience shone upon the actions of other mortals. This organizational scheme is perhaps unconscious, yet it compels us as strongly as it does the narrator. A sense of depth and texture is thus conferred on the story in a wholly artificial and unexpected way, almost, as it were, by chance.

There follows after this (not *from* this), a paragraph in which events start to happen very rapidly. Again, the transition is minimal, “when I came out of the cabin” serving as an indefinite reference point almost epic in its vagueness. Thus, the next paragraph immediately takes us to another area of action, and we make what connection we can:

The rest of the fleet was away out of sight and the tide was drawing us quickly toward the “Big Chicken”; I saw that the boat was quickly going on to her and I didn’t have any way to drive the boat in

any direction. I finally got the little boat put out with much toil and I was planning to save my own life in the little boat, should the big one go on the “Chicken.”

Finally we have a statement of the problem. It is not so much the moral turpitude of being drunk, but the physical dangers of being on a moving ship in the ocean without a responsive or responsible crew. The “Big Chicken,” a small rocky island at the southwest tip of the Isle of Man, is still very present today, and one can imagine it would have been a significant threat to shipping. Thus is the narrator justifiably concerned for the safety of his own life. We begin to feel at this point, if not sorry for him, then at least that his problem is a grave one. He was hired to help with the cooking, not manage the ship single-handedly. A small but determined resentment begins to build in us against a crew who would put its cook’s boy through so much difficulty, and all because of a selfish desire to celebrate a successful catch. Isn’t the catch itself its own reward? Perhaps we haven’t carried our line of thought quite that far. But we have, it seems, inevitably begun to put ourselves in the narrator’s place.

How and why has this come about? The narrator has made no attempt to woo us, to garner our sympathy. Even within the narrative framework, a ploy such as saying, “here I am, a poor cook’s boy, with no real training in the matter, left to manage a ship about to go on the rocks, with no one to help me. . . .” would have been permissible, and would have given us a proper pathetic context in which to emote. As it is, the narrator simply reports events as they occur, with little overt sympathy-raising. Could it be, perversely, the very *lack* of such an appeal causes us to run to the narrator’s aid? Do we feel instinctively that he can’t defend himself, can’t even begin to sublimate his fears and desires? He tells us for example, “I was planning to save my own life in the little boat, should the big one go on the ‘Chicken.’ ” Wouldn’t we have to call that a selfish impulse? Shouldn’t he be thinking of the crew who, though drunk, are still human beings in danger of losing their lives? Shouldn’t the narrator attempt, at least on paper, to save other lives as well? He should, and then we might well have some hopelessly pompous, insufferably upright morality tale about how goodness and purity triumphed over evil, and at the very moment of triumph, forgave evil for its wrongs. But the narrator chose not to do this, not to represent himself as a hero many years after the fact.



In spite of all the alibis we have furnished him, the narrator has avoided the heroic course. He is what he is—a scared and selfish cook's boy, and he tells us this, and it charms us. Of course his account has fallen upon well-adapted ears. It is almost axiomatic that we live in an age of anti-heroes, whose small, undistinguished, and often sordid lives seem about the right size for a generation without *Great Expectations*.

Indeed, the modern anti-hero struggles against unequal odds, as does our narrator, who seems about to make a premature visit to the sea bottom; and in our selfish concern for our own problems, we hardly appear to care. Will he be saved from the dreadful peril and live to narrate again, or will he perish in waters that tell no tales?

Common sense gives us the answer, while natural curiosity spurs the desire to know how he survived. In the course of several paragraphs, the narrator tells us of a number of close scrapes, in which winds or tides brought him very close to the "Chicken," then carried him away again. During this time, the narrator did a bit of steering and anchor casting, all the while poised to jump in the little boat and save his life. After the initial threat to the ship, the actual account of repeated similar perils is quite dull; the ship approaches the rock, is carried away from it by the current, turns and approaches again, is carried away by wind, approaches again, is deterred by some quick anchor work, etc. The narrator seems to be wanting to tell us exactly how much work he did that awful night, and does so at the expense of a sure touch for reader suspense and excitement.

The only extraneous (and therefore interesting) detail in this succession of paragraphs is that, of all the men who are lying like dead bodies, one of them was lying with his feet near the fire, ". . . and it looked to me that he felt the heat, for he often started." A detail such as this is most unremarkable. But to have it brought to our attention in the midst of the aforementioned life and death matters, seems somehow to isolate it and give it a prominent place in our consciousness. The narrator is certainly a child of his eyes, and this faculty makes it possible for us to recover, through him, the primordial sense of what it is to tell a story as though one were really living it.

But we are not the only ones able to benefit from this account; it would surely have been of interest to the other crew members, who woke the next day, took up positions, and, as the narrator tells us, "no man said a word to the others." Perhaps that is what angered the narrator most of

all—their failure to acknowledge his own heroic role the previous night. But then again, they may not have known. And anyway, one is not generally communicative on those famous mornings after. It is possible we are for the narrator, against all reason, the sympathetic attentive crew he never knew, adoptive listeners, as it were.

The narrator himself seems to take a rather motherly role in the proceedings. The shoe problem, for example, continues to plague him: “When the jobs were done, there was one man without shoes to put on his feet, two pair of his shoes were burned, but another man lent him shoes to go home.” Why he should be obsessed with this we can only conjecture. A deep dislike of wanton destruction might be one explanation. Another might be some association of shoes with land—wearing shoes meant one was heading home to relax and enjoy its comforts. Destruction of one’s shoes might therefore mean the destruction of possibilities of ease. For whatever reason, the narrator continues to mull over this shoe problem almost to the end. Just a bit more idiosyncrasy to toss into the already overflowing pot.

The last part of this tale takes quite a different tack, if you’ll pardon the expression. The actual events of the story conclude with the man who had to be lent shoes; he has gone home as has, presumably, everyone else. But the narrator doesn’t seem to know how to wind down. He turns instead to a kind of meditative mode, using this frightening experience as a springboard for making certain moral judgments and assessments. The first paragraph of this new mode is almost embarrassingly personal and direct; the narrator has obviously given vent to years of pent-up feeling.

I have been troubled a time or two in the past with men who would get drunk, but I was never in such a state as I was that night, and I hope that such a thing will not happen to me any more in my life. The fishermen are not drinking now as they used to; nevertheless, there are some of them who make beasts of themselves in Crookhaven still, when their own families don’t see them.

Now we discover that being with men who drink, and he himself (probably) an abstainer, has been a long-term problem for the narrator. Questions that we asked ourselves earlier, such as whether or not drinking is customary in celebrating a successful catch, now seem to get answered.

Luck in fishing was a pretext, as we had half-guessed; fishermen in those days presumably drank quite a bit, and for just about any reason. We gain new information about the history of Manx fishing at the expense of the feeling that this story has been a unique event. It rather appears to have been the worst example of what might have been an almost daily abuse.

We are clearly overstating the case, for the narrator's attitude here has thrown us into a condition of panic. He is so plaintive—"I hope that such a thing will not happen to me any more in my life." We find ourselves bending under the burden of the narrator's own difficulties and mental anguish. Somehow, this seems almost a violation of our rights as polite listeners to stories. We wanted to know what happened on the ship that day, and the narrator's part in it. But since this is not supposed to be a story of the narrator's life and hard times, merely (as he announced to us in the very first sentence) the account of one night on the ocean in a fishing boat, what he now says at the end seems *de trop* and out of place.

Our sympathies are probably on the point of shifting anyhow. No longer do we look with moistened eyes at a poor, put-upon cook's boy. Instead we find ourselves suddenly gazing at an older, crotchety person, whose moral judgments have grown brittle. That reference to the fishermen's "making beasts of themselves in Crookhaven" is as inappropriate and baffling as any other enigmatic statement in the story. Obscurity at the beginning of a tale is pleasantly stimulating, an invitation to partake of the mystery. But arcane references such as this at the close lead only to frustration and the disagreeable sense of a loose end. It is a poor technique for a storyteller who expects a return engagement. Of course our narrator is not that sort of storyteller. In spite of his brave introduction, he doesn't appear to think of himself as a storyteller in the strict sense. That would require a vitality of imagination he seems to lack—the ability to objectify oneself and imagine oneself in a role: the *role* of storyteller; the *role* of listener. Obviously, the narrator has no conception of the latter, and a very unconvincing one of the former. It is fortunate he doesn't live by his tongue.

Or by his wits, one might add. Following the paragraph in which our narrator bemoans his fate is another which would appear to contradict the preceding one:

I have been at the herring at very stormy times and have come through a risk or two, but those times are all forgotten by me, for if the fishermen were to keep in memory the dangers they had come through, they would not go to sea anymore.

Unless he is implying that the events of which he has told us were so much more horrific than the ordinary dangers which can (and should) be forgotten, the narrator appears to have become illogical. The story line has wound down, yet a kind of nervous energy continues to drive the narrator forward. He chatters away like an overwound toy abandoned by its bored owners.

This unfortunate tendency to advance inexorably, against all reason, becomes more evident as the story approaches its actual, physical end. Keeping in mind the paragraph just cited, note the similarity of the one which follows it:

We have been in peril many times with wind and it is in snow the most tempestuous time I ever spent on the ocean. Nevertheless, when we would get into port, the danger would soon be forgotten.

Our narrator obviously has no ear for style; his use of repetition is childish and not oratorically effective. Note the flabby parallelism: "I have been at the herring at very stormy times"/"We have been in peril many times." Also the dogged reiteration of "forgotten": "but those times are all forgotten by me"/"the danger would soon be forgotten." A less-than-lively logical arrangement in these two paragraphs seems to be responsible for the linguistic blariness. In both paragraphs there is a basic balance and opposition between the perils lived through, and the ability to forget those perils. Perhaps some hyper-subtle linguistic analysis would reveal to us why the narrator is so desperately intent on forgetting the dangers of a life at sea. His desire in this direction is so strong that it causes him to disregard any threat of reader boredom. This evidence, taken in conjunction with the general telling of the story, would appear to point in the direction of a strong psychological compulsion, some actual struggle between memory and efforts to forget.

But perhaps we are speaking from some vantage point which our reader

knows not of. We have, after all, seen a third paragraph in the same vein which we have not yet offered up for inspection. This one takes a slightly different turn, although it is structurally and thematically similar to the other two. You'll by now recognize the all-too-familiar beginning:

Many a time I have been in peril thinking it would be my last hour, and ready to give myself up for dead, but nevertheless, the Almighty protected us and led us to port in safety, but I don't like the sea now.

The "many a time" trope has begun to drum rather insistently in our ears. We also begin to hear the familiar sounds of another construction, that of "nevertheless" ("ny yeih"), which usually signals the great turnabout in thought—the fisherman rescued from some contemplated tragedy. It is difficult to know whether such formulations indicate a paucity of language, a lack of imagination, or actual locked-in patterns of thought. This whole complex of limitations is probably the best explanation, rather than any single reason. It is never that simple to separate thinking from the language in which it occurs.

Nor is it simple to decide what sort of person the narrator is. The question becomes more teasing in this paragraph, with a wholly unexpected introduction of piety. The conception of "getting into port" is still of primary interest to him, but now he takes even less credit for it. It is ". . . the Almighty [who] protected us and led us to port in safety." Always a seeming pawn on these sea voyages, the narrator has now admitted his total lack of responsibility in the preservation of his life. The Almighty has, in some almost graphically visual way, taken the vessel by an invisible thread and pulled it into port. The narrator, like Bunyan's Pilgrim, has been saved from despair, a despair he seems always on the point of giving way to. Were it not, that is, for the wonderful "ny yeih," the magic touchstone which changes fortunes with its semantic prestidigitation.

But this much-abused formula is beginning to wear thin in this third of three similar paragraphs, "Nevertheless, the Almighty protected us," ought to be enough for anyone, the last thing we want to hear in this life. But our fretful narrator feels he must add to that, protected though he was. "But I don't like the sea now," he says in that same sentence, with hardly a pause for breath. A classically disconnected thought, disconnected

and contradictory. Fishermen, we had been told, were able to forget their temporary fears as soon as they got into port. What was it that so embittered our poor narrator? This particular night on the sea? An accumulation of such experiences?

We clutch eagerly at the word “now.” When is “now”? Given his approach to the telling of a story, it would have to be assumed that ‘now’ refers to the actual moment in which the tale is being told. That leads us to believe that the narrator, in saying, “but I don’t like the sea now,” was actually pursuing some different train of thought from that which concerned the Almighty. The two fragments are not ontologically related, nor temporally, and the fact of their appearance together in the same sentence testifies to a supreme carelessness not generally seen.

We do not, however, feel any desire to condemn the narrator for this lapse. Quite the contrary, its presence in the story seems to epitomize and testify to an almost unknown degree of naturalness and casualness. It is as though he wrote the story on one reckless impulse, and then never looked at it again, never even reread it. How agreeably unlike the careful pruning and trimming our own works undergo, to such an extent that third or fourth drafts bear scant resemblance to the first. With this story, we feel ourselves thrown back into some neolithic age in which printing had just been invented, in which people could luxuriate in the communicative powers of language without a care for style or diction. In short, a more innocent age in which a printed alphabet was not yet seen as a barrier, or as an end in itself, a period in which the written text was not yet the exclusive vehicle of communication. We have lost that possibility forever, unless television succeeds in obliterating the written word. But we can have a sense of what unreflective language must have been like, with the aid of our narrator, who yields little to convention.

If there were to be any conventionality, it would most likely be at the beginning or end, times when the narrator would be most conscious of his role, either because he was about to enter it or abandon it. We commented earlier on the formality of the first paragraph, in which the narrator announced in *précis* form and with great exactitude what he was planning to tell us. Following that paragraph, no further attempts were made to alert us to the fact that he was telling a story at all. We were simply there with him as he griped and groped his way through a long night among drunks. If he were doing much more than talking to himself, we were not made aware of it.

But now we are about to enter the final paragraph of the tale, after which our narrator will fall silent again for centuries. This is the point at which he must decide to remain unconscious or reveal himself as a humble storyteller after all. True to his timid persona, the narrator compromises. Thus, the last paragraph begins on that same personal, endearing note, and ends with a surprising change of tone:

I have gone to the herring and to the mackerel fishing at Kinsale, at Glendore, Castlehaven and Baltimore, Bearhaven and Crookhaven for fifty-four years, and I think it is time for me to get rest and to spend my old days at peace, in the place I like best of all the countries I have seen with all my traveling. Nevertheless, we must strive to work while we are in this life and don't know how soon we shall be summoned to put down the load, to take rest in the ground out of which we were taken.

This last paragraph maintains the story's high standard of eccentricity. The narrator continues to show poor judgment by giving us a wholly undeserved catalogue of the places in which he has gone herring or mackerel fishing. Such a description might have been appropriate (indeed, had its merits) at the beginning of the tale, as reassurance that he knew whereof he spoke. But the end is really no place for it; it slows down the rhythm, and offers a great deal of new information which cannot be assimilated. Nevertheless, we love him for it, and for all his other little foibles. We rejoice in the fact that he preserves his crusty idiosyncrasy to the end, exalting the process of emoting over that of persuading. We would have to say that the narrator's character irradiates the story, gives it form and *raison d'être*. We might say that he has heard nothing about the fiction-making process, in which telling a story is different from living the story, and giving something a beginning, middle, and end, or rhetorical form, is a way of distancing it from oneself and one's actual perceptions. Of all that and more, the narrator is appealingly ignorant. Whatever compromise he makes at the end can only be viewed as a wave of the hat at some distant, foggily perceived tradition.

To the end, the narrator resists the inevitable winding down of the story by a frenetic and artificial winding up—thus the catalogue. But suddenly, inconceivably, comes the awareness that the story is indeed over,

that he has told all he can and all he wants, that language and experience are both spent. At this moment, he has successfully defoliated a large area of consciousness; there is nothing left to tell us, nothing left to perceive. So some deeply felt animal instinct tells him it is time to retire. Retire from the story, of course, but since the story is lived, more than told, to retire from the story demands some equal and concurrent reaction. The story's end requires the narrator's retirement from active life—his effectual end. Therefore, it is more than rhetorical when he says "I think it is time for me to get rest and to spend my old days at peace, in the place I like best of all the countries I have seen with all my traveling." We are to understand that the story, though about one incident, has epitomized his travels and experiences. The narrator has aged with his tale.

Had the story ended with the word "traveling," we would have had a simple case of a narrator's identifying almost completely with what he was narrating. No stylish literary flourishes for him, no game playing, persona-hiding—none of the defenses of a belletristic army on the rout. Instead, the telling, the reliving, the play of emotions as they are reinvoked by the telling, twenty or thirty years of pent-up anger and frustration revealed to us as they are revealed to the narrator. A psychiatrist could have arranged no better therapeutic medium. But this easy commingling of narrator and story holds true only until the final sentence, which shatters the pattern.

It is not surprising that the last sentence begins with one of the now-classic "neverthelesses." If we look back at the others in the story, we find that their appearance almost always signals a change in tone, a grudging surrender of ground. "Nevertheless, she didn't strike the rocks"—the narrator was not actually hurt as badly as he had expected to be. "Nevertheless, when we would get into port, the danger would soon be forgotten." The perils were not so overwhelming that they couldn't be forgotten in safety. "Nevertheless, the Almighty protected us and led us to port in safety." Never were the narrator's deepest fears fully realized. He was frightened, but unscathed. One could generalize that all these "neverthelesses" precede phrases which are unwillingly wrenched from the narrator. His story seems to indicate a need for sympathy, for consolation that such a hard life should have been thrust on such a small man. "Nevertheless," he was never actually injured, as others surely must have been in his line of work. He does not appear to have been left legless, armless, or lifeless,



after fifty-four years at sea. He has therefore no bona fide reason to complain, and he knows it. These “neverthelesses” are some deeply-buried moral impulse warring savagely with his need for sympathy, and to some extent sabotaging it. And one has the sense that the narrator himself is not aware of this, that the struggle is taking place on some subconscious level which surfaces fleetingly in linguistic signs.

The last signal of intentional change, this last “nevertheless,” is perhaps the most extravagant of all: “Nevertheless, we must strive to work while we are in this life and don’t know how soon we shall be summoned to put down the load, to take rest in the ground out of which we were taken.” This sentence is a surprise even against a backdrop of surprises. Up to this moment we had been pointed in the direction of the narrator’s retirement and graceful withdrawal from the story. Choosing the right spot in which to spend his last years—what tired fisherman wouldn’t do likewise? But then, to keep us from complacency, that damned “nevertheless.” If we didn’t feel we knew the narrator down to the darkest corner of his craven soul, we might want to say that he is playing with us, leading us in one direction at the very instant he is thinking of changing course. But no, that isn’t our narrator. His changes of direction are too clumsy; his syntax groans with less-than-polished repetition. If he is throwing us off the track, it is only insofar as he is throwing himself off, thrashing about in different directions to escape the unpleasant course of his recollections. “Nevertheless,” he croaks to us, throat tightened with misery. It is a dreadful moment for everyone, another psychic distress signal.

Here, at the end, our narrator has gone soft on us. He realized first of all that he *is* a narrator, that all of this has been a story, and that stories have certain conventions. One introduces a story in a particular way (or consciously fails to introduce it), and one concludes in some other way, one which prepares us for our reemergence into the world. *Ite missa est*. Out you go. This was but an interlude. Or something of the like. Here, what have we? A narrator who bows his head and tosses us into the lion’s den of a religious call to arms:

You know I’ve been thinking of retiring. But that doesn’t mean you should regard me as impious. I know the proper way to end a story, as well as the next man. When I said that about retiring, I was only spinning my wheels, indulging an impossible daydream. I want you

to know that I understand one doesn't just stop working for the pure slothful joy of it (much as one might like to), etc., etc.

For the narrator, the proper way to end a story is by means of an abrupt change in diction (not to mention subject) which serves as ornamental scroll to the sober gothic script of the text. A quasi-religious, quasi-mystical topic does nicely in this regard, and the less it has to do with the story, the better.

In addition to stylistics, there is probably also an element of superstition in this ending. Raising one's head too far above the daily bread could be perilous, particularly on those last few excursions; one could get sloppy, both physically and morally. And it would take a dark Celtic god too long to discover that lapse, and to act upon it. The narrator seems to have forgotten that saving one's hide in a cowardly and selfish manner is not the last word in religious compliance. As usual, his reasoning is highly flexible, and his religion seasoned with convenience.

But the sea is a hard master, displaying as it does the very face of divinity. It entices and it repels. It feeds and it destroys. It bathes and it engulfs. It is meaningless depth and immanent presence. It remains always, yet is never still. The paradoxes of Christianity find their echo in the sea's endless continuum. It is not surprising that the narrator has turned to religion for his envoi.

Still, unless we have been brutalized by the rocky expanse of the story, and feel ready to accept anything with a weak nod, we have to find these final images somewhat odd. "Striving to work while we are in this life," has, admittedly, the dull ring of orthodoxy and ineradicable Sunday schooling about it. Beware of sloth—it has a way of creeping up on one. Beware also of too much certainty: "[We] don't know how soon we shall be summoned to put down the load." The granite face of a dictatorial god, surveying the blind, scurrying ants which are his subjects. In the forefront of these is our narrator, clutching two armloads of herring, looking around fearfully. At least that is the caricatured vision we have of him, as he concludes his tale in this slightly histrionic way. And in terms of histrionics, the last phrase is the most dramatic of all: "to take rest in the ground out of which we were taken." Semantically, this goes a great distance beyond "ashes to ashes." Instead of the latter's disembodied (and therefore objectified) fragments, we are presented with the suggestion of

whole fleshly bodies being raised from and lowered into the ground. The images here are almost as tangible as those in Indian creation myths, where clods of earth go to form human beings.

This is indeed an unexpected direction for our fisherman-narrator to take, and one that leaves us open-mouthed and waiting for the next sentence, which will, alas, never come. Worse luck for the analytical reader, who will never be able to decide whether this last sentence is ornamental or heartfelt. No mean feat for a “simple” fisherman to leave a “sophisticated” reader gasping for air at the end of a puerile and hopelessly naked account. Perhaps it is that very contrast between the petulant and self-engrossed persona we thought we knew, and some final new voice of orthodoxy and symbolic fervor, which strikes us in the belly like a leather fist.

Such is the power of innocence, when it turns in the direction of creative miscalculation. Techniques of calculated shock rarely have the same impact, since their authors are struggling against the homogeneous and seasoned medium in which they themselves have always been immersed. The innocent, bathed naturally in an oral and improvisatory tradition, is bound to be a curious case when he tries his hand at formalized material. The strain of his temporary transformation shows, and he is much too preoccupied with his new role to try to camouflage it. Panting and gasping, sweating and steaming, he plunges headlong down a path which he knows promises only destruction, determined to do the job right even though it may cost him his honor and authenticity. What could be more interesting and dramatic, more the species’ very struggle for identity, than this innocent’s voyage through an alien world? And in this world, the world of rectilinear signs on paper, unities, and flawless and consistent diction, innocence can only be apotheosized, since the more it is compromised, the more it is affirmed.