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Renovating the Kitchen: Irishness, Nationalism, and Form in the Theatre of John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Thomas Kilroy

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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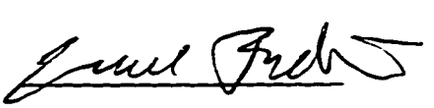

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Renovating the Kitchen: Irishness, Nationalism, and Form in the Theatre of John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Thomas Kilroy submitted by Leonard Robert Falkenstein in partial requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

This study examines Irish drama of the period 1959-1993 in light of the radical transformations which took place in Irish culture and society during this time. Taking as its starting point the new policy initiatives undertaken by the Lemass government in the late 1950s, which had the effect of opening Ireland's previously insular economy and culture to foreign influences, it explores how the resulting changes were registered in, and acted as an influence on, the works of playwrights John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Thomas Kilroy. In doing so, it examines how these dramatists have reappraised the concepts of Irishness and nationalism and reinterpreted them, within the context of dramatic form, for the stage.

As background for the discussions which follow, the first chapter of the dissertation surveys the state of Irish culture and society, and of Irish theatre, in the decades leading up to the social and economic revolution of the sixties and seventies. It then considers the impact of the changes as felt not only in economic terms, but also in Irish intellectual, cultural, and artistic life. This introduction is followed by individual chapters devoted to each of the five playwrights. In discussing a selection of representative texts from each dramatist's *oeuvre*, the dissertation examines the interrelated questions of how each playwright's theatre represents, and is representative of, an Ireland in transition, and how each writer's work conforms to, challenges, or modifies what can be seen as an inherited Irish dramatic tradition. As these chapters suggest, theatre history and social/cultural history are intertwined in the drama of these five playwrights. Each has confronted the dilemma of how to negotiate between past and present in a rapidly changing society. While their responses have been distinct and unique, the dissertation's conclusion suggests that their works are linked by a number of culturally- and socially-influenced connections and commonalities. As a final gesture, the conclusion also briefly considers the works of other contemporary Irish dramatists, particularly younger playwrights who have emerged since 1980, within the context of the achievements of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy.

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Introduction: Between Independence and Social Revolution: Ireland and Irish Drama 1922-1958

> The most important author of the contemporary Irish canon is T.K. Whitaker ... and its seminal work is his *First Programme of Economic Expansion* ...
>
> --Fintan OToole, "Island of Saints and Silicon," 1988

A new era in Ireland's history, and in the history of Irish drama, began in 1958 with the publication of the government White Paper *Economic Development*. The ensuing five years, which saw its recommendations implemented in the form of the First Programme for Economic Expansion of 1959 and its successor, the Second Programme of 1963, have been described by Irish cultural historian Terence Brown as "almost legendary years in Irish self-understanding. Irishmen and women believe now, as they believed then, that those five years represented a major turning point in Irish fortunes....the period when a new Ireland began to come to life" (*Ireland* 185).[1] The Fianna Fáil government's new direction, initiated by Department of Finance secretary T.K. Whitaker and Prime Minister Sean Lemass, came as a belated and somewhat desperate response to years of economic stagnation and crisis. The government's radical changes in economic policy, which included the elimination of prohibitive tariff barriers, massive government investment in industry, and the courting of foreign investors, in many respects represented a tacit acknowledgement of the failure of the nationalist, isolationist, and to a large degree anti-industrialist course charted by Irish governments of the previous decades. The effects of the First Programme were spectacular, sudden, and far-reaching: the economy grew at a rate that surpassed Whitaker's expectations (Brown, *Ireland* 186), and with this growth the processes of industrialization and urbanization already at work in Ireland accelerated rapidly. The Whitaker/Lemass reforms, then, acted as a catalyst, initiating the transformation of Ireland's inward-looking and traditional society to one which is postmodern and cosmopolitan,[2] a process still in transition at the present day.

The theatre is one of many sites where the profound changes that have taken place in Irish culture and society subsequent to 1959 have been reflected and analyzed. Because of the public and participatory nature of the medium, and in part because of the political origins and history of the native theatre movement in Ireland, as well as its popular success, the Irish theatre has served as a particularly responsive and illuminating register of the changing state of Ireland. Irish drama has been transformed fundamentally as Ireland itself has to a considerable extent broken free of the unrelenting self-absorption which was the national by-product of years of self-imposed isolation. This study will examine how Irish drama of the last thirty-five years has responded to the political, social, and cultural upheaval Ireland has experienced over this time. In particular, it will explore how five of the leading Irish dramatists of this period, John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Thomas Kilroy, in reacting to a changing social and political landscape, have broken with tradition by presenting increasingly complex and

critical depictions of Ireland and Irish nationalism in their works. It will also suggest that in doing so these playwrights have turned to unconventional and innovative dramatic forms with growing frequency. In order to discuss how the traditional has been recast in contemporary Irish theatre, however, it is first necessary to examine the state of Irish drama, and of Irish culture and society, in the years leading up to the Whitaker/Lemass reforms.

The consensus among critics of Irish drama is that throughout the 1940s and most of the 1950s, the Irish theatre, like the Irish economy, was moribund. During this time the once vital and innovative Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, was engaged, in the words of D.E.S. Maxwell, in a process of "mechanical self-duplication" (*Irish Drama* 4). committed to "a self-perpetuating repertoire of realist plays" (158). Typically these were comedies and dramas about Irish peasants, set in rural Ireland and performed according to what Denis Donoghue has called "the famous Abbey 'style'" (qtd. in Hogan, *Irish Renaissance* 9), a type of broad acting and direction that "reduce[d] all plays to a common denominator of farcical comedy" (Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 136). The blame for this state of affairs lay largely with the Abbey Board of Directors, and particularly managing director Ernest Blythe, who, Maxwell has suggested, apparently felt "no pressure to do more than satisfy large, popular audiences with undemanding entertainment, casually produced" (136). According to Anthony Roche, "Under Blythe's rule, the emphasis at the Abbey was transferred from the artistic quality of the plays to the degree of their Irishness" (*Irish Drama* 39). Plays were prized for their naturalistic detail, and actors for their ability to deliver "the requisite Peasant Quality" (Roche, *Irish Drama* 40) in their performances.

In this respect, Blythe's term saw the culmination of a trend established early in the history of the native Irish theatre, one which saw naturalism become its distinctive mode and Irish rural life its predominant subject. Despite Yeats's attempts to foster a poetic, avant-garde drama in Ireland, and despite his accomplishments in the genre, few dramatists followed in his path. Nor, for the most part, did they emulate the heightened, poetic realism of Synge, or the equally verbally extravagant urban tenement dramas of O'Casey. Instead, it was playwrights such as Padraic Colum, T.C. Murray, George Shiels, and Lennox Robinson, authors primarily of simple, workmanlike, painstakingly naturalistic comedies and tragedies of rural Ireland, whose works were most widely emulated by other Irish dramatists and came to best define and typify the "Abbey play."

Many explanations have been offered for the primacy of naturalism in the Irish theatre. David McKenna has pointed to the lack of a native theatre tradition in Ireland prior to the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, asserting that in Ireland, unlike in the rest of Europe, theatrical naturalism "was simply the logical consequence of inexperience," the product of a people "still only children in terms of theatrical development" (90). Indeed, the novice dramatist would almost certainly have found the works of Colum, Murray, Shiels, and Robinson more readily comprehensible, and infinitely more reproducible, than those of Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey. Similarly, the works of the naturalists would have been a much more accessible and less daunting alternative for emerging theatre companies to act and stage. Brown has suggested that this

was another reason for the predominance of naturalistic plays on Irish stages, particularly given the burgeoning popularity of amateur theatre in Ireland in the 1930s and 40s:

> During the war years especially (with their markedly restricted social opportunities), this movement amounted almost to an obsession. And it was 'the Abbey play', with its recognizable domestic regimes, its familial concerns and local vision, which proved most readily assimilable to the parish halls and school rooms of provincial Ireland. ("Counter-Revival: Drama" 173)

Moreover, since the amateur theatre provided the training ground for those who would later act and write for the Abbey as professionals, the "Abbey style" naturalistic play became the self-perpetuating staple of the Irish dramatic canon.

Logistical considerations aside, naturalism's success and predominance in Ireland probably owed as much to the social and political landscape from which it sprang. The impetus behind the formation of the first truly Irish theatre in Ireland, the Irish Literary Theatre, was unabashedly nationalistic. Like other nationalist cultural organizations which were offshoots of the Revival, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (founded in 1885) and the Gaelic League (founded in 1893), the Literary Theatre was envisioned as a platform for the promotion of Ireland's distinct (that is, non-English) identity, and, therefore, as a site of resistance to English colonial rule. On the stage these nationalist politics were dramatized in a variety of forms: mythological plays which sought to construct a heroic Irish past and to appropriate Irish myth for the purposes of the present political struggle: thinly-veiled nationalist propaganda plays like Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902); plays in Irish such as Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSugain* (1901); and naturalistic plays which showed Irish theatre audiences, accustomed to foreign plays performed mainly by English actors and companies, what they had never seen before--their own lives in minutest detail. By presenting Ireland with its own image, the naturalists not only fostered a politically empowering sense of national identity, but also, on the level of the national psyche, appealed to the desire for the exploration of an Irish communal heritage. Hugh Leonard has suggested that such a mentality was the legacy of Ireland's colonial past, and that it offered fertile ground for the growth of naturalism in the theatre:

> As a country unsure of its identity for very long, it is like a man who rejoices to see his name and photograph in the newspapers as proof that he really exists. And so we have taken delight in seeing ourselves in all our Irishness on the stage, in seeing the representation of our way of life, our customs, history, folklore, and institutions. ("Drama" 78)[3]

Given the representational absence that naturalism filled, as well as the nationalist politics it embodied, it hardly seems surprising that it emerged as the dominant mode of Irish theatre during the period of the drive for independence. Nor is it surprising that it remained so after independence was finally achieved in 1922: as the political status of the nation was transformed, the impetus towards naturalism was renewed as dramatists began the task of representing the realities of the new Free State to its citizens. This new state was not markedly different from the old one in terms of its institutional infrastructure. Ideologically, however, it institutionalized the ethos of a particularly conservative wing of

the nationalist movement, initiating changes in Irish society that were played out over succeeding decades.

Luke Gibbons has remarked that "In retrospect, these decades have come to be seen as the Irish version of the Dark Ages, a period in which the enclosure of Irish culture, so avidly sought by advanced nationalists since the beginning of the Revival, was finally achieved" ("Constructing the Canon" 954). The nationalist agendas of successive Free State governments ushered in a deeply conservative era, one which saw Irish nationalism and culture defined in progressively narrower and more restrictive terms as diversity and dissent were weeded out, both legislatively and covertly. In the arts, and particularly in the theatre, the result was monotony of form and complacency of subject matter. The parochial naturalist drama was reinscribed as the distinctive form of Irish theatre as Ireland withdrew from the rest of the world and became immersed in itself.

This retreat was in many ways the legacy of colonialism and religious retrenchment, a nationalist attempt to recover or recreate prelapsarian (that is, pre-colonial) Ireland. As Brown has noted, the Irish Ireland movement believed that Ireland had historically been sheltered from external influences prior to colonization (*Ireland* 54). According to the movement's logic, recapturing the essential Ireland therefore necessitated a return to isolationism. It also stood to reason that as colonizer and corrupter of Irish essence, England and all things English were demonized, while those elements of Irish culture and society deemed distinctly non-English were valorized. One of these was Catholicism, in Ireland's case a strongly Jansenistic strain which preached the evils of industrialization and loosening sexual mores. The Church's desire to keep the modern world at bay accorded well with the nationalist belief that another of Ireland's essential qualities was its rural, agriculturally-centred society and economy (unlike urban, industrial England). Church and state thus conspired, particularly overtly upon the accession of the Fianna Fáil government of Eamon De Valera in 1932. to shut Ireland's doors to contaminating outside influences and to hinder the forces of industry and liberalization at home.

The nationalist agenda which would define the new state was embarked upon much sooner, however. In 1925, two years after independence, the ruling Cumann na nGaedheal party announced its plans to "Gaelicize" the Irish educational system (Brown. *Ireland* 39), the first step in a prolonged, and ultimately unsuccessful, plan to revive the Irish language. The education system was also challenged by Irish Ireland critics, particularly Daniel Corkery, Professor of English Literature at University College Cork and, in the words of David Cairns and Shaun Richards, "effective laureate of the new State" (124). In highly influential works such as *The Hidden Ireland* and *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Corkery promulgated restrictive definitions of Irish identity and Irish literature to deny the Irishness of Anglo-Irish writers such as Synge. and to propound his rather tenuous theories about the historical continuity of "true" Irish literature (Cairns and Richards 127).

Even as Corkery was constricting the canon of Irish literature and the definition of Irish identity, other elements in the Irish Ireland movement turned their attention to other forms of cultural protectionism, often with the active support of the Church. Cairns and

Richards have suggested that governmental "submission to theocracy" led to the passage of three key pieces of legislation of the 1920s: the Censorship of Film Act (1923), the legislation outlawing divorce (1925), and the Censorship of Publications Act (1929). The clear subtext of a 1927 joint pastoral of the Irish hierarchy which denounced "the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress" was that foreign influences were to blame for these sinful trends, which, the document continued, "tend to destroy the virtues characteristic of our race" (qtd. in Brown, *Ireland* 33).[4] Brown has noted that "Much of the demand for the [Censorship] bill was orchestrated not by members of the political parties," but by members of two prominent Church organizations, the Irish Vigilance Association and the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, indicating that the Church viewed the bill as one means of stemming the flow of corrupting materials. Puritanical xenophobia was a "prevailing note" in the proclamations of supporters of the bill, who believed that as "all evil in literary and journalistic matters derived from abroad, particularly from England," it became "the business of an Irish legislature to protect Irish life from the impure external influences and to help build up a healthy, clean-minded Irish Catholic civilization" (Brown, *Ireland* 55). The religious proponents of censorship clearly had much in common with cultural protectionists such as Corkery. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Censorship of Publications Act, which in subsequent years was enforced overzealously to the detriment of the reading public and the careers of numerous Irish writers alike, received the unconditional support of Irish Ireland (Brown, *Ireland* 58).

The alliance of Church and state in Ireland reached its apogee during the extended term (1932-48) of the devoutly Catholic Fianna Fáil Prime Minister Eamon De Valera, who identified Ireland first and foremost as "a Catholic nation" (qtd. in Brown, *Ireland* 117). On taking office, his government courted Church favour by moving to ensure that "public life, state occasions, the opening of factories, new housing estates, and the like should be blessed by an official clerical presence." It also passed a series of laws to uphold its vision of Catholic morality, taxing imported newspapers in 1933 and banning trade in artificial contraceptives in 1935 (Brown, *Ireland* 116). The new Irish Constitution of 1937, authored primarily by De Valera in close consultation with the Church (Bew 209), further enshrined De Valera's conception of the Church's centrality to the state, outlawing divorce, protecting the Catholic educational system, and affirming in one clause "the special position of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of [Ireland's] citizens" (Brown, *Ireland* 126).

De Valera's devotion to a specifically Catholic brand of nationalism influenced his economic and foreign policy as well. His asceticism led him to believe that Ireland's poverty and lack of industry imbued the nation with a form of moral virtue, and that consequently, as he once professed on national radio, Ireland's duty was to help "'to save Western Civilization' from the scourge of materialism" (qtd. in Brown, *Ireland* 31). The anti-industrial (and therefore anti-urban) stance implicit to this declaration of Ireland's economic and moral purity and distinctiveness indicates the agenda pursued by the De Valera government. In its attempt to create a new Ireland according to its conceptions of

Irish essence, its goal became, in Brown's words, to make of Ireland "a genuinely independent, self-sufficient rural republic" (*Ireland* 110). As one of its first initiatives towards intended economic self-sufficiency, the government raised tariffs, sparking a trade war with Britain which heightened support for protectionism at home. At the same time, it increased aid to domestic industry, but always with the intention of fostering "rural renewal based on small farm life" rather than "any absorption of the country into industrial Europe" (Brown, *Ireland* 112).

Ireland's withdrawal from the global economy, and from the international community in general, was emphasized when, to widespread national support but condemnation from abroad, De Valera declared Ireland neutral during World War Two. Neutrality became a rallying point in Ireland, a catalyst for celebration of the nation's newly-acquired powers of self-determination (Brown, *Ireland* 132). The level of popular support for the policy accentuated how wholeheartedly official nationalist[5] ideology had been embraced by the populace. That De Valera's most famous statement of his vision for the nation was made at the height of the fighting in Europe is similarly revealing. In a St. Patrick's day radio address to the nation in 1943, he neatly summarized the values he and his government embodied in the process of describing "the Ireland which we dreamed of." This Ireland, he declared, was

> the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age. (748)

In its obliviousness to the horrific events occurring elsewhere in Europe, this passage typifies Ireland's isolation and self-absorption during the war years. Even more significantly, it demonstrates how fully the idealized pastoral archetypes of Irish essence subscribed to and promulgated by nationalists since the Revival had been politically appropriated and legitimized. When considered in this political, social, and cultural context, it does not seem unusual that so many Irish plays of the twenties, thirties, and forties valorized many of the same essentialist definitions of Ireland and Irishness. Nor is it surprising that these plays are so overwhelmingly similar in form, given the climate created during these years by nationalist educational reforms, censorship, the burgeoning influence of the Church, and Fianna Fáil's economic and foreign policies. In a culture suffused by institutionalized nationalist ideology, in which external influences were shut out and the forms and range of permissible expression increasingly restricted, naturalistic dramas of rural Ireland became the norm.

As reflections of the influence of coercive ideological pressures, the images of Ireland presented in these plays were often fanciful and inaccurate. As Fintan O'Toole has suggested, although the Irish Literary Revival "helped to create and sustain an image of rural Ireland as an ideal," the movement itself was "created in a metropolitan context for a metropolitan audience" ("Going West" 654-55). According to O'Toole, even early in its

history the Abbey "was not [reflecting] Irish reality" in its peasant plays, but perpetuating "an artificial literary creation," as evident in the fact that the Abbey actors, mainly Dublin natives, had to be trained to act like peasants, often by drawing on their memories of their ancestors: "In presenting revolutionary new plays, the Abbey players were already presenting an image of their own collective past, already in a sense disowning the present" ("Going West" 655). In order to further the anti-colonialist struggle by constructing Ireland as the antithesis of England, urban Ireland was necessarily ignored and naturalism enlisted "to convince an urban Irish audience ... that rural life was not just real but super-real, the essence of Irish life, the Real Ireland" (O'Toole, "New Wave"). While the city was denied representation almost entirely, as Brown has indicated, the depiction of rural life in literature and drama of the period was also highly selective:

> When Irish writers turned to rural Ireland to discern there an unsullied tradition they naturally highlighted those aspects of that life which suggested an undying continuity, an imperviousness to change, an almost hermetic stasis that transcended history. In so doing they were popularizing a notion of tradition that ignored the degree to which Irish rural life by the early twentieth century was as involved with the processes of history and social change as any other. (*Ireland* 68)

A compelling case can be made that the essentialist pastoral archetypes of Irish identity invoked and reinscribed by nationalists in politics and in literature were not only misrepresentative and illusory, but also debilitating in their impact on the nation as a whole. Two of the major casualties of the nationalist quest for essence and self-sufficiency were personal freedoms and economic prosperity. In a society gradually bowing to theocracy, little opportunity existed for individual expression, particularly of difference or dissent, and the enforcement of orthodoxy was frequently taken to extremes. As one example, Brown cites a well-publicized 1930 case in which the Mayo Library Committee rejected the appointment of a county librarian solely because the successful candidate was a Protestant (*Ireland* 115). While such repressions proliferated, the economy crumbled. Emigration remained high, and rose even further as the result of an economic downturn during the war years. In the face of such evidence, Brown notes, committed nationalists could sustain the "idealism" which inspired the drive for self-sufficiency "only by ignoring the dismal facts of emigration, economic stagnation, individual inhibition, and lack of fulfilling opportunity" (*Ireland* 118-19).

Despite these bleak social and economic conditions, a surprisingly small number of voices were raised in protest, and few dramatists ranked among the dissenters. As Brown has argued, "the 1940s and 1950s in Ireland had been years when Irish drama, despite some signs of life, had been conventional to a degree that even the realistic novel and short story had not been" (*Ireland* 233-34). While this conservatism was in large part a product of the social climate of the era, the particularly pronounced complacency of Irish theatre probably also had much to do with the material conditions which determined how drama was produced in Ireland, especially at the Abbey Theatre. The "Abbey style" developed during these years effectively blunted the edge of any politically provocative drama. In a well-publicized 1947 incident, Valentine Iremonger and Roger McHugh

walked out of the theatre during a production of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* which subordinated much of the work's tragedy in the interest of easy laughs. Before leaving, the two proclaimed before the audience their disgust with the "utter incompetence of the present directorate's artistic policy" based on "what they did to O'Casey's masterpiece tonight" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 136).

As Maxwell indicates, "Iremonger's complaint identifies the playing, not the plays" (*Irish Drama* 136), but it is also clear that from early in its history the Abbey's choice of repertoire followed a conservative mandate which stifled dissent and innovation. After offended nationalists rioted during the initial runs of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 and *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926, the Abbey rejected a number of plays, since acclaimed, which challenged the boundaries of convention in terms of subject matter and style: Austin Clarke's unusual and mildly salacious verse drama *The Hunger Demon* in 1927; O'Casey's expressionist anti-war play *The Silver Tassie* in 1928; and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!*, an expressionist satire of Irish politics and society, in 1929. While the Abbey had at least tenuous grounds for refusing some of the plays it was offered,[6] its motives for rejecting these three are much less easy to fathom or justify, and probably had more to do with ideology and personalities (Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 79). Whatever the reasons, the series of rejections indicated that despite its revolutionary origins, in the post-independence era the Abbey was increasingly becoming yet another of the forces of orthodoxy in Irish society.

Apart from their symbolic significance, the rejections had other far-ranging consequences. Not the least of these was the alienation of O'Casey, the most trenchant and vociferous critic of Irish society among Irish dramatists, which marginalized dissent even further. O'Casey's self-imposed exile from Ireland made it possible for Irish audiences to view the scathing depictions of Irish puritanism found in his late plays *Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy* and *The Bishop's Bonfire* as the bitter ravings of an outsider. Micheál Ó hAodha has observed that these works were all too often and too easily "nonchalantly dismissed as an old man's petulant joke" (134).

Moreover, as Ireland's subsidized (as of 1925) National Theatre, the Abbey's artistic policy effectively enshrined parochial naturalistic drama as the Irish theatre's dominant form. While the Dublin Drama League, created in 1919, and its successor, the Gate Theatre, founded in 1928, offered forums for alternative forms of drama--classics from the international theatre and experimental plays by Irish dramatists--neither of these companies (or any of the other smaller theatres which sprang up in later years, such as Austin Clarke's Lyric Theatre Company) ever posed a serious challenge to the Abbey's aesthetic hegemony. The Dublin Drama League was in thrall to the Abbey throughout its existence, grudgingly allowed to stage its productions in the theatre on the two nights per week that the Abbey was dark, and dependent on members of the Abbey company for its players and directors (Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 92). Although the Drama League's mandate was to stage foreign plays to offer an alternative to the Abbey's parochial fare ("to open up the door and let us out of our prison," in the words of its founder, Lennox Robinson), the company's manifesto, written by Robinson, ultimately seeks to make the case for cosmopolitanism by appealing to nationalist sentiments: "Seeing foreign plays will not

divorce our minds from Ireland ... but brought into touch with other minds who have different values of life, suddenly we shall discover the rich material that lies to our hand in Ireland" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 91-92). Thus, even when looking abroad, the Irish dramatist's eyes were expected to remain resolutely fixed on home.

The Gate was (and has remained) a more autonomous and substantive alternative to the Abbey. In addition to foreign plays, the Gate produced plays rejected by the Abbey (including *The Hunger Demon* and *The Old Lady Says No!*), as well as other original work by Irish dramatists, frequently non-naturalistic in style. The Gate was plagued by poor attendance figures, financial difficulties, and infighting for many years, however, and never threatened the Abbey's reputation as Ireland's leading theatre. Although at times the Abbey experienced similar problems, as Maxwell has suggested, "it was still to the Abbey that audiences looked ... for new Irish playwrights" (*Irish Drama* 133). Consequently, it was the Abbey's increasingly cautious and monotonous fare that continued to define Irish drama, and to provide models for aspiring Irish playwrights.

Even though he had long been dissociated from the day to day workings of the theatre, the death of Yeats in 1939, coupled with the accession of Blythe to the position of managing director two years later, symbolized the passing of an era in the Abbey's history and the institutionalization of the conservative course the theatre had charted in preceding years. That the Abbey continued to enjoy popular success during this time indicates, however, that its audiences generally approved of its orientation and product. As Christopher Murray has suggested, for Irish dramatists and audiences, "In the 1940s and 1950s society was mere background, something to be taken for granted like the weather" ("Irish Drama" 299). While some mainstream plays of the period did confront serious social problems, few did so directly or from an unflinchingly oppositional position. Brown has observed that those plays which "attempted an Ibsen-like social critique" generally did so in "a fashion that seemed to satisfy audiences rather than to disturb them" ("Counter-Revival: Drama" 173). Thus, these plays demonstrate "an underlying complacency shared by playwrights and audience alike that the society depicted, despite the frequent grotesqueries of action they presented, was fundamentally sound" (Brown, *Ireland* 244).

The plays of several leading dramatists of the Free State era, including T.C. Murray, George Shiels, Paul Vincent Carroll, and Lennox Robinson, provide illuminating examples of the type of complacency Brown identifies. Murray's *Aftermath*, first performed at the Abbey in 1922, is an early example of the genre Hugh Leonard has branded "the form of parish-pump Ibsenism ... encouraged by the Abbey Theatre" ("Drama" 80). The play can be viewed as an ambitious but flawed attack on the restrictive conventions which had governed marriage and landholding in rural Ireland since the Famine. Murray's protagonist, Myles O'Regan, is a sensitive, poetic, Dublin-educated schoolmaster who has returned to the home of his grasping, hard-headed mother in his native Irish village. Myles is in love with the equally sensitive and aptly-named Grace Sheridan, the village's Dublin-born schoolmistress, but after she is threatened by Mrs. O'Regan, Grace rejects Myles to marry the town doctor. Out of spite and a desire for "revenge" (85) Myles weds Mary Hogan, the practical and land-rich but highly unsuitable

local girl his mother has chosen for him, and becomes a farmer. After years of stultifying domestic misery, Myles, like Nora Helmer in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, finally decides he must heed the "Voice crying to me all hours 'Go! Go!'" (99) and deserts wife and mother to escape to freedom.

While *Aftermath* is in some respects a revealing exposé of the destructive and enervating nature of the bourgeois values embodied by Mrs. O'Regan, Murray ultimately sidesteps the central issue which the play raises. In Murray's hands Grace's jilting of Myles seems unmotivated and unreasonable, certainly less the consequence of Mrs. O'Regan's threats than simply of Grace's capricious sudden resolve to seek the wealth and security the doctor offers her. Grace virtually replaces Mrs. O'Regan as the villain of the play, and thus Myles is depicted as less the victim of a restrictive social structure than of a fickle woman. Consequently, what might have been a probing dissection of a social system which rewarded greed and hypocrisy and crushed individual freedoms becomes. instead, a melodramatic domestic tragedy. It does not help that both Myles and Grace are depicted as flighty, self-absorbed, and condescending, in contrast to the severe but in many ways admirably pragmatic and practical Mrs. O'Regan, Dr. Manning, and Mary Hogan. Murray evidently felt too much sympathy for, or affinity with, those he initially set out to confront to allow him to sustain a more sweeping indictment of the debilitating orthodoxies of rural life. Moreover, he may have felt some understandable apprehension about challenging a value system which had held hegemonic status in the nation as a whole for decades (not least among the very audiences he was writing for), and which was now about to be politically institutionalized and legitimized.

Like *Aftermath*, George Shiels' *The New Gossoon* interrogates the social codes which presided over rural Irish life, but in this case within the framework of comedy. First performed at the Abbey in 1930, *The New Gossoon* is also clearly the product of a later period than *Aftermath*. Shiels' comedy depicts an Ireland in the process of post-independence consolidation, a nation struggling to institutionalize traditionalism in the face of modernity. In the play this tension is dramatized in the form of generational conflict. Ellen Cary, a hard-working, old-fashioned widow farm wife, is struggling to tame her son Luke, the "gossoon" (foolish layabout) of the play's title. Ellen wishes to see Luke settled on the farm with a sensible wife, but Luke much prefers carousing about the countryside on the motorcycle he purchased by surreptitiously selling Ellen's lambs. While Luke represents the younger generation and the forces of change and progress in the play, Shiels' spokesman for the traditional values of the older generation is Luke's Uncle Peter, who extols the virtue of work and rails against modernization in terms which not only closely echo the Irish Catholic hierarchy's 1927 joint pastoral, but also presage the rhetoric of De Valera: "This country is going to hell at a hundred miles an hour! Petrol and pictures and politics and jazz and doles and buses and bare legs and all sorts of foreign rascalities. You and I were content to toil and moil for a living, but the new breed wants to be well paid, well fed, and idle" (261-62). Luke counterpoints Uncle Peter's glorification of the land by arguing that "All that stuff about the young Irishman's passion for the red soil is bunk" (242), and laments that the puritanical isolationist nationalism his uncle espouses has become the guiding ideology of the nation:

> He was damned hard up for a cause that fought and died for this country.... It's an ideal country for growing old men. They can live on a diet of legends about Brian Boru.... Everything in this country is a mortal sin. It's a mortal sin to keep a greyhound, or a motor-bike; it's a mortal sin to go to a dance, or speak to a girl after sunset.... [but] the most deadly sin of all is not to have a long, white beard. (243)

As in this passage, Shiels often allows Luke to be a forceful and incisive critic of Irish society. Moreover, the playwright seems to side with his younger characters in the play's battle of the generations: the older characters are irredeemably staid and often hypocritical and conniving, while the young, although muddle-headed, are essentially harmless and sympathetic. Nevertheless, Shiels opts for a conventional comic resolution which restores the traditional social order: Ellen's hopes are realized as Luke agrees to marry Sally Hamil, once a "gossoon" herself, but now a practical, sensible girl who vows to transform Luke into a respectable and hard-working farmer. Luke's anarchic energy is harnessed and redirected towards furthering the material goals of his conservative society. That this turn of events is rendered seemingly unironically suggests that like Murray. Shiels was unwilling to press his criticisms too far: the structure of *The New Gossoon* allowed him to gently chide Irish society's puritanical excesses while ultimately reasserting the validity of its values.

As compared with Shiels, Paul Vincent Carroll was a much more vociferous and less conciliatory critic of Irish society. In his dramas Carroll raged against Irish puritanism and narrow-mindedness with a ferocity that at times rivalled O'Casey's, but only rarely. Although he once professed to be "as Irish as a terrier and with as sharp a bite" (qtd. in Hogan, *Irish Renaissance* 52), Carroll's works are those of a dramatist who. as Robert Hogan has argued, was "by turns an astringent critic and an abashed conformist" (*Irish Renaissance* 52). Often, as in his 1939 drama *The White Steed*, Carroll's duality and inconsistency as a social critic become manifestly evident.

The White Steed was first performed in New York after being rejected by the Abbey, almost certainly because its subject matter was deemed potentially too controversial. The play is set in an Irish village whose kindly and popular Canon, Matt Lavelle, has been paralyzed by a stroke. His replacement, the despotic Father Shaughnessy, is a dour, self-proclaimed guardian of right who seizes on the Canon's illness as an opportunity to impose his brand of moral absolutism on the town. Shaughnessy organizes an enthusiastic and masochistic band of Gaelic revivalists and social climbers into a local "Vigilance Committee," a moral vigilante squad assigned to ferret out and punish sin in its many forms. According to Shaughnessy, these include drinking, "kissin' on the roads," "bad dancin'" and "mixin' with Protestants" (10). Along with this Jansenistic brand of Catholicism, Shaughnessy and the Vigilance Committee preach a xenophobic nationalism that labels England "a pagan land" (53), their goal being the creation of "a purely Catholic State" (34) in which a distinction between civil law and religious law no longer exists.

Shaughnessy's zealots are opposed by an idealistic few: Canon Lavelle; Denis Dillon, the local schoolmaster; Nora Fintry, whom Shaughnessy has fired from her job at

the library for her supposed moral failings (in a notable parallel to the 1930 Mayo case): and Inspector Toomey of the Gardai, ex-freedom fighter who vows to uphold "the secular independence I shot men down for ... and blew lorries of British soldiers sky-high for" (96). Events come to a head when Toomey refuses to yield to the authority of the Vigilance Committee and arrests some of its members for unlawful vigilante actions. The victory of the anti-Shaughnessy forces is sealed when Canon Lavelle appears, suddenly miraculously restored to health, to chastize and rout the remainder of the Vigilance Committee mob.

This resolution seems forced and patently unrealistic, however. Carroll seems to suggest that moderate voices within the Catholic Church and the state could be called upon to prevent the imposition of a repressive conservative social order at a time when such moderates were in short supply. If anything, the 1937 Constitution and the burgeoning influence of the Catholic Truth Society and the Irish Vigilance Association (the obvious inspirations for Carroll's "Vigilance Committee"), offered proof that Ireland was edging further towards theocracy. That *The White Steed*'s happy ending is attained through the agency of a benevolent priest, whose heroic actions are only made possible as the result of a rather improbable *deus ex machina*, indicates that Carroll's subversive imagination had rather strictly circumscribed limits. Ironically, despite its outwardly anti-clerical overtones, the play proves that Carroll was very much in thrall to his Catholic upbringing. Indeed, despite professing that he had a "rebel heart" (qtd. in Hogan, *Irish Renaissance* 63), Carroll also once admitted that "in case you think I'm a heretic and an infidel, I'm a good Catholic" (qtd. in Hogan, *Irish Renaissance* 55). Like those of Murray and Shiels, therefore, Carroll's attempts to offer oppositional social criticism in his plays were compromised by his fundamental complicity with his society and his inability to gain sufficient critical distance from it.

The consummate example of the complacency of the drama of the Free State years, however, is perhaps Lennox Robinson's *Drama at Inish*, which, as Brown has argued, tacitly questions the need for socially and politically engaging theatre in Ireland altogether ("Counter-Revival" 174). First performed at the Abbey in 1933, the play depicts the farcical and near-tragic consequences of the summer season visit of a troupe of actors to the resort town of Inish. The leader of the troupe, the histrionic Hector de la Mare, approaches theatre with evangelical zeal, declaring it "a tremendous mission where the pulpit is the stage and the great dramatists preach the sermons" (210). Since, according to Hector, the aim of theatre is to "revolutionize some person's soul" (210) by revealing the despair and depravity that lie hidden beneath the surface of everyday life, the players' repertoire consists entirely of weighty Russian and Scandinavian problem plays and tragedies. The people of Inish prove all too susceptible to the intended message of this lugubrious fare: the town, previously quiet and unremarkable, becomes a veritable sink of iniquity as its citizens' perceptions of reality are altered by the plays they see night after night. As they begin to fancy themselves characters in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov, and Tolstoy, the villagers fall into profound depths of melancholy; they take to drink, theft, and arson, plot murders, and attempt suicide. Fortunately, the players are

recognized as the source of the trouble before any serious harm is done, and are hastily sent packing, to be replaced by a circus.

The play's implicit message is that artists must bear moral responsibility for the effects of their work, and that art can be a dangerous thing. Brown has argued persuasively that in *Drama at Inish* Robinson affirms that "provincial Irish life does not need its Ibsens or Chekhovs" ("Counter-Revival" 174). This interpretation of the play has been echoed by Maxwell, who regards the play as Robinson's self-mocking repudiation of the "parish-pump Ibsenism" which in later life he acknowledged as the characteristic form of his own early works and those of peers like Murray: "We were very young and we shrunk from nothing. We knew Ibsen and the plays of the Lancashire school, we showed our people as robbers and murderers, guilty of arson, steeped in trickery and jobbery" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 72). In *Drama at Inish* Robinson parodies the dramas of this genre, and in doing so seems to cast aspersions not only on social drama as a genre, but also, more significantly, on the notion that Irish society was flawed in any way that justified dramatic commentary. In its implicit assertion of the fundamental soundness of Irish life, Robinson's play is, in Brown's words, "a suavely managed endorsement of a conservative society's self-satisfaction" ("Counter-Revival: Drama" 174). In this respect *Drama at Inish*, like *Aftermath*, *The New Gossoon*, and *The White Steed*, is representative of the prevailing tone of many of the Irish plays produced in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties.

By the 1950s, however, the form of the cautious and self-congratulatory "Abbey-style" drama was not only exhausted, but also increasingly incapable of accurately representing the changing face and mood of the nation. As it became clear that three decades of official nationalism had failed to deliver economic prosperity, and as modernization progressed inexorably despite the most concerted efforts of traditionalists to keep it at bay, tensions and rifts began to develop which threatened the facade of societal seamlessness promulgated by official nationalism. A new Ireland was clearly in the making, one which demanded new dramatic forms and new dramatists to adequately articulate and examine its state of flux on the stage.

Seamus Deane has argued that Irish nationalism "was reduced in this century to a caricature of itself because it could not reconcile its conservative cultural vision of itself with the economic demands of modernisation" ("Remembering" 88). According to Liam de Paor, the most obvious sign of this failure, and consequently the greatest single cause of official nationalism's political downfall, was "the simple failure to provide employment and the consequent scandal of mass emigration" (23). Between 1945 and 1961, 500,000 people left Ireland to seek their fortunes elsewhere (Cairns and Richards 139), an overwhelming majority of them from rural areas. The high emigration figures offered tangible proof that many young Irishmen and women had not only given up hope of ever finding a satisfactory living at home, but had also grown steadily more dissatisfied with the conditions of rural life in general, and no longer felt a commitment to the land. A 1956 government report on the emigration crisis noted "the unanimity of the views presented to us in evidence on the relative loneliness, dullness and generally unattractive nature of life in many parts of rural Ireland at present, compared with the pattern of life in

urban centres and with that in easily accessible places outside the country" (Brown, *Ireland* 142). In part, the report blamed the personal testimonies of successful emigrants for allowing rural dwellers insight into "the contrast between their way of life and that in other countries, especially in urban centres" (Brown, *Ireland* 142). Another source of such information, the report's authors claimed, was the media, in particular "the cinema and the radio" (Brown, *Ireland* 142). These media, as well as "mass circulation periodicals," Brown has remarked, were responsible for "bringing Ireland into contact ... with the social forms of advanced capitalist consumer societies, thereby raising Irish expectations and creating demand for a new economic order" (*Ireland* 173). Thus, as de Paor has suggested, modern technology undermined successive official attempts to shut Ireland off from the outside world, driving another nail into the coffin of De Valerian nationalist ideology:

> Looking back, we can now see that de Valera's "Ireland that we dream of" was quite impossible of fulfilment, because the world's technological and other revolutions simply will not permit the necessary measure of isolation. It is not possible to build a wall ... around Ireland and to maintain here a kind of frugal republican virtue, while the outside world indulges in an orgy of greedy affluence. (23)

In 1957, in the face of a mounting social and economic crisis, John Kelleher "described Ireland as a society imploding on 'a central vacuity'" (qtd. in Cairns and Richards 139). In Brown's words, "Ideologically the fires of economic nationalism and the quest for cultural self-sufficiency were waning, but as yet they had not been replaced by a coherent set of new values" (*Ireland* 170). In the wake of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms, this absence was filled by "consumerist values" (Brown, *Ireland* 199) as Irish society embarked on a wholesale pursuit of the "greedy affluence" which, according to de Paor, it had envied from afar. The economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, spurred by the dismantling of tariff barriers, widespread investment by foreign multinationals, government incentives to industry, and EEC membership (as of 1973), ushered in a new era of what Brown has referred to as "ostentatious consumption" in Ireland (*Ireland* 200). Economic growth and prosperity had other predictable effects: with industrialization more people migrated from rural areas to the cities, particularly Dublin, a demographic shift reinforced by the fact that in the new economy small farms had become increasingly untenable. Thus, as Brown has noted, "a way of life that had once been extolled as the authentic base upon which the nation securely rested was no longer considered viable" (*Ireland* 202). Urbanization and the emergence of a more stratified class system also led to inevitable problems: urban poverty and overcrowding, and an upsurge in crime and drug abuse, particularly during the economic downturn of the 1980s which ended the boom years and precipitated a renewed wave of emigration. In terms of its values and material conditions, then, as Brown observed late in the decade, the Ireland of the 1970s bore little resemblance to the Ireland of De Valera:

> That ebullient, vigorous, modernizing society in quest of affluence and success, where real opportunities exist for the adventurous and energetic, a society disinclined to view poverty as anything but self-inflicted, brash, ostentatious, and

> not a little callous, is of course a far cry from the Ireland dreamed of at independence and sought throughout the austere years of Mr. de Valera's stern premiership. (*Ireland* 203)

This statement emphasizes the extent to which bourgeois American-style capitalism displaced anti-materialistic asceticism as the nation's official ethos. Various explanations have been offered for the relative ease with which the fundamental principles of official Irish nationalism were overturned, transforming the nation seemingly overnight from isolationist to outward-looking. Commentators have pointed to the abstruse nature of the economic debate surrounding the changes (Cairns and Richards 140), the emergence of a new generation of leaders born after independence, and the influence of the predominantly British and American programming received via the new medium of television (the BBC had reached eastern Ireland since 1952, and the national Irish network, RTE, began broadcasting in 1962) (Gibbons, "Challenging the Canon" 561; Brown, *Ireland* 188). A climate conducive to change was also created within Ireland in the 1960s and 70s by Vatican II, which initiated a series of modernizing reforms of Catholicism, and by the revisionist movement, which galvanized debate in intellectual circles (Gibbons, "Challenging the Canon" 561). Spurred by the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, a number of historians and cultural commentators began to question and reassess the ideological and historiographical underpinnings of official nationalism. Such important and controversial texts as Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*, Father Francis F.J. Shaw's "The Canon of Irish History--A Challenge," and Garret FitzGerald's *Towards a New Ireland*, all published in 1972, established revisionism as Ireland's intellectual vanguard and ignited a war of words that has carried on for decades. Internationally, of course, these were tumultuous times as well, and the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements in America, as well as the student uprisings taking place around the world, had an observable impact in an Ireland no longer as insulated from the outside world as it once was.

While it began to grow more liberal and secular under the pressure of these influences, as evinced by the growth of a native feminist movement and an increasing resistance to orthodox Catholicism, Irish society remained predominantly traditional and conservative. As Paul Bew, Helen Hazelcorn, and Henry Patterson have remarked, despite the significant social and economic convulsions of the seventies and eighties, Ireland has seen relatively little class-based conflict and virtually no "radical politics" or "industrial militancy" (185). Although church attendance declined, particularly among the young, a 1974 poll found that 90 percent of Catholics maintained their weekly devotion: by 1980 the number had fallen somewhat, but remained at a still overwhelming 82 percent (Bew 211). Similarly, while attitudes towards the Church's teachings on sexuality had liberalized sufficiently to allow the passage of a law permitting the limited sale of contraceptives in 1979, the conservatism of the majority was reaffirmed by a series of legislative and judicial acts: in 1983 a referendum reinscribing the illegality of abortion was passed; the same year saw the Supreme Court uphold the constitutionality of Irish laws prohibiting homosexual acts and conduct; and in 1986 a referendum on a proposed amendment to the constitution which would have legalized divorce was defeated. The

rate of Ireland's social transformation thus lagged behind that of its material transformation.

From the 1960s onward, then, Irish society has occupied an anomalous middle ground between tradition and postmodernity.[7] As several commentators have suggested, events in Northern Ireland since 1968 played a major role in arresting the economic and social revolution which had been initiated in the Republic. Michael Kenneally has depicted the period from 1922 to 1968 as a time when Ireland attempted to exercise a willful blindness towards the unresolved issues of the Anglo-Irish war:

> It is one of the ironies of recent Irish history that at the moment when society in the Republic began to evince the first shifts away from the values derived from a nationalist ideology to a more pragmatic, ahistorical, even secular perspective, the renewal of the Northern conflict served as a powerful reminder that, in fundamental ways, the decades since 1922 constituted, for both the North and South, a social and political hiatus, a period when the essential questions of national identity and affiliation had been postponed, not solved. (3)

Brown has argued that within the Republic the violence was perceived largely as an inconvenient threat to the progress of economic and social renewal, and that the southern state consequently strove for as long as possible to "ignor[e] when it could the commotion at its doorstep" (*Ireland* 216). Eventually, however, as the conflict continued to escalate with the 1981 H-block hunger strike campaign and the entry of Sinn Fein into electoral politics, it became increasingly difficult for the citizens and government of the Republic to remain emotionally and politically disinterested. In the wake of the Long Kesh protest, broad popular support for the nationalist cause was reignited, while politically the convening of the New Ireland Forum acknowledged the gravity of the crisis. In the words of Seamus Deane, the violence in the North interrupted Ireland's rush "to embrace all of those corporate, 'international' opportunities offered by the European Economic Community and the tax-free visitations of international cartels," prompting the return "to center stage [of] all those issues of communal identity, colonial interference, sectarianism, and racial stereotyping that had apparently been sidelined" (*Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* 13-14).

The traumatic events in the North, together with the economic and social transformations effected in the Republic and the inevitable backlash the changes have inspired among traditionalists, have forced a fundamental re-evaluation of how "Ireland" is defined as both state and concept. Terms such as "discontinuity," "disruption," and "transition" have been invoked with increasing frequency in theoretical assessments of modern Ireland. While John Wilson Foster has described Northern Ireland as a "structuralist" state in which the rigid binary logic of sectarianism cries out for deconstruction (230), the works of other theorists suggest that the Republic, by contrast, has already been, or is in the process of being, discursively deconstructed. Richard Kearney has linked the "fundamental changes" Ireland has recently experienced in terms of its "political and economic status" to the nation's current "prevailing sense of discontinuity, the absence of a coherent identity, the breakdown of inherited ideologies and beliefs, the insecurities of fragmentation" (*Transitions* 9). Ireland's membership in the

EEC and the conflict in the North have, Kearney argues, made both the "'unitarist' ideology of the South and the 'unionist' ideology of the North ... more and more untenable" (*Transitions* 9-10), casting Ireland into the midst of a "transitional crisis" (*Transitions* 14), one he defines as a "conflict between the claims of tradition and modernity" (*Transitions* 9).

Writers such as Thomas Kinsella and many of the playwrights and critics associated with Derry's Field Day Theatre Company have ascribed the "discontinuity" Kearney speaks of to the linguistic and cultural deracination Ireland experienced as a consequence of colonization. In O'Toole's opinion, however, the source of Kearney's "transitional crisis" is more obviously the economic changes of the contemporary era ("Saints and Silicon" 15). O'Toole has suggested that "Between the resurgence of Irish nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century and the social transformation of the 1960s, 'Ireland' was a single, imaginable entity" (*Jesse James* 11). By undermining its cultural foundations, O'Toole argues, the changes of the sixties fractured the notion of Ireland as a "unified concept" (*Jesse James* 12), forcing Irish writers to confront and record a new, variegated reality:

> What the economic revolution of the early sixties meant to Irish literature was ... a removal of the cultural reference points which had shaped its earlier period.... in the Ireland of the sixties and after, it was precisely the fixed cultural notions which were being called into question. New class forces, new divisions of urban and rural, new consumer choices were making themselves felt in Ireland, so that 'Ireland' itself, as a fixed and coherent notion, ceased to exist, either in social life or in literature. What we are dealing with in contemporary Irish literature is a series of variations on Ireland, a series of individual responses to discontinuity, disruption, and disunity. ("Saints and Silicon" 22)

According to O'Toole, by the eighties, the sense that Ireland had become "an invention, a fantasy ... something up for grabs and needing to be refashioned every time a speech was made or a painting begun" was "overwhelming" (*Jesse James* 12).

Amidst this dominant sense of instability, the one constant of Irish life remained emigration, in O'Toole's words "the ultimate expression of an unstable place" (*Jesse James* 14). Like O'Toole, David Lloyd has seized on emigration as a phenomenon indicative of the contemporary Irish condition, one marked by displacement and "uncertainty of location." Lloyd has posited that the experience of "dislocation" is

> quite familiar in a culture which is geographically of Western Europe though marginal to it and historically of the decolonizing world, increasingly assimilated to that Europe, while in part still subject to a dissimulated colonialism, and which continues to lose up to 30,000 people annually to emigration. With peculiar intensity, Irish culture plays out the anomalous states of a population whose most typical experience may be that of occupying multiple locations, literally and figuratively. (2-3)

For Lloyd and O'Toole, to inhabit contemporary "transitional" Ireland is thus to be physically and psychically displaced, to find oneself in a discursive field which, having

experienced the erasure of many of its guiding codes and ideologies, is now largely empty and unbounded, constantly being reinvented.

The cultural vacuum created by the abandonment of the traditional values of official nationalism was, as noted above, quickly filled by materialism and the eager adoption of cosmopolitan (particularly American) culture. For many commentators, the wholesale substitution of secular supra-national materialism for traditional values, no matter how confining the latter might have been, was a cause for concern rather than celebration. Brown has commented that "many poets, writers, and artists ... have lamented that the social changes of recent years have dealt a fatal blow to a traditional Ireland that enshrined many irreplaceable values" (*Ireland* 239). Moreover, in 1979 Brown himself offered this warning:

> those who propose pluralism as a concept to illumine contemporary and future Irish reality may in fact be ignoring how much Ireland as a whole ... may be losing the social diversity it once had in the homogeneity of a consumer society. If this reductive process is in fact occurring, then social and cultural pluralism will be before long an entirely otiose concept in a signally pallid and diminished Irish reality. (*Ireland* 236)

The process Brown describes has been interpreted as a form of neo-colonialism by prominent Irish intellectuals such as the late F.S.L. Lyons, who decried Ireland's "absorption" into "the dominant Anglo-American culture" (qtd. in Brown, *Ireland* 236), and Seamus Deane, who has described the supplanting of British by "Americanised culture" in Ireland as "a repetition of the old mistake that we gain identity or that we lose it through another culture" ("Irish Future" 92). Kearney expresses similar apprehension over Ireland's potential loss of cultural sovereignty in his apt and witty summary of the "central problem facing contemporary Irish culture" in the postmodern moment: "how to mediate between the images of past and future; how to avoid the petrification of tradition and the alienation of modernity; how, in short, to obviate the extremes of either a reactionary Re-Evangelization or a multi-national Los-Angelisation of society" (*Transitions* 16).

For others, however, concerns about the politics of culture and the fragmentation of Irish identity were and are outweighed by the positive, freeing effect of jettisoning the debilitating baggage of the orthodoxies of the past. In 1974 Eavan Boland declared, "Let us be rid at last of any longing for cultural unity," pronouncing the aspiration for unity both futile and an historically oppressive imposition on individuality: "For there is ... no unity whatsoever in this culture of ours. And even more important, I recognize that there is no need whatsoever for such unity. If we search for it we will, at a critical moment, be mutilating with fantasy once again the very force we should be liberating with reality" ("The Weasel's Tooth" 7). O'Toole has been perhaps even more unequivocal in championing the new Irish cultural order over the old, even as he acknowledges that the changes Ireland has experienced have had enervating consequences, including what some would call a loss of identity:

> Modern Ireland is permeable, economically, culturally, and in terms of population. It lets in the great tide of international blandness and lets out much of the life

> blood of the country. But when the identity that is thus undermined is as rigid and narrow and illusory as the Irish one was, then a loss of identity is not necessarily a bad thing. (*Jesse James* 13)

In O'Toole's terms, Irish identity has perhaps not been lost so much as reconfigured; moreover, the process has acted as both purgative and catalyst to the growth of a vital new culture. Where traditionalists might see a death, the end of one phase of Irish history, O'Toole, speaking for many others, sees a cultural and historical *tabula rasa* and the promise of a new beginning: "in Ireland now there is a sense that history is still only beginning. The very lack of a formed modern culture is itself a strength, a demand that things be seen anew" ("Saints and Silicon" 35).

One of the locations within Irish culture where this practice of re-vision has proceeded with the greatest impetus and passion has been the theatre. As the social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of Ireland has been transformed over the last thirty-five years, Irish playwrights have recognized the need for a fundamental reassessment of both the nature of Irish experience and the ways it has traditionally been represented on stage. The result has been the flowering of a new, less parochial, more variegated and vibrant Irish theatre, in a process that has been described as a second Irish dramatic renaissance: Anthony Roche begins his recent study of contemporary Irish drama by declaring, "Drama has once more regained its urgency, as it did in the approach to Irish independence, as the site where old models can be broken up and reshaped, reimagined through the medium of play" (*Irish Drama* 1).

Already by the mid 1950s it was becoming clear that the "old" Irish theatre, the theatre of Robinson, Carroll, Shiels, Murray, and others, was sterile and outdated. The growing perception that the Abbey and its typical fare had become irrelevant, that it had lost touch with the realities of Irish life, found expression in the form of new challengers to its hegemonic domination of theatrical practice in Ireland. In 1953, Alan Simpson founded the Pike Theatre in Dublin, his stated intention being to "stir up the theatrical lethargy of post-war Ireland" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 148). In subsequent years the Pike staged a number of provocative new works: Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (after its rejection by the Abbey); expatriate Irishman Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two years after its first performance in Paris; and Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*, which became embroiled in controversy when Simpson was arrested and charged with "presenting for gain an indecent and profane performance" (Maxwell, *Irish Drama* 159). The play was performed in 1957 as part of the inaugural Dublin Theatre Festival, itself founded with the intent of diversifying theatre in Ireland by providing a forum for both new Irish drama and international plays and companies. Notably, this challenge to the traditional insularity of Irish drama came at a time when European (and particularly British) theatre was being revolutionized in the wake of the Paris, London, and Dublin productions of *Waiting for Godot*, the debut of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, and the visit to London of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble.

The controversy over *The Rose Tattoo*, as well as the fiasco which forced the cancellation of the 1958 Theatre Festival (Beckett withdrew two of his own plays from the Festival after the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin's objections to the inclusion of

O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* and an adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses* caused their enforced withdrawal), demonstrated that even as Irish theatre began to recognize its own limitations and become more open and cosmopolitan, it remained subject to the inhibiting influences of large elements of what was still a highly conservative society. It would be a mistake to suggest that liberalizing tendencies in the theatre were held in check solely by external forces, however. As already noted, the Irish theatre, and particularly the theatre establishment represented most prominently by the Abbey, was itself predominantly conservative. That in the late fifties Irish theatre remained for the most part mainstream and traditionalist (despite incorporating an element of burgeoning eclecticism) should thus be seen to a considerable degree as the consequence of the theatre's own conservatism and timidity.

As the remaining chapters of this study will suggest, while theatrical practice in Ireland has diversified substantially over the last thirty-five years, it has in some respects retained an underlying conservatism. Although the influence of such wide-ranging international movements as Epic Theatre, the Theatre of the Absurd, the Theatre of the Image, and Agitprop is evident in the works of many contemporary Irish dramatists. Irish theatre is still to a large degree insular, a theatre created for Irish audiences, dealing with Irish subjects, and drawing its forms from the Irish theatrical tradition. While more plays have been set in Dublin and fewer in kitchens of thatched cottages (for decades the archetypal setting of peasant drama and comedy), many have remained relatively traditional in terms of form (retaining a bias for verbal as opposed to visual drama. for instance) and could be described as largely, if not completely, naturalistic. And while the traditional, De Valerian nationalism which for decades formed the subtext of Abbey Theatre productions has long been obsolete, ceasing to inspire the imagination or devotion of the populace, concerns about shifting definitions of Irishness and the "national question" continue to be debated regularly on the stage.

In its admixture and juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements. the superimposition of new on old, contemporary Irish theatre both represents, and is a representation of, the condition of contemporary Ireland, a nation in the midst of the "transitional crisis" defined by Kearney: a state of "being in transit between two worlds. divided between opposing allegiances.... of being both part and not part of [one's] culture. of being in exile even while at home" (*Transitions* 14). The following chapters examine Irish drama of the last thirty-five years as a product and mirror of Ireland's "transitional crisis," itself the consequence of the social and cultural upheaval the nation has experienced over this time. In doing so, my intention is to relate the works of selected major contemporary Irish dramatists, Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy, more closely to their historical, social, and cultural contexts than have the authors of previous studies.[8] This has not been done with the goal of establishing definitive causal links between historical and literary/dramatic events. Nor is it my desire to present the history of contemporary Irish theatre as a similarly causal continuum of seamless movements and influences. As we all know, the mechanisms of history are much too disparate and random to allow us to seek to impose a neat chronological narrative upon it. Rather. my method has been to read contemporary Irish social and cultural history and contemporary

Irish drama as complementary and interwoven texts, seeking, for the most part, to propose rather than to prove precise intertextual connections.

My primary focus in this study is to examine how, in concert with Irish society as a whole, contemporary Irish dramatists have reappraised the concepts of Irishness and nationalism and reinterpreted them, within the context of dramatic form,[9] for the stage. Notably, Irish dramatists of the sixties, seventies, and eighties turned increasingly to non-traditional forms to represent the changing realities of Ireland at the same time that traditional definitions of Irishness and nationalism were being called into question. Under the pressure of the events of the last thirty-five years, the reverence accorded these former icons was in large measure replaced by a profound sense of ambivalence towards all constructions of Irish identity, both traditional and postmodern. The works of many of today's Irish dramatists register this ambivalence. In the new Irish drama, the old symbols of nationhood came to be treated either with suspicion (if not outright hostility) or indifference. O'Toole has remarked that "A thatched cottage on the stage of a new Irish play was not a static backdrop but something that would have to be immediately contradicted and subverted" (*Jesse James* 13). At the same time, however, Irish dramatists have expressed their unease at the unchecked incursion of international popular culture. In the face of the prospective obliteration of whatever distinct sense of Irish identity still exists, many have revisited or sought to reformulate tradition as a bulwark against a formless postmodern future. Events in the North, meanwhile, have provided additional impetus for such reworkings and invested them with poignancy as a number of writers, particularly from the North, have felt compelled to return to issues of nationalism and colonialism which many had assumed were safely buried.

Contemporary Irish drama's ambivalent stance towards modern Irish culture and society is perhaps most evident in the works of those writers who, like the five dramatists whose plays are the subject of the following five chapters, have lived in both the "old" and "new" Ireland. John B. Keane, Thomas Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Tom Kilroy were all born between 1926 and 1935. Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel all began to write plays and have their works staged between the late 1950s and early 1960s, the time when Ireland's social and cultural revolution was being instituted, while Kilroy's first opening night came somewhat later, in 1968. These five playwrights became the major Irish dramatists of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, in terms of prolificity, popular and critical reception, and influence. This in itself is a good reason for studying these writers, of whom only Friel and, to a lesser degree, Murphy, have garnered significant critical attention. More importantly for the purposes of this study, however, their works offer particularly revealing insights into the process of transformation which both Ireland and Irish drama have undergone. As writers whose sensibilities were shaped by their experiences of growing up in the Ireland of De Valera, their early plays, written when the effects of the Lemass reforms had not yet begun to have a marked impact, register the sense of frustration commonly expressed towards the inhibitions and deprivations of the former era. In later plays, which begin to portray the realities of Lemass' new Ireland, the focus shifts to the troubling consequences of the reforms (the

new materialism and the lack of enduring values in a society which has traded its identity for foreign capital and culture), and to the North.

The plays of Keane constitute an exception to this pattern. As I argue in the following chapter, Keane has made little attempt to address the realities of contemporary Ireland in his works. Notably, however, although his themes and techniques have remained firmly rooted in the past, his plays have been immensely popular. Unlike Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy have made the new Ireland the stuff of their drama. Subsequent chapters will examine these four playwrights as dramatists whose works probe the nature of contemporary Irish society and are marked by the "relentless search after innovation" which Christopher Murray describes as a defining characteristic of contemporary Irish drama ("Irish Drama" 291). My discussion of these writers is not intended to be comprehensive (especially in the case of Murphy, Leonard, and Friel, who have all been extremely prolific); rather, I have concentrated primarily on those works of each writer which combine a cogent examination of the contemporary Irish condition with an innovative use of dramatic form. As my analyses indicate, each of these dramatists, writing from a different discursive location within Irish society and drawing on an array of widely varying influences, offers a unique and highly particularized dramatic perspective on contemporary Ireland. Murphy's plays are imbued by existentialist concerns about the nature and dynamics of being and survival. Leonard's Irish plays, many of them satires of Ireland's *nouveaux riches*, incorporate the mechanics of farce and the comedy of manners. While Leonard's primary subject has been suburban Dublin, Friel, whose works draw on such diverse influences as Chekov and Brecht, was largely a dramatist of rural northwest Ireland until events in the North led him to examine the roots of the crisis in a series of more overtly political plays. Finally, Kilroy, whose most acclaimed works share many of the concerns of Friel, Leonard, and Murphy, has written a series of thematically-related plays which examine role-playing, performance, and the inherently coercive nature of the social contract within the context of Irish history and politics.

I have devoted the conclusion, which follows my chapter-length studies of each of these playwrights, primarily to exploring the connections and commonalities between their works which emerge in the course of my examination of their individual *oeuvres*. My particular focus has been to try to account for these similarities by linking them to the collective experiences of social and cultural change which form the common context of contemporary Irish drama and literature. As a final gesture, the conclusion briefly considers developments in Irish theatre since 1980 in light of the achievements of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy. These years have seen the emergence of an impressive number of accomplished new playwrights and the opening of several new theatres. In addition, a number of collectives and "alternative" theatre companies have been formed, and at long last the Irish theatre has been energized by the production of a substantial body of work by women dramatists. While I would suggest that the work of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy undoubtedly helped pave the way for these new voices, it is equally apparent that the new Irish theatre registers a subtle, yet significant, break with that of its predecessors: it is the product of a generation of writers.

directors, and actors whose sensibilities have been molded almost exclusively in the ferment of post-1958 Ireland and post-1968 Northern Ireland, a generation which has known only post-Whitaker/Lemass Ireland, and for which, accordingly, the concepts of Irishness and nationalism carry very different associations than they did for writers of the generation of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy.

Notes

1. My analysis of Irish history in this chapter draws heavily on Brown's cogent and informative 1985 monograph *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922 to the Present.* As its title implies, Brown's work is distinguished from other histories of this period by the emphasis it places on the evolution of Irish culture over these years (sometimes, perhaps, at the expense of more "conventional" history). I have found Brown's cultural/social approach to Irish history particularly useful as it reflects my own methodology in this study. An oft-quoted text which has gained a considerable reputation in the field of Irish Studies, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* has been praised by John Montague as "a splendid study of Ireland" (6) and by David Cairns and Shaun Richards as a work which "can be recommended without hesitation ... provid[ing] the nucleus for reflection on post-Treaty Ireland" (156).

2. Cf. Anthony Roche's invocation in *Contemporary Irish Drama* of Fintan O'Toole's reading of recent Irish cultural history: "As Fintan O'Toole put it, Ireland has passed from a traditional to a post-modern society without encountering modernism" (129). Desmond Bell has advanced the same thesis:

> Ireland never really experienced a form of socially engaged modernism. 'Modernism' ... hit Ireland late, a consequence of the economic MODERNIZATION of the sixties rather than of the social ferment of early twentieth-century Europe. Modernism as an artistic movement had by then already run out of steam globally and eschewed its politically radical origins. In 1960s Ireland 'modernism' as pseudo international style and sensibility was championed not by a radical avant garde but by the purveyors of consumer capitalism .... In Ireland this modernism degenerated into a shoddy simulation of consumer prosperity in a society undergoing a tawdry and shortlived experience of the global post-war capitalist boom.... *Such are the contradictions of Irish modernization that we have prematurely entered the post-modern era.* (228-29)

3. As might be inferred from Leonard's androcentric and totalizing rhetoric (and as will be discussed in more detail below) in practice the image of Ireland which emerged in the naturalistic drama of the period was one which suppressed or effaced differences within the nation, particularly the experiences of women and of urban dwellers.

4. In its appeals to the necessity of controlling women's bodies and expressions of sexuality, the document also clearly demonstrates the sexism which was central to this formulation of Irish nationalism. The ideal of a pre-lapsarian Catholic Irish Ireland would, of course, have been seriously threatened by any rebellion undertaken by women against the domestic and symbolic roles they had traditionally been accorded within Catholic and nationalist ideology. As Kim McMullen has asserted, writing of the post-independence period, "The private female body serves the body politic, and the state's legislative control of women's bodies in particular (but sexuality in general)--in censorship, reproductive rights prescriptions, economic discrimation against mothers and married women, and ... divorce ban--becomes a cornerstone of national defense" (38).

5. Throughout this study I have used the term "official nationalism" in a manner which follows its usage by Gibbons ("Constructing the Canon" 952) and by Brown to refer to the formulation of nationalism "propagated by government party and opposition alike" (Brown, "Counter Revival: Provincialism and Censorship" 89), and thus given institutional and hegemonic validation in post-independence Ireland.

6. Such as its argument that inadequate "technical resources" prevented it from staging Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* in 1905.

7. Here and throughout this study my use of the terms "postmodern" and "postmodernity" derives largely from Fredric Jameson's definition of the concept in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society":

> ... [postmodernism] is not just another word for the description of a particular style. It is also, at least in my use, a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formalizing features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order--what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism. (113)

In providing a chronology for the emergence of postmodernism, Jameson continues by noting that "The 1960s are in many ways the key transitional period, a period in which the new international order (neocolonialism, the Green Revolution, computerization and electronic information) is at one and the same time set in place and is swept and shaken by its own internal contradictions and by external resistance" (113). As I mean to suggest in this study, the Irish experience of postmodernism conforms in many respects to the historical model Jameson describes.

8. A survey of the major works in the field begins with D.E.S. Maxwell's *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980* (1984). Maxwell's history is an invaluable comprehensive survey of the Irish theatre from its beginnings, but because of its breadth is necessarily quite limited in the amount of space devoted to the individual playwrights whom I discuss in this study. As Christopher Murray has suggested, Maxwell's study is also flawed in that it "seriously" overlooks the theatrical qualities of many of the plays it analyses: "It persists in the study of drama as literary artefact, as if there were no difference between drama and poetry, or drama and prose fiction" ("Rev." 246). Seamus Deane has also alluded to this aspect of Maxwell's book. In an otherwise glowing review, Deane observes that Maxwell's "primary interest is in the 'sovereignty of words'" ("Rev." 95). Robert Hogan's *'Since O'Casey' and other Essays on Irish Drama* (1983) covers a great deal of ground but discusses individual playwrights rather briefly, and offers little by way of discussion of contemporary Irish drama's cultural and historical contexts. Michael Etherton's *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* (1989) takes something of a scattergun approach to the field, including discussions of Leonard, Stewart Parker, David Rudkin, Graham Reid, Ron Hutchinson, Anne Devlin, Frank McGuinness, Kilroy, Keane, and Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden, among others. It concentrates primarily on the plays of Murphy and Friel, however, while all the others get relatively short shrift. Moreover, it is hard to dispute S.F. Gallagher's analysis of Etherton's book as a text in

which, methodologically, it is "difficult to get one's bearings" ("Rev." 82). Gallagher complains of Etherton's shifts from "morbid Marxism" to an "embryonic deconstruction" and concludes that it is "difficult to escape the conclusion the book has been published too soon" ("Rev." 82). Anthony Roche's *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (1994) provides extensive and illuminating chapter-length discussions of the plays of Friel, Murphy, and Kilroy, but neglects the work of Keane and Leonard. Roche concentrates mainly on thematic readings of the plays of these three dramatists (focusing particularly on their relationship to the works of Beckett), but does not discuss their contexts extensively. This approach led one reviewer to comment that he "could not help wishing that Dr. Roche's 'larger cultural context' had been yet larger" (Burke 26). And while other critics have offered contextual readings of the plays of these writers, few have pursued such interpretations in great detail. Those who have, moreover (Fintan O'Toole's *The Politics of Magic: The Work and Times of Tom Murphy* is the best example), have tended to concentrate exclusively on individual playwrights. Consequently, no one has yet provided the contextually-based comparative approach to the works of these dramatists found in this study.

9. Throughout this study I use the term "dramatic form" in its broadest sense, to refer to such formal qualities of individual plays as set design, lighting, costume, use of stage space, cast doubling, and the overall "style" of productions (ie. whether naturalistic or non-naturalistic, whether the "fourth wall" is broken or not, etc.).

"An Entertainer, Not a Purveyor of Messages": The Theatre of John B. Keane

> ... the minute you move away from the truth, you are in serious trouble in the theatre. This is what is happening now. There are too many shadows and not enough blacks-and-whites.
>
> --John B. Keane interviewed by Fergus Linehan, 1970

For the work of a writer who once professed his distaste for ambiguity, the theatre of John B. Keane is imbued by an unexpectedly large number of contradictions. Although Keane is a self-proclaimed populist whose works have been both praised and derided for their popularity, his plays speak to and for a relatively narrow constituency. Even though most of them were written in the sixties and seventies and are set in the present, Keane's dramas are largely the product of the "old" Ireland, and in many cases seem incongruously oblivious to the social and cultural revolution of the post-1958 years. While the Ireland depicted in his plays is clearly one in transition, it remains disproportionately dominated by the social and political orthodoxies of mid-century. And while Keane's depiction of Irishness and Irish nationalism is often critical, his theatre frequently occupies an uneasy middle ground between social commentary and sentimentality, attacking backward-gazing nationalism at one moment, yet reinscribing its basic assumptions the next. Moreover, despite the melodramatic nature of some of his plays, Keane's characters inhabit a moral landscape in which right and wrong often cannot be clearly or satisfactorily differentiated, as Keane's evident unwillingness to condemn even some of his most unsympathetic characters indicates.

Far from the theatre of "blacks-and-whites" which he proposed in discussion with Fergus Linehan of the *Irish Times* and fellow playwrights Brian Friel and Hugh Leonard in 1970, Keane's theatre is thus one in which ambiguities and "shadows" are commonplace. Rather than a single, monolithic "truth," Keane's plays offer a series of variations on truth, and therefore on the truth of what "Ireland" represents as nation and concept. That at a time when he was already well advanced in his playwriting career Keane called for a theatre of certainties, a theatre which he did not at any point actually create, suggests that he was either blind to the ambiguities within his work or frustrated by his inability to write the type of plays he wished to write. Either way, Keane's failure can be interpreted as the predictable outcome of a search for absolutes in an era marked by uncertainty and tumult, particularly in Ireland. Indeed, in its inherent contradictions Keane's theatre offers a paradigm of the state of Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s: in their reluctance to address the central consequences of Ireland's social revolution, in their attempt to hearken back to an (imagined) earlier, less complicated era, Keane's plays depict a nation belatedly and somewhat forcibly adapting to the course of change its leaders had initiated. The importance of Keane's theatre lies in the fact that it captures the mood of anticipation tempered by trepidation that dominated Ireland during the nation's period of social and cultural transformation. Perhaps even more significantly, the popularity of Keane's plays suggests that they represent Irish experience in a manner that

the populace either believes, or wishes, to be accurate. Keane's works, moreover, merit attention as exemplars of a transitional moment not only in contemporary Irish history, but also in the history of recent Irish drama: Keane's theatre shares certain affinities with both the parochial naturalistic drama of earlier generations of playwrights and the less conventional, less parochial work of younger playwrights. Keane might thus be viewed as the last of an older breed of Irish playwrights, or the first of a new one.

Keane's dramatic work has commonly, and not inaccurately, been placed in the genre of the folk drama of the Irish West, whose line of descent stretches from the plays of Synge and George Fitzmaurice to those of M.J. Molloy. In particular, such early Keane plays as *Sive* (1959), *Sharon's Grave* (1960) and *The Field* (1965) bear decided affinities to the works of these earlier dramatists, whose influences Keane has acknowledged (Smith and Hickey 9; Hogan, *Since O'Casey* 39). Like those of Synge, Fitzmaurice, and Molloy, Keane's plays are almost all located in the rural West and South and draw much of their power from their language, a dramatization of the vibrant idiom of Keane's home, County Kerry. As in the plays of his precursors, violence is frequently integral to Keane's dramas. At times, he also incorporates elements of the grotesque and the fantastic, although not nearly as frequently as Synge, Fitzmaurice, or Molloy. While often evocative of the fierce, primitive land explored by the earlier folk dramatists, Keane's plays are situated in a much more contemporary, easily identifiable, "civilized" Southwest. D.E.S. Maxwell has observed that Keane's plays inhabit the same territory as the bizarre "dramatic fantasies" of his fellow Kerryman Fitzmaurice; according to Maxwell, however, they do so, "Geographically but not imaginatively" (*Irish Drama* 168). Micheál Ó hAodha, meanwhile, has instructively described Keane's theatre as a marriage between the "folk idiom" of Fitzmaurice and the "strength" of the archetypal Abbey naturalist T.C. Murray (137). Indeed, the influence of the Abbey's naturalistic tradition, well established by the time Keane began writing plays, is readily observable in his dramas.

Another playwright frequently invoked in discussions of Keane's theatre is Boucicault. Simple comparison of the two dramatists, however, misrepresents the nature of Keane's writing: while Keane has readily acknowledged the melodramatic aspects of his work (Smith and Hickey 100), his melodrama is rarely the spectacle and plot-driven melodrama of Boucicault, but rather that of domestic tragedy, one less extravagant in the machinations through which it is derived and more dependent on character.

Such a categorization of Keane's theatre underscores what is perhaps its major limitation: Keane's rigid adherence to the restrictive form of conventional Abbey-style "peasant quality" naturalism. Anthony Roche has suggested of *Sive*, Keane's first play, that "If the Abbey of the 1950s had been looking for a play that most continued and developed its own founding tradition, this was it. *Sive* offered an authentic image of the country life it had so long depended on as a dramatic staple, now written by an insider" ("John B. Keane" 30). Surprisingly, for reasons which will be considered below, the Abbey rejected *Sive*, despite the play's adherence to the theatre's established formula. As a further irony, when the play was eventually staged in an amateur production, Jim Fitzgerald, the adjudicator of one of the drama festivals at which it was entered, opened

his remarks on the performance by noting that Keane was "in the direct tradition of many Abbey dramatists of the previous twenty years" (Smith and Hickey 59). He then used this comparison to blame the Abbey, in part, for the failure of Keane and other Irish playwrights to find

> a subject big enough for the immense force and vitality at their disposal. This has been, in my view, the mystery which has rendered Irish writing ineffectual generally, but particularly in the theatre.... Is it the stranglehold of naturalism at the Abbey? I don't know. Is it a subconscious suppression we all suffer from due to the special conditions in this country? I don't know. (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 59)

It seems safe to infer from his comments that for Fitzgerald one of the failings of naturalism, one of the conditions it imposes on Irish writers like Keane so as to "render them ineffectual," is that it necessitates an inordinate concentration on the particular and local, and thus is limited in its ability to appeal to any other than a national, if not regional, audience. This has certainly been true of Keane's work: while immensely popular at home, Keane's plays have been produced outside Ireland only rarely, and, with the exception of the Abbey's production of *The Field* in Moscow in 1988, never entirely successfully.[1] Keane's plays have failed to travel well in large part because Keane has never made a concerted attempt to address a non-Irish audience. Despite professing in his interview with Linehan, Friel, and Leonard that the dramatist must "write for everybody; you must write for the whole human race," Keane also asserted that the roots of drama must be parochial, in the process offering an insight into his writerly methods: "surely everything begins at parish level, or in a house, or in the mind of one man. Beginning there, it must be parochial and it must be individual to begin with" (Linehan 12). Keane's fierce parochialism is further revealed later in the same interview. In the midst of a discussion of the subject matter of Irish drama (circa 1970), when Friel suggests that Keane is "stuck with the peasants of Kerry," Keane's response is indignant:

> Keane: When you say peasants of Kerry, you forget that we were the first civilization in Europe.
>
> Friel: I don't use the terms in a derogatory sense at all.
>
> Keane: You should clarify the accusation, because you cannot throw out these carefully chosen lines. I am stuck with the people of Kerry and thank God I am, because at least I can write about them and I am only beginning to know them, and this is very important. At least I know my people. (Linehan 12)

Keane's theatre is very much written for and about "his people," as opposed to "the whole human race." The failure of *Sive* in London in 1960 after its rapturous reception throughout Ireland can almost certainly be ascribed, as Jean-Michel Pannecoucke has suggested, to the play's highly particularized Irish setting and subject matter, and its consequent marginality to a theatre scene then being revolutionized by the radical social drama of the "new wave" of young British dramatists (143). As Robert Hogan has remarked, summarizing the limitations of Keane's theatre, "Keane has never really left Ireland" (*Since O'Casey* 39).

A strong case can be made, however, that Keane's theatre is primarily regional, as opposed to national, in that its constituency is confined almost exclusively to rural Ireland. Keane's plays address urban Ireland rarely and almost always uncertainly, and thus offer a skewed and unrepresentative image of Irish experience, particularly given that they were written during a period of wide scale urbanization. Only three of Keane's plays, *No More in Dust* (1961), *The Rain at the End of the Summer* (1967), and *The Change in Mame Fadden* (1971) have urban settings; notably, they are all among the least successful of his works. In the interval since its first production, Keane has apologized for *The Rain at the End of the Summer*, his semi-satirical examination of a petit-bourgeois Cork family, by indicating that a "loss of direction" led him to write the play (Roche, "John B. Keane" 30). Years earlier, the playwright's own brother, Irish actor Eamonn Keane, had criticized Keane's depiction of working-class Dublin in *No More in Dust*: "As I see it, the play is mostly about Dublin, and John has got away from the people he knows. You have got to live in Dublin to know the city well. You cannot write about it looking through a side window. The play has nothing to say ..." (qtd. in Smith and Hicky 106).

Not surprisingly, given their predominantly rural settings and subject matter, Keane's plays have been more successful with rural than with urban audiences. While many of Keane's dramas have drawn large audiences in Dublin, his support, both popular and critical, has been markedly more unequivocal in the countryside. Poet Brendan Kennelly's observation that "If you put on a Keane play in any part of rural Ireland it will pack out" (Smith and Hickey 242) draws a significant distinction between Keane's reception by rural and urban audiences. The performance history of *The Rain at the End of the Summer* offers a telling example of this distinction: while a comparative failure in Dublin, the play was a box-office success in Cork, a centre both far less metropolitan than Dublin and much nearer Keane's home in Listowel, North Kerry. Similarly, as Keane's biographers, Gus Smith and Des Hickey, have noted, *Moll* (1971), Keane's slight comedy about three priests and their domineering housekeeper, was panned by Dublin critics but subsequently "enthusiastically received on its tour of the southern counties, where not a few parish priests' housekeepers were living legends" (181). Smith and Hickey's comment suggests that Keane's work often strikes chords for rural audiences which it does not for Dubliners, a sentiment echoed by Barry Cassin, director of a number of Keane's plays, who has described the "puzzlement" of "urbanites" confronted by characters whose actions "didn't make sense to the urban mind" (Smith and Hickey 166).

The negative responses accorded Keane's work by some Dublin critics might be taken as further evidence of the relative inaccessibility of Keane's theatre to urban audiences. Not entirely unjustifiably, for years Keane interpreted the unfavourable reviews his plays received in Dublin papers, coupled with the Abbey rejections of five of his plays, among them *Sive* and *Sharon's Grave*, as proof of a "metropolitan" bias against his work (Smith and Hickey 172). Keane's sense of persecution only heightened his lifelong feelings of alienation from the city (director Ben Barnes has remarked that Keane is "like a fish out of water when he comes to Dublin" [Smith and Hickey 215]), isolating him as a writer and pushing him into a closer alliance with the amateur and semi-professional theatre groups which produced his work when the Abbey would not (most

notably Cork's Theatre of the South). Had Keane been taken into the Abbey fold and extended a warmer reception in Dublin generally, it is possible that he might have explored new directions in his work and developed into a more truly national writer. Instead, his status as a primarily parochial, regional playwright was solidified.

Nevertheless, some critics have sought to define Keane as a representative national writer, typically by invoking what Pannecoucke has called the "intense realism" of his naturalistic theatre (142). Michael Etherton has argued that Keane's plays, along with those of Fitzmaurice and Molloy, depict a true image of the Irish West, as opposed to that found in the "Dublin theatre" (2) of Synge and Yeats. Etherton's avowal of the authenticity of Keane's theatre would seem to be confirmed by Kerry writer Bryan MacMahon's reaction to the first production of *Sive* in Listowel: "It had the absolute drum of the common people. We were seeing something we had known always existed here, but now it was presented on stage before us" (Smith and Hickey 18). Similar critical comments, the gist of which is that Keane's accomplishment as a playwright lies in his faithful reproduction of some familiar truth of Irish nature, are commonplace. Writing of *The Man From Clare* (1962), one of the few Keane plays produced at the Abbey in the sixties, Smith and Hickey have remarked that "Keane was doing what the Abbey was founded to do--bringing the reality of life in Ireland onto the stage" (114). This vein of commentary reaches its height in Robert Hogan's assertion that Keane's plays depict "a kind of Hidden Ireland, with a life richer and larger and more basically Irish than life in the modern Dublin of television antennas, exhaust fumes and rectangular office slabs of concrete and glass" (*Since O'Casey* 39). Here, Keane's works are championed for their verisimilitude and "authentic" Irishness, and defined as representative of the "real" or "true" Ireland.

This is a claim that bears questioning not only because of Keane's limited engagement with urban Irish experience (the authenticity of which Hogan's statement seeks to deny), but also because his plays often seem in many ways oblivious to the profound changes which were taking place in Ireland generally at the time of their writing. As Hogan has noted, Keane's Ireland was "an Ireland in transition" (*Since O'Casey* 121): during the sixties and seventies, as outlined in the previous chapter, the structure of Ireland's economy, society, and culture were fundamentally overturned. Overall, Keane's dramas demonstrate a limited perception of the magnitude of these changes and a collective unwillingness or incapacity to accommodate them and their consequences.

Nonetheless, it is equally true that in select instances Keane's work has been highly perceptive, and even prophetic, as to the nature of the transformations Ireland was experiencing, if never fully able to accept them. In retrospect, a few of Keane's plays in particular, *Sive* and *The Field* among them, appear to have been especially insightful. Anthony Roche has suggested that like many other Irish plays of the period, these dramas, along with *Big Maggie* (1969), reflect "conflicts of identity, language and culture suffered by their characters and a conservative Ireland struggling to deal with the rapid onset of modernisation" ("John B. Keane" 29). Fintan O'Toole has echoed Roche by describing the same three works as "thoughtful and keenly-observed dramatisations of social change,"

plays which "are less about a mythic clash of good and evil and more about the human dilemmas that confront ordinary people in times of change ("Introduction" *Keane: Three Plays* 7-8). O'Toole has pointed to one of the final moments in *Sive* as a particularly noteworthy example of Keane's prescience. In it, the tinker Pats Bocock describes the changes he has observed in his travels throughout Ireland, and predicts what they portend:

> There is money making everywhere. The face of the country is changing. The small man with the one cow and the pig and the bit of bog is coming into his own.... The farmer will be the new lord of the land.... There will be great changes everywhere. The servant boy is wearing the collar and the tie. The servant girl is painting and powdering and putting silkified stockings on her feet and wearing frilly small clothes under her dress.... The servant will kick off the traces and take to the high road. Money will be in a-plenty. (84)

O'Toole has described Keane's insight as prophetic, noting the remarkable conjugation by which this speech, which presages the coming of American-style materialism to Ireland and its revolutionizing of the extant class system, was first performed in 1959, the year that the First Programme for Economic Expansion, which would have exactly these consequences, was instituted ("Saints and Silicon" 22).

Keane has revealed, however, that although *Sive* is ostensibly set in the late fifties and was in part meant to address the state of Ireland at that time, the play was actually written about an earlier, more specific time and place. According to Keane, the raw material for the play came from his childhood excursions to the Stacks Mountains, where he visited a community of people who "through technology and through turfcutting ... dragged themselves out of the past and into the present, I fear rather too hastily.... when I wrote my first play *Sive*, it was about these people, about their language and their values" (Roche, "John B. Keane" 30). Viewed in light of this revelation, *Sive*'s relevance to Ireland on the eve of its economic and social revolution seems much less prophetic than coincidental.

Other aspects of the play suggest that it is more of the 1930s than the 1950s, more a finely-detailed historical account of the social changes which occurred in an isolated community during Keane's childhood than a cautionary tale about the dangers of modern capitalism. Keane has noted that on completing the first draft of the play he feared it was too quaint for a modern audience: "It wouldn't work. For one thing, the names of the characters were nothing short of ludicrous, the theme was outworn and the language too flowery" (Keane, *Self-Portrait* 87). Indeed, even for Keane's immediate audience, the practices of matchmaking and arranged marriages, on which the action of *Sive* centres, would have been the stuff of relatively distant memories. The weird, ritualistic cursing songs of Pats Bocock and his son Carthalawn, from which the play derives much of its dramatic power, were similarly anachronistic, the product of Keane's childhood observations of tinkers in the Stacks (Smith and Hickey 15). Even the bodhrán which the tinkers use to accompany their songs was at the time regarded as something of an exotic instrument, familiar in North Kerry but little seen and redolent of the distant past elsewhere in Ireland (Smith and Hickey 17).

In many respects, then, *Sive* was a museum piece from its very inception, despite its ostensibly contemporary setting. In this sense it is by no means unique among Keane's dramas. In two of the characters of *Sharon's Grave*, set in the thirties, Keane depicts two "types" which had vanished from Irish society by the sixties: the travelling thatcher, Peadar Minogue, and the folk healer, Pats Bo Bwee. *The Buds of Ballybunion* (1976) is Keane's sentimental portrait of another Irish anachronism: a class of elderly rural vacationers known as "buds" who vacationed in the Irish resort town of Ballybunion every September until their way of life died out at the end of World War Two (Smith and Hickey 199).

Keane often seems more comfortable when dealing with such nostalgic and archival material than when he makes a conscious effort to address the changing face of contemporary Ireland, as he does in *The Rain at the End of the Summer*, *The Change in Mame Fadden*, and *The Chastitute* (1981). In 1992 Smith and Hickey observed somewhat belatedly that the subject of *The Rain at the End of the Summer*, Keane's self-acknowledged failure, is "the *new* morality that is beginning to exert itself in the country" (167). A clash between this new morality and the old, played out in terms of a generational conflict, is at the heart of the play. The prosperous suburban O'Brien family is torn apart when patriarch Joss expires at the height of an impotent rage precipitated by the refusal of his philandering, ne'er-do-well son, Jamesy, to stand by a servant girl whom he has gotten pregnant. To a certain degree, Jamesy and his lawyer brother, Toddy, embody the more permissive (and in its guiltlessness rather un-Catholic) attitude towards sexuality which had begun to make inroads in Ireland in the sixties, as well as the snobbishness of the burgeoning post-Whitaker/Lemass reforms *nouveaux riches*. Any substantive impetus towards social commentary is defused, however, by the play's rapid descent into bathos and melodrama. Remarking on the original production, *Evening Press* reviewer Maureen O'Farrell commented that

> J.B. Keane has floundered in this his first foray into modern Ireland. He fails to catch the attitudes and petty snobberies of the class which he has chosen to portray and concentrates instead on the 'girl in trouble' theme.... The result is slight, repetitious and rather trivial domestic tragi-comedy. (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 167)

The Change in Mame Fadden, Keane's attempt to seize the liberalizing moment to offer a sensitive examination of the previously taboo subject of menopause, is equally unsatisfactory. The play's title character is persecuted by her husband and sons, who find her flighty and abrasive menopausal behaviour an embarrassing impediment to their efforts to ascend in the ranks of Dublin society. As a final solution, they seek to have her committed; she responds by going off to drown herself in the Liffey. The absurdity of the plot is compounded by the fact that Mame's behaviour hardly qualifies as eccentric, let alone unbalanced. Moreover, the exact nature of her affliction and its cause is never directly stated. Keane's enthusiasm to become a crusader for women's issues was apparently tempered by his old-world reluctance to deal with those issues in anything but euphemistic terms.

A similarly dated sensibility is the central problem with *The Chastitute*. As Robert Hogan has observed, the play's protagonist, a middle-aged farmer who experiences a series of farcical misadventures in the course of a desperate, doomed quest to lose his virginity, is "an anachronism": "The audience laughs at a man of the 1950s, whose problems seem a bit unbelievable in the 1980s. The fun ... is rooted in our memory of puritanism rather than relevant to our present experience" (*Since O'Casey* 145-46). Keane's John Bosco McLaine seems much more the contemporary of Patrick Kavanagh's Patrick Maguire than of the "Travolta-like townies" (67) who inhabit the world of "booze, sex and discos" (14) that, in the opinion of one of *The Chastitute*'s characters, modern Ireland has become.

While some of Keane's most recent works thus frequently seem oddly out of touch with the realities of contemporary Ireland, the same cannot be said of *The Field*. At a time when the economic, social, and political status quo was being challenged and reformulated in Ireland, the play effectively and perceptively captured the central tension in Irish society by dramatizing a destructive clash between parochialism and modernity in a small Irish village. The play's central conflict, the battle for the eponymous field waged by farmer Bull McCabe and industrialist William Dee, symbolically encapsulates the course of Irish economic history since the Whitaker/Lemass reforms were instituted with the intention of diversifying the traditional, agriculturally-based national economy. The Bull, who needs the field to access water for his cattle, represents the post-Famine Irish ethos which valued land above all else, as articulated in his repeated invocation to his son: "Land is all that matters, Tadhg boy, own your own land" (18). Dee's plan to cover the field in concrete in order to manufacture building blocks is thus for the Bull a moral abomination, a perversion of the natural function of the land: "'Tis a sin to cover grass and clover with concrete" (44). In denouncing Dee, the Bull also plays upon the fact that his opponent is an outsider who has come to the southwestern village of Carraigthomond from England. The Bull refers to Dee as a "total stranger" (50) and a "bloody imported whoresmaster, taking over the village as if he owned it" (40). Notably, however, although he has spent the previous twelve years in England, Dee is a fellow Irishman, "a Galway man" (33) by birth. Even as the Bull seeks to construct Dee as a foreign opportunist plundering and prostituting the native soil, Dee's Irishness underlines the telling irony that the opening of Ireland to foreign investors (a process begun by the Whitaker/Lemass reforms and proceeding in earnest at the time the play was written) was initiated and encouraged by the Irish people themselves.

As Keane was perceptive enough to realize, the reorganization of Ireland's economy was accompanied by far-reaching changes to the basic structure of Irish society. *The Field* depicts the moment at which modernization began to foster serious challenges to the existing hegemony, which for decades had been primarily parochial, patriarchal, and Catholic. The major voice of opposition to the social status quo in the play belongs to Mamie Flanagan, a type of Irish proto-feminist who delights equally in dressing and getting her hair done according to the latest fashions and in ridiculing the pious hypocrisy of the village:

> The drapers won't even put panties in the windows here--hypocrites. Do you know what kills me ...? It's watching those sanctimonious bitches on their way to the altar of God every Sunday with their tongues out like bloody vipers for the body of Christ, and the host is hardly melted in their mouths when they're cuttin' the piss out of one another again! ... If you get your hair done different they whisper about you. Dress up in a bit of style and they stare at you. You'd want an armoured car if you wore a pair of slacks. (15-16)

In this sanctimonious patriarchal society, women are valued primarily for the amount of land they own and their ability to work: the men of the town congratulate Tadhg on his prospective bride by noting that she's "a fine heifer," "a good milker" with "nine acres!" (66). The mother of nine children, Mamie rails loudly and incisively, if ultimately ineffectually, against the twin male deities, priest and husband, who preside over a hierarchy which enslaves her and allows her only one holiday a year--the brief one at the end of her annual pregnancy.

If, in the figure of Mamie Flanagan, Keane prefigured the nascent socially-transformative potential of modern feminism, in William Dee he depicted the vanguard not only of a new Irish economic order, but of a new Irish civil society. Supremely, if somewhat naively, confident in the rule of law, in the ability of lawyers and the police to protect him and uphold his rights, Dee refuses to bow to the Bull's threats of violence and boycotts, oppositional tactics borrowed from the anti-colonial Land War of the nineteenth century (Stalder 60-61). Dee, however, fatally underestimates the degree to which the tribal loyalties of the previous century continue to hold sway in Carraigthomond: the Bull murders him and evades justice by intimidating the rest of the community into observing an enforced conspiracy of silence. Like Dee, Mamie is also ultimately defeated by the violent patriarchal power which she opposes so vehemently: at the end of the play she is cowed into submission by the Bull's threats to reveal her infidelities, even as she learns that she is about to endure her tenth pregnancy. The forces of modernity and social reform are held at bay, overwhelmed by the simple brutality of the old parochial hegemony. Events within the play indicate, however, that this state of affairs will not endure for long: the outside world is encroaching on Carraigthomond in the form of the jet airplanes that Tadhg can distinguish by their sound, and the electricity, television, and indoor plumbing that even the Bull has been persuaded to install in his home (55). *The Field*, written at the height of the first wave of Irish economic expansion, thus anticipates the new era in Irish politics which was evolving even as the play was being written: one in which the old De Valerian ideals embodied by the Bull McCabe--conservatism and intense nationalist isolationism--were rendered powerless and obsolete by the rise of transnational capitalism.

While *The Field* accurately prophesied the shape of post-Whitaker/Lemass Ireland, Keane the playwright seems to have regarded the inevitable arrival of the new era and the extinction of the old with greater foreboding and suspicion than celebration. Indeed, in the play Keane's sympathies appear to rest more with the Bull, as a simple man pushed to extreme ends to defend that which he has been taught to prize above all else, than with William Dee, the drama's most obvious victim. Anthony Roche has described

one particularly notable moment in a 1989 interview when Keane's predisposition to identify with the Bull became readily apparent:

> the most astonishing transition in my talk with Keane occurs when ... he shifts from citing his own views to taking on the persona of the Bull McCabe and referring to the last lines of *The Field*, citing the Bull not as a mere mouthpiece for his views but as a mythic and dramatic figure who gives them a final and objective vindication.

Keane's gloss on the Bull's rationale for his actions, quoted in the same interview, is similarly revealing:

> in the Bull McCabe's eyes, who is the primeval man of the earth, a man of the soil. he felt that Christ was being betrayed. He was accused of betraying Christ himself for the killing of this man who wanted to put concrete over his land. But the Bull saw that man as a polluter, as a murderer of life itself. If these people had their way, the Bull maintains, there wouldn't be any land, the land would be gone. In my estimation the Bull succeeded in the finish. ("John B. Keane" 31)

While his words fall short of being an outright endorsement of the Bull's crime, Keane's vigor in presenting the Bull's position bespeaks at least a grudging underlying sympathy for the "primeval man of the earth" locked in allegorical battle with the "polluting" industrialist for the heartland of Ireland. Although the Bull is far from a romantic figure. and while his victory over Dee is highly dubious, the ending of *The Field* might thus be explained in part as the work of a playwright with an essentially conservative sensibility. a playwright who, while aware of the dangers of over-romanticization, bears a sentimental attachment to the land almost as strong as that of his protagonist, and who is himself wary of change and progress and reluctant to consider their consequences.

Such an appraisal of Keane is also suggested by a consideration of *Big Maggie*, a play whose central character resembles the Bull McCabe in many respects. Freed by the death of her unfaithful, abusive husband, Big Maggie Polpin embarks on a quest for personal expression and fulfilment. In the process she becomes a sort of Irish Mother Courage who drives her children away one by one through her harsh and uncompromising matriarchal domination of their personal lives: she forces her eldest daughter into a hastily arranged "proper" marriage upon learning that she has slept with a married older man and is now "spoiled goods"; she alienates her younger daughter by stealing her suitor, a man Maggie considers an untrustworthy philander; and she drives her eldest son away by refusing to allow him to marry on the grounds that his prospective bride is penniless. Maggie justifies her behaviour as "the hardness of concern," telling her eldest daughter that she has feelings "for all of you. That's why I never let any of you have your own way. If I hadn't love I wouldn't care" (227).

Keane, who has admitted to drawing on some of "the nice little bits" of the characters of his mother and wife in his portrayal of Maggie (Smith and Hickey 161). apparently intended his protagonist to be perceived as a harsh but ultimately sympathetic figure. Audiences, as well as actors and directors involved in productions of the play, seem to have responded accordingly. Ronnie Masterson, one of several women to have played Maggie, has professed her admiration of the character: "I love the role ... and I

think I achieved a certain understanding with the audience because I emphasised the compassionate side of the woman.... I think the audience sympathises with her over-concern and, at the same time, appreciates her problem as she has been left to bring up a family" (Smith and Hickey 164). Barry Cassin, director of the original production, has offered a similar assessment, asserting that Maggie "is by no means an outrageous character.... Ultimately she is fighting for her family, even if she adopts tough methods. I have no doubt audiences identified with her, although some urbanites might not accept her old-fashioned approach" (Smith and Hickey 166-67). Ben Barnes, who directed Abbey revivals of *The Field* in 1987 and *Big Maggie* in 1988, also chooses to view Maggie in a positive light, as he does the Bull McCabe: according to Barnes, during rehearsals for the plays he and his cast came to decide that both characters "by and large ... were acting out of love, as opposed to acting out of anything more negative" (Roche, "John B. Keane" 31).

To read these characters in such a way is problematic, however, in that any sympathetic portrayal of the Bull or Maggie runs the risk of reinscribing the conservative, outmoded political and social values which they epitomize--in the case of the Bull, isolationism and the prioritizing of rural interests which had paralyzed the Irish economy since independence; in the case of Maggie, restriction of sexual freedoms and the decades-old system of conventions whereby marriage, landholding, and emigration were rigidly controlled by economics in rural Ireland. This interpretative crux is paradigmatic of a fundamental contradiction inherent to Keane's work: Keane has made a habit of presenting himself as something of a non-conformist and political and social activist, once describing himself as someone "hostile to institutions and authority" with "a facility in my makeup to be outspoken" (Roche, "John B. Keane" 30). Certain of Keane's writings and some of his personal activities, such as his association with the Language Freedom Movement, a group which protested compulsory Irish language education in the sixties, to some extent validate Keane's account of his character. Nonetheless, as much as Keane may esteem himself a crusader, his dramas, even those most clearly intended to be socially and politically provocative, overwhelmingly tend to reinforce the status quo as much as they challenge it.

Big Maggie is a case in point. The play is one of many in which Keane attacks a favourite target: Irish Catholicism's peculiarly virulent brand of sexual repression. Maggie Polpin is portrayed as the middle-aged victim of an oppressively puritanical upbringing, an interpretation which was emphasized in the 1988 Abbey revival of the play. In a new monologue which Keane wrote for the revival, Maggie blames the wasted years of her youth and the failure of her marriage on her childhood indoctrination at the hands of an institution which implicitly condemned sex in all forms, even within marriage, as sinful: "the awful truth was that my sex-life, my morals, my thought, word, and deed were dominated by a musty old man with a black suit and a roman collar and a smell of snuff.... Oh I curse the stifling, smothering breath of the religion that withered my loving and my living and my womanhood" (234). Finally freed from all obligations by the death of her husband and the estrangement of her children, Maggie vows to make up for lost

time: "The weal of the chastity cord is still around my belly and the incense is in my nostrils. I'm too long a prisoner but I'll savor what I can while I can ..." (235).

What Maggie apparently fails to realize, however, in an irony that also seems to have evaded Keane, is that she has exerted as stifling an influence on her children's sexuality as the Church imposed on her own, intervening to prevent two of them from making matches with partners she considers unsuitable, and forcing a third into a loveless marriage of convenience for the sake of appearance. Fintan O'Toole reads symbolic national historical resonances in her situation and actions: "Like Ireland after Independence from England, Maggie is given her freedom with the death of her husband. But like the Irish state before the sixties she uses that freedom to keep her children under rigid control, denying and thwarting their sexuality, largely for economic reasons" ("Saints and Silicon" 31). O'Toole sees *Big Maggie* as a cautionary tale for 1960s Ireland, a "parable" in which Keane offers "a grim warning of what will happen if a way of accommodating sexuality to social stability is not found" ("Saints and Silicon" 30-31). While O'Toole's reading validly interprets Maggie's treatment of her children as emblematic of the repressive excesses enacted by Church and State in De Valera's Ireland, *Big Maggie*'s original audiences seem to have been either oblivious or unreceptive to any such subtextual social/political critique. That so many people perceived Maggie sympathetically, regarding her behaviour towards her children as eminently and admirably practical even if somewhat harsh,[2] suggests that audiences tended to read the play in a way which reinscribed conservative values. Moreover, given Keane's own apparent underlying sympathies for a heroine modelled after his wife and mother, it seems unlikely that he intended the play to be received in any other way, or that he fully appreciated how Maggie's actions compromised his attempt to make an effective statement about Irish puritanism.

Even though *Big Maggie*, as Keane has asserted, "was before its time from the point of view of sexual understanding" (Roche, "John B. Keane" 32), the play stops well short of endorsing unrestricted sexual freedom. For while Maggie's middle-aged sexual awakening is implicitly approved, her teen-aged daughters' attempts to explore their sexuality are tacitly censured. In this respect the play exemplifies a common crux in Keane's works: while he frequently attacks puritanical attitudes towards sex, asserting *in theory* the inherent healthiness and goodness of sex, in practice he seems consistently less willing to accommodate and condone the concrete reality of sex, particularly female sexuality and sex practiced outside the bonds of marriage. Paradoxically, in Keane's works sex is both that which is valorized and, in O'Toole's words, "that which must be contained" ("Saints and Silicon" 32), a contradiction which underlines the essentially conservative nature of Keane's social commentary.

Keane's ambiguous stance towards sexuality becomes evident through a comparison of a number of his plays. In addition to *Big Maggie*, Keane attacks sexual puritanism in several other works. The rigors of a life of enforced chastity drive Dinzie and Neelus Conlee insane in *Sharon's Grave* and bring John Bosco MacLaine to the brink of suicide in *The Chastitute*, while in *The Year of the Hiker* (1963) the marriage of Kate and Hiker Lacey is undermined by Kate's devout sister, Freda, who manages to convince

Kate that even marital sex is sinful. Nonetheless, when "illicit" desire is consummated in other plays, as happens in *The Rain at the End of the Summer* and *The Crazy Wall* (1973). two dramas in which a young son of the central household impregnates a servant girl, the participants are implicitly condemned for their moral failings. In both it is suggested that weak fathers (and thus a lack of firm parental moral guidance) are to blame for the sons' indiscretions, and, particularly in *The Rain*, that such laxity is the regrettable product of liberalization. Like his protagonist, Joss O'Brien, who rails impotently against the licentiousness of the modern generation at the end of the play, in these works Keane seems unable to fully accept the consequences of the sexual liberation which elsewhere he so adamantly endorses. Here, as in the case of Maggie's daughters, Keane's old-world sensibility, remarked upon by Barry Cassin in conversation with Smith and Hickey, reasserts itself: Smith and Hickey note that Cassin "detected ... a strong morality in Keane's works, perhaps an older morality, as for instance when Maggie smacks her daughter on the face for having spent the night with a man in a hotel. [Keane] had a way of making one aware of the moral points he was making" (145).

In his most recent play, *The Chastitute*, Keane's "older morality" collides with the contemporary world in a way which illuminates the playwright's fundamental ambiguity towards both sexuality and the moral state of modern Ireland. As noted above, the play is in part a platform for Keane's well-versed denunciation of Irish Catholic sexual repression. Lamenting his middle-aged virginity, John Bosco MacLaine blames it on his upbringing in a house dominated by an obsessively pious mother who "suffocated" his father with "repeated massive doses of rosaries and novenas" (46), in a village where it was "common practice" for mothers to sew rosary beads to their daughters' underwear to encourage chastity (10). Even John Bosco's confessor, the liberal Fr. Kimmerley, admits that their home, Tubberganban, is all too typical of other Irish villages where "enforced chastity is stifling life itself" (46).

However, even as Keane attacks the restrictive attitudes of the forties which continue to hold sway in some quarters of rural Ireland, it becomes equally clear that he hardly considers those of the sexually-permissive eighties, which have made inroads as far as places like Tubberbangan, an improvement. While John Bosco's immediate aim is to lose his virginity, his ultimate goal is marriage. All the women he meets, however, as O'Toole has noted, are either "frigid" or "fast," the latter being particularly unsuitable for the type of conventional marriage which Mickey Molloy, John Bosco's matchmaker, believes every man desires: "And what are we looking for? Sure isn't it only someone to make our beds and wet our tay and keep us company for the rest of our days with maybe a leg thrown over now and again?" (39). Speaking of "modern damsels," Mickey snorts. "They all wants the bull but none of them wants the calf"; John Bosco's Aunt Jane agrees, asserting that John "doesn't want one of these modern misses, one of these so-called libbers" (14). O'Toole's commentary on the play, quoted by Smith and Hickey, suggests that in such moments the play reveals and articulates Keane's own sense of disapproving bafflement at the liberalizing trend in Irish society:

> "the ravages of the new rampant sexuality are encountered by John Bosco in his search for a mate; indeed, sex has been loosed on the Irish countryside and has

> gone too far, denying unfortunate farmers like John Bosco the chance of happiness." ... O'Toole found the men in Keane's play "cornered, cowed and embittered" by the failure of women to play their parts.
>
> To O'Toole, the playwright was capable of exerting considerable force when he wrote about the old world of arranged marriages and simple peasants, but as the world became a more complex and difficult place, as the idea of a simple rural locality sheltered from outside interference vanished, [Keane] ended up with a cranky and bewildered despair. (206-07)

Indeed, a suggestion of Keane's despondency at the moral state of modern Ireland seems evident in one of John Bosco's ironic, self-deprecatory quips: "Hard to believe, isn't it, in this day and age with morals at their lowest ebb, that I have yet to have a woman?" (8).

As plays such as *The Chastitute*, *The Crazy Wall*, *The Rain at the End of the Summer*, and *Big Maggie* indicate, therefore, Keane's critique of Catholicism has consistently been tempered by an underlying moral orthodoxy. While from the beginning of his playwriting career Keane did not hesitate to attack Church-sponsored sexual repression, in the twenty years which separated *Sharon's Grave* and *The Chastitute*, as the sexual revolution which began in the sixties reached Ireland, Keane seems to have grown progressively more uneasy as he observed the scope of the changes it effected around him. Perhaps the most instructive way of qualifying Keane's achievement as a social commentator on sexual issues is to note that although he once declared, speaking of *Big Maggie*, that "there was much needless suffering and misunderstanding of relationships because of the attitude, religious and otherwise, towards sex in Ireland, most notably rural Ireland" (Roche, "John B. Keane" 32), Keane is also a "regular churchgoer" (Smith and Hickey 118) who has described himself as "a strong and perfect Christian" (*Self-Portrait* 5).

If Keane's work as a social critic has been weakened by his inability to put aside his personal reverence for the institution he originally set out to confront, the same might be said of his overtly political commentary. As exemplified by his involvement with the Language Freedom Movement and his clashes with the Gaelic Athletic Association, which once suspended him from participating in Gaelic games because he played rugby and spoke out against the GAA's ban on it and other "un-Irish" sports (Smith and Hickey 35), Keane has been a vocal opponent of orthodox Irish nationalism. Speaking of one of his publishers, Sean Feehan, Keane once observed that "He was very nationalistic; I was the opposite as I believed that nationalism can be divisive instead of a healing process" (Smith and Hickey 144). Keane's distaste for extremist nationalism is also evident in his satiric portrayal of the Padraic Pearse-like Sean Trean in *The Crazy Wall*. Trean is a caricature of bigoted, exclusionary Irish nationalism, given to spouting maxims such as "any Irishman who plays rugby is a swine" (60) and "Ireland divided will never be at peace" (58). At one point in the play, Keane's protagonist, Michael Barnett, assumes what sounds like the voice of the playwright as he upbraids Sean for displaying the "national failing" of "taking ourselves too seriously" (15).

While Keane has warned of the potential dangers and failings of an aggressive and chauvinistic nationalism, his work demonstrates that he is by no means unpatriotic. If anything, as his two most overtly political plays, *Many Young Men of Twenty* (1961) and *Hut 42* (1962), indicate, Keane's attempts to create politically provocative drama have been undermined by an excessive patriotism which often verges into sentimentality. Both plays constitute successful political theatre in that they explore important Irish political and social issues from an entrenched and combative critical perspective. In both cases, however, the effectiveness of Keane's polemic is diminished by his inability to avoid sentimentality, particularly in the context of his portrayal of the nation as a pure concept, a thing apart from and above the quotidian hypocrisies and political misdealings which he uses the plays to attack.

The tonal duality of *Many Young Men of Twenty* is suggested by the fact that it is, in what seems a rather peculiar mixture of style and subject matter, a musical about emigration. In one sense, as Robert Hogan has suggested, the play is "a bitterly moving plaint directed against the circumstances that force many young men of twenty to leave their country.... It criticizes greed for money, religious prudery, and the time-serving, pork-barreling, hypocritical politician" (*Irish Renaissance* 216). A trio of characters act as mouthpieces for this aspect of Keane's political commentary: Peg Finnerty, a barmaid and single mother; Maurice Browne, a cynical, outspoken village schoolmaster; and Danger Mulally, a transient seller of holy pictures. Between them, these characters score a number of hits on a variety of targets over the course of the play. One of Peg's speeches is a particularly effective attack on rural Irish petit-bourgeois snobbery and religious hypocrisy. In it, she urges all Irish servant girls, treated like slaves at home, to emigrate

> to England, where you'll be treated like a human being, where the boys of your own class earn as much as the schoolteachers here, and where you'll have a chance of marrying and dressing decently and where, when you go into a dancehall, you'll meet nice boys, not like the farmers' and the shopkeepers' sons and the university students of Ireland who want nothing from you but a good night of pleasure and who'd be ashamed of their sacred lives to talk to you in the street the day after. (393)

Maurice and Danger, meanwhile, rail against those, particularly the politicians in the Dail, who perpetuate the conditions which cause emigration. In one of the central speeches of the play, Maurice confronts T.D. J.J. Houlihan, blinkered nationalist and "pork-barreling hypocrite" extraordinaire:

> You're all blinded by the past. You're still fighting the civil war. Well, we don't give a tinker's curse about the civil war, or your damn politics, or the past. [It's] [t]he future we have to think about.... We're sick to death of hypocrisy and the glories of the past. Keep the Irish language and find jobs for the lads that have to go to England. Forget about the Six Counties and straighten out the twenty-six first. (404)

Almost certainly it was moments such as these which led one Dublin reviewer to suggest that "*Many Young Men of Twenty* is worth a half a dozen official reports and a hundred

political speeches. It should be compulsory viewing for every TD" (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 105).

While certain speeches in *Many Young Men of Twenty* may be politically charged and hard-hitting, Keane does not sustain his polemic over the course of the play. Peg's proto-Marxist critique of rural Irish society, for example, is abandoned almost as soon as it is broached, and while Keane may validly blame nationalist politicians obsessed with the battles of the past for the tragedy of emigration (as noted in the previous chapter, nationalist policies had inhibited economic growth since independence, leading to massive emigration in the forties and fifties), Keane offers no real solutions to the problem. More seriously, however, the impact of Keane's commentary is frequently deflated by retreats into sentimentality, perhaps most notably in the play's final moments. To the strains of the play's theme song, "Many Young Men of Twenty," a chorus line of emigrants bound for England forms on the stage and joins Peg in singing Keane's plaintive lyrics:

> Many young men of twenty said goodbye.
> They left the mountain and the glen,
> The lassies and the fine young men;
> I saw the tears of every girl and boy
> Many young men of twenty said goodbye (412)

At such moments emigration becomes the stuff of maudlin personal pathos, threatening to obscure the point which elsewhere in the play Keane has taken considerable pains to underline: that emigration is a national economic phenomenon with political causes and solutions.

Moreover, Keane ultimately sidesteps his own critique of nationalism by problematically depoliticizing the concept of "Ireland" as nation. As the play closes, Danger, who has also decided to leave for England, observes that he and his fellow emigrants "are not the first and we will not be the last.... Don't blame poor oul' Ireland but blame the hypocrites that brought us to this pass" (412). Danger's admonition is predicated on three assumptions: that "poor oul' Ireland," the nation as object of sentimental reverence, is something distinct from the political and institutional machinery which constitutes "Ireland" as a political entity; that this sentimentalized Ireland of the imagination is fundamentally sound; and that the solution to the real (as opposed to the imagined) Ireland's problems is simply a matter of rooting out "the hypocrites that brought us to this pass." Of course, Danger's (and by extension Keane's) idealized, hypocrite-free "Ireland" is a fanciful fiction, a sentimentalized projection which allows him to criticize official nationalism and blame Ireland's woes on a relatively select few, while retaining an essential belief in the sanctity of "Ireland" as nation and ignoring elements of the Irish character which bear as much responsibility as the "hypocrites" for Ireland's problems.

To a certain degree Danger himself embodies some of these qualities. As his name suggests, Danger is the play's most subversive figure, a drifter on the margins of society who flings well-aimed barbs at anyone, particularly those in the establishment, whom he considers guilty of perpetuating the crime of emigration. He supports himself, however,

by selling holy pictures to heartbroken departing emigrants as souvenirs of Ireland. As an unabashedly staunch Catholic (he professes his great love for Christ in a maudlin--and apparently completely unironic--scene which begins Act II of the play), Danger represents the restrictive religious orthodoxy which Peg hints is partially responsible for driving young men from Ireland: "'Tis stories about prostitutes and easy money that carries half of 'em over there" (384). And as an opportunist who profits from emigration, even as he condemns it and is moved to tears by the sight of London-bound emigrants leaving their families at the train station, Danger symbolizes the official attitude of a nation which denounced emigration as a national tragedy, yet was highly dependent on the infusions of currency it provided (in the form of money sent home by emigrants) to bolster its struggling economy. As in the case of Big Maggie Polpin, whom he would create some years later, it seems doubtful whether Keane realized how fully Danger was implicated within the very institutional and societal structures he was apparently intended to subvert.

Hut 42 shares both the theme of *Many Young Men of Twenty* and its inconsistencies as a work of political theatre. Keane's subject is again emigration, this time explored from the perspective of a group of Irish labourers at a work site in England (notably, *Hut 42* is Keane's only play set outside Ireland). Once again, Keane uses the play to denounce emigration, but, as in *Many Young Men of Twenty*, his ultimate reluctance to criticize "poor oul' Ireland" undermines his attack. Like Danger Mulally, Skylight Maglinty, Keane's protagonist in *Hut 42*, is in some respects a shrewd and trenchant critic of Irish politics and society. As was true of Danger, however, Skylight's sharpest criticisms are frequently mitigated almost immediately by sentiment. At one point early in the play Skylight bitterly observes, "We've got churches in every village that cost a hundred thousand quid, but there's no money for factories" (7). Seconds later, however, when a Welsh colleague challenges him to explain why he wishes to return to Ireland, Skylight waxes sentimental: "Because it's our home! Because it's where we were born and no matter how much we criticize it, we love it--we love the cursed spot, and that's all we think about from mornin' till night" (7). In a similar moment later in the play Skylight retreats after initiating a second attack on Ireland's failure to care for its own. Immediately after he argues that "a country ... should be judged by the provision it makes for its sons," and that "If Ireland is to be judged like a parent, it must be convicted on every count," Skylight concedes that "I'd give all I have to go home again for good" (19). Keane's treatment of Skylight's brief and highly ambivalent moments of dissent thus substantiates D.E.S. Maxwell's description of *Hut 42* as a play which "takes up urgent themes" but "sentimentalizes the exile, his drunken heart of gold and 'love of a small home in Ireland'" (*Irish Drama* 169).

The play's most telling scene, the one which best exemplifies Keane's reluctance to deal in any substantive manner with some of the serious issues *Hut 42* raises, occurs as Skylight and his homesick fellow emigrant labourers reminisce longingly about Ireland. When one of the men asks the play's villain, Darby Hogan, what he would be doing were he in Ireland at that moment, Hogan, whom Skylight regards as the sort of unsavoury character who gives Irishmen a bad name in England, explodes with pent-up rage:

> I'd be in the dirty loft o' some farmer's house, an' I'd be hungry, 'cos there's no bloody farmer in Ireland goin' to give you enough to eat ... an' I'd be sick to the gills with farmers who think that anyone who works for them should be treated like cattle .... I'd be thinkin' I'd jump out o' bed an' break into the room where the farmer was sleepin' with his wife. I'd be thinkin' that maybe I'd catch the farmer by the hair o' the head inside the bed an' cut his gad, an' gattle his missus for spite. (26)

Skylight's "That's enough o' that" (26) is the only response any of the men offer to this speech, and, moments later, with Hogan gone, all join in a hearty Cork song about "Mary Anne Fitzgibbon" who "Got her knickers torn to ribbons/... the night the goat broke loose on the Parade" (27). Hogan's brief disruption of the otherwise sentimental scene is quickly glossed over, his intimations that exploitation and class conflict are inherent to the structure of rural Irish society ignored by the other characters and apparently deemed too inflammatory by Keane. As in the case of Peg Finnerty's attacks on the rural bourgeoisie, Keane muzzles Hogan after his only outburst, suggesting the playwright could not validate, and did not know quite what to do with, or how to control, the subversive force he had momentarily unleashed.

Keane's ultimate failure to address the troublesome issues raised by Hogan and Skylight effectively is perhaps not surprising given the simplistic solution which he proposed elsewhere to the larger problem of emigration. In his 1964 autobiography, *Self-Portrait*, Keane, who himself emigrated to England for a time in his youth, adopted the words of Skylight Maglinty to counsel those considering emigration:

> The solution is--don't go! Stay at home. We are your people and this is your country.
>
> We--the ones at home--are responsible for you.
>
> A country is like a parent. It must provide for its children, so stay at home, and when the urge which is part of the heritage of the Irish race takes hold of you, plant your feet firmly on your own soil and don't go. (35)

While Keane's patriotic advice may have tugged at the heartstrings of prospective emigrants, it is unlikely to have offered much comfort to the landless young man or woman languishing in chronic unemployment. Keane's proposed solution is no real solution at all. Like his attempts to define and confront the problem in *Many Young Men of Twenty* and *Hut 42*, it is overly simplistic and overly emotional.

Possibly the most interesting and illuminating assessment of *Hut 42* was penned by an anonymous critic writing for the *Cork Examiner*. In a positive review of the opening night of the play's Cork run, which followed a three week stint at the Abbey, the critic suggested possible reasons for the play's cool reception by Dublin critics. The resulting commentary says much not only about *Hut 42*, but also about *Many Young Men of Twenty* and, indeed, Keane's entire *oeuvre*:

> Not having seen the Abbey production I cannot say why the work did not please then as it did last night. I suspect, however, that the lightness of direction evident last night might have been lacking in Dublin and that the rich humour of the work might have been lost in an attempt to paint the social problems on which the play

> is loosely founded. Which would be a mistake with this work. Keane is an entertainer, not that he does not have many pertinent comments to make: he has, and he writes his messages but does not trespass in the realm of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. He is an entertainer, not a purveyor of messages. (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 112-13).

This statement goes a long way towards explaining the popularity of Keane's plays and the occasionally unexpected reception some of his most serious works have garnered. As in the case of the Cork critic's review of *Hut 42*, there have been other instances in which some of Keane's weightiest writing on "social problems" has provoked laughter: in past productions of *The Field*, audiences frequently guffawed at the scene in which the Bull McCabe whispers an Act of Contrition into William Dee's ear shortly after murdering him (Smith and Hickey 207); Keane's purportedly serious attempt at feminist drama, *The Change in Mame Fadden*, was perceived (not unjustifiably, unfortunately) as a comedy on many of the nights it was played (Smith and Hickey 176); and Gerry Sullivan, one of the actors who appeared in the original production of *Big Maggie*, has confessed that while he "got the impression that John B. regarded [*Big Maggie*] as a serious commentary on aspects of Irish life, especially marriage," audiences loved the "comic bits" and he himself was inclined to see the play as "a tragi-comedy with moral undertones" (Smith and Hickey 162-63). Such reactions, which would seem to offer support for the *Cork Examiner* critic's appraisal of Keane, suggest that the serious subjects of these works were mishandled by Keane or by his interpreters in production, or, perhaps more significantly, that audiences were predisposed to expect a certain kind of writing from Keane, that even when the playwright attempted to be a "purveyor of messages," his reputation as "entertainer," as a primarily comic writer of folk drama, preceded him.

To a great extent, this is a problem which Keane has brought upon himself. As a garrulous public figure and a playwright nurtured by the amateur theatre movement, Keane has unabashedly courted the approval of large, popular audiences. Keane's popularity, however, almost certainly cannot be explained solely as the product of his willingness, as one disdainful critic of his lightweight comedy *Moll* put it, to "[pander] to the public's lowest common denominator" (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 180). Rather, Keane's popularity suggests that his works successfully tapped into the Irish public's collective consciousness, appealing to contrasting elements of a national sensibility which, during a period of revolutionary change, was profoundly schizophrenic.

On the one hand, Keane's plays captured the mood of change afoot in the nation by seizing the moment to articulate, in a way that had not been possible before, the populace's longstanding resentments towards the twin icons of Church and State, which had dominated and controlled life in Ireland for generations. While Keane's attacks on these hegemonic institutions have always been highly qualified and far from radical, his works nonetheless have acted as a forum in which expressions of dissent against the prevailing orthodoxies have been aired and debated, however tentatively. In this respect, his plays broke new ground, and were, in the words of one observer, "therapeutic": "one

of the secrets of [Keane's] popular success was that he wrote about subjects that people up to then only talked about privately" (Smith and Hickey 168).

On the other hand, the essential, underlying conservatism of Keane's work in terms of both subject matter and ideology, its evocation of a simple folk past and its suspicious stance towards the modern world and its values, played upon the natural apprehensions of those only reluctantly adapting to change. For those who wished to subscribe to De Valera's vision of Ireland as a last refuge from the "filthy modern tide," Keane's folk plays offered the lamentable last glimpse of the authentic, or, in Hogan's phrase,[3] "Hidden Ireland," the shamrock Ireland in which life was "richer and larger and basically more Irish than life in the modern Dublin" (*Since O'Casey* 39). While Keane's plays may have been embraced by many because they enshrined the past as a bulwark against an uncertain future, they were rejected by others for precisely the same reason. As Barry Cassin has suggested, in the wake of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms, those who were working to transform Ireland into a progressive, cosmopolitan European state found in Keane's plays an all too embarrassing reminder of the backwardness they were fleeing: "... there was a certain intellectual snobbishness, a feeling in urban circles that we should be striving to get away from our roots. In the 1960s, people had become self-conscious about their roots, and to them Keane's plays recalled a peasant past" (Smith and Hickey 209). Playwright Aodhan Madden has offered similar reasons to explain the snubbing of Keane by the Dublin elite:

> He was raw, unsubtle, sentimental, his plays furrowed muddy tracks into neurotic Irish consciousness.... Our self-delusion could better be served by imitations of Syngian romanticism or the mean city angst of Beckett. Keane was plastic statues and bar room bathos. *Sive* was thus deemed irrelevant; arranged marriages just didn't happen any more in Gay Byrne's Ireland. And how could the Bull McCabe fit comfortably into the tarmacadam of EC-subsidised farming? (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 220)

While Keane's works remained popular outside Dublin, as Smith and Hickey observed, "During the 1970s, it was noticeable that he was finding it difficult to fill the big Dublin theatres with his new plays, as he had done in the 1960s" (201).

By the mid 1980s, however, Keane's plays had gained a new measure of critical acceptance. The rehabilitation of his reputation was signalled most obviously by the Ben Barnes-directed revivals of *Sive*, *The Field*, and *Big Maggie* at the Abbey, the theatre which had rejected his plays so often in the past. The first of the revivals, *Sive*, opened in June, 1985 and, in the words of Smith and Hickey, "was ecstatically received by an audience that in the main consisted of a new generation of young playgoers. It proved an auspicious first night with the professional theatre strongly represented, along with leading civic and business figures" (215). One suspects that the passage of time was responsible for rendering Keane fashionable, that by 1985 the Ireland depicted in Keane's plays was virtually extinct, no longer the primitive "Hidden Ireland" which had been a gauche affront to cosmopolitan sensibilities. The "new generation" could thus look to Keane for a window to the nation's folkloric past, while those old enough to remember that past could turn to his plays to feed their nostalgia for what they remembered as

simpler times. If, as the following chapters will suggest, the works of playwrights such as Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy engage more fully with Ireland's new realities and better articulate the condition of contemporary Irishness, Keane's theatre speaks eloquently of the past and of the difficulty of Ireland's transition to postmodernity. In Fintan O' Toole's words, for Irish audiences, Keane's plays "tell us a lot about how we got to be where we are now" (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 219).

Notes

1. The other exception is, of course, Jim Sheridan's 1990 film adaptation of *The Field*, which garnered international acclaim largely on the strength of Richard Harris' Best Actor Oscar nomination. Sheridan's screenplay, however, diverged substantially from Keane's text.

2. Cf. these comments from *The Cork Examiner*'s review of the play's opening night: "Big Maggie is a character which one will admire and hate.... But it must be said that Keane has with tremendous honesty enquired into how an older generation and a younger can hope to live on a limited holding and even how we can expect to discard some of our most revered shibboleths and replace them with pragmatic valuations" (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 163).

3. A phrase in turn derived from the title of Daniel Corkery's monograph *The Hidden Ireland.*

"New Mind Over Old Matter": The Theatre of Tom Murphy

> I believe in the individuality of races and cultures *and* I believe in internationalism; they are not contradictory. I believe that nationalism is an elemental and dangerous emotion, intrinsic to us all: but I believe that it is more dangerous not to acknowledge it or to pretend otherwise.
>
> --Tom Murphy, "Introduction" to *Plays: One*, 1992

A rejection of the binary opposition of nationalism and internationalism, and of the related paired terms tradition and postmodernity, lies at the heart of Tom Murphy's drama. Over the course of his career as a playwright, Murphy has critically dissected these concepts, revealing their inadequacies and failures and, concomitantly, the myopia of the people or nation which unquestioningly adopts them as its dominant ideological imperative or *raison d'etre*. While it in many respects looks beyond the borders of Ireland, Murphy's critique is grounded in a specific analysis of the Irish context, and charts, as Fintan O'Toole has asserted, an "inner history of Ireland since the momentous changes which were set in motion in 1959" (*Politics* 16). Murphy's early works, written in the first years of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms, before the impact of the new initiatives was widely felt, examine as their subject the rural, provincial Ireland of De Valera, the Ireland of Murphy's youth. These plays, *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), *On the Outside* (1962), *Famine* (1968), *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant* (1969), and *The Morning After Optimism* (1971), register a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the restrictions and deprivations of the time, and constitute a scathing attack on the discourse of official nationalism and those icons it held dear: rural life, genteel poverty, the Church, and Ireland's heroic but tragic past. Murphy's emphasis in these works is on the violence and repression implicit in the attempt to impose a unified, structuring vision on the nation, and on the artificiality and untenability of the vision that had been chosen.

As the hegemony of official nationalism was challenged and eroded in the years following the reforms, Murphy's focus shifted from the violence of enforced homogenization to the disjunctive realities of fragmentation and disruption. With the opening of Ireland's economy and culture to outside influences, the progress of urbanization and industrialization, and the growing (if yet marginal) resistance to the stranglehold exerted over the population by a slowly modernizing but still conservative Church, Ireland entered the postmodern era. From *The Morning After Optimism* and *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1974) on, Murphy's works become less concerned with exposing the failings of the old Ireland and instead concentrate increasingly on what it means to live in the new Ireland. The imaginative terrain of these plays is the contemporary Republic, a nation in which the dominant values of the post-independence period are quickly being supplanted by new ones--materialism, internationalism, secularism--antithetical to the old. For Murphy, the death of official nationalism and the ascendancy of the new order, while in some respects liberating, has not come without a price. The characters of his later plays are displaced inhabitants of a depthless, deracinated, and dehistoricized Ireland, lost souls searching for an identity in a nation which has lost its own and no longer resembles

home. Ironically, these works suggest that the postmodern era's lack of structure is in some respects as limiting and debilitating as the strictly regimented structure previously imposed on Irish life by the coercively homogenizing imperatives of official nationalism.

Significantly, in these plays Murphy is not content merely to expose Ireland's postmodern malaise, but also to explore the dynamics of how it might be overcome, at both individual and national levels. Murphy's unwillingness to tolerate any form of restriction of individual freedoms and his unwavering belief in the human capacity to transcend confinement are clearly evident in dramas such as *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *The Gigli Concert* (1983), and *Bailegangaire* (1985), plays in which the dispossessed and broken attain some measure of integration and hope for the future through heroic acts of willed transformation. In this sense Murphy's later plays are less about the dehumanizing consequences of life in the postmodern world than they are about the redemptive power of the human potential to change our material and spiritual conditions of being.

Elements of the reading of Murphy's *oeuvre* outlined above have been proffered by various critics of his work, most cogently and definitively by O'Toole in his insightful and meticulous monograph *The Politics of Magic: The Work and Times of Tom Murphy*.[1] My goal has been to build on and depart from the work of O'Toole and other critics of Murphy by exploring previously neglected dimensions of his drama in light of their conclusions. More specifically, I have attempted to extend O'Toole's analysis by situating Murphy's work within the context of contemporary debates about postmodernity, particularly within Ireland. This chapter examines Murphy as a playwright who (unlike his contemporary Keane) fully acknowledges and engages with the social and material changes Ireland has experienced in recent decades, but who defies the ethic of postmodernism (in particular the notion of "the death of the subject" [Jameson 114]) by positing the autonomy of the individual subject, ascribing to his characters an individuated and knowable identity as well as the capacity to transform themselves and their environments. In discussing this and other aspects of Murphy's drama I have also concentrated more extensively on the theatrical elements of Murphy's plays than have previous critics, examining his use of dramatic form, particularly as it relates to the Irish dramatic tradition, as integral to the explorations of nationalism and contemporary issues of identity which are central to his works.

Although Murphy's drama is in some respects the product of an Irish tradition, its formal eclecticism marks a definite break with this tradition's dominant mode--Abbey-style naturalism--and signifies Murphy's transcendence of the historic insularity of the Irish theatre. Unlike dramatists such as Keane, who modelled their works almost exclusively on those of previous generations of Irish playwrights, Murphy has looked to both Irish and non-Irish writers for inspiration. His list of acknowledged influences includes Synge, O'Casey, and M.J. Molloy (O'Toole, *Politics of Magic* 28), but was initially headed by Lorca (whom he has called "my favorite playwright") and Tennessee Williams (Hickey and Smith 226). Indeed, Murphy has admitted that, due to a youthful bias against all things Irish, "It took me 20 years to discover geniuses like Synge and O'Casey" (Renton 11).

Critics have responded to Murphy's melding of elements of form and style drawn from the Irish and international theatre by emphasizing the innovative and cosmopolitan qualities of his drama. Recognizing that Murphy's theatre does not fit easily under the rubric of Irish drama as it has conventionally been defined, critics have been inclined to employ adjectives like "European" and "international" to describe his work, a tendency typified by Michael Etherton's labelling of Murphy as "above all else, a European Irish playwright" (108). To cite only two among numerous examples, an early review of *The Gigli Concert* praised the play as one that "will ultimately secure Mr. Murphy's status and reputation as an international playwright of the first rank" (Hadfield 5). Similarly, O'Toole has called *The Sanctuary Lamp* "a European play of considerable importance" (*Politics of Magic* 158) and described its "essential nature," along with that of *The Gigli Concert* and *The Morning After Optimism*, as "European theatre, playing on and with a set of European cultural archetypes" ("Introduction," *Plays: Three* xi).

O'Toole's observation points to the complex and wide-ranging network of associations embedded in many of Murphy's plays, which include allusions to such diverse and abstruse intellectual and cultural pursuits as Jungian psychology (as explored in *The Morning After Optimism* and other plays) (Lanters 484-5; O'Toole, "*Homo Absconditus*" 97); Hollywood gangster movies of the forties and fifties (*The Blue Macushla* [1980]); Italian opera (*The Gigli Concert*); and Shopenhauerian metaphysics (*Too Late for Logic* [1989]). The cosmopolitan nature of Murphy's allusions alone distinguishes his theatre from that of dramatists such as Keane, whose plays are constructed almost solely on a foundation of specifically Irish cultural associations and thus presume an overwhelmingly Irish audience. By situating Ireland within the context of global culture and resisting the parochialism of official nationalism, which attempted to define Ireland as a nation and culture distinct and separate from the rest of the world. Murphy's plays address a wider audience, both Irish and non-Irish. His approach to even the most Irish of subjects, Ireland's history, has been governed by his global perspective, as indicated by his ability to draw parallels between American gangsterism and the turmoil of 1970s Ireland in *The Blue Macushla*, and between Ireland's Great Famine and the other European famines of the nineteenth century which he researched while working on *Famine* (Murphy, "Introduction" x).

The internationalism of Murphy's theatre is also indicated by the sheer volume and range of comparisons which have been drawn between his works and those of major world dramatists. In discussions of Murphy's *oeuvre* and individual plays, critics have related his dramaturgy to that of the ancient Greek tragedians (Roche, *Irish Drama* 135; O'Toole, *Politics of Magic* 145-46), Shakespeare (Roche, *Irish Drama* 144; O'Toole, "Introduction," *Plays Three* xi), Ibsen (O'Toole, *Politics* 104), Chekov (Griffin, "Produced" 18; O'Toole, *Politics* 104), Eugene O'Neill (Mason 103-04; Roche "*Bailegangaire*" 114), Tennessee Williams (Mason 103-04), Arthur Miller (Roche "*Bailegangaire*" 114), Brecht (O'Toole, *Politics* 94), Lorca (Lanters), Sartre (O'Toole, "Introduction," *Plays: Two* xii), the British "New Wave" dramatists, especially John Osborne (Murray, "Rough and Holy" 12), Sam Shepard (Roche, *Irish Drama* 145), Edward Albee (Murray, *After Tragedy* viii), and, particularly, Beckett[2] and Pinter.[3] The

length and variety of this list speaks both to the desire of critics to pin readily-identifiable labels on Murphy and, ironically, to the difficulty of categorizing his work.[4] That Murphy has been cast as everything from a latter-day Aeschylus or nineteenth-century social realist like Ibsen to an existentialist absurdist in the tradition of Sartre, Beckett, Pinter, Albee, and Shepard points to the undeniable eclecticism of his theatre, the quality which led Robert Hogan to comment in 1982 that "it is impossible to predict what a new Murphy play will be like" (*Since O'Casey* 137). This eclecticism lends Murphy's plays a dimension of cosmopolitanism in the sense that they frequently evoke the formal and stylistic hallmarks of such diverse international artistic/dramatic movements as expressionism, epic theatre, and absurdism. Murphy's propensity for formal experimentation, for infusing and merging conventional Irish naturalism with elements of these other dramatic genres, indicates both the breadth of his dramatic vision and his dissatisfaction with the limitations of naturalism.

Murphy's rebellion against naturalism was consciously undertaken, as illustrated by a frequently quoted anecdote about the origin of his first play, *On the Outside*. Murphy has revealed that the first decision he and Noel O'Donoghue, his friend and collaborator, made in the course of planning their prospective drama was to reject the conventional Irish setting:

> In 1959 I was standing, one night, in the square at Tuam [his birthplace]. My best, and oldest, friend asked: "How much have you on you?" And I replied: "About half a dollar,"--two and six--so we agreed to write a play, saying: "One thing's for sure, it's not going to be set in a [fucking] kitchen." In the course of five or ten minutes we had five characters and a setting outside a dance hall. (Renton 11)

As Thomas Kilroy has suggested, Murphy and O'Donoghue's vehement repudiation of the kitchen setting indicates the degree to which, by this time, "The peasant play and its cramped setting had come to stand for everything that was outmoded in the Irish theatre" ("Generation" 139). Although quite possibly facetious, Murphy's comments concerning his and O'Donoghue's financial impetus for writing *On the Outside* hint that their reasons for eschewing the archetypal kitchen were grounded not only in their belief that the peasant play was hackneyed and exhausted, but also in possible ideological objections to the form. As a genre which owed its origin to the nationalist movement's interest in presenting rural life as the touchstone and exemplar of Irish existence, the peasant play all too often romanticized and valorized rural Ireland by depicting it as a pastoral Gaelic paradise. For penniless and disaffected rural youths like Murphy and O'Donoghue, for whom emigration was frequently the only feasible response to the dearth of employment opportunities at home, such an image of the Irish countryside must have seemed vastly and hypocritically out of step with its deprived realities.

The peasant play also tended to be highly selective in terms of the filters through which it presented its vision of rural Ireland. Typically, its protagonists were either farmers or shopkeepers, the most affluent members of the rural community (aside from a limited number of professionals), whose lives were dramatized within the naturalistic confines of the domestic spaces which signified their status: the farmhouse and the shop. While privileging those classes which were the pillars of post-independence rural society,

such representations largely effaced the poor, landless underclass. O'Toole cites Murphy's concern for these people, whose interests were marginal to the Abbey-dominated theatre establishment's bourgeois conception of nationalism, as one of the primary ways in which Murphy's "vision of Ireland was totally counter to the [Abbey's] ideology" (*Politics* 43).

As more than one critic has observed, Murphy's early plays in particular are driven by a palpable sense of frustration at the distorting images of Ireland perpetuated by official nationalism through the medium of the mainstream Irish theatre. Christopher Murray has stated that "Murphy's early plays can be seen as a young playwright's angry contention not only with the society which he found inert and stultified but with the theatrical tradition which in its conventionality merely endorsed the same inertia" ("Rough and Holy" 11). Anthony Roche has similarly observed that these plays "register an increasing dissatisfaction with either the well-bred bourgeois domestic setting or the peasant cottage kitchen as equally demeaning and distorting theatrical stereotypes" (*Irish Drama* 7). In these works, Murphy's reaction against tradition and its ideological trappings is expressed not only through his rejection of conventional settings, but also through his choice of protagonists: the main characters of these plays are not farmers or shopkeepers, but "townies," landless, working-class residents of small towns who, according to O'Toole's definition, are not members of "the agricultural economy of the country" (*Politics* 33); notably, this is the class to which Murphy himself belonged (Waters 26).

Both elements of Murphy's break with tradition are incorporated in the formal qualities of *On the Outside*. As its title suggests, the play unfolds not within any domesticized space, but in the open air, in this case outside a dance hall in the countryside. Although ostensibly free, this space is nonetheless clearly controlled and politicized: Murphy's protagonists, Frank and Joe, who work at the factory in town, are barred admission to the dance they dearly wish to enter because of their inability to pay the cover charge. Their poverty underscores a larger sense of exclusion which they, as "townies," experience in the form of discrimination: when they attempt to con their way into the dance hall (with its attendant associations of pastoral utopia), they are caught out and forcibly ejected by a bouncer who challenges them with the classist insult. "Maybe you're two good men, hah? ... Townies." After the bouncer leaves, Frank observes. "These buffers will soon object to us walking on the roads. He wouldn't be so tough in town" (198). O'Toole's reading of this moment is instructive, pointing to the way Murphy's text reveals fractures in the facade of nationalist unity:

> In this exchange there is the sense of a deep division between town and country: the Bouncer, on his own rural territory, defeats Frank and Joe; if they were to get him on their territory, the town, the positions would be reversed. This is an antagonism between two neighbouring countries, a state of undeclared war within the nation that goes against every assumption of nationalism. (*Politics* 33)

By exposing this antagonism, O'Toole suggests, Murphy subverts one of the central tropes of nationalist literature: "That the Irish countryside should be an alien place for two young Irishmen is itself a startling breach with the conventions of Irish literature since the

Revival, in which the countryside is the essential Ireland, the natural habitat of the Irishman" (*Politics* 31).

In this sense, *On the Outside* unveils the extent to which nationalist constructions of Ireland and Irish identity were patently fanciful and exclusionary, dependent on a willful blindness to certain unpleasant truths. This message was reinforced by Murphy's next play (although his first to be produced), *A Whistle in the Dark*, and by its reception. *A Whistle* is Murphy's uncompromisingly brutal portrait of a dysfunctional family of Mayo "townies," the Carneys, now living in Coventry, England, where they survive by way of petty crime and brawling. When considered at a superficial level, the play in some respects seems to confirm the worst stereotypes of the drunken, quarrelsome, simian "Paddie," as indicated by the reactions of some English theatre critics to the play's first production at Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in 1961 (O'Toole, *Politics* 10). Notably, English audiences were the first to see the play only because it had previously been rejected by the Abbey's managing director, Ernest Blythe, under circumstances related by O'Toole: "Blythe replied to Murphy on behalf of the Abbey not merely with a rejection slip, but with an abusive denunciation. The characters of the pnay, he said, were unreal, and its atmosphere was incredible. He did not believe that such people as were to appear in *A Whistle* existed in Ireland" (*Politics* 42). When the play finally reached the Dublin stage after its success in London, Blythe was heard to remark to a companion on leaving the theatre, "I never saw such rubbish in my life" (Roche, *Irish Drama* 133). As O'Toole has suggested in remarking on Blythe's incredulous reaction to the play, "In a sense, Blythe was right. Such people did not exist in the Ireland of nationalist ideology to which Blythe most fervently belonged" (*Politics* 42). Many others shared his view for the same reasons, among them a number of theatre critics:

> While some of the critical reaction was positive and perceptive, much of it was informed by the notion that there were no such people in Ireland and that if there were, to show them was to demean the theatre. Des Rushe, writing in the *Irish Independent*, said of the Dublin production that "My ultimate reaction to Thomas Murphy's savage play ... was one of nausea, and I do not think the theatre is an institution which should nauseate.... There are in short no real human beings [in the play]. (O'Toole, *Politics* 11-12)

That Rushe's distaste for *A Whistle* seems to have been rooted not only in patriotic outrage at Murphy's depiction of his characters, but also in a sort of prudish perplexity at the play's unsettling dramaturgy, provides a measure of how far Murphy had gone in violating the formal conventions of Irish theatre as part of his critique of nationalism. Perhaps the most strikingly original qualities of the play (at least when it is considered in the context of the Irish dramatic tradition) lie in its language and the level of violence, both explicit and implicit, which permeates it.

The characters of *A Whistle* speak in a manner which was unprecedented in Irish theatre at the time the play was written. Like the characters of Pinter's early plays, and unlike the typically loquacious protagonists of Irish plays from Christy Mahon onwards, their sentences are forced, fractured, ungrammatical, sprinkled with highly particularized colloquialisms and guttural noises, and heavily punctuated by dashes and ellipses which

suggest the difficulty of their struggle to express themselves. In a play which focuses on class conflict and the centrality of class divisions to Irish nationalism, the inarticulacy of the Carneys is an obvious sign of their social and economic dispossession, one of the marks which distinguishes them from their "betters."

Dada, the family patriarch, ex-Gardai officer and now menial labourer, is more keenly aware of this than his offspring, as evident in his labourious and comic attempts to speak a "correct" version of "standard" English, and in his self-deluded efforts to convince others that he has garnered the favour of the more prosperous citizens of his town through his professed command of Irish: "I'm fluent at it. Many's the conversation I have at home with John Quinlan. You know, John, the doctor. And Anthony Heneghan--he's an architect. At the club. And often, for the sport of it, we talk nothing but Irish all night. At the club" (26). Once the language of the common people, Irish, "one of the great badges of nationalism" (O'Toole, *Politics* 53), has become a mark of privilege, betraying the bourgeois principles at the nationalist movement's core. For Dada, who naively subscribes to what O'Toole has called "the dream of nationalist Ireland, the dream of a country in which the common name of Irishman would serve to diminish differences of class and status" (*Politics* 53), fluency, particularly in Irish, represents a means of transcending the class boundaries which have relegated him to the status of outcast and of attaining an equal footing with his "betters." As O'Toole has argued, in believing that these boundaries can ever be crossed, let alone so easily, Dada is sadly deceived, in a manner which parallels Ireland's unquestioning belief in the unifying myths of nationalism:

> Dada's drinking with the doctor and the architect is an attempt to live out this supposed unity.... The image of architect, doctor and dosser discoursing through the night in fluent Gaelic and drinking heartily at the golf club is a risible and pathetic fantasy which is the product not just of Dada's delusions of grandeur. but also of a whole nation's political delusions (*Politics* 53-54).

O'Toole has described *A Whistle in the Dark* as "a specifically post-nationalist play" based on its consistent refusal to accede to the nationalist vision and its repeated foregrounding of "the sense of irreconcilable division between different kinds of Irishman [*sic*]" (*Politics* 54). Dada has become aware of the fixity of these divisions after being offered the job of caretaker at the club, a position which he considers beneath him. The illusion of fraternity which he had come to believe in shattered, Dada's veneer of "civilized" language collapses, overwhelmed by inarticulate rage:

> I hate! I hate the world! It all! ... But I'll get them! I'll get them! By the sweet. living, and holy Virgin Mary, I'll shatter them! They accepted me. They drank with me. I made good conversation. Then, at their whim, a little pip-squeak of an architect can come along and offer me the job as caretaker. To clean up after him! But I'll--I'll--Do you hear me? I hate! ... (60-61)

Like the slogans of nationalism, Dada's cultured facade is proven false. even as his bombastic threats resound with hollowness. Beyond a mere failure to make language work for him, however, Dada's words reveal a fundamental inability to understand and articulate his state of dispossession. That this is a condition common to all the Carneys

becomes clear when Harry, perhaps the most perceptive of the brothers, finds himself unable to name or define in anything more than the vaguest terms those responsible for creating the hierarchy which oppresses him. When pressed to identify the "they" who are united against him, he can only respond, "they--they--they--they--THEM! Them shams! You all know who I'm talking about. You know them" (44). The impotence of Harry's stammering attempt to name his enemies signals a failure not just of words but of perception and comprehension, an inability to recognize the appropriate external target for his rage.

Powerless to find and strike back against "them," the Carneys turn their anger inwards, attacking their fellows in the community and one another in a manner which further reveals the fractures in nationalism's facade of Irish unity. Significantly, although reviled as emigrant "Paddies" in Coventry, the Carney's main antagonists are not the historic enemy, the English, but rather a fellow family of Irish emigrants, the Mulryans, against whom the Carneys wage an ongoing clan war. The illogicality of this type of internecine division in the face of a common foe is underlined when, as part of the Carneys' celebration of a great victory over the Mulryans, Dada, completely oblivious to the irony of his words, sings "The Boys from the County Mayo," a ballad which sentimentalizes the plight of the deracinated Irish emigrant by calling for a united front against the oppressor:

> Far away from the land of the shamrock and heather,
> In search of a living as exiles we roam,
> And whenever we chance to assemble together,
> We think of the land where we once had a home.
> But those homes are destroyed and our land confiscated,
> The hand of the tyrant brought plunder and woe....
> So, boys, stick together in all kinds of weather.
> Don't show the white feather wherever you go;
> Be each as a brother and love one another,
> Like stout-hearted men from the County Mayo. (69)

The irony of the ballad becomes even more apparent when, shortly afterwards, the Carney brothers begin to brawl with one another, a fight which ends with the eldest Carney, Michael, accidentally killing the youngest, Des.

Murphy's use of song in this moment offers a striking and instructive contrast to Keane's in *Hut 42*, one which suggests an underlying distinction which distinguishes their work as political playwrights. While in *A Whistle* and *Hut 42* Murphy and Keane both dramatize the situation of the Irish emigrant in England as a means of critiquing official nationalism, Keane uses song as a retreat from his tentatively-advanced barbs, ultimately papering over his attacks on the nation through the romanticized vision of Ireland expressed in Skylight Maglinty's songs. In Murphy's hands, however, the similarly sentimental "Boys from the County Mayo" is proffered as an exemplar of nationalist rhetoric's hypocritical and shallow attempt to impose a false image of unity and fraternity on a nation riven by internal divisions, primarily of class.

Murphy's refusal to capitulate to the naive political vision of the song also in some measure signifies his break with the type of naturalism typically found in the works of playwrights such as Keane. Murphy has admitted that after vowing not to set his first play in "the traditional Irish kitchen ... I didn't go much further when I set [*A Whistle*] in an English kitchen" (Hickey & Smith 226). As Anthony Roche has suggested, however, the contempt with which the younger Carneys treat the set (the comfortable middle-class home of the bourgeois Michael, which they have occupied and are in the process of demolishing piecemeal) can be seen as a reflection of Murphy's own distaste for conventional dramaturgy: in one respect, Roche argues, the younger brothers' breaking of Michael's cups and chairs and their spilling of beer on his furniture are gestures indicating their unwillingness to be tamed and civilized, but on another level they

> can be taken as Tom Murphy's own rebellion in his playwriting against the constraints of urban bourgeois drama, the type of theatre that has prevailed in England in this century. Refusing to confine passionate speech and action within the polite formalities of middle-class manners and social chit-chat, Murphy is declaring war on the remaining pieties of conventional theatre ... (*Irish Drama* 138-39)

In his next play, *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant*, which was written in 1962 but not performed until 1969, Murphy continued this attack, but shifted his target from the "urban bourgeois drama" back to the Irish peasant play. Set in 1958 in a small town in the Irish West, *A Crucial Week* is an equally biting, if less overtly savage, assault on pre-Lemassian Irish values as *A Whistle in the Dark*. In *A Crucial Week*, however, Murphy's critique of Irish politics and society can be more directly connected to his use of non-naturalistic techniques than in his previous plays. Murphy adopts many of the defining characteristics of the peasant play in *A Crucial Week*, but with subtle and significant variations. The play's set is described as "a street on the outskirts of a small town in rural Ireland," offering a view of the kitchen and bedroom of Murphy's protagonist, John Joe Moran, along with the exterior of the shop next door and a communal water pump in the street (100). Murphy not only opens up and expands the traditional box set of the peasant play to offer a view of the entire town (since the town as a whole, rather than a single family or person within it, is his subject), but also makes provision for scenes which take place in a grocery shop and hay shed outside the confines of the on-stage set. These unfold in a fluid space on the forestage, their locales suggested through a few bare props.[5] Murphy also subtly disrupts the unity of naturalistic convention through a series of expressionistic dream sequences in which, as his stage directions indicate, "movement and speech become stylized and the characters become caricatures" (100).

Both during these sequences and at other points in the play Murphy's dialogue occasionally devolves into a parody of the "peasant-speak" of Irish dramatic tradition. In a play which examines the inhibitions and deprivations of small town life in Ireland during the De Valera period, this parodic speech, like Murphy's variations on a strictly naturalistic use of space, suggests the degree to which the style of the peasant play itself had become an outworn, inhibiting cliché and a barrier to creative expression: in *A*

Crucial Week Murphy's dramaturgy strains at the constraints of naturalism just as his protagonist, John Joe, struggles to escape the bonds of myopic Irish conservatism represented by his controlling mother, the village priest, Father Daly, and his employer, Mr. Brown (the local gombeen man). During the play's first dream sequence, John Joe's mother upbraids him for his materialistic aspirations and his choice of Mona, the town's "worldly" new bank teller, as his girlfriend: "I'd swear my oath that poverty is not good enough for him. Heeding that hussy of a clotty of a plótha of a streeleen of an ownshook of a lebidjeh of a girleen that's working above in the bank" (104). Murphy's absurd "Synge-song" rendering of the speech conveys the extremism of Mrs. Moran's peasant pride in simplicity and paranoid suspicion that Mona, the outsider who dresses and acts after the modern fashion, harbours a well of iniquity in which John Joe is certain to drown. Notably, however, her stylistically-exaggerated pronouncement is rivalled in terms of parochial venom by some of the opinions voiced by the community's other voices of conformity in non-expressionist sections of the play. Mr. Brown at one point observes that Ireland's role "is to be the anchor" of a "universe" which is "trembling" as a consequence of widespread change (133-34). This parroting of the rhetoric of De Valerian isolationism is echoed and extended by Father Daly, who confesses to John Joe that "God knows there are plenty of things wrong here, but I wouldn't exchange those trifles for the hoard of evil that exists in the outside world" (141).

Beset from all sides by the stifling forces of nationalist orthodoxy and stasis, John Joe's only form of resistance is to mock his oppressors through mimicry: "But Eileen Óg, a girleen," he says to Mona in "stage-Irish brogue" as they contemplate emigration, "how would you like to leave the mists that do be on the bog and fly away to seek your fortune?" (123). In this instance, John Joe's adoption of "Synge-song" is intended less as an accurate imitation of the speech patterns of people such as his mother than as a commentary on what he and Murphy regard as the legacy of official nationalism: a poverty both of aspirations and material conditions and of the political will needed to change those conditions. As perhaps the ultimate example of Murphy's melding of the thematic and formal dimensions of the play, *A Crucial Week* as a whole may be seen as a similar act of mimicry--a play in which Murphy intentionally imitates the style of the peasant play imperfectly, his variations on the form intended to draw attention to the limitations of naturalism and its affinity, as an artistic medium, with the rigidly monocular, inwardly-fixed gaze of official nationalism.

Christopher Murray, writing of *A Crucial Week*, has suggested that "As Murphy presents them, the conditions of small-town Irish life were so deadly, so repressive, and so inimical to freedom and honesty of spirit that they amounted to a kind of continuing famine, or despoliation" ("Rough and Holy" 11). John Waters has described the "raw materials" of Murphy's plays in markedly similar terms as "the grief ... the lovelessness, the violence, the guilt, the indecency, the *famine* of smalltown Ireland and its walking maimed" (26). Both critics' use of the word "famine" is almost certainly not coincidental, as famine is a recurrent trope in Murphy's works, a fact signalled most obviously by the title of the play which he wrote following *A Crucial Week*.

Although Murphy's *Famine*, first performed in 1968, is primarily a history play about Ireland's Great Famine, it had its origins in the same sense of frustration with rural Ireland's poverty and stultification which led Murphy to write *A Crucial Week*. Somewhat curiously for a history play, Murphy has described *Famine* as "autobiographical" ("Introduction" ix), explaining that "Consciously and unconsciously, in the writing of the play, while aware of the public event that was the Irish Famine in the 1840s, I was drawing on the private well and recreating moods and events, apprehensions of myself and my own times" ("Introduction" xiv). As suggested by his description of *Famine* in the program notes of the 1984 Druid Theatre production, Murphy saw the Famine as both metaphor for and possible source of the economic, sexual, and creative stagnation which characterized Irish rural life in mid-century:

> It's not about the history of the Irish Famine. Living in the 1960's, I found that I was a Famine victim, that it wasn't over.... *Famine* to me meant twisted mentalities, poverty of love, tenderness and affection; the natural extravagance of love wanting to bloom--to blossom--but being stalemated by a nineteenth century mentality. (qtd. in O'Dwyer 33)

Thus, for Murphy the repressive moral absolutism of his early years was the contemporary analogue and possible progeny of the nineteenth-century disaster which "stopped the Irish race in its tracks" (Murphy, "Introduction ix). Moreover, while nationalist views of the Famine tend to emphasize England's culpability in the tragedy, Murphy's desiction of events, in Gerald Dawe's words, "holds off from identifying itself simplistically with the customary nationalist mythology" ("The Future" 153), although the colonial overlords nonetheless are the target of much criticism in the play. Both through his depiction of the historical fact of the Famine and his metaphorical relation of the essence of the tragedy to the deprivations of the 1950s and 1960s, then, Murphy's unique and rather extraordinary accomplishment in the play is to rend an anti-nationalist statement from an event which has become a nationalist rallying point.

Murphy's resistance to prevailing orthodoxies in *Famine* also extended to his use of form. His division of the play into twelve different scenes, many of them exteriors, each of which materializes out of a fluid stage space, continued the assault on single-set, peasant cottage naturalism which he began with *On the Outside*. With his next major work, *The Morning After Optimism*, Murphy's rejection of naturalism became total, reaching the point where, in O'Toole's words, "there could be no going back to the kitchen" (*Politics* 87).

The play caused a sensation when it was first performed at the Abbey in 1971, mainly on account of its radically avant-garde (at least for Ireland at the time) form. In *The Morning After Optimism* Murphy dispensed with mimesis almost entirely. The play is set in a stylized forest which, according to Murphy's description, "could be anywhere" (Quidnunc), but is strongly suggestive of a psychological rather than a literal forest, a dark forest of the subconscious. As O'Toole has suggested, not only does Murphy move from modified naturalism "into a purely theatrical use of space" in the play, but his characters are also stylized and "completely non-naturalistic," most obviously in terms of their dialogue (*Politics* 86-87). Murray has observed that for these reasons "It was a

startlingly arrogant play, to some people insufferably pretentious. But its like had. quite simply, not been seen at the Abbey before" ("Rough and Holy" 12).

Murray further describes *The Morning After Optimism* as a work which "marked a radical challenge to Irish realism in all its manifestations, linguistic, stylistic, and nationalistic" ("Rough and Holy" 12), notably linking Murphy's use of form to his political critique in the play. As in his previous works, these elements of the play are inextricably intertwined, in this case through motifs involving self-discovery and sacrificial purgation. The central characters of the play, James and Rosie, a slovenly and cynical middle-aged ponce and whore, discover their younger, ideal alter egos in the forest in the figures of Edmund and Anastasia, an absurdly perfect (but utterly vacuous) fairytale/pastoral prince and maiden. Entranced by these long-awaited images of the ideal mates whose existence they have been taught to believe in, James deserts Rosie to pursue Anastasia, while Rosie woos Edmund. When both are rejected (as Edmund and Anastasia, naturally, fall in love with one another) and when their attempts to corrupt their better selves out of revenge also fail, James and Rosie become reconciled to life with one another, punctuating their abandonment of the ideal for the real by murdering Edmund and Anastasia in a freeing, comic resolution.

In 1971 Murphy described the characters of the play as "hav[ing] the Irish thing of guilt .... You know how we're brought up on fairytales, people grow up trying to live a dream ..." (Quidnunc). James is an obvious example of such a person, as indicated by his description of the things he was taught as a youth (he speaks of himself in the third person):

> teachers too were saintly men and could answer all his questions.... And the books he read were filled with heroes; people lived happily, ugliness was sure to turn to beauty, and poor boys were better than rich boys because they were noble really.... And the Church told him of God, kind God and guardian angels.... And the kindest stork you ever saw would take care of any works and pomps. And there were things called politicians for doing favours and seeing to things. Be a good citizen is all they asked and vote for us and we shall do the rest. (44)

As O'Toole has suggested, this passage, and the play as a whole, can be read allegorically: "The fairytales which James must escape from are induced, not by his own mind. but by social indoctrination, the forces of school, family, church and state which Murphy's earlier plays rail against" (*Politics* 79). These institutional forces together weave the fabric of the master narrative (or grand fairytale) which, according to O'Toole, the play seeks to expose as false and hollow--the myth of the "Golden Age" of Gaelic civilization whose return had been promulgated for years by Irish nationalists: "The public rhetoric of the state was filled with this notion of an ideal innocence, an innocence which would make Ireland a beacon to the world, the centre of a spiritual empire, which ... might save Christian civilization" (*Politics* 73). By 1962, when Murphy began work on *The Morning After Optimism*, it had become abundantly clear that these grandiose aspirations for the Irish state had not come to pass, and had in fact become an impediment to real progress. Given these circumstances and Murphy's highly ambivalent relationship to nationalist discourse, it hardly seems surprising that he came to create a work which celebrated the

killing off of idealized illusion (both literal and metaphorical) as a means of effecting an accommodation to the imperfect realities of the present. That he did so through the medium of his most strikingly non-naturalistic work to date is also no surprise given the trend in his previous works towards the identification of nationalist ideology with conventional naturalistic dramaturgy.

O'Toole has described *The Morning After Optimism* as "a negative play" in the sense that it "clears space for an attempt at transcending history rather than actually invoking any images of such a transcendence" (*Politics* 86). With his next major play, *The Sanctuary Lamp*, Murphy began to explore the possibilities of attaining the transcendence O'Toole invokes. The play is a pivotal one in Murphy's *oeuvre*, marking a transition between the style and subject matter of his early works and those of his later plays. Like those which preceded it, the play is in many ways a blistering critique of nationalist orthodoxies, but Murphy's attack is much less narrowly based in it than in earlier works. By the time Murphy began writing *The Sanctuary Lamp*, the face of Ireland had been considerably altered since he wrote his first play in 1959, the result largely of the Whitaker/Lemass-initiated political and economic reforms. From *The Sanctuary Lamp* onward, these changes came to figure more and more prominently in Murphy's drama as his plays increasingly began to address the most current phase of Irish cultural history, their focus shifting from the tyrannies of official nationalism to what Shaun Richards has called "the traumatizing of national identity" which accompanied Ireland's entry into the postmodern era (81).

The Sanctuary Lamp dramatizes and defines this transitional moment both in Irish history and in Murphy's dramaturgy. Like his earlier plays, it is driven largely by a palpable sense of angry iconoclasm, a desire to reveal truths and unmask oppression, here directed against one of the major pillars of Irish nationalism, the Catholic Church. With *The Sanctuary Lamp*, set in "A church in a city" (98), Murphy literally invades the space of the Church in order to overturn and usurp its power, once again rejecting straight naturalism in favour of what O'Toole has referred to as a more "consciously theatrical" ("Introduction," *Plays: Three xii*), symbolic use of space. The church of the play's setting is taken over by Murphy's three central characters, all of them dispossessed and desperately in need of something: Harry, an ex-circus strongman seeking refuge from his past; Maudie, a homeless waif tormented by guilt over the death of her child; and Francisco, an ex-circus juggler looking to bring closure to one chapter of his life by finding Harry and telling him of the death of Olga, Harry's wife and Francisco's lover. By the end of the play, all three have found the comfort they were seeking, not through the symbolism or theology of Catholicism, but rather through one another. In this respect, as O'Toole has suggested, the play offers an image of "nothing less than the replacement of the old gods by the new, of worn-out Christianity by a new faith in man" ("Introduction," *Plays: Three* xiv). The sense of usurpation of deistic authority connoted by this interpretation is physicalized at various points in the play by the characters' appropriation of Catholic ritual: Harry, Maudie, and Francisco unconsciously create their own variation on the Mass by sharing a meal of altar wine and fish and chips; Francisco climbs into the pulpit to deliver a blasphemous "sermon"; and the play ends with Maudie and Francisco

asleep in separate compartments of a confessional which the three have overturned and placed lengthwise on the floor. The symbolism of this moment becomes particularly telling when Francisco, who earlier had railed at length against his indoctrination at the hands of the Jesuits, discovers to his delight, supine inside the confessional, that he has forgotten the words of the Act of Contrition, proclaiming this a victory: "I've beaten them" (160).

Although Murphy has cautioned against reading Francisco's blasphemous and vehemently anti-religious pronouncements as representative of his own attitudes towards Catholicism, he has acknowledged that *The Sanctuary Lamp* was written out of his belief that "the church has got between man and the divine," and that the play validates "*personal* religion, as against institutionalized religion" (Waters 27). In this respect, the play posed a direct challenge to Irish Catholicism and its historic hegemony within the nation, both official and legally defined (as in the 1937 Constitution) and unofficial (as the *de facto* faith of the people). Its effectiveness in doing so was proven when its first production in Dublin in 1975 was greeted with a series of protests. That the uproar was not particularly vociferous (at least as compared with others in the long and storied line of Irish theatre controversies), that as many people seemed to find the play pretentious as blasphemous (Griffin, "Produced" 19), and that such an iconoclastic play was even produced at all, let alone at the Abbey, offered evidence that Ireland had changed dramatically in the interval from 1969 to 1975. In writing *The Sanctuary Lamp*, Murphy was, in Christopher Griffin's words, "reflecting his compatriots' new questionings, doubts about the old eternal verities, Ireland's spiritual vulnerability in the age of anxiety, and new forms of conflicts between Ireland's past and present" ("Audacity" 63).

As O'Toole has suggested, the new mood in the nation was largely the product of the groundbreaking reforms instituted in the late sixties:

> Whitaker's revolution called into being new class forces, new divisions of urban and rural, new consumer choices, new modes of behaviour, so that "Ireland" itself as a fixed and coherent notion ... ceased to exist. It was replaced by a series of divisions ... a range of individual responses to the problems, not of unity and homogeneity, but of discontinuity, disruption and disunity. (*Politics* 30)

As one of the first of these responses to discontinuity, *The Sanctuary Lamp* tacitly affirmed the dissolution of Ireland's former unity; however, the spiritual and political crises of identity which it presents as consequences of this cultural and historical rupture are by no means unique to Ireland, but rather can be seen as symptomatic of a postmodern condition common to Western capitalist societies. With the opening of its formerly rigid economic and cultural borders, Ireland was rapidly losing its distinctiveness and becoming a copy of other Western capitalist states, a fact signalled most obviously by its entry into the EEC in 1973. Murphy acknowledged this new reality by locating the play physically and psychically in a space that is simultaneously in and outside Ireland: although the church in the play is Catholic, suggesting an Irish setting, the city of *The Sanctuary Lamp* is actually in England, and Francisco is the play's only Irish character. Maudie and Harry both being English. In his portrayal of the spiritual hunger of all three characters, as well as his suggestion of the impotence and irrelevance of traditional

religion (the roof of the church is "falling in" [106], the confessional is used as a broom closet, and the candle signifying "the constant presence" in the sanctuary lamp needs replacing "every twenty-four hours" [106-07]), Murphy offers an image of a common, by no means uniquely Irish, quest for meaning in the age of materialism. The world in which this quest takes place is one where God is at least missing, if not indeed dead (Harry explains to Maudie that Jesus' "sense is gone a little dim" on account of his being "locked up here at night ... reflecting [on] his former glory" [114]). In its thematic concerns, then, *The Sanctuary Lamp* looks beyond the immediate Irish context in a way Murphy's work had not done previously. In doing so, it indicated both the new impetus which came to dominate Murphy's drama--his departure, in Richard Kearney's words, from "native *folk* concerns" to "the modernist obsession with the crisis of human communication and identity" (*Transitions* 162)--and the extent to which Ireland had entered a new, transnationalist period of its history.

Although as a lifelong critic of the coercive, homogenizing violence of official nationalism Murphy had ample reason to embrace the arrival of this new era of (comparative) openness, his drama from *The Sanctuary Lamp* onward in fact registers a profound ambivalence towards the processes of social transformation then afoot in Ireland (as they still are today). While Murphy could celebrate the challenging of the old orthodoxies of Church and State, his later works suggest that he was equally aware that the unchecked absorption and erasure of Irish culture by the assimilative forces of global capitalism (primarily American) could not be regarded as a positive or acceptable alternative. At the core of these plays is the belief that if the "backward look" of nationalism paralyzes (Richards 81), the problem with the new materialism which supplanted it is not only that it works to efface markers of Irish cultural difference and historicity, leaving in its wake what Terry Eagleton has called "the depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathected surfaces of postmodernist culture" (qtd. in Richards 93), but also that it provides, in the words of Shaun Richards, "no vision of a future other than that of social and material advancement" (89).

Murphy depicts the perils of both the old ideology and the new materialism in two of his plays of the eighties, *The Blue Macushla* (1980) and *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985) (Murphy's reworking of his earlier play *The White House* [1972]). In these works Murphy presents contemporary Ireland, to adopt D.E.S. Maxwell's metaphor, as spiritually rudderless, "marooned between a Past with an Authorized Version (or several Authorized Versions) for official worship and a politically directionless present" dominated by "the banalities of entrepreneurial and political discourse" ("New Lamps" 66). The protagonist of *The Blue Macushla*, Eddie O'Hara, embodies the new Ireland. A former petty crook, Eddie has battled to rise above his humble origins, parlaying a series of shady dealings into a successful career as the owner of The Blue Macushla, Dublin's prime nightspot. As a hard-bitten, self-made man who disdains religion, declaring crucifixes "a jinx" (193), who "don't like sharin'" (182), and who cares little for ethical considerations relating to the sources of his riches, Eddie embodies the secular capitalism which became the dominant ethos in Ireland in the sixties and seventies. As O'Toole has observed, he is "not so much an individual with a detailed psychological history, but the

representation of the psychic history of a country in search of a new self-image" (*Politics* 125). Like Ireland at this time, the model that Eddie looks to in formulating this new image is America: along with most of the other characters in the play, Eddie parrots American speech and mannerisms, and insists that his bar be run according to American principles (importing the American-originated tradition of serving green beer on St. Patrick's Day, for example [OToole, *Politics* 123]). Moreover, that Murphy wrote the entire play in the style of Hollywood gangster movies of the thirties and forties provides a telling commentary, O'Toole notes, on "the extent to which the country has been colonised by American patterns of speech and thought" (*Politics* 123). Murphy's use of pastiche (according to Jameson the quintessential postmodern form [113-16]) additionally points to the fact that the consequence of this cultural neo-colonialism has been the loss not only of any normative concept of Irish culture, but of any notion of a distinctive Irish dramatic style.

Not surprisingly, even the images of "traditional" Irish culture found in *The Blue Macushla* are bastardised and commodified. The star employee of Eddie's club is Roscommon, a rural Irish lass whom he pays to dress in absurd peasant costume and sing sentimental Irish ballads in torch song style. Roscommon's huge popularity can be explained as a manifestation of what Desmond Bell has termed the "provincial flight into nostalgia" which served as a counter-reaction to Ireland's premature entry into the postmodern era (229). Notably, however, as dramatized in Roscommon's act, the images of the past which Murphy suggests have become desired in the face of the postmodern erasure of difference are not real so much as stereotypical and easily consumable: additionally, that they are being sold as sexualized through Roscommon indicates the extent to which even these "pure" tourist-board images of the traditional have been debased through their appropriation by the machinery of capitalism.

Significantly, the character most moved by Roscommon's songs is No.1, the boss of the nationalist terrorist "splinter group of a splinter group" (189) referred to in the play as the "Erin go braths," which represents the dangerous and pernicious (as opposed to the merely gauche) face of the "flight into nostalgia." Murphy thus links the depthless, packaged vision of Irish history promulgated by Eddie in The Blue Macushla (as site of seventies-style cultural production) to the extremist nationalism of the "Erin go braths," suggesting that a continuum exists between their respective views of history and reformulations of traditional Irish nationalism. The ability of the "Erin go braths" to see politics in the same blinkered, black and white terms which underlie Eddie's stereotypical representations of Irish identity allows them to justify their murderous pursuit of the "Golden Age" image of Ireland as a "united li'l ole Emerald Isle" (189) and blinds them to the hypocritical, ironic gap between their "noble" intentions and their violent methods. As one example, early in the play Eddie is blackmailed into joining the group and forced to read his membership oath under threat of injury or death: "... I will actively seek to establish and defend a united Ireland.... I will foster a spirit of unity, nationality and brotherly love among the entire people of Ireland. I swear that I take this obligation without reservation ..." (159). Eddie is stopped dead (literally) in his aspirations towards Easy Street when his shady past catches up to him in the form of the "Erin go braths." In

the same way, Murphy suggests, postmodern Ireland's dreams of material prosperity were, at the time the play was written, being counterpointed by a resurgence of traditional nationalist ideology, recast in an even more virulent form in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland. In *The Blue Macushla*, Murphy exposes the fraudulence, inadequacy, and moral bankruptcy of both philosophies as structuring visions for the nation.

This is also the case in *Conversations on a Homecoming*, a more conventionally naturalistic play set in the lounge bar of a town in the West of Ireland, which centres on the reunion of four former drinking buddies, all now failed idealists. The four, Michael, Tom, Liam, and Junior, were originally brought together in the early sixties by JJ, a small town "visionary" who, inspired by the rhetoric and mythology surrounding John F. Kennedy, opened The White House Bar as a beacon of liberal-progressive, American-style sixties social and entrepreneurial idealism in provincial Ireland. Murphy dramatizes their reunion in the same pub years later, depicting the dissolution of their individual aspirations as a means of commenting on Ireland's flawed post-1959 attempt to remake itself in the image of America. The men have gathered to celebrate the homecoming of Michael, whose pursuit of the American dream took him to the U.S. in an unsuccessful attempt to establish an acting career. He has returned home to discover JJ an alcoholic, The White House fallen on hard times, and the Kennedian ideals of "thought, hope, generosity, expression, aspiration" (84) basely transmuted into the crass Yankee materialism represented by Liam, whom Tom not inaccurately refers to as "Mr. successful-swinging-Ireland-In-The-Seventies" (108) and "the worst of the worst type of a ponce of a modern fuckin' gombeen man" (109). As Richards has suggested, Liam is "a composite of capitalist menace" (90), a man with a finger in every commercial pie (he is described as "a farmer, an estate agent, a travel agent, he owns property") who also "affects a slight American accent" (81), peppers his speech with Americanisms, and is a devoted acolyte of the country-and-western music craze which swept Ireland in the sixties and seventies.

As his eager adoption of American values and mannerisms might indicate, Liam's pursuit of wealth extends even to a willingness to commodify his own culture and heritage. He is poised both to take over The White House itself (signifying the ultimate supplanting of JJ's legacy) and to open a tourist office in town to sell sentimentalized images of Ireland to the numerous foreigners willing to pay money to see "a few of the natives telling funny stories ... and singing" (104).[6] Nonetheless, he also espouses a particularly virulent, if rather shallowly rationalized and ill-defined, nationalism, grasping after the most obvious markers of the indigenous culture whose disappearance he is helping to speed. He is a "regular churchgoer" (104) who frequently spouts what Michael terms anti-Protestant "bollocks talk" (99) about the North, becoming noticeably tongue-tied when attempting to explain his conception of the Catholic Republican heritage: "And Truth and Faith and Faith and Truth inex--inextricably--inextricably bound. And--And!--cultural heritage ... No border, boy! And cultural heritage inex--inextricably bound with our Faith and Hope and Hope and Faith and *Truth*!" (99). In Liam's incoherence at this moment Murphy presents the image of an Ireland which, having in Tom's words sold "the little we have left of charm, character, kindness and madness to any old bidder with a

pound, a dollar, a mark or a yen" (112), is now struggling to redefine itself. All that is left to cling to are the old clichés, from which Liam's chauvinist nationalism, stoked by events in the North, is born. As Michael discovers to his amazement, this particular manifestation of the reactionary backlash against the postmodern threat to identity is disconcertingly widespread: Junior remarks only half-jokingly that even he and Tom "thought about" "marching on the North" to "Shoot us a few Prods" (85).

The one alternative to the paradoxical yoking of transnational capitalism and reactionary nationalism which Murphy suggests has come to define the new Ireland is embodied in the play by Michael, who retains his faith in JJ's idealism. In response to the taunting of Tom, who calls him a "daft romantic" (100) and accuses JJ of having "fed people's fantasies," Michael counters that those like Tom who are "ready to believe nothing" (103) are guilty of the even more grievous sin of being "afraid of realizing themselves" (101). While Tom is perceptive enough to recognize that JJ's beliefs were founded on a set of "assumed images" no less "arbitrary" than Liam's (101), he is, as Richards has argued, unable to "reach a stage beyond realization; indeed, he is blinded by a sense of what is lost and lacks an adequate appreciation of what still could be" (91).

Through the clash between Michael and Tom, as through that between the questing Harry and the venomous Francisco in *The Sanctuary Lamp*, Murphy suggests that cynicism and trenchant self-articulation alone do not represent an adequate response to oppression and dispossession. For while Tom's and Francisco's vitriolic repudiations of the ideals of the past perform a healthy function in exposing the repressions these ideals fostered, the wholesale rejection of the past leaves both individual and nation shorn of any cultural and historical heritage in an age in which the very concept of identity is already under siege. Accordingly, to meet the challenge of postmodernism, a way must be found, in Richards' words, not simply "to violently reject, but to radically accommodate, the past" (89), to

> resist both the tyranny of the master narrative and the temptation to abandon an indigenous structuring principle. For Murphy, as for Ireland (and in this respect Ireland is paradigmatic of a global situation), the issue is the ability to achieve, in the face of late-capitalism's erasure of difference, a cultural-social consciousness which is both modern and Irish in an effective transcendence of their previously perceived mutual exclusion. (Richards 87)

By insisting on the importance of achieving this synthesis, Murphy's later plays oppose the homogenizing and deracinating tendencies of postmodern culture, suggesting that at some level it remains possible for individual and nation to attain a sense of distinct and autonomous identity. In this respect, Richards argues,

> Murphy's drama ... occupies a point of resistance, in that while firmly located in the postmodern moment, the search of its characters for meaning, as the authorial approbation of that struggle, asserts the ability to resist the loss of the "depth model," as even those characters who experience only loss are still possessed of sufficient "interiority" to articulate the priority of resisting the demise of subjecthood. (Richards 93)

Kearney's designation of Murphy's sensibility as essentially modernist rather than postmodernist is thus incisive, as Murphy defies the ethic of postmodernism not merely in positing that the erasure of difference can be resisted, but also by offering, in plays such as *The Sanctuary Lamp* and (especially) *The Gigli Concert* and *Bailegangaire*, images of how it might successfully *be* resisted. Various characters in these plays manage to free themselves from the forces which limit and confine them, achieving self-realization and transforming themselves and their environments in the process. In these individual (and occasionally cooperative) acts of self-definition and willed transformation, Murphy presents a model for collective or national transformation, depicting one potential route to social and political change and the reassessment of cultural identity. Notably, the theatre is central to this transformative vision, as Murphy's images of transformation in these plays are frequently explicitly theatrical, evoking and relying on a semiotics of gestural, aural, and imagistic symbolism. In this respect, Murphy's use of form in these plays once again broke new ground in the Irish theatre. While in some respects reminiscent of Yeats' drama of music, poetry, gesture, and image, Murphy's brand of total theatre was in other ways entirely new in the sense that it was created as a means of representing and responding to the discontinuities of the contemporary era. That this happens to be a period in which scepticism about the representational and communicative capacities of language has coincided with an increasing exploration by many playwrights of "the non-verbal aspect of drama to generate alternative sign systems" (Fitzgibbon, "Dramatic Vocabulary" 47) has made Murphy's works all the more timely.

As I have already suggested, Murphy's interest in such alternatives to the conventional semiotics of the theatre was apparent even in his earliest works, but it reached full expression in *The Sanctuary Lamp*, a play which contains one of the most notable examples of his images of transcendence. The conflict between Francisco and Harry, who counters Francisco's rabid denigration of belief by observing that "when you have nothing and believe in nothing, you have nothing at all" (142), is in some measure resolved when Harry succeeds, with "a mighty effort" (146), in lifting the church's pulpit off its base as Francisco stands in it delivering his mock sermon. For Harry, the ex-strongman who earlier had tried but failed to perform the same feat when the pulpit was empty, the moment symbolizes his victory over both the repressive dogma of the Church and the antithetical nihilism of his antagonist, Francisco. At this point, Harry conquers the twin burdens of the paralyzing guilt which has dogged him over his abandonment of his wife and daughter (both of whom are now dead) and his hatred of Francisco (whom earlier he had wanted to kill), leaving him free to begin a new life.

In this respect Harry resembles J.P.W. King in the triumphant moment of transcendence at the end of *The Gigli Concert*, Murphy's most emphatically theatrical dramatization of the liberating potential of transformation. King is an Englishman, the Dublin representative of a cult/New Age movement called "dynamatology," the science (or art), in King's words, of "Self-realisation," through which the subject can be "project[ed] ... beyond the boundaries that are presently limiting you" (4) in order to "possibilis[e] that hidden power of the possible waiting within you" (19). Despite his confidence that his teachings are the conduit through which "anything becomes possible"

(26), King himself lives in a pathetic state of alcohol-numbed squalor. His antagonist and ultimate source of inspiration in the play is the significantly nameless Irish Man who comes to him for assistance in achieving his own personal therapeutic aspiration: to sing like Beniamino Gigli, the exquisite Italian tenor of the thirties and forties. A "self-made man" (5), the Irish Man is a contractor who has built "more than a thousand houses" only to come to the realization that "There's more to life than working myself to death" (32): "There's too many facts in the world," he says, "Them houses were built out of facts" (6). Like Eddie in *The Blue Macushla* and Liam in *Conversations on a Homecoming*, the Man is, in O'Toole's words, "the archetypal Irish business success of the sixties" (*Politics* 164) who has, as King puts it, "sold [his] soul" for "the poxy, boring anchor of this everyday world" (21).

As such, he is a symbol of post-Whitaker/Lemass Ireland (a reading underlined by his generic name) who, like Liam (although to a lesser degree), turns to reactionary, reconstructed nationalism to compensate for the absence of a structuring identity. At one point, provoked by King, the Man battles back with a chauvinist attack on King's nationality: "We were making little gold crosses over here when ye, over there, were still living in holes in the ground.... Oh, but very cold people, the English ... Oh, and your Empire: that's located somewhere now in--what's them little islands called?" (20). This nationalist name-calling is, however, obviously facile, a reflexive response rather than a considered one, more indicative of the Man's rootlessness than his rootedness. As a more effective means of compensating for his loss, and of dealing with the overwhelming despair and emptiness of his bourgeois existence, the Man has, in Kearney's words, sought refuge in "a form of perfection beyond the materialist idols of power and wealth--the sublimity of music" (*Transitions* 165). His attempt to sing like Gigli ultimately fails, however, when he proves unwilling to entirely abandon the materialist world and returns to it delusively certain that he has healed himself, warning that "You can surprise yourself and find yourself strayed too far from the world" while smugly imploring King to "face the facts" (38) which he had earlier derided.

Nonetheless, the play does not end in failure because, even as the Irish Man relinquishes his quest, it is taken up by King himself, who, over the course of the play, has progressively been sympathetically drawn into the Man's obsession with Gigli. In the play's final moments, brought to the brink of despair and insanity by his inability to work his "magic" (38) on the Man, the impending death of his lover, and a massive dose of alcohol and sleeping pills, King vows "I'll sing like Gigli or I'll die" (38), finally succeeding after several abortive attempts. Murphy's stage directions specify that "He cues in his imaginary orchestra and we get the orchestral introduction to 'Tu Che a Dio Spiegasti L'Ali', and he sings the aria to its conclusion (Gigli's voice): triumphant, emotional ending" (39). On one level, King's moment of transcendence, as he succeeds in the process he describes as "simply new mind over old matter" (38), signals his own victory over the chains of his past which have confined him to the limitations of his present realities and impeded his progress towards a fully realized future. On a larger scale, however, King's subsequent actions indicate that this personal triumph can supply the pattern for wider-reaching, politically substantive change: King switches on his record

player, placing a Gigli recording on "repeat," and "'invites' the music toward the open window" (39), suggesting, as Richards has noted, that "releasing the song through the open windows into the dormant world of Dublin ... can have a socially transformative function" (94).

Murphy's implication about the potential we carry within us for collective acts of willed transformation and triumph over adversity is also inherent to the highly theatrical nature of *The Gigli Concert*'s ending. In the theatre, meaning is created collaboratively, through the interaction of actors and audience. When the actor playing J.P.W. King sings with the voice of Gigli at the end of a production of the play, it will, of course (barring a truly fortuitous piece of casting), not be the actor singing, but Gigli on tape, lip-synched by the actor. For this moment to "work" theatrically in the way Murphy intends (that is, for the audience to interpret the ending as an optimistic paean to the power of "new mind over old matter"), requires not only a convincing performance on the part of the actor, but inevitably also a reciprocal and not inconsiderable willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. In this respect, as O'Toole has observed, *The Gigli Concert* is "a hymn to the theatre itself" ("Introduction," *Plays: Three* xiv), one which uses the theatre as metaphor and microcosm of the necessary collective will to transformation: "The action of *The Gigli Concert* may take a philosophical form but its logic is essentially a theatrical one. It moves toward a daring moment in which the impossible becomes possible, not as an idea, but as an action on the stage" (O'Toole, *Politics* 175).

This collective aspect of the play aside, *The Gigli Concert* is still very much about the *individual* search for meaning and identity, what Patrick Mason, the play's first director, has described as "the pain of the soul in a soulless world" (100). Furthermore, although it is possible to read the relationship between J.P.W. King and the Irish Man in part as an allegory of contemporary Irish/English relations, as some critics have argued.[7] *The Gigli Concert* is nevertheless a decidedly cosmopolitan play in its deliberate admixture of numerous disparate cultural influences--Irish, English, Italian, and American (particularly, as Anthony Roche has noted, in King's parroting of the discourse of pop psychology and Murphy's incorporation of techniques and conventions of Hollywood *film noir* [*Irish Drama* 164-68]). In this interwoven network of cultural signifiers, as well as the instability of his characters' cultural affiliations (the Irish Man aspires to become the Italian, Gigli; and the Irish Man and the Englishman, King, effectively swap or merge identities over the course of the play), Murphy suggests the postmodern condition of Ireland even as he gestures towards the fact that the manifestations of this condition are by no means exclusively or specifically Irish.

The emphasis is reversed in *Bailegangaire*: if *The Gigli Concert* is primarily concerned with the individual search for the soul, in *Bailegangaire* Murphy felt compelled to return to the Irish roots of his theatre to explore the national dimensions of this quest in contemporary Ireland. The play addresses the disjunctive consequences of Ireland's rapid leap from tradition to postmodernity, positing the necessity of healing the rift to the national psyche which ensued while providing a dramatic model of the process whereby the gap between past and present might be bridged. In *Bailegangaire* Murphy suggests that, by resolving its discontinuities and exorcising what Richards has called

"the failure of images of the Irish past and those of the postmodern present" (96), Ireland might be empowered to enter more productively into the future, as both iconic devotion to the past and blind faith in the hollow form of "progress" ushered in by international capitalism have proven inadequate responses to the present.

Murphy has revealed that *Bailegangaire* had its genesis largely in his observations of what he describes as the "extraordinary anomalies" which mark the postmodern landscape of Ireland, particularly in the West:

> in Connemara ... you can walk into a pub and there are people there speaking a language which perhaps you don't understand--which is the national language.... You can walk fifty yards further down the road and you'll see a man up to his knees in mud carrying plastic bags of turf out of the bog, but he has a walkman on his head. You can go another hundred yards and arrive at a big house which turns out to be a restaurant and the menu is in French and the woman is saying "Your table is over haar" in an English accent. You can come out of that and pass a thatched house or a hovel, you can go on another bit and come across, in the middle of nowhere, a church that looks like a sputnik about to take off ... (Waters 28)

In *Bailegangaire* these anomalies are suggested through Murphy's frequent juxtaposition of images of the old and new Ireland. The play is set in 1984 in the kitchen of a traditional thatched cottage in the West which, reflecting the contemporary time scheme, contains "some modern conveniences: a bottle-gas cooker, a radio, electric light" (43) and is located just down the road from a Japanese computer factory, now bankrupt and about to be closed (as happened to many of the new, foreign investment-spawned industries in the bust which followed the boom of the sixties and seventies).

The convergence (or perhaps more accurately the abutment) of the two different eras on stage is also embodied in the play's characters: Mommo, a senile old crone who endlessly repeats the same story from her past without ever finishing it, and her two granddaughters, Mary and Dolly. In these three figures Murphy counterpoints the deprivations and tragedy of Ireland's past with the oppressive directionlessness of its present. Mommo's story, located in the pre-industrial 1950s, is a catalogue of peasant "Misfortunes" (74), unsentimentally enumerated, concerning the events leading up to the death of her grandson Tom, Mary and Dolly's brother. Mary, who emigrated to England only to discover that there is "no freedom without structure" (55), has felt compelled to return to Ireland in the hope that she will find the "home" she is seeking: "*Home*. Where is it, Mommo?" (56). And Dolly, despite her acquisition of material wealth ("I've rubber-backed lino in all the bedrooms now, the Honda is going like a bomb and the *lounge*, my dear, is carpeted" [49]), is an abused and deserted wife who fills her days with meaningless sex, her ultimate goal being to "come to grips with my life" (69). The failures and unfulfilled promises of past and present are further juxtaposed, and the temporal and communicational divide which separates them underlined, through the structure of the play. Mommo's lengthy, solipsistic recitation of her story overlaps with and is interrupted by radio broadcasts, the narration of Mary's and Dolly's own "stories," and activity at the factory outside the house as meetings and protests are held to mark its

impending closure. Mommo, who is unable or unwilling to even acknowledge the presence of her caregiver, Mary, is imprisoned within her own narrative as surely as Mary and Dolly are locked into theirs, signifying the state of a nation in which past and present are radically disjunctive, the past's failure to inform the present also the failure of the nation. If this is the problem, the solution that ***Bailegangaire*** proposes is that the past and present must be brought into dialogue, a process represented in the play, as Roche has observed, by the elimination of "the distance separating the story Mommo tells from the lives of the three characters ... the 'gap' between them [is] precisely that which has to be filled in and made meaningful by a sustained process of dramatic interaction" (*Irish Drama* 151).

The impetus which effects this outcome in ***Bailegangaire*** is provided by Mary. who, driven by her frustration with the crippling repetition of Mommo's story (she has become convinced that "I can't do anything the way things are" [62]), forces Mommo to finally conclude the story, hoping that this will allow the two of them to "move on to a place where, perhaps, we could make some kind of new start" (70). Over the course of the single night depicted in the play, Mary keeps Mommo awake, prodding her to continue the story, and finally collaborating with her in the narration of the story's tragic ending. the death of Tom. At this moment, which significantly occurs with Mary, Mommo, and Dolly together in Mommo's bed, the two granddaughters flanking their grandmother, Mommo finally acknowledges that her story, which she has always told in the third person, is about herself and her own family. In doing so, she also acknowledges Mary for the first time, addressing her by name as she has not before:

> Mommo: Be sayin' yere prayers now an' ye'll be goin' to sleep.... Yes? For yere Mammy an' Daddy an' grandad is (*who are*) in heaven.
>
> Mary: And Tom.
>
> Mommo: Yes.... (*She is handing the cup back to Mary, her eyes held on Mary.*) And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing. Mary, and haven't we everything we need here, the two of us.
>
> Mary: (*tears of gratitude brim to her eyes; fervently*): Oh we have, Mommo. *Her tears continue to the end but her crying is infused with a sound like the laughter of relief.* (77)

As Richards has argued, in this moment of transgenerational *rapprochement*, Murphy depicts the reintegration of the Irish psyche in a process that is both one of purgation and accommodation--the ghosts of the past are exorcised even as they are recognized and acknowledged, suggesting the possibility of a new beginning: "The moment at which that past is simultaneously articulated, accepted, and projected into the future is expressive of a transcendent hope which is capable of envisaging a future which encompasses the past rather than being itself incarcerated in memory" (96). By rejecting the equally limiting binary alternatives of postmodern dehistoricization and ultra-nationalist historical obsession. ***Bailegangaire*** posits, Ireland might move towards redefining itself in such a way as to render obsolete the troublesome questions of identity which have plagued its past.

Notably, Murphy's call for the acceptance and accommodation of the past is echoed at the level of dramatic form in *Bailegangaire*. At first glance, the play seems a throwback to the days of Abbey "peasant quality" naturalism, with its cottage kitchen setting inhabited by an old woman who is part Cathleen ni Houlihan, part Maurya from Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (particularly in both characters' recitations of their misfortunes) and part Gaelic *seannachie* (storyteller) (Richards 95-96). Thomas Kilroy has described the play's incorporation of these allusions to the past as "knowing" ("Generation" 140), suggesting that in writing *Bailegangaire* Murphy was quite deliberately echoing the style of an earlier period in Irish drama. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that the playwright who once vowed never to set a play in a kitchen could have done so later in life unconscious of any contradiction or irony. Rather than seeing *Bailegangaire* as an about-face on Murphy's part, however, it is apparent that his adoption of vestiges of the peasant play form is intended not reverentially but instructively, as a commentary on contemporary Irish attitudes to national history and identity. In the play, Murphy refuses to romanticize the peasant past (by instructing that the set be "stylized to avoid cliche" (42), for example, as well as by depicting the era of Mommo's story as a time of stultifying poverty). In doing so, he suggests the danger of mis-remembering the past and enshrining its images as unattainable icons to be striven after in the present. Furthermore, by framing the peasant play nucleus of *Bailegangaire* within a modern world of computers, helicopters, and linoleum, Murphy points to the remoteness and irretrievability of that earlier time, even while emphasizing the importance of retaining some form of a national historical consciousness in the postmodern moment.

In its call for this complex and considered stance towards history and nationality, *Bailegangaire* offers proof that Murphy's attitudes had changed considerably since he began his career as a playwright in the late 1950s. Like other writers of his generation, Murphy's art and ideas were profoundly affected by the dramatic social and economic changes which Ireland experienced in the intervening years. As wide scale industrialization threatened to sweep away not only the historic closed-minded insularity of De Valera's Republic but also any and all of the more positive markers of Irish tradition and difference, Murphy's impetus began to shift from unmasking the tyrannies of the bad old regime to exposing those of the bad new one. In the process, Murphy's drama began to express the longing for rootedness which he has suggested has always been latent to his psyche and his drama. In a 1972 interview, Murphy observed that "I am very much drawn back to Ireland. I suffer from a nostalgia which is more than a sentimental yearning for place. I believe that there is a make-up in the body which comes out of the particular earth of the place in which a man is born" (Hickey and Smith 227). More recently, Murphy has echoed the same sentiment in similar terms: "I have a very strong tribal instinct within me, a very strong homing instinct" (Roche, *Irish Drama* 146). For the Murphy of the 1980s, as opposed to the "angry young man" of 1959, it was no longer adequate simply to walk away from the kitchen, rejecting past and home outright as did Mary on her initial flight into exile. Instead, Murphy's recent drama registers Mary's subsequent desire to recover and redefine Ireland as "home," embracing past, present, and future in an attempt to reappropriate Ireland as a spiritual and artistic land. For Murphy,

as for many other contemporary Irish intellectuals and artists (including, of course, the other playwrights examined in this study), this is a matter of compelling urgency.

Notes

1. In addition to O'Toole, cf. particularly Anthony Roche's chapter on Murphy in *Contemporary Irish Drama*, Richard Kearney's chapter on Murphy in *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Shaun Richards' "Refiguring Lost Narratives--Prefiguring New Ones: The Theatre of Tom Murphy," and the collection of essays on Murphy in *Irish University Review* 17.1 (Spring 1987).

2. Cf. Roche, *Irish Drama* 145, 152-53; Murray, "Rough and Holy" 9-10; Stembridge 59; Griffin, "Audacity" 63-64; White 71; Kearney, *Transitions* 162, 169.

3. Cf. Dukore; Griffin, "Produced" 17; Swann 150; Murray, "Rough and Holy" 9-10; Roche, *Irish Drama* 145.

4. This difficulty is also evident in the number of outright contradictions which surface in critical commentary on Murphy's work. As one example, Christopher Murray and Ruth Neil have taken opposing positions on the style of Murphy's plays. Murray has declared Murphy a naturalist: "Murphy's forte is naturalism. His characters always have a history and a controlling environment" (*After Tragedy* viii). Neil, however, has argued that "the term naturalism ... hardly applies" to Murphy's plays, as Murphy does not "attempt a full and especially detailed representation of social conditions" ("Murphy and Lorca" 99). Similarly, while Richard Kearney has suggested that Murphy's plays "conform to the Irish norm of 'verbal' theatre" (*Transitions* 162), Christopher Fitzgibbon sees the wordless and gestural element of Murphy's drama as its primary and defining quality, arguing that Murphy's "originality lies in the use of 'wordless' drama to subvert, contradict or perplex the superficial meanings of the dialogue" (47).

5. This use of space was quite innovative in Irish drama in 1962 when *A Crucial Week* was written but was decidedly less so in 1969 when the play was first performed, owing to the success in the interim of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), which also utilized a fluid forestage area and was, moreover, highly similar in theme to Murphy's play.

6. Cf. Murphy's comments in a 1980 interview: "Take tourism, for instance. I go down to the west quite a lot and I see hotel managers telling funny stories and practically dancing for tourists. It makes you wonder if they're interviewed or auditioned for their jobs. They actually *thank* the visitors for deigning to come here: there's no dignity--we're not beggars, for God's sake" (Boland 21).

7. Cf. particularly Roche, *Irish Drama*, 177-81; Kearney, *Transitions*, 168.

"Not to Confront the World, But to Shore it Up": The Theatre of Hugh Leonard

> Brian Friel and I share a desperate search for form. We are in a country which is growing up, which is--whether it knows it or not--coming to terms with the outer world due to television, the influx of industry, a complete new aristocracy. And we are trying to write about this, to find out about it, to explore it, to find out whether it is good or bad, not for audiences but for ourselves. To do this, Irish playwrights as a whole are trying to break away from a naturalistic form and to try some kind of form where we can say the particular and the general.
>
> --Hugh Leonard interviewed by Fergus Linehan, 1970

> I do not think ... that I am a controversial playwright in the sense of shocking the *bourgeoisie*. I can decry them and criticise them, but I cannot begrudge them their beliefs and values.
>
> --Leonard interviewed by Des Hickey and Gus Smith, 1970

Hugh Leonard's is in many respects the definitive voice of contemporary middle class Ireland. As the nation embarked on the process of "coming to terms with the outer world" in the 1960s and 70s, Leonard became Ireland's most devoted chronicler of the new affluence by taking as the subject of his drama the newly-emergent suburban middle class. Fittingly, in Leonard the nation's struggles to rearticulate itself as traditionalism was superseded by prosperity were recorded by a playwright who himself embodied many aspects of contemporary Ireland's crises of identity. As was true of Irish society as a whole, during these transitional decades Leonard's experiences were marked by a search for identity coupled with cultural displacement and self-estrangement. Adopted at birth by a working class couple from the now-prosperous Dublin suburb of Dalkey, Leonard grew up all too aware of his rootlessness, and eventually sought unsuccessfully to discover who his birth mother was (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 158). Leonard's uncertain parentage led directly to a linguistic crisis of representation, a crisis of naming, which he has experienced all his life. As he observed in a 1982 interview, he has of necessity become accustomed to answering to multiple variations of his adoptive name (Keyes), the name which appears on his birth certificate (Byrne) and his pen name (Hugh Leonard): "It's very inconvenient now. I'm known in Dalkey as Jack Keyes, my name is John Joseph Byrne, I'm known as John Keyes-Byrne, I'm known as Jack Leonard. I let people I don't like call me Hugh" (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 159).

For a major part of his life, Leonard's conception of home was equally ambiguous. After his initial success as a playwright, Leonard was persuaded to leave Ireland for England, where he spent most of the sixties leading a double life of divided cultural loyalties, writing scripts for British television nine months of the year and an annual play for the Dublin Theatre Festival in the other three. In 1970 he returned to Ireland, lured by the change to Irish revenue law which granted tax-free status to the earnings of creative writers (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 162). He settled near his childhood home in an affluent

suburban housing estate which, he has revealed, was "known to the locals as Disneyland. The people there, mostly fairly well-to-do and a few chancers, were so insecure living in this new milieu that they were almost afraid to talk to their neighbours because each one said, 'I'm a phoney. I don't belong'" (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 163).

Leonard's personal journey, from humble beginnings into self-imposed exile from home and traditional values to uneasy prosperity, is also a microcosm of the collective history of Ireland over the same period, a history recorded in Leonard's drama. His early plays, such as *Mick and Mick* (1966), which centres largely on the tribulations of an upwardly-mobile suburban couple (marking it as a relative anomaly in Irish theatre of the time), offer images of a traditional Ireland on the cusp of economic and social revolution. Within a very short time the process of transformation had become widespread and entrenched, and Ireland had changed irrevocably as a result. The plays which Leonard wrote following his return to Ireland register a sense of alienation as he began to take account of the new realities. His initial impulse was towards satire, as in plays such as The *Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971), *Time Was* (1976), and *Kill* (1982) he exposed the hypocrisy and shallowness of Ireland's new elite, their crass materialism, moral vacuousness, and fraudulent relationship to the past. Already by the mid-seventies, however, the *nouveaux riches* had ceased to be a novelty or anomaly in Irish society, and consequently could no longer be dismissed merely as the subject of ridicule. *Summer* (1974) is a more sober examination of these people notable for its empathetic treatment of the pathos of their lives. In a similar vein, in *Moving* (1992) Leonard takes stock of thirty years of Irish history, depicting the period from 1957 to 1987 as a time of considerable material advancement but of distressingly little spiritual progress or enlightenment in the lives of the first generation of the post-Lemass Irish bourgeoisie.

Leonard's drama is significant in that it provides a window on the material and psychic transformation of Ireland not just through the subject matter of his plays, but also through their forms and reception. Leonard's observations of the marriage of cultural and temporal contraries which define contemporary Ireland and its population's ambivalent and shifting subject positions provide the raw material of his plays; as cultural artefacts, however, the plays embody the same contradictions and ambivalences, suggesting that the sense of dislocation and crisis of self-knowledge common to Leonard's characters has been keenly experienced by Leonard himself.

The range of apparent contradictions expressed and embraced by Leonard as both playwright and public figure would seem to support this contention. Leonard has persistently decried and derided what he perceives as an Irish obsession with the past, yet he has been equally scathing in his condemnation of the dehistoricizing and deracinating tendencies of postmodernism. At the same time he has also, particularly in his autobiographical play *Da* (1973), suggested the futile and misguided nature of any attempt to banish or escape history. Additionally, as part of his vocal objection to the parochialism of Ireland's fixation on its past, Leonard has spoken frequently, as he did in his 1970 *Irish Times* interview with Fergus Linehan, of the need for Irish playwrights to discard the old forms inherent to the formulaic Irish drama of the past in favour of new ones better suited to the changing realities of a transforming nation. In practice, however,

Leonard's formal innovations have been limited primarily to his adaptation of the farce and comedy of manners to the Irish context, forms which, while non-Irish in origin, can hardly be considered much less conservative than the naturalistic peasant play. And while Leonard has declared it his intention to "criticise" the *nouveaux riches* (as he stated in his 1970 interview with Des Hickey and Gus Smith), his plays betray an essential sympathy for them, almost certainly because Leonard recognizes that his own values do not differ substantially from theirs. Indeed, the impression of Leonard that one is apt to receive from a profile of the playwright which O'Toole wrote for *In Dublin* in 1982 is of a cigar-chomping, Rolls Royce-driving *arriviste* contentedly discussing his investments and his new boat (*Jesse James* 158, 162). That Leonard is himself one of the people he satirizes is no less ironic than the fact that his plays, as Christopher Murray has observed, "are invariably welcomed in Dublin by the very audiences they, presumably, make fun of" ("Irish Drama" 301).

Rather than offering proof that Leonard's plays provide a sanitized view of the new Ireland which is divorced from reality (and thus, as Murray implies, that they are irrelevant to the current Irish context), the popularity of Leonard's plays with middle-class audiences, no less than the ironies and contradictions with which his theatre is imbued, marks them as very much a product of their time. Murray has described Leonard as "a craftsman of the highest order, inventive, witty and humorous," but has proclaimed his works devoid of "social or political impetus": "His plays reflect back upon themselves, as it were, and exist in a sealed-off world of fantasy and performance" ("Rev." 136-37). For Murray, Leonard's adherence to "a pre-Brechtian type of theatre" of "pure entertainment" brands him as a theatrical dinosaur: "the values which have made his plays successful on Broadway belong to an earlier era.... He is not just reactionary but obscurantist. He will not accept that outside of the Broadway musical the terms of the contract between stage and audience have changed" ("Rev." 137). Consequently, Murray sees Leonard as something of a perverse anomaly in the contemporary Irish theatre:

> He is the one major playwright of modern times in Ireland about whose work I am uneasy in using the term 'transitional'. Where many of the other writers, Kilroy, Murphy, Friel, all seem to be bridging two worlds, the old or traditional and the new, in constant mutation, Leonard seems to have found a style, an habitual way of regarding experience (somewhere between amused tolerance and high glee), and it is hard to imagine his art as developing. ("Irish Drama" 301)

While such criticisms of Leonard's drama (and Murray is by no means the only critic to advance such a reading[1]) are not without some validity, they disregard both the overt political and social satire of plays such as *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, *Time Was*, and *Kill* (Murray acknowledges *Kill* as Leonard's one political play but deems it a failure ["Rev." 136]). Less obviously, they also ignore the extent to which Leonard's plays captured the Irish public's uncertainty about the nation's economic and social revolution: it seems probable that middle-class audiences have responded so positively to Leonard's plays not just because of his skill as an entertainer, but because his satire of the *nouveaux riches* and ambivalent stance towards the past expressed their own unease and repressed feelings of guilt about abandoning the structuring principles of the past for a new, more

materialistic set of values. Although one might argue that the gentle comedy of Leonard's plays does little to challenge the values of the bourgeoisie, but rather reinscribes them (an argument that will be considered below), it nonetheless seems clearly insupportable to suggest that these plays lack relevance to the contemporary Irish social and political context. Assessments of Leonard's drama like Murray's also neglect the political dimensions of Leonard's use of form, as admittedly conventional and unremarkable as it may initially appear. As I mean to suggest in the discussion that follows, Leonard's use of form is integral to the political and social commentary contained in his plays, as well as to the way these texts might be interpreted within the framework of a broader materialist analysis (that is, not just what the plays "say," but what is indicated by the very existence of the plays and by their reception) as works which both represent and are representative of contemporary Ireland's "transitional crisis."

Leonard's 1970 suggestion that he was preoccupied with a "desperate search for form" was rooted in his perception, stated in the same interview, that "There has been too much parochialism, too much parish pumpery in Irish drama" (Linehan 14). For Leonard the parochialism of Irish drama, and of Irish literature and society in general, has been a hobby-horse throughout his career. In a second 1970 interview Leonard described Irish dramatists as "still copying [T.C.] Murray and [Lennox] Robinson, still involved in an incestuous kind of theatre.... Whilst playwrights abroad are making urgent personal statements, Ireland's playwrights are still dribbling on about the aunt's farm and the marriage broker" (201). Even twelve years later, Leonard apparently saw little evidence to suggest that the theatre scene had become any less parochial. In his 1982 *In Dublin* interview he proclaimed, "I think the curse of Irish playwrighting is that it's been parochial for years and this is why Irish plays have no validity outside." "They don't write about men," he added, "they write about Irishmen" (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 162). The latter is a favourite maxim of Leonard's, one he has repeated numerous times in similar contexts,[2] including once as part of his address at a 1986 conference on "Irishness in a Changing Society." Leonard's talk, titled "The Unimportance of Being Irish," provoked ample controversy, not least for his assertion that he could "find little that is universal in the contemplation of the navel that passes for our literature" (qtd. in Gallagher, "Introduction" 5).

As indicated by the tenor of these remarks, Leonard seems to have remained rather curiously and obstinately oblivious to the palpable break with traditionalism and the trend towards cosmopolitanism which has revitalized Irish drama and literature since the post-1958 reforms. But while Leonard's fervent crusade against parochialism now seems somewhat dated, grounded in the memory of a former time more than in current realities, its origins are perfectly understandable given the social and cultural milieu in which Leonard came to maturity. Like the other playwrights of his generation, Leonard grew up in the repressive atmosphere of De Valera's staunchly Catholic and nationalist Republic, at a time when Irish theatre was defined almost exclusively by the Abbey's naturalistic repertoire. And as was true of dramatists such as Murphy, Friel, and Kilroy, Leonard's reaction against the closed-mindedness, insularity, and deprivations of mid-

century Irish society was echoed in his rejection of the peasant play as that society's institutionalized dramatic form.

These conjoined and complementary aspects of Leonard's youthful rebellion were intricately melded in one of his early successes as a playwright, his adaptation of Joyce's *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, titled *Stephen D.*, which premiered at the Dublin Drama Festival in 1962. The appeal which Joyce held for Leonard is not difficult to understand, given Leonard's lifelong Stephen Dedalus-like denunciation of the "nets" of home, Catholicism, and nationalism (his plays are filled with characters who must struggle to "fly" these "nets"), and his recent decision at the time of the play's writing to emigrate to England. Indeed, the final lines of the play, spoken by Stephen as he stands on a gangway awaiting the ferry that will take him away from Ireland, undoubtedly conveyed some of Leonard's own feelings about his home:

> This lovely land that always sent
> Her writers and artists to banishment--
> O Ireland, my first and only love
> Where Christ and Caesar are hand in glove
> I will not serve! (54)

Leonard's refusal to serve extended not just to the subject matter of the play (Joyce was still deemed an apostate by a significant segment of the Irish population at this time, and the play aroused controversy for its dramatization of his "blasphemy and bawdy" [*sic*] [Ó hAhodha 151]), but also to its iconoclastic non-naturalistic form: the play consisted of an uninterrupted series of numerous short scenes established through lighting and a few minimal props in a fluid stage space. This type of staging, while now commonplace, had rarely been seen on Irish stages before (Hogan, *Irish Renaissance* 188), which led to positive commentary on the play's unconventional form. In the opinion of at least one critic, Micheál Ó hAodha, *Stephen D.* was "the most spellbinding piece of stagecraft seen in Dublin" since an earlier Gate production of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of our Teeth* (150).

Few of the stage plays which Leonard has written since have been as formally adventurous, however, and the style of *Stephen D.* itself may well have had more to do with the logistical demands of compressing Joyce's dense novels into a two-hour play than with any experimental intentions on Leonard's part. On the whole, Leonard's plays are more formally conservative than those of Murphy, Friel, or Kilroy, which is not particularly surprising given Leonard's acknowledged influences. He has expressed his high estimation of O'Casey (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 161) and described the plays of Lennox Robinson and Kaufman and Hart as models for his own, explaining that he "revered" the American duo in particular "as supreme architects" (Gallagher, "Q. & A." 13): "They knew how to make a play work. Construction in a play is most important" (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 161). Leonard's prioritization of construction, his professed belief that "content is much less important than the way it is presented" (Linehan 14), along with his valorization of "entertainment" in the theatre and concomitant dislike of "whatever reeks of the author's contempt for his audience ... the humourless self-indulgences of John Arden, the emptiness ... of Pinter," helps explain his admiration for Alan Ayckbourn, J.B.

Priestly, Stephen Sondheim, and Georges Feydeau, whom he has called "the daddy of us all" (Gallagher, "Q. & A." 13). It also illuminates the widespread and not entirely unfounded charge that Leonard, in D.E.S. Maxwell's words, "constructs his plays--with great skill--around good lines" (*Irish Drama* 175), as well as the logic of critical assessments which have likened his work to that of Aykbourn (Gallagher, "Introduction" 12; E. Fitzgibbon 40), Noel Coward (Gallagher, "Introduction" 12; Murray, "Rev." 137), Somerset Maugham (Murray, "Irish Drama" 301) and (rather less flatteringly) Neil Simon (Murray, "Rev." 136; Hogan, *Since O'Casey* 133). In the course of his search for a new form to represent the changing realities of a transforming Ireland, then, Leonard was drawing inspiration primarily from the work of playwrights who, apart from O'Casey, are or were writers mainly of witty, urbane, deftly-structured, and highly conventional dramas about and for the middle classes.

His eventual choice of Feydeau as his direct model for *The Patrick Pearse Motel* was in many respects truly inspired. Leonard acknowledged his debt to the French master of the farce in describing the play shortly before its 1971 premiere as "black farce, very formalised, derived from Feydeau" (Quidnunc). Leonard's use of the adjective "black" points to the work's satiric qualities, an element either denied or not recognized by critics such as Robert Hogan, who has categorized the play as "simply entertainment" (*Since O'Casey* 133). Hogan's limiting description ignores the significance of the play's form. *The Patrick Pearse Motel* was arguably the first native Irish bedroom farce, and the timing of its appearance was by no means coincidental. As O'Toole has suggested, the economic and social revolution of the sixties "made farce, for the first time, an available form for the Irish dramatist" ("Saints and Silicon" 26) in the sense that it swelled the ranks of the middle and upper-middle classes, the leisured elite whose disposable income, *ennui*, and forcibly assumed veneer of respectability provide the ingredients for the abortive attempts at infidelity which are the stuff of Feydeau's farces. At the same time, the reforms loosened prudish Irish attitudes towards sex sufficiently so as to permit, without widespread outrage and scandal, the production of a play in which sex was not only at the centre of the action, but treated in a comic rather than self-righteously condemnatory fashion.

As an Irishman who lived in England for most of the sixties, Leonard observed the economic, social, and moral transformation of the nation from the somewhat privileged position of an insider momentarily on the outside. As he told O'Toole in 1982, he became

> fascinated by the movement of society here [in Ireland]. In another country you can see a society on the move very, very gradually because it's such an intricate and confused process. Here you can see people with one foot in the old world, one foot in the new world. And as I once said an Irishman still believes that a rich man can't get through the eye of the needle. But now we've got the money to build bigger and better needles. (*Jesse James* 163)

Leonard's comments register his interest in the collision between traditional moral values and the new affluence which he saw taking place around him, a conflict or process of accommodation which in 1970 he described as the "hobby horse" of his drama:

> My own is, as I say, the Irishman trying to come to terms, or refusing to come to terms, with the twentieth century. He is enjoying its privileges and ignoring the moral pitfalls; the fact that he has got to sacrifice a little of his Catholicism here if he wants to make a little money there, or lose a little money and so on.... I am interested in (a) if he acknowledges that there is a disparity here, that there is a social problem, and (b) how he copes with it. This, I think, is a feasible subject for drama. (Linehan 14)

Leonard's vision of an Ireland in which the population has been riven by the moral dilemmas and other changes brought on by the country's rapid transition to postmodernity is depicted in *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, a play he has described as "an attempt to bridge the two worlds, the worlds where you have one foot in your granny's parlour and wakes and things and the other foot up in [the affluent Dublin suburb] Foxrock and your g and t's on a Sunday morning" (O'Toole, *Jesse James* 164). In many ways, in farce Leonard seized upon the perfect vehicle to portray what he perceived as a state of national schizophrenia, given the form's reliance on humour based on the confusion of identities.

Typically in farce identities are mistaken either through pure accident or as the consequence of characters' deliberate assumption of false fronts. *The Patrick Pearse Motel* abounds with examples of both, but perhaps the most notable fall into the latter category, as the play's characters are all working very hard to pass themselves off as something they are not. The play centres on two couples who are up-and-comers in what Leonard has described as Ireland's "new aristocracy," "the Foxrock aristocracy" (Gallagher, "Introduction" 7). Dermod and Grainne Gibbon, according to Leonard's stage directions, "might have been born for affluent living; there is no trace of the parvenu about them" (90). The same cannot be said, however, of Fintan and Niamh Kinnore, on whom "prosperity sits ... like a donkey on a thistle" (90). Older than Dermod and Grainne, their old-world, pre-affluence habits more deeply ingrained, Fintan and Niamh find it more difficult to play the role of the cultured and well-coiffed. This is particularly true of Niamh, whose social gaucheries Fintan (for whom, as a businessman, conformity to the new codes of behaviour has become a high-stakes imperative) is continually trying to correct. Niamh is allowed to be herself, Fintan tells her, "At home--not when you're out" (96). The futility of his Pygmalionesque labours is underlined early in the play, however, when Niamh describes the weather as "urinating," explaining that Fintan has "told me not to use the other word" (91). Dermod and Grainne, meanwhile, despite their polished exteriors, are engaged in an equally deceptive bit of play-acting, pretending that theirs is a perfect marriage. Dermod, we learn, is far more interested in making money than in making love, and Grainne at one point dissolves in tears, overcome by abject misery, as she enumerates her possessions in a vain attempt at convincing the audience (and herself) that money *has* indeed bought them happiness (94).

Fintan and Niamh and Dermod and Grainne are embodiments of the rampant sense of insecurity Leonard identified in his wealthy neighbours on his return to Ireland. Caught between the new Ireland and the old, unable to remould themselves according to the new image by severing their ties to a past now seen as primitive, or despondent at finding the new values ultimately devoid of any informing principles, they are psychically

adrift, masked imposters obsessed with trying to forge and solidify some sense of self through the pursuit of such tangible goals as sex (Grainne) or money and status (Dermod and Fintan). As becomes apparent over the course of the play, however, the pursuits they have chosen, even if successful, are unlikely to provide them with anything to help define the emptiness which lies behind their masks. Murray's criticism that Leonard's plays are "pre-occupied with activity, the energy of farce" and that his drama is therefore shallow, "one of performance rather than revelation" ("Rev. 137) which reflects only on "its own world of play" ("Rev. 138) as opposed to any larger social or political context, thus seems blind to the fact that the world Leonard is depicting, that of the *nouveaux riches*, is centred precisely on role-playing and performance. Theirs is a world dominated by the frenetic (and to a disinterested observer almost certainly inane and farcical) activity associated with gaining and maintaining wealth and social standing. Far from evading the contemporary Irish context, then, in *The Patrick Pearse Motel* Leonard not only turned a critical eye on the emergent class which is the face of the new Ireland, but also captured the image of this class's pattern of social relations through the form of his play itself.

The other insight offered by the play is that the sense of dislocation which characterizes contemporary Ireland's "transitional crisis," that manifested in the crises of identity experienced by Leonard's characters, is the product of the process of dehistoricization which marked Ireland's passage into the postmodern era. As O'Toole has noted, the characters of *The Patrick Pearse Motel* have been "displace[d] in relation to the past" by "rapid social mobility" ("Saints and Silicon" 27), their links to a much simpler, traditional past severed by the consumerist revolution. Like Eddie in Murphy's *The Blue Macushla* and Liam in *Conversations on a Homecoming*, they respond to their state of historical displacement by seeking reconnection to the past through its reappropriation, as Leonard suggests has been the case in contemporary Ireland as a whole. Hence the apotheosis of Dermod and Fintan's company, "Mother Ireland Motels, Limited" (95), which is the eponymous Patrick Pearse Motel itself, a fully modern inn with eighty-four units, each a historical theme room emblazoned with the portrait of a nationalist hero (an iconographic decorating scheme which prompts one of the characters to label the motel "a political Stations of the Cross" [129]). The Patrick Pearse also boasts a restaurant called "The Famine Room" which features specialties such as "Battle of the Boyne Salmon," "Black and Tan Pigs' Feet," and "I.R.A. Bombe Surprise" (98) and a gift shop which sells, among other items, "authentic" Irish shillelaghs manufactured in Japan.

Through the example of Dermod and Fintan's Japanese shillelaghs (which notably are defective and prone to shatter) Leonard suggests not only the futility of any attempt to recover or reconstruct the nationalist past in the multinational present, but also the patently fraudulent nature of the historical vision perpetuated by the motel and its ilk. Dermod and Fintan are not interested in honouring or preserving the "real" past (as ephemeral and unknowable a concept as that may be), but rather in creating cheap, easily-consumable images of that past which they can sell to those as historically deracinated as themselves. In the process, as Gerald Fitzgibbon has suggested, "The names and occasions of history are thus reduced to a kind of Kerrygold wrapping, giving the illusion of locality and national essence to an international commercial product" ("Historical

Obsessions" 44). That a market exists for this product indicates, in Fitzgibbon's words, that "According to the play what passes for 'a sense of history' in the Ireland of the sixties and early seventies is just the spurious invocation of a few totemic names and dates to cover the nakedness of the new acquisitive social ethic, what might be called the 'business lunch' version of national identity" ("Historical Obsessions" 44).

Fitzgibbon's comment points to Leonard's trenchant observation that the past has been selectively reinterpreted in the present to allow nationalism to be co-opted by materialism. Just as the *nouveaux riches* have been forced to make compromises with Catholicism in order to vindicate their lifestyle (Grainne explains that she and Dermod have "swopped our old parish priest for a Jesuit [who] told us that the bit about the rich man and the camel going through the eye of a needle doesn't apply in ... Foxrock [94]), so the new breed of entrepreneurs has been required to rewrite the history books to portray the goals of the nationalist movement as material and economic prosperity. Discarding De Valera's vision of Ireland as a pastoral utopia uncorrupted by the materialism of the outside world, Dermod preaches a philosophy of "Ireland first ... and at all costs. But it is not patriotic to lose money. It is a betrayal of the economy" (99). According to his version of Irish history, the Patrick Pearse Motel "is the fulfilment of the dreams of the men who died for this green island," and the ultimate "insult to their memory," he posits, would be for the motel to "go bankrupt" (158). Pearse, Connolly, and Collins fought not so much for a free Ireland, Dermod would have his customers believe, but to make Ireland free for capitalism.

That Dermod's understanding of history is blatantly fanciful, motivated by naked greed and opportunism, is a truth which Leonard appropriately reveals through Hoolihan, the half-senile 1916 veteran whom Dermod and Fintan employ as watchman at the motel. In an exchange with the staunchly nationalistic Fintan, one which rather transparently reveals the ultimate target of Leonard's satire, Hoolihan unwittingly exposes the way the original idealistic goals of the nationalist movement have been besmirched through their appropriation and reinterpretation by the new elite:

> HOOLIHAN. ... But wasn't Mr. Pearse full of oul' codology, wha'? ... The rubbidge he used to come out with. 'Never tell a lie. Strength in our hands, truth on our lips, and cleanness in our hearts.' Jasus, what sort of way is that to run a country?
>
> FINTAN. Nice talk from a man who fought in nineteen-sixteen!
>
> HOOLIHAN. Yous lot has more sense. I do like to see the big motor cars and the women with all the rings .... I do like to see everybody buyin' things and batin' the lard out of the other fella. Money is great, though.
>
> FINTAN. How dare you criticize Pearse to me? You don't deserve to have been shot in the lung.
>
> HOOLIHAN. Decent man. 'Freedom!' says he. They wouldn't have shot him if they'd a known what we were goin' to do with it when he got it for us. They were gobshites, too.
>
> FINTAN. You ought to be ashamed of ...

HOOLIHAN. ... If I hadda had brains, I'd be rich too, because it's the best nationality. (140)

Fintan can only sputter ineffectually in rage as Hoolihan's musings lay bare the discomfiting reality that the motel is not a monument to the nationalist heritage, but to pure and naked greed. Later, when Hoolihan wanders off drunk into a vicious and potentially deadly storm, Dermod and Fintan, the chaos of the evening now resolved and their relationships with their wives mended, are caught up in negotiations regarding the financing of their next project, The Michael Collins Motel in Cork, and consequently are too busy to notice or care. Their lack of concern for the plight of Hoolihan, whom they have already decided to fire, demonstrates the depth of their contempt for the "authentic" past, absorbed as they are in the lucrative business of perpetuating commodified images of an imagined past.

As S.F. Gallagher has suggested, at moments like this the tone of Leonard's satire in the play moves beyond simple or merely playful ridicule, adopting instead "a note curiously resonant of the reproachful strain of Yeats' 'September 1913' (Was it for this ...?)" ("Introduction" 8). Leonard's anger seems grounded in the belief that such blatant commercial manipulation of historical images as that practiced by the Dermods and Fintans of contemporary Ireland, made possible by postmodernism's obscuring of Ireland's once integral connection to its past, is not only ideologically and morally dubious, but also potentially dangerous. Leonard pursued this thesis in *Time Was*, his 1976 play which depicts a world in which nostalgia has become an Irish, as well as international, disease of epidemic proportions, one with a peculiar and malign side effect: longed-for figures from the past are mysteriously appearing in the present, while those afflicted with the worst cases of nostalgia are being sucked into the past. This is the eventual fate of P.J., the play's protagonist, who epitomizes what another of Leonard's characters calls "living in the past syndrome" (209). Before P.J. disappears into the vortex of nostalgia, however, it becomes evident that his memories of the past are inaccurate and distorted, as revealed most obviously when the object of one of his fondest reminiscences, a prostitute named Tish, is transported into the present and proves far less enchanting in reality than she had been in his memories.

As a light comedy based on an unrealistic scenario, *Time Was* offers a relatively gentle lesson on the perils of historical obsession and misremembering the past. In *Kill*, however, his comic/satiric allegory about contemporary (circa 1982) Ireland and its politics, Leonard pushed his ideas one step further, presenting the violence in Northern Ireland as the product of the same phenomena. Fitzgibbon has written of Leonard that "No contemporary Irish playwright has been as consistent ... in satirising the Tourist-Board-Guaranteed-Irish market-led version of national history or national identity. And his satire is not entirely humorous: the cultural charades played to develop tourism may end up serving terrorism" ("Historical Obsessions" 45). This is precisely the premise explored in *Kill*, in which Leonard depicts the Ireland of 1982 as a nation with no defining vision, adrift between past and present and led by a clique of corrupt, scheming charlatans. As in *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, Leonard's choice of form in *Kill*, which he describes in his opening stage directions as "black comedy, swinging at times into farce"

(380) seems entirely appropriate given the mendacity of his characters, their proclivity for disguise and false self-representation, and the chaotically unstable political and cultural realities of the Ireland they inhabit.

The play's setting encapsulates this state of flux. *Kill* is set in a deconsecrated church ("Kill" is an anglicization of the Irish "cill," for church) which Leonard presents as "a metaphor for a newly-laicised Southern Ireland," and which is adjoined by a "besieged and much-disputed 'alms house'" that represents Northern Ireland (380). This modern Republic is presided over by Wade, the slick and manipulative prime minister/lord of Kill House who embodies the spirit of the times by outwardly espousing a reactionary nationalism--he asserts that "We in Kill House ... are not taken in by the cheap, the gimcrack and the foreign ..." (397)--even as it becomes clear that in his courting of moneyed interests he has allowed Kill to fall into disrepair, the integrity of its indigenous culture undermined by an invasion of cheap foreign goods (exemplified by the crozier purportedly owned by St. Patrick but curiously emblazoned with "Made in Taiwan" that is one of the valued national treasures housed in Kill's crypt [404]). The hypocrisy and deceit evident in the gap between Wade's official pronouncements and his actual policies is mirrored in the equally uncertain location between past and present occupied by his political allies: Father Bishop, a liberal priest, now defrocked, who nonetheless pretends to be a bishop; and Tony Sleehaun, Wade's partner and confidant from the world of business, an *arriviste* developer/demolisher who, like Fintan in *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, attempts rather unsuccessfully to mask his "provincial origins" under a veneer of "practiced smoothness" (382). Leonard's cast of imposters who double as contemporary Ireland's power brokers is rounded out by Judge Lawless, (representing the judiciary), a toady of Wade's whose "wrappings are ... brighter than the contents" (402); and by Iseult Mullarkey (representing the arts), a vociferously nationalistic master of the musical saw who effuses false modesty.

In the guilefully performative nature of his characters, their ready assumption of false identities, Leonard offers an image of a contemporary Ireland caught between the competing claims of tradition and postmodernity, unsure of how to reinvent itself to meet the challenges of the present. All too often, he implies, the inclination has been to lean toward the past as a bulwark against the structurelessness of the postmodern moment, a reactionary politics exemplified in *Kill* by Iseult, who presents herself as a throwback to the mythologized Irish maidens of yore and expresses a desire to live (literally) in the past: "I always wish we lived in the olden times of the heroes and warriors" (440). The problem with Iseult's brand of historical obsession, Leonard suggests, is that it is based on and perpetuates simplistic and inaccurate images of the past the like of which have fuelled Ireland's long history of political violence, a pattern repeated in the case of the post-1968 strife in Northern Ireland which is the immediate context of *Kill*. Iseult's work as a writer of cliché-ridden nationalist propaganda songs provides a perfect example of the manipulative misrepresentation of historical images with which Leonard takes issue. One of her songs, apparently typical of her repertoire, is a ballad sung by a plaintive Irish rebel about to be hanged by "the cowardly Saxon." He implores his mother to delight in

his martyr's death, and to be proud that he will die with his "good name" unbesmirched: "Although I've thrown a hundred bombs,/I've never told a lie" (457).

Such stuff, Leonard posits, is fodder for the extremist attitudes which provide the underpinnings of the Northern conflict, as manifested in Wade's obsession with the alms house. Determined that his "destiny" is "to be the one who at last achieves the return of the alms house to Kill" (400), Wade pursues his goal with a single-mindedness that causes him to neglect the upkeep of Kill and to lend covert support (despite numerous public declarations to the contrary), to Mort Mongan, the thug whose repeated raids on the alms house reflect his allegorical role as "a rampaging microcosm of the Provisional I.R.A." (380). Leonard's account of the genealogy of Mongan's evolution as a terrorist, delivered by Father Bishop, further emphasizes how distorted accounts of the Irish past have contributed to the violence of the present:

> His foster-father told the boy that he was of noble lineage, that his titles and estates had been usurped.... His adopted mother taught him songs and stories of old injustices. She dinned it into him that forgiveness was a crime and vengeance a sacrament. His priest, an uneducated man, assured him that heaven was his birthright and Protestants were godless. At school, he was made to memorise a litany of the dead. They taught him that living was for weaklings and death was a badge of manhood. (428)

Finally, Mongan was "[driven] off his head" by the "speechifying" of Wade (409), whose rants against the residents of the alms house are notable for their frequency and propagandistic flavour (as just one example, he plays on Iseult's staunchly Catholic and nationalist sympathies by denouncing the keepers of the alms house as "pagans" who "sing of kissing in haystacks, never of death and mothers," to which she coos, "Bomb them, bomb them" [430]). The fostering and supportive role which Leonard believes is played by official, political approval in perpetuating terrorism is underlined most clearly at the end of the play when, the other guests having left Kill House, Wade embraces Mongan, who is revealed to be his son.

The play ends with Kill/Ireland still in turmoil. Through his cunning, Wade has routed his political enemies and seems destined for re-election, which bodes ill for any prospect of an end to the guerrilla war being waged for control of the alms house. In this sense, Leonard attributes the prolongation of the conflict in the North to the inability of the Irish populace, and particularly its political leaders, to articulate a new and original vision for the nation, one freed from the enslavement to distorted images of the past which he suggests has been a national failing for far too long. The result, he posits through the form of *Kill*, has been an ongoing state of chaos, a national farce which all too often is far from funny, and from which there seems to be no hope of escape.

Even Leonard's less overtly political plays, those such as *Da*, *Summer*, and *Moving* in which he returns to the more familiar ground of suburban Ireland, and in which outrageous farce and satire are replaced by gentle, wry, largely naturalistically-portrayed comedy and social commentary, are permeated by the same sense of stasis, the same conception of the past as enthralling and inescapable. In the highly autobiographical *Da*, Charlie, Leonard's fictional alter ego, returns to Ireland from his home in England for his

father's funeral, arrogantly confident that with the death of his last surviving parent he will now be able to finally cut all ties to his past and home, as he has wished to do for years. Instead, from the moment he arrives he is haunted by memories of the past, particularly of his uneasy relationship with his father. The past is physicalized on stage in the figures of his younger self, his mother, and, most prominently, his Da, who dogs his footsteps continually, even when he tries to escape to the local pub. As much as Charlie insults and berates him (driven to the point of distraction by the end of the play, he orders him to "Hump off. Get away. Shoo. I don't want you" [231]) and despite his claim, delivered as he taps his head, that "I'm turfing you out. Of here" (230), Da refuses to be banished. Indeed, as Charlie leaves the house in the play's final moments to return to England, Da, much to Charlie's chagrin, bursts through the fourth wall to tag along, cheerily promising "I'll keep up with you" (231).

In Charlie's failure to escape from Da, Leonard suggests the essential and integral nature of upbringing and personal history to the construction of individual identity, and the futility of any attempt to deny the centrality of these factors in the formulation of individual conceptions and representations of self. The same understanding might be applied to a reading of the play which views it as an allegory of contemporary Ireland's relationship to its past. As Fitzgibbon has observed in commenting on this dimension of the play, Charlie's relationship with his father, who in many respects embodies the nationalist past, "is vividly representative of the love-hate relationship with nationalist history which is the crux of attempts to redefine contemporary Irishness" ("Historical Obsessions" 47). Charlie's rejection of Da is in many ways a rejection of the past he represents, in his gauche provincialism, his embarrassingly vocal championing of the I.R.A., De Valera, and Hitler (180), and his insular, closed-minded demonizing of England (198). Charlie's discovery that this past is not so easily banished can be seen as an object lesson for contemporary Ireland on the necessity of acknowledging the sometimes unpleasant truths about its history as part of its process of redefinition. Simply glossing them over leads to the reductive, glorified, and implicitly dangerous historical ignorance displayed by the characters of *Kill* and *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, while attempting to purge them altogether, as seen in Charlie's travails, is not only foolish but impossible. Notably, the form of *Da*, specifically its setting, reinforces this message on the play's personal and autobiographical level, as Leonard's drama about a return from exile, written by a playwright who had recently done just that, and who was notorious for his denunciations of the parochial naturalism of Irish drama, is set primarily in a kitchen, described in the opening stage directions as "the womb of the play" (166). In this respect the formal qualities of *Da* can be seen as a somewhat deferential act of acknowledgement on Leonard's part of his literary and artistic roots as an Irish playwright, a dramaturgical homecoming which parallels Charlie's and Leonard's literal, physical homecomings.

In *Summer* and *Moving* Leonard explores what he perceives as a particularly ironic consequence of contemporary Ireland's entrapment by the past, suggesting that the post-1958 period has been a time in which the frenetic pace of material progress in Ireland has been belied by an unflagging and discordant spiritual and philosophical stagnation. These plays register a perception that the Irish *nouveaux riches* could no

longer be treated merely as an amusing anomaly. Rather, with the swelling of their ranks and their emergence as the dominant economic and political force in Irish society, the trials and dilemmas of their lives, especially their struggle to find meaning in a world in which materialism has replaced the old certainties promulgated by religion and nationalism, had become those of Ireland as a whole, and consequently were the stuff of pathos as much as of comedy. Both plays depict an Ireland floundering, mostly unsuccessfully and directionlessly, to find a way out of this malaise.

Summer, which Leonard has described as "static, naturalistic, but dramatic" conveys this sense of despondent and ultimately hopeless questing through its circular form. The play, written in two acts, the first set in 1968, the second in 1974, centres on two picnics held six years apart at the same suburban hilltop site attended by the same group of eight characters, three middle-aged, middle-class couples and two of their offspring. The first act portrays an Ireland flush with the excitement of its new prosperity. "There's a few quid in the country now," (238) Stormy, a builder, declares buoyantly, happily anticipating the transformation wealth and progress will wreak on the still-pristine landscape below: "Give me ten years and all them fields and woods down there will be gardens. Then there'll be a view worth looking at from here" (252). Already, however, there is an awakening awareness among Leonard's characters of the hollowness of their new affluence, the "progress" defined in a facile but not inaccurate manner by Stormy: "Bellies full, cars to drive home in, and instead of poverty we've got debts--that's progress" (246). As Trina, another of the characters, incisively observes, the outward busyness of the *nouveaux riches*, "puffing themselves up with their sales-of-work and their meetings," is largely an exercise in self-deception, an attempt "to cod themselves that they're not dead and done for" (268). In what can be seen as an ironically similar effort at staving off mortality, the play's first act ends with Richard, Trina's husband, and Jan, Stormy's wife, embarking on an affair that will end unhappily six years later in Act Two.

With this passage of time the sense of emptiness experienced by the characters has become more palpable and universal. Stormy, previously the conformist voice of the new prosperity, now laments that the development of the area surrounding the picnic site, which he foretold in Act One, has taken place, and speaks wistfully of its formerly unspoiled state (272). Once the subject of middle-class aspirations, suburbia has now become a menacing and monotonous reality, and nostalgia, as in *Time Was*, has become a national obsession: "The past is fashionable," Jan tells Stormy as he expresses his bafflement at his daughter's fascination with jazz, "It's the in thing": "Any decade but this one," Richard concurs (300). Overwhelmed by the emptiness of the present, Leonard suggests, contemporary Ireland can only seek meaning in the past, a phenomenon which exposes the insubstantiality of the new values. While the nation has progressed materially, it has failed to articulate a new ethos to replace the old conservative Catholic and parochial nationalism which is now *passé*. This state of spiritual stagnation is emphasized by the play's ending: as the second picnic comes to a close, it seems apparent that Lou, Stormy and Jan's unhappily married daughter, and Michael, Richard and Trina's

free-spirited son, are about to begin an affair that seems certain to end as disastrously as that carried on by their parents.

Leonard's implication in *Summer* that the contemporary Irish condition is defined by spiritual hunger and emptiness, circular and static, trans-generational and unchanging, is also inherent to the structure of *Moving*. As in *Summer*, the play's two acts follow the same characters over a gap of several years. In *Moving*, however, this span is much larger--Part One is set in 1957 and Part Two in 1987--and the characters, the suburban Noone family presided over by patriarch Tom, do not, according to Leonard's stage directions "age in the slightest. These are basically the same people and at the same age" (v.). This unusual non-naturalistic framework[3] foregrounds the outward, material changes which have taken place in the life of the Noones, and in Ireland as a whole, over the thirty year time span of the play, while at the same time emphasizing that the essential character of both the nation and its people has remained static despite these changes. The ironic, seemingly schizophrenic, realities of an unchanging nation in which the most obvious constant is change are embodied in the figure of Tom Noone. Tom, in 1957 an employee at a corner grocery store and in 1987 a manager in the supermarket chain which "squeezed it out" of business (74), personifies the ethos of social mobility which defines and dominates the new Ireland. A firm and unwavering believer in the power of individuals to transform themselves and their environments, he places all his hope in the future, and advocates the severing of all ties to the past: "The here-and-now is what's ours, and whatever's in front of us will be good because we'll make it good" (40).

Over the course of the play it is revealed, however, that Tom, like the Ireland he represents, defines progress almost entirely in material terms--as the acquisition of a better-paying, more prestigious job, the purchase of a new car or television, or a move into a bigger house in a more select neighbourhood (which is precisely how the Noones are occupied on each of the two days, thirty years apart, on which the play is set). As becomes particularly clear in Part Two, Tom's frenetic quest for social and material advancement and his veneer of social liberalism (he accepts his children's decision to stop going to church [65] and expresses his support for John, his son Carlos' teacher who has been ousted from his job on account of his homosexuality [61]) in fact mask an essentially conservative sensibility. An unapologetic capitalist, he attacks Carlos for the "bolshiness" of his political leanings (68) and defends his company against his activist daughter's accusations that it condones the mistreatment of animals by nonchalantly quipping, "Pardon me, miss, it bought up this house .... And it keeps *you*" (66).

Distressingly, Tom's attitudes seem typical, and frequently even less extreme, than those of his society, as epitomized by the circumstances surrounding John's firing: convinced that Ireland had entered a new period of social tolerance, John came out of the closet only to discover that what he had interpreted as "The new enlightenment" was in fact a facade concealing a society still in thrall to the values of the past. (One, apparently representative, excerpt from his hate mail reads, "Did Pearse and Connolly die so that a pervert might contaminate our children?" [62].) This type of reactionary social conservatism, complemented by a naked acquisitiveness, is, the play suggests, all too characteristic of the dominant ideology of contemporary Irish society represented by Tom.

but perhaps best exemplified by his wife, Ellie. Initially (in Part One) humble and devoid of pretension, and hesitant to endorse Tom's materialism ("it's not the house that's being owned," she tells him, "it's us" [36]), by 1987 Ellie has become a staunch conservative and snob who denounces John in homophobic terms (77), speaks down to her social "inferiors" as she did not formerly (44), and is frank about her own materialistic motivations: "the Mini, the holidays, the new house--they're the carrots that keep this donkey on the road" (77).

While Tom remains ever-hopeful that the day will soon come when Ireland's new affluence will be matched by a progressive and meaningful social transformation--he is convinced that John would not have been persecuted if he'd only waited "three or four years" longer to come out--the regressive hardening of Ellie's attitudes actually provides evidence to the contrary. Tom seems equally oblivious to his own culpability in perpetuating this state of stagnation as, content merely to believe in the promise of a better future, he does nothing to bring it into being. Unable or unwilling (or both) to formulate a new set of values himself, he shifts responsibility for the future onto the next generation and lives his life as a passive observer, his spectator status underlined in the final moments of the play as he sits watching television ("a window on the world," he has proclaimed it earlier [47]). As he does so, "his smile," Leonard's stage directions indicate, is "lost in the trouble-free world of the future" (80). And while it is possible that his faith in the young is well founded given the apparently advanced political consciousness of both his son and daughter, it is also hinted (at moments such as that when his daughter speaks condescendingly towards the working-class movers [64]), that their activism is shallowly based, a merely faddish allegiance to momentarily fashionable causes.

Moving thus ultimately suggests that Ireland's "progress" since the economic and social revolution of the sixties has been only superficial, a case of moving in circles, or, perhaps more accurately, moving while standing still. Furthermore, Leonard implies that there is little prospect of escape from the spiritual rut in which contemporary Ireland finds itself, as both old and young, the representatives of the new Ireland and the old, are equally incapable of formulating a new vision for the nation. The judgement passed on Tom by the Removals Man who acts as chorus and narrator in *Moving* consequently seems applicable not only to him but to all of the characters in the play and, by implication, to contemporary Ireland as a whole: "There's them that make history, and there's them that history makes" (80).

The apparent pessimism of Leonard's vision in the play, and, indeed, of many of the works in his *oeuvre*, a quality which distinguishes his drama from that of the later Murphy, may suggest that Leonard has simply been unable to find any evidence to suggest that contemporary Ireland will soon emerge from its "transitional crisis." Alternatively, as O'Toole has argued, the resigned tone of plays like *Moving* and *Summer* may indicate that Leonard "has become a prisoner of the reality he has tried to reflect" ("Saints and Silicon" 26). In O'Toole's estimation, "The impulse of Leonard's work is not to confront the world, but to shore it up" (*Jesse James* 165), an assessment which seems hard to dispute given the overwhelming popular, if not critical, success of his plays, and Leonard's valorization of "entertainment" over politics in the theatre (Chaillet 321).

While, as I have argued in this chapter, Leonard's plays, as he once put it himself, "do *not* want for social commitment" (Gallagher, "Q. & A." 13) in the sense that they frequently offer trenchant, insightful observations on the disjunctive state of contemporary Irish society (the criticisms of critics like Murray notwithstanding), Leonard's brand of commentary is, apart from a few exceptions, relatively gentle and restrained. Only rarely, as in *The Patrick Pearse Motel* and *Kill*, does his tone move beyond bemused or weary resignation into something bordering on anger or excoriation, and typically his plays offer no solutions to Ireland's postmodern malaise, in O'Toole's words no "place where the divided mind might be healed" ("Saints and Silicon" 28).

Whereas the characters of Murphy's plays are able to transform their realities, triumphing over the same adversities that afflict the inhabitants of Leonard's Ireland, no such hope seems available to Leonard's characters. Moreover, it seems questionable whether Leonard would have us believe that such aspirations are truly necessary, that his people and the world they live in are as deeply flawed as all that. Read in this light, one might argue that rather than confronting the Irish middle class with the inadequacies and shortcomings of their political and social vision, and thereby implicitly suggesting the need for meaningful societal reform, Leonard's plays present the failures of these people and their nation as inevitable and understandable, the product of circumstances beyond their control, ultimately affirming and reinscribing their values instead of challenging them. This, more than anything else, may be the key to Leonard's popularity--that beneath the social commentary of his plays, even in the case of the barbed and corrosive wit of *The Patrick Pearse Motel* and *Kill*, dwells an underlying complacency about the state of Irish society, or at best, as O'Toole has put it, a tacit acceptance that "since nothing else is possible, things might as well be as they are" ("Saints and Silicon" 28-29).

The underlying conservatism of this sensibility might be traced to Leonard's own solidly middle-class affiliations and the trajectory of a career which has taken him from the position of marginal outsider to the central ranks of the *bourgeoisie*. The playwright who commented in 1970 that it was the people in "the boxy houses that attract me" (Linehan 14) has never relinquished his obsession with the *nouveaux riches*, and at one point became one of them himself. In the process, Leonard, the orphan and exile of ambiguous name and origin, has become the poet laureate of the Irish middle class, an insider who, as O'Toole has suggested, "writes about them as no other Irish playwright could" (*Jesse James* 163) because of the discursive location he occupies. In taking as his subject the crises and neuroses of an Irish middle class caught in the transition between tradition and postmodernity, poverty and wealth, an oppressively structured past and an oppressively structureless present, Leonard is to a large extent writing about himself. At the same time, however, he is also writing about contemporary Ireland as a whole, depicting the common experience of the nation through the vehicle of a drama which is both more unrelentingly single-minded in form and subject matter and perhaps in some ways more personal in expression than that chosen by his fellow playwrights, Keane, Murphy, Friel, and Kilroy, in their own artistic quests to represent the realities of a changing land.

Notes

1. Cf. S.F. Gallagher, "Q. & A. with Hugh Leonard," p. 13.

2. Cf. Linehan 14; Leonard, "Drama: The Turning Point" 78; Gallagher, "Introduction" 5.

3. Notably, the play's chronology is highly reminiscent of that employed by Caryl Churchill in *Cloud Nine.*

Engagement From the Sidelines: The Theatre of Brian Friel

> But for the writer, I think his position is better as a sideline one, as against an involved one. This is against the feeling of the moment where writers everywhere are becoming more and more committed socially.
>
> --Brian Friel interviewed by Eavan Boland, 1970

> Ireland is becoming a shabby imitation of a third-rate American state.... We are rapidly losing our identity as a people and because of this that special quality an Irish writer should have will be lost.... We are no longer even West Britons: we are East Americans.
>
> --Friel interviewed by Des Hickey and Gus Smith, 1972

> I would like to write a play that would capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment. This has got to be done. for me anyway, and I think it has got to be done at a local, parochial level, and hopefully this will have meaning for other people in other countries.
>
> --Friel interviewed by Fergus Linehan, 1970

The drama of Brian Friel explores the same state of flux which is such a central concern of so many of the plays of John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, and Thomas Kilroy. Friel's perspective on this contemporary Irish condition differs substantially from that of his fellow playwrights, however. In order to understand why and how, it seems instructive to note that, unlike Keane, Murphy, and Leonard, all of whom lived for a time in England, Friel has never left Ireland. Friel's drama is thus the product of a writer who, no matter how exasperated he may have become with what he once called "inbred claustrophobic Ireland" ("Self-Portrait" 20), has never been brought to turn his back on his home either metaphorically or literally. Like those of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Kilroy, Friel's plays analyze contemporary Ireland's transitional moment by occupying a Janus-like position, simultaneously looking backwards at the old, traditional Ireland and forwards at the new, postmodern, multinational Ireland, subjecting both to probing critical scrutiny. But with the notable exception of his savage 1971 drama *The Gentle Island*, Friel's treatment of the old Ireland is rarely as harsh or uncompromising as that it is accorded in the plays of Leonard or the early Murphy. And just as Friel has been less willing to repudiate the old, his works register a greater suspicion, arguably from an earlier time than those of his contemporaries, about the new. A number of plays dating from the first phase of his career, particularly *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), and *The Mundy Scheme* (1969) indicated Friel's growing unease, only a few years after the effects of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms began to be felt, with what Jochen Achilles has described as "Ireland's transformation from being an autonomous and unique agrarian society to becoming a part of a consumer civilization devoid of any contours and substance which, spreading out from the major industrial countries, in particular the USA, is threatening to envelop the whole world" (6).

Friel's resistance to the homogenizing forces of global capitalism was thus a strong undercurrent in his works from early on, evidence of the committed cultural nationalism which has informed his writings and activities throughout his life, culminating in his association with the Field Day Theatre Company from 1980 to 1994. Friel and Irish actor Stephen Rea founded Field Day in 1980 in the hope of encouraging a solution to the problems in Northern Ireland by exploring, through the forum of theatre, the unique cultural and historical heritage of Ireland, both North and South. Long before the company was formed, however, Friel was stressing the need for Irish dramatists to create a theatre which presented what he believed to be an authentic image of contemporary Ireland--one that did not merely succumb to the allure of the new by eliding the past, but which recognized the country's debt to its past. In a revealing 1972 *TLS* commentary on the state of Irish drama, Friel argued that "beneath the patina of Hiltonesque hotels and intercontinental jet airports and mohair suits and private swimming pools ... we still are a peasant people" ("Plays Peasant" 304). Therefore, he suggested, it was vital for Irish dramatists to retain a sense of their origins:

> ... the persistent cry in Ireland at the moment is for a more "relevant" drama. Write of Ireland today, the critics scream. Show us the vodka-and-tonic society. Show us permissive Dublin. Forget about thatched cottages and soggy fields and emigration.... The demand is interesting. Leaving aside the confusion between the art of the writer and the craft of the commentator, it is interesting because it is not a genuine demand for the revelation of a new "truth" about the country but for a confirmation of a false assumption.
>
> The assumption is that Dublin is a miniature New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, and that it shares with these capitals identical social, economic, moral and cultural problems. And the postulate implies that if the artists would only concoct plays about drug-addiction and highrise apartments and urban aggression and gay power, then Dublin's place among the global capitals would be miraculously and publicly assured. The dramatists laugh at this demand because they see how spurious it is: live tail, get dog. ("Plays Peasant" 305)

Friel's statement (which notably is in many respects a direct refutation of the type of theatre written by Hugh Leonard[1]) calls for the acknowledgement of those facets of Irish cultural difference which, he asserts, endure even in the postmodern era and, concomitantly, for some form of retention of the past rather than its outright dismissal.

Friel has always been adamant to caution, however, that this does not mean that either the past or received formulations of Irishness are to be enshrined as iconic, immutable and irreproachable. In a second 1972 essay, Friel spoke of the need for contemporary Irish writers to question what he saw as the "certainty that is cast-iron and absolute" which characterized the vision of post-Independence Ireland:

> The generation of Irish writers immediately before mine never allowed this burden to weigh them down. They learned to speak Irish, took their genetic purity for granted, and soldiered on. We are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the word foreign means. We want to know have these words any meaning at all. And

> persistent considerations like these erode old certainties and help clear the building site. ("Self-Portrait" 21)

For Friel, then, a critical (re-)evaluation of both inherited traditions and suppositions and the new markers of identification which have supplanted them is vital to the process which can be seen as the central impetus of his drama: a redefinition of Irishness which melds past and present, incorporating and embracing the past and asserting Irish cultural difference, yet which, unlike the "old certainties," is flexible and enabling rather than rigid and confining. Described in this way, Friel's project appears decidedly similar to that of Murphy in *Bailegangaire*; indeed, as Elmer Andrews has suggested, the ultimate goal of Friel's work mirrors that of a number of contemporary Irish writers, as does the challenge he inevitably encounters in realizing it:

> The central problem which Friel, along with a good many other Irish writers, faces is how to negotiate between the past and the future, how to reconcile traditional value and the search for individual freedom and authenticity, how to avoid the danger of fossilisation on one hand, and the danger of postmodern dehumanisation on the other. ("Fifth Province" 30)

While Friel's drama is thus rooted in dilemmas and realities which mark the common ground of the contemporary Irish context, it seems possible to argue that in his works the quest for reconciliation of the dichotomies of past and present, old modes of social and political interaction and new, is invested with greater urgency and importance than in those of many other Irish writers, including the other playwrights examined in this study. Friel's obsession with the subject is relentless, as is evident in the frequency with which tropes of transition and division appear in his drama. As Terence Brown has noted, Friel's "imagination has repeatedly been drawn to those phases in Irish social experience that can be reckoned as transitional" ("Have We a Context?" 190), an observation which applies to the numerous plays in his *oeuvre* set at watershed moments of personal/societal/national transformation. To note only some of the most obvious examples, the action of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* unfolds on the night before a young Irishman's emigration to America; *The Gentle Island* is an allegorical depiction of the violent rupture caused by the arrival of modernity on a primitive island off the west coast of Ireland; *Aristocrats* (1979) dramatizes the decline and fall of a Catholic Big House: *Translations* (1980) explores the historical nineteenth century moment at which Gaelic Ireland became Anglicized; *Making History* (1988) takes as its subject the final vanquishing of resistance to the Elizabethan colonization of Ireland in the routing of Hugh O'Neill's forces at Kinsale; *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) examines the consequences of rural Ireland's first tentative steps towards industrialization in the 1930s and, even more significantly, of pagan Ireland's transition to Christianity; and *Molly Sweeney* (1994) depicts a young blind woman's brief, troubled passage into the sighted world.

Given their tendency to occupy liminal moments or epochs, it is hardly surprising that many of Friel's characters are divided figures straddling the boundary between an old world and a new, and consequently at home in neither. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Gar O'Donnell, torn between his love for Ireland and his anticipation of a brighter future

in America, is literally split into two characters representing his Public and Private selves. In other plays, characters' divided loyalties are equally palpable, if less obviously indicated. In *Aristocrats*, Eamon, a commoner who has married into the family of the local Big House, but who has always felt like an outsider among them, ironically finds it harder than any of his in-laws to abandon crumbling and indebted Ballybeg Hall. Over the course of *Translations*, Owen, who acts as intermediary between his native Gaelic community and the British forces for whom he works as a translator, comes to question his role as an agent in the cultural colonization of his own people. And in *Making History*, Hugh O'Neill, the great Gaelic chieftain who was raised and educated in England and took an English wife (and whose accent shifts between English and Irish over the course of the play), finds himself leading a doomed rebellion against the queen to whom he had formerly pledged his loyalty.

Friel's recurrent evocation of images of division and transition (and of the related concept of translation, considered in all its literal and metaphorical dimensions) has elicited substantial commentary. Nonetheless, surprisingly few critics have drawn a connection between Friel's use of these tropes and the contemporary Irish social and political context, despite the huge explosion of criticism which has accompanied the playwright's post-*Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* elevation to the status of Ireland's best known and oft-discussed living dramatist.[2] In large part, this may be because he has been extremely reluctant to admit that his work even has such a context. Friel has consistently voiced his opposition to the notion of a politically or socially committed drama. When asked in a 1965 interview what he thought of "those plays that put across a social message," he replied, "I don't agree with it at all" (Morison 5), an opinion he reiterated in the 1970 *Irish Times* interview in which he suggested to Eavan Boland that the writer's "position is better as a sideline one, as against an involved one" (Boland, "Crisis" 12). Even ten years later as he worked on the play that became *Translations*, arguably his most overtly political work, he repeatedly expressed reservations in his playwrighting diary about "the almost wholly *public* concern of the theme.... Public questions; issues for politicians; and that's what is wrong with the play now. The play must concern itself only with the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls" ("Extracts" 60). Friel's attempt to draw a line between the private and public, the personal and political, the sideline and centre, relies, of course, upon the dubious proposition that these terms are, in fact, distinguishable, rather than inextricably intertwined. The fallibility of this logic seems to have been proven by the reception of *Translations*. Critical commentary on the play has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the large, "public" issues of colonization, language, and culture central to the play, while the way in which these issues are played out through the trials and dilemmas of Friel's individual characters has been relatively neglected.

The political resonances of *Translations* were so widely perceived and debated as to be undeniable, particularly as the play came to be more and more closely identified with the overtly polemical and contentious aims and activities of Field Day. In the years following its initial production, as Marilynn Richtarik has observed, *Translations* became "firmly enshrined as Field Day's central text" (241). Almost certainly for this reason it has

been to *Translations*, and to a lesser extent to his later Field Day drama *Making History*. that critics have looked first when discussing Friel as a political writer. Two of Friel's plays of the seventies also clearly influenced by "public" events have generated similar. if somewhat more limited, discussion: The *Freedom of the City* (1973), Friel's angry response to the events of Bloody Sunday and the tribunal which exonerated the killings carried out by British army paratroopers on that day; and *Volunteers* (1975), a play set after the introduction of internment which centres on a group of political detainees who have volunteered to work at the site of a Dublin archaeological dig. The problem with reading Friel's political and social commitment solely through these four plays, as a majority of critics has tended to do, is that the image of Friel which inevitably emerges is misrepresentative. Viewed in the context only of these works, Friel is too frequently pronounced a writer concerned almost exclusively with "The Northern question" and that intersection of the sweep of broad issues of colonization, language, historiography and national/cultural identity which has emerged as the particular domain of Field Day.

Friel's background as a Northerner has undoubtedly shaped the political vision found in his drama. Born in 1929 in County Tyrone, Friel lived and worked in Derry from 1939 to 1968 before moving just across the border to the Inishowen peninsula in north County Donegal, where he has resided ever since. He was actively involved in the Civil Rights movement from its inception, participating in a number of marches, including the one on Bloody Sunday, and the determination which he formed later in life to use theatre as a means of breaking down boundaries and resolving differences (again as epitomized by his involvement with Field Day) can clearly be linked to his first-hand experiences of division, violence, and disenfranchisement (as a member of the minority Catholic population[3]) in the highly-charged sectarian atmosphere of the North. What critics have too often neglected to note, though, is that Friel's works have always encompassed a political and social dimension which extends beyond the particulars of the situation in the North to the effects of the economic, social, and cultural transformation of recent decades, which have been experienced across the entire island, if rather more dramatically in the historically more insular Republic. Friel's obsession with division and states of transition should thus be viewed as the product of dual influences--the Northern crisis as well as the crisis occasioned by the Republic's rapid leap into postmodernity--only one of which has been extensively explored.

The intention of this chapter, then. is to take some steps towards redressing this imbalance by examining the body of Friel's drama as a response primarily to the clash between tradition and postmodernity precipitated by Ireland's economic and social revolution of the sixties and seventies, as was the focus of the discussions of the drama of Keane, Murphy, and Leonard earlier in this study. Friel has not been able to draw on the somewhat privileged perspective towards home, borne of exile, which each of these dramatists acquired through their emigrant experiences. Nonetheless, as a writer who has occupied a geographical and psychic borderland, residing both in the North and on the extreme northwest fringe of the Republic, and who has claimed his reluctance to "deposit fealty" to either state, Friel has by his own reckoning lived the life of an internal exile: "both places are your home, so you are an exile in your home in some kind of sense"

(O'Toole, "Man From God Knows Where" 20). Friel's consciously adopted position on the margins of Irish politics and society, along with his notorious penchant for privacy and his insistence on maintaining a measure of "critical distance" from the subjects of his drama,[4] have all, it may be argued, combined to provide him with a particularly clear-sighted view of the changes which have taken place in Ireland, North and South, since the late 1950s.

In discussing how Friel's drama captures and responds to these changes I have concentrated on the plays of his early and late periods. In doing so, my intention has been to build upon Fintan O'Toole's helpful but somewhat reductive assessment of Friel's *oeuvre*. O'Toole sees Friel as a writer who in his early works perceptively and accurately defined the most compelling subject of drama in modern Ireland, but later became sidetracked by the Troubles and eventually relinquished any willingness to address the contemporary Irish context (or at least what O'Toole believes are its most salient features) altogether:

> having identified the social rupture caused by economic change in Ireland in the sixties, Friel effectively left it there. As the sixties wore on, the explosion of civil conflict in Northern Ireland became a more pressing context for his work and he eventually abandoned the Southern Question of economic and social change for the Northern Question of identity and a different sense of dislocation. ("Saints and Silicon 17)

For O'Toole, this was an "evasive action" ("Saints and Silicon" 17) which permitted the "sense of loss and rupture" identified in Friel's early drama "to be dealt with at a distance. keeping the writer's hands free from the vulgar grime of contemporary Irish reality" ("Saint and Silicon" 16).

While O'Toole's implicit suggestion that "the Southern Question" ought to be recognized as a more valid and worthy subject of drama than "the Northern Question" is clearly a matter of opinion, his reading of the first stage of Friel's career is instructive. As noted above, Friel's early works, up to and including *The Gentle Island*, depict Ireland as a divided nation caught in the midst of an accelerating social and cultural transformation from the old order to the new, a transition which Friel finds himself unable to either endorse or lament unreservedly. As O'Toole and other critics have suggested. this thematic thread, which culminates in *The Gentle Island*, was largely severed by the intrusion of the Northern crisis into Friel's work, manifested in the subject matter of his next two plays, *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers*. With these works, Friel's determination to remain on the "sidelines" crumbled in the face of his outrage at the events of Bloody Sunday.

While the Troubles undeniably preoccupied Friel's dramatic concerns for some time, he by no means abandoned the subject of the clash between tradition and postmodernity in contemporary Ireland, as O'Toole contends. Rather, as I mean to argue. Friel returned to it with renewed vigor in a trio of plays written in the eighties and nineties. *The Communication Cord* (1982), which O'Toole reads, together with *Translations*. as a play which demonstrates that Friel had come "to abstract the sense of discontinuity from the real and immediate economic change and locate it in language"

("Saints and Silicon" 17), is on the contrary a trenchant, incisive view of the new social and economic realities of an Ireland which has come to be dominated by the shallow values of an emergent yuppified middle class. Like *The Communication Cord*, *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993) is a decidedly ambiguous depiction of the present-day consequences of the processes of modernization and internationalization fostered by the Whitaker/Lemass reforms and first observed and dramatized by Friel in his plays of the sixties. The characters of these two recent works, like those who populate Leonard's *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, *Summer*, and *Moving*, and Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *The Gigli Concert*, and *Bailegangaire*, are dispirited and dehistoricized, and desperately in search of meaning in a world in which the old certainties have been replaced by an ultimately unrewarding pursuit of material well-being. In these plays, as well as in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel, in the manner of the later plays of Murphy, validates the quest for the transcendent as a possible solution to Ireland's postmodern malaise. A comparison of the two playwrights and the vision advanced in their recent works seems particularly apt given that Andrews' description of the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of Friel's work might equally and unqualifiedly be applied to Murphy:

> Friel resists the apocalyptic tendencies of the Postmodern, advancing instead what we might call a 'New Humanism', an existentialist aesthetics which is critical of, as well as informed by, certain aspects of Postmodernism. For he is as much concerned with reconciliation, reintegration, synthesis, accommodation as with their impossibility. (*Art of Brian Friel* 63)

One of the levels at which Friel, like Murphy, seeks accommodation in his drama is that of dramatic form. As I mean to suggest, Friel's use of form can be read in tandem with his commentary on the changing economic, social, and cultural realities of contemporary Ireland. Just as in the realm of Irish cultural praxis Friel advocates that tradition and the past be acknowledged and incorporated--but emphatically not regarded as iconic or inviolable--as new definitions of Irishness are formulated, so in his drama he has sought to respect and accommodate the Irish dramatic tradition even in the course of creating a new theatre unencumbered by the dictates of that tradition. Here, the parallel with Murphy again presents itself, as it does when it is also considered that the quest for transcendence which dominates the later works of both dramatists is played out not only within the plays themselves, but also at a metatheatrical level. Both Friel and Murphy seek to create a new form of theatre in these works, one which communicates with its audience not just through words, but also through images and movement, and their attempts to do so both approximate and are intimately related to their characters' strivings after transcendence. But where Murphy succeeds in this effort, Friel ultimately falls short, a failure which suggests that Friel is far less optimistic that Ireland's "transitional crisis" can be resolved. Considered in another light, his inability to create such a drama of transcendence might also be understood as the product of his unwillingness to abandon his personal and authorial position of detachment from the crisis, as well as of his theatre's greater indebtedness to the Irish dramatic tradition.

Although Friel is by no means ignorant of or indifferent to the place of his works within the larger context of international theatre, he has always defined himself primarily

as an Irish playwright writing for an Irish audience. In the same essay in which he espoused the distinctiveness of Dublin and of Irish culture and society in general, Friel argued as a corollary that Irish playwrights who seek inspiration elsewhere will be disappointed: "it is no help to the Irish dramatist to look outside Ireland because his situation is substantially different from the French or English or German or American dramatist" ("Plays Peasant" 306). For Friel, devotion to the particular and the local is paramount, hence his 1970 assertion, recorded in his *Irish Times* interview with Fergus Linehan, that any play intended to "capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment" would necessarily have to be conceived at "a local, parochial level" (Linehan 14). By observing a fidelity to the parochial (a term, as Peacock has observed, which Friel uses "in the positive sense ... espoused by Patrick Kavanagh, as opposed to 'provincialism' ["Translating" 122]), the dramatist's work gains a conviction, Friel has maintained, that makes it accessible to both local and foreign audiences. Friel suggested to Linehan that "If you write with a certain truth about any situation or any people, even though the rest of the world isn't well versed in the peculiarities, I think you acquire a kind of universality," a comment he echoed in a later conversation with Gus Smith and Des Hickey: "The canvas can be as small as you wish, but the more accurately you write and the more truthful you are the more validity your play will have for the world" (223). Communicating with "the world," however, has always been a secondary consideration for Friel, a fringe benefit which may or may not accrue from the task he sees as the primary concern of Irish drama: that of exploring and conveying certain truths about Ireland to the Irish people. These are the terms in which he framed his perceptions of the Irish dramatic tradition and trends in contemporary Irish theatre in a 1982 interview:

> ... apart from Synge, all our dramatists have pitched their voice for English acceptance and recognition.... However I think that for the first time this is stopping, that there is some kind of confidence, some kind of coming together of Irish dramatists who are not concerned with this, who have no interest in the English stage. We are talking to ourselves as we must and if we are overheard in America, or England, so much the better. (Agnew 60)

Given the obvious strength of the commitment to cultural nationalism which such comments reveal, it is perhaps surprising that Friel's plays deviate from traditional Irish forms, incorporating influences from the international theatre, as often as they do. Friel experiments with new forms and modifies and disrupts naturalist conventions in a number of his plays. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Friel's protagonist, as already noted, is split into two characters, while in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* the title character repeatedly breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly, as does Andy Tracey, the protagonist of *Losers (1967)*. In *Winners* (1967), *The Freedom of the City*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* the eventual fate of some of the characters is foretold by others who provide commentary on the events of the plays as they unfold in flashback. *Living Quarters* (1977) takes place in the subconscious minds of its characters, who gather to revisit a fatal day in their lives, their re-enactment of it taking the form of a rehearsal controlled by an imagined stage manager; and *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Molly Sweeney*

are monologue plays, each with a cast of three actors who speak only to the audience and never to one another.

Critics have pointed to apparent dramaturgical borrowings from the international theatre in the case of several of these plays, noting especially the Brechtian 'epic' form of *The Freedom of the City*,[5] the affinities between *Living Quarters* and both Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Dantanus 144) and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (Neil, "Non-realistic Techniques" 355), and the stylistic, thematic, and structural similarities between *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.[6] Friel's work has, moreover, prompted as many comparisons with that of other non-Irish dramatists such as Arthur Miller,[7] Eugene O'Neill,[8] Antonin Artaud (Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 212-18), Harold Pinter,[9] Henrik Ibsen (Murray, "Emblems" 69), and (especially) Anton Chekov[10] as with that of Irish playwrights such as Yeats (Murray, "Emblems" 69), Synge,[11] O'Casey,[12] and Beckett (Schrank, "Rev." 154; Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 58, 110).[13] That Friel's dramatic imagination extends beyond the borders of Ireland is also evident in the fact that he has translated or adapted works by Euripides (on whose *Hippolytus* Friel's *Living Quarters* is based), Chekov (*Three Sisters* [1981]), and Turgenev (*Fathers and Sons* [1987] and *A Month in the Country* [1992]), as well as the eighteenth-century Irish playwright Charles Macklin, whose *The True-born Irishman* Friel rewrote as *The London Vertigo* (1990).

The experimental and international elements of Friel's theatre aside, the influence of the Irish dramatic tradition is still an unquestionably strong presence in his works. As Thomas Kilroy has suggested, Friel's drama demonstrates respect for, if never inhibiting deference towards, the conventions of the Abbey peasant tradition to which Friel, in Kilroy's words, was an "heir":

> What marked him apart from the best of his predecessors, T.C. Murray, say, or Paul Vincent Carroll was not so much his material (since it arose in the first instance out of a similar background) but what distinguishes all first-rate writers: the range of his sensibility. Yet, with some exceptions, he was to remain loyal to this inherited tradition: that branch of naturalistic Irish drama which originated in and took its inspiration from rural Catholic Ireland and which had dominated Irish theatre, not always happily, throughout the late twenties, the thirties, forties and fifties. ("Theatrical Text" 93)

Like most of his Abbey forbearers, Friel is primarily a dramatist of rural Ireland: only three of his plays (*The Mundy Scheme*, *The Freedom of the City*, and *Volunteers*) have urban settings, while a majority of the others are located in or near the fictional County Donegal village of Ballybeg (its name taken from the Gaelic for "small town") which has become his signature setting. And while Friel's plays are rarely purely naturalistic in form, they are often largely so, a distinction which Bernice Schrank has noted in describing Friel as "a descendant of the naturalist line who constantly rubs against and transforms its conventions" ("Rev." 153). A number even of Friel's most formally unconventional and experimental works--among them *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, *Winners*, *The Freedom of the City*, *Living Quarters*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa*--can be described in general terms as plays in which a central core of naturalistically depicted action is enclosed within a non-

naturalistic frame. As Joe Dowling, a frequent director of Friel's plays, has observed, one of the most obvious indications that Friel's dramaturgical instincts are essentially naturalistic lies in his meticulously, some might say ploddingly, realistic approach to set design:

> ... Friel never really developed a sense of the possibilities of stage design as a way of expressing the imagery of his plays. He is usually very literal in his demands for the physical environment, describing in detail exactly the type of setting he requires. This rarely allows for an imaginative approach from the designer and demands a clear naturalism--even in plays which have a more expressionistic possibility. (187)

Dowling has accounted for what he sees as Friel's "lack of concern for the visual environment" by noting that Friel

> creates mainly through the language and the characterisation rather than through extraneous theatrical effects.... While many contemporary writers eschew the use of narrative and find contact with their audience by use of disconnected images and intense physical activity, Friel has never abandoned the central role as storyteller. His methods of telling the story may change with each new work, but the starting point is always rooted in a naturalistic reality. (187-88)

Dowling's designation of Friel as a storyteller, a playwright concerned primarily with words as opposed to images, has been echoed by Kilroy, who has described Friel's drama as "literary" as opposed to "theatrical" and posited a cultural genealogy for this aspect of his artistry:

> while our culture may have had no indigenous, native theatre prior to the eighteen-nineties it did have the *seanchai*, a distinctively histrionic artist with his repertoire, his own audience... More subtly than any other Irish playwright Friel has transcribed this national skill into the theatrical medium. This is why we often have to enlist a literary or quasi-literary vocabulary in talking about some of the plays. ("Theatrical Text" 98)

Other critics have pursued a similar line of reasoning to suggest that Friel's dramaturgy has a distinctly Irish pedigree. Like Kilroy, Christopher Murray has pronounced Friel's drama "literary," arguing that in this respect Friel's theatre can be linked to that of Yeats and Synge, both of whom, Murray observes, believed that "Irish drama should first and foremost be 'literature'" ("Emblems" 78). Katherine Worth has suggested that the "persuasive storytellers" of Friel's plays are descendants of an equally eminent line which stretches from "Boucicault's shaughrans and Synge's playboys ... to Beckett's blind Hamm" and Murphy's Mommo (75). For Richard Kearney, similarly, Friel is merely the latest exponent of "Ireland's verbal theatre," a genre whose practitioners have included "Goldsmith, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, Yeats and O'Casey" as well as "Murphy, Kilroy, Leonard and Friel" ("Language Play" 20). Friel's place in this tradition, Kearney argues, is evident not only in the eloquence and loquaciousness of his characters, but in the fact that his plays "have become increasingly concerned with the problem of language. So much so that they constitute not just a theatre *of* language but a theatre *about* language" ("Language Play" 24).

If Friel's theatre is peculiarly Irish in its verbal proclivities and in its rooting in Abbey peasant naturalism, both qualities are readily apparent in his early works, particularly *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Friel's protagonist, Gar O'Donnell, considered as the sum of his Private and Public selves, is a verbal dynamo whose garrulous, virtually unremitting interior monologues and flights of fancy dominate the play. As Andrews has suggested, the sheer force of Gar's articulateness alone marks *Philadelphia* as a play which "is firmly in the native Irish tradition of verbal theatre" (*Art of Brian Friel* 89): in the words of Seamus Deane, Gar's is "a virtuoso performance of the kind of Irish eloquence which had come to be expected from Irish playwrights in particular" (*Selected Plays* 16). With its treatment of the time-honoured Irish theme of emigration and its largely naturalistically-defined setting in the home of a County Donegal village shopkeeper, the play was also one, as Kilroy has observed, which explored ground very familiar to Irish audiences: "One might be in any number of kitchen farces, comedies, tragi-comedies of the preceding decades" ("Generation" 136-37).

Nonetheless, as Kilroy and other critics have noted, Friel's fidelity to the peasant play form was knowingly less than perfect. In addition to the striking non-naturalistic device of splitting Gar into two characters, Friel defies naturalist conventions by employing a downstage area as a "fluid" space in which events are dramatized in flashback. Although, as Michael Etherton has observed, Friel uses this space "rather timidly" (156), the experiment was still a relatively bold one for an Irish play in 1964. As Anthony Roche has suggested, Friel's use both of this space and the complex, atmospheric lighting scheme which helps to define it were not only beyond the scope of the Abbey's technical resources at this time, but also likely to have provoked the resistance of its governing body, which well might have "resented ... such a radical re-presentation of its traditional fare" (83). In any case, the play found a more receptive home at the Gate, where it was first produced under the directorship of Hilton Edwards. Roche has also pointed to Friel's use of the upstage area of the set as a further significant deviation from the traditional form of the peasant play. This space is divided between the kitchen of the O'Donnell home and Gar's bedroom, a design which, Roche observes, incorporates the "archetypal" Irish kitchen, but "denie[s] it autonomy": "*Philadelphia, Here I Come!* does not dispense with the kitchen; some of its most crucial scenes occur there. Neither does it dominate the entire stage" (*Irish Drama* 80).

That Friel's modifications of the peasant play's formal conventions were, as Kilroy has argued, "self-conscious" ("Generation" 137) suggests that Friel, no less than his contemporaries Murphy and Leonard, had come to recognize the limitations and inadequacies of the Abbey tradition. As a play which implicitly signals peasant naturalism's shortfalls by demonstrating the much wider range of dramatic possibilities opened up by even slight variations on the standard form, *Philadelphia*, in George O'Brien's words, can be seen as a work which advocates the peasant play's renovation: "*Philadelphia, Here I Come*! speaks in the tone of a theatrical tradition (that of the Irish kitchen drama) in the process of renewing itself" (52). In this respect, Friel's use of form can be read in tandem with his treatment of his subject matter, as *Philadelphia*, like the early works of Murphy and Leonard, is in many ways an angry response to the

deprivations of the De Valera years. In Andrews' words, Friel "satirises 'official' Ireland" (*Art of Brian Friel* 86) in the play, targeting particularly what D.E.S. Maxwell has called the post-independence state's "Victorian mores of social decency" ("'Figures'" 53) and the nationalist economic policies which contributed to emigration. As Ulf Dantanus has argued, the drama reveals

> a sensibility offended by some west-of-Ireland conditions that provoke young people to leave, and the lack of remedying policies from official sources. We may even, in this context, usefully see Gar's father, who is unable to help his son, as a symbol of the failure of official Ireland to provide the young generation with hope and future. (95)

Friel conveys an image of the gap which separates the Ireland of mid-century from the evolving, contemporary Ireland in the impenetrable wall of silence which divides Gar from his father, S.B. O'Donnell. The frustration which fires Gar's desire to emigrate is rooted equally in his inability to communicate with S.B. and his unwillingness to resign himself to what he perceives, not inaccurately, as the sterile, paralyzing monotony of life in Ballybeg. Gar's unbridled antipathy for the inhibitions, hypocrisies, and material and spiritual poverty of Irish rural life becomes apparent in many of his daydreams. In one he imagines himself the pilot of a jet "with its tail belching smoke over Ireland," leading a machine gun attack on "a bloody bugger of an Irish boat out fishing for bloody pollock" (31); later he rallies his momentarily flagging spirits by envisioning a similar scenario: "tomorrow morning, boy, when that little ole plane gets up into the skies, you'll stick your head out the window ... and spit down on the lot of them" (33).

Gar's fantasies are clearly his means of escaping the confinement he experiences, of expressing and imaginatively acting out alternatives to the limited roles he is allowed to play in daily life. That he can experience this form of escape only when he is alone, and that his Private self, the primary seat of his creativity and emotions, is severed from his Public persona, indicates the extent to which these qualities have been stunted by his environment. As Neil Corcoran has suggested, in this way Friel's splitting of Gar underlines the coercively homogenizing tendencies of mid-century rural Irish society: "the two Gars, Public and Private, are certainly a way of dramatising Gar's alienation, the virtual schizophrenia of character and reaction into which he is forced by his cultural and domestic circumstances" (15). In creating Private Gar, however, Friel not only exposed the repressions of his society, but also, as Andrews has noted, "demonstate[d] ... his desire for something excluded from cultural order and its usual forms of representation. The character of Private allows him to give expression to all that is opposed to the small-town, highly conventionalised social order of Ballybeg" (*Art of Brian Friel* 85).

For Gar, Philadelphia, his future home, stands as an exotic and alluring alternative to Ballybeg, just as by the early sixties Ireland as a whole had become markedly and progressively more obsessed with America and all things American. This trend, which coincided with the beginning of Ireland's social and economic revolution, attained "hysterical proportions," in Terence Brown's words, during the Presidency of the Irish-American John Kennedy ("'Have We a Context?'" 190). Through Gar, Friel explored the element of creeping cultural neo-colonialism which had become a significant aspect of

the relationship between the U.S. and what O'Toole has called an Ireland "newly Americanised" ("Marking Time" 202) through the transformative economic, social, and cultural effects of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms. Seen from this perspective, as O'Toole has suggested, Gar's division is metaphoric of a nation in uneasy transition from the old post-independence mode of social relations to a new model represented by America:

> Friel's sense of the divided mind ... makes it appropriate to split the main character Gar O'Donnell into two parts ... and to take soundings in the spiritual schizophrenia engendered by the pull between home and the small town on one hand and dreams of success in the big city on the other, exactly mirroring the beginnings of urbanisation and industrialisation in the early sixties. ("Saints and Silicon" 16)

As seen through Gar's eyes, America is everything that Ireland is not, and offers everything that Ireland cannot. If for Gar the enticements of home can be concisely summarized by describing Ireland as "the land of the curlew and the snipe, the Aran sweater and the Irish Sweepstakes," he relishes in contemplating (and parodying) the conservative Irish establishment's xenophobic denigration of the U.S. as "a profane, irreligious, pagan country of gross materialism.... Where the devil himself holds sway, and lust--abhorrent lust--is everywhere indulged in shamelessly" (32). America holds the promise not only of sexual freedoms unimaginable in devoutly Catholic Ireland, but also the obvious attraction of material wealth: Gar imagines himself becoming "president of the biggest chain of biggest hotels in the world" (35) and returning to Ballybeg "when I make my first million, driving a Cadillac and smoking cigars and taking movie-films" (78). The sensual and material comforts of America aside, Gar also professes his admiration for its individualistic ethos, as against the cloying and stifling parochialism he endures at home. Parrotting the words of his old schoolmaster, Gar champions America as "a vast restless place that doesn't give a damn about the past," a land where he can find the "impermanence" and "anonymity" he desires and escape "All this bloody yap about father and son and all this sentimental rubbish about 'homeland' and 'birthplace'" (79).

That Gar seems to believe all the stories/myths he has been told about America, or at least that he seems to *want* to believe them, is a telling indication of just how potent the very idea of America had become for young Irishmen and women like him. The extent to which Gar, no less than Ireland as a whole, had fallen under the sway of American influences is further evident in the fact that much of his dialogue and many of his daydream fantasies are derived from American popular culture. At different points in the play Gar adopts the role of "Garry the Kid," a John Wayne-like cowboy with an aversion to fences (34); carries on a dialogue with himself in an idiom that Friel refers to in a stage direction as "absurd Hollywood style" (46); fabricates a story about his father's origins which has all the hallmarks of a Hollywood "B" spy thriller (57-58); and sings the popular American folk song "California, Here I Come!" (changing the words slightly) as a kind of mantra. Gar's facility with these pop culture references is clearly the product of his immersion in them, and, as Andrews has suggested, that his network of cultural associations includes as many foreign as Irish influences, that he is as familiar with

Hollywood westerns as with ceilidh music, "is expressive of a fragmented and confused cultural inheritance, the sign of a profound crisis of identity" (*Art of Brian Friel* 88).

While Friel presents this cultural confusion as a common, even universal, contemporary Irish condition, and while he can apparently find much on the American side of the U.S./Ireland dichotomy to admire, he is hesitant to endorse American values or the Americanisation of Ireland. Friel's ambivalence towards the changing face of the nation is encapsulated in Gar's reluctance to repudiate his home outright. For while Gar perceives that America can offer him far greater opportunities for wealth and freedom than Ireland ever could, in Andrews' words, "however much he fulminates against Ballybeg, he is tied to it by bonds of sentiment not even he understands" (*Art of Brian Friel* 86). His assertion that Ballybeg is "a bloody quagmire, a backwater, a dead end.... I hate the place ..." (79) is a show of false bravado performed in the heat of the moment for the benefit of his estranged ex-girlfriend, much as he repeatedly sings "Philadelphia, Here I Come!" in an effort to ward off lingering feelings of nostalgia. In the final moments of the play his true unwillingness to abandon his home for America is unmasked as he asks himself, "God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?" (99).

Gar's hesitancy seems rooted not just in his sense of attachment to home, but also in his misgivings about America, apprehensions which Friel evidently shared and which surface most prominently in his treatment of Gar's Irish-American aunt Lizzie. As Helen Lojek has observed, in Friel's plays Irish-Americans typically embody a set of "values and [a] lifestyle ... threatening to traditional Irish life" (83), and Lizzie shares many of their worst qualities, particularly what Lojek has referred to as their "shallow materialism and vulgarity" (84). Lizzie and her husband Con, who are unable to have children of their own (a sign, Lojek argues, that Friel sees life in America as "sterile" and "life-denying" [81-82]), persuade Gar to leave Ballybeg for their Philadelphia home, which is empty and lonely but air-conditioned and "located in a nice locality," as Lizzie puts it (59). The two win Gar over with an appeal based largely on the material comforts he will enjoy: even Lizzie is forced to admit that their offer amounts to a "sorta bribery" (65). More than her materialism, however, Gar finds himself repulsed by her "grammar" and "vulgarity" (65-66), as well as her embarrassingly unrestrained displays of emotion. Nonetheless, he gives in to her "bribery," seemingly enthralled by the knowledge that Lizzie is his last and most tangible link to his long-dead mother. That Lizzie claims to have been "so alike in every way" to Gar's mother, who is remembered by all who knew her as a romantic, spritely Irish maiden, is perhaps the most obvious indication of Friel's anti-American bias in the play: as Lojek has suggested, "... [Gar] and the audience are left to wonder what it is about America which has transformed a charming peasant girl into a needy, overbearing, middle-class, middle-aged matron" (80). Lizzie therefore personifies the dangerous possibility which seems implicit to Friel's analysis of the shifting ground of Irish culture in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*: that, in Lojek's terms, "as Ireland moves into the late twentieth century her people will forsake their lyrical, mythic past and become mere hucksters, fumbling in a 'greasy till'" (83), a fate to which Gar's condition of cultural colonization is an apparent precursor.

Friel reasserted this traditionalist, somewhat reactionary stance towards Ireland's evolving cultural and social transformation in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, another play in which past and present, the new Ireland and the old, and Ireland and America come into conflict. Whereas in *Philadelphia* Friel examined the relationship between the two nations from the perspective of a prospective young Irish emigrant, in *Cass* his analysis derives from the antithetical situation of an elderly emigrant returning home to Ireland after living most of her life in America. Cass McGuire, Friel's protagonist, emigrated as a young woman to New York City, where she worked for decades as a waitress in a Skid Row diner, dutifully sending a portion of each of her meagre pay cheques home to the family of her brother, Harry, in Donegal. The Ireland she returns to as an old woman bears little resemblance to the home she left. No longer the impoverished and proudly nationalist Republic of former times, it is the Ireland of the expansionist, prosperous mid-sixties, and Harry is in many respects its epitome--a bourgeois businessman and accountant whose wife cannot tell the difference between Gaelic and German (34), and whose offspring include a doctor, an architect, and a teenage son who reads "true detective" comics (9). Cass discovers that Harry has never used or needed the money she has sent him, but instead has saved it for her retirement, an affront which as Brown notes "caught a poignant moment of transition in Irish/Irish American relations" when an "economically resurgent" Ireland was beginning to wean itself of its dependency on and obsession with America: Harry's rejection of Cass's money, Brown suggests, is "a cruel kindness which lets her (and a whole generation of Irish American exiles) know, that they don't really need *her* either" ("'Have We a Context?'" 190).

If, as Brown argues, Harry's gesture is both a personal slight and, symbolically, a defiant rejection of American paternalism, when Cass arrives in Ireland she suffers an even more obvious rebuff which can also be read allegorically. Initially welcomed into the home of Harry and his wife, Alice, Cass soon exhausts their patience with her drunken and disorderly behaviour, leading Harry to place her in a retirement home named Eden House. Cass's banishment from Harry's home is another implicit snub against America, in the sense that as in the case of Gar's aunt Lizzie, many of Cass's most unappealing qualities, those which most offend the delicate bourgeois sensibilities of Harry and his family, are those which Friel presents as most typically American. Cass is an even more extreme caricature of American gaucheries than Lizzie. She is louder, more irascible, and more vulgar (she has a fondness for coarse language, scatological humour, alcohol, cigarettes, and gaudy clothing), and Friel's stereotyping of her frequently seems a thinly veiled jab at Americans in general, an impetus almost certainly grounded in his opposition to the burgeoning influence of American culture on Irish life.

While Harry's exasperation with her is to some degree understandable, therefore, Cass is by no means an entirely unsympathetic character; indeed, at times Friel seems more kindly disposed towards Cass's failings than Harry's treatment of her. For while Cass has lived a life of selfless devotion to others, Harry and his successful but selfish and cold-hearted children (none of them can be bothered to return home for Christmas) represent a new materialistic Ireland obsessed with the ethic of social mobility, a society concerned only with the future and wantonly ignorant and disrespectful of its past.

Viewed in this light, Harry's attempt to insulate himself and his family from the disruptive and publicly embarrassing presence of his long-lost sister by hiding her away in a retirement home is paradigmatic of this new ethos.

In a play which promotes the revaluing of the past as a preferable alternative to abandoning or ignoring it, Cass's flippant and disdainful attitude toward the past also becomes a target of criticism. If the U.S. is indeed, as Gar professes, "a vast restless place that doesn't give a damn about the past," Cass embodies this image of America. She declares emphatically at the beginning of the play that "in my book yesterday's dead and gone and forgotten.... I live in the present.... Right here and now!" (14); nevertheless, although she repeatedly asserts that "I don't go in for the fond memory racket" (17), the play demonstrates the truth of Harry's rebuttal to her claims: "You may think you can seal off your mind like this, but you can't. The past will keep coming back to you" (14). Cass fails to control the form of the play to prevent her story from being told in flashback, and, in another of Friel's meta-theatrical touches, gradually loses touch with the "real people" (23) in the audience whom she regards as her "friends" and "intimates" (12). She becomes locked within the fictional world of the play, unable to see beyond the stage to the audience, as she slowly surrenders to the temptation to retreat into memory as a bulwark against the tragedies and disappointments of both past and present. In doing so she follows the urgings of two other residents of Eden House, Trilbe Costello and Mr. Ingram, who regularly seek consolation in solipsistic performances that Friel calls "rhapsodies" (7), histrionic recitations of blatantly false reconstructions of painful episodes from their personal histories. Eventually, bowed by loneliness and stung by the rejection of her family, Cass performs a "rhapsody" of her own, spinning the unsavoury reality of her life story into an elaborately fanciful fairy tale.

Although Cass has deserted the "real" world for one of illusion and artificially constructed nostalgia, Friel, as Corcoran has suggested, refuses to condemn her for doing so:

> Cass's performance of herself is a kind of triumph of the creative act, the transformation of her reality into a fictive artifice which may uniquely offer solace in a life bereft of all alternatives .... There is perhaps an impulse towards the sentimental in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, with an uncertainty about exactly how we are to judge Cass's self-performance, about whether the retreat into fantasy is actually being celebrated by the play as the only recourse in a life of such depredation and desperation. (21)

By positing that absorption in the past and memory can in some instances be enabling rather than invariably paralyzing and debilitating, *The Loves of Cass McGuire* offers a somewhat positive perspective on the much-remarked Irish penchant for cultivating personal and collective/national memory. Moreover, as Lojek has argued, because they are immersed in an aesthetically rich, even if misremembered, past, the lives of Friel's rhapsodizers are in certain respects more fulfilled than others': "Silly as the residents of Eden House ... seem, their world yet has a dreamy grace and lyricism missing in the dull middle class world outside" (83). *The Loves of Cass McGuire* can thus be regarded as a play intended to reassert the value(s) of the past, written in distressed reaction to

contemporary trends in an Ireland rapidly discarding its past (and thus its distinctive identity) in blind imitation of the materialistic and individualistic American ethos of "impermanence" and "anonymity." For Friel the past is worth preserving, and indeed must be preserved, in order to prevent Ireland from becoming either a bland bourgeois state populated solely by people like Harry, or "a shabby imitation of a third-rate American state" (Hickey and Smith 224).

This is the phrase Friel used in 1972 to express his fears for Ireland and to summarize the message of his 1969 drama *The Mundy Scheme*:

> We are rapidly losing our identity as a people and because of this that special quality an Irish writer should have will be lost.... We are losing the specific national identity which has not been lost by the Dutch or the Belgians or the French or Italians. We are no longer even West Britons; we are East Americans. (Hickey and Smith 224)

As a political satire about a corrupt and self-serving Irish government which compromises the dignity and sovereignty of the nation by obsequiously courting foreign capital, *The Mundy Scheme* expresses Friel's outrage at the post-Whitaker/Lemass public policy initiatives which he blamed for this collective erosion of identity. As the play opens, the government of Taoiseach F.X. Ryan is teetering, brought to the brink of collapse by its mismanagement of the economy. Just when defeat in the looming general election appears certain, salvation arrives in the form of an elaborate foreign investment project devised by the conniving Minister for External Affairs, Michael Moloney, in concert with Irish-American multimillionaire Homer Mundy. According to their plan, the eponymous Mundy Scheme, vast tracts of Ireland's scenic and pristine but depressed and undeveloped West are to be handed over to foreign investors (primarily American) to be converted into huge international cemeteries designed to ease the demand for prime real estate in the world's largest cities. Enticed by the prospect of potential benefits such as "a flood of capital investment into the country, an immediate drop in emigration, full employment in depressed areas, new airstrips ... a 300 percent leap in tourism" (194), and swayed by the public relations skill of the charismatic Ryan, the public is sold on the scheme, and the play ends with the Taoiseach poised to win re-election.

Ryan, an auctioneer-turned-politician whose penchant for salesmanship and willingness to sell his nation to the highest bidder are the legacy of his former profession, succeeds in persuading the populace of the merits of the scheme largely by cloaking it in the still-potent rhetoric of nationalism. Despite the indiscretion of one of his less capable ministers, who impoliticly but revealingly proclaims in the Dail that "Even if we did sell half the country to America, we got top prices for it" (286), Ryan is able to package the Mundy Scheme as an "Opportunity for all of us to create the Ireland the idealists of 1916 gave their lives for" (273), disguising the loss of autonomy inevitably involved in surrendering control of the nation's economy, along with a goodly portion of its territory, as a victory for Irish nationalism. Through the figures of Ryan and Moloney, therefore, Friel satirized the timeless phenomenon of Irish politicians and businessmen who pay lip-service to nationalist ideals while being motivated primarily by uncomplicated, opportunistically non-partisan greed and self-interest (Leonard's Dermod and Fintan in

The Patrick Pearse Motel and Tony Sleehaun and Wade in *Kill* are clearly in the same line of descent). It is owing to such leadership, Friel implies, that the ostensibly post-colonial Irish state has succumbed to a condition of economic and cultural neo-colonialism hardly better than the "serfdom" which Friel's prologue to the play describes as the state of Ireland under English rule (158).

In one sense, then, *The Mundy Scheme* can be read as a somewhat reactionary response to the social and cultural transformation of Ireland ushered in by the opening of the nation's economy to foreign investment during the Whitaker/Lemass era. At the same time, however, that Friel was as biting in his treatment of the old Ireland as the new suggests that he believed that the failure of official nationalism to provide a relevant and positive vision for contemporary Ireland was equally responsible for the culturally and socially disjunctive state of the nation. As Andrews has noted, in the play "Friel takes a ferocious delight in overturning the romantic myths on which a false and sentimental nationalism rests" (*Art of Brian Friel* 125-26). His satiric targets include ultra-orthodox Catholicism, nationalist xenophobia, the valorization of the rural West as the seat of Irish essence, and, particularly, what Andrews has called "the Irish addiction to death" (*Art of Brian Friel* 120). The image of Ireland as a vast graveyard, the prospect envisioned at the end of *The Mundy Scheme*, is a *reductio ad absurdum* which at once ridicules this obsession with death and proclaims that the Ireland of romantic nationalism is now an obsolete myth sustained only by a number of equally outworn and exhausted tropes.

Notably, this image recurs in Friel's next play, *The Gentle Island*, in which, as Andrews has observed, the playwright continued the assault on "the fiction of romantic Ireland" initiated in *The Mundy Scheme* (*Art of Brian Friel* 118). As Deane has suggested, *The Gentle Island* is a "savage" play in which "Friel turned on all the illusions of pastoralism, ancestral feeling, and local piety that had been implicit in his treatment of the world of Ballybeg," so much so that the play constitutes a palpable break with his former works: "After this play, Friel had effectively cut himself off from his early work. He was seeking a new kind of drama, one in which the emotions of utter repudiation would replace the half-lights of exiled longing" (*Selected Plays* 15). Friel was at work on *The Gentle Island* when he told Fergus Linehan in 1970 that he wished to "write a play that would capture the ... flux that this country is in at the moment" (14), and in dramatizing this state of flux Friel depicted an Ireland in which new ways and old values are violently disparate and incompatible, and blind fidelity to tradition and the past deluded and dangerous. In accordance with his belief that such a play would have to originate at "a local, parochial level" (Linehan 14), after a series of formally experimental works (*Philadelphia*, *Cass*, and *Lovers* [1967][14]) Friel returned to peasant naturalism in *The Gentle Island*, apparently choosing post-independence Irish society's defining dramatic mode quite deliberately as a fitting but somewhat ironic vehicle for his most scathing critique of its hegemonic values.

While the form of *The Gentle Island* is naturalistic, the play is also an allegory in which Inishkeen, the Donegal island on which the play is set, is a microcosm of the rapidly transforming Ireland of Friel's time. In Andrews' words, in the play Friel "hones in on the point of crisis, the point at which an old order is on the verge of collapse.... What

transpires on [Inishkeen] epitomises the crisis of culture in the larger island of Ireland: the unresolved conflict between Tradition and Modernity" ("Fifth Province" 30). Within Friel's drama the "old order" is represented by Manus Sweeney, inveterate fantasizer and promoter of the pastoral ideal, and patriarch of the only family on Inishkeen to resist the lure of emigration. Shortly after the last of their neighbours set sail for Britain, the Sweeneys are visited by the new Ireland in the form of Peter and Shane, a gay couple on holiday from Dublin. As Corcoran has observed,

> If the Sweeneys are the last of what Inishkeen ... has been, then Peter and Shane, the urban tourists, are presumably what it is to become, if it is to become anything other than a desert. The island is caught, therefore, at its moment of transition: from an agricultural and piscine economy worked by an indigenous peasantry ... to the tourist economy of the urban middle classes. (24)

The gap which separates the world of the Sweeneys from that of Peter and Shane, Inishkeen from Dublin, becomes immediately obvious when Sarah, Manus' daughter-in-law, asks the new arrivals if they are "Yanks" (21), a question which exposes the divided state of a nation in which change has occurred so rapidly as to render its metropolitan centre unrecognizably foreign to the natives of its rural hinterland. Peter's view of Inishkeen, meanwhile, is if less bewildered equally clouded, coloured by conventional (particularly urban Irish) romantic perceptions of the country's West. "My God, this is heaven" (18), he proclaims, surveying the same bleak shore and rocky, infertile soil to which boatloads of native islanders have just recently bade good riddance.

Peter's blithely romantic view of Inishkeen is countered by the more cynical and perspicacious Shane, whose gaze penetrates the shroud of false myths in which the island is cloaked. Rejecting Peter's touristic idealization of the island, Shane posits his own etymology for "Inishkeen"--"Apache name. Means scalping island" (19)--which bears decidedly different connotations from Sarah's translation of the name: "'the gentle island'" (22). Shane's reservations about Inishkeen prove well-founded, as it soon becomes apparent that the island, far from being "gentle," is a place of brutal violence. Over the course of the play the Sweeneys attack an abandoned dog and tell stories of occasions on which their fellow islanders delighted in torturing cats (14), a donkey (68), and a travelling "niggerman" who had the misfortune of being branded a thief (67). Through what Shane calls these "obscene" (68) narratives, Friel, as Andrews notes, offers "a bitterly ironical reworking" of conventional tropes about the West: "This island is home to no rural idyll.... it turns out to be a place seething with frustration and violence.... Its inhabitants, devious, desperate and vicious, are lurid contradictions of the popular fiction of the Noble Peasant" ("Fifth Province" 31). Shane is also perceptive enough to recognize the barren, life-denying qualities of the Sweeneys' existence on the island, symbolized in the ghoulish nature of the many furnishings of their home salvaged from shipwrecks and airplane crashes, in the childless marriage of Sarah to Manus' son Philly, and in Manus' fixation on the past. Shane tells Peter, "we give support to his illusion that the place isn't a cemetery. But it is. And he knows it. The place and his way of life and everything he believes in and all he touches--dead, finished, spent. And when he finally realizes that, he's liable to become dangerous" (37).

Through Shane's words Friel suggests that for Manus and Inishkeen, and, by extension, for Ireland as a whole, tradition has become a potentially deadly trap, a charnel house in which lives and minds ossify and become unable and unwilling to incorporate change. That this is true in Manus' case becomes evident at the end of the play. Shane's fears are realized when the clash between tradition and postmodernity, between what Corcoran has called "Manus's backward look, his desire to keep things as they were" and Shane's "certainty that this way of life has had its day" (24), comes to a tragic conclusion. Throughout most of his stay on Inishkeen, Shane, the engineer whose ability to repair the Sweeneys' radio, gramophone, and outboard motor betokens his immersion in the modern, industrial world, and whose self-consciousness, antic behaviour, constant role-playing, and "uncertain origins" (37) mark him as an embodiment of the protean, undefinable face of postmodern Ireland, is looked on bemusedly by the family as a helpful and amusing oddity. While they tolerate his eccentricities, when they come to perceive the most radical expression of his otherness, his homosexuality, as a threat to the purity of their closed community, their response is swift and violent. After purportedly discovering him having sex with her husband, Sarah decides that Shane must be punished. When Manus proves too weak to carry out the task, Sarah takes matters into her own hands, shooting Shane in the back, leaving him paralyzed for life. With Sarah's act, the divisions within the nation are reinscribed, the tentative attempt at *rapprochement* and integration between the new Ireland and the old signified by Peter and Shane's initial acceptance into the community of Inishkeen (and symbolized in Shane's union with Philly) undermined by traditionally-rooted prejudices. Shane's crippling is a metaphor for an Ireland which remains captive to rigidity and intolerance, and the play ends, as Andrews has argued, on a bleakly pessimistic note, with little prospect of progress or amelioration at hand for either Ireland or the individuals who comprise it: "Friel's is a dark and nihilistic view of human relations.... He offers no hope for the future, no possibility of fundamental change" ("Fifth Province" 33).

The shooting of Shane is the first, but by no means the last, instance in Friel's drama in which an effort to bridge gaps and heal divisions ends in violence and tragedy. In particular, among other examples, Shane's maiming anticipates the fate of George Yolland, the English Ordnance Survey officer in *Translations* who is murdered for violating the primal taboo among warring tribes by falling in love with an Irish woman, and of Mabel Bagenal, Hugh O'Neill's English wife in *Making History*, who dies while giving birth to their stillborn child. While these later examples represent failures to cross cultural borders between Ireland and England rather than within Irish culture itself, it hardly seems coincidental that the first eruption of physical violence in a Friel play appeared in a work written during some of the worst months of the Troubles, when the kindling of tribal, atavistic passions threatened a full-scale implosion of civil society in Northern Ireland. In this sense, the bleakness of Friel's vision in *The Gentle Island* seems an understandable product of its time, and the play as a whole can be seen as a crucial turning point in Friel's *oeuvre*--a drama which is not just about the conflict between tradition and postmodernity in the Republic, but which was also his first work to address

the violence in the North and its cultural and colonial roots, matters which would soon become central to his authorial preoccupations.

That it does so only indirectly, and that Friel may not even have been fully conscious of the way contemporary events had insinuated themselves into the play, does not seem surprising given Friel's initial reluctance to make the Troubles a subject of his art. In response to the question of why he had not "written a play about the Civil Rights movement," Friel stated in an interview which was published in 1972, but conducted some months earlier, that "One answer is that I have no objectivity in the situation; I am too much involved emotionally to view it with any calm" (Hickey and Smith 222). This remark closely echoed comments he had made regarding the same subject in February of 1970: "I don't think I can write about this, about the situation in the North. Because, first of all, I am emotionally much too involved about it; secondly, because the thing is in transition at the moment. A play about the civil rights situation in the North won't be written, I hope, for another ten or fifteen years" (Linehan 14). Within two years of this interview, however, on January 30, 1972, Friel found himself pinned to the pavement by gunfire in the midst of Bloody Sunday in Derry (O'Toole, "Man From God Knows Where" 22), and on February 20, 1973, *The Freedom of the City*, his play about Bloody Sunday and the Civil Rights movement, premiered in Dublin. For much of the next two decades, the conflict in Northern Ireland and its resonances in the Republic dominated Friel's drama, culminating in his founding of Field Day and his authorship of *Translations* and *Making History* for the company.

Friel did not entirely abandon the subject of the Republic's "transitional crisis" during this time. It surfaces as an important subtext in plays such as *Volunteers*, in which the valuable Dublin archaeological dig of the play's setting is about to be obliterated to make way for a shiny, modern hotel,[15] and *Aristocrats*, in which he portrays the loss of ancient Ballybeg Hall (and the decaying, hidebound traditions it represents) as a positive, freeing experience for its hereditary proprietors. It was not until his 1982 farce *The Communication Cord*, however, that Friel returned to what O'Toole has referred to as the "Southern Question" ("Saints and Silicon" 17) in depth. As compared to his early works, in this play and in 1993's *Wonderful Tennessee* Friel presents a more current, and in some respects more jaded, view of the changes which have taken place in Ireland since the late fifties. The Ireland of these plays is today's Republic, a nation in which the processes of industrialization and internationalization initiated and impelled by the Whitaker/Lemass reforms have long since become entrenched. The impetus behind these dramas, then, is no longer to question the nature and wisdom of the changes and register their impact by depicting the rapidly transforming contours of the nation, as was the case in Friel's plays of the sixties, so much as to examine the individual and collective consequences of the changes as they have been played out over the intervening years. Friel implies that Ireland has in many ways been altered for the worse, as the characters of *The Communication Cord* and *Wonderful Tennessee*, culturally and historically deracinated, struggle to find identity, meaning, and faith in their monochrome, emptily materialistic postmodern world, a quest for the spiritual which Friel wishes to validate, but about whose chances for success he remains decidedly pessimistic.

Friel has suggested that he turned to the genre of farce for the first time in *The Communication Cord* in part because *Translations* had been "treated much too respectfully," leading him to be pigeonholed as a writer of weighty national(ist) epics, a "kind of categorising" which he did not appreciate and therefore wished to "disrupt" (O'Toole, "Man From God Knows Where" 21).[16] A perhaps more significant influence on Friel's choice of form was his Hugh Leonard-like revelation that farce offered a fitting analogue for the condition of Ireland in the eighties. Shortly before the play opened he told an interviewer that it was intended to be a complement to *Translations:* "This farce is another look at the shape the country is in now.... I think that it's a perfectly valid way of looking at people in Ireland today, that our situation has become so absurd and so ... crass that it seems to me it might be a valid way to talk and write about it" (Comiskey 8). As in *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, to which it bears a number of resemblances, the state of absurdity depicted in *The Communication Cord* carries deep cultural and political overtones. Like Leonard, Friel portrays contemporary Ireland as a nation which has lost its identity in the materialist postmodern era and which is consequently engaged in a desperate and (as becomes clear early on in the play) futile attempt to recover it.

Friel concretizes the object of this doomed quest in the form of the play's setting, a thatched cottage in Friel's familiar fictional locale of Ballybeg, County Donegal. But while it is instantly evocative of the past and the pastoral idyll so central to post-independence Ireland's official mythologies about itself, the cottage, as Friel's stage directions indicate, although "'traditional'" and "accurate of its time" in "every detail," is a fake: "one quickly senses something false about the place. It is too pat, too 'authentic'. It is in fact a restored house, a reproduction, an artefact of today making obeisance to a home of yesterday" (11). Among the characters who are drawn to the cottage over the course of the play (most of them, notably, Dublin professionals), some recognize it as a false icon of a now vanished past. Tim Gallagher, a junior lecturer in Linguistics who arrives as part of an elaborate ruse to get tenure by posing as the cottage's owner in order to impress his girlfriend's well-connected father, soon realizes that "I feel no affinity at all with it.... In fact I think I hate it and all it represents" (40); nonetheless, he carries on with his scheme, albeit reluctantly. Similarly, Jack McNeilis, his lawyer friend who is the cottage's actual owner, takes delight in parodying the reverential, essentializing rhetoric of those who would romanticize it as "where we all come from ... our first cathedral" (15), but thinks nothing of espousing the same sentiments in pretended earnest when using the cottage as a convenient spot for casual seductions. The readiness of Jack and Tim to exploit what Eamonn Hughes has called the cottage's "affective value" (75) is characteristic of a contemporary Irish society which has cultivated "a knowing indifference to the past" (O'Brien 110). At the same time, however, that the two are successful (at least to some degree) in doing so indicates the desperate willingness of their society to invest even patently false icons of their lost heritage (like the cottage and Leonard's Patrick Pearse Motel) with "affective value" despite their fraudulence--or perhaps, Friel implies, precisely *because* they are fraudulent, and consequently more alluring than the "real," all too often pedestrian, stuff of history.

Friel embodies this somewhat sadly self-deluded, somewhat hypocritical, attitude toward the past in the figure of Senator Doctor Donovan, politician, doctor, and amateur antiquarian, the man whose favour Tim has set out to win. If Tim and (particularly) Jack draw Friel's ire for calculatedly and opportunistically preying on the collective sense of cultural confusion afflicting the nation, Donovan is an even more obvious and culpable target of the play's satire. As Kearney has suggested, Donovan is "a caricature of all that is sentimental and sententious in the modern bourgeois Republic" ("Language Play" 50). Far from being harmless or simply ridiculous, however, the brand of sentiment Donovan represents, Kearney argues, is insidious, for "while exploiting to the full the commercial conveniences of the modern multi-national society, [he] still clings to the craven illusion that nothing has changed, that Romantic Ireland is alive and well in a restored Donegal cottage waited to be purchased by the highest bidder" ("Language Play" 51). Donovan, who has, in his own words, spent all his years "trafficking in politics and medicine" (31). epitomizes the burgeoning number of upwardly-mobile professionals spawned by the urbanization and industrialization of the sixties and seventies for whom the West, perpetually mythologized in Ireland, took on a new type of iconic status as a vaguely exotic, while comfortably distant, holiday retreat from the urban sprawl of Dublin. On arriving at the cottage, he earnestly effuses the very same essentializing, hyperbolic clichés about the place which Jack had parodied earlier: "This speaks to me.... This whispers to me.... This is the touchstone. That landscape, that sea, this house--this is the apotheosis.... for me this is the absolute verity" (31).

That Donovan perceives the counterfeit cottage as both "absolute verity" and, even more revealingly, "the true centre" (43) demonstrates not only the shaky foundations of his claims to authoritative antiquarian knowledge, but also the extent to which his rhetoric and ideas are throwbacks to (or holdovers from) an earlier era. When he asserts that the cottage "transcends" the "hucksterings" of politics, medicine, and the marketplace (31), and when he rallies to defend it from a purported German real estate speculator, proclaiming "You are going to learn very soon, my friend, that there are still places in this world, little pockets of decency and decorum, where your wealth means nothing at all" (53), Donovan is invoking, with an eye to reinscribing, De Valera's vision of Ireland as the last bastion of the pure of heart in a corrupt, materialistic world. Donovan's pronouncements and the admixture of old-style romantic nationalism and chauvinist xenophobia which underlies them (he refers to the German elsewhere as "that foreign brute" [59] and a "Typical bloody German" [35]) are absurdly dated in themselves, but appear even more ludicrously incongruous to the new realities of Ireland when considered in light of the fact that Donovan is an EEC senator, a man whose profession, by its very existence, signifies that the old nationalist and isolationist Republic whose foundational values he affirms has long since ceased to exist.

Moreover, while Donovan rages against foreigners like the German (known to the locals as Barney the Banks) whose eager consumption of pristine Irish coastal property he perceives (not entirely unjustly) as a new form of colonialism, he seems oblivious to the ironic parallels between Barney's attempt to buy Jack's cottage and his own determination, shortly after arriving in Ballybeg, to find another one just like it for

himself. Donovan fails to recognize the extent to which he participates in the commodification of his culture, largely because he also cannot understand that his presence in the community is in some ways as alien, if not more so, than that of Barney, who, unlike the jet-setting senator, has at least lived in Ballybeg for some time. For, as events reveal, Donovan's pretensions to local knowledge and his claims of affinity with his rural paradise are as fraudulent as the cottage. His facade collapses when, transported by a fit of antiquarian enthusiasm, he tethers himself by the neck to a hitching post formerly used for cows, only to discover that he cannot undo the clasp securing him. He remains, as Friel's stage directions specify, unable to stand, "chained in such a way that he is locked into a position facing the wall" (56), as the other characters try unsuccessfully to free him, his limited range of vision and movement a symbolically appropriate comeuppance warning of the dangers of the backward look he espouses. Under the duress of his predicament, his true feelings begin to surface: when Jack attempts to comfort him with a sympathetic recitation of their standard chorus of clichés about the cottage, "this is where we all came from.... This is our first cathedral. This shaped all our souls," Donovan snaps back, "This determined our first priorities! This is our native simplicity! Don't give me that shit! ... This is the greatest dump in all--Aaagh! My neck!" (70). And when he is finally freed some time later (by Barney, ironically), he storms off, determined never to return. Donovan's devotion to the past is revealed as a false front, a compensation and cover for his basely materialist motivations, the moment his ability to manipulate the past and its resonant powers, to keep it in a neat, tightly controlled, easily consumable package, breaks down. Accordingly, for Kearney, Donovan is "hypocrisy incarnate, a symbol of the very *discontinuity* in Irish cultural history which he refuses to acknowledge" ("Language Play" 51).

Donovan's posturing is to a certain extent explainable (if not entirely forgivable) as a response to this discontinuity, as the Senator, like every other character in the play, is a victim of the dislocating effects of the rapid social, cultural, and economic transformation of Ireland. Although he was born in a "place like" Jack's cottage (31), Donovan has been citified to such a degree that he is now grossly out of place in Ballybeg; worse, the rural homeland he remembers (or perhaps more accurately *mis*remembers) no longer exists, as symbolized not only by what Kearney calls the "distinctively ersatz character of the restored cottage" ("Language Play" 47), but also by Nora Dan, the nosy neighbour whom Jack describes as "the quintessential noble peasant--obsessed with curiosity and greed and envy" (21). The one "authentic" native of Ballybeg in the play, Nora Dan is in fact as much of a fraud as Donovan. She is, according to Friel's stage directions, "A country woman who likes to present herself as a peasant" (21), her reliance on an idiom laced heavily with absurdly thick dollops of Synge-song the most obvious clue to her assumed identity. That there are no genuine peasants or peasant cottages in Ballybeg, that Jack's cottage is restored and Nora Dan must work at playing the role of a peasant, indicates, in Kearney's words, "the futility of any literal quest for the lost grail of our cultural past" ("Language Play" 47) in an Ireland which is irrevocably changed from the traditional, agrarian society it once was.

Friel also communicates this message through the form of the play. Both its peasant cottage kitchen set and the character of Nora Dan (her speech and mannerisms intact) could have been lifted verbatim from any number of weighty Abbey dramas of previous decades. In *The Communication Cord*, however, these allusions to what Gerald Dawe has called "an idiom once synonymous with theatre in Ireland" ("Field Day" 67) are subverted, becoming the target of satiric ridicule. Any nostalgic possibilities which might have been hinted at by Friel's set were immediately dashed, once the lights came up, by the indecorous and distinctly un-Irish (Leonard excepted) Feydeauesque sex farce which unfolded within the iconic cottage's walls. Friel's playful disruption, one might even say mockery, of convention and audience expectations can be interpreted as an assertion that for the Irish dramatist, as for Donovan and the other characters of *The Communication Cord*, a return to the past is impossible: the artistic past is as distant, hideworn, and unreproducible in the present as the literal (and metaphoric) architecture of history, and the contemporary Irish playwright must therefore create new forms better suited to Ireland's new realities.

While the genre of classical farce is by no means particularly innovative, reliant as it is on well-established mechanisms and formulas, Friel's interweaving of its conventions with those of the peasant drama created in *The Communication Cord* a hybrid postmodern work whose form (as in the case of Murphy's *The Blue Macushla*) is an integral element of the play's cultural commentary. In particular, Friel employs the typical farce device of mistaken identity as a metaphor for the state of cultural confusion afflicting contemporary Ireland. Through a combination of deceit and accident, the characters of the play are eventually reduced to a condition of near-total bewilderment as to one another's identities:

> EVETTE: Who's that?
> JACK: That's Claire.
> SUSAN: Who are you?
> JACK: That's Evette.
> EVETTE: Who is she?
> JACK: That's Susan. (72-3)

Such confusion is the predictable product of the characters' frequent deliberate assumption of false identities, as well as the misunderstandings engendered by the presence on stage of one person whose mastery of English is decidedly imperfect (Barney) and another who purportedly understands only French, but who is actually also fluent in English (Evette). To complicate matters even further, the characters are plagued by a cottage door which has a propensity to blow open on the slightest provocation, extinguishing their lamp and pitching them into total darkness. At these points, in Kearney's words, "All the characters lose their bearings and stagger about in farcical mimicry of the cultural-linguistic disorientation which has befallen them" ("Language Play" 51). At the height of the chaos, Tim is even brought to question his own identity: "Tim Gallagher--isn't it? I hardly know myself" (50). In the microcosm of postmodern Ireland that is *The Communication Cord*, Tim's admission points to the inevitable and understandable state of ontological confusion effected by the erasure of traditional

markers of cultural identification. Hence, too, the profusion of stereotypes on Friel's stage (Nora Dan, the stage-Irishwoman; Barney, the caricature thick German; Evette, the stereotypical French sexpot): in a world in which all identities, personal and cultural, are now necessarily more consciously performed than ever before (given the collapse of these markers of difference and the challenges which have been posed to the orthodoxies which erected them), it is the broadest, most easily appropriated and emulated traits of ethnic and national identification, Friel suggests, that will be incorporated into individual performances of cultural affiliation.

Neither Friel nor his characters are willing to accept the condition of personal/cultural displacement and confusion depicted in *The Communication Cord* as utterly and hopelessly final and irreversible, however. The aspiration of the play's characters for a grounding in something more solid and real than the welter of superficial and fraudulent signifiers of identification that surrounds them becomes apparent in the play's final moments. Tim and his former girlfriend Claire, the two most astute characters in the play, achieve a reconciliation (Tim's relationship with the facile Susan Donovan now severed) on attaining the mutual realization that "Maybe silence is the perfect discourse" (86). Rejecting the spoken word as an untrustworthy means of communication (a conclusion emphatically proven by the events of the play), they turn to gestural, physical language as a purer and truer medium for their feelings, but with alarming results: while locked in a prolonged kiss, they lean unthinkingly against the one fragile pillar which holds the cottage's loft gingerly in place, and the entire building collapses around them. For Andrews, this moment signifies the valorization of their kiss as "the realisation of a muted presence, of authentic relation beyond the homogenising, reductive, stereotyping activity of the dominant social (dis)order" (*Art of Brian Friel* 195). The power of this "radically subversive 'realism'" (Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 197), George O'Brien suggests, is such that the counterfeit cottage cannot withstand it: "The kiss is more authentic than the too 'pat, too "authentic"'... cottage playhouse" (110). As Kearney has noted, however, Friel's ending, far from being simplistically and unreservedly triumphant, is "disquietingly equivocal": "The hint of some salvation through silence ... is counteracted by the literal unleashing of darkness and destruction. While the abandonment of speech spells loving communion for Tim and Claire, it spells the collapse of the community as a whole" ("Language Play" 52). The ending of The *Communication Cord* would thus seem to signal that no matter how much Friel may wish to believe in the existence of a scheme of communication and personal/national identification which might transcend what Andrews has called the "postmodern Apocalypse" of utter relativism (*Art of Brian Friel* 234), he remains sceptical that such a realm of unchanging essence is accessible, and profoundly reluctant to unproblematically endorse such an idealistic (and in many respects reactionary) philosophy.

The same conclusions can be drawn from the equally ambiguous depiction of the failed aspiration towards transcendence which lies at the centre of *Wonderful Tennessee*, a play which contains strong echoes of *The Communication Cord* (as well as of *The Gentle Island* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*), but in which Friel's treatment of contemporary middle-class Ireland is considerably more sympathetic. Like the characters of *The*

Communication Cord, the three middle-aged couples of *Wonderful Tennessee*--Terry and Berna, George and Trish, and Frank and Angela--are representatives of an urban, cosmopolitan Ireland which has lost touch with its cultural roots; in stark contrast to *The Communication Cord*, however, their ultimately unsuccessful attempt to rediscover and reclaim those roots through an overnight tourist expedition to a remote and mysterious Donegal island is neither mocked nor satirized.

Friel establishes his characters' common sense of dislocation with the first words of the play, spoken after the six disembark from their hired minibus at pristine Ballybeg pier: "Help! We're lost!" (1). Trish's cry, which she repeats several times as a half-joking, half-despairing refrain, attests not just to her own feelings of physical and geographical disorientation, but also to the collective state of cultural loss experienced by contemporary Ireland. Friel's characters are the products of this loss, their culture a conglomeration of competing voices and influences, most of them foreign. The extent to which their consciousnesses have been shaped by international popular culture is illustrated by the songs they sing, accompanied by George on accordion, to pass the time as they wait for the ferry which is to take them to Oilean Draiochta, the island they plan to visit. As Andrews has observed, "Not one of the items in George's eclectic repertoire is specifically Irish. Folk culture has been taken over by a 'popular' culture imported from England and America, to the point where the local has become the 'Other' rather than 'home'. The culture of the local has become colonised ..." (*Art of Brian Friel* 252). George's personal history is a paradigm of this process: an accomplished musician who began his career as a member of a classical ensemble called the "Aeolians," he abandoned his original calling to join a popular touring band named "The Dude Ranchers" in order "to make some money" (51). George's forced accomodation to the progressive Americanisation of Irish culture (and hence, Friel implies, the growing materialism of Irish society) marks the course of his career as a striking analogue to the post-1950s history of Ireland as a whole. That contemporary Ireland is no longer the insular nation it once was is also indicated by the contents of the party's picnic baskets, which are filled with delicacies from the EEC marketplace such as "Honey gateau," "cherry and mandarin chartreuse" (29), and "Brandied peaches and Romanian truffles" (38).

While the yuppified middle class of this transformed society may be experiencing a newfound prosperity, as the extravagant and refined tastes of Friel's three couples would seem to suggest, it is equally clear that wealth has not brought them happiness. (In this respect they resemble Leonard's characters in *Summer* and *Moving* and Murphy's Irish Man in *The Gigli Concert*.) The despair which lies only shallowly concealed beneath their outward shows of false gaiety becomes apparent on several occasions, one of which is when Angela describes the stresses of her harried, yet perfectly and typically banal, middle-class existence: "Housework--the kids--teaching--bills--Frank--doctors--more bills--just getting through every day is about as much as I can handle; more than I can handle at times" (67). Angela's angst is magnified in Berna, who, shortly after declaring that "there are periods--occasions--when just being alive is ... unbearable" (32). demonstrates the depth of her despondency by throwing herself off the pier in a half-hearted, pathetically incompetent suicide attempt. While Berna makes no secret of her

unhappiness, the other characters, including Angela, initially attempt to deny or assuage their collective feelings of emptiness by singing a desperately forced litany of "happy" songs: "Happy Days are Here Again" (2), "I Want to be Happy" (2-3), "I Don't Know Why I'm Happy" (10), and another which begins with the lines, "Here we are again, happy as can be/All good pals and jolly company." Angela performs the latter in a song and dance routine which significantly is "full and exuberant" but coloured by "a hint of underlying panic" (11).

As Andrews has argued, the roots of their unhappiness can be traced to their lack of an authentic cultural heritage, and to the spiritually numbing nature of their "deadeningly materialistic world" (*Art of Brian Friel* 259):

> *Wonderful Tennessee* is Friel's culminating statement of marginalisation or suppression of rural, pagan, oral tradition by an advanced modern material society which is literate and scientific, humanised and Christianised, and supported by the mass media of book, film, gramophone, and radio. The characters have lost touch with their Celtic past. A whole cultural heritage has been suppressed in a process of Catholic and humanist colonisation. (*Art of Brian Friel* 261)

That their malaise does indeed have these origins, that they are in some way exercised by the sense of loss and absence Andrews cites, is suggested by the fact that their destination, Oilean Draoichta, "Island of Otherness; Island of Mystery" as Berna describes it (17), represents precisely the spiritual qualities and the connection to Ireland's mythic heritage missing from their lives. A holy island, site of pilgrimages in bygone days (20), Oilean Draoichta is also a savage place ("Bloody Indian territory," Trish calls it [8], evoking Shane's impressions of Inishkeen) where pagan and Christian ritual intersected and overlapped. Terry, who knows more about its history than any of the others, claims that Dionysian "drunken orgies" (20) were once enacted alongside the island's Christian ceremonies, and tells the story of how a young man was ritually murdered there as part of a frenzied celebration held in the aftermath of the 1932 Eucharistic Congress (63). As home to what Angela jokingly refers to in parodically exaggerated advertising lingo as "The Passions That Refuse To Be Domesticated" (27), the island is a relic of a way of life and a type of enthusiastically stringent spiritual devotion now obsolete in an increasingly secular, materialistic new Ireland. In trying to explain why religious pilgrims no longer visit the island, Frank comments, "People stopped believing, didn't they?", to which Terry replies, "Nobody does that sort of thing now, do they?" (20).

While the six characters of the play may be exceptions to this rule, their attempt to complete their own version of a pilgrimage to Oilean Draoichta, to in some measure enter and appropriate "The wonderful--the sacred--the mysterious" (18) as a salve for their unfulfilled and fragmented lives and souls, comes to naught. After a night of fruitless waiting, the expected ferryman, like Godot, never comes, and with dawn they reluctantly return home. As Trish suggests, they have at least, however, gained confirmation for themselves that the island, visible from shore only indistinctly and reputed a mirage by some, is indeed "there" (74). Inspired by this small victory, they vow to return next year to try again, in Angela's words, "Because we want to! Not out of need--out of desire! Not in expectation--but to attest, to affirm, to acknowledge--to shout Yes, Yes, Yes!" (75-76).

As compared to the vapid, one-dimensionally acquisitive characters of *The Communication Cord* (Tim and Claire excepted), the suburbanites of *Summer*, who talk endlessly of their discontents to little effect, or *Moving*'s Tom Noone, who is too self-deluded to recognize that both he and his country are moving only in circles, the characters of *Wonderful Tennessee*, who battle the same postmodern Irish malaise which is the subject of these other plays, achieve a greater awareness of their condition and, with this, a greater willingness to believe in and work toward some form of amelioration. But while their hope that the transcendent can be attained is in many ways their redemption and potential salvation, the play remains a work which is, in Andrews' words, more about "the yearning and struggle for transcendence ... than its achievement" (*Art of Brian Friel* 257). As in *The Communication Cord*, Friel will not or cannot take the final step of granting his characters the consummation they desire, suggesting once again that his faith in the quest for the transcendent which he seems to wish to advocate is in fact less than complete and unqualified.

Andrews has argued that in this sense *Wonderful Tennessee* in some measure retreats from or overturns the enthusiastic promise of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the play he regards as the one work in Friel's *oeuvre* in which transcendence is fully and unreservedly achieved. For Andrews, the defining scene of the earlier play occurs in Act One when the five Mundy sisters burst into a frenzied, spontaneous dance. In this moment, he suggests, the sisters transcend the brutally limiting conditions of their material and spiritual lives, even if only briefly. Furthermore, he posits, that this tenuous triumph is attained and communicated performatively, through what he calls "the transformational magic of the theatre" (*Art of Brian Friel* 257), proves that Friel himself had attained a type of transcendence in the play--the successful culmination of his search for a new form of theatre designed to accomodate his "developing concern with incorporating into the theatrical presentation a primitive, non-rational, richly expressive discourse of music and dance capable of expressing simultaneously a sense of individual personality and a sense of community" (*Art of Brian Friel* 57). According to Andrews, the impetus for this artistic quest, which he links (albeit not without qualifications) to the innovative work of Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, and Jerry [*sic*] Grotowski (*Art of Brian Friel* 212-18), was Friel's "growing dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of words, an impatience with their duplicity, especially when they are in the hands of the chroniclers and ideologues" (*Art of Brian Friel* 210). This suspicion of words, always a subtext in Friel's works,[17] had indeed become perhaps the central theme of the two original plays he wrote immediately prior to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *The Communication Cord* and *Making History*.

No matter how soundly based Andrews' analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* may be in theory, however, when considered in more detail, his claims for the play appear somewhat inflated. For, far from being the breakthrough he describes it as, *Dancing at Lughnasa* seems, if anything, a play which is only marginally less equivocal and pessimistic than *The Communication Cord* and *Wonderful Tennessee* in terms of its willingness to posit the capacity of individuals and nations to experience positive, transformative change. Friel has described the play as a work which is about "the large elements and mysteries of life" and "the necessity for paganism" (Kavanagh 134), which

may indicate that in writing it he set out to create the artistic paradigm of transcendence that Andrews believes it to be. That the play is highly conventional, however, and seems to be more about the *impossibility* of paganism than its necessity says a great deal about Friel, so much so, I would suggest, that the play might be regarded as the final word on Friel and his drama.

In reading *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a play which strives for the transcendent, successfully or otherwise, it is instructive to consider it in the context of its chronological place in Friel's *oeuvre*. The play, his first post-Field Day drama, registers a palpable break with the works he wrote for the company over the preceding decade--*Translations*, his version of *Three Sisters*, *The Communication Cord*, and *Making History*. The overt emphasis on politics, history, language, and issues of cultural identity which marked these plays vanishes almost entirely in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Rather, in its autobiographical element (the play's protagonists, the five Mundy sisters, were modelled on Friel's aunts) and 1930s cottage kitchen setting (heavily influenced by Friel's memories of his childhood summers spent in the County Donegal village of Glenties) (Kananagh 134) the play is deeply tinged with the air of nostalgia--notably, in this work there is not a whiff of the satiric subversion to which Friel subjected the highly similar setting of *The Communication Cord*. *Dancing at Lughnasa* can thus be seen as a retreat into the realm of personal history, one motivated in whole or in part by Friel's exhaustion with the "public" concerns of Field Day. This interpretation is supported by the explanation Richtarik has offered for Friel's break with Field Day and his deviation from the style of the "'Field Day play'" in the drama: "I suspect he felt constrained by the ideological framework Field Day had developed by 1989" (268).[18] For Fintan O'Toole, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a "disavowal of history" as well as of "a specifically Irish cultural context" ("Marking Time" 208), the play most exemplary of what he sees as one of the defining qualities of Friel's drama: "Brian Friel does not write history plays, but plays that mock history. He looks for a time that is outside history, a personal time, the time of our lives.... Friel's plays are less about historical sweep than they are about the excavation of unchanging places, people, and dilemmas" ("Marking Time" 202-03).

This is certainly an impression strongly conveyed by much of both the subject matter and style of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. For Kate, Maggie, Rose, Agnes, and Chris Mundy, the unchanging daily routines of cooking, baking, feeding the hens, knitting, fetching turf, and buying provisions are the dominant realities of their lives. In comparison, at least initially, politics and current affairs both foreign and domestic are abstruse, absurd, and so comfortably remote that they are resigned to the stuff of casual conversation and the nonsensical children's rhyme sung by Rose and Maggie:

> Will you come to Abyssinia, will you come?
> Bring your own cup and saucer and a bun ...
> Mussolini will be there with his airplanes in the air,
> Will you come to Abyssinia, will you come ....
> Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?
> If you don't, we'll be like Gandhi with his goat.
> Uncle Bill from Baltinglass has a wireless up his--

> Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote? (3-4)

O'Toole views this flippant treatment of history--the looming crisis of World War II, the dominance of Irish politics by De Valera's Fianna Fail forces, which was to result in the sisters becoming "the victims of an oppressively Catholic ethos, shortly to be enshrined in [the 1937] Constitution" (Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 220), and even the Spanish Civil War, which is subverted through Friel's portrayal of the absurd circumstances by which Chris's lover, Gerry Evans, is recruited by a grotesque member of the International Brigade--as indications that

> The play does not happen on the margins of history, history happens on the margins of the play. World history and Irish history are introduced as if they are about to become important, but only in order that we may see that they are not.... Great historical forces are conjured up only to be dismissed. It is the things that are set against them, the things out of which the play works, which are infinitely more important to the world of *Dancing at Lughnasa*: memory and ritual. ("Marking Time" 210-11)

If this was Friel's intention, however, as may well seem to be the case at first, this goal is undermined over the course of the play. O'Toole either glosses over or fails to recognize the extent to which politics and history eventually do intrude on the world of the Mundy sisters: Gerry is wounded in the war; Kate loses her job as a schoolteacher when the suspicious eye of creeping Catholic extremism is turned upon Fr. Jack, the one Mundy brother, who has been sent back to Ireland after "going native" at his missionary post in Africa; and the family is ultimately broken apart when Rose and Agnes, who had earned a meagre living by hand-knitting gloves, are displaced by the opening of a new garment factory in Donegal Town, leading them to emigrate to London in a futile search for a better life. Perhaps because he felt a sense of duty to his autobiographical subject matter, or perhaps for other reasons, Friel could not, ultimately, bring himself to evade or deny the potency of historical or political forces in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, if indeed he ever set out to.

Set against the levelling effects of the anonymous and impersonal workings of history, the sisters' brief moment of triumph in Act One seems, in the end, rather muted and inconsequential. Moreover, it is equally apparent that even at the height of their dance, the sisters have not achieved complete transcendence. According to Friel's stage directions, as they dance "there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves" (22). Their very evident self-consciousness, however, is a sign that they have not entirely stepped out of themselves. They have not lost their awareness of their surroundings; nor, by implication, fully escaped from the hegemonic discourses which confine them to their constructed roles.

Whatever victory they might have achieved is even further qualified by the framework within which it is presented, which serves to diminish its potential impact and distance it from the audience. While from one perspective the sisters' dance might be seen as a moment of feminist empowerment, an overturning of patriarchal logocentrism by a wordless physical discourse of the subjugated female body,[19] such an interpretation is weakened by the fact that all of the events of *Dancing at Lughnasa* are circumscribed

within the consciousness of Friel's male narrator, Michael, who, in an admission which further undermines the potential power of the moment, freely acknowledges that his memories of the summer depicted in the play are of questionable veracity: "In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (71). As Joan Robbins has observed, the inscription of the Mundy sisters within the nostalgically distorted memory of Michael, Friel's fictional alter ego, is clearly analogous to the discursive position of the playwright himself as the author of this depiction of his aunts' lives: "Michael's memory is that of a boy/man--i.e., Brian Friel--through which the private hopes, fears, and dreams of five women are funnelled and in many respects, idealized. Friel's view is sympathetic but incomplete; it reflects the plight of Irish women according to a man" (85).

Finally, it must also be considered that the sisters' dance is contained not only within the fuzzy memories of Friel/Michael, but also within the confining frames of both the theatrical proscenium arch and the formally conventional structure of the play itself. When J.P.W. King sings like Gigli at the end of *The Gigli Concert*, he requires the participation of the audience, in the form of its belief in his accomplishment, to complete his transcendent achievement; the presence of Michael on stage in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. however, offers a frequently intrusive visual and verbal reminder of the unreal, distantly recalled and reconstructed nature of the events of the play, and consequently is likely to inhibit its audience from engaging with its characters in as direct a manner as in Murphy's drama. And while Andrews has suggested that in the play Friel "goes outside the native tradition of verbal theatre altogether ... through his experiments with pagan ceremony. music and a new wordless language of the body" (*Art of Brian Friel* 228), the similarities between *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *The Glass Menagerie* (evident most obviously in Michael's long, Tom Wingfield-like monologues), together with Friel's respectfully portrayed peasant cottage kitchen setting, suggest the degree to which he was in fact working within the strictures of traditional verbal and national dramatic idioms. As much as Andrews may wish to associate Friel's dramaturgy with the work of Artaud, Friel's uses of ritual, movement, and music have been few and fleeting; even in *Dancing at Lughnasa* his artistic instincts are primarily those of the "storyteller" Dowling and Kilroy see him as. Moreover, it seems safe, after all, to predict that none of Artaud's plays will ever win a Tony award for Best Play on Broadway, as did *Lughnasa*.

If the play's reach exceeds its grasp, if it ultimately cannot offer either an image or a model of transcendence, its failure, or perhaps more accurately its simple inability to do so, is, I would argue, entirely typical of Friel. In an autobiographical essay published in 1972, Friel observed of himself that "I ... get involved in sporadic causes and invariably regret the involvement, and hope that between now and my death I will have acquired a religion, a philosophy, a sense of life that will make the end less frightening than it appears to me at the moment" ("Self-Portrait" 17). Commenting on this passage, Andrews has suggested that Friel "presents himself as a man who can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief" (*Art of Brian Friel* 2). This description goes a great distance towards explaining the ambiguities central to Friel's life and work. For Friel, the outsider at home neither in Northern Ireland nor the Republic and the political dramatist with an

aversion to politics, all ideologies and causes are suspect, all histories and opinions open to question. The governing precepts of nationalism must be interrogated along with those of internationalism, just as all received discourses and dramatic modes can neither be wholeheartedly embraced nor rejected out of hand. Friel's incessant probing of the dichotomies of contemporary Ireland and his refusal to give up the quest for a space in which they might be resolved, despite his failure to find such a space in or through his work, are the defining characteristics of his drama. As such, like that of his fellow contemporary Irish dramatists, his theatre and the sense of uncertainty, division, and relentless striving after the elusive goal of wholeness and transcendence which underlies it are in many vital respects the product of his times. Friel's drama is that of a playwright who was reluctantly brought to address public issues only as a result of the unavoidability of the crisis in the North and the social and economic revolution in the South, but who has produced some of contemporary Irish drama's most incisive and inspired analyses of both societies from his position of engagement on the sidelines.

Notes

1. The animosity between Friel and Leonard is a badly kept secret. Fintan O'Toole has noted that "Friel regards Leonard as an Irish version of Neil Simon; Leonard sees Friel as a narrow nationalist" ("Today" 133); cf. also O'Toole, *A Mass for Jesse James*, 161-62.

2. One need look no further for evidence of Friel's canonization than the Irish Drama Summer School run out of University College Dublin which has, in recent years, focused exclusively on the plays of Synge, O'Casey, and Friel in its program.

3. Friel has noted of his years in Derry that "The sense of frustration which I felt under the tight and immovable Unionist regime became distasteful. One was always conscious of discrimination in Derry" (Hickey and Smith 221).

4. Notably, the two plays in his *oeuvre* about which Friel has expressed perhaps his deepest reservations have been those based most directly on personal experience--*The Freedom of the City* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Friel's concerns about the latter are based on the revelatory nature of its autobiographical content (Kavanagh, "Friel at Last" 134), while he has said of *The Freedom* that "I wrote it out of some kind of heat and some kind of immediate passion that I would want to have quieted a bit before I did it" (O'Toole, "Man From God Knows Where" 22).

5. Cf. Jent 580; Neil, "Non-realistic Techniques" 354; Binnie 368.

6. Cf. O'Toole, "Marking Time" 208-09; Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 58.

7. Cf. Neil, "Non-realistic Techniques" 352; Murray, "Emblems" 69; Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 58.

8. Cf. Corcoran 17; Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 58.

9. Cf. Rollins, "Fox" 76; Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 58, 210.

10. Cf. Worth 77; Coakley 191-97; Murray, "Emblems" 69; Peacock, "Translating" 119; York 164-65; Roche, *Irish Drama* 105; Dantanus 105; Pine 1.

11. Cf. Andrews, *Art of Brian Friel* 89, 227; Murray, "Emblems" 69.

12. Cf. Schrank, "Politics" 71-76; O'Toole, "Marking Time" 208; Roche, *Irish Drama* 105.

13. This list of citations is by no means all-inclusive, but is meant to provide a representative sample of the frequency with which the works of other dramatists are compared to Friel's.

14. *The Mundy Scheme* might also be included in this list, for while its form was not particularly inventive, the genre of broad political satire which Friel employs in the play had rarely been seen on Irish stages, at least not until it became the domain of Leonard shortly thereafter.

15. The play was inspired by the actual case of the Wood Quay excavations in Dublin, which met a similar fate.

16. In the years following its initial production, *Translations* had widely come to be interpreted, and in some cases attacked, as a play which presented a romanticized, idyllic vision of pre-colonial Gaelic Ireland--a reading of the play which seems difficult to justify.

17. Cf. particularly Kearney, "Language Play"; Verstraete, "Brian Friel and the Limits of Language."

18. Furthermore, as Richtarik has noted, Friel's unwillingness to offer *Dancing at Lughnasa* to Field Day (it was first performed at the Abbey) led to a "rift" between Friel and Stephen Rea (267-68), a dispute which almost certainly contributed to Friel's decision to resign from the company in 1994.

19. This would seem to be a subtext of Terence Brown's description of their dance as "the dance of the misplaced, of proud, gifted, bravely energetic women whose lives are misshapen by an Irish society that will, as it changes, destroy the lives they have struggled to achieve." For Brown, the events of the play, the dance primary among them, "[hint] at residual springs of energy which, if tapped, might allow self and society to flow more readily together" ("'Have We a Context?'" 200).

To "Transform the Human Animal": The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy

During the last twenty years few Irish dramatists have been in any way exciting technically. More often, however, our dramatists today are guilty of a worse defect than mere lack of technical proficiency. They are inclined to shirk the painful, sometimes tragic, problems of a modern Ireland which is undergoing considerable social and ideological stress.

--Thomas Kilroy, "Groundwork for an Irish Theatre," 1959

To base one's identity, exclusively, upon a mystical sense of place rather than in personal character where it properly resides seems to me a dangerous absurdity.

--Kilroy, "Author's Note" to *Double Cross*, 1986

It has always intrigued me that theatre in particular gets its effects through deceiving the audience, and I am fascinated with the paradox in that: that you can get at truth by actually changing your appearance, and the connection between that and criminality, subterfuge, conmanship, etc.

--Kilroy interviewed by Martin Cowley, 1991

In 1959, as John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, and Brian Friel were all in the process of embarking upon their careers as playwrights, Thomas Kilroy was a twenty-five year old graduate student at University College Dublin. Fintan O'Toole has noted the prophetic coincidence whereby the young Kilroy's manifesto on the state of Irish drama, "Groundwork for an Irish Theatre," published in the summer of that year, appeared at the very moment that a new generation of Irish dramatists was beginning to come to prominence, and only scant months after the initiation of Whitaker and Lemass' momentous First Programme for Economic Expansion ("Double Vision" 57). Even as the faces of Ireland and of Irish drama were in the tenuous first stages of what would be an irrevocable transformation, Kilroy offered a trenchant critique of Irish drama of the forties and fifties and called for exactly the type of rejuvenation and renewal of the Irish theatre that he, Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel, among others, would bring about. The new theatre Kilroy envisioned was to be formally experimental and innovative, not merely as an end in itself, but as a central part of the larger goal of creating a vital, socially engaged theatre "which ... absorbs some of the conflicting topical, social issues around it and gives a public interpretation of current values" ("Groundwork" 192). In order for this new theatre of commitment to thrive, Kilroy suggested, old values and forms would need to be overturned:

> In our search for a new Irish theatre we are probably looking for premises with a clear view from every window. Too often the view from our modern Irish windows is cluttered up with distracting monuments to the dead and glorious past of politics and art. If we ever do come to house a creative theatre for a new generation, many of these idols will have to be demolished so that the interesting

> faces of modern Ireland may crowd at every window on the theatre.
> ("Groundwork" 192)

O'Toole has recorded the somewhat predictable response of the Irish theatre establishment to Kilroy's "implicit attack" on the Abbey and its monochrome repertoire of the preceding decades: "one of its directors, Gabriel Fallon, sneeringly and facetiously urged the young man 'to become in the shortest possible space of time a startlingly good dramatist, and to induce as many as possible of his friends to follow his example'" ("Double Vision" 58).

This, of course, is exactly what Kilroy did, although perhaps not quickly enough to please Fallon. While his contemporaries Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel had each seen their first plays produced by 1961 (all but Friel also having had at least one of their works rejected by Fallon and his colleagues at the Abbey by this time), Kilroy's first stage play, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, did not debut until 1968, when it was performed at the Olympia Theatre as part of the annual Dublin Drama Festival. Almost certainly because he began writing plays at a later date, Kilroy's *oeuvre* developed in a manner which deviates in one significant respect from the pattern found in the drama of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel: while some of the early works of his fellow playwrights are grounded largely in the social realities of mid-century Ireland, all of Kilroy's dramas are rooted firmly in the post-Whitaker/Lemass "new" Ireland. When Kilroy ventures into the terrain of the "old" Ireland, as he does to some degree in *Mr. Roche* and *Talbot's Box* (1977) and more substantially in *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991), it is always from a deliberately and self-consciously distanced perspective.

In dealing with the new Ireland, however, Kilroy's drama explores many of the same issues, problems, contradictions, and dilemmas addressed in the plays of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel. As in the case of his contemporaries, Kilroy's drama is vitally concerned with the subject of identity, both personal and national, and the shocks and reformulations which previously stable conceptions of Irish identity have experienced in the postmodern era. Underlying all of Kilroy's plays is the belief that identity is a construction based largely, if not entirely, on performed allegiances which are socially and ideologically determined. For this reason, his works suggest, identity has become particularly unfixed in the Ireland of the "transitional crisis," where, in the wake of the Whitaker/Lemass reforms, performances of Irishness could no longer follow a fixed script. This state of cultural confusion, explored in plays such as Friel's *The Communication Cord*, *The Gentle Island*, and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Leonard's *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* and *The Blue Macushla*, and Keane's *The Field*, is perhaps the primary subject of Kilroy's two plays of the sixties, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* and *The O'Neill* (1969). These plays depict an Ireland familiar from the works of his fellow playwrights: one that is caught in the transition from insularity to internationalization, and whose inhabitants have therefore been forced to forge a sense of personal and collective identity from out of a disorientingly variegated and frequently contradictory field of markers of cultural affiliation.

Kilroy's drama suggests that under these conditions individual identity and autonomy have become increasingly tenuous concepts. Lacking a stable culture with and through which to identify themselves, the characters of his plays, as seen especially in *Mr. Roche* and *Talbot's Box*, have been rendered acutely susceptible to the dominant discourses of the new Ireland: materialism and the reactionary, nostalgic nationalism with which it is often, albeit somewhat incongruously, allied. Kilroy's works lament the trend which has seen Ireland evolve into a country which is paradoxically materialist yet backward-looking, and are preoccupied with exploring the role of the individual both as victim of, and as the potential site of resistance to, what their author sees as the malign consequences of this ideological and cultural reformulation of Irish society. In a 1979 lecture titled "The Irish Writer: Self and Society, 1950-1980" Kilroy remarked that "I am fascinated and often appalled by what happens when the intense, concentrated hopes, fears, beliefs of the private person are subjected to the fragmenting, diffusionary effects of public life," pointing to *Talbot's Box* in particular as an example of his "obsession" with this issue (181). In the play Kilroy's protagonist, Matt Talbot, is beset by a series of figures who seek to impede his obsessive, solitary quest for spiritual union with God by enlisting him either physically or symbolically into the service of a variety of partisan causes. Notably, however, they prove unable to do so. Whatever the outcome of his spiritual quest (yet another of the strivings after transcendence which mark contemporary Irish drama) Talbot successfully resists all those who would appropriate him, his maintenance of an unassailable aloneness a victory for the individual over the coercive and corrosive material and ideological entrapments of society.

Both *Talbot's Box* and the terms in which Kilroy framed his discussion of the conflict between individual and society in "The Irish Writer" suggest that he, like Friel, adheres to the belief that at some level the realms of the private and public, the self and society, can be differentiated and separated. Thus, while Kilroy's conception of identity as largely constructed and performed follows the current of those elements of post-structuralist thought which conceive of the individual as a subject constituted in and by ideology and language, he retains the humanist belief that at the core of every being, beyond and beneath the external layerings of codified beliefs and behaviours, exists a nucleus of what he has referred to as "personal character" (*Double Cross* 7). For Kilroy, this domain can, under certain circumstances, be shielded from ideology, and therefore, potentially at least, can be the locus of an autonomous individuality. As Anthony Roche has argued, Kilroy's plays posit the necessity of freeing this "space of existential possibility," an end which they suggest can be effected by "resisting the pressures of social conformity" (*Irish Drama* 206).

If this is the implicit message of *Talbot's Box*, Kilroy continued to develop his thoughts about identity, the individual, and society in *Double Cross* and *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre*. Both are plays about actors who create their identities through performances enacted on very different, yet in some respects essentially similar, stages--the global stage of the propaganda war carried on in the European theatre during World War II (in the case of Brendan Bracken and William Joyce in *Double Cross*), and the much smaller stage of a travelling fit-up company touring rural Ireland during the war

years (in the case of the troupe of actors depicted in *Madame MacAdam*). As Christopher Murray has observed, Kilroy's use of the same central metaphor--that of acting--in both plays points to the conclusion that "identity [is] something constructed and creative rather than fixed and determinate" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 135). Kilroy's corollary is that conflicts and divisions which are grounded in competing allegiances to place, nation, race, and any and all manner of other such superficial markers of identification are, as he has put it, "absurd" (*Double Cross* 7) and need only to have their constructed, performative roots exposed to be proven so. Given that both *Double Cross* and *Madame MacAdam* were written for Field Day, this commentary could not help but be read in the context of the ongoing civil strife in Northern Ireland.

Inherent in the argument presented in these plays, therefore, is the notion that we must be particularly vigilant in regard to the socially and ideologically determined nature of our individual performances of personal and collective identity. Such circumspection is vital, Kilroy implies, as the performative act holds the potential for danger--manifested in the forms of everything from "criminality, subterfuge, conmanship" (Cowley n.p.) to ethnic and racial conflict--when its performativity goes unacknowledged. Along with this, an integral subtext to Kilroy's examination of role-playing in *Madame MacAdam* is the suggestion that theatre can perform a vital, socially ameliorative and potentially transformational role by serving as a site in which danger can be vicariously experienced even as its performative underpinnings are foregrounded, allowing them to be analyzed and understood. If the play proposes that the theatre can contain (that is, both incorporate and confine) danger to a positive end, it also, as Murray has argued, offers "the fellowship of the theatrical experience" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 137) as a practical model for meaningful social change. Theatre's communal and interactive approach to the attainment of goals and generation of meaning, the play suggests, is paradigmatic of the form of collective will to achievement required to heal divisions and cross boundaries in a fractured society. In this sense, *Madame MacAdam* is a metatheatrical elaboration on the call for a socially committed Irish theatre which Kilroy first advanced in 1959.

As Murray has observed in commenting on this aspect of the play, Kilroy's "devotion to the therapeutic obligations of art" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 138), no less than the underlying humanism of his plays, marks his artistic and intellectual sensibility as something of a throwback to an earlier era: "in the end, he is a modernist in a postmodernist world" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 138). That, as noted in earlier chapters, both Murphy and Friel have been described in the same way suggests a commonality in the works of the three playwrights, one that almost certainly owes its origins in no small part to their shared experience of history and culture. As I turn now from the broad overview of Kilroy's drama which I have sketched so far to a closer examination of some of his plays[1] and their dramaturgy, the similarities of vision, purpose, and method which link the theatre of the three dramatists, signifying their common concern with the transitional and disjunctive condition of contemporary Ireland also explored in the drama of Keane and Leonard, will become even more apparent.

As in the case of each of the other playwrights examined in this study, Kilroy's use of form is an integral element of his theatre, one that is indivisible from the commentary

his plays offer on the state of contemporary Ireland. Kilroy's belief that the Irish theatre of the forties and fifties had "not been a creative theatre" ("Groundwork 194), a criticism voiced in his 1959 manifesto, led him, like Murphy, Leonard, and Friel, to break with the tradition of Abbey peasant drama, a genre he would later describe as "badly in need of infusion" ("Theatrical Text" 93). In doing so, however, he, like his contemporaries, did not reject tradition wholesale. In a more recent piece of theatrical criticism, Kilroy has suggested that the trend among Irish playwrights of his era has been to "impose a new kind of theatrical imagination upon traditional material," and has pointed to this "mixture of traditional material and formal inventiveness" ("Generation" 137) as one of the defining qualities of the drama of the contemporary period. Acknowledging that some of his own works typify this categorization, Kilroy went on to identify *Talbot's Box* as a modern reworking of one of "the conventional types of times past ... the Irish Religious Play" ("Generation" 137).

But where Kilroy parts company with his fellow playwrights, as seen in the highly non-traditional form of *Talbot's Box*, is in the depth of his experimentalism. His departures from naturalism are, on the whole, more radical than those of Murphy, Leonard, and Friel, almost certainly for reasons which can be related to his ideas about the role of theatre in society. In discussing the distinction between his generation of playwrights and that which preceded it, Kilroy has pointed to the "self-consciousness" ("Generation" 137) of today's writers, himself included, as the most obvious mark of difference. Kilroy's use of a self-consciously non-naturalistic style is central to his conception of theatre as a laboratory in which the performative nature of individual and collective identity is depicted, discussed, and analysed, with the goal of arriving at what he has called some form of "truth" (Cowley n.p.). As this description of his theatre indicates, Kilroy, like Brecht, works to engage his audience intellectually, but not emotionally. In a 1983 interview, he indicated that in his work he has been "always wary of exploiting the kind of emotional hot-house .... of easy effects" (Dawe, "Thomas Kilroy" 117-18). His desire to make his audiences think rather than feel has led to his frequent use of "defamiliarizing" non-naturalistic devices designed to foreground the artificiality of his plays and mitigate their emotional impact: frequent direct address to the audience through the "fourth wall," the overt and intentional doubling of roles by actors, and the use of projections and expressionistic sound and lighting effects.

By incorporating these formal elements as an integral facet of his theatre, particularly in *Talbot's Box*, *Double Cross*, and *Madame MacAdam*, Kilroy has created a uniquely postmodern, and uniquely Irish, variant on the "'theatre of ideas'" (Dawe, "Thomas Kilroy" 117), one which has prompted comparisons with the works of Brecht (Etherton 56; Murray, "Worlds Elsewhere" 131) and Shaw (Rabey 35), and which has been singled out as a style "not naturally part of the Irish theatrical tradition" (Edwardes n.p.). That Kilroy has expressed his admiration for the plays of Shaw (Dawe, "Thomas Kilroy" 117) and Denis Johnston (Murray, "Worlds Elsewhere" 130) and implicitly praised the dramaturgy of Yeats, Beckett, and Artaud in his criticism ("Two Playwrights" 184-85) sheds further light on his drama, as does the fact that his style has also been compared not only to that of Beckett[2] and Artaud,[3] but also to that of Stoppard

("Technically Exciting" n.p.) and Wilde (Edwardes n.p.). The thread which unites all of these dramatists, and which is particularly evident in the theatre of Kilroy, is an insistent theatricality which springs from a common disregard, if not outright contempt, for the conventions of the bourgeois naturalistic theatre. For Kilroy, following the philosophical lead of these other dramatists, naturalism's emphasis on verisimilitude and its preoccupation with the middle class impose unacceptable limitations on the writer's capacity to "fulfil the role of commentator on current values" ("Groundwork" 195) and, through the medium of theatre, effect meaningful transformations of our societies and ourselves.

Kilroy's first two plays, *The O'Neill* and *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, are his most formally conventional. Still, even in these early works his frustrations with the restrictions of naturalism and his commitment to examining the changing face of contemporary Ireland through an intellectual and analytical drama, rather than the theatre of "raw emotions" which he attacked in 1959 ("Groundwork" 198), are readily apparent. *The O'Neill*, which was written before *Mr. Roche*, in 1966, but not performed until after it, in 1969, is a history play which, in its focus on the life and times of Hugh O'Neill, covers much of the same ground as Friel's *Making History*. The two plays differ significantly, however, in terms of subject matter and form. While Friel's play focuses largely on the relationship between O'Neill and his English wife, Mabel, including as one of its central scenes the moving account of Mabel's death in childbirth which symbolizes the tragic outcome of the couple's attempt to cross cultural boundaries, Kilroy's drama focuses on O'Neill the politician, relegating Mabel to a relatively minor role.

And whereas *Making History* is almost seamlessly naturalistic, *The O'Neill* incorporates some significant deviations from naturalism which are strongly reminiscent of the approach to the staging of history found in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Kilroy's play begins, seemingly naturalistically, in *medias res*, with O'Neill's triumph at the Battle of the Yellow Ford. Within minutes, however, his celebrations are interrupted by his English antagonists, Sir Robert Cecil and Lord Mountjoy, who order that the "beginning" of the play be performed. The original set is dismantled and, the stage space now revealed as fluid, the play begins again. Kilroy's refusal to let his audience participate uncritically in the glory of O'Neill's victory, his demand that they see, assess, and understand the events which led to his triumph (and later his crushing defeat by Mountjoy at the Battle of Kinsale), is further underlined when the very same scene is interrupted for a second time at the start of Act Two. As in Act One, the original intrusion is followed by a scene involving three Irish spies, Moyle, O'Flannigan, and Mahon, who, rather in the style of Bolt's Common Man and Eliot's four Knights,[4] address the audience directly in an attempt to justify their betrayal of both sides in the conflict of nations in which they are immured.

Kilroy portrays the doubly treasonous actions of the spies, one of whom is eventually brought to such a state of confusion as to his loyalties that he bewilderedly asks his comrades "what side are we on[?]" (59), as merely a smaller, more sordid image of the condition of doubleness which affects O'Neill. Like Friel's, Kilroy's O'Neill is a man caught between two worlds. An anglophile bred in England who professes his "great

respect for English civilization, its good order and civil security, its sense of organization" (25), O'Neill, driven by the belief that "this old Gaelic world is dead" (44). expresses his desire to become "a modern man" (29) and lead Ireland into the enlightenment of "a new Europe" (52). At the same time, however, he acknowledges that as the hereditary leader of his people, he is bound to their will and compelled to betray his English upbringing by fighting to preserve Ireland's ancient culture and civilization: "I am *The O'Neill*! Only half of myself belongs to myself--the other half belongs to the people" (32). Friel's O'Neill presents himself as a captive to the same dilemma in *Making History*:

> I have spent my life attempting to do two things. I have attempted to hold together a harassed and a confused people by keeping them in touch with the life they knew before they were overrun.... And I have done that by acknowledging and indeed honouring the rituals and ceremonies and beliefs these people have practised since before history.... And at the same time I have tried to open these people to the strange new ways of Europe ... to nudge them towards changing evaluations and beliefs. Two pursuits that can scarcely be followed simultaneously. Two tasks that are almost self-cancelling. (40)

In choosing Hugh O'Neill as a subject for their dramas and in portraying him as irreparably divided between the claims of an old and a new world, both Kilroy and Friel were offering a commentary on their own times. As is frequently the case in history plays. *The O'Neill* and *Making History* often seem to be less about the time in which they are set than that when they were composed. For Friel, writing for Field Day in 1988, O'Neill's inability to stave off the forces of colonization and his failure to build bridges between Ireland and England through his marriage presented compelling analogues for a nation embroiled in an ongoing anti-colonial struggle fuelled by uncompromising hatreds. Similarly, Kilroy's O'Neill, who speaks of himself as "splintered" (34), a man "torn apart at the crotch" (31) between the old values of Ireland and the new world represented by England, is, in Murray's words, a decidedly "modern figure" ("History Play" 284). In his divided cultural loyalties, O'Neill symbolizes the condition of Ireland in 1966--a country undergoing a process of rapid modernization and internationalization even as it engaged in a nationwide celebration of its past on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising.[5] Viewed in this light, O'Neill's goal of making "isolated" Ireland "part of Europe" (44) can be seen, as Murray has noted, as a "prophetic" forecast of Ireland's entry into the EEC in 1973. In a further parallel between play and history also observed by Murray, this consolidation of Ireland's post-1958 moves towards internationalization was contradicted by the eruption of tribal passions in Northern Ireland, just as O'Neill's dream of a Europeanized Ireland is shattered in Kilroy's drama when he is coerced by his jingoistic countrymen into facing the English at Kinsale ("Worlds Elsewhere" 133-34).

Kilroy turned to an even fuller exploration of the "transitional crisis" in 1960s Ireland in *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, a play whose protagonist, Kelly, embodies the same state of cultural dislocation and ambiguity depicted in the figure of O'Neill. But while O'Neill is a symbol of Gaelic Ireland's anglicized colonial future who is dragged down by the past even as he attempts to lead his people on the path to "the new Europe" (51), Kelly symbolizes a traditional Ireland which has been unable to cope with

the shock of postmodernity, and in response has retreated into a longing, somewhat desperate fixation on its past. A Dublin civil servant whose "large, peasant hands" (7) betray his rural upbringing, Kelly is the sole member of his family to have escaped poverty and emigration, his "brains," as he tells his friend Seamus, having allowed him the chance to get "out": "The rest of them are still around the stirabout pot in the cottage" (53). As such, he is, as O'Toole has observed, one of the beneficiaries of post-Whitaker/Lemass Ireland's "new meritocracy" ("Double Vision" 59). But while he holds down what he half-heartedly calls a "bloody good job" at "the Service" (56), Kelly's life is an empty series of deadening routines, split between days spent at work and nights passed in the pub in the company of the same all-male circle of friends. The despair of his life is reflected in the bleakness of his home, a dark, claustrophic basement flat described in Kilroy's stage directions as "drab" and "crowded" (9) and more evocatively by Myles, one of Kelly's friends, as "This tomb" (20).

The flat is part of a once grand but now decaying Georgian house (one of many in the neighbourhood to be split up in a sign of the times [10]), and the very fact that Kelly has stubbornly refused to move to better accommodations indicates the extent to which he gravitates towards the past and routine as bulwarks against the chaos of an Ireland in cultural transition. On arriving home at the beginning of the play he takes comfort in discovering that all is as he left it: "Same sky. Same street. Same keys" (10). Later, in the course of the eventful all-night drinking session depicted in the play, he accuses Seamus only half-jokingly of perfidy for having deserted the camaraderie of the drinking circle by getting married (11), while Seamus in return admonishes him for not having "changed even a little" (52) in the time he's lived in Dublin. Significantly, Seamus' rebuke, rather than inspiring any sort of self-critique on Kelly's part, serves only to send him into an extended fit of nostalgia for his lost origins. He reproaches himself for having grown distant from his family (53), speculates dreamily about giving up his job in order to "[work] on the land" (he chauvinistically observes, though, that "the only people who can get the land in this country are the bloody Germans" [55]), and reminisces fondly about his childhood home:

> A cottage you could hardly turn round in. With one bed between four of us and a milk bucket to wash out of under the big kitchen mirror. But it was a home, not like this chicken box of an outfit here.... And a big fire roaring up the kitchen chimney. That was a natural place to live in, boy, whatever you may say about its appearance. (56)

In Kelly's essentializing vision, his small, sepulchral flat, with its tiny, new-style "kitchenette enclosed in a cupboard on the back wall" (9), is, as a pale shadow of the hearth/kitchen of his childhood, an image of the debasement of traditional values which has been wrought by postmodernity.

Kelly's nostalgia can thus in one sense be seen as a defensive, conservative backlash against the materialism of his age, the new ethos embodied in the figure of his philosophical antagonist, Myles. A car salesman and self-proclaimed womanizer of epic stature who peppers his speech with Americanisms, Myles is Kilroy's satiric caricature of a 1960s Ireland which is eagerly, if not altogether successfully, attempting to recreate

itself in the image of America. In contrast to the backward-looking Kelly, Myles is fixated solely on the present and future: "If there's one thing that gives me the willies," he tells Kelly and Seamus, "it's halloo-hallah about history and stuff. It's now that counts, friend, now and not yesterday" (18). In the new, post-Whitaker/Lemass economy, he pontificates, earnestly parroting the individualistic rhetoric of American-style capitalism, those who are stuck in the past will be left behind: "The country is on the move.... On the up and up. For those that are on the move, that is. Fellows that dig. Fellows with savvy. Get me? You got to be moving too or you'll be left behind" (19). The ultimate goal of this Darwinian battle for wealth and status is, for Myles, narrowly materialistic: "I like life, man. The feel of good cloth, smell of good cigars, the smell of a perfumed bird" (20). Not surprisingly, given his obsession with the superficial trappings of success, Myles advises Kelly to revamp his "image" (19) in order to get ahead, offering his own careful cultivation of his "appearance" (20) as a model. Over the course of the play it becomes apparent, however, that Myles' chosen image is patently fraudulent, his claims of his sexual prowess grossly exaggerated and his suave facade a performance he has perfected through close study of "the big boys that come in to buy their Jaguars" (21). When, as the drinking party is breaking up at the end of the play, it is revealed that Myles lives with his mother and must get home in time to have breakfast with her (in the finest tradition of Irish male mother-fixation), he is finally exposed for what he is: a pathetic poseur unconvincingly trying to live up to an unnatural, borrowed image.

If the self-deluded, insecure, and narrowly materialistic Myles represents one aspect of the new Ireland which sends Kelly fleeing into the past in a futile attempt to recover the lost essence of an Ireland now spiritually and culturally dislocated, the title character of Kilroy's play represents another which is more profoundly subversive of Kelly's conceptions both of Ireland and of self. The mysterious Mr. Roche, the homosexual whom Kelly, Myles, Seamus, and Doc (the fourth arrival at the party) meet in a pub and invite back to Kelly's flat for drinks, and whom they taunt in homophobic terms and eventually murder unwittingly, is a symbol of all they revile and fear. For Kelly, Roche also represents all that was safely suppressed in the old Ireland. In conversation with Seamus, Kelly laments the proliferation of homosexuals in Dublin (he has become convinced that the local pub now "crawls with them after dark" [57]) and their increasing boldness in practising their "perversions" (33) as incontrovertible signs of the moral decay of the city, proof that Dublin has "gone to hell altogether" (57). Over the course of the evening, Kelly, whose hatred of Roche is peculiarly intense, twice marshals Myles and Doc to attack Roche in acts of drunken horseplay which appear relatively benign on the surface, but which can also be read as symbolic attempts to smother the threatening otherness that Roche's sexuality represents. They first force him into the bathroom with Kevin, a young man he has picked up at the pub earlier that evening, in an emblematic, forcible re-closeting of the homosexual act (one, however, which takes a prurient delight in contemplating the act itself, as seen in Myles' carnival barker call to an imagined audience to "Roll up! Behind this door we have the--the greatest--let me say it--the greatest show on earth. Get your pennies for the slot, folks" [31]). After Roche, who is highly claustrophobic, recovers from the fright he has been given, he provokes the ire of

the trio by defending himself from further verbal jibes, leading them to gang up on him once again. This time they shove him into the flat's "holy-hole" (Kelly's name for his sub-basement storage space), and when they pull him out a few minutes later, he is, ostensibly at least, dead.

When his death later proves to have been less than a *fait accompli*, Kelly is obviously relieved, but also, at another level, deeply perturbed. The most virulently homophobic of all the men, Kelly is revealed to have had the greatest personal stake in silencing Roche, as he is trying desperately to deny his own latent homosexuality, a facet of his character to which Roche is inextricably linked as the one man with whom he has had a sexual encounter. As Anthony Roche has noted, at the very moment when Kelly confesses this liaison to Seamus, Roche, whose body Doc and Kevin have taken away to dump in a park, miraculously revives, indicating the psychic bond which connects the two characters and the futility of Kelly's bid to suppress his own sexuality: "As Kelly emerges from the closet, Mr. Roche, representing that aspect of Kelly which the latter has always sought to deny, simultaneously emerges from a death-like state with his *alter ego*'s confession. He returns as the embodiment of that which Kelly has repressed ..." (*Irish Drama* 195). Kelly's inability to banish his *doppelgänger* is underlined at the end of the play when Roche returns to the flat and defies Kelly's repeated requests that he leave. Finally, Kelly himself goes off to Sunday Mass, while Roche remains behind, seated "motionless" (79) and immovable in Kelly's chair. As Murray has argued, Roche's displacement of his host suggests at least the possibility that Kelly's life will be transformed for the better, as the enigmatic, seemingly otherworldly Roche (his resurrection after his death in the "holy-hole" has obvious religious overtones) "is a figure that sanctifies the space around him" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 130).

This interpretation of the play's ending seems particularly apt when it is considered that Roche, in his well-publicized "deviant" sexuality, his hatred of "enclosed spaces" (31), his unfailingly respectful and considerate treatment of others, and his refusal to hold a grudge (he is quite simply unable to, as he cannot "remember anything, ever" [77]) in many ways represents the idealized spirit of what a new, more open, and more tolerant Ireland could be. As such, he embodies a positive alternative to both the coldly materialistic, fiercely competitive new Ireland of Myles and the isolationist, puritanical, and backward-looking old Ireland which is the object of Kelly's fond reminiscences. That this symbol of potentiality, of a progressive new Ireland which may be in the making, cannot be killed off, evaded, or in any way ignored suggests that he might have the positive, transformative effect on Kelly that Murray suggests. This is a conclusion which is also hinted at in the final exchange between the two characters:

> MR. ROCHE (*with spirit*): Go away. Go off and pray. Pray for the dead. For all the dead and the living dead.... Requiescant in Pacem. A consolation for the dead. How to die.
>
> KELLY (*frantically*): I'm not dying. I'm not dead!
>
> MR. ROCHE: Precisely. You understand me perfectly. (78)

For the moment, however, as Murray has noted, Kelly is "still afraid" of Roche and "anxious to be rid of him," a sign that Kelly "remains trapped in his self-made tomb"

("Worlds Elsewhere" 130), dominated by his old prejudices and fears of realizing and expressing his individuality, a captive to the past.

The image of contemporary Ireland which emerges from *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, therefore, particularly if Kelly and Myles are understood as representative of two contrasting yet fundamentally complementary faces of postmodern Irishness, is of an oppressively conformist society in which nostalgia has become a compensatory response to the spiritual and cultural enervation created by rampant materialism. If Kilroy, through the figure of Mr. Roche, implied both the necessity and the possibility (however remote) of striving to transform or escape from this society, in *Talbot's Box* he depicted Matt Talbot (1856-1925), the early twentieth century Dublin mystic and candidate for sainthood, as one of the few who have actually attained the transcendence which seems only a tenuous proposition at the end of *Mr. Roche*. In offering a more detailed treatment of what Murray has referred to as the subject of "the self under siege in modern times" ("Irish Drama" 296), Kilroy, as Anthony Roche has suggested, shifted his "dramatic emphasis" by altering the "point of view" established in his two plays of the sixties: both *The O'Neill* and *Mr. Roche*, he has noted, centre on the unsuccessful attempts of their protagonists to "identify with the group," while in *Talbot's Box* "the central figure is already an outsider," one who "provoke[s]" the "defensive violence" of his society through the very fact that he has "become unassimilable" (*Irish Drama* 198). The heroism of the individual who is able to defy assimilation, as opposed to the individual desire for integration into the body of the collective, thus becomes the focus of Kilroy's dramatic explorations in the play.

As he probed further into the terrain of the conflict between self and society, Kilroy's approach also became more non-naturalistic. Roche has suggested that this was a necessary and predictable evolution in Kilroy's work, arguing that in both *The O'Neill* and *Mr. Roche*, "there is a sense of both the central characters and the playwright struggling to free themselves from naturalistic conventions, a sense of these forms as neither relevant nor adequate to convey the experience of a fragmented, chaotic reality" (*Irish Drama* 199). The reason for this was almost certainly, as Denis Sampson has implied, that Kilroy had become increasingly interested in exploring chaos as the condition not merely of contemporary Ireland, but also, more generally, of Western society as a whole in the era of the crisis of the subject (130).

That Kilroy wished to examine some of the larger and less specifically Irish dimensions of the issues of identity first raised in his early plays is suggested by the radically abstract form of *Talbot's Box*, a play which frequently leaps over and takes place outside of the boundaries of nation, time, and place which confine the action of the two plays of the sixties. Although it is still very much a work about Ireland, Kilroy's primary focus in *Talbot's Box* is on the solitary spiritual struggles of his protagonist, and for this reason the Irish context is less vital to the play than had been the case in *The O'Neill* and *Mr. Roche*. And while, as in *The O'Neill*, Kilroy turns to history in the drama as a means, in Murray's words, "of exploring the pressures on role and identity in contemporary Ireland" ("History Play" 284), history as a whole is much less central to *Talbot's Box*. Concomitantly, Kilroy's treatment of his historical subject matter is much less exacting

and thorough than in his first history play. His disregard for the naturalistic trappings of historical detail and chronology is indicated by the manner in which the play jumps between past and present--often without obvious indication or motive--and frequently occupies different times simultaneously (at one point even the characters become confused as to whether the year is 1892, 1913, or 1977 [26]). And whereas the action of *Mr. Roche* unfolds entirely within the naturalistically depicted confines of Kelly's flat, the stage space in *Talbot's Box* is fluid, with one important qualification: as Kilroy's opening stage directions specify, the space is dominated by a minimalist, abstract variation on the box set of old: "The lights reveal a huge box occupying virtually the whole stage.... The effect should be that of a primitive, enclosed space, part prison, part sanctuary, part acting space" (11).

As this description suggests, the box, within which most of the play is performed, functions metaphorically as both cage and sanctum. It is Talbot's refuge from the world outside, but also a symbol of how his life has been circumscribed by the walls he has had to build around himself to keep the world at bay. In his "Author's Note" to the play, Kilroy has suggested that this paradox was central to his original conception of the psychological drama at the heart of *Talbot's Box*:

> I wanted to write a play about the mystic and the essentially irreducible division between such extreme individualism and the claim of relationship, of community, society. I was also interested in the way individuals of exceptional personality invite manipulation and the projection of the needs of others.... In the beginning I was possessed by the crude manipulation of an eccentric, inaccessible man by forces which sought a model for the purpose of retaining power over people. What I think I wrote was a play about aloneness, its cost to the person and the kind of courage required to sustain it. (7)

Kilroy's Talbot is a man hounded by a series of figures, both during his life and after his death, who threaten his masochistic spiritual quest by seeking to appropriate him or his memory in one form or another, many for blatantly partisan purposes. In Kilroy's portrayal of the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913 (historical accounts of Talbot's role in which differ[6]) both sides try unsuccessfully to recruit Talbot to their cause. He is first beset by a wealthy captain of industry who seeks to coerce him into "say[ing] a few words[.] Off the cuff. Y'know. Dangers of syndicalism. Y'know. Rights of private property" (33). Later, he is denounced by one of his fellow workers for having been "Down on his knees while the rest of us was tryin' to get up off them" (31). Notably, Kilroy depicts the contemporary movement to have Talbot canonised as merely another manifestation of the attempts at appropriation Talbot was forced to rebuff during his life, and suggests that it too has been motivated by (largely conservative) political interests. At the beginning of the play a contemporary priest addresses the audience, asking those assembled to "pray for the Beatification and Canonisation of this holy Dublin working man, that in these troubled times the people might have a model of Christian loyalty and obedience, to fight off the false doctrines, subversive influences, dangerous and foreign practices, that threaten our faith" (18). The priest's campaign is bolstered by the lobbying of a contemporary Dublin capitalist, an heir of the 1913 industrialist, whose reasons for

supporting Talbot's canonisation are even more blatantly self-interested: not at all religious himself, he nonetheless exhorts, "This man must be canonised! We could do with a saint in the country in these troubled times.... Religion is in peril. The whole country is in peril! Look at inflation!.... If there was more praying and less marching around with placards we'd soon beat inflation in this country" (53).

The capitalist's attempt to co-opt the spirit of Talbot into the workings of the postmodern economy is but one of several examples in the play which suggest that, as Murray has argued, for Kilroy, "Talbot ... is an image of the modern self under siege by mass consumerism. Modern Ireland wants to appropriate Talbot, possess him as a marketable entity ..." ("History Play" 285). Ironically, as becomes apparent over the course of the play, Talbot's allure as a figurehead, commodity, and marketing tool lies precisely in the fact that he represents the spiritual values which allowed him to attain the freedom from his society which once provoked the ire of his fellows. In the contemporary era, Talbot's strength of devotion and the apparent ease with which he shunned the trappings of materialism have, while still resented, become the object of envy.

While Talbot the symbol is invoked, and at a nominal, surface level possessed, by many in the play, the essence of Talbot the man proves, in Sampson's words, to be "immune to the descriptions, explanations, and judgements of all those who wish to dominate or use him," including those who seek to "exploit his reputation after his death" (134). Talbot passes his life studiously oblivious to the workings of history, commerce. and politics, his goal of achieving the bliss of being "alone in Gawd" (23) leading him to reject the world as a materialist "hell on earth" (55) and to put aside his desire for marriage and a family. In the end, he remains unknowable: exasperated, two of the figures who crowd around him are finally brought to cry out, "Who is this chappie anyway?" and "Will the real Matt Talbot please stand up!" (46).

Talbot's victory over the world (if it can indeed be described in those terms) is by no means achieved without great effort or sacrifice, as becomes especially clear in two striking, emblematic scenes. The first is Kilroy's depiction of Talbot's struggle to avoid being swallowed up in the tumult of the Lockout, in particular the violence of the riot which occurred on 1913's Bloody Sunday:

> A sound, which grows louder and louder, of thousands of shuffling, marching feet seems to come from the distance.... TALBOT is alone in the centre pooled in light. The walking feet come nearer and there is pushing, scratching, beating against walls, TALBOT moves and touches the walls and there is momentary silence. Then a great uproar and beating which threatens to demolish the great box. Cries of Strike! Strike!.... Sounds of panic, Police attack on bodies and heads. TALBOT has thrown himself against the back wall as if holding it with his body. Abrupt silence with TALBOT spreadeagled against the wall ... (35)

The physical and psychological toll exacted by Talbot's effort to maintain his freedom is also suggested in a later scene in which his excruciating routine of daily devotions, which sees him "Jumping over trolley cars, crawling over banks, scrambling over warehouses.... Surmounting what is commonly known as material reality" (60), is narrated by one of the actors in the style of a sportscaster covering a steeplechase. At the end of his "three

masses plus numerous ejaculations, meditations, exercises of a religious nature en route" (60) Talbot collapses. Kilroy's stage directions indicate that in the final moments before he crumples, Talbot's "effort should be of a gradually weakening animal in a cage" (59).

At the end of the play Talbot remains, somewhat ambiguously, in the cage that is his box. Still, he has maintained his aloneness and apartness, a conclusion pointed to by the play's final image. Talbot achieves his apotheosis in death as the other actors watch voyeuristically from outside the box: "The great doors of the box are closed from without by the two men and the woman who stand looking in through cracks in the walls from which bright light comes which illuminates their faces" (63). As Sampson has observed, Talbot's success in preserving a unique and unified identity in the face of external pressures is also suggested by the play's casting scheme: "only one actor has the privilege of remaining in character, the one who plays the dead Matt Talbot" (135). In contrast, Sampson notes, all of the other actors play multiple roles, many of which are not characters so much as simply mouthpieces for various ideologies, in a distressing image of a world in which "character has disintegrated and with it the reliability of speech as an expression of a stable self" (130). That Talbot is able to preserve a "stable identity," as Sampson has argued (134), would seem to imply that, for Kilroy, the concept of individualism, while undeniably under siege, remains, for some and at some level, viable in postmodern Ireland and in the postmodern Western world. That Kilroy's true individual can remain so only by pursuing a patently fanatical and self-destructive isolation suggests, however, that Kilroy recognizes the difficulty of the task, and that he realizes that any belief in complete autonomy must be regarded with great suspicion.

If the path to total individualism trod by Matt Talbot is available and accessible to relatively few, Kilroy posited in his next two original works for the stage that we can at least strive to achieve a greater awareness of how we are entrapped in ideology and, in doing so, gain insights crucial to our ability to effect meaningful changes in ourselves and our societies. The vehicle for this potential transformation, both *Double Cross* and *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* suggest, is theatre itself. In these two plays, particularly the latter, Kilroy depicts the theatre as a forum in which the constructed nature of our identities and social performances can be productively interrogated and analysed. That these plays espouse this idealized conception of the political and social utility of theatre is not surprising given that both were written for Field Day, a company whose mandate, as defined by its directors in 1985, was (and remains) to stage plays which offer probing "analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the [political crisis in the North]" (Field Day vii). The model of theatre which Kilroy had first advocated as his ideal in 1959--one that is socially engaged, that functions as a "community" ("Groundwork" 192) and is built around the workshop ("Groundwork" 196-97)--corresponds very closely to Field Day's approach to theatre. For this reason, Kilroy's involvement with the company,[7] which he has praised as "the most important movement of its kind in Ireland since the beginning of the century" (*Double Cross* 7), can be seen as a natural outgrowth of the philosophy of theatre he had been pursuing throughout his career.

As a play which explores the notion that, in the words of one of its characters. "Identity can be a fiction" (76), *Double Cross* furthered the Field Day project by critically dissecting the foundations on which the web of identifications which form the basis of nationalism and sectarianism rest. Kilroy, who has elsewhere expressed his lack of affinity for the "public values" of "tradition and place, kinship and tribe" ("Theatrical Text" 92) concisely summarized his feelings about obsessive, essentialist nationalism in his "Author's Note" to the play: "To base one's identity, exclusively, upon a mystical sense of place rather than in personal character where it properly resides seems to me a dangerous absurdity" (6-7). *Double Cross* points towards the same conclusion, ultimately suggesting that feelings and expressions not only of national, but also of tribal, affiliation are as much, if not more, artificial and performed as they are inherently predetermined.

Kilroy's case studies in this dramatic exploration of the political and social implications of "acting or role-playing," as he has defined the central issues of the play (*Double Cross* 6), are his protagonists, Brendan Bracken (1901-58) and William Joyce (1906-46). Once again drawing on history to frame and inform a contemplation of the present, Kilroy presents Bracken and Joyce, two Irishmen who renounced their Irishness and went on to gain prominence on the world stage during World War II, as "two men who invented themselves" (19), as one of the play's narrators describes them. Upon leaving Ireland for England, both "obliterated all evidence of their Irishness. Fabricating, instead, ultra-English identities for themselves" (20). Bracken went on to become Minister of Information in Winston Churchill's war cabinet, while Joyce, a prominent member of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, went to Germany and reinvented himself as the infamous "Lord Haw-Haw," Nazi radio propagandist. Central to Kilroy's depiction of both characters is the suggestion that they are historical actors in every sense of the word. Both created new identities for themselves by copying the speech, dress, and mannerisms of the colonial/Aryan masters they emulate, as demonstrated particularly in the case of Bracken, who claims to "subscribe to the Wildean notion that one must make of one's life a work of art" (29). It becomes clear, however, that, as Sampson has observed, there is no core of conviction or truth beyond the facade of either man: "To be in character is impossible for either because in life, Kilroy insists, all they had were roles" (136). Popsie, Bracken's lover, finally arrives at this realization after being repeatedly driven to the point of distraction by his duplicitous nature: "you spend your life constantly evading, constantly avoiding, constantly inventing--How can one possibly live like that?... can you not be yourself for once!... whatever you are" (27).

The sobering irony which derives from this and which becomes equally apparent over the course of the play is that the fiercely opposed ideologies the two men espouse as archrivals in the war's propaganda campaign are no less assumed than their nationalities. Kilroy portrays Bracken and Joyce, who significantly are both played by the same actor, as psychic twins, doubles, a suggestion underlined at the end of the play when Bracken hails Joyce as his shadowy, long-lost "brother" (78). That the two have ended up on opposite sides in the war, Kilroy implies, is largely a matter of chance, for at a subterranean level there is an essential similarity between the seemingly antagonistic loyalties they strive to embody. Bracken's Englishness is founded on notions of racial

supremacy only slightly less virulent than Joyce's fascism, as becomes apparent when at various points in the play he refers to Jews as "yids" (18) and rails against Gandhi as a "foul smell[ing]" threat to "Cultivated living" (37). The underlying kinship of their affiliations is disturbingly suggested when Bracken, in a sort of waking nightmare, is pursued by the disembodied voice of Joyce, which is clearly speaking from the depths of Bracken's own subconscious: "We are one. You and I are one. Why then, my friends, are we at war? The Germany that I know and the England that I know are one, two halves of the one, great, Northern European culture and civilization" (44-45).

Divorced from its chilling context, this passage, in its call for two warring peoples to look beyond the superficial differences which divide them and recognize those bonds which connect them, can at a very basic level be seen as a summation of Field Day's message for Northern Ireland. By underlining the artificiality and constructedness of many accepted markers of national difference, Joyce's call to Bracken reinforces the argument advanced through Kilroy's portrayals of his two protagonists. Both are clearly presented as extreme cases of the disintegration of identity in the era of the crisis of the subject, two men whose total rejection of their pasts, and consequently of whatever stable core of identity once defined them, has made them particularly reliant on adopted images as a means of constructing some sense of self. Kilroy is unwilling to accept that our identities are *nothing* but a tissue of performed allegiances, that nothing lies beneath our performed surfaces, as Popsie's frustrated demand that Bracken stop acting in her presence suggests. Nonetheless, the play forces its Irish audience at least to consider the possibility that concepts such as nationalism, loyalism, and Irishness are no less artificial than Bracken's Englishness and Joyce's Nazism. This premise is succinctly reinforced for the benefit of Field Day's patrons when Bracken's acquaintance Lord Castlerosse suggests that his friend's duplicity is a characteristic inherited from his Irish upbringing: "Of course the Irish are always trying to be something other than Irish or else they're being more Irish than you could possibly believe" (33).

In Kilroy's most recent play, Madame MacAdam, proprietor of an English travelling theatre company marooned by a petrol shortage in a provincial Irish town during World War II, offers a similar assessment of the Irish national character. Commenting on the difficulty of playing to Irish audiences, she observes, "How can you perform theatre before a population of performers?" (46). As her remark indicates, *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre*, a drama which Roche has described as "not so much a sequel to *Double Cross* as its parallel or counterpart" (208-09), is a further elaboration on the theories of role-playing and identity central to the earlier play. While *Madame MacAdam* returns to the same issues, in engaging with them it pursues a new direction: if *Double Cross* suggests the need to interrogate the performative roots of personal and national identity, *Madame MacAdam* posits that theatre can play an integral role in this process, and can, moreover, be a site in which divisions can be healed. Thus, where *Double Cross*, as a play about two prominent historical figures who were inveterate actors, is implicitly metatheatrical, *Madame MacAdam*, as a play about acting and actors written for a travelling theatre company (Field Day), is overtly so.

The disquisition on theatre which is central to the play is the product of Kilroy's lifelong obsession with the aesthetics of the medium. In a 1991 interview, he suggested that the play grew out of his desire to explore deception as an integral element of theatre: "Theatre succeeds through deception.... I was fascinated by the contrast between this type of deception in theatre and that of criminal deception." As a consequence, he indicated, he also became increasingly interested in costuming and the connection between the theatrical and social performance of roles:

> In the play I'm interested in the whole business of costumes, and of the things that happen when people dress up. This is not just simply stage costumes but it also has to do with uniforms.... I was very interested in the way you have a contrast between the stage costume and military or police uniforms, and the way in which it brings an element of theatre into everyday life. Danger can be created on the stage too, creating fantasy and transformation. The play tries to show the way in which theatre harnesses danger and [through] the fact that it is contained on the stage, people can experience danger vicariously. (Hassett n.p.)

In the play, Kilroy's ideas about the nature and role of the theatre are expressed largely in the form of a debate between the title character and Rabe, the most talented actor in her company. The volatile, moody Rabe, who has suffered persecution by the Black Shirts as a London Jew, is intensely committed to the idea of creating an explicitly political theatre whose goal is social amelioration. His description of the theatre he imagines closely echoes Kilroy's comments on the capacity of the theatre to contain danger and thus bring about change: "What I want, more than anything, is a theatre which can hold--danger.... Where danger can detonate upon a stage. You see, I believe if theatre can do that, there will be less--danger left in the world. Our only hope is that art transform the human animal. Nothing else has worked" (24-25). Having been persuaded to join the MacAdam company in the belief that Madame shares the same philosophy, he is now frustrated to find himself performing what he calls "second-rate" (36) melodramas, "rubbish to entertain a lot of yokels" (37). Behind her back, he complains bitterly about the inadequacy of Madame's dramatic vision: "She made it sound as if theatre could heal everything, make it whole again. Well, where is it, then? This great fucking theatre of transformation?" (18).

What Rabe fails to recognize is that the troupe's mere presence in the town, any considerations of its repertoire aside, has had precisely the "dangerous," revitalizing impact on the community he longs to effect from the stage. Over the course of the play, the actors, both directly and indirectly, force the townsfolk to confront various unpleasant truths about themselves. In this respect, as Roche has noted, the play's plot reflects that of Lennox Robinson's *Drama at Inish*: "Kilroy follows Robinson's line of using overt theatrics to expose the codes constructing everyday social discourse" (*Irish Drama* 211). Unlike in Robinson's play, however, the actors' impact on the town is finally validated as beneficial, not dismissed as unwarranted meddling. As Roche's comment suggests, the actors, an invasion force from England which has breached the defenses of the isolationist Ireland of "The Emergency," disrupt the stultifyingly settled norms of social interaction in

the town by interacting with the natives, most dramatically in the form of Rabe's liaison with a local girl, Jo.

Even more subversively, their presence brings the compulsive "performers" in the local population to an uncomfortable awareness of the artificiality of their own performances, as exemplified particularly by the defensive and hostile reaction the troupe provokes on the part of the Local Defence Force leader, Bun Bourke. A baker by day, Bourke's identity transforms once he dons his LDF garb at night: as he tells his cowed charges, "In this uniform I'm not Bun Bourke. I'm Squad Leader Bourke" (2). Bourke's "transvestism," as Roche has described it (*Irish Drama* 213), allows him an outlet for his latent fascism and overt xenophobia (he is convinced Ireland is about to be invaded by the British, Germans, Americans, or Japanese at any moment [3]). Moreover, his role as "Squad Leader Bourke" is also clearly integral to his sense of self. Threatened by the obvious parallel between the daily acts of transformation performed by the actors and his own, Bourke is compelled to persecute the troupe for the crime of what Roche has called "effac[ing] the distinctions which society strives to keep in place" (*Irish Drama* 213). For Bourke and those of his ilk, such a violation of established hierarchies constitutes a breach of morality, as suggested by the terms in which he denounces the actors: "Fucking atheists. Pure people don't carry on, putting on the act, trying to be what they're not.... Infiltrators! Come out and show your born faces, will ye! Paint and powder, mincy-mancy, shaping and dressing and stripping and putting on the act" (46).

Like the Nazi Joyce in *Double Cross* and the Black Shirts from Rabe's past, Bourke exemplifies the truth of Madame MacAdam's observations that "Once one puts on a uniform one is in danger of unleashing one's violence" (67). For this reason, she suggests, "we must never confuse theatre and everyday life" (57), as the performative act that goes unrecognized as such by its originator can lead to everything from the petty cruelties caused by a fickle lover (as in the case of Rabe's jilting of Jo) to world wars and the sectarian conflict which formed the immediate context for the Field Day production of the play. When the line between stage and auditorium is blurred, the theatre loses its power to educate and enlighten, and for this reason Madame is an adamant exponent of the need for "creative distancing" (70): she rebukes her colleague Lyle Jones for "violat[ing] the very principle of theatre" (70) by assuming a false identity to win money in a gambling scam, and roundly condemns Rabe for his similar inability to "confine his theatricality to the stage" (65).

Ultimately, Kilroy implies, because Rabe is unable to distinguish between art and life, his model of theatre is also deficient. In its insistence on confrontation, it lacks the quality of tolerance which Madame sees as essential to theatre's capacity to heal. "The miracle of theatre," she tells him, "is built upon acceptance.... It is built upon human error and human frailty.... It is built upon patience with what actually exists. Not some cloud-cuckoo-land. If we bear witness to the steady pulse of the world there is no miracle which we may not perform upon the stage" (36-37). For Madame, transformation can only be achieved collectively; it cannot be imposed. For this reason, as Murray has noted, theatre, in its communal nature and its grounding in the interaction between actor and audience, offers both the perfect model and perfect forum for the ameliorative process: "Deceit is

play; play is deceit. But play also demands assent, acceptance, tolerance from an audience" ("Worlds Elsewhere" 137).

If Madame accuses Rabe of harbouring a hopelessly unrealistic conception of theatre and the theatrical, Kilroy leaves himself open to the same charges. In insisting that it is possible to distinguish between the realm of the performative and that of the "real," that one can at some level exist and function outside of the influence of ideology, Kilroy's plays subscribe to a problematic notion of identity that challenges the ethic of postmodernity. In doing so, and in emphatically and idealistically professing the belief that art has the capacity to "transform the human animal" Kilroy's drama expresses an ethos similar to that found in the works of Murphy and Friel. In reacting to and dramatizing the transforming state of Ireland, all three of these dramatists reach towards visions of unity and transcendence that fly in the face of the cultural and social upheaval that defines postmodern Ireland. As I mean to suggest in the conclusion that follows, their refusal to accept what is can be seen both as an indication of the trauma of dislocation they have suffered and as a sign that their sensibilities were formed in an earlier era.

Notes

1. Kilroy, who has split his energies between creative writing (both drama and fiction) and academia for most of his career, has written far fewer plays than Keane, Murphy, Leonard, and Friel. His work for the stage includes only six original plays, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* (1968), *The O'Neill* (1969), the unpublished *Tea, Sex, and Shakespeare* (1976), *Talbot's Box* (1977), *Double Cross* (1986), and *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991), along with Irish adaptations of Chekov's *The Seagull* (1981) and Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1989).

2. Cf. Sampson 130; Roche, *Irish Drama* 189.

3. Cf. Murray, "Worlds Elsewhere" 131; Sampson 133.

4. I should note that I am indebted for this observation to the keen eye of my supervisor, Dr. Ron Ayling, who first drew my attention to this parallel to *Murder in the Cathedral*.

5. Kilroy makes the parallel to 1916 rather explicit. While the English characters in the play question the fitness of the Irish for "self-government," O'Neill speaks of popular support for his rebellion in phrasing that recalls 1916 and rhetoric of Pearse: "All Ireland is out.... Even the centuries of the dead are marching with us" (14). (My thanks again to Dr. Ayling for this observation.)

6. Kilroy summarizes the debate in his "Author's Note" to the play: "There is a long-standing taunt of Matt Talbot the Scab, the betrayer of his fellow-workers. There is the counter-defence by, among others, contemporary trade-unionists, that Matt Talbot subscribed fully to the rights of the workers" (7).

7. In addition to writing two of its plays, Kilroy served on Field Day's board of directors from 1988 to 1992.

Conclusion: Generations of Playwrights

> In Ballybeg, at the point when [*Translations*] begins, the cultural climate is ... no longer quickened by its past, about to be plunged almost overnight into an alien future. The victims in this situation are the transitional generation. The old can retreat into and find immunity in the past. The young acquire some facility with the new cultural implements. The in-between ages become lost, wandering around in a strange land. Strays.
>
> --Brian Friel, "Extracts From a Sporadic Diary," 1983

> But is this matter of tradition of any interest any more? Certainly, younger people in the Irish theatre today find it a bore. There is even the eerie sensation of watching some of the work of one's contemporaries and, worse still, of one's own, becoming historical while one is still alive. But that, precisely, is why the question of tradition is important at this time. The writer who is born into a traditional culture and lives to see it undergo massive change has a peculiar problem in bridging the present and the past. My own may be the last generation with such a sense of continuity with the past, particularly the immediate past.
>
> --Thomas Kilroy, "A Generation of Playwrights," 1992

In arguing that the dislocations born of rapid cultural transformation are experienced most acutely by those in mid-life at the time the changes occur, Brian Friel and Thomas Kilroy have pointed to an illuminating means of contextualizing their own plays and those of John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, and Hugh Leonard. As five writers whose lives have spanned two very different eras in the history of contemporary Ireland, and whose drama has come to define a transitional period in the history of Irish theatre, these five playwrights and their works offer more than substantial support for this theory. The extent to which their plays express and are driven by what might be regarded as a poetics of dislocation is, however, perhaps only the most obvious of a number of patterns which emerge from a comparison of their individual *oeuvres*, each of which has been shaped by a shared history of cultural revolution.

All five grew up in an Ireland which, as Kilroy has put it, "now seems as remote as the last century," a country in which the dominant realities were "isolation, repressiveness and dreariness. An Ireland, then, that was a self-isolating place, timidly holding itself inwards while the modern world rushed by, headlong and frantic, outside" ("Generation" 135). Not surprisingly, then, in first depicting their society on stage in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Keane, Murphy, and Friel attacked the deprivations and repressions that had been the distressing stuff of life in Ireland for years. Plays such as Keane's *Sive*, *Sharon's Grave*, *Many Young Men of Twenty* and *Hut 42*, Murphy's *On the Outside*, *A Whistle in the Dark*, and *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant*, and Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* confronted, with varying degrees of outrage and bitterness, some of the most pernicious manifestations of the restrictive political culture and social conditions that had prevailed in Ireland for decades. Keane railed against

clericalism and sexual repression; Murphy attacked gombeenism and the unacknowledged class divisions in rural Ireland; and both, in concert with Friel, turned a highly critical eye on the inability of a xenophobic, isolationist nationalist regime to provide for its citizens, a failure of political direction and will which fed the national tragedy of emigration. For Murphy and Friel in particular, a further, but integral, element of the assault on the status quo advanced in these early plays was an artistic rebellion against the hegemony of the peasant play form. In plays like *A Crucial Week* and *Philadelphia* both sought (albeit somewhat tentatively at first) to modify and open this archetypal national genre to the international influence of expressionism.

But if the Ireland of this period was, like pre-Famine Gaelic Ireland as depicted by Friel in *Translations*, a society "no longer quickened by its past," it was also one which had already begun to be "plunged ... into an alien future" ("Extracts" 59). Even while Keane, Murphy, and Friel embarked on their careers by writing plays which were in many senses located in the Ireland of De Valera (politically and psychically if not entirely temporally), the social, cultural, and political realities of the country were being fundamentally transformed, a process speeded and impelled by the Whitaker/Lemass reforms and the incursion of foreign popular culture via the new medium of television. As Ireland's economy and culture increasingly fell under the sway of foreign influences, the stiflingly homogenous vision of Irishness promulgated by official nationalism could no longer be sustained. Post-Whitaker/Lemass conceptions of Irishness began to reflect the growing heterogeneity of an Ireland which, while still traditional in many respects, was eagerly embracing both American and (to a lesser degree British) popular culture and American-style capitalism, and in the process adopting the materialist values which De Valera had fulminated against as contrary to the spirit of the brand of Catholic Irish nationalism he sought to promote. By the mid- to late sixties, Keane, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy had begun to recognize and address the new shape of the culture in their dramas. Keane's *The Field*, Leonard's *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, Friel's *The Mundy Scheme* and Kilroy's *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche* portrayed the new reality of Irish life as a condition of uneasy suspension between a traditional past and an Americanized postmodern future, and, through figures such as Keane's Bull McCabe and Kilroy's Kelly, dramatized the disorienting consequences of the changes.

Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy also observed with clarity that the explosion of violence in Northern Ireland added yet another complicating factor to the turbulent process of cultural reformulation already under way. In the years after the outbreak of the conflict, an Ireland contentedly treading the path to material prosperity in an international consumer economy (particularly in the years after the country gained EEC membership) was forced to confront the painful, unfinished business of its colonial past. In addition to threatening the stability of Southern society, the violence, as depicted by Murphy in *The Blue Macushla* and *Conversations on a Homecoming* and by Leonard in *Kill*, also prompted a resurgence of some of the extremist nationalist passions of old, frequently recast in a virulently chauvinistic form. Like Friel's *The Gentle Island*, these plays remarked the way in which the Northern conflict thereby exacerbated an emerging trend towards the valorization of nostalgia (exemplified particularly notably by Kelly in *Mr.*

Roche) as a widespread compensatory response to the chaos and disunity, both cultural and political, of the time.

While the Troubles dragged on throughout the seventies and eighties with little prospect of peace in sight, and as the transformative changes to the Republic's economy and culture initiated in the sixties became institutionalized only to breed further upheavals, Irish society had little alternative but to attempt to adapt to the apparently unresolvable lack of cultural and political stability in the country. In apparent recognition of this fact, Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy began to create works which no longer merely reflected the confusions, uncertainties, and divisions engendered by transition, but which also sought to address the problem of how to accommodate the turmoil, how to deal with the loss of a previously stable sense of cultural identity. Notably, despite their vociferous criticisms of many of the prevailing social and political orthodoxies of pre-1960s Ireland, all five refused to accept or embrace the new Ireland uncritically, and the variety of their dramatic responses to it says much about the trauma of cultural dislocation each of them has experienced in recent decades.

Of the five, John B. Keane and Hugh Leonard have proven in many respects the least resilient to the changes Ireland has experienced, the most creatively and ideologically disarmed and bewildered by them. In his plays of the early sixties Keane presciently anticipated the shape the changes would take, and in *The Field* he insightfully portrayed the inevitable divisive clash between the old and new orders which defined the process of transition. His attempts to venture into the terrain of the new Ireland in later plays such as *The Rain at the End of the Summer*, *The Change in Mame Fadden*, and *The Chastitute* were far less accomplished and assured, however, and revealed nothing so much as his own bafflement at the liberalizing trend in Irish society. Keane's retreat from playwrighting at the beginning of the eighties after *The Chastitute*, considered alongside the success which revivals of his early folk plays have enjoyed since that time, has only tended to confirm his status as a dramatist primarily of the Irish past.

If Keane's attempts to deal with contemporary Ireland have been marred by an uncomprehending awkwardness, Leonard's, by way of contrast, might best be described as overly comfortable and complacent. In dramatizing the face of the new Ireland, and in particular the emergent class of the suburban *nouveaux riches*, Leonard's first impulse was towards satire, an artistic strategy he employed with considerable virtuosity in plays such as *The Patrick Pearse Motel*, *Time Was*, and *Kill*, and which Friel would use with similar effectiveness some years later to the same ends in *The Communication Cord*. Leonard's satires are brilliantly witty and sharply observed exposés of a society dominated by greed and hypocrisy, a contemporary Ireland in which the loss of fixed markers of cultural identification has created a population predisposed to endless role-playing and nostalgia as a means of forging individual and collective identities; but they are also imbued with the sense that nothing can be done, that there is little prospect of any solution to the problems the satire discloses. The hollowness and despair implicit in Leonard's commentary in these plays is even more apparent in *Summer* and *Moving*, in which a paralyzing sense of political and social stasis is depicted as the inescapable reality of contemporary Irish middle class life.

While the plays of Keane and Leonard thus typically retreat from the subject of contemporary Ireland in a state of uncomprehending or weary resignation, those of Murphy, Friel, and Kilroy have much more successfully and combatively engaged with the collective consequences of the "transitional crisis." In their later plays each of these playwrights identifies and addresses the same malaise that afflicts Leonard's characters, one grounded above all in contemporary Ireland's gapped cultural inheritance and the spiritual aridity of its new materialistic ethos. The Irish Man in Murphy's *Gigli Concert*, for example, tormented by the emptiness of his narrowly materialistic existence, is merely a more self-aware and fully realized type of many of the *nouveaux riches* characters of Leonard's plays. But where Leonard tosses up his hands in defeat, Murphy, Friel, and Kilroy offer images of figures who succeed in overcoming individual manifestations of this collective postmodern crisis by transforming or transcending the conditions which limit or confine their lives. J.P.W. King sings like Gigli in *The Gigli Concert*, Tim and Claire are united through the "perfect discourse" of silence in *The Communication Cord*, and Matt Talbot manages to maintain his solitary spiritual devotion in *Talbot's Box*. In insisting that such acts of transformation are possible, even if never easily achieved (Friel's characters in particular are more likely to fail than to succeed in their quests for transcendence and completion) Murphy, Friel, and Kilroy signal their refusal to accept the malign effects of the "transitional crisis" as fixed and unchangable.

Implicit in their stance is the suggestion that even in the postmodern era some vision of Irish cultural unity might be pursued and attained. All three of these writers have demonstrated their commitment to this ideal through their drama, as exemplified particularly in the involvement of Friel and Kilroy with the Field Day project. Notably, in recent years all three have written plays which seek to establish links between personal/national history and the present, suggesting that they wish to redefine an Irish cultural identity for the contemporary era--one that is inclusive but not coercive in the way that past formulations were--by bridging the divide which separates postmodern Ireland from its traditional past. Murphy's *Bailegangaire* depicts a healing *rapprochement* between the generations of a divided family; Friel's *Translations* and *Making History* explore the contemporary resonances of crucial moments in Irish history; and Kilroy's *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre*, like Friel's autobiographical *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is an evocation of personal history: Kilroy has described the play as a "nostalgic" (Hassett n.p.) work based on his memories of the travelling fit-up companies that visited his childhood home in County Kilkenny (Cowley n.p.).

In turning to the past, each of these plays, following the lead of Hugh Leonard's autographical *Da*, also represented something of a return to formal tradition for a trio of playwrights whose works of the seventies are distinguished by their bold experimentation. Like Leonard in *Da*, in *Bailegangaire* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* Murphy and Friel revisited the archetypal kitchen setting, while Kilroy's *Madame MacAdam*, although still markedly non-naturalistic, is considerably less stylized than *Talbot's Box*. If, after their first tentative rebellions against naturalism, the upheaval of an Ireland in transition inspired these dramatists to explore new forms in an attempt to represent the chaotic new realities of Irish culture and society, their return to more traditional forms at a point when

all were well advanced in their careers can be interpreted as indicative of a collective desire to forge a reconnection to the past. In the sense that they seek to accommodate the past within the present at the level of both subject matter and form, these plays can thus be regarded as perhaps the most telling proof of Kilroy's 1992 assertion that the playwrights of his generation, in large part because of the particular experience of dislocation they have suffered and the cultural/historical memories they retain, are obsessed with the subject of tradition, haunted by that which has been lost and determined that its relevance to the present be addressed and acknowledged.

If this concern with tradition defines the generation of playwrights which includes the five dramatists discussed in this study, it may also, as Kilroy has suggested, be the clearest mark of distinction between their works and those of Irish playwrights who have come to maturity since the beginning of the 1960s. Kilroy's belief that the "matter of tradition" is regarded as "a bore" by "younger people in the Irish theatre today," and his consequent suspicion that his own works and those of his peers are "becoming historical" before his very eyes ("Generation" 136) are certainly not without foundation. As only one example, this is the impression emphatically conveyed by *Digging For Fire* (1991), one of the first plays written by the young Dublin director and dramatist Declan Hughes, for whose Rough Magic Theatre Company Kilroy revised his *Tea, Sex and Shakespeare* in 1988. *Digging for Fire* chronicles the disastrous reunion of a group of Generation X Dubliners. Once a closely-knit circle of friends, they have now grown distant, and the paths their lives have taken in the intervening years reflect the cultural condition of contemporary Dublin: one is an HIV-positive artist; another is a lecherous advertising executive given to spouting American-derived ad-speak phrases such as "Like mega-overhyped conversational matrix vibe, Dan" (114); and a third, Breda, works for a Howard Stern-like trash talk radio host (described as "like a post-modernist Gay Byrne" [80]).

The most articulate character in the play is Danny, a failed writer recently returned from self-imposed exile in New York, who acts as a mouthpiece for Hughes's often acerbic social and cultural commentary. When Breda asserts that her work in talk radio performs the valuable function of building "A *greater* sense" of a distinct cultural "community" in Ireland, Danny challenges the notion that such a community could exist. or ever did during his lifetime: "I grew up with the TV on ... with England and America beaming into my brain; I never had a single moment of, I don't know, 'cultural purity'. I didn't know where I was from" (99). Far from lamenting the fact that he has no "sense of place" (100), however, Danny, who counsels "embracing the chaos" (96) as the healthiest and most effective response to postmodernity, laments Ireland's inability to accept the reality that it is no longer culturally distinct. Doing so, he feels, would bring a freeing end to the ongoing, tiresome debates about identity and tradition which have paralyzed the country:

> ... what I'm saying is: the chaos *is* here--wannabees and weirdoes on the airwaves, brains fried from TV and video and information overload--so acknowledge it. don't pretend there's some unique sense of community, that Ireland's some special little enclave--things are breaking down as fast here as anywhere else. (100)

In an interview published the year after *Digging For Fire* premiered, Hughes echoed the words of his character in suggesting that audience reaction to the play proved that it spoke both to and for the youth of Ireland:

> I don't want to sound grandiloquent, but when it was staged in Dublin there was a sense of people having waited for a play like this--certainly people my age. The response was, 'At last here is an Irish play that just takes for granted the fact that people have grown up with British TV in their homes and they don't have some unique sense of what it is to be Irish.' (qtd. in Pamela Edwardes 129-30)

While it would be unfair to suggest that the opinions expressed by Hughes in *Digging For Fire* are representative of his entire generation, it seems equally clear that many among the new breed of Irish playwrights share his orientation towards matters of culture and identity. Fewer playwrights seem anxious to debate these issues in their works, while more have turned to the everyday stuff of life in contemporary Ireland for the subject matter of their plays. As Ireland has continued to grow more urbanized, Irish playwrights have increasingly chosen the urban sprawl of Dublin as a setting for their works, with dramatists such as Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Paul Mercier and Jim and Peter Sheridan writing plays about such timely issues as rock and roll, drug addiction, street culture, and the economic and social woes which accompanied the downturn of the national economy in the 1980s. The North has seen a similar blossoming of issue-oriented drama, much of it, as David Grant has suggested, inspired by the continuing spectre of the Troubles (xi), which has prompted Northern playwrights to explore the question of how an embattled population has carried on with daily life in the midst of constant crisis. At the same time, a number of accomplished women playwrights, among them Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Marie Jones, and Marina Carr, has emerged to prominence in both the North and the Republic, revitalizing an Irish theatre long dominated by male voices. The success in the 1980s of Belfast's feminist theatre collective, Charabanc, is a particularly notable example of the recent and ongoing feminization of the Irish theatre. A company formed by "five actresses ... frustrated at how few opportunities for work seemed to exist in Northern Ireland," the group went on to become, in Grant's estimation, "the most progressive force in modern Northern Irish Theatre" (xi).

In all these ways, Irish drama has moved in new directions in the eighties and nineties and engaged in fresh debates not addressed in the plays of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy. It would be a serious error, however, to underestimate the influence these writers have had on the new generation of Irish playwrights. Indeed, many of the younger playwrights seem to be carrying on the work of these dramatists as much as they are breaking new ground. To mention only a few examples which invoke comparisons, the imagistic style of theatre explored by Murphy and Kilroy in plays such as *The Morning After Optimism*, *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *Talbot's Box*, and *Double Cross* has found new exponents in Tom MacIntyre and Michael Harding; Bernard Farrell, who has championed the work of Leonard (McGarr 2), has been described as a "worthy successor" to the playwright (Murray "Rev." 207); and Charabanc seems in many respects to have been modelled after Friel and Rea's Field Day Theatre Company. As just one further, more concrete example of the way the work of the playwrights of the generation

of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel and Kilroy has shaped the Irish drama of the present and future, two of the most remarkable Irish plays of recent years, written by perhaps the leading playwright of the new generation, Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and *Carthaginians*, almost certainly would not have been written without the influence of Friel or Field Day, for whom the plays were originally intended. If, as Kilroy suggested in 1991, contemporary Irish drama is a "tremendously vital" field at present, a conclusion the preponderance of fine new writers and theatre companies would seem to suggest, much of the credit is owing to the contributions of Keane, Murphy, Leonard, Friel, and Kilroy, the first theatrical chroniclers of the new Ireland.

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