





# **THE POLITICS OF IRISH WRITING**

Edited by

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## FOREWORD

Irish studies has entered the new millennium as a vibrant area of research characterized by a wide variety of methodological approaches. The need for an increased interdisciplinarity and strengthening of the role of critical and cultural theory has been generally recognized by centres for Irish studies, international associations and individual scholars alike; nevertheless, the fact remains that most Irish studies programmes, regardless of their geographical location, still focus largely on the traditional disciplines of literary studies on the one hand, and history and politics on the other.

This situation is not necessarily to be seen as either a weakness or a strength. It should, however, serve as a strong indicator of the value of close contact between various practitioners in Irish studies. If interdisciplinarity is not to be taken merely as a buzzword, and although it may often be difficult to develop in the context of a single institution or association, scholars need to work on building up networks in order to facilitate long-term cooperation and exchange of ideas.

The input of young researchers is of crucial importance in this process. However, funding for doctoral students in particular has been repeatedly highlighted as a general problem in developing Irish studies, together with the scarcity of forums where discussion of innovative work in progress can take place and new points of collaboration can be established. The tradition of the New Voices in Irish Criticism conferences inaugurated in 1999 stands as a remarkable model to follow, but it has sadly remained almost unique in its effort.

In its modest effort to improve the situation and provide a venue in continental Europe, the Prague Centre for Irish Studies was pleased

to take this initiative last autumn and host an international conference for young scholars in literary studies, which forms the core of its research activities. The conference under the umbrella theme of The Politics of Irish Writing was geared towards the publication of an edited collection of essays on the topic. It is my pleasure to present the volume to current and potential members of the international Irish studies community now. The book is marked both by the diversity and the originality of approaches to canonical authors and texts, ones who are often neglected, and recent writing alike, and quite eloquently demonstrates the potential of the up-and-coming generation of Irish studies scholars.

I would like to express heartfelt gratitude on behalf of all participants in the Politics of Irish Writing project to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Ireland to the Czech Republic for their understanding, enthusiasm and vital support. Finally, I am delighted to add that since the inception of our project, an intensive seminar for international PhD students has been launched under the auspices of the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS), with its first round to be held at the Catholic University of Leuven Centre for Irish Studies in Belgium in September 2010. This is a clear sign of the awareness of the need to seriously engage with the ideas of young researchers at European level, and to provide consistent assistance in their work. Our Centre remains committed to further contributing to this process.

Ondřej Pilný  
Centre for Irish Studies  
Charles University, Prague  
*January 2010*

## INTRODUCTION

The present volume reflects the current issues of what we have termed the politics of Irish writing, whether these arise directly from within the field of Irish studies or from related disciplines. The diversity of the topics covered in this collection of essays illustrates how vibrant the current discussions in Irish studies are, and how debates within specific areas of research interrelate, explicitly or less so, but always to mutual benefit. It is our hope that this book will testify to the strength and vitality of the current research of, in particular, postgraduate students working in Irish studies.

Essays grouped in the first section discuss the politics of appropriation with regard to the works of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. First, Adam Putz deals in his contribution with Yeats's and Joyce's cultural appropriations of Shakespeare. Putz points out that some views of contemporary criticism concerning this topic are rather reductive and problematic as they fail to engage "subversive Irish appropriations in conversation with Shakespeare criticism." Putz thus sets out to rectify the pattern that governs Shakespeare's legacy in Yeats's and Joyce's writing. David Vichnar's essay on "Corrupt Paris, Virgin Dublin" tells, as the subtitle informs us, Joyce's *Tale of Two Cities*. Vichnar offers a biographical reading of Joyce's writing and examines the correlation between the predominant tropes common to Joyce's life and writing. Discussion of unstable identity and liberation from deterministic history in works by Joyce, Beckett and John Banville is the topic of Eoghan Smith's contribution, in which he addresses the question of art's ability to maintain itself as a sovereign entity and analyzes the condition of art in works by the respective authors.

The essays in the second section deal with the topics of de-/colonization. Giulia Bruna explores J.M. Synge's subversion of the rhetoric of the empire in his travelogue *In the Congested Districts*. Through a close reading of Synge's text, Bruna aims to show that he utilized common narratives of cultural remembrance instead of adopting the tropes of colonial surveillance to demonstrate the limitations of the ideology dominant at that time. Her essay is followed by discussions of the same issue in Irish school books and then schoolboy novels. Katrina Morgan investigates the impact of the colonial administration on the Irish education system; her aim is to detect whether the content of the school books resulted in submissive or subversive identity of the pupils. Ciaran O'Neill also engages with the issue of identity; his essay analyzes rewritings of political history in two schoolboy novels, Francis Hackett's *The Green Lion* and Kathleen Pawle's *We in Captivity*. O'Neill explores the extent to which these texts recreate historical events, such as the fall of Charles Parnell, for example, so that they would appeal to the imagination of a youthful audience.

The contributions in the following section deal with innovative approaches to central aspects of cultural and revolutionary nationalism respectively. Maciej Ruczaj's essay offers a radical rereading of Patrick Pearse through the mechanism of *translatio sacrii*. The concept serves in Ruczaj's reading as a major premise governing the construction of Pearsean nationalism and is identified as a key structural element in Pearse's plays. Anna Pilz discusses Lady Gregory and G.B. Shaw's anti-colonial criticism within the Egyptian context. Both these authors engaged in the disputes concerning colonial claims over Egypt and some of their literary works, as Pilz documents, aimed at promoting the rights of the colonized. Barry Sheils reads Yeats's poem "Easter 1916" as an expression of the author's concerns for literary freedom. Sheils proposes that Yeats's aim within this poem is principally to stress the difficulties associated with the general reception of the relation between aesthetic philosophy and political revolution.

In a section focused on women's fiction, Whitney Standlee revisits the work of Katharine Tynan, a prolific author whose memoirs provide a unique and perceptive account of the times. Standlee's detailed exploration of Tynan's work proves helpful to anyone

interested in the development of the British-Irish relations, especially as it draws on hitherto unpublished sources such as Tynan's memoir *A Woman's Notes In War-Time: Observations from a Quiet Corner*. Theresa Wray's essay engages in a detailed examination of work by another prominent author, Mary Lavin, who defies easy categorization, a fact Wray identifies as one possible reason why Lavin's writing has not yet received commensurate critical attention. However, Wray's contribution provides strong arguments that may help to rectify this matter, particularly since she presents Lavin's *The Becker Wives* as a valuable depiction of social and political issues emerging from the implementation of the Irish Constitution of 1937.

Guy Woodward's and Michaela Marková's essays attempt in their discussion of the Northern Irish pre-Troubles writing to engage fully with fictional portrayals of Northern Irish society from both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. Woodward's analysis of Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice Cream* addresses the issue of the proportion of known historical events in Moore's book and questions the author's role as the intermediary for authentic wartime experience. Marková, for her part, brings to the fore the work of a neglected fiction writer Janet McNeill. Although it has received significant attention from readers and reviewers in its time, her writing still struggles for appropriate critical acclaim. Marková argues, in particular, that McNeill's fiction is a valuable source of insight in the process of Northern Irish middle-class Protestant identity formation that is worthy of consideration.

Sean O'Faoláin's views on the Northern Irish political situation are the focus of Niall Carson's contribution: he demonstrates that O'Faoláin's liberal Republicanism, based on the values of the French Revolution, found its way into *The Bell* during O'Faoláin's editorship between 1940-1946. O'Faoláin's attraction to the Northern Irish issue, as Carson documents, was inspired by his efforts to build up "a social picture of the inhabitants of the island as they actually were, denuded of their ideological aspirations." This section is followed by two essays that deal with the relevant writers' responses to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. "The half-built, half-derelict house" of the 1798 rebellion in Stewart Parker's play *Northern Star* is discussed by Radvan Markus, who works with the supposition that the interpretation of the past is more important than the past itself and, as

such, greatly influences the politics of the present. His use of Hayden White's tropological explanation of renditions of history offers tentative conclusions regarding the 1798 rebellion and its treatment in drama. Naomi Banks argues that Seamus Heaney's poetic response to the Troubles, which has been the subject of a wide-ranging critical debate, may also be understood as a search for a specific type of Northern Irish political elegy. In her view, Heaney adopts political elegy because it provides him with tools to express private and public mourning in a way no other poetic genre allowed him to at the time.

The essays in the section *Between Home and Beyond the Sea* prove how varied contemporary Irish poetry has been. Daniela Theinová unravels the treatment of traditional iconic images of feminized land by contemporary women poets. Satire, irony and subversive humour are identified as the most frequent reaction to the imagery that has become distinctly outlived – applied by both male and female authors. However, Theinová argues that the latter have received considerably less attention. Challenging approaches to the Irish poetic tradition are at the core of Eleanor Chatburn's essay on Derek Mahon's politics of intertextuality. Cross-cultural and cross-temporal aspects in Mahon's poetic translations are seen as highly contributive to his own poetry. Chatburn's analysis of Mahon's poetry documents that he does not rely only on his Irish forebears but equally constitutes himself as "the receptor and product of canonical foreign poetic texts that lie outside of Irish literary culture." Intertextuality is also the focus of Maren Kratz, who examines the legacy of Dante's poetry in the works of Seamus Heaney and Harry Clifton. Her paper compares the creative process the two Irish poets engage in to the quest of Dante's Ulysses and argues that both authors show that "there is a basis for identification with the medieval Italian poet, despite a vast temporal and cultural distance."

Space, place and a sense of belonging are principal themes for the next two contributors, Tea Raše and Kateřina Jenčová. Raše applies Peter Sloterdijk's notions of c/kynicism to a collection of short stories by Philip Ó Caeallaigh. In her analysis, the theoretical position of cynicism transforms into the disposition towards life adopted – kynicism. Her essay explores what else besides the author's origin makes Ó Ceallaigh's collection a piece of Irish writing since the stories are set in a deteriorating housing estate situated in contemporary

Romania. Jenčová's paper argues against the exclusion of the majority of the Canadian population from migration discourses. Her case study emphasizes the potential that is represented by Irish-Canadian explorations of the identity narratives. Jenčová refers to works by ethnicity scholars such as Smaro Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies*, for instance, to support her view that critical attention should also be devoted to the origins of the Irish-Canadians.

Finally, prominent features of recent Irish drama are discussed by Ester Žantovská and Hana Pavelková. Pavelková focuses on another prominent feature of recent Irish plays: the use of monologue. She examines, in particular, the unreliability of monologue narrators, and the ways in which ambiguity and incompleteness of narration create dramatic tension. The credibility of the speakers in *Faith Healer*, *Baglady* and *Not I* is crucial to our understanding of the plays according to Pavelková: it is the dynamics characteristic of the relationship between the unreliable narrators and the audience that makes these monologues work. Black comedy might, as Žantovská maintains, currently be regarded as a popular Irish export commodity. In a poignant outline of the genre, she provides an insightful discussion of three plays by contemporary Irish playwrights – Mark O'Rowe, Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson. According to Žantovská, black humour subverts both romance and any element of tragedy present within the plays. Banality is thus elevated to the narrative of heroic epic.

We hope that the reader finds, in particular, the many points of overlap between the arguments of the various essays enriching and stimulating. This set of interrelated writing also provides a useful map of the most recent tendencies in Irish studies research.

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# IRISH CLASSICS THROUGH NEW PRISMS

## CONTINENTAL THINKING, CONTINENTAL LIVING: W.B. YEATS, JAMES JOYCE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF APPROPRIATING SHAKESPEARE

Adam Putz  
(University of Warwick)

To the extent that appropriation is a performance of identity, it offers possibilities for cracking the codes of ideology and provides glimpses of realities that as yet have no name.  
Christy Desmet, *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999)

Postcolonial criticism on the appropriation of Shakespeare in Ireland under the Union has principally focused on the ways in which Irish nationalists redeployed his plays and poems in their campaign against the English cultural and political establishment.<sup>1</sup> Robin Bates has recently taken this influential line in *Shakespeare and the Cultural Colonization of Ireland* (2008) to situate the Shakespearean text as “their cage and yet their key.”<sup>2</sup> However, this approach offers a reductive account of that fight while failing to position subversive Irish

<sup>1</sup> See Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996) 268-85.

<sup>2</sup> Robin E. Bates, *Shakespeare and the Cultural Colonization of Ireland* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 42. See also Rebecca Steinberger, *Shakespeare and Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Conceptualizing Identity and Staging Boundaries* (London: Ashgate, 2008).



appropriations in conversation with Shakespeare criticism as either “foreign” or “domestic.”

This article salvages some of that dialogue to point up the role it played in shaping the Shakespeares of both Yeats and Joyce. In his essay “At Stratford-on-Avon” (1901), Yeats leverages the “racial” characterization of Celtic poetry explored by Ernest Renan in his study *La Poésie des Races Celtiques* (1854) and echoed by Matthew Arnold in his lectures “On the Study of Celtic Literature” (1867) to unseat the reified “Anglo-Saxon” of Edward Dowden’s *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875). Dowden had taken the first chair of English literature established in Ireland at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1867. He later served as a key literary figure in the Anglo-Irish opposition to the Revival in both this role and his capacity as president of the Irish Unionist Alliance at a time “when its publications exhibit[ed] an almost hysterical fear of the shift in political and cultural power towards the Catholic majority.”<sup>3</sup> For Yeats, Dowden had revealed a Shakespeare merely bent on material success. But Joyce strongly stresses the “racial” distinction between their Shakespeares by fictionalizing a debate about *Hamlet* in *Ulysses* (1922) that complicates the issues to which Yeats and Dowden had addressed their criticism. Stephen Dedalus emerges from the bawdy “Scylla and Charybdis” episode as an alternative to the colonial reading subject and an answer to the crisis of authenticity undermining the effort undertaken by cultural figures to speak on behalf of the Irish in English after the fall of Ireland’s “uncrowned king,” Charles Stewart Parnell.

Between 1865 and 1866, Arnold lectured on Celtic literature while serving as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He would abandon Victorian convention by seeing in Shakespeare the “natural magic” of Celtic poetry, “the indefinable delicacy, charm, and perfection of the Celt’s touch” found in “the beauty of expression, unsurpassable for effectiveness and charm, which is reached in Shakespeare’s best passages.”<sup>4</sup> Arnold recasts Shakespeare in the mould of a Celtic bard

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Joyce’s Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 63.

<sup>4</sup> To illustrate this point, Arnold used just a handful of examples taken from only two of Shakespeare’s comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (II, i, 84-86) and *The Merchant of Venice* (V, i, 1-4, 7-8, 11-14). See Matthew Arnold, “On the Study of Celtic Literature,”

here – genealogical considerations aside – to cool the conflict heating up between national and regional identities under the Union, making a political play in this way that he does nothing to tone down here.<sup>5</sup> As he observes:

France can truly boast of her ‘magnificent unity,’ a unity of spirit no less than of name between all the people who compose her, in England the Englishman proper is in union of spirit with no one except other Englishmen proper like himself. His Welsh and Irish fellow-citizens are hardly more amalgamated with him now than they were when Wales and Ireland were first conquered, and the true unity of even these small islands has yet to be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

Arnold wanted this “true unity” to prevail and considered it the pressing cultural as well as political project of the contemporary moment. In particular, he envisioned a lasting union between England and the Celtic countries fringing it, achieved through an Anglo-Celtic

*Lectures and Essays in Criticism, The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R.H. Super, 11 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-1977) III, 291-386 (379).

- <sup>5</sup> Arnold immediately incensed the popular English press with his conditional support of the Welsh language movement and the Eisteddfods (see *The Times*, 8 September 1866: 8). Moreover, newspapers routinely ran lurid articles about the Fenian threat during the late 1860s and early 1870s, suggesting that “Fenian fever” still ran hot amongst readers on both sides of the Irish Sea three years after the dramatic attack in 1867 on a police van in Manchester and the explosion at Clerkenwell gaol in London brought the Fenians to public prominence. On 16 December 1867, an editorial in *The Irish Times* – far from committed to Irish nationalism of any sort – condemned the violent actions in England:

The Clerkenwell outrage surpasses in reckless and fiendish cruelty anything that has been perpetrated for many years. To explode a barrel of gunpowder in a densely crowded neighbourhood – to maim and blind and hurl to sudden destruction innocent, unconscious victims – to deal the felon stroke of murder and of life-long mutilations worse than death on men, women, and children who, even in a state of open war would have been sacred amid the fury of battle – this is a crime the turpitude of which cannot be expressed in words.

The response to the Fenians could just as often not take the form of words. The appropriation of Shakespeare proved particularly important on these occasions. For example, the notorious cartoon “The Irish ‘Tempest’” ran in *Punch* on 19 March 1870 with a wilting Hibernia (Miranda) sheltering from “Rory of the Hills” (Caliban) under the protective arm of W.E. Gladstone (Prospero).

- <sup>6</sup> Arnold 392-93. See Seamus Deane, “Arnold, Burke and the Celts,” in *Celtic Revivals*, 21-27, for a discussion of how Arnold also drew on Edmund Burke’s political writings in these lectures and his *Irish Essays* (1882).

poetic forged anew. Arnold heard just such a poetic sound in Shakespeare's "Celtic note," the greater appreciation of which could help to produce a spiritual union stronger than the precious little that he thought politics alone had already accomplished.

His last lecture concludes with an apposite political gesture in this context. For his Oxford audience, Arnold distinguished between Celts and Fenians to suggest that Irish republicans amounted to little more than a by-product of "the Philistines, who among their other sins are the guilty authors of Fenianism."<sup>7</sup> He recommends as a solution to this hopelessly middle-class problem of political mismanagement in Ireland founding "at Oxford a chair of Celtic, and to send, through the gentle ministration of science, a message of peace to Ireland."<sup>8</sup> Arnold acknowledged the idea that formally studying Celtic literature might thus achieve "true unity" really belonged to Renan. "I have read few things for a long time with more pleasure than [his] '*Sur la poésie des races celtiques*,'"<sup>9</sup> he wrote to his Cornish mother from Renan's beloved Brittany on 8 May 1859. "I have long felt that we owed far more, spiritually and artistically, to the Celtic races than the somewhat coarse Germanic intelligence readily perceived."<sup>10</sup> His lengthy letter ends with the observation that although Renan had gone "too far" in his praise of Celtic poetry, he had also shown how to understand "the nature of both races."<sup>11</sup> Arnold would himself identify the Celtic nature with "stubborn rebellion against the despotism of fact."<sup>12</sup> For Anglo-Saxons, he singles out their slavish fidelity to it. Yet Arnold never identifies rebellion against fact in Shakespeare. Nor does he find Shakespeare coarse in his many moments of fidelity to it.

<sup>7</sup> *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (Charlottesville, VA, and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996-2001) I, 446.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold 386. In 1877, Oxford established this chair and Welsh scholar Sir John Rhys served as its first occupant.

<sup>9</sup> Lang 446.

<sup>10</sup> Lang 446.

<sup>11</sup> Lang 446.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold would repeat either this phrase or variations of it throughout his lectures, including "rebellion against fact" and "chafing" or "react[ion]" [usually qualified as "vehement" or "passionate, turbulent, indomitable"] against the fact". He assigns the idea to a "great friend" of the Celt, "Monsieur Henri Martin, whose chapters on the Celts, in his *Historie de France*, are full of information and interest" (344n).

With *Caliban: Suite de "La Tempête"* in 1878, Renan would nevertheless observe that at least one of Shakespeare's characters does indeed rebel. Writing against the short-lived Paris Commune of 1871, Renan imagines a Caliban successful in his rebellion against the fact of Prospero's illegitimate rule over his island but, because of his own incompetence and corruption, proves himself little better as a leader. Renan's *Caliban* represents his own suspicion of the *demos*, if not his notion of an object lesson in French revolutions. In 1901, Yeats would see a similar dynamic at work behind the fall of Shakespeare's figures of regal failure and exploit the distinction between Celts and Anglo-Saxons to position "Shakespeare's Myth" in his only essay devoted entirely to the Shakespearean text.

Yeats stresses with characteristic tact that in his English history plays Shakespeare dramatizes the condition of the king as both thing and nothing, as both man and office, a duality represented by the crown itself and one able to be deconstructed, as it was constructed, by simply taking an oath. The crown can pass peacefully from one king to another or along with the other spoils of war as a signifier of these temporal and atemporal identities, the king's two bodies.<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare shows that Richard II knows the score on the crown's circulation as a symbol of consolidated power better than most. As he declares before a motley crew of nobles assembled at Barkloughly Castle in northern Wales, dejected after their defeat in Ireland and now faced with an insurrection at home:

For within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits.<sup>14</sup>

Until:

humoured thus,  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> *The Life and Death of Richard the Second*, III, ii, 155-57.

<sup>15</sup> *The Life and Death of Richard the Second*, III, ii, 163-65.

But not farewell crown, of course, which soon passes to the usurper, Henry Bolingbroke, an event that later divides the English court into the warring houses of Lancaster and York. Romantic-cum-Aestheticist subjectivity effectively delimits the lyrical displays of Richard II such as this one, a position that Yeats supports in "At Stratford-on-Avon."<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately for Richard II, these flourishes also appear to invite Bolingbroke to take the crown as his own. After all, the laurel better suits "Richard, that sweet lovely rose."<sup>17</sup> Yet Yeats does not so easily oppose poetry to politics on this point. Rather, he brings the competing voices of Shakespeare's play into productive tension by squaring the "dreamy dignity" of Richard II's verse off against the "rough energy" of Bolingbroke's own to point up the flagging monarch as a rebel against fact, a Celt. For Yeats, Richard II serves as the model that Shakespeare now held up before Ireland, the answer to Bolingbroke, and above all, his son Henry V, who served for Dowden as "not only the typical Anglo-Saxon, but the model that Shakespeare held up before England."<sup>18</sup> That Richard II responds with a "sit upon the ground" and the "sad stories of the death of kings" to the news that Bolingbroke has executed his courtiers underscores this point for Yeats.<sup>19</sup> "[Dowden] lived in Ireland, where everything has failed, and he meditated frequently upon the perfection of character which had,

<sup>16</sup> See Walter Pater's essay "Shakespeare's English Kings" (1889), *Appreciations: With an Essay on "Style"* (London: Macmillan, 1922) 185-204. That Shakespeare does not deviate from "the facts" found in his sources – "sometimes in their very expression" – points up for Pater the way in which the lyric provides for dramatic unity amongst the diversity of material in the history plays. Pater's Shakespeare thus becomes a composer, his "lights and shadows" themes. As Pater observes at the end of his essay, "unity of impression" recommends the lyric, which "preserves the unity of a single passionate ejaculation." For Yeats, Shakespeare's Richard II speaks in this way "for all men's fate." For Pater, Richard II would "talk of graves" to indulge in poetry "simply for those moments' sake," adding an aesthetic edge to his experience of the very real forces of destruction that he and his few compatriots now face. Pater's Richard II is neither hero nor poet, but a man of "average human nature" regardless of his knack for poetry. It would appear, then, that Pater's concept of the "irony of kingship" becomes the irony of an ordinary life lived under extraordinary circumstances. Yeats follows Pater to this point before abandoning him in favour of a Richard II heroic in his defeat.

<sup>17</sup> *Henry IV*, I, iii, 175.

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon," *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Early Essays*, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran, 14 vols (London: Scribner, 1990-2007) IV, 73-83 (78).

<sup>19</sup> III, ii, 150-51.

he thought, made England successful, for, as we say, 'cows beyond the water have long horns,'" <sup>20</sup> Yeats observes of his father's friend. However:

[Shakespeare] saw indeed the defeat that awaits all, whether they be Artist or Saint, who find themselves where men ask of them a rough energy and have nothing to give but some contemplative virtue, whether lyrical phantasy, or sweetness of temper, or dreamy dignity, or love of God, or love of His creatures. He saw that such a man through sheer bewilderment and impatience can become as unjust or as violent as any common man, any Bolingbroke or Prince John, and yet remain "that sweet lovely rose."<sup>21</sup>

For Yeats, the "poetic reverie" of the feckless Richard II overmasters the calculated rhetoric that the efficient Bolingbroke uses to marshal his troops and secure the crown.<sup>22</sup> He finds in *Richard II* the means for

<sup>20</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays* 79.

<sup>21</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays* 79. Yeats makes a similar move in "Easter 1916." The ambivalence of his initial attitude towards the Rising becomes clearer as he brings the "bewilderment" of Shakespeare's "Artist or Saint" to bear on the martyred signatories themselves, marking the point when his own bewildered attempt to sort out the causes or reach conclusions about the utility of their actions finally fails. He can now only name the dead "in verse:"

We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
*Bewildered* them till they died?  
I write it out in verse—  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

See Yeats, *Selected Poems and Four Plays*, ed. M.L. Rosenthal, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Scribner, 1996) 83-85. My italics.

<sup>22</sup> This reading of *Richard II* proved an abiding one for Yeats. In September 1937, he saw the play performed at the Queen's Theatre, London. Afterwards, Yeats complained to Dorothy Wellesley of Sir John Gielgud, calling his "as fine a performance [as] possible, considering that the rhythm of all the great passages is abolished. The modern actor can speak to another actor, but he is incapable of reverie. On the advice of Bloomsbury he has packed his soul in a bag and left it with the bar-attendant. Did Shakespeare in *Richard II* discover poetic reverie?" *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 899.

making his case that “Shakespeare cared little for the State, the source of all our judgments, apart from its shows and splendours, its turmoils and battles, its flamings-out of the uncivilized heart.”<sup>23</sup> Frank Benson’s performance in the role during the “Week of Kings” at Stratford’s Memorial Theatre that year impressed this play upon Yeats as “dramatic in the highest sense” with its originally censored deposition scene.<sup>24</sup>

Yeats enlists Richard II as his Celtic co-conspirator in a rebellion against the “stern fidelity to fact,” then, that had sanctified the Anglo-Saxon materialism and British imperialism behind much contemporary Shakespeare criticism.<sup>25</sup> Dowden’s own *Mind and Art* still ranked foremost in this camp when Yeats decided to tackle Shakespeare for himself, reaching a twelfth edition alongside the publication of “At Stratford-on-Avon” in 1901. Dowden had come out against the Revival, professing that the “direction of such work as I have done in literature has been (to give it a grand name) imperial or cosmopolitan and though I think a literature ought to be rooted in the soil, I don’t think a conscious effort to promote a provincial spirit tends in that direction.”<sup>26</sup> For Dowden, Shakespeare “was himself resolved, as far as in him lay, not to fail in this material life of ours, but rather, if possible, to be for his own needs a master of events. The portraits of English kings from King John to King Henry V are a series of studies of weakness and of strength for the attaining of kingly ends. To fail is the supreme sin.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays* 80.

<sup>24</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays* 295. Yeats, George Moore, and Gregory all considered contracting the Benson Company to the Irish Literary Theatre and its successor, the Irish National Theatre Society. See R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 2003) I, 236-37.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Henry S. King, 1875) 165.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in E.A. Boyd, *Appreciations and Depreciations: Irish Literary Studies* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1917) 157.

<sup>27</sup> Dowden, 73. From the archival research of J.O. Halliwell-Phillips, Dowden deduced a Shakespeare commercially motivated in mind as well as art. Halliwell-Phillips’s revision of the Romantic conception of Shakespeare’s wild genius according to the documentary evidence at Stratford compelled Dowden to centre the spiritual identity of Shakespeare on his purchase of New Place in 1597, the second largest piece of property in Stratford at that time.

While reading *Mind and Art* as an undergraduate at Trinity in the early 1890s, Synge himself wondered with due incredulity about his professor's point: "was he [Shakespeare] not more interest [*sic*] about the plays than the pound! The infinite of meditation and of passion both lay within range of Sk's experience and of his art. He thought it more important to feel the great problems are not for the intellect but for these emotions and imagination."<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory from the Shakespeare Hotel in Stratford on 25 April that "I am working very hard, reading all the chief criticisms of the plays and I think my essay will be one of the best things I have done. The more I read, the worse does the Shakespeare criticism become, and Dowden is about the climax of it. I[t] came out [of] the middle class movement and I feel it my legitimate enemy."<sup>29</sup> The first half of "At Stratford-on-Avon" featured in *The Speaker* on 11 May, the second a week later.<sup>30</sup> Together they represent Yeats's attempt to put his own name to the power of Shakespeare's unique dramaturgy, the spiritual significance of which he thought lost on his more materially minded contemporaries. As Yeats concludes, "Shakespeare's Myth, it may be, describes a wise man who was blind from very wisdom, and an empty man who thrust him from his place, and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness."<sup>31</sup> So much for Shakespeare's "infinite variety,"<sup>32</sup> however, sacrificed here to make room for a Shakespeare who "meditated as Solomon, not as Bentham meditated, upon blind ambitions, untoward accidents, and capricious passions, and the world was almost as empty in his eyes as it must be in the eyes of God."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> TCD MS 4373.

<sup>29</sup> Yeats, *Letters* 349.

<sup>30</sup> In *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), the essay appeared intact with the exception of a brief section largely on Frank Benson's performance in the role of Richard II.

<sup>31</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays* 81. Yeats would recover the virtues of the Shakespearean subplot in the short essay "Emotion of Multitude" (1903), *Early Essays*, 159-60.

<sup>32</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, II, ii, 272.

<sup>33</sup> The idea that Shakespeare's mixture of comedic and tragic forms represents a distinctly English national poetic dates back at least to the early eighteenth century and the critic Joseph Addison's ringing defence of his "genius" as sourced from nature rather than filtered through art, from the English countryside rather than the French salon (see *The Spectator* of 3 September 1711). Addison's case found a continental champion in Herder, who pointed up Shakespeare's plays as offering "us Germans" a new literary heading in 1773; see *Shakespeare*, ed. and trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton



Yeats did not make an immediate impact on Shakespeare criticism but, by 1911, things had changed for bardolaters. The heroic poet of "Saxondom" celebrated by the Scottish essayist and translator Thomas Carlyle back in 1841 had come to preside over "the Anglo-Celtic people" now lauded by the obscure English playwright Reginald Ramsden Buckley in his aptly titled *The Shakespeare Revival and the Stratford-upon-Avon Movement*.<sup>34</sup> But some things never change. As Benson himself declares in the volume's introduction, the new dispensation shall embrace "the fervour of the Romance nations, the discipline of the Teuton, the primitive vigour of the Slav, the enterprise of the Scandinavian, the mystic reverence of the Oriental" and unite "the subtle strength of India" to achieve "the triumph of the Aryan Empire."<sup>35</sup> Both Benson and Buckley ride roughshod over the older rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon "racial" supremacy and its concomitant celebration of Shakespeare as a confident if not commercially savvy image of Britain's cultural superiority in a radical departure from Yeats's essay. Consequently, the inclusion of whole pages from "At Stratford-on-Avon" in *The Shakespeare Revival* represents a fundamental misappropriation, albeit only inserted to illustrate Buckley's banal observation that "there is still no escaping from the charm of the conditions of playgoing amid the green meadows and old-world buildings associated with the life of Stratford's dramatist."<sup>36</sup> Yet by overlooking the ideological mooring of the "Celtic note" to Arnold's

University Press, 2008) 16-24. Coleridge, Hazlitt and Shelley just as surely as Goethe, Heine and Schiller testify to how effectively Herder had made his case. Few would now think that Voltaire was onto something when he lamented in the eighteenth of his *Lettres Philosophiques* (1733) on English culture that Shakespeare wrote "monstrous farces called tragedies;" see *Philosophical Letters: Letters Concerning the English Nation*, trans. Ernest Dilworth (New York: Dover, 2003) 85.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993) 96. In 1907, Buckley completed *Arthur of Britain*, a cycle of five verse dramas. He then partnered up later that year with the English composer Rutland Boughton, a friend of G.B. Shaw, to set the cycle to music. By 1908, Buckley and Boughton had almost finished *Uther and Igraine*, the first part of the cycle. Recognizing that no commercial theatre would take on the cycle, the pair proposed founding a communal theatre supported by a small farm to be worked by the company itself. Personal scandal in Boughton's life put the project on hold indefinitely, however.

<sup>35</sup> Reginald R. Buckley, *The Shakespeare Revival and the Stratford-upon-Avon Movement* (London: George Allen and Sons, 1911) 188.

<sup>36</sup> Buckley 25.

liberal unionism, Yeats had indeed left himself open to such misuse as well as abuse.<sup>37</sup>

Not long before he collected "At Stratford-on-Avon" in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), Yeats bumped into a young James Joyce on the steps of Ireland's National Library in Dublin, from where the pair ducked into a café on O'Connell Street together.<sup>38</sup> In the interview, Joyce proved every bit a precocious upstart. "Why had I concerned myself with politics, with folklore, with the historical setting of events," Yeats has Joyce demand in a preface penned for, but never published in, that volume. "Above all why had I written about ideas, why had I condescended to make generalizations?"<sup>39</sup> Yeats recalls "explaining the dependence of all good art on popular tradition," a relationship to which the Shakespeare text testifies for him here as elsewhere. To his defence of the folk and their lore – a defence that he made in essays and introductions written up and down the 1890s – Yeats has it that Joyce simply replied: "Generalizations aren't made by poets; they are made by men of letters. They are no use." A generalization on Joyce's part, to be sure, but one that forced Yeats to face an inconvenient truth: the game of cultural politics in which he wagered his early reputation as an Irish poet had played to a stalemate. Joyce suggests, then, that Yeats and his Shakespeare only retained value as a commodity – that of folk artist – in a marketplace of ideas – that of literary criticism – commensurate with Celtic as the currency servicing their transaction as such. Yeats had attempted to "neither a borrower

<sup>37</sup> See Yeats, "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1897, 1902), *Early Essays*, 128-38. Yeats specifically and Celticism generally served as favourite targets of D.P. Moran. His weekly review, *The Leader*, frequently took aim at the early Abbey Theatre. In addition, his collection of opinion pieces in the popular Irish press from the late 1890s, collected as *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* (1905), questions the nationalist credentials of the Revival. See Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism, 1890-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) for a recent discussion of their antagonism in this context.

<sup>38</sup> Yeats still thought "At Stratford-on-Avon" a success of sorts in 1908, when he inscribed the Irish-American lawyer and art collector John Quinn's copy with the observation that "I think the best of these Essays is that on Shakespeare. It is a family exasperation with the Dowden point of view, which rather filled Dublin in my youth. There is a good deal of my father in it, though nothing is just as he would have put it." *A Bibliography of the Writings of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968) 90.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 103.

nor a lender be"<sup>40</sup> in this economy but, by Joyce's estimation, he stood to lose his shirt all the same.

Shakespeare criticism had become a closed shop in Dublin since Trinity hired Dowden in 1867, a situation to which the Revival contributed its clichés that riffed off Arnold's "Celtic note." Joyce would instead privilege the Shakespearean text as a work of art – one of pure potentiality – rather than as a cultural artefact – one of pure commodity – with the fictionalized debate about *Hamlet* in *Ulysses*. As Stephen challenges A.E.'s assertion that "the words of Hamlet bring our minds into contact with the eternal wisdom, Plato's world of ideas" with "Horseness is the whatness of allhorse" in his own head, he mocks the naïve idealism upon which Yeats had constructed his reading.<sup>41</sup> Joyce then stresses it to breaking as A.E. – George Russell – claims "movements which work revolutions in the world are born out of the dreams and visions in a peasant's heart on the hillside,"<sup>42</sup> a claim akin to Yeats's own made on the day that the pair first met. But Stephen also plays fast and loose with the few known "facts" from Shakespeare's life that feature in his theory, only to learn from the essayist John Eglinton that the local authority on the matter, Dowden, will not speculate about the connection of these facts to "the mystery in Hamlet."<sup>43</sup> While an undergraduate at Trinity, Dowden served as a mentor to Eglinton – William Kirkpatrick Magee – just as he had to Bram Stoker before him. He later helped Eglinton to secure a position with the National Library after several years of unemployment. In the autumn of 1898, Eglinton opposed Yeats in a debate that raged across the pages of the conservative *Daily Express* over the contemporary relevance of Irish folklore and legend. He famously expressed his doubts about "whether anything but *belles lettres*, as distinguished from a national literature, is likely to spring from a determined preoccupation with them."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Eglinton worried that the Irish Literary Theatre could in fact provide a false cultural foundation for separatist Irish nationalism in the stories of Ireland's heroic past.

<sup>40</sup> *Hamlet*, I, iii, 78.

<sup>41</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, et al. (London: The Bodley Head, 1986) 152, 153. Hereafter cited by episode and line number.

<sup>42</sup> 9.104-106.

<sup>43</sup> 9.1072-73.

<sup>44</sup> Each contribution to the debate by Eglinton, Yeats, A.E., and William Larminie appears in *Literary Ideals in Ireland* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899).

Yeats countered that Shakespeare had himself privileged the poetic as popular, that Shakespeare had himself relied on English and European sources of folklore and legend in a manner that neither Eglinton nor Dowden noticed. For Yeats, popular art of the sort Eglinton proposed could do little more than serve the utilitarian goals of whoever employed it.<sup>45</sup> He concludes, then, that the new national drama could reveal “a hidden life” of Ireland as Shakespeare’s own did of England.

However, Joyce’s Shakespeare appears no more the playwright of a Celtic dispensation than an Anglo-Saxon one in this context. Nor does he appear more of a playwright than the “cornjobber and moneylender” that Stephen calls him.<sup>46</sup> To combat the tribalism rotting the core of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, Joyce circulates a fiction of his own about Shakespeare. As Buck Mulligan puts it, Stephen “proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father.”<sup>47</sup>

Once his calculations have secured the support of his audience, Stephen denies his own theory.<sup>48</sup> Eglinton can only deny it circulation in his monthly journal, *Dana*. As Stephen suggests early in the episode, his own method deceives knowingly. He achieves clarity “by seeming otherwise,”<sup>49</sup> forcing his audience to plug their own values into the variables of his equation. Eglinton locates the truth “midway,” concluding that Shakespeare “is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, Stephen’s denial points up the positive hypocrisy that Joyce uses to reconcile the reader to the Shakespearean text’s fundamental alterity, however well contemporary critics such as Dowden and Yeats, Eglinton and A.E. had conspired to overdetermine its meaning in Dublin. Joyce demonstrates the pernicious manner in which cultural politics had come to mediate the relationship between the colonial reading subject and its object in this way to mark the point where the discourse of literary history ends and that of the literary as such begins.

<sup>45</sup> Yeats articulates a position here similar to that found in his essay “What is Popular Poetry?” (1901). See *Early Essays*, 5-11.

<sup>46</sup> 9.743.

<sup>47</sup> 1.555-57.

<sup>48</sup> 9.1064-67.

<sup>49</sup> *Othello*, II, i, 135.

<sup>50</sup> 9.1018-19.

## “CORRUPT PARIS, VIRGIN DUBLIN”: JOYCE’S TALE OF TWO CITIES

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Expounding on his spectral theory of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which is also (if not primarily or wittingly) a theory of himself – for he, like Mallarmé’s Hamlet, is reading *the book of himself* – Stephen, Joyce’s increasingly altered ego, observes in a side note that “Elizabethan London lay as far from Stratford as corrupt Paris lies from virgin Dublin.”<sup>1</sup> At this point, let us bypass the two oddly evaluative epithets with which Stephen’s mind equips the two central loci of his – and also Joyce’s – life, and merely settle for noting that Dublin comes to be associated with the life of the man and Paris with the life of the artist. For it was in Stratford that Shakespeare was seen “into and out of life” and Ann Hathaway laid “pennies on his eyes to keep his eyelids closed when he lay on his deathbed,” and it was in Dublin that Stephen/Joyce stood at his mother’s deathbed, watching her “who brought me into this world [lie] there, bronzelidded, under few cheap flowers.”<sup>2</sup> And it was in Elizabethan London that, as Dumas *père* – or was it Dumas *fils*? – has observed, Shakespeare, “after God ... created most,” and it was in Paris that Stephen was “going to do wonders,” become a “missionary to Europe after fiery Columbanus,” from where he was summoned back to Dublin by a “blue French telegram,

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, et al. (New York: Random House, 1986) 9.149. Cited here as U followed by episode and line number.

<sup>2</sup> U 9.222.

curiosity to show: Nother dying come home father."<sup>3</sup> If Stephen's first flight to Paris was Icarian, then Joyce's second one was truly Dedalian, performing the wonders of his creation.

For it is a well-known fact that the last word of *Ulysses* is not Molly's "Yes," just as the last word of *Finnegans Wake* is not ALP's "the," but both end on a biographical note specifying the locus where these two texts were seen "into and out of life," *Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-21*, and *Paris 1922-1939*, respectively. In this article, while being aware of the possible pitfalls, I propose a *biographical* reading of Joyce's writing, in other words, a writerly reading of Joyce's life, for biography (literally *the writing of life*) is a particularly complex circuit of exchange in Joyce's case. The two centres around and between which to base this reading of Joyce's writing of his life and the life of his writing must be the virgin Dublin and the corrupt Paris. Since space restrictions make it difficult to do justice to either here, both cities will be treated by selecting just a few of their predominant images and tropes both in Joyce's work and his life; focusing on the latter locus will also make it possible for this article to be tied in with the general topic of this volume, for it was in Paris that Joyce's writings came to be increasingly perceived as political and revolutionary.

However, before "corrupt Paris" let us look at "virgin Dublin." One of the oldest and most persistent clichés of Joycean criticism has been to associate the Dublin of Joyce's oeuvre with the one inhabited by his *Dubliners*, which is marked – on the thematic/ideological level – with *paralysis* and depicted – on the formal/aesthetic level – by means of *naturalistic mimesis*. This normally comes accompanied by a reference to Joyce's famous 1906 letters to his publisher Grant Richards, where he speaks of Dublin as "the center of paralysis" and the "scrupulous meanness" with which he depicted the city, as it were, in a "nicely polished looking-glass."<sup>4</sup> Just as Garry Leonard has voiced reservations as to the implications of the former statement – "if Dublin is the center of paralysis, what is the periphery?"<sup>5</sup> – one can indeed wonder about the *polishing* effected upon the Joycean mirror, a

<sup>3</sup> U 3.192-99.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *Letters 1*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking, 1967) 64.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Leonard, *Reading Dubliners Again: A Lacanian Perspective* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) 320.

mirror doomed to “crack” by the end of the very first *Ulysses* episode. The “warping process”<sup>6</sup> of Joyce’s deceptive naturalism entitles him to bedim in the reflection of his polished mirror all the features whereby the turn-of-the-century Dublin resisted or eluded paralysis: its technologically advanced infrastructure (water supply and drainage, electric lighting, rail and public transport systems), vast urban development through suburban growth and numerous housing projects, but also an enlivened societal and institutional ambience.<sup>7</sup>

The city’s ambiguousness is further deepened in *Ulysses*, whose naturalistic side presents a meticulously detailed fictional layout following the 1904 *Thom’s Directory* – so meticulous, in fact, that Joyce boasted that if it were destroyed by some catastrophe, the city could be rebuilt from his rendering. And yet, the carefully reproduced *kosmos* of the “Dear Dirty Dublin”<sup>8</sup> is in constant jeopardy of disintegrating into *chaos* – an emblem of which may be the finale of the “Wandering Rocks” episode, which “mistakes” the Grand Canal bridge for the Royal Canal bridge.<sup>9</sup> Of the many carnival costumes worn by the city at the linguistic pyrotechnics of the night in *Finnegans Wake*, the emblematic one comes relatively early on: “Dyoublong”<sup>10</sup> referring to not only the “doubled,” topological versus toponymic status of the city within Joyce’s fiction, but also introducing some of the *Wake*’s socio-historical concerns, encapsulated in the question: “Do you belong?” This is a question that applies universally to urban citizenship, and it is in this sense that Joyce’s remark to Arthur Power that to “get to the heart of Dublin” is to “get to the heart of all the cities of the world”<sup>11</sup> should be viewed. Needless to say, the issue of *belonging* is to crucially shape Joyce’s “corruptive” sojourn in Paris.

When dealing with “Joyce the Parisian,” the prominent Joycean Jean-Michel Rabaté identifies a similar duality within two prevailing biographical clichés, two different *texts* through which Joyce’s *life* in the interbellum Paris is read: one that might be called Hemingway’s

<sup>6</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 497.3. Cited here as FW followed by page and line number.

<sup>7</sup> For more, see James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 2, “The Paralyzed City.”

<sup>8</sup> U 7.921.

<sup>9</sup> U 10.1273.

<sup>10</sup> FW 13.4.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 505.

Joyce, where the “Irish genius [adds] his own tenor voice to the hoarse chorus of drunken American ‘Pilgrims’ wandering between Odeonia and the cafés of Montparnasse,” and the other the Joyce of Arthur Power,<sup>12</sup> a “secretive writer, living only with his family and a small group of devotees.”<sup>13</sup> While Rabaté’s article strives to demonstrate that although there may well be some grain of truth in both of these clichés, they correspond to different phases of Joyce’s time in Paris, my interest here is a more textual one; the question being, how does Joyce’s portrayal of Paris – whether in *Ulysses* or in *Finnegans Wake* – process and further complicate this duality?

When in July 1920 Joyce came to Paris at the bidding of the ever-agile Ezra Pound for a period that was to extend over two decades, he had behind him the unsuccessful attempt at revisiting the post-war Trieste, whose nascent nationalist soon-to-turn-fascist movement had already begun to stifle all of the pre-war cultural and linguistic diversity that Joyce had cherished so dearly. In the first months of his Parisian sojourn, he repeatedly expressed (mainly to his friend and future translator Valéry Larbaud) his belief that this was meant to be a temporary stay, and voiced his wish to go back to Rome, or – even “further” *back* – to Dublin. It can be seen, then, how Joyce fashions his nomadic exile as a text in a constant process of rewriting – first, the unsuccessful revisitation of the formerly successful years in Trieste, then the envisaged (though never realized) revisitation of the once unsuccessful months in Rome (where he had taken up a temporary position of a bank clerk in 1906-07). Meanwhile, the trip to Paris constituted a Daedalian revisitation of the Icarian flight (and fall) 17 years previously.

Joyce’s surprisingly early and pitifully brief stay in Paris between December 1902 and April 1903 is suspected by his foremost biographer Richard Ellmann of having been part of his designed “experiment in living ... which required that he experiment with living elsewhere.” Joyce’s astonishing decision to go to Paris in order to study medicine, in turn, is seen by Ellmann as “the daydream of himself as Dr. Joyce, poet, epiphanist, and physician, surrounded by

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Power, *Conversations with James Joyce*, 1<sup>st</sup> paperback ed. (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Joyce the Parisian,” *Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 83.



fair women.”<sup>14</sup> That this daydream was soon to change into a nightmare of isolation and destitution is brought home by the first recollection of Paris found in *Ulysses*:

It must be a movement then, an actuality of the possible as possible. Aristotle's phrase formed itself within the gabbled verses and floated out into the studious silence of the library of Saint Genevieve where he had read, sheltered from the sin of Paris, night by night.<sup>15</sup>

In a gesture already anticipating the ostensibly reclusive Joyce of the late 1930s, Stephen shelters himself from the sin of Paris, not with some fresh-from-the-print issue of any of the sundry post-symbolist or proto-avantgarde reviews, but with Aristotle: his knowledge of Paris came through the study of *il maestro di color che sanno*.

Critics are right in pointing out that the crucial event occurring between the narratives of *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*, and thus absent from both, is the traumatic death of Joyce's mother, in *Ulysses* only present as the macabre ghost haunting Stephen's exacerbated filial imagination. However, another spectre – this time haunting Stephen's equally exacerbated artistic imagination – is his ill-fated “mission” to the continent, where he was to father his art, only to be summoned to “come home father” since “nother [was] dying.” There are essentially two different images of Paris, which, juxtaposed, might be seen to represent the dually oppositional extremities of Joyce's art – its naturalistic realism and mythological symbolism:

His feet marched in sudden proud rhythm over the sand furrows, along by the boulders of the south wall. He stared at them proudly, piled stone mammoth skulls. Gold light on sea, on sand, on boulders. The sun is there, the slender trees, the lemon houses. Paris rawly waking, crude sunlight on her lemon streets. Moist pith of farls of bread, the froggreen wormwood, her matin incense, court the air. Belluomo rises from the bed of his wife's lover's wife, the kerchiefed housewife is astir, a saucer of acetic acid in her hand. ... Faces of Paris men go by, their wellpleased pleasers, curled *conquistadores*.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ellmann 110-11.

<sup>15</sup> U 2.67-70.

<sup>16</sup> U 3.209-15.

This is a passage whose germ can be found in one of his earliest letters to Nora and whose reworking Joyce later attempted in *Giacomo Joyce* (for a more detailed analysis, see Rabaté's account<sup>17</sup>); here, the dual unity is nicely exposed in the neat juxtaposition of the "crude sunlight" of the "raw waking" of Paris with her "matin incense [courting] the air." Also noteworthy here is that the trigger for the particular memory is the "gold light on sea," the Sun, the aspiration and doom of Icarus. The next passage depicting another memory from Stephen's Paris-obsessed mind casts light on the crucial mythological dimension posed by the choice of Paris for the Joyce of 1920:

A seachange this, brown eyes saltblue. Seadeath, mildest of all deaths known to man. Old Father Ocean. *Prix de Paris*: beware of imitations. Just you give it a fair trial. We enjoyed ourselves immensely. Come. I thirst. Clouding over. No black clouds anywhere, are there?<sup>18</sup>

Joyce's choice of Paris, like the *amor matris* of Stephen's meditations, may be both an objective and, less obviously so, a subjective genitive. Having at least three options to toy with as regards his future whereabouts, the Joyce of 1920 makes *the judgment of Paris* in choosing the earthly delight and beauty of a city where the account of his flight from and back to Dublin would find its publisher, its typesetter, its first critics and promoters, a city where he would become instantaneously famous, if also increasingly isolated and reserved. And he undertakes his Parisian rewriting of his life in the midst of drafting a chapter which in itself performs a rewrite of the previous chapters written in Trieste and Zurich, the 'Circe' episode:

STEPHEN: *Et exaltabuntur cornua iusti*. Queens lay with prize bulls. Remember Pasiphae for whose lust my grandoldgrossfather made the first confessionbox. Forget not Madam Grissel Steevens nor the suine scions of the house of Lambert. And Noah was drunk with wine. And his ark was open.

BELLA: None of that here. Come to the wrong shop.

LYNCH: Let him alone. He's back from Paris.

ZOE: (*runs to Stephen and links him*) O go on! Give us some parleyvoo.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Rabaté 85-86.

<sup>18</sup> U 3.482-84.

<sup>19</sup> U 15.3866-76.

At Bella Cohen's brothel, Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer<sup>20</sup> have noted, Paris is cast into the role of the other (depraved, outrageous, perverse), meant to reassure the Dublin self of its "normality." Mabbot Street, for all its debauchery, is the "wrong shop" for what is perceived as Stephen's *parleyvoo* manners and sexual tastes. Yet, it should be stressed that what is taken for Parisian depravity has little if anything to do with Paris. The quote from the Latin Psalm harks back to the recent appearance of the beardless, horned face of William Shakespeare; Madam Grissel Steevens, to a popular eighteenth-century Dublin rumour about the swine-faced veiled benefactress; the "suine scions of the house of Lambert" remind us, yet again, of the potentially monstrous outcome of even the healthiest form of sexuality; and Noah's "open ark" puns on the symbolically charged motif of drunkenness and the taboo of witnessing the father's nakedness<sup>21</sup> (and forebodes HCE's exposure and *hesitancy*).

Most importantly, the myth of Pasiphae's "confessionbox lust" brings home the point that in the Daedalus myth, art is an aftereffect of perversion, art is always begotten through sin: Daedalus had first crafted a hollow cow-shaped mould, a guise under which the lustful queen could entertain her passion for a prize-winning bull before having to build his ingenuous labyrinth to hide the monstrous product of this passion, the hybrid figure of Minotaurus. The *ignotae artes* to which Daedalus had set his mind are the arts of hiding, for after all, *ars est celere artem*: and as mentioned above, as long as Paris is – throughout *Ulysses* – the corrupted city of sinfulness, it is also the locus of the corruption of the virginal without which art could not come about. This intriguing link between Paris and Daedalian art is revisited in the second of Shaun/Jaun's watches that form Book III of *Finnegans Wake*:

Once upon a drunk and a fairly good drunk it was and the rest of your blatherumskite! ... Look in the slag scuttle and you'll see me sails spread over the singing, and what do ye want trippings for when you've Paris inspire your hat? Sussumcordials all round, let ye alloyiss and ominies,

<sup>20</sup> Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (eds.), "Introduction: Highly Continental Evenements," *Poststructuralist Joyce – Essays from the French* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 2.

<sup>21</sup> Don Gifford, *Ulysses Annotated. Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*, rev. and expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 513.

while I stray and let ye not be getting grief out of it, though blighted troth be all bereft, on my poor headsake, even should we forfeit our life. Lo, improving ages wait ye! In the orchard of the bones.<sup>22</sup>

Here, suffice it to merely point out the juxtaposition of precisely the *experienced* paraphrase of the *innocent* opening narrative formula of *A Portrait* with the “trippings/trimmings” now rendered unnecessary once you have had “Paris inspire your hat/inside your head.” That Joyce’s *bios* is always present in his *grafe* is displayed in his mention of “alloyis,” not only referring to one of his middle names, Aloysius, but to the illustrious St. Heloise, the fated lover of St. Pierre Abaelardus, who just so happened to teach at the Paris Church of St. Genevieve.<sup>23</sup>

Paris inside his head and he inside Paris – to speak of Joyce’s “settling down” in Paris would be to misunderstand his project of *nomadism within the inside*: the list of Joyce’s Parisian places of residence features no fewer than twenty addresses recorded by his biographers. Nor were those nineteen years without further attempts at flight, normally marking a crisis – the severest one, in 1931, brought about by the coinciding writer’s block, eye troubles, the deepening estrangement of the now certainly deranged Lucia, and the death of his father, resulting in a letter where Joyce, yet again in a most writerly fashion, attempts to structure his life and divide it up neatly into decades.<sup>24</sup> He went to London, but only to suffer the mortification of marrying Nora, with whom he had intended not to live in wedlock, and shortly after returning, he left again for Switzerland.

His settlement in Paris, as suggested by the *Wake* quote, was therefore of the mental, or spiritual, order: from the exaggerated praise for the supposed influence of Dujardin’s otherwise obscure novel *Les Lauriers sont coupés* to his rather amusing invention of the French etymology of his very name (Joyce – de Joyeuse). The ever-

<sup>22</sup> FW 453 20-30.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald McHugh, *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) 453.

<sup>24</sup> “I understand that both Miss Monnier and Miss Beach have written to you to come over for the séance on the twenty-sixth which for all I know may celebrate the close of my Paris career, just as that of the 7<sup>th</sup> of December, 1921, opened it [...] So to conclude I shall probably go into a small furnished flat in London and then perhaps go to Zurich and then perhaps go back to London and then perhaps go somewhere else and then perhaps come back to Paris.” Joyce’s letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, March 1931, *Letters* 1, 302-303.

perceptive Rabaté puts his finger on the very essence of Joyce's liking for Paris when claiming that Joyce "felt in Paris a unique blend of respect for tradition and playful love of experimentation."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, from his missed encounter with Proust (whom Joyce – apart from one frustratingly inconsequential encounter – only met at the latter's funeral in 1922) onwards, Joyce had a close, if also somewhat instrumental, relationship to a whole *pleiade* of experimental writers – from Valéry to Eliot, from Larbaud to Beckett, from Pound to Jolas. It was Eugene Jolas who procured a regular and, unlike with *Ulysses* in the English-speaking world, *uncensored* publication of instalments from *Work in Progress*, and also hailed Joyce, in the famous manifesto opening the February 1928 issue of his journal *transition*, as the leader of the "revolution of language" staged in his multilingual poetics open to languages, cultures and other authors to an unprecedented degree and kind.

Although Power and Ellmann<sup>26</sup> might be right in claiming that these encounters seldom took place in real life, they most certainly did take place in writing, which in Joyce's case, as I have been at pains to show here, is where *real life* "really" happened. Joyce – as his *Wake* puts it<sup>27</sup> – *parised* himself, made himself at home in and "athomed" with the locus of his youthful failure, which he was determined to rewrite with his mature success. In another instance of uncannily doubled rewriting that would have doubtlessly appealed to Joyce, when the critical avantgarde was beginning to catch up with its revitalized literary predecessor, after three long decades of oblivion or contempt for his final Parisian work, its full revolutionary impact was re-discovered and re-realized back in Paris: at the Paris Joyce Symposium of 1975, where another writer, Phillippe Sollers (whose real name was Joyaux), waving a bright red copy of *Finnegans Wake*, exclaimed triumphantly to the baffled audience: "Je vous montre une révolution."<sup>28</sup> A revolution which could not have taken place without the corrupting milieu of the sinful Paris, Q.E.D.

<sup>25</sup> Rabaté 91.

<sup>26</sup> "All [Joyce] would say about Paris, when anyone asked his opinion about it, was that 'it is a very convenient city,' though what he meant by this phrase I was never able to discover" (Power, *Conversations*, 60); "Joyce was now [in early 1922] more at home in Paris, which, he told Wyndham Lewis, was 'the last of the human cities,' guarding its intimacy in spite of its size." (Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 508).

<sup>27</sup> "Parysis, tu sais, crucycrooks, belongs to him who parises himself." FW, 155.16-17.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Morris Beja, "Political Perspectives on Joyce's Work," Jacques Aubert and Maria Jolas (eds.), *Joyce et Paris*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1979) 107.

# **AFTER JOYCE AND BECKETT: ART AND AUTHENTICITY AND POLITICS IN THE FICTION OF JOHN BANVILLE**

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The steady exposure of the aesthetic realm as an historico-political activity has made it impossible to regard “art” in any sense other than to assail the very notion of the special status once afforded to that exalted term. The processes involved in such exposure are historically, culturally and philosophically complex. They are not restricted to an abstract branch of thought; rather it can be broadly argued that the hermeneutical destructuring of the metaphysics of transcendence that was ushered in during the Enlightenment period, and later made the object of devastating inquiry in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example, has conceptually reached for art some sort of critical apotheosis in postmodernity. This apotheosis might be usefully characterized as the feeling of the loss of authenticity.

From this perspective, “art” has long ceased to be viewed as a mediator of truth, but groundedly contains within its own structures the historicity of truth. Such a “death of art,” or its “secularization,” as Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo has termed it, may be viewed as a net effect of extended self-interrogation within the western tradition that

has challenged the very idea of authentic, essential identity.<sup>1</sup> Politically, the various traumas, upheavals and reconfigurations suffered during the twentieth century on national and international scales have concretized to various degrees a deep suspicion in western culture of the concept of authenticity, exemplified in certain European politics, for instance, by a reflexive recourse to relativist standpoints. Consequently, the impossibility of a transcendent art is not only a hermeneutically wrought philosophical position but may also be regarded as the socio-aesthetic expression of the mistrust of essentialisms. Radical critiques of identity that have become the norm in critical discourse are profoundly connected to the political potentialities of art; for the artwork, like the political, depends upon a narrative of legitimation to sustain its authority, a legitimation no longer available without simultaneously carrying an air of authenticity. In this sense, critiques of identity that have become integral to both contemporary art and criticism are part of a wider historical process through which the very concept of stable, essential identity has been called into question. These critiques are accordingly less notable for their radical possibilities than they are for being historically paradigmatic.

In the field of what is termed Irish studies, much criticism shows a commitment either to the embracement of liberation from deterministic history which this process enables, or else through explanations of how unstable identity has always been a feature of the modern Irish historical experience.<sup>2</sup> While the politics of either view are contested, both perspectives have been particularly applied to writers at the forefront of modernism whose experimentalism lends itself to such open interpretation, such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and latterly, may be applied to the work of John Banville. I am restricting myself here to these writers on the grounds that their fiction has generated much debate on where the political interfaces with the aesthetic within Irish modernism. On occasion, these writers have

<sup>1</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 51-64. Vattimo also identifies mass production as contributing to the secularization of art.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion on how modernity has been conceived of in Ireland, see Joe Cleary, "Introduction: Ireland and Modernity," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 1-21.

been considered to be non-Irish writers by virtue of their commitment to European cosmopolitan and modernist plurality and hence their escape from historical determinism and political motivation. Elsewhere they have been regarded as peculiarly Irish writers who record the instability and loss of authenticity as an Irish cultural experience entirely consistent with modernity, since, according to Declan Kiberd, for example, "to be modern is to experience perpetual disintegration and renewal, and yet somehow to make a home in that disorder."<sup>3</sup> But the same operation is at work in each of these critical views: the political nature of the artwork is characterized by a suspicion of a general pathos of authenticity. Current criticism has thus recognized the progressive recognition from within the modernist/postmodernist artwork itself of the decline in the ability of art to maintain itself as a sovereign entity. In historico-aesthetic terms, twentieth-century Irish writing traces this development from the suspicion of authenticity, implicit, though often understressed in Joyce, to the full-blown self-negation of art in Beckett, and present in Banville as a form of political ambivalence derived from a deep concern for the potential of art to assert critical power.

In what sense can the development of this apparent "death of art" – to the point where the goal of the artwork has become to erase its own legitimacy – be viewed as a political act from an Irish perspective? The most obvious critical framework from within which this question might be answered is the field of postcolonial studies. I will return later to Joyce, on whom much has been written about in these contexts, and to Banville, on whom virtually nothing has been written from a postcolonial perspective. Beckett, significantly, is Banville's greatest aesthetic influence, and Beckett's work, often considered troublesome when categorized as Irish due to the erasure of Ireland as a significant presence in his work, might be regarded as the supreme example of the fraught, but instructive, relationship between the modernist artwork and postcolonial identity.<sup>4</sup> I will first briefly outline how Beckett's work has been read as a political fiction, before

<sup>3</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage, 1996) 329.

<sup>4</sup> Banville has been critical of Joyce in a way that he has not been of Beckett. He has on one occasion suggested that "one admires Joyce, one is in awe of him, but somehow one finds it hard to love him ... I do not find myself 'singing' him, as I will for instance sing certain passages of Beckett." John Banville, "The Dead Father," *Irish University Review*, 12.1 (Spring 1982): 64-66.



looking at the political aspects of Banville's work in relation to his two major Irish precursors.

David Lloyd's seminal article "Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject" was the first significant attempt to place Beckett's work within a postcolonial context, and thus establish a theoretical relation between Beckett's aesthetic and Irish postcolonial subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd argued for Beckett's demolition of narrative as the undoing of the bourgeois values that sustained the logic of colonialism – that of political or cultural entitlement as a form of authenticity. Lloyd's article provides a theoretical foundation for a postcolonial reading of Beckett's treatment of the subject, by suggesting that the erasure of the privilege of art in his writing coincides with the refusal to assert positive identity. In other words, the legitimacy of narrative that is required to authenticate identity – a necessity of the colonial enterprise – is disestablished at every moment in Beckett through the denigration of narrative itself. Lloyd therefore views Beckett's work as "the most exhaustive dismantling we have of the logic of identity that at every level structures and sustains the post-colonial moment."<sup>6</sup> Lloyd's argument has proven influential in tracing how the absence of place, specifically Ireland, in Beckett's writing does not preclude postcolonial readings of his work.

Nevertheless, Beckett has often traditionally been regarded more as a European avant-gardist than an Irish writer, partly due to his "exile" from Ireland, for example, or his decision to write in French, or because of his brutal satirization of the Celtic Revival in a text such as *Murphy*. More importantly, the intense interiority and barren landscapes of Beckett's work seems to suggest a desolate topography of the mind rather than an engagement with socio-political realities. Anna McMullan, for instance, has suggested that "Beckett ... troubles postcolonial theory as a writer identified with European metropolitan culture and with the presentation of a dislocated individual consciousness amidst the ruins of history rather than on communal interaction and the construction of alternative histories."<sup>7</sup> However, McMullan concludes

<sup>5</sup> David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993) 41-58.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd 56.

<sup>7</sup> Anna McMullan, "Irish/Postcolonial Beckett," *Palgrave Advances in Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004) 96.

that Beckett's "rejection of national boundaries of identity and history was informed not by a refusal of the struggle for national independence or liberty ... but within the context of a hegemonic social structure and the symbolic systems which legitimized and sustained that structure."<sup>8</sup> Here the suggestion is that all systems that legitimize identity, whether they are nationalist, imperialist or otherwise, are refused in Beckett. This refusal is not an overtly political gesture, but presents itself through the rejection of the power of art to legitimize itself through the act of aesthetic self-annihilation.

Such postcolonial critiques of Beckett potentially widen out what is already immanent in his writing – that is, narrative self-annihilation – to enable specifically Irish political reading of his work. They nevertheless have resonance with Adornean readings that argue that the main characteristic of the best modernist art was its capacity to incorporate its own negation. While Maurice Blanchot's contemporary assessment in the 1950s that "literature is heading towards itself, towards its essence which is disappearance," seems to superficially accord with a literature that is apolitical, Adorno had championed Beckett as the writer of their times for precisely this same reason – his writing appears as a necessary rejection of the politics of cultural authenticity that had enabled Fascism to grip Europe in the '30s and '40s.<sup>9</sup> More locally perhaps, his work can also be viewed as an implied critique of the cultural politics of the infant Irish state. Adorno regarded the "irresistibility" of Beckett's writing as residing in its abandonment of itself "unreservedly to the process of disillusionment;" this abandonment was not accidental but part of the "fate" suffered by Beckett's generation.<sup>10</sup> According to Adorno, art must now "incorporate its own decline" as the process of self-critique continues to dismantle the status of art, allowing silence to become the only available form of revolt.<sup>11</sup> Beckett's works are "not absurd because of any absence of meaning, but because they put meaning on trial; they unfold its history. His work is ruled as much by an obsession with positive meaninglessness as by the obsession with a meaninglessness that

<sup>8</sup> McMullan 97.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "The Disappearance of Literature," *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 136.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Teidemann (London: Athlone Press, 1997) 16.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 320.

has developed historically.”<sup>12</sup> Adorno thus points to the historicity of Beckett’s writing, highlighting both the necessity of its appearance at that particular moment in time and Beckett’s formal representation of human existence in the mid-twentieth century.

Consequently, what we find in Adorno’s understanding of Beckett, and this is repeated in the criticisms of Lloyd and McMullan, albeit with a different focus, is that the political characteristic of his writing is the disestablishment of authentic identity through disorienting narrative to claims to truth. A notable difficulty arises, however, when this disorientation is valorized as a decisive political intervention, because here art could potentially find itself at the service of an ideological agenda and thus not only contradict the possibility that the decline of art is necessary, but that its weakening power is viewed as its great strength.

The most striking example of how the complicated and often paradoxical suspicion of authenticity in the wake of Beckett has asserted itself in contemporary Irish literature after Joyce and Beckett can be seen in the postmodernism of John Banville, who has always situated himself firmly and ambitiously in a literary tradition he believes to be beyond politics. No other contemporary Irish writer has deliberately and strenuously attempted to distance himself from the category of Irish writing, or pursued an aesthetic so far removed from socio-historical comment, suggesting consistently over the course of his career that art is both useless and beyond the realm of politics.<sup>13</sup> But the political character of Beckett’s writing has been something of a blind spot for Banville, where his commitment to a pure aestheticism as a uniquely powerless activity entails a complete rhetorical separation of art from politics and moral didacticism. What we see in Banville’s work is the primacy of art over the political. And yet, by seeking to restore art as a metaphysical ideal, Banville simultaneously restores an ideology of positive identity. So it is that in much of Banville’s writing, the major issue of anxiety concerns this restoration of positive identity in the form of commitment to the autonomy of art.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 153.

<sup>13</sup> “All one wants to do,” Banville has stated, “is make a small, finished, polished, burnished, beautiful object ... I mean, that’s all one wants to do. One has nothing to say about the world, or society, or morals or politics or anything else.” Banville has made similar comments repeatedly throughout his career. Belinda McKeon, “Searching the Undercurrents,” *The Irish Times* 1 June 2005: 14.

Banville's particular view of Irish modernism can be partly glimpsed in his refusal to be named as part of an exclusively Irish tradition. He has even disallowed Joyce and Beckett to be part of an Irish tradition, seeing Irish writing instead as "inevitably an adjunct of English writing."<sup>14</sup> His absolute defence of Joyce and Beckett as typically non-Irish writers has been consistently made on the grounds that modernist literary experimentation had no concern with nationhood. In this sense, the innovations of Joyce and Beckett, for Banville, must be considered a rejection of both the inherent cultural politics of the Celtic Revival and the naturalist social critique that came to dominate Irish writing after Ireland's subsequent independence.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, for Banville, modernism represents a radical break with history and its driving force, the nation. In reading Joyce and Beckett this way, Banville potentially suggests modernist art to be a blissful metaphysic of placelessness.

It has been tempting, therefore, for some critics and Banville alike to draw a line from Joyce's rejection of the Celtic Revival to Banville's repudiation of Irish writing: both writers, it would appear, eschew traditionalist notions of cultural authenticity, reinforced by their commitment to aesthetic experimentation.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, Joyce firmly held that art was beyond politics, and he disowned Yeatsian cultural nationalism. Thus Joyce might be the spiritual father of Banvillian aestheticism because his highest value was art itself. Such a view is not without grounds, but it has led to Joyce's writing being viewed as free from the cultural and political ideologies not only of the Revival, but also free of determination by the Irish historical context altogether. Accordingly, Emer Nolan has suggested, a view of Joyce has developed among critics where "the idea of liberation which his work celebrates is unrelated to Irish culture, proceeding from the creative imagination of the émigré artist rather than from the inert realistic substratum of

<sup>14</sup> Ronan Sheehan, "Novelists on the Novel: Ronan Sheehan Talks to John Banville and Francis Stuart," *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies 1979-1981*, 3.1., ed. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982) 408.

<sup>15</sup> In the work of Patrick Kavanagh, Edna O'Brien and John McGahern, for instance.

<sup>16</sup> Rüdiger Imhof, for example, believes Joyce, Beckett and Banville not to be "Irish" writers at all, because modernist experimentation, he suggests, precludes political concerns. See Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1997) 7-14.

his writing.”<sup>17</sup> But this view of Joyce asserts the authority of the imagination over life and ignores the historicity of consciousness. Joyce’s view of both Ireland and the imagination was surely more complex than that and his own historical self-awareness keener: on the contrary, Joyce’s narratives demonstrate the historicity of subjectivity which prevents the autonomous imagination from completely dominating the quotidian world. As Nolan notes in relation to Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he is “presented as a subject forever in process, and the projected moment of his ultimate self-fulfilment in art is postponed beyond the limit of the narrative;” in *Ulysses* this process is further extended; in *Finnegans Wake* it never ends.<sup>18</sup>

Beckett, too, was notoriously apolitical in his writing, signified by an almost complete absence of fact. The empty landscapes found in his work may be regarded as indicative of his disavowal of politics, but only if we view the paucity of Irish referents in his work as a disengagement from local politics and a relentless examination of the immutable structures of human existence. As has been rightly recognized, however, Beckett’s works are political in the sense that they refuse the politics of identity. This constitutes the political relation of art to reality; as Adorno insisted, Beckett’s writing deals “with a highly concrete reality: the abdication of the subject.”<sup>19</sup> In this, Beckett pushes to extremes the impending powerlessness and unrealisable identity already implicit in Joyce. In *Finnegans Wake*, for example, the authorial voice is annihilated at the very moment it asserts its organizational power. Beckett’s narrative predicament is one of unease at positive identity. Often critiqued as existential, it is also political, connected to his sense of cultural isolation in Ireland and his horror at Fascist totalitarianism.<sup>20</sup> In this, politics and aesthetics find common expression: in Beckett the growing powerlessness of the subject coincides with a suspicion of authenticities.

If all this is also implicit in Banville, is it then the case that his writing, which appears to accord with the ideological emancipation of

<sup>17</sup> Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1995) xii.

<sup>18</sup> Nolan 38.

<sup>19</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” *Aesthetic and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977) 190.

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of Beckett’s sense of cultural estrangement, see Kiberd, 530-50.

Lyotardian international postmodernism, is really a misguided assertion, or even a misreading, of the supposed anti-politicism of Irish modernism? The irony of Banville's work is that its political character is defined by its assertion of the anti-politicism of the postmodern powerlessness of art. Joe Cleary has argued there might be two different ways to approach this form of postmodernism. If it is a movement committed to innovation and transgression, it appears as a belated form of modernism "at a time when innovation and transgression have long since become *de rigueur*, routine, even banal."<sup>21</sup> In this, postmodernism would have all of the trappings of modernism, but none of its dynamism. Alternatively, Cleary suggests, postmodernism might be viewed as a renunciation of the grandiosity of modernism, but if so, it "will almost certainly rebound against it, because such an art, if it is to be consistent, disentitles itself to the kinds of elevated authority that modernist art had sought."<sup>22</sup> In actual fact, Banville's writing incorporates both of these positions by beginning with the former and moving towards the latter. Banville's aestheticism, itself a reaction to a perceived obsession with parochial issues inherent in contemporary Irish politics and culture, aspires towards an ideology of aesthetic authenticity, while simultaneously lamenting the loss of authenticity. His work seeks to restore art as a metaphysical ideal at the same time as it mourns the death of art. Thus, the political aspect of Banville's writing is to be found in both the suspicion of authenticity, and the yearning for authenticity.

Once art has disrobed itself of its transformative power, it becomes empty content. Cleary queries whether Banville represents "the de-energized tail end of the hectic Irish modernist literary experiment."<sup>23</sup> Cleary's concern here arises specifically from the inability of contemporary Irish culture to resist the forces of globalization. He argues that for Irish contemporary writing to regain its critical strength it must be "responsive to the demands of the new global conjuncture."<sup>24</sup> We should add, however, in relation to Banville, that the anxieties of his writing also arise from a diminishing belief in the metaphysical status

<sup>21</sup> Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007) 104.

<sup>22</sup> Cleary 104-105.

<sup>23</sup> Cleary 110.

<sup>24</sup> Cleary 110.

of art coincidental with the suspicion of political ideologies since the kind of wilful dedicated resistance to capitalism that Cleary argues for would also involve a political commitment that is anathema to Banville's aesthetic ideals. In this, his writing defines its own political uncertainty: the question of how a progressive, critical art might be possible in the face of its own annihilation becomes the major anxiety behind his writing. At once abolishing its own premise and threatening to bring an end to itself by falling into silence is, for such a consciously post-Beckettian writer, the only final outcome.

But what can be articulated after nothing can be articulated? Banville's attraction to silence is a continuation of Beckett, but there is an insurmountable problem if art in the wake of Joyce and Beckett is to have any possibility for revolt: that is, how can that revolt be communicated at all without falling into *actual* silence? Not only would this be meaningless, but in addition, for Banville, this form of revolt would have no currency because *something* continually begs to be communicated, and communicated eloquently. In the absence of defined political commitment, all that can be articulated is the pathos of self-pity: melancholy and disillusionment, disappointment and fatalism. The supreme irony lies in the realization that Banville's pursuit of a pure aesthetic, freed from historical determinism, is itself an indicator of the contemporary condition of art, at once committed to its own impotence while nostalgic for an exalted status that art once had.

# COLONIZED ISLAND, DECOLONIZED MINDS?

## **“I LIKE NOT THE RAGS FROM MY MOTHER COUNTRY FOR TO TICKLE THE SENTIMENTS OF MANCHESTER”: SYNGE’S SUBVERSIVE PRACTICE IN *IN THE CONGESTED DISTRICTS***

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*In the Congested Districts* is a remarkable example of investigative reporting within the Irish canon along the lines of left-wing *engagé* writing such as George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), as has been pointed out by Declan Kiberd.<sup>1</sup> The reportage was the result of a tour to the Congested Districts of Connemara and Mayo that the playwright John Synge and the painter Jack Yeats undertook together in the months of June and early July 1905, under the commission of the English newspaper *The Manchester Guardian*. They witnessed distress and attempted to produce an evaluation of the work of the Congested Districts Board (CDB) set up by Lord Arthur Balfour in 1891 as a relief organization and vehicle for the implementation of local enterprises such as fisheries, kelp-making, and textile industries. The politics behind the CDB have been ascribed to Balfour’s Constructive Unionism, “by which the government of the time sought

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<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, “Synge’s *Tristes Tropiques: The Aran Islands*,” *Interpreting Synge. Essays from the Synge Summer School 1991-2000*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000) 84.



to reconcile Irish people with the Union by an amelioration of their social condition."<sup>2</sup> For the reportage, Synge produced twelve articles and Yeats a series of pen-and-ink illustrations that came out between 10 June and 26 July of the same year. Their trip to the West was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration that has been explored by Yeats's commentators and biographers, especially in relation to the illustrations the painter created for Synge's travel book *The Aran Islands*, or the sketches for the costumes of his plays, such as those for *The Playboy of the Western World*. The *Guardian* commission also marked the start of a form of intellectual and artistic communion, as has been emphasized by many experts on both artists.<sup>3</sup>

A common approach to depicting Western distress emerges from *In the Congested Districts*. Synge's no-frills style is correlated to that of the visual material painted by Jack Yeats for the publication. Adele Dalsimer underlines how "Jack Yeats's drawings match Synge's descriptions in subject, in detail, in effect, and in sensitivity to their assignment and their audience," thus creating "a unity in Synge and Yeats's interpretation of C.P. Scott's assignment."<sup>4</sup>

Synge's *In the Congested Districts* gives voice to what Heather Laird, borrowing from Raymond Williams, describes as "Residual Ideology,"

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Grene (ed.), *J.M. Synge. Travelling Ireland. Essays 1898-1908* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2009) xxiii. All subsequent quotations from Synge's articles are from this new edition of his travel articles, abbr. *Travelling Ireland*; for further reference, the date of publication in the newspaper will also be indicated.

<sup>3</sup> See Bruce Arnold, "John M. Synge 1905-1909," *Jack Yeats* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) 133; Ann Saddlemyer, "Synge and Some Companions, with a Note concerning a Walk through Connemara with Jack Yeats," *Yeats Studies*, Vol. 2 (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1972) 29.

<sup>4</sup> Adele M. Dalsimer, "'The Irish Peasant had all his Heart:' J.M. Synge in The Country Shop," *Visualising Ireland*, ed. Adele Dalsimer (Boston; London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 211, 223. See also Anthony Roche, "J.M. Synge. Journeys Real and Imagined," *Journal of Irish Studies* (IASIL Japan), 16 (September 2001) for another example of a shared vision. Roche's analysis concentrates on words and drawings depicting the relief works and the ruthless ganger supervising the workers ("Among the Relief Works," *Manchester Guardian* 17 June 1905, *Travelling Ireland* 50): "Synge's account has begun by singling out from 'the dozen or more men and women working' the figure of the ganger 'swaggering among them and directing their work.' In Jack Yeats's accompanying illustration, the picture is dominated by the ganger in the right foreground, pulling assertively on the lapels of his jacket as his gaze scrutinizes the dozen workers. The former have been described by Synge as 'a slow, inert procession.' Jack Yeats suggests the loss of bodily energy and individual autonomy in the way the shoulders of all four men are sloped and one body mechanically reproduces the inert shape of the other" (91).

that is, “a value system that has outlived its own time, ... unable to function as the dominant ideology in the new social order, but ... capable of demonstrating the limitations of the ideology that is dominant.”<sup>5</sup> At the turn of the century, the people inhabiting the Congested Districts were remnants of a previous economic order – landlordism – that was painstakingly changing, since the agrarian system had been subjected to several years of Land War from 1879 to 1887, and this was still in the process of stabilizing itself. Poverty was rampant and emigration often the only effective remedy in areas that had been severely ravished by the Great Famine previously. The Congested Districts were not only residual territories in a subordinate position from many perspectives – historical, financial, political: they were also in an economic limbo where improvements or activities did not seem to take off, despite numerous measures carried out since the Famine.<sup>6</sup> These colonial marginalities seem to embody the concept of “Subaltern” as Gayatri Spivak has postulated: “Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of Capitalism or Socialism.”<sup>7</sup> The Congested Districts were peripheral and in the process of being economically de-marginalized with the CDB’s “modernizing manifesto.” When Synge went there, after fourteen years of interventions, the sense of economic stagnation was still strong. Moreover, a sense of spiritual impasse and dejection prevailed among the people.

This analysis of *In the Congested Districts* aims to demonstrate how Synge manages to avoid tropes of colonial surveillance, asserting instead “common narratives of cultural remembrance.”<sup>8</sup> Synge proposes both a formal and thematic subversion of what David Spurr describes as the “Rhetoric of the Empire,”<sup>9</sup> exemplified by previous narratives depicting the Congested Districts and aimed at carrying forward

<sup>5</sup> Heather Laird, *Subversive Law in Ireland, 1879-1920* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005) 139. See Laird’s book for further details on the Land War and boycotting.

<sup>6</sup> See Ciara Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891-1923* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) for further details on the CDB.

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Supplementing Marxism,” *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in the International Perspective*, ed. Bernard Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (London: Routledge, 1994) 115.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses. Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) 154.

<sup>9</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of the Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

ideas of Constructive Unionism, stressing philanthropic efforts, and, consequently, ideas of a forced dependence on the colonial mother country for survival.<sup>10</sup> The expression “common narratives of cultural remembrance” is borrowed from the Native American poet and thinker Gerald Vizenor from his book exploring narratives of “absence and presence” in the context of Native American culture, taking into account literary and visual tropes produced about the “Indians” by both Native Americans and colonizers. Vizenor seeks instances of an active presence of Native American tradition, as opposed to discourses of “absence of the native, ... simulations of the Indian ... documents of discovery, cultural studies and surveillance.”<sup>11</sup> The expression “cultural remembrance” that will be used to define the character of Synge’s articles in Connemara and Mayo is charged with what Vizenor terms as “sovenance” implying “presence in remembrance,”<sup>12</sup> in opposition to a mere elegiac keening for the “vanishing” – therefore almost absent – Irish poor of the Western districts.

Synge’s articles subvert the colonialist rhetoric, ultimately achieving a sense of presence. Amongst the devices deployed throughout the reportage, he uses many first-hand testimonies in order to create a plurality of voices and a historical perspective; he possesses a critical awareness

<sup>10</sup> Several philanthropists, such as the Quakers, had travelled around the congested West for a long time bringing relief and writing pamphlets about the situation. In 1880, the Quaker James Hack Tuke wrote a powerful piece – *Irish Distress and its Remedies. The Land Question. A Visit to Donegal and Connaught in the Spring of 1880* (London and Dublin, 1880) – which was so resonant as to attract the attention of Lord Balfour who decided to personally visit the places described and, finally, in 1891, set up the CDB to face the emergency. Tuke also organized programmes of assisted emigration and was appointed member of the CDB. See also the pamphlet by W.J. Sinclair that ferociously attacks Tuke: *Irish Peasant Proprietors. Facts and Misrepresentations. A Reply to the Statements of Mr. Tuke* (Edinburgh and London, 1880). The cooperative movement was also very active, particularly in the person of George Russell, AE. At the end of the century, Russell threaded upon the relief routes as bank organizer for the I.A.O.S. and was appointed editor of the official journal of the corporation, *The Irish Homestead*, in 1905. Both in his official reports and in his editorials, his journalism is clearly militant, moving from plain minutes writing to uplifting paeans, embellished with a grandiloquent style and philosophical quotes, presumably coming from his study of theosophy, aimed at achieving an upheaval of Irish consciences in order to shape them according to self-help ideals. For further reference, see *Selections from the Contributions to the Irish Homestead by G.W. Russell-AE*, Vol. 1, ed. Henry Summerfield (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Vizenor 16.

<sup>12</sup> Vizenor 15.

and sharpness in tackling socio-economic issues, such as the emigration or the monopoly of the shopkeeper – the “shopocracy.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, he de-mythologizes colonial stereotypes of Irishness and Irish way of life, which were often nurtured by figures such as the carman, that Synge effectively depicts as:

the cause of many of the misleading views that chance visitors take up about the country and the real temperament of the people. These men spend a great deal of their time driving a host of inspectors and officials connected with various Government Boards, ... [belonging] to classes that have a traditional misconception of the country people. It follows naturally that the Carmen pick up the views of their patrons, ...<sup>14</sup>

At this stage, the historical ‘behind the scenes’ of the reportage may be informative about the politics of the *Guardian* commission to the Irish artists. The editor C.P. Scott contacted Synge personally in May 1905, and they agreed on the terms of their journalistic partnership and the editorial lines through several letters reconstructed by Bruce Arnold in his study of Jack Yeats.<sup>15</sup> What emerges from their correspondence is Synge’s willingness to accomplish the *Manchester Guardian* “mission” in his own way: “In my letters I could work on the lines you suggest, but I would deal with the problem independently.”<sup>16</sup> Although Scott had accepted Synge’s personal approach without too much resistance, enunciating truthful observation as the only quality he was looking for in a reporter,<sup>17</sup> Synge felt, nonetheless, a certain nervousness about the whole project, not considering it to be using his full potential and unwilling to “lift the rags from my mother country, for to tickle the sentiments of Manchester,” as he wrote to his friend MacKenna.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the *Guardian* was directly involved in the relief activities in the West, as Synge informs us in “Erris,” quoting the work done in Aghoos with

<sup>13</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 7-13, quoted in Ciara Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891-1923. Poverty and Development in the West of Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005) 14.

<sup>14</sup> “The Peasant Proprietors,” *Manchester Guardian* 5 July 1905, *Travelling Ireland* 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold 134.

<sup>17</sup> J.L. Hammond, *C.P. Scott of the Manchester Guardian* (London: Bell, 1934) 53.

<sup>18</sup> J.M. Synge to Stephen MacKenna, 30 May 1905, *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*, vol. I: 1871-1907, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 111-12.

the aid of the funds raised by the newspaper a few years previously.<sup>19</sup> The *Guardian's* involvement began around 1897, when a Manchester Relief Fund Committee was set up in Manchester town hall as a consequence of a shocking report on the conditions in the Districts that Mr James Long, a *Guardian* journalist, had published in the paper.<sup>20</sup> This clearly exemplifies how pamphlet and journalism, to borrow the striking expression coined by Synge, "having lifted the rags," could "tickle the sentiments" of the people for a philanthropic campaign to be initiated. As a matter of fact, in the previous decades, the rags of Ireland had been lifted all too often in order to tickle the sentiments of England. As noted elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> the distress in the West had been particularly predominant in the media agenda since the Famine.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "Erris," *Manchester Guardian* 8 July 1905, *Travelling Ireland* 83.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Stevenson, "West of Ireland Distress," *The New Ireland Review*, 10.4 (December 1898): 192.

<sup>21</sup> See note 10 for the literary sources. Moreover, descriptions of the Congested Districts also appeared in photographic images that accompanied official reports. There are in fact three major photographic collections:

- 1) Tuke's Connemara Album, which goes back to 1892; the photographs were taken by an official, Major Routledge-Fair, on Tuke's request and they were of relevance to an inspection of the territories. However, they were never published in official documents at that time, but were kept "for personal use;"
- 2) A more official collection compiled by the Belfast photographer Robert Welch, following his visits to Connemara in 1894 and 1895 with the Irish Field Club Union, is labelled the Balfour Album, since it was donated to Lord Balfour in 1896 by members of the local gentry, Poor Law Guardians and local clergy;
- 3) Another official CDB collection is held in the National Photographic Archive in Dublin, like Tuke's Connemara Album, and was assembled from 1906 to 1926 with some snapshots taken again by Welch: the Congested Districts Board Archive 1906-1926 gathers 120 photographs (42 attributed to Welch and others may be the work of J.D. Cassidy, photographer in Ardara, Co. Donegal). For further details on the collections, see *Framing the West. Images of Rural Ireland 1891-1920*, ed. Ciara Breathnach (Dublin and Portland, Oregon: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> See Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, ed. Maureen Murphy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998). The American reformer, teacher and bible reader had been visiting Ireland since the early 1840s, working as an independent missionary both in Dublin and in the West (See Murphy's Introduction to the *Annals* 11). A literary connection between Synge and Nicholson is brought forward by Synge's biographer W.J. McCormack in *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000). McCormack argues that Synge would have personally read Nicholson's *Annals* (247, 322). In the same *Annals*, Nicholson mentions a meeting with Quaker missionaries and, in particular, an encounter with James Hack Tuke whose pamphlets and reports were very well known to her (91, 98). This can lead us to believe that, through Nicholson's

The antecedent reports generally possess the characteristic of being part of the whole bureaucratic and cultural apparatus of the colonial power, the epitome of colonial surveillance and constructive unionist bias: they can be theoretically framed in what David Spurr indicates as the tokenistic process of “affirmation,” described as that “rhetorical economy of the media [which] creates a demand for images of chaos in order that the principles of a governing ideology and the need for institutions of order may be affirmed.”<sup>23</sup> Philanthropy and all that revolves around it can be read as instrumentalist to colonialism’s “perpetual need for self-affirmation.”<sup>24</sup>

As regards Synge, his distancing himself from a rhetoric of pity and philanthropic views can be traced back to his academic fosterage in Paris. As Ben Levitas has outlined,<sup>25</sup> he studied socialist thought, and in particular, he read John Hobson’s sociological studies of poverty, *Problems of Poverty. An Inquiry into the Industrial Condition of the Poor* (1891). The English economist’s early sociological study tackles, among various topics, the “sweating system,” the condition of women workers and the “influx of population into large towns,” giving an interesting insight into his evaluation of the moral aspect of poverty. Hobson disagrees with moralizing and patronizing attitudes held by philanthropists concerning a moral cause for poverty and their implied syllogisms that the poor are also bad people.<sup>26</sup> Thus, these ideas might have constituted the origins of Synge’s clever disenchantment that made him subtly aware of socio-political dynamics at stake in the Congested Districts.

Synge’s literary journalism not only investigates and scrutinises, but also opens up into literary moments of memoir. He finally manages to avoid patronizing stylistics by intensifying human participation in the articles, and giving voice – directly – to the people

reports, Synge could have been very likely aware of the Quakers’ relief work in the western seaboard since the Famine.

<sup>23</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 109.

<sup>24</sup> Spurr 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Levitas, “J.M. Synge: European Encounters,” *The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Synge*, ed. P.J. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming December 2009) 118. I am grateful to Dr Mathews for his permission to quote from this essay and from his Introduction to the *Companion*.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Hobson, *Problems of Poverty. An Inquiry into the Industrial Condition of the Poor* (London: Methuen, 1891) 171-72.

experiencing the distress. Throughout the series, Synge refers in passing to a number of “official sources” and organizations at work in the Congested Districts, also showing a technical awareness of economic mechanisms. However, he does not quote directly from the official sources, nor does he use statistics or baseline reports to back up his investigation. Instead, he deliberately uses what can be termed as “first-hand witnesses,” people he met in person on the road and interviewed as the journey evolved.

In stark contrast to the previous specimens of reports, Synge’s “direct speech mode” by quoting verbatim from his testimonies becomes pivotal in the subversion of the colonial tropes highlighted above. Synge’s “common people” become present, functioning in a more active role. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the first-hand testimonies are not word for word transcriptions, but partial reconstructions of the informers’ accounts in conversation with the interviewer. Synge travelled and talked to the people. Despite the hastiness of his and Yeats’s journey, he managed to include a certain range of informers in terms of gender, age and profession. Because of Synge’s knowledge of the Irish language, he could get people to talk about themselves and about things probably not so easy to share with a stranger. As Jack Yeats has recollected, “His knowledge of Gaelic was a great assistance to him in talking to the people. I remember him holding a great conversation in Irish and English with an innkeeper’s wife in a Mayo inn.”<sup>27</sup> Probably because of the intimacy established with a common tongue and Synge’s personal sensibility, they did not feel threatened or particularly annoyed about “lifting their own rags” and providing their interlocutor with many details. As regards the courtesy of people experiencing utmost poverty, in his *The Road to Wigan Pier*,<sup>28</sup> George Orwell makes an illuminating observation which is indicative of a shared sensitivity of the two writers as interviewers:

I cannot end this chapter without remarking on the extraordinary courtesy and good nature with which I was received everywhere. ... If any unauthorized person walked into my house and began asking me whether the roof leaked and whether I was much troubled by bugs

<sup>27</sup> Jack B. Yeats, “Appendix. A Letter about J.M. Synge by Jack B. Yeats. Published in *The Evening Sun* (New York) of 20 July 1909,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 2: *Prose*, ed. Alan Price, (Gerrards Cross: Colyn Smythe, 1982) 401.

<sup>28</sup> George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; London: Secker and Warburg, 1969).

and what I thought of my landlord, I should probably tell him to go to hell.<sup>29</sup>

There is a striking episode where Synge shows this awareness and extreme sensitivity in "Between the Bays of Carraroe" when the old man they met on the road is telling his life story, recalling better times. He seems to be on the verge of experiencing an utmost discomfort, so Synge decides to steer the conversation towards a much lighter topic: "The old man himself was cheerful and seemingly fairly well-to-do, but in the end he seemed to be getting dejected as he spoke of one difficulty after another, so I asked him, to change the subject, if there was much dancing in the country..."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, both this article and "The Ferryman of Dinish Island" with its moving account of a life of hardship experienced by the ferryman attempt a switch of the journey trajectory: what had started as "horizontal travel" characterized by linear and geographical progressions now shifts to the "vertical"<sup>31</sup> mode of the journey, which is the temporary perspective, travelling through time and touching on historical events as well, such as the Land War and Famine. Synge's pieces propose micro-histories, as opposed to predicates of universal history. As P.J. Mathews has remarked,

[Synge's method] is to concentrate on the details of the material and cultural impoverishment of life among the most marginalised of people in remote rural Ireland. The politics of agrarian unrest are not the focus – they are a given. It is the exhaustion and trauma left in their wake at an individual level that is of most concern.<sup>32</sup>

Synge's artistic choice of reconstructing the direct speech of the informers not only aims at giving a major authoritativeness to his sources, but the immediacy of the direct testimony and emphasis on experience lived in the first person recalls storytelling techniques. Furthermore, it aims at subverting previous colonial modes whereby the poor, the oppressed and the subaltern were normally voiceless.

<sup>29</sup> Orwell 68.

<sup>30</sup> "Between the Bays of Carraroe," *Manchester Guardian* 14 June 1905, *Travelling Ireland* 48.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines. Travel, Language, Translation* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 18.

<sup>32</sup> P.J. Mathews, "Re-thinking Synge," *The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Synge* 32.



In these “monophonic”<sup>33</sup> structures, it was generally the commentator with the mastery of his art and his omniscient, dominant perspective that pointed the bias in a certain direction. However, as James Clifford has observed in *The Predicament of Culture*, the plurality of narrators and points of view does not necessarily guarantee objectivity: sometimes, in an anthropological context, it reinforces a series of fake assumptions of objectivity or confirmation of the anthropologist’s testimonies, since he is the one who ultimately organises them in the text.<sup>34</sup> In Synge, however, the “polyphonic choice” not only seems quite a new and pioneering attempt towards the “breaking up of monophonic authority:”<sup>35</sup> it also achieves the value of a political statement, instrumental to the aims of his reportage, which effectively ends up advocating Home Rule as the only effective remedy to uplift the people from material penury and spiritual dejection: “One feels that the only remedy for emigration is the restoration of some national life to the people.”<sup>36</sup>

Not only does Synge describe the conditions of the poor in the Congested Districts, as Orwell was to do in 1937 for the English miners in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he also quotes them directly to provide evidence for his argument on the one hand and, as a subversive strategy, to make them speak for themselves, “breaking up the monophonic authority.” This is reminiscent of a similar device that an Italian writer Nuto Revelli, would later use in 1977 in collecting testimonies of peasant life in the Alps around Cuneo, where World War II and Resistance were fought, and the same mountains de-populated and impoverished by an exodus towards the industrial cities of the plain or emigration to France or America. In the book *Il Mondo dei Vinti* (The World of the Defeated), Revelli personally recorded 270 testimonies of peasant life and extrapolated for publication eighty-five life stories

<sup>33</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1988) 50.

<sup>34</sup> James Clifford describes how twentieth-century ethnography sometimes quotes “extensively and at length from informants in order to manifest collaborative production of ethnographic knowledge,” remarking, however, that “such a tactic only begins to break up monophonic authority. Quotations are always staged by the quoter and tend to serve merely as examples or confirming testimonies.” Clifford 50.

<sup>35</sup> Clifford 50.

<sup>36</sup> “Possible Remedies – Concluding Article,” *Manchester Guardian* 26 July 1905, *Travelling Ireland* 98.

translated into “Hiberno-English Italo-Piedmontese.” He conducted his research using mediators who accompanied him to visit these mountain survivors. In two introductory chapters, he explains how he carried out his investigation and how he finally chose and constructed the short stories. He also contextualizes them and gives his interpretation of historical and socio-economic phenomena. After that, the rest is all “micro-histories,” personal testimonies introduced only by a title, the name of the informer, his age, the date the interview was held, and the name of the mediator. His intent to write an alternative history, re-engaging in a dialogue with “the world of the defeated” is announced in his introduction as follows:

I dati statistici, le ‘mozioni dei partiti’ I documenti ufficiali delle associazioni contadine, le inchieste a livello scientifico, sono ‘storia’ scritta dagli ‘altri’ e mi interessano marginalmente. Scappo da Cuneo, citta’ sorda e bigotta, e cerco il mondo dei vinti, dove un dialogo e’ ancora possibile, dove col dialogo respira la vita. ... E’ il mondo dei vinti che mi apre alla speranza, che mi carica di una rabbia giovane, che mi spinge a lottare contro la sociera’ sbagliata di oggi.”

[Statistics, parties’ motions, official documents of peasant corporations, scientific enquiries are “history” written by “others” and they are of marginal interest to me. I run away from Cuneo, a deaf and narrow-minded town, and I go looking for the world of the defeated, where a dialogue is still possible, where, through dialogue, I can breathe life. ... It is the world of the defeated that gives me hope, and a young rage that pushes me to fight against today’s wrong society.]<sup>37</sup>

Although Synge’s and Revelli’s realities are distant in space and time, they both share a responsible and coherent engagement, both thematic and formal, in “breaking up the monophonic authority” and building instances of cultural remembrance expressing a polyphonic, plural and dialogic structure that moves from a macro-narrative towards a micro-framework.

<sup>37</sup> Nuto Revelli, *Il Mondo dei Vinti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977) xxvi. My translation.

# **“ENGLISH IN TASTE, IN WORDS AND INTELLECT”: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POLITICS OF THE IRISH NATIONAL SCHOOL BOOKS**

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The cultural revival which developed in Ireland during the later part of the nineteenth century may be described as an aesthetic programme designed to re-connect the Irish people with their Gaelic language and culture, in an attempt to counteract the subordinate and submissive identity cultivated by the colonial administration through a direct promotion of Anglican culture. Indeed, Declan Kiberd argues that Ireland was viewed, and accordingly “invented” by the English as the colonial other: “Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters.”<sup>1</sup> One such “experiment” which had obvious implications for Ireland’s cultural identity was the establishment of a national system of education, and it is this phenomenon and its relationship to national culture and identity that this essay explores.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995) 1.

<sup>2</sup> The system was not merely experimental, but it was an atypical case for western education in general: its growth and expansion was not accompanied by an increase in urbanization and industrialization, whilst it would be another forty years before any comparable system was introduced into England.

In 1831, the British government withdrew financial support from all voluntary education societies in Ireland, to create a national system of education under the terms laid out by Lord Stanley, Chief Secretary of Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Under this method, children of all denominations were to be educated together. Schools were controlled by a board of government-appointed commissioners who were made responsible for inspection, teacher training, and the suspension/dismissal of teachers, and the editing, printing and sale of all text books connected with the system.

However, although reflections on Ireland's colonial and postcolonial period often view cultural nationalism as an important "force" in the propagation of "ideas," the role of the educational text in such explorations is repeatedly neglected. Part of my aim here is to address this situation by offering a brief analysis of the educational texts that were disseminated on a national level amongst Irish school children during the system's first two decades. These texts were read by children across Ireland and as such were ideally placed to provide a form of cultural imperialism; one aimed at defending the political reality of British rule. This essay will open by situating the Irish child's colonial subjugation as a "given" motif of the system's establishment, looking closely at the school texts so as to reveal their connection with cultural issues of power relations. Attention will then turn to the didactic nature of the texts, examining the ways in which a self-conscious attempt at reinforcing the colonial enterprise in Ireland was nevertheless interspersed with an ideologically charged meta-narrative. My concern here will be to argue that this underlying narrative mix complicates the system's relationship to colonialism as it produced, albeit perhaps subconsciously, educational texts that offered an alternative and potentially 'dangerous' version of Irishness than that specifically designed to subdue and contain the Irish child.

There was a general recognition at this time that education systems were ideally placed to represent the cultural and social agenda of

<sup>3</sup> The largest sums were awarded to the Kildare Place Society which was in receipt of £30,000 in 1831, directly prior to the establishment of the national system. At that time, the Society ran 1,621 schools with 137,639 children on roll. However, numbers were declining due to increased Catholic mistrust and, in September 1831, the £30,000 grant was transferred and used to create the national system. See Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment. The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1970) 87-91.

British imperialism. Children could be “socialized” through taught cultural, linguistic, moral and social codes.<sup>4</sup> Debates aligning colonial systems of education with the subjugation of subject peoples have, perhaps predictably, come to dominate the study of such institutions. In the case of Ireland, Elaine Sisson, describing the introduction of the national system, states:

... the British government swiftly brought the planning, development and writing of the school curriculum under its own supervision. Imperial ideals were institutionalized through a rigid curriculum with prescribed textbooks written especially for Irish schools.<sup>5</sup>

She strongly portrays this as a “brutal colonial educational system which continually privileged the teaching of English history and geography and which promoted the cultural and moral superiority of Englishness over Irishness.”<sup>6</sup>

This line of argument is indeed compelling. Certainly the gradual decline of illiteracy during the nineteenth century, which the system as the largest educational provider helped to bring about, did lead to the adoption of English as the literate language. Furthermore, the early texts which helped bring about this decline were devoid of content relating to Irish history and culture. But as this essay aims to show, Anglicization, and with it the loss of an indigenous cultural

<sup>4</sup> In 1835, such an ideal was clearly stated by the English government as an essential requirement for subduing the colonial subject in India. In his 1835 Minute on Indian Education, delivered to the House of Commons, Thomas Macaulay declared: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.” Cited in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995) 430.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Sisson, *Pearse’s Patriots. St Enda’s and the Cult of Boyhood* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004) 24.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Sisson 23. Likewise, John Coolahan, writing on the history of Irish education, proposes that the national system was initiated by the British government during the political era of Union and Catholic Emancipation as a means of “cultivating attitudes of political loyalty and cultural assimilation.” John Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1981) 4.

identity, did not necessarily lead to the direct homogenization of colonial subjects, but may instead have produced a heterogeneous identity still open to nationalist persuasion.<sup>7</sup>

The ideal of a non-denominational state system, essentially providing combined literary instruction, naturally called for the introduction of secularized school books. Hence, within four years of the system's founding, the commissioners had developed a scheme of five graded reading books which formed the core of the curriculum content. These books provided a sequenced method of instruction, taking the child from the basics of elementary literacy to much higher levels of conceptual learning equivalent to today's secondary mode of education. Each national school was granted a free stock of the commissioners' books which were renewed on a regular basis, with extra copies available at a considerably reduced rate. The figures for 1851 tell us that almost 300,000 of these books were sold to Irish schools with a further 100,000 more given as free stock.<sup>8</sup> At this time, there were 4,704 national schools in operation with an average daily attendance of 282,575 in total. These first published editions were therefore handled by a large number of Irish school children, and remained in circulation until at least 1865.<sup>9</sup> Hence their significance for the cultural impact on the Irish child reader should not be overlooked.

As noted above, latter day commentators have described the national curriculum disseminated through these books as a unique tool for imposing imperialistic ideals on to the Irish child in order to promote 'consensual' subjugation. Bearing in mind the number of children who would have come into contact with these school books, it is easy to see why this might be the case. Indeed, only one of these texts – *The Third Book of Lessons* (1835-46), was compiled by an Irish Catholic – William McDermott, employed as a literary assistant from

<sup>7</sup> This paradox draws on Bhabha's thesis, identifying the exclusion of the native culture as counterproductive, since it engenders resistance through ambiguities effectively produced within transparent models of authority. See Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985): 144-65.

<sup>8</sup> J.M. Goldstrom, "Richard Whately and Political Economy in School Books," *Irish Historical Studies*, 15 (September 1966): 136-37.

<sup>9</sup> A selection of the text books first published in the 1830s were still in use in 1870. See Akenson 231, for a concise list.

1832 to 1834 and later as an inspector of the board. This is particularly significant if we consider that the national system has been aligned with having vastly reduced the levels of illiteracy amongst the Roman Catholic population during this period.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this edition was subsequently revised in 1846 by Dr Whateley, the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin and national commissioner.<sup>11</sup> Whateley's modified edition removed not only a description of the Lakes of Killarney and the Giant's Causeway, but also a two-page entry of patriotic verses by Mrs Balfour which contained references to "the harp" and the "native land," along with Sir Walter Scott's poem *Love of Country* which asks:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own my native land?<sup>12</sup>

It is not clear why this original edition was allowed to remain for the first decade of the system's standing, especially as all commissioners had to agree on the content of the books prior to publication,<sup>13</sup> but this subsequent revision does provide evidence for the necessary removal of nationalist/Irish content from the school books. Within the 'unedited' sections of this text, children were presented with passages aimed at reducing the cultural distinctiveness between the Irish and English: "The people of these islands have one and the same language (all at least who are educated), one and the same Queen – the same laws; and though they differ in religious worship, they all serve the same God, and call themselves by the name of Christ."<sup>14</sup> This extract also shows the system's non-denominational aim to reduce secular conflict within Ireland by promoting integration and in turn buttressing the political reality of Union. Examples of this kind can be found throughout the series of Readers, all of which

<sup>10</sup> Figures compiled from the Census of Ireland, 1901, illustrate that in 1861, 45.8% of the Catholic population could neither read or write, yet by 1901 this figure had dropped to 16.4%. Cited by Akenson 377.

<sup>11</sup> Akenson 231.

<sup>12</sup> *Third Book of Lessons for the Use of the Irish National Schools* (Dublin: The Commissioners for National Education, Ireland, 1836) 250-51.

<sup>13</sup> At that time, there were seven commissioners: three Anglican, two Presbyterian and two Catholic. See Akenson 117.

<sup>14</sup> *Third Book of Lessons* 154.

avoided reference to Irish history or culture, instead providing lessons that taught good moral and social behaviour combined with Biblical stories adapted for use by all denominations. However, at this point, it is important to consider that according to evidence gathered by the commissioners, the majority of school children were engaged with the study of the *First and Second Book of Lessons*.<sup>15</sup> With this in mind this essay will now focus on an analysis of these elementary texts to consider how the practice of learning to read was tied in with concerns relating to the socialization of the Irish child, and how this in turn was tied into Ireland's 'colonial' position.

The *First Book of Lessons* was formulated to teach the forms and sounds of letters, before progressing to the reading of words of one, two and three syllables. It contained simple sentences which gave no sense of continuous story but instead used jingles and mottoes to teach morals and virtues such as honesty, benevolence, industry, kindness to animals and generosity, such as the following typical examples:

*If I sin, I am bad. Let me not sin, as bad men do.*

Ned hit Tom a rap; his lip bled. *It is a sin to do ill.*

I hate to do ill; I was not made to be bad.

An ant is wise in art; do it no harm. If Tom runs, will he pant? ask him.  
Is it a fact that Ned broke his arm? *I will do no bad act.*

Sam must not hurt my horse.

*A good boy will not tell a lie. Sin is the cause of all our woe.*<sup>16</sup>

These initial texts were used to instruct "beginning" readers in correct moral and social behaviour, and other than promoting the use of the English language, do not seem to contain any specific 'colonial' content. However, there is no notable relevance to everyday Irish life,

<sup>15</sup> The Report of 1865 shows that 282,196 children or 41.80 percent were studying Book I, whilst 182,088, or 26.97 percent of children were using Book II. *Thirty-second Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, for the year 1865*, 13 [3713], H.C. 1866, xxix.

<sup>16</sup> *First Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools* (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1836). 11, 12, 16, 17, 32. Emphasis in the original.



while there is a noteworthy concern to promote obedience and submissiveness. Hence, the promotion of nationalistic feeling was avoided within a narrative that endorsed compliance; essential for the smooth running of any colonial administration. The children would progress from this text to the *Second Book of Lessons*, which continued practice in reading and spelling within a framework that may be considered 'colonial' in nature as the political reality of "Union" is promoted through an emphasis on Ireland's geographic and linguistic ties with England. As in the *Third Book of Lessons*, the existence of a separate Irish culture or language is ignored in favour of sentiments expressive of a strong cultural affinity with England:

The country you children live in, is Ireland ... On the east of Ireland, is England, where the queen lives; many people who live in Ireland were born in England, and we speak the same language, and are called one nation.<sup>17</sup>

Many towns, and a large extent of country, make a kingdom; it is enclosed by mountains; it is divided by rivers; it is washed by seas; the inhabitants thereof are fellow-countrymen; they speak the same language; they make war and peace together – a king is the ruler thereof.<sup>18</sup>

Ireland is referred to as a separate geographical entity but any move that might stimulate Irish nationalism is carefully avoided. Instead, children are presented with the image of the English migrant who culminates the ideal of a shared linguistic heritage and sovereignty. English culture was also presented as being separate, superior, and worthy of imitation:

It is thought that the apple-tree is a native of the East. ... it has no where been brought to greater perfection than in England.<sup>19</sup>

For size, strength, swiftness and beauty, the English horses now excel those of every other part of the world. English race horses often run at the rate of a mile in two minutes.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Second Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools*. (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1835) 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1835 176.

<sup>19</sup> *Second Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools*. (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1837), 109.

Extracts such as these can be found throughout the series of Readers, suggesting that the underlying aim of the commissioners was to promote a version of national education that would uphold the system of colonial administration. This factor was later addressed by Padraig Pearse in his 1908 essay "Murder Machine." Here, Pearse censures the system for the loss of a national Irish identity, describing the curriculum as implicitly imperial, forced on the Irish child in an attempt to alienate him from his own literature and culture.<sup>21</sup> In Pearse's eyes, the system aided subjugation as it fashioned notions of inferiority within the child's imagination, separating him from his own cultural background.

However, other contemporary commentators describe the system as one of educational anarchy in which teachers were responsible for promoting anti-colonial feeling. For instance, the 1916 Commissioners' Report describes allegations made against National School teachers suggesting they had abused their position, encouraging school children to rebel against the British government.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in 1851, Dr Cullen, then Archbishop of Dublin, linked the National Schools with Fenianism. However, this may be read as a biased and opportunist form of criticism since Cullen was openly opposed to both state intervention in Catholic education and the interdenominational form the system promoted.<sup>23</sup> Here, then, we are presented with the idea of a dual system; one able to produce citizens either loyal or disloyal to government. Yet, as shown above, the curriculum was designed to promote ideas of Union and cultural affinity, carefully avoiding anything that might stimulate Irish nationalism. Nonetheless, on closer examination, it would seem that these cautiously controlled texts were

<sup>20</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1837 104-105.

<sup>21</sup> Padraig Pearse, "The Murder Machine," *The Complete Works of P.H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix, 1924).

<sup>22</sup> Public Record Office Northern Ireland: doc. ED/10/1/52: *Eighty-second Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland 1915-16*. This Report refers to instances of alleged disloyal teaching: "Shortly after the Rebellion of Easter, 1916, our attention was called to statements which appeared in the public press, both in Ireland and in Great Britain, in which the writers alleged that the deplorable occurrences which then took place in Dublin and other parts of Ireland, were to some extent to be attributed to the character of the teaching given in many of the national schools." (7; my emphasis).

<sup>23</sup> See E.R. Norman, *The Catholic Church and Ireland in the Age of Rebellion 1859-73* (London: Longmans, 1965) 96.

indeed able to contain an underlying narrative capable of offering an alternate reading to that intended by the central administration.

Within the Preface to the *First Book of Lessons*, teachers are told to “exercise them as much as possible on the *meaning* of such words and sentences as admit of being defined and explained.”<sup>24</sup> Considering the substance of this Reader, such an instruction was probably set to ensure the child understood the moral essence of the lessons. However, when this note is set against certain extracts from the text, complications begin to emerge in which readings become dependent on the political affiliation of the teacher. For instance, one of the first lessons tells us that “Tom had a gun,”<sup>25</sup> whilst further on we have the seemingly unrelated sentences: “The wind blew off my hat. There has been a feud in that tribe for more than a year. Let each man have his due. Brew some beer.”<sup>26</sup> This is accompanied by similar phrases in subsequent lessons such as “It is fraud to take what is not yours. Read this clause,” or “All men must die. Let us take a walk in this green field. That fierce man is chief. What is a shield? Is he a friend or foe?”<sup>27</sup> I would argue that extracts such as these have obvious connotations for any teacher wishing to “define” or “explain” Ireland’s history of anti-colonial struggle, allowing for an interpretation linked to power and politics even though the book does not contain any direct affiliation with Irish history or culture. Officials connected with the system tested the children on their ability to read the texts, and therefore did not concern themselves with looking at how phrases such as “friend and foe” or “have his due” may have been understood by the children, thereby allowing any form of dissolute teaching to remain undetected.

Although extracts such as these did allow for an alternate reading of the text, considering the elementary level of these lessons, such an interpretation would be dependent on the teacher’s portrayal of the work. The *Second Book of Lessons*, however, was edited with the assumption that children would have already acquired basic reading skills, yet again the lessons are complicated by an underlying, more problematic form of discourse: “We should never assume a character

<sup>24</sup> *First Book of Lessons* 1836 2.

<sup>25</sup> *First Book of Lessons* 1836 10.

<sup>26</sup> *First Book of Lessons* 1836 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> *First Book of Lessons* 1836 29, 32.

which does not belong to us.”<sup>28</sup> This seems to warn the child not to succumb to the text’s attempt at cultural assimilation. The sovereign power is also questioned, using a narrative that would perhaps easily register with the system’s Catholic children:

Monarch, who rulest over a hundred states; whose power is terrible as death, and whose armies cover the land; boast not thyself as though there were none above thee: God is above thee: His powerful arm is always over thee; and if thou doest ill, assuredly he will punish thee.<sup>29</sup>

Here, the text offers a lesson in divine retribution, seemingly suggesting to the child that any form of “sovereign” mistreatment would be punishable by God. This ideal was reiterated to the children through four lessons narrating the Biblical story of Abram. The story begins: “God appeared twice to Abram and renewed his former promise, that he should be the father of a great nation, and that his descendants should inherit the land, in which he was a sojourner.”<sup>30</sup> It then moves on to tell the fate of Abram’s enemies, recapping the tale of God’s removal of an “unworthy” monarch: “the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah, brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all that dwelt in the cities.”<sup>31</sup>

As the Preface to this textbook instructs the teacher to ensure pupils can both read and understand the Lessons, the same question arises as to how such extracts may have been interpreted and/or taught by teachers/readers who were not “loyal” to British rule. Furthermore, as these children were developing into independent readers, their life outside of school may have had an impact on any controversial interpretation of the text. This becomes especially significant when considering the *Third Book of Lessons* that was not only aimed at the more advanced reader but openly discussed the correlation between education and colonization. The spread of schools and Christianity are explained as being fundamental to the civilizing mission of colonization and imperial expansion, yet within this text the Irish child is seen as being central to this endeavour rather than being a victim

<sup>28</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1837 159.

<sup>29</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1837 178.

<sup>30</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1837 84.

<sup>31</sup> *Second Book of Lessons* 1837 87.

of it. For instance, Africa is marked out as a country in need of such a civilizing mission: "Africa is the barren region of the earth both as respects the nature of the soil and the moral condition of its inhabitants."<sup>32</sup> Read by an Irish child, such a description may lead to feelings of cultural/national superiority when comparing themselves to Africa's immoral citizens and barren land. Furthermore, the child is presented with images encouraging him or her to take part in any future colonizing mission: "... it will present new scenes and objects of commercial enterprise, and it is certain that it will open an almost unbounded field for Christian philanthropy and missionary zeal."<sup>33</sup>

Africa was not the only nation dealt with in such a way. Other lessons, for example, referred to the inhabitants of Lapland who were described as "extremely ignorant," "indolent" and "dirty," whilst both the native Australian and New Zealander were described as being "among the lowest and most ignorant savages in the world" as they were "cannibals, or eaters of human flesh."<sup>34</sup> Hence, although Ireland was not referred to in a distinctly national way within these texts, the Irish child was still able to gain a sense of his own cultural superiority when reading portrayals of the racially inferior and uncivilized other.

Moreover, national school children were not presented with images of themselves as the inferior colonial "other" as was the case within English texts which represented the Irish as uncivilized, ignorant and irrational.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when injustice was voiced over the national system, it was not the stereotypical image of an uncivilized Irish child that was drawn upon, but one who has been deprived of learning about his own language, culture, history and tradition.<sup>36</sup> This in itself had the potential to cause complications within any educational system designed as a method of cultural assimilation. The Irish child was to be educated through the promotion of the English

<sup>32</sup> *Third Reading Book for the Use of Schools* (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1843) 167.

<sup>33</sup> *Third Reading Book* 169.

<sup>34</sup> *Fourth Reading Book for the Use of Schools* (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1861) 80. 154, 56. Although this particular edition is of a later date, this text was in continual use from 1835-67.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see *Our Irish Theatre* (1897), as reproduced in Lady Gregory's memoir which states: "We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism."

<sup>36</sup> See Pearse, "Murder Machine."

language and culture, but this diffusion could lead to conflict as the child took on board lessons of equality rather than subservience, whilst the presence of a more problematic underlying narrative could produce further anti-colonial tensions. As Homi Bhabha has argued, resistance to authority may indeed surface from such textual ambiguity:

[Resistance is] not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the "content" of another culture ... It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power.<sup>37</sup>

As this essay shows, the texts carried messages of unionism and the socialization of the subject but also contained an underlying discourse which had the potential to disrupt any colonial endeavour. It is also important to recognise that there is no one simple and straightforward explanation in education as a basic strategy of central social mechanism. Although it can be said that learning to read and write was of little importance in itself – children had to be instructed in their relative duties within society in order for the education they received to be beneficial – each of them would have also been a family child, a working child, a street child, an urban or a rural child, a child whose social class and other experiences may not have been identical to those of his or her classmates. Hence, it becomes almost impossible to predict the message each individual child would have gained from the national texts. Thus, my interest here has been in the thinking behind the national system as displayed through its books, in order to draw attention to ambiguities present within the narrative. Perhaps then, when Douglas Hyde criticized his fellow countrymen for "ceasing to be Irish without becoming English,"<sup>38</sup> he was implicitly referencing a schism of identity brought about by a national education system that was indeed devoid of Irish literature and tradition, but that failed to fully Anglicize the subject due in part to the textual ambiguities described above.

<sup>37</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders* 153.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" (1892), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. II, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 527.

# PEARSE, PARNELL OR THE PRIESTS? THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN THE IRISH SCHOOLBOY NOVEL

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By the end of the nineteenth century, there were only two novels that can be properly said to conform to an “Irish schoolboy novel” template – that is, a novel based primarily on life at an Irish boarding school for boys.<sup>1</sup> By the beginning of World War II, eleven novels had been written about boarding school life in Ireland, with all but two of them taking their inspiration from attendance at a leading Catholic school. These novels ranged from simple replications of earlier English schoolboy novels to the later and much more subversive takes on the genre, which include much more famous, and perhaps much more important texts, such as Francis Hackett’s *The Green Lion* (1936), and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Despite the popularity of juvenile fiction in Ireland and Britain, the majority of these novels have been critically ignored, even in recent surveys of the period.<sup>2</sup> The Irish schoolboy novel is best understood in relation to the Irish *Bildungsroman* tradition – but this article will

<sup>1</sup> We can make a rather speculative case for William O’Brien’s *When We Were Boys*, published in 1890, although it is really more of an overtly nationalist *Bildungsroman*, and indeed, Percy FitzGerald’s *School Days at Saxonhurst* (1867), also merits a mention, although it is based on Stonyhurst College in England.

<sup>2</sup> For example, John Wilson Foster finds no room for them in his excellent recent survey *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

focus purely on the Irish schoolboy novel's negotiation of history, politics and identity in relation to two of the later texts, Francis Hackett's *The Green Lion* and Kathleen Pawle's *We in Captivity*, both published in 1936. Juvenile literature tends to lionize and to denigrate – in short, it needs its heroes and its anti-heroes, and unlike other, more stable genres, it has licence to create and recreate history in order to appeal to the imagination of a youthful audience. What results is a sometimes glorious, sometimes comical, rewriting of political history.

As literary subgenres go, the schoolboy novel is relatively easy to pin down. It began in 1857 with the publication of a book that enjoyed enduring popularity through the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.<sup>3</sup> Written by Thomas Hughes, an old boy of Rugby College, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* came to define public school education, and allied it to what David Newsome has called the ideals of "godliness and good learning."<sup>4</sup> By the time Hughes died some forty years later, over seventy editions had been printed, with popular editions appearing as late as the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The book, though didactic and self-consciously moral, did much to popularize and publicize English public school education. Hughes had created something of a monster, and an entirely new market. As the nineteenth century came to a close, the genre was firmly established, so much so that the novelist Henry James was led to question its merit and usefulness in 1900:

The literature, as it may be called for convenience, of children, is an industry that occupies by itself a very considerable quarter of the scene. Great fortunes, if not great reputations, are made, we learn, by writing for schoolboys...<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There were earlier examples, but none so popular. See Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London: John Murray, 1961) 28-92.

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Mack, *Thomas Hughes: The Life of the Author of 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'* (London: Benn, 1952) 90.

<sup>6</sup> Henry James, "Future of the Novel: An Analysis and a Forecast," *The New York Times* 11 August 1900: BR 13.



From the original stuffiness of the early schoolboy novels such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, or *Eric, or Little by Little*, by Dean Farrar, the genre proved elastic enough to incorporate the popular stories of writers such as R.M. Ballantyne and G.A. Henty, all of whom generally concentrated their novels more on Empire adventure themes. The quality of these stories may well have been dubious, and subject to the derision of authors such as James – but very often they outsold him.

The genre had a definite impact in Ireland, too. By the 1870s and 1880s, periodicals such as *The Boys Own Paper* were widespread and available cheaply all over the island of Ireland. The Intermediate Education Act of 1878 had also helped to create a coherent schoolboy audience in Ireland by increasing child literacy and by encouraging school attendance. In the 1909 issue of the Castleknock College Chronicle, J.M. Sheehy remembered that in his small town in the 1870s, he and his fellow classmates had access to titles such as *The Boys of England* or *Young Men of Great Britain* and *Our Boys Journal*, and he attributed his interest in literature to the 'Harkaway Series,' to which he was exposed in *The Boys of England*. Sheehy remembered:

Jack Harkaway was my hero. I followed him from his schooldays, to his adventures after schooldays by sea and land. I went with him to Oxford and keenly enjoyed his university career. I next accompanied him into the army, and among the Italian brigands. Finally, I shared his son's adventures and his own around the world. Now, they were but poor stuff really, as literature, but they were stories about boys. That was enough.<sup>7</sup>

There can be no doubt as to the fact that there was a market for such material, but the Irish market was tiny in comparison to the English one, where great fortunes, as Henry James put it, were easily made.

Those educated at Irish schools depicted in the Irish schoolboy novels, generally in the period 1860-1920, represented a mix of both the established elite and the rising middle and merchant classes, whose sights were trained on elite status or at the very least upward social mobility. This desire for equality under empire motivated a

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Sheehy, "The Need of an Irish 'Boys' Paper," *The College Chronicle*, Castleknock June 1909: 32.

systematic and deliberate reduction of obvious difference between an education received at English elite schools and at the Irish schools that sought to emulate them. This reduction of difference, which may also be read as imitative or emulative behaviour, depended mostly upon superficial factors, such as the acquisition of a particular accent, expressions, sense of fashion, and ability to compete in certain field games. In postcolonial studies, this behaviour is often referred to as either mimesis or mimicry, and is seen as an effect of power relations between colonizer and colonized. Such obvious emulation was held as suspicious by Irish nationalists of every hue, and reviled by the more advanced. The still recognisable tags of West Briton, Shoneen and Squireen were attached to the typical product of these schools. First among those who publicly denounced the schools for their imitation of English models was the journalist D.P. Moran in his nationalist weekly, *The Leader*, where he frequently referred to his own Alma Mater, Castleknock College, as “that cricket and ping-pong College,” and a “brake on the Irish wheel.”<sup>8</sup> By 1936, the year that Hackett and Pawle published their schoolboy novels, Ireland had changed irrevocably. What was now necessary to confirm and solidify the foundation of the young Irish state was the creation of a young Gaelic hero, centrally involved in the core events of a green history. That they chose to do this within an established pro-Empire genre, and based upon schools very far from sympathetic to the cause, makes for an often conflicted narrative, and sometimes, outright confusion.

*The Green Lion* is loosely based on the author’s own childhood in Kilkenny City in the late nineteenth century. Hackett himself attended the prestigious Jesuit school at Clongowes Wood in Co. Kildare between 1897 and 1900, before emigrating to America in 1901, where he wrote for numerous American magazines including *The New Republic*. His schoolboy novel is best interpreted as an attack on the limiting effect of the Catholic Church on Irish society and is set against the backdrop of the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, the pre-eminent figure in the Irish Home Rule movement in the 1880s. The action unfolds before the eyes of a precocious young schoolboy, Jerry Coyne, the illegitimate child of a seminarian, and the impressionable daughter of a local farmer. Jerry is abandoned by his separated and

<sup>8</sup> James H. Murphy and Michael M. Collins (eds.), *Nos Autem: Castleknock College and Its Contribution* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996) 101-102.

scandalized parents, who have fled to Australia and America respectively. Jerry's understanding of Ireland in the Revival era is influenced by his exposure to rural Ireland, which he venerates, and cosmopolitan Ireland, which he gradually comes to despise for being in thrall to English mores. The novel opens with Jerry's idyllic early years in rural Kilkenny, living with his mother's family, the Coyne's. His influences are recognizably Gaelic, with pastimes such as hurling and traditional dancing to the fore. This comfort is short-lived, however, and Jerry is soon thrust into cosmopolitan Ireland, under the care and guidance of a Parnellite family in Kilkenny City, the Laracys.

Humphrey Laracy, Jerry's new guardian, is a committed Parnellite, and references to the contentious leader dominate the narrative in its early stages – so much so that Parnell himself makes a guest appearance in Kilkenny late in Chapter Two, offering us a glimpse of the powerful nationalist figure late in his career. The blame for the downfall of Parnell, seen here as a heroic figure and beyond reproach, is placed squarely on the unwelcome interference of the Catholic Church. This is explicitly referred to on several occasions. At one point, a friend of Humphrey's declares within earshot of Jerry: "We may not win under Parnell. He's wore out, God help the man. But we'll go on, and then we'll give Maynooth what-for."<sup>9</sup> Naturally, all this has a significant impact on Jerry's ideas of Irishness and Irish history. When his aunt insists that he be sent to Clongowes Wood for his education, Humphrey Laracy foresees Jerry's reaction: "He'll find the Jesuits West Britons instead of Irish, and he'll hate them for it. I don't think it matters, do you? They'll make him work and give him a good education."<sup>10</sup> With this clear and stark proviso, Jerry enters the most prestigious Catholic school in Ireland.

At Clongowes, identified as St Ignatius throughout, Jerry discovers an education that seems alien to his rural Gaelic roots. At Clongowes, the boys play cricket, the Irish language is dismissed as the "language of the kitchen." This Catholic conservatism very much offends the Irish-Ireland sympathies of our young Gaelic hero, and he reacts accordingly. His friends are few and the reader is informed that "Jerry ached at the loss of his liberty."<sup>11</sup> He immerses himself in nationalist

<sup>9</sup> Francis Hackett, *The Green Lion: A Novel of Youth* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1936) 76.

<sup>10</sup> Hackett 207.

<sup>11</sup> Hackett 230-36.

history, working backwards, the reader is informed, from Parnell to the rebels of '48 and the economic theories of James Fintan Lalor, thus establishing the process of his radicalization as a reaction to the alien and imposed Anglocentric ethos of the school.<sup>12</sup> This reaction reaches its full conclusion with Jerry's decision to leave Ireland altogether. Disillusioned with the state of Irish nationalism in the vacuum left by Parnell, and filled with outright hostility towards the Catholic Church, our hero is forced to migrate to America, at which point the novel ends. Hackett creates an anti-Tom Brown in *The Green Lion*. Jerry's nationalism isolates him at a school that leans towards outright exaltation of Empire. As the product of an illicit and badly advised tryst he is cast out from rural and peasant Ireland, seen in *The Green Lion* as firmly controlled by the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Ultimately, despite his stringent moral code and wide-eyed enthusiasm for the cause of Irish nationalism, he must escape Ireland.

The second novel considered in this article has a much less controversial history than *The Green Lion*, which was censored in 1936, prompting Hackett to leave Ireland in a fit of pique – thus emulating his protagonist. Kathleen Pawle, author of *We in Captivity*, based on Blackrock College in South Dublin in the run-up to the Easter Rising of 1916, is unique among the 13 authors in the Irish genre, and stands apart from the other authors as both a woman and, consequently, as a writer with no direct experience of boarding at an Irish school for boys. As with Hackett's novel, much time is spent describing the young Irish hero, magnificently named Ignatius Proudfoot, as a bland Irish boy, surrounded by momentous social change. Ignatius is born to a handsome Parnellite and his snobbish wife in the village of Moyrath, Co. Meath. The opening chapters are devoted to establishing the local priest, Father Farley, as an active opponent of Irish nationalism, mirroring Hackett's dismissal of the Catholic Church as a block to national progress. Ignatius himself is entirely ambivalent to both religion and nationalism; it takes his youthful attraction to a local flame-haired girl called Maureen McCarthy for him to question his identity in the community. Having won a scholarship to study at Rochenoir, the name itself a direct reference to Blackrock College, Maureen ridicules Ignatius for what she calls his "shoneen name ... because he was clean and respectable and because his father was a supporter

<sup>12</sup> Hackett 286.

of the Irish Parliamentary Party.”<sup>13</sup> Maureen’s tastes are for more active nationalism, and the greening of Ignatius is further symbolized in a key scene at the end of the section dealing with Moyrath. In this scene, Ignatius and Maureen are present at the death of an old woman named Mary the Brogue. The scene drips with symbolism, as the mantle of Irish nationalism is transferred from the Shan van Vocht of revivalist literature to the young Cathleen Ni Houlihan as embodied by the fiery Maureen. Whether any of this registers with young Ignatius is unclear, but very shortly afterwards he enters a New Ireland, like Jerry Coyne before him.

At Blackrock College, Ignatius encounters a range of characters too diverse to deal with in this article, but chief among his formative influences is a young priest with nationalist leanings named, somewhat unimaginatively, Fr Hugh O’Neill. His schoolmates range from the fiery republican Healy to the more circumspect McDowell and Finlay, to a cockney-born character named Jeremiah O’Sullivan. His schooldays are marked by exposure to Republicanism and interludes of romantic involvement with Maureen in Moyrath. Blackrock is depicted as a school largely in sympathy with the existing system, and distrustful of any nationalist sentiment, preferring instead to safeguard its success rate in the Indian Civil Service examinations. Through a series of unlikely coincidences, the boys become involved in the inner circle of the Irish Revolution. In a scene that requires a considerable imaginative leap by the reader, the four boys meet Patrick Pearse, leader of the 1916 Rising, in No. 2 Dawson St where he not only grants them a private audience – but quotes from Joseph Mary Plunkett’s poem *The Dark Way*, allays the fears of the more moderate McDowell and Finlay, and even manages to capture the attention of the hitherto nonplussed Ignatius Proudfoot. Pearse is portrayed as a conflicted but resolute republican. Our first glimpse of the man shows just how far his reputation had grown by 1936. In this scene, a friend of Ignatius, Healy, meets Pearse for the first time at Dawson St:

Healy went with the soldier. They went down the passage and stopped outside a door at the end of it. Healy was told to go in ... he was face to face with Patrick Pearse. He was around at the back of the desk before

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Pawle, *We in Captivity* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1936) 21.

Pearse had time to stand up, and, falling on his knees, he seized the man's hand and kissed it.

"Well," Pearse said, "that's a fine way to be greeted."

"I can't help it, sir. I've wanted to know you so much."

Pearse motioned him to a chair in front of the desk.

"I've several dear friends among old Rochemoir [Blackrock] boys," Pearse said, and added "It's a pity you couldn't have managed to come to St Endas."

"I won a scholarship for Rochemoir, that's why."

"Ah yes, it's a fine school."

"It's a damn shoneen stronghold – I'm sorry sir."

Pearse smiled and turned to a large map of Dublin that almost covered one of the walls and a green, white and yellow flag draped over it.<sup>14</sup>

This scene, preposterous as it is, is not the only liberty Pawle takes with history. The symbolism of a green white and yellow (rather than orange) flag draped over the map presumably used to plan the Easter rebellion – while simultaneously dismissing the West British pretensions of Blackrock – is indicative of the dramatic shift in the school's reputation outside of its target market after independence in 1922. The reference to Pearse's own school at St. Endas also serves as a counterpoint to Blackrock by referencing this Irish-Ireland version of the public school model, and reminding us that Pearse was someone whose influence on Irish education was to assume greater importance after his death, as with Tom Arnold at Rugby School in England. Later in the narrative, Pearse is shown declaring independence from an elevated position, outside the GPO – this time on top of a table. From this point on, we are treated to a radical rethinking of the Easter Rising, through the eyes of all four boys, who have now become mixed up in the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Our young hero Ignatius now plays his part in the rebellion fighting alongside Michael Mallin and Countess Markievicz, thus completing his transformation into a republican boy-hero. Ignatius, despite shedding his shoneen past, cannot, however, live in an Ireland so enslaved by the Catholic Church, and the novel ends with his emigration to America, with Maureen naturally in tow.

The characters of Jerry Coyne and Ignatius Proudfoot were created by very different authors, but with the same intended function. To write a schoolboy novel is, naturally enough, to admit a desire to

<sup>14</sup> Pawle 144.

influence the youth of a nation. In effect, it is an exercise in re-imagining a past school life and foisting it upon an audience with no experience of it. In the newly formed, insular and insecure 1930s Ireland, it is significant that both Pawle and Hackett recreated the young Irish hero, and placed him within a genre of literature that was perhaps more pro-England and pro-Empire than any other. What Pawle, Hackett and other writers remembered was, in fact, an imagined and idealized childhood. The Irishness they portrayed to children may have had some basis in fact, but the placing of key nationalist figures and symbols within the text, whether it was Charles Stewart Parnell touring Kilkenny in *The Green Lion*, or Patrick Pearse declaring Irish independence in *We in Captivity*, dictates that in 1930s Ireland a heroic Irish childhood involved the rejection of Anglicization in favour of active involvement in progressive nationalism. The Irish schoolboy novel required a new kind of Irish hero – part cosmopolitan, part moralist, part rustic – but entirely nationalist. Most strikingly of all, this hero turned away from Catholic Ireland and as a result, a most radical voice emerged from the most unlikely source.

# FACES OF IRISH NATIONALISM

## LITURGY AND REVOLUTION: TWO PLAYS BY PATRICK PEARSE AND *TRANSLATIO SACRI*

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Patrick Pearse is an unlucky character in Irish Studies. J.J. Lee described his reception in the last century as swinging between the poles of idolatry and demonology: Pearse the patron saint of the Republic and Pearse the evil ghost of modern Irish history.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, this polarity seems to be transcended by a new perspective, stimulated mainly by the rise of postcolonial studies: Pearse the language activist and Pearse the educational innovator is discussed as opposed to Pearse the militant nationalist. This new attitude reclaims Pearse as a subject in the field of Irish Studies (rather than a case for a psychoanalyst or a sexologist). Nevertheless, it manages this mostly by evading what was the main stumbling block of the earlier dispute. It omits the issue referred to repeatedly as Pearse's notorious concept of blood sacrifice.

If the "notorious concept of blood sacrifice" is the first premise most immediately connected to the aesthetic-ideological image of the Rising, the other is its theatrical aspect. Edna Longley in her revealing essay describes Pearse as a "narcisist performing before the mirror of history," a director "conscious of the audience," rather than a military leader.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J.J. Lee, "In Search of Patrick Pearse," *Revising the Rising*, ed. Máirín Ní Dhomhacháda, Theo Dorgan (Derry: Field Day, 1991) 122.

<sup>2</sup> Edna Longley, "The Rising, The Somme and Irish Memory," *Revising the Rising*, 33-34. To speak of the Easter Rising in terms of its theatricality is a common occurrence best



Down-to-earth pragmatist Michael Collins once commented on the irritating “air of Greek tragedy” surrounding the Easter Rising. He was quite right detecting the overall “theatricality” of the event, yet it might be added that he mistook the genre. Recent critic Ben Levitas came much closer when he defined republican “street theatre” as “part mystery play, part melodrama, part avant-garde provocation.”<sup>3</sup> Each of the elements mentioned would require a separate analysis, but I would limit myself to the first, and – in my opinion most important – of them. I would claim that it is in the correlation between the frame of the medieval dramatic genre and the notion of the blood sacrifice that the core of Pearse’s re-formulation of Irish nationalism must be sought. The linking point between the two elements is the Catholic liturgy of the Mass – the most intimately known aesthetic and symbolic framework for Pearse and any Irish Catholic of the time.

This essay will begin by outlining the main premise underlying Pearsean nationalism which may be characterized as the mechanism of *translatio sacrii*. This will be followed by an examination of three plays written between 1911 and 1916, which provides a key to the re-interpretation of the Rising as viewed from the perspective of the Catholic sacrament of Eucharist.

## 1.

According to Anthony D. Smith, the dawn of the era of nationalism in Europe was symbolically heralded by two eighteenth-century paintings: Jacques-Louis David’s *Marat assassiné* and Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe*. Both inconspicuously allude to the convention of *Pietà* providing a fitting confirmation of the thesis first formulated by Durkheim that nationalism is a substitute communal code for fading Christianity, religion in which the nation worships itself.<sup>4</sup> Benedict

summarized by the title of the recent book by James Moran: *Staging the Easter Rebellion. 1916 as Theatre* (Cork: Cork University Press 2005). The conscious artistic aim is easily discerned in the choice of the date, the choice of the ‘stage’ and other details. After all, Dublin crowd received Pearse’s ‘performance’ as if in theatre – with an ovation or (more often) booing. Cf. also F.X. Martin, “1916 – Myth, Fact, Mystery,” *Studia Hibernica*, 7 (1967): 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Levitas: *The Theatre of Nation. Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 224.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernity. A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998) x-xi.

Anderson notes that nationalism should be classified along with religious denomination rather than political ideologies, since it provides a similar psycho- and sociological function as religion: the sense of continuity which the finite existence of the individual acquires in the communal “mystery of regeneration.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it remains inherently dependent – at least in its early phases – on religious symbolism and imagery, undertaking a process that may be characterized as *translatio sacrii* – in analogy to the crucial term of medieval mystical political theory.<sup>6</sup> *Translatio* is a process concomitant with secularization, based on “the use of the sacred traditions for the construction of utterly new and secular edifice” and gradually – when the new phenomena reach a stable position – leaving the religious layer aside.<sup>7</sup>

The theme of the dialectics between Christianity and European nationalism becomes less clear-cut, however, when the relation of simple substitution is replaced by a complex re-adjustment and interdependence of both phenomena, as happened in countries that did not undergo any rapid process of secularization such as Poland or Ireland.<sup>8</sup> The concept of *translatio sacrii* provides a foundation for Pearse’s theory of Irish nationalism. Nevertheless, it encompasses far more than merely using religious terminology for political ends as

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 11.

<sup>6</sup> Medieval *translatio imperii* denotes the process of transposition of the mystical source of world power residing in the Roman Empire first to Charlemagne, then to the German Emperors.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Nikodem Bończa Tomaszewski, *Źródła narodowości. Powstanie i rozwój polskiej świadomości w II połowie XIX i na początku XX wieku* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2006) 193; John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism. The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987) 138.

<sup>8</sup> Since the well-known article by Father Francis Shaw in 1971, there has been a tendency to view Pearse’s nationalism in Ireland as a highly heterodox if not heretical misuse of Catholic theology (Francis Shaw SJ: “The Canon of Irish History – A Challenge,” *Studies*, 61 (Summer 1972): 115-153). It must be remembered, however, that from the perspective of the pre-2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council Catholicism such a connection did not cause any particular revulsion. In fact, in his crucial early essay (1922) on Catholicism and political form, Carl Schmitt mentions Pearse as one of the proofs of the political flexibility of Catholicism and its ability to accommodate under various circumstances completely opposite political attitudes: Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and the Political Form*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996) 7.

seen in his pamphlets with their countless evocations of national “baptism,” “redemption” or “gospel.” In Pearse’s discourse, nation is constructed in analogy to the Church. It is not a substitute – as in the various forms of nationalism of secularized societies – but as a younger brother to the supreme and universal spiritual community of the Church. It is most clearly demonstrated in the well-known passage from “Ghosts:”

Like a divine religion, national freedom bears the marks of unity, of sanctity, of catholicity, of apostolic succession. Of unity, for it contemplates the nation as one; of sanctity, for it is holy in itself and in those who serve it; of catholicity, for it embraces all the men and women of the nation; of apostolic succession, for it, or the aspiration after it, passes down from generation to generation from the nation’s fathers.<sup>9</sup>

The centre of the communal existence of the Church is liturgy, and more precisely, the sacrament of Eucharist. Via Eucharist, the diachrony of the Church’s earthly pilgrimage is each time transcended in the miraculous synchronicity of the redeemed time. Eucharist is at once a commemoration (the repetition of biblical events), the actual revelation of Christ – His body and blood – on the altar, and finally an insight into the future reality of the heavenly beatitude. Just as the Sacrifice of the Mass is the centre of the life of the Church, so Pearse’s nation – constructed *per analogiam* – requires a similar crucial point of intersection between the timely, the historical and the eternal; a single moment that absorbs past and future in the one flash of revelation. And as the Eucharist is – in theological terms – the repetition of Calvary, Pearse’s axis of the world is also built around the notion of sacrifice. Moreover, just like the liturgy, it functions in constant tension between acting and actual happening.

## 2.

On 3 April 1911, a Good Friday, the first major production of Pearse was staged at the Abbey. Performed by the students and the staff of St. Enda’s, Pearse’s Passion play was entitled simply *An Pháis*. It is

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Pearse, “Ghosts,” *Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Phoenix Publishing, 1924) 226.

striking that Pearse's mind, only very slowly evolving towards political separatism and the affirmation of the violent insurrection, finds its first considerable dramatic expression in the Passion play. Firstly, because it meant a return to the archetype of all sacrifices and secondly to the source from which modern European drama was born and which displays most explicitly the link between religious ritual and theatre.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, to the Dublin public, *An Pháis* appeared as something more than yet another use of a traditional form. Patrick Colum heralded it as the "first serious theatre piece in Irish" – a message political in itself due to the position of the language issue in Ireland at that time. It received special critical praise for introducing local, Irish elements into the biblical story, particularly the appearance of the women keening in darkness after the Crucifixion.<sup>11</sup>

Insertion of local, national elements into the universal story directed the public's attention towards the relation of the two elements. Commenting on his initial feelings as a member of the audience, Desmond Ryan writes: "Some of us thought, though to many it may seem an irreverence, that our national and individual struggle was in ways a faint reflection of the Great One just enacted. Is it not so? The man is crucified as Nation..."<sup>12</sup>

From one medieval genre – liturgical play *per se*, Pearse moves towards another: *An Rí*, written in 1913, bears the subtitle "Morality Play." But what matters here is yet again the theme of sacrifice. If in *An Pháis* we had a biblical theme with some additional national flavour, this time it is a national play within the framework of religious symbolism. The sinful king is doomed to losing one battle after another, and finally gives away his sword to the Abbot of the monastery who chooses a new king – the most innocent of his young disciples – Giolla na Naomh. The boy leads the troops to the next battle and gains victory with the price of his own life.

<sup>10</sup> The Passion of Christ is to this day the only gospel reading that is presented in the Catholic liturgy of the Mass as a performance.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Sisson, *Pearse's Patriots. St. Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004) 40-42.

<sup>12</sup> Sheridan Gilley, "Pearse's Sacrifice. Christ and Cuchulain Crucified and Risen in Easter Rising," *Irish Terrorist Dilemma*, ed. Y. Alexander, Alan O'Day (Dordrecht: Martinus Nyjhoff Publishers, 1986) 37.

Two aspects must be highlighted here as far as our theme is concerned. The first is the consistent use of the Eucharistic motives in reference to the struggle fought “for the people” and against “the foes of the kingdom.” It is through equating the Sacrifice of the Mass with the battle that the incompetence of the sinful king is displayed: “Do you think that an offering will be accepted from polluted hands” – asks the Abbot and the stress falls on the liturgical term “offering.” Shortly afterwards, he takes the comparison even further and makes it more explicit: “It is an angel that should be sent to pour out the wine and to break the bread of this sacrifice” – again speaking about the battle and this time applying the explicit terminology of Eucharistic ritual. In the final scene, when the dead body of Giolla na Naomh is brought back to the monastery from the battlefield, the King’s exclamation “O white body ... it is thy purity that hath redeemed my people” inevitably alludes to the image of the Host. Especially taking into consideration the fact that Giolla na Naomh is laid out on the bier, lifted above the crowd and then borne into the church with the sound of *Te Deum* – the anthem sung most prominently at the end of Corpus Christi processions.<sup>13</sup>

As Ben Levitas remarks, Giolla is a direct successor of the Íosagán-child-Christ of Pearse’s earlier texts, now turned into a national figure.<sup>14</sup> The connection between Eucharist and the violent death of the individual is not necessarily blasphemous. In early Christian theology, Eucharist was very strongly linked with the phenomenon of martyrdom. The Church Fathers repeatedly compare the body of the martyr to the body of Christ – transformed by suffering into the incorruptible and ennobled “body spiritual.”<sup>15</sup>

The difference between Christian martyrdom and Giolla na Naomh’s death, as well as between medieval mystery plays and Pearse’s lies elsewhere: whereas in the former case individual salvation in the afterlife was the primary goal, here we move within

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Pearse, “The King. A Morality,” *Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse*, ed. Séamas Ó Buachalla (Cork: Mercier Press, 1977) 67-80.

<sup>14</sup> Levitas 212.

<sup>15</sup> “I am God’s corn and I am grinded into flour by the teeth of wild beasts in order to become the pure bread of Christ” says St. Ignatius in the letter to Romans. In the description of the martyrdom of Polycarpus, we encounter a literal vision of the body “baked” in the fire into “golden bread.” Quoted in Dariusz Karłowicz, *Arcyparadoks śmierci* (Warszawa: Fronda, 2007) 295-96.

the sphere of collective, communal and this-worldly redemption by means of the sacrifice of the outstanding individual.<sup>16</sup>

This issue is touched upon in the opening scene of *An Rí*. The theological roots of Pearse's nationalism are confirmed in the exchange between the Monk and the Abbot concerning the nature of guilt and salvation:

And are all guilty of the sins of the King? If the King is defeated it's grief will be for all. Why must all suffer for the sins of the King? ... The nation is guilty of the sins of its princes. I say to you that this nation shall not be freed until it chooses for itself a righteous King.<sup>17</sup>

In this dialogue, we can trace the transformation onto the "national level" of the basic organicism of Catholic theology, best summarized by St. Paul to Corinthians: "For as by one man – Adam – came death, by one man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."<sup>18</sup> The basic unity of human beings is an underlying principle of the concept of original sin and of the universal salvation brought about by Christ's death. From this point in *An Rí*, it is very easy to step forwards towards the notorious ending of Pearse's last play – *The Singer*: "one man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world."

### 3.

*The Singer* forms the third and final step in the development of the Pearsean *translatio sacrii*. Here again we encounter the Eucharist imagery used in connection to violent death, as in Sighle's vision: "And then they will lie very still on the hillside, – so still and white, with no red in their cheeks, but maybe a red wound in their white breasts, or on their white foreheads." In fact, the very sacrament is mentioned in Sighle's monologue in a telling context: she speaks of her recurrent memories of the exiled hero – MacDara – and adds that "At Mass his face used to come between me and the white Host." The image gains its significance when we later realize that in the context of the play MacDara comes to occupy the place of the community's Messiah.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J.L. Talmon, *Political Messianism. The Romantic Phase* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1961) 265.

<sup>17</sup> Pearse, "The King" 70.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor 15: 21-22.

*An Rí* was based on the motif of *imitatio Christi* – the following of Christ's learning about "giving one's life for others." *The Singer*, on the other hand, is a secularized, national version of the Passion Play with the last days of MacDara very closely copying the last days of Christ. The inherently passive Giolla na Naomh, virtually a model Girardian scapegoat, is exchanged for the active Messiah of the Gael.

Seamus Deane called Pearse "the last romantic in Irish politics."<sup>19</sup> In *The Singer*, it is the romantic messianism that modifies and transforms the medieval liturgical qualities of the earlier plays. In this respect, *The Singer* fits quite easily into the pattern provided by the major prophets of romantic millenarianism: Mickiewicz, Mazzini and Michelet.<sup>20</sup> The main stress falls on the figure of the "great man" who takes the burden of the communal fate and acts as the divine agent on Earth. This great man is no longer a humble servant like Giolla na Naomh: on the contrary, he goes through a dark night of despair and degradation to be transformed by the rediscovered divine mission.<sup>21</sup> This mission is characteristically endowed on him two-directionally. It springs from collectivity and, at the same time, it is God-given – the image inserted into MacDara's revelation of "the face of God" in "the dumb suffering people."<sup>22</sup> His mission leads him to defy all the traditional authorities: not only is MacDara conflicted with the colonial power, but his acts are criticized by the ecclesiastical authority and he cannot find agreement even with the older members of the rebelling Gaels. Using Weberian terminology, MacDara is a charismatic rather than a traditional leader. As a typical romantic prophet, MacDara stresses the opposition between individual salvation and collective this-worldly salvation in a typical juxtaposition between Christ – the redeemer of the individual soul – and the new Messiah of the mortal body:

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Deane, "Heroic Styles. The Tradition of an Idea," *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 20.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Andrzej Walicki, *Filozofia a mesjanizm* (Warszawa: PIW, 1968) 9-22; Andrzej Walicki, *Mesjanizm Adama Mickiewicza w perspektywie porównawczej* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2006) 15-28, 40-43; Talmon 265.

<sup>21</sup> Defined by Y. Talmon as one of the integral elements of millenarian-messianistic thinking. Joanna Jagodzińska, *Misterium romantyczne* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2006) 132.

<sup>22</sup> Present in all three thinkers mentioned above in accordance with the basic two-dimensional concept of the messianistic process ("from God through a great man to the people" and "from the people towards a great man and further"). Cf. Jagodzińska 140; Talmon 265.

they say that to be busy with the things of the spirit is better than to be busy with the things of the body. But I am not sure, master. Can the Vision Beautiful alone content a man? ... The true teacher must suffer and do. He must break the bread to the people: he must go into Gethsemane...<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.

Shaun Richards called Pearse's plays "literary rehearsals of the act of liberation."<sup>24</sup> Their connection to what happened afterwards – the events of Easter Week – seems undisputable. What is the nature of this connection, however, from the perspective of the *translatio sacrii* mechanism?

The crucial fact about liturgy is its complex relation between the gesture and the actual act or between the symbol and the actual event. In the sacred dynamics, the border between these poles is transcended in the miraculous synchronicity of the redeemed time. Despite the definite and unchangeable form, liturgy is much more than a static set of signs and gestures – it is the ACT.

The limitations of the literary creation are expressed by MacDara who exchanges his role of the maker of the songs for that of the leader of the revolution. "I think true man is divine in this, like God, he must needs create, he must needs do..."<sup>25</sup> Here the liturgical model connects with the romantic stress on the activist "philosophy of deed,"<sup>26</sup> opening up space both for transforming the leader of the people into a demiurgical *übermensch* of the western world and for transforming a purely verbal creation into the creation of history.

In the generic terminology employed throughout this article, the process of *translatio sacrii* may be explained as a transfer from the sphere of the liturgical drama via romantic messianism to the national liturgy itself.<sup>27</sup> The relation between Pearse's on-stage and off-stage

<sup>23</sup> Pearse, "The Singer," *Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse* 117.

<sup>24</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 110.

<sup>25</sup> Pearse, "The Singer" 117.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Walicki 21. It was Schelling who seemed fascinated by the link between ritual and specific actual act in Christianity. In his view, "the spirit of Christianity is the spirit of the deed" rather than an abstraction; cf. Jagodzińska 41.

<sup>27</sup> There is a fascinating parallel between Pearse's evolution and the ideas of the major poet and ideologist of Polish Romanticism Adam Mickiewicz who formulated a theory of the new "national romantic drama" that would rely heavily on a return to the



productions must be explained in terms of transcending the juxtaposition between dramatic production and ritual. Medieval and baroque liturgical drama functions as the preparation and explication of the ritual. It serves as an initiation into the conscious participation in the sacrament itself. Calling into life the fictitious world of the play, it necessarily requires inscribing the ritualistic core into the narrative, historical and fictionalizing pattern. Its function thus remains essentially unfinished, needing fulfilment and complementation in the liturgy itself.

Returning to where we began: it is only by means of the "liturgical" interpretation that we can unite the two main strains of the critical conceptualization of the Rising outlined in the introduction, i.e., the idea of blood sacrifice and the "theatricality" of the event. The link can be found in the theological delineation of the liturgical sign.

The liturgical sign in Catholic theology functions in a fourfold sense. The classification is based on Aquinas' *Summa*, yet it was most explicitly developed in the twentieth century by Cipriano Vagagnini. The liturgical sign is first a commemoration of the past event (*signum rememorativum*, i.e., death and resurrection of Christ). Secondly, it demonstrates the supernatural reality revealed in the present moment, in the transformation of bread and wine into Body and Blood (*signum demonstrativum*). Thirdly, it heralds the future reality of salvation (*signum prognosticum*). Finally, it addresses the faithful as an obligation (*signum obligativum*).<sup>28</sup>

The Easter Rising as constructed by Pearse conforms to the theological pattern. Edna Longley (among others) points to the commemorative aspect of the Rising, "the tribute to the Dead," stressed in the recurrent invocations to the past generations of "seven heroic centuries" and Pearse's obsession with the nationalist version of the "communion of

religious roots of the theatre (which he sought in the medieval mysteries and pagan rituals) yet, at the same time, would acquire a specific national flavour. These premises led him finally to the drama of the nation's hero, transformed miraculously (and in analogy to transubstantiation) into a Messiah figure, thus reaching the borders between dramatic production and history. It is a drama that not only commemorates and celebrates the national hero, but seeks its complementation in the actual revelation/revolution (for an interpretation of Mickiewicz's major drama, *Dziady*, from the point of view of medieval mysteries, see Jagodzińska, 9-140).

<sup>28</sup> *Summa Theologiae* III 60.3; Jagodzińska 60, 134.

saints" of Irish separatism – his repeated litanies of names from Wolfe Tone to O'Donovan Rossa. In her interpretation, the rebellion seems to be almost a "back-formation."<sup>29</sup> The Rising is, of course, an obvious prognostic of future Irish independence as well as the powerfully expressed reminder of the obligation to the next generations to assert the existence of the nation by arms. Three of the above-mentioned dimensions of the nationalist liturgical sign are summarized in Pearse's famous speech from the dock: "We have kept faith with the past, and handed a tradition to the future."<sup>30</sup>

What about the last, central and most complex dimension of the Eucharist – *signum demonstrativum*? In Pearse's writings, the miraculous transformation is always linked with the ability to act, irrespective of whether we are discussing his plays or the political pamphlets. These are full of warnings that "the failure of this generation" consisting in its inability to act leads to the gradual weaning of the Nation-Church. The response to this process of degradation is the renewal of sacrifice. Freedom (of the nation) – he writes in "The Separatist Idea" – is so splendid a thing ("splendid" being in fact another term with strong religious connotations) that it cannot be defined in words, it must be asserted by deed.

Just as the Eucharist is a sacrament of miraculous transformation and the Real Presence of Christ in the specific moment of time in the specific place, the Easter Rising is a miraculous transformation of men ("changed, changed utterly") and the assertion of the Real Presence, real existence of that spiritual being named the Irish nation in the full splendour of its glory. At the commemoration of Robert Emmet, Pearse juxtaposes the military and political failure of the rebellion with the importance of its assertion of Ireland's existence, calling it "a triumph for that deathless thing we call Irish Nationality." And at the grave of Wolfe Tone, Pearse spoke about dying "in testimony of the truth of Ireland's claim to nationhood." In this, once again, he is linked to the Christian theology of martyrdom: the martyr is after all "a witness" – a witness and proof of the truthfulness of the faith. The verbs "to show," "to prove" and "to testify" are among the most common in the final words of martyrs as given in hagiographical literature.

<sup>29</sup> Longley 32-33.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Piaras Mac Lochlainn, *Last Words. Letters and Statements of the Leaders Executed After the Rising at Easter 1916* (Dublin: OPW, 1990) 28.

By means of their deed, they are asserting the Truth which cannot be explained in words, but can only be made *visible*.<sup>31</sup>

In his provocative essay "Patrick Pearse: Irish Modernist," Declan Kiberd outlines the tense artistic atmosphere of the 1910s, crying out "for implementation in some form of action, some enactment." Kiberd poses the main dilemma of the revolutionary generation as: "how does one turn image into event?"<sup>32</sup> This article has been an attempt to outline a new perspective on Pearse's nationalism which by means of the theology of liturgy transcends this opposition and merges his writings and his ultimate political achievement into a consistent whole.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Karłowicz, 337.

<sup>32</sup> Declan Kiberd, "Patrick Pearse: Irish Modernist," *The Life and After-Life of P.H. Pearse*, ed. R. Higgins and R. Uí Chollatáin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009) 72.

<sup>33</sup> This perspective requires an analysis of the modern influences on this crucial figure in the evolution of Irish nationalism, with such names as George Sorel, Carl Schmitt, Charles Peguy or Marinetti featuring as points of reference, although – as in the case of the above interpretation – not as direct intertextual links but rather analogical expressions of the cultural and intellectual climate of the period. Some of those parallels have already been outlined in the final chapter of Sean Farrell Moran's *Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

# **“THROUGH EGYPTIAN SPECTACLES”: LADY GREGORY, GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND ANTI-COLONIAL CRITICISM<sup>1</sup>**

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In her article “Felons of Our Land” (1900), Lady Gregory celebrates popular Irish ballads and songs of defeat.<sup>2</sup> As a young girl, she had bought books of Irish rebel songs with her pocket money, which suggests her early interest in Irish history and nationalist narratives. Her adolescent sympathies appear to have lingered, for Gregory quotes from a song by Galway writer Francis Fahy where it is the Irish felon who functions as the hero, rather than the supporter of the British Empire:

Ah! these were of the Empire, we yield them to her fame,  
And ne’er in Erin’s orisons is heard their alien name;  
But those for whom her heart beats high and benedictions swell,  
They died upon the scaffold and they pined within the cell.<sup>3</sup>

The above quotation encapsulates a tone of sentimental heroism despite the failure and repudiation of Irish support for the Empire. As the

<sup>1</sup> A.M. Broadley, *How We Defended Arábi and His Friends – A Story of Egypt and the Egyptians* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884) iii.

<sup>2</sup> “An Irish Song,” quoted in Lady Gregory, “The Felons of Our Land,” *Cornhill Magazine*, May 1900: 623.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory, “The Felons” 623.

wife of the former Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Gregory, Lady Gregory had first-hand experiences of both colonizer and colonized. Sympathy with the felon type cannot be attributed to mere sentimental romanticism, but must be understood in the political context of Gregory's first encounter with a nationalist movement in Egypt in 1881. In support of the Egyptian nationalist Arabi Bey, she published "Arabi and his Household" in *The Times* the following year.<sup>4</sup> Gregory's position as a supporter of the colonized was to endure, and to be shared by other prominent Anglo-Irish authors. In September 1907, she signed a petition to Sir Edward Grey, drafted by Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, asking the British government for a "speedy release of the prisoners" arrested for assaults on British officers in an Egyptian village, Denshawai, in June 1906.<sup>5</sup> The Denshawai affair provoked Shaw to write the "Preface for Politicians" to *John Bull's Other Island*, in which he criticized the colonial project.<sup>6</sup> This article will compare the impact of Egyptian affairs, in 1882 and 1906, on both writers and their respective critique of British imperialism.

In November 1881, Sir William and Lady Gregory arrived in Cairo where they "tumbled into a revolution."<sup>7</sup> After they met Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, "[a]n *enfant terrible* of politics indeed," and his wife Lady Anne, the two couples allied in support of Arabi Bey and his nationalist movement.<sup>8</sup> In December 1881, Blunt and Sir William launched a campaign on Bey's behalf in *The Times*. Although Chenery, editor of *The Times* and a friend of Sir William's, printed letters in support of the nationalist movement, an equal amount of space was given to their enemies such as Sir Samuel Baker. Furthermore, over the course of summer 1882, Sir William feared his reputation was waning in London and withdrew from the hard-line argument presented by Blunt. He writes to Sir Henry Layard: "I view all these matters differently from Blunt, who pushes things to first principles ... He has fought for Egypt alone. I have fought for England first, and for

<sup>4</sup> Lady Gregory, "Arabi and His Household," *The Times* 23 October 1882.

<sup>5</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Letters*, Vol. IV: 1905-1907, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 724.

<sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Prefaces* (London: Constable, 1934) 439-72.

<sup>7</sup> Lady Gregory, *Seventy Years*, ed. Colin Smythe (New York: Macmillan, 1974) 34.

<sup>8</sup> Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries. Being a Personal Narrative of Events 1888-1914, Part One: 1888-1900* (1919; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) xiii-xiv.

Egypt also.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Blunt records in his diary that Lady Gregory “remained more staunch.”<sup>10</sup> Arabi Bey, the Egyptian nationalist leader of fellah origin, is the first felon who attained Lady Gregory’s sympathy and outspoken support. She took up her pen and began drafting “Arabi and His Household” in late July 1882. The massacre of Alexandria, portrayed as the precursor of “the massacre of all Christians,” and the war of Tel-el-Kebir were followed by heated discussions over Arabi’s true character.<sup>11</sup> The felon in the cell was accused by the British government and in the press of treason and held responsible for the massacre of Alexandria and the subsequent war. It was the likelihood of a death sentence, linked to the unfavourable image of his “reign of blank barbarism” and “ignorant mind” that spurred Lady Gregory into action.<sup>12</sup>

“Arabi and his Household” launched Gregory’s career as a writer. The article was designed not to give an outline of events but “to interest Englishmen in this family – simple, honest, hospitable, as I found them, and who are now poor, hunted, in danger.”<sup>13</sup> This description could be equally applied to the Irish country folk that she would later visit in cottages and workhouses. Gregory stresses the simplicity, authenticity and kindness she experienced when visiting Arabi Pasha’s family. Despite the domestic focus, the emphasis on Arabi’s kindness and truthfulness serves a definite political purpose: establishing a counter image of the “Oriental despot.”<sup>14</sup> By exposing the British reports as rumour-based and rife with false coverage, the establishment of a counter image becomes Gregory’s tool to criticize British imperialism, a method that will also be employed by Shaw in 1907. Her portrait of Arabi provides a contrast to “the absurd tales of his ferocity and bloodthirstiness” and lays bare her anger at the

<sup>9</sup> Sir William Gregory, *Sir William Gregory, K.C.M.G. – Formerly Member of Parliament and Sometime Governor of Ceylon – An Autobiography*, ed. Lady Gregory (London: John Murray, 1894) 382.

<sup>10</sup> Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt: Being a Personal Narrative of Events* (1907; New York: Howard Fertig, 1967) 237.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Brome Weigall, *A History of Events in Egypt from 1798-1914* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1915) 203.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Alfred Milner, *England in Egypt*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition with additions summarizing the course of events to the close of the year 1895 (London: Edward Arnold, 1902) 13; Weigall 127.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory, “Arabi” 4.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004) 229.

misrepresentation of him as a “bloodthirsty despot” by the British press. With reference to rumours about Arabi’s corruption and violence, she critically acknowledges the power of the spoken word and emphasizes the dangers of judging a country and its situation from a distance or applying British rules to colonial territories. Rather than relying on reports circulated by colonial information networks such as Reuters, she believes in oral testimony from “one who has taken the trouble to investigate the truth of the stories” and in her own experience.<sup>15</sup> The article is written in a forthright, sarcastic tone. Published despatches, intended to prove that Arabi’s character was based purely on “cowardice,” provoked Gregory’s sarcastic remark that “surely they know better than his old mother!”<sup>16</sup>

Attacking imperial society for denying Arabi the ability to display his true character and by providing a counter image, Gregory functions as a mediator between colonizer and colonized. Yet, her representation is far from unbiased. In fact, she fights with the same weapon as her enemy, when the article is turned into a propagandistic piece in its own right. Since “Arabi and His Household” was based on two visits to Arabi’s family in spring 1882, a comparison between diary entries and the article is enlightening. The British public was made to believe that Arabi had accumulated a small fortune by corrupting the government, lining his own pocket and living in luxury.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it was of utmost importance for Gregory to stress the simplicity of the family’s living conditions. She recalls in her diary:

The house is new and unfurnished. ... The room is bare, a few hard seats, a tiny table covered with a crotchet antimacassar, and on the walls photographs of Arabi in small black frames, and on her breast one set in diamonds. Her dress a trailing green, rather in European fashion. ... She is his third and only reigning wife. The last wife, she says, had nothing to recommend but that she was big and fat. Just a good bit of meat!<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, the article reads:

<sup>15</sup> Gregory, “Arabi” 4.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory, “Arabi” 4.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see: Weigall 124.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory, *Seventy Years* 39-40.

The sole furniture of the reception room of Arabi's wife consisted of small hard divans covered with brown linen and a tiny table with a crochet antimacassar thrown over it. On the whitewashed walls the only ornaments were photographs of him in a black wooden frame.<sup>19</sup>

The diamonds are mysteriously absent, as is the fact that Arabi had been divorced twice. The snobbish tone of his current wife is equally removed and turned into the voice of a loving, caring wife. Her belief "in his truthfulness" stems from her personal experience that Arabi always "adhered to his words," his manners and the way the native people spoke about him.<sup>20</sup> One of the great themes of the article is Arabi's authenticity, which renders him a heroic figure – not only for the Egyptian people, but also for Gregory herself. Moreover, outspoken political support for the Egyptian nationalist embodied her sympathies for nationalist movements and established her as a notable writer. As Gregory proudly remarks in her autobiography, the article "really was a success" and as she had been told by her husband and his friends, she was the very subject of London table talk.<sup>21</sup> Lady Gregory became what Collini terms a "public moralist" and British public opinion became much more sympathetic towards Arabi.<sup>22</sup>

Due to this early support for the Egyptians and criticism of British imperial misrepresentation, it is hardly surprising that, in 1907, Lady Gregory put her name to a pro-Egyptian and anti-imperial cause yet again. In 1906, Egypt once more became a *cause célèbre* of the British press due to the colonial government's conduct. On 13 June, five uniformed British officers went to shoot pigeons in a small village in the Nile Delta and were subsequently attacked by the villagers. The officers, injured, fled on foot to raise the alarm at the nearest camp. Whilst Captain Bull died on the way, another officer succeeded in reaching the camp. Fifty-two villagers were later taken into custody and tried by a special tribunal which only dealt with acts of violence against the British army of occupation. They were permitted no jury. Four villagers were sentenced to death on 27 June for murder and hanged publicly and a further twelve were sentenced to imprisonment.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory, "Arabi" 4.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory, "Arabi" 4.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory, *Seventy Years* 46.

<sup>22</sup> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).



What Blunt called a “monstrous sentence” precipitated criticism from Gregory’s friend George Bernard Shaw,<sup>23</sup> who then drafted a petition for the release of the remaining prisoners. Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats and Blunt were among the signatories.

Initially, English public opinion supported the severe sentences because of the general belief that the villagers involved in the Denshawai affair had staged a deliberate, anti-English insurrection. Nonetheless, general concern for the trial procedures demanded the publication of the trial transcripts and governmental papers. These were published as White Papers in July and September 1906. Mr Findlay, the acting agent and Consul-General, wrote a covering letter to the September White Paper, subsequently published in *The Times*.<sup>24</sup> According to Findlay, British officers were shooting *wild* pigeons just outside the village of Denshawai and were soon attacked by the villagers who tried “to take their arms by force.” The natives are further accused of having deliberately set fire to a threshing floor. Moreover, *The Times* article quotes an assertion from the Parliamentary paper that the natives had been upset about pigeon-shooting since the previous year and “wished the ‘killing’ of all the officers.” A medical report written by Dr Nolan, meanwhile, states that Captain Bull’s “serious injuries” led to his death.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Nolan’s testimony was eliminated from the White Paper and the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that Captain Bull actually died of sunstroke.<sup>26</sup> Angered by such incongruities, Bernard Shaw criticized this false reporting by stating: “We receive official accounts, we receive popular accounts, and we receive, rather more rarely, accounts from people who really know.”<sup>27</sup> Following very closely along the lines of Gregory’s argument, Shaw’s article demonstrates how a combination of errors in reportage and British misrule of the colony has provoked his anger.

In his petition, Shaw outlined the hypocritical nature of the British government in the Denshawai affair. He remarks that “nothing had happened that might not have been expected in any English village if

<sup>23</sup> Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries. Being a Personal Narrative of Events 1888-1914, Part Two: 1900-1914* (1920; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) 147.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times* 8 September 1906: 5.

<sup>25</sup> *The Times* 8 September 1906: 5.

<sup>26</sup> Blunt, *Diaries Two* 147.

<sup>27</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962) 165.

a shooting party of foreigners, ignorant of our language and customs, had begun to shoot the domestic animals and farm stock under the impression that they were *ferae naturae*.”<sup>28</sup> Employing the same analogies he uses in his petition, Shaw would write at length about “The Denshawai Horror” in his preface to *John Bull’s Other Island*. Here he outlines in more detail the manner in which the British officers ignored the Egyptian custom of gaining consent for shooting from the headman of the village – “for the villagers keep pigeons just as an English farmer keeps poultry” – and were unable to communicate with the villagers because they could not speak Arabic.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Shaw interprets the incident as the outcome of a cultural misunderstanding and lack of engagement with local habits. Sarcastically referring to the execution, during which one of the sentenced hung for half an hour “and gave his family plenty of time to watch him swinging,” Shaw further emphasizes that there was only one gallows available whereby the executioners “kept the entertainment going by flogging eight men with fifty lashes each.”<sup>30</sup> Shaw’s description of a public hanging and flogging in terms of “entertainment” highlights his strong opposition to this violent sentence. He excoriates imperial conduct in Egypt, particularly in terms of militarism and the system of justice.

Appalled that the House of Commons, having been informed with 24-hour notice of what would happen, had not intervened by telegram to stop “these barbarous lashings and vindictive hangings,”<sup>31</sup> Shaw criticizes the British government in a letter to the editor in *The Times* on 7 July 1906. This letter suggests that he is not against the British occupation of Egypt as such but rather against its conduct. England could have solved the situation in a more appropriate manner, should have known better and acted according to its, now disputable, moral superiority, by demonstrating “British humanity and civilization.”<sup>32</sup> Yet the conduct employed by the English in the Denshawai incident causes Shaw to question the British Empire:

<sup>28</sup> Yeats 724.

<sup>29</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 460.

<sup>30</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 462.

<sup>31</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 467.

<sup>32</sup> *The Times* 7 July 1906: 14.

I ... enforce my warning to England that if her Empire means ruling the world as Denshawai has been ruled in 1906 ... then there can be no more sacred and urgent political duty on earth than the disruption, defeat, and suppression of the Empire ... As for the Egyptians, any man cradled by the Nile who, after the Denshawai incident, will ever voluntarily submit to British rule, or accept any bond with us except the bond of a Federation of free and equal states, will deserve the worst that Lord Cromer can consider 'just and necessary' for him.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, Denshawai provoked Shaw to strong criticism of the British government. Angered by the militarism and questionable system of government used in Egypt, Shaw denounced the Empire. In consequence, he argued for a federal solution that could go hand in hand with his ideas of socialism.

Towards the end of the 1906 version of the preface, Shaw condemns the White Papers that were supposed to "whitewash the tribunals and the pigeon-shooting party, and to blackwash the villagers." He proposes Blunt's *Atrocities of British Rule in Egypt* (August 1906) as the counter-narrative to the Parliamentary Papers: "When they have read it they will appreciate ... why Home Rule is a necessity not only for Ireland, but for all constituents of those Federations of Commonwealths which are now the only permanently practicable form of Empire."<sup>34</sup> As was the case with Lady Gregory, Shaw also applied British misbehaviour abroad to British misbehaviour in Ireland, which resulted in a desire for Irish Home Rule. Moreover, his statement appears to be almost prophetic with regard to the executions of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916. Indeed, in a later edition of the preface, Shaw adds a few pages entitled "Twenty Years Later" in which he writes that Easter 1916 is the sequel to the Denshawai affair. As in Egypt, the English disgraced themselves again by their demeanour in Dublin: "All that was necessary was to blockade the Post Office until its microcosmic republic was starved out and made ridiculous."<sup>35</sup> Yet the British artillery bombarded Dublin city, executed the leaders of the Rising and made them heroes overnight, "martyrs."

The view "through Egyptian spectacles" resulted for both Gregory and Shaw in the recognition of the shortcomings of British colonial

<sup>33</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 467.

<sup>34</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 468.

<sup>35</sup> Shaw, *Prefaces* 469.

government abroad. In their writings, both use sarcasm to fight false representations by the British press and government. Although both write in a somewhat polemical manner, their criticism of British colonial government in Egypt cannot be described as mere “superficial polemicizing.”<sup>36</sup> Not only were they successful in their criticism – Arabi Bey was not sentenced to death but sent into exile, and the remaining prisoners of Denshawai were released by the end of 1907 – but the Egyptian encounter was a pivotal point in Gregory’s life. She identified with a felon in 1882, expressed pro-nationalist sentiments in 1900 and put her name to the release of a number of Egyptian fellaheen in 1907. In her case, criticism of British colonial conduct preceded nationalism and resulted in a change of allegiance. She remarked: “The people have grown to hate England through their love for Ireland – Our class is now through dislike of England growing to care for their own country.”<sup>37</sup> In 1909, Gregory and Shaw would create “a challenge to empire” at the Abbey Theatre together.<sup>38</sup> Fighting against Dublin Castle over the implementation of English censorship in the case of Shaw’s play, *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, both Gregory and Shaw applied their recognition for Britain’s imperial misconduct abroad to Britain’s misconduct at home – arguing for Ireland on the same terms they had both once argued for Britain’s colonies farther afield.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 44.

<sup>37</sup> Lady Gregory quoted in John Kelly, “Parnell in Irish Literature,” *Parnell in Perspective*, ed. D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 256.

<sup>38</sup> Lucy McDiarmid, “Augusta Gregory, Bernard Shaw, and the Shewing-Up of Dublin Castle,” *PMLA*, 109 (1994): 26.

# FROM DIGNITY TO BEAUTY: AESTHETICS, REVOLUTION AND THE PROBLEM OF RECEPTION IN “EASTER 1916”

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Writing to Lady Gregory on 11 May 1916, in the immediate aftermath of the Dublin Rising, W.B. Yeats occupied himself with the matter of literature: “At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.”<sup>1</sup> Whilst the note of despondency is unmistakeable, it is hardly decisive. In almost the same breath, Yeats admits that he is already “trying to write a poem on the men executed,”<sup>2</sup> conceding that those literary and critical freedoms he values might productively interbreed with political exigency after all. The poem which resulted, “Easter 1916,” by demonstrating Yeats’s ambivalent acceptance of the new republican dispensation in the wake of the Rising, is probably his most complete political poem. Yet, ironically perhaps, it is also one of his most self-consciously aesthetic poems. This article is an attempt to account specifically for this coincidence of political and aesthetic development by considering “Easter 1916” as the occasion when Yeats translated his concern for literary freedom from its defensive formulation as freedom “from

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 613

<sup>2</sup> *Letters* 613.

politics" to its more radical emanation as the aesthetic ground of political authenticity.

Yeats's letter to Lady Gregory provides a key coordinate in supporting this reading. It is where he admits of his desire to write poetically about a political event and first commits to paper a version of what would become his aesthetic refrain: "A terrible beauty is born."<sup>3</sup> More significantly, however, the letter illuminates the pedigree of this refrain. Writing of Maud Gonne, Yeats draws attention to her remark that, along with the Rising, "tragic dignity has returned to Ireland."<sup>4</sup> The proximity of these phrases is worthy of note. Why did Yeats, so obviously impressed by Gonne's formulation, "tragic dignity," transform it into "a terrible beauty"? Whilst he may have had different pragmatic or prosodic reasons for making this change, it is the discourse of aesthetic philosophy that most coherently justifies it. We know that by this time Yeats had read Coleridge and Carlyle, both eminent mediators of the German aesthetic tradition, at least name-checked Schiller and Goethe, immersed himself in Nietzsche, and explored the aesthetic philosophy of Edmund Burke. Therefore, it is not fanciful to imagine that his modification of Gonne's sentiment was philosophically astute. Whereas "dignity," using Schiller's classic definition, insists on the subordination of sensuous nature to moral nature, fitting with Gonne's conceptual understanding of political right and her unwavering employment of a national ideal, "beauty" remains a sensuous category.<sup>5</sup> By emphasizing the "beauty" of the rebels' sacrifice then, Yeats effectively deprives it of a fixed conceptual meaning: sacrifice denied rational and moral self-evidence must attain its authenticity beyond ideation in the volatile event of its reception. It is with this in mind that I shall conduct a new reading of "Easter 1916" as a poem which gives primary emphasis to the problem of reception as central, certainly to aesthetic philosophy, but also to political revolution.

<sup>3</sup> *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 391-94.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters* 613.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," trans. Jane V. Curren, *Schiller's "On Grace and Dignity" in Its Cultural Context: Essays and a New Translation*, ed. Jane V. Curren and Christophe Fricker (USA: Camden House, 2005) 161.

## The Economy of Sacrifice

The theme of "Easter 1916" is less the substantive issue of Irish independence than the economy of its transmission and exchange. By interrogating the circulation of the rebels' sacrifice and the sentiment that informs it, Yeats considers how the objective of national freedom is embroiled by the opportunism of national dogma. The lines that open the final stanza highlight this significant concern with economy: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice?"<sup>6</sup> At issue is not the value of sacrifice *per se*, but the potential for immoderate sacrifice. The poet appears to be making a case for conservative measure against the profligacy of political violence. However, seven lines further on, he stops himself with the question: "Was it needless death after all?"<sup>7</sup> Here he is playing the role of an accountant having a second look at the ledger. Perhaps the Rising was not so profligate: "after all." Put in the balance with heaven, and what heaven might repay, the sacrifice could yet prove to be an excellent investment. Having duly considered where the smart money is, we can follow the poet as he supports the rebels' cause through the famous roll call of names. There is little doubt, it seems, that by the end of the poem the stock of the rebels has risen after some initial fluctuation and uncertainty.

Put like this, the economics of the stanza are quite conventional and Yeats is showing himself adept at calculating symbolic capital and establishing the rule of economic good sense. We could imagine a reading of the whole poem in which the poet retrospectively rationalizes and incorporates into a political and symbolic economy that which he initially regarded as an extreme and excessive case of political violence. However, this would be an incomplete interpretation. That the final stanza develops according to a series of analogies of exchange, moderation, and restitution is not without its ironic edge. From "Too long a sacrifice," to "Heaven's part" and "our part" (which designates the apportioning of shares), to "needless death," to knowing when it is "enough / To know," to the potential for "excess of love," we are guided conspicuously through a process of economic rationalization.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Variorum Poems* 394.

<sup>7</sup> *Variorum Poems* 394.

<sup>8</sup> *Variorum Poems* 394.

But what is more significant than Yeats's final sum is how he signposts the economy of a political event, such that even something so *otherworldly* as sacrifice can be said to have a market value.

By considering sacrifice as an economic problem, we are entering the territory uncovered by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>9</sup> Here Nietzsche characterizes sacrifice, particularly the Christian God's sacrifice of himself, as establishing a kind of *arche-economy* that serves as the foundation for modern economies of investment and redemption. The Christian God sacrifices himself in human form, thus cancelling the sins of the world: i.e., cancelling mankind's debt to God. The ancient covenant, in which mankind had to pay for his prior transgressions, is ostensibly abrogated because Christ's death represents the creditor killing himself, effectively absenting himself from the economy of exchange. Henceforth no man should worship simply out of obligation or fear. Yet, so Nietzsche argues, in a grand historical and metaphysical irony, instead of dissolving the cynical economy of exchange, Christ's death compounds it, universalizes it, and infiltrates it into the fabric of the inner mind of man. What was a structure of obligation – we expected to pay for our transgressions – becomes a hopeless feeling of guilt – we are not able to pay even though we want to. An external register of indebtedness is replaced by an internal feeling of bad conscience. This has the knock-on effect of accentuating the creditor's prestige and his place in the symbolic economy: since we cannot pay God back in life, he must exist so we can pay him back in the afterlife. This is the basis, as Nietzsche sees it, for Christian martyrology and its weak imitation in the frugal lives of the Christian merchants who save, pray, and invest in an afterlife where God can be met again and all debts can finally be settled.

We should be clear that this is not Nietzsche's final word on self-sacrifice. The deed of Christ's sacrifice is still a noble act for Nietzsche. The problem concerns mankind's reception of the deed, which demands the restitution of the benefactor within the economy of exchange at all costs. We have a secular equivalent to this theological conceit in the form of the nation state, where those who sacrifice themselves for the state are granted their posterity by the marketplace:

<sup>9</sup> *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000) 493-532.



they survive the breach of their own deaths by their symbolic instantiation as reproducible *homunculi*. The 1916 martyrs “MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse”<sup>10</sup> are each susceptible to this reproduction, where death means ideological reification, but not revolution. The guiding point is that “Easter 1916” does not, as the majority of the critical literature suggests, simply call into question the efficacy of the Rising (was it justifiable according to its objective?) but queries the calculated investment in the rebels’ heroic afterlife.<sup>11</sup> The supreme irony, to which the poem tends, is that the danger of political fanaticism lies in the process of economic moderation which secures the violent deed as an exchangeable symbol. Because the 1916 *Proclamation of Irish Independence*, along with the tradition it invokes, is ineluctably embroiled in the economics of property exchange (who owns Ireland?), the very notion of the aesthetic is put under pressure. Yet, this is precisely what Yeats seeks to recover by usurping “dignity” with “beauty.” Yeats mobilizes the term “beauty” to characterize the Rising as phenomenal, in a sense without purpose, and therefore terrible, in order to qualify the accounting that takes place when a deed is measured for its symbolic viability. This is to say, he emphasizes the volitional freedom by which the rebels gave their lives, (the beauty of the deed), over the abstract “freedom” to which the deed is directed.

### The Gift of Sacrifice

The difficulty of receiving the Rising as freely given, rather than already accounted for, is analogous to the difficulty of aesthetic appreciation. The burden lies with the poet as surrogate reader, historian and audience member: can he free himself from indebtedness, (the moral interpretation; the salutary lesson), in order to permit the freedom of beauty? As well as taking for its subject the difficulty of receiving the rebels’ sacrifice as a kind of gift, both the gift and the difficulty of gift-giving organize the form of the poem. Therefore, I would like to

<sup>10</sup> *Variorum Poems* 394.

<sup>11</sup> The criticism which best develops the aesthetic aspect of “Easter 1916,” in tandem with the political, includes the following: Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 213-17; Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2000); and Edward Larrissy, *Yeats The Poet: The Measures of Difference* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 132-37.

explore how the paradoxical status of the gift, as an economic figure that resists the strict rationalization of investment and symbolic reconciliation, ultimately describes the poem's locution.<sup>12</sup> It is my contention that the progress of the poem follows the poet's acknowledgment of the Rising as a gift.

In the first stanza, we encounter the poet going about his daily business exchanging "polite meaningless words"<sup>13</sup> with others among the untransformed of Dublin society. Superficially, it is a record of his complacency as a Dublin clubman: "Being certain that they and I / But lived where motley is worn."<sup>14</sup> Although we anticipate that this is about to be exploded by revolutionary events, "All changed, changed utterly" etc.,<sup>15</sup> we should not adhere to the *before and after* trajectory without further consideration. It is worth remembering that far from simply recording the way things were before the Rising, Yeats is poetically organizing the conditions for his own reception of it. The refrain is a case in point here because, whilst it tells us that everything has "changed," its function in the poem *qua* refrain is to repeat and to circulate. Therefore, an ongoing compositional logic is undermining the idea of a purely redemptive event in the act of transmitting it.

Because we know that to anticipate a gift too eagerly is indecent, (that to answer the door with our hands held expectantly before us is effectively to pre-empt a gift being given), we train ourselves to affect disinterest, prolong conversations on other topics, quell our curiosity, and put the present to one side for our later delectation. In other words, we implicitly acknowledge that we must compose the conditions for our own surprise. By analogy, it seems to me, instead of simply recording his political inauthenticity, and by extension that of Ireland before the Rising, Yeats dramatizes, through the opening stanza, the deferral and compositional indirection necessary for the acceptance of the Rising as a gift. By self-consciously marginalizing himself within the scene of political expectancy, Yeats points to the axiomatic irony of the gift; namely, that once it is directly appropriated,

<sup>12</sup> Underlying my understanding of this paradoxical characterization of the gift is Jacques Derrida's engagement with the anthropology of Marcel Mauss. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> *Variorum Poems* 392.

<sup>14</sup> *Variorum Poems* 392.

<sup>15</sup> *Variorum Poems* 392.

it ceases to operate as a gift and becomes instead a return on an investment. Thus, the first stanza, so often read as a depiction of contemporary life awaiting its redemption, can be re-read as the recognition and operation of the "tact" required for receiving a gift. Potentially, we have two positions here: that of the ideologues (those expectant recipients of the Rising), for whom the rebels' sacrifice takes place on a timeline of punctual investments and returns, and that of the poet, for whom such teleology undermines authentic freedom and originality of the Rising. In other words, it is by not expecting the Rising that Yeats is in a position to receive it in a way that those who do expect it cannot.

This difference in mode of reception has further metaphysical implications for an understanding of time. The political economy established by the logic of investment and return (where the investment of martyrdom secures the return of national independence) instantiates a stable and linear temporal axis along which the shift from Ireland as potentiality to Ireland as actuality is realized. On my reading, however, in which the Rising is analogous to a gift, the Rising's non-returnable and irresolvable qualities destabilize the axis upon which a central historical narrative unfolds. What we might call the untimeliness of the gift (the fact that a gift resists full appropriation at any given moment, if it is to remain a gift) focuses our attention on the significant relation between the composition of the poem and the composition of the revolutionary event. I have argued that the poem makes a kind of virtue of the poet's separation from the main narrative of Irish independence (through the poet's unconcerned distraction in the first stanza). So too is the poem separated from the event it ostensibly memorializes. "Easter 1916," although completed a mere five months after the Rising, was initially circulated in a limited edition among Yeats's friends and acquaintances. It was only with its general circulation in 1920 (coinciding with the hunger strike of the republican Mayor of Cork City, Terence MacSwiney) that the poem, in an ironically untimely fashion, achieved its timely public profile. This apparent accident of reception in turn echoes a broader historical enigma: the Rising did not begin until Easter Monday, effectively a day late since it was planned for Easter Sunday, and Ireland itself constituted a belated – untimely – nation among the nations of Europe. This affinity between the unpunctual transmission of the poem and that of the Rising is prefigured within "Easter 1916" by Yeats's reflection on the poet's

own untimeliness. Thus, the political and the aesthetic converge through the shared problematic of their disjointed transmission and reception.

If the first stanza is read as establishing the conditions under which a gift might be acknowledged, the second stanza proceeds to describe the act of reception itself. Here begins the delicate process of cataloguing the contents of what has been given, leading to the familiar moment of resentment when we realize that what someone has given us reflects their idea of the kind of person we should be. Yeats runs through the participants of the Rising, picking out Constance Markiewicz, Padraig Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and John MacBride. It is the last of these, MacBride, the abusive husband of Maud Gonne, who provides the sticking point:

This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart.<sup>16</sup>

Yeats is troubled by the fact that the Ireland he is offered has for one of its totems a man for whom he has such scorn. How can he be truly thankful for such a legacy? Immediately, however, he revises his tone: "Yet I number him in the song; / He, too, has resigned his part / In the casual comedy."<sup>17</sup> It is one of the most magnanimous changes of heart in Anglophone literature, but should not be mistaken for a submission on Yeats's behalf to the demands of a greater constituency who would like to see MacBride celebrated in light of his political martyrdom. Rather, this revision is indicative of his acknowledgement that the gift is not identical with the manifest content of the legacy he has received. The dramatic metaphor ("... resigned his part / in the casual comedy") is crucial for this acknowledgement. The "part" to which MacBride resigns himself allows Yeats to separate the man he despises from the deed he admires; just as we might separate an object we have unwrapped from the gift which remains veiled in the encounter with the person who gave it to us. The phenomenology of gift-giving is thus reaffirmed since, rather than obligating Yeats to MacBride,

<sup>16</sup> *Variorum Poems* 393.

<sup>17</sup> *Variorum Poems* 393.

the Rising frees him into a new volitional relationship with his erstwhile antagonist.

This personal recognition initiates a metaphorical tension between the phenomenal movement of nature and the non-sensuous identity of a “stone” in the second half of the poem, which thematically echoes the tension between the non-appropriable gift and the stability of economic rationalization and ownership. The task for the poet is to preserve the playful movement of new social configurations acknowledged through the gift from the purposefulness of national dogma: “Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone.”<sup>18</sup> The difficulty of this task is formalized in the language of the poem itself, continually threatened by the demands of political rhetoric, and is best exemplified by the concluding lines:

I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.<sup>19</sup>

Although it might seem from this that the poet cannot escape the obligations of political economy after all, since he is paying off his symbolic debt to the Rising, something has been exposed in the reflective act of his returning the names of the *martyrs* to economic circulation: an incision has been made through the interval of the poem. If Yeats makes the art of his composition conspicuous (“I write it out...”), it is because he wants us to see the rhetorical form of this remembrance and the volition necessary for the gift to circulate. Far from proving his simple fidelity to the investments of Irish Republicanism then, he ensures that the spectre of infidelity is preserved within the symbolic forms of political faith; just as the contingent act of writing is made conspicuous at the very moment we might expect the appropriative event to efface it. Indeed, this is Yeats’s appropriat(iv)e speech act.

<sup>18</sup> *Variorum Poems* 393.

<sup>19</sup> *Variorum Poems* 394.

But its self-consciousness reminds us that, as well as describing the subversion of the gift within the economy of conventional exchange, "Easter 1916," as an aesthetic artefact, is itself a gift, subverting the conventional exchange of language and sentiment by remaining untimely and somehow inappropriate.

In this article, I have considered Yeats's aesthetic preoccupation in "Easter 1916," and employed the figure of the gift to describe its significant operation within the political economy. More generally, I have begun to recover the aesthetic from its designation as *counter-revolutionary* (in the tradition of Edmund Burke) by arguing that it is precisely the gratuity and impropriety of the aesthetic phenomenon ("needless death") that preserves its radical potential from the over-determination of ideological interest; and which liberates the reading subject from the falsely limiting idea that the only valuable political actions are those that enter an economy of need.

# WOMEN WRITERS: REVIVAL AND AFTER

## KATHARINE TYNAN'S NOVELS AND THE POLITICS OF IRELAND'S "LONG GESTATION," 1890-1916

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During the summer of 1914, the Dublin-born writer Katharine Tynan began a new literary project – a home front journal about the Great War. For the benefit of prospective publishers, she had neatly printed the title on the diary's front page – *A Woman's Notes in War-Time: Observations from a Quiet Corner*.<sup>1</sup> As her chosen title indicates, Tynan was from the outset preoccupied by her sense of distance from war-related events. Dublin was conspicuously removed from the centre of war-related action and life in Ireland was, frustratingly for the author, much the same as it had been before the fighting began. "There was no general air of calamity," Tynan writes on her journal's opening page. "Everyone was doing pretty well what they had been doing since the Deluge."<sup>2</sup> Yet simmering below this placid surface there was also, she asserts, a shift in political thinking. The thoughts and concerns of Dubliners had for the first time in many years moved beyond the boundaries of their native country: everyone had begun talking "of the War instead of the Civil War, which latter question had retired into obscurity."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Katharine Tynan, "A Woman's Notes In War-Time: Observations from a Quiet Corner," unpublished memoir, John Rylands Library (Manchester), Papers of Katharine Tynan, GB 0133 KTH, Box 13, Folder 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tynan, "A Woman's Notes in War-Time" 1.

<sup>3</sup> Tynan, "A Woman's Notes in War-Time" 1.

Tynan aligns her own feelings with those of her Irish neighbours, but her ill-disguised disappointment at the *laissez faire* attitude with which her fellow Dubliners greeted the onset of war demonstrates that there was indeed a perceptible difference between the author and her contemporaries in the Ireland of 1914. Tynan's acts of migrating from Ireland to England and back again between 1893 and 1911 had in fact transformed her political views and resulted in an emotional investment in the British war effort which was distinctly lacking in many of her Irish compatriots, as she would later admit in her memoirs: "I had lived eighteen years in England, I had come to believe that affection for England and love of Ireland could quite well go hand in hand. I was enthusiastically pro-Ally."<sup>4</sup> Her interest in the war and its politics would lead her to write a body of World War I poems which enjoyed widespread, albeit fleeting, popularity in Britain. Yet Tynan's acknowledged fondness for England would suffer unexpected challenges over the course of the war. Both her war diary and her novels written to 1916 effectively chart the course of that testing ground.

When Tynan is mentioned in academic studies today, it is almost invariably for her five volumes of memoir, which recount her many and diverse associations with a number of writers who emerged on the publishing scene between 1880 and 1920. Interest has understandably centred on her close associations with, and reminiscences about, the foremost Irish poet of the period, W.B. Yeats. The pair had met in 1885, the year that her first book of poetry, *Louise de la Vallière*, was published. Tynan's junior by six years, Yeats was drawn to her then-considerable literary reputation, and soon became the closest of her confidantes. The two were often together, and frequently conversed on the topics of literature and politics. Yeats's surviving letters to Tynan trace the course of their relationship, which would grow in intimacy to that point that, in his unpublished autobiography, he admits to having considered proposing marriage to Tynan because he believed her to be in love with him.<sup>5</sup> Recent academic work has in fact confirmed that Yeats did propose to her on 19 July 1891 but was

<sup>4</sup> Katharine Tynan, *The Years of the Shadow* (London: Constable and Co., 1919) 204.

<sup>5</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972) 32.



refused.<sup>6</sup> Despite this rejection, Tynan's affections for Yeats persisted long after her marriage in 1893. She was to write in 1910 of the most intimate days of their acquaintance: "it is a very gentle personality I think of in those days – very gentle and very dear."<sup>7</sup>

Tynan and Yeats undoubtedly shared a passionate interest in Irish politics but, just as her literary career preceded his, so too did Tynan's political activism predate their friendship. She had been a member of the Ladies' Land League years before she met Yeats and had formed, during the period of her activism, a friendship with the League's president Anna Parnell, sister of the Irish Parliamentary Party leader Charles Stewart Parnell. An adamant Parnellite, Tynan remained proud of her decision to support Ireland's "uncrowned king," to the detriment of her career, throughout the party split precipitated by the revelation of his affair with Katherine O'Shea. She evocatively describes the damage inflicted on her by anti-Parnellites in her memoirs and correspondence, including one notable letter written to Mary Gill on 14 November 1891, a month after Parnell's death: "I'm feeling now as if I was a wicked person since this morning when I got a letter from Father Russell [the editor of the *Irish Monthly*], telling me he couldn't do anything for my poems ... because of the part I'd taken in politics."<sup>8</sup>

While her enthusiasm for Parnell's Home Rule cause persisted, Tynan's relocation from Ireland to England upon her marriage would have a profound effect on her – politically, professionally and personally. This move coincided with a shift in Tynan's literary output, for it was after she migrated to England that she first began to write novels. Over the course of her career, she increasingly turned from poetry to prose for her livelihood and would write well over 100 novels before her death in 1931. It is no accident that the beginning of her career as a novelist coincides with the beginning of her marriage, for, in marrying Henry Hinkson, Tynan left financial security behind and found herself

<sup>6</sup> See James J. McFadden and Daniel Kiefer, "'Abstracted in His Dreams': Katharine Tynan's 'W. B. Yeats,'" *Modern Philology*, 88.3 (February 1991): 261, and Peter van de Kamp, "Tynan, Katharine (1859–1931)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 25 Sept 2009 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33887>.

<sup>7</sup> McFadden and Kiefer 70.

<sup>8</sup> Katharine Tynan, letter to Mary Gill, 14 November 1891, John Rylands Library, Papers of Katharine Tynan, GB 0133 KTH, Box 16, Folder 3.

having to turn to novels as a means of “boiling the pot.”<sup>9</sup> From then on, writing was less an artistic pursuit, and more of an attempt to “keep the fire on the hearth for the children and the securities and sanctities of home about them.”<sup>10</sup>

Tynan, by this time a household name in both Ireland and England through her poetry and prolific journalistic work, found a ready audience for her novels and, although she would claim they were created “not to please [her]self, but to meet demand,” the necessity of writing them did not deter her from seeking to influence her readers by promoting causes, political and otherwise, in which she was interested.<sup>11</sup> Her first novel, *The Way of a Maid*, is a case in point. Published in 1895, it is markedly concerned with the topic of inter-religious marriage in Ireland and deals with issues that Tynan, a devout Catholic, had faced throughout her courtship with and marriage to the Protestant Hinkson. In *The Way of a Maid*, she argues that cross-religious alliances, although rare, are of benefit to Ireland and its people. Many of the almost exclusively Catholic inhabitants of her fictional town of Coolevara are, we learn, descended from the Protestant Cromwellian soldiers who long ago came to conquer and remained to be subjugated:

Those unconquerable warriors settled down in various parts of the fertile Irish country, and, in days of peace, had to ground arms before the violet-eyed daughters of the mere Irish. In course of time they or their sons renegaded to the Scarlet Woman, and became as sturdy on her side as they had been on the other in their psalm-singing days. Admirable results these marriages have had.<sup>12</sup>

By the novel’s close, similar intermarriages have been achieved between Tynan’s present-day Protestant and Catholic characters with correspondingly beneficial outcomes.

Between 1894 and the beginning of World War I, many of Tynan’s prose works act to justify and defend the Irish to English readers. Some simultaneously and intuitively serve as warnings to the English to alter their behaviour towards the Irish before trouble ensues. In her

<sup>9</sup> Katharine Tynan, *The Middle Years* (London: Constable and Co., 1916) 353.

<sup>10</sup> Tynan, *The Middle Years* 353.

<sup>11</sup> Tynan, *The Middle Years* 353.

<sup>12</sup> Katharine Tynan, *The Way of a Maid* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1894) 6.

1901 novel *A Union of Hearts*, Tynan appropriates for her title a phrase often deployed in political circles to describe the long-standing union between Ireland and England in recognizably ameliorative terms that served to redefine the alliance as a state of mutual affection rather than the imposed and uncomfortable position of political dependency that it actually was for Ireland. In Tynan's fictional re-envisioning of the English-Irish union, the well-meaning but misguided English landowner, Rivers, is forced into a state of dependence on the Irish land reformer Aileen Considine, who acts as both his guide and conscience. In educating Rivers about the violent "League days" and cautioning that "the Celt is peacable and gentle – till his home or his family is menaced," Aileen curtails a murderous tenant-led mutiny.<sup>13</sup> Similar plots and characters would recur in her novels throughout the first and second decades of the twentieth century.

Tynan's work would likewise feature themes that promoted the idea of economic independence for Ireland. Her fictional politician Sir Gerard Molyneux from *The French Wife* of 1904 is characteristic of her many fictional advocates for Irish fiscal reform. Demonstrated to endorse John Redmond's then recent anti-emigration policies for Ireland when he details his first-hand experiences of witnessing Irish migrants in New York "dying like flies" in tenement buildings, Molyneux simultaneously asserts that the tradition of migration is bleeding the country dry and destabilizing its native workforce. His political projects, meanwhile, culminate with a land reform bill that identifies him as the fictional equivalent of Ireland's then Chief Secretary George Wyndham, whose land reform act of 1903 Tynan greatly admired. Beginning with this novel and continuing through to *Heart o'Gold* (1912), Tynan's plots would also more often than not revolve around the establishment of cooperative farming and industry projects such as those that Wyndham and her friends Sir Horace Plunkett and George Russell ("Æ") espoused for Ireland.

Like her exemplar Æ – about whom she once wrote, "One feels inclined to say of him as Lord Henry Fitzgerald said of Lord Edward, 'Dear fellow, he is perfect!'" – Tynan was a pluralist as well as a Home Ruler.<sup>14</sup> She would admit that she, like many of the diasporic Irish characters featured in her fiction, occupied a political position

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Tynan, *A Union of Hearts* (London: James Nisbet, 1901) 77.

<sup>14</sup> Tynan, *The Years of the Shadow* 204.

somewhere between “Irish” and “English” which could be difficult to reconcile. “I was a Sinn Feiner to my English and Scottish friends, and even dared to call myself so,” Tynan would write in 1922. Yet she confessed that her “Sinn Fein friends” would think her “sadly lacking,” and attributed this “lack” to her migrancy: “a long period of years lived out of the country has taught me that no cause and no people are altogether black or altogether white.”<sup>15</sup> It is unsurprising, given Tynan’s enthusiasm for politics and the number of Irish reformers she counted among her many friends, that her novels frequently act to promote the ideals of those who shared her Home Rule values. It is equally unsurprising, considering her fondness for the English homeland she had adopted and only recently relinquished, that the policies she most often and avidly promotes in her novels up to 1916 are ones of conciliation, compromise and cooperation, on both sides of the Irish-English equation.

Tynan, unable to invest herself unequivocally in the “either/or” policies of “Irish Ireland,” nowhere in her novels endorses a Sinn Féin ethos of “ourselves alone,” never actively promotes her friend Douglas Hyde’s de-Anglicizing mission for Ireland, and only cursorily involves herself in the cultural nationalism of Yeats and his revivalist colleagues. Likewise, while others of her politically active Irish friends surface as influences on her novelistic themes early and identifiably in her *oeuvre*, Yeats’s political projects appear to have had little impact on Tynan’s fiction. Yeats does not in fact make his first discernible appearance in her work until *Her Ladyship* in 1907 – twelve years after Tynan began publishing novels. Yet in this first appearance, he is central to the plot: it is Yeats’s poetry that inspires Hugh, a poor tailor, to aid Lady Anne in her cooperative industries and eventually leads him to win her heart.

Yeats, it could be said, is conspicuous in Tynan’s fiction for his absence. We might, however, read him into the many and varied tales Tynan constructs from her first novel onwards of men who propose marriage but are rejected, and particularly to the number of those spurned suitors who are poetically gifted writers but terrible spellers – as Yeats undoubtedly was. Of these, the most compelling is the main character of Tynan’s novel *John-A-Dreams*, published in that all-important year of 1916. The John of the title is, like Yeats, a gifted poet

<sup>15</sup> Katharine Tynan, *The Wandering Years* (London: Constable, 1922) 135.

who loves the seemingly unattainable Octavia Sweeney. Octavia acts as a composite of two women central to Yeats's life to that point: her name, pre-existing romantic relationship, and affection for John are reminiscent of the married woman, Olivia Shakespear, with whom Yeats once had a passionate affair, while her stately physical appearance and humanitarian projects are more redolent of the poet's great love, Maud Gonne. Rather than the elusive Octavia, John's family encourage him to marry his dear friend Monica, whom they admire and advocate for John much as the Yeats family admired Katharine Tynan and once advocated her for "Willie." John at first cannot contemplate proposing to a woman with whom he is not in love, but his opinion soon changes when Monica considers entering a convent – as Tynan herself once did. At that point, John, "in sudden angry revolt against" what he terms "her sacrifice," asks her to marry him.<sup>16</sup> She rejects him only because he is not in love with her.<sup>17</sup>

Noting the many ways the details of Tynan's novel dovetail with what we now know about her relationship with Yeats, it is conceivable that, into *John-A-Dreams*, Tynan wove at least some of the tale of their friendship. Lending credence to this suggestion, Tynan borrows her title from the nickname, "Jack o'Dreams," that Yeats gave to the main character of his only published novel, *John Sherman* (1891).<sup>18</sup> In this earlier work, the titular John bears a resemblance to the author himself, while Tynan almost certainly can be glimpsed in the character of John's true love, the plain but honourable Mary Carton. If *John-A-Dreams* is indeed a response to *John Sherman* and was intended as an allegory for Tynan's relationship with the poet, it was an understandable undertaking considering the import of events in the year it was published and the history of their acquaintance. Tynan and Yeats had spent much time together in their idealistic youth, had shared an enthusiasm for the "Young Ireland" ethos of their friend, the "'48 man" John O'Leary, and had together conjured dreams and visions of a better Ireland. By the time Tynan was to publish *John-A-Dreams*, those early

<sup>16</sup> Katharine Tynan, *John-A-Dreams* (London: Smith, Elder, 1916) 256.

<sup>17</sup> For additional information on Tynan and Yeats's relationship see James J. McFadden, "William Butler Yeats at Katharine Tynan's Home, Whitehall," *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, Vol. 8, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1990); Katharine Tynan, *Twenty-Five Years: Reminiscences* (London: Smith, Elder, 1913) 39; and Katharine Tynan, *The Middle Years* 66.

<sup>18</sup> W.B. Yeats, *John Sherman and Dhoya* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1990) 9.

aspirations for Ireland were being shattered by the violent aftermath of the Easter Rising.

Over the course of World War I, the tone and subject matter of Tynan's fiction would alter. Perceptibly more melancholic during the first two years of the war, it would become even more so after the spring of 1916. Meanwhile, Tynan would work assiduously on her journal until late 1915, regularly writing of life on the home front and collecting numerous first-hand accounts from the war zone to intersperse with her own thoughts. Her entry for 16 April 1915 is representative. In it, she conveys her impressions of the troop of Irish Volunteers she had seen marching through Harcourt Street Station that morning:

These are the Volunteers who have broken away from Redmond & his party. Fine, stalwart, splendid material of soldiers – playing at the game, not playing the game. Some wounded Tommies home on leave stood & watched them go past with the flaunting & triumphal air. One wondered at the thoughts behind the quiet-bitter faces of the men who had known war & the men who were playing at war & playing ungenerously. There were some five hundred stalwart, well-equipped young men in that procession. Did the immense, heroic tragedy of the war wake in them nothing but derision?<sup>19</sup>

Four years later, this episode would be tellingly re-imagined in Tynan's memoirs: "we saw about five hundred of the Irish Volunteers going for one of their route-marches," Tynan recalls about that same morning. "A good many people in Dublin believed that the Volunteers were only play-acting – in their ignorance. They swung along, splendid, vigorous fellows, full of life and the joy of life. ... A couple of very small, very insignificant Tommies stood and stared at them from the sidewalk."<sup>20</sup>

By 1919, Tynan's perspective of the Irish Volunteers had been distorted by her knowledge of what was to ensue and, with hindsight, she was to rewrite her own history to ignore her part among the "ignorant" onlookers who viewed the Irish fighters with contempt. Such a rapid re-envisioning indicates the pace at which the Rising had shifted Irish consciousness back within the boundaries of the homeland, and had

<sup>19</sup> Tynan, "A Woman's Notes in War-Time," entry for 15 April 1915.

<sup>20</sup> Tynan, *The Years of the Shadow* 175.

become, for many Irish people, the cornerstone of a new nation-building mythology. For Tynan, more specifically, it suggests that, by 1919, belief in Ireland's rectitude in taking up arms against England had supplanted any earlier faith in the efficacy of following a course of mutual respect and patient cooperation that had burgeoned during her many years as a migrant in England.

Tynan readily admits to having been blind-sided by the violence of the English response to the Rising: "To me any bloodiness between England and Ireland was unthinkable," she would write in 1919. "All that belonged to the bad old days. And here was '98 come again, and the people who were my own people were being shot and deported by the people with whom we had lived in amity and affection for eighteen long years."<sup>21</sup> Tynan's Irish novels from 1916 onwards would retain that same sense of dreams partially shattered that first suffused her fiction in *John-A-Dreams*. Conciliation and cooperation between Irish and English characters was thereafter less easily imaginable. Irish politicians and reformers largely disappeared from her stories, while her images of Ireland thenceforth became those of a decaying land with little hope of prosperity.

Equally significantly, Tynan's war diary would remain unpublished. Just before the Rising, she set it aside and never again resumed writing it. Her reasons for doing so are readily conjectured. By 1916, the question of a civil war in Ireland had re-entered the communal consciousness. Tynan's "quiet corner" was no longer quiet.

<sup>21</sup> Tynan, *The Years of the Shadow* 205.

## **THE QUEST FOR FLORA: WHO IS SHE? ESTABLISHING ONE WOMAN'S PLACE IN MARY LAVIN'S "THE BECKER WIVES"**

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This article will focus on one key text in the oeuvre of Irish writer Mary Lavin, a novella entitled "The Becker Wives." Lavin was published from 1939 until 1995, during which time she revised many of her short stories and incorporated them into a number of collections which, I would argue, reflected both men's and women's responses to social conditions in Ireland, particularly during the 1940s. Despite criticism of these constant revisions by Sean O'Faolain, whom Lavin quotes as saying "... an author has no right to re-edit his published stories, that the work should stand as it was when it was written," she counters his disapproval with the legitimacy of a lifetime's successful writing and lived experience that finds its way into her fictional world, as demonstrated by the later widow stories and Vera Traske narratives.<sup>1</sup> "The Becker Wives" is a key text in that it invites scrutiny of the traditional position of women in Ireland, at a time when assessment of the legislative restrictions placed on those self-same women had been debated in the newspapers throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lavin in L.R. Stevens and S. Stevens, "An Interview with Mary Lavin," *Studies*, 86.341: 43.

<sup>2</sup> A series of letters and articles were written in response to the draft Constitution to the *Irish Independent* in May 1937, challenging the treatment of women contained within the Constitutional Articles. In contrast, a promotional magazine supplement containing the



It also serves as a melting pot for observations on the debates surrounding Ireland's neutral position in World War II, in its exploration of the reticence and uncertainty displayed by the Becker family in moving forward. As a transitional text, it is perfectly positioned to address those social and political issues emerging from the implementation of the Irish Constitution of 1937, functioning essentially as a statement piece.

Any deviation from Lavin's preferred format of the short story is also telling. In her opinion, it is a powerful construct:

[t]he novel, it seems to me, is too ambitious. I wrote short stories because I believe in the form as a powerful medium for the discovery of truth ... At its greatest it magnifies life in much the same way that a snow flake under a microscope or a smear under a slide is seen to have an immensely complex design.<sup>3</sup>

She adds, "A short story writer has to be judged ultimately by the whole body of the work. The most anthologised stories are often the least important in the body of the work."<sup>4</sup> That is what is so noteworthy about "The Becker Wives" – it moves towards the lengthier novel format and away from the intensity of the short story, and it has not yet received the full critical attention that it deserves.

Until relatively recently, Lavin was not an obvious choice from the Irish literary canon for new readers, yet was popular and critically acknowledged during her writing career; indeed, it is only within the last few years that a speculative second wave of critical appreciation of her work has emerged within the context of other Irish women's writing such as Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien, and, more recently, Una Troy.<sup>5</sup> It is significant that Ann Owens Weekes in her

full draft of the Constitution in both Irish and English was issued with *The Irish Press* on 11 June 1937, for instance, containing a foreword by Eamon De Valera. This also carried extensive advertisement coverage for successful Irish brand names and companies and was, in addition to copies of the Constitution, made available to all through local post offices. As a direct marketing strategy, it was designed to offset problematic media responses.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Lavin quoted in Maurice Harmon, "From Conversations with Mary Lavin," *Irish University Review*, 27.2 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 288.

<sup>4</sup> Lavin quoted in Harmon 292.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Nix, "Una Troy's Fiction: The Figure of the Irish Woman Writer," PhD thesis, National University of Ireland, Cork, 2008. See also Michael Neary, "Flora's Answer to the Irish Question: A Study of Mary Lavin's 'The Becker Wives,'" *Twentieth Century*

study of women writers anticipates this second wave and reminds potential readers what is so important about Lavin's work, that as a teenager Weekes "In a fever of excitement, afraid that this elusive, unnameable thing might disappear ... sought and read." She adds:

Here were people like those I knew, people whose stories could have come from my own village. As such, they fed a void barely sensed till then and changed my perception about the world I lived in. With the force of revelation I saw that my life and the apparently dull lives of those around me were as valuable and as worth exploring as the lives of the more privileged.<sup>6</sup>

As Elke D'hoker has pointed out in her recent essay for *Irish Studies Review*, the lack of availability of Lavin's two novels and many short story collections is an obvious factor with regard to her recognition, but there is also the underlying sense that Lavin is not easily categorized and so adopts a marginal position for this reason.<sup>7</sup>

Autobiographical, social and political dimensions of her life stimulate Lavin's vision of social realism. Lavin's accounts of the tension between personal and national versions of achievement suggest a writer who is keen to validate the worth of the individual, of small town and rural life, while at the same time seeking to expose the hollowness of some of the official rhetoric of Eamon de Valera's government. Although she herself had some financial autonomy throughout her career, there were increasingly fewer opportunities for many women to maintain their independence in the workplace or in their personal lives in 1930s and 1940s Ireland. As Myrtle Hill argues, at that time, "... women's role in the Free State was characterised as domestic and familial, with legislative measures progressively eroding their position in public life."<sup>8</sup> Once the 1937 Constitution was passed, it seemed a woman's place was most definitely in the home. Despite the timeframe for publication of her short stories extending well

*Literature*, 42.4 (Winter 1996): 516. Here it is read as a search for what Irishness means. Richard F. Peterson, *Mary Lavin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 39-40, here more as a loss of personal identity.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Owens Weekes, *Unveiling Treasures The Attic Guide to The Published Works of Irish Women Literary Writers* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Elke D'hoker, "Beyond the Stereotypes: Mary Lavin's Irish Women," *Irish Studies Review*, 16.4 (November 2008): 415-30.

<sup>8</sup> Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland A Century of Change* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003) 100.

beyond the 1930s into the 1990s, the narratives and their fictional chronologies initially clearly reflect a response to that earlier period, and then continue to revision Irish life as Lavin publishes well into her eighties, capitalizing on the changes she observes.

In an interview, Lavin was asked if the gender difference of point of view in her writing was an essential or incidental strategy as she writes from both perspectives. Her response was: "I write as a person ... I am a writer. And I write about people as I see them whether they are men or women. Gender is incidental to me in that sense."<sup>9</sup> Despite her refusal to be labelled by her gender, she offers clear exemplification in her short stories of a marginalized female population struggling to define their voice and find their place. Whilst this resistance to being defined herself highlights the importance of the craft rather than the writer, it also accentuates the problematic location of the woman writer within the context of Ireland's religious and secular ideologies. Regardless, Lavin sees herself as an equal within a body of writers, in that she is a practitioner of the craft. She works within a masculine discourse as a norm and does not wish to "step out" and recognized as different. In separating her own creative self from the content of her writing, she also diffuses the added *complication* of her gender at that time, and by continuing to subvert reader expectations of women's roles within relationships, the home and wider society, Lavin still offers striking alternative strategies for women to cope within the orthodoxy of Catholic Ireland. Interestingly, Lavin's work was never banned by the Censorship Board despite a range of challenging subject matters that include incest, extra-marital relationships, illegitimacy and senility. In fact, the seven deadly sins are all committed in her stories.<sup>10</sup>

Reading "The Becker Wives," we are faced with an implicit construction of a social documentary of the middle classes confronted with change, where clear issues surrounding control and freedom emerge. It is a departure from the more realistic mode that Lavin normally frequents with its

<sup>9</sup> Lavin in Stevens and Stevens 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> "Sarah," in *Tales From Bective Bridge* (1942; London: Michael Joseph, 1945) engages with illegitimacy, potential incest, adultery and abandonment. "Senility" in *The Shrine and Other Stories* (London: Constable, 1977) with old age and senility as the title suggests. "Sarah," "Lilacs," "Brother Boniface," "At Sallygap" in *Tales From Bective Bridge* cover nearly all of the seven deadly sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth. This was Lavin's first collection.

theatricality, yet it also serves as an exploration of the terrain of the domestic, and as a microcosm of Ireland in the 1940s. It is surprisingly regarded as a disappointment by Frank O'Connor who sees it as "only a ghost of a story."<sup>11</sup> He identifies that she "deliberately eschews the physical world,"<sup>12</sup> and perhaps it is that failure to provide the usual fields and waterways of Dublin and Meath that causes him such concern. It can be read as more of a psychological thriller or fantastical cautionary tale, far more complex than O'Connor seems to think.

A particular focus in this narrative however, is that of caution with regard to an unquestioning drive towards the unproven void of modernity, brilliantly exposed through the figure of Flora in "The Becker Wives." Flora is catalyst, strategist and prisoner all at once. As a strategist for change she is flawed, bringing with her as she does a blemished inheritance that has the potential to destroy the stability of family life. "The Becker Wives" is critical, both of the static and self-complacent family whose successful inheritance appears to have weakened any business acumen and social awareness, and also of the ephemeral and insubstantial changes ahead signified by the unexpected addition to the family in Flora, the new wife.

We learn she is an outsider intellectually, psychologically and physically. Undeniably, Flora acts as a conduit for change but her humorous antics, the mimicry of others, the apparently innocuous party games all take on sinister connotations when she overdevelops them. The trope of the outsider embodied in Flora is directly opposed to the inclusive sisterhood that is the Becker women. The pace of the narrative speeds up dramatically as her descent into madness becomes more obvious and the novelty factor offered by Flora with her poetry, modernist artistic patronage and her dramatic impersonations becomes dangerous and, according to the narrative, unsustainable. Her aberrant behaviour is flagged as leading to the destruction of the family.

The deceased matriarch Anna Becker (who makes a brief appearance at the outset of the novella and sets the gold standard for all the women in the family) is promoted as the *ideal* in an Ireland of conventional ideals – she brings "content" to the marriage, "more often than not

<sup>11</sup> Frank O'Connor, *A Study of the Short Story* (New Jersey: Melville House Publishing, 2004) 203.

<sup>12</sup> O'Connor 203.

heavy with child.”<sup>13</sup> After her death, and with the introduction of this new *performer* into the family (for that is what Flora is, the essence of the woman has long since gone and she merely exists through the roles that she adopts to survive), adversarial exchanges between all of the women emerge. Flora moves beyond the normal power base of a new wife. Challenges to the accepted hierarchy emerge – older wife against younger, brother against brother, husband against wife – and whilst the established Becker women are presented as staid and predictable, unlikely to threaten the peace and tranquillity of the lives of their male counterparts, Flora is exciting and adventurous.

This manifests itself in her physical presence in the narrative. She acts as one representation of femininity in that she is physically attractive, slender, sociable and non-threatening, at least at first. Her lack of engagement with the domestic sphere may be seen as an aberration, of immaturity early on in marriage. In contrast, once sisters-in-law Charlotte and Julia Becker become larger in pregnancy as alternate representations of femininity through their fertility, they began to feel awkward, and “found it advisable to conceal their condition under massive fur coats,” rendering them even more like a herd of breeding cows with their coverings of animal skins, and finally after the matriarch Anna’s death, as “replicas” of her, they would sit in public “fat, heavy and furred,” joined by their sister-in-law Henrietta. (14) Linguistically, the alliterative listing highlights a visual sturdiness that Lavin wishes to contrast early on with the insubstantial frame of Flora, and drawing on Patricia Coughlan’s essay “Bog Queens,”<sup>14</sup> I would argue these natural images of Becker femininity ally themselves to the idealization of icons of domesticity within the history of Irish rural life that involve the silenced and passive woman, and play with the allegorical representation of Ireland as woman, alongside a problematic parallel in Flora. This is where the divide becomes significant.

These animal references or image clusters are continued in the descriptions of the whole family when they are out socializing –

<sup>13</sup> Mary Lavin, “The Becker Wives,” *The Becker Wives and Other Stories* (London: Michael Joseph, 1946) 9. Subsequent quotations are from this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Coughlan, “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. Toni O’Brien and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) 90.

primarily the women are criticized by the youngest son Theobald, but even his brothers become distracted as they look across “the intervening bulks of their respective wives” rather than focusing on their own social group. (16) The cow-like images of the women form an inevitable association with the semi-domesticated barnyard. In contrast, the newcomer Flora is presented as a wild creature always straining to break free.

Flora is everything that the Becker women are not – and Lavin cleverly manipulates the reader into constructing a fantasy image of her through allusions designed to attract and then unsettle the reader. This false sense is heightened into a fantasy figure when another brother Samuel meets Flora for the first time at *his own* engagement dinner. He has “covertly” observed her with “genuine admiration,” despite the close proximity of his fiancée and the nature of the social occasion into which Flora had entered. (44) The narrative intrusion into the mind of Samuel allows us to observe discordant activity between the realism of Flora and the filmic fantasy clip akin to a twenty-first-century advertising campaign for cosmetics or chocolate. His view of her is contained within an “absurd” picture of “a young girl in a long white dress, with bare feet, and a yellow mane of hair, who in a flowery meadow, skipped and frisked about.” She is actually dressed in “her trim little suit and her little black shoes tied with trim little black leather bows.” (44) This pastoral fantasy alters in the later versions of the novella as Lavin limits the building references to wild animals in connection with Flora’s madness, softening the tragic denouement. Linguistically, in this 1946 edition, the narrative points towards a very particular binary construction, that is, of woman versus girl, and by implication, experienced versus inexperienced. By adopting the exterior trappings of adulthood with conventional dress codes and behaviour, Flora could then be conceived as non-threatening, yet by allowing her to intrude into the private interior of Samuel’s consciousness in an opportunistic manner, Lavin suggests an independence from social convention (both for Samuel and Flora) that may create turmoil. Almost immediately, Samuel begins to trade Flora’s fragrance, both literal and metaphorical, against his fiancée who “never wore perfume.” (44)

From this point on, we enter into a literary deviance, as it were – anticipated associated images of Flora emerging from the etymology

of her name fail to materialize. Borne out of Roman mythology – Flora was the goddess of flowers – the pagan associations would truly separate Flora from Catholic Ireland through an organic semiotic link. But perhaps it is the link with the land that Lavin wishes to sever; the roots of a flower would serve to act as stabilizers, and yet the figure of Flora is initially straining to be independent and proves to be unhinged.

There is also a religious deviance; Saint Flora was said to have performed unusual feats, existing without food for three weeks whilst in prayer, or on another occasion, "... while meditating on the Holy Spirit, she was raised four feet from the ground and hung in the air in full view of many onlookers." Onlookers also were said to have witnessed stigmata – as she "... seemed to be pierced with the arms of Our Lord's cross, causing blood to flow freely at times from her side and at others, from her mouth."<sup>15</sup> Despite obvious recoil from religious affiliations through modernist preferences in Flora, these illusions or miracles are interesting comparisons to the transformations in "The Becker Wives."

Flora arrives at the dinner "Perched on Theobald's arm, or rather hanging from it ... the very image of the little chaffinch type of thing." She is portrayed as physically delicate, "exceedingly small and fine-boned," intimating that she is fragile and vulnerable, (38) in sharp contrast to the bulk and solidity of the rest of the Becker women. Her features are presented in such a way that it is impossible to read about Flora without imagining her poised to fly away. The idea that "the excited beating of her heart ... [requires] outlet: ... to beat her wings, or flutter her feathers, or even to clutch her perch" perhaps overplays the image, (39) but any reading of the text has to acknowledge a sense of entrapment here, and an unnecessary agitation emerging from Flora. Along with this compounding of imagery is an atmosphere of disquiet – her "little" hand has "long varnished claws," (39) more like a bird of prey, yet to be perched suggests domestication; her alliance to Theobald conventionally involves courtship, then marriage, however, that concludes with the anticipation of the lunatic asylum. What might that suggest? The wild bird confined in a cage should be free –

<sup>15</sup> Catholic Online, Saints and Angels. August 2009 <[http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=119](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=119)>. See also August 2009 <<http://www.thesacredheart.com/sts/flora.htm>>.

but that freedom comes at a price for Flora. It appears the irrational has to be curtailed within the narrative, and in the context of an Ireland that may be interpreted as trapped, any psychological or emotional estrangement from the conventions of the time is noteworthy.

The solidity of the other Becker women is also framed in opposition to Flora when it comes to personal choices made with possessions; for Flora refuses to have an engagement ring and there is a certain unease amongst the women that she may in fact refuse to acknowledge her new status by not having a wedding ring either. Both Charlotte and Julia are clearly identified through the signifiers of “thick bands of gold [with] big solitaires each set in a thick gold claw.” (47) Marriage is presented as a heavy undertaking. To deny its framed existence is to be placed as an outsider.

Without labouring the point too much, Lavin extols virtue in the weightless nature of Theobald’s new life with Flora. This weightlessness is allied to the modernity of artistic expression that she brings to the family, a fragility and delicacy of feeling. There was to be no house ownership, merely the renting of an apartment. Flora revelled in the purchase of the new, the modern, where the Becker wives had come to realize the comfort and value of antiques. In so many ways she breaks the mould, yet this drive to move forward, this abandonment of convention is undercut with a caveat – that the move may not be productive. The descriptions of Flora alter over time, as erratic multiple associations mirror the uncertainty of her own theatrical behaviour, and the metamorphosis from prey to hunter, from specified to anonymous creature is disturbing, and her association with destruction through earlier flame imagery encodes a warning for the reader.

The most chilling transformation evolves slowly, and even the normally placid Beckers become concerned at what they see. Flora alters the dynamics of her performances increasingly to focus on one person – Samuel’s wife Honoria who is now pregnant with their first child. Honoria serves in this role as the embodiment of the State and Church ideal. Flora cruelly mimics Honoria to the point where she *becomes* her. Flora imitates the noticeable alteration in Honoria’s gait as she gains weight; she begins to move around in a similar manner emphasizing the heavy tread of late pregnancy, eventually acting like this when alone. When Charlotte comes to visit her brother-in-law, she comes upon Flora walking about the drawing-room “her hips



were swaying” and she was positive it really was Honoria in the room. (67) This optical illusion is part of a dangerously powerful pseudo-mass hysteria, as the others had all begun to comment on strong physical similarities between the two women. This is physically, psychologically and emotionally unrealistic – and yet it supports Lavin’s horrifying strategy of survival for Flora exhibited in full in the closing stages of the narrative.

The shocking climax to this intrusive behaviour comes as Flora cannot move outside of her fantasy. When she is cornered in the breakfast room, the role she has adopted falls apart. Flora appears to be completely subsumed by the *character* of Honoria, Samuel’s wife, even denying her own given name as she is overtaken by a desire for social inclusion and emotional stability through Honoria. The language of the narrative allies Flora with a wild animal cornered. The rabid connotations pre-date more recent descriptions of the seducer in Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” and reference Bertha Mason in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

Yet, just as suddenly as Lavin creates a ferocious and seemingly unstoppable force in this woman, she allows her to collapse within her madness. Flora’s voice vacillates between enraged shouting and a pathetic whisper when she shakes and fumbles in her attempt to validate her self through a written statement of her name. She has written it down in an attempt to claim an existence. The force of the written word is prioritized as she feels she cannot exist rationally without it, but, ironically, Lavin does not permit the reader or the Becker family to identify the name on the paper. Flora turns to Samuel in a last attempt to prevent incarceration, waving the paper; speaking in the third person, she reveals the genealogy of madness that she has kept hidden from her husband Theobald since they met. (75) The strategy of retreat into madness could be argued as the only viable choice available to Flora at this time.

However, there is a codicil to this; as Showalter argues, this notion of the unconsciously rebellious madwoman suggests some empowerment, when in reality the madness “... is a desperate communication of the powerless.”<sup>16</sup> This means the figure of Flora is problematic in that she

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1991) 5. She is referring to nineteenth-century figures of the madwoman in literature but the premise holds well here.

represents a modernist tactic that is barren, insubstantial and far from lucid. Alongside this seemingly futile challenge to the orthodoxy of Catholic Ireland in this episode, she embodies the specific struggle that women face defining themselves and legitimizing their own voice.

Throughout "The Becker Wives," Lavin encodes a warning to the reader that if change is made too quickly, then it is not always valid; if it lacks consistency, then it has limited value. Yet, whilst the obvious physical transformations arise in the Becker women as they progress through pregnancy and motherhood, *their* active creation of a new dynasty is positive – even Flora's disturbing appropriation of her sister-in-law's "being" acknowledges this. In later editions of "The Becker Wives," a *softening* of reductive imagery and less aggressive foregrounding of the disempowered female suggests a partial acceptance by Lavin of the social status of women in Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. Can Lavin's process of revision be read as a strategy to present the various incarnations of Flora as testing sites in a continued search for independence? Lavin's re-evaluations do not offer a final solution, nor do they suggest acceptance of the position of women in Ireland, either through Flora or the Becker women, but they can be read as advances, thus ensuring that discussion surrounding a woman's position in Ireland successfully continues.

# CROSSING THE DIVIDE: NORTHERN IRISH PROSE BEFORE THE TROUBLES

## **HISTORY, NATIONALISM AND *THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM***

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War, and World War II in particular, clearly has the potential to be disruptive to the writing of autobiography and autobiographical fiction, genres for the most part concerned with the development of the self and the individual. War is by its nature communal, and in the case of World War II consisted of a great number of known incidents and episodes experienced by hundreds, thousands and millions of people at once. Writers attempting to tackle the subject in a realist or personal mode are thus presented with a particularly problematic web of contextual conditions and boundaries through which to navigate. This is the basis of Holger Klein's argument that:

Like that of the First World War, fiction of the Second World War is embedded in other prose literature: histories, biographies and autobiographies detailing not what could be true, but what is true in the sense that it can be documented as fact or vouched for by specific persons. This is an immediate, likewise immense context to our subject, meriting close consideration. In the war, fiction shares with other literature a general subject as dramatic – or traumatic, as exciting, in many respects as hair-raising as anything a writer could conceive.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Holger Klein, *The Second World War in Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984) 16.

Just as the action in realist war fiction has to be positioned within or against the events of the real war, so as to correspond with factual accounts of the conflict, contextual demands are also placed on autobiographical texts. Writers of wartime autobiographical fiction or memoir must also “embed” their texts, a process which involves marshalling considerable amounts of contextual information, at the same time as managing the expectations and prior knowledge of the intended reader. In his study *English Fiction of the Second World War*, Alan Munton describes novelists having to “clear a space within a period already heavily defined by other means, particularly by readers’ knowledge of history,”<sup>2</sup> but the autobiographer arguably faces a similar task. Participants in and victims of World War II can be dispossessed of their individual stories, as these are subsumed into the greater historical reality of the war, and for many readers of war memoirs what is perhaps important is how the subject’s story relates to known episodes already familiar to the reader. Here “known episodes” refers to historical events identified, textualized, dated and described by a number of sources, and that can, by their common currency, easily be recruited into a variety of cultural forms, although the exact details of their genesis and development may be a matter for historical debate. From a British perspective (for example), chief amongst such episodes would be the Dunkirk evacuation, the Blitz and VE Day. In Northern Ireland, the Belfast Blitz of 1941 and the arrival of American troops in the province that same year might be pre-eminent.

The question of how far to integrate the life of the subject with known historical events is of frequent concern for autobiographers of many times and places, of course, and as Liam Harte notes, it is of particular relevance to the Irish nationalist autobiographical tradition of identifying the progress of the self with that of the nation.<sup>3</sup> Although the balance of power may be shifting in favour of more personal narratives, the combination of a politicized tradition and a strong sense of collective memory mean that Irish autobiography continues to be dominated by its relationship with history. In terms of Northern Ireland and World War II, the global scale of the conflict, coupled with the fact that, as in Britain and in Europe, for the first

<sup>2</sup> Alan Munton, *English Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Faber, 1989) 28.

<sup>3</sup> Liam Harte, *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 3.

time civilians too came under widespread and sustained attack, also make it difficult for autobiographers of this period to maintain distance between personal, national and global histories. This article will argue that the position of Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, as a work of autobiographical fiction itself and in relation to other non-fictional accounts of the war, exemplifies what Holger Klein describes as the "embedding" of war fiction in other prose literature, where fiction, autobiography and eyewitness accounts exist symbiotically, a result of Moore's status as intermediary for the authentic wartime experience.

Patricia Craig writes in her biography of Brian Moore that her subject himself always agreed that *The Emperor of Ice Cream* was "the most directly autobiographical" of his novels.<sup>4</sup> It describes the passage from boyhood to manhood of Gavin Burke, a seventeen-year-old from Catholic West Belfast, who to the various horror and amusement of his family leaves school to join an Air Raid Precautions Unit: the novel opens with Gavin donning his (tellingly) ill-fitting and uncomfortable British uniform for the first time. Although he no longer believes in God or the Church, he remains "unreasonably in dread of God's vengeance for the fact of this unbelief,"<sup>5</sup> a dread that manifests itself in the Catholic figurine of the Divine Infant of Prague which stands on the dresser in his bedroom, giving voice to his conscience by reminding him of his various sins, sloth, smoking and masturbation. He also contends throughout the novel with the conflicting advice of a pair of personal guardian angels, the Black Angel and White Angel, the former subversive and anarchic, dedicated to self-satisfaction, the latter careful and conservative.

Initially, during the phoney war, the freedom afforded by his new nocturnal job allows him to immerse himself in the seductive alien worlds of bohemian socialist theatre and seedy Belfast nightlife, in so doing falling foul of his overbearing father, whose hatred of the British and of Socialism stretches to endorsing Fascism in Germany and Spain. On the first night of the Blitz, however, Gavin is thrust into the midst of appalling human carnage when he works a long stretch sorting bodies at a temporary morgue, an exhausting and sickening

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Craig, *Brian Moore: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002) 74.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Moore, *The Emperor of Ice Cream* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965, repr. London: Paladin, 1987) 10.

experience which seems to shock him into manhood almost overnight. Following the raid, he is reunited with his father, who recants his Nazi sympathies in the bomb-damaged family home. The novel clearly draws on Moore's own experiences as a young man in Belfast and in ARP during the early years of the war, and both Patricia Craig and Denis Sampson's respective biographies include interviews with Moore in which he openly discusses the similarities between Gavin Burke and his younger self.<sup>6</sup> I do not intend to revisit these comparisons here, but rather to read *The Emperor of Ice Cream* in terms of what it can tell us about the complex relationships between autobiographical fiction and known historical reality, and Northern Ireland and the British "People's War."

Jeanne Flood's Freudian reading of the novel argues that "the book is flawed by Moore's use of the techniques of narrative realism when he no longer has a view of the world which can be expressed by such a convention."<sup>7</sup> Flood claims that the title of *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, taken from the Wallace Stevens poem, indicates a shift by Moore from the realism of his first four novels to a perspective where the imagination is "at last accepted as legitimate,"<sup>8</sup> and is somewhat dismissive of the historical content of the novel, saying that "Moore is clearly interested in writing a timeless fable" but that this "gets tangled with the trappings of a realistic novel" which include its "location in a specific and limited historical period." Flood concludes by stating that the realistic elements of the novel "exist only as background for the testing of the hero and they lose validity."<sup>9</sup>

I disagree profoundly with this analysis, and believe that a reductive emphasis on the symbolic at the expense of the historical content of the novel is misguided, considering that Gavin's swift passage from the naivety and nihilism of youth to manhood appears in the novel as a *direct result* of his experience in the aftermath of the air raid when he volunteers to work in the morgue. It seems unlikely that Moore conceived this autobiographical work of fiction, based on his own early experiences of World War II as a "timeless fable," since the change

<sup>6</sup> Craig 74; Denis Sampson, *Brian Moore: The Chameleon Novelist* (Dublin: Marino Books, 1992) 38.

<sup>7</sup> Moore 69.

<sup>8</sup> Moore 69.

<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Flood, *Brian Moore* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press / London: Associated University Press, 1974) 70.

in Gavin, rendered textually in the shift from his internal conflicts to more dispassionate descriptive passages, derives explicitly from his experience of a known historical event. This is not mere “background:” in having Gavin join the ARP, as he did himself, Moore intervenes in one of the best-known episodes of Northern Ireland’s war history and writes Belfast into a more secure place in World War II history.

Gavin’s recklessness in leaving school, and his willingness to antagonize his parents by joining what is seen as a branch of the British army, is attributed in the novel to much more than the rebellion of the youthful subject against his progenitor familiar to readers of autobiographical fiction. *The Emperor of Ice Cream* is written in the third person, but drops frequently into intense passages of free indirect discourse, the longer of which occur over the opening pages of the novel as Gavin struggles with his uniform and argues with his brother over his decision, silently taking strength from the knowledge that he has the poets on his side. Gavin justifies the chaotic patterns of his own life by identifying himself with literary imaginings of the imminent apocalypse by W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and W.B. Yeats, signifying an assimilation of the personal into a greater political historical reality, just as Gavin’s examination records are buried in the rubble:

It was all prophetically clear. Hitler was Yeats’ “Second Coming.” He was the rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. Yeats knew what nonsense it was, in this day and age, to talk of futures and jobs. But how could you explain that to Owen, who had read nothing for pleasure since his Boys’ Own Weekly days? How could you tell him that, for you, the war was an event which had produced in you a shameful secret excitement, a vision of the grown-ups’ world in ruins? It would not matter in that ruined world if Gavin Burke had failed his Schools Leaving Certificate. The records would be buried in the rubble. War was freedom, freedom from futures. There was nothing in the world so imposing that a big bomb couldn’t blow it up.<sup>10</sup>

The poems cited and quoted in *The Emperor of Ice Cream* are all taken from *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, a heavily modernist and anti-Georgian anthology published in 1936 which contains several political contributions from socialist poets, and a volume that would

<sup>10</sup> Moore 11.

seem to offer to Gavin at this point a far more secure belief system than the Bible. Significantly, the Auden poem which appears, "Consider," constitutes in part a warning, counsels the need to develop a considered view of current world events, and is alert to the possibility of air attack in its mention of a "helmetted airman." The above passage mocks Gavin's adolescent pretensions, as can be seen from the contrast of Yeats' high art with the meaningless clichés (perhaps acquired from his mother) "in this day and age" and "ruined world" with the more prosaic "Schools Leaving Certificate," but the overall tone is ominous. Chekhov's gun here becomes a "big bomb:" most readers will surely already be aware of the devastation wrought on Belfast by the Blitz, so the narrative is predicated to an extent on how Gavin's story fits with this known historical event. The anticipation and dread of the reader can be managed rather than created. *Contra* Flood, the war is not mere "background" to the novel, since the "vision of the grown-ups' world in ruins" is crucial to Gavin's progress, as becomes apparent when the "freedom" which he believes destruction will bring is later swiftly undercut by the horror of the human cost found amongst the ruins (again, foreshadowed by Gavin's vision of lost documents).

The fact that Gavin seems to fit into the larger historical narrative with greater ease than he does into his Catholic community in Belfast is also indicative of this progress. The identification between the subject and the nation commonly found in much Irish nationalist autobiography is absent from the novel. Gavin's preoccupations rise above sectarian squabbles, and although his ramblings here are naïve, perhaps even juvenile, his concerns are worldly. Irish nationalism in *The Emperor of Ice Cream* is certainly shown to be displaced and discredited by the war, and Moore's initial portrayal of the Catholic nationalist community in the novel is of a blinkered and bigoted group, wilfully ignorant of the international situation. Gavin's father adheres strictly to the doctrine that England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity, and gleefully welcomes news of British defeats in the early years of the war over the breakfast table each morning, whilst one of Gavin's colleagues at the ARP post, the nationalist "Your Man" Gallagher and his neighbours on the Falls Road "considered it a point of honour to leave a light shining in their upstairs windows at night in



case any German bombers might come over the city.”<sup>11</sup> Having lost faith in the IRA, Gallagher has backed Hitler, albeit on a pragmatic rather than ideological level, as a power more likely to succeed in overthrowing the British and uniting the thirty-two counties again.

Liam Gearon has noted the ironic critique in Moore’s presentation of a colonized minority allying itself with one imperialist power in the hope of overthrowing another: more emphatic is the unsparing if contrived retribution visited upon Gallagher, as he stands, flashlight in hand, lamenting the loss of his wife and children in the bombing of the Falls. However, as Gearon observes, the inclusion of the heavily mythologized, often elusive story, much mentioned in historical accounts and anecdotes of the Blitz, of the Dublin Fire Brigade’s night mission to Belfast “their peacetime headlamps blazing”<sup>12</sup> helps to avoid the perception that Moore’s is a loyalist critique of the nationalist/republican minority.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the fact that immediately a “loyal pro-British patient” in the hospital responds with the counterclaim that the “English had loaded fire engines on ships in Liverpool and that those ships were already on their way across the Irish Sea”<sup>14</sup> shows how such known episodes of the war were contested and mythologized even as they happened.

*The Emperor of Ice Cream* is a heavily social novel, and like much World War II fiction it exploits, especially in scenes at the ARP post, juxtapositions of disparate characters thrown together by an accident of history and forced into communal cooperative existence in the face of a common threat: in Belfast, of course, the juxtapositions inevitably carry greater narrative tension and symbolic significance. Alan Munton’s analysis of British war fiction stresses the importance of the communal experience of World War II:

<sup>11</sup> Moore 61.

<sup>12</sup> Moore 228. For references to the involvement of Irish fire brigades, see Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992) 566; Brian Barton, *The Blitz. Belfast in the War Years* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1989) 136; John W. Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (London: HMSO 1956, repr. Belfast: Blackstaff, 2000) 234; Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality 1939-45* (London: André Deutsch / Dingle: Brandon, 1983) 421.

<sup>13</sup> Liam Gearon, *Landscapes of Encounter: The Portrayal of Catholicism in the Novels of Brian Moore* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002) 52.

<sup>14</sup> Moore 228.

War is a social activity. Men go out in groups to kill each other, and they die together. People being bombed in their homes or shot in the streets also die together. Out of such events there inevitably arise social changes with widespread effects. It is because people fight wars collectively that writers of war fiction must find ways of recreating collective experience, often undergone in situations of chaos whose meaning remains uncertain. The critic, following after, must find ways of ordering material so varied in content and so massive in quantity that at first sight it may appear unmanageable.<sup>15</sup>

Munton tackles this mass of material with the help of a British historical term, the “People’s War” developed by the socialist historian Angus Calder in his cultural history of the same name. Calder argued that during World War II governments were forced to depend on the cooperation of the ruled, and even on that of “scorned and underprivileged sections of society, manual workers and women,”<sup>16</sup> that the established social structure of Britain was challenged by the vast mobilization of workers during the war, and that dissatisfaction of the public with the running of the war between 1940 and 1941 fomented widespread revolutionary attitudes. However, despite Labour’s victory in the British general election of 1945, and the subsequent Keynesian programme of reform, Calder believed that the forces of “wealth, bureaucracy and privilege survived [the war] with little inconvenience.”<sup>17</sup> As well as a term for a potentially illusory political exchange of demands and policies, however, the People’s War also evokes ideas of community and cooperation familiar from popular (and frequently government-sponsored) British wartime culture, many forms of which are manifested in sometimes indistinct though highly pervasive exhortations to pull together, to keep smiling through, to look after one’s neighbours in trouble, and so on. Crucial episodes exploited here would include (again) Dunkirk and the Blitz in London, where the role of the civilian population is stressed in cultural depictions of the response to a crisis.

Munton’s decision to approach World War II fiction by way of the People’s War seems to stem in part at least from the role played intermittently by Calder’s book as a conduit between fiction and

<sup>15</sup> Munton 1.

<sup>16</sup> Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992) 17.

<sup>17</sup> Calder 18.

history. As well as more traditional socio-historical sources, Calder also quotes from creative works such as war novels by Elizabeth Bowen and Evelyn Waugh to support his thesis. Conversely, *The People's War* today stands as a valuable resource for cultural and social historians of mid-twentieth-century Britain, as well as younger writers striving for contextual authenticity in their own fictional renderings of the war. Calder's work thus stands between "experienced" war fiction written by writers alive during the war and historical accounts and "researched" novels or poems by writers too young to remember it.<sup>18</sup>

In Northern Ireland, two major historians of the period, Brian Barton and Robert Fisk, refer in a similar way to *The Emperor of Ice Cream* in their accounts of the aftermath of the Belfast Blitz. Fisk, in his *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality 1939-1945*, and Barton, in *The Blitz: Belfast in the War Years*, each use, word for word, exactly the same passage from Moore's novel, describing the harrowing scenes in the temporary morgue at the Mater hospital:

... stink of human excrement, in the acrid smell of disinfectant, these dead were heaped, body on body, flung arm, twisted feet, open mouth, staring eyes, old men on top of young women, a child lying on a policeman's back, a soldier's hand resting on a woman's thigh, a carter, still wearing his coal sacks, on top of a pile of arms and legs, his own arm outstretched, finger pointing, as though he warned of some unseen horror. Forbidding and clumsy, the dead cluttered the morgue room from floor to ceiling...<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the uncompromising nature of its content and the fact that Moore himself experienced the Blitz, neither Barton nor Fisk attempt to scrutinize or interrogate this passage: it is allowed to stand, and the account moves on. The status of the passage as an extract from a work of fiction is barely acknowledged. Fisk introduces the passage referring to Moore's "semi autobiographical novel,"<sup>20</sup> Barton merely attributes it to "Ulster author Brian Moore,"<sup>21</sup> although in an earlier chapter Barton does refer to "novelist Brian

<sup>18</sup> Munton 9.

<sup>19</sup> Moore 233.

<sup>20</sup> Fisk 425.

<sup>21</sup> Barton 146.

Moore"<sup>22</sup> whilst introducing another quotation from *The Emperor of Ice Cream*. Each historian accords the descriptive passage the same, unquestioned status granted to other supposedly factual eyewitness accounts elsewhere. Furthermore, in an earlier paragraph describing the Luftwaffe's use of flares immediately prior to the Easter Tuesday raid on Belfast of 15 April, Fisk integrates Moore's description of this in the novel as "beautiful, exploding with a faint pop in the sky above them, a magnesium flare floated up in the stillness, lighting the rooftops in a ghostly silver" with quotes from eyewitness interviewees, Irish journalist James Kelly (whose memory of the flares as "like a giant candelabra spreading out across the city" is no less lyrical) and IRA volunteer Paddy Devlin.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps due to the sensitive and traumatic nature of the historical material, until relatively recently critics have shied away from questioning the accuracy of Moore's account. However, in an interview for Hicks' article, "History and Masculinity in Brian Moore," Moore himself agreed that he had conflated the first two air raids on Belfast for narrative effect: "Yes, I think so. I was present of course at both raids and took part in them but it's funny I seem to remember the first raid as the really big one where all these people were killed and there were firebombs and all sorts of things and that the second raid was less dangerous."<sup>24</sup> This is verifiably not the case. The first raid on the city, on 7 April 1941 resulted in 13 deaths: the destruction was concentrated mainly on the docks. The second raid, on 15 April hit the residential north of the city hard, and killed at least 900.<sup>25</sup>

The historians' use of the text locates the accounts of Barton and Fisk, and by extension *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, in the space between the "experienced" and the "researched:" the novel has become an "embedded" and key text in accounts of the People's War, or "People's Blitz" in Belfast, and is clearly an important source of known episodes, despite Moore's tendency to conflate and truncate these episodes for his own

<sup>22</sup> Barton 99.

<sup>23</sup> Fisk 418.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Patrick Hicks, "History and Masculinity in Brian Moore's *The Emperor of Ice Cream*," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 25.1-2 (July/December 1999): 408.

<sup>25</sup> The original official figure made available by the Northern Ireland government in 1944 was 745, but Westminster government documents and Northern Ireland Fire Authority figures suggest that the number was significantly higher. For discussion of this, see Barton 150-51.

fictional ends. The rarity and strangeness of this fictional rendering of wartime Belfast by someone who experienced the time and the city first hand is crucial, and in writing the self consciously autobiographical *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, Moore has secured himself a uniquely privileged position in shaping historical perceptions of the effect of World War II on the city and on the nationalist community.

# JANET MCNEILL'S FICTIONS OF NORTHERN IRISH PROTESTANT IDENTITY

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Ulster, as the poet John Hewitt says, "is not one region, it's several regions."<sup>1</sup> Thus, in order to understand the complexities of the Northern Irish question, it is necessary to study the spatial and cultural negotiations through which the various communities present there assert their position in the region and define themselves in relation to it. In assessing the process of Northern Irish identity, it should be borne in mind that "the concept of belonging in place acquires particular intricacy in the context of Northern Ireland" because of the "strong territorial imperatives [that] come into intimate conflict."<sup>2</sup> Janet McNeill's adult fiction concerns itself with this process in the context of the Northern Irish Protestant middle class and thus serves as a valuable source of representation and information.

This essay discusses McNeill's adult writing; and the analysis of McNeill's works proceeds mainly from the presumption that "the uncertainties and threats (real-and-imagined) or transcultural environments drive groups and individuals to seek self-definition through the non-

<sup>1</sup> Hewitt cited in Peter McDonald, "The Fate of 'Identity': John Hewitt, W.R. Rogers, and Louis MacNeice," *Returning to Ourselves: the Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School*, ed. Eve Patten (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995) 45.

<sup>2</sup> Bryonie Reid, "Labouring Towards the Space to Belong: Place and Identity in Northern Ireland," *Irish Geography* (2004): 103.

negotiable absolutes of nation and religious/cultural traditions.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, familial, social and religious backgrounds influence McNeill’s protagonists to such an extent that they are unable and unwilling to redefine their identities to accommodate the socio-political changes of the 1950s and ’60s.<sup>4</sup> However, the characters finally come to a conclusion that the way in which they have defined themselves is no longer feasible and they decide to search for new means.<sup>5</sup>

Although McNeill was born in Dublin and lived and studied in the United Kingdom, she spent thirty-five consecutive years of her life in Northern Ireland. Indeed, this is the place with which her adult novels are normally associated as eight of them use it as their sole setting and another one, *The Small Widow* (1967), contains brief scenes from Belfast when the protagonist returns there for a holiday. McNeill’s adult fiction can be divided into three periods according to the predominant themes the author covers. Within the novels McNeill wrote in the first period, she introduces the focal point of her works – the Northern Irish Protestant middle class, mainly from Belfast. Her early works are characterized by McNeill’s “exploration of [Protestant] middle class self and the hostile places it both creates and is forced to inhabit.”<sup>6</sup> McNeill emphasizes the disadvantages of identity constituted through communal loyalty; she is sensitive to the formative impact of the environment and Protestant upbringing on the protagonists’ characters. These two she sees as decisive and, unfortunately, destructive.<sup>7</sup> The second period may be described as a period of transition towards a more open sense of the protagonists’ belonging to place. In this period, McNeill criticizes the ineffectuality of the middle class and scrutinizes the absoluteness of their certainty. She traces the psychological development of her protagonists, which may, to some, appear as a movement away from “locality.” The last two adult novels written during the third

<sup>3</sup> J.P. Sharp. “A Topology of ‘Post’ Nationality: (Re)mapping Identity in *The Satanic Verses*,” *Ecumene*, 1 (1994): 74.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the social changes, see Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> This shift is discussed towards the end of the essay.

<sup>6</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991) 40.

<sup>7</sup> Janet McNeill, “The Regional Writer and His Problems,” *The Belfast Telegraph* 8 December 1956, or “Ulster Writers Told to Avoid Trivial Vein – Advice from Janet McNeill,” *The Belfast Telegraph* 7 February 1957.

period are rather anonymous in terms of their setting. McNeill almost completely moves away from a Northern Irish background but the topic – the imperfections of middle-class protagonists who are, finally, on the verge of gaining an adequate sense of self – remains the same.

The protagonists of McNeill's novels are, at first sight, ordinary people. The lives of such people may appear to be boring, but one senses the unreleased dramatic energy that lies just below the surface of their everyday business. McNeill's stories reveal how severe situations shatter the protagonists' carefully arranged ways of life. The reader meets the protagonists shortly before, during or just after a life-altering event – an accident (*Gospel Truth*, 1951), death of a close relative (*Tea at Four O'Clock*, 1956), a person gone missing (*Search Party*, 1959), or a child come to stay in the house (*A Child in the House*, 1955), for example. These incidents make people reflect upon their lives and their reflections are rich and varied. McNeill's interest is in how the protagonists react, and how they adjust themselves to accommodate the changes the new situation brings.

McNeill manages to describe, in detail, the means by which the middle class transform space into place and interact with other people (predominantly from the working class). The main feature of the process as portrayed by McNeill is the way in which her characters define their identities in connection to Northern Ireland. Jonathan Stainer argues that "place-based identity and senses of belonging in Northern Ireland ... are socially effective, enduring and problematic, but deliberately constituted, mediated and in some sense then, ultimately 'false.'"<sup>8</sup> This implies that the Northern Irish identity, which Protestants have developed, should have been different, more in accordance with the conditions there. Had it not been for the British governmental support, Terence Brown argues, Protestants "would have been forced to develop a different, ultimately truly serviceable self-understanding and historiographical consciousness."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, due to Protestant uncertainty and impossibility of relying on their past, in the province they seem to tend to understand their identity as

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Stainer, "Literature and the Constitution of Place Identity: Three Examples from Belfast," *Senses of Place: Senses of Time*, ed. G.J. Ashworth and Brian Graham (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2005) 168.

<sup>9</sup> Terence Brown, *The Whole Protestant Community: The Making of a Historical Myth* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1985) 9.



something that is permanently fixed and unchangeable, which predetermines them to a certain kind of paralysis.

McNeill's protagonists take things as unchanging; they are fixated on their past as they think that in the past their status was definite and not to be questioned. For them "to belong is to protect exclusive, and therefore, excluding identities against those who are seen as aliens and 'foreigners.'" <sup>10</sup> They ignore the fact that they need to adopt a new approach to their identity formation. The narrow-minded approach of the middle class to their identity formation and their stance towards their social environment has driven them inside their big houses. McNeill emphasizes this "voluntary" isolation because it is one of the sources of middle-class ineffectuality. The protagonists attempt to hide away inside their big houses, thinking, naïvely, that the high walls will protect them against the necessity to adapt their identities to suit their social climate. Their houses, the shrines to their past values, are supposed to offer them protection and an opportunity to practise their rituals – which stand for a link with an "unchangeable" past – and carry on charades which would not be possible on a larger scale. Furthermore, the protagonists try to find asylum in their big houses because "home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness." <sup>11</sup> Besides, as David Seamon maintains, "home is an intimate place of rest where a person can withdraw from the hustle of the world outside and have some degree of control over what happens within a limited space." <sup>12</sup> I therefore maintain that the impulses that urge the characters inside the houses are the familiarity of the terrain and their sense of control over their own affairs.

The lives inside the big houses dwindle "into a depressingly pathetic round of pointless gestures." <sup>13</sup> In a sense, it is a kind of vicious circle – people retreat from public life to "hide" inside their houses but there they fall under the spell of the house and under the formative influence they experienced during their childhoods. They live like caged animals in a zoo, their big houses being their

<sup>10</sup> *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, ed. E. Carter, J. Donald, J. Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993) 8.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 24.

<sup>12</sup> Seamon cited in Cresswell, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Madden-Simpson, "Introduction" in Janet McNeill, *Tea at Four O'Clock* (London: Virago Press, 1988) xi.

enclosures. Their illusory hopes of being protected by their big houses offer only temporary reassurance. Isolation, I maintain, poses a far greater threat to the protagonists' identities as they might not be able to react in time. For these people, home is not a place where they can be themselves. There are several reasons for this. First, it is impossible to live without any connections with the outside world. Then, taking Gaston Bachelard's theory of home as a primal space into consideration, it appears as if McNeill's protagonists are predetermined to fail in their everyday public lives because the patterns learnt within the home were inappropriate.<sup>14</sup>

McNeill's characters also visit the same holiday resorts every year. They believe that by doing so they do not have to be afraid of the possible changes and adjustments that they would have to make elsewhere. Visiting the same place, they can be sure that they know the usual occupants of the hotel and their habits. Moreover, there is a mutual agreement among the guests that no one should disturb the preordained course of events. Their relationships may be characterized by what John Wilson Foster calls collusion, which he describes as a "two-person game in which each confirms the other in a false position because it is necessary to the maintenance of the relationship."<sup>15</sup> However dysfunctional the relationship is, the participants mutually support their false views of it as it is essential for them to maintain their bond. Otherwise, they would have to accept the futility of their relationship, which would mean that they would have to do something about the situation. Thus, collusion functions as a form of "protection" against reality.

The female characters adopt a certain strategy but only in order to avoid confronting reality and everyday problems. This strategy is illness. Women nurture pain and – although it is an unpleasant feeling – they find it comforting and it becomes an integral part of their character. Illness becomes an excuse not to consent to performing a social role the woman is not fit for (Florence in *As Strangers Here*, 1960); it also provides a certain security as something stable and continuous; moreover, it can give the woman something she can master (Mildred in *Tea at Four O'Clock*). As one of McNeill's characters asserts, it is

<sup>14</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> John Wilson Foster, *Forces and Themes in Ulster Fiction* (Dublin and London: Gill and Macmillan, 1974) 236.

“always better to accept the pain than to fight it.” Although the problem the female characters suffer from normally starts off as a minor issue, which could be eliminated without consequences, it does, however, usually end up as a serious illness that is life threatening or even fatal.

Overall, the protagonists’ behaviour and the rituals they keep on performing become more absurd when compared with the conduct of the wider public. McNeill gives voice to members of the community who question the validity of Protestant identity formation – for example, Sarah Vincent (*The Maiden Dinosaur*, 1965) and Edward Ballater (*As Strangers Here*). Edward’s story in *As Strangers Here* – deemed by Barry Sloan a “perceptive study of Presbyterianism”<sup>16</sup> – marks his transition to having a more open sense of belonging to a place. In time, Edward seems to realize that people who claim they belong to Belfast come from different backgrounds and that their claims also differ. This is clear from the way he reflects upon the Cave Hill. To begin with, the hill seems to give him a sense of assurance – a feeling he is unable to obtain from his vocation. Any time he feels low and uncertain, it is sufficient to look at such a familiar sight:

... the heavy mass of the Cave Hill presided over the city. Edward looked up at it thankfully, finding in its solidarity a healing for his passing irritation. It was often like this. During his ministry the Cave Hill had been a touchstone for peace.<sup>17</sup>

He also views it as “something that couldn’t be taken from him.”<sup>18</sup> However, the few incidents he has to face make him think about the fact that there are other people in the city whose claims to it are contrary to his.

Edward has tried to make his congregation aware of the fact that there might be something wrong with their identity formation as related to place. He wants to warn them that they should modify the way they claim Northern Ireland as *their* place. He attempts to point out to them that there might be other people who claim the same surroundings and invest them with personal and intimate feelings. Edward would like the people to realize that the Cave Hill is:

<sup>16</sup> Barry Sloan, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Adammation?* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000) 273.

<sup>17</sup> Janet McNeill, *As Strangers Here* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960) 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> McNeill, *As Strangers Here* 26.

... a place whereby unhappy history chained the future to the past, a place where a man might find, in the sight of it, the evidence of things unseen, which, though they cast confused and conflicting shadows on this beloved borrowed country, were in their true image imperishable and good and full of glory.<sup>19</sup>

People do not seem to make any effort to change as “a set of inherited beliefs, sitting snug in their pockets” gives them a feeling of security and self-righteousness.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that their living conditions have changed, McNeill’s protagonists still tend to use the old rituals.<sup>21</sup> However, it is impossible for the protagonists to maintain their exclusiveness and their values intact.

As the middle-aged protagonists “inhabit an emotional and spiritual no man’s land between faith and faithlessness, hope and despair, intimacy and isolation,” they have to look for new behavioural patterns to adopt in order not only to survive but to live.<sup>22</sup> However, McNeill also stresses that it is never too late for a change. It remains, therefore, a question of how the protagonists are going to react. The only option McNeill’s protagonists have to alter their situation is to adopt a different attitude to space so that they have an appropriate sense of place. Place in Ulster cannot normalize and naturalize Protestant identity as there are various communities claiming the territory, which means that people have to negotiate their claims. Furthermore, place does not play a positive and affirmative role – it does not confirm the identity that is based on the sense of belonging to it. Despite their attempts to be incorporated into the region, Ulster Protestants were not able to produce an affirmative vision of their own lifestyle. To be able to accept the fact that there are other people claiming the same space, McNeill’s characters should deny the notion of place as fixed because such a view implies the construction of the “other.”<sup>23</sup> Essentially, they have to accept the notion that “place is the

<sup>19</sup> McNeill, *As Strangers Here* 192.

<sup>20</sup> McNeill, *As Strangers Here* 81.

<sup>21</sup> Foster argues that the same is true for the protagonists from works by Reid, Gilbert and Buchanan. Foster, *Forces and Themes* 244.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, *Forces and Themes* 229.

<sup>23</sup> David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a priori* label of identity."<sup>24</sup>

Foster points to – and praises – the fact that although McNeill's stories do not offer any catharsis, there is a constant tension created by the insecurity and uncertainty caused by the futility of the situation.<sup>25</sup> McNeill's fiction for adults "conveys without brouhaha the terrifying vacuum of failure and impotence that can yawn behind the compensating ritual and fantasy of apparently respectable and even successful middle-class lives."<sup>26</sup> However, Ruth Hooley argues that in confronting their problems, the characters do come to terms with their past.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, I claim that aside from differing approaches to the past, there are, for each respective character, three stages to the development of reactions to the problems, and each represents one of the aforementioned periods of McNeill's writing.

Even though McNeill's stories should not be taken as identical with reality, however, they may offer a valuable insight into the lives of the protagonists. Especially because, as Stainer maintains, "Ulster/Protestant identity, other than being 'not-Irish,' has been a much more poorly articulated, less coherent and charismatic defining trope."<sup>28</sup> Brown asserts that Ulster Protestants have an interesting story to tell – "one of essential homelessness, dependency, anxiety, obdurate fantacising, sacrifices in the name of liberty, villainous political opportunism, moments of idealistic aspiration."<sup>29</sup> It is important for Protestants to tell their story because in doing so "they may come to realize at last where they are most at home and with whom they share that home."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, I claim that McNeill's writing deserves more critical attention than it has received to date because it helps to express a more compact definition of non-Irish Ulster/Protestant identity.

<sup>24</sup> Cresswell 37.

<sup>25</sup> Foster, *Forces and Themes* 230.

<sup>26</sup> Foster, *Forces and Themes* 228.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Hooley, "The Art of Restraint: A Critical Evaluation of the Adult Fiction of Janet McNeill," unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Ashworth 168.

<sup>29</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988) 238.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *Ireland's Literature* 238.

# SEÁN O'FAOLÁIN, *THE BELL* AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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On 27 June 1927, in an interview with *The Manchester Guardian*, Eamon de Valera declared that: “[t]hose elements in the North which have wilfully assisted in mutilating their motherland can justly be made to suffer for their crime, and I do not think they should continue to receive the favoured treatment which they now enjoy in the Free State. They have chosen separation.”<sup>1</sup> Such accusative outbursts were common amongst politicians from both Éire and Northern Ireland, and these attacks helped to polarize the peoples of both states. However, there was a more sophisticated attempt to reconcile the cultural rift that Partition had caused, and this effort was exemplified in the pages of *The Bell* under Sean O’Faoláin. O’Faoláin was keen to advocate a liberal Republicanism that openly engaged with Northern Ireland, and his publication selections as the editor of *The Bell* between 1940-1946 reflect such a position.

In October 1939, *The Capuchin Annual: 1940* was published with a considerable print run of 25,000 copies.<sup>2</sup> This annual was printed on behalf of the Capuchin Order in Ireland and contained submissions from, inter alia, such luminaries as Daniel Corkery. It also contained a submission assigned to an author writing under the pseudonym of

<sup>1</sup> “An Interview with Mr. De Valera,” *The Manchester Guardian* 27 June 1927: 16.

<sup>2</sup> *The Capuchin Annual: 1940*, ed. Father Senan O.M. Cap (Wexford: John English and Co., 1939) 50.

Ultach, titled "The Persecution of Catholics in Northern Ireland," subsequently reprinted as *Orange Terror*.<sup>3</sup> Ultach is described as "[a]n Ulsterman with many opportunities of observing persecution as practised in the 'six counties.'"<sup>4</sup> Written against the backdrop of totalitarian regimes in both Germany and Russia, *Orange Terror* set out to demonstrate that the administration of Northern Ireland was also acting as a totalitarian state, with an actively repressed Roman Catholic underclass: "[w]hen I say the Northern Irish statelet, despite the professions of its masters, is in form totalitarian, I mean just that." The author also argued that the Northern Irish state was directly attacking its own people exclusively on the grounds of their religion, through a series of anti-Catholic pogroms, carried out by both the institutions of the state, and members of the Protestant community. Persecution was used as a method to maintain the position of a powerful political and financial elite that stimulated fears of Papist rebellion within their own community, and thus, maintained a divided and impotent working class: "[t]he Orange leaders in their wisdom fixed on a permanent and ever-sure means by raising up a common 'enemy' – Rome."<sup>5</sup> For Ultach, Northern Ireland was a deeply unjust society.

O'Faoláin himself was deeply influenced by this article, reproducing (without acknowledgement) a large number of its arguments and quotations in his own work *An Irish Journey* (1941), published a year later.<sup>6</sup> He was particularly taken with its suggestion that there were underlying economic reasons for sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland as this fitted with his personal beliefs. O'Faoláin's own attraction to this theory stemmed from his obsession with redefining Irish society culturally, by building up a social picture of the inhabitants of the island as they actually were, denuded of their ideological aspirations. He also espoused a specific definition of Republicanism, one that was true to the values of the French Revolution, and was more inclusive than the hypocritical pieties of bourgeois Catholic Ireland. In an essay on Wolfe Tone, O'Faoláin was to claim: "[i]f that word [Republicanism] means anything to Ireland it means what it meant to him. It means the flash and thunder of other

<sup>3</sup> Ultach, "The Persecution of Catholics in Northern Ireland," *The Capuchin Annual* 161-75.

<sup>4</sup> Father Senan O.M. Cap, *The Capuchin Annual* 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ultach, "The Persecution of Catholics in Northern Ireland" 161-75.

<sup>6</sup> Sean O'Faoláin, *An Irish Journey* (London: Readers Union Limited, 1941).

words that lit his mind and lit the mind of dying Ireland, and for which, at least once, poor ragged Irish peasants fought and died – France.”<sup>7</sup> For O’Faoláin, Republicanism was an ideal, capable of an inclusivity that transcended both boundary and creed. O’Faoláin ensured that this liberal Republican ethos permeated the pages of *The Bell*.

The November 1943 edition of *The Bell* contained an article called “Orange Terror: A Demurrer” and it was anonymously signed Ultach Eile. This submission set out to directly address the issues brought forth in “The Persecution of Catholics in Northern Ireland.” Ultach Eile agreed with its findings in that he saw the Northern Irish government as a sectarian institution that persecuted a third of its population purely on religious grounds. He also regarded the problems of Northern Ireland as essentially economic. It was a society where powerful industrialists fermented discord, to keep its workforce divided: “[t]he Six County Bosses are ... enemies of the British workers in their struggle for social betterment. They have been mischief-makers between the British and Irish peoples.” This socialist answer to Irish sectarian strife had obvious merits, because it removed any barrier to social harmony by an appeal to the betterment of all sections of society. Ultach Eile viewed Ultach’s argument as accurate but flawed. By placing exclusive emphasis on the plight of the Catholics in Northern Ireland, Ultach missed the point of the suffering of all members of Northern Irish society in the interests of market capitalism: “[h]e [Ultach] asks that attention be concentrated on the position of the Catholics as such. I believe this line arises from faulty analysis and that if activated it could only buttress Orange reaction.”<sup>8</sup> O’Faoláin identified the importance of such a debate, and continued to publish submissions contributing to it.

During the winter of 1943, Harry Craig and friends gathered in Trinity College Dublin to discuss the implications of *Orange Terror* by Ultach and the response by Ultach Eile. These discussions led to Craig’s submission of “A Protestant Visits Belfast” later that year. Craig was writing from Éire where he felt his Protestant religious beliefs had been safeguarded by a government that had shown impartiality to all its citizens irrelevant of their religious identity: “[t]heir position as Protestants was given full recognition and there

<sup>7</sup> Sean O’Faoláin, “Rebel by Vocation,” *The Bell*, 13.2 (November 1946): 97-114.

<sup>8</sup> Ultach Eile, “Orange Terror: A Demurrer,” *The Bell*, 7.2 (November 1943): 137-42.



was no discrimination against them because of their religion." Craig decided that in light of the accusations in *Orange Terror*, a trip to Belfast to see for himself how Protestants and Catholics interacted would be required. From the beginning, Craig felt uncomfortable with his findings. The economic thesis put forward by Ultach Eile was in Craig's opinion a valid one and he was shocked by the sectarian violence that it caused: "the Foreman is usually either a member or partisan of the Orange Lodge or Unionist Party. He has the power to grant or refuse a job. ... Sectarian violence does seem to hinge on the scarcity of work." Craig also supported Ultach and Ultach Eile in their assertions that this violence was caused by a Protestant sectarian state, abusing the minority Catholic population to maintain its own industrial and political interests: "[t]he emphasis is on mass-dismissals of Catholics and the re-employment of Protestants in their stead." He was angered by what he saw, and found it difficult to accept that this hatred revealed a form of religious intolerance on behalf of Protestantism. This behaviour was all the more offensive because it betrayed the best tradition of liberal Protestantism in Ireland, a tradition that had a proud history in providing intellectual leadership across Irish society: "[w]hat angered us most, what angered my friends last week, was that the terror reigned in our name, in the name of Protestantism. ... Yet whatever tradition of liberalism was ours is being violated in the North."<sup>9</sup> Craig's analysis of the political and sectarian turmoil in Northern Ireland supported the findings of Ultach, Ultach Eile and O'Faoláin himself, so its presence in the pages of *The Bell* is unsurprising. However, it also neatly reflects one of O'Faoláin's deliberate ploys as an editor, in that he used writers from Éire to criticize Northern Ireland and writers from Northern Ireland to criticize Éire. The tensions in Northern Ireland offered O'Faoláin an opportunity to exploit political dogma in order to level criticism both North and South of the border. It also had the added benefit of allowing O'Faoláin himself to remain aloof from the debate, giving him credibility as an objective editor and further room to navigate the difficult course of the Irish political landscape.

The February 1944 edition of the magazine contained an article written by the Dean of Belfast titled "'Orange Terror': A Rebuttal."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Harry Craig, "A Protestant Visits Belfast," *The Bell*, 7.3 (December 1943): 236-44.

<sup>10</sup> The Dean of Belfast, "Orange Terror: A Rebuttal," *The Bell*, 7.5 (February 1944): 382-93.

This article was written by the Co. Wicklow born William Shaw Kerr, Dean of Belfast between 1932 and 1945, and author of *A Handbook on the Papacy* (1950).<sup>11</sup> Kerr's submission is unusual in that it contains a substantial introduction by O'Faoláin outlining the previous submissions on this topic. O'Faoláin's decision to add an editorial comment as a preface signals his awareness of the controversy that he suspected this article would cause and he noted in this: "[s]ince the following article was written 'Orange Terror' has been banned in the Six Counties."<sup>12</sup> Although O'Faoláin was aware of his role as an editor and was at pains to stress his impartiality, it is interesting to note that he would add a comment here, even if it was just to restate the arguments made in previous articles. Considering O'Faoláin's predominantly southern readership, he must have suspected that an article by the Dean of Belfast defending the Northern Irish state would be at risk of seeming seditious and perhaps of drawing the unwanted attention of the Censorship Board. Nevertheless, he used this opportunity to make a comparison between the two states of Éire and Northern Ireland in that they both employed strict censorship whenever it was considered politically expedient.

Kerr began his defence by attacking Ultach's claim that there was systematic discrimination against Catholic workers in Belfast, seeing action against Catholics rather as a direct result of their support of treasonous military action against the state: "[i]t is simply because of a great military organisation to overturn the State by criminal methods. His propaganda theme of persecution of Catholics 'as such' can deceive none but the most ignorant outsider." He then continued by suggesting that Roman Catholics as an entire group were against the Northern Irish government, and their lack of representation within that Government was evidence of their refusal to participate in it: "[p]ractically all the members of the Roman Catholic Church are opposed to the existence of the Northern Government ... But their opposition explains why they have not a larger share in official posts. They cannot have it both ways." Attributing Catholic under-representation to an unwillingness of a small minority to participate in a valid, legally enshrined government, Kerr made no distinction

<sup>11</sup> William Shaw Kerr, *A Handbook on the Papacy* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1950).

<sup>12</sup> Sean O'Faoláin in The Dean of Belfast, "Orange Terror: A Rebuttal" 382.

between a Northern Irish government acting to safeguard its own interests and Éire's doing the same: "[i]n short, the punishment of organised murder, rebellion, robbery in Éire is normal defence of the State. In Northern Ireland it is anti-Catholic oppression[.]" The Dean further took Ultach to task by challenging his claim about anti-Catholic pogroms in Northern Ireland. He identified the violence in question as the direct result of an attack on a peaceful parade by members of the Catholic community: "[t]o describe the shootings and evictions as a one-sided pogrom is absurdly unjust. It is a queer pogrom in which more than twice as many of the supposed assailants were killed as of the inoffensive victims."<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of such a provocative article by O'Faoláin in *The Bell* indicates the lengths he was willing to go to in order to foster a real debate about Partition.

In response to this, the March 1944 volume of *The Bell* contained an article called "Ulster: A Reply," sent in by The Ulster Union Club.<sup>14</sup> The article included an introduction from O'Faoláin that described the Club as "an association of Ulster Protestants devoted to the emergence of an Ireland that will transcend the present unnatural divisions of Ireland."<sup>15</sup> The president of the Ulster Union Club at that time was the author Denis Ireland, and his presence as its head would ensure that it received a substantial place in *The Bell*, having already been published within its pages. This piece began by bemoaning the exchange of horror stories as practiced by both Ultach and the Dean of Belfast concerning the pain inflicted upon their respective communities. The Ulster Union Club claimed they would prefer to look beyond the differences between the factions and see if it were possible to extract what is common to both, in seeking to set their agenda for a united Ireland: "[w]e begin, in other words, by taking it for granted that both sides, Catholic and Protestant, hate and deplore the whole sordid business of murder and counter-murder." As such, the article argued that the real root of political strife lay outside of Ireland entirely, caused by English imperialist attitudes to its Irish "colony:" "If at this point the Dean inquires whether we are hinting at English interference in the affairs of Ireland, our reply is that we are not hinting at it, we are stating it as a fact." According to the Ulster Union

<sup>13</sup> The Dean of Belfast 384-87.

<sup>14</sup> The Ulster Union Club, "Ulster: A Reply," *The Bell*, 7.6 (March 1944): 474-84.

<sup>15</sup> Sean O'Faoláin in The Ulster Union Club, "Ulster: A Reply" 474.

Club, this infighting amongst Irish people had been artificially created at the hands of English interests. However, the authors were willing to acknowledge that in its current condition Northern Ireland was a sectarian police state, operating without a fair mandate from its people: “[a]nd if the Dean wants proof that persecution in Northern Ireland is political and not religious, we, as Protestant Nationalists, have also been persecuted.” Abuses of state power in Northern Ireland had, according to the Ulster Union Club, destroyed any hope of unity within Ireland, tied Ulster Protestants to a conservative voting system and made a sham of any claims to fight for the cause of liberty on behalf of the allied powers: “[h]as it occurred to him [the Dean of Belfast] that the real result of political gerrymandering is to turn the ‘Unionist’ vote into a tied vote and the would-be ‘imperial province’ into what is called in the liquor trade a tied house?” In the end political actions were counter-productive for the formation and development of democratic institutions within civil society. Support of this state was in itself difficult without undermining democracy as a principle. For this, the Ulster Union Club berated the Dean of Belfast and rejected his call for support of Northern Ireland:

The Dean of Belfast tells our Catholic fellow-provincials, and presumably our Protestant and largely Presbyterian selves, that it is really very naughty of us not to love this monstrosity. He is wasting his time. Either this war is about something or it is not. And Democracy, like Charity, begins at home.<sup>16</sup>

For both the Ulster Union Club and O’Faoláin, Republicanism and specifically Republicanism defined as a holistic and democratic social practice, was the answer to a more peaceful and prosperous Irish society.

O’Faoláin and his editorial work in *The Bell* sourced Irish writers that presented alternatives to the political stand-off between politicians both North and South of the border. He was determined to attempt to offer a sympathetic ear to Protestant Northern Irish writers and politicians, notwithstanding his own suspicions of the political establishment there. Despite his aspirational Republicanism, O’Faoláin was also willing to exploit the political tensions within

<sup>16</sup> The Ulster Union Club 474-84.

Northern Ireland in order to level criticism at his own society. This was a privilege he was to enjoy throughout his long career. Writing as late as 1955 in the *Irish Times*, he suggested that:

Hitherto we have always blandly talked of the North joining hands and forces with us. Why not the other way round? It might be both salutary and instructive to consider that in the present state of the Republic the lady might have some understandable reasons for not wishing to even as much entertain such proposals until the fate of her children had been protected, the settlement drawn up, and her future home put into a little more attractive order.<sup>17</sup>

All in all, O'Faoláin's political outlook seems to have been one of liberal Republicanism, tied closely to the French model. Although he remained critical of Éire's attitude towards Partition, and was sympathetic towards the Unionist community in Northern Ireland, O'Faoláin also saw Partition itself as a horrible injustice inflicted on the island as a whole. Writing in the pamphlet *The North* (1944/45) O'Faoláin was to claim: "[w]hen I think of Partition I think of something that is a sin against Ireland, but I also think of something that is a sin against civilisation."<sup>18</sup> For O'Faoláin, Partition would remain a divisive and unjust political solution to Irish needs. However, it would also offer the opportunity to express a more liberal-minded Republicanism that engaged with Unionist communities in Northern Ireland, within a sphere of enlightened debate.

<sup>17</sup> Sean O'Faoláin, "Partition," *The Irish Times* 30 May 1955: 5.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Frank Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical 1923-1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) 108.

# MUSES AMIDST ARMS: WRITERS' RESPONSES TO THE NORTHERN CONFLICT

## **“THE HALF-BUILT, HALF-DERELICT HOUSE”: INTERPRETATION OF THE 1798 REBELLION IN STEWART PARKER’S *NORTHERN STAR***

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It has been shown persuasively in the works of recent theorists of history and interpretation, such as Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur,<sup>1</sup> that, contrary to traditional opinion, history cannot be simply identified with the past, and despite the fact it is written on the basis of traces of the past, it inevitably involves considerable selective and constructive effort on the part of those who write it. Historians should, and most do, strive for objectivity, but precisely because this goal can never be fully achieved, single historical events tend to have various, often mutually exclusive interpretations. What interpretation is chosen by a given community is of vital importance due to the strong link between (narrative) history and personal or collective identity. It is the interpretation of the past rather than the past itself that can significantly influence the politics of the present.

It is one of the intentions of this essay to show and exemplify that (at least in the context of the 1798 Rebellion and its reflections) it is

<sup>1</sup> See above all: Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Recit: L'intrigue et le recit historique* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1983); Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Recit: La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Recit: Le temps raconté* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1985).

worth studying interpretations of history in historical fiction and drama since they can play an important and innovative role in the process of construction of history and identity. They cannot be simply disregarded as “fictitious” because every interpretation, even in historiography, may be seen as a fiction of a kind. This, at least, is clear from Hayden White’s analysis of the tropological grounding of any rendition of history and even Ricoeur, who rightly maintains that history can be distinguished from fiction by its unbreakable link to documents and other traces of the past (which require continuous correction of the historical picture),<sup>2</sup> admits that there is some overlap between references of history and fiction. Similarly to White, he also shows how history inevitably borrows configurations from fiction and speaks about “référence croisée” [crossed reference] of the two modes.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of these theoretical findings, a contrast will be established between the ongoing process of interpretation of the rebellion in historiography and politics with its portrayal in Stewart Parker’s play *Northern Star*, and certain tentative conclusions will be drawn.

Recent theory of history and interpretation has only rarely been used by the critics of Irish historical drama and fiction – for example, James Cahalan’s *Great Hatred, Little Room*,<sup>4</sup> the only comprehensive book to date on the Irish historical novel, is, despite its obvious merits, still grounded in the “realist” tradition, as epitomized by György Lukács’s monograph *The Historical Novel*,<sup>5</sup> published in 1962. Nevertheless, a researcher of historical prose or drama can find inspiration in the work of the German scholars Ansgar Nünning and Mark Berninger, whose monographs on the British historical novel and the British and Irish historical drama respectively made effective use of the most recent theory, opening up the borders of the genres discussed to include not only realistic works in the traditional mode, but also modern, innovative and experimental plays and novels. Although both authors differ in their theoretical backgrounds and areas of research, they agree upon the wide scope and range of

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, *Le temps raconté* 280.

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, *L'intrigue et le récit historique* 154.

<sup>4</sup> James M Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962).

functions these literary works may assume. The main implication can be summed up in the thesis that historical novels and plays do not merely mirror historical experience, but also play a significant role in its construction. One example of this attitude might be Mark Berninger's definition of historical drama: "Geschichtsdrama ist Drama, das Geschichte gestaltet und sich so in einer der vielfältigen möglichen Weisen mit Geschichte auseinandersetzt." [Historical drama is drama that constitutes history and deals with it in various possible ways.]<sup>6</sup> The emphasis lies on the word "constitutes" – no longer can we speak about a mere "poetic awakening" of the people who participated in historical events, as in Lukács's description of the main function of the historical novel,<sup>7</sup> but on the basis of Hayden White's relativizing of the border between history and fiction, historical drama is assigned a potentially much more general role. In keeping with the spirit of this definition, Berninger's work strives towards a reassessment of the traditional perceived relationship between historical drama and historiography – instead of being seen as dependent on historiography and judged by the standards of historical accuracy, historical plays should be seen as independent and a historical factor in their own right.<sup>8</sup>

All these theoretical findings are highly relevant for the literary reflections of the 1798 rebellion in Ireland, which are the subject proper of my essay. The rebellion itself and even more so the political turmoil of the immediately preceding decade are rightly regarded as a crucial period in Ireland's modern history. This is not so much due to the immediate political consequences of the event, but mainly because of its continuing status as a source of inspiration for subsequent political movements and its important role in the forming of Irish national identity. It was the first period when all the socioeconomic,

<sup>6</sup> Mark Berninger, *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Großbritannien und Irland seit 1970* (Trier: WVT Trier, 2006) 47. All translations are my own.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács 42.

<sup>8</sup> Despite his rather severe criticism of White, a similar argument has been made by Nünning for the historical novel. In his discussion of the possible societal functions of the genre he asks: "Inwiefern können historische Romane der Gegenwart Funktionen als Medium der kulturellen Erinnerung, der historischen Sinnstiftung oder der metahistoriographischen Reflexion erfüllen?" [To what extent can contemporary historical novels fulfil the functions as a medium of cultural memory, making historical sense or metahistoriographical reflection?] Ansgar Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion*, Band I (Trier: WVT Trier, 1995) 10.



religious and language groups who had lived in relative isolation from one another during the eighteenth century came into intensive contact (and conflict). The results were admirable and disastrous at the same time. While the political project of the United Irishmen, famously expressed in Wolfe Tone's words "to substitute the common name of Irishman, in the place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter," retains its inspiration to this day, the numerous bloody acts of sectarian violence committed not only by the government side, which tried to exploit sectarianism to break up the fragile alliance of the rebels, but in many cases also by the insurgents themselves, show that the legacy of the rebellion is far from being unambiguous. Also, the relevance of 1798 for the recent conflict in Northern Ireland cannot be disputed – as the 1790s saw the origins of both Irish Republicanism and the Orange order, it is hardly surprising that they have served as an ongoing source of inspiration for both sides of the political and religious divide.

This internal ambiguity of the event is clearly reflected in the various interpretations that have been published in history books ever since Sir Musgrave's loyalist narrative that came out in 1802.<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive account of all the mutually conflicting points of view that have subsequently appeared in Irish historiography and politics is given elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> but it is certainly a point of interest that historians have never come to any agreement as regards the proper meaning of the rebellion in the general context of Ireland's history. When examining the various historiographical positions closely, it is difficult not to have the impression of a circular movement. As Roy Foster succinctly puts it: "what Hubert Butler wrote of Irish history sometimes seems true of Irish historiography as well. It is all like 'a journey on a scenic railway in a funfair: we pass through towering cardboard mountains and over raging torrents and come to rest in the same well trodden field from which we got on board.'" <sup>11</sup>

According to the changing political landscape, the prevailing interpretation moved in the nineteenth century from the Loyalist

<sup>9</sup> Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland* (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1802).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Kevin Whelan, "'98 after '98," *Tree of Liberty* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) 133-75.

<sup>11</sup> R.F. Foster, "Remembering 1798," *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 233.

position, which saw the rebellion as a Catholic conspiracy, through the nationalist interpretation of the Young Ireland movement and the Fenians, which stressed the United Irish legacy and the physical force tradition, towards the highly influential Catholic interpretation of Father Patrick Kavanagh in the 1880s, who tried to reclaim the rebellion for the Catholic church by downplaying the role of the secular United Irishmen and stressing the role of local Wexford priest leaders who, when faced with government provocation, bravely fought for “faith and fatherland.” From the 1960s onwards, the so-called revisionist historians managed to dissolve many popular myths concerning the event, although sometimes coming dangerously close to the reductive loyalist interpretation of the early nineteenth century. Their views were in turn challenged by a new generation of historians in the 1990s, most clearly represented by Kevin Whelan, who shifted the stress from sectarian violence to the political discussions of the 1790s, the inspirational value of the United Irishmen and the wider international context of the events. However, they are far from having the last word in the discussion because in the eyes of many critics (like the above-mentioned Roy Foster), they had revived the older nationalist interpretation while trying to draw attention away from the more sinister aspects of the rebellion.

I believe that it is clear even from this sketchy overview of the historiographical positions what the theoretician Hayden White was referring to when he described meaning in history as being dependent on the ideological position and the language strategies of the historian. Although all the historiographical accounts point out important facts and draw attention to interesting sources, the overall interpretations contained in them all run the risk of being reductive and one-sided in one way or the other.

The crucial question of this essay, however, is whether we might find interpretations of 1798 in historical novels and plays which – despite being “fictional” – might, due to the skill of the author and the scope of the genres, be more balanced and possibly more inspiring for the future. Although the large corpus of novels and plays written on the topic to date are of varying value and most of them, particularly from the time around the centenary, can be read as more or less

straightforward political statements,<sup>12</sup> there are also some examples of truly outstanding works that may be used to illustrate the argument made in this essay. One of them is the play *Northern Star* by the Belfast author Stewart Parker (1941-1989). First staged in 1984, it is one of the later plays of the author, most of whose dramatic work, be it for the television, radio or theatre, was preoccupied with the conflict in Northern Ireland. His intention was not, however, to reflect the conflict directly, by realistic means, which would merely repeat the hardly revealing fact that in the province "Catholics and Protestants hate each other,"<sup>13</sup> nor make straightforward instructive statements of how peace and unity can be achieved, which would mean only preaching to the converted. His principal aim was instead "actually embodying that unity, practising that inclusiveness, in an artistic image,"<sup>14</sup> by specifically dramatic means. In his famous lecture, *Dramatis Personae* (1986) Parker states:

A play which reinforces complacent assumptions, which confirms lazy preconceptions, which fails to combine emotional honesty with coherent analysis, which goes in short for the easy answer, is in my view actually harmful.

And yet if ever a time and place cried out for the solace and rigour and passionate rejoinder of great drama, it is here and now. There is a whole culture to be achieved. The politicians, visionless almost to a man, are withdrawing into their sectarian stockades. It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can begin to hold up its head in the world.<sup>15</sup>

This 'mission statement' is also valid for his portrayal of history in *Northern Star*, indicating the radically different shape that an interpretation of a historical event can assume in drama as compared to historiography and politics. In this particular play, arguably one of the most complex

<sup>12</sup> This has been shown by two as yet unpublished PhD theses which discuss 1798 fiction from 1799 to 1914: Jim Shanahan, "An 'Unburied Corpse': The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898," Diss., Univeristy College Dublin, 2006; Eileen Reilly, "Fictional Histories: An Examination of Irish Historical and Political Novels, 1880-1914," Diss., Oxford University, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart Parker, "Dramatis Personae," *Dramatis Personae and Other Writings*, ed. Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston and Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia 2008) 25.

<sup>14</sup> Parker, "Signposts," *Dramatis Personae and Other Writings* 104.

<sup>15</sup> Parker, "Dramatis Personae" 25-26.

and mature of his works, Stewart Parker decided to focus on some of the historical causes of the conflict, on a period in which the fate of the province for two centuries to come was being decided. The action takes place during the last night before the final captivity and execution of Henry Joy McCracken, a Belfast Presbyterian and a United Irish leader. It is set in a half-built, half-derelict cottage, which may be understood as a symbol of Belfast or Northern Ireland in general, but even more broadly, of the unfinished business of the construction of an inclusive Irish national identity, which was, after all, one of the principal aims of the United Irishmen. The events of McCracken's last night are interspersed with the re-enactment of the protagonist's reminiscences on seven different phases of the development of the United Irish movement and the actual rising, each written in the style of a different Irish playwright and loosely structured along the concept of the Seven Ages of Man, famous from the well-known monologue of Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

The formal features of the play are of crucial importance and, as Marylinn Richtarik has rightly pointed out, integral to its meaning.<sup>16</sup> The structuring of the action along two basic time levels, which may be broadly described as the level of action and the level of reflection, fulfils Mark Berninger's definition of a metahistorical drama<sup>17</sup> and strikes an interesting parallel with a number of other modern Irish and British historical plays and novels, for example, Brian Friel's *Making History* or Liam Mac Cóil's *Fontenoy*. This structure highlights the fact, also pointed out by the above-mentioned theoreticians of history, that history is no given progression that can be simply presented "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" [as it actually was], to use Leopold von Ranke's famous statement, but that it is created anew every time we reflect upon the past and tell stories about it. In connection with the series of the seven flashbacks, Elmer Andrews stresses that by accommodating the history of the 1798 rebellion to "the familiar typology and predestined pattern of the Seven Ages of Man" Stewart Parker shows that "there is nothing in the Irish past which cannot be accommodated in terms of the typical," which "cannot be translated

<sup>16</sup> Marylinn Richtarik, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, ed. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 267.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of this subgenre, see Berninger 160-211.

back or held within orthodox structures and stereotypes.”<sup>18</sup> If we take into account Hayden White’s theory of history, however, Andrews’s statement assumes a much more general validity than just referring to the Irish past – if we accept White’s view that the narration of history is determined as much by the facts as by the tropological structures embedded deeply in Western culture, *any* past must be presented in terms of the typical if we want to be able to speak about it at all, and hence the risk of orthodox structures and stereotypes is inescapable. Consequently, the structure of *Northern Star* carries an important message about the nature of history as such, not only in Belfast or Northern Ireland.

The interpretation of 1798 presented in the play does not easily fall into any of the neat categories prepared by the above-mentioned historians. Richtarik is right in drawing a parallel between *Northern Star* and the view of the ‘90s generation of historians around Kevin Whelan who strived to highlight the positive message of the United Irishmen and recognized “the 1798 rebellion as the mass-based, ideologically driven, and largely Protestant-led affair that it was.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike these historians, however, Stewart Parker does not yield to the temptation not to speak about the war, to paraphrase Roy Foster’s statement,<sup>20</sup> and does not hesitate to criticize the United Irishmen for their use of violence and distinctive ways in which they contributed to the hopeless situation of Northern Ireland in the 1980s. The tragic fallacy of people like Henry Joy McCracken lies in the fact that they accepted the “inescapable logic of events”<sup>21</sup> and, in a true Calvinist manner, followed their “predestined” ways,<sup>22</sup> even if they led into an increase of violence, alliance with doubtful sectarian groups like the Defenders, and civil war. Predestination, after all, is the thief of time, as the much telling malapropism of the bartender Peggy in the first of

<sup>18</sup> Elmer Andrews, “The Will to Freedom: Politics and Play in the Theatre of Stewart Parker,” *Irish Writers and Politics*, ed. Okifumi Komesu and Masaru Sekine (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990) 259.

<sup>19</sup> Richtarik 264.

<sup>20</sup> Foster 226.

<sup>21</sup> Parker, *Northern Star, Three Plays for Ireland* (Birmingham: Oberon Books, 1989) 54.

<sup>22</sup> The criticism of the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination in “Northern Star” was also noted in Richard Rankin Russell, “Playing and Singing toward Devolution: Stewart Parker’s Ethical Aesthetics in *Kingdom Come* and *Northern Star*,” *Irish University Review*, 37.2 (Spring/Summer 2007): 366-95.

the flashback scenes (this time in the manner of Sheridan) goes.<sup>23</sup> This attitude of the United Irishmen is shown for instance in the dialogue between McCracken and his lover Mary Bodle in Act II:

MARY: Why did you allow yourself to resort to the gun?

McCRACKEN: It was moral force. And then it was physical force.

Nobody just suddenly decided that. It was the inescapable logic of events.

MARY: There's always the choice to say no.

McCRACKEN: Saying no is a final exit. You act out your small part in a huge drama, Mary, but it is not of your own creation. You're acting all along in the dark, no matter how clear it seems at the time. You only have one choice. Either retire from the stage altogether. Or play out all your allotted roles until the curtain falls.

MARY: Aye, that's right. On a stage full of corpses.<sup>24</sup>

Stewart Parker's *United Irishmen* are also criticized for their desire of martyrdom connected with a fear of ordinary life, over-emphasis on rationalism and an indulgence in empty symbolism. The last attitude is shown very clearly during the scene at the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792, organized by McCracken's relative Edward Bunting.<sup>25</sup> In their hilarious conversation with Bunting, written in the style of Oscar Wilde, McCracken and Theobald Wolfe Tone show an utter disregard for the harpists, although their society makes much use of the harp as the symbol of Ireland. For Stewart Parker (as he showed in his *Irish Times* article "Buntus Belfast," where he describes what happened when, as a person with Protestant background, he tried to learn the Irish language in the troubled city), the process of reunification of Ireland, the search for "the corporate soul"<sup>26</sup> of the Protestants and Catholics was not based on the devotion to empty symbols, but on a deep interest in the culture of the "other."

This analysis of selected features of the play leads us to the concluding question – what is the qualitative difference between the image of 1798 in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* and in the historiographical accounts and political interpretations mentioned

<sup>23</sup> Parker, *Northern Star* 14.

<sup>24</sup> Parker, *Northern Star* 54.

<sup>25</sup> Parker, *Northern Star* 35-38.

<sup>26</sup> Parker, "Buntus Belfast," *Dramatis Personae and Other Writings* 33.

earlier in the essay? We can appreciate the balanced position of the play, facilitated by the inherent dialogical potential of the genre, which is able to praise the United Irishmen while strongly criticizing them at the same time, thus retaining both the inspiration and the warning the 1798 rebellion held for 1984 Belfast (and, of course, other times and places). Apart from that, there is an overall tendency towards the general: there is much metahistorical reflection to be found in both the structure and content of *Northern Star* and reasons for historical processes are sought at a deeper psychological and spiritual level. The history which this particular play constitutes (to return to Mark Berninger's definition), is therefore in certain respects richer and more inclusive than in the works of many of the historians mentioned in the first part of the essay, who (in the distinctive manner described by Hayden White) have selected facts and formed narratives to serve some, often limited, political purpose. This is, of course, not to say that history books should be replaced by novels and plays, but that the interpretations of history contained in them are worth studying and that in places where certain historical events still have a tremendous influence on the present (as in Northern Ireland, but this is far from the only example), they may contribute to healing historical traumas and creating an inclusive national identity,<sup>27</sup> so that the "half-built, half-derelict house in the continuous past," which is the symbolic setting of *Northern Star*, might yet become a comfortable abode for all.

<sup>27</sup> Obviously, their influence may be quite the opposite – see, for example Cahalan's severe criticism of Leon Uris's novel *Trinity* (Cahalan 190). What matters here, however, is the possibility of a positive effect.

## **“ADEQUATE TO OUR PREDICAMENT?”: IN SEARCH OF A NORTHERN IRISH POLITICAL ELEGY**

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The genre of elegy can be traced through English literature as a clearly defined tradition of poetic mourning. Exemplary elegies include Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's "Adonais," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." Even within the brief list given above, it is possible to follow the development of the genre, as each poet takes up the conventions of the tradition and re-animates them to fit a particular situation. Elegy, therefore, has had an intensely reciprocal relationship with its practitioners, offering them tools with which to process their mourning, and, in turn, being constantly reinvigorated as each poet engages in their own way with the genre. This characteristic of elegy, how it provides a clear set of conventions yet at the same time remains open to development, is perhaps why it seems to have been taken up by Northern Irish poets as they have sought to respond to the political situation known as the Troubles. This poetic engagement, it might be argued, has led to the development of a specific subgenre of elegy: Northern Irish political elegy.

The idea of a "political elegy" might seem paradoxical: the intensely private processes of grief and mourning seem to be in direct contrast with the public world of politics. However, there are two responses to this contention. First, elegy has always been simultaneously public



and private. Milton's "Lycidas" mourns for the poet's friend, Edward King, but also contains an invective against the corrupt clergy of that time.<sup>1</sup> "Lycidas" is also a search for consolation for the poet, both in terms of assuaging his grief, and also, perhaps more importantly, in convincing himself of his own poetic merit, helping to establish him as a serious and accomplished writer.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, then, it is both a personal and a public endeavour. The second point to make is that during the Troubles, sectarian violence came to affect ordinary citizens: public politics began to intrude upon interior, domestic spaces, meaning that elegy, as a public and private poetry, seems to be an especially fitting genre in which Troubles poems might be written.

The image of the domestic being invaded by political violence is a theme prevalent in many of Michael Longley's Troubles poems, as has been noted by Peter MacDonald and Fran Brearton.<sup>3</sup> Longley, together with Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, is one of the first generation of poets who felt compelled to respond to the political situation in Northern Ireland. This article will consider three poems from this first generation of the Troubles poets, in order to concentrate on what one group of writers has done to develop a genre that might be "adequate to their predicament."<sup>4</sup>

The political elegy was discussed by Kevin Murphy in a lecture given in New York in 2008, where he considered Yeats's "Easter 1916" and Heaney's "Casualty" as examples of poems written in response to specific political events. Murphy identifies both "Easter 1916" and "Casualty" as elegies, adding that

<sup>1</sup> John Milton, "Lycidas," *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Longman, 2007) 237-56.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sacks argues that in writing an elegy for fellow poet Edward King, Milton's "ambition was not merely to write a consummate pastoral poem but to secure immortality." *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Peter MacDonald, "When the Troubles Enter Longley's Poetry, the Dominant Perspectives are Domestic Ones," *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 133; and Fran Brearton, "'Home' Is a Violated Space," *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006) 99.

<sup>4</sup> See Seamus Heaney's description of the task faced by Northern poets: "From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament." "Feeling into Words," *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber, 2001) 23.

as is the case with traditional elegies both in English and in earlier literatures, each of these poems becomes the occasion for the poet to reconsider the nature and purpose of his vocation. As such, these poems are simultaneously public and private, political and poetic, national and personal.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to extend Murphy's reading of political elegy to include not only poems that respond to particular events, but also the poetry of a place and time in which the political climate was directly linked to the sense of bereavement and loss in the entire community.<sup>6</sup>

One of Heaney's early political elegies was written in 1966 when, to quote Heaney, "most poets in Ireland were straining to celebrate the anniversary of the 1916 Rising."<sup>7</sup> "Requiem for the Croppies" was originally called "Requiem for the Irish Rebels (Wexford, 1798)" and it commemorates what Heaney calls the "seeds" of the later uprising.<sup>8</sup> The "Croppies" were members of the Society of United Irishmen, revolutionary republicans who rebelled against British rule in 1798 in the hope of establishing an Irish republic, an uprising that was echoed in 1916. While "Requiem for the Croppies" might be seen as a pre-Troubles poem, it is an important example of Heaney using the genre of elegy with which to write a political poem. Indeed, the elegy contained enough perceived political content for Heaney to begin omitting it from public readings during the height of the Troubles: "For nearly 30 years and more I didn't read it, because I was aware that it would always have been taken as a coded IRA poem."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Murphy, "Tradition and Transformation: Yeats, Heaney and the Irish Political Elegy," talk given to the New York Yeats Society at Glucksman Ireland House, New York University, 12 April 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Like Murphy, I see Yeats as an important predecessor for the generation of poets discussed in this essay, due in part to his own engagement with, and development of, the elegiac tradition. Although further discussion of Yeats's influence would require a far lengthier study than the current one, we might take note of Jahan Ramazani's observation that, in his "remarkable departures from elegiac tradition, ... Yeats helps to remake the elegy for the modern period." *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy and the Sublime* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Heaney, "Feeling into Words" 23.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Parker, *Northern Irish Literature, 1956-1975: The Imprint of History*, Vol. 1 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 66; Heaney, "Requiem for the Croppies," *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998) 22.

<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted by Jenny McCartney in "Seamus Heaney Has Seen It All," *The Telegraph* 13 Sep 2007, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3667860/Seamus-Heaney-has-seen-it-all.html>>.

The poem is an elegy, but an unusual one. It is a sonnet, which places certain formal constraints upon the poet. Heaney readily engages with these constraints: he writes in a regular, iambic pentameter; he adheres to a regular rhyme scheme, using, almost exclusively, full rhymes (camp/tramp, hike/pike); and he organizes his poem into an octave and a sestet, with a turn or “volta” in line 10. The sonnet is not a Shakespearean one, however; the neat rhyming couplet at the end of a typical English sonnet seems somehow inappropriate in elegy, as the tidy formal conclusion appears to be incongruous with the chaotic experience of grief. Therefore, Heaney chooses a sonnet form far closer to the Petrarchan model, also used by Milton, an archetypal elegist and sonneteer. While the sonnet form in general might seem too rigid to be used to write about the disruptive experience of death, in a political elegy the adherence to traditional form can bring a sense of re-ordering in the aftermath of civil violence.

Heaney’s sonnet engages with elegiac tradition, especially as the deaths of the croppies are remembered. In the line “The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave,” the idea that nature itself responds to death echoes early elegies such as Milton’s “Lycidas.” The images of mass slaughter in battle also echo a more recent elegist of conflict: Wilfred Owen. “The hillside blushed,” as an image of physical bloodshed, is reminiscent of the image in Owen’s “Spring Offensive” of the buttercups on the battlefield catching the soldiers’ blood.<sup>10</sup> The event of death is repeated in lines 11 and 12; “Terraced thousands died” is reiterated in “The hillside blushed.” Indeed, repetition is also a feature commonly found in elegy. Peter Sacks gives a number of explanations to account for the use of repetition as an elegiac convention, and the most important in this context is the fact that repetition “creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death.”<sup>11</sup> This feature of elegy also enables it to deal with the disruption of political violence.

Perhaps the most elegiac aspect of “Requiem for the Croppies” is the image of resurrection (or at least, new life that supersedes death)

<sup>10</sup> See, in particular, lines 30-31: “earth set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood,” Wilfred Owen, “Spring Offensive,” *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, Vol. 1, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus / Hogarth Press, 1983) 192-93.

<sup>11</sup> Sacks 23-24.

in the final lines. While the dead are buried “without shroud or coffin,” the “barley” in their pockets lives on to commemorate their lives after they have died. This is consolatory, not just because it recalls natural cycles of death and re-birth, but also because the image of the barley might be a metaphor for elegy itself. Heaney may be hinting that while the croppies were buried “without shroud or coffin,” the poem he is writing might act as a figurative shroud or commemorative wreath, reinstating the dignity of the dead, and providing them with a lasting memorial.<sup>12</sup>

“Requiem for the Croppies” was written before the escalation of violence at the end of the 1960s. After this date, Heaney faced the task of mourning victims far closer to him than the Irish rebels of 1798. He was also forced into a continual consideration of his role and responsibility as a poet writing out of such a politically volatile situation, in which his work could easily be misread, as he had believed might happen with “Requiem for the Croppies.” This may have been one of the reasons for his shift in tone when writing “The Strand at Lough Beg” which appeared in his 1979 collection, *Field Work*, and mourns the death of his second cousin, Colum McCartney, a civilian killed in the sectarian conflict.<sup>13</sup> This later poem is one of Heaney’s most faithful engagements with the genre of elegy, containing many of its conventional features, with its pastoral setting, self-incriminating questions and admissions of guilt, images of ritual cleansing and wreath weaving, and the tentatively consolatory final image. While it is intensely personal, which perhaps guards, to some extent, against its potential hijacking for propagandist purposes, it is, nevertheless, a subtly political poem, expressing the poet’s anger at the violence which intrudes upon his peaceful, rural community.

Heaney is not the only poet to mourn the fragmentation of society caused by the Troubles. A number of Michael Longley’s poems deal directly with this issue, and one example is “Wreaths,” published at the end of the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Each section of the poem identifies the subjects by their role in society, which in some ways makes society itself

<sup>12</sup> The idea that elegy itself might be created, or “woven,” to form a poetic wreath is discussed at length by Sacks, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Heaney, “The Strand at Lough Beg,” *Opened Ground* 152-53.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Longley, “Wreaths,” *Collected Poems* (London: Cape, 2006) 118-19.

the victim of violence.<sup>15</sup> The civil servant's death is described as a loss of experience: "The books he had read, the music he could play." This echoes the praise found in traditional elegies such as "Lycidas," recognizing the artistic potential left unfulfilled by the premature death. Death enters in the second line of the poem, and the reader is given brutal details:

He was preparing an Ulster Fry for breakfast  
When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:  
A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,  
The books he had read, the music he could play.<sup>16</sup>

With this death, violence invades and "violates" the domestic. Indeed, to quote Fran Brearton, the "shock" of the death "violates the lyric poem too, which is rhythmically disruptive and musically discordant, as well as uncompromising in the plainness of its description."<sup>17</sup>

The second section, "The Greengrocer," makes the most obvious references to the sectarian divisions of Belfast, mentioning "the Shankill" and "the Falls" roads. However, it also seems to point out the absurdity of such violent divisions between neighbouring communities, who have so much in common, with the celebration of Christmas given as an example.

"The Linen Workers" is the most complex part of the poem, mourning both the "ten linen workers" and the poet's father. This section is the most public and also the most private part of the poet's mourning. There is a sense in which the "speaker's feeling for his father teaches him how to feel for the anonymous linen workers," as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has noted.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, public grief seems to cause the poet to return to his personal grief, as he "once again" prepares his father's body for burial. In the final stanza, the elegist seems to find comfort in performing rituals of burial, and in

<sup>15</sup> Neil Corcoran suggests that: "The implication of the titles is presumably that in Northern Ireland nobody is truly invisible behind a function, since your job can place you in front of a bullet." *English Poetry since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993) 186.

<sup>16</sup> Longley, "Wreaths," 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley* 145.

<sup>18</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Conflict, Violence and 'The Fundamental Interrelatedness of all Things,'" *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, ed. Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000) 86.

reconstructing the dignity and individual identity of the mourned subject. Before he reaches this point, Longley mourns the politically motivated deaths of the nameless "linen workers," who are represented by a list of debris:

When they massacred the ten linen workers  
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,  
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:  
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.<sup>19</sup>

The dead are signified by the objects they carried, making them, again, a symbol of the wider community. Indeed, Kennedy-Andrews is reminded by these "commonplace" objects of "the concentration camps: ultimately, Longley's poem is an elegy to all victims of violence."<sup>20</sup> The fourth stanza, therefore, seeks consolation in the re-burial scene. The restoration of the father's "spectacles," "money" and "false teeth" to their proper places on his body suggests preparation for an afterlife existence. These actions, linked to the images of the previous stanza, also suggest the poet's desire to respond to public events, which he does by transposing them onto his personal situation. There is a sense in which the poet's need to mourn for his society is met, to some extent, as he mourns his private loss.<sup>21</sup>

The poet is clear that this is a re-burial: "Before I can bury my father *once again*,"<sup>22</sup> foregrounding the fact that the act is a figurative one, and drawing attention to the poem itself, which has become the vehicle for mourning. Indeed, "Wreaths" shows the poet's awareness of the consolation that might be found in elegy, as a created work that can offer memorial and reconstruction after the dispersal caused by

<sup>19</sup> Longley, "Wreaths" 9-12.

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy-Andrews 87.

<sup>21</sup> Brearton sees a connection between cycles of private and public mourning, seeing that "each burial of his father is also a bringing of the memory of him back to life, one which rather than healing the wound, reopens it each time, keeping it green," which parallels the situation as "the violence in Northern Ireland perpetuates itself." *Reading Michael Longley* 147. Corcoran observes: "The linen workers are felt for because the father is felt for; and the poem knows that a public elegy can only be written from such private sources when the public horror is sent to invade the private grief." *English Poetry since 1940* 187.

<sup>22</sup> Emphasis mine.

death.<sup>23</sup> Each section has a different formal structure, and this gives a sense of the plural nature of the losses mourned and the fragmentation caused by them. The form of the poem also reflects the way in which Longley brings together public and private, political and poetic, in his development of the genre of Northern Irish political elegy.

Derek Mahon, in contrast to Longley, is perhaps the most difficult of the three poets to read as an elegist. His poetry often resists simple generic definition, and seems to be deliberately ironic. According to Neil Corcoran, Mahon writes with an "effort of detachment."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, speaking about the Troubles, Mahon has said: "It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungiven and Magherafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it."<sup>25</sup>

The poem to which Mahon refers in the above quotation is "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," which might not immediately be seen as a traditional elegy.<sup>26</sup> It does not fit the conventions as closely as Longley's "Wreaths," which deals with individual deaths, and mourns them in a number of traditional ways. It is not even obviously a Troubles poem. While "Requiem for the Croppies" shows that Troubles poems might make only oblique references to the contemporary political situation, Mahon is even more oblique than Heaney. Indeed, Mahon's subjects are "a thousand mushrooms," forgotten in an abandoned shed. These mushrooms are elegiac figures which stand for human suffering, those lost peoples of "Treblinka and Pompeii" and, by implication, the victims of Northern Ireland's Troubles.

Mahon's poem is dedicated to J.G. Farrell, whose novel *Troubles* focuses on the Hotel Majestic, a symbol of the Anglo-Irish Big House.<sup>27</sup> The hotel in Farrell's novel is burned to the ground amidst the upheaval of the IRA attacks and the reprisals of the early twentieth

<sup>23</sup> Brearton suggests that there is in Longley "a belief in imaginative compensation – poetry displacing conventional religious consolations," "Poetry of the 1960s: The 'Northern Ireland Renaissance,'" *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 106.

<sup>24</sup> Neil Corcoran, "Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon," *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999) 137.

<sup>25</sup> Derek Mahon, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, ed. John Brown (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon, 2002) 115-16.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Mahon, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999, repr. 2008) 89-90.

<sup>27</sup> J.G. Farrell, *Troubles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, repr. 1981).

century. Mahon's poem is set in "the grounds of (just such) a burnt-out hotel," long after these "civil war days." The opening line of the poem seems, tentatively, to offer hope, while simultaneously giving a sense of aftermath and violence suffered: "Even now there are places where a thought might grow." This hope, despite suffering, is embodied by the anthropomorphized mushrooms, which "crowd to a keyhole." While there are other living things present in the poem, like the rhododendrons and rooks, the mushrooms are the only ones given human qualities. Yet they remain mushroom-like in their humanness: they wait in "a foetor / of vegetable sweat," their "pale flesh flak[es]," they are "magi, moonmen," "Web-throated, stalked like triffids." Consequently, although in some ways the mushrooms are symbols of universal suffering, Mahon complicates our response by making them, simultaneously, alien and detached from our experience.

While the poem is a complex response to the suffering caused by political violence, it can, nevertheless, be seen as a development in the genre of Northern Irish political elegy. While it makes no direct reference to the dead of "Dungiven and Magherafelt," the nod to Farrell and the mention of "civil war" foreground Ireland's political history, while the "Indian compounds" in the first stanza allude to British imperialism. Crucially, the "people of Treblinka and Pompeii" are symbolic of all victims of events and regimes against which they have no power to stand. All of these can be read as oblique references to Mahon's contemporary situation, just as Heaney used the Irish Rebels of 1798 to write a poem about the 1916 uprising. Having identified some of the political aspects of the poem, it is also possible to trace the various elegiac characteristics that Mahon has chosen to include.

The elegy is defined as a "song of lamentation for the dead, usually mourning the loss of a personal friend or public figure, though sometimes offering a melancholic reflection on a lost way of life," and it is traditionally "characterized by a temporal movement from lament to consolation."<sup>28</sup> Mahon's poem mourns for a loss greater than the death of one individual. Like Longley's elegies, which seem to mourn the fragmentation of society, "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" is an

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Regan, "Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy," *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*, ed. Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 9; Marjorie Perloff, "The Consolation Theme in Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,'" *Modern Language Quarterly*, 27 (1966): 306.



elegy for the Northern Irish community, which has "come so far in darkness and in pain." It laments the lost "lives" that the mushrooms "had to live," and it also offers a form of poetic consolation similar to that found in elegies from Milton's "Lycidas" to Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies" and Longley's "Wreaths;" the consolation that a poem has been created in memory of what has been lost.

In the final stanza, the poet is begged by the mushrooms "to speak on their behalf / Or at least not to close the door again." This seems to be what compels poets to write political elegies about the Troubles. There is a responsibility to speak about, or at least not to cover up, the situation. In writing an elegy, the poet creates a memorial to those who "have come so far in darkness and in pain:" the elegy preserves and immortalizes those "naïve labours." This, of course, is a simplified reading, and Mahon does not allow us such a neat conclusion. The pronouns in the final stanza are plural; the mushrooms beg not "me," but "us." This is characteristic of Mahon, who seems to insist that the reader shares this burden of responsibility with him: it is not just "you with your light meter and relaxed itinerary," but also "us," as witnesses of the poem, who are begged to "do something." Mahon does not claim that his poetry alone can provide a fitting memorial for victims of political violence; he seems, rather, to suggest that consolation might only be found in a communal effort to express and process the bereavements of the Troubles.

This need for a communal effort of response to the political situation in Northern Ireland is one that has been engaged with to a large extent by the community of Northern poets. In the work of the three poets discussed here, it can be seen that each adopts various conventions of the elegiac tradition in ways that augment and contribute towards their own individual poetic voice. Heaney looks back through almost two centuries of Ireland's history in order to find fitting subjects for his elegy, and uses this temporal space as a way of engaging obliquely with his contemporary situation. Mahon uses a similar technique, yet brings a further level of detachment by employing a characteristic sense of surrealism as he chooses to anthropomorphize a shed full of mushrooms as his elegiac subjects. Longley is perhaps the most explicit in his Troubles poems, concentrating as he does on specific victims of the violence, but like the other poets, he works out his grief by turning his attention away from these political deaths and concentrating, instead, on the figure of his father. Each poet seems to

formulate his response to the Troubles by poetically mourning a symbolic subject or set of victims, and in doing so, each contributes to the development of a genre of poetry that seems to have emerged from this particular context: Northern Irish political elegy.

# BETWEEN HOME AND BEYOND THE SEA: CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY

## **“LETTING IN THE LIGHT OF LAUGHTER”: TRADITIONAL ICONIC IMAGES OF THE FEMINIZED LAND IN THE HANDS OF CONTEMPORARY POETS**

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In the satirizing dissection of the sectarian strife in the North in *Autumn Journal*, Louis MacNeice asks pungently: “Kathleen ni Houlihan! Why / Must a country, like a ship or a car be always female, / Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by / we did but see her passing.”<sup>1</sup> The image of a woman going by is a taunt apparently directed at Yeats’s famous playlet and the figuration of Ireland as *Sean-Bhean Bhocht*. The stereotype, however, has far older origins and a much broader scope of variations. The allegorical image of the sovereignty of Ireland presented as a female figure can be traced back to the early Irish manuscripts and to medieval political writing, including various forms of the sovereignty myth as well as the odes on the Irish lords.

Irish poetry, of course, has no exclusive right to the identification of the national with the feminine. As the Indian political philosopher Ahish Nandy has asserted, the history of political colonization may be theorized as a history of feminization while the attempts of a people to regain autonomy have been customarily described and encouraged as a fight for the resumption of “a traditionally masculine role of power.”<sup>2</sup> In western cultures, frequent propagandistic use of the metaphor

<sup>1</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Poems Selected by Michael Longley* (London: Faber, 2001) 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ahish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), as cited in Gerardine Meaney, “Sex and Nation:

has accompanied the national and literary resurgence resulting from the romantic plunge into the unknown waters of the vernacular. It has traditionally – and contradictorily – been paraded as a standard on both sides of various power conflicts, representing the subjugated territories as perceived by the invaders while at the same time symbolizing the resistance of the colonized people. This universality of associating the feminine with the national has been emphasized by Angela Bourke: “Both pseudoscientific and romantic approaches to folklore depend on a view of colonized and marginalized people as feminine.”<sup>3</sup>

Although the trope is supposed to be of Indo-European provenance, it was also employed continuously in Irish literature from medieval times, and even served as the foundation of a separate poetic genre. By the end of the sixteenth century, the motifs of the fruitful bond between the ruler and the female figuration of his region began to become problematic with the tightening hold of the colonizers on the lives of Irish lords and with their timber-mining and landscape-charting activities. While the landscape and its inhabitants were being harassed by the invaders, the conceit of the feminized land was taken over by the post-bardic poets of the seventeenth century and subsequently appropriated by Irish Jacobitism, becoming the symbol of the colonized nation – an image that would reign over Irish political poetry and nationalist resistance for at least the next three hundred years.

The main subgenre of Irish Jacobite verse, the sophisticated, highly ornamental *aisling* (or vision) poetry most often refers to the subjugated land as *an Spéirbhean* (the Sky Woman), a regal figure of great physical beauty appearing under one of the Celtic appellations of Ireland, such as Éire, Ériu, Banbha or Fódla. In the slightly later development of the eighteenth-century Jacobite folk songs, the Sky Woman was given a body of flesh and blood and a name in the vernacular, such as Síle Ní Ghadhra, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir and, later, Rosaleen or Róisín Dubh, or indeed the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* (the Poor Old Woman). Máirín Nic Eoin recapitulates how the image developed into a nationalist symbol,

Women in Irish Culture and Politics,” *Irish Women’s Studies Reader*, ed. Ailbhe Smyth (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) 233.

<sup>3</sup> Angela Bourke, “Reading a Woman’s Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” *Feminist Studies*, 21. 3 (1995): 556-68.

writing that after the feminine figuration of *aisling* poetry was taken over by the Irish Jacobite song in English,

[it] was adopted and adapted to give voice to almost every subsequent national movement of significance. ... The female image becomes a potent element in nationalistic rhetoric through the publications of the Young Ireland movement ... Through the translations of Jacobite poetry ... Caitlín Ní hUallacháin and her contemporaries enter the literature of the Anglo-Irish cultural revival.<sup>4</sup>

By the time the national and literary revival were in full swing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, most poets had abandoned the conventions of Jacobite forms. Still, the woman image representing all kinds of abstract concepts and ideals continued to be cherished and frequently used. As the chief agitprop of the nationalist rhetoric, the feminized iconic image of Ireland became so intrinsically linked to the awareness of national identity that the latter was virtually inconceivable without the former. The motif appears in a large number of variations, ranging from the venerated figure of Mother Ireland and the *aisling* heroine to the *Sean-Bhean Bhocht* or even the fallen slut. Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is perhaps the most famous reworking of the traditional trope of the *cailleach-spéirbhean* transformation:

- Did you see an old woman going down the path?
- I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.<sup>5</sup>

This contribution aims to focus on one of the ways in which contemporary Irish poets have confronted the allegorical representations of the feminized land and harnessed them to their own polemics with the literary tradition. It will draw attention to the elements of satire and parody that often inform such efforts of transgression. Outlining certain parallels to be seen between these ironic approaches and Bakhtinian conceptions of literary transgression and cultural or political

<sup>4</sup> Máirín Nic Eoin, "Sovereignty and Politics, c. 1300-1900," *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions*, Vol. 4, ed. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 275.

<sup>5</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, *Modern Irish Drama*, ed. John P. Harrington (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991) 11.

transformation, this article will also touch upon some ways in which they may be aligned with Julia Kristeva's notions of poetic language and *jouissance*. So as to keep within the prescribed limits of space, the focus is on reactions coming from the pens of women, although mocking responses to the trope have been just as prevalent among male poets.<sup>6</sup>

One irony about the feminine constructs of the country that is frequently commented on is the way they contributed to women being kept from the country's historical narratives and literary tradition. Nic Eoin notes that in the political song tradition, "the woman as signifier becomes a site of representation on which are projected political yearnings and hopes as well as deep feelings of historical loss and grievance."<sup>7</sup> According to Gerardine Meaney, women are thus presented as "guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation, they become the territory over which power is exercised."<sup>8</sup>

Yeats's handling of the stereotype in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, recalled with sarcasm by MacNeice, has provided a trigger for the anti-nationalist wrath of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who has protested that Yeats's metamorphosing image "galvanized a whole population at the beginning of the [last] century, and is still shockingly alive in the collective psyche."<sup>9</sup> Striving to free women from the yoke of the rusty image of Mother Ireland, Ní Dhomhnaill uses her own poems to overturn the masculinist tendencies prevailing in the canon. On multiple occasions, she has amused herself by reaching back into the patriotic tradition, extracting images and exposing them in a ridiculing context.

<sup>6</sup> From an early stage, the conventions of Irish Jacobite verse and the trope of the feminized figuration of the subjugated land were the subject of parodies and subversive commentaries. The trend that began with works such as *An Airc* (The Ark), the caustic political satire by the Scottish Jacobite poet Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair or Brian Merriman's famous satire *Cúirt An Mheán Óiche*, has had its reverberations in the writing of modern Irish poets such as Máirtín Ó Direáin, Louis MacNeice, Paul Muldoon and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, to name but a few. It is worth noting that the satirical reworking of old conventions and stereotypes is a unifying element, not just reaching across the gender divide, but also pertaining to poets from the two language milieus coexisting within Irish literature.

<sup>7</sup> Nic Eoin 275.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* (Dublin: New Island, 2005) 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ní Dhomhnaill, *Selected Essays* 48.

Indeed, few of the sexist clichés in poetry by male authors ranging from Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin and Aogán Ó Rathaille to Pádraic Pearse or Yeats have escaped her voracious, caustic attention. In “Caitlín” (Cathleen),<sup>10</sup> the speaker remembers with benign irony the good old days of Cathleen Ní Houlihan:

Díreach toisc go raibh sí an-mhóir ina *vamp*  
thiar ins na fichidí, is gur dhamhas sí an Searlastan  
le tonntracha méiríneacha ina gruaig dhualach thrilseánach;  
gur phabhasae gléigeal í thiar i naoi déag sé déag,  
go bhfachthas fornocht i gConnachta í, mar áille na háille,  
is ag taisteal bhóithre na Mumhan, mar ghile na gile;

...

ní théann aon stad uirthi ach ag maíomh  
as na seanlaethanta, nuair a bhíodh sí ag ionsaí ...

just because she made the Twenties roar  
with her Black and Tan Bottom – O Terpsichore –  
and her hair in a permanent wave;  
just because she was lily grave  
in nineteen sixteen; just because she once was spotted  
quite naked in Cannought, of beauties most beautied,  
or tramping the roads of Moonstrare, brightest of the bright;

...

because of all that she never stops bending your ear  
about the good old days of yore ...

The parody of Ó Rathaille’s phrasing in his most famous *aisling* “Gile na Gile” (Brightness Most Bright) only serves here to set the satirical context, the real sarcasm being saved for the rest of the poem which becomes a mocking catalogue of some later moments in the nationalist strife. One of Ní Dhomhnaill’s self-proclaimed approaches has been to overturn the body-landscape trope, representing the landscape alternatively as a male body. The strategy comes through even in love lyrics such as “Oileán” (Island) where the persona dreams of approaching the spread-eagled body of her nude male object, “mar a luíonn tú /

<sup>10</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, “Caitlín” / “Cathleen,” trans. Paul Muldoon, *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women’s Poetry 1967-2000*, ed. Peggy O’Brien (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1999) 169-70.

uaigheach, iathghlas, / oileánach" ("where you lie back, / wistful, emerald, islanded").<sup>11</sup>

Another tactic, shared by a number of poets, has been to step off the pedestal directly into the shoes of the eulogizer, reversing the polarity of the situation. Again, Ní Dhomhnaill's work affords a copious supply of examples. In "Fear" (Looking at a Man), a male object is being stripped in playful revenge by the passionate eyes of the female spectator. The bedazzled persona willingly vacates the position of the artist's model for the man, and picks up the baton as the panegyrist:

ba chóir go mórfaí tú  
os comhair an tslua,  
go mbronnfaí ort  
craobh is próca óir,  
ba chóir go snóifí tú  
id dhealbh marmair  
ag seasamh romham  
id pheilt is uaireadóir.

You're the one they should praise  
In public places,  
The one should be handed  
Trophies and cheques.  
You're the model  
For the artist's hand,  
Standing before me  
In your skin and a wristwatch.<sup>12</sup>

In her delightful erotic poem, "Veneer," Vona Groarke writes from a similarly transposed perspective. Omitting references to traditional tropes, however, she concentrates on a cherished flaw in the beauty of her lover's body:

Were he lying down, I'd crook in the hollow  
of him and, with my index finger, slub the mole  
at the breech of his back that rounds on darkness  
like a knot in veneer: shallow, intricate, opaque.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Oileán" / "Island," trans. John Montague, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994) 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "Fear" / "Looking at a Man," trans. John Montague, *Pharaoh's Daughter* 140-141.

<sup>13</sup> Vona Groarke, *Flight* (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 2002) 48.



Biddy Jenkinson, on the other hand, is explicit in her rewriting of the tradition. In “Mo Scéal Féin – Á Insint ag Aisling” (Telling an Aisling – My Version of the Story), the situation is inverted twice over: otherwise a virtuous soul, the persona sits up all night so completely taken by the phantom of her sleeping profligate idol that she herself falls into a ghostlike state, turning into a spectre and a slave to her own infatuation.

Codladh i gclúmh aingil anocht ar mo ghrása  
Ach spailpín mé féin  
Taise bhocht nimfemáineach.

Tonight my darling slumbers in angelic down;  
But I’m just a navvy,  
A wretched nymphomaniac ghost.<sup>14</sup>

What Jenkinson’s late night apparition, Groarke’s lover and Ní Dhomhnaill’s clothes horse have in common is the enamoured admiration they provoke in their female observers. While some of the poems contain jibes, more or less overt, at the nationalist rhetoric, others speak simply of personal love and have no obvious correlatives in history or the patriarchal literary tradition. But whether the prevailing tone is mocking or affectionate, the idealized object is scarcely ever *ideologized*. Even if the incentive behind a poem is to settle an old score, the retribution halts sagaciously at the point when the poet can enjoy speaking from the perspective of an active subject. The objectification of men by women authors is thus rarely effected in patronizing terms, and, if so, then with a relieving, ridiculing sting. Shifting the emphasis slightly, one might ask if having been so insistently reminded of their otherness and marginality, women and their texts may not be better suited for accommodating the idea of alterity and pluralism in their polemics with the canon and for leading the form of ethical dialogue as required by Simon Critchley, for example, who insists that such a dialogue “should not result in the annulment of alterity, but in respect for it.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Biddy Jenkinson, “Mo Scéal Féin – Á Insint ag Aisling” [Telling an Aisling – My Version of the Story], *Rogha Dánta* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 5. My translation.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Ethics Of Deconstruction: Derrida And Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 13.

In her critical study of the representations of women in the poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney, Patricia Coughlan complains of the tendency discernible in many male poets of harnessing the feminine principle as “a main motivating force”<sup>16</sup> in their work. Similar charges against men for reducing womanhood to a lifeless notion or, paradoxically, using it as an ego boost, have of course been prevalent among feminist critics. According to Virginia Woolf, “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”<sup>17</sup> Without this magic power, she infers with characteristic irony, the world would still be a wild, uncivilized place. There would have been none of the great wars, no tsars or emperors would ever have gained their extraordinary influence.<sup>18</sup> Simone de Beauvoir sums it up laconically: “The most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women.”<sup>19</sup>

Eithne Strong took up the threads of these critical voices in her poem “Yellow Joke.” In associating the notion of frenetic joy with the shattering to pieces of the (presumably male) superego, the piece also provides an apposite gloss on the previously discussed salutary use of humour and satire in much contemporary poetry by Irish women.

I have a great liking  
for the ridiculous,  
the way it makes  
a fatal hole in solemnity,  
letting in the light of laughter.  
...  
Let us enjoy the banana skin  
bringing dictators to the ground.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Coughlan, “‘Bog Queens’: The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 45.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando: Harcourt Press, 2005) 35.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Benjamin's famous dictum that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 256.

<sup>19</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993) liv.

<sup>20</sup> Eithne Strong, “Yellow Joke,” *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*, ed. Ailbhe Smyth (Dublin: Attic Press, 1989) 110.

The comic has been long established as one of the constituent traditions in Irish writing. However, while volumes have been published on the legacy of sardonic and polemic critiques of society in the prose writings of authors such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Pádraic Ó Conaire, most critics have tended to neglect or disregard the elements of comedy and satire in literary works by women. Still, although in recent years, thanks to the research carried out on authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Clare Boylan, Edna O'Brien or Lady Gregory, the role of women in the tradition of subversive humour in Irish literature has been determined as indispensable, often even formative, in the fields of prose and drama, considerably less attention has been devoted to poetry.

In an essay on the comic in the writings of Edgeworth, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin argues that the novelist's best achievements are based on the reworking of the dramatic suppression of certain (often female) voices, thus recalling Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and his theory of the carnivalesque function of the novel that lies in bringing about a comic juxtaposition of marginalized and official forms of language.<sup>21</sup> The Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque as a method of challenging official discourses has been taken up readily by feminist critics such as Nancy Glazener who sees it as compatible with the feminist concept of the feminine as an anarchic and a subversive force.<sup>22</sup> Other critics have found the Bakhtinian conception of carnival transgression (formulated in *Rabelais and His World*) attractive because it aims to challenge the official culture and discourse, i.e., above all the medieval and early Renaissance ecclesiastical culture which renounced the body and the cyclical nature of human life. In this respect, Bakhtin's theory seems relevant to the stream of thought in French feminist linguistic theory that has proposed the formulation of *écriture féminine* as a means of shunning the official masculinist (not only academic) discourse, insisting on the close affinity of such a specific female genre with the body.

<sup>21</sup> Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Voices of Maria Edgeworth's Comedy," *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers*, ed. Theresa O'Connor (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 20.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Glazener, "Dialogic Subversion: Bakhtin, the Novel and Gertrude Stein," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David G. Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 110.

Yet, such equalizing tends to be overly simplistic. Julia Kristeva, whose insistence on the fluidity and plurality of the semiotic material (capable of undermining the symbolic order) make her school of thought compatible with the idea of *écriture féminine*, has warned against the risks involved in a too eager recourse to the body at the expense of language. With reference to Bakhtin's theory, she insists that the process of dialogical "transgression" of linguistic and social conventions can only succeed if it accepts "*another law*."<sup>23</sup> If Bakhtin argues that it is only through a literary text that the festive forms of popular carnival can achieve what he calls "the self-awareness necessary for effective protest,"<sup>24</sup> then theories of feminist writing must approach their subject of study primarily as literature while at the same time being aware of its aim of undermining the official discourse. As Clair Wills points out, "The challenge of feminist poetry is precisely a *literary* challenge, and only through that a political one."<sup>25</sup>

Kristeva's refusal of the controlling, intrusive superego, which threatens to thwart the achievement of the desirable, productive state of *jouissance*, fundamental for the process of a semiotic act of writing, as well as her definition of poetry as a practice of the speaking subject (formulated as essentially multiple), recall, in turn, Bakhtin's theory of hybridization and of dialogized heteroglossia as a mixture of voices that creates a "complex unity of differences."<sup>26</sup> Thus, through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in literary language and through Kristeva's notion of *jouissance*, we are brought back to the Irish poets' polemizing with their literary tradition and to Eithne Strong's call for carnival laughter. It is in creating a living (or satirically dead) literary counterpart to the rigid cliché of the feminized land that the humour and sarcasm employed in the writings of many contemporary Irish women poets becomes a successful method of transgression. The objective of these poems is to overthrow the stereotypical representations of Ireland as

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984) 71.

<sup>24</sup> Clair Wills, "Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* 131.

<sup>25</sup> Wills 141.

<sup>26</sup> See James P. Zappen, "Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)," *Twentieth-Century Rhetoric and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources*, ed. Michael G. Moran and Michelle Ballif (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000) 7-20. Cf. also Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990) 20-21.

a female body through the distancing techniques of laughter and irony rather than through the plunge into the mythologized feminine – represented again by the body. In other words, the elements of satire are essential not only in bringing about transformation, but also in the making of good poetry. Referring to the ethics of linguistics, Kristeva notes that “language [is] defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution, and transformation. Situating our discourse near such boundaries might enable us to endow it with a current ethical impact. In short, the ethics of a linguistic discourse may be gauged in proportion to the poetry that it presupposes.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kristeva 25.

## **“ECHO-PROLONGING POET”: THE POLITICS OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE POETRY OF DEREK MAHON**

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Writing in “Aran” of the life of the poet *in extremis*, Derek Mahon admits he is a “Hand-clasping, echo-prolonging poet!”<sup>1</sup> When in exile, lost, or far from home, comfort and assurance can be found through clasping the hands of poetic forebears who have suffered for their art and triumphed. Much of Mahon’s work is driven by the desire to immerse himself into the fertile depths of tradition, becoming a member of the pantheon of artistic demi-gods. And yet the desperate irony of the frank admission of “Aran” belies the complexity of the nature of artistic influence within Mahon’s work. A highly self-conscious poetic inheritor, Mahon challenges conceptions of tradition for the contemporary Irish poet. In figuring himself as the receptor and product of canonical foreign poetic texts that lie outside of Irish literary culture, Mahon becomes a cultural and literary émigré. This essay will examine the function, form and politics of Mahon’s poetic translations as cross-cultural and cross-temporal acts of creation – or more specifically, *re-creation* – to offer a reading that harmonizes Mahon’s internationalist aesthetic with his experience as a Northern Irish contemporary poet.

From his first publication, *Twelve Poems* (1965), to his most recent collection, *Life on Earth* (2008), Mahon demonstrates his internationalist

<sup>1</sup> Derek Mahon, “Aran,” *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999) 66.

yearnings. His collections of poetry are populated with foreign voices from across centuries and continents. Voices across time and continents – from Ovid to Rilke to Auden – are all encased within the permeable walls of his collections. Through this technique, as Hugh Haughton notes in his article, “The Importance of Elsewhere: Translation and Derek Mahon,” Derek Mahon “inflect[s] his verse with a cross-cultural air.”<sup>2</sup> His *Collected Poems* (1999) abounds with works demonstrating varying levels of artistic influence from allusion to adaptation to translation. The proliferation of translated material in the Mahon canon is well represented in a recent republication of the poet’s own selection of works under the title *Adaptations* (2001). But aside from assimilating allusion, quotation and translation into his own creative collections of poetry, Mahon has also published separate editions of the poetry of Philippe Jaccottet, Gérard de Nerval and Saint-Jean Perse. His experimentation with translation and artistic media ranges from dramatic translations of *The Bacchae* (after Euripides) (1991) to *Racine’s Phaedre* (1996) to *Cyrano de Bergerac: A New Version of Rostand’s ‘Heroic Comedy’* (2002) and translations of the novel, such as Raphaële Billetdoux’s *Night Without Day* (1987). These ambitious translations of venerated – but rather unfashionable – poets, dramatists and writers work together to challenge expectations of what a contemporary poet can achieve. They do more than just flaunt Mahon’s virtuoso skills as a wordsmith: they resurrect and enliven old texts in fresh new contexts.

The remarkably sustained level of devotion throughout Mahon’s writing career to this translated material invites comment: what personal motivation lies behind his obsession with translation as an artistic medium? Central to uncovering this driving force is one of Mahon’s most characteristic qualities: it is what Terence Brown calls his notably “emigrant sensibility.”<sup>3</sup> As has already been established by Haughton in “Place and Displacement in Derek Mahon” (1992) and Richard Tillinghast in “Derek Mahon: Exile and Stranger,” leave-taking, displacement and exile are central motifs in Mahon’s poetry.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Haughton, “The Importance of Elsewhere: Mahon and Translation,” *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002) 145.

<sup>3</sup> Terence Brown, “Introduction,” Derek Mahon, *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1996) 18.

<sup>4</sup> See Haughton, “Place and Displacement in Derek Mahon,” *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992) 87-122;

Mahon voluntarily takes up the position of the exiled outsider in order to indulge his “peregrine imagination.”<sup>5</sup> This outwards movement towards exterior traditions implies his dissatisfaction with Ireland and Irish literary traditions. As a poet from the North of Ireland, as is Haughton’s observation, Mahon responds to what he “clearly perceives as the insularity of the Irish, in particular Northern Irish culture,” and consequently, “he has always been open to and energized by ideas of and from elsewhere.”<sup>6</sup> For Mahon then, it often becomes imperative to occupy the external perspective of an outsider looking in, and it is this that drives Mahon’s emigrant creative imagination to turn towards the potential of translation as a creative mode. His poetry progresses by means of interaction with poetic precursors to establish the perspective he deems necessary to explore both personal and communal concerns.

The relationship between Northern Irish domestic politics and artistic creativity is often uneasy in Mahon’s poetry. His work registers a tension between what he sees as the competing demands of society and the demands that art places upon him. And although Mahon frequently moves away from Ireland as a site for poetry, his indebtedness to Irish literary traditions should not be belittled. The strong presence of Irish and Northern Irish writers and poets throughout his collections is worthy of detailed study in itself, but it will have to suffice here to note the vacillating influence of his poetic forefather W.B. Yeats, in addition to contemporaries such as Michael Longley and John Montague. The voices of Gaelic writers Raftery and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill also emerge in Mahon’s home-based translations of their work in *Adaptations*. He is also drawn to other Irish poets who, like Mahon, have crossed cultural borders: the Anglo-Irish poet Louis MacNeice and Francophile Irishman Samuel Beckett. And although the remainder of this essay focuses on non-Irish influences, it is by following the model of these sometimes hybrid Irish poets that Mahon’s cross-cultural poetic engagements help to revitalize the field of modern Irish poetry.

and Richard Tillinghast, “Derek Mahon: Exile and Stranger,” *New Criterion*, 18 (September 1999), *AccessMyLibrary*, 15 August 2008 <<http://www.accessmylibrary.com>>.

<sup>5</sup> Brown 19.

<sup>6</sup> Haughton 146.



The jaded voice of the aging poet-author of *The Yellow Book* confesses that the verse letter is a “forest of intertextuality.”<sup>7</sup> This self-conscious reflection speaks to Mahon’s awareness that his work has become almost impregnably dense in allusion. The prevalence of literary allusion and translation in Mahon’s collections of poetry is testimony to what Haughton observes as his “need to take his bearings from elsewhere, as part of a larger cultural history,” since such “translation can be seen as one aspect of Mahon’s interest in cultural adaptation and transfer, a central preoccupation throughout his writing life.”<sup>8</sup> The desire to achieve this all-important “elsewhere” is reflected in Mahon’s obsessive search for alternative spaces to frame his personal experience. “One part of my mind must know its place,” Mahon tells himself in “Spring in Belfast,” but this is complicated, given that, as he records in “A Garage in Co. Cork,” “We might be anywhere.”<sup>9</sup> Anxiety about place and all its incumbent security and self-knowledge invades many of his poems. When Mahon loses faith in the ability to root himself into a place, at home or abroad, he takes his bearings instead from literary landmarks. In the often locationless geography of Mahon’s poetic landscapes, the signposts are his precursors’ texts. By navigating with the aid of established voices, Mahon finds he is able to progress with his own art even when doubts assail him. The interpolation of the works of these venerated poets into his own original work serves to lend the resulting highly intertextual creation all the authority and gravitas accorded to his precursors.

Bearing in mind these reflections on *why* translation appeals to Mahon, consideration will now be given to *how* translation works in Mahon’s poetry. As an established academic practice, translation has its own rules, rules that Mahon can at times disregard deliberately. Traditionally, the discipline is ruled by strict attention to semantic fidelity, but the semi-scientific approach of the pedantic linguist often fails to convey all the qualities of the original poem. That is to say, many poetic effects may be lost in translation. Mahon freely admits his attitude towards the poetic translation does not prioritize textual fidelity and technical accuracy. In the Foreword to *Adaptations*, Mahon tells how he subscribes to the “venerable tradition” of “the imaginative,

<sup>7</sup> Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997) 29.

<sup>8</sup> Haughton 145.

<sup>9</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems* 130.

recreative (and recreational) adaptation.”<sup>10</sup> His poetic “adaptations” range from near-literal translations to what are effectively new poems loosely based on the original text. The criticism Mahon must combat is that he is taking the easy route to create powerful poetry. He admits that many poets use the medium of translation or adaptation “to keep the engine ticking over.”<sup>11</sup> Translation has a history of being read in terms of “violent images of ‘appropriation,’ ‘penetration,’ or ‘possession,’” where close fidelity to the source text is everything, and any departure from the original an act of aggression.<sup>12</sup> Theorists have been concerned with the balance of power that lies with translation: where are the creative rights of the original author, is his/her authority still respected, or has this been violated? Recent developments within this field of critical enquiry, however, have redefined translation’s “terminology of faithfulness and equivalence” and ushered in an allowance for a greater degree of flexibility and artistic licence in handling the source poem.<sup>13</sup> These moments of creative liberty where the “imaginative, recreative and recreational” adaptor departs from the source poem give the greatest insight into Mahon’s creative processes.

One notable instance of Mahon working as “adaptor” rather than literal translator is his recreative translation of Arthur Rimbaud’s lyrical masterpiece, “*Le Bateau Ivre*.” Rimbaud, along with Baudelaire and Valéry, belongs to a Francophile aesthetic tradition to which Mahon repeatedly alludes in his work. Decadence seems very alien to Northern Irish literary discourse, yet despite this – or more likely because of it – Mahon weaves it into his hybrid internationalist poetry. Playing with apparently antithetical cultures allows him to discover shared values, desires and experience with other voices; it is his fighting response to his artistic solitude. A portrait of the thrills and dangers of leaving home, Rimbaud’s darkly visionary poem narrates the desire to sail away from France and indulge in a rapturous immersion with the terrifying forces encountered in open sea. His goal is to experience the exoticism of “*l’inconnu*” [the Unknown], a dark power that similarly enthralls Mahon in his adaptation of the poem.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Derek Mahon, “Foreword,” *Adaptations* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006) 11.

<sup>11</sup> Mahon, *Adaptations* 11.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London: Methuen, 1980) 5.

<sup>13</sup> Bassnett 6.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Sorrell, “Notes,” Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 319.

The voyage undertaken by the poet-speaker becomes a metaphor prophetic of the poet's own journey into "*voyance*" ["the realms of vision"]. The speaker balances euphoric vision against the dangers of the destructive powers of the sea, as is found in the following stanza from Mahon's version of the poem:

Storms smiled on my salt sea-morning sleep.  
I danced, light as a cork, nine nights or more  
Upon the intractable, skull-trundling deep,  
Contemptuous of the blinking lights ashore.<sup>15</sup>

Another Irishman indebted to French literary traditions, Samuel Beckett, also finds himself drawn to the Rimbaud visionary poem. His "Drunken Boat" offers an alternative translation of the same stanza:

I started awake to the tempestuous hallowing  
Nine nights I danced like a cork on the billows, I danced  
On the breakers, sacrificial, for ever and ever,  
And the crass eye of the lanterns was expunged.<sup>16</sup>

It is each poet's handling of Rimbaud's third line, "*les flots / Qu'on appelle rouleurs éternels de victimes*" ["the waves / Which some call victim breakers"] that is indicative of their differing approaches towards the practice of translation.<sup>17</sup> Beckett picks upon "*victimes*" [victims] and turns it into "sacrificial," thus giving "I danced / On the breakers, sacrificial, for ever and ever." Where Beckett chooses to portray the poet-speaker as relishing his death-inducing visionary dance, Mahon's translation remains more loyal to the original text, where the wilful poet-voyager convinces himself that he is safe from the dangers of the sea. The waves may be "victim breakers" but his speaker refuses to acknowledge that he will be one of these victims. It is this refusal to give in to the force of the sea that powers Mahon's adaptation. His choice of vocabulary in his adaptation – "Upon the

<sup>15</sup> Mahon, *Adaptations* 65.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Drunken Boat," *Collected Poems in English and French* (London: Calder, 1977) 93.

<sup>17</sup> All translations in English given in square brackets are those of Martin Sorrell from Rimbaud, *Collected Poems* 125.

intractable, skull-trundling deep" – is telling.<sup>18</sup> He chooses the adjective "intractable" over the more exact translation of "*eternels*" ["eternal"], an alteration that betrays the fascination that he writes of in his poem "Rage for Order" as the allure of the "unstructurable sea."<sup>19</sup> The vast spaces of the open sea pose a great challenge to a poet such as Mahon who is obsessed with artistic control, as shown by his habitual revising and re-editing of his own poems. The whole stanza is spun around a fundamental but creative tension: the "intractable" nature of the sea versus the controlling nature of the poet who seeks to contain its force within a few mere stanzas. Mahon's awareness of this difficulty translates into the tone of his vocabulary. The cruel relentlessness of Mahon's language differs greatly from Rimbaud's more Romantic vocabulary. This is a sea that is not only "intractable," indifferent to human attempts to shape, order or control it, but is also "skull-trundling," rolling the bones of its victims mercilessly around its deeps. Mahon over-dramatizes the danger posed to the foolhardy poet so that the tension between artistic control and artistic release is heightened.

Mahon's dexterous manipulations demonstrate his ability to balance creative yearnings against respect for the source text. Despite the subtle effects carried through by his semantic alterations, Mahon retains the formal shape of the Rimbaud original. Where Mahon maintains Rimbaud's strong alternating *abab* rhyming pattern throughout his translation, Beckett lets the formal structure of the poem slide. Mahon criticizes Beckett for making "no attempt ... to reproduce the simple rhyme scheme of the original" in his 1977 *New Statesman* review of Beckett's *Collected Poems in English and French*.<sup>20</sup> Beckett's move away from Rimbaud's poem is in keeping with the sacrificial surrender that he describes in the previously quoted stanza. For whatever reason, Beckett chose to take a more relaxed approach to his translation, and he must accept the consequential loosening of creative control that this effects. In contrast, but firmly in character, Mahon clings on to his artistic control, sourcing his technique from

<sup>18</sup> Since Mahon has been an obsessive reviser of his own work, the Rimbaud translation appears with subtle differences in each republication: from the original in *The Hunt by Night* (1982), to the revised version in *Collected Poems*, and the second revised version in *Adaptations*.

<sup>19</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems* 47.

<sup>20</sup> Mahon, "The Existential Lyric," *Journalism* 55.

Rimbaud's alexandrine quatrains, where strict formal control binds the force of the sea within a pattern of alternating masculine and feminine rhymes. Mahon mirrors this rhyming structure, but carries it one step further than Rimbaud to force "skull-trundling deep" into a rhyme with "sleep." And, through this simple device, he forces the "intractable" sea into a quiet slumber.

Mahon's deft treatment of just this stanza alone indicates his ability to balance the roles of both translator and creative poet. It demonstrates the precision of judgement and a subtlety of touch required to be able to work personal creativity into the new poem while still doing homage to the original text. It can be seen how these impulses are balanced against each other in another section of Mahon's "*from The Drunken Boat*." The second stanza of his poem reads:

Not that I cared: relieved of the dull weight  
of cautious crew and inventoried cargo –  
– phlegmatic flax, quotidian grain – I let  
the current carry me where I chose to go.<sup>21</sup>

Here the poet-speaker abandons "the dull weight" of his cargo and his crew in a symbolic gesture that reveals the necessity to be able to embark on his visionary journey unencumbered by restrictions. In the Rimbaud poem, the flax and grain are deliberately labelled as "*blés flamands ou de cotton anglais*" ["Flemish wheat and English cotton"]. Northern Europe and the trading routes of the French cargo ships are his explicit geographical frame of reference. Yet Mahon chooses to replace the "Flemish" and "English" signposts in favour of "phlegmatic flax; quotidian grain." Abandoning Rimbaud's specific European context allows Mahon to universalize the visionary experience enacted within the poem. Without these geographical pinpoints, his "*from The Drunken Boat*" is both geographically and temporally locationless. It allows Mahon to narrate the cross-cultural condition of discontent with one's homeland waters and the desire for the exotic that drives one into dangerous new terrain. It enables him to offer us a universal tale of the desire for vision, of its temporary fulfilment out at sea, and of its

<sup>21</sup> Mahon, "*from The Drunken Boat*," 58.

inevitable failure when the vision, and the poem, must inevitably come to an end.

And yet, despite the removal of Rimbaud's cultural frames of reference, Mahon's substitution carries its own cultural connotations. The shadow of Ireland is imprinted subtly onto the text in the alteration of the ship's cargo of "wheat" and "cotton" to the Irish exports of "flax" and "grain." So Mahon's poem has both multiple locations and no location; it is everywhere yet it is nowhere. It moves from Rimbaud's French homeland to the "nowhere/everywhere" sphere of existence that cultural emigrant Mahon often seems to yearn for. A place liberated from the restrictions of temporality and nationality, recreating the voyage of Rimbaud's *"bateau ivre"* allows Mahon to indulge his "emigrant sensibility."<sup>22</sup> But he cannot erase his own identity completely, and Ireland soon seeps back into his "universal" poem through the fleeting reference to "grain" and "flax." It is the lightest of touches in just a passing remark, but it speaks to the bi-cultural air of Mahon's translations. For even when Mahon is submerged in another language and another culture, his feet remain in Ireland. His bi-locality works like a pair of bi-focal glasses: even while exploring foreign landscapes and alternative literary traditions, he keeps one eye firmly on home.

In the politics of writing in contemporary Northern Ireland, Derek Mahon's decision to work with the literature that lies outside of Irish tradition might be interpreted by some readers as a political gesture. Such a reading cannot be supported by any close analysis of the function that translation performs in Mahon's work. His artistic choices do not form any renunciation of Irish identity but, as has been shown, demonstrate his ability to balance both Irish and non-Irish worlds. He assimilates refreshing new discourses into a trans-cultural body of work as can be seen in Mahon's *"from The Drunken Boat."* A culturally multi-centred artwork – written in Ireland, in English, deriving from the French language and French culture – Mahon's adaptation straddles the Irish Sea and the Channel. It is a text entangled in both domestic and exterior cultures that brings Ireland into Rimbaud's France, and France into Mahon's Ireland. The bi-focal, bi-cultural vision of this "echo-prolonging poet" allows him to indulge the temporal and cultural artistic freedom that he craves. In exploring different forms of

<sup>22</sup> Brown 18.

intertextual engagement with his poetic precursors, Mahon builds an exciting nexus of fresh literary relationships. Overseeing this task with a Janus-like gaze, Mahon's connections echo back into the past yet also help him to look forward to progress into the realm of the new and undiscovered. This intertextual quest establishes new links and combines literary presences to offer fresh poetic perspectives and enlarge cultural horizons for the benefit not only of Irish literary discourse, but for all forms of contemporary poetic discourse that seek to engage with external and alternate modes of being.

## “THE CANTO OF ULYSSES”: DANTE AND CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY

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When asked recently about Irish writers' fascination with Dante, Dublin poet Harry Clifton replied that for that small country on the edge of Europe, Dante is *the* great European, and more importantly, *the* great Catholic poet. Clifton has a Catholic background, like Thomas Kinsella and Seamus Heaney, and he has a history of self-imposed exile from his home country, which might go some way towards explaining an interest in Dante. Clifton confirmed there is a basis for identification with the medieval Italian poet, despite a vast temporal and cultural distance. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* in exile, and ever since James Joyce it has been established that the idea of exile is close to the Irish psyche. On a political level, there is a deliberate distancing from England and her literary culture and role models, a rebellious stance against British influence and oppression, as Gerald Dawe suggests.<sup>1</sup>

After Joyce, Beckett, MacNeice and Kinsella, Seamus Heaney revitalized the Irish Dante from his 1979 collection *Field Work* onwards. *Station Island* (1985) is probably the most prominent case of Heaney's use of Dante. In the collection's eponymous sequence, the poet-speaker, a pilgrim at Lough Derg, encounters various ghosts from his past, among them Irish poets Carleton and Kavanagh, with Joyce as a kind of Virgilian

<sup>1</sup> Clifton and Dawe in separate conversations with the author in 2008.



father figure offering poetic advice. By having Kavanagh's ghost say "Forty-two years on and you've got no farther!"<sup>2</sup> Heaney deals with an anxiety of influence inevitable when choosing Lough Derg as a literary setting, as Carleton, Kavanagh, and others had done before him. Heaney's admiration for and identification with Dante lies in the latter's achievement of combining personal and collective history, taking into account political as well as metaphysical aspects of life and thus creating a universally valid allegory of human existence. He writes that by taking the *Commedia* as an example, he was able to "stir the old pool of Irish Catholic sub-culture in the light of Dante's great vision, and [find] ways of dramatizing inner conflicts about politics and commitment by summoning other voices whose function it is to rebuke or instruct."<sup>3</sup>

"An Afterwards," from *Field Work*, is a personal, domestic adaptation of Dante's verses on Count Ugolino in Canto XXXII and XXXIII of the *Inferno*, complementing Heaney's translation of that canto at the end of the collection. In Heaney's poem, the poet's wife condemns him to dwell in the ninth circle of hell, where, according to Dante, betrayers of their own kindred are plunged in ice. The wife accuses the poet of having committed the sin of neglecting his duties as a husband and father in favour of a proud dedication to his art. The poem is also about the sin of literary jealousy:<sup>4</sup>

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle  
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain;  
For backbiting in life she'd make their hell  
A rabid egotistical daisy-chain.

Unyielding, spurred, ambitious, unblunted,  
Lockjawed, mantrapped, each a fastened badger  
Jockeying for position, hasped and mounted  
Like Ugolino on Archbishop Roger.

And when she'd make her circuit of the ice,  
Aided and abetted by Virgil's wife,

<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 73.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, "From Station Island," *Studies in Medievalism*, 2.3 (Summer 1983): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, "A Poetry Reading," *Le culture di Dante* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2003) 359.

I would cry out, 'My sweet, who wears the bays  
In our green land above, whose is the life

Most dedicated and exemplary?'<sup>5</sup>

The poet is under pressure from both his neglected family and the competitive literary environment. This results in a longing for escape. But by assuming the wife's point of view, the poem also has an ironical, indeed comical tone, questioning the seriousness of the pressure. Heaney remembers translating Dante's Ugolino episode in the late '70s in Belfast, when the "dirty protest" took place in the Maze prison: "Republican prisoners were holding out for 'political status' and there was a sense of violence, intimacy, almost erotic danger in the air. The thick murky atmosphere of the *Inferno* was right for that time."<sup>6</sup>

"The Biretta," from the 1991 collection *Seeing Things*, is a reflection upon a clerical cap, divided into three parts, "like Gaul."<sup>7</sup> The speaker remembers the first time he saw a biretta, comparing the priest who wore it to a figure in an El Greco painting. These memories of Catholic rituals, at once eerie and mocking, recall Joyce's approach to such topics. "Saurian and stormy" may refer to "hellfire" as well as to the priest:

The first time I saw one, I heard a shout  
As an El Greco ascetic rose before me  
Preaching hellfire, saurian and stormy,  
Adze-head on the rampage in the pulpit.<sup>8</sup>

In the seventh stanza, there is an explicit allusion to Dante:

Now I turn it upside down and it is a boat –  
A paper boat, or the one that wafts into  
The first lines of the *Purgatorio*  
As poetry lifts its eyes and clears its throat.<sup>9</sup>

The first canto of the *Purgatorio*, used before in "The Strand at Lough Beg," opens with Dante's metaphor of the ship of poetry, in

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1979) 44.

<sup>6</sup> Heaney, "A Poetry Reading" 346.

<sup>7</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991) 28.

<sup>8</sup> Heaney, *Seeing Things* 28.

<sup>9</sup> Heaney, *Seeing Things* 29.

which Dante and Virgil leave the infernal ocean and approach Mount Purgatory. This ship of poetry is the boat "that wafts into the first lines of the *Purgatorio*" in Heaney's poem. The personification of poetry "lifts its eyes," like Dante, up to the mountain, where the sinners are purged of their sins as the throat is cleared of infernal ashes, recalling the "dry urn of the larynx" from section V of "Station Island."<sup>10</sup>

"The Flight Path," from the 1996 collection *The Spirit Level*, is divided into six parts of different lengths. The first section is a memory about Heaney's father folding a paper boat. With the completion of the boat, "a dove rose" in the child's breast, only to sink again because he "knew the whole thing would go soggy once you launched it."<sup>11</sup> The recurring image of the paper boat, as used in "The Biretta," again takes up the sea voyage as a metaphor for poetry, also employed by Dante at the beginning of the *Purgatorio*. A poet undertakes his (imaginary) voyage on paper; hence, a paper boat. In the fourth section, longer than the other sections, Heaney quotes three lines from his own translation of the Ugolino episode in *Field Work*. In the new context, Bernard O'Donoghue finds confirmed the "metonymic connexion" of Ugolino gnawing Roger's skull as an "obsessive chewing over of political obsession."<sup>12</sup> Dealing with death by hunger, "Ugolino" in *Field Work* had been "horribly prophetic" of the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981, which were set in motion by Ciaran Nugent's "dirty protest."<sup>13</sup>

Out of Long Kesh after his dirty protest  
 The red eyes were the eyes of Ciaran Nugent  
 Like something out of Dante's scurfy hell,  
 Drilling their way through the rhymes and images  
 Where I too walked behind the righteous Virgil,  
 As safe as houses and translating freely:  
*When he had said all this, his eyes rolled*  
*And his teeth, like a dog's teeth clamping round a bone,*  
*Bit into the skull and again took hold.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Heaney, *Station Island* 72.

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996) 26.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue, "Dante's Versatility and Seamus Heaney's Modernism," *Dante's Modern Afterlife. Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. Nick Havelly (London: Macmillan, 1998) 242-57.

<sup>13</sup> Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney. A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 190.

<sup>14</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 30. Italics in the original.

Neil Corcoran suggests that “translating freely” is a pun describing a translation “unconfined by literal rendering” as well as a translation undertaken from a safe distance “by an unconfined poet aware to the point of moral exacerbation and self-recrimination of those who are incarcerated.”<sup>15</sup> Section 6 concludes the poem with a sense of hope, in the natural and peaceful surroundings of a place of pilgrimage, Rocamadour. The image of the rising dove, the symbol of peace, is taken up again in the final line: “And somewhere the dove rose. And kept on rising.” There is “a distance still to go”<sup>16</sup> in the life of the poet, the pilgrimage has not yet come to an end. On the way, Dante’s example has enabled Heaney to express personal as well as political matters through translation, adaptation, and allusion.

In Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, pilgrim poet Dante encounters Ulysses, a mythological figure created by his own predecessor, Homer. Dante pauses and listens to Ulysses’ story. The following lines are from Ciaran Carson’s 2002 translation,<sup>17</sup> or rather version:<sup>18</sup>

Remember who you are, what you were made for:  
not to live like brutes, but for the quest  
of knowledge and the good.” I said no more;

for, encouraged by this brief address,  
my comrades were so keen to journey on  
I scarce could hold them from the final test;

and with our stern set firmly towards the dawn,  
we made wings of our oars for that mad flight,  
forever gaining on the port horizon.<sup>19</sup>

This is the effect of the power of rhetoric used, or misused, towards the goal of the quest, the human urge to explore, discover, conquer, exemplified in the figure of Ulysses guiding his companions towards death. In Dante’s retelling of Homer’s story, through what Robert Hollander calls a “careful yet free-wheeling revision of classical

<sup>15</sup> Corcoran 190-91.

<sup>16</sup> Heaney, *The Spirit Level* 30-31.

<sup>17</sup> Ciaran Carson, *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (London: Granta, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Don Paterson, “Fourteen Notes on the Version,” *Orpheus. A Version of Rilke* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) 73-84.

<sup>19</sup> Carson 184-85.

text,"<sup>20</sup> Ulysses himself meets his fate in drowning with his men and ship, with the Earthly Paradise in sight, yet unattained. The popularity and literary importance of Canto XXVI in the *Inferno*, and of the Ulysses myth in general, is rooted in the quest theme, people's manipulation through clever use of language, and the recurring myths about the consequences of pride.

Seventy-two years after the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*, another Dubliner comes across Dante and the universal theme of the quest for knowledge, reflecting the urge to escape and explore foreign countries and therefore himself in self-imposed exile. The Irish poet Harry Clifton, who has, among other places, lived in Africa, France, and Italy and only in 2004 returned to Dublin, published a poem called "The Canto of Ulysses" in his collection *Night Train Through the Brenner* (1994).<sup>21</sup> The title of the poem "The Canto of Ulysses" not only alludes to the reading of Dante's canto happening in the poem and to the canto as such, but also implies that the poem might be *about* Ulysses, or from Ulysses' point of view. Consequently, the poem's speaker can be said to identify with the Greek hero, and the two men merge into one. "The Canto of Ulysses" consists of seven stanzas with eight lines each, following a rhyme scheme that slightly changes from stanza to stanza. It is set in the poet's and his wife's home in Italy, where the speaker reflects upon the approaching departure from that temporary home. There is a palpable tension between the impossibility of settling and an anxiety about what is to come:

As the eye reads, from left to right,  
 Ulysses' canto, what comes next,  
 The day, already spread like a text  
 On the ceiling above me, asks to be read.  
 Anxiety, or increasing light,  
 Whatever wakes me, fills my head  
 With the oceanic billows  
 Of a slept-in marriage bed.

The shutters go up, like thunder,  
 On the street below. If the soul fed  
 On coffee, aromatic bread,

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hollander, "Dante's Antaeus (*Inferno* XXXI.97-132)," *Electronic Bulletin of the Dante Society of America* (2000), 1 October 2009 <<http://www.princeton.edu/~dante/ebdsa/rh062000.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Clifton, *Night Train Through the Brenner* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994).

Niceties raised to the power of art,  
 We would long ago have knuckled under  
 To perfection, in the green heart  
 Of Italy, settled here,  
 And gone to sleep in the years.

But what was it Dante said  
 About ordinary life? My mind wanders  
 Like Ulysses, through the early sounds,  
 A motor starting, taps turned on,  
 Unravelling Penelope's skein,  
 Unsatisfied, for the millionth time,  
 With merely keeping my feet on the ground –  
 As if I could ever go home!<sup>22</sup>

The text in front of the poet seeps into his contemporary surroundings: forces of nature are evoked by the sound of the shutters and the sheets rumbled by a storm of passion, or marital fight – we can only guess. Something in the speaker's soul is stirring, preventing the return home. His wife becomes Penelope, home and hearth, ordinary life. This conflation of text and life recalls Eavan Boland's "The Journey,"<sup>23</sup> a female version of the poet guide motif. Boland's speaker is led into an underworld by Sappho after reading about her; this might be in Clifton's speaker's mind as he remembers Dante's "women will all be widows to the quest" in stanza four. He cannot see the passage clearly; the text in front of him is blocked by a hampering feeling of impotence, of aging. This is where his reality diverges from the original text: he takes his wife, his "one satisfaction / At the heart of the known world" with him, wherever the journey takes him, and he admits to certain "cowardice" in his "need to be gone."<sup>24</sup> As the similarity to the Greek hero becomes blurry, the "sail of Ulysses, west of the Sun" is "dwindling in ptolemaic skies."<sup>25</sup> Obviously, the role of women has undergone some changes, as has the notion of virility. The last stanza, the ultimate recognition of departure looming, reeks of regret. Ordinary life is associated with peace and enjoyment, parting

<sup>22</sup> Clifton 69.

<sup>23</sup> Eavan Boland, "The Journey," *Chicago Review*, 35.3 (Spring 1986), 10 Dec. 2009 <<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/orgs/review/60th/pdfs/59boland.pdf>>.

<sup>24</sup> Clifton 70.

<sup>25</sup> Clifton 70.

becomes an exhausting undertaking. The price of adventure, of constant dissatisfaction, has not changed over the centuries, apparently. The flood (perhaps in the form of a nervous breakdown) punishes the lack of humility, and so “The Canto of Ulysses” ends with the words of the canto of Ulysses, Canto XXVI of Dante’s *Inferno*, “infin che ‘l mar fu sovra noi richiuso,”<sup>26</sup> transformed into the present tense and substituting “until” with “before,” effecting premonitions:

Any day now, we hand back the key  
 To habit, peace, stability,  
 The seasonal round, festivities  
 Of wine and cherry. Think of the fuss  
 Of what to take, and leave behind –  
 Shade for the soul, our miniature trees  
 Of olive, oak, and southern pine –  
 Before the seas close over us.<sup>27</sup>

The “green heart of Italy” might live on in the form of miniature trees, as a keepsake, for memory’s sake, but any “mad flight” has its consequences.

Interestingly, in Carson’s translation of the last lines of Canto XXVI, the stern and prow of Ulysses’ ship have female possessive pronouns (not so in Dante’s original, but also used in other translations such as Hollander’s), and he closes with a markedly female pun:

Three times it whirled her with tempestuous force;  
 and at the fourth time round, her stern rose,  
 her prow went down, as pleased Another. Thus

the waters broke above our heads, and closed.<sup>28</sup>

Once again, a shift in male perception, or absorption, of female influence and presence might be in evidence here.

John A. Scott writes that for Dante, “only a figure from the remote past of classical antiquity could provide such a complex web of

<sup>26</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia. Inferno*, commentary by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi (Milan: Oscar classici, Mondadori, 2005) 792.

<sup>27</sup> Clifton 70.

<sup>28</sup> Carson 185.

allusions and parallels.”<sup>29</sup> How much more complex, and confused, is the web we can spin now: classical antiquity, Dante, and an abundance of subsequent works constitute a treasure trove of hypotexts, as Gerard Genette calls the works influencing a new text. Irish poets use Dante to convey their own individual and quotidian subject matter. His work serves as a catalyst for their own issues to be turned into poetry, for their own art to be created, all the while acknowledging the presence of the looming predecessor. It takes immense courage to approach his work and integrate it, but grappling with the great might end up rubbing off on those who do so. There is a thin line between arrogance and superiority, between naivety and genius. In art, the current revitalization, or revival, of traditional forms and classical models rejects Pound’s modernist view that the only surviving system is the alphabet. The *terza rima*, or, in painting and theatre, the triptych, for example, serve contemporary artists as inspiration and guidelines. Dante proves a challenging basis for new texts to be built upon, forever reinterpreted and renewed.

Since *Field Work*, Seamus Heaney has proven the vitality of Dante with regard to various subjects. For him, as for Ciaran Carson, Dante has served as a means of dealing poetically with the Troubles. From Thomas Kinsella to Harry Clifton, Dante has inspired reflections on actual and metaphorical life journeys. His appeal to Irish writers has not diminished in an age of secularization and migration. On the contrary, as an exile, political role model, linguistic revolutionary and visionary, he speaks to the independent Irish mind in a unique way.

<sup>29</sup> John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) 259.



# THE SEARCH FOR NEW SPACES: CONTEMPORARY IRISH FICTION

## **C/KYNICISM AS A WAY OF EXPLORING THIRD SPACE IN PHILIP Ó CEALLAIGH'S *NOTES FROM A TURKISH WHOREHOUSE***

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Drawing from what many scholars have called the topological turn within cultural theory, this article investigates critical spatiality as a possible means of expressing social articulation of difference in Philip Ó Ceallaigh's collection of short stories *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse*. Regardless of the fact that the author employs a variety of narrative voices, his strategic location, or his position in a text with regard to the material he writes about, is a consistent one. Hence, I argue that what may at first seem to be Ó Ceallaigh's cynicism is in fact what the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls Kynicism, the latter being an adopted disposition towards life rather than a theoretical position. Setting most of the stories in Romania is therefore by no means coincidental. By choosing marginalized locations, the author not only creates a whole new literary space that lies somewhere between his imagination and his characters' enactment of lived alternatives to dominant spaces, but he also asserts what Edward Soja calls Thirdspace, a notion which resists, challenges and subverts the traditional binary in human geography.<sup>1</sup> In as much as there is a collage of coexisting material spaces and mental or imagined places, the discourse

<sup>1</sup> Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* (Malden: Blackwell, 1996) 4. Further references are given in parentheses in the text.

of othering may emerge and a rhetoric that empowers the concept of plural geographies can be engaged, potentially linking geographic thought and social action.

Soja claims that mainstream spatial or geographical imagination has, for at least the past century, revolved primarily around a dual mode of thinking about space:

One... Firstspace perspective and epistemology, fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped; and the second, as Secondspace, conceived on ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms. In the late 1960s... an-Other form of spatial awareness began to emerge... 'thirling' of the spatial imagination... Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to 'real-and-imagined' places. (11)

Soja calls this critical thirling-as-Othering or trialectics "to describe not just a triple dialectic but also a mode of dialectical reasoning that is more inherently spatial than the conventional temporally-defined dialectics of Hegel or Marx." (10) He claims it is "a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions and events and political choices," meaning that it is shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centres and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived and that it is "marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into spatial (action) in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power." (31)

Soja also sees the provenance of Thirdspace in postcolonial theory. He claims that Homi Bhabha was the first to use the term "Third Space" as an intervention, as an alternative space of enunciation, (141) but also connects it with the "reworldings" of Gayatri Spivak (134) or Edward Said's concept of hybridity. (136) It is important to note, however, that the three above-mentioned postcolonial critics have often been criticized for saying very little about specific lived spaces. John MacKenzie, for instance, states that:

Said himself says very little about specific colonial moments and touches on particular territories only in passing. Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak make even fewer, if any, attempts to anchor their work in the empirical depths of the imperial experience, tending to generalize in strikingly airy ways.<sup>2</sup>

Said's term "hybridity" is particularly problematic because not only is it not possible to separate a theory full of tropes such as traversing, being in-between or migrating from the globalized climate of the capitalist monoculture, but, also if it is removed from specific locations, "... postcoloniality cannot be meaningfully investigated and the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover."<sup>3</sup>

Soja's concept of Thirdspace is at the same time similar to and different from Bhabha's Third Space in that it inevitably emphasizes location<sup>4</sup> by implying that in his,<sup>5</sup> as in Lefebvre's, spatial trialectics and thirdings, there is a preference for *lived spaces of representation* as the terrain for the production of "counterspaces," "spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning..., as a strategic location from which to encompass, understand and politically transform all spaces simultaneously." (168) It is precisely due to this that the notion of Thirdspace "in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also," with its "practical continuity of knowledge production," (61) never becomes hyper-relativistic in its radical epistemological openness. With regard to this, Soja asserts:

If Firstspace is explored primarily through its readable texts and contexts, and Secondspace through its prevailing representational

<sup>2</sup> John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995) 42.

<sup>3</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 19.

<sup>4</sup> It is also noteworthy that Lefebvre's rare use of the concept of "place" does not go unnoticed for Soja. He claims that this is so "largely because its richest meaning is effectively captured in his combined use of 'everyday life' and 'lived space', meaning that the separation/distinction of the two is unnecessary, misleading and reductive to the meaningfulness of both space and place." Soja 40.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Soja's *Thirdspace* carries the subtitle *Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*.

discourses, then the exploration of Thirdspace must be additionally guided by some form of potentially emancipatory praxis, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious – and consciously spatial – effort to improve the world in some significant way. (22)

In this respect, it is noteworthy that Ó Ceallaigh takes the Irish short story to places it has never been before. Not one of the nineteen stories in the collection is set in Ireland. Apart from a few interludes in the United States, the reader is plunged into a highly feral atmosphere of everyday life in Eastern Europe, mostly Romania, amid the disillusioned and forgotten, living in moist, squalid flats in crumbling apartment blocks, walking polluted and clogged city roads or taking a break in the underdeveloped countryside. It is an extremely disenfranchised, grim world without any fixed landmarks, inhabited by people who are trapped in moments of complete disorientation that mark the corrupt social frameworks of the post-communist era. As many stories are written in the first person, the reader is under the impression that the narrator is most often the same character in different circumstances. We are presented with the voice of a very detached, selfish male protagonist without any power or money. He is a wanderer, living somewhere at the bottom of society, often very archaic in his macho masculinity and the way he seeks sexual gratification, as well as solipsistic in his world views, yet the very structure of Ó Ceallaigh's collection immediately points to the fact that there is more to it than at first sight.

The collection significantly opens with the short story "Taxi," a haunting depiction of a break-up, in which the driver and the passenger represent two opposing sides to the male character. The driver is loud, crude and full of macho bravado regarding his sexual conquests, whereas the passenger is quiet, submissive, nervous, sensitive and unsure of whether he will be able to recapture the love of the partner that he is about to pick up from the train station. After the woman fails to show up, the sense of disappointment is made enduringly bitter through a device by which the passenger becomes a boy as well as through the driver's deliberation about whether to take the passenger back for free. And although the passenger remains silent for most of the story and is not in the spotlight until the very end, the emphasis is on *his* experience and the reader can't help but wonder whether this is the moment the boy in fact becomes the wandering

recluse we encounter in most of the stories that follow; with all the symbolic implications of a taxi, a vehicle that the anything but complacent passenger very significantly does not drive himself, which would mean bearing the onus, too.

What follows soon afterwards is perhaps one of the weaker stories in the collection, but one that is important for understanding this collection as a whole. "Who Let the Dogs Out?" is a kind of a farce about male prostitution, in which the protagonist, apparently quite regularly, offers his services to a classics professor. It is a story in which the narrator proclaims himself a Cynic, accentuating the fact that "...the word Cynic meant canine, because the Cynics lived like dogs. Stray ones... The vagabond mongrels of the ancient world."<sup>6</sup>

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk draws a distinction in his study *Critique of Cynical Reason* between Cynicism and Kynicism by calling the former "cynical reason" and the latter "kynical irony."<sup>7</sup> Cynicism is reserved and theoretical, implying a position of authority, whereas Kynicism is cheeky<sup>8</sup> and gestural, carried out from below. According to Sloterdijk, Diogenes literally embodied philosophy through a method and a manner of argumentation called *kynismos* – making himself the medium of his message. Diogenes urinates, farts, picks his nose and masturbates in public. He shows no respect for virtually anything, parodies Gods and heroes, jokes with prostitutes, and tells Alexander the Great to move out of his sunlight. For Sloterdijk, Kynicism is therefore:

... a first reply to Athenian hegemonic idealism that goes beyond theoretical repudiation. It does not speak against idealism, it lives

<sup>6</sup> Philip Ó Ceallaigh, *Notes from a Turkish Whorehouse* (London: Penguin, 2006) 78.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 37.

<sup>8</sup> Sloterdijk emphasizes that "only in the last few centuries has the word 'cheeky' (frech) gained a negative connotation. Initially, as for example in Old High German, it meant a productive aggressivity, letting fly at the enemy: 'brave, bold, lively, plucky, untamed, ardent.' The devitalization of a culture is mirrored in the history of this word." Sloterdijk 102-103. It is interesting to note that Sloterdijk describes Bohemia as space in which cheekiness has been or was tolerated throughout history and which has allowed one to be a true Kynic. The Bohemians, wanderers, vagabonds, the marginalized and impoverished artists, journalists, he claims, "played a prominent role in the regulation of the tensions between art and bourgeois society. Bohemianism was the space in which the transition from art into the art of living was tried out..." Sloterdijk 117-18.

against it ... When Diogenes urinates and masturbates in the marketplace, he does both because he does them publicly – in a model situation ... The philosopher thus gives the small man in the market the same rights to an unashamed experience of the corporeal that does well to defy all discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

The position of a Kynic is precisely the position Ó Ceallaigh takes. The male narrator(s) of his stories use or even offer sex in exchange for money, copulate mercilessly with their girlfriends' friends in blind allies, use women for food, shelter or banknotes, but at the same time reflect introspective yearning and tender compassion for the weakest and the marginalized, all those who are both literally and metaphorically living on the edge of society because they have "had their pensions and were sleepy in the afternoons."<sup>10</sup> This is most apparent in the second story of the collection, which is at the same time its centrepiece as it is sixty-four pages long. "In the Neighbourhood" is a story about the lives of a very diverse group of tenants of a Bucharest tower block during a single day. The day is marked by plumbing problems, affecting most of the building, and if an efficient plumbing system is a basis of every developed country due to the need for clean water, and proper collection and transport of wastes, then it seems only logical to depict this shabby apartment block in terms of what Michel Foucault called a heterotopia.

With the concept of *espace vécu* Lefebvre was, according to Soja, probably the first to explore Thirdspace as a radically different way of looking at and exploring space, (76) but Foucault's notion of heterotopology is also very close to this. Foucault's heterotopias are places of crises or of deviation, as depicted in this particular story with a broken pipe or a leaking roof in need of urgent repair. In Soja's words, they are:

... sites that have been persistently disappearing in our society, although a few remnants can still be found, usually in association with a preferred location, sites that can change in function and meaning over time, according to the particular "synchrony" of the culture in which they are found and are typically linked to slices of time. (159-60)

<sup>9</sup> Sloterdijk 103-106.

<sup>10</sup> Ó Ceallaigh 33.

Very impersonal high-density apartment blocks, linked to the communist-era architecture, that were once considered a supreme symbol of homogenous unity now represent nothing more than a poor attempt at squashing the last vestiges of the soul. Because of their huge size, they tend to be locations where public and private spaces strangely overlap and are thus “capable of juxtaposing in one real place several different spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible or foreign to one another.” (160) Heterotopias also “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that simultaneously makes them both isolated and penetrable,” (160) as depicted in this case by thin walls through which every tenant is virtually placed in his neighbour’s home, or by moments when elevators reach the floor of their destination and everyone rushes to the door to see who it is. And finally, heterotopias are also described as “unfolding between two extreme poles.” Their role is either to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space as even more illusory or “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled,” (161) that again perfectly captures what these buildings were originally meant to be and what they in fact are.

“In the Neighbourhood” reflects a microcosm populated by those living on the margins and significantly, the narrator reveals himself to be one of them. Despite the skyscraper-like height of any of these apartment blocks, the narrator’s perspective is never one from above, so Dorin, the artist in “In the Neighbourhood,” does not paint the city below him, but the apartment blocks opposite his own. In the same manner, when the narrator of “Walking to the Danube” returns from a field trip to the hills of Romania, he does not look down on the city, but glances at his room. What we have is what Soja calls an intimate geography of everyday life exemplified in the individual voice of the intensely localized *flâneur* (313), something that stands in stark contrast with the “view from above” that de Certeau described as “an arrogant voyeurism that homogenizes urban life under the desire for legibility, the quest for an all-comprehending signifying vision.” (311)

As dreary and as desolate life on the margins of an Eastern European city may be, and as deprived and derelict existence in its rural areas is, beneath the surface there is a world much more alive than in the affluent West. The characters the narrator allies himself

with are too engaged with the exhausting, but genuine activity of living their lives, and we as the readers cheer them on, feeling that in their wretched everyday world, there is a possibility for shared sensibilities and empathy, coalition and common commitments. With "Honey," on the other hand, the story about a retired American couple so trapped in the routine of marriage that they can no longer communicate in any other way but by beginning with a banal platitude of endearment, we cannot help but laugh out loud when the husband eventually, indicatively,<sup>11</sup> falls off of a ladder.

To conclude, a comment about the extent to which this is an Irish collection of short stories is perhaps in line. It is more than obvious that, for instance, the story entitled "Broken Teeth" about a character's fantasy of leaving his Bucharest flat, in which "there was no toilet seat and the bowl was caked with history,"<sup>12</sup> does not tell us much about Ireland. It is not how people in Ireland live, at least not any more, but the act of choosing and full heartedly living in the space of the marginalized does tell us something about the politics of Ó Ceallaigh's writing. It tells us something that points to the Irish *post*-postcolonial position, one that emerges from the author's Kynical strategy of displacement and raises the question of who we can be and still be Irish rather than what it means to be Irish.

By writing about the work of the African-American cultural critic Bell Hooks, Soja claims that choosing marginality is a simultaneously political and geographical act which "becomes a critical turning-point in the construction of other forms of counter-hegemonic or subaltern identity" which "reconceptualizes the problematic of subjection by deconstructing and disordering both margin and centre" as there is a "definite distinction between the marginality which is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility." (97)

Bearing all this in mind, it is no surprise that the whorehouse from the title of the collection, as depicted in the eponymous story, is indeed a heterotopia *par excellence*: one that truly embodies Foucault's concept of it, but at the same time goes beyond the limitations that emerge from Foucault's view of brothels primarily as "cathedrals of

<sup>11</sup> The first association that comes to mind is that of the link between a ladder and the property ladder.

<sup>12</sup> Ó Ceallaigh 122.



pleasure”<sup>13</sup> and one that is therefore perfectly in line with Edward Soja’s idea of Thirdspace. For Foucault, a brothel is a perfect example of a heterotopia in that it is an external site of transgression that challenges the values of a dominant culture, but one cannot help but wonder: Is the brothel for women, first and foremost, not a place of work, an establishment to which they come for business, not pleasure, and in which they are expected to meet and satisfy their clients’ needs?

Ó Ceallaigh’s whorehouse, however, is a place where women lead the game, negotiating time, money and foreplay. The prostitute in the story eventually even blackmails the narrator, an unpublished author, by forcefully taking his notes as a “security deposit” after all his attempts to retrieve his money from an ATM machine fail. The whorehouse thus becomes a very nasty metaphor for life or a particular side of life for which there are no fixed rules and from which a Thirdspace inevitably emerges. Ó Ceallaigh’s consciously spatial reality is one that is in constant making and is, once you get past their Kynicism, their brusqueness and their apparent virulence, peopled by characters driven by an essential humanity, necessary for inverting, transforming, and making changes that truly produce new meanings.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret E. Farrar, *Building the Body Politic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 32.

## ***A PILGRIM IN IRELAND: A QUEST FOR HOME:* AN ADUMBRATION OF THE IRISH-CANADIAN IDENTITY NARRATIVE**

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This micro-study sets out to adumbrate the Irish-Canadian postcolonial narrative of the quest for one's origins. The "search and found" narrative of one's cultural and ethnical history which, during the past three decades, since multiculturalism has been the official policy of the Canadian government, has in various versions and modifications become the predominating theme in all of fine art.

As demonstrated below using the example of Frances Greenslade's non-fictional novel, *A Pilgrim in Ireland: A Quest for Home* (2002), when we look at the Canadian population today, the majority of its members are normally excluded from contemporary "migrancy and multiculturalism" discourses. Exploring the origins of the descendants of the former "Anglo-Celtic settlers" has been vaguely overlooked.

The first Irish immigrants arrived in (what is presently known as) Canada during the eighteenth century. The biggest waves arrived between the 1820s and 1830s when the British government provided free passages from Ireland to Canada, then later after the Great Famine, and again between 1901 and 1921. Irish Canadians are currently considered to be part of the majority of the Canadian population and so the literature they produce is predominantly regarded as lacking any distinct ethnic

experience, which is one of the salient features of ethnic Canadian writing.<sup>1</sup>

However, Smaro Kamboureli argues in *Scandalous Bodies* that since the 1990s the perception of ethnicity in Canada has begun to change. She believes ethnicity points to the gaps in identity, among ethnic and non-ethnic Canadians alike, and ethnic writing now aims at a dialogue between different cultural communities.<sup>2</sup>

For a long time in Canada, the Irish have been considered “insiders” because they are “white,” English speakers and participated in the British colonial effort. In the past few decades, similarly to other “ethnic” writers around them, Irish-Canadian authors have developed a deep interest in their origins and their cultural roots; they too (along with the rest of Canadian ethnic writers) felt that they did not entirely belong in Canada. The theme of “Ireland” has become predominant, and the identification with Irishness, Irish history, traditional beliefs or Ireland’s geography may be perceived as a measure for Irish-Canadian identity.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident from Keith Jeffery’s *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* that these authors crucially insist on developing a relationship with the past – with the land, the ancestors, the lost language, the history and the beliefs, and articulate their understanding of the present self and its displacement. Only through this process of re/visiting Ireland is it possible for the authors to address and transcend the binaries that are responsible for the paradox that Ireland was both imperial *and* colonial.<sup>4</sup>

To demonstrate contemporary Irish-Canadian literary tendencies, I would like to draw attention to Frances Greenslade and her novel *A Pilgrim in Ireland: A Quest for Home* (2002). After living in four provinces, and making each her home, Frances Greenslade began

<sup>1</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *Wherever Green Is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora* (London: Hutchinson, 2000) 196-99.

<sup>2</sup> Smaro Kamboureli, *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2000) 161.

<sup>3</sup> For further general information on the topic, see James P. Byrne, Philip Coleman, Jason King, *Ireland and the Americas: Culture, Politics and History* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Keith Jeffery, *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996) 1.

wondering about what home meant anyway,<sup>5</sup> and in her non-fictional novel she described her first visit to Ireland. She took a six-week trip across the whole island, a journey which she decided to accomplish in order to re-discover the origins of her ancestry. According to the reviewer Anne Cimon, Greenslade strongly focuses on the colonizer/colonized perspective. This is specific to her work, particularly since her husband is a Native Canadian and so she is able to draw parallels between Native Canadians and the Irish.<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated in Greenslade's novel, she and her fellow "pilgrims" tend to approach the issue of identity by distancing themselves from Canada and focusing on their ethnic homeland, later returning to their Canadian life with a fuller understanding of their own identity. These opposing questions of "oneness" are raised by the paradoxical situation of the Irish as both colonizers and colonized, but the deconstruction of the colonizer/colonized discourse offers answers to these negotiations between the Self and the Other.

Frances Greenslade commences her quest for origins at a gathering of her husband's tribe. She knows that her ancestors arrived in Canada in the nineteenth century. In contrast to the effort of her husband's tribe to get into close spiritual contact with their ancestors, Greenslade realizes that she has lost touch with hers and does not remember them at all. The reader is made aware that European colonizers systematically attempted to destroy aboriginal traditions, but a few hundred years later, the colonizers themselves know almost nothing of their own heritage.

This personal experience sows the seeds of crisis in Greenslade's life and is the accelerator of her Irish quest. In her novel, she admits:

I have culture envy. I envy people who have a place, and stories and a culture that grew out of that place. I'm native Canadian, but not indigenous; of Irish origin, but not Irish. Catholicism is as close as I come to a tradition, but it's not connected to a place.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Frances Greenslade, "Bio," 11 September 2009, <<http://www.francesgreenslade.com/bio.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Cimon, "A Canadian Quest in Ireland," 10 September 2009, <[http://www.booksincanada.com/article\\_view.asp?id=3385](http://www.booksincanada.com/article_view.asp?id=3385)>.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Greenslade, *A Pilgrim in Ireland: A Quest for Home* (Toronto: Viking/Penguin, 2002) 17. Further references are given in parentheses in the text.

Her friends mock her when she explains that she is searching for a culture of her own. Her goal is not to look for dates and birth certificates. However, finding an ancient family signature on some ancient family document and bringing it back to Canada would make her return to Ireland complete. (21) She leaves for her ethnic homeland with a romantic vision of what to expect:

I would set foot on Irish soil and suddenly feel that I'd come home; ghosts would talk to me in graveyards, and old codgers in tiny Irish villages would tell me I looked just like someone they'd once known and I'd discover that I could play harp and sing in Irish. (190)

This imagined Ireland is the space where Greenslade realizes that her multiple split identity is partially Canadian and partially Irish. She begins to understand that the only possibility of understanding and capturing her own roots is by travelling to Ireland.

According to Susan Robertson, locations work as representations, they have their own identities and also influence the identities of the people who engage with them. Greenslade's reflections on certain locations in Ireland are split between her contemporary and past approach – between her present experience and the histories and memories connected to the specific location that could be understood as a typical feature of her partially North American and partially European identity.

When Greenslade comes to Ireland, she expects that:

...if I touched the same rocks, felt the same wind on my face, sat on the same dirt as my ancestors, the land would whisper something so subtle and simple it would slip past the neat categories my mind had waiting for it and I would just understand. (52-53)

The identification with Irish locations and spaces is a long, complicated and virtually impossible process. Each place is full of history, family connections, gender constructions or religious meanings, and it is rather difficult to see through all of these and understand the connections. Nonetheless, Greenslade attempts to find places that are particularly meaningful for her – places she can somehow connect with her family history, and with that, at least to some extent, with a sense of home.

As Jonathan Rutherford states, identities are interdependent and relational. Therefore the idea of community plays an important role in the construction of subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> In Greenslade's non-fictional work, it is clearly evident that she has two communities with which she potentially identifies – the Canadian and the Irish. To use Bhabha's terminology, hyphenated identities "function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other, confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification."<sup>9</sup> This mutual mirroring is closely connected to the production of knowledge of one another which is an important instrument used by the colonizer in order to sustain imperial rule over the colonized, and subsequently also used by the visiting Irish Canadian "tourist" when encountering the Irish living in Ireland. Mutual acceptance and identification are subject to certain conditions. Both parties must be able to go beyond first impressions and stereotypes and stereotyping.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson states: "... all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, to belong to a community means to engage in what is imagined, to engage in the community's history and memory that connects both the personal and the political, and often exists in various versions. In her novel, Greenslade emphasizes in particular the role of the Irish as colonizers. She tries to understand the history of the Irish diaspora and of Ireland. She knows that the former is a consequence of the latter, and this leads her to search for the link. The special position of the Irish in Canada results from their dual role as colonizers and colonized. All authors comment on the complex relationship of the Irish to the issue of colonization. In exploring both English domination over Ireland and Irish loyalism to the British Empire, they engage with two postcolonialisms and attempt to change the contradictory position of the colonizer and colonized. Quite unexpectedly, in Canada the colonial relationship between England

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 9-27.

<sup>9</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 51.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson 6.

and Ireland disappears in time, and as the authors see it, true friendships evolve.

Frances Greenslade notices the racial uniformity in Ireland:

How could the Irish, who so bitterly resented the discrimination they had been subjected to, themselves turn discriminators? It was the question I asked myself about my own family history, the question I found I couldn't escape, even here in Ireland. How did my ancestors leave behind the punishing restrictions on their culture, only to find themselves in North America, if innocently, in a similar role to the British colonizers they so detested at home? (118-19)

The role she describes is, for example, that of the initiator of Canada's Indian Act of 1876. (120) She compares the Indian Act with the Irish Penal Laws of 1695 which discriminated against the Irish and their religion and did not allow Irish marriage ceremonies. A similar practice continues in Canada even today among First Nations couples, who are married in a traditional ceremony, then hold a civil one to legalize it. Furthermore, Native Canadians were forced to go to residential schools and were given English names. (121) Greenslade's personal connection to Native cultures enables her to understand the meaning of colonization, even without her trip to Ireland. Yet, at the same time, these connections also complicate her notion of belonging to the Irish. Her problem is that she knows enough political but almost no personal history. Her family's contribution to the colonization of Canada remains open to her imagination:

I'd like to blame it on the British, wash my hands of the Indian Act, and slip into the cozy denial that wraps around my certainty that *my* signature isn't on any treaties or any of that ancient history.

However, she cannot convince herself of the Irish innocence which leads her to assert:

I will never feel at home on this land until I know how my own stories intertwine with the stories of those who were inhabiting the land when my ancestors arrived. (126-27)

What Greenslade is really looking for is an intimate relationship with the land. The Irish were forced to give it up by the English, and

the settlers in Canada forced the Native inhabitants of North America to give up that same kind of relationship. In negotiating the contradictory position of the Irish and the colonization, Greenslade tries to re-acknowledge and restore that intimate relationship and claim it for herself as both an Irishwoman and a Native Canadian. The barrier between her seemingly opposed identities dissolves as it becomes clear to her that her participation in Native Canadian culture had always been an expression of her Irishness. She claims she only needed to return to her roots to be reminded of Irish spirituality, an element of Irishness that her ancestors had lost on their way to Canada.

At the end of her novel, Greenslade returns to Canada with a better understanding of her identity. During her visit to the land of her ethnic origins, she was able to confront the two notions of Ireland she had, a passive one built on her family accounts, the books she read and photographs she saw, and the other, based on active perception of the island as a modern, vivid country which she experienced personally. Greenslade realizes that the division between the past and the present, in other words, the modernization of Ireland complicates her identity negotiations. During her re/visiting of Ireland, she resorts to old family property, to ancient sites, graves and rural locations where some of Ireland's past is very recent. She identifies more with the old than the new, more with the static than the dynamic, that is, with the Ireland she believes – or wishes to believe – she knows. She breaks down the colonizer/colonized binary because on the basis of her multicultural background she looks at colonization from a different perspective. Being both Irish and Canadian, while at the same time being neither fully, is a difficult state for it does not guarantee integration on either side. Still, it offers access to two different cultures without having to carry the full weight of either.

From Greenslade's perspective, Irish Canadians can be perceived as being split between remembering and forgetting, indulgence and denial, pride and shame because they come across an endless series of dichotomies. They finally realize that they have been away for too long to consider Ireland their true home, and nor is Canada.

According to Smaro Kamboureli, "[e]thnicity is not simply a matter of origins. It is indeed a matter of cultural and social contingencies."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Kamboureli 163.



She points to the social construction of ethnicity and to the fact that Frances Greenslade and other Irish-Canadian writers have to be actively engaged with their Irish ancestry and culture in order to maintain their ethnic affiliation. Such ethnic affiliations transcend national ones, and seemingly ethnic boundaries are thus reinforced in Canada by every generation. Kamboureli also cautions against the threat of ethnicity becoming both an inescapable label and a master narrative that subordinates the subject in the present to the writer's roots in the past,<sup>12</sup> which has become a threat in contemporary multicultural Canadian arts. The distinction between art for the sake of one's ethnical background and art that goes beyond one's ethnical determination is very delicate. However, Greenslade's documentary version seems to be one piece of work that is set to survive the crucible of the future.

<sup>12</sup> Kamboureli 145.

# NIGHTMARISH VISIONS ON STAGE: CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA

## **UNRELIABLE STORYTELLERS ON STAGE: *FAITH HEALER, BAGLADY AND NOT I***

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One of the features considered typical of an Irish play is its reliance on narrative. The tendency towards text-based drama is still very much alive even today in the black comedies of the internationally popular young Irish playwrights Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe, Enda Walsh and Martin McDonagh. Of the three plays this essay will deal with, Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) is undoubtedly part of this tradition. Frank McGuinness's *Baglady* (1985) and Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972), however, are examples of the few exceptions that – although still using imaginative and rich language – are more experimental in their treatment of the theatre medium.

All three plays are minimalist and have a monological structure that encourages the audience to focus on language, with the most radical example being Beckett, who famously reduced the speaker to a mere Mouth. Friel uses monologues to present three different accounts of the relationship between Frank, the eponymous faith healer, his wife/mistress Grace and his manager Teddy, deliberately leaving the audience in doubt as to the accuracy of the individual accounts. "Because it is a drama of language, the conflict is on the level of language, and it is the discourses of the three characters which come into conflict, rather than the characters themselves, who are never on

stage at the same time,"<sup>1</sup> Tony Corbett explains. McGuinness, having only one character on stage, uses monologue for a different purpose: to present the complicated identity of his speaker, the old Baglady, "an amnesiac rape victim searching hopelessly for her slaughtered son,"<sup>2</sup> unable to distinguish between her traumatic past and her present situation. Beckett's *Not I*, a probable inspiration for McGuinness, dramatizes the inner conflict of the speaker on a much more complex and abstract level. The speaker of *Not I*, reduced only to a Mouth, is a seventy-year-old baglady with a traumatic past, lying paralyzed in a field and trying to piece together what has happened, never admitting that the fragmented story she is narrating is actually her own.

What these monologues have in common is the fact that what the characters evade, lie about or vehemently refuse to say is as revealing for the audience as what they actually say. Nevertheless, because of the hermetic, excluding nature of a monologue, the audience has no way of verifying what the speakers say and dramatic tension arises from the ambiguity and incompleteness of *Faith Healer*, *Baglady* and *Not I*.

### ***Faith Healer***

It is interesting to ask how we actually form our opinion of the three individual speakers and why we find one version more credible than another. As Kristin Morrison wrote in her book *Canter and Chronicles: The Use of Narrative in the Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter*, "The stories which the characters contribute, reveal as much as they conceal and they also examine the issues of power ..."<sup>3</sup> In *Faith Healer*, the stories we hear seem credible on their own, but once confronted with the other versions, it is the power of the individual storytellers that forms our opinion and interpretation of the play. It is important to bear in mind the difference between watching the performance of *Faith Healer* in the theatre and just reading the text of the play since our perception of the monologists is certainly influenced by the skills

<sup>1</sup> Tony Corbett, *Brian Friel. Decoding Language of the Tribe* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002) 114.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Gayle Backus, "The Gothic Family Romance," *Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (London: Duke University Press, 1999) 224.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Morrison, *Canter and Chronicles: The Use of Narrative in the Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 173.

and talent of the individual actors and how the performance is directed.

If we focus on the text only, we might say that the mechanism of *Faith Healer* functions in the following way: the characters refer to each other as if the audience have not heard the previous narrative. When we hear the first two monologues by Frank and Grace, we encounter two different, sometimes contradictory versions of their life story and we cannot tell which of the two characters is more trustworthy. The crucial character for forming our opinion is Teddy, not directly involved in the relationship between Frank and Grace, who seems to provide the missing information. As Richard Pine rightly pointed out: "Teddy's function is twofold: to act as our guide, a point of reference, to the statements of Frank and Grace; and to relieve with his Cockney humour, the tragedy of the narration."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Teddy's monologue is the longest and most detailed, which enhances the impression of his version being true. We can assume that when two of the speakers basically say the same thing, it is probably what really happened. As Tony Corbett explains, "[the repeated lines] function as linguistic anchors in the text, the nearest thing an audience gets to proof of the truth of any of the monologues. ... they act as warning buoys of consensus ..."<sup>5</sup>

However, if we take a closer look at Frank, Grace and Teddy, we have to admit that none of the speakers are to be trusted completely. Judging by Grace's and Teddy's monologues, it appears that Frank often makes things up and so seems to be the biggest liar. However, both Grace and Teddy discourage us from dismissing Frank completely:

GRACE: It wasn't that he was simply a liar – I never understood it – yes, I knew that he wanted to hurt me, but it was much more complex than that; it was some compulsion he had to adjust, to refashion, to re-create everything around him.<sup>6</sup>

TEDDY: I've thought maybe – course it was bloody minded of him! [To leave Grace alone while she was giving birth] I am not denying that! – but maybe the kind of man he was, you know, with that

<sup>4</sup> Richard Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 126.

<sup>5</sup> Corbett 123.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Friel, *Faith Healer, Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 345.

strange gift he had, I've thought maybe – well, maybe he had his own way of facing things ...<sup>7</sup>

Grace's credibility is undermined by the fact that she is on the verge of a breakdown. She even admits herself that there are certain memories she is not able to face up to. Her monologue is a confession resembling a therapeutic session. There are certain events she can talk about to her psychiatrist, but there are other memories that are still painful and these are addressed to the audience. Unfortunately, telling her story does not have the cathartic effect that therapy should have and we find out that Grace finally gave up and committed suicide. We can assume that there are also many other things she had not told us. Even Teddy, who seems to be the most credible, is not telling the whole truth. He pretends to have only a professional relationship with Frank, but it is obvious that he is emotionally involved with both Frank and Grace. Moreover, in a more humorous way, he drinks throughout the entire monologue, which might also influence our opinion of his reliability as a narrator.

What is important is that although they remember certain events differently or have no recollection of them, all three characters make such serious omissions in their versions that what they omit actually draws our attention. As Thomas Kilroy suggested, "The important thing is not whether the statements are true or false but the degree of falsehood and its motivation, whether deceits are self-serving or other-serving, black, white or grey."<sup>8</sup> The fact that Frank completely omits to tell us about the birth and death of his stillborn baby in Kinlochbervie reveals most about his character. It seems that he is not only hiding this event from us, but also from himself. Similarly, Grace completely leaves Teddy out of the crucial scene in Kinlochbervie and puts Frank in his place. This tells us about the degree of her obsession with him. With the same logic, Teddy's narration betrays him as a hopeless romantic when he tells us about the birth during which he took Frank's role of the husband, which seems to be his wish.

In other words, what is at play in *Faith Healer* are not so much the facts, but how they are remembered. Or as F.C. McGrath claims, "the facts

<sup>7</sup> Friel 365.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kilroy, "Theatrical Text and Literary Text," *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, ed. Alan Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1993) 100.

are less important than their emotional significance within the psychic structures of memory.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Baglady*

Memory and its complex psychic structures are also crucial to the next play to be discussed. *Baglady* is a tragic story about a daughter who was raped by her father and had a baby with him. The father killed the baby and forced its mother to be silent. The monologue presents the struggle of the violently silenced narrator to tell the truth. In a way, *Baglady*’s monologue is reminiscent of William Faulkner’s modernist novel *The Sound and the Fury*, where the first part is narrated by Benjy, the mentally handicapped son of the Compson family, whose mind is that of a three-year-old child, and who is unable to comprehend the loss of his sister and other tragic events happening around him. Both Benjy and *Baglady* are unable to distinguish between the present and the past and, in their distorted minds, time is frozen. Faulkner and McGuinness both attempted to convey the mental processes of their two traumatized, vulnerable protagonists through a fragmented stream of consciousness. Neither text is easy to decipher and it takes several readings to piece together the deliberately ambiguous and chaotic narrative.

McGuinness’s use of monologue is very different to Friel’s ‘literary’ approach. Contrary to *Faith Healer*, where stage directions are kept to a minimum and the monologues work essentially as a literary text or a radio play, the power of McGuinness’s *Baglady* is in its theatricality. McGuinness, though still a minimalist, bears in mind other elements of the theatre medium such as space, movement, gestures and costume. The moments when the actress speaks to her hands, or rocks her whole body gently, or beats herself violently while simultaneously trying to fight her hands away are extremely powerful stage images that are absent from Friel’s *Faith Healer*. The following passage is an example of the imaginative way McGuinness uses a single gesture to dramatize *Baglady*’s inability to communicate. She uses her hands as partners in conversation. The hands “speak” and tell us the truth:

<sup>9</sup> F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel’s (Post)Colonial Drama. Language, Illusion, and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999) 168.

*The Baglady buries her face in her hands, then speaks to her hands.*

My father gave me money. Where is it? What did I do with it? Answer me. You know. You were there. ... I'll tear you apart. I'll cut your tongue out, if you don't tell me what happened to me. Tell me everything. Tell. Clap if you're going to tell me. Clap. Clap.

*The Baglady claps her hands.*

You were walking towards the water. You were carrying something in your hands. We tried to tell you not to. You couldn't hear what you were carrying. Your Father was with you.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly to the gestures and movement, McGuinness also carefully orchestrates the use of props, such as a chain, a wedding dress or a ring, that are ritualistically "drowned," i.e., dropped down to create a huge pile of objects, symbolizing Baglady's tragic life. By making effective use of all the elements of the theatre medium available to him, McGuinness follows the example of Beckett, who has always been very well aware of the nature of theatre and other media and carefully exploited their full potential, as we will see later in *Not I*.

McGuinness claims that he wrote *Baglady* for Maureen Toal's voice, but there is also another important source of inspiration: the tarot cards that Baglady reads in the climactic part of her monologue. Similarly to Mouth in *Not I*, she is unable to admit that she is speaking mainly about her own past and present. For example, she raises the queen of hearts and tells her: "Your son is dead, his father killed him. She couldn't say my son is my father and my father is my son. She could not say it, but that was all she possessed, the truth."<sup>11</sup> The next card she picks is the queen of spades, strikingly reminiscent of the image we see on stage: "The quiet card. ... She has the face of a corpse. Is she a woman at all? There's some doubt about it. Does she remind you of anybody? Do you remember the queen of hearts? She had a son. Did he look like this? Is this why his father killed him?"<sup>12</sup> She later manipulates the cards as characters and the connection between her interpretation of the cards and her own tragedy becomes even more visible. Finally, she tears the cards into pieces and "drowns" them like the rest of the other objects she carries with her.

<sup>10</sup> McGuinness, *Baglady, Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 390.

<sup>11</sup> McGuinness 392.

<sup>12</sup> McGuinness 393.

The tarot cards work on multiple levels in the play. As Margot Gayle Backus has pointed out, the Baglady is reminiscent of the tarot card "the Fool."<sup>13</sup> If we look closely at the card, we see that its imagery is cleverly employed in *Baglady* also in its *mise en scène*, costume and in the nature of Baglady's character. The Fool is carrying a stick with a bundle of all his belongings, is followed by a dog and walking off a cliff. On the older version of this card, the Fool was often portrayed as a ragged vagabond or a beggar, who is apparently being chased away by an animal, either a dog or a cat, that had torn his clothes. Both versions merge in the iconography of McGuinness's *Baglady*. The actress is walking along the edge of the stage, dressed in men's clothes, with her hair covered by a grey scarf. Baglady's gender is deliberately put into question. Also, the dog from the card is mentioned many times as a reference to male violence and to the torment she is suffering.

Another aspect of the tarot card of "the Fool" is its function in the game. Its number is zero and, as such, the Fool can actually replace any card. In other words, the Fool can become the king, the queen or the knave, or any other character. Baglady similarly impersonates different people without indicating whom she actually means. She addresses various listeners by using pronouns with an unclear referent. In her traumatized mind, her son, her father and herself actually merge into one. For the audience, it is very difficult to follow her chaotic stream of consciousness, and there are some instances when she is certainly not telling the truth, for example, when she constantly repeats that her father was a good man and that "he never touched her, never raised his hand, never,"<sup>14</sup> which is in stark contrast to her reading of the tarot cards. However, her struggle to tell us the truth about her tragedy is so intense that the audience feels empathy for the tormented, unreliable narrator.

### *Not I*

In *Not I*, the relationship between the unreliable and extremely evasive narrator and the audience is even more problematic. It has been mentioned above how difficult it is to piece together Baglady's

<sup>13</sup> Backus 220.

<sup>14</sup> McGuinness 386.



fragmented monologue and how many discrepancies there are in the contradictory monologues in *Faith Healer*. Beckett's *Not I* pushes the limits of communication between the stage and the audience much further. He presents the spectators with only a very small, faintly lit image of a Mouth suspended in darkness above the stage and pouring forth a stream of sound. Since the focus of this essay is on the reliability and unreliability of the narrator, it serves our purpose to deal with the play as if the words Mouth utters were comprehensible. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the experience of watching the performance for the first time in theatre differs dramatically from watching the film version and even more so from a reading, or several re-readings, of the text.

It is striking that the play composed mainly of a rapid incantation of words has as its protagonist a speaker who was "practically speechless... all her days"<sup>15</sup> until the crucial moment when something happened in the field one April morning and the stream of words started to pour out from Mouth. The dramatic tension of *Not I* is created by the complex relationship of the teller, Mouth, and the told, the seventy-year-old woman whose sad life story we hear narrated. Mouth is not the only character present on stage, however. There is also the silent character of the Listener, who at three crucial points in the narration, when the speaker vehemently refuses to admit that the story she is telling is actually hers, makes a slight "gesture of helpless compassion."<sup>16</sup> Besides these three hints as to the true nature of the relationship between the speaker and her story, there are other moments that betray Mouth as an unreliable narrator. The monologue consists of fragmented episodes from the speaker's life, interrupted by some inner voice, probably the Listener, who makes Mouth correct her narrative periodically. However, some parts of her monologue function also as a meta-theatrical commentary on her present situation. Although Mouth is describing the events in the field, the exact words also correspond to what is happening on stage at the time of narration: "morning sun... April... .. straining to hear...the odd word...make some sense of it...whole body like gone...just the mouth...like maddened...and can't stop...no stopping...no."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Not I, The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 379.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett 375.

<sup>17</sup> Beckett 381.

Importantly, the meta-theatrical passages like this one concern the audience, too. In this particular example, the words correspond to our struggle to decipher what is happening, “to make some sense of it.”<sup>18</sup> In other passages, however, Beckett draws the audience directly into the performance. As in his previous work entitled *Play*, the spotlight that illuminates the speakers causes them pain, not physical, but psychological. It urges them to go on with their narrative and thus prolongs their torment. We, as the audience, experience exactly the same thing. In her introduction to the collection of essays *Monologues*, Clare Wallace suggests that in a monologue play there is the possibility “that as spectators, we take the role of the confessors, or worse still, voyeurs...”<sup>19</sup> I would add that given the nature of Beckett’s *Not I*, members of the audience become voyeurs who cannot avoid being part of Mouth’s torment.

To conclude, Mouth, similarly to Baglady or Grace, just longs for peace and, unable to face her personal grief directly, she falsifies her story. Yet, it is the dynamics between the unreliable narrator and the audience that makes monologues such as *Not I*, *Baglady* or *Faith Healer* work. Brian Singleton expresses his concern that “the monologue formats reveal an anxiety about theatre as a medium for communication.”<sup>20</sup> I would suggest that Beckett’s, Friel’s and McGuinness’s monologues do not reveal an anxiety about the theatre as a means of communication, but are proof that even unreliable narrators can communicate with the audience effectively.

<sup>18</sup> Beckett 381.

<sup>19</sup> *Monologues*, ed. Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 6.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Singleton quoted in Eamonn Jordan, “Look Who’s Talking, Too: The Duplicitous Myth of Naïve Narrative,” *Monologues*, 129.

# SHOCK, GLOOM AND LAUGHTER: CONTEMPORARY IRISH BLACK COMEDY

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The combination of the comic and the grotesque or the base, producing laughter and shock or unease at the same time, is already to be found in the plays of the Greek dramatist Euripides. From that time onwards, drama of this genre has appeared in various forms throughout theatre history, enjoying great popularity particularly in some periods (such as in Elizabethan/ Jacobean drama). The mapping of the contemporary theatrical scene leads one to believe that the genre of black (or dark) comedy is thriving particularly well in Ireland nowadays, at least as an export commodity. This article will discuss three plays that could – despite considerable differences in style, tone and structure – serve as flagships of this dramatic category, namely, Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* (1999), Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003) and Conor McPherson’s *The Seafarer* (2006).

In theories of modern drama, the notion of “dark comedy” has interestingly become equivalent to “drama” in general. This implies that “dark comedy” (“tragicomedy” in this sense) is in fact the general mode of twentieth-century drama, particularly the post-war development of innumerable theatrical idioms that all belong to mixed dramatic genres. “The mixture of the comic and the pathetic in man,”<sup>1</sup> as J.L. Styan

<sup>1</sup> J.L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy. The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 272.

wrote in 1962, is in fact the basic ground for the ambivalence we have come to expect in the plays of modern playwrights, although we may not always associate their work with the term comedy.

Since 1962, when Styan published his seminal work *The Dark Comedy*, the understanding of the term has been transformed somewhat. Some of the arguments have also dated, as the plays in question have gradually become part of the traditional canon. However, certain insights apply even to dark comedy in the narrower sense of the term as we understand it today – e.g., the significant absence of true comic relief<sup>2</sup> as the reception of black humour is necessarily associated with constant ambivalence, thanks to the genre's dual frame of reference.<sup>3</sup> The general definitions of black comedy are variations of the same phrase: it is "writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life. Black humour often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character."<sup>4</sup> Elements of irony are used and serious or taboo events and topics are treated in a satirical manner. In fact, violence and cruelty became the topics of comedy instead of tragedy in the twentieth century, or rather of black comedy,<sup>5</sup> that has a pessimistic world view but lacks the transcendence and the catharsis of the tragic ending. As Patrice Pavis claims, its "values are negated and the play only ends "well" in an ironic tour de force,"<sup>6</sup> irony being a crucial subversive device. Black comedy also borrows from tragicomedy, with which it shares certain features such as its approach to fate, which is not connected with absolute criteria but materializes in the form of a series of mistakes and accidents. Theoreticians of the genre also point out that fate is frequently simply the result of the author's skilful and overt weaving of the plot.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the author seems more present than in other dramatic genres, in a sense standing for the tragic fate, a malevolent God-like creature, which

<sup>2</sup> Styan 266.

<sup>3</sup> Zdeněk Hořínek, *O divadelní komedii* (Praha: Pražská scéna, 2003) 123.

<sup>4</sup> "Black humour," 25 August 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/67959/black-humour>>.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Lukeš, "Irská zabijačka," *Svět a divadlo*, 12.3 (2002): 61.

<sup>6</sup> Patrice Pavis, Christine Shantz, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 34.

<sup>7</sup> Hořínek 123.

corresponds to the notion of futility and grotesque nature of life typical of black comedy.

All of this with slight deviations applies to the classics of dark comedy (such as Friedrich Dürrenmatt or Jean Anouilh) and also largely to McDonagh, O’Rowe and McPherson, although they demonstrate a looser understanding of the genre, appropriating it to their own needs. O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* is comprised of two boys’ monologues recounting their mock-heroic quest through two nights in contemporary Dublin, an imagined urban landscape, balancing between the real city and a hallucinatory land with mythical undertones. The dark laughter is rooted predominantly in language, which draws attention to itself up to the point of becoming the sole conveyor of meaning and atmosphere, since dialogue – the source of classical dramatic conflict – is missing. Formally, rhythm is the main structural feature of the play. Supported by the frequent use of the present continuous, as though following the gaze of a film camera, it grants the play the impression of a swift ride reminiscent of the tempo of the times. There is a hint of the rhymes that take over in O’Rowe’s *Terminus* as well as the repetition of words and alliteration. These formal devices once pertaining to heroic epics or the high genre of poetry and now mixed with the contemporary phenomena of rap or slam poetry enhance the mercilessness of the content of the narrative. Banal details are juxtaposed with stylized poetic language elevating the narrative to precisely that of the heroic epic, satirically mocked (for instance, when the ominous character of Ladyboy, with whom Rookie is in trouble over two dead fighting fish, asks – “Have you got me money for me dearly departed, for me fightin’ betas?”<sup>8</sup>).

The definite article employed in front of the names of the tough Howie and the seducer knight Rookie serves the same purpose. The poetic elevation is in striking contrast to the depiction of the individuals that people the world of *The Howie* and *The Rookie* and their futile lives. There is Avalanche (A monster. ... Sixteen stone, size forties on her chest, few tats);<sup>9</sup> there is the vicious brother (in fact son) of the girl Rookie seduced – compared to human pudding, six feet tall, with Down’s syndrome; there are smelly Flann Dingle and Ginger Boy with their green hi-ace van riding like hell through the streets for

<sup>8</sup> Mark O’Rowe, *Howie the Rookie* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999) 45.

<sup>9</sup> O’Rowe 11.

pure pleasure from the danger; there is The Howie's father, detached from direct human contact, seeing the world only through the lens of his handicap. The use of the grotesque resulting in unsettling humour pervades the whole piece, from the characters' description of their world to gags of the type of the tough Howie falling from the stairs, his parents laughing viciously.<sup>10</sup>

In the tradition of black comedy, based on the pettiness of the reasons that lead to violence, the heroic quest of punishing The Rookie that The Howie describes is based on something very low – catching scabies – as is The Rookie's problem with the fighting fish. Nonetheless, the threat of violence to be exacted by Ladyboy, the almost mythical figure supposedly with three sets of teeth like a shark, is no less ominous for it. Black humour subverts both romance (the girl is either drunk or has a fat ass in white see-through ski pants) and any elements of tragedy present (upon the death of The Howie's brother, their mother is described spitting out vulgarities, "Spangly glitter shit runnin' down her face,"<sup>11</sup> their father appearing with the handicap to shoot the scene). Even the mythical aspect of the narrative smells of the gutter – for example, whereas the God of death in ancient societies appears in the form of mythical animals, here it is the van with two mad youngsters, pointlessly speeding through the days.

The allusion to smell is not accidental, the play is full of ugly scents, mostly of bodies, a typical feature of the grotesque, as described, for instance, by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*.<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin's literary trope of the grotesque body serves as regeneration of the social system. O'Rowe's text may seem stripped of such regenerative socio-political consequence, but even here the grotesque is linked to vulnerability and belittlement as well as to humanity. Out of all the degradation, pointlessness and grotesqueness finally emerges the mock-heroic quest with the ethical significance of tragedy. Howie's fight for Rookie is a form of sacrifice, repentance for the death of his brother, which cannot be redeemed other than through another death. *Howie the Rookie*, albeit a black comedy structured like an intensifying nightmare and exhibiting a fascination with violence,

<sup>10</sup> O'Rowe 10.

<sup>11</sup> O'Rowe 28.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

paradoxically finds what we may call an impaired catharsis in a landscape full of wretched existences.

To discuss the black humour of McDonagh's comedies, one might consider any of his popular 'Irish' plays. In all of them, humour lies in the tension between violence, the stylized vulgar language and slapstick comedy. Yet it is *The Pillowman* that would probably bear the title of the blackest of McDonagh's comedies. The play seems, at least at first sight, the least non-committal with its treatment of the model situation of the author – Katurian – and his dim-witted brother interrogated by two detectives of a police state in connection with two children being murdered according to the plot of Katurian's stories. *The Pillowman* certainly elicits what may be called the guilty laugh, the mixture of horror and shocked laughter of the tradition of the *grand guignol*. We might claim that *The Pillowman* represents the far extreme of black comedy tradition, while *The Seafarer* might be placed at the other end of the spectrum.

What all three plays discussed have in common, however, is the fine line between the real and the surreal with the parameters of the nightmare and the crucial structural principle of the grotesque, which functions on three levels here – in the black comic repartees of the dialogue, in the narrated stories and in authorial manipulation and play. The narration of the quiet primitive 'sensational' stories is what brings in the true savagery and this presents both a problem and potential for their staging, which is decisive for the extent to which the grotesque element takes over (for example, depending on whether the stories are narrated, acted out by live actors or using inanimate objects). In text-based analysis, the grotesque functions as a natural balance between the horrendous content of the short stories and the comicality with which the text is imbued. Here hyperbole serves as a potential means of escaping the effectively melodramatic, providing the black humour and the constant elusion of an unambiguous interpretation. Without the pervasive use of hyperbole, it is easier to attribute 'meanings' to the play, be it the functioning of the police state, the ethics of art, the borders of reality or violence in the contemporary world. However, *The Pillowman* resists such simple signification. Seeing the play through the prism of the grotesque helps to understand the mechanical nature of the world of the drama and prevents one from falling into the trap of psychological motivations.

Indeed, *The Pillowman* displays the touch of the mechanical or mechanized on all levels – from the unavoidability of the situation, the death of Katurian/the author and the overall conception of violence and its implementation, to the mechanical reading of the stories as parables with immediate reference to reality. The suppression of the ‘human’ element is reinforced by the perceptible presence of the author, the acrobatic twists and heavy manipulation of the plot, playing with the reader’s/spectator’s expectations. The author – whoever he is – in a sense appears in the character/position of Katurian, as the narrator of the stories Katurian has written and as the deviser of the plot of the drama. It is significant that this important aspect of black comedy theory – the overt authorial manipulation, the author as Fate – is so central to McDonagh’s play which touches upon the nature of writing. Nevertheless, one may also be falling into the trap of perceiving *The Pillowman* as a parable of sorts.

McPherson’s *The Seafarer*, with no overt violence and its conventional three unities structure accompanied by realist dialogue, seems to be the misfit in the three works. It is the only play that does not disqualify psychological acting, an uncommon occurrence in black comedy. Yet, the grotesque, the pervading element in the plays already discussed, also appears in *The Seafarer*, albeit more subtly, incorporated into the well-crafted structure of the play and open to its theatrical potential that in this case might stress it or subdue it completely. The play is set in the basement of a dilapidated house in a suburb of Dublin overlooking the mythical Howth Head. The place, which “has morphed into a kind of bar in its appearance,”<sup>13</sup> where tea is poured on carpets, phlegm rubbed into armchairs and whisky spat back for toast, symbolizes the inner world of the men who meet there to celebrate Christmas by playing cards and drinking – potential clowns, sadly comic in their messed up lives and attempts to still enjoy each coming day.

The black comedy is the outcome of the combination of the uncomfortable Faustian line of the story – Sharky’s felony for which he is to be doomed and taken to hell by the ominous stranger Lockhart – and the slapstick comedy provided by the trio of drunkards, responsible for many an almost classic gag. The destructive force and the source of the grotesque in the form of gratuitous violence in

<sup>13</sup> Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006) 3.



O'Rowe's and McDonagh's plays has its parallel in *The Seafarer* in drink – the conversation about it, the search for it, its consumption, the conversation as a consequence of drinking. Even the devil Lockhart deviates from the conventional impersonation of authority and is subjected to grotesquely drunken behaviour, almost falling to the floor, fretting about his uncomfortable human 'insect' form. The result is an atmosphere of the macabre, the dance of death, with the celebration subverted by an acute sense of disintegration.

The underground abode itself is a reminder that these men cannot sink much lower. When Lockhart torments Sharky in describing hell as a place where one experiences permanent self-loathing, the effect of this threat is only partial once we realize that it is in fact the metaphorical state of the present, which the men are trying to escape by drinking. Lockhart is not only the devil coming to get Sharky, he is (hinting at others' transgressions) the inner demon of all drunkards. His ambivalent (often silent) presence continually throws a different light on the interaction of the others; it is thanks to the mythical figure of Lockhart that the play escapes pure realism.

There is not much hyperbole in *The Seafarer*, yet it is a legitimate member of the group. The ending (in contrast to that of O'Rowe's play) is of an accidental nature, involving the finding of lost glasses and the realization that it was not Lockhart's card that won the game. The doomed Sharky is saved but the form of catharsis implied (in the form of man-to-man affection and Sharky's 'rebirth') is again of the impaired kind. Moreover, the drinking is to continue right after morning mass, the frustrated lives (or at least most of them) are only temporarily lit up. The night full of anxieties and spreading paranoia is succeeded by the day saved only by a post-hangover drink. Humour and gloom are tightly bound in this play.

Apart from their generic affiliation, all three plays interestingly share one other specific feature. Regardless of their unique styles, each of the playwrights shows indebtedness to the work of David Mamet, in the poetics but predominantly in the use of language. The plays are reminiscent of Mamet's best work since the casts are all-male (with the one exception of *The Pillowman* with its minor characters of Mother and Girl, who nevertheless only appear in the 'metafiction' of the play, so they do not affect the main dramatic action nor the present power structure). Although this may also apply to other Irish plays that

might fall into the category and thus may seem coincidental, it is telling of a certain kind of masculine atmosphere of the contemporary form of the genre. As in Mamet, the solely male population of these exceptionally dark comedies is connected to some kind of unleashing of the male ego, which enables the men to adhere to fictional conceptions of who they are, making them potentially clownish, grotesque or sadly comical. Conor McPherson claimed that "If a woman walked onto the set of *Seafarer*, the play would be over. In the absence of women, men are able to revert to this infantile thing that liberates them from responsibility."<sup>14</sup> McPherson refers to drink but in fact it does not matter what it is (pub, gang or prison) – the idea of men unchained when in all-male company (for good or bad) is what is important.

Nevertheless, the grotesque subverts any assertion of maleness. In *The Pillowman*, it materializes mainly in the detective duo, a play on and citation of the good and bad cop relationship, the power structure between the two and as it is exerted outwards. Both Ariel and Tupolski are somehow unleashed by the power they possess, which makes them the grotesque characters they are. *Howie the Rookie* is a 'me and the guys against some other guys' type of narrative, all-male perspective in the form of two characters on stage 'heroifying' themselves, presenting the boys' world, full of hierarchies and constant transformations between the hunting alpha male and the hunted grotesque victim. The male body has the potential to become both – the proud dandy Rookie farting from fear upon meeting Ladyboy, the fearless Howie being thrown out of the window after a victorious fight, impaled on the railing, a spectacle for all. Whereas a fitting commercial description for O'Rowe's macho play could be taken from the headline of a *New York Times* review – "Blood, Guts and Poetic Words on the Mean Streets of Dublin,"<sup>15</sup> McPherson's play is more a depiction of "melancholy Irish manhood."<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the

<sup>14</sup> Chris Jones, Theatre Loop, "Conor McPherson: The Agony of Conscious Souls," 13 January 2008, 28 August 2009 <[http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/the\\_theater\\_loop/2008/01/conor-mcpherson.html](http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/the_theater_loop/2008/01/conor-mcpherson.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> Jason Zinoman, "Blood, Guts and Poetic Words on the Mean Streets of Dublin," *The New York Times* 28 August 2009 <[http://theater2.nytimes.com/2005/05/25/theater/reviews/25howi.html?\\_r=1](http://theater2.nytimes.com/2005/05/25/theater/reviews/25howi.html?_r=1)>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Billington, "The Seafarer," *The Guardian* 29 August 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/sep/29/theatre1>>.

national stereotype involved, Michael Billington's phrase points to a deficiency of the maleness at stake. The men drink to drown their frustrations and memory, to assert their masculinity – that alcohol often brings about the opposite is hardly surprising. Outside the subject of the play, there is confirmed presence of the women who have to be strong enough to cope with their partners' weakness. On the other hand, drink gives these men a reason to socialize and be able to take – albeit a strange kind of – pleasure from each other's company.

While other good examples of the specific genre that has helped to popularize contemporary Irish drama in the international context could be discussed (such as some of Enda Walsh's plays), the selected plays by probably the three most exported Irish dramatists stretch on the imaginary axis of contemporary black comedy from one end to the other, taking on widely disparate forms. The attraction and specificity of the genre as employed by O'Rowe, McDonagh and McPherson lies – apart from other factors such as the audience and dramaturgical expectations in staging an "Irish play" – in the sensation of the *grand guignol* and slapstick traditions deriving from the use of hyperbole and the grotesque, as well as in the way it works with transformations of reality or realism by employing elements of the surreal, the mythical or the supernatural. This, in many cases, helps overcome the boundaries created by the specificity of the Irish context, a bonus for the painless transfer onto international stages.









