

Matthews, Mark and Molly Mark 8:22-26 and 10:46-52 in two contemporary Irish Dramas

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Two recent Irish dramas, *Molly Sweeney* by Brian Friel and *Communion* by Aidan Matthews, make use of the motif of blindness and allude to the Gospel miracles of healing.¹ This paper will attempt to explore some elements of intertextuality between these three texts and suggest that the afterlife of texts is as much a dimension of the process of interpretation as is the exploration of the text's genesis and literary origins. If the term "intertextuality" is a relatively recent one, the process of reading one text in the light of others has probably been going on since the beginning of reading. Texts may "criter" other texts in a variety of ways: through direct quotation, discreet allusion, imitation or parody, to name but a few.²

Blindness in the Gospel according to Mark

Readers of this journal need little reminding of how contemporary Marcan scholarship has alerted readers to the importance of the evangelist's technique of intercalation³ and to the significance of blindness as a metaphor for misunderstanding or failure in discipleship.⁴ The Gospel's central section, the journey to Jerusalem, is framed by two narratives of cures from blindness (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). For most of this section (except for a single healing story of the possessed boy in 9:14-27 and the controversy about divorce in 10:2-9), Jesus has

¹Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney* (Laughery: The Gallery Press, 1994); Aidan Matthews, *Communion*, (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Playscript series, 2000). References to page numbers of these editions will appear in the body of the text.

²For an introduction to intertextuality from a literary critical stance, see *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still) Manchester University Press, 1990. That it has proved a companionable term in recent biblical studies might be judged by titles such as Dale Allison, *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg: 2000).

³Most commentaries discuss the significance of this technique, sometimes called the Markan sandwich, see for example, J.R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Marcan Narratives," *N T* 31 (1989) 193-216.

⁴The excessively negative picture of T. Weeden (*Mark: Traditions in Conflict*, Philadelphia, 1971) has been balanced by a more literary reading which mirrors the reader's initial enthusiasm and fear of conflict (J.R. Donahue *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: 1983).

turned away from the crowds to predict his approaching passion and to spell out in detail the consequences of discipleship. Both stories are located in a precise geographical location, the first at the upper boundary of Galilee and the other at Jericho, the beginning of the ascent to Jerusalem, the place of rejection and death. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon has called attention to the major importance of minor characters in Mark.⁵ She regards the two-stage healing at Bethsaida as preparing the gospel's implied audience for the second stage of seeing and understanding. Despite his profession of faith which follows immediately on this scene, Peter has not achieved this stage of understanding. The cure of Bartimaeus on the other hand manifests many typical characteristics of the call story form.⁶

The absence of the Bethsaida story in Matthew and Luke has prompted some to question whether it belonged to the oldest stratum of the tradition or was a Mark's own back formation from the Bartimaeus story.⁷ It does contain several perplexing features; not least the apparently "magical" use of healing techniques⁸ and the failure of Jesus' first. In all the other Gospel stories, healing is instantaneous. Ancient anthropology was innocent of the complex nature of sensation or of human activities such as speech, hearing and sight.⁹ In the Gospels, people blind from birth see immediately (e.g. John 9:7) and those who had never heard speak from the moment of their healing in grammatically accurate sentences. This story alone seems to echo a modern understanding of the complexity of seeing in which the eye is assaulted by a host of colours and movements without any process of ordering or selection and that may explain its fascination for readers, who are invited enter through the imagination into the experience of someone who is suddenly invaded by light and colour.

Molly Sweeney and "the direction from which light comes"

Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* received its first production in the Gate Theatre,

⁵The Major Importance of Minor Characters in Mark," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (ed. Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon) (Sheffield: 1994) 58-86.

⁶Struthers Malbon *op. cit.* 66.

⁷For a convenient summary of the issues, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* volume II, (New York: 1994), 490-494. Meier is impressed by the arguments that the story has a historical core but that it has undergone substantial redaction at Mark's hands.

⁸But note a similar technique in John 9 which seems to blend aspects of both of Mark's healing stories into a new creation.

⁹See for example Hans Dieter Beetz "Matthew 6:22f and Ancient Greek Theories of Vision" in *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black* (ed. F. Best and R. Mel. Wilson) (Cambridge: 1979), Joel Marcus, "A Note on Markan Optics," *NTS* 45 (1999) 250-254.

Dublin on 9 August 1994. It tells the story of a woman who had lost her sight in infancy, had it restored temporarily at the age of forty-one, only to lose it within weeks and to sink inexorably into the silent world of autism in a mental hospital. It is a perplexing play, in which no dramatic action takes place on stage. The three characters do not interact in any way, but standing side by side in their own acting space of a bare stage, tell their version of Molly's restoration and decline from their differing vantage points as victim, husband and surgeon. According to Richard Pine, the play consists of "thirty-seven monologues intercut in a filmic way, out of which the spectator must compose his own drama and his own truths."¹⁰

Friel's work is self-consciously intertextual. The substance of the story, and indeed much of the language of the play, is taken from an account by the neurosurgeon Oliver Sacks of the restoration of sight to a patient called Virgil in 1991. Virgil had suffered from thick cataracts and retinitis pigmentosa from childhood. He had lived, nevertheless, a contented and productive life employed as a massage therapist in the local YMCA until the age of about fifty. (Molly Sweeney too "worked as a massage therapist in a local health club"). His impending marriage to a sighted woman led to her persuading him to undergo surgery. Although the operation was initially successful, Virgil proved unable to bear the strain of learning to reconstruct a world known through the other senses in visual terms. Within a few months, he had reverted to a final blindness, "a blindness he received as a gift," for it "allowed him to escape from the glaring, confining world of sight and space and to return to his own true being, the intimate, concentrated world of the other senses which had been his home for almost fifty years."¹¹ The text of the play is introduced by two quotations. The first is from the French Encyclopedist, Denis Diderot: "Learning to see is not like learning a new language. It is like learning a language for the first time."¹² The second is a poem of Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's supb't surprise
As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanations kind

¹⁰The *Diner*: *The Art of Brian Friel* (Dublin: 1999) 288.

¹¹"To See or Not to See?" in Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (London: 1995) 144.

¹²Sacks cites the same quotation *op. cit.* 134.

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.

In the play itself, Frank, Molly's self-educated husband, will quote the debate between the philosophers Locke, Molyneux and Berkeley about vision and the reconstruction of reality which he discovered in a do-it-yourself magazine.¹³

Friel is, at surface level, exploring the philosophical problem of how sighted and non-sighted people construct the world and whether tactile and other non-visual methods of perception can be translated ultimately into the language of vision. Language, translation and memory are recurrent themes in his work.¹⁴ As the play opens, Molly tells how "by the time I was five years of age, my father had taught me the names of dozens of flowers and herbs and shrubs and trees." Under the guidance of her father, she had learned how to order the world by the "same ritual of naming and counting and touching and smelling." From Mr. Rice the surgeon, we learn that Molly was not totally sightless for "she could distinguish between light and dark, she could see the direction from which light came, she could detect the shadow of Frank's hand moving in front of her face. But for all practical purposes, she had no useful sight" (17). She has, however, a profound capacity for joy, for the pleasures of work, radio, walking, music, cycling and especially from swimming.

I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience --- every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone --- sensation that existed only by touch and feel, and moving swiftly and rhythmically through the enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it... (24).

In contrast to Molly's profound vision of the world and her place in it, both husband and surgeon are blind in a different way. Frank has taken on the restoration of Molly's sight as the latest in a line of worthy but misguided causes. Frank is an innocent enthusiast with the autodidact's smattering of information on the most unlikely subjects. He has built up a file on Molly's case, including a collection of extracts from various philosophers on "the relationship between vision and knowledge, between seeing and understanding" (28).

Rice is an alcoholic surgeon in professional decline, drinking to forget the bitterness of betrayal by his wife's adultery with a colleague. Fantasy takes over when he finally decides to take on Molly's case. He contemplates advising his former glittering colleagues of the step he is about to undertake. He considers phoning his former professor:

Paddy Rice here, Professor. Of course you remember him! You called him a rogue star once --- oh yes, that caused a titter. Well he works in a rundown hospital in Donegal now. And I suspect, I think, I believe for no good reason, that Paddy Rice is on the trembling verge, Professor. He has a patient who has been blind for forty years. And do you know what? He is going to give her vision --- the twenty first recorded case in over a thousand years! And for the first time in her life -- how does St. Mark put it in the Gospel? --- for the first time in her life she will "see men walking as if like trees" (28).

Molly comes to realise that she is a victim of the ambitions of the two men, just as in her childhood she had been used by her father in a war against her mother. She wants to see, but only for a brief time

to be afforded a brief excursion to this land of vision, not to live there --- just to visit. And during my stay, to devour it again and again with greedy, ravenous eyes. To gorge on all those luminous sights and wonderful spectacles until I knew every detail intimately and utterly ... And then, oh yes, to return again to my own world with all that rare understanding in me forever (41).

That in fact is what happens. From her final monologue, we learn that Molly is been confined to a mental hospital. The final barriers of space and time appear to have collapsed "and anyhow, my borderline country is where I live now. I am at home there. Well ... at ease there... And why should I question it anymore?" (67).

Richard Pine suggests that the play might be read as an allegory of colonialisation or as a feminist fable.¹⁵ There may be some truth in the suggestion, but perhaps, like all Friel's work, it might be also read as a reflection on the profound issues, which trouble modern Ireland. Pine regards *Dancing at*

¹³The *Diviner*, 288.

¹⁴The debate is outlined in Sacks *op. cit.* 104.

¹⁵As might be judged from the titles of some of his plays, e.g. *The Communication Cord* (1982), *Making History* (1988), *Translations* (1991).

Loughnasa and *Wonderful Tennessee* as “allegories of a society which has lost its memory, its imaginative hinterland.”¹⁶ Each of the characters in *Molly Sweeney* is in search of a lifting of the darkness and confusion of vision which threatens to extinguish even the rudimentary sight that can tell the direction from which light comes. Molly longs for a temporary visit to the land of vision, but the cost of that sojourn will be a blinding by the light. Frank is in search of one great cause that will replace all the ephemeral schemes that have ruled his life. Rice yearns for the single bravura performance that will redeem a career that has lapsed into self-pitying despair. In one sense, they are all blind with only enough sight to tell the difference between light and dark and the direction from which light comes. Friel has probed relentlessly the hidden places where pain lurks in contemporary Ireland. He distances himself from the traditional language of religion, yet his dramatic work consistently uses imaginative images of mythic scope to uncover something of the inner emptiness and blindness of a society that has broken from its spiritual and cultural roots under the pressures of modernity.¹⁷ The real questions *Molly Sweeney* probes are, in the end, less the philosophical issues of the correlation of sense knowledge and vision, but more those of deeper human mysteries of how one can negotiate a world when the traditional maps take no account of new features in the landscape, or to borrow an image from *Translations*, when once-familiar place-names are translated into a new language.¹⁸ Molly has found a kind of ease in a borderline country and is reluctant to question it anymore. At the end of his first breathless monologue, Frank goes back to the debate between Locke and Molencue about whether people who know a cube or a sphere by touch alone would be able to distinguish them by sight. Rice had given him the technical name for such a condition:

He said that neurologists had a word for people in that condition--- seeing, but not knowing, not recognising what they see. A word first used in this context by Freud apparently. He said that people in that condition are called agnostic. Yes. Agnostic. Strange, because I always thought that word had to do with believing or not believing.¹⁹

¹⁶*Ibid.* 284.

¹⁷ Witness, for instance, his use of language of miracle in *The Faith Healer* or of pilgrimage in *Wonderful Tennessee*.

¹⁸ As when Owen tells Hugh that the priest no longer lives in Lios na Muc but Swinefort. “And to get to Swinefort you pass through Greencastle and Fairhead and Strandhill and Croft and Whiteplains. And the new school is not at Poll na gCaorach, it’s at Sheepcock. Will you be able to find your way?” Brian Friel, *Selected Plays* (London: 1984) 418.

¹⁹ Richard Pine has noted Friel’s failure to develop the notion of “gnosis”, a term Rice uses later to

By his wounds we are healed - Aidan Matthews and *Communion*

Aidan Matthew’s play *Communion* was premiered in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin on 25 April 2002. It adheres to traditional dramatic conventions more closely than does Friel’s play. Matthews too is probing questions of meaning, symbol and memory in an Ireland that seems poised to collapse into a one-dimensional state, but he seems more at home in the traditional language of Catholicism than Friel does. *The plot is relatively simple. Jordan Hellery is a young man dying of cancer of the brain. He is attended at home by his devoted mother Martha and Marcus, his younger brother who has spent two years as a patient in a mental hospital. Three minor characters pass through the sick room where the action takes place: Arthur McLaughlin, a Protestant neighbour whose “social ebullience almost conceals fracture and hurt,” Fr. Anthony O’Driscoll, a Holy Ghost missionary priest recently returned from Rwanda, and Felicity Spellman, Marcus’s Church of Ireland girlfriend. The action of the play takes place in the final weeks of Jordan’s terminal illness and it unfolds in two acts. The climax of the first is the celebration of Mass in Jordan’s sick room attended by all the characters. The second act closes with his death, as his mother helps him to breathe his final breath in a rhythm that recalls her own labour at his birth. A brief epilogue, set after the funeral, brings the other characters together for a final time to comment on his passing. The grim setting is lightened by the deft wit, and indeed occasional comedy of the writing and the sometimes acerbically accurate characterisation of some of the minor characters. Matthews sets St. Augustine’s famously negative description of the human plight “intra faeces et urinam nascimur” as the epigraph to the printed text of his play.*

The names of the characters imply more than a hint of symbolism. Jordan, the named after the river marking the boundaries of the Holy Land and the place of baptismal rebirth, hovers in the borderland between life and death. Like her biblical counterpart, Martha is “busy about many things,” fussing around her dying son, while sustaining an ongoing guerrilla war with Marcus. Marcus, the Latinised form of Mark, has spent two years in a mental hospital, during which he attempted

describe Molly’s condition of “blindsight” as an “unresolved feature” in the text and wonders whether he does not intend to evoke the older religious meaning of gnosis. “Molly’s flight from knowledge of the sighted world, the renaissance world of order and normative behaviour, is her second, more real and more harrowing *rite de passage*, as she attempts to regain inner equilibrium from which she had hoped to make but a brief excursion” (*The Diviner*, 295).

suicide by cutting his wrists. Felicity is a free spirit bringing something of the happiness her name implies to Jordan and for a brief moment weaving an enchanted spell around him. Arthur and Fr. Anthony have good Ulster Protestant and Southern Catholic names respectively.

The religious idiom through which Matthews explores the questions of life, death, suffering and relationships is uncompromising: but like the religious image near the sick bed, it is "modern and primitive at the same time" (stage directions, 7). The play opens with Marcus pretending to read to his brother. In reality, both are weaving a sexual fantasy about a priest and his lover that ends abruptly with Marcus' musings on the modern canonisation process. He suggests that the only criterion for sainthood appears to be "an active hex on sex in order to achieve the state of holiness, alongside utter ignorance of the way in which ordinary human beings live and die in the dirty, fertile world that God looked at and thought was a good thing" (9). The celebration of the Mass which is the climax of the first act is cut short by a scream from Jordan as his tumour invades a nerve, the harbinger of death. In formal terms, it is a very accurate rendering of the liturgy, with the only difference from normal Catholic practice being that Fr. Anthony passes the stole to Felicity who wears it and then attempts to drape it around Martha who, uncomfortable at this breach of her familiar boundaries, bundles it into her lap. The scripture passages chosen are a free form of Isaiah 43, psalm 102 and Mark's story of the cure of the blind man at Bethsaida.

Matthew's characters speak in religious terms with fluency and lack of inhibition. One might detect in their discourse some common representative Irish religious types. Martha's straight-laced traditional piety takes her to Lough Derg to pray for Jordan, but the clear boundaries of her acquired social world and status (she was born after all in Ballyshannon, just a few miles from Lough Derg, but now lives in Dublin 4) render her incapable of entering into the liminal *communitas* of the pilgrimage. As she confides to Fr. Anthony, "Lough Derg is not really meant for people like us... Very good people go... but very... Fiamma Fail (61). She blames Marcus' religion teachers for his mental illness and his preoccupation with God. The priests who ran the Dublin colleges for the sons of the professional classes knew what they were doing: "so it was one religion class per week and one maths class per day with a double period on Friday." The arrival of young lay religion teachers with beards and banjos subverted that neatly ordered world with its claim of divine sanction:

They filled his head with all kinds of nonsense about solidarity and brotherhood and humpbacked whales and God only knows what else...

You can fall out of pride, you can fall out of favour with God himself but you can't fall out of your social class (30).

Arthur claims to be just "a pavilion-member" of the Methodist Church, but despite his bumbling exterior, he has a practical, if at times awkward, love of neighbour. The heartbreak of estrangement from his only son for whom he endlessly photographs the neighbourhood and whose marijuana plants he keeps in his greenhouse simply because they are a reminder of him, mark him out as a tragic prodigal father who pours his affections on the Mel Henry boys.

Felicity whom Arthur describes as "the picture of happiness" is a more complex character than she may at first appear. She is adrift from her Church of Ireland moorings, consults a psychic regularly, has got drunk at Marcus' party and shares a joint with Jordan in an act of secular communion. Her religion is uncomplicated – "where in the world is Jesus Christ not really present... I think that if God loves us as much as he says he does, then he won't let any of us get lost in the darkness" (50-51).

The three younger men, Jordan, Marcus and Fr. Anthony are the most perplexing of all. They are children of post-modern Ireland, with neither the easy certainties of Martha and Arthur nor Felicity's capacity for spontaneous joy. Through their painful and sometimes irreverent self-awareness, the author articulates a sense of the precariousness of the contemporary Irish religious condition which is aware that it no longer has a firm grasp on its story but has no other ready to hand.²⁰ Anthony is the most uncomplicated of the three. He claims that he entered his Order because he loved the sense of community, the prestige of ministry and the manliness of the missions it offered. He seems confused but not very bright, translating the story into a sentimental idiom of love: "Jordan dwells in the mystery of God, I live in the mystifications of theology" (63). As Martha acidly remarks, he loves everyone, "but the only people he cannot stand are his own religious superiors and of course, the Pope" (21). His articulation of the traditional truths of faith avoids the hard edge of intellectual engagement and so

²⁰ Matthews has described the religious state of post-modern Ireland in a vivid paragraph. "A mystic said to me some years ago that the Catholic Irish had endured two haematomas in the last hundred and fifty years and that the blood-let was such that it would require subtle transfusions to restore even a threshold well-being to a patient who was sick unto death. In the first instance, we had lost our language, he said, and so our stories were unintelligible to us. In the second, we had lost our faith, and had no table manners accordingly for the right bread-breaking. This is a drastic shorthand for a complex narrative, but it may be true." ("Altered State: Catholicism on a Cusp", *The Way Supplement*, 98 [Summer, 2000] 15).

is ultimately flat and platitudinous. In the end, his religion proves every bit as traditional as Martha's when he returns after Jordan's death to claim the hairs left in his razor as a relic.

Pairs of brothers are an archetypal biblical image from Cain and Abel to the two sons of Luke's parable. There are clear echoes of the prodigal son parable, with Jordan playing the role of the dutiful son and Marcus the role of the prodigal returned from the distant land of the mental hospital. The dying Jordan is an enigmatic character. The role of the patient sufferer is thrust upon him by his mother and Anthony, and he plays it in his interactions with them, letting the mask slip only in the presence of Marcus and Felicity. He is preoccupied with the smell of his bodily functions. Mother and priest offer him the easy reassurances of religion, but Jordan himself is less sure. In a voice from beyond the grave, courtesy of a cassette recording, made at Marcus' urging before his final illness had destroyed his capacity for speech, he tells Martha that he is not sure that she will find him in death as Doubting Thomas found Jesus, but that she will find him in her pain, like Mary whose tears turned a graveyard into a garden (73).²¹ Marcus is the most complex character of the play. He resents Jordan's suffering because it is "so male and so reputable" while his own is unwholesome: "he can show his sutures and every one's eyes fill up. When I show them my arm, they wince and shrink away" (26). Marcus has become an outsider because he has taken God so seriously. The formalised religion he has been offered in his youth made him only "a piece of Christianity Incorporated, not a part of Christ incarnate" (59). If he were to think about God in the mental hospital, privileges were withdrawn. Marcus grasps more than the others do the symbolic tantalising depths of religious language: Christ promised eternal life to those who believe, not immortal life to those who obey (14). His irreverence and mockery are a kind of iconoclasm that shatters false images and by peeling away the cataracts, allows light to reach blind eyes.

Matthews' text draws on the biblical story in a richly intertextual way. The use of the story of the healing at Bethsaida as the gospel reading in the sick-room Mass suggests that blindness and healing are a controlling metaphor for the whole play and there are hints that most of the characters are in some way affected by defective sight. Anthony claims to have "double vision" as a result of his theological studies (72). Arthur assuages his broken heart by attempting to capture the neighbourhood through the surrogate eye of the camera for his grandchildren. As Jordan's tumour presses more painfully on his optic nerve, his sight weakens

and he needs Marcus to put drops in his eyes. (14) Matthews uses this action in a way that recalls vividly Mark's use of the healing of blindness stories. Marcus is reluctant to put the drops into Jordan's eyes as it makes him look as if he had been crying. As in the gospel story, the action must be repeated again before the celebration of the Mass begins (38). Reflecting once more the Markan narrative, a second victim of blindness asks for healing when Martha realises that her eyes are "dry burning. As if there were sand in the pleats" (76). She asks Marcus to do her eyes with Jordan's drops. Refusing at first, he only yields when, in a phrase reminiscent of Marcus's earlier comment to Jordan, she says that when she tries to do it herself, "they run down my face and I look like I'm weeping." This final poignant moment brings to light Martha's blindness that has been evident to everyone else from the beginning. It is a blindness that has prevented her from acknowledging Marcus' pain and she is blinded socially by the trappings of social position the fruit of her marriage to a wealthy surgeon.

It is Marcus who is the unlikely agent of healing. Like the Risen Christ, he carries the wounds in his wrists that even Felicity cannot bear to see and would rather cover with long white gloves. His mental illness makes him the counterpart of both the demagogue in Mark 5:1-19 and the outcast, marginalised Christ. Matthews' philosophical conversation partner is René Girard under whose direction he studied at Stanford University.²² One of the central preoccupations of Girard's work has been to explore the social role of what he terms "mimetic violence" and of the scapegoat figure in the development of culture.²³ In the cassette Martha plays after his death, Jordan identifies Marcus as "the family scapegoat" (73), yet it is over his own dead body, as he has predicted to Felicity (53), that mother and son will eventually make their peace. It would be fruitful to pursue Matthews' debt to Girard in other aspects of the play, not least the function of ritual and sacrifice, but the constraints of space do not permit it here.

Conclusion

This paper has said nothing that is new or original about the text of Mark. Much of the attention of biblical scholars has quite rightly focused on the writer's role

²¹Introductory biographical note in *Communism*.

²²R. Girard *La Violence et Le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972). For the use of some of Girard's concepts in biblical studies, see *Semeia* 33: René Girard and *Biblical Studies* (ed. Andrew J. McKenna) SBL, 1985.

²³In a striking moment in the performance, as the scene is changed at the end of the second act, Jordan rises from his bed and stands for a moment in the semi-darkness looking towards Martha.

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in the intertextual process or the way in which the biblical writers, consciously or unconsciously, are themselves readers and become echo chambers, so to speak, of existing texts. There is another dimension to the process. I have attempted to explore two contemporary texts in the light of a common biblical intratext. Both I'rieli and Matthews invite us to read our canonical text in a more provocative way, holding it up against the constantly shifting kaleidoscopic pattern of contemporary Irish culture. One of the gains of the recent interest in literary intertextuality has been the salutary reminder that "the text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole and so does not function as a closed system."²⁴ This is true even when a text achieves the status of a classic, like the texts of scripture. The bible text must be allowed to enter into dialogue with other texts and not just those from which its creators are presumed to have borrowed. A reader who knows only the bible will remain less aware and less sophisticated as a reader. As a teacher of undergraduates studying theology as part of an arts degree, I am often struck by the poverty of their reading experience which prevents them from grasping much of what the text offers. Both I'rieli and Matthews have proved to be imaginative readers of Mark. They invite us as fellow readers to engage once more with the Gospel story, not as a dead letter or an archaeological artefact but as word and symbol that call us to explore something of the reality of our own time.

²⁴ Still and Worton, *Intertextuality*, Introduction, 3.