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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the major conflicts and stresses which surround the coming of age in rural Ireland today and which commonly contribute to mental breakdown. The study is based on ten months of participant observation in an Irish-speaking village of Southwest Kerry, combined with weekly visits to the county mental hospital. The author uses a comparison of selected themes in four cards of the Thematic Apperception Test, which was administered in its entirety to 36 normal village adolescents between 15 and 19 years and to 22 single mental patients of both sexes between the ages of 15 and 35. The author concludes that the cost of inheriting the land and perpetuating the rural culture, with its demands of an austere lifestyle leaves the Kerry adolescent and young adult few options. Among these are escape through emigration, stoical acceptance via repression, or periodic maladjustment during which times the delicate balance tips and the normally repressed individual is flooded with uncontrollable angers, resentments, and felt needs for attachment and intimacy with the absent or nonexistant "significant others" in his life. (Author/RM)

THE PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND:
ANOMIC THEMES IN RURAL IRELAND

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Things Fall Apart
The center cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
W.B. Yeates

On a given census day in 1971; two out of every hundred males in western Ireland were in a mental hospital. Nearly all (89%) were lifelong celibates; most were between the ages of thirty-five and fifty, and more than half were diagnosed as schizophrenic.

On a given census day in 1975 in the tiny parish of Ballybran in Southwest Kerry; almost five percent of the population of 549 people was receiving psychiatric care or medication as in-patients at the County Mental Hospital or as out-patients at the psychiatric clinic in nearby Dingle. Two-thirds of these patients were men, and all but one was single.

And, on any given dark winter's night when the rest of the parish has long been asleep, one can pass by the ancient stone cow house of Michael O'Brian and hear the old "saint" milking and talking to his cows, or merely "standing the night" with them while reciting several decades of the rosary. But, Misha M'God what harm? Michael, the old recluse, is a saint and he serves his cows the way he once served his mother, God rest her soul.

Or, taking the rocky bohoreen road that seperates the Finn from the O'Nail pasture, one might encounter holy Philomena, dressed in vibrant reds and greens, on her way to a Mass long since over. She will stop you and hold you fast until she has been able to get it right -- her loose, broken, diffuse geneology -- counting the names and numbers of people long since dead or gone away and groping for her place among the shadows, Philomena asks you again: "Has Jimmy Mickey come home yet?"

Mental illness, both treated and untreated, is common in the land of saints and scholars, and is statistically associated with the western region, peripheral agriculture, male status, depopulation, isolation and celibacy. Diagnosed

schizophrenia accounts for 56% of mental hospital beds in the west, four times the figures for schizophrenia reported in rural England and Wales. Among hospitalized women there appears to be a greater tendency towards obsessive-compulsive states, phobias and hysterias, while among men there is a higher percentage of affective psychoses, schizophrenia, and alcoholism linked with immature or dependent personality characteristics.[1]

In this paper, based on ten months of participant observation in an Irish speaking village of Southwest Kerry, combined with weekly visits to the County Mental Hospital, I will examine one aspect of mental illness in Ireland -- its association with permanent celibacy and the more generalized problem of culture death, stagnation and anomie prevelent in the western countryside. I will use a comparison of selected themes in four cards of the Thematic Apperception Test -- which was administered in its entirety to thirty-six normal village adolescents between fifteen and nineteen years, and to twenty-two single mental patients of both sexes between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five -- in order to illustrate and inform the following discussion of the major conflicts and stresses which surround the coming of age in rural Ireland today and which commonly contribute to mental breakdown.

All village males tested were potential farm heirs; in contrast, almost all the females were anticipating emigration from the village. Similarly, nine out of the eleven male psychiatric patients were stay at home farm or trade workers, while most female psychiatric patients had spent at least some time working abroad. These differences were not consciously selected for, but were a natural reflection of demographic patterns.

Prior to the Great Famine of 1845-1847 the population of Ballybran parish was 2,772 souls. Church records indicate that marriages were frequent, contracted

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[1] Statistics drawn from O'Hare and Walsh, The Irish Psychiatric Hospital Cencus, 1971. Dublin: The Medico-Social Research Board.

at a tender age and families were large. The population was reduced to half by the famine, and as in the rest of Ireland, there followed an adaptive reversal of marriage and birth patterns, and a spiraling emigration rate. Whereas in 1965 the census recorded a population of 645 persons, today it is 461. The thirty-eight deaths and fifteen emigrations of the past year were offset by only three births. The last parish marriage took place three years ago and has yet to produce an heir. Few married couples today value the old seven-nine child household once so prevelant in the community, and a very successful and religiously sanctioned form of birth control -- total continence -- is practiced by several upwardly mobile village couples since they have produced their desired limit of two or three children.

The predominant household in Ballybran today is a consanguinal rather than affinal. Of 138 households, only 41 are traditional extended or nuclear families. The remaining 87 households are comprised of various combinations of blood kin: solitary bachelors, bachelor brothers with spinster sisters, widows and widowers alone with their unmarried adult children. The flight of women from the once tightly endogamous community can be witnessed in the virtual absence of eligible women. While there are more than thirty still hopeful young bachelors between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five, only two eligible women between these ages still remain in the parish.

The majority of these bachelors are able to make an adequate adjustment to the demands of their stoical existence through strongly cathected male bonding patterns in work and recreation. However, for the more psychologically vulnerable, a gradual withdrawal from peer activities, such as sports events and summer dances, co-operative turf cutting and hay makings, signals the onset of an engulfing spirit of depression and dispair -- sometimes climaxing in fits of rage or violence directed against neighbors or even their own homesteads and livestock.

A major theme in TAT card one (a boy contemplating a violin on a table before him) told by both normal and disturbed men, but not by women, illustrates well the rural Irish male's sense of anomie with regard to his life and work. Half of the normal males and a quarter of the male mental patients told stories of despondency over a violin that was broken or sadly out of tune. A seventeen year old potential farm heir from Ballybran, told this story:

> He looks fed up, and his violin is broken. He doesn't know what to do. He's looking at it disgustedly. It might have broken while he was playing with it. Nothing to attract his attention to, only that.

Semus, a thirty-three year old Irish speaking bachelor farmer and diagnosed schizophrenic, first imprisoned and then later hospitalized for violent and disorderly conduct at a dance hall, told this story:

> It's in the mind of the brain he has it. He's asleep on the guitar. He feels down and out. (Why?) It's broken. (What's the future?) He's thinking about his future as a guitarist. (What about it?) There is none.

While to the psychoanalytically oriented, the violin is a symbolically phallic instrument, and the broken violin image would be interpreted as an indication of severe castration anxiety among rural Irish males, I believe that the anthropologist can best contribute to the interpretation of projective test material by looking first at the manifest content of the images and placing them into the framework of the cultural meaning which these images might have on the conscious level. The violin or fiddle, for example, accompanied by the goatskin drum called the baron, and the melodian and tin whistle, is the music of the Irish countryside, and conjures up strongly patriotic passions in the breasts of villagers at home and abroad. Irish music, like the Irish language itself, represents a way of life which the villagers sense is dying. Of their language the old Irish storytellers are wont to say: "The words are broken in my mouth". Of their music: "My spirit is broken; how can I play when there are none to listen?". This malaise is expressed and felt most keenly by those lads who must sacrificed so much in remaining loyal to the village and the culture -- and who

intuitively sense that "things aren't working", necessary relationships are "broken" and "out of tune".

Women responded to the violin image in an oddly characteristic fashion. Almost half the normal women and one-third of the disturbed told stories which ignored or misidentified the violin. Some women referred to it as a gun, a book, a painting, a plane, while others referred directly to the blank sheets of paper beneath the violin, ignoring the instrument itself. Since it has already been established that the fiddle is an important symbol of Irish culture, the failure to notice or recognize it on the part of the women cannot originate in unfamiliarity. Rather, there seems to be an obstinate blocking, denial or rejection of a possible threatening symbol. The male phallus? Rural lifestyle? Probably both, we hypothesize.

The passivity and dependency of the boys' themes in which the lad unhappily looks for help in playing or mending a broken or untuned fiddle, can be contrasted with the rebelliousness of the normal girls, five of whom told stories in which they actively threw down and broke in anger the violin, or escaped from the tedious lessons. There is a vitality to the girls' stories almost totally lacking in those of the boys'. Contrast Anya's story:

> He's fed up and feels like breaking the old fiddle now. He's gotten no good out of it, and he throws it down and says, 'the hell with it'. Then he goes out to have a crack with the other lads.

with Peter's story:

> It seems to me that this boy was sent to do his violin practice which he doesn't like. His father was a good violin player and they want him to be good at it too. I think he doesn't like music and he's in a sulk. (Outcome?) He'll get bored and then fall asleep on the violin.

We also used card one to measure attitudes towards achievement and competence. Again the greater statistical difference was between all the women and all the men of both samples. More than half of the normal women, and an even greater proportion of the disturbed women told positive achievement stories -- themes in which they set out, often in the path of difficult obstacles to accomplish

set goals. By contrast, eight out of 14 normal men, and five of the eleven psychiatric patients told stories of negative achievement -- themes in which they withdrew from social goals, felt bored, sleepy or otherwise disinterested in the task.

What is being illustrated here is the end result of a differential socialization experience for rural farm heirs and their more upwardly and outwardly mobile sisters and older brothers. Conrad Arensberg's description in the 1930's of a lively farm family life in which patriarchal father delayed retirement and set son against son in the competition for his favor and eventual inheritance of the highly valued farm lands, has during the intervening years given way to a new system of farm transfer governed by the principle of elimination -- that is, the last boy to escape (usually the youngest son) gets stuck by default with the farm and saddled with a lifestyle of almost certain celibacy and self-negating service to the "old people". These farm heirs (represented in my normal and psychiatric samples) and known in local parlance as the "angashores" or "leftovers" are prepared from early childhood by their parents and older siblings for their destined role by a subtle but persistent process of ego deflation. It is this socialization process, I hypothesize, which contributes in part to the high rates of psychosis -- especially schizophrenia -- among vulnerable single male farmers.

In interviewing the parents of each of the nuclear households in Ballybran, I discovered a pattern of fixed status for children ordained by sex, birth order, physical or mental apptitude, and by supposedly inborn tempermental differences. There was hardly a farm family that could not boast of it's "pet child", its white haired boy whose given name was frequently affixed with the nickname "bawn" (meaning white) as in the rhyme one jealous brother had composed for me: "Here's our Paddy Bawn, Mama's pet who can do no wrong".

Although no farm owners today would ever admit to having been "reared a pet", it appears from the life histories of older villagers that in former

generations, the family pet was often the first born son, traditionally named after his paternal grandfather, and reared in order to fill his projected role of farm heir. Today the pattern has been reversed, for the greatest aspirations of village parents no longer rest in agriculture or farm ownership. The first born "Paddy Bawns" of today are reared for export -- for the occupations of schoolteacher, civil servant, successful emigrant, possibly the priesthood. Daughters may be called "pets", but being Daddy's pet daughter carries far fewer implications than being Daddy or Mammy's pet son.

Children born with physical handicaps have traditionally and still are to some extent prepared for the town and village trades. But the greatly disvalued role and status of farm heir is reserved today for the family's so-called "runt", "scraping of the pot", "leftover" and "blacksheep", who is supposedly discovered at a very tender age to have no brains, no guts, no drive, no ambition. One village lad and farm heir, identified strongly with the somewhat downcast looking young man in card 6BM (an elderly woman standing with her back turned to a tall young man), and told this story:

> The mother is telling the son that she is disappointed in him because he failed his 'Inters'. She is saying:'Nick, you are the one child I could never get any good out of. From the time you were born I could see that you would never amount to anything but a stay at home. The boy is thinking that he has stayed at home too long, that he should leave. But he realizes that his time has past, it is already too late. (Outcome?) He does the best he can, and hopes that his mother will come to accept him for what he is.

While everything is sacrificed in order to educate the family's pet at a town boarding school, the "angashore" will often be encouraged by parents and sometimes by teachers to end his education with primary school. The unfortunate "blacksheep" of the village are reared according to the rules of self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents seem to realize that the more emotionally delicate and dependent the child, the less talented and self-confident, the more bashful and socially awkward, the greater their ability to bind this son to themselves and to the land. Like Nick in the TAT story above, the potential heir of the

family is often told to his face and even in the presence of outsiders like myself, that he is "hopeless", the family's "n'er do well" and "slob" -- a person who could never make it beyond the ken of Ballybran, and a lad no girl would ever care to marry. From my small sample of eleven male psychiatric patients, there was a positive correlation between mental illness, late or later birth order and farm inheritance -- particularly in large farm families.

Supposedly in-born personality traits of "nadur" (nature, warmth) and "duchas" (blood or breeding) were offered by the local populace as explanations for the apparent success of one child vs. the seeming hopelessness of another. "Briseann an duchas tri shúilibh an chat" -- breeding breaks out in the eye of the cat" -- was the common proverbial explanation of "poor character" in a child or adolescent. Duchas, or breeding, was believed to be passed on through the male line, and could go back up to seven generations. While whole family trees sometimes became characterized by a single "ducas" -- e.g. the O'Connors are a family of saints" or "There was never a Moriority didn't have the heart of a mouse" -- brothers and sisters could inherit their particular duchas from a variety of patrilinial ancestors, with Sean taking after thrifty Grandfather Euge, and Paddy taking after idle Uncle Morris.

The second quality of inherited character, "nadur" or nature, comes from the matriline. It was translated to mean warmth, compassion, sensitivity, softness, mother-love. Children were believed to be born with more or less absolute quantities of nadur, which in the days of breastfeeding was believed to be transmitted through the mother's milk. Interestingly, boys in general were believed to have more nadur than girls, and the supposed "delicateness" of their sons, particularly of their incompetant blacksheep, was a quality which mothers played upon and reinforced. Village mothers claimed that their sons were easier to raise than their daughters, were more compliant, had a greater affection for their parents, and a deeper love of the mother-country. They also added uniformly that little boys were "softer" by nature than little girls and needed more attention

and "comforts". The frequently diagnosed "immature" or "dependent personality" traits among Irish male psychiatric patients is, I am convinced, a by-product of this early dependency training for rural boys.

These supposedly in-born personality differences between boys and girls were clearly reflected in marked contrast of attitudes towards farming, familism, and emigration on TAT card 2 -- a country scene in which a young girl carrying books in her arm stands in front of a man working in the fields while an older, suggestively pregnant woman looks on. 63% of the normal girls and 46% of the female mental patients told deprivation stories followed by real or imagined escape from the countryside. While normal and disturbed women commonly described the rural scene as a "poor farm in the outback" or a "miserable piece of rocky land" (realistic assessments of farming in depressed mountainous west Kerry), the normal boys were given to romanticising the rural scene, calling the farmers "rich and prosperous" or "doing all they can to make their farm a civilized environment". The eleven male psychiatric patients, however, sided with the women and none of these told stories with "pastoral ideal" motifs, and five told social or economic deprivation stories, which were resolved in resignation rather than emigration.

Throughout the normal males responses to card two runs one unifying theme, one of fixation, perhaps - familism. The normal males seemed unable to transcend the meaning of family as defined in terms of anything other than family of origin or sibling bond. The male stories, like the parish of Ballybran itself, were peopled with single, solitary, unmarried characters overly preoccupied with the relationships of childhood. 43% of the boys (some of whom are old as 21) described the farm scene as a sibling set of brother and sister with mother looking on, or even as two sisters and a brother, rather than as the usual conjugal groups described by most people of other cultures. The following is from a long response given to this card by an eighteen year old boy, middle child in a family of six children:

Brother and a sister and a mother, right? The girl is thinking about

> what is going to happen in the future, that when her mother will die, she will really have to get down to work...the boy, well the mother seems to have gotten the upperhand of him. She has beaten him, not whalloped him -- but gotten the better of him. The boy is thinking that when his mother will die, he and his sister can live happily together for the rest of their lives without any bossing around.

Familism, interpreted as sibling sets struggling against parents, is probably a healthly defense against the authoritarianism of Irish family life, where bonds of duty unite children to their parents, but even stronger bonds of affection unite siblings to each other. Mihal's fantasy, expressed in the response above, of mother dying and he and his sister living together happily ever after "without any bossing around", represents a real and growing alternative to marriage in Ballybran where there are nearly as many households comprised of adult sibling sets than there are traditional nuclear and extended families.

The most remarkable difference to emerge from the TAT concerned attitudes of the normal and psychiatric samples of men and women towards sexuality, romantic love, and generativity. In both male and female normal samples there was throughout the responses an absence of themes dealing with love and affiliation between the sexes, a dirth of marriage and conjugal themes, an intense embarrassment with the partial nudity of cards 13MF (bedroom scene) and 17 (scantly dressed man on a rope), as well as a blocking or denial of the pregnant condition of the older women in card two. The normal cards were marked by an intense familism, a preoccupation with the material and economic, rather than social, environment, and a romanticism and fascination with death. By contrast, the psychiatric patients -- both male and female -- told a high percentage of courtship and marriage stories in which they consciously rejected celibacy and childlessness as a way of life.

While themes of guilt, sexual prudery and repression were equally high on the very compromising bedroom scene on card 13MF in both normal and psychiatric samples, the disturbed men and women tended to relate directly and immediately to the issue at hand -- sexuality, while the normal villagers, male and female, told family sickness or death stories or far-fetched story-book fantasies of a

damsel in distress found on the doorstep and brought in from the storm. Johnny, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, age 22, told this story which concludes with an interesting bit of insight:

> This picture, for want of a better word, could be called sordid. It shows a bedroom scene between a husband and wife. I seems they have just had sexual intercourse. However, the man has got dressed very quickly, or else he can't bring himself to have it. We'll choose the former. He has just had the intercourse and now he is bitten by pangs or remorse, which is a thing that shouldn't happen if we were educated properly to the normality of all sexual behavior.

While pregnancy and delivery stories were noticeably absent in both normal samples, they were common in the psychiatric samples. Peter, a 22 year old tradesman and hospitalized alcoholic given to fits of violence and aggression told this rather gently story to card 13MF:

> This is a girl and she seems to be in great pain, and your man can't bear to look at her. She could be in labor and having difficulties. You want an ending? O.K. , the girl dies, but the baby lives, and the father takes care of it.

Following the TAT I would at times ask the more out-going mental patients to consent to the Draw-A-Person test. Seamus, the malcontented 33 year old bachelor and schizophrenic mentioned earlier, summed up in his picture all the longing in lonely souls like himself for growth, creativity and intimacy -- for Seamus immediately drew the portrait of a very pregnant woman.

It is our conclusion from the TAT responses, interviews and observations of village life, that the cost of inheriting the land and perpetuating the rural culture with its demands of an austere and I would be tempted to say "unnatural" lifestyle, leaves the Kerry adolescent and young adult few options. Among these are escape through emigration, stoical acceptance via repression, or increasingly today, periodic maladjustment during which times the delicate balance tips and the normally repressed individual is flooded with uncontrolable angers, resentments, and more importantly, with felt needs for attachment and intimacy with the absent or non-existant "significant others" in his life.