Introduction

_The Irish are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their country­men. No sir; the Irish are a fair people;—they never speak well of one another._

—JAMES BOSWELL, _The Life of Samuel Johnson_

In the logic of our time, it is better to have a bad experience that turns out well, than to have just a plain good one.

During the first three months of 1972 a trial took place in the middle district of Pennsylvania: THE UNITED STATES of AMERICA versus Eqbal Ahmad, Philip Berrigan, Elizabeth McAlister, Neil McLaughlin, Anthony Scoblick, Mary Cain Scoblick, Joseph Wenderoth. The defendants stood accused of conspiring to raid federal offices, to bomb government property, and to kidnap the presidential advisor Henry Kissinger. Six of those seven individuals are, or were, Roman Catholic clergy—priests and nuns. Members of the new “Catholic Left.” The Catholic Left has no Flaubert, or Mark Rudd (of SDS), to declare: “I am the Catholic Left.” If that personification could fall on any shoulders, it would have to be the Berrigan brothers, the Fathers Philip and Daniel. They and the Catholic Left, in the last half­decade, were aboard a questing Pequod, spinning round and round in the vortex of antiwar protest. Their fragile craft was taken under; the moment had come and gone.

The whirlpool that swallowed them ultimately was the trial of
INTRODUCTION

the Harrisburg Seven. With the intensity of Ahab, they had sought to scuttle the war machine of the state. The government, in turn, responded with a power equal to a force of nature.

The narrative that follows tells the tale of those three months in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: the trial, the case, the events, the demonstrations, the panels, and the people. The Vietnam war is the shadow that falls on all the proceedings, and though this country is not in a state of siege, the defendants, lawyers, and all concerned, found themselves living its vastly diminished counterpart, a state of trial. It was unrelenting and did not lift till the cease-fire of the verdict.

After the trial concluded, the case's raison d'être died in his sleep on May 2, 1972; that day, in Harrisburg, there was a post-trial hearing on the issue of discriminatory prosecution. A UPI photographer came into the courtroom with the news: "Hoover's dead!" History has already begun to wash his memory in Lethe; America's forgetfulness is its form of forgiveness and absolution.

Memory should not be another casualty of the Vietnam war; the trial of the Harrisburg Seven is not just a footnote to the folly of J. Edgar Hoover's last days. Seven men and women, and more, contested the awesome force of this country's ire and might; like Ishmael, we can be saved by the great buoyancy that the defendants gave to the coffin of their trial.

And, further, let us not forget that the Reverend Philip Berigan, S.S.J., at this writing, is serving his thirty-fifth month of imprisonment for pouring blood on a filing cabinet full of paper.

William O'Rourke
23 July 1972
Prologue

I sacrifice myself for my neighbours, for my fellow-countrymen, for my children, and these sacrifice themselves in their turn for theirs, and theirs again for those that come after them, and so on in a never-ending series of generations. And who receives the fruit of this sacrifice?

—MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO, Tragic Sense of Life

The Cathedral of Mary Our Queen is surrounded by well-groomed duchies of northern Baltimore suburbia. It is a dormant creature, roused only for events, such as the funerals of special men.

The interior, over a hundred yards long, is a solemn cavity, vast enough to shelter a dirigible. There are many small altars along the sidewalls, each dedicated to a particular saint. Twenty-four chandeliers hang from the ceiling in the shape of coronets for Mary Our Queen. A multitude of rainbows provoked by the stained-glass windows dapple the bent backs of the congregation.

Today, the staves of grief have been assembled; everything is transformed, renamed, elevated. Chants, potions, and spells are summoned. Not having time, the healing stretch of space, the ritual folds back on itself, giving more surface upon which sorrow can disperse.

All in attendance are lashed to their thoughts. Women are crying; men are crying. The distribution of Holy Communion is accomplished rapidly; not many receive at funerals. There is a vague revulsion at eating with the deceased in the room.

Empty, the cathedral smells of cold stone and incense; now, the humid scent of mourning, the perfumes these burghers wear,
fourteen hundred of them, rises to the cathedral’s vaulted heights.

Two dollars is what you would receive for serving at funerals, which, when I was an acolyte, made them less popular than weddings, which brought you five. The costumes of the church have changed since the days I served. Gone are the somber vestments of the Requiem Mass; now they are white and the service is called of the Resurrection. We altarboys, cherubic spectators of grief, made the trip to the graveside and held tapers taller than ourselves, which gave us the chance to brave the hot wax that dripped into our hands. How many strangers have I seen lowered into holes?

That was a dozen years ago; and this man that lies in a coffin under a satin shroud stitched HE IS RISEN is almost unknown to me. Francis X. Gallagher, attorney for the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, former state legislator, and counsel for four defendants of the Harrisburg conspiracy case. In the courtroom he sat back with the defendants. At first he appeared to be not an attorney but the friendliest of federal marshals. His suits always had the ingratiating rumpled of an accessible man.

A dozen priests fuss around the altar; two clerics sitting in the sanctuary are the Fathers Joseph Wenderoth and Neil McLaughlin. They are standing trial in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for conspiring to raid federal offices, to bomb and to kidnap. The chasubles of the celebrants are lined with red, like the bodies, now so often photographed, that rest on a bright tray of their own blood.

Kneeling in prayer are Sister Elizabeth McAlister, R.S.H.M., and the inactive priest Anthony Scoblick and his wife, the former Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, Mary Cain Scoblick. They too are on trial in Harrisburg for conspiring to raid, bomb, and kidnap.

The congregation rises and sinks to its knees in waves like pliant seaweed. Here, also, are Sisters Jogues Egan and Marjorie Shuman and Beverly Bell, all ladies of the Church, lately christened by the government with clammy surnames: unindicted coconspirators.

Eight years of parochial school toll in my memory. The nuns would allot us three minutes for our examination of conscience...