

Peig Sayers: Religious Subversions, Covert Withholdings, and Undaunted Mettle

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Abstract: *The autobiography Peig A Scéal Féin (1936) inaugurated a new breakthrough in Blasket Island literature. Only a few years after its original publication, the autobiography was usurped as a teaching tool by the nascent Irish Republic being shaped by the De Valera government. A school edition, carefully edited and sanitized, was published in the 1940s and Peig became a textbook incorporated every third year as part of the school Leaving Certificate. As part of an effort to explode a patriarchal, sanitized myth, I want to re-examine the life story Peig in the context of Sayers's larger oeuvre, including An Old Woman's Reflections (1939), and radio presentations for the BBC (1947). A fuller appreciation of these written and oral performances reveals a hidden and much more intriguing Peig Sayers who saliently invalidates the stereotype on three fronts: creatively manipulating her religious heritage to serve her own egocentric and duplicitous ends; demonstrating a proclivity for privacy that leads to strategic suppressions and covert maskings; contravening any image of pious docility when she repeatedly celebrates female rumbustious audacity and the pleasures of insurgency. The tales she selects to narrate, and her own actions within several stories, demonstrate an undaunted mettle as well as a predilection for passionate rebellion that should be spotlighted rather than suppressed or censored.*

With the publication of her autobiography, *Peig A Scéal Féin* (1936), Peig Sayers inaugurated a new breakthrough in Blasket Island literature. The male-dominated versions of Blasket island life and culture presented most ably by Tomás O'Crohan and Muiris O'Sullivan were now augmented by a very different perspective – that of a woman. Although born on the mainland, Peig Sayers spent the majority of her life – fifty years – as an integral member of The Great Blasket's community and culture. Little did Peig realize, however, how quickly her life's story would be appropriated and warped.

Only a few years after its original publication, the autobiography was usurped as a teaching tool by the nascent Irish Republic being shaped by the De Valera government. A school edition, carefully edited and sanitized, was published in the 1940s and *Peig* became

a textbook incorporated every third year as part of the school Leaving Certificate. With a mission of reviving the Irish language and presenting role models of national origin, the Department of Education cut over 23% of the original text as it sought to promote *Peig* as an ideal personal narrative.¹ In “Rereading Peig Sayers,” Patricia Coughlan notes that the autobiography soon became a standard for teaching not only the Irish language, but Catholic virtues as well:

During the 1970s... [*Peig*] figured among a list of six prose texts, of which students had to be conversant with two.... Peig was, as we might put it, promoted as a role model for girls, and her piety, purity and allegedly unquestioning acceptance of suffering agreed very well with the dominant ideology of the De Valera years. (62)

Thankfully, *Peig* was removed as a Leaving Certificate text in the 1990s, but the damage was already done, and done well. Generations of Irish teenagers learned to detest the stereotypical image Peig Sayers had been fitted into – an image that has become ingrained as part of Ireland’s national tapestry and cultural psyche. This stereotype features traditional domestic virtues including feminine submissiveness, patient endurance of life’s travails, and a piously Catholic adherence to the Ten Commandments.

As part of an effort to explode such a patriarchal, sanitized myth, I want to re-examine the original *Peig* in the context of Sayers’s larger oeuvre, including *An Old Woman’s Reflections* (1939), and radio presentations for the BBC (1947). A fuller appreciation of these written and oral performances reveals a hidden and much more intriguing Peig Sayers who saliently invalidates the stereotype on three fronts. First, we see Peig creatively manipulating her religious heritage to facilitate self-indulgent and duplicitous ends. She demonstrates that she is fully capable of torquing Catholic tenets as she enlists God’s aid for errant transgressions. Second, Peig demonstrates a proclivity for strategic suppressions and covert maskings. These skills in posing affect her narrative designs most tellingly when she creates a provocative palimpsest that exposes unresolved volatilities in her relationship with her father, Tomás Sayers. Third, Peig decisively contravenes any image of pious docility when she repeatedly celebrates female rumbustious audacity and the pleasures of insurgency. The tales she selects to narrate, and her own actions within several stories, demonstrate an undaunted mettle as well as a predilection for passionate rebellion that should be spotlighted rather than suppressed or censored.

Religious Subversions

The image of the religiously obedient, docile novice is radically upset early in *Peig* when the author describes herself creatively contorting her religious training as she perpetrates “the very first roguery that entered my head” (35). The scene commences innocently enough: as a fledgling schoolgirl, Peig needs three pence to purchase a highly

desired new schoolbook. Following her father's advice, Peig is to bring six eggs before school the next morning to an elderly neighbor, "Ould Kitty," and receive the three-pence book money in exchange. All goes well until Peig spies a freshly baked sweet-loaf beckoning from a cupboard shelf while Ould Kitty is distracted, searching for her pennies. Needless to say, Peig steals half the loaf under the cover of a very smoky cabin interior. What I find so fascinating, however, is not the theft itself but Peig's savoring of the details of the temptation and the exuberant pride she exhibits in revealing the crime to her best friend, Cait-Jim:

While she [Ould Kitty] was groping for the pennies – this because if a finger was poked into your eye you wouldn't see it with the smoke – I spied a loaf of bread inside on a shelf on the cupboard. It was a cake made of snow-white flour with apple filling in the middle and sugar on the top. I was taken by an unmerciful desire to taste the cake and straightaway the temptation struck me to snatch some of it. (34)

Fifty years later, this minor peccadillo is augmented into a storytelling event by an "Ould" Peig Sayers in her sixties, still relishing each feature of her childhood temptation. The "snow-white flour" (a decided luxury in 1880s West Kerry), the "apple filling in the middle," and the sugar coating which crowns the achievement are savored *even now*, as Peig narrates the episode to her son Mícheál, verbally embellishing and delighting in her own delivery.²

Once the cake is eaten, however, the expected pangs of guilt and contrition begin to emerge. When Cait-Jim reassures Peig that they will never get caught because Ould Kitty wasn't watching, the little thief responds:

'She wasn't,' I said with a kind of remorse beginning to come over me just the same, 'but there was Someone looking at me and I'd prefer now not to have touched it. . . God save my soul, Ould Kitty will be all out cursing me and my father will be far worse to me if he comes to hear of it.' (35)

The valences of the superego include communal as well as familial retribution but they center on the religious implications of sin. Here, however, Peig piquantly discharges any stereotype of submissive piety subsequently concocted for her. Cait-Jim offers the perfect antidote for remorse and reparation, one which Peig enthusiastically espouses:

'Cut the Sign of the Cross on yourself,' said Cait-Jim, 'and ask God to protect you from her.'
'Oho,' said I, 'isn't it fine and easy you have the cure?' (35)

As a temporarily guilt-ridden child – and as an elderly story-maker – Peig spotlights the inventive subversion of religious principles. The "Someone" above witnessing the breaking of His Seventh Commandment can easily be bribed and enlisted as protector

from retribution. All one has to do is warp a religious ceremonial gesture of making the sign of the cross on one's body, morphing a reverential action into a magical talisman.

Throughout her life, including her career as storyteller, Peig demonstrates her potent attraction to outlaws such as Muiris O'Shea and Séamus Pléasc – the type of person who has earned appellations such as “rascal” or “polished trickster” (123). In this respect, she strikingly recalls John Millington Synge's Pegeen Mike who would love nothing better than to share the company of “the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes ...” (*Playboy* 100). Not only does Peig celebrate legendary “crookedness” and “conspiracy” in her selection of stories, she often models her own behavior after such outlaws (123, 121). In doing so, she tellingly belies the image promoted by the Irish educational agenda, that of a humble, obedient disciple of the Virgin Mary. For instance, during her second stint “in service” on a farm outside Dingle, Peig takes great pride in flouting her employer's rules and regulations. Of all the orders she is given, one is sacrosanct – always make sure the cows are securely tethered in the byre before retiring. The farmer has an interesting set up in his cow-house: one long overhead beam, running from gable to gable, has a series of large metal brackets, or staples, in it with a thick rope descending from each staple to tether the cows individually. They are spaced apart carefully to give each cow adequate room, to prevent any kicking or biting. When Peig awakens one morning to find a cow wandering around in the back garden, she knows she has been remiss and fears the worst. Sure enough when she enters the byre one of the cows has been severely hurt by the free one and is lying hunched on the ground, bleeding profusely, looking “as if she were about to die” (135).

What to do? Wake the master and face the music responsibly? Not Peig Sayers. Her first reaction is to turn to God for assistance – not as the source of Christian virtues but as an accomplice to aid and abet her in duplicitous subterfuge: “‘Almighty God!’ I prayed, ‘help me to think of some plan that'll save me from this calamity!’” (135). Her desperate supplication apparently elicits ‘divine inspiration’ because Peig suddenly hits upon a scheme to redirect liability and free her from censure. If she could only pull the large metal staple free from the beam of the cow byre, then tie the rope around the neck of the escaped cow, “no one would ever be the wiser but that [the cow] had pulled it free” (136). With all her strength, however, she can't budge the metal staple from the beam above. Fortuitously ‘divine inspiration’ seems matched by ‘divine intervention’ a la Samson at the pillars of the Philistines' temple. Peig credits “God . . . even stronger than all expectations” with interceding to give her the adrenaline and the brawn to dig her heels into the dirt floor, tug and tug with all of her body weight and, after what seems an age, surprisingly succeed:

I was now in full fettle so I put all my strength into the job on hands, and the dickens take me, it was a wonder my brains weren't dashed out against the wall when the staple gave! ... ‘Thanks again and again to God,’ I said, ‘who relieves every hardship.’ (136)

After tying the rope with the extracted staple to the fugitive cow's neck, Peig wakes the master, feigns naïve innocence, and informs him that a cow is loose out back. Assessing the crime scene, the farmer falls for the ruse, blaming the cow herself for escaping, exclaiming "I don't know from Adam how she pulled it free... I'd have sworn that it was so firm that the Great Eastern Cableship wouldn't have pulled it loose!" (137). Ah, but Peig with her torquing of Catholic tenets is aided by a force more powerful than even the largest steamship of the era: "He wouldn't have said that if he only knew all the puffing and blowing I had trying to pull it. But then again, I admit that it wasn't I pulled it, but the power of God when He saw me in the trouble" (137). That's a new God for most – one never extolled in any Catholic church of Ireland (or elsewhere). Given the right circumstances, Peig's God seems more of an outlaw from the Holy Trinity – a rascally accomplice who always has her back.

Covert Withholdings and Narrative Suppressions

Like James Joyce's Mrs. Mooney who runs "The Boarding House," Peig is "quite able to keep things to herself" (Joyce 71). Peig's covert withholding skills lack the cunning malice of a Mrs. Mooney, but they definitely affect her narrative style. Her renditions appear provocatively strategic when we consider her multiple accounts of being sent into service for the first time at the age of thirteen. She establishes the contexts of her banishment piecemeal and very subtly. Her eldest brother Seán's marriage to Cáit Boland is presented as a logical stepping stone to enable sister Máire to engage in matrimony. With Peig's mother an invalid, Máire has overseen the female domestic responsibilities of the household since she herself was quite young. Máire cannot possibly wed and move out until one of the older boys marries and brings his new bride into the house to take over. The progressive marriages of Seán, Pádraig, then Máire are presented calmly and logically as "nature taking its course" with only the hint of a caveat:

A short time after [the marriages of the older brothers] my sister Máire married a Kennedy man from the parish of Ventry. Every one of them now was doing for himself or herself but I was still a charge on my father and he had his hands full for he was a hard-working labouring man. (25)

This idea of being "still a charge on my father" opens the door to the crucial tension that now mushrooms. When Seán's bride, Cáit, takes over as "woman of the house" in the Sayers family, frictions develop and become progressively more volatile:

From the day my brother Seán married, I think my father knew little peace of mind for his daughter-in-law Cáit was fiery tempered and apt to flare up on occasions. . . . My father, however, was a quiet, sensible man with no mind whatsoever for trouble or wrangling and because of this he often turned a deaf ear to his daughter-in-law when she was in a tantrum.

I often listened to them and I had pity for my father when I heard the tongue-lashing she gave him. What I've come to understand now and I think it true, is that it was for my sake and for the sake of my mother who hadn't her health that he put up with so much of this lacerating. (25-26)

Of salient interest are the several explanations Peig offers for her father's submissive acquiescence. She explains that her father "had his hands full" as the main bread winner in the household and that his "quiet" sensibility and antipathy toward any sort of "trouble or wrangling" were enabling skills, allowing him to tune out Cáit's diatribes (26). Finally, she states that her father's refusal to engage and assert himself was actually a defensive posture designed to protect both his incapacitated wife and his youngest child, Peig herself. As he makes plans to send thirteen-year-old Peig into service in Dingle Town, Tomás Sayers offers the following explanation to his neighbor Old Muiris:

What else could I do? . . . I'm convinced that if [Peig] were out of the house I'd have more peace of mind than I have. They [daughter-in-law Cáit with son Sean acquiescing] consider the old woman in the corner no small charge on them besides carrying the expense of the girl too. (36)

Peig's presentation of her father's rationale for uprooting his daughter and sending her into servitude, however, proves to be a red herring. Re-constructing this traumatic event from the vista of an elderly storyteller, Peig has been leading us up the wrong path while she engages in subversive suppression. Only in the last quarter of her autobiography, does Peig reveal the true cause of her banishment into service for four years in her early teens. Much later, married to Peats O'Guiheen on the Blasket and about to give birth to her first child, Peig returns to Vicarstown to be near her mother during the delivery. Describing this return trip, she provocatively re-writes the narrative as presented a hundred or so pages previously. In the curragh leaving the Blasket, she muses:

I was facing for my native townland again but this journey was unlike any other journey I had ever made before. I wondered if the wrangling still went on between them at home or if Cáit, my brother's wife, now ruled the roost. If that was the case, it was a certainty that the angel of peace would walk among them! . . .

Erra, man alive, it wasn't the same house at all! I never thought I'd see Cáit as pleasant as she was for she almost pulled me asunder with sheer affection. I knew at once what had happened.

'Thank God,' I said in my own mind, 'the dispute is over. The sallow lass has won the race and she's boss at last.' (165-66)

Finally, three quarters of the way through her reconstruction of her life, Peig reveals a disturbing discernment that she has been aware of for decades but has kept *sub rosa*.

Cáit Boland's antipathy toward her young sister-in-law was not centered on a rejection of Peig herself or any genuine concern about putting food on the table. Between the time Sean married and the time she was exiled to service, Peig had become a pawn in a strategic power struggle between Cáit Boland and Tomás Sayers for dominance in the Vicarstown household. Tellingly, she does not wonder if her *father* has finally bested Cáit; rather, she wonders if *Cáit* "now ruled the roost" – a vantage that Peig had seen coming since her childhood. Through the act of narrating, Peig is finally coming to terms with the real source of Cait's rejection of her. The unspoken maneuvers for ascendancy, rather than merely another mouth to feed, were always the cause of Cait's animosity.

This surprising about-face in the narrative constitutes a crucial palimpsest that partially erases and partially writes over the earlier accounts which rationalized her father's passivity as a product of his quiet temperament. The earlier accounts of the family friction and this later one remain in tension and bespeak an intriguing, unresolved volatility in the text. Earlier, in the first quarter of the autobiography, Peig had said "What I've come to understand now and I think it true, is that it was for my sake and for the sake of my mother who hadn't her health that [my father] put up with so much of this lacerating" (26 emphasis added). The "now" she refers to occurs as she narrates her autobiography in the mid 1930s, probably within a few weeks or months of the subsequent revelation which countermands this previous, supposed "truth" excusing her father's acquiescence. The ongoing tension revealed through this palimpsest attests to an extremely ambivalent response to her father whom she adored – especially as a master storyteller – and covertly felt great disappointment in – as the patriarch of the family who banished young Peig into servitude far from home.

Such skills of surreptitious withholding and private strategizing are also evident when we listen to some of the radio broadcasts that Peig taped in later life for the BBC. The first of these broadcasts, taped in 1947 from her hospital bed back on the mainland in Dingle, reveals Peig provocatively suppressing her skills with English as she serves as advocate for the Irish language through her gifted storytelling. The radio interviewer, W.R. Rodgers, who himself had no Irish, asked Peig a series of questions or prompts in English which she had no trouble understanding and immediately responding to. Here are two examples of the type of question posed to her in English: "Rodgers: *Now Peig, have you any story about St Brendan you can tell us?*" and "Rodgers: *Do you remember the time your father wasn't able to finish the story, the story of the red ox?*" (Almqvist, *Peig Sayers* 203, 209). With these and all other questions posed in English, Peig does not miss a beat, quickly responding in Irish, always providing a substantial, entertaining story. After recording a series of folktales from Peig in Irish, the BBC interviewer coyly asks, "*Peig, can you tell us a little in English about who you learnt your stories from?*" (Almqvist, *Peig Sayers* 211). Her response, now in English, proves a classic in irony and subterfuge:

I am sorry I cannot, sir. I have very bad English because there was no English going on by my time when I was young. And another thing, I was too much given to the Irish, and I inherited that from my father. I rather prefer the Irish stories and Irish songs and everything in Irish because I had no English. And then we thought it better to pick up the Irish than the English at the time. So I am no good for telling stories in English. (Almqvist, *Peig Sayers* 211)

With more than tongue in cheek, Peig eloquently denies her abilities in English. This well-wrought refusal demonstrates a superior vocabulary as well as an ease with English syntax, sentence structuring, and verb tenses. She proves comfortably experienced with causal relationships established by connectives such as “because” or “so,” and she ably controls chronological relationships with conjunctions and adverbs such as “when” and “then.” Without any punctiliously parsing of syntax or grammar, Peig’s denial of her abilities in English also demonstrates that she deftly interconnects independent and dependent clauses with practiced precision.³ As we shall subsequently witness, Peig often keeps her skills with English to herself, feigning complete ignorance of the language when it strategically suits her.

Undaunted Mettle

In her storytelling as well as her life, Peig displays an attraction to and a penchant for female rumbustious audacity which flies in the face of religiously prescribed, turn-the-other-cheek passivity. Her celebration of staunch, physical opposition is brought to the forefront in an episode of *Peig* titled “A brave woman protecting her husband,” when a Dingle woman named Cait, described as “a powerful, closely-set mallet of a dame,” physically defends her husband from being attacked in Curran’s store (97). Having downed a couple of glasses of whiskey on the sly underneath a staircase, Cait hears her husband being threatened out in the front of the store by “a huge long legger of a countryman” (98). She breaks off the end of the pipe she’s been smoking, uses the bowl of the pipe to fortify her fist, and challenges her husband’s would-be assailant:

‘You’ll strike him, is it?’

‘Strike him I will and belt the lard out of him too.’

With that Cáit hits him above the eyes with the pipe-head she had in her hand and lifts him clear and clean off the ground. He falls head first against the counter.

‘There you are, you devil! Who’s atin’ the clay now?’ she asked.

‘Mop up that!’ she said then, for a stream of blood was flowing down the big fellow’s cheek. (99)

This is precisely the type of scene that the Irish Department of Education took exception to and scrupulously deleted because it spotlights Peig Sayers extolling dauntless

rebellion rather than decorous acquiescence. Some of the other sections that The Educational Company of Ireland, Dublin and Cork fastidiously excised from Peig's autobiography include the drunken festivities of the Ventry Races, the legendary Father Owen contravening the Fifth Commandment as he punches and flattens the Protestant parson, and all of the scurrilous shenanigans, thefts, and subterfuges of Séamus Pléasc to whom Peig devotes an entire chapter. As stated earlier, over 23% of the autobiography was expunged when the Education Department offered its bowdlerized version of Peig Sayers to Ireland's secondary school pupils. Although critics such as Ciaran Ross persist in focusing on "Peig Sayers' romanticized Christian ethos, an ethos that is always foisted on misery and tragedy..." ("Blasket Island" 139), we are much better off listening to Bo Almqvist reminding us that Peig was more "festive and mirthful" than she is usually given credit for, and intrinsically inclined toward "pranks, dishonesty, petty theft and other acts that are hardly typical of model behavior" (*Peig Sayers* 167-68).

Another example of Peig's predilection for daring defiance features the storyteller herself as protagonist. This one, from *An Old Woman's Reflections*, takes place on a religious pilgrimage from the Great Blasket all the way to a rural area a few miles outside of Tralee. Curiously the "Wethers' Well Pilgrimage" is allocated an entire chapter not for any religious significances but for the travelers' stories which animate the entire trip. The three mile row from the Great Blasket to Dunquin, the twelve mile hike between Dunquin and Dingle, the train trip from Dingle to Tralee, and then the horse-drawn wagon trip from Tralee to the holy well are all celebrated for the myriad folktales and communal banter that make the going and coming such an unforgettable adventure. The pilgrimage proper – a series of stations around a sacred well, the supposed culmination of the entire endeavor – is actually elided in a few oblique sentences. In an extensive chapter of over 4,500 words, Peig dismisses the devotions themselves in a mere one-half of a sentence – a narrative maneuver that emphatically contravenes any image of a reverential role model.

It is rather the train trip back from Tralee to Dingle that receives the spotlight – as it should – because the return trip showcases Peig's unflinching and intrepid mettle. When the Islanders board the train for their return to Dingle, they find every carriage so full that "a wren wouldn't find room on any of the seats" (77). Peig, however, spies a bench with a man's expensive overcoat draped across its entire length. Although her companion, Kate, warns her not to touch such an expensive article of clothing, Peig takes charge, picking up and folding the overcoat into the size of one seat and taking the rest of the bench for herself and Kate:

But after a couple of minutes two men came into the box. One of them was a nice middle-aged man from Dingle and the other a big fat strong man who had a basketful of a stomach. A watch in his pocket and a yellow chain across and the appearance on him that he was a fine gentleman.

He stood in front of us and asked in English who folded his overcoat like that. Nobody answered him. Then the Dingle man spoke in Gaelic and asked who moved this good man's coat.

' 'Twas I moved it, good man,' said I.

'Where did you find it in yourself to do the like?' said he, and anger in his voice.

'Because I understood the overcoat to belong to one person and that by right it deserved only one man's space, and if you haven't your entitled space, righteous man, I will leave this place to you. Though there's good bulk in you, I think you have enough room, because I have bought this seat as well as you. There was no bad penny in my money when I paid for it.' (78)

Although further from home than ever before, and entering a train for only the second time in her life, Peig is anything but passively acquiescent when confronted with a novel predicament. There is obviously a class difference being asserted here, with the quality of the overcoat, the gold watch and chain, and the well-fed girth of the coat's owner attesting to a supposed hierarchical superiority that ought to be deferred to. This superiority is also manifested as the "gentleman" imposingly stands over the two seated women, confronting them in the English language. Although Peig knows English quite well, she remains silent as if unable to comprehend the rebuke issued in the foreign tongue. Peig strategically uses this type of subterfuge when it suits her, here waiting to be addressed in Irish by the local man from Dingle before she takes up her verbal cudgel. When her impertinence is challenged, she responds with even more audacity, flaunting her wit and abilities with, what Blasket Islanders refer to as, "cross-talk." One overcoat logically belongs to one man deserving only one seat. The money she paid for her fare is just as good as anyone else's, and any attempt to assert a class hierarchy is emphatically undercut by the sarcasm of phrases such as "righteous man" and "though there's good bulk in you." Needless to say, Peig carries the day. The two men wind up sharing one seat, alternately sitting on each other's knee for a spell. As an accomplished storyteller with skillful timing, Peig can't help but include a closing fillip as a finishing touch: "'Didn't you always hear,' said the Dingle man to the fat hulk, 'that nobody ever got the better of women?'"(78).

This caliber of resolute, assertive opposition also anchors another chapter of *An Old Woman's Reflections* titled "The News of the 1916 Revolution: the Black-and-Tans' Visit." During the War of Independence (1919-22), news reaches the Islanders that Dingle Town is being burned by the British. Even worse, the Black and Tans are set to invade the Great Blasket because they suspect that the island is being used as a haven to hide arms for the Irish Volunteers. Everyone on the Blasket seems to be panicking over fears that "blood is being spilled at our door at last" and "the island [will be] blown up in the sky and everything in it burnt..." (116, 118). As the fearsome mercenaries invade the village and begin ransacking each house for evidence of insurrection, Peig accentuates her calm poise during the chaos and her steadfast refusal to knuckle under to the threat.

I was sitting by the fire, drinking my cup of tea, as usual, when Eileen my daughter ran in the door and terror in her.

‘Oh! God with us, Mammy, all the soldiers and guns that are about the hamlet – and what are you doing?’

‘I am eating, my girl,’ said I. ‘If it’s death itself for me it’s a great thing to be strong for the long road.’ (118)

As a creative narrator, Peig shapes a scene worthy of legend, promoting the storyteller herself as exemplar of tenacious intractability. Unlike the men of the Island, even her husband, Peats, Peig refuses to act in a subservient manner for the marauding Black and Tans:

. . . Patrick, my husband, the blessing of God with his soul, came in, and mad rushing on him.

‘For God’s sake,’ said he, ‘have you no anxiety only eating and drinking, and your eating and drinking to be ended immediately. Hurry and take down those pictures on the wall!’ (118)

The pictures that Peats is so anxious to conceal honor the martyred leaders of the Easter 1916 Rising, images that would surely ignite the Black and Tans’ lethal wrath. Peig, however, has her nationalist hackles straight up, and she refuses to capitulate:

‘Musha, defeat and wounding on those who fell them!’ said I. ‘They felled them without mercy and they alive, and it seems I have to hide the pictures from them now, and they dead! But may I be dead and as dead as a stone if I’ll take them down in fear of any Stranger wretch! ...’ (119)

Pointing specifically at a large picture of Thomas Ashe, a celebrated Kerry rebel who captured four R.I.C. barracks during the Rising, Peats insists:

‘Take it down!’ he said angry.

‘I couldn’t, I say. It will have to be left where it is, and if it’s the cause of our death, it’s welcome. They fought and fell for our sake, and as for Thomas Ashe’s picture,’ said I, ‘I can’t hide it from anyone.’ (119)

Gainsaying any stereotype of proper female submissiveness, Peig adamantly refuses to demonstrate dutiful subservience to her husband, even when he barks the same order at her twice. She also refuses to humble herself before the invading mercenaries and alter her home to present a domestic tableau fit for British approval. Instead, she demonstrates a passionate rebelliousness when confronted by gun-wielding troops, repeatedly welcoming death rather than hide the tributes to honored Irish revolutionaries. Fortunately the powder keg never ignites because the Black and Tans are circumvented by a seemingly insuperable language barrier. Peig (again) strategically feigns ignorance

of the English language so that “we had no understanding each other only deaf and dumb talk, and it’s very little of that was going on” (119). Adopting a pose that “I had nothing to do but take it easy,” Peig frustrates every overture by the Black and Tans so that “they went their way without doing harm or damage...” (119).

To conclude, I would like to turn to an intriguing evaluation presented by Colm Toibin in a book review concerning the fiction of E.M. Foster. Commenting on the critical perception that the novel *Maurice* is Forster’s “only truly honest novel,” Toibin states:

... *Maurice* is, while fascinating in its own way, also his worst. Perhaps there is a connection between its badness and its “honesty,” because novels should not be honest. They are a pack of lies that are also a set of metaphors; because the lies and metaphors are chosen and offered shape and structure, they may indeed represent the self, or the play between the unconscious mind and the conscious will. . . . (9)

Considering such statements, one is reminded that any autobiography or memoir is also filled with creative fiction. By selecting which life episodes to narrate, settling on particular words, orchestrating sentence structures, or developing organizational progressions, authors necessarily impart an inventive design to any life. To fully appreciate Peig Sayers’s many performances and the provocative “play between the unconscious mind and the conscious will,” we need to understand that the patriarchal stereotype of Peig, developed to support the new Irish Constitution of 1937, has been a chauvinistic lie from the very start. Patricia Coughlan astutely appraises the iconic image of Peig as “the quintessential holy Irish mother, who has suffered and is resigned. . . she endures femininely, emulating the Virgin Mary” (62). Such a warped stereotype is long overdue for demolition. A fuller appreciation of *Peig, An Old Woman’s Reflections*, and her various personae as storyteller dramatically manifests that Peig Sayers – as a schoolgirl, teenager, and grown woman – was rarely, if ever, inclined to bow her head and say “be it done unto me according to thy word.”

Notes

- 1 Máire Ní Mhainnín and Liam P. Ó Murchú, editors of *Peig: A Scéal Féin* (1998), explain that the original edition, published by Talbot Press, Dublin in 1936, includes 251 pages in 27 chapters. The subsequent school edition, published “sometime after 1945, when guidelines on standardized spelling were issued,” only included 193 pages of text. Chapters 4, 5, 10, and 14 were deleted as were episodes within chapters that were deemed unfit. The episode “A Brave woman defending her man” from chapter 11 was cut as was “How the two old men saw two moons in the sky” from chapter 21. Over 23% of the original text was excised for the school edition. I graciously thank Dáithí de Mórdha of the Basket Centre, Dunquin, Ireland for his translation from the 1998 edition of Máire Ní Mhainnín and Liam P. Ó Murchú.
- 2 Encouraged by visiting Dubliners Máire Ní Chinnéide and Léan Ní Chonalláin, Peig began narrating her life story to her son Mícheál (*An File*) in the mid 1930s. Ironically, although a champion of oral Irish, Peig could neither read nor write her own language.

- 3 Peig could read and write English very well. For an example of her English writing skills, see a letter from her to Kenneth Jackson dated “Blasket Isle, 5 January 1933” available in Bo Almqvist, “Kenneth Jackson and Peig Sayers: The creation of *Scéalta ón mBlascaod*,” 101-102.

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