Heroes on Stage: Robert Emmet, Charles Parnell, and Michael Collins in Three Irish Plays from Interwar Avant-garde to the 1990s

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Abstract

Once they enter the zone of public memory, historical figures, however celebrated they might be, are no longer able to speak for themselves, but become objectified by historians, creative writers, and interested parties down through the generations. Their portraits of revolutionaries might potentially counteract the subjugation imposed by colonial and anti-colonial powers and give them a more humane touch that prompts the audiences' independent judgments. Representations of these historical figures might therefore put their contributions, personalities and even charisma under the microscope, challenging the historiography that tends to apotheosize them as heroes. The plays under discussion, chosen for their particularly avant-garde innovations and not yet fully discussed in the literature, are Dennis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (1929), Larry Kirwan's *Mister Parnell* (1992), and Tom MacIntyre's *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (1995). These plays feature Robert Emmet, Charles Parnell, and Michael Collins, renowned yet still controversial Irish revolutionaries, respectively.

Keywords: Robert Emmet, Charles Parnell, Michael Collins, historiography, Avant-garde, Irish drama

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Introduction: Finding Hidden Realities

Theatrical engagement with iconic figures involved in seminal moments of Irish history can be considered as almost a distinctive tradition in Irish writing for the stage. If so, it is a tradition in which dramaturgical innovation challenges counter-revolutionary tendencies in dramatizations of political events, which often "de-sensationalise . . . the images of political violence . . . with complicating and distancing ironies" (Grene 47). Epic content generates experimental dramaturgies, and audiences of these plays are confronted with alternative, sometimes disturbing, realities which reject inherited ideological assumptions.

Despite the fact that the Abbey Theatre, on its foundation as the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, aimed to be an experimental and less commercial venue that encouraged playwrights to be more adventurous in form and theme, it became

less subversive before Lady Gregory retired in 1928. Although the Abbey was not entirely resistant to European innovations before 1928, the Peacock and the Gate produced a much larger number of dramas that highlighted European aesthetics and sensibility.[1] It was not until F. R. Higgins and Ernest Blythe joined the Board of the Abbey Theatre in the 1930s that the company started to stage a small number of more unconventional plays, for instance *Katie Roche* (1936), an expressionist play by Teresa Deevy. However, it has been argued that "for twenty years the Abbey did not put on a play dangerous enough to provoke violent controversy" following "the ruction over *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926" (Ferrar 8), but produced peasant kitchen plays that mostly portrayed "the life of artisans and country people" (Malone 296).[2] Incidentally, in continental Europe, August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Giraudoux, Arthur Schnitzler, and others had been prolifically influencing world theater before and during the interwar period.[3] Finding it difficult to persuade Abbey board members to be less Irish-orientated and more international, and perhaps worried about losing its own audience, Yeats, upon the advice of Lennox Robinson and others, helped establish the Dublin Drama League in 1918 "for the purpose of seeing plays which we otherwise would have no chance of seeing," as Robinson stated in a letter to James Stephens (qtd. in O'Neill 113.). This fringe theater aimed to introduce avant-garde or experimental plays of the time to Dublin audiences. It served to inspire a number of young playwrights, such as Denis Johnston and Sean O'Casey among others.

Given the fact that the Abbey Theatre had kept the primary "Irish" aim to the fore in de-Anglicizing theatrical performances, not all Irish writers were agreeable to mythologizing the past, making heroes of revolutionaries, and putting the emphasis on the glorious side of the Easter Rising. To counteract such cultural nationalism and to keep the dramatic presentation of historical figures more polemical than authoritative, some playwrights chose not to follow the convention of the well-made, realistic play. Instead, they experimented with non-naturalistic stagecraft by creating new theatricalities and showing their protagonists' minds in chaos, the violence of nationalistic ideology, and the sexual expression and class struggle implicit yet fundamental in nation formation. This essay will therefore focus on three history plays that feature renowned yet controversial revolutionaries, namely Robert Emmet (1778-1803), Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) and Michael Collins (1890-1922), whose public and private selves are dramatized and interrogated in a non-linear manner with the aim of revealing an alternative understanding of their inner voices. These plays

1 Although Yeats introduced Japanese Noh elements (e.g. staging, music and movement) to the Irish stage and had "invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, . . . an aristocratic form," he rejected O'Casey's expressionist anti-war play, *The Silver Tassie*, in 1928, and prompted the playwright, who was furious, to premiere it at the Apollo Theatre in London in 1929. (Yeats, "Introduction" 1).

2 For a while the choice of going to either theater was one between "Sodom and Begorrah." ("Sodome, My Love" par. 1). As to Irish peasant kitchen dramas, see Hans-Georg Stalder's *Anglo-Irish Peasant Drama: The Motifs of Land and Emigration*.

3 For more details, see Ian R. Walsh's *Experimental Irish Theatre: After W. B. Yeats*.

are Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (1929), Larry Kirwan's *Mister Parnell* (1992), and Tom MacIntyre's *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (1995).[4]

Pushing the Boundaries in Theatre: A Brief History

Despite the fact that Abbey realism was the dominant form of theatrical expression in early-twentieth-century Ireland, having contributed some of the most powerful plays to appear on stage, some writers appealed for a more European outlook for the theater, on the grounds that its stage had been over-dominated by insularity and was inward looking.[5] Notably, the board members of the Abbey Theatre were not always open to theatrical innovations and cultural challenges in the way its founders had promised in their manifesto: "[We] believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England" (Gregory 402). Although it is true that *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 and *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926 illustrate the Abbey's courage to make a breakthrough in demonstrating more authentic yet unpopular Irish realities, the move was a flash in the pan. Many productions were not free from "stage-Irish, unintentional self-parody," not only following "melodramatic formulae" but reflecting perhaps "national self-blindness" to its isolationism (Ferrar 8). Displeased with the growing conservatism of the Abbey, George William Russell (AE) therefore contended that "[w]e cannot be intellectually self-sustaining any more than England, France, Italy or Germany could. . . . We must penetrate the Irish culture with world wisdom, or it will cease to be a culture, and our literature will lose its vitality and become a literature of conventions" (qtd. in O'Neill 113).

To make the Irish stage a more adventurous, outward looking and less parochial place, the Gate Theatre, founded in 1928 by Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, was a venue that introduced European and American playwrights and works that would not be commissioned by the Abbey.[6] Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867), Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891), Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922), and Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923) were noted examples that exhibited avant-garde or modernist theatrical experiments popular at the time. Specifically, The Dublin Drama League, New Players and the Pike often presented new dramas that had been successful in London, Paris and other European

4 Although the three plays by Johnston, Kirwan and Macintyre concern figures from different historical contexts, they have been chosen in terms of their peculiar or experimental dramaturgies. It could also be noted that the majority of plays about Emmet, Parnell and Collins were written in either a journalistic or melodramatic manner, and some were not particularly creative in form and content.

5 These writers include, for example, J. M. Synge, Lennox Robinson, T. C. Murray, Sean O'Casey, Padraic Colum, St John Ervine, Teresa Deevy, and others.

6 Regarding the conflicts and collisions within and between the Abbey, Peacock, and Gate theaters in the early twentieth century, please see Elaine Sisson's article, "'A Note on What Happened:' Experimental Influences on the Irish Stage 1919-1929."

cities, or classic plays that, according to D. E. S Maxwell, "invite[d] a greater variety of production and acting than the Abbey repertoire" (28).[7]

For Irish playwrights, including Sean O'Casey and Denis Johnston, who had been suspicious of nationalistic propaganda and the over-romanticization of revolutionaries, the then current non-realistic dramaturgies, for example German Expressionism, prompted them to ask hard questions and, to some extent, deliver their own hard answers in thought-provoking forms. Their interest in non-Irish/Celtic expression was, however, beset by the Abbey's cold eye on the theatrical innovations burgeoning on the European mainland, as it had primarily sought to be a national theater rather than a venue for international input. O'Casey, as a victim of the nonchalant attitude of the Abbey towards his fourth play, *The Silver Tassie* (1928), was infuriated by Yeats's conventionalism that barred him from seeing the novelties of his new play. The text was referred to only as "a series of almost unrelated scenes . . . there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action," as Yeats put it in a letter of rejection (741). O'Casey's use of both realistic and non-realistic techniques in portraying the horrors of World War I and its aftermath was obviously too radical for a national theater not able to accommodate alternative innovations.[8]

As. Maxwell observes, the embrace of new theatrical forms of expression, or the avant-garde, continued James Joyce's attempt to undermine traditional forms with "disjunctions, elisions, *dérèglements* of consciousness" (emphasis in the original 30). What Joyce did was politically "symbolic of the revolution against the bourgeoisie" (Innes 20). That said, having been critical of the realism and propagandist nature of nationalist writings, authors delved into the inner qualities of their protagonists by not always specifying surface details that historians would emphasize but often by juxtaposing dream and reality in episodic scenes. This resulted in the questioning of politicized historiography, followed by reconstructions of hidden or lesser-known realities. Alongside the agenda of European expressionist artists, Johnston and O'Casey, as mentioned earlier, also lodged a shared protest against the institutionalized brutalities of war, industrialization and authoritarianism, in an attempt to tackle the Irish question with more humanitarian concerns. Moreover, playwrights seeking to make a breakthrough for the theatrical realism popular on the Irish and English stage since the late nineteenth century found that non-conventional and minimalist expressions, employed to varying degrees, enabled audiences to approach different human situations more intimately and to confront truth directly, although often in nightmarish ways, through the characters' dreams of the subconscious or other surreal scenarios.

Although the three plays under discussion feature Robert Emmet, Charles Parnell and Michael Collins, respectively, none of them are represented as patriots that

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7 For more details on how the Gate has struck a path different from that of the Abbey and helped revolutionize dramaturgies, see *Cultural Convergence: The Dublin Gate Theatre, 1928-1960*, edited by Ondřej Pilný, Ruud van den Beuken and Ian R. Walsh, as well as Walsh's *Experimental Irish Theatre: After W. B. Yeats*.

8 For details, see David Krause's *Sean O'Casey, The Man and His Work*, p. 90.

audiences might have been familiar with. They are generally seen as representatives of states of mind and shift away from realistic portraits. At times they turn into caricatures, often grotesque, that unsettle stereotypes which had been simplified for political causes. The other characters encountering these figures might, notably, also be reduced to symbols reflecting certain ideas or groups in society without individualities. In particular, through multiscenic designs the audience is able to encounter the private selves of the characters to the extent that the past is reconfigured for alternative or open interpretations.

Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* (1929): Putting an End to the Emmet Story

Among many plays written about Robert Emmet on both sides of the Atlantic since the nineteenth century,[9] Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"* is atypical in that it does not follow the realistic, well-made convention that most existing works had done. Furthermore, it resists the urge to dramatize the details of how Emmet organized the 1803 uprising, absconded, and took risks to meet his sweetheart. It satirizes Emmet right from the beginning of the play, when the unnamed Speaker—who plays the revolutionary on the run and who is later arrested by Major Sirr—seems to have been concussed after being struck accidentally by a Redcoat. The Speaker, having regained consciousness with help from a doctor who rushes to the stage from the audience stalls, starts to believe that he is really Emmet and is unable to tell physical reality from the theatrical illusion of which he is a part.

Johnston's unprecedented and innovative approach was a bold metatheatrical experiment that sought to mask the distinction between the actor and the historical personage in order to critique the existing over-romanticized propaganda about Emmet. As he put it in his memoir, "I was not going to concern myself with propaganda. I was going to describe soberly and sensibly exactly what I saw, and give the people at home the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, whether happy or unfavorable" (Johnston 216). Although he set out "to paint Ireland and her problems in their true colours" (qtd. in Ferrar 17),[10] his daring revision of a worn-out heroic story was not accepted by the Abbey even after several resubmissions. It is well known that the script came back to him with a sheet of paper on which "The Old Lady Says 'No!'"

9 Robert Emmet has been a popular subject in theater, represented in history plays and melodramas as a fighter or a romantic suitor, in English or Irish. Plays in English include Nathaniel Harrington Bannister's *Robert Emmet* (1840), Dion Boucicault's *Robert Emmet* (1884), Joseph I. C. Clarke's *Robert Emmet: A Tragedy of Irish History* (1888), Julius Tietze Tietzelieve's *Robert Emmet: Ireland's Patriot Martyr* (1902), James Pilgrim's *Robert Emmet* (1903), Henry Connell Manga's *Robert Emmet* (1904), Norreys Connell's *An Imaginary Conversation* (1909), Johanna Redmond's *Falsely True: An Incident After the Rising in 1803* (1911), Lennox Robinson's *The Dreamers* (1915), Micheál Mac Liammóir's *The Ford of the Hurdles: A Masque of Dublin* (1929), Paul Vincent Carroll's *Death Closes All* (1947) and *The Conspirators* (1937), Valentin Iremonger's *Wrap Up My Green Jacket* (1948; radio drama), James Ignatius Fanning's *Melody Alone* (1960), and Donal Giltinan's *A Light In the Sky* (1962). Plays in Irish include Maura Molloy's *Summer's Day* (1935).

10 Ferrar quoted this statement from Johnston's 1947 essay, "The Present State of Irish Letters."

was written—the original title was *Shadowdance*. No matter whether it was a suggested new title or not, it was the "expressionist tricks," as he believed, that could not be recognized and accommodated by the Abbey's board members at the time, although he knew that his play would "be described as anti-Irish" (Johnston 348).

Johnston's exposure of discord between apparent reality and stage performance serves to show how a historical personage is created or distorted, and how the story is (or is not) coherent. Specifically, whether Emmet can be reconstructed as a vivid and convincing character depends on how historians, storytellers, songwriters and playwrights organize or dismiss a given amount of information. Nevertheless, without there being much documentation relating to this eighteenth-century figure, the received knowledge is mostly built upon the heroic image that his patriotic and sensational speech from the dock reinforced.[11] His farewell speech inspired many prospective republican leaders who quoted his words to boost their own charisma as merely an expedient for personal political advancement.[12]

The Old Lady Says "No!" effectively illuminates how the given image of Emmet is trimmed to meet political expectations. In particular, the unnamed Speaker and other characters, both male and female, play multiple roles in the prearranged play-within-the-play, suggesting that what appears to the audience is more or less the result of a series of inventions. Noticeably, apart from the Speaker who interchanges between Emmet the revolutionary and himself as an actor, Emmet's girlfriend, Sarah Curran, also plays the old Flower Woman impersonating the "Shan Van Vocht," or Cathleen ni Houlihan, recruiting young Irishmen to fight for Irish independence. Major Sirr interchanges with the statue of Henry Grattan, Emmet's contemporary who was in favor of parliamentary reform. The Stage Hand, who is supposed to work behind the curtain, performs the role of Minister for Arts and Crafts joining the party held by Lady Trimmer, an impersonation of Lady Gregory.

With the stage lighting turned on and off to indicate when these actors are in and out of the performance, the audience experiences the possibility that acting can be simply for acting's sake, and so can storytelling, even if the storyline and time-shift are anachronistic. In this connection, the audience encounters more personages from different periods of time on stage, for example O'Cooney (based on Sean O'Casey), O'Mooney (on Patrick Tuohy), O'Rooney (on Liam O'Flaherty), Maeve (on the mythological queen of Connacht), and so on. Metatheatrically, by exhibiting so great a number of characters in the same time and space, the playwright demonstrates how elements of a heroic narrative can be recombined to serve different purposes.

Take one scene set in a room resembling Lady Gregory's Coole Park House, for instance. This scene celebrates the success of the Irish literary movement, and features guests ranging from government officials to writers and actors, including the Speaker who insists that he is really Emmet. One of the guests, Maeve, has a

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11 Emmet was later convicted of treason and hanged. The full script of Emmet's speech from the dock during the trial can be seen at "Robert Emmet's speech from the dock on the eve of his execution." *Sinn Fein,* September 19, 2003.

12 For example, Patrick Pearse engaged himself with the Emmet legacy in 1916 by eulogizing the latter as having "redeemed Ireland from acquiescence in the Union. His attempt was not a failure but a triumph for that deathless thing we call Irish nationality" (qtd. in Whelan 54).

strong Irish accent acquired, according to herself, at an acting school in Lower Abbey Street. Satirically, her acquired accent is enough to impress the non-native speakers in the party, whereas to the Anglo-Irish hosts, such as Lady Trimmer, the exaggerated accent, even though unauthentic, is amusing. On the other hand, Lady Trimmer, "dressed in widow's weeds," in joining the Minister to announce the death of a poet as a national loss, and reading Yeats' line from *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, "So Yellow-haired Donough is dead" (Johnston 389-400), points to Johnston's cynicism about the overrated Gaelic Revival among the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.[13] With that being said, the dramatic mimicry of the house party at Lady Gregory's Coole Park is not intended to pay respect to cultural revivalists but, skeptical of the direction they were heading in, points to a likelihood that Ireland might become more provincial than international under the guidance of these socially privileged people.[14] Apparently, this was not a view that the Abbey board members would have found agreeable and they were likely to have taken offence at it.

It can be claimed that the metatheatrical scenes in *The Old Lady Says "No!"*—through the interventions of stage lighting and of the Stage Hand—are to some degree taken from Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), in which audiences are informed that characters perform roles, rather than contributing to a coherent narrative. Johnston's "life-long engagement with Pirandello," according to Daragh O'Connell, began with his early participation in the Dublin Drama League, playing a role himself in Pirandello's *The Rules of the Game* in November 1928, and writing the libretto for *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1957 (86). Specifically, in *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, it is the Speaker who demonstrates how an actor conducts the self-conscious performance by switching between roles. When the Speaker finds himself unable to convince others that he is really Emmet, he smartly "assume[s] a Parnellesque attitude," claiming "Until the party deposes me I am leader" (Johnston 376). It is not until later, when The Blind Man points out to the Speaker that Emmet has been dead since long before, that he starts to remove his pretense and ask around repetitively if he/Emmet is dead, "I am dead this hundred years and more?"; "I am only a play-actor—unless I dare to contradict the dead! Must I do that?" (Johnston 392, 398). Ironically, the concussion that the Speaker suffers at the beginning of the play seems to remind the audience of the difference between propaganda and truth. The way for the actor to recover his own identity is by putting Emmet to death, as the end of the play shows, while the actor also believes at the same time that he is dead, given that he never figures out that there are discrepancies between a heroic story and reality.

It can be assumed that Johnston's motivation for writing *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, a challenging piece for any Irish theater, was not merely to add to the existing Emmet

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13 Christopher Murray argues that *The Old Lady Says "No!"* is not only "satirical of the nationalist ethos and tradition, by means of the literary and cultural icons and forms popularised by the Abbey Theatre", but aims to "irreverently" debunk and travesty Yeats's heroic ideal and allegory as presented in his *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (121).

14 *The Old Lady Says "No!"* was rejected by the Abbey but welcomed and produced successfully by The Gate Theatre, which aimed to "show the world to Ireland" rather than "show Ireland to herself" (Mac Liammóir, 355). "[F]acing a period of insularism," the Abbey at the time was entrenched "in a local conservative realism" (Bastos 211).

repertoire but more likely to debunk the over-celebrated Emmet story, despite the fact that this play would be deemed a threat to Irish patriotism. According to Christopher Murray, Johnston did want to "show Ireland to herself; indeed he wanted to rub noses in the muck of facile mythologizing. He needed a forum where questions of identity and Irish politics could be forcibly put" (123). However, some reviewers condemned the play as an incomprehensible "madhouse play" and "the confusion arising from a lack of intellectual coherence" (qtd. in Peacock 125).

Nevertheless, Johnston's deployment of metatheatrical devices by getting Sarah Curran and the Speaker to recite fragments of patriotic verses—mostly from *The Dublin Book of Verse*, a popular anthology published during the Irish Revival in 1909—recollects the excessive romantic elements added to the Emmet story *after* he was executed in 1803.[15] What the playwright intended to do was to end this story by not only showing how "the figure of Robert Emmet had congealed into a cliché" (Poulain 124), but by having the Speaker announce "Let my epitaph be written" at the end of the play and then finally die—with a rug covering his body placed there by a doctor (Johnston 404). The death of Emmet on stage implies that Johnston anticipated a waning of nationalist fervor and a movement among Irish theater practitioners beyond insularity and complacent introspection.

Larry Kirwan's *Mister Parnell* (1992): De-mythologizing Parnell

In 1891, after the tragic death of Charles Stewart Parnell—also an Anglo-Irish Protestant nationalist like Emmet[16]—, the controversy about the "Uncrowned King of Ireland" and his scandalous love affair with Katherine O'Shea, wife of Captain William O'Shea, a Catholic Nationalist MP for County Clare, seemed to reach a watershed point. Some of Parnell's opponents tended towards forgetting and forgiving, whereas his old adherents spared no effort in linking his "sacrificial" end to *noblesse oblige* and carried it to sublime heights. His funeral in Dublin, attended by more than 200,000 people, was reputed to be one of the biggest funerals ever held in Ireland. Many of Parnell's supporters reckoned that if he had remained in the leadership, the Irish Parliamentary Party would not have split, Home Rule might have been achieved earlier, and the partition between Northern Ireland and the Republic would not have come about.

In contrast to Johnston, who lived through Ireland's revolutionary period in the early twentieth century, Kirwan, a playwright and musician born in 1954 in Wexford, was brought up in a family where "Republicanism . . . [was] more like a religion, a spiritual path, even a cult, and my grandfather initiated me into it" ("Forgetting to Remember" 44). However, he was not fully absorbed into this "cult" but recognized himself more "[as] a socialist . . . , I resented that [James Connolly] had been

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15 See Daragh O'Connell's "Pirandello and Joyce say 'Yes!' in Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!.'*".81.

16 According to Patrick Mackin, Parnell's "campaign of appeal to the Fenian tradition gave him a revolutionary image . . . [and] may well have been a latter-day Robert Emmet" (par. 3).

railroaded by tears-in-the-beer nationalism" (Kirwan, "Bill Nevins talks with Black 47's" par. 61). His nationalist upbringing and socialist inclinations shaped him, as a dramatist, prompting interest in how even a peerless political figure could be brought into complex power struggles. As a writer who understands competing political philosophies, Kirwan expects the audience, if possible, to "take control of their future by asking questions, not following leaders" ("Forgetting to Remember" 46). *Mister Parnell*, in this vein, dramatizes how the protagonist's personal circumstance was over-manipulated by his opponents, alongside Parnell's responses to accusations. Most importantly, the play provides an original angle from which to evaluate Parnell's love affairs and political downfall, particularly as regards women's sense and sensibility.

Mister Parnell, which premiered at Synchronicity Space, New York, in 1992, is an example of Epic Theatre, in which Parnell's story is presented in non-linear narrative episodes. The story opens in a linear fashion, revealing the causes of his political turmoil, though stage lighting and singing, both individual and in groups, are employed to create alienation effects for audiences of onlookers to Parnell's romance with his mistress. As in Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, Kirwan's characters stay on stage most of the time, waiting for their cue from an unnamed "Chairwoman," who works as a stage manager "introducing the seated speakers" (Kirwan 137). The fact that the cast members can only perform a share of their experience when they are cued suggests that no single perspective can be predominant over historiography. With the audience constantly watching each of the cast members, male or female, victim or not, the play invites spectators to form their own perspectives, on a love affair that transformed the political landscape of modern Ireland.

Take the portrayal of Katherine O'Shea, for example: this play does not caricature her as a frivolous coquette or "a can of worms" (138), as Kirwan asserts from the anti-Parnellites' point of view. Instead, she is presented as a lonely wife with a husband who had been unfaithful to her with a number of women—including her own sister, Anna Steele—prior to Katherine's encounter with Parnell. This revelation, shown at the beginning of the play, prompts the audience towards a possible motive behind Captain O'Shea and Anna's decision to publicize Katherine's love affair; the greater imperative is less to defend a "Christian marriage," as O'Shea claims (Kirwan 157), but to get a share of the huge inheritance that Katherine had received from her aunt.

Timothy Healy, a Member of the Irish Party in Parliament, switches sides from ardent support for Parnell and joins William Gladstone, Parnell's political rival, to boost his own chances of succeeding a wounded leader. What Healy did not foresee, ironically, is the ubiquity of Parnell "all over their 'new' Ireland, in the form of street names and statuary; 'They never even named a toilet after me,'" Healy confides to the audience at the end of the play (Kirwan 198). However, as the audience could see from a distance, Parnell's death does not change the fact that, in his private life, he is far from being a man of courage and honesty, eventually planning to exile himself to Spain with his mistress and children and to change his name entirely. As the play shows, he does not embrace martyrdom voluntarily, as later propaganda asserted: "as soon as he slid into that cold earth, he became the martyr [people] always wanted" (Kirwan 197). Kirwan shows Parnell always protective of Katherine and their relationship, believing that his public duties and private life can be separated.

It seems to him that a private romance would hardly lead to the split of the Irish Parliamentary Party and even cost him his life. He never even intends to publicize it for personal interest.[17]

What should also be noted is that the play does not simply delineate Parnell as a central character in a biographical manner. Through the characters around Parnell, a Parnell story is reconstructed to show that he is not necessarily an intruder in someone else's marriage but a better companion for Katherine O'Shea than her husband. He is portrayed as a more humane character than O'Shea, a victim of a political power struggle, and a father who wants to protect his children. He is not a heroic and Messianic figure but has weaknesses that every human being might have.[18] Furthermore, the title of the play, *Mister Parnell*, suggests the deconstruction of the Parnellite myth by referring to the protagonist as a mister, rather than a party leader or an uncrowned king. In other words, Parnell's ethical transgression might be morally unacceptable, but the playwright eschews moral judgment, leaving it for each audience member to develop their own understanding.

As to the aesthetics of the play, *Mister Parnell* illustrates the effects of mixing realism with expressionism. The latter is reinforced by unnamed figures representative of social opinions, such as "Bishop," "Union Jack," "Parnellite," "Tenant Farmer," and so on. There are characters who play double roles, for instance Chairwoman and Rosheen, Union Jack and Parnellite. The double roles and the antagonistic opinions they represent suggest that all the characters, including Parnell, are dominated by external forces that always redraw their boundaries or enlarge their religious, moral, and political demarcations.

Tom MacIntyre's *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (1995): An Icon Questioned

Among tragic heroes in modern Irish history, including but not limited to Emmet and Parnell, Michael Collins was no less controversial as regards his role in the negotiations with the British government for the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 and his rivalry with Éamon de Valera. His short but dramatic life has been the inspiration for many playwrights, for instance, Tom MacIntyre.

MacIntyre was brought up in East Cavan in a Presbyterian community, where Éamon de Valera, Patrick Pearse and Thomas McDonagh were referred to as "the felons of our land" by his grandmother, while "Collins [was] notably absent" in her

17 Parnell later compared himself with Moses when seeing the Irish Parliamentary Party split because of his scandal. As he put it in *Freeman's Journal* in 1890, "If I am to leave you . . . I should like – and it is not an unfair thing for me to ask – that I should come within sight of the promised land" (qtd. in Lyons, "The Parnell Theme in Literature," 71).

18 Henry Harrison MP, who acted as Parnell's *aide-de-camp* and provided service to Katherine after his death, wrote two books defending the couple based on the widow's personal accounts. It is said that the two books provide more favorable views of Parnell in his relationship with Katherine. For details, see his *Parnell Vindicated: The Lifting of the Veil* (1931) and *Parnell, Joseph Chamberlain and Mr Garvin* (1938). F.S.L. Lyons argued that Harrison "did more than anyone else to uncover what seems to have been the true facts" (*Charles Stewart Parnell* 324).

list of nuisances (MacIntyre 217). As a child whose understanding of the nation's heroes and villains came mainly from his family, and as a Protestant he was to take "the adversarial stance," developing a skeptical view of the said and the unsaid, not only in everyday speeches but also political narratives (MacIntyre, "Conversation" 309). A creative writer who had read widely "Meyerhold and Appia and Grotowski and the whole bunch" (MacIntyre, "Conversation" 310), he learned to approach his subject matter in critical ways that have "put the nation in the psychiatrist's chair," according to his biographer Justin O'Brien (qtd. in "Tom MacIntyre obituary" par. 9). The unseen yet fierce power struggle between Collins and de Valera, as well as the interplay of their true, private personalities, are investigated in this play.

Good Evening, Mr Collins, similarly to the two plays discussed above, is written in expressionist and minimalist styles which not only disrupt received understandings of Ireland's history and the birth of a nation, but reveal possible discrepancies in politically committed historiography. Audience members are thus prompted to the imaginative completion of gaps the playwright leaves in the play's dramatization of Collins and de Valera, their friendship, political antagonisms, and the darker sides of their personalities. To facilitate new perspectives, the playwright stipulates that the setting be "*minimalist. Essentials to be conveyed by lighting and soundtrack*," which enables flashbacks and flash-forwards to be staged (MacIntyre 161). Strategically, by reducing props, the minimalist stage paves the way for non-linear and more challenging perspectives as regards the characters under discussion.

Despite the title *Good Evening, Mr Collins*, the play features the public and private selves of Collins and de Valera in many unseen aspects, and neither appears to be as righteous and patriotic as their public images have always suggested. Each is seen as a not-quite-respectable womanizer, who maintains overlapping relationships with staff, followers, or married women. As they behave so disrespectfully toward women, they appear, in personal character, less as political rivals and more as birds of a feather. However, critical depictions of such notable figures are not simply malicious caricatures but are designed to reveal the chauvinistic nature of Irish republicanism in its inner circle, especially when it came to male bonding. What the playwright intends to reveal is that the charisma that these men had acquired can be seen as problematic and one-sided, although politically useful to galvanize their followers.

MacIntyre uses experimental dramaturgical elements in *Good Evening, Mr Collins*, including an off-stage perspective on these public figures and a metatheatrical device to satirize their violent acts and thoughts. For example, when Collins, at the beginning of the play, anachronistically quotes a statement of Bobby Sands (1954-81), a hunger striker and member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), "'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children'—somebody wrote," it suggests a link between these two men who both died as a consequence of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty (MacIntyre 165). Collins was assassinated in an ambush in August 1922, aged 31; Sands died after 66 days on hunger strike in May 1981, aged 27. Both of them have been seen as martyrs of Irish republicanism, although it would be problematic to state that Collins was sacrificed for the peace which the British government had wishfully promised through the Treaty.

In the play, Collins is always belligerent and a strong supporter of retaliation and violence: "We pay them back in their own coin" (MacIntyre 166). In other words, to claim that he intended to be a peacemaker for the good of Ireland could be a misunderstanding, in that the signing of the Treaty, whether done by either Collins, de Valera or anyone else, would have been a difficult choice at the time. That de Valera consistently and silently watches Collins at the corner of the stage implies that Collins's trip to London with Arthur Griffith to meet Winston Churchill, and later the fatal ambush on his way to Cork, were engineered, directly or not, by de Valera, his colleague but also political rival.[19]

Furthermore, of much greater interest is the expressionist technique used in *Good Evening, Mr Collins*. In keeping with the dramaturgical strategies of Johnston and Kirwan, Collins's three female confidantes, Moya, Kitty Kiernan, and Hazel Lavery, are played by one actor throughout the play. This does not necessarily mean that the three women are the same in personality, but they are the most haunting figures for Collins in his private sphere. They do not appear all together but show up in Collins's life in private moments, when they "merge into one another, separate, merge again. They're ghosts, Collins's own private ghosts" (Carr 246). It is ironic that they never seem to have been taken seriously by historians and in the public media as independent persons who dare to express their desires and thoughts but merge into one character silenced on the social margin of an entirely patriarchal society. They are expected to be "ghosts" who are muted and romanticized as young or married women having an infatuation for a male politician. To some degree they are Collins's emotional pillars and should be documented as such, while a heroic narrative would be unlikely to benefit from being a petty or secret romance that would, however, lead to moral questions rather than political propaganda.

What the audience also sees is Collins's attitude towards Irish politics in the flashbacks and flash-forwards involving these women. He could be both an ironman or a warrior who takes revenge and violence for granted, and a fragile individual who hates patriotism, as he reveals to Kitty that "I am fed up with politics, often," and to Hazel about his depression: "This bitch of a country is sucking me dry. I'm a walking corpse in a land of corpses" (MacIntyre 170, 211). He might have been aware that he is a chesspiece of de Valera, who constantly supervises him on stage in silence and even urges him "to make a will," and he has no choice but to make himself look like a tragic hero who wants peace for Ireland more than any other politicians of the time (MacIntyre 208).

The distancing effect is also deftly employed in the series of short scenes that feature episodes in Collins's life. In one of the final scenes, Collins is invited to George Bernard Shaw's home for dinner during the Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations in London and later to Sir Horace Plunkett's house at Foxrock, Dublin, days before his death. Shaw does not come under the spotlight from backstage but abruptly shows up downstage, saying to the audience that "you knew I'd appear—period piece—

19 For details on the friendship and rivalry between de Valera and Collins, please see Jack Lynch's "Collins and de Valera: Friends or Foes?" and Julia Walsh's "Eamon de Valera and the Rivalry That Led to War."

au contraire–indefatigable disturber of the peace!" (MacIntyre 213). His location downstage and the use of the term "period piece" may suggest MacIntyre's desire to distance Collins the character from Collins the hero, in pursuit of a kind of objectivity over political partiality. What is also peculiar about the use of the distancing effect is that when Shaw talks with Collins about his epitaph in this fictitious scenario, the audience see Collins trapped in a political dead end over the Treaty, and worried about his mixed reputation as an Irish Don Juan: "let us praise God that [Collins] had not to die in a—in a snuffy bed" (MacIntyre 214).[20] Although these scenes and flashbacks illustrate only some moments of Collins's career and private life, they position him as "a deeply confused, highly imaginative and willful man" (McGuinness xi).

Of greater note is the final scene that portrays Collins's last moments before death. The scene shows journalistically how the protagonist was gunned down in an ambush by anti-Treaty forces during the civil war, turning his head towards the audience in slow motion: "Collins swivels his head—slowly—leftward to view the audience . . . [and] turns and proceeds to a chaise-longue downstage right, stretches himself on it" (MacIntyre 216). Arguably, this slow-motion, expressionist treatment of his death and resurrection may prompt audience members to contemplate the violence of his death, imaginatively, for an extended period of time. Furthermore, they might feel disturbed and uncomfortable to be looked in the eye by a dying person and to witness his ghostly resurrection. With de Valera always sitting on the sidelines to watch Collins meeting his death, this minimalist play, which focuses entirely on its characters through flashbacks and flash-forwards, implies not only that the birth of the nation is problematic but that the relationship of de Valera and Collins is that between a "cheerless tyrant" and a "Cavalier," a stereotype of their rivalry passed on to MacIntyre from his grandparents when he was a child (MacIntyre 217). In staging two individuals with tragic flaws rather than charismatic heroes, this play provides an "idiosyncratic and perceptive treatment of Irish history . . . turn[ing] a strobe light on a twentieth-century Irish icon, sometimes to grotesque effect" (Mahony 238). Thus, MacIntyre's use of distancing effects not only challenges received historiography, but pushes audiences to go beyond linear narratives of flawless national heroes.

Conclusion: Problematizing Historiography

One common feature of the three plays is that audiences are placed in the position of outsiders who can re-evaluate these "uncrowned Kings of Ireland" through dramatizations, not based on stereotypical falsehoods but from different viewpoints, of their public and private selves.

As to Emmet in *The Old Lady Says "No!"*, the playwright does not reconstruct him as a loving suitor of Sarah Curran in particular nor put an emphasis on his heroic sacrifice as most Irish storytellers or dramatists have done. Not only does the central character get confused about Sarah, Deirdre, and the old Flower Woman, but he

20 The phrase about "dying in a snuffy bed" appears in Shaw's letter to Collins's sister after the assassination in Béalna Bláth in 1922.

also fails to tell the difference between himself as an actor and Emmet the historical figure after being concussed at the beginning of the play. His confusion suggests the contingency of a historiographical perspective, as the unnamed Speaker/narrator can no longer be impartial about the events, nor explain them consistently. He becomes, at best, a performer demonstrating a preferred political view and expected sentiments.

Such unreliability is also exemplified through a large number of quotations or paraphrased excerpts of poetry that Emmet and other characters use in their conversation. Some of the verses were actually written after Emmet's death, but without knowing this, the audience may simply be impressed by the stereotype that those excerpts build. The anachronistic use of quotations may imply that the past is not defined by what happened before, but by current sentiments. In the case of Emmet, as he has long been regarded as a fighter for Irish independence by radical republicans, it seems justifiable to heroize him in order to endorse violence and bloodshed. Arguably, by including expressionist and anachronistic elements in the play and provoking confusions and discomfort among the audience and critics, the playwright might be seeking to challenge the celebrated Irish heroism and to question the mystification of political figures in history, restoring them as living individuals rather than clichés or idealized images.

In this connection, Kirwan's *Mister Parnell* also presents how problematic it is for a protagonist to emerge from his moral and political downfall to achieve popular martyrdom within a short period of time. The playwright anticipates MacIntyre by focusing not only on Parnell the person, but also on the ways in which he interacts with others in public and private spheres. In this representation no one is less hypocritical or high-minded when it comes to their private interests and desires. The tragic end of Parnell therefore illustrates how and why a scapegoat like him would be ostracized under circumstances of religious and political fervor. In other words, it is popular political preference or correctness that would define or deny the legitimacy of a fallen hero and how he should be recognized on social media and in the future. Dramaturgically, as in the case of Johnston's Speaker, the Chairwoman who performs the roles of stage manager and one of Parnell's woman admirers, along with non-verbal devices such as the rotational use of stage lighting, effectively alienates the audience from familiar accounts of characters who have haunted Irish republicans of later generations.

MacIntyre's *Good Evening, Mr Collins*, in a similar vein, illustrates how a history play can be more polemical than a single story with a one-sided perspective. The minimalist conception of the stage puts Collins and his comrades/enemies under the microscope and enables audiences to observe more closely how elusive, vengeful and complicated Collins is and whether de Valera is a suspect in the matter of Collins's death. In addition, the jumble of short scenes that present events in fragments implies that history as lived can only be thought of as a coherent story if many possible realignments are excluded. It could therefore be contended that Shaw's proposed task of writing Collins's epitaph is impossible to complete, even by Shaw himself, as Collins's contribution to the partition of Ireland remains obscure and awaits further interrogation.

The three plays under discussion were written across a long span of time, from Johnston (1929), to Kirwan (1992) and MacIntyre (1995), their common intention

being to take experimental, radical or unorthodox approaches to these revolutionaries. Johnston survived mid-twentieth-century Irish censorship, and Kirwan and MacIntyre may be thought of as inheritors of a *jeu d'esprit* visible in Johnston's and others' oppositional engagement with the European avant-garde in the early years of the Irish Free State.

The experimental approaches used in the three playwrights' works and their provocative endings initiated a shifting relationship between performers, spectators, and revolutionaries of the past. As audiences enjoy a privileged position from which to observe the history under question from multiple viewpoints, the task of understanding Emmet, Parnell and Collins, and evaluating their contributions to Ireland rests primarily with them. Finally, regardless of how modern Irish history should be understood as an open question, the three playwrights have bridged Irish theater to its European counterpart in a cross-cultural scenario and illuminated another revisionist dimension for Irish people.

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