

**The Plays of Sean O'Casey 1919-1964:
Innovation, History and Form**

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ABSTRACT

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TEXT

This thesis provides a radical re-reading of O'Casey's early work, which sheds new light upon the later plays. The orthodox reading of the so-called 'Dublin Plays' - *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) – as a triumph in theatrical naturalism that is never matched in the later plays, is here strongly countered. The thesis seeks to demonstrate that far from being dramatic failures, the later plays are fresh and dynamic, a logical and natural progression from the formal and thematic experiments within the early plays. The thesis argues that it is the critical labelling of O'Casey's first plays as 'comedies' or 'realist dramas', which has led to the prevailing view of the last plays as theatrically flawed. This distorting critical prism has resulted in an underplaying of O'Casey's significant contribution to theatrical innovation in the first half of the twentieth century.

O'Casey's work has received comparatively little recent critical attention, particularly from British academics. This is clearly no academic accident: O'Casey's marginalisation by scholars is directly linked to the way theatre critics misinterpreted his plays from 1924 onwards, when they received their first performances at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. This study considers the complex dynamics of national and theatre politics that underpin these critical misunderstandings and explores why O'Casey has often been dismissed as a dramatist of character. Discussing plays from *The Harvest Festival* to *The Moon Shines on Kilenamoe*, I explore why each play becomes more experimental in form and analyse why O'Casey's critics and public alike gradually become alienated from what they perceive as the new experimental style of his later work. Chapter 1 considers O'Casey's early plays with special reference to the use of space in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. In chapter 2 I examine the use of repetition as a controlling dramatic technique in *Juno and the Paycock*, chapter 3 explores the re-writing of history as drama through O'Casey's re-dramatisation the Easter Rising in *The Plough and the Stars*, chapter 4 focuses on O'Casey's engagement with European, especially German, Expressionism in *The Silver Tassie*; and his experimentation with what we now label 'Absurdist' techniques, as well as dance and song in *Within the Gates* which provides the subject for chapter 5. The later plays are discussed in chapter 6, where their formal and thematic innovations are considered in relation to the contemporary developments in the cinema and Absurdist drama.

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Abbreviations

- A2 Sean O'Casey, *Autobiographies 2* (London: Macmillan, 1980).
- BB Sean O'Casey, *The Bishop's Bonfire*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).
- BGC Sean O'Casey, *Behind the Green Curtains* in *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey Vol.5* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).
- CDD Sean O'Casey, *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).
- DFN Sean O'Casey, *The Drums of Father Ned* in *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey Vol.5* (London: Macmillan, 1984).
- FN Sean O'Casey, *Figuro in the Night* in *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey Vol.5* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).
- HF Sean O'Casey, *Harvest Festival* With a Foreward by Eileen O'Casey & an Intro. by John O'Riordan (Gerrards Cross, 1980).
- HH Sean O'Casey, *Hall of Healing* in *Sean O'Casey: Plays 2* introd. by Arthur Miller (London, 1998).
- JP Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition*

Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).

- L1 Sean O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey*
Vol. 1 1910-41 (ed.) David Krause (New York:
Macmillan, 1975).
- L2 Sean O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey*
Vol. 2 1942-54 (ed.) David Krause (New York:
Macmillan, 1980).
- L3 Sean O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey*
Vol. 3 1955-58 (ed.) David Krause (Washington
DC: The Catholic University of America
Press, 1989).
- L4 Sean O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey* Vol.
4 1959-64 (ed.) David Krause, (Washington DC:
The Catholic University of America Press, 1992).
- MSK Sean O'Casey, *The Moon Shines on Kilyenamoe*
in *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey* Vol.5
(London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).
- NNO Sean O'Casey, *Nannie's Night Out* in *The*
Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey Vol.5 (London
& Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).
- OLL Sean O'Casey, *Oak Leaves and Lavender*
(London: Macmillan, 1946).
- PD Sean O'Casey, *Purple Dust* in *Sean O'Casey:*
Plays 2 introd. by Arthur Miller (London, 1998).

- PS Sean O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).
- RRFM Sean O'Casey, *Red Roses for Me*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).
- SG Sean O'Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).
- ST Sean O'Casey, *The Silver Tassie*, in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).

Sean O'Casey, *The Silver Tassie* (London: Macmillan, 1928 repr. 1930). I have used this early edition to discuss the differences between this first published edition of the play and O'Casey's second version of end of the play prepared for *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1949).

- WTG Sean O'Casey, *Within the Gates* (London: Macmillan, 1934).
- Sean O'Casey, *Within the Gates* in *Sean O'Casey: Plays 2* introd. by Arthur Miller (London, 1998). I have used this edition of the play alongside the original edition above as it is the most recent edition containing the second version of the end of the play.

Notes on Editions

Where possible, I have cited O'Casey's plays from the most recent selection by one of O'Casey's foremost critics; *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* Selected by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985).

In the case of *The Harvest Festival*, however, I have used the first published edition of the play (Gerrards Cross, 1980), because of the 'Foreward' by Eileen O'Casey and the 'Introduction' by John O'Riordan.

For those plays not included in Ayling's selection, I have used the most recently published versions in *Plays 1* (London, 1998) intro. by Seamus Heaney and *Plays 2* (London, 1998) with intro. by Arthur Miller. However, *Oak Leaves and Lavender* is not published in either of these recent editions, and since it remains unchanged since its first publication I have used an original first edition.

For all date references to O'Casey's plays I have cited the date of publication. This creates one or two anomalies: *The Shadow of a Gunman* was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1923, but it was not published until 1925 when it appeared alongside *Juno and the Paycock* in *Two Plays*. *Juno and the Paycock* was staged at the Abbey in 1924, but not published until this joint edition with *Shadow* in 1925, therefore I have cited the same publication date for both plays.

Finally, *The Harvest Festival* remained unpublished during O'Casey's lifetime, but I have used the approximate date of its writing as a means of placing it historically within the O'Casey canon.

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Michelle C. Paull
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Introduction: Beyond Naturalism

Sean O'Casey is still a much admired playwright, but his work has nonetheless received surprisingly little critical analysis. In the last forty–five years (apart from Christopher Murray's recent biography), there have been only five books containing a comprehensive critical consideration of his plays, and only one or two significant volumes which discuss selected plays.¹ There is no major work of Irish or British criticism on his plays - all the significant full-length critical analyses of O'Casey's oeuvre are American.² In order to explain this critical neglect by Irish and British scholars, it is necessary to examine the plays' reception by

¹ Christopher Murray *Sean O'Casey: Writer at work, a biography* (Dublin, 2004) does include scholarly discussions of the plays, but its focus is primarily biographical. The five important comprehensive studies are: David Krause's *Sean O'Casey The Man and his Work* (New York, 1960); Robert Hogan's *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey* (New York, 1960); Saros Cowasjee's *Sean O'Casey: The Man Behind the Plays* (Edinburgh & London, 1963); Bernard Benstock's *Paycocks and others: Sean O'Casey's World* (New York & Dublin, 1976); and Heinz Kosok; *Sean O'Casey, the Dramatist* (Gerrards Cross & Totowa NJ, 1985), a revised version of his earlier work *Sean O'Casey, Das dramatische Werk* (Berlin, 1972). Carol Kleiman's insightful *Sean O'Casey's Bridge of Vision; Four Essays on Structure and Perspective* (Toronto; Canada, 1982) begins to examine the importance of Expressionism and the Absurd, but only in a selection of the plays. Ronan McDonald's important *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey and Beckett* (London, 2002) examines the tension between politics and the family in the early plays alone.

² See Krause (1960); Hogan (1960) and Benstock (1976).

theatre critics from 1923 onwards when they received their first performances at the Abbey Theatre.³

The reception of the early plays as 'photographic' naturalism with vivid 'character' portrayals was a source of intense frustration and annoyance to O'Casey. Ibsen, whom O'Casey admired, had also begun by predominantly using naturalism as a form in his early work, yet he had not suffered from the same narrow critical focus.⁴ Critics did not laud Ibsen's plays simply for presenting an accurate interpretation of Norwegian life: he was automatically

³ For contemporary reviews, letters and journal excerpts, see R. Hogan & R. Burnham (eds.), *The Years of O'Casey 1921-26, A Documentary History Vol 6 of The Modern Irish Drama series* (Gerrards Cross, 1992). While this volume does offer slightly more authorial commentary than the previous volumes, there is a deliberate policy not to comment on the plays. It is, however, an invaluable source of reference for the history of the theatre and provides much important historical context for *The Plough and the Stars*. The volume allows the reader to 'catch the reality and excitement' (11) of the historical moment, as if they were there to witness the unfolding events themselves.

⁴ The term 'naturalism' (and its cognates) in this thesis (unless specifically stated otherwise) is used in accordance with popular and semi-professional usage and refers to artistic works (mainly dramatic works) which seek to portray an accurate life-like reproduction of a character, action or scene. In this sense 'naturalism' involves a set of techniques and not a system of beliefs. It is therefore distinct from 'naturalism' the philosophical position (which began in the late 16th Century and differentiated between revealed (divine) and observed (human /knowledge) and from 'Naturalism', the literary movement led by Émile Zola in the late 19th Century (which advocated life-like reproductions for specific philosophical reasons). For a detailed discussion of the terminology, see Raymond Williams 'Society, environment and the theatrical environment: the case of English naturalism' in M. Axton & R. Williams (eds.), *English Drama: Forms and Development – Essays in Honour of Muriel Bradbrook* (Cambridge, 1997), 203-23. For an account of the reception of Ibsen's early work see James Walter McFarlane *Ibsen and Meaning: Studies, Essays and Prefaces 1953-87* (Norwich, 1989), 103-141; also Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist Vol 11828-1864* (London: 1967), 135-163; and Inga-Stina Ewbank 'Ibsen on the English Stage: The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating' in Errol Durbach (ed.) *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production* (London, 1980), 27-48.

credited with dramatizing wider social issues and ideological concerns.

Murray correctly sees the labelling of O'Casey's early plays as 'naturalist' as the principal reason for the rejection of the later plays.⁵ Indeed the Irish reviews determined the critical consensus that labelled O'Casey a dramatist of character, ignoring the larger ideological questions raised by his work. O'Casey felt that his plays dealt with pressing ideological concerns, not only relevant to Dubliners but important at both national and international level.⁶ His response to the critical myopia was to move his plays increasingly away from what he felt was the stifling confines of 'naturalism'.

When O'Casey came to London in 1926 he was surprised and dejected by the diet of musicals, revues and comedies that sustained the London audiences,⁷ even though he himself had already been deeply influenced by these 'popular' forms and was to continue to be so,

⁵ Christopher Murray *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Manchester, 1997) 88-112.

⁶ For some important comments on the 'international' dimension to O'Casey's work see Kosok (1985), xii; 70 and 96.

⁷ Sean O'Casey *Autobiographies 2* (London, 1980), 261. All subsequent references to this edition are made using the abbreviation A2.

especially in *Within the Gates* (1934).⁸ The London critics in turn clearly read the 'comic' elements in his own plays through the filter of this popular entertainment, just as the Irish critics had earlier focused on the humour in his Abbey plays.⁹ The 'comic' consequently came to dominate in public perceptions of his plays in both Britain and Ireland.

However, it was not simply the shortsightedness of the theatre critics that led to this distorted picture of O'Casey; it was also their (often hidden) political, religious and nationalist agendas. Some nationalist reviewers criticised *The Plough and the Stars* because of their resistance to the Abbey Theatre project in general, with its particularly Yeatsian (rather than 'national') programme.¹⁰ O'Casey's patronage by the Abbey Theatre directorate, not

⁸ For the importance of the Irish 'popular' theatre in O'Casey, see Stephen Watt *Joyce, O'Casey and the Irish Popular Theatre* (Syracuse, 1991). Watt suggests that O'Casey increasingly adopts the techniques of melodrama, moving closer to the traditions of the 'popular' theatre in his later plays. It was this adoption of the popular that Watt believes is responsible for the dismissal of O'Casey's later works by drama critics at the time and by literary critics ever since. For a recent appraisal of the use of the vernacular (or what could be termed 'popular' language) versus 'standard' language in O'Casey's work, see Colbert Kearney's *The Glamour of Grammar: Orality and Politics and the Emergence of Sean O'Casey* (Westport CT, 2000).

⁹ John O'Riordan, in the first discussion of all the plays *A Guide to O'Casey's Plays from The Plough to the Stars* (London, 1984), insists upon the comic as the link between all O'Casey's plays.

¹⁰ For the historical context see Robert Hogan & Richard Burnham (eds.), *The Years of O'Casey 1921-26: A Documentary History Vol 6 of The Modern Irish Drama* (Gerrards Cross, 1992); Garry O'Connor *Sean O'Casey: A Life* (London, 1988), for O'Casey's response to the rejection of *The Plough and The Stars*. See A2, especially 107-8 & 234. See further chapter 3 below.

unnaturally, led to his plays being interpreted in the context of the theatre project itself. O'Casey's work was thus considered as part of the dramatic heritage of Synge, Lady Gregory, Denis Johnston, Lennox Robinson and Yeats himself. While these connections are obviously significant, they have interfered with the critical interpretation of O'Casey as a distinct dramatist in his own right; and they have especially shaped the early perception of O'Casey as a protégé of Yeats.¹¹ This perceived link with Yeats, particularly during the episode of *The Plough and the Stars*, was especially damaging.

But it was not only the theatre critics who misunderstood O'Casey's work. The Abbey Theatre directorate failed equally to appreciate his subtlety or range as a dramatist. For example, Yeats may have rejected *The Silver Tassie* for a production at the Abbey partly because he felt O'Casey had written a play which lacked a strong Irish theme. His famous criticism of the play centred upon his perception that because O'Casey was writing about the

¹¹ It is possible too that O'Casey suffered from early comparisons of his work with that of Synge, being seen as kind of Synge of the city, bringing Dubliners to life just as surely as Synge was thought to represent the people of the West Coast. O'Casey did once wearily point out 'I am sorry, but I'm not Synge; not even, I'm afraid, a reincarnation': Kosok (1985), 311.

First World War, he was writing out of ' [his] opinions',¹² rather than about events he knew about, by which Yeats presumably meant Irish working-class life in Dublin. Yeats had established his preference for an Irish focus for Irish writers early on. His attitude to *The Silver Tassie* is further complicated by his reluctance to accept the First World War as a fitting topic for artistic (particularly poetic) consideration. Yeats rejected the poetry of Wilfred Owen, for example,¹³ and may have felt that the overtly anti-war sentiments of *The Silver Tassie* made it closer to propaganda than drama. In *Explorations*, Yeats comments 'art, in its highest moments, is not a deliberate creation, but the creation of intense feeling, of pure life'. No doubt for Yeats, the pacifism of *The Silver Tassie* betrayed this 'purity' of feeling by substituting an artificial 'creation' of anti-war sentiments serving a particular political purpose.¹⁴

¹² Sean O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey* Vol 1 1940-41 (ed.) David Krause (New York, 1975), 268. All subsequent references to this volume are made using the abbreviation L1.

¹³ Yeats excluded Wilfred Owen from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1895-1935* (Oxford, 1936). Writing to Dorothy Wellesley in December 1936 Yeats remarked that he considered Owen 'unworthy of the poet's corner of a country newspaper....He is all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick....There is every excuse for him but none for those who like him', see *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (Oxford, 1940), 124. His most famous dismissal of Owen comes from his introduction to the anthology above: 'I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war; ...I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry' cf. (Yeats 1936), xxxiv.

¹⁴ W.B. Yeats *Explorations* (London, 1962), 157-160, 152. As Foster points out, even at the end of 1914, Yeats remained detached from WW1. See Roy

Lady Gregory followed the critics in her advice to O'Casey that 'your gift is characterisation'.¹⁵ He later claimed that her remark had led him to 'thr[o]w over my theories and work [...] at the characters [in *Juno*] and this is the result'.¹⁶ O'Casey may well be said in this sense to have contributed to the perception of himself as the Abbey's dramatist of character; and this still, astonishingly, remains the critical orthodoxy.¹⁷

However, with the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey abandoned naturalism as a form and made scant

Foster *W.B. Yeats: A Life. 1 The Apprentice Mage 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1997). I am indebted to Dr. Richard Greaves for discussions on this topic.

¹⁵ Lady Gregory 8 March 1924, *Journals Books 1-29* (ed.) Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross, 1978), 512.

¹⁶ Lady Gregory (1978), 512. Tracing O'Casey's account of this exchange between himself and Lady Gregory presents some challenges to the reader. O'Casey's six volumes of autobiography, published between 1939 and 1954, reveal him pushing forward the boundaries of the genre of autobiography. The autobiographies are written in the third person, showing that O'Casey was certainly conscious of the construction of a persona involved in all literary accounts of the self. For a preliminary investigation of some of the intriguing issues behind the autobiographies, see Robert Lowery (ed.), *Essays on Sean O'Casey's Autobiographies* (London, 1981), especially the chapters by Krause and Moya; and Michael Kenneally's *Portraying the Self: Sean O'Casey and the art of autobiography* (Gerrards Cross, 1988). Cf. C. Desmond Greaves *Sean O'Casey: Politics and Art* (London, 1979), which misconstrues the 'fictional' nature of the autobiographies.

¹⁷ Krause (1960) discusses some formal and historical questions but focuses on O'Casey's skills of characterization. Benstock (1976), proclaims his work 'a study of characterisation'. Even Kosok (1985), who is very interested in structure, devotes much space to establishing a 'central' character in each play (a near impossibility in *The Plough and The Stars*, when he is forced to argue that there are 'nine characters of equal importance' (4)). This is also true of Herbert Goldstone's *In Search of Community: The Achievement of Seán O'Casey* (1972); and James Scrimgeour's *Sean O'Casey* (London, 1978). Even Murray (1997) in his analysis of *The Harvest Festival* (1919) and *Red Roses For Me* (1943) uses character as a focus, showing how 'heroism' is used and 'revised' (91) in the later play.

use of it in his subsequent plays. Following his departure from the Abbey and also from Ireland itself, O'Casey's work was deemed highly problematic. By 1934, with *Within the Gates*, he not only dispenses with naturalism, but with Dublin and an Irish location altogether, choosing a London park as its setting. In a very real sense, this radical disjunction in terms of form and content contributed to a culture of critical disappointment surrounding O'Casey's work in Ireland and Britain that is evident to this day.¹⁸

O'Casey, however, was never simply a comic dramatist; neither was he merely a dramatist of character; nor did he offer any narrowly naturalist vision of Dublin society. O'Casey's method of characterisation emphasises the constructed nature of the theatre *per se*, undermining the naturalistic settings and questioning the playwright's desire to represent the real in the theatre. As Carol Kleiman has shown in her analysis of *The Silver Tassie* and

¹⁸ Seamus Deane's article 'Irish Politics and O'Casey's Theatre' which appeared in the Belfast journal *Threshold* in 1973, represents an important example of the kind of opposition that O'Casey's work continues to face from Irish critics. O'Casey is criticised for the presentation of what is perceived as an apolitical stance in his plays. Deane remarks that O'Casey 'does not in any of his plays [...] develop a critique of Irish history or politics [...] Politics was the occasion of his plays; morality was their subject' (6). Deane's opposition to O'Casey's style is shared by Declan Kiberd 'The Plebeians Revise the Uprising Sean O'Casey and 1916' *Féile Zozimus: Two Dubliners Sean O'Casey and Donn S. Piatt* 3 (1994), 29-45. Kiberd later recanted this earlier antipathy to O'Casey in his more recent work *Irish Classics* (London, 2000), where he offers a focused analysis of *Juno and the Paycock* as O'Casey's 'most negative' (483) and 'darkest' (488) play.

Red Roses for Me, O'Casey's engagement with Expressionism is important in the later work. But he was, I intend to show, hugely inventive from the outset.

In chapter 1 of this thesis, O'Casey's use of stage space in his earliest surviving plays *The Harvest Festival* (1919) and *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1922) is examined in relation to the public and private worlds of the plays. Even from this very early point in his career, O'Casey exploits the limits of the Abbey stage space¹⁹ and builds (as Yeats did in *On Baile's Strand*) on the tension between onstage and offstage space.

Chapter 2 focuses on the origins and development of *Juno and the Paycock* (1925). O'Casey's use of structural and linguistic repetition in this play is in many ways a foreshadowing of Beckett's use of repetition and an extension of such devices found in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. Here we find O'Casey's early use of what comes to be a regular motif in his work, that of the room, which serves as a means of exploring the 'public' and 'private'

¹⁹ The original Abbey Theatre and its stage was very small, reflecting its original use as 'a nationalist meeting room for lectures or political meetings'. See Robert Welch *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford, 1999), 31. Like the Mechanics Institute, it had been licensed to stage only one-act plays. See Welch (1999), 31-32. For further details on the technical limitations of the Abbey Theatre in general, see J.W. Flannery *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (London, 1976), 256-262.

worlds of the national and personal. 'Character' here in *Juno* is a means of exploring archetypes: Juno herself is a refiguring of the trope of the woman of Ireland.

This chapter goes on to challenge the traditional critical focus on the perceived naturalism and success of O'Casey's characterizations. I suggest that O'Casey's method of characterization allows him to raise other ideological questions about the nature of Irish femininity and its connection to national identity, rather than simply to present true-to-life figures on stage.

In many ways O'Casey's struggle with naturalism as a form is connected to his political outlook. O'Casey always said that he was a Communist,²⁰ and like Brecht he was intrigued by the vexed question of what constitutes 'naturalism'. For Brecht:

the task of the artist was to de-naturalise the rigidified world by means of a whole new range of formal devices which would draw the spectator's attention to the content of the contradictions under which he/she lived.²¹

In both *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey re-presents two very 'real' historical events in the

²⁰ See Murray (2004), for whom O'Casey's communism is an essential aspect of his identity. See too Shrank's essay 'Radical politics and the plays of Sean O'Casey' in Bernice Shrank *Sean O'Casey: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport CT, 1996) for a political overview of O'Casey's work .

Easter Rising and the First World War. The audience must have felt that they knew the reasons behind both, but O'Casey seeks to make them question the nature of their understanding by attempting to 'de-naturalise' their view of the stage world through a range of 'formal devices' that we could recognize as Brechtian.

Chapter 3 considers O'Casey's decision to dramatize one of the defining moments of modern Irish history - the Easter Rising - in *The Plough and the Stars*. Written only a decade after the event, O'Casey's play begins to probe the mythological status of the historical moment. Here, O'Casey asks the audience to question their responses to the Rising by re-staging extracts of speeches from one of the infamous 'heroes' of the event, Padraic Pearse. O'Casey's re-contextualisation of Pearse within a dramatic setting prompts the audience to consider how figures from history attain their mythic status.

O'Casey's increasingly overt use of such Expressionist techniques in this play is, I suggest, a direct challenge to those audiences who had missed the rather more muted use and significance of such techniques in the earlier *Juno and the Paycock*. O'Casey continues to

²¹ Elizabeth Wright *Postmodern Brecht* (London, 1989), 70.

explore the figure of the woman of Ireland in *The Plough*, now through his presentations of Nora, Bessie and Rosie. Song in this play both underwrites his exploration of women's role in shaping and developing images of national identity, and it provides a point of contact with mythic traditions of the woman of Ireland as old hag/ young mother which O'Casey is seeking to re-interpret.

It has long been noticed that O'Casey uses 'distancing' techniques in *The Plough and the Stars* at moments of high emotional tension. Ronald Ayling suggests that O'Casey adopts a kind of Brechtian alienation technique whenever he fears 'there is the likelihood of spectators identifying themselves uncritically with the feelings or the values of the stage creations'.²² Nicholas Grene has noted that the events of Easter Monday in Act II of *The Plough and the Stars* 'are narrated in the distanced style recommended for Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*',²³ as we merely 'hear' Pearse's voice but never see him on

²² Ronald Ayling *Continuity and Innovation in Sean O'Casey's Drama* (Salzburg, 1976), 55 and; Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Dublin, 1999).

²³ See Ayling (1976), 55 and Grene (1999), 142. Cf. Nicholas Grene 'Distancing Drama: Sean O'Casey to Brian Friel' in *Irish Writers and the Theatre* (ed.) Masaru Sekine (Gerrards Cross, 1986), 47-52. Grene (1999) reminds us that even in *Juno and the Paycock* 'the invitation to the audience is to watch this space, a space which can never be viewed or valued in one way for long'. 131-2.

stage. The 'displaced'²⁴ figure of Pearse, the nation's hero, is thus ^{subjected to irony} and the theatre audience is forced to consider their own responses to Pearse as they witness the varied responses to his speeches from the characters on stage in front of them, whilst he himself is confined to the offstage space.

Major historical events in *The Plough and the Stars* occur offstage. According to Doherty this technique of 'displacing the hero'²⁵ is O'Casey's deliberate attempt to rewrite tragedy as a form for overt political purposes. I argue that such representations of character emphasize the constructed nature of theatre *per se*, and that they undermine the naturalistic setting of his plays, by questioning the playwright's ability, or indeed desire, to represent the real world in the theatre.

Furthermore, O'Casey was self-consciously involved in a creative dynamic with both his audience and critics. He was far more aware of the nature of *live* theatre than his colleagues at the Abbey and used this to particular effect in his plays. As Jan Mukarovsky says :

Not only does the stage action influence the audience, but the audience also influences the stage

²⁴ Francis Doherty 'Displacing the Hero in Modern Irish Drama' in *Theatre Research International* Vol 15, No 1 (1990), 41-56.

²⁵ Doherty (1990), 41-56.

action... The audience is therefore omnipresent in the structure for stage production.²⁶

Mukarovsky is thinking about the influence of the audience in the theatre at the time of the performance, but in O'Casey's work we can also see the influences of previous audiences alongside the current one. O'Casey was especially sensitive to audience response to his work and this in turn shaped each subsequent play.²⁷

His response was often deeply personal. As O'Connor's biography reveals, O'Casey was a complex man, full of contradictions; cantankerous, sometimes aggressive, quick to lose his temper and often deliberately evasive. In his early years as a writer he was often in debt, and the rejection of his plays by the Abbey would have meant financial hardship for him.²⁸

At the beginning of his career he would be writing a new play during the rehearsals of the early performances of a previous work. The influence of the audiences of *The*

²⁶ Jan Mukarovský, *Structure, Sign and Function: selected essays* trans. and ed. by John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, 1978), 218.

²⁷ Jack Mitchell *The Essential O'Casey: A Study of the Twelve Major Plays of Sean O'Casey* (Berlin, 1980). Mitchell, by contrast, argues for each play being 'a relatively autonomous artistic model of reality, with its own specific and irrepeatable relationship to the latter', 13.

²⁸ During one particularly difficult financial period O'Casey was employed by Delia Larkin as a caretaker in the Old Forester's Hall, where he cleaned and prepared the hall for concerts and plays, see O'Connor (1988), 129.

Plough and the Stars, for example, is clear in *The Silver Tassie*; and the consequences of their reaction to *The Plough and the Stars* are present in the form and structure of *The Silver Tassie*. Echoes of the audiences of *The Plough and the Stars* are thus still felt in the theatre during the performances of *The Silver Tassie*, and they make their presence felt again through their critical reaction to the latter play. As Raymond Williams explains:

An audience is always the most decisive inheritance, in any art. It is the way in which people have learned to see and respond that creates the first essential condition for drama²⁹.

Each new play was thus adapted and re-structured in the light of this interactive process; and it is therefore imperative to see O'Casey's plays not as discrete entities but as part of an evolving creative process.

Chapter 4 investigates the play that provides the most detailed evidence so far of O'Casey's decision to abandon naturalism as a form, *The Silver Tassie* (1928). Because the very nature of naturalism is at the centre of the debate between Yeats and O'Casey that led to the plays rejection by the Abbey, it is important to see the political significance of O'Casey's adaptation of naturalism here. The public controversy over the rejection of the play

²⁹ Raymond Williams *Drama in Performance* (New York, 1968), 178.

is fuelled by a complex set of misunderstandings, stemming from class divisions, national politics, professional jealousies and a basic failure to understand the nature of the play.

Chapter 5 considers *Within the Gates* (1934) as the inevitable outcome of O'Casey's earlier experiments with naturalism as a form. The reasons behind his almost complete break with stage naturalism here are examined in the context of the public criticism and rejection of the form and content of his previous play. O'Casey's confidence as a dramatist is growing, and his response to his critics now is to ignore them as far as possible. O'Casey has finally accepted that it is they who are at fault and not himself as a dramatist. The increasing use of song and dance here is central to O'Casey's desire to re-conceptualize the modern stage; and to signal his own and his characters' liberation from the trammels of politics, history and conventional aesthetic and moral prescriptions.

O'Casey's increasingly radical formal experiments in each play, then, are not the act of a failing playwright. They are responses to and extensions of his experiments in his previous works. O'Casey was acutely aware from an early stage, as was the German critic Peter Szondi some years

later, that form can become tired, its capacity to communicate diminishing with each successive usage.³⁰ These formal innovations are symptomatic of his two ideological questions: 'What is the nature of theatre as a cultural artefact?' and 'What can be the purpose of theatre in the modern world?'

For O'Casey, as for Szondi, 'form is not an abstract entity, independent of time and place, but rather inextricably tied up with the content it informs.'³¹ His plays provide audiences with a kind of meta-theatre: they question the role of the theatre itself in defining public consciousness, particularly in response to specific historical events such as the Easter Rising and the First World War. O'Casey was, in this sense, actively participating in a broader debate about the potential of modern drama and how it can best reflect an ever-changing reality. As Katharine Worth has shown,³² O'Casey, like his Abbey colleagues, can be seen to be part of a broader European tradition of theatrical

³⁰ Peter Szondi *Theory of the Modern Drama: a critical edition* ed. & trans. by Michael Hays [=Vol. 29 *Theatre and History of Literature* Minneapolis, c.1987]. Cf. Michael Hays, 'Drama and Dramatic Theory: Peter Szondi and the Modern Theater' *boundary 2* 12 (1983), 70. Hays suggests that form can become weak, no longer strong enough to contain the social and political points that the play seeks to present.

³¹ Peter Szondi in Hays 'Drama and Dramatic Theory', 70.

³² Katharine Worth *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London, 1978).

experimentation. O'Casey is in many ways the link between Yeats's generation and Beckett.

O'Casey's desire to 'de-naturalise' the 'real' environment that he is presenting shows that he is already aware of the distortion involved in so-called 'realistic' theatrical representation. As Elizabeth Wright explains:

'Realistic experience' is false consciousness: what is required is a naturalism which allows you to see the underlying abstract connections. On the one hand, there is the reified world of lived experience, on the other hand, the totality, the perspective of what it fits into, allowing you to see the ideological forces which produced the reifications and to transform the reified by seeing its relation to the whole.³³

O'Casey employs a similar use of hyper-naturalism as a means of political demystification, but he uses it instead in a very un-Brechtian way in order to heighten the emotional response at moments of crisis. He uses melodramatic ploys, what Bentley aptly calls 'Naturalism of the dream life'. As Bentley demonstrates, melodrama can transport audiences into realms they would otherwise avoid, where 'the experience was had not refused' (p.199).³⁴ O'Casey deliberately builds in moments of melodrama in

³³ Wright (1989), 71.

³⁴ Eric Bentley *The Life of the Drama* (New York, 1964), esp., 199.

his plays in order to make his audiences experience difficult emotions.

In the final chapter, I consider the impact of O'Casey's detachment from a particular London theatre on the development of his later career. This, in many ways, meant that he was never entirely happy with the London productions of the later plays. He didn't have the benefit, at least, of any artistic control over the production. But that didn't mean that his London work was lackluster. As Katharine Worth notes, it is now that the 'musical mode'³⁵ found in Yeats is fully developed in O'Casey's use of song, music and dance, particularly in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* (1946) and *Cock-a-Doodle-Do* (1949). This work, she continues, connects O'Casey securely with the experimental drama of Europe and looks forward to the Absurdist tradition. Worth's approach aptly removes the critical focus on characterization by drawing our attention also to O'Casey as visual playwright. O'Casey is particularly interested in the use of colour and displays 'an intense and very precise visual imagination'.³⁶ Worth is the only critic to

³⁵ Worth (1986), 224.

³⁶ Worth (1986), 225.

emphasize consistently this visual quality in O'Casey's work and to concentrate interest on its symbolic aspects.³⁷

O'Casey's increasing use of such techniques from *The Silver Tassie* onwards shows that these tropes are an essential feature of his vision, rather than an act of desperation from a dramatist who has lost his way. His dramatic experiments become ever more striking, as he continues his exploration of the power of dance, increases his use of symbolism and investigates the potential of a 'total theatre' experience for his audience, anticipating in many ways the efforts of many subsequent practitioners associated with what has come to be known as the Theatre of the Absurd. O'Casey's early plays are in many ways part of the tradition of the Shavian drama of ideas; and as O'Casey begins to question the nature of reality as an ideology itself, he anticipates many of the concerns of his younger contemporary Samuel Beckett.³⁸

It is clear that O'Casey was rejecting all efforts to categorize his work in the aesthetic and political spheres, highlighting the shortcomings of such labels as Irish,

³⁷ This was first noted by Worth in her article 'O'Casey's Dramatic Symbolism' *Modern Drama* 4 (1961-62), 260-267.

³⁸ Cf. Kleiman (1982) who sees *The Silver Tassie* and *Red Roses for Me* as bridges between Expressionism and the Absurd.

Protestant, Catholic, Woman, Mother, Nationalist, and Communist when they confine individuals within parameters that are not of their own making or over which they have no choice. Through an examination of structure, form and historical context I will show how a radical reconsideration of O'Casey reveals him as a dramatist of the contemporary world. The radically disjunctive and iconoclastic nature of O'Casey's style means that it is perhaps only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century and after three decades of post-modern experimentation, that we as audiences are ready to respond to O'Casey's futuristic aspirations for drama.³⁹

³⁹ Cf. Victoria Stewart's *About O'Casey: The Playwright and the Work* (London, 2003), which provides both a useful collection of interviews with O'Casey, reprinted from his lifetime, alongside an interesting series of interviews with contemporary practitioners who have produced O'Casey plays since the 1990s. Practitioners such as Andy Arnold artistic director of The Arches, Glasgow, recognise the modernity of O'Casey's plays; and indeed Arnold chose *Purple Dust* (1943) for his 1993 production as he felt 'that it would fit in well with our style of theatre' (121). Shivaun O'Casey reveals that in her own production of *Behind the Green Curtains*, she originally intended the actors to wear masks. In a revealing comment on the actors, Shivaun points out 'they weren't ready for it'. Instead, her production used stylized make-up, 'incorporating animal improvisation and "characteristics"' (135), a style which has much in common with the presentation of character in the current Julie Taymar production of the West End musical *The Lion King*.

Chapter 1

Staging space: *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*

O'Casey's earliest plays demonstrate that his use of form is innovative, developmental, and consistently experimental.

The Harvest Festival (c.1919) and *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1925), work to adapt the strictures of the naturalist stage, sometimes through the incorporation of melodramatic or Expressionist techniques sometimes through the use of music and song and most frequently through the use of stage space.

An exploration of the implications of the use of space in O'Casey's work is important for two reasons. First, because it influences the interpretation of thematic issues in the plays; and secondly because it highlights the shortcomings involved in labelling O'Casey as a naturalistic dramatist. His style of drama seems at times reminiscent of the music-hall that he was so fond of attending; and the anarchic potential contained within this older, conventional form of theatre should not be underestimated. Indeed, the music-hall form, with its tradition of encouraging audience interaction and engagement, is recalled in the crossing of

boundaries between onstage and offstage spaces in O'Casey's work.

O'Casey's plays can be seen to use space to explore the nature and limitations of the theatrical genres of naturalism and Expressionism, while also creating moments of *Verfremdungsteffekt*, when the audience is reminded of the artificiality of its own situation as audience in the theatre, watching a play which cannot make visible all the events that it describes.¹ O'Casey's audience is denied a complete visual realisation of the events in the play because the play is limited by three things: first, its own architectural space, the Abbey stage; secondly, by its artistic space or the limitations of the artistic imagination of the playwright, whether this is a conscious decision or from a lack of imaginative perception about the potential of the particular theatrical space at hand; and thirdly, the play is limited by its own theatrical space as a representation of reality, constrained by the limitations of the conventions of naturalism. The audience cannot, for example, see the shooting of Minnie Powell since the set is built to show

¹ Brecht's 'Verfremdungseffekt' is the theatrical counterpart to the Russian Formalists literary term 'ostranenyie', which they saw as the benchmark of literary Modernism. Brecht takes the term and politicises it: 'It cannot be stressed too often that for Brecht the V-effect is not a free-value technical device. He is aware that it is used in other cultures, but insists that he wishes it to be used dialectically, as an expression of real relation, and that it be aimed at

Davoren's and Shields' room, not the space beyond the tenement. Such conventions are often foregrounded by the play and the audience is reminded that the events before it constitute an enactment of the 'real' rather than the 'real' itself.

Both *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *The Harvest Festival* deny the complete enactment of events in spatial terms. Instead, the audience is consistently required to acknowledge the presence of other spaces that it cannot see. Significantly, the audience must engage with the effects of these offstage spaces on the stage in front of them. In these two plays the audience witnesses a blurred distinction between these seen and unseen spaces with notable thematic effect.

Both *The Shadow of a Gunman*, the first O'Casey play to be produced, and *The Harvest Festival*, the only surviving example of O'Casey's earliest work, reveal a persistent interest in the uses and effects of onstage and offstage space. *The Harvest Festival* occupies a unique place in the O'Casey canon, since it provides the only evidence of how O'Casey was experimenting with structure as soon as he began writing plays.

the interests of a particular class for whom it is to promote revolutionary change by pointing to what is historically outmoded', see Wright (1989), 26-27.

Before accepting *The Shadow of a Gunman* for production in April 1923, the Abbey Theatre had refused four other O'Casey plays written between 1918 and 1922. Of these four plays, only the manuscript of *The Harvest Festival* (c.1919) has survived; copies of the other plays were destroyed in the fire at the Abbey in 1951.² All of these plays differed structurally: *The Frost in the Flower* (c.1918-19), was probably in two acts; *The Harvest Festival* and *The Crimson in the Tri-Colour* (c.1920-21) were both in three acts; and the last play of this early unproduced period was *The Seamless Coat of Kathleen* (1922), a one act play.

O'Casey returned to the one-act structure briefly with *Kathleen Listens In* (1923), written swiftly in the weeks immediately following performances of *The Shadow of a Gunman* at the Abbey and designed to be performed at the end of a major play. However, O'Casey was unnerved by lack of audience response to this play: 'The audience received the little play in dead silence...Not even a cold clap

² The Abbey fire on 18th July 1951, began shortly after the evening performance of *The Plough and the Stars*. The original manuscript for *The Crimson in the Tri-Colour* (1921) had already been lost once. The Abbey had held onto the play for longer than the previous plays and this raised O'Casey's hopes that they were considering a production. However, Lennox Robinson, who was responsible for the day to day running of the theatre, wrote to tell him that they had lost their copy of the play. O'Casey was ready to re-write the play from memory (since he had no other copy), but was saved from the necessity of having to do so when Lennox Robinson wrote again to say that the play had been found. However, the Abbey still refused to produce this play. See O'Connor (1988), 131.

of a hand anywhere' (A2, 144). No doubt this early audience rejection of the play would have affected O'Casey deeply, and it may well be that this (as with his later plays) determined the construction of his next work. The very brevity of the one-act *Kathleen Listens In* may have led to his re-adoption of the three-act structure for *Juno and the Paycock* (1924).

The Harvest Festival reveals the extent to which O'Casey had learnt from his early experiments and indicates the swift pace of development in his dramatic technique. Only four years separate *The Harvest Festival* from *The Shadow of a Gunman*, yet the latter demonstrates its greater sophistication through its fluidity of plot and the complexity of its dialogue. Stilted and often arid in *The Harvest Festival*, the dialogue betrays the play's origin as a vehicle for members of the Liberty Hall social club, of which O'Casey was manager at the time. The expression of thematic issues such as the class struggle and conflict between the Church, State and representatives of the Labour movement often reads as dogma and takes on a propagandist tone:

JACK: ...With me, sir, and with those who have become class-conscious, it is no longer a question of how to alleviate poverty, but a fight to abolish it altogether....It is by violence that the master class

secured all that they possess, it is only by violence that they can hold it (HF, 36).

Ironically, it is O'Casey's later work (such as *The Star Turns Red*, 1942) that is often criticised for its propagandist tone, but *The Harvest Festival* indicates that his political commitments were already clearly present in his work at the outset. With time, however, O'Casey developed a greater subtlety in the expression of such beliefs and refined his ability to critique these views at the same time.

What we must also bear in mind when assessing the qualitative differences between *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* is that O'Casey did not have the opportunity to see *The Harvest Festival* in performance. With his later plays he was able to edit his own work as a result of seeing the Abbey rehearsals, and he regularly made changes to structure and dialogue. In his autobiography, O'Casey tells how he would sit on the stairs to the left of the stalls at the Abbey to watch the performance 'to see and help to guide the evolution, through acting and design, of his own [play]' (A2, 142). O'Casey clearly sees himself as playing an integral part in the development of each play into a performance, but his conception of himself as a 'guide' indicates the theatrical dynamic that he sees existing between himself as

playwright, the actors, designers and directors. O'Casey has sufficient theatrical sense to recognise that the script will develop as a result of performance and that the performance itself is a collaborative project. Because *The Harvest Festival* has not benefited from any performance, it lacks this crucial stage in the artistic development of an O'Casey play.

O'Casey, however, did not abandon his early work altogether. He went on to re-work material from *The Harvest Festival* into his later plays. For example, the character of Mrs Rocliffe in this play is demonstrably similar to the grieving mother figure of Juno in *Juno and the Paycock*; and Mrs Rocliffe's final speech can be seen as the precursor to Juno's final speech in *Juno and the Paycock*. The same sense of balance is suggested by both women between the death of the son of a 'friend' and that of a 'foe'. When Mrs Rocliffe's son Jack is killed by a 'scab', his friend Bill asks Mrs Rocliffe if she is comforted by the thought that they, in turn, had killed her son's killer. Mrs Rocliffe expresses her doubts, just as Juno will do:

I don't know, Bill, I don't know; maybe he, too, was the only son of some poor old, broken hearted mother (HF, 65).

Such sentiments are repeated, though more highly wrought, in the 'scales o' sorra' speeches of Juno and Mrs Tancred in *Juno and the Paycock*. I will discuss the effects of repetition in this speech in more detail in Chapter 2, but it is clear that O'Casey had not finished with this theme at the end of *The Harvest Festival*; in fact it takes the repetition of this idea in another play to allow him to fully develop the dramatic expression of the tension between maternal love and pity. In *Juno*, the tension is focused much more on the relationship between maternal love and political affiliation (though this is also suggested in *The Harvest Festival* in the scab versus striker motif), when male affiliations based on politics and nationalism conflict with maternal love. Such a critique is continued in *The Plough and the Stars* through the character of the mother-to-be Nora and her fierce outburst at Jack Clitheroe's preference for his membership of the I.C.A. over his loyalty to the home. In all these plays the female is tied to the domestic, the male to public political action.

Mrs Rocliffe's character is mined again for *The Plough and the Stars*, since she demonstrates not only thematic links with Juno Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* but also with Nora Clitheroe. Both women seek to prevent the

'private' males, Jack Rocliffe and Jack Clitheroe, from engaging in 'public' political events through a mixture of direct action, pleading and expressions of foreboding. The entire plot of *The Harvest Festival* is also remarkably similar to that of *Red Roses for Me* (1942).³ This kind of imaginative re-cycling of material in subsequent work is not uncommon in the creative arts, but such echoes and re-inventions show that the resonant themes in O'Casey's work are present from this earliest play.

Architectural and stage space

O'Casey had not only been a visitor to the Abbey Theatre long before any of his plays were successfully produced there; he had already acted on its stage as well. O'Casey had performed at the Abbey when it was known as The Mechanics Theatre and had regularly watched his brother Isaac perform there.⁴ That he was acutely conscious of

³ Both of these plays take a labour theme depicting a strike with a worker opposing those in charge, but *Red Roses for Me* (1942) is usually considered the most autobiographical of O'Casey's plays.

⁴ When he was fifteen years old O'Casey took the part of Father Dolan in Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun*. His brother Archie was acting in the play and got Sean a free pass to watch the performances (A2, 142). As Sean had been attending the theatre so regularly and knew the script by heart, when the actor playing Father Dolan fell ill, Sean was offered the part at short notice, see *The Letters of Sean O'Casey 1942-54* (ed.) David Krause (New York, 1980), 1021-22, note 2. All subsequent references to this volume of the letters will be abbreviated to L2.

the limitations of the stage space at the Abbey is clear from his autobiography:

Inside, Sean saw how small the theatre was [. . .] It somehow looked smaller now than when he knew it as The Mechanic's Theatre. [. . .] Again Sean was treading the poor, narrow stage, [. . .] He had told no one that he had known this old stage well, (A2, 142).

No doubt he had this limitation of space in mind when he was writing his own work for the same stage. O'Casey faced a challenge and realised that he had to overcome the constricting nature of the Abbey stage space by practical means in his plays. Having performed on the stage gave him a greater awareness of its limitations than the other Abbey dramatists.

In an attempt to overcome the potentially predictable nature of the Abbey's box set, both *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* feature verbal accounts of events which audiences may have wished or expected to see dramatised visually. The audience is invited to extend the set imaginatively through O'Casey's careful formal structuring of offstage events. In this way the mind of the audience is encouraged to travel beyond the fourth wall; audiences must decide not only what happens, but where it takes place. The character of the environment in which such offstage moments are set thus becomes a

crucial part of the creation of the atmosphere of suspense and unease, which is critical to the dramatic momentum of the plays.

Such an elastic conception of the form of a naturalistic set is entirely consistent with the blurring of the formal divide between public and private spaces that both plays take as their thematic focus. We witness in *The Shadow of a Gunman* the 'public' world of Maguire invading the 'private' living space of Shields, the 'public' world of the tenement tampering with Davoren's 'private' aspirations to be a poet, and the 'public' demands of national civil war breaking in to the 'private' space of the tenement. This tension between the 'public' and the 'private' world is not only played out on a thematic level, but on a formal, spatial level as well.

Michael Issacaroff's 'Space and Reference in Drama' posits the significance of dramatic space in theoretical terms, and his terminology is useful for a consideration of the use of space in O'Casey's plays:

In the theater, mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience and represented on stage. Diegetic space, on the other hand, is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters. In other words, mimetic space is transmitted directly, while diegetic

space is mediated through the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually.⁵

Such differences between 'showing' and 'telling' are familiar to narratologists, but this model is useful in the analysis of drama too because of the 'dramatic tension' caused by the 'interplay between the mimetic and diegetic space',⁶ which in O'Casey's work can be most clearly seen in the relationship between the 'public' and the 'private' space.

Both *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* display 'tensions' between these onstage and offstage spaces. Both plays explore the difficulties involved in containing the boundaries of the 'public' and 'private' self through the use of mimetic and diegetic stage space. Both plays make use of 'auditory and nonauditory'⁷ representations of space to dramatise thematic issues in spatial terms. Issacharoff's explanation of the distinction is pertinent here:

in a theater script, language takes two forms: auditory (the spoken text or discourse of the characters) and non-auditory (the stage directions or meta-discourse). *Both modes of discourse can refer to dramatic space*, but they differ in their respective functions. The function of meta-discourse is to refer exclusively to what is *visible* (i.e., what the producer

⁵ Michael Issacharoff 'Space and Reference in Drama' in *poetics today* 2:3 (1981), 215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

has intended to make visible to the audience). The function of discourse, on the other hand, is to refer both to what is visible and to what is not, and thus, for example, to space described but not shown on stage. In its referential function, meta-discourse guides the activity of the *producer*, while discourse, when it refers to the visible (i.e., mimetic) space, channels the perception of the *audience*.⁸

Issacharoff characterises spatial references as constructed in language as well as in the more tangible elements of form: the physical stage set and the relationship of costume to setting. In such a conception of space, the discourse of the characters functions to refer to 'what is visible and to what is not' and to direct 'the perception of the *audience*'.

O'Casey's plays consistently direct the audience's perception beyond the confines of the Abbey tenement set. The raid on the tenement in *The Shadow of a Gunman* takes place offstage, constructed by reportage, the 'auditory' medium of communicating the presence of other dramatic spaces. The audience hears about the raid from the characters of the tenement, who witness the specific event in person.

Because this is such a potentially startling dramatic event, and as such potentially dramatic theatre, we are forced to ask why O'Casey chooses not to present this

⁸ Ibid., 215.

moment in the mimetic space. Of course practical difficulties would have prevented any large scale presentation of this, but there is no indication that O'Casey ever considered that the raid should be presented directly in front of the Abbey audience. The use of space here, and elsewhere, is thus deliberately structured so that such momentous events, otherwise conventionally dramatic moments, take place beyond the sightlines. The effect of this is to force the audience beyond the mimetic and into an awareness of the diegetic space as well.

By directing the audience's perception into the space beyond the confines of the Abbey stage, O'Casey's play functions in a Brechtian manner to remind the audience of the constructed nature of the play they are watching. The 'narrow' stage space at the Abbey and the smallness of the theatre that O'Casey recalls vividly in his autobiography may be more relevant than first meets the eye. Interpreting the Abbey stage space metaphorically, we might suggest that there was a narrowness of vision in the minds of audiences at the Abbey theatre that O'Casey was trying to address in spatial terms. By moving the focus of the action of his plays beyond the realms of the room represented in the mimetic onstage space, O'Casey is

encouraging his audience to move their focus to the world outside the auditorium. In this way members of the audience at an O'Casey play have to balance the demands of both the 'public' and the 'private' worlds in their minds at the same time. While they interpret the action they are watching in the mimetic space, the play requires that they also hold in their mind the nature of all the other diegetic spaces that are evoked by the play: the rooms outside the tenement, the political, social and economic world of Ireland that did not stop simply because 1,500 people had taken their seats in the Abbey Theatre that night.

The Harvest Festival

The play takes as its title not only a particular space in time but also a particular architectural space, since the Harvest Festival always takes place in church. From such a title it is not difficult to guess that one of the objects of the play's irony will be the Catholic Church. Yet critics of the play did not balk at its subject, only its structure. The letter rejecting *The Harvest Festival* for production at the Abbey Theatre in 1919 contains explicit criticism of the play on the level of form. The readers were unhappy about the structure of the play:

The play is interestingly conceived but not well executed. It is seldom dramatic and many of the characters...are conventional conceptions.⁹

What is surprising here is the criticism of the characterisation, since the next play, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, is specifically praised for the vibrancy of the characters.¹⁰ But what concerns us here is the claim that the play is 'interestingly conceived but not well executed'.

The room at the house of the church warden Williamson, for example, suggests aspirations beyond its own setting, in much the same way as O'Casey's non-auditory signals in the stage directions of the description of Nora's room in *The Plough and the Stars* speak of her desire to escape the confines of the tenement space. Mr and Mrs Williamson's 'private' room is constructed with the 'public' space in mind, since it is designed to

impress those who may be visitors with a sense of the family dignity in the plenitude of household goods (HF, 3).

Nora has similar middle-class aspirations in *The Plough and the Stars*, which are indicated through her attempts to

⁹ Sean O'Casey *The Harvest Festival: A Play in Three Acts* (Gerrards Cross, 1980), with a foreword by Eileen O'Casey and an Introduction by John O'Riordan. See Introduction, xii.

¹⁰ For example, Frank Hugh O'Donnell wrote in the *Dublin Evening Herald* 13 April, 1923, 2: 'his characterisation was excellent and convincing. His characters were as perfect, and as his photographs [sic], for one really felt his men and women were but photographs, was nothing less than a work of genius'. For other similar reviews see Hogan & Burnham (1992), 145-147.

control the tenement space between herself and the outside world. Nora has a lock fitted to her front door, figuring metaphorically her desire to thwart easy access from the 'public' world outside her room into her 'private' space inside. Nora's room is 'furnished in a way that suggests an attempt towards a finer expression of domestic life' (PS, 135). Nora's attempts to control her own space suggest a desire to remove her 'domestic' sphere from the world of the tenement and to place it in a more comfortable, less dangerous, alternative space elsewhere.

Both the Williamsons' room in *The Harvest Festival* and Nora's room in *The Plough and the Stars*, then, suggest a private space that is in conflict with itself: they are rooms that are constrained by their own limitations. These rooms demonstrate the thwarted ambitions of their female occupants in particular and have in a sense become empty spaces, for instead of representing the 'private' space they function only as sterile spaces; neither authentically working-class nor middle-class rooms. The rooms are false representations of social space, mimetic representations of the continual tension between the 'public' and 'private' demands placed upon their owners. They represent the tension between space and social

class: the desire to seek privacy is regarded as a middle-class aspiration, since the desire to escape from the communal is viewed as an act of separation from a true class position.

Both Mrs Williamson and Nora Clitheroe want to make use of the public space for their own private ends, in the same way that Shields and Davoren are seen to do in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. Mrs Williamson and Nora seek to demonstrate their distance from the space of the tenement through public means. Nora buys a new hat and has it delivered to the tenement; its arrival is thus seen by all the neighbours and Nora's 'notions of upperosity' (PS,137) are noted by Mrs Grogan. Mrs Williamson in *The Harvest Festival* also uses public purchases to display her perceived superiority to those around her. She is able to reject self-sufficiency because she can *buy* whatever she needs; she takes pride in being able to draw the public world into her private domain. When a workman at her house asks her if she grew all the vegetables she has collected for the Harvest Festival herself, her unequivocal reply is one of stupification:

MRS WILLIAMSON: Oh! dear no; thank God we are able to buy everything we want. These have been sent up from the country by a friend [. . .] Wouldn't they look splendid now around the pulpit or put

somewhere in the chancel where everybody could see them [?] (HF, 6).

Mrs Williamson's private home and her income function as a statement of her perceived superiority. It is important that these goods delivered to her are brought into her private space. Yet they must then act as a public sign of her separation from those around her, who grow their own produce. The vegetables must be placed in the chancel precisely where 'everybody could see them'; the point of their presence is to signify her absence from the working-class community who till the land. This sign will function in the same way for Mrs Williamson's friend in the country: she does not need to keep all the vegetables herself and can afford to send them to friends.

That this private space of the Williamsons' home is clearly recognised as a provocative area to the workers in the play is demonstrated through the stoning of the house at the end of Act 1. Mr Williamson is Works Foreman as well as Churchwarden, and the striking workers come to attack his house as a means of protest against their treatment at work. The Williamsons' house does not function as a private space for the workers: it publicly declares itself as a class space, signifying the difference in status and treatment between the lower-middle and working

classes. By attacking the Williamsons' private space, the workers (we infer) do not share the Williamsons' own distinction between public and private spaces, or between personal and political issues. The private is political, in their view; it is a constructed middle-class position. The audience is forced to consider how they feel about this destruction of the private space, and in some sense they must share Mrs Williamson's question at the end of the first act:

MRS WILLIAMSON: They'll not leave a pane of glass in the house. What does it all mean [sic] (HF, 24).

As the play presents the wilful destruction of a home, the audience is forced to consider the origin and impact of such acts of aggression.

Mrs Rocliffe tells how her son Jack, the hero of *The Harvest Festival*, was once a regular churchgoer, but was lured away from his private faith through a gradual awareness of Ireland's economic poverty. Jack has been led into the public world through his private reading of literature:

MRS ROCLIFFE: An' he was such a regular churchgoer [...]; but it's the readin' that has ruined him, the readin', the readin'; after a while when he began readin' I noticed a change in him (HF, 39).

Jack's private act of reading has challenged his understanding of the public religious aesthetic.

This conflict between private beliefs and public acts of allegiance is enacted regularly in this play as the public and the private spaces clash throughout. The public body of the Church, for example, represented by the Rector and the Bishop, visits Jack in the private space of his home, hoping that as a union activist, he will quell the rioters and end the strike. They ask him to attend the evening's Harvest Festival at the church, rather than speaking to the workers in the Union Hall as planned. By changing the public space that Jack is to inhabit, the Church seeks to dispel his public power. Jack, however, refuses the appeal from the Rector, attends the union meeting as planned and is shot by a 'scab' during the fight with the strikers. Jack is killed in the play because he cannot maintain his movement between the public and the private spaces: he has crossed the line between private insurgent and public hero to the workers and he cannot occupy both spaces simultaneously. His working-class assailant is significant since he rejects Jack's public status as his leader, upholding instead the power of the overlord, Sir Jocelin (it is one of the scabs who fires the shot that kills Jack).

Jack's death in *The Harvest Festival* functions as an emotive emblem of the conflict between the Church and State on the spatial level. Jack's body becomes a sign of resistance for the workers, and potentially for the audience. The site of his burial itself becomes a contested space. His mother wants his body to rest in the church overnight, but representatives of the Vestry, Mr Williamson in particular, object to Jack being given a Christian burial. Since he had rejected the Church in life, most representatives of the Church want to reject the space of the Church for him in death. Williamson takes care to draw attention once more to Jack's involvement in the destruction of his own private space, his home:

MR WILLIAMSON:...that fellow laughed, actually laughed when the crowd were smashing every window in our house (HF, 50).

Such destruction of the private cannot be sanctioned at a public level, and for Williamson, as famously for Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, acceptance of the traitor into the public space of the church would imply his acceptance of the attacks upon his own home. The strikers, however, do not want Jack's body to be taken into the space of the church either, but for a very different reason:

most of the men is bringin' him here against their will, for they'd rather wake him in the Union Hall where we could all be near our comrade (HF, 53).

The Rector initially espouses the Christian position and seeks to maintain the public position of the Church toward supposed sinners that 'the wishes of my Master are paramount to the wishes of my vestrymen' (HF, 53).

However, the issue of class conflict first posed in the play through the space of the Williamsons' home is re-affirmed through this debate about the appropriate space for Jack's wake and burial service. For the representative of the local squirarchy, Sir Jocelin Vane, allowing Jack's body into the church is tantamount to the Church's acceptance of anarchy and self-destruction. He questions the Rector's initial willingness to accept Jack's body into the public space of the church and explains his own feelings on the subject to the Rector:

SIR JOCELIN: ...if you are determined to identify yourself - and through yourself, to identify the Church, with those who have committed themselves to the overthrow of established Society, and with Society, to overthrow the Church - for we all know that the safety of the Church depends upon the stability of Society - then, sir, you will not have Sir Jocelin Vane with you (HF, 59-60).

Sir Jocelin quietly elides the logical conclusion of his own argument, that if he is seeking to defend the public face of the Church he is also trying to defend his own position in

the status quo, for any threat to 'established Society' is as much a threat to him as it is to the Church. The play underlines this axis of support between the Church and the ruling class through Sir Jocelin's arguments about space.

The public space triumphs in the play: the Rector gives in to the demands of his vestrymen and rejects the public principles of the Church. The private views of vestrymen and the private control of the wealth on which the public institution of the church depends are seen to dominate in this bleak vision of capitalist society. Sir Jocelin knows that his threat to withdraw the funds of the parish grant him private power over a public institution. If Sir Jocelin withdraws funds, the Church will collapse, not at national level, but on the level of the local community. The Rector must give because he is not a private individual, but a public representative of a public organisation which relies on private funds. The public space has won, but it has won through the rule of the private, and more importantly, wealthy, person. In addition to the Rector's conscience being vanquished by the practical demands of keeping his church funded, the imperatives of the class war are seen to win over those of Christianity. While his earliest surviving play, *The Harvest Festival*, may lack subtlety in the

expression of its political position, it does demonstrate that O'Casey employs contested public and private spaces; to underwrite his thematic concerns from the outset of his career.

The Shadow of a Gunman

From its first moment O'Casey second play also depends on the dramatisation of the clash between the mimetic and the diegetic space. In the opening moments of the play the 'Voice of Woman at the Window' breaks in upon Davoren's poetic reverie, as she hammers at the window and calls to wake up Seumus Shields. The play does not allow the audience even a few moments of relaxation to absorb the atmosphere it immediately directs the audience's 'perception'¹¹ to the world outside. The 'Voice of Woman at the Window' and the 'Voice at the Door' are presented as intrusions into the world of the play, but they cannot be denied. The sounds of the world beyond the room break upon this private moment of reverie for Davoren and Shields; and the existence of the space beyond the tenement room is thus rudely indicated for the audience. Neither the window nor the silhouette of the woman are

¹¹ Issacharoff (1981), 215. I borrow the term 'perception' from Isaccharoff because it seems a particularly helpful way of describing the shifts in focus in O'Casey's play.

seen.¹² His offstage world may not be defined, but it cannot be ignored. O'Casey wants to disturb his audience and disrupt their quiet enjoyment of the first moments of the play, reminding them of the public world outside that they have just left behind.

Both voices are breaking into the 'private' space from 'outside', and the wake-up call of the Woman can be read in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. The Woman is trying to rouse Shields from his slumbers, just as the 'public' realm is trying to 'wake up' the private individual to what is going on outside their personal lives. The response of Shields to the Woman's calls is comic and heavily ironic:

SEUMAS (shouting): All right, all right, all right! The way these oul' ones bawl at a body! Upon my soul! I'm beginning to believe that the Irish people are still in the stone age. If they could they'd throw a bomb at you (SG, 4).

Seumas is resistant to his 'wake up' call: he would much rather stay in bed, in his private space, undisturbed by demands from the world outside. The metaphorical significance of O'Casey's use of language can be

¹² Some productions do show the window and a woman's figure visible through it. The Phoenix Theatre Company production at the White Bear Theatre in London in July 2000 did show her outline, but a detailed description of the woman's space outside the room is not usually specified in performance. In the play text, the woman in the window occupies the diegetic space.

recognised retrospectively, but even at this moment in the play Shields has to give in and respond to the calls from outside. Shields' joke that he fears he will be destroyed by those outside, throwing a 'bomb' to disturb his peace, functions proleptically as well as ironically, leaving the audience reflecting uncomfortably upon their early laughter later in the play.¹³ There is, however, a stream of visitors to the tenement who impose on Davoren's time to work and sleep: McGuire comes to leave his bag; Minnie Powell's visits are welcomed; Grigson rolls into the room drunk; Tommy Owens, Mrs Henderson and Mr Gallagher arrive with their letter to the IRA. Day and night, representatives of the public world force themselves into the 'private' world of Davoren the private poet, who simply wants to be left on his own in his room to write.

¹³ The recent production of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, directed by Dominic Drumgoole on tour from the Abbey Theatre at the Tricycle in London in April 2005, emphasised this constant spatial tension between the public and the private in the tenement particularly well. The set was designed to demonstrate the fragile barrier between the internal space of Donal and Seumas's room, the public space of the communal hallway, and the front door to the house. The wall which supported the door to Donal and Seumas's room had been removed to leave only the door frame on view, and this door opened so incessantly to allow the influx of visitors that it was almost as if the door itself were not there either. This removal of the side wall of Davoren and Seumas's room, so that the audience could see everyone coming in and going out of the tenement building via the communal hallway, emphasised the constant disturbance suffered by both men, in particular the poet Davoren, as the noise of the public world encroached on his private space. But the public world will not and cannot be denied, and Drumgoole's decision to show the coming and going of all the characters, rather than concentrate on their presence in the room, emphasised the constant stream of life that is just beyond private space, the public world that cannot be denied.

Ironically of course, Shields has no need to worry about bombs being thrown at him from the outside world of public politics. Shields simply allows bombs to be brought right into his own bedroom, not thrown, but delivered, not aimed at him by indeterminate public figures of the 'Irish people', but brought indoors in a bag and left for him to look after personally by his 'private' friend, Maguire. Shield's pronouncement on the national character of the Irish people frames a further irony, since his assessment is symptomatic of his own 'private' failings, particularly in his reliance on the character of Maguire:

That's the Irish people all over - they treat a joke as a serious thing and a serious thing as a joke' (SG, 7).

This dramatisation of the 'private' individual's eventual failure to resist the claims of the 'public' national world outside him is figured both in terms of myth and space in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. In the presentation of the character of Shields, O'Casey is beginning a series of ironic explorations of Graeco-Roman and Irish mythical figures, which becomes a feature of his later work. In his next play, *Juno and the Paycock*, we see the classical figure of Juno and in *The Plough and the Stars*, the mythologised leader, Padraic Pearse as the 'Voice of the

Man'¹⁴ being subject to further ironic probing. While the links between the mythic figures and their refigurings are more intense in these later plays, Shields does make the link directly between himself and the mythical figures of Cuchulain and Prometheus in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. He brags to Davoren about the quality of the braces that he is selling - 'they'd do Cuchullian [sic], they're so strong' (SG,6), - but they break before the end of his speech, leading Shields to think of another 'broken' engagement that day - Maguire missing his arranged appointment. At that moment Maguire enters the room, clutching his bag and telling Shields that he cannot keep their previous appointment because he has to go to Knocksedan instead. This juxtaposition of the broken braces and Maguire's broken appointments acts as a dual portent: it creates foreboding of future trouble with Maguire and functions to ironise the value of myth. The figure of Shields as a broken-down Cuchulain is a bathetic re-invention of the saviour of Ireland. Instead of fighting for his country, this modern Cuchulain cannot even recognise a foe or traitor, and unwittingly accepts the bag of bombs from Maguire into his home without suspicion or question.

¹⁴ This figure is also referred to as 'The Voice of the Speaker' in the play.

The figure of Maguire as a threat to this latter day version of Cuchulain is also represented through the different spatial relations in the play. A production of *the Shadow of a Gunman* by Shivaun O'Casey in 1993 made particular use of lighting to create the effect of shadow, encouraging the atmosphere of tension and unease evoked by Maguire's presence.¹⁵ The poster for this production took as its focus the moment of Maguire's arrival, which became emblematic for the whole play, an instance of transition between the public and private worlds. Maguire figured in the poster in shadow, standing in the doorway holding his bag, on the threshold between the public world outside the tenement and the world within. The 'shadow' of a gunman is clearly conveyed in the representation of Maguire, but equally shadowy is the space outside that he brings into the tenement with him. Maguire's entrance disturbs the cosy intimacy of the room, interrupting the interaction between Shields and Davoren, and reminds the audience that not only are there other rooms beyond the

¹⁵ Shivaun O'Casey explained to me during discussions we had between 2000 and 2002 that she particularly wanted to emphasise the shadow effects in her own production. Though she now concentrates on directing, her dual perspective as an actress earlier in her career, especially in the part of Minnie Powell in the 1967 London production at the Mermaid Theatre directed by Jack MacGowran, as well her experiences of performances as an audience member (Shivaun recalls attending productions of her father's plays, especially after his death, when she would accompany her mother to the shows), informed her production.

one that they are watching at the moment, but also that there is a street outside that Maguire has just traversed to get here. Maguire represents the threat from outside (which is to become a relevant feature of the later plays and notably in the work of Harold Pinter); and certainly the visit from the Black and Tans at the end of the play highlights that with shocking force.

In Drumgoole's production at the Abbey in 2005, Maguire was similarly identified as the crucial figure in the production. This time his status was signalled through the positioning of his bag on stage. O'Casey's stage description reads '*He puts the bag in a corner of the room*' (SG,7) - here in the corner it is positioned where the two worlds interact. Through Maguire's bag, the diegetic space acquires a mimetic presence on stage. In Drumgoole's production it was positioned stage right, front and lit from the top, placed on a chair in front of the audience so that no one could miss it. Such positioning took on a quasi-pantomimic quality, with the phrase 'Look in the bag' almost palpable in the auditorium. There the bag sat as a literal time bomb. It worked to emphasise how the public world of the play has very cleverly eased its way into the private domain, for while Donal and Seumas pontificate idly about

nationalism and poetry, the bombs sit quietly alongside them in the room, just biding their time before they explode

Personal involvement in politics cannot be avoided in O'Casey: there is no escape; we cannot decide not to believe in politics any more, as Seumas naively suggests that he has done. Whether he does believe or not is beside the point, we are not isolated individuals, living in our rooms detached from society. Other men and women act if we do not - just as Minnie Powell decides to take action to hide the bombs, while Donal and Davoren only sit mute and frozen when the soldiers arrive. Maguire has involved the whole house in the intellectual debate about the necessity for conflict to achieve nationalist aims. The whole conflict is there with Seumas and Donal in their room, symbolised by Maguire's bag.

Through Maguire, the audience is encouraged to remember the 'public' space of nation, politics and myth. The status of Maguire's character at this point in the play is questionable. The audience knows that he is unreliable: he arrives several hours late for his meeting with Shields, simply cancelling their proposed business with the implausibly airy remark about his alternative arrangements for the day: 'Business, business. I'm going out to catch

butterflies' (p.6). Maguire is a figure of mystery and his brief presence and then extended absence add to the tension and growing sense of unease in the play.

At this point neither the audience proper nor the audience onstage know what is in Maguire's bag, but his significance as a figure of menace and threat functions in retrospect. The play expands the irony of Maguire as the representation of the private associate turned outside invader of the peace of the tenement by revealing Shields' understanding of Maguire's character. Shields identifies Maguire as a representative of the destructive nature of inward-looking Irish politics: 'There's a fellow who thinks the four cardinal virtues are not to be found outside an Irish Republic' (SG,7). Shields does not perceive Maguire as a threat to his own safety because he comes from inside, a Republican Irishman, from whom Shields considers himself safe since: 'I taught Irish six nights a week' (SG,7). Shields has assured himself of his own nationalist credentials and thus assumes that those around him must be assured of them too.

There is some ambivalence about levels of foolishness in the play: is Maguire to be considered a fool by the audience, concentrating his efforts too narrowly on

nationalism, or are we to ridicule Shields, who rejects Irish national politics as too parochial and yet substitutes nothing but narrow self-interest and a focus on the politics of his own four walls? Shields in fact provides a representation of his own concerns through his name: he seeks to protect himself from the outside at all times, while 'shielding' himself from an awareness of the complexity of the politics of his own nation.

Changing and sharpening the spatial focus

The scene between Shields and his landlord following so soon after the departure of Maguire reminds the audience that the significance of space depends upon the nature of those who inhabit it. The visit from Shields' landlord forces another character to occupy the same space as Maguire, at the door, bursting in from the outside. But the reaction to the arrival of the landlord is very different to the reaction to the arrival of Maguire. The landlord's knock announcing his presence unnerves Shields far more than the unannounced arrival of Maguire. The juxtaposition of the arrival of these two very different characters and the contrast in Shields' response to them is significant. Maguire, who slips in without warning and a threat to the safety of Shields is simply met with an expression of frustration - 'What's the

use of you coming at this hour of the day?' (SG,83) - but not fear. Meanwhile, the next visitor, the landlord, who has every right to call and who very publicly knocks at the door, is greeted with suspicion and annoyance. Shields asks, '*irritably* Who's that; who's there?'(SG,7). This reinforces the depiction of Shields as a character who lacks awareness and heightens the irony of his own presentation of himself as a modern-day Cuchulain.

The visit from Shields' landlord comments further on the nature of Shield's relationship with the outside world. Although Shields may desire retreat from the public demands upon him, he cannot completely evade them. The landlord brings Shields notice to quit, for Shields has been writing letters to the newspaper complaining about 'the state of the yard' (SG,86) in tandem with the state of the tenement. The landlord objects to the publicity, particularly as this troublesome tenant is eleven weeks behind with the rent. Shields, through writing to the newspapers, has attempted to use the power of the 'public' press to improve his own 'private' circumstances, demonstrating that he is prepared to engage with the outside world only when it may bring him some personal profit. There is a sense that Shields believes he has moved

on from what he now perceives as his earlier foolish cares for the outside world, inverting the mythical decision of Cuchulain, who gave up private interest for a passionate devotion to the public cause of Ireland.

Shields has seen fit to mention that he taught Irish in the evenings. He also reveals that he was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, but 'after all me work for Dark Rosaleen' (SG,7), he can't get his fellow Republican, Maguire to put off his visit to Knocksedan until the next day so that they can complete their business trip for private profit. There is a sense of frustration from Shields, an implication that he is asking himself what he has gained personally from all his work for national, public causes. As there does not seem to be any immediate personal profit for him, he has consequently withdrawn into the private world of his room and has decided to improve his economic position by sub-letting his room to Davoren.

In some senses we could read Shields as a perfectly reasonable man, even voicing some of O'Casey's own communist frustrations with the limitations of Irish nationalism. What is the use of nationalist activities if nationalism's first concern is not to improve the economic position of the working-man, the poor and the sick?

Shields' rejection of the 'public' space outside the tenement may in this sense be seen as a very political act – a refusal to take part in nationalist causes since they do not represent the interests of his class. However, there is little evidence that Shields has such a disinterested stance. His withdrawal from the public sphere is the action of a tired man, scared and unsure. Finding himself at odds with the public world may make him feel a traitor to that world, but the play shows that his withdrawal from the public realm is an equal betrayal of the responsibility he owes to *himself* to act and take part in the society in which he lives. The movement between the public and private spaces in the play indicates that there are dangers to the individual who withdraws from political action and rejects public obligations.

Shields' anxiety about the threat of the public world outside is manifest in the sounds he hears of the tapping on the wall – the physical point between the public and private 'spaces':

SEUMAS [in an awed whisper]. This is the second night I heard that tappin! I believe it bodes no good to me. There, do you hear it again – a quiet, steady, mysterious tappin' on the wall (SG,26).

The artificiality of the barrier between the public and private worlds is suggested by this auditory signal. Only Shields

hears the sound, as if it is conjured by his unconscious, a representation of his desire to deny the power and tentacles of the public world, encroaching on him even as he hides in his room.

Davoren, the main shadowy gunman figure of the play, also demonstrates such a tension between engagement with, and withdrawal from, public space. His presence as a perceived gunman on the run, hiding in the tenement, allows him a particular licence to withdraw from public space and the demands of the outside in the world of the play, while his position as poet belies his rejection of the outside space. Davoren is first identified in the play as a poet, writing a verse about the power of life and love to overcome the sorrows of pain and suffering. Davoren sees himself as the modern-day Irish Shelley, regularly repeating a line from Shelley's poem *Prometheus Unbound*: 'Ah me! alas [sic] pain for ever, for ever!' (SG,82), either to bemoan his own lack of privacy and quiet in the room he shares with Shields, or to ironise Shields' own complaints about the difficulties he faces trying to prepare to do business against all the odds. The Promethean parallels are significant since Davoren is no Promethean 'saviour' of the people, unlike Shelley's mythical hero. Davoren, as we find, actually has

to be saved himself – by Minnie Powell. The link between Davoren and Shelley is interesting too because it sets a British republican poet against an Irish pseudo-republican gunman. Shelley was very much the figure of the poet in society, but he was also very much engaged with the public world and responded to it directly in his writing.¹⁶

In contrast to Shelley, however, Davoren eschews the problems of the political world around him in his own poetry, characterised by a distinctly non-political Romantic tone:

Or when the Summer's ardent arms outspread,
Entwined with flowers,
Enfold us like two lovers newly wed,
Thro' ravish'd hours -
Then sorrow, woe and pain lose all their powers,
For each is dead, and life is only ours (SG, 4).

Davoren's lack of political and cultural engagement is also reflected in the comparison with poets from Ireland, such as Samuel Ferguson, James Mangan and Thomas Davis. Mangan's work is later drawn upon for ironic effect in the characterisation of Rosie in *The Plough and the Stars*, but here it is Davoren who is the butt of the ironic comparison. While Ferguson's poems such as *The Burial*

¹⁶ Shelley was both a poet and a political commentator. 'The Mask of Anarchy' (1819) directly addresses the contemporary political regime to characterise the then Prime Minister Lord Castlereagh as a murderous villain: 'I met murder on the way, he had a mask like Castlereagh,/Very smooth he was yet grim, seven

of *King Cormac* and *Lays of the Western Gael* attempt to recover Irish myth and to explore the distinctive qualities of the Irish national character,¹⁷ Davoren's poetry withdraws from engagement in national issues and exudes a sweet private sentimentalism. While Ferguson may not have considered himself a fanatical nationalist, he is concerned with investigating the process through which definitions of the self and the national character come to be created in public culture. Davoren, however, uses the public potential of the poet only for personal gain. Like Shields, Davoren wishes to engage with the public world only on his own terms and to use it for his gain alone.

Song and the extension of space

In *The Shadow of the Gunman* O'Casey begins to experiment with form by using song as a means to extend the implications of his use of space in the play. Songs resonate in both public and private space, sung by private individuals and recognised by the public audience.

O'Casey's use of song can be seen as part of the same

bloodhounds followed him'. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy: A Poem* with a preface by Leigh Hunt (London, 1832), 2.

¹⁷ Samuel Ferguson was a Protestant Irish nationalist poet. For a detailed discussion of Ferguson, see Robert Welch *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats* (Gerrards Cross, 1980), esp., 116-155.

kind of exploration of the 'affective power of Irish folksong' that Samuel Ferguson had also been engaged upon.¹⁸ Ferguson attacked Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy* (1831) as seditious and conducted his own attempt to characterise the national 'Gaelic temper' by examining the way it might be revealed in song. O'Casey continues in his own work to probe this relationship between song and national identity.

O'Casey uses song to connect the space between the private and public definitions of self and nationhood. Maik Hamburger has suggested that the two central songs in the first and second acts of the play are the 'hinges on which the acts turn from the private to the public sphere. They mark the end of the private lives of the main characters and the beginning of their public lives'.¹⁹ Hamburger sees song as an intrinsic part of the creation of O'Casey's 'theatrical moods and tensions'.²⁰ And, like Grene, Hamburger begins to explore the effects of such structural devices in the creation of a 'distancing effect' for

¹⁸ *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (ed.) Robert Welch (Oxford, 1996), 185. O'Casey, however, does certainly not share the patronising and condescending tone of Ferguson, see Greaves, (2002), 101-2.

¹⁹ Maik Hamburger 'Anti-Illusionism and the Use of Song in the Early Plays of Sean O'Casey' in *O'Casey Annual 2*, ed. by R.G. Lowery (London, 1983), 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

the audience.²¹ The song allows a crescendo of tension as the action of the play moves towards the song, tension which is then expiated through the singing of the songs 'with a certain extravagance'.²² Such excess in the delivery of the song breaks the naturalistic frame and then allows the subsequent scenes to be played for their comic effect:

they [the songs] take the weight off the following scenes and allow them to be played lightly without loss of effectiveness.²³

Such careful analysis of O'Casey's use of form provides thoughtful insights. But, rather than providing a defusion of the tension, I would argue that the songs serve in fact to underwrite the tension between the demands of the public and the private. Tommy Owens' song in Act 1, for example, is 'God Save Ireland', and the irony of having a character such as Owens render this song in particular is acute. Tommy's excess of passion is evident in the text: Minnie tries to interrupt him, as the stage direction tells us, '*in an effort to quell his fervour*' (SG,15). It is this ardour that is being satirised here. By the end of his performance of just a few lines of the song, Owens is on the verge of

²¹ Grene (1986), 52-53.

²² Hamburger (1983), 12.

²³ Ibid , 12.

hysteria, '*Tearfully*' (the stage directions point out) telling Davoren that 'I'd die for Ireland!' (SG,15).²⁴ The play functions in a meta-dramatic way at this point, using the song to convey the kind of emotional hysteria that can be generated generally through such patriotic songs. The song serves as a reminder of how its powerful poetic message can be reduced to conduits for private emotional excess and self-aggrandisement.

It is also the structural placing of this song, just before the arrival of Mr Gallogher bearing his letter to the IRA, that gives it such particular importance. A public national cause is represented in the song, and at this historical moment the IRA functions as one of the representatives of this cause in Ireland. This song presents a dilemma for the audience and poses a number of pressing questions for them: What happens when a song becomes associated with a particular public cause? What does it mean to sing this song now?

The play raises questions for the audience, considering why they might want to access particular

²⁴ The rendition of Tommy's song by Owen Oldroyd in the Phoenix Theatre Company's production at the White Bear Theatre Club in London, July 2000 was full of the 'extravagance' as Hamburger suggests. The effect was to create an atmosphere of excruciating embarrassment between Minnie and Davoren as they listened to Tommy's growing enthusiasm for his theme.

emotions through song. Tommy Owens is presented as singing the song for the evocation of his private feelings and in order to assuage his feelings of rejection for *not* being called to serve Ireland. Like Shields, Davoren and Gallogher, Owens is attempting to use the public world as a means of personal solace, without offering anything in return. But the play is pointing out that the dynamic between the public and the private world is constant: you cannot simply choose to sing 'God Save Ireland' as a metaphor for your own private resentments, for the song has consequences in the public world.

We have already seen how the drawing room in *The Harvest Festival* acted as a metaphoric space for Mrs Williamson; in *The Shadow of a Gunman* the spatial arrangements are much more complex achieving a tense, claustrophobic atmosphere by restricting the mimetic space to one room, and yet allowing the audience to be aware of the presence of other spaces which they are not permitted to see or visit mimetically. The setting of *The Shadow of a Gunman* is a 'return room', which is an extra room that has

been added to the tenement, 'eked out of space not originally intended for a room for habitation'.²⁵

The architectural definition implies that the audience is being invited to witness a space which should not really be there because it is barely fit for human habitation.²⁶

The fact that O'Casey selects this particular room is curious. The 'return room' ironically assumes another, more obvious, kind of meaning as a space that we keep coming back to, one from which there is no escape.

Similarly the play suggests that we will keep coming back to the issues raised in this room and the many others like it, until something is done to remove the need for such return.

In the world of the play, someone always wants to occupy the return room, not as a space of resolution but as a space signifying continuity. Tommy Owens is lining himself up to be the next tenement 'gunman', showing his allegiance to Davoren's supposed cause by reciting lines from the nationalist patriotic poem: 'God save Ireland ses

²⁵ Editors note in Sean O'Casey, *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey: A Students' Edition* with Selected notes and Introduction by Ronald Ayling (London, 1985), 497 note 1.

²⁶ Although the audience may not immediately be aware of the architectural name of the stage space that they are watching, it is an interesting space since it functions at both the auditory and non-auditory levels. The director is obviously aware that it is this particular space since s/he has read the script, and so in his/her own meta-discourse s/he may want to find a way to suggest the potential significance of this.

the hayros, God save Ireland ses we all' (SG,15). Tommy Owens would be delighted to take Davoren's place, for he is 'bloody well tired o' waitin' (SG,16) and is longing to fulfil what he sees as his national role:

TOMMY: I'd die for Ireland I never got a chance - they never gave me a chance (SG,15).

This obsessive space of the return room is the subject of a number of returns in this play and the pathos of such a compulsion to repeat a kind of theatrical threnody in O'Casey's work.

If we consider the definition of the architectural term 'return',²⁷ it is clear that O'Casey was using the stage space to try to give his audience an opportunity both to engage with and to turn away from this obsessive focus on death and nationhood in his first play at the Abbey. In spatial terms the return room in fact invites the taking of a new direction. The 'return' room thus gives the audience an opportunity to 'turn away', at right angles, from the directions that the arguments in this room are taking them. O'Casey's use of space can again be read as a

²⁷ In architectural terms the return room is defined as 'the part of a wall or continuous moulding, frieze, etc. which turns away (usually at right angles) from the previous direction', editor's note in O'Casey (1985), 497. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines an architectural return as 'part receding from line of front e.g. side of house or of window-opening (*return angle, side, wall etc*)' (Oxford, 1982). This notion of 'part receding' also captures this duality in the audience's response, suggesting a desire to see but also to withdraw from engagement with what is presented to them on stage.

metaphorical attempt to 'turn' the audience away from the propensity to repeat the tragic events that they see unfold in the play.

Poetic space and [de]-constructing the hero

The play draws attention to the way that myths of femininity and nationhood, conflict and heroism are so deeply ingrained in the national psyche that they have become part of everyday speech. The play considers the insidious nature of unreflective repetitions of powerful cultural constructs. The names 'Cuchulain', 'Kathleen ni Houlihan' are bandied about by Shields with abandon, without any serious consideration of their appropriateness or relevance.

The audience must also consider whether the ideological principles enshrined within the myths themselves have become debased. For example, when Shields comments on the lateness of Maguire to Davoren and 'tags' his remarks with reference to a line from the archly patriotic poem 'The Passing of the Gael' by Ethna Carberry, he adds:

I suppose that he was too damn lazy to get up; he wanted the streets to be well aired first. - Oh, Kathleen ni Houlihan, your way's a thorny way.

DAVOREN: Ah me! alas, pain, pain ever, for ever!
(SG , 5).

Although Davoren is ^{subjecting} Shields here in order to ^{to irony}
 highlight the excessive nature of the allusion, Davoren is
 himself ^{the subject of irony} (as we have already discussed)
 through his own reference to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

The play specifies the way that poetry, song and other literary texts are constantly being absorbed into the private consciousness, to be re-used later in other 'public' contexts, offering a different kind of non-communication between private individuals. Mrs Henderson boasts to Davoren how Mr Gallogher's children have been 'trained well' in the songs that help to frame the national consciousness:

It ud make your heart thrill like an alarm clock to hear them singin' 'Faith ov our Fathers' an' 'Wrap the Green Flag Roun me (SG, 103).

Such songs point out how perceptions of masculinity and nationhood are so deeply inscribed in the public consciousness that any public resistance to these feelings would be hard to sustain. What is particularly noticeable in O'Casey's plays is the distortion of subject that takes place in the slippage between the public and the private representations of myths and ideological positions.

The ambiguous nature of heroism in O'Casey's plays is evident through the dramatic exploration of the status of the word 'hero'. The definition of what exactly constitutes heroism is constantly undermined by events in the play, making it difficult for the audience to decide where their sympathies should lie. This is precisely the point; the play shifts the ground of the heroic by regularly shifting the focus of its own irony. The play's title may be seen as a proleptically ironic comment on Davoren's insouciant remark at the end of Act 1: 'And what danger can there be in being the shadow of a gunman?' (SG, 23). The entire play works to critique the notion that men can play with guns without harm. The play derides the notion of heroism, what might be called the heroic space in the national consciousness; and this heroic space is vilified through a blistering exposée of conventional ideas about masculinity.

The play's title rests its irony on the echo of manhood found in the 'shadow' of a gunman. The concept of 'masculinity' remains imprecise in specific details, though it is a concept which both male and female characters acknowledge and seem to believe is shared by all. Shields, for example, connects his definition of masculinity with his early support of the Nationalist cause: 'when in the Irish

Republican Brotherhood I paid me rifle levy like a man' (SG, 84). In a sense, Shields has been living in the shadow of a gunman ever since his membership of the IRB allowed him to pay a fee and let another man carry a gun on his behalf; and his definition of masculinity similarly rests on this 'shadow' of a connection to the power of the gun. The use of 'like a man' is a significant phrase here, and it is clear that Shields has used his economic power to avoid taking any physical risks himself.

Tommy Owens attempts to 'prove' his manhood to Davoren by being the shadow-of-a-shadow, for he defines his valour through the prism of Shields:

. . . We're all friends here - Mr Shields knows me well- all you've got to say is, 'Do you know Tommy Owens?' an' he'll tell you the sort of man Tommy Owens is. There's no flies on Tommy - got me? [. . .] - Mr Davoren understands me well, as man to man. [. . .] (*He catches Davoren's hand*) Two firm hands clasped together will all the power outbrave of the heartless English tyrant, the Saxon coward an' knave. That's Tommy Owens' hand, Mr Davoren, the hand of a man, a man - Mr Shields knows me well (SG, 15).

The comic effect of this effusive assurance of masculinity is heavily ironic. Tommy Owens is trying to persuade Davoren, as an apparent gunman, of his own bravery with reference to the social standing of Shields, who has already spoken to Davoren of his earlier connection with the IRB.

Again, Tommy Owens' speech draws on the conventions of 'public' poetry in the definition of private notions of masculine bravery and endurance. The inclusion of the rhymed phrase in Owen's speech suggests poetic convention, and although the actual poem might be difficult to identify, it is the convention that makes the point here. Tommy uses the poem for his own private ends and bathetically reduces whatever genuine power the poem may have had originally. When Tommy follows this speech later with his plaintive question, 'Why isn't every man in Ireland out with the I.R.A.?' (SG,16), his query is rhetorical. Owens enunciates his own fear of emasculation through this question. He claims that he was never given the chance to join the fighting; and having been denied the means to prove his manliness in the context of war, he needs to ask whether it is possible that other men are also not part of the fighting. Since he cannot prove himself through fighting, he has to prove himself through a readiness to fight instead: 'all the same I'd be there if I was called on' (SG, 15).

The play thus questions and ironises the concept of heroism and the heroic, and this is specifically linked to the connection between masculinity and Republican activities

in the play. The status of Mr Gallogher, for example, as a 'man' is raised for the audience by his satirical presentation in the play. Mr Gallogher is shown to have a distorted understanding of his own importance as well as a false sense of his own status as an occupant of a tenement in Dublin. Mr Gallogher reads out the contents of his letter to the IRA, requesting their assistance in some private problem with his neighbours in the tenement. Mr Gallogher seems to believe that the IRA are a localised version of the Noise Abatement Society and requests that they visit his family to sort out the trouble with his neighbours. That Mr Gallogher has written such a letter is all the proof that Mrs Henderson needs of the masculinity of her neighbour: 'There's a man for you Mr Davoren' (SG,22).

By presenting this scene in the mimetic space, showing Mr Gallogher looking for Davoren's approval of the contents of his letter, the play renders public understanding of the aims and activities of the army as ridiculous and ill informed. At this historical moment there is evidence to suggest that the IRA's activities were more closely military and public than they became later on.²⁸ Even the

²⁸ As far as a social or economic policy was concerned, the IRA organization at this stage was blank and provided only for a military organization. See Tim Pat Coogan *The I.R.A.* (London, 1995), 42.

Constitution of the IRA, drawn up in July 1923, just a year before the production of the play at the Abbey, specifies only vaguely that the organisation will work to 'protect the rights and liberties common to the people of IRELAND'.²⁹ In 1924 the IRA does not seem to have been involved in solving local disputes at local level. The play is ironising Gallogher, who is such a 'man' that he wants other men to come and sort out his private problems for him. Though he does not wish to appeal to public representatives of British power in Ireland by calling in the police to solve his private problems, he believes himself important enough to call on another public army, which is predominantly involved in public military activities, to solve his private dispute. Mr Gallogher's letter specifically invites representatives from the outside public space into the tenement, for private gain; and his letter directly invites violence into the home: 'If you send up any of your men, please tell them to bring their guns' (SG,20). This notion is both hilarious and chilling. Gallogher has no notion of the possibly serious consequences of his request, remaining apparently oblivious to any sense of the reality of the violence he might incite.

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

The placing of Mr Gallogher's letter at this stage in the play is crucial: it is read out just before the (significantly named) 'Voice outside' announces in the 'Stop Press' news that Maguire has been shot in Knocksedan. By setting these two auditory moments against one another, the play discreetly emphasises the consequences of using guns - people get shot and killed, not simply members of the IRA, but ordinary, tenement people like Maguire and potentially Seumus and Davoren or any of the characters presented on stage so far. The play asks the audience to consider the perils implicit in Mr Gallogher's letter: he is asking the IRA to come into his home armed, risking the lives of his neighbours and his whole family, just as Maguire himself is shot in the 'public' space outside.

Such a scene also works to underline the disturbing lack of awareness of the reality of the work of the IRA: despite newspaper reports of the death of men like Maguire, the connection between guns and death does not seem to be made in the minds of those who 'valorise' Davoren. The play suggests that the ordinary people of Dublin have little idea of the aims and objectives of the IRA, or if they do, they seem to have little conception of how these aims are to be achieved. Yet it is these very men and

women, who make up most of the Abbey Theatre's audience, who are complicit in the construction of such masculine heroes as Davoren.

When the representatives of the other army, the Black and Tans, arrive to search the house for weapons, the reality of the invasion of the private space by gunmen is demonstrated most brutally. In Drumgoole's production, with the walls stripped away, the full extent of the desecration of the private space could not be evaded by the audience. The soldiers streamed into the building, mounting the stairs two at a time, screaming orders at the occupants of the tenement, dominating every space in the building, running along the hall, down into the basement, bursting into Donal and Seumas's room, sweeping all their ornaments off the shelves and all their belongings onto the floor. By allowing us to see the arrival of the soldiers and their colonisation of the internal spaces of the house, the production brought home to us the full impact of the violence of the invasion.

Such early experiments in the effects of the use of space in both *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman* indicate that the public/private dichotomy was one that O'Casey was interested in exploring from the outset of

his career as playwright. The use of space in both plays emphasises that our desire to extricate ourselves from the public political arena is pointless – it comes to seek us out in the private sphere in the end. Spatial concerns are inextricably linked to the development of O’Casey’s thematic concerns. In his next play, *Juno and the Paycock*, O’Casey begins to explore space in linguistic terms; and in the next chapter the stylistic feature of repetition will be shown to function as the lexical correlative to his earlier treatments of public and private spaces in *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*.

Chapter 2

Repetition and structure in *Juno and the Paycock*

After the surprising popularity of *The Shadow of a Gunman*, the Abbey Theatre directorate was happy to accept *Juno and the Paycock* (1925) for production and the play became O'Casey's first long-running success there. The Abbey was pleased to have a new playwright whose plays were critically fêted, popular with the public, and, crucially for the Abbey's precarious finances, profitable.

In terms of O'Casey criticism, the die was already cast. Critical responses to *The Shadow of a Gunman* had determined the view that O'Casey was a dramatist of character. Even today, *Juno and the Paycock* is seen as an archetypal O'Casey play, strong on realism in its portrayal of the Irish working-class, weak on experimental stage practice and ideological insights and lacking relevance beyond its Dublin location.¹ O'Casey's early

¹ The reviews of John Crowley's revival of *Juno and the Paycock* at the Donmar Warehouse in London, for example, are typical of this continuing approach to O'Casey's work. See *Theatre Record* Vol 19 10-23 September 1999, 1213-1217. For example, Nicholas de Jongh in the *Evening Standard* (21/9/99), discusses 'this tragedy of Dublin tenement life' and revels in the plays's 'folksy atmosphere of an old-fashioned Irish soap opera. Liberal helpings of Irish working-class banter, and bonhomie, are served, spiked with the charm of scoundrels', 1213. Shaun Usher in the *Daily Mail* (21/9/99) has

work seems to have acquired a pseudo-sociological reputation with critics, who praise his representation of the plight of feckless, work-shy Irish drunkards in Dublin. Yet this ignores the fact that the play is not only offering a critique of such stereotypes, it also contains other experimental features which help to redefine the nature of naturalistic representation on the proscenium Abbey stage.

The early plays from *Juno* onwards are an amalgamation of genres, involving moments of melodrama and farce as well as comedy and tragedy.² This generic

little time for the play's structure: 'It's sermons and set-pieces are overt and clumsy', (1214) while Sheridan Morley in the *Spectator* (2/10/99) draws the familiar conclusion about O'Casey's real focus: 'But O'Casey was essentially a character man; a lot happens in *Juno*...But it is the people who transfix us here', (1214).

² O'Casey also wrote a little-known one act play *Nannie's Night Out* in July 1924, soon after he had finished writing *Juno*. 'Irish Nannie', an alcoholic, is released from jail after a sentence for assaulting a policeman and comes out into the street 'lookin' for throuble' (NNO, 506). The play's use of song and dance suggests the unquenchable spirit of nationalist opposition. Songs from two 'Ballad Singers' open the play, setting the nationalist context through their rendition of snatches from the songs 'The Harp that Once Through Tara's Halls' and 'There's a Dear Little Colleen'. 'Irish Nannie' proclaims her independence from state control through her rejection of police authority: 'I'm telling you the Polis is making a mistake if they think they can tame Nannie'(NNO,508) and revels in her own spirit of defiance: 'Irish Nannie has gizz in her, gizz in her, gizz in her!' (NNO, 308). But her spirit of independence is abruptly curtailed when she suffers a heart attack and dies at the end of the play. However, even as she is dying she remains undefeated 'I'll die game, I'll die game!'(NNO, 530). Irish Nannie's unbowed defiance in the face of death has much in common with the death of The Young Whore in *Within the Gates* (see chapt 5 below). Lennox Robinson persuaded O'Casey to change the ending of the play and have Irish Nannie taken back to prison instead, see Murray (2004), 157. However, such an alteration undermines the political dynamic of the play and when O'Casey allowed a text of *Nannie's Night Out* to be published in Sean O'Casey *Feathers from the Green Crow* (ed.) Robert Hogan (London, 1963), his original ending was reinstated and Lennox Robinson's alternative was published as 'another ending', see O'Casey (1963), 331.

hybridity serves to disrupt conventional methods of interpretation for the audience. By allowing an audience the widest range of potential access points to his work – by collapsing the fourth wall through farcical and comic turns that involve playing across the footlights - the plays encourage audiences to engage with ideas on a number of different levels simultaneously. In this sense, the structure of O’Casey’s plays becomes a kind of bricolage, allowing the audience a certain freedom to choose, without forcing O’Casey to relinquish artistic control entirely. This bricolage of form in the play functions to defamiliarize the conventional genres used and creates a complex meta-dramatic effect, inviting the audience both to reflect on the scenic shifts within the play, and also to reconsider preconceived notions of how a given genre itself ‘performs’ in a play.

The plot of *Juno* is itself worthy of the melodramas of the Victorian stage in England, for by the end of the play all the classic features are in place. The pregnant daughter - Mary Boyle - has been abandoned by her lover Bentham in the roles of cad and crooked lawyer; Juno Boyle and Mrs Tancred form a pair of mourning mothers, weeping over the death of their sons; the drunken husband and father role is

ably filled by Jack Boyle, who doubles as abusive father when he threatens to take a strap to his errant daughter. The desperate ruination of all at the *dénouement* of the play is rather neat and tidy and just a little too convenient to be accepted at face value by the audience. Borrowing the tropes of a melodramatic plot in this way, O'Casey invites the audience to compare the tidy *dénouement* in melodrama with their awareness of the dissonances and contrivances within the melodramatic ending of his own play.

In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, we saw how the mythological allusions functioned to critique heroism. In *Juno*, the portentous Roman myth of Juno will resonate forcefully.³ Juno is not the most obvious choice of a name for an Irish heroine, and it is through her naming that the play reconsiders the dual role of woman as the perceived centre of the private home and of the public nation state. Juno's name invites the audience to recognise that she can function both as a repetition of the admonitory Classical figure in a melodramatic sense (what will happen to us if we

³ Juno Moneta is a distinctively Roman Juno 'The ancient association of her epithet with *monere* (to warn) is usually accepted, but its origins are unknown' s.v. Juno in Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edition) (Oxford, 1996), 801.

do not change our ways), and as a new figure who invites the audience to reflect upon its own culture.

'Juno' makes her character both theatrical and metadramatic. In the world of the play, Juno can work as a heroine, but she is also raising political, national and religious issues for discussion. Juno is patently not a 'real' woman of Dublin; her name and her mythological background work to show the audience that she is not. The character of Juno prompts consideration of the 'poor old woman' of Ireland, a figure that is re-examined in many of O'Casey's early plays.

Juno links Irish womanhood with other national and mythological traditions of women who are also representatives of the nation. Rather than looking to Britannia as a point of comparison, the name Juno transports her beyond the modern Western world altogether, to a civilisation that is at one remove from the Judaeo-Christian context, which forms the background to the development of both Britain and Ireland. In order to avoid comparisons with contemporary problems, O'Casey has avoided such Celtic mythical figures or names as Kathleen ni Houlihan, in favour of Graeco-Roman civilisation.

The potential irony in the repetition of the classical name is suggested to the audience through Bentham, who first comments on the origin of her name in the play. Bentham first visits the family as Mary's boyfriend, bringing the good news about the will. Later Bentham is to be exposed as incompetent (in the drawing up of the will) and a liar (over his promises to write to Mary), so with hindsight, his assessment of any potential link between Juno's name and her classical namesake is not to be trusted. Any over-zealous race to link the classical and modern Juno is rejected for the audience through Bentham's unreliable character.

Bentham's attempt at intellectual superiority, underlined by his exaggerated dress sense, immediately encourages the audience to be suspicious of him and his edicts. The audience sympathises with Boyle here, who, albeit unwittingly, swiftly undercuts Bentham's notions of superiority:

BENTHAM: Juno! What an interesting name! It reminds one of Homer's glorious story of ancient gods and heroes.

BOYLE: Yis doesn't it? You see, Juno was born an' christened in June; I met her in June; we were married in June an' Johnny was born in June, so wan day I says to her, 'You should ha' been called Juno', an' the name stuck to her ever since (JP, 65).

Bentham has identified the link with classical myth for the audience, but crucially he also functions to reveal its ironic intent with Boyle's response sharply dismissing Bentham's intellectual pretensions, while underlining his own weak scholarship as he inserts a Roman goddess into a Greek epic. The reference to the myth alerts the audience to the potential misappropriation of myth for national and political purposes. Juno's name reminds the audience of the constructed nature of all the heroines of Irish drama, from Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn* to Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan*.

It is not simply that names are repeated to metadramatic effect in *Juno*. O'Casey's early plays are littered with repetitive phrases too: the most well-known in *Juno* is Boyle's 'the whole world is in a terrible state o' chassis' (JP, 101). Indeed, the entire play is structured around formal set pieces and episodes of repetition, including the distinctly unrealistic repetitive dialogue of Johnny Boyle: 'I can rest nowhere, nowhere, nowhere' (JP,71). Alongside the repetitive phrases there are also repetitive scenes, which create and re-create moments of recognition for the audience. This chapter focuses on the structural effects of such recurrent moments of recognition. Repetition functions in this sense as a formal dramatic *aide*

memoire for the audience, allowing them to reflect upon and re-interpret the previous dramatic moment in the light of this latest encounter and inviting them to reflect on the notion of the 'real', 'originary' event.

Repetition and lament

For Kierkegaard 'Repetition is reality'⁴ and to accept the necessity of repetition is curiously both a sign of maturity and also of fear, for repetition offers a psychological protection against death. To repeat is to reassure yourself that you have existed here before and thus will do so again. The salutary function of repetition in Beckett's drama is clear enough from such a model, and here in *Juno* we see it functioning as a psychological bulwark against death. But it is also the 'reality' offered by the process of repetition that is a valuable influence upon audience response in this play. It is the inescapable nature of repetition that is useful to O'Casey, for it becomes impossible for his audience to avoid encountering particular feelings or emotions when they feature repeatedly in the play.

Mrs Tancred's entrance in Act 2 underlines Juno's ironic and tragic role in the play. The play's rejection of the

military connotations of the classical Juno is achieved through the attempt to re-sensitise the audience to the most obvious fact of war, which is also one of its greatest taboos, the fact of death. Robbie Tancred's funeral procession is structured so that the audience is led to experience the very moment of death. This is achieved through the disruption of the play's celebratory atmosphere by the funeral procession during the engagement party for Mary and Bentham. The entrance of Mrs Tancred into the Boyle's front room, where the party is taking place, provides the dramatic caesura, quite deliberately stopping the momentum of the action in the play. Juno, Mary and Mrs Madigan have been taking turns to sing songs such as 'Home to our Mountains' and 'If I were a blackbird'. O'Casey's use of song here might seem contentious, for such sentimentalism might indicate that we are now in the presence of the 'stage Irishman' or 'Irish woman' again, bursting into bucolic rapture to please the gallery audience.

But O'Casey is more sophisticated than that: the use of song here is more accurately an attempt to find a medium of communication when speech proves inadequate to express mood and feeling. In the same way that

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard *Repetition* (1843) trans. by Walter Lowrie (repr. London 1941), 55.

O'Casey will use the song between Nora and Jack in Act 2 of *The Plough and the Stars* to indicate the potential for unity, peace and harmony, which is interrupted by the arrival of the army represented by Capt Brennan, he uses song in *Juno* to create the atmospheric potential for a happy family evening, if only the historical context were different. In this way the poignancy of the destruction of this harmony is all the more marked by the entrance of Mrs Tancred in the next few moments.

Because of Juno's national significance in mythical terms, the desire for harmony within the Boyle family on a private level may also be read as a desire for a harmony within the state. National peace can be interpreted as continually interrupted by death, the repeated deaths which are the result of the Civil War. Mark Rawlinson has discussed 'the flight from the wounded body' as particularly evident trope in literature of the Second World War,⁵ and it is such an evasion of the reality of conflict that O'Casey is determined to prevent. Elaine Scarry goes further:

War entails a ...structure of physical and perceptual events: it requires both the reciprocal infliction of massive injury and the eventual disowning of the injury so that its attributes can be transferred

⁵ Mark Rawlinson *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2000), 25.

elsewhere, as they cannot if they are permitted to cling to the original site of the wound, the human body.⁶

O'Casey, by contrast, allows the injury to be maintained at its 'original site': the death of Robbie Tancred is re-enacted for the audience, as his funeral procession begins with the descent of the tenement stairs. According to Kiberd, O'Casey's plays are primarily tragedies rather than tragic-comedies because: 'he wished to shock his spectators and to compel them to undertake a reassessment of their deepest convictions'.⁷ So here O'Casey evokes the memory of death for broadly similar reasons. Kiberd suggests that Abbey audiences at this time were still too close to the 'painful events' being described, 'and so actors tended to emphasize the comic elements and to deflect some of the darker implications'.⁸ Robbie Tancred's funeral scene forbids such an escape into comedy, both for the actors and the audience, and forces them all to face a 'sense of trauma.

The interference of unwarranted death into the life of this tenement is emphasised not only through the carefully

⁶ Elaine Scarry *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, 1985), quoted in Rawlinson (2000), 26.

⁷ Declan Kiberd *Irish Classics* (London, 2000), 484.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 484.

crafted placing of this scene within the play, but also by the specific instructions in O'Casey's stage directions about the way that this scene should break in upon the engagement party scene. Although Laurence Olivier's 1960 production at the National Theatre chose to set Mrs Tancred's scene offstage, it is clear that this was not originally part of the structure of the play. The stage directions state that Mrs Tancred 'appears' when Mary opens the door to the Boyle's rooms, and she is obviously supposed to enter the Boyle's rooms fully, followed by one or two neighbours. During her speech '*She moves slowly towards the door*' and at the end of her speech '*They pass out of the room*' (JP, 80).⁹

This invasion of sorts by Mrs Tancred into the private space of the Boyles' rooms was particularly emphasised in a 1993 production from the Gate Theatre in Dublin.¹⁰ Here Mrs Tancred's thematic importance was recognised when

⁹ Kenneth Tynan's own production of *Juno and the Paycock* at the Lichfield Theatre in 1949 shows a sense of awareness that it is important for the audience to be reminded of the life outside of the room. Bill Shine who played Joxer in Tynan's production remembers that Tynan specifically built 'a little passageway visible to the audience on stage right' even at the expense of having a smaller window for Joxer to climb through on the set. See 'Interviews' Kenneth Tynan Papers (uncatalogued) Deposit No 9360, The Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.

¹⁰ Joe Dowling's Gate Theatre Company (Carnival Theatre and Rainbow Productions) in Dublin took the production on tour and played at the Albery Theatre in London in May 1993.

she entered far into the room. From the audience's viewpoint, she formed a spatial link on stage between herself, Juno and Mary Boyle, visually underlining the way that her speech is to affect these two women most of all in the play.

The positioning is significant in two ways: first, it ensures that Mrs Tancred becomes the focus on stage, since she is side-on, centre stage for the audience. This creates a sense that the audience is watching everything in the onstage room through the prism of Mrs Tancred, effectively colouring all that they see and hear by the knowledge that this woman's son is dead. Secondly, she creates a potential nexus of effect: her position on stage is a kind of spatial prolepsis, since the sightlines from Mrs Tancred link out through the shape of the triangle created to Juno and Mary Boyle. Juno becomes the next mother to experience the loss of her son, and she is the next person to repeat Mrs Tancred's speech. The spatial connections between the three women imply that the pregnant Mary will be the next to lose her child to this war, and so to repeat the speech that her mother and Mrs Tancred have made before her.

Mrs Tancred's entrance is also essential to the creation of the atmosphere of guilt with which the audience must engage. The music, laughter and songs of the previous moments are stopped short, and then laughter becomes hollow as the audience recognises that they have been laughing and enjoying themselves, just like the Boyles, although they had only recently heard about the death of Robbie Tancred. The audience, since the opening moment of the play when they heard the news of the death, have been gradually lured into the trap of dissociating themselves from this death. It is this kind of alienation from the meaning of death that allows Juno to rationalise Robbie Tancred's death as something his mother had been judiciously awarded:

JUNO: ...In a way she deserves all she got, for lately, she'd let the Diehards make an open house of the place...(JP, 81).

If this kind of justification were allowed to stand unchallenged in the play, then it would also be very difficult to dismiss Bentham's savage analysis of the event:

BENTHAM: The whole thing is terrible Mrs Boyle, but the only way to deal with a mad dog is to destroy him (JP, 80).

When men are equated with dogs, then this is how we can treat them. Dog or Diehard, friend or son, the play

promotes recognition that these are merely categories, none of which is important in itself, when they all lead to death. Indeed, the process of categorization alienates us from humanity by disabling feelings of human connection and responsibility.

Jacques Derrida's conception of repetition as having a dual function - it both 'stabilizes' the original and 'threatens to undermine it' - can be seen as appropriate to *Juno*.¹¹ Adopting Derrida's terms here, we could say that Mrs Tancred's entrance is the 'original' which subsequent repetitions seek to undermine. Because repetition depends upon its original for its own existence, it has been interpreted in Western culture as 'parasitic, threatening, negative'.¹² Derrida suggests this negative model has emerged from the distinction between speech and writing: he cites as his example religious texts such as the Torah and the Bible, which originated in speech, but require repetition in writing, a form other than their original, in order to continue to be heard, which might be seen as parasitic or threatening to the oral tradition of religious instruction.

¹¹ Steven Connor *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford, 1988), 3. Connor draws on the theories of Derrida and Deleuze in order to analyse Beckett's work. This style of analysis is also productive when applied to the work of O'Casey.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

There is, however, as Derrida like Kierkegaard before him contends, a positive power to repetition. Far from seeing linguistic repetition as 'negative' in this context, Derrida claims that 'repetition is the first writing'.¹³ According to Connor, however, even in this first repetition, some change must occur, for repetition is like a circle which is traced twice: although nothing changes, an 'imperceptible difference emerges'.¹⁴ Derrida goes on to suggest the possibility of subversion and escape from repetition, through the very process of repetition itself:

Once the circle turns, once the volume rolls itself up, once the book is repeated, its identification with itself gathers an imperceptible difference which permits it efficaciously, rigorously, that is discreetly, to exit from closure.¹⁵

Derrida is pointing out that repetition contains within its own structure the potential for an escape from its own endless circularity. This potential for an 'exit' is especially evident in Juno's speech towards the end of the play. The end of the play may well function as the traditional point of 'exit' from the theatrical space, but the earlier speech of Juno's also

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass (London, 1978), 295. See also Connor (1988), 4.

invites the audience to 'exit' from the 'closure' of the repetitive nature of these attitudes towards death.

The repetition of Mrs Tancred's speech from Act II by Juno at the end of her final scene in Act III is the most important moment in the play. The repetition is signalled by Juno self-consciously calling the audience's attention to the fact that Mrs Tancred has made the same speech before her:

JUNO: Its as well I remember all that she said - an' it's my turn to say it now (JP, 100).

These similarities in the linguistic use of both biblical and literary allusions in the words here allow Juno to be seen as the epitome of the tragic mourner.¹⁶ Juno, in mourning for her son, is raised beyond her specific grief. Juno Boyle is linked back to numerous classical counterparts through this speech, and to all women across time and place.

Juno's repetition of the speech offers an 'exit' from the closure of its own tragic utterance, making the speech at once archetypal and original, for it both follows the tradition of the tragic lament and establishes its own new emotive variant. This can be seen in the specific linguistic changes which take place between the 'original' speech of

¹⁶ Fiona Macintosh *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Tragic Drama* (Cork, 1994), 160.

Mrs Tancred and its repetition by Juno. It is necessary to examine both speeches closely, and to consider the way they are situated in the structure of the play and on stage, in order to consider the implications of this repetition for the audience in the theatre.

Mrs Tancred's speech functions as a repetition or at least a doubling in its first utterance, for she positions herself as the other side of the 'scales o' sorra' to her neighbour Mrs Manning, whose Free State soldier son was killed in an ambush led by Robbie Tancred a few weeks before. Though they are on opposite sides of the political divide in this conflict, they are in some sense mirrors of each other as grieving mothers. In this way Juno is later seen as another repetition of this mother figure. Though we do not hear Mrs Manning speak or see her appear in the tenement space on stage, it is clear that Mrs Tancred feels she speaks for both women, thus doubling the power of the first speech:

MRS TANCRED: An' now, here's the two of us owl women, standin' one on each side of a scales o' sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin'sons.[...] Mother o'God, Mother o' God, have pity on the pair of us!...O Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets!...Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone...an' give us hearts o'

flesh...Take away this murderin' hate...an' give us
Thine own eternal love! (JP, 80).

Mrs Tancred not only draws attention to the way that she and Mrs Manning echo each other's role as grieving mothers, but also underlines that their two sons mirror each other through their individual deaths.

The first linguistic repetition in this speech repeats the maternal theme as well, since it is an appeal to Mary in her role as the Mother of God. The repetition works its effect upon the audience in two ways: first, it allows Mrs Tancred to be heard as speaking for both mothers, allowing each of them to ask the Virgin Mary why she did not intercede for them to save their sons from death. However, Mrs Tancred is pleading for her son quite deliberately in the language of religion because it is at this point, after death, that she has accepted the common link of humanity between the men, despite their political differences.

The second repetitive phrase of Mrs Tancred's speech is the troubling and graphic metaphorical description of the manner of Robbie Tancred's death: 'When me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets!' (JP,80). Again, the

repeated phrase also speaks for Mrs Manning and Mrs Tancred's sons, who were both shot dead.

The repetition is not the 'Same', however, because it differs in one slight detail: the second use of the word 'bullets!' has been further emphasised with the use of an exclamation mark. The effect of this slight difference from the 'original' phrase just before, is to force the actress playing Mrs Tancred to emphasise this particular word in the phrase and to make the audience concentrate on that word too. The whole phrase thus demands that the audience reflect on its meaning: what exactly do these words say? The audience cannot gloss over them, nor concentrate instead on how sad it is that Mrs Tancred has lost her son. They have to go through the experience of imagining how Robbie Tancred died, not once, but twice. In fact the scene of his death requires very little imagination from the audience, since it has been described in the earlier moments of Mrs Tancred's speech:

he was lyin' for a whole night stretched out on the side of a lonely country lane, with his head, his darlin' head, that I ofen kissed an' fondled, half hidden in the wather of a runnin' brook (JP, 79).

But O'Casey is relentless. The repetition extends the lurid details. The play requires that the audience think about what it means to 'riddle' a man with bullets, to dwell on the

fact that the bullets, the very items of his destruction, showered Robbie Tancred's body before he died. This is uncomfortable theatre indeed, because the audience is implicated in the shooting. They, like the Mother of God Mrs Tancred so pitifully appeals to, did nothing to prevent such deaths. O'Casey's play implies that through their support for either side, and without any specific activity to try to prevent such deaths, the audience allowed the conflict to continue, so that deaths such as Robbie Tancred's repeat themselves, endlessly.

The play is positing hard-line morality here: no nation is worth the sacrifice of its own population. Human life is sacrosanct, never to be sacrificed, regardless of the claims of nation, religion or politics; and this is the implicit spur for Juno's decision to repeat the speech of Mrs Tancred after the death of Johnny. For it is the death of the body that makes her focus on the value of life, regardless of political affiliation:

JUNO: Maybe I didn't feel sorry enough for Mrs Tancred when her poor son was found as Johnny's been found now - because he was a Diehard! Ah, why didn't I remember that then he wasn't a Diehard or a Stater, but only a poor dead son! (JP, 100).

Juno proceeds to repeat Mrs Tancred's speech, comparing the maternal pains of birth and death, just as Mrs Tancred

had done. She asks the Mother of God why she did not intervene to protect Johnny from harm, just as Mrs Tancred had done. Juno has to change Mrs Tancred's phrase 'Mother o' God, Mother o' God have pity on the pair of us' (JP,80), to 'Mother o' God, Mother o' God, have pity on all of us' (JP,100). This is obviously necessary because Juno wants to speak for the three women now: Mrs Manning, Mrs Tancred and herself. Juno has to adapt the phrase, accommodate what has happened since last time we heard it. Paradoxically, the repetition is necessary to emphasise that nothing has changed, there has simply been more death.

However, the phrase also becomes a kind of blessing for all in the theatre, both the on- and offstage audiences. Again, the audience has been implicated in this death through the use of repetition. The cry for pity upon 'all' suggests that everyone deserves some pity, since no one appears either willing or able to dispense with their religious, political or national affiliations to try to end this cycle of death. It is also a foreboding. Mary, whose own pregnancy has only recently been revealed, has just expressed her reservations about going with her mother to see the body of her dead brother. Just before Juno begins

to repeat the speech of Mrs Tancred, Juno reminds the audience of this pregnancy, through her response to Mary:

JUNO: I forgot, Mary, I forgot; your poor oul' selfish mother was only thinkin' of herself. No, no, you mustn't come - it wouldn't be good for you (JP,100).

It wouldn't be good for Mary to see the body of Johnny, because she might begin to think about the fate of her own future child. Juno's pleas for pity on 'all' might be seen to prefigure a prayer for pity on her own grandchild, for the potential for Mary to have to repeat the speeches of Mrs Tancred and Juno herself is clearly suggested by this scene. The implied questions that such use of repetition raises for the audience are: How many more times must such a scene be repeated? Or, indeed, is it possible to prevent any further repetitions of this scene?

The play's answer to such questions is a resounding affirmative. For O'Casey, to accept is to remain passive, which is tantamount to collusion with the enemy.¹⁷ Such an ideological position can be traced to O'Casey's

¹⁷ O'Casey specifically resented what he saw as Beckett's enslavement to the endless cycle of repetition and human entrapment within it. O'Casey was anxious to disassociate himself from Beckett's outlook: 'his philosophy isn't my philosophy, for within him there is no hazard of hope; no desire for it; nothing in it but a lust for despair, and a crying of woe', see 'Not waiting for Godot' in Sean O'Casey's *Blasts and Benedictions* (London, 1957), 51. O'Casey found Beckett's work too dispiriting, despite its humour and he could not agree with what he saw as Beckett's nihilistic acceptance of modern existence. While Beckett saw human endeavour as endearing but ultimately fruitless, O'Casey could not accept that action would not lead to change.

Communism: he felt oppressed by any acceptance that human existence must, by its very nature, be without significance, meaning or perhaps even pleasure. It is only the ideological system that it has to operate within that causes humanity's alienation from itself; and O'Casey uses his plays to prevent the development of just those atrophied feelings that he felt capitalism demanded.

O'Casey's use of repetition has much in common with the philosophical position of Hume with its commitment to change and development:

Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind that repeats it.¹⁸

Certainly this is true of *Juno*, but it is also true of the audiences who watch *Juno* and 'repeat' the play in their own minds after the performance. This is one of the positive powers of the use of repetition in the play: the audience is offered an opportunity to 'repeat' the events, recognise the repetition as destructive and so choose to reject further repetitions and thus 'exit' from the circularity of memorised events.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* trans. Paul Patton (London, 1994), 70. Cf. David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1739), Book I, III section xvi.

In Juno's speech we hear a shift from the 'vernacular to a highly stylised idiom' ¹⁹ in its allusiveness. Rather than being a 'a cheap theatrical contrivance' this makes Juno into '*the* archetypal mourner.' ²⁰ In this sense we can see how Juno's speech works to de-personalise the experience of mourning at the end of the play. As Macintosh explains: 'all tragic laments...are never entirely the property of one individual'.²¹ Juno's repetition of the earlier lament of Mrs Tancred and their joint allusion to the suffering of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself indicate that their speeches are not simply for themselves and their sons, but are part of a 'collective response'²² to mourning that the audience will both recognise and respond to.

The gradual eliding of Juno the private character into Juno the public mourner in the space of her final speech is paralleled by other formal experiments in the play. Juno transcends her character in the play; and the focus on Juno - one character, one mother - is universalised to allude

¹⁹ Fiona Macintosh 'Tragic Last Words in Greek and Irish Drama' in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (ed.) M.S.Silk (Oxford, 1996), 422.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 423.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 423.

²² *Ibid.*, 423.

beyond Ireland and beyond Christianity, to evoke the nature of mourning as a social and cultural emblem in itself.²³

Repetition and closure

Deleuze characterises two distinctions in repetition in his work *Différence and Répétition*.²⁴ First, repetition can be 'mechanical' or 'naked'; it simply repeats the original without any alteration. Secondly, repetition can be 'clothed' or 'disguised'; something is added to the original and 'seems to impart a difference to it'.²⁵ Deleuze becomes quite lyrical about the perceived distinctions between these two kinds of repetition, but it is worth citing his distinction because it does have some bearing on the way O'Casey's uses of repetition can be interpreted:

The first repetition is the repetition of the Same, explicable by the identity of the concept or representation; the second repetition comprehends

²³ C.f. Macintosh (1996), 423: 'The stylisation of the big speech and the lament...grants the speakers access to a shared inheritance that is recognized by the members of the audience no less than by the dramatic characters themselves. It is not simply that particular pains have been absorbed into the generality of human suffering, but that the audience respond to the repetitions and allusions with pleasure.'

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze *Différence and Répétition* trans. Paul Patton (London, 1994), see particularly 'Introduction: Repetition and Difference', 1-27; and chapter 2 'Repetition for Itself', 70-128.

²⁵ Connor (1988), 6. This quotation is cited as Connor's own translation of Gilles Deleuze *Différence et Répétition* (Paris, 1968), 36-37. I have used Connor's translation of Deleuze in large part here, since I find this more fluid than the Paul Patton translation (Gilles Deleuze *Repetition and Difference* trans. Paul Patton (London, 1994)) cited in note 31 below.

difference, and comprehends itself as the alterity of the idea...The first is negation, in the absence of concept, the second, affirmation, due to its excess over the Idea...The first is naked repetition, the other a clothed repetition, which comes into being in clothing itself, in masking and disguise.²⁶

Although Deleuze eventually abandons such a strict line between difference and repetition, he does maintain a distinction between *différence libre* and *répétition complexe*, the latter he sees as the kind of repetition that resists 'subordination'²⁷ to mechanical reproduction. A *répétition complexe* exists as equally important and recognisable as the first manifestation. As Connor points out:

there can never be any such thing as pure or exact repetition. In order to be recognisable as such, a repetition must, in however small a degree, be different from its original.²⁸

Clearly it is of vital importance that a repetition is recognised as a repetition; and this is evident in *Juno*. Indeed repetitive potential is an intrinsic part of the actors' performance; and each performance by each actor in each production of the play will differ to some degree. Repetition in drama is by its very nature a '*répétition complexe*', since

²⁶ Ibid., 6 (Deleuze [1968], 36-37).

²⁷ Ibid., 7 (Deleuze [1968], 2).

²⁸ Ibid., 7 (Deleuze [1968], 2).

it can never be merely a 'mechanical' repetition owing to the diverse number of influences that effect its transition from page to stage for every production and indeed for every performance.

For Deleuze, the use of repetition in art is a weapon against the dominance of the Same; it is seen as a 'liberation', since its very difference indicates change and development. As Connor points out, while art is made up of various kinds of repetitions, it can never become a repetition in itself:

Rather, as Deleuze argues, by setting different sorts of repetition in play against each other, art (and especially modern art) can highlight the principle of pure difference, and therefore 'point out to philosophy the path that leads to the abandonment of representation' (DR, 94) and free us from our contemporary servitude to the social forms of repetition in standardisation, routine and consumption.²⁹

O'Casey's patterning of his own repetitive techniques allows all the kinds of repetition he draws upon - linguistic, structural thematic - to 'play' against one another and to accentuate their very difference through the process of their repetition. When Johnny Boyle says, 'I can't rest nowhere, nowhere, nowhere', each enunciation of the last word

²⁹ Ibid., 6 (Deleuze [1968], 33-36).

reflects back the previous enunciation to assert both its own individual power and the necessity of its repetition.

Repetition requires the audience to engage with the events on stage in front of them and to repeatedly analyse the enacted and reported events and characters on stage. Through such a process of re-assessment and close reflection on what is seen and said, the audience will take an active part in the construction of their own interpretations of the play.

O'Casey's use of repetition in his early plays is closely aligned to his ideological position on art, which is entirely in keeping with his political views as a Communist. Repetition functions to prevent O'Casey's plays being standardized as 'Abbey plays'. As a regular visitor to productions at the Abbey before his own plays were produced there, O'Casey wanted to be sure that there was nothing 'routine' about his own work and that it retained an identity distinctive from the plays of Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge or Lennox Robinson. Deleuze's comment suggests that the effect of repetition will eventually lead to the abandonment of representational art, and this is clearly what happened to O'Casey in his later work. After his subtle attempts to deconstruct naturalism in the early plays,

he abandoned the attempt altogether in *Within the Gates* (1934), to concentrate on the development of a new kind of dramatic form that was not in danger of becoming slavishly replicated, in the manner of some of the productions of his more naturalistic works.

But through such techniques as repetition we can see that, even in his earliest work, O'Casey was attempting to prevent his plays becoming a product ~~for~~ capitalist consumption in the theatre. In *Juno*, in particular, we find a deliberate resistance to 'closure'; instead we are offered a liberation, to adapt Deleuze's terms, from *endless* repetition. In this sense, O'Casey invites his audience to feel their own power and potential, encouraging them to believe that a resolution to the play's themes of civil turmoil and cruelty is indeed possible.

The play's structural 'coda' of Jack and Joxer's return to the tenement after Juno's powerfully emotive speech at the end of Act III is rather more deeply distressing and anti-heroic than its music-hall overtones might at first suggest. Boyle and Joxer's inebriated antics, crawling around the empty tenement room while uttering scarcely comprehensible sentences, are not simply an opportunity for the actors to display their skills as stage

drunks. The scene ironises both Boyle's failed idealism and Juno's last speech. Her prayer to the Virgin Mary asking for human 'hearts of stone' to be transformed into 'hearts of flesh' and her plea for 'murderin' hate' to be replaced by 'eternal love'(JP, 100) are unequivocal repetitions of the Christian tenet 'love thy neighbour'. There are at least two levels to the repetition in Juno's speech: first, the repetition of Mrs Tancred's words and second, the repetition of the Judaeo-Christian Word. In Juno's speech the audience may recognise the words of the prophet Ezekiel from the Old Testament:

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you: and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh.³⁰

Any audience would find this universal message of the necessity for peace and understanding quite hard to resist, because O'Casey has made Juno repeat a universal truth, what Jung would term a communal myth: that universal harmony will be achieved through love and life, rather than hate and death. The play, we might feel, is in danger of

³⁰ Ezekiel 11. 19. Ezekiel tells of God's promise 'And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh' See also Ezekiel 36. 26 where the prophet tells that God will 'take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh'. In the following chapter, Ezekiel describes seeing the valley of the dry bones, and it is this section of the prophet's narrative that influenced T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In Chapter 6 I consider further links between Eliot and O'Casey's work.

ending with a laudable, but rather tidy and convenient message, bordering on the pious and even trite. However, O'Casey's play demands that we think beyond that truism, that we think around it, that we reconsider its meaning and even our human potential to achieve such a vision in practice.

This demand to 'think again' is clear from the structure of the play. To end the play with Juno's speech would have been too easy. It would offer the audience an escape into two mythologies that the play presents as contentious: first, that the problems of poverty and national identity can be solved through human love and by resorting to the myth of divine responsibility; and secondly, that womankind is innately strong and uniquely able to cope with suffering and pain, whatever its origin or cause. For O'Casey, it seems that both of these ideas come close to cant. Such truisms have become a means of evading further discussion and thought; it is too easy to slip into the dogma of love-conquers-all or that women are the saviours of the world, rather than to engage in a more complex philosophical and political debate.³¹

³¹ Cf. Marianne Peyronnet in *Times Change* (No.12 Winter 1997/98) on O'Casey's positive presentations of strong female characters. She stresses his connections with the *différentialiste* branch of French feminism in which the woman is not simply equal but different; she is superior and different from men.

As we have seen, the repetitive nature of Juno's final set-piece speech does not demonstrate the tragic-comic repetition that Gilles Deleuze ascribes to any repetition, but rather more its tragic force.³² While Juno recognises the necessity to repeat Mrs Tancred's speech - 'and it's my turn to say it now' (JP, 100) - she is unable to recognise the necessity for her to differ from it. By repeating the speech of Mrs Tancred rather than constructing her own new language of self-expression, Juno demonstrates her own oppression. Juno, like Boyle, is unable to change enough to make a difference to her situation, for while the speech implies that she has learnt something herself, its very utterance is an indication of repetition of old thought patterns. For Juno still wants to pass the responsibility for changing the feelings of the human heart to a power other than herself, to that which she sees as a higher power, Jesus. But the scene demonstrates to the audience that such a rationale allows

Peyronnet sees O'Casey's female characters as part of this tradition of superior women, citing Juno, Nora and even Minnie Powell as examples.

³² Cf. Deleuze (1994), 15: 'There is a tragic and comic repetition. Indeed, repetition always appears twice, once in the tragic destiny and once in the comic aspect. In the theatre, the hero repeats precisely because he is separated from an essential, infinite knowledge. This knowledge is in him, it is immersed in him and acts in him, but acts like something hidden, like a blocked representation. The difference between the comic and the tragic pertains to two elements: first, the nature of the repressed knowledge...second...the manner in

Juno to continue to distance herself from the construction of a new identity for humankind. Juno wants God to change the attitude and behaviour of humanity for her, rather than work towards the discovery of a way to change human attitudes herself. Such an interpretation heightens the tragedy of the scene; despite all that she has suffered and the degree of enlightenment she believes that she has found, the play demonstrates through such repetition that Juno still believes change to be a divine responsibility rather than a human one.

The play's tragedy is heightened because of what we already know about the repeated female nurturing that Mary's baby will be subject to in the play. Mary expresses dismay that her child will 'have no father!' (JP, 99), but Juno's encouraging response is unequivocal:

JUNO: It'll have what's far better - it'll have two mothers (JP, 99).

The tragic echo of this remark is layered here; the sadness that the child will have no father is clearly to be felt by the audience, for that paternal absence necessitates the duplication of the female influence. But if we come back to this remark after we hear Juno's last speech, and consider

which the character is excluded from this knowledge, the manner in which 'he does not know that he knows', 15.

that the child will be subject to the influence of such thinking from two women, the repetition of mothering does not suggest positive hope for the child but its direct opposite - the negative oppression of the inevitable continuance of Juno's attitudes through Mary on to the child itself. The play works to heighten its tragic implications through the presentation of such an inescapable cycle of repetition.

It is thus absolutely necessary that the audience does not end the play on the emotional high note of Juno's speech. Boyle's return to the tenement room brings the audience back from the convenient emotional "closure" to face a further, potentially consolatory proposition, albeit one that can never be proven: that civil war could be prevented by greater brotherly love. Before the audience is able to withdraw into a set of pre-defined responses about the relationship between brotherly love and death, the structure of the play works to throw back some searching questions at the audience: Can you talk to such a man as Boyle about the power of universal love? How will you be able to influence men such as him with delicate talk of spirituality? As Juno herself earlier ruefully remarks to Mary's questioning of the existence of God in the face of all that has gone wrong for the family, 'Ah, what can God do agen

the stupidity o' men!' (JP,99). The structure of the play thus moves the audience beyond comfortable philosophical conclusions and on to the most pressing question: How can individuals work towards the achievement of universal accord? The play is fearless in its exposé of the problem: men such as Boyle have to be influenced to change their vision of the world and their behaviour.

Yet what hope is there that those with Boyle's outlook may be influenced to change their views? The play's final scene pulls no punches. Boyle remains entirely unchanged at the end of the play. He is still in the company of a man he has sworn to avoid; he has still come home to collapse in drunken paralysis. The only significant difference is that this time he will fall onto his floor instead of his bed. In a sense nothing has changed for him since the opening scene: he has learnt nothing; he will carry on in this way forever, because he believes the world to be in 'chassis' and that he is blameless and powerless to change it.

Here in the coda we see Boyle's position as very similar to that of Mrs Tancred earlier in the play. When she remarked 'me home is gone now', she might well speak for Boyle as well at the end of the play. He returns to an empty

tenement room, his furniture cleared by the bailiffs; his son is dead, he has thrown his daughter out of the house and Juno has left him. He is a sterile stage figure, left without an heir, except one he wishes to deny in Mary. Juno has gone and he has no further potential to become a father, since the female influence is lost. The picture of Boyle on stage with Joxer forms an ironic and pathetic contrast to the strength of the vision of the 'two mothers', Juno and Mary, in the previous scene. It is impossible to see Boyle and Joxer as capable of being 'two fathers'. O'Casey is indicating the barren nature of a nation without a female input through his use of scenography, repetition and structural difference here. A distinctively 'male' nation is presented as weak and uncomprehending, like Boyle himself.

In John Crowley's production of the play at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 1999, Boyle was reduced in the final scene to an animal state, unable to stand on his legs like a human being, instead rolling around on stage like a worm. The stage directions specify that Boyle should be 'sitting' as he utters his last words, and the Donmar production developed this still further by showing Boyle curling up into a foetal position onstage. This is a

pronounced dramatisation of what the end of the play implies: Boyle needs to return to a state which connects him more closely with the female. It also links him to the speeches of Juno and Mrs Tancred, both of whom had linked the pain of giving birth with the pain of losing their sons to death.

Boyle in this way forms a visual repetition of their themes through his position onstage, waiting for a rebirth as a male figure more closely aligned with the feminine forgiveness and understanding that the audience has seen Juno expressing in the previous scene. While this may sound as if O'Casey has pre-empted the 'new-man' notions of masculinity, the language makes it clear that such a crass implication is misplaced. The specific difficulty of a nation without the feminine is seen in the collapse of Boyle's language at the end of the play.

Again it is the repetition that helps the audience to interpret Boyle's linguistic collapse at the end of the play as something more than drunken ramblings. Boyle's use of repetition works in contrast to that of Juno. Where Juno was fluid, practised and coherent, Boyle's speech is fragmentary, disparate and disjointed. Boyle can hardly form sentences and their sense is incoherent. Where Juno

was specific in her repetition, Boyle is more wide ranging. He begins with a stream of historical repetitions, echoing the play's earlier attempt to draw attention to the power of the dead and the names of the dead through the repetition of the military name of Tancred. Boyle speaks in referential terms, enunciating keywords, dates, historical events and myths that have stuck in his mind:

BOYLE: If th' worst comes ...to th' worst...I can join a flyin' ...column...I done...me bit...in Easter Week...had no business...to ...be...there...but Captain Boyle's Captain Boyle! (JP, 101).

Boyle repeats Easter Week in his own mind as a moment of personal glory and because he has chosen to repeat a glorious memory of the event. But the audience is prompted to notice the disturbing disjuncture between the 'original' historical moment and the representation of that event in Boyle's own mind. Although he claims that he 'had no business to be there', he remains proud that (in his own mind) he was present. The play exposes fallacies in Boyle's thought process through this moment of repeated mis-remembering. First, that he feels he should not be there - why should he feel that a nationalist uprising should not be his 'business'? If Boyle did not believe it to be a genuine nationalist event, then why did he eventually join in and support it? The play uses repetition to demonstrate the

seductive attractions of myth. Whether or not Boyle believed in the cause, he went to join it. If the audience believes that Boyle's boastings are as much a fantasy as his being a Captain at sea, then the point is made just as effectively.

In retrospect the Rising has attained iconic status and men like Boyle want to be associated with it, whether or not they agreed with it politically at the time. Still after all that has happened to Boyle in the play, he can still remember Easter Week with pride. Specifically he has remembered the deaths of Easter Week with pride. Despite all the deaths that have taken place around him since, including the death of his own son as a consequence of the post-Easter Week activities, Boyle still wants to volunteer to create more. The great event that he particularly chooses to remember is that another man died for his country:

*BOYLE: Commandant Kelly died... in them
...arms...Joxer...Tell me Volunteer butties...says
he...that...I died for Irelan'! (JP,101).*

Despite his own direct experience of another man's death, Boyle does not express any understanding of the necessity for change. He still wants to repeat a memory which connects him with a deeply troubling event in Irish history,

which had already become mythologized in his own mind. He still wants to repeat and celebrate nationalistic axioms - 'I died for Ireland!' - that refuse to give up the necessity for death to achieve national independence.

Boyle's repetition of ideological myths at the end of the play demonstrates to the audience that he is caught in a cycle of repetition, which shows no sign of development or potential for 'exit' in each subsequent 'tracing'. Repetition here simply entrenches the fixed position still further. The repetition of these phrases at the end of the play suggests their continuing status as 'mechanical repetitions', rather than repetitions that would encourage a re-writing into a *répétition complexe*.

Conclusion

This 'interrelationship' between the original and repetition is at the centre of the debate about the relevance of naturalistic drama to the modern period; and it is apposite to a critical reconsideration of O'Casey's work because the nature of repetition can only be asserted through a consideration of the 'original', which inevitably involves a consideration of the nature of the 'real'.

Juno and the Paycock 'repeats' the background of the Irish Civil War, where the British Army and the paramilitary groups operated a 'tit-for-tat' policy of shooting a soldier in response to the death of one of their own personnel. O'Casey's interest in this particular historical moment is underlined through the theatrical replication of one of these tit for tat killings by using reportage. Mary Boyle comments to both the on and off-stage audiences as she discusses the newspaper account of the death of Robbie Tancred with her brother Johnny Boyle and, by implication, with the audience proper. The newspaper article is in itself a pseudo-repetition, or in Jean Baudrillard's term, a 'simulacrum' of the purportedly 'real' event.

The play's representation of the utter pointlessness of revenge killings is underlined both by the use of repetition and by the description of the dramatic space where the event took place: 'On a little by-road, out beyant Finglas he was found' (JP, 47). The reductive diminution of the kind of road where Tancred met his death - not a main road but a by-road, and a 'little' one at that - denies this death any potential heroism. Whether he died 'wearing his jacket green' or not, he ended his life in the gutter. O'Casey

underlines his point by elucidating the manner of Tancred's death - by repetitive shooting:

MARY:...seven wounds he had - one entherin' the neck, with an exit wound below the left shoulder-blade; another in the left breast penethratin' the heart , an'... (JP,48)

Johnny's attempt to stop the repetition of the elucidation of the wounds Tancred received:

JOHNNY [*springing up from the fire*]: Oh, quit readin' for God's sakes! Are yous losin' all your feelin's? It'll soon be that none of you'll read anythin' that's not about butcherin'! (JP,48).

is clearly significant in retrospect when the audience recognises his part in the death of Robbie Tancred. The details of the wounds recited in the register of a post-mortem document has made Johnny uncomfortably aware of his own involvement in these wounds. Even if he was not present, he was in some sense responsible for the death of Tancred. The audience too is made to experience the manner of Tancred's death and must accept the discomfort of this moment of repetition alongside that experienced by Johnny.

The reporting of such an event in the opening moment of the play invites the audience to focus on the reality of the historical moment it represents. How many times has this moment been repeated during the conflict?

How many individuals, from both sides, met their deaths in this ignominious way? The repetitive structure of the play makes the audience engage with uncomfortable realities and it undermines attempts to lionise young men such as Johnny as heroes.

The irony here is directed toward Johnny himself, for he is pointing out the repetitive potential of such events through his own words: 'it will soon be that none of you reads anythin' that's not about butcherin' (JP, 48). Because of activists like him, women like his sister are constantly in danger of reading about 'butcherin' '. The play suggests that if contemporary historical events are allowed to continue without critical comment then the endless killings will make it impossible to read about anything in the papers that does not involve death.

32_a

The play questions Deleuze's distinction for it asks the audience to consider whether they believe there is any such thing as an 'original death': if the rationale for each current death is a previous killing, then is it possible that we could infinitely historically regress in our desire to sanction each new demise? And if we must atone for an 'original' death through a repetition of the same (further death) then where are we going to stop? Do we go back simply to the

32_a Ibid., 6 (Deleuze [1968], 34-37).

death of Pearse, to Cuchulain, St Patrick, the Crucifixion? The play invites the audience to think about the status of such deaths and the deaths that have occurred in their name to consider how they have acquired their mythic and meaningful status, and whether repetition plays a part in increasing the status of death whenever it is repeated. The audience is invited to reflect upon whether these deaths did once have powerful archetypal qualities which have become increasingly debased by needless repetition.

If these needlessly repetitive deaths are, in Deleuze's terms, merely 'mechanical' repetitions, the particular use of the repetition of historical moments in O'Casey's early plays, by contrast, can be read as a *répétition complexe* as the re-writing and re-enactment promote awareness of difference. In his next play O'Casey repeats the most significant historical myth in the Irish history, the Easter Rising, and invites the audience to engage with its status as myth. Repetition in O'Casey causes the audience to reconsider the historical events that prompted the plays, and to refer back to earlier plays as they watch a later one. *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars* all refer the audience back to decisive moments in Irish national history.

The audience is urged to consider how their views about a historical event may have changed, not only in the light of the play that they are currently watching, but also in the light of O'Casey's previous plays.

The depiction of the Easter Rising in *The Plough and the Stars*, as we will see in the next chapter, invites the Abbey audience to consider this play as foreshadowing the historical events of *The Shadow of a Gunman*. By visiting the same historical period and dramatising inter-related historical events, the plays allow the audience numerous opportunities to adjust their own interpretations of both the events themselves and the representation of them in the plays. As Beckett maintains:

The identification of the immediate with past experience, the recurrence of past action or reaction in the present, amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. Such participation frees the essential reality...³³

This interaction between the contemporary historical moment and the past historical event occasioned by O'Casey's plays demands that the audience engage in a dialectic about the nature of 'real' and 'imagined' historical events. The disparity between what actually happened and what has been culturally constructed as having happened is

³³ Samuel Beckett *Proust* (London, 1970), 74.

demonstrated by the very existence of the play itself. At its most complex, the play invites its audience to engage with a reconsideration of the nature of the real.

Beckett's distinction between symbol and substance reminds us that the play is not only asking the audience to ponder the evocative nature of symbols (such as the tri-colour) *per se*, but also to think about the symbol of the dramatic character in drama and its relationship to the 'substance' of real people. By engaging and re-engaging in events, listening and re-listening to speeches, the audience consistently involves itself in the kind of dialogue that Beckett had in mind, questioning the nature of 'essential reality' and attempting to distinguish between 'imagination and direct apprehension'.

Chapter 3

Private and public stagings in *The Plough and the Stars*

The theatricality of public and private events, and even their deliberate staging is a recurrent concern in O'Casey's plays. *The Plough and the Stars* returns to this theme, and the re-staging of the 1916 Easter Rising prompts a discussion of how this initially and apparently sad and minor event achieved its cultural and mythical status as a defining moment in the nationalist consciousness.

Particularly interesting are both the re-enactment of Pearse's speeches and the public responses to them.

However, what is interesting in this play is not simply the fact that a real historical event is being staged, but that it is enacted in such a self-conscious manner. In the case of Pearse's actual speeches, there would have been a double re-staging at work for the audience watching the play at the time of its first performances. Instead of witnessing a conventional re-enactment of his speeches, they negotiate his words through the performance of an onstage actor articulating *The Voice of the Speaker*.

It is the performative aspect of the spoken word and the audience's response to the 'spoken state'¹ of a play that Lionel Pilkington has seen as crucial to the critical interpretation of the effects of Yeats' play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) on Irish revolutionary activities. Yeats' anxieties about the possible effects of his play - 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?'² - do not only concern the composition, they also involve his worries about the effects of the written word when spoken, particularly by Maud Gonne in her reportedly mesmerising first performance of his own play.³ O'Casey too seems to share Yeats' questioning and serious concerns about the ways in which words can be changed not only through performance in a 'public' theatre, but in other kinds of performance too, and notably on the political platform.

On watching a production of *The Plough and the Stars*, one is tempted to ask the question: is a re-enactment of the Easter Rising being staged here to see whether

¹ Lionel Pilkington "“Every Crossing Sweeper Thinks Himself a Moralist”: The Critical Role of Audiences in Irish Theatre History' *Irish University Review* Vol. 27 No.1 (1997), 152.

² W.B. Yeats 'The Man and The Echo' *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1952), 393.

³ Pilkington (1997), 152-3.

another 'performance' of the event reveals anything different? If, as in the theatre, every performance is different, then a historical event (which was also staged, or at the very least carried out with the knowledge that the public would see and hear about it), when it is re-staged, demands a reinterpretation of the original event in the light of each subsequent 'performance'. Many members of the first audience at the Abbey would have been reminded of their own role in a public event such as the Rising. And faced with O'Casey's play and Yeats' comments, many felt that they were being written out of the record of the events, in which they (in marked contrast to the non-combatants, Yeats and O'Casey) had significantly taken a part.

This chapter deals with the multiple levels of enactment involved in the staging of *The Plough and the Stars*: the public posturing in the theatre and beyond during those early controversial performances, and the self-conscious performances (male and female) within the play proper. No other play perhaps, demonstrates more fully the truth of what sociologists and theorists of ritual theatre have argued – namely that the boundaries between 'life' and

'theatre' are far more fluid and complex than many of us chose to believe.⁴

Private and public myths about the Rising

As Roy Foster puts it, '1916 was made by a minority of a minority'.⁵ But that is not how it had come to be perceived when *The Plough and the Stars* was produced ten years later. The event became mythologised very quickly; it transformed into a projection of all nationalist longings, rather than those of a few members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Patrick Pearse, a member of the Irish Volunteers (the IRB's militia), is 'inescapably' connected with the 'ideology' of 1916.⁶ One of the key factors in the growth of the public importance of the Rising may be Pearse's private conception of himself. Seen as 'excessively vain and possibly emotionally disturbed', Pearse cut a curiously Hamlet-like figure dressing regularly in black, and being dismissed by his critics as 'a dilettante

⁴ See, for example, Erving Goffman *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harmondsworth, 1975); Richard Schechner *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York, 1993); and Victor Turner *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982).

⁵ Roy Foster *Modern Ireland 1600 -1972* (London, 1988), 477.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 477.

and a crackpot'.⁷ Certainly, the decision to organise a centrally important political event in Dublin on Easter Monday when most of the Dublin population were at the races,⁸ does not suggest that Pearse was a particularly down-to-earth political activist with practical knowledge of the activities of real people.

Initially his support for the nationalist cause seems confused, at the very least. While claiming to be a nationalist, he advocated Home Rule in 1912, as 'this would allow Irishmen to bear arms'; but these technicalities did not encourage recognition of his devotion to the cause in the IRB.⁹ There was serious doubt about his commitment to the nationalist cause, and Pearse was trying to prove himself more worthy to the membership of the IRB throughout 1913. His speech at the grave of Wolfe Tone in July 1913, with its imagery of achieving life from communion with the 'heroic spirit' of Tone, helped to

⁷ Séan Farrell Moran *Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption* (Washington D.C, 1994), 134.

⁸ Sheila Lawlor *Britain and Ireland 1914-23* (Dublin, c.1983), 7.

⁹ Moran (1994), 134.

achieve his acceptance at the highest levels of the IRB.¹⁰

As Sean Farrell Moran points out:

As his commitment to violence and sacrifice grew more intense, he met with an ever-increasing enthusiasm from those he admired most. The more he pushed the limits of this vision of violence into language, the more he became acceptable to the still-sceptical members of the IRB's leadership.¹¹

Pearse's decision to seize the Post Office might have much to do with his own need to prove himself a consistently true and loyal member of the IRB. The events at the Post Office are part of Pearse's own enactment of the role of Nationalist, entirely committed now to the necessity of violence and unafraid to transfer his thoughts from words to actions. Comments about Pearse focus on the effects of his voice rather than what he did: 'he would croon at us in that peculiar voice of his...the people...hung on his slow melodious words, dreamed his dream and very largely did his will.'¹² Such comments from contemporary

¹⁰ Padraic Pearse *The Complete Works of Padraic Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* Vol.5 (Dublin, 1920-25), 55.

¹¹ Moran (1994), 137.

¹² Quoted in Moran (1994), 147.

listeners underline the accuracy and necessity of O'Casey's presentation of Pearse in his play.¹³

Pearse's actions at the Post Office, then, may have been an attempt to prove himself as man of action to the leadership of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. This along with his own financial crises and the imminent decline of his school 'made urgent his need to find release in some course of action.'¹⁴ Pearse was looking for a way to be remembered not as a failure but as a legend.¹⁵ As Moran suggests, it may be that Pearse 'found his own salvation in a vision of selfless sacrifice'.¹⁶ What is implicit here is that Pearse himself recognised that his own actions would create a myth, and the actions at the Post Office were creating a myth for Pearse himself too. O'Casey is asking the audience of *The Plough* to consider whether the Easter Rising might not have been staged for the greater glory of Ireland, but for the greater glory of Pearse himself. Kiberd

¹³ This also re-enforces the validity of the Gate Theatre company's decision not to risk the power of Pearse's voice being heard again by allowing the actor to speak the lines 'straight', just as O'Casey himself was cautious about the re-inscription of the speeches in the play.

¹⁴ Moran (1994), 138.

¹⁵ This is re-enforced by the title of the most famous account of the life of Pearse by Ruth Dudley Edwards *Padraic Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London, 1977).

¹⁶ Moran (1994), 138.

points out that Pearse himself wore 'an ancient sword' throughout much of the fighting and 'insisted upon handing it formally to the leader of the British forces at the moment of surrender'.¹⁷ Clearly, Pearse was casting himself in the role of ancient warrior, and continuing a personal fascination with Cuchulain, which had been seen even in the choice of the relief sculpture of Cuchulain carved in stone above the door of his school, St Enda's.¹⁸ Even Michael Collins recognised the events of Easter Week as a re-enactment: 'They were conscious of re-enacting the Cuchulain myth,' he remarked.¹⁹

Pearse, along with Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Plunkett, decided on military action against the British government, ostensibly hoping that this one moment of insurrection in Dublin and the provinces would lead to revolution. They were joined in January 1916 by James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen's Army, who had

¹⁷ Declan Kiberd 'The Plebians Revise the Uprising', *Féile Zosimus: Two Dubliners Sean O'Casey and Donn S. Platt* Vol 3 (1994) 29. Although in this article is essentially critical of O'Casey, he later came to revise his view and presents a careful reading of O'Casey and O'Flaherty in his later volume *Irish Classics* (London, 2000). See chapter 27 'After the Revolution: O'Casey and O'Flaherty'.

¹⁸ Kiberd (1994), 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

previously been opposed to Pearse's mantra 'bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing'.²⁰

There remains some confusion about the early plans for the Rising, but there is evidence to suggest that, initially at least, there was to have been an assignment of ammunition. But the ship bringing the supplies was scuttled and Eoin MacNeill, leader of the Irish Volunteers, cancelled the manoeuvre. However, Pearse and his followers decided to rise up in Dublin, whatever the forces available to them; and on Monday 24th April 1916, one thousand Volunteers and two hundred ICA men seized the General Post Office and other Dublin sites. A proclamation was read in the name of the provisional government of the Irish Republic. A few days of vicious fighting ensued, but the insurgents surrendered on 29th April. The government's reaction to the Rising was swift and brutal: the imposition of martial law, the random shooting of civilians, including the execution of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, imprisonment and deportation. Finally, the fifteen key members of the Rising, including

²⁰ Foster (1989), 477.

Pearse, were shot, and as Foster remarks: 'the fifteen grisly executions in early May created as many martyrs'.²¹

This moment of martyrdom is what interests O'Casey. He is not so much concerned with the Rising itself as its consequences. He is interested in what has been obscured by the process of martyrdom, and is keen to strip away the layers of obfuscation and establish how it is that the minority can be perceived as the national voice. As Townshend points out:

The rising was certainly a manifestation of violence, but it was more than this: it was, to a large extent the manifestation of violence as politics...It was rather a form of politics which may be called 'demonstration politics', the armed propaganda of a self-selected vanguard which claimed the power to interpret the general will. Cathartic action was substituted for methodological debate; ideal types replaced reality; symbols took on real powers.²²

It is this artifice of the Rising that intrigues O'Casey in *The Plough and the Stars*. The play suggests that audiences should not be fooled into believing that the Rising was a political event proper. It was not based on 'methodological

²¹ Ibid, 485.

²² Charles Townshend *Political Violence in Ireland, Government and Resistance Since 1848* (Oxford, 1983), 312 (also partly quoted in Foster (1989), 487). In his most recent volume, Townshend identifies Pearse as the powerhouse behind such 'demonstration politics', for 'It was Pearse, more than anyone, who forged the direct link between culture and politics', see *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London, 2005), 12.

debate'; rather it was an incident of 'demonstration politics', based on Pearse's almost petulant decision to carry on with the planned military action despite the absence of all rational hope of success. Those who followed him into the fighting may also be seen to have responded to Pearse on an emotional level; and it is this appeal of the emotional above the rational that O'Casey's play seeks to demonstrate.

Public performances

There were a number of performances going on in the theatre on the night of the protests over the production, which did not, incidentally, take place at the première. On the opening night, February 8th, the play received a standing ovation and calls for O'Casey to appear on stage to accept his plaudits as playwright.²³ On the second evening during the second act, 'ominous hissing' was heard and the sister of Kevin Barry (who had died in one of the skirmishes between British troops and Irish nationalists, which had come to be known as the Anglo-Irish War)

²³ O'Connor (1988), 197.

objected to the Republican flag being unfurled in the pub.²⁴

All contemporary accounts agree that it was on the appearance of Ria Mooney, as the prostitute Rosie Redmond in Act 2, that vocal objections from the audience actually began. Aside from the moral objection to such evidence of the 'real life'²⁵ of Dublin (Joseph Holloway was heard to utter that 'There are no streetwalkers in Dublin'²⁶), this angry reaction might seem a little difficult to explain. But, as my discussion below will show, it was the play's critique of the links between nationalist mythology and the cult of the female in Irish politics that fuelled this anger.

It was not until the 11th February that the riot actually broke up a performance of the play, and Welch sees this as a result of 'the gradual absorption on the part of Dublin audiences of what this play was actually communicating about the struggle for Irish independence in 1915-16'.²⁷ Members of the Irish Volunteers (Republicans), including Mrs Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, tried to stop the performance with catcalls from the back of the balcony. A

²⁴ Robert Welch *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999* (Oxford, 1999), 95.

²⁵ Hogan & Burnham (1992), 287.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 295.

²⁷ Welch (1999), 95.

man in the pit was heard to protest that the play was a 'slander on the Citizen Army'.²⁸ Other audience members took up the protest and threw coal or coins on stage. A woman set fire to the stage curtains and the performance had to be stopped. A male audience member tried to punch the actor, Barry Fitzgerald, and fighting ensued. Another actor, F.J McCormick asked the audience to disassociate the actors from the dramatist's work, a plea that was received favourably by some of the audience, but not by the other actors. Yeats appeared on stage to make his 'apotheosis' speech, where he bracketed the response of O'Casey's audience with the similarly critical response of the audience at the Abbey for Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907, suggesting that O'Casey's fame would also be 'born here tonight', as had that of Synge.²⁹ Yeats berated the audience for having 'disgraced yourselves again...Synge first and then O'Casey',³⁰ which was greeted by a chorus of 'The Soldier's Song', sung by women who had come to occupy the vacated seats in the

²⁸ Hogan & Burnham (1992), 300.

²⁹ Ibid, 296.

³⁰ Ibid, 296.

front row; and this was taken up by other women in the stalls and the gallery. Police removed these women, and the play proceeded and eventually Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington announced from the gallery that she was also leaving under police protection.³¹ The play was completed but with continued disturbances throughout.³²

Ria Mooney remembers that the rioting began when she arrived on stage to point out that in the newspaper accounts of the riots the 'fuss was ...about the prostitute'.³³ Shelagh Richards (who played Nora Clitheroe), recalls the stage curtains being set alight by the protesters just as she entered for the beginning of Act 3 - when Nora has just returned from the barricades after searching for her husband all night - and that the riot escalated from this moment on. Whoever is right, the protesters are objecting

³¹ Ibid , 301.

³² As a pitiful aftermath to this riot, three youths tried to interfere with the last performance of the play on 13th February, by attempting to kidnap Barry Fitzgerald (who played Fluther Good). The plan was foiled when the three unidentified, armed youths arrived at the house where Fitzgerald was registered as living, only to find he actually lived elsewhere. They asked his mother where he was, assured her that no harm would come to him, and told her that they simply had orders to keep him away from the Abbey until it was too late for him to appear in the play. They were nervous and easily scared off by Fitzgerald's mother and other members of the household, leaving after only 5 minutes. Ridiculous though this event was, it indicates the kind of antipathy to the play in Dublin. See Ibid, 308.

³³ Ibid, 297.

to exactly the same thing: the representation of the connections between Irish womanhood and nationalism on stage. Two specific objections were being voiced in the theatre that night: a rejection of the play's portrayal of men, and, a rejection of the play's portrayal of women. There were those who were objecting to the 'anti-idealistic... anti-republican and anti-patriotic critique of the founding icons of the Irish Free State', specifically the play's perceived 'betrayal' of men such as Pearse, Connolly, Plunkett and MacDonagh.³⁴ But intimately connected with this, was the rejection of those whom Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington called 'the women of Easter Week' (L1,173). Sheehy-Skeffington particularly objected to Nora Clitheroe, but other members of that audience were objecting to the other woman of that week, the prostitute Rosie Redmond.

That the play itself was meant to be a public act of defiance is clear, and the first night honours were not what O'Casey had hoped for.³⁵ In a sense O'Casey is trying to

³⁴ Welch (1999), 95.

³⁵ 'O'Casey's deliberate act of desecration, his flagrant irreverence, would fail to make the impact both he and Yeats had hoped, and his insult would have the halo of "artistic masterpiece" conferred on it' (O'Connor (1988), 197). And so when the riotous response to the play came on the second night, this appears to be what O'Casey had expected, or had even planned, as the appropriate response to the play. In effect, he appears to have orchestrated what he hoped the reaction would be - he was witnessing a public performance of his play, but with an added twist that the public was performing for him in the exactly the

assume the role of impresario outside his public domain of the theatre, outside his given public frame as a stage dramatist, and to command public responses beyond his legitimate boundaries. He questions the rigid limits of stage and auditorium, refusing to accept the barrier of the fourth wall. It is also his reluctance to accept heroes, noted by the correspondent in the *Irish Times*, or even apparently heroic events, that makes him refuse to see the events of Easter Week surrounded by any kind of idealistic aura. If, as O'Connor suggests, the Easter Rising had acquired a reputation as 'the most holy event in the emergence of the new Ireland, combining a nativity with a paschal sacrifice', then O'Casey's 'dark vision of the events of 1916, ...becomes a deliberate kind of profanity, a calculated act of desecration'.³⁶

Clearly O'Casey was determined to question the origins and impetus for the Rising rather than to damn the events themselves. Already aware of the mythologized versions that were being promulgated as historical facts,

way that he wished. O'Connor seems to present O'Casey, and to some extent Yeats, as quite conspiratorial in the writing and presentation of this play. Robert Welch too senses its provocative nature: 'To many this play was not just an affront, it was a betrayal and a calculated insult', see Welch *The Abbey Theatre*, 96.

³⁶ O'Connor (1988), 174 & 197.

O'Casey sought to re-focus attention upon the events themselves. By investigating or re-imagining the kinds of events that took place, the play allows exploration of the motivations of people who took part and, further, to examine the ways that these very same people are either allowing themselves to be portrayed or want themselves to be portrayed in the historical accounts of this event. So when O'Casey comments upon himself that he 'went home feeling in no way exalted by his famous apotheosis',³⁷ he may mean that he was in no way pleased with Yeats' interpretation of the reactions to his play, or that the audience had misplaced its criticism by focusing on the playwright himself rather than the mythological representation of history, of which his play sought to remind them.

The riots were organised by Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington, whose own husband was killed during the Easter Rising and whose critical letters to the press in response to this play complained that the drama did not accord sufficient heroism to the 'real' participants. Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington wants unquestioning mythologized

³⁷ A2, 151

accounts of the Rising; she also objected to the controversial moment in the play when the tricolour is unfurled in the pub. O'Casey cannot understand why Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington attacks the play, but her criticism is precisely because she sees the play exposing uncritical notions of heroism. What she doesn't realise, however, is that O'Casey wants his audience to experience two responses to the play: first to recognise and identify with the representations of Nationalism that they see on stage; and then by understanding how they have become problematic, to reject them as representations of what 'real' Nationalism is or should be as a political creed.³⁸

The public protest about the play led to what O'Casey himself described as “two plays”³⁹ going on in the theatre. The audience became players in their own drama, prompted as they were by the play itself to display their feelings in a public setting. When the cast members were physically attacked on stage, and stink bombs were let off,

³⁸ Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington is fully conscious of the international effects of such presentations of Easter Week, particularly upon America and American funding of the Nationalist cause (Pearse's own lecture tour underlines that the American support of the Nationalists was strong; and he was advised to describe himself as a 'left-wing nationalist' in order to gain greater audiences). See Moran (1994), 141.

³⁹ O'Connor (1988), 198.

it was clear that this was a planned response by the audience. The leader of the orchestra had been warned by an audience member to remove anything of value before the performance began. O'Casey's response to this public display is curious. During the riots, he remained in the theatre foyer signing autographs, maintaining the public role of the dramatist, while apparently allowing the public to provide its own 'play' in the auditorium beyond.

O'Casey ^{may well have wanted} wanted such an audience

response to take place.

Yeats was also giving a performance that night, acting out a role as public benefactor and protector of new talent. Both he and O'Casey must have been expecting trouble at the theatre, for earlier that evening Yeats had left a copy of the speech he went on to deliver later that night at the offices of the *Irish Times*, prompting O'Connor to suggest that Yeats 'shaped the event entirely to suit his own ends'.⁴⁰ This certainly casts a different light on Yeats' 'apotheosis' speech, with his race to defend O'Casey and the comparisons he draws with Synge. But it is interesting to consider what it might reveal about the public role of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 198.

Yeats as patron of this national theatre, and about the role he conceived for himself as O'Casey's personal critic. It might be revealing too to think about Yeats himself attempting another kind of heroism on behalf of O'Casey, ironically proving O'Casey's point precisely: how easy it is to become caught up in the passion of the moment and how tempting it is to strike a pose.

One audience member commented that 'Mr Yeats struck an attitude' as he took the stage to deliver his speech, but that his words were drowned out by the noise.⁴¹ In this case then, unlike Pearse, Yeats was not a mere disembodied voice. Furthermore, he ensured that his words were seen in print in the newspaper the next day. But his performance did not turn out to be the heroic event it might have appeared in print. The response to Yeats from the audience was not a mesmerised silence at the speech of the great poet; the rioters continued their protest as he spoke. Yeats's attempt to bring a level of analysis and comment to a hoard of fighting theatre-goers was a foolhardy stance, since they were not interested in his words at that moment. Yeats seems to have realised this; his concern was to be part of the myth of the riots after the

41 *Ibid.* 199.

event – as his pre-emptive presentation of his speech to the press demonstrates.

This 'myth-making' process surrounding the night of the riots is precisely one of O'Casey's points of concern and interest: how is it that the chaos of actual events (like the Easter Rising and the response of the audience to this play) can become events of cultural and political significance? To what extent does the play influence

historical interpretations of an event such as the Rising?

O'Casey selected three ^{Speeches} of Pearse's to re-dramatise in his play because ^{es} speech written for public delivery obviously resonated for him as a dramatist.^{41a}

O'Casey did actually admire Pearse initially, but chooses ^{one} three of his later speeches (made as a graveside eulogy to O'Donovan Rossa, whom even Pearse notes as rigid and 'unbending' in his political beliefs)⁴² to show the insidious nature of such divisive and bloodthirsty talk, and the dangers of allowing it to remain unchallenged.

O'Casey is obviously wary of re-enforcing the adoration and hero ^{worship} of a man deeply committed to distance and separation between men and nations. His own

^{41a} For further discussion of these three speeches see Susan Cunneen Harris *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Indiana, 2002), 123.
⁴² Pearse (1920-25), 130.

Communist sympathies, by contrast, led him to favour unity and contact between sympathizers. A letter to the *Irish Times* seems to recognise O'Casey's reluctance to be caught up in spurious emotional experience: 'I take it O'Casey is a rather disillusioned fellow about heroes and the like'.⁴³ But O'Casey is also casting an ironic sideways glance at the assumptions about the Irish character that are contained in Yeats and Lady Gregory's letter to patrons in 1897: 'We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory'.⁴⁴ O'Casey's selection and mode of presentation of the Pearse speech provides a cold, satirical examination of this alleged Irish skill, while also calling upon it to make its point. If the Irish are so famous for listening, O'Casey's re-dramatisation appears to ask, how then did they not really hear what was being said in Pearse's speech?

The fact that the speech is only to be heard, rather than enacted by a character that the audience can see, underlines the importance and the effects of the spoken as opposed to the written word. It is significant that the 1916

⁴³ Cited in O'Connor (1988), 200.

⁴⁴ Sean McCann 'The Beginnings' in *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (ed.) Sean McCann (London, 1967), 10.

Commemorative Committee requested that the Abbey Theatre not perform *The Plough and the Stars* as part of the Jubilee celebrations fifty years later 'since it revived memories they wanted forgotten during the commemoration'.⁴⁵ Clearly O'Casey both succeeded and failed as a dramatist in *The Plough and the Stars*. His play evoked the kinds of feelings and responses that inspired debate about cultural representations of the Rising, but in turn such responses were so potentially dangerous and unsettling that they were still forty years later considered too unwise to recall.

A further 'staged' event took place as a result of the riots in the theatre, with the series of letters exchanged between O'Casey and Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington in the press. The public stage, in her estimation, had also allowed the production of a play which did not even appear to represent the Easter Rising. Instead, the national theatre was reflecting the interests of a group of English, or Anglo-Irish aristocrats, with little knowledge of the 'real' Irish working-class speech and dialogue they loved to promote

⁴⁵ Catherine Rynne 'The Playwrights' McCann (1967), 84.

as authentic in these plays.⁴⁶ This, along with the Yeats protest, and O'Casey's own curious reluctance to comment on the action both during and after the performance, suggests that the initial staging of this play is tied up not only with the interpretation of the play itself, but the definition of what 'Irish theatre' was to be and the definition of what it meant to be Irish at that time. The play does not hold the only legitimate 'meaning' for its own controversy; rather it is part of the wider public response to national identity and the question of what it means to be a private individual in a nation which is negotiating its own independent status on the international political stage.

The protests against O'Casey's play may have been connected to the public protest against Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, as Yeats suggested in his speech, but not for his reasons. Rather than the audience having 'disgraced yourselves again.... first Synge and then O'Casey',⁴⁷ it may well be that the Abbey Theatre directorate had 'disgraced' itself again, by pre-supposing the popularity of both plays for the 'wrong' reasons of

⁴⁶ As she left the balcony at the end of her protest on the night of the riot, Mrs Sheey-Skeffington was heard to utter 'All you need do now is sing "God Save the King"'. See Hogan & Burnham (1992), 302.

⁴⁷ Nesta Jones *File on O'Casey* (London, 1986), 29.

authenticity and language. Audiences, for a range of public national and private individual reasons, were protesting against these plays being part of the historical representation of Irishness and Irish literary drama. The public protests were part of the rejection of the pre-selected examples of 'a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature'⁴⁸ that Yeats and Lady Gregory had conceived in their letter to potential sponsors in 1897. Yeats described the reception of both plays as a negative, even reactionary response. But Pilkington notes:

when... meanings other than those that are assumed to be normative and literary are attributed to a play, then these meanings are presented as an expression of a philistine, and sometimes violent, literal-mindedness.⁴⁹

Public reaction to the play is only seen as negative by Yeats and Lady Gregory because it conflicts with their own private conceptions of how an individual should respond to ideas with which they do not agree. The riots reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of theatre-going in Dublin by Yeats and Lady Gregory:

48 McCann (1967), 10.

49 Pilkington (1997), 156.

theatre going in Dublin has never been labelled an event. 'Come to the theatre' has never had the snob appeal that the same invitation has in London ... - it has always been regarded as part of the process of living ... and living means participation.⁵⁰

Such 'participation' obviously refers not only to the attendance at the performance itself, but actively responding to it, which the Dublin audience clearly did on that occasion. O'Casey may have been more aware than either Yeats or Lady Gregory of the kind of reaction he was likely to elicit, perhaps even wanted to create. It may well be that O'Casey did not wish to stop the public protests, nor to respond to them himself immediately, because he considered the anticipated reaction of the audience as a central part of the theatrical event. He realised that the public theatre was the appropriate place for audiences to respond to the ideas before them.

Simply put, it may be that Yeats and Lady Gregory wanted their audience to be made up of very different kinds of people. Both of them aspired to an audience whose intellectual outlook was very close to their own, and yet they still wanted to assume the role of paternalist teachers.⁵¹

⁵⁰ McCann (1967), 7.

⁵¹ Yeats's early 'ideal' audience is a 'select' one, though he later becomes much more interested in a 'wider' public.

However, in the case of *The Plough and the Stars* both Yeats and Lady Gregory themselves learned a lesson. O'Casey's account of that night in his autobiography exhibits a tone of relish: 'The whole place became a mass of moving, roaring people' (A2, 149); and his reluctance to call the police to quell the fighting until the very last moment suggests a quiet enjoyment and a willingness to let things take their course.

Yeats did recognise that this type of reaction or riot was likely to occur and this is why he had his speech prepared and given to the newspaper in advance. Yeats' support for *The Plough and the Stars* was part of his own staged protest to the audience about what he perceived as a rejection of his own analysis and understanding of the nation and its character, or even of his own inability to depict what he saw as typical Irish theatre. Yeats may in fact have been conscious that he, Lady Gregory, George Moore and some of the other 'visionaries' were not held in the highest esteem by some of the Dublin audience.

The participation in the theatre by the audience during that performance of *The Plough and the Stars* reflects the longing for 'participation' in other fields of life. This aspect of the Irish character is certainly dramatised by

O'Casey himself in the play. His characters are looking for new roles for themselves within the 'real' world of the play. Uncle Peter's agitated obsession with the perfection of his uniform for the meeting of the I.C.A, his petulant anger when he finds Mrs Grogan handling his army sword, and his attack on The Covey with this sword when he thinks The Covey may have creased his army shirt, all show that Peter is desperate to maintain a protective control over this one new role he has established for himself as part of the Irish Citizens Army.

Again, O'Casey's Communist sympathies are in evidence here, for his plays suggest that the characters believe themselves politically disempowered. The men, in particular, seek to reclaim both their active role in national political events, as well as their self-esteem through membership of a new political movement, the I.C.A. This involves a local membership and hierarchy, over which they maintain a tight control and which brings with it a recognised social position in relationship to their immediate neighbours. For this reason it is crucial for Jack Clitheroe to get his position as Commandant, as Mrs Grogan recognises: 'He wasn't goin' to be in anythin' where he couldn't be conspishuous' (PS,108). Jack must be seen to

have his new role and for that role to be acknowledged as significant by his neighbours, since this is his means of counteracting his feelings of worthlessness and alienation from his local environment.

What O'Casey's play is pointing out, however, is that the search for alternative self-definition through the activities of such military groups remains misplaced. In a Marxist sense, the plays suggests that such activities are simply another ideological trick: army membership does not provide a synthesised opposition to the original social and psychological problems, which led to army membership in the first place. This is very close to the avowed Communist rejection of movements against nationalism, feminism and racism amongst others, which its own ideology predicts would be swept away with the destruction of Capitalism. As Ben Levitas mentions: '*The Plough and the Stars* would again give dramatic form to friction between socialist and nationalist objectives'.⁵² The play suggests, in the Communist sense, that nationalism, or membership of the I.C.A. (if that is what nationalism means), is pernicious: it does not give man back his dignity, since his role in the

⁵² Ben Levitas *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916* (Oxford, 2002), 220.

army is a false one. Nationalism simply diverts attention away from what should be the real areas of political concern – poverty and disease. Indeed, if this is the political thrust of his play, it does explain why O’Casey became exasperated when only his later plays were identified as depicting Communist themes.

The Plough and the Stars shows its opposition to army membership and all it implies through a satirical presentation of male vanity about its most potent symbol - the uniform. Their dress is mercilessly mocked by Mrs Grogan:

The Foresters’ is a gorgeous dhress! I don’t think I’ve ever seen nicer, mind you, in a pantomime...Th’ loveliest part of th’ dhress, I think, is th’ osthricness plume...When yous are goin’ along, an’ I see them wavin’ an’ noddin’ an’ waggin’, I seem to be lookin’ at each of yous hangin’ at the end of a rope, your eyes bulgin’ an’ you legs twistin’ and jerkin’, gaspin’ and gaspin’ for breath while yous are thryin’ to die for Ireland! (PS, 132).

Mrs Grogan’s linking of the army uniform with a pantomime costume is particularly intriguing because of O’Casey’s own attempt to revive the anarchic potential of the techniques of melodrama and popular theatre. If army uniform is indeed like a pantomime costume, it suggests the fatuous nature of these accoutrements: they fool nobody. We know they are put on for entertainment only; the audience knows it and

the actors know it. Mrs Grogan is certainly not fooled; her use of this comparison shows that she recognises army membership to be a role, and significantly, a role which will lead to death in some sense, whether of male integrity, or of real political action or the actual physical death of the soldiers in any ensuing fighting. Clearly some men are not fooled by this male pose either. Fluther sneers dismissively at Peter's uniform: 'when you'd look at him you'd wondher whether th' man was makin' fun o' th' costume o' th' costume was makin' fun o' th' man' (PS,132).

The motif of symbolic death through army membership is thus continued through this concentration upon the uniform. Fluther and Mrs Grogan are talking together as Peter gets ready to go to the army's torchlight procession. Mrs Grogan begins to link the larger social issue of disease with death; Fluther begins to cough, and Mrs Grogan muses languorously on the arbitrary nature of death. She suddenly holds out Peter's army shirt towards Fluther, asking him if he would like to wear it. Fluther instead withdraws from it in horror as 'a thing that looks like a shinin' shroud' (PS,110). Significantly, it is only after his anxiety about death by disease has been awakened in his mind by Mrs Grogan's comments, that he discusses the

uniform in non-comic terms. Fluther transfers his fear about his real situation, over which he has no control, the poverty of his environment, the risk of illness, to that which he can control, the shirt as the representation of army membership.

The implication that army activities are simply a distraction from battling with the real economic problems of the environment is underwritten by the presence of Mollser, the consumptive girl, in the play. At the end of Act 1, Nora and Jack have quarrelled over her burning of the letter offering him the position of Commandant, and he has left the house in high dudgeon for the meeting. Mollser arrives unannounced in Nora's rooms, coming in to sit with Nora, as her mother, Mrs Grogan, has gone to the meeting. Mollser is scared in case she dies in the house on her own. Bessie appears to direct the audience to look at what has been left behind:

There's th' men marchin' out into th' dhread dimness
o' danger, while th' lice is crawlin' about feedin' on
th' fatness o' the land. But you'll not escape from th'
arrow that flieth be night, or th' sickness that wasteth
be day (PS,125).

Bessie may be thinking of her son and others fighting in the First World War, but there is a suggestion too that the

'soldiers' of the I.C.A are also marching out that night in the torchlight parade and are similarly going into unidentified danger. They are leaving the social problems around them unaddressed, like the sick Mollser left to cope as best she can. The anti-capitalist, anti-nationalist message is clear: have you not looked around at your own social problems yet? Membership of the I.C.A is seen as an evasion of the individual responsibility towards effective social and political action. It exchanges an action for a role. Moller's final comment (expressed after she has coughed) 'Is there anybody goin', Mrs Clitheroe, with a tither o' sense?' (PS,126) seems perfectly appropriate here.

Female performances

The play takes us beyond the specific example of the illusion of new male roles, to consider why and how women might want to escape their gender roles. From private to public and from local to national roles, the play makes us conscious of the oppressive nature of the connection between the role of the female in the home and, at national level, in the state. O'Casey is now continuing to tackle the problematic nature of the figure of Ireland as a woman.

In this play O'Casey is again offering an alternative to the connections between woman and nation, as suggested by Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). The woman of Ireland in Yeats's play is either the ageing crone or the young queen, and this is the kind of image that Edna Longley suggests 'helped to propagate the feminine mystique of Irish nationalism'.⁵³ O'Casey is questioning how the definition of the nation as female may play a part in supporting and maintaining nationalist ideology. He takes this historical moment of the Rising, which is so intimately connected with nationalist mythology, and re-inscribes his female characters into a new version of the woman and nation myth. Rather than perpetuating Yeats's dual aspect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, O'Casey attempts to re-define his version of the female by adding a third face to the figure of the woman of Ireland. Kathleen Quinn's work suggests that O'Casey pre-empted the approach adopted by contemporary women dramatists, which appropriates traditional representations of the woman

⁵³ Edna Longley *The Living Stream* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1994), 188.

of Ireland with three faces: 'the goddess was almost always depicted as having three faces - virgin, mother and crone'.⁵⁴

So the play sets up O'Casey's version of the tripartite goddess myth in Nora Clitheroe, Rosie Redmond and Bessie Burgess. But O'Casey does not finish there. He wants to emphasise that he is breaking with older traditions. Rather than simply pre-empting this very modern recovery of the three faces of the woman of Ireland, as Katherine Quinn suggests, it is clear that O'Casey goes a step further to secure his distance from that older tradition. He inverts their 'divine' characteristics: the virgin becomes a whore, the mother ~~has a miscarriage~~ and the crone does not kill (as in the hag of Yeats's play requiring her own 'blood sacrifice' of the young Michael to renew the land), but dies herself. Bessie may even be said to be sacrificed, as she is shot while trying to save the life of the failed mother-figure of Nora. O'Casey can thus be seen to challenge female stereotypes.

This challenge is perhaps most clearly seen in O'Casey's decision to resurrect the woman of Ireland as a

54 Kathleen Quinn 'Re-Visioning the Goddess: Drama, Women and Empowerment' in *Ritual Remembering: History, Myth and politics in Anglo-Irish Drama* (eds.) C.C. Barfoot & Rias van den Doele (Atlanta, Georgia, 1995), 185.

harlot, in Rosie Redmond, a face of the 'goddess' which was overshadowed by the virginal figure of woman in the aisling poems of the nineteenth century. Rosie's name obviously associates her with the James Mangan ballad of that period 'Dark Rosaleen', but in O'Casey's play she is returned to the 'earthy' woman of an earlier folk version of the poem (which Mangan carefully sanitised to fit his ideal). The earlier 'Roisin Dubh' (Little Black Rose) is full of sexual imagery and activity:

I'd kiss the young girl who would grant me her
maidenhead and do deeds behind the *lios* with my
little Roisin Dubh.⁵⁵

It is this version of the sexually active woman of Ireland that O'Casey draws upon for Rosie. This woman is not interested in responding to nationalist calls for political action. Although she listens to the voice of Pearse as she waits for custom in the pub, she changes her support of his words instantly when she recognises that a potential customer, The Covey, rejects his phrases. She is less interested in theories of nationhood than life and sex: 'If y'ass Rosie, it's heartbreakin' to see a young fella thinkin' of

⁵⁵ Poem quoted in C.L. Innes *Women and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880-1935* (Athens, Georgia, 1993), 21.

anythin', or admirin' anythin', but the silk transparent stockin's showin' off the shape of a little lassie's legs!' (PS,165).

On the surface of it, Rosie seems a woman who is not interested in sacrificing any 'young fella' of hers for the nation. Nothing, not intellectualism ('thinkin'), or hero worship ('admirin') must come between the enjoyment of real life connections between men and women. Rosie is a woman of Ireland who wants to enjoy life, not promote death, and significantly sex can lead to the creation of life. But, of course, even this suggestion breaks down. Rosie, as a prostitute, can only offer an ersatz relationship between men and women. This version of woman only offers another role for her to play; it does not offer a real solution either. O'Casey is not suggesting prostitution as a means of liberation for women, for this female figure of Ireland is also a distortion; she leads to false relationships based on pragmatism between men and women, so Rosie swiftly aligns herself with Fluther after she has been rejected by The Covey.

The traditional association of women and nation begins to disintegrate when analysed in *The Plough and the Stars*, suggesting that in O'Casey's play he is rejecting

all mythical roles for women, both ancient and modern. Instead he seeks to find new kinds of definitions of what it means to be a woman in Ireland, when the term woman has become so loaded with national, political overtones.

O'Casey's use of song give us further insights into the exploration of these links between woman and nation. O'Casey's songs have been disregarded by critics as time-filling exercises in his plays, remnants of his love of Shakespeare and nights spent at the music-hall. The comparison with Shakespeare's use of song might have been better explored, for the use of song *Twelfth Night* or *Hamlet* is not simply to entertain the audience. Song in O'Casey's plays provides an intensity and unity to the play's themes; and they add a further layer of performance to the plays, which affords an additional level of self-consciousness to the audience watching and hearing them being 'performed'. Rosie's song at the end of Act 2, for example, provides further insight into her critique of the links between womanhood and nationhood.

The song is carefully placed after a series of bellicose statements from Capts. Brennan, Langdon and Clitheroe. It also follows a re-iteration of some of the extracts from the speeches of Pearse. The song offers a

strident response to the focus on death from the Captains who have just pledged themselves to 'Death for the Independence of Ireland!' (PS,141) as well as to Pearse's oration on death.

The subjects are a woman and her lover whiling away the night together and in the morning 'to our joy a bright bouncing boy / was dancing a jig in the bed!'(PS,141). Rosie's song celebrating existence is thus set against the unified cry for death, and sparks the recognition that the sons Rosie sings about creating may live only to join the 'death cult'⁵⁶ of the army. The birth of the boy in the song emphasises that the boy may go on to enjoy life and sex like his parents, or equally he may simply become another Clitheroe, who is heard calling his men to arms as soon as Rosie's song has ended, as if he were calling the child of the song to come and march with his army. This is a potent image of the link between birth and death in the fight for nationhood. O'Casey selects the emotive figure of the boy child in this song, possibly

⁵⁶ Longley (1994), 189.

suggesting the links with the Christ child and its attendant image of innocent sacrifice.⁵⁷

Each face of the woman of Ireland, Nora, Bessie and Rosie, has her own distinctive song attached. In Act 1, when the other men have already gone to the torchlight procession of the I.C.A., Jack sits at home with Nora. She appeals to him to sing her one of the songs that he had sung to her during their courting days, as a means of distracting him from the argument that they have just been having over his membership of the I.C.A., Nora chooses what appears to be a popular song 'When you said you loved me,'⁵⁸ which is replete with images of nature - birds,

⁵⁷ Although some parts of the song were cut at some early performances of *The Plough and the Stars*, it is the song and the figure of the prostitute that become the focus of tension in the play in Colm Tóibin's recent play *Beauty in a Broken Place* (Dublin, 2004), on the subject of *The Plough and the Stars* riots for the Abbey Theatre in 2004. In a projected exchange between Lady Gregory and Yeats, Gregory is aware that it is the song that will cause the greatest objection:

Lady Gregory: But some words must go, I do realize that – the song must go, it is quite filthy

Yeats: I must confess it was the song, the filthy song, which kept me from falling asleep as I read all the dreary dialogue (*Beauty in a Broken Place*, 36-37).

Toibin's figuring of the character of O'Casey goes further. After the show Toibin's O'Casey compliments Ria Mooney, who played Rosie Redmond, seeing her as crucial to the play's success:

O'Casey: You saved the play, my play. If people had disliked Rosie the other two acts would have failed (*Beauty in a Broken Place*, 48).

In Toibin's reading and re-construction of the initial performance of the play, both the prostitute and the song are essential to the play's success rather than to its failure.

⁵⁸ O'Casey wrote most of the songs for the play himself, or re-used songs and poems he had written years before.

bees, flowers and trees. The first two verses give an indication of the style of the song:

Th' violets were scenting th' woods, Nora,
Displayin' their charm to th' bee,
When I first said I lov'd only you ,Nora,
And you said you lov'd only me!

Th' chesnut blooms gleam'd through th' glade, Nora,
A robin sang loud from a tree,
When I first said I lov'd only you, Nora,
An' you said you lov'd only me! (PS,122).

O'Casey is attempting to acknowledge, and to begin to address critically the pastoral myth of Ireland through this song. He is reminding the audience that there is another version of Ireland that does not connect the land to violence. This may form part of a stereotypical Romantic idyll, yet the imagery of the song draws attention to the beauty of the land itself: 'Th' violets were scenting th' woods, Nora...The chesnut blooms gleamed through the glade/Th' golden rob'd daffodils shone, Nora' (PS,122).

Crucially it is Nora as the maternal face of the woman of Ireland, who asks for the sensual vision of Ireland to be repeated to her. It is also Nora, as the addressee of the song, who is being appealed to within the song itself (the repeated use of her name sounding like a constant call to attention), asking her to look at this other

representation of Ireland. Nora, the Cathleen ni Houlihan figure, in asking Jack to sing to her, has asked a man to help her to remember or repeat a vision of Ireland, which she seems to know of, but cannot enunciate. Nora is essentially asking for another role for herself.

O'Casey is conscious here that male support of nationalism requires female support as well. It is a male expectation that the female will support or even ask for 'blood sacrifice', in the name of nationhood. O'Casey is pointing out that if the redefinition of the woman of Ireland is to be successful, men must also have a place in finding woman's other definition of herself. O'Casey suggests that women are already aware of this; Nora asks Jack to sing to her. Such re-definitions of gender roles may seem patriarchal, but in fact they force men to take part in redefining the nation too. The play asks questions of both men and women: asking men to consider how they view redefining the female figure of Ireland, while asking women to examine how they feel about men inscribing their character in this way.

Through the song, we see that Jack must remind Nora of herself as nation and together they must listen to a version of Ireland that does not require the land to be made

fertile again through blood sacrifice, as Pearse's speeches promote. The song instead presents a harmonious vision of Ireland, already fertile, emphasising the intimacy of the connection between male and female figures through the repeated phrase: 'When I said I loved only you Nora/ and you said you loved only me' (PS,122). The song re-enforces this intimacy suggesting their union would lead to the creation of life, in place of the mythical vision of the woman demanding the sacrificial death of the man. The song shows that Ireland already has within her the potential for her own peace and happiness through the harmonious vision of the natural landscape: 'Th' trees, birds, an' bees sang a song , Nora,/ of happier transports to be' (PS,122).

At the end of the play during one of Nora's 'mad' scenes after Jack has been killed in the fighting, she begins to set the table for his tea while trying to sing these verses again on her own. She is attempting to return this non-violent, pastoral image of Ireland, to carry her back to the time before the army gained importance in Jack's life and before his death. But without Jack alive to recall the scene with her, it is impossible for this song to do anything positive; it can only confuse and terrify her. She forgets a verse of the song, suggesting that she has the vision of

Ireland in her mind, but cannot quite reach it, since she is alone and too scared to enact it on her own: 'Jack, I'm frightened...Oh Jack, where are you?' (PS,173). The deconstruction of the song here reminds us of the crucial interdependence of both genders in the construction of the nation.

Bessie's song, the song of the old hag, is similarly revealing. Bessie, the old woman of Ireland, has to go out into the street to rescue the pregnant Nora from the fighting. Bessie stays with Nora as she sinks further into madness at the end of the play, as if the old woman of Ireland will still have to protect the new. Nora now asks Bessie to sing to her, and again the difficulties of re-defining woman and nationhood are suggested through the use of song. Bessie, does not choose a nostalgic Irish ballad, as Jack had, but chooses instead the particularly Protestant hymn 'Lead Kindly Light':

Lead, kindly light, amid th' encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
Th' night is dark an' I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on.
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
Th' distant scene - one step enough for me.

So long that Thou hast blessed me, sure Thou still
Wilt lead me on; [...]
O'er moor an' fen, o'er crag an' torrent, till
Th' night is gone.
An' in th' morn those angel faces smile

That I have lov'd long since, an' lost a while!
(PS,165).

The song is sung while Bessie gently 'leads' Nora into a room, suggesting that Ireland's old vision of woman must lead the new figure forward, even though neither of them knows the way nor can see where their journey will take them. The imagery of a lonely, slow, dark journey over difficult ground 'moor, fen, crag, torrent' is appropriate here, since both the figure of woman and the concept of Ireland as nation will face difficult challenges, until the 'angel faces.../lov'd long since, an' lost awhile', and the other visions of the nation of Ireland can be rediscovered.

O'Casey's choice of song for the final act of the play indicates that he is not trying to predict where such re-definitions of Ireland's women and their role in the state may lead the nation. The song suggests only a dogged search for answers through the dark terrain of Ireland, with only the hope of resolution ('kindly light') to lead the way. There is a positive belief that answers can be found: the 'angel faces' that the hymn evokes suggest that O'Casey has an ideal vision of Ireland in his own mind, even if he only hints at it in the play through his use of song.

Re-staging the public performance

Any re-enactment of historical events exposes both the 'staged' and chaotic aspects of their occasion. *The Plough and the Stars* replays before the audience (some of whom may not have witnessed the Rising and consequently know the event only through its mythical or idealised representation) the atmosphere and series of confused events that make up the pitiful events at the Post Office. Levitas credits Pearse with an inversion of 'Drama as a cultural-political gesture', suggesting that Pearse imagined that:

A sufficiently gestural insurrection could amplify the tradition of heroic failure into a national revelation. The theatre of war could resign metaphor, and in the Rising, be staged as production: part mystery play, part melodrama, part avant-garde provocation.⁵⁹

O'Casey's presentation of the event, however, undercuts such a grandiose vision and simply makes *The Rising* laughable. Bessie Burgess and Mrs Grogan, though politically opposed to one another, work together during the fighting to effect a more successful looting operation for themselves. Such activities in the play imply that this event was not a major political movement led forward by the

⁵⁹ Levitas (2002), 224.

ordinary people of Ireland. The home of Burgess, Grogan, Clitheroe et al. is a small private house in an insignificant backstreet of Dublin, which only accidentally becomes involved in the fighting at all. The re-enactment of the Easter Rising thus exposes many of its failures as a 'staged' event. Indeed the effects of this re-staging are both to raise questions about how such a minor event can achieve such public acclamation, and to question the political skill and perspicacity of the man who organised such an event, Pearse himself.

The most significant moment in the play which allows for these re-interpretations is obviously the re-presentation of the words of Pearse. The 1994 Gate Theatre production acknowledged the enunciative power of words by fracturing the rhythm of the words of *The Voice of the Speaker*. The resulting jagged expression, with the emphasis apparently placed on the 'wrong' words, like a poem badly read, was an attempt to undercut the oratorical power of the words on the page. This may have been an attempt to convey simply the words written down, stripped of their positive performative value as far as they could be in a public theatrical performance by a well respected Irish company on tour in England. It is as if the director and

actors of the Gate Theatre Company felt that a more conventional delivery might lend a historical authority to Pearse's words again. Both the limitations and the expectations of the public theatrical space are evident here.

In drama a performance is required in the public space of the theatre; the drama requires a successful performance to be a successful play.

In the 1995 production of the play at the Barbican Theatre in London, the touring Abbey Theatre production directed by Ben Barnes figured *The Voice of the Man* in a cinematic style, with the actor's silhouette projected against the vast back window of the pub which covered three quarters of the stage.⁶⁰ The black and white imagery of this figure and the stylised movements of the actor as the sound of the voice was projected via an obvious recording, invited comparisons with the vast Nazi rallies since the image of the Speaker was cast in Hitleresque mode. While

⁶⁰ In the Abbey production of *The Plough and the Stars* touring in London in April 2005 directed by Ben Barnes, two actors were involved in the role of the Voice of the Speaker – one who articulated the Voice, played back to the audience via a recording, while another other performed the gesticulations and body movements of the speaker to accompany the speech. The actor was shown in shadow, his silhouette projected onto a screen formed by transforming the large window at the back of the bar in the play. Aside from the Fascist overtones that this style of presentation suggested (as I discuss later), this was very successful in a practical sense for the actor and the audience, since the audience could hear every word of the speech (and it is very important that they do absorb every word) without the breathlessness which would have been caused by the actor moving and speaking at the same time.

this might have implied that Pearse had a far greater audience following than he actually did, this production very clearly linked Pearse's oratorical skills to those of a modern dictator and the comparison was chilling and illuminating.

O'Casey is undoubtedly trying to undermine the emotive 'performative' aspect of Pearse's speech by re-dramatising it. Such re-staging both draws attention to the stylized nature of the speech itself and provides a fresh environment in which the speech can be reconsidered. A re-staging also invites a more critical examination of the words themselves, and a recognition that Pearse's theatrical performance of the 'written' words invites us to see them as separate, but equally influential, material for interpretation.

A critical enquiry into the reasons for, and the effects of, this scene in the play prompts similar questions for the critic as for the contemporary audience: how much of this is the original speech and how much has been added by O'Casey himself? Just as the play as a whole asks us to reflect upon the nature of truth and fiction in public political events through the enactment of Pearse's speech, it prompts a consideration of the combination of the emotional, the rhetorical and the manipulative operating

within all public and political utterances. The inter-play of offstage and onstage audiences forces a debate about the nature of dramatic reality and historical truth. What is important about Pearse in O'Casey's play is his voice; his discourse is his identity and the foundation of his success.

O'Casey wants to suggest a darkness, but also a futility in the public image of Pearse, in a similar vein to Marlow's questioning of the figure of Kurtz at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: 'The voice was gone. What else had there been?'⁶¹ O'Casey is presenting the voice of Pearse to the audience to ask whether that voice is all we have left of him now, and whether it was also the most powerful aspect of Pearse's appeal at the time. O'Casey seems to suggest that it was not what Pearse said, but the way that he said it which influenced audience responses to him. The commemorative programme of the O'Donovan Rossa funeral notes:

Cold lifeless print cannot convey an idea of the depth and intensity of feeling in which his words were couched. Calm and deliberate, in soft yet thrilling accents, his oration was almost sublime...⁶²

O'Casey invites the recognition that Pearse's contemporary audiences were seduced by words, while recognising that

⁶¹ Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness* (London, 1985), 112.

he risks the same mesmerising effect upon his own audience by reproducing some of Pearse's speech in his play.

Ben Barnes' production was also particularly anxious to signal this concealed aspect of the words on the page; and his decision to stage an actor gesticulating and 'performing' Pearse conveys the power of the physical enunciation of the words: we may read the text and feel that they cannot possibly have been so influential, but when we hear them delivered in a theatrical style we are forced to face their power. *The Plough and the Stars* thus highlights the fact that the subsequent actions of those responding to Pearse's speech, and the angry or enthusiastic responses of contemporary audiences to O'Casey's drama, may both be prompted by emotionally charged responses rather than critical thought. O'Casey is not necessarily critical of such an emotional response, but wants his audience to acknowledge that this kind of feverish response to political events can and does happen.

The play also asks the audience to recognise that as public individuals they are not caught up in a great historical

⁶² Edwards (1977), 237.

moment over which they have no control. History is something to which they directly contribute, and the audience is forced to recognise its own intimate involvement in the construction of history. *The Plough and the Stars* thus re-dramatises this idea, which had begun to be explored in *Juno and the Paycock*. The audience cannot deny personal responsibility for public political actions in the way that Jack Boyle tries to suggest in *Juno and the Paycock*:

We've nothin' to do with these things one way or t'other. That's the Government's business, an' let them do what we're payin' them for doin' (JP,80).

The Plough and the Stars refuses the audience the luxury and convenience of this kind of evasive response.

This in part is what Nicholas Grene is saying when he refers to the lack of 'aesthetic catharsis'⁶³ available to an audience of *The Plough and the Stars*. There is no escape from the audience's recognition that they too could have been equally enthralled by Pearse's speeches then, just as now they are repulsed by their re-staging in O'Casey's play. The inter-cutting of offstage and onstage audiences invites a kind of Brechtian response. The

⁶³ Grene (1986), 52.

audience is required to think about its own role and function in the arena of the theatre itself, and may in turn reflect upon their private roles as individuals in the public sphere of the public nation state. In what seems a combination of his humanist and Communist ideals, O'Casey reminds the audience that real historical events can be changed by individual actions.

The unnerving aspect of the play is not simply that Pearse's words are given another representation, but that the public reaction to them is also seen again. What is perhaps most disturbing is that the kind of reactions delineated in the play need not have happened. The play is asking the audience to consider at what point they were prepared to ignore the consequences of Pearse's evocation of 'blood sacrifice' and accept the necessity of death for whatever minor military gain, even the control of a Post Office. But the play also requires the audience to consider whether they can take refuge in the words of Pearse alone.

The Plough and the Stars requires much of its audience, and it will not allow them to evade responsibility for political action by blaming the phrases of one man, when many had responded so freely and passionately to

the sentiments they expressed. The play reminds the audience, therefore, that they have an interest and a stake in maintaining the illusion of significance around the events of the Rising. They collude with its historical interpretation and re-interpretation in order to maintain their own dignity and perhaps even preserve their own egos.

History has been turned into a performance, and as such its dramatic text must remain essentially the same. Any play or performance which questions the reasons, necessities or motivations of any of the participants constitutes a threat to the vital nature of the incident and to all who took part, or supported those who took part. Audience riots and reactions against *The Plough and the Stars* do not perhaps seem so unreasonable in the light of some of these considerations. No audience would like to be appraised of its possible foolishness or face up to its own role in the representation or even distortion, of historical events.

The chaotic and even farcical nature of the event at the time is signalled by the furious way in which Fluther and Peter's reactions are gradually inflamed by a mixture of mass hysteria, alcohol and the sheer brilliance of Pearse as an orator. Yet even this oratory only affects certain

characters, significantly the men. O'Casey may well be suggesting that the men are naive enough to believe such words, while the women are sensible to think only of the more practical consequences: Rosie thinks of the way it will affect her business, and Mrs Grogan and Bessie consider the looting potential. After having heard Pearse's speech evoking death, and watching Mrs Grogan and Bessie Burgess go outside to fight one another, Fluther ignores Pearse's invocation for men to fight, and comments upon the women instead: 'Women is terrible when they start to fight. There's no holding them back' (PS,173). The play shows two female arch-enemies, Mrs Grogan and Bessie Burgess, both apparently radically opposed to one another on religious grounds, uniting at the time of the event, not in joint support of the fighting for an independent Ireland, but to secure the best use of a pram for the purposes of looting the burnt out shops and houses.

This kind of anti-heroic undercutting of some of the most 'heroic' moments the Rising casts considerable doubt on the ways in which heroic notions of the events actually developed. The instant in which potentially combatant men are seen responding to the call to arms is satirised through the responses of Fluther and Peter. Their responses are

also juxtaposed with the responses of the non-combatant Rosie (who considers only how the meeting will affect her business that night) and with the ironic presentation of the fight between Bessie and Mrs Grogan. Such anti-heroic presentations of the inhabitants of this tenement all serve to play down the image of a Dublin energised to the point of political action. Such 'supporters' of Pearse's words are not loyal supporters of the cause, but pragmatists making use of a situation that has presented itself to their greatest advantage.

Most importantly Pearse's political message is also immediately rejected by another member of the stage audience, The Covey. The play presents the moment in Pearse's speech when he attempts to soothe anxiety about the necessity of war:

VOICE OF THE SPEAKER:...People in Ireland dread war because they do not know it. Ireland has not known the exhilaration of war for over a hundred years. When war comes to Ireland she must welcome it as she would welcome the Angel of God! [...]

THE COVEY (towards all present): Dope, dope. There's only one war worth havin': th' war for th' economic emancipation of th' proletariat (PS, 134).

Clearly the play draws the political inadequacy of the speeches to the attention of both the offstage and onstage

audiences. O'Casey builds in an inappropriate register to both speeches to strike a false note here. The patronising self-aggrandisement of The Voice of the Speaker suggests a longevity, knowledge and omnipotence impossible for any human being. Equally, jargonised phrases such as 'economic emancipation' and 'proletariat' serve only to emphasise The Covey's distance from the very working-class that his theoretical principles claim to represent. But he retains the greater integrity of the two here, because of his repeated use of the blunty honest term, 'Dope'. In this way O'Casey is carefully able to convey the rejection of Pearse's words without the necessity of accepting the logic of The Covey's pronouncements.

The stage directions require The Covey to speak 'towards all present' signalling that he is to address the onstage audience, which in turn requires that they must make a show of listening to him. This ensures that he is the central focus of attention too for the offstage audience in the auditorium. So, by arranging the actor's stage position, and by subtly inflecting The Covey's speech patterns, O'Casey ensures that everyone gets the message. Political posturing just won't do; the bellicose Speaker cannot be answered by further repetitions of

doctrine, whether they be from supporters of the Speaker, or from his opponents, like The Covey. O'Casey thus reminds his audience that there were other political options that the private individual could, and often did, follow. The following of political leaders and the build-up of political events are not the result of politically considered convictions.

Fluther^{'s} and Peter's enthusiasm for the cause is consistently undercut by O'Casey's satirical presentation of the pomposity and self-aggrandizement that is the root of this enthusiasm. Both the Barman and The Covey are depicted as recognising Fluther's increasing agitation, and its concomitant sense of self-importance as he recalls being taught to honour the 'Shan Van Vok' (PS,174) as well as ^{recounting} _^ his presence at O'Connell Street and Phoenix Park. His ^{the tale of} _^ spirited denials of his unnecessary excitement serves only to make him look more ridiculous:

BARMAN: Speak easy, Fluther, thry to speak easy.

THE COVEY: There's no necessity to get excited about it, comrade.

FLUTHER (more loudly): Excited? Who's gettin' excited? There's no one gettin' excited! It would take something more than a thing like you to flutther a feather o' Fluther! (PS,138).

O'Casey underlines the passion that such memories of these experiences can evoke and immediately makes clear that Fluther's support for the cause is based on such passions rather than political understanding. The Covey questions Fluther on the specifics of the policies of the Labour movement:

THE COVEY: Well let's put it to th' test, then, an' see what you know about th' Labour movement: what's the mechanism of exchange?

FLUTHER [roaring, because he feels he is beaten]: How th' hell do I know what it is? There's nothin' about that in th' rules of our Thrades Union!

BARMAN: For God's sake, thry to speak easy, Fluther.

THE COVEY: What does Karl Marx say about th' Relation of the Value to th' cost o' Production?

FLUTHER [angrily]: What th' hell do I care what he says? I'm Irishman enough not to lose me head be follyin' foreigners! (PS, 138).

In this exchange O'Casey is re-iterating through the Barman's comment that Fluther's reaction is stimulated by anger and frustration with The Covey, who has provoked him into a recognition of the poverty of his own political knowledge about the cause he is claiming to support. O'Casey's stage direction for Fluther underlines his anger at being 'beaten' or caught out and found inadequate in his analytical understanding of political concepts.

Fluther also serves to unite O'Casey's concurrent themes of nation, international suspicions and misunderstandings, which are trapping Dublin and Ireland into political paralysis. Fluther's lack of national political understanding and his isolationist approach to new political ideas from outside Ireland make him a sad combination of misplaced enthusiasm and nationalist zeal, held back from effective political action by fear. Instead, men such as Fluther look to figures like Pearse to do their thinking and acting for them. Unfortunately, they forget to consider the aspirations and fears of the leaders themselves. In Pearse's case, this was not a fear of the moment of death itself; he seemed fully prepared to die at the Post Office and even expected it, having settled all his financial accounts the night before his death.⁶⁴ But Pearse did fear that he would die in the memory of the nation,⁶⁵ and sought to expunge his historical death through a heroic martyrdom securing his posterity through historical accounts and dramatic representations of the events. In *The Plough and*

⁶⁴ Lawlor (1983), 8.

⁶⁵ Moran (1994), 134. Moran mentions that Pearse regularly wore black clothing and links this to Erich Fromm's analysis of such behaviour as a form of necrophilia, see *Ibid* , 135.

the Stars, O'Casey indicates the dangers inherent in seeking posthumous self-glory through acts of martyrdom.

Conclusion

Declan Kiberd's article in *Féile Zozimus* (1995) concludes:

The "European" dimension of Easter 1916 is swiftly passed over in *The Plough and the Stars* so that the playwright can present nationalism as a pathology. It is never examined in all its mesmeric power: rather it is caricatured.⁶⁶

Essentially, Kiberd is correct. O'Casey is suggesting that Ireland has a particularly 'pathological' interpretation of nationalism. That is precisely the point. But though Kiberd would prefer the representation of a more inclusive, outward looking European conception of Irish nationalism than the one presented in O'Casey's play, O'Casey himself seems suspicious of any attempt to represent the nationalism as positive *per se*. He is particularly sceptical of the 'nationalism' expressed by the Easter Rising. Nationalism is not shown in 'all its mesmeric power' in *The Plough and the Stars*, precisely because O'Casey considers it too insidious and dangerous to allow that kind of nationalist power to resurface on the public stage and in

⁶⁶ Kiberd (1994), 38.

the private mind of an audience. The consequences of Pearse's actions prove this.

But O'Casey does not 'caricature' nationalism. Instead he tries to raise the topic of nationalism for discussion within the formal restraining framework of his play, thereby mediating between the real feeling of support for nationalism that he knows will be present in his audience, and the 'false' or ill-considered feelings of passionate support generated in the audience by the experience of watching its representation in the play.

O'Casey was fully aware of Yeats' feelings of responsibility and guilt for *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, and does not want similar feelings for himself. He does not want the audience nor the critics to interpret his play in similar ways either. The speeches of Pearse figured through *The Voice of the Man*, filtered through the perceptions and responses of the onstage audience, work deliberately to prevent this unselfconscious absorption of the 'power' of nationalist argument. Rather than ignoring nationalism, as Kiberd implies, O'Casey is fully conscious of its mesmeric 'power' and both acknowledges and responds to this aspect of political ideology in his play. The play maintains that an understanding of the 'mesmeric power' and influence of

nationalism is as crucial to an understanding of the events of Easter Week as is an understanding of the political specifics of the cause.

The 'European' focus that Kiberd identifies as lacking in the play is also part of O'Casey's point. A true sense of fellow feeling and co-operation between nations, is perceived as prevented by such extreme nationalist, egotistical or heroic affiliations, epitomised by Pearse. True European co-operation rejects isolationist policies in favour of international support and co-operation. But as Bessie Burgess underlines, Ireland seems reluctant to take on its true international responsibilities, of practical active support of other nations, which will be vital if it is to claim the status of a European nation.

Bessie enters the pub after The Covey returns, having heard the meeting going on outside. The words of Pearse ring out:

VOICE OF THE SPEAKER: ...we rejoice in this terrible war. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields...millions of lives given gladly for love of country (PS,129).

Bessie Burgess focuses on the selective isolationist attitude of this speech, by pointing out the religious and national specificity of these actions:

I can't for th' life o' me undherstand how they can call themselves Catholics, when they won't lift a finger to help little Catholic Belgium (PS,133).

The Catholic Mrs Grogan, realising that the barbed comment is directed at her, or provoked anyway to set Bessie Burgess right about an issue she feels a Protestant has no right to comment upon, responds by raising her voice to ask: 'What about little Catholic Ireland?' (PS,133). O'Casey has now neatly juxtaposed the crucial two sides of his case. What is Ireland's place in the public realm of international relations, and how does this affect her role in the maintenance of peace and stability in her own country as a private nation state?

O'Casey has presented the contradictions and dilemmas that already exist in Ireland, and that will become more urgent to resolve as she becomes an independent nation. O'Casey seems at odds with himself in response to this debate. Bessie Burgess goes on to explain the 'storm of anger tossin' in me heart' (PS,168) at the thought of all those who died in World War 1, including her own son. Yet strangely she goes on to depict the men 'layin' down their white bodies, shredded into torn and bloody pieces, on th' althar that God Himself built for th' sacrifice of heroes!'

(PS,133). This is an anomalous reinscription of the heroic nature of death, this time for an international rather than a national cause. It is somewhat uncritically presented at this moment in the development of an anti-heroic thesis. It seems as if Bessie is suggesting that the men who died in World War 1 were heroes, duped and lured to their death by a God testing their loyalty to their nation and each other, seeing how far they would go to 'prove' the superiority of one country over another.

But the play still works to point out the dangers of restricting your outlook to the boundaries of your own nation. If, as a private individual of the public state, you refuse to look beyond your own nation, you are in danger of becoming incestuously obsessed with national heroes and national history. When as a nation you create men like Pearse, who will dress up and go out and sacrifice both their own life and the lives of others in order to re-enact historical myths such as that of Cuchulain, and who do so in order to inscribe themselves indelibly back into the history of their own country, then how will it be possible to develop a nation of people with enough sense to see their interests as common on an international scale? O'Casey maintained: 'Almost everything I've written (except juvenile

stuff) was written as Communist. I've been a Communist for more years than I care to remember'.⁶⁷ Clearly, an international political focus for O'Casey's next play, *The Silver Tassie*, was inevitable.

⁶⁷ Patricia Angelin 'Comrades in Arms: George Jean Nathan and Sean O'Casey', *Éire-Ireland* Winter (1994), 16.

Chapter 4

The Silver Tassie: Expressionism and Beyond

In *The Silver Tassie* (1928) O'Casey accentuates his experiments in dramatic form in a more theatrically forthright manner, most notably in the Expressionistic second act. The play explores the now familiar theme of public and private concerns, but here this is extended to include an international as well as national perspective. The action shifts from the domain of the 'private' Dublin room (which had provided the spatial focus of *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock*), to the trenches of the First World War in France in Act 2.

O'Casey regularly moves his action in and out of public and private spaces from *The Harvest Festival* onwards. In the early play essentially the 'private' space of the vicarage is exposed as susceptible to 'public' pressure. In *Juno*, the action remains in the Boyles' room, but now the threat to the occupants always comes (as will be the case with Pinter's plays) from outside, whether it is Bentham with the will, the IRA searching for Johnny or the simple entry of Mrs Tancred into the

Boyle's room.¹ In *The Plough*, the action spills over into the street outside; and part of the tension of the play stems from the futile attempts of Nora to prevent the 'public' demands of the Rising from intruding into the home.

The Silver Tassie becomes a pivotal play in O'Casey's oeuvre, not simply because it was the subject of scandal at the Abbey, but because it affords a clear understanding of O'Casey's earlier and subsequent work. *The Silver Tassie* is generally considered to mark closure in critical terms: the end of O'Casey's association with the Abbey, the end of his 'good' popular plays and the end of his financially successful drama.² But *The Silver Tassie* should instead be seen as the play which marks the beginning of O'Casey's increasing confidence in his own theatrical experiments, and of his right to challenge theatrical conventions. Here O'Casey builds on his experiments in *The Plough*, notably his presentation of Pearse's disembodied voice; and we find an even bolder fracturing of character, not confined to a

¹ Cf. Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, where Goldberg and McCann invade the 'private' space of the lodging house where Stanley is living, coming from outside to torment and intimidate him.

² Cowasjee (1963), for example, calls his chapter on the play 'The Break with the Abbey Theatre and Exile' and sets up his ensuing discussion in his opening sentences thus: 'With *The Plough and the Stars* we come to the end of O'Casey's career as an Abbey dramatist. It is a fitting climax to what many consider to be the most fruitful period of his dramatic career', 85.

single scene, but now deliberately developed throughout the entire play in the character of Susie.

Similarly the sharp critique of heroism that is conducted in *The Plough* with reference to history, is here extended to include an exposé of the ideology of heroism *per se* through the embattled and wounded war-victim Harry. Ireland no longer provides the focus nor site of his drama, O'Casey (like Joyce's Stephen Hero) is now liberated as a dramatist – his inspiration comes from Germany, from Eugene O'Neill in the U.S. and beyond. O'Casey shows in *The Silver Tassie* that he is capable of becoming a key figure in European Modernist Theatre.

The rejection of *The Silver Tassie*

The furore around the reception of *The Silver Tassie* is an extraordinary event in the history of the Abbey Theatre. The relationship of O'Casey to Ireland and Irish drama, his personal friendship with Yeats, and in particular the development of O'Casey's oeuvre, were all radically changed by an episode which reveals failings on both sides. Yeats was the most influential member of the Directorate, initiating the decision to reject the play for production at the Abbey in 1928, although, as Lady Gregory notes, it was Lennox Robinson who made the

final decision that the play should not be produced.³ According to O'Casey's own reading of events, Yeats had decided to reject the play 'before it was sent in', signalling his rejection of the play to Lady Gregory before he had considered the opinion of the other members of the Directorate.⁴ Certainly the incident reveals a series of weak, anxious judgements on the part of the other members of the Directorate (Lady Gregory, Lennox Robinson and Dr William Starkie), indicating their reluctance to go against the wishes of Yeats himself. The rejection of the play raises the issue of what, or indeed who, defined Irish drama at this time, while also exposing the difficulties faced by the Abbey Theatre as it sought to represent the particular style and subject matter of this definitive 'Irish' genre. The particular influence of Yeats in the construction of what constitutes Irish *literary* theatre is also made explicit through this incident with O'Casey's play.

Yet why did O'Casey decide to oppose Yeats publicly and single-handedly over his criticisms of *The*

³ In her *Journals*, Lady Gregory notes that at the last moment, while at the Abbey during one of the last performances of *The Plough and the Stars*, she asked Yeats and Lennox Robinson 'if we might still consider putting it [*The ST*] on....Yeats inclined to it but L.R. said 'No, it was a bad play.' See *Lady Gregory: The Journals Volume 2* (ed.) Daniel Murphy (New York & Oxford: 1987), 273. Lennox Robinson's remarks thus closed off the discussion and any further consideration of a production of the play at the Abbey at this time.

⁴ L1, 297 (5th?[sic] July 1928).

Silver Tassie? It was clear from O'Casey's meetings with Liam O'Flaherty that support for his opposition to Yeats was ready to be harnessed if he had wanted to pursue such a route. O'Casey's reasons are not entirely clear. It is possible that apart from any doubts he was now experiencing about Yeats's judgement, O'Casey was also being petulant and felt the paternalist role of Yeats in the production of his work to be a very personal one, and one which he must handle on his own. It is also likely that O'Casey simply did not feel that he could trust the other groups in opposition to Yeats, or that his feelings of alienation and distance from these groups were stronger than his need for support in opposing Yeats.⁵

Yeats's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* suggests a desire to control the development of Irish drama in the manner he alone considered most appropriate. Yeats was following his own path, making assumptions about the form, content and style of drama that *he* regarded as progressive and developmental in Irish drama. His membership of the Abbey Directorate may have appeared to make him a representative of a very broad

⁵ O'Casey commented upon O'Flaherty's 'arrogance' in A2, 107 and saw such men opposed to Yeats as essentially self-serving, motivated more by professional jealousy than any fundamental objections to Yeats's work. O'Casey did not wish to become a vehicle for the anger and frustration of others but he may also have been considering the possibility that any future work he might want to offer to the Abbey would be refused simply because Yeats didn't like it.

view, but in fact it served to disguise his very significant personal input at the time. As Shivaun O'Casey, the playwright's daughter has observed:

...the rejection did affect his [O'Casey's] credibility, because of Yeats being such a great man at the time and a Nobel prize-winner. It obviously affected what people thought of him [O'Casey].⁶

O'Casey had been concerned for some time about his relationship with the Abbey Theatre. The audience reaction to *The Plough and the Stars* is one of the reasons behind O'Casey's increasing dissatisfaction with the Abbey, Irish audiences, even Ireland itself.⁷ Even if such an extreme audience response was not quite what O'Casey had anticipated, we can read his initially rather relaxed responses to the riots as, at the very least, a reluctant resignation to the events taking place in the auditorium. It would seem that some level of critical engagement or political response from his audience was very much in O'Casey's interest.⁸ But it is certainly clear that even after submitting *The Plough and*

⁶ Shivaun O'Casey, interviewed by Martin Drury in *The Page and the Stage: The Plough and the Stars* (Dublin, 2003), 11. In conversations with me during my work on her archive, Shivaun re-iterated that she considered that Yeats's judgement was crucial to O'Casey's literary reputation at that time.

⁷ O'Casey remarks after seeing the protestors evicted from the theatre: 'For the first time in his life Sean felt a surge of hatred for Cathleen ni Houlihan sweeping over him. He saw now that one who had the walk of a Queen could be a bitch at times' A2, 150. As Krause points out '...this "apotheosis" was also the beginning of his alienation', see L1, 164.

⁸ See Chapter 3 above.

the Stars for consideration, O'Casey was already becoming dissatisfied with the attitude of the Abbey Directorate to his plays.⁹ Yeats's outright rejection of *The Silver Tassie* seemed to confirm all that O'Casey had been concerned about in his association with the Abbey. He felt like an actor in danger of being typecast, forced to write more plays about 'real' Irish people, endlessly writing and re-writing *Shadow*, and *Juno and the Paycock* under a series of different titles.

O'Casey also felt that he was being mis-cast as a dramatist of character and it is clear that he did not see himself as such. His frustration is clear in his mockery of Dr Starkie's decision to re-read all his previous plays before assessing *The Silver Tassie*:

What is one to think of a Critic and a Director who thinks that the best way to prepare his mind for a new play is to read over again three other old ones!¹⁰

O'Casey clearly felt that Dr Starkie's most sensible course would have been to have read *The Silver Tassie* first and then maybe, if desired, re-read the earlier plays, which may have given him a greater insight into O'Casey's gradually emerging style. But Yeats himself

⁹ In a letter to Lennox Robinson (10/1/26), in response to a request for further changes to the dialogue in *The Plough*, O'Casey's irritation with the Abbey Directorate is clear: 'The play itself is (in my opinion) a deadly compromise with the actual; it has been further modified by the Directors but I draw the line at a Vigilance Committee of Actors' L1, 166.

¹⁰ L1, 280 (To *Irish Statesman*, ?/6/28 (sic)[unpublished letter]).

might have been more sympathetic to O'Casey's greater confidence in his new direction, since he too had been subject to similar type-casting as a poet.¹¹

O'Casey replied to Dr Starkie in a letter intended for publication in *The New Statesman*:

...when you say that the play hasn't the reality and emotion of the other plays, and so ask for 'more of the same again', you seem to say that the Drama must stand still. (L1, 283)

O'Casey seems tired of being regarded as the boy-dramatist or apprentice to the 'master' Yeats:

Mr Yeats is no master of mine; he never was and he never will be....he may criticise me but he mustn't give me orders.¹²

But it was not only at the Abbey that he was seen as a dramatist of a particular kind. Responding to a critical review of *The Silver Tassie* in the *Irish Statesman*, O'Casey makes it clear that he had long been aware that his aims and techniques as a dramatist had been misunderstood. In a letter to the paper on 4th August 1928, O'Casey's riposte to the reviewer who had been 'moved by the intensity and incapacity of the play'

¹¹ After the success of *Poems 1895* Yeats was criticised for trying new forms; his readers would have much preferred him to stay with the 'nice' poems of this his most popular collection. In a letter Yeats comments on the continually rising sales of his early collection, its popularity with readers and its financial success creating dual pressure on him to write more of the same kind of work: 'Accident has given the work written before I was thirty all the public attention I get. For many years Unwin's volume has brought me in between £30 and £40 a year, and the sale's [sic] always slightly increasing', see Yeats (1954), 576 (22/2/13).

¹² *Manchester Guardian* 12/6/28, 22.

was that he himself had been 'moved by the intensity and incapacity of the criticism'.¹³ His dissatisfaction with what he considers the lack of coherence in critical responses to his work is expressed through an analogy with Cubism:

[It] reminds me somewhat of the art of the cubist painter introduced to the art of criticism: a rapid circle around Starkie, a delicate curve touching the feet of Robinson, an oblique move towards O'Casey, then a sudden swirl and off at a tangent on a bee line for W.B Yeats.¹⁴

O'Casey's annoyance is that every work of art must be examined and judged in the light of Yeats's work or, at very least, what Yeats had defined as 'Irish drama' by critics such as 'YO' (in the *Irish Statesman*), who sat in judgement with very few critical faculties of their own.

Writing to O'Casey after the correspondence between O'Casey and Yeats and had been published in the press, St John Ervine remarks that O'Casey's decision to publish the letters was 'perfectly justified'. Ervine is quick to remind him of the significance of his national role as a dramatist as an important aspect of this episode:

The production of a play by you at the Abbey by you is a matter of public interest. The Abbey is the nearest thing we have to a national theatre in these islands: it is subsidised by the Government of The Free State, and therefore the rejection of a

¹³ *Irish Statesman* 4/3/28, 340.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

play by an author who , as Yeats himself asserts, saved the theatre from extinction is a matter of considerable public interest.¹⁵

Yeats had indeed admitted that O'Casey had saved the theatre from bankruptcy,¹⁶ and O'Casey must have found it particularly galling that the theatre he had helped to keep open was now peremptorily refusing his work. He may even have felt that the Abbey owed him the opportunity to take both an artistic risk for himself, and a financial risk for the theatre in mounting a production of a more experimental play. In his letter to Gabriel Fallon, O'Casey writes that he has heard from Yeats that *The Plough and the Stars* is playing to 'packed' houses. He ruefully remarks to Fallon, 'Odd that he seems to have forgotten that a great play may empty a house as well as fill one',¹⁷ suggesting that he was aware even before he submitted the text that *The Silver Tassie* would not be as financially successful as his previous plays.

Certainly a recently discovered unpublished letter from Lady Londonderry to O'Casey in June 1928, suggests that, privately at least, O'Casey had feared that *The Silver Tassie* would not be popular fare with the

¹⁵ LI, 263 (6/6/28).

¹⁶ In his letter to O'Casey, Yeats admits 'if you had not brought us your plays just at that moment I doubt if we would now exist', see Yeats (1954), 740 (20/4/28).

¹⁷ LI, 244 (11/5/28).

Abbey. O'Casey had sent Lady Londonderry a copy of the play and she writes to thank him:

I shall be most interested to read the play. Without really knowing anything about it except the letters which I had already read in the Press it certainly appears that they had made it a forgone conclusion that they should reject it. I remember when you spoke to me about it a long time ago you said that some of the things in it would not suit the Abbey Theatre.¹⁸

Clearly O'Casey already had the limitations of the Abbey Theatre at the forefront of his mind and perhaps should not have been quite so surprised by the Abbey's rejection. However, it was the manner of their rejection which seems to have galled him most.

O'Casey's decision to publish the private correspondence between himself and Yeats on *The Silver Tassie* in the national press was churlish, even uncharitable in the light of Yeats's previous public acts of support for his work.¹⁹ O'Casey could be hot-headed.²⁰

¹⁸ Unpublished letter from Lady Londonderry to O'Casey 16th June 1928. I found this letter while going through O'Casey's archive when I helped Shivaun O'Casey organise her father's papers prior to their deposit at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin in 2002.

¹⁹ Aside from Yeats's public support of O'Casey on the night of the riot during the performance of *The Plough and the Stars*, a lesser known occasion of Yeats's support was during O'Casey's attempts to gain publication of his short story 'I Wanna Woman'. The typesetter at Macmillan had refused to set the copy because he objected to the subject of the story (prostitution). Yeats signed a letter of protest to Macmillan and eventually the story was published in *Windfalls* in 1934. See O'Connor (1988), 290 and Murray (2004), 221.

²⁰ Bernard Shaw's wife Charlotte even asked him and Eileen to lunch in June 1928 to try to smooth over the dispute and persuade him, in his own words at a later date, to 'restore the sword to the scabbard'. Eileen O'Casey suggested that her husband should submit any further letters he was going to write on the subject to Shaw who would then 'edit' anything that he felt inappropriate. Charlotte Shaw suggested a special arrangement

He probably did over-react, but he was most angry about what he saw as the covert way in which Yeats's conducted himself. O'Casey's publication of the correspondence was an attempt to bring the reasons for this decision out into the open. He wanted the private actions of an establishment that billed itself as a *national* and thus publicly accountable theatre, brought out into the public domain.

This tension between private honesty and public accountability is a recurrent theme in O'Casey's plays, and this act of publishing all the correspondence shows that he lived by his own ideals. The event also exposes how vulnerable he felt himself to be in a theatrical world that was all relatively new to him. It was almost as if he felt he did not really belong there at all. No one at the Abbey (not even Lady Gregory who usually seems most sympathetic to new playwrights) seems to have taken the trouble to explain to him how decisions were taken, and he had little understanding of the process of writing and re-writing that seems to have been standard practice with new playwrights at the theatre.²¹

to forward any letters to Bernard Shaw 'at once' (L1, 298 8/7/28). However, despite the great friendship between the two men there is no evidence to suggest that O'Casey adopted this idea, in fact, quite the opposite: 'He had refused the counsel of Uncle Yeats, and he had no intention of taking the counsel of Auntie Shaw' (A2, 280).

²¹ Mary Fitzgerald 'How the Abbey Said No: Readers' Reports and the Rejection of *The Silver Tassie*' in *The O'Casey Annual* No.1 (ed.) Robert G.Lowery (London, 1982), 73-87. As Fitzgerald points out 'The Abbey

However, having written three plays for the Abbey, it is debatable how 'new' O'Casey could be considered as a playwright. Even Bernard Shaw wrote to Lady Gregory after the rejection of *The Silver Tassie* and remarked 'Why do you and W.B.Y. treat O'Casey as a baby?'²² As Shaw's remark suggests, there may have been some reluctance on the part of the Abbey Directorate to let go of their hold on O'Casey's reins.²³ It may have been difficult for them to accept that one playwright no longer felt the need of their advice (if, indeed, he ever had), an attitude they probably found strange, particularly as the Abbey directors themselves

policy was intended to encourage playwrights either to revise or re-shape their offering or to try again'. O'Casey's 'authorial relations' with the Abbey had followed a 'different path'. Though he had previously been offered advice about how to improve his early rejected plays, he had always preferred to write a new play rather than to revise his work (78). O'Casey was happy to revise the play after seeing it in rehearsal and *Juno* and *The Plough* were both revised in this way (82).

²² Lady Augusta Gregory *Lady Gregory's Journals 1916-1930* (ed.) Lennox Robinson (London, 1946), 110 (28/6/28).

²³ O'Casey's credentials as protégé for both Yeats and Lady Gregory is prominent in Colm Tóibín's recent play, *Beauty in a Broken Place* (Dublin, 2004): 'LADY GREGORY: He is our greatest discovery. I think perhaps of all of us he has – / YEATS: The common touch,' BBP, 11. As Tóibín's O'Casey arrives at Yeats's home for one of his soirées he wryly comments 'The latest and rarest specimen they had collected, John Cassidy, with his hobnailed breath and his tenement squint', BBP, 14. In reality Joseph Holloway remembers O'Casey recounting one such evening to him while they were walking together in St Stephen's Green: 'O'Casey told me of an evening he spent in one of the intellectual's houses, where the three or four present talked art at top speed. He was struck dumb and listened awhile for scraps for future plays', see *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer* (Carbondale, 1967), 233.

continued to offer their own plays to each other for criticism and refinement.²⁴

Yeats had made a critical misjudgement over *The Silver Tassie* - at least, both O'Casey and Bernard Shaw thought so - and Lady Gregory subsequently agreed; and even Yeats later changed his mind about the play. But at this time, O'Casey was aware of the cost of Yeats's mistake artistically and financially to himself, and perhaps also conscious of the practical consequences of such future mistakes for a working-class writer.²⁵

²⁴ Fitzgerald (1982), notes that the Abbey rarely sent Readers' Reports verbatim to the authors; comments were usually 'softened'. But Abbey Directors were 'merciless' in their criticism of each others work, since 'feelings were secondary, art was all', 82. Fitzgerald mentions Yeats's remark that he wrote all his plays and invited Lady Gregory to comment upon his work (82). This is confirmed by recent scholarship noting the dual composition of *Kathleen ni Houlihan* by both Yeats and Lady Gregory. See Julia Hill, *Lady Gregory: An Irish Life* (London, 2005) 'It [the play] was like an abstract painting in blocks of colour, containing within itself the inspirational sweep of politics. But it needed someone to imagine the dialogue of the family before Cathleen enters and how exactly, for example, they would discuss the impending marriage. This Augusta did, writing proudly in pencil under what became the first part of the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, ending just after the woman enters the cottage. 'All this is mine alone A.G.'', 157. See also James Pethica 'Patronage and Creative Exchange: Yeats, Lady Gregory and the economy of indebtedness' in *Yeats Annual* 9 (1992), 60-94. It is possible that Yeats thought O'Casey would recognise his criticism of *The Silver Tassie* as part of that tradition. However, 'Sean O'Casey seems to have known little or nothing of this practice', Fitzgerald (1982), 82.

²⁵ Behind O'Casey's anger was also his recognition that the rejection of his work by Yeats could spell the decline of his burgeoning career as a dramatist. Without a production at the Abbey, public recognition of his work in Ireland would be virtually impossible. A cartoon produced by O'Casey at the time of *The Silver Tassie* débâcle depicts his anxieties in visual terms. Yeats looms large on the steps of the Abbey, holding up a forbidding hand to the younger playwright, while Lennox Robinson is depicted on the step below him. Lady Gregory is shown on her knees between Robinson's legs, also holding up her hand against his entry to the building. The cartoon includes a parody of O'Casey's chanting in Act 2 of *The Silver Tassie* with the caption which reads:

Yeats: We decree that thou art a heretic.

Robbie: Cast out from the unity of the Abbey.

Yeats: Sundered from her body.

Revising naturalism

The explicit newness of O'Casey's approach in *The Silver Tassie* was deliberate: only this could make critics realise that he was no Dublin 'naturalist'. His response to the *Irish Statesman's* review of *The Silver Tassie* is revealing. What is wrong with the reviewer's interpretation of the play in O'Casey's view is that the reviewer wants repetition rather than innovation and development:

he wants the old and much caressed familiarities. He wants *The Silver Tassie* to be a copy of *Juno* because it was a copy (it wasn't) of actual life.²⁶

O'Casey knows that he is not presenting reality in *The Silver Tassie* because he knows that he has not been presenting 'reality', as the critics have understood it, in his previous plays. O'Casey realised after the response to *The Plough and the Stars* that critics were interpreting his work in the only way they knew how - in terms of what they already knew: 'They saw in Sean that of which they themselves were full - the cinema and the

Robbie: Segregated and abandoned for evermore.

Lady Gregory: Amen (O'Casey (9/6/28) L1, 265)

The cartoon visually expresses O'Casey's feelings of alienation, even paranoia, after the Abbey's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* and suggests that O'Casey felt that he had little to lose by a public display of his irritation and anger now that he had been 'abandoned for evermore' by the Abbey.

²⁶ L1, 304 (To *Irish Statesman* 4/8/28). The original review of the playtext is in *Irish Statesman* (21/7/28), 391.

revue'.²⁷ Such misconceptions of his work are what seem to be at the heart of O'Casey's discontent, both with the Abbey itself and with audience responses to his plays. He is conscious that they even misinterpret his use of comedy, believing him to base his style on that of 'revue', which he claimed never to have seen in his life. O'Casey's response was to write in a starkly anti-naturalist manner. O'Casey was answering the charges and objections of his audiences. Even though he felt himself to be in rebellion against the critics and claimed to despise their opinions, O'Casey was ultimately being defined by, and in the terms of, that rebellion. He recognised that he would have to leave Ireland to escape these criticisms, but also recognised that while he remained in Ireland he would have to respond to them.²⁸

Just before he writes *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey elects to give himself a free rein. He was not averse to criticism, but only when he felt that it was informed rather than inept criticism. In fact he deliberately looked to the critics to inform his written style. He remained inspired by the books of dramatic criticism he had read by

²⁷ A2, 155.

²⁸ O'Casey was quite aware of the problems he faced in Ireland, but displays a new-found confidence in his own abilities as a dramatist 'while he was here he would have to deal with the critics at home. How? By going his own way, that was the one thing to do, for there wasn't even a hint of guidance in what they said. They were no good' (A2, 155).

George Bernard Shaw and later the American critic George Jean Nathan. When O'Casey came to London in 1926 he was anxious to find out who were the leading playwrights of the period, and records in his autobiography that the two most frequently mentioned names were Noel Coward and Edgar Wallace. He duly went to see a number of West End productions of their plays, along with many others. At the end of his trawl, however, O'Casey claims that what struck him was that he could remember 'nothing' of these plays, neither the language nor the actors performances had made any lasting impression on him, since 'not a word not a gesture' remained in his mind afterwards. He was amazed at the 'fanfares of welcome and praise that were blown by many of the critics for these poor, pottering things [plays]'.²⁹

In the second section of his autobiography *Rose and Crown* (1952), published long after the rift with Yeats had been healed, O'Casey praises Yeats's writings about the English theatre, particularly his article in the *Irish Statesman*:

All exploitation of the life of the wealthy, for the eye and ear of the poor and half poor, in plays,... is a travesty of the life of the rich...it impoverishes and vulgarises the imagination, showing a life that is all display and hurry, passion without emotion,

²⁹ A2 261.

emotion without intellect, and where there is nothing stern and solitary.³⁰

The inclusion of these particular remarks of Yeats elucidates O'Casey's own problematic relationship with naturalism as a dramatic form detailing his own view that theatre was an art form catering to the masses in a distorted way. Yeats crystallises what O'Casey, from the vantage point of 1952, believes himself to have been doing in 1928-29. O'Casey felt himself to have been grappling with naturalism as a dramatic form because he was troubled by the politics of naturalism. He agreed with Yeats that the rich were being misrepresented in the plays on the English stage, and was determined not to 'exploit' the life of the working-class similarly in his own work, despite regular critical opinion to the contrary. As, for example, Austin Clarke, comments:

Mr O'Casey's work is a crude exploitation of our poorer people in the Anglo-Irish tradition that is now moribund.³¹

O'Casey's attempts to re-work naturalism stem from the recognition that he does not want to use the form in the same way that it had been used by Coward, Wallace or Sheriff, since he agrees with Yeats that such naturalism encourages emotional responses which are

³⁰ W.B. Yeats 'A People's Theatre: A letter to Lady Gregory' in *The Irish Statesman* 29/11/19, 547.

³¹ 'The Plough and the Stars' in *Irish Statesman* 20/2/26, 740.

false rather than deeply felt or in any sense 'real'.

O'Casey's reference to Yeats's views on theatre in *Rose and Crown* (the volume of his autobiography that covers the years of O'Casey's arrival in London), is revealing.

O'Casey sees Yeats expressing his own politically left-wing views of theatrical form:

The Theatre grows more elaborate, developing the player at the expense of the poet, developing the scenery at the expense of the player, ... doing whatever is easiest rather than what is most noble and shaping imaginations before the footlights as behind, that are stirred to excitements that belong to it and not to life; until at last life turns to other things, content to leave specialised energy to weaklings and triflers, to those in whose body is the least quantity of herself.³²

Yeats is elucidating a fear that the audience will become alienated from the theatre in quite a Marxian sense here; and O'Casey's comment on this quotation from Yeats is 'you took the words out of my mouth'.³³ O'Casey, was in fact, seeking to prevent his drama becoming what Baudrillard has called the 'simulacrum', a false representation of emotion rather than the emotion itself.³⁴ While it would be a nonsense to suggest that drama can present 'real' emotion, what O'Casey and

³² A2 262.

³³ A2, 262. O'Casey furthers this Marxist interpretation of Yeats, since he goes on to say 'Ah, Yeats, a ray from the red star had pierced your ear, although you didn't know it then', 263.

³⁴ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, 1994).

Yeats are pointing out is that this is what bad naturalist drama presumes to do; the audience begins to believe that naturalist drama provides true emotions. O'Casey and Yeats both agree that such drama is dangerous and damaging, and potentially threatens the survival of theatre as a meaningful genre. Yet at the same time Yeats and O'Casey are left with a conundrum; how is the audience to be made aware that their perceptions of naturalism are being challenged?

With hindsight, it is difficult to see how two dramatists who appear to agree on the ideological principles of the theatre, could so radically disagree about the way they see this being achieved in theatrical practice. Ideologically, *The Silver Tassie* should have been a point of union for the two dramatists, for here O'Casey seeks to engender genuine emotion in audiences by means of a new use of dramatic form.

O'Casey recalls Andrew E. Malone's comments on *The Plough and the Stars* in *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well*, the first volume of his autobiography:

The plays said one, are naught but a series of Tableaux Vivants; O'Casey is purely a photographic artist. He is striving after a literary quality of speech, which is entirely alien to the Dublin slum-dwellers; ...The career of O'Casey induces fear for the future...His plays are phases of Dublin life as abnormal as they are

transient...Is O'Casey a dramatist or is he but a combination of the cinema and the dictaphone?³⁵

The critics cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, O'Casey is condemned as inaccurately giving a 'literary' quality to the real speech of Dubliners, and on the other hand is dismissed as merely able to record real speech accurately. Such tension between art and naturalism is at the core of critical dissension to O'Casey's work. He is continually criticised for the inaccuracy of his mimesis and yet he is constantly rejecting the mimetic principle in his work. Such comments will rear their head again in the critical reactions to *Within the Gates*.³⁶

O'Casey was similarly disturbed by critical rejections of his earlier plays. R.M. Fox for example, referred to O'Casey's early work as 'the Drama of the Dregs'.³⁷ Fox suggested that these 'slum plays' were acceptable as 'entertainment' but that in the theatre 'truth was wanted as well as entertainment'.³⁸ The vexed question of what constitutes artistic 'truth' was, of course, exactly what O'Casey felt he was trying to dramatise.

³⁵ A2, 154.

³⁶ See chapter 5 below.

³⁷ A2, 154.

³⁸ Ibid., 154.

Yeats's letter of rejection begins by commenting upon this issue of O'Casey's perceived lack of naturalism:

You have no subject. You were interested in the Irish Civil War... you were exasperated by what you had seen or heard as a man is by what happens under his window... But you are not interested in the Great War; you never stood on its battlefields or walked in its hospitals and so you write out of your opinions.³⁹

Mary Fitzgerald notes in her study of the reader's reports of plays submitted to the Abbey that Yeats regularly rejected plays with the criticism that they lacked 'subject';⁴⁰ and this was one of the stated principles from the Abbey's 'Advice to Playwrights' (presumed to have been written by Yeats), 'a work of art can have but one subject.'⁴¹ But the criticism that O'Casey writes out of his own 'opinions' seems at odds with another tenet of the 'Advice to Playwrights', that plays suitable for performance should display 'some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer.'⁴² From this point of view O'Casey could be said to be doing exactly what Yeats wanted, though it may be that Yeats felt that the focus was not Irish

³⁹ W. B Yeats (1954), 741 (20/4/28).

⁴⁰ Fitzgerald (1982), 80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75. An extract from the 'Advice to Playwrights' is included in Fitzgerald's article.

enough, since the above phrase continues 'or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference'.⁴³ This would be consistent with O'Casey's deliberate effort to move away from the specific national, or rather regional focus of Dublin, and to look for a more international scope for his drama.

O'Casey is incensed at criticism of *The Silver Tassie* from Yeats, considering it 'impudently ignorant', and poses the obvious response: 'Now, how do you know that I am not interested in the Great War? Perhaps because I never mentioned it to you.'⁴⁴ He then offers a list of people with whom he has discussed the war, including Lady Gregory, and (of particular interest because of the portrayal of the doctor in the play) a surgeon who had served at the front. O'Casey also asks how it would be possible for anyone 'with eyes to see, ears to hear and hands to handle' *not* to be interested in the war. But it is this vexed question of naturalism that keeps coming back between the two men, for O'Casey asks incredulously:

do you really mean that no one should or could write about or speak about the war because one has not stood on its battlefields? Were you serious when you dictated that - really serious now?...Was Shakespeare at Actium or...G.B.Shaw in the boats with the French...when

⁴³ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁴ L1, 271(? April 1928 ?[sic]).

St Joan and Dunois made the attack that relieved Orleans? And does war consist only of battlefields? ⁴⁵

He is rightly amazed that a playwright should be restricted only to what he knows, for O'Casey sees that way lies artistic and dramatic stagnation. Yet conversely he is at pains to assure Yeats that he did talk to the wounded and walk around the hospital wards. But it is clear that he saw *The Silver Tassie* as more naturalistic than any of the plays that he had seen thus far at the Abbey, including his own plays.

G.B. Shaw, who famously supported the play with the comment 'What a hell of a play! Of course the Abbey should have produced it', ⁴⁶ gets to the heart of the problem immediately, for his comments suggest that he also felt Yeats did not understand it. Shaw writes:

If Yeats had said 'It's too savage, I can't stand it', he would have been in order...Yeats himself...is not a man of this world: and when you hurl an enormous chunk of it at him he dodges it, small blame to him. ⁴⁷

⁴⁵ L1, 271(? April 1928 ? [sic]).

⁴⁶ L1, 284. (19/6/28). George Bernard Shaw *Collected Letters* do not include this letter to O'Casey; it is only referred to in an annotation in Shaw's letter to Nancy Astor on 9/2/34. The annotation reads: 'GBS had read all of O'Casey's plays and seen London performances of a few of them, notably *The Silver Tassie* ('What a hell of a play!' he wrote to O'Casey), produced by Charles Cochran in 1929', see *George Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1926-1950* (ed.) Dan H. Laurence (London, 1988), 364-365.

⁴⁷ L1, 285 (19/6/28).

Shaw disagreed with all of Yeats's criticisms; and Shaw is aware that it is not only in the second act that O'Casey dispenses with 'naturalism' as the contemporary critics might understand it, as he remarks in a letter to

O'Casey:

The first act is not a bit naturalistic; it is deliberately fantastic chanted poetry. This is intensified to a climax into the second act. Then comes a ruthless return for the last two acts to the fiercest ironic naturalism.⁴⁸

Along with Yeats's rejection of the play's faulty naturalism, his second major objection to the play is that 'there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action'.⁴⁹ Yeats thinks that this is an unfortunate mistake on the part of O'Casey and has not recognised that it is in fact a deliberate choice. For Yeats, the theme of the Great War had dominated the characters in the play.

The problem of dominance of theme was a fault that Yeats found in many of the plays that he did not like at the Abbey.⁵⁰ With O'Casey's play there are two possible reasons for his dissatisfaction with the Great War as a theme; first, the danger of propagandist drama and secondly the fact that World War One was

⁴⁸ Lady Gregory (1946), 110-111.

⁴⁹ Yeats (1954), 741.

⁵⁰ Fitzgerald (1982), 80.

not perceived as a subject that was 'Irish' enough for the Abbey theatre.⁵¹ If only O'Casey could get back to great characterisation, Yeats seems to feel, the play would be saved: 'your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself the main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end'.⁵²

The most irritating phrase for O'Casey here must have been 'the past', for Yeats fails to realise that O'Casey is trying to extend and develop from the way he wrote in the past. O'Casey's great innovative success in *The Silver Tassie* is to allow the War to dominate the presentation of the individual characters:

The mere greatness of the war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background...the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak.⁵³

For Yeats it is more real to reduce the history of the world to a backdrop, in front of which the small focused world of the individual can be said to speak for all.

O'Casey confesses that he does not understand what Yeats means by 'wallpaper', but makes it clear that he considers that the kind of drama Yeats seems to favour

⁵¹ See, for example, W.B.Yeats's 'Samhain' lectures 1904, in *Irish Dramatic Movement* (ed.) Mary Fitzgerald and Richard J. Finneran, (Basingstoke, 2003).

⁵² Yeats (1954), 741.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 741.

reveals nothing about life. In fact it obscures real life, just as do the plays at the Abbey: 'that is exactly what the Abbey dramatists are trying to do - building up, building up [sic] little worlds of wallpaper and hiding striding life behind it all'.⁵⁴ Abbey drama, the kind of drama Yeats is encouraging O'Casey to write here, is not 'real' drama as far as O'Casey is concerned.

O'Casey defends his lack of dominating character as the point of distinctive success of the play: "'The Silver Tassie'", because of, or in spite of, the lack of dominating character is a greater work than "The Plough and the Stars".⁵⁵ His letter to the *Irish Times* of 9th June 1928, under the title 'Mr O'Casey replies to his critics' underlines how conscious O'Casey was of critical opinion and the fragility of his self-belief in that he felt he *must* answer them. The finale of this 'reply' indicates his own realisation that there is a gap between his own understanding of naturalism and that of the Abbey directors: 'the funniest thing of all to me is the declaration by Doctors Starkie and Yeats that O'Casey has written something abstract and elusive'.⁵⁶ Clearly

⁵⁴ L1, 272 (? April 1928 ?[sic]).

⁵⁵ L1, 272 ([?] April 1928 ?[sic]).

⁵⁶ L1, 276 (9/6/28).

O'Casey felt that he had written something entirely concrete and straightforward.

O'Casey believed that a drama without a dominating character is more 'real', and his political outlook as a communist is in part responsible for this viewpoint. George Lukács's combative statement that 'Modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie, modern drama is bourgeois drama'⁵⁷ seems to echo O'Casey's dissatisfaction with the drama of Coward, Sherriff and others that he saw in London on the English stage in 1928. Lukács also makes unfavourable comparisons of modern drama with Elizabethan drama, which O'Casey himself greatly admired. For Lukács, all classes are represented equally in Renaissance drama, but in modern drama, 'the dramatic characters are derived on the whole from a single class...The lower classes merely take part in comic episodes or they are on hand simply so that their inferiority will highlight the refinements of the heroes.'⁵⁸

The most striking challenges to naturalism in the play involve comedy. O'Casey himself was tired of accusations that he simply wrote sketches, or revues:

⁵⁷ 'The Sociology of Modern Drama' by George Lukács trans. Lee Baxandall in *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (ed.) Eric Bentley (London, 1990), 425.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 425-6.

and he was equally weary of comments such as this one about *The Plough and The Stars* from the Irish poet and critic Fred O'Higgins: 'His [O'Casey's] is a technique, in the quintessence of an all-Abbey burlesque, intensified by diversions [sic] and 'Handy Andy' incidents'.⁵⁹ In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey's characters refuse to become a means of re-enforcing the class system, by allowing the working classes simply to entertain and granting the middle classes the dramatic action in which to ennoble themselves. He had already turned such class association on its head in his portrayal of Bentham in *Juno and the Paycock*. But if we look at one of these apparently merely comic episodes in *The Silver Tassie*, we can see it as comic but also very far from the 'music-hall' status accorded it by the critics.

The scene of the ringing telephone takes up six pages of script and forms approximately ten minutes of action. This seems in itself quite a substantial amount of time to allocate to merely comic 'business' in the final act of the play. Harry, paralysed in the war, has been taken to the Avondale Football club dance, now in his wheelchair. There is the obvious painful irony of the two returns to this location, the one which opened the play, the scene of his triumphal return with the winning football

⁵⁹ 'The Plough and The Stars' in *Irish Statesman* 6/3/26, 797.

cup and Jessie on his shoulders, and the other, almost its entire opposite, before the audience now. This time Harry's former girlfriend, Jessie Tate, has aligned herself with Barney, the new hero, who has the V.C. for rescuing Harry from certain death. Harry pursues them in his wheelchair, not wanting to leave them alone together, and Jessie shuns Harry while Barney pleads with Harry to leave them alone to dance together. Harry, however, will not let either of them forget the difference between his own physical situation and theirs:

HARRY: To the dancing, for the day cometh when no man can play. And legs were made to dance, to run, to jump, to carry you from one place to another; but mine can neither walk, nor run, nor jump, nor feel the merry motion of a dance. But stretch me on the floor fair on my belly, and I will turn over on my back; then wriggle back again onto my belly, and that's more than a dead, dead man can do!⁶⁰

Harry is obviously placing the responsibility for his current physical presence upon Barney, who saved him from death at the front and figures himself in this animal state, writhing around the floor like a worm.⁶¹ The play makes each individual responsible for the condition of Harry, whether it be the man who fired the bomb that trapped Harry in the rubble, or Barney, the man who

⁶⁰ O'Casey (1985), 234. All subsequent references to this edition of the play are cited in the text.

⁶¹ This atavistic image of Harry is similar to the figuring of Boyle at the end of Donmar Warehouse production of *Juno* in 1999 (see chapter 2), where he was reduced to an embryonic state by curling on stage like a foetus.

rescued him from the ruins; each individual who played his role of enemy or hero is responsible for the position of Harry in that room on that occasion and for his vision of himself as less than a man.

Following this bleak moment in Act 4, the action moves to an apparently 'comic' episode. Critics tend to see this episode as placed here to lighten the mordant and relentlessly naturalist tone of the play's unswerving, even self-indulgent, focus upon the practical fact of Harry's legless body. The incident with the telephone, however, carries on the seemingly relentless naturalistic tone, through the technique of comedy, which arguably increases the quality of hopeless sadness that pervades the later acts of the play in particular. Sylvester and Simon, the new variation on the comic duos of Boyle and Joxer and Fluther and Peter as far as the critics were concerned, have witnessed some of the interactions between Harry, Barney and Jessie. They remark upon the ill-advised nature of Harry's visit there, pointing out that it would have been better if he had not come at all. Harry is reduced to ornamental status by the men in their speech: he has become an example of the wounded soldier, and as such needs his proper setting, like some kind of perverse museum piece:

SIMON: ...it would have been better, I think, if Harry hadn't come here tonight.

SYLVESTER: I concur in that Simon. What's a decoration to a hospital is an anxiety here.

SIMON: To carry life and colour to where there is nothing but the sick and helpless is right; but to carry the sick and helpless to where there's nothing but life and colour is wrong.

(The telephone bell rings) (ST, 105).

The play is clearly asking a 'real' question here:

What can be done with the wounded, the injured and all those who have suffered in the war if they cannot be brought to where there is 'life'? Are we to forbid them entry to a world that they thought they were fighting to protect? Are we suggesting that they must inhabit another planet now, because they are injured and we do not wish to be reminded of our own roles in the creation and continuation of a war which made them different from us?

O'Casey's use of the telephone in this play pre-figures Salvador Dali's use of this visual metaphor of broken communication in his work immediately before the Second World War. The telephone functions as a condensed metaphor of the recurring themes of frustrated communications and misunderstandings between human beings on an intimate and private level that have wider implications for national and international communications.

The telephone begins to ring at this moment in the action, as if it starts to dramatise the slow rise of the First World War itself. Rather than reading the telephone as simply a comic device, we can read it as a continuation of the play's critique of the war. Sylvester acknowledges that the phone is ringing, but Simon reassures him that someone else will answer it (ST, 106). They try to resume their original conversation about Harry, but still the phone rings and distracts them. Again they reassure themselves that someone else will deal with it. This exchange echoes the chronology of the development of WW1 itself, a small Balkan war brewing slowly, the whole of Europe knows it must respond, each nation hoping that someone else will deal with it. The blind man, Teddy Foran, a soldier who lost his sight in the war, feels his way to the door to tell the two men (who can see and hear) that the phone is ringing (ST, 106). Foran thinks that Sylvester and Simon have not heard it, but they acknowledge that they have. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the play implies that even a blind man could have perceived the situation escalating in 1914.

The blind man Teddy, wants them to answer the phone and communicate with those at the other end. Eventually, Mrs Foran enters to inform Simon and

Sylvester that Susie Monican, their nurse, wants one of them to answer the phone and let her know if it is anything important (ST, 107). Again a parallel with the developments of the international response to the Austrian crisis can be seen here: others are waiting to see how the situation will turn out. Simon is nervous because he has never used a phone before and Sylvester was flustered on the only other occasion that he has tried, but Simon and Mrs Foran prevail upon him to try again (ST, 109). There is confusion and they become snappy and angry with one another as they try to establish the best way to answer the phone, in a comic parallel to the international squabbling about how best to control Prussian ambitions. Eventually Simon lifts the receiver and begins to shout and talk at the earpiece, carrying out a faux conversation, before admitting to the others that he could not hear anything. Simon tries to interpret the noises that he hears, but none of them knows how to make any sense out of what they hear:

SIMON: ...Something like wine, or dine, or shine, or something-an' a thing that's hummin'....

MRS FORAN: They couldn't be talkin' about bees, could they?

SYLVESTER (scornfully): Bees! No, they couldn't be talking about bees! That kind of talk, Mrs Foran, only tends to confuse matters (ST, 110).

In the face of all this confusion, rather than admit either to each other or anyone else that they do not know what to do, they decide to put the phone back and to 'slip away' if it rings again:

MRS FORAN: Yes, put it back, an' say it never rang
(ST, 111).

This apparently comic scene with its banal commentary thus functions to re-enforce the previous scene between Harry, Barney and Jessie. The onstage and offstage audiences cannot pretend anymore that the war did not happen. Harry and Teddy Foran are back home and whatever event is publicly staged for them, like this dance, they cannot truly join in as they would have done before the war. Teddy Foran will throw no more plates at his wife for he cannot even see to find a ringing telephone let alone his wife's favourite Delph dish that he enjoyed breaking during a visit home in the war (another onstage event that the onstage audience have to acknowledge as illustrating the effects that the war is having on the behaviour of its men). Harry will not dance with Jessie, nor carry her on his shoulders, nor win any more cups at football. The onstage audience are discomfited by the presence of Harry following Barney and Jessie in his wheelchair, because it reminds them that everything has changed. They cannot change

historical events or put the war back, like the phone handset, and pretend it never happened. They cannot put the men back in the same environment and pretend they are the same men who went to war, and that it is only their bodies that have changed.

Finally the comic coda to this episode puts the blame for the misunderstood phone-call firmly at the other end of the line. Sylvester replaces the receiver and the stage directions tell us that they all '*look*' at the phone for a few moments, focusing both their attention and the attention of the audience in the auditorium upon the phone as object of communication. Mrs Foran breaks the silence: 'Curious those at the other end of the telephone couldn't make themselves understood' (ST, 111). This is too heavily ironic to be merely a comic remark. A telephone, the symbol of new modern technology, should function to bring Ireland into closer contact with the rest of the world, no longer dependent upon Britain as her nearest neighbour. Instead the phone has become an object of frustrated communication, bringing nothing but confusion.

O'Casey, like Dali ten years later, suggests an ambivalent attitude to modern technology, sensing that it is not simply the addition of a new infrastructure that will automatically change society in positive ways. Modern

technology often fails in its aspiration to connect people, for it is not enough in and of itself to put people in touch; it is the attitudes and outlook of individuals which have to change first. Those who are calling should be able to make themselves understood, says Sylvester. But the play suggests that the relations between nations should be dynamic, involving a willingness by all concerned to make the effort to understand.

When we cannot understand we seek to blame others, and a common theme in O'Casey's work is the acceptance of personal responsibility which remains a focus of this play. It is not up to others to 'study an' study it then, or abide by the consequences, for we can't be wastin' time teachin' them' (ST, 111), as Sylvester suggests. It is precisely this kind of evasion of personal responsibility that the play highlights here. The whole point is that we must *want* to teach others and develop a desire to understand that which we do not know, rather than simply pretend that the knowledge is not relevant to our lives. The play suggests that private evasions have national consequences.

'Individualism' and the fracturing of character

In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey is also seeking to avoid another of the faults that Lukács finds in modern drama,

namely 'the drama of individualism',⁶² and it is for this reason that O'Casey chooses to eschew the creation of the one 'dominating character' that Yeats and other critics had seen as one of the most successful parts of the dramatic form of *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*. In seeking to make his drama different from other plays at the Abbey and in London, which Lukács would dub 'bourgeois',⁶³ O'Casey, rather than strictly using traditions of melodrama to make his work more 'popular' as Stephen Watt has suggested, uses these to remove his work from 'bourgeois' theatrical conventions altogether. For O'Casey melodrama is not simply 'popular'; it is a means of reflecting the diversity of Dublin characters and their lives. Melodrama allows a plurality in drama - of character, action, comedy, theme - and it is this diversity that enables O'Casey to succeed in depicting 'real' working-class life. A dramatic focus upon one person, or one family, a concentration on one episode of an individual life is, for O'Casey, a restriction in terms of both theme and style. This was, for him, middle-class or bourgeois drama, closer to Coward and others that he

⁶² Lukács in Bentley (1990), 430.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 430.

had seen when he first arrived in London than to a true dramatisation of Irish working-class life.

His rejection of this 'individualism' in *The Silver Tassie*, is furthermore, connected to a series of political issues that the play raises about 'modern' humanity, the development of personality and the origin of conflict. O'Casey, like his contemporaries the modernist novelists, tries to show through the form of his work that personality is the locus of contemporary confusion. This is the 'real' problem that O'Casey feels is not being represented in modern drama; this is the kind of problem that 'naturalism', as it was then conceived as a dramatic form, could not hope to capture on stage. O'Casey would have endorsed Lukács's distinction here:

the old drama, by which we mean primarily that of the Renaissance, was the drama of great individuals, today's is that of individualism. In other words, the realization of personality, its *per se* expression in life, could in no wise become a theme of earlier drama, since personality was not yet problematic. It is in the drama of today the chief and most central problem.⁶⁴

It is the 'problematic' nature of personality that obsesses O'Casey in *The Silver Tassie*. He wants to get away from the strong comic individual as a character because this encourages the wrong kind of engagement from his audience. They relax into forming a connection with the character and are thus tempted by the easy

⁶⁴ Ibid., 433.

enjoyment of focusing upon a personality at the expense of engaging critically with the play, thus evading its political and ideological issues.

Through the portrayal of Harry and the other soldiers in the play, O'Casey conveys the confusion of personality and values which takes place when the individual has to negotiate changes of moral position that are dictated by the public state. In the Expressionist Act 2 for example, the action is set with deliberate vagueness 'In the war zone' (ST, II, 41). This is not the defined specificity of a trench or a dug-out, the theatrical space which might be said to serve as the spatial replacement of the drawing-room in any middle-class drama about the war, notably R.C. Sheriff's *Journey's End* for example. This broad phrase, detached from any particular kind of war experience that 'the dug-out' or 'in the trenches' would evoke, removes the potential for a class divide in the response to the action. As with *The Plough*, O'Casey's plays do not allow the audience to avoid an emotional engagement with the war they are witnessing on stage. This representation of war will speak to all members of the audience. The responses to the action would draw on a wider range of war experience from the audience members: those of combatants and non-combatants, of officer and non-

officer class. O'Casey tries to draw all his audience as quickly as possible into his war environment and to prevent any audience member with a different kind of war experience feeling alienated from his representation of the war.

Certainly O'Casey is aware that the experience would be articulated differently by its various participants. Gone from O'Casey's version of war are the two-handed dialogues between two characters, a quiet, manly, one-to-one exchange of comments born out of personal responses to the war beyond, and perfectly coherently expressed, despite the battle raging all around, through the language of the English public school. In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey attempts to change the formulation of the expression of real thought by replacing prose speech with verse. Through this 'chanted poetry' the thoughts of the men at the battlefield are enunciated, not as a coherent, clearly argued and highly organised rhetorical exercise, but as a woven extract (though still highly organised) of inter-related thoughts and concerns from a broad group of soldiers, rather than from one or two:

1st SOLDIER [nodding towards The Croucher]:
One more scrap, an' 'e'll be Ay one in the
kingdom of the Bawmy.

2nd SOLDIER: Perhaps they have forgotten.

3rd SOLDIER: Forgotten.

4th SOLDIER: Forgotten us.

1st SOLDIER: If the blighters at the front would
tame their grouching.

THE REST: Tame their grouching.

2nd SOLDIER: And the wounded cease to stare
their silent scorning.

THE REST: Pass us by carried cushy on the
stretchers (ST, 207).

Here we see an attempt to express what is going on in the mind of soldiers at group level in order to represent the national male consciousness. O'Casey is experimenting with what is not usually seen or expressed, to look at what the public actions of individuals might reveal and seek to conceal about their private thoughts. In this play their speech represents not only things they might say but how they might feel, a presentation of feelings that the men might believe it disloyal or unheroic to express openly: 'And the shirkers sife at home coil'd up at ease./Shells for us and pianos for them/Fur coats for them and winding sheets for us' (202). O'Casey eschews the creation of one dominant character with whom the audience could identify easily and has removed Harry, who had the potential to become the central character of this play, to blend in with the throng of other, previously unknown, characters.

This makes it much more difficult for the audience to engage with the characters, but O'Casey does not want his audience to follow an easy route.

The replacement of God by the state in war is a recurrent motif in this act, and the scene is significantly set in the 'ruin of what was once a monastery' (stage directions, ST, II,41). Furthermore, the individual has taken over the role of God through the endorsement of the state decision to decide who should live or die. The stage set confirms that, through such an endorsement, man has positioned himself as an equal to God. The stage directions stipulate that 'Almost opposite' the damaged crucifix in the monastery is the figure of Barney, tied to a gunwheel in a potent re-figuration of Christ on the cross. This could be any soldier, and the implication is that they are all suffering since war is crucifying all soldiers. Morality has been replaced by the 'amorality' of war, which causes only suffering and is witnessed in the 'crucifixion' of Barney and the perversion of the private morality of the soldiers who are put in the position of taking a life – which their religious morality tells them only God should do.

The placing of the howitzer gun 'where the span of the arch should be' (ST,II,42), suggests that this is also where the altar should be; and O'Casey's ironic use

of the imagery of the church is bitterly critical of the ways in which religion is used to justify war and of the failure of the church and religion to stop the carnage. Instead of the celebration of God, the war zone offers a place of tribute to the folly of man. We can almost here the echo of Juno's comment 'What can a god do agen the stupidity of men?'⁶⁵ reverberating here.

The blending of the actions of the state with the individual and religious collusion in the justification of war is seen in the questions of the unnamed men in this act:

1st SOLDIER: But wy're we here that's what I want to know!

2nd SOLDIER: God only knows-or else, perhaps, a red -cap.

1st SOLDIER (chanting): Tabs'll murmur, 'em an' 'aw, an'sy: "You're'ere because you're Point nine double o, the sixth platoon an' forty-eight battalion, The Yellow Plumes that pull'd a bow at Crecy, And gave fame a leg up on the path to glory:

[...]

1st SOLDIER (chanting): The padre gives a fag an' softly whispers: "Your king, your country an' your muvver 'as you 'ere." An' the last time 'ome on leave, I awsk the missus: "The good God up in heaven, Bill, 'e knows, An I gets the seperytion moneys reg'lar".

(He sits up suddenly.)

But wy'r we 'ere, wy'r we 'ere,-that's wot I wants to know?

⁶⁵ O'Casey (1985), 99.

THE REST (chanting sleepily): Why 's 'e'ere,
why's 'e 'ere - that's wot 'e wants to know!
(ST, 46-47)

Such exchanges exemplify the confusion between public and private rationales for the presence of the soldiers in the war zone. The frustration of the men is evident, displayed in their anxiety that these public and private reasons cannot be reconciled into a coherent or convincing linguistic response to their own self-questioning demands to discover the 'real' reason for their presence at the battlefield. The men ask, 'Why are we here?', and reveal that it is their priest who first made the links between god and state for them, artfully concealing that one has now replaced the other at the battlefield. This blending of the public role of the state and the private role of the man in war is affirmed through the cry of the '1st Soldier'. He quotes the words of the priest, the representative of organised religion at the front, who has told him that "Your king, your country an' your muvver 'as you 'ere" (ST , II, 47), appealing to the soldier's loyalty on two levels: his public duty to the nation state and his private emotional commitment to his home and family symbolised by his mother. The priest's reassurance is a tacit demonstration of the consent of the Church.

In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey is trying to widen the boundaries of naturalism, not simply by presenting action in the war but through an attempt to represent the male unconscious, allowing the soldiers to evoke their thoughts during their staged reality of life at the front. Act 2 seeks to express what is going through the mind of soldiers, not only at the level of individual characters but at group level, representing the male consciousness in war. Nora in *The Plough and the Stars* spoke of the fear that she saw in the eyes of the men at the barricades. In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey allows the men their own voice and lets them air their anxieties and concerns in front of the audience themselves, rather than allowing their emotions to be reflected in reportage. Such a staging functions to forbid the audience an escape into the comfort of hearsay. The men orate their own feelings and it become more difficult for the audience to evade them. Their speeches offer a presentation of unconscious feelings that they might believe disloyal to express openly: 'Fur coats for them and winding sheets for us' (ST, 202). This kind of exploration of the male psyche reminds us that ^{although} O'Casey is particularly sympathetic ^{to women,} he is interested in the responses ^{of both sexes, and how these} to politics and ideology can be gendered.

Act 1 of *The Silver Tassie* would seem to follow the style of the openings of previous O'Casey plays, or at least Yeats, Lennox Robinson and Lady Gregory all read it as such. Act 1 does seem to present a typical O'Casey environment: the opening scene is the living-room of a working-class family. Neighbours such as Simon Norton are seated at the fireside while others, such as Susie and Mrs Foran, regularly call in, allowing Mrs Heegan no privacy. Living conditions are communal: Mrs Foran uses Mrs Heegan's fire to fry her sausages, while Susie cleans Harry's gun for him before he returns to the front.

But O'Casey already begins to disrupt familiar naturalistic conventions through his portrayal of Susie. Susie's language and speeches, her erratic appearances on stage - popping up from behind chairs or through doors like a perverse Jane-in-the-box - is not a conventional portrayal of a young Irish girl in the manner of Minnie Powell or Mary Boyle. Susie becomes a kind of music-hall caricature of womanhood, resisting his earlier portrayals of woman as a tragic survivor (Juno Boyle), betrayed innocent (Minnie Powell or Mary Boyle), or woman driven mad by male misunderstanding (Nora Clitheroe). Instead, the Susie of Act 1 seems much closer to O'Casey's figuring of Bessie Burgess, with her

blend of the poetic and the prosaic, her portentous narrative commentary upon events and frequent message of doom:

SUSIE: (Chanting as she resumes the polishing of rifle) Man walketh in a vain shadow, an disquieteth himself in vain: He heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.

(She sends a chant in the direction of Sylvester and Simon, Susie coming close to the two men and sticking an angry face between them).

When the two of yous standin quiverin' together on the dhread day of the Last Judgement, how will the two of yous feel if you have nothin' to say but 'he broke his chain across his bisseps'? Then the two of you'll know that the wicked go down into hell, an' all the people who forget God!
(She listens a moment, and leaving down the rifle goes out by door left) (ST, 181-2).

Susie's personality in the play has been viewed as a confusing and perverse case of character reversal, which is hard to reconcile with the rest of the play. However, it is only confusing if we look at her as a representation of a 'real' woman. O'Casey's point is that we do not, indeed we cannot, construct Susie thus. She changes character; she is not a consistent 'real' person, but a dramatic device for O'Casey, and as such she can be changed and modified, depending upon her dramatic context. Susie can become the flirtatious nurse, provocatively dressed, in Act 3 because she has a more important function in that guise than she would have as

a god-fearing, frigid woman. Susie's language and costume function to underline the audience's awareness that there is something significant about her character change. She has abandoned her speech full of excessive religious chanting and speaks instead in prose vernacular. Susie even reminds the audience, and her audience of patients in the world of the play, that she is not the same woman that she was before the war began and this transformation is to be signalled through the use of her job in her title:

SUSIE: For the future during the period you are patients here, I am to be addressed as "Nurse Monican", and not as "Susie". Remember that, the pair of you, please (ST, 219).

As with O'Casey's construction of Pearse in *The Plough and The Stars*, the character of Susie leads the audience back out of the world of the play and the environment of the theatre and back into the real world outside. As I have suggested in Chapter 3, the re-contextualisation of Pearse's speeches in *The Plough* invites the audience to re-consider their logic and validity. In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey goes further and forces the audience to be actively engaged in the process of dramatic construction: they must assimilate Susie's changes and respond to them as they are happening. This is an integral part of O'Casey's

dramatic method. The audience cannot *learn* how to respond to Susie. They have no recourse to newspaper accounts or the reactions of other political figures, as they had to condition their response to Pearse. They must here decide for themselves how to respond to the character of Susie, at the time, in the theatre, during the course of the performance.

This formal 'fracturing' of Susie's character forces the audience of O'Casey's plays to re-think their preconception of the status and function of characterisation in general. But, it is more wide-ranging than that. O'Casey's experiments with characterisation in this play raise questions about the nature of naturalism and representation on stage.

The limitations of the constructed figure on stage can be seen as a source of power and control for the audience, since they can choose to accept or reject the delineation of character at any time throughout the production. The audience in this O'Casey play is thus constantly faced with the knowledge that they are watching an enactment rather than an entertainment. Caught in an environment where the theatrical conception of reality and imaginative construction is fluid, the audience has to work hard to establish a sense of naturalism in the play. Ultimately, the audience

cannot avoid engaging with their own reality as an audience throughout the play, forcing them to be constantly self-aware and alert. As Erving Goffman mentions:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation - this self - is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.⁶⁶

Goffman's work is concerned with the presentation of the self in real life here, but his application to O'Casey's presentation of Susie remains valid since the play asks the audience to consider the nature of Susie's representation as a 'real' character for the audience. The audience can decide whether they will 'credit' or 'discredit' Susie's character, or whether they have to dispense with the notion of crediting or discrediting characters altogether, fixing instead upon shifting representations of types or styles of being.

The changes that take place in what Susie's wears in *The Silver Tassie* demonstrates that the visual had a strong resonance for O'Casey even in plays as

⁶⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1959), 252-253.

early as *The Silver Tassie*. O'Casey's symbolic use of costume is an important trope in both *The Plough & The Stars* and *The Silver Tassie*. Katherine Worth has indicated the significance of costume in O'Casey's later plays,⁶⁷ but it is clear that it is also a significant feature of the plays from his 'early' period.

The use of Susie's costume also points to a possible Freudian interpretation of her behaviour (just as O'Casey was experimenting with using Freudian notions of unconscious thought in this play). Susie's outfits express her character but also suggest a psycho-sexual explanation of her change from repressed religious girl to a liberal, flirtatious and sexually uninhibited woman between acts one and three of the play. O'Casey was certainly interested in Freud, and the copy of *Moses and Monotheism* (London: Hogarth, 1939) in O'Casey's own library contains page markings in his own hand throughout the volume.⁶⁸ One passage in particular suggests that O'Casey may well have read Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1912), for he marks the passage where Freud refers back to the idea that religious beliefs

⁶⁷ Katherine Worth 'O'Casey's Dramatic Symbolism' in *Modern Drama* 4 1961-62 (ed.) A.C.Edwards, 261.

⁶⁸ I was able to consult O'Casey's copy of this volume, so marked, while his library was still at Shivaun O'Casey's home in London in 2001, as a couple of others in this chapter.

may be understood in the same way as the neurotic.

The sentence marked by O'Casey was:

From then on [since *Totem and Taboo*] I have never doubted that religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual, which are so familiar to us, as a return of long forgotten important happenings in the primaeval history of the human family, that they owe their obsessive character to that very origin and therefore derive their effect on mankind from the historical truth they contain.⁶⁹

O'Casey is obviously interested in the neurotic origin of Susie's obsessively religious character in Act 1. Susie's character is being used as a means to explore the nature and origin of religious obsession in a nation whose history is so much engaged in the nature of religious belief and conflict. The play invites the audience to think about Ireland's historical obsession with religion in a way that has some parallels with T.S. Eliot's use of myths and fertility rites in *The Waste Land*. But the play is also concerned to investigate how such obsessive behaviour can be used in war and how religious devotion can be exploited by both politicians and the Church.

Susie's status in the play is more than as a character. The zeal behind her religious devotion is not simply a character trait, but also prompts the audience to think about the historical complexity of human

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud 'Totem and Taboo' in *Moses and Monotheism* (London, 1939), 94.

engagement with religious practices that are used in the play. The obsessive nature of her religious concerns - 'We don't go down on our knees enough' - functions as both satire in itself and an ironic reflection on other kinds of religious distortion in the play, for example, the padre telling the soldiers that it is God who wants them at the front. Susie's religious obsession also forms a parallel with the distortion of religion in Act 2, where the chantings and pious dedication usually reserved for religious devotions and practices are transferred instead to the mantras of warfare and idolatry of the gun. The Howitzer receives the heretical chantings of the men, who sing to it: 'We believe in God and we believe in thee' (ST, 216).⁷⁰

Through Susie's costume, both the Ego and the Id are made manifest on stage, and the role of public events in the shaping of these private developments of libidinal consciousness is raised as a serious issue. War is regularly represented in literature, both in private diaries and in personal anecdote as a time of sexual freedom and liberation; and O'Casey chooses Susie's involvement in war as the catalyst for this moment in her personal psychological development. Susie is seen

⁷⁰ O'Casey had seen a production of Ernst Toller's *Masses and Man* in 1925 when his friend Gabriel Fallon performed in it for the Dublin Drama League. O'Casey admired Toller's work and Fallon believed that much of Act 2 of *The Silver Tassie* was inspired by Toller, see Fallon (1965), 47-8 and Murray (2004), 193.

before Harry in the play, during the first scene, but her character is intrinsically linked to his from the outset. She is witnessing the argument between Sylvester and Simon, while vigorously polishing Harry's gun. Even from the outset the dialogue and stage action are directed towards one character who is not yet on stage. This creates an atmosphere of anticipation and perceived importance concerning the character in both the offstage and onstage audience. But it seems that O'Casey counterpoints the characters of Harry and Susie, trying to avoid the dominance of either a male or a female character. Harry is not the only focus of action here, and Susie will be removed altogether from the action in Act 2. Nevertheless, throughout much of the play Harry and Susie are played off against one another: Harry the public soldier and Susie the private woman, both being affected by the same circumstances.

Susie's clothing is carefully described in the stage directions and immediately the repression that her dialogue will later reveal is hinted at in the restrictive skirt and blouse that she is seen wearing on stage. O'Casey characterises her physically as 'a girl of twenty-two, well shaped limbs and challenging breasts' (ST, 181). She is obviously a considerably attractive girl, but all of these physical attributes 'are defiantly hidden by a rather long

dark blue skirt and bodice buttoning up to the throat, relieved by a crimson scarf around her neck, knotted in front and falling down her bosom like a man's tie' (ST, 181). O'Casey uses the colour significantly here (just as he will do more overtly in his later plays) for Susie's repressed life force - her Id if we use Freudian terms - is signalled through the red scarf which 'defiantly' breaks out over her tightly buttoned clothing, revealing her desire to be free of convention, to take part fully in human existence and engage with human sexuality. The scarf, arranged like a *man's* tie, indicates her desire for a male dimension to her existence. At this moment in the play, before her active war service, Susie remains afraid of her individuality, her femininity and her sexual nature. The stage directions continue to underline this: 'She is undeniably pretty, but her charms are almost completely hidden by her sombre ill-fitting dress, and the rigid manner in which she has made up her hair declares her unflinching and uncompromising modesty' (ST, 181). Susie remains afraid, yet curious and interested. Her stance as the play opens is 'motionless, listening intently' (ST,181), for she is waiting for the arrival of Harry. This stage action parallels her psychological state: it suggests that she is waiting, watchfully, for the

male influence that she desires, is fascinated by, and yet fears.

Resisting Heroism

O'Casey is carrying on parallel investigations into human development in this play. While on the one hand he sets up and then removes Harry from the main focus as a character, tampering with the notion of the hero figure and the importance of the individual character in the structure of modern drama, he also emphasises the inescapable nature of the significance of the individual.

The development of Susie's character might be troubling for a feminist interpretation of the play, with its suggestion that a woman cannot have a fully developed sense of self until she has been 'completed' by a man and acquired 'male' characteristics of self-assertion and leadership, in this case, through the 'male' environment of war. Susie is not an entirely sympathetic figure and many aspects of her character remain problematic, but her connection to O'Casey's investigation into the influence of the concept of the 'death instinct' from a feminine perspective is intriguing.⁷¹

⁷¹ For a discussion of the relationship between femininity and death see Cannon Harris (Indiana, 2002). Harris explores 'The way Irish audiences and Irish playwrights constructed images of Irish women (17) alongside her examination of 'the mythology of sacrificial martyrdom' (10) with reference to the plays of Yeats, Synge and O'Casey's early plays. See 167-226.

O'Casey questions the perception that the 'death instinct' has its origins in ancient Irish history. In *The Politics of Irish Literature*, Malcolm Brown indicates that the death-loving Fenian must be a concept which Yeats himself either invented, or at the very least maintained, when it had already been long discredited by others:

It cannot be said that the Fenians lacked emotional depth or sensitivity, yet not the slightest interest in the death mystique can be found among any of their statements of purpose. They possessed, not always but often, great courage, a powerful sense of code, a full awareness of mortal danger always near; but they were not addicted to the operatic effect.... There is no literal historical referent for Yeats's "romantic" death-loving Fenian, so that its source must be sought elsewhere.⁷²

Brown discusses Yeats's hatred for what he called the influence of the 'good citizen' in the poetry of Davis for example, but shows that Yeats's own 'disembodied Irish spirituality, his "red rose-bordered hem," was another invention of this same "good citizen" approach to poetry and literature. The concept of male death in the cause of Irish nationalism may have been revived by Yeats when it had long been seen as redundant, for Brown sees this love of the death mystique as something Yeats handed down throughout the Irish Literary revival:

⁷² Malcolm Brown *The Politics of Irish Literature From Thomas Davis to W.B. Yeats* (London, 1972), 215.

Afterward it disintegrated rapidly, as its substance was discovered to be a figment, a fabrication out of old tunes and wisps for words for oblique motives. O'Casey wrote a war-weary play, *The Plough and The Stars*, to bid it farewell. Most other post-Yeatsians rejected it *in toto* and succeeded in getting it committed as insane. In the end it survived only underground, producing occasional painful oddities like *Pigeon Irish* by Francis Stuart, Yeats's last protégé.⁷³

Brown has identified O'Casey as distant from Yeats on this point, showing that he is critical of the ideology underlying the speeches of Pearse in *The Plough and the Stars*. *The Silver Tassie* is a more widespread critical attack on this kind of idealised martyrdom of the sacrifice of self for the nation.

What is significant here is that O'Casey has not finished with this theme in *The Plough and the Stars*. The rejection of martyrdom as a perceived pre-requisite for any claim to love and support for your nation remains a central concern of *The Silver Tassie*, and this too is part of Yeats's anger at the play and an aspect of his rejection of the work. In tandem with Yeats's rejection of the play because it was not Irish enough, it seems that the opposite is also true. The play was *too* Irish in its criticism of the theme of martyrdom. The implication of Brown's comments here is that the problematic status of martyrdom in Irish literature led to a gradual decline in its use as a literary construct, resulting in a gradual literary

⁷³ Ibid., 217.

rejection of martyrdom by most writers. But Yeats, it seems, was still working over martyrdom long after others had dispensed with it: 'Unruffled by the tainted heredity of the Irish death mystique, Yeats handed it on down with his recommendation to the literary movement he founded'.⁷⁴ O'Casey's work is therefore part of a wider literary critique of martyrdom and can be seen as being at the forefront of what today would be called post-colonial interpretations of Ireland. His plays were a rejection of a monolithic 'Irishness' and an attempt to embrace the plurality of Irish, as well as other national identities.

Most significant for my argument is that O'Casey uses dramatic form to continue the interrogation of this motivation towards death. As with *Juno, Nora and Rosie*, O'Casey takes the woman of Ireland figure and subverts the audience's expectations of her character and behaviour. The strangeness of Susie's character in Act 1 is deliberate. O'Casey wants his audience to see through her to the ridiculous nature of what she represents - the notion of dying for your country. O'Casey's play asks what about living for your country?

⁷⁴ Ibid, 217.

Is this possible in a nation, whose psyche is so closely tied to the notion of death as a gesture of nationalism?⁷⁵

The characters of Susie and Harry are thus part of this rejection of both the cult of the hero and its association with the death mystique. Susie is the specifically feminine rejection, and is part of O'Casey's continuing re-inscription of the figure of the woman of Ireland in his drama. We have seen O'Casey re-working the female representations of nation in Juno, Nora, Rosie and Bessie in Chapters 2 & 3. If the audience reaction to his critique of heroism in *The Plough* focused deliberately on the distorted representation of Pearse, now in *The Silver Tassie* he focuses on the ideology of heroism itself.

Susie's strangeness and obsession with death can clearly be seen from her first speech in the play, which she utters in the least naturalistic manner that O'Casey can find for her in this naturalistic setting of a front living room. As we have already seen, and what has often been ignored in criticism of this play, the non-naturalistic dialogue begins in the first act. It is Susie who begins the incantations as part of her ordinary

⁷⁵ Cf. Macintosh (1994), 30: 'Death in Ireland...is markedly different from the 'hidden' death that Aries and others have identified as the characteristic feature of 'modern' death in the West. It remains a public concern both on account of the rural nature of Irish society and because its political potential is still recognised and exploited'. For a further discussion on death in Ireland see Nina Witoszek *The Irish Funerary Tradition* (Galway, 1990).

speech; immediately marking her out as dramatically distinctive. Susie is never allowed to establish herself as a 'real' character; her first appearance identifies her status as symbolic rather than 'real'. This also helps to explain Susie's dramatic 'character change' in Act 3, which is only unusual if we think of her as a 'real' person. As it is not unusual for a metaphor to resonate different meanings throughout a poem, so in *The Silver Tassie* the audience has to become adept at 're-reading' Susie's character each time they encounter her.

O'Casey has moved the focus of the audience further away from a concentration on any one character in *The Silver Tassie* than he did in any of his previous plays: but he recognises that however much he wants to make the audience think, he cannot leave them to do all the work themselves. When O'Casey re-wrote the ending of the play for his edition of the *Collected Plays* in 1949 after seeing Raymond Massey's production of the play in London in 1929 – as we will see - his critique of heroism is made explicit.

There are episodes of structural repetition that the audience may have expected O'Casey to make use of in this play: for example, Harry's return to his regiment as an injured soldier at the battlefield - possibly carried by his friend Barney (who we learn only later in the play

had rescued Harry from certain death); Harry's return home from the front as an injured soldier, coming home to his mother and his return home after the fight with Barney at the Avondale Football Club dance in Act 4. O'Casey's rejection of any such potentially mawkish return scenes underlines his rejection of conventional naturalist drama. Instead, the audience is invited to question *why* such returns have not been included in the play. Repetition has been deliberately denied to the audience here, and this refusal to revisit the familiar spaces works to frustrate the audience's desire for explanations that would lead to imaginative and dramatic closure. The play's rejection of scenes that the audience may have expected to see again, is also an indication that the conventions of the tragic and heroic are continually being challenged in the play.

If obvious mirroring scenes have been denied to the audience, then those that are given stage space become particularly significant. Harry's first scene of return to Ireland is not to his own home, but to a venue that the audience has only heard about - the Avondale Football Club. In the first act, just before he left for the front, the audience had heard of his great sporting victory, now both the audience and Harry return to it not as the site of sporting victory, but of public humiliation.

His presence is required, as the previous winner of the cup, to present the trophy to the new champion - his best friend Barney Bagnall. The irony could hardly be missed here; Harry Heegan has been able to return home as the injured soldier only after being saved from death by Barney. In this act Harry points out that Barney encouraged him to live, by asking him to 'Think of the tears of Jess, think of the tears of Jess' (ST, 246). But Harry is paralysed from the waist down and his girlfriend Jessie has rejected him in favour of the uninjured Barney. Harry's status as the triumphant football hero of Act 1 is irretrievable.

This return of the hero in *The Silver Tassie* has not been a comfortable experience for the audience. The structure of the play ensures that the audience does not relax into a reassuring representation of Harry's re-assimilation into his old way of life. O'Casey's play does not allow his audience to forget that war has consequences nor to evade engagement with these consequences.

As we have seen the first act of *The Silver Tassie* is figured in comparatively naturalistic style, similar to what O'Casey's publishers had called 'The Dublin Trilogy'. The first act of the play stresses the physical superiority of Harry with a particular emphasis, for as the

play opens the audience is listening to a conversation between Harry's father Sylvester and his friend Simon, discussing Harry's physical prowess, regaling each other with accounts of his superior skills as a boxer and his ability to floor a policeman with one decisive blow. Harry is deliberately described in these excessively physical terms, since after this build up, Harry himself is presented to the audience, arriving triumphant from victory in a football match at the Avondale Football Club, where he scored the winning goals. This is the first 'hero's return' in the play, as Harry and his girlfriend Jessie enter the scene being carried aloft on the shoulders of the other players, with Jessie holding the winning cup - The Silver Tassie - in her hand. Harry's excited account of scoring the goals is listened to by the onstage audience, and Barney comments occasionally to support Harry's account. In retrospect this scene functions both ironically and tragically for the audience. This kind of triumphant return home for Harry will not be seen in the play again. This scene is an elegaic representation of what might have been, of what Harry's life would have been like had the First World War not intervened. But there are no more triumphant returns home in the play - Harry's return from hospital in France is curiously elided in the play - we simply see him

mysteriously transferred from the hospital in France to the Avondale Football Club for the party in Act 4.

Harry's heroic return from battle is further undercut by the representation of his psychological state after he has been injured. In Act 3 in the hospital he is presented as suffering from acute depression and paranoia. He is moody and uncommunicative, refusing to respond to a suggestion that he sit in the garden, defensive and tetchy when offered cigarettes: 'I can get them myself if I want one. D'ye think my arms are lifeless as well as my legs?' (ST, 222). He refuses to join in with the rhetoric of recovery and is brutally pragmatic about his circumstances. Simon attempts to encourage Harry by commenting on the potential improvement offered by the next operation on his legs:

SIMON: ...you'll maybe be in the centre of the football field before many months are out.

HARRY [irritably]: Oh, shut up, man! It's a miracle I want – not an operation... Did you ever clap your eyes on a body dead from the belly down? Blast you, man, why don't you shout at me, 'While there's life there's hope'! (ST, 223).

This is a long way from a conventional heroic response and presents a sensitive representation of the acutely depressed soldier who will not be comforted. It is necessary for the audience to see and engage with this version of the returning soldier, for this is part of the

play's revision of the heroic figure. The play forces the audience to encounter a damaged war hero, not simply to hear about Harry's depression from other characters, so that it is impossible for them to avoid a disquieting engagement with the uncomfortable effects of war injuries. The play does not allow the audience to forget that the physical and psychological consequences of war live with all of us long after the conflict is over. The play offers the audience a different set of thoughts about the war: conflict causes mortal injury, yes, but also sometimes injuries that can be survived; and they have to be lived with by all of us, not just those who suffered the injury. You cannot paper over the conflict and forget all about it. The play invites the audience to recognise that going to war means living with the concept of irretrievable change. If you can cope with that concept, the play suggests, then you can go to war, but do not then pretend that war is heroic. *The Silver Tassie* alerts the audience to the nature of the reality of now, which is often subdued beneath heroic discourse and suggests that uncritical repetitions of heroic dogma come very close to cant.

Barney offers a further version of the hero figure in the play. In Act 1 he is very much Harry's sidekick, a 'best friend' character, supporting Harry's role as leading

man. But the war changes both men irrevocably and this is figured through an exchange of their heroic status in the play. Harry is injured in a raid (a scene which is not shown) and Barney saves his life – a heroic action for which Barney later receives the V.C. So by Act 4 Barney has changed places with Harry as the more traditional hero - Barney has won the medal and he also wins Harry's girlfriend Jessie, who transfers her allegiance to him after Harry has been injured. The play works to highlight this ironic role reversal. Harry comments sarcastically that Barney encouraged him to survive in the early crucial moments of his rescue by exhorting him to 'Think of the tears of Jess, think of the tears of Jess'. But Harry also wryly observes that 'Jess has wiped away her tears in the ribbon of your Cross' (ST, 246). By Act 4 Barney has lost patience with his friend and is tired of the responsibility of trying to humour him. Harry insults Jessie by calling her a 'whore' and Barney's temper snaps. He calls Harry a 'half-baked Lazarus' and begins to fight with him, screaming. 'I'll tilt the leaking life out of you, you jealous, peering pimp!' (ST, 246).⁷⁶ The scene works to underline the complexity of 'the hero'. How do both kinds of heroes – those who received medals and those who did not -

⁷⁶ Here the use of 'pimp' refers to a spy rather than the contemporary sexual reference.

cope with the perceived differences of their status? How will it change old friendships and relationships? Will heroic status itself lead to further conflict?

This scene also offers some insight into the female role in the support of the heroic image: Jessie has simply been unable ^{to} stay faithful to Harry - she simply would not be able to face being the partner of a man so badly injured. The assumption that she would is itself part of the rhetoric of the heroic. The play does not flinch from the inclusion of an unsupportive female response to male injury as a major part of its ongoing critique of conventional visions of the heroic. Men and women may not always behave in the way we would like them to, and the audience cannot avoid the uncomfortable representation of further emotional distress for Harry.

As part of his re-writing for the 1949 edition of the play, O'Casey changed the song sung by Surgeon Maxwell and inserted a new speech for Susie, which becomes the penultimate speech of the play. Susie began the play as a religious zealot, who harboured a fairly obvious longing to supplant Jessie as Harry's girlfriend, and the transformation of her personality itself in the play functions as a further reminder to the audience of the inexplicable and the revolutionary nature

of the changes that the war brings. In the first act Susie is a girl who wears 'sombre, ill-fitting' clothes and displays an attitude of 'uncompromising and unflinching modesty' (ST,181), while reciting religious warnings about the general lack of piety in the world to anyone who will listen. By the third act she has been transformed into a pragmatic and efficient nurse, flirtatiously dressed, wearing silk stockings and making 'every detail' of her VAD nurses' uniform 'as attractive as possible' (ST,219). Susie's last speech is a response to the first expression of sympathy that Jessie (his former girlfriend) has uttered for Harry. The original speech runs as follows:

JESSIE: Poor Harry!

SUSIE: Oh nonsense! If you've passed as many through your hands as I, you'd hardly notice one.[*Susie pulls Jessie from the chair.*] Come along, Barney, take her in (131).⁷⁷

It may be that O'Casey felt that this speech was not explicit enough or perhaps simply not long enough to allow the irony to develop and for the audience to respond to this. Susie's revised speech in the *Collected Edition* of 1949 is as follows:

JESSIE: Poor Harry!

⁷⁷ Sean O'Casey *The Silver Tassie* (London, 1930), 131. Subsequent references to this edition of the play are made in the text.

SUSIE: Oh nonsense! If you've passed as many through your hands as I, you'd hardly notice one [*To Jessie*] Jessie, Teddy Foran and Harry Heegan have gone to live their own way in another world. Neither I nor you can lift them out of it. No longer can they do the things we do. We can't give sight to the blind or make the lame walk. We would if we could. It is the misfortune of war. As long as wars are waged, we shall be vexed by woe; strong legs shall be made useless and bright eyes made dark. But we, who have come through the fire unharmed, must go on living. [*Pulling Jessie from the chair*]

Come along, and take your part in life! [*To Barney*] Come along, Barney, and take your partner into the dance! (248).⁷⁸

This new speech can be read as a final pragmatic acceptance of the reality of war. This is interesting, particularly since O'Casey actually wrote these changes after not one but *two* World Wars. These changes were made after the idea that World War 1 was the war-to-end-all-wars had been proved untrue; perhaps O'Casey felt that his critique of heroism had not been powerful enough after all. We could also read Susie's speech ironically. She is curiously dismissive now of Harry's individual suffering and seeks to displace him from individual significance by joining him in with all the other wounded that she has tended ('If you've passed as

⁷⁸ Sean O'Casey *The Silver Tassie* in *Collected Plays* (London, 1949), reprinted in *Seven Plays by Sean O'Casey* (ed.) Ronald Ayling (London, 1985). All subsequent page numbers are from this reprinted edition unless otherwise stated.

many through your hands as I'). Her speech emphasises the theme of irreversible transformation, by pointing out that such changes are so stark that it is as if those who were injured by the war inhabit another world. She is ruthlessly honest about the fate of the men and does not shirk the uncomfortable reality that these men and others like them cannot return to their pre-war uninjured bodies. They are damaged for life.

Yet there is something strangely dispassionate about the tone of this speech which may betray its ironic function. To dismiss these injuries with the comment that 'It is the misfortune of war' is an attempt to remove their power to shock and distress us. The phrase is a conventional one; it is accepted uncritically by those in the play, for it is a statement which is used to help us to cope. But that coping does involve a dismissal, which O'Casey's use of the phrase draws our attention to, so that the audience cannot slip into the rhetoric of recovery with too great an ease. If we can detach any emotion that we feel about what has happened to these men from the reality of their changed circumstances then we can, in a current phrase, 'get on with our lives'. Susie's speech thus contains the potential for sympathy and understanding but is sufficiently ambiguous to invite the audience to critique the position it espouses. We who

have not been physically injured must indeed 'go on living', for in a moment that is very Beckettian, what choice do we have?

But the injured do not live in *another* world as Susie suggests; they inhabit the same space as us. The play shows us how a defensive displacement occurs; since we cannot remove the injured from our sight we have to pretend that they inhabit another world unconnected to us. They are in another world from the one they remember, perhaps, since they are now treated so very differently by those around them. But they cannot, and indeed should not avoid us and we cannot avoid them. This is our life together, both those who have been physically or psychologically damaged by war and those who have not or claim that they have not. O'Casey is making us, as his audience, face up to our own guilt about how we treat those who are physically and psychologically different from us and requiring that we accept our own callous behaviour towards those who have suffered. It would be easier for us if we did not have to see them and to face daily our implied guilt and shared responsibility for their injuries, through our acceptance of the ideological position that led to them.

Susie's admonitions to 'take your part in life' and 'take your partner in the dance' are thus encouraging

and life affirming, but also dispassionately suggest that those who can dance have a life, and those who do not must simply exist. This is also underlined by the song of Surgeon Maxwell which follows Susie's speech where he dismisses those who are depressed: 'Let him wrap himself up in his woe;/For he is a life on the ebb,/We a full life on the flow' (ST, 248). The presentation of such a dispassionate and shockingly selfish response invites the audience to reject rather than to accept the tenets of Maxwell's callous disregard for those who are no longer able-bodied. The implication of both Susie's and Maxwell's words is that 'life' is reserved for the physically fit and healthy – the disabled need not apply.

Conclusion

The opera version of *The Silver Tassie* by Mark Antony Turnage and Amanda Holden, premiered at the English National Opera in London February 2000, sheds light on the critique of the heroic in the original play with its blending of the original and unrevised endings to create its own version of the conclusion to the play. The opera ends with Maxwell's song, omitting Mrs Foran's speech, so the strains of the final couplet of the song 'Let him wrap himself up in his woe;/For he is a life on the ebb,/We a full life on the flow' (ST,248) echo over the

stage while Mrs Foran is simply left to look at the abandoned Silver Tassie, which had been damaged by Harry, lying on stage in front of her. The opera repeats the juxtaposition of two possible interpretations of the end of the play in visual and aural terms. Maxwell's song represents an attitude which the play presents as a contributory factor in the build up of anger and frustration in Harry; it is precisely because those around him feel able to dismiss all that he has suffered so peremptorily that Harry's aggression becomes so pronounced. Thus, Harry's distortion of the Tassie functions both as an expression of despair at his impotence *and* as a protest against those who dismiss the magnitude of the impact of his injury with cool detachment.⁷⁹

The play's blistering critique of the notion of heroism is thus underlined in the final added speeches of O'Casey's revised version of the play. What consolation is the chimera of the heroic now? Heroic discourse takes no account of the despair and frustration of the hero, and makes no provision for the hero's

⁷⁹ Michael White's review of the *The Silver Tassie* as an opera compares the end of *The Silver Tassie* with *Peter Grimes*: 'as the small personal tragedy of Harry Heegan is subsumed in the greater flow of life just going on' (*Independent on Sunday* 20/2/00, 8). White's review situates Harry's injuries in the much larger context of many individual lives 'just going on' in the post-war world. But it is the curious disregard for the effect of Harry's changed circumstances (just hinted at in White's review) that gives the tragic edge to the play and the opera. 'Life just going on' is to be expected; yet for others to go on, like Surgeon Maxwell, Susie and Mrs Foran, with little obvious sensitivity to those who cannot go on as they did before the war, is to add insult to injury as the cliché suggests.

response to those who are dispassionate or simply uncomprehending. Mrs Foran is part of uncomprehending humanity and it is her words that end the play. Harry's projected performance on the ukelele at the dance is swiftly cancelled after his fight with Barney, when Harry is sent home. But Mrs Foran cannot comprehend why this has been necessary, for she remarks:

MRS FORAN: It's terrible pity Harry was too weak to stay an' sing his song, for there's nothing I love more than the ukulele's tinkle, tinkle in the night-time (ST, 249).

Mrs Foran is insensitive and oblivious to why Harry might not want to stay and play the ukulele at his old football club - the scene of his previous sporting victories, when he still had use of his legs. She will never comprehend how painful it might be to him because she does not empathise, she thinks only of her own feelings and concentrates on what *she* would enjoy. The play exposes this selfish attitude in a way which does not condemn it, but simply observes that it exists and that men such as Harry will now constantly have to face such thoughtlessness from other people. The play suggests that to cope with this kind of behaviour will require a very different kind of heroism, one that has not been envisaged in the epic heroic tradition.

By ending the play with comments from three different perspectives, Susie, Surgeon Maxell and Mrs Foran, O'Casey has given the audience an opportunity to assess and re-assess their attitudes to the heroic. The play seems aware that as an audience we will want something good to emerge out of something as awful as war, and so we may be tempted to import positive values into the play's representation of its characters' lives. O'Casey's structure, irony, juxtaposition and use of multiple voices to end the play work to counter a potential audience's desire to see good emerging out of evil. *The Silver Tassie* resists the audience's attempts to place the play as a comfortable re-affirmation of heroic discourse ('It is the misfortune of war'), by inviting us to question and re-question our interpretations. O'Casey seems anxious that the impressions that we carry out of the auditorium and home with us remain complex and intriguing.

In critical terms *The Silver Tassie* should be read as marking the end of O'Casey's experiments with naturalism, rather than the beginning of his experiments with Expressionism and abstract drama, as is conventionally argued. Not until his next play, *Within the Gates* (1934) did O'Casey truly feel confident abandoning naturalism altogether. Yet such was the

effect of the attacks and criticism on *The Silver Tassie* that O'Casey took four years to find this new confidence. With his work now dismissed by Irish critics and by Irish writers whom he had hitherto admired and respected, O'Casey was even tempted to abandon drama as a form altogether. *Within the Gates* marks the point in his career where O'Casey finally felt able to ignore the comments of the critics and to go 'his own way' (A2,155). O'Casey was only now able to write the plays that he had been working towards creating over the previous twelve years, plays which were to make his oeuvre in many ways quintessentially experimental.

Chapter 5

***Within the Gates*: In search of an audience**

It is *Within the Gates* (1934) rather than *The Silver Tassie* that marks in formal terms O'Casey's most distinctive resistance to theatrical naturalism. The play is not the first of the plays that 'fail'; it is rather the culmination of all those earlier plays that have succeeded in various ways.

Robert Hogan summarises the standard critical analysis:

For years the critical cliché about O'Casey's work was that it began to disintegrate when he left Dublin, that, in Lady Gregory's words about Henry James 'he might have found more sap and substance among his own people'.¹

Yet while Hogan appears to distance himself from critical orthodoxy, he goes on to maintain that 'O'Casey's excursion into Expressionism led him to a dramatic impasse', even though he is forced to point out that 'O'Casey does not agree'.² But far from entering some new 'dramatic impasse', with *Within the Gates* O'Casey reaches

¹ Hogan (1960), 205.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

the theatrical destination to which O'Casey has been heading since his very first experiments with 'mimetic' and 'diegetic' space in *The Harvest Festival* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*.

As he writes *Within the Gates* O'Casey is self-consciously engaged upon a project not only to re-define the nature of his own drama, but to re-imagine contemporary drama in a new cultural context. Hogan is nearer the mark when he comments:

Within the Gates is an important play to O'Casey...It is perhaps one of those important works that passionately engaged writers ultimately wrestle with, and in which they attempt a kind of personal catharsis, a full and complete statement of their worldview.³

What is so distinctive about *Within the Gates* is the very sense of release and theatrical defiance that the play contains. This is O'Casey returning to the theatre, still sore from the Abbey rejection of *The Silver Tassie*, after having dabbled in the writing of short stories and poetry in *Windfalls* and finally simply having decided to carry on and produce the kind of drama that he truly wanted to write.

Even C.B. Cochran, who had produced *The Silver Tassie* in London after the Abbey débâcle, acknowledges the increasing complexity and range of O'Casey's style. He

³ Ibid., 77.

rejected the script of *Within the Gates* in 1933 noting that it was 'too highbrow' for a production by him and ruefully remarked:

I suppose you are tired of people advising you to get back to the method of 'Juno'. I wish you would.⁴

Cochran's remark is indeed symptomatic of those who were anxious that O'Casey should have another certain 'hit'; he speaks as a commercial theatre producer keen to acquire for himself the box office successes of O'Casey's previous plays for the Abbey. However, O'Casey's response to Cochran underlines his own awareness of what the most straightforward dramatic path for himself should be:

Your advice to go back to the genius of 'Juno' might be good for me but bad for my conception of drama.⁵

For O'Casey, *Within the Gates* is his defining theatrical moment. He sees the play as providing the opportunity for him to develop a new dramatic form, pushing at theatrical boundaries. O'Casey's later work is part of the broader European experiments, and *Within the Gates* is probing the limits of theatre as surely as the work of Brecht and Lorca. As Katharine Worth notes:

O'Casey ... has an important place among the playwrights who fashioned Irish drama out of Europe

⁴ L1, 460 (1/8/33).

⁵ L1, 462 (7/8/33).

and it is natural to discuss his plays in that context even though his own European affiliations were very different from theirs.⁶

Worth reminds us that O'Casey may have been influenced by the German Expressionists, in particular Ernst Toller, though she sees the links to Yeats and O'Neill as more pertinent to an analysis of O'Casey's dramatic style.⁷

O'Casey's work provides an important link in the line of theatrical experimentation in twentieth-century English-speaking drama, which culminated in the theatre of Beckett and Pinter in the 1950s and early 1960s. As Worth has noted: 'O'Casey stands unmistakably behind Beckett',⁸ and we can see O'Casey as the precursor of the New Wave of post-war drama, a period that Dan Rebellato wittily terms *1956 and all that*.⁹ Kenneth Tynan also makes the link between O'Casey and New Wave drama in his pithy,

⁶ Worth (1986), 221.

⁷ This link to O'Neill's work may indeed be part of the enthusiastic reception of O'Casey's work in America, indicating a recognition of their experimental connections. Certainly, the admiration was mutual, for when O'Neill read *Within the Gates* he wrote to congratulate O'Casey on his achievement: 'It [*Within the Gates*] is a splendid piece of work...I was especially moved – and greenly envious, I confess! – by its rare and sensitive poetical beauty. I wish to God I could write like that!', see L1, 482 (15/12/33).

⁸ Worth (1986), 221. Beckett did write a tribute greeting to O'Casey on the occasion of O'Casey's 80th birthday – something that he had refused to do for a similar celebration of Shaw's work when asked in 1970.

⁹ Dan Rebellato *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London, 1999), see particularly 10-36.

though patronising, review of Brendan Behan's *The*

Hostage (1958):

It seems to be Ireland's function every twenty years or so to kick English drama from the past into the present. Mr Behan may well fill the place vacated by Sean O'Casey.¹⁰

O'Casey was not primarily interested in what he could do for the English or indeed Irish theatre in a purely national sense, but was looking to explore how his drama might transform the experience of theatre on an international scale. He was interested in exploring the reach of theatre, its boundaries and possibilities. He recognised that extraordinary potential of the theatre to involve, uplift and to provoke its audience, and he did not see this potential addressed in contemporary drama.

O'Casey was also seeking to widen his audience. Although Stephen Watt sees the style of O'Casey's later plays as a move to appeal to a more middle-class audience, it is clear that the very opposite is true.¹¹ O'Casey was seeking always to expand his audience, to encourage a greater diversity of class in his audience base; and he sought to bring a new kind of drama to an audience he saw

¹⁰ Kenneth Tynan *Tynan on Theatre* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 76.

¹¹ See Watt (1991), 143-188.

as being duped by theatrical naturalism which, as O'Casey is at constant pains to point out, is not at all 'real':

If we are to confine the drama to a sober and exact imitation of life, then the drama is dead, for life itself is much more interesting than its sober and actual imitation. What realists take for life is but a faintly warmed up corpse.¹²

This sense of theatrical de-mystification sits very comfortably alongside O'Casey's Communism. It is not simply that O'Casey wishes to re-define drama through theatrical form for its own sake. This re-definition of the stage, as for Brecht, is part of O'Casey's political activity; there is a moral imperative for him to ~~break~~ breakdown the strictures of naturalism. Naturalism is the opiate, and audiences must have their eyes opened to its distortions and obfuscations. If drama is 'dead', then for O'Casey the potential for social change has been thwarted; and he was not one to let this happen without a fight. This chapter tracks O'Casey's attempt to find this 'new' audience for his new drama. He finds it in neither Britain nor Ireland, but in New York.^{12a} Here on Broadway, with its musical traditions and most recent developments in the modern musical, finally O'Casey finds an audience ready to understand his pivotal experimental drama *Within the Gates*.

¹² Sean O'Casey *Blasts and Benedictions* (London, 1967), 117.

^{12a} See for example, 'Sean O'Casey and Within the Gates: The Irish Playwright Goes to New York' in John P. Harrington 274 The Irish Play on the New York Stage 1874 - 1966 (Lexington, Kentucky, 1997), 98 - 121.

Censors and Critics

The immediate change in the theatrical context of *Within the Gates* (1934) is that it is the first of O'Casey's plays to reject the specificity of the historical moment. Although the play does allude generally to its political context in its comments on the international post-war world, it does not take as its focus a particular local, national or international event. This ellipsis of time, the refusal of a particular focus, is quite deliberate on O'Casey's part. This decision is an attempt to forestall critical responses to the play as naturalist or non-naturalist and may well have been a reaction to Yeats's criticism of *The Silver Tassie*. Though O'Casey reacted stridently to Yeats' criticism, he may have felt that the only way to avoid the presumption that he would always represent a 'real' historical moment was to reject any specific temporal focus altogether.

But it was not history this time that caused O'Casey problems. In Boston the play was banned on the grounds of morality; and when a license was applied for a proposed London production at the Royalty Theatre in 1933, there were further grounds for complaint.¹³ In London too

¹³ Objections to O'Casey's later plays on religious grounds, particularly *The Bishop's Bonfire*, are well documented. His plays were also objected to on the grounds of sexual morality (as we have seen with Rosie Redmond in *The Plough and the Stars*). O'Casey's *Figuro in the Night* came in for a similar

O'Casey faced objections from the clergy and a possible ban on the play on the grounds of morality, although the extent of the debate about its suitability remains undocumented. Because protests about the play were received after the end of its London run, the objections seem to have been ignored by O'Casey's critics. Yet it is clear that there were initial fears that the play would face the objection of the censor, particularly on the part of Norman MacDermott, manager of the Royalty Theatre.

In accordance with the requirements of British censorship, MacDermott submitted a copy of the play to the Lord Chamberlain's office in November 1933. On the 12th December, Norman MacDermott sent another letter to Major Gordon, informing him of his return to theatre management and asking for a personal meeting with Gordon: 'I should like to call and have a general talk with

kind of criticism to *Within the Gates* from the Lord Chamberlain; the implications of the dialogue were considered overtly sexual. *Figuro in the Night* was to be performed as part of a 'Festival of Irish Comedy' at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East in August 1963. The Festival was organised by Alan Simpson (who had once been arrested for showing Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Festival in 1958). A total of five pieces of dialogue were deemed in need of alteration in *Figuro in the Night* to meet with the censor's approval, cuts which Simpson considered 'a bit schoolboyish'. Simpson felt unable to go ahead with the production because of these proposed changes, and as a result withdrew O'Casey's play from the festival altogether. Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence WB 5 1963-68, Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.

you on the [sic] Censorship sometime if you will allow me'.¹⁴

We can speculate that MacDermott's return to theatre management and his proposed production of *Within the Gates* were linked to the request to discuss the issue of censorship so urgently with Major Gordon. He clearly foresaw some possible objections to *Within the Gates* and was attempting to forestall trouble.

The General Secretary of The Public Morality Council (whose President was the Lord Bishop of London), Howard Tyrer, sent a letter to the Lord Chamberlain's office only after the play had been withdrawn, chiefly, it seems, because they had not sent a reviewer to the production in time. Unfortunately, his enclosure containing 'impressions of what was said from one of our visitors' in response to the London production does not survive in the Lord Chamberlain's papers. Even Tyrer himself, however, cautions against too great a reliance on such evidence as a means of assessing the play: 'of course it is very difficult to secure a verbatim report in the darkness of the theatre'. His main object, however, is not to report on the play but to obtain censorship of the work before any further public performances. In this way Tyrer exactly prefigures the

¹⁴ Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/12484, Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.

response of the Mayor of Boston as censor when he
comments:

...I am writing in the hope that very drastic
censorship of this play may be exercised in the event
of its being sent on tour in the Provinces, where I am
sure very great exception would be taken thereto.¹⁵

Tyrer's main anxiety finds expression in a curious
spatial confusion in the letter. Alongside the literalism of this
response, Tyrer's comments demonstrate that he is merely
able to respond to drama at the level of mimesis:

The language, in our opinion, is most objectionable
and certainly if the scenes depicted were presented
in an open space, would call for the intervention of
the authorities.¹⁶

It seems that Tyrer is trying to argue that if such events took
place in a public park (that is, if O'Casey's play were
actually 'real'), then 'the authorities' would have to intervene
to stop such real life taking place. Again, O'Casey's work is
at the mercy of a confused logic of naturalism and fixed
notions of good drama on the part of his critics. However,
aside from an acknowledgment letter assuring Tyrer that

¹⁵ Letter from Howard M. Tyrer to the Lord Chamberlain's Department, 24
April 1934 in Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284, Department of
Manuscripts, The British Library.

¹⁶ Letter from Howard M. Tyrer to the Lord Chamberlain's Department, 24
April 1934 in Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284, Department of
Manuscripts The British Library.

'this matter is receiving the Lord Chamberlain's attention',¹⁷ no further account of the correspondence survives and the Lord Chamberlain's response remains unknown. This short exchange reveals that the apparent naturalism of *Within the Gates* was already causing consternation and anxiety for moral reasons during its London run, although these 'moral' objections never became public knowledge nor moral capital as they did later in Boston.

The initial reader's report on the play, submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office by G.S. Street provides the familiar critical reaction to O'Casey's later work, but interestingly focuses on immorality as the principal objection to the play. Street's report opens with the recurrent critical refrain: 'Mr O'Casey's work has deteriorated sadly since "Juno and the Paycock", that attractive blend of tragedy with genuine comedy and irony.'¹⁸ Street considers *Within the Gates* 'a pretentious satire, sometimes as pointless as when stupid people argue about God and Christianity and so on – they are their own satirists on both sides'.

O'Casey's ideological debate about religion is thus swept

¹⁷ Lord Chamberlain's Office to The General Secretary of The Public Morality Council 25 April 1934, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284, Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.

¹⁸ Reader's Report on *Within the Gates* 15th November 1933, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284. All subsequent quotations from this report in this paragraph are taken from the same source.

out of the way, and Street summarises the action of the play concluding his report with a list of five 'details' of 'coarseness, or suggestiveness' which trouble him in the script.

Yet there is a curious tension in Street's analysis. While he carefully lists five instances of 'unpermitted words', he is not dogmatic, indeed is even somewhat blasé about the presentation of the specifics of prostitution. Highlighting what was probably The Young Whore's speech on page 35 of the script,¹⁹ he marks the language as potentially problematic, but qualifies his concern with the recognition that such openness would only create difficulty in another kind of play. O'Casey's work is of a different calibre, and so while Street marks the incident for the attention of the blue pencil - 'p35. the prostitute business' - he underplays its significance: '-but not offensive I think in a serious play'. Nevertheless, it is the 'frankness' of the play, from the girl's title of 'The Young Whore' to 'the pervading "whore" business', which troubles him most distinctly.²⁰ Yet he is not

¹⁹ The version of the script that the Lord Chamberlain received does not survive in the Lord Chamberlain's archive. However, as the play was published by Macmillan before its first production, it is likely that the office was sent the 1933 printed edition of the play. Certainly the page numbers of the potentially objectionable passages seem to tally with recognisable incidents on the pages of the published script.

²⁰ When O'Casey came to prepare the play for inclusion in *Collected Plays* Vol. 3 (1951), he made number of substantial changes, particularly as a result

prepared to ban the play's production on these grounds alone: 'Personally I think this is an offence rather to "niceness" than to real delicacy, and I see no sufficient reason for condemning the play'. Street is simply pointing to a potential for prudery amongst the audience or critics, but he certainly does not want to ban the play on such grounds. Street does, however, recommend that, because the play 'is so frank', a further 'one or two' opinions of its suitability for performance should be obtained.

The second reader's report, dated 7th December, concurs with the five points of objection noted by Street,²¹ and agrees that 'subject to the above' *Within the Gates* should have its licence granted. Yet the Lord Chamberlain was nothing if not cautious; two further opinions on the play are canvassed. One is another full report and the other a

of seeing the New York production of 1934. One of these alterations was to change Jannice's title from 'The Young Whore' to 'The Young Woman', a modification that R. Mary Todd feels helps the audience 'to see her [Jannice] as a woman instead of a prostitute', see R.M. Todd 'The Two Published Versions of Sean O'Casey's *Within the Gates*' in *Modern Drama* 10 (1967-68), 351.

²¹ The second note is filed in red pen on the reverse of the original letter, indicating that the second Reader had read the First Reader's report before compiling his own and was potentially influenced by the initial interpretation and comments on the play. John Johnston's account of his work as Assistant Comptroller in the Lord Chamberlain's Office suggests that he took account of the views of previous readers: 'I always read the reader's synopsis as well as those plays scripts which the readers asked me to examine... In those texts where attention had been drawn to certain language or 'business' I would mark the passages 'leave', 'cut' or 'alter' as appropriate – and the Lord Chamberlain would concur or otherwise', see John Johnston *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London, 1990), 20.

swift letter from Violet Bonham Carter, headed 'Within the Gates'. Bonham Carter is brief, but to the point:

I do not see how this play (an exceedingly tedious one in my opinion) could possibly be banned. The occasional coarseness of the language can be pruned in five or six strokes of the blue pencil – if this is done the only possible objection to it left is the fact that it “features” a “Young Whore” as its central figure.

The only unusual thing about this - not unusual - procedure is the use of the Biblical name for her calling - & I don't think we could take exception to the play on these grounds.²²

Bonham Carter, like Street, felt that the main problem with the play was not its morality or perceived coarseness, but its uneven quality. The London censor, in contrast to Boston, simply felt that the play was not very good rather than a threat to decency. Both Street, his colleague and Bonham-Carter, unlike T Connolly or the Mayor of Boston, felt able to tolerate its perceived naturalism. The readers can see that the location of the park, the figures of the gardener, the Bishop and the prostitute are all 'real' enough, since these are recognised roles in society in a way that the Dreamer, for example, is not. The characters speak in English, some in the faux Cockney dialect that O'Casey adopts and so they are understood by the readers as real people. These readers

²² 4th December 1933 Violet Bonham Carter, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284, Department of Manuscripts, The British Library.

however, do not see that the dialogue consists of a blend of statement and symbol or that the songs are sung poems, and the chanting closer to a mass than a mass-gathering.

The most striking reader's report on *Within the Gates* however, comes from Viscount Buckmaster, whose depth of understanding and perception of the play's ambition is revelatory and puts his contemporary London critics to shame with its perspicacity. His report is a calm, measured assessment of the play, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of O'Casey's work notably lacking in the later critical reactions to the production. Buckmaster cautions against just the kind of learned responses to drama that O'Casey himself is trying to prevent:

The difficulty in forming an opinion upon this play lies in the fact that there is a natural tendency to criticise new work by old standards. Conceptions of literature and art have changed. Much modern literature attempts to describe thought instead of narrative, and art tends to produce symbols instead of form. These considerations are very relevant to this play, which is essentially symbolic. It is ridiculous to imagine that real people in the situations of those who are its prominent characters would use the language put into their mouths.²³

Buckmaster is very clear that *Within the Gates* should be interpreted as part of the developing canon of

²³ Reader's Report on *Within the Gates* 26th November 1933, Lord Chamberlain's Correspondence 1933/1284. All subsequent quotations from Viscount Buckmaster's report are taken from the same source.

'modern literature' with its concomitant 'essentially symbolic' style. Such an insightful reading of the play makes it seem a pity that this reader's report would not be seen by O'Casey himself. Buckmaster is consistently at pains to distance the play from naturalism, emphasising the essential unreality of the dialogue and reiterating the point later in his report:

This play...contains passages of great eloquence and beauty, although as I said it would be impossible to expect them from the different characters if they were real people.

The implication of Buckmaster's comment here is that the Censor cannot take offence at dialogue that was not written to imitate actual speech.

However, it is the tension between symbolic ideas and their theatrical expression that Buckmaster sees at the core of possible objections to the play. He speculates that the reason for the possible 'realist' interpretation lies in its use of dialect:

The fact that so much of the play is in distorted and wholly unreal cockney dialect is, I think, unfortunate, and tends to invest the play with a reality which it does not possess.

Buckmaster is pointing out that even in this deeply experimental play O'Casey is not being quite symbolic enough. O'Casey has not quite let go of the desire for the

representation of actual speech, and the implication of Buckmaster's comment is that he feels that this works against the style of the drama, compromising its symbolic essence. This is intelligent analysis, but what Buckmaster may have missed is that in this play O'Casey was attempting to re-invest ordinary speech with a poetic quality as a means of suggesting the symbolic nature of all speech.

The voices of the general public, for example, who open Scene II with communal singing, become the voice of the collective unconscious, extolling one another in the best Wordsworthian tradition to put down their books and come outside to celebrate the value of nature above business and profit:

SOME OF THE CROWD: Ye who are haggard and giddy with care, busy counting your profits and losses, Showing the might of your name unto God in the gay-coloured page of a cheque book; Storing the best of your life in a drawer of your desk at the office:

ALL TOGETHER: Bellow good-bye to the buggerin' lot 'n come out To bow down the head n' bend down the knee to the bee, the bird, n' the blossom, Bann'ring the breast of the earth with a wonderful beauty! (WTG, 48-49).

This is not real dialogue nor even the real lyrics of a song, but rather the poetic evocation of the simple pleasure of

nature. The play is not 'realistic' any more than it is simply about the activities of a prostitute in a public park.

It is more interesting to think of O'Casey's theatrical style in *Within the Gates* in the way that Mary C. King has re-defined Synge's realism in his work:

The term 'anthropological realism' applied to the Abbey productions on which Synge advised should perhaps be replaced by 'ethnographic veracity'. His is not a 'slice of life' theatre, but a highly stylized liturgical drama. Experienced actors accustomed to 'stage Irish' noted the strangeness of Synge's language, its artificial rhythms. He coached them rigorously, longing for the formality of musical notation. The delivery he favoured shared something of Yeatsian incantation: language was not reducible to the cerebral.²⁴

The language O'Casey constructs for *Within the Gates* may initially be read as naturalistic, but like Synge, it actually has a very different rhythm to real speech. O'Casey shares Synge's desire to remove language from the sphere of the literal 'cerebral' interpretation and create a sense of felt language. This desire to stretch interpretation beyond the prosaic is part of the drive behind O'Casey's use of the dance in the play, to which I will return later in this chapter.

There was, however, one British critic who shared something of Buckmaster's understanding of the play:

²⁴ Mary C. King 'J.M.Synge, 'National' drama and the Post-Protestant Imagination' in Shaun Richards, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge, 2004), 89.

Mr O'Casey is struggling towards a new mode of expression (or, more accurately, an old and forgotten one), and his play is not for those who want an ordinary 'show'. ... Honourable it certainly is and exciting for those who are fascinated by theatrical technique... Mr O'Casey has gone a long way further than he did in *The Silver Tassie* towards a theatre of poetic power as well as prosaic fun.²⁵

Ivor Brown identifies the 'poetic power' of the play, which had similarly struck Buckmaster; and Brown identifies this, along with the 'experiments with theatrical form', as the key to the enjoyment of the play. Other critics, however, such as PLM in the *Daily Herald*, though sympathetic to the style which he found 'impressive', felt that audiences 'will certainly regard [O'Casey's] method as pretentious'.²⁶

James Agate's famous dismissal of the play is on similar lines.²⁷ The antagonism between the two men is well known and Agate's dismissal of the play is brutal and unthinking: 'pretentious rubbish'.²⁸

Gordon Beckles in the *Daily Express* simply avoids any critical engagement with the production since 'The piece is a cry from the heart. *Is not a play*'; and he challenges O'Casey instead to do his own job for him and

²⁵ *The Observer*, 11 February 1934 .

²⁶ *Daily Herald* 8 February 1934.

²⁷ See LI, 491-502 for a complete reprint of these reviews and of O'Casey's responses to them.

²⁸ *Sunday Times* 11 February 1934.

'to tell the world what this play is *really* about'.²⁹ Strangely, Beckles does note the Greek echoes of the production. He points out, 'There is music and dancing, in the manner of Greek drama', but lamely concludes that O'Casey 'is trying to say something, desperately, but incoherently'. Agate considers the play's failure is that it is a kind of propaganda, but ultimately he suggests it is unsuccessful because it is written by an Irishman:

... I try to grapple with symbols, sublimations, subfuscations, and substantiations whereby an author shelves his characters to substitute himself. ... The trouble is Mr O'Casey is essentially an Irishman who, while labelling his characters English and dropping the accent, still retains the Irish idiom.³⁰

O'Casey responds both to Beckles and Agate, but his response to the latter is more interesting. He agrees with Agate that 'I make my characters real and unreal... I do so first because change is needed in the Theatre and second because life is like that – a blend of fantasy and realism.'³¹

O'Casey worked hard to defend his play, though he did consider the London production 'paltry' (A2,359), complaining to George Jean Nathan that 'the Producer

²⁹ *Daily Express* 8 February 1934.

³⁰ *Sunday Times* 11 February 1934.

³¹ *Sunday Times* 18 February 1934.

strained himself to try to make it appear as “human as possible.” He withered up before every suggestion of symbolism that was in the play’.³²

This blend of the mythic, romantic and experimental is what O’Casey had been producing with great subtlety in his plays to date. However, the banner was out and O’Casey was rigorously developing what he felt was a powerful ‘new’ style of drama. *Within the Gates* would itself be part of this process of revivifying theatre for the modern age: ‘That is the main thing to be done if the drama of today is to be in the main stream of the great drama of the past’.³³

It is significant that the reaction to *Within the Gates* was not the same all over America. The Broadway reaction was mostly positive, but this was in part because of O’Casey’s attempt to instruct the critics on how to read his play. After a week’s performance in Philadelphia, however, the transfer to Boston was thwarted, as Christopher Murray records, since *Within the Gates* was banned by the Mayor before it even had a performance on the grounds of its immorality.

³² L1, 510 (31/3/34).

³³ O’Casey (1967), 116.

This ban on performances was shortly followed by a ban on the sale of the text. Despite a petition from Harvard students and the stalwart support of Brooks Atkinson, the play was censored in Boston, a decision repeated in Toronto, prompting the projected tour of ten other cities to be cancelled.³⁴ The opportunity for O'Casey's reputation to be reviewed as a result of the American tour of his latest work was summarily curtailed. Despite O'Casey's best efforts to lead his critics to a new way to receive and interpret his drama, he had once again been thwarted by his own 'naturalism' – the depiction of a 'real' prostitute, which, according to the main objector to the work, the academic Terence L. Connolly, 'until his [O'Casey's] time had never been portrayed on the stage in his native country'.³⁵ Again, O'Casey is caught between two versions of the real – criticised by theatre critics in London for not being 'real' enough and for being too 'real' by academic critics in Boston.

³⁴ Murray (2004), 238-39, notes that two Jesuits who saw the last performance of *Within the Gates* in New York made a number of objections, and suggested alterations, including changing the name of 'The Young Whore'. These changes were accepted and it seemed that the tour would go ahead until Mayor Mansfield of Boston, possibly under pressure from Boston academics including Terence L. Connolly, requested that the play should not transfer to the city. Boston still had an official censor and Connolly spoke against *Within the Gates* at the hearing where the play was eventually banned by a vote of two to one.

³⁵ Murray (2004), 239.

O'Casey had tried to allude to this key area of debate without using the loaded term 'naturalism' and substituting his phrase 'a fuller manifestation of life' instead. O'Casey points out that what he and his critics are actually in dispute about is not the play *per se* but something rather more intangible: the very nature of the real and its representation on stage. As O'Casey remarks:

Realism, the portrayal of real life on the stage, has failed, for the simple reason that real life cannot be shown on the stage; Realism has always failed to be real.³⁶

In *Within the Gates* O'Casey thought that he had found the answer to a more authentic presentation of the essence of life on stage. He felt that this blend of music, dance and the interrogation of ideologies was his 'form'. Whereas Shaw concentrated his discussion of ideologies in language, O'Casey sought to remove the concerted focus on the linguistic, perhaps in an effort to remove the sense of dogmatism or the occasional undramatic nature of Shaw's work.

The critical reception of the play in New York was far more positive than London. O'Casey's chief supporter amongst the critics was Brooks Atkinson. When he reviewed the printed play before seeing a production,

³⁶ O'Casey (1967), 116.

Atkinson responded to the variety of forms and styles in the play and their wide appeal with an appropriate musical metaphor for *The New York Times*:

His [O'Casey's] conception of the theatre as an organ with many stops, capable of speaking in many voices, makes *Within the Gates* the most virtuoso project that the theatre has had to face in some years.³⁷

Atkinson considers the play a 'human pageant', but even he notes that 'there are problems' for, as he points out, 'He [O'Casey] is unable to penetrate to the inner life of his characters. He clutters his last act with burlesque arguments.'³⁸

However, when the New York production opened, Atkinson was unstinting in his praise:

For Mr O'Casey is right. He knows that the popular theatre has withered, and he also has the gift to redeem it with a drama that sweeps along through the loves and terrors of mankind.³⁹

For this play in particular it is clear that it requires a grand realisation on stage to gain the full effect of its power.

Atkinson notes that it is this specific New York production, that has been able to give the play its resonance:

³⁷ Brooks Atkinson *Sean O'Casey: From Times Past* (ed.) Robert G. Lowery (New Jersey, 1982), 58 (*New York Times* 31/12/33).

³⁸ Atkinson (1982), 60 (*New York Times* 23/10/34).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Being the theatre of spiritual magnificence, it needs all the glories of stage art and it has them in this superb production.⁴⁰

The American critics were thus prepared for the anti-naturalism of *Within the Gates*. This may well be in part due to O'Casey's advance preparation, but it was also its own indigenous vaudeville and musical traditions. One reviewer in particular directly refers to O'Casey's lesson to the critics while also acknowledging the specific power of the New York production:

As it is produced at the New York theatre, with the lavish talents of an unusually fine company devoted to its performance, it comes out as a moving drama, with 'simple austerity, swinging merriment, beauty in music of word and colour of scene, and (almost, but not quite) with a tragedy too deep for tears'. Those are the qualities that Mr O'Casey desires to bring back to the theatre, according to his own words in an interview he gave to the New York Times before the play opened.⁴¹

Obviously, the strategy had worked. The American critics read and responded to O'Casey's instructions concerning the interpretation of his new work. Would that the London critics had been so amenable – but in fairness, they had not seen a production which could do justice to the power of O'Casey's most confidently symbolic work.

⁴⁰ Atkinson (1982), 61 (23/10/34).

⁴¹ Edith J.R. Isaacs *Theatre Arts Monthly* December 1934 in Jones (1986), 44.

O'Casey's friend and most stalwart supporter, George Jean Nathan, writing in the *American Spectator* remarked of *Within the Gates*:

As the play is a test the resources of the theatre, so it is too, a test of the resources of criticism.⁴²

Nathan recognised that this new kind of drama would need a new kind of criticism – just as O'Casey himself had hoped in his comments to James Agate.⁴³

Innovations in Form

Within the Gates is ambitious in its reach. The play tries to combine the experimentalism of the avant garde with the popularity and grandeur of a Broadway musical, though the setting and tenor of the principal *dramatis personae* read more like the cast of a bad joke than a serious production: a dreamer, a prostitute and a bishop meet in a public park.

Recurrent concerns of O'Casey's work are still very much in

⁴² Quoted in Murray (2004), 237. For further discussion of the friendship between O'Casey and Nathan see Robert Lowery & Patricia Angelin (eds.) *My Very Dear Sean: George Jean Nathan to Sean O'Casey, Letters and Articles* (London, 1985).

⁴³ O'Casey did of course go on to write his first formal book of criticism proper not long after *Within the Gates*. In *The Flying Wasp* (1937) (which was later subsumed into *The Green Crow* (1956), O'Casey offered a commentary on English dramatic criticism and continued his dialogue about criticism more generally in the press throughout his life. Robert Hogan collected more of O'Casey's critical writings for *Feathers From the Green Crow* (1963), but aside from Christopher Murray's 'O'Casey as Critic' in *the Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol 18, no 2 (dec 1992, 58-67) there has been little serious analysis of O'Casey's work as a critic in his own right.

evidence here. The setting is perfectly consistent with O'Casey's concern to dramatise the intersection of the 'public' and 'private' in spatial terms. O'Casey is aware that although a park is a very 'public' environment in one sense, in another it encloses many private events, conversations and encounters between the different individuals who use this public arena. Many 'private' discussions are conducted in this 'public' arena, personal secrets spill over into the public domain, as any passer-by who has overheard such a 'private' conversation will concur. The title also speaks of enclosure, a contained public domain, with recognisable boundaries and the sense that the audience is being allowed 'in' to watch is marked by the closing of the gates at the end of Scene II.

Location is important in O'Casey's use of space in this play. On O'Casey's move to London after the Abbey débâcle, it is significant that he chose to set *Within the Gates* in that most particularly English of venues - a park - and one totally symptomatic of Englishness: Hyde Park. This can be read as an open gesture of hostility to those who rejected *The Silver Tassie*, since it not only denies a Dublin location, it also dispenses with the site of the room and the tenement building that are distinctive features of

O'Casey's plays until 1934. Such a move out beyond the very private space of the family home is an apparent *volte face* by O'Casey, away from the security of the Dublin tenement. However, in practice, as we have seen, O'Casey has ventured in and out of doors, and certainly in and out of rooms since *The Harvest Festival*.

Within the Gates is nevertheless, O'Casey's first play, indeed his only play, to be set exclusively out of doors. The private negotiations between individuals take place in a public setting; privacy is achieved through plot rather than setting. The choice of this external space - what might be interpreted as alien territory for O'Casey - also flies directly in the face of Yeats's caution to him about the subject of and the setting for *The Silver Tassie*. Yeats's remark 'You know nothing about the battlefields of World War 1 and so [you] write out of your opinions' most angered O'Casey because it suggests that he was writing outside his designated place within Irish drama. Yeats felt that to write about what he considered to be non-Irish subjects was not the job of an Irish dramatist. O'Casey, on the other hand did not agree with such a limitation and felt that as a dramatist he was entitled to write about anything he wanted to, including a subject as vast as the First World War; or, if

he saw fit, a closer focus on a day in the life of a London park for *Within the Gates*. This choice can also be seen as a continuation of the modernist fascination with the resonance of the out of doors and the public environment.⁴⁴

Yet O'Casey's use of space in *Within the Gates* is complicated by the fact that the play is exploring many of the themes familiar from the earlier plays, themes which had seemed so specific to Dublin. O'Casey is still writing about Dublin and Ireland, even though he is also writing about London and England. His choice of space echoes his own perspective as an exile: a park is not lived in, merely visited, and as such it suggests the vision of the observer and the status of the voyeuristic eye. Equally, O'Casey re-visits Ireland from a distance but now takes up earlier themes from the exile's point of view, examining his nation as if through the prism of an English observer. The choice of setting thus affords O'Casey the opportunity tentatively to explore the parallels between the English society depicted in the play and the Irish society from which O'Casey had emerged.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' also explores this balance between the public and the private in public spaces. See Virginia Woolf *Kew Gardens* (London, 1999). Pound's Imagist poem 'In a Station of the Metro' looks at similar areas of private fragility exposed through its contrast with the harsh unforgiving public environment of the underground station. See Ezra Pound *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1952), 109.

The visual clue to the continued examination of Ireland through an English setting is emphasised by O'Casey's very specific stage directions about the use of colour in the play; and it is this specificity that re-inforces the link between the park and Ireland. O'Casey gives a very clear description of how he would like to see the park gates, which give the play its title and enclose the action, depicted. O'Casey chose a curtain, which he acknowledges as borrowed from Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*.⁴⁵ The gates are to be rendered as 'stiff, formal, dignified and insolent.' The sense of entrapment in a cold, alienating environment is reinforced by a later detailed stage description:

The bars should shine with the silver gleam of aluminium paint, and cross or diagonal bars should be a deep and sombre black. All the space between the bars should be dark - but not too dark - green. (WG, 88).

While the grass of the park must obviously be depicted as green, the English audience cannot be unaware

⁴⁵ The connections between O'Casey and O'Neill's drama have not been given much critical attention, but there are many similarities between the dramatists including their experiments with form, their use of Greek material and their mutual interest in Expressionism. O'Casey was an ardent admirer of O'Neill's work and declared himself 'jealous' of what O'Neill, amongst others, had done 'but this is a jealousy of admiration and affection' from 'Notes on the Way' in *Time and Tide* (L1, , 561[13/4/35]). Murray (2004) suggests simply that the men 'had a certain sombreness in common' (235). O'Casey was delighted when O'Neill went to see the New York production of *Within the Gates*, especially as O'Neill was notoriously reclusive. Though O'Neill's opinion of the actual production is not recorded, as we have seen (note 7), he had written to O'Casey praising the play in typescript.

of the additional resonance of this colour for an Irishman. The sense of constriction in this description is profound, enhanced by the precise detail of the darkness of the shade of green. Dublin's creeping paralysis is evoked through this shade of green as clearly as it is in Joyce's *Dubliners*. The aluminium bars conjure up the bars of a prison cell for the audience, reminding them of the artistic paralysis of Dublin, while also suggesting O'Casey's perception of his own repression as a dramatist in Ireland. The contrast of the silver and the black bars creates a series of religious crosses, offering the audience a visual replication of the continued importance and domination of the clergy in Ireland, and a continuation of Joyce's argument from *Dubliners* that Ireland is still imprisoned by its religious tensions.

O'Casey's description of the process of writing *Within the Gates* in his autobiography, *Rose and Crown*, draws our attention to the markedly filmic qualities of the play:

He [O'Casey] had written a lot of dialogue and rough drafts of themes, and now he was trying to write the wild themes and wandering dialogue into a design of Morning, Noon, Evening and Night, blending these with the seasons, changing the outlook of the scene by changing the colour of the flower or tree, blending these again with the moods of the scenes (A2, 351-2).

The play was to be structured into these cinematic 'scenes', rejecting the more theatrical arrangement of acts. The repeated motif of 'blending' the seasons and the colours is much closer to the fading in and out of scenes in films than the awkward intrusiveness of scene changes in the theatre. Whilst the sense of an Expressionistic layering of scenes recalls the 'episodes' of the German Expressionist dramatist Ernst Toller, links with Eisenstein in the cinema are equally strong. Certainly O'Casey's description of the role of the camera is strikingly evocative of the more recent language of film criticism in which the director takes his place as the film's *auteur*.

Sean had his own ideas about films. To him the camera was king of the kinema. It was the actor in all the film did, or tried to do. Actors however great, actresses however glamorous, were but minor correlatives of the kinema, like fancy buttons on a coat and pretty buttons on a belt (A2,352).

O'Casey's thoughts about film are of particular significance to *Within the Gates* since he was not at all convinced that this piece of writing would turn out to be a play at all.⁴⁶ Alongside the work of Fritz Lang, O'Casey was

⁴⁶ The O'Casey's had recently moved to Chalfont St Giles in an attempt to reduce their debts by selling the remainder of the lease on the flat at Woronzow Road. It was also a time of great personal difficulties in their marriage. Eileen's long-standing relationship with Ephraim had been re-ignited into an affair during her run in *Bitter Sweet*, resulting in an unwanted pregnancy and later an abortion. This was a traumatic time and O'Casey was hurt but ultimately sympathetic and understanding. It may seem unkind to suggest that the portrayal of 'The Young Whore' Jannice in *Within the Gates* may owe

also familiar with the work of Sergei Eisenstein; and an specially arranged series of viewings of Russian films, including *Battleship Potempkin*, had been arranged for O'Casey by Sidney Bernstein, after which the O'Casey's met Eisenstein at a party.⁴⁷

After his domestic difficulties, O'Casey began to 'get back to the play or film - or whatever it turns out to be'⁴⁸ in Chalfont St Giles, while also beginning the work that would eventually become his autobiography - provisionally titled 'A Child is Born'. Experimenting in different forms and genres was very much on his mind at this time. A further venture into film with *Within the Gates* was then a distinct possibility, using the same director who had produced the film version of *Juno and the Paycock* - Alfred Hitchcock. O'Casey had serious discussions with Hitchcock about the potential of *Within the Gates* as a film and Hitchcock seemed interested. Sean and Eileen invited Hitchcock and his wife Alma, who was also his co-producer, to come to dinner and discuss the project. Although Hitchcock seemed keen, O'Casey felt that Alma (who was also his business partner

something to the tensions that O'Casey saw in his wife at this time, but there are some parallels: both women are filled with a longing for commitment and security, yet are lured by the desire for something more exciting and exhilarating.

⁴⁷ Murray (2004), 214.

⁴⁸ O'Connor (1988), 286.

in his early films) was not convinced by the project (A2, 353). Despite initial promises, and the sketching out of a scenario, O'Casey never heard from Hitchcock again; and it was this lack of directorial interest in the project as a film that led O'Casey to making the outline film script into a play, rather than any specific desire to return to theatre at this point.

It is striking that when O'Casey does write *Within the Gates*, he continues his experiments with form, rather than retreating into the safety of the less starkly experimental style of earlier plays such as *Juno*. The first experiment, as we have heard, is at the level of structure, since *Within the Gates* is divided into scenes rather than acts. Such a decision gives the play a Greek quality, since it presents 'episodes' of action interspersed with choral odes and rejects the Roman influenced five-act structure. The removal of the fixed parameters of an act releases the play from the limitations of such a traditional form. The concentrated period of time allotted to a conventional 'act' of a play can be avoided, liberating the playwright and avoiding the sense that the themes and content of the drama are being constructed and moulded to fit into the audience's expectation of a significant line of development

both within the play and within the rhythm and pattern of each act itself. The abandonment of the traditional act structure also works to contradict the audience's expectation of a 'resolution' in the final act that is implicit in traditional three or four act plays. Removing the fixed acts of the play also releases O'Casey from the necessity to place an interval in the structure of the play, allowing the action to flow continuously without interruption for the audience. The removal of the interval is a formal experiment typical of European drama at the time and used to particular effect by Lorca and Ionesco.

The sense of inevitable movement towards resolution at the end of the play is negated here by shifts in structure and terminology. If, ultimately, a *reader* feels as if there is little difference between a 'scene' and an 'act', there is distinction for the *audience* in the theatre, who experiences the fluidity and transitional nature of a scene as opposed to the more formulaic conventions of an act of approximately forty-five-minutes duration. The structural changes of *Within the Gates* work to re-align audience expectations of an O'Casey play; O'Casey faces his audience's antipathy head-on. Despite having faced the criticisms of *The Silver Tassie*, and despite the acute pain

they caused him, O'Casey refuses to compromise on his continuing formal experiments now that his new-found confidence becomes increasingly defiant.

There are other major experiments with form in this play. Dance, music and song are all used to a much greater extent than in any of his previous plays; and there is a real sense of liberation for O'Casey. It is as if he takes the most controversial act of *The Silver Tassie* - Act 2 - and uses this as a starting point from which to continue his experiments in *Within the Gates*. The first words of the play are sung by a Chorus rather than spoken by an individual character, a decidedly classical opening, as with Greek drama. Although the plays of Euripides, for example, often start with a Prologue delivered by one actor, the early plays of Aeschylus do often begin with a chorus. Christopher Murray suggests that 'the new play was a continuation of the *Tassie* by other means', though he concentrates on O'Casey's fascination with the 'Jonsonian manifestation of verbal energy' in *Hyde Park* as his point of connection.⁴⁹

Within the Gates is very much part of the European tradition of ensemble performance, in which the action is concentrated on a series of performers and theatrical events, relentlessly trying to move the focus away from a

⁴⁹ Murray (2004), 212.

central character, just as the second act of *The Silver Tassie* was trying to do. The play does not feature a family, but concentrates the action on an apparently random group of individuals using the public park. The family motif is fractured further by Jannice, the young whore, since she has no family in the traditional sense, only a step-father who has now tired of helping her, because she will not adopt his atheism as her philosophy. Representations of the family are all distorted or non-standard in this play. The nanny brings the baby in the pram into the park; the parents are never seen. The Old Man and the Young Man appear together, but there are no women to accompany them to make up a more traditional family group. The Bishop lives with his sister (or, the only representative of his family in the play is his sister) and even the final *dénouement* reveals that his own potential family was disrupted by conventions and morality.

But Jannice is also interesting as a character since she connects the play to another European theatrical tradition, the Max Reinhardt school of theatre. Reinhardt's theatre saw itself as a 'people's theatre', classless and inclusive. Reinhardt, much in common with theatre today, wanted to celebrate the use of the body in theatre: 'For

Reinhardt...movement (as opposed to the voice) was the prerequisite for the performer'.⁵⁰ O'Casey, as Yeats had done in his *Four Plays for Dancers*, also explores the potential spiritual significance of dance and the power of the body in *Within the Gates*.

Jannice's character in particular inherits the spiritual traces of the Greek inspired dances of Isadora Duncan and Louie Fuller. Indeed her use of dance is Maenadic in spirit, manic and distracted like Nora in *A Doll's House*, who infuses her tarantella with desperate longing, Jannice's dance is an expression of individuality, sexuality, frustration and despair. As O'Casey had used the choric elements of Greek drama, its 'episodes' rather than acts and had announced in his article for the New York Times that he wished to return drama to 'the austere ritual of the Greek drama',⁵¹ it is clear that O'Casey uses dance as a means of enhancing those Classical roots. London drama critics in the earlier part of the century had certainly responded to examples of Greek dancing with the kind of philosophical, stridently non-naturalist interpretation of the dance that

⁵⁰ Edith Hall, & Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914* (Oxford, 2005), 528 and generally see J.L. Styan *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁵¹ O'Casey (1967), 114. This is further element of comparison with the works of Eugene O'Neill.

O'Casey was seeking for his own work. After seeing Maud Allan dance in London in 1908, for example, W.L. Courtney, drama critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, was moved to rhapsodise that her movement was 'part of that rhythmical motion which philosophy tells us lies at the basis of all created things, and is an imitation of the laws of the universe.'⁵²

O'Casey has focused on the body and the dance as a means of attempting to express the confusion of thoughts and emotions in the post-war world. The chorus girls who open the play, dressed as crocuses, cornflowers and daffodils, owe much to the traditions of the musical and to Cochran's reviews, but they also function as a highly stylised presentation of the actor's body.

This inexplicable spirit of life and the euphoric pleasure of being part of an energy of the universe which cannot be rationalised are what O'Casey attempts to capture through his own use of dance in *Within the Gates*. In this sense he does echo Ibsen's 'joy of life', but there is also a kind of fatalistic and humorous enjoyment of life which pre-empts Beckett's 'nothing to be done'. If all ideological positions have been tested by the War and found wanting, then *Within the Gates* suggests that we

⁵² Quoted in Hall & Macintosh (2005), 549.

must accept that the universe is beyond human control. But this does not mean that we give up hope of resolving its problems like the Down-and-Outs; instead we 'die dancing'.

Jannice's dance with the Dreamer until her death at the end of Scene 1V is, as in Scene II, a direct riposte to the mordant hopeless return of the Down-and-Outs, singing their doleful refrain. The Bishops' instruction that Jannice should join the Down and Outs and seek salvation through repentance with them is rousingly rejected by the Dreamer, who stands between Jannice and the Down-and-Outs to prevent them absorbing her into their ranks. The Dreamer encourages the dying Jannice to dance with him and as they dance, the Down-and-Outs approach like lost souls seeking another to join them. The Dreamer rouses Jannice to defy them:

DREAMER (fiercely): Sing them silent; dance them still; laugh them into open shame! (WTG,165).

Jannice does die dancing and with her defiance she ends as a triumphal symbol of aspiration and hope for life. The Young Whore never gives up her sense of personal pleasure, her own crusade against the trauma of her life; she resists being quelled into feeling guilt and regret for her existence. In essence the message of *Within the Gates* is

hopeful, upbeat, undefeated, believing in the power of life and the love of living as the most essential ideology of all. The Dreamer's final song rejects those who are fearful of their own existence, who are cowed by any dogma:

Life that is weak with the terror of life let it die; Let it sink down, let it die, and pass from our vision forever! (WTG, 167).

The sense that this play is somehow a prayer for the world is underlined by the instructions for the production printed in the published play:

From the Bishop's 'Benedicti vos a Domino', in the Fourth Act, to the departure of the Down-and-Outs, the dialogue should, if possible, be intoned (Frontispiece, WTG).

The positive drive to carry on after all the destruction that the war has caused is clear from O'Casey's response to the criticism of Agate:

But the creed of this play is that all must be faced and overcome. That force and power must be created out of what we have.⁵³

Here O'Casey anticipates in many ways the ideology of the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin conceives of Absurdism as:

an effort, however timid and tentative, to sing, to laugh, to weep - and to growl - if not in praise of God...at least in search of a dimension of the Ineffable; an effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, to instil in him again

⁵³ *Sunday Times* 18 February 1934.

the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish, to shock him out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical, complacent, and deprived of the dignity that comes of awareness.⁵⁴

O'Casey's work shares this Absurdist drive to make the audience aware of the 'ultimate realities' of their existence; and this desire to inspire and enlighten runs concurrent with O'Casey's political agenda to de-mystify contemporary social conditions. The post-war world is not a pleasant one, but it is one we inhabit and we must make the best of it. The need to remind the audience of the 'cosmic wonder' of their human state is something for which *Within the Gates* strives, not only through ideological argument but through the creation of a euphoric, sensual experience achieved by the layering of aural and visual forms and the juxtaposition of song, dance and poetic language.

O'Casey was a great friend of George Bernard Shaw by the time he came to write *Within the Gates*, and it is possible that Shaw had discussed with him his own unsatisfactory experience with a musical adaptation of his work.⁵⁵ What is clear is that O'Casey wanted to overcome

⁵⁴ Esslin (1980), 400.

⁵⁵ An operetta version of *Pygmalion* had been proposed to GBS in 1921, but Shaw remained stung by the memory of the adaptation of *Arms and the Man*: 'Never again will I face the loss and disgrace the thrice accursed Chocolate Soldier brought upon me', Shaw (1988), 730. However, Shaw's objection was mostly on financial rather than formal grounds, since a musical production of his work by another author threatened his regular income: 'Pygmalion is my

the usual boundaries between drama and the musical.

Rather than have a separate musical production of a serious play, O'Casey wanted to incorporate music, dance and drama within one theatrical experience. Robert Hogan suggests that dance was what O'Casey 'adds' to *Within the Gates*, since song and chanting had already been used in *The Silver Tassie*. For Hogan dance here is a 'debilitating technique', used to greater effect in the later plays such as *Red Roses for Me* and *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy*.⁵⁶ Yet O'Casey's use of the dance in *Within the Gates* works to evoke a depth of feeling and emotion for the audience that is not possible through dialogue alone.

The Young Whore's spirit and defiant individuality is expressed not through the lucidity of her language, but through her evocation of the semiotic spirit of the dance:

THE YOUNG WHORE (hysterically): I tell you if I have to die; I'll die game, I'll die dancing! (WTG, 35).

Dance underscores the Young Whore's contradictory emotions and tortured psyche. Not only does Jannice see dance as a means of expressing her petulant and careless rejection of all those who have rejected and betrayed her; it

most steady source of income: it saved me from ruin during the war and still brings in a substantial penny every week. To allow a comic opera to supplant it is out of the question' (730).

⁵⁶ Hogan (1960), 75.

is also the expression of her potential salvation. What Janine fears above all is loneliness and isolation: 'I can't live alone any longer dad' (WTG, 36), she claims as she pleads with the Atheist, her step-father, to share his home again. Jannice goes a step further when explaining herself to the Gardener: 'I am frightened to live alone any longer' (WTG,42). Janine tells herself that she will not be alone, believing that she will marry the Gardener. When telling the Atheist of her plans, she is confident that it is the dance that will secure her future:

THE YOUNG WHORE: We're going to the dance together tonight, when we'll settle everything. You'll see (WTG, 37).

Language cannot convey Jannice's complex anxieties and feelings of frustration, and she uses the dance as a means of explaining her sense of exploitation and dissatisfaction as she broaches the subject of marriage with the Gardener:

THE YOUNG WHORE:....Marry me Ned. You want me or you don't want me. I'm not just going to be a dance number for you any longer (WTG, 42).

Here feelings of hatred and rejection of her mother are articulated through a further association with song and dance. When Jannice meets her mother, the old woman

asks her for money and claims that she has not long to live.

Fiercely despising her mother, Jannice lashes out:

THE YOUNG WHORE: I'd dance and sing if I thought you'd die within an hour! (WTG, 74).

The experiments in form in *Within the Gates* are not restricted to song and dance but also have a sense of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* about them. When Brecht discusses the impact of the alienation effect in 'Street Scene', he concentrates on the necessity for theatre to make the ordinary unusual again:

...taking the human social incidents to be portrayed, and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.⁵⁷

In Scene III of *Within the Gates* such a moment occurs with the particularly English activity of reading the newspaper. Three men come on stage '*with stiff, conventionalised steps*' (WTG, 90), carrying a newspaper and a deckchair. They open out the papers in '*four staccato movements*', holding the papers so that '*each page appears before the reader like a placard*'. The titles on their papers consist of 'Murder, Rape, Divorce, Racing, Suicide, Execution and Great Cricketer Talks about God'. These metonymical

⁵⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene' in Bentley (1990), 91.

statements about the content of the press are particularly Brechtian in their style of presentation. As the readers sit on stage reading, a chorus of 'London Bridge is Falling Down' begins to play in the background, clearly asking the audience to look at the state of the nation presented before them.

O'Casey re-stages his by now familiar on-stage, off-stage technique here, inviting the audience to see the representation of the actors' reading matter as a means of reflecting on their own prurience or in a very Brechtian sense to 'criticize constructively' what passes for news. The Readers themselves offer a comment on the major function of the press – to make money – for as the Young Whore arrives amongst them, they adapt the words of 'London Bridge is Falling Down' to words of their own 'Gold and silver's grown a god, My fair lady'. The Young Whore is moved to offer her own valediction for the press:

Oh Lucifer, Lucifer, who has caused all newspapers, stars of the morning and stars of the evening, to be written for our learning, grant that we may so read that we may always find punch in them, hot stuff in them, and sound tips in them, so that both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls, we may get closer and closer to Thee! (*Indignantly to the Readers*) Why the hell don't you all say Amen? (WTG, 92-93)

Such an ironic moment in this liturgical style is reminiscent of the 'Song to the Gun' in *The Silver Tassie*, and again marks another moment of alienation for the audience, who are forced to see themselves as consumers of titivating stories, lies and gossip and as such latched in a pact with the devil. Viscount Buckmaster's assessment of the essentially symbolic nature of the use of language in *Within the Gates* is most evident in speeches such as this. The power of such speeches comes not from O'Casey using language in a purely naturalist sense to convey plot, but in the modernist sense to construct interest in the significance of the language itself.

Aside from his occasional Brechtian style, O'Casey also pre-empts the work of Beckett. We have already seen how the play presages the Theatre of the Absurd in general terms; in *Within the Gates* the use of the two men, the Older Man and the Younger Man, one who has a stiff left leg and the other a stiff right leg and who despite their differences in age 'both are in the last lap of physical decay' (WTG,7) anticipate the Beckettian couple in *Waiting for Godot*:

THE OLDER ONE: 'Ow's the old leg, 'Erbert?

THE YOUNGER ONE (with a movement indicating hopelessness): Aw, Gord! 'Ow's yourn?

THE OLDER ONE (With a similar movement):
Aw – sime wye, with honours!

(A pause.) (WTG, 7).

The balance of physical deprivations between the pair, their shared state of decline, their focus on the passage of time, and the balance in their exchanges of dialogue all pre-figure Beckett's theatrical practice. Even the stage pause, later used by Beckett, is used here and creates the same theatrical space of vacuity and absence as we find in Beckett. The men have nothing to say to one another; there is a mutual resignation and hopelessness suggested in the space of the pause. They balance precariously on the edge of the yawning chasm of the unsaid.

The pause also has a tragic-comic function here too. The men are filling up their time, in a very Beckettian way, simply waiting. Here, rather than waiting for Godot to come in, they are waiting for their horse to come in, passing the hours until the result of the race is known:

The Younger One: Long hours to go yet before we know for certain if it's a frisk or a fall.

Older One (gloomily): As minutes pass me 'opes er getting fyneter en' fyneter.

Younger One (hopefully): Pedigree's good, enyhow; couldn't 'ave 'ad a better dam or sire.

Older One (dubiously): Doesn't alwyes count, Godfrey, doesn't alwyes count.

Younger One (yearningly): If 'e only 'as the stamina to stick it to the end of the course, en' win even by a short 'ead – oh, wot it would mean to us!

Older One: Difference between poverty en' wealth fer a month or more.

(*A pause*) (WTG, 7-8).

The men in this play act as forerunners of Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for something to happen to them that could change their lives. The ridiculous comic sense that they have been waiting together like this before many a horse race is balanced by the recognition that such activities are all they have to look forward to; gambling is the only activity that might offer them some material change from the current poverty of their existence.

Finding the Audience

American awareness and understanding of the musical as a form is deeply rooted in the cultural background of the New York audience; and this may also go some way towards explaining why the American audiences and critics reacted so much more positively than London audiences to *Within the Gates*. The long tradition of vaudeville of America began in 1792 when Piis and Barre opened their Théâtre du

Vaudeville, producing musical comedies that were eventually given the sobriquet 'vaudeville'. Satirical and variety acts accompanied by popular music largely made up of these shows; and vaudeville rapidly spread to English music halls where it there also took on the title of its original location. Vaudeville was a mixture of song, comedy and dance, often featuring attractive women as its stars. O'Casey employs the elements of the popular musical in *Within the Gates* and many of the later plays. The beautiful woman of the musical was particularly evident in the New York production of *Within the Gates*, since the American actress and silent screen star Lilian Gish played the part of the Young Whore.⁵⁸

O'Casey's play also connects strongly with an even older tradition in the musical theatre - that of the English burlesque. The British burlesque tradition has been very vibrant since its beginnings in the mid-eighteenth century and was most popular in late Victorian England.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁸ O'Casey's love and appreciation of the female form is seen consistently in the detailed descriptions he gives to the women in the stage directions. From Minnie Powell in *The Shadow of Gunman* to Loreleen in *Cock -a-Doodle - Dandy*, O'Casey carefully specifies the colour of their hair and clothes, their figure and their youthful attractiveness and spirit.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Michael Booth *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester [1980]) [repr. of *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (ed.) M. Booth (Oxford, 1969-76)], esp. 149-212 and John D. Jump *Burlesque* (London, 1972), 52-72.

burlesque developed its scope through the work of James R. Planché and later Gilbert and Sullivan; and it was Gilbert who transformed the parodic elements of the genre into its satiric style and concentrated, through his collaboration with Sullivan as composer, on developing the musical score.⁶⁰

With its comic or parodic acts, grotesque exaggerations, its combination of the serious and the comic, burlesque on the English stage developed into a form which critiqued and ridiculed not just contemporary political concerns but also stage conventions. O'Casey at this time builds on this well-established tradition, which was the perfect foil to his frustration with and rejection of contemporary English stage conventions. The pantomime features of his work, his use of the comic value of the duo, such as the Older and the Younger Man, the 1st and the 2nd Nursemaid and the 1st and 2nd Platform Speaker, for example, all relate back to the burlesque.

Whereas the pantomime would take as its source fairy tales, nursery rhymes or folk stories, the burlesque tended to take more elevated subjects - literature and myth,

⁶⁰ Cf. V. Clinton Baddeley *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre After 1660* (London, 1952), 119: 'The importance of Gilbert's work as a librettist lies in the fact that he was not burlesquing, parodying, or travestyng particular musical productions. He was burlesquing musical conventions in general.' See also Lee Bliss 'Pastiche, burlesque, tragic-comedy' in *the Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama* (eds.) A. R. Braunmuller & Michael Hattaway (Cambridge, 2003), 228-253.

historical or classical legend and Shakespeare.⁶¹ Music was an essential, though often minor, feature of the burlesque tradition and often used to underline the action or for comic effect, sometimes drawing on well-known popular tunes. Although O'Casey does not only use music to comic effect in *Within the Gates*, he is clearly using it to underscore the action of his play, just as he had begun to do in his earlier plays. Since O'Casey wanted his plays to contain formal elements that would find a resonance in the widest range of audience possible - a blend of styles, song poetry and dance in the Shakespearean manner – the burlesque and its American vaudevillean second cousin were the important models.

Breon O'Casey remembers being taken to the English musical hall by his father as a young child (Breon himself retains a love of music hall songs as a result),⁶² and O'Casey was clearly thinking of music hall traditions while writing the play. When O'Casey first began to sample the fare of London theatre, he claimed that the only production that left him with any lasting impression was the chorus of *Rose Marie*: 'the extraordinarily beautiful slide and slip,

⁶¹ Cf. Booth ([1980]), 149-121.

⁶² Conversation between the author and Breon O'Casey August 2001.

shimmering with colour, of the girls in the chorus of that immensely mortal musical play' (A2,261).

The impact of music and colour, as we have heard, is central to O'Casey's conception of *Within the Gates*, but O'Casey adapts techniques from the comic turns of music hall comedians in the word play of certain speeches in his play. The Foreman, for example, catches the Gardener talking to the Young Whore during working hours and admonishes him, cautioning him to save his womanising for out-of-working hours. The rhyming repetitions to be delivered in an imitation cockney dialect recall the 'patter song' of the nineteenth-century burlesque:

...In your awm time you can charnce your awm as much as you like with dandy women, randy women, candy women, ready women, heady women, steady women, beddy women, weddy women, splendid women, mended women, ended women, boyish women, toyish women, coyish women...fancy women, dancy women, chancy women, or eny other clars of women you warnt to 'andle or leggle (WTG, 45).

There might almost be a pause for applause after a fast paced delivery of these lines.

It is possible to read the play as an allegorical consideration of the post-war world. Whilst *Within the Gates* is the logical progression of the ideological issues raised by *The Silver Tassie*, this play focuses firmly on the post-war

consequences of the conflict not simply to individuals in society, but to its ideological fabric. It is far closer to the Shavian 'Play of Ideas' than has previously been thought, although O'Casey's work seeks to realize these ideas in a more dramatic way than Shaw's highly rhetorical style allows.

In *Within the Gates*, dance and song work together as a unified expression of the tension between the post-war desire for harmony and new beginnings on the one hand, and the damage done to politics, ideology and religion through world conflict on the other. The 'characters' of this play represent ideologies and beliefs that had been questioned as a result of the First World War. The Atheist represents the quest for personal responsibility, and suggests the 'failure' of religion in its ability to prevent the conflict or to provide a satisfactory account of its necessity. The Bishop represents the unchanging face of organised religion, apparently unmoved or unaltered by the conflict, withdrawing into platitudes and retreating into well-rehearsed pre-war expressions of faith. The Dreamer suggests much of the potential and hope for the future; it is only through him that a new future can be imagined, yet he offers only dreams not action. The Young Whore represents

sexual anxiety and confusion, the more liberal morality of the post-war world, set against guilt and the desire for security amidst the increasing freedom of the 1930s.

These ideological positions are questioned, countered, explored and excoriated in the play, particularly at the end of Scene II. The Dreamer attempts to seduce the Young Whore by offering her a song in exchange for her favours. Significantly, he asks her name, wanting to dedicate the song to her but also transporting their potential union into the world of the personal and poetic and away from the suggestion of exploitative sexual bartering. In the song of the Dreamer, the body of Jannice is compared to the beauty of the branches of the willow and apple trees, and the poet is clearly offering her a vision of their union which is not sordid or furtive but natural and pure:

THE DREAMER: Gay white apple blossoms her
breast,
Her legs golden branches of a willow;
I'd enjoy for a year and a day,
Looking down from the heights of a pillow
Looking down from the heights of a pillow!
(WTG, 81).

Sex here takes on a lyrical and witty quality; it is not a thing of shame and disgrace but of beauty and enjoyment. This return to the peace of the pastoral was also a feature of the song between Jack and Nora in *The Plough and the Stars*,

as we saw in Chapter 3. And in *Within the Gates* too there is a political overtone to the song.

The Young Whore can be seen as O'Casey's continuing representation of the Young Woman of Ireland. In the post-war world he sees that the continuing problem of national identity and self-definition has not evaporated. The 'Old Woman' of the play is the mother of the Young Whore, and can be seen as a further version of the Old Woman of Ireland. In Scene II, when the Young Whore declaims that she would dance and sing if her mother died within the hour, she is the Young Woman of Ireland, longing for the death of the old representation of her nation. The Old Woman takes up the Young Whore's curse and repeats it several times, even turning to the Bishop to ask for support and his help in condemning her pronouncement:

OLD WOMAN (wildly): You'd dance and sing if I died in an hour! Hear that, now! Dance and sing! How can God listen to such a saying and not strike you dead? (*Over to the BISHOP*) Didja hear what she said? – dance and sing if I died in an hour? Come over and bruise her hopes with a grim curse from God (WTG, 75).

The Young Whore responds 'hysterically' by claiming 'My heart my heart – you'll be the death of me', allowing the dual interpretation of the weakness of her heart physically to be set against the 'heart' of old Ireland being passed on

to the Young to destroy its progeny. The Old Woman's burning resentment is so strong that she almost physically attacks her daughter, raising her arm to strike her, stopped only by the Dreamer moving forward to stop her arm in mid-air.

The play expresses the continuing battle between old and new conceptions of nationhood through Irish metaphors, but with no less resonance for other post-war countries. It is significant that it is the Dreamer who must stop the old and new versions of nationhood fighting one another - there must be an alternative solution to conflict – though the Dreamer is seen to fail since he cannot construct a solution. He remains a dreamer - and simply sends the Old Woman away. She retreats after stroking a laurel wreath, a loving gesture to the dead, with a speech that confirms her as the voice of the lost nation:

THE OLD WOMAN. ...The bad present, and the good absent; the shame living, and the pride buried; gone from my grasp and my sight in the smoke and flame of war. O Jesus, is there no rest to be found anywhere! (WTG,77).

This sense of hopeless dislocation also reminds us of Johnny's refrain 'I can rest nowhere, nowhere, nowhere' (JP, 71) from *Juno and the Paycock*. *Within the Gates*

reminds the audience that Irish national identity and politics still deny the nation rest.

In an Expressionist evocation of the dead, The Young Whore has also indicated her connection with those who have been lost through her vision of hell. She is as haunted as the Old Woman by images of the past and is tortured by those who appear to be calling her to join them. The use of colour and imagery in this speech has much in common with the Expressionist cinema of Fritz Lang, and would not seem out of place in a scene from *Metropolis* (a film that O'Casey had seen and admired when he first came to London in 1926) or *Dr Caligari's Cabinet*.

THE YOUNG WHORE: ...Green-eyed, barrel-bellied men glare and grin at me; huge-headed, yellow-eyed women beckon to me out of the glow from the fire that can never be quenched. Black-feathered owls, with eyes like great white moons, peck at me as they fly through the glow from the fire that can never be quenched (WTG, 37).

The Young Whore's vision represents the haunting of society by the death of its youthful generation. The Young Whore lives, but many of her age do not. The sense that this society is haunted by the First World War is echoed in the final scene of the play, where the figure of the soldier on the war memorial is lit from the back, so that it takes on the semblance of a perverse bronze as the light '*shines on*

the head and shoulders of the figure, making them glow like aluminium' (WTG,125). The Old Woman continues her wail for the dead, of Ireland and of the rest of the world, as she elevates a laurel wreath above her head before placing it at the foot of the statue, lamenting the dead generation. She sings of the children who will never be born to the loves of the soldiers, 'Her emptiness thrill'd to be big with the fruit of his love-/But deep in the black earth's lying now the red plumed dragoon!' (WTG,144). Her bitter hatred of life is unremitting: 'May God in a rage smite the world to its end' (WTG,145). Only the power and energy of the dance, of the non-verbal can answer this curse; and it is essential that the Young Whore, daughter of the Old Woman, is the dancer and counters this message of despair of life with a gesture of energy towards life, futile though it may be. Again the absurdist message is clear:

For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions and to laugh at it.⁶³

In his song to The Young Whore, The Dreamer is trying to lead Young Ireland to a conception of herself based on just such dignity, a poetic sense of self rather than the pragmatic. But she is dismissive and in a satiric flare at

⁶³ Esslin (1980) , 429.

O'Casey's own Communist views, Jannice only becomes interested in the Dreamer when he offers her a pound to accompany his song. But even this is not enough to hold her attention, and the economic imperative wins when she responds to the more promising signals from the Young Man in the Plus Fours. In Marxist terms, the economic imperative has won. Having taken his pound, the Young Whore still goes off with the man who can offer her more. When the Dreamer asks why he cannot accompany her, she comments 'mockingly':

THE YOUNG WHORE: Not this time dear. The exchange isn't good enough (WTG, 82).

There is a potentially feminist reading of this transaction. While the play is not so unreflective as to suggest that prostitutes are not exploited, there is a sense that Jannice feels a moment of power and control through this episode of exchange. Again dance is used ^{to} express her (perhaps misplaced) sense of her own power and exultation: the stage directions specify that Jannice 'waltzes up the centre path' of the park, to the tune of the Blue Danube Waltz in the background, as she exits to follow the Man in Plus Fours. Both the Bishop and the Gardener call to her in an attempt to stop her going with him. But she ignores them, since what they can offer is not enough. The

stage directions emphasise that the joke is on the men left behind at the end of the second scene:

...the music grows louder and seems to mock the men as - THE GATES CLOSE (WTG,83).

Jannice has gone out dancing, her defiance expressed in movement.⁶⁴

The play indicates where future problems of nationhood will lie – in the economy. In the light of the Celtic Tiger effect in Ireland during the 1990s, this play seems prescient. For if the economic will always prevail over the poetic, then the play seems to imply that any nation can make a whore of itself. Thralldom to the financial means trade to the highest bidder, whatever the consequences, just as Jannice here offers herself to the Young Man in Plus Fours simply because he appears to provide better financial terms.

Yet with typical O’Caseyan irony, the Young Whore functions as both a representative of the financial

⁶⁴ When he re-edited *Within the Gates* for the 1951 edition O’Casey cut some minor characters from the play, including the ‘Man in Plus Fours’, see Todd (1968). In the 1951 edition, Jannice refuses the money from the Dreamer a little more kindly and declines to leave with him simply because she fears the uncertainty of life in his company: ‘There is no peace with you’. Jannice chooses to leave instead with the Salvation Army Officer, for she believes ‘Here is a real friend who offers peace as a child might offer a friend a new-blown daisy’ see Sean O’Casey *Within the Gates in Plays 1* (London, 1998), 144. While this might appear to dilute some of the economic thrust of the staged versions, it nevertheless depicts Ireland choosing safety and security over change and development, retreating once more into the promise of reward in the afterlife through religious belief rather than the challenges of economic progress now.

imperative and a contempt for it. She is not avaricious since she does not hoard money, merely uses it for her own purposes, to give her pleasure. She 'flings' two of the three pound notes recently given to her by the Dreamer towards the Attendants when defying the Bishop's offer of a place in a nunnery, taunting him with the phrase 'Be merry for a minute, for you'll be a long time dead' (WTG ,106). Her defiant gesture exalts the financial possibilities of the here and now. The play uses song and dance to complete the ironic rejection of deferred gratification proffered by the Church, as Jannice takes the Bishop's staff and '*singing and dancing round with mock stateliness*' delivers her song complete with O'Casey's new words to the tune of 'Little Brown Jug':

THE YOUNG WHORE: Sing and dance, dance and sing,
Brief life should be a joyous thing;
The minds that are to troubles wed
Are fit to host but with the dead!
Ha, ha, ha, you and me, til we both have ceased
to be,
Sling out woe, hug joy instead,
For we will be a long time dead! (WTG,107).

Jannice's song and dance is juxtaposed immediately with the song of the Down-and-Outs, who, as O'Casey was quick to note, do not only represent those who are economically deprived, but those who are also spiritually

and emotionally barren. The bleak hopelessness of their words contrasts with the wild abandon of Jannice's call to enjoy life. If Jannice's dream is reckless or wrong, the play suggests that it is infinitely preferable to the state of anomie pronounced by the Down-and-Outs. The Down-and-Outs also offer a further comment on the economic imperatives suggested by the play. There are those for whom debates about ideology and the search for a solution to problems of the post-war world are futile, since the future offers only stasis for them. Nothing can be changed or improved, no developments can be made, since they would be deemed pointless; and this, the play suggests, is the most dangerous and destructive ideology of all:

*THE DOWN-AND-OUTS: We challenge life no more,
no more, with our dead faith, or dead hope;
We carry furl'd the fainting flag of a dead hope and a
dead faith (WTG, 109).*

It is possible to read Janine as an expression of a post war-traumatised mind, as representative of an international psyche, damaged by war and its resultant ideological insecurities and suffering from a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome before such a condition found its name.

In both Chapters 2 and 3 we have seen how important was the use of song in *Juno* and *The Plough*. In

Within the Gates O’C develops the experiments with the chant that he had begun in *The Silver Tassie* . The focus of the words of the song that opens *Within the Gates* – which O’Casey wrote himself – is rebirth. This fits the temporal moment of the play, since Scene 1 is set in Spring but O’Casey is thinking more widely than that; the new beginnings are on a national and international scale. The initial focus of this play is the sense of aftermath. The dominating feature of the opening set is the statue of the figure of a soldier in the War Memorial, to be set centre stage left and carefully described in the stage directions:

...a steel helmeted soldier, the head bent on the breast, skeleton-like hands leaning on the butt-end of a rifle. Bushes allow the figure to be seen only from the waist up....The figure stands out grey against the blue sky and green shrubs, and seems to be shrinking back from the growing interests brought into being by new life and other interests (WTG,1-2).

This is the figure left over from WW1 and the world of *The Silver Tassie*, the soldier, ever present in the scene, a presence in the play, a background to the action; but the play is moving forward. The soldier’s head is focused on his feet. The audience cannot see the object of his gaze since it is obscured by the ‘bushes’, instead they must simply note that he is there, and that new events are developing in front of him.

The Dreamer enters the gates of the park gently humming the opening refrain of the first song, creating a parallel between the dead soldier of the statue and the young man alive and singing; as if the spirit of the soldier has been transformed into the Dreamer, who sings of rebirth. The opening lines of the song suggest that the post-war world is one of opportunity and potential for change. The world is seeking something new, divorced from the past and re-born into single bliss, ready to make a new social marriage:

CHORUS (singing): Our mother, the earth, is a maiden again, young, fair, and a maiden again. Her thoughts are a dance as she seeks out her Bridegroom, the Sun, through the lovely confusion of singing of birds, and of blossom and bud (WTG, 3-4).

The sense of a world in transition that characterises the opening of the play may well account for O'Casey's concern about its reception. This was his first dramatic work since *The Silver Tassie* and the sense of a defining theatrical moment must have been almost palpable to him, as he worked to refine and develop his dramatic style in an attempt to bring him closer to a broader range of audience in the Shakespearean manner that he so admired.

It is ironic, then, that his visit to America and the location of the performances of *Within the Gates* should have placed him so firmly in 'an elite section of American society'.⁶⁵ Staged at the National Theatre on Broadway, O'Casey's work took on the mantle of being 'dangerously middle-class',⁶⁶ and the audiences who saw it were much closer to the upper echelons of New York society than the Bronx. However, O'Casey could not have known this, since his only close contact with America had been the letters between himself and George Jean Nathan - the very critic who so admired O'Casey's work and had persuaded him to bring it to the American stage. What is important to O'Casey is that 'compared to London, it [New York] seemed open to new ideas and forms'.⁶⁷ Here was a country with a reputation for embracing the new and here was O'Casey with a new play, a re-vitalised combination of music, drama and song - Shakespeare for a modern audience.

⁶⁵ Murray (2004), 233.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 233.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 233.

Marvin Carlson, amongst others,⁶⁸ has drawn attention to the potential for 'haunting' in all theatrical performances:

Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places.⁶⁹

This sense of theatre as the 'repository of cultural memory', in Carlson's terms is very much at the centre of O'Casey's re-investigation of the historical moment through the theatrical frame which is common to his earlier plays:

All theatrical conventions have recognized, in some form or another, this ghostly quality, this sense of something coming back in the theatre, and so the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex.⁷⁰

O'Casey seems to have been aware of these spectral presences around his own work, even if he did not refer to it in these terms. What is distinct about O'Casey is that he recognised that 'this sense of something coming back' was not limited to the reception of his work. He understood that this same notion of returning and repetition was infecting

⁶⁸ See in particular the work of Herbert Blau, Richard Schechner and Joseph Roach.

⁶⁹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as a Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor MI, 2001), 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

the critical reception of his work. What kept 'coming back' was the vexed question of the 'naturalism' of his drama. The 'cultural memory' of his plays as something other than how O'Casey saw them, was what was stalling the reception of his work as modern and experimental. In New York, O'Casey decided to face this problem head on by attempting to take control of his reputation as a dramatist by pre-empting the critics and circumventing the 'haunting' of his own drama by previous critical reactions to it.

As part of this attempt to forestall the kind of criticism he had long become used to (and had received for the London production of *Within the Gates*), O'Casey made a point of trying to educate his American critics about the content and style of his new work *before* the play opened. Although not tremendously accommodating with his time, O'Casey did make himself available to the New York critics and in a particularly significant choice of subject matter, spent time 'Commenting on plays old and new and the lack of new writing' to Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*.⁷¹ The day before the production opened, O'Casey published a piece in the *New York Times* entitled 'From *Within the Gates*'. Christopher Murray points out that this

⁷¹ Murray (2004), 236.

piece gave 'critics a stick with which to beat him [O'Casey] when the curtain went up'.⁷² Yet this article is also a very powerful *cri de coeur* from O'Casey, which works in two ways. First, it is a plea to his critics and to his audience specifically asking for the rejection of naturalism *per se*, and secondly it is a passionate attempt to forbid the critics' rejection of *Within the Gates* on formal grounds.

O'Casey opens the article with a carefully judged rhetorical gesture – appealing to the superior sensibilities of his new critical audience by telling them of the interpretative mistakes made by the London critics when faced with the production of the play:

When *Within the Gates* was first performed in London, some of the English critics began to run around in circles, rumble out protests, and do everything but face firmly the form of drama that had been impudently thrust upon them. It was over their heads and they immediately began to try to trample it under their feet. They were perplexed and then they were frightened. Like the Bishop in the play they called for a fuller manifestation of life, but when it came they fled from before it and hurried for refuge in the ranks of the down and out critics.⁷³

Immediately, O'Casey has set out his stall. His London critics are dismissed as cowardly, intransigent and reactionary, leaving the American critics to take up the space left for imaginative, open and forward looking

⁷² Murray (2004), 236.

⁷³ O'Casey (1967), 111.

analysis, appreciative of his innovative 'form of drama'.

O'Casey is trying to educate his audience about the kind of drama he is producing in a pre-emptive strike.

But this article does more than pander to the vanity of the American theatre critic and audience. It becomes O'Casey's manifesto for theatre. The piece functions as a public explication of all he had tried to do in his work so far, but that critics had not wanted to recognise. As with the argument with Yeats over *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey's tone is one of frustration, since he believes that he is writing exactly the kind of play that theatre critics say they want to see in the theatre. O'Casey feels that he is already producing the kind of modern drama that they want to see developed – the representation of 'real life' on stage. It is the question of what form this representation takes, and how that can be reconciled with O'Casey's formal development which creates a potential contradiction here. O'Casey's Brechtian strand of critical engagement perhaps seems at odds with his parallel desire to go beyond naturalism.

Conclusion

What is highly significant about his article is that O'Casey ends the piece with a passionate statement about his vision of theatre. What he proposes is a theatre closer to postmodern conceptions of theatre, familiar to contemporary companies such as *Shunt* or *Frantic Assembly*. O'Casey wants a dynamic between audience, actors and creator that conjures an organic experience of theatre and requires interdependence, in order to create meaning:

The new form in drama will take qualities found in classical, romantic and Expressionist plays, will blend them together, breathe the breath of life into the new form and create a new drama. It will give rise to a new form of acting, a new form of production, a new form of response in the audience; author, actors and audience will be in communion with each other - three in one and one in three. If a play is what it ought to be it must be a religious function, whether it be played before a community of thousands or a community of ten.⁷⁴

This requirement of the critical engagement of the audience has been a consistent feature of O'Casey's previous plays, as I have discussed in my earlier chapters. It may be that O'Casey imagined future theatre developing along the lines of Forum theatre – with the actors

⁷⁴ O'Casey (1967), 116.

presenting a play, the audience being invited to stop the action and explain how they would have done things differently; and the author then working with the suggestions of the actors and audience to revise the play before the next performance.

The Brechtian sense of theatre leading to action and change and of the audience remaining active, thinking and dynamic throughout the production is common to O'Casey's conception of theatre as he portrays it in this article. But there must be a spiritual dimension to the theatre for O'Casey, which he characterises here as a 'religious' function.⁷⁵ He wants theatre to inspire a sense of awe as well as action and to work as a unifying force for the audience, who may then, in a traditional Communist sense, go on to see their interests as common. This group aesthetic experience should not only work to unite the audience but should, perhaps paradoxically, also encourage individual thought. In this way theatre would invite an emotional connection for the audience which would be close to the sense of spiritual engagement created through attendance at a religious service, but would

⁷⁵ Again, this sense of theatre as religion in a godless world has much in common with O'Neill's work.

not require the acceptance of dogma or denomination to achieve its sense of personal fulfilment.

In the final irony, W.B. Yeats and O'Casey were in some sense re-united over *Within the Gates*. Yeats had supported O'Casey's in the furore over the typesetting of his short story 'I Wanna Woman' and this may have helped the process of reconciliation; and after separate cases of illness the men began corresponding with one another again. In a surprising about-turn, Yeats, who had been so unhappy with the Expressionistic second act of *The Silver Tassie*, as we have heard, asked O'Casey for his permission to produce *Within the Gates* at the Abbey in 1935. O'Casey recalls their meeting in his autobiography and gives his account of Yeats's comments on the play:

O'Casey, he said, bending towards him, you have succeeded in your last play *Within the Gates*. The co-ordination of mood, dialogue and technique there is a success, where, I think, it is a failure in your *The Silver Tassie*....I believe it to be a most successful achievement in your newer manner (A2, 281)

O'Casey was flattered at the praise but nevertheless refused Yeats a production of the play at the Abbey, not out of pique, but because he had learned the lessons of the London and New York stagings well. He realised that the Abbey stage and their resources were too small to offer the

play a suitable production. O'Casey offered Yeats *The Silver Tassie* instead and eventually Yeats suggested both plays, so that he might have *Within the Gates*. However, Brinsley MacNamara vetoed *Within the Gates*, so another controversial staging of *The Silver Tassie* was added to the O'Casey canon, closing after only a week to be replaced, ironically enough, by Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*.⁷⁶

Although the productions of *Within the Gates* did not bring O'Casey great material wealth, the play did have these two particular effects on his oeuvre. First, it overtly established O'Casey as a different kind of playwright, and secondly it established his work as needing a different kind of criticism. Far from having reached 'the bottom of a critical cul-de-sac' as a result of *Within the Gates*,⁷⁷ O'Casey was now in the liberated position of being able to write as he wanted to and to see that his dramatic vision could take shape successfully on stage. He was now ready to continue his theatrical developments and his future plays such as *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* and *The Bishop's Bonfire*, see him moving forward boldly into the avant garde.

⁷⁶ For full details of this episode see Murray (2004), 241-243.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 245.

Chapter 6: Plays without a theatre

After the critical success of *Within the Gates* on the New York stage, O'Casey was left with a dilemma. Though he had written two consecutive plays that were intellectually admired, they remained financially unsuccessful - particularly when compared to his ever popular early work. As C.B.Cochran had realised when he himself turned down the opportunity to mount the first London production of *Within the Gates* (see chapter 5), O'Casey's breach with the Abbey remained; and so while he had isolated successes in London and New York, he still had no theatre for which he could write specifically. O'Casey's contemporary work was now considered a risk for any theatre and its producer.

As Katharine Worth has noted, this was a serious limitation for his work and may be one of the reasons why O'Casey has never been seriously linked with the British avant garde to which his later work more clearly belongs. While Beckett held sway in Paris, Harold Pinter built his association with the Arts Theatre in London and John Osborne claimed the Royal Court, O'Casey did not have the luxury of a regular association with a particular stage. As a result, his later plays came to be read as

somewhat inchoate: he was out on a limb, his experimental drama had no established theatre to give it a popular focus nor to establish its distinctive critical 'brand'.

Yet this limitation of venue can also be read as a liberation for O'Casey's art.¹ Since he was not writing with a particular stage space in mind, O'Casey could instead explore the nature of stage space and representation in its widest sense. His later plays are characterised by just such wide-ranging explorations of the nature of presence and absence and illusion, (particularly in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, 1947), and the real and the imagined (for example, in *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy*, 1949); but above all, they build on similar motifs and devices that he had employed in his earlier work, which now coalesce to create what we now call 'total theatre'.² Here again we find dance and song, visual and aural dissonance and repetitions employed to probe ideological concerns. O'Casey's use of such

¹ For Murray (2004), O'Casey's lack of a particular theatre may indeed have been a deliberate choice. Joan Littlewood, whose Workshop Theatre (at that time based in Manchester) with its blend of music and song, would in many ways have been the perfect company to work on O'Casey's later plays. Yet O'Casey rejected her approach to mount the first production of *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy*, even though she (very unusually) asked him twice. O'Casey claimed a possible American option on the play as the reason for his first rejection, but then allowed Peter Trower at the People's Theatre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne the world première. Murray suggests that O'Casey refused Littlewood because 'he feared being captive to such a group', 317. The restrictions of the style of one theatre company, as well as one theatre, are clearly uppermost in O'Casey's mind.

² Cf. Worth (1986): 'the text is often no more than a scenario for what now might be called a "multi-media show"', 224.

formal elements draws on his earlier Expressionistic experiments, but they also mirror much avant-garde contemporary theatre practice and engage even more stridently with current political debate. O'Casey's late plays may continue to lack audiences, but it may well be that audiences today - with their familiarity with dance work such as Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Tanztheater, the installations of Forced Entertainment and the ensemble pieces of, say, Théâtre de Complicité – are now ready for the disjunctive 'total' theatre that is O'Casey's late oeuvre.

A 'total' song and dance about it

Oak Leaves and Lavender is a particularly interesting play because it is so rarely discussed or performed, and yet is in many ways an intriguing example of *Gesamtkunswerk*. It is also important because the play was published in Vol. 4 of the *Collected Plays* in 1951 without any of O'Casey's usual textual revisions.³ As we have seen most clearly in the radical changes made to scripts of *The Silver Tassie* and *Within the Gates*, after their initial productions, O'Casey's usual mode as a playwright was to undertake re-writing when prompted by his experience of watching rehearsals and observing the first production. However, although O'Casey was

³ Kosok (1985), 197.

dissatisfied with the London production of *Oak Leaves and Lavender* at the Lyric Hammersmith, declaring in the last pages of his autobiography that it was 'the worst production of a play of his' (A2, 655) that he had ever seen, he chose not to make any alterations to the text before it was published. Scathing and caustic about the producer of the play, Ronald Kerr, O'Casey laid much of the failure of the production at his door.⁴ Yet his main source of discontent here is that because the production was weak, the development of his own play suffered, since he had been denied an essential part of the critical dynamic that he used both to help him construct and reconstruct his plays and to stretch his development as a playwright:

The play, admittedly, was a difficult one, probably a clumsy one, possibly, even, a bad one; but the shocking production failed, in every possible way, to show whether it was one, or all, of these; failed to give the slightest guidance to an experimental playwright (A2, 655).

⁴ O'Casey was anxious about the production even before it was mounted. In a letter to George Jean Nathan 14 March 1947, O'Casey indicates his dissatisfaction with Ronald Kerr and for a reason which seems eminently justified given the nature of this play. O'Casey writes: 'He is what he calls "a realist," and doesn't like anything puzzling or picturesque or what might be too imaginative for an audience to grasp; so he is striving to "make the play as normal as possible". I have let him cut quite a lot - I am getting too old and tired to argue -, but I have just refused a request to change the figure of the Young Son of Time from an expressive costume to fit him into a modern one - overalls or dress suit I suppose. Taking out as much as possible the very thing I laboured so hard to put into it - and before any rehearsal had taken place'. Clearly Kerr was simply the wrong producer for this play with its distinctly non-naturalistic style. It is interesting that O'Casey specifically comments on decisions being made about the style of the production before any rehearsals had been conducted - a practice which would in itself be an anathema to O'Casey's own creative practice. See L2, 456.

O'Casey needed a production to tell him whether or not his play was any good and, of course, whether it could work on stage or how it might be changed to make it work in the theatre.

A bad production meant that O'Casey was denied the principal benefit of his triple dynamic of playwright, production and audience. The printed version of *Oak Leaves and Lavender* thus needs to be read as a kind of draft of a play in O'Casey's terms. It is unsurprising that O'Casey decided not to revise the play before publication in the *Collected Plays*, since it was impossible for him to decide what was good or bad about it until he had seen it staged effectively. While Heinz Kosok feels that 'this play more than any other may have gained in effectiveness from certain revisions',⁵ O'Casey clearly could not decide what these were. Rather than make a bad job of it and institute changes that might not improve the play, he simply left the text to be published as he first wrote it.

The play shows the potential for a different kind of theatre: one that had been demonstrated in the New York production of *Within the Gates*, but was never fully realised on stage in London during O'Casey's lifetime. What kind of theatre this would be was perhaps not fully

⁵ Kosok (1985), 198.

defined even in O'Casey's mind, but he knew what it

should include:

It [the drama] ought to contain a combination of all of the arts; there ought to be music in it and ballet in it, and of course, dialogue in it – good dialogue in it – architecture, in the form of the way in which the scene is constructed; scenic design – that's painting – every conceivable art that a human being knows should be crafted and intermingled and woven together in the drama. I tried to do that ever since I dropped off writing what was called 'realism' – though honest to God, I don't know and never did know and never will know what exactly realism means or any of the other forms to which names are given, such as Expressionism, Impressionism, Realism and all that sort of thing. They are all mysteries to me.⁶

While this might have a tinge of 'I'll know it when I see it', O'Casey's remark underlines that he had a clear concept of the content of his drama, even though he may not always have been exactly certain how these genres would connect and coincide until he had seen the work staged. His remarks also indicate an understandable reluctance to have his work labelled as belonging to any particular group or tradition, since he knew from experience how limiting these categories could become.

Prior to the performances at the Lyric

Hammersmith in London, there was an early try-out of the production in Eastbourne. The play was mentioned

⁶ Sean O'Casey, extract from an interview included in *Under a Coloured Cap*, a T.V. documentary made by his daughter Shivaun O'Casey for the Irish television station RTE in 2004 and broadcast on BBC4 in August 2005.

in the *Eastbourne Chronicle* a week before it opened and the local newspapers showed their familiarity with the conventional interpretations of O'Casey's work:

In *Oak Leaves and Lavender* O'Casey has departed from his usual Irish background.⁷

Despite the use of non-Irish locations in both *The Silver Tassie* and *Within the Gates*, this play was still considered as a new venture for O'Casey.⁸ After having seen the play itself, the reviewer makes the same point again, but finds some consolation in the 'Irish' nature of the characters:

Although Mr O'Casey has departed from his usual Irish atmosphere, nevertheless, he has woven characters of his native land into the core of the play, and has set down his jigsaw puzzle in a West Country manor in the early days of the war culminating in the Battle of Britain.⁹

The *Eastbourne Herald* strikes a similar note of relief in its review of the production:

Although O'Casey has abandoned the background of his native Ireland, and peopled his play with a lady of the manor, men of the RAF, Land Girls, Home Guards, and others who made up the life of wartime England, two of his chief

⁷ *Eastbourne Chronicle* 2/5/47, 13.

⁸ Murray (2004) disregards any non-Irish focus of *Within the Gates* and *Oak Leaves and Lavender* as he believes that they are written 'both for and about England' (90), because they are both set in England. My thesis shows that this approach misses the essential line of formal development in the plays, which runs through O'Casey's work from as early as *The Shadow of the Gunman*, though most notably from *Juno and the Paycock* to *Within the Gates*.

⁹ *Eastbourne Chronicle* 9/5/47, 13

characters are Irishmen, Feelim O'Morrigan and his son Drishogue.¹⁰

The breath of relief is almost palpable here: twenty-two characters and a dance chorus, a non-Irish location, but, thankfully, at least two of the characters are Irish.

Neither of these reviews even mentions the 'Prelude' - the opening dance chorus of the play. Only one local reviewer, 'J.D' is considerably more insightful, describing the actions in the Prelude, while also suggesting to the readers that the play is 'as much a story of a house as it is of human beings'.¹¹ O'Casey's use of the house in this play links back both to the Modernist exploration of the life of inanimate objects seen inside a house (as in the 'Time Passes' section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), and forward to the contemporary use of dance interpretations of classic drama such as those of the *Punch Drunk* dance and theatre company.

The reviews of the London production are slightly more probing, but many come to the play looking for evidence of the continuity of characterisation that they believe epitomises O'Casey's best work. Lionel Hale for the *Daily Mail*, for example, can find comfort only in:

¹⁰ *Eastbourne Herald* 3/5/47, 4.

¹¹ *Eastbourne Gazette* 7/5/47, 4.

a garrulous Irish butler who might have been amusing (though I doubt even this) if played by Mr Arthur Sinclair.¹²

The reviewer for the *Times* is disappointed that Fred Johnson playing Feelim

has not the dryness which might show the butler as a comic philosopher fit to talk on equal terms with Fluther and the Paycock.¹³

All reviewers are united, however, on the abject failure of this particular production: Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times* exemplifies the critical response:

This must, in a quiet way, be one of the worst acted performances to be seen in London.¹⁴

It is interesting that Hobson lays the fault at the door of the actors, rather than, (as O'Casey himself) Ronald Kerr's production alone. Even the *Times* opens its review with the specific qualifier: 'In performance Mr O'Casey's new dramatic experiment in poetic prose disappoints',¹⁵ an indication that the play may not so be much at fault in its writing as its transposition from page to stage. But the reviewers are struggling to understand

¹² *Daily Mail* 14/5/47, 3. Lionel Hale is referring to Arthur Sinclair of the Abbey Theatre Company, who had performed in many of O'Casey's earlier plays on tour in London as well as in Dublin.

¹³ *Times* 14/5/47, 6.

¹⁴ *Sunday Times* 18/5/47, 2.

¹⁵ *Times* 14/5/47, 6.

O'Casey's 'wild mistake',¹⁶ and do look to his text as the source of disappointment:

...but it is not because Mr O'Casey finds words for the inarticulately heroic that his play disappoints: rather because they are so often the wrong words and leave his theme bare of meaning.¹⁷

The search for 'meaning' is what is at issue for the critics here, because once again, they are seeking to explain the play in naturalistic terms. Lionel Hale eventually has to throw up his hands in defeat:

With these ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged land girls, and bombs that go bump in the night, this critic was first confused and finally crushed.¹⁸

If we try to read the play in these terms then, of course, it becomes a nonsense. But that is the fault of theatre criticism, not of O'Casey, who is moving ever more closely towards the Theatre of the Absurd.

In *Oak Leaves and Lavender* we see both O'Casey's connection with the Theatre of the Absurd, and also his tribute to and his continuing dispute with Yeats as dramatist and critic. The use of the dancers is clearly an honorific gesture to Yeats. However, *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, set in the Second World War, is

¹⁶ *Daily Mail* 14/5/47, 3

¹⁷ *Times* 14/4/47, 6

¹⁸ *Daily Mail* 14/5/47, 3.

subtitled 'A World [sic]on Wallpaper'¹⁹ - a direct reference to Yeats's criticism of *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey's play set in the First World War.²⁰

O'Casey was not prepared to let 'the whole history of the world' become mere 'wallpaper' in his drama, rather he wanted to invert this pattern and make the history of the world the very subject matter of his play. Yeats's comment suggests that he wished history to remain a backdrop to individual discussion and commentary in the play. O'Casey however, sees history as the focus of his aesthetic: it is historical conditioning which creates, defines and drives 'the characters who pose and speak', and as such it is this progenitor of individual ideologies that must be explored and analysed. In choosing dance as his form to conduct this investigation, O'Casey pays tribute to Yeats's own fascination with Noh drama and his appreciation of dance as a means of achieving a non-verbal communication with the audience. But O'Casey is also taking his own experiments with dance in *Within the Gates* a step further from its use as an expression of

¹⁹ The subtitle was to be the actual title of the play, but perhaps O'Casey felt that this was simply too petty a jibe at the late W. B. Yeats.

²⁰ The most relevant sentence of Yeats's letter to O'Casey to recall here is the one where Yeats's claimed that 'The whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak' see Yeats (1954), 741. I have discussed this earlier argument between the two men about *The Silver Tassie* in Chapter 4 above.

emotion in that play to a means of exploring rationalist thought - the whole history of two centuries in a short dance sequence in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*.

'The Prelude' is very carefully set up and described by O'Casey, using three pages of stage directions. As in one of his earliest plays *The Harvest Festival*, the house is used as a symbol of conflict – in this case it is a symbol of a nation in constant preparation for war.²¹ O'Casey's own Communist politics are also beginning to show through, since there is some suggestion that war is the inevitable result of British imperialist expansion.

²¹ There is some similarity here between O'Casey and J. B Priestley in their exploration of the origins of war, what G.W. Brandt describes as 'the telling of a parable with surface realism', see 'Realism and Parables: From Brecht to Arden' in *Contemporary Theatre* (eds.) John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London, 1962), 44. The symmetry between O'Casey and Priestley's approach was most clearly seen in Stephen Daldry's recent revival of *An Inspector Calls*, where the pre-World War II setting of the play is blended with a post World War II scene after the London Blitz, allowing a dual commentary on England before and after both World Wars. Ian MacNeill's set in Daldry's production enclosed the drawing room of Priestley's opening scene inside a representation of a house. The actors played the first scene inside the house, shut off from the audience and unseen by them until the house 'exploded' at the end of the scene, the walls opening and ejecting the cast from the house into a war-torn street, surrounded by crumbling buildings and displaced families wandering aimlessly along the road. This apocalyptic vision of the damage caused by war and the relationship between the public and the private space is one that O'Casey is acutely conscious of in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*. Priestley himself, however, did not see any points of comparison when he reviewed the text of *Oak Leaves and Lavender*. While he acknowledges that the play is 'not without great moments', he feels it is 'largely disastrous' and is unconvinced that it could ever find a successful production. Priestley concludes by advising O'Casey to 'return to his old method, to the old characterisation and realistic action (not without its own symbolism of course);' - a caveat which redeems Priestley's assessment of O'Casey to some extent, see *Our Time* Vol 5-6 (Aug. 1945-July 1947), 238.

Evoking Toller's Expressionist set in *Masses and Man* (a play that O'Casey had seen),²² O'Casey's stage directions describe how the house itself can be interpreted and presented as a machine. In the '*broad and beaded panelling*' of the eighteenth-century room of the house '*a dreamy engineer might see in them the rods and shafts of machinery*', while in the lines of chandeliers are '*the possible beginnings of gigantic gantries*' and even the '*big bureau might turn into a fine lathe turning our finely-formed tools*' (OLL, 1). The columns supporting the room are seen as '*great ponderous hammers*' (OLL, 1), while the space between them is envisioned as a potential '*mighty coke oven to smelt the steel for the hammers*' (OLL, 1-2). In this way the house becomes a metaphor for England as a war machine, a nation that has produced the raw materials for its own conflicts, not in a distant faceless factory, but in the central comfort of its own living-room. Even the epitome of middle-class culture in the room - the grand piano- is envisioned as a distorted object and the very origin of the force for destruction:

The end of the grand piano on the right - for only part of the room is visible- might be the beginning of a monster table for the drawing of blue-prints, the skeletons of those things for which the steel melts and the hammers fall (OLL, 2).

²² For details of this influence see chapter 4, note 70.

Seldom has the homely piano seemed such a chilling and repulsive object of fear; its position to the 'right' of the set is surely not accidental, using its spatial placing to indicate its association with a repressive political position.

Any contemporary production of this play would have to suggest the duality of the set very carefully, since once again O'Casey is continuing his exploration of onstage and offstage space here, very much as he did in *The Shadow of a Gunman*.²³ The set should make it possible for the audience to imagine, and indeed to fear, that in the half of the house that is not visible to them on stage might be a space where this nightmare vision of the house is already realised, so that in another time and space this house functions as a fully operational war factory. This vision is indeed partially realised at the end of the play when the set 'comes alive', transforming itself into a vision of the very working factory that this opening set suggests. In this way, O'Casey uses a kind of Brechtian device in an attempt to show the connections between time and space, vision and reality simultaneously. Again the cinematic qualities of the set are clear with the important relationship

²³ See chapter 1 above.

between state, man and machinery being highly evocative of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

O'Casey uses the dancers as another link between time periods, especially with the figure called 'Young Son of Time' who leans against the set's clock to draw together the different ages represented. He is clearly an augmentation of the figure of Old Father Time, for he represents past, present and future, so designated through his costume, with its 'vivid emerald green' suggesting the lively present, his sable coat pointing ominously to the future and his silver conical hat connoting the past.

Colour has long been a means of emotional or ethereal evocation for O'Casey: from Mary Boyle's pondering over a green or blue ribbon for her hair which hints at the presence of her new boyfriend before he is even mentioned, to the green dress splashed with scarlet radiating the independent spirit of Loreleen in *Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy* even before she speaks a word of dialogue. Colour is always a central means of expression in O'Casey, adding layers of meaning: 'I feel the colour change! What is it?' says the 3rd Lady Dancer in the Prelude of *Oak Leaves and Lavender*. This is a question O'Casey constantly wishes to pose for his audience: when the colour changes in his work, what

does it mean? O'Casey's use of colour is painterly²⁴ in its careful symbolism and underwrites O'Casey as a dramatist of total theatre.

O'Casey's use of colour also links his work very strongly to the theatre of the Royal Court in the late 1950s,²⁵ showing particular comparison with the use of colour in the work of John Arden, for example.²⁶

O'Casey's conception of an all-encompassing theatre is particularly evident in his later work, where he freely identifies himself as a dramatist of the senses, as he appeals to the audience on all sensual levels. The late

²⁴ O'Casey was particularly interested in the visual arts, and in later life acquired some small modern paintings and even a Picasso sketch which are now in the possession of his daughter Shivaun. His eldest son Breon followed his father's love of art in his own career as a painter and sculptor in the modern symbolist style.

²⁵ Interestingly, one reviewer of the first London production of *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy* in 1959, seeks to present O'Casey as a contemporary 'Angry Young Man'. Cecil Wilson's review of the production (entitled 'O'Casey at 79 is still the angry young man'), begins by making a specific link between what O'Casey was doing in the 1920s to what Osborne was doing on the contemporary stage: 'The Angry Young Man of the 20's [sic], now a placid 79, returned to the London theatre last night. He was competing with the Angry Young Men of the 50's [sic] on their own ground and showing them what the English language really means', *Daily Mail* 18/9/59, 3. The theme is picked up by Paul Tanfield in the theatre column of the paper a few days later, and there is a short satirical piece about the very polite encounter between these two angry men John Osborne and O'Casey, see 'Old Anger and New' *Daily Mail* 24/9/59, 16. Two years later when reviewing the London production of *The Bishop's Bonfire* at the Mermaid Theatre in London, July 1961, when O'Casey's play opened in the same week as John Osborne's *Luther*, Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times* goes on to make a direct comparison between Osborne and O'Casey's work: 'Like some sections of 'Luther', Sean O'Casey's comedy also asserts that the Church is death. Mr O'Casey is more uncompromising than Mr Osborne, but he is gayer too', *Sunday Times* 30/7/61, 8.

²⁶ In John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), for example, the disturbed Black Jack Musgrave is significantly named, and the darkness of his mood is often contrasted with the vibrance of the red coats of the other soldiers. For a further discussion of the potential comparison of O'Casey and Arden's use of form, see Brandt in Russell Brown and Harris (1962), 49-55.

plays resonate aurally of course, through the musical quality of O'Casey's language and his regular use of song; but in these plays O'Casey is particularly anxious to work upon the visual sense, and in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* upon the sense of smell too, where the aroma of lavender becomes an evocative yet also fearful scent in the action of the play.

The use of lavender then is not only symbolic as a physical metaphor for Englishness, but as a colour it signifies decline and absence, decay and lack.

O'Casey's use of red is always associated with sexuality, desire and the life force, as we saw particularly in his portrayal of Susie in *The Silver Tassie* and will see again in Loreleen in *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*. Red is also symptomatic of ideological passion for O'Casey, not simply sexual passion and human love, but spiritual aspiration, personal beliefs and ideologies, seen most overtly in his use of red for the artistic muse in his most biographical play *Red Roses for Me* and in its eponymous song. In *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, O'Casey's use of lavender, a colour which can be viewed as a kind of diluted and bowdlerized red, is the visual, as well sensual, connotive to the declining condition and dynamism at the centre of the English nation. O'Casey paints his vision of England in a colour

which suggests, in his terms, muted sexuality; neither a deeply sensual religious or regal purple, nor a passionate, vibrant, living scarlet, but an ambiguous shade, some way between red and its opponent blue, with all the coldness and stagnation that blue spectrum suggests.²⁷

Three couples dressed in eighteenth-century costume open *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, in a ghostly rejection of realism, dancing to the tune of a minuet on a stage lit for twilight. The dancers look down through a window at the events of the world below in a manner that is both contemporary and ancient. The dancers do not move in a realist manner, for their music is played on a piano:

a little slowly, and perhaps a little stiffly. The dancers move slowly and stiffly with the melody; indeed they dance as if they found it hard to move, and did so as if in a dream; or as if their thoughts were on things almost forgotten, rather than on the dance (OLL, 2).

The indication that these dancers are indeed shades is clear visually from the '*narrow lines of black*' around the dresses of the women and the '*black braid*' that edge the men's jackets along with the '*black*' (OLL, 3), rather than silver, swords that hang at their side. Their speech is

²⁷ I am not suggesting that O'Casey is using lavender in its current association with homosexuality, simply that he uses red to suggest human and spiritual passion and thus any variant of this shade in his work is significant.

quiet and distorted, any clear emphasis is forbidden by

O'Casey's specific stage directions:

When they speak they do so in seemingly level tones, scarcely giving any inflection to, or putting any emphasis on, their words. Their voices too are low, a pitch or two above a whisper; but clearly heard (OLL, 3).

The muted speech of the dancers has a mechanical tone contributing to our sense of them as dancers on a music box, and linking them to the mechanised set in the first act of the play. The dancers speak only at a specific place onstage - in front of the window - which is the only place that they appear to be able to 'see through' to the twentieth-century from their own time and space.²⁸

O'Casey's dancers are obviously not presented as 'real' people, but as time-travelling visitors from another space and dimension, conjured only by extreme circumstances - the Battle of Britain - to return to view the living. With typical O'Casey irony it is not the ghosts who are frightening to the audience, but rather the ghosts themselves that appear frightened of the twentieth century - or at least this specific moment of the twentieth century.

²⁸ The importance of windows and transitional places between one space and another in O'Casey's work is gradually coming to be more clearly recognised and incorporated in productions of his work. The large window at the back of the stage in the 1997 production of *Juno and the Paycock* at the Abbey theatre in Dublin allowed the audience to recognise their own voyeuristic role as observers of the Boyle household while also becoming a kind of mirror allowing the audience an opportunity to peer through its own windows. See further chapter 2 above.

One pair of dancers connects the contemporary British struggle with other historical revolutionary moments, becoming anxious at their own presence in the moment and the fearing 'the guillotine' (OLL, 5), betraying their obvious connection with the French Revolution. Both the 1st and 2nd Lady Dancer fear the lack of light in what they see ('But why do our torches burn no longer?'(OLL,5)) and are unnerved by the empty streets and strange sounds. The dancers interact only with one another; but the Young Son of Time comments on their questions as a kind of narrator figure, trying to allay their fears and directing their presence or exit from the stage.²⁹ For example, The Young Son of Time reassures the French couple that they may leave, reassured that events from their own time have not been lost or forgotten:

Go, and leave the fair deeds you did to stir faint thoughts of grandeur in fond memory's mind (OLL, 6).

The point of this ghostly resurrection at this point in the Prelude is to reassure and inspire the audience. As the third couple dance towards the window the sound of a girl selling lavender singing 'Who will buy my bonnie

²⁹ Ronald Kerr wrote to O'Casey commenting specifically upon the presence of the Young Son of Time, remarking that he 'intrudes in the Prologue rather than assisting it'. O'Casey wearily comments to George Jean Nathan: 'He can't see the figure is meant to "intrude" on the shadowy dancers, and isn't meant to be an assistant', L2, 458.

lavender' is heard, and the third couple speak for the spirit of old England that the song has evoked. The 3rd Lady Dancer can only just hear this voice 'from another world' as she comments 'Some sound is hurting me' (OLL,6-7).

This snatch of an old English ditty functions much as 'The violets were scenting the woods, Nora', Jack Clitheroe's song to Nora in *The Plough and the Stars*,³⁰ for it raises the image of peaceful pastoral England and resurrects an evocation of a vision of England which is all but lost. The image here in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* of a fading nation seems clear to the dancer, for she feels as if a whole period of English history is now forgotten and this presses upon her consciousness through the chorus of the old song:

It is so sad that no sign is left to show the strength we had, or the grace and elegance that led it forward (OLL, 7).

But this is swiftly countered by her partner for at this point the dancers give us hope; the 3rd Gentleman dancer is emphatic in his response:

The world shall never lose what the world has ever given (OLL, 7).

This is resoundingly positive for O'Casey, perhaps even a little too close to being comfortingly and

³⁰ See Chapter 3 above for a more extensive discussion of the use of Jack's song.

conservatively propagandist (far removed from the usual accusations of propaganda levelled at *The Star Turns Red* and *Red Roses for Me*). But the optimism of the male dancers is soon quelled. For although it might appear that there is hope for England's salvation in the nation's impressive intellectual heritage, 'Goldsmith, Berkeley, Boyle, Addison, Hone, Swift and Sheridan still bear the flaming torches through the streets of life' (OLL,7), there is considerable irony behind this list. From Goldsmith to Sheridan in the 3rd Gentlemen Dancer's list, only Hone and Addison might be considered English.

Not surprisingly perhaps then, all the dancers express anxiety about the nation's future and pine for past heroes to bring redemption:

2nd GENTLEMAN DANCER: Where is Marlborough and where is Clive?

3rd GENTELMAN DANCER: Where is Wolfe and where is Wellesley?
(OLL, 9)

The Young Son of Time soberly reminds them all:

England's orphaned of her greatest men. She is alone at last, and she is lost (OLL, 9).

Swiftly reminded that they can no longer fight in

England's battles themselves, the dancers resolve to

dance on, since they can do nothing else, their own sense of what England was has been lost to them.³¹

The 2nd Lady Dancer comments 'Let us dance and try to glide to things remembered' (OLL, 10). The use of dance here as in the opening of the play, seeks to remind the audience that past greatness and memories of colonial glory are not enough to counter modern warfare. While the audience might themselves metaphorically want to carry on dancing through a vision of happier memories of great Englishness, the Prelude seeks to remind them that this is the response of the ostrich and is insufficient, indeed dangerous to the modern conflict. As confirmation of this dual acceptance of the past in tandem with the need to redefine future action, the voice of the Lavender Seller is heard again. This song, echoing at the end of the Prelude, evokes a positive and tranquil vision of Englishness and balances this vision of an England now lost alongside the turmoil and isolation of the present nation in need of immediate salvation through the national resonance of this song.³²

³¹ There is also a sense of Beckettian resignation about their decision here: and their paradoxical desire to stop dancing, yet their compulsion to continue, reminds us of Vladimir and Estragon's desire to leave and yet inability to move in *Waiting for Godot*.

³² O'Casey was very much a part of a broader intellectual reconsideration of British imperialism after WWI. Leonard Woolf, for example, foresaw the destruction of the empire from within: 'In his view, Britain's own untenable institutions, especially the overseas empire, would destroy its civilization, even without Hitler's help'. See Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton NJ & Oxford,

The central part played by Irishmen in the entrenchment of British colonialism is of course entirely elided by the dancers; they neither recognise nor comment upon this national inter-relationship. Harold Hobson, reviewing the London production of the play, caught something of this sense of the play for he remarks: '*Oak Leaves and Lavender* is, in fact, a reply to Burke'.³³ Lionel Hale reviewing for the *Daily Mail* also picks up on the connection between Irish and British colonialism, though simply as a means to dismiss this production: 'the fact remains that it [OLL] is an atrocity that amply pays back anything Cromwell did to Ireland'.³⁴

That the Prelude is introducing a strong political message rather than providing a simple sentimental and nostalgic indulgence is borne out by the date of the play – 1946, when the war was over and the post-war reconstruction was only just beginning. In *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, O'Casey investigates the attractions and difficulties with English nationalism, just as surely as he had investigated Irish nationalism in *the Plough and the Stars*. The play acts as an elegy for an England which

2004), 94. Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1936), for example, clearly plots the decline of the British Empire.

³³ *Sunday Times* 18/5/47, 2

³⁴ *Daily Mail* 14/5/47, 3

has been lost forever. It is directed at the post-war audience now faced with the challenge of redefining both its national and international identity.³⁵ It is crucial that the nation does not seek to redefine itself in pre-war terms in a post-war world.

As one of the victors in the Second World War, it would be tempting for the nation to re-establish its former glory. However, that would be to position England back in its colonial past, and re-establish the very image of itself that led to its own destruction in the Second World War. The play thus poses a number of problems: on the one hand, the nation was victorious in the war, but its victory was gained only through loss and destruction. The play asks the audience to consider whether there can ever be a victorious nation in war; and if the nation is successful in the destruction of other countries, is that to be considered a positive or a shameful value?

³⁵ In *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf linked the redefinition of national and international identity to a re-imagining of sexual identity, for she saw imperialism inextricably linked to patriarchy. As Esty remarks: 'Woolf frequently returned to the idea that an unbalanced sexual-aggressive drive, central to the ways and means of patriarchal power, both fuelled and was fuelled by the imperial enterprise', Esty (2004), 95. Thus the desire to conquer was a dangerous patriarchal ethos to which neither men or women should subscribe, but which was particularly destructive to women, since by glorying in the Empire, she became subsumed in the very structure which was the object of her sexual oppression. Woolf, however, does go on to say that if the imperial world is at the point of collapse then the post-war world was a ripe moment for a change in sexual politics. O'Casey following a more traditional Communist line, would argue that sexual equality would automatically occur after Capitalism had been abandoned.

In *Oak Leaves and Lavender* O'Casey uses dance to signal the rejection of just such a temptation to repeat the lessons of history. As we have seen in Chapter 2, O'Casey used the motif of the repeated speeches of Mrs Tancred and Juno in *Juno and the Paycock* to underline the peculiarly repetitive dynamic of history. In *Oak Leaves and Lavender* O'Casey moves from a predominantly verbal strategy towards a visual strategy, which is similarly designed to expose the perils of destructive repeated behaviours. Dance provides the perfect metaphor for repetition, with its imperative to repeat learnt steps, in order to create the recognised movement and sequence of specific dances. It offers especially the perfect parallel for repeated thought patterns that O'Casey sees as insidious and destructive.

The dancers in the Prelude symmetrically perform a minuet, rather than a free style-dance, and are thus required to dance a prescribed repeated sequence of steps in order to re-create the highly stylised dance. In this kind of dance there is also a touch of the mechanical - a further means of linking the dancers to the mechanised set. Each pair of dancers moves forward to perform their 'set piece' before the window and each dance is accompanied by a similar 'set piece' of dialogue. When the dancers step forward it is to

speak of something that has gone or ended, or to

question the absence of the past:

1st LADY DANCER: Light no longer. Golden glow is gone. Look! Oh no; I'm afraid to look. Do not see; do not hear. Let us move behind (OLL,4).

The role of the dancers in their own historical period is pronounced as over by the Young Son of Time, just as their dances too will end as soon as their function in the Prelude is fulfilled. The repetitive action of the dance reinforces the repeated historical anxieties of the English nation. O'Casey's play asks the audience to recognise in the dancers a representation of their own ideological position as a nation.

The 3rd Gentleman Dancer, for example, underlines the post-colonial narrative. England must recognise its connection with its own history, while at the same time project a new vision of itself for the future. The dancers constantly comment on the lack of light and the absence of 'torches', symbols and metaphor of enlightenment long associated with the colonial endeavour. O'Casey's play shows that the colonial flame is gradually being extinguished and, indeed, its expiry is essential for the survival of civilisation. When the 2nd Gentleman Dancer observes the burning of London and comments 'The flames get wider, The enemy is striking home to England's inmost heart' (OLL,8), he is not

simply alluding to the Blitz, but also to the colonial flame which, as the Prelude implies, has incinerated England from within, in a manner which Marlow from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* would surely recognise. The dancers are used to underline the play's message that English colonialism is the nation's own 'enemy'. The play suggests that, ultimately, colonialism always leads to destruction – either to the nation itself, or as the agent of destruction inflicted upon others or both - as in the Second World War. This war was a conflict which owed its origin in part to a defence of international treaties designed to protect trading rights gained, for example, during 'the scramble for Africa'; and this kind of colonial protectionism is an inevitable consequence of territorial expansion.

At the end of the play, the dancers return to collect the dead Dame Hatherleigh, the owner of the manor house, to prepare to absorb her into their ranks. But before she leaves the stage, she institutes a *coup de théâtre* that would not be out of place in the modern theatrical magic shows of David Copperfield, David Blaine or even a *Danse Macabre*. The set has been more closely linked to the style of a factory, of which there was only a hint at the beginning of the play. The fireplace assumes the form of a stylised drop-hammer,

the panelling has become belts and bars, and although it is still recognisably a room, '*everything in it is touched strongly with the form of its first existence*' (OLL, 119).

This return of objects to their organic essence is also part of the play's colonial commentary. England had long enjoyed a reputation as 'the workshop of the world' and here O'Casey presents his audience with the raw materials of that fame. *This* is what England is famous for, the play shows us. Dame Hatherleigh stands by the window where the dancers had performed the Prelude and '*blows a whistle sharply*' (OLL, 154). The stage directions then instruct that '*the room becomes alive with movement*', and the house set transforms itself before the eyes of the audience into a fully functional factory, with belts travelling across the ceiling, wheels turning and the large drop hammer centre stage beginning to rise and fall. It is at this point that the Dancers return to reinforce the links of this scene with the post-colonial commentary. As Dame Hatherleigh, dressed now in her own sable cloak, once seen on the Young Son of Time, prepares to join the dancers in death. She comments:

We must all go soon. Our end makes a beginning for others (OLL, 155).

An end always marks a beginning for O'Casey, as his one-act play *The End of the Beginning* suggests; and

in our own period of recycling, this image of beginnings from something at the end of its first life is particularly resonant. The death of the owner of the old manor, the house that is representative of the old pre-war England, provides an opportunity for a fresh start. But, it must be new, not simply a continuation or repetition of the old ideological ways. Dame Hatherleigh is clear that:

Only the rottenness and ruin must die. Great things we did and said; things graceful, and things that had a charm, live on to dance before the eyes of men (OLL, 156).

The 'rottenness' of insidious pre-war ideologies must prove fatal; only the valuable aspirations of the colonial world – the desire to effect positive change – can live on and be celebrated by the next generation. This connection between the dancers and the past is clearly established through Dame Hatherleigh's speech. The Dancers '*sadly*' acknowledge that 'The people need our swords no longer' (OLL, 156); and they are downcast at their vision of 'marching men in brown', the returning soldiers, making their way back to England, as if the return of the soldier were somehow a sight of regret for them.

But the 3rd Gentleman Dancer attempts to reassure the others that although their own vision of

England is now outmoded and needs to be left to history,
a new vision of England will rise again:

The lavender will bloom again, and oak leaves
laugh at the wind in the storm (OLL, 157).

The lavender, the play's own symbol of England and the oak leaf, another resonant symbol of the English nation, have finally been united, just as the play's title suggests. The nation will rise again, as itself in essence, but in a different form. The 'storm' may remain, but the new oak leaves will grow back stronger and more able to resist the power of the prevailing wind, from whichever extremist political position it blows.

The dancers move off stage together taking up this chorus and exclaiming 'The lavender shall bloom again!' (OLL, 158). The stage directions again point to the end of the dancers and their visions since the music to accompany their exit is '*slow and somewhat staccato, as if the player found it hard to press down the notes*' (OLL, 157). Their music is now too hard to play; their dance is over and shall not, indeed should not, be seen again. Their time and their ideology is finished; and as if to emphasise this break with the past, the play ends with the song of the Lavender Seller - voicing again the need for the new vision of England yet to be created and sung.

O'Casey's stark use of colour, his consideration of the relationship between man and machine and his exploration of the Fascist aesthetic suggest his links with Futurism and Vorticism in the world of art. The eleventh 'intention' of Marinetti's 1909 'Manifesto' might almost refer to one of O'Casey's later plays:

we will sing of the multicoloured polyphonic tides of revolution in the old capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke;... deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing....³⁶

It is easy to see how O'Casey's use of the house as machine in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* might be added to Marinetti's list. The desire to change and develop the nation through art, indeed the only means of effecting lasting change, provides a strong line between O'Casey's work in the theatre and other challenges to entrenched ideologies in the visual arts.

The debate over national and personal self-definition through political ideology has been constant throughout the play. O'Casey uses a combination of Brechtian and Absurdist techniques to force his

³⁶ F.T. Marinetti 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' in *Marinetti: Selected Writings* (ed.) and with intro. by R.W. Flint, trans. R.W. Flint & Arthur A. Copotelli (London, 1972), 42.

audience to detach themselves from the heated emotions of the arguments raging between the characters, and to encourage a more reflective engagement with the political positions.³⁷ The first entrance of Dame Hatherleigh in Act 1, for example, is marked by her carrying with her a two-foot high 'V-for Victory' sign, which she places on the centre of the table (which might easily itself be placed centre stage). This sign has a both realist and ironic function: Dame Hatherleigh is a tireless war worker who has cause to possess such an object, but the presence of this placard of propaganda, which is visible on the table throughout the entire act (indeed, potentially throughout the entire play) creates its own ironic potential for the reconsideration of all propaganda and propagandist phrases associated with the war, including one which will soon be heard regularly in the play: 'Germany Calling'.

³⁷ Gabriel Fallon, at one time a close friend of O'Casey, who had acted in *The Shadow of a Gunman* remembers the Brechtian qualities of O'Casey's rarely produced one-act play *Kathleen Listens In* (1923). The manuscript was presumed lost for many years, but Ronald Ayling suggests that O'Casey was so dissatisfied with this play and another one-act play, *Nannies Night Out*, that he 'prevented' publication after their first performances. They remained unpublished until he granted Robert Hogan's special request to reproduce them in *Feathers From the Green Crow* (Columbia, 1962). See Sean O'Casey *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey* Vol 5 intro. by Ronald Ayling, xi. Fallon remembers *Kathleen Listens In* as 'Brecht before Brecht', see Fallon (1965), 14. O'Casey subtitled the play 'A Political Phantasy in One Act' and with its simple set, short scenes, songs and numerous unexplained exits and entrances of characters as they try to convince Miceawl and Kathleen of the veracity of their political views, this one act gives an early insight into some of the techniques that O'Casey developed most fully here in his later plays.

O'Casey makes a point of using contemporary technology in a way that companies using modern video installations and computer technological in theatre today would recognise. In *The Silver Tassie* O'Casey made use of the telephone, and here in *Oak Leaves and Lavender* he takes the most resonant icon of the Second World War in an age before the dominance of television - the radio - and transforms the medium and the machine into a means of psychological expression and political commentary.

In Act 1 for example, Edgar and Drishogue, the young English and Irish airmen living in the house are arguing about why they are going to war at all. They debate what it is about England that they believe themselves to be fighting for, and when Edgar remarks that they might die fighting the country's cause, Drishogue, the Irishman, argues that death is inevitably part of life and should not be feared:

If death be the end, then there is nothing; if it be but a passage from one place to another, then we shall mingle with a great, gay crowd! (OLL,37).

The panel on the wireless cabinet immediately lights up, '*showing the German sign of the swastika in its centre in flaming red*' (OLL, 37) and the first line 'Deutschland über Alles' (the first line of the German national anthem) is heard alongside the voice echoing 'Germany Calling,

Germany Calling, Germany Calling' (OLL, 37). Neither of the two young men reacts to this sound or vision; only Feelim, Drishogue's father thinks for a moment that he may have heard a noise.

This lack of onstage reaction indicates that the vision is not directed at those on stage at all, but at those watching. The audience is being asked to consider Drishogue's carefree attitude to death juxtaposed with the sight of the emotive Nazi icon and the blast of propaganda from the radio. The sound of the voice serves as an 'answer' to Drishogue's remark and asks the audience: is this just the kind of ideological position and emotional reaction that Fascism needs to prosper? A joy for death? Or, simply, is Drishogue's remark the culmination of the rationalist position to which centuries of English history have brought us - men, not even of that nation, who believe that the best way to live their life is to embrace death? More than any verbal argumentative counter to Drishogue's words, the sight of the swastika and the quotation of the propagandist phrase, require that the audience carefully consider the logic of his words.³⁸

Later in the same act the radio becomes a kind of Freudian dream motif, when Dame Hatherleigh's

³⁸ W B Yeats's poem 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' also comes to mind here. See W.B. Yeats *Yeats's Poems* (London, 1989), 237.

unconscious thoughts are proleptically projected through the radio. Dame Hatherleigh tells Feelim: 'I sometimes dread the things I seem to see and hear', and immediately has such a vision of German warplanes and jackboots 'with a pillar of fire before them showing itself in the shape of a whirling swastika!' (OLL, 47). She imagines the sight of her son burning in the flames and her husband pummelled to the ground by the jackboots. Again, O'Casey's stage directions for the use of the radio are specifically timed: the words of Dame Hatherleigh should be pre-empted (*'Before she fancies these things'*), by the sight of the swastika and the sound of the phrase 'Germany Calling'. But the combination of technology and imagination also conjures further sounds here:

While she speaks, the tramp of many marching feet can be heard...as if every jackboot were shod with steel....The sound does not come near, and fades away when Feelim begins to speak (OLL, 47).

What the audience hears is the realisation of Dame Hatherleigh's fears projected into a real conscious moment; and such a moment functions like a cinematic revelation of insight into the tortured psyche of a leading character, achieved by the single camera focus and the film-within-a-film technique.

O'Casey was acutely conscious of the power of sound and aural influence, hence his decision to use the radio as his medium to present unconscious anxiety on stage without the necessity of a voiceover or a stage narrator figure. What is so unusual about this moment is that such a striking visual image is created through the use of sound alone.³⁹ Neither of the characters involved in this scene reacts to the sight or the sounds of Dame Hatherleigh's vision; it is a technique attempting to engage the audience with the realities of the words and to make them experience her psychological terror involved through a vivid soundscape. That which is being imagined on stage in front of the audience is a typical reality of war, with which the audience cannot evade engagement.

Finally, in Act 2 the radio is used to encourage the audience to maintain an ironic distance from the argument evolving on stage. Deeda Tutting is arguing with Drishogue, the young Irishman who is a fervent Communist supporter. Deeda and her husband had worked for, and supported, the Soviet Union, until her husband was taken into a concentration camp by the

³⁹ In *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey created his powerful image of the moment of battle at the end of Act Two, through the use of light alone. As Katharine Worth notes 'the Word had failed', see Worth (1972), 117. In *Oak Leaves and Lavender* he continues his experiments with the power of the non-verbal in the construction of haunting imagery.

Ogpu (the Russian equivalent of the Gestapo).⁴⁰ Now

Deeda bitterly decries the Soviet Union and instead celebrates the potential of Germany's National

Socialism:

...the National Socialism of Germany, in many respects, is far superior to Soviet Rule; and if it only gives up its racial animosity, and its spirit of conquest, it's Germany will become more cultured than even Britain's or France's pompous and hypocritical imperialism! (OLL, 67).

Drishogue however, is curt and dismissive of her attempts to excuse Fascism at the expense of the Soviet Union and tartly replies:

You're asking a lot of Fascism, lady – you're asking it to cease to be itself (OLL, 67).

The argument escalates and begins to involve everyone on stage: Drishogue's father Feelim, three Home Guards, a Land Girl, Joy and the Housekeeper, each of whom join in taking different sides and adding their point of view to the increasingly raucous debate. This ideological free-for-all is in danger of becoming ill-disciplined and while it mimics the lack of easy resolution to such political debates, O'Casey does not want to resolve this argument for the audience within the realism of the stage moment. Instead, the play seeks to remind his audience that they are detached observers of this

⁴⁰ O'Casey based this character, perhaps rather unkindly, on the socialist Feeda Utley, whose husband Arcadi Berdichevsky disappeared in a concentration camp. She thus became a dedicated campaigner against the USSR. See Murray (2004), 507 note 115.

argument through the interruption of the verbal dynamic with a visual effect.

The panel of the wireless cabinet is once more suddenly illuminated with a swastika, while trumpets play 'Deutschland über Alles'. The stage directions are quite clear that this is not a naturalistic moment for the actors in character since 'the animated crowd take notice of nothing but themselves' (OLL,72). But it is deeply ironic since it reminds the audience that while the characters on stage are arguing, Germany is getting on and fighting a war. Such ideological debates about the merits of Soviet communism or any 'value' of Fascism cannot be resolved in any meaningful way within the time frame of a play or within the arena of the theatre – nor should the audience expect them to be. The illuminated swastika marks a point of political attention for O'Casey's audience, but not a moment of ideological resolution. The swastika functions as a kind of 'warning light' to the audience; arguments on stage solve nothing. Such discussions of political ideology need to take place off stage, outside the arena of the theatre and in the audience's own homes and lives.⁴¹

⁴¹ This link between Fascism and death is also continued through the use of the dance in *The Bishop's Bonfire*. In Act II the young Foorawn reminds Codger of his old age by commenting '...we're all steppin' our way to th' tomb' (BB, 456). Codger tries to lift some humour out of this thoughtless remark by responding; 'We are, we are; goose-steppin' it right enough, Miss'. In a radical change of behaviour, Foorawn suddenly 'gaily' ripostes

Dance, colour, metamorphosis and the new morality

O'Casey continues to use dance as a motif to express energy, sexuality, independence and defiance in his later work. In a number of plays from this period - *Figuro in the Night*, *The Bishop's Bonfire* and *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* in particular - we see just how central sexual politics are to his agenda.⁴² In *The Silver Tassie*

'Goose-steppin' it there, Codger; yis, an' lively, too - quick march, man!')(BB, 456), linking arms with Codger and 'goose-stepping around the room' to the tune of the Marseillaise. As the pair imitate marching soldiers together, Foorawn playfully announces 'To th' tomb!' and Codger joins in, setting the pace 'Step be step! Steady ordher; left right, left right; march on, march on!'. Their promenade is halted only when Foorawn hears 'A wailing blast from the bookineeno' - the statue of Saint Tremolo just brought to the house especially for the Bishop's imminent visit. In Act III the Canon confirms that 'St Tremolo's always on the watch to warn, and when his warning's heard, is always ready to help' (BB, 471). As with Dame Hatherleigh in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, it is only Foorawn who hears the sound from the statue and fearfully breaks away from Codger, who is left alone, comically standing with one leg high in the air ready for the next goose step. Foorawn thinks she is being warned not to be lively, dance and enjoy herself, for she chastises Codger with her remark '...you shouldn't, you shouldn't coax poor souls to places where they don't want to go; to sayin' things that shouldn't be done; to doin' things that shouldn't be said' (BB, 457). But the audience may well be asking what the statue is actually 'warning' against. The play suggests that Foorawn is worrying over the wrong thing through the confusion of her syntax; the mixing of her 'said' and 'done' phrases. The audience may be tempted to think that the goose-step does indeed lead to death; but not the graceful or timely death of old age to which Codger is heading, but the sharp immediate displacement of life from young men, women and children attracted by the Fascist ethic and inspired by notions of nationalistic patriotism just as surely as the English and the Irish. In this sense, Fascism of any nation that celebrates the drive for death in any national cause is united in a fundamentalist desire to sacrifice the living for the dead.

⁴² This overt sexuality may be behind the initial difficulties in staging an American production of *Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy*. An unpublished letter from Jean George Nathan to O'Casey 14/3/48, which I found amongst O'Casey's papers in Shivaun O'Casey's archive, throws some light on this matter. O'Casey wrote to Nathan that the producer Dick Maddern was reluctant to mount a production of the play, because he was anxious, amongst other things, about the scene with 'the woman in a car with a married man' and feared upsetting the Catholic church, L2, 509 (9/2/48). Nathan responds with some sympathy to O'Casey's view of American producers: 'I sometimes despair of ever persuading them out of their

O'Casey continues his exploration of human sexuality as a means of the expression of life and energy.

Significantly, it is at the dance held at the Avondale Football that Barney and Jessie publicly display their burgeoning relationship, openly dancing together in defiance of Jessie's ex-boyfriend the crippled Harry Heegan. The moribund influence of sexual repression upon the national character was at the root of the exchanges between Rosie and the Covey in *The Plough and the Stars*. These themes and formal analogies return in *Figuro in the Night*.

Figuro in the Night (1961), with its Dublin location is a one-act satire, set in streets on the city's outskirts. The Young Girl, although she appears interested in receiving the attentions of a young man, shuts herself in her house lest she be subject to any amorous temptations.⁴³ Scene 1 then presents an Old Man and an Old Woman reminiscing about their past life and loves. The Old Woman seems to wish for a greater

cowardice...Dick Maddern couldn't understand the play at all. I explained it to him, but he still seemed not to be able to comprehend'. Clearly, despite the great success of *Within the Gates* fourteen years before, Boston censors notwithstanding, some American producers remained reticent about producing O'Casey's later work. Nathan comments that he had tried to get Elia Kazan interested in a production, since he was 'excellent director' but 'have not yet heard' [from him]'. See, the Sean O'Casey Archive, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

⁴³ The use of ribbons for the girls' hair as a motif for incipient sexual activity, first used through Mary Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*, reappears in this play when in the final scenes the unafraid Young Man calls at the home of the Young Girl and sings to her of the blue ribbons that he has brought for her hair.

enjoyment of life and love, while the Old Man remains anxious and frightened of the terrors of love. But eventually even the woman runs out of the scene, shocked at what she has allowed herself to say, and insistent that she and the Old Man travel home by different roads since 'I have to keep my reputation well in hand' (FN,347).

Scene 2 opens with the entire scene transformed by colour, much like the transformation of Dublin in the bridge scene from *Red Roses for Me*.⁴⁴ The whole street is much '*brighter*' and the doors and windows of the houses are painted with vibrant primary colours. A riot has developed because of the presence of a naked statue of a boy, the 'Figuro' of the title, who is displayed sculpted with a penis and positioned in the street. The sight of the figure of the naked man is said to have sent the women into a frenzy and they are attacking men in the street in the force of their ardour. This farcical behaviour is like a parody of the kind of reaction that the

⁴⁴ Towards the end of Act 3, when Ayamonn encourages his onstage audience to believe in the beauty and hope inherent in the city of Dublin, the vision of the ethereal qualities of the city is brought to life in colour onstage: '*The scene has brightened, and bright and lovely colours are being brought to them by the caress of the setting sun. The houses on the far side of the river now bow to the visible world, decked in mauve and burnished bronze; and the men that have been lounging against them now stand stalwart, looking like fine bronze statues, slashed with scarlet*' (RRFM, 309). This is moment stops the action of the play and invites both the onstage audience and the audience proper, to bask in a reflective moment, celebrating the potential of both their own city and their own nation. Eeda's face is completely transformed, for she now 'shows a fresh and virile face' (RRFM, 309) while the whole company rise as if from the dead, revitalised for a brief moment by the glory of the scene before them.

zealots of the play most fear; the sight of even a representation of a male body sending the women into a panic and quite literally creating riots in the streets of Dublin.

The play ends with the religious zealots defeated and the Young Girl from Scene 1 opening the door of her home and inviting the Young Man inside. The two old men watching bemoan the mutual damnation of the couple:

1 st Old MAN:	She'll do for him, now!
{together}	
2 nd OLD MAN:	He'll do for her now!
	(FN, 364)

But as they finish speaking the stage directions point out that '*The music of a dance begins*' (FN, 364) and '*young girls and lads come in dancing*' (FN, 365). All the men are '*brightly dressed*' and although all the girls wear more neutral shades, they all sport '*brilliant blue ribbons*' in their hair. The dance celebrates the vitality of the real life connections between couples; and the synergy between the Young Man and the Young Girl is underlined when they come out of the house to join in the dance, each wearing something blue as a visual connection between themselves and the rest of the dancers; and the dancers '*pause to let them join in*'. As in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, however, the stage dance

is stylised, not free form, and there is an element of the sacred about their performance. The stage directions include a special 'Note' (FN, 365) that the dance should be 'partly processional' suggesting a religious tone to the performance and a particular formality. O'Casey suggests that Chopin's '*Polonaise in A would do fine*' (FN, 365). A joyful yet ordered dance suggests that the play celebrates human sexuality without necessarily embracing a 'free love' lifestyle. The stylised dance is a physical riposte to the religious puritanism satirised in the play. Open sexual freedom need not lead to social anarchy as the Old Men, terrorised by their piety, fear. The play's combination of colour and dance work together to enhance the sense of joyful liberation from this oppressive ideology.⁴⁵

Father Boheroe in *The Bishop's Bonfire* (1955)⁴⁶ similarly tries to use dance to encourage the young couple Daniel and Keelin (who has previously flirted with Rankin as I discuss below) to defy their parents and the church to and celebrate their love. After swearing to

⁴⁵ As we have seen such oppression was clear in the Censor's objections to this play, see further chapter 5, note 13.

⁴⁶ The opening of *The Bishop's Bonfire* in Dublin in February 1955 was the rigorously opposed by the Roman Catholic church and some sections of the press, who ran what amounted to a smear campaign against O'Casey, stressing the anti-Catholicism of his play. The tactic failed, however, when the bookings rose and not a ticket remained available for the first performance. O'Casey later wrote a riposte to his critics about this episode for his first collection of critical essays, see Sean O'Casey 'Bonfire Under a Black Sun' in *The Green Crow* (London, 1994), 122-145.

go through life together 'bravely, wherever life may lead us' (BB, 462), as Daniel proclaims, the priest '*half dancing*' himself, heads towards the piano and begins to play a waltz. Urging them on to continual defiance of Keelin's father Reiligan (who is used here as the representative of the family and the state as well as the strictures of the Church rather than the priest himself), Father Boheroe plays to them while encouraging their choice:

You've escaped from the dominion of the big house with the lion and the unicorn on its front; don't let yourselves sink beneath the meaner dominion of the big shop with the cross and shamrock on its gable (BB, 462).

The priest reasserts the link between the colour blue and sexual liberation, inverting the more familiar implications of blue as the colour most closely identified with the Virgin Mary and sexual innocence. His own name means 'Red Road' in Gaelic,⁴⁷ denoting his links with passion and with danger; and in English it suggests the combination of a 'heroic' stance and his perceived 'bohemian' outlook. Boheroe encourages the lovers to run away together: 'Blue bonnets, blue bonnets over the border' (BB,462). Keelin and Daniel are thoroughly united by their dance, for the stage directions point out that they '*have come into the rhythm of the music*',

⁴⁷ Hogan (1960), 124.

moving around the room 'dreamily' and finding themselves 'well under the music's spell' (BB, 463). Only when Reiligan enters the room and physically parts the couple from this 'belly-to-belly' dance (BB, 463) does the influence of the movement fail, leaving Daniel to weaken and retreat, apologising for his 'mad' actions.

O'Casey continues to use metaphors of movement in his later work, and another of his resonant symbols is the bird.⁴⁸ Identifying himself strongly with this particular symbol, O'Casey entitled his first volume of essays *The Green Crow* (1957) and its sequel *Feathers from the Green Crow* (1963). His most extended symbolic use of the bird, however, is in *Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy* (1949), where the cockerel is used to satirise the unquestioning acceptance of superstition and mystical beliefs. In both *The Bishop's Bonfire* and *Figuro in the Night*, birds are used as a means of providing unity between fear of the church and fear of

⁴⁸ It is possible that O'Casey presented philosophical debates through such ordinary symbols because he had been influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson's account of the working methods of Socrates. When cataloguing O'Casey's library at Shivaun O'Casey's home, before the collection left for the National Library of Ireland, I found a number of books by Emerson and Shivaun told me that her father was a great admirer of his work. One volume, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, was clearly well used, for O'Casey had listed page numbers and topics for reference on the inside front cover of the book. Heavily marked in double lines of O'Casey's distinctive pencil was Emerson's discussion of Socrates: 'He was as plain as a Quaker in habit and speech, affected by low phrases, and illustrations from cocks and quails, soup-pans, and sycamore-spoons, grooms and farriers, and unnameable offices', see *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (London, 1913), 161. This sense of the banal being used for higher purposes is certainly typical of O'Casey's theatrical style and the reference to 'cocks' here in the light his later use of the bird in the title of his play is intriguing.

love, between conventional morality and independent thought and imagination. Birds are also used to indicate independence of spirit and, like dance, often signify liberation and defiance in their satire of cowardice and conformity.

In *The Bishop's Bonfire* for example, Reiligan insults his stonemasons, Rankin and the Prodigal, for their delay in building the wall by chastising them for 'standin' there motionless like gorged gulls airin' themselves on a quay-wall' (BB, 414). In the ensuing scene, the two men, re-inforcing Reiligan's simile are perched on the scaffold, unconsciously imitate the stance of resting gulls. The men begin to argue over possession of a brick to set into the wall of the church they are building. Their petty squabbling and physical battle over who owns the brick conjures up the sight and sound of seagulls fighting over their prey. While all the bluster of their battle seems childish but harmless, the serious nature of their bird-like chatter gradually becomes evident, for the men are also arguing over the strength and value of their personal religious faith. Ownership of the brick is actually a battle over the level of their piety and faith, and the argument turns to a desire to prove who is the better Catholic of the two.

When the Prodigal becomes annoyed that Rankin is setting one of his bricks, he '*snatches the brick back angrily*', setting it in his own section of the wall instead and sneers at Rankin:

Good Catholic an' all as you call yourself, you're not goin' to be let bounce yourself into an authority you've no legal or Christian right to! (BB, 415).

The battle for the title of best Catholic is played out through the men's fight over the brick, and Rankin is clear that it is for the true honour of the deity that the men are fighting:

It's not your brick an' it's not my brick; it's nobody's brick; if it's anybody's brick it's God's brick (BB, 416)

The play shows from the outset that religious disagreements begin at the very foundations of the Church itself.⁴⁹ Rankin and Prodigal are the stonemasons who are literally building the walls of the new church and spire, creating a new edifice, another representation of the Church, but also, potentially, another barrier to harmony.

Through the use of the bird symbol, the play is able to connect the petty arguments of the common

⁴⁹ Alan Brien, reviewing the London production of the play at the Mermaid theatre in July 1961 comments on O'Casey's own religious beliefs as potentially drawn from the very origin of philosophical opposition to Christianity. He identifies O'Casey as a Gnostic, 'the oldest of all the unorthodoxies', rather than an agnostic. According to this review, the presentation of God in *The Bishop's Bonfire* is as an 'envious deity ruling through a monstrous conspiracy against the divine essence of man', *Sunday Telegraph* 30/7/61, 8.

believer with the wider doctrinal arguments about personal conduct and morality. Later in the act, for example, Prodicar is tempted by a keg of gin brought to the site by Codger. Rankin is constantly reminding Prodicar not to succumb to the temptation to go and take a drink with the other men, and he becomes angry that he is being watched so closely:

Looka, me good angel, I won't have you hoverin' over me like a saygull over a fish too deep for a dive down! (BB, 422)

Rankin's connection with the sea bird is emphasised here and helps to explain the contrast in his behaviour, from being a silly but harmless character to the sudden viciousness that erupts when Keelin tries to tempt his piety.

As the Prodicar makes off to get a drink, Rankin *'takes off his hat and indulges in a prayer'* (BB,424). The young girl Keelin sees Rankin alone praying and comes out of the house to flirt with him. Rankin is trying to make mischief out of Keelin's earlier conversation with Father Boheroe, and uses the bird motif as a means of evading a romantic connection between himself and Keelin:

RANKIN: [slyly with a touch of malice]. Doesn't sound proper for a priest to talk too much to a young good-lookin' girl. I seen a young swalla this mornin'. Flyin' swift he was like he was carousin' close to heaven.

KEELIN: [hilariously]. Now you do a carousin' close to earth, fancy boy. Never mind the flying swalla – there's a far prettier birdie standin' beside you now. It's nice to know Father Boheroe thinks me good-lookin', an' nicer, darling, when you look at me, you think so too (BB, 425).

But Rankin remains focused on the swallow in the sky, the idealistic aspiration of love, instead of the real woman beside him. Here the use of the bird symbolises freedom, moral cowardice and sexual evasion simultaneously. Rankin continues to focus his comments on the bird – admiring its isolation and denying that he has ever looked at Keelin directly or noticed her beauty:

...I never looked; only at the swalla up high away from man in a wide world of his own (BB, 425).

The swallow, detached from any real demands in a real world, is a thing of admiration for Rankin, who has difficulty rationalising the demands of the spiritual and the real. Keelin recognises the importance of the symbol of the swallow to him, since she tries to present herself in the image of the bird: 'Look at me the way you looked at the dancin' swalla'. But this attempt to yoke ideal and real love in his mind proves fatal to her cause. As Rankin changes the subject Keelin becomes more direct, taking radical action to draw his attention to her corporeal body.

In an echo of Rosie's stockinged temptation of The Covey in *The Plough and the Stars*, Keelin shows

Rankin her stockinged leg, inviting him to tie her shoe tighter with the phrase: 'Look, and let yourself live for a minute!' (BB,426). But this attempt to tamper with the idealism of the bird merely shocks Rankin, and all his satirical force in the play is undercut by his revolting reaction to Keelin's seduction. The stage directions almost have to be read twice to be believed:

Rankin gives a shuddering, frightened start when he sees the nyloned leg, jerks his head up from the sight, looks Keelin in the eyes for a second, then viciously spits in her smiling face (BB, 426).

Rankin, the comic brawling builder, the pious zealot is exposed as a scared coward without the wit or finesse to be able to reject Keelin's attentions without hurting her feelings, his stultifying morality rendering him afraid to acknowledge or respond to his own feelings. The symbol of the swallow has carefully united the opposing drives of desire and restraint to which Rankin is subject and that run in tandem in all religious doctrine. Rankin, the builder of the church is the perfect example of the tension between the ideal and the real that religion requires its followers to resolve.

A constant O'Casey theme that life is to be lived, not simply intellectualised or imagined in the abstract, resonates throughout this play. Father Boheroe reiterates this tension seen in Rankin in his speech to Foorawn, a young girl who has taken a vow of perpetual

chastity and continues to deny her love for the young writer Manus. Father Boheroe prompts Foorawn to have the courage to give up her vow and leave the village with Manus, but she is indignant that a priest should invite her to think of such action:

...Muddlin' a young girl's mind against turnin' her face to God, an' turnin' her back on the world, the flesh, an' the devil (BB, 486).

As ever, the battle is seen by Foorawn as a choice between the sanctity of the spiritual and the dangerous desire to engage with reality. Father Boheroe is clear that the more difficult task is to live in the world and engage with its problems:

Ah Foorawn, it is easy to turn one's back on things, but it is better and braver to face them. I shall never turn my back on a beautiful world, nor on the beautiful flesh of humanity, asparkle with vigour, intelligence, and health; and as for the devil, what we often declare to be the devil is but truth who has at last mustered the courage to speak it (BB, 486).

The shooting of Foorawn by Manus in the final act underlines that those who cannot engage with real life cannot continue to live in an emotional vacuum. As she dies, Foorawn concocts a brief suicide note to remove Manus from any blame, but the phrase she chooses to confess is significant: 'I can bear this life no longer' (BB, 491). Foorawn cannot live in the fullest sense of the word because her vow of chastity prevents her from engaging with the relationship that she most desires.

Ironically and pitifully, through her final act she commits a sin in the eyes of her Church and condemns herself to everlasting life in purgatory, an ironic reflection of the play's perception of her human life.

It is, no doubt, in *Cock-a-Doodle-Andy* (1949), O'Casey's favourite among his own plays, that he most clearly links the symbol of the bird with sexuality, sin and the devil. Sailor Mahan believes that Loreleen, his daughter by his first wife, and recently returned from England, has become possessed by a mystical spirit, if not the very Devil himself. He imagines that as his daughter passes pictures of saints on the walls of the house, they turn themselves away to face the wall 'to circumvent the lurin' quality of her presence' (CDD, 399). Again the female leg becomes the focus of potential male downfall:

I tell you I've seen the way th' eyes of young men stare at her face, an' follow th' movements of her lurin' legs – there's evil in that woman! (CDD, 399).

Sailor Mahan is most concerned about the effect Loreleen is having on his young second wife, Lorna. He imagines that since Loreleen's return he has seen 'horns' emerging from his wife's head as she looks at herself in the mirror; but most troubling to him is that his wife 'often dances be herself' in her room, and he is worried about the implications of sexual infidelity 'dancin'

in her mind with hefty lads, plum'd with youth, an'
spurred with looser thoughts of love' (CDD, 340). Aside
from betraying his own anxiety about his comparative
age and jealousy of a youth long lost to him, it is difficult
to take his remarks seriously. But as Loreleen makes
her first appearance in the play, the stage directions
instruct '*A cock suddenly crows lustily*' (CDD, 341).

However, only
Mahan hears the cock crow, ^{being used} the sound at his
comic expense.

Loreleen is extremely attractive, dressed in green
and red, and wears an ornament in the shape of a
'*cock's crimson crest*'. She attracts the attentions of two
of Mahan's workers who come to ask him for higher
wages, and who pay her many compliments. But the
danger of Loreleen is underlined when the men, anxious
to catch up with this beautiful woman new to the area, try
to follow her and are subject to a transformation scene
before their very eyes:

1st ROUGH FELLOW [*with awe in his voice*].
What's happenin' to her? A cloud closin' in on her,
flashes like lightening whirlin' round her head,
an'her whole figure ripplin'!

2nd ROUGH FELLOW [*frightened*]. Jasus, she's
changin' into th' look of a fancy-bred fowl! It's
turnin' to face us; it's openin' its bake as big as a
bayonet! [*the crow of the cock is heard in the
distance*] (CDD, 344).

Whether Loreleen does actually transform into this figure of the bird or is simply a manifestation of the men's desire is not clear to the audience at that moment, since the event takes place off stage and is simply described by the men. What this sets up is an anxiety and quality of strangeness; it is clear that nothing will be as it first seems in this play.

When Shanaar visits Mahan and Michael, he continues this revelation of 'unreal' happenings with his tales of the 'Big powers of evil' that might manifest themselves in animals or even people: 'You might meet a bee that wasn't a bee; a bird that wasn't a bird; or a beautiful woman who wasn't a woman at all' (CDD, 346). Such stories reiterate the terror of the bird and its links with the dangerous threat of female sexuality. As an example, Shanaar tells a story of another man's possession by spirits. The culprit took the guise of another bird - a cuckoo - who was so powerful that it possessed a priest to murder a nobleman for his money so that he could consort with a woman who was the embodiment of the bird. When the priest was apprehended and hung for murder, his guilty sobs were transformed into the call of a cuckoo and the laughter of a girl.

Immediately juxtaposed with Shanaar's tale is the first appearance of the Cock. Marion thinks that a goose has escaped and is flying around in the kitchen of Michael's house; and the comic terror of the men who imagine this is indeed an evil spirit come to live in their home makes a mockery of such superstitions:

MICHAEL [*trembling- to SHANAAR*]. D'ye think it might be what you know?

SHANAAR [*his knees shaking a little*]. It might be, Mr Marthraun! it [*sic*] might be, God help us!⁵⁰

As the men timidly argue over who is the best suited to go into the house, the sound of '*cackling with a note of satisfaction, or even victory in it, interspersed with the whirring sound of wings*' is heard, the sound satirically mocking its listeners.

The audience may think that the comedy is focused on the characters on stage, but when '*the head of a large COCK* [*sic*], with its huge crimson comb' appears through the window of the room of the house, the audience has to realise that some of that laughter is actually directed offstage at them. Something absurd, that they did not envisage, has appeared on stage with no rational explanation. Only the significantly named Messenger is able to tame the Cock and leads him, tied

⁵⁰ O'Casey (1985), 349. All subsequent references to the play are from this edition.

by a green ribbon, out of the house and onstage for both the onstage and offstage audience to see. Though the sounds of the Cock's presence have been lively, he now stands 'meekly' at the side of the Messenger '*stopping when he stops and moving when the Messenger moves*' (CDD, 351).⁵¹ Though the Messenger also carries with him something that '*might have been a broomstick*', this object has itself undergone a transformation into a silver staff '*topped with a rosette of green and red ribbons*' (CDD, 351), more suggestive of a band than a magician's wand.

The bird's connection with simple pleasure and enjoyment rather than devilish danger is underlined by the Cock's link with the metaphor of the dance. When Michael's wife, Lorna suggests that the bird should be handed over to the 'Civic Guard', the Messenger reassures her that the bird is quite harmless:

⁵¹ In the production of *Cock-a-Doodle-Do* by the Red Mick Theatre Company at the Baron's Court Theatre in London in April 2005, the cock was not presented as a character or an absurdist figure at all. Instead, the image of the cock comb was projected by a red filter onto the back wall of the set whenever the cock should have appeared on the set, and the Messenger conjured the image of the cock resting in his arms by the manipulation of his clenched fist under a large red piece of cloth that he carried in his arms. While the use of the light filter and comb projection was true to the spirit of technological experimentation in O'Casey's work, the pseudo-realist appearance of the cock in the arms of the Messenger was a step back too far towards realism and did not convey the magical, other-worldly quality of the Cock's role. The absurdism is obvious, however, in photographs of the famous English Stage Company's production in 1959, with Norman Rodway as The Messenger, standing next to a six-foot-high figure of the eponymous 'Cock'. However, Shivaun O'Casey points out that she and her father felt that Royal Court had an 'incorrect concept', both of the set and figure of the Cock ('A big ungainly cockerell'). They may indeed have been much happier with Red Mick's more sparing representation of 'this life force'. See Stewart (2003), 135.

...He was lonely, an' was only goin' about in quest o' company'. Instead of shyin' cups an' saucers at him, if only you'd given him your lily white hand, he'd have led you through a wistful an' wondherful dance. But you frightened the poor thing! (CDD, 351).

The appearance of the Cock on stage is not simply to satirise superstitious belief but to undermine the connection between the unexplained and danger. The Cock cannot be explained either by rationality or emotion; his presence does not appear to make sense. Instead he represents the general principle of opposition, and significantly makes a lot of noise and causes a great deal of consternation to those who try to shoo him away. Only when he is treated with a kind welcome of the hand can the Cock bring good. The need to oppose and break free from internal and religious oppression, to expose pomposity and hypocrisy, are all signalled by the list of objects that the bird damaged or attacked while at large in the house. Lorna tells the Messenger:

Frightened is it? It was me was frightened when I seen him tossin' down delf, clawin' holy pictures, an peckin' to pieces th' brand new tall hat that Mr Marthaun bought to wear, goin' with the Mayor to greet His Brightness, th' President of Eire, comin' to inaugurate th' new canteen for th' turf workers (CDD, 352).

The Cock's attack on the china, religious pictures and the tall hat suggests that the domestic, religious and civil life of Ireland is either already under attack from within, or that it needs to be coruscated from outside

with some considerable force. The conflict and damage that such analysis of these three superstructures will create within Ireland is underlined when the Messenger instructs the Cock to crow. The sound of its cry is immediately followed by '*a rumbling roll of thunder*'. O'Casey develops this juxtaposition to one between the human voices and the thunder, for a similar purpose, in his later play *Behind the Green Curtains*. In both plays the sound of thunder is a portent of dangerous public opposition.

But the Cock is most closely associated with Loreleen and celebrates her desire to enjoy sensual pleasures quietly without harm to anyone else.⁵² During the fancy dress dance, she is seen generously to join Mahan in the dancing. Her headdress takes the shape of a horn and as she dances so her costume reflects her increasing link with sensuality through the 'wonderful dance' of the Cock, with '*the cock-like crest in Loreleen's hat...rising higher*' as she dances. But her love for life cannot be tolerated, a horn appears on her head and she is subjected to what is almost a sexual attack, by the two men who saw her transformed into a Cock in the first scene. She is brought back,

⁵² O'Casey described the Cock as 'the symbol of life itself'. See his programme notes to the first London production by the English Stage Company, directed by George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre, September 1959.

dishevelled after this attack before the priest to explain her conduct. Father Domineer has no compassion and merely sneers at her: 'Give the honied harlot plenty o' space to show herself off in' (CDD, 398). The Cock does not appear in the final scene, only the sound of thunder hints at his former presence. His work has been done. Loreleen sets out from the village on foot after having been banished by the priest, and is swiftly followed by Lorna, whose rousing encouragement speaks ironically of the real location of 'evil' in the town, not in the visiting Cock, but in the town itself: 'Lift up your heart, lass: we go not towards evil, but leave an evil behind us! (CDD, 401).

The danger of sexuality is also seen through the motif of the horse in *Purple Dust* (1940), O'Casey's comedy where the use of animals is mostly Aristophanic. Cyril Poges and Basil Stoke bring their younger mistresses Souhaun and Avril from London to Ireland to take up residence in an old Tudor mansion now being restored. They have turned from the city to the country in an early depiction of 'downsizing', planning to make a living from farming. The plays pokes fun at this English perception of the Irish country idyll in the first appearance of Poges, Basil and their mistresses. They arrive on stage carrying country accoutrements, but in

diminutive versions: Avril has a '*dainty little Shepherd's crook*'; Poges brings '*a little wood rake with a gaily coloured handle*'; Souhaun carries '*a little hoe*'; and Basil '*a slim- handled little spade*'.⁵³ Each use of 'little' mocks the bearer as they perform a short dance '*in what they think to be a country style*' (PD, 277). Each character wears a white smock, featuring '*the stylized picture of an animal*' (PD, 277) on the front: for Poges a pig; for Basil a hen; for Souhaun a cow and for Avril a duck. Clearly each character will take on some feature of their animal counterpart in the play. But it is the use of the horse that is most disturbing for Poges and Basil, for the horse represents both strong physical and sexual capacity for their younger women mistresses, alongside the possibility of liberation from their stultifying life in the country with older men who are no longer sexually satisfying. As Avril complains to the young pretender O'Killigain, Poges is '*a gutted soldier bee whose job is done, and still hangs on to life*' (PD, 287). Basil and Avril arrange to go for a ride and have their horses brought to the front of the house, and O'Killigain asks Souhaun who is to be riding the horses. On hearing that it is Basil and Avril, his dismissal of their abilities is laced with sexual overtones:

⁵³ Sean O'Casey *Purple Dust* in *Sean O'Casey: Plays 2* introd. by Arthur Miller (London, 1998), 277. All subsequent references to this play are from this edition of the play and are included in the text.

O'KILLIGAIN: I suppose you know these horses are mettlesome creatures and need riders at home in the saddle?

SOUHAUN (*more haughtily still*): Miss Avril and her friend learned the art in a London riding-school, and exercised frequently in Richmond Park; so your solicitude is unnecessary, sir.

O'KILLIGAIN (*viciously*): Richmond Park isn't Clune na Geera ma'am. The horses there are animals, the horses here horses (PD, 308-9).

The sense of an impotent England, unable to cope with the reality of a new post-war rugged landscape is clearly suggested through these sexual parallels in the play.

Basil and Avril arrive on stage for their ride dressed in Hollywood-style English riding clothes, Avril '*tripping in, dressed in jersey and jodhpurs*', and Basil wears '*gleaming top-boots with spurs*' and carries a whip. While such a talisman might convey sexual dynamism, Basil is instead humiliated and cuckolded as a result of this attempt to dominate a foreign landscape with his outdated Englishness. After giving his horse 'a little jab with the spur' (PD, 313), he complains that 'the brute behaved like a wild animal, just like a wild animal' unseating him from his mount and leaving him abandoned on the landscape.⁵⁴ Avril is rescued by

⁵⁴ This connection between the metaphor of the horse and sexual desire is particularly evident in D.H. Lawrence's short story 'St Mawr', see D.H. Lawrence *St Mawr and Other Stories* (London, 1997). Lawrence's most famous use of the horse as a sexual symbol is in *Women in Love*, where Gudrun is transfixed by the sight of Gerald Critch violently controlling his mount. See D.H. Lawrence *Women in Love* (London, 1998).

O'Killigain and significantly 'canters' away with him as Basil complains 'Naked and unashamed, the vixen went away with O'Killigain!' (PD, 313).

In *Purple Dust*, then, sexual betrayal is overt and unashamed because the play uses the figure of the ageing Englishman to point out that the nation can no longer colonise a foreign landscape without some cost to itself. Colonialism is an outmoded concept which belongs with outdated riding habits and brightly shinning spurs – firmly in the past. *Purple Dust* thus begins the critique of the victorious English colonialist which is more fully realised, as we have seen, in the later *Oak Leaves and Lavender*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ The donkey is conversely used as a means of obstruction and of liberation denied in O'Casey's last play, the one act *The Moon Shines on Kyleneamoe* (1961). Lord Leslieson, a British Foreign Office official, is left stranded at a railway station late at night and is desperate to get into the 'town' of Kyleneamoe to continue his journey to deliver urgent documents to the English Prime Minister who is holidaying nearby. He has been led to believe that he can hire a car at the station, but in a Kafkaesque farce, the train driver and the station master deny all knowledge of the town 'Town? What town?...Someone musta been pullin' his leg' (MSK, 386). The only creature that might be persuaded along the road is the station master Corny's small donkey Jinnie, whom he uses to carry turf from the bog. But Corny is intransigent and refuses to use his donkey for any other purpose: 'I'm not goin' to rouse little Jinnie out of her donkey-dhreams, no, not for any sthruttin' High Official of England's Foreign Office!' (MSK, 391). Leslieson is thus stranded and he vows to sleep on the station until the next morning. But Corny is not without hospitality, and invites, indeed insists, that the Englishman stay under his roof for one night, promising to take him to nearest car-hire using Jinnie and the cart in the morning. While this might seem as if the play's denouement is perilously close to resolution through good old Irish hospitality, the play again underlines that Irish co-operation with England cannot be demanded. Only when Corny offers entrance into his own house of his own accord does the play resolve harmoniously. The use of Ireland's resources, symbolised by Jinnie, are not to be taken for granted, even if they can be paid for with good English money which is much needed by Corny. As always with O'Casey, it is about choice; any further encroachment upon Irish territory (seen in the manner of Lord Leslieson's wish to dominate the native landscape though his desire to travel at *that* moment across the

History and the echo

In *The Drums of Father Ned* (1959), O'Casey blends his experiments with sound with verbal repetition, which is now extended to include the entire sound score in general. He introduces the motif of the echo, drawing on its comic value. The 'Preramble' to the play, set in 1926, 34 years before the play itself is set, provides context for the hatred between the two Catholics, Binnington and McGilligan and a parallel between the men and the warring factions in Ireland itself.⁵⁶

The scene opens with a country town, '*shadowy, outlined only in a dream-like way*' (DFN, 135) in Ireland, which is '*burning*'. To accompany this eerie scene is the sound of chanting - '*A chant of voices, a chant of misery and defiance*' - which seems to emanate from behind the town ('*It is low, as from a distance, but is clearly heard*' (DFN, 135)). From this phantasmagoric background the voices ring out:

countryside) cannot be tolerated. Only when Ireland *requests* further mutual exchange to the advantage of each, should the British once again think of setting foot on Irish terrain.

⁵⁶ A preproduction of the play was famously thwarted at the Dublin Festival in 1958, along with an adaptation of *Ulysses*, after disapproval from The Archbishop of Dublin, the Very Reverend John Charles McQuaid, amongst others. The Archbishop refused to say the votive Mass to celebrate the opening of the Festival if any play by Joyce or O'Casey was performed. O'Casey refused to make cuts to the play and instead withdrew it from the Festival. Samuel Beckett withdrew his three plays in sympathy and the Festival collapsed. This episode is complex and has as much to do with the reputation of Joyce as it does with any particular O'Casey's play. For the most comprehensive account of events, see Murray (2004), 396-404.

The Black and Tans are blasting now
Ireland's living into the dead; (DFN, 136)

Binnington and McGilligan, who haven't spoken to one another for ten years, are being held by a gang of Black and Tans, who are trying to force them simply to look at one another and shake hands. Even with their hands up and at the end of the barrel of a gun, the pair refuse to acknowledge the presence of the other and become ridiculous figures, with one angling his face to the left and the other to the right, so that there is no danger of them catching a glance of one another. They, quite literally, would rather (and do) face running a gauntlet of bullets than speak to one another. This caricature of heroic behaviour offers an ironic enactment of a moment of heroism which is distorted by the petty nature of its origin. The Officer taunts the men with the fact that they 'do business together', and Binnington and McGilligan immediately jump to their own defence. The 'Echo', making its first appearance in the play, now satirises and undermines the logic of their argument:

BINNINGTON: That's different, for business is business.

MCGILLIGAN: Yis, business is business.

ECHO: Business is business (DFN, 142).

Unlike the first sound of the radio in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, this echo is immediately acknowledged by the characters on stage for it startles the Officer and is given a realistic explanation by McGilligan: 'When th' winds is right, th' higher hills round the town sometimes gives an echo' (DFN, 142). But its satiric impact is not reduced by this realism, for the repetition of the pusillanimous phrase is highlighted just as effectively whether it is a 'real' echo or a more ethereal source. However, since the Echo may be conjured by the wind, and only 'sometimes', O'Casey sets the context for the more mysterious appearances of the Echo later in the play.

In the Preramble, the hatred between the two men is so intense that the Officer gives the orders that they be allowed to live, since they would do more harm than good alive:

Can't you see that these two rats will do more harm to Ireland living than they'll ever do to Ireland dead? (DFN, 144).

Binnington and McGilligan literally '*crawl*' off stage, acting like the insects they insultingly name one another ('You muddy ditch-worm... You dung beetle' (DFN, 146))⁵⁷: and as they pass out of vision '*the red flames rise higher than ever*', suggesting that more damage is

⁵⁷ Again, this use of the image of man as sub-human reminds us of Boyle at the end of *Juno* and of Harry's image of his injured body as a 'worm' in Act 3 of *The Silver Tassie*.

inflicted on the town by the personal battles of its compatriots than from any external threat. The first chorus of the opening song is repeated as a means of connecting the physical devastation of the town by the Black and Tans, with this psychological destruction caused to human relationships by attitudes and behaviour of men like Binnington and McGilligan:

The Black and Tans are blasting now
Ireland's living into the dead;
Her homes and shops in flames fall down
In red ashes on her bonny head (DFN, 146).

Clearly, it is not only the Black and Tans who are 'blasting the living into the dead', for every age old dispute such as that of Binnington and McGilligan is responsible for drawing the life of the living closer to that of the dead.

At the end of the 'Preramble' O'Casey also introduces the drums of the title for the first time when '*A very faint, distant roll of drums mingles with the chant*' (DFN, 146). Like the thunder in *Behind the Green Curtains* (as I discuss below), the drums function both as portent and as call to arms. Significantly, as with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we never see 'Father Ned' on stage at all; indeed it is not even clear that there is such a person. The figure of the man and the sound of his name are enough to cause a plethora of riotous actions to take place in the town. Indeed, even if he is a

person, it is not the presence of his corporeal body that is important; only the sound of his drums is necessary sending out their call to arms and action throughout the town.

What is interesting about this first use of the Echo in the play is that it is itself 'echoed' or repeated twice more in the first act of the play. Binnington and McGilligan are now thirty-four years older, the former is Mayor of the town and the latter his Deputy. They remain sworn enemies who still work together but only speak to insult one another. The men are about to take delivery of a shipment of wood from Communist Russia for their construction businesses, a country with which their religion forbids trade since it is an atheist state. The men are still rationalising their decision to make another of these profitable transactions and the Echo mocks their hypocrisy:

MCGILLIGAN: Our people must have houses.

BINNINGTON: An' we need timber to build them.

MCGILLIGAN: An' business is business.

BINNINGTON: Yes, business is business.

ECHO: Business is business (DFN, 160).

As they worry that someone in the town will hear of their transaction, they begin to argue, blaming each other and as McGilligan almost mentions the name of the Russian sea port from which the timber sailed,

Binnington hurriedly intervenes. But as he does so he establishes a thought-provoking link between their covert actions and the drumming of 'Father Ned', the sound of an impetus for action and change in the play:

BINNINGTON [interrupting him]: For God's sake, man! Are you ready to send th' hidden word drummin' through the air of th' day, an' have it murmured again be th' whisperin' breezes of th' night? What is done was only done to help th' people to homes they need.

MCGILLIGAN: You are right. It was done in a good cause, a good cause.

BINNINGTON: An' business is business.

MCGILLIGAN: An' business is business.

ECHO. Business is business (DFN, 161).

O'Casey wants to focus his audience's attention on 'business' because it is the central force of capitalism; and while the audience sees the hypocrisy of the two men, there may also be a suggestion of hope. Through trade, connections between nations are established that would not and could not be engendered in any other way. This is emphasised later in the play by the visit of Skerighan, the tradesman from Northern Ireland, who is even invited to the McGilligan's home for dinner and eventually plays the tune adopted by Northern Irish marching bands, of 'Lillibullero' [sic] on their 'Catholic

piano' (DFN, 203).⁵⁸ The Echo again rings out to

underline the ridiculous satire of such a moment.

McGuinty plays music for the family who are just carrying out a rehearsal of their Tostal bows for the ball.

McGuinty picks out the chimes of the clock on the piano:

MCGUINTY: It's their climax! [*Lilting and playing*].
Th' chimes of time is playin' them out. La la la la;
la la la la.

ECHO: La la la la; la la la la (DFN,210).

Comparisons with T.S. Eliot's 'that

Shakespearean rag' from *The Waste Land*⁵⁹ and the

⁵⁸ The tune 'Lilliburlero' has a complex history of association with both Protestant and Catholic traditions, and O'Casey deliberately uses this song's sectarian ambiguity for comic effect. First appearing in 1641 in connection with Catholic royalist Richard Talbot, it was taken up by both the English and Irish after the defeat of Irish forces by William III. John Gay took up the tune for use in *The Beggar's Opera*, and the B.B.C. used the tune as their theme tune during World War 2 (and now in the World Service), which may be where O'Casey remembers hearing it most. It is possible that the line 'Lilli-burlero, bullen -a-la' is a parody of the Gaelic 'Lilli bu léir ó bu linn an lá'. See *Sources of Traditional Irish Music c.1600-1855 Vol 1* (ed.) Aloys Fleischmann (London, 1998), 21 and H.E. Piggott *Songs that Made History* (London, 1937), 26-29. This double association of the 'la' sound in English and Gaelic may have been in O'Casey's mind as he added the Echo's mocking use of the word, overlaying the irony by using a sound that was itself an echo of another language, no longer easily understood in its own nation.

⁵⁹ The tune Eliot used in *The Waste Land* has been identified as a song from the 1912 *Ziegfeld Follies*, so it is possible that O'Casey may have heard the song performed at the Music Halls of which he was so fond. What is most interesting is that O'Casey and Eliot are using the song to similar effect. McGuinty is playing the 'Lillibulero' as he adds 'la' to the tune; and as David Chinitz comments of Eliot's use of original song: 'the lyric banks for its bid for humour on the shock generated when a culture's most revered texts are treated with an unceremonious familiarity', see David E. Chinitz *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago, 2003), 48. There is a double irony for O'Casey, since the 'Lillibulero' is a 'revered text' for only half of the sectarian divide, and yet its own ambiguous religious history as a song suggests that it should be revered by neither. As Chinitz remarks of Eliot's use of the original 1912 'Shakespearean Rag' 'Eliot clearly understood that the ragging of Shakespeare...had explosive potential to amuse or to offend; to link history and contemporaneity, or to push them apart;...' (48).

pathetic 'Baa' of the sheep in Beckett's *All That Fall*⁶⁰ are not far away here. When verbal communication cannot make sense, music is the only alternative. The 'la' of song is both an epitaph and hymn, playing out the ridiculous nature of the divisions caused in both this town and the nation by personal and religious differences. The family are united by the sound of a good tune, as long as they have no idea of its sectarian meaning. Time is indeed playing them out – changes are taking place and they cannot remain cloistered in a town or a nation steeped in old animosities and antagonisms, whose origins even the older family members struggle to recall.

Trade is a means of communication and the play shows that the hypocritical willingness to trade goods, but not ideas, with another nation such as the USSR, simply because that nation does not acknowledge the importance of the deity is farcical. Change must eventually come about, because the time for continuing revenge for old divisions between people, towns and nations has now passed. In place of the language of division, there is the music of connection, musical harmony crossing the national barriers more effectively than the dissenting sound of voices alone.

⁶⁰ The sounds of the wind and the animals are the only sounds to be heard as Mrs Rooney bemoans her isolation 'There is no one to ask' see Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* in Beckett (1990), 191.

This incipient internationalism, suggested through music, is continually accentuated by the use of the Echo. Murray, the organist, is arguing about the music for the forthcoming Tostal with Father Fillifogue. Murray has been able to lead his choir to sing well during their rehearsals of non-religious songs for the concert, but they no longer take any interest in practising their hymns. As Father Fillifogue struts off stage, outraged at the thought of Mozart and Haydn being played at the ceremony, the Echo picks up on Murray's delight at the list of the European composers whose work will be represented instead:

MURRAY: ...Mozart, Back [sic], Beethoven, Haydn an' Handel too!

ECHO: Haydn an' Handel, too (DFN,180).

This use of the Echo, with its slight change of punctuation, announces the presence of the music of these artists at the Tostal and in Ireland itself, not as defiant act, as Murray's emphasis implies, but as a stated fact, and an inevitable right. The drums back up the Echo's stance with their portent of welcome changes to come, since the drum roll '*faint and far away*' is heard as the act closes.

It is the drums, of course, that remain the most insistent and inspirational sound in the play: a rousing beat, increasing in volume throughout the play, sounding

at every moment of rebellion against, and inversion of, the town's traditional behaviour and beliefs. The drums also support the international co-operation that the play suggests offers salvation to the internecine battles of Ireland. At the end of the play, everything in the town has been given up to the Tostal (which is by its very nature is an international festival of the arts). Even the lorry designated to transport the Russian wood from the ship in the dockyard has been requisitioned to carry the floral displays to the ceremony instead - on the orders of 'Father Ned'. The origin of the wood becomes known to the assembled group in McGilligan's house at the end of Act III. Father Fillifogue instructs that this 'atheistical timber' (DFN, 230) should be burnt as atonement for its purchase; but one of the mummers, Tom, promotes the message of international co-operation:

There's other things in the wharf that need burnin' more than the' timber on the wharf. Th' things of th' earth that God helps us to grow can't be bad, let them come from Catholic Italy, Protestant Sweden, or Communist Russia. I say take what God gives us by the labourin' hands of other men (DFN, 231).

This desire for international support is followed by Michael and Nora openly admitting that they have been living together, though unmarried; the announcement of a new library committee, no longer dominated by the Catholic church; and the identity of two new candidates

for the Mayor's office – the lovers Michael and Nora. The entire cast of the play is gradually caught up in the energy and charge of all these changes, and begins to join the march towards the town meeting to select their new representatives. The sense that the whole of the Ireland is in open revolt against itself and its history is emphasised by the return of the Echo, now commenting on the remorseless drive for change symbolised by the drumming. At the sound of the drums, Murray calls:

MURRAY [shouting triumphantly]: De drums of Fader Ned!

ECHO [very quietly but very positively]: Dee dh drums of Fader Nud!

[The music of the March goes on] (DFN, 239).

Again, the expansion of the Irish intonation in the Echo's version of Murray's phrase points to the particularly Irish nature of these drums, alongside their particular necessity as a sound and inspiration to action for Ireland. Social, moral and civil practices have to be changed all over Ireland, just as they are in the play's town of Downvale in order for it to become a modern nation. The music of the march 'goes on' at the end of the play because O'Casey recognised that in Ireland in 1959 there was still much work to be done. The blend of musical and verbal sounds in the play allows the

audience critical distance and comic engagement with the complex political implications of O'Casey's play.

The drum is one of three instruments that are significant here, the others, like the piano and the harp, resonate with a sound more than their own.⁶¹ The sound of the drums opens the first act.⁶² The piano, linked with middle-class aspirations in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, functions in this play as a further signifier of class, but also of religious values, and is neatly linked with the motif of the Echo in the first act. The scene is the home of Binnington, now Mayor of the town and his maid, Bernadette, who is stealing an opportunity to play the piano before the family come home. Mrs Binnington catches her in the act, telling her to leave it alone since she is not good enough to play it: 'That instrument is only to be touched be an edifyin' finger' (DFN, 149). Bernadette becomes very angry and rounds on Mrs Binnington, linking the latter's rise in status with ill-gotten gains of the recent conflict, but Mrs Binnington doesn't bat an eye and continues to practise her pirouettes for the ensuing Tostal ball while responding to her maid:

⁶¹ Cf. Katharine Worth 'Words for Music Perhaps', in Mary Bryden (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Oxford, 1998), 9-20.

⁶² Beckett is often noted for attempting to control productions of his work by the very specificity of his stage directions. O'Casey too, is very direct about what he wants his productions to look and sound like. In this play he specifies the exact recording of the drums from Haydn's Symphony No.103 that he wants the audience to hear in the play – even to the extent of listing the actual record number in his 'Note' for the production. See O'Casey (1985), 133.

BERNADETTE [*angrily and sullenly*]: Youse wouldn't have a piano if it wasn't for the dead who died for Ireland!

MRS BINNINGTON [*quietly but positively*]: Maybe not. But all that's well over now.....We've done our best for our glorious dead with murmurin' of thousands of Rosaries, hundhreds of volleys fired over where they lie, an' th' soundin' of hundhreds more of Last Posts. All that can be done for a dead hero is to put a headstone over his grave, an' leave him there.

ECHO: An' leave him there.

BERNADETTE [*bitterly*]: An' forget all he said an' all he ever done.

ECHO: All he ever done.

MRS BINNINGTON: God's will (DFN, 151).

It is interesting that Mrs Binnington's speech highlights the number of sounds that are used to mark the existence of the now silent dead: the Rosaries, the volleys of shots and the Last Post; and there is the sense that all this 'sound and fury' do indeed seem to signify nothing for Mrs Binnington. On this occasion the Echo is not acknowledged by anyone on stage for once again, as with the radio in *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, the Echo is only for the benefit of the audience in the theatre. It is the casual nature of Mrs Binnington's delivery of this statement that also undermines its sincerity. The sense that the dead should lie quiet in their graves is one that O'Casey might have some sympathy with, but unlike the dancers in the 'Prelude' of

Oak Leaves and Lavender, Mrs Binngton's pirouettes do not include a recognition of any positive changes or consequences of the deaths that now allow her to own a piano and to continue dancing. Mrs Binnington's burial of a hero means that she does just that – bury them and forget that they ever existed, just as Bernadette implies. Honour the men, then forget that they ever lived. But Bernadette herself is questioned by the repetition of the Echo – what is it exactly, the repetition seems to ask, that 'he ever' did? Does such heroism cause the nation to remain in a state of perpetual antipathy and animosity, as we have seen with Binngton and McGilligan in the 'Prerumble'? Does heroism have any value as an ideal if it only leads to death? The audience of *The Drums of Father Ned* are faced with vexing questions about the nature of heroism and national identity, just as surely as the audiences were confronted with them in *The Plough and the Stars* thirty-four years previously.

Conclusion

O'Casey continues his questioning of the nationalist aesthetic through song in *Behind the Green Curtains* (1961), his meta-dramatic play about the role and responsibilities of writers and journalists. This play asks a question that O'Casey must have asked himself throughout his own life: what does it mean to be a writer

and an Irishman? The play opens with two middle-aged women, Angela and Lizzie, in a pairing that remind us of a modern day Bessie Burgess and Jennie Grogan or, perhaps, Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. Two women in faded clothing acquired from charities, walk on stage together and sit down on a bench outside an Anglican church. In the background 'we hear faintly the music of the *'Dead March in Saul'* (BGC, 247). Lizzie proclaims 'That music stuff gives me the creeps', but Angela undercuts her anxiety by pronouncing that it is merely 'Some stiff gettin' berried' (BGC, 248). The women argue about the possibility of an afterlife and consider how their oaths of sobriety (clearly broken) might help their standing with the deity.

O'Casey allows himself one of his playful juxtapositions here, for when the Verger, who had been conducting a rehearsal of a funeral service, emerges from the church, he greets the women with the first two lines of the popular ballad from the musical *Oklahoma!* : 'Oh, what a beautiful morning...oh, what a beautiful day!'(BGC, 255). The amusing irony of a clerical figure, moved to express emotion through a secular song rather than a hymn, continues the link between song and spirituality from O'Casey's previous play, *The Drums of*

Father Ned (1959).⁶³ The link between church and state is also comically drawn, when Angela thinks she recognises the picture showing the face of a man in a house window. But the man she took to be 'St Joseph or St Pether' (BGC, 260) is soon identified as Parnell, and O'Casey has neatly drawn his audience into parallels between saints and sinners.

This is perhaps not quite the parallel that the play draws between writers and the world, but there is a very close examination of the writer's responsibility of all writers to 'walk...within the shadow of truth, courage and sincerity' (frontispiece to play). Significantly, the printed version does not contain a cast list so the audience asks as they meet each new character: who are these people, or perhaps, more specifically, who do they think they are? Journalists, judging and analysing, often remain unknown and unaccounted for themselves: the play gives them personalities, petty drives and

⁶³ In Act II, for example, Skerigan tries to get Michael to identify God as a Protestant or a Catholic, but Michael merely laughs and responds: 'He is all...He may be but a shout in th' street'(DFN, 226). When pressed by Skerigan to suggest what kind of shout, Michael's reply links God and the Church to music, giving a pantheistic view of the deity: '...it [the church] might just be a drunken man, unsteadily meandering his way home, shouting out Verdi's [*he lilt the words*] "Oh, Le-on-or-a" ' (DFN, 226). In Act I, Nora similarly counters Binnington's suggestion that 'Our Blessed Lord never joined in a dance, never halted in His work to sing a song' by making a case for a God with strong appreciation for music and dancing, even a Bacchanalian sense of fun and enjoyment: 'If he didn't dance himself, he must have watched the people at it, and, maybe, clapped His hands when they did it well. He must have often listened to the people singin', and been caught up with the rhythm of the gentle harp and psaltery, and His feet may have tapped the ground along with the gayer strokes of the tabor and the sound of the cymbals tinkling' (DFN, 167).

emotions just the same as anyone else in an attempt to reduce the demi-god status of a journalist.

Gradually, a group of writers and actors gather together outside the church; they have come to the funeral of another writer, Lionel Robartes,⁶⁴ and it does not take long before the name of Yeats himself is mentioned in their discussion: 'Yeats lived behind velvet curtains' says McGeelish (BGC, 263). An argument is developed over the dual choice facing the writers: whether they should go to the Memorial service for a fellow writer or to the Catholic march to condemn 'Atheistic Communism' (BGC, 266). A range of equivocations follow: whether they should divide themselves into two groups and attend both events; whether the Catholics can go to the graveside of the dead man, since they know that their faith forbids their attendance at the service, or whether sneaking in at the side of the church to the grave would circumvent their sin.

At the last moment Kornavaun tells them 'excitedly' that he 'rang up the Archbishop's Palace' and has been told that any involvement in the service would be a 'grave sin' (BGC, 268) for the Catholics. Now that

⁶⁴ Cf. W.B. Yeats's collection of poems entitled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (Churchtown, 1920), with its emphasis on political and philosophical issues, which was clearly in O'Casey's mind here when he chose this surname for the deceased figure of an author.

the church has forbidden it ('The Church speakin'! Obedience! '(BGC, 268)), nearly all the men excuse themselves from the service. Only the Catholic female writer, Reena, followed by the Communist Beauman, defy the ban and go to the service. As they do so the sound of the 'Dead March' from Saul, heard as the play opened, echoes again and the sound of the tolling bell after their words sounds like a death knell, not just for the dead writer inside the church, but for all the writers outside the church as well, whose spirits are dead and who have exposed their lack of 'courage and sincerity' that the play shows is essential to their role.

Though *Behind the Green Curtains* is less experimental in form, it continues to use moments of surreal sound adding further dimensions and emphasis. When the writers initially decide not to attend Kornavaun's march, for example, and resolve that they will 'tell him each face to face that we won't be there' (BGC, 282), the stage directions instruct that '*a peal of thunder is heard*'. The men are transfixed while the sound of the thunder undergoes a metamorphosis into the humble peal of the doorbell⁶⁵:

⁶⁵ The sound of a bell is also used to ironic effect in O'Casey's one-act play *Hall of Healing* (1951). Written just before *Juno* it is set in a 'Dublin Parish Dispensary for the Poor'. The Old Woman waits her turn to see the new doctor at the Dispensary, whose lack of sympathy or concern for the health of his patients is shown by his refusal to let them enter his waiting room until the appointed surgery hour, despite the freezing weather

They suddenly become stiff and still; the rumble gradually developing into, or changing into, the doorbell ringing clear and loud and demanding. They are all standing stiffer now, and there's a long silent pause (BGC, 282).

The sound of thunder harks back to the use of the rousing drum roll in *The Drums of Father Ned*, and indicates the gathering storm of public opposition that the writers would face if they were to oppose the march in print. Their unmoving stiffness links them back to the funeral march of the previous scene, representing a kind of death for themselves and their writing; for they

outside. His patients are identified only by the colour of their clothing in the play, e.g. 'Green Muffler' or 'Grey Shawl'. The Doctor is anxious to get rid of his patients as quickly as possible, regardless of the severity of their illness, and instructs his assistant, Alleluia, that there should be no delay to them arriving in his room after he has rung his bell to summon the next patient: '...and mind you no delay when the bell rings. Immediately one enters, pop another at the edge of the surgery to be ready when the bell sounds again' (HH, 406-7). Alleluia decides to mark out the surgery floor with chalk, placing patients in specific spaces in the room to facilitate immediate entry to the surgery at the sound of the Doctor's summoning bell: '*he draws a straight line on the floor, half-way between the bench and the Surgery door. Just outside the door, he draws a circle. Within the circle, he puts a patient facing the door and places another patient toeing the line, facing too, towards the Surgery door. The Surgery bell rings. Alleluia hurries the patient in the circle into the Surgery, shoves another patient into it while another toes the line*' (411). The 'venemous clarity' (414) of the sound of the bell, thus initiates this farcical stage exchange almost a dozen times, and the patients are swiftly ejected from the Surgery to claim their 'bootles' (412) of medicine from Alleluia (who also has to run across the stage to issue each patients' medicine from the Dispensary). This Absurdist stage routine underlines the play's critique of the medical profession, ironising those who seek to treat patients' problems via an exterior panacea, rather than to acknowledge the economic origin of their illnesses. The previous doctor at this Surgery had a greater social and political awareness. Black Muffler remembers that '...he said what I needed was better food, a finer house to live in, and a lot more enjoyment. And when I said couldn't you give me a bottle, Doctor, he laughed at me...he said you can't expect to drink health into you out of a bottle' (HH, 410). Significantly, the doctor had recently died of cancer, suggesting that even new ways of managing disease were simply decaying in Dublin. While the play's subject matter may have some connection with the outbreak of T.B in Ireland in the late 1940s (see O'Connor (2004), 328) it is in some sense a continuation of Bernard Shaw's critique of the medical profession in *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1911) and the Absurdist style of *Hall of Healing* makes its political points in a new way.

know that if they accept the challenge of such opposition they will face vilification (just as Reena found that after attending the funeral, her articles for the newspaper were no longer required).

Colour is once more deployed by O'Casey in *Behind the Green Curtains*, now playing a central role in his critique of the Irish writer in Scene II. The action shifts to the drawing room of a well-respected factory owner who has been a patron of the arts, Senator Chatastray, who has much in common with the real figure of Yeats. McGeera, McGeelish Bunny and Horawn, most of the writers and the actor from Scene 1, are in the room waiting to see this influential man. The narrowness of their writerly and artistic vision is demonstrated through McGeelish's discovery of 'A photo of a nude!' (BGC, 273) and other similar pictures, which, they surmise, are for Chatastray's personal titivation, but which are later identified as postcards of the paintings of Renoir and Cézanne.

While these Irish artistes wait in the room, Chatastray is himself trying to avoid a visit from the Catholic zealot Kornavaun, a man keen to persuade him to challenge and prevent the proposed marriage of a Protestant man and a Catholic girl working at his

factory.⁶⁶ When Kornavaun has left, the men then withdraw behind the significantly coloured green curtains to discuss the arts. The play draws the audience's attention to the importance of this moment, by structuring it into a kind of dance, and linking it with the funeral march of the previous scene by accompanying the movement of the closing curtain with a series of rhythmic phrases repeated as at a Latin mass:

Chatastray '*slowly draws the curtains, almost keeping time to the remarks made about them*' (BGC, 279) and the responses begin:

CHATASTRAY:Let's draw th' green curtains an' blind some of th' squinting eyes.

MCGEERA: Draw th' green curtains.

MCGEELISH: Fitley and firmly, draw th' green curtains.

BUNNY: To blunder th' eyes.

HORAWN: Lookin' in at th' windows.

[*A pause*] (BGC, 279).

The reverence with which the writers draw this discrete veil around themselves, shutting themselves and Ireland off from observation or commentary from the world outside, and their feeling that this isolation is necessary and valuable is what the play identifies as most troubling for Irish nationhood and continuing development.

⁶⁶ Chatastray betrays a hint of his cowardice when he later asks his maid Noneen to get rid of Kornavaun on his behalf.

The Absurdist use of the 'pause' here acts in both a Beckettian and Pinteresque sense. The hiatus provides a moment for the audience to consider the subtext of the exchanges and to dwell on their potentially sinister and disturbing connotations. While Pinter examines what goes on behind closed doors, O'Casey looks behind closed curtains, but their troubling questions are the same: Who *are* these men? What do they do and what are the consequences of their actions? O'Casey faces the audience with these questions about writers and the metadrama is clear: for O'Casey the playwright is both behind and in front of these green curtains himself.

This play identifies lack of personal courage and a clamour for isolation as the most pernicious desire of all writers, but particularly Irish writers. This remains the dominant challenge to Chatastray, and to a lesser extent, the other writers in the play. Chatastray's decision over whether to adopt the yellow and white rosette and later the sackcloth coat (an ironic nod towards Yeats' poem, 'Song', with its first line: 'I made my song a coat') of the Catholic inspired movement, and to join the other writers in their public march and protest against atheism and Communism is a challenge that Chatastray fails on both occasions. His first failure

results in a 'punishment' episode for his housekeeper Noneen, and the second in the loss of his chance of love with Reena.

When Chatastray tried to defend his countless independent thoughts in the safety of his own house, Reena reminded him:

None of th' brave thoughts, though, were let escape out into th' cool air of life. Well let's pull th' green curtains back now, an' open th' windas (BGC, 306).

Clearly Reena is pointing out that none of the writer's 'chat' of his name, indeed ever does go 'astray', but stays firm and secure inside the house, safely behind the green curtains. But Chatastray lacks the 'Guts' that Reena tells him are necessary for a writer and is scared to pull back the curtains, telling her not to 'be so fond of meddling'. Instead, he wants to shut out the noise of the men marching to the meeting and retain his splendid isolation: 'I want to shut my eyes and my mind away from it all' (BGC, 307). This is one of the most chilling statements made by the writer in the play: an abject decision to withdraw from seeing the world as it is, or even to think about it. Instead, he withdraws to his isolated world of the simulacrum, behind the green curtains, but never in front of them. Reena tries to appeal to the spiritual nature and responsibilities of writing, reminding Chatastray that 'when you shut out the

people, you are shutting out God' (BGC, 307). But though Chatastray wavers, he eventually rushes out to join the march in full costume.

The failure of his decision is signalled through the song on the record given to him by Noneen, now recovered and on her way to England with Beauman. Reena finds love with Beauman and decides to leave for England with him and Noneen. Just before they leave, Reena plays Noneen's record, which she had said was a favourite of Chatastray's. The final chorus of the song plays on the gramophone of Chatastray's empty room:

Each wave that we danced on at morning, ebbs
from us
And leaves us, at eve, on the bleak shore alone
(BGC, 328).

The image of Chatastray left alone in Ireland, on the shore, while the free-thinking and courageous trio of Reena, Noneen and Beauman set out across the water for England is poignant. Chatastray is left alone because he cannot ride out the waves of opposition that must come his way as a writer. But while he is dancing on the crest of this particular wave of popularity, he is destined to remain in his chosen state of isolation, 'bleak' as that will be.

O'Casey left for England with those pioneers, as we know. And he did so at much cost to his own development, especially because it left him without a

theatre. But in other senses, the departure from Ireland gave him the freedom to experiment far more boldly than remaining would have done.

O'Casey's vibrant experiments with sound, symbol and abstraction mark his work as typical of current stage practices, as much as it is symptomatic of the theatrical investigations of the most radical of his theatre contemporaries. As we have seen O'Casey does indeed practise what he preaches in the theatre.

Ideology, theory and practice are combined in his work, producing theatre that continues to be exciting, dynamic as well as rigorous in its intellectual reach. But O'Casey's work still suffers from the main difficulty that it met with in his own lifetime: he so rarely finds a director or a critic whose imagination and perception match, or at least understand, his own. Since many directors, on account of their sources of funding, remain cautious about the financial success of his vehemently anti-naturalist plays, it seems more than certain that much of O'Casey's later work is destined to remain on the page alone.

Theatre directors are lured by the apparent naturalism of his early plays and are nervous of O'Casey's increasing defiance of the need for easily understandable narratives in his later work. In this we

may be complicit as audiences, since we are often shy of learning new ways to engage with drama, much preferring to fall back, like a troubled actor, on our bag of learnt 'tricks' of interpretation. O'Casey requires more of us his audience; lazy analysis will not do. And yet, now of all times with our acquaintance with the works of 'difficult' practitioners such as Elizabeth LeCompte, Robert Lepage or Tim Etchells, perhaps O'Casey deserves a re-launch. For O'Casey's way is full of hard questions and uncomfortable answers. But it is not all gloom; there is always a song and music to celebrate along our journey.

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