

The Performance of Critical History in Contemporary Irish Theatre and Film

by

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Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines theatre and film in Ireland between 1988 and 2005, focusing on the plays of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr, as well as a select group of films from this period. Employing a method of analysis that couples close-readings with attention to socio-cultural context, aesthetic form, and issues of representation, the dissertation demonstrates how theatre and film work to complicate conventional Irish historical narratives and thereby encourages a reassessment of contemporary constructs of Irish identity.

The introduction provides a contextual framework for significant contemporaneous social, cultural and economic changes in Ireland, and includes a case study of ‘The Spire,’ a monument unveiled on Dublin’s central boulevard in 2003, which I argue is the architectural metonym for the transitional nature of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The case study explores the aesthetics of the monument, as well as the politicised public debate that ensued, and thereby provides a snapshot of issues relevant to the readings pursued in dissertation’s remaining chapters.

The discussion of Sebastian Barry's 'family plays' reveals the playwright's effort to refuse traditional binary conceptions of identity and to proffer, instead, a dramatic landscape that similarly refuses to allow conflict to dominate. Barry's use of a non-conflictual dramatic form supports his narrative interest in compassion and peaceful resolution, and provides a model for living with otherness that could prove useful in an increasingly diverse and globalised Ireland. Marina Carr's plays share Barry's desire to represent aspects of Irish character anew, but they also dramatise how cultural transitions are difficult and never linear, and how the conventional pull of memory and the past has a residual presence in the 'new' Ireland. Taken together, these chapters reveal Barry's hopefulness as an antidote to Carr's tragic endings. The final chapter provides close readings of several 'Celtic Tiger' films, arguing that the representation of landscape is the key lens through which Irish film communicates shifting images of Irish identity. A cycle of films from the first years of the new millennium ekes out a space for new modes of representation through a critical dialogue with major tropes in Irish film history.

*In loving memory of my first teacher –
my bright and beautiful mother,
Angela Harrower (1947-2008)*

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PREFACE

In times of social upheaval or significant cultural change in the national arena, existing constructions of identity are subject to questioning, scrutiny, and, ultimately, to a degree of revision. Identity is continually being shaped; it is a complex entity that, through its multiple layers, bears the mark of its own temporality. The formation of identity takes place through a process of accretion, where events, ideas, facts, myths, and performances build upon one another to create an ever shifting image of the self. Identity is shaped and reshaped by repetition: it borrows from popular and personal memory, it draws sustenance from the power of myth, and it looks to history for legitimacy.

Fundamental changes to a society's fabric, such as those experienced by Ireland through the 1990s, challenge reigning configurations of identity because they mark a turn away from linear constructions of the past. Ireland experienced rapid and radical changes to its economic, social, and cultural makeup in the final decades of the 20th century; by the time the Celtic Tiger was waning in 2003, for example, Ireland was no longer a poor country in the world, but was instead notably affluent. This major economic change, coupled with a variety of significant changes in social practices and cultural institutions, painted a picture of Ireland that was no longer commensurate with its own historical record; Irish identity, as projected through commerce, policy, and the arts, needed a makeover. The plays and films that constitute this study have contributed to Ireland's process of redefinition.

Writing about the impact of memory on the present, Mieke Bal argues that "...cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully

contrived.” Cultural recall is an act of memory, and memory, Bal argues, is “active and situated in the present” (Bal vii). Identity is clearly tied up with memory, and as such it relies on the past for contextualization. However, identity is also something that one performs – to varying degrees of consciousness or wilfulness. As much as identity is something that one bears internally and diachronically, it is also something that one creates, shapes, and shares with others.

The performing arts provide an excellent ground for the reflection of identity, but they also foster the very creation of that identity. To my mind, performance allows for a dynamic interrogation of cultural values, social mores, and ultimately, the bases of identity. Moreover, in addition to interrogating society, performance *is* social practice itself. Theatre and film, in their broader definitions, share several traits that commend them for joint study: they are dialogic, they follow conventionalised patterns of narrative development, and they create rich visual and aural palettes to deliver their narratives. As modes of social practice, the theatrical and cinematic products of a culture provide a fecund ground for analysing the role that memory, history, and nation play in shaping identity. Both modes have developed rigorous formal conventions – that is, they are well developed art forms that operate partly through convention – while at the same time they both grapple with the aesthetics and politics of direct representation. These two aspects – the function of artistic form and the process of artistic representation – lie at the core of my study. In fact, the texts that I have chosen for study reveal that these two aspects feed each other; the formal choices displayed in the plays and films contribute to historical constructions of identity, while at the same time, representational aspects, such as character and setting, are best understood in

relation to the dramaturgical structure of the plays, or the narrational strategy employed by the films.

At first, this study appears to present an eclectic mix: two playwrights with wildly different approaches to drama, and a selection of films that span genres and attract different audiences. However, all of the texts in this study have been chosen because they engage with historically significant constructions of Irish identity. In the process of engagement, collectively they reveal the image of an Ireland in transition, and by extension, they represent the conflicted nature of Irish identity in this period of transition. The plays and films that comprise this study share four significant traits.

1. Cultural Currency

First, they can all claim a considerable degree of cultural currency; Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr are not the only playwrights to tackle the role that Irish history has played in the formation of identity, but they address this issue repeatedly across their plays, and they employ novel methods in the process. Both writers have had many of their plays produced by the National Theatre of Ireland. In fact, all the plays that I discuss in detail, save one, had their Irish premiere on either the Abbey main stage, or in the smaller performance space below – the Peacock. The National Theatre in Dublin, generally referred to as the Abbey Theatre, has a long history of representing the ‘theatrical soul’ of Ireland; it first raised its curtains in 1904, offering a triple bill of plays by Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats – two of the theatre’s founders. The Abbey played a large part in the Irish literary revival of the early 20th century, and through its dedication to producing plays by Irish writers, was a significant contributor to the cultural aspect of early 20th-century Irish nationalism. Christopher

Morash's book, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, successfully argues that theatre did not *begin* in Ireland with the birth of the Abbey, but the mythos that surrounds the Abbey has been successful at promoting the popularly accepted notion that it did. During the year of the Theatre's centenary, historian Roy Foster, who is no sentimentalist when it comes to nationalist narratives, wrote about the Abbey:

For all the criticism it attracts locally, it remains a unique Dublin institution and a cornerstone of national cultural life, continuing in the mould set by the extraordinary collaborators who founded it 100 years ago ("A Troubled House").

While the Abbey is known for its strong literary bias when it comes to programming, it has made, and continues to make, significant contributions to Irish culture, and by extension, to artistic expressions of Irish identity. The plays it produces, as we will see especially in the chapter on Marina Carr, are not always the most flattering images of that identity.

The films I have chosen for study also boast a kind of cultural currency, although here the definition has to be altered slightly to fit the medium. The main films in this study are all relatively well known, and have attained this status through their appeal to critics and scholars, or through their appeal at the box office. These are films that reflect back at Ireland an immediate image of itself, even if, as is the case with a few of the films, the setting is not contemporaneous with the time of the film's release.

2. Engagement with 'Irishness'

Marina Carr, Sebastian Barry, and the set of films I have chosen are all engaged in defining what it means to be Irish. This is not to say that they explicitly discuss Irishness in

their narratives, or in the case of the film *Goldfish Memory*, that they even name their setting as Ireland. But instead, the choice of setting, the use of language, the characters, and social issues they address are all clearly relevant to the ongoing shaping of Irish identity. There are many plays that choose to abstract their settings, and many films that favour genre conventions and generic settings over those that engage with Ireland as a distinct place; these works fall outside the purview of my study.

3. Investment in History and Identity

In the process of articulating a contemporary picture of identity, each of the works in my study dialogues with ideas of Irish history, and with historically potent constructions of identity. The plays and films discussed in the following chapters are not ‘history plays’ per se, but they are all marked by an awareness of history; they display a degree of reflexivity about the ways in which history has been constructed to favour dominant interpretations and to privilege certain groups over others. The effort to represent an authentic image of Irishness emerges out of the way that the plays and films negotiate aspects of history. In some cases, the relevant history is literary or cinematic; Carr’s plays employ tropes made popular by Yeats himself, drawing a long and crooked line between one of the Abbey’s founders, and one of its contemporary stars. But as we’ll see, Carr only entertains the tropes long enough to radically alter them. In the case of my chosen body of films, each of the works in this study can be seen to dialogue with the legacy of landscape representations in Irish film; this is their particular way of shaping the cinema’s construction of a distinct image of Irish identity. Sebastian Barry tackles the received historical record more directly, challenging history’s cast of characters by way of creating his own theatrical cast from members of his extended

family. Taken in total, my investigation reveals how each text critiques monolithic interpretations of Irish identity in its own authentic way.

4. Authenticity

The final aspect that ties my texts together is much more difficult to define, perhaps in part because it contains what can be seen as a value judgment about the contribution that a given play or film makes as an artwork. I discuss a particular use of ‘authenticity’ when I refer to the aesthetic theories of Theodor W. Adorno in the Introduction, but for now, my best articulation is as follows: the plays and films in this study are original, refreshing, and often iconoclastic. They appear more committed to artistic integrity than to consumer taste, even though many of them clearly hold commercial appeal, as evidenced by box office success, touring productions, or international distribution. These texts are challenging on a formal level, as well as on a cultural level, in that they do not hold court with old shibboleths, and they often catch their audiences by surprise.

Film is the more popular medium of the two, but theatre has the ability to create an in-the-moment dialogue between audience and performer. While the plays of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr have played to audiences across Europe, North America, and Australia, their ability to reach large numbers of spectators is arguably more limited, and their impact felt more strongly on home soil, where a theatrical tradition is strongly rooted in the culture. Both media have the ability to speak to local audiences as well as to international audiences, but the economy of the final product in the case of film means that it is more likely to reach a broader international range. Staged plays, especially when produced at Ireland’s National

Theatre, project an image of Irishness directly back to Irish audiences. For these reasons, I am able to conduct a richer study by including texts from both media.

As stated above, broadly conceived, this study includes an attention to form and to issues of representation as they relate to an historically informed conception of contemporary Irish identity. In order to situate the plays and films in context, I begin the study with an analysis of significant changes in contemporary Ireland. The introduction is divided into three sections: Monument, History, and Memory. The first section compares the process leading up to the unveiling of a new monument, The Spire, on Dublin's main thoroughfare in 2003. I analyse the public response to this moment as a way to demonstrate how Ireland aims to project itself to its own citizens, and to the international community. My argument is that the choice of the new monument, and the ensuing public reaction to it, reveal a conception of national identity that differs significantly from the more self-consciously nationalist Ireland of earlier decades. Further, the public debate about the monument reveals that, in 2003, the question of whether or not Irish identity *could* be fixed and definable was clearly circulating in the 'collective consciousness' of the nation. The analysis of the Spire sets the stage for understanding the world into which the plays and films emerge.

The section on history similarly reveals a culture in transition. In this section, I explore the changes or movements in recent Irish history that challenge the stability of well-worn narratives of identity. In particular, I discuss changes to Ireland's economy, religious institutions, ethnic composition, and historiographical practices. The final section of the introduction explores the traditional role of memory in Irish society, and provides a working distinction between memory and history that is relevant to the subsequent chapters.

Chapters Two and Three, respectively, are devoted to Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr. Both playwrights engage with historical concepts of identity, while also at the same time implicitly addressing contemporaneous social issues. Their plays include socially marginal characters in dramatically central roles, and their novel approaches to dramaturgy serve to comment on the narrative developments in their plays, and ultimately, in Ireland. The final chapter situates a group of contemporary Irish films against the backdrop of foundational films that conventionalized the representational nexus of landscape and identity. In this chapter, I argue that a new cycle of films that emerged late in the Celtic Tiger period demonstrates a desire to shake off traditional cinematic markers of Irishness, in favour of a more international image.

INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY IRISH IDENTITY: MONUMENT, HISTORY, AND MEMORY

On March 8, 1966, as Ireland prepared for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Easter Rising, a loud explosion erupted in the centre of Dublin's main thoroughfare, throwing chunks of concrete in every direction. The target was the monument to Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Horatio Nelson, known locally as Nelson's Pillar, which had occupied the median strip in front of the General Post Office on O'Connell Street for over 150 years. As municipalities around Ireland geared up for the anniversary, someone thought that the most fitting way to commemorate the Rising was to destroy the central standing monument to Ireland's colonial past. No one was hurt, save Nelson's concrete head, which was thrown to the ground as the upper half of the column was destroyed. The monument was deemed irreparably damaged, and the army was forced to completely remove the remnants of the pillar two days later. Ironically, as the newspapers commented with some relish, the controlled explosion by army engineers caused considerably more damage to the surrounding site – taking out nearby shop windows – than had been caused by the initial explosion. The statue's head now rests at the Dublin Civic Museum, relegated to the less politically-controversial status of urban artefact.

Controversy surrounds the question of who was responsible for blowing up the Pillar, but it is widely believed that the explosion was carried out by a splinter group of the Republican movement;¹ the choice of target, the timing, and the spectacular nature of the

¹ Called Saor Uladh. See Whelan, p.44. Specific individuals have also been pinpointed. Liam Sutcliffe was interviewed by police in 2000, after claiming he was the one who planted the bomb in an effort to mark the

event sent a clear political message during a year that was filled with acts of remembrance, on both republican and loyalist ends of the spectrum.² In 1966, the Garden of Remembrance was unveiled by Eamon de Valera on Easter Monday at Parnell Square, just north of the now-absent Pillar. The inscription reads that the Garden is dedicated to “all those who lost their lives in the cause of Irish Freedom.” The year also marked another 50th anniversary – that of the Battle of the Somme in World War I – where many young Irish men, mostly from Ireland’s north, lost their lives. The deaths at the July 1, 1916 battle provide a major marker in loyalist/unionist memory, and northern Protestant Irish cultural memory in general.³ In the face of Ireland’s various acts of remembrance, the destruction of the pillar appears as an attempt to destroy solid, iconic representations of memory. The explosion at Nelson’s Pillar

Easter Rising in a “more dramatic” way than was being planned by the Republic. He was released without further questioning. See Holland. The bomb has also been attributed to a group of former IRA men, including Joe Christle. See English, p.2. Curiously, there does not appear to be an ongoing investigation into the ‘mystery.’

² The event also spawned other ‘performances,’ namely the song, “Up Went Nelson” by the Go Lucky Four, and “Nelson’s Farewell,” by The Dubliners, which hit the charts 48 days after the initial explosion (Gogan). The first two verses of “Nelson’s Farewell” reveal the celebratory tone attending the Pillar’s destruction:

Oh, poor old Admiral Nelson is no longer in the air.
 Toora loora loora loora loo!
 On the eighth day of March in Dublin City fair,
 Toora loora loora loora loo!
 From his stand of stones and mortar
 He fell crashing through the quarter,
 Where once he stood so stiff and proud and rude.
 So let’s sing our celebration,
 It’s a service to the nation.
 So poor old Admiral Nelson, toora loo!

Oh, fifty pounds of gelignite it sped him on his way,
 Toora loora loora loora loo!
 And the lad that laid the charge, we’re in debt to him today.
 Toora loora loora loora loo!
 In Trafalgar Square it might be fair
 To leave old Nelson standing there
 But no one tells the Irish what they’ll view.
 Now the Dublin Corporation
 Can stop deliberation
 For the boys of Ireland showed them what to do! (Dardis).

³ For an excellent analysis of how different factions within loyalist groups use the memory of the Somme battle for political argument, see Graham and Shirlow.

was a public performance of Republican politics, signifying that at least some members of the Republic did not accept a colonial symbol on the main street of their capital. Following the Irish army's 'controlled' demolition of the remaining stump, the empty space once occupied by Nelson's likeness was cleaned up, paved over, and left officially unoccupied for the next 37 years.

On January 21, 2003, a crowd of thousands slowly gathered at the same spot, eager to witness an entirely different performance of national identity, in an Ireland where the significance and character of national identity had shifted considerably. There were no obvious performers at this event, and any semblance of a stage was overrun by heavy machinery and dusty lumps of discarded concrete. No one had officially announced an event, yet an audience gathered and waited for the final moment of a performance that had been five years in the making. Some spectators stood in the middle of the street, others peered from behind shop-front displays, and a few lucky folks strained out of third-story windows, scoring a view worthy of top dollar box-seats. Suddenly, a massive round of applause erupted, and the event was over. Shortly after the town clock at Eason's Booksellers chimed the noon-hour tune, the crowd began to disperse amidst cheers and hurrahs. The event that had drawn such an audience was the completion of the Spire, a 400-foot tall stainless steel cone monument that was commissioned to fill the vacancy adjacent to the General Post Office, where Nelson's Pillar had once held pride of place. This time the cause for the gathering was sanctioned by the city, but regardless of legalities, both events – the destruction of the Pillar and the erection of the Spire in its place – can be seen as temporally specific statements of national identity.

By all accounts, the completion of the Spire was a major event in Dublin's contemporary history. The installation of the piece required the largest crane ever seen in Ireland, and newspapers tracked the movements of its various components across the countryside. On the day of the Spire's completion, one spectator noted that "O'Connell St. was packed with what could only be described as a world cup [sic] atmosphere" (Stunned.org) and another audience member bolted to the closest pub as soon as the final section was secured, returning with pints of Guinness for the crew. The national newspaper printed no fewer than eight articles covering the day of spontaneous street theatre, and the moment was preceded by a lively discussion among columnists, editors and letter-writers dating back to the announcement of the competition for the monument's design. Citizens wrote from around Ireland and the diaspora to debate the merits of the planned monument. The Spire was installed in segments over the period of a month, and the *Irish Times* reported on every shift in wind speed and direction, anticipating when the conditions would be right for the installation of the final piece.

The competition for the monument's design was launched in late 1998, a year that itself was marked by a proliferation of statues across Ireland in commemoration of the 200-year anniversary of the 1798 Rebellions (Beiner 61). The statues raised in 1998 are markedly different than the Spire, in that they seek to commemorate a key event in nationalist history. In this respect, they are the more typical kind of statue in Ireland, and by contrast they make the new monument all the more remarkable for its non-representational nature. The Spire was commissioned as part of the *O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan*, a larger effort by Dublin Corporation to rejuvenate the capital city's main thoroughfare. The plan states that the competition should be marketed with a high public profile (Dublin Corporation, *O'Connell*

Street - Integrated Area Plan 115), and it is clear that at least part of the public debate was generated and encouraged by official efforts. The letters page of the *Irish Times*, however, reveals that there was a genuine, widespread popular interest in the monument. Letters to the Editor display a keen interest in representational aspects of the monument, often questioning its meaning, or suggesting how Irish history or morals⁴ should be reflected in the eventual design. These letters exist alongside a characteristic Dublin humour that competes to coin a witty moniker for the latest piece of public art.⁵

The demise of Nelson's Pillar and the unveiling of the Spire provide distilled examples of how national identity is shaped over time, and 'performed' by and for the nation. Each event stands as a symbolic marker in the shifting display of Irish national identity, suggesting a change in the way Ireland views its relationship with its own history, and a way in which memory is used in forming contemporary identity. The former event – the destruction of the Pillar – is more inward-looking, drawing on the mythos of ancient debates about sovereignty and land ownership, while the latter event – the completion of the Spire – elides these debates in favour of placing Ireland on the global stage, and fashioning it as a new land unhampered by a fractured and bellicose past. The Pillar's bombing is an act of selective remembrance, whereas the Spire's success in the competition can be seen as a

⁴ The Spire was meant to commemorate the new millennium, but the completion was three years off schedule. Several letters were published calling for the monument to have recognizable Christian decorations, in order to celebrate the passage of 2000 years since the birth of Christ. For example, Father Placid C. Nolan writes that in order to combat the "distinct lack of meaning" in the new design, why not "give it a Christian meaning for all of us by simply replacing the pointless light bulb at the top with an illuminated cross – preferably a four-faced one, which could be seen for miles around from north, south, east and west. This could bring a ray of hope to many souls struggling to find meaning for their lives" (Nolan).

⁵ The Anna Livia Fountain, which was moved from O'Connell Street to make more space for the construction, was dubbed the "Floozy in the Jacuzzi," and the Molly Malone statue, representing the fair fishmonger from the song "In Dublin's Fair City," is referred to as "The Tart with the Cart." Some of the names thrown around for the Spire before its completion were "The Spike in the Dyke," "The Stiletto in the Ghetto," and "The Needle" (Dublin's north side is typically poorer, and is known for prostitution and drug use). The official name of the sculpture is "The Monument of Light," but this term usually only appears as a reminder in newspaper articles about "The Spire."

public act of forgetting. It remains to be determined how well Ireland's shift in approach to capital monuments reflects broader currents in Irish society. Chapters on Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr, and contemporary Irish film will each address this question in turn.

In order to explain the dynamics that led to the erection of the Spire, and by extension, to mark off the time period of my study, it is important to explore empirical changes to the Irish cultural and political landscape as well as several of the theoretical movements that have shaped contemporary Irish national identity since the late 1960s. While some of the changes discussed below have origins in earlier decades, the early 1990s mark the moment when cultural changes began to converge and solidify. This time period marks the beginning point of my study. By the time the Spire was unveiled in 2003, economic growth was in a slump, and the astronomical transformations in the economy brought about by the Celtic Tiger had stabilized; my study concludes shortly after this period. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to analysing the cultural tectonics of contemporary Ireland, to provide the context for the often contradictory maelstrom from which contemporary theatre and film emerge.

In delineating the social, economic and historiographical issues that are pertinent to contemporary Ireland, my assumption is that to differing degrees, performance both reflects contemporaneous trends, and offers representations that challenge the status quo. Further, both text and performance play an important role in critiquing the world they inhabit, providing room for the expression of discordant or alternate voices in the social landscape. My approach does not follow any one particular ideology, but is clearly indebted to the work of several theorists. First, I am in general agreement with Stephen Greenblatt's arguments about the importance of social context in interpreting and understanding works of art. His

new historicist approach acknowledges that while works of art manage to communicate and maintain relevance beyond the moment of their emergence, they nevertheless contain within them the historical conditions of their production (Greenblatt 12-13). Attention to historical circumstances allows us greater access to the rich dialectic of art and society, whereby each pushes the other toward new cultural developments. On the one hand, research into historical context permits a more sophisticated understanding of how an art work might reflect its historical circumstances, but, on the other hand, it helps to reveal how art works may challenge the social reality in which they are produced. The dialectic lies in the ways that art can resist political orthodoxies, and through its formal structures and critical distance from political practice, can provide alternative ways of considering and addressing social issues.

Greenblatt notes that his approach frequently, but not always, assumes a positive relationship between art and the conditions of its production, in that art often “reinforces the dominant beliefs and social structures of its culture.” Alternately, Greenblatt acknowledges, certain works of art provide images that counter, or at least call into question, the dominant cultural conditions of their production. He argues that “[t]he ability of artists to assemble and shape the forces of their culture in novel ways so that elements powerfully interact that rarely have commerce with one another in the general economy has the potential to unsettle this affirmative relation” (16). In the case of the plays and films I discuss, I would take Greenblatt’s assertion one step further, and suggest that this potential unsettling actually challenges long-held or ‘official’ narratives of the past in ways that force a reassessment of contemporary constructs of identity. Art has the ability to express situations and characters that may otherwise be seen as untenable in social reality; through both its representations, and its formal structures, art can provide alternative ways of viewing the present, and the

historical foundations upon which contemporary social narratives are based. My analysis of dramaturgical form follows this line of argument, implicitly borrowing from Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theories.

In Adorno's critical theory, dominant social narratives provide an image of a unified society, which necessarily elides discordant voices or social groups. Adorno argues that artistic form, because it is not bound by the logic of instrumental rationality, holds the potential to reveal false projections of social unity (Adorno). Authentic artworks, to adopt Adorno's language, do not engage directly with political reality and spotlight alternatives, but instead pay rigorous attention to the demands of artistic form. Antagonisms of social reality, that is, the disunified elements that dominant groups prefer to ignore, appear through formal elements within the artwork.⁶

The plays I discuss are not 'political' based on the criteria that they take politics as their subject matter; however the ways in which the plays construct contemporary Irish identity give pause to official narratives emerging from Ireland. In this sense, while they are not overtly political plays, they nevertheless operate in political ways. As Adorno argues, "no work of art can be true in social and political terms unless it is true in its own terms as well" (Adorno 351). The plays and films that inform my study of artistic representation in Celtic Tiger-era Irish culture have been chosen because they demonstrate an authentic engagement with contemporaneous social issues alongside a clear commitment to artistic innovation. This dual engagement with artistic form and social matters produces artworks that investigate the social fabric without making this investigation their subject matter. By exploiting the

⁶ Adorno writes: "In art, the criterion of success is twofold: first, works of art must be able to integrate materials and details into their immanent law of form; and, second, they must try not to erase the fractures left by the process of integration, preserving instead in the aesthetic whole the traces of those elements which resisted integration" (9-10).

imaginative approaches available to art in ways that are not available to politics – and perhaps even in employing a degree of forward-looking fantasy – these works scrutinize accepted tropes of Irishness, and offer up alternate possibilities in their place. In short, the films and plays that constitute this investigation are thoughtful, provocative, and cognizant of the transitional state that characterizes this particular moment in Irish history.

While the focus of my study is on plays and films that critique monolithic interpretations of Irish identity in their own authentic ways, it is clear that these works, like O'Connell Street's new Spire, did not arise in a vacuum.

I. Monument: From Pillar to Spire - Destruction and Construction of Identity

The act of blowing up Nelson's Pillar in the celebratory atmosphere of 1966 can be seen as a performative statement about the death of colonialism. By destroying a vestige of colonialism instead of simply treating it as historical artefact, the bombing suggests that Ireland's relationship to Britain – or more specifically, Ireland's postcolonial status – was still a relevant factor in the definition of Irish identity. The destruction performed an element of popular political consciousness, as much as the erection of the Pillar in 1808 performed official political will. Erected to commemorate Nelson's success against the French navy at the Battle of Trafalgar, the Pillar consisted of a Doric Column emanating from a broad cubic pedestal, all topped off by a statue of Nelson. At 134 feet, it was tall enough for the concrete Nelson to gaze beyond the city's tallest rooftops to the sea at Dublin Bay (Henchy 55). For a century and a half Nelson's Pillar provided a focal point for the city of Dublin. Residents and tourists could climb to the viewing platform to get the best available view of the surrounding

city and countryside. The Pillar was featured on many postcards of Dublin, effectively cementing its status as the architectural metonym for the capital city.

As much as the Pillar was loved for its functional value, it was considered an uncomfortable fit by many, especially during the 20th century. As a symbol of British imperialism in a country that had continuing struggles against the British, the monument was a target for political controversy. There were calls for its removal from the moment it was erected, and after the Republic was established in 1948, the City Council twice passed resolutions that it should be replaced by something befitting a newly independent nation. On each occasion, the trustees responsible for the Pillar declined to give the City permission to remove it. About a month before the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Easter Rising, the controversy around the Pillar came to an abrupt – or explosive – end, and several years later the trustees transferred responsibility for the site to the City. Edna Longley argues that nationalist sentiments did not mount steadily in the decades leading up to the Pillar's destruction, but rather that "the 1966 commemoration [of the Easter Rising] actually revived a waning piety. And 1966 fed into 1969" (Longley, *The Living Stream* 70). The connection between the outpouring of nationalist sentiments in 1966 and the explosion of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in 1969 demonstrates how commemorative activities are as much or more about voicing contemporaneous political concerns as they are about marking anniversaries. Accordingly, the destruction of Nelson's Pillar can be understood as a statement of Irish nationalism, but the process of choosing the new Spire monument, and the public response to it, requires closer scrutiny to determine if traditional configurations of nationalism were still relevant. If the idea of Irish national identity was still a significant

factor in the decisions made during the Spire competition, then the character of that identity changed significantly from the early days of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

The Spire competition was launched as one aspect of the Dublin Integrated Area Project; the project's goal was to kick-start the rejuvenation of the north side, and in particular to restore the once grand boulevard of O'Connell Street. The street, and the north side of the Liffey River in general, had been in decline since their heyday in the 1950s. O'Connell Street is described as "vital to the urban identity of Dublin" (Dublin Corporation, *O'Connell Street - Integrated Area Plan* 21), and in the effort to provide something new and proud, we can see Dublin's desire to live up to the roaring reputation of the Celtic Tiger, which transformed the Irish economy in the mid- to late 1990s. In fact, the Integrated Area Plan suggests that the street could be lined with "the corporations and companies that are the success story of Ireland in the 1990s" (45). The guidelines to the competition emphasise the malaise of the street in economic terms – the lack of high-end shops, the proliferation of fast food joints and worn signage – but they are silent about the social problems that face the street, which are equally apparent in the reputation that Dublin's north side bears as a relatively impoverished home to drug users and petty thieves.

For all the focus placed on economic issues, there is also an acute acknowledgement that O'Connell Street acts as a performance space for both local and international displays of Ireland's identity. The report notes that O'Connell Street might be the first glimpse outsiders have of Ireland, because it is the televised site for St. Patrick's Day parades, and a live web-cam beams out images of the O'Connell Bridge area every thirty seconds, year-round, from the *Irish Times* website (28). O'Connell Street, with its ubiquitous presence in media images of Dublin, demands a more attractive public face. The authors of the Integrated Area Plan

acknowledge the street's public role, and incorporate a layout that encourages performance events:

O'Connell Street needs the kind of spaces that can respond to a complex role: spaces that can accommodate performance events, spaces where hard commerce is softened by public art and pavement cafés, spaces that can be dressed up theatrically for State events, combining, on the one hand, gravitas and architectural dignity, and on the other hand, festive playfulness and the capacity for civic ritual (28).

Dublin Corporation acknowledges that the street is important because it is internationally recognised as the main street in the country's largest city, but the overall character of the report does not call on historical markers of national identity in order to make its case for the rejuvenation. In fact, the report downplays the Pillar's historical links, stating that it was "more of a visual and physical symbol of the capital's 'heart' than a historical monument," (62) contradicting the fact that there were ongoing calls, on political grounds, for its removal. Therefore, a tension exists between Dublin's desire to give a face lift to an area that is historically significant to national identity, and the lack of attention paid to the constitution of that national identity. From the debate played out in the newspapers to the final moment of street theatre, there emerges what I will call a 'public performance of national identity-making.' Importantly, this performance emerges in a state that has an increasingly ambiguous relationship with "the nation" as a source of identity. Several incongruities exist between the stated aims of the competition and the chosen monument;

examining these incongruities unveils the complex process of raising a national monument when the identity of the nation's inhabitants is in particular flux.

The Puzzle of the Spire

The Plan for O'Connell Street states that the goal of the new monument is to help rejuvenate O'Connell Street, and to provide a symbol that represents the city and the Republic (27). The competition guidelines echo this aim, stating "[t]he monument should be a new symbol and image of Dublin for the 21st century (such as, for example, the Eiffel Tower is for Paris and the Statue of Liberty is for New York)" (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland 6). The published material does not explicitly state what constitutes "representation," nor is it clear about the shape and character of Ireland in the 21st century. The IAP focuses on preserving important sites of memory, while at the same time embracing cutting-edge design, and new technology. The intention to make Dublin an international city that competes culturally and economically with other capitals in the European Union is evident in the examples drawn from other major European centres, with Paris's Champs-Élysée making numerous appearances. The competition closed in September 1998, and a short list of three candidates was announced two weeks later. In the announcement, the assessors choose to include the definition of monument, which they cite as follows: "anything that preserves the memory of a person or an event...any structure, natural or artificial, considered as an object of beauty or of interest as a relic of the past: a historic document or record" (J. O'Connor, *A New Monument for O'Connell Street: Assessors' Report, Stage 1 Assessment*, 2). The references to *monument* are clear from the beginning, and the guidelines do not substitute the words "building," "public art installation," or

“sculpture.” Still, the assessors found it necessary to state that the winning proposal should have mnemonic characteristics.

Given these explicit guidelines, the choice of the Spire as the winning monument appears puzzling because it fails to meet several stated criteria. In terms of the criterion of memory, the resultant 400-foot sleek cone by Ian Ritchie Architects, a London-based firm, represents no person or event, and does not even sport an inscription. In short, it is not a monument in the traditional definition of the term. Once the construction was underway, there were several efforts to tie the piece to an event, as if the cone could gain meaning, after the fact, through these connections. It was originally called the Millennium Spire, and was intended to be up in time for the millennial celebrations, but several construction difficulties delayed its completion, and “Millennium” was dropped from the title. Subsequently there was a plan to unveil it on St. Patrick’s Day, but the lighting system at the top was faulty, and it was eventually unveiled on July 7, 2003 – a date that lacks any other significance. Efforts to tie the statue to a significant event were continually foiled, which is fitting considering the pure aestheticism and neutrality that mark its design.

One of the other shortlisted monuments, this one by the architectural firm of Jonathan Bennett, had similar dimensions as the Spire, but sported the ‘ghost of Nelson’ at its top, composed of shadows layered in glass. The firm dubbed it, rather redundantly, “A Monument to Memory.” The committee deemed it potentially too costly, and questioned the relevance of the image of Nelson to Ireland in 2000 (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland 148). The Spire, therefore, was in competition with more traditional monuments. The final assessment report discusses the winning design’s merits, saying it is a “brave and uncompromising beacon that leads the eye and imagination upwards.” No mention of its value as a monument

to public memory or to the past appears in this final report. Instead, the jury notes “this is a monument of its time, of Ireland in Europe in the 21st century, free to imagine a monument which is not a regretful, backward glance towards a native, historical sect but a technological feat of wonder, legible and intelligible to Irishman and visitor alike” (J. O’Connor, *A New Monument for O’Connell Street: Assessors’ Report, Stage 2 Assessment 2*).

Lawrence McBride, in his book on history and memory in Modern Ireland, notes that commemoration of the past is a mnemonic creation in itself; through commemorations, the lines of demarcation between present concerns and commemoration of the past intermingle or feed into each other. “While anniversary rituals are designed to provide the impression of continuity and sameness,” McBride writes, “their annual repetition paradoxically allows the original events to become overlaid with contemporary preoccupations” (McBride 26). If the Spire can be seen to commemorate anything, it is the disappearance of a form of Irish identity that was symbolised by the destruction of Nelson’s Pillar. However, the neutrality of the design refuses to recall, through form or inscription, the thing that it replaces, making it closer to an erasure than a remembrance. In short, the Spire can be seen to negate remembrance, countering one of the explicit original intentions of the competition jury.

The memorial aspect of the monument, however, was only one criterion noted by the competition guidelines. The guidelines also called for a design with a “vertical emphasis” that “relates to the scale and quality of O’Connell Street as represented by the late 18th century and the early 20th century architecture and civic design” (Dublin Corporation, *A New Monument for O’Connell Street* 6). The winning design garnered much criticism, and its construction was stalled by a court case that saw artist Mícheál Ó Núalláin successfully challenge Dublin Corporation’s plans on the basis that it had not conducted an

Environmental Impact Study (“Court Quashes Decision” 4; Carolan 7)⁷. Ó Núalláin, in at least eight letters to the *Irish Times* between 1999 and 2002, argued that the 400-foot Spire was too tall, but it is clear that his real concern was the aesthetic qualities of the winning design⁸. The Spire certainly has a vertical emphasis, but its relation to the scale and the quality of the street is questionable. The final product is seven times the height of the adjacent General Post Office, and in terms of texture and tone, it has little in common with the concrete and granite structures around it. But more importantly, the Spire does not fit with the more implicit expectations contained within the memory of the space it occupies. The third explicit intention for the new monument, in addition to memorializing something and fitting into its environment, was that it should replace Nelson’s Pillar. (J. O’Connor, *A New Monument for O’Connell Street: Assessors’ Report, Stage 1 Assessment* 1). The destruction of the Pillar had been linked, at least in the narrative developed by the O’Connell Street Integrated Area Plan, to the increasing dereliction of the street since the early 1960s (62). Therefore, the competition was not simply a brand-new commission, but the attempt to fill an absence. The geographical space is marked by the memory of its predecessor, and the Pillar is alive in the memories of the older generation, who wrote nostalgic letters about the role it played as a meeting place and marker of the city centre.

When viewed in the context of its surroundings, the Spire appears incongruent with the other monuments that line O’Connell Street. First of all, it is right next to the General Post Office (GPO), which as a building and a locale figures heavily in Irish nationalist

⁷ The Spire project was restarted after an Environmental Impact Survey was conducted, reviewed, and opened to submissions. At the end 2000, Noel Dempsey, the Minister of the Environment, gave the project the green light, with his Senior Planning Adviser Eoghan Brangan arguing that it was “a pivotal element in the reordering of O’Connell Street” (McDonald).

⁸ Ó Núalláin argued that “all the buildings and all the monuments in O’Connell Street are built in relation to human scale,” and that the winning design did not “remotely relate to the quality and scale of O’Connell Street nor to its buildings,” nor to the street’s “18th and 19th-century architecture” (Ó Núalláin, “Statues on O’Connell Street”; Ó Núalláin, “Millennium Monument”; Ó Núalláin, “O’Connell Street Spire”).

memory. The GPO is the site of the Easter Rising in 1916, when nationalist agitator Patrick Pearse stood on the steps, and in a true example of J. L. Austin's speech act theory⁹, proclaimed the birth of the Irish republic.¹⁰ The post office is still the site of major public gatherings, and commemorative marches of all different varieties begin or end outside its main doors, including contemporary movements like opposition to the US-led war in Iraq, a rally for which was advertised on posters along O'Connell Street in the Spring of 2003. All the other major monuments on the street are political in nature; a walk up O'Connell Street from the Liffey reveals statues of several key figures in the nationalist movement, with Daniel O'Connell to the south, and Charles Stewart Parnell at the north end of the wide boulevard. Jim Larkin¹¹, a trade unionist who helped to organise dockworkers, stands with arms outstretched, just south of the Spire. If we can learn about cultural history based on what monuments a society chooses to erect at a given historical moment, then we can see in these 19th and 20th century monuments the struggle for nationhood, and the effort to assert a regional identity that is distinct from the colonial centre. By contrast, the Spire is decidedly apolitical as much as it is non-representational.

The distinctness of the new statue was not lost on many observers, who struggled to make meaning out of its innocuous form. Ironically, some of the biggest bloopers in the hermeneutical process of describing the new statue came from the international community. Articles in the *Globe and Mail* and the *New York Times* erroneously note that its base is covered in "Celtic symbols," suggesting either poor journalism, or an expectation from the

⁹ Austin would likely refer to the proclamation as a series of performative sentences, where "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action." To utter the sentence, Austin writes, "is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (6).

¹⁰ The proclamation is called "Poblacht na hÉireann," which translates as "The Republic of Ireland." For the full text of the speech, see Pearse, *Poblacht na hÉireann*

¹¹ The dates for the completion of each monument are as follows: Daniel O'Connell – 1882, Charles Stewart Parnell – 1911, Jim Larkin – 1980.

North American community for a predefined quality of ‘Irishness’ (Staff, “New Irish Symbol Finally Stands Tall”; Lavery). This error demonstrates the horizon of expectation projected onto Ireland by the rest of the world, as well as the stereotypical way that Celtic iconography has been packaged for ready export. In fact, the base of the Spire had been sandblasted to create a DNA double helix, which possibly satisfies the “21st century” aspect of the competition, and the texture on the pattern was pressed from rock excavated from the construction site.¹² This abstract nod towards the literal representation of Irish landscape did little to satisfy politicians and members of the public who wanted a clear iconic monument on their main street.

To be certain, most of its detractors argue that the Spire symbolizes nothing at all. On the other hand, some commentators welcomed its lack of representational qualities. Writing in the *Irish Arts Review*, curator and critic Raymund Ryan argues that the monument’s openness to interpretation must be deliberate, in order to accommodate an increasingly multicultural if not secular age (R. Ryan 95). Unlike Nelson’s Pillar, or the many other statues that line O’Connell Street, this new sculpture carries no particularly historical or Irish markings, and despite being referred to as a monument, recalls no figure, event or movement in the Irish past. Therefore if it is viewed in light of commemoration, as the assessors urged competitors to consider, then it is not commemorating something from the past, but is instead involved in an act of commemorating the present. Following Pierre Nora, we might therefore

¹² Or as Ian Ritchie puts it: “The pattern is made by mirrored areas being masked during shot peening. Shot peening is a process that both cleans and hardens the metal surface, and the technique can also impart a texture to the surface. It is through the nature of this texture that the quality of the reflected light can be defined. The pattern itself was created from the interference of a 2D double helix, DNA, laid upon a 2D scanned image of a rock core sample taken from the site. This 2D pattern was then retranslated onto the lower frustum of the conical spire using a laser cut masking material which was impervious to the bombardment of both shot peening materials, stainless and glass. The representation upon the monument’s surface of the hidden rock below the surface and the normally invisible DNA of man has provided an abstract pattern, but one that gives a hint of the Irish diaspora – the idea of scattering and of ebb and flow” (Ritchie, “Notes on a Monument”).

classify the Spire as a 'nonevent.' Nonevents are immediately charged with heavy symbolic meaning, yet ultimately seem like anticipated commemorations of themselves. Nora argues that in order to confer meaning on a cultural moment, contemporary history has seen an explosion in the effort to create such events (Nora 22). However, as Longley has argued, memorialising is not a neutral action; "[c]ommemoration is not just reactive or passive but a reinforcement of mystical kinship bonds and hence a political agent. To commemorate Bloody Sunday or Internment or the Boyne or the world wars is always a contemporary political intervention" (Longley, "Multi-Culturalism and Northern Ireland" 35). The erection of this statue under the guise of a memorial event marks a shift in the link between time and identity, suggesting that, regardless of how the public perceives its relationship to the past, this particular moment is resolutely refusing to look backward. Therefore, in addition to not memorializing something, one could argue that the Spire releases the spectator from the *responsibility* of remembering, allowing him or her to contemplate a future that is not continually tied up with the past. In a society that puts remembrance high on its list of cultural activities, the flipside of forgetting may be a necessary if radical counterpart. In fact, if anything political can be attributed to the Spire, then it is a gentle urging towards the formation of an identity that does not look to the past for sustenance, but instead looks to the future as hopeful, even if that future remains undetermined.

As Edward Casey writes, the pull between past and future exists in all public commemorative displays: "public memory is both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) *and* acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event. Public monuments embody this Janusian trait: their very massiveness and solidity almost literally enforce this futurity, while inscriptions and certain easily identifiable features...pull

the same physical object toward the past it honors” (Casey 17). Lacking inscriptions and other mnemonic representations, the Spire appears to be drawn more towards the promise of futurity.

Yvonne Whelan argues that the shift in public monuments from political and military symbols of postcolonial national identity towards more neutral statements of public art has been underway since the beginning of the 1990s (Whelan). This being said, I would argue that the framing of the Spire as both an object of memory and as a replacement for Nelson’s Pillar makes the act of erecting it relevant to contemporary politics. The destruction of Nelson’s Pillar used a bomb blast to commemorate the anniversary of a Rising which was itself driven in part by the idea of blood-sacrifice and ties to an ancient, mythologised past. The Spire, on the other hand, is unlikely to appeal to the idea of tribal enmities. The jury was conscious of avoiding traditional markers of nationalism, reportedly in light of the fragile Peace Process that had been underway, in its latest incarnation, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April, 1998. The assessors received several proposals that were “quite aggressive symbols of nationalism, including over-sized – indeed gigantic – Easter lilies, national flags, etc. which where were intended to refer to the GPO and related historical issues,” but concluded that these were “inappropriate in the context of the Peace Initiative.” (J. O’Connor, “Letter to Father Declan Marmiom”).

Ironically, at the same time as the project eschews the notion of remembrance in its structure and in its stubborn resistance to prescribed meaning, the degree of public debate and interest surrounding it *anticipates* remembrance. The Mayor of Dublin, who was on the competition’s jury, stated “while the choice was a difficult one, the Board of Assessors is confident that the new Spire will *become* a well loved symbol of Dublin in the next

Millennium” (Lord Mayor of Dublin, *my italics*). An editorial echoed this sentiment, stating that despite “all the begrudgery, there can be no doubt that it will become one of the most memorable and talked-about elements of the city’s public realm, nationally and internationally” (“A Point Well Made”). If the Spire does not have meaning now, perhaps it will when the future looks back on it.

The jury’s definition of monument includes reference to a “relic of the past.” Viewed one way, the monument’s past begins at the moment of its unveiling; the act of unveiling and the act of commemoration become one and the same thing, so that the monument commemorates not the past, but its own moment of unveiling, which reflects not a memorialized Ireland of the past, but the Ireland that exists at the moment of its appearance.

Despite the evidence given by the Spire, it is still clear that the Irish proclivity for memorialising will not disappear anytime soon. Three months after the statue was completed, O’Connell Street was plastered with advertisements for a “Republican Commemoration” of Easter Sunday, which would assemble at the Garden of Remembrance, and march to the GPO where it would culminate in a rally.¹³ The glossy posters simply stated that the event was “organised by the Republican movement.” The concurrent existence of the Spire and Republican rallies in the same historic space points to the complex and sometimes contradictory forces that vied for a role in defining Irish identity in the 1990s and 2000s. Like the Happy Prince statue in Oscar Wilde’s short story of the same name,¹⁴ the Spire reflects, upon its erection, an image that city officials would like to think imitates the actual character

¹³ This assessment is based on my observations of O’Connell St. during a visit in April 2003.

¹⁴ See Wilde. In the fairytale, the statue of the Happy Prince provides a focal point of beauty for the city, but below its high column, many of the people live in poverty. Systematically, the Happy Prince employs a swallow to give away the jewels and gold that cover him, until his outward appearance becomes shabby. The town councillors take down the statue because it no longer beautiful, and thus no longer reflects their ideal image of the town. The irony is that the town is now happier and richer, even if its main symbol, which has become internally richer, does not reflect this on the outside.

of Dublin, even if that image is an illusion. Following this argument, the Spire is a monument both to the new Ireland – prosperous, urban, attractive to tourists and returning emigrants – while also being a monument to the anticipated future of Ireland, which is manoeuvring to shed debilitating political binaries, accommodate plurality, integrate other ethnicities, and retain economic prosperity and a commitment to secularism. In short, the monument is a symbol of the attempt to refashion a contemporary identity, and to revisit Ireland's relationship to its own history. As we will see in the chapter on contemporary Irish film, the reconfiguration of landscape is one way that Ireland is confronting historical constructions of Irish identity, and reshaping those constructions in ways that reflect the transitional nature of contemporary Irish society.

The Spire's moment of completion in January 2003, amidst a reported crowd of 2,000 spectators, is a testament to an Ireland that is more comfortably examined for its postnational aspirations, than through the backward-looking lens of postcolonialism. However, there are clearly still elements in Irish culture that recall traditional early 20th-century formations of nationalist identity. The destruction of Nelson's Pillar and the construction of the Spire are both performances of identity, but their different aesthetics, as well as the different ways in which audiences have responded to them, signal a changing ethos in how that identity is fashioned, how it relates to the past, and how Irishness is currently being shaped for the future.

II. History: A Culture in Transition

Contemporary identity is always to a certain extent tied up with historical constructions. Identity, in the broad cultural and ethnic sense, draws on the legacy of representations and struggles and myths that give birth to the contemporary moment, and by extension, the contemporary moment is conceived in relation to these historical or foundational stories.¹⁵ In Ireland, identity is often conceived in binary terms, based on an interpretation of the past that divides the populace in terms of perceived loyalties: Catholics are loyal to the nation of Ireland, and Protestants are loyal to maintaining a union with Britain. In the republic of Ireland, nationalist histories conceive of these two sides of the binary as mutually exclusive, eliding other forms of identity that do not fit within the either/or schema.¹⁶ The binary understanding has been supported throughout the 20th century by ongoing political conflicts that pit the two major groups on opposite sides of the debate about the status of Northern Ireland. The period of 1968 onwards marks the most elevated contemporary moment in this conflict, with efforts at establishing peace from the late 1990s through the early 2000s raising a debate over whether the period of “The Troubles” had drawn to a close. On May 8, of 2007, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin formed a power-sharing government, and in July of that year the British army formally ended their operations in Northern Ireland, effectively drawing the Troubles to a close. The binary

¹⁵ I use the word “stories” to encompass both fabricated myths, and factually-based narratives of the past.

¹⁶ Victor Turner’s assessment of binaries as keeping opposing sides ‘clean’ or ‘pure’ is useful here. He writes, “what is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean. The unclear is the unclean ... From this standpoint, one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least “betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points in the space-time structural classification” (97).

conception of identity may arguably begin to break down of its own accord under these new arrangements, as the conflict-based reason for the binary begins to disappear.

However, several contemporary changes in addition to the peace process have given pause to long-held constructions of identity, and are relevant to the discourses around identity pursued by the playwrights and filmmakers in this study. For the purposes of my investigation, these socio-historical changes break down into two movements. On the one hand, since the mid-1990s, Ireland has experienced significant social and demographic changes that are in part attributable to the wealth created by the ‘Celtic Tiger.’ This historically new affluence, along with increasing integration into the European Union, has made Ireland an attractive destination for immigration, which reverses the long-standing pattern of net out-migration. In addition, there has been an increasing secularisation of public sentiment, which is noted, if unequally represented, in public policy decisions. On the other hand, at the same time that Ireland is undergoing significant social and economic changes, there has also been a concomitant movement to re-evaluate how Irish history has been written. Several historians, often lumped together under the vague category of ‘revisionism,’ have been critical of the ways in which Irish history has created a narrative that recognises all good Irishmen as Catholics involved in a 700-year struggle for independence from Britain. Irish identity, therefore, is being challenged from more than one angle. The cumulative effect of the changes marks a culture in transition, with the forces of change and those of conservation butting up against one another.

The movements marked by the Celtic Tiger and revisionist historiography, both of which I will delineate in more detail below, are forward-looking, in that they set their sights on the type of culture that Ireland is in the process of creating. While the buoyant economy

and increasing European Union integration have led to a culture that appears content to abandon its tendency to walk forward while continually casting a glance over its shoulder, historiographical debates maintain the past – or at least the way the past has been constructed through the writing of history in post-independence Ireland – as a lively factor in the construction of contemporary identities. Contemporary historiographical movements, which find their roots in the early decades of the Irish Free State, are subject to ongoing debate, and require an engagement with Irish history as part of the process of constructing a contemporary Irish identity. While the playwrights who form the focus of this study – Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr – engage with the legacy of literary and social constructions of Irish identity over time, the cinematic lens appears to focus more squarely on the present moment, interrogating the ways in which contemporary identity is being shaped by shifting demographic patterns. In many ways this distinction – between theatrical and cinematic products – is a crude one, but it provides an initial framework for understanding contemporary preoccupations in the two media. The case-studies that follow in subsequent chapters bear out the differences in a more nuanced fashion. The sketch below of economic changes and cultural debates in contemporary Ireland is an attempt to situate artistic products in the changing cultural milieus of the 1990s, and will explore in turn changing ethnographic patterns, historiographical debates, the impact of the Celtic Tiger economic boom, and the waning authority of the Catholic Church.

Changing Ethnographic Patterns

After a century of net migration equalling emigration, the decade from the early 1990s to the early 2000s saw a reversal, and Ireland now has more people moving to the

country than moving away from it. For the first time in remembered history, Ireland is a place to go *to* and not a place to escape or seek exile *from*. The massive migration turnaround challenges the collective memory connection between Irish identity and emigration, a connection undoubtedly forged by much of the history written about the Famine of the mid 19th-century.¹⁷ The change in turn begs a reassessment of emigration and exile as key attributes of Irish identity, as well as Irish ethnicity as a central characteristic of Irish national identity. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, both Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr refigure the way identity is tied to notions of emigration and exile.

Ireland first experienced net in-migration after joining the European Community in 1973, but this was largely the result of returning Irish émigrés. The 1980s then saw a return to high emigration rates, with 2% of the population fleeing high unemployment and a stagnant economy. All told, very few immigrants of non-Irish or non-British background came to Ireland before the mid-1990s (Mac Éinrí). However, this changed dramatically during the Celtic Tiger period of 1995-2000 when approximately 250,000 persons – about half of whom were returning Irish – moved to Ireland. During this period, immigrants accounted for 7% of the total population, a figure that is considered “astonishing,” and is unparalleled in other EU countries (Mac Éinrí). The most significant factor to the formation of Irish identity is the shift in the nationality of immigrants. While the total percentage of the population born outside the Republic grew from 5.5% in 1986 to 7.5% in 2002 (a 36% increase), the total number of Irish residents not born in Ireland, the UK and the US grew

¹⁷ By conservative estimates, 1.5 million persons emigrated during the Famine years. Historian Roy Foster maintains that this number is significant, but that it must be understood in context. Large-scale emigration predated the Famine, and if sustained at the rate set in 1841, would have equalled 130,000 emigrants a year. The peak emigration figure during the Famine occurred in 1851, where 250,000 persons left Ireland (*Modern Ireland* 323-324). The Famine, therefore, raised the spectre of emigration to new heights, but its singular significance to the idea of Irish emigration may loom larger in collective memory than it does in the actual past.

from 0.9% to 4% over the same time period – a 344% increase in the relative percentage of non-Anglo minorities.¹⁸ The actual numbers might seem small, but the change is not insignificant when one considers how culturally homogeneous Ireland has been for most of its history. Those who now claim Irish as their nationality, but who hail from further afield, bring new elements to the collective pot of cultural memory. The sort of multi-ethnic cultural history that forms the identity of urban Canadians, for example, is still relatively new to Ireland.

One of the major aspects of this migration to capture the Irish public imagination is the arrival of asylum-seekers/refugee claimants. Before the mid-1990s, Ireland had been one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in Europe, but beginning in 1994 and rising every year through the decade, there has been a substantial increase in refugee applications (Curry 138). According to a study of public responses to an increase in refugees, the relative percentage of refugee applicants to population remains quite small in comparison to other European countries, but there is a general perception, fostered by the media, that refugees are “flooding” Ireland, and that they are often applying for reasons of economic gain, instead of for political asylum.¹⁹ According to this Dublin survey, there are high levels of hostility towards refugees arriving in Dublin, regardless of origin, although the refugee’s nation of origin does alter the degree of hostility towards him or her; Curry concludes that the degree of ‘social distance’ demonstrated by respondents increases in line with the exoticness of the foreign group (Curry 148).²⁰ As a result of the hostility faced by refugees, ethnically-based

¹⁸ All calculations (and potential errors) are mine, based on 2002 census results. See Central Statistics Office, *Census 2002 - Volume 4 - Usual Residence, Migration, Birthplaces and Nationalities*, p. 132 for the figures involved.

¹⁹ Piaras Mac Éinrí corroborates this statement about the media’s impact, and puts the figure for asylum-seekers at 10% of the foreign immigrant population since 1995 (Mac Éinrí, no pag.).

²⁰ Curry’s postal survey was administered to a “large random sample of the Dublin population”, and he articulate the measure of hostility towards refugees based on the concept of social distance, which is the “degree

organisations of asylum seekers have arisen; Ireland is now faced with the challenge of addressing the idea of “other” within a previously homogeneous social space (Mac Éinrí).

The causes of racism are often difficult to pin down. Declan Kiberd suggests the fear of ‘hybridity’ is one of the causes of racism in contemporary Irish society. As he explains, the policy towards asylum-seekers gives applicants only two weeks to appeal a rejection, whereas Irish citizens generally have six months to appeal court decisions. Kiberd argues that the incredibly short appeal period suggests that one is either instantly Irish, and welcomed into the fold, or not allowed to negotiate for a new Irish identity at all; there is no in-between (Kiberd, “Strangers in Their Own Country” 47-52). This either/or approach to Irish identity mimics the traditional practice of viewing Catholics and Protestants as binary opposites. Kiberd develops the notion of a fear of hybridity specific to the Irish case, but his notion resonates with Victor Turner’s formulation of the “liminal personae.” In Turner’s concept, persons who are in-between recognized social stages, such as late adolescence and marriage, acquire the characteristic of liminality. Arguably, this theory could be extended to encompass persons who fit uncomfortably between social groups. According to Turner, society does not know where to place the liminal personae, who is “neither this nor that,” but both at the same time. The structural “invisibility” of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified” (96). Travellers in Ireland have often been viewed in this light – as a group that is specific to Ireland yet not fully accepted into Irish society, and Marina Carr’s plays adopt these liminal figures as central characters.²¹ Sebastian

of intimacy to which a person is willing to admit a member of any particular social group,” and includes questions such as: Would you marry someone from this group? Would you deport or debar them from Ireland? The survey targeted Dubliners’ responses to six groups: Africans, Arabs, Bosnians, Romanians, Spaniards, and Travellers. Interestingly, the largest degree of social distance (highest display of hostility) was towards Travellers, a long-existing ‘outsider’ group that is ethnically Irish (Curry 139-141).

²¹ Travellers are typically families or a group of families that live in caravans or roadside encampments throughout Ireland. They have a history of itinerant habitation, along with a history of negative treatment by

Barry also incorporates hybridity into his plays, fishing out of his personal history characters that do not fall easily into traditional political groupings in Ireland.

A recent *Irish Times* article points out that there are contradictions in the way migrants are viewed by Irish people. For example, one poll found that 8 in 10 Irish people want restrictions on non-nationals, but also found that the statement “It is good that children in Ireland today are growing up in a multicultural society” had an overwhelmingly positive response (Munck). These contradictions are not surprising considering that the demographic shifts brought about by migration are relatively new to Ireland, and people are still trying to feel out what it means to “live with difference.” Clashes between other groups are not new to Ireland. In fact, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter, differences in Catholic and Protestant imaginaries, as well as republican and loyalist politics, have been key in the formation of Irish identities. In the political hotbed of Northern Ireland, Edna Longley argues that the difference between the two sides is significant enough to characterize the factions as ethnic groups, because “they define themselves according to religious difference and different historical narratives” (Longley, “Multi-Culturalism and Northern Ireland” 2). However, the combination of Ireland’s membership in the European Union and its recent prosperity – which makes it an attractive country in which to settle – has shifted the source of

“settled” populations in Ireland. For the most part, Travellers are looked down on by the mainstream population of Ireland, and are sometimes seen to have a distinct ethnic identity, although this distinctness is used for both positive and negative purposes. Niall Crowley defines Travellers as “a minority ethnic group with a nomadic tradition. They identify themselves as a distinct community and are seen by others as such. They share common cultural characteristics, traditions and values which are evident in their organization of family, social and economic life... Travellers have a long shared history which, though undocumented, can be traced back before the twelfth century through mention of Travellers in the law and through analysis of their language, the Cant. They have a distinct oral tradition and largely marry within their own community. These elements have all been identified as defining an ethnic group.” Crowley argues that Traveller ethnicity has been contested by the majority settled community, who define them as deviants or misfits, which results in perceiving Travellers “as failed settled people in need of rehabilitation and assimilation” (232). The 2002 Census results report that 23,681 persons (0.6%) out of a total population of 3,917,203 identified themselves as Travellers (Central Statistics Office, *Census 2002 - Principle Demographic Results* 35; Central Statistics Office, *Census 2002 - Volume 8 - Irish Traveller Community* 10). Because of the itinerant tradition in Traveller communities, it is expected that the number is closer to 30,000 (Minority Rights Group International).

the clashes. The new transitioning ethnographic make-up of Ireland suggests that the age-old Catholic-Protestant divide must be opened to look at new religious realities that do not frame difference within a Christian²² framework. If the idea of Irishness once emerged from a primarily Christian framework, or even from the clash between Christian denominations, then the arrival and permanency of new groups will eventually raise a challenge to old formations of Irish identity. My argument is not that the plays and films of this study neatly represent Ireland's new ethnicities, but rather that contemporary artistic works reflect the results of ethnographic changes through the rupturing of traditional formations of identity, which are often defined by a political/religious binary between ethnically homogeneous groups. The political manifestation of this stew of demographic shifts is the concept of pluralism, which admits a variety of identities and perspectives into its definition.

Like Declan Kiberd, Edna Longley acknowledges anti-immigrant prejudice in the Republic, but argues that in comparison to Northern Ireland, "mono-cultural attitudes" have been changing more rapidly there: In the Republic "exclusivism is directly challenged by pluralism; whereas the North's twin blocs perpetually squeeze the pluralistic centre" (Longley, "Multi-Culturalism and Northern Ireland" 5). While Longley attributes the break-up in unified approaches to culture to the growth of pluralism – that is, the accommodation of a variety of perspectives in the public sphere – commentators disagree on both the definitions and desirability of plurality in Ireland.

²² The formation of identity based on Catholic-Protestant or Nationalist-Loyalist binaries is problematic, because the source of political fighting is based on more than just religious or political affiliations. At times, the differences can be seen as ontological, forming the very core of self-definition. Edna Longley refers to the Catholic-Protestant strife in the 20th century as the "Irish Culture War", suggesting that the real battle is being fought not between two religions or two political positions, but between opposing cultures ("Multi-Culturalism and Northern Ireland").

It has been argued that a unified conception of Irish identity has been subject to challenge over a much longer period than that of my study. For instance, Rob Doggett's analysis of W.B. Yeats' poetry parts with dominant interpretations of Yeats, arguing that the poet's work breaks down unified ideas of Irish identity:

far from reinscribing an outmoded nationalist mindset that idealizes one form of Irish identity, eighteenth century or otherwise, Yeats pointedly challenges former and current nationalist narratives of history by focusing instead on instances of rupture and the chaos of the present. In so doing, Yeats undercuts those stable narratives of a unified heroic nation that were central to the political and cultural nationalists' agendas in the 20s (Doggett 139).

However correct Doggett may be in this interpretation of Yeats, the 'identity' he discusses is nevertheless one that is Irish or British in terms of ethnicity. It is clear that the ways in which identity has been challenged since the mid-1990s demand a broader girth for what it currently means to be Irish.

Despite the reality of changing demographics, it is important to note that the spectrum of cultural pluralism has not deeply penetrated the Irish social fabric. This realisation underlines the distinctiveness of Sebastian Barry's work, in particular, because it moves so clearly beyond traditional binaries of representation. A survey of contemporary approaches to Irish identity demonstrates how the contributions to be made by identity groups outside traditional political affiliations are often elided, even by those who embrace a politics beyond traditional binaries. In an appeal for greater multi-culturalism, Declan Kiberd concludes that government must secure a "national philosophy," because "only people secure in their national philosophy are capable of dealing confidently with those who come among them

with deep commitments to alternative codes” (Kiberd, “Strangers in Their Own Country” 74). This statement belies the reticence to accept broader definitions of plurality, because despite the appeal to tolerance, it still maintains an insider/outsider dichotomy, separating the Irish citizenry into distinct groups: there are the ‘true’ insiders, and then there are the outsiders who seek to join the insiders. Such a separation does not reflect the realities of the European Union’s increasingly porous borders, and suggests that the definition of pluralism is up for debate. For Seamus Deane, pluralism is merely a “buzz word” for liberalism, in that it believes the “best of all possible worlds is based on the hope of depoliticizing the society to the point where it is essentially a consumerist organism...The full realisation of the individual self is regarded as an ambition that institutions exist to serve” (quoted in Longley, *The Living Stream* 42). Apart from creating a direct and unnecessary link between plurality and consumerism, the idea that admitting a variety of viewpoints into the public sphere is tantamount to ‘depoliticizing’ society is perplexing. A similar scepticism about pluralism is held by Peadar Kirby, who argues that Ireland is indeed *less* pluralistic than it was a hundred years ago, when parliamentary nationalism existed alongside revolutionary republicanism, and suffragists plied their cause along with unionists (Kirby 24-25). While indeed this variety of political pluralism may be a thing of the past in contemporary Ireland, there is a new hope for a pluralism that will encompass different ethnicities, sexual orientations, non-Christian religions, and so on. How long it will take, or indeed if, these will be achieved remains to be seen. Kirby is correct in taking issue with the “widely claimed” notion that “in contrast to the past, Ireland has recently become a pluralist society, with more egalitarian values,” (24); however his singular focus on ‘indigenous’ Irish values as key to pluralism ignores the new ways in which Ireland can achieve diversity. I would argue that the ‘wide claim’ to diversity

is best viewed as an image that Ireland officially aims to project, in a similar way to how the Spire projects a cosmopolitan nation that has cut its ties to old and congealed forms of identity. Negotiating the gap between image and reality, and thereby challenging traditional notions of Irish identity, is how the playwrights and filmmakers of this new generation do their best work.

Historiographical Debates

In its most reduced form, nationalist historical writing supports the politics of Irish nationalism, which, to provide a crude sketch, draws on ancient Gaelic or Celtic cultures, favours a view of Irish history where English rule was at best negligent and at worst intentionally harmful to the Irish population, views Irish Catholics as a nation predominantly unified in a struggle against Britain, and reads contemporary Ireland in a postcolonial framework. Nationalist history has been the guiding paradigm in the writing of Irish history since Ireland gained independence in 1922, but at the same time, there have been challenges to the way that nationalist historical writing represents the past, and by extension, how historical representations contribute to contemporary formations of identity. These challenges are often lumped under the loose category of ‘revisionism,’ a category that will be retained for the purposes of exploring approaches to Irish history in literary criticism that are salient to this study.

Historical revisionism in Ireland, which challenges nationalist orthodoxies, can be traced at least as far back as the mid-1930s, to the journal and academic societies set up by historians T.W. Moody and R.D. Edwards (Brady 3). While ‘revisionism’ remains a controversial subject in Ireland, the impact of revisionist historical writing on literary and

theatre criticism is exemplified by the fact that it is no longer possible to comfortably address Ireland's history without engaging with the theories and perspectives behind the writing of history. In short, whether one agrees with the tenets of revisionism or not, one of the by-products of revisionist writing has been to invigorate a discourse about the ways in which history is constructed, and how this construction affects popular ideas about the Irish past. For example, James Murphy's book *Abject Loyalty*, which demonstrates how Queen Victoria was met with great enthusiasm during her visits to Ireland, reveals how the relationship between nationalists and the Monarchy was not always one of antagonism (J. H. Murphy). The plays and films discussed in subsequent chapters are marked by an awareness of history in a general way, but they also display a degree of reflexivity about the way that historical narratives congeal over time, admitting some aspects, and eliding others. This study is not interested in pigeonholing artistic works on either side of the debate, but more so in tracing how the existence of the debate has been absorbed both thematically and formally in contemporary theatre and film. The plays of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr display an awareness of how history has been written, in that their representations of Irish identity draw from the legacy of historical constructions of identity, while also subjecting these constructions to scrutiny. Their work engages with issues that are relevant to nationalist interpretations of the past, but does not fully bear out the ideologies that underpin Irish nationalism. In the cinema, the awareness emerges through an engagement with the patterns developed within the Irish cinematic tradition: on the surface, the engagement appears more formal and inward-looking. However, as we will see, Irish cinematic traditions have served to construct (and literally to project) a popular image of Irishness that itself contains a series of familiar binaries and stereotypes.

Theatrical and cinematic challenges to nationalist narratives of the past are significant because in Ireland, cultural identity is linked to historical identity in a particularly acute way. Furthermore, historical identity has been largely constructed through the lens of Irish nationalism. The contemporary portrait of Irish identity is heavily linked to Irish history, which, as we will see later in this chapter, has a strong but not always commensurate relationship with memory. According to Pierre Nora, whose extensive volumes “*Les Lieux de Mémoire*” map the pathways of memory in France, the level of controversy brought about by differing historiographical interpretations depends on how strongly a particular culture bases its identity on entrenched and accepted mythologies of its own past. Where tradition provides a strong basis for identity, historiographies that deflate or challenge accepted historical narratives also challenge contemporary definitions of identity. Nora identifies the United States as a counterpoint; differing interpretations of key events in American history do not threaten the American tradition, because America is a country of “plural memories and diverse traditions,” and therefore the very idea of ‘American tradition’ is not monolithic (10). While there are clearly various interpretations of key events in Irish history (traditionally breaking down along nationalist versus unionist lines), the interpretation that persists in the Republic is one that is aligned with nationalist aims. To threaten this version is to threaten Irish identity, which helps to explain, according to Nora, why the historiographical arguments that emerge from both nationalist and revisionist historiographies are often polemical.

In the short book *Multi-Culturalism: The View from the Two Irelands*, Edna Longley and Declan Kiberd, in separate essays, each call for an approach to historical writing – and by extension literary criticism as it is applied to historical writing – that breaks down the

existing binaries between north and south, loyalism and nationalism. Longley has been affiliated with revisionist approaches to literary criticism, yet in an earlier work, she questions how revisionism has been defined. Referring to the act of literary criticism, she asks: “Is it revisionist to suggest that there may be no dominant paradigm: that colonial readings might be spliced with approaches which show Ireland/Irish writing in other lights?” (Longley, *The Living Stream* 32). This approach to literature, which attempts to eschew an overarching paradigm in favour of culling from several traditions, is nevertheless equated with what Kiberd labels as revisionism, because in his interpretation, ‘colonial readings’ lie at the very basis of Irish history, and by extension, at the heart of nationalist identity. At times, the nationalist-revisionist debate in historical writing mimics the idea of a binary that exists between nationalist and unionist circles, particularly concerning the Troubles in Northern Ireland. As discussed above, Kiberd decries the inability in Ireland to accept ‘hybridity,’ or cultural pluralism (Kiberd, “Strangers in Their Own Country” 47-52), but at the same time he equates revisionism with a “loathing for history” and a complete abandonment of the idea of nation (65), demonstrating little tolerance for historiographical approaches that aim at a similar hybridity of approach. The binary that exists between nationalist and revisionist approaches is relevant to Sebastian Barry’s work, because while his plays could be labelled revisionist, what they really accomplish is a refusal of the binary that exists between competing historiographical approaches.

In order to retain the nation as a central phenomenon of critical analysis while still calling for hybridity in terms of identity, Kiberd empties nationalism of its immanent political qualities, arguing that it is merely a way of *organising* normative codes: “At the core of all societies, even bad societies, is a set of cultural codes: and nationalism has always been

no more than a political and economic means by which to protect and deliver certain cultural values” (Kiberd, “Strangers in Their Own Country” 68). Kiberd goes on to suggest that nationalism is a cultural practice that is key to definitions of Irishness, as opposed to a political movement that both draws on and creates cultural traditions in order to sustain its aims. By extension, therefore, revisionist historical writings that decentralise nationalist aims are not merely striking at representations of Irish identity in history, but at Irish identity *itself*. This argument does not defend orthodox versions of Irish history on their own terms, but instead folds nationalism into an essential definition of Irishness, weakening his own call for hybridity. What Kiberd’s argument does not explicitly acknowledge are the ways in which Irish nationalism functions normatively in the creation of identity, and therefore resists notions of hybridity. The following definition by Eric Hobsbawm is useful:

‘Invented Tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1).

Both nationalist and loyalist communities, which are in and of themselves plural in their political outlooks, have their share of invented traditions, but the key aspect of Hobsbawm’s definition is the connection between continuity and normativity – a connection that is not fully borne out by Kiberd’s arguments around nationalism as a means for delivering cultural codes. Invented traditions seep deeply into the outlook of a culture, and because they are normative in their function, criticism or breaking of these traditions is akin to attacking the moral fibre of the culture in which the tradition is based. Kiberd’s criticism is important to

note, because he is arguably one of the most influential critics currently working on Irish literature.

Debates in historiographical approaches are relevant to this study because they underlie conceptions of Irish identity that are being created through character and dramatic structure in Barry's and Carr's work. However, it is not particularly new for writers to incorporate a criticism of the mythos that accompanies nationalism into their works. For example, as previously noted, Rob Doggett argues that Yeats' poetry refuses to sanction any concrete historical narrative as a means of comprehending and valorising the present. By undercutting the expected progression evoked by the titular date with a vision of the present as chaotic, the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" reveals that "nationalist and imperialised modes for ordering time must be cast aside before new histories may be articulated" (Doggett 144). As we will see, Sebastian Barry's plays move significantly in this direction as well.

Ireland as Postcolonial or Postnational?

Nationalist perspectives on Irish culture have been criticised from historiographical angles, as discussed above, but they should also been seen in light of a changing contemporary political culture, where the importance of nation to Irish identity is waning. The most prevalent way in which Irish nationalism has been read is through the lens of postcolonialism, which traces the effects of colonialism on the national psyche. This approach is pursued by Declan Kiberd in his seminal *Inventing Ireland*, and by many of the Field Day²³ anthologists. One of the main criticisms of a postcolonial reading of Ireland is

²³ Playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea founded the Field Day theatre company in 1980, for their production of Friel's *Translations* in Derry, Northern Ireland. The production subsequently toured Ireland, and

that it draws on theories that were created with so-called ‘Third World’ countries in mind, and therefore does not fit the specificities of Irish history. Scholars approach the postcolonial discourse in Ireland from different perspectives, including Liam Kennedy, who counts the ways in which postcolonial interpretations of Ireland have led to the M.O.P.E. factor – what he argues is the erroneous idea that the Irish are “the most oppressed people ever” (L. Kennedy). Edna Longley’s approach argues for the admittance of loyalism into the rich analysis of Irish memory, which breaks down the singular tie to nationalist perspectives that have for the most part equated Irish memory with nationalist memory. However, Richard Kearney’s approach to contemporary Ireland’s political composition steps outside the discourse of postcolonialism, arguing that contemporary Ireland is best described not in relation to its colonial past, but in relation to its diminishing preoccupations with nationalism. Both Irish and British nationalisms must be overcome, Kearney argues, in order to move past the political impasse in Northern Ireland. Kearney’s analysis is notable because it is both descriptive and prescriptive. In many ways Ireland has moved past defining the nation-state as central to identity, and further, it *must* move past nationally-based preoccupations in order to more fully embrace democracy (Kearney).

The relevance of ‘nation’ to contemporary Ireland is complex, in that it admits responses that bolster both nationalist and revisionist approaches to history. In the republic, the battle has been won for national independence, which has the effect of both creating a nation, and allowing the importance of ‘nation’ in public consciousness to recede into the background. Aside from the most staunch republicans (who claim that the republic is only provisional until the six counties of the north are brought into the fold), the nation is no

received considerable critical and popular attention. Field Day also publishes special editions of plays and literary works, and books and pamphlets on literary criticism, history, politics, and cultural studies (Keough-Naughton Institute).

longer something to strive for, and therefore recedes as a factor in the formation of identity. The example of the Spire supports the notion that symbols of historical nationalism are no longer required as markers of contemporary Irish identity. In addition, the various efforts of the Peace Process, which have seen a dramatic decline in civil unrest in Northern Ireland, if not a complete political solution to date, also help to quell long-held conflicts. Still, it is clear that efforts to celebrate key moments in nationalist history continue to persist in the Republic. Two examples will suffice. In 2005, a special collection of 33 CDs with an accompanying book was released that collects oral histories to commemorate the Rising of 1916 – a key moment in the narrative of nationalist history (O’Hea O’Keefe). The launch of the collections made the front section of *The Irish Times*, with the authors stating the timing was opportune, considering the approaching centenary of the Rising²⁴. Similarly, the Taoiseach reinstated the traditional 1916 Easter parade in 2006, which includes the Army marching past the General Post Office, in order to “reclaim traditional republicanism from Sinn Fein” (Brennock, “Taoiseach Reinstates”). The parade was cancelled in 1969 after the eruption of political violence in Northern Ireland. These recent developments suggest that while the struggle to make a nation may have waned, the desire to retain the story of nationalism has not. The place of nationalism in formations of Irish identity is crucial to this study, because nationalism contains myths that support Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Eric Hobsbawm’s “invented traditions.” These myths still provide fodder for contemporary plays and films, but the fact that their credence has been challenged by

²⁴ See O’Regan. Note that the centenary was still eleven years away when this book was published; using millennia as a yardstick, this gap is relatively small, but eleven years is not an inconsiderable gap when it comes to the preparation of anniversary commemorations. The collection is only a small part of the work being done by Janet O’Hea O’Keefe and her husband Maurice O’Keefe; their website archives over 1,500 recordings collected from across the country since 1990. See: <http://www.irishlifeandlore.com/>

revisionist historiography and postnational perspectives on Irish culture gives pause to the analysis of how they operate within contemporary texts.

Discussing Irish public school curricula in the years following independence, Seán Farrell Moran argues that historical knowledge promoted by nationalist historians served as the basis of personal and societal pride; but it also served as the *raison d'être* of the nation state. Accordingly, the Irish Free State reinforced itself with a curriculum based on the nationalist model of Irish history, tying the newly emergent state to a teleological view of history wherein the ancient past led to and legitimated the new state (Moran 214). If Kearney is correct in saying that, at least to some degree, Ireland is moving towards a postnational political culture, and by extension, that there is no longer the need to promote nationalist rhetoric, then we are left to question what happens to the mythological basis for identity formation that Moran cites as fodder for the legitimisation of the new state. If myths of a unified Celtic past were once put to the cause of national pride, then how do they function in relation to Irish identity within contemporary texts? Does myth become the repository of that which is no longer legitimate – an empty container of past identifications? Or can myth be resurrected in the service of fresh new identity formations?

Regardless of how nationalism may have been used to shape historical interpretations in a particular way, it is clear that Irish identity has been partly shaped by a series of myths that are key to nationalism. Marina Carr's plays grapple directly and literally with the function of myth in society. Carr creates worlds full of characters that sink and crumble under the weight of the mythologies that she weaves around them, demonstrating the great power and the great danger of tribal belief systems.

The Celtic Tiger

If Irish identity, and therefore the traditional connection between memory and identity, has been challenged by increasing socio-cultural diversity connected to increased immigration and the breakdown of dominant historiographies, then it has also been challenged by massive changes in Ireland's economic status. By now it is a cliché to state that Ireland, up to the early part of the 1990s, was a poor country that lacked a strong economy and adequate employment. In contrast, the period of 1991 to 2002 was a period of increasing prosperity, characterized by annual GDP growth rates between 6.1% and 11.1% (OECD), and in the period of 1993 to 1998, a 290,000 person (25%) increase in total employment (O'Connell). The "Celtic Tiger," named in homage to the East Asian Tigers before it, transformed Ireland into a wealthy country, largely based on highly competitive tax schemes, and the related migration of high-tech and dot-com industries to the island. Although the economy's growth rate slowed in 2003, it picked up again by 2005, and was strong until the end of 2007. In 2004, Ireland had one of the highest GDP-per capita incomes in the European Union, falling into third place just after Denmark (CIA, "The World Factbook: Rank Order - GDP - Per Capita"). In what some have dubbed "Celtic Tiger 2," (2004-2007), average income levels continued to grow at an above-average rate, and Ireland maintained a higher growth rate (6.9%) than the United States, United Kingdom, and all the countries of the pre-expansion European Union (CIA, "The World Factbook: Rank Order - GDP - Real Growth Rate").

The newly wealthy Ireland diverges in description from the narratives of the old Ireland, which are often tied to poverty, sacrifice, and scarcity. In his book on Irish memory,

Nicholas Miller argues that the significance of this change alters contemporary definitions of Irish identity, in that

[c]apital, and the international commerce that is creating it, has become, of all things, an authentic discourse of Irishness. In this case, coming into its “own” has meant for Ireland a wholesale redefinition of the terms of its identity and a de-centering of traditionally privileged centers of Irishness. Globalization is routing the process of Irish self-fashioning through vocabularies of culture and experience that have traditionally been defined as non-Irish (Miller 10).

Access to capital, in Miller’s argument, was decidedly non-Irish before the rise of the Celtic Tiger.

The image that Celtic Tiger Ireland projects to the international community is primarily tied to prosperity, but prosperity does not stand as a socially isolated element of culture. In contemporary Ireland, prosperity comes packaged with other perceived cultural identifiers. Ireland’s prosperity has been tied to social changes that characterise it as increasingly secular, liberal, and forward-looking in orientation. The new prosperity, Miller argues, not only focuses the Irish psyche on the future, but also severs the ties to an identity that is based around conflict and polarisation:

After centuries spent in embattled pursuit of independence in its many elusive forms - economic prosperity, political autonomy, religious and geographic unification, historical atonement - Irish culture has quite suddenly begun to shed its identification with struggle as its principal and defining characteristic (Miller 1).

The result of this shifting identification, Miller continues, is that the idea of struggle as part of Irish identity has become something associated with the past, where the past has become “a distinct and contrary position, that time of Ireland’s sacred but benighted struggle” (2). But as much as consumption might be taking precedence over politics as a cultural preoccupation, there are many social factors that point to the fact that contemporary Irish identity is still deeply imbued with markers of the past, or at the very least, that contemporary Irish culture remains in transition.

As an example of the cultural contradictions still inherent in Irish society, Lionel Pilkington points to the riots at Drumcree in the latter half of the 1990s. The Protestant Drumcree Church is situated in Portadown, County Armagh, in an area that is predominantly Catholic. Beginning in 1995, ironically after both loyalist and nationalist paramilitaries ordered ceasefires, conflicts erupted when the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) attempted to reroute the Portadown Orangemen Parades which are practiced to commemorate Protestant success at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The parade traditionally marched along the Garvaghy Road in the housing estate of Drumcree, against the protests of the estate’s community, which is 95% Catholic/nationalist (Bryan, no pag.). Cautioning against the assumption that the Celtic Tiger denotes a society unified in its orientation towards the future, speed, and progress, Pilkington notes:

Whereas the Celtic Tiger denotes Ireland’s rapid growth within a global, high-speed and predominantly service-based capitalist economy, Drumcree appears time-bound and fixed obsessively to a specific locality; here, the characteristic experience is not speed, but an obdurate, slow-motion choreography of waiting (Pilkington 127).

In addition to the persistence of ‘Troubles’ politics, the overall wealth of the Celtic Tiger has been accompanied by an increasing gap between rich and poor – evidence that the boom has not been equally gracious to all areas and social strata in the country. Critics and close watchers of the period have noted that the public projection of Ireland’s image as broadly affluent does not reflect the negative aspects of an increased gross domestic product. Peadar Kirby argues that “the high economic growth rates of the 1990s have been accompanied by growing relative poverty, inequality and occupational stratification, and by declining welfare” (Kirby 30). In terms of social progress, Kirby grants that today’s Ireland offers “a more solid economic base and its looser sense of identity has opened spaces of accommodation for Northern unionists,” but cautions that “an all-pervasive rhetoric of multiculturalism cloaks the emergence of an ugly racism, a continuing intolerance to the Travelling community and an antipathy in many quarters to the greatest source of multiculturalism in Irish culture, namely the Irish language” (34). Considering the fast pace of socio-economic change in Ireland, it is not surprising that the process of transition would be marked by a number of internal contradictions, in this case the existence of poverty amidst great wealth, and forces of conservation against those of novelty and change.

There is some evidence of resistance to the rapid economic and cultural changes that coincide with the Celtic Tiger. Marina Carr’s broken and displaced characters are one example of a reaction against the sudden promises of wealth and change in Ireland, and films that emerged at the end of the decade of growth, *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003) and *Adam and Paul* (Leonard Abrahamson, 2004) chart figures who are disenfranchised from the

new affluence of urban Ireland. Theatrical and cinematic responses to Celtic Tiger Ireland will be traced in more detail in subsequent chapters, but at this point it is fitting to return to that odd new monument that decorates O'Connell Street; a monument that was conceived during a contest held at the height of economic renewal, and arguably erected as a lasting symbol of that moment as growth began to level and even decline. In addition to viewing the Spire as a symbol devoid of political import, as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is also possible to view it as an attempt to make a public statement of stasis and permanence, in a society that is marked by the very opposite. Rapidly changing social organisation can cause deep anxiety, and can encourage a cultural backlash that seeks to halt the inevitable disappearance of traditional practices and beliefs; the physical results of this backlash often appear in the form of monuments, which are meant to mark, in space, a disappearing configuration of time and space (Huyssen 23). Changes to the economy in Ireland have been significant, but importantly, they have also been accompanied by increasing secularisation, which arguably has an equal or even more profound effect on shifting notions of Irish identity.

The Waning Influence of the Catholic Church

Two significant elements of Irish identity – the role of the Catholic Church, and its concomitant attitudes towards the body and sexuality – have changed considerably over the last decade of the 20th century. Several events have shaken the authority of the Catholic Church as the main arbiter of morality in this time, significantly affecting the long-held association between Irish identity and the practice of Catholicism. In many ways, it appears that Catholicism is waning as a basis for social and political decision-making, and it is clear

that in concrete terms, a smaller percentage of the population is attending mass on a regular basis. However, the power of religion as a basis for morality, as discussed below, still holds significant sway in the public imagination. Therefore, as many commentators have noted, there is an increasing gap between the persuasive powers of the Church, and the persuasive powers of the religion it espouses. This gap can be seen to be reflected in Sebastian Barry's work, in that he calls into question the polarising tendencies of the Church, while at the same time his dramaturgy follows the structure of redemption, pointing to the retention of Catholic ideals at a spiritual, if not institutional level. Marina Carr's plays also test the authority of the Catholic Church, through the central characters' struggles with traditional Christian mores. Her plays draw simultaneously on several religious traditions, including early Celtic mythology and the ancient Greek polytheistic cosmology, which place more contemporaneous clashes between Christian denominations into a broader spiritual framework. The loosening of the Catholic Church as one of the central lynchpins of identity in the Irish context should be understood in light of both specific events that became public in the 1990s, as well as an overall shift in social attitudes that took place over a relatively short period of time.

In many ways the Church sealed its own fate by both allowing and covering up patterns of abuse that occurred within its own ranks over several decades. One major story that captured the public imagination was the revelation of systemic abuse at the Magdalene Laundries. For decades, hundreds of women were confined and forced into labour at 'laundries' under the auspices of rehabilitation; in many cases, the women sent to the Laundries were victims of sexual abuse, or were 'too flirtatious' for the social mores that dictated moral codes. Once there, the women were abused and humiliated, and often never

saw their families again. The women's stories provided clear inspiration for Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992), as well as Peter Mullan's 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*.

The revelation of serious sex abuse scandals continued throughout the 1990s, affecting Catholic Church dioceses in several countries, including the United States and Canada. In Ireland, it was revealed that, in many cases, the Church knew of the abuses and did little to stop the offenders; instead, they responded by merely shipping the offending priests from one parish to the next. In one case, Fr. Brendan Smyth was convicted of systematically raping hundreds of children over a 45-year period. The revelation of the abuses, and, more importantly, the complicity of the Church, has been named as the main factor in the drop in weekly mass attendance in Ireland over the ten-year period surrounding the events. A 2003 survey found that 50% of Catholics attend mass at least once a week, down from 60% in 1998. The decline was most significant in rural areas, where church-going has traditionally been strongest, dropping from 77% to 60% over the same period (Staff, "50% of Irish Catholics"). An earlier survey found that 36% of Catholics said their religious practices had been affected by the sex-abuse scandals (N. Haughey). For most respondents, this manifested itself in a decline in mass attendance, as well as a distrust of the Church. Importantly, for most respondents, the events did not change their faith in God, suggesting that while spiritual beliefs persist, the authority of the Catholic Church to control or guide these beliefs is waning. While the Church's negligence in these cases had a direct affect on the public practice of Catholicism, a loosening of Church authority was necessary in order for these revelations to capture the public imagination. The scandals were revealed in the 90s, but it is important to note that they were known, at least to some, in previous decades. While the scandals desecrated the appeal of the Church to many of its followers, the very fact that

they were publicly acknowledged and debated suggests that the Church was no longer beyond public scrutiny. Shifts in public policy around the hot-button issues of abortion and divorce in the 1990s demonstrate that the Catholic Church's ability to capture both the public imagination and to exert pressure on legislative bodies is waning.

The revelation of abuses within the Church has been accompanied by changes in the way Church doctrine is accepted and integrated into Irish politics. The special position of the Catholic Church was removed from the Irish constitution in 1973²⁵, but it is clear that debate about the influence of the Church in shaping public policy was still being waged through the 1990s. In 1988, Senator David Morris of the Irish Parliament challenged Ireland's laws against sex between men on the grounds of breach of privacy, and his case was successful. Largely motivated by this ruling, Ireland formally decriminalised homosexuality in 1993. The United Kingdom, by comparison, had decriminalised homosexuality in 1957. The decriminalisation passed through parliament without significant opposition, but the abortion debate, which has been waged through proposed amendments to the constitution, demonstrates the wavering but continuing influence of the Catholic Church in secular matters.

Abortion is generally illegal in Ireland, barring very specific cases as outlined by the judgement in the 1992 *X Case*. In this case, a 14-year old girl, pregnant from a rape, was barred from travelling out of Ireland for what would be a legal abortion in another state. The public outcry was significant, and eventually she was allowed to pass on the basis that not obtaining an abortion could threaten not just her health, but her life, as there was a high likelihood that she would commit suicide as a result of the unwanted pregnancy. Later that

²⁵ "The Fifth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1972," was ratified on January 5, 1973 (*Constitution of Ireland/Bunreacht Na Héireann*)

year, two referenda were passed: one guaranteed the right to travel between Ireland and another state; the second ensured the right to disseminate information about services lawfully available in another state (Irish Family Planning Association). A referendum to return to the stricter pre-1992 laws was rejected by the population in 2002. While abortion is still currently illegal except for this specific ‘threat to the mother’s life’ circumstance, it is generally accepted that the *X Case* raised the debate about how much the state should interfere in moral matters that stem from religious beliefs.

Similarly, the 1995 referendum on divorce demonstrates the increasing distance between public policy decisions and the arguments put forth by the Church. Despite the strong objections of the Catholic Church, divorce was legalised in the Republic in 1997, with the slimmest of margins: 50.28% of valid ballots were cast in favour of allowing the dissolution of marriage, and 49.72% against (Donnelly). However, the new legalisation is significant, because only a decade earlier, a similar referendum failed by a much larger margin, when 63.1% voted against the legalisation of divorce; voter turnout at both referenda was comparable (Prendiville 355).

While these changes in public moral sentiment have occurred over a relatively short period of time, and they are significant to contemporary Irish approaches to the person and to sexuality, it is clear that a struggle still exists within Irish society between relatively liberal, western European attitudes to sexuality, and more conservative forces. The public and government reaction to the opening of a “sex shop” across from the General Post Office on O’Connell Street is a case in point. At the time when construction was just beginning on the Spire site²⁶, city officials and local businesses complained about the opening of an outlet of the English-owned Ann Summers shop, which sells exotic lingerie and ‘marital aids’

²⁶ I would like to thank Barry Monahan for bringing the Ann Summers debate to my attention.

(otherwise known as sex-toys). Dublin Corporation tried to have the shop cease trading, but the case was quickly struck down in court. *Irish Times* columnist Kevin Myers argued at the time that the city was out of step with the more liberal attitudes to sexuality adopted by the majority of the public, as evidenced by the long line-ups of women outside the shop (Myers, “An Irishman’s Diary”)²⁷ Ann Summers had already been operating in the Republic for 10 years, but in a more private way, at all-women home parties (T. O’Brien).

Clearly the existence of “marital aids” in Irish lives is not the contentious point, but instead it is the fact that the shop held a prominent *public* place in Dublin. Dublin Corporation’s response to the shop contradicts their published responses to the Spire. The Corporation claimed that the pressure on the Ann Summers shop was not about censorship, but in the end, the image of the shop, prominently placed in same environs as the GPO and the Spire, did not fit with the desired projection of Dublin, even if many Dubliners were interested in the shop’s commodities. The effort to shut down the shop on the one hand, and the effort to liberalise the policing of sexual mores on the other hand, demonstrates that concrete changes in society are often not accompanied by immediate changes to the public *perception* of society. During moments of significant cultural transition, definitions of self, nation, and place – which are fed by collective memory – meet with material changes to the social fabric. The functions and powers of memory are embedded deeply in Irish culture, and the litany of changes to Ireland’s economy, demography, and cosmologies force a reconsideration of the elements that constitute collective memory.

²⁷ See also: “Sex Shop Plans Exposed ‘Flaw’”; Beesley, p. 1; Ingle, p. 1; Myers, “Furore over Sex Industry...”, p. 8.

III. Memory: The Irish Propensity for the Past

The range of changes taking place in Irish society necessarily places the relationship between Irish history and contemporary Irish identity in relief; layers of identity accrete over time, and through an engagement with particular understandings of tradition, place, and lineage. When the cultural elements that historically contribute to identity formation, such as the ones discussed above, are subject to redefinition, then so, too, will the face of the identity that has been built on those cultural elements. However, redefinition takes time, and the direct correspondence between changes in Irish society and culture, and changes in contemporary definitions of identity are challenged by the role that personal and collective memory plays in sustaining historical ideas of Irishness. Memory in Ireland has, to say the least, a particularly powerful cultural currency. Unlike history, which we think of as defining the past – even though the writing of history is affected by contemporaneous preoccupations – memory automatically refers to the effect of the past *on* the present. By definition, memory is “a term which directs our attention not to the past but to the past-present relation. It is because ‘the past’ has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much politically” (Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson, qtd. in Kammen 5).

Edna Longley, who focuses on the strongest hotbed of cultural memory, Ireland’s North, states that “first, the culture and politics of Northern Irish memory correspond to European and transatlantic patterns,” but “second, they manifest these patterns in a peculiarly intense way” (“Northern Ireland” 23). In other words, there is nothing particularly distinct about the character of memory in Irish culture, other than its strength and endurance. The division of Irish society into a variety of identity groups fosters the growth of pockets of

collective memory. Individuals certainly have personal memories, but it is the act of sharing and recalling memories within a group of people that leads to the solidification of particular memories into shared cultural narratives of the past. As Maurice Halbwachs has argued, even recent memories are formed through group associations:

What makes recent memories hang together is not that they are contiguous in time: it is rather that they are part of a totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation at this moment, or with whom we have had a relation in the preceding day or days...It is not because memories resemble each other that several can be called to mind at the same time. It is rather because the same group is interested in them and is able to call them to mind at the same time that they resemble each other (52).

Memory has the ability to construct powerful narratives about the past, and therefore it is important to discuss both its similarity and difference to what we call 'history.' For Pierre Nora, history is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer." Memory, on the other hand, is "a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, in so far that it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it" (Nora 8).

In the same way that we acknowledge that history is shaped by currents in historiographical theory, we also understand that memory is shaped by the automatic or intentional variations in recall. Memory functions necessarily as revisionist, not only because of the imperfections of recall – affected by time, space, and errors in accuracy – but also because it is intentionally selective, choosing to emphasise certain events or feelings over others. Memory lets some aspects of the past fade into the background, and highlights other

elements that otherwise may have receded into the shadows. Memory is partial, choosy, and untrustworthy, while at the same time, it is a rich repository of the past, and a fundamental constituent of personal and collective identity. As Samuel Beckett – *the* modern dramatist of memory – writes, “[y]esterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous” (Beckett 3).

It seems important to make a clear distinction between memory and history, largely because of the implicit sense that history is somehow more objective than memory – that it has been written, and vetted, and holds a kind of concreteness that memory does not hold. The above discussion on historiographical movements in Ireland reveals this definition of history as false: it too is subject to mistakes, intentional elisions, and biases. Further, there are reasons to believe that history and memory are becoming peculiarly joined. In popular terms, Michael Kammen argues that there is a

perception widely shared by most folks that memory *is* history. Unless someone remembers “it,” it might just as well not have happened. Conversely, history hinges upon memory: the necessarily selective, collective remembrance that suits a society (688).

While I do think it is important to maintain a distinction between the two terms, (and here I follow Nora’s definitions), it is clear that the two terms feed each other, and that the process of identity formation relies on both, sometimes with little distinction made between the two.

The competition for the Spire focused on the intended memorial function of the new monument, but in the end the chosen statue had no identifiable mnemonic meaning. As I’ve argued, the decision to choose the Spire as the winner points to an awareness of the way that

memory has functioned in Ireland, and perhaps to a desire to renew the way the past figures into 21st century formulations of Irishness. Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr both question the function of memory as well; in Barry's *Steward of Christendom* in particular, the title character is left with only his memories, and the reliability of those are fading. Marina Carr's protagonists are trapped by their memories, and haunted by their own pasts. In both cases, memory is characterized as personal and domestic, but, as I will discuss, their plays reflect a larger socio-political interrogation of the ways in which memory has been put to use in Ireland. In the film *Goldfish Memory*, which constitutes the longest case study in my final chapter, characters attempt to live in an eternal present, but are caught by their own propensities to remember past transgressions in the process.

The role of memory in Ireland is particularly acute. During the Troubles in particular, there was little cultural need to actively cultivate remembrance, because remembrance was widely used by different sides of the conflict as a way of constructing and fortifying unique identities. Images and slogans that conjure memory are prevalent in Northern Ireland, where the act of remembrance, in line with particular political ideologies or religious affiliations, is central to defining core identities. Slogans demanding that one remember this or that moment in history – usually a victory or defeat at battle – are written on the sides of buildings and along city walls. For example, the repeated shots of “Remember 1690” shown on urban walls in Pat O'Connor's 1984 film *Cal* tell the viewer that the Catholic protagonist Cal is walking in Protestant territory, a fact that is confirmed when his house is set on fire later in the film. “Remember 1690” has several referents; chronologically, the first is the Battle of the Boyne, when the Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Catholic King James; second, it refers to the political situation of the Troubles, and serves as a call to all Protestants in

Northern Ireland to remember that the figurehead of their religion won, and that, in short, Protestant rule should prevail. There is no need for the passerby to actively engage in an act of remembrance when witnessing the graffiti, because the repeated statement is, itself, an act of remembrance. The imperative to remember events from the distant past is a significant element of genealogical or denominational heritage.

In many cases the legitimacy of the lineage between the historical event and the contemporary group laying claim to that event is shaky, but this does not seem to drain power from the combined stew of history and memory as political rallying call. The disregard for accuracy in historical lineage blurs the line between past and present. Writing about Belfast, David Wilson explains “the patterns are carved in history; history is a prison, a trap.” But paradoxically, in some ways, “there is no past at all in the North; there is only an eternal present, in which rival atrocities from the 1640s or the 1790s fuse with rival atrocities from the 1920s or the 1980s, in which events, memories and myths have become jumbled together in contemporary consciousness, in which the dead and the living are chained together” (159-60).

In the North, the intertwined roots of memory and identity grow deep, and much of the factional iconography in Belfast draws connections between paramilitary groups of the 1980s and 1990s, and major nostalgic and tragic events in the past. In 2003, when the Peace Process was well underway but clearly not complete, a short walk up the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast revealed dozens of murals dedicated to remembrance-as-identity. In particular, more than one painted mural depicts UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) figures standing beside soldiers decked out in gear from the First World War. The first image is of a contemporary Protestant paramilitary figure, masked and clad from head to toe in black, and

the second image represents a soldier from the 36th Ulster division at the infamous Battle of the Somme. The historical lineage from the Somme to late 20th century Belfast is tenuous at best: while the soldiers at the Somme fought for Britain, their declared enemy was Germany; they were not consciously fighting against Irish nationalists, and certainly not against the Irish nationalists of the contemporary North. Regardless of this historical detail, the paired iconography attempts to stir up contemporary commitments to the Unionist position by connecting it to a major historical event for Protestant families in the North.²⁸

The next street over from the Shankill Road is the Catholic stronghold of the Falls Road; the iconography here is more contemporary, and it is used to state the nationalist perspective on the status of Northern Ireland. There are several murals and shrines to Bobby Sands and the hunger strikes of 1981, where Sands and nine others starved themselves to death to protest their demotion from “prisoners of war” to “ordinary decent criminals.” The most prominent mural covers the side of Sinn Féin’s northern headquarters, and in some cases, Sands is depicted as a Christ-like martyr. However, there are also murals drawing connections with other nationalist movements across the globe, which are based on ideological links and not blood ties or genealogy; in 2003 there were murals calling for Palestinian freedom, and solidarity between Irish and Catalan freedom fighters; several years later, there was a mural negatively depicting George Bush’s war on Iraq. While the Protestant side seems to reach back deeply in time, the Catholic side reaches through space and accesses more recent memories; both sides commemorate their dead as a way to bolster support for contemporaneous political standpoints.

²⁸ The reasons for the Somme’s significance in Northern Irish memory are complex; many young Catholics from the south also died in the battle, but the event has not been memorialised in the same way in the south. For an extended discussion of these issues, the intricacies of unionist and loyalist iconography in the North, and the factional splits inside the unionist movements, see Graham and Shirlow.

Ian McBride focuses on the common political counterparts to Catholic and Protestant religious affiliations – nationalist and unionist – and names these distinctions, respectively, as ‘redemptive’ and ‘providential’. “The nationalist past, as Oliver MacDonagh has observed, turns on ‘subjection and struggle’, takes ‘heroic defeat’ as its recurring motif; and prizes ‘the bearing of witness as against success....The Protestant self-image, on the other hand, envisages ‘an endless repetition of repelled assaults, without hope of absolute finality or of fundamental change.’” (McBride 15). Put in a slightly different way, Longley argues that patterns of remembrance in Ireland revolve around a major difference in Catholic and Protestant ways of seeing the self. Citing public support for hunger strikes as an example, she writes:

It is not only because individuals lack stamina that loyalist hunger strikes have always fizzled out: the gesture also lacks cultural support. Protestantism – and even Anglicanism is low-Church in Ireland – eschews iconography, martyrology, mariolatry, saints, Christ on the Cross. In Protestant theology, Pearse’s self-identification with Christ appears more obviously blasphemous. Orange insignia stick to the Old Testament, not only out of savage affinities, but because of the ban on representing the New. As a result, the Protestant equivalent of martyrology is a biblical narrative of persecution (paranoia rather than masochism) (Longley, *The Living Stream* 73).

The attention to memory in Ireland is an acknowledged reality, and can be manipulated intentionally to garner political support. Longley argues that Padraig Pearse and company planned the Easter Rising with the eventual commemoration of that Rising in mind: “[n]ever has an insurrection been so deliberately memorable as well as commemorative, so conscious

of its audience,” Longley writes, citing the phrase ‘They shall be spoken of among their people’ from Pearse’s poem *The Mother* as an example of Pearse’s frequent tone (Longley, *The Living Stream* 72). Memory is used in self-conscious ways in the plays and films of my study as well, but the self-consciousness can also be seen as self-critique; memory is revealed as problematic, and in the case of *Goldfish Memory*, forgetting is offered as an attractive alternative. The struggle to retain memory while also admitting its traps is clear in both Barry’s and Carr’s plays, and in order to represent memory, they often represent its loss, its distance, its leaving, and its disappearance. The ephemerality of memory, in many ways, complements the ephemerality of theatre as a medium.

* * *

O’Connell Street’s tall and weighty Spire, at the moment of its unveiling, appeared as anything but ephemeral, providing instead a permanent marker for Ireland at the beginning of a new century.²⁹ The sculpture’s permanence stands in contradistinction to the cultural flux that surrounded it, offering a snapshot of Irishness at a very particular moment in time. However, it is fair to view such a snapshot as illusory or mirage-like, because identity continually reforms and reshapes depending on the cultural variables that are relevant at any given moment. The fact that the Spire projects an idea of permanence and stability says more about the way Dublin wanted to see itself in 2003, than about how Dublin really *was* in 2003. Discussing the unearthing of monuments in the 19th century, Andreas Huyssen explains that

the monument came to guarantee origin and stability as well as depth of time

and of space in a rapidly changing world that was experienced as transitory,

²⁹ Ironically, a news report on May 8, 2008 announced that the Spire and several other monuments may have to be temporarily removed to allow for the construction of a metro line. The face of Dublin continues to change rapidly (Declan).

uprooting, and unstable. And the primary monument in the nineteenth century's admiration for classical and "prehistoric" antiquity was architecture. Thus it was no coincidence that Hegel placed architecture at the very beginning of art. Monumental architecture especially (think of the cult of obelisks, pyramids, temples, memorial and burial towers) seemed to guarantee permanence and provide the desired bulwark against the speed-up of time, the shifting grounds of urban space, the transitoriness of modern life (Huyssen 200).

Huyssen argues that monuments functioned in the 19th century as symbols of stasis, as reassurances of permanence in light of industrialisation (Huyssen 200). In contrast, Dublin's millennial Spire stands as both a representative marker of the Celtic Tiger moment, and as a conscious resistance to what that moment signifies in terms of traditional Irish history, economics, and religion. The Spire's aesthetic and political uniqueness on O'Connell Street might be a marker of its contemporariness, but its very existence, with a base bored deep in to the earth and rock beneath the street, resonates more with history and tradition. Ironically, Ireland's economic renewal was based primarily on high-tech and dot-com booms that have since lost the power of their early momentum. The renewal was based on an ephemeral medium, and was also shown to be ephemeral in its survival. To the contrary, the Spire in its very permanence reinscribes the idea of concrete memory, which is the opposite of ephemerality. In short, the Spire stands as a permanent monument to an ephemeral moment, containing within it the contradictions that face an Ireland in transition. These contradictions structure the plays and films that will be explored in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

MIXED LOYALTIES AND QUELLED CONFLICTS: SEBASTIAN BARRY'S DRAMATIC APPROACH TO IRISH HISTORY

“Sebastian Barry’s plays are about history, but not in any very obvious or familiar sense,” writes Irish theatre and cultural critic Fintan O’Toole in the introduction to Barry’s first collection of plays, most of which were inspired by and loosely based on distant relatives in Barry’s family history (Barry, *Plays 1* viii). The characters in Barry’s plays are surrounded by major events in modern Ireland’s history, yet the associated major historical figures always manage to operate on the periphery of these events. While references to the Irish political past are woven deeply into the fabric of his theatre, they are not the main subject of the plays, and therefore appear in the narrative only in oblique ways. Moments in Barry’s plays provide us with complex images of the Irish past, but the main subjects of the image are unexpected, in that they have not played a role in shaping the annals of official history. Part of Barry’s approach is to refuse a dramaturgical structure based on binary approaches to the Irish past; his characters have multiple identities, and cannot be slotted into singular loyalties to ‘Ireland’ or to ‘Britain.’ His images, in short, fall outside both loyalist and Republican nationalist frames of reference.

In many ways, Barry’s theatre is revisionist, in the particular sense that it is associated with the movement in Irish history which began in the 1930s but continues today. His work does fit with some of the basic outlines of the revisionist movement, characterised by a rejection of Irish history as a focused, 700-year long march to national independence. But revisionist history has many voices, and Barry does not fall easily into one particular camp.

His plays create their own narrative of Irish history, which contributes to the ongoing debate about representing the Irish past. He weaves this alternate version of the past by drawing on the kind of popular or collective memory discussed in the introduction, and populating the figures of that popular memory with characters drawn from his own extended family. Barry's characters claim conflicting loyalties, forcing accepted narratives of the past to be reconsidered for their exclusivity and partiality.

Heroes on the sidelines

Barry's plays do not focus on the 'great events' of the Irish past, yet these events often circle in the background, providing a recognisable context for the characters' lives. Unlike many 20th century plays that engage directly with Irish politics, Barry's are focused on smaller moments in domestic history. This is not to say that politics do not enter his theatrical radar; in fact, the plays are intensely political in the way they grapple with British and Irish history, and the legacy of divisions engendered by conflicts between the two. Barry's theatrical landscape gently nudges the great heroes of Irish history offstage and onto the sidelines of the dramatic action, placing them, as one scholar notes "just as much on the theatrical periphery as his chosen characters exist on the historical periphery" (Cummings 292). His focus instead is on the marginal characters of Irish history whose lives have been touched irrevocably by the grand events around them. Moving these marginal characters to the centre of his drama suggests that "...a more accurate picture of Ireland's complex past may lie in the details of these individual tales of confusion and loss" (J. Haughey 301). The concomitant result of this shift is to displace not only the importance, but also the dramatic function of well-known figures. The heroes and villains that would populate 'great man'

accounts of Irish history are represented through memory, often functioning as spectres in the narrative, but never as catalysts in the dramatic action.

Set in 1932, *The Steward of Christendom* traces the waning days of Thomas Dunne, whose presence in a mental asylum is marked by a steady flow of memories from the turbulent decade leading up to independence. Two major events in Irish political history recur in Dunne's recollections: the handover of state power to the nascent Irish government in 1922, and the general strike and lockout of 1913. Referencing this latter date, the play is dotted with references to trade union leader "Big Jim" Larkin, but like all of Barry's well-known historical figures, Larkin never makes an appearance in the *mise-en-scène*. Instead, he serves as a spectre of Thomas Dunne's shifting world. Dunne is the self-proclaimed steward of Christendom, a police officer who, in the play's narrative, was once responsible for keeping order on the streets of Dublin, and who took his role as the British monarch's defender in Ireland very seriously. Dunne's encounter with citizen protesters in a rally organised by Larkin marks the first moment in the story when Dunne begins to experience the breakdown of British Ireland, and therefore, the breakdown of the organising metaphor for his career and life. The "Black Jim" that haunts Dunne's hallucinations at the opening of the play (23-24) is a mottled version of the "Big Jim" who spearheaded the strike of 22,000 workers in 1913. Smith, the orderly who alternately cares for and berates Dunne, also conjures up the hanging of Robert Emmet (1778-1803) as an example of what "official men" did to a "patriot" and a "fine Protestant gentleman at that" (*Steward* 249). Smith's use of Emmet is an intended jab against the ex-Police official Dunne, but an anachronistic one in that Dunne could not have been in service, or even alive, during Emmet's life. The anachronism serves to emphasise how key events and figures serve so palpably as markers of

identity. Importantly, Emmet was both Protestant and an Irish patriot – a combination of identities that introduces the theme of ‘multiple loyalties’ that operates throughout the play. Barry sidelines the famous figures, so that their traditional use in nationalist memory – as a rallying call for republican revolution – is quelled by their displacement from the main dramatic action. Instead, Barry explores the function of individual memory as a way to unpack the diachronic impact of the Irish cultural practice of viewing the present through the events of the past. Beginning with *Boss Grady’s Boys*, he weaves threads of personal memory with events in Irish history, creating a tension that complicates the historical record.

Boss Grady’s Boys’ premiere on the Peacock stage of the Abbey theatre in August 1988 marked the first performance of a Barry play on a major stage.³⁰ The play follows a few days in the unremarkable but imaginatively rich lives of two brothers, the eponymous Josey and Mick Grady of the play’s title. Josey is the elder brother, and suffers from occasional dementia. The play is familiar in 20th-century Irish dramatic history for its setting in a rural cottage, complete with glowing turf fire, as well as for its long monologues and preference for narrative exposition over dramatic action. However, the play’s gentle and honest exploration of repressed sexual desire and brotherly love separates it from precursors like *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) or more recent works such as Martin McDonagh’s *Lonesome West* (1997). In *Playboy*, the Irish play most likely to make it on a modern drama university survey course, the inhabitants of a small rural village get very excited when a young man, Christy Mahon, timidly appears in the local pub, seeking shelter. As his audience grows, his confidence builds; when he reveals that he just killed his mean and overbearing father, who was trying to marry him to a woman twice his age, the villagers celebrate him as

³⁰ Barry’s first piece of theatre, the one-woman play *The Pentagonal Dream*, was produced by the Operating Theatre company at The Damer Hall in St. Stephen’s Green in March 1986, but *Boss Grady’s Boys* is the first play to attract wide-spread attention to Barry as a playwright.

the ‘playboy of the western world.’ The trope of repressed sexuality is treated narratively through the overt attention paid to Christy by the town’s young- and middle-aged women. It is made clear that the barmaid, Pegeen Mike, is attracted to the seemingly wild and assertive Christy partly because he contrasts so strongly with her regular suitor, Shawn Keogh, who does not want to be seen alone with her for fear of what the local priest will say. When Christy’s father appears – very much alive after receiving Christy’s blow – violence ensues and in a curious turn of sympathies, there is talk of lynching Christy for lying and for attempted murder. Martin McDonagh’s *The Lonesome West* shares the plot point of patricide and the rural setting of *Playboy*, and treats the relationship between two brothers who are constantly at each another’s throats. Coleman and Valene live in quarters that are too close for comfort, and they continually find ways to irritate each other, until the violence simmering below the surface turns into a rolling boil (McDonagh, *Plays*).

Boss Grady’s Boys shares the rural cottage setting of both plays, and the central character set of middle-aged brothers living in the same small space. However, the play treats the brothers’ relationship with remarkable patience, and explores their repressed sexuality without violence. The play is marked by the persistence of personal memory, which is often shown to make an awkward fit with lived history. In a recurring pattern, Josey at first insists that their old dog is alive, and then switches his verb tense to discuss how the dog, when it was alive, was loved by the sheep. Mick corrects him several times, and Josey changes his story to attempt to fit each correction, but it is clear that he has a persistent memory of the dog lying down with the sheep, and the sheep enjoying the dog’s company (6). Several times this personal memory is complicated by memories of Ireland’s political history, with the personal, less ‘official’ aspects of memory taking precedence. The strongest example of how

Barry complicates historical events occurs in the monologue that introduces Josey's memory of Michael Collins (1890-1922), who was widely known as "Mick." During the monologue, Josey interpolates references to "Mick" Collins into a story about his brother, who is also named Mick. As the monologue progresses, it become increasingly less clear which Mick he is talking about:

... It was like when Mick Collins was all the fashion, and Mick was away every night, and then every night away after that, when the old man was dead as a dog and the farm was ours in a way. It was our farm and no one came up the track to say otherwise. There were hens galore with brown eggs in them, there were two old pigs that wouldn't breed any more, there were more sheep, and a milking cow to boot. It is like that now, as if Mick were away all night at his game, and the country very silent in its manner around me. It is like that, with a bat coming in from the dark and losing his way in the firelight. Mick away, and the dark roof moving with the firelight. Mick away. Little heat from the fire in this state, the moon in her own house, Collins the same man that was buried afterwards. He was a big black man with a greasy face. Mick told me. He was the king of the country in his time. He was a lonely sort of man, I suppose. And he made me lonely. I'd make tea for a halfpenny (8-9).

The confusion between Micks demonstrates the difficulty in isolating Mick Grady's identity, because it is being filtered through the more recognised public figure of Michael Collins.

Collins is a curious figure in Irish history, because his status has shifted between patriot and traitor over time, depending how one regards his decision to sign the Anglo-Irish

Treaty in 1921.³¹ Tim Pat Coogan's biography of Collins did much to champion Collins's role in achieving Irish independence, but it was Neil Jordan's 1996 biopic that secured Collins a mythological status in Irish history.³² The debate about Collins's status continues today, and is acutely marked by the absence of any major memorial to him in the country's capital.³³ *Boss Grady's Boys* predates both Coogan's biography and Jordan's film, and engages with a Collins whose legacy is more ambiguous. In a sense, this makes Michael Collins a more fitting character in Barry's worldview, because his role in Irish history is hard to pin down. He occupies a liminal place in Irish republican history, and makes a fitting reference point for a playwright who continually breaks down black-and-white constructions of the past. Barry sets up Collins as a figure to be admired, but the criterion for admiration in *Boss Grady's Boys* is Collins's personal characteristics. Josey's monologue recalls not the Collins made famous by a vast network of intelligence networks, nor the Collins celebrated during the Anglo-Irish war for his successful guerrilla warfare tactics, but instead, it recalls the personal side of Collins, whose charisma wooed those around him. This decision fits with the perception of Michael Collins in popular memory – he was known for his effusive personality – but it is also characteristic of Barry to make reference to a public figure, only to then focus on the private side. Neil Jordan's biopic traces the major political events in Collins's life, but in the end it focuses just as much on his personal side, cross-cutting the

³¹ When Collins returned to Dublin from Westminster with the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December, 1921, two factions emerged from the republican cause. One faction sided with Collins, and has since praised him as a hero for achieving independence; the other faction considered Collins a traitor because the Treaty failed to achieve several stated aims, such as the status of Ireland as a Republic, as well as an Ireland that consisted of all 32 counties.

³² Robert Cole argues that Jordan's approach to Collins is not new in film history (445-447), but the Hollywood-epic appeal of *Michael Collins* (1996) means that Jordan's film had a tremendous impact on views of Collins, and as a result, generated a great deal of debate.

³³ O'Connell Street, the major boulevard in Dublin, is dotted with large iconic memorials to Ireland's great nationalist heroes. The stretch north from O'Connell bridge to Parnell Street includes statues of Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), Jim Larkin (1874-1947), and Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891).

final scene where he is shot on a roadside in County Cork with images of his fiancée, Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts), trying on her wedding dress. The personalizing of Collins in this film creates audience sympathy for the Collins character (played by Liam Neeson), while also fulfilling the convention that places a heterosexual romance at the centre of the epic blockbuster.

Michael Collins is referred to in *The Steward of Christendom* as well, and again the focus is on how he looked, and the feelings that he inspired. Recalling his meeting with Collins, Dunne remembers he had “a glamour about him, like a man that goes about with the fit-ups, or one of those picture stars that came on the big ship from New York, to visit us” (286). Dunne knew that most of the men in his division supported Collins, but his loyalty to the British Empire, which had fought against Collins, proved stronger:

And for an instant, as the Castle was signed over to him, I felt a shadow of that loyalty pass across my heart. But I closed my heart instantly against it.

We were to have peace. On behalf of the Crown the chief secretary wished him well. And indeed it was peaceful, that moment (286).

Dunne’s loyalty to the King, which I will discuss later in this chapter, caused him to hide that fleeting response.

In addition to complicating previous dramatic or republican treatments of Michael Collins, Mick’s monologue in *Boss Grady’s Boys* has the effect of placing the Grady brothers’ history alongside the history of Michael Collins. By choosing to use Collins’s nickname “Mick,” but more importantly, to call one of the Grady brothers “Mick,” Barry has Collins become almost interchangeable with Mick Grady in the monologue, weaving the brothers’ history into national history, and by extension, granting their history equal dramatic

weight. This small act places the characters alongside stereotypical ‘textbook’ versions of history, creating a presence where an absence may not have even been noted. The monologue at times conflates the two Micks, highlighting the fact that fate or accident has singled out the one Mick for fame and importance in defining Irish identity, whereas the other Mick, who is just as much a part of Ireland, and who has struggled long and hard in his own way, has been relegated to the shadows of this definition. The end of the above monologue briefly mentions the mayhem that ensued in the Civil War following Independence, but it turns quickly away from any mention of politics, and toward a discussion of the effect of the war on ordinary citizens:

All that spring and summer, as now and then some brave boy spat at me in the streets, I could not hold back the tide of ruin. It was a personal matter. We had restored order in the days of Larkin. One morning I met a man in St Stephen’s Green. He was looking at a youngster thrown half-in under a bush. No more than eighteen. The man himself was one of that army of ordinary, middle-class Irishmen with firm views and moustaches. He was apoplectic. We looked at each other. The birds were singing pleasantly, the early sun was up.

‘My grandsons,’ he said, ‘will be feral in this garden – mark my words’ (286).

It is characteristic of Barry to not push the reference to Michael Collins, the Anglo-Irish war, or the Civil War any further in terms of an explicit political statement; instead, Barry’s political statement is to suggest that there are ways of remembering crucial moments in Ireland’s political history without focussing on political acts and factions. In fact, Josey’s remembrance is nostalgic, and Collins stands as a symbol of the positive anticipation that precedes any large social change. Decades after the days of Collins and the founding of the

Irish Free State, both the Grady brothers and Thomas Dunne of *The Steward of Christendom* long, not for a different historical outcome, but for the sense of hope and excitement generated by Collins. Reviewing the play's premiere at the Abbey Theatre in August 1988, Fintan O'Toole characterizes Josey's short speech as "one of the most complete invokings of the hopes and failures of the War of Independence in Irish literature," and praises Eamonn Kelly's stylised approach to Josey (O'Toole, "Brilliant Bold Boys"). While O'Toole appreciates the non-naturalistic approach to the performances, other critics debate the merits of the play based on its perceived connection to Irish rural reality. One reviewer appears bothered by the distance between the play's representation of rural life, and the stereotypes he would expect to find in a 'rural drama': Con Houlihan writes that while Barry's grasp of the rural is impressive, "surprisingly there is hardly a mention of football, Gaelic or otherwise" (Houlihan, "Rural Brother's Drama"). On the other hand, one critic concludes: "But surely we've seen enough old men sitting around turf fires and sipping tae on the Irish stage to do us a lifetime" (Coughlan). These responses, which assess the supposed accuracy of Barry's rural setting, contrast directly with the O'Toole review just mentioned, which notes how the impressionistic quality of Barry's writing alters the received tradition of rural cottages and men talking around turf fires. The act of recall is not merely an *event* for Josey, it is his preferred state of being. Josey *exists* in the process of recall, as he continually strives and fails to complete the act of remembering. He is also a broken man who longs for things he has never had, and has trouble controlling his bodily functions. The combination of physical decline with a fractured memory makes him an apt symbol for Ireland, which is similarly struggling to create a new foundation for memory that acknowledges, but is not bound to, the idea of looking to the past.

The Barry Family Tree

Part of what marks Barry's work as unique is the fact that he draws on real figures from his own genealogy to create the main characters in his plays and novels. In certain cases the connection is vague, as with *Boss Grady's Boys*, which was inspired by a great aunt and cousin he used to spend summers with in Wicklow as a boy (Barry, quoted in "Barry in Season"). In other cases, he harvests his characters directly from the branches of his own family tree: Fanny Hawke, the protagonist in *Prayers of Sherkin*, is based on Barry's great grandmother; Thomas Dunne of *The Steward of Christendom* was one of his great-grandfathers; and *Our Lady of Sligo* traces the final years of his maternal grandmother. Barry has explained that he draws on these distant relatives in an effort to populate his own history; therefore his plays can be considered a fictionalised form of historical writing. In addition to these genealogical connections, the plays also contain intertextual references to his other works; Thomas Dunne's daughter in *The Steward of Christendom*, Annie Dunne, appears as the title character in his 2002 novel, and is also one of the aforementioned inspirations for *Boss Grady's Boys*. Annie Dunne's older brother, Willie Dunne, appears as a ghost in *The Steward of Christendom*, and is also the main character in Barry's 2005 novel, *A Long Long Way*. Barry's plays and novels, therefore, are written like members of an extended family, with each one revealing intimacies and secrets about the other. The important aspect of this genealogical approach, at least in terms of historiography, is that the central characters who populate Barry's plays also once populated the Irish landscape; Barry's fictionalised accounts of the Irish past find their basis in actual lives. The implications of this fact for views of the Irish past will become clear when looking at the ways Barry deconstructs binary constructions of identity.

Historian Roy Foster characterises Barry's project as "one of recovery," of "stitching back into the torn fabric of Irish history the anomalous figures from an extended Irish family" ("Lost Futures" 23). Barry's version of history privileges figures who would otherwise be lost – to use a metaphor drawn from rural Irish landscapes – to the flotsam and jetsam of the past. From a music hall dancer in *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* to the cowboys of the Irish diaspora who tear through the American west in *White Woman Street*, the ancestors who populate his plays are not figures that command public attention; in fact, they lead average, unremarkable lives in terms of their public status. Even though his plays comment on moments that are now widely considered major events in Irish history, his characters are represented only as minor players in these events. Placing these figures on stage is in and of itself an act of historical reclamation, first because these characters would otherwise be easily elided or missed in written history, and second because they could only occupy awkward places in the accepted historical record. The theatre of W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, which explicitly aimed to include the 'little people' of Ireland in the dramatic action, contained an implicit nationalist agenda. In contrast, Barry chooses characters that do not fit easily with either of the major factions in Irish history. The 'standpoint' that he writes from, like that of his characters, is that of an insider whose eclectic personal background³⁴ has made him an anomaly in both Catholic and Protestant circles.

Regardless of the use of personal genealogy as inspiration, Barry's construction of narrative belies the fact that he is not merely drawing on a personal and singular history, but is tapping into a broader sense of collective memory. The characters are real, but the intricate details and dates of their lives are fictions. "I am in fear as a playwright of facts and dates and I will never make an historian," Barry writes in the preface to his collection of plays (*Plays 1*

³⁴ Barry refers to himself as a 'Catholic bohemian.' (Barry, *International Festival of Authors - Interview*).

xv). He does not spend hours in the archives poring over the facts of history, and his research is “emotional rather than empirical” (Wallace, “Interview”). As is most clearly evidenced by *Hinterland*, which merits a full discussion later in this chapter, Barry’s process involves consuming to a certain extent what is already a given in collective memory, and then fashioning it with his own interpretive spin. This is important in terms of Barry’s populist approach to history, because it tells us that his sources are available to all, and that he is tapping into what most Irish people would understand about their own history. What is remarkable is that this personal or collective history is often at odds with ‘official’ history, which as I discussed in the introduction, has been written from a nationalist, pro-republic perspective.

Refusing to shape history through binaries

Prayers of Sherkin, which premiered at the Abbey Theatre on the Peacock stage in 1990, tells the story of a small Quakerish sect in the 1890s who live peacefully, in relative isolation, on a piece of land off the south-west coast of Ireland. Having emigrated from Manchester several generations earlier, the sect has now dwindled to a few members of one extended family, who, without the infusion of new blood, can no longer procreate. Prayers to the sect’s founder, asking him to replenish their numbers with new members from Manchester, have gone unanswered, and the sect strictly forbids marrying outside the religion. The two grown children of the family, Fanny Hawke and her brother Jesse Hawke, have no one to marry, and a considerable portion of the dinner-table conversation is devoted to this conundrum.³⁵ The main narrative conflict arises when Fanny Hawke, on a routine

³⁵ John Hawke is the patriarch of the family, and his nightly dinnertime prayer notes the dwindling gene pool: “Lord, we do abide, even unto this third generation. There are no others. Lord, you have taken my wife Charity.

shopping trip to the mainland, meets Patrick Kirwin, who is both an outsider to her sect, as well as a newcomer to the town. Despite gentle warnings from locals that the Hawkes only marry their own kind, Patrick proceeds to woo Fanny in his own awkward but warm-hearted way. After a few initial protests, Fanny agrees to see him, and Patrick asks her to marry him. The core of the issue is that Fanny's religion does not allow her to marry outside the sect, but the prospect of other members arriving is effectively non-existent. The group will die out if Fanny's generation, represented only by Fanny and her starry-headed brother Jesse, do not raise children. It is important to note that while the sect lives a fairly isolated existence, their provisions against intermarriage do not extend to a ban on the spheres of commerce and fraternization. Jochen Achilles argues that the intricate relations between the islanders and the mainland dwellers "make clear that even the most secluded and self-centered community depends on otherness" (444). John Hawke barter with nuns on the mainland for the beeswax to make his candles, and in turn, the proceeds from his handiwork light up the town of Baltimore on the mainland, home to both Catholics and Protestants. Hawke's communication with the mainlanders extends beyond the simple necessity of otherness to that of friendship; the islanders are friendly with the boatman, who shares stories of his world travels as he ferries them between mainland and island. Similarly, the Hawke family are friendly with Meg and Stephen Pearse, a Presbyterian couple who own the general shop on the mainland. When the island women cross to the shop, leaving John at home, Stephen Pearse is disappointed that his "big bear of a friend" (John Hawke) is not with them (75, 90).

Barry sets the play a hundred years in the past, and in the play's premiere production, the costumes and paratexts surrounding the production clearly placed the action at an

Bring in your own time a plain husband from Manchester for this our daughter Fanny, and a plain wife for Jesse. Lord, we are not lonely but we are few. Send us your help. Lord we pray that you have not forgotten us, your five remaining. Send us increase" (55).

historical distance. The actors were attired in Quaker dress from the 1890s, and director Caroline Fitzgerald characterised the production as a “costume drama” (O’Donnell 27). In addition, the Abbey’s newspaper advertisement featured a grainy image of a woman attired in a Quaker dress and bonnet. The cumulative effect of the play’s marketing and mise-en-scène suggests a kind of Irish heritage drama.³⁶ However, the religious conflict at the core of the play is difficult, if not impossible, to read outside the frame of sectarian conflicts that were raging in northern Ireland at the time of the play’s premiere. Implicitly, the play addresses contemporary issues that concern a contemporary audience, supporting the common notion that artistic representations of history address the present as much as they offer interpretations of the past.

The originality of the play lies not in the fact that it reads a religious conflict through a domestic setting, or that it provides a hopeful resolution to the conflict, but that it chooses to represent this conflict in a way that falls outside the binaries of Catholic/Protestant or Irish/British. These binaries have provided the backbone for dramatic conflict in countless plays in Ireland’s literary history, and clearly predate the “Troubles Ireland” from which Barry’s early plays emerge. For example, Yeats’ 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* provides one of the earliest examples of a text where nationalist loyalties overpower an impending marriage. Drawn by the Old Woman’s call to arms, the soon-to-be-married Michael questions the Old Woman about the hopes to which she has been alluding. Serving in the

³⁶ While I have not come across any specific theoretical formulation of an “Irish Heritage Drama,” Ruth Barton has created the category of “Irish Heritage Cinema,” which she theorises as marked by rural pastoralism, in contradistinction to the British Heritage Cinema popularized by the films of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. Barton’s definition of Irish heritage cinema includes films that emerged in the 1990s, and have in common “a nostalgic, edenic view of Ireland,” that is uncritical about the past, eschews modernity, endorses family values, portrays gender and sexuality conservatively, and avoids any representation of contemporary political violence. Examples include *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (John Sayles, 1993), and *Circle of Friends* (Peter Yates, 1995) (Barton, *Irish National Cinema* 148-156). I discuss Irish heritage cinema in more detail in Chapter 4.

play as an allegorical embodiment of nationalist Ireland, she responds, “The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house” (Yeats, *The Variorum Edition* 226). Without being named, the ‘strangers’ are clearly the British. In the end Michael falls quickly under the spell of the Old Woman’s call, and chooses to ‘marry’ himself to the possibility of a British-free Irish republic instead of marrying his fiancée Delia. He exits the family home to follow the Old Woman to battle, leaving his unworn wedding clothes where he dropped them. The binary of Irish as authentic versus the British as outsiders and colonisers as reflected in Yeats’ work has a broader cultural significance, as it supported the drive to create the indigenous Irish Literary Theatre in 1897.

Sean O’Casey also approaches the reality of British occupation in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), but in this case with an eye to challenging the promotion of blood sacrifice that marks Yeats’ play. Christopher Murray refers to O’Casey’s approach as one of demythologising, calling it “a revisionist play before the term was even coined” (*Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 94). Even though the play creates a level of ironic distance from the heroism claimed by supporters of the Easter Rising, O’Casey still uses the Irish/British binary as the skeleton onto which he grafts the domestic conflicts that arise in the play. Updating the historical battle and removing the ironic distance, Brian Friel’s *The Freedom of the City* (1973) uses the contemporaneous events of Bloody Sunday (January 30, 1972) as a way to explore the effects of British rule on everyday lives. The plot shifts between the Mayor’s parlour in Derry’s Guildhall, to scenes from the later Widgery inquiry into the day’s events. In the Guildhall parlour, we meet three peaceful civil-rights marchers who are sheltering themselves from the unexpected street violence; at the inquiry, which takes place in a different narrative timeframe, but is plotted alternately with scenes in the parlour, it

becomes clear that the three main characters were shot when they attempted to peacefully leave the building. Friel's play is a fictionalised account of an historical incident that holds a great deal of power over the republican imaginary in Northern Ireland, and as such, the play clearly marks the inadequacy of the inquiry and subsequent report, which absolved the British army of wrongdoing in the day's deaths (Widgery).

Friel's focus is on the three characters in the Guildhall, and he draws us into their lives through conversations about family in much the same way Barry does in *Prayers of Sherkin*. The binary is presented mostly through Friel's dramaturgical structure, which presents the innocent and chatty threesome in one scene, and the cold British officials in the next. This alternation paints the three marchers as peaceful, well-meaning and innocent Catholics, and the British as a solely militaristic presence who were all too willing to shoot innocent civilians. The scenes from the Widgery Tribunal further this distinction, with Friel calling for the judge to be placed "high up in the battlements" (*Selected Plays* 107).

There have been attempts to reframe the traditional binary of conflict in plays such as Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), and Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Toward the Somme* (1985), but in the final analysis, each of these plays still relies on the binary to create a dramatic conflict. *A Whistle in the Dark* seemingly places the blame for violent conflict solely on the heads of the rough-and-tumble Carney family, by conjuring up a dark world of tribal conflicts that places the brothers in a never-ending conflict with another Irish family, the Mulryans. However, Murphy places this intra-Irish conflict in relief by setting the play in London, at the home of Michael Carney and his English wife Betty.³⁷ Betty, and the fact that she is English, become

³⁷ Anthony Roche explains that the switch in locale is what reveals their actions to be so inappropriate. "[T]he faction-fighting tribe of the Carneys has been displaced from its native Mayo, from an Irish rural hinterland to a

fodder for the visiting brothers' ire, and in the end, Michael loses his own battle to fight the tribal pull asserted by his bellicose brothers. The traditional binary is thus reinstated, with Betty and the London setting standing against the ingrained 'old country' customs of the Carney family. Murphy is clearly critiquing this sort of tribalism, but nevertheless he does it by using the binary as a source of dramatic conflict. Christopher Murray summarises the play as dealing with "the lives and culture of Irish migrants" in England, but clarifies that "Murphy's focus is on the neurosis of the individual, related to the neurosis in Irish society itself." Murray states, however that "[c]learly it is not the plight of emigrants *per se* which forms the main interest of *A Whistle in the Dark*" (*Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 166). By placing the brothers and the dramatic action in England and not their native Mayo, the play frames the social discord in a way that necessarily echoes the history of tribal conflict between the Irish and the British. The Carneys' emigration to London thus becomes implicated as a factor in their continued fighting, as evidenced by Michael's failed attempts to send Des, the youngest and least hardened of the lot, back to Ireland.

What *A Whistle in the Dark* has in common with the previously mentioned plays is that it offers a critique of the legacy of sectarian behaviour. It offers this critique through an unpleasant exploration of Irish animosity towards a vague notion of Englishness; what it does not do, unlike the plays to follow, is offer a forum for reconciliation. Despite Michael's attempts to move beyond violence, the play can only offer a tragic resolution. As the denouement unfolds, Michael uncharacteristically strikes his wife, and accidentally kills Des, the one last hopeful figure in the Carney family (T. Murphy).

modern urban setting. In this locale, their activities are no longer appropriate, are rather at odds with the environment" (*Contemporary Irish Drama* 138).

Stewart Parker's *Pentecost*, set in 1974 Belfast, also aligns sectarian conflict with dramatic conflict, but his play is generously ecumenical, attempting to find common ground between opposing factions. The play follows five ordinary characters who gather, over a period of a few months, in one of the last occupied houses in a unionist area of Belfast. The background to the play is the Ulster Worker's Council Strike, which arose out of Protestant anger over the power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland in December 1973. Two of the characters, Ruth and Peter, are Protestant, and two of them, Marian and Lenny, are Catholic. The remaining character, a staunch unionist named Lily who recently died in the house, appears as a ghost. With this unlikely cast of characters assembled, Parker unfolds the story of Lily's secret affair with an English serviceman, which was consummated on the sofa in the front parlour of the house. The sofa becomes a place for other dalliances in this now decidedly ecumenical household, which angers Lily's ghost. While the radio plays speeches by the British Prime Minister denouncing the strike, and Lily remains defiantly sectarian, it becomes clear that the members of the younger generation occupying the household have moved beyond Lily's categorical worldview (S. Parker). The characters are still identified as Catholic or Protestant, but they have immediate problems that cut across sectarian divides. Parker's play is remarkable for its hopefulness, particularly considering that it was produced before the various ceasefires and peace agreements of the 1990s. Even in the worst of situations – civic shutdowns in Northern Ireland and deadly political violence – there is hope for reconciliation through personal efforts.

Frank McGuinness' critical success of 1985, the lyrical *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, also assumes an ecumenical posture, but the ecumenism lies in the dialogue between the playwright and his play, and not in the narrative of the play.

Observe the Sons of Ulster follows the lives of eight young men, all Protestant and with varying degrees of passion about the unionist cause, who eventually fight for Britain at the Battle of the Somme in World War One (McGuinness, *Observe the Sons*). In actuality, this particular historical battle claimed the young lives of many Ulster men, and functions in the loyalist collective memory in a similar way that the Easter Rising of 1916 or Bloody Sunday (*Freedom of the City*) functions in nationalist or republican collective memory. Each battle stands as a constitutive moment in the formation of the respective political and ideological loyalties, as evidenced by the breadth of murals dedicated to their commemoration, which I discussed earlier in the Introduction. Keeping the significance of the Battle of the Somme in mind, it is remarkable that McGuinness, a Catholic from the Republic of Ireland, would venture to write a play that represents one of the most lamented yet celebrated moments in Protestant loyalist history. As one could argue about many plays that take significant moments in history as their setting, *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* is as much a comment on the politics of 1985 Ireland as it is a comment on the politics of 1916. As Nicholas Grene notes, the play speaks to a truth: “the truth that, after the Somme, after the mass mechanised slaughter of the First World War, the petty nationalisms of Unionists and Republicans were to become hollow and unreal” (Grene 257).

The initial response to the play was that it attacked the “tribalism of Ulster Protestantism” (qtd. in C. Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 204), but Murray concludes that it is difficult to see the play in this light; to the contrary, the play represents a “triumph of the imagination. It sympathises profoundly with an alien point of view” (204, 206). In fact, it can be said that both *Pentecost* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster* sympathise with alien points of view, by exploring the possibility of finding common ground between

opposing perspectives. Both plays retain, as characters, representatives from both sides of the binary, and their achievement lies in highlighting the importance and value of communication across political divides. Like these two plays, *Prayers of Sherkin*'s central story explores the domestic effect of religious sects, and the impact it has on traditional ways of living. Yet unlike these earlier examples, Barry's work chooses not to explicitly represent the core conflict that has seemingly been at the heart of religious difference in Ireland for centuries. As I have argued, choosing to stage moments of reconciliation between opposing factions is not new to Irish theatre, but Barry re-presents Irish history by revising the binary approach one step further. In *Prayers*, he figures the conflict as one between a little known, and historically little-documented sect, and the various external belief systems that surround them. By choosing to place Quakers at the centre of a debate about religious difference and taboos against inter-marriage, he makes two distinct achievements. First, he alters the religious identities in the conflict, giving the play room to explore a sensitive and contentious issue without the historical baggage that would prejudice a cautious or defensive audience. Second, this alteration allows him to address the legacy of sectarian conflict through the more elastic device of metaphor. The consequence of these two achievements moves beyond the conciliatory approach of *Pentecost* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. The mapping of a Quaker/Non-Quaker and Insider/Outsider binary onto an existing Catholic/Protestant or Nationalist/Loyalist binary provides Barry with the rhetorical room to present alternatives for moving beyond binary approaches altogether.

By removing the traditional Catholic/Protestant binary³⁸ from the dramatic conflict, Barry instead dramatises the life of a group that holds an even stronger claim to minority status within Ireland. By focusing on this small sect, Barry places the struggles of Ireland's main religious groups into relief, and forces the audience to view them in a fresh light. There is one moment in the play when John Hawke the chandler talks about the mainlanders in terms that clearly distance his island-swelling sect from either side of the religious conflict. In drawing his dinnertime prayer to a close, he says to the prophet: "May you not leave one of us alone here since all around us are the darkneses of the Catholics and the strangenesses of the higher Protestants" (55)³⁹ To a contemporary audience, the Quaker sect might seem to hold the most mysterious practices in the *dramatis personae*, so this statement affords the audience the opportunity to acknowledge that 'darkness' and 'strangeness' are relative terms, depending on one's own religious subjectivity. Barry's metaphor for contemporary sectarianism provides an alternative to the tragic resolution that marks *A Whistle in the Dark*, in that violence is no longer an option, and a potential tragedy is reframed as an opportunity for growth.

At the end of the play Fanny Hawke chooses to marry the man from the mainland, and it is made clear that he is from a mixed background.⁴⁰ But again, the playwright does not allow a refigured binary to emerge between the two lovers; Patrick Kirwin turns out not to be

³⁸ The group on Sherkin Island are Protestants, but their rules of segregation are so strict that they cannot marry anyone who is not connected to the original group that left Manchester several generations earlier. John Hawke makes it clear to the Protestant Stephen Pearse that it is not the fact of Patrick Kirwin's Catholicism that makes him unsuitable for Fanny. He says to Stephen "She must abide by the island or else she is not a member of our families...Why, your own son even, if he had existence, could not marry her without the same loss. Even he could not be one of us" (103). This hard-line distinction effectively removes the sect from the larger Protestant communion.

³⁹ Note, this line prompted hearty audience laughter in the original production at the Peacock theatre, possibly suggesting that Barry's revisionism is offered and taken with a good degree of humour (Barry, *Prayers of Sherkin Production Video*).

⁴⁰ In a survey of the Abbey archive's press clippings on the first production, I found only one critic that noted this aspect of the play. See Harding.

a simple Catholic lithographer from Cork City, which the townsfolk had originally thought, because he claims both Catholic and Jewish ancestry. This further complexity explodes the notion of the binary itself, offering neither Catholic, Protestant nor Other, but a hybrid being. Patrick Kirwin's potential identification with an either/or identity transforms easily into a both/and identity, as he cannot claim a singular religious background. As a result, Kirwin is not challenged by a singular religious calling, and it is presumed that after the play's close, both he and Fanny will live to don their wedding clothes (unlike Michael in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*). At the end of the play, as if to demonstrate her acceptance of Fanny's choice to marry outside the sect, Aunt Sarah presents Fanny with an old wooden case from Manchester: "This is your proper hope-chest, Fanny, with tansy and heart's ease to freshen the clothes" (115).

The embracing of difference in *Prayers of Sherkin* produces an inversion of the effect *Cathleen ni Houlihan* intended to have on audience members. According to Murray, in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, "... the action reflects back upon its own purpose: the process Michael undergoes as he listens to the stories and songs of the old woman [sic] is the same process which the audience undergoes in attending the play. He is changed utterly. As in a dream he exits to join the revolution" (C. Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 21). If audiences indeed reflect on their experiences, then the effect of a production of *Prayers of Sherkin* is to exit the theatre, leaving the vestiges of the revolution behind. *Prayers of Sherkin*, if it preaches at all, preaches forgiveness for the historical animosities that continued to plague and divide 1990s Ireland.

The reception of the play suggests that Barry's deconstruction of the binary made the historical relevance of the play questionable in the eyes of some critics. In a *Times Literary*

Supplement review of the 1997 London premiere of the play, the reviewer criticizes what she sees as an abundance of “loving tolerance” in the Sherkin family:

It seems churlish to carp against such an essentially kind play...but it does lack any vestige of historical or psychological realism. *Prayers of Sherkin* is probably best taken as a fairy story, the perfect choice to entertain a nervous American aunt of Irish extraction, over here for the first time in search of her roots. There is nothing nasty in the woodshed; indeed the woodshed is positively bursting with loving-kindness. And Ireland, a land of stars, bees and flowers whose shores are kissed by the Atlantic surf, has not a trace of religious intolerance – wherever did one get the idea that it had? (Gee 21).

Sarcasm aside, this response to the production indicates the reviewer’s scepticism about the play’s aims. Gee clearly does not find the play’s relation to lived history believable, and it seems that the reason is because the play lacks the conflict – in particular the religious conflict – one would expect from an Irish play. Despite the suggestion that the play lacks “psychological realism,” it is clear that Barry’s presentation of religious tolerance was taken more as make-believe – a product of the Irish penchant for folklore and fairytales – than as an attempt to provide alternatives to intolerance. Writing in 1992, Fintan O’Toole’s response to the play demonstrates the elasticity of metaphor employed by Barry, indicating the political implications of the play were not necessarily lost on all audience members at the Irish premiere. O’Toole writes:

The best play I know about the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe is set on an island off the Irish coast in the 1890s and has nothing whatsoever to do with either Communism or Eastern Europe. Sebastian Barry’s “Prayers of

Sherkin” is, however, in its re-enactment of the story of Fanny Hawke who must leave her millenarian sect on Sherkin Island in order to marry, a superb metaphor for the necessary death of a community and an ideal so that the individual may live (“Lament in a Hushed Voice”).

For Fanny, leaving Sherkin Island is about freeing herself from the past in order to have a future⁴¹, which precisely mimics Barry’s revisionist stance on the orthodoxy of republican narratives of history. It is only through freeing the Irish historical consciousness from the orthodoxy of republican narrative that Ireland can move forward. Fanny does not abandon tradition entirely, but is able to negotiate a way out of the impasse that tradition has imposed on her. In a vision before she agrees to marry Patrick, she receives permission from Matt Purdy, the sect’s spiritual leader. Purdy tells her to heed the urge to marry Patrick Kirwin, for he is being brought to her by Purdy himself:

Fanny Who is calling me, Matt Purdy?

Matt Purdy They are the voices of thy children. They wait for you up the years, and you must go. All about them lies a cruel century of disasters and wars that I did not foresee. I steer you back into the mess of life because I was blinder than I knew. I saw a vision in time, that will not serve me outside time. I give you back to the coming century, Fanny, and your children are calling you. There are lives that are waiting to be made in a black century, and though they will see suffering, yet they will value their lives. Oh, in the darkest heart

⁴¹ I should add that Fanny’s departure from Sherkin Island and her subsequent marriage to Patrick Kirwin also allows for the birth of the playwright, who is then able to occasion such revisionist dramas. Fanny Hawke was Barry’s great-grandmother, who crossed the sea to marry his great-grandfather. Writing about the development of the play in his preface to the Methuen collection, Barry states: “It wasn’t long before the thought struck me that if she hadn’t crossed that stretch of water, I wouldn’t exist myself, a small matter in itself but maybe of some importance to me. Therefore the play is a sort of calling over that water to her to come, to come” (*Plays 1* xvi). Ironically, in an interview just prior to the play’s Dublin premiere, Barry reveals that he did not know up until the last moment of writing if Fanny would decide to stay on Sherkin, or leave for the mainland (Walker).

they will cherish them. There can be nothing without Fanny Hawke...Go,
little Fanny Hawke, into that Catholic darkness, into a century of unlucky
stars. So words in the future time may be said of thee, that thou did well to go,
and said you would, and did, and rose greatly to go (105-6).

With this complete release from customary obligation, Fanny is able to attempt a new future that is free of impossible religious constraints, while still retaining fealty to her religious beliefs. Despite the exclusionary principles of the sect, Fanny transforms herself into one who can embrace an entirely new identity and lifestyle. Throughout his dramatic oeuvre, Barry's characters display a complex tension between fixed, externally derived identities, and the individual desire to cast off immutable categories. He presents this tension largely through the creation of characters who are ill-fit for any single category of identification. *The Steward of Christendom*, in which Barry revisits the Anglo-Irish war (1919-1921) through the tormented memories of Thomas Dunne, is another case in point. The war and its fall-out in the subsequent Civil War (1922-1923) have been largely characterized in popular memory from a republican standpoint, but Barry complicates the tendency to read history through identity categories by focussing on an individual who does not fit comfortably on either side of the historical record.

The Steward's Thomas Dunne is based loosely on Barry's great-grandfather, James Dunne, who was a member of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, otherwise referred to as the DMP (Herlihy 2001). In the play, Dunne has risen to the rank of Chief Superintendent in the Dublin Metropolitan Police, which he claims was significant for a Catholic in the days before independence (245). Historically, the unarmed force was entrusted with keeping order in Dublin, but became targeted by those who opposed the British presence in Ireland. The DMP

were run by the British, so by definition the force was loyal to Britain and British rule. In Barry's play, Thomas Dunne surrenders the site of British power, Dublin Castle, to Michael Collins in 1922. Dunne's Catholic ethnicity, his professed loyalty to the King, and his working-class roots do not combine well with his policing of working-class demonstrations, and as a result, his identity is complex and difficult-to-categorise.

The moment of independence simplifies the idea of identity into two major categories: those who support a break from Britain, and those who remain, in their hearts, loyal to Britain.⁴² In this binary, Irish Catholics are not meant to profess loyalty to Britain. In fact, the main reason the Anglo-Irish Treaty failed to be accepted by all parties – causing a schism that ultimately led to the Civil War – was not because it failed to deliver a united Ireland, but because it failed to deliver a republic (R. Foster, *Modern Ireland* 506). The Treaty, brought back to considerable discord in Ireland by Michael Collins, contained an Oath of Allegiance to the British crown, and many who had fought for independence were not willing to continue pledging allegiance to what they saw as a foreign monarch. The problem that Dunne's loyalty creates, at least in terms of nationalist history, is that the country he is loyal to is Britain, and not the newly emerging Ireland. His loyalty is rooted both in a sense of duty to his country, as well as in a kind of monarch-worship for an earlier 'golden-age' where the outlines of his world appeared more fixed, and the idea of loyalty itself was honourable. In one of his daytime reveries, Dunne recalls his younger days in the Dublin Military Police:

I loved her for as long as she lived, I loved her as much as I loved my wife

Cissy, and maybe more, or differently. When she died it was difficult to go

⁴² There were clearly more than two factions when Ireland gained independence, as evidenced by the Civil War that followed. However, it is fair to say that these factions were sub-factions of the two main categories I have identified.

from her to the men that came after her, Edward and George, they were good men but it was not the same. When I was a young recruit it used to frighten me how much I loved her. Because she had built everything up and made it strong, and made it shipshape...We were secure, as if for eternity the orderly milk-drays would come up the streets in the morning, and her influence would reach everywhere, like the salt sea pouring up into the fresh waters of the Liffey. Ireland was hers for eternity, order was everywhere, if we could but honour her example. She loved her Prince. I loved my wife. The world was a wedding of loyalty, of steward to Queen, she was the flower and perfecter of Christendom. Even as the simple man I was I could love her fiercely. Victoria. (250).

Dunne's reverie is similar to Josey's recollection in *Boss Grady's Boys* of the days when his brother Mick was away. In Josey's monologue, the referent for "Mick" gets confused and doubled between Mick the brother, and Michael Collins, and in Dunne's soliloquy, the referent is missing until the very end, when he simply states "Victoria." In both cases, the referent becomes confusing or vague, putting the audience in a state of continual hypothesis reformation in an effort to determine the subject of the speech. This process of revising and reforming allows for the creating of multiple interpretations, which is commensurate with Barry's overall approach to Irish history, where singular truths are questioned, and hidden truths are called into light.

The idyllic, timeless vision of a strong Empire presented in Dunne's recollection of his days as a young recruit contrasts sharply both with the world Dunne inhabits as a higher ranking officer, and with his life in the Baltinglass county home. The semblance of an

apparently immutable past conjured by his reverie places in relief his current state of torment and fragmented memory in the narrative present of the play. In this way, Dunne's mental journey in the play provides a metaphor for Ireland of the 1920s, as well as a metaphor for the contemporaneous, strife-torn Ireland out of which Barry's plays emerge. Importantly, Dunne's loyalism is not historically inaccurate⁴³, and the idea that it could be taken as inaccurate is precisely the monolith of received history that Barry attacks. Therefore, the possible political awkwardness that accompanies Dunne's loyalism in the play emerges as the product of nationalist mythology, whereby the history of identity affiliations is read backwards after independence.

In *The Steward of Christendom*, Smith, the orderly who cares for Dunne in the Baltinglass county home, stands as an example of the culturally pervasive effects of this mythologisation, because his denigrations are pointed at Dunne's loyalism. To complicate his loyalty, Dunne's position in the Police force means that he ends up in the enemy camp during the predominantly-Catholic workers' uprising in 1913. Smith uses this knowledge to berate Dunne for his supposed involvement in the riots of August 31, 1913:

Chief superintendent, this big gobshite was, Mrs O'Dea, that killed four good men and true in O'Connell Street in the days of the lock-out. Larkin. Hah? His men it was struck down the strikers. (*A gentle hit with the drying cloth*).

Baton-charging. A big loyal Catholic gobshite killing poor hungry Irishmen. If you weren't an old madman we'd flay you" (243)⁴⁴

⁴³ Displays of loyalty to the British monarch in Catholic Ireland of the 19th and early 20th centuries are not uncommon historically; Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland in 1849 and King Edward VII's coronation tour in 1903 were both great public successes, as the touring monarchs were continually met with enthusiastic crowds professing their loyalty. See Loughlin and J. H. Murphy.

⁴⁴ Between June and August of 1913, there were thirty separate labour disputes in Dublin, and then a general lockout occurred which saw 22,000 workers on strike (R. Foster, *Modern Ireland* 442). On August 31, 1913, there was a violent clash between striking workers and the police. Socialist and union leader Jim Larkin was

If Dunne is a ‘loyal Catholic’ and the men he attacked were “Irishmen,” then the implication is that Dunne is *not* an Irishman. If he is loyal to the King of the colonising country, according to Smith, he must be disloyal to Catholics, republicans, and members of the working class. Dunne’s position as a high-ranking member of the DMP further alienates him from the majority of Catholics at the time, who held labourer and working-class positions.

At its crudest, the binary approach adopted by popular perceptions of history allows for two categories of Irish inhabitant: British colonisers, who are middle- or upper-class, pro-union, loyal to the Queen, and Protestant on the one hand, and, the on the other hand, the “common people” of Ireland, who are working-class, republican, committed to the idea of an independent Ireland, and Catholic. While Dunne is working for the DMP, he believes he is working for his country. When independence is achieved, his country becomes the ex-coloniser, at least in the 26 counties of Ireland that formed the Irish Free State, and later, the Republic of Ireland. In effect, Dunne ends up on the ‘wrong side’ of history: his allegiance is to the passing regime, yet his religious affiliations put him in a community that is ready to remove all vestiges of that regime. In a flash, Dunne goes from being a staunch patriot (to Britain), to a traitor (to the new Irish State), without any shift in his own perspective. In a moment – in that handover of the castle – Dunne’s place in history is made incomprehensible. One scholar argues this point even more vociferously, saying that “[n]ationalist history regards such evidence of Catholic loyalism as politically irreconcilable to the Irish identity it wishes to foster in its irredentist creation of a Celtic Catholic Irish state. As a Catholic loyalist, Thomas Dunne remains politically unhip: an ideological

addressing the crowd on O’Connell Street, and on their way to arresting him, the DMP, batons in hand, charged the crowd. Two men were killed in the incident. A statue was erected in 1979 in Larkin’s honour on O’Connell Street in Dublin.

embarrassment” (J. Haughey 292).⁴⁵ Barry’s empathetic treatment of Dunne goes against this historical grain, establishing a fluidity between the identity markers of religion and politics that is uncommon in nationalist history, as well as in the history of Irish drama.⁴⁶ Nicholas Grene interprets the play from a feminist standpoint, citing Dunne’s love for Victoria (and lukewarm feelings for the Kings that followed her), infantilising flashbacks to his childhood, and his role as both father and mother to his children as examples of how the play “seeks to rewrite the traditional nationalist version of Irish history as a tyrannically patriarchal colonial power oppressing a feminised Ireland from the viewpoint of a man who sees his role as servant of a protective matriarchy” (253). Grene concludes that, instead of creating the “standard image of the policeman [as] the sadistic agent of a masculine colonising force imposing itself on a feminine colonial other,” Barry’s Dunne “is dramatised as both self and other, masculine and feminine, father and mother, parent and child” (256). Interestingly, Grene’s conclusion invokes binaries of identity in order to reveal how they are subsequently corralled in the service of a more complex, heterogeneous characterisation of the Irish past.

Barry’s main avenue into the exploration of fluid identities is through the structuring devices of a memory play. The narrative unfolds as a series of flashbacks to key moments in Dunne’s life, which sometimes coincide with key political moments in Irish history, and always coincide with key moments in Dunne’s own familial history. The memory structure operates critically in three ways: first, it shifts the view of Ireland’s past from the political to the personal. Second, as a result, it invites alternate interpretations of the past. And third, it

⁴⁵ John Wilson Foster argues that Barry’s achievement is to “rescue from near oblivion the loyal Irishman as hero, but in no clear-cut or agenda-driven way.” Dunne’s loyalty, Foster continues, is to the Crown but also to military or policing traditions (J. Foster 105).

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford reads *The Steward* as intentionally political, directly stating that the play (and Barry’s novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*) is an attempt to justify Irish loyalty to the British crown (121).

deflates some of the dramatic tension that would arise from actually staging the historical conflicts. This final result provides the basis for most of the dramatic criticism levelled against Barry as a playwright.

The memory-structure of *The Steward of Christendom* has the effect of shifting the focus of the play from the political moment of national transition in Dunne's career to the effect of that transition on his psyche. Instead of building a play around the events themselves, Dunne gives us Thomas Dunne a decade later, as he is languishing and waning in an asylum. This presentation has the concomitant effect of transforming a political struggle into a personal one, which of course, is not new to dramatic literature. The external effects of factional Ireland become embodied in Dunne's liminal state, as he shifts among the triad of accurate recollection, altered recollection, and dementia-induced delusion. His internal battle stands as a metaphor for the struggle to free Ireland from any singular reading of the past. Dunne's fractured recall symbolises the difficulty he has in recreating a coherent narrative that would explain his own history in relation to the history of Ireland. In writing a play about history with a main character that is plagued by difficult and inconsistent recall, Barry raises doubt about the ability to reconstruct an accurate past at all. The ambiguity of recall opens a gap for alternate interpretations of the past, which draw on personal history as much as on national history. In the same way that Barry draws on his own genealogy to populate his plays and understand his ancestors, Thomas Dunne assesses history through his own channels of memory. The important distinction between Dunne's memory and the kinds of memory patterns discussed in the introduction (cultural memory employed to ideological ends) is that the form of memory employed by Dunne is distinctly personal. Dunne draws on individual memory and resolutely rejects the ideological categories of nationalism and

loyalism.⁴⁷ As a result, this individual, domestic memory pokes holes in the hegemonic categories of remembrance set up by centuries of identification based on religious or national loyalties. Barry does not directly critique traditional mnemonic categories, but instead offers a parallel set of historical interpretations in their place. The fact that he is using his own family history as inspiration is also significant. It is not just a vivid imagination that nudges Barry to opt out of the binary of religious conflict, but a real past that he is reclaiming in the present on Ireland's stages. Instead of providing a new way of looking at the past, Barry's plays demonstrate that such a past was always there to be seen.

Drama as conflict? Barry's subversion of expectation

One of the most prominent criticisms of Barry's work is that his plays lack dramatic conflict. Instead of following a pattern of crisis, climax and resolution, or staging conflict between characters, Barry's plays mediate conflict before it threatens to disrupt established equilibriums. The family plays are remarkably devoid of external conflict. Instead, Barry operates within a non-judgemental framework, which focuses on forgiveness. In the same way that his plays revise approaches to Irish history, then, they also revise expectations around dramatic form. *Prayers of Sherkin* provides a good example because it raises the possibility of conflict at several turns, only to deflate it just as quickly. Fellow playwright Dermot Bolger, reviewing the first production of the play for the *Sunday Press*, declined to consider this a problem with Barry's playwriting, instead finding sufficient drama in the poetry of his language: "So much modern drama revolves around the artificial creation of friction on the stage. One of the major achievements of Barry's play...is to hold the audience spell-bound by the sheer power and radiance of language and to move through a deep tragedy

⁴⁷ This contrasts with the murals of the Falls and Shankill Roads, which I discuss in the introductory chapter.

without a single voice being raised on the stage” (Bolger). However, it is clear that most reviewers did not concur with Bolger’s assessment, finding the lack of ‘friction’ disappointing. The typical review looks more like this:

[I]t desperately lacks the essential conflict and change of drama. Its appeal is solely to the eye of the mind: its multitude of words conjures pictures of the turbulent sea of Sherkin and Cape Clear upon which people travel to their destinations of America and Valparaiso, but there is too little turbulence of the emotions sufficiently evident to engage an audience easily (Nowlan, “Requiem for a Dead Community”).

Nowlan’s response was otherwise very positive, as were the majority of reviews.⁴⁸ Writing on the same day in the *Evening Press*, Cal Houlihan praised the play, but concluded that the play “enhances [Barry’s] standing as a wordsmith,” but lacked overt drama (Houlihan, “Sebastian Makes All the Right Mistakes”). Another critic called it “an enthralling production,” but firmly noted that “*Prayers of Sherkin*, which opened last night at the Peacock, is not a drama” (McGarry). This sentiment was also echoed beyond the newspaper pages. In a later journal article, Christopher Murray focuses less on assessing the dramatic merit of the play, and more on examining how the absence of conflict contributes to a generic classification: “Undoubtedly, *Prayers of Sherkin* lacks conventional dramatic conflict. It is unified, indeed, by this very evasion. No characters are admitted who do not in some way share the transcendental outlook of the Quakers. This is idealization; no island is without its Caliban” (C. Murray, “Such a Sense of Home” 247).

⁴⁸ For example, it was highly recommended by Lorcan Roche in the *Irish Independent*, as well as the reviewer at the *Sunday Business Post*, who called it “a work of beauty, charm and wit” (L. Roche, no pag.; “Rev. of *Prayers of Sherkin*”). Brian Brennan wrote in the *Sunday Independent* that “it captures those moments of change in a way that no historian could, the moment at which ideology and cherished doctrine are discarded for the sake of survival” (31).

Barry does not stage dramatic conflict in expected ways; instead he sculpts forgiving characters, and demands that the audience practice introspection and self-reflexivity as part of their theatre-going experience. His narratives do create the *possibility* for conflict, but he deflates the conflict before it reaches the place where it would be staged. In this way, his work is diametrically opposed to that of his rough contemporary Martin McDonagh, whose plays incorporate bloody violence at every turn. It is clear that Barry disrupts expectations about the genre of history plays, but it is also clear that he is confounding audience expectation about the nature of dramatic literature, which traditionally demands conflict as a defining element of the genre. The repeated critical response that his plays suffer because they lack conflict is a curious thing, considering the fact that modern Irish drama in general can be characterised as suffering from a surplus of narrative over dramatic action. So what is behind the chorus of voices claiming that his plays, in particular, lack conflict? Two potential explanations arise: the first is that Barry represents controversial moments or relationships in Irish history, but refuses to follow these moments through to the violent conclusions that have characterised them in Irish history; the second, related, explanation is that he fails to follow the conventions of dramatic structure when the audience is most expecting these conventions to play out. The combination of these two novel approaches amounts to a gentle plea, to Ireland and possibly beyond, for reconciliation and forgiveness.

In *The Steward of Christendom*, the vagaries of memory make it difficult to determine Thomas Dunne's level of complicity in state-supported violence in the early part of the 20th century. More precisely, his fractured recall makes it difficult to clearly say whether he was traitor or patriot, much like the figure of Michael Collins, who haunts Dunne's memory in

brief flashes. As noted, the county home's orderly, Smith, accuses Dunne of 'baton-charging' good Irishmen at the 1913 lockout, but Dunne's own recollection counters this assertion:

There was no one killed that day that I know of, there were scores of my men in Jervis Street and the like, with head wounds. I'm sorry Smith's brother was killed. I'm sorry for all the poor souls killed these last years. Let them come and kill me if they wish. But I know my own story of what happened, and I am content with it (246).

This statement, told to Mrs. O'Dea, ends any further debate with Smith, and the memory structure of the play reframes further conflict about the issue as an internal struggle for Dunne.

The figure of the aging Dunne is one of a man who has lost his place in the political world, but who most regrets the passage of time that has removed him from the presence of his daughters. This regret is presented as an absence in the greater narrative of his memory. Because his memory is the key to forming a semblance of an historical narrative, this memory gap forces a pause in the linear process of historical reconstruction: the whole of history cannot be reconstructed if significant gaps are patently missing. Also, Barry often gives us a fragmented recall of an event before he fills in the details of the event itself. Recalling the moment when Annie took him to the Baltinglass county home, Dunne's reveries begins with the following admission: "I know I did what Annie said I did." Immediately, he qualifies this, saying "but at the time, at the time, I knew nothing, or I knew something else. And it was the gap between the two things that caused me to cry out in the car..." (252). It is later revealed that Dunne had become like a madman, yelling at friends and neighbours alike, causing Annie to bring him to the county home. Barry's ordering of

plot events to radically reorder the chronology of the play's larger story creates a momentary gap between event and recollection, echoing Walter Benjamin's process of historical materialism. In order to test the diachronic resonance between event and recollection, there has to be a gap in time. For "a part of the past to be touched by the present instant <Aktualität> there must be no continuity between them" (*The Arcades Project* 470). The gap Dunne experiences provides this discontinuity, which destabilises hegemonic – and by extension nationalist – narratives of history.

Barry also explores the gap between past and present through the use of theatrical metaphor; in the case of *The Steward of Christendom*, costume proves the richest source of such metaphor. Act Two of the play begins with a hallucination sequence, where Thomas is wearing the dress uniform of his police days (276). His daughters bustle around, readying him for the hand-over of the Castle to Michael Collins. The moment is presented as fully embodied, in that each character is played by an actor, which contrasts with the long narrative passages where Dunne describes the figures in his past. As Dunne exits the door of his house in the hallucination, the actor playing Dunne actually exits the door of the county home room, wearing the dress uniform. While still under the spell of memory, he has an argument with Smith, who has come to determine why Dunne is wandering the halls (280). The altercation takes place offstage, so that when Dunne returns moments later, he appears before the audience stripped of his uniform and in the dirty long-johns that costumed him for Act One. Within seconds, Smith wraps him in a straightjacket, and strikes him with a pacifier (281). Tied up in a straight-jacket on the bed in Baltinglass, Dunne is the completely pacified image of the past. The fantasy of the past he was living moments before has been beaten to a quiet, his youthful vigour subdued by the jacket. The costume shift marks the passage of ten

years in terms of the play's story, but takes mere seconds in the play's performance, encapsulating the theatrical equivalent of Benjamin's dialectical image. Benjamin writes:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it (Benjamin, "Theses" 255).

The flash is twofold because it contains both image and ruin: the image is Dunne at the height of confidence in the world that surrounds him, and the ruin is Dunne as a broken, forgotten figure. In both ceremonial suit and straightjacket, Dunne is threatened by those who wish to control his memory, and thereby control his own complex formulation of identity. The 'ruling classes' operate metaphorically as a singular narrative that seeks to control the writing of history. The two images of Dunne are given equal imaginative weight through the material presence of costume, aided by the compressed period of time in which they are presented. The swift transition calls into question the gap between past and present, by forcing images of each to exist in close proximity. In their work on the relationship between clothing and memory, Jones and Stallybrass argue that the materiality of clothing is significant, because it leaves a print upon the wearer as well as the observer. But clothes are detachable, Jones and Stallybrass continue; they can move from body to body, disrupting the initial sign of the imprint. The detachability of clothes is "precisely their danger and their

value: they are bearers of identity, ritual, and social memory, even as they confuse social categories” (4-5). When Dunne disappears in one uniform only to return in another, and be fitted immediately with a third, he undergoes a process of shifting from one social category to another without the requisite time for adjustment that such a shift would take. The narrative compression implied by the visual shift reveals Dunne’s own shifting sense of identity over time, which parallels Barry’s representation of how attitudes towards identity may also shift over time.

Barry’s creation of the Dunne character is itself an act of resurrection; in the gap between event and the recollection that occurs through the writing of history, figures like Thomas Dunne, Catholic, loyalist and altogether confusing to nationalist historiography, were elided. The play is a response to that elision, through the resurrection of a character that figures little in 20th century Irish history. Barry is not necessarily privileging popular, ‘little people’ history over nationalist narratives, but is challenging the viability of interpreting history through any single narrative. Dunne’s struggle is an internal one, filled with the conflict between action and regret, and Barry does not suggest that his version of the past is accurate. The ghosts and guests who visit Dunne at the home often correct his partial memories, and Barry’s dramaturgy does not privilege one character’s version over another.⁴⁹ In addition, there is an incongruence between the way Dunne remembers the history that he lived and shaped, and the way that it is remembered officially. When he says that the DMP were never armed, and that their unarmed status informed the decision to take them off the

⁴⁹ It could be argued that all events in the play emerge from one consciousness – that of Dunne – but the ‘dramatic’ scenes that include actors playing his children, son-in-law, and a recruit are styled in a way that differs significantly from the clear ‘narrative-recall’ moments in the play. The lighting changes, and Dunne’s physicality changes, so the suggestion is that the audience is viewing a direct moment in the past, and not only Dunne’s mnemonic recreation of that moment. The scene where Dunne leaves wearing a uniform and returns in his long-johns is presented initially as a hallucination, but the clarity of the details makes it seem more like a narrative flashback than a rambling, inaccurate hallucination.

street at Easter 1916, he calls the momentous occasion “that rebellion at Easter time, that they make so much of now” (245). The Easter Rising has a more significant status in official history than it does in his recollection.

The shift from inter-character conflict to personal turmoil removes the possibility for dialogic or physical conflict, which is likely what Barry’s critics refer to as a ‘lack’ of dramatic conflict. But how does this effectively differ from scores of other Irish plays, and plays outside of Ireland for that matter, which also reframe conflict as an internal struggle? The key difference in Barry’s approach is that he consistently displaces, or removes entirely, the idea of blame. His plays do not judge or weigh the factions in the Irish polis, but instead remind us that identity is a layered and often contradictory thing, and that any full account of the past, and any form of lasting reconciliation, requires this complexity to be acknowledged and not hidden.

For all the charges laid against Dunne, Barry has written him as a broken-down, harmless old man who longs for his lost family. He is also the protagonist, so this combination raises the audience’s sympathy for him. At the end of the play, Dunne is not judged for his place in history, but recounts a tender story about reconciling with his father. The story stands as a parable for Barry’s final statement on the troubled Irish past, because, once again, the narrative shifts from an expected conflict to a compassionate reconciliation. As a boy, Dunne was instructed by his father to kill the family dog, for it had destroyed one of the sheep. Unable to do it, the young Dunne stowed away for a day with the dog, returning cold in the evening, fearing that he and the dog were “for slaughter.” But when he returned, his hulk of a father merely pulled the young Dunne to him, so that the boy’s cheek rested against his belt buckle:

And he raised his own face to the brightening sky and praised someone, in a crushed voice, God maybe, for my safety, and stroked my hair. And the dog's crime was never spoken of, but that he lived till he died. And I would call that the mercy of the fathers, when the love that lies in them deeply like the glittering face of a well is betrayed by an emergency, and the child sees at last that he is loved, loved and needed and not to be lived without, and greatly (301).

The response of Dunne's father shocks the young Dunne, because he had been expecting at least the dog's death, if not his own physical punishment. This monologue closes the play, leaving the audience with a clear message of non-violence and reconciliation. In a similar fashion, Barry's plays can be seen as the historiography of reconciliation: the rewriting of history in order to favour tolerance and understanding over retribution and side-taking.

The dramaturgy of *The Steward of Christendom* is central to this message of reconciliation. Barry could have presented us with Thomas Dunne in 1922, when the Civil war was erupting, Ireland was reaching independence, and his career was coming to an end. But instead he gives us this central moment filtered through the ageing and faltering memory of Dunne 10 years later. He chooses to dramatise the moment when Dunne is haunted by memories, as opposed to dramatising the dynamic events that resulted in these memories. In a sense, the events of the play come to Thomas Dunne in a way that mimics how history operates when not guided by a grand interpretive narrative: it is fractured, confusing, and muddled in terms of allegiances and factions. A dramatic narrative structured by memory provides flexibility for a hermeneutic approach to history, and this can be seen in other plays by Barry.

Prayers of Sherkin sets up the audience for heightened conflict by emphasising the solitary and strict nature of the Quakers' existence, but when Fanny Hawke tells her father John that she is going to marry Patrick Kirwin, John gives her a full blessing instead of a curse, telling her the "four doors of the island are open" (85). He professes he will be heartbroken if she leaves, but the blessing empties the drama of any roaring or warring climax. Still, the play does not shy away from conflict. If Fanny does not marry, the sect will likely die off. Yet in order to marry, she must leave the island, and sever ties with her family for life. The conflict that Barry creates is very real, for Fanny is faced with a choice between continued fidelity to her religious beliefs, or marriage and a life with children; she cannot have both at the same time. Barry sets up this conflict, then approaches the situation with his characteristic non-judgemental outlook. Ultimately, Fanny needs to make a choice, but she ends up gaining both a blessing from her father, as well as the chance to pursue an independent life where she can have a family. By placing these two seemingly irreconcilable situations together, Barry is suggesting that there are alternatives to digging in one's heels on religious questions. As Fanny departs for the mainland, John Hawke offers her the story of her birth as a parting gift, demonstrating the 'mercy of fathers' that Dunne recalls in his story at the end of *The Steward of Christendom*. When she was born, John explains, he ran to kiss his bawling child, and then "sick with joy," took a moment to himself. He tells Fanny: "There was a singing in the wind all full of your name, Fanny Hawke, Fanny Hawke, and I that never could dance could dance that day, and I danced, and shook out my legs. (*After a moment.*) Remember these things, Fanny" (116). John's heartfelt statement of love and acceptance allows Fanny to leave in good conscience, and echoes the kind of reconciliation between factions that was sorely needed in the 20th century of Barry's writing. Memory in

this case is not a trap, but a tool for liberation. Through his fond recollections of her birth, John is able to turn Fanny's vision firmly towards her future.

So let us return to the refrain that Barry's plays are not 'dramatic enough'. It is evident that Barry is disrupting audience expectations about conflict; however, what is usually characterised as a lack of *dramatic* conflict appears more likely as a lack of expected *Irish* conflict. Barry presents situations that by all historical consideration should be ripe with sectarian battles, but in the end, he chooses to not to stage the battles, and to approach religious identity as complex and layered. In the end, he turns both sets of expectations – those around dramatic form and those around nationalist history – on their heads. The positive popular reception of his plays suggests that there is an appetite for alternate dramatic forms, and similarly, an appetite for alternate political structures. The one Barry play that has received primarily negative critical reception is *Hinterland*, and it is clear from the types of comments levelled at the play and playwright that the removal of conflict and judgement can have varying results, depending on the subject matter.

The Reception of *Hinterland*

Hinterland, which premiered in 2002, makes for a rich case study in audience and critical response, because it provides an example of what happened when Barry's traditionally innocuous dramatic investigations of Irish history became more pointed, or perhaps simply more contemporary. It is unclear why Barry decided to shift his setting to a more contemporary moment, but he has said that the play was a response to director Max Stafford-Clark's challenge to him to write a "well-made play," which contains the kind of dramatic arch and climax absent from his earlier plays. *Hinterland* follows an ageing

politician through a period of domestic and political crises. The play is the seventh in Barry's series of 'family' plays (Kiberd, "The Subversive Family"). The series began with the five plays collected in *Plays 1*, and continued with *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998), which was inspired by his maternal grandmother. As with the earlier plays, the central dynamic and characters are drawn from his own family history. The key difference is that in this play, he hides his family members in characters and a plot that are drawn a little too closely from contemporary Irish history. The result was a critical failure that prompted a series of terse debates in Irish newspapers. *Hinterland* premiered in January 2002 at the Octagon Theatre in Bolton, England, transferred the next month to the Abbey Theatre, and then in March moved to the Royal National Theatre in London. Originally planned as a study of men in his father's generation,⁵⁰ it quickly became clear to audiences that the life of the main character in the play, Johnny Silvester, had major parallels to the life of disgraced former Taoiseach Charles Haughey.⁵¹ In the play, Silvester sports Charvet shirts,⁵² drinks from a silver teapot, and is in the midst of ending an affair with a journalist:⁵³ each of these aspects points to a level of

⁵⁰ Barry maintains that it is the collective personality traits of the Haughey generation which intrigue him rather than the peccadilloes of any individual. "What troubled me about that generation is their incapacity for guilt" (Fay, no pag.).

⁵¹ Haughey served three terms as Ireland's Taoiseach (Prime Minister), and brought excitement to the office while also bringing about charges of corruption. Haughey died in 2006, and the obituary in *The Economist* sums up his legacy well: "Charles Haughey was a technicolour politician in a monochrome landscape. He burst onto the Irish political scene at a time when it featured dull men distinguished only by their austerity... He had mansions, estates and a private island. He liked antique furniture, and fine art, horses, clothes and wines... Many had long wondered how he supported a lavish lifestyle on a politician's salary... Only in 1999 did a corruption tribunal identify \$10m-plus of the lavish gifts he had received from businessmen, and the way his bank simply cancelled a large chunk of his overdraft (Mr Haughey had warned them "I can be a very troublesome adversary")... He was a flagrant tax-evader: when the authorities finally caught up with him, he had to sell his estate to pay them" (Obituary: Charles Haughey).

⁵² Haughey was widely criticized for his excessive displays in the context of difficult financial circumstances in Ireland. It was publically discussed that he had spent large sums on "tailored shirts and expensive restaurant meals while simultaneously urging Irish people to tighten their belts amid economic gloom" (Staff, "Former Taoiseach Haughey").

⁵³ In May of 1999 when Haughey's finances were being investigated by a tribunal, former Sunday Independent journalist Terry Keane revealed that she had had a long-term affair with Haughey. Both were married to other people, and the affair was reportedly widely suspected or known in political circles for a long time ("Journalist Reveals Affair").

moral and economic corruption, and each aspect was publicly discussed in newspaper accounts of Haughey.

In previews leading up to the production, critics openly acknowledged that the play had the ring of Haughey⁵⁴, but did not concur that it was a pointed indictment of his time in power. However, once the first reviews were printed, critical reception consistently evaluated the play in light of its Haughey connections. As noted, Barry claims the play was his attempt to follow dramatic conventions; whether he fully achieved this or not, *Hinterland* provides an excellent counter-example to *Prayers of Sherkin* and *The Steward of Christendom*, because it attempts to include traditional dramatic conflict, while still retaining a resolution of non-judgement.

A comparison of the reception of the play in London and Dublin is illuminating in this respect. Most critics thought it was a weak play, but the reasons for weakness differed widely in each city. In London, the *Guardian* critic writes: “However much of a hoo-ha it may have caused in Dublin, because of its hero’s apparent resemblances to Charles Haughey, in the Cottesloe it seems a dramatically tame affair” (Billington). London reviews often mention the uproar in Dublin, but do not lay the blame for the play’s weaknesses on the Haughey connection.⁵⁵ In certain cases, the implicit critique of Haughey’s shortcomings failed to provoke Dublin reviewers. “There is no mistaking which fallen idol is the real subject,” writes Luke Clancy, “[b]ut how much more interesting a play about Charlie Haughey might

⁵⁴ In a year-end review of happenings on the Irish stage, Kelly et al. are more pointed: “Patrick Malahide as Johnny Silvester talks like Haughey, has a mistress like Haughey, a put-upon wife like Haughey, lives in a grand house like Haughey, and “did some service for the nation,” like Haughey” (126).

⁵⁵ The most lively description of the play’s shortcomings comes from the *Telegraph* critic Charles Spencer: “Exciting stuff you might think, but, for those with only a peripheral interest in Irish politics, I have to report that, as hot potatoes go, *Hinterland* is about as exciting as a lukewarm Spud-U-Like covered in rancid marge and greasy baked beans. Whatever Haughey’s failings, he surely didn’t deserve quite so windy and indigestible a play as this” (Spencer). The sympathy for Haughey in the English responses presented as ironic and humorous, which contrasts with the serious tone undertaken by a number of Irish reviewers.

have been 10 years ago. Now tilting at CJH is mainstream” (Clancy). In fact, a survey of Irish criticism suggests quite the opposite: *Hinterland*, with a setting unlike the 19th century *Prayers of Sherkin* or early 20th century *Steward*, was likely too *close* to, and not too distant from, its historical subject matter.

The response in the Irish press reveals a general agreement that Charles Haughey was indeed still a controversial subject for representation in the early 21st century. The critical response in Dublin was nothing less than scathing, and it jumped out of the arts section into the front page news of the *Irish Times*. There were irate letters to the editor, Haughey’s lawyers obtained a copy of the script from the Abbey theatre, articles in the newspaper made painfully personal attacks on Barry, and the playwright contemplated leaving the country because the venom was so extreme (Brennock, “Haughey’s Lawyers Studying Script”; Chrisafis). The negative public and critical reactions clearly hit at a sore spot, because Barry plays had been celebrated for many years for their gentleness.⁵⁶ The major criticisms fell into two camps. On the one hand, some critics thought it inappropriate that Barry staged a play (as he had done many times before) about the inner workings of a man’s family life during a moment of crisis. There was criticism that it was too personal – too inappropriate to ‘reveal’ the details on stage. Oddly, there was little revealing to do, because critics recognised Haughey immediately; the details Barry included were already widely known to the public at the time of the play’s staging. Barry was not revealing anything the public did not already know, but was pulling on a readily available collective memory about the time period. Most of the ire was raised around the character of Silvester’s son, who attempts suicide in the play.

⁵⁶ For example, *Prayers of Sherkin* prompted the following letter to the editor: “In an age when violence and foul language are the order of the day on screen and stage, Sebastian Barry’s play, “Prayers of Sherkin,” at the Peacock Theatre, stands apart. This masterpiece of poetic language and beautiful, gentle imagery was a rare treat” (P. Ryan).

Barry maintains that this portrayal is based on his extended family's history, but several critics argued Barry was making an unfounded implication about Haughey's son.⁵⁷ In sum, one thread of criticism was protective of Haughey's family life, or more accurately, was protective of the supposed line that should be drawn between life and art. Barry had mixed fact and fiction too liberally, and this time it was deemed inappropriate.

The other camp of criticism lambasted Barry for not persecuting Haughey *enough*. In the end, Barry comes out on the side of non-judgement, creating a complex character who knows he is a villain, but believes that he has done some good for his country. This ambiguity struck many reviewers as unjust, and it was clear that they felt the dramatic resolution should firmly damn the fictional Johnny Silvester, as an effigy of Charles Haughey. If there was ever a question about how theatre contributes to extra-theatrical public debates, this example makes it clear. The issue raised two areas of discussion: first, the dramatic text was being judged because it failed to follow the model of crime and punishment; and second, (when the debates left the arts pages), the play raised the questions of art's role in the representation of public events. Had Haughey been brought to justice through the legal system, the response might not have been so venomous, but without this public act of catharsis, the play took the major beating. The audience required there to be a clear moral statement about Haughey, but in characteristic fashion, Barry refused to completely choose. This refusal to take sides is commensurate with Barry's approach to the Irish historical record throughout his *oeuvre*. The refusal to choose sides revises traditional

⁵⁷ In an interview, Barry claims that Haughey was based on his father, and that the son who attempts suicide was based on himself (qtd in Kelly et al. 126). Fintan O'Toole, known for his insightful and intelligent reviews (and no doubt a fan of Barry's work,) argued that the presence of the suicidal son affected the play's unity, because he was the only figure that was not clearly recognizable from Haughey's circle. This argument, unlike most of the criticism of the play, focuses on how the inclusion of the son created a flawed play, as opposed to how the inclusion of the son signaled a poor *moral* choice on the part of Barry (O' Toole, "Portrait of Haughey as Macbeth at Bay").

binary approaches to history, in much the same way that *Steward* constructs a complex notion of loyalist identity, and *Prayers of Sherkin* reframes the Catholic-Protestant opposition in a way that has more than two ‘sides.’

The general critical response to *Hinterland* is worth further reflection, because it does not follow the patterns of response to other Barry plays that contain similarly non-judgmental denouements. Critics and audience members did point out the now-characteristic lack of conventional dramatic structure,⁵⁸ but the critical backlash was most squarely directed at the personal-political nexus of the play’s subject matter. One possible explanation for this backlash is that the subject matter occurred too recently in the Irish past, so there was little room for critical distance on part of the audience. The performative act of embodying Haughey on stage – a person who was still alive – created a more acute dialectic with contemporary society than did the conjuring of ghosts and visions to the stage that Barry practices in his earlier plays. Furthermore, it is a much larger leap of the imagination, on the part of the audience, to accept Haughey as a metaphor for a generation than it is to do the same with the unwritten lives of Thomas Dunne or Fanny Hawke. The irony remains that in trying to hide his own troubled family within these recognisable characters, Barry succeeded in hiding them too well.

Another possible way to view the harsh critical response is to look more closely at the dialectic created between audience and theatrical event. The anger around the lack of judgement, both in terms of politics and dramatic structure, is compounded by the fact that the audience was likely made up of people who had elected Haughey, and then subsequently were betrayed by him. In a sense, the audience is implicated by its own inaction as much as

⁵⁸ One disgruntled audience member at the Abbey theatre writes: “it meanders interminably without reaching a dramatic climax or any conclusions except the merciful final curtain” (Dowling).

by the lack of action on the stage. Barry's other plays are set in the more distant past, but they are still tapping into contemporary concerns. His plays reflect on the present, but the problem with *Hinterland* is that he uses the present to reflect on itself, and theatrical metaphor gets lost in the immediacy of the moment.

Overall, the critical reception of Barry's work has been positive. A public appetite clearly exists for Barry's plays, as evidenced by overwhelmingly positive reviews, and the considerable number of 'bums in seats' at the National Theatre, or on Broadway. While the plays might not follow conventional dramatics, they are nonetheless theatrically imaginative: *The Steward* is supported by acute attention to costume elements that embody Thomas Dunne's decline; *Boss Grady's Boys* requires intricate lighting to demarcate the spaces between dream and reality, and *Prayers of Sherkin* calls for set pieces to fill in around the actors, indicating that the play operates in an imaginative realm as much as a material one.

* * *

Barry's combination of historically marginalized characters and non-judgemental dramatic forms leads to a body of work that writes a particular form of history. Scott Cummings argues that Barry's characters "exist in a present that is relatively free of conflict and, to that degree, void of the possibility of change" (Cummings 293). I do agree that conflict is continually undermined in Barry's plays, but I do not think that his fictional worlds discount the possibility of conflict, or that his dramaturgical choice to find resolution without conflict voids the possibility of change. In fact, it is Barry's refusal to allow conflict to shape his narratives that offers a refreshing approach to Irish history and politics. When conflict is present in Barry's plays, it falls outside expected binaries, and gestures towards reconciliation instead of rage or violence. His plays are profoundly hopeful. Taken within the

context of an increasingly global and plural Ireland, the strong interest in his plays may point to shifting audience appetites. While audiences recognise a distinct absence of dramatic conflict in his work, his work is generally welcomed by audiences, and embraced by critics. The same can be said of Marina Carr's work, which turns Barry's mildly utopian vision of Ireland into a "benighted dystopia" (Merriman 312).

The inclusivity of Barry's characterizations inserts a note of dissonance into the way that Irish identity has been orchestrated through a series of compartmentalised historical narratives. Rather than striking a bad note, this dissonance is productive: it fills out history's cast of characters, and enriches the storehouse of the past. Instead of corrupting normalised definitions of identity, it provides additional fodder for understanding the complexities of Irish identity in the past, as well as in an increasing postnational Ireland. Barry introduces characters 'lost' to popular history into his plays, and in the process, he reconfigures how we comprehend the place of these characters in relation to the existing historical record. The disruption of binary approaches to identity is Barry's great revisionist tool, because the significance of this approach reaches beyond the realm of Irishness towards broader understandings of history. Through the disruption, Barry reveals the bankruptcy of identity constructions that rely heavily on certain aspects of identity – namely the religious and the political – over other aspects of identity. His plays ask us to reconsider the way that history has been organised through taxonomies and oppositions. Marina Carr shares aspects of Barry's approach, namely that her plays interrogate historical images of Irish identity by placing figures marginalised by the mainstream at the centre of the dramatic action. But instead of sidelining monolithic readings of political and religious identity through her characterisations, Carr focuses on social and economic hierarchies, drawing her cast of

characters from the poor, the physically scarred, the genealogically tormented, and the socially stigmatised. In this way, Barry's and Carr's plays complement each other by providing a thorough critique of Irish culture from a variety of perspectives. But quite distinct from Barry, Carr's plays thrive on conflict, and her use of grand mythological frameworks continually references the structure and tropes of tragedy.

CHAPTER 3

FROM BOGLAND TO MOUNT OLYMPIA: MATERIALITY AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE PLAYS OF MARINA CARR

Where Sebastian Barry confronts the way the received historical record has represented Irish identity in singular and stifling ways, Marina Carr turns to the role that myth – that great hermeneutic tool for ordering and understanding history – has played in the formation of Irish identity over time. Carr's plays trace the difficulty of accounting for the cultural myths that shape identity in a society that may have become suspicious of myth. Her theatrical works acknowledge the breakdown of a secure mythos of Irish identity, by incorporating myth into a landscape populated not by heroes as with Yeats before her, but by broken-down characters who cannot formulate coherent identities. The figures in her plays are cat-people, ghosts, severed twins and bog-walkers who literally and metaphorically drown in the myth-making landscape to which they are drawn. In many ways, Carr's plays demonstrate an excess of identification with myth and place and history. Her characters have been shaped by these myths, and this shaping is evident in the social roles they inhabit, as well as in the ways that they long for mythological structures to permeate their worlds. However, Carr surrounds her characters with the dark and dull realities of daily life, where they seem aware of the changing socio-economic landscape in Ireland, but unable to access it. The corporeal presence of her characters is often ephemeral (in the case of ghosts), or their bodies are presented as broken down and fundamentally at odds with the worlds they inhabit. In this way, Carr's characters make an odd fit for the late 20th century Irish world that has borne them; as opposed to the celebrated characteristics of the 'new Ireland,' which are affluence and urbaneness, Carr's world is rural, and wealth is not celebrated, but met

begrudgingly. In short, her world serves as a critical antidote to the celebrated aspects of the Celtic Tiger, while also engaging with the legacy of myth-making that has shaped both Irish literature and Irish society.

Carr's engagement with history operates in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, she explores the persistence of the past in personal history, detailing how the past can literally and figuratively haunt the present, and shape character. On the other hand, Carr invokes history through the use of mythological structures, employing the 'history of humankind' alongside individual, psychological history. To this end, Carr's referencing of Irish history is distinguishable both from Sebastian Barry's revision of nationalist narratives and dramatic conventions discussed in the previous chapter, and from the engagement with formal/aesthetic traditions of landscape representation in Irish film, discussed in the following chapter. Despite these unique citations of history, the plays and films in this study all invoke history as a way of commenting on issues and sensitivities prevalent in contemporary Irish culture. What emerges in Marina Carr's plays is a picture of a culture and identity that is 'caught-between' the past and the future, and uncertain about how contemporary Ireland, in a period of transition, is to be defined at all. Carr's plays engage in a metaphorical tug-of-war with the idea of history: her dramatic universe is shaped and haunted by history, while at the same time the power of history to control the future is revealed to be dying: it can only persist if constantly resurrected by personal belief. Carr's plays verge on the tragic in terms of ancient definitions of the genre, but the stories they trace are decidedly domestic; despite the repeated invocations of history, their settings are roughly contemporaneous with the moment of their writing. Therefore, Carr's plays are unlike Sebastian Barry's 'historical plays,' which are set in the past, and which treat the years that

are central to the formation of the Irish identity that he then gently dissects in his narratives. Instead, Marina Carr gives us stories of contemporary misfits, restless in their own skins, and alienated from their own domestic spheres. Carr's characters have been deeply shaped by personal history as well as by historical tropes of Irish identity, and her plays dramatise the struggle to be free of one's own internalized strictures.

Several critics view Carr's focus on domestic stories as part of a larger shift away from politics on the Irish stage. For example, Christopher Murray suggests that Carr's focus on myth and storytelling operates outside of a critical political framework:

Like so many Irish playwrights...she is too protective of her individualism to employ political analysis dramatically. Myth rather than politics shapes her narrative. She tends to fetishise the 'story' as access to the wellsprings of passion and wisdom (C. Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 237).

Murray's point taken, it is also possible to view her work as a systematic effort to treat the effects of the political on the individual. While Carr's approach to politics may be less traditional, this does not make her works apolitical. Carr's plays are peopled with marginalised characters, and they put females at the centre of the dramatic action. Additionally, her narratives contain a complex interplay among landscape, myth, and memory. Put together, these aspects situate Carr's politics in terms of a feminist revisioning of history, where domestic tragedy reigns, and traditional sources of Irish identity formation hold little comfort. To view this effort as non-political is to view politics in a narrowly defined framework.

Travellers and Bloodlines: Refiguring the Centre and the Margins

Carr places historically underrepresented characters at the forefront of her dramatic action; one clearly identifiable example is her refreshing representation of Irish Traveller communities. Carr's characterization of Travellers works to demonstrate that the idea of social 'difference' conventionally associated with Travellers hides an effort by 'mainstream' society to unload undesirable elements of the psyche or society onto this group, thereby creating a false sense of mainstream domestic life. Her plays are dotted with extended arguments between characters that, much reduced, amount to exchanges such as this: "You're a no-good Tinker." Response: "No, I am NOT a Tinker, YOU are a really low-down no-good Tinker," and so on.⁵⁹ This kind of exchange, and the narratives of the plays in general, usually culminate in a stand-off over the ethnic status of the participants, but that status is never concretely affirmed. Carr's attention to ethnicity, or constructions of ethnicity, opens a discourse around Traveller identity, and the treatment of Travellers. Importantly, Carr provides a presence for Travellers and socio-economically marginalised individuals in her plays, but her narratives do not reveal Travellers as a distinctive social group.⁶⁰ *By the Bog of Cats...*, produced on the Abbey stage in 1998, comes the closest to clearly presenting its lead character as descending from Travellers; Hester Swane walks for hours on the bog, and reviles the indoors. But working alongside these initial easy markers of Traveller lineage is a narrative-wide reduction of the characterization of 'Traveller' as socially regressive; the play shifts expectations around what the category means socially. At the outset of *By the Bog*

⁵⁹ Travellers are often referred to by the derogatory term "Tinkers," however this term is widely considered unacceptable in contemporary, public usage.

⁶⁰ Niall Crowley's argument (discussed in the Introduction), is that Traveller ethnicity has been contested by the majority population as a way to define Travellers as deviant in terms of the mainstream population (232). Carr's approach, instead, is to show that 'negative' traits associated with Travellers are actually widely practiced; the result is that arguments leveled against Travellers lose their power, because in Carr's plays, Travellers cannot be conveniently categorized as the "Other."

of Cats..., the Ghost Fancier (a grim-reaper sort of character who has arrived unceremoniously at the beginning of the play, when his services are not required until the end), has an exchange with Hester that does not unequivocally name her as a Traveller, but provides the audience with the conventional indicators:

Ghost Fancier You live in that caravan over there?

Hester Used to; live up the lane now. In a house, though I've never felt at home in it (266).

Caravans are typically associated with Traveller housing, along with a preference for outdoor living. A few pages later Hester says that she has 'tinker blood,' making the exchange more clear to the audience, but it is not revealed until much later that her 'Tinker' blood is not the real reason she does not feel comfortable in the house – the house is owned by her ex-husband Carthage, whose relatives despise her and who have made little effort to welcome her into the family. Her final displacement from the house (Carthage is about to remarry), initiates a Medea-inspired chain of events, causing her behaviour to be best viewed through the heightened lens of Greek tragedy rather than through the lens of ethnography. Hester acts because universal forces beyond her control cause her to act, and not because she is a Traveller who knows only learned roles.

Carr's characterizations blur the perceived line between Traveller and non-Traveller identities within the Irish context, providing an alternate approach to breaking down polarizations in Irish identity. By leaving the audience unclear about whether or not her characters are meant to be Travellers, Carr makes it more difficult to dismiss sectors of the Irish populace on the basis of their lineage. Carr's approach is different than Barry's, but the results are not dissimilar: both playwrights complicate essentialist notions of identity. In

Barry's case, the long-standing binary of Irish identity is challenged by an effort to break down a deterministic relationship between religious background and political affiliation; in Carr's case, fixed notions of identity based on genealogical lineage are challenged. Her characterizations move beyond the effort to embrace the kind of plurality in Irish identity that could be achieved through characterizing Travellers as downtrodden but nevertheless 'good.' Instead, the blurring of fixed markers of identity demonstrates how the characteristics that have been associated with the Traveller in a negative way – untamed, restless, sexually free, verbally unrestrained or 'uncivilised' – are attributable to all economic and ethnic sectors of society, and further, that viewed in a different light, these characteristics might be a sign of liberation from traditional social codes.

As a complement to challenging the social distinctiveness of Travellers, Carr's dialogue reveals how behavioural expectations have been deeply entwined with notions of biology and genealogy in historical constructions of Traveller identity. Discussions of genealogy and personality traits as following blood lines appear throughout Carr's 1996 play, *Portia Coughlan*. After a fight with her parents – Marianne and Sly – Portia storms out of the house. Frustrated by the fight, the following exchange between Portia's mother, Marianne, and her paternal grandmother, Blaize, reveals how Carr interrogates these genealogical assumptions through the use of outrageous statements and characterisations:

Blaize I warned ya and I told ya, Sly, to keep away from the Joyces of Blacklion. Tinkers, the lot of them.

Marianne We were never tinkers and well ya know it!

Blaize O, yes, yees were! Came into this area three generations ago with

nothin' going' for yees barrin' flamin' red hair and fat arses. And the County Council buildin' yees houses from our hard-earnt monies. We don't know where ye came from, the histories of yer blood. I warned ya, Sly! Do ya think you'd listen? There's a devil in that Joyce blood, was in Gabriel, and it's in Portia too. God protect us from that black-eyed gypsy tribe with their black blood and their black souls! (215).

The initial prejudice in Blaize's attack appears to be premised on Marianne's connection to Traveller ('Tinker') blood, but as her tirade continues, a fuller picture emerges of why she deems this 'blood' so offensive. Her resentment at the social welfare efforts of the County Council reflects to some degree the community backlash aimed at the settlement of Traveller families,⁶¹ but Blaize's comments also strike at the level of bloodlines, which is a common reference point in Carr's plays. Regardless of the historical accuracy of Blaize's assault, the venomous attack is premised on the notion that Marianne's connection to local place is relatively recent ('only three generations ago'). This suggests that Blaize considers those who have true ties to the land as having been 'locals' for much longer. Blaize's short description of the Joyces – as having "flamin' red hair and fat arses" – mentions the 'Tinkers'' absence of property, while at the same time it focuses entirely on their presumed physical/genealogical characteristics. This resentful comment, which is meant to name the Travellers as 'other' to Blaize's 'true' or 'pure' Irishness, rests on attributes that are considered both attractive as well as conventionally Irish. The shapely, fiery Irish colleen, familiar from

⁶¹ Fanning reports that one member of parliament in Ireland believes that the loss of her seat in the 1997 election was in part due to her constituents' opposition to Traveller housing plans in her constituency, and her unwillingness to oppose the plan (166-7). For an account of the clash between local Travellers and non-Travellers in County Clare in 1997, see 'The persistence of Traveller exclusion' in the same book, pp. 128-131.

folklore and Irish film⁶², has become an iconic symbol of youthful Irish womanhood easily recognised internationally as attractive. As Blaize's tirade continues, the bloodline argument is solidified, and it is only after the full story unravels in the play that the audience understands that Blaize's attack hides a pre-emptive defence against her own culpability and silence around the family's inbreeding. As we later learn, Marianne and Sly are half-siblings; Blaize's husband impregnated another woman with Marianne around the same time he impregnated Blaize with Sly. Blaize was aware of the blood relation long before Marianne and Sly were married, and her assault on Marianne therefore is an attempt to hide the fact that contrary to her cries, she was all-*too*-aware of the 'histories of [her] blood.' In her warnings to Sly, Blaize apparently never mentioned the key genealogical reason that might have prevented him from marrying Marianne.

Carr's critique of contemporary social phenomena here is multi-layered. On the surface, she presents a raging bigot full of the hatred long aimed at Travellers, but this hatred can also be seen as analogous to the growing prejudice against recent Irish immigrants from further afield (see the discussion of changing ethnographic patterns in the Introduction). Later in the play, Carr has Maggie May reveal that Blaize was aware of the close blood relation between Sly and Marianne, but failed to voice it owing to the shame it would cast on her own marriage. This revelation can be seen as a critique of the culture of silence that shapes social relations in modern Ireland. The culture of silence, as we have come to understand through the cases of the Magdalene Laundries and Father Brendan Smyth, has been abetted by more official silences from modern Ireland's primary arbiter of moral authority, the Catholic Church. Without irony, Blaize caps off her stream of invective with a

⁶² The classic example is Maureen O'Hara, whose red hair was highlighted to magnificent effect by the Technicolor film process in *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952).

call to God as the protector of her untainted, pure Irish blood. Here, the materiality of bloodlines and genealogy is met with a spiritual justification, and the two are turned in a rich stew: the Joyces are morally questionable because of their inbred ‘blood,’ and at the same time, their souls are tainted by the devil.

A similar interlacing of the material and the spiritual occurs shortly afterwards at Portia’s funeral, where Blaize continues her assault in the same vein, referring to Portia and Gabriel as “haunted monsters” who were bred from animals and humans (229). The final layer of Carr’s critique can be seen through the ambiguity that surrounds bloodlines in the play in general. While curses, claims, and heresy abound, Carr leaves the ‘truth’ of each character’s lineage up to speculation. The notion of genealogical ‘purity’ is so severely scrutinized by the end of the play that the much abused identity of ‘Tinker’ cannot even lay claim to genealogical purity, which in turn means that any so-called ‘settled’ Irish person likely has ‘Traveller blood’ in his or her gene pool. Carr’s ambiguity in characterization therefore radically disrupts the notion of settled superiority through a subversive use of miscegenation.

The traits that shape Carr’s maybe-Travellers do not appear more sensitive, or more favourable than ‘othering’ depictions such as those in Jim Sheridan’s film *The Field* (1990), where the Traveller characters, including the young love interest named only “Traveller Girl,” are shown as dirty, wild, and unsocialised. Carr’s Traveller characters are similarly rough around the edges, and unkempt both physically and socially; the uniqueness of her dramatic treatment is not so much in *how* she depicts them, but in how they are *not* unique in relation to the rest of her characters. The recent film *Pavee Lackeen* (2005), discussed in more detail in the final chapter, makes a good point of comparison. Shot in a vaguely social

realist style – with a meditative pace that pauses for lengths of time on small domestic details – *Pavee Lackeen* presents Travellers as marginalised and downtrodden by broader Irish society around them, and shows their daily struggles using the trademark tools of the observational documentary. Through the narrative, the audience witnesses the characters’ shared cultural characteristics, which include the use of a unique community language and social traditions, the effort to connect with the government and save earnings for improved living spaces and amenities, and a connection to the outdoors. Ostensibly these are all values that ‘non-Travellers’ would supposedly respect as well, which lessens the perceived distance between Traveller and non-Traveller practices. By painting this sympathetic portrait of more widely identifiable social struggles, the film reclaims the marginalised identity of Travellers as the ‘other,’ and situates them as one among many different Irish communities. The liberal nod is to suggest that really, they are just like ‘us’, but only poorer, and in contemporary times, lesser benefactors of the Celtic Tiger’s financial largesse. Carr, on the other hand, presents characters who may or may not be Travellers, and suggests something slightly but significantly different: not only are Travellers *like* us (i.e. mainstream society), but so-called mainstream society is not as refined and respectable as we might like to think, especially if inner thoughts and desires are brought to the surface. Many of her characters, regardless of their ethnicity, are wild, unkempt, and psychologically or socially dysfunctional.

The themes of incest and inbreeding are prevalent in the play beyond their connections to Traveller identities, suggesting that Carr’s implicit critique of Traveller representations in Irish culture and society is one branch in a broader critique of genealogical approaches to Irish identity. In *Portia Coughlan*, the true nature of Marianne’s and Sly’s shared parentage is revealed in stages by different characters, but the prevalence of incest

does not stop with this married couple. By Portia's own nostalgic admission, she and her twin brother Gabriel, the offspring of this incestuous union, 'made love' from the time they were in the womb:

...ya see, me and Gabriel made love all the time down be the Belmont River
among the swale, from the age of five – That's as far back as I can remember
anyways – but I think we were doin' it before we were born. Times I close my
eyes and I feel a rush of water around me and above we hear the thumpin' of
me mother's heart, and we're a-twined, his foot on my head, mine on his
foetal arm, and we don't know which of us is the other... (253-4).

This is Portia's fondest memory, and to the audience, it is one of the most tender moments in the play. In typical Carr fashion, the incongruence of a beautiful moment with a questionable social practice (incest) leaves the audience to question how they feel about this admission.

Carr's characterisations are exaggerated, and in the exaggerations the audience can see how aspects of the characters' behaviour provide truthful portraits of family dynamics in society at large. *By the Bog of Cats...*, for example, hints at incestuous relations between mother and son. On Carthage Kilbride's wedding day to Caroline, Carthage's mother appears in a dress that matches the bride's attire; the stage directions call for the elder Mrs. Kilbride to pose for a picture with her son as a bride and groom would; her wedding speech about Carthage is too affectionate for the moment, and it is capped off by a revealing slip of the tongue. As she toasts the new couple, Mrs. Kilbride says "if Carthage will be as good a son to Caroline as he's been a husband to me then she'll have no complaints" (311). Instead of suggesting that the incestuous behaviour of her characters is a fiction untenable in the reality

outside of her plays, Carr's naturalisation of these moments – Carthage barely notices his mother's behaviour – suggests that the tendency to cross social boundaries in small ways is not uncommon. By situating social decay in the realm of the biological and the domestic, Carr transforms the notion of Irish history from political or nationalist history to genealogical history. Her use of genealogy, with its focus on the material aspect of bloodlines and familial tensions, differs widely from Sebastian Barry's autobiographical use.

The Broken Body and the Grotesque: Inversion of the Inside/Outside Binary

Carr's central characters bear the weight of history internally. Instead of dramatising their struggle with external societal expectations – in the way, for example, that Sebastian Barry has Thomas Dunne feverishly proclaim pure intent over his fealty to the British monarch – Carr focuses on the psychological effects of social marginalisation. Her female protagonists – the title characters from *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, and Hester Swane from *By the Bog of Cats...* – are beautiful and often wealthy, but at the same time they are psychologically incapable of easily fitting into the world around them. Their restlessness and ambiguous relationship with their surroundings reveals a battle with personal agency, which results in the struggle to take action. This struggle manifests itself primarily in Carr's protagonists, and signals the general inversion of the inside/outside binary that characterises Carr's work. The sociological effects of Ireland's struggles with nationhood, political unrest and poverty are developed in her characters as psychological traits. To all appearances, her protagonists are blessed by beauty, wealth, wit, and talent. In contrast, they are scarred internally. The opposite, however, holds for Carr's supporting cast of characters, who keep their rage in check, and provide the stability and support so desired by her protagonist. On

the outside, to all appearances, these characters are physically broken down – disabled, disfigured, and sometimes even grotesque, but on the inside, they are kind and reliable.

Carr's supporting characters have been blessed with none of the grace and beauty so easily held by her female protagonists, but neither are they doomed to inaction or self-destruction. Cognizant of the chaos and imminent danger that surrounds them, these supporting characters manage to pull through their lives day-to-day, allowing mundane realities to keep the chaos of the protagonist at bay. Nevertheless, Carr's supporting characters are still marked by their own lived histories. Instead of bearing the weight of history through the internal scars of psychological trauma, their broken or distorted bodies reveal their histories directly. If Carr internalises the effects of social ills with her protagonists, she does something decidedly different with her supporting characters. This motley collection of friends and family bear their personal histories – the scars and wounds of their socioeconomic circumstances – rather loudly on their rusty frames. One of the more extreme examples is the aptly named Catwoman from *By the Bog of Cats...*, who resists the ordinary comforts of home, preferring instead to wander the bog and live directly on the landscape. Catwoman is introduced to us as follows:

Enter the Catwoman, a woman in her late fifties, stained a streaky brown from the bog, a coat of cat fur that reaches to the ground, studded with cats' eyes and cats' paws. She is blind and carries a stick (271).

Catwoman enters early in the play, producing a mouse from her pocket as she wanders over to Hester and demands a saucer of milk. Hester declines to give her the milk, instead retorting: "If ya could just see yourself and the mouse fur growin' out of your teeth. Disgustin'" (273). At the local wedding, Catwoman insists on lapping her wine from a

saucer, and when approached by a ghost, her senses (minus the sight) respond in animal-like ways, as she cocks her ear and starts sniffing (298-9). The descriptions of Catwoman, along with her behaviour throughout the play, veer towards the grotesque,⁶³ presenting a character whose feral tastes and movements characterise her as chimera-like. She dresses herself in parts of cats, but she also takes her feline affinity a step further by subsisting on bog mice and the odd saucer put out for her by kind neighbours.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham reads the grotesque as a process that takes as its task the perversion of classical norms. As opposed to embodying a fixed state of being, grotesqueries to Harpham signify ontological transformation. From a theological perspective, “although the grotesque is more comfortable in hell than in heaven, its true home is the space between, in which perfectly formed shapes metamorphose into demons. This mid-region is dynamic and unpredictable, a scene of transformation or metamorphosis” (Harpham 8). Catwoman embodies this liminal quality because she is at once human and feline. The audience never witnesses her eating a mouse, but this moment is not dramatically necessary because the audience’s imagistic impression of her is created by other characters’ descriptions.

The character of Catwoman is a microcosm for Carr’s dramatic worldview, in that Catwoman draws power both from the realm of the material – she communes with birds,

⁶³ There are multiple theories of how to understand the grotesque, with Wolfgang Kayser’s psychoanalytic approach and Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of the grotesque through the excesses of carnival providing unique but thorough scholarly accounts from different perspectives. For the purposes of this discussion, I prefer the following attempted definition by Ewa Kuryluk: “The meaning of the grotesque is constituted by the norm which it contradicts: the order that it destroys, the values it upsets, the authority and morality it derides, the religion it ridicules, the harmony it breaks up, the heaven it brings down to earth, the position of classes, races, and sexes it reverses, the beauty and goodness it questions. The word “grotesque” makes sense only if one knows what the “norm” represents – in art and in life” (11). This definition is useful when discussing Carr’s plays because it views the grotesque as consistently operating against historically contextualised social and biological norms. Admitting that the grotesque often includes human/animal combinations, Geoffrey Galt Harpham argues that nevertheless there is no one set of visual characteristics that delimits what can be considered grotesque; instead, the grotesque can be seen as “concept without form” (3). Given this argument, a definition based on social function is more useful than one based primarily on physical characteristics.

wears unrefined pelts, and eschews social manners – as well as from the realm of the spiritual – ghosts in purgatory seek her out, and she has the powers of an oracle. The ontological liminality that characterizes the grotesque is exemplified when she is approached by the ghost of Joseph Swane. Killed several decades earlier by his sister Hester without warning or apparent reason, Joseph wanders the underworld, painfully existing halfway between the living and the dead. As the plot marches toward its tragic climax, Catwoman senses his presence:

Joseph Hello. Hello.

Catwoman Ah Christ, not another ghost.

Joseph Who's there?

Catwoman Go 'way and lave me alone. I'm on me day off.

Joseph Who are ya? I can't see ya.

Catwoman I can't see you aither. I'm the Catwoman but I tould ya I'm not talking to ghosts today, yees have me heart scalded, hardly got a wink' sleep last night (299).

In Carr's heady mixture of Irish and ancient myth, the situation of Joseph Swane recalls W.B. Yeats' late play *Purgatory*, where ghosts are conjured on the wedding anniversary night of the Old Man's mother.⁶⁴ In Yeats' play, the Boy is killed in order to halt the cycle of retribution; in Carr's play, Hester kills her own child ostensibly to save her from a motherless existence. On the evening when Hester's ex-husband will take a new bride, Hester's brother,

⁶⁴ The play conjures ghosts in ever-increasing increments, so that they move from being an idea, to a figure that the Old Man can see, to a figure that both the Old Man and the Boy see together. At first, the Old Man hears hoof-beats, and the Boy says he cannot hear a sound. Then the Boy thinks his father mad for seeing ghosts (although the stage directions that call for a young girl to appear in a window allow the audience to also see the apparition). Finally, the Boy also sees the figure in the window, and he shrinks back in horror at the sight of a "body that was a bundle of old bones / Before [he] was born" (*Selected Plays* 223-225).

Joseph Swane, returns from the dead as if to underline the previous iteration of the cycle.

Carr's plays draw mythological sustenance from a variety of sources: the influence of Yeats is significant, but her characterisation of Catwoman in *By the Bog of Cats*... also conjures the figure of Teiresias, who shares her trait of blindness, but metaphysically is all-seeing (Bourke 129). In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Teiresias is prompted by the behaviour of birds that dwell with him to prophesize great danger for Thebes. In *Oedipus the King*, Teiresias is hesitant to reveal his knowledge about Oedipus' lineage because this knowledge is likely to be met with anger or disbelief. Like Teiresias, Catwoman gathers information from the sounds of the birds; the play's opening, which shows Hester burying her companion swan 'Black Wing,' foreshadows the imminent disaster that Catwoman corroborates through her dream. Carr's approach to ancient mythology demonstrates a willingness to borrow from past literary forms, while also displaying a playfulness or impressionistic approach to the material she borrows. Teiresias may not be part of Euripides' *Medea* – the play that lends the majority of its plot points to *By the Bog of Cats*... – but his character is nevertheless useful, because it conjures the fated, destabilised world reflected in classical drama, and resurrected by her plays.

As a liminal figure – a grotesque figure between states of being – Catwoman embodies the historical tensions that have accrued between marginal groups in society and the Irish state. Her grotesqueries, narratively explained as necessities of a poor, hardscrabble life, lend an unavoidable visual presence to internal struggles that might otherwise be elided by mainstream societal representation. Catwoman wears the effects of her personal history – a personal history intimately tied to the struggle of poor, marginalised women – on her person. The grotesque characteristics associated with her are external manifestations of this

history. But instead of piling all the potential elements of social marginalisation onto this one character, Carr spreads them amongst other characters who on the surface may not appear to be as vulnerable, opening an interpretive space where visual appearances may or may not be reflective of character as a whole. In Carr, the liminality of the grotesque extends to the level of biology, in that the process of transformation or metamorphosis threatens the idea of biological integrity. Harpham argues that:

the grotesque, and those who indulge in it, frequently encounter a backlash that takes the form of genealogical abuse, with accusations of illegitimacy, bastardy, or hybridization, terms that indicate structural confusion, reproductive irregularity, or typological incoherence (5).

Curiously, Catwoman is the character in *By the Bog of Cats*... who most fully invites a grotesque reading, yet these abuses are piled not onto her but onto other characters in the play.⁶⁵ Hester and her ex-husband's mother variously accuse each other of descending from sullied blood lines as a way of asserting their own personal integrity and right to place. Through her partial and unconventional use of the grotesque, Carr subtly disperses the litany of social ills amongst her characters, disabling easy stereotypes: Catwoman may appear as grotesque, but the expected identity that accompanies the grotesque is more clearly associated with other characters in the play who, on the surface, appear to inhabit the social mainstream. This inversion of expectation recalls Carr's treatment of the Traveller identity within her plays, in that the process of stereotyping becomes difficult because the sum total of characteristics associated with any given marginalised group becomes dispersed or displaced through its appearance in characters of all appearances and backgrounds. In

⁶⁵ Bernadette Bourke argues that while *Portia Coughlan* treats character and situation through the grotesque, *By the Bog of Cats*... "goes beyond the boundaries of grotesque imagery and launches us into the bizarre world of carnival itself" (129).

blurring the conventional lines separating one social group from another, Carr provides the possibility to look beyond the idea of stereotype, or further, to question the basis of social characterisations entirely. This process is in line with critical uses of the grotesque, where “the deliberate deforming of the image is an essential step in the process of reforming it” (Harpham 12).

Catwoman marks one of Carr’s more extreme characterisations of the body as broken or disfigured, but her plays are marked by more ‘realistic’ instances of bodies in various states of disrepair. *Portia Coughlan* is the example *par excellence*, where the supporting characters display an array of physical challenges. As we are introduced to the *dramatis personae*, the audience sees their scars born clearly on the outsides of their bodies. Raphael limps into the first scene of the play with a bad foot, and rumour has it that he lopped off half of it for the insurance compensation. Portia’s aunt, Maggie May, is overweight and shows the abuses of too much drinking, as well as the hard-knocks after-effects of life as a street prostitute. As she marches into Portia’s house bearing a large parcel, her soft husband Senchil tries to take the parcel from her, pleading, “Sit down, pet, your varicoses, ya shouldn’t be wearin’ them high heels, pet, don’t know how many times I told you that” (196). As she lights one cigarette after another, he implores her not to smoke so much, adding “and you didn’t get your lungs checked out this five year.” Of her doting, skinny husband, Maggie May at one time remarks, “Senchil wasn’t born, he was knitted on a wet Sunday afternoon” (240). Senchil has a “banjaxed” heart, and nibbles only on digestive biscuits, in an effort to avoid more dangerous cookies for fear they would cause blood clots. The unlikely pair nag each other, but all of these family members – Raphael, Maggie May, and Senchil – are the gentle figures in the play. They rarely say an unkind word, and in

general, try to keep Portia from teetering over the edge into self-destruction. Similarly, her friend Stacia collects Portia's kids for her, and also finds the time to join Portia for kick-it-loose drinks at the local bar. Locally, Stacia is known disparagingly as "The Cyclops of Coolinarney," because she has only one eye. The other one was gouged out, but we never learn how or why it happened. Stacia tells Portia how, during a recent trip to Dublin, she purchased eye patches in four different colours: "one's blue, one's green, one's yellow, and one's black for Mass and funerals" (205). Stacia is not afraid to mince words. When the rough-around-the-edges bartender Fintan Goolan flirts with Portia, Stacia goads him with certainly one of the more innovative uses of stage costume: staring him down, she taunts: "Lookin' for somewhere to put it, Goolan? (*Flips up her eye patch.*) Go on, I dare ya! I fuckin' dare ya!" The audience is left with the effect of the action – Fintan's shock ("Jaysus H!"), and his quick retreat from the stage (209). Stacia's revelation of her missing eye is another example of the grotesque in action in Carr's plays, as it reveals the body as penetrable and characterised by orifices, as opposed to the original impulse reflected in the eye-patch, which is to conceal and contain the body's openings and wounds.

While all of these simple and essentially kind, broken-bodied characters wear the scars of their own history on their outsides, Portia's damage clearly resides on the inside, as if the weight of history and social expectation has turned inward. Portia is able-bodied and beautiful, and according to those who share the parochial mindset she rails against throughout the play, her beauty is such that "[s]he could have had anyone" (226). Instead of bearing the scars of her history externally, Portia's rage, and the rage of many of Carr's leading women, emerges in a series of articulate, venomous outbursts. Where the scarred and broken bodies of Carr's supporting characters hide kind and essentially content figures

inside, Carr's beautiful and successful leading characters can barely contain their rage at the way decorum and social expectation have robbed them of liberty and happiness. The venom that erupts from these bodies through dialogic confrontation is enough to "savage" anyone "to the scut," as Raphael says to Portia after being subject to a particularly acute attack (254). Carr's writing is remarkable for the direct and brutal nature of the dialogue shared between characters – her characters express their anger, frustration, hatred, and disgust directly, granting the other figures in the *mise-en-scène* and the audience no mercy. For a first-time reader or audience member, the dialogue is shocking in its savagery, suggesting a cheeky play with the general expectations of stage decorum: Carr draws from the classics, but her treatment of character, as also seen through her use of the grotesque, breaks as many conventions as it upholds. In a fit of self-loathing for her inability to let go of her brother's memory, Portia unleashes a torrent of assaults on her husband Raphael:

Raphael (*going over to her*) Portia, you don't mean any of this, you're upset, ya can't mean what ya been sayin'.

Portia (shaking with rage) Get away from me! You think I don't? Then hear this and let's be free of all illusions for evermore. I despise you, Raphael Coughlan, with your limp and your cheap suits and your slow ways. I completely and utterly despise you for what you are in yourself, but more for who you will never be. Now leave me alone. And light no more candles for me for fear I blind ya with them. (*Snuffs out candles violently*).

Raphael Portia, please, don't speak to me like this, please. Think what you're sayin', this isn't you –

Portia The fool comes back for more. Well, there's more! You asked me where I was tonight. Well now, I'll tell ya. I was screwin' the barman from the High Chaparral. Gettin' angry now, are ya? Good. Beginnin' to hate me? Better still. I want none of your watery love, Raphael Coughlan, and while we're on the subject he was useless, just as I knew he would be, useless, as useless as you. Go on, cry away, break your heart, Raphael Coughlan, it'll heal, don't worry, it'll heal, and I'll go guarantor for you that once it's healed there'll be nothin' under sun or moon that'll ever lance its tough hide again (222).

Carr makes it clear that Portia's intention is to say whatever will be most shocking to her husband, because what the audience knows, and what Raphael does not know, is that her meeting with the 'barman' ended with an argument, and not with sex. So while Portia reveals to Raphael the 'truth' of her distaste for him, her words are also used to pierce whatever is left of the fragile bond they may have shared. "In her plays words are like boiling water. They scald you if they so choose," writes Frank McGuinness in the programme for the premiere of *By the Bog of Cats* ... (McGuinness, "*By the Bog*" 87). The venomous use of language recurs in Carr's plays, and is often centred on the main female character's long-standing dissatisfaction with her husband or partner. The severity and character of the outbursts suggest that, on the one hand, the characters are speaking from a position that is firmly rooted in an image of their own lived history. On the other hand, the extreme expression of this personal history can also be understood as indicating the breakdown of Ireland's traditional culture of silence – a culture that permitted, for example, abuses by the Catholic Church to continue for decades.

Rage: Addressing Ireland's Culture of Silence

Carr's 2006 play, *Woman and Scarecrow*, presents an alternate way of critiquing the historical culture of silence. The play dramatises the last day of 'Woman' as she wastes away, bitterly, in her deathbed. Woman leaves behind eight children she claims to have never wanted, and a husband (with the character name 'Him'), whom, as in many Carr plays, she detests but from whom she is inseparable. Attending her bedside is 'Scarecrow,' who alternates between the roles of alter-ego, subconscious voice, and eventual Grim Reaper. Instead of dramatising Woman's hatred of Him in a dialogue between husband and wife, Carr this time turns the expression inward, focussing on the battle with the self over the dissatisfactions of life. By splitting the subjectivity of the main character into two bodies on stage, she allows an inner struggle to be dramatised externally in dialogue. As she lays dying, Scarecrow demands that Woman write a letter to Him, expressing her profound disappointment and disgust in his role as a husband. Scarecrow at one point begins dictating the letter, for fear that Woman – the external, acting subject – will not fully express the anger that the internal, psychological subject has kept silent. Continuing her diatribe to Him, Scarecrow dictates:

You are without pride, without dignity, without any sense of who you are or where your place is in the world or what you are here for... You have reeled through my life reeking havoc at every turn. Well, I am crying out at last, Enough! You will go no further with me. And I want you to know I am going to my grave with my heart broken, yes, broken, but not for you, my heart broken for myself and my children, that I allowed your puling, whining need ensnare me so (54-55).

Carr's use of split subjectivity suggests that Woman has led a life in which she has silenced her inner self, and failed to follow a path that would lead to an 'authentic' life. Woman represents the side of the Woman/Scarecrow character who wanted more, but settled for less in terms of personal desire and assertiveness. The portions of character history revealed earlier in the plot paint her as a silent participant in her own life – as a woman who explored little of her deepest desires. The appearance of Scarecrow at the moments leading up to Woman's death allows her to break her own historically constructed wall of silence. When her silence is broken, there are only two bodies on the stage, and while they represent multiple parts of Woman, they do not include 'Him.' The character at whom Woman directs her anger is not present to receive the invective. Instead, the letter serves as a device to accomplish several dramatic and theatrical effects. First, the letter demands that Woman acknowledge the difficulties of her past. The writer and reader of the letter are both present on stage, so the message in the letter, and the response to that message, are presented at virtually the same time. The letter becomes a device for delivering difficult 'truths' while demanding that the writer remain present at the letter's 'delivery.' Second, by removing "Him" from the stage, the letter turns the theatre audience into the main receptacle for Woman's historical frustrations and resentments. In the dramatic arc of the play, Woman is about to expire, so her unleashed torrent of disappointments, even if accepted and addressed by 'Him,' would do very little to change her own predicament. The onus is on the audience to understand and empathise with Woman's articulated rage, and possibly to read that rage in the context of a culture that no longer sees silence as an effectual way of dealing with the past. Finally, the intimacy of the letter, underlined by the intended receiver's absence, illuminates Woman's real object of anger: herself. While the letter is explicitly directed at

“Him,” it becomes clear that Woman is angry at her own weakness and willingness to lead an unsatisfying life.

As a parallel to Ireland’s growing cultural discursiveness, Carr is presenting us a character that is on the brink of extinction, both literally in terms of the play, and figuratively in terms of Ireland’s cultural ethos. Woman can be seen as representative of a traditional culture that prefers to bear the weight of loss and profound dissatisfaction privately. The character of Scarecrow also allows buried memories to surface in the dialogue, placing the factor of ‘memory’ as an active, disturbing agent in the play. Whereas Woman refuses to recall the past accurately, Scarecrow is the character who provides us with Woman’s early memories, and forces them to be recalled without the misty lens that Woman and time have placed over them. Memory becomes an active force in shaping this metatheatrical dialogue, because the character of Scarecrow forces the Woman’s past to be recalled in its ugly, contradictory, and ultimately, truthful details. The anger unleashed by Woman, through the not so common device of split subjectivity⁶⁶ applied to the familiar device of the letter, is directed at an audience who is living through an historiographical movement that is encouraging history to be seen as messy and contradictory, as well as living through cultural changes that have questioned the role of silence in Irish culture.

Throughout the play Woman recounts a fragment of a memory of herself as a child, dressed in the new red coat and new red hat bought by her mother before she died. The red items are a metonym for her relationship with her mother, and when she asks Auntie Ah, the

⁶⁶ Brian Friel, easily the most well-known Irish playwright of the generation that precedes Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr, uses the device of split subjectivity in his 1964 play, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* The main character in this play, Gareth O’Donnell, is presented as two characters (played by two different actors) – the Private Gar, and the Public Gar. The device in this case uses split subjectivity to demonstrate the difference between the public persona and the id or the alter ego, and the distinction is made explicit through the device of doubling the character. In *Woman and Scarecrow*, Carr uses the device to reveal the contradictory sides of the same emotion or impulse.

woman that raised her after her mother's death, to verify that her mother left her with these new items – the aunt denies that Woman came to her with anything:

Woman ...Auntie Ah, did I ever have a red coat?

Auntie Ah (*Smooths Woman's hair*) Calm. Calm. Calm, girl. You'll need the vestiges of your mind to orient beyond.

Woman A red coat and a red hat to match? When I came to you?

Auntie Ah You came with only the clothes on your back.

Scarecrow I knew you made it up. That baloney about the red coat. It never happened.

Woman Now you're going to hijack my memories. Don't you start! (47).

Woman admits that the "larger canvas" of the past "eludes" her, but she clings to this detail as a kind of metaphysical comfort – as an assurance that her mother provided for her in important ways, even if she did not raise her (47). But when Auntie Ah exits, having denied Woman the details of her imperfectly recalled young life, Scarecrow quickly disabuses Woman of her usual romantic recollection:

Scarecrow Well, first of all, there's no mystery about her. The only heroic thing she did was die young.

Woman Your cruelty has no bounds.

Scarecrow What have I said?

Woman I want to know how she drank her tea and you're rattling on about heroism. Christ, all I'm asking you is to tell me how she lived!

Scarecrow She lived bitterly. I remember her battering the spuds into venomous pup for the dinner. I remember her vagueness on the beach, her

refusal to play. I remember the weeping in darkened rooms, the obsession with Mass and fawning over the priest... And underneath it all I remember this volcanic rage that erupted given any opportunity on the small, the weak, the helpless. Hardship was all she knew. Hardship was all she understood. Hardship was her prayer in the morning and her evening song. A woman of rock, carved out of the rocks around her. Immovable. Devastating to behold from the cradle (50).

We learn earlier in the play that Woman's mother was deeply unhappy, having had her heart broken by one man, and marrying another. This is the same path that Woman has pursued in her life, which draws on the thematic preoccupation with genealogy across Carr's oeuvre. The device of split subjectivity here forces the protagonist to face her own false memories, and to share this process of unearthing the authentic (yet painful) past with the audience. While in *Portia Coughlan* Carr directed her protagonist's anger at the most ready container of her frustrations – her husband Raphael – in *Woman and Scarecrow* Carr invites the audience to bear more direct witness to the historical and genealogical sources of that anger. Reading the plays in the chronological order of their writing, the theme of the revelation of a frustrated inner life grows with each play, and the focus of the plot becomes more squarely aimed at unearthing cloistered aspects of memory and articulating the pain of personal history.

While Carr's efforts to break historically constructed walls of silence appear as part of a hopeful progression away from the kinds of silence and repression that once characterised a closed, fearful society, audiences may be forgiven for having the distinct sense that Carr is writing about a lost generation, and that the only hope for healing is placed

in an as-yet-unarticulated future generation. Carr gives us very little guidance about this future generation, because children appear only in name or in passing in her plays, and they are often fragile or psychically scarred, as will be discussed in the following section. The present generation in Carr's plays – the female protagonists of *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *Woman and Scarecrow* – are all presented at the point of their extinction. And while this extinction may be mortal, psychological, spiritual, or some combination of the three, it appears that the largest statement her characters can make is to speak. Feminism as a movement in Ireland was historically tied up with other movements – labour rights, minority religious rights, and land rights, to name a few. Social freedoms that strongly affect women's lives, such as the legality of divorce and the possibility of traveling abroad for an abortion, were only gained in Ireland in the years leading up to the Celtic Tiger. While Carr's character studies are heavily psychological, plumbing the depths of her female protagonists' subjectivities, the anger that the characters display is also social; Portia, for example, is obsessed with the loss of her brother and is likely suffering from mental illness; however, she is also angry at the roles she has to inhabit as a woman, and at the way these roles have paralysed her actions. Carr's characters therefore display the wounds of both external and internal crises, and her pattern is to shift inward the external constraints of society such as patriarchy, Catholicism, and economic hardship. It would be possible to interpret Carr's psychological focus as suggesting that Ireland's troubles are a manifestation of the troubled minds of its citizens, but instead I would suggest that her psychological focus be taken as a metaphor for Irish history; instead of exploring social movements and the politics of contemporary Ireland directly, Carr reads history through the genealogy of her characters.

Both Marina Carr and Sebastian Barry are interested in domestic stories of strife, and both are interested in genealogy, but they approach the idea of personal and blood history from different perspectives. Barry uses his own family history as a springboard for creating a broad, complicated picture of historical Irish demographics, whereas Carr writes the scarring impact of Irish history into her characters' genealogies. For the most part, Barry avoids grandiose scenes of conflict, and redresses Irish warring through gentleness and compromise. Carr, on the other hand, writes characters who have been traumatised to varying degrees, and who eventually reveal everything in a fiery and uncompromising rage. Cathy Caruth has written that trauma is fully experienced and eventually overcome only when it has been first forgotten, then recalled and *told*. Trauma to Caruth is "always the story of a wound that cries out," and Carr's characters demonstrate how historical trauma read through the repressions of womanhood also must be spoken, and formed into personal narratives, in order to be fully experienced (and possibly overcome) (4).

The Burden of Motherhood

The frustration directed at husbands, and by extension, the institution of marriage, is also directed at children, who in Carr's world are the seemingly inevitable products of marriage. Carr's rejection of the behavioural expectations of gender points to a critique of the status of women in traditional Irish society. Her earliest published dramatic work, *Low in the Dark* (1990), is a Beckett-influenced absurdist play that trades on our fixation with gender by constantly calling attention to it. In the first scene, Bender gives birth to a girl, but she and her elder daughter Binder keep referring to the baby as a 'he' or a new 'son'. The following scene introduces a game of role-playing between Baxter and Bone (two males), with Baxter

dressed in high-heels and affecting a female's voice as the two knit, argue, and generally play 'house'. The other character in the play, Curtains, is a female who is dressed head to toe in curtains, so that she is unrecognisable and presumably, her sexually identifying features are hidden (*Low in the Dark* 5-13). Gender is the prominent subject of discussion in this play, and it is revealed as both a convention and a curse, particularly for women, who get the most extensive treatment in Carr's oeuvre. The absurdist style of *Low in the Dark* is unique amongst Carr's published plays, but her interest in gender conventions and constraints remains in her subsequent works.⁶⁷ Carr's later works are largely naturalistic, and the shift to this style removes the playfulness associated with absurdism, resulting in a more biting critique of gender's impact on women's lives.

All of Carr's female protagonists have children, and their attitude towards these children ranges from aversion to outright hostility, with the consequences for the children increasing in subsequent plays. In *The Mai* (1994), the title character's daughter Millie appears as a spectre of her older self, which parallels her fragile, insignificant place in the Mai's consciousness. *Portia Coughlan* (1996) trades insignificance for outright hostility: Portia's anger emerges as a response to the social expectations of marriage and motherhood. Portia rails against Raphael for not being able to play the role of lover to her satisfaction, but at the very least she comforts him near the end of the play by revealing that she chose him, emotionally, before their relationship began (255). In contrast, she makes it clear that she never wanted children, and that their appearance failed to stir 'natural' abilities to nurture

⁶⁷ Sarahjane Scaife, who acted in the first production of the play, explains that the play was seen as experimental at the time (1989), but that when she looks back on some of the supposedly absurd passages, they no longer appear so absurd in light of the ongoing cultural debates about nature vs. nurture and genetics vs. environment, etc. (13).

them. When Raphael admonishes Portia for not paying due attention to their sons, she responds:

I never wanted sons nor daughters and I never pretended otherwise to ya; told ya from the start. But ya thought ya could woo me into motherhood. Well, it hasn't worked out, has it? You've your three sons now, so ya better mind them because I can't love them, Raphael. I'm just not able (221).

Portia's explanation that she is not *able* to care for her children contrasts with the idea of maternal desire; her questionable mothering skills rest, in her final statement, not on a lack of desire, but on a lack of *ability*. Her characterisation, therefore, rails against the assumption that maternal skills are 'innate' and 'natural', which decouples the assumed connection between womanhood and the ability to nurture and provide love. Portia is a 'bad' mother not because she does not want to spend time with her sons, but because at a fundamental level, she is incapable of doing so.

When Carr's characters do claim to love their children, the attachment is so inseparable from the mother's own self-definition that it ends up leading to catastrophe. At the end of *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester kills her daughter Josie because Hester is unable to separate Josie's feelings from her own feelings toward the mother that abandoned her decades earlier. On the brink of suicide, Hester begs Josie to run far away, suggesting that her aim is to spare her daughter. But when Josie says that she would be lonely without her, Hester's perspective changes, and she immediately couples Josie's fears with her own sense of longing for her mother. Hester kills Josie to save the girl from the torment Hester assumes her daughter will face in the future. The act of killing, in Hester's damaged mind, is merciful because the unfulfilled longing for inadequate mothering is worse than death:

Josie Ah, Mam, I want to be where you'll be.

Hester Well, ya can't, because wance ya go there ya can never come back.

Josie I wouldn't want to if you're not here, Mam.

Hester You're just being contrary now. Don't ya want to be with your Daddy and grow up big and lovely and full of advantages I have not the power to give ya?

Josie Mam, I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return

Hester Don't be saying them things to me now.

Josie Just take me with ya, Mam (*Puts her arms around Hester*) (338).

Hester proceeds to slit Josie's throat, stating "I won't have ya as I was, waiting a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't Josie, they don't..." When Hester slits Josie's throat, Josie dies quietly, whispering the same words that Hester whispers at her own moment of death minutes later: "Mam – Mam –" (341).

In examining Hester's actions and longings, Carr turns the lens on the female protagonists that people her plays, and provides the perspective of the children who suffer from their mothers' physical or spiritual absences. In this case, Hester is the wounded child who cannot make sense of her life, because her mother, much like Portia, was more apt to wander the landscape than to tend to the needs of her children. Of her own mother, Hester says "[t]here's a longin' in me for her that won't quell the whole time" (275). By having Hester kill her daughter, Carr ends the genealogical cycle of longing and dissatisfaction in the Swane family line, while at the same time perpetuating the mythological tradition of killing as solution.

In *Ariel* (2002), a play that traces the rise of a ruthless politician, infanticide is once again practiced, but this time it is outside the dramatic action of the play, and proves to be the evil secret at the centre of the play. When *Ariel* opens, Fermoy appears to be the positive portrait of fatherly love. On her sixteenth birthday, Fermoy lifts his daughter Ariel in to the air, carries her around the room and sings Happy Birthday before presenting her with a new car (11). Moments later, he confesses to his brother, “God, they’d drive ya mad, kids. I spind the whole day duckin them” (12). This contrast immediately sets up the tension between the desire to raise children, and the resentment that can arise from their impact on one’s life. At first glance, this tension is understandable, so no one expects, when Ariel fails to return from a spin in her new car, that she died at her father’s hands. The significant difference between Ariel’s death at her father’s hand, and Josie’s death at her mother’s hand, is that the audience understands that Fermoy killed his daughter as a stepping stone to power. Paralleling the Ancient Greek mythological sacrifice of Iphigenia at the hands of Agamemnon in an effort to appease the gods and save the fleet, Fermoy kills his own daughter believing it is ordained as a necessary step in his efforts to gain the office of Taoiseach. Yet, as with Hester, who appears to think she is saving her daughter from a worse fate, Carr makes Fermoy’s motives ambiguous. In his confession to his wife, Fermoy argues that he ‘sacrificed’ Ariel because she was ‘too good’ for this world. Fermoy’s ‘proof’ to Frances is that Ariel was born with the remnants of stunted wings on her back – a ‘fact’ that Frances disputes (57). By introducing supernatural, unaccountable elements into her plays, Carr asks the audience to engage in the morally ambiguous act of empathising with the monster characters that she has created. If indeed the gods and the sprits do hold sway in Carr’s world, then who is to say that the characters are wholly responsible for their worldly actions?

In *The Mai*, Carr pits the domestic dissatisfaction with marriage and the dissatisfaction of mothering against each another, suggesting that the inability to mother comes from a surfeit of romantic love. The Mai herself is tragically addicted to her absent husband Robert, even though it is clear that she hates both him and herself because of this addiction. But the case of the Mai's mother, Grandma Fraochlán, is more to the point: she explains that her love for the 'nine-fingered fisherman,' the husband who died, was so strong that she nearly went crazy when he died. Her passion for this husband overpowered her ability to love her children:

Grandma Fraochlán ...There's two types of people in this world from what I can gather, them as puts their children first and them as puts their lover first and for what it's worth, the nine-fingered fisherman and meself belongs ta the latter of these. I would gladly have hurled all seven of ye down the slopes of hell for one night more with the nine-fingered fisherman and may I rot eternally for such unmotherly feelin' (182).

Grandma Fraochlán's statement demonstrates that her love for her children was always second to her love for her now-dead husband, which reverberates with the tension between Portia's love for her dead twin brother, and her duty towards her husband-proper, Raphael. In Carr's worlds, love comes in limited quantities, with children and living spouses continually having to fight for affection in competition with absent husbands or dead lovers. In these worlds, female sexual desire and fantasy capture the imagination of the protagonists more fully than would be considered acceptable in a traditional Catholic society.

The expectation placed on women to care for their families by putting the needs of their immediate family first gets shunted aside in favour of a kind of love or infatuation that cannot be returned in kind. In the case of *Ariel*, Frances's tortured longing is for a dead son from a previous relationship. Her current son Stephen, who is ten years old in the first act of the play, is still attempting to suckle her, and the suggestion is that he was only recently (and poorly) weaned from her breast (22). In continuing to breast-feed her adolescent son, she provides him with a bodily semblance of care and nurturing, while starving him of any real affection. Her breast is a surrogate for affection to Stephen, while at the same time Stephen's suckling allows her to keep the idea of her dead infant son continually alive. In this play, however, the central character is the ambitious politician Fermoy, husband to Frances and father to Stephen, Ariel, and the middle child Elaine. While Fermoy is punished (to death) by Frances for his murder of their daughter Ariel, Carr uses a shift in the expected plotting of her mythological source material to comment on the more rigid expectations around motherhood. After Frances kills Fermoy, (as Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon) the expected progression is for Stephen (Orestes) with the support of his sister Elaine (Electra) to kill his mother. However, in Carr's play it is Elaine who takes up the knife against her mother. Elaine stabs Frances in the throat at the close of the play not only to avenge her father's death, as in *The Oresteia*, but also to fatally punish Frances for never loving her enough. Angered by the fact that her mother has moved her father's burial place, Elaine takes Orestes' place, but the final altercation between mother and remaining daughter reveals a much deeper source of anger:

Elaine I tould ya not to touch me father's grave. Tould ya ih'd disturb everythin. But ya wouldn't listen, would ya?

Frances Just geh ouh! Geh ouh a this house and don't come back. You're so full a your own hate ya don't nohice the hate of others. Some zebra stallion grafted you onta me. I wanted a son to make up for James. And I goh you. Now g'wan wud that piece of information and leh ud sustain ya on your travels. G'wan, geh ouha me sigh.

Elaine Aye, some zebra stallion grafted me onta ya alrigh, and I festered there, bidin me time. Ya say ya prayed for a son to make up for James. Well, I am James. I'm James returned. And I'm me father that ya butchered to hees eyeballs. And I'm Ariel. And I'm Elaine wud your deah on me palm, carved into my plain a Mars like a stone. Whah a relafe to be finally livin ud.

Stabs Frances in the throat (Ariel 74-5).

The final moments of the play draw on Elaine's deep dissatisfaction with Frances's mothering, despite the fact that Fermoy's brand of fathering, in comparison, included murdering his eldest child. This moment also expands the expectation of parenting into a broad, mythological plane, by suggesting that Elaine was fated to carry out this act from birth – that it was written in her stars.

While much of Carr's dramatic conflict centres on domestic competitions for affection and attention, the natural landscape also draws a significant portion of her protagonists' attentions. In *Portia Coughlan*, Portia's best friend Stacia Doyle encourages her to take a holiday, realising that Portia has never been on a vacation.

Stacia When's the last time you had a holiday?

Portia Haven't never been on one, Stacia.

Stacia Jay, that's right, you've never had a holiday. That's shockin', Portia!

Shockin'!

Portia Don't want one, don't think I'd survive a night away from the Belmont Valley.

Stacia Don't be daft, a' course you would, might even enjoy it (207).

The text then calls for Gabriel's voice to play faintly, reminding the audience that Portia is also attached to the landscape because it was the place where he died (and it is the place where, at the end of the act, she will also die). The landscape has a profound effect on Portia, and Carr continues to explore the relationship between character and place in her other plays. The title character of *The Mai* builds a house with a huge window onto Owl Lake, which is where she meets her eventual death. Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats*... wanders the bog in search of her mother's spirit, and kills her own daughter to save her from the same fate. The familiar literary trope of characterising children as symbols of the future gets short shrift in Carr's worlds, because the characters who have children are tied more to the past and to the landscape that symbolizes that past than to any potential future. Carr's representation of mothers directly opposes more traditional conceptions of maternal sacrifice as topping other worldly concerns, while at the same time it rejects the idea of sacrifice as presented through Yeatsian dramatizations of 'Mother Ireland.' In Yeats' modern Irish dramatization of Mother Ireland through *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, children are potential objects of sacrifice for nationalist causes; in Carr's case, children are sacrificed because their mothers cannot live up to societal pressures that dictate the idea of 'good parenting.' Here, the family is not used as a metaphor for the state, but instead is used directly as a way of rejecting the state's Catholic-inspired expectations of women.

The Land: Complex, Compelling, and Dangerous

In a way similar to how Carr complicates expected depictions of motherhood and rural life, she also draws on historical ties between Irishness and natural landscapes in order to complicate the expected relationship between these two entities. Ireland has long been defined by its landscape, and as Ireland grows in popularity as a destination for tourists, the Irish tourist board has capitalized on images that provide the international short-form for Ireland: rolling hills, stony ancient ruins, sheep, and the possibility of fairies popping out from behind all of that stone. However, as I will discuss further in my analysis of contemporary Irish film, the focus on Irish *cities* as viable destinations was also growing during the period of the Celtic Tiger, suggesting that Ireland was making itself anew as a destination that included something other than just rural landscapes and pints of Guinness in dusty old pubs. Historically, the ‘land’ in Ireland provided a precarious basis for identity formation and survival. The famine years clearly shook the faith of Ireland’s inhabitants in the land’s ability to provide sustenance, but the centrality of the land nevertheless is evidenced by the several historical battles fought over land ownership and accessibility during the formation of the Irish nation. The effect of land-as-identity on the formation of a distinctive aesthetic in Irish filmmaking has been profound, and will be explored in significant detail in the next chapter.

Carr’s plays reflect the centrality of rural landscapes in Irish culture, while at the same time, her work suggests that the connection between people and landscape can be obsessive and dangerous, if not fatal. Carr’s characters are intimately connected with the midlands landscapes that surround them, but unlike John B. Keane’s 1965 play *The Field* (or the film adaptation of the play), ties to landscape are no longer characterised as a result of

necessity and poverty. Instead, Carr's characters are either well-to-do, or have the means to be financially well-off if they so choose. Rather than exploring economic ties to the land, Carr's plays trace deep spiritual connections to the land, revealing these connections to be at times comforting, and at times highly destructive. Her characters do not need the land for physical and material survival, but they are nevertheless drawn to it, critically reflecting the complicated historical relationship between Irish people and the land they inhabit.⁶⁸

On one level, Carr shows the land to be both compelling and dangerous, recalling a similar trope in plays that span from Synge's 1907 one-act *Riders to the Sea* through the aforementioned *The Field* by John B. Keane, to Brian Friel's *Translations* (1982). In this trope, characters honour the landscapes they inhabit, but cannot escape the dangers associated with it. In Synge's play, the central figure of the old woman, Maurya, keens at the loss of her last son, taken, like all the others, by the sea that feeds them. *The Field* sees Bull McCabe kill a rival who wants to buy the land he has lovingly cultivated. When Lieutenant Yolland, responsible for translating geographical place names of the small village he has become smitten with, disappears in *Translations*, the army threatens to kill all the livestock. In Carr's plays, the push-pull trope of the land continues, but the power of the land is made considerably darker and more self-conscious than in these earlier works.

Cuura Lake in *Ariel* provides the hiding place for the title character's murdered body, as well as the final resting place for her grandmother before her; in *By the Bog of Cats*... we learn that one of the sources of Hester's madness lies in the dark secret that she slit her brother Joseph Swane's neck as they rowed across a lake. Similarly, Owl Lake provides the central landscape element for *The Mai*, and the lake figures heavily in the play's narrative.

⁶⁸ For excellent stills and an analysis of how the scenography of several productions of *By the Bog of Cats*... transforms the Irish Midlands into an "intersection between places," see Cerquoni. This quotation is from p. 199.

The Mai builds her house around a view of the lake, and the central mythological tale in the play, about a jilted lover who cried a lake of tears around her, is told to us in several instances by Millie, the Mai's daughter and the play's narrator. The myth of the lake is that Coillte, the daughter of the mountain god, fell in love with the Lord of all flowers, Bláth. They spend the spring and summer in love, but then Bláth tells her that he must spend fall and winter with the 'dark witch of the bog,' to return only in the spring. Distraught, Coillte follows Bláth to the witch's lair, and finds him ensconced and unresponsive. She cries a lake of tears, and is eventually pushed into the lake by the dark witch. In the spring and summer, the mournful sound of Bláth's pipes causes birds to suddenly flee. (Carr, *The Mai* 147). As Millie wraps up her recounting of this tale, a ghostly flash of light on stage reveals the Mai's body draped in Robert's arms, as if the Mai is Coillte to Robert's Bláth. The play ends with the Mai, distracted and restless, wandering out towards the lake at night, suggesting that the image is a premonition for story events not covered by the play (186). *Portia Coughlan* takes the association between water and death to its most complex iteration, substituting the various lakes for the Belmont river, and tracing the obsession with the land to the eventual death of the title character at the top of the play's second act. While *The Mai* hints at the title character's suicide by drowning, *Portia Coughlan* makes the drowning the central narrative event.

Portia's response to Stacia's suggestion that she go on a vacation reveals that she is tied to the landscape in complex and destructive ways. Portia is married to a wealthy husband, and has the means to escape her rural life, but her connection to the landscape keeps her captive in the Belmont valley. Throughout the play, Portia's communion with the land suggests that she appreciates the material beauty of the landscape, and takes pleasure in

following its cycles closely. Continuing her discussion about vacations with Stacia, Portia says:

Oh I'm sure I'd live through what other folks calls holidays, but me mind'd be
turnin' on the Belmont River. Be wonderin' was it flowin' rough or smooth,
was the bank mucky or dry, was the salmon beginnin' their rowin' for the sea,
was the frogs spawnin' the waterlilies, had the heron returned, be wonderin'
all of these and a thousand other wonderin's that river washes over me (207-
8).

The colourful description of the river and the bank is peaceful and nostalgic at first, but it comes back to haunt the audience of the play at the beginning of the second act, when Portia is shown suspended from the pulley that has raised her out of the river. Wearing only a slip, her body is "dripping water, moss, algae, frogspawn, waterlilies, from the river" (223). The romantic beauty of the river's contents, described by Portia to Stacia a day earlier, becomes the final accoutrements of her death. Portia's decorated body in death recalls that of Shakespeare's Ophelia, except that the moss and algae accompanying her are more grounded in the slimy muck of the earth, than in the "crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" that Ophelia had woven into "fantastic garlands" (Hamlet, Act IV Scene vii). Instead of romantic imagery to accompany Portia's drowned body, Carr's focus is on the dramatic-historical significance of the place: Portia is pulled from the same spot of the river where her twin brother Gabriel was pulled fifteen years to the day earlier. Portia does not plan and prepare for her death with the precision and resolve of a madwoman; instead it is planned for her, one could say, as a way of completing the final twinned pattern of her life. Her demise

comes as a result of the material landscape that she encounters, but her cause of death points to a spiritual longing associated with Gabriel, and symbolized by the landscape.

The character of Gabriel is painted for the audience more through character recollection than through staging; as a ghost he does appear before the audience at certain key moments leading to her death, but we learn more about him through character memory. The material and the spiritual are interwoven in the character of Gabriel, in that Portia searches out his ghost by the banks of the Belmont river, while other characters describe him as something otherworldly. When Sly tells Portia to forget her dead twin brother and move on, Portia retorts:

Forget Gabriel! He's everywhere, Daddy. Everywhere. There's not a corner of any of your forty fields that don't remind me of Gabriel. His name is in the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone (213-14).

The imagery is rich with the material flora and fauna of the Belmont Valley, which is commensurate with other recollections Portia has of Gabriel. At the same time, however, Sly recalls his son as otherworldly – as something detached from the material world:

I drove that child twice a week every week to Dublin for his singin' lessons, in the hay season, when the cows was calvin', when there was more than enough to be done at home...God forgive me, but times I'd look at him through the mirror and the thought would go through me mind that this is no human child but some little outcast from hell. And then he'd sing the long drive home and I knew I was listenin' to somethin' beautiful and rare though he never sang for

me – Christ, I loved his singin’, used stand in the vestry of Belmont chapel
just to listen to his practisin’ – those high notes of God he loved to sing (230).

Hard-pressed to characterise Gabriel accurately, Sly’s attempts waver from something inhuman, to something devilish, to something Godly. Gabriel’s presence exerts a push-pull force on Portia, drawing her in and repulsing her at the same time. At the top of the play, Portia appears in a sort of trance in her living room, listening to Gabriel’s voice. A spot lights Gabriel on a different section of the stage, as he stands, ghostly, on the bank of the Belmont River. The stage directions call for Portia and Gabriel to subtly mirror each other in their movements (193). Gabriel is immediately associated with the materiality of the landscape, as well as exerting a spiritual pull on Portia; he is both present for the audience, and unattainable for Portia at the same time. When Raphael appears in the living room, Gabriel’s voice fades away, accompanied in the stage directions by the spot fading to black. When Raphael leaves moments later, Gabriel’s voice gets louder, and Portia has to put on a CD to drown him out (193-5). Portia’s only option for intentionally seeking out Gabriel is to visit the river bank, and it is through these visits to the natural landscape that she attempts to fill her spiritual absence.

The penultimate scene of the first act provides a rich dialectical image of the tension Portia experiences between wild nature and the organisation of civilisation. As Portia sits by the river on one part of the stage, throwing leaves into the river and then hunkering down to look deeply into it, Raphael appears on another part of the stage in the living room. He calls unsuccessfully to Portia, not knowing she is absent, and then proceeds to create a perfect picture of romantic civility: he puts on music, sets the table for two, opens a bottle of wine, and lights candles. (217). The images sit in tension with one another because they provide

opposing ideas of what Portia both desires and fears: she tries in vain to communicate with Gabriel by the river bank, even though communicating with him signals a further descent into depression and despair. Similarly, she is repulsed by the order and civility of the life she leads with Raphael, but at a cognitive level, she knows it is the one thing that could save her. At the end of the play, she tells her husband that when she first met him, she thought “if Raphael Coughlan notices me I will have a chance to enter the world and stay in it, which has always been a battle for me” (255). The landscape associated with Gabriel is the central image that defines this push-pull battle for Portia.

While the tension between the material and the spiritual is most clear and complex in *Portia Coughlan*, various iterations are found in several of Carr’s earlier and later plays. By *the Bog of Cats*...places the tension within the character of Catwoman, who talks to ghosts and has portentous visions of the future, but remains deeply tied to material elements of the landscape, with mice in her pockets and cat parts in her costume. Catwoman lives on the bog, a landscape which mirrors her own grotesque figure in the scars it bears from the turf removed to fuel domestic fireplaces. When Black Wing, Hester’s favoured bog swan, is found dead in a bog hole at the opening of the play, Hester wants to remove it from its natural grave and bury it near her caravan (265-271). The swan lived its life on the bog and died on the bog, but to Catwoman she was also a harbinger of danger and trouble to come, and the swan’s death signals the beginning of Hester’s spectacular decline. The animal’s importance to both women is linked to its material presence on the bog landscape, along with its clairvoyant capabilities.

In the first production of *The Mai* at the Peacock Theatre in October 1994, the large picture window of the Mai’s living room figured prominently in the centre stage. The

placement of the window calls attention to the landscape it frames beyond the stage, allowing the Mai to stare at her beloved Owl Lake, while also mediating the presence of nature for the audience. We learn in the play that the Mai built the house around a view of the lake, but unlike in *Portia Coughlan*, the setting never ventures outdoors. The Mai is drawn to the landscape because she associates it with her husband Robert, but her relationship with Robert is dysfunctional, so the lake becomes both a source of pleasure and a source of pain. While the window deliberately distances the audience from the landscape, it also produces a metatheatrical effect by pointing out the prominence of landscape to the audience. Because we never see the Mai actually interact with the lake, the audience becomes trapped, along with the Mai, in the confining interior of her home. Further, the audience's understanding of the lake is built on the mythological tale of the jilted lover's tears, which substitutes the natural significance of the lake as a picturesque place of peace and greenery for the spiritual significance tied to ancient mythology.

The tension between the material and the spiritual or otherworldly is evident in the plays' settings and narrative preoccupations, but the tension also plays out at the level of form, where a version of naturalism collides with formal ventures away from naturalism. Reviews of *The Mai* indicate that the mixture of different theatrical forms might sit uncomfortably together on the stage. For example, David Nowlan's *Irish Times* review of the play's premiere reveals expectations about the production's verisimilitude, in that his criticisms in several cases are directed at the production's perceived distance from 'reality.' For example, he notes that the setting is "brilliant in concept save for the fact that the lake outside the window looks more like an Atlantic sea breaking on a Connemara shore than the lapping of an inland lake." Further, Grandma Fraochlán, as played by Joan O'Hara, "is

internally and emotionally sound but has more hair and physical agility than any centenarian ever seen” (Nowlan, “Dialogue”). Nowlan’s comments on the lake image and his reservation of full praise for O’Hara’s performance target the production’s perceived verisimilitude, suggesting that the production overall, and perhaps the play text itself, demand a greater correspondence to lived reality. However unimposing or small the lake might be in reality, its use in the narrative clearly provides it with a larger mythological function alongside its literal function; the story of Owl Lake uses Celtic names in a story that conjures Greek deities, and the brief moment where Robert plays Bláth to the dead Mai’s Coillte also stretches conventional expectations of realism. Similarly, while Grandma Fraochlán might be 100 years old in the play, her swearing and sensual recall of lovemaking with her long-dead husband conjure up a character that disrupts audience expectations of a centenarian on many levels, suggesting that remarkable physical agility is but one trait among many.

Regardless of whether one may agree or disagree with Nowlan’s criticisms of the play, they suggest that the line between the real and the mythical, or the earthly and the ethereal, was less than distinct in the design and playing at the *The Mai*’s premiere. Carr’s midlands plays take a particular approach to naturalism, in that her characters are so deeply connected to their environment that that they appear to be made of its same material. This naturalism, however, contradicts the audience’s sense of realism, because the characters speak and act with an honesty and unreconstructed venom that is generally reserved for private thoughts and secret, imaginative revenges; it is difficult to ‘believe’ that people could behave this way in reality.

Fintan O’Toole understands the tensions or formal incongruities in the play as reflecting a rapidly changing Ireland. The play, according to O’Toole, demonstrates an

understanding that “realism and surrealism are no longer opposites for Irish theatre, that our reality is so strange that only strange images can encompass it” (“A New World”). Where O’Toole uses ‘realism’ and ‘surrealism’ as the poles between which the play’s form moves, I would suggest we could better see the tension as one between the material and the spiritual, or the earthbound and the ethereal. The drama is heightened beyond realistic expectations, no doubt, but the form in question revolves around rules of naturalism and expectations of decorum more than around realism and verisimilitude. The original definitions of naturalism, stemming from theatrical theories of Zola and Ibsen, involve an interest in heredity and environment,⁶⁹ both of which are key to understanding the behaviour of characters in Carr’s plays. As discussed in the previous section on character, Carr continually refers to bloodlines, inbreeding, and genealogy in the feuds she creates between characters. Into the deeply material mix of environment and genealogy, she throws the continual threat of a higher power; her power is not God, per se, but fate, destiny, and all the large, arguably very *un-naturalistic*, forces of the ancient western world.

The tension between the material and spiritual read through landscape is consistent with other bipolar tensions in her work. In the same way that character reveals a tension between outer beauty and inner turmoil, nature is presented as both captivating, and dangerous or entrapping. Carr’s characters are not tied to the landscape out of necessity or poverty, as was the case for rural dwellers in impoverished Ireland, but they are nevertheless still tied to the land, as it exerts a spiritual or otherworldly force. Characters are drawn to the landscape, but they often end up dying on the land as a result of their inability to sever the dangerous attraction. The push-pull force of the land reflects that transitional nature of Irish identity in ways that are similar to those explored around the unveiling of the Spire: the land

⁶⁹ See, for example, Émile Zola’s *Naturalism in the Theatre* or *Preface to Thérèse Raquin*

no longer holds the power of sustenance in the way it once did, but the legacy of this power has not been entirely drained. The transitional period of the Celtic Tiger and its after-effects reflects the shift from the materiality of landscape as key to identity, to the ephemerality of the material as a marker of identity in the new Ireland.

The Real and the Mythical Collide

In the same way that Carr's treatment of landscape veers between deeply material and decidedly spiritual, her narratives ask the audience to follow plots that are on the one hand realistic and tied up with the mundane, and on the other hand, wildly mythological and grandiose. Her characters are for the most part everyday people, but their expectations for love, success and happiness are of comparatively gargantuan, mythical proportions. The life of the imagination, for her characters, is larger than the worldly vessel that contains it.

Time does not pass in Carr's plays in a linear fashion, as we expect it to in the contemporary western world, but instead time moves in cycles. Her cyclical conception of time is more akin to a mythological temporality, where actions and events from the past live in close concert with those of the present. Similarly, the division of time into past, present, and future does not have the same power to shape reality as do the mythological or spiritual forces of fate, destiny, repetition, and revenge. Characters in her plays discuss the danger of repeating the past, and of falling into old patterns, but these discussions often yield few results; instead, her narratives play out like endless repetitions of personal and mythological cycles of time. In *The Mai*, for example, Grandma Fraochlán suggests that the Mai's husband Robert is bound to leave her because he is tainted by his own father's similar abandonment:

Grandma ... Your own father left your mother, didn't he?

Robert He never left her! He went to America for a few years. It was after the war, he had to get work, but he came back, didn't he!

Grandma And thousands stayed, war or no war, or brung their wives and children with them. But not you, no, and not your father, and sure as I'm sittin' here, you'll not be stoppin' long, because we can't help repeatin', Robert, we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same (*The Mai* 123).

Grandma Fraochlán in *The Mai* is similar to the grandmother character Blaize in *Portia Coughlan* – they are both aging matriarchs who have witnessed countless decisions by people around them, and have seen enough time pass to understand that patterns of behaviour can be repeated. They are gruff and cynical, but their honesty is refreshing. In the above exchange, Grandma and Robert are clearly aware of how history can repeat itself, but their discussion does little to change the course of history; in the end, the Mai is left without Robert once again. The reasons for his departure are left ambiguous, and the audience can assume either that Grandma was right – history does repeat itself, especially along genealogical lines – or that Grandma, in this wild and fierce world that Carr has created, *cursed* him to repeat the past!

The movement of time in *Portia Coughlan* is similarly stymied by forces that do not fit neatly into earthly conceptions of linearity and progress. Portia is never actually alone in the play, but is passed around like a baton in a timed relay until the moment of her death; in the brief moments when other characters are not on stage with her, Gabriel appears in image or in sound. At the top of the play, she is lost for a moment in his voice, then Raphael comes home. When Raphael leaves, Maggie and Senchil appear; when Portia tries to escape to the

river, she finds Damus waiting on the bank. Sensing Portia's lack of interest in him, Damus asks her why she keeps coming to the river. Portia responds, "I come here because I've always come here and I reckon I'll be comin' here long after I'm gone. I'll lie here when I'm a ghost and smoke ghost cigarettes and watch ye earthlin's goin' about yeer pointless days" (203). There is the sense that she has no choice but to return to the river, to seek it out again and again.

Portia's movement around the stage, from living room to river bank to local bar, does not follow the ordered progression of the everyday, but instead falls into a cyclical pattern over which she claims to have little control. Carr weaves the narrative of play like an ancient myth, where the revelation that anchors the tragedy only comes near the end of the play, even if the dramatic climax falls somewhere in the play's middle. Carr sets up the ghostly figure of Gabriel as central to the dramatic progression of the play (but does not include him in the dramatic action), and then waits until the final moments of the play to reveal the dark secrets that surround this character. In this way, Carr is weaving a myth around Gabriel, which mirrors her quotation of extant myths in this and other plays. In his discussion of the ways in which the past is interpreted, shaped, and used to understand or justify the present, George Lipsitz makes the following distinction between myth and history:

Because myth emphasizes the eternal and the cyclical, it speaks more to reconciliation with existing power realities than to challenges against them. Myth provides legitimation for the world as it is; it reconciles people to the disparity between their desires and their opportunities... History, on the other hand, involves a search for hidden truths and a look beyond surface appearances. History explores how things came to be, and it inevitably

confronts all the roads not taken and all the blasted hopes of the past. It enables us to judge competing myths by a single standard, that of factual investigation into the accumulated consequences of past actions. If myth enables us to live with our pain by naturalizing it, history encourages us to ease our pain by understanding it intellectually and analytically (217).

Lipsitz's distinction situates myth as a passive agent that interprets the present as an inevitable outcome of the past, and history as an active, investigative tool that objectively interrogates competing narratives of the past, in order to weigh their relative truth values.

Carr's characters employ myth for a variety of purposes: in *Ariel*, myth is used as an excuse for past transgressions (Fermoy invokes myth to justify killing his daughter) and for the title characters in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, it is used to justify an inability to act. In certain cases, the characters quote mythological stories without calling attention to the source; Oedipus is referenced in *Ariel*, for example, when Boniface says that he burst a blood vessel in his eye over the torture of knowing what Fermoy had done; he says to Fermoy "You're the wan should be bleedin from the eyes" (50). But for the most part Carr's use of myth is self-conscious, because her plays trace the dangerously seductive power of myth, and question the role that mythological structures play in shaping identity, relationships, and decision-making. Carr's use of myth is critical and revisionist; each referenced myth contains enough plot line to identify its ancient source to the audience, but not enough to consider the play a clear adaptation. Her eventual use of the myth differs from its source in significant ways. At times, she reverses character gender, or changes the expected resolution of a myth; at other times, the belief system supporting the myth is revealed to be so corrupt that the myth becomes broken. Carr employs myth in a way that both references the historical power

of myth in Irish culture, and challenges the way that this power has been assumed and employed. Carr's critical and revisionist narratives, therefore, question the passive, legitimating, and reconciling cultural function of myth as identified by Lipsitz; her use of myth appears closer to his definition of history, which involves "a search for hidden truths and a look beyond surface appearances" (Lipsitz 217).

The central structures of *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats...*, and *Ariel* are all drawn from relatively well-known ancient myths, but in each case, Carr toys with the source myth in a significant way. Unlike her literary predecessor Yeats, for example, who strove to carefully and accurately outline ancient Celtic myths in his plays, Carr liberally dots her narratives with ancient Greek mythology, sometimes following expected characterization and progressions, and other times abandoning her source material and steering the myth in new directions. The most self-conscious and narratively obvious use of myth in Carr's plays occurs in *The Mai*, which is also her earliest published play to draw directly on mythological frameworks.⁷⁰ At the end of the first act, our narrator Millie recounts the tale of Owl Lake: the story is clearly reminiscent of Persephone's descent to Hades, and Demeter's subsequent efforts to reclaim her daughter from the underworld. In Carr's retelling, the characters have Irish names, and the myth undergoes several variations. In the Olympian myth, Persephone is innocently picking flowers when Hades rises through a cleft in the earth and steals her away. Persephone's mother Demeter, goddess of the earth, is so distraught that the earth becomes barren, and Hades is eventually persuaded to return Persephone. Before he does, however, he tricks her into eating Pomegranate seeds, which forces her to return to the underworld for four months each year. The four months mark the season of winter, when earth's living

⁷⁰ *Low in the Dark* (1989), included in the Faber & Faber collection of her plays, clearly reveals its Beckettian influences but does not quote or borrow from any evident mythological source. Two previously produced plays, *This Love Thing* (1991) and *Ullaloo* (1991), have not been published.

creatures hibernate, or die off. In Carr's version, Persephone becomes Bláth, who must live with the 'dark witch of the bog' for part of every year, and Demeter is the forlorn lover Coillte, instead of a distraught mother (219). The changes that Carr makes switch the mythological figures' genders, and transform the earthly pursuer from a mother to a lover. The new version of the myth serves as a warning to the audience about the Mai's own dangers: pursuing someone who disappears on occasion brings heartache. The myth in both cases explains the cyclical nature of time and the seasons, and also parallels the cyclical nature of relationships in the play, where history repeats itself generationally: the Mai grew up with an absent father, as did Millie, as will Millie's child.

Portia Coughlan borrows from two major myths, but in this case the myths underline character relationships without being referenced explicitly. Portia and her brother Gabriel are twins with different levels of staying-power on the earth, recalling the Gemini story of Castor and Pollux/Polydeuces.⁷¹ As a sweetly singing ghost, Gabriel exerts a pull on Portia that is reminiscent of the pull the Sirens exert on Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey*.

The mythos surrounding twins enforces the fact that even in death, twins are not effectively separated. In the ancient Greek and Roman myth, Castor (the immortal twin) is consumed by grief over his brother's death, and requests that he share his immortality with Pollux. Jupiter grants the wish in a limited way – the two brothers can enjoy the spoils of life alternately, passing one day in Hades, and the next in the Heavens. In Carr's telling, Portia's survival is based on *not succumbing* fully to Gabriel's world. The myth is altered to account

⁷¹ Clare Wallace rightly argues that Portia's relationship to Gabriel has echoes of another legend – that of Romulus and Remus – that involves a struggle between twins for dominance and survival (Wallace, "Authentic Reproductions" 62). Romulus and Remus were cast into the River Tiber before being rescued, which provides a further detail for Marina Carr's characteristic inversions of her source myths. Riana O'Dwyer notes that Portia's passion for Gabriel has "some parallels with Antigone's for Polynices" (245). The multiple interpretations underline the way that Carr draws liberally from mythology and theatre history.

for contemporary understandings of death, and to provide a larger anchor for Portia's longing. The idea of twinning or doubling permeates Carr's play, overpowering any concept of time as linear. History repeats itself in the deaths of Gabriel and Portia at the same spot in the Belmont river, on the day when Portia is exactly double the age that Gabriel was when he drowned. Carr's opening stage directions suggest that Portia and Gabriel mimic each other's actions unconsciously. We learn late in the play that the twins' parents were also half brother and sister, suggesting that the cycle of incest has twinned itself down the family line. The stage presence of Gabriel alone has a dual nature – he is a figure from a fixed past, but he has also come to haunt the present. Gabriel appears throughout the play, singing and walking along the riverbank playground of his youth. The other characters do not see nor hear him in the play, and only at one point do the stage directions indicate that Portia might see him. In this moment, she appears to stare through the walls of her local bar, the High Chapparral, and fix her gaze on a silent and motionless Gabriel.⁷² Time, movement, and sound pause for a moment, and in their fixed gaze, the siblings are reunited. From this point onward, the only trajectory Portia can follow is one toward her death. Seen in this light, Gabriel's appearance is similar to Thomas Dunne's costume shift from ceremonial jacket to straightjacket in Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*: both present Benjaminian dialectical images, where history resonates with the present in a flash that marks a moment of danger. When Gabriel appears on the riverbank, history threatens to repeat itself; when Portia is raised from the riverbank, the progress of time as twinned or doubled is complete.

In *The Odyssey*, Circe warns Odysseus to not follow the sweet song of the Sirens, because hidden behind the incomparable beauty of their song is certain death. The

⁷² The stage directions read as follows: “Portia comes over to table to drink, her mood has changed again. She stands there looking off into space, holding drink, cigarette, looks upstage to river. Gabriel is there” (243). Ostensibly it is up to the director to determine if she actually sees him or not.

bewitching voices of the sea nymphs cause men's minds to melt away, and all thoughts of the return home to evaporate. As Odysseus is about to return to sea, Circe warns him to plug his oarsmen's ears with wax so that they will not be lured by the Sirens:

Listen with care
to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.
square in your ship's path are Seirênês, crying
beauty to bewitch men coasting by;
woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
He will not see his lady nor his children
in joy, crowding about him, home from sea;
the Seirênênes will sing his mind away
on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones
of dead men rotting in a pile beside them
and flayed skins shrivel around the spot

(The Odyssey, Book 12, c. Lines 1-15)

In Portia's case, the sea is replaced by the bank of the Belmont river, and the Sirens are not alluring creatures, but her dead brother's ghost; the power of the singing is not literal, but psychological – she is not physically kept from her husband or children, but Gabriel's singing disallows her from seeing them with any degree of joy. Like the song of the Sirens, Gabriel's voice is part balm to Portia, and part dangerous seduction; when she chooses to follow his voice near the chronological end of the play, she is choosing to enter the world of spirits, and to leave that of the living. But for Portia, the allure is very different than what Odysseus faced in the open seas. First, Carr has swapped genders, or more accurately,

blurred the lines between them. Instead of the sound of dangerous women luring men away from their warrior selves, Gabriel's voice beckons Portia to recreate a unified subjectivity. Only in his presence can she fully inhabit herself – not because she needs him to justify her existence, but because only together can they create any sort of recognisable subject. In the *Odyssey*, the song of the Sirens prohibits the sailors from returning to their families' loving arms; in Portia's case, her acquiescence to Gabriel's refrain does the opposite – it returns her to his arms. Where the Sirens tempt men to abandon their familial duties in favour of sweet sounds and meadows of clover, Gabriel lures Portia to the swirls and murky depths of the Belmont river; in effect, he lures her back to the maternal womb. This reunion allows them both to stop haunting their respective spheres.

Both *By the Bog of Cats...* and *Ariel* can be viewed as contemporary Irish midlands retellings of their ancient source myths. The earlier play is a retelling of the Medea story, with the variety of revisions that conventionally accompany Carr's use of ancient myth. In this play, Hester Swane, distraught that her ex-husband is about to marry a younger, richer woman, eventually kills her daughter and then kills herself after setting the newly married couple's house ablaze. Carr's substitutions and alterations in this case are most notable for how they insert unexpected characters into well-worn plot lines. In *By the Bog...*, Catwoman, a marginal figure who can be read as short-form for a disenfranchised Irish Traveller, replaces the chorus and the nurse. She is the character who aids Hester (the Medea figure), and she is also the character that shares warnings about the future. The structure of ancient tragedy, with its unyielding sense of destiny and inevitability, is present in *By the Bog of Cats...*, but Carr introduces a stronger commitment to the idea of individual agency, which in

the end makes the deaths of Hester and her daughter more horrific.⁷³ Catwoman tells Hester to leave the Bog, in order to save her own life, but Hester references supernatural forces to deny her own agency:

Catwoman [...] lave this place now or ya never will.

Hester Doesn't seem to make much difference whether I stay or lave with a curse like that on me head.

Catwoman There's ways round curses. Curses only have the power ya allow them (276).

The use of the supernatural in this case only serves to make Hester's choice more chilling, because the power of myth has been exposed by Catwoman as psychological, and to an extent, controllable.

Ariel also draws liberally from ancient Greek mythology as the basis for its plot line, by quoting the sacrifice of Iphigenia, including some of the reverberations of the sacrifice on the house of Atreus, as traced by the early parts of *The Oresteia*. Bent on attaining political power, Fermoy kills his daughter Ariel, dumps her body in a lake, hides all traces, and lets the family believe that her disappearance is a mystery. Ten years later, in the second act of the play, the truth is revealed to the audience, and to his wife Frances, who eventually kills him in a fit of rage. Unlike Clytemnestra with Aegisthus, Frances does not have a lover to speak of, but is sufficiently consumed by a longing for her dead son. She is not physically unfaithful to Agamemnon, but instead is emotionally absent from her husband because of the *memory* of her dead son. The dead children – first her son and now Ariel – take the place of

⁷³ In the introduction to a collection of new Irish plays, Frank McGuinness writes: "Tragedy is so often the consequence of a fatal lack of self-knowledge. Marina Carr rewrites the rule. Her characters dies form a fatal excess of self-knowledge. Their truth kills them" (McGuinness, *The Dazzling Dark* x). For a thorough analysis of the role that tragedy plays in Carr's plays, see Wallace, "A Crossroads."

Clytemnestra's lover. At one point, Frances's remaining daughter Elaine lambastes her mother for allowing the dead to play such an unduly pivotal role in her life. Elaine, and not the remaining son Stephen, plays the role of Orestes in avenging their father's murder. The ending of the play follows the basic plot outline of *The Libation Bearers*, but compared to the entire trilogy of *The Oresteia*, *Ariel* lacks the closure provided by *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus' third play in the trilogy. In this final play, ancient cycles of retribution and natural law meet with civilisation's counterpart of trial-based justice, and the Furies are given a role in the new social order. In Carr's version, the ancient Furies are not satiated or provided with alternate outlets for their protective energy. If we understand the Furies as Chthonic goddesses linked to sacrifice and the underworld, then by not providing us with western civilization's trial and jury, Carr effectively suspends the plot in the underworld – we are left in hell. Frances's dying words – “Elaine...no...no...no more...” – are a call for the cycle to stop, but Carr leaves us without the potential for catharsis or redemption (75). Unlike Barry, whose ecumenism still gives credence to the idea of redemption, Carr disallows this possibility by ending in medias res. In addition to this significant plot truncation, Carr also offers a modern twist on tragedy as genre, by providing psychological (instead of theological) explanations for some of the characters' behaviours. At one point in the play, Boniface and Frances recall how Fermoy, as a young boy, was made to hold down his mother as his father killed her. As in much of Carr's work, little time is devoted to explaining the circumstances of this moment, or to discussing its after-effects; madness is presented as both genealogical and psychological, but her characterizations do not plumb the depths of that psychology (26).

Ariel's cosmology is a mix of ancient, Christian, pagan, and early 20th-century Irish nationalism defined by its fervour. Fermoy's description of his god draws from Hindu and pagan sources. Talking to his Christian monk brother Boniface, Fermoy says:

Oh, he's beauhiful. When he throws hees head back hees hair gets tangled in the stars, and in hees hands are seven moons thah he juggles like worry beads. Hees eyes is shards of obsidian, hees skin is turquoise, and hees mouth is a staggerin red, whah the first red musta been before ud all started fadin, I'm noh capturin him righ, for how can ya parse whah is perfect" (16).

Fermoy feels he has this god on his side, and that in order to win the election, all he need do is sacrifice something to this god. Importantly, Fermoy tells Boniface, there needs to be a "blood sacrifice" for him to take power (18-19). By putting these words in Fermoy's mouth, Carr is recalling Padraig Pearse's calls, leading up to the proclamation of the Republic in 1916, for blood to spill out on the Irish land.⁷⁴ However, the context of revolutionary Ireland is no longer valid in the 2002 of *Ariel*'s premiere, so the idea of blood sacrifice is made strange through Fermoy's iteration: it appears the product of a madman, which in turn can be seen to comment on the history of blood sacrifice in Ireland. At the same time that Carr suggests a break in the continuity of time, where blood sacrifice appears ludicrous to contemporary society, Fermoy's daughter – the next generation of political possibility – condones her father's act. Attacking Frances for killing Fermoy in revenge, Elaine says:

⁷⁴ For example, see Pearse's 1913 Pamphlet "The Coming Revolution," which states: "We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people ; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood" (98-99).

I can tell the difference between a crime of eternihy and a low, blood-spahhered, knife-frenzied revenge. And then your coward's insanihy plea on top of ud. Whah my father done to Ariel had the grandeur a God in ud. Pure sacrifice. Ferocious, aye. Buh pure. Whah you done to him was a puckered, vengeful, self-servin thing wud noh a whiff of the immortal in ud (64).

In each of the above examples, Carr's quotation of mythological elements and her borrowing of several myths' plot structures appears to be executed in a random way, yet this very randomness is reflective of the chaos in the worlds she creates. Carr's use of myth reflects the society that she builds in her plays, which is in turn reflective of the changing, unstable society surrounding Celtic Tiger Ireland. Cohesive mythic narratives, which once signified a unified societal ethos, are replaced by piecemeal quotations and semi-significant reversals; ancient myth appears broken, truncated, or perverted. Carr's messy mythology connotes a societal structure that is broken, and a reigning ethos that is crumbling. Appearing on the stage in the mid to late 1990s, Carr's plays reflect the breakdown of a unified mythos of Irish identity that existed from the early 20th century through the Troubles of the later 20th century. This older Irish identity, through her use of myth, is revealed to be threadbare, because the 'truths' it was once built upon – the moral validity of the Catholic Church and the unity of nation and religious ethnicity as definition of identity – have been revealed as problematic and bellicose social constructions. A more elegant and thorough quotation of ancient myth in her dysfunctional worlds would be like trying to pass off the grandeur of ancient Greek myth in the gladiatorial arenas of ancient Rome.

Several reviewers (although still the minority) have found Carr's use of mythology problematic precisely because of this ill fit. For example, Eamonn Sweeney argues that Carr

attempts to impose a significance on the story of *Portia Coughlan* “with some fairly hackneyed references to mythology and rivers which belong in a far poorer play than this, and are reminiscent of something left over from a much older Abbey work” (Sweeney). Separate reviewers concluded that *By the Bog of Cats*... lost its power “amid a gassy swamp of myth, melodrama and pantomime theatricality,” and that Fermoy’s sacrifice in *Ariel* “has no religious logic and cannot transcend the huge distance between Greek drama and our own” (Goldhawk; Arnold). Each of these reviews points to the awkward gap between the function of myth in ancient times versus its function in contemporary times; I would not disagree that Carr’s inclusion of myth is reminiscent of more traditional Abbey fare, but I would suggest that this reminiscence is intentional, and points to the ill fit between contemporary sources of Irish identity and the roots upon which traditional identity has been built. The formal awkwardness of myth in Carr’s plays, therefore, points to a breakdown of traditional narratives of identity, and to the difficulty in forging identity anew. Traditional narratives of the past survive through repetition and remembrance, but Carr’s plays also point to the dangers of memory, providing, perhaps, the caution that one must also forget in order to move forward.

The Push-Pull of Memory: Remembrance and Forgetting

In exploring the dark side of memory, Carr examines the push-pull relationship that contemporary Ireland has with its own past, and the tension that exists between remembrance and forgetting in a rapidly changing society. This tension becomes explicit in *Ariel*, where Carr exploits it to shape the dramatic conflict in the play, and self-consciously calls it to attention through character traits and dialogue. Frances’s present is shaped by her losses in

the past, whereas Fermoy looks resolutely forward, burying the consequences of his own actions in order to succeed. The discussion around Frances's pictures of her dead husband and child is a case in point:

Frances Where's me locket?

Fermoy takes locket from his pocket, gives it to her, dancing all the time. She examines it.

What's your phoho doin here?

Fermoy I left in the child's phoho. Don't be getting thick over natin agin. I don't mind ya wearin a phoho of the child but noh heeself. I'm the wan should be straddlin your heart.

Frances And what ya do wud Charlie's phoho?

Fermoy On me desk.

Frances Ud's important to remember whah has been lost.

Fermoy (*Pulling her to him*) I know. I know.

Frances Like hell, ya know. Ya don't remember yesterda, you're thah suurt of a man.

Fermoy (*Dancing with her*) Oh, I remember everythin, don't you ever fear, buh ud's important to forget too (30-1).

While Frances wears the past around her neck like a cross she must bear, Fermoy instead chooses which parts of the past are useful for his gain, and which parts he will intentionally forget. In this play, memory is not only a burden for those who suffer from it directly, but the reliance on it is seen as a threat to the family and a threat to the everyday. Frances strikes out at her remaining daughter Elaine, suggesting Elaine would have her forget the missing Ariel

and the dead James, but Elaine retorts that Frances is addicted to the sorrow wrapped up in her memory of loss: “I know wan thing abouh sorrow. I learned ud watchin you. Sorrow’s an addiction like no other. You won’t be full till you’ve buried us all. Well, you won’t bury me, Ma” (52).

Memory as entrapment is also evident in *The Mai*, but this time it can be seen in the play’s structure, through the conceit of Millie as the play’s narrator. As narrator, Millie is 30 years old, but the action of the play takes place when she is 16; this small conceit effectively makes the entire play a memory. Millie provides the audience with background exposition of the events on stage, with only a small lighting change to accompany the 14-year time shift. This dramatic structure emphasises the inevitability of the play’s outcome, which we learn from Millie midway through the first Act: the Mai dies an untimely death six months after the play’s narrative ends.⁷⁵ Everything that the audience will learn has already happened to the play’s narrator, and it cannot change.

Carr’s characterization of memory as dangerous, and events in the past as inevitable, is met by a healthy suspicion about the accuracy of memory recall. The discussion between Woman and Scarecrow about the red coat is one example of memory’s debatable trustworthiness, but the following exchange between Woman and Scarecrow, as the latter makes the former write a final letter to Him, provides a rich example of how time and desire shift memory recall, and call the accuracy of memory into question. After Woman writes down instructions for her funeral, Scarecrow takes over the letter through dictation, with Woman questioning Scarecrow at every step:

⁷⁵ Millie does not tell us how the Mai died, but she recounts her memory of going into town with Robert to find clothes for the Mai’s body. As they worked their way through the shop in a daze, townspeople seemed to recoil, “lest they breathed in the damaged air of Owl Lake that hung about us like a wayward halo” (128). Coupled with the brief onstage tableau of Robert holding the Mai’s limp body, the suggestion is that the Mai drowned herself in Owl Lake.

Scarecrow On the brink of extinction I have a few things to say.

Woman (*Mockingly*) ‘On the brink of extinction...’

Scarecrow Heading into the dark I want to leave a trail of darkness after me. I want you to wake at three in the morning and think of me packed into the cold hard clay and when you think of me down there I want you to realize that you have killed me as surely as if you had taken an ice pick and plunged it to the hilt.

Woman I got sick, I died, that’s all there is to it.

Scarecrow And what about me?

Woman You can’t lay all this at his door (54).

As the letter-writing continues, Woman stops resisting Scarecrow’s dictation, and instead starts to fill in Scarecrow’s sentences:

Scarecrow ... You have reeled through my life wreaking havoc at every turn. Well, I am crying out at last, Enough! You will go no further with me. And I want you to know I am going to my grave with my heart broken, yes, broken, but not for you, my heart broken for myself and my children, that I allowed your puling, whining need ensnare me so.

Woman (*Writing. Softly*). Yes.

[...]

Scarecrow I realize now I was mistaken in my generous estimation of your capacity to love.

Woman For it is clear as day that you are and have always been, and I presume will continue to be, incapable of loving anyone.

Scarecrow: That is anyone except yourself.

Woman: And your insatiable ego. And what drives my hatred now is
my...my...my...

Scarecrow: Blindness to what you have...

Both: Slowly taken from me down the years, that is, my capacity to love,
which was boundless in the beginning, long ago when we walked by the river,
too poor to buy a cup of coffee. Be aware I go to my grave bewildered by your
cruelty. I go angry, I go unforgiving and I wonder when the time comes how
you will go to yours.

Pause.

Look after the children, my unwanted gifts to you, my consolation prizes to
myself.

Pause.

Scarecrow: Put it somewhere he'll find it (55-56).

As Woman states her memory of events, Scarecrow continually corrects her recollections. In part, Scarecrow is attempting to correct Woman's tendency to protect Him – to view the past in a better light – by injecting a healthy dose of the difficult truth into her accounts. But at the same time, Woman and Scarecrow are two aspects of the same consciousness; as the dialogue progresses, their two versions of the past become integrated, and memory congeals into an agreed-upon account of the past. If the audience reads Scarecrow and Woman as distinct subjects, then history is being debated; however, if the dialogue is staging a reintegration of two parts of one subjectivity, then the discussion of the past – of which version of history is accurate – can actually be read as revisionism. As discussed in the

introduction, the process of revising congealed accounts of popular history has been taking place through the 20th century, and Carr's choice to stage a discussion of the past through split subjectivity provides a creative approach.

While *Woman and Scarecrow* questions our ability to trust memory's version of the past, *The Mai* playfully toys with the very idea that it is possible to know the truth about the past. Grandma Fraochlán recalls how her mother told her that her father was the Sultan of Spain, and every summer she would stand on the cliffs looking for her father to return (Carr, *The Mai* 169). Aware of the fabrication, Grandma goes on to claim that her genealogy is half Moroccan, half Spanish, and a quarter Tunisian. When her daughter Julie calls her on this creative application of mathematics, Grandma retorts viciously: "A good kick up yours is what you need! Don't ya dare come the schoolteacher with me, ya little faggot ya!" (142). Speaking to the audience many years later, now a mother herself, Millie admits that when her son asks about his absent father, she responds: "daddy is an El Salvadorian drummer who swept me off my feet when I was lost in New York. I tell him his eyes are brown and his hair is black and that he loved to drink Jack Daniels by the neck" (164-5).

The use of exotic locales in the fabrication of a genealogical narrative in *The Mai* could appear as concocted nostalgia – the creation of particular narratives of the past that can then be retained and romanticized in the process of forming contemporary identity. Nostalgia certainly appears in Carr's characters, but her self-reflexive treatment of nostalgia suggests that as a mode of remembrance it is suspect. In *The Mai*, nostalgic recollections are clearly bracketed by the use of tired and worn clichés. For example, Grandma Fraochlán gets lost in reverie, recalling a dance with her beloved late husband, the nine-fingered fisherman. Talking as if to his ghost, she says: "And we danced at the Cleggan fair and you whispered in

me ear – sweet nothings – sweet nothings” (Carr, *The Mai* 121). Nostalgia is similarly treated as suspect in *Ariel*, where Frances’s continued mourning for her dead son James clashes with Fermoy’s desires for a new, powerful future. A conversation between Sarah and Boniface, Fermoy’s aunt and brother, respectively, reveals the distrust of nostalgia:

Sarah And what d’ya think a the antics a your little brother? They’re goin to puh him on the throne. I used change that fella’s nappy. Seen ud all now. (*Watches as Boniface pours another drink for himself*) Ya were thirsty as a child too, a bottle in each fist as ya snoozed in the coh. Your Ma used love watchin ya guzzling. The little sounds of him, she used say, isn’t he like a little bonamh?

Boniface You’d reminiss the future, missus, if ya thought ya’d geh away wud ud

Sarah Aye, I would, and noh wan a yees would belave me (53).

The notion that there is something to ‘get away with’ in the processes of reminiscence suggests that memory is suspect – a notion that is further confirmed when Sarah says that none of her family believes what she says during these reminiscences. As much as Sarah’s nostalgic recollections of the past are scrutinised through this dialogue, she remains, possibly, one of the least problematic figures in the play. Carr does not have a clear breakdown between protagonist and antagonist in her plays, because all of her characters appear flawed in one way or another. In *Ariel*, the central figure is clearly the power-mongering, murdering Fermoy who treats the past as one weapon in his arsenal to dominate the future; his daughter Elaine follows in his footsteps, and both appeal to the nebulous power of myth over that of memory. On the other side are Sarah and Frances, both of whom are focused on the past, and have a debilitating reliance on memory; in the end, these characters may not be as evil as Fermoy, but they are powerless and ineffectual, and they

provide little guidance for living to the audience. Carr doesn't leave the audience with much to admire.

Ghosts on Stage

Perhaps the most theatrically engaging comment on memory comes with the way Carr uses ghosts to merge the past and present, and in the process reveals memory and nostalgia as partial, problematic, and ultimately unsatisfying bases for living. Clare Wallace argues that ghosts are part of a culture of belief in Ireland that is waning, and therefore are part of the cultural heritage that Carr reinstates in order to both explore identity, and “furnish the severe alternative world of her drama” (Wallace, “Authentic Reproductions” 55). Carr's cast of characters is peppered with ghosts, and the ontological status of these ghosts is foregrounded in different ways depending on the circumstance. In the case of *The Mai*, Grandma's nine-fingered fisherman never appears, but his presence in the narrative is as strong as many of the characters who are given corporeal presence on stage; Grandma carts around his oar as a memento of her lost love. Grandma's intense and eternal love for him is provided as an explanation for her poor job as a mother, and her daughters speculate that Grandma's poor mothering may be the reason for their own failures in relationships. On stage, the Mai's husband Robert is the most ghostly figure, because even in his bodily absence, he directs all of the Mai's actions. She builds the house hoping for his return, and frames the windows large and open, so she is able to see his approach. When he does return, he is never fully present, practicing what Anthony Roche calls “internal withdrawal,” by playing his cello and reading the newspaper on Christmas Day (A. Roche, “Woman on the Threshold” 158). Robert haunts the house, rather than inhabiting it. The Mai's daughter, on

the other hand, remains on stage as a narrator regardless of the play's setting in time; she is never dead in the play's narrative, but her appearance as the same body in different time frames provides her the semblance of a ghost.

In *Ariel*, Fermoy fears that Ariel will return to seek retribution, and Frances finds it difficult to function after the loss of her son James (she keeps pictures of her old family in her locket, and recall that she is still breastfeeding her son Stephen at ten years old). In *By the Bog of Cats*... ghosts are premonitions that history may repeat itself; Hester killed her brother Joseph out of jealousy, and by the end of the play, she too dies from another round of jealousy. Ghosts share the stage with the living in this play, as if the line between this earth and the beyond has become porous; Catwoman, who communes with the dead and the living, provides the link between the unrecovered past and the tumultuous present. The Ghost Fancier hovers from the beginning of the play, ready to sweep Hester away to her inevitable end, and Hester's dead brother Joseph returns from "stravagin' the shadows" to confront his murderer (321). Both the Ghost Fancier and Joseph seek to understand the past, and possibly, to grant forgiveness to those who transgressed against them on earth. Their demeanour, when they meet the living, is not confrontational, and not about retribution in the way that we would expect from, for instance, the ghostly figures in Yeats' *Purgatory*.

In *Portia Coughlan*, Gabriel appears for the audience, but is never seen by any of the characters on stage, including, arguably, Portia. Gabriel is the central figure in Portia's consciousness, and provides the reason for her restlessness in the world; this restlessness is in turn the source of the play's main conflicts. Gabriel's appearance for the audience is the most direct, iconic use of a ghost character in Carr's plays, because he appears bathed in radiant light, he is invisible to some characters and not to others, and he appears at moments when

Portia's desire to live is wavering.⁷⁶ However, the more complex use of a ghost figure comes in the form of Portia herself, who appears dead at the top of the second act of the play, and is then 'resurrected' by the playwright for the third act. Act Two opens with Portia's dead, semi-clothed body suspended from a crane on the bank of the river, and the following scene presents the family wake in the very room where Portia was last seen alive. Aside from these scenes, Portia appears to be living for most of the play. Carr's choice to literally kill off the lead character in the middle of the play subverts audience expectation, because theatrical convention suggests that when the protagonist dies, the play is nearing its end. Ibsen's *Strange Passenger* makes this convention self-conscious when he says to a waning Peer Gynt, "[y]ou needn't worry in *that* respect – No one dies halfway through the last act" (Ibsen and Fjelde Act 5 Sc II 165).

Audience expectation is challenged once again when Carr returns her protagonist to the stage, seemingly intact, for the third and final act of the play. At the top of Act Three, Portia appears slumped on her living room couch; it is early morning, and although she is tired and only semi-conscious when her husband Raphael enters, she is very much alive. Carr provides no explanation in her play text for the chronological discontinuity witnessed by the audience. Her stage directions at the top of Act Three indicate only that Portia is dressed in the same clothes she was wearing at the end of Act One. The reviewer for *Theatre Journal* concluded that Carr is providing us with alternate endings to the play; in one sequence, the chronological 'end' of the play takes place in Act Two, when Portia decides to follow Gabriel, drowning herself in the same spot of the Belmont River where her brother took his own life 15 years earlier. In the other sequence, Act Three provides the chronological end of narrative; Portia renounces her sibling bond and chooses life, even if it is a mundane sort of

⁷⁶ Carr explicitly calls for the effect to be 'ghostly,' in her stage directions (209).

life (Dean 234). In some ways, this interpretation of the play is more hopeful – despite calls to ‘shuffle off her mortal coil,’ (or to reattach the umbilical one), Portia determines that she will persist in life. By renouncing Gabriel’s summoning, she may be able to inhabit her earthly existence more fully. The orthodox interpretation, followed by other reviewers and scholars, is that Carr has simply reversed her act structure, giving us the final act of the play before the penultimate act; Portia’s death and wake are a flash-forward to the chronological end of the story. In this case, the audience views the entire third act with the knowledge of its inevitable ending. Here, Carr has returned us to the territory of ancient Greek tragedy, where the protagonist’s end is fated and foreshadowed from the beginning. Hegel’s definition of tragedy here holds sway – in facing a choice between Gabriel’s seductive and redemptive call or, as Portia puts it, the “colours of this world” that she so loves, a sacrifice inevitably enters the picture. While each option has its own justification, one prevails only at the cost of the other (Hegel 1194-1199).

Carr’s choice to shift the chronology of the story in her plot effectively makes Portia a living ghost for the final act of the play, but it also provides the audience with the ability to view the narrative present of Act Three in terms of what comes after it. To draw an analogy with history, it allows us to understand current circumstances in terms of their historical antecedents, encouraging a more historically informed understanding of the present.

* * *

By awkwardly commandeering grand myths into the domestic sphere of daily, contemporary life, and at the same time subjecting traditional cultural narratives to a rigorous revising, Carr demonstrates the difficulty in locating a universal framework for understanding the major cultural shifts taking place in Ireland. With the waning of the

Troubles and the concomitant attempts at a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland, nationalism in the late 1990s did not hold the political power that it once did; similarly, the revelations of systemic abuse in the Catholic Church and increasing secularism have depleted religion's ability to foster social cohesion, and even the old Irish myths, built around the memory of sacrifice, poverty and oppression, no longer ring true in an affluent, forward-looking multi-ethnic polis. Conceptions of motherhood, social class, and the relevance of bloodlines are similarly being viewed in a different light. Because these traditional institutions or sources of identity have been drained, Carr's characters use myth – both ancient Greek and 20th-century Irish – as an escape. Ultimately, as with previous grand narratives, myth is not enough to provide Carr's protagonists with the sense of purpose that they desire.

As discussed in the opening chapter, the 'new' international face of Ireland at the 20th century's end – characterised by a high GDP, diverse ethnicities, Europeanization, and increasing secularisation – is less enchanted by allusions to the past than by the possibilities of the future; the Spire is an excellent example of the effort made by public officials to usher in an identity that is forward-looking, and devoid of the memorialising impulse. Nostalgia, as a tool in the perpetuation of a particular national outlook, similarly has little place in the shaping of contemporary Irish identity, except in cases where nostalgia has been seconded to heritage marketing schemes in the tourism industry. The public debate around the design of the Spire symbolises a moment of disquiet and transformation in the function of Ireland's past as a tool in shaping identity. The competition guidelines demanded a clear monument to memory, but the winning design was ahistorical and non-iconic. The judges concurred that the winning design was hopeful and forward-looking, and, arguably, hopeful *because* it was

forward-looking. The shining beacon for Ireland in the 21st century was resolutely not going to look to the past for meaning or significance. Similarly, Carr's treatment of memory demonstrates the central but frequently destructive role that memory plays in shaping character identity. For the central figures in Carr's plays – the Mai, Portia, Hester, Frances, and Woman – memory is tied to despair; these figures are aware that memory is a trap, but they are nevertheless reluctant to forget, as if to forget is to betray the past that haunts them. Carr's treatment of memory treads the territories of regret, revision, and nostalgia, and conjures ghosts to provide a corporeal presence for the psychological hauntings of her characters. Carr's plays are unique for their intensity and extremity: her characters shock the audience with their brutal honesty and what one could term a 'lyricism of the profane.' But at the same time, the plays quote and transform images of rural Ireland, and amplify or distort the way that memory has been conventionally employed in Irish theatre history. Formally, her plays push the boundaries of naturalism, creating larger-than-life characters who seem to emerge directly from the landscapes that surround them. Carr exploits the resources of the theatre fully, capitalising on the medium's ability to exaggerate and creatively distort the mirror image of reality. In the end, the distortions help to clarify the reality behind the amplified, misshapen image. Cinematic representations of Ireland hold a different kind of mirror up to Irish culture, and provide a complementary lexicon for representing the complex and transitional nature of identity during the time period of this study. Like Marina Carr's plays, the films I discuss in the next chapter trade heavily on the relationship between character and landscape, conferring the latter with the power of defining Irishness to an international audience.

CHAPTER 4

LANDSCAPE AS HISTORY IN IRISH FILM: TOWARDS A NEW IMAGE, TOWARDS A NEW IDYLL

Marina Carr is not alone in exploring the power of landscape in the Irish cultural mythos. In fact, it is fair to say that the presentation of landscape has been one of the most significant features in the construction of a cinematic Ireland. As the study of Irish cinema began to attract considerable attention in the late 1980s, scholars identified landscape as a central mode of representation, and subsequent scholars have paid close attention to its formal presentation, with a particular focus on the ways in which land has been politicised. One can easily understand why landscape might factor so heavily into Irish film history, as it factors so heavily into collective memory. Ireland's rocky history with the land's dependability has become a social preoccupation, and politically, land ownership and sovereignty have fed into centuries of political conflict. But despite this troubled relationship, as Marina Carr's plays show, the land still exerts a considerable pull on its inhabitants. Even the Irish living abroad feel this pull, as evidenced by the success of the company 'Official Irish Dirt.' In 2006, an Irish businessman by the name of Alan Jenkins found the pot of gold when his new business venture reached the end of the proverbial rainbow: Jenkins sells 12-ounce bags of 'real Irish dirt' to Irish ex-pats living abroad, so that when they die outside Ireland, they can have an authentic sprinkling of the 'auld sod' on their caskets⁷⁷ (P. White). Unlike major European countries that boast many architectural and artistic attractions, Ireland has typically drawn tourists for its rural archaeology or its verdant natural landscapes.

⁷⁷ The dirt has to be sanitised through a special process in order to meet agricultural import requirements, but people are buying it as gifts, and to plant shamrocks at home. You can get yours at <http://www.officialirishdirt.com/>

However, the effort to present and alter landscape depictions in Irish film trumps even this history: ideas of landscape have been so significant that the act of challenging conventional depictions is tantamount to challenging the definition of Irish cinema itself. Furthermore, because film is one of the major ways of identifying and typing national character for international reception, challenges to cinematic depictions of Irishness comment on Irish identity in broader social, political, and cultural spheres. To scrutinise the function of landscape in Irish film is to scrutinise shifting notions of Irish identity.

While the ultimate focus of this chapter is Irish film of the Celtic Tiger era, it is important to note that filmic preoccupations with landscape have developed over a much longer period of time; while the particular approaches seen in the Celtic Tiger period are novel, their significance is only clear when seen in light of previous filmic developments. To set the stage for understanding contemporary representations, this chapter will trace several historical stages in the development of landscape thematics and iconography, and demonstrate how images of the land, and ideas associated with these images, have proven a critical filter for challenging broader understandings of Irishness. The intention is to demonstrate that one of the richest ways to understand contemporary Irish cinema's engagement with Irish history is through an analysis of the development of Irish *film* history, read through landscape.

Landscape Conventions: Rural Idyll and Urban Violence

In the late-1980s book *Cinema and Ireland*, Luke Gibbons notes that landscape has played such a central role in Irish film that it often contributes more to the construction of a cinematic Ireland than do character-based or thematic preoccupations (203). In the same

volume, John Hill argues that two main sets of images dominate the history of cinematic representations of Ireland and the Irish. On the one hand, cinematic images have conceived of Ireland as “a simple, and generally blissful, rural idyll,” or in apparent contrast, as a “primarily dark and strife-torn maelstrom” (Hill 147). For the most part, idyllic images correspond with rural depictions, and the strife-laden ones with representations of city life, but Hill also notes how violence, even when depicted playfully, permeates both sets of images as a way of solving problems.⁷⁸ While at first glance idyllic representations appear to contrast sharply with images of urban strife and violence, Hill argues that both depictions “imply a contrast between the characteristics of Irish society and those of an apparently advanced and modern civilisation.” The contrast with modern civilisation has been depicted as both virtue and vice, Hill continues, and both depictions are problematic. When read as virtue, pre-modern depictions have the tendency to link Irishness with primitiveness in condescending ways, and when read as vice, these depictions suggest a failure on the part of the Irish to produce a civilised society (147).

The binary of Irish cinematic traditions has been adapted and fleshed out by several scholars, but it ultimately continues to break down along similar lines. For example, Harlan Kennedy argues that the opposites of ‘ideology’ and ‘idyll’ are “magnetic and co-existent ones,” as films from one category contain a series of narrative and stylistic oppositions to films from the other category: “*The Informer*’s tortured negatives – no color, no sky, no love story, no pastoral images, no family life – could be used to print all the positives found in [*The Quiet Man*]” (H. Kennedy 3). Similarly, Martin McLoone lends one chapter to each cinematic tradition in his comprehensive book, *Irish Film*. The first chapter is titled

⁷⁸ For an argument about violence in *The Quiet Man* – a film that has been historically associated with warmth and idyll – see Gillespie.

“Romanticism and Landscape,” and the second, “Political Violence and the Myth of Atavism” (McLoone, *Irish Film* 33-84). Luke Gibbons’ contribution to the groundbreaking *Cinema and Ireland* takes this sustained binary of rural-idyll/urban-violence as a given, and proceeds to develop a framework primarily for understanding the first half of the binary, or the cinematic tradition that links landscape to romanticism. This tradition will provide the central thread for the remainder of this chapter.

In analysing the function of rural images in cinematic representations of Ireland, Gibbons begins with the premise that representations of Ireland have for centuries been “enclosed within a circuit of myth and romanticism,” and that the advent of film and television enabled these romanticised stereotypes to reach broader audiences (Gibbons 194). Scrutinising the connection between the variety of rural representations and the pervasiveness of romanticising tendencies, Gibbons develops a schema that borrows from a distinction drawn between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ types of primitivism, developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky. Films that draw on ‘soft primitivism’ depict a world aligned with pastoral ideals, where nature is abundant and not required for sustenance, and rural places exist for leisure purposes and not toil (198-9). The best known example is *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), which can be seen both to feed the tourist imaginary, and to supply diasporic audiences with heaps of nostalgia for the ‘old country.’ In many cases, the film fuels both impulses at once, as the foreign tourist is often the nostalgic emigrant.

It is perhaps more difficult to see the romanticism inherent in ‘hard primitivist’ depictions of rural Ireland, because in these depictions, the landscape is bleak and austere, sustenance is hard won, and the land continually provides *opportunities* for toil. Initially, films such as *Man of Aran* (Robert Flaherty, 1934) and *Ryan’s Daughter* (David Lean, 1970)

appealed to critics as ‘realistic’ in their depictions of the relationship between the Irish and their hard-scrabble geography (Gibbons 196-7). In *Man of Aran*, the audience is told through image and title cards that the family on the island must risk life and limb to catch dangerous sharks so they can have oil for light, and that they must dig through cracks in the rock with their bare hands to scratch out dirt for an eventual garden patch. However, Gibbons’ argument reveals how “hardship and squalor” are redeemed “in the interests of aesthetic experience,” by recalling Walter Benjamin’s argument about photography: even the most desolate subject matter can be rendered beautiful by the photographic image⁷⁹ (197). In Gibbons’ view, the figures in *Man of Aran* may be shown to struggle with the land, but the depiction nevertheless conforms to historical conventions of the pastoral, which involve the absence or elimination of the principal source of rural poverty and degradation: the experience of work and exploitation, the social reality of labour in the face not only of material scarcity but also profound political and economic divisions (198).

A dozen years later, the connection between romanticism and Irish film remains uncontested in the scholarship, although scholars tend to focus more on ‘soft primitive’ depictions when providing an overall critique of cinematic representations. In the most thorough account of Irish film to appear since *Cinema and Ireland*, Martin McLoone generally agrees with Gibbons’ analysis, citing *The Quiet Man* and *Man of Aran* as the films most useful for expanding the discussion of the two strands of romanticised primitivism. The continuing

⁷⁹ Gibbons supplies a Benjamin quote, but I prefer this one: “[photography] can no longer depict a tenement block or a refuse heap without transfiguring it. It goes without saying that photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory than this: what a beautiful world! *A Beautiful World* – that is the title of the well-known picture anthology by Renger-Patsch, in which we see New Matter-of-fact photography at its peak. For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment” (“The Author as Producer” 230). As I argue later in this chapter, *Man of Aran*’s director Robert Flaherty employs all aspects of cinematic style in the service of making the impoverished figures of Aran appear heroic and rustically romantic.

popularity of these two films with audiences, according to McLoone, suggests that “more than any other cinematic vision of Ireland and the Irish, it is these films which have stood as markers for a general ‘Irishness’” (McLoone, *Irish Film* 34-5). McLoone’s most important contribution to the *The Quiet Man* discussion is his reading of the film as parodic and formally self-conscious in the ways it sets up a pastoral vision of Ireland for emigrants both onscreen and off (52-58). He argues that the film is conscious of the ways in which it constructs a stereotypical image of rural Ireland, suggesting that an awareness of stereotypes is not incompatible with their furtherance.

The importance of *The Quiet Man* and *Man of Aran* to later generations of Irish filmmakers is reflected in the fact that several recent films dialogue with these early films both implicitly and explicitly. Ruth Barton argues that *The Quiet Man* has “evolved into a cinematic ur-text” that has been quoted, inverted, and reworked both inside and outside Ireland and Irish filmmaking (Barton, *Irish National Cinema* 75). In the study of cinematic depictions of Irish landscape, these two films can be taken as foundational representations against which more recent contributions to the construction of a cinematic Irishness can be compared.

The Quiet Man can be read ironically in its treatment of geography, because on the one hand it presents a string of stereotypical references that make its setting in ‘Ireland’ unequivocal, but on the other hand, there is a remarkable *lack* of specificity of place. Within minutes of the film’s opening, we hear a variety (of variably accurate) ‘Oirish’ accents; the chatty characters at the train station mention local place names no fewer than 20 times, and a small man – Michaelleen O’Flynn – walks into the frame decked out from head to toe in what appears to be the costume of a leprechaun. As the opening minutes unfold, we see a horse-

drawn carriage, a Celtic cross, and green fields dotted with fluffy white sheep – all clear signifiers of Irishness in the contemporaneous cinematic lexicon. The setting as Ireland asserts itself forcefully through the mise-en-scène from the moment of the film’s opening. At the same time that the general place of Ireland is being asserted, the fantasy of Ireland as a cinematic creation becomes apparent through a corresponding vagueness in the setting’s *specific* location. Sean Thornton, the protagonist, wants to get from the train station to Innisfree, which we understand is somewhere in the west of Ireland. Ireland’s west stands as a short form for authentic Irish identity in cultural nationalist movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Gaeltacht – or Irish speaking area – is in the west, and so are the windswept landscapes made famous by J. M. Synge, and revisited in the plays of Martin McDonagh. ‘The West’ is both a real, relatively untouched natural landscape in the country, as well as a mythical place that has been appropriated as a symbol of ‘authentic’ Catholic Irishness. As Thornton tries to get directions to Innisfree, the film self-consciously taps into this mythical status through a debate about the direction Thornton should travel to get there – each of the quirky characters hanging around the train station points him in a different direction. McLoone reads this scene as the director’s effort to “establish the ambience of an illogical land and an equally illogical people,” and notes how a series of framing devices work to make the audience aware of the film’s picture-postcard representation of Ireland (McLoone, *Irish Film* 53). The Innisfree of the film is a fictional place, although through the film’s recurring theme music, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” it recalls Yeats’ poem of the same name, which is based on an actual geographical locale in County Sligo. The blend of fact and fiction in the creation of a setting is common in films from many traditions, but the added aspect of mythical figures and framing devices in this instance has the effect of

establishing Ireland as a *real* geographical place that is defined *by* its mystery and otherworldliness. Innisfree becomes a short form for Ireland, which becomes a short form for all of the attributes and characteristics inherent in the pastoral, such as rural idyll, leisure, bliss, and nostalgia.

The otherworldliness of *The Quiet Man*'s setting offers the audience an escape from the pressures of everyday modern living, mimicking the protagonist's own journey from his hectic city life in America to his genealogical roots in Ireland. The possibility of escape – in other words, the basis for the film's fantasy – is not through travelling to a *new* place, but in returning to a place from the past. For the film's audience, it is not necessary that this past place be a part of their own personal history (although it holds a special resonance for diasporic audiences), but only that it be from a time that is considered simpler or more pure: a golden, pastoral age. In *The Quiet Man*, the landscape itself, which is made prominent in the cinematography and the mise-en-scène, operates in a nostalgic mode, appearing in the plot as key to character memory at one moment, and then subsequently reappearing to double the act of recall. The repeated use of memory themes and devices creates nostalgia for both the historical past, as well as for past moments in the film itself. For example, when Sean Thornton pauses on a bridge to meditate on his journey, he recalls his mother's words about the family cottage that he intends to repurchase:

Don't ya remember it Seaneen, and how it was...The road led up past the
chapel, and it wound and it wound. And there was the field where Dan
Tobin's bull chased you. It was a lovely little house, Seaneen. And the roses!
Your father used to tease me about them, but he was that proud of them too.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ All quotations are based on my transcription from the DVD copy of the film.

The film's formal approach is to give us the words through Sean's mother's voice-over, which is also speaking in the past tense. This strategy effects a doubling of memory: we witness Sean's memory of his mother, and his mother's memory of the cottage at the same moment.⁸¹ As the voice-over proceeds, the camera employs a series of glance-object cuts to suggest that Sean is responding to his mother's words, and when the voice-over ends, Mickaleen responds, as if to Sean's thoughts, "Ah, that's nothin' but a wee, humble cottage."

Several sequences in the film use narrative developments as a way to insert more landscape into the *mise-en-scène*, and to engender a sense of nostalgia for that landscape. A scene at the Innisfree Races, which furthers the complications of the romance plots between Mary-Kate/Sean and Red Will Danaher/The Widow Tillane, also provides an opportunity to reveal rolling hills and seaside locations to the audience, while providing narrative justification for putting John Wayne on a horse outside of the *American* west. Similarly, the Donnybrook (raucous group fight), where Sean finally dukes it out with Red Will, allows the film to revisit several key settings that figured earlier in the plot. As a misplaced punch lands Red Will in the river, the audience can recall the comic fishing exploits of Father Lonergan; as Sean lands one on Red Will's chin, Will takes a spin, causing the fighters, onlookers, and camera to travel together to an adjacent field where Sean earlier walked home after being abandoned by Mary-Kate. Through the foibles of romance the film operates in a nostalgic mode the first time it includes these settings, and through the repetition, the comedy allows for a doubling of nostalgia. John Ford employs a similar approach in the end credits of the film, by summoning all of the main characters, one at a time or in pairs, to curtsy for the camera in front of various rural backdrops. The curtain call recalls key moments in the film,

⁸¹ For insightful discussions of the relationship between the fantasy world and the aesthetic incongruities of the editing in this scene, see Gibbons p. 225-6, and McLoone, *Irish Film*, pp.54-5.

creating an instant nostalgia for the filmic moments that have just passed. The sum total of the film's narrational strategy is to encourage a sense of nostalgia through the use and reuse of landscape images.

In contrast, *Man of Aran*, which was released as a documentary, seeks to establish the Irish as heroic in their struggles against an austere and unyielding landscape. In the course of the film, the title character hunts for sharks in dangerous waters, while his wife carries seaweed up the cliffs to their eventual garden patch. As the 'man' of Aran splits large rocks to make a garden bed, his wife and son patiently retrieve dirt from cracks in the rock to fill the bed. Title cards inform the viewer of the dangers inherent in their travails, and note the slim rewards they gain for their efforts. Criticism has been levelled from many directions at the film's director, Robert Flaherty, for the fabrications and anachronisms in the film. For example, the family we follow on Aran was not a real family; rather, the 'family members' were cast for their looks. (Tiger King, the protagonist and titular character, was not even from the islands). The shark hunt used curraghs that had long since been retired, and Aran islanders no longer needed shark oil for their lamps, because, as can be seen in the odd shot, the island had been hooked up for electricity.⁸² The weight of these criticisms is dependent on the film's claim to truth through its categorisation as a documentary. But in fact, the term 'documentary' was not widely in use prior to the film's release, and was actually coined by John Grierson as a way of describing one of Flaherty's earlier films, *Moana* (1927) (McLoone, *Irish Film* 38-9).

Whether we conceive of the film as a documentary or not, the question of representation is still relevant, because the film was received at its opening as symbolic of a

⁸² This territory has been well trodden: For discussions of 'untruths' and anachronisms in the film, see Barsam p. 58-71 and McLoone, "*Man of Aran*".

particular kind of Irishness. The premiere on May 6, 1934 was attended by Ireland's President Eamon de Valera, as well as several other dignitaries and celebrity personalities, making it a national event (Rockett 71). As Harvey O'Brien has argued, the de Valera government at the time was engaged in a rather aggressive effort to stir cultural nationalism, and *Man of Aran* nicely fit the ascetic romanticism, or what Gibbons would call the 'romanticism of hard primitivism' that lay behind the project. The nationalist project emphasized frugality and self-sufficiency, and the struggle of the family in the film demonstrated this in cinematic form (H. O'Brien 49). Flaherty was also criticised for failing to attend to the specificities of the Irish experience in his approach. His themes in other films, such as the 'Canadian' *Nanook of the North* (1922), also emphasise the struggle of man against nature. As the argument went, the portrayal of a people in *Man of Aran* may have had as much to do with Flaherty's own 'authorial' preoccupations as with the particular concerns of Aran Islanders (Calder-Marshall; Rotha and Wright; Barsam). But despite the layers of criticism, the film still remains a key work in the representation of Irishness on screen.

Flaherty's formal choices are particularly relevant, because of how well they support his thematic preoccupations, and how they have been quoted and reworked by more recent films. Throughout *Man of Aran*, characters are placed in as close contact to the source of their toil with nature as possible, emphasizing the profound, everyday connection between the islanders and their natural environment. Toil is almost exclusively connected to the outdoors, even though it is fair to assume that domestic or indoor tasks would have been equally demanding. When Maggie Dirane, the wife of 'Tiger King,' carries seaweed up the cliffs from the shore, she heaves it into a basket that rests heavily on her shoulder. Criticism of the film noted that by the time of the film's making, islanders were using donkeys for such

tasks. The critical interpretation of this aesthetic choice is that it emphasises the difficulty of her task through the anachronism, but it is worth noting that at the same time, it emphasises the proximity of the character to her natural environment. The same can be said for the sequence in which she and her son scrape soil from the grooves of the rock; the lack of implements connects them directly to the dirt. The film employs repeated extreme long shots that emphasise the majesty of the landscape while dwarfing its inhabitants in comparison. The contrast makes the characters appear defenceless, but also heroic for their perseverance under such harsh conditions. Flaherty's characters walk close to the spray of the ocean, which again emphasises both the danger of their daily travel to work, as well as their intimate physical connection to the landscape. In several shots the wide framing makes it clear that they could choose a different, less dangerous path, but this would detract from the heroic and elemental portrayal ultimately achieved by Flaherty. The heroism is accentuated by the fact that despite the apparent hardships narrated by the intertitles and reinforced by the setting and activity, the characters are often smiling as they work, which supports the romantic notion that the ability to survive under hardship and austerity is a character trait.

Rural Unrest: 1990s Complications of Romanticised Landscapes

More complex images of rural Ireland have appeared since Hill's analysis. Employing very different formal approaches, *Poitín* (Bob Quinn, 1977) and *The Field* (Jim Sheridan, 1990) paint bleak portraits of life in the impoverished and somewhat lawless west, *December Bride* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1993) opens typical rural landscapes to an entirely new cast of characters, and both the successful independent film *Korea* (Cathal Black, 1995) and *The Butcher Boy* (1997), directed by one of Ireland's best known directors, Neil Jordan, figure

the intrusion of international politics at least partly through the complication of otherwise idyllic landscapes.

When contrasted with the romanticised Irishness presented in earlier representations, all of these films are historically notable for their alternate visions. However, *The Field* deserves particular attention for how it systematically refigures the narrative and iconography of *The Quiet Man* with a darker version of the connection between land ownership and the diaspora. The film version of *The Field* is based on a play of the same name by John B. Keane, with the screenplay making significant changes to the play's characters, plot and setting. Cheryl Herr's assessment of the filmic adaptation is that, in toto, it amounts to no less than "a critique of the play's historical and aesthetic premises" (Herr 1). While the film may have a literary source, it is fair to assume that representational choices – including the decision to set much of the film outdoors in contrast to the play's indoor settings – are dictated by cinematic concerns, and that the film can be understood as a distinct aesthetic and historical product in its own right.

At the outset, the narrative similarities between *The Field* and *The Quiet Man* are remarkable. Consider the following narrative developments: In the first half of the century, an American whose roots are in Ireland arrives in a small village in the west; he sets out to purchase a piece of land that has been owned, but not used, by a widow for a long time. A local man already has already implicitly staked his claim to the land, but after unpleasant bargaining, the American buys the land from the widow. The irreverent local drunk holds important information about a growing love affair involving the town's fiery Colleen. The local priest helps to ingratiate the American with the community, and few people try to stall his efforts.

This story outline could describe either film, but the plot gets increasingly darker in the later film, and the representation of the connection between Irish identity and landscape shifts to admit a much more ferocious element. In *The Field*, the American (known primarily as “The Yank”) was not born in Ireland, but has returned to the place of his ancestors to continue the successes of his business projects in America. He intends to purchase the titular field, cover it with concrete, build a factory on it, and pull electricity from a local water source in order to power it. The film taps into the tensions between tradition and modernity that were prominent during the play’s original setting of mid-20th-century Ireland. The film is set several decades earlier, in the 1930s, which, it could be argued, allows the director to tap more directly into nostalgia associated with a clearly pre-modern time in Ireland.

The Yank’s primary foe is Bull McCabe, who rents the field from the widow, and believes he has a moral right to it because he and his forefathers have cultivated it for generations. Unlike in *The Quiet Man*, where the local townsfolk quickly rally around the figure who has the strongest historical claim to the land, it is not always clear who supports ‘the Bull;’ most appear afraid of him, and are motivated more by a combination of this fear, superstition, and blind allegiance than by an authentic sense of community. When the Yank wins the purchase of the land in an auction, the outcome is not acceptable to the Bull, and he kills the Yank in a crazed fit of rage that foreshadows the film’s Lear-like ending. The final image of the ‘Yank’ contains the main sources of tension driving the narrative – he dies on the bank of a river near the field, lit by the headlights of his car.

The Field contributes to the legacy of Irish landscape depictions by dialectically presenting both a fetishization of landscape, as well as the deconstruction of the landscape/romance impulse. In terms of fetishization, the field is first presented to the

audience with a reverence that elevates it to the holy. An early sequence wordlessly follows the Bull and his son Tadgh as they ascend a steep ridge, awash in cold, thick mist. On their ascent, Bull pauses in the mist to pray inside a ruin, and shortly after they pass the final crest, the clouds part and sunshine fills the *mise-en-scène*. Perched above the field beside a babbling brook, the field is revealed as pastoral ideal: all bright green hues, cows grazing peacefully, and the soundtrack reduced to a single refrain on the bagpipe. Through a series of cuts between Bull, Tadgh, and the field, Bull remarks, “God made the world, and seaweed made that field, boy.” Blowing the seed off a spent dandelion, he cautions, “this is what we’d be without the land, boy,” as the fluff scatters into the wind. This early image is steeped in reverence and nostalgia, and retains the familiar romantic approach to the depiction of landscape. Comparisons to the source play only serve to emphasise how broadly the film contributes to the ways in which landscape and Irish character have been essentialised in Irish cinema. For example, the film’s narrative reshapes the Bull as a sensitive man with deeply spiritual connections to the land, while at the same time the film’s style draws from a lexicon of visual images, such as the curragh at sea, that stoke nationalist pride and sentiment.⁸³

But even as the film elevates the landscape as a source of nostalgia, beauty, and reverence, a parallel plot line interrupts this vision, suggesting to the viewer that the romanticized land contains a potential perversion within itself. The film opens with the men dragging a cart containing the body of a donkey. At the top of the first ridge, the donkey is thrown into the sea below; the donkey’s fall is shown through a series of rapid, overlapping shots from different angles, in one of the narration’s only overtly self-conscious moments. This opening sequence disrupts continuity enough to suggest that the narration is not

⁸³ For an extended comparison of the film to the play, see Cavanagh.

communicating the full story behind what is clearly a dark moment. This scene continues underwater, as the donkey, muzzle twisted in rigor mortis, sinks deeper into the sea. This final shot foreshadows a graphically similar moment near the film's close, when the underwater camera frames the body of the Yank, eyes open, sinking at the same speed, in the same white-blue hue. The placement of the donkey sequence at the start of the film positions the viewer to expect that the holiness and beauty of the field has its dark counterpart in other aspects of landscape.

Throughout the film, the reverence shown to the field by the Bull gradually turns into a perverse obsession, which in the end drains the landscape of its initial romantic presentation. For example, a group of Travellers haunt the film's narrative. The Bull warns his son Tadgh not to flirt with the local Traveller woman, because, according to the Bull, "Tinkers" have no respect for the land in general because they lost their own during the Famine.⁸⁴ Sheridan paints the Travellers as wild, dirty, and potentially dangerous, but he also paints their connection to the land as liberating – something that Bull's obsession with the land prevents him from achieving. This obsession eventually pushes Bull into madness; as he drives his own cattle into the sea, his son Tadgh is inadvertently thrown over the cliff in the stampede. Seeing his dead son, Bull wades into the crashing surf, raving at it to "go back."

As a counterpart to the tranquility of the field early in the plot, Sheridan uses the motif of water to suggest danger and death. The early image of the sinking donkey starts the motif, which is subsequently picked up by the Yank's death in the rain near the stream, Tadgh's fall from the cliff to the shore, and Bull's final moments in the raging sea. Nature literally devours characters in this film. At first glance this suggests that the romantic impulse apparent in *Man of Aran* – the hard version of 'primitivism' – is retained through the

⁸⁴ For a discussion of theories surrounding Traveller origins, see Fanning and N. Crowley

providential powers associated with landscape in the film. However in *The Field*, the characters, through their obsessions and grave miscalculations, are drained of the kind of heroism that follows the family on Aran. While the film could be criticised for falling into the stereotype of presenting characters as elemental,⁸⁵ it at the same time shows this elemental connection as perverse and problematic, demonstrating an awareness of the ways in which Irishness has been stereotyped. The tension between landscape as object of worship, and the practice of this worship as perverse, acts as commentary on the legacy of romanticised filmic images of Ireland.

To date, Cathal Black's 1995 film *Korea* has not been released for home viewing, but it continues to attract a great deal of critical attention from scholars (it graces the cover of Lance Pettitt's *Screening Ireland*), and it has become a marker for the kind of culturally astute film that can be made on a small budget. The film uses a coming-of-age/star-crossed lovers plot as its narrative backbone, and explores the struggle between a father and son in rural Ireland of the 50s. The father, John Doyle, is haunted by memories of the Irish civil war of the 20s, in which he resisted Michael Collins's treaty, but was spared execution by Irish Free State forces. Facing an uncertain future because his commercial fishing licence is about to be revoked for what he deems tourism purposes, he attempts to send his son Eamon to America. Eamon resists, primarily because he fears that emigrating to America will cause him to be immediately drafted as a soldier in the Korean War; Eamon is haunted by nightmares about a local boy, Luke Moran, the brother of his girlfriend, who recently died under similar circumstances. The narration elegantly contrasts images of rural idyll, such as John Doyle's flashback to his honeymoon at Howth, with images of war and destruction from both the Irish civil war and the Korean War.

⁸⁵ See H. Kennedy p. 7 and Cavanagh p. 96

Korea is nuanced in its depiction of the complex relationship between Irish identity and immigration to America, a theme touched on briefly by *The Field*. Both films foreground landscape in their treatment of the emotionally complex issue of migration. In *The Field*, the townspeople throw a céilidh for the village's sons and daughters who are about to depart for America. The "American Wake," as the celebration is called, signifies the lack of opportunity in rural Ireland, which for many is a result of small land plots that can only sustain one son and his eventual family. The spectre of emigration haunts *The Field*, and various characters suggest that Tadgh's older brother, Séimí, killed himself in the sea because he could not stand the knowledge that Tadgh would have to leave Ireland when Séimí inherited the small field. Black's film turns the tables on this depiction, by looking critically at the practice of emigration and its various motivations. John Doyle's motives are not entirely clear, but the possibility exists that he is sending his son to America so that he can collect soldier's pay from the US Army. In addition, Eamon's girlfriend is Una Moran, the daughter of a local man who fought in the Free State army, and is still despised by John, 30 years later, for what he considers was a betrayal of Ireland. Despite this very different take on the motivations for emigration, *Korea* also uses the rural landscape as a primary character in the film, and similarly deconstructs the pastoral connection between Irishness and landscape by presenting the dangers of romanticising the landscape.

John Doyle's livelihood, as well as the memories that tie him to the past, revolve around the lake that he fishes. The lake and its surrounding greenery are presented in saturated colour, and the entire film appears awash in dark blue tones. Narratively, the lake is a source of sustenance, but it is also repeatedly presented as the mise-en-scène of death: John's wife died because her lungs could not stand the dampness; John is about to lose his

fishing licence and only hope of livelihood; Luke Moran's coffin is rowed across the lake to its burial site; and the final showdown between father and son takes place in a boat in the middle of the open lake. A recurring image of fish thrashing in an underwater cage, accompanied by ominous music, reminds the viewer that for all the inherent beauty of this landscape, it contains the possibility of struggle and death. At the end of the film, John breaks down and appears remorseful at his obsession with the past and with the lake. In the film's narration, the lake appears at pivotal moments, making it a visual symbol of John's inability to forget, and the dangers inherent in living in the past. In this way, the lake is a shortcut to the filmmaker's exploration of the broader cultural connection between memory and Irish identity.

The lake is foregrounded in the funeral scene, as Luke Moran's body is brought to its final resting ground. As the procession of rowers clad in black moves solemnly across the frame, the casket appears draped in an American flag, the lush greenery in the background causing the casket to visually pop out of the frame. This single shot is complex in its depictions of the multiple cultural tensions between Ireland and America. It at once marks the spectre of death that haunts a century of Irish emigration (Irish people leaving because of the Famine, dying in transit, and dying in America) while at the same time it foregrounds the operations of cultural imperialism by placing the coffin squarely in a setting that is primarily associated with American depictions of Ireland. Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* treads a similar path through the dream-like incursions of the Cold War on Irish landscapes.

Jordan's disturbing film *The Butcher Boy* (1997) traces a short period in the life of Francie Brady, a pre-adolescent, troubled boy whose father is an alcoholic, and whose mother suffers from depression. The scene where an increasingly fearful and delusional

Francie plays ‘cowboys and Indians’ with his friend Joe is set on the hilly banks of a lake. As they play, Francie imagines a mushroom cloud exploding over the lake. As in *Korea*, the image in Jordan’s film complicates depictions of Irish landscape through the violent incursion of international politics. The explosion over the lake also cleverly alludes to the power of American culture and politics, by having the boys engage in a game based on the western, which is arguably the most iconic, enduring genre of mainstream American cinema. References to American pop culture are scattered throughout the film, beginning with Francie’s opening monologue, in which he inhabits a fantasy of comic-book superhero proportions. However, it is the iconography of Catholic morality, and its studied psychological effects, that receives the most sustained attention and criticism in the film. For example, the Virgin Mary (played by Sinead O’Connor!) appears to Francie numerous times, most memorably at the edge of a field near the end of the film. Francie’s father abuses alcohol, Francie is abused by a priest at the reform school, and he carries a deep hatred for the Nugents, who are portrayed as English, and by extension, not Catholic. A discussion of the general portrayal of Catholics in film would move beyond the scope of this current work, but it is important to note that, as argued by Martin McLoone, the legacy of rural landscape images in Irish cinema admits a distinctly Catholic cast of characters.⁸⁶ From *The Quiet Man* through *The Field*, Protestants are either not represented as part of the landscape of rural Ireland, or in the case of *The Field*, they are marginalised figures, unwanted by the community, who eventually leave the land. When the widow decides to sell the field to the highest bidder, she is never explicitly identified as Protestant, but as she leaves the auction

⁸⁶ See McLoone, “Reimagining the Nation” for an insightful discussion of how the film “peoples” the landscape with this non-traditional community, thereby refiguring expected connections between community and landscape.

ground, she remarks, “I’m going back to my own people,” turns to walk off, and is hit by dung thrown from offscreen.

In keeping with an analysis of films that complicate early representations of landscape, *December Bride* (1993) is notable for how it alters the expected political connections between rural landscapes and conventional forms of Irish identity. In a similar way to how Sebastian Barry inserts unexpected characters into key historical events, *December Bride* is remarkable for how it opens up a landscape typically associated with nationalists and Catholics to Orange Order iconography and unconventional family arrangements. In the film, the central characters are Protestant: a single woman and her mother work for a farmer and his two middle aged sons. The farmer dies, and the woman begins affairs with both of the brothers, leading to a communal situation where her two eventual children have two fathers, because she refuses to reveal any knowledge of the paternity.

The scene in the film that most directly complicates the expected reading of rural landscapes as Catholic takes place at an outdoor community fair on the Twelfth of July – the day that celebrates William of Orange’s defeat of the Catholic James. The camera snakes through the crowd to reveal orange sashes and Lambeg drums, both standard Protestant icons, and finally focuses on Frank Echlin, the more emotionally unsettled of the brothers, who has been somewhat ostracised by the community for the structure of his household. Over a small embankment from the rally, a courting ritual takes place that is similar to the horse and bonnet event at the fair in *The Quiet Man*. In contrast to the ritual in the earlier movie, in this film, pairs of men run full speed towards each other to capture a woman’s scarf that has been tossed into the air between them. Frank wanders into the gathering, and signals

his intent to join the fight. He attains the scarf, is almost brushed off by the woman who owns it, but eventually gets to walk her home. In contrast to the bright and lively horserace in *The Quiet Man*, this scene is marked by silence, low light, and brooding colours in the mise-en-scène. The scarf-battle is choreographed in a brutal and pared-down way, with the men's bodies crashing into one another with a dull thud. In the earlier film, the competition is a community affair – a chance to commune with the landscape. In *December Bride*, the competition is relegated to the margins of the community activities, and the environment is ominous. As Frank parts ways with the young woman, he is silhouetted against a twilight sky. The image is beautiful, but it is immediately undercut by the plot, because Frank is brutally beaten against the same sky. The soundtrack reinforces the narrative punch of the moment by providing realistic, stomach-turning sounds of the blows to Frank's body – these are not the sound-effect slaps of *The Quiet Man's* donnybrook. The next time Frank appears in the plot, he is irreparably crippled. When compared to the iconic representation of Irish mating rituals in *The Quiet Man*, the formal approach in this scene severs the conventional connection between beautiful landscapes and innocuous pleasures, while at the same time it undercuts expectations about cultural difference in Irish communities. The two films employ distinct tonal and generic approaches, but in the end, the predominantly Catholic community in *The Quiet Man* and the Protestant one in *December Bride* share similar mating rituals and landscapes. *December Bride* systematically deconstructs the pastoral vision of landscape, while also populating the landscape with alternate familial arrangements.

December Bride, *The Field*, and *Korea* share several features common to Irish

‘heritage cinema’, a cycle of films from the 1990s identified by Ruth Barton.⁸⁷ Lance Pettitt summarises Barton’s list of characteristics nicely:

The Irish heritage film is nostalgically uncritical about the past; it displays a longing for a ‘pastoral innocence,’ (often featuring narratives focused on childhood); it tends to have rural settings or eschew modernity; it offers conservative portrayals of gender and sexuality; it endorses the value of family and small community; and it avoids contemporary political violence...Barton concludes that these films are aimed at the ‘demands of the up-market television tourist and of the Irish tourist trade’ (*Screening Ireland* 115).

Commensurate with the characteristics of this cycle, these three films are all set in Ireland’s pre-modern past, they engage directly with violence, but not with the contemporary political violence of the “Troubles,” and the imagistic appeal of their rural settings traditionally has been used to evoke images palatable to tourist audiences. However, the similarities end there, in that each film challenges the more conservative aspects in the heritage film definition. The dual tensions of past/present, tradition/modernity that mark the thematic preoccupations of all three films militate against the nostalgia that is palpable in a heritage film such as 1995’s *Circle of Friends*. *December Bride* takes the conservative views of sexuality in small communities as its main target, proposing an alternate definition of family, regardless of the fact that Sarah agrees to marry one of the brothers at the film’s close. Sarah’s sacrifice in

⁸⁷ See Barton, “From History to Heritage.” A later version of his article appears in Barton’s book *Irish National Cinema*, pp. 148-156. In this later version, she lists the following films, among others, as sharing the heritage formula: *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992), *Hear My Song* (Peter Chelsom, 1991), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (John Sayles, 1993), *War of the Buttons* (John Roberts, 1994), *Circle of Friends*, (Peter Yates, 1995), *The Playboys* (Gillies MacKinnon, 1992), *Waking Ned* [released as *Waking Ned Devine* in North America] (Kirk Jones, 1998), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O’Connor, 1998).

becoming a 'December Bride' is prompted by her daughter's wish to have a family name and to reinstate tradition; this decision can be read as a loving gesture between women, as opposed to a defeat at the hands of the reigning patriarchy.

While *The Field*, *Korea*, and *December Bride* share some characteristics of the heritage film cycle, they are clearly also countering the nostalgic and romantic appeal of films like *Circle of Friends*. Each of these films retains the imagistic beauty of the pastoral while at the same time removing the nostalgia that conventionally accompanies the pastoral, complicating the conventional connection between landscape beauty and atavistic portrayals of Irishness. Director Thaddeus O'Sullivan has argued that his film, *December Bride*, allows a more open dialogue about sectarianism because it is a period piece, and therefore is able to come out of the shadow of the "Troubles" (Black). There may be some leeway given as a result of the 'costume drama' genre, but I would argue that the spectre of the "Troubles" haunts most 1990s audiences watching Irish films that venture to treat issues of religious difference. However, the film's refreshing treatment of sectarianism is partly a result of its unique setting: the city is the usual home to political discussions, and not the rolling hills of the countryside. According to Lance Pettit, *December Bride's* cinematography "presents us with beautiful scenery but in a restrained, austere way that connects character to landscape, showing that visual pleasures are not necessarily incompatible with radical narratives" (*Screening Ireland* 119). As I have shown, this statement could apply equally to *The Field* and *Korea*.

The same cannot be said of the Irish-language film *Poitín* (1977), which complicates the romantic, pastoral approach to 'place' in Irish cinema by directly attacking the landscape and its relationship to its inhabitants. *Poitín* is arguably the best known and most discussed

film by Bob Quinn, one of the most respected independent filmmakers to emerge during the period of Irish filmmaking characterized by Lance Pettit as “indigenous experimentation” (Pettitt, *Screening Ireland* 103). Quinn’s film was the first to receive Arts Council funding in the form of a film script award (38), and it is significant because it is the first feature to be filmed entirely in the Irish language. When discussing alternate images of rural life in films of the 1990s, it is important to look at *Poitín* because it sets a precedent for complications of the Irish cinematic pastoral. The film is widely recognised as seminal by contemporary scholars, but unlike the films of the later time period discussed above, it can not be seen to have the same commercial intentions or appeal. In fact, when the film was first screened on Irish television on St. Patrick’s Day, 1979, it was called “disgusting,” “insulting,” and a “national disgrace” by shocked viewers (“Filmography - *Poitín*”).

Quinn has stated that he was intentionally trying to counter ideas about Ireland that were popularised by *The Quiet Man*, and the pensive pace of *Poitín* is reminiscent of the art cinema mode, except for the fact that we learn very little about the motivations of his characters, and more about the social conditions that spawn their irregular behaviour. Despite the bleak portrait of a poitín (moonshine) maker, his daughter, and the rough middlemen who alternately drink and pawn the alcohol at the local fair, Quinn has been overt in identifying his nationalistic impulses in interviews. Providing an accurate portrait of the impoverished west tops his agenda, and *Poitín* can be seen to quote aspects of earlier, fictionalised portraits of rural Ireland. The Connemara landscape is one of the few elements that *Poitín* has in common with its *Quiet Man* target, and a comparison of the two settings yields wildly different depictions. Instead of lush, manicured greens, *Poitín*’s colours are all browns and greys, and the fields are scarred by the holes left from cutting turf. The bootleggers get

covered in the muck of the bogs from time to time, and the lake becomes their eventual drowning site. Jerry White reads Quinn's films as Ireland's version of a Third Cinema, arguing that while the film repudiates the romanticism attached to "Gaelic, rural values," at the same time it recognises that these values do exist, but just not in the way imagined by mainstream representations (J. White 7). While White's perspective focuses on the film's anti-colonial message, it is just as compelling to view the film as serving up a pointed critique of Irish *cinematic* institutions.

One of the most remarkable inversions of romanticised rural landscape images comes with Quinn's particular use of the long shot. Following a nasty row with the local publican, the bootleggers are sent out of the pub, drunk almost to the point of stupor. The shot fades to black, and three landscape shots appear in successive dissolves, over a relatively long period of time (20 seconds). The shots are not particularly motivated by the narrative, suggesting the ubiquitous use of landscape that comes with romantic depictions. However, the tone and context of the shots alters their reception: first, they are book-ended by unpleasant actions in the plot, and second, their appearance is bleak, with only the diegetic sound of howling wind on the soundtrack. In the next sequence, the bootleggers are shown waking up in their car, and then walking across a field at daybreak. The figures are framed in an extreme long shot against a brooding sky. The contrast is so sharp that the film stock appears almost black and white, and their once-foreboding bodies are miniscule against the towering trees that frame their walk. The image at first glance is reminiscent of the oft-used long shots in *Man of Aran*, where the family is shot from a great distance walking along the seaside cliffs. The inversion in *Poitín* is in the narrative progression: at the point in which the figures cross the awesome landscape, they have exhibited ugly behaviour, their destination is the poitín-maker's house,

and their intention is to terrorise the poitín-maker and his daughter. The heroism and majesty associated with the long-suffering (but contented) people of Aran is absent in the narration, even though the shot's framing works familiar territory.

The radically critical portrait of rural Ireland presented in *Poitín* remains unchallenged by subsequent films in its degree of thoroughness. While the films I have discussed from the 1990s – *The Field*, *December Bride*, *Korea*, and *The Butcher Boy* – each help to complicate the long-held association between Ireland and rural idyll, they do so mostly through their narrative preoccupations. *Poitín*'s achievement – albeit a dark one, given how thoroughly irredeemable are the characters and social structure – is to marry narrative innovations with stylistic ones. However, it is significant that unlike *Poitín*, the other four films were all slated for commercial release, and all except *Korea* were picked up by distributors and fared well at the box-office. In this regard, the independent film *Poitín* appears ahead of its time. It was not until the resurgence of Irish filmmaking, after the reinstatement of the Irish Film Board in 1992, that a significant effort was made at the commercial level to critique the history of pastoral filmic representations.

Dark City: The Other Half of the Binary

While the above rural-setting films attempt to address the legacy of landscape depictions by complicating stereotypically romantic treatments, most films in the 1990s with predominantly urban settings continue to present the city as bleak and potentially dangerous. Lance Pettitt argues that *The Commitments* (Alan Parker, 1991) portrays Dublin “on the edge of modernity” but also notes that the city is “noisy, tatty and dirty.” The image is not without irony – when the band of the film's title has its photograph taken, the manager insists on

urban squalor as the background, suggesting a degree of self-reflexivity about the grunge appeal of Irish cities (Pettitt, *Screening Ireland* 126). Alan Parker's later urban squalor film *Angela's Ashes* (1999), set in tatty Limerick instead of tatty Dublin, manages to add nostalgia to its appeal, as it tracks the impoverished early childhood years of Frank McCourt, the author of the film's source novel. More recently, the box office hit *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003) offers contemporary Dublin, free of any notable political conflict, as a crime-ridden city swathed only in shades of grey. In addition to these generically disparate examples, films that fit the genre of 'Troubles films' consistently take the city as their setting, with the political conflict in Northern Ireland as their narrative background. The longevity of the Troubles genre has been well documented. John Hill concludes that violence, regardless of its seeming connection to nationalist/loyalist struggles, is often represented as essential to the Irish character (Hill). As a counterpart to his discussion of the tradition of romanticism and landscape, McLoone dedicates a chapter of *Irish Film* to what he considers to be the other major tradition of representation in Irish film: political violence (60-84). Significantly, the first book dedicated to a single topic in Irish Cinema, *Shooting to Kill*, extensively treats film and television that addresses the "Troubles" (McIlroy). Most scholarship on film and political violence in Northern Ireland focuses on the treatment of urban settings; of particular interest to this chapter are the ways in which several "Troubles" films represent rural areas by bracketing off landscape in key ways. *Cal* (Pat O'Connor, 1984) and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) both precede the emergence of the Celtic Tiger, and *Divorcing Jack* (David Caffrey, 1998) was in production in Northern Ireland as the Celtic Tiger was initiating sweeping economic changes in the south. While each of these films explicitly addresses the political conflict in Northern Ireland in its narrative, each film

also draws on additional generic traditions: *Cal* is a ill-fated romance, *The Crying Game* incorporates significant comment on gender and sexuality into the form of a thriller, and *Divorcing Jack* is a black comedy that takes a post-modern approach to genre conventions by indiscriminately quoting and splicing together the syntax and iconography of several traditional genres.

The title character in *Cal* is a young Catholic man who has become reluctantly caught up with the IRA, and who lives in a predominantly Loyalist area of a city in Northern Ireland. Cal and his father are routinely threatened by Protestant paramilitaries, who slip late-night notes under their door, and the mise-en-scène of Cal's daily life is saturated in Loyalist iconography. The sidewalks and retaining walls pictured on his daily walk are covered in the kinds of graffiti still seen on the Shankill Road and other areas of Belfast. Eventually, Cal is beaten up by three loyalist youths, and he and his father are burned out of their home. Cal spends the film suffering from guilt and regret – the story never reveals how Cal became involved with the IRA group, but the plot eventually reveals that he was the driver at the point-blank shooting of a Protestant policeman. Plagued equally by guilt, compassion, and sexual curiosity, Cal finds ways to be around Marcella, the Catholic woman who was widowed when her husband – the Protestant policeman – was murdered. Cal eventually ingratiates himself with Marcella's Protestant in-laws, takes a job on their farm, and then begins a doomed love affair with Marcella.

The film is set in a grey and rainy town in Northern Ireland, and the graffiti-covered mise-en-scène is marked by dark tunnels and seedy back alleys. When Cal first begins to work at the farm, the rural landscape appears as an escape from the danger and claustrophobia in the town. However, the film's thematic preoccupation is with the

psychological impact of Cal's actions, as evidenced by scene where Cal and Marcella first make love; sensual moments are intercut with Cal's memory of the night he assisted in Marcella's husband's murder. The rural landscape proves no escape from this internal prison. As Cal becomes reluctantly involved in further IRA activities – he is bullied and appears too afraid to resist – rural landscapes become a synecdoche for unattainable freedom. When Cal is brought to an IRA leader's home, the camera positions the leader in front of a painting of rural Ireland in all its picture-postcard beauty. Similarly, when Cal visits his now-broken father after their house has been burned down, he looks askance at a watercolour of hills and fields on the wall, hoping that Marcella's home will provide him refuge. In this way, the film literally brackets off rural landscapes, making them as unattainable as the perfect images of beauty hanging in picture frames on the wall.

The Crying Game similarly divests rural landscapes of any redemptive power. The film was released in 1992, during the early days of the peace process when informal talks and itinerant ceasefires alternated with paramilitary bomb explosions in Belfast shops. It won Neil Jordan an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, and has been the subject of extensive debate, with many scholars scrutinising the interplay between genre and a variety of identity-politics approaches.⁸⁸ The film follows Fergus, an IRA volunteer who is increasingly disenchanted with Northern Irish politics, and increasingly enchanted with Dil. Dil is the former girlfriend of Jody, a British soldier who was kidnapped by Fergus, and subsequently killed by a truck while trying to escape under his watch.

In *The Crying Game*, natural landscapes share equal footing with cityscapes as places of danger and entrapment. At the start of the film, a slow sideways tracking shot reveals a

⁸⁸ On the interplay between genre and race, gender and sexuality, see Lugowski, Kotsopoulos, Payne, Kotsopoulos and Mills, Chumo, and Ciecko.

leisurely seaside carnival, with water gently lapping the shore, and a Ferris wheel slowly turning in the distance. The romantic refrain of Percy Sledge's "When A Man Loves a Woman" plays non-diegetically, adding a safe, nostalgic tone to the image. But the slow tracking combined with a languorous long-take soon takes on the air of surveillance, as the concrete beams of the heavy bridge cut the frame, adding dark and mysterious pools of light to the original idyll of the image. As the scene progresses, and the sound shifts from the lush non-diegetic soundtrack to a tinny, diegetic version that squawks out of the fair's loud-speakers, the narration reveals that Jody has been set up, and the woman (Jude) he is romancing is an IRA operative preparing to kidnap him. Jody is caught by a team of IRA men on the same shore where the viewer was originally positioned for the opening landscape tracking shot, which alters, in retrospect, the function of that original shot. At first glance, the narration appears to be positioning the fair and the surrounding landscape as the object of interest, but after the kidnapping, it is revealed that the invisible foreground – the original position of the camera – is more important, and that it is a place of entrapment, and not of idyll or leisure. Ideas of perception and perspective constitute a motif in the film, both at the narrative level, and through the *mise-en-scène*. Dil's apartment, for example, is draped with layers of semi-transparent fabric, which partially block the spectator's view of the deep space, while at the same time encouraging the spectator to scrutinise the image. This directorial play with perception is also found in director Jordan's repeated use of mirrors in the *mise-en-scène*, and in the narrative's play with audience assumptions about gender and sexuality.

After Jody is captured at the fair, he is swiftly transported to a densely wooded area. The camera maintains a tight, claustrophobic framing, which is enhanced by rapid and

disorienting cutting. Jody is quickly blindfolded and tied to a chair in disused greenhouse, where the windows are opaque from neglect. This rural outpost is also a place of entrapment, and any romanticism that could be associated with the natural setting is further deflated by the recounted fable of the scorpion and the frog. In the hours leading up to the moment when Fergus will be ordered to kill Jody as a political statement by the IRA, Jody tells Fergus the Aesop fable in which a scorpion, wanting to cross a stream and unable to swim, asks a frog to carry him on his back. As the fable goes, the frog replies that if he were to get that close to the scorpion, he would certainly be stung. The scorpion retorts that it would not be in his own best interest to sting the frog, because then they would both sink and die in the stream. Following this logic, the frog agrees to transport the scorpion, and as he reaches the middle of the stream, he feels a sharp sting in his back. When questioning the scorpion why he has stung him, for now they certainly both will die, the scorpion replies that he could not do otherwise, for it is “in his nature” to sting the frog. The fable is explored metaphorically throughout the film, to probe the assumed links between nature, gender, sex, and sexual orientation⁸⁹, but it also clearly deflates the idea of nature as escape, or benign alternative to the city.

Divorcing Jack is remarkable for approaching the “Troubles” through black comedy, an approach that likely would have been considered politically insensitive prior to the ceasefires of the late 1990s. As with *The Crying Game*, *Divorcing Jack* is primarily set in the city (a futuristic, post-independent Northern Ireland), but incorporates in its intrigue an excursion to a seaside location, and sets its dramatic climax in a rural valley. The film’s primary critical contribution to the cinematic exploration of political unrest and violence in

⁸⁹ Discussions of gender, sexuality and race have been explored extensively in the literature on the film. For example, see Kotsopoulos; Pramaggiore, “I Kinda Liked You”; Boozer.

the North is through its pastiche approach to genre. Throughout the course of the film, the narration draws on everything from the coming-of-age story to the buddy/cop movie, and variously employs the generic syntax from comedy, romance, thriller, western, gangster, and action films. This genre-splicing allows the film to ‘get-away’ with lampooning Northern Ireland’s political situation. The sometimes indiscriminate pastiche of genre conventions destabilises any singular interpretation of the film’s politics, which appears to be the film’s main statement about Northern Irish politics: there are so many factions, loyalties, and beliefs that there is no singular path to solving the political impasse in Northern Ireland.

Divorcing Jack rallies between various genres, but it is the film’s continual return to black comedy through uncomfortable plots shifts that provides the most sustained commentary on previous depictions of Irish landscapes. In one scene, Margaret returns to her apartment shortly after having had a playful romp with the film’s protagonist Dan Starkey, a layabout who writes hack journalism for a Northern Irish tabloid. The romantic tone of the previous scene continues, as sunlight pours through the windows that line the entire wall of her apartment, and sappy music bridges the scene transition. Moments after Margaret enters the apartment, smiling and in a dreamy state, she is forced to duck to the ground as the same sunny windows blast apart one after another, sending shards of glass flying through the room. Drawing on audience expectations built by the combination of Troubles-era news reports and the iconography of action films from wider film traditions, it would be fair for the spectator to assume that someone is trying to shoot Margaret. However, after she throws herself to the floor and the smashing pauses for a moment, it becomes clear that she is being assaulted with ... tubers. Margaret is not the victim of a paramilitary attack, but instead she has been ‘potatoed’ – attacked in a much less life-threatening way by Trish, Starkey’s

betrayed wife. The use of the potato, of course, is heavily cheeky, because of its ties to one of the most sustaining historical events of Irish identity and Irish popular memory – the Famine of the mid-19th century. The substitution of potatoes for bullets or even bricks, therefore, subverts the generic expectation that Margaret is being shot at for political reasons, while at the same time it lampoons a loaded symbol of the Irish past. The ‘potatoing’ sequence literally inserts the primary historical fruit of the Irish landscape into the ‘troubled’ cityscape of the film, bringing together both streams of Irish filmmaking as identified by Hill et al. in one filmic moment. The black comedy approach, combined with the peace efforts that were contemporaneous with the film’s release, allows the film to ‘get away’ with satirising the Troubles and the Famine at the same time.

The film’s dramatic climax takes place on a rural road in a valley, with Dan Starkey trapped between thuggish IRA men on one side of the road, and an ex-IRA politician, possibly about to be elected as the new head of state in an independent Northern Ireland, on the other side. At the same time, Starkey is geographically sandwiched in the valley between two ascending hillsides. The choice to set the climax in this valley moves the action from the city to a decidedly rural place, and functions in a number of ways. On the one hand, it disrupts the aura of peace and leisure conventionally associated with rural areas, but on the other hand, it irreverently recalls the valley where Michael Collins was killed in Neil Jordan’s film of the same name from 1992. This dual reading retains the film’s blackly comic tone, and is also in keeping with the film’s post-modern approach to the construction of narrative, which destabilises any one reading. Unlike Collins, Starkey survives; he is left stranded on the rural road as the cars of both factions peel off in opposite directions, only to blow up several seconds later.

Cal, *The Crying Game*, and *Divorcing Jack* demonstrate not only how cityscapes in Irish film are repeatedly associated with political violence, but also how pre-Celtic Tiger films about the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland signal social ills through their bracketed treatment of rural landscapes. Rural areas appear infrequently within the films’ plots, and when they do appear, they are not offered as an uncomplicated idyllic alternative to the city, which suggests that narrative concerns can take priority over iconographic traditions of representation. The depiction of rural landscapes in these films, in this case, is driven more by the narrative concerns of the “Troubles” genre than it is by the aesthetic tradition that links landscape with romanticism. Moreover, the binary traditions of representation identified by Hill and further developed by McLoone are not replicated *within* these particular films, but instead affect the overall aesthetic of each film: in rural films, romanticism reigns; in these “Troubles” films, both the city and the countryside are bleak. The bracketing of rural landscapes in pre-Celtic Tiger urban films serves to make these landscapes inaccessible to the films’ characters, suggesting that despite the deployment of the city as the primary setting, rural landscapes still retain a degree of currency in the Irish cultural consciousness. In these “Troubles” films, rural landscapes symbolise a lost potential, in that they provide little alternative to the bleakness of the city, while at the same time it is clear that they are made inaccessible, which has the potential to make them more attractive. The ‘lost potential’ is not subject to the lens of nostalgia, but serves more as a reminder of how far violence has penetrated the Irish social fabric. Films that emerge towards the latter part of the Celtic Tiger era, to which we will now turn our attention, treat both cityscapes and rural landscapes in a very different fashion.

Cinematic Trends in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

At the beginning of the 21st century, two major trends emerge in Irish popular cinema. Both trends – albeit from radically different standpoints – can be seen as direct reflections of the social and cultural changes facilitated by the massive transformation of the Irish economy. The first trend is manifest in a series of films that are generally celebratory of social changes. These films celebrate the economic success of the Celtic Tiger and its concomitant contribution to personal wealth, the growth of career opportunities, and the widening social freedoms that accompanied increasing liberalism in the 1990s. The 2003 film *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill) stands as the prime example of this series of films, and I will return to it in great detail later, as it is remarkable in the history of Irish film for its formal treatment of landscape. To begin, I will focus on the ‘socially critical’ trend, as its antecedents in Irish film history are clearer.

Emerging around the turn of the century, this trend involves a group of films that are critical of both contemporary and historical Irish social institutions. The inward scrutiny of these films is bolstered by familiar stylistic conventions that favour bleak images of urban Ireland. But instead of focusing political scrutiny on the North, the narratives take aim at social groups left behind by the Celtic Tiger, as well as the conservative social institutions of late 20th-century Ireland. Made on a tiny budget with a skeletal crew, *Adam & Paul* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2004) is a hyper-realistic, contemporary *Waiting for Godot* whose central characters are a pair of homeless heroin addicts roaming the streets, rather peacefully, for their next fix. Despite the film’s slapstick moments and comic approach, the bleak existence of the main characters combined with thoroughly grey long-shots of urban wastelands make for a depressing take on contemporary life in Dublin. Adam and Paul are Irish by birth, but

their encounters with immigrants from various communities demonstrate that the increased income disparity which accompanied the massive growth in the Irish GDP cuts across ethnic boundaries. On the other side of the production-budget spectrum, the international hit *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003) is also set in contemporary Dublin, and similarly makes little reference to the spoils of Ireland's new economy. The cast of characters are plucked from the down-and-out fringes, but the city they traverse is clearly the contemporary, cosmopolitan Dublin, as opposed to, for example, the dingy alleyways and claustrophobic Georgian tenements of Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1984). Despite the hustle and bustle of the consumer-friendly streets, Dublin in *Intermission* is presented in shades of grey, and is riddled with petty criminals and depressed, disenchanted youth.

***Pavee Lackeen* and Depictions of Marginalisation**

Along the spectrum of 'socially critical' films, *Pavee Lackeen* (2005) bears close scrutiny because it addresses the social and economic inequalities of Traveller families – an issue of national concern that has received little previous treatment in Irish film. The relative poverty and marginal social status of Traveller families precedes the Celtic Tiger, but the film's attention to the income gap between the most affluent and the most impoverished sectors of contemporary Ireland focuses a new light on Ireland's historically marginalised groups. *Pavee Lackeen* is groundbreaking in its straightforward documentary-style presentation of Traveller families in contemporary Ireland. The title character is a small girl whose youth and innocence help put into relief the difficulties of her young life. Traveller families are presented in their everyday encounters, and the film employs a simple, observational style that appears devoid of directorial commentary. Instead of being depicted

as restless and reluctant to settle in one place, the Travellers are disrupted by city officials and developers, who attempt to move their contemporary caravans from the ditches and shoulders of highways on the city outskirts. The young girl's mother saves money to purchase a larger, more suitable caravan, and there are attempts to bring the comforts of civilisation – such as running water – closer to the homestead, instead of suggesting that Travellers would like to be far away from these domesticities. The unique language the family members use to communicate with one other is presented as a distinct, historically developed language, instead of as the uneducated banter it appears as in *The Field*. Importantly, the positive changes in the authenticity of the depiction do not hide the rough and dangerous constants in this family's lives, so the kind of romanticism attached to the rootless Traveller in the previous films is upended by the realities such populations face on Irish society's figurative and literal margins.

Previous depictions of Travellers in films such as *The Field* or *Into the West* have followed the romanticising tendencies of Irish cinematic pastoralism, offering a depiction of Travellers that exploits their marginalised social status in Irish society as a form of authenticity, based on a supposed genetic connection to rural landscapes. The type of depiction offered by *The Field* at first appears in distinct contrast to the depiction offered in Mike Newell's mystical film *Into the West* (1992). *The Field* suggests that Travellers are a threat to social stability, by presenting them as wild and lawless, and dressing them in raggedy clothing. To Tadgh, who aims to break free of the Bull's slavish devotion to tradition, the unnamed 'Tinker Girl' is ultimately very alluring. In Newell's film, the narrative centres around Traveller families, with two young Traveller boys serving as the protagonists who head off to the myth-bound west of Ireland on the back of a magical horse.

The socially marginal status of the Travellers, as evidenced by a number of early scenes that show them living in outdoor urban wastelands and getting in trouble with the law, is ultimately treated as an attractive statement about freedom. The boys' father is attempting to settle them in the city, but the boys' love of the horse, and their ultimate journey to the west, work as a metaphor for the pursuit of a series of negative freedoms: freedom from the city, from the law, from the indoors, and an escape from the literal, painful, past to the mythic, 'authentic' past. In *The Field*, Bull McCabe disdains the Travellers because they are without land, and for him, tending to the land is his link to history and his key to the future. Still, the mise-en-scène presents the Travellers as very much *of* the land, because they live closely with animals, are marked by dirt from the ground, and park their caravans in rural, ungroomed areas. Jim Sheridan's portrait supports the Irish cultural stereotype of Travellers as rough and uncivilized, while at the same time it draws on the romanticised iconography of 'hard primitivism;' they may be wild, but their wildness contains a desirable freedom and fortitude: despite hardships, they live off the hard-scrabble land, and have the strength to stand up to the social prejudice that surrounds them.

Into the West, which operates in the generic realm of children's fantasy,⁹⁰ contributes to the romanticisation of Irish rural landscapes both through its recourse to the ancient legend of Tír-na-nÓg as something to be sought in the fields and seas of the west, as well as through its depiction of the city and 'settled life' as bleak, claustrophobic, and over-policed. The boys in the film escape various authority figures in the city on the back of their pure white horse, their imaginations filled with images of American westerns from television and the cinema.

The brothers' various escapes from their pursuers depend on the horse's geographical

⁹⁰ Ruth Barton suggests that the classification of *Into the West* as a children's fantasy was likely unintended by the filmmaker, and categorises the film as part of the cycle of Irish heritage films that "seem happy to plunder with impartial regard from imperialist and revivalist representations" (*Irish National Cinema* 150-1).

intuition and intimate knowledge of the landscape. The film has been read as grappling with ‘The American Dream’ through its referencing of American popular culture, as well as its directed appeal to American audiences (Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* 127-9). Ultimately the plot follows a fantasy pattern, and the small investigations into the Traveller’s socioeconomic marginalisation are negated by the escapist drive of the narrative. As McLoone emphatically states, the attempt to mobilize aspects of Irish mythical tradition does not absolve the film of indulging “historicist nostalgia” (*Irish Film* 120).

Pavee Lackeen, by completely upturning previous Traveller depictions, can be seen as a step away from the romanticising tendencies of rural landscapes, and a step towards addressing long standing prejudice and inequality in Ireland. The Travellers have been a socially and economically marginalised group in Ireland for a long time, but ironically it could be suggested that it took the influx of other minority groups, through the immigration waves of European integration under the Celtic Tiger, to encourage an Irish filmmaker to look inward towards its treatment of historical elements of diversity. To date, feature films in Ireland have not jumped in to tackle these incoming or new sources of diversity head on. The popular independent hit *Once* (John Carney, 2006) traces the brief romance between an Irishman and a recent Czech immigrant, but the film’s focus is on music and relationships, and not the perils of immigration.⁹¹

If *Pavee Lackeen* can be seen to address a socio-economically marginalised group in Irish history, then *The Magdalene Sisters* (Peter Mullan, 2002) responds to the scandals that

⁹¹ *The Front Line* (David Gleeson, 2006) focuses on an immigrant from war-torn Congo who has been granted asylum in Ireland, and is pulled into criminal activity in Dublin. It is early to suggest that anything akin to a cycle of immigrant films will occur in Ireland, but these two examples point to early attempts at representing other ethnicities in Dublin.

upended the Catholic Church in the 1990s. The film, which was preceded by the British television documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (Steve Humphries, 1998), scrutinises the abuse of so-called ‘wayward’ women by Catholic Church figures, and uses the lush countryside as its setting. In this film, the landscape of rural Ireland proves little comfort to the women, because they, and the viewers, are confined for the most part to the indoors, making for a *mise-en-scène* that is sparsely dressed, dimly-lit, and populated with hard lines and angles. The women’s punishment involves the removal of access to outdoor spaces, in part because of the contact with members of the outside world made possible by the visually porous fences. The outdoor spaces in the film serve as liminal zones between their place of confinement, and the relatively free world beyond the fenced-in boundaries of this confinement, recalling the ways in which landscape is bracketed off in several “Troubles” films.

Pavee Lackeen, *The Magdalene Sisters*, and *Adam and Paul* are at once addressing the negative social by-products of Ireland’s new economy, such as poverty and crime, as well as engaging with the darker historical issue of systematic neglect or abuse at the hand of Ireland’s central social and religious institutions. Arguably, this critical mode of address has been enabled by an attendant growth in social liberalism that disrupts an historical culture of silence, and encourages transparency and discussion. While these films challenge traditional Irish social customs, they remain formally bleak in the depiction of Irish cityscapes, suggesting that urban Ireland remains troubled. In blurring the line between documentary and fiction, *Pavee Lackeen* is the most experimental of the lot, raising questions about the relationship between representation, authenticity, and the cinema. Despite this

experimentation, the film relies on a familiarly sombre portrait of urban Ireland to deliver its message.

To say that the socially critical perspective of these films from the early 21st-century has been solely encouraged by the waning grip of Catholic moral codes would not be entirely accurate, because it ignores the fact that the criticism of religious institutions and economic marginalisation are not new to Irish cinema. For example, take Lance Pettitt's statement about independent Irish cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s:

This new Irish cinema did not revere its national history nor its traditional institutions, like the Catholic Church, marriage and the family, all of which were scrutinised on screen. The latter institutions were seen less as bulwarks of Irish social stability and more as arenas for conflict and questioning.

Ireland changed rapidly and experienced a brief period of affluence in the first half of the 1970s, but these films explored the experience of people pushed to the margins of this new Ireland. By putting Travellers, unemployed people, homelessness, homosexuality and urban lives on screen the fault-lines of modernity in Ireland were exposed (Pettitt, *Screening Ireland* 103).

Given the preceding discussion, Pettitt could be talking about *Adam & Paul*, *Pavee Lackeen*, and *The Magdalene Sisters*, but his observation instead refers to films such as *Poitín*, *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981), *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981), and *Reefer and the Model* (Joe Comerford, 1987). There are clear parallels between the social and economic contexts of each group of films, but the significant difference is that the films Pettitt mentions emerge from independent, counter-cinema traditions, whereas the more recent films have mixed origins. *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Intermission*, at the very least, have significant budgets

and their use of known genre conventions affords them a fairly broad commercial appeal both inside and outside Ireland.

Challenging the Pastoral Ideal: The City as the New Idyll in *Goldfish Memory*

Perhaps the most remarkable occurrence, in terms of the history of city representations in Irish film, is a series of romantic comedies that emerge at the beginning of the 21st century. In contrast to the ‘social issue’ films discussed above, these films forego any significant political engagement, preferring instead to offer only the flush and celebratory side of urban Celtic Tiger Ireland. When considering the abundant offerings of American romantic comedies of the same period, it is not surprising to find that they are characterised by an absence of social and political commentary; the genre focuses on fantasy and lightness, offering an escape from serious concerns. The contemporary Irish offerings, which include *About Adam* (Gerard Stembridge, 2000), *When Brendan Met Trudy* (Kieron J. Walsh, 2000), *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 2003), and *Cowboys & Angels* (David Gleeson, 2003) similarly avoid political commentary. What is remarkable, therefore, is not the ways in which urban romantic comedies are developing in Ireland, but the very fact that a series of them have appeared in quick succession. As shown, the Irish city has long been associated with crime, poverty, dirtiness, and political violence; the new series of films bursts with images of bright, clean, Irish cities that offer the same possibilities for romance and leisure as Paris, London, or New York. The films foreground their cityscapes, offering urban Ireland’s buildings and bridges as a contemporary idyll, in contrast to the tradition of pastoral idyll. While all four films offer Irish cities as the site of romance, *Goldfish Memory* is uniquely notable because it

posits queer, fluid sexuality as the new norm, and enlists the cityscape as its chief sponsor in sexual liberation.

Goldfish Memory, shot on digital video with a barebones production model under the Irish Film Board's low budget feature initiative, presents itself as a simple romantic comedy set in contemporary Dublin. On closer analysis, the simplicity gives way to implicit social commentary. One of the boldest aspects of the film is its presentation of sexual orientation as fluid, along with its celebratory approach to a range of sexual experiences. The film uses a relay structure to follow a group of young, hip Dubliners as they roll in and out of beds, in a looser, queerer take on Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* (1900). At first glance, *Goldfish Memory* is part of a new trend of Irish romantic comedies that foreground their urban setting, but with a clear focus on representing non-heterosexual attractions. However, the way in which the film punctuates a utopian sexual universe with images of Dublin as a bright metropolis significantly transforms both cinematic expectations about Ireland as a geographical entity, and generic codes that guide audience expectations of romantic comedy. *Goldfish Memory* suggests that providing new, queer images of Irish identity requires a jettisoning of the existing lexicon of landscape imagery.

Given the way the city has usually been presented as crime-ridden, *Goldfish Memory* is remarkable for the way it envisions urban life. The mise-en-scène is filled with rainless streets and lush interiors, and many shots are slightly overexposed, providing an upbeat, romantic image of a chic, desirable metropolitan centre. These images are a deliberate response to the legacy of bleak and rural images in Irish cinema that writer/director Liz Gill believes were responsible for turning Irish audiences away from Irish films (Gill).

In *Goldfish Memory*, Dublin is civilised, progressive, attractive, and notably free from socially divisive elements like crime, classism, racism and homophobia. The rural scenes in the film are brief; they do not provide a distinct contrast with the urban scenes, and they are not central to defining the characters or their Irishness. In fact, Irishness does not seem to be a concern at all in the narrative, which, ironically, is indicative of new understandings of identity in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The characters and places are divested of traditional cinematic markers of Irishness, which reflects a broader cultural trend towards remaking Irish identity as international, plural, and cutting-edge contemporary.⁹² On the one hand, the film offers insistent images of central Dublin, providing local audiences the opportunity to collectively experience their own city through a familiar genre on the big screen. On the other hand, the narrative never explicitly states the film's setting. The accents and the rare joke about Irish mummies let us know that the action takes place in an Irish city, but Dublin is not *named*, and the idea of "Irishness" has little purchase in the film's narrative or characterisations. The film's formal choices, reflected in frequent coffee-shop settings, or the exploration of the spectrum of sexual couplings, reflect a loose jumble of European and North American influences more than anything discretely Irish or Dubliner. The sense of place developed through the hodgepodge of influences has the effect of obfuscating Dublin behind a screen of the 'contemporary-urban,' and recalls Martin McLoone's coining of the "anywhere-but" city. McLoone's argument is based on a series of turn-of-the-century films from Britain's 'celtic fringe' that are marked by their efforts to differentiate the depiction of the city of their setting from previous filmic representations. Hence, Belfast is presented as

⁹² The scope of 'traditional' cinematic representations includes both earlier images of pastoral, primitive Ireland, as well as the laundry list of 'overdone themes' in *The Fifth Province* (Frank Stapleton, 1997): "Irish mothers, priests, sexual repressions and the miseries of rural life" (McLoone, *Irish Film* 169).

cheery and upwardly mobile in *With or Without You* (Michael Winterbottom, 1999), and not as the traditional locus of sectarian strife (McLoone, “Challenging Colonial Traditions” 52).

Much of *Goldfish Memory* film is set indoors, and without explicitly naming it as Dublin, the city could stand for many possible European cities. The narration’s refusal to indisputably identify the setting as Dublin serves the film’s overall venture into the realm of fantasy; the setting might look like Dublin to those who know it, but the refusal to identify it as such provides a degree of artifice, allowing the film’s setting to exist at the level of imagination. This approach is commensurate with the narrative and stylistic approaches of many mass-market films, and the particular ways in which the film mixes real with imagined space suggest a significant development in the dialectic between Irish identity and Irish landscape representations.

The Dublin that the film presents is in many ways a familiar one, but not one that has been made familiar through cinematic conventions. Repeatedly, scene transitions are marked by shots of the Ha’penney and Millennium footbridges, which unfold in a series of meditative dissolves. Other scenes take place at Trinity College, in bars that are presented as alongside the central quays of the Liffey River, and on the well-scrubbed side streets of Georgian Dublin. The film also includes a number of shots of the Docklands, which may not be as internationally familiar as the Trinity College area, but which is currently popular with Dublin’s youth. Therefore, the film offers iconic representations of Ireland, familiar to Dublin-dwellers and post-card buyers alike, but the iconography is not drawn from the lexicon of cinematic conventions, such as cottage kitchens in rural areas or broken-down tenements on city side-streets usually associated with Ireland. In the rare moment when the film’s iconography does recall earlier films, the narration alters the way the iconography is

received. Liz Gill's use of Liffey bridges to mark transitions, for example, recalls one of the most famous landmarks in Irish film history: the aforementioned bridge used in the filming of *The Quiet Man*. Whereas the transition in *The Quiet Man* is primarily metaphorical, marking Thornton's spiritual return to his roots, the Liffey bridge sequences in *Goldfish Memory* are literal, artfully marking the shifting light of a day's passage in central Dublin.

As discussed in the introduction, Ireland and Irish identity have long been marked by a surfeit of memory and remembrance; the bridge sequence from *The Quiet Man* provides a central example of how the cinema has contributed to this preoccupation with memory. In contrast, the central metaphor in *Goldfish Memory* is about the necessity of forgetting. Tom, the Lothario lecturer who seduces his female students, compares the goldfish's three-second memory to the resilience of the human heart: when faced with the prospect of new love, humans forget about past heartaches. The key narrative point is that memory can be a hindrance, suggesting that the relationship with memory in this new Ireland has shifted to one of forgetting. In terms of narrative and style, both of which refuse Irish cinematic conventions, *Goldfish Memory* is firmly planted in the present. Its themes and mise-en-scène are indicative of the post-Celtic Tiger moment in history, where definitions of Irish identity have been challenged by changing migration patterns, as well as a new-found affluence. The turn away from exploring the past is part of a broader cultural movement in Ireland, and it helps to explain why the images of Dublin in the film do not include sites such as the General Post Office, which are firmly associated with Ireland's political history. In this way, *Goldfish Memory* appears to be jumping resolutely into the present and perhaps the future, in ways that the plays of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr do not.

The decision to eschew familiar markers of Irish identity recalls Ireland's recent effort to represent itself through public works such as the Spire, which, as discussed, contrasts sharply with the 19th and early 20th century monuments and architecture that surround it. This new monument does not contain any attribute that would associate it with Irish nationalism, nor does it engage with historical elements of identity formation, in the way the Cuchulainn statue in the adjacent GPO appropriates a Celtic figure for modern cultural nationalism. Until the end of the 20th century, rural landscapes were the chosen environment for nationalist Ireland's own self-image. The tourism industry, in its target marketing to the Irish diaspora, has worked to generate nostalgia around the Irish countryside – particularly the west – which further entrenches the idea of rural Ireland as the *real* Ireland. The success of the campaign, however, has meant that tourist conveniences often trump authenticity, so the west that the tourist actually gets to visit has been shaped specifically with the tourist in mind. The award-winning short film *Yu Ming is Aímh Dom*/*Yu Ming is my Name* (Daniel O'Hara, 2003) addresses this reality with tongue in cheek. When Chinese backpacker Yu Ming arrives in Dublin after having studied the Irish language at home, only to find out that no one actually speaks Irish in Ireland, he promptly departs for the west. He gets a job at a roadside pub pouring Guinness, where he greets other tourists thirsty for the 'authentic' Gaeltacht experience: "Failte go Connemara. Conas atá tú?"⁹³ The film is clever, of course, because it comments on Ireland's political choice to make Irish the official language, even though it is spoken only in small pockets of the country. The film's humour trades on the recognition that the Irish countryside, posited as a legitimate place of escape in films from *The Quiet Man* to *Into the West*, is actually a museum display for tourists. *Yu Ming is Aímh Dom* comments on the 'Disneyfication' of the west, and the willingness of

⁹³ Translated in the film's subtitles as "Welcome to Connemara. How are ye?"

even those who seek an authentic engagement with Ireland's history and unique culture to buy into the tourist imaginary.

In the last decade, the tourism industry has started to market Ireland's urban heritage. (Lincoln 203). A sign of the 'success' of this shift in marketing tactics is the growing popularity of Dublin as a tourist spot. The increase in hotel bookings in Dublin, however, has been met by an equally large decrease in visits to the south and west, which have traditionally drawn large numbers. As a result, the government recently ordered a major revamping of the way regional tourist boards market the country to foreign visitors (Cullen 1). The images of Dublin in *Goldfish Memory* correspond to this shifting notion of Irish heritage, suggesting that Irish identity is now urban, and that in direct contrast to the way the rural has been formulated, the urban is sexy, hip and liberal. Considering the change from rural to urban in the way Ireland is marketed to tourists, it is all that more interesting to note the brief ways in which rural images appear in the film's mise-en-scène.

When the plot strays briefly into rural areas, the camera does not offer sweeping vistas. Forays beyond the metropolis are clearly motivated by the narrative, and are brief in duration. When the newly engaged couple Larry and Rosie drive to the countryside to meet Rosie's parents, the surrounding landscape appears in the background of the mise-en-scène in three brief shots that total eleven seconds of screen time. Excursions to rural areas are also treated ironically: the entry to the rural area where Rosie's parents live is marked by a sign that says "Termonfeekin,"⁹⁴ and as Larry sits on a cliff, asking for a sign from above to guide his relationship, he is answered with a plop of bird droppings. The engagement with the rural as a source of either nostalgia or toil is absent in these depictions; whereas *The Quiet Man* begins with a meditation on the past, the phrase that starts *Goldfish Memory*, and trails

⁹⁴ "Feekin" is a slighter less potent Irish version of the familiar expletive.

through the plot like a single baton in a sexual relay, is “Goldfish have only a three second memory...” Thematically, the film champions the ability to move on, which is supported by an almost involuntary predilection for forgetting. The distinct lack of purchase on memory is met by an equal impatience with nostalgia, which is particularly apparent in the ways in which traditionally romantic landscapes are treated. Larry and Rosie’s trip to the country is immediately followed by a scene between Clara and Isolde in a small art gallery; here, the only greenery has been relegated to framed photographs on the wall. The framing device makes the characters’ relationship to the landscape photographs self-conscious. When Clara and Isolde pause in the gallery, the camera positions them in the foreground, with a framed picture of a rural area under construction in the near background. The rural landscape presented is only a representation, and further, it is one that is about to be transformed or obliterated, likely for the growth of suburban Dublin. The mise-en-scène self-consciously distances the characters from the landscape while they engage in an argument – a narrative development that further deflates the romanticism Luke Gibbons has argued is associated with rural images of Ireland (194-257). This particular framing of rural landscapes at the gallery functions differently in *Goldfish Memory*’s narration than it does in the example from *Cal*, because in the former, the city is not presented as otherwise dangerous, nor as a stifling alternative to the countryside.

Instead of spacious outdoor vistas, *Goldfish Memory* offers spacious interiors, filled with natural light. The film’s characters, including students and bartenders, live in modern spaces in hip areas of town. Even the bike courier’s small canal boathouse looks spacious, because the camera uses a wide-angle lens and deep focus to emphasise the strong vertical lines of the floorboards, elongating the viewer’s perception of the room. While the camera is

presenting bright new urban images of Ireland, the narrative is also centered around sexual couplings that put lesbian, gay and bisexual desire on par with heterosexual desire.

The relationships and sexual dalliances in *Goldfish Memory* include both long- and short-term arrangements, and the characters range from those who inhabit relatively fixed identities along the gay-straight continuum, to characters who do not identify with any fixed position. In short, anything goes in terms of sexuality, although gender is presented as relatively fixed. Writing in 1997 about the (small) history of gay film in Ireland, Lance Pettitt notes that gay viewers could often only seek out representations of themselves in Irish film by reading images ‘against the grain’, that is, by either noting implicit textual and iconographic markers of homosexuality, or by settling for negative depictions, because at least those depictions marked a presence:

If a society, through legislation and cultural mores, criminalises certain forms of sexual pleasure and the expression of them, then the discriminated group is forced to raid the oppressor’s representational territory, transforming images and codes, subverting the cultural boundaries that they effectively patrol (Pettitt, “Pigs and Provos” 259).

Six years after this article was written, *Goldfish Memory* emerges as a film full of gay- and lesbian-positive images that do not have to be wittily uncovered or read ‘against the grain.’ Instead, the film offers up the images wholesale, in a celebratory fashion. Following a loose relay structure reminiscent of *La Ronde*, the characters jump in and out of bed, and fall in and out of love with one other without consequence; sexuality is presented as fluid, while at the same time, more fixed identifications at any point along the spectrum are not frowned upon. In short, sexuality, regardless of orientation, is presented as guilt-free, which stands as a

measure for how far the film has distanced itself from earlier depictions of sexuality.⁹⁵ The narrative presents queerness as another element of identity, but not as an element that marks someone as ‘other.’ The approach to queer sexuality here is an assimilationist one: gay people are just like everyone else. The argument arguably moves one mainstream step past B. Ruby Rich’s characterisation of the ‘new queer cinema’ – in which sexual fluidity is a key characteristic – by assuming that the entry of non-heterosexual identities into the mainstream is already complete: the slogan “they’re here, they’re queer, get used to them” transforms into “they’re here, they’re queer, everyone already is used to them”⁹⁶ Clearly the film could be criticised on the grounds that presenting non-normative relationships as entirely carefree does not engage with contemporary social realities that affect gays and lesbians. The *Sight and Sound* reviewer of the film argues that this lack of engagement diminishes both the drama and the comedy of the film (Westwell 52). However, the choice to forego political commentary in the film is also commensurate with the conventions of romantic comedy: in order to keep the obstacles to love light and surmountable, the film avoids broader social and political issues. In this case, the film’s dialogue with the politics of identity is aimed at the level of genre: the non-normative sexual partnerships in *Goldfish Memory* overturn the

⁹⁵ In heterosexual representations, Irish film has often presented themes of repression and guilt, reflecting conservative interpretations of Catholic teachings. The small body of literature on homosexuality in Irish film reflects the small output of films with gay themes or characters; for a discussion of gay male sexuality in Irish film, see “Pigs and Provos” and “A Construction Site Queered”, both by Lance Pettitt.

⁹⁶ The first phrase is from Rich, in one of the first articles to herald the arrival of a ‘new queer cinema’ (32). Rich notes that the group of films that emerged from the international festival circuit at the start of the 1990s does not share “a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern,” but that these films are “energetic” and “irreverent,” and are united by a common style that includes pastiche and irony (ibid). Benshoff and Griffin add the descriptors “brash” and “defiant” to the list, arguing that New Queer Cinema sets itself apart from realistic films by employing unique forms as well as queer-specific content (220-2). In many ways, *Goldfish Memory* is distinct from the New Queer approach in that it appropriates mainstream forms seamlessly, without explicit commentary.

central convention of romantic comedy, which is the plotting of a heterosexual coupling.⁹⁷

The commentary, therefore, surfaces in the way genre conventions are subverted.

Director Liz Gill is very clear that she intends the film to reach mainstream audiences, and that she also hopes that it might provide positive reassurance to viewers who are struggling with their own sexualities. While the film initially received criticism from gay audiences for not being “gay enough,” which one could interpret as an attack on the universalizing impulse of the film, Gill maintains that the film was meant to be accessible to straight audiences, to help them understand that homosexuality is ‘normal’ (Gill)⁹⁸. Same-sex desire is ‘normalised’ through the film’s partial adoption of romantic comedy conventions, but at the same time, the conventions expand to incorporate new material. There is no discernible central plot or lead character in the film; instead, an ensemble cast weaves multiple romantic sub-plots, offering a grab-bag of alternatives to conventional depictions of romance. One of the enduring characteristics of the romantic comedy is its adaptability to changing social realities. But despite this seeming flexibility, the dominant social ideology still sets the boundaries for what is considered acceptable material for the shaping of romance in mainstream cinema. As recently as 1992, Steve Neale noted that there were no romantic comedies in Hollywood with lesbian or gay couples – or Asian or black couples, for that matter (Neale 288). *Goldfish Memory* can be seen as part of a slowly emerging effort to change this reality.

While the film is not a direct product of Hollywood, it does exploit many of the conventions developed and repeated by Hollywood romantic comedies. For example, the

⁹⁷ When discussing American films about lesbian relationships in the mid 1990s, Maria Pramaggiore argues: “The recurring adoption of the generic conventions of the romantic comedy in films by lesbians... suggests an interest – lesbian? queer? cinematic? all three and more? – in remapping romance” (“Fishing for Girls” 66).

⁹⁸ This was achieved with no small degree of irony; at a test screening, one of the audience members wrote, “it makes homosexuality look normal.” The comment was not intended as a compliment (Gill).

film provides several variations on the ‘wrong person’ scenario, where characters realize they are engaged to or involved with the wrong person, only after realizing they are more in love with another person. Similarly, the film’s conclusion leaves all characters contented with their romantic situations, reaffirming a social belief in the possibility of romantic love. The film even employs the convention of the ‘gay best-friend/confidant’, familiar from the popular romantic comedies *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1997), *The Object of My Affection* (Nicholas Hytner, 1998), and *The Next Best Thing* (John Schlesinger, 2000). But part of the process of queering romantic comedy conventions emerges in the subtle ways the film alters these existing conventions. In the case of the gay best-friend relationship, both characters – Angie and Red – are gay, and their “ah, why not?”, regret-free one-night stand with each other produces a baby that will eventually be parented by Angie and her new girlfriend Kate, with support from Red and his new boyfriend David. The ‘wrong person’ scenario expands to a ‘wrong-sex’ variation in some cases (Clara moves from Tom to Isolde; David moves from Rosie to Red), but not in others (Clara keeps boyfriend Conzo on the side; Rosie moves from David to Larry to a fling with a third man; Tom finds true compatibility with Renee after fumbling with Clara and Isolde). Several characters also find happiness in their newfound *detachment* from romantic connections. The upshot is that the film offers an ingenuous, non-ironic picture of the fantasy of romance, while multiplying the possible permutations for romantic coupling. Jonathan Murray’s essay on the domestic reception of *The Magdalene Sisters* proves illuminating here. He argues that the film succeeded in both commercial and critical domestic circles due to its adoption and adaptation of Hollywood conventions. Contrary to critical writing that reads the success of national cinemas through their perceived distance from mainstream cinematic forms, Murray argues that the adoption

of Hollywood conventions by *The Magdalene Sisters* – in particular the generic conventions of the prison drama – proves politically progressive. The implication of his argument is that the familiarity of the prison drama engages spectators of mainstream film, while at the same time that it significantly critiques the Magdalene laundries' functional proximity to prison wards (J. Murray). Aside from the significant play with sexual orientation, *Goldfish Memory* fulfills the expectations of the romantic comedy genre in every way, suggesting that the generic familiarity smoothes the way for the presentation of marginal sexualities.

Part of *Goldfish Memory*'s approach to the queered romance is to position the city as a site for sexual liberation, painting a freshly affluent Dublin as an optimistic site of experimentation and possibility. The romantic comedy is not a common genre in Irish film history, and previous films tracing (heterosexual) romances were more usually set in the countryside, with *Circle of Friends* (Pat O'Connor, 1995) and *The Matchmaker* (Mark Joffe, 1997) exploiting misty, small-town settings to heighten the romance that is bolstered by nostalgia.⁹⁹ In terms of romance and the city, *Goldfish Memory* is not the only film in post-Celtic Tiger to explore alternate sexualities, but it is the boldest effort. *About Adam* follows the titular character's romantic adventures with three sisters, and hints at a possible dalliance between Adam and the sisters' one male sibling; however, the film stops short of consummating this romance. The film is equally sunny in its depiction of Dublin, similarly presenting sexual experimentation as positive and liberating, but the key difference is that *About Adam* clearly winks at the fantasy it is creating. The special-effect sparkles that bounce off bright surfaces in the film are a self-conscious device to draw attention to the fantasy world of the film, reminding the viewer of the film's departure from reality.

⁹⁹ A search of the comprehensive database Irish Film Genres database, an academic venture that catalogues Irish films by genre, reveals only 24 romantic comedies out of 268 feature films released between 1981 and 2006 ("Irish Film Genres – Database").

In *Goldfish Memory*, the narrative is presented more classically. A Dublin that embraces sexual freedom is presented without irony or reflexivity, situating the present-centred, realistic depiction of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in tension with a more future-oriented approach to sexuality. In *Goldfish Memory*, the cityscape is an accomplice in the exploration of sexual desire and identity. The cinematic depiction of Dublin as a bright, hopeful, bustling centre is met by a concomitant transformation in the approach to sexuality. The film's mise-en-scène presents both metropolis and sexuality as safe, open, and inviting. To recall McLoone's term, Dublin is 'anywhere-but' Dublin – a city that has become so assimilated into Europe that it no longer stands out as Dublin. Similarly, sexual experimentation and identification across the spectrum are also assimilated, positioning homosexuality as 'anything-but' different and non-normative. Evidence for this approach is reflected in the film's formal strategy; the narrative of sexual experimentation does not shift to accommodate changes in the setting. For example, the film makes little distinction between public and private spaces when developing the various romance plots. When Red and David kiss for the first time (following David's weak protestations that he is "not gay,") the two kiss without any concern for the social environment around them. *Goldfish Memory* is mostly set in the bright daylight, but the kiss between Red and David takes place at night after a drinking binge, under bright streetlights. The kiss subverts Irish conventions of masculinity by changing the expected narrative progression (the booze-up ends with locked lips instead of locked fists) and by setting the encounter on an open public street. When the men kiss, they do not acknowledge the social world around them. But more importantly, the camera's framing avoids any complex tension with off-screen space, lending the open street the same safety as a private room.

Remarkable for a film that deals with the intimacies of relationships, there are almost no point-of-view shots. Therefore when public kisses are witnessed by other characters in the film, there is no entry into the on-screen witness's subjectivity. When Clara sends Angie off to work with a morning-after kiss, the camera frames the embrace in a mirror on the side of the van belonging to Angie's work-partner, Eddie, who is in the foreground of the shot. There is then a cut to a closer framing of the mirror, and the shot appears to be just off Eddie's point-of-view. Regardless of Eddie's position, the side-mirror acts as a distancing device, instead of as an entry into Eddie's subjectivity. Similarly, we see Tom's surprise at witnessing Clara and Isolde's DVD-cover kiss in a wide café window, but the cinema-audience has the exclusive view of the intimate chat which precedes the kiss. The cityscape that provides a backdrop for these moments is presented in warm and inviting tones.

New Images, New Irishness

Goldfish Memory's bright and optimistic images of Dublin suggest that the depiction of non-normative sexualities requires a new cinematic lexicon, possibly because the legacy of filmic images of Ireland cannot bend to accommodate queer Ireland's cinematic 'coming-out.' The film suggests that new images are required if Irish film is to honestly explore the existence of, and advocate for the understanding of, same-sex desire in Ireland. The use of the city as a site for queer assimilation is notable, because it reverses the trend witnessed in a number of ideologically similar American films, which choose the suburb or small town as their setting.¹⁰⁰ The Dublin presented in *Goldfish Memory* is urbane and cosmopolitan, and it marks the new internationally promoted face of Ireland. By choosing the city as its locus, the film inserts same-sex desire into the mix of images that characterise the Irish identity that

¹⁰⁰ I thank Maria Pramaggiore for this insight.

comes with this new picture of Ireland. In her article on the lesbian films *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1994) and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995), Maria Pramaggiore argues that the latter, which contains the more universalizing impulse of the two films, uses a small-town setting to assimilate images of lesbian romance. The film's use of the automobile as a motif recalls mainstream American youth culture (Pramaggiore, "Fishing for Girls" 70). In Irish film history, the recognisable locus of Irish identity (to recall John Hill's analysis) is best characterised by the small town or village, where the inhabitants are marginalised by their poverty. Homosexuals, even when sympathetically portrayed, are still outlaws with marginal living arrangements, such as in Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1984) or Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* (1988) (Pettitt, "A Construction Site Queered" 62).

The 'real Ireland' depicted in *Goldfish Memory* is more readily recognised by its culture of consumption, which includes hip night spots and expensive downtown apartments. Homosexuals are neither poor nor marginalised; in fact, the film makes gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight identities part and parcel of a homogeneous depiction of Dublin. The same social and political shifts in contemporary Ireland that create the space for the expression of non-normative sexual identities, such as the breakdown of Catholic religious hegemony, increasing integration into the diversities of the EU, a shift in wealth patterns through the Celtic Tiger boom, and increased immigration from outside the traditional British and American diasporas, have also contributed to the diversification of the Irish demographic in a number of other ways. *Goldfish Memory* draws on shifting attitudes towards sexual identity, but does not include other markers of diversity, such as ethnicity and class, that mark the "new Ireland." My point is not to judge the film for its level of inclusiveness or for its reach

in terms of remapping a range of marginal groups, but to note that some of the very elements that make the exploration of sexual diversity possible – increasing secularism and multiculturalism – are outside the film’s purview. If the new Ireland in *Goldfish Memory* is straight, gay, and everything in between, it is also shown as entirely white and middle-class.

An early sequence in the film takes place at the St. Patrick’s Day parade in the streets of Dublin. In a few brief seconds, the scene attempts to show the growing diversity of Dublin, by including ethnically diverse floats in the *mise-en-scène*. One group is framed marching with placards; the group leader’s sign reads: “St. Patrick was Egyptian.” A reporter from a local television news station, Angie, stops one of the marchers, Clara, to ask what this particular group is representing. Happy to spread her cause on camera, Clara claims “there is ample evidence to support the fact that Patrick was North African, and that many of his beliefs reflect the teachings of ancient Egyptian religion. The Catholic Church, *of course*, has simply used Patrick as propaganda to squelch out the indigenous religions of the day.”¹⁰¹ Angie listens with rapt attention, but it is clear from her puppy-dog expression that her interest is in Clara, and not the politics of what Clara is saying. In terms of narrative progression, the march is a conceit for Clara to meet Angie, who will soon become her lover. However, the brief sequence somewhat humorously points to a particular moment in contemporary Ireland, one marked by efforts to deal with the complexities of new immigration. Arguably, the growing diversity of opinion, religion, and ethnic backgrounds fostered by an influx of immigrants is part of what supports the breakdown of Catholic moral hegemony and fixed Caucasian identity in Ireland, thus allowing a film that deals explicitly with outlaw sexualities to find such a happy audience both within Ireland and abroad. The film sets up this socio-cultural moment through this one brief sequence, yet throughout the

¹⁰¹ All quotations from the film are based on my transcription from the DVD.

film, we are only presented with images of relatively affluent, ethnically Irish characters. The film is remarkably progressive for its approach to sexuality and sexual identity, and the existence of this sequence points to the film's awareness of how Irish identity must be seen, in a time when immigration is changing the ethnic makeup of Irish cities, as a layered construction of many subject positions. Clara's brief statement at the parade is the only moment in the film that deals overtly with politics, so it draws attention to issues of race and ethnicity in contemporary Ireland. The scene stands out for its commentary on politics, because the film's treatment of sexuality is through the rather apolitical genre conventions of romantic comedy, and not through an exploration of the issues that surround sexual identity politics. While the parade sequence firmly plants the film in early 21st century Dublin, the queer fantasia throughout the rest of the film suggests a timeframe that is still somewhere in the future. The release of *Goldfish Memory* at this point in Irish gay and lesbian film history is notable, therefore, because unlike other traditions (e.g. American independent cinema), the film has not been preceded by a distinguishable moment of oppositional cinema. The politics of gay/lesbian/bisexual identity have not been fully hashed out on Irish screens, but the appearance of *Goldfish Memory* signals that the mainstream market, at least in the darkened halls of the cinema, is ready to incorporate images of non-normative sexualities as part of an evolving definition of Irishness.

The appearance of *Cowboys & Angels* (David Gleeson) later in 2003 suggests that *Goldfish Memory*, and its precursor *About Adam*, can be seen as part of a cycle of Celtic-Tiger influenced urban romances. Each of these films favours freedom and a contained degree of hedonism, as opposed to more traditional values of steadfastness, toil, and reserve. Instead of Dublin, *Cowboys & Angels* moves to another major urban centre, Limerick, and

follows the fast maturing of Shane, a direction-seeking young man in his early 20s who moves into a shared apartment with a more focused young gay man named Vincent. The film's overall lightness in the face of Shane's foray into drug-running, and the frequent city shots and settings at dance clubs limit the dramatic weight of the treatment, making the film a 'dram-edy', most likely targeted at teen and 20-something audiences. *Cowboys & Angels*, like *When Brendan Met Trudy*, *About Adam*, and *Goldfish Memory* before it, foregrounds the energy and excitement of its urban setting while at the same time treating that setting as a generic Eurocity. The film does not promote its location, nor does it hide it – Limerick is mentioned early on, and a few shots near the end of the film clearly take place at Shannon Airport; the suggestion is that Limerick is as vibrant, and holds as much urbane appeal, as many other European cities. The film takes a similarly fluid, sex-positive approach to relationships, which is most evident in a cross-cut sequence where we see Shane and Vincent separately consider a sexual encounter outside their stated preference. The sequences are given a balanced cinematic treatment, suggesting that it is just as novel for a gay man to consider sleeping with a woman as it is for a straight man to consider sleeping with a man.

* * *

Gay romance is not new to world cinema, and as Kelly Kessler points out, a survey of American films reveals that female directors have been turning out confident, non-threatening images of lesbian love since the mid-1990s (Kessler 13). *Goldfish Memory*'s free and celebratory exploration, therefore, is not ground-breaking simply for including positive images of gay and lesbian love, but because it offers these images to a mainstream Irish audience, without the existence of a tradition to support these images. For example, gay and lesbian groups in Ireland have pointed out the higher suicide risk faced by gay and lesbian

youth, which suggests that the level of acceptance promoted in the film has not been matched outside the cinema.¹⁰² This reality tells us that, in terms of its relationship with the real Ireland of 2003, the film has something in common with the ‘social issue’ films of the Celtic Tiger period addressed above. *Goldfish Memory*’s subject matter addresses gaps in representation, even if its mode of address is mainstream, and its formal presentation is accessible.

In the end, while the film’s cityscape presents a very distinct moment in contemporary Ireland, its presentation of sexuality does for Irish cinema what the Spire on O’Connell Street does for Irish architecture: it wishes into existence a pluralist moral landscape that a newly multicultural, post-Celtic Tiger Ireland is only starting to experience.¹⁰³ While the films of the early 1990s submitted landscape representations to rigorous critique, they probed the boundaries that traditionally define Irish existence, maintaining a vested interest in the idea of nation. This new cycle, on the other hand, can be seen as decidedly postnational in its approach; the films show little concern for nations and

¹⁰² In an email (2005), Liz Gill acknowledges that the social reality of teenage suicide was a motivation in making the film, and that she hoped some at-risk teenagers “might see the film and take some heart.” A recent study on suicide in Ireland acknowledges that suicide has risen drastically in the last two decades (from 5.79 per 100,000 in 1980 to 25.93 in 2000), and is now the leading cause of death for young males in the 15 to 24 age category (Lynch 442). Several international studies trace the elevated incidences of suicide in homosexual or bisexual youth populations; for example, see Bagley, Ferguson, and Remafedi. By contrast, the Irish government has been criticised for bypassing sexual orientation as a factor in its National Task Force on Suicide, and in general for the lack of research on the link between suicide and non-heterosexual orientations. See “Carers ‘Are Ignoring Gay Teens’”, and McCabe.

¹⁰³ Debbie Ging argues that Irish film of the Celtic Tiger era might appear thoroughly ‘globalised,’ but traditional discussions of identity and place still occupy the public consciousness: “[A]lthough the culture industries actively trade in global images because they are more commercially viable, Irish people do not necessarily live in the celluloid global village that they see projected on their cinema screens....If we look at the daily newspapers, watch current affairs programmes or listen to the radio, it is clear that we have a great number of national preoccupations. Indeed, it would seem that issues of identity now concern Irish people more than ever before, and that the definition of ‘Irishness’ has never been more contentious” (191).

borders, they blithely ignore conventional political, sexual, and formal boundaries, but at the same time, they target international mainstream audiences.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *When Brendan Met Trudy* practices genre-splicing, suggesting that the conventional boundary of genre is also subject to disruption.

CONCLUSION

The plays and films in my study reflect an Ireland in transition, where social and cultural preoccupations that were waning before Ireland's economic transformation come head to head with a radically altered lexicon of representation. The Spire on O'Connell Street and *Goldfish Memory* work very hard to ignore the tensions generated by cultural transition, but in doing so, they both appear more as fantasy than as any attempt at a reflective representation of contemporary reality. However, their wishfullness is refreshing, and these examples can be viewed as trial balloons sent out by those who seek new forms of expression for a new kind of society. The Spire and *Goldfish Memory* can 'get away' with their fantasies because they appeal to the popular imagination, and they project positive images of a nation whose artistic products have often tried to articulate pain, poverty, and loneliness. The filmic representations of the 1990s, which emerged before the new century's cycle of urban romantic comedies, demonstrate how the effort to paint new images comes in fits and starts; *The Field*, *Korea*, and *December Bride* all work to break down stereotypically romantic treatments of landscape, but, curiously, they still treat rural landscapes as central to the definition of Irish identity. *Goldfish Memory* severs this connection by thrusting sunny skies, happiness and urbanity into the forefront.

The theatre of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr demonstrates the tension of transition more adamantly. In many ways, their plays reflect Irish theatre history more clearly than *Goldfish Memory* reflects Irish cinematic history. The centrality of memory and the rural settings preferred by both playwrights are familiar, as is Barry's preference for narrative over dramatic action and Carr's use of myth to shape her characters' realities. But in both cases,

these familiar tropes are transformed by the ways that the plays echo contemporaneous social changes. Barry's dramaturgical form parallels his fundamentally peaceful message, but while delivering this message, he regenerates the historical record. His work is revisionist, but he attempts to make the politics of his revisionism secondary to his overall message, which is one of acceptance, and of peace. The journeys that his characters take point to the difficulty of transition, whether that transition is Fanny Hawke's decision to leave her family, or Thomas Dunne's transition from clarity and order to senility and chaos. Carr's cast of characters are often handed the types of opportunities that the Celtic Tiger economy has on offer, but they are unable to reap any of the potential awards; Portia cannot escape Gabriel and the Belmont River, Hester cannot escape the bog, and Frances remains tied to her dead child. Carr's characters display distinct and unyielding worldviews that prevent them from moving on, which is an apt metaphor for an entire country faced with large-scale changes.

Genealogy also provides a window on the past for both playwrights, because it stands for a kind of historical surety: the past can be found in the blood, it is material, it is inseparable from identity. In both playwrights, the power of history is as dangerous as it is necessary, and the message is not simply to forget and move one, but to try, at least, to see why there is value in this effort. The major difference is that Barry's plays end on a note of redemption, and Carr's tend to end tragically, with the possibility for redemption escaping along with her protagonist's will to live. Contemporary Irish film's primary strategy for addressing Irish history is through the resources of film form, and dramaturgical structure also proves a significant tool for Barry and Carr. Barry builds his dramas towards an expected climax, but then thwarts expectation by refusing conflict. In comparison, Carr's

intense dramatic action does reach a narrative climax, but it refuses resolution; no significant changes to character or society can be expected through the denouements of her plays.

In 2002, both playwrights moved away from settings that eschewed a direct engagement with contemporary politics, and premiered works that focused on a politician's desire for power, and his ultimate downfall. The reviews for both of these plays – Carr's *Ariel* and Barry's *Hinterland* – were the most negative either playwright had received to date, which suggests that either the public was not interested in seeing politics as dramatized by these playwrights, or that neither Barry nor Carr was very good at writing plays on these topics. As discussed in the section on the reception of *Hinterland*, the representation of Ireland's more recent past was seen as irresponsible on Barry's part. The critical response to *Ariel* isolated the ill fit between contemporary politics and Greek mythology as one of the play's faults, but perhaps in this case as well, the play's attempt to represent more recognisably contemporary social phenomena was at issue. Regardless of the explanation, the reception of the plays reveals the power that works of fiction have in the economy of identity construction. In fact, the public response to Barry's *Hinterland* was not so different that the response that Bob Quinn faced when his film *Poitín* was shown to Irish audiences: many were 'disgusted', and called it a 'national disgrace.' If the image of collective national culture produced for the audience is too critical, or perhaps in part too truthful, the artwork can jump clearly out of the realm of entertainment and into the world of politics.

My approach in this dissertation has been to read contemporary Irish theatre and film for how they each critically employ history in reflecting and challenging contemporary notions of Irish identity. I have selected particular films and playwrights because their implicit ideological figurations resonate with one another, but my approach could be applied

to works beyond the ones that I have included in this study. Martin McDonagh's growing body of work in both media is a case in point. After a decade of as one of Ireland's most celebrated and produced playwrights, McDonagh took up filmmaking in 2004, and created *Six Shooter*, a film version of his darkly comic and melodramatic theatre. In his work for the stage, McDonagh seduces audiences with plays that *seem* deeply Irish, because they rampantly quote the broader outlines of modern Irish drama. However, McDonagh publically claims that he has not read or seen the works that his plays so clearly parody. His plays engage with Irish theatre history, but in way that could be considered stylistically postmodern: he quotes liberally, splices genres, has his characters do terrible things, and then asks us to enjoy the entire display of humanity's horrific failings.

I raise the example of McDonagh because his most recent work for screen, *In Bruges*, is remarkable for how it connotes 'Irishness' despite a plot that never sets foot on Irish soil. In the film, two Irish hitmen roam around Bruges waiting for their instructions. They encounter a carnivalesque film set peopled by dwarfs, and despite the central narrative conceit that suggests an action film, most of the narrative is dedicated to one character's soul searching. The film is set entirely in Belgium and it was financed by US and UK sources, but it stars two of Ireland's most internationally recognisable actors, Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson. The Bruges of the film is anything but a McLoone 'anywhere-but' city, in that the medieval city's uniqueness is delivered repeatedly through the mise-en-scène, despite the Farrell character's protestations of boredom. In one way, the film could be seen as the logical extension of *Goldfish Memory* in terms of the way it uses landscape to represent Irishness: if *Goldfish Memory* makes its setting in Dublin clear but unannounced, *In Bruges* moves out of

Ireland altogether. Despite this clear break with place, the film still pursues the question of identity with a vengeance, making it central to the Gleeson character's journey.

Identity is a continually forming entity, and the variety of cultural products that emerged at the turn of the last century point to the ways that history is both quoted and discarded during periods of significant societal transformation. The Spire on O'Connell Street gives a clear signal that Ireland plans to move into a forward-looking, international, urban future, which is an impulse also reflected in *Goldfish Memory*. However, for every example like the Spire, there are other examples to demonstrate that the forward-looking impulse is only one side of the coin. Doagh Island in the North, for example, has created a theme park that for part of the year stands as 'Santa's Island,' and for other parts of the year, boasts a "life-sized Famine Village." The Famine Village treats tourists to a long list of 'attractions,' including original thatched dwellings, an Orange lodge, a Republican safe house, and 'scenes' of an Irish wake, a Travelling community, and an eviction of impoverished tenant-farmers (Doagh Famine Village). The scenes 'perform' these moments from the past without any actors, for they are staged in tableaux using mannequins. In this way, the tourists that visit the Village can be seen to 'repopulate' it with their presence. This kind of attraction contrasts sharply with McDonagh's most recent box-office attraction, because it capitalizes on Ireland's impoverished rural past, at a time in history when Ireland is affluent and increasingly urban. The fact that the village can project its attraction as an 'authentic' part of the Irish experience at the same time that the Irish Tourist Board is asking potential visitors to brace themselves for "breathtaking scenery, cultural delights and captivating cities" (Tourism Ireland) reinforces the fact that cultural transitions take place over long periods of time. The theatre of Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr, and the filmic

preoccupations of contemporary Irish cinema provide a unique window on this process of redefinition and redress.

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