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# Domestic and Imperial Politics in Britain and Ireland: The Testimony of Irish Theatre

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I wish I could find a country to live in where the facts were not brutal and the dreams not unreal.

Shaw (1984: 88)

The whole Irish-British cat's cradle...a subject for drama which is comprised of multiplying dualities.

Parker (2000: xiii)

The relationship of Ireland and Irish people to modernity has come about, primarily, as a function of the country's colonial status.<sup>1</sup> British colonialism produced in Ireland a mediated experience of modernity, manifested, for most of the twentieth century, both as material disadvantage and as critical opportunity. While exclusion from the mainstream had baneful economic consequences, it seemed to confer advantages at the level of critical consciousness and cultural vitality. Yeats's poetic characterization, 'We Irish... thrown upon this filthy modern tide', apprehends succinctly this ambiguous position (Yeats 2000: 122): the experience of psychic and material buffeting inspires a search for positions other than those dictated by modernity. For Irish nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century, alternative locations – in which one could act on history as more than a mere 'other' to a colonial reality – were to be found by cultural means. Domination generates psychic experiences of being other than oneself: 'to be is to be like; to be like is to be like the oppressor' (Freire 1985: 25). In consequence, throughout the colonial period, and, in the mid-nineteenth century, intensely so, Ireland witnessed a series of attempts by anti-colonialists 'to speak a true word' (ibid.: 60). The question of 'authenticity' became a key one in dramatizing the Irish race and the Irish nation, either in the theatres of the English-speaking world (Greene and Morash 2005: xv), or in public sites of

armed insurrection.<sup>2</sup> To enunciate one's Irishness was to affirm for local audiences one's sense of being other than the empire decrees one to be – a crucial step in the formation of anti-colonial consciousness.<sup>3</sup> It was also to claim space among a broader *polis* for the proposition that colonial practices are fundamentally destructive of the humanity of those subject to them.<sup>4</sup> The latter argument requires, in the first instance, that such persons' humanity be acknowledged, and is useful in grounding anti-colonial movements for national self-determination. It applies also, as Freire argues, to the 'dehumanized' oppressors produced in the metropole by the practices of empire (Freire 1985: 32).

In contemporary Irish Studies, Ireland and Britain are, first and foremost, ideas (see Kiberd 1996; Kirby et al. 2002). Irish Studies interrogates constructs of Ireland and of Britain, as functions of utopian desires and dystopian terrors, exposing relationships in which they antagonize and complement each other. Such constructs are negotiated in practices of representation and interpretation, public and private, metropolitan and peripheral. Irish perceptions and experiences of the drama of Ireland in – and after – the British Empire testify to tensions common among colonized peoples between insurrectionist and quietist versions of postimperial desires (Amkpa 2004: 1–18). The insurrectionist notion of Britain as interloper is encoded in the phrase, 'the British presence in Ireland'. The quietist account of Britain as (problematic) neighbour gives rise to discussions of 'British–Irish' or 'Irish–British' relations. As he contemplates his execution in Belfast, following the failed rebellion of 1798, Stewart Parker's Henry Joy McCracken poses a key question for insurrectionists: 'So what if the English do bequeath us to one another some day? What then? When there's nobody else to blame except ourselves?' (Parker 2000: 81). In his final moments, Parker's McCracken suggests that independence conceived of simply, or mainly, as the absence of the colonizer will bring problems of its own (Merriman 1999: 305–17). Irish experience shows that statehood is all too easily, and all too often, separated out from anti-colonial aspirations to universal liberation, once the state has been achieved. New institutions command popular allegiance for their 'national' character, even as they reinscribe the social relations which characterized the colonial apparatus they claim to have transformed.<sup>5</sup>

In the penultimate decades of direct imperial rule in Ireland (1880–1910), the battle for the right to narrate the nation was joined on many fronts, with the idea of national culture a crucial site of struggle (see Matthews 2002: 22–37). For generations raised in Independent Ireland, the sense of gradual amelioration of the imperial perspective on Irish independence, prior to the rebellion of 1916 and the War of Independence (1919–21), has been difficult to appreciate. Nationalism's ideological appropriation of the insurrection of 1916 as an inevitable manifestation of the historical will of the people distorts the reality that it came as a huge shock to the general population. To elites, both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, who had been in the vanguard of a relatively sedate progress towards national autonomy within the United Kingdom, it was a cataclysm. Yeats's phrase in 'Easter 1916', 'a terrible beauty is born' (Yeats 2000: 60–2), registers its impact on those of his class and political outlook. It is a pointed historical irony that, post-independence, the phrase itself became a commonplace of nationalist rhetoric deployed to

erase the complexity of pre-1916 Ireland, and recruit, *ex post facto*, a huge majority engaged with the quietist project of Home Rule to a historically inevitable movement towards popular insurrection.<sup>6</sup> The quietist approach – in which ‘constructive unionism’ finds common cause with ‘constitutional nationalism’ – privileges contiguity over conflict, stresses ‘what we have in common’ over ‘issues that continue to divide us’, and finds its fullest expression in the Good Friday Agreement (1998).

As contemporary Independent Ireland wrestles to transform itself from colonial province to EU member-state, a sense of the radical unreliability of received accounts of Ireland’s historical formation in relation to empire begins to emerge, drawing attention to the politics of critical valorizations of culture. Lionel Pilkington argues for ‘a cultural history of Ireland that accounts for Irish theatre’s complex relationship to colonialism and modernity’,<sup>7</sup> and this chapter attempts to enable reflection on insights which drama’s ‘masterful images’ may make available. As a broad schematic structure, I suggest that where history purports to deal in the ordering of ‘facts’, and political movements in the realization of collective dreams, cultural artefacts are wrought from utopian desires. My critical wager is that performance texts make available unique and often unusual insights into the social, political and cultural circumstances of the moments in which they are produced and reproduced. Read in this light, they enable the critical interpreter to locate, and to exceed, both the brutality of reductive facts and the unreality of elitist dreams. Critical concentration on artefact and consciousness, sharpened by sensitivity to what Pilkington calls ‘the libidinous physicality of performance’ (Pilkington 2001: 5), enables acts of theatre to yield up vital insights in radically unstable, even unforeseeable ways. Intellectually useful schemas such as ‘insurrectionist’ and ‘quietist’, and positions such as ‘cultural elitist’ and ‘Fabian socialist’, simply collapse in the face of the passionate performance of utopian desire:

The extraordinary kinetic impact of [Yeats and Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houliban*] could work surprisingly even with those of very unnationalist convictions. Gregory recorded the reaction of Shaw watching a London performance in 1909: ‘When I see that play I feel it might lead a man to do something foolish.’ She was, she said, ‘as much surprised as if I had seen one of the Nelson lions scratch himself.’ (Greene 1999: 69–70)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yeats, Gregory and others saw a national theatre as a contribution to cultural revival which would drive the transformative dynamics of Ireland under Home Rule (Pilkington 2001: 6–34). Home Rule for Ireland would usher in a spiritual renaissance, in which a noble, submerged culture would proclaim itself as radical other to urban, industrial modernity. *Cathleen ni Houliban* (1902) makes use of the insurrection of 1798 – mythologized in countrywide commemorations during 1898 – in order, allegorically, to assert the native heroism of the Irish, in keeping with a utopian formulation of nation-as-culture (Yeats 1991: 2–13). Shaw, a rational socialist thinker, saw Ireland modernizing when joined in radical complementarity with Britain. Confronted with *Cathleen ni Houliban*, he was moved, not to detached appreciation of allegory, but by the visceral shock of the

performance of a young man's rejection of homestead and marriage bed for battlefield and grave, in the name of the captive nation. When utopian allegory and rational consciousness met, the encounter was mediated in and through performance, producing the kind of remarkable effects witnessed by Gregory. Thus, performance practice intervenes to create unpredictable excesses of meaning, fundamentally affecting the significance of the artefact and its potential impact on individual and public consciousness.

Imperialism produces lived experiences which are psychically injurious (Moane 2002: 109–23), and gives rise to needs for recuperative strategies in the consciousness of *both* dominated and subordinated. In the metropole, such strategies emerge as a *mythos* (Kearney 2002: 3–14) in which the dominated other is stripped of its humanity, and becomes a complex focus of anger, contempt, fear and pity.<sup>8</sup> The ethical collapse involved in colonialism's oppressive practices is accommodated by culpable habits of moral occlusion: 'That blessed old head of yours with all its ideas in watertight compartments, and all the compartments warranted impervious to anything it doesn't suit you to understand' (Shaw 1984: 83). In the colony, the imperial *mythos* emerges in barbaric practices of domination, and is countered by collective narratives of resistance, grounded in demands for respect, justice and liberation: 'Empire: a name that every man who has ever felt the sacredness of his own native soil to him, and thus learnt to regard that feeling in other men as something holy and inviolable, spits out of his mouth with enormous contempt' (Shaw, 'Preface to the Home Rule Edition', *ibid.*: 59). The coercive realities of domination require that counter-narratives remain, as their usual designation, 'subversive', suggests, below the surface. Over time, utopian desires, produced by prolonged experience of oppression, become powerful historical actors in their own right, as Yeats acknowledges in 'The Man and the Echo' in relation to *Catbleen ni Houliban*:

Did that play of mine send out  
Certain men the British shot?  
(Yeats 2000: 130)

It would seem that 'facts', brutal or otherwise, are at best partial perspectives on human experiences formed among historical encounters, between and within Britain and Ireland (Flannery 2005: 454–5). Cultural work, and especially the testimony of theatre, enables us to take account of 'dreams', no less significant for their manifest unreality. Plays in performance are complex artefacts in time, producing excesses of meaning from the flux of competing material conditions and *mythos* in play at any given moment. Critical sensitivity to theatre's characteristic complexity, and the critical courage to hazard interpretations alive to the pressing circumstances of the day, vindicate theatre's public role. Fully engaged in dialogue with its society, theatre enables radical public questioning, essential to social regeneration and the common good.

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) remains Ireland's outstanding public intellectual, a status vindicated by his *John Bull's Other Island* (1904), which deals directly

with Ireland's relationship with imperial Britain. In this work, which Patrick Mason asserts is '*the Irish play*',<sup>9</sup> Shaw stages historically rooted contradictions arising from relationships between persons mandated by their Britishness, and people mediated by their Irishness. As such, it is an exemplary artefact of Irish–British relations, and, with its accompanying prefaces and related essays, a robust intervention in a politics at once incorrigibly domestic and definitively imperial. Crucially for this chapter, *John Bull's Other Island* functions both as a play and as a kind of critical metatext, which provides a means of interrogating the radical credentials of subsequent artefacts of Irish theatre, and of strategies deployed to critique them. In re-engaging with sites, persons and dilemmas produced among the contests of an imperial past, Shaw makes cultural material itself available as a generative public resource (Greene 1999: 18–34). As the twentieth century progresses, Irish drama returns again and again to the dramatic material of *John Bull's Other Island*, reworking what Shaw's dramaturgy positions as primal scenes. Those reworkings seek, on the one hand, to endorse the pristine credentials of the national state (Pilkington 2001: 86–165), and, on the other, to expose and critique the continuities of oppression visited on the people of Independent Ireland, as decolonization is indefinitely postponed, and colonialism mutates into neo-colonialism (see Merriman 1999).

*John Bull's Other Island* opens in the 'Office of Broadbent and Doyle, Civil Engineers, Great George Street, Westminster. Summer 1904, 4.40pm' (Shaw 1984: 68). In this room in metropolitan London, plans for Ireland's future in Imperial Modernity have been made. Tom Broadbent is about to depart for Ireland to advance a scheme to set up a 'Garden City' in Rosscullen, the townland in the west of Ireland from which his partner in business and in this scheme, Larry Doyle, is in self-imposed exile. On the walls of the office 'hang a large map of South America, [and] a pictorial advertisement of a steamship company' (ibid.: 69) – icons of the empire in which Ireland is to be fully integrated. Empire's engineers are men of the modern world, grounded in unassailable epistemologies, expressed in stern binaries of progress and stagnation. Larry's professional 'enlightenment' is a function of his formation at the centre of empire: 'It is by living with you and working in double harness with you that I have learned to live in a real world and not an imaginary one. I owe more to you than to any Irishman' (ibid.: 83). Harnessed to the imperial project, he is locked in a historical contest with Irish 'benightedness': 'The dullness! The hopelessness! The ignorance! The bigotry!' (ibid.: 80). His father, Cornelius, is 'a Nationalist and a Separatist', but a civil engineer undertakes to 'join countries, not separate them' (ibid.: 84), placing 'Galway within 3 hours of Colchester and 24 of New York'. This office, dedicated to precision and efficiency, houses an 'Anglicized Irishman' (ibid.: 161) countenancing, not the development of actually existing Ireland, but an imperialist's dream of a modernist utopia. Compounding the dramatic irony, Broadbent, a 'Gladstonized Englishman' (ibid.: 161), and begetter of Larry's 'reality', is wholly taken in by a grotesquely sentimental idea of Ireland – embodied in Glaswegian Tim Haffigan's 'stage Irishman':

BROADBENT: But he spoke – he behaved just like an Irishman.

DOYLE: Like an Irishman!! Man alive, don't you know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more-power-to-your-elbow business is got up in England to fool you . . . He picks up . . . the antics that take you in . . . in the theatre or the music hall.

(ibid.: 78)

Broadbent's falling for an Irish grotesque, simultaneously endearing and degraded, illustrates Bhabha's account of the double effect of racial stereotype. The desire/terror dynamic is underscored by Broadbent's instruction to his servant to pack a revolver and ammunition for his 'delightful' trip to Ireland (ibid.: 70). Performativity is central to imperial relations, and in its multiplying confusions around power, identity, nation and empire, *John Bull's Other Island* enacts the contradictions embedded in ideas of Britain and Ireland, and aspirations arising from them, as Ireland anticipated the achievement of national autonomy within the empire.

Act II moves the action to a 'desolate . . . lonely' landscape near Rosscullen (ibid.: s.d. 90). Defrocked cleric and self-styled madman Peter Keegan, conversing pleasantly with a grasshopper, offers a contrast with the London office that could hardly be more extreme. Change is afoot in the west of Ireland, now that Wyndham's Land Act has transformed tenant-farmers into owners of smallholdings. Rosscullen's social organization turns on grotesque mimicry of metropolitan order, in the performance of which the right to narrate the debased Other is appropriated, and exercised, by petty local elites. In Act III a meeting of the expanded local worthies consider the qualities required of a new MP for Rosscullen. The sitting MP has been found unsuited to changed circumstances:

MATTHEW [*breaking out with surly bitterness*]: Weve had enough of his foolish talk agen landlords. Hwat call has he to talk about the lan, that never was outside of a city office in his life?

CORNELIUS: Were tired of him. He doesn't know hwere to stop. Every man cant own land; and some men must own it to employ them. It was all very well when solid men like Doran an Matt were kep from ownin land. But hwat man in his senses ever wanted to give land to Patsy Farrll an dhe like o him?

(ibid.: 115–16)

Cornelius articulates precisely the rationalization of effortless passage from colonial to neo-colonial social organization, from which significant numbers of persons remain socially and economically disqualified. Shaw anticipates with chilling accuracy the nature of the social order which emerges in Independent Ireland from 1922 on:

AUNT JUDY: Theres harly any landlords left; and therll soon be none at all.

LARRY: On the contrary, therll soon be nothing else; and the Lord help Ireland then!

(ibid.: 112)

The curriculum vitae of the desired 'new class of man in parliament' (ibid.: 117) includes attitudes pro-farmer, anti-labour and pro-church, and means sufficient to live in London.

With the possible exception of the last-mentioned qualification, all of these 'attributes' characterize what Joe Lee refers to as 'the official mind' of Independent Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

Legislated into solid economic roles, the chosen of Rosscullen have no wish to disrupt imperial governance in Ireland, and locate their heart's desire, in the shape of a new master. What is required is one who will mediate between them and metropolitan legislators, in order to protect their recently acquired economic status. Those who will fund their aspirations still languish at the bottom of imperialism's social pyramid – persons such as Patsy Farrell.

MATTHEW: Was Patsy Farrll ever ill used as I was ill used? Tell me dhat?

LARRY: He will be, if ever he gets into your power as you were in the power of your old landlord . . . you, who are only one step above him, would die sooner than let him come up that step; and well you know it.

(ibid.: 118–19)

Farrell, possessed of '*a cunning developed by his constant dread of a hostile dominance*' (ibid.: s.d. 92), repeats the dramatic functions of such as Danny Mann, in Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), and, as a beast of burden for the members of Father Dempsey's ad hoc committee, anticipates Lucky in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Patsy functions, then, as a kind of fulcrum in the dramatic world of the play, and among dramas of Ireland, from the desolate aftermath of the Famine to the enervating disappointments of independence.

Like Danny Mann and Lucky, Patsy's terror is of 'hostile dominance', and not of domination itself, which he accepts as his lot. His life is a struggle to ameliorate dominance by subterfuge: 'he habitually tries to disarm [hostile dominance] by pretending to be a much greater fool than he is. Englishmen think him half-witted, which is exactly what he intends them to think' (Shaw 1984: s.d. 92). In other words, Patsy deploys the same performative tactics as Tim Haffigan, to similar ends. Obediently accompanying Broadbent on a ludicrous errand – 'It will be quite delightful to drive with a pig in the car: I shall feel quite like an Irishman' (ibid.: 127) – Patsy is injured when the pig bolts. Addressing a crowd in the bar afterwards, Broadbent, unconscious of the fact that he is the butt of a huge joke among the general population, eulogizes Patsy:

I greatly regret the damage to Mr Patrick Farrell's fingers; and I have of course taken care that he shall not suffer pecuniarily by his mishap. [*Murmurs of admiration at his magnanimity, and A Voice* 'Youre a gentleman, sir']. I am glad to say that Patsy took it like an Irishman, and, far from expressing any vindictive feeling, declared his willingness to break all his fingers and toes for me on the same terms. (ibid.: 136)

The link between Patsy and Danny Mann is explicit:

HARDRESS: Ten years ago he was a fine boy – we were foster-brothers and playmates – in a moment of passion, while we were struggling, I flung him from the gap rock into the reeks below, and thus he was maimed for life.

DANNY: Arrah! Whist aroon! Wouldn't I die for yez? Didn't the same mother foster us? Why wouldn't ye brake my back if it plazed ye, and welkim!

(Boucicault 1987: 193–4)

Larry's grim predictions of Patsy's aggravated servility under a native master are anticipated in dramatic action, in Act II. Broadbent has broached with Father Dempsey the historical significance of Rosscullen's Round Tower, which frames the setting when the dramatic action moves from England to Ireland:

FATHER DEMPSEY: They are the forefingers of the early Church, pointing us all to God. *Patsy, intolerably overburdened, loses his balance, and sits down involuntarily. His burdens are scattered over the hillside. Cornelius and Father Dempsey are furiously on him, leaving Broadbent beaming at the stone and the tower with fatuous interest.*

CORNELIUS: Oh, be the hokey, the sammin's broke in two! You schoopid ass, what d'ye mean?

FATHER DEMPSEY: Are you drunk, Patsy Farrell? Did I tell you to carry that hamper carefully or did I not?

PATSY [*rubbing the back of his head, which has almost dented a slab of granite*]: Sure me fut slipt. Howkn I carry three men's luggage at wanst?

(Shaw 1984: 98)

This physical action itself prefigures the entrance of Lucky and Pozzo in Act I of *Waiting for Godot*:

*Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. Pozzo a whip . . . Noise of Lucky falling with all his baggage . . .*

POZZO: Be careful! He's wicked. (*Vladimir and Estragon turn towards Pozzo.*) With strangers.

(Beckett 1975: 22)

Lucky is spoken of as a domestic animal, content in his own way with his habitual master. The relationships of domination staged in the persons of Danny Mann, Patsy Farrell and Lucky are demonstrably related, and specifically different. Danny draws meaning and fulfilment from proximity to Hardress Cregan; Patsy's relationship with Broadbent, and his ability to accommodate personal injury, turn on hard cash. The point here is not simply to expose the currency of a key dramatic type in Irish theatre. The significance of the body of the oppressed, burdened and broken, alters with the material circumstances of the actual world critically interrogated by dramatic imagery and action. Thus, Danny Mann is so grateful for a benign Irish master, when the option is an English one tolerant of death by mass starvation, that the breaking of his body itself may be accommodated in a grotesque quietism. Patsy Farrell has come to understand that, though the Englishman may have a revolver in his pocket, his liberal sensibilities make him amenable as a business proposition, should he cause harm to



those in his employ. In Act I of *Waiting for Godot*, the Pozzo/Lucky pairing plays out the stark dynamics of colonial oppressor and oppressed. In Act II, Pozzo, no longer a power in the land, is blind. Lucky remains trapped in an abusive existence from which there is no escape. His grinding neo-colonial reality reprises colonial coercion without any prospect of mitigation, and so crushes him that he is reduced to alternating acts of silence and babbling, compliance and collapse.

*John Bull's Other Island* stages other points of fulcrum, reinterpreting past episodes in Irish dramatic worlds, and pointing to future reinterpretations of those episodes as potent strategies for critical cultural interventions. There is the figure of the English/Irish heterosexual couple, which enables the play to be read, as Grene points out, as a version of the Irish National Romance (Grene 1999: 28–9). Quietist anti-colonial critique acknowledges the power of the gendered trope, while arguing that it is insufficient to the task of representing what has been described as ‘the totality of relationships’. The ludicrous encounter between an intoxicated Broadbent and a bemused Nora Reilly (Shaw 1984: 101–6) ironically prefigures Friel’s appropriation of the same trope in scenes involving George Yolland and Máire Chatach (Friel 1989: 47–9, 49–53). The ironic quietism of Shaw’s version enables, perhaps, a more searching reading of Friel’s approach to this primal figuration of the colonial encounter. Similarly, Larry Doyle’s ambiguous position between modernity and Ireland<sup>11</sup> might be set against Owen in *Translations* (1980), and against the highly complex border-crosser, Sanbatch Daly, in *The Wood of the Whispering* (see Merriman 2004). Reading Sanbatch and Sadie as an ironic restaging of the English/Irish heterosexual couple has considerable potential as a challenge to critical perspectives on other reworkings of this primal figuration.

Performances are circumscribed as much as liberated by the dynamics of the theatrical encounter, elegantly schematized by Susan Bennett (Bennett 1992: 183). For critical projects to realize transformative potential, they must take account not only of the fertile indeterminacies of performance moments, but also of their limitations. All too often, critical perspectives accept the world as an unproblematic given, of which the stage world is a skewed version. In performance, dramatic action exists in dialogue with the world in which it is staged, and may function mimetically, allegorically or analogically as a representation of that world. From the very beginning, *John Bull's Other Island* was regarded in Ireland as a ‘difficult’ play,<sup>12</sup> that it might be wiser to stage seldom, if at all, and – ironically – elsewhere. This view persists among those ‘interpretative communities’ who assemble prior to the theatrical moment to determine repertory choices. Plays whose fictional worlds stage realities and figures that pose sharp challenges, moral, political or intellectual, to the actual worlds inhabited by comfortable audiences are even more likely, as cultural production moves ‘steadily toward easy, globally digestible narratives’, to be excluded from the repertoire.<sup>13</sup>

The great play of 1960s Ireland, Tom Murphy’s *Famine* (1984), is such a work, and has much in common with *John Bull's Other Island* as a cultural intervention and a theatrical challenge. *Famine* is a drama from the abyss, rich in examples of the

doubleness of experience and desire. It was produced first at the Peacock Theatre in 1968, revived in Galway by Druid Theatre Company in 1984, and by Garry Hynes at the Abbey in 1993. In terms of Irish dramaturgy, *Famine* is formally innovative, and the dramatic content takes in multiple locations and extremes of human experience.<sup>14</sup> The play's episodic structure enables the juxtaposition of human intimacy ('Scene 4: The Love Scene' and 'Scene 12: The Springtime') with public affairs and the mechanics of colonial rule and resistance efforts ('Scene 2: The Moral Force' and 'Scene 5: The Relief Committee'). 'The Relief Committee' is a stark reworking of Shaw's primal scene of elite deliberations on the fate of an abject people. The Irish potato famine, or the Great Hunger (1845–7), devastated the population of Ireland by starvation and forced emigration. It is the dystopian touchstone in the narrative of British imperialism in Ireland, and has been imagined more than once by Irish artists as a metaphor for the national condition since independence.<sup>15</sup> Bread is central to life, but bread alone will not sustain humanity, as O'Casey's praise for James Larkin makes clear: 'A man who would place a rose as well as a loaf of bread on every table.'<sup>16</sup> *Famine* is true to the practicalities of this utopian dialectic, in that its dramatic world, and the range of meaning of its dramatic actions, are wrought not only of social reality but of existing dramatic strategies. In 'Scene 4: The Love Scene' Liam Dougan has a secret hoard of nuts and apples. Even though the fruit is sour, it transforms Maeve Connor's demeanour from that of a bitter old hag to that of a 16-year-old girl. What transforms Maeve is not food only, but the type of food, to which J. M. Synge compared the ideal language of drama: 'In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry' (Synge 1995: 96–7). Indeed, after eating the apple Maeve joins in singing an eighteenth-century ballad, *The Colleen Rua*, in which the language is excessive and mellifluous (Murphy 1984: 47). Metaphorically, it is food specifically linked to 'the imagination of the people . . . rich and living' that rejuvenates Maeve, and occasions the only moment of desire for life fulfilled in the entire play (Synge 1995: 96).

As in the case of *John Bull's Other Island*, there is a lot at stake in *Famine*, for playwright, actors and directors. The play's cultural significance is generated by its dual identity as an apparently historical play that is also always a refusal of the ideological consensus at the core of contemporary Independent Ireland. The burning critical question concerns the extent to which the play's intervention is of such an order that its audience can begin to lay down its own stake as it enters the theatre. David Lloyd locates the challenge to audiences in the content of cultural artefacts, in the decisions made by artists as they work and rework material. Cultural workers must 'begin to trace alternative histories, histories which may not spell success in terms of the dominant paradigm, and may even . . . spell a certain kind of failure' (Lloyd 1999: 105). Lloyd sees in such histories 'a repertoire for what I would call the history of possibilities, thinking, once again, of the ways in which even the defeated struggles and gestures of the oppressed remain in memory to re-emerge as the impulse

to new forms of solidarity' (ibid.). *Famine* demonstrates that, in engaging with 'many, less well-documented memories of other decisions and other affiliations' (ibid.), drama finds a present resource from which to draw critical content.

The infrequency with which *Famine* has been staged may have more than a little to do with its mobilization of the dynamics of colonial oppression in order to critique the inequities of contemporary Ireland. This much it shares with *John Bull's Other Island*. There is also the problem that neither *Famine* nor *John Bull's Other Island* sits easily with popular interpretative positions. Lloyd's exhortation explicitly rejects the 'Great Man' approach to historical narration, and it is salutary to extend that refusal to habits of mind which seek the grand design of a play in the actions and dilemmas of its protagonists. To construct *Famine* as a narrative of John Connor's dilemmas is about as useful as approaching Brecht's *Galileo* as the struggle of a troubled genius against a cruel world. It is a commonplace of criticism that Murphy is an angry navigator of the great binary of 'individual versus society'. Richard Kearney accurately presents Murphy as an iconoclast of 'the consumerist Irish bourgeoisie who resent any deviant flight of creativity, force many of their artists into exile, and... try to destroy those who remain'.<sup>17</sup> However, Kearney queries the radical potential of what he reads as an 'angry, at times apocalyptic attitude to contemporary Irish society' in Murphy's work (Kearney 1988: 170). He locates the problem in the playwright, detecting in him a tendency to the position of the *poète maudit*, and finds 'Murphy's heroes' responding to 'the threat of the irrational collective' with a 'fierce individualism' (ibid.: 170). Such critical practice centres the 'tragedy' of John Connor as the dramatic focus of *Famine*, even though epic form inaugurates spatial and temporal conventions which critique and position tragedy itself as an ideological construct. This suppresses the actual cultural significance of *Famine*, which dramatizes individuals and collectivities as socially produced relations in dynamic dialogue with each other.

Even if *Famine* is fruitfully regarded as a tragedy – and its material is such as to risk exhausting the concept – it would be wise to approach it with Wole Soyinka's observation in mind:

The persistent search for the meaning of tragedy, for a re-definition in terms of culture or private experience is, at the least, man's recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories... There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man's experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing drives between uniqueness and Oneness. (Soyinka 1995: 140)

The tragedy of *Famine*, worked out in scenes from the imperial encounter, is the tragedy of all the persons in the dramatic world: 'If Murphy's theatre is anything, it is a theatre of "several things happening at once", with the stage full of oppositions and collisions, presenting both a world of actuality and a world of metaphor.'<sup>18</sup> Connor's 'human paradox' is a part of the fabric of *Famine*, and not the privileged point of engagement for

critical interpretations of the play. Murphy's dramaturgy is crucially that of human interdependency, of several *people* 'happening at once', as it were, and no one is 'isolated' as a natural state. When, in the final scene of the play, John Connor stands *in his isolation* with a loaf of bread in his hand, he undergoes an epiphany. He is staged, not in a typical, but in a liminal moment. The Irish Romance is reworked in *Famine* in scenes of thwarted fecundity which ironize notions of natural order and romantic aspiration in a struggling social unit.<sup>19</sup> Collective living is the goal here, writ small in narratives of human intimacy, and large in the dramas of public events which occur in the same dramatic space as parallel dramatic worlds interact. The real contest, as the vicious argument between Mickeleen O'Leary and Fr Horan demonstrates (Murphy 1984: 28–30), is not between an isolated individual and a malevolent collective, but between competing social models, between opposing visions of collective living. Where John Connor is the focus of critical attention, the dramatic importance of Maeve's emergence from awful years of hunger to contemplate the possibility of a future is read as a commitment to 'redemption', cited as characteristic of Murphy's work. Maeve's moment of personal refusal, of bread, and of the notion of ending, is a bold gesture. In the final moment of the play (*ibid.*: 87), her clear apprehension is that what is now before her is not the possibility of a future, but a finite range of available future possibilities. In its final moments, *John Bull's Other Island* confronts the limited possibilities for those living in a twentieth-century Ireland which has become a neo-imperial dystopia:

KEEGAN: [*low and bitter*] When at last this poor desolate countryside becomes a busy mint in which we all slave to make money for you, with our Polytechnic to teach us how to do it efficiently, and our library to fuddle the few imaginations your distilleries will spare, and our repaired Round Tower with admission sixpence, and refreshments and penny-in-the-slot mutoscopes to make it interesting, then no doubt your English and American shareholders will spend all the money we make for them very efficiently in shooting and hunting, in operations for cancer and appendicitis, in gluttony and gambling; and you will devote what they save to fresh land development schemes. For four wicked centuries the world has dreamed this foolish dream of efficiency; and the end is not yet. But the end will come.

(Shaw 1984: 160)

In many respects, Keegan's excoriation of 'the foolish dream of efficiency' retains currency. Acts of theatre are themselves compromised by precisely the same 'efficiencies' as those which now confine all other-focused practices in contemporary social organization: disinterested public provision in areas of shared human need. In the current phase of Keegan's nightmare vision, strategies of representation and interpretation which go beyond the 'limit situations' (Freire 1985: 74–5) imposed by systems of domination are urgently required. Gerry Smyth charges a 'radical' Irish studies with 'the production of cognitive maps which enable Irish people to locate themselves in relation to both their own local environments and to the series of increasingly larger networks of power which bear upon those environments' (Smyth 2001: 19). What mediates Irish – and British – experience of contemporary reality is

the prevalent, and quite probably dangerous, fantasy of a new imperium: a transnational 'Anglosphere'. David Lloyd's argument that 'the integration of Ireland and the Irish into Western modernity is not only not the only story, but not the only possibility' (Lloyd 1999: 105) is an urgent reminder of the ethical imperative to think critically and otherwise about history. If Britain and Ireland are ideas, they are contesting ideas with histories of fact, counter-narratives of desire, and futures in human capacities to dream. If what remains is indeed a 'cat's cradle', then, in a world shrunk by technology, and with imagination confined within a nexus of fear and coercion, it stands as a reminder that social and political arrangements are accommodations with the chaos produced by domination and resistance. What Maeve Connor embodies is a way of mitigating the unreality of dreams, in resolutely living through the violent contradictions of contemporary states, formed among coercive imperial practices. Independent Ireland may well be irretrievably implicated in a new imperium, but Irish cultural production, marked by centuries of colonial and imperial experience, testifies to lessons learned, utopian desires too strong to suppress, and the capacity of critical cultural practices to perform a generative, public, role.

## NOTES

- 1 Debates around Ireland's colonial status are summarized in Eóin Flannery (2005). 'External Association: Ireland, Empire and Postcolonial Theory' in Lucy Cotter (ed.). *Third Text* 19:5. London: Routledge, 449–59.
- 2 Young Ireland Rebellion (1848); Fenian Rebellion (1867).
- 3 'Postcolonial writing... is initiated at that very moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance' (Kiberd 1996: 6).
- 4 Note the prevalence of metaphors of destruction, ruin and loss, of body and of mind, throughout plays from Synge to O'Casey to Beckett.
- 5 Lee records a dissenting contribution to the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Civil Service (1932–5), 'sounded by a Labour figure, Luke Duffy: "I entertained the hope that the present Commission... would sketch the outlines of an organisation... which harmonises with the traditions and responds to the aspirations of the Irish people... and regret that they should have based their conclusions on the existence of an organisation designed to serve other purposes"' (Lee 1990: 197).
- 6 See my discussion of the film *Mise Éire* (1959) in Merriman (2004).
- 7 See Lionel Pilkington (2005). 'Historicizing is Not Enough: Recent Developments in Irish Theatre History', *Modern Drama* 47:4, 729.
- 8 'This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse' (Homi K. Bhabha (1983). 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen* 24:6, 27).
- 9 Patrick Mason, artistic director, Abbey and Peacock Theatres (1992–8), unpublished conversation with the author, October 2005.
- 10 Lee argues that, from 1927, the 'official mind... clung to existing economic orthodoxy... nurtured... an aversion to the working class in general, and to organised labour in particular' (Lee 1990: 108).
- 11 'But sure Larry's as good as English: arnt you Larry?' (Shaw 1984: 117).
- 12 *John Bull's Other Island* is 'astonishingly demanding as a play, demanding significant resources, not least a cast of bravura actors' (Mason, in conversation with the author, 2005).
- 13 Debbie Ging (2002). 'Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger' in Kirby et al. (2002: 185).

- 14 'Famine is clearly Brechtian in its use of projected (usually ironic) titles above each scene, its episodic structure, and, as Fintan O'Toole has argued, in its insistence on the link between material and economic conditions on the one hand, and the intimate life of the mind' (Morash 2002: 229).
- 15 Éibhlís ní Dhuibhne, 'Milseog an tSamhraidh', in (1997). *Milseog an tSamhraidh agus Dún na mBan trí thine*. Dublin: Cois Life, 1–67; Tom McIntyre and Patrick Mason, *The Great Hunger*, Peacock Theatre 1983 and 1986; Tom McIntyre (1991). *The Great Hunger: Poem into Play*. Dublin: Lilliput.
- 16 'Larkin... was insistent that workers should demand flowers as well as bread on the table. O'Casey was in complete agreement' (Murray 1997: 109).
- 17 'Tom Murphy's Long Night's Journey into Night' in Kearney (1988: 169).
- 18 Fintan O'Toole (1987). *The Politics of Magic: The Works and Times of Tom Murphy*. Dublin: Raven Arts, 55–6. Note the persistence of an opposition between the actual and the metaphorical. In a semiotic reading of theatre, of which O'Toole is elsewhere a subtle exponent, all stage action is both actual to the dramatic world(s) depicted, and metaphorical in relation to the experience/desire dynamic of the world(s) into which it plays.
- 19 For Brecht, the smallest social unit is not one person, but two people.

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