

# REVIEW OF MAURICE WHELANS “THOUGHT: THE INVISIBLE ESSENCE”

by

Charlie Stansfield

It struck me at some point when reading Maurice Whelan’s new book, *Thought the Invisible Essence* that thinking, a bit like reading, writing and dreaming is not framed often enough as conversation. As readers when we’re lucky, we enter into dialogue with the writer and the conversation continues long after the book is finished. This poetic and meditative book offers an unhurried, deep analytic conversation with Maurice, as he “wanders through the question of what it is to have a mind and to use it”

Thought is given a wide definition, “*extending beyond the confines of the intellectual..... including art, literature, spirituality and dreaming*” (p3). Thought is also defined by its absence, in the language of “alternative facts” and the “gimlet eyed” thinking of the Catholic Church when forced to acknowledge widespread clerical sexual abuse. As Irish prime minister, Enda Kenny said in a quietly furious speech in 2011:

*“...Far from listening with St Benedicts “ear of the heart” the Vatican’s reaction (to widespread torture and abuse of Irish children by priests) was to parse and analyse with the gimlet-eye of a Canon lawyer”*

To parse and analyse in this gimlet-eyed way, as Kenny notes, is to prevent the kind of thinking that fosters reflection, understanding and helps to ameliorate pain and solve problems. While the book uses the Catholic Church in Ireland to highlight the collapse of thinking, a gimlet-eye could apply to any institution that consciously or unconsciously privileges one dimension of a situation, discouraging creative thought. But there are always rebels that somehow can circumvent the status quo and provide new ways of looking at things. Kenny is one of the dozen or more quoted in the book standing courageously for the pursuit of truth and justice.

An early premise of the book is that in order to think, we need to know where we start from. *There is no view from nowhere*. Maurice grew up steeped in the culture of the Church and at one point considered the priesthood. He sensed a duty to write, a need to write. “*I had questions for which I could not find answers.*” Four early chapters of the book are a search for those answers in a steady and unflinching style.

Taking the Catholic Church in Ireland as a microcosm for its failings worldwide, and using the Church to closely examine conditions that give rise to the collapse of thought, two cases of perpetrator priests are examined in detail. One is the case of Noel Reynolds, a man who in his 60s admitted to the sexual abuse of 100 children, over 39 years, all the while out in the community ‘*camouflaged as a priest*’. Reynolds hinted things were not quite right with him quite early in his career. He eventually told

the hierarchy of his sexual attraction to children in 1996, but was subsequently appointed to a hospital containing a children's ward and a school. Even when the wretched man died in 2002, his crimes known, fifty fellow priests and a bishop attended his funeral and a glowing obituary was written in a diocesan magazine.

The book highlights a sickeningly familiar trajectory, from Belfast to Ballarat various inquiries, documentaries and films have revealed an institution determined to obfuscate, deny and maneuver in order to shield itself from the consequences of its crimes. If not for the courage and persistence of victims it would be business as usual even now. The strength of the writing is that it highlights the parallels between Reynolds actions and those of the Church, between the pathology in his mind and the Church's willful refusal to look beyond its gimlet-eye; reflecting the madness of its own collective mind. Both dimensions reflect perverse elements and the kind of callous immaturity that evokes condemnation, but as I began to realize reading this book, this can become another gimlet-eye. Condemnation and outrage are natural and necessary, but if this is exclusively the state of mind where you live and work, understanding will not grow. The purpose of examining the situation of the two priests in such detail is to try and understand more deeply the impacts on their victims, but it also has another impact. After re-reading extracts from a couple of interviews with Reynolds, I was surprised to feel a stirring of pity for his imprisoned, disastrously muddled, impoverished life.

One of the threads of the densely packed first section of the book is on the importance of language in shaping thought. *Debase language and you debase thought*. As I read, my mind drifted back to 2008, during promotions for World Youth Day in Sydney, then Bishop, currently Archbishop, Anthony Fisher made a public statement, in which he referred testily to those "*dwelling crankily on old wounds*"<sup>1</sup>. His Excellency was referring to the family and supporters of two young girls who had been repeatedly raped by their local priest. *Dwelling crankily on old wounds*. I never forgot this phrase because it stood as a powerful example of the way Church language repeatedly communicates to victims and their families that clerical sexual abuse is '*just a scratch*.' In chapter five, using the work of psychoanalysts, Hans Loewald and Ronald Fairbairn, Maurice offers a nuanced understanding of the wound of sexual abuse, showing how violence and intrusions from the damaged mind of a priest or parent impacts the mind of the victim. He proposes a *psychic Sophie's Choice* situation<sup>2</sup> where in order to survive, to prevent mental disintegration, a child is forced to kill off part of their mind. This chapter offers a useful contribution to my ongoing understanding of the survival-adaptation continuum, the relentless guilt, responsibility, shame and badness that many child survivors live with. The *Sophie's Choice* metaphor had a clinical immediacy, and seemed the ideal

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Colvin, Radio National 16 July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In the book *Sophie's Choice* a mother has to decide which of her two children can survive and which will be sent to die in Auschwitz. A child being abused by a parent or priest is placed in a similar dilemma through their need to preserve good identification with parent/priest, part of their own mind has to be sacrificed. (p57)

companion to a quote from Paul Williams (2022) in his book “The Authority of Tenderness” where he states:

*“When you die at a young age, strange things happen. Most are out of reach but the strangest and most paradoxical of them is being unaware that it has happened whilst at the same time, experiencing it each moment....”*

The analysis offered for the failure of thought within the Catholic Church is wide ranging and deep, covering history, politics, religious, spiritual, legal and psychological aspects. I couldn't help thinking that some consideration of gender within this mix of conditions is missing. The Catholic Church is indisputably an institution of “*absolute masculine hierarchy*”<sup>3</sup>. Even today, it has adopted an understanding of clerical sexual abuse that does not acknowledge the way perpetrators gender and organizational response are entwined. I think it could deepen understanding if a gender lens was applied. Then again, to be fair, most books, most conversations are incomplete especially the satisfying ones, that invite you to continue the conversation in your own mind. I think this is exactly what Maurice is hoping for readers of his book.

I had the experience writing this review that it was hard to progress past the detail in this first part of the book. I did not know why the tragedy of gimlet-eyed thinking in the fortress Catholic Church seemed so significant. I kept asking myself like a stern schoolteacher, how is it helping your book review to be staying here? Then one day, the poem, *Fringe Dweller* entered my mind. This is one of the most empathic, touching poems in the book. I had almost forgotten about it in all of the analysis of the failure of thinking. It appears just before the concluding chapter in this first section, like a glimpse of the subject herself, passing you by on a busy street.....

*.....To numb her gnawing  
Need she strides  
With flailing arms  
A moving crucifixion.*

Then I knew.

In the remaining sections of *Thought the Invisible Essence*, the reader is held firm by the understanding that there are minds to turn to when we can't think. These minds orient us when lost, and provide the gentle push our thoughts need in order to grow. Sigmund Freud, Emily Dickinson, William Hazlitt, John McGahern, Ella Sharpe. Conversations with those long gone, that nevertheless remain, as Maurice writes, *sometimes more alive than the living their vitality eternally perpetuated in their writing or their art*. The consolations of such conversations in dark times makes it not quite right to call them writers, poets or thinkers. These people are our friends.

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<sup>3</sup> Marie Keenan Irish psychotherapist and academic

And these, the best of friends make reliable companions in the alternately wobbly and firm terrain of psychoanalytic life. Because what is psychoanalysis for if not to develop a mind of our own, the freedom to think for oneself; a lifelong quest, and we need as much help in that regard as we can get. We live and work in groups and we are all vulnerable to wanting to be accepted. Sometimes that can mean it is difficult to think and speak outside dominant ways of thinking.

Part two of the book introduces the reader to these good friends of Maurice, many of whom have stood and spoken outside of the dominant ways of thinking. He shows how he converses with them, extending across time, space, and cultural divides, paying close attention to their choice of words, and the way in which things are said. Reading, after all, is like listening in the way that it is possible to get a sense of how a writers mind works through tempo, tone, voice and the resonance in our own minds as we receive the words.

*“Listen to the presence or the absence of an in-between space, in your own mind and in the mind of others. Listen for the transient which the fretting mind cannot see....”*

Reading poetry, he says, is central to this endeavor, adding elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, poets take words and gives them a good shake, reading poetry gives the mind a good shake. Like a kaleidoscope transforms the same elements into infinite numbers of new patterns, poetry has a way of inviting thoughts to rearrange themselves sometimes surprising us. Poems can help improve our imagination, our deep listening capacities and help us recognize what is true. Poems, like the truth, can't be faked, and at the heart of this book is the effort to go beyond what is fake – fake news and fake thought. Some poems, as mentioned earlier, just find their way into you, highlighting Mary Oliver's observation that a poem is not first and foremost a literary thing. A poem is a place in which to feel things<sup>5</sup>.

The third section of the book is a collection of essay like chapters that are not presented in any order, and there is no attempt to tie up loose ends or make any firm conclusions. Maurice is leaving that job to the reader through their own ongoing conversation as they read. Taking up the thread of place that has woven through the book from the writers origins in the fields and hedgerows of rural Ireland, to Amherst Massachusetts where Emily Dickinson lived a quiet life in order to think and write, through the island in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Richard Dyers Kingdom, William Hazlitt's country, place has loomed evocative and large. In this last section a new thread emerges, that of space. Specifically, inner-space. A wonderful vignette in chapter 25 *Hope is the Thing* leads the new exploration. In order to do it justice, I quote it in full (page 205).

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<sup>4</sup> *The Space We Occupy and the Space Where Others Reside* Psychoanalysis Downunder Issue 13, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, *Upstream* 2016

*Marin Moraru was a prominent Romania Shakespearean actor. After he retired, he gave an interview in which he talked about the rehearsals for a production of The Tempest at the National Theatre in Bucharest. He was playing Caliban, and they rehearsed for nearly two years. However, just before the premiere, state censorship considered that production of The Tempest inappropriate and cancelled it. 'My Caliban would have been a great Caliban,' said Marin Moraru in that interview, 'because I had discovered something new and extraordinary in Shakespeare's text.' 'What?' the host asked him. 'Something that only I had seen. But I'm not telling you.'*

*Years later Moraru was interviewed again and asked what was it he had discovered in Shakespeare's text. Again, he refused to answer. Pressed and asked, 'wouldn't you like to share your discovery?' he said no and offered the following explanation to the interviewer. 'I'll tell you something, although you'll probably not get it. When the censorship cancelled our production, I was devastated. I was devastated because I knew I'd never have another chance to play Caliban. "God, what will happen to my Caliban?" I asked myself obsessively, but there was nothing I could do. Then, after a few years, the very thought that I alone in the whole world had seen something new and extraordinary in Shakespeare's The Tempest gave me a joy of an intensity I'd never known. That joy has never left me, and today it's as intense as it was when I first felt it. I don't know how to put it. It's been like an inner overcoat; one that nobody can rob me of, as long as nobody knows about it. I don't think I can go on without it. As an actor, I used to think that it's all about being on stage; well, it's not. I see from your face that you don't get it. How could you, when sharing has become a global ideology? I told you that you'd probably not get it.'*

And here lies the limitation of any book review. Because when it comes down to it, we all have to find our own Caliban. The conversations I have with Maurice's friends are not the same ones he has. The conversations that I enjoyed with him, as I read this very generous, vivid book, are not the same ones that will interest you. They are mine alone, as they will be yours alone if you read the book. The poems that made their way into my mind, some tentatively, some in a sudden rush; *Fringe Dweller*, *The Gift of Writing*, *Old Ground*, *Cartography* might not land in your mind in the same way. Nevertheless, I'd still recommend that you check them out. Because if you want your own mind to have good manners; you'll seek out and nurture diversity of thought. *Good manners of the mind do not grasp the truth too tightly, always allow space for further growth for another mind that might in time add or subtract (p196)*

Conclusions.

While the first section of the book is rather a challenging read, the second and third sections of the book provide the restorative experience you need after the hard work

of staying with things, you'd rather not. The poems are placed throughout, I think, so that the hard work can be understood in another way, sometimes in just a few lines. It is not a textbook of psychoanalysis, but it could be. It so cleverly and persuasively makes the case for the necessity of art, literature, poetry in the growth and development of mind, not exclusively, but mostly through the emotional experience generated by each of these mediums. It could be read as an anthology, to dip in and out of. Perhaps on a slow, winters Sunday, along with a good cup of tea.

As if to illustrate its argument for pluralism, the book itself defies genre. It dips and weaves, creating a rich mix of essays, memoir, reportage, short fiction, poetry. It is not a conventional book, and would be hard to classify for those who like to classify such things. I hope that this review has made the case by now that in the field of art (and psychoanalysis), classification be damned!

I think of the book more like a literary journal all of its own; one with a psychoanalytic bent, an anthology of thinking, a series of tentative, inconclusive, answers to the never ending question(s) what is mind? What is thinking? What is a human life lived fully? It seems most appropriate that its publisher is Ginninderra Press; ginninderra is an Australian Aboriginal word meaning small flash or ray of light, one that provides direction and gives hope within darkness. It is apt that when concluding this review of *Thought The Invisible Essence*, ginninderra is the last word.