

A Body that Matters: Tom Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at Tom Kilroy's play *Talbot Box*, and argues that it resorts to the tropes of the Passion narrative, revisited by ex-centric mystic Matt Talbot, to expose the homogenising, normalising and exploitative efforts of the Catholic Church, a powerful institution which is shown to work in collusion with the forces of capitalism. Using a grotesque, often farcical dramaturgy, the play displays the joint attempts of ecclesiastical and temporal powers to appropriate Matt Talbot's private performance of the Christian Passion for their own purposes, as well as the ways in which he resists instrumentalization by submitting himself to a radical form of bodily exposure. The play thus invents its own version of a theatre of cruelty in order to accommodate a mystical experience which lies beyond the reach of realistic representation.

Keywords: object, Catholic Church, Thomas Kilroy, Matt Talbot, Passion play

This paper is part of a broader project which looks at the traces of the Passion Play in modern Irish drama from the Revival onwards. I use the term "Passion Play" in a very loose sense: what I am interested in are the ways in which Irish plays recycle the tropes, images and dramaturgy of the Passion of Christ, often in secularized contexts, and the ideological and aesthetic implications of such recycling. In particular, I am interested in uses of the climactic moment of the Christian narrative, that of the Crucifixion, in which the exposure of the dying body on the cross, endlessly rehearsed in Christian iconography and dramaturgy, endows the male victim with the status of speaking subject, and paradoxically enables him to utter a radical critique of the structure of power which is destroying him. Thus modern Irish theatre often turns to the dramaturgy of the Passion to challenge existing power structures as well as to promote an anti-conformist or rebellious character, a minor voice or a subversive discourse.

In *Talbot's Box* (1979 [1977]), Tom Kilroy resorts to the tropes of the Passion Play to expose the homogenising, normalising and exploitative efforts

of the Catholic Church, a powerful institution which is shown to work in collusion with the forces of capitalism. While Matt Talbot has no message for the world and shuns publicity, his private performance of the Passion nevertheless constitutes a critique of the power structure and its ideology. Yet the play does not just use Talbot's Passion as a critical idiom, but explores it on its own terms as a genuinely mystical, ritualistic experience which cannot be contained, let alone explained, within the secular framework of the play. Kilroy's play suggests that this mystical experience can be adumbrated and gestured towards, but not fully described. The play chronicles the life and death of Matt Talbot, a Dublin working-man who was born in dire poverty in 1856 and initially took after his alcoholic father, before experiencing a religious crisis at 28: he then took the pledge of total abstinence from drink and, while carrying on his life as an unskilled worker in a timber-yard, secretly led a severely ascetic life, practising various forms of mortification of the flesh, including the carrying of heavy cords and chains. These were discovered by the doctors who examined his body in the morgue after he died of heart failure in the street in 1925. This revelation triggered a popular cult of Matt Talbot, and the movement towards his canonization, which started in 1931, achieved its first success when he was made Venerable in 1975, two years before the first production of *Talbot's Box*. Kilroy says that he had first intended the play essentially as a critique of Irish Catholicism, but that things did not quite go according to plan: "I began *Talbot's Box* as an angry anti-Catholic, anti-Talbot satire but the figure of Talbot defied me as I wrote! I was unable to dismiss him outright with the result that I had to find my own version of mysticism to write the play" (message to the author, 07 July 2012). Using a grotesque, often farcical dramaturgy, the play displays the joint attempts of ecclesiastical and temporal powers to appropriate Matt Talbot's performance of his faith, as well as the ways in which he resists instrumentalization by submitting himself to a radical form of bodily exposure. The play thus invents its own version of a theatre of cruelty in order to accommodate a mystical experience which lies beyond the reach of realistic representation.

At one level, the play is about the Catholic Church's attempts to appropriate Matt Talbot's private performance of his faith for ideological purposes, and use him as an exemplar of submissiveness and endurance in order to neutralise contestations of the status quo in Irish society. The play moves freely between different time-periods as it revisits episodes of Talbot's life, and explores the ways in which these episodes are rehearsed and reinterpreted in retrospect, after Talbot's death. The Ireland staged here is shown to be superficially bigoted, yet in the process of becoming profoundly secularised. Rituals are performed perfunctorily and drained of any spiritual content (see the high-speed confession scene in the opening sequence), and the dialogue is punctuated with an endless list of religious phrases which have congealed into entirely profane expletives, as in this early exchange in the morgue:

Second man. What've you got there, sister?

Woman. Chains.

Second man. Chains?

Woman. And cords.

Second man. Begod.

Woman. Removed by me at an earlier moment from that holy man lying there before us. [...] He had lived with them for the better part of his life so that the chains, though rusted, had sank into the flesh...

Second man. Mother of Jesus! (16)

Seeking to comment on Talbot's extraordinary behaviour, the secularized clichés paradoxically capture the failure of ordinary language to make any sense of his faith and religious practise. From this dialogue, the audience realises that Talbot's mystical experience exceeds the boundaries of the reality that such language constructs. Even the ubiquitous, changeable "priest figure" has lost all trace of spirituality; her language is a collage of hollow-sounding clichés and bungled slogans, as when she encourages the hesitant confessant to "trust in Divine Providence, our Blessed Mother Mary, St. Patrick our national saint, St. Brigid and also several others" (16), or admonishes whoever might be listening to "Return to the bosom of Mother Church, all you that labour etcetera, etcetera" (15). The choice of a female actress to play the "priest figure" literalises the catachresis "Mother Church" and thus exposes the manipulative rhetoric of a patriarchal institution which bars actual women from any position of responsibility, yet masquerades as a reassuring maternal figure to conceal its exploitative agenda as the instrument of capitalism.

The Church colludes with Ireland's rising capitalistic elite in a joint attempt to appropriate Matt Talbot as an emblem of the submissive, compliant worker, which can be used to deflect the claims of the working-classes. One grey area of Talbot's life concerns the part he played during the Dublin lock-out in 1913, when he was accused of betraying his fellow-workers by refusing to go on strike. In the lock-out sequence of the play, Talbot takes no part in the ideological debate between the protesting worker and the foreman, and his reason for continuing work has nothing to do with politics; rather, the exhausting carrying of timber is an intrinsic part of the ritualised physical penances which he imposes on himself daily, and constitutes a private performance of the bearing of the Cross. Yet the foreman exploits Talbot's religious practise by calling him "a walking saint" (27) and holding him up as "a model for all Christian workers" (31). After Talbot's death, the campaign for canonisation is carried out in the name of the status quo. The priest figure's passionate speech in the opening sequence reveals the extent to which the Church has become the voice of social orthodoxy: "Let us pray for the Beatification and Canonisation of this holy Dublin working man, that in these troubled times the people might have a model of Christian loyalty and obedience, to fight off the false doctrines, subversive influences, dangerous and foreign practises,

that threaten our faith...” (18). The primary targets, of course, are socialism and trade unionism, the “false doctrines” which challenge the hegemony of the emerging class of Catholic capitalist magnates. Perched on a recalcitrant “horse” (the First man), the Second man embodies the *nouveau riche*, self-proclaimed “crame of the crame”, who conspire with the Irish clergy to have Talbot declared “a real, certified Irish saint, at last” in the hope of containing all subversive energies – the “mischief-makers” hilariously metaphorized by the “horse” who ends up throwing his rider in a farcical rendition of proletarian revolution (53-54). The play thus revolves around a central paradox: Matt Talbot the egotist eccentric is appropriated by a homogenising, normalising power structure to fend off subversion and enforce conformity. This is done by turning his life, post-mortem, into the edifying spectacle of a Passion.

The incipit of the play dramatizes the making of a naturalistic stage. A huge box appears on the stage, the front of which is then opened from within so that “*the audience now sees inside*” (11), in a literal enactment of the removal of the fourth wall. Exposing the construction of the naturalistic stage, the play’s opening deconstructs naturalism itself and, in a typically Brechtian gesture, invites the audience to view whatever is presented on this stage critically, as spectacle rather than reality. Indeed the object of the play is not so much Matt Talbot’s life, but the dramatization of his life by those who campaign for his canonisation. The opening of the box thus also suggests a gesture of violent exposure, the turning of an intensely intimate, private experience into a public show. The opening sequence in the morgue constantly gestures towards its own theatricality, as the actors prepare to act out a pre-written script under the authority of the priest. A woman impersonating a statue of the Virgin Mary steps out of character complaining of cramps; the two men speculate about the genre of the play which is to be played out (“a sorta trial”, “an entertainment”, “a kind of temptation of the saint”, “a sorta quiz but without the hand-outs”, 12-13); the woman again disrupt the performance by entering at the wrong moment speaking a stage direction:

Woman (*high*). Enter, attractive nursing sister, carrying chains...
 Second man. It’s not your turn yet, for Christ’s sake! (15)

The sequence culminates with the two men introducing Talbot with a flourish in the style of a master of ceremonies at the music-hall: “Ladies and Gentlemen! We give you... Matt Talbot! Servant of God!” (18). The rest of the play, which reconstructs selected events in the life of Matt Talbot, is really a show within the show, framed by the joint powers of the Church and big business – though at times the show threatens to escape their control. The explicit staginess of the beginning is taken up again at the end in an obvious reprise when Talbot’s exhausting daily round of several churches in his final days is grotesquely reduced to a sporting event, with Talbot miming and

First man commenting through a loudhailer: "Yes! Ladies and gentlemen, at great expense to the management we give you the greatest athletical... theological... metaphysical performance of all time!" (59). Again, the focus is on the spectacularization of Talbot's life, and on the violent distortion imposed upon it in the process.

At one level, then, *Talbot's Box* offers the spectacle of a Passion staged by power: yet it also shows that Matt Talbot resists appropriation and imposes his own dramaturgy. I quoted earlier Kilroy saying that Talbot had "defied" him and subverted his original plan for the play, and I would suggest that this writing experience of Talbot's defiance is somehow incorporated into the play itself, as Talbot consistently refuses to be contained within the framework of the play staged by the conservative forces who try to exploit his life-story. The autopsy scene at the morgue in the beginning of the play dramatizes a collective attempt to read Talbot's enigmatically encumbered body. Although authoritative discourses proliferate in this scene (a sermon, a medical expertise, a police report), all fail to capture what Talbot's body testifies to, i.e. the mystery of his faith. His dead body remains a scandalous physical entity which defeats interpretation and categorisation; as one of the medical assistants puts it, "if we don't have instructions we can't put a label on him like a normal corpse. If we can't put a label on him we can't shove him in one of the drawers" (14). During the rest of the play, many "labels" will be unsuccessfully suggested for Talbot, who simply refuses to be shoved in a drawer. Take the following exchange, at the end of the 1913 sequence:

Woman. He was a tool of the Church against the workers!

Second man. He was a scab! He was a scab!

First man. He was irrelevant!

Priest figure. He was a saint! (36)

Each speaker has a specific ideological agenda and is trying to fit Talbot in a pre-existing category, but none is ready to take him on his own terms – nor does he ever offer an explanation. Indeed one aspect of Talbot's resistance strategy is that he hardly ever engages in dialogue, and has no message for the world. While the foreman is desperate for him to commit himself politically ("Couldn't you get him to say a few words? Off the cuff. Y'know. Danger of syndicalism. Rights of private property. [...] Can he be quoted?", 33-34), Talbot reserves words for a higher usage: "St. Teresa", he prays, "help me to silence me tongue, except when it tries to speak to Almighty God" (19). Abstracting himself from linguistic exchange Talbot effectively withdraws from the communal sphere, and experiences his faith as a form of radical aloneness with God. To the priest's orthodox reminder that "We are each in the other and all in Christ", he replies "Then I'll be alone with Gawd" (48), in a non-sequitur which borders on the sacrilegious. This aloneness, which

makes him fundamentally incapable of sharing his experience, is suggested by the box itself, which points metonymically to Talbot's room but is also partly reminiscent of the skull-shaped "refuge" in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957)¹. Just as *Endgame* can be read as the play which Hamm creates for his own diversion, the stage in *Talbot's Box* is partly a projection of Talbot's mind². I suggested earlier that the play was a dramatization of Talbot's life orchestrated by the joint forces of temporal and ecclesiastical powers – but it also fleetingly attempts to represent Talbot's experience from his point of view. The stage, in other words, is the site of a conflict of discourses – or rather, a conflict between the discourses of Church and capital, and Talbot's individual experience, which refuses to be contained within this discursive framework and interferes with the smooth unfolding of the show, as when the priest's edifying sermon on the virtue of the Christian family in Act 2 is counterpointed and grotesquely undermined by Talbot's traumatic childhood memory of his alcoholic father beating up his mother.

Another, more radical form of resistance to power has to do with Talbot's handling of his own body – paradoxically just that for which he is recognised as "a saint". An early episode shows Talbot being examined by a doctor, who reports to Talbot's sister:

Second man. [...] The human body, Madam, is a machine, madam, albeit the most remarkable engine ever constructed. Like every machine it has precise, limited functions. It may be repaired. It certainly needs frequent oil and fueling. Certain parts respond to greasing, oiling, liquidity. Other parts, like the remarkable Voltaic Dry Battery, cease to function in water. In short, madam, your brother's engine, Madam, is deplorably run-down. That will be one guinea, please. (21)

The doctor's description of the human body as machine and engine belongs to a tradition of thought which originates in the Enlightenment philosophy of La Mettrie and Descartes, and was modified with the advent of the industrial revolution: "The nineteenth century reconceptualized the body as a motor rather than simply a machine; its energy levels and the capacity for work conceived in electro-chemical and thermodynamic terms. Late nineteenth-century studies of motion and performance by Muybridge, Murray, Taylor and others were carried out within this paradigm, equalizing the energies of the body in relation to industrial apparatus" (Armstrong 1998, 78-79). The doctor's extended metaphor does not only function as a smokescreen to cover his incapacity to provide medical help; it also constructs a highly ideological version of the human body as geared towards maximum efficiency and performance, within its "precise, limited functions" in the context of industrial labour. By exhausting his own body, Talbot subverts this ideology of performance: collapsing repeatedly under the weight of the plank which he carries with a fellow-worker, he effectively sabotages the smooth running of the work in the timber-yard.

Although he refuses to go on strike and refrains from taking a political stance, his archaic system of physical penance and fast is, in fact, a deeply subversive critique of the modernist ideal of the Taylorized body.

Because he resists assimilation within the systems of production (both discursive and industrial) controlled by power, Talbot emerges as a complete non-conformist in a society obsessed with conformity. For this failure to conform he is both worshipped and violently rejected, two attitudes expressed graphically in the opening sequence in the morgue, when the dead body is first slapped by the “existentialist” assistant (15), then kissed “passionately” by an exalted nurse (17). After a scene in which Talbot is persuaded to drink by his father and brother and “collapses in a drunken heap”, the Second man, impersonating an advocate of the Temperance movement, expresses equal abhorrence for alcoholics and ascetics, arguing that “dipsomania and religious mania are two sides of the same coin”, and insisting that “true humanity resides in the middle.” “Keep out the freaks!” (45) he concludes, thus implicitly casting Talbot out of the human community in both his capacities. Talbot’s most radical challenge to the normalising social body which tries to absorb him is in fact his dogged cultivation of abjection. The abject, Julia Kristeva has taught us, is that which cannot be assimilated, the repulsive wastes (bodily fluids, shit, ordure) which threaten the living body’s identity, and from which it must extricate itself in order to survive. “The corpse”, she argues, “seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (Kristeva 1982, 4). The complex system of mortification of the flesh which Talbot imposes upon himself – literally, the putting to death of flesh, in accordance to St Paul’s maxim that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (*Galatians* 5:24) – allows Talbot to become “infected by death” in his lifetime, until the process of becoming abject culminates in death itself. In the beginning and end of the play, the actors are disturbed by a repellent smell which they finally identify as issuing from Talbot’s body:

First man. It’s... it’s his... his body.
 Woman. Well I never! Body odour!
 Second man. So that’s it!
 First man. It’s how he... smells himself. It’s how he... wishes to smell. It’s how he wishes... to be.
 Woman. Oh, course.
 Second man. It’s disgustin’, so it is.
 Woman. Some people!
 Second man. I get it now (*Sniff.*)
 Woman. A bit like... perspiration (*Sniff.*)
 Second man. Sweat. (*Sniff.*) Definitely sweat.
 Woman. It’s like... must.
 First man. It’s like dust.
 Woman. Dying.

First man. Ordure.

Second man. Defney Shit.

First man. (*Scream*) Can't you see, can't you, that he defiles us! Don't you understand that he put himself in our place? That he assumes us in himself? That he would reduce us to his... his... smell?

Woman. The nerve!

Second man. That yoke! (60-61)

The smell of the corpse interrupts the performance, derails communication by generating a frantic chain of signifiers which are so many attempts to cast out what they are naming (perspiration/sweat/must/dust/dying/ordure/shit), and threatens the very identity of the group: "he would reduce us to his... his... smell". Constituting himself as abject, Talbot is an unbearable, inassimilable reminder of humanity's mortality who cannot be suffered to dwell within the social body: "he cannot be us", the First man concludes. Metaphorically, the stench of the decomposing body can be read as the "bad smell" which radical artistic work exhales when it confronts society with those unpalatable truths which it is most eager to disregard, and at one level, the uncompromising Talbot is a figure of the artist – a performing artist whose embodied critique of society's assimilative, normalising power is played out to the death. The theme of the stench of the abject human body has an august tradition in the Anglophone theatre: we are reminded of Lear who, when Gloucester asks to kiss his hand, answers: "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality" (Shakespeare 1997 [1608, 1623], 336), and of Hamm, retorting to Clov's remark that his body will stink when he dies, "You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses" (Beckett 2009, 29). *Talbot's Box* too is a dramatic exploration of the scandal of mortality as a condition of the living flesh; yet where *King Lear* and *Endgame* reveal the tragic collapse of the Christian "promised end" (Shakespeare 1997, 386) and the ambiguous defection of transcendence ("The bastard! He doesn't exist!"; Beckett 2009, 34), *Talbot's Box* takes the mystical experience seriously and invents a dramaturgy to accommodate something which lies beyond understanding.

The play has no sympathy for Talbot, who is pictured as a morbid, obsessive egotist, with no consideration for the legitimate claims that others (family, acquaintances, fellow-workers) lay on him. Yet it does not question the authenticity of his faith, and creates a ritualistic drama to give shape to an experience which remains mysterious to the end. While the play shows the attempts of the various instances of power to impose their own staging of Talbot's life-story, it also allows Talbot to perform his Passion on his own terms, and invents a dramatic language not unrelated to Antonin Artaud's notion of the Theatre of Cruelty. Here is an extract from a text Artaud wrote in 1947, "Theatre and Science":

True theatre has always seemed to me the exercise of a
dangerous and terrible act
where the idea of theatre and spectacle is done away with

as well as the ideal of all science, all religion and all art.
The act I'm talking about aims for a true organic and physical
transformation of the human body.

Why?

Because theatre is not that scenic parade where one develops
virtually and symbolically – a myth: theatre is rather
this crucible of fire and real meat where
by an anatomical trampling of bones, limbs and syllables
bodies are renewed
and the mythical act of making a body presents itself
physically and plainly. (Artaud 1965, 169)

Despite the enigmatic quality of Artaud's theatrical utopia, it is easy to see how this text resonates in relation to *Talbot's Box*. Attempts to comprehend Talbot's pursuit rationally are repeatedly defeated, leaving both doctors and priests nonplussed. Talbot claims repeatedly that in withdrawing from the world he sees "the world made whole" (24), "the world made right and straight" (62), but theatrically we are granted no representation of that vision. What is offered instead is Talbot's suffering body as the very site of his encounter with God. Talbot deliberately inflicts upon himself the sufferings endured by Christ – bearing his cords and chains as Christ bore the cross, following an elaborate fasting routine and claiming that: "Me work makes me see the eternal in every hour. 'Cause it sickens me. That's work" (22). The actor's body is on permanent display, first almost naked and covered in garish painting to evoke the scars, then effectively laden with chains, and repeatedly collapsing under their weight. Despite the cynical efforts of power to turn this into a "scenic parade" that might suit their ideological agenda, the "anatomical trampling of bones limbs and syllables" which is Talbot's performance exceeds their attempt at myth-making, and in the process, mysteriously, a body is "renewed".

In the opening scene at the morgue, one medical assistant rebukes his colleague for discussing soccer because, he says, "we could be on the brink of an apotheosis" (14), and though this remark is met with scepticism it is a fairly accurate description of what happens in what Nicholas Grene has called "a *coup de théâtre* of total transfiguration" (Grene 2002, 72): as Talbot, having risen painfully from his deathbed to bind himself with chains, suddenly "*flings both arms out in the shape of crucifixion*", "*blinding beams of light shoot through the walls of the box*" while a deafening wail rises, "*scarcely human but representing human beings in great agony*" (19). In a re-enactment of Christ's resurrection the limitations of Talbot's exhausted body are transcended, and some sort of presence is manifested. Talbot's entire performance of cruelty is made meaningful by this experience, this act of body-making which cannot be explained or even sustained on the stage for more than a few seconds. As the rest of the cast block out the light beams, the wailing cry stops, Talbot collapses again, and the stage is restored to normality. Poignantly, this happens at the beginning of the play,

and the rest of it charts the cruel protocol which Talbot follows to his death: the emphasis is on the painful quest, not the fleeting moment of ecstasy. Yet Talbot imposes a new theatrical idiom on the stage, in which the exposed body testifies to a reality that cannot be contained within the dramaturgy of power.

Although Talbot himself consistently refuses to take a stand and deliver a message to the world, political, religious or otherwise, the eccentric's embodied performance of the Passion constitutes a powerful critique of the normalising force of the conservative pillars of Irish society – the Catholic Church and the capitalist ruling class which it sustains – but also challenges the very secularism from which Kilroy is writing. One is reminded of Foucault's remark that he conceived all his books "as direct experiences to 'tear' me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same" (Foucault 1991, 32). Like other Irish plays written around the same time – Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975) and *The Gigli Concert* (1983), Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) –, *Talbot's Box* explores the possibility of a dimension of human experience outside the reach of representational aesthetics – call it presence, or magic, or "Gawd" – and invents a theatrical idiom which promotes the body as the privileged site of that experience.

Notes

¹ Indeed the construction of the set at the beginning of the play is reminiscent of Clov's delimitation of the acting space in the prologue of *Endgame*.

² Anthony Roche suggests that it is structured like a Yeatsian "dreaming back" (1994, 202).

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