

REVIVAL'S LIMIT, OR A POST-REVIVAL SPACE? GERALD MACNAMARA'S 'CHRISTMAS LAUGHTER'

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What I mean by 'parody' here . . . is not the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity.

(Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 26)

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 10)

In his work on the nature of the postmodern, Brian McHale suggests that locating the transition from one literary paradigm to another requires an attention to changes in 'the dominant'. Working from Roman Jakobson's formulation of the dominant as that which is 'the focusing component of a work of art', McHale sets out a series of discursive focuses that map out shifting text/world relationships. Thus, in his schema, 'the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological', while 'the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological'.¹ Tracking dominances from those concerned with the nature of knowledge and knowing to those more attentive to the nature of 'being' traces for McHale the more thoroughgoing epochal shift from modernist to postmodern text/world engagement. Drawing on the architecture (if not the precise coordinates) of this argument, and in particular its attention to the shifting centres of gravity in the relationship between imaginative mode and world, this article sets out to examine another (more culturally specific) set of shifting paradigms. In place of the modernist/postmodern dialectic, the focus here is on the changing 'focusing components' that map out the move within Irish literary history from the revivalist project to a post-revival world/text view.

There is of course an implicit danger here: any attempt to render an extensive network of cultural relations down to a putative skeletal structure can lead to reductive gestures of simplification. This article, then, does not propose to 'decode' the revival in order to reveal a single monolithic dominant; rather it examines a representative dialectic that comes under transformatory pressure in the process towards a post-revival aesthetic. My interest is in specific pressure points and the transformational potentiality they may reveal and hold, rather than grand teleological narratives. That said, the focus here is on what has often been described as the major dominant of the revivalist period, that now familiar search for narrational codes of 'authenticity'. It is this philosophical imperative, after all, which provides the ruling hegemonic structure for many of the revival's central methodologies. We can detect its power in the search for a version of history/mythology

revelatory of just such authentic figures and stories, and in the recovery of places that hold out hope for an atavistic authenticity untouched by the perils of a tainted modernity. More than any other, perhaps, it is the displacement or deconstruction of this dominant that was the central objective of the more advanced modernist projects that came in revival's wake. It is that modernist period that is most fully marked by a dominant of sceptical deconstruction, driven by the sense that the revivalist performance of authenticity was in itself an exercise in inauthentic cultural-politics (a position most powerfully articulated by Joyce).

The point here is to explore the processes and pathways via which this kind of shift in literary-philosophic dominant is enacted and transacted. The aim is thus to reinterrogate the revival itself for those signposts that reveal the ways in which cultural dominants are already in a state of flux even at the very moment of their articulation. More particularly, this article examines the role of parody as one of the key 'literary motors' that instigate, enable and monitor the realignment of cultural dominants. In this sense parody is a mode of transformational possibility precisely because it acts as a form of 'authorised transgression' in terms of that which is seen as normatively dominant.² Taken in these terms, parody enacts a kind of regulatory surveillance, providing a safety valve and outlet for those pressures that build up in any cultural system. The parodic is thus not simply concerned with imitation (as some reductive definitions indexed by Hutcheon would have it); rather it is an act of transformation and translation. It is this potential for process that Simon Dentith identifies when he writes that parody is 'part of a range of cultural practices, which allude, with deliberate evaluative intonation, to precursor texts'.³ Gérard Genette formulates this relationship in terms of an original 'hypotext' transformed by the parodic process into a new 'hypertext'.⁴ It is here that Dentith's insistence on an 'evaluative intonation' takes on a particular importance, as it establishes the parodic as an innately (and necessarily) critical move. The relationship between hypo and hypertext is thus not simply one of ideological mirroring but one of ideological process.

This labile image also reminds us that we need not think purely about reductively narrow relationships between pure 'texts' as such. In place of such a 'direct target' model Linda Hutcheon has discerned in parody a capability for more invasive relationships between parodic hypertext and world (or world as text). Working from a more developed reading of intertextuality, Hutcheon locates in the parodic the potential to interrogate and reshape the fabric that makes up discourse itself.⁵ The hypotext in such a case does not have to be a specific single cultural artefact, the parodic hypertext may take as its target a whole gambit of relations (historical, societal, political) that inform (and thus make possible) any given cultural artefact. While certain sections of *Ulysses* may have a very clear target for their parodic intent, for example, Joyce's text also parodies the broader fabric of relations that has informed constructs like nationalism, empire, religion, and so on. This kind of 'high parody' manages not simply to establish oppositional lines of descent/dissent in terms of that which is its target, it manages to rupture the systems of meaning that have provided the basis for this target's existence and functioning.

Parody is, then, one of the ways in which 'newness enters the world'; it is one of the cultural wheels that facilitate the transformatory process described by McHale. It acts as an enabler of shifting dominance by providing a ruptured space in the hegemonic strategies of the discourse that is its target. A central contention in what follows is that the parodic functioned as a de-familiarisation device within the revivalist project, reflecting the idea of revival back in upon itself and beginning the process of destabilizing alteration. It is this

potentiality that suggests a number of links, although not always of a perfect match, between the parodic mode and Bakhtin's sense of 'carnival' as a transgressive generator of resistance strategies. Which is not to suggest the two as somehow coterminous; it is rather that they illuminate each other in a usefully ambivalent manner. At times Bakhtin himself was clear to distance his reading of carnivalesque from 'the negative and formal parody of modern times'.⁶ While at other moments he seemed content to work with the parodic as a form that still retained some of the potentiality of pure carnival excess.⁷ Both carnival and parody function as 'counter-songs' providing a space with the potential to rupture the normative operation of ideological dominance (Bakhtin recovers the medieval term 'Christmas laughter' to describe carnival's function in relation to the authorized religious festivities). What they share ultimately is a disposition or ability to work most effectively from the fringes of hegemony—from a position that is, to a greater or lesser extent, removed from the exercise of power.

Taking this as its cue, the focus here is on a space that has in different ways over the years been perceived as working at the 'periphery' of revival, namely 'the North'. As we will see, the attempts to bring revival to Ulster in those same years that saw the emergence of an Ulster-centric unionism gave rise to a singular set of power relations. Perhaps the most interesting direct result of this north/south dialectic, in terms of the revivalist project at least, was the decision to establish the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT) in Belfast in 1904. This northern group is re-emerging as the site of renewed critical interest, and there is a gathering sense that its oeuvre provides an amenable space for opening up the performance of revival in revealing ways. It is becoming ever clearer that the Ulster Literary Theatre, particularly in its early years, provided one of the most powerful counter-spaces to the Abbey's gathering hegemonic claims to 'National Theatre' status (a claim based largely on the dominant quest for authenticity discussed above). For the most part this Belfast counter-space is usually thought of in terms of a regional nationalism. The Ulster Literary Theatre is thus sited as searching for an authenticity more attuned to provincial differences and needs; and there is certainly much of this character in the Ulster Literary Theatre's work. We need only look to the early plays of Rutherford Mayne for evidence of this inclination.⁸ Mary Burgess captures this regional specificity nicely, suggesting that as 'with so many aspects of the revival, "national" drama in the north had to survive in a special regional and political climate, while remaining in dialogue with the Dublin movement'.⁹

There is a sense too however, that we may read in much of the work associated with the Ulster Literary Theatre a drive to re-examine the very framework—aesthetical, philosophical, methodological—within which it operated. The specificity of the Ulster Literary Theatre's position, in other words, enabled it to interrogate the dominants of revival while still operating within a recognisably revivalist framework. It is this re-examination that makes the work of the Ulster Literary Theatre such an interesting performative space, because it operates not merely at the level of narrative and characterization but also at the level of ideological process. Those modes of dominance (predominantly modernist) that we usually associate with writers who came in revival's wake were pre-rehearsed from the wings of revival itself.¹⁰ Voices once thought of as peripheral may now be read as tracing the emergence of the post-revival moment, or, at least, one possible version of the post-revival moment.

To be more precise, a notable consequence of the Ulster Literary Theatre's position within revival was its ability to produce work uncommonly attuned to the parodic will to deconstruct. The most complete demonstrations of this proposal can be found in the work

of 'Gerald MacNamara', the penname of Harry Morrow, a brother from the well-known Belfast family and one of the Ulster Literary Theatre's most popular and important playwrights.¹¹ This seems particularly true of the extraordinary early burlesques with which he announced his arrival on the theatre scene. Some excellent recent work has reposed Suzanne and the Sovereigns (1907), *The Mist that does be on the Bog* (1909), and Thompson in Tir-na-nOg (1912) as amongst the revival's most interesting 'lost' plays.¹² A central contention of this recovery is that MacNamara's work could only have appeared out of Ulster in these years. At the most obvious level his work is saturated with the political and cultural imagery of Home-Rule era Ulster. These are plays populated with discussions easily recognizable to those familiar with Belfast's ground-level politics (then and now), and with humour brought directly on to the stage from the shipyards and mills of the city. However, the specificity of MacNamara's viewpoint is also revealed in the formal innovations and playfulness that characterize almost all his work for the Ulster Literary Theatre. Each of these early plays reveal MacNamara as one of the most advanced and sophisticated parodists of the revival, in all senses of that phrase. If this was a parodic vision largely produced by the conditions of bringing revival to the North, then the end result was a parodic strategy that time and again ruptured the fabric of discursive dominance through which the revival had sought its performance of authenticity.

The 'northern revival' is most fruitfully read as a meta-construct, enacting the revival's principles while simultaneously providing a space within which these principles could be made strange to themselves. This doubled process would force a new way of reading revival into the light (even if this 'newness' was not fully acted upon until the post-revival period). To understand this more fully we must reposition the 'northern revival' as a marginalized discourse twice over. As Burgess suggests above, cultural-nationalist writers who stayed to work in Belfast, and who made the North the main subject of that work, were required to respond simultaneously to a doubled perception of peripheral status. Their position was clearly a minority one in terms of an Ulster largely dominated by the ongoing transformation of Irish unionism into an Ulster-centric formation. But it is clear too that these writers felt marginalized by a Dublin-centric revivalist hierarchy that showed little inclination to include the experiences of the North into the methodology or aesthetic of their cultural project. This feeling is perhaps best encapsulated by the memory of one such northern writer, James Cousins, of meeting Douglas Hyde. On meeting Cousins in Dublin, Hyde sought to encourage the Belfast man with the words: 'I knew you had a southern soul in your northern body'.¹³

In the end more or less everything the Ulster Literary Theatre produced was refracted via a creative consciousness informed by this doubled positioning. Those who strove to establish the Ulster Literary Theatre were only too aware of the precarious nature of their position; indeed the idea of a nationalist theatre for Belfast was largely conceived as a way of resisting this very perception. That idea first emerged in 1902 when Bulmer Hobson and David Parkhill proposed to establish the 'Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre'.¹⁴ This idea met with some strong resistance, not least from W. B. Yeats who famously refused permission for the Belfast group to perform *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. In the end it was Maud Gonne who solved that particular impasse, telling Bulmer Hobson 'never mind Willie, he wrote that play for me and you can perform it anytime you like'.¹⁵ But the broader problem of rejection and resistance would remain to haunt what would become the Ulster Literary Theatre for years to come.

Despite this rather inauspicious beginning, the two men went ahead and from 1902 to 1904 Belfast witnessed a number of sporadic performances by the 'Ulster branch of the Irish Literary Theatre'. Most notably during this period the new company performed Cathleen Ni Houlihan as part of two separate seasons. However a letter in 1904 from George Roberts, then secretary of the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS), informing the group that they had no right to claim sister-branch status was to change the nature of this attempt to stage a revival in Belfast. At the most obvious level the group decided on a quick change in nomenclature, re-emerging just a few months later as the 'Ulster Literary Theatre'. Dropping the claim to 'Ulster Branch' status was, however, more than a merely cosmetic alteration; it was in fact just the most overt sign of a much more thorough rethink of the entire project. Or at least it confirmed to those involved what they had long thought to be the case: they would have to go it alone and mould a distinctly northern version of revival. From the very beginning, then, this Belfast group took up a self-reflexively problematical position; a position that is best characterized in terms of an inside/outside duality.

It was Gerald MacNamara who most fully seized on this problematical position, deriving from it a significant source of creative potential. It was MacNamara's work that was most attuned to Hutcheon's sense of parody as 'repetition with critical distance', and seemed most able to perform the Bakhtinian sense of parody as a 'double-directed' discourse. As Mary Burgess has pointed out, MacNamara's refusal of hegemonic norms also found a formal outlet in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque spirit. Burgess makes the case that those techniques of the carnival later identified by Bakhtin 'were adapted by MacNamara to create a new kind of historical satire in the first two decades of the twentieth century'.¹⁶ It is in that intersection between carnival and parodic excess that we may begin to see the beginnings of hegemonic instability. The northern revival, in other words, marks a kind of 'Janus-space' in the fabric of the revival's normative dominants. Working his way out of the northern revival's inside/outside duality, Gerald MacNamara set about creating a performative space that functioned as a representational 'interspace'; a space in which revival could be replayed with critical distance. Or perhaps more accurately, in this doubled interspace MacNamara was able to address many of the dominants of Irish cultural life. While this included the nature of revival, the discursive practices of other formations such as 'Ulster Unionism' also fell under the gaze of his parodic talent. Indeed MacNamara is best remembered as the writer of plays filled with caricatured figures from the Orange Order (most famously in *Thompson in Tir-na-nOg*) and other characters who likewise parody the evolving discourses of a specifically 'Ulster Unionism' (clearly demonstrated throughout *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*). What is less well remembered is that he was the playwright responsible for some of the most intriguing northern-revivalist responses to the work of the early Abbey Theatre.

These kinds of doubled parodic engagements are discernible from MacNamara's earliest entry onto the Irish theatre scene. *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* was his first full-length piece for the Ulster Literary Theatre (co-written with 'Lewis Purcell'—the pen name of David Parkhill); it was first staged at the Exhibition Hall on 26 December 1907 and was an immediate success with playgoers in Belfast. The plot concerns the eponymous 'Suzanne', a seventeenth-century Irish girl, who has blown flirtatious kisses at both King James II and William of Orange. Suzanne's actions result in both men falling madly in love with her. After this initial set-up, the play proceeds to invert, reorder and generally 'play' with the post-seventeenth-century history of Ireland. In its course the narrative action revisits the Siege of

Derry and the Battle of the Boyne, both of which are represented as a series of farcical situations involving mix-ups, misunderstandings and base motivations (mainly sexual).

The style of the play, and its Christmas performances, meant that it was largely received as a theatre experience most akin to pantomime (that modern incarnation of carnival as literally 'Christmas Laughter'). Indeed it is this interpretative strategy that seems to have saved the play from politicized forms of censure; an early review by the *Irish News* and *Belfast Morning News* is representative of a generous early response:

The story runs through a mad and merry maze of grotesque happenings, with mock melodrama interspersed, the Siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne being 'worked in' as incidental items, and the whole proves a delightfully irresponsible, but none the less amusing, production.¹⁷

The play's reception as a collection of serious incidents replayed as 'a mad and merry maze' of 'delightfully irresponsible' plot sequences points to a very particular kind of cultural and social event. Bakhtin's sense of carnival as a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' that is in turn marked by 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'¹⁸, coordinates here with the reviewer's implicit suggestion that a reaction informed by strict politicality is somehow inappropriate. The reviewer points to the manner in which the play required its audience to inhabit a different kind of interpretative space. If the original function of carnival was to enact an alternative sacred space deflating the religious ritual against which it performed in parallel, then here we have a dramatic space that sought to deconstruct the politics at work outside the auditorium's doors exactly by proposing itself as beyond its reach. It is here that we see that doubled function of the parodic as it inhabits a dual space operating simultaneously within a given discourse in order to provide a perspective from beyond it. In this case MacNamara draws on the potential of parody to provide a 'carnivalized' version of history; it is a version that punctures the fabric of various contemporary Irish politico-cultural discourses, each of which sought to present itself as the keeper of an essential authentic truth.

The Ulster Literary Theatre's ability—born out of its specific positioning in revivalist practice—to undertake this kind of cultural work is what makes it such a valuable space in the fabric of revival; particularly in terms of recovering those pre-partition narratives of cultural and political identity in the North. The Ulster Literary Theatre provides an opportunity to read northern Ireland back through Northern Ireland. It is somehow apt, then, that we may read the entire plot of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* as dedicated to questioning the processes through which dominant historical narratives achieve their 'authorization' and/or validation. More fundamentally, MacNamara in this play questions the whole edifice of 'History' as an entity capable of revealing a stable coherent 'truth'. Indeed even before the curtain went up, those in the audience would have received fair warning that their historical sensibilities were about to be challenged. The programme for the original performance of the play contained a 'Note' in which the audience is informed of certain 'ground rules' concerning what they are about to see:

While disdaining any desire to be serious, we cannot overcome an ingrained tendency to instruct, as well as amuse, our audience. Let us amuse or not, instruct we will. Therefore many historical facts hitherto unsuspected may be confidently looked for. The play is not founded upon any recognised history, because, from exclusive information at the disposal

of the authors, there is grave reason to suppose that the history of the Three Kingdoms is, in many points, not to be relied upon. If we can but correct some of the prevailing misconceptions our labours will not have been in vain.¹⁹

So it is not so much that *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* is a flight from history, but rather (its authors propose) it is History itself that is open to interrogation. Thus in the course of the piece the audience will 'discover' that the Siege of Derry took place because William put Suzanne within its walls for safe keeping; in his turn, King James's only interest in the city was a desire to 'break in' to retrieve his new love. By the same token the Battle of the Boyne is replayed as a way of deciding who should have Suzanne's hand in marriage.

The focusing component of *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* is a drive to deconstruct History as revelatory of essential truth. In this way it performs a cultural dominant that seems to have more in common with the kinds of literary shifts that occur in the wake of revival; *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* reveals a deep scepticism regarding the politicization of historical and mythical narrative. This parodic drive reveals itself in the multitude of historical reorderings and replaying that populate the piece, many of which share a playfulness reminiscent of the intricate (proto) postmodernist turns of Flann O'Brien. In an early scene, for example, we see a delegation of Orangemen arriving in Holland to request William's assistance (in MacNamara's world the Orange Order pre-exists William's intervention in Ireland). The delegation's lead representative (Sir Joseph) outlines the situation to William in the following terms:

SIR JOSEPH. Your Majesty, at a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Society we moved a resolution that henceforth we would pay no allegiance to King James, and that it was most desirable to have an Orange king as a reigning sovereign, and as we heard so much about you, and knowing you to be a staunch Orangeman, it was agreed that this deputation should approach you and give you first offer of the throne of Ulster.²⁰

MacNamara presents his audience with Orangemen actively 'creating' the William they need in order to become Orangemen. Slightly later they offer William 'a magnificent white horse for [his] use exclusively on the battle field'²¹, thus revealing the Orange Order bestowing onto William the iconic beast astride which he will be pictured across a myriad Lodge banners. The fact also that these representatives of Orangeism are only really concerned with 'Ulster' would not have escaped the notice of the play's original audiences. In this instance MacNamara represents the broad canvass of Irish history undergoing a process of transmutation as it is called to the service of Ulster's Home Rule resistance.

William's response to these overtures continues to reveal MacNamara's incisive talent for presenting historical revisionism in action:

KING WILLIAM. [Rising to his feet]: Gentlemen, you do me a great honour. I am so overcome with emotion, that words fail me to properly acknowledge the great compliment you pay me. But tell me, where is Ulster? [Sits down] [All look at each other in surprise and disgust]
SIR JOSEPH. Your majesty, it is the most northern and most loyal portion of Ireland.
KING WILLIAM. [Looking wearied] Gentlemen, I am afraid we cannot come to terms. You must clearly understand my position. I am Prince of ALL Orange—not a piece of Orange. Is it reasonable to expect that I should give this country up for the chance of a part of Ireland? ...

SIR JOSEPH. But, Your Majesty, there is another matter. If you consent to our offer, you may succeed in becoming king of not only all Ireland, but England as well, if you defeat King James.

KING WILLIAM. Ah, that is not so bad. But what do you mean by defeating King James? We hope that our coming to Ireland would not lead to any unpleasantness. We couldn't care to be mixed up in any rowdyism.²²

Shockingly for the play's Orange delegation, William here conspires to demonstrate just how unfamiliar he is with his position in the hagiography of twentieth-century Orangeism and the evolving Ulster-centric unionism. The audience watches on as this iconic seventeenth-century figure repeatedly refuses to be drawn into his cultural-political role, as it is perceived by a contemporary Ulster unionism.

However to suggest that MacNamara was only concerned to reveal the processes of revision and invention working at the heart of Ulster Unionism would be to mistake the range and ambition of his project. It is evident that MacNamara was actually concerned to explore and expose these processes as they haunt any form of Nationalist discourse. In this regard we may further read the figure of 'Suzanne' as an oblique response to Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan; or, perhaps more accurately, to the desire for icon creation displayed by Yeats in his most straightforwardly nationalist play. As noted above, the original 'Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre' had performed Cathleen Ni Houlihan in two separate seasons in Belfast before the emergence of the Ulster Literary Theatre. Gerald MacNamara was present at one of these performances; his memory of the event is telling, in terms of his work generally and in terms of Suzanne and the Sovereigns more particularly. MacNamara's clearest memory concerned the reaction of the Belfast audience to Yeats's symbolism:

The Belfast public were not taken by Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Ninety-nine per cent of the population had never heard of the lady—and cared less; in fact someone in the audience said that the show was going 'rightly' till she came on.²³

As it turned out MacNamara was not alone in perceiving a difficult reception for Yeats's piece in Belfast. Rutherford Mayne (the Ulster Literary Theatre's recognized 'major' playwright) also witnessed one of these performances, and he too left the theatre rather perplexed: 'I'm afraid I didn't quite catch what Yeats was at because the audience seemed to take it as a sort of rather funny peasant play'.²⁴

Both men's memories go straight to the heart of the Ulster Literary Theatre's project. Cathleen Ni Houlihan's rather dubious reception in Belfast had only confirmed the need for a different kind of revival in Ulster, for different kinds of narratives and other forms of symbolism. It is exactly this independent revivalist spirit that MacNamara would later capture in his description of how the Ulster Literary Theatre sought to operate:

The nucleus of 'The Ulster Theatre' was a band of serious minded young men and women (none of them out of their teens) who, in the first years of this century were enthusiasts in the 'Irish Ireland' movement.

Although their sympathies were with the Gaelic League they were not attached to that organisation in any official way. They were absolutely 'on their own'—what might be called an 'Ulah Sinn Fein'.²⁵

That remarkable phrase proposing the nascent Ulster Literary Theatre as an 'Ulah Sinn Fein' finds all kinds of resonances with MacNamara's sense that Yeats's symbolism was

somewhat inadequate when presented to the very particular dynamics of a Belfast audience. In many ways, in fact, Suzanne and the Sovereigns represents just the earliest attempt in what would be a career-long search for images, symbols and narratives that could cope more readily with the complexities of bringing revival to Ulster.

In Cathleen Ni Houlihan MacNamara had seen Yeats's powerful attempt to create an actively participating nationalist icon. Yeats's play is so effective because 'Cathleen' is a pseudo self-aware synecdoche for an entire nationalist history of Ireland (this self-awareness was only intensified by Maud Gonne's early performances). This was just the sort of move that MacNamara was deeply suspicious of, and in 'Suzanne' he gives his answer from Belfast. Suzanne remains throughout his play a steadfastly unaware character; kept off-stage, Suzanne is uninvolved in the monumental processes that accompanied her flirtatious behaviour. At its centre MacNamara's piece is about a literary character displaying a deep-seated refusal to assume the mantle of nationalist iconic female.

The audience watches on as time and again a series of men construct a meaning for this female body, the body in question remaining unseen and disengaged from the process. MacNamara's sceptical perspective regarding what he clearly sees as some of nationalism's more dubious desires becomes inescapable in the play's final moments. As the play draws to a close it is revealed, much to the shock of both James and William, that their love-object Suzanne has in fact eloped with Van Tootil, William's court painter. And so Suzanne (read ironic Ireland) is left as a doubly silenced figure: she has spent the entire play under construction by her two male admirers and will now only be accessible through the iconic paintings of yet another male artist (read historian, politician, writer). Speaking from his northern parodic interspace, the play's denouement would appear to be MacNamara's rejection not only of the historical game playing of organizations such as the Orange Order, but also of those same dialectics that he read as informing much of Irish nationalism.

If in this way Suzanne was a more or less oblique response to some of the tactics emerging from the early Abbey Theatre, MacNamara's next play would turn out to be his most obvious parody on the fixations and methodologies of the Ulster Literary Theatre's one time sister branch. Where Suzanne had sought to open up for reconsideration nationalism's historical dominant, MacNamara's next play would openly parody the revival's search for a representational space capable of producing and revealing the authentic Ireland. This next production, *The Mist That Does Be On The Bog*, premiered at the Abbey on 26 November 1909, and was an instant success with Dublin audiences. *The Mist That Does Be On The Bog* is the story of one day in a small cottage in the West of Ireland, as it is visited by a collection of people variously seeking to experience the 'true West'. In an ironic inversion of Syngian dramaturgy, however, the cottage in this work is rented out by its actual inhabitants, a peasant couple named Quinn. The audience witness this business transaction and the rest of the piece is played out in a stage-cottage populated with characters in search of a true peasant abode, one just like they've seen at the theatre (the Abbey perhaps). Synge is the most obvious target of this parodic set-up, but there is a pervading sense that it takes aim more broadly at the revivalist fetish for the West as a repository of folk memory.²⁶ More specifically the play's final denouement reveals that the play is also about the ways in which little room had been made for the North (its people and experiences) in the revivalist project to find spatial pathways to a more 'authentic' Ireland. It is a piece, finally, in which we can see most clearly the signposts of a shifting dominant; or, at least, it can be read as an example of internal 'surveillance' that indexes the kinds of critiques to be more fully developed in revival's wake.

The Mist that does be on the Bog's parodic intent finds its most obvious (and performative) manifestation in the verbal register heard on stage. As the play opens we find the cottage's original inhabitants (Bridget and Michael Quinn) getting ready for the day; their conversation makes it clear that we have found ourselves in a Syngian styled linguistic landscape. Bridget has called to Michael telling him to get out of bed:

MICHAEL. Woman, dear, can you not let me get a wink o' sleep?

BRIDGET. Is it a wink of sleep you would be wantin' in the middle of the day and not a bit of turf in the house and the goat not milked, and not a hand put on the corn, and the hens out laying eggs the dear knows where and—?²⁷

As a straightforward imitation of Synge this opening speech is, in fact, quite well accomplished, with its listing of chores concerned with farming and animal husbandry. However MacNamara will continue throughout the play to ratchet up the linguistic tension from the imitative to the parodic level. It is these opening moments that establish the scenario that allows the events of the piece to unfold. Bridget and Michael discuss the sign in their window advertising that they wish to rent out their cottage. Bridget reminds the dubious Michael of the reasoning behind the move: 'Didn't Father Doran tell us and him just come from Dublin that all the quality in the big world do be searchin' the country over for cottages just like this—and them in their motor cars?'²⁸

In place of Syngian authenticity the audience is presented with a peasant couple completely aware of the nature of their cottage as 'commodity', a place that was simultaneously 'home' but also a fetish object for those in search of a lost national home. It is also evident that they are equally aware of the consumers they should target: the 'quality' of Dublin (such as might go to the Abbey perhaps). Not long after this exchange a group of such cultural tourists arrives—and by motor car no less. Two sisters, Cissie and Gladys, are the first to appear at the Quinns' door, they will be joined a short time later by Gladys's husband Fred. The two women are immediately struck by the charming 'authenticity' of the place and quickly strike a bargain to rent the cottage. We soon learn that these sisters are particularly delighted with their new accommodation, as Gladys is a playwright who has come to the West to seek inspiration for her new work. In turn Cissie is quick to spot the potential of having their very own peasant cottage all to themselves:

CISSIE. Oh! Gladys—I'm so glad you have taken the cottage. [Looking around] Isn't it a picture? If we could only have our stage 'set' like this! Wouldn't it be a capital idea to rehearse our new play here?²⁹

It is soon agreed that they should indeed set about rehearsing Gladys's play (it is after all set in just such a cottage) and that they should do it in costume for full effect. The cottage stage set before the audience is now transformed into a meta-theatrical space as the play within the play takes over the physical presence on stage. Moreover as the two women begin (now in full peasant costume) performing Gladys's 'work in progress', it soon becomes clear that her work owes much to Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Like Synge's piece, the early exchanges of Gladys's play are occupied with a mother's concern for an apparently missing son. On stage Gladys takes on the part of the distraught mother, but the potentially tragic tone is quickly deflated by an unintentionally clumsy parodic register:

GLADYS. [Starts in a whining tone] Is Cornelius back yet?

CISSIE. He is not back yet, but the silver moon is only in its first quarter yet, and he might be delayed by the grace of the saints in O'Hanlon's pub.³⁰

The absurdity of the piece is soon wound up several notches with the arrival of a 'tramp' at the cottage's door. His arrival proves especially fortunate to the sisters, who of course are now well into their dress rehearsal, for the tramp's arrival coincides perfectly with that moment when the tramp 'character' is supposed to arrive on stage in Gladys's play. Naturally the two women decide to continue on 'in character', surmising that if they can fool a real west of Ireland tramp then their characterization must be first rate. Little do they know (as opposed to the audience, who are quickly let in on the secret) that this particular tramp is actually a Dublin man called Clarence St John. They are likewise unaware that their 'tramp' has come to the West in disguise to gain a true insight for his writing, for St John is a playwright too. What follows is some of MacNamara's most accomplished writing and stagecraft. St John is quickly convinced that he has struck inspirational gold, a place that will swiftly furnish him with a wealth of 'local colour' to add intellectual truth and representational validity to his work. Likewise the two women are certain that in the tramp they have found the perfect touchstone for their attempts to represent the West. The stage is thus occupied with a series of separate but intertwined language games, as each character sets out to improvise their perceived role:

CISSIE. Thank you kindly, stranger. Come and sit down by the fire and put a heat into your limbs, for it's myself that's thinkin' that your bones are aching and you travellin' on the hard roads this day.

CLARENCE. [Aside] This is delightful. I could write a play here in one hour. [To Cissie] You speak kind words, lady, and true ones, for its no joke crossing the hills when the fog is on them, and lying down under the heavens when the night is cold.³¹

The audience is thus confronted with a series of meta-dramaturgical exchanges, with the unintentional parodying produced by the characters on stage embedded further within the parodic will to deconstruct produced by MacNamara's play *The Mist* that does be on the Bog. The action on stage is thus doubled through various refractive frames of reference allowing those in the auditorium to watch a number of different plays simultaneously. It is an experience that is in some ways replicated by the characters on stage. Cissie is here convinced that she is managing to represent the West back to itself; while St John is seen to draw inspiration for future representations of the West from something that is itself a representational construct. The action on stage is now played out as a kind of cultural-nationalist 'false consciousness'. The audience is confronted with a 'meta-space' overpopulated by people seeking to interpret it; a move, of course, that implicates those in the auditorium at the Abbey as well as those that have taken to its stage. In this moment of fake 'first contact' the two characters are caught up in a mutually sustaining hermeneutic circle of interpretation, but one that is completely removed from the actual ontology of life in a small community in the west of Ireland.

The play is filled with moments that provide pure parodic delight; but these are also moments that interrogate a problematical subject/object schism, as the search for truthful representation pushes each of the characters further into an inauthentic position. The ensuing clash between the search for an authentic west and the methodologies of cultural and intellectual modernity result in the performance of an epistemological violence.

Throughout the rest of the piece MacNamara continually points to the gap between subject, representation, and meta-representation. Albeit it is a schism beautifully couched in his affectionately parodic mode, as in this moment when the sisters' improvisations result in a rupture of the dramatic space:

GLADYS. Moira, what is keeping you with the milk, and the stranger like to die with the thirst that's on him?

CISSIE. Maybe it's yourself could find it, for I cannot.

GLADYS. It's over there in the North-West corner.

CISSIE. It's the poor shape I do be makin' at the findin' of it and without a compass . . .³²

In fact such moments result in a series of representational and discursive ruptures. Cissie's attempt to locate a true 'character' is seen as unsustainable as she begins to feel increasingly alien and dislocated in this newly discovered space. But there is the sense too that this kind of project is also unsustainable as Cissie is here seen to import a radically modern subjectivity into this putatively authentic environment.

Indeed it is this final reading that haunts most of *The Mist*, and is made the actual subject of the action on stage in the final moments. The drive to represent that each of the characters has been engaged in eventually collapses in upon itself. St John has fallen in love with Cissie; he reveals himself as a Dublin playwright and asks her to marry him. What he has fallen for, of course, is the image of a pure colleen from the west of Ireland, a girl untouched by modernity. It is this declaration that forces Cissie into coming clean and revealing what they have been up to all along. St John the Dublin playwright is forced to acknowledge that what he has actually fallen in love with is a simulacrum of the west, one that has been pre-read and pre-performed for him by other playwrights engaged with cultural 'revival'. The more revival searches for 'authenticity' the further it actually recedes into the distance. Tellingly St John seems prepared to take the whole thing in good spirit until Cissie's final revelation:

CISSIE. It simply means that I have been in this cottage only an hour. I am staying with my sister who has rented the place for a week. I belong to Belfast.

CLARENCE. [Turns away and hangs his head] Belfast!

CISSIE. Yes, Belfast [Huffed] You need not be so shocked—there is nothing the matter with Belfast.³³

In the end the Dublin playwright is most vexed to find that this representational space has been invaded and thus constructed for him by a playwright and actor from 'the North'. Read retrospectively, then, the play has all along been concerned with the geo-cultural selectivity of a revivalist practice that seeks to authenticate only certain versions of Ireland and Irishness. This already meta-play is doubled once again, now revealing itself more clearly as a specifically Ulster Literary Theatre piece that strives to speak about the condition of its production and the validity of other spaces and voices—'there is nothing the matter with Belfast'. It is here that we are returned to the idea of parody as a form of cultural surveillance providing a commentary—from within and without hegemonic discourse—on the construction of focusing dominants. Speaking from this pseudo-carnavalesque inter-space, the Ulster Literary Theatre provides some of the most important internal signposts marking the shifting ground of the revivalist text/world dominant. Doubled once again, the Ulster Literary Theatre haunts the periphery as both a revivalist and post-revival space.

NOTES

1. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9–10. Emphasis in original.
2. See Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 128.
3. Dentith, *Parody*, 6.
4. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5. Emphasis in original.
5. See Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 122.
6. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 11.
7. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 21.
8. See Vandevelde, 'An Open National Identity' for a further discussion of Mayne in this context.
9. Burgess, 'Belfast Carnavalesque', 75.
10. Mary Burgess makes the case, for example, that the work of Denis Johnston finds a significant progenitor in the plays of the Ulster Literary Theatre playwright 'Gerald MacNamara' (see Burgess, 'Belfast Carnavalesque'); and I would suggest that MacNamara's work finds significant resonances in the later parodic exercises of Flann O'Brien.
11. Five of the Morrow brothers became involved in various cultural endeavours around this period; Fred would produce much of the Ulster Literary Theatre's work and would go on to be the Theatre of Ireland's producer for much of its existence; George Morrow would become a well-known illustrator for *Punch*.
12. See, for example, Burgess, 'Belfast Carnavalesque' and Lyons, 'Of Orangemen and Green Theatres'.
13. Cousins and Cousins, *We Two Together*, 40.
14. For more, see Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster*.
15. As quoted in Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster*, 2.
16. Burgess, 'Belfast Carnavalesque', 78.
17. See the *Irish News* and *Belfast Morning News*, 27 December 2007.
18. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 10.
19. Programme for *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*, held in Rutherford Mayne Archive, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.
20. MacNamara, *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*, 26.
21. *Ibid.*, 27.
22. *Ibid.*, 27.
23. Quoted in Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster*, 3–4.
24. Quoted in Killen, *Rutherford Mayne*, 2.
25. Harry Morrow (Gerald MacNamara), essay entitled 'The Rise of the Ulster Players': a copy of this essay can be found in the Linen Hall Library's 'Rutherford Mayne' archive, it may originally have been intended for publication in *The Crystal*.
26. The *Irish Independent's* theatre critic, 'Jacques', commented at the time of the play's first performance at the Abbey: 'The author calls his work 'A fog in one act'. A most apt title. The little play is most obviously a skit on the kind of dialogue put into the mouths of Irish peasants by dramatists and novelists who deal with Irish peasant themes'. (*Irish Independent*, 27 November 1909)
27. MacNamara, *The Mist That Does Be On The Bog*, 58.
28. *Ibid.*, 58.
29. *Ibid.*, 59.

30. Ibid., 61.
31. Ibid., 62.
32. Ibid., 62.
33. Ibid., 65.

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