

Affirming Mystery in Eric McCormack's *The Mysterium*

“Just out of curiosity, though,” I said, “what do those words on the title page mean—*certum quia impossibile?*” “They’re a short form of another Latin phrase—a paradox. . . . Loosely translated, they mean that something you always thought to be quite impossible may actually be the only solution to your problem. Worth remembering, in our profession.”

—JAMES MAXWELL AND REEVE BLAIR in *The Mysterium*

The last decade or so has seen the consolidation of a sub-genre variously called the “anti-detective,” “metaphysical detective,” or “postmodern detective” novel.¹ Probably the most famous example is Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, but novels as diverse as Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, and Timothy Findley’s *The Telling of Lies* may also be said to fit the type. What these novels have in common is a rewriting of traditional detective motifs for “serious” literary purposes. They all foreground the detective novel’s built-in meditation on reading (from Dupin on, detectives are portrayed as exemplary “close readers”) in order to raise questions about the construction—or even possibility—of meaning. They also subvert the traditional “closed” ending of the detective novel, in which the criminal is identified and the mystery “solved”; in so doing, they seek not to dispel but to affirm mystery. As Stefano Tani puts it:

Anti-detective fiction restores and assimilates [detective conventions] to twentieth-century man’s acceptance of the nonlogical in everyday life. Once decapitated by the nonsolution, detective rules no longer epitomize a genre but a contemporary attitude towards life as a mystery to be accepted. (151)

Like its cousins in the postmodern detective genre, Eric McCormack’s *The Mysterium* (1992) both asserts and celebrates mystery. *The Mysterium* offers the same distinctive mix of metafictional playfulness and macabre events found in McCormack’s previous books, the story collection *Inspecting the Vaults* (1989) and the novella *The Paradise Motel* (1990).² It also builds on

the parodies of detective conventions evident in stories like “Eckhardt at a Window” and “The Fugue.” Like McCormack’s earlier work, *The Mysterium* uses metafiction to foreground the complex relationship between language and reality, and thereby, as Stanley Fogel puts it (with reference to *Inspecting the Vaults*), to “[jeopardize] our confidence in the relationship between words and things” (Fogel 137). By affirming the inevitable mystery in reality, *The Mysterium*—in good postmodernist fashion—dramatizes the need for humility about claims to knowledge. At the same time, the novel seeks to expand our understanding of what affirming mystery might mean. Indeed, as McCormack himself explains, *The Mysterium* grew out of a meditation on the word “mystery,” which can refer not only to a detective “mystery,” but to religious “mystery,” and to “mystery” as the “mastery” of a trade or art (“Less Than Meets the Eye” 10). *The Mysterium* exploits the potential in all these meanings to create a multi-layered meditation on what it might mean to take life “as a mystery to be accepted.”

The Mysterium tells the story of James Maxwell’s investigation into the strange events at Carrick, a small Scottish-like town in the “North” of the “Island.” As told in the document authored by Robert Aiken, Carrick has suffered three acts of vandalism, a brutal murder, and a mysterious plague—or poisoning—in which the victims “chatter about this and that till they abruptly [die]” (61-62). Maxwell’s investigation uncovers an earlier mystery that seems connected to these later events: the mining deaths of a number of prisoners of war, in what was ruled at the time an “accident,” but in what seems to have been an act of revenge for the death of a platoon of Carrick men during the War on the Continent. This earlier mystery seems to explain the malaise of the town at the beginning of the story.

The opening lines of the novel, which exhort the reader to “smell” the book, establish the importance of affirming mystery. According to the opening lines, anyone who can smell “scents a north-east wind carries on a March day in the northern part of this Island” and also “a hint of something strange” is “probably still safe.” But anyone who smells only “the paper and the binding,” anyone without imagination and a sense of mystery, is probably lost (1). A strange smell permeates the town of Carrick within the story as well, and it is clear that those who are “lost” or “safe” may be identified by who is or is not aware of it. James Maxwell, the narrator, is aware of it throughout; certain figures of authority—the warden in the insane asylum (100), a soldier (222)—are not. Near the end of the story Maxwell discovers

that the smell emanates from the body of Robert Aiken, the character, more than any other, who is the “author” of the mystery at Carrick.

The smell is closely related to another key image in the novel, the fog. Carrick, we are told, is often shrouded in a fog that “wipes out the borders between countries and the lines between earth, sky, sea and shore” (5). Allusions to the fog stress the way it dissolves the solid world. So Miss Balfour “disintegrated for a while in the dark” (32) and the fog on the Green “was so thick the far side was quite obliterated” (43). Reeve Blair makes the obvious interpretation:

Nothing’s straightforward here. People keep things hidden, even trivial things, and it’s hard to know why—maybe it’s just a natural liking for secrecy. In the North real mysteries become even more mysterious. (75)

In various places, the novel suggests a necessity—even a certain comfort—to the fog. For the residents of Carrick, sunshine is the weather that is disorienting (36); they only pretend to prefer sunny days, only pretend “that they could see just as clearly in sunshine as in more discreet light” (48). The idea that you can see things more clearly in “discreet” light is picked up by Reeve Blair in one of his pedantic lectures:

And remember, James: it’s not always the clues that are right before your eyes that are significant. Some of the most important things in life can only be seen with peripheral vision. (112)

The connection between the fog and the smell is made explicit by Maxwell when he observes that “the fog seemed to be that bitter smell made visible” (151).

The images of fog and smell are only two of many devices that signal *The Mysterium’s* intention of offering a self-reflexive meditation on the construction of meaning. Indeed, in typical “postmodern detective” fashion, *The Mysterium* regularly foregrounds the parallels between James Maxwell’s exploration of the mystery at Carrick and the act of reading. Maxwell himself is presented at first as a kind of ideal reader. He admits near the beginning that he has left much of his life “sleeping in books” (68). As the investigation unfolds, and he becomes more active in making up his own interpretations of events, Maxwell takes on the role of writer as well as reader. At the end he tries to write a book about the events at Carrick, but does not finish it because he is haunted by the possibility that he and Robert Aiken (and Kirk, another “author” of the mystery) might be relatives. The thought of such a co-incidence lying at the heart of his investiga-

tion appalls Maxwell, for it implies “a world so patterned, so contrived” that it is “a world *without mystery*” (253).

If Maxwell performs the role of reader/writer, the witnesses are explicitly likened to characters in a novel. “These people are as good as dead,” explains Reeve Blair, with his usual mix of pedantry and double-entendre. “They aren’t much more than cadavers who can still talk . . . They may be interesting characters but they’re no more substantial than those people you meet in your dreams” (109). The fictional quality of the witnesses is suggested by the fact that their testimonies are in the third person, as if they are themselves products of an observing narrator. Literally, of course, within the terms of the novel, this narrator is James Maxwell, and the shift to third person only highlights Maxwell’s tendency to organize the clues he encounters into a coherent story (Reeve Blair criticizes him in the end for the “very selective” quality of his “transcriptions and condensations” [251]); still, because the testimonies are so completely in the historical voice, with a level of detail which far exceeds what is likely in an actual interview, there remains the impression of some other, anonymous voice. Another hint of fictional quality is that each witness has a highly marked peculiarity of speech, apparently as a result of the poisoning or plague (which adds new meaning to the idea of “speech pathologies”). So Kennedy speaks his sentences backwards (79), Miss Balfour has a “unique dialect” (139), Dr. Rankin’s conversation is “peppered with childish insults” (160), and so on. The blatant nature of the speech differences foregrounds and parodies a key novelistic convention for constructing characters. Maxwell’s interviews with the witnesses are filled with parodic elements. Before each interview an authority figure imposes an arbitrary time limit, half-an-hour, an hour, and so on—a common device for generating suspense in mystery stories (124, 138). The witnesses each also have a specific piece of the story to tell and no more (in detective fiction, as in Carrick, a witness’s “life” runs out “with her string of words” [151]). Interestingly, the witnesses seem to be aware of their own role as characters: they come right out to tell Maxwell when they’ve told all they’re permitted to tell (137, 150). They are also uniformly unconcerned about their impending deaths; instead, they worry whether the portraits of themselves in Robert Aiken’s account are sufficiently “interesting” (136, 150, 220-21).

Intertextual references intensify the metafictional quality of the tale. Like many of McCormack’s stories (“The Fragment,” “Sad Stories in Patagonia,” and “One Picture of Trotsky,” to name only three), *The Mysterium* uses the

device of texts within texts to foreground that *mise en abyme* so beloved of postmodernism: is it real? is it fiction? . . . lost again in the funhouse of language. The novel contains references to at least two earlier works by McCormack, *The Paradise Motel* (“Do you remember when the Motel Paradiso affair hit the headlines, James?” [179]) and “The One-Legged Men” (“The most popular” artists at the later day festival are the elderly miners from Muirton who have “each lost a leg in an accident that killed and maimed half the town’s miners” [189, see also 201]). It also contains a long and hilarious discourse on criminology by Reeve Blair that is a thinly veiled parody of contemporary literary theory:

The originator of the revolt [against the old methods of investigation] was a man named Frederic de Nossure. In his treatise, *A Course in General Criminology*, he set the world of criminal theory on its ear by the simple statement: ‘the nature of the crime is totally arbitrary and requires new systems of analysis’ . . . He proposed that an altogether new set of terminology be introduced, built around the triad: CRIMINIFIER—CRIMINIFIED—CRIME. (174)

These references, in conjunction with the other devices, make clear that the events in Carrick are “staged,” in more ways than one, that the inhabitants have “set us a test” (171) and that the town itself is “a theatre of some kind . . . some intricate performance” (108).

What does this performance teach about the construction of meaning? Not surprisingly, the “message” is not at all straightforward. Take, for example, the thematic pronouncement repeated at various points in the novel: “Telling the truth is only possible when you don’t know very much.” This pronouncement—like everything else metafictional about *The Mysterium*—is tellingly ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to refer to how the “truth” of the situation in Carrick becomes more difficult to pin down as more information is revealed. Truth, then, is superseded by how “one possibility melts into another,” as Reeve Blair says (245), or it is like the sand that slips through the festival artist’s fingers (190). This side of the pronouncement warns against those who would claim too confidently to tell the truth. Indeed, as Fogel has pointed out, much of McCormack’s writing works to unmask the “ease with which we classify, sort, and organize” as a “dubious virtue” (Fogel 137). In this context, truth becomes the province of the narrow-minded or ignorant—rather like the moralistic monks in *The Name of the Rose*, who try to protect their ownership of truth by limiting what can be disseminated from the library.

On the other hand, an alternative reading of the pronouncement is also possible. According to this reading, limiting what you know is a necessary enabling act. James Maxwell's situation at the end of the novel hints at the old saw about creative writers, that they should only learn as much as they need to know to tell the story. John Barth puts it nicely when he says that a novelist's homework is "the opposite of ice-bergs: Eight-ninths of [it] . . . is in plain view on the surface of [the text]" (Barth 180). To learn too much is to forgo an important kind of "affirming mystery"—the writer's ignorance which leaves a space for imagination—and thus to be threatened by a silence in which no truth can be told.

The first interpretation of the pronouncement aligns *The Mysterium* with other postmodern texts, which commonly argue for (and dramatize) the need for humility about claims to knowledge. Such humility is one of the most valuable lessons Maxwell learns in the novel: "Now, I wonder if any decision can ever be that simple. I ask myself, does any of us know, really, why we do what we do? That was one of the lessons I was to learn in Carrick" (68). At various places in *The Mysterium*, the lesson is reinforced, as, for instance, when Maxwell admits "I'd made up a cause and effect that was understandable and convenient. And quite wrong" (169; see also 220 and 239). A similar plea for humility about claims to knowledge is at the root of the idea of affirming mystery in postmodern detective novels. In *Hawksmoor*, for instance, the two time periods in the novel, with their maze of almost-but-not-quite parallel events, foreground how causal explanations obscure as much of history as they illuminate. Ackroyd's novel can be read as elaborate demonstration of the childrens' joke that a History lesson is a "Mystery lesson" (Ackroyd 29). In *The Name of the Rose*, William of Baskerville backs into a solution through a totally incorrect chain of reasoning. The lesson William draws from his experience could stand as a moral for *Hawksmoor* or *The Mysterium* as well:

Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth. (Eco 491)

A number of McCormack's most gruesome earlier stories have contained explicit warnings against fanatical quests after "absolute truth." The sect in "The Fragment," for instance, horribly mutilate their bodies in an attempt "to make themselves the perfect embodiments of spiritual self-sufficiency" (*Inspecting* 26), while Da Costa in "Lusawort's Meditation" is literally "too

good to live,” so the world begins to invade his body (194). In *The Mysterium*, the most obvious absolutists are the three men who apparently engineer the deaths of the prisoners of war: Alexander Aiken, Jakob Grubach, and Doctor Rankin. Alexander is, quite simply, an ego-maniac. He is capable of intellectual brilliance (many of the most resonant metafictional pronouncements come from him) but also great evil: when he discovers that one of the prisoners of war is having an affair with his wife, he sets out to kill all of them (166). Jakob, on the other hand, is obsessed with history. He believes “that to possess a country’s past was almost the same as possessing the solid earth of it” (162). As a result, his bitterness at his own persecution and exile, which involved a proclamation that his version of his country’s history was “officially unacceptable,” seems to know no limits, and he agrees to go along with Alexander’s plan in order to “strike a blow against those who had ruined his family and his homeland” (161, 166). Doctor Rankin absolutely believes in his own authority. He is the town patriarch, the one who usually has “the last word” in the decisions of the town council (34). He feels no compunction about sexually assaulting his patients (166). He goes along with Alexander’s plan, presumably, as a way of revelling in his own power.

Similarly, though more benignly, the limit of Reeve Blair’s authority in the text is signalled by his own traditionally detective-like adherence to reason. So when Maxwell recognizes the Reeve’s love of mystery for its own sake as an attitude like “one of those old religious cabalists,” Blair denies it, saying that those in his profession “are concerned with mysteries—not mumbo jumbo” (73). Tellingly, the Reeve puts dreams in the same category as religious “mumbo jumbo,” a tendency that seems to be connected to the fact that he is a Southerner (where there is less fog and more sunshine), and, as a result, he is fundamentally at a loss for how to deal with the events in Carrick. He projects confidence at every turn, but the fact is, he has had to bring in James Maxwell, a more “creative” reader/writer, in order for the story to unfold. Maxwell, unlike Blair, believes that dreams “could be deeply revealing, no matter how puzzling they might appear” (73), a necessary attitude in a place in which, as Robert Aiken points out, “the crazy logic of dreams [has been] introduced into the rational world” (212).³

Humility about claims to knowledge is not, of course, the same thing as saying “nothing can be known” (just as the “crazy logic” of dreams is not entirely beyond understanding). Although *The Mysterium* warns against the absolutisms of Alexander, Grubach and Dr. Rankin, and gently satirizes the

rationalism of Blair, it doesn't suggest, as an alternative, that everything is simply relative or undecidable (a common misrepresentation of texts that foreground epistemological uncertainty). One of the most interesting things about McCormack's work—as in the best postmodern texts—is the way that metafictional elements have a way of doubling back to comment polemically on “reality.” The very ambiguity of the metafictional elements invites this doubling back. Remember the enabling side to the idea of “not knowing very much.” Or consider again the image of the smell. As I mentioned at the outset, the smell signals the importance of affirming mystery, but the smell itself is “bitter,” which implies that awareness of the smell—for all its value—is not necessarily a pleasant experience (just as neither the unconscious nor “reality” is necessarily pleasant). Awareness of the smell may “save” us from the plague, from that involuntary—if joyful—release of the repressed, but it also implies that we are not fooled by the bland surface of the town: something truly “smells” in Carrick, and those who are aware of it are half-way to perceiving the underlying reality.

The red circle perhaps most powerfully illustrates this “doubling-back” quality of images in the novel. Red circles (or just circles) show up at various places in *The Mysterium*: at each act of vandalism (14, 30, 45), as Swainston's mutilated mouth (51), in the fish affected early on by the plague (they swim “in tighter and tighter circles before rising to the surface” [56]), as Kirk's “stigmata” (the imprint of the gun barrel left after the guerrilla leader murders Kirk's lover [102-03]), and so on. As signs (and as clues), these circles are both empty and full: they point to the vagaries of history, to the possible worth of our explanatory systems (a big zero); and yet they are pregnant with meaning at the same time. The red circle is the mark for Camp Zero, the prisoner of war camp around which the mystery behind the mystery seems to revolve. The recurrence of circles in the novel, the way they strike terror in the townspeople, underlines the fact that the present of Carrick is deeply conditioned by the earlier incident. The red circles foreground all that was at stake when the townspeople closed ranks to “let history re-write itself just a little bit” (169). The closing of ranks is both origin and effect of the town's decay, emblematic of the stultifying insularity of the place. And yet, as the sign itself suggests, the connection to Camp Zero is, from one point of view, an elaborate nothing: the miners were not in fact killed to avenge the Carrick men; the townspeople (most of them, anyway) have nothing really to hide.

The doubleness in images like the red circles throws light on McCormack's

claim, in his introduction to *Inspecting the Vaults* and in a recent article, that his fiction testifies to “the power of the written word” (*Inspecting* xii; “Less” 6). McCormack’s texts dramatize that the power of words is rooted in what makes words hard to control: the multiple meanings they invoke, their profound connection to imagination and the unconscious. Like the elixirs Robert Aiken learns to concoct from his father, words are inherently ambiguous—they are always both poison and cure—and this ambiguity is the very source of their power (37). For this reason, what words offer is always a kind of “peripheral vision,” to return to Reeve Blair’s term, a vision that foregrounds epistemological uncertainty (affirming mystery) while at the same time hinting at some of “the most important things in life” (112). Like the red circles, words—and the stories they form—are an elaborate nothing, “lies” that nevertheless, indirectly and obliquely, can expose the “truth.”⁴ One of the best images for the duplicitous power of words in *The Mysterium* is the Carrick bend. It turns out that the knot was *not* named after the town, that the connection is spurious, a lie, and yet as a metaphor the knot still represents the town remarkably well (190, 221).

A favourite McCormack motif for portraying the power of words might be called “the return of the repressed text.”⁵ A number of his stories portray situations in which the destabilizing power of words asserts itself in spite of efforts to the contrary. In “The Fugue,” for instance, a man who masquerades as “a scholar and a man of culture” is caught up in a moebius strip of fiction and reality in which the pattern of the “cheap novels” he so loves, but which he claims to be able to contain within “their place in his own particular jungle,” come back, in a most direct way, to haunt him (*Inspecting* 231-4).⁶ In “Inspecting the Vaults,” an Orwellian regime imprisons people for crimes of imagination (one prisoner belongs to a family that constructed an entire forest of papier maché [*Inspecting* 6], another is accused of being a “mouth-sorceress, a manipulator of spells” [10]) and then rationalizes its activities with administrative jargon (the prisoners live in “vaults’ . . . not ‘basements,’ and especially not ‘dungeons’—a most unsuitable word” [3]). For all the regime’s efforts at control, however, what they try to repress comes back to haunt them. For one thing, the vault-dwellers are prone to a “wailing” that “penetrates all barriers.” This howling has an inexplicable power: “It should be impossible for the other vault-dwellers, underground, to hear the cry, yet invariably they all take it up” (3). And the narrator of the story, the “Inspector” in charge of these vaults,

turns out himself to be a suspect. His crime? He may or may not be implicated in the disappearance of his entire village, on the site of which the authorities have found “something unthinkable:” a disemboweled body “completely tattooed from head to toe with columns of words” (18).

By foregrounding the return of the repressed text (which, after Derrida, you might also call “the return of textuality”) McCormack implies that words can create a space of freedom, even, potentially, of resistance: there is something hopeful in the way that the wailing—even if it is, in itself, a horrible wailing—exceeds all attempts at control by the regime. The fact that what words tap into is often mysterious and chaotic is all the better for those who share the condition described by JP in *The Paradise Motel*:

Some men do not need to search for order, they are overwhelmed by it, everywhere they turn. They feel as though they’re in a prison where each moment of the day is planned, every action overseen. They hunger for the smallest particle of chaos, for things that do not fit. (105).⁷

Certainly, from a writer’s point of view, the power of words can be a tangible pleasure: it means that there is no “last word” to a story, no final version, only an infinite sequence of possibilities each with its unsolved and potentially absorbing mysteries. One message of *The Mysterium*, like the story “Eckhardt at a Window,” is that the value of the performance is simply in the contemplation of all the various possibilities. Inspector Eckhardt, at the end of his unsolved case, realizes that he “is not discontented with the way things have worked out. He knows now that he has no wish ever to solve his mystery . . . only to contemplate it, to delight in its complexities” (*Inspecting* 54). Similarly, the open ending of *The Mysterium* seems to invite the response of James Maxwell: let whiskey “oil the machinery” and then sit back for hours “discussing the mysteries at Carrick from this angle and that, considering such matters as guilt, innocence, doubt and certainty” (249-50).

At the same time, as *The Mysterium* implies, what “returns” with a repressed text is an oblique indication of the “truth.” Recall that in the novel the plague induces normally reticent people to talk volubly until they die. The subject of their talk, and sometimes the nature of their speech impediment, is directly connected to what they had repressed in their lives before the infection. Kennedy sets the pattern by monologuing endlessly about his wife’s twin sister, the “first time” he’s told anybody about her (79).⁸ Anna, to use just one other example, talks about Robert Aiken, her first lover. Her speech impediment involves violent displays of emotion triggered by certain

key words, which is appropriate, since a cause of her alienation from Robert is that she could not say “I love you” (she “had no wish to express such emotions in words” [95]). It’s also interesting to note that the plague first strikes animals (rabbits, fish, dogs, and sheep) and children (young Cameron who “talked and talked, day and night” [59] and then five others [61]) and only finally adults. In other words, the plague takes effect first on those least “repressed” and gradually progresses to those most repressed. Understanding the plague as a return (and release) of the repressed also explains why it is such a “benign killer”; the threat of death pales before the euphoria of the unburdening (82).

The unburdening of the townspeople emphasizes that Carrick’s present state comes from a failure to affirm mystery adequately, either by actually dispelling mystery (love does not flourish in the town because lovers “know each other too well” [195]) or by absolutist perversions of the need to affirm mystery (the closing of ranks after the mine disaster). In either case, the townspeople have drawn a (red, bloodied) circle around the town, imprisoning themselves in an insular certainty and defining everything outside as threatening and other. They have internalized the lesson of “the taming” described by Miss Balfour, in which the town colliers are terrorized by a ram so that they repress their deepest desires and never go near the sheep that are “the fulfillment of [their] essence” (147).

The “essence” from which the townspeople are alienated is hinted at in *The Mysterium* by the various intertwined meanings of “mystery.” For instance, one signal of the town’s stultified condition is the fact that the church is shut down. According to Robert Aiken, “no sound” has emanated from the church since the end of the War (17). When Kirk asks him about this silence, Robert explains that his father said “we don’t need churches anymore,” because “we’ve learnt everything the Great Executioner in the Sky had to teach” (47). At its best, the religious sense of “mystery” implies a certain humility in meta-physical matters. The OED puts it succinctly when it describes a religious mystery as “a doctrine of the faith involving difficulties which human reason is incapable of solving.” Alexander thinks he has solved everything, but, creature of reason and ego that he is, his “solution” only feeds his fearful obsession with death: “The body is nothing but a food supply for a million maggots” (202).

Most crucially, however, the novel implies that the townspeople are alienated from the idea of “mystery” as “mastery of a trade or art.” This mystery is intimately connected to the festival at the literal and metaphoric heart of

the novel. McCormack has shown a fondness for rituals and festivals throughout his work.⁹ Fogel argues that such rituals “act subversively to contextualize ironically our own value-making practices” (143). In *The Mysterium*, there are some good examples of the way ritualized activity can be used to rationalize atrocity: the taming (147), the almost ceremonial murder of Kirk’s lover (102), the “rites” attendant on the persecution of the Grubachs (161). At the same time, however, these abuses of ritual are shown to be perverted expressions of a fundamental—and fundamentally empowering—human activity. The nature of this activity is suggested by Carrick’s medieval Festival of the Mysterium, the disappearance of which is the key signal of the town’s present malaise.

According to the account by “Johannes Peregrinus,” a text within the text of *The Mysterium*, the medieval Carrick festival began with “a great procession” in which “eech crafte and mystery” was represented (84). The various mysteries assembled at the church to make their oath: “*Wee swear that we will well and truly oversee our mysteries. And all good rules and ordinances we shall keep*” (85). After the day of processions and solemn oaths, there followed “much drinking and eating and wenching,” in the middle of which, on the third day, there was a stage play of the “*Mysterium Mysteriorum—the Mystery of Mysteries*” (86). Peregrinus remarks negatively on all the “wicked sorte” who descended on the town, but his criticism is tempered by the tangible benefit he himself received from one of the mysteries celebrated in the festival: the Carrick town apothecary gave him a “sovereign remedy” against “a sleeplessness conducive to a melancholy” (86).

Clearly, in these various details, the festival embodies an ideal of community in which responsibility and freedom, internal cohesion and openness to the outside, are balanced. From one point of view, the festival is a carnivalesque celebration that invites outsiders into the town and gives license to “wickedness.” As Reeve Blair points out, with his usual double-entendre, Peregrinus uses erratic spellings in his account because “[in] those days there weren’t any rules” (110). Blair, however, misses the fact that the disorder of the festival is contained within a larger—but not oppressive—commitment to the common good. The procession and other organized activities are a strong expression of solidarity, and the guild members swear on the steps of the church to keep “all good laws and ordinances” of their mystery, laws and ordinances which, judging from the original English guilds, always began with respect for the “common law” (see Smith xxxix).

The Carrick festival also celebrates a condition of relatively unalienated labour: during the festival week, as Reeve Blair points out, Carrick becomes for the tradespeople not just a workplace but “the stage of their performance” (111). For this element, McCormack taps into views sometimes expressed in scholarship on the medieval guilds:

The early English Gild was an institution of local self-help which, before the Poor-laws were invented, took the place, in old times, of the modern friendly or benefit society . . . [Their] main characteristic was, to set up something higher than personal gain and mere materialism, as the main object of men living in towns. (Smith xiv-xv)

Or, in the same vein:

The rules laid down by the Guilds, and to which all men of the trade had to submit, had reference (1) partly to securing the good quality of the work, and (2) partly, like all Guild-Statutes, to the temporal and eternal welfare of their members. Both kinds of rules were consequences of the fundamental principle of all Guilds, namely, care for the common interest by means of association. (Brentano cxxviii- cxxix)

These quotes highlight how the guilds put the general welfare of the community over the free pursuit of profit. Brentano describes a very telling incident from the fourteenth century in which certain “rich” merchants called “Grocers” began to deal in “all manner of merchandize vendible,” much to their own profit. After a complaint, the king, Edward III, responded with a decree “that all artificers and people of mysteries shall each choose his own mystery before the next Candlemass; and that having so chosen it, he shall henceforth use no other” (cxxiii-cxxiv). Though the social inequities of the medieval period warn against taking these accounts naively, the loss of communal values represented by the disappearance of the guilds and their festivals is, as McCormack seems to argue, something to mourn.

The Mysterium suggests that, at its best, to take “life as a mystery to be accepted” means to adopt an attitude to life analogous to that embodied in the guild festivals. It means to forgo certain efficiencies deliberately—certain advances of technology and reason—in order to affirm other values. That the festival is now “out of fashion” is particularly poignant when you consider that Carrick, at the beginning of the novel, is not only psychologically but *economically* depressed (191). Smaller communities almost always suffer from capitalism’s mania for rationalization and efficiency. As Robert Aiken points out at the beginning of the novel, the town still “contains practitioners of the various trades as it did in its heyday,” but these practitioners are now no longer “townspeople” but “strangers” (7). In economic terms, there

may be something impossible about declining to be efficient (are we not all prisoners of international financiers and the competitive global economy?) and yet “*certum quia impossibile*” (as the epigraph to Peregrinus’s account of the festival says): “something you always thought to be quite impossible may actually be the only solution to your problem” (84, 112).¹⁰

The Festival of the Mysterium, then, intertwines the aesthetic or epistemological implications of “affirming mystery” with more directly practical concerns. In fact, the festival embodies within itself all the various “mysteries” in the novel. There is an explicit connection between the “mystery” practiced by other craftspeople and the “mystery” of the writer (all those freedoms and responsibilities): Maxwell’s own task in Carrick is likened to a guild member “learning his trade” (68, 187). The rituals acted out have a reverential quality to them, and in the *Mysterium Mysteriorum*—the Mystery of Mysteries—Peregrinus discovers something that highlights the limits of his own knowledge: he cannot tell what this stage play involves—it remains a permanent gap in his account—because he is not one of the initiates. The festival also feeds back into the novel’s metafictional account of “the power of words.” The “exotic” experiences offered by the festival (“staged” or not) nicely parallel the experiences offered by literature. Not surprisingly, the first part of the testimony of Robert Aiken deals with his love of the festival, and the elements he most loves offer clear parallels to the best functions of art: the artist whose impressionistic portraits revealed “characteristics his sitters never knew they possessed or had managed to keep hidden,” and the sailor who tells the story of the Carrick bend, that thing of deceitful beauty, only to be trusted if you “had tied it personally” (190).

To affirm mystery, then, the novel seems to argue, is a festive business. It is to tap into and affirm all the intertwined “mysteries” implicit in the Festival of the Mysterium. There is something licentious and not entirely serious about the process—the power of words implies a carnivalesque indulgence in “wickedness,” in things marginal and transgressive, and also warns against taking absolutist positions (especially, perhaps, with regard to the “ideals” represented by the festival). At the same time, to affirm mystery is to speak to a range of more prosaic human needs: the needs for community, reverence, and for a dignity in labour. As Robert Aiken points out, the people of Carrick, like all human beings, “wanted to be part of something coherent like those tradesmen at the festival hundreds of years ago” (221).

NOTES

- 1 My own preference is to use “postmodern detective.” “Anti-detective,” Stefano Tani’s term, implies too much of a binary, as if the later novels are acting only in opposition to the “traditional” mystery. In fact, the later novels simultaneously exploit and undercut the received conventions—a typically postmodern tendency (see Hutcheon, *Canadian* 1-8 or *Poetics* 3-8). “Metaphysical detective,” on the other hand, a term used by Patricia Merivale and Michael Holquist, implies that earlier mystery novels somehow do not have a metaphysics. They do (which is one reason so many critics have been fascinated by them): just that it is not the metaphysics of Nabokov or Pynchon or Borges. So, as much by default as anything else, “postmodern detective” is a term I will employ in this paper.
- 2 Though he has published only three books so far, McCormack has established himself as a distinctive voice in contemporary Canadian fiction. There is not another writer in Canada who does quite the kind of work he does—all those Borgesian echoes in *Inspecting the Vaults*, the dizzying mix of playfulness and horror throughout. *The Mysterium* is McCormack’s most sustained effort to date. It doesn’t have the *tour de force* quality of some of the stories, but is, it seems to me, a highly successful novel that raises some complex issues in a winningly playful and dramatic way.
- 3 I was at first tempted to link Kirk, because of his mane, to the level of religious mystery. Kirk does, after all, explore the region with a fishing pole that seems a “divining rod” (10), and he contributes to the return of the repressed mystery in Carrick. Alas, however, that was as far as I could make the connections go. It is possible that Kirk’s name is one of those teasing clues, empty and full at the same time: it turns out it is not even his original family name, but rather an easily spelt patronymic given to his mother when she emigrated to the Colony (237).
- 4 In this context, it is well to remember the paradoxical effect of Kirk’s acts of vandalism. At first glance, the acts seem designed to defile or obliterate the town’s past, but ultimately they have the opposite effect. The acts, by their very appearance as attempts to efface history, end up posing the question “Why would anyone want to obliterate the town’s past?” and thus make history a subject of urgent concern.
- 5 As my examples below indicate, this motif is similar to one of the devices Borges claims is fundamental to all fantastic literature: the contamination of reality by dream (Irby in Introduction to *Labyrinths* xviii). In both cases, the power of words and of what words tap into (imagination, the unconscious) has a way of destabilizing everyday assurances about reality.
- 6 This story reads like a one-upping of Julio Cortázar’s “Continuity of Parks,” a possibility signalled by the spurious quotation from Cortázar that makes up its epigraph. It also has parallels with a story like Borges’s “Tlon, Orbis Tertius,” in which the fantastic world of Tlon makes intrusions “into the world of reality” (Borges 16).
- 7 In the context of this article, it is also well to remember the epigraph from R.P. Blackmur that begins *The Paradise Motel*: “What, should we get rid of our ignorance, the very substance of our lives, merely in order to understand one another?”
- 8 Her story presents another image for the necessity of mystery. Turns out that the sister that was born blind had an operation at twelve to restore her sight. But she didn’t like being able to see. Everything was disappointing to her, nothing was as beautiful as she had imagined it, except her dog and shadows. As a result she blinded herself again and lived “happy as a queen” (79).
- 9 See the saturnalia festival described in “Inspecting the Vaults” (*Inspecting* 15) or the rites of the spider-god in “Sad Stories in Patagonia” (30-32) or the Kafkaesque festival in “Festival” (115-28).

- 10 The values represented by the guilds remind me of a story from my hometown of Waterloo, Ontario, where there are many Mennonite farmers. Some years ago, it seems, the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to do a cost-benefit study comparing modern farming methods with the traditional methods of the Mennonites. How was it, the Ministry wondered, that the Mennonites could survive—even thrive—while forgoing such efficiency-producing devices as fertilizers and tractors? When it came time to do the study, however, the Mennonites had trouble cooperating, for the simple reason that they could not understand the surveys they were asked to fill out. It seems the survey listed “labour” as one of the “costs” of production, but, from the point of view of the Mennonites, “labour” is one of the “benefits.”

By a quirk of circumstance, Eric McCormack lives in Waterloo, Ontario (though I have never met him).

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