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# The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Conor McPherson's *Girl from the North Country*

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Graley Herren



## The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Death and Rebirth in Conor McPherson's *Girl from the North Country*

In February 2015, the Irish American playwright John Patrick Shanley conducted a revealing interview with his Dublin counterpart Conor McPherson for *American Theatre* magazine. Asked about his preoccupation with the supernatural, McPherson intimated, “I remember when I was a little kid, I was always interested in ghosts and scary things. If I want to rationalize it, it’s probably a search for God.” This quest led him to theater. “There’s something so religious about the theatre,” he stated. We’re all sitting there in the dark, and there’s something about how the stage glows in the darkness, which is such a beautiful picture of human existence. What’s really interesting is the darkness that surrounds the picture. I’m always trying to bring the darkness onto the stage.”<sup>1</sup> Darkness may have moral valence as evil. More important, however, darkness connotes mystery, the unknown, or, as McPherson has expressed it elsewhere, “the beyond.” In an interview at his alma mater, University College Dublin, McPherson posited a distinctly Irish attraction to “the beyond”:

My theory about the Irish psyche is that, Ireland being the most western point of Europe, beside the Atlantic Ocean—for thousands and thousands of years nobody knew in Europe perhaps that there was anything beyond that. And so we were the place that was right beside “the beyond.” And I think that somehow we internalized that in quite an anxious way. And I think that our pagan Neolithic ancestors who built Newgrange and all of this kind of thing were somehow struggling with trying to reach “the beyond” and commune with it.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his theatrical career McPherson has persistently staged efforts to commune with the beyond. The best known example would be his classic

1. John Patrick Shanley, “Conor McPherson Searches for God in ‘The Night Alive,’” *American Theatre* (December, 2013), available at <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/02/23/conor-mcpherson-searches-for-god-in-the-night-alive/2/>.

2. Dave Fanning, “UCD Connections,” interview with Conor McPherson, 3 November 2009, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwzUHtwgcbA>.

Irish ghost play *The Weir* (1997), where Valerie receives a phone call from her drowned daughter, Niamh, begging her mother to come rescue her. In more recent plays, from *The Seafarer* (2006) and *The Veil* (2011) to *The Night Alive* (2013) and *Girl from the North Country* (2017), McPherson has increasingly turned toward explicit religious imagery and cosmology in his metaphysical explorations for the stage.

*Girl from the North Country* is the most fully realized of McPherson's religious plays to date. It straddles the threshold between this world and "the beyond," a contentious border separating good and evil, light and darkness, love and hate, life and death. The play communes with "the beyond" through the medium of Bob Dylan's songs and the mystery of theater; *Girl from the North Country* dramatizes passage back and forth across these borders.<sup>3</sup> Drawing upon both Christian and pre-Christian models, McPherson charts a cyclical journey between life, death, and rebirth, in which the theatrical space serves as the site for communal transformation, and music serves as the catalyst for renewal.

Conor McPherson and Bob Dylan prove to be an inspired pairing. In his introduction to *Girl from the North Country* McPherson recalls, "Maybe five years ago I was asked if I might consider writing a play to feature Bob Dylan's songs. I initially didn't feel this was something I could do and I had cast it out of my mind when, one day, walking along, I saw a vision of a guesthouse in Minnesota in the 1930s."<sup>4</sup> One breakthrough was the decision to avoid the so-called "jukebox musical" formula. Rather than stringing together several songs from an existing discography to provide the characters and plot for the book (such as the distillation of ABBA's songs in *Mamma Mia!*), McPherson wrote a play inspired by the conditions that produced Dylan. He locates his play in Duluth, Minnesota, the birthplace of Robert Allen Zimmerman (alias Bob Dylan) in 1941, and he sets it in 1934, the year that Dylan's parents wed. Aside from those pregnant facts, McPherson eschews the lure of biography and focuses on Dylan's songs to comment upon the characters and their struggles. There are no Dylan avatars in *Girl from the North Country*, which instead centers upon the bankrupt innkeeper

3. I wish to thank David Beal of Special Rider Music for permission to quote from the following Bob Dylan songs: "Girl from the North Country" ©1963 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991 by Special Rider Music; "Like a Rolling Stone" ©1965 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music; "I Want You" © 1966 by Dwarf Music; renewed 1994 by Dwarf Music; "Forever Young" ©1973 by Ram's Horn Music; renewed 2001 by Ram's Horn Music; "Tight Connection to My Heart (Has Anyone Seen My Love)" ©1985 Special Rider Music. I provide a page number in those instances where the quotation is taken from the published script of McPherson's *Girl from the North Country*.

4. Conor McPherson, *Girl from the North Country*, music and lyrics by Bob Dylan (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), 6; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (GNC 6).

Nick Laine, his wife Elizabeth who suffers from early-onset dementia, and several Depression-era drifters passing through their Duluth boardinghouse.

McPherson's chief attraction to the project was not biographical but spiritual. Dylan's religious journey covers many miles, including sharp swerves with plenty of blood on the tracks. Raised Jewish in rural Minnesota, Dylan drifted far from his religious roots, most notably in his very public conversion to Christianity in 1978. He released a trilogy of Christian albums between 1979 and 1981 and embarked on a series of proselytizing concert tours. This initial fervor soon died down, however, and in the ensuing years he has kept his personal religious affiliations largely to himself. But he still periodically sings jeremiads against modern corruption and faithlessness, and he occasionally issues musical warnings about a day of reckoning near at hand. It is the religious dimension of the songs, not the man, which attract McPherson and resonates with his own spiritual quest, filtered through the distinct perspective and iconography of his own Irish Catholic upbringing. As McPherson observes in his introduction to *Girl from the North Country*, "Mr. Dylan sings about God a lot. Sometimes God appears as an impossible reflection of yourself. Sometimes as someone you could never know. But however God appears, however Mr. Dylan begs for mercy, you understand that cry" (GNC 7).

That description resonates with the "search for God" that McPherson avowed to Shanley, a God who might be a projection or an illusion but who serves a life-affirming function nonetheless. McPherson further hinted at Dylan's religious appeal in a piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine. He told journalist David Browne, "By setting it before Bob was born, we could cut it loose from all associations with him and the Sixties. . . . This gives it a feeling of the Nativity: that when Bob entered the world, everything changed."<sup>5</sup> Equating the birth of Dylan with the birth of Jesus may go a bit too far, even in *Rolling Stone* (which was named in part after Dylan's song "Like a Rolling Stone"). But the Nativity reference does tip McPherson's hand. Reviewers of *Girl from the North Country* have tended to focus on its pastiche of 1930s Americana. It is worth noting that this play is McPherson's first set in America, and he has studiously done his homework to lend the play an air of authenticity. He leans heavily (some critics believe too heavily) upon iconic American reference points. The play is filled with echoes and debts to the drama of Thornton Wilder and Eugene O'Neill, the fiction of John Steinbeck, the photography of Dorothea Lange, and the songs of Woody Guthrie. Distracted by these cultural allusions, most have overlooked or downplayed the religious intertextuality of *Girl from the North*

5. David Browne, "How a Bob Dylan Musical Finally Got Off the Ground," *Rolling Stone*, September 13, 2017, available at <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/inside-bob-dylan-musical-girl-from-the-north-country-w502632>.

*Country*, a feature that becomes particularly significant in light of McPherson's other recent work.

McPherson's play takes its title from Dylan's melancholy 1963 song. The song was released on the album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which featured a memorable cover photo of Dylan and girlfriend Suze Rotolo huddled against the cold on a snowy New York street. He wrote the song during a bout of extreme loneliness while Rotolo was away on extended holiday in Europe. This separation conjured up the ghost of an earlier lost love (probably Echo Helstrom) from his Minnesota past. Although his initial sources may have been concretely biographical, the resulting song is elusive and shrouded in mystery. It opens,

Well, if you're travelin' in the north country fair  
Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline  
Remember me to one who lives there  
She once was a true love of mine<sup>6</sup>

Dylan never refers to New York or Minnesota by name, preferring instead the more enigmatic "north country," which seems less a geographical marker than an existential condition. The north country is a harsh windswept environment, but it is also the home of beauty; the singer's "true love" resides there. For reasons that are never explained, the singer cannot return to the north country. He is on the wrong side of the borderline, permanently separated from his lover, and must therefore resort to sending messages through an emissary (the "you" of the lyrics). But why can he not return? Perhaps he is in prison or on the run from the law. Perhaps he is in another relationship now but cannot help but remember her "when the snowflakes storm / When the rivers freeze and summer ends." Or, most compelling of all, maybe the singer or his true love has died, crossing the border into what Hamlet called "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (*Hamlet III.i.80-81*). The singer laments,

I'm a-wonderin' if she remembers me at all  
Many times I've often prayed  
In the darkness of my night  
In the brightness of my day

"Girl from the North Country" provided McPherson with the metaphysical borderland between life and death, the desolate mood of frustrated longing, and the chiaroscuro palette of light and darkness he needed to superimpose his dramatic religious vision onto the map of Dylan country.

McPherson signals the otherworldly setting of *Girl from the North Country* in Doctor Walker's opening monologue. The town doctor functions as narrator

6. Bob Dylan, "Girl from the North Country," *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*. New York: Columbia Records, 1963.

and speaks directly to the audience. Several reviewers have compared Doctor Walker to the Stage Manager in Wilder's *Our Town*. Wilder's play takes place in bucolic Grover's Corners, but by the end the Stage Manager presides over a graveyard of the talking dead. McPherson picks up where Wilder left off. "My name is George Arthur Walker. I'm a doctor. Least I was. Back when this was our world. I healed some bodies in pain. But as we know pain comes in all kinds. Physical, spiritual. Indescribable" (*GNC* 12). The phrase "our world" may indeed recall "Our Town," but the question remains: what world? Walker seems to be referring to the world of the living, a world that he and the other characters have evidently left behind. By the end of the play we learn that the doctor committed suicide, retroactively confirming that Walker is dead and has been posthumously conjuring up scenes from past life. There is also something deeply metadramatic about this world, where the innate repetition of theater doubles for certain religious conceptions of the afterlife (one thinks of Dante's *Inferno*, Sartre's *No Exit*, and any number of works by Samuel Beckett). If *Girl from the North Country* is set in the afterlife, then the early scenes suggest Hell or Purgatory. The lost souls condemned to this boardinghouse are weighed down by worry, sorrow, and regret. They are doomed to repeat their failures again and again.

*Girl from the North Country* is not McPherson's first smuggling expedition across the border between life and death; his 2006 play *The Seafarer* includes the Devil as a character disguised as "Mr. Lockhart." Lockhart arrives on Christmas Eve at the home of Sharky Harkin, with whom he was once imprisoned. Sharky was so hopelessly drunk back then that he forgot beating a man to death outside a pub. The Devil sprung him from jail, allowing him twenty-five more years of freedom, and now he has come to square his debts. Lockhart spells out his agenda and reveals his identity in no uncertain terms: "I want your soul, Sharky. . . . I'm the son of the morning, Sharky. I'm the snake in the garden. I've come here for your soul this Christmas, and I've been looking for you all fucking day! We made a deal. We played cards for your freedom and you promised me—you *promised* me—the chance to play you again. So don't start fucking me around now."<sup>7</sup>

In both *The Seafarer* and *Girl from the North Country*, Hell is the condition of being completely isolated and seemingly beyond the reach of love. As Lockhart describes it to Sharky, "you can't even deal with the thought that someone might love you, because of all the pain you always cause. Well that's a fraction of the self-loathing you feel in hell, except it's worse. Because there truly is no one to love you. Not even Him" (80). Nick Laine, in the later play, suffers acutely

7. Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Theatre Communications Group, 2007); hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*S* 51).

from this predicament. The proprietor of the Duluth boardinghouse has tried in vain throughout the Depression to hold his family together, but everything is now falling to pieces. Even before Elizabeth's dementia firmly took hold she announced that she no longer loved him. His son is a drunken and dissolute would-be writer named Gene (perhaps an allusion to Eugene O'Neill) who continually thwarts his father's attempts to secure him a stable job. His adopted daughter Marianne has gotten pregnant under mysterious circumstances, and resents Nick's efforts to marry her off. And he ruins his one chance at escaping and starting over with the widow Mrs. Nielsen. Early in the play they plan to run off together with her husband's insurance money and start their own hotel—but the money never materializes, and without it there is not enough to bind them together. She eventually confronts him with the question "Do you love me?" (*GNC* 70) His reply echoes Lockhart's description of damnation:

NICK: How can you love someone who ain't got a soul?

MRS NIELSEN: You have a soul.

NICK: I don't feel it.

MRS NIELSEN: I feel it. Just say it to me. Just say it.

NICK: I can't love anyone! There it is! There's the truth! (*GNC* 71)

Another metaphysical feature from *The Seafarer*, which sets the stage for *Girl from the North Country*, is the spiritual function of music. McPherson closely associates music with beauty, harmony, and grace. Not surprisingly, then, the Devil finds music repellent. Before his true identity is even revealed, Mr. Lockhart already expresses disdain for music. His Christmas Eve pub crawl on the way to the Harkin house exposed him to much musical revelry, but he admits, "as soon as a sing-along starts, I'm out of a place, that's just the way I am" (*S* 43). When Ivan puts on a record to liven up the atmosphere, Lockhart immediately protests: "I don't like any music. . . . I can't hear it. . . . I just don't like the sound. You see, to me it's just an ugly noise" (*S* 75). Later, it becomes clear why the Devil finds music abhorrent: it reminds him of Heaven, his celestial home before being evicted by God for rebellion. According to Lockhart's description of Heaven, "At a certain point each day music plays. It seems to emanate from the very sun itself. Not so much a tune as a heartbreakingly beautiful vibration in the sunlight shining down on and through all the souls. A blanket of clear, almost unthinkable, harmonies" (*S* 81). Ever since the Devil was cast out of the light and into the dark, out of the sun and into the cold, he has been as deaf to music as he has been deprived of God's love.

McPherson also incorporates a spiritual dimension of music in *Girl from the North Country*, but his treatment is more ambivalent. If the presence of music alone were the determining factor, then a play filled with Dylan's songs would be Heaven, not Hell. But it is not as simple as that. Yes, Dylan radiates through

the songs like a presiding deity, and his music occasionally quickens the dead of this underworld. However, the songs themselves resist appropriation as paeans of heavenly bliss and harmonious love. McPherson's selection of Dylan songs tends toward those that express unsatisfied longing for love lost, love thwarted, or love just out of reach. The play's title is an emblematic case in point, but there are others. Marianne piercingly pleads, "Has anybody seen my love?" in the song "Tight Connection to My Heart" (GNC 25). Gene futilely moans "I want you, I want you, / I want you so bad" to his dying love ("The guilty undertaker sighs") in the song "I Want You" (GNC 47). Elizabeth conveys her alienation from her marriage and family by asking "How does it feel / How does it feel / To be on your own / With no direction home?" in the classic "Like a Rolling Stone" (GNC 56). There is also a clever effect achieved in performance by intercutting "Like a Rolling Stone" with "I Want You" so that the latter answers the question posed by the former: "How does it feel?" "So bad." McPherson enlists Dylan's songs to express the anxious longing of lost souls in *Girl from the North Country*. The atmosphere may be morbid and infernal, and the separation from love implies damnation. Yet, this condition is not beyond redemption in the play. There is poignancy in the characters' lamentations for lost love. Furthermore, the fact that they at least have song as an outlet for their yearning suggests that hope remains for their cries to be heard, their prayers to be answered, their love to be restored.

Perhaps the best Christian analogue for this state of suspension, not quite damned but not yet saved, is the state of Limbo. Neither the Bible nor the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifically acknowledges Limbo. Nevertheless, there is a long theological and literary tradition positing the existence of a dwelling place for those who have not earned entry into Heaven, but who are nonetheless spared the eternal punishment of Hell. Of special note here is the idea of the Limbo of Infants, which exists for unbaptized children who died uncleansed of original sin but were innocent of committing any personal transgressions. None of the characters in *Girl from the North Country* is without sin; quite the contrary. Where the notion of Limbo becomes most relevant is with respect to the recurring mentions of a "girl down the hole." Irrepressible thoughts of the "girl down the hole" haunt multiple characters in the play. At times the "girl down the hole" seems to refer to a specific dead girl; at other times, it seems to refer more broadly to the death of innocence itself. In fact, "Girl from the North Country" in the title may ultimately refer as much to the totemic "girl down the hole" as to Dylan's song.

The first line delivered by Elizabeth Laine is, "I can hear it" (GNC 12). Doctor Walker provides a potential gloss on this line with the backstory of Nick's sister, Leonora, who died at the age of six when ten-year-old Nick let her wander off. According to Walker, Leonora "fell down a taconite hole. Fell forty feet.



The boys could hear her down there—calling out for Nick. But by the time Nick came . . .” (*GNC* 41). One would expect Nick to be haunted with guilt over his sister’s death, but he refuses to face it. Instead, it is Elizabeth who hears cries for help. During one of their vicious arguments Elizabeth confronts Nick with the taboo subject:

ELIZABETH: You hear the girl down the hole?

NICK: What?

ELIZABETH: I know you hear it.

NICK: Why don’t you shut your fucking mouth?

ELIZABETH: I know you do. You hear it more than me!

NICK: *suddenly grabs* ELIZABETH. *She fights him.*

You do! You do! You do!

(*GNC* 67–68)

An excruciating call from an innocent spirit begging for deliverance from the world of the dead has been a preoccupation for McPherson as far back as *The Weir*. He adds layers of complication in *Girl from the North Country*, however, by linking the “girl down the hole” not only to the dead, but also to the unborn.

Nick and Elizabeth’s adopted daughter Marianne is pregnant, but a great deal of mystery surrounds the paternity. Nick suspects the father was a random boatman who got what he was after and then ran away: “The father’s jumped on a damn lake boat—probably down in Toledo by now” (*GNC* 18). When Doctor Walker is summoned, he questions whether Marianne is pregnant at all. He explains the term “pseudocyesis” to Nick: “Well, sometimes if a girl feels an intense need to . . . connect to something or to . . . well, to have a baby. Her body can manifest all the signs of a real pregnancy. Menstrual cycle stops, belly swells up, morning sickness, she might even feel the baby moving . . . these symptoms can be very convincing, Nick” (*GNC* 63). When Marianne finally accounts for the circumstances of the conception, she suggests a “phantom pregnancy” of a very different kind:

That night I . . . the night the wind came in my room. I woke up. All I knew then was . . . someone was there. . . . It was deeper than a man. Older than a man. When I pressed my face into his tunic and I breathed in, I could smell, like, ancient water. You know that smell like water under the ground? Like stone? And when I breathed in more and more it was like I was breathing through him. And I could see through him—into the ancient past. A figure in a boat, and someone was singing and I . . . that’s how it happened. (GNC 73)

The Boatman Cometh. It sounds as if Marianne was impregnated by the Ferryman on the River Styx. It is a harrowing, bewildering description, an unholy comingling of birth and death. One can only imagine what offspring would result from such a coupling—perhaps Death incarnate. One thinks of Vladimir’s description linking birth and death in *Waiting for Godot*: “Astride of a grave

and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps.<sup>8</sup> The image is of a child born not into life but into death, the “girl down the hole.” Tellingly, McPherson follows up Marianne’s description of her conception with the first and only performance of the title song “Girl from the North Country.” In this context, it might as well be called “Girl from the Death Country.”

Elizabeth makes further cryptic references that tighten the knot binding birth and death. Marianne decides to run away with Joe Scott and tells her mother she is going. Elizabeth offers a strange piece of parting advice to her daughter: “Just don’t play with knives. You know the Devil’s only tryna be your friend ‘cause you give him your blood” (*GNC* 88). Marianne nods silently, implying that she understands—though just what the mother is talking about remains a riddle for the audience. What can Elizabeth mean by these references to knives, blood, and making friends with the Devil? Is she suggesting that the Devil is the father of Marianne’s child, that she is carrying the spawn of Satan? Possibly. But the more likely interpretation is that the warning about knives refers to a prior blood sacrifice, which attracted the Devil’s attention and approval. Doctor Walker’s diagnosis of pseudocyesis may be accurate, but it does not mean that Marianne never has been pregnant. To put it plainly, there is reason to suspect that Marianne has had an abortion. Admittedly, the final scene of the play alludes to Marianne’s return home with a baby in her arms. However, that alleged scene takes place more than a year after her departure, time enough for her and Joe to have had a child of their own. The clues suggesting a prior abortion are well concealed, but Elizabeth knows how to decode them.

If, in fact, Marianne had an abortion, it adds an eerie layer of grief to her haunted rendition of “Tight Connection to My Heart (Has Anyone Seen My Love).” The song is moving enough when understood as a plea for a missing lover, but it becomes heartbreaking if directed instead toward her unborn (and never to be born) child. “Well, I had to move fast / And I couldn’t with you around my neck” sets the parameters of her decision from the start (*GNC* 25). The lines “I’ll go along with the charade / Until I can think my way out” now seems to reference the phantom pregnancy, while the lines “My hands are sweating / And we haven’t even started yet” take her to the brink of the procedure. In this new context, the repeated question “Has anybody seen my love?” slips seamlessly into the keening of a grieving mother, giving the lie to the wishful thinking of “Someday maybe / I’ll remember to forget” (*GNC* 25). Obviously, Dylan did not compose the song with this dramatic situation in mind—but it is uncanny how effectively it functions to signpost Marianne’s abortion.

8. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Drama Works* (London: Faber, 1986), 84.

"How does it feel" to lose a child? Elizabeth knows all too well. Early in the play, Nick explains that the family adopted Marianne because "Elizabeth always wanted a daughter." Before she can stop herself she blurts out, "We lost a baby girl" (GNC 22). The implication is that this child died in infancy, rather than being aborted. In any case the death continues to haunt her. During one of their arguments, Nick grabs Elizabeth and demands, "What happened to you? Where's my wife? Where's my damn wife?" She pointedly replies, "Devil took her bitch" (GNC 67). Elizabeth is apparently trying to tell Nick that she has never been the same since the death of their baby girl, whom she believes was stolen by the Devil. Elizabeth's dementia manifests not as a loss of memory but rather, as an overabundance, a supersaturation, of memory. Her most persistent memory takes the form of the "girl down the hole." Elizabeth does not hear the voice of Leonora; instead, she hears a voice closer to home, that of her innocent deceased daughter. Furthermore, the lamentations of her dead daughter form a threnody with a more distant voice in time, the primal loss of her own childhood innocence.

McPherson anticipates these time-bending experiments in his plays *The Veil* and *The Night Alive*. Set in 1822 at an Irish country house, *The Veil* features seventeen year-old Hannah who hears voices. The minister Reverend Berkeley and the philosopher Charles Audelle come to study Hannah in hopes of proving the existence of supernatural spirits. Berkeley asserts, "We all know that Hannah hears echoes of a past none else can hear."<sup>9</sup> Audelle frames her gift in terms of darkness and light: "An elemental darkness is already inside each of us, how we explain it to ourselves is for each of us to bear. Anyone with a gift such as Hannah's is like a beacon in the dark" (V 175). It turns out that Audelle was responsible for the death of his young daughter, and he becomes convinced that the cries Hannah hears are those of his daughter. An alternate theory is that the crying child is Hannah herself as an infant. During a séance she begins channeling the voice of her father, frantically asking, "Have you seen it? . . . The infant. . . The baby . . . that was here" (V 194). It appears that this Irish house is haunted by its own "girl down the hole": "It was a girl, wasn't it? . . . I can hear her crying!" (V 195) Hannah's trance leads her even deeper as she begins speaking in the voice of the trapped girl, seemingly the spirit of her own infancy: "They've locked me in! They've locked me in! . . . This is a dream. This must be a dream. . . . Can you not hear it? Are you made of stone? (*Shouts.*) Can you not hear her?!" (V 195)

By the end of *The Veil*, however, Hannah is convinced that the spirit hails not from the past but from the future: "I know now I was seeing and hearing

9. Conor McPherson, *The Veil*, in *The Night Alive and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2016), 174; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (V 174).

what is yet to be! Not the past! I have never seen the past. I saw that the child I have heard crying here is my child, the child I will never know because I will perish bringing it into the world" (V 219). She adds,

I saw that I would forever wander looking for my baby. I have seen what eternity holds for me. . . . I will be locked in a room. And that room is death and there is no door from which to leave. I saw it all. (V 220)

In a metadramatic sense, Hannah is absolutely right. She is locked in a room with no exit: she is a character confined to a play performed inside a theater, where she is doomed to continue searching for her baby, forever recycling through a timeless vortex. The "girl down the hole" in *The Veil* has essentially fallen down the rabbit hole of time.

McPherson extends this concept through his references to black holes in *The Night Alive*. Near the end of the play a character named Doc tells his friend Tommy about "a mad dream."<sup>10</sup> In this dream he met one of the three wise men who followed the star of Bethlehem at the Nativity. The subject of stars leads the magus to divulge the time-warping powers of black holes:

. . . when a star . . . dies, okay? It collapses into itself and its gravity is an unbelievable force, right? Not even light is quick enough to escape. He said that's why it's called a black hole. And he said that the faster you travel, the slower time goes, okay? And he said that if you ever came near a black hole you'd be sucked in so fast—faster and faster and faster—that time would slow down so slowly and it would take you so long to reach the heart of the dying star that you would never actually arrive, because at that speed, time, itself, becomes meaningless. So a black hole is a place, he said, where there is . . . no time. And he said that all the stars in our galaxy, and all . . . our sun, and all . . . everything is just spinning round and round a black hole. (NA 76)

This galactic view of a cosmos "going round and round a place where there is no time" finds its perfect microcosm in the theater. McPherson's persistent interest in spirits has always led him to peer into "the beyond" in ways that stretch the boundaries of time and space. His recent plays increasingly look to Christian cosmology as refracted through the prism of post-Newtonian physics to arrive at a highly dramatic view of time and space, life and afterlife.

His richest expression of this syncretic fusion is *Girl from the North Country*. When Elizabeth hears the "girl down the hole," who and what does she hear? Perhaps she hears the cries of her dead child or that of her daughter Marianne. Perhaps she hears the cries of her own dead innocence, the capacity for hope and love she once harbored before the Devil sunk his hooks in her family and

10. Conor McPherson, *The Night Alive*, in *The Night Alive and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2016), 75; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (NA 75).

imprisoned them among the living-dead. But McPherson offers a more life-affirming possibility as well. Elizabeth and Nick seem bound for some murder-suicide climax as he gets rid of all the tenants and approaches his wife with a revolver. She calmly takes the gun from him and delivers a lucid speech about the slow death of their love. But just when she seems set to put them both out of their misery, she makes an unexpected and remarkable gesture. She empties all the bullets onto the floor and declares, "You have her for ever. So what do you say we live a little longer?" (GNC 100) Elizabeth chooses life over death. She calls a truce in her raging battle with Nick and in so doing renews her openness to love. She sanctifies the moment by singing "Forever Young." The beginning is a holy benediction:

May God bless and keep you always  
May your wishes all come true  
May you always do for others  
And let others do for you  
May you build a ladder to the stars  
And climb on every rung  
May you stay forever young  
Forever young, forever young  
May you stay forever young. (GNC 100-01)

But why "Forever Young"? McPherson's employment of song takes on new resonance if we do not understand it as being sung by a fifty-something wife to her fifty-something husband, but instead, treat it as if Elizabeth serves as a spiritual medium for "Forever Young," a message channeled through her from the "girl down the hole." The innocent inner child—be she a younger self of Elizabeth, one of the dead children from the past, or even the future love child of Marianne and Joe—is singing a psalm, a prayer of blessing at the hour of need. "Forever Young" restores the deadened Elizabeth back to life, at least for the time being; and her resurrection lights the way for Nick's possible salvation as well.

The conclusion of the play presents a powerful, if enigmatic, marriage of Heaven and Hell. Doctor Walker provides an epilogue for what happened to each member of the Laine family after the action of the play proper. Nick and Elizabeth escaped Duluth for Sioux City and lived there in relative peace (though not prosperity); she eventually died in a flophouse with Nick by her side, and then he headed south to parts unknown. Their son Gene found a journalism job and briefly fell in love, but will meet his demise in Okinawa during World War II. Marianne fared best of all, running away with Joe Scott and having a child, but even she returned to the boardinghouse a year later only to find it shuttered and deserted.

If one judged solely by Doctor Walker's narrative summation, this would hardly sound like a happy ending for the Laine family. However, Walker's drab chronicle is contrasted—if not contradicted outright—by the luminous pantomime enacted on stage. As Walker delivers his concluding remarks, “We see NICK and ELIZABETH having dinner—happy and healthy. GENE joins them” (GNC 101). A few moments later, “MARIANNE comes and sits. The family are happy together” (GNC 101). How is the spectator to reconcile the lackluster destinies verbally communicated by Doctor Walker with the idyllic *tableau vivant* of a marriage and family happily reunited in love?

McPherson's *The Night Alive* provides an important key for unlocking the conclusion of *Girl from the North Country*. The central couple in *The Night Alive* is Tommy and Aimee. Tommy rescues Aimee from an abusive relationship with her drug-addicted, sociopathic boyfriend Kenneth. Tommy falls in love with Aimee and invites her to run away with him, but she rejects his proposal, sure that they are doomed. As she makes her final exit, Tommy is convinced that she is going to commit suicide. And maybe she does. However, at the end of the play Aimee walks back into Tommy's house. “They stand looking at each other. For a moment he wonders if she is real. Darkness falls” (NA 77). The end. This arresting final moment recalls Doc's dream about the wise man, who disclosed, “Yeah, apparently, when you die, you won't even know you're dead! It'll just feel like everything has suddenly . . . come right, in your life. Like everything has just clicked into place and off you go” (NA 77). McPherson indulges Tommy's vision of Heaven, his dream of perfect happiness, embodied in a reunion with his beloved Aimee. In a *New York Times* interview with Patrick Healy, McPherson expressed his intentions in unabashedly religious terms: “To me, all of my plays are about the mystery of God, about reaching a point of transcendence where unsayable emotions can emanate.” He explained the play's final moment as arising from that mystery and transcendence: “By the last scene, I just wanted that man and woman in the room to jet off into the cosmos, because that's the lovely possibility of theatre.” However, McPherson also admitted to Healy that he met resistance from some spectators and critics to that conclusion: “Some people thought it was a too happy ending. Or that I was being glib. But I saw the ending as a glimpse into the mystery of life—a moment when life has clicked into place.”<sup>11</sup>

The happy family reunion that comes at the end of *Girl from the North Country* is likewise an expression of religious mystery, in which the Laine family seemingly jets off into the cosmos and transcends the hardships that have anchored them to misery for much of the play. This vision of domestic

11. Patrick Healy, “Hope Doesn't Come Out of a Bottle,” *New York Times*, 27 November 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/theater/conor-mcpherson-prepares-the-night-alive.html>.

bliss at life's end comes full circle back to life's beginning through reference to the Nativity. In his introduction to *The Night Alive*, McPherson observes, "All I can say is that the particular chaos at the heart of *The Night Alive* seems to be specifically that of broken families. No parent is with their child, no family is intact, almost no one has a home. And yet, like a nativity play, shelter is found, alongside love, redemption and rebirth" (NA xiii). McPherson foregrounds the Nativity theme with an epigraph from the Gospel of Matthew: "When they saw the star they rejoiced. They went into the house and they saw Mary and her child. And falling to their knees they offered their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh" (NA 3). The playwright again invokes the Nativity at the end of *Girl from the North Country*, when Doctor Walker summons Christian echoes in his description of Marianne's return: "Saw Marianne and her Joseph come by the following winter. And damn if she didn't have a baby in her arms! Yes, she had a baby. They were well dressed in warm coats. Came up and stood outside the old inn with that baby in their arms. They looked up at the windows a while, then I watched them walk away" (GNC 102). Mary and Joseph, the newborn child, no room in the inn: it all clicks into place—almost too perfectly.

McPherson follows up the allegedly "too happy ending" of *The Night Alive* with a more ambivalent conclusion in *Girl from the North Country*. Set aside the message for a moment, and consider the messenger. Doctor Walker may be conjuring up an image of radiant love (let there be light), but he remains a shadowy figure. The play circles back to darkness at the end when Walker recounts his suicide: "I left this world . . . on Christmas Eve 1934. Set it all up. It was just like stepping through a glass wall. I could still see everything. Saw the time come and go" (GNC 102). Earlier in the play he confided to the audience that his wife had left him and he turned to morphine for temporary relief of the pain. This physician who could not heal himself ultimately made a choice opposite that of Elizabeth, choosing death over life. In the closing lines of the play, he describes his death as a plunge into the abyss: "I looked out on the water. Then I closed my eyes" (GNC 102).

McPherson is doing something interesting with blindness and sight here. On the one hand, Walker defines death as a blind dive into darkness. On the other hand, he is given second sight on the other side of the threshold: "It was like stepping through a glass wall. I could see everything" (GNC 102). What he seems to be describing, in metadramatic terms, is the experience of crossing the border of the fourth wall, ceasing to be a performer in life's bitter drama and instead assuming the role of spectator. Walker closes his eyes, like the dropping of the stage curtain to conclude the play. But death is not the end. What does he see when he reopens his eyes? One suspects he sees the play *Girl from the North Country*. Walker's transition from actor to spectator

is not a downgrade from active agent to passive recipient. Rather, his transformation signifies the integral function of the audience as co-creators of illusion, both inside and outside the theater.

In 2012, McPherson gave a revealing interview with Noelia Ruiz that provides key insights into his thought and his theatrical practice. McPherson declared,

For me the theatre is a very mysterious place which has something to do with human consciousness and our ability to create our world, which is what all of us do every day. We all create a world within our own mind which we think makes sense. It includes our own personal history as well as our intentions for the future. But it is all an illusion. It is an essential illusion because the world has to mean something to us otherwise we cannot live.<sup>12</sup>

There is a long-standing theatrical debate over whether fantasy is the cause or the cure for human suffering, and in this interview, McPherson sides unequivocally with the latter. Illusion is a necessary component to life, as intrinsic to human consciousness as it is to theatrical spectacle. McPherson conceives of the illusion-making enterprise of theater as a creative, life-affirming act. His description of this process to Ruiz makes it clear that the audience is engaged in this act of creation just as surely as the playwright:

as a group, collectively, in the dark, we all collude in suspending our disbelief together, willingly, to allow an illusion to unfold before us. In theatre you have to concentrate quite hard to maintain the illusion, but that collective effort deepens the experience and takes us into a kind of a trance. And when that happens I think it really concentrates the theatre's peculiar brand of magic which reflects the magic of being alive, the magic of being conscious, the mystery and the miracle of that, the complete unknown aspect of all of that which is so necessary to live our lives.<sup>13</sup>

McPherson is drawn to the Christian mysteries because they provide ready-made examples of miraculous stories, archetypal characters, moving emblems of resurrection, and the saving power of love. In the Ruiz interview, he spoke of his lingering appreciation for these lessons from his Irish Catholic upbringing:

I suppose that being brought up in Ireland the majority of people of my generation would have been brought up as Roman Catholics, and perhaps when you grow older you question that or move away from it, but it's still somehow in your DNA to consider stories which are powerful enough to contain all of these

12. Noelia Ruiz, "Interview with Conor McPherson," in *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: "Right Beside the Beyond,"* ed. Lilian Chambers, Eamonn Jordan, and Susanne Colleary (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), 277.

13. Ruiz, 277.



concepts. The stories in the Bible are fantastic because they really do contain them in such a creative way, like the story of Jesus Christ and that little holy family, and how Jesus died, even if he was God, he died. In some way it is sort of the perfect melding of the infinite and the painfully finite.<sup>14</sup>

These principles are compatible with McPherson's own values, but there are key distinctions between Christian belief and theatrical suspension of disbelief. Unlike the tenets of faith, the latter is an illusion, magnificently and unapologetically so, and never lays claim to revealed truth. At the end of the day, McPherson is a man of the theater more than a man of God.

The playhouse rather than the church is McPherson's locus for renewal. By the close of *Girl from the North Country*, a beatific moment of love, happiness, and rejuvenation has been enacted. In a cosmos governed by linear time, this vision of bliss could be regarded as a culmination: paradise regained. But this is theater, whose the cosmos is cyclical, not linear like the Christian cosmology. What is gained by the conclusion of this play, any play, is always lost again and must be regained tomorrow night. The Laines enjoy a moment of domestic bliss, and Doctor Walker indulges a moment of long-deferred healing. "Then I closed my eyes" (GNC 102). The curtain falls. And when it rises tomorrow night, when Walker reopens his eyes, he is back through the looking-glass, behind the fourth wall. All the characters have returned to their starting positions, required to suffer again through their passion play in order to earn another momentary salvation, following the spotlight's star to that serene Nativity at the end, recycling from death to rebirth to death, night after night. This is how, to borrow Dylan's words, they "build a ladder to the stars / And climb on every rung," how they stay "forever young" (GNC 101). But McPherson also heeds the wisdom of the old Yeats, reminding us "where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."<sup>15</sup>

The religious roots of McPherson's drama are nurtured in the soil of Irish Catholicism, but they claw down even deeper. When Ruiz asked why he set so many scenes during Christmas Eve, he emphasized the pre-Christian significance of the holiday:

Anyone who is brought up as a Christian probably still feels the sense of possibility of Christmas Eve. Christmas day is probably less important, but Christmas Eve has always had that magic. I suppose what Christmas has managed to do is to take a very pagan festival, which is marking the end of the worst of the winter, to survive it and then celebrate you are going to be moving into the spring. It is a wonderful festival that really says something about the human

14. Ruiz, 278–79


15. W. B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume I: The Poems, Second Edition*. ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 356.

condition, especially the feeling of the longest night along with the idea that a baby is born who somehow unifies the family and unifies the world; it's such a powerful message.<sup>16</sup>

McPherson went on to connect the magic associated with pagan celebrations of rebirth and the magic of theatrical illusion: "So it is lovely to place people that are having difficult lives and look at them on Christmas Eve and then suggest all of these things. It's a very magical thing and especially in the theatre because of the idea of community where you have everybody helping to create the illusion."<sup>17</sup>

McPherson works through Christianity to reawaken older religious mysteries associated with pre-Christian agricultural societies whose seasonal conceptions of time prove intimately compatible with theater. His ancient Irish ancestors at Newgrange provide the prototype. This Neolithic community constructed a network of passage tombs in the River Boyne valley, the most magnificent of which is Newgrange. The tomb is ingeniously constructed so that the sun shines directly into the burial chamber at dawn on the winter solstice. Apparently, this early Irish society recognized that the winter solstice marked the pivot point of the year, when winter started cycling back toward spring, darkness started cycling back toward light, and death started cycling back toward life. The theory goes that people of Newgrange believed their dead ancestors in the tomb were restored back to life when the solstice sun shone into the tomb.

In *Girl from the North Country*, McPherson succeeds in reproducing the solstice conditions of the passage tomb at Newgrange. His religious drama conceives the theater as a dark chamber imbued with mystical potential. When the spotlight shines onto the stage, it penetrates the darkness and summons the dead back to life. The communion with "the beyond" is life-giving and magical, but it is also ephemeral. The sun will set, the cold North Country night will descend again like a pall, and the Duluth dead will settle back into their graves. There they will hibernate until the time comes 'round again to crawl out of their hole and into the mystic.

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16. Ruiz, 279.

17. Ruiz, 279.