Conflicting Irelands:
the first productions of the Irish Literary Theatre

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Résumé *: A partir de l'idée que le mouvement dramatique aboutissant à la création du théâtre national au début du XX*^{e} *siècle est né du nationalisme culturel qui a proposé l'inspiration pastorale comme source principale des représentations de l'identité irlandaise, notre travail se propose d'illustrer le processus par lequel le paradigme culturel a été traduit dans des images dramatiques dans les premières productions de la Société dramatique irlandaise. Notre étude de cas porte sur deux pièces,* The Countess Cathleen *de W. B. Yeats et* The Heather Field *de Edward Martyn. Nous mettons en lumière la tension surgie entre la sphère du politique et celle du théâtre, transposée dans le rapport entre le public et l'auteur dramatique. Les réceptions des deux pièces en question se sont faites sur des prises de position différentes, ce qui souligne le processus complexe de pourparlers par le truchement duquel on a mis les fondements de la future orientation distincte du théâtre irlandais moderne. On a donc favorisé la pièce réaliste ayant un sujet rural, à savoir* The Heather Field *au profit du modèle symboliste et allégorique représenté par la seconde pièce, à savoir* The Countess Cathleen.

Mots-clés : *nationalisme culturel, théâtre irlandais, représentation, réception*

Christopher Murray's most recent study of twentieth-century Irish drama is significantly subtitled *Mirror Up to Nation*, as proof the fact that for as long as there has been a distinct Irish drama it has been so closely bound up with national politics that the one has been considered more or less a reflection of the other [1]. That this should be so is but understandable since the Irish Literary Theatre which took shape in 1891 as the personal endeavor of a few literary personalities including William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, Edward Martyn and George More to become a national theatrical enterprise within the span of a few years was an integral part of the broader cultural nationalism of the turn of the century, which sought to define their country's violent political and social upheaval and create for a long-colonised Ireland its own national identity.

In opposition to the Anglophone view that, since, at least the 16th century, had insisted on an absolute Irish otherness, rationalized as fundamental incivility whereby the Irish barbarians stood in marked contrast to their civil English colonizers [2], the nationalist project sought to counter the negativity of such hetero-images of Irishness by recuperating the essence of the Irish identity through a mythologising of its pre-colonial past, variously negotiated by the groups struggling for hegemony in late 19th-century Ireland. One set of images, evolved mostly through the efforts of Anglo-Irish intellectuals, internalised Matthew Arnold's opposition established between the ancient spiritual Celt and the modern philistine Saxon which had informed his *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, the famous collection of lectures published in 1867 [3]**,** and **"**created an idealised counter-image which saw her [Ireland] as pastoral, mystical, admirably primitive" [4]. Another group coalesced around institutions like the Gaelic Athletic Association (founded in 1884 as a powerful rural network emphasising physical training), or the Gaelic League (established nine years later and mainly dedicated to the revival of the Gaelic language) reworked the same basic opposition by substituting the moral peasant (who was in practice Catholic and Gaelic-speaking) to the corrupt Anglo-Saxon city-dweller. Thus, while retaining what were perceived as positive characteristics of Arnold's discourse on Celtism, such as the assumed spirituality and anti-materialism of the Irish, the rural definition of Irishness deployed linguistic, religious and also the moral categories associated with "familism" [5] not only as criteria of national identity, but also as "a code for anti-Englishness*"* [6]. In addition to these two ranges of representations made available for nationalist Ireland to choose, a third model evolved by the Ascendancy landlord class also reverted to the countryside, investing the space of their imposing country houses into the meanings of a rural idyll whereby landlords and peasants

were mutually bound in the "apparently unlegislated harmony of environmental and human relationships*"* [7].

The Irish Literary Revival, which was to spawn one of the most famous enterprises in the history of modern theatre, namely the conscious building of Ireland's national drama, was an integral part of these cultural debates. The story of the movement is by now fairly familiar and well documented [8], converging on the efforts of William Butler Yeats and a handful of other intellectuals to shift the nationalist debate into the literary and theatrical arena. With these in view, in 1891 Yeats helped found the Irish Literary Society in London, followed a year later by the National Literary Society established in Dublin. In 1897 there occurred the famous meeting in Dorus House during which Yeats discussed his plans of a little poetic theatre with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, which, a few days later, crystallised into the famous manifesto drafted at Lady Gregory's Cool Park, in which the three called for the creation of a new "Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature" which "will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism" [9]. In 1899, with Martyn's cousin, the novelist George Moore who had recently returned from London, co-opted into the enterprise, the Irish Literary Theatre came into being, and, as its title meant, it was conceived as a writer's theatre which was to provide an alternative to Dublin's popular stage by reflecting the literary and artistic developments of the day such as the models offered by André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris, or J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre Society in London did.

In an essay on "The Theatre" which appeared in the first number of *Beltaine: The Organ of the Irish Literary Theatre* [10] in May 1899, Yeats was advancing his ideal of a national drama in terms of a "remote, spiritual, and ideal" [11] theatre, able to restore the stage to its greatness through powerful speech, united with subtle thought and a respect for traditional myth, legend and folklore. His model was Wagner and the theatre at Bayreuth where his music dramas had managed to bring home the excitement of the romance of legend to the modern world. At the opposite end there stood the more immediately contemporary concerns of Ibsen and the kind of modern theatre gaining recognition against urban European audiences, which, in his view aroused only a "sympathy of the nerves" [12], and was unable to lead the people to a recovery of the spiritual life now lost. Nevertheless, Yeats was demarcating here the two contrasting modes adopted by the first playwrights of the national theatre, engaged in a jockeying for position between the followers of Wagner and Maeterlinck and the symbolic drama of the inner life [13] and those of Ibsen and the realistic one of everyday existence. Edward Martyn clearly sided with the latter ones, with his avowed belief that theatre, as exemplified by Ibsen's plays, should address psychological and social issues.

But, overlaid to these two contrasting stances in the personal attitudes of the dramatists there remained a further option to be made between the different paradigms of Ireland that the plays should represent: the otherwordly Celticism, the local and contemporary familism, or the almost feudal myth of the Big House.

The first season of the Literary Theatre put on under the direction of the English actress Florence Farr two plays: Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field*. These performances were not only to prove the Irish cultural event of the decade, but also to demonstrate the opposing literary and theatrical strains which had their bearing on what was to become Ireland's national theatre.

On the 8th May in the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin the Irish public were presented the performance of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. The play was based on a story, *The Countess Kathleen O'Shea*, that he had collected and included in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of Irish Peasantry* (1888) also pondering, at the time, on its potential to become the subject of a poetic drama [14]. The simple plot, set in a mythical Ireland, hinges on a morality play which aims to foreground the theme of self-sacrifice. The Countess, finding out that the

peasants in her lands are selling their souls to two demons for money and food during a famine, decides to save them by bargaining her own soul, pure and much more precious, in spite of the pleas of her old nurse, and those of the young bard, Aleel. The devils accept and the peasants are redeemed, but after the sudden death of the countess, an angel appears to announce that she too is saved, because God looks on the motive not on the deed.

In its author's reading the play was "symbolic: the two demons … are the world … the Countess herself is a soul" [15], while literature itself is the expression of "universal truths" [16]. But behind this aesthetic argument, the texts provides grounds to more ideologically laden readings. The first one is in Yeats's preferred Celticist note, considering the playwright trying to "spiritualise the patriotism and drama" [17] of Ireland by highlighting the power of the pure soul (Celtic) to transcend the snares of materialism (Saxon). This is the obvious conclusion to the encounter between the Irish Countess, the embodiment of Celtic spirituality and the demons, strangers to the land, who are suggestively transformed in the play from the supernatural villains into a pair of Merchants, operating on the principles of free trade, and coming from the East, a geographical location which embraces the English imperial centre. Nevertheless, the second reading which the text makes available sees Yeats making recourse to the myth of the Big House and vindicating its idyll of the social harmony between the landlord and the peasant. In accordance to the ethical scheme of the play, its chief virtue is generosity, "a quality most accessible to the rich [while] [t]he main virtue to which the poor may aspire is gratitude – as in the one blameless peasant character, Maire, who shows exaggerated respect and thankfulness to the Countess, then dies of starvation" [18]. In accordance to this, the Countess herself witnesses a transformation from a human benefactor, as she appears in the first act, when, having entered by accident the peasant cottage of a starving family she offers them her charity down to her last coin, to a supernatural donor at the end of the play when she has made the supreme sacrifice for the sake of the peasants, who all but one have proved unable to resist the deceits of the demons.

As Adrian Frazer makes the case, Yeats play was well attuned to the overall principles of the enterprise by encompassing "a number of progressive and patriotic elements. It shows how to turn an Irish fold-tale into a verse-play, how landlords should care for their tenants, how all Irish people should care more for their souls than their bellies, and how the English are devils who buy and sell" [19]. Nevertheless, by projecting a representation of the nation in which the Celtic Celticist spirituality became the corollary of the Ascendancy's supremacy, made the audience react against the performance, an uproar which was to herald similar reactions marking the stormy history of Irish theatre.

The controversy over the play had actually begun before its production, with the publishing of a pamphlet written by F. Hugh O'Donnell and suggestively entitled "*Souls for Gold"*. The author had accused Yeats for depicting the peasantry of Ireland as a "sordid tribe of black devil-worshippers" [20], while "the demented female, Countess Cathleen, who exhibits her affection for the soul-selling and soup-buying Irish people by selling her own soul to supply them with more gold and soup … is rewarded for her blasphemous apostacy by Mr. W. B. Yeats, dramatist and theologian, by being straightway transmigrated to heaven" [21]. Cardinal Archbishop Logue, representing institutional Catholicism, further assailed the play instructing the faithful to shun the heretical play, on grounds that "an Irish Catholic audience which could patiently sit out such a play must have sadly degenerated, both in religion and patriotism" [22]. Moreover, thirty-three members of the Royal University, including the important future radical nationalists Francis Sheehy Skeffington and Thomas Kettle, signed a letter objecting to the play considered to demean the Irish peasants by portraying them as irreligious and immoral [23], as its small cast featured a peasant who stole, a woman bent on fornication, and one iconoclast who destroyed a shrine of the Virgin Mary after struggling with his wife. All these were perceived as clear attacks on the Catholic

Nationalism's ideal of rural Ireland as exemplified by familism. To round off the controversy, D. P. Moran, editor of *The Leader*, dismissed even the play's claim to Celticism on the grounds that the "Celtic note …[was] one of the most glaring frauds that the credulous people ever swallowed" [24]. In answer to this flood of criticism directed at his play, Yeats grimly remarked that: "In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities" [25].

The next night, on the 9th May 1899, Martyn's *The Heather Field* was to appease Nationalist sensibilities by presenting a completely different image of the rural Ireland. Though the theme of self-sacrifice was also evident in it, the play was in stark contrast to the mythological and moralistic dreamscape of Yeats's *Countess Cathleen*. Set in the present, it engaged with the contemporary land question [26] by focusing on Carden Tyrell's overwhelming obsession with the heather field of the title, an infertile strip of land which he dreams to reafforest in every inch. The play's main tension arouse out of a battle of wills and attitudes to life cast by the script in gender terms. Thus, Tyrell's idealism, which made him sacrifice all money and energy in the reclamation of the land, was placed in stark contrast to his wife's pragmatic commonsense, which made her struggle to help her husband adjust to worldly concerns and material advancement, even if this would require the shock of being certified mad by the doctors. As Welch characterises the play, its mood and tenor are grim, because the protagonist's resoluteness and dedication display an iron fatality about them. Ibsen-like in its stern focus, it builds the sense of character as a fated sense of reactions unable to cope with necessity [27]. Edward Martyn aimed at a vivid representation of the agony and pathos issuing from unrealisable ideals, but one could hardly sympathise with Tyrell's projects in view of the apparent failures and apprehended impractibility of his schemes.

Nevertheless, the audience did sympathise with the author's stance towards rurality, considering the play to provide a truthful picture of the "true heart of the nation*"* as one critic appraised it [28]. Indeed, Martyn's play was in keeping with the values espoused by familism, foregrounding a vision of rustic dignity and rural virtue, which, though hardly bucolic, it nevertheless "exhibited the unspoiled simplicity of the essential Irish who had for so many violent centuries endured the ravages of climate and oppression" [29]. At the same time, *The Heather Field* reflected the contemporary concern with the changes occurring in the Irish countryside and impeding upon its agrarian world and its values. With these in view one may explain how its materialist realism had a much readier appeal to the public than Yeats's symbolic portrayal of the struggle between the soul and the forces seeking to entrap it.

In 1912, in a tribute brought to Yeats's role in the history of Irish theatre, Martyn confessed that it was hard for him to understand why his own literary career dramatically declined after the production of *The Heather Field***,** which had received much kinder if shorter notices than Yeats's play. Though he apologised by stating that "I am humbly conscious of my inferiority as an impresario to the two experts [Yeats and Gregory] whose feats I have the temerity to imitate" [30], considered in the light of the future development of the Abbey Theatre his play remains as important a landmark as *The Countess Cathleen*, for it was his brand of realism and focus on the contemporary rural world which came eventually to dominate the productions of the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's acknowledged national stage in the form of the peasant drama: "a play with Irish peasant characters, depicting their lives, habits and customs in a manner true to life….[and focusing on] contemporary Irish problems and themes such as emigration, rural marriage, habits and the ownership of lands" [31].

A year later, in a public letter to *Manchester Guardian*, Yeats was stating the following: "There is a moment in the history of every nation when it is plastic, when it is like wax, when it is ready to hold for generations the shape that is given to it." [32]. The odyssey culminating in the creation of the National Theatre may thus be seen to consist of a series of episodes in a cultural struggle in which authors and audiences alike were involved in the

attempt to mould the proper shape of the nation. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field* are not only convenient points of demarcation for what is understood as modern Irish drama, but they remain proof of the charged relationship of Irish theatre and national politics in the complex act of negotiation between playwright, subject and audience over the representation of Ireland on the stage [33].

Notes

[1] Murray, C., *Twentieth-century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation*, Syracuse UP, Syracuse, 2000.
[2] see Deane, S., "Civilians and Barbarians" in *Ireland's Field Day*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame,1986, pp. 33-42
[3] Arnold, M., *On the Study of Celtic Literatures*, 1867, online http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp10923
[4] Kiberd, D., "Anglo-Irish Attitudes" in *Ireland's Field Day*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1986, p. 92.
[5] D. Cairns and S. Richards employ the term "familism" as encoding the moral beliefs and behavioural norms of the Irish countryside which were based on unquestioned patriarchal authority and the strict regulation of sexuality. See *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture*, Manchester UP, Manchester , 1988.pp. 42-60 passim.
[6] R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1989, p. 449.
[7] Corner, J., Harvey, S., "Mediating tradition and modernity: the heritage/enterprise couplet" in *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, edited by J. Corner and S. Harvey, Routledge, London, New York, 1991, p. 52.
[8] see, for example, Ellis-Fermor, U., *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, 2nd edition, Methuen, London, 1954, Robinson, L., *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History 1899-1955*, Sidwick and Jackson, London, 1951, Hunt, H., *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1979*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1979, Welch, R., *The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999: Form and Pressure*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 1999.
[9] Gregory, A., *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* [1913], 3rd edition, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross, 1972, p. 20.
[10] "Beltaine" means May in Irish and it refers to the old Celtic festival of Beltaine marking the spring. The choice of this name was in accordance to the ILT's intention of performing new plays in the spring of every year.
[11] Qtd. in Edwards, Ph., *Threshold of a Nation: A Study in English and Irish Drama*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1979, p. 203.
[12] Qtd. in Welch, R., op. cit., p. 7.
[13] See Worth, K., *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, Athlone Press, London, 1978, which places the two at the beginning and end of a tradition including Wilde, Synge and O'Casey influenced by European symbolism deriving from Maeterlinck and Gordon Craig.
[14] Jeffares, A. N., Introduction to Yeats, W.B., *Selected Plays*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1964, p. 2.
[15] Qtd. in Cairns, D., Richards, S., op. cit., p. 72
[16] Qtd. in Frazier, A., *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1990, p. 13.
[17] Hogan, R., Kilroy, J., *The Irish Literary Theatre1899-1901*, Dolmen Press, Dublin, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1975, p. 51.
[18] Frazier, A., op. cit., p. 10.
[19] Frazier, A., "The Ideology of the Abbey Theatre" in Richards, S. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2004, p. 38.
[20] Qtd. in Welch, R., op. cit., p. 6.
[21] Cairns, D., Richards, S., op. cit., p. 73.
[22] Hogan, R., Kilroy, J., op. cit, p. 43.
[23] See Edwards, Ph., op. cit., p. 200.
[24] Qtd. in Cairns, D., Richards, S., op. cit., p. 68.
[25] Qtd. in Leeming, G., *Poetic Drama*, Macmillan Education, Houndmills, London, 1989, p. 30.
[26] The pressures exerted by the Land League, formed in 1879 in response to agricultural depression and landlordism, led to a series of measures being taken through the 1880s and 1890s to affirm tenant rights in terms of fair rent, free sale and fixity of tenure, culminating in 1903 with the passing of the Wyndham Land Act which provided treasury stock to facilitate the purchase of estates by tenant farmers, initiating thus the abolition of landlordism. See Moody, T. W., "Fenianism, Home Rule and the Land War", in T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin (eds.), *The Course of Irish History*, revised and enlarged edition, Mercier Press in association with Radio Telefís Éireann, Dublin, Cork, 1994., pp. 275-293 passim.

[27] Welch, R., op. cit., p.6.
[28] Stalder, H. G., *Anglo-Irish Peasant Drama: The Motifs of Land and Emigration*, Peter Lang, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Las Vegas, 1975, p 43.
[29] Brown, T., *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History1922 – 1985*, Fontana Press, London, 1985, p. 83.
[30] Qtd. in Frazier, A., *Behind the Scenes*, op. cit., p. 22.
[31] Katz Clarke, B., *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre*, UMI Research Papers, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982., p. 122.
[32] Qtd. in Foster, R.F., *W.B. Yeats: A Life. Vol.1. The Apprentice Mage,* Oxford UP, Oxford, 1997, p. 494
[33] This is the basic premise advanced by Grene, N. in *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2002.

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