



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 37 | 2026

Title	Catholic Ritual and the Grotesque Moral of Trouble(d) Bodies: The Role of the Stomach, Digestion, and Bodily Experience in Bernard MacLaverty's <i>Cal</i> (1983)
Author	Danielle Blee
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	37
Publication Date	October 2026

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Catholic Ritual and the Grotesque Moral of Trouble(d) Bodies: The Role of the Stomach, Digestion, and Bodily Experience in Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983)

Danielle Blee

The University of Glasgow

This paper explores the stomach as a central site of moral and historical trauma in Bernard MacLaverty's Cal. Specifically, this will highlight the organ's history of hunger within the Irish canon through an analysis of Catholic iconography. In doing so, this paper considers the Great Famine, the 1981 Hunger Strikes at the Maze Prison complex, and religious fasting in repentance for sins. Hunger is considered within the context of Ireland's colonial past, both as a forced bodily trauma and as a method of colonial resistance against the British administration which once attempted to starve its body politic. Within the novel, the stomach acts as a somatic vessel for sin and salvation; it is a signifier of Cal's internal guilt and the rigid political and moral absolutism of his environment. Undoubtedly, the stomach plays a vital role within the novel, with this essay considering how the organ is represented both biblically and politically. This paper understands this correlation through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque bodily realism, viewing the stomach and other bodily functions – such as digestion and sex – as socially and culturally productive in Irish Troubles fiction. In essence, this paper examines Ireland itself as a body, with Catholicism as its stomach, processing and digesting the violent trauma of its colonial past and present.

Ireland's vast literary body starves and consumes, digests and excretes. This process arises from a history of constant dualities – between Protestantism and Catholicism, or war and peace. While Bernard MacLaverty claimed that his 1983 novel *Cal* is “more about Catholicism than it is about the Troubles”, the work remains a vital entry in the Irish Troubles genre (“Glasgow, in Interview”).¹ But, while the religious tension in MacLaverty's work is widely accepted, analysis of the Trouble(d), starving body remains underdeveloped: this is the critical gap this paper attempts to remedy. If Ireland is a body, then Catholicism is its stomach. In *Cal*, the organ serves as the site of Catholic liturgical redemption and suffering, historically emptied to advance the national cause. MacLaverty explores this tension by utilising what he

¹ On Redemptive Suffering and Catholic symbolism in *Cal*, see Davis, 81-95 and Mahon, 71-104.

describes as “the mental furniture” of Irish identity by fusing the liturgical symbolism of the Eucharist with modern nationalistic rhetoric and by mapping Ireland's history of moralised self-sacrifice directly onto his protagonist's physical suffering (“An Interview”). The religiopolitical tensions of Trouble(d) Ireland certainly established such a framework of sacrifice, providing both the soldiers for a civil war and the moral justification for violence to redress historical wrongs. Ultimately, applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of grotesque bodily realism reveals how the stomach, digestive tract, and sexual organs reimagine traditional Catholic concepts of sin, sacrifice, and suffering as distorted and visceral realities within the context of the civil war. By tracking how this imagery of suffering was mapped onto the starved Irish body, this paper uncovers an explicit cultural ancestry of hunger-haunted literature.

In Irish folklore, the *Fear Gorta* (“Man of Hunger”) is an apparition that takes the form of an emaciated man, begging for alms or food. Appearing during times of famine, he is both a harbinger of starvation and a mythological reflection of the historical trauma plaguing the Irish psyche.² Elsewhere is the *Féar Gortach* (“Hungry Grass”): cursed patches of land, where a wrong step can cause an insatiable, fatal hunger. Thus, the metaphorical stomach, as both a site of power imbalance and political resistance, has a long history in Irish culture.³ Before this paper can analyse the entwined imagery of Catholicism and the stomach within MacLaverty's *Cal*, it is vital to reconsider the political, cultural, and economic history of what I call ‘Ireland's empty stomach’. This paper will consider the cataclysmic effects of *An Gorta Mór* (“The Great Potato Famine”) and the 1981 Hunger Strikes on the Irish psyche, establishing hunger as a historically significant ailment to the Irish body politic. Namely, the Famine resulted in a demographic collapse, with Brian Donnelly arguing that it was “the most significant and far-reaching event” in modern Irish history (260). The Famine's impact is best measured by the visceral void it left behind. To elaborate on Donnelly's point, Ireland's population was recorded as around 8.2 million but fell dramatically in the Famine's aftermath, with around one million dying and over two million emigrating, according to the 1841 census (Carney 36). The suffering was exacerbated by a British colonial administration that, as Joel Mokyr argues, “simply abandoned the Irish and let them perish” (292). By exporting grain

² See W.B. Yeats' “The Solitary Faeries” in *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry*, 81.

³ See Joseph Lennon's “Dreams That Hunger Makes: Memories of Hunger in Yeats, Mangan, Speranza, and Irish Folklore”, 62-81.

while the Irish starved, the colonial system transformed the act (or lack) of ingestion into a systemic weapon, imprinting a lasting disdain for the British administration among the Irish.⁴ This devastation of populace, culture, and language seized the Irish literary imagination, with arguably Ireland's most famous writer, James Joyce, grappling with its sociopolitical aftermath. As Bonnie Roos emphasises, "trying to read *Ulysses* without reference to the Irish potato famine is to miss this all important key" (160).⁵ The Famine codified the stomach as the central site of the Irish experience, as it appears consistently throughout its history and literature. The stomach (and the act of digestion) became an integral tool of resistance, specifically during the 1981 Hunger Strikes, as it sought to draw power from the very colonial system that attempted to starve it.

Hunger pains continued to hit Ireland's stomach during its Trouble(d) period of civil war, from the late 1960s until 1998. Specifically, the 1981 Hunger Strikes, at the heart of the Troubles, followed a tradition of 'willing' starvation and martyrdom. This is a sentiment that appears throughout MacLaverty's *Cal*, in which he depicts a body politic at war with its own anatomy, one which voluntarily purges itself to resist British colonial power.

The concept of a willing hunger first emerged in 1920, following the death of Sinn Féin leader Terence McSwiney; it resurfaced during the 1981 Hunger Strikes at the Maze Prison. As a political tool of resistance, hunger striking became a defining act of "self-immolative martyrdom" against British policy (Sweeney, "Self-Immolative Martyrdom" 337). Initiated in response to the removal of Special Category Status, the protest cycle moved from the blanket protests of 1976 to the dirty protests of 1978, before culminating in the 1981 Hunger Strikes. These strikes specifically mirrored Irish revolutionary history, with the seven original strikers chosen to represent the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, affirming their service "in the name of God and of the dead generations" (Pearse). Most famously, Bobby Sands collapsed the British narrative of criminality associated with the strikers when he was elected as MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 1981. One month after his election, Sands would die from a hunger strike, martyring himself at the height of his political legitimacy. As Paul Howard argues, Sands' election "brought down the shaky edifice

⁴ See Dean M Braa's "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society", 193–215.

⁵ On the Irish Potato Famine in Joyce, see Julieann Ulin's "'Famished Ghosts': Famine Memory in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", 20–63; and Robert Merritt's "Faith and Betrayal: The Potato in *Ulysses*", 269–276.

of British security policy in Northern Ireland, one based on the hypothesis that the conflict was caused by a small rump of criminals who enjoyed no community support" (70). For the Irish psyche, hunger was an effective form of protest, a religiopolitical experience which fused physical starvation with the metaphysical pursuit of martyrdom amidst the era's religiopolitical tensions. These strikes were deeply entwined with Catholic rhetoric, as evidenced by Sands' own diary: "I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world. May God have mercy on my soul". Hunger, framed by the Troubles, canonised the Irish political leader. By attaching theological martyrdom to the nationalist pantheon, the stomach became a site where the political rebel was transformed into a sacred figure.

This concept of ritual self-sacrifice began a "special value in the development of Irish-Christian traditions, particularly so if it was linked to or offered up to God in unison with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Christ" (Sweeney, "Irish Hunger" 422). In Catholic doctrine, the suffering of the body is intrinsically linked to the gratification of the soul – a sentiment which permeates *Cal*. Here, suffering and self-sacrifice are 'offered up' in exchange for redemption: for example, as noted by Cal, his mother "did everything she should do ... if what she wanted was spiritual she denied her body" (MacLavery, *Cal* 111). Again, MacLavery reinforces this through the iconography of Irish ascetic Matt Talbot, who "turn[ed] pain and sorrow into a gift for God" (*Cal* 111). The Irish literary body is defined by this fraught relationship with consumption. Central to the nationalist symbology of British wrongdoing, Ireland's history of starvation is essential to understanding the stomach as a site of both spiritual penance and political resistance. In this colonial context, whereby the individual is stripped of political, civic, and social liberties, the body becomes central in the arsenal of resistance. In choosing to starve voluntarily, the protestor reclaims sovereignty over their own flesh. This delivers the historical ghost of the famine, the *Fear Gorta* (a sombre, passive image of the suffering Irish peasant) to transform it into an aggressive, active agent of political resistance. In this way, the willing, spiritual hunger of the striker becomes an act of indictment against the British state, reclaiming power from an enforced historical legacy.

If the Great Famine established the stomach as the primary site of colonial suffering, MacLavery reimagines the organ as the locus of ecclesiastical and moral strain. The tension Cal experiences is not merely a byproduct of hunger but a somatic manifestation of guilt for his participation in Robert Morton's murder. For Cal, the stomach is the ultimate signifier of

his revulsion toward violence; his admission that he has “no stomach for it” elevates the organ to the role of the physical body’s conscience (MacLaverty, *Cal* 19). Within this framework, the self-mortification of the flesh evolves into a tradition of Irish-Catholic expression, most visible in the ritualistic consumption of the Eucharist. As the Catechism asserts, “the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice” (1367). This sacred ingestion represents a grotesque mode of self-mortification; the stomach becomes the site of transubstantiation, where “the whole substance of bread and wine” is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ (*La Santa Sede*). As Mikhail Bakhtin emphasises in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), such rituals reflect a “phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth” (24). To fully understand how this transformation operates, one must look to the etymology of the word ‘grotesque’. According to the *OED*, the term originally alluded to a “kind of painting or sculpture consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms” discovered in the subterranean grottos of ancient Roman chambers. By definition, then, the grotesque is entwined with the shameful, buried, or hidden. This etymological link directly connects the grotto to the corresponding liminal spaces of the grave and the womb – both of which emphasise the dissolution of the body’s borders (as widely debated in grotesque criticism).⁶

Taking this into consideration, MacLaverty’s *Cal* occupies a liminal space of grotesque spirituality in which life and death are inseparable. At the beginning of the novel, Cal witnesses a literal dying birth, as calves in the abattoir are slaughtered with cheesewire during labour. The calves “get born in bits”, with their fragmented bodies representing the physical manifestation of the grotesque’s cycle of destruction and renewal (MacLaverty, *Cal* 142). Correspondingly, the Memorial Acclamation, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”, codifies this duality within the Catholic imagination, framing the body as a site of perpetual, fragmented rebirth. Cal’s depiction of a dying birth, alongside the liturgical acclamation, echoes the Bakhtinian duality of life and death, a cycle driven entirely by the renewing engine of the stomach. In *Cal*, the corporeal experience of the stomach becomes fundamental to the Catholic literary imagination: it is a visceral signifier of both moral calamity and grotesque transformation amidst the violence of the Troubles. While the crucifixion is often studied for its experience of bodily trauma and destruction, consuming the

⁶ See Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque*, particularly ‘Introduction’, ‘Chapter 1’, and ‘Chapter 2’, 2-73.

Eucharist presents an overlooked opportunity to consider a linguistic and physical rebirthing through the stomach.⁷ Consequently, the body of both Christ and the believer form what Bakhtin coins the “double body”, where the “life of one body is born from the death of the preceding” (318). The stomach’s symbolic power as a site of ‘rebirth’ demonstrates its fundamental centrality to Catholic liturgy:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’. (Matthew 26:26-28)

The stomach serves as the liturgical pivot of the Catholic Church, where the consumption of the Eucharist transforms redemption into a literal, corporeal experience. Much like the calves “born in bits” at the abattoir, Christ is rebirthed after the crucifixion as the Host – a fragmented body to be consumed and digested by the faithful. This visceral transformation underpins the “mental furniture” of the Catholic experience MacLavery invokes as he reimagines the Eucharist as a symbol of the consumed and consuming double body.

Thus, the stomach serves as a cyclical metaphor throughout *Cal*, symbolising the internalised violence and trauma embedded within the Northern Irish psyche. By opening the novel at an abattoir, MacLavery immediately grounds the Northern Irish body in a site of slaughter and consumption, signalling a focus on an idiosyncratic body politic: “he stood at the back of the abattoir ... his stomach rigid with the ache of want” (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). Here, MacLavery reconceptualises the Irish stomach by repurposing the historical culture of hunger into a modern, nervous condition. Cal’s “rigid” and “tightened” frame stands in direct contrast to that of the Preacher, whose “strong stomach” allows him to digest the violence that leaves Cal in a state of increasing physical tension (MacLavery, *Cal* 1-11). Consequently, the Preacher has long been an allegorical focal point for critics reading the religious contentions of the Troubles.⁸ Described as “an anaemic with a strong stomach”, he requires

⁷ See Frank Senn’s *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual*, particularly Chapter 5 ‘Sacrifices and Meals’, 119-148.

⁸ On The Preacher, see Peter Mahon’s “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”, 77-104.

the sustenance of sacrificial blood from the abattoir's butchered cattle to maintain his health (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). MacLavery links this consumption to Easter Rising leader Pádraig Pearse's infamous lamentation that the "heart of Ireland would be refreshed by the red wine of the battlefields" (*Cal* 75). As Peter Mahon observes, the Preacher preys upon these "sacrificial dynamics": his "Adam's apple of a vulture" bridges the grotesque and theological (74). By consuming the blood of the butchered, the Preacher embodies a death culture that sustains itself on the very people it purports to save.

Expanding upon Mahon's reading, one must consider the theological and anatomical history of the Adam's apple to explore how the Preacher serves as a grotesque signifier of inherited guilt. Per Thomas Bartholinus' *Anatomy*, this protrusion represents the fatal apple lodged in the throat of man – a permanent physical reminder of original sin (123). This focus on the throat, the gateway to the stomach, reinforces the Bakhtinian notion of a body that "swallows the world and is itself swallowed" (317). Consequently, the Preacher becomes a personification of an Ireland sustained by the ritual consumption of its own sinful history, transforming a political critique into a deeper theological exploration of the Troubles. Through this imagery of the gullet, MacLavery captures the static nature of the conflict: like the biblical apple stuck in the throat, the original sin of Northern Irish history can neither be digested nor expunged. Joyce tackles a similar physical stasis in *Ulysses*, famously declaring that "history [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (42). This line exemplifies a distinct Irish preoccupation with paralysis, where the physical body remains static amidst historical turbulence and violence, or as Cal laments, "caught between the jaws of two opposing ideals" (MacLavery, *Cal* 86). Often, the martyr's body sits at the centre of this historical paralysis. This is the pantheon culture that MacLavery interrogates through the Preacher. Amidst these religiopolitical tensions, Irish martyrdom became a methodised, liturgical practice. As Radford points out, Pearse "joined the calendar of patriotic martyrdom which he had elevated through word and deed to the stature of an *Imitatio Christi*, finally embodying the whole Irish people" (280). To expand upon Radford's point, there is an overtly grotesque edge to this liturgical martyrdom: by calling for "the red wine of the battlefields", Pearse not only invokes the blood of Christ, but positions himself as a figure who paradoxically consumes the very people he claims to embody. MacLavery posits that this alignment of theological martyrdom and political violence is the root cause of Ireland's historical sleep

paralysis. Consequently, the Preacher, in drinking the sacrificial blood of the warring populace, becomes a perversion of Eucharistic practice. In this act, the Northern Irish body is literally and metaphorically crucified and processed through the Bakhtinian act of becoming, solely to sustain the national ideal. By attaching the Eucharistic cycle of sacrifice and resurrection to the stomach, MacLaverty exposes the cannibalistic brutality of the ethnoreligious civil war.

In a Bakhtinian reading, consumption and excrement become essential in a life, death, and rebirth cycle. Bakhtin posits that in the dichotomy of death and rebirth, excrement holds a special status; in *Cal*, where both the body of Ireland and Cal are constantly “eating and defecating”, this encourages a rich textual exploration (MacLaverty 19). These bodily elements are deeply positive because they link the individual directly to their environment through a process of renewal. Within this framework, Cal’s nervous stomach (churning with guilt and Catholic rejection) serves as the novel’s somatic centre. As Richard Russell argues, MacLaverty utilises “Catholic faith and practice” to drive the narrative’s deeper meaning (28). Cal must be viewed as a central by-product of Ireland’s religiopolitical digestive tract; he is the “Merde. Crotte de chien. Merderer” that the nation consumes and subsequently excretes (MacLaverty, *Cal* 9).⁹ Undoubtedly, scatological metaphor is central to MacLaverty’s critique of both Catholicism and sectarian violence. He utilises his ‘low’ imagery to externalise Cal’s guilt for the murder of Robert Morton. This scatological focus finds a theological precedent in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus addresses the Pharisees’ preoccupation with ritual purity: “do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (Matt. 15.17–18 qtd. in Czachesz 97). As István Czachesz posits, while faecal matter may trigger disgust, it is not inherently “ritually unclean” (97). This distinction is vital to a Bakhtinian reading. If Ireland is a body that consumes its populace through Eucharistic ritual, then Cal represents the by-product of that consumption. He is the material rendered unproductive to the nationalist cause, the literal and metaphorical excrement of the Irish body politic. But crucially, however, the Bakhtinian grotesque finds a site of positive renewal

⁹ “Merde” from French, “shit”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/merde>. “Crotte de chien” from French, “dog dirt”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/une-crotte-de-chien>.

in scatological metaphor. Throughout the novel, Cal attempts to rid himself of the sectarian rhetoric of violence and nationhood. Through this allegorical digestion of trauma, MacLavery presents excretion as an act of resistance against a personified Ireland. The “image of excrement” plays a “special role in overcoming fear”, serving as the “intermediate between earth and body” (Bakhtin 175). For Cal, phrases such as “crotte de chein” and “dirty vache”¹⁰ linger like “indigestion”, signalling a somatic rejection of the body politic (MacLavery, *Cal* 4). By utilising this scatological metaphor, MacLavery clarifies his stance on the dogmatic nationalist institutions; Cal effectively transcends the Eucharist, replacing the sanitised image of Jesus’ sacrificial body with the raw reality of his own expunged trauma. Ultimately, Cal’s scatological metaphor facilitates a positive transgression against the Trouble(d) status quo. He finds a strange sanctuary in the shelter of the cowshed, with “the reek of the cattle much more acceptable than the smell of the abattoir [...] the dung smell that hung around them was not unpleasant” (MacLavery, *Cal* 69). In this shift, MacLavery establishes a preference for the living, processing body over the slaughtered one. By embracing the positive connotations of excrement, Cal solidifies his role within the grotesque cycle of renewal. He emerges as a distinctive Northern Irish grotesque Jesus, a figure whose identification with bodily waste ensures his metaphoric resurrection: he rises not from the tomb, but from the digestive tract and subsequent waste of Ireland’s violent history.

Undoubtedly, Cal’s attempts at penance and self-mortification align his suffering with Christ’s destroyed body. MacLavery integrates the imagery of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1512-1516) into the narrative as a pictorial delineation of rebirth through trauma. Painted for a hospital church specialising in the treatment of *ignis sacer* (St. Anthony’s Fire), the altarpiece presented a Christ whose body mirrored the patients’ own decay. As Uta Henning and Marry Rasmusen explain,

[i]t was the duty of Antonite houses to care for the sick, especially those beset by the ignis sacer, St Anthony's fire, the source of which was ergot poisoning (caused by eating cereals affected by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*) and which usually ended up in

¹⁰ “Vache” from French, “cow”. *Collins French-English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/vache>.

decaying limbs. These had to be severed from the body ... (marks of the disease are painted in various panels of the Isenheim altarpiece.) Before a patient was admitted to the Antonite house at Isenheim, he was led to Grünewald's altarpiece ... thus becoming motivated to accept his suffering as Jesus Christ did. (667)

By leading patients to this image, the Atonites encouraged the sick to internalise their agony as a mirror of Christ's own suffering. This interconnection of the stomach, decaying flesh, and spiritual atonement provides a visceral template for both the Catholic liturgy and the nationalist rhetoric of blood sacrifice that Cal is forced to navigate. Indeed, this image of the broken or suffering body saturates the Northern Irish novel: as Kai Erikson argues, "the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body [...] traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos [and] a group culture" (185). Grünewald's altarpiece embodies this communal trauma, bridging the physical agony of the Isenheim patients with the renewing spiritual energy of Christ's sacrifice. The altarpiece embraces the material reality of this suffering; Grünewald integrates the domestic and the divine by depicting "a bed, a glass jug, a *chamber pot* and a wooden tub" alongside the Madonna (Henning and Rasmusen 667, emphasis added). This inclusion of the chamber pot reinforces the Bakhtinian cycle of life and death, where the by-products of digestion, the excremental results of spiritual and physical consumption, are foregrounded as essential to the experience of both the Isenheim patients and MacLaverty's *Cal*. MacLaverty ensures that Cal's physical body, specifically the stomach, remains the primary site of his trauma: "he rubbed his stomach and belched quietly. Nerves gave him wind" (*Cal* 89). This digestive distress serves as a somatic manifestation of the guilt that Lanta Davis identifies as "resembling the suffering of Christ" (88). This penance is literalised when Cal wears the murdered Morton's "y-fronts" and "carries the mesh frame of the bed ... on his bowed back" (MacLaverty, *Cal* 104). This imagery invites a dual reading of the crucifixion: Morton's underwear functions as a perizoma, mirroring the ragged loincloth depicted in Grünewald's altarpiece. As a grotesque Jesus figure, Cal offers up his suffering, not for a divine cause, but as a visceral atonement for Marcella, the woman whose husband he helped to murder.

As this paper has emphasised, Cal's digestive tract and bodily functions serve as the somatic centre of the Irish body politic. However, in line with the Bakhtinian lower bodily stratum, shifting the focus to reproductive and sexual organs reveals how Cal's self-

mortification operates through the Eucharistic lens. Cal's attempts at atonement manifest a "sexualised penance" (Shumaker 9). This penance entwines sexual hunger with the physical stomach; as previously noted, Cal's stomach is rigid "with the ache of *want*" (MacLavery, *Cal* 1; emphasis added). This sexualised penance expresses itself through his relationship with Marcella, Robert Morton's widow. While critics such as Mahon focus on the "maternal Madonna" aspect of Marcella, this paper goes further, arguing that her sexual anatomy, as well as the act of sex itself, becomes a metaphorical altar at which the liturgic Catholic mass is performed (104). Marcella's sexual organs, more specifically her womb, become the metaphorical Tabernacle hosting the Eucharist. Within Cal's own grotesque imagination, Marcella is not merely a mother figure, but the living Altar; his desire for her becomes a ritualistic attempt to find sanctuary within the very worship he otherwise rejects. Cal wishes to "share his guilt, to commune with [Marcella]" and be forgiven for his sins as a communicant of both her body and spirit (MacLavery, *Cal* 151-152). Indeed, the sacrament of confession within the Catholic doctrine permits the absolution of sin, yet MacLavery grounds this spiritual release in the physical architecture of the body. In *Cal*, the Eucharist becomes central to the exploration of Trouble(d) bodies, with Cal emerging as a grotesque version of the crucified Christ offered up within the sanctuary of Marcella's body. MacLavery emphasises the grotesque notion of death and rebirth as intertwined with sex and the lower bodily stratum. When Cal and Marcella have sex, the "flesh of Christ spotted and torn, bubonic almost" is juxtaposed against the "smoothness of Marcella's body" (MacLavery, *Cal* 165): this moment represents a crucial transition from the stomach to the womb. While the novel begins with Cal's stomach "rigid with the ache of want", a site of acidic guilt and the digestive violence of the state, his union with Marcella offers a ritualistic shelter (MacLavery, *Cal* 1). Drawing on Henri de Lubac's argument, the narrative positions the Church's altar, personified by Marcella, as the site of an "anomalous return to the womb", receiving the sinner into a space of new life (69). While the womb is central to the cycles of life and death in grotesque analysis, it remains underdeveloped in the Bakhtinian canon; Mary Russo addresses this gap in *The Female Grotesque* (1994) by re-establishing the regenerative power of the female body within grotesque criticism. She anchors this in etymology, linking the grotto (the root of grotesque) to the cave, or the "cavernous anatomical female body" (Russo 1). In *Cal*, MacLavery constructs a corporeal Catholic altar by mapping liturgical significance onto active sexual anatomy. This carnal sanctity stands in direct contrast to the classical Madonna, whose

body is “transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, [and] symmetrical” (Russo 8). Ultimately, MacLavery recasts the classical, static religious icon as a site of sexual movement – a grotesque altar through which worship facilitates renewal and regeneration. The conception of the Church thus becomes paradoxically feminised; the destructive digestive tract of the Northern Irish body politic, which seeks to swallow and excrete Cal as a “merderer”, is momentarily halted by the creative potential of the womb (MacLavery, *Cal* 9). In Marcella’s bed, the “bits” of the butchered calves and the torn flesh of Grünewald’s Christ are gathered back into a temporary wholeness, reimagining the act of sex as a restorative, albeit grotesque, Eucharist to be consumed and digested.

Cal, therefore, possesses an inherently digestive quality. The novel’s Eucharistic references are far from accidental, opening with the sacrificial body and blood of the abattoir as a grotesque inversion of Catholic doctrine. In this way, Cal and the body of Ireland emerge as a Bakhtinian “double body”, where the proximity of life and death becomes a cosmic attempt to transcend the sectarian violence of the Troubles. As Bakhtin posits, “the soul’s beatitude is deeply immersed in the body’s lowest stratum” (378). Thus, the somatic experience, centralised in the mouth, stomach, womb, and anus, becomes inextricably entwined with Christian liturgy. Cal functions as a grotesque Jesus, offering a sexualised, masochistic penance to Marcella that conflates spiritual death with physical rebirth. By seeking refuge on the Morton farm, Cal finds a shelter that is perpetually overshadowed by the trauma of this past. In MacLavery’s vision however, the stomach remains the final arbiter of truth; Cal’s redemption is not found in the clean rhetoric of the state, but in the messy, digestive reality of a body that must suffer in order to be reborn.

Works Cited

- Allman, Mark. "Eucharist, Ritual & Narrative: Formation of Individual and Communal Moral Character". *Journal of Ritual Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2000, pp. 60–68.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1965. Translated by Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Braa, Dean M. "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society". *Science & Society*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1997, pp. 193–215.
- Carney, F. J. "Pre-Famine Irish Population: The Evidence from the Trinity College Estates". *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol. 2, 1975, pp. 35–45.
- "Catechism of the Catholic Church". Catholic Culture.org,
<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/index.cfm?recnum=4230>
- Czachesz, István. *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse: Hell, Scatology, and Metamorphosis*. Routledge, 2012.
- Davis, Lanta. "Redemptive Suffering in the Isenheim Altarpiece and Bernard MacLavery's Cal". *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 81-95.
- De Lubac, Henri. *The Motherhood of the Church*. Translated by O.C.D.Sr Sergia Englund, Ignatius Press, 1982.
- Donnelly, Brian. "The Great Famine and the Literary Imagination". *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 69, no. 275/276, 1980, pp. 260–72.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community". *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathay Caruth, John Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- The Gospel According to Matthew*. Authorised King James Version, Grove Press, 1999.
- Griffith, Benjamin. "Ireland's Ironies, Grim and Droll: The Fiction of Bernard MacLavery". *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 106, no. 2, 1998, pp. 334–38.
- "Grotesque, n. & adj., etymology". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2241918312>.
- Henning, Uta, and Marry Rasmusen. "Grünwald's Isenheim Altarpiece". *Early Music*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2001, pp. 667–69.
- Howard, Paul. "The Long Kesh Hunger Strikers: 25 Years Later". *Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 4 (106), 2006, pp. 69–91.
- Lennon, Joseph. "Dreams That Hunger Makes: Memories of Hunger in Yeats, Mangan, Speranza, and Irish Folklore". *Irish University Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2017, pp. 62–81.

- MacLavery, Bernard. *Cal*. Vintage, 1983.
- . “Bernard MacLavery, Glasgow, In Interview”. Interview by Christian J. Ganter, *Anglistik*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1996, p. 13.
- . “An Interview with Bernard MacLavery”. Interview by Russell Richard, *Irish Literary Supplement*, 2006, p. 22.
- Mahon, Peter. “Blood, Shit, and Tears: The Textual Reinscription of Sacrifice, Ritual, and Victimhood in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”. *ELH*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71–104.
- Merritt, Robert. “Faith and Betrayal: The Potato in ‘Ulysses.’” *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1990, pp. 269–76.
- Mokyr, Joel. *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*. Taylor & Francis, 2013.
- Pearse, Padraic. *The Easter Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916*. Dolmen Press, 1975.
- Radford, F. L. “King, Pope, and Hero-Martyr: *Ulysses* and the Nightmare of Irish History”. *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1978, pp. 275–323.
- Roos, Bonnie. “Feast, Famine and the Humble Potato in *Ulysses*”. *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*. Irish Academic Press, 2006.
- Russell, Richard. “Parabolic Plots in Bernard MacLavery’s *Lamb*”. *Bernard MacLavery: New Critical Readings*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque*. Routledge, 1994.
- Sands, Robert. “Prison Diary”. *Bobby Sands Trust*, <https://www.bobbysandstrust.com/writings/prison-diary/>
- Senn, Frank C. *Embodied Liturgy: Lessons in Christian Ritual*. Augsburg Fortress, 2016.
- Shumaker, Jeanette. “Rivalry, Confession, and Healing in Bernard MacLavery’s *Cal*”. *Notes on Modern Irish Literature*, vol. 9, 1997, p. 9.
- Sweeney, George. “Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice”. *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1993, pp. 421–37.
- . “Self-Immolative Martyrdom: Explaining the Irish Hungerstrike Tradition”. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 93, no. 371, 2004, pp. 337–48.
- Thomas, Bartholin. *Bartholinus Anatomy*. P. Cole, 1662.
- Tuama, Padraig O. *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community*. Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2017.

Ulin, Julieann. "'Famished Ghosts': Famine Memory in James Joyce's *Ulysses*". *Joyce Studies Annual*, 2011, pp. 20–63.

"La Santa Sede". *Vatican.va*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/vatican/it.html>.

Yeats, William Butler. *Fairy and Folktales of the Irish Peasantry*. Walter Scott Publishing, 1890.