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5 / Waiting for the exceptional: Pearse's drama and the space between Law and law.

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> Only our conception of time makes it possible for us to call the day of the Last Judgment by that name; in reality it is a summary court in perpetual session.
>
> —Franz Kafka[1]

The question of time and its judgments haunts Patrick Pearse's work for the theatre. Time and again (a haunting phrase in itself) his plays concern themselves with the origin, agency and temporality of judgment. Indeed there is clearly something (but not all) of the Janus-faced modernist project in these works that look longingly towards a newly imagined future while processing a sublimated nostalgia for meanings lost in some now vanished originating moment.[2] In many of Pearse's plays we can detect a mind meditating not just on the nature and possibility of action but on the relationship between present action and its function in the posterity of the future. It is to be found, most obviously, in the sacrificial actions of key bodies in his three most complete works for the theatre: the young boy in *An rí/The king* (1912); the eponymous teacher-priest in *The master* (1915); and MacDara, the covert revolutionary balladeer in *The singer* (1916). In different ways, sometimes oblique, sometimes more directly, his drama resolves itself around the processes and agents through which radical action can be instigated. This onstage action is further shaped by the assumed relationship with the observing audience – those who have been implicated by their participation in the drama. In the space between the stage-action and the participating gaze, Pearse's work invites reflection upon the notion of judgment – its personality, mechanisms, modalities, agency and time frame. More specifically, this essay argues, at the heart of Pearse's drama is a

1 Franz Kafka, 'Reflections on sin, pain, hope and the true way' in *The Great Wall of China: stories and reflections* (New York, 1970), p. 287. 2 For more developed argument on Pearse as a modernist see Máire Ní Fhlathúin, 'The anti-colonial modernism of Patrick Pearse' in Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby (eds), *Modernism and empire* (Manchester, 2000), pp 156–74; Declan Kiberd, 'Patrick Pearse: Irish modernist' in Roisín Higgins and Regina Uí Chollatáin (eds), *The life and after-life of P.H. Pearse* (Dublin, 2009).

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particular politico-cultural concern for the mechanisms of judgment as revealed by the regulatory powers of both the 'law', the diachronic marker of real-world legal process, and the 'Law', the synchronic marker of trans-historical justice. We can see something of this philosophic dichotomy at work in his 1916 pamphlet 'The sovereign people' in which Pearse draws a telling distinction between the originating 'natures' of a nation and an empire:

> The nation is a natural division, as natural as the family, and as inevitable. That is one reason why a nation is holy and why an empire is not holy [...]. The nation is the family in large; an empire is a commercial corporation in large. The nation is of God; the empire is of man – if it be not of the devil.[3]

It is the space created by this sacred/profane dialectic that allows Pearse to further assert that 'the right to the material ownership of a nation's soil coexists with the right to make laws for the nation and that both are inherent in the same authority, the sovereign people'.[4] Republicanism, in other words, functions through a law borne of the Law. Empire, or colonialism, functions through a rendering of the two:

> laws made or acts done by anybody purporting to represent the people but not really authorized by the people, either expressly or impliedly, to represent them and to act for them do not bind the people; are a usurpation, an impertinence, a nullity.[5]

The implications are clear – a properly constituted anti-colonialism would not only resist colonial law but seek to reveal a fundamental absence of authority at its core. Colonial law is here not so much wrong, as simply empty.

A central proposition in what follows is that it is in the dialectical space between the two – Law and law – that Pearse most fully inhabits the imaginative intersection between his cultural and political selfhoods. His most famous play, *The singer*, for example, ends with the eponymous singer, MacDara, declaring: 'I will take no pike. I will go into the battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree!'[6] It is a declaration – not without its problematics – that connects

3 Patrick Pearse, 'The sovereign people', Tracts for the Times, 13 (Dublin, 1916), p. 7. 4 Ibid., p. 10.
5 Ibid., pp 5–6. 6 Patrick Pearse, *The singer* in Róisín Ní Ghairbhí and Eugene McNulty (eds), *Patrick*

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the actions of military rebellion with divine judgment. At its heart stands an image of time: MacDara's actions, like Christ's, will find their full revelation only in retrospect; his present actions are fully readable only when placed in the context of a covenant with the future. It is an ending that functions as an ideological engine through which the present becomes an imagined utopian past.

In this regard Pearse's drama is very much of its revivalist moment – a moment whose key cultural turn was signalled by a concern for the re-articulation of Irish selfhood in its temporal, as well as spatial, psychical components. This is a period that has many of the contours of what Paul Ricoeur (following on from Karl Jaspers) would term a 'boundary situation'.[7] For Ricoeur, these are moments of crises 'such as war, suffering, guilt, death etc. in which the individual or community experiences a fundamental existential crisis'. Ricoeur goes on to argue that at 'such moments the whole community is put into question'; and if in extreme cases it feels itself to be 'threatened with destruction from without or from within' such a community 'is compelled to return to the very roots of its identity' – what he posits as the 'mytho-poetic' core of its existence.[8] While Ricoeur was clearly more concerned with the apocalyptic implications of extreme events (holocaust, genocide, world war), there is also a sense in which this thinking is translatable to those moments of cultural-nationalist self-interrogation or reinvention. Such moments are marked by a discourse in search not only of modes of resistance to imposed external structures but narratives of communal self-(re)definition.

At the heart of the nationalist 'boundary situation' driving the revivalist project, this essay contends, was a sustained and deep-set cultural interrogation of the pathways through which power was manifested through the translation of 'Law' into 'law'. Writing from Trieste in 1907, James Joyce, for example, in a newspaper piece entitled 'Ireland at the bar', sought to allegorize Ireland's troubled status – as a non-speaking actor on the stage of nations – by recourse to a narrative of legal inequity, centring on the infamous Maamtrasna Murder trials of 1882:

Pearse: collected plays/Drámaí an Phiarsaigh (Dublin, 2013), p. 228. **7** Karl Jaspers uses the term '*grenzsituation*', which can be translated variously as 'boundary situation', 'borderline situation' and 'ultimate situation'. For more on this idea in its original context see Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, ii: *Existential elucidation* (Chicago, 1969); Oswald O. Schrag, *Existence, existenz, and transcendence: an introduction to the philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (Pittsburgh, 1971). **8** Paul Ricoeur, 'Myth as the bearer of possible worlds' in Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (eds), *Crane Bag book of Irish studies* (Dublin, 1982), pp 261–2.

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> Several years ago a sensational trial was held in Ireland. In a lonely place [...] a murder was committed. Four or five townsmen [...] were arrested. The oldest of them, the seventy year old Myles Joyce, was the prime suspect. Public opinion at the time thought him innocent and today considers him a martyr. Neither the old man nor the others accused knew English. [...] The questioning, conducted through the interpreter, was at times comic and at times tragic. On one side was the excessively ceremonious interpreter, on the other the patriarch of a miserable tribe unused to civilised customs, who seemed stupefied by all the judicial ceremony.[9]

Much like Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial*, the old man is faced by a process of law that he cannot comprehend, one he cannot access in any meaningful way. Myles Joyce cannot 'read' or make visible the law that has him in its grip, he cannot speak to it. Likewise, Joyce presents the law as having no proper access to, or interest in, him as a subject in the world. It is a narrative that resonates with Gayatri Spivak's assertion that colonial law was one of those processes whose effect was to eradicate spaces of power within which the colonial subject could articulate his or her proper subjectivity. As she puts it, along with the production of scientific systems of knowledge, the 'institution of the law' was one more discursive space wherein 'great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients' through which the colonial subject could fully occupy his/her agency in the matrix of power.[10] For his namesake James, Myles Joyce becomes symbolic of Ireland as it stands subject to a law that misreads it, as it stands exposed to a system that speaks 'differently'.

In terms generated by Giorgio Agamben's recent influential work, we might also begin to read Myles Joyce as a kind of exceptional body, one that was left exposed by a law that simultaneously abandoned and judged it. The old man, Joyce, is in the end condemned by a law that strips him of all the linguistic markers of proper subjectivity. We might here draw on Agamben's thinking around the nature and function of sovereign power – with its specific attention to sovereignty as executed through the 'Law'. This is work that has centred on the recovered archaic and paradoxical figure of *Homo sacer*

9 James Joyce, 'Ireland at the Bar' in Ellmann and Mason (eds), *The critical writings of James Joyce* (London, 1959), p. 197. For more on Joyce's engagement with this historical event see James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the question of history* (Cambridge, 1995). 10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader* (Harlow, 1994), p. 75.

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(sacred man), a figure Agamben re-presents as 'bare life'.[11] For Agamben this archaic figure (he traces its existence back through classical Greek and Roman juridical systems) was one from whom the usual protection of both the Law and religion had been removed. Thus: *Homo sacer* could be killed and yet not murdered – as defined in Law; *Homo sacer* could be killed and yet not sacrificed – as defined by religious codification.[12] Placed outside all modes of protection, sacred man is transformed into 'bare life', a body stripped down to the point where all that remains is its corporeal signification. It is in this passage from inclusion to exclusion that Agamben detects the proper significance of *Homo sacer* for the performance of the Law and, thus, sovereign power. In this version of the juridico-political order the Law includes us all in its purview exactly through its (ever-constant) potential to exclude us from its protection. This paradox of inclusion/exclusion is the juridical motor, Agamben argues, at the heart of the development of modern bio-politics. This is a development that we can in turn read as central to the very nature of modernity – as Agamben reminds us: 'It can even be said that the production of a bio-political body is the original activity of sovereign power.'[13] Sovereign power is thus the source of an ideological locus that has the 'right' to decide when the Law can be suspended – that is, withdrawn in a manner that leaves certain bodies in the position of 'bare life'.[14] At the heart of sovereignty, that most complex of abstractions, then, we find the power to define and create bare life, a power revealed as all too material in its execution on real bodies.[15]

The shift from Joyce to Pearse (with a nod to Kafka) is perhaps not the most obvious of moves to make. As Seamus Deane puts it, Pearse is this period's 'most famous minor writer and its major revolutionary figure';[16] one could argue, indeed, that it is the tensions between these designations that

11 For an extended discussion of this figure, in addition to Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford, CA, 1998), see Agamben, *State of exception* (Chicago, 2005), and Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and politics: a critical introduction* (Edinburgh, 2014). **12** As Agamben puts it, the proper significance of the *Homo sacer* figure is that it is 'situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine Law' (*Homo Sacer*, p. 73). **13** Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 6. **14** There is a particular paradox at work here, one that Agamben notes as 'the Law is outside itself', or alternatively as 'I, the sovereign, who am outside the Law, declare that there is nothing outside the Law' (*Homo sacer*, p. 15). For a powerful explication of the ramifications of this power in the context of post-Sept. 11 geopolitics see Judith Butler's *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London, 2006) – particularly the essay 'Indefinite detention'. **15** In this respect Agamben's work sheds new light on Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.' For more on this relationship see *Homo sacer*, pp 8–19, and Carl Schmitt's *Political theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago, 2006). **16** Seamus Deane, *Celtic revivals: essays in modern Irish literature* (Winston-Salem, NC, 1987), p. 63.

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leads Declan Kiberd to note that it can seem 'almost heretical to link Pearse to James Joyce'.[17] Yet both men were certainly interested in the transformatory possibilities offered by the imaginative re-ordering of the world. Moreover, many years before the turn to direct-action rebellion, Pearse too had been much concerned with the problems of the Law/law and the bodies that stand before it. In addition to his persona of schoolmaster turned revolutionary, Patrick Pearse also held a Law degree and around the same period when Joyce was writing in Trieste, Pearse took on what appears to have been one of his very few cases as a barrister in court. While much less serious in import and consequence, it is a case that echoes Myles Joyce's experience of communicative alienation. The case of R.V. MacBride (or MacGhiolla Bhrighde) concerned the use of Gaelic names on carts, and Pearse took the case on behalf of the Gaelic League. As Arthur Cleary, who was present in court, observed:

> It was in some ways a strong case. The events happened in a thoroughly Irish part of Tirconaill where Irish was the national language of everyone, and it might, therefore, seem reasonable that a native Irish speaker was justified in describing himself in that language on his cart. But this would not have accorded with the persecution of the Irish language, which was then, and is still largely, pursued. Consequently an R.I.C. constable had prosecuted him and there had been a conviction. Against this the proceedings in the King's Bench were, in effect, an appeal.[18]

Joyce's metaphorical concern for a law incapable of reading its subjects, and for bodies excluded from its *logos*, is transformed into the literal material of this case. The law here refuses the signification of identity inscribed in Irish letters on the man's cart, insisting instead on a transformation of the terms through which identity is expressed and thus made knowable to it. The presiding judge, indeed, after arguing 'in favour of Irish for a bit – a way of his when he was going to decide against you', eventually proposed 'some complications which involved the conception of an Irish-speaking police constable who knew no English' – a rather obfuscatory sidestepping of the relationship that was actually at stake in the case.[19] In its summing up the

17 Kiberd, 'Patrick Pearse: Irish modernist' (Dublin, 2009), p. 65. 18 Arthur Cleary, 'Patrick Pearse's only case' in Louis Walsh, *Old friends: being memories of men and places* (Dundalk, 1934), pp 113–14. 19 Ibid., p. 115.

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court confirmed that 'letters meant English letters'.[20] Both the case of Myles Joyce and Pearse's experience of 'English' law in Ireland may be read as demonstrating the problem of what Jean-François Lyotard has termed 'the *différend*', namely (as Spivak parses it), 'the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another'.[21] Both cases, that is, reveal a discursive friction or disconnect between the hegemonic ambitions of British jurisprudence in Ireland and the actual bodies that it attempts to regulate and make knowable to itself. In their different ways, each of the narratives also reveals the ways in which what we might term the 'colonial *différend*' can result in the production of bodies placed beyond the law's protection.

It is an idea that returns us to Agamben, and indeed to Kafka. In the course of tracing the development of sovereign power and the law into the twentieth century, Agamben points us to a Franz Kafka short story that he reads as revelatory of the invasive reach of disciplining power in late modernity (as with much else in Kafka, this nightmare of legal totality can only seem evermore prescient to his twenty-first century readers). 'Before the law' (also sometimes titled 'At the door of the law'), a story perhaps better described as a parable, tells of a 'man from the country' who comes in search of admittance to the Law. He comes to an open door – an entrance to the Law we are told – but the attendant doorkeeper refuses to let him pass to what is beyond: 'The man thinks about it and then asks whether in that case he will be allowed in later. "Possibly", says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment."'[22] This perpetual deferral – 'not yet' – is key to the story's power; its effect is to require the man to sit at the door awaiting his admittance. This pattern of request and refusal is continued for many years, with the man from the country now permanently camped at the threshold to the open door. In fact the man spends the rest of his life in just this position, summoning up points of clarification to be addressed to the intransigent doorkeeper (discussion is possible but the final answer is always a refusal to admit the desperate man), until he reaches the very final moments of his life:

> He has not long to live. Before he dies, everything he has learnt in the entire time becomes concentrated in his head into a question that he has not asked the doorkeeper hitherto. He beckons him to approach, for his body is growing stiff and he can no longer get up. The doorkeeper has

20 Ibid. **21** Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', p. 96. **22** Franz Kafka, 'At the door of the law' in *Franz Kafka: stories, 1904–1924* (London, 1995), p. 194.

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> to bend right down to him, the difference in height between them having altered very much to the man's disadvantage. 'What do you want to know now?' the doorkeeper asks. 'You're insatiable.' 'Everybody seeks the Law', says the man, 'so how is it that in all these years no one but me has demanded admittance?' The doorkeeper sees that it is all over for the man, and to penetrate his growing deafness he shouts at him, 'No one else could gain admittance here because this entrance was meant for you alone. Now I am going to close it.'[23]

The seemingly counterintuitive denouement on further inspection reveals the real power of the Law. There is no place into which the man can enter, for as Derrida puts it in his reading of the story, the Law here is 'the guarding itself, only the guarding'.[24] According to Derrida, Kafka reveals the real heart and origin of the Law: 'The secret is nothing – and this is the secret that has to be kept well, nothing either present or presentable, but this nothing must be well kept. To this task of keeping, the nobility is delegated.'[25] The Law for Derrida, in other words, is present only in, and by way of, its happening – and this 'secret' is kept by the keepers of hegemonic power. For Derrida, then, while the diachronic 'law' may be recordable and traceable as a function of history, the synchronic 'Law' withholds itself and refuses its own historicity:

> The Law yields by withholding itself, without imparting its provenance and its site. This silence and discontinuity constitute the phenomenon of the Law. To enter into relations with the Law which says 'you must' and 'you must not' is to act as if it had no history or at any rate as if it no longer depended on its historical presentation. At the same time, it is to let oneself be enticed, provoked and hailed by the history of this non-history.[26]

While not suggesting Pearse was engaged with the kind of linguistic turn produced by post-structuralism, I do want to pick up on some resonances between his work and the reading of the Law proposed by Derrida. Pearse's work, I want to suggest, is populated with images of the colonial law as an empty signifier – an empty vessel that lacks historical roots and thus validity. Crucially, however, and here we need to relocate his work as essentially utopic, as opposed to the radical scepticism of Kafka (and indeed Derrida in this

23 Ibid., p. 195. **24** Jacques Derrida, 'Before the law' in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Jacques Derrida: acts of literature* (London, 1992), p. 206. **25** Derrida, 'Before the law', p. 205. **26** Ibid., p. 192.

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instance), Pearse is occupied with the conceptualization of a Law that is capable of properly reading the Irish bodies within its purview. In his reading, these are bodies that are the very source of (authentic) sovereign power, and thus of 'the Law'. This is an idea that goes to the philosophic heart of republicanism in its broader European context of course; in such a political locus the Law is in effect reading itself. In this regard we might look to one of Pearse's most interesting and subversive short stories, 'The keening woman'/'An bhean chaointe' (1907/1916). Indeed Pearse's story now reads like an anti-colonial version of Kafka's 'Before the law' (1914).

Like Kafka's work, 'The keening woman' tells the story of waiting. We meet an old woman who has spent the last decades of her life waiting for the return of her son Coilin from prison. In the course of the story we discover that her son died many years ago in prison and that she has since gone mad; it is also suggested that Coilin was innocent of the murder for which he was imprisoned – the murder of a local landowner was actually carried out by a government agent. At the centre of the narrative stands a journey undertaken by the mother, who moves through a series of authority figures in search of justice for her son. As she tells us: 'I went to Galway. I saw the governor of the gaol. He told me that he wouldn't be able to do a taste, that it's the Dublin people who would be able to let him out of gaol, if his letting-out was to be got.'[27] While Kafka's man from the country gets to meet only one doorkeeper, Pearse's 'every-mother' moves through a series of doors but each is revealed as unable to deliver the law/Law. On finally reaching Dublin she tells us:

> The morning of the next day I enquired for the Castle. I was put on the way. I went there. They wouldn't let me in at first, but I was at them till I got leave of talk with some man. He put me on to another man, a man that was higher than himself. He sent me to another man. I said to them all I wanted was to see the lord lieutenant of the queen. I saw him at last. I told him my story. He said to me that he couldn't do anything. I gave my curse to the Castle of Dublin, and out the door with me.[28]

Once again the Law appears here as that which guards itself, as that which continually delays those who seek it; Pearse's story works to reveal colonial law as an absence that protects itself by a process of constant deferral. The story reaches its conclusion with the rather unlikely notion of the woman

27 Patrick Pearse, 'The keening woman' in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *Plays, stories, poems* (Dublin, 1980), p. 219. **28** Ibid., p. 220.

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travelling to London to see the queen, a narrative device perhaps borrowed from the story of Grace O'Malley's (Gráinne Ní Mháille's) reputed journey of 1593 to petition Elizabeth I for the freedom of her brother and son. It is a move that allows Pearse to place 'Ireland' in direct confrontation with the putative sovereign origin of colonial law in Ireland:[29]

> When I came to London I asked knowledge of the queen's castle. I was told. I went there. They wouldn't let me in. I went there every day, hoping that I'd see the queen coming out. [...] I went over to the queen before she went in to her coach. There was a paper, a man in Dublin wrote for me, in my hand. [...] I spoke to the queen. She didn't understand me. I stretched the paper to her. She gave the paper to the officer, and he read it. He wrote certain words on the paper, and gave it back to me. The queen spoke to another woman that was along with her. The woman drew out a crown piece and gave it to me. I gave her back the crown piece, and I said that it's not silver I wanted, but my son. They laughed. It's my opinion they didn't understand me. I showed them the paper again. The officer laid his finger on the words he was after writing. I curtseyed to the queen and went off with me. A man read for me the words the officer wrote. It's what was in it, that they would write to me about Coilin without delay. I struck the road home then, hoping that, maybe, there would be a letter before me.[30]

The letter, of course, never arrives and the woman is left to wait before the law in a narrative that can offer her no resolution; the impossibility of communication condemns her to the state of trauma-induced psychosis in which we meet her at the story's outset. Importantly, however, Pearse's narrative does index a resolution for the reader; or at least the story's purpose seems to be to suggest for the reader possible starting points for resolution. The woman, of course, is 'Mother Ireland' and her textual journey from coast to coast in Ireland, and from Ireland to England and back again, has primarily established the need to look to herself for a Law (the letter of the law) that can properly read her, and which she can in turn read.

That image of an allegorized Ireland awaiting the arrival of a (in Pearse's terms) valid Law is one that we may now see as shadowing much of his work

29 For a really fruitful and suggestive reading of the role of gender in this story see Máire Ní Fhlathúin, 'The anti-colonial modernism of Patrick Pearse'. 30 Patrick Pearse, 'The keening woman', p. 221.

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for the theatre. Indeed there is something almost Beckettian about Patrick Pearse's fascination with the act of waiting. His drama is saturated with characters whose very being seems regulated by the act of anticipation, by a gaze directed towards some future event or revelation. Almost all his plays and pageants occupy some form of temporal inter-zone, presenting his audience with in-between places burdened by the problematic consequences of the past and awaiting a future-defining event. It is into these inter-zones that Pearse places a series of 'exceptional' bodies. These are bodies whose exceptionality functions to signal, on the one hand, the problem of colonial law (it is revealed as 'empty'), and, on the other, the possibility of a re-articulated covenant with a self-authored Law. Pearse's key performative bodies, in other words, may be read as articulating sites of counter-sovereignty that symbolically emanate the utopic possibility of a new Law. More particularly, the image of the young male body as the site of a possible, or hoped for, newly articulated covenant with the concept of the Law is one that Pearse will return to time and again in his drama.

Indeed the male body as a site of a 'political theology' becomes the explicit framing device for the action of his early work, *Íosagán* (1910). Here the action inhabits a space that hovers somewhere between life and death, between this world and the next, between the profane and the sacred. It opens with a stage-image of an old man, Matthias, sitting, observing, waiting – it will soon become clear that it is death's arrival upon which he waits. As the action unfolds we learn that Matthias has fallen away from the Catholic church due to its disavowal of Fenianism and a priest's condemnation of his part in it. Matthias' days are now spent mostly in the company of the village's young boys, whose memories are too short to affect their sense of Matthias and his actions. It is one of these boys who sums up Matthias' situation:

> CUIMÍN: I heard Father Sean Eamonn saying it's the way he did some terrible sin at the start of his life, and when the priest wouldn't give him absolution in confession there came a raging anger on him, and he swore an oath he wouldn't touch priest or chapel for ever again.[31]

The notion that we are in a zone outside of the normative regulatory powers of church and (colonial) state is further reinforced by the introduction of Íosagán – the young Christ figure who will in the end be the

31 Patrick Pearse, *Íosagán* in Ní Ghairbhí and McNulty (eds), *Patrick Pearse: collected plays*, pp 120–1.

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catalyst for Matthias' reconciliation with faith and divine power. Tellingly, Íosagán often joins the young boys in their play but slips away when the adults appear:

> CÓILÍN: … he goes from us when grown people come near us. He will go from us now as soon as the people begin coming from mass.[32]

Matthias' wait for acceptance by, and reconciliation with, the church – something in the end that is facilitated by Íosagán – locates the action in a limbo space, a space in which his republicanism has in effect been misread and judged too soon. In Pearse's vision the righteousness of republicanism will be confirmed retroactively by the judgment of the future; as another of the young boys puts it:

> PÁDRAIC: He's not a wicked person, *muise*. Don't you mind the day Íosagán said that his father told him Matthias would be among the saints on the Day of the Mountain?[33]

The reference to the Day of Last Judgment is illuminatory here; indeed it provides the key to the parable's action and intent.[34] Pearse presents his audience with a body speaking from a space unrestricted by the confines of profane history (as Íosagán tells Matthias, 'I was always here') and thus able to authorize Fenianism's rejection of colonial law.[35] By bleeding the sacred into the profane, in other words, Íosagán's body performs a teleological validation of the history of Irish republicanism.

The action of *An rí/The king* (1912) is similarly poised in an inter-zone between a disappointed past and a newly rearticulated covenant with the future. It opens with another scene dominated by the act of waiting. This time it is a group of young boys who stand in the grounds of a monastery observing the action of a battle below. Their king is engaged in another campaign but there is little hope that he will be victorious – his rule has been tainted by un-kingly actions – and in their discussion of the situation the boys link 'the thousands [the king] has slain' and the 'churches he has plundered' with the 'battles he has lost'.[36] When the scene is joined by a group

32 Ibid., p.123. 33 Ibid., p.121. 34 Revelation 20:11–12: 'Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.' 35 Pearse, *Íosagán*, p. 123. 36 Patrick Pearse,

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of monks and their abbot the allegorical signification of the battle below the ramparts becomes ever more apparent. The king's rule is conjured as a form of imperial folly, an internal process of colonization that has had tragic effects on the people. As the abbot puts it: 'This king has shed the blood of the innocent. He has made spoils and forays. He has oppressed the poor. He has forsaken the friendship of God and made friends with evil-doers.'[37] Pearse here sublimates his vision of British wrongdoing into this tyrannical kingly figure and his abuse of sovereign power. The abbot, moreover, suggests that such a rotten core at the centre of the Law/law should not be in a position to decide on the issues of life and death at stake in moments of crisis:

> THE ABBOT: It is an angel that should be sent to pour out the wine and to break the bread of this sacrifice. Not by an unholy king should the noble wine that is in the veins of good heroes be spilt; not at the behest of a guilty king should fair bodies be mangled. I say to you that the offering will not be accepted.[38]

The king thereafter becomes about the search for one who could more ably interpret the proper responsibilities of sovereignty as the origin of the Law, and thus as the keeper of a power over the bodies in its care/control. It is here too that the play takes it most obvious republican turn, with the suggestion that the real problem is the site of power in royal prerogative – a site that increasingly stands in Pearse's work as a symbol for British misrule in Ireland:

> THE ABBOT: The nation is guilty of the sins of its princes. I say to you that this nation shall not be freed until it chooses for itself a righteous king.
> SECOND MONK: Where shall a righteous king be found?
> THE ABBOT: I do not know, unless he be found among these little boys.[39]

In politico-theological terms what is needed is a new covenant between the people and he that leads them. But this is really a thinly veiled conceit for what Pearse is actually concerned with – the political revelation of (proto-) republican action. Once again – and this is clearly not unproblematic – the

The king in Ní Ghairbhí and McNulty (eds), *Patrick Pearse: collected plays*, p.151. 37 Ibid., p. 153. 38 Ibid. 39 Ibid.

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carrier of a newly imagined future is the body of a young boy, who must die to birth a new world of rebalanced power and authority. The search for (what we might term) the 'postcolonial moment' thus finds its most precise modality in Pearse's work in the broken body of young manhood.[40] While the monks have been busy with their analysis of politics and power, the young boys of the monastery have likewise been discussing their own position in the hierarchy of the imagined nation. Most of them are boastful of the fact that they come from the royal line and are thus worthy candidates to take over as king. But one, named Giolla na Naomh ('servant of the saints'), refuses to propose himself as a successor to the king, declaring instead: 'I would rather be a monk that I might pray for the king.'[41] It is this righteous boy who takes the king's place in battle. The resultant symbolic alteration in sovereignty, and thus origin of the Law, changes the course of the conflict and the people are victorious – winning their fight for freedom after seeing the young boy fall and die in battle for them. Importantly, the old king gives way willingly and kneels before the dead boy's fallen body, thus acknowledging this symbolic representative of a previously abused people as the rightful site of power. Once again Pearse invites his audience to witness a moment of transference and transformation; the question of sovereignty is presented as mutable and translatable, a crucially enabling conclusion in Pearse's project to rearticulate colonial law and its enactment in Ireland.

The possible translation of the source of the Law in Ireland is an idea that also speaks to the structure and action of *The master* (1915), a piece that presents a confrontation between a noble teacher – named Ciarán but in many ways a sublimated version of Pearse's self-image – and a king figure named Daire. The play returns its audience to one of the key turning points in Irish (proto-) history, the arrival of Christianity and the subsequent displacement of older Druidic religious practices. Its message is once again the possibility of transformation and the importance of those who are willing to face down entrenched positions of power. Early in the piece three of Ciarán's pupils discuss the king's opposition to his teachings:

ART: But why does the king come against Ciarán?
CEALLACH: It is the Druids that have incited him. They say that Ciarán is over-turning the ancient law of the people.
MAINE: The king has ordered him to leave the country.[42]

40 It is an image, as Michael Cronin demonstrates so brilliantly in his essay for this collection – that would soon find its echoes on the battlefields of a Europe torn asunder by the First World War. **41** Pearse, *The king* in Ní Ghairbhí and McNulty (eds), *Patrick Pearse: collected plays*, p. 152. **42** Patrick

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Thereafter the play proceeds by way of a biblical analogue: the Old Testament of royal power is challenged by the New Testament of an enlightened law represented by the teacher and his community of pupils. As with *Íosagán*, the audience is confronted with the codification of a politico-theological argument: colonial law is here seen as defunct and in need of the new covenant of a proto-republicanism. Tellingly, the play ends with a stage-image that leaves no doubt as to which of these forces is in the ascendancy. The Archangel Michael appears on stage – to protect Ciarán from the king's sword – proclaiming his arrival in terms that reinforce the alignment of republican action with a tactical rendering of the sacred as an alternative authorizing power:

> MICHAEL: I am he that waiteth at the portal. I am he that hasteneth. I am he that rideth before the squadron. I am he that holdeth a shield over the retreat of man's host when Satan cometh in war. I am he that turneth and smiteth. I am he that is Captain of the Host of God.[43]

As with the old man Matthias, Ciarán's politicized exceptional body is here protected, or validated, by the ultimate exceptionality of divine intervention. Faced with this divine confirmation that the old order must give way to the new, the king bends to his knee in supplication. Finally then, *The master*'s return to a moment when the 'law of the people' was reimagined and radically translated away from the pagan towards the Christian provides an analogue for counter-hegemonic resistance.

CODA: *THE SINGER* (1916)

Long before the grand performative gesture of Easter 1916, then, Pearse had understood and explored the deep structural and symbolic possibilities of the dramatic space. It is this concern for the symbolic, and theatre's potential for delivering subversive ideas through codified language (somatic as well as spoken dialogue), that most fully informs Pearse's openly revolutionary play, *The singer*. Of course this is a very particular play in Pearse's career and life – at this stage he was not simply writing a play about revolution but helping to plan one in the real world. As a result it is the play for which Pearse (the

Pearse, *The master* in Ní Ghairbhí and McNulty (eds), *Patrick Pearse: collected plays*, p.179. **43** Ibid., p. 197.

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playwright) is best remembered – it is also the piece that has provided the most ammunition for critics (cultural and political) who draw on it for evidence of a megalomaniacal (or indeed messianic) side to Pearse's clearly complex personality. It is not difficult to see why. *The singer* appears, after all, almost consumed with the seductions of redemptive violence and the purifying possibilities of blood spilt by young men marching towards their destiny (an image that would be forever changed in a Europe soon to witness the final logic of total warfare on the Somme). However, while there is clearly much that is problematic about the piece, proving or disproving the psychopathologies of the writer – who would soon turn his attention to a moment of revolutionary action saturated with symbolic intention and consequence – is in truth too much for any play to bear. All that said, positioning *The singer* in the longer view of Pearse's career in the theatre may help reveal its structural consistency within his dramatic vision and remove it from the more reductive readings sometimes assigned to it. More specifically, what we find here is a continuation of Pearse's symbolic interrogation of sovereignty and the origin of the Law/law.

As *The singer* opens once again we find ourselves in a dramatic space consumed by the act of waiting. The opening scene is occupied by two women (an old woman, Máire, and her foster-daughter, Sighle) burning the midnight oil as they await the return of the men of the house. The most immediate concern is the young man of the house (Colm) and his ragtag band of fellow rebels, all of whom are out on the mountainside for covert military training in preparation for the anticipated rebellion. But behind the scene's anticipatory tension there also lies the more mysterious fate of the house's elder son (MacDara) who has been forced away from the area because of his openly rebellious songs and poems. Indeed we'll soon learn that the women's passive waiting (as one of the men will later put it: ''Tis women that keep all the great vigils'[44]) stands in for a more generalized sense of passing time before some hoped-for radical action. Most obviously Colm and the local men are obsessed with their condition of being on hold as they await the messenger who will bring the word to trigger open rebellion. By the play's end it will become clear that MacDara is the near-mythical figure who has been travelling the country inspiring rebellion with his impassioned and eloquent words. Tellingly, the play's ending will bring with it the realization that everyone has 'waited too long'.[45]

44 Patrick Pearse, *The singer* in Ní Ghairbhí and McNulty (eds), *Patrick Pearse: collected plays*, p. 209.
45 Ibid., p. 222.

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It is pretty clear that the character of MacDara is a projection of Pearse's idealized self on stage; but the play may be also be read as the culmination of Pearse's interest in the links between language and action, and the judgment of this action by an imagined future. When asked by his old teacher (Maoilsheachlainn) 'Is a poet not a maker?' MacDara responds by saying that cultural creativity is merely the first step on the road to full revolution:

> No, he is only a voice that cries out, a sigh that trembles into rest. The true teacher must suffer and do. He must break bread to the people: he must go into Gethsemane and toil up the steep of Golgotha.[46]

As with the earlier plays discussed above, this central image is not quite the straightforward Christian piety it may first appear. Rather, it allows Pearse to reference Christ as a prototype of the radical revolutionary, a model of transformatory possibility. Once again the idea of active resistance leads Pearse to the image of an exceptional body – or, rather, the image of 'the people' as a communal exceptional body (the body politic):

> The people, Maoilsheachlainn, the dumb, suffering people: reviled and outcast, yet pure and splendid and faithful. In them I saw, or seemed to see again, the Face of God. Ah, it is a tear-stained face, blood-stained, defiled with ordure, but it is the Holy Face.[47]

Not surprisingly, given the context within which Pearse was writing in early 1916, the sacred/profane conceit is more obviously politically loaded now. The theocentric imagery is thus a vehicle for a message of communal radicalization, and it is this that provides the meta-context for MacDara's claim that 'One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world.'[48] The image of divinity – the ultimate exceptional body of Christ is the powerful absent presence on stage at this moment – is really an image of counter-sovereignty, an alternative site of Law (one that frees and redeems). In many ways, of course, such a reading merely adds grist to the mill of those arguments around Pearse's messianic tendencies. But when viewed through the longer lens of Pearse's career in the theatre, we may begin to see a more subversive philosophical scaffolding lying behind the seemingly reactionary religiosity. It is a philosophical scaffolding, moreover, that will ultimately help shape Pearse's involvement in radical events beyond the fourth wall.

46 Ibid., p. 219–220. **47** Ibid., p. 222. **48** Ibid., p. 228.