Irish Drama and Wars in the Twentieth Century

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By

Wei H. Kao

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For my parents
in love and gratitude

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Irish Studies Review 24.2 (2016): 1-17 [Taylor & Francis]; “Staging The Outcast in Brendan Behan’s Three Prison Dramas” from *Estudios Irlandeses* 15 (2020): 51-61; “Performing “Easter 1916”: Plays by Denis Johnston, Tom Murphy, and Donal O’Kelly” from *After Sailing to Ireland* (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 2020, pp. 121-146); “The Healing of Trauma in Anne Devlin’s *After Easter*: Female Experiences and the Nationalistic Historiography" from *Essays on Modern Irish Literature* (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2007. 143-155); "Remapping Protestant Women and Interracial Minorities in Christina Reid’s War Dramas" from *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010. 205-221); "An Alternative Peace Process: Violence and Reconciliation in Marie Jones’s Plays” from *The Theatre of Marie Jones: Telling stories from the ground up* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2015. 91-105); “The Anglo-Irish Big House and War Memories in Three Plays: Lennox Robinson’s *The Big House*, Joseph O’Conor’s *The Iron Harp* and Brendan Behan’s *The Big House*” from *Generational and Familial Conflict in British and Irish Drama and Theatre* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019. 191-212); “Domination, Resistance, and Anglo-Irish Landlordism in Iris Murdoch’s *The Servants and the Snow*” from *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination: Essays* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010. 127-146), edited by M.F. Simone Roberts and Alison Scott-Baumann by permission of McFarland & Company; warm thanks go to Prof. Chantal Zabus, Editor-in-Chief, and Prof. Esther De Bruijn, Managing Editor of *Postcolonial Text* for giving me permission to reprint “Can Minorities Speak in Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*?” from *Postcolonial Text* 13.2 (2018): 1-14. Part of the Conclusion of the book is translated and revised from the paper published in “Return to Dublin: Irish Theatre in Retrospect” from *Taipei Theatre Journal* 19 (2014): 115-136. Last but not least, I will be glad to recognize any holders of copyright that have not been mentioned above.

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INTRODUCTION

It has long been clear that the western theatre, from ancient Greece onwards, has carried out the important, though controversial, task of demonstrating how political violence disrupts or transforms a country by having a range of impacts on civilians and social minorities. Despite the fact that people can be swayed by existing populist ideologies or propaganda, dramas that portray political issues can be a mirror for societal self-examination and can encourage alternative acts against violence, autocracy or dehumanizing forces. To some extent, political dramas, usually more tragic than comic in terms of their subject matter, may invoke a healing catharsis by showing how the protagonists find their paths to salvation and thus helping the spectator to identify a viewpoint or emotion that resonates with their personal experiences.

It can also be stated that many masterpieces of western dramatic literature, for instance Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, Goethe's *Egmont*, Schiller's *Don Carlos*, Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and others, have had lasting effects by examining the ethics of political violence in terms of free will, truth and social justice. Despite most of these plays being tragedies, the protagonists and their communities attest, in one form or another, to the regenerative power that sublimates their sufferings.

In addition, because the stage can draw public attention to important and controversial issues, modern and contemporary playwrights continue to inquire into existing political conflicts and violence. Notable dramatists, not of Irish origin, include Edward Bond, Nicolai Erdman, Maxim Gorki, Günter Grass, David Rudkin, Jean Paul Sartre, Peter Shaffer, Wole Soyinka, and so forth.[1] By portraying convoluted power struggles and (inter)national crises, their plays often illustrate how a victim can act as an executioner of violence, and how they inflict or submit to it.

That is to say, both classical and modern political dramas, regardless of whether they present the victims or perpetrators of violence, high-profile

[1] Other playwrights who have engaged with political violence in the world theatre include, but are not limited to, John Arden, Bertolt Brecht, Howard Brenton, Albert Camus, Max Frisch, Eugene Ionesco, Sławomir Mrożek and Ernst Toller.

figures or common folk, have a shared agenda in appealing to *pathos*, which, according to Aristotle, is "an act which is destructive to life or involves pain, such as killings, paroxysms of pain, woundings, and all that kind of thing in the visible realm" (Aristotle 1997, 68). By eliciting the audience's senses of sympathy, empathy, pity, sorrow or compassion, the dramatization of violence, be it visual or implicit, reflects how one's autonomy can be under threat and the vulnerability of the socially underprivileged. This agenda is, interestingly, shared with that of the epic theatre which, according to Bertolt Brecht, aims to be a social and cultural institution rather than a venue of entertainment. In other words, plays with political concerns can not only engender aesthetic significance but "correspond . . . to a revolutionary political project" (Pilkington 1998, 13). Notably, by demonstrating relevant cultural phenomena and ignored voices, social, economic and political realities are yet to be examined, challenged or subsequently transformed.

Similarly to playwrights from the European mainland, Irish dramatists who have experienced, closely or not, the political antagonism and upheavals of their country often dramatize what their critical eyes have seen in relation to the ongoing radical nation formation and its consequences. Many notable or canonic (Anglo-)Irish writers and playwrights, including Brendan Behan, Elizabeth Bowen, Maria Edgeworth, J.G. Farrell, Augusta Gregory, James Joyce, Kate O'Brien, Sean O'Casey, George Bernard Shaw, Jonathan Swift, J.M. Synge, Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats, among others, have made alternative, often satirical, observations on Anglo-Irish politics and colonial power in their works. It can be argued that rethinking the necessity of using violence and introducing different, if not unseen, political issues have become conventions for many generations of Irish creative writers. With concern for people's suffering, fear and pity because of wars and political conflicts, the stage is an important venue on which playwrights can visualize living terrors and, incidentally, redeem those sacrificed, willingly or not, in brutal political and economic contradictions.

According to Marvin Carlson, the theatre is pretty much a "repository of cultural memory" which is never static but "subject to continual adjustment and modification . . . in new circumstances and contexts" (Carson 2001, 2). Because a history drama can be re-performed or re-read over the years, it becomes a constant reminder for audiences of their unpleasant shared past and is likely to prompt a different understanding of unresolved issues. Some people may argue that the solution lies in forgiveness and forgetfulness to reduce confrontations, if for the sake of peace. Nonetheless, to forgive or to forget cannot undo the trauma that an individual or a community has endured. On the other hand, to efface national disgraces and failures might

be technically feasible, whereas history always repeats itself if one never learns a lesson or assumes that peacemaking can operate outside of memory. In this vein, Stewart Parker, a Belfast playwright, criticizes that to "forget the past [is] both impracticable and pernicious. On the one hand, you can't forget a nightmare while you are still dreaming it. On the other, it is survival through comprehension that is healthy, not survival through amnesia" (qtd. in Richtarik 1999, 16).

Having said so, dramas that showcase wars and terrors, regardless of the scale of confrontation, enable audiences to face the consequent political and social conflicts and their likely impact on individuals. As most Irish playwrights presenting wars usually make their own observations, their works, to a certain extent, echo the agenda of the Theatre of Witness so as to reveal "the true stories of those who have been marginalised, forgotten or hurt by society . . . in spoken word, movement, music and visual imagery" (Sepinuck 2011, 163).

Despite the fact that most Irish plays do not bring those victims, prisoners and their families, or asylum seekers, to the stage, as the founder of the Theatre of Witness, Teya Sepinuck, has intended to do, Irish dramatists often address personal and communal experiences, disclosing how people across divides of difference revisit their suffering, discover painful truths, and try to reconcile with themselves and others. Although "the shifting sands of the Northern Ireland Peace Process" have guaranteed no ultimate solution but a bumpy road to more negotiations (Grant 2008, 14), Irish plays that have emerged organically provide multiple standpoints not merely to challenge the *status quo* but to condemn, implicitly or explicitly, the authorities that have encouraged bloodshed to continue.

Differently from electoral rhetoric that often simplifies political complexities and stands against an opposition view, plays that feature sectarian conflict and its repercussions, if endorsing a polarized view, are usually illustrative of the contradictions inherent in propaganda or self-comforting views. To be more highly critical of the established yet problematic order, most playwrights would go beyond, as David Ian Rabey has stated, "the values of the social, or even theatrical, institutions that produced [their works]" (Rabey 1986, 2). Although it can be argued that it is highly unlikely for any creative work to be entirely free from political positioning or the implicit operation of an ideology, the dramatization of struggle against any example of injustice may realize what Peter Brook has warned about the use of public media, including theatre, to be the bearer of a political message. In other words, the value of drama lies in its intention of "go[ing] beyond the stage itself," not only to reach a wider audience but

to reflect the problematic *status quo* and those more sober, if not impartial, views (Brook 1968, 44).

To be more critical of or even more subversive to the *status quo*, the theatre, according to Arthur Sainer, can "plunge itself into the world of myth, ritual, politics, [where it] dares to ransack the treasures of the unconscious" (Sainer 1975, 364). To "ransack" these cultural and social elements, intertwining antagonistic political entities with a strong enmity against the other, the dramatist cannot be a static storyteller nor a mouthpiece for a certain ideological position but must turn his/her characters into living organisms to initiate intellectual responses from the spectator. Their responses to and reception of a play, regardless of whether they are positive or more reserved, would explain why George H. Szanto asserts that "all theatre is political" (qtd. in Rabey 1986, 1).[2] Although some overstate that if a play fails to "criticize the political and social system of the country, it is in fact supporting it and indirectly (or directly) propagandizing for its continued acceptance" (Hudson 1971, 2), a creative writer should be more conscious of the historical and cultural determinants inherent in the issue in question. That said, the value of a play depends on whether it is subordinate, intentionally or not, to the superstructure that implicitly regulates the public in all aspects.[3]

It cannot be denied that the British occupation of Ireland that began in the twelfth century has been a determining force behind Irish life and it has thereby unceasingly prompted conflicts at different scales. Nevertheless, not until the 1840s to the 1990s did Ireland undergo radical transformations due to events such as the Great Famine, the failed Fenian uprisings (1848, 1867), the Irish Revival, the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Dublin Lockout, the War of Independence, the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the Civil War, the Northern Ireland Troubles, and an internationally-brokered peace process resulting from the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Brexit in 2020 undoubtedly gave rise to some degree of uncertainty over the political status of Northern Ireland within the UK and its relationship with the Republic in

[2] This is the general claim made by George H. Szanto in his *Theater and Propaganda*.

[3] "Superstructure" is a term that Karl Marx used to describe the way in which social mechanisms incorporate legal, political, educational, economic and religious systems together with the ethical and artistic values that embody a society's ideology. In Marx's view, a society's superstructure is greatly subjugated by the bourgeoisie that exploits and oppresses the working class or proletariat. Here I would like to extend this Marxist term to the theatre as a social institution that could reflect such workings on stage or the forces that tend to domesticate it.

the European Union. All these have brought about significant effects on and transformation of the imagined community and are often the source of grave concern for Irish people on both sides of the North-South border.

Amid constant political strife, militant confrontation, assassinations and struggles against British rule, Irish playwrights have been prompted to stage many imagined alternatives to these troubling issues and for audiences, as James Joyce stated, to have "one good look at themselves in [their] nicely polished looking-glass" (Joyce 1965, 64). The theatrical alternatives, alongside those in reality, offer the spectator the chance to inspect and discuss, if not totally impartially, matters involving education, parenting, social welfare, denominational conflicts, sectarian violence, child abuse, gender stereotypes, sexuality, masculinity and femininity, racial discrimination, migration, disability, Irish language acquisition, labour issues, adolescent delinquency, historiography and revisionism, ageing and illness, imprisonment, social minorities, television and broadcasting, domestic violence, storytelling, the Northern Ireland Troubles, war memories, the arms race, policing, the peace process, and so on. The dramatizations of these issues, regardless of being politically correct or not, all ask crucial ethical questions about the use of violence against human life, depicting the incompatibility between one's individuality and community values, when two or more antagonistic powers intend to diminish the former when promoting a conflict that can actually be avoided given enough time.

The plays to be discussed in this book might not offer immediate solutions to the complicated, troubling issues, although many contemporary Irish dramatists have collaborated towards creating a "fifth province," a concept promoted by Field Day Theatre Company, to strategically "provide an imagined, desired space/time of communicative possibility" (Herron 1998, 180). Despite the fact that no directly revolutionary or subversive action is advocated, but imagined encounter and dialogue are presented, audiences might be united in a common experience of feeling and finding an emotional outlet, thus being more neutral or open to a different understanding of truths and facts. Specifically, with perspectives that transcend the crippling oppositions of Irish sectarian and denominational politics, the spectator might learn to stand up against injustice or to ally more spontaneously with an alternative point of view. The new standpoint with which the audiences are inspired might lead to different strategies to cope with or to break the existing impasse in sectarian politics, if this is possible.

This book examines modern and contemporary plays that dramatize some crucial moments of Irish nation formation in retrospect. The

incomplete nation formation in the early twentieth century, if seen from the republican point of view, could be held to account for the unresolved Northern Ireland Troubles and later the ecopolitical crisis because of Brexit. Political and economic instability, alongside violations of human rights, have inspired many Irish playwrights to depict violence and its resonances. Although some of the struggles they dramatize, be they personal or military, domestic or international, focus on an individual's failure during a national conflict or crisis, they epitomize an everyday experience perceptive to most of the audience members.

To enable a more systematic investigation into the various theatrical responses to the upheavals of the state during the twentieth century, the plays to be discussed in this book will be categorized into "Dramatizing Anglo-Irish Conflicts," "Theatrical Voices from the South," and "The Northern Ireland Troubles, Women, and Drama." Differently from existing monographs that usually focus on canonic, well-known plays, most of the works to be studied here have not been much elaborated upon yet deserve more scrutiny. In general, by entering into these less-discussed yet important Irish dramas, the book may provide a more comprehensive picture of how theatre practitioners have been engaged with troubled Irish politics.[4]

The book will start with Iris Murdoch's less discussed work, *The Servants and the Snow* (1970), to investigate a painful chapter in Anglo-Irish relations in the early twentieth century. The position of Iris Murdoch in the Irish literary canon has always been ambivalent, as the writer, unlike her mostly male Irish compeers, did not write a substantial number of Irish-flavoured works, nor remark constantly on Irish cultural and political matters. Her novel, *The Red and the Green* (1965), set on the eve of the 1916 Easter Rising and concerning an extended Anglo-Irish family during

[4] Some notable monographs that survey twentieth-century Irish drama but have yet to offer a more complete study of relevant works include *Ireland at War and Peace* (Cambridge Scholars, 2011), which is a collection of essays that do not particularly feature Irish theatre. Some recent titles place more emphasis on the Northern Ireland Troubles but not on dramas by playwrights from the Republic of Ireland. Two of these are: *Political Acts: Women in Northern Irish Theatre, 1921-2012* (Syracuse UP, 2016), and *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Peter Lang, 2010). Other titles that were published earlier and mostly deal with canonical Irish plays include A *Critical History of Modern Irish Drama, 1891-1980* (Cambridge UP, 1984), *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre* (Barnes and Noble, 1991), *Twentieth-century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (Manchester UP, 1997), and *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge UP, 2004), among others.

the political emergency, is always identified as her only serious Irish work. As might be expected, her close connections with the literary and academic circles of England have done little to define her as an Irish writer, particularly given her somehow politically incorrect Anglo-Irish origin. However, some critics, such as Donna Gerstenberger, have argued for her implicit Irishness in her "consciousness of national materials" and portraits of lower-class Irish people in their troubled homeland, despite not all of them receiving full characterizations in her works (Gerstenberger 1975, 70). Although she is not being widely perceived as an Irish pen, it is interesting that Murdoch was anxious to defend her non-Englishness to Peter Conradi, her biographer: "you could cut with a knife [my Irish accent]," and introduced herself as an Irish person in conversations with friends and colleagues (Conradi, 2001, par. 2). To relocate the proper position of the playwright within Irish literature, this chapter will reexamine *The Servants and the Snow* (1970), an almost forgotten play by Murdoch, and situate it in a colonial framework which encapsulates her rather implicit but significant theatrical approach to British dominance over Ireland—through an impending riot of servants in an Anglo-Irish residence. Symbolically, a series of incidents that take place in this residence suggests how the playwright observes the colonial suppression of the colonized, the sadomasochistic mentality that undermines anti-colonial movements, and, more significantly, the Oedipus complex that maintains authoritarianism from one landed generation to another. This chapter will also expound on how Murdoch has differentiated herself from her male compeers by illustrating Irish experiences from a more universal perspective, rather than through insular politics.

The Anglo-Irish big house novel has enjoyed much critical attention in the past few decades, while the dramatizations of the fall of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy during the Irish Civil War (1922-3) seem relatively untouched. The chapter, "The Anglo-Irish Big House and War Memories in Three Plays," will focus on three less-discussed works that include Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926), Joseph O'Conor's *The Iron Harp* (1955) and Brendan Behan's *The Big House* (1957). These plays do not merely document ignored facets of the Anglo-Irish community but also illustrate incidents during the Irish Civil War, when residences were either being burned down, besieged or occupied by people who were used to being powerless and subordinated. Notably, the big houses, having been built centuries before as symbolic extensions of British imperial power, play roles that move beyond silent observation of the rise and fall of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, but function as a political arena that prompts negation, exile

and expulsion of their residents and those living outside their gates. This chapter will also examine how the three plays uncover institutionally silenced Anglo-Irish experiences, while addressing how playwrights from two generations perceive the Anglo-Irish legacy differently. It will also demonstrate how their perceptions are subject to the political contexts the nation was in at the time of the plays' writing.

It could be maintained that Christina Reid's *Joyriders*, set in the context of Belfast sectarian violence in 1986, is a play that addresses the concerns of northern Irish teenagers from social minorities. This play not only critically interrogates the intimidating political and economic mechanisms that undervalue teenagers, mostly Catholic, but also questions the canonicity of Sean O'Casey's 1923 play, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, through the differing views of young Irish audiences. This intertextuality lies in the fact that *Joyriders*, beginning with a theatrical production of the tragic ending of Gunman, reproduces many of Gunman's dramatic elements and cross-examines them in a Belfast context. The protagonists of the two plays, not all surviving the sectarian hatred, illustrate the ways in which Irish nationalism is perceived as an entertaining, resentful, patriotic, or ignored subject, for the jobless, the homeless, drug addicts, and others on the margins of society. Through their eyes, political and religious conflicts are not necessarily the breeding ground for heroism, but reveal its absurdity and irrationality. "Voices from the Irish Margin: Sean O'Casey's The Shadow of a Gunman and Christine Reid's *Joyriders*" will therefore emphasize how O'Casey and Reid dramatize their critiques of relevant ideologies across several decades in Ireland. One important area of elaboration is how Reid's adaptation of O'Casey's masterpiece raises and foregrounds women's issues.

The Easter Rising of 1916 has always been a popular yet important subject in Irish literature and drama. Despite the fact that the event has given rise to many critical inquiries and occasioned heated debate among nationalist and revisionist historians, this historical event has been revered almost as a creation story for the Republic of Ireland. However, an ontological difference between, as Fintan O'Toole points out, "an inept tragedy of errors and a solid achievement" should still be revisited so as to properly examine accounts of the heroism of nationalist martyrs (O'Toole 1988, 42). Interestingly, the varying perceptions of the Easter Rising have been presented by Irish playwrights in ways that could offend radical nationalists, through offering views that are often politically incorrect and disturbing to their audiences. With a less celebratory note, their alternative perspectives often feature the conflicting consequences of the Rising and illuminate ignored yet credible facets that may serve to rebut the received

interpretations.

In this connection, "Staging the Easter Rising: Plays by W.B. Yeats, Sean O'Casey, Colm Tóibín" will examine three plays that revisit the Rising and offer thought-provoking subject matter. They either reflect on the causes and effects of remote English rule in Ireland or delineate the immediate impact of the Easter Rising on different social strata. The three plays include Yeats's less discussed play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), and Tóibín's *Beauty in a Broken Place* (2004). Although there is a relatively long-time span during which these works were produced, the social contexts in which the playwrights lived and worked give rise to diverse portrayals of the same political turmoil. More significantly, these plays initiate a debate on the Easter Rising yet produce healing effects by restaging historical traumas.

The widely understood significance of the 1916 Easter Rising is that it served as a catalyst for the birth of the Irish Free State, despite the fact that the forced partition of the island has led to many casualties of acts of violence in the following decades. Although the arguments between nationalist and revisionist historians have not been fully reconciled, there has only been limited discussion of how Irish playwrights have engaged with this event with works that confront, contradict or uphold existing ideologies. Their theatrical presentations of the Easter Rising do not always present Irish rebels/revolutionaries as central characters but visualize different kinds of memory with characters, real or fictional, who are socially marginalized and alienated. The chapter, "Performing 'Easter 1916': Plays by Denis Johnston, Tom Murphy, and Donal O'Kelly," will aim to examine alternative perspectives dramatized by Irish playwrights who reexamine this historical incident and prompt contemporary audiences to take a different view. The three plays under discussion are Johnston's *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958), Murphy's *The Patriot Game* (1991), and O'Kelly's *Operation Easter* (1995).

Brendan Behan was one of only a handful of Irish writers who wrote prolifically in the mid-twentieth century, given that an overbearing censorship had stagnated the local literary scene for decades and prompted many artists to exile or silence themselves. His portraits of the Irish Republican Army and the working-class community—in which he was raised—brought many previously unseen characters to light, including prison inmates, prostitutes, homosexuals and so forth. However, the most notable aspect of Behan's dramas is not necessarily the realistic approach by which most Irish playwrights have delineated social plights, but his meta-theatrical manner, alongside ensuing alienation effects, that keep audiences

critically aware of a highly politicized and sectarian society. He consistently attempts to unsettle nationalist propaganda, gender biases and the puritanical narrative that the state/church apparatus had reinforced. His depictions of prisons—forbidden spaces that rarely receive public exposure—challenge the binary perception of being either a martyr or a betrayer, a terrorist or a pacifist, and a moral or immoral being. Given that the young Behan had been jailed in both England and Ireland for supporting republican causes, he was able to offer a personal yet revisionist view of prisoners from different political persuasions and cultural backgrounds. In "Staging the Outcast in Brendan Behan's Three Prison Dramas," the three prison dramas to be discussed include *The Quare Fellow* (1954), *The Hostage* (1958) and *Borstal Boy* (1967)—the final one is a posthumous adaptation of Behan's same-name novel. These plays map out an alternative imagination of Ireland from within and beyond political imprisonment, and—last but not least—his theatrical legacy.

Among these prison plays by Behan, *The Hostage* is particularly controversial in that it portrays the ambiguous responses of socially and politically marginalized characters to militant Irish republicanism and hardline unionism. Their voices, untimely in political terms yet potentially challenging, from both sides of the divide, suggest an alternative approach to reshaping the nationalist and unionist historiographies of Ireland. The dramatization of these politically invisible figures, including an Anglo-Irish house owner, prostitutes, a homosexual navy man and his black boyfriend, a skivvy, a Russian sailor, and a British hostage being guarded by an IRA officer, illustrates an unpleasant Irish reality that disgraces the puritanical façade maintained painstakingly by the Catholic nationalist government during the mid-twentieth century. The characters survive as individuals on the social margin yet are put under a collective spotlight by the playwright who left the Irish Republic Army to which he once pledged loyalty. *The Hostage* presents Ireland as an "anomalous state," as described by David Lloyd, while its inclusion of underrepresented characters could be seen as paving the way for a post-nationalistic imagination of Ireland after the 1916 Easter Rising.[5] More significantly, through the occasional Brechtian distancing effects on stage and dramatic ironies employed in the play, it might be regarded as counteracting the assumption that Gayatri C. Spivak expressed in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The chapter, "Can Minorities Speak in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958)?," will therefore examine

[5] For more details, see David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and The Post-colonial Moment* (1993).

how Behan, from a working-class background, intended to rebuild fragmented Irish experiences in a theatrical context, and whether this problem play contains a "history from below"—without imperialist structures but effectively reversing the nationalistic power relation in which minority groups are still subordinated and oppressed.

Among the seven signatories of the Easter Rising Proclamation, James Connolly has been an underrepresented figure in Irish history. The controversy surrounding Connolly mostly centers on his questionable role in this radical nationalist siege, even though he had been one of the most prolific Marxist theorists of his day, being a founder of the Irish Labour Party and of the Irish Citizen Army. Having been an outspoken socialist, he was unfairly marginalized by most of the Irish republican propaganda and nationalistic discourses down to the present day. Even more peculiar, he was subsequently undervalued by his fellow socialists who were upset about his participation in the Easter Rising, a rebellion that most Marxists did not consider to be the right approach to end class warfare.

It may well be that historians have not been able, and seem unlikely to be able in the near future, to provide a convincing or fair assessment of Connolly, nor to verify whether he would have been able to "marry socialism and nationalism" and identify an Irish cultural nationalism, as Austen Morgan boldly argues in his own version of Connolly's biography—written from a revisionist viewpoint (qtd. in Boyce 1996, 169). Interestingly, Connolly's political ambivalence has yielded plenty of scope for the imagination of playwrights in envisaging his final few days before he was executed by the British government for his part in the Irish insurgence. Their theatrical conjectures—backed by archival research to varying degrees—allow audiences different alternatives for learning about, interpreting, assessing, or even celebrating, the legacy of this controversial Marxist. Most importantly, they are able to look beyond the selectiveness of historians in recreating Connolly as a material figure. The three plays under discussion in "James Connolly on Stage: History, Imagination, and Interpretations" include Margaretta D'Arcy & John Arden's *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975), Larry Kirwan's *Blood* (1993), and Terry Eagleton's *The White, the Gold and the Gangrene* (1993).

Having examined a number of historical figures in Irish dramas, it might be appropriate to judge that once these people enter the zone of public memory, however celebrated they might be, they are no longer able to speak for themselves but become objectified by historians, creative writers, and interested parties down the generations. The more controversial they were during their lifetimes, the more likely they are to be refashioned

imaginatively or rebuilt with facets that might counteract the eminence, sometimes grandiose, that might be awarded to them. Representations of these historical figures and relevant events might put their contributions, personalities and even charisma under the microscope, challenging the historiography that tends to apotheosize them as heroes.

For modern Irish playwrights, revisiting the past is not done to entertain the audience by supplying a dose of nostalgia but to reexamine historical individuals, not just according to the official records, and the forces that make them what they are today. 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 judgements. That said, their creative approaches, if not entirely based on reality, might effectively unsettle complex national and identity formation with metatheatrical devices, such as role play, play-within-a-play, mimicry, impersonation, and so forth. Audiences, as observers and participants, are thus able to experience how different perspectives and realities can be antithetical yet co-habit simultaneously, and come to a more reflective understanding of their shared past.

Similarly with the 1916 Easter Rising, the Northern Ireland Troubles have also inspired many dramatists to write plays with political and social significance. Take Anne Devlin, born in 1951 in Ulster, for example. She often observes how Irishwomen were conditioned by nationalistic violence and its lexicon in many of her works. To interrogate the way in which Irish nationalism and patriarchy subjugates Irishwomen, her play, *Ourselves Alone* (1987), a name derived from the English translation of *Sinn Féin*, features how three women in one politically torn family submit to, accuse or ignore male lovers' unyielding expectations of their being loyal and submissive objects—in both the domestic and public spheres. Specifically, their struggle against masculine politics challenges the core of the republican ideology, in that the playwright not only exposes the hypocrisy of those republican heros-to-be, but also unveils northern Irishwomen's hidden but active sexuality, in attempting to unshackle the traditional male domination over female bodies and desires. Republicanism, through the critical eyes of the women protagonists, does not appear sanctified but as a sexist product to be questioned. Interestingly, the picture that Devlin presents about Irishwomen's sexuality and individualities remakes the traditional, motherly image of them—sanctioned by nationalists and/or Catholics—suggesting the possibility of creating a new rhetoric and aesthetics in women's views and experiences. The chapter, "Awakening from the Troubles in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*," will thus dwell upon

how this play illustrates the triumphs and failures of women searching for their own voices alone and creating a female version of an ideal Ireland, in which the emancipation of women is the basis of national liberation and ultimate peace.

It is well known that, since the 1980s, postmodern critics such as Hayden White and Saul Friedlander have been questioning the given historiography. One of their arguments is that history can be "narrativised" by historians who are capable of producing, distributing, and/or distorting the meaning of relevant events, so their historic interpretations cannot be beyond all question. However, before they made this claim, Irish revisionist historians had, since the late 1960s, attempted to put traditional historiography into question, arguing that many historians have failed either to examine a wider range of historical materials or, if they have made such a study, to interpret those materials accurately. Having observed the arguments from historians of both persuasions, Michael Laffan, a revisionist historian, contends that many revolutionary events, such as the Easter Rising of 1916, have been regarded by most Irish nationalists for decades as "sacrosanct, immune to criticism or even to serious examination, a model of pure heroism in a world of good and evil" (Laffan 1991, 107). Seamus Deane also maintains that the Irish Identity—which Irish nationalists have endeavoured to forge—is "not . . . an exclusively Irish notion . . . [but], more emphatically, an English one . . . [as] the 'dialectical opposite of imperialism'" (Deane 1998, 184). Their critique of Irish nationalism is not only effective within academia; interestingly, playwrights from the North have expressed similar concerns for the consequences brought upon the Irish by fundamentalist historians.

Devlin, whose works often examine the identity issue in a divided society, is keen to explore how Irish women struggle for their own voices. Her play, *After Easter*, written in 1994 and portraying how the three sisters of a family from Belfast resist or echo the given political ideologies, could be thought of as a feminist work tackling a mixture of social issues: Irish nationalism, Catholicism, capitalism, and so forth. It could be argued that the playwright's representation of female experiences in seeking an individual identity is a theatrical practice that also mirrors the concerns both of postmodern and revisionist critics. Having the postmodern and revisionist critiques of historiography as its theoretical basis, the chapter, "The Healing of Trauma in Anne Devlin's *After Easter*: Female Experiences and the Nationalistic Historiography," will dissect how the playwright, through the story of a family highly affected by conflicting politics, reveals the weaknesses of relevant ideologies in Ireland. The playwright does not endorse any existing political discourse or religious persuasion as iconic.

More profoundly, she uses the funeral of the protagonists' father as a "ritual" in which a politically-divided family is finally able to reconcile itself to a common identity beyond various ideological constraints; this reconciliation is mainly reached through the female characters' shared experiences of exile and the awakening of their desire. As a whole, how Irish women in a patriarchal society fly past those "nets" of nationality, language, and religion, as James Joyce figures out for Stephen Dedalus, is what seems to have inspired Anne Devlin in writing the play.

Furthermore, Devlin's Belfast Trilogy, which comprises *The Long March* (1984), *Ourselves Alone* (1985), and *After Easter* (1994), received some unfavourable reviews when the plays were premiered, in that the playwright not only interrogated republicanism and unionism, which had traditionally been male-dominated, but delineated women's experiences, which had either been invisible or assumed to be coherent with those of their male peers. More significantly, this trilogy, which has rarely been discussed as a whole, provides a matriarchal representation of the Northern Ireland Troubles, and chronicles women's collusion, resistance, and/or self-healing during the political and militant conflicts. On the one hand, Devlin's trilogy challenges the stereotype of Mother Ireland and its colonial and religious implications, so as to counteract the permissive patriarchal mechanisms in Irish politics. The anti-patriarchal nature of this Trilogy, on the other hand, unsettles the traditional romantic attitude toward heroes and female admirers, introducing a feminist interpretation of war and romance with an unconventional approach to mythological characters. Being a theatrical critique of her politically divided, working-class community, this trilogy to be discussed illustrates the process of reconciliation through which Irishwomen regain their subjectivities for the peace to come.

The role of women in Northern Ireland's peace process has been a matter of concern for many women playwrights since the 1980s. Despite the fact that Marie Jones, a co-founder of the Charabanc Theatre Company in Belfast, has only written a limited number of plays that are directly engaged with the Northern Ireland Troubles and their aftermath, they have been deliberately created to demonstrate the largely ignored experiences of Protestant and Catholic individuals, especially those deemed politically and religiously nonconformist. It should also be noted that Jones adopts a distinctive strategy by revealing hidden yet unsettling aspects of Northern Irish life and maintaining a justifiable standpoint that is expressed through either a confused Protestant man, or a group of angry Catholic women.

Specifically, *A Night in November*, a monodrama with only one male Protestant character, presents how sectarianism stereotypes and demonizes

Catholics and forces them to be almost invisible and unapproachable. *The Blind Fiddler* presents the flashbacks of a family as they look back from a time after the Northern Ireland ceasefire to the sectarian divides of the 1960s, when a Catholic mother is trying to shield her children from violence on the eve of the Troubles. *Somewhere over the Balcony* is an all-woman play that dramatizes the life of Catholic women in the Divis Flats in Belfast and their alternative views of the Troubles as seen from a high-rise balcony. Notably, these plays visualize a theatrical space through a man's monologue, a family's recollections, and women's conversations, presenting how sectarian violence incurs political absurdities and hampers interpersonal relationships. By not endorsing any specific political persuasion in Northern Ireland but instead dramatizing the everyday difficulties of living in a deeply divided society, Jones also questions the over-celebration of masculinity in both nationalist and unionist discourses that has unrelentingly oppressed both genders regardless of whether they are on the social margin or seemingly within the mainstream.

"Alternative Peace Process: Violence and Reconciliation in Marie Jones's Plays on the Northern Ireland Troubles" will therefore make critical observations on different but neglected facets of Northern Irish life during the Troubles and examine how Jones deconstructs gendered ideologies through the eyes of politically problematic characters. More importantly, this comparative study of these plays, centering on male and female experiences considered separately, may echo those of her other works that appeal for justice and peace in regions where both tangible and intangible divisions still exist.

Having said so, it should be fair to say that Northern Irishwomen's experiences of war, particularly those of Protestants (unionists), have never drawn sufficient attention from historians, sociologists, and theatre critics, although Northern Ireland has seen constant conflict between diverse parties both inland and overseas. This is partially because, in both literary and political terms, the idea of "Mother Ireland" has been so suffocating that individual voices of women are often simplified or neglected, promoting the male expectation of the ideal Irish woman as being as motherly and patriotic as Cathleen Ni Houlihan—a mythical figure dramatically accentuated by W.B. Yeats—who was, ironically, an Anglo-Irish Protestant. The representation of Northern Irishwomen who are neither Catholics nor nationalists remains void, or they are often stereotyped as homogeneous unionists. It was not until the 1980s, when a small number of women dramatists began to stage the mixed voices of their sex, that audiences and critics started to show concern for this social minority, and a comprehensive

study of these women has never been completed. Christina Reid, Belfast-born and from a working-class Protestant family, is one of several playwrights who often dramatize—in a journalistic style—the assorted experiences of women who may not sympathize with the unionist agenda but are forced to choose between being either betrayers of the nation or silent supporters of their husbands and male family members.

Reid's plays—which often delineate women's predicaments when husbands and brothers are absent fighting wars on the European mainland or intensely involved in anti-IRA paramilitary forces—can thus be seen as not only the historiography of Protestant northern Irishwomen and their awakening, but also critiques of the unionist ideology and its violence. In particular, this female-centered historiography through drama, not necessarily with political leaning towards any specific party, is complicated with issues of the coloured minorities whose presence in Ireland, or involvement with Irishwomen in Britain, initiates female liberation. Specifically, the women in Reid's plays may not devote themselves to the front line of the wars but seem more capable of toppling political mechanisms by displaying their contradictions through religious zeal and superstition. The playwright, by touching upon the racial issues, also renders the ethnic and denominational conflicts in a significant global perspective, suggesting how Ireland's peace is not likely to be made by means of insular politics but through the growing contribution of immigrants and inter-racial marriages. Her plays, presumably, break fresh ground for the Irish theatre which is now striding out of the shadow of anti-colonial sentiments by exhibiting the true but not always appealing faces of this split nation. Reid's war dramas, to be discussed in relation to Protestant Northern Irishwomen's experiences, include *Tea in a China Cup* (1983), *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989), and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1989).

It cannot be denied that there are many notable twentieth century Irish playwrights who have not been included due to limited space, while the dramas selected here are intended to be representative of the major or ignored issues concerning communities and individuals at war. Although the events and conflicts portrayed in these plays will soon disappear into history, or have already done so, their dramatizations will serve to remind future audiences and readers of not only their historical lessons but also the ethical aspects of violations of human life and rights as well as the political manipulations behind the conflicts. As theatrical forms of investigation, these plays present an interplay of two questionable types of memory, namely public and private. Both are yet to be rethought from revisionist perspectives, despite the fact that the truths behind the official propaganda

could inevitably cause national embarrassments, when the power of interpreting history shifts to a more impartial hand or a new generation.

"A dramatist is not a historian," as Yeats wrote in defence of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), which was controversial for the depiction of Irish peasantry and the act of patricide, despite the playwright having claimed that he had done a lot of fieldwork by collecting stories in the Aran Islands (qtd. in Steinman 1983, 46). Nevertheless, Synge *can* be regarded as a historian because he "did not care to read books of history, but preferred to read the original letters or records if possible," as Samuel Synge—the dramatist's younger brother—stated to his daughter, Edith, about her uncle (Synge 1932, 121).[6] The plays that are discussed in this book, among many more yet to be dwelt upon in the future, document some painful facets that should not vanish into history unnoticed but have more serious attention paid to them.

[6] Stated in Samuel Synge's letter to Edith Synge on October 3, 1922.

I.

DRAMATIZING ANGLO-IRISH CONFLICTS

CHAPTER ONE

DOMINATION, RESISTANCE, AND ANGLO-IRISH LANDLORDISM IN IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE SERVANTS AND THE SNOW*

Iris Murdoch's position in the Irish literary canon has always been ambivalent, as the writer, unlike her mostly male Irish peers, did not write a substantial number of Irish-flavored works, nor remark frequently on Irish cultural and political matters. Her novel, *The Red and the Green* (1965), set on the eve of the 1916 Easter Rising and concerning an extended Anglo-Irish family during the political emergency, is identified as her only serious Irish work.[1] As might be expected, her close connections with the literary and academic circles of England did little to define her as an Irish writer, particularly given her politically incorrect Anglo-Irish origin. However, some critics argue for her implicit Irishness in her "consciousness of national materials" (Gerstenberger 1975, 70), and portraits of lower-class Irish people in their troubled homeland, despite not all of them receiving full characterizations in her works. Although she is not widely perceived as an Irish author, Murdoch was anxious to defend her non-Englishness to Peter Conradi, her biographer: "you could cut with a knife [my Irish accent]. I may have misleading Oxford overtones—but the vowels are Irish," and often introduced herself as an Irish person in conversations with friends and colleagues (qtd. in Bostridge, 2008).[2] If the nationality of a writer lies in

[1] Other works that are set in Ireland include *The Unicorn* (1963) and the short story "Something Special" (1958), while The Red and the Green is the one that more closely deals with Irish politics.

[2] In a 1978 interview, Murdoch also emphasized, "My Irishness is Anglo-Irishness in a very strict sense. . . . I'm profoundly Irish and I've been conscious of this all my life, and in a mode of being Irish which has produced a lot of very distinguished thinkers and writers" (qtd. in Conradi 2001, 27).