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# NORDIC IRISH STUDIES

Editors

Carmen Zamorano Llena and Billy Gray

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## **Nationalism and the West in Brian Friel's *The Gentle Island* and Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane***

*Chu He*

Given their drastically different backgrounds – one is a Tyrone native, writing primarily in Ireland from the 1960s to the 1990s while the other is a London-based playwright of Irish immigrant parents whose dramatic debut was published in the 1990s – Brian Friel and Martin McDonagh are seldom considered together. Although they can be said to be writers of different cultures and generations, their portrayals of the west of Ireland are surprisingly similar: both demythologise this nationalist construct and uncover its morbid, violent interior. This article will compare Friel's *The Gentle Island* with McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Written twenty years apart, both plays react to de Valera's national myth of a Catholic, Gaelic Ireland, in which not only the idyllic, self-sufficient country life and noble peasant are exposed as false pretensions but the Catholic morality is also shown to be so dangerously oppressive that it promotes violence. More importantly, this article will argue that through the brutal confrontation between the characters' backwater world and an intrusive outside world, both plays depict the inevitable bankruptcy of a parochial, xenophobic nationalism in a modern, globalising time. Although no ready remedy is offered directly, the malicious, suicidal cycle presented in the plays clearly rings the death toll for the old myth and calls for a new definition of Irishness.

The myth of the west started not only as a reaction to colonial stereotypes but more importantly, as an answer to the Irish people's need for a national identity. If the English colonisers denigrated the Irish people and country as barbarous and backward, the Irish nationalists go to the other extreme: they sanctified the Irish people as heroic and noble with a glorious Gaelic past and propagated the west as intact and authentic because it was distanced from the Anglicised, corrupted east and thus retained its Gaelic-speaking, old-fashioned lifestyle. In this way, an idealised west was created by cultural nationalism: as the preserver of the Gaelic language and culture, the west represents the Irish national identity, characterised by a timelessly noble peasantry and an idyllic countryside. Such romanticising Gaelic traditions gave rise to the Gaelic League and the

Irish Literary Revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which ‘resurrected’ the dying Irish language and the forgotten Irish mythology and folklore. Striving to reclaim ‘a pre-colonial past [. . .] free from imperial interference’, Irish nationalists idolised a Gaelic, Catholic, peasant identity’,<sup>1</sup> the very opposite to their Protestant, urban, English colonisers, not aware of the falseness of their own fabricated noble Irishmen and their Gaelic west.

Yeats and Synge were two important contributors to the myth of the west. According to Declan Kiberd, Yeats has ‘said “Connaught for me is Ireland’. To him, it was the repository of an essential national identity embodied in folklore, poetry, the Irish tongue. It was the landscape of dreams and imagination’.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, ‘Yeats actually stood sponsor for [. . .] the myth when he celebrated his dream of the noble and the beggar man’.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Synge had his share in the myth of the west and the peasant life. As his travelling account *The Aran Islands* ‘presents a powerful attraction to the west, to a world that is native’,<sup>4</sup> he clearly idealised the islanders’ lives as simple, integrated, and pristine, contrasting sharply with the vulgar life in mainland cities and towns. Living with Gaelic-speaking people also enabled Synge to speak the native language. His ingenious use of Irish vernacular added a strong, rustic flavour to his plays and rendered a true-to-life picture of the peasant life, which, as the manifesto of the new national theatre – the Abbey Theatre – declared, presented a real Ireland for the Irish audience.<sup>5</sup> In this way, his reproduction of Hiberno-English and the peasant life contributed as much as his travel journal to the formation of the myth, and his ‘assiduous desire “to restore and preserve the folk-cultural texts of the Gaelic-Irish peasantry” (Castle 265) necessarily locates his work within a nationalist endeavor’.<sup>6</sup>

As an important source to boost Irish people’s self-esteem and to differentiate themselves from the English, the myth of the west ‘governed cultural productions since the beginning of the cultural revival in the 1880s [. . .] guided the political ideology of the 1916 revolutionaries [. . .] shaped social and economic policy in the first decades of the Irish Free State after 1922’<sup>7</sup> and actually continued to influence the politics of the Irish government from the 1930s to the 1960s. Promoted by conservative politicians such as Michael Collins and de Valera, the ideal of a pastoral, self-reliant Ireland ruled the new Republic:

A land whose countryside would be bright with cozy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for

the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.<sup>8</sup>

De Valera's vision of a bucolic, Gaelic utopia, however, 'never really existed in the first place', and it was only 'a picture of what we like to imagine that self to be rather than what that self is'.<sup>9</sup> Nostalgia and romanticism prevented the Irish nationalists from seeing that their Gaelic past was not pure or authentic and their country people and life were not noble or idyllic either.

Given the persisting fantasy of the west, both Friel and McDonagh choose to revisit this old myth in their plays when Ireland transforms from a Catholic, nationalist, rural country to a modern, international, and increasingly disenfranchised state since the 1970s and thus an overhaul of the old molds is direly needed to make room for the new developments. As Friel says, 'we are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the word foreign means. We want to know have the words any meaning at all. And persistent considerations like these erode old certainties and help clear the building site'.<sup>10</sup> By showing their characters trapped in a desolate island or a suffocating cottage in the west of Ireland and eventually committing homicide, Friel and McDonagh concur in their exposure of the sinister reality behind the romantic myth. While tearing down the enshrined image of the west, they also attack two allegiances that closely knitted with the myth: 'loyalty to the most authoritarian church in the world and devotion to a romantic ideal we call Kathleen'.<sup>11</sup> In the two plays, Catholic morality is shown to be as lethal as nationalist ideology, for they both enthrall the female characters to sterility and drive them to maniac violence. The inevitable yet disastrous confrontation between the insular, barren west and the open, potent outside world testifies to the dehumanising nature of such piety, which predestines its collapse. In this way, Friel and McDonagh urge a rethinking of Irishness on the debris of the detrimental myth.

Growing up in de Valera's time, Friel is in a good position to unmask this myth. Although 'all Friel's plays articulate various forms of postcolonial disillusionment',<sup>12</sup> *The Gentle Island* specially 'looks at the peasant heritage glorified by the fathers of the state [. . .] [which] still permeates modern Irish life'<sup>13</sup> and sets out to overturn 'the romantic myth on which a false and sentimental nationalism rests'.<sup>14</sup> While demolishing long-held beliefs in Catholicism, noble peasantry, and Celtic heritage, Friel does not reestablish some real truth about Irishness, for he knows that culture has to be constantly reviewed and redefined – its fluid performance denies any canonisation.

Set on the island of Inishkeen off the west coast of County Donegal, *The Gentle Island* (1971) dramatises the disastrous confrontation between Inishkeen and the outside world, between the Sweeneys, the only inhabitants left on the island after a massive emigration, and two Dublin visitors, Peter and Shane. Unlike Peter, Shane is not taken in by the seemingly simple and peaceful island but sees its violence and desperation, which culminates in Sarah's frantic shot at Shane on an accusation of his homosexuality with her husband Philly. As many critics have mentioned,<sup>15</sup> the island of Inishkeen, like Ballybeg in Friel's other plays, is a small-scale Ireland. Manus, the householder of the Sweeneys, is the authoritative mouthpiece of the peasant myth. Although he himself travelled to America and England when he was young, he binds his family tightly to the desolate island with stubborn loyalty to ancestral legacy and tradition: 'this is your home, this is where you belong [. . .] this is where your family's grown up'.<sup>16</sup> However, this revered Celtic heritage turns out to be bogus, for Shane's search for an ancient Gaelic folk-song only ends with 'Oh! Susanna,' an 1847 American song associated with the California Gold Rush. Held in thrall to the island by their patriarchal father Manus, Philly, Sarah, and Joe are like the escaping young monks who are turned into stones by the old monk in the local legend, whose attempts to leave are as futile as the three stones' creeping during the night. As the head of the only family on the desolate island, Manus actually becomes 'King of nothing'.<sup>17</sup> However, blind to the fact that they can hardly make a living by 'scrabbing a mouthful of spuds from the sand', Manus insists that 'we haven't much. But we have enough'.<sup>18</sup> His self-deception is most obvious when he introduces the island as a beautiful place and proudly calls it 'a self-contained community'<sup>19</sup> to Peter and Shane.

If Manus falls for de Valera's ideal of a self-sufficient, Gaelic, Catholic Ireland, Peter falls prey to a pastoralism which 'tended to sentimentalise backwardness, to find poverty saintly and primitivism heroic'.<sup>20</sup> Tired of the hustle and bustle of city life, Peter is immediately attracted by the quiet and simple island. To a wandering visitor like him, 'the calm, the stability, the self-possession'<sup>21</sup> of the island has special charm. However, given the fact that the island's population has shrunk from two hundred to four in the past fifty years, it is highly ironic to see that the 'constant' island life Peter idolises is actually on the verge of extinction. It is also interesting to note that Peter's longing for permanence meshes with Manus's dream of a timeless lifestyle handed down from his ancestors. In this sense, Manus and Peter build the myth jointly – Manus reinforces Peter's romantic misimpression of the island, while Peter '[gives] support to [Manus's] illusion that the place isn't a cemetery'.<sup>22</sup> The

huge difference between them, between the west and the east, between Inishkeen and Dublin, vanishes in their willing participation in the myth-making. Viewed in this light, Peter is not unlike those urban, middle-class intellectuals who romanticise the west according to their nationalist ideals.

Shane, on the other hand, is not fooled by the deceptive appearance of the island. Like Skinner in *The Freedom of the City* and Keeney in *Volunteers*, Shane disguises his perception in glibness, jest, and clown-acting. It is through him that the hidden irony of the island's name Inishkeen comes to light, for he calls this Irish 'gentle island' a 'scalping island' in Apache.<sup>23</sup> By associating the islanders with Native Americans, the violent, primitive 'other' invented by their European conquerors through the myth of scalping, Shane recycles the British colonists' myth of a backward, barbarous Ireland to demythologise Irish nationalists' idealisation of the west. Shane's renaming the island thus offers an insight into the dangerous 'violence that lurks beneath the seemingly idyllic surface of the island'<sup>24</sup> and delivers his criticism of Manus and Peter's myth-making.

Violence and brutality, as a matter of fact, are pervasive on the island. Like in a war museum, sites of wartime disasters spread all over the island, and the islanders, as 'a race of scavengers',<sup>25</sup> live on others' destruction for their own survival, taking whatever is left from the wreckages of foreign airplanes, freighters, submarines, tankers, mine-sweepers, etc. Toughened by World War II and other big or small scenes of warfare in Irish history, the islanders treat other lives cruelly: they drown and shoot animals; they chop off Manus's left arm to punish him for seducing a girl who later becomes his wife; they have an African thief dragged all over the island by a mad donkey and dump his corpse into the sea; their hostility towards the two outsiders well expresses their tribal xenophobia. Peter, duped by their façade of friendliness, is totally unaware of their dirty tricks on him when they cut turf together: he is not only exhausted trying to catch up with the Sweeney brothers but also constantly menaced by Philly, who '[plunges] the spade down within half an inch of his hand every time'.<sup>26</sup> To Shane, the all-knowing, intractable, and dangerous joker, they are more vicious and violent: they beat him up and finally shoot him almost to death. Those brutal happenings clearly show that the gentle island is actually a bloody, violent island and those honest, simple peasants are parochial and cruel.

Therefore, nothing is further from the truth than the image of 'the simple, upright, hardworking island peasant holding on manfully to the real values in life'.<sup>27</sup> Friel's island peasants are by no means moral paradigms. Traditional attributes such as modesty, integrity, and purity that Irish peasants are supposed to possess are completely lacking in the characters.

Years of moral control ironically produce lustfulness. Bouncing back from the stringent moral suppression, the characters' sexuality, though censured by Catholicism, runs rampant indeed. If leaving sterilising Inishkeen releases Bosco: 'Get the knickers off, all you Glasgow women! The Inishkeen stallions is coming!'<sup>28</sup> Manus's oversea experiences also embolden him to seduce and desert an island girl. Moral transgression becomes inevitable when the contact with the outside world stirs up the forbidden or dormant desires of the islanders and causes them to seek sexual freedom through encroachment. That is why upon Shane's arrival, Sarah confesses that her husband Philly is 'no good to me' and makes explicit sexual advance to him: 'I want to lie with you, engineer'.<sup>29</sup> Humiliated and enraged by Shane's rejection, Sarah slaps him viciously when he invites her to dance, which is applauded by Philly and Joe: 'Give him another! Another! Another! [. . .] Beat the head off him, girl!'.<sup>30</sup> Through such violence, Sarah vents out all her sexual frustration.

Like Sarah's repressed sexuality, Philly's dormant homosexuality is also wakened by the outsiders. Although Sarah has been blamed for their childless marriage: 'I'm the barren one. My womb bears no crop',<sup>31</sup> it turns out that Philly's sexual orientation is to blame. Encouraged by Peter and Shane's partnership, Philly opens himself up in sexual expression. Like most gay couples, old Peter and young Shane are faced with a troubled relationship. While Peter demands 'a modest permanence' and '[I]ove, Shane, love, love – all I have is invested in you – everything – for the best years of my life. There must be some return',<sup>32</sup> Shane views it only as an endless lease and hateful obligation, which creates an opportunity for Philly, who could be a refreshing new partner for Shane to cure his tiresome, hackneyed love life. The mutual attraction between Shane and Philly is demonstrated through an unusual love-hate relationship in which sex and violence are connected again: while cursing and punching Shane mercilessly, Philly also invites him to shoot lobster-pots together at night, and Shane seems to enjoy both treatments in spite of Peter's jealousy. Their affair, however, is discovered by Sarah, who sees them 'stripped naked' in the boathouse and Philly '[is] doing for the tramp [Shane] what he couldn't do for me'.<sup>33</sup>

This revelation is not only scandalous but dangerous, threatening to jeopardise Manus's Inishkeen, a place not unlike de Valera's Republic in its devotion to 'the myth of Gaelic rural innocence as the foundation for family and social values for the Irish nation'.<sup>34</sup> As Kathryn Conrad points out, 'If the [family] cell is stable, so too are the social institutions built upon it': the nuclear family thus 'serves as the foundation of the nation-state'<sup>35</sup> and is 'enshrined in the 1937 constitution'.<sup>36</sup> That is why Manus is

so keen on bringing Joe's migrated girlfriend Anna back for marriage and presses Sarah and Philly to have children. This traditional family structure, however, is menaced by homosexuality, which 'threatens the reproduction of the heterosexual family cell' and undercuts 'the discourse of bourgeois nationalism' and Catholicism.<sup>37</sup> In Manus's eyes, Peter and Shane are thus the root cause for Philly's transgression: 'It's them – them queers! I should have killed the two of them when I had them! What we had wasn't much but what there was was decent and wholesome! And they blighted us! They cankered us! They blackened the bud that was beginning to grow again!'<sup>38</sup> Since all his curse and venom are outbound – the outsiders are unvaryingly the scapegoats of all the wrongs – Manus's ingrained tribalism comes to the surface, which, against the more common practice that 'two's to blame or no one's to blame',<sup>39</sup> exculpates Philly's implication in the homosexual scandal and points at Shane as the only culprit.

As a matter of fact, Shane's crime lies not only in corrupting Philly but also in mocking Manus's myth-making by exposing his pretense about the island, parodying his glorification of country life, and ridiculing his obsession with Irish language and tradition. Such an affront to the revered peasantry immediately incurs tribal punishment. If the islanders' enmity towards Shane is disguised in their rough dancing horseplay, Sarah's shooting glaringly consummates such resentment and hostility – the offender must be punished to appease the violated ancestral beliefs and traditions so that the disrupted local order can be restored. No wonder Shane finds himself at gunpoint, his plea of not guilty unheard. Although Sarah urges Manus to behave like the King of Inishkeen and kill Shane, it is finally her who shoots him and shatters his spine. The substitution of Manus by Sarah in the critical moment clearly shows the decline of a feeble, disabled old patriarchy and foreshadows the female dominance and violence in McDongah's play. Disabled for life, Shane ends up in the same way as the mongrel dog who is severely maimed by Manus. Shane, the disbeliever and the transgressor, is thus destroyed by the noble peasants in an idyllic countryside.

Although the outside threat is eliminated with Peter and Shane's leaving, life on Inishkeen is nevertheless at its dead end, for the inevitable clash between Inishkeen and the outside world only accelerates the collapse of the already doomed, outdated, insular autocracy. Shocked by the cold-blooded killing, Joe is leaving for Glasgow, and Sarah and Philly's sexless marriage holds no promise for the future. Manus's dream of reviving the island by having grandchildren from his two sons is dashed, for Joe's final departure and Philly's barren marriage clearly indicate that there will be neither hope nor life on the island, for 'the place and his way of life and

everything he believes in and all he touches – dead, finished, spent’.<sup>40</sup> In this way, Friel demythologises the west: ‘this island is home to no rural idyll [. . .] [and] its habitants [. . .] are lurid contradictions of the popular fiction of the Noble Peasant’.<sup>41</sup>

Twenty years later, in Galway, McDonagh’s dramatic debut *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* attacks the same piety to the west as we see in Friel’s play. As the first play of his Leenane trilogy, this play depicts the country life in a small village on the west coast of Ireland in the 1990s. Many critics have noticed the discordance between the time period the play is set in and the way it is described. In 1996, when the play was premiered, Ireland had entered a phase of rapid economic development and become the Celtic Tiger with its high GDP and low unemployment. The social, political, and economic transformation actually started in the 1970s, when Friel’s play was premiered, a process which finally turned the Republic into a modern, globalised nation in the 1990s. As a result, ‘in matters such as fertility and marriage patterns, sexual attitudes, the tabloidisation of the newspapers and fast-food culture, the Republic has joined the mainstream of the Western world’.<sup>42</sup> Such openness, however, cannot be found in McDonagh’s play: Leenane still remains an isolated, xenophobic place, with no job opportunities and a lot of moral oppression, which produces not only mass emigration but also domestic violence and desperation. ‘[T]he moral and social stagnation’ of the village thus echoes de Valera’s Catholic, rural society’.<sup>43</sup> No wonder Fintan O’Toole says that ‘The country in which McDonagh’s play is set is pre-modern and postmodern at the same time. The 1950s is laid over the 1990s, giving the play’s apparent realism the ghostly, dizzying feel of a superimposed photograph’.<sup>44</sup>

Instead of blaming McDonagh for this historical inaccuracy, we need to understand his intention behind such a deliberate anachronism. Modernisation does not put an end to the myth of the west but instead commodifies it worldwide: ‘On millions of postcards, rural Ireland was depicted as real Ireland, and cities were often discounted as fallen places, evidence of dire Anglicisation. When the census of 1971 revealed that more people lived in towns than in the countryside, that rural myth, far from being exploded, took on new life’.<sup>45</sup> Staging the idyllic, carefree, enchanting west in the tourist brochure as a desolate, stifling place is McDonagh’s way of stamping out this ‘new life’. As the antique myth remains undead, demythologisation is never outdated. The irony and sarcasm embedded in the beginning of the play clearly show his criticism: ‘a touristy-looking embroidered tea-towel hanging further along the back wall, bearing the inscription “May you be half an hour in Heaven afore the Devil knows you’re dead”’.<sup>46</sup> The cliché Irish blessing on the souvenir

towel exemplifies the Irishness packaged for tourists, which is, however, relentlessly unmasked as hellish rather than heavenly in McDonagh's play. If McDonagh's life between London and Ireland allows him to see the west from both the outside and the inside so as to address their discrepancy, his informal knowledge of Irish drama also puts him in an ongoing theatric tradition, for 'An archaic West of Ireland, sexually unfulfilled, depleted, and demoralised, has remained imaginatively live and theatrically viable well past its period sell-by date'.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is a natural continuation of Friel's *The Gentle Island* with its renewed force to deconstruct a myth that has long passed its time. As Grene points out, 'Archaic Ireland is dead but it won't lie down: the fierceness of McDonagh's iconoclasm feels like an effort to kill it at last'.<sup>48</sup> By exposing the grotesque and sinister flip side of the romantic west, McDonagh beats the life out of the undead mythology of earlier generations.

Like the island of Inishkeen off the coast of Donegal in Friel's play, Leenane, a small town in Connemara, Galway, is also a deserted place, for 'economic growth and a move toward urbanisation over the past several decades has stripped the Irish countryside of its jobs and inhabitants'.<sup>49</sup> Since 'there never will be good work [. . .] Or even bad work. Any work',<sup>50</sup> most people have left home to find a job in Britain or America, and only the old and the weak are left behind with nothing to do but sit around and watch Australian soap operas. Mag's perpetual sitting in the rocking chair, Maureen's irritability, and Ray's restlessness all speak to the ennui and stagnation of their lives even in a time of material plentitude, surrounded by modern commodities such as an electric kettle, TV, radio, car, Complan, etc. In a place where 'you'll have a long wait [. . .] for the news' and 'it's soon bored you'd be',<sup>51</sup> people can hardly restrain themselves, which results in rampant violence in the whole community: Father Welsh punches Mairtin for nothing, Coleman cuts the ears off his brother Valene's dog out of spite, and Maureen pours boiling oil over her mother Mag to retrieve information and finally kills her to clear her way to freedom. The sterile country life and brutal villagers clearly echo Friel's play: both reverse the image of the pastoral west and the noble peasants and attack the lingering myth.

As many critics have noticed, this play is also a parody of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Although both Synge and McDonagh present 'the West of Ireland, the corner stone of the Literary Revival [. . .] this location "of pure, Catholic, native Ireland"' as a place of 'violence [. . .] madness [. . .] bodily functions, sexual desire, blasphemy, and general degeneracy',<sup>52</sup> they convey different messages. Unlike Synge, McDonagh's

use of Hiberno-English is not to achieve poetic effect and exalt the vernacular of the west but to stress its ‘uncouth, ungainly and deflationary’ quality, which makes it ‘a caricature of the lyricism of Synge-song’.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, even if McDonagh shares Synge’s austere, unflattering view of the peasants, he carries it much further and with extra harshness: violence is no longer tucked away off-stage but fully performed in front of the audience, the parricide Christy fails to commit is completed by Maureen without a blink of eyes, and if the loony, wimpy Christy emerges from the play a mighty man, the former beauty queen of Leenane ends up being a doomed loon. It is clear that McDonagh’s mockery of Synge is directed at this cultural revivalist’s romanticism about the west. However, what escapes most critics is that, such parody does not stop at Synge but actually extends to Yeats where his critique of Irish nationalism gradually comes to the surface.

Like Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was another classic play during the Irish Literary Revival. Calling young men to sacrifice their lives for her and drive all the strangers out of her house, Cathleen Ni Houlihan has become the romantic symbol of the mother country Ireland. As the nationalist ideal of freeing Ireland from British colonisation can only be realised by renouncing individual happiness, material possession, and family, such absolute patriotism has drawn many criticisms, among which the best-known is Stephen’s bitter comment ‘Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow’ in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>54</sup> By caricaturing Cathleen Ni Houlihan as a manipulative, selfish, and decrepit old mother Mag in the play, who drives all the strangers from her house so that she could obtain a lifelong devotion from her daughter Maureen, McDonagh clearly writes in the same vein as his famous predecessor against the long-standing sacrifice and martyrdom demanded by Irish nationalism before and after independence: no abstract ideals – ideals of an independent country or ideals of an idyllic, Catholic state – should override individual, human life.

In spite of her crippled, senile state, Mag is the same totalitarian authority as Manus in Friel’s play. She rules from her rocking chair; everything from Complán, porridge, tea, radio, to TV has to be done in a particular way and her daughter Maureen has to serve her like a ‘fecking skivvy’.<sup>55</sup> As ‘a stoutish woman in her early seventies’,<sup>56</sup> Mag parallels the new state born in the 1920s, whose conservative nationalism is shown through her reverence for traditional culture and Catholic morals. Although Mag calls Irish ‘nonsense’ and claims that people should ‘speak English like everybody’<sup>57</sup> else so as to find a job in England or America, it is hard to tell whether it is her true opinion or just a way to oppose and get back at

Maureen for turning her radio off. It is more like arguing for the sake of argument, for Maureen's words also contradict her own deeds: while insisting 'It's Irish you should be speaking in Ireland'<sup>58</sup> and blaming the colonisers for causing them '[to beg] handouts from the English and Yanks',<sup>59</sup> she not only worked in England but is also eager to go to America, even at the cost of her mother's life. Therefore, it is small wonder to find Mag actually crave for 'Ceilidh Time' and her radio forever set for the old station. Her love for Delia Murphy's 'The Spinning Wheel' further testifies to her loyalty to the traditions. As 'The songs that Delia sang were decidedly Irish, many nationalistic and characterised by a strong sing-along ballad style',<sup>60</sup> Delia Murphy actually 'represented [. . .] the importance of re-establishing cultural identity after the devastating period of Civil War in Ireland and the many years of English colonization'.<sup>61</sup> 'The Spinning Wheel' is thus one of the 'most cloying popular manifestations' of Irishness.<sup>62</sup> Like Manus's devotion to Gaelic language and heritage, Mag's attachment to the Irish folk songs gives away her nationalist sentiments.

As a matter of fact, Mag's nationalism is made more explicit through her oppressive Catholic morality to which Maureen falls victim. After signing Maureen out of the mental hospital in England, Mag, as her daughter's guardian, not only 'keep[s] her in me care'<sup>63</sup> but more importantly, prevents her from socialising with men for twenty years because '[y]oung girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas'.<sup>64</sup> Disciplined by a mother who disdains her low-cut black dress as 'skimpy'<sup>65</sup> and calls her '[kissing] two men the past forty years' as 'plenty',<sup>66</sup> Maureen cannot but remain a virgin and an old spinster in her forties. Such moral surveillance actually characterises de Valera's Republic, for it not only held onto a Gaelic, rural ideal but was also devoted to an extremely conservative Catholicism. With the privilege and authority granted by the 1937 constitution, the Roman Catholic Church subjected the Irish people to strict moral control: abortion, divorce, birth control, homosexuality, cross-road dance, etc. were all prohibited and women were confined to the home. Like Manus's censorship of Shane's homosexuality, Mag's moral repression of Maureen's sexuality shows her to be a mouthpiece of the new Republic.

Given her tribute to the cultural traditions and Catholic morality, Mag clearly represents Irish nationalism and becomes another Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Since nationalism demands a total devotion of body and soul of its people above personal life, it is no surprise that in Yeats's play, Cathleen comes the very day before Michael's wedding and lures him away from his future wife to fight against the English for her. Likewise, Mag also destroys the possible union between Maureen and Pato so that Maureen

could wait on her hand and foot all her life. As a selfish, possessive mother demanding her child to sacrifice for her, Mag caricatures Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Ironically, Cathleen's lofty ideal of national freedom degrades into Mag's pathetic desire of securing a caretaker so that she will not end up in a nursing home, Cathleen's striving for independence is twisted to Mag's clinging dependence, and Cathleen's urging Michael to leave home and join the army also reverses to Mag's retaining Maureen at home by hook or by crook. Lying about Pato's party invitation, Mag denies Maureen the opportunity to socialise and meet people for marriage. When this ruse fails, she exposes Maureen's stigmatic past in the mental hospital to scare Pato off, and finally burns his letter to Maureen in which he asks her to go to America with him. By depriving Maureen of every chance she has to start a new life of her own outside the home, Mag ruins her daughter's personal happiness and enslaves her with domestic and filial duties. In a similar way, the Irish people were also bound by a parochial, narcissistic patriotism which gave rise to the myth of the west, and their obligations to the nation state also overrode their individual needs and wants. Claimed by the same demanding Cathleen, Maureen does not give herself up willingly like Michael but confronts her with resentment and retaliation. The dysfunctional relationship between Mag and Maureen thus brings out the bankruptcy of Mag's nationalist autocracy, for the imposition of Gaelic culture, punitive morality, and chauvinistic insulation no longer matches the landscape of a post-independence, modern Ireland. Like the collapse of the traditional, heterosexual family in Friel's play, the breakup of the nuclear family of Mag and Maureen also remains political: it 'undermines and destabilizes the very foundational elements of Irish nationalism'.<sup>67</sup>

Maureen's hostility towards her mother is obvious from the very beginning. Having been 'on beck and call for [Mag] every day for the past twenty years',<sup>68</sup> Maureen is at the end of her patience and she stomps, bangs, snaps and curses at every order her mother gives. To torment Mag, Maureen not only forces her to drink lumpy Complian and eat horrible Kimberleys but also flirts with Pato in a slip. Deliberately doing what Mag hates helps Maureen to vent out her anger and frustration, but more importantly, enables her to assert her independence and obtain a tenuous sense of control. From small revolt 'Me world doesn't revolve around your taste in biscuits'<sup>69</sup> to bigger rebellion "'stay with me tonight [Pato]" [. . .] "Aren't we all adults, now? What harm?"',<sup>70</sup> Maureen strives to break free from her mother's dominance. In this sense, Maureen's violence against her mother is more for control than for punishment: subjecting her mother to physical torture makes Maureen feel most powerful and in charge of her life. By pouring the hot oil on Mag's hand, Maureen not only retrieves the

information she wants but also becomes the master of the house. The scramble for dominance and control behind the violence makes Maureen's horrifying act akin to the rampant violence on Friel's *Inishkeen*, which jointly demolish the image of noble peasants in the west. Although Maureen gains the upper hand here and there by inflicting bodily pain on her mother, she cannot escape Mag's spiritual tyranny and manipulation as long as she is still alive. That is why she daydreams about romancing at her mother's funeral, for 'what's stopping me now?' even if she knows that 'you'll never be dying. You'll be hanging on forever, just to spite me'.<sup>71</sup> Through the undead Mag, McDonagh clearly invokes the recurring ghosts of de Valera's nationalist ideal and the myth of the west that still haunt modern Ireland.

Disturbing as it is, the domestic abuse and violence between Mag and Maureen have actually settled into a habitual lifestyle, for the play has made it clear that it is not the first time that Mag interferes with Maureen's personal life or Maureen scalds Mag's hand. Such a weird daily cycle is not broken until a real threat from the outside world makes its appearance. Like Peter and Shane's visit, which breaks the peace of the *Inniskeen* in Friel's play, Pato, the home-coming Irish emigrant, also intrudes into Mag and Maureen's isolated life: he spends a night with Maureen, stays till next morning, and chats with dumbfounded Mag before he leaves. His invasion into their house and physical encroachment on Maureen's body is nothing compared with the mental distraction his proposed elopement and a life in America give to Maureen, who, as a result, is diverted from her obligations to the decrepit yet clinging mother(land). To prevent this from happening, Mag, like Cathleen Ni Houlihan, needs to drive the stranger out of her home to regain her territory and secure her position. However, Maureen is no longer Michael, who, instead of driving the stranger out to protect the mother, invites the stranger in and ultimately kills the mother to go with the stranger. In this way, McDonagh blatantly mocks Yeats's nationalist play.

Maureen's attraction to strangers is made clear very early. In Scene one, talking about the fellow who murders an old woman in Dublin, Maureen has expressed the desire 'to meet, and then bring him home to meet you, if he likes murdering ould women'.<sup>72</sup> In Scene three, Maureen actually brings home a stranger Pato, who is from the same community but there 'have no more than two words passed between us the past twenty years'.<sup>73</sup> Although Maureen hates her life under her mother's control, she is nevertheless stuck with it until Pato's coming from outside upsets her daily routines and challenges her fixed frame of mind. Change is actually inevitable, for the cottage in the remote west is no longer able to remain insular in the 1990s: the characters not only enjoy various modern devices

such as an electric kettle, TV, radio, car, and swingball, ‘an immensely popular children’s game in the 1980s’,<sup>74</sup> but are also connected to the outside world through Australian soap operas, exotic food like Complian and Kimberley biscuits, and their emigrants. The imbalance between a modern material life ‘infiltrated and bastardized’ by ‘outside influences’,<sup>75</sup> and a backward-looking, claustrophobic state of mind will surely lead to rupture when the occasion arises. Therefore, it is small wonder that Maureen decides to abandon her mother and go with Pato to America without even a struggle. To get rid of a mother who claims that ‘I’d die before I’d let meself be put in a home’,<sup>76</sup> Maureen clunks her dead with a heavy poker. Although both Friel’s and McDonagh’s plays end with appalling female violence that is related to sex, one incident aims to eliminate the outside threat and restore the old, heterosexual order while the other aims to remove the domestic obstacle to a new sex life. By killing Mag, Maureen emphatically turns her back on Cathleen Ni Houlihan and her insatiable demand for self-denial and sacrifice.

However, Maureen’s matricide does not lead her to freedom or open up a new world to her. When the hope of leaving with Pato for America turns out to be a self-willed illusion, Maureen slumps deeper into her old life. As Ray notices, she has ironically become another Mag: ‘The exact fucking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name!’.<sup>77</sup> Such a ghostly rebirth is actually announced by the belated birthday song ‘The Spinning Wheel’ for her mother from the other two daughters. Like the monotonous, spinning wheel in the song, Maureen goes on with the same isolated, deadlocked life. Mag’s continued life through Maureen shows McDonagh’s sober view of the nationalist ideology, which will not die with one blow but lingers on in another form. In this way, both Friel and McDonagh depict the tenacity of the nationalist myth through the Sweeneys’ resumed life on Inishkeen after the shooting and Maureen’s rocking in her dead mother Mag’s chair, whose prolonged, ghostlike existence, however, cannot cover its doomed fate: Joe’s leaving and Philly’s sexless marriage with Sarah shows the dead end of the island life on Inishkeen, and Maureen’s bleak life as a loner in Leenane will not get her anywhere either. By having Cathleen Ni Houlihan end up as Maureen, McDonagh drives the irony home: if Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan leaves as a young girl with the walk of a queen, his beauty queen of Leenane stays rotten in her country cottage, with no child to call on. In this way, McDonagh satirically subverts the myths and ideals held by Irish nationalists, and his play can be viewed as ‘the culmination of a long demythologization of the West [. . .] and a final reversal of Romanticism’.<sup>78</sup>

For centuries, the image of the west, nationalist ideal, and Catholic morality have dominated Irish society and captured Irish writers' imagination. Friel and McDonagh, in spite of their differences in age, background, and style unanimously write back to those myths. Jointly, their plays deconstruct the idealised noble peasants and pastoral country life, attack the moral oppression Catholicism imposes on the people, and denounce the nationalist devotion to a parochial Irish identity when Ireland is actually merging into the modernised, international world. By showing the inevitable downfall of the old, mythologised, nationalist constructs, both writers clear the way for a redefinition of the west and Irishness.

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## **Unveiling the Past: Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's 'Sex in the Context of Ireland'**

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This article<sup>1</sup> focuses on Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's short story 'Sex in the Context of Ireland', compiled in the collection *The Pale Gold of Alaska* (2000).<sup>2</sup> The narrative tackles some of the most prominent historical events which influenced the construction of the Irish Free State and Irish nationalism as presented by the marginal perspective of the main character Arabella Brazil, a young prostitute in Dublin's red light district. The personal account of her past ironically functions as a counter narrative which destabilises hegemonic views on Partition as one of the major identity processes in the history of Ireland as a nation. This is performed in the story by offering a perspective on the private lives of women as well as on the need to understand how gender and sexuality are intertwined with class and economic circumstances. As will be contended, Ní Dhuibhne's Bella is paradigmatic of women's social, sexual and economic subordination, which in the story also pertains to the dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised subject, since the practice of women selling sex could be understood as paradigmatic of oppressive sexual relations in patriarchal societies.

Ní Dhuibhne's 'Sex in the Context of Ireland' is included in the collection entitled *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, a set of interdependent narratives issued from varied female perspectives which reassess different transitional stages of Irish history, from the waves of immigrants from Ireland to the United States to Celtic Tiger Irish society and its aftermath. By doing so, Ní Dhuibhne's collection intentionally questions received ideological assumptions of what it means to be 'Irish' for women at different stages of the country's history through personal accounts which consistently deviate from traditional historical narratives: As Rosi Braidotti contends, 'History as we have come to know it is the master discourse of the white, masculine, hegemonic, property-owning subject, who posits his consciousness as synonymous with a universal knowing subject and markets a series of "others" as his ontological props'.<sup>3</sup> Ní Dhuibhne's collection contributes to challenging the master discourse of Irish History from a gender perspective.

These Irish women's sense of alienation from official history – as construed and produced by patriarchy to serve its aims – is enhanced in the collection by the characters' displacement from the nation's borderland, either literally or metaphorically speaking, a fact which foregrounds issues concerning nomadism, migration, and exclusion. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze's 'nomadology' – understood as the urge to change conceptual schemes which would overcome the dialectic of majority/minority or master/slave – Braidotti complements woman's subjectivity as 'nomadic' (in a constant flux and submerged in a process of becoming) with specific geo-political and historical locations, in which being 'nomadic' is no metaphor, but a scar of history 'tattooed on your body'; it is 'being homeless; a migrant; an exile, a refugee'.<sup>4</sup>

Ní Dhuibhne's collection in general, and 'Sex in the Context of Ireland' in particular, exemplifies women's displacement from the constitution of the body politic, and from those significant events of which Europe can be proud. As stated by Rosi Braidotti, 'the history of difference in Europe has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications'.<sup>5</sup> However, by enabling her character to produce a discourse of her own in the narrative, Ní Dhuibhne's Bella no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a male dominant subject, but rather becomes a complex and multi-layered individual: 'Woman [. . .] may be the subject of *quite another story*: a subject-in-process; a mutant; the other of the Other'.<sup>6</sup> However, Bella's 'ex-centric', nomadic subjectivity offers liberating possibilities as a way to step out of a stagnant social order by resisting 'established categories and levels of experience'.<sup>7</sup> As will be argued, the character's narrative not only resists settling into socially coded modes pertaining to women's propriety and sexuality, but also unveils an unofficial history of her own country by voicing her traumatic experience.

Furthermore, Ní Dhuibhne's choice of the short story – a literary genre which most literary traditions regard as a 'form at the margins',<sup>8</sup> as an 'ex-centric at the low end of the hierarchy of arts'<sup>9</sup> – further enhances the sensation of peripheral visions. Despite the relative centrality of the short story in the Irish literary tradition, especially after James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the genre's formal freedom and hybrid nature suggest the vindicating powers of those alien to the mainstream of hegemonic culture. As Heather Ingman explains, the short story may convey the potential to reflect instabilities, change, fragmentation and dissolution, often becoming a suitable site for contesting official discourses, springing with renewed interest in times of change and transformation.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the short story's relative marginality may also allow for what is out of tune with

hegemonic thought, thus conveying a spirit of dissension, and a feeling of alienation from official culture.

Ní Dhuibhne regards Joyce as the predecessor of the modern Irish short story, including her own; as she claims that Joyce, ‘gave us a template in *Dubliners* that we have not yet replaced’.<sup>11</sup> Although Ní Dhuibhne has overtly acknowledged the influence of numerous writers and varied literary traditions, James Joyce’s particular vision of *Dubliners* and Dublin life seems to have been especially fruitful in her own literary landscape: ‘When I started writing I believed I was writing a spontaneous short story, my own, uninfluenced by anyone [. . .] I didn’t say “I want to write stories like the stories in *Dubliners*”, but that’s what I did’.<sup>12</sup> In his collection of short stories, Joyce aimed at reflecting the *Dubliners*’ sense of dislocation and paralysis in private and public terms, prosaic and divine, banal and artistic realms. As Jeri Johnson has argued, Joyce ‘calmly addresses matters which in the first decade of the last century were seldom mentioned in literature: poverty, drunkenness, bullying, child-beating, sexual exhibitionism, suicide, cynical exploitation (sexual, financial, political) of children by adults, of women by men, of employees by bosses, of those with little power by those with much’.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Ní Dhuibhne reassesses many of these issues – poverty and immigration, prostitution, adultery, gender difference, class segregation – and incorporates some others such as ageing and its effects on family matters, physical and mental degeneration, cancer and chemotherapy, dependent parents and dutiful daughters, capitalist exploitation and environmental concerns. In fact, Joyce’s pattern of interlinked short narratives is subtly echoed in *The Pale Gold of Alaska*, for Dublin also emerges as a ‘referential field upon which one can register meaning and establish connections’.<sup>14</sup> Ní Dhuibhne’s characters explore the gap between ordinary Dublin and those landmarks whose political and cultural significance suggest the difficulty to construct a homogeneous Irish identity, whilst signalling the legacy of Ireland’s colonial experience. In this sense, the hybrid, fluid form of the short story suits Joyce and Ní Dhuibhne to portray Ireland as a place of identities in transition and the Irish imagination as essentially migratory.<sup>15</sup> As Ingman contends, Ireland is an ‘in-between place of shifting identities, of change and transformation [. . .] in which the Irish short story also operates’.<sup>16</sup>

‘Sex in the Context of Ireland’ is principally a critical, satirical contestation of the consecration of purity and moral righteousness as the ‘national virtues of Ireland’,<sup>17</sup> and it humorously questions many ideological assumptions of the Irish nationalist discourse forged at the turn of the twentieth century. As will be subsequently argued, the disparity

between the Catholic constructions of female propriety, fuelled by nationalist discourse, and the individual experience of female sexuality is suggested by the gap between the story's documentary title and the narrator's colourful experience. As the story shows, the official discourse pertaining to women's propriety actually repressed and obliterated those sexual mores and practices which deviated from the established Catholic norm. As Hasia Diner's analysis suggests, it was generally believed that 'Irish women rarely crossed the line when it came to sexual deviance [. . .]. In Ireland, illegitimacy was virtually unknown, and prostitution extremely rare'.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Maria Luddy has observed, premarital sexual activity, illegitimacy and prostitution, though often viewed as 'abnormal' deviations of female sexuality, were commoner than was generally agreed.<sup>19</sup>

Non-coincidentally, Ní Dhuibhne privileges Bella's account of her past and of her sexual activity over major political events which, at the turn of the twentieth century, prefigured the constitution of the Republic of Ireland, such as the Easter Rising in 1916, or the proclamation of the Irish Free State in 1921, briefly referred to by Bella. Rather than an affirmation of her own condition as a fallen woman, Bella's confession unveils the history of a country stricken by economic hardship, where women were more vulnerable to its consequences.

The first person narrative, set in Dublin's Red Light District in the early 1920s, is produced by Arabella Brazil, a young Monto prostitute as she is interviewed by Frank Murphy and Miss Moriarty, two members of the 'Legion of Mary', an association of Catholic laity which served the Church on a voluntary basis. Murphy and Moriarty ask Bella to clarify the determinants which turned 'a nice girl' into a fallen woman, while also hoping to convince her to discontinue her professional activity. Historically speaking, the 'Legion of Mary' was founded in Dublin in 1921 by Frank Duff, and was particularly active after the proclamation of the Irish Free State, especially in 'disinfecting' the Red Light District from its morally questionable tenants; the story dramatises this particular historical stage in the construction of a new Ireland.

Ní Dhuibhne's choice of names for the members of the Legion of Mary indirectly points at the social and political context of Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the story the Legion is led by Frank Murphy, most likely a blend of the names William Murphy and Frank Duff. General William Murphy was Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police; he was strongly supportive of closing down brothels and providing reformed prostitutes with hostels and reforming institutions in early twentieth-century Dublin. Frank Duff, on the other hand, founded the Legion of Mary in 1925, and was actively engaged in going door-to-

door persuading prostitutes to abandon their activities.<sup>20</sup> Besides, Miss Moriarty evokes associations with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes narratives, being, as is well known, the latter's lethal enemy.

In the story the Legion's 'holy mission' humorously contrasts with the prostitute's unsophisticated and rudimentary concerns, which in the narrative are emphasised through the character's position as a narrator, whose informal, colloquial and spontaneous speech puzzles her rigid interlocutors:

‘Maybe ye’re askin what I’m doing here, in a kitchen in Monto? A nice girl like me in a place like this! Maybe ye’re not askin at all maybe you couldn’t give a sugar but I’m goin to tell ye anyways like it or lump it, so I am. Stop saying so I am I can hear ye sayin now, talk proper, talk so we don’t hafta strain our delicate ears to listen and to understand what it is ye’re sayin. Well I won’t and if yez can’t understand it’s you loss’.<sup>21</sup>

Bella's speech is emphatically colloquial, suggesting familiarity and proximity. Ironically, her first person narrative – which fluidly moves from self-address to interrogation of her silent interlocutors – brings to mind the penitential, self-explanatory nature of confessions, only to subvert the expectations which such a narrative pattern conveys. Bella is not a penitent prostitute, although her 'confession' does entail some revelation of her past which the mindful and more experienced narrator is able to reassess in a critical mode: the certainty that Irish nationalism and the Catholic Church allied to construct her as an undesirable subject, which Bella's unusual surname suggests: Brazil. The choice of the South American country as part of the prostitute's identity could hint at her family history of emigration, as well as at an anticipation of the narrative's conclusion, where Bella mentions her intention to leave Ireland. On the other hand, Western thought has often construed South American countries as eccentric, exotic and over-sexualised. As Edward Said has explained, such prejudices operate in Western constructions of countries often identified with the 'Other', where 'one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe',<sup>22</sup> which positions Bella as the epitome of Otherness. Bella's sexuality is perceived by her inquisitors as a potential threat and a trap for otherwise virtuous Irish males, as well as a blot on the country's Catholic reputation, something which is suggested by Murphy openly stating after listening to Bella's narrative: 'I now know that this whole terrible industry can be simply eliminated from Ireland [. . .]. The Legion will eliminate all sexual activity in Ireland: Nothing less will satisfy me'.<sup>23</sup> Murphy not only regards Bella's sexuality as deviant and pernicious, but also as a singular

market transaction, ‘a terrible industry’, and his views ultimately reflect anxieties about women trespassing the boundaries between private and public.

Furthermore, Ní Dhuibhne’s Arabella, who calls herself ‘Bella’, establishes an intertextual dialogue with Joyce’s Bella Cohen, who runs the brothel at 82 Tyrone Street in Monto which Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus visit in ‘Circe’. Bella, Ní Dhuibhne’s postmodern Bella Cohen, ironically enchants her audience by unveiling a narrative which not only concerns her past, but also the corrupting and corrupted mechanisms that had exerted control over her body and her sexuality. Significantly, the mysterious and magical processes that transform men into grotesque and enslaved swine in Homer serve Ní Dhuibhne, via Joyce, to point at the hidden processes by which Bella becomes a harlot, bringing to the fore women’s vulnerability in face of poverty, class exclusion and symbolic enslavement. Like Joyce’s ‘Circe’, Bella’s narrative demonstrates that ‘sexuality [. . .] is culturally and historically constructed by the pressure of hidden laws and compulsions in the service of larger social controls [. . .] which serve social institutions charged with the organization and regulation of social behaviour and its significance’.<sup>24</sup>

At the brothel Bella is accompanied by Lilly – overweight and unattractive, and thus briefly recalling Joyce’s Florry Talbot in ‘Circe’ – and Molly Malone, not ‘long for the world’,<sup>25</sup> as she is dying of syphilis.<sup>26</sup> The risk of infectious and venereal diseases and the prostitutes’ inability to protect themselves against them arise in the description of Molly. Ní Dhuibhne ironically joins together the tale of the beautiful fishmonger, unofficially one of the icons of the city of Dublin, with more recent readings of the myth which reassess Molly as a sex worker who was ‘alleged to have died either of typhus or of venereal disease’.<sup>27</sup>

Murphy and Moriarty remain in silence as Bella weaves a patchwork of personal recollections; ironically, by doing so the prostitute unweaves official narratives, and questions received assumptions which concern the body and female sexuality. As Luddy argues, Irish nationalism constructed the prostitute as the innocent victim of British colonisation, infecting the Irish nation with physical and spiritual disease.<sup>28</sup> Through her narrative Bella offers a sad picture of post-famine Ireland where poverty stigmatised her family and preconditioned her prospects of a future, which Bella points to as the sole explanation for prostitution: ‘I came a me own free will. Nobody forced me. Nobody came and dragged me be the scruff a the neck and said now Bella you go on the game or we’ll bate the livin daylight’s outa ye [. . .]. Starvation if ye want to know the real name’.<sup>29</sup> After the death of Bella’s mother, her father remarries and his new wife urges Bella

to find a job to alleviate the family's financial problems. Ironically, Bella's prospects of a modest job will be truncated due to her Catholic provenance in a Protestant business: 'Once she sent me, me ma, to do an interview in Jacobs. She seen an ad in the *Daily Mail*. GIRLS WANTED. GOOD WAGES. REFERENCES ESSENTIAL [. . .]. The minute I walked into the room I knew be the way the two men looked at one another they wouldn't be takin me'.<sup>30</sup>

More significantly, Bella discusses her Catholic upbringing in charity institutions where physical abuse and violence were widely tolerated:

Me ma died when she was havin me, her third, and then Da skipped it off ta England and we were takin in be the nuns in the Good Shepherd Convent down the street from where I'm standin now. I do often spit when I pass it God forgive me. Me brother and me sister died in there. I do hate talkin about the place or thinkin about it. All I'll say about it is this. The sound. The blow of wood or leather on children's skin. That was the music of the Good Shepherd. The feelin. Hunger. Fear of yer life. Hate of the nuns. Freezin cold [. . .] The weak died. Me brother. They beat him to death I swear to God. Nobody would believe me of course and I know you won't either. A nun bet him till he died and then she sent him out in a white coffin and said, 'He is gone to a better place.' [. . .]. Me sister died of natural causes. That is to say, hunger. Aided and abetted by other things but I'll say no more.<sup>31</sup>

Through Bella's narrative the Convent emerges as a real picture of hell, where the religious order practises severe physical punishment. However, according to Miss Moriarty, who stands for the official Catholic narrative, the nuns running orphanages 'are heroes' for giving the children 'a good Catholic upbringing',<sup>32</sup> yet Bella's narrative is articulated to oppose this, and reveals a history of violence, sadism, and sexual abuse:

They [the nuns] often talked like that. Made a laugh of it. What they were goin to do with ye. I do believe sometimes they thought it was just a game. Sometimes a few of them would come to watch while one of them was doin it, as if it were something to enjoy like a play in the Theatre Royal [. . .]. Getting dirty was one of the things you could never do, on pain of the usual [. . .]. 'Come in and stay quiet.' She [Sister Assumpta] pulled me in after her and shut the door behind us. Then we were in pitch darkness. The coal. The dark. Her black habit. After a while I could see her white wimple and the sort of huge stiff collar thing they had on, like a bib, over the chest, hiding what they had of breasts. A lot in Sister Assumpta's case. She had me feeling

them in no time at all [. . .]. ‘Go on. Don’t be afraid!’ she said. ‘Aren’t they soft and delicious?’ [. . .]. Meanwhile she was into my drawers.<sup>33</sup>

Bella and her family emerge as personal victims of what Moriarty calls a ‘good Catholic upbringing’, identified as the root of Bella’s disenchantment with the world, of her loss of innocence and of the trauma provoked by the effects of sexual abuse at the Convent.

Bella’s social ostracism is also emphasised by a common construction of prostitutes as infectious creatures, carriers of disease and immorality which could be potentially transferable to ‘respectable men and women of society’.<sup>34</sup> As Bella acknowledges, ‘We get diseases, you pick up things, it’s a professional hazard and the hospitals, since the Irish took over them, weren’t places ye’d want to go to’.<sup>35</sup> But the prostitutes in Bella’s brothel are not only sites of venereal infection and thus agents of potential contamination; some of them are also unmarried mothers, who are regarded as disgracing their families and their country alike. The infected Molly, agonising while Bella is being interviewed by the Legion, dies after giving birth to a girl, whom the nuns give away in a manner which suggests processes of child trafficking and legally dubious adoptions:

You’ll be delighted to know that the baby has been given up for adoption to an American couple. It’s a new project the good sisters have. Good Catholic American couples – and I assure you there are often no better Catholics, Irish extraction of course – are often looking for healthy babies to adopt. The nuns have decided that this is the ideal answer [. . .] well, you know the situation [. . .] I have, I must say, had a hand in arranging some part of the project. I credit for that. I had a meeting with a friend of mine in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Thanks, I may say, to my personal intervention, the scheme can function easily. The babies don’t even require passports. They are simply let slip quietly out of the country as if they had never existed, and nobody is any the wiser.<sup>36</sup>

In Ireland, as in other European countries, many of the adoptions of these illegitimate children were facilitated by nuns in mother and baby homes or in Magdalene laundries and State-run institutions, most often sites of refuge for former prostitutes and their offspring. Even after the Adoption Act in 1952, the Catholic Church promoted that a still unknown number of Irish children were adopted by American families on condition of being raised Catholic.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, and argued previously, the social and political events that intervened in Irish independence and those which took place immediately

after are invariably seen with suspicion by Bella, who ironically suggests Irish inefficaciousness – “Ireland is free. The Dublin Metropolitan Police is now the Gawrda Sheehauna.” “Them Irish names is always bad news”<sup>38</sup> – or, at best, little effective change for the less privileged: ‘Frank was having tea. With him was another sister, a Miss Ní Choincheanain this time. A lot of them had names in Irish. Weird. Nee this and nee that. Long noses thin mouths big hair spotty skin. That’s what Nee means if you want my opinion’.<sup>39</sup>

Bella’s narrative evidences how prostitution has been manipulated by different social groups in order to produce ideological discourses to justify varied aims: one of the most persistent constructions of the prostitute at the dawn of the twentieth century in Ireland was produced by Irish nationalism, viewing the prostitute as a victim corrupted by the British soldier. However, Bella and her work mates energetically contradict this view; they are little concerned with salvation, and ironically they lived better when the British soldiers used to seek their company: ‘Before the Free State got into being it was better. So Lilly says. She would know she was there’.<sup>40</sup>

The violence which the narrative suggests as implicit to some Catholic practices is brought to the fore at the story’s denouement, when Frank Murphy burns down Monto in a desperate attempt to ‘eliminate all sexual activity from Ireland’.<sup>41</sup> Bella critically states that Murphy’s efforts are ridiculously useless; significantly, the closing down of Monto as part of a design to consecrate Ireland as paramount to virtue after the constitution of the Irish Free State turns Bella into a migrant who follows the British soldiers on their way to England.<sup>42</sup> With the idea of purity cast as a woman’s responsibility and as a primary characteristic of the ideal Irish woman,<sup>43</sup> Bella has no longer a place in Ireland, both literally and metaphorically speaking.

To conclude, ‘Sex in the Context of Ireland’ dramatises how official institutions at the turn of the twentieth century regarded prostitutes as objects of medical degeneration and contagion, but also as a symbol of British oppression, the means by which the British soldier ‘infected the Irish nation with physical disease and immorality’.<sup>44</sup> Bella’s narrative metaphorically unmasks the prostitute as a body with multiple writings on it of her imagined essences and functions, as an instance of the manipulation of the female body and her sexuality to serve different ideological discourses as produced by Irish nationalism, the Catholic Church and patriarchy. Bella’s prostituted body encapsulates the many contradictions and discrepancies of the constitution of Ireland as a nation, becoming an ‘overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the material social conditions [. . .] an interface [. . .] of intersecting material and

symbolic forces, [. . .] a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed'.<sup>45</sup> By doing so, Ní Dhuibhne's narrative ultimately explores different fears concerning female sexuality, often embodied as infectious, moral threats to the Irish population in the form of prostitution, venereal diseases, or illegitimacy. Bella's narrative reveals how the Catholic Church and the Irish State collaborated to produce a particular discourse to exorcise such fears by repressing female sexuality and categorising prostitutes as sites of moral contagion. In addition to this, the home was strongly recommended as the 'natural' place for women, which resulted in a subsequent idealisation of their role as mothers: any deviations from this pattern were commonly regarded as 'sexual crimes'. This view has been of course used in most Western societies as a powerful means to exert surveillance and control over women's sexuality. However, and as Luddy suggests, in Ireland the idealisation of motherhood was a significant feature of the rhetoric of politicians in the new Irish Free State, and discussions on the female body became central to such discourses.<sup>46</sup>

Significantly, Bella finds herself at odds with the transformations which the formation of the Irish Free State brings about, which enhance her ex-centric, outlawed position, thus deciding to leave Ireland and join her alleged oppressor in England. As Bella unveils the secrets of her past in her narrative, she ironically construes an alternative, peripheral vision of the major events which had led to the constitution of the Irish Free State, through a narrative which produces a humorous and secularising effect on those events, while also signalling her own prostituted body as an instance of ideological manipulation. However, Bella's final migrant, 'nomadic' status allows her to move 'across established categories and levels of experience' after having refused to be defined by coded modes of thought and behaviour.<sup>47</sup> Ní Dhuibhne's narrative challenges assumptions informed by a homogeneous conception of national identity by fostering dissension and difference: in this sense, 'Sex in the Context of Ireland' is articulated to resist a particular ideological discourse which pertains to the construction of nationality and gender, and to the relationship between the two.

## Notes and References

- 1 This essay benefits from the collaboration of the research project 'Women's Tales': *The Short Fiction of Contemporary British Writers, 1974-2013* (FEM2013-41977-P) and the research groups *Discourse and Identity* (GI-1924) and *R2014/043 Rede de Investigación de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade II* (Xunta de Galicia).

- 2 Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Pale Golf of Alaska and Other Short Stories* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2000).
- 3 Rosi Braidotti, 'Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20.3 (2003): 51.
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- 13 James Joyce, *Dubliners*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: World's Classics, 2008) xii.
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- 15 Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 12.
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- 18 Hasia Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Emigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 136.
- 19 Luddy 2.
- 20 Luddy 211.
- 21 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 111.
- 22 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 190.
- 23 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 131.
- 24 Margot Norris, 'Disenchanted Enchantment: The Theatrical Brother of "Circe"', *Ulysses: En-Gendered Perspectives*, eds. Kimberley Devlin and Marilyn Reizbaum (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 229-30.
- 25 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 109.
- 26 The passage brings to mind Joyce's 'The Sisters', which also opens with the narrator's recollection of Father Flynn's words, 'I am not long for this world' (Joyce, 3). Through the character of Molly, the prostitutes voice the terrible consequences of failure to protect against syphilis: "'Should get her thrun outa here,'" Lilly said crossly. "She'll infect the lot of us'" (Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 110).
- 27 Siobhán Marie Kilfeather, *Dublin: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 6.
- 28 Luddy 7.
- 29 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 111.
- 30 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 117.

- 31 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 112-13. Bella's account of her brother Eddie's death is reminiscent of William Blake's poem 'The Chimney-Sweeper' in *Songs of Innocence* (1789). In Blake's poem, the little chimney sweep is also motherless, and abandoned to be sold by his father. Similarly, the child cries when his golden curls are shaved: 'There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head, / That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved; so I said, / 'Hush, Tom, never mind it, for when your head's bare / You know that the soot cannot spoil your White hair.' (Wu Duncan, ed., *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. 63, ll. 5-9). Tom also experiences a vision of death and of 'a better place' in the poem, which functions as a release from the poverty and misery of his daily life. Both Blake and Ní Dhuibhne stress the child's innocent nature in opposition to the corruption that permeates many social institutions, while also pointing at the Church's perverse manipulation of Christ's message to perpetuate injustice and inequality.
- 32 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 125.
- 33 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 115-16.
- 34 Luddy 7.
- 35 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 126.
- 36 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 129, 130.
- 37 Aliah O'Neill, 'The Legacy of Church-run Mother and baby Homes in Ireland', *Irish America*, web, 21 November 2014, <<http://irishamerica.com/2010/08/the-legacy-of-church-run-mother-and-baby-homes-in-ireland/>>.
- 38 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 120.
- 39 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 128.
- 40 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 113.
- 41 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 133.
- 42 Ní Dhuibhne, 'Pale Gold' 133.
- 43 Maryann Valiulis, 'Neither Feminist Nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman', *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society*, eds. Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1995) 172.
- 44 Luddy 156.
- 45 Braidotti, 'Becoming Woman' 44.
- 46 Luddy 194.
- 47 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 4-5.

# The Choreography of Exile in Colum McCann's Fiction

*Marie Mianowski*

Colum McCann's bestselling novel *Dancer*<sup>1</sup> about the life of the famous dancer Rudolf Nureyev presents the most overt example regarding his use of the theme of dancing in McCann's work of fiction. However, the scope of dancing and movement in McCann's work goes beyond any use of dancing as a thematic element of storytelling. Dance, gestures and bodily movements in general are actually extremely meaningful in his writing, not only as a theme but also as a literary trope and further, as part of an aesthetic of exile. In Colum McCann's fiction, dancing is very often a way for exiles to truly inhabit the new space they have landed in and to transform it into a lived-in place. Dancing is a way for the characters to escape past and present traumas and project themselves into the future. In short, it is a means for them to make a home. While much has been written about the representations of exile and trauma in Colum McCann's writing<sup>2</sup> the role of bodies and dancing bodies in particular has not been the object of any academic study. In *This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann*,<sup>3</sup> dance and choreography are only addressed in Susan Cahill's chapter on the novel *Dancer* entitled 'Choreographing Memory: The Dancing Body and Temporality in *Dancer*'. My aim is to show that movement, and dancing movements in particular, are meaningful in all of McCann's works and actually inform his entire oeuvre. This article examines the way in which choreography and fiction writing are linked when it comes to narrating the experience of exile and expressing the singularity of one's experience of space. More specifically, I will focus on the links between dance, memory and landscape in Colum McCann's collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994),<sup>4</sup> thereby making connections with his novels and his more recent short stories.

'Landscape' is understood in this article as a concept which 'materializes space by implicitly introducing a viewer and a gaze, while abstracting place by adjoining a critical point of view to it'.<sup>5</sup> Landscapes engender memories of the past and of the exiles' past homeland while dancing bodies inscribe and project a form of hope into space. Therefore, drawing upon the phrase used by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,<sup>6</sup> I will first focus on 'the gravity of exile' in the collection, for dancing can be perceived as a way of escaping the spirit of gravity which sees life as a

burden to be borne. In the second section of this article, the fundamental role of memory and repetition in the making of the exiles' landscapes will be examined. In the context of exile, distance turns the remembered geography of the homeland into a nostalgic landscape in which bodies ache with sorrow. How do dancing rituals heal the minds and bodies of the exiles, and how does the imagination creatively feed both on what is remembered from the past and what has been forgotten? Finally, in the third part, the focus will be on the way McCann's fiction depicts dancing bodies writing what words are unable to express: the vital, imminent movement of hope. Not only do McCann's characters dance away the 'spirit of gravity', but they gracefully trace the gestures of their imminent future. Dancing movements map the memory of trauma, but they are also the sign of a genuine metamorphosis as they sublimate nostalgia and create a choreography of hope.

### **Dancing as a Form of Exile**

Colum McCann was born in Dublin in 1965 and began his career as a journalist in *The Irish Press*. In the early 1980s he took a bicycle tour across North America and then worked as a wilderness guide in a program for juvenile delinquents in Texas. After a year and a half in Japan, he and his wife Allison moved to New York where they currently live with their three children. Colum McCann is also the award-winning author of six novels, *Songdogs* (1995), *This Side of Brightness* (1998), *Dancer* (2003), *Zoli* (2006) *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), as well as *TransAtlantic* (2013).<sup>7</sup> Yet his two collections of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1994) and *Everything in This Country Must* (2000)<sup>8</sup> have also been widely acclaimed and mostly contain stories relating to themes of exile and displacement. His first collection, with twelve short stories, tells of the suffering and pain of home leaving and displacement in various ways. In the first part of the collection, the narratives depict situations of uprooting and departure from the homeland and deal with the complexity of adapting to a new place. The narratives emphasise the effects of time on the characters' or the narrators' perceptions of the place they have abandoned. The second part of the collection describes situations of exile within society itself where characters are either excluded from 'normal' society because of some physical disability, or because they have committed some crime. It illustrates a form of exile within society. Death is the third form of exile presented in the last short stories of the collection, and it is the most radical of all, as exile then means being utterly retired from the world of the living.

The bodies of the travellers, wanderers or other misfits are central in all the short stories.

In the short story entitled 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the central character Flaherty is a former boxer who has been abandoned by his wife Juanita. He lives in the past, as if his life had stopped many decades before, on the day his wife left him. The character never adapted to his Californian environment, and this is visible in the way he is clad, wearing a dark overcoat under a scorching sun. More generally, the first short stories of the collection show how difficult it is for some of the characters to adapt to a new place. Bodies suffer from illnesses or mutilation. When the woman narrator of the short story 'Sisters' leaves Ireland, her father hugs her, but the text describes her as an object, comparing her to a cigarette: 'My father had hugged and cradled me like his last cigarette at Shannon Airport'.<sup>9</sup> When two decades later she clandestinely crosses the border to the United States, she is still escaping the sordid reality of her family in Ireland with a sister suffering from anorexia and mutilating her skinny body. However, as she escapes and crosses the border, huddling like a foetus in the bunk of her boyfriend's car, she still has the status of an object in the syntax of the sentences describing her: 'Now, two decades later, in the boot of a car, huddled, squashed under a blanket, I ask myself why I am smuggling myself across the Canadian border to go into a country that never allowed me to stay, to see a sister I never really knew in the first place'.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, guilt is latent and hope is often not an option. Dancing movements and gestures then become a form of exile from the gravity of reality. In the short story 'Sisters', the narrator does not become an actual, thinking and desiring subject until the final meeting with her dying sister in a South-American hospital. Only then does she fully accept the actual time and space in which she lives. At the beginning of the short story, the narrator describes what she used to do with her hands while she 'gave'<sup>11</sup> herself to strangers. Her hands seemed to be dancing and the dancing exiled her spirit out of her body and took her away from the sordid reality she was experiencing: 'Sometimes I would hold my hands out beyond their shoulders and pretend that I could shape or carve something out of my hand, something that had eyes, and a face, someone very little, within my hand, whose job it was to try to understand'.<sup>12</sup> Gestures and movements indeed tell a lot of the mental and physical suffering linked to exile.

In 'Breakfast for Enrique', the eponymous character, Enrique, who comes from Argentina, is also dying. The narrative hints at his parents back home in Argentina, and the narrator illustrates the distance by pausing in the narrative and describing the imagined pain of the father who does not know where his son is. In doing so, the narrator shows how the father's

body merges with the landscape: 'There are times I imagine a man at the very tip of Tierra del Fuego reaching his arms out towards the condors that flap their wings against the red air, wondering where his son has gone'.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, the parents in 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River' waiting for their sons who have left to Continental Europe, seem to be integrated into the landscape of the homeland. Just as Enrique's father seems to be about to fly like a condor, standing on the verge of the mountain, in 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', the mothers fish in the river 'in vain',<sup>14</sup> symbolically trying to join their exiled children, throwing their lines in unison over the river.

The original movement of displacement caused by exile, whether geographical or psychological, is re-enacted through the gestures and skipping or dancing movements of the bodies of those who have experienced exile. The way their bodies move in space is meant to tame the feelings of separation and alienation induced by exile. On the other hand, the reader witnesses a distortion in the way landscape is represented and that distortion seems to betray the ambiguity and unreliability of memory. Memories transform the present reality of the characters as they try to cope with their new environment. But conversely, landscape plays tricks on the mind, as it makes sudden memories surge again to the surface.

### **Memory and Repetition: Dance as a Ritual between Past and Present**

In Colum McCann's short stories the flow of memories is mingled with implicit facts and forgotten elements of experience. Everything becomes a pretext to make the past come back. At the beginning of 'Sisters' memories of home are mingled with colours and elements of landscape that refer to the mysterious depth of the bogland emerging in the form of black water while hinting at its preserving qualities:

I have come to think of our lives as the colours of that place – hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel. I remember when I was fifteen, cycling across those bogs in the early evenings, on my way to the dancehall in my clean, yellow socks.<sup>15</sup>

Equally important is the reference to the same yellow socks that closes the short story: 'Where, Sister, did you put those yellow socks of mine anyway?'.<sup>16</sup> They have actually travelled across the short story and ended up in a South American convent where Sheona finds her dying sister Brigid and learns that she has grown into the habit of wearing yellow socks, too.

The socks, therefore, stand as a symbol of the link between the sisters that transcends space as well as time and despite the very different lives they have led. It links them both to their common past and origins.

On the other hand, a few short stories show characters striving to screen themselves from the past and keep it from resurfacing. 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' best illustrates the will to build a protection from any sort of resurgence. As early as the first page, the narrator argues that Osobe, a Japanese exile, has come 'to Ireland to forget it all'.<sup>17</sup> The narrative depicts a character who, year after year, papers the walls of his house with

layers and layers of wallpaper [. . .]. It looked as if Osobe had been gathering the walls onto himself, probably some sort of psychological effect of the bomb. Because the wallpaper had been so dense my father and some members of the town council simply had to knock the house down, burying everything that Osobe owned in the rubble.<sup>18</sup>

Not only does Osobe seem to build a protective shell for himself, but as he adds up layer after layer of wallpaper, he constructs a palimpsest version of the place he lives in. It is as if this ritualised wallpapering enabled him to create a place of his own, free from the past, and to focus on the possibilities offered by the present. The same image of permeability can be observed in 'Step We Gaily On We Go'. In this short story, the narrative states that on the day Juanita left Flaherty, the 'courtyard was grey as granite [. . .] granite was impermeable. That he [Flaherty] had learned. Granite doesn't let water through'.<sup>19</sup> Yet, despite all the attempts at protection against the past, dancing movements, gestures, leaps and skips enable the characters in the collection to trace links between the past and the present and give meaning to what could not otherwise be expressed.

In McCann's short stories, dancing in city dancehalls is part of the cultural memories of the exiles. However, those public dances should not necessarily be understood totally differently from the random dancing movements of bodies suddenly leaping or skipping in an attempt to express what characters or narrators cannot formulate or have forgotten. In 'Sisters', Sheona goes to 'dancehalls' and so does Laura in 'From Many, One',<sup>20</sup> as well as Moira and her sister-narrator in 'A Word in Edgewise'.<sup>21</sup> Dancehalls are first and foremost places of amusement but dances or movements of bodies trigger memories of the past also when they are ritualised. Indeed, the repetition of movements and gestures partakes of a general acceptance and appropriation of space. In turn, the repetitive movement of the body or gesture, as in a dance, creates a specific landscape. Faced with the abstraction of foreign and alien space, the

characters create their own subjective landscape through the movements of their bodies. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze described repetition and habit as pertaining fundamentally to dancing.<sup>22</sup> In McCann's short stories the function of repetitive dancing movements as a means of converting gravity into lightness is obviously a key element.

At the beginning of the short story 'Around the Bend and Back Again', the main character, who is a disturbed young woman who has lost her house and family, is described as circling repeatedly around one puddle. The narrator comments upon this circling as if the character were completely mired into the present and was cut off from any possible evolution, as if the past would not go away and no future was possible for her: 'She spent yesterday afternoon circling one of the puddles out by the greenhouse, just walking round and round like there's no tomorrow'.<sup>23</sup> In 'Step We Gaily On We Go', the narrator scatters his tale with literary and historical references, proverbs and sayings which connect the main character Flaherty to his Irish origins. The short story almost has the shape of a reel with Flaherty's plodding to and from the Laundromat. Here again the exiled character seems unable to move on and his past clings to him no matter what. Just as he seems trapped in a nonsensical routine, the rambling monologue of Moira's sister in 'A Word in Edgewise' resembles a form of stream of consciousness. She speaks to her dead sister but almost to herself out loud, voicing her inner thoughts and associating ideas subjectively without any rational link, forgetting that her sister is actually dead and lying on her death bed: 'between yourself and myself and the walls, sometimes I almost regret putting the cart before the horse, so to speak, marrying Eoin like I did'.<sup>24</sup> While she makes up her dead sister's face, it is almost as if she were painting the mask of life on her and forgetting that Moira is actually dead. She speaks to the dead woman as she always has, 'like a runaway train',<sup>25</sup> without really expecting any answer, without paying even any attention to the meaning of what she says, hence negating death itself. The music of her voice and the movements of her hand eventually enable her to acknowledge her place and the present of her sister's death. As the short story nears its end, the 'runaway train' comes to its destination and realises that she faces her dead sister's body on the day of her funeral. In the midst of the narratives, beyond the limited scope of words, the movements of dancing bodies hint at what words fail to express and generate a metamorphosis.

## Dancing into the Future

The dancing metamorphoses transform the exiles' nostalgia into a form of hope and trust in the future. In tracing into space the time of imminence, dancing movements and gestures make bodies escape gravity and the weight of the present moment. Thus, for one instant, the dancing movements of bodies create a form of eternity. One of the characteristics of art is always to try and push limits beyond what it can reasonably reach. McCann's writing carries words to the limits of words, towards what cannot be told nor spoken except through gesture or movement. When words fail to tell what emerges from the past because it has fallen into oblivion or it is too cruel to be told, bodies come along and dance out a few skips and leaps. As Giorgio Agamben argues in his essay 'Les Corps à venir',<sup>26</sup> 'dancing is then simply a form of bodily writing'.<sup>27</sup> This becomes a real feat when it concerns a fictional character.

Well before publishing his novel *Dancer*, in which McCann focused on dancing and Nureyev, dance was intimately part of his writing. In *This Side of Brightness* (1998), his hero Clarence Nathan worked on the construction sites of New York City's skyscrapers and leapt from floor to floor in a movement that the narrator himself described as a dance: 'he is swinging in the air, in nothingness'.<sup>28</sup> Colum McCann's latest short story 'Aisling',<sup>29</sup> with its repetitious ternary rhythm, also grounds its aesthetics in music and dance.<sup>30</sup> In a paper devoted to Deleuze's analyses of dance and movement, Estelle Jacoby<sup>31</sup> argues that dancing is about transmuting weight into lightness through movement.<sup>32</sup> Quoting an extract by Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*,<sup>33</sup> she mentions the Greek God Dionysos as the ideal dancing figure who enacts metamorphoses through dancing: the tension between weight and lightness destabilises bodies before they themselves undergo a metamorphosis. Dancing movements are thus interpreted as incessant metamorphoses. Significantly, this image of a metamorphosis through dancing is present in the last short story of McCann's *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* collection as for each soldier killed in Northern Ireland a baby swan is born and majestically spreads its wings in Cathal's lake. In the eponymous short story, 'Cathal's Lake', Anna Pavlova is a swan who 'in the early days of the year before the lake became so choc-a-bloc would dance across the water, sending flumes of spray in the air'.<sup>34</sup> In real life, the dancer Anna Pavlova was Nijinsky's partner in the Parisian 1912 performance of the 'Death of the Swan' at the Chatelet Theatre. At the end of the short story, the lake is practically covered with swans ready to take their flight. So Cathal resumes his digging and in the narrative his actions are compared to a struggle to meet his exiled relatives:

‘All these years of digging. A man could reach his brother in Australia, or his sister in America, or even his parents in heaven or hell if he put all that digging together into one single hole’.<sup>35</sup> While the reference to the swans links ‘Cathal’s Lake’ to Irish mythology and, in particular, to the legend of the Children of Lir, bodily movements and dancing gestures can be read as metaphors of the transforming power of those legendary swans. Similarly, in ‘Fishing the Sloe-Black River’, the title short story of the collection, a simple choreography conjures up the longing of twenty-six mothers for their exiled sons. Although the writing is extremely concise and the allusion to the sons’ exile is very brief, the true meaning of the mothers’ ritual weekly meetings and unproductive fishing in the sloe-black river is revealed by the tragic choreography of their motherly bodies throwing their lines in unison. The movements of their bodies lined along the river banks and the empty lines they eventually reel, illustrate how pointless their waiting is, but also how much all those little daily individual and collective rituals link them to that other place where their exiled children now live: ‘they waited the women, and they cast, all of them together’.<sup>36</sup> Symbolically, through their movements the dark and slimy emptiness of the river has been transformed into the lightness of hope, as a thin line lightly floating in the air.

In ‘Step We Gaily On We Go’, the title of which ironically comes from a wedding song, Flaherty is an ex-boxing champion and the word ‘dance’ is used to describe the movements of the boxer on the ring: ‘Wait for the hole. Spare the right. Dance a little. Jab. Atta boy. Move away. Dance. Throw that shoulder’.<sup>37</sup> The dancing movements are meant to fill in the moments between the actual boxing actions in which anything is still possible. They can also be read as pointing to fundamental moments in between the gestures and postures of bodies. In this moment of dance, the movement of bodies also translates the imminence of a metamorphosis, a transformation which is about to take place in the economy of the short story.

In ‘Through the Field’ and ‘Stolen Child’, the two short stories that depict a social type of exile and in which social institutions play a central role, dancing also appears as exhibiting a sort of metamorphosis:

Kevin gets me to stand at the end of the line and then just starts walking through the field. Everyone just steps on along behind him, but pretty soon he gets to jogging and everyone jogs along behind him, brushing away the grass with their hands, until it gets faster and faster and we’re hightailing through that field, the grass parting along in our way. [. . .] My own body gets kind of loose and I find myself

damn near dancing through the field. I haven't danced like this since the club in Giddings burnt down.<sup>38</sup>

The dancing inscribes in the air above the freshly ploughed field something that cannot be written or described in words and which has to do with the sense of being there and simply alive. The same sort of existential revelation can be read at the end of the short story 'Sisters' in relation with dance. One of the many discoveries Sheona makes as she is reunited with her sister Brigid is that her sister has learnt how to dance.<sup>39</sup> The episode is crucial, as it shows that, over time, dance is a language that has become common to both sisters. Sheona is standing at the foot of her dying sister's bed and she is handling Brigid's feet as if they were puppets and as if her feet were going to talk to her:

Her feet are blue and very cold to the touch. I rub them slowly at first. I remember when we were children, very young, before all that, and we had held buttercups to each other's chins on the edges of brown fields. I want her feet to tell me about butter. As I massage, I think I see her lean her head sideways and smile, though I'm not sure. I don't know why, but I want to take her feet in my mouth. It seems obscene, but I want to and I don't'.<sup>40</sup>

This extract can be compared to an episode in Diasnas's show *Le Sourire de l'Aube* which Giorgio Agamben discussed in his essay on dancing. Diasnas is a contemporary dancer and the show Agamben mentions in his essay was produced at the Bastille Theatre in February 1995. He described how Diasnas put his bare feet negligently on a suitcase and how his feet suddenly seemed to move away from his body, as if transformed into metaphysical puppets which, over the course of a few minutes, experienced a life of their own in reunions and separations. At the very moment when the hand of the dancer popped out and got hold of the handle of the suitcase, the feet returned to their simple nature of feet and absurdly had to fit back inside a pair of shoes and walk about. Through this example, Agamben wished to emphasise that in the brief interval during which the mime's feet quitted their role as puppets and had not yet resumed their walking role, 'a pitless being' had emerged. That 'pitless' being was beyond any shaped or shapeless thing, beyond anything utterable or unutterable, a being existing outside any system of representation of reality. In 'Sisters', while the narrator massages her sister's feet, all of a sudden she is seized by the urge to take her sister's feet in her mouth. As in Diasnas's show, those feet cease to exist as mere feet but suddenly also reveal the image of a 'pitless being'. What is essential in this example is what has

been created by the massaging of the hands and feet, between the moment when the desire was expressed and the moment when the word ‘obscene’ can be read. During this hiatus, it is as if a veil had been lifted over reality and a future becomes altogether possible. Not surprisingly, Sheona then looks out of the window and thinks of her future. The metamorphosis of her gaze, as well as the possibility of a future, has been expressed through a gesture, in a movement of feet like dancing puppets.

## Conclusion

In Colum McCann’s short stories, dancing seems to reconcile bodies with the actual space and time in which they live, thus suspending inner turmoil and chaos. In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou defines dancing as forgetting, because bodies forget their weight. He also defines it as a beginning because any dancing gesture should act as if it were re-inventing its own beginning. He then goes on to define dancing as a game because it frees bodies from all social constraint, and eventually also presents it as a wheel turning on itself.<sup>41</sup>

Colum McCann’s first short story collection expresses through dancing movements and rhythms the vital energy that goes along with any exile. Movements trace in the air a form of choreography of the times to come. The work of the imagination and the art of fiction enable Colum McCann to transcend the harsh reality and turn the memory of land into a landscape. However, to the characters in most of the short stories, exile contains within itself some of the inalienable nature of death. The experience of otherness is like a deep chasm that art can only hope to bridge and sublimate. In his writing, Colum McCann is as much a poet as a choreographer, for he attempts to sublime time, space and the shortcomings of memory by conjuring up visual references, linguistic tropes and the arabesques of dancing bodies. According to Alain Badiou, dancing is the perfect metaphor of thought, because just like dance, thought is an intensification of actual experience. However, dancing also suspends time into space and because it is an absolutely ephemeral art form, dancing has to do with eternity. Nureyev’s urge was to tell a story and dance at the same time. Even in his early short stories, Colum McCann seemed to be ready for an encounter with the hero of his novel *Dancer*.

## Notes and References

- 1 Colum McCann, *Dancer* (London: Phoenix, 2003).
- 2 See, for example, Eoin Flannery, *Colum McCann: The Aesthetics of Redemption*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011) or John Cusatis, *Understanding Colum McCann* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).
- 3 Susan Cahill and Eoin Flannery, eds., *This Side of Brightness: Essays on the Fiction of Colum McCann* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012).
- 4 Colum McCann, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (London: Phoenix, 1994).
- 5 Marie Mianowski, *Irish Contemporary Landscapes in Literature and the Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012) 1-2.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London: Penguin, 1961) 178.
- 7 Colum McCann, *Songdogs* (London: Phoenix, 1995); *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix, 1998); *Zoli* (London: Phoenix, 2006); *Let the Great World Spin* (London: Phoenix, 2009); *TransAtlantic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 8 Colum McCann, *Everything in This Country Must* (London: Phoenix, 2000).
- 9 McCann, 'Sisters', *Fishing* 4.
- 10 McCann, 'Sisters' 3.
- 11 McCann, 'Sisters' 1.
- 12 McCann, 'Sisters' 1.
- 13 McCann, 'Sisters' 30.
- 14 McCann, 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River', *Fishing* 56.
- 15 McCann, 'Sisters', *Fishing* 1.
- 16 McCann, 'Sisters' 22.
- 17 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' 37.
- 18 McCann, 'A Basket Full of Wallpaper' 50.
- 19 McCann, 'Step We Gaily On We Go' 17.
- 20 McCann, 'From Many One' 114.
- 21 McCann, 'A Word In Edgewise' 157.
- 22 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum International Publishing 2004).
- 23 McCann, 'Around the Bend and Back Again' 117.
- 24 McCann, 'A Word In Edgewise' 162.
- 25 McCann, 'A Word In Edgewise' 170.
- 26 Giorgio Agamben, 'Le Corps à Venir', *Les Saisons de la Danse* 292 (1997): 6-8.
- 27 Paul Valéry, 'Philosophie de la danse', *Œuvres I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 1390-1403.
- 28 Colum McCann, *This Side of Brightness* (London: Phoenix, 1998) 197.
- 29 Colum McCann, 'Aisling', *New Irish Short Stories*, ed. Joseph O'Connor (London: Faber & Faber, 2011) 182-86.
- 30 Marie Mianowski, 'Skipping and Gasping, Sighing and Hoping in Colum McCann's 'Aisling' (2011): The Making of a Poet', in special issue 'The Irish Short Story of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', ed. Bertrand Cardin, *Journal of the Short Story in English / Les Cahiers de la nouvelle* 63 (2014). Forthcoming.
- 31 Estelle Jacoby, 'Penser la Danse avec Deleuze', *Littérature* 128 (2002): 93-103.
- 32 Jacoby 94. My translation of 'En effet, travail de transmutation, la danse s'appuie sur le lourd, le corps, pour en faire du léger dans l'affirmation du mouvement'.

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- 33 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la Philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962) 222.
- 34 McCann, 'Cathal's Lake' 180.
- 35 McCann, 'Cathal's Lake' 178.
- 36 McCann, 'Fishing the Sloe-Black River' 56.
- 37 McCann, 'Step We Gaily On We Go' 60.
- 38 McCann, 'Through the Field' 93.
- 39 McCann, 'Sisters' 18.
- 40 McCann, 'Sisters' 21.
- 41 Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

## **Yeats's Hauntings: Exorcising the Demon of Fanaticism in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer***

*Wit Pietrzak*

*Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) is among the most radically compressed volumes that Yeats ever produced. Standing between two landmark volumes, *Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *The Tower* (1928), the collection could easily be overlooked were it not for three of Yeats's prime achievements, 'Easter, 1916', 'The Second Coming' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. R.F. Foster notes that *Michael Robartes* 'was not a full "trade" collection, but an interim statement', seeing the book as an anticipation of *The Tower*.<sup>1</sup> However, I would argue that, its brevity notwithstanding, the collection plays out a crucial conflict of allegiances in Yeats's life. The poems are invariably haunted by the never-named composite spectre of Maud Gonne, who appears to frustrate the poet's quest for wisdom and happiness. The recurrent images of political fanaticism and its destructive influence on one's life are offset by mystical visions of illumination that are sought through the union of the poet with his mediumistic lover, who represents Yeats's wife, George. The complexity of this dramatisation shows that Yeats's idea of Gonne had changed profoundly. In *Michael Robartes* she stands for a single-mindedness that results in the sterility of art and thought; as a result she becomes a symbolic agent of chaos and destruction, a sort of prefiguration of 'That insolent fiend Robert Artisson' from 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'. Her place as the erstwhile muse is taken by George Yeats, whose mystical contact with the occult Instructors presents a different mode of haunting that offers illumination in lieu of a doctrine of hatred. Therefore, *Michael Robartes* will be shown here as an important transition point in Yeats's oeuvre, in which he made a successful effort to exorcise the bitter presence of Maud Gonne as an icon of fanaticism so as to make space for the intellectual beauty expressed in mystically-conveyed images. Even though he was to engage in unparalleled radicalism in the late 1930s, Yeats would never again come to appreciate Gonne as an embodiment of Irish national and aesthetic aspirations.

The poems that comprise the volume were composed during a particularly turbulent period in Yeats's life. On the one hand, the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish war forced him to take uneasy sides in the

political strife that ensued; on the other, in the summer of 1917 Maud Gonne yet again declined his marriage proposal, followed swiftly by her daughter's, Iseult, similar rejection, which brought him to Georgie Hyde-Lees, to whom he was shortly married. Although the beginning of their marriage was most inauspicious, eventually, after Mrs Yeats's revelation of her mediumistic gift, he was able to confide to Lady Gregory that 'from being more miserable than I ever remember being since Maud Gonne's marriage I became extremely happy. That sense of happiness has lasted ever since'.<sup>2</sup> His wife's gift sparked an outburst of poetic activity that far surpassed in both number and quality all of Yeats's lyrics executed under the spell of his erstwhile Helen of Troy.

Such a redeployment of allegiances, both aesthetic and socio-political, is thematised throughout *Michael Robartes*. Even though the volume in no way severs the links with his earlier work, Yeats seeks to distance himself from the kind of fanaticism that Gonne represented to him in the period between the Rising and the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century. The arrangement of the poems in the book, meticulous as usual, suggests a three-part division, with each part struggling with a slightly altered form of a spectre of fanaticism. The first four lyrics deal with the poet's personal life being haunted by images from his past. The following five centre on the events of the Easter week and their aftermath, attempting to exorcise the demon of political hatred. Finally, the four poems, beginning with 'Towards Break of Day' and ending with 'A Prayer for my Daughter', focus on the tension between the actual state of civilisation dominated by fanaticism and visions of what Yeats termed a 'poetical culture'.<sup>3</sup> The last two short lyrics are a coda to the book, asserting the poet's position developed throughout.

## I

The eponymous poem features a didactic discussion in which 'He' explains to a woman that all knowledge is contained in the human body. The tone of either speaker suggests that Yeats wrote the lyric with Iseult Gonne in mind.<sup>4</sup> 'She' appears ironic, crisply playing with the metaphors that 'He' devises to illustrate her confusion with the knowledge 'He' tries to impart to her ('My wretched dragon is perplexed'<sup>5</sup>). At the same time, there is no denying the fact that 'She' is also desirous of his wisdom, encouraging him to explicate some of the more recondite of his ideas. However, the first stanza implies that 'She' may in fact be a composite figure, comprising both Iseult and Maud Gonne. The image of the knight killing the dragon that 'every morning rose again', itself evoking the ceaseless struggle for the

beloved that Yeats dramatised in Book Two of *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *Dhoya*, is a symbolic depiction of man's struggle with woman's opinionated mind:

Could the impossible come to pass  
 She would have time to turn her eyes,  
 Her lover thought, upon the glass  
 And on the instant grow wise.

The fragment evokes 'The Two Trees'. The earlier lyric uses the image of 'the bitter glass / The demons, with their subtle guile, / Lift before us when they pass' to implore his beloved not to pay heed to 'The ravens of unresting thought' that make her 'tender eyes grow all unkind'. Instead, she is besought to 'gaze in thine own heart, / The holy tree is growing there'. Only if the woman sheds opinions and thoughts can they be united 'Gyring, spiring to and fro / In those great ignorant leafy ways'. The 'gazing in thine own heart' is an image of the beloved who is not obsessed with worldly preoccupations but rather, as it is put in 'Adam's Curse', understands that 'To be born woman is to know – / Although they do not talk of it at school – / That we must labour to be beautiful'. In 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' the woman is advised to look in the glass which is not carried before her by demons, but one in which she would achieve an introspective insight, to gain similar knowledge to that gleaned in 'The Two Trees'. 'Michael Robartes' thus emphasises that women's role is to cooperate with men in seeking some prelapsarian unity; whereas, should they devote themselves to opinions, 'they grow cruel' until 'the opinion becomes so much a part of them that it is as though a part of their flesh becomes, as it were, stone, and much of their being passes out of life'.<sup>6</sup> This image of petrification will recur in 'Easter, 1916'.

The origin of the knowledge adumbrated in 'Michael Robartes' is unveiled in 'Solomon and the Witch'. A celebration of Yeats's wife and their mutual revelation, the lyric underlines the importance of the woman in the process of winning knowledge, directly depicting the sessions of automatic writing that the Yeatses pursued since 27 October 1917. The poem was written in March 1918 together with another laudation of George Yeats, 'Solomon to Sheba'. However, it is 'Solomon and the Witch' that vests more authority in the woman. In this poem, the witch is the more active figure, initiating the conversation and conveying the knowledge for Solomon to interpret. The poem takes its central image of 'Chance being at one with Choice' from the script for 26 January 1919, which speaks of 'joyous [*space*] luck [*space*] through choice [*space*] the gregarious luck through chance'.<sup>7</sup> Once chance and choice coincide, there comes a perfect

image that marks an end of the present dispensation of the world.<sup>8</sup> In *Vision*, Yeats associates the conflation of chance and choice with Phase 15, adding that in it ‘contemplation and desire, united into one, inhabit a world where every beloved image has a bodily form, and every bodily form is loved’.<sup>9</sup> However, in the poem a complete image is not attained, as ‘Maybe [it] is too strong / Or maybe is not strong enough’.<sup>10</sup> This failure marks an essential aspect of Yeats’s vision of creative life in that if the image were obtained, it would mean that there is no more space for poetic expression. The point that in life one is forever questing for the right image continues throughout Yeats’s oeuvre and is lucidly expressed in ‘To the Rose upon the Rood of Time’, where the speaker implores the rose to ‘Come near’, at the same time pleading ‘Ah, leave me still / A little space for the rose breath to fill’.<sup>11</sup> ‘Solomon and the Witch’ ends on a similar note, with the witch crying in both spiritual and bodily ecstasy ‘O! Solomon! Let us try again’.<sup>12</sup>

What the two lovers discover is that the search matters more than its ultimate goal. There can be no final revelation but only partial glimpses, what Yeats called after Mallarmé ‘the trembling of the veil of the Temple’.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the essential feature of these momentary insights is that they always trigger a recommencement of the search. This is explained in the automatic script; when Yeats asks what qualities stand in ‘indissoluble relation with the image’, the medium replies that ‘its *essential* is the *self-moving*’.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the nature of the quest for images, as ‘Solomon and the Witch’ illustrates, is its non-fulfilment. The poet, who strives after wisdom, is to seek forever the right image and never to grasp it fully. In ‘Per Amica Silentiae Lunae’, completed some months before the poem, this process is phrased most aptly: ‘I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning, in the humility of the brutes’.<sup>15</sup> It is in such a terrible lightning that the vision in the poem ends.

In the same essay, Yeats explains that knowledge comes from the images that exist in *Anima Mundi*, the soul of the world. They are conveyed to one through one’s anti-self, what Yeats also calls ‘the Daemon’ or ‘Daimon’. The notion of anti-self is an extension of Yeats’s theory of mask understood as ‘an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of [one’s] internal nature’.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, ‘because the ghost is simple, the man heterogeneous and confused, they are but knit together when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and it may be dreads, and of that only’.<sup>17</sup> The tragedy of life is the constant conflict between man and his anti-self, which must never end if

images are to continue to flow. Yeats also explains that 'the Daemon [. . .] brings man again and again to the place of choice, heightening the temptation that the choice may be as final as possible, imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever of works not impossible is the most difficult'.<sup>18</sup> This fragment of 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae' appears to underscore 'Solomon and the Witch'; Yeats argues that the chance and, implicitly, choice, since they originate in the Daimon, will in fact always remain elusive. The moments of crisis, when choices are made, are procured by the anti-self and serve to increase one's creativity. The witch in the poem knows that just as sexual desire is insatiable so is the spiritual yearning for the beautiful image, since 'beauty [. . .] is but bodily life in some ideal condition'.<sup>19</sup>

The wisdom of the body that 'He' preached in 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' derives from man's physical and spiritual unity with woman. It is this unity that the next two poems in the collection reveal to be under threat. In both 'An Image from a Past Life' and 'Under Saturn' the personal drama of Yeats and his wife is invoked. Tormented by a feeling that he 'would love [Iseult] to my life's end',<sup>20</sup> Yeats brought his marriage to a brink of dissolution in a matter of weeks. 'Fully aware of the reasons for his unhappiness, first [George] contemplated leaving him'. Yet, instead, she tried 'arousing his interest through their joint fascination with the occult'.<sup>21</sup> So the automatic writing sessions began. In 'Solomon and the Witch', Sheba seems possessed by what the script identifies as an Instructor, while the sudden emergence of 'A sweetheart from another life' in 'An Image from a Past Life' is reminiscent of Frustrators that would occasionally disturb Mrs Yeats's spiritual connection. In the poem, it is 'His' unconscious 'Image of poignant recollection' that shatters the woman's peace of mind. Read in the context of 'Solomon and the Witch', the visitation of 'the hovering thing' represents a drastic interruption in the revelatory epithalamium.

The haunting presence in 'An Image' has recently been identified as Iseult Gonne by Foster<sup>22</sup> and as Olivia Shakespeare by Saddlemyer.<sup>23</sup> However, the evocation of the spectre whose beauty 'had driven [it] mad' as well as its passionate frenzy described in the last stanza seem to suggest Maud Gonne,<sup>24</sup> 'With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind / That is not natural in an age like this'. In 'Under Saturn', the 'lost love' unequivocally refers to Gonne. Still, in both poems, Yeats seeks to assure his wife that the past loves pose no threat to her and 'will not prevent him from recognising that she brought him two gifts he desperately needed when he sought refuge in her from his obsessive pursuit of Iseult Gonne – comfort and wisdom'.<sup>25</sup> Again, in emphasising the contrast between his wife and

spectres of Maud Gonne, Yeats declares his affiliation with wisdom and domestic comfort against frenzy and self-centredness. Moreover, the fact that throughout the volume Gonne is only alluded to with varying degrees of precision indicates that her position in Yeats's mind was relegated to the background. Although she remains a persistent figure, it is no longer her almost divine beauty that haunts the poet but rather her obduracy and lack of wisdom. Over a year after finishing 'Under Saturn', Yeats brought up a direct charge against Gonne's political activities. In *The Stirring of the Bones*, covering Queen Victoria's Jubilee, he remembered, 'a week [after the riots] Maud Gonne marches forty thousand children through the streets of Dublin, and in a field beyond Drumcondra, and in the presence of a priest of their Church, they swear to cherish towards England, until the freedom of Ireland has been won, an undying enmity'. This precipitated his rueful disillusionment with Gonne's politics: 'How many of these children will carry bomb or rifle when a little under or a little over thirty?'<sup>26</sup> The preoccupation with Gonne's fanaticism enters the focus of the five politically-involved poems in *Michael Robartes*.

## II

Despite the fact that 'Easter, 1916' was written before Yeats's estrangement from Gonne, the poem displays a similar tension between wisdom and a spectre of fanaticism to the previous poems in *Michael Robartes*. Brown lucidly summarises the central conflict: 'Yeats represents the dangers of fervent, even fanatical, commitment to an ideal, as a dialectic between stone and a living stream, between the immutable and flux'.<sup>27</sup> The poem presents two reasons why the heart may be turned to stone. On the one hand, it results from obsession with 'one purpose alone' and on the other from 'Too long a sacrifice'. Both are allusions to Gonne's 'stony cruelty',<sup>28</sup> the former idea represents her 'one-idea'dness', as she was to describe herself in her autobiography,<sup>29</sup> while the latter is derived from what Yeats explained as her hankering after 'some memorable action for final consecration of her youth'.<sup>30</sup> In both cases the stone image is meant in a negative sense. Little wonder that Gonne took exception to the poem, asserting in a letter that 'it isn't worthy of you & above all it isn't worthy of the subject'.<sup>31</sup> Gonne berates Yeats's poetic achievement, considering it inferior to the grandeur of the rebels, the 'drunken, vainglorious lout', John MacBride included. She stresses that those who gave their life for Ireland fulfilled their destiny in the act. As a result, in her opinion his poem should unequivocally sing the 'spiritual beauty' and

‘tragic dignity’ of the Rising. She could hardly have more misconstrued the poem.

‘Easter, 1916’ is underscored by Yeats’s theoretical foundations of society that he sketched in his diary of 1909. He observes there that ‘all civilisation is held together by the suggestions of an invisible hypnotist – by artificially created illusions. The knowledge of reality is always in some measure a secret knowledge. It is a kind of death’.<sup>32</sup> These illusions are comprised of powerful images that mould civilisation according to their antithetical logic. To probe beneath the veneer of illusion must result in the death of the particular form of civilisation that is immediately re-organised around another image. This idea is reapproached ten years later in ‘If I Were Four-and-Twenty’, where Yeats ends by ‘recommending to the nation a new doctrine, that of unity of being’.<sup>33</sup> Very much on his mind in 1919, Unity of Being represents for Yeats a state of mind and spirit in which all conflicts are brought to a precarious and transient balance, where they are not resolved but kept in a creative tension, therefore existing like ‘a perfectly proportioned human body’.<sup>34</sup> Unity of Being may be achieved when man seeks an ‘expression of Daimonic thought,’<sup>35</sup> that is, the one most opposed to his internal nature. Yeats also applies this idea to civilisation in general. In the *Four Years* section of *The Trembling of the Veil*, he asserts that ‘nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is, of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity’.<sup>36</sup> What defines a nation is an image antithetical to its actual nature.

Therefore, the daring act of the ‘motley’ crowd of the first stanza of ‘Easter, 1916’ appears to result from the fact that the men followed the antithetical dictate of the Daimon. As a result, when the speaker asseverates in the last stanza that ‘our part / To murmur name upon name’, which is then repeated with a more stately diction: ‘I write it out in a verse’, he means his words literally. Ramazani concludes his reading of the elegy saying that Yeats ‘re-enacts a historical change as a perpetual linguistic event’<sup>37</sup> – perpetual and perpetuating a reformation of Ireland around a riveting image. The historical event did not receive a wide public acclaim until the leaders of the Rebellion were executed. Yeats seems to have understood that the potential of the Uprising lay not so much in its political effect, for the speaker ponders ‘Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith’, as in the powerful energies that it could unleash in the popular imagination provided it was captured in the right image. This notion is anticipated in his letter to John Quinn, in which Yeats wonders ‘if

[he] could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction'.<sup>38</sup> Since in the past he did not manage to channel the thoughts of the young, some of whom may have participated in the declaration of enmity to England that Gonne had instigated, he could at least attempt to fashion the future. Already in early May he got hold of his central image of 'terrible beauty' that he used in a letter to Gregory<sup>39</sup> but it took him over four months to compose the remainder of the poem. Thus, the 'terrible beauty' represents an image that is to create unity by evoking a state of mind most distant from Ireland's real one. The new birth, which in the poem comes from the sacrifice, is not understood in political terms but rather as a rekindling of Irish imagination, which Yeats was preoccupied with at least since the quarrel over the Library of Ireland with Charles Gavan Duffy in 1892.

From this angle, 'Sixteen Dead Men' is not so clearly in favour of the Rebellion in that, in the conflict between those that recommend to 'still the land / Till Germany's overcome' and Patrick Pearse and Martin MacDonagh, neither side is shown to be blameless. Whereas the former appear to be prevaricators, the latter seem fanatics, 'deaf and dumb' to all voices that oppose them. 'The Rose Tree' is perhaps the only lyric supportive of the Uprising, although the poet can only extol the sacrifice in symbolic terms. The poem, invoking 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time', accepts the heroic gesture of Pearse and James Connolly as having placed them now on the same plane as Cuchulain and Fergus. Thus 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'The Rose Tree' engage in a debate that resembles that of the latter two stanzas of 'Easter, 1916'. 'Sixteen Dead Men' is haunted by political fanaticism, deafness and dumbness corresponding to the 'one-idea'dness' and sacrifice that may have triggered the Rising but is unlikely to rework the violence into a potent image. In response, 'The Rose Tree' offers to narrate the appreciation of the Rebellion in images that turn the event into a sacrifice for symbolic rejuvenation. Thus, the three Uprising lyrics seek to shake off the spectre of 'one-idea'd' politics that would focus only on the immediate goal of regaining independence. That spectre bears the face of Maud Gonne.

Following their row in November 1918,<sup>40</sup> Yeats attributed Gonne's sudden, if expected, fury to what he termed neurasthenia and general infirmity after her imprisonment but also to her mind frame, which, as he told John Quinn, must have been complicated 'by the fact that ever since Easter 1916 her convictions have been fixed ideas, always making her judgement unsound'.<sup>41</sup> Those fixed ideas were nothing new in fact, since she had long cultivated her two interlocked obsessions, the desire to free Ireland and, more disturbingly, her abhorrence of England. Back in the

early days of their friendship, Gonne appears to have admired Yeats's poetry in so far as it 'belongs to Ireland'.<sup>42</sup> For Yeats, towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century this would have seemed a contradiction in terms; it was his poetry at its best to which Ireland would belong.

Gonne also haunts 'On a Political Prisoner', although, in a letter to Pound, the woman in the poem is identified as Constance Markievicz.<sup>43</sup> Yeats, however, saw Markievicz as bearing 'some small physical resemblance to Maud Gonne'.<sup>44</sup> Both women illustrate a similar point, also called up in 'Easter, 1916' in reference to Markievicz, whose voice 'grew shrill'; having lost 'youth's lonely wildness', they both became 'Blind and leader[s] of the blind'. In this poem, as in 'Easter, 1916', Yeats portrays the composite figure of the woman as a fanatic, guilty of betraying her youth in favour of political action. For Yeats, Gonne's and Markievicz's political single-mindedness has destroyed their bodies and perverted their minds, as a result leaving them bitter and decrepit. What they have sacrificed for the political ideal that they cherished is the promise of Unity of Being that results from finding a balance between body and soul, the natural self and the Daimon. Therefore, the terrible irony of their lives is that they squandered their symbolic potential for making a true change in people's minds, which alone would have ensured the emergence of 'poetical culture' in Ireland, what Yeats believed was the first step to freedom. The 'rock-bred, sea-borne bird' under whose 'storm-beaten breast / Cried out the hollows of the sea' represents an image of heroic ideal that could revitalise the nation deadened by the 'one-idea'd' politicians inveighed against in 'The Leaders of the Crowd' who 'to keep their certainty accuse / All that are different of a base intent'.<sup>45</sup>

'The Leaders of the Crowd' places fanaticism against the truth that 'flourishes where the student's lamp has shone'. The 'student's lamp' evokes the Romantic trope for the revelation of truth as well as the Rosicrucian 'inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance' lit in the tomb of the Father Christian Rosencrucx. In a short piece devoted to Rosencrucx, Yeats observed that the ancients and Elizabethans 'abandoned themselves to imagination [. . .] and created beings who made the people of this world seem but shadows;' but the present 'age of criticism' has forgotten those passions.<sup>46</sup> Twelve years later, in 1907, Yeats invoked that insight again. In 'Poetry and Tradition', he observed that 'large numbers could not call up certain high feelings without accustomed verses'. Those high feelings came from 'mingling of contraries' that constituted the nobleness of art and poetry: 'the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing

turbulent energy, the perfection of its marmorean stillness'.<sup>47</sup> Yeats regards the role of poetry as a symbolic evocation of feelings that masses can then adopt. Unlike the critics, who would only employ logic and focus on expediency, the poets' task is to fashion images of powerful emotions because those images will then illuminate the path to an intellectual rebirth of the people. When in late 1918 Yeats wrote 'The Leaders of the Crowd', this high ideal of poetic vocation must have been rekindled due to his newly-unveiled wisdom. Thus, the knowledge that the lamp symbolises is the promise of wisdom inherent in the right image as opposed to the crowd's lack of subtlety, 'loud music' and 'heartier loves'. As 'the voice, the soul of the crowd',<sup>48</sup> the one who never 'Complained of the people', Maud Gonne is a haunting presence in the poem. She is an implicit referent of a powerful accusation in that Yeats indicts her fanaticism and shows her path of life as leading to 'the tomb'. The context of 'Easter, 1916' returns here. The Rising can only be regarded as signalling a new birth if it is remade into an image that mingles contraries within the space of a single utterance. Therefore, Yeats comes to perceive Gonne's extolment of the Easter week as exemplifying the pernicious fanaticism that stifled the flowering of passions which could awaken the nation.

### III

The five political poems in *Michael Robartes* show the spectre of fanaticism hovering over Ireland, granting that spectre Gonne's face, with a tint of Constance Markievicz's wasted features. The following four poems in the collection depart from national politics, shifting the focus to the individual search for Unity of Being as manifested in the wider pattern of history. 'Towards Break of Day' drops the critical agenda of 'The Leaders of the Crowd' and returns to the theme of 'Solomon and the Witch'. As Yeats halves a vision with his wife, what is revealed this time is not a perfect image to end the world but an allegorical depiction of the poet as 'The marvellous stag of Arthur'. In the context of the previous lyrics, 'Towards Break of Day' represents an attempt to banish the Gonnean spectre of political fanaticism by seeking the delight that comes from a search for the freedom of vision.

In the poem, Yeats implicitly focuses on his personal exorcism of Gonne as an erstwhile spiritual partner. 'Towards Break of Day' is underscored by an insight from the first edition of *A Vision*: 'When two people meditate upon the one theme, who have established a spiritual link, they will inevitably in my experience no matter how many miles apart, see pass before the mind's eye complementary images, images that complete

one another'.<sup>49</sup> The ending of the passage, due to its intricate syntax, implies that only beholding an image by two people will allow it to be seen in its complete form but also the completion may refer to the people themselves, who are thus spiritually joined in the vision. The background for the poem and the above-quoted excerpt is located in the script for 7 January 1919. It is some time later, as Saddlemyer notes, that Yeats and his wife's dream interactions are described as coming 'through telepathy & everything'.<sup>50</sup> The ability to share a vision results from the fact that they are supernaturally linked. This must have borne resonant implications for Yeats, since before the connection with his wife he only once established so strong a spiritual link with another woman. In *Memoirs*, he remembers the spiritual marriage with Gonne that also took place in a halved dream.<sup>51</sup> That dated back to December 1898. Ten years later, after the possible consummation of their union, she expressed her certainty that their relationship would henceforth continue as a spiritual union that 'will outlive this life, even if we never see each other in this world again'.<sup>52</sup> In 1919 this spiritual union would have, if not ended, then greatly lessened in importance. Seen against this background, 'Towards Break of Day' shows Yeats to be resolved that his future lies with his mediumistic wife rather than the hate-ridden 'leader of the crowd'.

Once freedom from politics has been adumbrated, Yeats focuses on the search for the image that will open the path to Unity of Being. 'Demon and Beast' in one breath casts away 'hatred and desire', both inextricably linked with Gonne, and records a fleeting experience of gaining the sweetness of sudden self-completeness. The poem is informed by an insight from 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae':

At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy, most commonly when at hazard I have opened a book of verse [. . .]. Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant, the open book beside me, or closed, my excitement having over-brimmed the page. I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life: everything fills me with affection [. . .]. I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end. It seems as if the vehicle had suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that the images from *Anima Mundi* [. . .] burn up time.<sup>53</sup>

The flow of images from *Anima Mundi* suggests a sudden achievement of unity with the anti-self. Such a unity, as Solomon and the witch discovered, cannot last but the overwhelming joy and solidarity with all that exists is worth 'trying again'. In 'Demon and Beast', as soon as he 'saw [his] freedom won', the poet discovers that he is welcomed by prominent

Irishmen from the past and that even ‘A stupid happy creature / Could rouse [his] whole nature’.<sup>54</sup> The speaker feels at one with other men but also with nature even in its most uninspiring forms. This ‘blessed’ state, which Yeats will call ‘Vacillation’, can only be experienced ‘the moment I cease to hate. I think the common condition of our life is hatred’.<sup>55</sup> It is to hatred that ‘every natural victory belongs’ but all such triumphs are worthless in comparison to the joy coming from even the briefest experience of Unity of Being, after all ‘What had the Caesars but their thrones?’.<sup>56</sup> In ‘Demon and Beast’, this blessed state passes shortly because it either is a ‘geriatric symptom’ or comes from a ‘persistent mortification of the flesh’ and for Yeats ‘it is only through acceptance of the body, ageing as it may be, that some temporary state of beatific serenity can be found’.<sup>57</sup>

Seen against the backdrop of ‘Demon and Beast’, ‘The Second Coming’ appears to be another instant of the demon and beast of natural victories dominating the world. In the poem, ‘The worst’, who are ‘full of passionate intensity’, only take interest in furthering their ideologies, whatever those might be. ‘Passionate intensity’ is a most positive term in Yeats provided it is used for the achievement of beauty and wisdom. Therefore, ‘the worst’ do possess the right quality to recreate the world but they are too single-minded to accomplish the feat. Moreover, despite their ‘passionate intensity’, they are slaves to the historical process. The violence that floods the world is not unleashed by them, rather they are tools of the ‘rough beast’. In the poem, the horrors that result from the ‘passionate intensity’ are imaged forth in passive voice: ‘The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned’.<sup>58</sup> According to the logic of *A Vision*, being true to the primary phase that began with ‘a rocking cradle’, ‘the worst’ eke out their existence following the dictates of their Body of Fate. Thus, the world depicted in ‘The Second Coming’ is subjected to the course of the present cycle of history. Ironically, Yeats summons his most powerful images to reveal that stagnancy and lack of will.

The lyric functions on two principal levels. On the one hand, it denotes a universal process of destruction and antithetical reconstruction; on the other, when investigated in the context of its position in the volume, it seems haunted by the poet’s decade-long personal quarrel with Gonne over her unimaginative politics, which encouraged acts of cruelty against England. In ‘The Second Coming’, the fearsome onslaught of ‘the worst’ as supporters of political radicalism reveals a direct charge against Gonne’s doctrine of hate. Despite her vehemence, she remains dependent on the

general course of history and consequently cannot hope to rejuvenate the life of the nation.

A similar conflict between passivity and willed action is played out in 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. The poem has been criticised for implying the daughter's 'subordinate relationship to male culture'.<sup>59</sup> Feminist readings of the lyric would emphasise her immobility but, bearing in mind the context of Yeats's other writings, 'A Prayer for My Daughter' seems rather to represent 'the recovery of an unself-conscious unity of being'.<sup>60</sup> Hoping his daughter will not be overly beautiful, thus having to compensate for her imperfection with courtesy and magnanimity, Yeats evokes his criticism of Gonne in 'Adam's Curse'. The need to 'labour to be beautiful' marks the human condition and 'A Prayer for My Daughter' seems to prefer an imperfect life to fallen divinity.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Yeats wishes his daughter would think that 'opinions are accursed', stressing that 'creativity and civility', both presupposed in the idea of rootedness, can arm her 'against the straitjacket of opinion'.<sup>62</sup> The daughter is encouraged to live a life of willed self-fashioning in unity with her future bridegroom rather than accept the role that either beauty or opinionated mind could force on her. Therefore, Yeats desires that his daughter grow up into an opposite of Gonnean fanaticism and so ensure that 'arrogance and hatred' do not triumph over his ideals of 'custom and ceremony'.

## Coda

The two short lyrics that come at the end of *Michael Robartes* repeat Yeats's adumbration of the wisdom of images that he elaborated with his wife. 'A Meditation in Time of War' is a record of one of the insights that the poet can glean if he sheds hatred. In this respect, it repeats the instantaneous illumination of 'Demon and Beast'. The mood of the lyric, similarly to, if less intensely than, 'Demon and Beast', is appropriately joyful for the grandeur of the revelation that is obtained. The last two lines, 'I knew that One is animate, / Mankind inanimate phantasy',<sup>63</sup> seem to refer to the composite nature of reality as discussed in 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae'. The One represents the Daimon as partaking of the wisdom of *Anima Mundi* that contains the antithetical images that shape the entire world. Mankind is thus the Daimon's phantasy. When Solomon and the witch almost produce an image to end the world, they try to open themselves to the flow of images from the One, as does the speaker in 'The Second Coming', who, though without willing it, beholds the revelation of the new tyrannical divinity to rule the new dispensation of the world.

That mankind is the Daimon's phantasy also points to the logic of the Easter poems, most clearly to 'Easter, 1916'. The unassuming people the speaker has 'passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words' are incapable of action until they are possessed by the appropriate image. Yeats returned to that idea less than a year before his death, when in 'The Statues' he asked rhetorically, 'When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side / What stalked through the post office?'.<sup>64</sup> The Rebellion is thus understood to have resulted from the invocation of the right image. In turn, the sacrifice itself becomes an image that is incorporated into *Anima Mundi* to later 'trouble the living stream'.<sup>65</sup>

'Meditation' invokes Blake in its directness and emphasis on the primacy of vision over mundane reality. The lyric demonstrates unequivocal acceptance of the wisdom that Yeats found and confirmed through his wife. Therefore, in an act of double homage, 'To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee' introduces the poet and his wife by name. This is the only lyric in Yeats's oeuvre that identifies both, as though the poet unveiled the identities of the 'Hes' and 'Shes' throughout the volume. Stressing that he 'Restored this tower for my wife George', Yeats, blatantly belittling his wife's critical input in the restoration, assumes the mask of a kingly figure, a Solomon or Harun Al-Rashid, who bestows a token of his gratitude on the woman who has given him wisdom and peace. The plea 'May these characters remain / When all is ruin once again' refers to the poem itself but also to the symbolic tower of his oeuvre. If the three series of lyrics discussed above are seen as a path to the eventual overcoming of worldly entanglements in favour of vision, then the restored tower appears to be an image of ascension to wisdom. 'These characters' are certain to outlive the incipient ruin, even of the building itself.

When looked at from the vantage of 'To Be Carved', the other poems in *Michael Robartes* quite clearly endorse the visionary wisdom of images that Yeats sought so passionately. As an implicit addressee of the collection, George Yeats becomes a part of the quest for this wisdom. Thus, with hindsight, in 'To Be Carved' Yeats regards the volume as a product of a joint spiritual effort. That effort, in part, was aimed at coming to terms with his fury of a muse. The bewitching charm of Maud Gonne, hauntingly present in almost every lyric in *Michael Robartes*, is temporarily broken as the poet realises that she is an obstacle to achieving Unity of Being. For Yeats, the future lay with the tower dominating his imaginary landscape and a continuous study of the revelation unexpectedly granted him by his Sheba.

## Notes and References

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- 2 Qtd. in Joseph M. Hassett, *W.B. Yeats and the Muses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 132.
- 3 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, eds. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999) 118.
- 4 Foster 190.
- 5 W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996) 176.
- 6 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972) 192.
- 7 George Mills Harper, ed., *Yeats Vision Papers. Volume II* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1992) 192.
- 8 Yeats asserts that the history of the world is a struggle between two principles, the primary and the antithetical. The domination of each cycle lasts approximately 2000 years, so the twentieth century was on the brink of a major change. *A Vision* (New York: Collier Books, 1969) 262-63.
- 9 Yeats, *A Vision* 136.
- 10 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 177.
- 11 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 31.
- 12 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 178.
- 13 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 111.
- 14 Yeats, *Vision Papers* 487.
- 15 W.B. Yeats, *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Scribner, 1994) 14.
- 16 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 163.
- 17 Yeats, *Later Essays* 11.
- 18 Yeats, *Later Essays* 28.
- 19 Yeats, *Later Essays* 20.
- 20 Qtd. in Foster 100.
- 21 Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 102.
- 22 Foster 191. Less than a week after the wedding Yeats confessed to Lady Gregory that 'I am troubled for I cannot banish another image' (qtd. in Foster 135). The image, as Foster states, is that of Iseult and the letter evokes the aura of betrayal, even if only in thoughts, exuded in 'An Image from a Past Life'.
- 23 Saddlemyer 237.
- 24 A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968) 221.
- 25 Hassett 144.
- 26 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 277.
- 27 Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 232.
- 28 Throughout the volume Yeats downplays Donne's political influence. See Anthony Bradley, *Imagining Ireland in the Poems and Plays of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Palgrave, 2011) 88.
- 29 Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 124.

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- 30 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 42.
- 31 Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares, eds., *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938* (New York: Norton, 1993) 384.
- 32 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 356.
- 33 Yeats, *Later Essays* 46.
- 34 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 250.
- 35 Yeats, *A Vision* 141.
- 36 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 167.
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- 38 Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* (London: Hart-Davis, 1954) 614.
- 39 Wade 613.
- 40 Foster 135.
- 41 Qtd. in Foster 137.
- 42 MacBride 88.
- 43 Foster 138.
- 44 Yeats, *Memoirs* 78.
- 45 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 184.
- 46 W.B. Yeats, *Early Essays*, eds. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007) 144.
- 47 Yeats, *Early Essays* 186-87.
- 48 Gonne called herself that in response to Yeats's frantic letter written on discovering that she was to marry MacBride. He tried to persuade her that her influence on the people lay in her superiority of social stature. MacBride 166.
- 49 Qtd. in Jeffares 234.
- 50 Saddlemyer 198.
- 51 Yeats, *Memoirs* 132.
- 52 MacBride 259.
- 53 Yeats, *Later Essays* 31.
- 54 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 186.
- 55 Yeats, *Later Essays* 31. In a letter to Gonne written ten years later, Yeats returned to the need to purge hatred, for it 'has no good whatever'. MacBride 441.
- 56 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 187.
- 57 Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 210.
- 58 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 187.
- 59 Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 137.
- 60 Grene 208.
- 61 The images of Helen and Aphrodite as having lost their divinity by marrying men who were not their equals is underscored by a letter to Gonne in which Yeats tried to dissuade her from marrying MacBride, emphasising that, were she to do so, she would no longer be one of 'the Golden Gods'. (MacBride 165).
- 62 Hassett 143.
- 63 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 190.
- 64 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 336.
- 65 Yeats, *Collected Poems* 181.

## **‘Mr Yeats’s treacherous instinct of adaptability’: Subjectivity, Culture, and Theatrical Space**

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In his 2010 study *Yeats and European Drama*, Michael McAteer situates W.B. Yeats’s dramatic works firmly within a European tradition of experimental theatre, moving from Henrik Ibsen through August Strindberg to Maurice Maeterlinck and Luigi Pirandello. Certainly these playwrights have often been considered to exist in parallel or in counterpoint to Yeats, but McAteer argues with a novel emphasis that Yeats was deliberately and self-consciously engaged in developing a European-style theatre of estrangement: ‘The experiments [he] undertook in the 1900s arose from his renewed interest in Ibsen and a desire to represent Ibsen’s treatment of social alienation through the theatre of estrangement Maeterlinck had developed in the 1890s’.<sup>1</sup> Such an analysis points us, inevitably I suggest, towards further consideration of the genealogy of ideas which conditioned this flourishing of meta-theatrical experimentation around the turn of the nineteenth century.

The underlying premise of this essay is that theories of acting have historically expressed both a philosophical anxiety surrounding self-authentication and a commitment to defining a social ethics. Notwithstanding the fact that Yeats did not write a dedicated work on the craft of the actor, his frequent reflections upon acting, interspersed throughout his writings on the Irish theatre, invite serious consideration in ethical terms.<sup>2</sup> My further claim is that although Yeats consistently cast his drama in the light of Ireland, his thinking about acting is an inflection of a broader European tradition of ethical and communitarian thought which investigates the interrelations between subjectivity, culture, and theatrical space. Whether due to the orthodoxy that Yeats’s poems are more successful dramatically than his plays, or to the overwhelming context of cultural nationalism in Ireland, this European tradition of thought has not always been fully acknowledged. Here, I will try to credit it by looking at the way in which Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘Letter to d’Alembert on the Theatre’ focuses on the same issue of dramatic authenticity which comes to preoccupy Yeats.<sup>3</sup> This ethical preoccupation with drama plays out specifically through the question of adaptability: the adaptability of the

artistic genius; the adaptability of social life configured in ritual; and the dramaturgical formalisation of adaptability through the theatrical convention of the subplot.

### Actors and Acting

We might usefully begin by comparing two of Yeats's more astute interventions on the process of acting in order to establish how an ostensibly technical concern with playing a dramatic role onstage embroiled him in wider cultural and philosophical issues. In his introduction to *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1934) the poet remembers watching 'an Abbey actor going up the stairs to his dressing-room after playing the part of a lame man' and noting appreciatively 'that he was still limping'.<sup>4</sup> He cites this as evidence that the conscious adoption of a 'secondary personality' is the path to the freedom of unconscious expression and revelation. The actor, we are told, is akin to a spiritualist medium who mimics the voices of the dead in order to achieve authentic incantation. Yeats concludes this thought in a telling fashion: 'Because mediumship is dramatisation, even honest mediums cheat at times either deliberately or because some part of the body has freed itself from the control of the waking will, and almost always truth and lies are mixed together'.<sup>5</sup> Not only are the actor and the medium akin but, because the sacred role of the medium is comparable to the profane role of the theatre actor, impersonal religious knowledge is 'almost always' bound-up with deceitful representation. In other words, the artifice and *secondariness* of the actor in the process of acting becomes a potential authenticator of spirituality.<sup>6</sup> This calls for some qualification of Yeats's renown as a credulous spiritualist. After all, if 'truth and lies are mixed together' and the lie is consequently naturalised as the pathway to truth (rather than being its opposite), then he suggests a preference for the modes – séance, ritual, play – over the substance of truth. In précis, the celebrated actor or medium embodies the paradox of what Yeats had come to call 'style' or 'attitude', in which the secondary pose of the artist – his dramatic effect – becomes the original condition for what he terms in his 1908 journal, '*arduous full life*'.<sup>7</sup>

A second intervention on the process of acting serves as a significant contrast to his admiration for the Abbey actor. This time Yeats considers an actress playing the old woman in *Riders to the Sea*:

She has never been to Aran, she knows nothing but Dublin, surely in that part she is not objective, surely she creates from imagination, I

thought; but when I asked her she said, 'I copied from my old grandmother.' Certainly it is this objectivity, this making of all from sympathy, from observation, never from passion, from lonely dreaming, that has made our players, at their best, great comedians, for comedy is passionless.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas the Abbey actor continued to limp when offstage, committing his identity to the process of adaptation, the actress strictly and dispassionately demarcates her onstage mimicry from her 'real' offstage self. Consequently, she presents an idea of her grandmother which remains a product of her unobtrusive offstage intellect. The difference between these two styles of acting might seem a mere difference of technique, not unrelated to contemporary Hollywood lore where so-called method actors, dimly associated with the work of Constantin Stanislavski, are alternatively feted and ridiculed by their audience and their peers. As I hope to show, however, Yeats's implicit preference for the attitude of the actor who continues to 'act' offstage indicates a cultural and ethical concern which moves us beyond the merely technical aspects of acting. In fact, despite his qualification of the actress's passionless 'objectivity' we have little reason to judge her bad at acting, insofar as she may succeed to great effect in recapturing her grandmother's manner. At issue is not her failure as an actress but rather the cultural sway of her success: her technical accomplishment indicates the deception of modern 'objectivity' as well as the metaphysics that underlie it. Yeats is calling into question the foundational idea of an offstage reality that clearly precedes dramatic representation.

In spite of his yearning after the thespian skills of well-known contemporary actors Frank and William Fay and his hardnosed recognition of the advantages of theatrical professionalism, at the centre of Yeats's stated ambition to create a subjective and 'naïve' folk theatre is a countenance for 'bad' acting.<sup>9</sup> The paradox of a 'bad' actor is that whilst he may let the effect of verisimilitude slip on the stage, allowing the audience to see that he is, after all, performing a dramatic role, it is much less certain at what point his 'acting' begins and ends.<sup>10</sup> *When is a bad actor not acting?* Although the man limping up the staircase at the Abbey Theatre might conceivably be seen to undertake a routine intended to improve his next performance, the accent of Yeats's interpretation is placed upon the usurpation of the actor's 'waking will'. Just as the actor's limp has become unconscious, so his 'performance' has become ubiquitous: onstage and off. In this view, the demands of onstage accomplishment (being a good actor), and the demands of an audience to be satisfied, are ancillary, if not antagonistic, to the cultural and metaphysical implications of the actor's

life as an actor. He may be as unconvincing on the stage as he is convincing off, and yet still conform to Yeats's dramatic philosophy. This celebration of the actor who cannot simply will the effects of his performance translates into a more general cultural paradox: the coexistence of disdain for the acting profession – as false, artificial and removed from real life – with the recognition of theatricality as a profound cultural force. The challenge for Yeats's naïve Irish theatre is precisely this: to qualify the representations of modern drama by radicalising the understanding of the dramatic, and to replace the private idealism of the actress objectifying her grandmother on the stage with the culturally and metaphysically adaptive paragon of the Abbey actor, whose psychology and physiology have been altered through the passions of acting.

In his 1925 Nobel lecture describing the origins of the Irish dramatic movement in the 1890s, Yeats recalls how in the midst of heated cultural debates on what constituted an appropriate national subject matter somebody had asked him, with disarming simplicity: 'Where will you get your actors?' Safe to say, Yeats detected the deeper cultural accusation lying beneath the apparently innocent concern with the demands of performing a play in a non-metropolitan location: to wit, where will you get your actors who are not actors, who are not, in other words, already inducted into the professional and comic objectivity of the English theatre? Not only does Yeats recall his immediate response to the question, but he also proceeds to reflect, from the perspective of 1925, on the metaphysical absurdity of the task which confronted him as a young man: the task of finding actors who were *not* actors. It is a passage worth quoting at length:

[. . .] I had said, 'I will go into some crowded room, put the name of everybody in it on a different piece of paper, put all those pieces of paper into a hat and draw the first twelve'. I have often wondered at that prophecy, for though it was spoken probably to confound and confuse a questioner it was very nearly fulfilled. Our two best men actors were not indeed chosen by chance, for one was a stage-struck solicitors' clerk and the other a working man who had toured Ireland in a theatrical company managed by a Negro. I doubt if he had learned much in it, for its methods were rough and noisy, the Negro whitening his face when he played a white man, but, so strong is stage convention, blackening it when he played a black man. If a player had to open a letter on the stage I have no doubt that he struck it with the flat of his hand, as I have seen players do in my youth, a gesture that lost its meaning generations ago when blotting paper was substituted for sand. We got our women, however, from a little political society which described its object as educating the children of the poor, or

according to its enemies, teaching them a catechism that began with this question, 'What is the origin of evil?' and the answer, 'England'.<sup>11</sup>

The fantasy of 'chance', meant to eliminate the sully of a professional training and to provide the conditions for naïve actors to emerge, is inevitably curtailed by the political context: the important qualification in this case, albeit summoned for comic effect, is that the actor be 'not-English'. Yeats is at his most interesting when tracing the adaptive space between the non-specific 'crowded room' – a kind of folk source where everyone is an actor *in potentia* – and the limited actuality of existing political and theatrical institutions. Specifically, he points us to his 'best men actors' who are exemplary for the historical difference they represent: one in particular, already inducted into the 'rough and noisy' habits of the English-style theatre, prompts the poet to laugh at the absurdity of theatrical realism, and to characterise objectivity on stage as little more than a convention. The old-fashioned gesture meant to signal the opening of a letter does not simply signal an aberrant anachronism in the fabric of a realistic theatre, but the anachronism of realism itself – an historical position manifest also in the spectacle of a black man blackening his face in order to play a black man on the stage. Here is a version of theatrical objectivity in which convention has separated itself entirely from sensuous experience: the man would only be forced to adorn himself in such an absurd fashion if there were no acknowledged continuity between the on stage and the off. Yeats's inference is not, however, simply that the fact of an actor being black might usefully inform a dramatic representation of a black man – by itself this offers too fixed a view of self-representation. Rather, it is that the representation of being black on stage in Yeats's passionate, naive theatre would require neither a black actor nor black face paint.

Importantly, the ideo-plasticity inherent to this view of self-dramatisation is in keeping with Yeats's own avowed process when composing lyric poetry. 'I speak in my own person and dramatize myself', he writes in the essay which framed the publication of his Nobel lecture, 'The Bounty of Sweden'; in the next breath he deems his soliloquies to have merit only insofar as they are appropriate to the other men he 'imagines' himself to be. Yeats is adamant that he has no faculty peculiar to himself, 'no special gift' except a capacity for great labour in making his speech seem '*all men's speech*'.<sup>12</sup> Such modesty is double-edged, since where there is no 'special gift' there is also no special hindrance to prevent him from speaking in another's voice – in that of a black man, say, or of an

old woman. In this respect, the poet's anonymity is at one with his power to adapt himself *into* others, and to produce valuable work. It is only after some time has elapsed and the work is re-found in printed form, 'dog-eared by some young man, or marked by some young girl with a violet', that the poet admits to feeling particularised again, 'ashamed, as though somebody were to attribute to me a delicacy of feeling I should but do not possess'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we arrive at the primary bind of Yeats's theatre of the self: the necessary labour of adapting oneself to others in order to become dramatically more oneself; and, conversely, the inevitable shame of being recognised speaking in somebody else's place. This destination also returns us to a prominent Romantic theme, namely the essentially social constitution of the artistic genius.

### **The Paradox of Artistic Genius**

Immanuel Kant's definition of 'Genius' as 'the inborn predisposition of the mind [*ingenium*] through which nature gives the rule to art' is at once a succinct formulation of a longstanding precept of artistic production, and an early expression of Romantic-era anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Although the idea that nature should constrain and authenticate the expression of the artistic will does not originate with Romantic thought, the locating of nature as 'the inborn predisposition' of the artist typifies the Enlightenment concern with the structure of subjectivity. In view of the constitutional power that the modern subject has been endowed with, nature can preserve its authority only by revealing itself within that subject. So it is that the ingenuous poetic self and his identification with the common language of men, the spirit of the folk, or the contours of a natural landscape, becomes a significant literary trope. The genius qualifies the intellectual fancy of artistic composition by reinstating the rule of nature. Yet the paradox which results from this is equally significant: the exceptional disposition of the genius, which differentiates him from other artists and 'ordinary' men, effectively functions to militate against artistic exceptionality by returning the idiosyncratic expressions of art to the coherence of natural sense.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, genius is an example of superior artistic ideation, but on the other, it is the effacement of ideation through an apparently natural form.

Foremost among those factors that prevent us from saying today simply 'Yeats was a genius' is our critical awareness of this paradox, and our accompanying suspicion that 'genius' is a normative designation which only passes itself off as natural authority. Within every claim that the nature of Yeats's authority (his genius) is not identifiable, or that it is merely confected (a claim made in different ways by Conor Cruise

O'Brien, Seamus Deane and W.J. McCormack), lies an implicit counterclaim: it is the fact that we cannot identify his nature which proves his exceptional genius.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the prototypical expression of this critical ambivalence can be found in James Joyce's 1901 polemic against the Irish Literary Theatre, 'The Day of the Rabblement'. After conceding that Yeats may have been a poet of the first order, and singling out for praise *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Joyce goes on to write: 'But an esthete has a floating will, and Mr. Yeats's treacherous instinct of adaptability must be blamed for his recent association with a platform from which even self-respect should have urged him to refrain'.<sup>17</sup> It is apparent that Joyce is trying to hold Yeats accountable for his alliance with the provincial, crowd-pleasing fare of the Irish theatre. But there persists an ironic admission that only a poet of Yeats's authority could both succeed as a poet and make such a representative alliance. If Yeats 'must be blamed' he is still not identifiable as someone who *can* be blamed, in the same way as his collaborators 'Mr [George] Moore' and 'Mr [Edward] Martyn' can, since we are told he has 'a floating will'. Yeats's exceptionally aesthetic embodiment means that his authority is always other than that narrow political identification which is the focus of Joyce's critique. The phrase 'treacherous instinct of adaptability' is clearly meant to carry the weight of Joyce's *ad hominem* attack here, but it also signals his blind spot. After all, his flagrant erudition (evident from the opening reference of the essay to Giordano Bruno of Nola), and conviction that the artist should only ever make terms with his own kind in order to exorcise the devil of populism are symptomatic of a partial model of intellectual cultivation. The unusual felicity of the phrase which Joyce bestows on us, but also, indirectly, on his fictional alter-ego Stephen Dedalus who chooses 'silence, exile and cunning' over simple intellectual disdain, lies in its naturalisation of treachery: treachery belongs not only to the intellect but to the instincts – to the body of the actor.<sup>18</sup> In the process of making a moral, political and cosmopolitan point at Yeats's expense, then, Joyce inadvertently pays tribute to a material form of cultivation – the instinct of adaptability – that his ostentatious intellectualism cannot account for.

Significantly, after having met Joyce in person, Yeats picks up on the term 'adaptability', suggesting he was not only sensitive to the sleight Joyce intended but also alert to its oversight:

The qualities that make a man succeed do not shew [sic] in his work, often for quite a long time. They are much less qualities of talent than qualities of character – faith (of this you have probably enough), patience, *adaptability*, (without this one learns nothing), and a gift for growing by experience & this is perhaps rarest of all.<sup>19</sup>

Placing ‘adaptability’ alongside ‘growth’, Yeats reminds Joyce that genuine artistic cultivation involves more than the development of an intrinsic logic but also adaptation to potentially unpredictable extrinsic conditions. He gives priority to ‘character’ over ‘talent’ and to the application of the self in historical situations over any definition of apodictic selfhood. There can be no question that by shifting the emphasis away from the idea of an exceptional ‘natural talent’ Yeats profoundly challenges any unproblematic identification of genius. Indeed, this disagreement between Yeats and Joyce, though originating as a question of the national theatre, clearly develops as a question of ethical character. On one side, we have the magnificent isolation of Joyce’s ideal artist removed from popular culture and reflected in the predictable spectacle of the tragic hero who dies for an austere principle. On the other side, we have Yeats’s ‘adaptable’ artist, galvanised by the ‘naïve’ imagination of the folk tradition, who affirms the act of living in the world of non-ideal representations.<sup>20</sup>

I would like to develop two aspects of this latter Yeatsian understanding of genius in the remainder of this essay. First, that the cultural authority it implies takes for its heroic totem not the exemplary role on stage, but the actor who plays such a role. The actor, who both is and is not himself, is considered heroic over and above the acted content of the play. This is a point Yeats articulates in his late poem ‘Lapis Lazuli’ (1938), which directs the reader to Shakespearean tragedy as a conspicuously overdetermined spectacle:

There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,  
That’s Ophelia, that Cordelia;  
Yet they, should the last scene be there,  
The great stage curtain about to drop,  
If worthy of their prominent part in the play,  
Do not break up their lines to weep.<sup>21</sup>

How do we identify *them* in this stanza? *They* are the tragic characters Hamlet, Lear, Ophelia, and Cordelia, certainly; but, *they* are also the actors through history who have known how to dramatise these characters’ passions. Indeed, it is *they* – secondary men and women, the actors – who ‘know’ that Hamlet and Lear in the face of their tragic fates ‘are gay’; and, accordingly, it is their heroism, based upon the full extent of their dramatisation, which is emphasised over the narrow ends of a dramatic script.

The second and corollary point concerns the place and the function of the theatrical stage. Yeats's appreciation for the impersonal process of acting defines a metaphysical interplay between the actor acting himself when on the stage (overdetermining the spectacle), and the actor acting himself when off the stage (complicating the ideal of an ingenuous or natural self). A further consideration of this interplay will allow us to see how the problematic of the stage resonates in broader cultural terms as well as within the mind of the artist.

### **Rousseau and Ritual**

In one respect, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is an unlikely model for Yeats's ethos of adaptability. After all, it is Rousseau's moralistic influence that Yeats deplors in the political optimism of Shelley, Ruskin, and Wordsworth; and more specifically in the failure of their 'dramatic sense'.<sup>22</sup> In another respect, however, Rousseau's work is the canonical foreshadowing of Yeats's endeavour, since it is his enduring concern for the natural authority of art which best exercises the paradox of genius. Whilst Yeats might be suspicious of the idea that nature is intrinsically good, he is nonetheless reliant upon the authoritative value of nature to save his art from idiosyncratic mannerism and bogus theatricality. In other words, even as he dispels the myth of ingenuous nature he recovers the value of the natural and becomes in the process an important interpreter of Rousseau.

The Rousseau text most germane to our current concerns with the idea of a national theatre and the general value of acting is his 'Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater'. This famous letter was a response to Monsieur d'Alembert's assumption that the institution of a national theatre in Geneva would contribute to the prudence (*la sagesse*) of the Genevan people. D'Alembert had written that theatrical performances

would form the taste of the citizens and would give them a fineness of tact, a delicacy of sentiments, which is very difficult to acquire without the help of theatrical performances; literature would profit without the progress of libertinism, and Geneva would join to the prudence [*la sagesse*] of Lacedaemon the urbanity [*la politesse*] of Athens.<sup>23</sup>

To this Rousseau is incredulous. He cites the exaggerated theatrical passions represented on the French stage and wonders whether there is any sense in thinking 'that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad'?<sup>24</sup> There is, of course, a well-

established response to Rousseau on this point which reads his ostensibly anti-theatrical and anti-Parisian polemic as indicative of moral puritanism: intolerant, not only of actors, but of any foreign body which might pollute Genevan society.<sup>25</sup> However, pursuing the hypothesis laid out above, that a cultural mistrust of actors can coalesce with a radicalisation of acting on a general cultural and metaphysical level, we can discern two distinct positions playing off one another in Rousseau's letter: one which condemns theatre, theatrics and deception outright, artistic or otherwise; and another which is more concerned to qualify cosmopolitan theatrics and seeks to elevate the drama of communitarian life. Which is to say, one is anti-drama, the other concerned with the natural authority of drama.

Rousseau writes: 'The ancients had Heroes and put men on their stages; we, on the contrary, put only Heroes on the stage and hardly have any men'.<sup>26</sup> His argument is that theatrical drama – and he has in mind the neo-classical reproductions of the French theatre – by reproducing the predictable spectacle of a hero's death diminishes the living value of heroism. A national theatre performing such spectacles could only provide a space for exaggerated pathos and intellectual self-flattery. We can extrapolate from this point an unexpected conclusion: in the theatre the people are contained as an audience, both flattered and flattened, as their dramatic lives are displaced onto the stage; but outside in the open air and through social ritual, these lives might find authentic dramatic expression. Consequently, it is not simply that Rousseau's parochialism closes itself off from the different dramatic representations which a national theatre would introduce to Geneva; rather, it seeks to preserve the dramatic representations of everyday life from the petrification of the theatrical relationship between a complacent audience and a troupe of onstage actors.<sup>27</sup>

Although Yeats spent large parts of his life engaged in 'Theatre business, management of men' and instituted in several different forms a national theatre for Ireland, his intention that such a theatre would be a naturally expressive part of the national life aligns him with Rousseau.<sup>28</sup> Like Rousseau, he boasted of his 'parochialism' and opposed the fetishised interiority of theatrical space. Furthermore, his avowed aims, to 'plunge art back into the social life', to return theatre to the world of 'convention and decoration and ceremony', and to prioritise ritualistic drama, thematically converge with Rousseau's defence of Genevan life from the structure of the French theatre.<sup>29</sup>

Because ritual plays such an important role in qualifying modern theatricality for both Rousseau and Yeats it requires further definition, especially if we are to avoid viewing it simplistically as the 'natural'

practice of a social group. More relevant than the anthropological 'primitiveness' of ritual, and its inevitable mobilisation as an atavistic expression of anti-modernity, is the question concerning its dramatic composition: ritual is a differential, inherently dramatic process rather than an object ready for identification. Rousseau invites us into such a compositional process when describing the natural virtue of chasteness in women. Although he stresses that the 'chasteness' or 'modesty' (*la pudeur*) of Genevan women would be under threat from the low morals of theatre actors and the moral degeneracy encouraged by the spectacle of theatre acting, his full meaning only suggests itself if we consider the following passage:

The apparent obstacle, which seems to keep this object at a distance, is in reality what brings it nearer. The desires, veiled by shame [*la honte*], become only the more seductive; in hindering them, chasteness [*la pudeur*] inflames them. Its fears, its tricks, its reserves, its timid avowals, its tender and naïve delicacy, say better what chasteness thinks to hide than passion could have said it without chasteness. It is chasteness which lends value to favours granted and sweetness to rejection.<sup>30</sup>

Once again Rousseau's apparent cultural protectionism belies a deeper complexity. Chasteness is threatened by theatre acting; but not in the way we might imagine innocent nature to be threatened by vile pretence. If Parisian actors pose a threat to chasteness, it is not on the grounds that the performance of sexuality is corrupt, but rather because their blatancy obliterates the dramatic element of an authentic sexuality: 'Its fears, its tricks, its reserves, its timid avowals, its tender and naïve delicacy [. . .].' Important here is the procedure of co-implication which the veil initiates between the chaste woman – standing in for the chasteness of Genevan society – and the audience who desires her. She does not stand shamefully isolated behind her veil, rather her shame instantiates an aesthetic distance which enacts a seductive and sexual call to the other. Indeed, shame provides the vital connection between the chaste woman whose untouchable sacredness can only be represented through the insignia of dishonour (*la voile*) and the many interpretative possibilities this insignia raises. In the course of multiple interpretative acts, which are also erotic attachments, the question form overwrites a presumed offstage naturalness. Is the veiled subject to be trusted? How are we to understand her promises? Can she be said to exist as a singular woman at all?

Rousseau does not ask us, then, to distinguish between artifice and nature, but rather between two qualities of artifice: the feminised veil

which holds the hidden authority of natural sentiment and preserves through hermeneutic strategies the aesthetic flame of chasteness, and the theatrical masks of heroes, which express the shameless abstractions of modern idealism. This distinction underwrites Yeats's repeated association of his own writing with social ritual, beauty and femininity; and explains why he is less excited by the ideal of a woman's beauty than by the repeated ritual of its production. In his 1903 poem 'Adam's Curse', though ostensibly expressing the conscious vice of theatricality, the *toilette* of a woman, linked with lyrical composition, is suggestive of Rousseauian chasteness. Two locutions are significantly matched in the poem: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught" and "To be born woman is to know – / Although they do not talk of it at school – / That we must labour to be beautiful".<sup>31</sup> Again shame ('Adam's curse') provides the connective tissue, authenticating the woman's, and the poet's, processes of self-dramatisation – which are also self-profanations. The woman speaker – based on Maud Gonne – lets her interlocutor and audience into a shameful secret: her ideal beauty is not virgin, it has been laboriously constructed; her chasteness takes the form of a mask. Whilst this ruse of revealing her offstage repetitions exposes her theatricality, in the very same moment it redeems this theatricality by de-reifying its ideal status. The reader is invited to share in womanly knowledge, at once shameful and erotic, as it moves against the ideal of a womanly nature. This is a poet's knowledge, too, of course, as Yeats pointed it out in 'The Bounty of Sweden': there is the necessity of laboriously composing oneself through others, and then the shame of not possessing the 'self' that others have projected onto you. It is this necessary agitation that constitutes the ritual bond of sociability.

### **The Function of the Subplot**

Because the ritual veil performs an identity, but preserves difference within that identity, a true appreciation of Yeatsian aesthetics must account for both its productive and interpretative aspects. Rousseau's discussion of chasteness anticipates such complexity by arguing that the social magnetism of beauty (sexuality) relies for its ritual power upon the preservation of difference and distance through withdrawal, as much as on the promise of communal identity. Yeats condenses this aesthetic and interpretative complexity of ritual when he writes that '[as] the most powerful form of drama, [ritual] differs from the ordinary form, because everyone who hears it is also a player'.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the audience member becomes fully implicated in the drama; by definition, in ritual

drama the heroic act is diffused through the multiple arteries of its reception, not centrally consummated on the stage. The analogy with sexual consummation should be discernible now that we have considered Rousseau's censure upon the pornography of the French theatre.

Yeats recognises and implicitly reviews the fallacy of heroic centrality in his play *On Baile's Strand* by having his Fool observe and satirically embody Cuchulain's tragic fight with the sea. At a first reading we might consider the Fool's parodic, essentially marginal narration of Cuchulain's heroic demise as an ironic commentary on the discrepancy between a modern audience and the ancient nobility of a tragic spectacle: 'Fool: There he is down! He is up again. He is going out in the deep water. There is a big wave'.<sup>33</sup> However, beyond this classically entrenched interpretation we must note how the fool's ritual embodiment – as both performer and audience member – suggests a different kind of heroism at play in Yeats's cultural aesthetic.<sup>34</sup> Like our archetypal 'bad' actor who continues to limp once he is off the stage, the importance of the Fool resides in the ubiquity of his dramatic embodiment. We imagine that the Fool is both playing the role of himself and incapable of playing any other role. On this reading he occupies, indeed embodies, a significant liminality, which corresponds to the shame of the Romantic genius confronting the effect of his claim upon others – becoming, in effect, his own audience. The published poem makes the poet feel a fool: 'as though somebody were to attribute to me a delicacy of feeling I should but do not possess'.

This same foolishness, experienced through the act of reception of oneself, is amplified by the theatrical convention of the subplot. A subplot works by inviting an audience to think it is witnessing offstage events, and practically engaging with a foolhardy character's response to what has been happening on the stage. From one perspective, the stage has vanished as the plinth on which the heroic action is taking place, and the audience feels colluded-with. From another perspective, however, the stage has become ubiquitous because the subplot is in fact no less dramatic than the hieratic theatre of the main plot. As Yeats puts it elsewhere, 'the speeches of Falstaff are as perfect in their style as the soliloquies of Hamlet'.<sup>35</sup> In this fashion, he is following in the footsteps not only of Rousseau, but of the German bardolators (notably Herder and Goethe) who found in Shakespeare a cultural antidote to the trim logical perfections of the French theatre. But Yeats is also suggesting a paradoxical effect whereby an erosion of theatrical pathos through the subplot signals a deepening of the dramatic sensibility. This is at the centre of his attempt to introduce the dramatic conventions of social ritual to the idea of a national theatre. We

can turn to his short essay from 1903, 'Emotion of Multitude', for a rich formulation of this line of thought:

The French play delights in the well-ordered fable, but by leaving out the chorus it has created an art where poetry and imagination, always the children of far-off multitudinous things, must of necessity grow less important than the mere will. This is why, I said to myself, French dramatic poetry is so often rhetorical, for what is rhetoric but the will trying to do the work of the imagination? The Shakespearean drama gets the emotion of multitude out of the sub-plot which copies the main plot, much as a shadow upon the wall copies one's body in the firelight.<sup>36</sup>

The extent to which Yeats is embroiled in a tradition of Western philosophical thought on the subject of dramatic representation is evident from the final sentence which recalls Plato's famous parable of the cave. In Plato, the shadows on the cave wall are impoverished representations of the original body which cannot be perceived in the unenlightened world.<sup>37</sup> But for Yeats, already in 1903 altering Plato's parable (as he would so famously in 'Among School Children'), the shadows are projections of the body, which, though moving away from the original, are paradoxically the only means by which the original can be produced. So the freedom from shameful projections offered by Platonic philosophy's move into Ideal truth is unavailable to the Yeatsian dramatist.

'We think of King Lear', Yeats continues, 'less as the history of one man' than as 'the history of a whole evil time'.<sup>38</sup> But this, he assures us, would be impossible without the multiplicity of the subplot. The cacophony of Lear's mind is replicated in the de-structuring of theatrical space through the subplot ('Tom, the Fool'), and once again in the cultural reception of the play. That is to say, the genius of the play cannot reside singly with the act of its hieratic protagonist, but must develop along with the multiple adaptations and inevitable adulterations of that act. Here Yeats uses the subplot – the projection of multiplicity – in a way that is comparable to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's use of the term 'profanation'. For Agamben, 'the passage from the sacred to the profane [. . .] come[s] about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely play. [. . .] Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use'.<sup>39</sup> In the present example, it is a profanation of the idea of a heroic or sacred content on stage. The subplot as profanation returns genius from the realm of transcendental identification and selective ownership to the processes of ritual and 'play': the poet becomes a fool in the face of his own work's reception. In this

way, genius is simultaneously both absent as a centrally defined concept, and present among the proliferation of dramatic representations that go to make up 'arduous full life'.

### **The Ethics of Adaptability**

If historically there has been reluctance within Yeats Studies to consider the metaphysical reflexivity of his dramatic thought, it may well be due to an ongoing assumption that his theatrical philosophy is nationalist, idealistic, and dissociated from the mainline of European aesthetics, as well as due to the critical opinion that his dramatic style depends on unreflective intensity and heroic apotheosis. This essay has offered a revision of both these points of view. We have seen from our encounter with Rousseau that parochialism does not abduct the artist from philosophical complexity. Further, we have grounds to dispute the veracity of Louis MacNiece's longstanding and influential argument, in which he claims that Yeats only dramatised the 'apex' of the tragic pyramid and 'mistakenly wished to dispense with the base'.<sup>40</sup> There is little doubt that Yeats played extensively around 'the base', to the extent that in *On Baile's Strand* or *The Death of Cuchulain* it is 'the apex' that has been lost sight of.

However, this essay has sought to do more than retrieve Yeats's meta-theatrical reflections in which the apparatus of acting imposes upon heroic apotheosis and reveals the mechanics of onstage ideology. It has attempted to transpose these reflections into cultural and ethical terms. So the reflective conceit played out on the stage – the actor acting himself – becomes the authentic social condition off it in the form of ritual; and the compositional irony of the subplot becomes the paradox of the adaptable genius who both is and is not himself. Yeats's tutelary presences for this development are unsurprisingly found through Shakespeare: Lear, as we have already seen; Hamlet, the hero who endeavours resolutely to be a subplot in his own drama; and Hamlet's antecedent Richard II who, being 'full of capricious fancy', transforms himself from a King into an actor.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the logic of the subplot is discernible within Yeats's poetry: explicitly in 'Easter 1916' for instance, which profanes the absent spectacle of the Rising through its themes of late-coming, rumour and sexual adulteration; but also implicitly through the digressive, non-conclusive train of Yeats's poetic voice and his strategic use of refrain and interruption. Our prospective question concerns how this aesthetic embodiment coincides with the ethical under the rubric of adaptability. Can the acknowledged *secondariness* and shamefulness of the subject's relation to his world – the essential profanity of the 'bad' actor – yet produce an

original accomplishment? This study on the relation between the poetic and the ethical in Yeats's work has yet to be written.

## Notes and References

- 1 Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 6.
- 2 I will refer more than once to Yeats's writing in 'The Irish Dramatic Movement: 1901-1919', but it is fair to say, given Yeats's preoccupation with dramatisation in language and in life, that his writing on theatre often loses its distinction from his writing on other topics. It is true that Yeats did not write exclusively on the figure of the actor, but he is known to have collaborated with Edward Gordon Craig, whose collection of essays and dialogues on acting consolidated theoretical reflections on performativity and space. *On the Art of Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1911). See: Karen Dorn, 'Dialogue into Movement: W.B. Yeats's Collaboration with Gordon Craig', *Yeats and the Theatre*, eds. Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (London: Macmillan Press, 1975) 82-109.
- 3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre', *The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol.10*, eds. and trans. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth and Christopher Kelly (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004) 251-352.
- 4 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 364-65.
- 5 *Explorations* 365.
- 6 The virtues of secondariness are expressed elsewhere in his journal of 1909, as follows: 'I can only set up a *secondary* or interior personality created out of the tradition of myself [. . .]. It must have that slight separation from interests which makes charm possible, while remaining near enough for passion' (my emphasis). W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955; London: Macmillan, 1980) 463.
- 7 My emphasis. 'Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of arduous full life'. W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, transcribed and ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972) 151.
- 8 Yeats, *Explorations* 249.
- 9 Yeats, *Explorations* 252.
- 10 When Frank Fay suggested that the Abbey players should aim at 'simplicity and not subtlety' and describe death scenes rather than act them out on the stage due to their lack of professional expertise, he was providing a pragmatic rationalisation for Yeats's principled development of theatrical estrangement which had been tried so effectively in *On Baile's Strand* – where Cuchulain's fight with his son happens off stage (see McAteer 74). As well as highlighting the felicitous relationship between the 'bad' actor (the amateur player) and theatrical innovation, Fay unwittingly suggests a link between the 'bad' actor and theoretical enquiry into the nature of the on-stage spectacle.
- 11 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 563.
- 12 My emphasis. Yeats, *Autobiographies* 532.

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- 13 Yeats, *Autobiographies* 533.
- 14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 186.
- 15 Derek Attridge cites Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as the canonical English Language expression of this paradox. Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language* (London: Methuen, 1988) 1-4.
- 16 See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Passion and Cunning: An Essay on The Politics of W.B. Yeats's in *In Excited Reverie*, eds. A.Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross (London: Macmillan, 1965); Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1985); and W.J. McCormack, *Blood Kindred: W.B. Yeats, The Life, The Death, The Politics* (London: Pimlico, 2005).
- 17 James Joyce, 'The Day of the Rabblement', *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, eds. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 71.
- 18 Stephen is speaking to his friend Cranley about his 'point of view' having rejected the ideology of nation or church: 'I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning'. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976) 247.
- 19 My emphasis. W.B. Yeats, *Collected Letters*, vol. iii, ed. John Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 249-50.
- 20 Yeats, careful to distinguish an authentic 'naïve' theatre from political populism, said in conversation with Joyce that the folk imagination 'creates endless images of which there are no ideas'. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 103.
- 21 W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach. (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 565.
- 22 Yeats, *Explorations* 275.
- 23 D'Alembert's letter is quoted in the same text edition as Rousseau's more famous response (Rousseau 253).
- 24 Rousseau 265.
- 25 Given Rousseau's centrality as a central figure in the history of Western ideas, of course much has been written on him; but it is probably the deconstructionist paradigm which currently defines the critical debate on his thought; whether charging him with being the exemplar of 'logocentrism' or defending him from such a charge. See: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997); Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1983).
- 26 Rousseau 274.
- 27 The risk that attends Rousseau's endeavour, to reconnect the audience to the drama of their everyday lives, is one of boredom. Likewise, if the audience has to be estranged from the rarefied form of self-fascination found in the theatre in order to recover their own dramatic virtue, then Yeats's signature dramatic techniques, including prolonged stillness, the mask, and the farcical displacement of heroic action, can be said to invite *both* the audience's boredom and their ethical reconnection to society.
- 28 Yeats, *Variorum Poems* 260.
- 29 Yeats, *Explorations* 300, 180.
- 30 Rousseau 313.

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- 31 Yeats, *Variorum Poems* 204-5.
- 32 Yeats, *Explorations* 129.
- 33 W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russel K. Alspach. (London: Macmillan, 1966) 524.
- 34 McAteer's argument supports this reading. See *Yeats and European Drama* 68.
- 35 Yeats, *Explorations* 108.
- 36 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1969) 215.
- 37 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 240-43.
- 38 Yeats, *Essays* 215.
- 39 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007) 75-77. The discrimination taking place here between authentic 'use' (akin to the processes of social ritual) and mere instrumentality bears an interesting resemblance to the social philosophy of Yeats's early intellectual mentor William Morris.
- 40 Louis MacNiece, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 84.
- 41 Yeats, *Essays* 105.

## Seeing *Seeing* in Steve McQueen's *Hunger*

Anne Goarzin

Steve McQueen's avowed motivation in making *Hunger* (2008)<sup>1</sup> was to explore the visual possibilities of an event that had been sheltered behind prison walls as it took place in 1981 and to reclaim a story that had remained invisible to the public.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously and rather ironically, in concerning themselves with these events, the critical viewer of the film is bound to reclaim written language in order to deconstruct the film's narrative and its visual postulates.

This essay will attempt to determine how *Hunger* 'looks' as well as how it 'works', as Paul Ricoeur says.<sup>3</sup> It should first be noted that this reading owes much to Tom Herron's point that in the course of the movie, 'language becomes exhausted.'<sup>4</sup> Referring to Julia Kristeva's essay in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, he stresses that much like Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521-22), the figure of the dying Bobby Sands 'contaminates us in its deadness'<sup>5</sup> and leaves us to meditate on our own inevitable mortality, the image thus becoming 'unmanageable'. Herron's remark indisputably echoes the visual shock common to all viewers of *Hunger* and the difficulty in viewing abject images or reflecting upon them. According to Kristeva, the abject is what threatens meaning, and the primary example of abjection is the corpse, which of course is a reminder of our own materiality.<sup>6</sup> Yet one might contend that it is not just images, but indeed all manner of meaningful narratives or systems that are questioned in *Hunger*, thereby agreeing with John Lynch that the film does not have self-starvation merely as a theme, but that it is also (and maybe primarily) metaphorically hungry for something new. As Lynch explains, the film moves from 'words on film' to 'shapes' as a form of expression, stressing in particular the performative nature of the prison narrative. Lynch goes on to show that the film generates a new syntax, a disrupted narrative that relies on new images.<sup>7</sup>

How then and why does the movie shift the viewer away from straightforward images to unsettling interpretations? By showing how *Hunger* performs a shift from the literal (clichés) to the figurative (through metaphors), only to return to the literal in the last act,<sup>8</sup> I aim at exploring what these new images might be. I will attempt to examine the nature of the images the film submits to our viewing and to assess their ability to

establish distance between the viewer and the subject of the movie. As the eye relentlessly imposes itself in the last act of the film, I will conclude by exploring the relevance of Deleuze's concept of the 'Body Without Organs' for the film.

### **From the Literal to the Poetical: Immediate and Differed Meaning in *Hunger***

What kind of knowledge does *Hunger* impart to the viewer? The opening sequence of Steve McQueen's film engages with what seems to be visually competing territories of the image – the realm of the literal and that of the figurative. In the tense opening scene which has the viewer following Raymond Lohan (Stuart Graham) from a home devoid of warmth to a prison environment where, paradoxically, a manner of collective life is being recreated, McQueen questions one's notion of the familiar, that is, of what one thinks one knows. The prison officer's solitary and silent morning ritual at home feels uncannily disturbing, much as the open environment of the street he lives on is potentially threatening.

Confronting the viewer with the blatant physical limits of the prison environment (window frames, corridors, doors) and with the constraints of social rituals and codes both inside and outside Long Kesh prison, the film's opening shot relies on symbolic images, leaving sounds and music aside in order to focus on visual motives that will run through the movie. This sequence adequately provides an insight into the film's investigation of what we view and how we interpret things. As the prison officer washes his bruised hands, facing the bathroom mirror with his eyes closed, he is depicted as someone who is literally unable to look at his own face in the mirror. Simultaneously, the viewer is defined as one who can see what the protagonist cannot, the mirror serving here as a *mise en abyme* of one's central scopic role.

Outside the prison, insignificant details such as a discarded crumb on the prison officer's napkin take on heightened metaphorical importance in relation to the central issue of food in the movie. Inside the prison we see white-walled corridors, a prison officer smoking a cigarette with his back against the wall, a rat scurrying away. The image of the rodent exemplifies how the film relies on the potential of images to express universal symbolism (the rat being associated with filth) as well as to shift towards the metaphorical - thus making the rat image into a powerful image of entrapment in an environment where prison officers appear to be as imprisoned in their own ideological system as the inmates in their cells. Such a metaphor implements a transfer of meaning between what we see (a

rat) and the knowledge we infer from it (or the meaning which is added to the image).

Let us keep in mind that as an analogical trope, the metaphor also involves a semantic distortion between the object and the image (in this case, from animal to human). McQueen provides many visual analogies in the opening sequence (rat, hands, eyes) which may not appear as immediately disturbing, thus leaving one with the reassuring impression that one can readily make out the complexity of the images on the screen. It has indeed been argued that in the case of McQueen's film, stereotypes of the martyred Republican prisoner versus the callous Protestant prison officer persist. While this may be true, there also seems to be a deeper function to McQueen's visual rhetoric.

Indeed, clichés allow the viewer to acknowledge explicit or recognisable categories of representations. The cinematic medium on the other hand re-articulates these conceits through the narrative, at times using pictorial references which the viewer is familiar with (the Maze prison, the urban environment or familiar objects), while also pointing at more classical images to be found mostly in Western art. In turn, these oblique images pull one towards the implicit dimension of visual representation. In order to circumvent mythification or over-simplification of types,<sup>9</sup> the film tends to visually resort to the transfer of meaning through metaphor, progressively departing from explicit or solidified perceptions of the image.

What is striking throughout *Hunger* is that the metaphor intervenes when language is at a loss for ways to 'figure' the un-figurable, the unbearable – and therefore calls for a transfer of meaning from one thing to another in order to renew meaning. This in turn leads to a *re-connaissance*,<sup>10</sup> literally a renewed knowledge, in that the 'thing metaphorised is re-cognised, known again in this unexpected form which does not tear it from itself but asserts its renewed familiarity'.<sup>11</sup> The analogical trope of the metaphor thus progressively gains the upper hand over clichés and stereotypes. As the movie unfolds, this transfer of meaning appears increasingly multilayered, contradicting the assumption that there is one single meaning or one single representation of any given event.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the metaphor seeks to provide new analogical meaning for a word, or here an image: such complexity might prove unnerving for the rational viewer who is keen to interpret what they see – while at the same time offering them an alternative language.

## The Disguise of the Metaphor

In the case of *Hunger*, the displacement of meaning that occurs through the metaphor is also an acknowledgement of the tension between an object and the naming of the object. How these metaphors appear in the film and how they are prompted by McQueen as a visual artist requires further examination.

More often than not, the film's images are complex, akin to metaphors *in absentia*. As one views the naked bodies of the inmates for instance, it is hard not to associate them with iconic representations of Christian saints and martyrs – although no specific picture might spring to mind immediately or clearly.<sup>13</sup> However, even though one identifies the figure of the starving prisoner with that of Christ, one remains aware that in the last act of the movie, the ineffable and disturbing nature of the thing pictured (the emaciated, distraught, dirty prisoner) calls for a transfer of meaning for it to be 'manageable'.

In the absurd world of the prison, religion fails to provide comfort or justification, just as the Christian message of hope and faith no longer holds sway in the face of the brutal reality. So how might images of saints and martyrs mediate viewing? One way to account for the film's reliance on Christian imagery is to interpret it as a visual substitute for a growing, less easily depicted, collective political faith. Terry Eagleton argues that,

Nationalism is a lingering trace of transcendence in a secular world. Like God, the nation is immortal, indivisible, invisible yet all-encompassing, without origin or end, worthy of our dearest love, and the very ground of our being. Like God, too, its existence is a matter of collective faith. [. . .] 'Filling out the empty place of the Supreme God', Slavoj Žižek comments; 'defines the modern notion of Nation'.<sup>14</sup>

It may be satisfying to equate Bobby Sands with Christ, or the prison officer's hands with Pontius Pilate's, yet the film resists obvious visual equations. One is tempted to suggest that McQueen's background as a visual artist<sup>15</sup> allows him to 'flesh out' visually and poetically the otherwise expected gaunt figure of the hunger striker, by referring the viewer to further references in the history of art, and beyond religious imagery in particular. For instance, as one searches one's mental or bookish collection of visual analogies, one finds undeniable intellectual appeal in reallocating meaning to the image and in solving the enigma of 'what is this image

reminiscent of?', or 'which specific representations of martyrs in art might McQueen have had in mind while making *Hunger*?'

There are limits to the metaphorical interpretation however, and Ricoeur warns against perceiving the metaphor as a mere filter, a lens through which one sees things 'like another'. Indeed, he argues that, by essence, the metaphor also shifts from one category to another, 'sort-crossing',<sup>16</sup> suggesting that the mediation of other visual representations may allow for a re-figuration of the image. In the case of *Hunger*, McQueen takes the viewer further afield than the safe area of art reference by sort-crossing between rationality and animality, the human and the sacred (Bobby Sands the man, the saint, the victim, the creative artist). Ricoeur's point is that the metaphor is a disguise which allows the viewer to bypass the unbearable image by investigating the missing vehicle of the metaphor (that is, by uncovering the analogy) instead of confronting the horror itself. The strength of McQueen's movie is that it explores the fluctuations of the image and does not dwell on one single mode of representation. It is a film in which the prisoner's body moves from being the tenor of a metaphor *in absentia*<sup>17</sup> in the first and second acts - an image with strong ties to the field of art history, which requires active intellectual investigation - to an unmediated, physical *performer* of meaning in the last one.

### **Challenging the Metaphor: The Impossible Transfer of Meaning**

There are several ways in which *Hunger* questions the image and the way one views it. By reclaiming an event which was, at the time when it occurred, invisible and hidden away behind prison walls or only distantly echoed verbally by the media, McQueen aims at giving a new lease to the 'space of the inside', as mediologist Régis Debray says - 'reactivating the invisible space of the inside, via poetry, challenge, writing, hypothesis, or dreaming'.<sup>18</sup> However, as the invisible becomes visually overwhelming for the stunned viewer, the space of the inside turns out to be very disquieting.

This culminates with the scene where the spectator experiences a visual blow (28:21 minutes into the movie), although it is one that is somewhat deflected by the *mise en abyme* device implemented. Here the man pictured, a foreign worker utterly covered in protective gear, is in charge of cleaning the shape sprawled on a cell's wall, a target/spiral made of excrement.<sup>19</sup> The worker's perspective undeniably mirrors the viewer's own. Also a foreigner to the events, the eye is both drawn and repulsed by the sight. McQueen puts one in a position where the object viewed can no longer be expressed by language or analogies. Here, the shock of viewing

obscures any attempt at explaining the production of the shape, dragging one towards the centre of the image. While the worker moves past the initial shock and starts cleaning the wall, it seems the viewer is left with a retinal image that relentlessly states the unbearable. The difficulty of dealing with the repulsing image is refracted both in the sound of the worker's heavy breathing and by the haunting notes of cello music in the background. At this stage in the film, the slight inflexion from the eye to the ear is significant since it can also be read as an attempt to dematerialise an object that is excessively present, mainly because it is literally produced *by the body*.<sup>20</sup>

From that point on, the film (in an attempt to reclaim visually more of the hidden narrative of the hunger strikes) turns to representations of the physical violence inflicted on the inmates. Unlike in the scene depicting the 'target' image however, it seems the viewer becomes increasingly able to make sense (through empathy, or sympathy) of the subsequent sequences. This is true of the distressing scene in which the prisoners are washed by force before they are allowed to meet their relatives in the visiting room. Here, the recurrence of the motif of the prison officer's bloody hands which first appeared in the opening scene visually structures the narrative. The representation of physical violence culminates with the excruciating sequence which shows Special Units strip-searching and beating up Republican detainees to the rhythmical banging of batons on plastic shields.<sup>21</sup> Despite graphic details, one might contend that the scene remains 'bearable' because it features the cathartic figure of a young policeman who is shown breaking down as he retreats from the ongoing violence, also mirroring the viewers' own feelings.

The H-Blocks at the Maze prison are a world in which human relations hinge on a dialectic of humiliation and retaliation, and where the brutal killing of the prison officer which concludes the film's first act makes for a normative occurrence of violence.<sup>22</sup> McQueen also points to the failure of the traditional narrative to signify; discourses thrive, feeding upon violence and silencing alternative voices through gratuitous beatings or revenge killings. Here language is only able to turn upon itself, denying the prisoners any ideological justification. Tautology has become a substitute for meaning: 'Crime is crime is crime, it is not political' as Mrs Thatcher stated in 1981.<sup>23</sup> In such a context, the shift to a radically performative mode of expression is the only alternative where all other performing discourses have failed.

This is also a place in which the image is limited to surveillance or spectacle. Indeed the first part of the movie attests to the end of language and of all mediated signifiers. All known codes of meaning have been

abolished. Religious meaning has failed the prisoners, who smoke the pages they tear from the Bible<sup>24</sup> or use them as writing paper, hidden inside their body cavities to convey messages to the outside, and bypassing the now inane biblical message of goodwill and love. The failure of language is best illustrated in a mass scene where the Catholic priest's comforting mantras are drowned by the rumpus of the prisoners' conversation.

The fact that the prisoners' demands come to nothing only confirm the exhaustion of language, as Maud Ellman explains:

[. . .] the act of self-starvation can achieve the status of a hunger strike only through a declaration of intention. Otherwise it is reduced to the 'inane', a word derived from the same root as 'inaction', the latter meaning starved of *sustenance*, the former meaning starved of *sense*. To prevent this failure of signification hunger strikers must append a text of words to the mystery of their disintegrating flesh. In the case of the Irish Hunger Strike, this text took the form of five demands for special status as prisoners of war.<sup>25</sup>

At best, these demands are twisted, most notably by being taken literally, as when the prisoners' long-awaited civilian clothes turn out to be garishly coloured outfits. The hunger strike is thus first and foremost symbolic, as Eagleton remarks: 'to refuse food, but to refuse your oppressor's food, thus unmasking the irony of being kept alive by those who in some more fundamental sense are out to destroy you. It is not just a question of dying, but of laying one's death dramatically at someone's door'.<sup>26</sup>

McQueen's film does much more than reclaim the invisible. It conjures images of what might have been. By nature, the hunger strike is a public performative act which derives from the fact that under the circumstances, the limits of verbal language have been reached, making physical performance the only alternative to stifled or censored discourses and imprisonment. When the second part of the film begins, even political discourses have been twisted beyond recognition. Sands himself is now aware of the pitfalls and failings of language. His cautious use of words is shared by his fellow inmates as well as by his own family.<sup>27</sup> Halfway through the film, the long scene involving Sands and Fr Moran only stresses the discrepancy between the narratives inside and outside the Maze prison.<sup>28</sup> Inside, the inmates experience violence on the physical and on the symbolic level (as violence done to the Irish nation through them). Outside the Maze, negotiation remains the official line of the Provisional IRA.

With language being so out of joint, meaning is lost. Whatever language there was is supplanted by the animality of screaming and beatings in the second part of the film. In short, this is a place and a time

where language keeps deceiving, unable to channel communication or empathy. The little language that remains seeks to enforce authority and control over individuals in the form of registers or of identification cards. Such dysfunctional language only anticipates the equally dysfunctional act that is self-starvation.

### **The Discomfort of the Pictorial in *Hunger*: The Pictorial Turn**

*Hunger* is a film which visually confirms the shift from the linguistic (in the form of language that has become meaningless) to the ‘pictorial turn’, as defined by image theorist W.J.T. Mitchell:

In Europe one might identify [this turn] with phenomenology’s inquiry into imagination and visual experience; or with Derrida’s ‘grammatology’ which de-centers the ‘phonocentric’ model of language by shifting attention to the visible, material traces of writing [. . .] or with Michel Foucault’s insistence on a history and theory of power / knowledge that exposes the rift between the discursive and the ‘visible’, the seeable and the sayable, as the crucial fault-line in ‘scopic regimes’ of modernity.<sup>29</sup>

The shift from the linguistic to the visual occurs in the film by attracting the viewer’s attention to the visible. The pictorial turn is best observed in the final act of the movie, where it radically turns away from what Mitchell terms ‘the obsession with the model of the image as a figure of representational transparency and realism’.<sup>30</sup> As the image shifts from a point where it is still legible to a point where it provides no reassurance, it tends to make one intellectually uncomfortable. In other words, instead of defending ‘our speech’ against ‘the visual’,<sup>31</sup> the film chooses to make the friction and discomfort experienced in viewing palatable, offering anything but a transparent image. Mitchell considers this discomfort to be the outcome of the philosophical shift from the linguistic to the pictorial, resulting in the fact that, in the field of critical theory,

The picture now has a status somewhere between [. . .] a ‘paradigm’ and an ‘anomaly’, emerging as a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself), and as an unsolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own ‘science’, what Erwin Panofsky called an ‘iconology’. The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of ‘spectacle’ (Guy Debord), ‘surveillance’ (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making,

*we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them.*<sup>32</sup>

The pictorial turn in *Hunger* takes place in a dense five-minute sequence at the beginning of the movie (13:47 to 17:56), where a radical rejection of linguistic codes occurs. From the moment new Republican inmate Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan) enters the stomach-turning cell which he is to share with fellow prisoner Gerry Campbell (Liam McMahan), words prove inadequate to describe the vision he – and the viewer – is confronted with. The walls covered in faeces, the smell (left for the viewer to imagine), the festering food and the squirming maggots suspend the possibility of speech. McQueen has progressively forced one from the white lights of the corridor and the expected toughness of detention procedures to the dark light of a world in which language is no longer a currency.<sup>33</sup>

### **A Portrait of the Hunger Striker as an Artist**

The film oscillates between two alternatives. As part of the oeuvre of a visual artist who questions the limits of representation it undoubtedly 'shakes art history out of its dogmatic slumber',<sup>34</sup> as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it. Yet as a movie co-written with playwright Enda Walsh, it does not completely avoid the bias of language to describe images – that is, it elicits a reading of the 'textuality' and of the 'discourse' of images, applying a linguistic grid to describe visual experience.<sup>35</sup> One may indeed argue that the film addresses the limits of visual literacy and textuality, thus taking critical inquiry to another level. In other words, it leads to 'the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading [. . .]'.<sup>36</sup>

To explain this, one must return to the scene of the smeared cell. On the one hand, one might say that the visual shock of the cell is 'textualised', in that it is somehow rendered bearable to the viewer because of the visual analogies it generates. Indeed, one's fleeting impression is that Gerry Campbell is not represented merely as a prisoner, but as an artist in his studio, which allows one to make sense of the disturbing vision by applying to it the conventions of the visual arts. One might add that in the case of *Hunger* however, the very medium the artist uses ironically points to the limits of the chosen means of expression. For like all other sign-systems within the prison,<sup>37</sup> the designed 'canvas' fails to convey meaning beyond

this confined space, precisely because it cannot be viewed by a larger audience.

What makes this shocking scene seeable in spite of its abjection is the fact that it elicits visual connections with other visual works, themes and techniques, in particular with Francisco Goya's use of ochre and brown tones as found in the enigmatic painting of the *Half-submerged Dog*<sup>38</sup> or in his unsettling bearded human figures in *Two Old Men*. Both pictures are part of the *Black Paintings* series, which were made directly on the plaster walls of the artist's house between 1820 and 1824.<sup>39</sup> Yet, although the viewer's visual senses may be stimulated by the reference to the Spanish painter's visual work, the analogy fails to be utterly comforting. This is due partly to the fact that it sends us to the unintelligible darkness of Goya's own works, and partly to the cinematic form, which means we are viewing this scene against an unsettling soundtrack of scraping sounds (of the inmate spreading faeces on the canvas/wall) and squelching noises (made by the inmate foraging into festering food leftovers for a radio transmitter). Even if one chooses to discard the prism of art history, the implications of this early scene remain essential. Indeed what is pictured here is the process, central to the film, whereby the inmate's aesthetic status changes from passive object of representation (as well as object of political violence) to performer of his own visual '(Dirty) Protest' - a substitute for the failure of verbal discourse. The figure of the artist is later to change into a radical performer of the depletion of meaning - at which stage the body itself becomes the canvas. Following this 'portrait of the artist as an H-Block inmate', the film then cuts to an installation-like shot (17:29) epitomising McQueen's crisscrossing of the beautiful and the abject. The 16-second static shot shows urine flowing down the corridor from beneath the inmates' cell doors and slowly merging into a central river, the liquidity of which stands in sharp contrast with the solidity of the wall and metal. What the shot questions is the thin line between the abject and the beautiful; between the awareness of what those liquids actually are and the acknowledgment of the aesthetic value of the composition, which triggers unexpected visual appreciation.<sup>40</sup>

### **Beyond Clichés**

On first viewing, it is possible to interpret *Hunger* as an attempt at idealising and unifying the perception of a mythologised subject - the hunger striker - in the same way that Richard Hamilton secured his image in his visual work entitled *The Citizen*.<sup>41</sup> How does McQueen move away from such fixed narratives of sacrifice and national heroism? Quite simply,

I would argue, by asserting his freedom as a creative artist who resorts to 'secondary imagination' in order to 'dissolve, diffuse and recreate'<sup>42</sup> what others universally perceive.

Temporal and geographical distance from the event itself also allows McQueen to resume movement literally, through 'cinematic affect',<sup>43</sup> as Deleuze puts it. In other words, 'Cinema [. . .] can present images or perception liberated from this organization structure of everyday life and it does this by maximizing its own internal power'.<sup>44</sup> It also does this in an unexpected way, first by implementing a deliberately fragmented narrative, and by *not* choosing the documentary format.<sup>45</sup> The impossible relocation of the events in the Maze is what prompted McQueen into filming in a set that was rebuilt for the purpose of the movie. The production of renewed images can thus be seen as both the superior faculty of the artist to see and 'dissolve, diffuse and recreate' as well as a challenge to the fixity of a historical narrative that has been mythologised and appropriated by political groups and scholars.

As Tom Herron has noted, the film makes Bobby Sands the 'object' of attention while his fellow hunger strikers are oddly relegated to an afterthought, unnamed, at the end of the film - and it may indeed be true that *Hunger* lacks political accuracy. The question is to what extent does the film claim accuracy? It is precisely this fragmented approach and partial rendering of the events which justify an examination of the power and limitations of the figurative and of the literal within this visual, three-part and inevitably elliptical narrative. In other words, Sands is a metaphor for the process of self-starvation and its implications, and McQueen chooses to 'recreate' the story with Sands as a focus. But as the archetype of the hunger striker in his determination and physical decline, he is McQueen's door into one's perception and the focus he chooses in order to transform one's mental representations of the event. Centering on the body and the abjection of the physical conditions of the young men's lives in prison rather than going back extensively to the political context of the events is a deliberate choice. One only gets auditory glimpses of it through sound bites from Thatcher's speeches; and little is said with regard to the terrorist nature of the inmate's activities, or even the reasons for the self-inflicted 'Dirty Protests', for example. Yet what is produced is a new vision. Throughout the last act of the movie, McQueen strikingly has one 'see seeing' in a way that interrupts all pre-ordered discourses.

## Seeing *Seeing*

What images does the film create? One might take the example of the hallucinations experienced by the dying Sands. His visions of birds, of himself as the boy on the bus or running are progressively densified into a 'magical realist'<sup>46</sup> narrative of young Bobby's childhood. This new form reconciles the pictorial narrative of the last act with the verbal narrative told by Sands to Fr Moran in the second act. While the final image makes for neither a comprehensive life-narrative nor a 'true' vision, it is still one the viewer can hold on to because it has generated something new through the catastrophe of death.

*Hunger* is structured into three acts. The first two enact an inevitable progression into abjection and induce a questioning of the way one views things. The physical repulsion provoked by the sight of urine, excrement, blood or wounds entails a physical reaction in the viewer. It also distorts the intellectual distinction between subject and object, self and other and endorses the collapse of meaning. What seemed ordered into categories of the visual arts through analogy or discourse thus gives way to a fundamental uncertainty as to the method which should be applied in order to apprehend the events. The lessened distance between the viewer and the dying Bobby Sands makes the viewer cringe as one contemplates his sores and pains, and as Sands's (Michael Fassbender) physical ordeal fills up the vacated space of meaning, it proportionally depletes the physical body while the shocking sight of his gaunt form predominates. The relative aloofness which the viewer was able to retain earlier is abolished in the last act. Kristeva writes how,

[. . .] as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.<sup>47</sup>

Towards the moment of death, in the last act, it is almost as if McQueen were aware that showing the abjection of the food-deprived body might equally contaminate the viewer and mark the actual collapse of meaning (and might possibly result in the spectator not being able to cope with the image and leaving the cinema). This might be one of the reasons why metaphors and analogies return in the process of dramatising Sands's wilful death. The reading of the final act of the film as a Christ-like passion scene is anticipated by an earlier representation of a beaten (yet unmistakably

smiling) Bobby Sands - strongly evocative of Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa*.<sup>48</sup> McQueen, however, seems to combine various visual codes. The allegory of the Passion which informs the death of the Republican prisoner is sustained by the bloodied sheet, the stigmata, and the salient ribcage, all of which are reminiscent of the emaciated Christ of the Isenheim altarpiece.<sup>49</sup> Yet the scene is also traversed by metaphors of light(ness): an airborne feather, the shroud-like sheet over Sands's naked body, the sound of a flock of birds. All the while, the soundtrack combines white noises and the muffled sounds of conversations lost on the dying man.

By deflecting one's attention from the graphic process of Sands's physical undoing to his heightened visual perception (a tiny crack in the wall, the tremors of the neon light), McQueen suggests there is an alternative to obvious art history analogies. Indeed the wealth of visual possibilities in the final act of the film enables the viewer to momentarily turn away from religious allegories in order to literally un-frame the shocking moment of death, and shift to a more resolutely philosophical interpretation.

The intensity of the perception of light in the last act of this tragedy is specifically relevant in suggesting metaphorically that 'The act of abandoning your life [. . .] allows [your] Cause to shine out as the luminous backdrop to your own extinction',<sup>50</sup> as Eagleton phrases it. But even though this 'cause' undeniably has an ideological justification for the hunger striker, one could argue with Deleuze that the transcendental cause of the Nation that defines the political subject is only an illusion of transcendence, one that posits as a dogma the centrality of the human subject or an invented and enslaving foundation (God, Being, Truth).

Towards the end, *Hunger* moves from mere transcendence into Deleuze's plane of immanence. Thus when Bobby Sands denies the priest's arguments that the hunger strike is not supported by the party leaders outside of the prison, he also sets about to redefine a plane of empirical representation that is immanent and outside transcendental constraints. McQueen ultimately makes Sands into a figure of the artist, a performer of his own act and someone 'who plunge(s) into the depths of experience in order to release the sensibilities from which actual experience is composed'.<sup>51</sup> There are hints throughout the film at an alternative plane of thinking which is that of immanence. In other words, the film acknowledges a multiplicity of worlds such as the human, the animal, or even the bacterial. They redefine new potentials regardless of categories, in the same way the excremental becomes material for art, abolishing the distinctions between inside/outside, clean/ unclean. The body in *Hunger* is

‘beyond the organism, but also at the limit of the lived body [. . .] the body without organs’ Deleuze writes - it ‘lives [. . .] intense and intensive’.<sup>52</sup>

Sands’s final schizophrenic (static) vision of himself as a child or the alternate (dynamic) image of himself as a cross-country runner is one that delineates a new body – that which Deleuze and Guattari call a ‘CsO’ (*Corps sans Organes*), ‘a body without organs’ that liberates fluxes and intensities.<sup>53</sup> Indeed the dying body is one that no longer exists as an ‘organism’ (that is, an organisation of organs). It is one that reaches beyond these organic limits and ‘does not have organs, but thresholds or levels’<sup>54</sup> – amplitudes of feeling and excessive sensations which exceed the bounds of organic activity. The organism has literally shut down and makes possible the ‘temporary and provisional presence of determinate organs’<sup>55</sup> – the head, in the case of Bacon’s paintings. The film as an artwork, not unlike Bacon’s paintings as interpreted by Deleuze, ‘releases the presence beneath representation, beyond representation’.<sup>56</sup> In the case of Bacon, painting a hysterical subject means that ‘what the hysteric is incapable of doing – a little art – is accomplished in painting. [. . .] Abjection becomes splendor; the horror of life becomes a very pure and very intense life’.<sup>57</sup> The same is true of *Hunger*, where the horror of death becomes a very pure and intense moment.

That the eye of the dying man should be the focus of attention in the last act of *Hunger* is therefore highly relevant. McQueen does not treat the eye merely as a ‘fixed organ’. On the contrary, by focusing on Sand’s blurred vision and hallucinations, he liberates the eye ‘from its adherence to the organism, from its character as a fixed and qualified organ: the eye becomes virtually the polyvalent indeterminate organ that sees the body without organs (The Figure) as a pure presence. Painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the painting breathes...)’.<sup>58</sup> So does McQueen’s film, one might argue, as it literally brings the sound of breathing to convey the potency of a moment that fuses the intensity of childhood and the equally intense moment of death. One no longer sees Sands’s eye, in so far as the eye ‘becomes the destined organ of this presence’,<sup>59</sup> but rather one sees him seeing.

It is here that the proximity between McQueen’s film and painting comes into full view: the analogies which can be traced back to Goya, Grünewald, Bernini and others attest to the power of a representation that embodies the presence of Sands. In so doing, it makes the film part of ‘the adventure of painting’, as Deleuze would say, one in which ‘it is the eye alone that can attend to the material existence or material presence’.<sup>60</sup> McQueen’s talent resides in the fact that the film begins with a realism that strives to represent life and ‘eventually develops to alter the possible

perception of life'.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the movie, what one sees is the process of imaging itself, and the viewer, as a witness is assigned the role to tell the story, to explore codes and the way they were used in the historical context. *Hunger* thus empowers the viewer by enabling them to reclaim new ways of seeing and telling.

## Notes and References

- 1 *Hunger*, 2008. Running time 96 minutes. Written by Steve McQueen and Enda Walsh. Directed by Steve McQueen. Starring Michael Fassbender, Stuart Graham, Liam Cunningham.
- 2 Steve McQueen chooses to do so by exploring the cinematic functions of the analogy, 'the whole idea of people incarcerated in a cell 24 hours a day, for four and a half years, and what they did to protest [. . .] using their body as a weapon. If it's all you have, what do you do with it? Maximizing your resistance as such. That was interesting for me to show, visually, because it had never been actually filmed'. In Zachary Wigon, 'You Use Your Body to Die', an Interview with Steve McQueen, 27 March 2009, web, 27 August 2014 <<http://mubi.com/notebook/posts/you-use-your-body-to-die-an-interview-with-steve-mcqueen>>.
- 3 See Paul Ricoeur's remarks on the necessity to examine 'how it looks' and 'how it works' in *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil Essais, 1975) 302.
- 4 See Tom Herron's contribution to 'Conflicting Views: Visual Culture, Conflict and Northern Ireland', 9-11 June 2010: 'From *Troscadh* to Long Kesh: The Codes of *Hunger*', web, 5 January 2012, <<http://www.ucd.ie/photoconflict/conferences/conflictingviews/>>.
- 5 Julia Kristeva, 'Holbein's *Dead Christ in the Tomb*', *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia, 1989) 105-38. ('The representation without artifice of human death, the almost anatomical nudity of the corpse, communicates an unbearable anxiety to the spectator before the death of God, here confounded with our own death, so much is absent the least suggestion of transcendence.').
- 6 'A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being'. In Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3.
- 7 See John Lynch, University of Birmingham, 'Hunger: Passion of the Militant'. In 'Conflicting Views: Visual Culture, Conflict and Northern Ireland', web, 27 August 2014, <<http://www.ucd.ie/photoconflict/conferences/conflictingviews/>>.
- 8 The film breaks down into three parts. John Lynch points out that the three 'acts' of the movie rely on three dominant media: film narrative (the first act), theatre

- (the interview between Sands and the Father Dominic) and painting, in the starvation scenes towards the end. This structure has to do with McQueen's collaboration with the playwright Enda Walsh, but mostly, McQueen says, it is linked to his own perception of moments of rupture in the story: 'The structure for me was all about initially floating on your back down a river and taking in your surroundings. And all of a sudden there's a rupture, a fracture. Your surroundings have been distorted, you hit a rapid. The last part of course is the waterfall, a loss of gravity. And that's how I sort of structured it in my mind', web, 27August 2014, <[http://www.reverseshot.com/article/interview\\_steve\\_mcqueen](http://www.reverseshot.com/article/interview_steve_mcqueen)>.
- 9 See Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* 316 : '[. . .] le mythe, c'est [. . .] la métaphore à la lettre [. . .] il y a quelque chose dans l'usage de la métaphore, qui s'incline vers l'abus, donc vers le mythe' ('Myth is [. . .] metaphor taken literally [. . .] there is something in the use of the metaphor that tends towards exaggeration, therefore towards myth'. My translation).
- 10 Laurent Jenny, *La terreur et les signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) 45.
- 11 Jenny 45. ('*la chose métaphorisée est comme connue à nouveau, sous un aspect inattendu, qui ne l'arrache pas à elle-même mais l'établit dans une nouvelle familiarité*'. My translation)
- 12 *Hunger* is a movie which, as Clayton and Klevan would say, 'refuse[s] to define our feelings for us straightforwardly, and resist[s] crystallising meaning into a message'. In Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2011) 20.
- 13 As mediologist Régis Debray suggests in *Vie et mort de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995, 494) an additional constraint is that there are limits to how one sees things - 'there is no dictionary of the visible'. (My translation). Debray adds that all the images one perceives are dependent on myths and culture, of which we are 'innovative heirs' ('*Nous sommes des héritiers innovants, encombrés de mythes mais aussi dotés d'ustensiles, et notre culte est une transaction négociée bon an mal an entre notre héritage mythologique et notre milieu technique*', 495).
- 14 Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 94.
- 15 Steve McQueen was educated at Goldsmiths College and was the 1999 Turner Prize winner. He also represented Britain at the 2009 Venice Biennale.
- 16 Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* 317.
- 17 A metaphor *in absentia* is one in which one of the two attributes that for the metaphor is missing. In the case of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* famous quote 'All the world's a stage', the 'world' is compared to a stage, describing it with the attributes of 'the stage': 'the world' is the tenor, and 'a stage' is the vehicle.
- 18 Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* 503 ('*[r]edonner du jeu à l'invisible espace du dedans – via la poésie, la gageure, l'écriture, l'hypothèse, ou le rêve*'. My translation)
- 19 The shape is reminiscent of the materiality of Jasper Johns's abstract expressionism in his (black or gray) 'Target' paintings and drawings. See Jaspers Johns, *Target*, 1958, Conté crayon on paper 15 1/2 x 15 in. sheet (Collection Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Saul). See also *Target*, 1960s, Graphite wash on heavy, off-white wove paper. Image: 34.6 x 35.2 cm. Sheet: 47.2 x 46.5 cm, Ruth C. Roush Fund for Contemporary Art, 1968.
- 20 See Gilles Deleuze on the difference between painting and music : '[. . .] in a sense, music begins where painting ends, [. . .] It is lodged on lines of flight that

pass through bodies, but which find their consistency elsewhere, whereas painting is lodged farther up, where the body escapes from itself.' In Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 47.

- 21 This is also a visual and auditory echo of the opening image in the film.
- 22 The death of the Protestant prison officer while visiting his ailing mother in an old persons' home (41:43) looks like a parodic *Pietà* scene in which the alienated mother remains unaffected by her own son's death - as if religious metaphors had also become exhausted in a context saturated with religious and sectarian violence.
- 23 'There can be no question of political status for someone who is serving a sentence for crime. Crime is crime is crime. It is not political, it is crime'. Tellingly, Margaret Thatcher's disembodied voice resonates at the end of the installation-like scene which opens the last act. But the sound of her voice is one among many sounds (pouring, scraping) which are overwrought by an excerpt from Thatcher's May 1981 Stormont speech: 'Faced with the failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card. They have turned their violence against themselves through the prison hunger strike to death. They seek to work on the most basic of human emotions - pity - as a means of creating tension and stoking the fires of bitterness and hatred.'
- 24 'We only smoke the *Lamentations*', Bobby Sands ironically tells the priest.
- 25 Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Hunger, Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993) 19.
- 26 Eagleton, *Holy Terror* 90.
- 27 Witness to this is the sequence in which Sands's parents, sitting across their disfigured son, agree to twisting language to a point where what they say is the opposite of what they mean - Sands's remark addressed to his anxious-looking mother 'You're looking well' is countered by her brave 'So are you, son, so are you' (30:01).
- 28 It is striking that the only time the film offers a long explanation about the context for the actions of the Long Kesh prisoners, the official spokesman for the Republicans 'outside' should be a man of God (Father Moran, played by Liam Cunningham) and one who disregards his own priestly 'etiquette' by taking on a political role. McQueen insists on this formal and political break-up by turning the conversation into a two-way, public 'confession' to the camera.
- 29 W.T.J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 12.
- 30 Mitchell 13.
- 31 For the purpose of his demonstration, Mitchell relies on Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); *The Linguistic Turn: Essays Recent Essays In Philosophical Method* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967), and on Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).
- 32 My emphasis, Mitchell 13.
- 33 Ironically, writing his name is the last act of freedom the newcomer is granted. From then on the naming of the prisoners will be the prerogative of the wardens, and the prisoners will be denied any form of expression.

- 34 Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 14.
- 35 Mitchell 14-15.
- 36 Mitchell 16.
- 37 With the possible exception of the ‘comms’, ‘The circulation of the post supplants the circulation of the body, substituting the letters for the currencies of sex and food [. . .]. While the mirror search deprives the men of their own speech, the comms they have secreted in their bodies, the larger mirrors of the censored press attempt to rob the Irish nation of its speech, to screw the comms out of the body politics’, Maud Ellmann writes in *The Hunger Artists* 83-85.
- 38 Francisco Goya, *Half-submerged Dog* (130x84 cm), and *Two Old Men* (146cm x 66cm). Oil murals transferred to canvas, 1819-23, Museo Del Prado.
- 39 Much like the inside of the Republican inmates’ cells, Francisco. Goya’s paintings were meant to remain private and never to be shown to the public. The frescoes were transferred onto canvasses in 1874 and donated to the Prado Museum. Goya’s late-life frescoes might be the expression of his despair at the reality of war and violence, which was also the subject of the later *The Disasters of War* (1863).
- 40 The scene punctuates the film and recurs at the inception of the last act (68:04), which takes up the installation shot but this time adds in the human figure of the cleaner, pouring bleach and scraping the soiled corridor. The scene symbolically superimposes the flow of liquids and the flow of language (Margaret Thatcher’s speech) in what seems an endless three-minute cleaning scene.
- 41 Richard Hamilton, *The Citizen* (1981-83, oil on canvas, 2 panels, each 2000 x 1000 mm, Tate Gallery). It is worth noting that the fixity of the image is often taken for granted. The composition should be studied as a diptych – the second half of which is frequently eluded although it points at the complexity of visual as well as verbal representation, through its titles.
- 42 S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817) chapter 13: ‘The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead’. Web, 1 September 2014, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm>> .
- 43 Cf. Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, Critical Thinkers Series, 2002) 31.
- 44 Colebrook 31.
- 45 Little remains to be seen since 2006, when the Maze prison started to undergo demolition.
- 46 Tom Herron mentions the idea in his conference paper, web, 6 January 2012, <<http://www.ucd.ie/photoconflict/conferences/conflictingviews/>>.
- 47 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 3.

- 48 This occurs at the end of the second part, 41 minutes into the movie. See Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, 1647-52 (Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome).
- 49 Matthias Grünewald, 1515, *The Crucifixion*. Panel from the Isenheim altarpiece: oil on wood, 269 x 307 cm, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar.
- 50 See Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* 93. Eagleton's remark that the hunger strikers are 'children of the Enlightenment' may be taken in the literal sense here 'since for the Enlightenment the will is for the most part a force which dominates matter and presses it imperiously into its service. For the hunger striker, the matter in question is his or her own flesh. The final triumph would be the disappearance of matter altogether, as the protestor dwindles to nothing beneath the ferocious force of his own resolution' (Eagleton 89).
- 51 Colebrook 77.
- 52 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith. (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 39.
- 53 Deleuze notes that 'Beckett's Characters and Bacon's Figures share a common setting, the same Ireland: the round area, the isolator, the depopulator; the series of spastics and paralytics inside the round area [. . .]; the presence of the attendant, who still feels, sees and speaks; the way the body escapes from itself, that is, the way it escapes from the organism [. . .] it escapes from itself through the open mouth, through the anus or the stomach, or through the throat, or through the circle of the washbasin, or through the point of the umbrella. The presence of a body without organs under the organism the presence of transitory organs under organic representation'. (*Francis Bacon* 43).
- 54 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 39.
- 55 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 42.
- 56 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 45.
- 57 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 45.
- 58 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 45. The film's final shot ends precisely with the sound of breathing.
- 59 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 45.
- 60 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 47.
- 61 Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* 31.



# From Genealogy to Reconciliation: Public Engagement with Remembrance of the First World War in Ireland

*Richard S. Grayson*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

First World War remembrance on the island of Ireland has a highly charged political significance which is not seen in Great Britain or indeed in other countries. Over the past three decades, the ways in which government and local councils have dealt with the process have changed greatly.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, changes in grassroots public attitudes have been driven by the involvement of individuals and groups with genealogy.

Over the past twenty years or so in Britain and Ireland there has been a significant growth in opportunities to engage in genealogy and it is now arguably a form of cultural activity in its own right. This growth has been driven by and contributed to a range of television programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*,<sup>3</sup> *My Family at War*,<sup>4</sup> and *Heir Hunters*.<sup>5</sup> Some of these programmes have explicitly addressed the role of Catholic Irishmen in the British army, in terms of it being a forgotten, unusual and unexpected part of Ireland's past.<sup>6</sup> Monthly magazines covering Britain and Ireland include *Family Tree Magazine*<sup>7</sup> and *Family History Monthly*.<sup>8</sup> There are Ireland-specific publications such as *Irish Roots*<sup>9</sup> and the more journal-like *Irish Family History*.<sup>10</sup>

Family history societies, often with their own publications, can also be added to the list. These are not all new. The Genealogical Society of Ireland was formed in 1990,<sup>11</sup> the Irish Family History Society in 1984, and the North of Ireland Family History Society was founded in 1979,<sup>12</sup> with countless local groups in various states of attachment to larger bodies. However, it is the relatively recent growth of genealogical material available on the Internet which has widened access to genealogical research. That has democratised what was once a pursuit only of those who had the time and resources to travel to local archives and spend days if not weeks poring over original sources. The Internet has not only brought such sources into people's homes, but it has also worked in partnership with archives to open up previously unavailable material so that often the only efficient way to see certain sources is online. Of particular value to family

historians in Ireland has been the online 1911 Census, initially provided for parts of Belfast by a project based at Queen's University,<sup>13</sup> but now provided for the whole of Ireland by the National Archives in Dublin.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the availability of sources, the amount of material available for any one individual is relatively limited. In theory, all should have birth and death records, and anyone alive at relevant times should appear in a Census. There might also be marriage and baptismal records. Beyond that, unless found on shipping manifests or court reports, it is possible for people to walk the earth and leave little in terms of paper records. The exception is if there was military service and that is one reason why genealogical research so often focuses on personal military histories.<sup>15</sup> Many thousands of Irishmen served in the Second World War but given Ireland's neutrality and the closure of papers for that war, it is the First World War which draws attention, despite around two-thirds of individual service records being lost in the London Blitz of 1940. This article addresses the cultural activities around that research. However, before that is discussed, it is necessary to set out a basic chronology of remembrance in Ireland and to discuss some of the theories which help us to understand the way in which memory of the First World War can be understood.

### **Stages of Remembrance**

The first chronological stage of remembrance is one that can be described as marked by 'veteran engagement' and 'nationalist ambivalence/hostility', with remembrance steadily becoming dominated by the unionist tradition. From 1919, there was hostility from nationalists towards formal occasions in Belfast. When Peace Day was marked in the summer of 1919, the nationalist newspaper the *Irish News* said it celebrated militarism and that 'there is absolutely no difference between the manner and temper of a Red Indian victory carnival and the gorgeous processions arranged to celebrate the triumph over Germany'.<sup>16</sup> There was no overt Catholic presence in most parades in the north. The unveiling of the Belfast Cenotaph in 1929 was notable for the absence of Catholic organisations. Although representatives from two fascist groups (the Italian Fascists, and the Ulster Women's Units of the British Fascists) laid wreaths in the formal ceremony, 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division veterans only did so after the official proceedings, although they were included a year later.<sup>17</sup> More comfortable for Catholic ex-soldiers were events such as a September 1934 pilgrimage to Lourdes, organised by the French Association of former Priest-Combatants. Twelve Belfast men took part in a group of around 400 from

Britain and Ireland, on a journey that aimed to promote peace and reconciliation and included veterans of opposing armies.<sup>18</sup>

However, as Jane Leonard has shown in an article on Remembrance Sunday in Dublin, there were post-war poppy collections at Catholic churches, and, on the first anniversary of the armistice, a specific commemoration by the Irish Nationalist Veterans Association. A parade on Armistice Day (and after 1945 on Remembrance Sunday), which included Mass at the Pro-Cathedral as well as an Anglican service at St Patrick's, was held annually until 1971 when it was cancelled due to the effects of the Troubles. However, none of these events were without controversy, often involving clashes between students at Trinity College and University College.<sup>19</sup>

The result of this was that Catholic memory became personal and private. Regardless of whether unionists intended to make commemorations unionist in tone, any nationalist attending would be surrounded by the flags and symbols of a country to which they felt no allegiance, in a crowd singing songs that had nothing to do with nationalists' national identity. So, as Tom Hartley (a Sinn Féin city councillor in Belfast and former Lord Mayor of the city), has said, the history went 'underground',<sup>20</sup> with acts of memory becoming very private.

Meanwhile, from 1917 onwards there was a strong unionist focus on Somme remembrance. As Gillian McIntosh argues, the story of the Somme became absolutely central in the creation of inter-war unionism, with many unionist writers pointing out the contrasts between the activities of loyal Ulstermen on the Somme in 1916, and the rebellion in Dublin in the same year.<sup>21</sup>

By the time of the Northern Ireland conflict which began in the late 1960s and is generally known as the 'Troubles', that divide had hardened and ushered in a second phase of remembrance: 'unionist hegemony, nationalist alienation'. Remembrance of the First World War had become part of a wider commemoration of the British military and fed into wider assertions of British identity. If we were to characterise nationalist and republican attitudes to remembrance during the Troubles, a useful starting point is that of former prisoner Jim Gibney in a piece written in 2006. Although written in the context of Sinn Féin having revised its attitude, and Gibney himself calling for 'new thinking', it set out a still broadly accepted view. The First World War, he noted, 'was an imperialist conflagration which claimed the lives of more than five million soldiers with 23 million casualties. The scale of the human loss is incomprehensible. It was a pointless and futile war.' Ironically, that might be seen as being close to the dominant view in British popular culture, of the war as 'pointless'.

However, Gibney also made it clear that the war was uniquely problematic for republicans because, in Gibney's words, 'it was after all a British-sponsored war at a time when all of Ireland was occupied and that occupation in part continues today'. He added, 'Unionists used the Somme sacrifice as a badge of loyalty to their new state and still do. Wrapping their ceremonies in the union flag and British military regalia, intentionally or otherwise, diminishes the memory of nationalists who fought and died there'.<sup>22</sup> Gibney's view neatly summarises the myriad of broad nationalist objections to commemoration of the First World War: a wasteful conflict, in which Irishmen were duped by the Brits, and then made to celebrate afterwards in ways that were not to their liking.

However, even as Gibney wrote, major changes were happening. The following moments in the chronology aided the development of a third phase of 'shared sacrifice' with an increasing focus on personal loss. It began with the Enniskillen bombing of 1987, with 11 killed and 63 injured by an IRA bomb. This caused some to question nationalist politicians over whether or not their non-participation in remembrance was right. At the same time, there was a change in the type of history being written, such as Michael Hall's pamphlet *Sacrifice on the Somme* (Belfast: Faset, 1988), and work by Terence Denman<sup>23</sup> and Myles Dungan.<sup>24</sup> The SDLP subsequently engaged with formal events, first in Omagh in 1992 and, in the wake of the ceasefires, in Belfast in 1994. There was even some Sinn Féin engagement with Tom Hartley attending an Islandbridge ceremony in 1995, albeit related to the Second World War. Most prominently, the British, Irish and Belgian heads of state came together to open the Island of Ireland Peace Tower at Messines in 1998.

The fourth phase of remembrance is 'Sinn Féin's peripheral engagement in formal events', first in Dungannon in 2001, and then the high profile acts by Alex Maskey as Lord Mayor of Belfast during the 2002 Somme commemoration, repeated by Tom Hartley in 2008. However, at Sinn Féin's 2004 *Ard Fheis*, a motion was passed to the effect that the party should not take part in 'British military commemorations'.<sup>25</sup>

The fifth and most recent phase has seen a significant development in Sinn Féin's position with formal engagement in events in Belfast. In July 2013, newly in office as the third Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir continued his party's practice of laying a wreath before the main event at the 1 July Somme commemoration in Belfast.<sup>26</sup> However, on 11 November 2013 Ó Muilleoir took a formal role on Armistice Day at City Hall by attending the Royal British Legion ceremony.<sup>27</sup> This represented a step further than the involvement of either Alex Maskey or Tom Hartley, who had laid wreaths on the day of anniversaries and hosted

receptions, but had not attended the official ceremonies. Ó Muilleoir said that he wanted to show ‘respect to the unionist tradition’.

### **Theories of Memory/Remembrance**

Ways in which theories of memory can be used to understand the phases outlined earlier have been discussed in detail by the author elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> However, some key issues must be discussed here in order to understand processes of memory in Ireland as regards the First World War. The key starting point for any study of memory is the work of Maurice Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory* written from the 1920s to the 1940s.<sup>29</sup> Building on earlier work by Durkheim,<sup>30</sup> Halbwachs put forward the idea that different social groups determine what they will remember, and then reinforce those memories through the ways in which they remember. This creates a framework through which individuals can prioritise certain memories. Since memories of the past are more overtly part of political discourses in Ireland than in other places, we can more easily find ample evidence of theories of memory in operation than might be the case elsewhere. Halbwachs’s notion of collective memory, with different social groups determining what they will remember, and then reinforcing those memories through the ways in which they remember, is seen at play.

Meanwhile, Hobsbawm and Ranger have put forward the idea of ‘invented tradition’. Hobsbawm defined this not only as a set of practices with ritual or symbolic attributes, but emphasises that an ‘invented tradition’ seeks ‘to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’.<sup>31</sup> The development of the rituals of First World War remembrance coincided with the assertion of Britishness in Northern Ireland as the partition of Ireland was being proposed, developed and implemented with a new state being built.<sup>32</sup> Later, we can see the ‘invention of tradition’ in operation around the Peace Tower at Messines.

However, as regards genealogy, Foucault’s concept of ‘popular memory’ has some practical value.<sup>33</sup> This was seen by Foucault as the preserve of those who were marginalised from the dominant discourse. In the case of Northern Ireland there have been two dominant discourses (of country and monarchy) which combine to exclude nationalists who wish to remember the war but without paying homage to the cause of King and Country celebrated by unionists. If one was a nationalist who was not prepared to erase from the family history an ancestor’s war service, what could one do? As stated earlier, Tom Hartley described what happened as going ‘underground’. Here, individualised and private memories were

important and it is the expansion of those which the article will now address, with an anatomy of the types of genealogical activities in which people across Ireland are involved.

### **Categories of Remembrance**

The different types of activity can be categorised under seven headings as follows: official, museums, regimental associations, books of honour, memorials, community and centenary, although there is considerable overlap between some of these.

Official remembrance, while not overly genealogical, often involves people taking part to remember an individual or a community and it takes place in a variety of ways in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, 1 July 1916 is important as the anniversary of the Somme and is marked by many local councils in association with the Royal British Legion. The most high profile event is in Belfast, not least because at three points in recent years there has been a Sinn Féin mayor as discussed above.<sup>34</sup> In the Republic of Ireland, as in the north, there are annual civic events on Remembrance Sunday, with the Irish President first attending events at Dublin's Protestant cathedral, St Patrick's, in 1993.<sup>35</sup> Islandbridge, the national war memorial in Dublin, is an important part of commemorations and was a focal point of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II's visit to the Republic in May 2011. The visit was seen in the media in both the UK and the Republic as a powerful symbol of changed relations between the two countries. In some ways, there was little that was remarkable about a British Queen commemorating the dead of the British Army at Islandbridge, yet it did mark a shift for her to be doing so alongside President McAleese. Fintan O'Toole has said that because changes in attitudes to the First World War in Ireland had been underway for some time, the occasion 'merely dramatised what has already happened [. . .] not making history so much as marking it'.<sup>36</sup>

The second category of remembrance is the work carried on around museums, all of which help people to contextualise genealogical findings. Most of these are linked to a specific regiment, the exception being the largest, the Somme Heritage Centre opened in 1994 at Conlig just outside Newtownards in Northern Ireland. This museum is formally part of the Somme Association which has a stated aim 'to educate the public and commemorate, on a cross-community basis, the role played by Irishmen and women in the First World War'.<sup>37</sup> It has a particular focus on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions and, in addition to the Conlig museum, the Somme Association has run a visitor centre at Thiepval since 1994 and has run

Thiepval Wood since 2003. Regarding the specific regimental museums, three are in Northern Ireland: the Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum, Armagh,<sup>38</sup> the Royal Ulster Rifles Museum, Belfast,<sup>39</sup> and The Inniskillings Museum, Enniskillen.<sup>40</sup> All of these museums work hard to be non-sectarian, although interest in those associated with a 'Royal' regiment might be expected to come from the unionist community. A sign of this, as Keith Jeffery has pointed out, is that the Somme Association has a specific membership category for Orange Lodges.<sup>41</sup>

As regards museums in the south, there is only one sizeable regimental display, the Connaught Rangers Association section at King House in Boyle, Co. Roscommon.<sup>42</sup> However, the permanent 'Soldiers and Chiefs' exhibition opened in 2007 at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin has a large section on the First World War and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in particular.<sup>43</sup>

The third category, regimental associations, has considerable overlap with museums, especially in the case of the Inniskillings.<sup>44</sup> There are associations for all of the regiments associated with Northern Ireland, often focused on local branches. Because there are many veterans of these regiments still alive, for example as veterans of the Second World War or Korea, they have been in continuous existence for decades and their primary function is not First World War remembrance. However, from the point of view of First World War remembrance, associations linked to the southern regiments disbanded in 1922 are of significant interest.

One association, the Disbanded Irish Regiments Association, continued until 1982, when it was refounded as the Combined Irish Regiments Old Comrades Association. Throughout, its work has been focused on 'old comrades' as its name suggests. However, there are four other organisations, all established in recent years, which have been more specifically addressed to descendants of those who served and have therefore had a strong focus on family history and the First World War. The oldest is the Royal Munster Fusiliers Association, launched in 1992.<sup>45</sup> It visits memorials and publishes both a journal and a newsletter, and has a website. Probably the most active is the Royal Dublin Fusiliers Association, launched in 1996. Its work has included public exhibitions, collection of archival material, a journal and a website.<sup>46</sup> The Connaught Rangers Association was formed in 2002 and focuses on family connections with the regiment, in addition to having developed the museum collection at Boyle.<sup>47</sup> Newest is the Prince of Wales's Leinster Regiment Association (Royal Canadians), which was re-formed in 2003. Although it is based in England rather than Ireland, it is working with the County Library in Birr, Co. Offaly, to develop a collection. The association also

publishes a journal and organises ceremonies.<sup>48</sup> Finally, in October 2011 and for the South Irish Horse and the pre-1922 Royal Irish Regiment was revived.<sup>49</sup>

The fourth type of activity is the 'Book of Honour'. Using that specific label, Paddy Harte, the former Fine Gael TD, has been an influential figure. The first such publication, a listing of those killed in the First World War, was published in 2002 for Harte's home county, Donegal,<sup>50</sup> and has been followed by two others directly inspired by the example, including Dublin and Belfast,<sup>51</sup> and many other local studies which perform the same task.<sup>52</sup>

Such books of honour perform a memorial role in a similar way to traditional memorials, the fifth category of activity. Indeed, the Island of Ireland Peace Park at Messines, also involved Paddy Harte, along with Glenn Barr, who is from a loyalist background. The centrepiece of the Peace Park at Messines is an Irish round tower, with memorials to the 10<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions leading up to it. It is located close to the site of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> divisions' collaboration at Messines in June 1917. Meanwhile, most Irish memorials reside, of course, within Ireland. A valuable piece of research into the full range of memorials is the ongoing Irish War Memorials Project<sup>53</sup> which, in October 2014, contained records of 24,498 people on 889 memorials in 425 places.<sup>54</sup> Many of these memorials (which are not all for the First World War) date back to the period immediately after the relevant conflict. However, a memorial to 1,100 First World War dead from County Waterford was unveiled as recently as October 2013.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, projects can involve work around the names already on memorials. The Diamond War Memorial Project, launched in 2007, describes its aims as 'to investigate the stories of the lives and deaths of the many people, from the Derry/Londonderry area, who died as result of World War 1 (1914-1918) and also to pass on all this information to as many people as possible throughout the world'.<sup>56</sup> The project uses the city's war memorial as a starting point, documenting the stories behind the names on it, but it has also researched around 400 more men who are not named for reasons which are unclear.

The Diamond project overlaps considerably with the sixth category of activity: community, which involves researching and understanding the stories of those from a particular area, sometimes with a specific cross-community goal. Some of the work is simply carried out by individuals, not as part of a formal group, and Tom Hartley has been especially active in encouraging interest in the war among nationalists in order to reach across social divides. In particular, his historic walks around, and book about,<sup>57</sup> Belfast City Cemetery, has stimulated interest in war graves in what is a profoundly Protestant space at the heart of the Falls area. Most

recently, his book on the Milltown cemetery includes material on First World War graves.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond individuals, there are groups associated with unionism and loyalism which commemorate specific aspects of the war to an extent that their ideology and activities can be described as exclusively denominational, not in a pejorative sense, but simply because their prime focus is their own community and they tend not to engage in activities with nationalists. An example is the West Belfast Volunteers Flute Band which was formed in 2003 in memory of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Rifles.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast, there are also overtly cross-community groups. One of the first significant grassroots developments was through the Farset Youth and Community Development Project which had been launched in 1982, primarily to tackle unemployment in West Belfast. However, from the mid-1980s it has been taking cross-community groups of young people to France and Belgium to visit sites associated with the war. The first such visit in 1983 was unplanned, when a group was travelling back from a trip to Paris that had no connection with the war. The group's coach detoured to Thiepval and found the Ulster Tower in a bad state of repair. A range of initiatives followed, which led both to the re-opening of the Ulster Tower and the formation of the Somme Association.<sup>60</sup>

Two other initiatives which have had an explicit cross-community aim are R-PAST and the Messines Association. R-PAST has brought together young people from across Ireland to take part in the study of the military history of the island. The project focused on the complexities of the First World War. At its launch, Martin Meehan, once a leading figure in the IRA in North Belfast, said, 'People fought for all sorts of reasons, from political beliefs through to economic survival'. Veteran loyalist, Winston 'Winkie' Rea, also speaking at the event said, 'By understanding other people's experiences we will hopefully avoid the mistakes of the past'.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the Fellowship of Messines Association, formed in 2002, has used discussion of the First World War to bring together former combatants of the Northern Ireland conflict which began in the late 1960s and is commonly referred to as the 'Troubles'.<sup>62</sup>

One other community project is unusual: the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers Research Project which is something of a hybrid of regimental and community group.<sup>63</sup> Its uniqueness also rests in the fact that its work focuses on aspects of the First World War which explicitly involved nationalists. Because it concerns one community, some might ask why the label of 'sectarian' is not attached to it, in the same way as is done with other groups. This author would certainly not do so because the group has

consistently sought to engage with others in the unionist/loyalist community in its work.

The project had some unlikely origins in *An Eochair*, a support group founded in 1995 for former Republican prisoners, based in the Upper Falls area of Belfast. It is linked to the Clondara Historical and Cultural Group. These two groups launched the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers Research Project, through the *Irish News*, in 2006. They invited people whose relatives had served in the Connaught Rangers to meet to discuss the past. The 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers are especially significant to Belfast nationalists because when nationalists followed John Redmond's call to enlist in the British army, the largest number were sent to that battalion. Much of the project has focused on the military aspects of the war. Many of those involved (many of whom it should be stressed have no personal connection to former paramilitary organisations), have been most concerned with their own family histories. However, in a community where service in the British army has not been celebrated, and in many cases has been written out of the past, there has also been a journey of discovery in relation to the state of Irish nationalism in 1914. Seán O'Hare, who was associated with the Official IRA and was interned in Long Kesh in 1972, described his family's attitude to his grandfather's military service thus: 'grandfather was mistaken in joining the British army and he was kind of written out of family history'. However, his attitude later changed: 'We would have thought that anybody in the British army then would have been a traitor to Irish nationalism/republicanism. But many of us have come to realise that's not the case, it's just that they were as much for Home Rule as anybody else'.<sup>64</sup>

The project has now produced two editions of a publication entitled *The 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers: Belfast Nationalists at War*, published by the Ulster Historical Foundation as an eighty page booklet in 2008, and then expanded by a quarter for its second edition in 2011. The booklet contains chapters on individual stories, the general history of the battalion, and the politics of the time. Meanwhile, the group has linked with loyalist organisations such as the Mount Vernon History Studies Group, and the Ex-Prisoners Interpretation Centre (EPIC),<sup>65</sup> to organise conferences in 2010 and 2011. These have examined subjects such as the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers in 1913, and the early battles of the war from 1914 to 1916.<sup>66</sup> Throughout, there has been an emphasis on looking at popular – arguably tribal – versions of history, and assessing how far they are historically accurate.

The seventh and final category is for projects specifically associated with the centenary of the First World War. All of these could be grouped in

other categories, but it is worth reflecting on the impetus provided by the 2014-18 Centenary to inspire different types of work. In the first place, it should be noted that some projects are not solely focused on the First World War centenary and instead articulate their work within a narrative of the 'Decade of Commemoration' of the 'Decade of Centenaries' which includes events linked to the struggle for Home Rule and, later, independence. Many of these are for governmental bodies, whether local, national or cross-national,<sup>67</sup> with all of those except that of the Northern Ireland Centenary World War One Centenary Committee<sup>68</sup> covering the broad decade of commemoration.

Outside government, the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland runs a site listing events and research in which it is involved.<sup>69</sup> IrelandWW1, co-edited by the author with Catriona Pennell and Karen O'Rawe, aims to be a hub to link academics with a wider range of projects and organisations through providing information such as contact details and project outlines, along with a bibliography, an archive of news stories, and some free resources.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, a wide range of specific local projects have emerged during the centenary. Castleton Lanterns is focused on seventy-seven lantern slides found in a Belfast loft,<sup>71</sup> while another project looks at service from across East Belfast.<sup>72</sup> A website from the University of Limerick follows the lives of a County Tipperary family, the Armstrongs, during the war.<sup>73</sup> A project called 'Ireland's World War I Veterans 1914-1918' is aiming to list all those who served.<sup>74</sup> Many museums are hosting events and/or projects specifically focused on the First World War centenary.<sup>75</sup> All of these fit into categories already discussed, but their more recent appearance means that they are also worth thinking of as part of a specifically 'centenary' category.

## Conclusions

Over the past two decades or so, different communities across Ireland have found new ways in which to participate in remembrance. That now draws upon Provisional and Official Republicanism, in addition to all shades of unionism and loyalism. Even though there are still some activities which are not shared, there is at least some focus on shared events, even 1 July, which remains at its core a profoundly unionist occasion due to its importance for the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division. At the Irish state level, there has been extensive joint commemoration, from Messines in 1998 to Islandbridge in 2011.

None of this means that throughout society there is a shared story, but there are signs that through genealogy, one might develop. The genealogy

of those engaged in the First World War is often complicated because it reveals men serving in battalions other than the ones we might expect if the traditional sectarian narrative represents the full story.<sup>76</sup> Of course, that then implies they were serving with people one would not expect. Moreover, wherever they served, genealogy can reveal shared experiences across sectarian divides and this helps to complicate simplistic narratives. Such complication can have a powerful role in reconciliation and the appearance of a Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Belfast at a Royal British Legion ceremony in November shows that the unexpected can happen.

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- 33 Misztal 62.
- 34 See also Grayson, 'The Place of the First World War' 325-45.
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- 36 Fintan O'Toole, 'The Week that Anglophobia died', *Irish Times*, 21 May 2011.
- 37 <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/services/community-relations-groups/item/12/somme-association/> [accessed 4 October 2011].
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- 39 The RUR Museum ‘opened in Armagh about 1933, had a period in Ballymena, and put down Belfast roots in about 1963’. Email from Terence Nelson, RUR Museum, to author, 11 November 2011.
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## **‘Muscovite Days and Nights’: A Small Town Irish Newspaperman’s Soviet Travelogue of 1934**

*Anthony Keating*

During the 1930s, David Culbert Boyd, the editor proprietor of a small town regional Irish newspaper, the *Waterford Standard*, embarked on two journeys into Europe. The first, in 1933, was to Geneva to visit the League of Nations headquarters<sup>1</sup> and to report back to his readers on the state of European politics and the work of the League, which he published in a 13 part travelogue between September and December of 1933. His second trip, which is the focus of this article, was to the Soviet Union, to attend the Moscow Theatre and Leningrad Music Festivals of 1934, on a ticket subsidised by the Soviet Government. The trip provided material for a 19 part travelogue that was published between the September of 1934 and March of 1935, titled ‘Muscovite Days and Nights’.

Boyd was an erudite man, with connections and ambitions that reached well beyond his provincial base. He had a deep love of the arts, a sense of their civilising mission, and a passion for freedom of thought, speech and expression. Accordingly, his 1934 visit to the Soviet Union produced a travelogue that did far more than explore the music and theatre festivals, as his sponsors intended. The piece probed the reality of Soviet society from the perspective of a journalist who had lived through revolutionary change and thought deeply about its impact on his own country and community. Boyd contextualised his comments on Soviet politics and society within the ideological, historical and economic realities of the Soviet Union itself and the wider geopolitical stage. Notwithstanding the intellectual robustness of the work, it is a very entertaining account of his journey, full of intimate observations of those individuals he travelled with and those he encountered on the journey. The work is peppered with wry observations on the conditions of the Soviet Union and his native Ireland.

Boyd’s work is devoid of the Stalinist hagiography or anti-Soviet venom that punctuated most of the journalism published regarding the Soviet Union in this period depending on the pro or anti-Soviet worldview of differing authors.<sup>2</sup> Boyd, a former revolutionary with a strong social conscience, was in many ways on a sceptical pilgrimage, hoping against hope that he would discover a worker’s utopia. That said, he was aware

from his reading that he may well encounter a police state whose revolutionary ideals had become corrupted by the ambition and privilege of a bureaucratic and political elite. Boyd, who was socially liberal, with a detestation of poverty, was economically conservative. As a younger man he had been far more idealistic and overtly socialist, inner convictions that never quite left him and which indeed deepened following the horrors of World War Two; he nevertheless feared the impact of what we would now refer to as the 'big state' upon individual freedom.

This essay will explore Boyd's impression of Moscow and Leningrad through the lens of the socio-political analysis deployed in his work and the intimate pictures of the people and places he encountered on the journey. It will begin with a brief exploration of Boyd's background<sup>3</sup> and editorship of the *Waterford Standard* in order to illustrate the personal and journalistic qualities that dictated the ambition, scope and execution of his travelogue.

### **D.C. Boyd and the *Waterford Standard***

Boyd was the editor proprietor of a local newspaper largely serving the Protestant<sup>4</sup> community in the City of Waterford in south east Ireland in what was then the Irish Free State.<sup>5</sup> The population of Waterford City was just under 28,000 in the 1930s, of which approximately 6.16% were Protestants. It was a newspaper with a small circulation which Boyd subsidised with the profits from a related printing business that attracted work from the Church of Ireland, amongst others in the Protestant community.

Boyd was an erudite, well-read son of a Belfast loyalist,<sup>6</sup> Presbyterian family. He was highly intelligent with a combative personality. Despite his family background Boyd became an Irish nationalist, joining the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB)<sup>7</sup> in 1911, having come under the influence of fellow Protestant journalists active in the revolutionary movement, most notably Seán Lester<sup>8</sup> and Ernest Blythe.<sup>9</sup> Boyd subsequently joined the Irish Volunteers<sup>10</sup> on its formation in 1913. He began his career as a journalist at the age of 16 on the *County Down Spectator* and subsequently worked on the *Dublin Evening Mail*, during which time he was as an active member of the Irish Volunteers. He took a prominent role in the Howth gun-running<sup>11</sup> episode of 1914 as an intelligence officer, for which he used his role as a journalist as cover; producing articles on the event, and also the subsequent 'Bachelors Walk Massacre',<sup>12</sup> for the *Dublin Evening Mail*. During his career with the IRB, Boyd became close to many leading nationalists, some of whom went on to hold positions of authority and power in the early Free State governments and, in Seán Lester's case, on

the international stage. He took up his post at the *Waterford Standard* as a direct result of his IRB activities whilst on the run from the British authorities, having attempted to blow up a bridge in the weeks following the 1916 Easter Rising.<sup>13</sup> The post as a reporter for the *Waterford Standard* provided cover for his former activities. Boyd was to remain in Waterford for the rest of his life, dying in 1965.

He took over the proprietorship of the *Waterford Standard* on the death of the former proprietor, Mr. Robert Whalley on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1921, and immediately introduced a more combative, campaigning style of journalism, not typical of Irish local newspapers of the day,<sup>14</sup> or indeed of the Irish national press. Boyd had a passion for exposing corruption and the abuse of privilege, he was outspoken on political issues and a fierce defender of the independence and freedom of the press. He would run foul of the Irish authorities on three occasions, prosecuted twice for libel, in 1928 and 1945, and once under the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. Indeed, he remains the only journalist to have been prosecuted under Section 15 (1) of the 1929 Act,<sup>15</sup> a charge he received for reporting the alleged rape of a 13 year old girl by a wealthy local businessman, something he did because he felt 'cases of this sort need publicity',<sup>16</sup> particularly, Boyd argued, when perpetrated by those in power and authority.

Boyd's closest friend, and the man he described as his 'journalistic and political mentor',<sup>17</sup> was Seán Lester, who in 1929 became Ireland's Permanent Representative at the League of Nations, and in 1933 became the League's High Commissioner in the Free City of Danzig.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, latterly in 1940 Lester became the League's last Secretary General. Boyd's journalism had an international flavour, particularly during the turbulent decade of 1930s, a decade in which he was in regular contact with Lester, doubtless utilising this friendship to keep up to date with developments on the world stage,<sup>19</sup> particularly those international events that had real resonance within Ireland.

### **Ireland's Domestic Politics**

The momentous events on the international stage that led inexorably towards World War Two had resonance in the domestic politics of the Free State. Established just over a decade before Boyd's travelogues were published, the Free State remained an insecure fledgling nation with deep internal divisions. At the time Boyd embarked on his travels Éamon de Valera's, anti-Treaty, republican, Fianna Fáil party<sup>20</sup> had formed its first Government in the March of 1932,<sup>21</sup> replacing the pro -Treaty, Cumann na

nGaedheal<sup>22</sup> government that had been in power since 1923. The accession of Fianna Fáil into government had promoted fears among those who had supported the Treaty, including Boyd, that they may be subject to attack from the anti-Treaty, Irish Republican Army (IRA). Boyd viewed these developments as a manifestation of a dangerous phenomenon he dubbed, 'exaggerated nationalism'.<sup>23</sup> These fears had a particular resonance for the Free States Protestant community, of whom Boyd was a stout defender. However, he feared that the Protestant community would be driven to extinction through migration, ostracisation and persecution.<sup>24</sup> These fears grew in his mind with the election of Fianna Fáil to government in 1932 and the unleashing, as Boyd saw it, of the IRA.

One of Fianna Fáil's first acts in government was to repeal the ban on the IRA, which had been in place since September 1922 and to release many IRA prisoners from jail, essentially releasing a pro-Fianna Fáil paramilitary force back into circulation. Following these developments the IRA became increasingly active in disrupting the activities of their political opponents, particularly, Cumann na nGaedheal. The concern over IRA activities and the potential escalation of their violence against opponents lead to the formation of the Army Comrades Association, later known as The National Guard, an extra-parliamentary security organisation commonly referred to as the 'Blue Shirts'. The organisation consisted largely of former members of the IRA, who were pro-Treaty during the Irish Civil War. The purpose of the organisation was to provide physical protection for political groups such as Cumann na nGaedhel from intimidation by the anti-Treaty IRA, a situation which led to violent conflicts between the two organisations. Elements of the ACA would develop in time into the National Corporate Party, a Fascist party under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to adding fuel to the fire of domestic politics, as a result of its actions regarding the IRA, the Fianna Fáil government acted quickly to end the swearing of the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown and to withhold Land Annuities from the British Exchequer. These elements formed an integral part of the agreement which gave the Free State a level of autonomy from the British Crown, thereby raising the spectre of potential British action against the Free State. In addition to these tensions left-wing elements within the anti-Treaty IRA had broken away to form, along with other political and trade union interests, The Irish Republican Congress (IRC). The IRC was an avowedly anti-capitalist movement that opposed the Fianna Fáil government. It asserted that Fianna Fáil was not a truly republican party and that it pandered to the interests of British Imperialism and capitalism over the interests of the Irish working class,

agricultural wage earners and small farmers. The IRC also argued for equal wages for women in the workplace. Fianna Fáil, asserted the IRC, would ultimately impose on Ireland 'the straight jacket of Fascist Dictatorship'.<sup>26</sup> The Socialist/Marxist platform proffered by the IRC was an anathema to both de Valera's Fianna Fáil and the Catholic Church, an anathema that both Church and Government feared could result in a coup d'état, an event that de Valera also feared was within the capabilities of O'Duffy's ACA.<sup>27</sup> However, in the long run, the strength and potential of the ACA and IRC, to bring about a coup proved overstated as they themselves were both riven with internal conflicts. The IRC spilt into factions soon after it was formed and eventually dissolved in 1939. The National Guard was banned in 1933, as a result of O'Duffy's attempt to ape Mussolini<sup>28</sup> and lead a 'Long March on Dublin', which the Government feared could result in violent disorder and even a coup. The National Guard emerged again in a number of forms to try and avoid the ban but by 1936 it had essentially become a spent force, at which point the Government re-banned the IRA, the organisation having outlived its usefulness to Fianna Fáil'.<sup>29</sup>

The Free State embodied in microcosm many of the tensions being played out on the European and world stage. The tensions between left and right, the threat of violence, religious bigotry, the threat of imperial neo incursion, and what it meant to be a nation in an emerging post-colonial context carried the same weight in the minds of many Irish citizens as it had for the peoples of many other European states. It was from this domestic context that Boyd set out to explore both the role of the League of Nations in managing conflicts within and between states, and the reality of a Soviet Union that purported to be working towards a classless, harmonious society. Boyd was antiauthoritarian, anti-imperialist and, whilst not a pacifist, he had seen the horrors of war and agitated against the international arms trade, which he viewed as immoral. He championed the cause of the resolution of difficulties between nation states through diplomacy over the posturing of force and war; a role in which he viewed the League of Nations as having a fundamental role for the good, the operation of which he explored with his readers in his Geneva travelogue of 1933. The Geneva trip had clearly wetted Boyd's appetite for travel writing and the following year he embarked for the Soviet Union. His mission was to experience with his readers the theatre and music of the Soviet Union and to explore its political system, which purported to offer an alternative model of social and economic organisation that promised the maximisation of human potential and happiness. Despite being dubious about the latter claim, Boyd wanted to see for himself.

## **Muscovite Days and Nights**

In the March of 1934 Boyd took advantage of a subsidised ticket, costing £30,<sup>30</sup> to join a group of British and Irish journalists on a visit to the Soviet Union for the Leningrad Festival of Music and the Moscow Theatre Festival. He used this trip to compose a nineteen-part travelogue entitled ‘Muscovite Days and Nights’, which he published between the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1934 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1935. These articles were well regarded at the time amongst Boyd’s old comrades. Ernest Blythe recalled in his letter of commiseration to Boyd’s widow, Jo, in 1966:

A few days ago I met Mrs. Ina Heron who David and I knew as Ina Connolly, a daughter of James Connolly, the labour leader and signature of the Proclamation of 1916. She told me that David, after a visit to Russia, had written a series of articles which she thought were very valuable and interesting. If she had permission she would like to get them republished in some permanent form.<sup>31</sup>

However, there is no evidence of any republication of the series.

Boyd opens the series of articles with a piece framed in a conversation with his two young sons, in which he explained his trip. Boyd informed his readers that his purpose in going to the Soviet Union was to see what the reality of life is for ordinary Russians. Boyd was keen to see if the Bolsheviks were building a socialist utopia or a country in which ‘decency and family life were being undermined by an inhuman ideology’; the latter being the prevailing orthodoxy in the Ireland of the day. Ireland, during this period, was a deeply conservative Catholic country with a church-driven fear of Communism.<sup>32</sup> Boyd was careful to frame the historical context of the Bolshevik Revolution in his article asserting:

[. . .] it was not caused because the Russian people were free contented and happy. There must have been something rotten and terrible in their existence to have caused such a mighty upheaval. Things don’t happen for no reason. But sometimes revolutions simply mean jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. I don’t know whether the Russian people are free, contented now or not. I may not even know when I get there [. . .].<sup>33</sup>

Boyd resolved to go to Russia with an open mind but was aware that he was likely to be supervised closely on his visit. Asserting that ‘If I am to be supervised in Russia and brought about in a sort of invisible cage, I will go for some special purpose so that I will at least see the object of my visit

apart from whatever chance I may have of catching glimpses of the humdrum reality of life amongst people'.<sup>34</sup>

Under the previous editorship, the *Waterford Standard* had been avowedly anti-Bolshevik<sup>35</sup> but Boyd, whilst deeply sceptical of what he would find in the Soviet Union, still retained an idealistic hankering for the kind of society purportedly offered by Communism. In January 1925 the *Waterford Standard* carried an article regarding an evening seminar discussing Communism at the Y.M.C.A. in Waterford from which it was noted:

The result of the evening's discussion was that the prevalent superficial notions of what communism actually is gave way to a more accurate idea of the aims, objectives and motives of the theory of Communism, and people to whom the very name Communism signified danger and bloodshed began to see that the ideas by which the movement was inspired are very similar to those taught and promulgated by the Founder of Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Boyd relished the opportunity of exploring the Soviet Union in the company of a large number of journalists from British and American national newspapers declaring: 'there are many journalist colleagues in Moscow representing the great English and American national daily papers, who would welcome a brother of the Fourth Estate of the realm'.<sup>37</sup> Boyd, a provincial newspaper man, had no qualms in seeing himself as an equal to the 'great journalists' of Britain and America, in his eyes they were all newspapermen and for Boyd that gave them a connection beyond nationality or the size and prestige of the papers for which they wrote.

Boyd delighted in the company of journalists from major publications, listing amongst others, E.A. Baughan of the *News Chronicle*, Hubert Griffiths of *The Observer* and A.E. Wilson of the *London Star*, a leading theatre critic of the day. Boyd's comments about Wilson are particularly telling in relation to his views on the changing face of journalism, ushered in by the 'new generation' of university educated journalists. He observed: 'what I like about him most was that he was a real journalist, not the gaga type that scorns apprenticeships and relies on "connections" to crash into the newspaper world after a spell at Oxford or Cambridge and some footy literary efforts in the style of 'bright young things'.<sup>38</sup> Boyd met another journalist on board the *Sibir*, one Yen-Chih, of the Shanghai newspaper *News Weekly*, whom he had met in Geneva the year before; Boyd was sad to hear that the newspaper had been suppressed for being too radical.

## The Outward Journey

Boyd opted to travel to Leningrad from London Bridge, a journey of five days by sea and canal.<sup>39</sup> A keen sailor,<sup>40</sup> he had decided on this route as he found it preferable to being on a train for three or four days and additionally, he hoped he could befriend a Russian sailor who could help him master a few phrases of Russian, a language which he had been practicing prior to his departure. Friendships he asserted ‘were easily made at sea, and some of them are of a delightful character’.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Boyd’s descriptions on board the Russian ship, the *Sibir*, are full of colour and character. He describes the drama on the quayside, the various races, personalities, celebrities, socialites and journalists on board, clearly marking the Soviet Union as a fashionable destination for intellectuals and socialites alike. In addition to Boyd’s political and social commentary, the pieces include beautifully crafted sections that impart the romance and adventure of the journey, and it would be remiss not to offer some of this flavour here. Describing the departure of the *Sibir* from London Bridge, he observed:

Our voyage to Leningrad had commenced. Amongst the waving throng on the wharf some commotion became evident. There was a shout to make way. A taxi dashed up to the edge of the wharf, and poor old Mrs. Smith struggled out. She was an American dame of gentle mien, dressed in black and wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. She stood pathetically on the wharf as the gulf widened between her and the ship. There were shouts to the captain that a passenger had been left behind. He shook his head, and the gulf widened. Herbert Griffiths, the correspondent of “The Observer,” like a good journalist, was equal to the occasion. “Tell the lady,” he shouted from the upper deck “to go to Gravesend and catch the pilot boat, she’ll be all right.” The captain nodded his approval. There was a hurried consultation on the wharf, and a man shouted back “she’s afraid she would not be able to climb the rope ladder.” It’s her only chance” shouted Herbert.<sup>42</sup>

Boyd commented on the comfort of the ship and the vast array of Soviet propaganda material on sale to the passengers. Observing, ‘to be in fashion I soon had an armful of real red literature full of the communist virus and prepared myself for the mental inoculation’.<sup>43</sup> Boyd shared a cabin with two men on the outward journey, one being C.D. Darlington the geneticist and in later life a eugenicist with controversial views on race who Boyd described as ‘one of the most charming men I have ever met’. The other was Barton Wild, Organising Secretary of the Locomotive Engineers and

Firemen Union,<sup>44</sup> 'a man of brilliant common sense and a congenial soul'. Boyd clearly enjoyed the conviviality on board, going to the crew's quarters to drink vodka, quarters he described as being very comfortable 'in striking contrast to the cramped fetid unhealthy holes which seem to be considered good enough for sailors of the British Merchant Marine'.<sup>45</sup>

Boyd's love of banter comes through in his journalism. On being asked by 'an attractive' female passenger if he were a communist. Boyd replied 'I'm a journalist' to which she asked further, 'Do you write for the bourgeois press?' to which he replied 'for the Free State Press.' She asked 'Do journalists believe in anything?' his answer being, 'I hope so especially in the frailty and meanness of life. We see a good deal of it.' Later an American lady asked Boyd 'are you an Irishman?' to which he replied 'yes and proud of it.' 'The Irish run America' came her reply to which Boyd retorted 'they don't seem to be able to run their own country. When she suggested 'we could send some of them back to you' Boyd parried, 'Don't be nasty!'<sup>46</sup>

## **Leningrad**

When the ship pulled into Leningrad, Boyd observed what he viewed as the sinister presence of the Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoye Upravlenie (G.P.U.) or State Political Directorate, which were controlled by the secret police the Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD). Boyd was aware that under the Soviet Union's 'Criminal and Corrective Labour Laws' those who were alleged to have undermined the State, through simply exercising freedom of speech, could be put to death. He was also aware that it was the G.P.U. that held the power of life and death. He recalled 'I scrutinized the faces of the agents of this inquisition. What grim tasks have they performed?'<sup>47</sup> He walked down the gangplank to the 'Internationale'. Boyd had arrived in Leningrad.

Boyd offered a 'caveat emptor' to his readership, prior to embarking on any commentary regarding the Soviet Union. He informed his readership that he was 'not bold enough to pose as a purveyor of 'The Truth about Russia'. He advised them to beware of those who claim any monopoly on truth, pointing out that all commentators write from ideologically or religiously driven preconceptions, hostile or favourable, that may well colour their reports; therefore, he argued, there was no single 'truth' about Russia. Boyd was quick to observe the difference between the Soviet Union his hosts wanted him to see and the reality of daily life for many Russians. Musing on what he had seen as his party were being swept into Leningrad in a cavalcade of expensive cars, he noted the general run down

nature of many of the beautiful buildings and how their dilapidation contrasted their condition with the opulence of his tourist hotel. On his first evening in Leningrad, Boyd left the hotel on his own to wander the streets to see the 'real Leningrad'; observing that the streets and houses were like 'rabbit warrens. They were unimaginably dingy with broken hall floors and grimy walls. Life might be tolerable, but it could not be pleasant.' He then adds to provide a sense of balance: 'in fairness, I must admit that I have seen as bad in parts of Waterford, Dublin and Belfast'.<sup>48</sup> Boyd also commented on the plain dress and friendly disposition of the people.

Boyd's ability to slip away on his own was rapidly curtailed. Having declared that he did not want to be 'pigeonholed' as a journalist and wanted to be permitted to 'flutter about' as he pleased, he was nonetheless assigned an official 'guide' in both Leningrad and Moscow. Boyd's guide in Leningrad was a 'university educated' young woman by the name of Patchomina whom Boyd addressed as 'tavarish [comrade] darling'. The pair clearly enjoyed a similar sense of humour, something upon which Boyd thrived, quizzing Patchomina playfully on visits to places such as the 'Anti-Religious Museum'. When Boyd, an agnostic, questioned her on the antireligious views of the Bolsheviks, she replied 'The church in Russia was on the side of the Tsar, the nobility and rich merchants, helped to oppress and exploit the people and tried to keep them in bondage and serfdom.' When Boyd asked her, 'why blame God for that?' Pachomina simply shrugged her shoulders. Pachomina was particularly proud of 'New Leningrad' with its gleaming apartment blocks frequented by students and the middle classes, that differed remarkably from the hovels that Boyd had seen on his solo trip into old Leningrad. Despite her role Pachomina clearly intrigued Boyd, as did Soviet womanhood as a whole. He was fascinated by the fact that Soviet women carried out hard labour, building roads, etc. He wrote that it 'appalled me a little to see women and girls toughened and roughened in this way, but I was soon to learn that the women of Russia have for long carried out Olive Schreiner's<sup>49</sup> militant declaration of feminism in the days of the Women's Movement'. Boyd went on to muse on the nature of marriage in Russia:

Are men and women in Russia linked together by a flimsy marriage tie, happier at home by reason of their common toil and joint efforts for a livelihood than in a domesticity cemented by solemn vows which make the man a breadwinner and the woman the dependent housekeeper? And then I thought it was futile anyway to generalise about human relationships, because their complexity is infinite. No two people present the same aspect in their personal lives. You can't

put humanity in a matrix and mould men and women in the same likeness and the same feelings.

After a few pulls on my pipe, I came to the mighty conclusion that love must exist in Russia as well as anywhere else, and when it brings two people together, it over-comes somehow, all other difficulties.<sup>50</sup>

Boyd confessed to his readership that he had been excited at the idea of viewing a 'classless society' but he soon found that all the trappings of class were evident everywhere in Russia; something he found baffling. In attempting to understand the Communist rationale for these gross inequalities he read Stalin's<sup>51</sup> 1934 Report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which was provided to him by a "Glaswegian Marxist" who could not understand Boyd's confusion on the issue. In essence, Stalin argued 'equalitarianism' was the infantile ramblings of 'leftist blockheads'. Boyd interpreted what he saw to his readers explaining:

My actual experience in Russia, as events turned out, compels me to believe that there is a ruling class, an upper class, a middle class and a toiling class in the Bolshevik State. Money is power and money still rules the roost in Russia. Those with plenty of money have a better time than those who have not. If we abolish the word "class" we have still the word "distinction" left. We have place and power and affluence. It is mere juggling with nomenclatures but in essence Russia is not classless [ . . . ]

He then adds:

Communism as at present functioning in Russia is really State capitalism with all the social disabilities for the workers of private capitalism, the main difference being that the State can compel and private capitalists can only order [ . . . ] State capitalism can be fearfully ruthless!<sup>52</sup>

Boyd's sense of disappointment is palpable. His deployment of the term 'state capitalism' is interesting as it is indicative of the breadth and depth of his reading; he was not dismissing 'socialism' or 'communism' per se but rather the Soviet interpretation of it. 'State Capitalism' had been, and continued in this period to be, rejected by many Socialists, Marxists and Anarchists. Mikhail Bakunin<sup>53</sup> had offered this critique during the First International Conference in 1866<sup>54</sup> as did the German social Democrat Wilhelm Liebknecht<sup>55</sup> in 1896 with both men asserting the potential for state exploitation under Marxist inspired socialism. This critique was developed by Jan Wacław Machajski<sup>56</sup> in *The Intellectual Worker* in 1905,

which argued that socialism was a movement of the intelligentsia as a class; resulting in a new type of economic organisation he termed 'state capitalism'. Boyd's extensive reading and intellect, which was never far from the surface in his journalism, was deployed here with evident veracity in regard to the Soviet nomenklatura<sup>57</sup> and the economic and political taxonomy of the Soviet system.

### **On to Moscow**

Boyd travelled the 500 miles to Moscow by train in a carriage with 'two American actresses and a charming Englishwoman, who had Fascist tendencies'. Russian railways, declared Boyd, reminded him of the Euclidian axiom, 'Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one and other' with 'first', 'second' and 'third' class being replaced by 'first', 'hard' and 'soft'. Boyd impartially observes 'We cannot blame the Russians [. . .] it is a popular trick of all politicians. We do the same at home and try to delude ourselves that by changing the name of anything we are altering its nature [. . .] but the reality is the same despite the verbal dodges'. He observed with typical sarcasm, 'The building of a classless society has not yet advanced so far in Russia as communal railway travel, which one would think would be a fairly easy victory for the dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>58</sup> Boyd and the rest of the party on their arrival in Moscow were assigned a new guide, Cecilia Vilenskaya, a figure far less prominent in his pieces on Moscow than Pachomina had been in Leningrad.

Boyd was somewhat disappointed by the programme on offer at the Moscow Theatre Festival. He had anticipated some examples of 'socialist realism' but instead was offered 'heritage pieces' like Borodin's 'Prince Igor'.<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding his initial disappointment, Boyd was thrilled by the spectacle, the sets, the performances and the keenness of the audiences, observing how theatregoers in Russia did not seem as 'jaded' with theatre as their western counterparts. He argued: 'The Bolsheviks are avid for the theatre for they have no other emotional outlet. Religion has been replaced by drama, the Church by theatre'. He also observed a rigid hierarchical social stratification amongst theatregoers that caused him again to muse on how the new 'aristocracy' had supplanted the old order in Soviet society. He reports how, 'Russia is a land of new titles. Orders of different degrees are conferred from the Kremlin on Russians who have distinguished themselves in various ways. The old capitalist system has been faithfully copied in this respect, only more so'.<sup>60</sup> He expressed a particular admiration for Russian Ballet, for its beauty, the skill and craft of its performers and for its ability to resist the ideological straightjackets he

perceived being placed upon the rest of the arts in Russia. He quoted the pro-Soviet dance critic Jack Chan who argued 'of all the branches of the theatrical arts in the U.S.S.R., the ballet is the slowest in attaining new forms that will enable it to speak with clarity and truthfulness of a socialist ideology'. Chan advocated the 'modernising' of Russian Ballet to reflect socialist ideals, arguing that Russian ballet needed 'a clear understanding of what is required of it in a socialist culture'. Boyd celebrated Russian ballet's resistance to Chan's clarion call, arguing, 'Jack Chan can say what he likes. Russian ballet has succeeded so far in defying socialist realism and maintaining its classical tradition, and by the very nature of its technique it will remain what it is –the most beautiful form of all theatre arts'.<sup>61</sup>

He was less enthusiastic about the Communist Party's ideological stranglehold on much of the arts, something he had railed against in Ireland. Following a long and turgid interview with P. Novitaki, the Assistant Theatres Administrator at the Commissariat of People's Education, who was flanked by Bolshevik minders,<sup>62</sup> Boyd reflected on a trip to Lenin's Tomb, suggesting that the mausoleum and Lenin's embalmed body symbolised Soviet Russia. He asserts:

Communism too has been embalmed. What freedom there might be in Communism for the creativeness of the individual has disappeared in the Collectivism of Stalin. There can be no great drama nor art in Russia because socialist man-the new man as he is euphemistically called by the present Kremlin propaganda merchants-is not an individual. He is a collectivised, regimented being whose mind is only allowed to function within fixed limits.<sup>63</sup>

Boyd was, however, particularly struck by the investment the Soviet State made in cinema for children<sup>64</sup> and in the children's theatre movement in Russia, both of which he viewed extremely positively. However, his enthusiasm for the Soviet treatment of children was tempered by the glaring inequality he observed between those who benefited from initiatives like the children's theatre movement and the child beggars he encountered on the street, asserting 'there is something still radically wrong with the economic system of Soviet Russia, which permits such wide gaps in social welfare'.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to the theatre festival, Boyd's visit to Moscow contained two other events he found worthy of including in his written articles. One was a trip to a 'model gulag' and the other involved a chance encounter with a controversial author of the day, Ethel Mannin.

## Ethel Mannin

Whilst in Moscow, Boyd met the British author Ethel Mannin, whom he described as having an ‘Anarcho-Syndicalist’ bent. In 1930, she had published a book called *Impressions and Confessions* in which she spoke of the importance of physical love and her earlier feelings of sexual arousal for a female schoolmistress. Boyd had read her book and was thrilled to meet the author; thrilled enough to dedicate a whole article to the encounter. In the article, entitled, ‘Ethel Mannin,’ Boyd includes a snippet from his own notebook jotted down on reading Mannin’s book in which he acknowledges that if one’s love life is not ‘satisfactory’ it is possible to experience ‘inner emptiness’. Any reference to Mannin’s book and her reflections on physical love was a risky strategy for any publication in the Free State in this period and would have been for some readers quite shocking, but Boyd was to push the issue further as his article went on to mention a conversation he had with Mannin regarding a visit he made to a ‘Prophylactorium Feminin.’ There were five Prophylactoriums in Moscow in this period. They were institutions that sought to reform prostitutes by providing them with food, accommodation, medical care and training that gave them the opportunity to gain meaningful employment in factories and establish family lives.<sup>66</sup> To Boyd these institutions seemed far more humane and caring than the Magdalene Laundries<sup>67</sup> in operation in the Free State and he commended the Bolsheviki for tackling ‘a great problem with praiseworthy energy and efficiency. They have struck at the root of the whole business.’ Boyd was unable to elaborate on his visit due to Irish Censorship laws, writing, ‘in this hush hush country’, – referring to the Free State – ‘I cannot give any details’. He did, however, report that Mannin asked him if he had ‘seen any of the tarts?’ to which he ‘confessed’ that he had and that this confession had left him feeling ‘rather abashed’. Mannin, Boyd noted, was ‘unabashed’ by the conversation, a reaction which was indicative of her view that ‘the problems of life have no mystery and must be faced’; a philosophy that chimed readily with Boyd’s world view. Boyd’s article on his meeting with Mannin goes on to give the reader some insight into the private thoughts and feelings of this very public woman. On mentioning to her that he had read *Confessions and Impressions* he observed:

[. . .] she became a little nonplussed. She coloured slightly and then said simply “I’m sorry I wrote that book.” Boyd reflected ‘it is not for me to probe her reasons for being sorry for writing her confessions, but I came to the conclusion that the real Ethel Mannin is now

squirming on the hustings. She is still young, and this kind of self-revelation in a blatant world has left her vulnerable. That she has plenty of courage, a brave outlook, is undeniable. But I think she has confessed too much in public and she has left the citadel of her own life open to much of the gaze of the smirking rabble.<sup>68</sup>

### **A Visit to a Model Gulag**

Boyd paid a visit to a Gulag labour camp near Moscow called 'Bolshevo Commune' and whilst there is great debate amongst academics regarding how bad conditions were in many Gulag labour camps,<sup>69</sup> 'Bolshevo' appears to have been a model prison. It was, therefore, deemed suitable for visits by foreign delegates, Bernard Shaw, Lady Astor and H.G. Wells having been amongst its visitors. Prisoners were provided with an art school, theatrical groups and a forty-piece orchestra. It was in effect an 'open prison' with prisoner self-regulation, with a publicly asserted focus on humane ideological rehabilitation rather than simple punishment. It was in many ways the acceptable face of an unacceptable system. Boyd recognised 'Bolshevo' was untypical of the Gulag system, leaving his readers in no doubt in regard to the nature and ideological underpinning of the Soviet penal code. This article provides Boyd's clearest denunciation of the Soviet regime and is worth quoting at some length:

There is a queer mixture of savagery and ideology in the Soviet criminal and corrective-labour law. Officialdom in Russia is developing into as great a tyranny as Czardom [. . .] State capitalism and the administrators of the state, major and minor, are entrenching themselves in privileged positions and are becoming the ruling class [. . .]

The O.G.P.U., the most powerful and privileged class in the Soviet Union have complete control of the convicts. They are herded in communes and Maxim Gorky says, "the proletarian dictatorship successfully educates the mass of the socially dangerous, reforms their nature and develops the socially valuable abilities of the individual." All over Russia in the timber areas, in Siberia, and elsewhere the "socially dangerous" by means of forced labour are educated in this way. But even those who are not "socially dangerous" the writers, poets and artists of Soviet Russia have been regimented by Maxim Gorky and are only allowed to produce what he thinks will keep the proletariat in their place. Gorky is the most sinister figure in Russia today [. . .]. He has forgotten his own past as a revolutionary and sits enthroned as a tyrant with a sly, benevolent smile and a ruthless

nature, in a magnificent villa, beautifully furnished, on the outskirts of Moscow.<sup>70</sup>

Whilst there was no former Irish revolutionary with the power or inclinations of the Soviet leadership, the idea of revolutionaries who had forgotten their high-minded ideals and began to use their power in an authoritarian fashion to preserve the State they had created, had resonance for Boyd. His deep love of what he viewed as the civilising arts is apparent in his detestation of the corruption of the arts for propaganda purposes, personified in his attack on Gorky. He warned ‘The life of Gorky is a warning to revolutionary youth. It is a tale of how they can be lured to fresh manacles. For all revolutions end in new chains’.<sup>71</sup> This was undoubtedly an observation that rings true with Boyd’s own disappointment at the course post-revolutionary Ireland had followed. He believed this was particularly true in regard to the duplicity of the state and the Catholic Church in regulating individual moral behaviour, the persuasive influence of political corruption, and the draconian censorship of cinema, creative writing and aspects of journalistic freedom in pursuance of wider ideological goals.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Journey Home**

Prior to embarking from Russia, Boyd and the other theatre festival guests were invited to a banquet at a former nobleman’s home, which was operating as a museum. Boyd reminds his readers that the Soviet elite had replaced the former ruling classes and went on to accuse Lenin<sup>73</sup> and his fellow revolutionaries of ‘showing little regard for the ideal of a classless socialist society after he became dictator’. Boyd and his fellow delegates were entertained with what he described as a ‘bacchanalian feast’. ‘It was all free, provided by the Bolsheviks, for the edification of myself and those like me who set out for Russia to see the efflorescence of Communism and classless society.’ Tellingly Boyd wrote ‘I am not ungrateful-only disillusioned’. The next day Boyd met up with some

English and Scottish Communists-fellows for whom Moscow had been a kind of Mecca-and I asked them how they felt and what they thought. They were full of wrath! This was not Communism. This was not what they expected to see. How could all this feasting be allowed with so much semi-starvation around? It was a howling disgrace, a complete contradiction to Communistic ideology.

However, Boyd being Boyd couldn't help adding, 'it was a good night all the same, said I!'<sup>74</sup>

Having spent ten days in Moscow and Leningrad, Boyd returned on the *Sibir* with five days at sea to mull over his experiences and the insights they had offered to him and his readers. Boyd asserted 'it would be better for the world if this tremendous experiment in government were permitted to develop unmolested'.<sup>75</sup> He went on:

Blind antipathy, so far as Russia is concerned, is supremely futile. Malicious criticism goes the way of all malice. The position of the Soviet State has so improved that the Government can afford to treat foreign criticism very lightly, indeed, and even welcome it, when it is genuine and not prejudiced [ . . . ]

I discovered very little freedom in Russia. I was not impressed by what is called the new man. I saw nothing marvellous or glorious in the life of the Bolshevik. I am certain such a thing as classless socialist society does not exist in Russia and that the tendency at the moment is not in that direction but towards grades and distinctions just as obvious as in bourgeoisie society. I believe the dictatorship of the proletariat is oppressive in conception and practice and does not allow the same human freedom to exist that we understand. But I also believe that Russia must be allowed to work out her own destiny in her own way.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

Boyd's Soviet travelogue is educative and entertaining in equal measure. It harnesses the author's erudition and penmanship and provides the reader with an insight into Soviet life, culture and politics. The travelogue was even-handed in tone, a feature of Boyd's wider journalism. Additionally, the piece offers the reader insights into the variety, concerns and aspirations of his fellow passengers on the trip and Boyd's own desire for a fairer world, which he had always believed was going to be at the 'rainbow's end'; a conviction he developed following his own experience of the post-revolutionary settlement in the Irish Free State. Boyd had witnessed a roll back on pre-revolutionary promises in Ireland and the rise of what he viewed as an overly authoritarian post-revolutionary elite, albeit a far more benign elite than he had witnessed in the Soviet Union. This was an Irish elite operating within a fragile status quo that many in the 1930s, particularly, – though not exclusively – within the Protestant community, feared may be in the balance, as a result of political unrest, social division, bigotry and economic instability. The concerns Boyd expressed in regard to

personal freedom, glaring inequalities and the usurpation of the arts for political ends had real resonance for Boyd and his readership in regard to his and their fears for the governance and inclusivity of the Free State.

Boyd was first and foremost a journalist, with a hard-bitten view of the world and a sense of journalistic vocation and community. His writing was questioning and critical without being spiteful and chauvinistic or conversely hagiographic, something that cannot be said of the majority of journalists writing on the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In many ways, Boyd was an untypical small town newspaperman, enjoying contacts with friends who were in positions of power and responsibility on both the national and international stage. He also had a keen intellect and robust personality that allowed him to maximise the opportunities this offered to allow his newspaper to punch above its weight. Consequently, 'Muscovite Days and Nights' reads as if it was commissioned by a far larger, national newspaper and, is in part, remarkable for its reach and content because it was written by a small town editor proprietor of a provincial newspaper with a small circulation. The scope and ambition of the travelogue articles were indicative of D.C. Boyd's journalistic aspirations for his newspaper and readership. For Boyd, the *Waterford Standard* may have been provincial but it was never, under his editorship, going to be parochial.

## Notes and References

- 1 The League of Nations was an intergovernmental organisation founded as a result of the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War in 1919. It was the first international organisation whose principal mission was to maintain world peace.
- 2 Peter Fleming's Soviet reports for the London *Times* as an example of anti-Soviet bias in the 1930s and Walter Duranty, of the *New York Times*, as an example of pro-soviet, unquestioning journalism.
- 3 The author owes a considerable debt to D.C. Boyd's two surviving granddaughters, Avril and Beatrice who have provided the author with private family documents and photographs, including an unpublished autobiography of the late Renee Boyd, D.C. Boyd's daughter. I am also indebted to Mr Ian Paul and Mr Leslie Matson, close family friends of the late Mr David Boyd Jnr, for their provision of invaluable source material. Where possible the material contained in the documentation has been cross referenced with archival sources, obituaries, journalistic coverage etc to ensure their reliability.
- 4 This group were largely Church of Ireland (Anglican) but included some Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers.
- 5 The Irish Free State (6 December 1922 – 29 December 1937) was the State established in 1922 as a Dominion of the British Empire under the Anglo-Irish

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Treaty signed by British and Irish representatives in the December of 1921. On the day the Irish Free State was established, it comprised the entire island of Ireland, but as expected Northern Ireland almost immediately exercised its right under the treaty to remove itself from the new state.

- 6 Loyalists are loyal to the monarchy of the United Kingdom, support the preservation of the Northern Ireland polity and oppose a united Ireland.
- 7 The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was a secret oath-bound fraternal organisation dedicated to the establishment of an 'independent democratic republic' in Ireland between 1858 and 1924. Letter of condolence to Boyd's widow, Jo, sent by Ernest Blythe dated 5 January 1966, provided to the author by Mr Leslie Matson.
- 8 Seán Lester (28 September 1888-13 June 1959).
- 9 Ernest Blythe (13 April 1889-23 February 1975).
- 10 The Irish Volunteers was a military organisation established in 1913 by Irish nationalists. Cathal O'Shannon's obituary of Boyd published in the *Dublin Evening Press* on the 5 November 1965.
- 11 The Howth gun running took place in Ireland on 26 July 1914.
- 12 On the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1914 British troops opened fire on unarmed civilians in the centre of Dublin. Three people were killed instantly, thirty-eight were injured, and one man died later of bayonet wounds.
- 13 The Easter Rising was an armed insurrection staged in Ireland against British rule during Easter Week, 1916. Renee Boyd. Letter of condolence from Earnest Blythe. Cathal O'Shannon.
- 14 Anthony Keating, 'Sexual Crime in the Irish Free State: Its Nature, Extent and Reporting', *Irish Studies Review* 20.2 (2012): 137-58.
- 15 This section dealt with 'Offences in Relation to Publication of Reports of Judicial Proceedings'.
- 16 Anthony Keating, 'Setting the Agenda for the Press: The 1929 Case against the Waterford Standard', *New Hibernia Review* 16.2 (2012): 17-32.
- 17 Letter to D.C. Boyd's granddaughter, Beatrice, sent by her uncle, the late David Boyd Junior.
- 18 Lester was sent to Danzig (now Gdańsk, Poland), as the League of Nations' High Commissioner.
- 19 United Nations Office in Geneva archives series (SLP-1933-Sep-30 to Dec-23-P) (SLP-1937-Jul-31-P).
- 20 Founded in 1926, a party established to oppose the Free State settlement but to engage in the political process, Fianna Fáil had become the party of government in the March of 1932, having ended its policy of abstentionism by refusing to take their seats in the Free State parliament, in the August of 1927.
- 21 The Fianna Fáil government called a snap election in 1933 increasing its majority and hold on power.
- 22 The party later merged with smaller groups to form the current Fine Gael party.
- 23 David Boyd, Editorial, *Waterford Standard*, 21 May 1932.
- 24 High levels of Protestant migration were evident from Ireland between the years 1911 and 1926 with its peak being 1921 to 1922 but its actual causation is contested amongst scholars. See Andy Bielenberg, 'Exodus: The Emigration of Southern Irish Protestants during the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War', *Past and Present* 218.1 (2013): 199-233.

- 25 Eoin O’Duffy, (30 October 1892 – 30 November 1944) was an Irish political activist, soldier, and police commissioner, best known for his leadership of the Fascist, National Corporatist Party.
- 26 George Gilmore, *The Irish Republican Congress* (Cork: The Cork Workers Club, 1974).
- 27 Tim Pat Coogan, *De Valera: Long Fellow, Long Shadow* (London: Arrow Books, 1995).
- 28 Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (29 July 1883– 28 April 1945) was a leading founder of Fascism and the leader of the Italian, National Fascist Party.
- 29 Donnacha Ó Beacháin, *The Destiny of the Soldiers: Fianna Fail, Irish Republicanism and the IRA 1926-1973* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010).
- 30 Renee Boyd.
- 31 The original of the letter is in the possession of Mr Leslie Matson, a friend of D.C. Boyd’s late son, David junior, who kindly provided a copy to the author.
- 32 Maurice Curtis, *A Challenge to Democracy: Militant Catholicism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: The History Press, 2010).
- 33 David Boyd, ‘Muscovite Days and Nights’, *Waterford Standard*, 26 September 1934.
- 34 David Boyd, 26 September 1934.
- 35 For examples see *Waterford Standard*, 19 November 1919.
- 36 News Report, *Waterford Standard*, 31 January 1925.
- 37 Boyd, ‘Muscovite Days and Nights’.
- 38 David Boyd, *Waterford Standard*, October 6, 1934.
- 39 There was a long established service from the centre of London to St Petersburg. The ‘canal’ referred to is the German, Kaiser-Wilhelm-Kanal, now known as the Kiel Canal, which links the North Sea at Brunsbüttel to the Baltic Sea at Kiel-Holtenau.
- 40 Renee Boyd.
- 41 David Boyd, 6 October 1934.
- 42 David Boyd, 6 October 1934.
- 43 David Boyd, 6 October 1934.
- 44 The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) is a British trade union representing train drivers.
- 45 David Boyd, 13 October 1934.
- 46 David Boyd, 13 October 1934.
- 47 David Boyd, 26 October 1934.
- 48 David Boyd, 27 October 1934.
- 49 Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2011).
- 50 David Boyd, 27 October 271934.
- 51 Joseph Stalin (18 December 1878 – 5 March 1953) was the leader of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953.
- 52 David Boyd, 3 November 31934.
- 53 Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin (1814-1876).
- 54 International Workingmen’s Association (1864-1876), often called the First International.
- 55 Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900).
- 56 Jan Wacław Machajski (1866-1926).

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- 57 The Nomenklatura were a category of people within the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries who held various key administrative positions in all spheres of those countries' activities and whose positions were granted only with approval by the communist party of each country or region.
- 58 David Boyd, 17 November 1934.
- 59 Prince Igor is an opera in four acts with a prologue. It was composed by Alexander Borodin. The opera was left unfinished upon the composer's death in 1887 and was edited and completed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov.
- 60 David Boyd, 24 November 1934.
- 61 David Boyd, 22 December 1934.
- 62 David Boyd, 1 December 1934.
- 63 David Boyd, 8 December 1934.
- 64 5 January 1935.
- 65 David Boyd, 12 January 1935.
- 66 F.W. Williams, 'Prostitution in Russia', *Journal of Social Hygiene* 18.1 (1932): 360.
- 67 Francis Finnegan, *Do Penance or Perish: Magdalen Asylums in Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 68 David Boyd, 5 January 1935.
- 69 Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
- 70 David Boyd, 19 January 1935.
- 71 David Boyd, 9 February 1935.
- 72 Anthony Keating, 'Censorship, the Corner Stone of Catholic Ireland', *Journal of Church and State* (2013), doi: 10.1093/jcs/cst097. First published online: 21 November 2013.
- 73 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, 1870-1924) was a Russian communist revolutionary, politician and political theorist. He served as the leader of the Russian SFSR from 1917, and leader of the Soviet Union from 1917, until his death in 1924.
- 74 David Boyd, 23 February 1935.
- 75 Boyd was aware that in 1918 a coalition of Western forces had invaded Russia in an attempt to prop up the Tsarist regime, and that significant tensions remained between the Soviet Union and the capitalist world.
- 76 David Boyd, 2 March 1935.



## **Creating Irish London: Modes of Performative Irishness in London, 1870-1890**

*Richard Kirkland*

However else it has since been mythologised, traduced, or belittled, it is clear that the movement known as the Irish cultural revival broke upon the social structures of late nineteenth-century Irish London like a wave, washing away much that had become anachronistic, residual, and compromised. Led by a modernising (usually Irish-born and Catholic) intelligentsia, and characterised by a refusal to countenance assimilation with the host community, the aim of this movement was nothing less than the creation of what John Hutchinson and Alan O'Day have termed 'an autonomous modern nation capable of competing in the international economic and political order'.<sup>1</sup> In this they functioned alongside the other recognisable type of revivalist from this time, the romantic (often privately funded and Protestant) Irish poet, diarist, and scholar; figures that usually had longer term familial and social connections to London. These two types of revivalists would make common cause when expedient, but were also careful to draw a clear distinction when it was otherwise deemed necessary. Certainly in their political determination the modernising intelligentsia were much more hard line about the possible ways in which culture might be mobilised in the service of national renewal. As such, they were the 'shock troops of the cultural revival',<sup>2</sup> absolutely dedicated to their objectives, and determined to create new structures for Irish national life in the wake of Charles Stewart Parnell's fall.

Given the ambition of this aspiration it is perhaps unsurprising that what they found in the pre-existing political and social organisation of the Irish community in London was to appal them. By the late 1880s, the Home Rule movement in London was both lacking in dynamism and a cause that was gradually losing its galvanising effect on the political life of the Irish community. Alongside this, the influence of the Catholic Church in the capital was fitful at best, and for the most part the Irish poor remained locked in squalid and desperately overcrowded slums, with little opportunity for education or economic advancement. They also remained the victims of much overt anti-Irish prejudice. That said, if this new generation of revivalists found Irish London to be morally and politically

paralysed, it can be argued that the lack of appeal was mutual. R.F. Foster has observed that in general it is ‘striking that the new, Anglophobic, culturally separatist organisations did not, unlike the old Home Rule structures, appeal to the Irish in Britain’.<sup>3</sup> Certainly a key effect of the revival was that it forced people to decide which side they were on, making distinct affiliations which previously had been comfortably (or sometimes less comfortably) imprecise. The political polarisation of the early twentieth-century engendered a new stringency about classification which would dismiss many who would previously have considered themselves securely Irish as mere ‘West Britons’,<sup>4</sup> a term of abuse that assumed a particular waspishness among the circles of elite Irish London.

In London, then, the revival is not merely a historical label used to demarcate a series of attitudes towards culture and politics that became prevalent around 1890, but rather a phenomenon that declared itself with a self-conscious insistence, transforming – and often rendering anachronistic – previous ideological conceptions of what Irishness was and how it might be utilised. Indeed, even as early as 1894, the London-based Irish journalist William Patrick Ryan, in his self-published *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers and Possibilities* was historicising the movement, emphasising those elements of it that were distinctive to London, and anticipating its revolutionary potential. ‘Its aim is to teach Ireland to see herself, to be herself, to set her in her true place, realising her nature and her mission. It is an effort to bring knowledge, books, brave hopes, Celtic idealism as her ministering spirits’, the book’s conclusion proclaimed, with a certain breathless intensity.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps because of such singularity of purpose that much of the scholarly interest in Irish London has been focused on this period. Certainly, the dynamism of the revival, its intense attachment to an ideal, and its complex networks of influence and coterie, makes it a compelling subject for historical inquiry. Moreover, the professionalisation that the movement brought to the matter of Irish identity left a record of achievement that remains clearly visible. The quotidian work of Irish organisations in London at this time required the organisation and recording of membership lists, the keeping of accurate minutes, accounts and publication subscriptions, and this was second nature for the new generation of Irish revivalists who were often civil servants, teachers or journalists by day. Even allowing for the fact that this sudden upsurge of activity was concentrated around a comparatively tiny number of people – effectively the emergence of a number of elite groupings within a more diffuse constellation of interests and attitudes – it is still the case that in this

period much of our sense of Irish London goes from a period of hazy indefinability to sudden sharp relief.

London's revival, then, shone brightly, but the light that it spread has tended to cast in shadow those experiments in producing and performing Irish identity that were taking place in the British capital prior to its onset. It is, of course, in the nature of self-declared movements to traduce that which has preceded them, and yet, such activities, while lacking something of the revival's cohesiveness and unity of purpose, are in themselves of historical and cultural significance. For this reason it is the aim of this essay to deepen a perception of nineteenth-century Irish London by concentrating on the cultural production of the London Irish in the 1870s and 1880s, recognising the extent to which this activity prefigured the revival, but also the ways in which it was *sui generis*. In important and sometimes curious ways this is not just about identifying a narrative able to chart the rise of Irish nationalism as an identifying marker – although that is a major element – but is also the story of how previously inchoate communities, finding themselves with elements of a shared identity, began to recognise a larger allegiance through the production of culture. In this the idea of an 'Irish London' was created as a meaningful entity for social change, allegiance, and ethnic identification. Although the startling achievements of the revival has tended to reveal some of the shortfalls of this activity, for instance exposing its blindness to the stratifications of class, its failure to properly account for the unique and complex positioning of the diaspora condition, and its tendency to fall back on a sentimental and erroneous view of conditions in Ireland itself, it also demonstrates an insistence on the necessity of endurance in the face of hardship that refuses the condescension of posterity.

As is well known, in the years after the Famine the number of Irish people in London grew very dramatically to over 100,000, or something like 5% of the overall population. As Lynn Hollen Lees identifies in her foundational study *Exiles of Erin: Irish Migrants in Victorian London*, these immigrants fell into three broad categories: the middle class, artisans, and rural workers.<sup>6</sup> Of these, the latter category was by far the largest and the group that had the most difficulty in adapting its skill base to the demands of an urban economy. It was these Irish that populated London's many urban slums in shockingly overcrowded conditions. Indeed, as Sheridan Gilley and Roger Swift observed when discussing their collection of essays *The Irish in the Victorian City*,<sup>7</sup> for the poorest of the Irish immigrants conditions could hardly have been worse:

Our collective view was that the great mass of the Famine influx especially was poor; that it was discouraged and was in a large majority without any of the skills which the British economy was willing to reward; that it was without the contact with urban employers possessed by the English poor; and that many of the immigrants had left a rich Gaelic language and culture for a setting in which this past inheritance had no meaning and no encouragement to survive. Large numbers – already weakened by disease, exposure and hunger – died in Britain of starvation and cholera, while the collapse of Young Ireland and the eclipse of Chartism, in which some of the immigrants had taken part, had left them without a political voice. Disliked for their religion, their politics and their race, they were in Britain as exiles in Babylon; and it must have seemed highly problematic how far this separate social identity would survive.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these dire circumstances, there were always traces of an Irish collective visibility, but in many ways these moments only revealed just how disparate the Irish population in London actually was. During the 1840s and 1850s, for instance, the immigrant Irish of the St Giles Rookery, the labyrinthine and much-feared heart of Irish population in London, would make one of its rare ventures out of its stronghold to parade to Hyde Park Corner on St Patrick's Day. This was a determined statement of presence for a community that was usually deemed to be in the lowest strata of London society, but there is nothing in this activity that suggests any larger alliances or a wider perception of Irish commonality.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1870s, as the traumatic crisis conditions of the Famine receded, Irish emigration to Britain declined, and those that had remained from the earlier wave were, as Hutchinson and O'Day have observed, 'older and increasingly tending towards assimilation'.<sup>10</sup> As a result of its sudden and often brutal deracination, much of what constitutes the cultural practice of this group is now lost. Reginald Hall has noted in his research on Irish musicianship in London that while there was 'limited activity in singing, instrumental music-making and dancing' and 'indications of some activity in households, kinship and friendship networks and the community', ultimately 'the extent and detail of the surviving rural practices if this immigrant population may [. . .] never be known'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, beyond the obvious horrors of St Giles and Seven Dials, it is not even possible to locate Irish London as an entity in this period with any great confidence as the various Irish communities spread across the city were often from particular parts of Ireland and did not recognise any larger social constellation. Lacking consistent political mobilisation and representation,

or even a newspaper to articulate its case or press its claims, the London Irish often evade the historical gaze.

If evidence of the activities of the Irish population in London at this time is fitful, Irish politics, by comparison, could hardly have been more dominating. From the emergence of the Home Rule movement in the 1870s, through the Land War of the 1880s, and the rise of the cult of Parnellism, the London Irish were continually buffeted by events taking place elsewhere and were rarely actors in their own right. For instance, although Parnellism had its own specific powers of attraction for the Irish in London, and while Parnell himself placed importance on meeting and addressing London Irish political groups, the extent of the movement's penetration into the networks of the London Irish society was uneven at best. Indeed, of all Irish political activity at this time, perhaps the most notable for the London Irish was the Fenian bombing campaign of 1881-1885, terrorist activity which included the detonation of bombs on the London Underground system, at the Tower of London, and Parliament. This was of particular significance because, as Niall Whelehan has argued, this violence was intended to be of a scale 'sizeable enough to ignite a nativist backlash against the Irish population in Britain'<sup>12</sup> with the aim of provoking a greater revolutionary conflict. This chain of events never occurred although it was the London Irish who would endure the repercussions of the bombings through sporadic, if usually small-scale, outbreaks of retributive aggression. This was predicted by one of the bombers, William Lomasney who, as the dynamite war was in preparation, 'was deeply concerned about the terrible revenge which would be exacted upon the Irish living in England if such a campaign took place'.<sup>13</sup> If not quite on the scale that Lomasney feared, the alarm that the bombings caused certainly hardened attitudes against the Irish in London and encouraged the spread of anti-Irish sentiments in the popular media. Typical of these was an article in the London periodical, *Funny Folks*, 'The Irish Terror in London' from 1883, which prophesied the escalation of the terror campaign to include 'the blowing up of the Nelson column', an attempt 'to shoot Mr. Gladstone with an airgun, during his walk across St James's Park', 'the burning of Madame Tussaud's, and the houghing of the Temple Bar Griffin'. As a result, the article continued, newspapers 'preached a crusade against the Celtic inhabitants of London, and fearful scenes were enacted in the Irish quarters about Drury-lane and the Seven Dials. The tocsin pealed from the churches of St. Mary-le-Strand and St. Giles, and the hands of the metropolis were red with Hibernian gore'.<sup>14</sup> The humour of this is barbed, and it is left ambiguous as to whether *Funny Folks* would have objected to such genocide or not.

In terms of the history of terrorism the dynamite campaign is of considerable interest and yet, despite its spectacular nature, it is notable how little it appeared to influence the political orientation of the Irish community in London itself. That said, the attacks established an atmosphere of living that would become the norm for the community for much of the next century; the condition of a life lived within the poles of assimilation and prejudice, of being part of the city while also finding oneself held apart from it. The London Irish community became the object of both fetishisation and suspicion, and it was this bifurcated existence that creates the particular, and easily distinguishable, attitude that many Irish have held towards London since. For this community, London is both a kind of home, a place of distinctive Irish settlement, culture and economy, and, at the same time, a place of strangeness, hostility, and prejudice.

Although, as I have noted, Irish migrants to London were predominantly proletarian, unskilled, and focused on a very narrow range of activities, as Hutchinson notes, from 1871 ‘an increasing proportion of migrants oriented to civil service and teaching positions in England (particularly London) because of the growth of secondary education and professional training in Ireland, combined with limited employment opportunities at home’.<sup>15</sup> John Denvir, writing in 1892, argues that the major catalyst for this was the introduction of the competitive examination system for the Civil Service which led to an influx of Irish appointments, and ‘a greater proportion of them, perhaps, than of the other nationalities of the empire’.<sup>16</sup> ‘As a rule, there are no truer Irishmen, and, being men of education, they are often able to render valuable assistance to the cause’ he elaborates. However, despite their increased numbers, the Irish middle class in London remain slightly elusive in accounts of the period. This may be because, as Foster puts it, for many writers and historians they were ‘statistically invisible and ideologically unattractive’,<sup>17</sup> in that they were more prone to assimilation, and further removed from the resources of a Gaelic culture still visible in the London Irish working class. However, as Foster also notes elsewhere, Victorian London ‘was the magnet for generations of middle-class Irish *arrivistes* determined to make their mark’.<sup>18</sup> As a result Irish middle class and elite activity in London was readily identifiable, even if this was often only as an object of slight ridicule. In 1881 *Funny Folks* reported that London was ‘full of Irish refugees, timid women, who have fled before the Land Leaguers, or have been despatched by husbands and fathers across the water to a place of safety’. As a result, the article continued, ‘this influx of interesting Hibernian femininity will naturally exercise an influence on the fashions of the coming season’, leading to such phenomenon as ‘a run upon bog-oak

ornaments', 'worn by all persons of fenny pretensions to *chic*'.<sup>19</sup> Despite such satire, the Irish middle class in London do become more willing to self-represent in this period and were of crucial importance in the creation of the large-scale cultural projects that occur in the 1870s and 80s. Certainly it is impossible to imagine such a significant phenomenon as the foundation of the Southwark Irish Literary Club in 1883 occurring without the presence of civil service trained mobilisers such as Frank Fahy and John T. Kelly.

Perhaps the most important account of Irish life in London from the beginning of the period this essay is concerned with is Hugh Heinrich's *A Survey of the Irish in England* from 1872. A collection of articles originally written for the *Nation* newspaper, Heinrich's work is neglected when compared to other nineteenth-century accounts of Irish life in London, and even Alan O'Day, the book's most recent editor, suggests it is a source that should only be used advisedly. Nevertheless, despite its shortcomings it is of value in that, as O'Day notes, it 'falls into a vital time gap between the flood of Famine era refugees and the second wave of Irish emigration consequent on the agrarian depression of the later Victorian age'.<sup>20</sup> As a result it records something of what were a developing set of key ideologies and affiliations among the emigrant Irish at this time. Heinrich, Irish-born but resident in England, was an enthusiastic nationalist, and had been active in the Amnesty campaign for Fenian prisoners in the 1860s before becoming an energetic exponent of Home Rule. In 1871 he founded the *Irish Vindicator*, the first newspaper for Irish migrants in London, although this was not a success and closed after only four months.<sup>21</sup> His survey of the Irish in England, written for A.M. Sullivan, the sympathetic editor of the *Nation*, was his next project and would prove to be his major contribution to the cause of Irish Home Rule. Although in many ways a sentimental account beholden to many of the most pernicious stereotypes about the Irish at this time, his central diagnosis of the maladies affecting the Irish in London was stark. As he observed:

The prodigality of the landlord class and the poverty of the poor East-end outcasts are but evidences of cause and effect – the one of which must be arrested before the other can be checked. Till an Irish Parliament either holds out sufficient inducements to the Irish landlords to reside at home, or imposes a penalty on absenteeism, Irish wealth will be squandered in England.<sup>22</sup>

As this indicates, for Heinrich the emigrant Irish in London were but symptoms of an economic and political sickness evident in Ireland itself. The landlord class flaunted itself in London society, revealing nothing

more substantial than its own parasitism, while the Irish East End was sucked ever further into the hopeless poverty that increasingly defined its condition. ‘There are thousands – tens of thousands of the Irish people in London alone who are lost – lost irretrievably. [. . .] Our people are crushed, physically debased, and morally ruined by the dreaded circumstances almost inseparable from their lot’, he lamented.<sup>23</sup> In this Heinrick did not deem the Irish themselves to be at fault but rather their association with the English: ‘Everything good which the Irish in England have preserved is their own; their vices in nine cases out of ten are acquired’<sup>24</sup> he insists repeatedly. As this indicates, Heinrick’s study argues strongly against assimilation and for the preservation of a distinctly Irish set of cultural attitudes in a manner which would prefigure some of the de-anglicising rhetoric of the revival twenty years later.

Despite this, Heinrick’s account balances his pessimistic analysis of the dangers that the London Irish face with constant reminders of the community’s implicit cultural vibrancy, proclaiming ‘there is in London, as in nearly all the large towns in England, an immense force of Irish life, energy, and intelligence, which, if organised and united, would constitute a most valuable aid in accomplishing the national regeneration of their native land’.<sup>25</sup> Key to this potential was the city’s Irish middle class and he argues strongly for the political benefits that would accrue were it able to establish common purpose with ‘the great army of Irish industry which swarms in the marts and docks, and whose voice is potent in the democratic council or popular assembly’.<sup>26</sup> With such sentiments the *Survey* was, to a great extent, a propaganda piece for the Home Rule campaign, and much of his consideration of London discusses the prospects for the city’s then rapidly growing Home Rule Association.

While the overall value of *A Survey of the Irish in England* as a record of a community is debatable, elements of it are revealing. Most obviously, its very existence indicates that, while it is not in a good condition, there is clearly an Irish community that Heinrick can refer to; in other words, an idea of Irish London signifies within the terms of social organisation. Moreover, the survey provides useful information about the extent to which the Irish were deeply integrated into all sections of skilled and professional activity. Although at this stage it was scarcely mobilised in any meaningful way, the political potential of this grouping was palpable, and this awareness was a key factor in the various attempts to characterise and perform Irish identity in the subsequent two decades. Despite his non-assimilist instincts, it is also worth noting Heinrick’s continual concern with the politics of representation and how the Irish community appears

and appeals to the rest of British society; an emphasis that is indicative of typically pre-revivalist ideologies of national formation.

There were other indications of the change in the manner in which the London Irish chose to self-represent during this period. By 1872 some of the wilder elements of the celebration of St Patrick's Day in the city were coming under greater regulation, and were replaced by more formal displays of organised respectability. This was driven by the Catholic Church, and took the form of a pledge, the 'Truce of God', which required abstinence over the period of St Patrick's Day 'so as not to have the anniversary of Ireland's patron disgraced by scenes of riot and debauch'.<sup>27</sup> St Patrick's Day was also the traditional date for Irish political demonstrations in the capital, a custom so firmly entrenched that when one year passed without one (in 1878) it attracted comment.<sup>28</sup> These rallies gradually declined in attendance after the 1870s and by 1882 had been abandoned entirely.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, interest in the commemoration of the day continued to grow although its emphasis moved from politics to leisure; by the early 1880s the calendar of Irish-themed events listed in the *Daily News* was remarkably extensive and encompassed nearly all areas of the city. The keynote event amidst these celebrations was an annual concert at the Royal Albert Hall, which usually consisted of military bands playing popular Irish music. Resolutely unionist in tone, this occasion represented the symbolic encapsulation of state-sanctioned engagement with Irish culture in this period; it was the celebration of a national if not a nationalist day.

There were, however, other forms of Irish identity which wished to make themselves heard. The major example of Irish mobilisation at this time, and a significant landmark in the history of Irish London, was the series of monster meetings in support of the Amnesty campaign for Fenian prisoners held in Hyde Park. The largest of these was held on 3 November 1872 where, according to the *Morning Post*, there 'could not have been less than 20,000 persons assembled', with 'Piccadilly and Oxford Street [. . .] thronged with people of all classes and both sexes hastening to the park'.<sup>30</sup> The gathering was so large, the article speculated, for four reasons: 'the strong appeal made to the working classes by the Fenian Amnesty Committee', the Home Rule association mobilising the London Irish community as a whole, the fine weather, and (tellingly) 'the expectation of a scene consequent upon the anticipated interference with the meeting by the police'. Processions from different parts of London organised to march on the park. These originated from areas including Paddington and Hammersmith, with the largest, representing the East End, from Clerkenwell Green. This parade 'was headed by a brass band, and

accompanied by a number of flags, conspicuous amongst them being a green silk one with the inscription “God save Ireland,” and carried by a young Irish woman dressed in green silk’. Also prominent was a large banner with the inscription ‘Disobedience to tyrants is a duty to God’. The composition of the meeting was clearly heterogeneous, with the report noting a large number of women, English working men, and, what it termed, ‘higher classes’ represented. The rally passed a series of resolutions including one which noted that the:

Treatment of Fenian prisoners, considered in conjunction with the Algerine-like rule of the Government in Ireland, and the treatment of so-called rebels in Jamaica and India, combine to exhibit the true spirit of British policy, and contrasts most strikingly and unfavourable with that of the United States of America after the suppression of a protracted and sanguinary civil war.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the anticipation of police violence the meeting was conducted in good order, and at its conclusion the crowd dispersed from the park singing ‘God save Ireland’.

There were, then, a number of significant aspects to this event: the participation of a nascent Irish labour movement including a noteworthy number of women, the involvement of sympathetic non-Irish working class marchers, a militancy that was at least prepared to countenance resistance to oppressive policing, and, perhaps most significantly, a high degree of organisation. This mobilisation of the Irish worker was of a wider importance for the politics of the city as a whole. Indeed Denvir’s study of the Irish in Britain observed that the ‘Irish may be said also to be the backbone of other popular movements in London’, noting that:

Not only do you find them in the ranks of the purely Catholic and Irish societies, with their bands, banners, and patriotic emblems, but in connection with other political and temperance organisations – if one may judge from the handsome banners, on which you often see depicted such subjects as ‘Sarsfield,’ ‘The Irish Parliament House,’ and ‘O’Connell’, with quotations from Tom Moore and harps and shamrocks galore.<sup>32</sup>

Even accounting for the propagandist element of Denvir’s book, certainly the organisation of Irish labour in this period which he identifies was an important factor in the history of popular protest in London.

The Irish Festival organised at Alexandra Palace in north London in March 1876 was, if anything, an even more determined statement of

presence. Held on the Saturday after St. Patrick's Day, the event brought together many diverse Irish groups from across the capital and the south of England including Home Rule associations, Irish language movements, and temperance societies. According to the *Daily News*, its significance lay in the fact that it 'afforded an opportunity of bringing for the first time the Irish organisations of London conspicuously to the fore'.<sup>33</sup> Despite some organisational problems which entailed that those who had 'accepted literally the request to "come early" found themselves drifting about the Alexandra Park and Palace in a helplessly unemployed condition',<sup>34</sup> eventually the band of the St Anne's Total Abstinence Society struck up and the celebrations began. The numbers in attendance were large – estimated at 20,000 by the *Daily News* and 25,000 by the *Freeman's Journal* – and the tone was good humoured. After all, as the *Freeman's* observed (somewhat ridiculously), 'no one knows better how to enjoy a day's outing than an Irishman, full of frolic, high spirits, and good humour, except it be the rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed, daughters of Erin'.

The programme for the day included 'a performance of Irish music on the grand organ, followed by more Irish music from the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex Engineers, and, the most Irish of all, there was an entertaining contest between half a dozen national pipers'.<sup>35</sup> Later in the day there was a production of *The Colleen Bawn*, followed by further recitals, while outside a hurling match was 'played with the greatest zest and good humour',<sup>36</sup> and a number of Irish jig dancing contests were held. The celebrations culminated in the early evening when a grand march past of the various organisations took place on the Palace's East Terrace with a spectacular host of banners and around twenty bands. Following this parade most of the crowd dispersed although the festival atmosphere stayed with them; even those who later found themselves stranded at King's Cross station waiting for connections were entertained by an impromptu concert of Irish musicians with 'the more youthful and energetic of the company dancing a jig on the platform'.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile back at Alexandra Palace the day concluded with a banquet at which the chairman of the event, Mitchell Henry, the Home Rule MP and industrialist, proposed a toast to the Queen and then spoke passionately, and at some length, on the subject of the endurance of Irish history. 'Ireland has erected her alters to religion and patriotism, and has refused to bow the knee to the grim and blind idols of the new materialistic faith', he thundered. As his speech illustrated, while the tone of the event was for the most part celebratory, it was also politically resolute. Although short on detail, his call for the Irish to 'throw off the chains of intellectual, moral, and physical debasement'<sup>38</sup> was

pitched at a level of political radicalism that was unusual for such events at this time.

The ambition of the Festival, then, was impressive, and as an early instance of the kind of Irish event that would become increasingly visible in London through the rest of the century its importance is clear. For Hall, the event was notable because it ‘brought together middle-class and working-class interests’, but this confluence should be understood more as a loose coalition of Irish orientated groups seeking to assert a presence rather than as an overt political strategy. Alongside this, the temptation to see the Festival as a proto-revivalist happening should be resisted, if only because of the manner in which the themes of the event seem in contradiction with what might be understood as the major tenants of revivalism. As Henry’s speech vividly illustrated with its insistence on Ireland’s ‘religious fervour and undying patriotism’, the dominant force for Irish unity and subsequent action remained an ideal of Christian faith, however variously that faith was conceived, and in few of the speeches that followed the banquet was there any sense in which Irish identity might be otherwise conceived or represented. Moreover, while the great possibilities of Home Rule were touched upon a number of times, the dominant theme of the banquet was instead the obduracy of national survival, the necessity of resisting assimilation, and the ultimate endurance of Irish identity when cast adrift from Ireland itself. In his banquet speech Michael Francis Ward, member of the Home Rule League and MP for Galway Borough, developed the implications of this in striking ways:

If any other nation sends out a colony to another country it is rapidly merged into the life of the other country and is lost but an Irish colony is never lost (applause). They had planted an Irish colony long ago in France when they were driven out of Ireland by overwhelming power – that Irish colony to a certain extent still exists to-day, and, its head is the ruler of France (cheers). In late times they had sent Irishmen all over the world when they were driven forth by England, driven forth to colonise, sometimes at the point of a bayonet, frequently at the point of a crowbar, and as a result he asked was not there now an Irish nation in America and in Australia bigger than in Ireland? (cheers) That Irish nation had been driven forth dishonestly by the strong right arm, but driven forth as it were providentially, for in every large colony of England it stands up against England’s crushing power (hear, hear). Ireland had to congratulate herself on the fact that wherever she sent her sons they never ceased to be Irishmen, and never ceased resisting oppression (hear, hear, and applause).<sup>39</sup>

As this indicates, the Irish Festival looked forward to the possibilities of an Irish future both in Ireland and the diaspora, but in so doing, it returned repeatedly to the disaster narrative of nineteenth-century Irish experience. To put this differently, the threat of national cultural annihilation which had arisen repeatedly over the previous century remained vivid.

It was in these ways that Irish London began to recognise itself and as a collective identification it would become increasingly visible in London during the course of the remainder of the century. This was in part due to the progress of the Home Rule cause, but it is also important to recognise the manner in which Irishness and Irish personal identity was increasingly mobilised as a way of structuring urban leisure activity. In this the ways in which Irish identity positions would be performed, reiterated, and remade, could be surprisingly various. From the growth of Irish language classes among the burgeoning and aspirational clerical class, to the phenomenon of the Irish cockney comedian, from the itinerant Irish musician playing jigs for step dancers on Hampstead Heath, to middle class parlour concerts of Irish harp music, Irishness in London in the 1880s was highly visible and usually fashionable.

The economic element of this positioning was also increasingly important. Irish industries and crafts were penetrating London markets and subsequently the markets of the empire, and these commodities were often entirely reliant on an Irish identification for their appeal. The highpoint of this activity was the Irish Exhibition held at Olympia in West London from June to October 1888. This extensive and ambitious<sup>40</sup> event interpreted its brief broadly and represented to the public for an entrance fee of a shilling displays of Irish manufacturing and arts, performances of Irish music, military manoeuvres, galleries of visual arts, fabrics, and ceramics, and exhibitions detailing Irish history, nature, and culture. Although avowedly 'non-political' in its aims, the event could hardly avoid enmeshing itself in the intensity of Irish politics at this time. As Brendan Rooney points out, 'one might view the Irish exhibition as a rather extravagant public relations exercise, designed to appease the English public and amend their image of Ireland and the Irish in general'.<sup>41</sup>

The scale of the event was not perhaps remarkable when compared to other trade exhibitions in London at a time of confident imperial expansion, but was certainly significant in the context of Ireland and Irish manufacturing. In the exhibition hall there were nine avenues of displays, while a subway led from the hall to a six-acre outdoor site containing reconstructions of Irish scenes at their most compelling. The centrepiece of the exhibition was undoubtedly the 'Donegal Industrial Village', a mock-up of a typical rural Irish settlement designed by Alice Hart, the founder of

the Donegal Industrial Fund. A heavily idealised version of a typical Donegal settlement, the village consisted of twelve thatched cottages (which burned Irish peat), a large cross imported from Ireland at its centre, a holy well, and a ruined Irish tower. The cottages were populated by actual Donegal peasants, who were employed in demonstrations of their native crafts such as weaving and embroidery.<sup>42</sup> Other spectacular exhibits included a reconstruction of Blarney Castle, a Celtic round tower, and even a fully functioning dairy complete with sixty cows and attendant milkmaids in costume at which there was daily production of butter and cheese.<sup>43</sup> Alongside these, the *Belfast News-Letter* reported that ‘fountains, a switchback railway [an early form of roller coaster], and tobogganing slide have been added to gratify and amuse visitors to this unique exposition of Irish industries’.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the permanent displays, the exhibition also hosted a number of individual events most notably the ‘Fancy Fair’ in July at which famous women whose ‘potent influence may be said to regulate fashion and govern “Society”’,<sup>45</sup> dressed in Irish fabrics and jewellery, replaced the Irish peasants on the craft stalls in the area known as the ‘Old Irish Market Place’ (an area modelled on a market in Belfast). Notable personalities taking part included Lady Aberdeen, Countess Tolstoy, Constance Wilde, and Lady Gladstone,<sup>46</sup> and the atmosphere on the first day of the Fair was crowded and feverish with excitement. As the *Belfast News-Letter* reported ‘the rush of people was enormous and the limited space quickly became uncomfortably warm’.<sup>47</sup> The Fancy Fair energised an exhibition which had previously appeared worthy but slightly dull, lacking ‘the indispensable touch of the showman’s hand’ as the *Daily News* put it.<sup>48</sup> If nothing else, it indicated not only how fashionable Ireland was at this time, but also something of the sympathy felt for Ireland’s cause among London elites. The *Morning Post*’s daily listings of all the women taking part on each day of the fair were certainly very extensive,<sup>49</sup> corroborating the *Belfast News-Letter*’s estimate that ‘about 400 ladies of rank have expressed their willingness to take part’.<sup>50</sup> If such figures are correct then the Fancy Fair can be judged as something close to a phenomenon of its kind.

If such patronage indicated enthusiasm and sympathy for the cause of Irish economic renewal after the disasters of the previous decades, the event would resonate with the substance of Irish politics in other more contentious ways. As Janice Helland observes ‘the exhibition was meant to be strategic and compensatory as Home Rule debates proliferated; in retrospect, it represents a microcosm of tensions on the eve of Parnell’s fall from grace’.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Parnell himself was positively inclined towards the event, attending the opening of the exhibition and contributing a range of

marble stones from his quarry at Avondale to the display hall. But the complex mixture of accommodation, dialogue, and stern refusal, which typified much of pro-Home Rule strategy at this time, was also evident at the exhibition. Alongside the educative and illustrative element of the exhibition – its liberal commitment to enabling a better understanding of Ireland’s situation – there were also clear indications of where the limits of that appeal might lie. Most tellingly a visiting group of musicians, the Barrack Street Band from Cork, refused to play ‘God Save the Queen’ after the conclusion of their performance, choosing instead to leave the stage with their instruments. The *Belfast News-Letter* reported that ‘this behaviour was of so unexpected and startling a nature that the public appeared unable to realise the state of affairs until a Nationalist Member of Parliament began to applaud the retreat’.<sup>52</sup> A military band was summoned from its recital elsewhere in the grounds to perform the necessary anthem and the organisers banned the band from performing again at the exhibition. In explanation, the musicians themselves claimed that ‘they dared not go back to Ireland if they had played “God Save the Queen”’.

Perhaps the key significance of the Irish exhibition was the manner in which it refracted Ireland in crazed and distorted ways, creating an image of the homeland that seemed to mirror the distortions and selective ellipses of the emigrant consciousness. This was a “Virtual” Ireland’,<sup>53</sup> as Foster has described it, and as such was only the most extravagant example of a phenomenon that could be identified in different forms and media across London during this period. When the revival declared itself in the 1890s, these visions would soon appear hopelessly anachronistic and sentimental. As a more deliberately professionalised movement reflective of specific class interests, its main activists were concerned with promulgating a quite different conception of Irish identity disseminated via a new set of practices. If Irishness in London in the 1870s and 1880s was typically recognised through performance, exhibition, and parade, it is noticeable how the revival instead privileged individual contemplative acts such as creative work and (most obviously) reading. Indeed reading groups such as that generated by Eleanor Hull’s and Lionel Johnson’s *The Irish Home Reading Magazine*,<sup>54</sup> published under the auspices of the Irish Literary Society, were a key way in which networks of common cause were established across London, and thus helped in the creation of a self-conscious elite. Similarly indicative is the sternly censorious tone of *Inisfáil*, the Gaelic League’s London journal, which continually praised the virtues of punctuality, self-discipline, and combination, in contrast to what it saw as ‘English insult, caricature, and drivel’,<sup>55</sup> and the failings of its own more ‘apathetic members’.<sup>56</sup> Certainly the stakes were high. The first

issue of *Inisfáil*, appearing somewhat belatedly eight years after the Branch had been founded, described the London Gaelic League in its ‘intellectual order’ as ‘suggestive, at its best, of the beginnings of a national university’, with its goal the creation of ‘an awakened, trained, alert, enlightened people, with a clear consciousness of its strength’.<sup>57</sup>

This shift, heralded by the revival’s new priorities, did not mean that public, organised displays of Irishness were no longer apparent in this period, but rather it indicates that such performative moments were now used to reinforce a sense of individual Irish identity which was primarily imagined through the private consumption of texts and the acquisition of key knowledge. The scale of this could be impressive. As the journalist Charlotte O’Conor-Eccles observed with some wonder in 1902, ‘the visitor to the Athenaeum Hall, Tottenham Court Road, will find on any Monday evening some two hundred young men and women assembled to study Gaelic’.<sup>58</sup> It was in such ways that the revival made its appeal to Irish London; it could provide a coherent political rationale, structured leisure time, education and self-improvement, and to some degree a support network that provided a form of social security. And yet much of it was also chimerical. The revival’s stern warnings about the dangers of assimilation, voiced most insistently through the pages of *Inisfáil*, could not prevent the reality of the fact that the shifting, conditional, nature of ethnic identification in emigrant consciousness allowed for integration with many host practices, even while it protected the primacy of other cherished native habits and observances. Indeed, although the revival offered itself as a design for life, coherent and self-contained, we might argue with the benefit of history that its real purpose was to create, through a series of insistent rhetorical strategies, the idea of the Irish subject as an agent of political change. And in the years leading up to 1920 it is in this way more than any other that the movement would prove seismic.

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# Understanding the Recent Renamings of the Irish Department of Arts

*Alexandra Slaby*

The recent history of Irish cultural policy has been marked by many hesitations as to what to call the Department in charge of it, a situation which reveals the extent of the unease with which the Irish political class relates to the arts and culture. In no other country has an Arts or Culture Department changed names on as many occasions – six times in total since the 1980's – as in Ireland. The arts, as an area of public policy, are comparatively easier to pin down than culture, which has historically referred either to the cultivation of the mind through exposure to what Matthew Arnold called 'the best that has been thought and said',<sup>1</sup> or from an anthropological perspective relating to the whole spectrum of conscious expression. In the context of Irish public policy, they refer to the sum of art forms supported by the Arts Council under the Arts Acts of 1951, 1973 and 2003. Since 1951, support for the arts has been delegated to the Arts Council, while support for culture, tacitly defined, came directly from the Department of the Taoiseach and subsequently from the Department of Arts (in its various designations) in the form of direct support for the development of cultural infrastructures. This includes the media, cinema and the Irish language, in relation to fiscal incentives, and of cultural diplomacy abroad through the Cultural Relations Committee which became Culture Ireland.

The titles chosen for the Department of Arts by various political parties are indicative of how they relate to the arts and culture. However, the preference of parties either for the arts or for culture, deriving from their own intellectual history, can no longer be taken for granted, as both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have, on different occasions, both used and dropped the word 'culture'. Is the word culture used or discarded only for the sake of marking a departure from the outgoing government? After retracing the intellectual traditions leading to parties' inclinations towards the arts or culture, this article will seek to show how pressing party-political considerations and intellectual traditions have weighed against one another, from the creation of the first autonomous Department of Arts in 1993 to its latest configuration in 2011.

## The Broken Dream of a Unity of Culture

The origins of conscious Irish cultural thinking involve the wish to revive a golden age, where culture, understood in the romantic sense of an all-encompassing 'spirit' of a nation (first articulated in 1774 by the German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in *This Too is a Philosophy of History*), expressed the essence of Irish civilisation through its manifold but distinct artistic achievement. It was sustained in the second half of the nineteenth century by the endeavours of a distinct breed of Anglo-Irish intellectual, such as William Rowan Hamilton and George Petrie, who were less specialised and more versatile than their counterparts in other countries and who, along with the Royal Irish Academy which was increasingly involved in antiquarianism as the nineteenth century unfolded, participated in promoting a vision of culture which was a continuum between philology, folklore and the fine arts, all of which they collected, studied and disseminated.<sup>2</sup> On the strength of these discoveries, movements such as Young Ireland and activists such as Thomas Davis and Douglas Hyde continued to perpetuate an understanding of culture stemming from common sources.<sup>3</sup> William B. Yeats, in essays on 'Ireland and the Arts'<sup>4</sup> and on 'The Unity of Culture',<sup>5</sup> traced those common sources back to the Middle Ages when, he argued, they formed a whole with religion, and called for an overarching Irish culture which would incorporate elements of English culture while retaining distinct Irish characteristics. Although this understanding of culture, like the intellectual tradition sustaining it, is home grown, it cannot be dissociated from other conciliatory or cleaving 'spiritual' definitions of culture articulated in Britain or on the continent in the context of the development of cultural nationalist movements. Matthew Arnold, whose *Irish Essays*<sup>6</sup> were critiqued by Yeats,<sup>7</sup> famously associated culture and religion with the common search for perfection in his influential *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). For the revival of a national culture thus conceived, Yeats also looked to other countries for inspiration, such as Ibsen's Norway, whose Nationalteater, created in 1899, served as a model for the future Abbey Theatre in its role towards the encouragement of the native Norwegian language and literature at the end of Danish and Swedish occupation.<sup>8</sup>

Yeats's dream of a Unity of Culture was jeopardised when, with the creation of Sinn Fein and the publication of D.P. Moran's *The Philosophy of Irish Ireland* in 1905, the search for common sources gave way to an opposition between two civilisations and the extolment of the cultural forms revolving around the Irish language. This particular trend can also be seen in Eamon de Valera's cultural discourse: in 1921, in that he created

not just a Department for the Irish language, but a Department of Fine Arts, and he wished to promote both a modern and traditional vision of Irish cultural identity. However, the closure of the Department of Fine Arts after five months of existence put an abrupt end to an official definition of culture which included the fine arts. As was the case in other decolonised countries,<sup>9</sup> an identity-promoting culture was designed to help Ireland gain international recognition, and to give a 'progressive' image of the country.<sup>10</sup> In his subsequent speeches, Eamon de Valera, who provided the *Urtext* of much of Fianna Fáil's cultural discourse in the twentieth century, expressed a more restricted, even 'frugal'<sup>11</sup> aspiration for Irish culture. No more consideration was given to the fine arts, and museums were neglected. The pleas of the then head of the National Gallery, Thomas Bodkin, to restore the Department and rehabilitate the fine arts in general were systematically ignored from 1929, when he delivered a controversial lecture about 'The Importance of Art to Ireland', up to 1949, when his *Report on the Arts in Ireland* finally alerted the government to the situation and led to the passing of the first Arts Bill in Ireland in 1951 and the subsequent creation of the Arts Council.<sup>12</sup> A polarised, anti-intellectual, anti-artistic approach to culture had become the norm. Eamon de Valera visited the Abbey Theatre for the first time at the age of fifty, and he never actually set foot in the National Gallery.<sup>13</sup> During the Arts Bill debates, the most virulent statements against state support to the arts came from Fianna Fáil TDs.<sup>14</sup>

The consensus around the essentialist and homogeneous definition of culture promoted by Independent Ireland was facilitated by the domination of social sciences by cultural anthropology for much of the twentieth century. The relative importance of cultural anthropology in the field of social sciences, and its influence on cultural thinking, differentiates Ireland from continental countries where a sociological approach to culture prevailed. Anthropology, a British science which developed with colonial expansion in order to study the cultures of newly-discovered populations, widened the definition of culture to take it beyond the particularist Romantic approach to refer to 'the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society'.<sup>15</sup> It was from this standpoint that American anthropologists endeavoured to isolate the cultural traits of communities. The first anthropologists in Ireland were American,<sup>16</sup> and by virtue of cultural anthropology's descriptive, non-transformational remit – which was in tune with the vision of culture and society propounded by the Catholic Church in Ireland through the social science journals (*Social Studies*, *The Capuchin Annual* and *Studies*) and academic chairs (as in

University College Dublin) it controlled – that the discipline found a fertile ground and became the dominant approach in the study of culture in Ireland, precluding the development of a sociological approach that was perceived as more continental and ideology-laden.<sup>17</sup> Thus, social thinking traditions in Ireland made sure that culture was not to be seen as a social marker, as an instrument of subordination, or as a locus of subversion. In this context, while in Britain in the 1960s cultural studies started to challenge the consensus around cultural identity, in Ireland a collective, homogeneous and binding vision of culture continued to inspire generations of cultural decision-makers and politicians.

In the 1960s in particular, even among the new generation of Fianna Fáil politicians led by Seán Lemass,<sup>18</sup> the idea of a Department of National Culture started being floated.<sup>19</sup> Culture was deemed to have a central spiritual core, a belief which has remained part of Fianna Fáil's cultural discourse. This was exemplified during one of the Arts Bill debates in 1951 when, for Eamon de Valera, the arts were discussed within a wider definition of culture which was more spiritual than aesthetic, and still tinged with romantic nationalism: indeed it was stated that the mission of the Arts Council was to re-establish Ireland's pre-eminence in matters 'cultural and spiritual'.<sup>20</sup> Twenty years later, Charles Haughey also continued to refer to culture as consisting of the 'spiritual and intellectual needs' of the nation.<sup>21</sup> At this particular period the consensus around the spiritual element was such that it reached across to Fine Gael: for example, in the 1951 Arts Bill debate mentioned above, Taoiseach John A. Costello quoted Thomas Bodkin referring to the arts as providing, as for Matthew Arnold, 'almost every impulse to high thought and noble action which is not offered to us by patriotism or religion.'<sup>22</sup> Like religion, culture is understood as binding and identity-reinforcing. It is natural therefore that although, as Finance Minister, Charles Haughey did take some unprecedented measures in favour of 'cultural policy proper' by supporting artistic creation – the tax exemption for artists (Finance Act 1969), and the creation in 1981 of Aosdána, a support mechanism for artists making an 'outstanding contribution' to Irish cultural life – cultural policy 'as display' has tended to prevail when Fianna Fáil was in power, evoking the second term of Raymond Williams's distinction between the two main types of cultural policy.<sup>23</sup> Cultural policy 'as display' is less focused on participation and creation, and more on cultural infrastructure, heritage and high-visibility events.

Meanwhile, Fine Gael has tended to advocate for 'cultural policy proper', that is, for the prioritization of the arts and individual creativity. Taoiseach John A. Costello's view of culture in the 1950s was clearly

centred on the arts, as he sought to redress the ‘oppression and neglect’ of the previous governments *vis-à-vis* arts institutions.<sup>24</sup> Fine Gael introduced the Arts Bill in 1951 and prepared the creation of the Arts Council of Ireland in 1951. It was also Fine Gael which amended the Arts Bill in 1973 to introduce cinema as a subsidised art form and to make the Arts Council more representative of the arts community.

In the period leading up the 1980s therefore, there was little interaction in political discourse or in government action between culture and the arts. They were separate fields, each having its advocates. That was about to change in 1982 when a Fine Gael-Labour coalition government decided to appoint a Minister of State with responsibilities for Arts and Culture.

### **A Dream Come True: Arts and Culture at the Cabinet table**

The creation of the Arts and Culture section within the Department of the Taoiseach in 1982 meant that arts and culture would for the first time be dealt with as a single entity by the government. The main achievement of the new Secretary of State for Arts and Culture was the publication of *Access and Opportunity. A White Paper on Irish Cultural Policy*.<sup>25</sup> This document proposed to move from an arts policy to a cultural policy, promoting an ‘overall understanding of culture’ which for the first time in independent Ireland would transcend the aforementioned historical polarisation and include not only the arts as defined by the Arts Council<sup>26</sup> but also popular expressions in order to espouse a holistic definition of a common national culture<sup>27</sup> not unlike T.S. Eliot’s famous definition of English culture.<sup>28</sup> However, when Fianna Fáil returned to power in 1987, Charles Haughey was elected and directly took charge of culture himself, reducing the prerogatives of the Secretary of State for Arts and Culture to the mere European aspects of cultural policy, which, given the place of Europe in Fianna Fáil’s worldview, amounted to a demotion.<sup>29</sup> The solicitation of culture for political communication purposes then became a hallmark of Fianna Fáil’s cultural discourse. The manifestations of this understanding of culture as the collective expression of national identity had never been as evident as it was in the late 1980s, with the organisation of large-scale communication and commemoration operations (the Dublin millennium in 1988; the nomination of Dublin as European Capital of Culture in 1991). The more prestigious the project and the greater its vote-catching potential, the more Fianna Fáil politicians wanted to be seen to be associated with it.

Meanwhile, an increasingly vocal strand of cultural thinking emanating from the Labour Party added momentum to the *rapprochement* between the

arts and culture as a single area of public policy. Like Fine Gael, Labour adapts foreign (this time continental) intellectual references to the national context. The first expression of the Labour Party's cultural discourse had occurred in November 1971, during a Senate debate about the reform of the National College of Art (subsequently renamed National College of Art and Design), when Mary Robinson made the most memorable plea hitherto for public support of culture, referring to André Malraux's Maisons de la Culture built in France in the 1960s as 'modern cathedrals' that enabled the whole population to gain access to the greatest works of humanity.<sup>30</sup> However, as an example of a rather odd Irish idiosyncrasy, the Labour party's cultural discourse sometimes echoes Fianna Fáil's cultural exceptionalism, as in the prospect of increasing European integration, which President Mary Robinson indeed presented as an opportunity to 'reinforc[e] ourselves as a separate and ancient and rich cultural tradition'.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1992 election which brought a Fianna Fáil-Labour coalition to power, it was decided to build on the 'Arts and Culture' section of the Department of the Taoiseach by adding the Gaeltacht, and to create a full Government Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht entrusted to Michael D. Higgins, Labour TD and academic. Although Michael D. Higgins had no personal input in the composition of the portfolio - which reflected the priorities of both parties in the coalition,<sup>32</sup> - the Gaeltacht was more than welcome in Michael D. Higgins's 'cultural space'. Indeed, the Habermasian concept of the public space,<sup>33</sup> was central to Michael D.'s cultural discourse:

A clue to my own thinking is very much in the attitude I brought to the Council of Ministers in Europe where I introduced a new concept and began explaining it, and it went into wide currency at the end of my period, and that is the concept of the cultural space. They had all begun using it near the end, but that was when all the governments on the Council of Ministers in the European Union were right or right of centre, except myself. And they had a view that when economic growth comes you may be able to start funding the arts again. I explained to them that it was the wrong way to go about it, that you should in fact be investing in the arts at a time of non-growth if you were to prevent racism, if you were to prevent marginalisation, and also, if you were to avoid the double dividend of losing on citizenship twice over: you lost because you hadn't a job, and then you lost participation and so on. So I argued that the cultural space was wider than the economic space, and also, a point I made in my speech in Temple Bar with Jack Lang in 1994<sup>34</sup> was that the cultural space and

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its creativity could revivify the economic space rather than the other way round. That was a continual theme of mine all through the Ministry.<sup>35</sup>

A sociologist, Michael D. Higgins wished to push the study of culture beyond the mere observation of the cultural traits and practices of communities<sup>36</sup> which had made Irish cultural discourse impervious to emancipating frameworks built by continental social science schools. He defined culture as transformative and empowering, with a view to promoting a more inclusive citizenship endowed with critical consciousness. He included rural and urban, Irish and English, traditional and innovative forms. A wider sense of cultural identity, he claimed, would empower Irish citizens against domination, against ‘the colonisation of the imagination’.<sup>37</sup> Not only did he double the Arts Council’s endowment during his term, but his promotion of public service television through the introduction of a special protocol in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), and his defence of the ‘cultural exception’ during the GATT dispute in 1993 over the application of free trade to cultural goods, firmly associated his cultural policy with issues pertaining to the Irish language, indigenous media and cultural industries.

Between 1982 and 1997, fruitful interaction between the arts and culture as areas of public policy took place as they were approached and viewed jointly by the government. As a result, a sense of cultural maturity was evident, as in 1996 for example, on the occasion of two festivals of Irish culture in France (‘L’Imaginaire irlandais’) and in Germany (Frankfurt Book Fair) when Ireland showcased a renaissance of artistic creativity while also representing broader cultural achievements in the Irish language and traditional arts.<sup>38</sup> However, the word culture had become charged with intellectual references which made it known as a Labour Party word in Ireland,<sup>39</sup> at least according to the Fianna Fáil government which decided to drop it after its return to power.

### **The Cultural Space vs. the Economic Space**

Fianna Fáil’s return to power in 1997 opened a period in Irish cultural policy when the emphasis shifted from the encouragement of interaction between the arts and culture to the dissolution of these two terms into other areas of public policy.

To begin with, the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht became the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. In other words, exit culture and enter heritage, which was to be upgraded and

prioritised.<sup>40</sup> During the election, Fianna Fáil actually wanted to create a Department of Heritage, as existed in pre-Blair Britain, and spokespersons of all parties wished for the addition of heritage to the arts minister's portfolio.<sup>41</sup> This new emphasis was 'about fostering our cultural identity',<sup>42</sup> and yet the word 'culture' was crossed out from the title of the new Department and there was no public reaction.<sup>43</sup> Unlike her predecessor and successors, Síle de Valera did seem to have had an input into that transformation: when questioned about it in the Dáil, she replied, somewhat unconvincingly, that heritage was to be understood as 'culture and heritage', referring to the Irish word for heritage, which is *oidreacht* and has a wider meaning than in English. Culture was lost, then, in the translation. Michael D. Higgins reacted strongly to that change, saying that there was 'enormous significance in the dropping of the term "culture" from the title of the ministry'. He pointed out that contemporary artistic creation was necessarily excluded from that restricted portfolio, and that there was a risk that culture would no longer be defined as a 'binding force'.<sup>44</sup> What would be the harm of adding the word 'culture'? Michael D. Higgins saw this withdrawal as motivated by the mere wish to mark a departure from the time he was there. Cultural policy he argued, would be reduced to a 'very narrow version of the economic', thereby abolishing the 'cultural space'.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Síle de Valera did express in her speeches that she was concerned with 'culture' which was defined however in the narrow sense of the traditional, rural culture prized by American tourists. In her Boston College speech (18 September 2000), when she claimed that Ireland was closer to Boston than to Berlin, she not only distanced herself from the European framework of historical, political and cultural reference but also launched a cultural tourism policy which introduced the economic justification of public support to the arts: what would a pound invested in the arts return in terms of direct box-office income and indirect local revenue and jobs? She justified herself in an article she wrote for the *Irish Times*,<sup>46</sup> in which she took pride in the fact that her approach to the arts was much more pragmatic and less intellectual than that of her predecessor.

In 2002, Bertie Ahern made another alteration to the Department of Arts. He literally did not know what to do with the arts, as 'some key areas of our national life are not easily designated as economic or social, but have dimensions of both'.<sup>47</sup> He thus created a Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism (2002-2010). In a process of cultural policy dissolution, the other cultural prerogatives of the former Department were integrated into other government departments: heritage with the environment, the media with communications and natural resources, and the Gaeltacht with Rural and Community Affairs. In the new configuration, the association of the

arts with areas which have nothing to do with them was a radical departure which signalled the end of an approach to culture as a separate sphere of activity to be differentiated from the economy and treated *per se*. The new appointee, John O'Donoghue, unlike his predecessors, had no background in the arts, and he had not been party spokesperson for the arts. Although he succeeded in raising Arts Council funding to unprecedented levels, he was not very popular and his approach to culture was characterised as mere 'perfunctory efficiency'.<sup>48</sup> In 2010, a cabinet reshuffle took place and Taoiseach Brian Cowen seized the opportunity to rename the Department of Arts yet again by subtly changing the emphasis and bringing culture in again, although flanked at the cabinet table by two formidable rivals – tourism and sport.

The new Department of Tourism, Culture and Sport (2010-2011) was entrusted to Mary Hanafin, who had no background in the arts either, but was widely regarded as having been a successful minister for Social and Family affairs. Her main mission would have nothing cultural about it, but would be to restore the tourism and hospitality industry.<sup>49</sup> Indicative of a new understanding of the word 'culture' is Taoiseach Brian Cowen's addition to Mary Hanafin's mission statement of the imperative of 'ensuring that the creative industries play their full part in the vital task of economic renewal'.<sup>50</sup> The return of the word culture, cut off from the arts in Mary Hanafin's portfolio, may in all likelihood be put down not only to the prioritisation of cultural tourism, but also to its own semantic evolution which brings it closer to creativity.

The Lisbon agenda adopted by the European Council in 2000 indeed called on Europe to become 'the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world'.<sup>51</sup> As announced by Daniel Bell whose social forecasting in 1973 of a post-industrial society was taken up by Richard Florida in 2002, the *rapprochement* between the economy and culture was then to shift into a higher gear.<sup>52</sup> To translate that aim into policy, the European Commission's report entitled *The Economy of Culture in Europe*, published in 2006, revealed that while the 'cultural and creative sector' was growing and developing at a higher pace than the rest of the economy,<sup>53</sup> its role in fostering growth and employment was still largely ignored.<sup>54</sup> The recession renewed the emphasis on these new cultural forms as growth enablers. In 2010, the European Commission published a Green Paper entitled *Unlocking the potential of cultural and creative industries*<sup>55</sup> which reiterated the relevance and necessity of investing in the cultural and creative industries in order to create growth and jobs. These 'smart' sectors would regenerate and 'rebrand' countries. The government policy action plan *Building Ireland's Smart Economy: A Framework for Sustainable*

*Economic Renewal* published in 2009 started to include items from the European agenda. Action Point 2 of the *Smart Economy* document places an onus on culture to ‘Build the Ideas Economy’ and create ‘the Innovation Island’, so that Ireland will become ‘the innovation and commercialisation hub’ of Europe. To that end, incentives for investment would be maintained, and that investment would be targeted not only towards the ‘key arts and cultural infrastructure’, but also towards creative and cultural industries, and a synergy would be developed between cultural industries, tourism and the wider economy. Commissioned to see how to implement this new policy, a new Indecon report in 2009 on the economic impact of the arts in Ireland<sup>56</sup> found that the economic impact of the creative industries in particular was far more significant than any other area of culture, and that the creative industries (of which the greatest subsector by far is software) may play a role in the future prosperity of the Irish economy. Ireland has an advantage in the creative sector: it constituted 3.5% of the Irish economy in 2005, which is higher than the 2.6% figure for Europe and it also has an advantageous position in cultural technology and applications.<sup>57</sup> The creative industries can therefore contribute significantly to boosting Ireland’s exports, thereby fostering growth and encouraging economic recovery.

All these prospects of incoming positive externalities explain the renewed emphasis on culture as a priority area of government intervention, albeit in a very different sense from that in which the word culture had been used and promoted by Michael D. Higgins: the cultural space may be becoming co-terminous with the economic space. In the recent and more overt search for economic benefits, Irish cultural policy seems indeed to be following the global evolution of capitalism towards the de-differentiation of culture and the economy as identified by Maynooth Professor of Sociology, Michel Peillon.<sup>58</sup> However although Fianna Fáil’s modes of expression may appear superficially accommodating, something appears to have been lost in the shift from cultural to creative policy, and that is ‘the interest in “cultural capital”, in the writers, playwrights, artists and musicians [who] are less evident in everyday political discourse’.<sup>59</sup>

The end of Fianna Fáil’s domination of political life and the coming to power of a Fine Gael Taoiseach and Arts Minister in March 2011 revived the possibility of a renewed focus on artistic creation and education as a core element of the cultural sector, for such has historically been the hallmark of Fine Gael’s approach to cultural policy, although the word ‘culture’ has once again disappeared from the title of the Department. Given the semantic evolution of the word culture which had taken place – positioning it further away from the arts and closer to marketing and

innovation – the loss of this word is not quite as lamentable as it was in 1997. Although Fine Gael had a significant input in the genesis of cultural policy through the introduction of the first two Arts Acts, the creation of the Arts Council, and the writing of the first White Paper on cultural policy, it was not until 2011 that it had the possibility to implement its own cultural agenda. It was decided that the new minister would be Jimmy Deenihan, who was the party's arts spokesman as well as a sportsman of nationwide repute, and that the existing synergies between Tourism, Culture and Sport would be retained.<sup>60</sup> However, the Department was broken up once more as the government decided to move Sport and Tourism to the Department of Transport, mainly for party-political reasons, in order to create a substantial Department for Fine Gael's rising star Leo Varadkar.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, there was a feeling that heritage had not been successfully managed in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; indeed, the same was felt to be true in relation to the Gaeltacht in the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs.<sup>62</sup> It was decided to reconstitute them within the arts, a position they had held under Michael D. Higgins and Síle de Valera. The Department in its current configuration – at the time of writing – is called the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

Purely pragmatic motivations dictated the composition of this new portfolio, but as a result, the new Minister no longer has to pursue a cultural tourism policy, and can focus on an artistic and cultural remit. Even if the word culture is omitted from the title of the Department, it recurs in the Minister's discourse, as in his opening speech at the Dáil, in which he emphasised that 'the arts and culture are part of our primary script'.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the approach to culture is to be more arts-centred and educational: an Irish arts and film channel has been proposed.<sup>64</sup> The new minister soon expressed his wish to build stronger linkages between arts organisations, the business community and philanthropy in order to make up for the anticipated 15% drop in public funding over the next three years.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, one expects a rationalisation of the management of cultural infrastructures. While it would be most unwise to point with any certainty to the directions in which Fine Gael will take Irish cultural policy in the challenging years to come, one may perhaps look forward, beyond the administrative inconveniences arising from the mergers of cultural institutions, to discussions about values and about transmissions of the arts and culture. The National Campaign for the Arts, the leading arts advocacy group in Ireland, has actually commissioned research in that direction.<sup>66</sup>

Conceptions of and approaches to, the arts and culture in Ireland reveal an idiosyncratic combination of intellectual, political and pragmatic

considerations which defies any convergence with international or European cultural discourses shaped by Unesco or the European Commission. From the moment when the dream of a 'unity of culture' came to an end in the early days of Independent Ireland until the early 1980s, fragmented policies expressed and perpetuated a polarised understanding of the notions of arts and culture, to such an extent that culture, while being undefined and unquestioned, was nevertheless felt to be so central to government action that it was placed in the Taoiseach's office. Alternatively, the arts received meagre and half-hearted support through a small semi-autonomous body.

Since the creation of the first autonomous Department in 1993, interaction between the two at the Cabinet level has meant that a more artistic understanding of culture could prevail. Meanwhile, the association of political parties or coalitions with certain visions of culture or the arts has become less clear. The vagaries of the economy are a factor in such blurring of cultural thinking, as well as the general de-differentiation of culture and the economy. It does not help that pragmatic, administrative or personal motives seem to outweigh intellectual considerations in the various renamings of the Irish Department of Arts. Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that Fine Gael seizes this unprecedented opportunity to begin reversing the trend of de-differentiation and to deliver on its call for successive governments since the 1950s, to develop artistic and cultural education, both within and outside schools, as this can be viewed as the ultimate provider of cultural capital which enables the success of cultural policies.

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- 27 Nealon, *Access and Opportunity* 12. 'The culture of Ireland includes elements which are distinctively Irish and elements which belong to our shared human culture [. . .] Even to describe culture as a single entity is misleading; Irish culture

is heterogeneous, reflecting a complex and diverse social fabric, which – to name but a few categories with different cultural connotations – includes rural, urban, suburban and travelling communities, old, young and middle-aged people, English speakers and native speakers, the affluent and the disadvantaged [. . .]. Policy in relation to culture up to now has tended to be defined in terms of specific – and very significant – aspects of culture, such as the arts and the Irish language, but has never been formulated by reference to any overall understanding of the nature of culture and its role in national life’.

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## Book Reviews

John Strachan and Claire Nally, *Advertising, Literature and Print Culture in Ireland, 1891-1922*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 310 pages. £60/US\$100. ISBN 9780230298736 (hardback).

In the years following the death of the 'Celtic Tiger', Irish studies has witnessed a number of exciting shifts in perceptions concerning the consumer culture of Ireland, and its relation to art, literature, history and politics. While debates surrounding the significance of advertising, commodity culture and print ephemera in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within Britain are numerous, it is evident that research on these subjects in Ireland is still in a stage of embryonic development. As such, scholars from a number of disciplines will find this volume, *Advertising, Literature and Print Culture in Ireland, 1891-1922*, filled with stimulating discussions regarding the emergence and development of Irish commodity and consumer culture(s).

Readers familiar with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), along with Jennifer Wicke's *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement and Social Reading* (1988) and Garry Leonard's *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce* (1998) will be aware of the compelling descriptions of Irish advertising, commercialism and popular culture viewed through the eyes of Leopold Bloom. As John Strachan and Claire Nally note in their introduction, 'For James Joyce, advertising was part of 'the velocity of modern life' (8). However, as Strachan and Nally continue to argue, despite Joyce's attitude and references, attention devoted to the history of commercial, consumer and popular culture is largely incomplete. In a challenge to Hugh Oram's suggestion that following a boom in the 1930s, it was in the 1960s that Irish advertising 'came of age', and in an effort to highlight the problems related to the lack of critical analysis within Irish studies, Strachan and Nally, boldly and decisively begin their study by asserting the significance of their work; declaring '*Advertising, Literature and Print Culture in Ireland, 1891-1922* is the first book in Irish studies to pay close attention to the cultural meaning of advertising during the Revival era' (1). Thus, Strachan and Nally revisit and revitalise largely unchallenged perceptions, and this study is a very welcome and timely contribution to critical enquiries concerning Ireland's commercial, consumer and popular culture(s).

Following an outstanding ‘Prologue’ and first chapter, ‘Advertising and the Nation in the Irish Revival’, both of which survey the watershed moments leading to the formation of the ‘Irish Ireland’ movement and other Revivalist projects, Strachan and Nally, in a series of case studies, discuss aspects of Revival culture previously under researched, with reference to Irish advertising, commercial ventures and print culture. ‘The Sinn Fein Depot and the Selling of Irish Sport’ offers an examination of sport-related adverts, and sport inspired jingles, poetry and songs. In this exceptional piece, Strachan, by contrasting examples of ‘greening’, or ‘Hibernising’, with non-partisan and apolitical sport-related artefacts, created before and after the formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A.), exposes the relationship(s) between Ireland, National identity and sport. In contrast with Revivalist projects, examples of ‘High Culture’ are sensitively dissected and scrutinised in an effort to illustrate the connection between high and mass culture(s). In ‘Oscar Wilde as Editor and Writer: Aesthetic Intervention in Fashion and Material Culture’ and ‘Consumerism and Anti-Commercialism: The Yeatses, Print Culture and Home Industry’, Nally demonstrates, with varied success, that both Wilde and Yeats utilised advertising, journalism and print to shape perceptions of the artistic individuality and to fashion a place in the Irish psyche. While Nally’s discussion on the Yeatses is attentive and thought provoking, the analysis of Wilde and his contributions is laboured, largely focusing upon Wilde’s reception in literary and critical circles, and possesses little originality.

As the centenary marking the outbreak of the First World War approaches, Strachan and Nally’s examination of this remarkable period and Irish advertising is both apt and timely. ‘Advertising, Ireland and the Great War’, is an exceptional chapter which presents an analysis of the ‘little known aspects of [the] key part of modern Irish history and culture’ and discusses how the events leading to, and during the First World War, ‘were echoed in Irish advertising’ (205). In probing and analysing a number of Patriotic posters, newspaper columns, postcards, songs, satire, among other printed materials, Strachan and Nally highlight the competing and plural attitudes toward participation, propaganda and recruitment. Most striking is the balanced and unbiased position visible throughout this chapter, as Strachan and Nally note in their opening comments ‘Protestants [. . .] Roman Catholics and nationalist antecedents joined Irish regiments [. . .] On the other hand, there were those who [. . .] bitterly opposed the war’ (206).

Those new to this area will find this chapter an excellent starting point to consider further research, as well as a worthy addition to the accounts found in Keith Jeffery’s *Ireland and the Great War* (2000) or Adrian

Gregory and Senia Paseta's edited collection *Ireland and the Great War: 'A War to Unite Us All'?* (2002). Reader's familiar with Karen Steele's *Women, Press, and Politics During the Revival* (2007) and Kevin Rafter's edited volume *Irish Journalism before Independence: More a Disease than a Profession* (2011) will find the attention Strachan and Nally devote to a number of astonishing samples is exemplary. The range of materials taken from *Irish Freedom (Saoirseacht na hEireann)*, *Irish Independent*, *Connacht Tribune*, *Sinn Fein* and *The Spark*, to name a few, highlight the rich and varied perspectives that open the door for further debate concerning the significance of Ireland press.

The weaknesses of this volume are very few, namely, at times the number of illustrations and lengthy quotations read as a catalogue while lacking close reading and contextual explanations. Although Strachan and Nally offer some minor discussions on adverts and printed materials written exclusively in the Gaeilge language, the absence of a chapter exclusively devoted to the topic is notable. However, the strengths of this volume are manifold. The debates present are original, well-conceived and are not overloaded with theoretical jargon; each chapter is supported skilfully by Strachan and Nally's delightful choice of visual materials; the range of topics covered in this study offer readers a concrete position from which to expand and further consider Ireland's engagement and relationship with consumer culture. As such this collection will be of interest to researchers and students of consumer and commercial culture(s), Irish art, history and literature; it is a worthy beginning to an emerging field of research.

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Pilar Villar-Argáiz (ed.), *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. 273+xx pages. £70/US\$100. ISBN 978-0-7190-8928-2.

As the Celtic Tiger collapsed and newfound Irish prosperity turned to calamity, one dramatic change that apparently took the Republic by surprise was a sharp rise in inward migration: between 2002 and 2006, the population had grown by 322,645 individuals – see Brewster and Parker,

*Irish Literature Since 1990* (259). The influx of migrants, the emerging multiethnic character of Ireland and Irish literature, and contemporary literary responses to such changes are at focus in the collection *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, edited by Pilar Villar-Argáiz. The book, including its foreword by Declan Kiberd, moves in relatively new territory – for the first time, as the editor points out, enough material to fill a collection is available on these issues (15). The texts analysed in the eighteen contributions date from the decade before the beginning of the Tiger, through the boom years, and up to 2012.

Several contributors make forceful statements that underscore the important underlying premise that ‘literature can implement change’ (14). Thus, Anne Fogarty draws attention to stories that, in the face of exclusionary State policies, ‘resolutely raise the spectre of Irish racism’ (130) and Maureen T. Reddy suggests a new agenda for Irish writers and cultural theorists – to ‘rethink Irishness’, reconsidering it in a multiracial, multicultural and gendered context. Specifically, she calls for a reassessment of Irishness and womanhood, ‘separately and together’ (217).

It should be said that the voices heard in the texts analyzed are primarily those of Irish-born writers. Their views on the current state of affairs in a new multiethnic Ireland are offered (15), while the perspectives of migrants, although flickering through some chapters, are generally absent. In her introduction, Villar-Argáiz acknowledges the inherent risks of this approach – those of essentialising, stereotyping, and exoticising the Other and of reinforcing a them/us binary (15) – but also emphasises that it gives the collection homogeneity (15). Nevertheless, a future volume, making the migrant perspective primary, would be welcome.

Before turning to the individual essays, let me say that, rather than engaging in extended analyses of a few of them, I have chosen to briefly touch on each.

Of the collection’s four sections, Part I – on obstacles and challenges to multiculturalisms – begins with Charlotte McIvor’s examination of the work of three white Irish-born playwrights – Donald Kelly, Declan Gorman, and Charlie O’Neill – and their involvement with the community arts movement (37-38). The interrelated themes of immigration, race, and ethnicity are central. McIvor urges Irish theatre and performance scholars to examine processes involving all participants – minority, immigrant, and Irish-born – as this would help shift attention from the ‘representation of diversity to representation *through* diversity’ in the arts’ (47). Next, Amanda Tucker investigates the work of four writers born in Ireland and outside of it. Tucker argues, first, that the stories of Roddy Doyle and

Claire Keegan present multiculturalism as manageable by ‘Irish hospitality and good will’ (55). Emma Donoghue and Cauvery Madhavan, by contrast, ‘affirm the notion of transmigration’ – ‘multi-directional, open, and continuous’ immigration (61) – and show multiculturalism to be a ‘complicated and unresolved process’ (52). Thus, Tucker convincingly argues that vexing questions of identity may adhere to an enriching diversity.

Exploring representations of interethnic encounters between the Irish host and the foreign guest in contemporary poetry, Pilar Villar-Argáiz finds that Colette Bryce and Polish-born Kinga Olszewska expose ‘prejudices projected onto migrants’ by Irish communities, and that Mary O’Donnell and Michael O’Loughlin continue such critique by highlighting the ‘dehumanising effects of Celtic Tiger capitalism’ (77). Examining Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger novels, Margarita Estévez-Saá discerns two groups of novels – one focusing on returning emigrants and the other on Celtic Tiger Ireland more directly (80). Estévez-Saá finds that both groups denounce racism, and/or the migrant’s difficulty in integrating into society (90).

Part II sets out to rethink Ireland as a postnationalist community. First out is Eva Roa White who examines Roddy Doyle’s ‘hyphenated identities’, especially in the story ‘57% Irish’. She argues that, to Doyle, Ireland’s new cultural identity entails an expansion of the definition of Irishness – one that ‘encompasses hybridisation and its resulting hyphenated identities’ (95). So far, so good. It is troublesome, though, that Roa White fails to sufficiently problematise the use of ‘hyphen’ with ‘identity’. Questions come to mind: Does the hyphen truly entail multiplicity? Is equal weight assigned to the elements on either side of the hyphen, or is one privileged? An elaboration on such issues would have been welcome.

Rethinking Ireland with the idea of the ‘migrant nation’ (108) in mind, Carmen Zamorano Llena investigates intercultural exchanges and the redefinition of identity in Hugo Hamilton’s *Disguise* and *Hand in the Fire*. Her conclusion seems a welcome one: the internationalisation of Irishness has been transformed from a search for Irish descendants in the diaspora ‘into a process of acknowledging the Other within one’s own community’ (117) and inviting her/him to participate there.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas for a theoretical framework in her essay, Anne Fogarty analyses representations of immigrants in six stories by writers from several generations: Edna O’Brien, Colm Tóibín, Mary O’Donnell, Colum McCann, Anne Enright and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. Fogarty argues that, in the attempt to adopt the

perspective of the Other, these stories ‘dislocate Irish pieties about self, family, and community’ (130). Moreover, they take on what must be one of contemporary literature’s most urgent tasks – that of exposing the ‘racist norms of Irish society’ (130). Doing so, they indicate the path to a more inclusive sense of community.

Katharzyna Poloczek aims to ‘look into Ireland’s future’ (134) in her contribution. Having examined representations of migrants from new EU member states in the poetry of Sinéad Morrissey, Mary O’Malley, and Leontia Flynn and of ‘asylum-seekers from African countries’ in Michael Hayes’s “‘*Survivor*’”, Poloczek insists that migrants’ voices are needed in modern Irish discourse’ (146). One might add that, in this volume too, such voices are sadly muted.

Part III, on intercultural encounters as a means of ‘performing’ Irishness, begins with a chapter by Paula Murphy. Focusing on Dermot Bolger’s *The Ballymun Trilogy*, Murphy’s chapter investigates the themes of racism, intolerance and ‘alienation of the migrant at home and abroad’ (151). The work of Dermot Bolger is central in Michaela Schrage-Früh’s essay, too. Exploring his poetry – together with that of Mary O’Malley, David Weatley, Pat Boran and lesser-known poets – Schrage-Früh draws on the thinking of Wolfgang Welsch, who posits that acknowledging “‘our inner transculturality’” enables us to deal with “‘outer transculturality’” (163). Thus, Schrage-Früh rightly argues that when encountering migrants we face our own ‘internal foreignness’ which facilitates a more ‘compassionate stance’ toward the migrants’ sense of displacement’ (172).

In his essay on ‘multicultural epiphanies’, Jason King explores representations of self-discovery and highlights Hugo Hamilton’s transformation of Joyce’s idea of the epiphany as a moment of artistic self-revelation into one of a recognition of cultural difference leading to self-acceptance. King argues that Hamilton – as a second-generation German-Irish writer who arguably may act as ‘cultural intermediary between “new Irish” migrants and the literary traditions of the host society’ (185) – depicts the effort to ‘incorporate the unacknowledged Irish Other’ into a personal and a national self-image (186). Katherine O’Donnell’s contribution investigates Keith Ridgway’s ‘fat, comic’ Dublin novel *The Parts* (2003). Here, O’Donnell states, the encounter with the migrant ‘is no more than a few riffs in the jazz symphony of this novel,’ but it reveals something about ‘the zeitgeist of that Celtic Tiger period’ and multicultural Ireland (190).

Charles I. Armstrong has investigated ‘what happens when the poetic muse meets the touristic ruse’ (203). His essay shows that whereas Derek Mahon, Sinéad Morrissey, and Mary O’Donnell associate visiting tourists

with ‘invading forces’, Seamus Heaney, champion of generosity and responsibility, privileges the ethical aspect of the encounter with the Other. Armstrong concludes that, since ‘tourism pitches us between critical analysis and an unflinching ethical receptiveness’ (212), the choice between a welcoming and a sceptical stance toward the tourist is difficult.

Part IV, presenting views on gender, race and the city, is introduced by Maureen T. Reddy, who finds a useful roadmap for the necessary work of rethinking ‘Irishness in a multiracial and multicultural context’ (217) in Clare Boylan’s *Black Baby* (1988). The novel, advocating ‘revisions of dominant constructions of race and motherhood’ (217) prompts Reddy’s suggestions that ‘true intercultural interrogation’ is likely to ‘gain Irishwomen real freedom and therefore the possibility of true intimacy’ (228). This is, indeed, no ‘bad bargain’ (228).

In her study of Emer Martin’s *Baby Zero* (2007), Wanda Balzano rightly calls for a re-evaluation of the lives and stories of women, focusing on race, language, religion, and culture (231). Next, Loredana Salis investigates the representation of the migrant Other in plays set in Dublin by Paul Mercier, Sebastian Barry and Dermot Bolger. Questions raised in the essay concern the kinds of images of city life that emerge in these plays, the kinds of tales they tell, who tells them, who receives them and – most significantly in this context – how the non-Irish-born Other is depicted. Concluding the collection is David Clark’s essay on non-Irish migrants in Irish crime fiction. Clark identifies a tendency in crime fiction from the Republic to portray the ‘immigrant population as a ‘victim of criminal acts’ (265). Tales from the North, by contrast, indicate that ‘sectors of foreign arrivals’ are involved in crime there. Both categories depict Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger society as ‘coming to terms with change’ (266).

To conclude, despite certain flaws – primarily the muted voices of migrants in the texts analysed – *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland* is important. It is a strong and urgently needed contribution to an emerging field of multiethnic, post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland literary research.

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Fionna Barber, *Art in Ireland since 1910*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 311 pages. £29/US\$45. ISBN 978-3-0343-0983-7 (paperback); ISBN 978-3-0353-0565-4 (ebook).

Fionna Barber's magisterial masterpiece *Art in Ireland since 1910* is a welcoming sight for sore eyes: Never have the visual arts of Ireland up to recent times, 2007, been presented with such comprehension and illustration. The 266 illustrations, 222 in colour, survey with variety and scope a range of tendencies over the last hundred years. Yet Barber's analysis contests the proverbial idea that a picture is worth a thousand words. Her research and collection of facts, interpretations, constellation of themes and styles and her tracing of traditions offer more insight and knowledge than the visuals do individually or together. It is also a laudable achievement to assemble the arts of such a long period, particularly from our own times: from a solid decade before the birth of independent Ireland in 1921 to about a decade after the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998.

In her focus on Dorothy Cross's *Ghost Ship* (1999) in the introduction Barber establishes an iconic image for the characteristics of her own book. The haunting photo of the Nissan Art Project ship installation on the coastal waters outside Dún Laoghaire offers an existential and metaphysical installation from a very specific place and time that stimulates multiple hermeneutic discourses. The ghostly vessel suggests a contemporary vantage point for tracing the spectral cargoes of Irish visual arts. The ship illustrates powerfully that contemporary visual arts to a large extent have moved into the semiotic seas beyond canvas and conventional frameworks, and equally the necessity for recording transgressive visuals by more traditional forms of art and technology. The outdated ship also harbours the diminishing importance of the sea to the island of Ireland. Finally, the ghost ship connects conceptually with multivisual artist Rita Duffy's iceberg in Belfast Lough (2007) and Derry-based and twice Turner Prize nominated Willie Doherty's film *Ghost Story* (2007), two of the last works to be discussed in the book.

Between this circular contemporaneity Barber's historical survey appears in chronological order. This order, however, is constructed and reoriented according to current insight. Five of the principal points and values of Barber's analysis are first and foremost her capacity to discuss individual works, groups and orientations in relation to history, social issues and the sister art of literature – her expositions carry importance beyond the arts circle. Secondly, she attends to the state of the art up to 2007, which makes her book the most updated and the only one at present

that discusses with such breadth art movements after the Good Friday Agreement and the Celtic Tiger economy. Thirdly, she rectifies the gender balance by introducing more female artists. Fourthly, the selected art works all stem from the inner core of the new and the novel that are not easily accessible and widely known. Finally, her rereading of the standard schism of nation and modernity during the first half of the twentieth century, represented in the visual arts by S.B. Kennedy's *Irish Art and Modernism* (1991) and Fintan Cullen's *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland, 1750 to 1930* (1997), opens up the binary traditions that extend far beyond the aesthetic debates.

In its magisterial control and its correlation of the visual arts to the course of history and political issues *Art in Ireland since 1910* could be read in tandem with Declan Kiberd's analysis and contextualisation of the literature of the modern nation in *Inventing Ireland* (1995). In its opening up of binarisms and concentration on contemporaneity, Barber's outlook shares vision with John Goodby's explorations in *Irish Poetry since 1950* (2000). The correspondences between Barber's thesis and these two landmarks of literary scholarship include an extra interest in her work from literature communities. This cross-referencing reveals sensitivity to the transdisciplinary and interartistic drives that have driven so much of visual art, literature and hermeneutic discourses over the last couple of decades, and which finds a showcase in the recent *The Crossings of Art in Ireland* (2014).

Still, for all its transdisciplinary scope, *Art in Ireland since 1910* deals with art. The mere number and range of visuals in this book is priceless and the opportunity to study so much of the widespread activities of recent art between two covers is as stimulating as it is unique. Barber's approach overlaps with but maintains a far more independent position than the Fenton Gallery's treatment of the same topic, *Representing Art in Ireland* (2008). She keeps a wider outlook of cultural politics than the Republic-dominated juxtapositions of visual art and literature in Malcolm Maclean and Theo Dorgan's edited *An Leabhar Mòr: The Great Book of Gaelic* (2002) and Adrian Rice and Angela Reid's edited response from the North, *A Conversation Piece: Poetry and Art* (2002). She also opens up the genre-restricted focus of James Christen Steward's edited presentation of Irish figurative painting in the twentieth century: *When Time Began to Rant and Rage* (1999).

The latter half of Barber's wide-ranging book, from 1968 onwards, offers the most exciting and vital part in its exploration of the visual beyond canvas and gallery into installations, sculpture, performance, films and mixed media. This period also coincides with two drastic changes in

contemporary artistic concerns: the postmodernist discourses that affected the creative and critical idioms of art in all places, and the outbreak of the Troubles that became an unavoidable crisis to most artists in Ireland, especially in the North. Artists such as Robert Ballagh, Sean Scully, Dorothy Cross, Kathy Prendergast and Charles Tyrell gravitate towards the postmodern, and Jack Pakenham, Conrad Atkinson, Rita Duffy towards the Troubles, although most of them attend to both at various points in their career. Furthermore, these two major drives appear confluent in Seán Hillen's photomontage, Sandra Johnston's performative arts and Willie Doherty's film and photography. The conflation, dissolution and aftermath of the postmodernist tendencies and The Troubles show themselves in the continuous creativity of the aforementioned artists as well as in the works of Paul Seawright, Alice Maher, Andrew Kearney, Francis Hegarty, Andrew Stone, Cheryl Donegan, Anne Tallentire, Phil Collins, Amanda Coogan and Gerard Byrne, to mention a few of the new and intriguing artists that come to the fore in the final two chapters, 'The Unravelling Nation, 1990-1998' and 'After the End of Progress'.

Barber prepares the novelty of the latter part of her book in the first half where she assigns illustrations and interpretation to a number of artists and creative schools – Grace Henry, Sara Purser, Estella Solomons, Mainie Jellet, Mary Swanzy, Nora McGuinness, Gretta Bowen, the White Stag artists – that supplement the tradition and canonical names. The accent here is on women, but Barber's inclusion escapes programmatic feminism by accentuating their quality as well as their importance to their contemporaries. Her work in this field sows some of the seeds for recent exhibitions like 'Analysing Cubism: Mainie Jellet, Evie Hone, Mary Swanzy and Masters of European Modernism' at the IMMA in February – May 2013.

*Art in Ireland since 1910* is a grand synthesis of monuments, moves and motions in the imaginative field over the last hundred years, and it displays large sections of the contemporary panorama and supplements previous views of the recent past from an established retrospective vantage point. Barber's book offers a welcome scholarly alternative to the myriads of presentations of popular art and publications on single works, artists, themes, details, etc. in the age of coffee table books, and sets an admirable example of profound and sustained research at a time when academic bibliometric publish or perish pressures tend to dominate publications of this kind. The title, however, is somewhat misleading, for the book concerns itself with *visual* arts, regardless of how much the title promises a wider spectrum. There is no attention to music, dance and theatre, as the apprehensive silence, fixed position and authenticity of Cross's *Ghost Ship*

indicate. Furthermore, the all-inclusive socio-aesthetic-historical-gender parameter of analysis, also indicated by the plural hermeneutic possibilities of the *Ghost Ship*, diminishes edge and precision. The insiders will have to pursue the footnotes, bibliography and entirely alternative publications for radical approaches, controversy and specification. Additionally, experts within the corollary disciplines might find the representation of their own field too general. For example: the political chronology preceding the introduction repeats the grip of history upon art. The list of dates, however useful it might be to some readers beyond the island, repeats the wars of liberation South and North as primary pivotal points. This list also appears extremely short and superficial. The chronological order of the art analysis also tends to confirm the traditional history of art: questions of identity are imperative, nation and modernity constitute the double helix of long stretches of the previous century, a lot of the interesting art in the 1950s took place in the diaspora, female artists deserve a more prominent place. The book largely confirms the framework within which Irish art has been discussed.

*Art in Ireland since 1910* is also likely to attract acrimony from art camps. By its comprehension and unique position, the book contributes considerably to canon formation. Consequently, Barber's selections are bound to give rise to the standard concomitant discussion on such publications: why a number of important (contemporary) artists are not included, and to what extent a number of those who are can be justified.

Despite some reservations, Barber's wide-ranging view of the movements of art in action offers information, insight and interpretation to artists, academics and wider readership. *Art in Ireland since 1910* is very likely to become a standard work for discourses on visual Irish art for a long time.

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