

Wilde. The Wildean epigram takes a piece of conventional English wisdom and turns it on its head, rips it inside out, estranges the drearily familiar with a sudden shaft of semantic illumination. Like Herbert's own mode of writing, it combines cognitive force with self-delighting jest, displaying that capacity of language to dismantle and transfigure the world which we know among other things as wit. Shaw's wit is more terse and cerebral, Wilde's more perverse and self-pleasuring, Swift's more shatteringly subversive than either of them; and McCabe's writing draws on something of all of these modes, terse, teasing, devastating and delightful together. There's a productive perversity about his writing, which illuminates orthodoxy by putting an idiosyncratic spin on the commonsensical. It's hardly accidental that he was the first semiotic theologian in this country, the first to grasp how a certain anti-Cartesian understanding of the sign could be used to explore the mystery of the sacramental. 'Christ is present in the eucharist as the meaning is present in a word' is, one might claim, a *bon mot* about a *bon mot*.

Dismally few people, when you come to weigh it up, really change your life, even those who are traditionally supposed to. My supervisor at Cambridge changed my life about as much as Vera Lynn did. But without my long friendship with Herbert McCabe I wouldn't be at all what I am. So you can blame it all on him.

## Thomas: After a Fall

Another voice has come to inhabit my house.  
The window on the west side lets in sounds  
which flow out everywhere: noises like water  
running south, or east, or fingers of branches  
rubbing together, the words that leaves let slip  
when torn from their bough and set adrift.  
What it says impossible

to answer, except to wake and then to walk  
and then to eat and then to pray and doze.  
A sound that strains on its own axis like a tree.  
A voice sharpening its accent as a carpenter  
at daybreak going about his workshop makes  
ready for the long day's darg. Odd word.  
A sunshaft turns the hewn planks into gold.

James McGonigal