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Renegotiating National Identity: Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama and Performance

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by

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The Dissertation of Bryan Curtiss White is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Renegotiating National Identity: Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama and Performance

by

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Following nearly eight hundred years of British colonial rule, the twentieth century for Ireland was a time of political and cultural re-invention and re-creation. However, independence for the majority of the island came at a price: six counties continue to remain under British authority as the separate country of Northern Ireland; thus, the utopic vision of a united Republic of Ireland remains incomplete. In the following, I explore the ways in which drama and performance featuring the Irish in the twenty and twenty-first centuries

have worked to make sense of, and recover from the traumas inherent in, Ireland's colonial past while envisioning a more positive post-colonial future. With that said, I argue that just as the nation continues to be fragmented, so too are the dramatic responses to the national trauma, and therefore any attempt toward a construction of a cohesive national identity as was the goal of early Irish writers such as Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats will be imperfect. Nevertheless, I argue that each attempt toward a creation of national identity through the dramatic arts is both a necessary and useful step toward re-claiming and re-constructing a colonized past. To this end, the first chapter deals with Irish writers both adapting key works from the ancient Greeks as well as adapting events from Irish history for the purpose of creating a new historic truth. Next, using Sigmund Freud's theoretical approach toward humor, I argue that certain bleakly comic Irish plays both are responding to the violence of the Troubles as well as helping viewers, and playwrights, to recover. Next, I explore the extreme violence of the Great Famine and The Troubles and analyze how playwrights reckon with it. Finally, I consider the hunger strike of Bobby Sands as performance and argue that by effectively staging that which was invisible, Sands made the plight of Irish republicans visible on an international level.

When the final curtain fell in the Cork Opera House, that wet night in 1915, I was ready to explore, to respond to, for the first time to *see* the actuality of life in Ireland.

---Sean O'Faolain, *The Irish*

Introduction

Throughout its history, the nation of Ireland has been seen and defined from the outside—outside its communities, outside its borders, and outside its religion. In the twentieth century, when Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, J.M. Synge, and other Irish creative minds fought to create and establish a unique Irish national identity, their fight was against centuries of being defined largely by their colonial rulers, the British. What was authentically Irish? Was being Irish similar to the ways in which people were depicted in J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, a work that was a result of years of Synge studying and living with the more rural inhabitants of the Aran Islands? Or was being authentically Irish more akin to the characters in Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, who drink the intoxicating liquor of the language of revolution one day, but are much more interesting in looting to enrich themselves when the revolution finally begins? The riots that interrupted performances of these plays speak against the notion that either play provided a consensus view, and perhaps even against the idea that a consensus view would ever be reached.

In this project, I have examined the ways in which Irish national identity has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the twentieth century, with a primary focus regarding how Irish national identity was constructed as a response to British occupation and continued rule in Northern Ireland. A major consequence of this oppositional formation of nationhood is that it becomes impossible to disregard that violence has played a key factor in

Irish national identity. Irish revolutionaries and artists have sought, both literally and figuratively, for ways to deal with the trauma of empire and to construct a new, postcolonial, identity. There are those who would argue that British and Irish national characters are too similar to think of them in an intercultural context, but over the next several pages, I will give evidence to the fact that for as long as there has been a Britain (and even before that time), the British have systematically subjugated, mistreated, and cruelly dealt with the people of Ireland.

To begin, let us first consider someone who is thought of as being quintessentially Irish. Contrary to popular belief, Saint Patrick did not bring Christianity to Ireland. Though historians have difficulty with the dates of his life, he is thought to have been active in the mid-400s. Given that Christianity had grown popular enough in Ireland by 431 for Rome to appoint a man named Palladius the first Irish bishop, it stands to reason that either Ireland already had a fair number of converts prior to Patrick's arrival, or his ability to proselytize the Irish people was immediate and fast-moving (Ó Fiaich 53). What is undoubtable and inarguable, however, is that Patrick was key in spreading the religion across Ireland in the fifth century.

Patrick, the patron saint of the Irish, was born and grew up in Roman empire-ruled Britain. He was captured when he was sixteen years old by an Irish raiding party, taken back to Ireland, and forced to work as a slave for six years (Ó Fiaich 53). Having been the son of a priest who had originally not wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, the extremity of moving from a comfortable lifestyle to working as a slave tending sheep in the Irish countryside produced either a conversion with Patrick or a strengthening of his latent faith

(Cahill 102). Patrick was eventually able to escape Ireland and stow away with a group of traders who helped him get back to England.

One night, safe and sound back under his father's roof, Patrick had a vision. In his dream, a man named Victoricus (there were at least two saints by that name in Catholic lore by Patrick's time, but it is unclear if Patrick meant it to be one of them specifically) walks near Patrick with a large number of letters. Victoricus hands one to Patrick, and Patrick reads that on the letter has been written "Vox Hiberionacum, The Voice of the Irish" (Cahill 105). Before he could read further, he heard voices calling out "We beg you to come and walk among us once more" (Cahill 105). Patrick, of course, moved by the vision, returned to the land that had made him a slave.

Patrick's vision is worth some further consideration. In the first place, it is theatrical. Patrick, the observer, is pulled into the action in a gesture of audience participation, and he is so consumed by the experience in the dream, that he is unable to finish reading the letter that he had just been given. That he reads so little of the letter puts an extreme emphasis on the words he is able to read: The Voice of the Irish. One interpretation of these words assumes that the pleas to return to Ireland that Patrick hears directly after reading the phrase are Irish voices calling to him. A more compelling interpretation of the dream, however, is that Patrick believes that he has been called to become the Voice of the Irish. He must move to Ireland, speak to, and eventually, speak for the Irish. Multiple scholars agree that Patrick's Latin (in which he wrote his Confessions) is very basic in its vocabulary and style (Cahill 106 and Ó Fiaich 53), which indicates that more of his time was spent learning and speaking Irish than working on his Latin.

While I am not arguing that Patrick had ulterior motivations in coming back to Ireland, I do argue that it is both convenient and ironic that the patron saint of the Irish, and, indeed, a true point of understanding of what Irishness is within contemporary culture, was not Irish by birth. After his death, Patrick was lost, in a sense, for a few centuries until who he was was rediscovered and, perhaps, reappropriated. Thinking within the colonial and postcolonial relationship between Ireland and Britain, who could possibly be a more model Irishman than one who was born British? Further, how ironic is it that St. Patrick's Day in America is now essentially an opportunity to be Irish for a day when St. Patrick's goal was to make the Irish, through their religion, more like the British?

It would seem, however, that the influence Patrick had on the Irish church was not all positive. Within two hundred years of his death, the Christian faith of the Irish was judged in the next large church event that helped shape how the natives of Britain thought and would think of the Irish—the Synod of Whitby, which took place in 664. This gathering of church officials was explicitly convened in order to determine what the official date of Easter should be as well as what the proper type of hair cut was for monks and holy men of the faith; churches in Britain and Ireland, drawing on different traditions of Christianity, had differing ideas concerning both items. Although coming to an agreement on these two issues was the stated goal of the Synod, there were more issues that bubbled under the surface. As Thomas Cahill writes, "the Irish had many peculiar customs, encouraged diversity, enjoyed pagan literature far more than was good for them, were unconcerned about uniformity of monastic rule, and, perhaps worst of all, sometimes allowed a woman to rule over them … The Roman party wisely confined its objectives to the two matters it found most irksome because they were most visible. By the mid-seventh century, the visible image has assumed far greater

reality than the invisible thought," which is a particularly jarring development for holy men in a religion like Christianity, which is fundamentally based on the faith of a person versus their works (204-205).

While Cahill's comment about the visible is ostensibly a dig concerning the developing policies of the early Christian church, I would argue that the practices that were most visible from the Irish holy men allowed the Romans in Britain to assume the worst about the Irish as a whole. Concerning the hair cut issue, the British monks shaved a circlet at the crown of their heads, while the Irish tonsure "was achieved by shaving the front of the head from ear to ear and letting the hair in the back grow long … to the Roman it was proof of barbarian status. How could people who looked so ridiculous mean to suggest that this absurd tonsure was a sign of consecration?" (Cahill 202).

What is interesting to remember at this point is that although the two cultures have different traditions that led to diverse interpretations of Catholic orthopraxy, the British and Irish remain joined in their faith for the next several hundred years. Their faith formed the greatest bridge of this time period, and provided, as Homi Bhabha might say, an interstitial space—one in which they were both growing in and being connected by. This common ground would unfortunately come to be threatened over the next few centuries as Irish monasteries and churches were attacked and looted by Viking forces from Scandinavia. With this fear from outside forces, the Irish church became more withdrawn in an effort to protect itself, and this lack of visibility, combined with the more visible pagan elements of the culture led to what can rightly be called a betrayal of Ireland by the Catholic church.

Although some modern historians doubt the veracity of the document, a Papal Bull in 1155 granted King Henry II the moral right and imperative to assert English rule over

Ireland. Laudabiliter, so called because Pope Adrian IV lauded Henry for his desire to extend Catholicism to Ireland at the beginning of the text of the edict, found it "pleasing and acceptable that, for the purpose of extending the limits of the Church, checking the torrent of wickedness, reforming evil manners, sowing seeds of virtue, and increasing the Christian religion, you should enter that island and execute whatever shall be conducive to the honour of God and the salvation of that land" (Ginnell 283). If it seems peculiar that a man in the office of pope would give God's blessing to the invasion of a nation, even for the purposes of the advance of Christendom, we must take a moment to remember what makes Adrian IV unique in the line of apostolic succession: he was the only pope to have been an Englishman. This language of the Bull sets up the English as saviors and the Irish as "torrent[s] of wickedness," needing a superior power to reign over them and take care of them as they were unable to take care of themselves (Ginnell 283). Having the ideas of invasion and occupation normalized through the blessing of the pope set up a period of what Michel Foucault calls biopower that existed in Ireland until the twentieth century and continues to exist in Northern Ireland. It is the Irish adaptation to this perverse normalcy that I explore in the following pages, in terms of the ways in which Irish culture and national identity have evolved and adapted to English influence and the ways in which drama and performance working in the context of contemporary history have worked to forge a new Irish identity in response to this influence.

Part of what is odd about Laudabiliter is its fiery language against the unreformed Irish. This is peculiar because, as has been described above, Christianity had been growing and thriving in Ireland for several centuries before the pope took the step of effectively blessing an invasion in order to proselytize by force. It is even stranger when between the

years 1148 to 1152, a legate from Rome appointed four archbishoprics to Ireland specifically (Ó Cuív 101). These appointments indicate not only a widening Catholic base in Ireland, but also that Ireland was administratively able to be responsible for their own congregations, so for Adrian to call the Irish "unreformed" just three years after the widening of official Catholicism in Ireland is most peculiar. Some historians believe the document was a forgery, others assume the elderly pope was manipulated into giving the decree (he died in 1159), and some smell a whiff of cronyism between the pope and Henry. While any of these theories are unlikely to be definitively proven now nearly nine hundred years after the fact, what is inarguable is that Laudabiliter was the beginning of varying degrees of British rule in Ireland. By 1169, Ireland had been invaded by the British.

To address a point of contention that may occur in the mind of the reader: is it correct to label the forces that invaded the east of Ireland in 1169 British? Would it not be more correct to label them Normans? After all, it was the Normans whose invasion of the island of England climaxed with the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and Henry II was the head of this same people group when it launched its invasion of Ireland just over a century later. While it may seem like equivocating, remember that Henry II is something of a hinge in the history of Britain. He is the last king of Britain that historians typically call Norman, and he is the first associated with the Plantagenet line which ran for three hundred years until the death of Richard III ("The Angevins"). So, while it is true that calling the Normans "British" at this point in history is a bit premature, it should be underlined that the Normans and their descendants became the ruling class in what would become Britain.

As the results of the 1169 invasion show, the British desire to modernize the "backwards" Irish is a perennial one. The British instituted coinage for the first time in

Ireland, made Dublin an administrative center of the island, and appointed sheriffs in an effort to keep order (Martin 118). The invaders were careful, however, not to upset the system of Irish peasant laborers who worked in the fields; they, reasonably, wanted to continue to live and perhaps profit off of their labor (Martin 118). The invaders also did not systematically attack the land, focusing on control of rivers and coasts, leaving bogs and other less desirable areas to the native Gaels who had lived there. This lack of attention shows a disdain for a section of the people who were not perceived as real threats.

While the next major event did not concern the Irish specifically, its repercussions have had a major impact not just between England and Ireland, but also within the Irish people themselves. As the Protestant Reformation spread across Europe following the posting of Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1517, by the 1530s, through a series of acts and laws passed by the English parliament largely at the behest of King Henry VIII, England broke with the Catholic church, and the new Church of England was formed. In subsequent generations, just as Ireland's historical paganism had made the Irish appear barbaric to English rulers, the ways in which Ireland clung to Catholicism had a similar effect on the newly Protestant Britain.

An immediate effect of England breaking away from Rome was that it brought into question who was the ultimate ruler of Ireland. If the pope had allowed the earlier Henry to invade Ireland, there is an assumption there that the pope had ultimate control over that land. When England broke away, Henry VIII understood that this land over which he had previously been lord was now something he could hold as fully subject to him. In 1541, the Irish parliament officially established the fact that Henry VIII was now to be known also as the King of Ireland (Hayes-McCoy 153).

If it seemed that the majority Catholic Ireland would have a reprieve from the institutionalized Protestantism from England when Queen Mary took the throne and restored Catholicism, this restoration was short-lived as Queen Elizabeth switched the national religion back to Protestantism. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, there were a number of small rebellions against Britain in Ireland, and Britain successfully put each rebellion down. Two items of note followed the Second Desmond Rebellion which ended in 1583. The first was the institutional idea that starvation might be used as an instrument to assert dominance over the Irish. The Secretary to the Lord Deputy of England wrote "Great force must be the instrument, but famine must be the meane for till Ireland can be famished it can not be subdued"; this man likely had in mind a famine which in 1582 had killed more than 30,000 people in the Irish province of Munster (Allen 210). That said, that the tactic of famine as warfare was written about so positively in the era makes the horrible famines of the eighteenth century and the Great Famine of the nineteenth century that much more difficult to swallow. The second item was that the British sought to expand upon their gains by transplanting loyal English citizens from England to Ireland and giving them the lands that the rebels had previously owned (Hayes-McCoy 158). This practice of colonization did not sit well with the lords that controlled the lands in the north of Ireland, and in 1593, a new rebellion began that lasted for ten years.

This rebellion is particularly interesting in terms of the scope of this project. The primary method of attack the Irish used tended to be a defensive one. The Irish endeavored to avoid large losses; it was hoped that by prolonging the rebellion, the English would leave Ulster in specific and Ireland in general to its own devices (Hayes-McCoy 161). To this end, Irish forces, led by Hugh O'Neill, eschewed traditional battle methods and relied on

ambushing small groups of the much more powerful British forces—the defeat of the Spanish armada in 1588 by the British had made the English the preeminent power in Europe. Being the David to Britain's Goliath, the Irish sought out help from European powers, and the Spanish, licking their wounds following the earlier defeat, were only too eager to provide forces to fight the British. Unfortunately for the Irish and the fight for freedom, the Spanish help was a key ingredient in the recipe of the Irish defeat. In 1603, the Irish adapted a battle tactic that had garnered the Spanish a series of military victories—arranging their troops into a large mass that could overpower their enemies in formal battle. The British, being much more accustomed to battling in this way, quickly overpowered the under-experienced Irish and Spanish forces and brought an end to the decade-long rebellion (Hayes-McCoy 162). Ironically, the Irish who I will argue very successfully adapted other culture's dramatic works in an effort to define/re-define and establish their own culture and nationality, were particularly ineffective in adapting their battle tactics to those of another nation.

Of course, the other item of note from this time period for a paper ostensibly on the topic of theatre is the fact that the age of Elizabeth was also the age of Shakespeare, and his plays contain a number of passages that are particularly evocative for a nation that was at war with a much weaker force. While some of these passages will be discussed later on in this paper when Ireland's Druid Theatre Company's cycle of Shakespeare plays that were performed in the summer of 2015 is looked at in more depth, an important example of how the Irish were seen by the British occurs in Henry V with the "Irish" character of MacMorris. In his few lines, he is portrayed as hotheaded; he threatens to cut off the much calmer British soldier's head over a simple argument (III, 2, 1261). Additionally, he is self-hating; his

notorious line is "What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal" (III, 2, 1251-1252). Even though the character is allied to Henry V's forces, he is still specifically portrayed as not being an equal. Even though he denies his home country with a laundry list of epithets, he cannot help but let his barbarian tendencies toward unreasonable anger come through in the ways he interacts with the other soldiers. Thus, the viewers of Shakespeare's play would have taken the Irish as unworthy opponents as well as prone to inner divisions and in fighting. The character of MacMorris would have been Irishness writ large for the English audience; "MacMorris is never just himself: he is an assigned identity conjured up by a perception of Irishness as a whole" (Pilkington 14). By portraying the character of MacMorris as blustery and quick to anger, Shakespeare took advantage of stereotypes and through writing them reinforced them an audience who wanted to be justified in hating their enemies.

Following the Irish defeat in 1603, it was decided that the literal system of colonization that had begun in the 1580s would be expanded, and in 1609 the plantation of Ulster was established. The choice of Ulster as the location was curious and calculated as Ulster in those days, according to Theodore W. Allen quoting Sir John Davies, was the most Irish, and therefore most foreign, of the provinces of Ireland; "The entire mass of the population was Irish, following Irish customs and obeying only Irish laws" (Allen 115-116). Ulster had been a hub around which several Irish lords had lands and power, but many had fled following the end of the war, even though the British had pardoned many of these same Irish lords and restored their lands. Nevertheless, an effective means of subduing another people group that has a history of violence against the ruling power is to simply replace the people at the site of rebellion with citizens loyal to the crown. A rebellious people must be

dissipated in their own lands in order to assure that the crown will continue to maintain its power over them.

If the monarchs and parliament of England had been demanding of the people of Ireland to this point, Oliver Cromwell in his Commonwealth raised the stakes and level of violence once he assumed power; one of his first acts as lord protector was to mount a vicious military campaign in Ireland in response to an Irish uprising that had taken place back in 1641. While some historians have mixed views on the extent of Cromwell's viciousness (was his brutality in response equal to the fervor the Irish fought him with?), what cannot be disputed are some of his own words on his experiences in Ireland as found in his letters.

Writing about the Siege of Drogheda, Cromwell, devoutly Puritanical, would not acquiesce to accepted rules regarding sanctuary. After ordering that any men possessing arms in a town should be put to death along with the officers and leaders of that town, he would later write later write of the brutal siege "I think, that night, they put to the sword about 2,000 men" (Carlyle 169). He noticed, however, that approximately one hundred men had retreated in to St. Peter's Church in an effort to save themselves from the massacre. After offering the men in the church an opportunity to give themselves up, the men, likely being wary of someone who had just had so many of their fellow soldiers murdered, refused to leave the church. Cromwell, being caught up, as he wrote, "in the heat of action," ordered his men to burn down the church. As the church burned, Cromwell reminisced that he heard one man inside the building exclaim, "God damn me, God confound me; I burn, I burn" (169).

Writing later about the massacre, when others might have feel remorseful, Cromwell digs in deeper, saying, "I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgement of God upon these

barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood; and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future. Which are satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret" (170). Because the Irish were, to his mind, uncivilized and practiced the wrong religion, any violence toward them was justified because the Irish couldn't help themselves from being violent to their lawful rulers. Cromwell also noted that he sent many prisoners of war from Ireland to "the Barbadoes" (170). So, not only was Cromwell forcing the Irish from their land through death, he was also forcing them from their land to another part of the globe. As a consequence of his military action, Cromwell took many of lands that richer Catholics in Ireland owned, and gave them to Protestants who had assisted Cromwell in the Irish campaign. Even from landed Catholics who had not been a part of the rebellion, Cromwell took their specific land but he gave them other land that in many cases was worse than they land they had originally owned (Clarke 173). If the plantation of Ulster was, in part, and attempt to integrate Protestant loyalists into Ireland, the Cromwellian acts were a coup of taking and transferring wealth and power from Catholics to Protestants. "What it created was not a Protestant community but a Protestant upper class" (Clarke 174).

The British action of removing even the possibility of power and self-determination from the Irish, and in particular poor Catholic Irish, was reinforced through a series of measures known as the penal laws in the eighteenth century. The only way to escape these laws was through conversion to Protestantism. Theodore W. Allen argues that the intentions of these laws were fourfold. The first was to declass the Catholic Irish by ensuring that they could not own land from generation to generation; a Catholic could neither purchase land from a Protestant nor acquire it through marriage, and any lands owned by a Catholic could

not be willed to a descendant (82-83). Secondly, a series of laws disenfranchised Catholics and removed a number of rights they had previously held, including the ability to own a gun, practice law, or own a horse that was worth more than five pounds (84). Thirdly, there was legislation to prevent anyone, excluding family members, to teach Catholics how to read and write (85). Keeping Catholics illiterate proved a compelling way to exert power over them. Finally, Allen argues that these laws even broke down the basic family unit. If it was decided that Catholic parents were unable to take care of their children, the children were removed to potentially far away charter schools where they were to remain as long as they were children (87-88). This policy was under the guise of humanitarian aid, but even members of the government who enforced the legislation said that the children in the charter schools were "unhealthy; half starved; in rags; totally uneducated; too much worked, and, in all respects, shamefully neglected" (88). This same official later found charter schools "so deplorable as to disgrace Protestantism and to encourage Popery in Ireland, rather than the contrary" (89). That the penal laws were set against a background of a series of famines in Ireland helps the reader understand how difficult it was for some Catholic families to adequately provide for their children; the coarseness of a British ruling system that would take advantage of unspeakable tragedy against a people already assumed to be less than British Protestants was the subject of Jonathan Swift's excellent satire *A Modest Proposal* which proffered the suggestion that starving Irish citizens should turn to cannibalism. It was during the eighteenth century that the potato came to become an important part of the poor Irish farmer's diet, in part because of its ease of cultivation; with that ease came dependence, and that dependence was a contributing factor to the debilitating famine of 1845 (Foster 219).

In 1845, a series of potato crop failures began the Great Famine in Ireland. To his credit, Prime Minister of England Sir Robert Peel instituted immediate relief efforts, though he was motivated in part by keeping the Irish economy, which had been on shaky ground for much of the beginning of the nineteenth century, afloat—which is to say, just as earlier English rulers had exiled the lords of Ireland but kept the working poor in order to keep the economic system making money, Peel's concerns can easily be viewed more as materialistic than empathetic (Green 234). Peel purchased a large amount of corn and meal from the United States which he then employed Irish people to re-sell it on a sliding scale depending on familial income. This had the dual effect of employing as many as one hundred forty thousand people as well as providing food at what he hoped would be a more affordable price than what the market would determine during a crop failure (Green 234). What Peel did not do was to halt exports of food from Ireland, and this action looks damning with the hindsight that comes from looking back at this period, but as R.F. Foster points out, there were other famines in Europe in the nineteenth century, and none of those governments halted food exports either. Additionally, Irish farmers who were able to produce other types of crops would have been severely displeased to have their livelihoods taken away from them (Foster 327). It is sadly a matter of record that some of these foods meant for export were transferred to storage facilities and left to rot, so while the farmers were paid, food that was desperately needed by nearby people spoiled.

Unfortunately for those most affected by the famine, Peel fell out of power in Britain in 1846. The party who came to power were stout believers in laissez-faire economics, and it was decided that the food supply would be left to private enterprise to figure out in the event of future crop failures (Green 235). 1846 brought a more severe crop failure in Ireland than

the one that had hit in 1845, and by 1847, the English realized that they needed to do something to support the starving Irish and set up kitchens that would serve free soup (Green 235). However, the British ultimately pushed responsibility for the famine and for famine relief onto the Irish landlords.

Between 1845 and 1851, the population of Ireland dropped from around eight and a half million to approximately six and half million (Green 239). At least three quarters of a million of that change in population can be accounted for by death to disease or starvation (Foster 324). The rest of the difference comes from people fleeing the country, emigrating largely to America.

While the famine resulted directly from a naturally-occurring potato blight, it is difficult not to cast blame on the ways that the British handled the events, particularly given some thoughts from that era. British historian Charles Kingsley, as he surveyed an Ireland wrought by the famine was quoted as saying, "I am daunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country … I believe … they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours" (Cahill 6). It is ironic for Kingsley to assert that the Irish were better off under the care of the British when it one could argue that the famine was prolonged largely through British inaction when the blight hit Ireland so mercilessly in 1846. Another piece that is interesting about this quote will be helpfully explored through some of the ideas of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. One of Lacan's fundamental observations on childhood development is the idea of the mirror stage which is where the toddler is able to look into a mirror at his or her reflection and is able to realize that the reflection is not the

toddler themselves. Once the toddler realizes this, they therefore begin to understand that they are a distinct and discrete entity, separate from their reflection, their parents, and the world. What is stressed in Kingsley's quote is that because the Irish are white, he expects them to be more like the British, and, to dig in on his racism, he expects the Irish to easily be better off than black people, whom he could see suffer and not be compelled to care about. In other words, when Kingsley looks at Irish people, because they have skin that matches the color of his own, he experiences a cognitive dissonance—he assumes that the Irish will act like he does. Kingsley, in a sense, finds himself stuck in the mirror stage; he looks at an Irishman, and he sees reflected himself, and this is why he feels empathy, for it is as if what happens to the Irish is happening to him. And yet, because he is British and the colonial attitudes of the period color his understanding of what it is to be Irish, he views them as separate, as an other, but not as much of an other as he views black people. Kingsley's attitude toward the Irish is the attitude of the British toward the Irish writ large—the Irish are not other enough to cast off and not care about, as has happened with other British territories around the world in the twentieth century.

As this brief history of England's attitudes and actions toward Ireland through the nineteenth century has shown, the ruling powers of England have, through both force and inaction, profoundly impacted the people and the history of Ireland. In the twentieth century, both through violence and diplomacy, the people of Ireland became free of British rule, save for the six northern counties whose upper classes were worried about being ruled by a Catholic-majority Ireland. There was also a revolution in the arts in Ireland as artists, led and encouraged by Lady Gregory and William Butler Years, sought to define an Ireland that had for so long been defined the British who had ruled them. But how could the people of a

country who had only known being ruled forge a new national identity? To what extent is it possible to define one's self after being defined so long from without?

One method would be the re-adoption of original languages instead of English. In his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that in order for other cultures around the globe to be able to reach the heights of culture that the English reached with Shakespeare, the other cultures need to reject the languages of their colonial occupiers and do creative work in their own native languages, noting that the idea of writing in a foreign language is antithetical to national identity formation. He says that "The literature [African writers] produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages" (22). While Gaelic is the first official language of Ireland and is taught in primary schools, and many official signs throughout the country feature Gaelic, English remains the second official language, and most of the population of Ireland speaks English more regularly than they do Gaelic. There have been some efforts to affect a Gaelic-speaking theatre, but most Gaelic that is spoken in contemporary Irish theatre is confined to widely known simple words or phrases. Whether the proximity to England is too much or whether the effects of a colonized past weigh too heavily, it seems unlikely that a large-scale Gaelic revival in the arts is likely to happen in the near future. Having said that, Seamus Deane argues that Irish writers take "a vengeful virtuosity in the English language, and attempt to make Irish English a language in its own right rather than an adjunct to English itself" (quoted in Bates 123). If the Irish seem to be unable to go back to their original tongue, they will refashion English in their own image.

In this project, I argue that the Irish people at large and Irish playwrights in specific have been seeking to transform the trauma of centuries of oppression and the dispossession

of their land by the British into metaphorical new languages in attempts to adequately deal with this trauma. Some, like William Butler Yeats, argued that for a national renewal through the literary arts to be effective, artists should return to the use of Gaelic; other artists argued that this was impractical due to the already expansive use of English by the people of Ireland. In the first chapter, I argue that Irish playwrights have grappled with this trauma through the use of adaptations, both of other nations' works as well as adaptations of their own history. These adaptations are important because adaptations necessarily begin with another, already finished source. In the tumult of The Troubles of the twentieth century, there was a dread that the present may never again be corrected, that violence would always continue to be a way of life, that the separation between Ireland and the North would be a permanent fixture of existence. These adaptations gave a hope for the future as well as providing wisdom from historical contexts that had been re-imagined into the present.

In the following chapter, I look at the ways in which comedy has provided a means by which playwrights and audiences may deal with bleak circumstances, though I also question the limits of what comedy can provide to a country still necessarily divided. I find that many comedic plays rely on dark humor which, although sharing satire's motivation of pointing out those things that are stupid or immoral, diverges from satire as dark humor despairs of any possibility for improvement. The humor in these plays then is not as hopeful as the adaptations might have been; they offer merely an opportunity to deal with the trauma by momentarily distracting by means of laughter.

The subsequent chapter looks at the idea of the language of violence in Ireland in the twentieth century and questions how a necessarily destructive force can nevertheless be a necessary speaking point in any history of the growing national identity of Ireland in the

twentieth century. From a military standpoint and drawing on the successes of unconventional warfare that ultimately established the freedom of Ireland, the violence by the IRA and other likeminded paramilitary groups through the latter half of the twentieth century proved to be difficult in terms of swaying the public's opinion toward the rightness of a united Ireland and created a sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty is felt in the plays that I examine in light of the history of the period. What are the limits of the usefulness of violence toward nation-building and national identity?

Finally, I explore the performance of IRA hunger strikers with special attention paid to Bobby Sands, and I suggest that moving from a violence-based approach toward nation-building and into a self-sacrificial approach, the IRA was able to appeal emotionally to people around the world who otherwise were unable to see the unjustness with which the British were treating the Irish by dividing the country. I also examine the use of invisibility as a political force, and I assert that hunger-striking provides a double invisibility that was a necessary force to make Irish republicans seen.

As we move on to the following chapters, it must be stated that the trauma that I argue these works are trying to interpret and re-frame into useful narratives still continues. Although the Good Friday agreement from 1998 brought a cease-fire to the violence in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the fact that Ireland remains divided to this day is continued evidence of a British assertion of power. While this book deals with primarily twentieth and twenty-first century responses from playwrights to the national division, these responses will continue until, as Alan Feldman suggests, competing utopian ideas between the Irish and the British are one day concluded. As of this writing, it is unclear what will come of Britain's plan to leave the European Union; should it leave, and should a hard border be placed

between Ireland and Northern Ireland, the trauma will be again renewed, and one imagines there will also be a return to violence.

From my earliest youth I have regarded the connection between Ireland and Great Britain as the curse of the Irish nation, and felt convinced, that while it lasted, this country would never be happy or free.

---Wolfe Tone

Yes, it is a rich language, lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes.

---Brian Friel, *Translations*

Chapter One

The Problems of Adapting History

The opening line of the *Proclamation of the Irish Republic* states: "Irishmen and Irishwomen: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom" (taken from Donoghue). While the rebellion of 1916 was violently put down, a thread that ties much of the Irish twentieth century together is the appeal to, and use of, history in order to call others to action or as a justification for action. History, and "dead generations," are easy to mold to current ends as they cannot speak for themselves, and instead must be interpreted by the living.

The tone of the *Proclamation* is a hopeful one. The writer seems to believe that the course of history has led Ireland to its current position and that, because history has happened the way it had, Ireland was in a unique position to throw off British oppression and establish its own republic. For the 1916 writer, an Irish Republic was not something that might happen but was an optimistic historical inevitability. It is no wonder that many Irish republicans believed in this version of history as there was a great swell and assumption that the Irish

Republic would be a socialist one, similar to the way in which Karl Marx envisioned history assumed that socialism was a historical inevitability.

The modernist idea of historical inevitability is at odds with a postmodern idea of history as suggested by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In this essay, Benjamin likens the progression of history to a so-called Angel of History. He writes:

> A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin).

What is compelling about Benjamin's image here is the figure of the angel; he sees what has gone wrong in the past, but he cannot correct it as he is forever pushed forward into the future. An implication is that there are necessarily things that are being destroyed with each step of which the angel is unaware until it is too late. By focusing on the past, the angel is unaware of both the present and the future, pushed aimlessly and without recourse.

In other words, for Benjamin, there is no overarching dialectic at work; one cannot say that opposing forces are resolving into syntheses. History is just something that occurs, and all one can do is try to make sense of that. The idea of a dialectic scratches an itch, certainly; by invoking opposing forces, not unlike a protagonist and an antagonist, viewing history in this manner forms a narrative. An optimistic view of those working in the present, then, had them doing what the angel of history could not do; namely, to take action to correct the past, to "awaken the dead," We see this attempt to ascribe meaning in the face of

meaninglessness repeatedly in the way the Irish have made history, in the ways in which the Irish playwrights have adapted and re-made previous works, and in the ways playwrights take the island's own history, fictionalize it, and add a narrative that helps give meaning.

Consider the example of James Connolly, one of the Irish revolutionaries who seized control of a portion of Dublin in the Easter Rising of 1916, though this precis of his life does not do justice to the man and his work. He was a key proponent of the idea that a free Ireland ought to be a socialist republic, and indeed his seminal *Labour in Irish History* argued that middle-class attempts at a free Ireland (such as those by James O'Connell, who was an early proponent of non-violent protest) had failed entirely and that only through a working class uprising might a revolution effectively prevail.

During the battle as he worked to fend off British soldiers, Connolly was grievously wounded. Worried his injuries would kill him, he took the risk of being taken to a hospital where he was subsequently arrested and ultimately sentenced to death. His injuries from Easter Rising were so severe that he was unable to stand before the firing squad, and so he was "dragged wounded to be bound to a chair and shot" (Bell 30).

Connolly's views on history are best seen in some pieces of a conversation he had with Lillie and Nora, his wife and daughter, on the night before he was to be killed, as recounted in the notes that Nora took of the meeting. When Lillie's grief at her husband's imminent death bubbled over into the words, "your life, James, your beautiful life," Connolly replied simply, "Well, Lillie, hasn't it been a full life, and isn't this a good end?" (McGreevy).

There is a seeming perversity in calling one's one end "good," but Connolly recognized that his death, and the lives of the other republicans who had already stood before

firing squads, had the chance to crystallize Irish discontent at the brutality of British rule. It is not recorded whether he asked Lillie or Nora to record his final words for posterity, and yet his statement is at once personal and political. In the first phrase, "well, Lillie, hasn't it been a full life," it is clear that he is speaking of the life he has shared with his wife, so this portion of his statement is seemingly meant to comfort her and their daughter. In his second clause however, "isn't this a good end," he is speaking to a power larger than himself—that his death would help the larger cause of an independent Ireland.

That he was unaware that these words might ultimately leave the room make this speech a performance for himself and his family. While other people, on their death beds, might recant or otherwise mourn their own lives to the extent that they disavow the ideology of their causes, Connolly did not do so. He was a true believer in his cause, and as such, he understood that his words could help republicanism. Connolly knew the British, through his execution, were seeking to impose their own narrative on his life and on Ireland at large—that resistance against the Empire was futile, and those who tried to do so were going to be pushed into nothingness through their execution. Connolly snatched his personal history from that imposed meaninglessness and insisted that it be given the meaning that he intended.

Irish playwrights and theatre workers, in the light of the independence that was achieved in the twentieth century, worked to reframe and reshape the narratives that had been handed down over centuries of British reign. A key way in which these artists did so was through the medium of adaptation. Drawing on and re-appropriating works from other cultures in the past, Irish artists sought to bring to light what an Irish identity might look like and how such an identity could be performed. In the following section, drawing on adaptations from the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Irish history, I will argue that these

adaptations spoke to the political moment in which they were performed and worked to establish and reinforce what Irish national identity is, might be, and how it should be viewed, both nationally and internationally.

The first two adaptations to be discussed here are two versions of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Adaptations of *Antigone* have historically been very popular in cultures or subcultures who view themselves as having a moral high ground on an issue that the apparatus of the state disagrees with. In the twentieth century, Jean Anouilh's 1943 adaptation performed under the Vichy government in France and Athol Fugard's 1973 adaptation, titled *The Island*, performed under the apartheid government in South Africa both highlighted specific problems of their respective eras and cultures. When Field Day premiered Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* in 1984, tensions had reached a fever pitch in The Troubles. In 1981, ten jailed Irish republicans had died of starvation in a self-imposed hunger strike toward the specific end of "special status" as prisoners of war (instead of being jailed as merely common criminals) as a step toward the larger end of a once again unified Ireland (Whyte 306). In 1983, following the 1982 assertion of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that "no commitment exists for Her Majesty's Government to consult the Irish government on matter affecting Northern Ireland," Gerry Adams, oft-accused of being a member of the IRA though he has repeatedly denied it, won the election to be MP for West Belfast, raising the possibility of the legitimization of republicanism in Northern Ireland as well as the threat of further republican violence (English 317).

In the context of this tumultuous epoch, a version of *Antigone* in which an authoritarian Northern Irish politician is the Creon character is definitely going to be resonant with the time in which it is performed. For the purposes here, some of the most instructive

portions of the play are the ones in which *The Riot Act* differs from Sophocles' original and what those differences indicate about Irish, Northern Irish, and British attitudes of this time period. Marianne McDonald has pointed out that while Creon speaks with the eloquence of a seasoned politician, there is a sinister authoritarian, perhaps fascist, streak to the things that he says. For instance, in an early speech, he states that "if ever any man here should find himself faced with a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, then he must swiftly place that friend in the hands of the authorities" (Paulin 16). McDonald argues, as this quote points out, that Paulin's version of the play is weaker than Sophocles' original because Paulin's Creon is too rigid. While the character in Sophocles' version is portrayed as being a bit more thoughtful to both sides of the argument, Paulin's is villainized, particularly in contrast to the saintly Antigone since he is reduced "to the representative of an unjust occupying government" (McDonald 54). Nevertheless, with the play's background with Northern Ireland's continued presence in the United Kingdom coupled with the indefatigable inflexibility of the "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher, a politician character who will not yield to appeals to humanity helps to claim a republican-friendly narrative for the Irish. There are also some similarities between the Creon character and the Northern Irish Protestant leader Ian Paisley, who was quoted on one occasion in 1969 concerning Catholics, "They breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin" (Mullally).

A good point of comparison is in looking at *The Riot Act* in light of Seamus Heaney's 2004 adaptation *The Burial at Thebes*—a play dedicated to Marianne McDonald, my dissertation advisor. Following the disarmament of the IRA at the Good Friday agreements in 1998, the threat of violence on a daily basis for a unified Ireland was now several years from having been a daily reality, and so Heaney's Irish adaptation speaks less to an Irish audience

than as a rebuke to the policies of George W. Bush who led America into its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Heaney's character Antigone is not as decidedly strong from the outset of the play as Paulin's is. Consider Antigone's opening lines from *The Burial at Thebes*: "Ismene, quick, come here! What's to become of us? Why are we always the ones? There's nothing, sister, nothing Zeus hasn't put us through just because we are who we are – the daughters of Oedipus" (Heaney 1). Were this adaptation written a decade later, Antigone would be accused of being a whiny millennial—being from a privileged background and yet complaining that it is not fair that bad things are happening to her. Contrast this with Antigone's first lines in Paulin's version: "Ismene, love, my own sister, you know there's a last bitterness we've to taste yet?" (Paulin 9). Paulin's Antigone is fully aware that circumstances have thrust her into a staring match with death, and she has already accepted the consequences of her actions as if she is inevitable to stop them—this character is insisting on meaning.

Here, a brief digression on Jacques Lacan is able to help shed some light. In his lecture on *Antigone*, Lacan asserts that the character Antigone is powerful and unique because she insists on doing what she believes to be ethical even knowing that it will cost her her life. In effect, she is sanely and of her right mind choosing death, which is antithetical to prevailing ideas of what sanity is and should be: "Antigone reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire" (Lacan 247). That Heaney's Antigone is unsure yet of her fate reveals the times in which it was written because it contrasts with President Bush's surety that weapons of mass destruction were an immediate threat in Iraq and Afghanistan; Heaney's Antigone offers to the world at large the notion that violence for any reason should be more thoughtfully adjudicated, but Paulin's Antigone is for the republican Irish of the 1980s—

willing to die for a united Ireland. The idea that a person can be righteous in their actions and yet at odds with governmental mandates and even the sanctity of their own bodies is a particularly powerful one at a time in Ireland when Bobby Sands and other young men were literally starving themselves to death in prison to bring attention to their political point.

There is a long scene in Steve McQueen's film *Hunger* in which Michael Fassbender, playing Bobby Sands, talks with a priest in order to tell the priest his plan to go on a hunger strike, even if it should cost him his life. There is a lot to unpack in this film, not the least of which being that the film about the heroism of an Irish republican is written and directed by a British citizen, but in this particular scene, the focus in on the priest's attempt to talk Sands out of his plan under the assumption that life is more important that any political point, and one tactic the priest uses is an appeal to his Sands as a father:

> Priest: You're in no shape to make this call.
> Sands: It's done. It won't be stopped.
> P: Then fuck it, life must mean nothing to you.
> S: God's gonna punish me. […]
> P: Yeah and what's your wee son gonna say?
> S: Fuck off.
> P: Doesn't that interest you?
> S: Think you can attack me with sentiment? Typical priest.
> P: What does your heart say Bobby?
> S: I thought you had me all figured out Don?
> P: What's it saying? Tell me.
> S: My life means everything to me. Freedom means everything. I know you don't mean to mock me, Don, so I'll just let all that pass. This is one of these times when we've come to pause, it's time to keep your belief pure. I believe that a united Ireland is right and just. Maybe it's impossible for a man like you to understand. But having a respect for my life, a desire for freedom, and an unyielding love for that belief means I can see past any doubts I may have. Putting my life on the line is not just the only thing I can do, Don. It's the right thing … I'm clear of the reasons Don. I'm clear of the repercussions. But I will act, and I will not stand by and do nothing (McQueen).

Here is seen the same attitude, the same desire toward death that Antigone displays, and in fact, both characters make the ultimate choice to die. While Antigone is walled up to starve,

she commits suicide, and Sands continually made the choice to not eat each day of his hunger strike. So, both make the choice to die at least twice: once when they realize their plan will lead to death and again when they have seen their plan through to completion. Sands rejected not just his family, but also, as a Catholic, his religion in his decision to die.

While the film adaption of Sands' life in *Hunger* is relatively in line with the actual events as they occurred, it is important to make a distinction between the character of Sands and the person. During the strike, the actual Sands became a folk hero to the people of Ireland, even winning an election to become MP of a district in Northern Ireland from his prison cell—which was a major victory for the republican cause. In fact, one wonders whether Gerry Adams could have been elected without Sands being elected first. It would a mistake, however, to assume that the film overstates Sands' zealousness. In a letter from March 1981, Sands wrote that "They won't break me because the desire for freedom, and the freedom of the Irish people, is in my heart. The day will dawn when all the people of Ireland will have the desire for freedom to show" (Beresford 98). For the real Sands, as for the adapted Sands, as for Paulin's Antigone, "desire with its radically destructive character" has taken hold of them and leads them to their deaths (Lacan 283). Paulin's Antigone underscores the drive for a united Ireland that motived Bobby Sands.

In another adaptation worth consideration, during the summer of 2015, Druid Theatre Company travelled to New York City to present an adaptation of the Henriad: Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and *Henry V* performed as one eight hour theatrical event. Druid is known for new, bold theatrical adaptations of some of the great works in the Irish canon (titled with the theatre's name ahead of the playwright they were producing, e.g., DruidMurphy, DruidSynge), but DruidShakespeare was to be their first major international

production of the bard of Stratford-upon-Avon. The adaptor for this production is an exciting young Irish playwright named Mark O'Rowe, whose plays are marked both by the lyrical beauty of their language, frequently written as long monologues with a small number of actors on stage (*Howie the Rookie*, *Terminus*), as well as their shockingly brutal descriptions of violence that occurs to the largely lower class urban characters that populate his plays. Given Druid's location in Galway on the more rural west of Ireland combined with O'Rowe's home base in the urban Dublin, I eagerly awaited this production as it seemed to provide an Irish response to Shakespeare. If the Irish were colonized even in the language they spoke by the English, and if Shakespeare is inarguably the most famous theatrical mouthpiece of England, then an adaptation assembled by some of the most extraordinary contemporary Irish theatre artists ought to be fascinating in how it controls the words of Shakespeare. Indeed, even the name of the event, DruidShakespeare, connotes an appropriation of Shakespeare with the emphasis being on the question of what will Druid do with Shakespeare?

There is a saying that each theatrical production is a critique on the source material, but seldom has that apparent critique, at least at first pass, been as modest as it was with DruidShakespeare. For a production that was advertised and conceived of as an Irish response to Shakespeare, the tetralogy stayed essentially faithful to the source material. This is not to say that it was not a good production of Shakespeare nor that Druid did not put their own stamps upon it, but when thought of as an Irish response, the production seemed to be lacking.

As the company had used in some of their prior productions, the stage was covered in two or three inches of rich, dark brown soil that brought to mind the fertile countryside of the

west of Ireland. The actors were, in a sense, standing on their own soil even though they were across the Atlantic. Perhaps the most obvious change from many other productions was the use of gender-blind casting. While the actor who played Richard II was male, the actors who played Henry IV and Henry V were female. Other than in the performance of the character of the mistress of the inn (played by a large actor with full beard), the gender-blind casting was not something that was played for easy laughs, nor did it insinuate that because the two kings were played by women that the monarchs were weak. Both actors played the characters as Shakespeare wrote them: strong and forceful leaders and soldiers, particularly when compared to the ineffectual Richard II.

Those who would assert that the gender-blind casting provided a commentary from Druid would be rebuffed by the artistic director of the theatre and the director of the production, Garry Hynes, who asserted to Mark O'Rowe that the idea grew out of the fact that Druid's productions that revived great Irish work were so heavy with males that she simply wanted to work with some women (O'Rowe). Hynes went on to say in the symposium that she envied how other world cultures could take Shakespeare and make the plays their own and not have to worry about what the production "said" in terms of intercultural issues; she said that the end result and hope of Druid's work on the tetralogy was to create a production that superseded either English or Irish historical concerns (Hynes). While that may have been what occurred in the final production, other speakers at the conference related how that had not always been what was planned. Mark O'Rowe stated that prior to his joining the project, and, in fact, part of the reason he was brought on was that Druid was struggling with identifying enough specific Irish resonances in the text to sustain the epic production that they imagined, and Patrick Lonergan, to whom Hynes looked for

dramaturgical advice, confided that Hynes had asked him the question, which he paraphrased as, "How do we, as Irish, produce these plays today?" (O'Rowe and Lonergan). Even if the director argued that the production was to rise above specific Irish concerns, it is matter of record that Irish concerns were present in the original stages of the formation of the production.

So what, then, makes this production Irish? And what does this production have to do with Irish identity and seizing the historical narrative? The answer to these questions lies in a response Mark O'Rowe gave at the symposium. If there were one over-arching idea that made Druid's production different from other productions of these plays, that difference is how unsparing O'Rowe was in his cutting and editing of the original playscripts. In particular, O'Rowe wanted the plays to focus on action, and so he cut a number of monologues and soliloquys, even some that were well known, in the name of action, tempo, and pace. When O'Rowe was asked if the shortening of the plays were an attempt to make them feel more Irish, he responded no, but what made them Irish, instead, was their irreverence (O'Rowe).

This response is interesting in part because the response is itself irreverent. When looking at the production, a large amount of the irreverence comes from the drastic cuts, not only of speeches, but also of historically important characters. Even the character of MacMorris was cut; if ever there were an opportunity for this ugly Irish stereotype to be commented upon, this production would have been it. Yet, we should not forget that the shortening of these plays is in itself a radical gesture and a critical commentary from an Irish theatre company on the works of Shakespeare. It also provides a decolonial re-appropriation of language; if an aspect of the colonial legacy in Ireland is that English has supplanted the

native Gaelic, and if the majority of Irish people rely upon the language of a country that had subjugated them for centuries, how deliciously "irreverent" is it, to use O'Rowe's word, for Druid to excise such large portions of Shakespeare's language in the name of action?

This is the genius of the production: the form of the production offered an implicit critique on the source material to the extent that the average viewer, and, indeed, this viewer, came away from the production feeling like he had seen a faithful adaptation of Shakespeare's plays when, in fact, what had been performed subversively foregrounded the Irish production at the expense of the English source material. During the several intermissions, I heard other audience members complaining that certain speeches had been removed; the viewers that noticed these cuts seemed to feel the losses acutely—after all, part of the joy of returning to the classics is hearing the same lines performed in new and interesting ways. One could wager, however, that many of the audience members were unfamiliar enough with the original plays that they never noticed what had been taken away. For them, this production was what these plays by Shakespeare are. If these plays were written in part to stir public sentiment against the Irish in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, how magnificent is it that these same plays in 2015 can promote an Irish theatre company and aid in the re-contextualization of a portion of an English cultural icon. If history is written by its winners, than omission of that history and culture is a powerful tactic by those cultures that had been subjugated.

A final section of this chapter will focus not on new adaptations or versions of previous theatre works, but on an adaptation of history itself. Brian Friel's dramatization of the British effort to replace Irish names for places in Ireland as seen in the play *Translations*

will be analyzed, and the play will be thought of in terms of the work that Friel and actor Stephen Rea's theatre company Field Day were working to do.

To disparage one's opponent is simple, but the task of portraying those with whom one disagrees in a generous and thoughtful manner is much more difficult. Some Irish playwrights have walked on both sides of this divide to differing degrees of effectiveness; Brian Friel's *Freedom of the City*, written and performed shortly after the events of the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972 in which British soldiers shot twenty-eight peacefully marching protestors and killing fourteen of them, is nominally about how different interpretations of historical events allow different sides to justify their actions, but the play remains effectively as angry of an indictment against the British as any of his other works. Particularly for Friel, whose theatre company Field Day sought to put on works in an ambitious effort to do its part to allay the deep cultural wounds The Troubles had inflicted upon the island of Ireland, writing a play that has so much animosity on its surface seems at odds with his life's work, and this is why *Freedom of the City* remains not as well regarded as some of his other work.

But the genius of Brian Friel, as seen in his best plays, is in the way in which he focuses not on nationalism and politics but on the human and the humane as his characters try to make sense of a world that is new to them. In his introduction to a volume of Friel's plays, the great Irish critic Seamus Deane argues that many of Friel's plays are about violence that breaks out as traditional systems and structures of authority break down.

In his monologue play *Faith Healer*, it would have been easy to imagine the title character as nothing more than a conman and huckster; instead, Friel imbues the healer with the seeming ability to heal in a supernatural way, but the play ends with the healer having

lost what powers he might have had and the repercussions that follow from those around him who deeply wanted to believe. Similarly, in his *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the five Irish sisters, while devout Catholics and sisters to a missionary, nevertheless have a deep embodied knowledge that comes out in the form of dance that calls back to a pagan Ireland in a time before history. There is a truth deep within the sisters that, despite the constraints of their religion, emerges and escapes from them. The play contrasts the freedom these women might have had in pagan times even if they now find themselves culturally constricted and boxed in.

The greatest of Friel's plays, however, is *Translations*. While it is difficult to not think of this play as being necessarily political, Friel had not set out with a political axe to grind. As Friel later wrote, "The thought occurred to me that I was circling around a political play and that thought panicked me. But it is a political play – how can that be avoided? If it is not political, what is it? Inaccurate history? Social drama?" (Corbett 33). The "inaccurate history" that Friel mentions is his setting of *Translations* during the 1833 Ordnance Survey in which the British worked to effectively re-write Ireland by removing the Irish names for places and renaming them with English names. Also shown in the play are hedge schools, which also looks to a historical precedent. The 1833 Ordnance Survey followed on the heels of the 1831 Education Act, which, while not eliminating hedge schools, provided for a free elementary education to Irish children at the effective cost to the Irish of their language and culture. The Act "forbade the use of the Irish Language, and taught English history and customs," and because of these things, republican Patrick Pearse referred to the Education Act as "the murder machine" (Corbett 21). Credulity is strained to think that Friel thought his

play would not be necessarily political when the world he built it in was so fraught with hundreds of years of controversy.

Translations became the first production by the new theatre company Field Day, so-called due to a play on the surnames of its two founders, Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea. Field Day was set up in the currently-named city of Londonderry in Northern Ireland; the city had previously been known simply as Derry, and the name Londonderry remains a point of controversy—though the confluence of *Translations*, which is about the renaming of Irish landmarks, being the first play by Field Day in this renamed city is worth noting. Field Day was meant to be "a space of dialogue between the two conflicting communities, only to be pushed later towards a cultural expression of nationalism" (Szabo 5-6). Indeed, just as Friel had not set out with *Translations* to make it a political piece of theatre, neither had he and Rea set out to make Field Day a theatre company that sided with Irish republicans. That Field Day became nationalistic ties back again to the vision of history that Benjamin described: namely, that although Field Day and *Translations* itself started out as attempts to help and correct the wrongs of the past, they both were pushed into a future where they became nationalistic.

In this chapter, I have worked to show that although Irish writers have endeavored to creatively interact with their history in thoughtful ways in efforts to make positive changes, these works are nevertheless characterized by a sense that, try as the playwrights might, the future continues to come and that difficulties to improve upon the past are inherent. This is not to say that there is no optimism in these works or that there is no value in striving; it is merely to say that such striving is difficult. Additionally, it is also worth remembering that for much of Irish history, the island was united even it were under British control, so the fact

that the British-imposed schism that resulted in the creation of the new nation of Northern Ireland occurred forces a necessary break with history, and creative works that deals with history are necessarily going to be at odds with the current state of Ireland. In this way also, history collides with the present and becomes a difficult issue for Irish dramatist looking to reclaim and reinvent the nation's history.

Comedian: Have you heard the latest Irish joke?
Irishman: I'm warning you. I'm an Irishman myself.
Comedian: That's all right, Paddy. I'll tell it nice and slowly for you.

---Christina Reid, *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman … ?*

My lover's got humor, she's the giggle at a funeral.

---Hozier, "Take Me to Church"

Chapter Two

Contemporary Irish Black Comedy: A Study in Relief

An obvious pun would be to state that comedy is typically not taken very seriously. Though comedies both in theatre and in film may achieve popular success, when it comes to thorough academic analysis, performances and stories which are comic are frequently thrown by the wayside in favor of the consideration of serious, lofty drama. More attention has been paid to the study of why humans laugh. Henri Bergson, for instance, asserts that laugher is essentially and irrevocably a social activity; when we are alone watching a comic film on one of the smaller and smaller screens technology affords us, we might smile or be generally amused at a funny movie, but we likely will not laugh to the degree and with the delight that we would had we been in a crowded movie theatre full of like-minded people who also appreciated the humor.

Even though laughter as a response to comedy is social, the reasons why we laugh are personal. Aristotle, in his superiority theory, argues that laughter arises when we look down upon someone else, and certainly much early Greek and later Roman comedy bears this idea out with its recurring motifs of slaves or otherwise typically powerless people in society being shown to be wiser than their masters. Much later, Sigmund Freud argued that people laugh because various stresses and concerns of the self in society are repressed and cannot be

talked about, at least not in polite company. However, comedy allows people to see images of some of these repressed issues in a safe context in which people are allowed a moment of relief, a moment where these normally serious issues are allowed to be trivialized. Finally, and perhaps most simply, there is incongruity theory which asserts that we laugh at the juxtaposition of dissimilar elements. In general, incongruity is strongly visual in nature.

In this chapter I will be arguing that Irish playwrights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have internalized the various traumas of Ireland's twentieth century journey as an independent nation and that they have transformed these national traumas into comedy in an effort to purge the anxiety that comes from these serious issues; as Sean O'Casey once glibly put it, "That's the Irish people all over—they treat a serious thing as a joke and a joke as a serious thing" (Mullally). I will further assert that this shared psychological construct that holds and contextualizes the trauma works as a combination of the Carl Jung's ideas on the collective unconscious and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on sedimentation. The trauma is ever present, demanding a response.

Trying to examine the idea of the primacy of subjectivity that informs a good deal of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical thought, Merleau-Ponty argues that "before our undivided existence the world is true; it exists … We experience in it a truth which shows through and envelops us rather than being held and circumscribed by our mind" (6). If we take the world a priori, then it follows that the world—at least as we perceive and understand it—and historical events that shape that world will influence the ways in which we interact with the world. To use his language, the events that people experience and perceive in their environments become sedimented within them. An event occurs, a person perceives that event, and the person then takes that event in and it creates ripples in their

consciousness that can be seen and analyzed in their actions. The genius of the metaphor of sedimentation is that, just as in the ecological sense, what is sedimented becomes stuck and is difficult to get rid of. The fact that events and experiences become sedimented within consciousness helps researchers to form a genealogy of what has happened. Sedimentation occurs not just on an individual level, but also under a system of what constitutes national identity.

In David Ireland's recent *Cyprus Avenue*, commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in a joint production with the Royal Court Theatre, the viewer sees these internal forces at work, though they are seen in an unlikely character—an Ulster unionist. The events of this play surround the main character's, Eric's, obsession with his observation that his new granddaughter looks just like almost certain Irish republican Army leader and elected politician in Northern Ireland, Gerry Adams. Eric has been played by Stephen Rea both in the original Irish production and in the production that in 2018 was produced by New York City's Public Theater.

The casting of Stephen Rea adds layers of meaning to the performance. Rea, along with Brian Friel, co-founded Field Day, a theatre company created to explore the divide between Ireland and the North. In addition, Rea's most famous film role in his prolific acting career is that of the IRA member who begins a romantic relationship with someone who ends up being a different person than Rea's character expected in *The Crying Game*. In his career, Rea's politics have been explicit; he is a strong supporter of a combined Ireland, so his casting and performance as a vivid unionist necessarily gives a moment of dissonance for those familiar with him and his career. His performances are often world-weary, and Rea brought this persona to this play as well, according to *The Guardian*'s review, which stated

he gave a "brilliant performance" and his "seamed features and velvet voice convey the melancholia that lurks behind blind hatred" (Billington).

The play begins with Eric meeting with a psychologist, a black woman named Bridget. It is clear to the viewer that Eric does not want to be there, and the character in short order dispenses with racist and sexist epithets spewed toward Bridget. But what is most at stake for Eric is the fact that he is not Irish. When Bridget makes a comment about how he's Irish, she is rebutted by Eric who says:

> The last thing I am is Irish. My grandfather was killed in the Battle of the Somme. My father died at Dunkirk. And I too would die for my right to be British. My British identity, my culture, my, our way of life, *ours*, our heritage and being, our very, our *being*. Every summer I parade with the Orange. I fly the flag of the Union from the rooftop of our house. I worked for Her Majesty's Government to combat the relentless campaign of genocide conducted by the IRA against the Protestant people of Ulster over the course of three decades. I am anything but Irish. I am British. I am exclusively and non-negotiably British. I am not nor never have been nor never will be Irish (Ireland 8-9).

As this speech suggests, Eric hates the Irish and unequivocally considers the Irish a dangerous other. As his meeting with Bridget continues, his disdain for them continues to work its way into his speech with the usual derogatory terms of Fenians and Papists:

> Eric: A Protestant's eye never smile unless it's absolutely necessary. But Irish eyes—Fenian eyes—are forever smiling … The Irish smile as they kill … Do you know what a Fenian is?
> Bridget: It's a derogatory term for a Catholic.
> Eric: I wouldn't say derogatory … Fenians use it themselves (16-17).

As written by David Ireland, Eric's insistence upon using obviously derogatory terms for the Irish emphasizes the extent to which he despises them and considers them unworthy of thought. He even asserts that a slur is not a slur—speaking for a group of people with whom he will not speak with for them to speak for themselves. It is a nearly perfect metaphor, then,

that Eric projects his hatred of a people he will not allow to speak upon his five-week-old granddaughter.

As the play continues, the audience realizes that Eric is meeting with Bridget because something horrific has happened. From the first time he holds Mary-May, he believes she looks like Gerry Adams, the epitome of Irish republicanism. Not being sure if the baby's appearance is a coincidence, he puts glasses on the child and draws a beard on her with magic marker to see if the resemblance can be chalked up to chance. He then accuses his daughter of having had sex with Adams as an explanation for the resemblance, and he finally comes to believe that the small child is literally Gerry Adams.

His wife and daughter believe him to have lost his mind, so they force him out of the house. Eric then has a lengthy monologue in which he recounts a visit to London in which he stopped for a drink at an Irish bar. Given his accent, he is mistaken for being an Irishman, and he goes along with it—this speaks to ease of hiding one's identity, no matter how fervently avowed that identity may be. He says he "drank Guinness here to mask the unmistakable aroma of Unionism that must have emanated from me so pungently" (37). Eric makes a friend who buys him a pint—though Eric is afraid that means the man is coming on to him, much to Eric's dismay—and by the end of the night, Eric was "so drunk … that I almost would have had sex with him. In fact, I think we did share a kiss. Not a gay kiss. A manly kiss" (39). Eric says he was so happy that for one night, he was able to be Irish.

This is an interesting turn for David Ireland's play. It is a matter of armchair psychology and schoolyard crushes that people are mean to those to whom they are most attracted. The brutal climax of the play perhaps advances this notion further; Eric comes home and murders his daughter, his wife, and eventually, after throwing the baby in a

garbage sack, Eric slams the sack violently against the ground several times, eventually saying only, "Well, that's that then. That's that" (79). For Eric, the virtue of his deed is self-evident. He does not need fanfare or applause, and he does not repent by the play's end. Indeed, he is explicit that even if he has done wrong, God will forgive him. Though Bridget and the audience are appalled by what he has recounted, Eric is at peace.

Andre Breton is credited with being the first to articulate the notion of black comedy, a comedy that shares an impulse with satire in that both poke fun at characters or ideas that are stupid or immoral, but while satire is essentially hopeful—it brings up issues in an effort to make them better—black comedy acknowledges that the stupidity is irreparable—that bad things will happen and the best that we can do is laugh. David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* is bleak, particularly when viewed through the lens of contemporary history. This is play is, at heart, about the irreparable divides that borders, by their very nature create, and certain major world events of the last few years are all essentially about the problems with borders. Russia asserted that Crimea ought to be a part of Russia, and so it annexed it from the Ukraine by force—and the world watched. The United Kingdom felt that being a part of the Eurozone was detrimental, and so they voted to leave one of the most amazing coalitions of nations in the history of the world in Brexit. The election of Donald Trump to President of the United States—a man whose administration has sought to curtail legal immigration, drastically reduce the number of refugees who are able to seek asylum in the United States, and who ran on a platform that a wall should formalize the border between the United States and Mexico and should be paid for by Mexico—set in motion a nationalistic frenzy unseen since the dark days of the Cold War.

For the Irish and British audiences, it would be easy to claim that this play is nothing more than the lingering troubles from The Troubles, but this play has come out at a fortuitous time for its playwright. Yes, borders necessarily cause divides, and yes, divides necessarily cause hatred, and this hatred is writ large in 2018. Ireland's play leaves the audience with the troubling question: is laughter really the only response that can be mustered?

A profitable comparison will be made between *Cyprus Avenue* and several plays by formal Irish experimenter Enda Walsh. Many of Walsh's plays are essentially concerned with the problem of memory, or, perhaps more specifically, the problem of not being able to forget. His early monologue play *Misterman*, originally performed in 1999 by the author and later re-written for a touring performance by Cillian Murphy (a production I saw at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn in 2011), tells the story of a man who becomes unhinged from reality as he seeks to save the souls of those in his hometown even as he becomes infatuated with a young woman who plays a cruel trick on him. There is nevertheless a sense that he is re-telling his own story over and over again in an attempt to reconstruct it and reshape into having a better outcome. The monologist either mimics or plays taped audio—in a nod to Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*—from other characters, forever unseen to the audience. Similarly, Walsh's *The New Electric Ballroom* tells the story of three sisters, two of whom daily recount and reenact an incident from earlier in their lives as a warning and an instruction to their little sister. But it is the male-driven *The Walworth Farce* which will be examined in more detail here.

The Walworth Farce, much like the other plays mentioned, also concerns itself with a mandatory, daily (re)performance of traumatic events from the past, though unlike *Ballroom*, it's not as clear for whose benefit the performance exists, at least not at first. The play's three

main characters are Dinny and his two sons Sean and Blake, and the three men daily re-perform the story of why the three of them needed to leave Cork and move to the Walworth area in London. Early stage directions indicate that this performance, which takes place in their fifteenth story apartment, "resembles the style of The Three Stooges," so there are meant to be broad performances and exaggerated violence (though the violence at times becomes very real) (7). Additionally, their daily performance is judged by Dinny, and one of the three at the end of each day receives a best actor trophy (though, underscoring the myopic nature of a man who forces his sons to re-enact his memory of one day again and again, Dinny typically gives himself the award). The sons play a variety of different characters, including very young versions of themselves, so it is apparent to the audience that this recreation has been going on daily for fifteen or twenty years.

What causes a rift in the day of the performance we see in Enda Walsh's script is that Sean, who is in charge of daily going to the grocery store in the morning to buy a chicken to roast, a loaf of bread, some beer, and a few other things, has been flustered by the cashier and has come home with someone else's bag. Instead of a loaf and bread and chicken to roast, Sean has returned with a package of crackers and a large sausage. When the error is realized, Dinny cracks Sean in the skull with a frying pan leaving Sean on the floor. It is here that that the audience realizes that, unlike The Three Stooges who are forever being abused but never truly injured, there is a performed gross reality that raises the stakes and questions just how humorous that violence is. Taken for granted in film comedy is the fact that, no matter how serious a situation a character finds themselves in, the comedy always reminds the viewer that they are watching an essentially non-serious world where the ramifications are not as dire. It is a unique and compelling difference of the theatre that performed violence feels that

much more real, shocking, and breathtaking, depending in part upon how realistically staged such violence is.

The plot of the farce, as it has been written by Dinny, is that Dinny and his brother were set to receive an inheritance from their mother, but someone poisoned Dinny's brother, and Dinny then needed to run to London to escape. It is revealed, through the memory of Sean, that there was no poisoning and that Dinny had brutally murdered his brother for the money. The play suggests that Sean finds the strength to do this by the violence of being thrown out of the routine by grabbing the wrong groceries, and by the cashier from the grocery showing up and their door and interrupting their performance with the correct bag of groceries. As contemporary Irish comedies tend to do, this play ends in bloodshed. Blake, believing by murdering his father that Sean could go free, murders Dinny, and then Sean, rushing in from another room and inadvertently attacking Blake, stabs his brother to death. This gives cashier Hayley and Sean an opportunity to run. While Hayley escapes, Sean stands at the door, finally closing it, looking back, and the stage directions that conclude the play say "The light eventually fades down on Sean as we watch him calmly lose himself in a new story" (85).

There is much to unpack from this narrative, but among the most important for my purposes here is the recurrence of a father figure, lost in some haze of memory, who insists on holding fast to the events of the past. Unlike in *Cyprus Avenue*, however, Dinny does not merely hold onto longstanding prejudices that eventually seep their way into the present, but instead he has re-written an essential chapter of the past to be more palatable. When Sean confronts Dinny about how he has lied to change the past, Dinny says, "I start[ed] to make a new story … We're making a routine to keep our family safe. Isn't that what we've done

here? … It's my truth, nothing else matters" (69-70). Dinny postures that he is keeping his family safe by telling the lies that he has, but he is really, merely keeping himself safe. Falling into a subjective rabbit hole, Dinny sees no problem with keeping his sons essentially locked up for twenty years, telling and re-telling a story that has to be true for them to be a happy family.

The ending of the play, however, also provides an opportunity for analysis. Critics of major world skirmishes and indeed even critics of The Troubles argued that forgetting is a necessary part of reconciliation. *The Walworth Farce* is not a play about The Troubles, but I think it is a play that features an Irish character dealing with long-standing trauma, and the ending asserts that trauma is not so easily forgotten. With his brother and his father dead or dying, Sean could have left the apartment, perhaps with Hayley—there is a scene in which Blake insists that Hayley promise to take care of Sean. There is a familiarity with the extremely problematic world in which he lives, and those ending stage directions suggest that he is going to have to create a new, more palatable story for himself. In other words, coping strategies and mechanisms to live through traumatic seem to be passed down and sedimented generation by generation, this play asserts. Again, we have a play that is deeply comic but leaves its characters, and its audiences, discomfited regarding just what has been laughed at.

While not yet discussed, Martin McDonagh also traffics in black comedy, though his work is not typically as much about repetition as it is about brutality and shock. These may seem like odd traits for a comedy, but the two plays which have been analyzed thus far also prominently feature them. McDonagh is also a controversial playwright within the realm of Irish studies due to some issues of his heritage. Though he has many plays worth

investigating, this paper will look at some issues with his major work, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore,* in part through an examination of the playwright himself.

He was born in 1970 to Irish parents who had moved to the south of London. Every summer of his childhood, however, McDonagh visited his father's side of the family for six weeks at a time in the district of Connemara in Ireland, which tends to be read as an attempt by his family to allow McDonagh to develop and realize a sense of his Irish identity. Nevertheless, the fact remains that McDonagh was both born in and raised primarily in England. While McDonagh has definite Irish roots, critics find it difficult to view him as fully Irish; conversely, due to those same roots, it is difficult to see him as fully English. It is also worth noting that the man is a dual citizen of both Ireland and England. While these national distinctions might not even be considered in a pure consideration of his work, for a nation whose drama feels as essential to its own identity as Ireland's does, these personal allegiances are both telling and worthy of consideration.

For a playwright with Irish roots, McDonagh's seemingly derogatory style of portraying the Irish in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* demonstrates the conflicts within his own identity. Many critics argue that McDonagh is pandering to the English. Critic Mary Luckhurst looks to the fact that the play opened at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London as a sign that McDonagh is writing for a British audience. She views McDonagh as "a thoroughly establishment figure who relies on monolithic, prejudicial constructs of rural Ireland to generate himself an income" (35) Luckhurst asserts that the *The Lieutenant of Inishmore,* "lets the English off the hook because it reinforces familiar stereotypes about 'Irishness' and 'Ireland' that were originally invented to brutalise (sic) a nation and justify colonization" (37-38). Because all of the characters in this play appear to be presented as

"eejits" (idiots), the laughter and humor for an English audience comes in part from recognizing and laughing about the stereotypes of the Irish that the viewers have already internalized.

When Luckhurst quotes English theatre critic Charles Spencer who wrote about *Lieutenant* by saying "laughter is actually the only proper response to these brain-dead goons," it would seem like she has her smoking gun of evidence, and Spencer is just one of several English critics who had similar responses (36). To use a phrase coined by Ronald de Sousa, what Luckhurst seems to be describing is the idea of *phtonic* laughter. De Sousa finds this type of laughter unethical because it requires an endorsement. *Phtonic* laughter does not come from merely realizing that what has been said is in some way humorous, but it instead implicates both the teller and the listener due to the joke's necessarily being based on an attitude that is shared (De Sousa 240). Given that the English have historically oppressed the Irish, this explanation seems to fit nicely. Luckhurst and others argue that for the English, not only have the Irish always been the lesser people, but now McDonagh is capitalizing on this prejudice in order to make a quick buck.

The way in which McDonagh speaks in interviews does not help to defend himself from accusations of selling out the Irish to make money from British audiences. One flippant comment by McDonagh is:

> I mean, I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or being Irish because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both. That's exactly what the work arises out of, and it's interesting to me that it tends to be English people who have problems with that. But, ultimately, I don't really feel I have to defend anything, really (O'Hagan).

While this quote at once frustrates both those who want to peg McDonagh as either English or Irish, it also presents the way in way he thinks about himself in a post-national way.

Another key aspect of this quote is when McDonagh points out that it is primarily the English that are concerned about the ways in which he portrays the Irish in his plays. One would imagine that the Irish especially would be the most keen in the ways in which they were being presented. Yet it is Mary Luckhurst, a professor at the University of York, who has written perhaps the most scathing critique of McDonagh thus far, though she herself notes that while the Royal Shakespeare Company premiered *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* in 2001, major theatre companies in both England and Ireland were hesitant to produce the play. Both the National Theatre and the Royal Court in England as well as the Druid Theatre Company in Ireland all turned down the play, a move which McDonagh characterized as "gutless" due to the theatre owner's "fears about how damaging the play would be to the Northern Irish peace process" (Luckhurst 34). There is a sense that McDonagh views his work from a different perspective than simply one of nationality.

For a number of critics, the correct way to view Martin McDonagh is not from a purely English or Irish perspective, but from a global perspective. Catherine Rees suggests that McDonagh is not portraying Irish stereotypes in an attempt to make the Irish look poorly, but instead in an attempt to make people reconsider what stereotypes they already have about the Irish (Rees 120). These stereotypes for Rees are not just the characters that inhabit the plays, but the setting in which the plays themselves occur. When people think of Ireland, a common perception is that of rolling green hills on which quaint old-fashioned farms sit that are inhabited by kindly old farmers. In a new genre that Nicholas Grene calls the black pastoral, McDonagh caters to these stereotypes by portraying the opposite of what people might expect (Grene 245).

Rees sees the work of McDonagh as important because if there was ever a marked, specific Irish identity, the works of McDonagh fight against it. The Ireland of McDonagh is therefore, for Rees, a multi-national one; just as the characters in McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* watch Australian soap operas and listen to music from other countries, so too are the actual Irish people of today's world moving away from what has traditionally defined them as Irish. Rees then makes a logical jump when she asserts that the problem of continuous national identity is why there is so much violence in McDonagh's work. "McDonagh has shown that a loss in a community's shared sense of its cultural past can turn that society into a dysfunctional one … this then breeds the kind of violent amorality we have seen in McDonagh's work" (Rees 121). While this is an interesting explanation, and it perhaps explains the rise of violence in McDonagh's work, Rees' explanation is ultimately unfulfilling because it does not also take into account the McDonagh's use of comedy.

The most compelling case for what makes up McDonagh's national identity is that he is writing from the vantage point of an Irishman for a world that, in a sense, has lost many of its borders. After all, if one thinks only of McDonagh's works as being strictly representational (that is, if we consider that the takeaway from McDonagh's plays is that the Irish are purely louts), then "McDonagh's multiple ironies and/or any satirical dimension gets deliberately ignored" (Pilny 227).

Still other critics compare McDonagh derisively to filmmaker Quentin Tarantino by saying that McDonagh focuses on blood and not much else in his work. However, there is a sense that many of his characters have some sort of moral code by which they live (even if that moral code is grossly different from normative modes of behavior that many of the members of the audience might have). While it is true that essentially all of the characters in

his early Leenane trilogy are doing only what they themselves want at the expense of everyone else (the mother Mag thwarts her daughter's [Maureen's] plans for love in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* so that Maureen will have to take care of Mag), by the time *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* was penned and premiered, the characters are seemingly interested in life at large—even if this life is simply the one of an animal.

The growing, if skewed, sense of ethics that McDonagh has his characters portray in *Lieutenant* as well as in his later works is an important aspect in situating McDonagh as an Irish writer. McDonagh claims to be a pacifist, and *Lieutenant* was inspired by an actual attack by the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army). McDonagh's Irish roots seem to show through due to how he talks about the actual bombing that inspired the play in which two boys were killed. "I thought, hang on, this is being done in my name; I just felt like exploding in rage" (Spencer). From this quote, McDonagh obviously identifies with the Irish side of Irish/English politics. However, he does not approve of the way in which those who wish to make the point of the necessity of an united Ireland by murdering innocent people. Though audiences may laugh at the ways that Padraic, the titular Lieutenant of the play, talks in the play, the point of the play is to prove just how non-funny and serious the actions that Padraic engages in actually are. Thus, it is not just a comedy in which a British audience can look down its nose at the violently coarse Irish; it is a comedy in which the Irish, the English, and the world can evaluate the problem that terrorism remains in our contemporary world. If there is a *phtonic* laughter that is intended by McDonagh, this laughter springs out of the idea that there really are ignorant people in the world who remain very dangerous through the violent acts that they are able to inflict—particularly if that violence distances itself from any particular political point.

Put briefly, McDonagh wrestles with levels of Irish identity, and, as critics have pointed out, his plays do not leave their audiences feeling settled. As Patrick Lonergan suggests about all of Martin McDonagh's plays, no audience member should be completely happy with the response that he or she has had to the play. The laughter that transpires over the course of watching a McDonagh play implicates the audience (Lonergan 84).

Here *phtonic* laughter raises its head again. While it has been established that it is too reductive to think of this play merely within the terms of the English laughing at the foolish Irish, the laughter that comes from *The Lieutenant* is a *phtonic* laughter that is pointed within. Though the audience member may not realize it as it is laughing, when the audience member laughs at something violent that occurs on stage, it is because violence and horror has been fed to society to such a great extent, that it is no longer appalled by things it would have been otherwise appalled by normally. The audience gets to look down its nose at the violence in *Lieutenant* because violent movies and other forms of media have allowed it to. While the audience member may think that it is laughing exclusively at what is onstage, he or she is actually laughing at his or her own ability to laugh at those things that he or she would not normally laugh at. More specifically, the audience member is laughing at its own audacity to laugh at the dark images that are performed.

The balance between horror and comedy is something that typifies the writing of Martin McDonagh; he likes to see his characters (and his audiences) squirm and suffer. As he has stated in an interview:

> I walk that line between comedy and cruelty … because I think one illuminates the other. And, yeah, I tend to push things as far as I can because I think you can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality … There is a humour in there that is straight-ahead funny and uncomfortable. It makes you laugh and think (Rees NTQ 29).

Though critics have accused him of living to offend and make money, the Martin McDonagh of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* attempts to do something more. By laughing at how upside-down the morality of the world of his play is, audience members are encouraged to consider how they would prefer the world to be. McDonagh forces viewers to laugh at the violence and cruelty that can take root within humans, and, in doing so, the audience is able to recognize and laugh at the darker potential of human nature. As long as there are redeeming features to dark comedies that suggest ways to reevaluate life, then comedies ought to be able to portray what they wish.

In this paper, I have argued that sedimented histories of Ireland are engrained within the psyches of these contemporary Irish playwrights, and that the difficulties of these histories emerges from these creative artists utilizing Freud's relief theory through the use of black comedy. I have also argued that each of these comedies offers more to an audience than the audience may realize at first; all of the plays discussed implicate the audience in some way. While all of the plays are certainly funny, they also deal with serious topics worthy of further consideration, and the laughs that the plays earn are complicated by the violence of the events portrayed.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

---William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Chapter Three

On Violence in Twentieth Century Irish Drama and Performance

From the Easter Rising of 1916 which was brutally put down by the British, to the revolution the Rising helped inspire, to the Free State solution that separated Ireland from Northern Ireland, to the continued fighting which eventually led to the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, to the paramilitary fighting toward the stated goal of the re-unification of Ireland, violence, both committed by and forced upon the citizens of Ireland, has affected changes on the island of Ireland. That violence has affected Ireland's place on the world stage as well as its relationship with its former colonizer Britain is a given. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which violence affected the identity of a recently emancipated Ireland and the some of the ways in which violence is examined in popular works for the stage.

Before continuing, it needs to be made clear that any Irish republican violence does not exist within a vacuum. As was briefly distilled in the introductory chapter, the monarchs and prime ministers of Britain have worked to subjugate the Irish people by a number of methods, from laws created specifically to alienate and harass Catholics to the genocide of the Great Famine. Britain leaned heavily on its powers as empire, and the movements, armed

or peaceful, in the twentieth century toward an independent Ireland must be viewed as a response to the generational, systemic violence of the British monarchy.

There have been a number of films since the 1990s that have attempted to (re)present key moments in twentieth century Irish history. These films feature violent acts for the simple reason and grim reality that the historical events the films are depicting were characterized by violent events. Particularly in the visual, highly realistic world of filmmaking, it would be difficult to show the final moments of the 1916 Easter Rising without showing soldiers shooting at each other and the immediacy of the retribution of the British forces in the firing squads that killed key leaders of the Irish rebellion—as is featured in the opening minutes of the film *Michael Collins* (1996). Similar points may be made about the brutal treatment of republican prisoners in the 1970s and 1980s as depicted in *Hunger* (2008) and *H3* (2001), the violence incarceration wreaked on families in *Some Mother's Son* (1996), horrific images of the IRA's bombing campaign in *Omagh* (2005) and *In the Name of the Father* (1993), and the covered up massacre by the British in *Bloody Sunday* (2002), and any study of these films should consider the ethical consequences that attend the vivid, lifelike portrayals of violence that these films contain, but I am, in general, more concerned with examining plays from Irish playwrights that feature exceptional amounts of violence and coming to some conclusions about them.

While this chapter looks only at twentieth century plays and movies, an important place to start is by noting that few events have been as significant and devastating to Ireland as the Great Famine (1845-1852). By the end of the famine, there were approximately twenty-five percent fewer Irish people in Ireland than had lived there prior to its start, with half of that reduction being people who had died due to starvation or associated illnesses and

the other half emigrating, largely to America because after centuries of oppression by Britain, it was time to move to a place that had successfully rebelled and was free of British oversight (Gallagher 113). One would be hard-pressed to blame the British for the large-scale failure of the potato crop that began the famine, there is a level of consensus among historians that the British reliance in the belief that *laissez-faire* market principles would solve the problem of the famine on their own that exacerbated Irish suffering and made the effects of the famine much worse than they needed to have been. There is also evidence that the British continued to export food from Ireland and even left food to rot in storage bins before letting those who were starving have any.

The distrustful, oppositional attitudes between Britain and Ireland that bloomed as a result of the famine continue to remain deeply sedimented within British and Irish cultures. In a speech before the House of Commons in 1847, the recently former (he had just lost power the prior year) Prime Minister of Britain Sir Robert Peel said "I wish it were possible to take advantage of this calamity, for introducing among the people of Ireland the taste for a better and more certain provision for their support than that which they have heretofore cultivated" (quoted in Gallagher 75). Attempting to capitalize on what was already a national tragedy for a political, authoritarian end while that tragedy is still occurring is odious, particularly when one considers that the potato was one of the few types of crop that poor families in Ireland had room to grow. Still, the violence of oppression that is typified by the above statement is one that continues to linger in the Irish creative imagination.

As an example, consider Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, a play first performed in 1992 that very intriguingly de-locates the Irish/English conflict to Lebanon; McGuinness undoubtedly appreciates the additional layers of complexity added by

staging an English/Irish conflict in the midst of a location better known for Christian/Islamic conflicts. McGuinness writes that the original title of the play was *There Was An Englishman, And Irishman And An American*, as if it were a setup for a joke, and indeed the play features one man from each nationality, though the play places them in the unfunny and dire situation of being locked and chained in a cell, each having been kidnapped for ransom money (Lojek 33). Each man typifies the nation he represents, and it should be underscored that the actor who played the character of the Irishman Edward in the original production was Stephen Rea, one of the co-founders of the Field Day theatre company—whose mission was, in part, to explore and bridge the gap between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

McGuinness has said about the play in a letter to a friend that he has "come more & more to the decision that choice is the only basis for determining character. The men in chains in the cell in Lebanon survive through language, because it is shared & common to them all, but within that sharing, there are choices to be made, & by such choices are they known to each other, & to themselves individually" (Lojek 33). Throughout the first half of the play, Edward and Michael, the Englishman, make the choice to antagonize each other, even though their immediate oppression by their captors humiliates and degrades them; that is, though the characters have obvious, more-pressing concerns than the historical differences between their two nations, they have a very difficult time of moving past the prejudices that have defined the ways in which they have seen each other—as types of the other nationality—for their whole lives. Edward begins at one point to sound like a postcolonial reader as in the following exchange:

> Edward: Listen, times have changed, you English mouth … One time when you and your breed opened that same mouth, you ruled the roost … Not any more. We've taken it from you. We've made it our own. And now, we've

> bettered you at it … Not bad for a race that endured eight hundred years of oppression, pal … And there are those I hold responsible for that dispossession. Him, being one.
> *Edward points at Michael.*
> Remember the Famine? The Great Hunger?
> Michael: The Irish Famine was a dreadful event … But I'm sorry. How can I be personally responsible for what happened then? … You are ridiculous, Edward.
> Edward: I am Irish.
> Michael: Then may I ask you Irish one question, if I am personally responsible? … Could it be you only had your silly selves to blame? … You left yourselves utterly dependent on the potato? Why didn't you try for a more balanced diet? Carrots are delicious. What about bread and cheese?
> Edward: Jesus.
> Michael: That's typical. That is so Irish. Call on Jesus to solve your problems (130-131).

What's interesting about this exchange is that it would be easy to dismiss the extreme arrogance of Michael as being constructed by an Irish playwright, but as I showed earlier in the chapter, high-ranking people in the British government said essentially the same things while the horrors of the Great Famine were going on provides historical resonance. As the character Michael's attitude has been created to show, while enough time has passed for the British to be glib over the atrocity of the Famine, for the Irish, and the character Edward who represents them, there will never have been enough time.

While the Englishman and the Irishman are at odds with each other in this scene, in the next scene, the third prisoner, Adam the American, has vanished from the stage. While Edward and Michael cannot be sure of what happened to him, it is assumed that he has been killed, and this drives the characters to the edge of reason. While they, representative of the two nations, had been fighting against one another, the play emphasizes that there is a more menacing enemy that they both face in the form of their captors. In one of McGuinness's more Beckettian feats, there is a scene between the two men where they take turns play acting as the queen of England in an effort to keep one another's spirits up. While they had

been using words to divide themselves, they begin to be able to use words to form a coalition, and the two men do indeed start to care for one another.

It is interesting that McGuinness is unable to provide an entirely happy ending for both men in the play. While the play suggests that there may be a time when Irish and English can look past their shared history and become, at least, friendly, the play—and the playwright—does not let Michael off the hook entirely. In the final scene, Edward's ransom has been paid, and he is about to be free to go, but Michael remains chained. In a final act of brotherly kindness, Edward removes a comb from him pocket and combs Michael's hair. Though the two countries cannot become jointly redeemed through the use of language, they become joined in this physical act. Still, it is to be noted that the play ends with the Irishman going free, and the Englishman rotting in chains. If, as I've argued, one of the aims of the play is to provide hope that there may be a reconciliation between the two countries, McGuinness still wags a finger of guilt toward the British.

While *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is informed by the atrocity of the Great Famine, Tom Murphy's *Famine* is thus far the great Irish play on the topic, even though Murphy himself might disagree with that assessment. He writes in an introduction to the play that he does not "think that a play can do 'justice' to the actuality of famine: attempting to acknowledge that belief … I concluded the action in spring 1847. The historical worst was yet to come, Black '47" (Murphy xvii). Murphy believes that the enormity of the Famine and its lingering effects ("Was I, in … the mid-twentieth century, a student or victim of the Famine?" he writes elsewhere) cannot be fully expressed within one work of art, and his play underlines this incompleteness through its finiteness (xi). In Murphy's play, he takes the

enormity of the famine and distills it down to its effects on one family, and, in particular, one man, John Connor.

Death both overshadows and foreshadows the events of this play. The first scene features a wake for John's daughter, and it is argued by a villager that the reason she died was due to starvation because John, a year into the Famine, had convinced the other villagers to save the few potatoes that had grown to be seeds for the next year's harvest (14). While the immediacy of hunger is a local problem at the beginning of the play, but it becomes an international problem in the second scene where it is depicted that a cart full of oats is being led away from the starving villagers who grew them; the villagers are dismayed at food being taken away and protected by police officers. As is also seen in J. B. Keane's *The Field*, there is a recurring notion in Irish drama that the people who work the land should have some ownership over the land and the fruits of their labor upon it. The ways in which much serviceable land in Ireland was parceled off to loyal supporters of the British monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remains another sticking point within representations of the Irish in their drama. John Connor speaks to this point in this scene when he is chided by the police for wanting to eat the food that he's already sold by saying, "And what'd pay the rent for us then?" (24). John and the villagers are being starved and being ground up between the gears of the machinations of a capitalism that will make them grow food that they themselves are not allowed to eat.

If Murphy shows his anger at the ways in which the British handled their subject's starvation, it should be said that the British are not the only institution with whom his ire burns. From the beginning of the play, the village's Catholic priest seems to exist to remind the miserable villagers of the dogma of the church. In the first scene, at the wake, he

practices the catechism with John's son, the dead girl's brother. In the second scene, he shames the town folk from revolting and taking the food. In trying to calm the villagers down against the backdrop of the food being carted away, he asserts:

> Fr Horan: And ye were ready to murder – Butchery and gore! What advantage is worth a single drop of blood?
> Mickeleen: Jesus shed his blood!
> Fr Horan: To think that he did, and for you! (27).

In Horan's statement is the perversion of a religion, ostensibly founded on ideals of grace and mercy, and yet trafficking in guilt, judgment, and shame. If, as Theodore W. Allen asserts in his *The Invention of the White Race*, the British used the Famine as a means of controlling the Irish, Murphy asserts in this play that representatives of the Catholic Church used the Famine as a means to continue their dominance over the Catholic majority. As John's son responds when Horan asks him why it is important to be loyal to the church, the Irish must be loyal "because none can be saved out of it;" when the stakes are as high as eternal damnation, it becomes easy to influence a people desirous of a relief from pain and worry (12).

In the discussion so far, we have seen the ways in which the violence of the famine has interacted with the community, the church, and representatives of the British, but the play is most compelling in its portrayal of the famine on the family. While most of the characters in the play have actual character names, it is worth noting that John's wife was not given a name in the play—she is only titled Mother; in majority Catholic Ireland, *mother* has a specific, beatific connotation, and Murphy works to subvert the Catholic understanding in this play. As will also be seen and discussed in a few pages when Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy is analyzed (*The Shadow of the Gunman*, [1923], *Juno and the Paycock* [1924], and *The Plough and the Stars* [1926]), there is a tendency with Irish playwrights to have their mother characters face incredible cruelty from their husbands. While O'Casey's mother

characters are, to an extent, put upon to appeal to the sympathies of the audiences, it is not clear that that is what Murphy is doing with *Famine*. Certainly in Murphy is there an appeal to the idea of that motherhood is associated with loving and helping with the physical needs of the family, and these notions of the softness of motherhood are cruelly subverted by the reality of not having enough food. Early in the play, one character paints a macabre scene of how real the lack of food is by saying that he had seen in an earlier famine "a child under a bush, eating its mother's breast. And she dead and near naked" (13). Even in death, it is suggested, that mothers who are victims of starvation cannot escape the needs of their hungry families.

By the end of the play, though, this idea of the escape through death is re-examined. After spending time trying to provide for his family or escape death through emigration, John is in a stupor, and Mother, sensing that death is the only choice that makes sense for her, savagely attempts to draw his temper by verbally attacking him. John will not take the bait, however, and so Mother switches tactics. Speaking of the British, she says, "Johnny, are they to have my life so easy? … they have me prone, and I can only attack your strength … They gave me nothing but dependence: I've shed that lie. And in this moment of freedom you will look after my right and your children's right, *as you promised*, lest they choose the time and have the victory" (88). Mother enters into their shelter, and John follows her. The stage directions say "we hear the stick rising and falling … He has killed his wife and son." In this play, the viewer is asked to conclude that death is the only choice that makes sense for Mother; if she cannot provide food, than she believes that she has no place in the family. But it is important to note that the way in which she manipulates John is not by appealing to him

as a father, but in appealing to his hatred of the British. For John, the act of death must not be on British terms, but on Irish ones.

Mother's death is interesting to consider for a number of reasons. In the first place, there is the obvious comparison between Mother and the once fertile land. Just as the land is unable to provide food and comfort to those dying in the famine, so also is mother unable to gather and prepare food for the family. Another comparison to make, particularly in terms of the violence of her death, involes the ideas of René Girard as expressed in his *Violence and the Sacred*. In his book, Girard emphasizes that although violence tends to be an irrational act, there is some method behind it. He says "when unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (2). Violence in John Connor's village rains down from all directions. There's the uncaring violence of a land that won't produce food, the violence through mismanagement of the British that prolongs the famine and insists on food exports (while some of that food rotted in silos), and the systemic violence of the Catholic church that would damn a person's soul for not staying within its guidelines. Against all of these violences, John is shown to be powerless. He can only reclaim power through the sacrifice of his family, even if it drives him insane, as he is shown to be in the final scene. Still, as he sits and mumbles in that final scene, to paraphrase and pervert Camus, we must imagine him happy—though it has cost him everything, he has taken a moment of control in a world in which he is otherwise powerless.

Moving roughly chronologically in terms of events portrayed, the next work to be discussed is J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. This play has a notorious history of not only depicting violence on the stage, but also in eliciting it from the audience. *Playboy*

tells the story of Christopher ("Christy") Mahon who is happily greeted by a group of people at a bar when he claims he has murdered his father, and he becomes a romantic favorite of the beautiful Pegeen, usurping her former beau. When his supposed-to-be-dead father later walks into the bar, the bar folk become less impressed with him, so Christy tries to kill him again. While they had been excited the first time, the pub's patrons are now disgusted with Christy in part because they had by then met his father. Once again, Christy is unable to complete the act of murder, and his father effectively returns from the dead one more time. The elder Mahon now respects his son as a man, and the two head back to the farm.

When thinking about what might have caused a violent reaction from the audience, the subject of Patricide is obviously a very contentious topic, but what makes Synge's play doubly contentious is the point of view from which he was writing. In 1907, in addition to *Playboy* premiering, Synge's book, *The Aran Islands,* was published, which dealt with his travels to the west of Ireland over the course of several years. Modern critics reading the book accuse Synge of a primitivistic bias which alternatingly provides idealistic and starkly realistic images of the people he interacted with (Gilmartin 64-65). Indeed, writing with the cultural assumptions of the early twentieth century, Synge has no problem with repeatedly using the word *primitive* to describe the people and activities that he witnesses, and toward the end of the book, he tellingly locates his position for the reader: "Well, as I seem to know these people of the islands, there is hardly a day that I do not come upon some new, primitive feature of their life" (*Aran Islands* 129). In other words, though Synge in his cosmopolitan wisdom believes that he knows everything that there is to know about the people, he is still surprised daily by the limits of their backwards living—though the two examples that he immediately gives in the book, one of a woman changing into nicer clothes when he drops in

to her home to visit her husband and another of a grandmother singing a young boy to sleep while Synge has stayed chatting late into the night, seem to belie less a primitivism on the part of the Aran Islanders and more a lack of decorum on the part of Synge in terms of appropriate times and durations to his visits. As has been argued about the book, "There is a deepening sense in *The Aran Islands* that the poetry of its images are as much a product of his own isolation and strangeness as of the islands themselves" (Bogucki 521).

What this adds up to is that Synge viewed himself and had promoted himself as both an anthropologist and playwright, and he doubled-down on these interpretations of himself when he claimed to have received the inspiration for *Playboy* from a story he had heard in the Aran Islands. He positioned himself as if he were speaking both as a playwright and also as a self-proclaimed expert on the people that he was writing about, and his expertise painted people from western Ireland, those far from the cosmopolitan streets of Dublin in the east, as ignorant, backward-think rubes. Even in the early twentieth century, there was a belief that the more rural parts of Ireland were in some way more authentic and true to the identity of Ireland at large, and Synge, after studying these people, wrote a play in which a man who murdered his father is found to be heroic (at least at first). Is it any wonder, then, that early performances of the play devolved into the so-called *Playboy* riots?

On opening night at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, January 26, 1907, the audience grew so offended by the strong language and savage themes of the play that by the third act, murmurs and complaints from the audience kept much of the audience from hearing how the play ended. In a review in the *Freeman* newspaper, it was asserted that "the worst specimen of stage Irishman of the past is a refined acceptable fellow compared with that imagined by Mr. Synge … It is quite plain that there is need for a censor at the Abbey Theatre" (Dorcey

134). Arthur Griffith, early twentieth century Irish nationalist author and occasional supporter of Synge, wrote "Mr. Synge's play is one of the worst constructed we have witnessed. As a representation on the public stage it is a vile and inhumane story" (Ritschel 123). By the second night of the play's run, the theatre was full of displeased citizens who attempted to talk over the action on stage so it could not be heard, and the police were called to stand guard at various locations around the theatre in an attempt to keep order (though no one was arrested) (135). Synge himself fanned the flames by stating, "It is a comedy, and extravaganza, made to amuse … I don't care a rap how the people take it" (136). As protests from audience members continued throughout the first week of the performances, police alternately ejected spectators and "with batons drawn charged the crowds outside" (138). A number of people were convicted in courts resulting from their rowdiness with some even having to pay fines. The demonstrations eventually ended when W.B. Yeats, one of the Abbey's founders, allowed a public debate about the merits of the work (139).

The format of these riots seems at odds with their function—protesting a play's perceived obscenity and violence through the use of intimidation and violence seems like a non-starter, but, as Heidi J. Holder argues, it is the conflict between reality and fantasy that is at stake within the play. "What *The Playboy* did contain was the assertion that the audience's notion of the peasant type was indeed an illusion, its reality dependent—as is the reality of Christy Mahon as hero to the Mayo townspeople—less on truth than on collective faith" (Holder 531). In other words, the playgoers of the more urban Dublin had romanticized notions concerning what the more rural "peasants" of the west of Ireland were like, and *Playboy* had effectively worked to disabuse these viewers of those notions. That the impoverished people represented on stage would toast a man when they believed he had

murdered his father and turn their backs on him when they learned that he hadn't was too much for an audience that understood these poor in happier terms—it did not help that this story was being presented in a theatre that was proclaiming and fashioning itself to be the national theatre of Ireland.

The *Playboy* riots were not to be the Abbey's last. When Sean O'Casey's masterpiece, *The Plough and the Stars*, was first performed in February of 1926, it raised a fair number of eyebrows for its frank and unflinching evaluation of the Easter Rising of 1916. A protest group was formed by Francis Sheehy Skeffington, who had lost her husband during Easter Rising (Dorcey 150). At the fourth night of performances, the play was interrupted when a group of men and women, sympathetic to Skeffington's cause, rushed the stage partway through the performance, started fist fights with the actors, and nearly pulled down the stage curtain in order to show their displeasure with how the heroes of the Rising were being portrayed (Dorcey 150).

O'Casey was not as able to shake off this controversy as Synge had been in shaking off the one over *Playboy*. Though the Abbey kept *The Plough and the Stars* for its originally intended run of one week (aided again by police officers guarding the house), and though a bewildered O'Casey received a two-minute standing ovation at one of the performances, following a public debate with Mrs. Skeffington, O'Casey left Dublin and moved to London, where he remained for the majority of the rest of his playwrighting career (Dorcey 151-152). He seemed to have taken the controversy deeply with himself as we would later write of people in the arts, "The artist occupies a perilous place in life, for he is the most expendable of men. Really, he hasn't a place in life … He is brought out occasionally, shy, but hopeful,

to show a picture or two … gets a pat on the back, and then is coldly shouldered back into his hidden nook again" (*Green Crow* 170).

If there were a discrepancy between how the Irish peasants were thought to be and the realities of their lives in *Playboy*, *The Plough and the Stars* offered an unnerving discrepancy between the perceived nobility of those who had fought in 1916 with some of the realities that wartime fighting brings with it.[1] For one thing, O'Casey depicts nearly every character in his play as one who is overly driven by emotion, swept up by the currents of forceful speakers, and yet being opportunistic and cowardly when it comes to the actual day of fighting. In fact, all three of his "Dublin Plays" feature characters from the lower classes of society struggling and failing when presented with opportunities to advance themselves above their stations.

In *The Shadow of a Gunman*, first performed in 1923 but taking place in 1920 during the Irish War of Independence, the main character, Donal Davoren, in a lie of omission, does not dissuade a young woman from thinking he is a volunteer for the IRA in the hopes that it will increase her affection for him, but it all comes to nothing when it is discovered that Donal's roommate is an actual member of the IRA and has hidden a bomb in his room. In an act of misguided bravery, the young woman hides the bomb in her own apartment when they hear the military police announcing a sweep of the tenement they live in. She believes the police will not harm her because of her being a woman for the act of hiding the bomb, but she is proven to be incorrect: when the police find the bomb and she attempts to escape, she is shot.

Shadow of the Gunman is also interesting in respect to other works that it directly helped inspire. Christina Reid's 1986 play *Joyriders* begins with a group of teenaged friends

in a theatre watching a production of *Shadow of the Gunman* such that the first lines of *Joyriders* are the last lines of O'Casey's play. As will be discussed in a few paragraphs, O'Casey is clearly suspicious of the possibility of continued revolutionary zeal following any sort of revolution, and he has a deeply classist attitude toward the capabilities and capacities of the Irish lower classes about whom he wrote. If O'Casey is suspicious of nationalist fervors during the revolutionary and Civil War eras in Ireland, Reid continues the thought by revisiting and resituating these apprehensions in the time of The Troubles.

Both O'Casey and Reid are interested in class issues, but Reid, moreso than O'Casey, finds that political difficulties are expressly a problem of class. O'Casey's Davoren misleads his love interest which ultimately results in her death, but in Reid's play, it is the Northern Irish government that misleads the teenagers by making them enroll in job training programs when the teenagers know full well that they are training for jobs that either do not exist or do not exist for these specific teenagers. From the beginning scene, the young people are at odds with their environment; when the play within a play ends at the beginning of *Joyriders*, the teenagers opt to hang back and wait for the older audience members to retrieve their fur coats from the lobby. This simple and brilliant theatrical gesture by Reid immediately sets the teenagers as being out of place not only in their choice of entertainment, but out of place in a world in which they will perpetually be, literally or figuratively, waiting upon the upper classes before they are able to move on their own. If for O'Casey the violence is the literal killing of Minnie by the police, for Reid the violence is systemic and economic. How can The Troubles end, she seems to be asking, if even governmental gestures toward improvement such as job training are widely understood to be pleasant fictions? And how

much will young people succumb to the lure of acts of physical violence in the name of revolutionary ideas if there are no other options available to them?

Returning to O'Casey, in *Juno and the Paycock*, first performed in 1924 but set in 1922 during the Irish Civil War, the main character and titular peacock Jack Boyle learns that his family is to receive a large inheritance. Having the expectation of great wealth, the alcoholic Boyle starts spending money at a hurried pace. Through the events of the play, the inheritance is swindled from the family by the person who was to help them receive it, the swindler romances and fathers a child with Boyle's daughter, his son is killed in fighting related to the Civil War, and his wife and daughter end up abandoning Boyle for what one hopes will be a happier future for them as the mother utters the line, "Oh, it's thrue [sic], it's thrue what Jerry Devine says—there isn't a God, there isn't a God; if there was He wouldn't let these things happen!" (O'Casey 145). In this play, not only is there violence through warfare and fighting, but there is also the violence that comes with unrequited ambitions toward middle-class aspirations, and the disastrous consequences those aspirations bring.

In *The Plough and the Stars*, the last written and performed of the three plays, but dealing with the earliest historical events of the three, there are two groups of characters that affect and are effected by violence. The first is a large group of character types that are gathered at a bar in the second act. Outside the bar, there is a man giving a patriotic speech, encouraging all men to join in the fight to free Ireland from the British, and this speech causes the young men in the bar to swell with nationalistic pride and decide to fight. However, this fervor is short-lived in the world of the play as by the third act, the same characters are seen taking advantage of the confusion Easter Rising brought with it as they

riot and steal from their neighbors—looting for personal gain and abandoning the ideology they espoused just moments before in the world of the play.

The other set of characters worth examining in further detail in this play are Jack and Nora. Jack is an officer in the ICA (Irish Citizen Army)—whose flag featured the plough and the stars from which the play gets its name—but Nora, his wife, worries about the potential injuries that may befall him to the extent that she hides a letter which has promised Jack a promotion within the army. When Jack realizes what has happened, he immediately accepts his appointment. In the third act of the play, Jack attempts to help a wounded comrade, but Nora clings to him and begs him to leave the army and come home. Jack pushes Nora away with such force that it is revealed in the fourth act that Nora has had a stillbirth due to the violence Jack inflicted on her.

Of historical consequence that gives more meaning to the riots that surrounded the original production of *The Plough and the Stars* is the fact that by 1926, Ireland had become a so-called Free State in part due to the revolutionary activity that began in Easter Rising. Though officially still under British rule, the Irish Free State was a compromise that allowed the twenty-six southern counties to govern themselves on their own, though the six northern counties became a new nation, Northern Ireland. The Free State was such an unpopular solution to the problem of independence from Britain that Michael Collins, early Irish hero and freedom fighter, was murdered in an ambush for his part in the negotiation of the Free State. That the Irish Civil War nearly immediately followed the War for Independence shows just how egregious the solution of splitting up the island of Ireland was thought to be. "The civil war created a caesura across Irish history, separating parties, interests and even families, and creating the rationale for political divisions that endued" (Foster 511). Indeed, the tearing

asunder of the country caused nearly a century of violence as republicans who wanted the whole island united fought to that end.

Given that the civil war had just concluded in 1923, O'Casey's *Plough* was at once a brave yet unsympathetic response to a burgeoning new national identity for Ireland. Though O'Casey seems to care for the poor of Ireland by portraying their squalid circumstances in his plays and by creating well-rounded characters, he is also suspicious of the effects that money might have on the poor. Nicholas Grene writes that O'Casey's viewpoint here is not without issues, specifically that "the spectacle of the tenements, supposedly seen as they were, in fact depended on the vantage-point of class difference, a gap not only between the characters and the audience but between the characters and the author also" (134). Though the plays are written in a naturalistic style, O'Casey's attempt of giving of a voice to the voiceless speaks to his own class perceptions about the characters he wrote about.

O'Casey's trilogy promotes an unease about the worth and worthiness of the revolution. Though he had himself participated in revolutionary actions in the 1910s, the three plays show how deeply suspicious O'Casey had become of nationalist causes by the 1920s (McDonald 140). As is seen in the storyline of John and Nora in *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey questions the extent to which the violent means of warfare, even if in the name of fighting for a new nation, are valuable if the fighting ultimately results in the death of the children who might enjoy the new liberties; as in *Famine*, there is a sacrificial victim. While John Connor in *Famine* goes mad through the sacrifice and therefore gets to escape the pain of his time, the cruelty of *The Plough* is that John loses a child and drives his wife insane in the direct course of fighting for a free and, therefore, better Ireland. That independence was not achieved in Ireland for six years following Easter Rising underlines

the extent to which O'Casey takes issues with the personal sacrifices that will run in conjunction with a revolution.

It seems as if the violence of the decade which preceded the premier of *The Plough* worked its way into O'Casey's psyche and influenced the ways in which he could think about his country. Ronan McDonald writes "As well as being a commentator on his times, O'Casey is also a symptom of them, and far from transcending or debunking the rhetoric of political ideology, he is traumatized by it" (140). O'Casey writes about violence because, having lived through it, he cannot escape from it. O'Casey cannot forget the history. The violence has been internalized, and it is not easy to wash the sediment from it away.

This first group of Irish plays have dealt in some way with actual historic precedents all by providing fictionalized versions of what individual experiences may have been. For the second set of plays and films to be discussed, the connections between the plots of the plays and historical events is not as cut and dried. These plays feature extreme acts of physical violence, and I assert that part of the reason these plays are as violent as they are is that the playwrights grew up in the final years of The Troubles and that they internalized the apprehensions of the violence of the times.

Consider first playwright Mark O'Rowe, who writes primarily about the poor of Dublin who find themselves in difficult positions due to poor life choices. Far from a simple moralizer, O'Rowe consistently dwells in shock tactics, but he views his plays as offering more than that. In an interview regarding his play *Terminus*, he said, "you could say that it is just this fantasia of shocking events, appealing to the part of us that enjoys special effects. But you have something true and emotional to anchor that. Otherwise it's just spectacle" (Keating). Not only for that reason, but *spectacle* is also a profoundly odd word that someone

could use to describe *Terminus*, O'Rowe's most exemplary work in his young career, for the play, while describing action-heavy events, is told through alternating monologues among its three characters, identified only as A, B, and C—two women and one man. While all three characters come into contact at points, the women's main story has to do with witnessing and trying to stop what will be a back alley abortion while the man's story describes his immoral escapades following a bargain he made with the devil—the man wanted and gained a beautiful singing voice, but he remained too shy to sing in front of others.

Some will accuse O'Rowe of being a hack and only being able to draw interest to his work in dealing with shocking, violent events, and glancing at a high level at his work seems to give this idea some credence. His early play *Anna's Ankle* (1997) is about a man obsessed with the title body part of an actress in a snuff pornography film. One of the stories told in O'Rowe's monologue play *Howie the Rookie* (1999) deals with a young man who did not pay enough attention to the work of babysitting his younger brother, and the brother is hit by a car and killed as a result of the young man's negligence. *Crestfall* (2003) features the mention of bestiality, and critic Michael Raab argues that of all O'Rowe's play, this one is beyond the pale because "[O'Rowe] simply seemed to wallow in the violence and humiliation the three women undergo. The whole event reeked of misery tourism in the name of supposedly cutting-edge writing" (302). O'Rowe's most recently produced original play, *Our Few and Evil Days* (2014), deals with the weight of the effects of a son's incest upon a small family. To an extent, O'Rowe even plays up the ways in which he might be dismissed by his critics by stating that some of his earliest influences were "video nasties[2], cannibal movies, and kung fu flicks—*I Spit on Your Grave* and all that stuff. Really, we only watched them for the goriness of the special effects" and further that "I don't think I'd ever say I want

to deal with violence or do a study of violence, but I know it's what entertains me" and "the darker stories turn me on" (Raab 294, 303-304).

So what, then, is to be made of O'Rowe? Is his only intention to excite prurient interest? Or is there something else? As with the other playwrights that have been discussed previously, I suggest that O'Rowe is weighed down by the concerns of his time. In *Terminus*, the climax of the play features the villain/protagonist disemboweled and hanging by his entrails from the top of a crane. On the one hand, this is certainly disgusting, but on the other hand, cranes are emblematic of the boom that accompanied the Celtic Tiger of the early 2000s in Ireland. Though O'Rowe's instinct would be to deny any allegations that there is political or social commentary in his work (on an auteur with a similar style, he has remarked "If Quentin Tarantino has two guys rob a jewelry store, no one says it's a commentary on poverty and desperation and alienation of the modern male. It's a … heist movie! … Those are the rules of the heist movie"), it is worth noting that O'Rowe in *Terminus* features an exposing of what is on the inside of a person while upon a vestige of outward symbols of a growing affluence (Raab 305). The extreme nature of O'Rowe's work highlights the grotesqueness of things which are normally kept hidden in a society whose gross domestic product is growing. That *Terminus* was written and first performed just prior to the world financial meltdown that hit Ireland particularly hard, it remains an off-putting emblem of the hidden dangers that accompany economic expansion. It's also worth noting that the original production of *Terminus* premiered at the Abbey in 2007, just three years after budgetary woes nearly forced the Abbey to close down even in the midst of the great economic expansion of the so-called Celtic Tiger bear market, and just two years before the Irish government's release of the *Ryan Report* which estimated that thirty thousand children had

been the victims of either sexual or physical abuse by the representatives of the Catholic church in Ireland (Lonergan ix-x). Prosperity helps to conceal, but, at least in this example, it is unable to do so.

If in his monologue plays, Mark O'Rowe merely has his characters speak of horrific violence, within the oeuvre of his contemporary, Martin McDonagh, the audience must deal with real blood and guts stage effects. In one of his more infamous works, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), McDonagh features torture, murder, and the dismemberment of corpses on stage—and this is a play that is meant to be, and largely succeeds at being, a comedy. McDonagh's *Lieutenant* is explored in more detail in my chapter on the comic being a response to that which is overwhelming.

Marina Carr similarly has a concern with violence in her plays, though the through-line in her work is that of familial violence. As opposed to Enda Walsh in whose plays *The New Electric Ballroom* and *The Walworth Farce* feature characters being forced to re-enact horrific personal moments every day, Carr creates situations in which her characters live in fresh new horrific moments. In perhaps her most important work to date, *On Raftery's Hill*, Carr created a family whose head, the titular Raftery, sexually abuses his two daughters. In exploring this bleakest of topics, Carr brings to the critical conversation some of the ugliest prejudices that the more rural inhabitants of Ireland still have to deal with. The play, written and originally produced during the boon of the Celtic Tiger, also indirectly questions the limits of national economic success, and especially the extent to which future generations might also be able to experience that success. In the play, the youngest daughter is set to wed and finally move away from the horrible situation of her family life, but in an act of darkest comedy, the senile grandmother Shalome puts what was to be the wedding dress on herself

and then trudges around the family's property, making the dress filthy in the process. In a world where young people are kept from achieving their aims by family members either via malice from Raftery or through inattention from Shalome, Carr questions the stability of both the family unit as well as society.

The topic of sexual assault being included as a major plot point on stage brings with it a number of problems both for playwright and audience. For the playwright, there are questions about how a topic this sensitive might be treated; as opposed to the almost cartoonish gore Martin McDonagh's plays bring in an effort to shock, sexual violence as a trope in narrative drama is simply too much to deal with if the point of its inclusion is simply to shock. For the audience, of course, the question becomes how much an audience member can take when live actors appear directly in front of them in real time. Fortunately, this weighty topic is not meant merely for its shock value. As Eamonn Carr suggests, "The grotesque in Carr's work, just like that of J.M. Synge's, serves a significant function, in that it disorientates … Carr rightly moves the rape beyond the sexual dimension and into the frame of destructive and annihilatory power" (142, 148). The critic goes on to argue that this disorientation is not only through the sexual violence, but the play also works because it shows how strongly familial fetters hold, even in truly horrible situations. In this action, Marina Carr examines the ways in which violence has been internalized in her characters, not just content to dwell upon the external effects of that violence.

For the final grouping of violent contemporary Irish plays, I look primarily to Conor McPherson. His work focuses on people who have become stuck, who are unable to move past a specific instance of past trauma. Like O'Rowe, McPherson has chosen to write, at times, in full-length monologue plays. In McPherson's *The Good Thief* (1994), the title

character is a thief who, caught up as a pawn in a robbery that unfortunately becomes a kidnapping, attempts to protect the woman and child he has kidnapped. Unfortunately for him, unnamed violence occurs to the woman and child, and the thief is sent to prison. Part of what makes the play compelling is the direct address to the audience; why is it that the narrator feels like he needs to convey this story to an audience? Part of the explanation is that the thief has a desire for redemption even though he understands that he cannot have it. Just as the good thief in Christian orthodoxy begged Jesus for forgiveness as the two were being crucified next to each other because the thief knew that what he had done was wrong, the thief in this play says, "I sometimes wonder about the type of person I am, but not long. I'm no good" (238). There can be no redemption for this thief because, in a monologue format, he has no one to turn to for support; the audience can only judge him, so he remains haunted by his actions, unable to truly get past them. He is confessing to an audience who can only listen, unable to ameliorate his woes.

The topic of haunting runs through McPherson's work. In *The Weir* (1997), characters tell stories about their brief exchanges with the supernatural, and how those exchanges have affected them. In the play, five characters join together in a small bar in the west of Ireland and talk about experiences that might be explained away by physical means but are portrayed in the stories as being brushes with more than can be explained by merely physical means; this gives relevance to the title, because just as a *weir* is a type of dam that allows a small amount of water to flow over the top, small amounts of the spiritual world have spilled over into the physical world in the stories the characters tell. In the culminating ghost story, a woman from Dublin, Valerie, tells about how her daughter passed away unexpectedly in a freak swimming accident, and how the death shook Valerie implacably. A

few weeks after the girl's funeral, Valerie received a phone call, and on the other end of the line was a voice she understood to be her daughter, confused at where she was, and thinking that she needed her mother to pick her up from her grandparents. Valerie, sobbing, drove to the grandparents, but the girl was obviously not there. This apparent mental break was the final straw and caused the evaporation of her marriage. Though Valerie is trying to start anew in this rural village she has come to, the fact that she continues to tell her story underlines the fact that the violence that came from the death of her daughter is not something that can be easily washed away. Though Valerie, like the thief, wants to create a new life, she is tied down by the life that has happened to her. Just as the nation of Ireland cannot forget centuries of British rule in part because the island remains divided, so too is it impossible for McPherson's characters to forget the violence enacted upon them.

In conclusion, though playwrights like Mark O'Rowe argue that plays are violent merely because of the genre the author is writing in, I have asserted in this paper that the violence in Irish plays of the twentieth century have been a way in which the playwrights have attempted to codify and understand the violence that has been an undeniable force in the history of Ireland for centuries. While the IRA and other republican groups responded to the systemic violence of the British through physical violence, the playwrights discussed here found the nation's history of violence inflicted and received as issues to be discussed at length and responded to through more creative means.

End Notes

[1]It is interesting the Abbey chose to stage a new production of *The Plough and the Stars* in 2016 for the hundredth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. While the revival produced no riots this time around, one assumes that there are those who would continue to the find the play distasteful, even a hundred years later. That the Abbey remains faithful to O'Casey is obvious; its smaller, second stage is named "The Peacock," referring to O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*.

[2]"Video nasties" was the term given to movies that, particularly with the rise of VCRs in the 1980s, the British government censored or did not allow to be seen due to their especially violent, gory, or sexual content.

Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.

---Mary "Mother" Jones

Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.

---Bobby Sands

Chapter Four

The Limits and Uses of Invisibility: Bobby Sands and the Irish Hunger Striker

The trafficked. The undocumented. The incarcerated. The governing powers of numerous societies and various countries around the world seek to make specific people invisible for the purposes of profit and control. Victims of human trafficking are hidden from sight, their stories silenced, by those who mean to profit from effective slave labor. The undocumented immigrant must remain hidden out of fear of deportation and the ensuing cleaving of relationships with friends and loved ones. The prisoner is essentially hidden from society until such time as the legal system determines that person has been rehabilitated—which is to say, until the State decides that prisoner may rejoin society. Though the politics and situations of each example given here differ, I am here most interested in the ways in which certain Irish political prisoners in the twentieth century performed this invisibility, as well as the ways in which they fought against it.

It is important to note that invisibility is not always simply thrust upon individuals by governing forces; invisibility is also a tactic to reclaim power that has otherwise been usurped. If one were to imagine a member of the IRA, for instance, the picture produced by the mind's eye is likely that of a man wearing fatigues and a balaclava. The anonymity provided by the face covering is at once an issue of personal security—the individuals fighting a secret war against the much-better-armed British and Loyalist forces needed their

identities to remain effectively invisible in order for them and their families to not face repercussions—and also a matter of power. The hiding of the individual helps to mask true numbers, and the group might appear stronger than it might reasonable prove through its own access to weaponry.

The invisibility provided by the balaclava should be interrogated further as it makes visible the invisible. Through some actions of the IRA, the group was truly invisible, leaving behind only the effects of their work. In the various bombing campaigns, for instance, the point was for the group members to be truly invisible, to leave the bomb, and to escape, letting the explosion become that which is seen. The balaclava works differently because it insists on the individual person appearing in it; the balaclava asserts it power through the simultaneous visibility of the person and the invisibility of the identity of the individual. The person stands as a metonym for the IRA at large, at once personal and impersonal, at once visible and invisible.

Allen Feldman points out that "in a colonized culture, secrecy is an assertion of identity and of symbolic capital. Pushed to the margins, subaltern groups construct their own margins as fragile insulations from the 'center'" (11). This works both for the secrecy of the individual as well as secrecy for the group, and it has proven true as the notion of an independent Irish republic, and how that republic has been battled for, has remained elusive in the twentieth century. While the cleaving of the North by the British was tremendously unpopular for the Irish who by and large longed for one united Ireland, as the methods of the IRA and the various splinter groups who split off from the IRA, each with different specific aims, the "center" of the desire for a united Irish republic became more and more distressed by the violent means of the republican groups on the margins.

The strategic use of invisibility is tied to power, just as the forced invisibility of the individual by the State through the process of imprisonment is tied to power—as is, frankly, the cleaving of the six counties of Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland. The current situation of the Brexit proceedings which have highlighted apprehensions about how there will be increased difficulties passing from Ireland to Northern Ireland and vice versa highlight the absurdity of the assertion of power by the British on an island that without the British would otherwise be united. Perhaps Brexit will force a call again for a united Ireland; perhaps to rephrase the republican sentiment *tiocfaidh ár lá* (literally, "our day will come"), the day for a united Ireland is on the way.

In the case of those who would become the hunger strikers in the early 1980s, the invisibility that came with imprisonment was doubled through the decision of Margaret Thatcher's administration to rescind the political status that had previously been afforded to IRA members who had been jailed for their activities. The attempt to de-politicize these prisoners was a deliberate political choice by Thatcher, and it sent a message that sought to underline the legitimacy of the British political order and to delegitimize the workings of the IRA. If, the thinking went, the prisoners had no political status within the prisons, then these prisoners were no different than the common criminals who otherwise populated the prisons. If IRA members were common criminals, then they were not fighting for freedom and the reunification of Ireland through whatever means necessary, they were simply terrorists, seeking to disrupt the status quo and engage in the breaking down of polite and safe society. Indeed, the action of removing the political status worked to undermine the republican ability to maintain that they were working toward any kind of ideal; these men and women were simply breaking the laws of a society that was trying to protect itself and its citizens. This

tactic by Thatcher worked to silence these men, to make them doubly invisible, removed from whatever tactics they were attempting in public and to say that those things for which they had gone to prison was worth nothing. Without political status, the threat was that their imprisonment was worth nothing. So what needed to be done in order to make that imprisonment work for their own goals? In two words, hunger striking.

The hunger strike has a long history in Irish society and politics, and indeed, hunger itself has wrapped itself up in some ways with Irish identity due to two major famines. J. Bowyer Bell argues that while the hunger strike may not seem particularly Irish, "it was in a sense very Irish, very Irish Catholic, very much a nationalist tool, where the powerful could be shamed by the self-sacrifice of the weak: the process of starving was triumph, not the concessions wrested from authority" (565). Hunger strike historian David Beresford takes the fasting of Saint Patrick as an early example of hunger striking, though Beresford argues that that strike was not against earthly rulers, but against God himself. Per Beresford, an angel told Patrick that his original prayer to God was requesting too much, and so Patrick fasted for forty-five days until God changed his mind (15). Of course, fasting was a spiritual practice espoused by many early church fathers, so the fasting of Patrick, while a convenient starting point for Irish fasting, may have been less about the expression of Irishness itself and more about the expression of his faith. Nevertheless, Patrick remains a helpful guidepost, even, if as argued elsewhere in this book, his actual Irishness is a matter of further debate and consideration.

The notion of fasting as a means for redress of specific grievances was adopted in Ireland in medieval times. The "*Troscad* (fasting on or against a person) or *Cealachan* (achieving justice by starvation)," were spelled out in the civil code, called the *Senchus Mor*

(Beresford 14). There were specific conditions in which it was acceptable to attempt to right a civil wrong in this way, such as recovering a debt, though an aspect of the fast needed to include the faster remaining on the doorstep of the person who had committed the injury. What is key about the code is that it included an aspect of remuneration. The best case for remuneration would have been for the person who had committed the grievance to acknowledge the debt and to pay or otherwise make the matter right with the hunger striker. However, should the hunger strike continue unto the death of the striker, then "the person at whose door he starved himself was held responsible for his death and had to pay compensation to his family" (Beresford 15). Beresford notes that having someone die at one's home would have been particularly troublesome in terms of honor as hospitality was a key aspect of personhood in medieval Irish society.

While hunger striking experienced a lull for a time, it was a dramatist that reintroduced the concept in the early twentieth century. W.B. Yeats' 1904 play *The King's Threshold* features a central story in which a poet who has been imprisoned for speaking out in an attempt to get to some form of say in the government goes on hunger strike. The character of the king notes that "Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this, although there is good food and drink beside him, has eaten nothing" (quoted in Beresford 16). Although the play remains one of Yeats' minor works, it nevertheless appears very timely with Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War occurring only a dozen years in the future.

During the Anglo-Irish War, hunger striking once more began to be a means of protest for republicans; as tensions and assertions of national identity again raised their heads, the extremity of the hunger strike again became a calculated a deliberate option in the arsenal of the Irish republican. In 1920, Terence MacSwiney, an IRA commander and Lord

Mayor of the city of Cork who had been sentenced to a two-year prison term for inciting others to rebel, went on a hunger strike to protest what he considered to be an unjust prison term as he did not recognize the legitimacy of British rule in Ireland (Beresford 17). Although other prisoners joined the strike with him, he was the only one of them to see the strike to its ultimate conclusion; on the seventy-fourth day without food, he succumbed. MacSwiney in his writings underscored a key aspect of the hunger strike: "The contest … is not one of rivalry or vengeance, but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most that will conquer" (Beresford 18-19). Although this speech was given as he ascended to the office of Lord Mayor, and was therefore more about the greater struggle for an independent Ireland, there are obvious correlations between what MacSwiney believed the people of Ireland needed to do in order to achieve their freedom and what the hunger strikers needed to do in order to be "free." MacSwiney, after all, on the day he was court-martialed and initiated his strike, stated "I will be free alive or dead in a month" (Beresford 18). That he continued to strike well past two months is a testament to his insistence on perseverance—something that as a means to a free Ireland is one that republicans has continually taken to heart.

Following the conclusion of the Anglo-Irish War and as the partition of Ireland and Northern Ireland came into effect, prisoners continued to strike. The competing Irish factions of Michael Collins, who had supported the agreement with the British under the belief that it was the best option for Ireland to be able to stop the war—and who was later assassinated by an anti-partition republican, and Éamon de Valera, who believed that a divided Ireland could never be put back together, were contentious. The film biopic *Michael Collins* even suggests that de Valera ordered the assassination of Collins, though there is no historical evidence that

that was the case. These divisions at the top of the Irish political rule were echoed in the lower echelons of Irish republicans as well. In 1923, as many as 8,000 republican prisoners fasted in protest of the partition (Beresford 19). In the 1940s, three IRA men were allowed to fast to death, that last of which, IRA Chief of Staff Sean McCaughey died in only twenty-two days after he started to not even drink water as part of his fast (Beresford 20).

Following these events, the hunger fast again became a rarity in Ireland. This was caused, in part, by the effective dissolution of the IRA in the late 1940s. As the twentieth century continued the IRA was rebuilt and other smaller or splinter groups took on the cause of militant republicanism in Ireland. The earlier fasts built a tradition in Ireland of this sort of protest and were certainly in the minds of the hunger strikers led by Bobby Sands in 1981. These Sands-led protests are the concerns of the remainder of this chapter.

To begin, of what use is it to the individual to take part in a protest, the natural end of which causes the physical dissolution and death of that person? After all, in what sense does the republican phrase "our day will come" remain true when the individual is subtracted from the group? Or, how can one come into a mindset that would allow that person to give up their life, and therefore lose their own identity, in the name of helping to procure a utopia of a national identity?

What is ultimately at stake between the Irish republicans and British ideas concerning the necessity and rightness of their empire is a competing set of ideas concerning utopia. Utopias are blissful creations that often prove untenable in reality, but in terms of the possible, both the Irish and the British enjoy the positive possibilities that their notions of Ireland provide. These two ideas of utopia cannot co-exist; a divided Ireland is necessarily not a united Ireland, and only keeping Northern Ireland as part of the Empire is necessarily

not maintaining total control of the island. Given the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which established a ceasefire from republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups in Ireland and Northern Ireland, it would seem that both sides of this longstanding dispute between the nations are relying on what MacSwiney advocated in his speech: endurance. It is as if both sides are clinging to the notion that "our day will come." The thing about which both sides long is, as Allen Feldman puts it, "the imagined community of utopian completion: United Ireland or British Ulster" (9).

To be a hunger striker in this context is to be a true believer in the republican utopian vision for Ireland. The idealism that would envision the utopic state manifests itself in the sacrifice of the self for the good of the nation. This purity of vision engulfs all other concerns, including opportunities and responsibilities that remain in life. There is also a paradox in terms of the distance between the ideal of endurance and the ideal required to see a hunger strike through. On one hand, a hunger strike must, to a certain extent, be endured; to choose to disavow and reject one of the most basic of needs, and to turn away from the nourishment and pleasure that eating provides, is a physically demanding action. To say "no" to one's body as it demands sustenance is incredibly difficult; one needs only to look at the size of the diet industry to see how difficult people find it to even reduce the amount of food they consume, let alone turn away from food entirely. On the other hand, however, if the hunger striker plans to see the strike through to death, then there is a paradoxical specific end point at which endurance necessarily ceases.

But why would a young person strike at the cost of his or her own life? Father James Healy, S.J., suggests that there is "the conviction that he is showing great love in laying down his life for his friends … I am convinced that any suggestion that they are taking, rather than

giving, their lives would sound absurd to them, a plain mistake" (O'Malley 25). Father Healy is clearly viewing the hunger striker, or at least asserting that the hunger striker himself, views himself in necessarily Catholic imagery. In the quote, he paraphrases the words of Jesus from the gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 13 "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Just as Christ foreshadows the sacrifice on the cross in Christian belief in this passage, so too does Healy underscore the higher purpose to which the Irish Catholic hunger striker aspires, and this higher purpose works to provide aid in the performance of the strike. Through the enactment of the fast, the striker performs his or her love for the greater group to which he claims loyalty. It is clear that this passage of scripture was close to the heart of the leader of the 1981 hunger strike, Bobby Sands, as the Priest, Father Dennis Faul, who tried to convince Sands not to go through with the strike (a scene later dramatized in the film *Hunger*) specifically remembered Sands quoting this verse back to him (Taylor 279).

So the performance and enactment of the hunger strike is always at least dual-pronged. In the first place, the fast acts to as a protest in support of some specific cause—and this cause often also helps to unify factions. "The republican hunger strikes of 1980-1981, conducted in a … fraught political situation, were similarly affecting, arousing a generalized Catholic sympathy where close political allegiances were often wanting" (Kelly 461). For Bobby Sands and the strikers in 1981, that specific cause was to fight against the negation of political status for republican prisoners—political status treated republicans more similarly to how prisoners of war would have been treated, as opposed to being treated in line with other prisoners who have been convicted and imprisoned for civil or criminal matters. Their hunger also made the striking more personal between the strikers and those who watched them. This

is important because, as artist Adrian Piper points out, "forms of institutional oppression ultimately devolve in individual relationships, specific concrete relationships between you and me. After all, institutions are not abstract objects; institutions are run by individuals, they are staffed by individuals" (Anderson 88).

The film *Hunger* does a good job of portraying the personal nature of the hunger strikers' conflict at the H-Block prisons in Northern Ireland. In the first scene of a film, a man is shown washing his hands, and the knuckles are very well mangled and banged up. The man silently gets the water as hot as he can stand and he cleans the blood off of his hands. The obvious metaphor here of blood on one's hands associates this man with guilt and responsibility, but the viewer does not see just what the man is guilty of until a few scenes later when he is shown to be a guard at the prison in which Bobby Sands and other republicans are housed. The character Bobby Sands in brought into a central holding area, and he is completely nude (republicans in these prisons largely refused to wear the clothing of the general population of criminals as they viewed themselves as political prisoners, not members of the general population). Sands fights back with all his might; he refuses to let the British guards force him to do anything without a fight, and it is here where the viewer learns how the man who had been washing his hands gets his hands so dirty. He brutally punches Sands, repeatedly, until Sands is bloodied and he has no choice but to acquiesce and be dragged to his cell.

What this scene helps show is that for both the republican and the British guard, they exist not merely as metonyms of larger powers, but they are individuals needing to fight as individuals for that which they believe to be correct. For the Sands character, he fights because any inch of ground given to the British, even in a situation like prison where the

guards necessarily hold much if not all of the power, is an inch that will be nearly impossible to make up. The guard fights in part because Sands is fighting with all of his might, but certainly the guard understands that he needs to maintain the order of the prison and the rule of law. What these two men represent are diametrically opposed visions of reality; again, both believe in mutually exclusive visions of the utopic. There can be no both/and; it must be a case of either/or.

In the second place, the performance of the fast acts as a unifier to the group at large; it becomes something of a holy act. To extend the Catholic metaphor, just as Jesus died to wipe away the sins of the world, the striker-unto-death is willing to die, and sometimes dies, in an effort to wipe away the sins of the British against the Irish. The 1981 hunger strikers were communing with current republicans, but also, as Tim Pat Coogan argues, "they were going back into history, to the memory of Terence McSwiney [sic], the events of the 1940s, and the example of I.R.A. prisoners from time immemorial who, when all else was taken from them, fought the battle with the only weapon left, their wills … to fast to the death" (Coogan 370). The fasts were both for the issue at hand and as a performance of communion with both the living and the dead. It is no mistake that many of the films which examine the work of the hunger strikers portray them with beards and long hair. While this portrayal is certainly a matter of historical record, there also bears likeness between the characters of the strikers with popular portrayals of the figure of Jesus. Again, the idea of laying down one's life for the group hints at the beatific, and certainly the ways in which the hunger strikers are remembered bears witness to this idea in the popular imagination.

The striker occupies a liminal space between the living and the dead. Still alive, but denying himself those things that would allow life to continue, and not dead, but working

toward death, the striker acts as conduit, connecting that which is real and current with the dream for that which is utopic. In this liminal space, the striker transcends the needs of the physical in an effort to strike at that which will outlive them—certainly this is the case for the striker who strikes unto death. With these things in mind, let us a take a deeper look into one hunger striker in particular, Bobby Sands, and examine to what ends the means of his hunger strike led.

Robert "Bobby" Sands, later changing his name to Riobard O'Seachnasaich, was born in an area of Belfast called Rathcoole in 1954 to Catholic, but not necessarily republican-leaning, parents. He lived there until he was seven years old when his family was forced to leave following his mother being on the receiving end of an "orchestrated campaign of harassment by her nextdoor [sic] neighbor" (O'Malley 37). When the choices became to take the neighbor to court in order to attempt to cease the harassment or to move to another part of the city, the Sands opted to take the course of action that didn't involve the expense and time spent taking the matter to the courts.

With that said, much of the rest of Sands' young life is harder to re-construct, other than in broad swath. Padraig O'Malley states that he was skeptical of some of the accounts that he received from those who professed to know Sands when he was younger because so much of what they said seemed filtered through the prism of what Sands ultimately meant to the republican movement. However, of the accounts he believes, things like "'average' and 'ordinary' and 'easily fitting in' keep cropping up in conversation with those who knew Sands before involvement with the … movement" (39). In high school, Sands played on a travelling soccer team on which both Protestant and Catholic players played, and O'Malley notes that just a few years after the men had graduated, three people from the team, Sands

and two Protestants who had joined the Ulster Volunteer Force, were in prison for involvement with paramilitaries (40).

When he turned eighteen, according to O'Malley's analysis, Sands joined up with the IRA not out of a sincere desire toward the republican cause, but because joining up with a paramilitary was something that working class young men from certain neighborhoods in Belfast did. He had been a member of the group for no more than six months when he "was arrested when four handguns were found in a house where he was staying" (O'Malley 45). So how did this more or less average young man become the sort of person who is willing to lay down his love for the love of his friends that they might come to realize a vision of the republican utopia?

In prison, Sands was assigned to a location with other IRA members that was led by Gerry Adams. Adams, who would later become the president of Sinn Fein, was only a few years older than Sands, having been born in 1949. As a leader, Adams worked to give younger IRA members the history of what republicanism had been about, with an emphasis on literature and a push for the young men to learn Gaelic. Here Sands exceled, mastering the native tongue of Ireland to such an extent, that he tutored other prisoners who wished to learn (O'Malley 45). When Sands was released from prison in 1976, he "was no longer a naïve eighteen-year-old but a committed proponent of republican separatism" (O'Malley 48). Thus, even though he had a young wife and three year old son, it was only six months again when he found himself back behind bars, once again due to having possession of a firearm (O'Malley 49). He was eventually sent to the infamous Maze prison, sometimes known as Long Kesh because the prison was on a former Royal Air Force base of the same name. Allen Feldman argues that Sands came to believe and to understand "that the very

reproduction of the IRA, its ideological survival, and its conservations of an active and experienced membership were anchored in the prison situation" (162). This is to say that if the British government was going to arrest large numbers of IRA members, than the fight toward freedom and a united Irish republic would necessarily move to the prison system as well, and that it was not true that "the political was subordinate to the military and the full politicization of the Irish masses was predicated on a preliminary military resolution of the conflict" (Feldman 162).

In his time at Maze, there are three unique protests in which Sands participated. The first was the blanket protest. Because IRA prisoners had been told to comply with wearing prison uniforms as opposed to their own clothing, many IRA members started the blanket protest, in which they refused to wear any clothing at all, choosing instead to cover themselves with the blanket from their cell. For a time, guards allowed prisoners to continue to use bathroom facilities and travel the halls wearing their blankets, but this policy was eventually overridden such that prisoners were only allowed to leave their cells if they were wearing their prison uniform. IRA members resisted this which both effectively forced them to never leave their cells and necessitated the use of the dirty protest. Having no means of accessing bathroom facilities, prisoners used pots in their cells to urinate and defecate into, and as a means of protest, the prisoners began to pour the containers of their waste under the doors or out the windows so that it flowed into the hallways or the yard, forcing prison guards to mop it up. The guards eventually plugged the gaps under the doors and the permanently fixed the windows shut, so the prisoners had no outlet for their waste. With no means of disposal for their waste, prisoners began to smear it on their cell walls in an effort to empty the chamber pots. Of this time, one prisoner said:

> The cells by that time were in a bad way. We were lying on urine-soaked mattresses on the floor next to the excrement and the urine because during cell searches the screws [guards] would kick over the chamber pots. The food was very bad, and some of that was going on the wall to dry with the excrement because it was inedible. Guys would be making designs on the wall with the porridge and the excrement. Each morning we would lift the mattresses and chase the maggots out from under them. (Feldman 170)

Being subject to human rights abuses, these prisoners fought back with the only methods that had available to them: their bodies and bodily fluids. "The excreta went up on the cell wall as a historical record of the conditions of their imprisonment" (Feldman 181). Although this "record" was necessarily impermanent, it speaks to the will of the prisoners to attempt to continue to alter their environment, to make best of a necessarily terrible situation.

What was at stake in the prisons was the loss of the IRA's political identity. As mentioned previously, it is the work of a prison to make bodies invisible, to disappear them from lived experience outside of prison walls. The refusal by Sands and others to submit to being clothed by prison garb and choosing to instead be clothed in nakedness was consequential. It was unacceptable for these men to willfully give up their political status, a point that, as Sands realized, was totally key in the republican movement. Though there were branches of the IRA and affiliated groups that longed for a direct military solution to British colonization in Northern Ireland, Sands understood that no matter how brutal and frequent IRA bombings and assassinations became, there were a large swath of Irish republicans who found the use of violence on others unacceptable and immoral, even if they shared the vision for a utopic freed, and united Ireland. These protests were performative because it helped to underline the point that the IRA would not be made invisible, their cause was not that of the general population of criminals—they were imprisoned because they fought for a free Ireland.

The irony with all of these protests is that they made the prisoners both more and less visible. Reports of the human rights abuses of the Thatcher administration encouraged a younger Bernie Sanders, then in the office of Mayor of Burlington, Vermont, to pen a strongly worded letter to Thatcher in which he said "we are deeply disturbed by your government's unwillingness to stop the abuse, humiliation, and degrading treatment of the Irish prisoners now on hunger strikes," and imploring the Prime Minister to change her administration's tactics against the prisoners (Millward). On the other hand, as part of the blanket protest, by not wearing prison uniforms, prisoners were unable to see family members because they were necessarily not allowed to leave their cells. So the strategy of greater visibility gained was a tradeoff; it replaced the comforts of the personal with the insistence upon the political.

The third form of strike that needs to be discussed here is the hunger strike. This strike is most obvious based on the name, but it is the most interesting from a theoretical point of view. While the other strikes are predicated upon that which is on the outside of the body or that which has been emitted from the body, the hunger strike denies entry of food into the body. It is also the most necessarily painful, and with this pain comes another form of invisibility the strikers needed to fight against—the invisibility of pain itself. In her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry makes the argument that physical pain is mostly invisible to those not directly experiencing it. There are ways for doctors to help gauge the severity of pain level (such as having patients state on a scale of one to ten how much pain they are in), but even these tests in some ways fail when it comes to the problem of subjectivity; one person's pain threshold might be very different from another's. And so one problem that is a stake with the hunger strike is that the viewer cannot know how much pain the striker feels.

In the case of Bobby Sands, however, he kept a diary at the request of republican leadership for the first seventeen days of his hunger strike, so readers are able to assemble some idea of what the process was like for him. Over this time, he went from sixty-four kilograms to fifty-seven and seven-tenths kilograms (approximately one hundred forty-one pounds to one hundred twenty-seven pounds). This diary details the first two and a half weeks of what will eventually lead to his death, and it is important to break down how Sands chose to perform himself in these words. The audience for this performance were republican leaders, but Sands must have known also that, should the strike lead to his death, his words would be publicized and made widely available.

The topics that he covers in the diary are far ranging. He despairs early on that he has broken his mother's heart; in so doing, he reminds the reader of his own humanity. Sands was not a robot, only thinking of the good of a united Ireland, but he was a human being who loved his mother and felt badly for the pain he had caused. This is an important thing for him to write about because it is at odds with the callous ways in which Margaret Thatcher would later speak about Sands and the other strikers. He describes poor treatment from the "screws" (guards); at one point a guard sees Sands reading a short book, and he darkly jokes "I see you're reading a short book. It's a good thing it isn't a long one for you won't finish it" (Sands). Of this encounter, Sands writes, "That's the sort of people they are" (Sands). He later writes that "The Screws are staring at me perplexed. Many of them hope (if their eyes tell the truth) that I will die. If need be, I'll oblige them" (Sands). In writing about the guards in this manner, he is reminding the other republicans that if the over-arching problem is British hatred of the Irish and their colonization of Northern Ireland, by focusing on the guards, he underlines that the guards are the problem writ small—they are emblematic of the

larger issue, and any ways in which the guards may be pushed back against is a win for the republican movement. He writes several times about being tempted by the food he is daily offered, but he writes "I'm not troubled by hunger pangs, nor paranoiac about anything pertaining to food, but, by God, the food has improved here," underlining that in his estimation, a tactic of the prison is to increase the quality of the food in an effort to subvert his ability to withstand a prolonged hunger strike (Sands). Here we have no way of knowing whether this was an actual tactic employed by the prison, or whether his own hunger made the smells that much more savory. Also noteworthy in Sands' journal is that he alternates between writing in English and writing in Gaelic; he is unwilling to give up the idea that Irish national identity is in part tied up in its own language.

But Sands greatest performance is the way in which he highlights the utopic republican vision for Ireland. In his first diary entry, he writes, "Foremost in my tortured mind is the thought that there can never be peace in Ireland until the foreign, oppressive British presence is removed, leaving all the Irish people as a unit to control their own affairs" and later that "I am dying not just to attempt to end the barbarity of the H-Block … but primarily because what is lost in here is lost for the Republic" (Sands). In the final entry on the seventeenth day, he compares the physical, corporeal problem of the hunger to the higher issues of the mind:

> I was thinking today about the hunger-strike. People say a lot about the body, But don't trust it. I consider that there is a kind of fight indeed. Firstly the body doesn't accept the lack of food, and it suffers from the temptation of food, and from other aspects which gnaw at it perpetually. The body fights back sure enough, but at the end of the day everything returns to the primary consideration, that is, the mind. The mind is the most important. But then where does this proper mentality stem from? Perhaps from one's desire for freedom. It isn't certain that that's where it comes from. If they aren't able to destroy the desire for freedom, they won't break you. They won't break me because the desire for freedom, and the freedom of the Irish people, is in my heart. (Sands)

Understanding that Sands was performing in these writings in part for the republican leadership, one might dismiss his fervor as nothing more than a good soldier remaining steadfast in his dedication to the cause, but I think that such a dismissal fundamentally misunderstands the stakes of what Sands was experiencing. Certainly, optimistic writing on Sands' first day of the strike might be interpreted as a soldier eager to be used, but for Sands to remain steadfast on the last day his diary, after two and a half weeks without food, to not just republicanism but to the greater good of freedom showed that he was a true believer in the cause, and he was operating out of a sense of personal duty and responsibility. One wonders whether the other hunger strikers could have held as tightly to the goal themselves without Sands earnestly leading the way. Sands understood that in order to have hope of achieving the utopian dream of a united Ireland, he needed to fight back against the attempts of the British to make him and the other republican prisoners invisible through the use of slowly making himself invisible through his body eating itself. To fight invisibility with invisibility in order to, paradoxically, make the movement shine more brightly—this is the work of Bobby Sands.

These sustained hunger strikes which led to the death of ten men in total, captured the imagination of the public, and the public began to demand that the government act in a way that represents the dignity of life. The performance of the 1981 hunger strike worked multi-faceted responses. To begin, of course, there was public outrage, in Britain, Ireland, the United States, and around the world. In addition, the fast-unto-death provides encouragement for those IRA members also imprisoned; if their fellow members are able to see the fast to the end, then a sense of nobility and rightfulness becomes attached. And based on the writings and interviews with the men who died, there is a real sense that they fasted out of

their shared duty and obligation to the utopic dream. It also cannot be understated that the fasts of these men looked back to Irish famine of the nineteenth century with a key aspect of reversal. While in the Irish famine, approximately a third of the population of Ireland either died or emigrated from the island because of lackluster attempts of the British to quell the damage and dangers of the famine—in some cases, starvation was a result of a cruelty of the British to let food rot in warehouses instead of feeding it to the people; for the Northern Irish hunger strikers, they had food but they refused to eat it. In both cases, the British government was cruel in the implementation of their plans for control, but the hunger strikers were able to take their life (and their deaths) into their own hands. While a larger scale examination is not necessary in the work of this chapter, it is worth mention that Tom Murphy's play *Famine* explores a fictional man's experience during the Great Hunger, and he too must come to terms with whether it is better to take both his own and his family's lives instead of yielding to the famine exacerbated by the British.

In many of his essays, particularly "No More Masterpieces" and "The Theater and Cruelty," Antonin Artaud longs for the creation of a type of performance "to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of the poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out onto the streets" (85). Artaud was writing out of frustration with the current products that were being fashioned for the stage, but I argue there is a unique parallel between the type of theatre that Artaud longed for and that which was produced by Sands and the hunger strikers, and indeed, in nearly many high-stakes protests that are made known to the masses. Thinking again about Artaud's quote, people were outraged at the treatment of the hunger strikers, and people did pour into the streets to protest. One example of this is that Sands himself was put on the

ballot to become a member of parliament representing Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and he won the election while he was in prison and on hunger strike, obviously unable to campaign—even if the immediate response to this election by the British government was to amend its laws so that prisoners could not run for parliament (Taylor 281). Perhaps more to Artaud's point, when news of Sands' death was reported, there were multi-day riots in nationalist communities in Northern Ireland.

Artaud writes of the theatre he wants to create that "we have a right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone" (74). Sands' death was "understandable to everyone." His funeral procession was a huge display; it is estimated that one hundred thousand people followed his coffin through the streets (Taylor 283). The unjustness of the brutality of the British government was writ large upon his corpse, and Prime Minister Thatcher insisted upon the British position that had resulted in Sands' death. In statements following his death, Thatcher stated "He was a convicted criminal … he chose to take his own life. It was a choice his organization did not allow to many of its victims" and later, more infamously, "Faced with the failure of their discredited cause, the men of violence have chosen in recent months to play what may well be their last card" (Taylor 283-284). During Sands' protest, Thatcher would not meet with members of the Irish Parliament who had come to speak on behalf of Sands, and she stated, "It is not my habit or custom to meet M.P.'s from a foreign country about a citizen of the United Kingdom resident in the United Kingdom" ("Britain's Gift to Bobby Sands"). In some ways, if Sands' death was meant to be a rallying cry about the unjustness of Britain to those sympathetic to the republican movement, to Margaret Thatcher, his death was nothing

more than the loss of a criminal whose death should not be mourned and whose death was ultimately a victory for law and order in the United Kingdom.

In these quotes, Thatcher betrayed her weakness and her misunderstanding of what Sands and the other strikers communicated through their fasting and their deaths. Writing upon the situation, while the *New York Times* agreed with Thatcher in principle, the editorial board understood that Thatcher had given up more than she had gained: "Prime Minister Thatcher is right in refusing to yield political status to Bobby Sands … But this dying young man has made it appear that her stubbornness, rather than his own, is the source of a fearful conflict already ravaging Northern Ireland … By appearing unfeeling and unresponsive, she and her Government are providing Bobby Sands with a deathbed gift—the crown of martyrdom" ("Britain's Gift to Bobby Sands"). It is clear that recent film depictions of Sands and the other hunger strikers have picked up on this idea of martyrdom. In films about the strikers like *Hunger*, *H3*, and *Some Mother's Son*, when the strikers near death, they are portrayed as calm, resting peacefully, with long stringy hair and beards, reminiscent of course of the greatest martyr of the Catholic faith—Jesus Christ.

If can consider the fasting-unto-death as performance, each of these performances was perfect representation of Artaud's idea of a cruel theatre. The fasting-unto-death was necessarily deliberate, and Artaud describes his vision as "cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death" (102). By stating that the republicans had played "their last card," Thatcher mistook the stakes. For these men, the fasting was not a game, it was not a volley over a net

to see what was returned, but it was a conscious, deliberate performance to stoke outrage at their treatment in an effort to weaken control of the British government over republicans and republican prisoners that the vision of a utopian united Ireland might come to fruition in the lifetimes of the other nationalists.

In short, it was Thatcher's opinion and political intent that these men should be invisible, in the sense that those in power seek to make small those who would fight back against that power, and Thatcher undoubtedly believed that the strikers not affecting any policy changes and therefore not succeeding at anything but killing themselves would aid in her prerogative toward their invisibility. However, an old quote from Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of 1916's Easter Rising who was executed for his part in it, seems to ring true in the hearts and minds of the hunger strikers: "To fight is to win, not to fight is to lose" (Smith 13). Making the choice to take on the role of martyr was a deliberate method used not to prolong the game, as Thatcher would have parsed it, but to continue the fight, which is the fight looking toward when their day would come. Indeed, by fasting-unto-death, the striker makes himself invisible again, harnessing the force of what could otherwise be a performance of power from the British, and instead, using that invisibility toward the end of a free and united Ireland. To once again quote Bell, "the process of starving was triumph, not the concessions wrested from authority" (565).

In this chapter, we have considered the idea of the prison strike, and the hunger strike in particular, as a means of providing visibility to a population that is otherwise made invisible. Paradoxically, the hunger strike-unto-death both provides visibility to the prisoner that might not otherwise be afforded to them while also ultimately making that prisoner invisible through their own death. Additionally, I have argued that invisibility can be a

political purpose unto itself if the person making himself invisible is able to harness it in that manner. Finally, the hunger strike as performance has been considered as a means of not only rallying those who are likeminded around a shared cause, but also to bring widespread attention to the problems the strike is attempting to address. While it is true that a united Ireland remains a utopian fantasy, the eventual Good Friday agreement of 1998 allowed the violence of The Troubles to ultimately come to an end, and the dedication to the cause by Bobby Sands and other hunger strikers was an integral aspect of coming to that time of peace.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun …
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

---Seamus Heaney, "Digging"

Conclusions

Dorothy Macardle, a mid-twentieth century playwright, wrote in an essay on the Irish theatre that "The theatre, communal in its origins and in its appeal, remains sensitive to communal moods and the mind of the dramatist is a kind of weather-vane … Irish drama, even more than that of most countries, has been conditioned by the nation's history" (Leeney 97) Indeed, as I have argued in these previous pages, so much of twentieth century Irish drama is looking backwards and it continues to respond to the traumas of its history as it attempts to create a vision of a national identity. That so much of this drama directly or indirectly works through lingering issues of colonialism, as well as the fact that Northern Ireland continues to be colonized, suggests that the inherent difficulties of creating and maintaining a new culture have not yet fully been resolved in the Irish national imagination. Making a culture is a process of negotiations, of acceptance for certain issues and of attempts to negate other issues.

Lady Gregory understood well the issues of building culture, and she knew that theatre, apart from simply being about entertainment, might also be instructional in a movement to generate what the new Irish culture could be. She strongly asserted that for too long, Irish people had been portrayed on the stage simply as stereotypes, often as drunkards or simple-minded. She understood that there was a narrow line between any noble attempt to generate a new national identity one side and the ugly lows that unfettered nationalism can

fall to on the other. Both Lady Gregory and, to a greater extent, William Butler Yeats imagined a new national identity that looked back to Celtic or Gaelic roots, roots that were as close to apolitical as possible—other than the immediate assertion of the benefits of a pre-British-colonialized civilization.

In the first place, Irish writers have turned toward adaptations in an effort to create a new national identity. I have suggested that through turning to ancient Greek texts that deal with the relationship the individual must have to the State and modernizing these texts by putting them into current political contexts, Irish playwrights have created works that are both instructional and inspirational. Additionally, through the adaptation of specific events in Irish history for the stage, playwrights have given themselves and viewers an opportunity to re-think and re-imagine the ways these events have continued to influence notions of national identity.

I have also argued that with the establishment of Northern Ireland, a unified republic of Ireland is a dream not yet achieved. Because of this, Irish playwrights have turned to black humor which, while poking fun at specific topics like satire does, necessarily despairs of any possibility of change. Playwrights have turned to this type of humor not just because of the incomplete utopia that Irelands remains as, but also because, citing the work of Sigmund Freud, the laughter that is produced works as a release valve for a society that remains not at ease.

A hundred years past the events of 1916's Easter Rising which set the wheels of the vehicle that became the independent nation of Ireland into motion, I have argued that playwrights have continued to ground the violence in the nation's independence within the works that they produce for the stage. This violence on the stage speaks to a problem of

violence within a nation's history: how can violence, a necessarily destructive force, result in a new worthwhile creation? Taking for granted that there were no non-violent means by which the Irish could establish their own nation—though Daniel O'Connell attempted in a way to do just this in the early eighteenth century—we are left with the uneasy paradox that Irish national creation and identity are inexorably linked with destructive forces, and this paradox remains unsolved in the national psyche. As a brief example, that the title character of Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, an ultra-violent Irish republican who is depicted as being more concerned with enacting vengeance upon those who seemed to have wronged him than he is with finding out the truth and nature of the assumed wrong, is meant to be played not as frightening but instead played for laughs speaks to a playwright and a nation not at ease with the ways violence has come to be a part of the national story.

The final chapter, in conversation with the theoretical work of Antonin Artaud, argues that the republican hunger strike and, in particular, the performance-unto-death of Bobby Sands provided the ultimate performance in that it incited an international response to the cruelty inflicted upon republican prisoners and eventually made the Thatcher regime pull back from some of its more oppressive practices. I also make connections between the need for invisibility that the IRA and affiliated groups need to have to protect their volunteers with the necessary invisibility of pain involved with a hunger strike. I suggest that paradoxically the invisibility of Sands' pain ultimately made the struggle for prisoners' rights unavoidably visible and unable to be avoided.

The Irish stage continues to be a space in which history is re-contextualized and re-imagined in efforts to come to grips with the enormity of a colonial history. Because the island remains separated by an international border, the aesthetic and political work of

national identity remains in flux. This identity is large enough for a plurality of voices. As of the writing of these words, the nature of the British exit from the European Union has not been solidified, and I imagine with dismay how a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland will play out from a military/para-military standpoint. A new wave of sectarian violence would seem to be inevitable should the ability to pass freely between the two nations come to an ignominious end. However unlikely it may seem, may the island find itself instead in the midst of talks for a happy reunification instead.

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