

Reading Short Stories 2 - William Trevor's "The Virgin's Gift" -

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I

In 2007, a book about Mother Teresa was published under the innocuous title of *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (Doubleday). The peculiar subtitle was derived from the message which the saintly woman said she had received from Christ on September 10, 1946, on her way to Darjeeling for a retreat. The book consists mostly of her correspondence with her confessors and superiors, compiled and edited by the Rev. Brian Kolodiejchuk. Given its particular content and limited commercial appeal, the publication was expected to pass unnoticed except in the Catholic circles and among followers of Mother Teresa. A decade had already passed since her death on September 5, 1997, and some years since her beatification on October 19, 2003. The next (and, presumably, only) step that remained in the posthumous accolade for her was canonization, which most people believed would take some more time. This hectic age sends any celebrity swiftly into oblivion and allows no popularity to outlive its owner's demise too long. 'The Saint of the Gutters' is no exception to this ruthless impartiality of the modern amnesiac mindset. Then *Time* magazine took notice of the publication and chose Mother Teresa for the subject of the cover story (pp. 36-43) in its issue of September 3, 2007. The American weekly went on, in hindsight, to open what might be regarded as Pandora's box in the ecclesiastical world.

That is how 'The Secret Life of Mother Teresa' (as the blurb on *Time's* cover terms it) came to be known all over the world, a life totally concealed until then from the eyes of her disciples and admirers. The article in the magazine quoted the editor Kolodiejchuk as saying that 'for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever - , neither (sic.) in her heart or in the eucharist' (*Time*, p. 38). Despite her established image as an embodiment of self-abnegation and dedication to Catholicism, Mother Teresa in fact kept wandering in 'an arid landscape from which the deity had disappeared' (ibid.). In a private letter to the Rev. Michael Van der Peet in September, 1979, she wrote:

Jesus has a special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, - Listen and do not hear - the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak.... I want you to pray for me - that I let Him have [a] free hand. (*Time*, p. 36)

These candid and poignant words challenge and even cancel the received assumption that pious people

of Mother Teresa's fame, status and calibre seldom if ever waver in their belief. What is more amazing about her confession is that, while enduring an incredibly lengthy period of scepticism and incertitude, she never abandoned her faith or her self-imposed mission of humanitarian orientation. Hers is indeed a mind tormented incessantly by nagging voices of doubt and still engaged in a persistent quest of God. The Rev. Kolodiejchuk rightly construes her faith-filled perseverance 'as her most spiritually heroic act' (*Time*, p. 38). The struggle of the former Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu from Yugoslavia obliquely serves to demarcate the way in and the extent to which religion can be entangled in the formation of the innermost universe of an individual, especially under societal and historical circumstances where the *raison d'être* of any religious conviction is undergoing a rigorous scrutiny.

The purpose of art might be said 'to hold ... the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet*, III.2.22). But nature also imitates art from time to time. As a matter of fact, nature and art complement each other to give a fuller and truer account of human beings - their charms and enigmas, limitations and possibilities. Several years prior to the publication of *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, William Trevor, an Irish writer, took up the theme of a quest for faith and worked out a short story titled 'The Virgin's Gift', which is included in *The Hill Bachelors* (Viking, 2000). Read in the light of *Time's* reportage, the tale now appears as if tailored for annotation of Mother Teresa's prolonged years of agony and doubt. Her life may in its turn afford an otherwise unobtainable insight for appreciation of 'The Virgin's Gift' and also a vivid testimonial to the acuteness of a writer's percipience and creative imagination. If Trevor had some real personage or historical figure for the model of his artistic creation, the relationship between nature and art would be more reciprocal and circulatory. The two elements indeed play in each other's hand for revelation and confirmation of the truth about human nature.

II

The conceptual foundation of 'The Virgin's Gift' is laid in the question of how the Mother of the Son of God felt upon the abrupt visitation of Archangel Gabriel 'before she was holy' (*The Hill Bachelors*, 152: hereafter page numbers alone). Could it not be truer that, an ordinary girl of nineteen, she was immensely surprised, disturbed and even distressed by what befell her so unexpectedly? The author makes the hero of the story envision her as 'taken aback by the angel's annunciation, and plunged into a confusion' (152). The hero goes as far as to ask, 'And who could say there had not been crossness also?' (153). The rhetorical question reflects a wholesome common sense on the part of the author, who refuses to accept what has been received unconditionally in the whole history of the Christian cultures. His sight is riveted farther on the plausible reality of a living woman whose human dimensions might have been erased in the process of her deification in the Biblical writings. If the Blessed Mary had

entertained suspicion, anger and defiance, why not Michael, as is proved in reality by Mother Teresa? Faith will be tested and consolidated only in the wake of a sustained act of doubting, doubting, and more doubting.

In editing an anthology of Irish short stories, William Trevor defines the genre of short fiction as 'the distillation of an essence' (Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, ix). He puts his own words to practice and deftly distills an essence of Irishness and, for that matter, of humanity in 'The Virgin's Gift'. For the work is an extremely 'lean' tale even by the standard of short fiction. It is comprised of 16 pages, which are divided into four sections of diverse length. It has a single and simple plot in which nothing sensational or extravagant occurs, except a little surprise at the end. It has a hero named Michael but few other characters of significance. Reducing rhetorical flourish and ideological flab to the minimum, the narrative stands closer to poetry than to short fiction, as is vividly demonstrated by the grace and cadence of the opening lines:

A gentle autumn had slipped away, sunny to the end, the last of the butterflies still there in
December, dozing in the crevices of the rocks. (139)

This cautiously-chiseled style is most pleasing to the reader's eye and, in league with the piercing gaze into the workings of the soul, constitutes the primary charm and virtue of 'The Virgin's Gift'.

The 'leanness' of the story stems partly from the scarcity of information about the fundamental factors of storytelling, particularly location, time, and characterization. Evidently, 'The Virgin's Gift' is a Catholic story which deals with a Catholic man living in a Catholic country, but there is little further information beyond that. Not much is mentioned about locales except some unnamed places in Ireland, and still less about time. Amazingly, all that defines the historical period of the story is '... the very distant past that was his [Michael's] time' (139). By keeping time and place vague, the tale unpretentiously lays a claim to universality. In this vein, 'The Virgin's Gift' can be represented as a story that takes place somewhere and sometime in a pre-modern period: 'somewhere' and 'sometime' could be anywhere and anytime, regardless of region, race, and religion.

The paucity of information also applies to the depiction of the characters. The basic objective of characterization in 'The Virgin's Gift' is set for the verbal painting of inner landscapes rather than external delineation. Michael is a fifty-nine-year-old monk or, more appropriately, what might be called 'hermit', living alone in a small island a little way off the mainland. All the other persons are not much more characters than names recalled intermittently from the distant past when the hero examines the orbit of his own life and faith. His parents and Fódla are endowed with slightly more notable presence, but even these three are, in a practical sense, mere memories that hover hesitantly over the outskirts of his consciousness and sneak into his sense of reality as his conviction falters or strays

into nostalgia.

The incongruous combination of the surface serenity and underlying turmoil in 'The Virgin's Gift' rolls on to the finale where it is consumed into a blissful harmony. The sense of tedium aroused by the third-person narration of the hero's atrociously stoic, uneventful life is amply offset by the depth, rather than intensity, of his inner moans and shrieks. The outcome of his embattled quest is a gift for everybody involved both inside and outside the plot - Michael himself, his aged parents, and the reader as well. It is undeniable that 'religious faith' is prominent in the thematic concern of the story, but 'The Virgin's Gift' reaches farther and wider. The deep impression of awe that long lingers in the aftertaste of a non-Christian reader implies that the narrative addresses a greater, more universal theme, such as what essentially sustains human existence and how life could and should be lived.

'The Virgin's Gift' might be classified in the category of 'perambulating' or 'pedestrian' tales in which James Joyce's *Dubliners* is most celebrated. In this genre, very familiar and almost innate to Irish short story, the main character's roaming carries forward and unfolds the basic components of fiction such as plot, time-scheme, location, and his or her personality and human relationships. In 'The Virgin's Gift', Michael assumes that he has virtually 'walked all Ireland' (139) by the second command of the Virgin. On Day 2, he receives her third command, which prompts him to resume the ordeal again. The plot is put into motion as he sets out on a foot journey with no preparation on his hand. As he walks on, his days are interspersed with flash-backs of the events that marked the turning points of his life and with distant calls that still reverberate, though feebly, in his mind's ear. The past thus recollected is vaguely visible, the present is ever uncertain, and the future is not yet in sight. Everything is enshrouded in uncertainty as Michael's faith swings violently from doubt to anger to obedience. His effort not to question the meaning of his journey which seems equivalent to aimless drifting and therefore meaningless to him gradually turns out to be the final lesson requisite for total elimination of doubt and angst in his faith.

III

'It was a miracle, ... a summer marvel' (139) is how Michael feels toward his present conditions of being. His sense of complacency and gratification syncopates with the serene, peaceful atmosphere which pervades the opening scene. In the extremity of natural and human circumstances, the scenery and the mind interact in harmony. It is, nonetheless, not true to say that the hero is satisfied in every way and that his life is absolutely free from any perturbation. The passage that follows the opening contains some lines of ominous notes: 'Such entanglements of truth and falsity - and of good and evil, God and the devil - Michael dwelt upon ...' (139). His feeling of happiness and satisfaction is genuine,

but it never entirely extinguishes a quest for truth which still sets him on, after 24 years of solitary life on the island, to questioning himself and his faith. A seed of scrupulous self-examination and self-criticism is subtly sowed at the outset on the well-tilled, fertile soil of felicity and fulfillment.

Michael's steps of life have been at once humdrum and dramatic. He was merely 18 years old when the Virgin first appeared in his dream and instructed him to 'leave the farm and offer himself at the abbey' (140). Her visitation was unanticipated, and God's command she transmitted was harsh and cruel, not to him but to his parents, who had no other child to take care of them and their farm when they grew old. Furthermore, Michael had a childhood mate next door, Fódla, who had become his sweetheart by then. It was she, not Michael himself, or his parents, who did most to change his decision, saying, 'A dream's no more'n a dream' (140). Mild in demeanor and serious in temperament, Michael never contemplated ignoring the calling, while his parents were thrilled to know that their son was a chosen one. To the latter, who took the visitation as a miraculous blessing and not at all as a bane, disobedience was inconceivable and inscrutable, as is shown by his father's words of encouragement: 'God has spoken for you. ... Do not have doubt, Michael' (141). Placed in sharp contrast is Fódla's pathetic resignation:

Her hand slipped out of his, their friendship over. Her life, too, she said. (141)

Her female instinct and intimate knowledge of what Michael and his family were like forced her to acknowledge that there was nothing to be done and that her love and happy future plans were all finished prematurely. The Virgin's visitation, whether just a dream or a will of God, thus brought the modest, idyllic life of the two farming families to an abrupt end.

The narration of 'The Virgin's Gift' is conducted according to the chronological progress of the hero's life interspersed with his reminiscences and inner monologues. Part I begins with a glimpse of his annual preparation for the approaching winter. In his solitary life, he has a habit of thinking to himself and comforting his lonesomeness by remembering old days. The seasonal chores make him feel grateful to the basic skills for survival he learnt at the abbey along with his fellow monks. It was during those years at the abbey that the Virgin visited him for the second time and said to him, 'Find solitude' (142). Having been immersed in the life of order and discipline for 17 years, Michael initially took the second command as enigmatic, as little more than another 'disruption' in his established life, and even as another 'punishment' as on the morning of Fódla's tears. But no feeling of anger or defiance ever occupied him at that time. At the end of the recollection, Michael recapitulates the passage of his life since his departure from the abbey:

At the abbey, he had learned piety, had practiced patience, been humbled by his companions' talents, strengthened by their friendship. But in his solitude, he was closer to God. (144)

The last sentence enunciates the frame of mind in which he has come to judge and accept the second visitation. The fact that no remorse, no regret, makes inroads into his soul is significant here. 'He [God] will provide'(141), his father once said, and he was right, at least for the past 24 years. Part I closes when Michael goes to rest after having done what he thinks he should before the arrival of the merciless season while the sunny spell still goes on.

Part II ushers in a radical turn of the tide for both the story and the hero. The Mother of God appears in Michael's dream for the third time. He is surprised as on the previous two occasions, but he is more dismayed and perturbed than surprised this time. For he is mentally prepared to endure another winter in his humble habitat. He takes it for granted that the island is his last home where his soul will go to its eternal rest some day. The Virgin's instruction, 'In this month of the year you must leave it [your solitude]' (145), is delivered in a warm, quiet manner. The hero's immediate response betrays a touch of dissatisfaction and protest:

I was content on my father's farm. I was content at the abbey. This is my place now. (145)

As if attempting to soothe a sullen child, she adds, 'I have come to you the last time now' (145), to which Michael blatantly replies, 'I cannot understand' (145). No further word is exchanged between the Virgin and Michael. Then their final communion, poised in the absence of mutual agreement and understanding, fades in the darkness. The waking of the hero at dawn curtly announces the end of Part II. The sudden closure, which gives rise to an impression of rupture or discontinuity in the structure, actually reflects the hero's dismay and failure to come to terms with himself.

The turnaround of Michael's fate might be insinuated by a new phase that emerges in his dream, in the way the Virgin looks. She was in the guise of his mother on her first visitation and in an angelic form, as in a Gospel drawing by one of Michael's fellow monks, on her second. This time, however, she assumes a totally different shape: '... there was such beauty as Michael had never before beheld in a human face or anywhere in nature ...' (145). The first two occasions presented her in the figures of what had been registered in Michael's memory or perception. The third and last time visualizes her in an image unknown to him, an image unearthly and almost sacred which forebodes something ethereal, something way beyond human capacity.

Part III is another short section whose role it is to sketch Michael's inner conflict and fluctuations. The morning that follows the Virgin's third visitation finds the hero alternately in an uneasy mood of irritation, melancholy, and confusion. His joyful anticipation of the season for 'the celebration of the Saviour's birth' (146) is brutally thwarted. In deepening distress, the hero keeps wondering why, at such a late stage of life, after 24 years of complete solitude, he is urged to walk all over Ireland and mingle with people again. The days of anger and doubt set in and subject his faith to the test of

self-scrutiny. He rambles around the island and talks to himself. His piety eventually perseveres, supplanting his dubiousness with a plea for forgiveness of his presumptuous questions and attitude. Michael once again accepts the command whose purport or bearing on his way of being eludes his comprehension. His decision to give himself up to another ordeal, another attempt to walk aimlessly, marks the end of Part III.

The longest of the four sections, Part IV traces Michael's painful journey without preparation, without a destination, without a motive, only guided by an unseen hand. The first hardship that he has to cope with is to wade through the icy sea-water and cross the strait between the island and the mainland. Then comes a climb up a steep, rocky cliff, followed by a walk through thorny wild plants. The physical difficulties temporarily disappear in a bush of gorse where he suddenly discovers a path stretching before his eyes 'like a track' (148), as if laid out solely for the benefit of his journey. Eating wild fruit and drinking from rivers and springs, Michael walks on, still hopelessly astray in his search of the purport of his own travail.

Naturally, his doubt and exasperation intensify during the ridiculous mission driven by a blind faith. At the same time, he feels thankful, at least to the ongoing dry, mild weather, which is not very common in Irish winter. In fact, there emerge in his way some other signs of more than good luck, the signs which are almost premonitory and therefore rightly pertain to the season of celebration. The first of them is his invulnerability to harms inflicted by nature: he never bumps against tree branches nor stumbles on roots even in a dark forest. The second sign is manifested in a young farming couple who kindly provide Michael with food and drink. Those who are willing to give are entitled to receive, especially at this time of the year. The couple are expecting a baby: 'It wouldn't be long before an infant was born to them' (149). Still, the irrationality of Michael's ordeal enlivens his bitterness and shamefulness in turn as he trudges on. He is surprised to hear his own voice resonate inside himself, 'Am I your plaything?' (150). The sarcastic query carries a clear reverberation of the celebrated lines in *King Lear*.

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods.

They kill us for their sport. (IV. 1 36-37)

It should be remarked that, in spite of his petulance and defiance, the hero is always aware that '...he was protected while he was obedient' (150).

Michael's bipolar emotions continue to strive against each other to seize control of him until he stands at the door of a big house. The lady of the house, a widow, has dark hair and olive skin, which revive the old memories of Fódla in him. Eve Patten cites victimization as one of the major themes that the stories in *The Hill Bachelors* are concerned with (see Works Cited). What was victimized for the

sake of faith 41 years ago, what had to be relinquished for a life of praying and devotion, rears its envious head once again and begins to nibble at the old man's mind: 'More anger was kindled in him; he was no longer penitent' (151). He is overwhelmed and traumatized in particular by imagining the horrible vision that 'Fódlá bore the children of another man' and that 'she had come to belong to someone else' (151). This allusion to children symbolizes everything that is irrecoverable to the hero. It is not before the denouement that his secular angst at his lost happiness and unborn children is compensated with something far more precious and sacred. The question that should be posed in this scene is: Is Michael being tempted, and his faith tested? For the lady of the house outpours lavish hospitality on him and begs him to stay on. The soul which is pulled back to the world of pleasures and desires swings like a pendulum. 'I am not allowed to stay' (152), the hero somehow replies, although he is now stranded on an outpost of sanity hounded by raging confusion.

Since he set out on this journey, Michael has faltered and recovered. Hardships have been overcome, and temptations withstood. The tale that begins with 'a miracle', with 'a summer marvel', ends in the same strain, or rather, with a greater miracle which lives up to its title. Soon after he resumes his travel, he comes to notice that 'his cheerless mood slipped from him' (152). A vague recognition dawns on him that 'he had not failed' (152), either as the young man he once was or as the elderly man he now is. Taking the risk of committing an act of extreme profanity, he even compares the path he is treading to the one taken by the Virgin herself. Michael toils on for three more days, as if asking for atonement for his impiety, as if ashamed of his own perverseness. On the fourth day, a view which clicks into his distant memory opens up before him. His seemingly aimless wondering has brought him to the destination ordained by a providence.

Michael finds himself in the midst of a bleak, wintry scenery of the countryside, which he is able to discern as his birthplace. The signs of decay and deprivation are everywhere - no cattle grazing, no fowls pecking, no sound of any living creature. It is a world of silence and inertia immeasurably removed from the one still living in his memory. Only the old stone farmhouse still stands there, with the roof caving in and the windows stuffed with straw. A frail old woman and a blind old man answer his knock. They do not recognize him right away, naturally after the separation of more than four decades. The old woman lets out in a mixed tone of surprise and delight after a while, 'It is Michael' (153). The old man's monosyllable, 'Michael' (154), ensues, his wrinkled hand groping in the air. Besieged by age, ill health and poverty, the three decrepit people hold each other and celebrate the reunion. The 59-year-old hermit is back in the embrace of his aged parents, a genuine 'winter marvel' to them. A dim light in the hovel is highlighted for a vicarious depiction of their exaltation and their unity as a family:

A single candle burned in celebration of the day, its grease congealed, holding it to the shelf above the hearth. (154)

Around the time of the birth of the Son of God, Michael is born for the second time, 'a gift of a son given again' (154) by the Virgin to his parents. At one time, he thought about them that '... they would not be there at all, which was more likely' (142). They themselves are given to him as parents second time around, an invaluable and irreplaceable gift for him. Here is a holy family blessed for their obeisance, for nothing but the purity and strength of their faith. God indeed provided, and Our Mother kept her promise. Any moment of Michael's life has not been wasted.

IV

Supplement: an overview of Trevor's life and career

William Trevor is an Irish writer whose career is entirely built in England. His reputation as a superb storyteller, a maestro in the genre of short fiction, is well established in both his native and adopted land. Not many professionals alive and active today can exceed him either in the quality or quantity of short story. In view of the indisputable acknowledgement of Trevor's contribution in Ireland and the United Kingdom, or in Europe as a whole according to Suzanne Morrow Paulson (Preface, xi), it is quite surprising that he remains fairly obscure in the other English-speaking countries and little known in the rest of the world. Various reasons can be offered for his undeserved reception. He might be called 'a writers' writer', whose pen impresses his fellow men of letters and aficionados of fiction but scarcely pleases general readers. No one will deny the refined nature of his art and artistry, a part of which this article hopefully proves through close reading of "The Virgin's Gift". His style, his manner of narration in particular, and the reality, sometimes grotesque and macabre, which he extracts from the life of ordinary people, seem to be chiefly culpable for his relative obscurity.

William Trevor, whose real name is William Trevor Cox, was born on May 24, 1928, in Mitchelstown, County Cork, in the Republic of Ireland. He was the second child of Gertrude Davison Cox and James William Cox, both Protestants. His father was a bank official and had to relocate his family frequently due to the demands of his profession. Trevor accordingly had to change his schools many times as a small boy. He was educated at St Columba's College, County Dublin, and proceeded to Trinity College Dublin, from which he graduated in 1950 with a degree of Bachelor of Arts in history. He met Jane Ryan at the university and married her in 1952. Right after graduation, he responded to a newspaper advertisement and assumed the position of a private tutor. He switched his job to a schoolteacher but did not stay too long in it owing to the financial difficulty of his school. He eventually emigrated to England in 1953 and took up a teaching job in the Midlands. He then worked

as a copywriter in an advertising agency before he began to work full-time as a writer in 1965. He was also a sculptor and exhibited his works frequently in Dublin and London.

His first novel, *A Standard of Behaviour*, was published in 1958, to be followed by a long list of novels, novellas, and collections of short fictions. His prolific career has so far pounded out the following novels:

<i>A Standard of Behaviour</i> (1958)	<i>The Boarding-House</i> (1965)
<i>The Love Department</i> (1965)	<i>Mrs. Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel</i> (1969)
<i>Miss Gomez and the Brethren</i> (1971)	<i>Elizabeth Alone</i> (1973)
<i>The Last Lunch of the Season</i> (1973)	<i>The Children of Dynmouth</i> (1976)
<i>Lovers of their Time</i> (1978)	<i>Other People's Worlds</i> (1979)
<i>The Distant Past</i> (1979)	<i>Beyond the Pale</i> (1981)
<i>Scenes from an Album</i> (1981)	<i>Fools of Fortune</i> (1983)
<i>The Silence in the Garden</i> (1988)	<i>Two Lives</i> (1991)
<i>Juliet's Story</i> (1992)	<i>Excursions in the Real World</i> (1993)
<i>Felicia's Journey</i> (1994)	<i>After Rain</i> (1996)
<i>Death in Summer</i> (1998)	<i>The Hill Bachelors</i> (2000)
<i>The Story of Lucy Gault</i> (2002)	<i>A Bit on the Side</i> (2004)
<i>The Dressmaker's Child</i> (2005)	<i>Cheating at Canasta</i> (2007)

His collections of short stories are comprised of the following list:

- The Day We Got Drunk on Cake and Other Stories* (1967)
- The Ballroom of Romance and Other Stories* (1972)
- Angels at the Ritz and Other Stories* (1977)
- Lovers of Their Time and Other Stories* (1978)
- The Distant Past and Other Stories* (1979)
- Beyond the Pale and Other Stories* (1981)
- The Stories of William Trevor* (1983)
- The News from Ireland and Other Stories* (1986)
- Nights at the Alexandra* (1987)
- Family Sins and Other Stories* (1990)
- Two Lives: Reading Turgenev and My House in Umbria* (1991)
- Outside Ireland: Selected Stories* (1992)
- The Collected Stories of William Trevor* (1993)
- Ireland: Selected Stories* (1995)

Based on 'Select Bibliography' in Suzanne Morrow Paulson's commentary and overview (p. 173) and two internet sites, both lists are, amazingly, still growing.

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