

Introduction

(I)

In 1897 Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and W. B. Yeats, founders of the Irish Literary Theatre – which in 1904 was to become the Abbey Theatre – met in Lady Gregory's house in Co. Galway to discuss the venture. Their letter of intent, addressed to prospective guarantors, proposes 'to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature'.¹ As we shall see, the founders, shortly to be joined by George Moore, had different understandings of the character which this theatre should assert. Clearly, however, they regarded it as having neither native precedent nor instructive model in the general run of contemporary English drama. Commentators, from the earliest studies by Ernest Boyd (1918) and A. E. Malone (1929), concur on the truth at least of these premisses.

Boyd quite briskly dismisses 'the work of Irishmen whose spirit is as remote from their country as the scene in which their plays are laid'.² This principle excludes from consideration as Irish dramatists G. B. Shaw and Oscar Wilde. Malone regards more fully both these two playwrights and the issue they exemplify. He sees in them, placing them with William Congreve, George Farquhar, Oliver Goldsmith, and R. B. Sheridan,

a perfection of dialogue which is quite distinctively Irish; and they all have that wit which is no less a distinguishing mark of the Irishman. They are all satirists, viewing English life with a somewhat disapproving smile. In all their comedies it is the life of the English people that is satirised, there is nothing of Ireland in them but the pert dialogue and the ironic wit which are characteristic of their countrymen at large. Comedies by English writers tend to be humorous and sentimental, while comedies by Irishmen tend to be witty and ironic. Had it not been for the line of Irish writers from Farquhar to Shaw English comedy would have been almost entirely deficient in that satiric content.³

Malone's points are well taken and worth some development. When he talks of Shaw and Wilde 'viewing English life with a somewhat disapproving smile', he implies a stance at an eccentric angle to their (mainly) English objects of satire. Both are curious, detached observers of a scene only exotically familiar to them. The attitude harks back, for instance, to Goldsmith's inventing a Chinese as the voice of his alien status in his *Citizen of the World* essays; and to the cryptic variations which Swift imposes on Gulliver's accounts of his 'own dear beloved country'. Part of this dis-

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tinguishing blend of intimacy and division comes from a peculiarly but not uniquely Irish acknowledgement of a sovereignty of words. Malone recognises in Shaw and Wilde the perhaps excessively advertised 'pert dialogue and ironic wit which are characteristic of their countrymen'. More deeply, this delight is in a language which competes with life rather than running imitatively alongside it; creates a rival world which may either displace factual reality or in quite practical ways alter it.

Many of the dramatists considered in this study assert that words, if they are not paramount, are the equal of reality, possibly its creator, when words affect the way we see things. The assertion is central to the dramatic tension in Synge, and in the expatriate tradition is plainly evident in Wilde. Nevertheless – and as Malone also concludes – despite these resonances from their national background, the emigrant playwrights belong to the lineage of English theatre. They are rovers, marauders even, but within an English heredity. The great exception is Samuel Beckett, who declares his separation from that heredity by exile in France. An important part of his artistic genealogy is traceable to the tradition of Irish writing in English, and

1 The stage of the old Abbey Theatre, Dublin, during rehearsal



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more particularly to the movement initiated by the Irish Literary Theatre. It was in French that he began to evolve his own dramatic language; there can be no doubting the profound part in Beckett's experience of French companionships, French society and culture. Its unevicted host is his Irish background. Though a single, it is a closely informing, aspect of his work. It is to that aspect that the consideration of Beckett in this study is directed.

In attempting to find cause for the flight of the playwrights who might have established an Irish drama, Malone cites the total absence of any Irish equivalent to the venerable European-English tradition which took drama from the *tropes* of the mediaeval Church through the miracle and morality plays to the secular stage.⁴ Eventually, theatres were built in Ireland, in Dublin and in provincial, mainly garrison, towns.⁵ They and for the most part their repertoire were imports, the property of the Anglo-Irish, descendants of the original English invaders, who supplied their major patronage. English touring companies presented English plays, and this was the fare available to popular audiences in, for example, Dublin in the nineteenth century, where our story really begins.

The Irish dramatist Dion Boucicault (1820 or 1822-90) is of a rather more indigenous nature, though essentially he was a very practical man of the English and American theatre of his time, turning his hand to its fashionable melodrama and French comedy. His celebrated Irish plays are *The Colleen Bawn* (1861), *Arrah na Pogue* (1864), and *The Shaughraun* (1874). The interest of these lively and well-crafted plays, enjoyed by Shaw and Sean O'Casey, is their inverting the stupid and unreliable Stage Irishman into the charming and patriotic Stage Irishman, a reversal which Dublin took to its heart. Though their subjects and settings are Irish and their characters sentimental versions of Irish people, they are doing nothing more fundamental than adapting Irish matter to the prevailing theatrical formulae. These were not the plays to germinate a theatre expressive of lives and sensibilities whose reality had been so far unregarded by the drama.

(II)

Various chronicles carry the tale beyond the point where Malone stops: Peter Kavanagh's *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (1950), Lennox Robinson's *Ireland's Abbey Theatre* (1951), Gerard Fay's *The Abbey Theatre* (1958), Hugh Hunt's *The Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre* (1979). These record the Abbey's history and with that to all intents and purposes the chronological progress of Irish drama. Other theatrical enterprises there have been and are but the Abbey is comprehensively dominant. The books mentioned contain little extended criticism of the playwrights. Kavanagh's has the strongest thesis. He is concerned to demonstrate, prematurely as it turns

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out, that '[the Abbey's] collapse entitles one to the conclusion that the Abbey Theatre did indeed die with Yeats'.⁶ In addition to these, Robert Hogan and various collaborators are producing their invaluable *Modern Irish Drama*, beginning at 1899, drawing largely on contemporary accounts.

More purely critical studies are Una Ellis-Fermor's *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (1939, 1954) and Katherine Worth's *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (1978). These commentaries agree with Kavanagh in seeing Yeats, little thought of as a dramatist in his own time and in Ireland, as the presiding genius, and not only as a capably ruthless administrator. They judge his plays to be the model for and example of a modern verse drama; the dramatic theories dispersed throughout his writings an exciting programme for theatrical experiment – dance, music, and visual effects involved in a speech heightened and rhythmical yet appropriate to the stage. In Una Ellis-Fermor's opinion Yeats's plays reach an 'immediacy . . . achieved as the Jacobean and Greek dramatists achieve it, not by the quenching but by the exaltation of the poetic imagination'.⁷ Much of this power she attributes to its origins in the speech and folkways of Irish peasants. For Katherine Worth Yeats's plays are a product more of his response to the *avant-garde* European drama of his formative years – notably Maeterlinck – than of an Irish inspiration. He looks back to the stark effects of the moralities and in his 'total theatre' of song, instrumentation, stylised movement, lighting, anticipates O'Casey, Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Bond – indeed the modernist–contemporary stage as a whole.

This is the highest praise for Yeats's dramatic achievement and influence. It is easiest to agree on the magical persuasiveness of his theorising. Certainly his example has not led to a renaissance of verse for the stage: the inconsiderable verse plays of John Masefield, John Drinkwater, and Lascelles Abercrombie come far short of Ellis-Fermor's claim that they realise 'the possibility of poetic drama as a working theatre form'. T. S. Eliot, a more plausible contender, fitted his verse for the stage by making it increasingly like prose, without ever accepting prose as the medium for poetic drama in this century. The value of Yeats's plays is still a contentious matter. The academic consensus, it is true, approves them. There are dissenting voices. Robert Hogan in *After the Irish Renaissance* (1968) whose main concern is to survey the course of Irish drama since Yeats, argues that they are rather eloquent verse exposition than dramatic enactment.⁸ James Flannery, on the other hand, with substantial experience of producing them, sees in Yeats's plays exactly the virtues apparent to Katherine Worth, poetic drive and stageworthiness combined.⁹ The plays, astonishing sketches for a verse drama that never attained full being, do not seem to me to warrant this enthusiastic discipleship.

Nonetheless, judge Yeats the dramatist how we may, he remained for

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Irish drama an enduring memorial to an idea of poetic drama, active in later imaginations in quite other ways than Yeats's. Irish theatre in its heydays advances Yeats's intents; in its doldrums at least pays lip-service. In the common interpretation the Abbey turned to realist theatre and everyday matter: the 'peasant' plays of Padraic Colum, William Boyle and T. C. Murray. The fantasy plays of George Fitzmaurice were a brief aberration in this progress. Yeats said of the Abbey's development in these years (1903-10), 'its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat'.¹⁰

Synge's plays might be argued on either side. It was their passionately poetic language, their 'astringent joy and hardness'¹¹ that commended them to Yeats. They also invited scrutiny as realist representations of peasant life. Synge took pains over the accuracy of clothing and domestic interiors, he used the realist proscenium stage, he claimed that his language was faithful to peasant speech. His audiences looked for this conformity to truth but objected that his unflattering portrayal of country people falsified Irish life. Synge, mistakenly, defended himself largely on those terms. His plays in fact escape the nineteenth-century realist convention which is their frame.

2 The stage of the new Abbey Theatre



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Their effect – and it is an effect of language, its elaborate stylisation, and the rôle given to it of interfering with life – is to disturb the apparent solidity of his stage’s material accessories, to fantasticate and mythologise character and action.

Between them, Yeats and Synge propose a view of drama within which we can discern an outline of the Abbey’s evolution. Yeats, looking at the balance of verse/prose/poetic/realist theatre, saw his expectations miscarried. He did not recognise designs fulfilled in the realistic style which his prospectus rejected in favour of renewing ‘the theatre of Shakespeare or rather perhaps Sophocles’.¹² He does not altogether discount the virtues of dramatic prose, but his overruling belief is that verse more readily commands the full amplitude of poetry. Among his contemporaries he delighted in Synge’s ‘highly coloured musical language’, and praises – above its due – the ‘vivid speech’ of Lady Gregory’s plays. The prose of their successors was too remote from his preconceptions for his ear to catch its poetry:

Mr. Colum and Mr. Boyle . . . write of the countryman or villager of the East or centre of Ireland, who thinks in English, and the speech of their people shows the influence of the newspaper and the National Schools. The people they write of, too, are not the true folk. They are the peasant as he is being transformed by modern life . . . There is less surprise, less wonder.¹³

The comments, true enough as far as they go, cut off possibilities. Elsewhere Yeats argued that the only greatness achievable by a realist play must ‘arise out of the common life’ and its language – meaning the language or the kind of language available to Synge. He goes on to ask, ‘Is it possible to make a work of art, which needs every subtlety of expression if it is to reveal what hides itself continually, out of a dying, or at any rate a very ailing, language and all language but that of the poets and the poor is already bed-ridden.’¹⁴

Yeats is enforcing the answer ‘no’. The answer really is that common speech, however different from – one might even concede inferior to – the hibernicised English on which Synge drew, is amenable to the metamorphosis of art. Contemporary theatre – Beckett or Harold Pinter, in Ireland Thomas Murphy or Brian Friel – absorbs its poetry from registers of speech which by Yeats’s criteria are limited to giving ‘the sensation of an external reality’. Yeats’s theory, in his own restriction of it, is partial. If we extend it in a way which Yeats disallows, and take Synge’s stylising of spoken language as a model for other forms of colloquial speech, we have a draft, so to speak, which anticipates the governing practice of the Abbey drama.

The work of the Abbey Theatre, of Irish drama, is a long experiment, sometimes descending to stretches of mechanical self-duplication, with the boundaries of realist theatre. On its heights it engages realist theatre in

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poetic transformations, subdued in Colum, extravagant in O'Casey, beyond the mere traffic with, in Yeats's phrase, 'the sensation of an external reality'. It is remarkable in the tradition that it is essentially the flowering of an indigenous experience and imagination. It develops manners of presentation which are not discursive or sequential, which move away from literal portrayal: towards, in short, modernist attitudes and methods.

The experimental drama of Europe and Ibsen particularly were known in Ireland at the turn of the century. In Ireland it was suggestive not dominant, impressionable not prescriptive. Synge rejected it. It interested Yeats, but his feelings, about Maeterlinck for instance, were mixed. He drew upon Europe, as he did upon the Japanese Noh plays, quite arbitrarily to confirm or satisfy his own propositions. Denis Johnston, the Irish dramatist perhaps most consciously receptive to the drama abroad, gave to his borrowings from German expressionism a peculiarly Irish character. It is a self-sufficiency within cavalier alliances which continues to the present, informed by the sense of language as both reflecting and supplanting reality. There is a metaphor of this in the comment by the Irish painter Patrick Collins on his own work: 'you don't believe in the things you're painting, you believe in the thing behind what you're painting. You destroy your object yet you keep it.'¹⁵

The conclusions formulated here state the general argument of this study of Irish drama since the time of the Irish Literary Theatre – in effect the Irish dramatic tradition. Within world drama it is a brief chronicle, some eighty years, its achievement the more extraordinary for that. As far as possible the account given here both of its main events and its major dramatists sets them in their joint chronology. The inevitable and reluctant omissions, especially in the richly endowed present, when time has not yet passed sentence, represent personal judgments. At the heart of the matter, and so attracting the emphasis, are the playwrights rather than the theatres and players whose part is to supply the necessary stage, at their most enterprising when they beckon to a continuing line of dramatists. 'If we can pay our players,' Yeats said to the Royal Academy of Sweden, 'and keep our theatres open something will come.'¹⁶ The players paid and the theatres kept open justified his faith. Its inheritance is the subject of this book.

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I. Dreams and responsibilities: 1891–1904

I had had from the beginning a vision of historical plays being sent by us through all the counties of Ireland.

Lady Gregory

the peasant's primitive mind is too crude for any sort of interesting complexity in treatment.

Edward Martyn

the example can be set by the production every spring of an original dramatic work like the *Heather Field*, and by the production every autumn of a European masterpiece, like Ibsen's *Vikings of Heligoland*.

George Moore

I hope to get our Heroic Age into verse, and to solve some problems of the speaking of verse to musical notes.

W. B. Yeats

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At the turn of the century, the Irish Literary Theatre took form amidst the conflicting intentions of its main sponsors: Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn, George Moore, and W. B. Yeats. Yeats was the chief agent. In 1891 he played a large part in organising the Irish Literary Society in London and the next year in Dublin the National Literary Society, which heard the lecture by Douglas Hyde, the celebrated Gaelic scholar, 'The Necessity for de-Anglicising Ireland'. Both Societies were part of a vigorous movement to encourage a literature which, whether in the English or the Irish language, would have a distinctly Irish character. Yeats had always been interested in drama – his play *The Countess Cathleen* was published in 1892, *The Land of Heart's Desire* performed in London in 1894 – and began to seek a special place for it in the movement.

In 1897 he discussed with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, two landowners in the west of Ireland, the possibility of setting up a literary theatre in Dublin. A proposal, in the form of a letter signed by the three of them, was sent to various prominent Irishmen. It set out their plans:

We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish School of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by

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its passion for oratory, and 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 England¹

and solicited funds to keep the experiment going for a season in Dublin in each of the three years 1899–1901. Support for the Irish Literary Theatre was forthcoming. Opposition from commercial theatres and difficulties over licensing alternative buildings for theatrical performances were overcome. The detailed planning began for the first presentation in 1899, at which point George Moore was invited to join the original trio.

The four founding members made up an odd combination of social correspondences and divisions. Lady Gregory was a Protestant landowner. Martyn and Moore were landlords too. Both were Catholics, Martyn agonisingly devout, Moore ostentatiously lapsed. Martyn was a near neighbour of Lady Gregory in Galway, the Moore estates were in Mayo. All were humane proprietors, though Martyn had had a patrician hostility to the demands and depredations of the tenants' Land League in their campaign against the system of land tenure. Moore was a permanent absentee. Yeats, through his Sligo family, also had strong connections with the west of Ireland. At least tribally he was a Protestant, though not of the landowning gentry.

Moore claimed a greater practical experience of the stage than any of his partners, with some reason. Apart from his celebrity as the author of *Esther Waters*, and as a self-advertised 'bohemian', he had conducted a vendetta against the conservatism of the English theatre critics (*Impressions and Opinions*, 1891). He was an active supporter of J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre, which in 1893 staged his *The Strike at Arlingford*. Even so, Moore's credentials were not overwhelming. They were sufficient to allow him to condescend to Yeats and even more to Martyn. The Irish enterprise gave him the opportunity to instruct his colleagues and to display himself to advantage. *Hail and Farewell*² is his satirical account of events. Somewhere between history and fiction, it inclines the facts to magnify Moore.

Moore took credit for the construction of Martyn's *The Heather Field* (1899). During rehearsal he disrupted the casting of it. He was similarly autocratic with Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, in the same season, being particularly severe with the histrionics of Florence Farr, whose 'most perfect poetical elocution' Yeats greatly admired.³ Moore also collaborated – acrimoniously – with Yeats on *Diarmuid and Grania* (1901); and, assisted by Yeats, with Martyn, whose *The Tale of a Town* became Moore's *The Bending of the Bough*, favoured over the Martyn play for the theatre's 1900 season. Martyn did not relish this high-handedness. In the end he refused his name to any joint version: 'Moore would put in what he liked', Yeats reports him as saying.⁴

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There was plainly cause for the quartet to be at temperamental odds. When Yeats remarked, with how much sincerity we do not know, that Moore had his good points, Martyn answered: 'I know Moore a great deal longer than you do. He has no good points.'⁵ Among their contending displays Lady Gregory played an indispensable rôle as entrepreneur. It was she who organised the financial guarantees. Because Martyn defrayed expenses these were never taken up, but the backing they represented was essential. She had not yet begun to write plays and so did not challenge the self-regard of anyone else, nor did she have cause to defend her own. Perhaps for this reason she was the better able to placate Martyn and restrain Moore. She enjoined a fortnight's silence on Moore when, in the Irish Literary Theatre's first season, *The Countess Cathleen* came under suspicion of heresy. Lady Gregory assembled enough clerical opinion to quieten Martyn's pious misgivings – Moore was spoiling for a fight – and so retain his patronage.

Altercation and conflicts of personality took place on a certain common, if shifting, ground. The Irish Literary Theatre arose partly – as its original proposal implies – from its founders' shared contempt for the English commercial theatre: for its parade of spectacle; its cluttered realism of stage décor; even for its serious playwrights, acclaimed for inferior imitations of their betters, particularly of Ibsen. The condition of English theatre was indeed deplorable. The London stage was occupied – as was the Dublin commercial theatre – by melodrama, romance, farce, and versions of Shakespeare monstrously 'revised' to suit the demands of fashionable players. In Dublin the main theatres – the Royal, the Gaiety, the Queen's – were given over to imported companies whose productions of English popular successes combined, with few exceptions, the modish and the slipshod.⁶ Plays of simple faith and mindless patriotic sentiment, of which Dion Boucicault's were the most estimable, recognised an Irish audience but held to the prevailing style. They planted a hardy growth whose vulgarities were to flourish in more high-minded plays, like Maud Gonnet's *Dawn* (1904), free from commercial motive.

It is an indication of the standard mediocrity that audiences regarded the 'well-made' plays of Henry Arthur Jones (*The Silver King*, 1882) and Arthur Wing Pinero (*The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, 1893) as substantial theatre. Purporting to address social problems, they are a kind of genteel melodrama. Pinero had a slight gift for epigrammatic dialogue; his serious plays never penetrate beyond the conventions of the fashionable life which is their subject. Technically, the plays resort to such innocent devices as letter-writing and peripheral 'conversations' to allow two front-of-stage actors to expound the plot.

Between 1888 and 1898, when he was in turn drama critic for *The Star*,