

FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND (PART 2)

SEAN O'CASEY AND RADICAL THEATRE

Terry Phillips
Liverpool Hope University
phillim@hope.ac.uk

Abstract

Sean O'Casey's work after the Dublin trilogy has been neglected to a great extent by both theatre audiences and literary critics. This essay considers three plays which address specifically Irish issues, *The Silver Tassie* (1926), *The Star Turns Red* (1940) and *Red Roses for Me* (1943). Taken together, they may be understood as a radical response to successive counter-revolutionary indigenous governments: Cumann Na nGaedheal (1922-1932) and Fianna Fáil (1932-1948). The essay concludes that these plays ground the case for O'Casey as a radical Irish playwright—socially, politically and aesthetically.

Keywords

Christian socialism, experimental theatre, political theatre

About the author

Terry Phillips is Dean of Arts and Humanities at Liverpool Hope University. Her research interests are in the area of Irish Literature, particularly of the early twentieth century and First World War literature. She has published a number of articles on both these areas. Her work is influenced by postcolonial criticism and has focused on issues such as gender, class and national identity. She is currently working on Irish literature of the First World War and is a member of the British Association for Irish Studies.

Whilst Sean O'Casey's Dublin trilogy has remained enduringly popular with theatre audiences, O'Casey has received much less attention from literary critics. His work after the Dublin trilogy has been neglected to an even greater extent by both theatre audiences and critics, as has his contribution to a radical theatrical tradition in Ireland. His status as a radical dramatist is challenged by a number of eminent critics including Declan Kiberd, Raymond Williams and Seamus Deane. Their judgements are based largely on a consideration of the Dublin trilogy and it is something of a paradox that those who castigate the dramatist for his conservatism choose to focus almost exclusively on his three naturalistic dramas, which might also be considered the least politically progressive, although even this judgement may be seen as an oversimplification. In this essay I wish to propose that O'Casey's work which addresses specifically Irish issues, during what

might be termed his middle period, can be seen as a radical response to the Ireland of the Cumann Na nGaedheal governments of 1922-1932 and the Fianna Fáil governments of 1932-1948. For this purpose, I wish to consider three plays: his first experimental play, *The Silver Tassie* (1926), and two of his most overtly political plays, *The Star Turns Red* (1940) and *Red Roses for Me* (1943). These plays have been selected because they address politically and socially important issues affecting Ireland during the first two decades of the new state.

The Free State government which emerged in 1922, after the War of Independence, represented an essentially conservative coalition of interests, compounded by the refusal of Sinn Féin to enter the Dáil, thereby removing effective opposition. The most obvious absence from the agenda of the new state was socialism. In spite of Trade Union activity and Labour activism before the Civil War of 1922-23, internal wrangles and the disruptive effects of industrial disputes in 1923 caused a decline in Labour's election performance from which it did not recover, and independent parties representing the interests of farmers proved far more influential. Effectively, one of the consequences of the conflict between two versions of nationalism was to bypass the challenge of socialism (Foster *Modern Ireland* 513-15; Fanning 41-42; Lee 94-96, 124-28). As Terence Brown succinctly expresses it, "the likelihood that a consistent, energetic, politically powerful, socialist critique might be developed to challenge the prevailing economic and social orthodoxy was dim indeed" (103).

One of the additional factors which militated against socialism was the anti-Bolshevik stance of the Catholic Church, but the influence of the Church in other areas too was significant. The new state, in common with most postcolonial nations, needed self definition in relation to its erstwhile rulers and this self-definition most easily came by defining itself as Catholic. As is well-documented, both the Cumann Na nGaedheal government and the Fianna Fáil Government deferred to the Catholic hierarchy on a range of issues, most notably the constitution and divorce, but the influence of the Church's conservative social and moral values could also be seen in relation to a whole range of matters including censorship and education. To these conservative interests it might be added the subsidy to the Abbey Theatre was anathema, and therefore a potential point of tension within the coalition of interests discussed below.

The result of this conservative dynamic was the establishment of a bourgeois nationalist governing class, intent on aping the civil and financial infrastructure of its erstwhile masters, which accords with the political analysis of postcolonial societies offered by Frantz Fanon (119-65).¹ Conservative bourgeois nationalism, in alliance with farming interests, erstwhile Southern Unionists (albeit nationalist sympathizers) and the

conservative values of the Catholic Church, constitute a very specific political backdrop against which O'Casey wrote the three plays that are the subject of this article. O'Casey stands out as a dramatist concerned with the urban poor, when a large number of Irish plays performed by the Abbey since its inception were based on rural Ireland. Those rurally situated plays were to some extent a product of a version of Celtic nationalism which sometimes worked against a modernizing tendency and which was yet another way in which the alliance of Protestant Cultural Nationalists with the Cumann Na nGaedheal Government reinforced the emergence of a conservative ruling class. On the other hand, the Dublin slum-dwellers for whom O'Casey sought to speak belonged pretty well exclusively to the clerical-dominated Catholic community. Their role in the conservative politics of the state means that his treatment of them can appear unsympathetic as he regards them as not acting in their own real interests. This brings me to the second aspect of O'Casey's radicalism, his use of non-naturalist techniques after the trilogy. Such techniques, as I will demonstrate, are essential to the questioning of a social order in which the oppressed are complicit in their own repression.

The well-nigh unassailable position of the nationalist narrative of recent history and the near-sacred status of the Easter Rising for both Republicans and Free Staters in the Ireland of 1926 was demonstrated all too clearly by the ferocity of opposition to *The Plough and the Stars* and precipitated O'Casey's departure to London in 1926, where he spent the next two years working on *The Silver Tassie*. However, he was destined very shortly to run up against yet another manifestation of that same conservative nationalist version of history. The dispute over the Abbey's rejection of *The Silver Tassie* in 1926 is too well-known to rehearse in detail here, but I would contend that the rejection was based at least in part on the play's subject matter. Although Yeats's famous letter to O'Casey challenges him on the grounds that he had not experienced the Great War, and had no strong opinions about it, one suspects that in fact the reason has more to do with Yeats's general antipathy to work dealing with the War, and in this connection one may adduce his often cited rejection of the work of Wilfred Owen for the Oxford Book of English Verse.² When the play was eventually performed at the Abbey in 1935, it did indeed predictably cause offence (Hunt 90), notwithstanding Pilkington's assertion that "As a play that satirized British militarism in the First World War, the thematic emphasis of *The Silver Tassie* was, at least from an Irish nationalist perspective of the 1930s, hardly controversial" (127). Pilkington also points out the continued controversy over First World War commemoration: the wearing of poppies, commemorative marching and the singing of God Save the King (105); while Keith Jeffery's discussion of debates around the opposition to an erection of an appropriate war memorial

in Dublin is illuminating (110-25). The subject matter, in short, may be seen as a radical challenge to official nationalism, precisely because it dealt with the involvement of Irish soldiers in the British army of the First World War, which the new state most emphatically did not wish to commemorate. The war scenes of the play show a connection between English and Irish soldiers, which O'Casey the socialist may well have wished to emphasize but which ran counter to the separatist stance of the new state. The powerful Act II which distils the war experience of a group of soldiers, including the Irish characters of the first act, presents their comrades in arms as men, many of whom speak in cockney accents, who reminisce about a recognizably English home life (*The Silver Tassie* 45).

The play's radicalism, however, goes beyond a mere reminder of a fact of history which official nationalism would prefer to forget, although that very amnesia is bound up with the conservative values of state and church which the play challenges. It is of course, as Pilkington points out, anti-militarist, and furthermore links militarism with social class. In the crucial expressionist Act II which is set at the Front, the "Staff-Wallah" and the Visitor are satirized mercilessly. One of the soldiers comments of the Visitor, "The perky bastard's cautious nibbling / In a safe, safe shelter at danger queers me" (43) while his hypocrisy is exposed in the following exchange:

<i>The Visitor.</i>	... Straight down the road instead of round hill: shorter?
<i>Corporal.</i>	Less than half as long.
<i>The Visitor.</i>	Safe?
<i>Corporal.</i>	Yes. Only drop shells off and on, cross-roads. Ration party wip'd out week ago.
<i>The Visitor.</i>	Go round hill. No hurry. General Officer's orders, no unnecessary risks. Must obey. Military Authorities damned particular—won't let a ... man ... plunge! (47)

His last comment, a repetition of an earlier remark, with its facile use of the expression "plunge," draws attention to his upper class background and exposes him to ridicule. This should alert the critic to a crucial factor in the Irish context of 1928. Opposition to the British is perfectly acceptable, but comradeship with English soldiers in an alliance against the middle and upper classes is another matter. What Act II points towards is an internationalist agenda of resistance to oppression by the proletarian class, something which was not in the interests of either the Directors of the Abbey or the

Cumann Na nGaedheal Government who preferred to serve a more narrowly nationalist agenda.

O'Casey's portrayal of that proletarian class in Dublin is, I would argue, another indication of the play's radicalism. In the three mainly, but not entirely, naturalistic acts of the play, working class Dubliners are seen as complicit in their own oppression. The portrayal of the female characters, in particular, is savagely critical. Most obviously there is their focus on securing the separation allowance for dependents of soldiers on active service. In Act I, Mrs Heegan's anxiety that Harry should not miss embarkation and his return to the front operates as an insistent chorus, a constant undercutting of Harry's triumph on the football field, "Watch your time, Harry, watch your time" (27). The two young women, Harry's fiancée, Jessie, and his would-be lover turned religious fanatic, Susie, are mercilessly revealed as hypocrites in the final two acts, when Jessie turns her attention to Harry's comrade Barney, and Susie, no longer pining for Harry, forgets the consolations of religion and throws herself wholeheartedly into the pursuit of a doctor from the military hospital.

However, the relationship between the Forans, who live on the floor above the Heegans, should give pause for thought before the play is condemned as misogynist. Mrs Foran makes no secret of her desire to see her husband back at the Front (11). However, when the Heegans hear the sound of her being attacked and she bursts in terror into their room, her brazen rejoicing becomes more understandable. At this point the drama lays bare the underlying violence beneath the veneer of marriage:

Sylvester. You've no right to be rippin' open the poor woman's life of peace with violence.

Teddy. [*with indignation*] She's my wife isn't she? (22-23)

This reminds the audience that women have to learn to be survivors and that these women are struggling to keep their homes together, often with uncertain financial resources.

The play shows them as living in a context of triumphant masculinity. In Act I, the celebration of the returning hero from the football field is staged in such a way as to suggest religious overtones. The stage direction tells the audience that the silver cup is elevated "as a priest would elevate a chalice" (27), thereby importantly foreshadowing the worship of the gun in Act II. Harry's father and his friend Simon reminisce about his victory in the Cross Country championship, but most significantly his father declares

that “the day that caps the chronicle was the one when he punched the fear of God into the heart of Police constable 63 C under the stars of a frosty night on the way home from Terenure” (8). Such commitment to the values of physical strength brings its own downfall, so that the Harry, who loses the use of his legs, declares with vicious bitterness, “I’ll catch butterflies in bunches; twist and mangle them between my fingers and fix them wriggling onto mercy’s banner” (77). The uncaring treatment of those around him, the desertion of the women and the embarrassment of Sylvester and Simon are consistent with the community’s glorying in masculinity and reaches its most savage expression when Barney, who alone of the three soldiers in Act I escapes maiming, declares, “You half-baked Lazarus, I’ve put up with you all the evening, so don’t force me now to rough-handle the bit of life the Jerries left you as a souvenir” (99).

Such privileging of masculinity in the society on which the play is based was reinforced by the conservative values of the Catholic Church, particularly in relation to the family, which was so influential with the Cumann Na nGaedheal government. Thus, in the play, celebrated masculinity goes hand in hand with a crudely exploitative sexuality. Such a version of sexuality is suggested by Barney’s lifting of the skirt of the prudish and preaching Susie in Act I (30), and by the jocular references to the “Estaminay’s daughter” and the Staff-Wallah “sinking into the white-flesh’d breasts of a judy” in Act II (52). Sexual flirtation as male-instigated, with half-unwilling female compliance, is enacted on the stage between Jessie and Barney in the final act (98). The most revealing exchange on the subject is that between the Forans, observing the behaviour of Barney and Jessie:

Mrs. Foran. Astonishin’ the way girls are advertisin’ their immodesty.
Whenever one of them sits down, in my heart I pity the poor
men havin’ to view the disedifyin’ sight of the full length of
one leg couched over another.

Teddy. [*forgetful*] A damn nice sight, all the same, I think. (90)

This is, of course, a classic illustration of a conservative society in which women act as the enforcers of patriarchy and the burden of sexual restraint is placed entirely on their shoulders, requiring modest dress and behaviour, and holding them responsible for any male lack of self-control.

Nicholas Grene has commented on O’Casey’s negative treatment of women in *The Silver Tassie* “with its predatory wives and sex-object girlfriends” (Grene 125) but I would

contend that such wives and girlfriends are a product of a patriarchal society (indeed the very adjective “sex-object” suggests this). Ronan McDonald argues, correctly I think, that “it is a common error to see it simply as an anti-war play ... Only one or two critics have pointed out that the corruption and latent violence of the Dublin homes have been there since Act I and, perhaps, the war is a result of the prevailing social structure, rather than vice versa” (120). However, like Grene, McDonald goes on to cite the unattractive women of the play without linking their portrayal to the patriarchal nature of the society represented. What I contend is laid bare to the audience is a patriarchal society divided between the dominating physical strength of the male figures and the self-interested scheming of the females, which is essential to the maintenance of economic and political power by the ruling classes, a power which in turn has generated international conflict.³

A realistic mode, in seeking to represent its subject mimetically, because it represents discourse conditioned by the prevailing status quo, has a tendency to leave that status quo unchallenged. Since economically unequal societies tend to naturalize their very inequalities by the creation of classes such as the Dubliners of Act I, a mimetic representation of such classes becomes only a limited and partial way of addressing such inequality. It has similar weaknesses when used to portray an international conflict that emerged out of the internal logic of contemporary international diplomacy. Any mimetic portrayal of the debates surrounding the causes of the war will be conveyed through a discourse which incorporates within itself the limits of such diplomacy and naturalizes concepts such as the balance of power. Non-realist techniques thus become important in addressing such issues. This also helped to make the play too challenging for the rather conservative institution which the Abbey at this time had become. As Christopher Murray points out, Yeats’s objection that “there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action,” is an advocacy of “Aristotelian drama complete with Aristotelian hero” (105). The play marks a significant move away from such a model of drama and its naturalist manifestation “the well-made play” into the techniques of expressionism which were being increasingly used in European theatre, particularly in Germany. While the Irish National Theatre had originally been established specifically to promote Irish drama and a narrow view might be to see expressionism as a foreign import, it can equally be argued that, taken together with aspects of the play’s subject matter discussed above, it contributes to the integration of Irish culture into its rightful place within the broader culture of Europe, ironically something which Yeats himself, in his opposition to the Gaelicization of Douglas Hyde, consistently advocated.

The representation of the soldiers throughout Act II is predominantly but not exclusively non-naturalistic, they speak mainly in verse, their communal experience channelled as a series of choric performances which evoke, for example, the repetitive dreariness of the trench experience, "Cold and wet and tir'd ... Wet and tir'd and cold ... tir'd and cold and wet" (37). In a similar form, their longing for home, their comments on the Staff-Wallah and the Visitor are expressed. One of the most moving parts of Act II is the song of the wounded soldiers, expressed in three stanzas whose repetitions serve to emphasize key themes, for example the repeated two lines, "And we show man's wonderful work, well done, / To the image God hath made, made, made," repeated with a single "made" at the end, with its damning implications for those who proclaim Christianity and cause such suffering (48).

The techniques of Act II serve to draw attention to the scandalous collusion of many Christians in such a destructive enterprise. It is Act II, as much as the overtly sexual nature of the final act or the religious hypocrisy of Susie (who suggests in any case a Protestant evangelical tradition), which accounts for the opposition of influential voices from the Catholic Church when the play was finally staged by the Abbey in 1935 (Pilkington 127-30). Many critics saw the use of liturgy and religious iconography in Act II as disrespectful. The reality of the attack on official Christianity is much more profound. The use of liturgy and religious iconography is far from disrespectful but exposes a profound gap between Christian teaching and the conduct of those who call themselves Christians, a continuing concern of O'Casey. The overwhelming experience of the trenches of the Western Front, which formed the inspiration of much war literature, is visually encapsulated by the evocative stage set of Act II, with its representation of monastery ruins, heaps of house rubble, protruding dead hands, dead trees, shell-holes and barbed wire, almost a visual representation of a Paul Nash painting.⁴ The broken crucifix with its legend Princeps Pacis enforces the irony of a war fought by those who claim to worship the Prince of Peace, encapsulating the message of religious imagery placed side by side with scenes of destruction. This is expressed most shockingly of all in the scene where the soldiers worship the gun. The recurring phrase "We believe in God and we believe in thee" (54-55) may be taken as an expression of the irreconcilable and contradictory beliefs they hold; or of the exchange of the crucifix of Christ for the gun, so that the gun and not Christ becomes their route to God, the same God who might send over a "chit in the shape of a bursting shell." The effect of the religious references, both visual and auditory, is to expose the hollowness of religious practice and the failure of those who purport to be followers of Christ to live up to his ideals.

The Silver Tassie demonstrates a radical dissent from the orthodoxies of the Irish state of 1928 by its reminder of the role of Irish soldiers in the ranks of the Imperial army during the Great War of 1914-18; its exposure of the crude patriarchal nature of the urban society of its capital city; and by its use of religious material to expose the dissonance between warfare and the supposed ideals of Christianity. The overall effect of the non-naturalist techniques is to take *The Silver Tassie* beyond the story of Harry, whose very mythologizing turns him into a kind of Everyman, and to express something of the impact of the Great War on the lives of its participants as well as its implications for European philosophy and culture. What it does not do, any more than the plays of the "trilogy," is offer any solution. It is undoubtedly O'Casey's "bleakest, most Beckett-like play" (McNamee 297).

The Star Turns Red, on the contrary, represents a determination to deliver a positive message, the message of a communism which will transform the lives of Dublin slum dwellers and their like across Europe. O'Casey began the play as his next major dramatic enterprise after *Within the Gates*, which addresses social issues in an English context. *The Star Turns Red* was completed in 1939, first performed in 1940 and addresses the increasing pan-European opposition between the forces of Communism and the forces of Fascism. The play was completed before the Nazi-Soviet pact, which O'Casey regarded as simply demonstrating Stalin's pragmatism rather than negating the fundamental opposition between the two ideologies (O'Connor 319). However, I would also argue that the play has a particular relevance to specifically Irish issues. The forces of Communism are represented by Red Jim whose name, as well as the dedication of the play to "The men and women who fought through the great Dublin Lockout in nineteen hundred and thirteen" and references to the "Stay-in Strike," clearly suggests Jim Larkin.⁵

The most noteworthy of the Irish political issues which O'Casey addresses in the play is the increasing tendency of the Catholic Church in Ireland to ally with the forces of Fascism. Ireland, like most of Europe, witnessed the emergence of fascist elements during the 1930s. In the case of Ireland, there was a fascist dimension (if a somewhat superficial one) to the Blueshirts led by Eoin O'Duffy who emerged for a short time in 1933-34 (Foster *Modern Ireland* 549; Brown 162; Lee 179-84). However, their activity was short lived, and what concerned O'Casey much more was the later support of the Catholic bishops of Ireland for General Franco whom in a statement in 1936 they declared was "fighting the battle of Christendom against the subversive powers of communism" (Keogh 94, qtd. in Murray 136).⁶ Such right-wing clerical positions are clearly represented in the play by the Christian Front, in alliance with the fascist Saffron Shirts, and in particular by "the Purple Priest (of the politicians)." It is with the Purple Priest, who exemplifies the alliance of the

Church with the property owning classes, and his fellow-traveller, Joybell, that Red Jim has his most significant arguments, rather than the political authorities (who are represented in the play only by the Mayor and his wife). In a highly significant speech the Priest proclaims “one with the Church, with the State, and with Owners, / we mark Red Jim down as a wolf to be worried” (*The Star Turns Red* 280)—an indication of the way in which, motivated in part by anti-communism, the most influential members of the Catholic Church allied themselves with the interests of property. Lee comments pertinently, “Rarely has the Catholic Church as an institution flourished, by materialistic criteria, as in the Free State. And rarely has it contributed so little, as an institution, to the finer qualities of the Christian spirit” (159).

However, O'Casey's enduring ambivalence towards Christianity results in a continuing dichotomy in its representation. In keeping with the play's use of colour symbolism, the other side of the dichotomy is symbolized by “the Brown Priest (of the poor)” who represents a different if less politically influential aspect of Catholicism. There are several references in the play to *De Rerum Novarum*, the socially progressive encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, issued in 1891. One speaker, who exemplifies the political conservatism of working class Dubliners, expresses the fear of communism spread so effectively by the official Church: “Nice thing for a holy Pope to fix a red fringe on the Papal banner” (253) while the Brown Priest summons the authority of the encyclical in a vain attempt to protect the hero Jack's girlfriend Julia from punishment by the fascists (274). The play suggests that the voices of people like the Brown Priest are not brave enough. He is presented as exhibiting a very reluctant obedience to the Purple Priest who is described by Julia as “dragging the Brown Priest of the poor at his heels” (252-53). Only in the final visionary moment of the drama do things change. Red Jim is caustic in his condemnation of the Church in a long declamatory speech which includes the words “If your God stands for one child to be born in a hovel and another in a palace, then we declare against him” (325) and goes on to include other examples of disparity of wealth and position. Nevertheless the inspirational power of Christianity's founder is expressed clearly by Julia who, glancing at the crucifix above her father's body, says, “Against you, dear one, we have no grudge; but those of your ministers who sit like gobbling cormorants in the market-place shall fall and shall be dust, and shall be priests no longer” (315). In a review for the *New Statesman* of the first production of the play at the left-wing Unity Theatre, London, in March 1940, Stephen Spender commented perceptively, “Mr O'Casey is not a Communist at all really, but a Christian Socialist who hates the Church because it has not given the poor the equality which Christ and the Brown Priest of his play represent for him” (qtd. in Jones

51-52). While O'Casey would have emphatically repudiated the description, aspects of the teaching of Christianity and, perhaps most importantly, its visionary power, exemplified in the overarching symbol of the Star of Bethlehem which turns red at the conclusion of the play, continued to find expression in his plays of this period. The point is also made in relation to *Red Roses for Me* by Declan Kiberd, who describes it as a "search for a sort of Protestant self-election" and who sees the later play as the development of a fully fledged Christian socialism (245).

The other specifically Irish focus of the play lies in what O'Casey would have regarded as the continuing betrayal of the revolution by both the Cumann Na nGaedheal government and the Fianna Fáil government. The betrayal is foregrounded by the non-naturalist telescoping of time within the play. Thus the events of 1913 become merged with the later emergence of Fascism and this foregrounds the dynamic continuance of radical social criticism, both within Ireland and beyond, illustrating the fact that the earlier resistance to the colonial oppressor, manifested by Larkin and Connolly, is of the same radical order as resistance to the property-owning classes within Ireland and to the fascists in Europe. The logic of this is of course that the oppressors of 1913 have been succeeded by the bourgeois nationalist governments of the 1930s, seen in the play as in alliance with the forces of Fascism.

In this of course, the complicity of the population is essential, and the play's use of both naturalist and non-naturalist techniques draw this out. There is no sentimentalized working class, and there are no lovable characters among the ordinary Dubliners of the play. The play is at its most effective in its damning representation, with a few honourable exceptions, of the Dublin poor, the very people who should be Red Jim's most fervent supporters. Like his fellow countryman Robert Noonan, author under the pseudonym Robert Tressell of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, O'Casey suggests the workers' responsibility for their own oppression. The play opens with a naturalistic scene set on Christmas Eve in the home of an Old Man and Old Woman, fairly representative of the limited consciousness of working class Dubliners in the play. They have two sons, the hero Jack, a supporter of the Stay in Strike, and Kian, a member of the Saffron Shirts. The Old Woman is knitting and her husband (in the manner of Tressell's English workmen) is engaged in filling in his football coupon. While his sons are concerned with what becomes a life and death struggle, he struggles with the uncertainties of tipsters to whom he looks for advice, commenting with unconscious irony: "It would pay a man to have a mind of his own. Once get into the mind of others, and your own is a jungle of difficulties" (244). However, a mind of his own is the very thing he does not have. This apparently critical

portrayal of ordinary Dubliners is a continuation of their portrayal in the trilogy, which I think both Kiberd and Raymond Williams misread as an evasion of the issues on O'Casey's part, rather than as a representation of the false consciousness of a repressed population (Kiberd 218-38; Williams 147-53). In Act III when the body of Michael, Julia's father, a socialist shot by the fascists, lies in the house, the first mourners are represented as a series of types who provide a depressing chorus. Their names speak for themselves, and indicate their oppression: Young Man with Cough, Hunchback, Woman with Baby, Man with Crutch, Blind Man and Most Respectable Man. This provides what is in many ways the most powerful scene of the play as this group, in their condemnation of the political activities of the dead Michael, provide a chorus of compliance and complicity with their own repression. With unconscious irony the physically blind man indicates another sort of blindness with comments such as "It's easy to see how we'd fare if they [the communists] once got the upper hand here" (313).

The characters who make up the bulk of the Dublin poor in the play are both victims and agents of their own repression, created by the very system which oppresses them and a way out can only be indicated by the abandoning of naturalism in favour of the final vision of the play. In Act I, Jack speaks of the Star of Bethlehem which represents the visionary and prophetic power of Christianity which has endured for two thousand years, but which is about to be overturned by a greater vision: "So it shone when it led the kings; so shall it not shine when it leads the people. It leads no more, and never shall till its silver turns to red" (256). This calls to mind some of the apocalyptic poetry of Yeats, an element which comes more to the fore in *Red Roses for Me*. The final few minutes of the last Act present a powerful vision as the star in fact turns red (345). There is a sense in which miracles can now happen. The cautious Brown Priest now joins the revolution, "climbing over the barricades in the midst of the fighting" (349) and declaring to the Purple Priest, "The star turned red is still the star / Of him who came as man's pure prince of peace; / and so I serve him here" (351). There is a price to be paid, made clear by the death of Jack, but the play ends with Julia standing with an upright clenched fist, presumably accepting the price.

The Star Turns Red represents a radical response to the prevailing orthodoxies of the Ireland of de Valera, in its attack on the role of the Church and the Irish Church's support for fascism, and in its exposure of the repressed and unenlightened condition of the Dublin poor. Nevertheless, although its use of colour and symbol provide a powerful stage spectacle, it is a flawed play in that it is overtly propagandist, with only fleeting glimpses of characterization which goes beyond types, and with the victory of Red Jim presented as an arbitrary fact, not stemming from any dramatic action. The victory is an assertion of the

optimistic vision with which O'Casey moves on from the nihilism of *The Silver Tassie*, and this vision is given a more powerful and convincing presentation in O'Casey's next Irish play, *Red Roses for Me*.⁷

The play was first performed at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin in 1943, and is set during the 1911 Railway Strike. The setting is more precise, without the condensing of time of the previous play and is a return to the strict historical setting of *The Silver Tassie*. In keeping with this precise setting, the focus is very much on specifically Irish issues which are already broadly familiar from *The Star Turns Red*. The historical setting does not invalidate what the play has to say about the contemporary plight of Dublin's poor who, while their poverty may be less extreme than in 1911, have simply changed their masters. There is less emphasis on the role of the Church which, in keeping with the historical setting, is represented by the Church of Ireland, influential in 1911 though less influential than the Catholic Church of the 1930s and 1940s. The play gives considerable emphasis to those elements in Irish history and culture which continue, in slightly different guises, into subsequent decades and which represent specific obstacles to the spread of socialism, since they provoke divisions and argument, and distract from what in O'Casey's view should be the concerns of the poor.

Thus the play features a number of ideologues, friends and associates of the hero, Ayamonn Breydon. They include the sectarian personalities of the Protestant Brennan and the Nationalist Roory, as well as the Darwinist Mulcanny. Brennan, while he has some redeeming characteristics, represents the self-interest of the middle classes, both Protestant and Catholic, who came to power in post-revolutionary Ireland, a financial interest parodied by his constant enquiry of all and sundry about the safety of the Bank of Ireland, where he has deposited the money he earned by "starvin' to save, an' usin' his cunnin' to buy up a few oul' houses, give them a lick o' paint, and charge the highest rent for th'inconvenience of livin' in them!" (*Red Roses for Me* 130). Roory demonstrates the limits of the nationalism, which by the time of the production of *Red Roses for Me* had become the orthodox ideology of the state, demonstrating an overt racism in his dismissal of a Minstrel Show to raise funds in case of a strike, "We want no coon or Kaffir industry in our country" and his dismissal of Ruskin on the grounds that he is not Irish (150, 158).⁸ This demonstrates clearly the way in which nationalism creates a false consciousness which evades the international dimension of socialism. Roory's arguments with Brennan, running along familiar sectarian lines, provide a certain amount of amusement in the play, most obviously when the Darwinist Mulcanny points out the historical fact that the Vatican celebrated the defeat of King James and his French allies at the Battle of the Boyne.

However, these arguments are futile and do nothing to contribute to their fellow-Dubliners' welfare in which they all manifest a singular lack of interest.

The two aspects of the Christianity present in *The Star Turns Red*, the dichotomy between the power seeking of the Purple Priest and the sympathy with the poor of the Brown Priest are still here, this time represented by the Rector and the Inspector, the Rector's churchwarden, although the dichotomy is not as crucial to the play as it is in *The Star Turns Red* where the Church is very much the source of secular as well as religious power. The Rector, like the Brown Priest for much of the earlier play, is a rather timid representative of caring Christianity, saying, after throwing a few coins to the women in the Bridge Scene discussed below, "Let us go from here. Things here frighten me, for they seem to look with wonder on our ease and comfort" (191). However, in the final scene, he resists the opposition of conservative members of his Church and, after Ayamonn has been shot, receives his body into the church in response to his last request.

The fullest anticipation of the narrowness and conservatism of the bourgeois nationalist state that was to come is left to Ayamonn's girlfriend Sheila. She has only been on stage a few minutes when she alienates the broadminded in her audience by the comic announcement that she cannot join Ayamonn the next day because "The Daughters of St Frigid begin a retreat tomorrow, to give the Saint a warm devotion and Mother insists I go" (141). However, it is not just her religious conservatism but the total narrowness of her approach which makes her the least likeable character in the play, recalling more than anything the acquisitive Dubliners evoked by Yeats in "September 1913" who "fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer" (Yeats 120-21). She upbraids Ayamonn for his diversity of artistic and political interests, "you lead your life through too many paths instead of treading the one way of making it possible for us to live together," that is, to make money (143). Her approach is always, as Ayamonn says, "to walk safe on a crowded road" (170) and her ultimate betrayal is her attempt to persuade Ayamonn not to join the strike in the hope that "you'll soon be a foreman of some kind or other" (172).

However, some of her female fellow-Catholics, Eeada, Dympna and Finnoola, three of the very poorest characters in the play, show different qualities. The curious sub-plot around their missing statue of Our Lady of Eblana provides a happy counter to sectarianism and is typical of the way in which, in the naturalistic parts of the play, characters are rounded and have their own contradictions and tensions, representing more than a set of ideas. The missing statue has in fact been taken by the Protestant Brennan, who for all his financial meanness and indulgence in sectarian bigotry, takes sufficient pity

on the three poor women to get the statue repainted. Mrs Breydon, whose good works are crucial in persuading the poor women to listen to Ayamonn in the vision scene, says, "We don't believe in any of their Blessed Ladies, but as it's something sacred, it's best not mentioned" (161). Here is evident an openness to the spiritual, and a reconciling of the tensions between support for the poor and what the poor believe in.

The key Act in this play, which raises it as a dramatic achievement above the level of *The Star Turns Red*, is the visionary scene of Act III which draws strongly on expressionist techniques, and particularly the role of Ayamonn as visionary leader. What the scene suggests is that if only they would seize it, power lies with the people. The Act opens to show "A part of Dublin City flowering into a street and a bridge across the river Liffey" (185). The scene is in near darkness except for "the tapering silver spire of a church; and to the left, Nelson's Pillar, a deep red ... with Nelson, a deep black," clearly of course representing the twin oppressors of church and state. The poor of Dublin—considered in 1911 to house the worst slums in Europe—are shrouded in darkness. Eeada, Dympna and Finnoola, the three women who set such store by the statue of Our Lady of Eblana are "dressed so in black that they appear to be enveloped in the blackness of a dark night" (185-86). The colour of the scene is a powerful representation of the inequalities in the city in 1911, and the three women in the opening dialogue give voice to this state of affairs, describing the city as "A graveyard where th'dead are all above the ground ... An' she cockin' herself up that she stands among other cities as a queen o' counsel, laden with knowledge" (186). The ensuing scene, in a naturalistic mode, presents passersby whose conversation represents the cultural and political affiliations which went to make up early twentieth century Ireland and continue to constitute the inheritance of the Ireland of the early 1940s. Each in turn is put down by one of his or her companions, revealing the partial nature of their visions and beliefs. The Rector and the Inspector appear and the latter talks of Grattan and Swift, only to be put down by the Rector's comment that tens of thousands of the poor followed Swift to his grave. Finnoola dreams of the heroes of Celtic mythology, but is mocked by Eeada. Roory, arriving with Ayamonn, talks of the Battle Songs of Munster, only to have his ideas dismissed by Eeada as "spangled memories of battle-mad warriors buried too deep for words to find them" (195).

The scene returns full circle to bemoaning the state of Dublin but this time with a difference. The women repeat "It's a black an' bitter city" as their initial response to Ayamonn's call, "Rouse yourselves; we hold a city in our hands!" (196). Only the poorest of the citizens remain, the three women and the poorest men, to witness the transformation scene which reflects the visionary possibilities of a different world, in which not only the

city but its poorest inhabitants are transformed with colour and light, eliciting a recognition from one of the men that "Our tired heads have always haunted far too low a level" (200). This transformation depends on the leadership of the central character, Ayamonn Breydon. According to Hugh Hunt, Breydon was an idealized version of O'Casey himself (17), while the warm Christian goodness of Mrs Breydon was drawn from the character of the playwright's mother (13).

Ayamonn then leads a visionary chorus which recognizes that the elements of the city's many-faceted cultural inheritance, often its curse but potentially its gift, are insufficient by themselves but can be transformed into something greater: "Home of th' Ostmen, of th' Norman, an th' Gael, we greet you" (200). The nature of the new Dublin is made clear by the subsequent:

We swear to release thee from hunger an' hardship,
From things that are ugly an' common an' mean;
Thy people together shall build a brave city,
Th' fairest an' finest that ever was seen! (201)

The sound of the marching strikers initiates the return to the everyday and, for all the participants except Ayamonn, the scene becomes only a memory. In a moment which inevitably recalls Christ going to meet his fate, Ayamonn takes his farewell of the scene and the people he knows, telling Finnoola, "May you marry well, an' rear up children fair as Emer was, an' fine as Ossca's son" (202). The Act is remarkably successful, using light and colour to suggest possibilities which go beyond mere words and mere argument and partake of a degree of transcendence. Brendan MacNamee claims that *Red Roses for Me* is "a deeply Yeatsian play, because it is precisely this vital connection of imaginative vision with the 'blood and mire of existence' that gives Yeats's mature poetry its power" (295). He goes on to argue that what constitutes the every day is marked by categorization, "distinctions and ... consciousness of the ego" and that this is transcended by moments of vision. This seems to me a good description of what happens here. Act III with its representation of the reality of people's lives, particularly of the women's lives, and the vision of Ayamonn puts the play alongside *The Silver Tassie* as one of O'Casey's greatest triumphs.

Act IV represents the intrusion of day to day reality as Ayamonn goes to his death at the hands of a police gunman during the strike, "the blood and mire of existence" (McNamee 295). It is a reality that the play's ideologues wish to escape but which Ayamonn, its greatest visionary, willingly embraces. The link of reality and vision, what

MacNamee suggests constitutes Yeats's rosy cross, is completely missed by Roory who in the Bridge scene objects, "d'ye think talkin' to these tattered second-hand ghosts'll bring back Heaven's grace an' Heaven's beauty to Kaithleen ni Houlihan?" (197). Ayamonn's response is to point out the obvious fact that Kathleen also appears in the form of a poor old woman. In this context, the commonplace of legend acquires a real significance: "We love th'ideal Kaithleen ni Houlihan, not because she is false, but because she is beautiful; we hate th'real Kaithleen ni Houlihan, not because she is true, but because she is ugly" (197).

This is a profound statement which encapsulates O'Casey's vision, a vision of the beautiful Kathleen rendered true, and identical with the true Kathleen rendered beautiful. In this he inherits the radical tradition within Celtic nationalism, the resistance to the commercializing tendencies of English mass-culture which informed some of the values of the Gaelic League, but which became submerged in the movement's more traditional tendencies in the conservative post-revolutionary years. The vision finds its best expression in *Red Roses for Me* which challenges the dilution of the vision of transformation into the limiting categories of racially based national identity, sectarian affiliation and economic self-interest. In its suggestion of the need for a more internationally inclusive philosophy, it takes up *The Silver Tassie's* suggestion of a commonality of interest between soldiers in the European War. All three plays are critical of a working class complicit in their own repression, and *The Silver Tassie* and *The Star Turns Red*, in particular, of the hypocrisy of Church leaders who fail to condemn the destructiveness of warfare and ally themselves with the interests of the property owning classes. The potentiality which lies beyond the day to day realities, which can only reflect the ideologies which underlie them, is represented in the plays' departures from naturalism, which are essential to their radicalism. Radicalism may, of course, take many forms, but its essential characteristic is a challenge to the predominant ideology within which a given society operates, and in this sense O'Casey has an undoubted claim to a place in the radical tradition of Irish Theatre.

NOTES

- 1 J.J. Lee comments in relation to the Cosgrave government's desire to earn British approval, "It is as much a psychological characteristic of the *arriviste petit bourgeoisie* of a colonial society to cherish the approval of their erstwhile masters as it is for them to despise the less materially successful sections of their own community" (173).
- 2 Yeats's ambivalence towards the First World War is discussed in some detail in Foster, 59-79.
- 3 The way in which such hierarchically gendered societies encourage males to engage in warfare is discussed perceptively in Cooper, Munich and Squier's *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*.
- 4 For a discussion of the Gothic character of much of the representation of the Western Front in First World War literature, see Phillips 232-44.
- 5 For a discussion of O'Casey's Larkinism, see Newsinger 283-92.
- 6 For an account of de Valera's resistance to pressure to take sides in the Civil War from Catholic pressure groups such as the "short-lived" Irish Christian Front, see Fanning 132.
- 7 I exclude *Purple Dust* which, although set in Ireland, is predominantly centred on English characters.
- 8 For a telling example of the way in which assertive nationalism can degenerate into racism, see Fanning's discussion of the attitude of the music critic of Irish Radio News to jazz, "the music of the nigger" (58).

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Terence. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*. London: Fontana, 1985.
- Cooper, Helen M., Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier, eds. *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989.
- Fanning, Ronan. *Independent Ireland*. Eds. Art Cosgrove and Elma Collins. Dublin: Helicon, 1983.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1961. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Foster, R.F. *The Irish Story*. London: Penguin, 2001.
- . *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. London: Penguin, 1988.
- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. 1975. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Greene, Nicholas. *The Politics of Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Hunt, Hugh. *Sean O'Casey*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980.
- Jeffery, Keith. *Ireland and the Great War*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Jones, Nesta. *Writer-Files: File on O'Casey*. Ed. Simon Trussler. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Keogh, Dermot. *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1994.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. London: Vintage, 1996.
- Lee, J.J. *Ireland 1912-1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- McDonald, Ronan. *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Sean O'Casey, Beckett*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.
- McNamee, Brendan. "The Visionary Affinities of W.B. Yeats and Sean O'Casey." *Irish Studies Review* 12.3 (2004): 293-301.
- Murray, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.
- Newsinger, John. "Sean O'Casey, Larkinism and Literature." *Irish Studies Review* 12.3 (2004): 283-301.
- O'Casey, Sean. *Red Roses for Me. Collected Plays*. Vol. 3. London: MacMillan, 1962. 5 vols.
- . *The Silver Tassie. Collected Plays*. Vol. 2. London: MacMillan, 1959. 5 vols.
- . *The Star Turns Red. Collected Plays*. Vol. 2. London: MacMillan, 1959. 5 vols.
- O'Connor, Gary. *Sean O'Casey*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.
- Phillips, Terry. "The Rules of War: Gothic Transgressions in First World War Fiction." *Gothic Studies* 2.2 (2000): 232-44.
- Pilkington, Lionel. *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. 1952. Revised ed. London: Hogarth Press, 1987.
- Yeats, W.B. *Collected Poems*. 2nd ed. London: MacMillan, 1933.