BRUTAL PHANTOMS:
Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Irish Drama

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2009

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL BOGUCKI: Brutal Phantoms: Modernism, Ireland, and Anti-Theatrical Drama
(Under the direction of John McGowan and Nicholas Allen)

This dissertation analyzes the fate of realist theatrical conventions in the work of George Moore, John M. Synge, Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, and James Joyce. These writers reconfigured the conditions of theater so as to avoid the debased forms of expression they associated with the performance practices of British touring companies and with commercialism generally. Each playwright experimented with texts, performers, audiences, and theater spaces so as to foreground and criticize those aspects of the material stage they found inauthentic, sensational, and excessive. Recent narratives of the relationship between modernism and theater have rightly focused on the way literary or imagist avant-gardes generate new modes of innovative, radicalized theatrical display by, in effect, taking the stage outdoors or into the text. By locating these writers’ anxieties about theatricality in the overlapping histories of the Irish Revival and the economies of transatlantic theater production, I argue that the theater itself was often the site of its own most sophisticated critiques, and that the strategies these late naturalist and early modernist writers develop resonate with contemporary questions in Irish studies and performance theory about the status of live theater.
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INTRODUCTION

“All art is a battle with the phantoms of the mind.”

-W.B. Yeats, quoting Henrik Ibsen

“It may almost be said that before a verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal.”

-J.M. Synge

Reorientations in our understanding of the nature and scope of performance events have renewed attention to the welter of conflicts, controversies, scandals, riots, and discourses in Ireland from the beginnings of the Irish Revival to the Civil War. Many of these events can be interpretively modeled as operating in “theaters” in a general sense, but more specifically the theater and the values associated with theatricality often shaped and slanted the terms in which these events were understood. As a target for cultural critics and a set of vaguely aesthetic criteria for artists, theatricality took on often contradictory meanings. It became a term for both fraudulent performance and alienated spectatorship, even while the sensational spectacles and blatant political melodramas of the popular theaters in Dublin and London offered exactly the kind of force and effect Irish playwrights were hoping to create. Writers roughly associated with literary naturalism often defined their work as making these sensations and political effects more precise, reducing the threat of theater’s artificiality to a purely visual scene. At the same time, recoiling from such scenes—and revolted by how easily they could be co-opted by the
emerging entertainment industry—writers associated with literary modernism attempted to reject theatricality altogether, either by emphasizing fictional or diegetic qualities of their plays or by avoiding the material stage entirely. This dissertation analyzes a series of in-between cases, plays and performances that operate on both sides of the naturalist/modernist dichotomy.

George Moore, John M. Synge, Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, and James Joyce all wrote plays aimed one way or another toward production on the stage of the Abbey Theatre, but each of them envisioned drastically different conditions for theatrical performance. The fate of realist theatrical conventions in each writer’s prose and drama traces a network of connections between anti-theatrical impulses and modernist ideas about the autonomy of language. In strikingly different ways, these writers reconfigured the conditions of theater so as to avoid the debased forms of expression they associated with the performance practices of British touring companies and with commercialism generally. Each playwright experimented with texts, performers, audiences, and theater spaces so as to foreground and criticize those aspects of the material stage they found inauthentic, sensational, and excessive. Recent narratives of the relationship between modernism and theater have rightly focused on the way literary or imagist avant-gardes generate new modes of innovative, radicalized theatrical display by, in effect, taking the stage outdoors or into the text. By locating these writers’ anxieties about theatricality in the overlapping histories of the Irish Revival and the economies of transatlantic theater production, I argue that the theater itself was often the site of its own most sophisticated critiques, and that the strategies these late naturalist/early modernist writers develop
resonate with contemporary questions in Irish studies and performance theory about the status of live theater.

The history of the reception of the dramatic work of Moore, Synge, and Joyce in particular is a disjointed account of failures, riots, mismatched expectations, and deferred encounters. The plays they wrote were aimed at different audiences, but, even more strikingly, were the product of very different concepts of theatricality. Basic questions about what a theater is and how it generates its effects trouble the works of these Irish writers, presenting different configurations of discourse about the aesthetics of absorption, the alienation of spectatorship, and the impinging horizons of public space. Assigning these configurations to ill-fitting categories like naturalist, proto-modernist, and modernist diminishes the shock of realizing that these three versions of theatricality emerged so closely in time, say 1893-1911 for Moore’s experiments, 1902-1909 for Synge’s, and 1912-1922 for Joyce’s. Our own inheritance of modernist doctrines leads us to picture the unevenness of three competing versions of a roughly naturalist or realistic aesthetic as signs of the difficult birth of proper or “high” modernist techniques in the theater. Thus, theater’s “backwardness” as a medium—especially compared to film—is understood retrospectively as the product of its reliance on naïve mimetic forms and performances. Yet recent productions of early twentieth-century Irish naturalist works have suggested just the opposite. These plays are not simply almost modernist. They are complex engagements with senses of theatricality and expression which later avant-gardes rejected, repressed, or derided.

For each of these writers, this study asks three interrelated questions: First, what is the relationship between their prose and their dramatic texts? Second, what is the
relationship between these dramatic texts and the dominant practices of an expanding transatlantic theater industry? Third, how does the often minor resistance these texts present to theater as an industry compare with later “serious” avant-garde and modernist rejections of the stage, especially in light of the fact that these modernist refusals no longer seem possible in an age where theater itself is a marginal—if not “minor”—form in a dominantly televisual age? The complex aesthetic created by Synge and other “realist” dramatists is still often interpreted by means of political resonance or as a precursor to later modernist experiments, i.e. as either politically radical uses of dessicated forms or flawed proto-modernist effects. This dissertation takes up a series of in-between cases, moments when Irish drama’s political effects are irritating, but not yet explosive, and its relation to its own medium is skeptical, but not yet hostile. As it could not after Independence and the Civil War, theater could still in the opening years of the twentieth century produce images that were simultaneously complicit and critical.

Despite the overwhelming amount of work done on theater from the Revival to the Civil War, very few studies have engaged with both theater’s relationship to imperial authority and its role in the emergence of modernist theater innovations. The work of Cheryl Herr, Stephen Watt, and, more recently, Karen Vandervelde has recovered the vibrancy and intricacy of nationalist melodramas, showing the indebtedness of Synge and Joyce in particular to many of their sensational effects.¹ Likewise, Adrian Frazier’s account of Yeats’s machinations as an impresario,² linked with thicker accounts of the political dimensions of stagecraft and dramaturgy in Ireland,³ as well as more inclusive definitions of nationalist political discourse and performance events,⁴ have together made for a rich portrait of theater operating as one cultural event among a wide range of
competing performances and spectacles. The recent “widening” of the stage has shown the serious limitations of earlier, more formalist narratives, in which the separation of carefully crafted poetic language from its political and cultural contexts was understood strictly as a positive achievement, i.e. a movement from varying degrees of committed nationalism to apolitical, cosmopolitan formalism.\(^5\) As salutary as these culturalist and revisionary criticisms have been, they sometimes overlook structural innovations in the theater itself, often because these innovations were understood by many Irish writers in the 1920s and 30s as well as the theorists of today to be complicit with the emerging Republic, especially when they did not lead to the outright rejection of the theater as part of the state-regulated apparatus. Such rejections led to the characteristic forms of “absurd” theater, extravaganza, literary exaggeration, and fluid images of Irish art after the Civil War.\(^6\) Yet before the theater was more directly associated with the state, before the Abbey become a national institution literally and figuratively, when it was a space of often strenuous competition between political melodramas, tableaux vivant, lectures, operas, memorials, pageants, and reenactments, the theater articulated a variety of attitudes not only toward the authorizing conditions of the present state (which could be understood variously as suspended, unborn, nascent, or fully but imperfectly formed) but also toward past and future states as well. Before it was a state-sponsored form, theater was a “popular” and a “fine” art.

Theater’s materiality has often occupied a blindspot in critical theory, “cumbersomely literalizing cultural studies principles, cumbersomely exceeding social formal analysis.”\(^7\) Performance Studies has largely defined itself in opposition to theater history, and the contemporary field of Theater Studies is stretched between identifying
with cultural, media, and art studies—threatened by accusations of superficiality when it tries to include all three and of violent Eurocentricity when it narrows the field to “recognized” theatrical genres or spaces. Furthermore, even established theater spaces have had a fluid relationship with dominant forms of cultural production, because of its changing status as an industry and the multi-medial nature of its product. As an industry, theater has been subject to changing business models of competition, from economic theories that exempted entertainment to developing concepts of amusements’ marginal utility.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, its organizational structures changed from family firms to limited liability companies and its methods of distribution shifted from workshops and stock companies to entertainment factories built around the long run.

The industry that stages these repeated events and objects can be mapped onto an account of empire by way its associations with the colonial trading companies (governed by the same definitions of profit) as well as more modern competing corporations (with the proviso that some theaters began to receive state funding). Likewise, the theater, for all its participation in the “fine” arts, can also be mapped onto the long history of orientalist representation, from early modern reports of shipwrecks, storms, and natives in the Americas, to the eroticization of the Other in romantic portraits and the motifs of gothic and Victorian sensation novels. Even exempting the verbal discourses plays appropriate, we can generalize about its construction of space (perfecting perspectival accuracy and the detailed mapping of terrain and materials not yet rendered into discourse or the public sphere) and time (increasingly organized around the expression or revelation of a beautiful ideal until turning, or returning, to baroque emblems) in order to
find family resemblances with the great transit stations, map rooms, libraries, and time-
tables of nineteenth-century European cities.

The economies of theater and performance in Ireland in the 1890s depended on various intersections of cultural and nationalist politics, but they also depended on Ireland’s position within the wider circulation of English, European, and U.S. touring companies. For both playwrights and aspiring producers, the matter of deciding what texts to produce involved entering a tumultuous field of competing aesthetics and economies of prestige. In the great capitals of the nineteenth century, famous actors traded on their ability to disappear into roles, but if this disappearance were ever complete, it would also eliminate all the charisma, celebrity, and excessive display that was the true nature of their craft. This was the ambivalent condition of Irving, Coquelin, Tree, Rejane, Campbell, and Bernhardt: their bodies and voices should be concealed behind the mask of Hamlet, Alceste, or Svengali, yet what made those masks appealing to their new, global audiences was that they were worn by those instantly recognizable figures. In particular, when these actors turned to plays and roles that criticized theatricality and the values associated with it, they tended to neutralize those critiques, suggesting that they were not so existential, not so urgent, not so relevant to modern experience, that their consequences could not be safely separated from the everyday lives of their audiences. These performances, along with the theater’s later associations with governmental institutions, have obscured the force and variety of realist genres—melodramatic, naturalist, and modernist—that emerged at the start of the twentieth century.
For the purposes of this study, modernism is a series of literary doctrines prioritizing the autonomy of art and language. Especially after their institutionalization following the Second World War, these doctrines systematically devalued certain aspects of performance and theatrical production. As realism, representation, and mimesis became taboo in prose and poetry, the strategies of conventional theater performance and the spaces created to make them appealing began to seem grossly commercial and vulgarly expressive. Talk of reforming, reinventing, or even destroying theaters in the first half of the century was replaced in the second half by talk that assumed theater’s death or desiccation. Performances could only be artistic if they declared their complete autonomy from theaters by dismantling the proscenium arch from within, confronting audiences with their complicity in theatrical institutions, or by creating new occasional or environmental spaces. Yet declarations of new “sacred” or “empty” spaces in which radical performances could happen often depended on incredibly idealistic pictures of how those radical performances would then transform their audiences and the whole of social reality. This points back to the way doctrines of aesthetic autonomy originally emerged as critiques of late nineteenth-century aesthetic idealism. Proclaiming art’s purity was a way of insulating it from moralizing claims about beauty being the sensuous manifestation of truth and goodness. Consequently, many of the complex realisms which retained a clear link to public, political, and ethical discourses but which nonetheless presented sophisticated meditations on their own status as representations, were rejected as accommodations to reactionary bourgeois idealism.

The perception of theatricality, understood as a spectator’s active dissociation from events in the public sphere, had become an intensely creative problematic for Ibsen
and Manet, but once the public sphere as a whole was rejected in favor of more specialized readerships, their careful analysis of the conditions of theater and painting were ignored (Ibsen) or regarded as obvious (Manet). Martin Puchner has recently accounted for the innovations of several genres of modernist drama by tracing their resistance to actual theater practices: the phantasmagorical closet dramas of Mallarmé, Lewis, Joyce, and Stein operate through impossible stage directions; Yeats’s, Brecht’s, and Beckett’s dramas discipline theatrical representation by means of diegetic language; and the avant-garde manifestos of Marinetti, Pound, Ball, Huidobro, Breton, and Artaud depend on the coiled tension between speech acts and theatricality. Theater, as Puchner notes, is J.L. Austin’s paradigm for “speech acts occur[ing] in an unauthorized and unauthorizing context” (25). Manifestos, whether Marx and Engels’ original or of later avant-garde forms, articulate the tension between speech acts and present authorizing conditions, effectively (or ineffectively) “exorcis[ing] its own theatricality by borrowing from an authority it will have obtained from the future” (25). While the manifestos of the dadaists “seem to have given up entirely on the desire for authority and real change and instead delight in theatrical pranks,” all manifestos make this tension between speech acts and authority visible (25).

Defined more broadly as a set of values associated with actors and the economies of popular melodrama, theatricality was a nightmare for modernism. The avant-garde movements rejected the assumptions about time, space, and conventional morality that seemed to constitute commercial theater institutions. Anti-imperialist critics rejected the assumptions about high culture and civilization that were manifested in opera houses built in colonial cities. Writers heavily invested in new anthropological and
psychoanalytic discourses scorned the backward models of ethnographic encounter and unspoken motivation at the heart of conventional theater: new definitions of the taboo and the obscene were developed in explicit resistance to what could be publicly staged. Yet many of the earliest dramas experimenting with modernist techniques managed to analyze and critique conventional theatricality without rejecting it entirely. Even though at some point in their careers Strindberg, Chekhov, and Schnitzler, as well as Moore all rejected the idea that naturalist staging by itself made for forceful drama, they all used uncanny aspects of such staging to explore what was absent from the realist scene—and to scrutinize how anyone could come to feel that there was anything absent in the first place. The Romantic movements which gave rise to idealist aesthetic criteria had all been conscious of their methods from the start, but toward the end of the nineteenth century, playwrights in particular focused on how the language of aesthetic idealism developed and captured artists’ imaginations.

Toril Moi has shown how, in Ibsen’s work, the aesthetic idealism that infuses Europe’s dominant discourses about art is carefully dissected and traced to moments of appalling violence, repression, and alienation. In The Wild Duck, Hedvig’s susceptibility to Gregers’ metaphors leads her to take her father Hjalmar’s language about noble self-sacrifice literally and kill herself in order to prove her love. Yet Ibsen’s focus is not on Hedvig as a singular and pathological case. To the contrary, as Moi notes, she is presented as particularly intelligent and adroit with poetic language: the fact that, despite his high-flown language, “it never once occurs to Hjalmar that the question just may be whether he is capable of truly loving Hedvig is the scandal of the play” (259). “Ibsen’s realist plays,” Moi writes
are neither naively unself-conscious attempts to ‘represent reality,’ nor attempts to deny that art can represent reality…Ibsen’s modernist theater is not a cultivation of theater for the sake of theater, but an attempt to say something about the world and our place in it, without for a moment denying its own status as theater (217).

Critics who dismiss Ibsen as the writer of old-fashioned “problem plays” or as a misguided believer in realist representation rarely tangle with the complex metatheatricality of his later plays, particularly *The Master Builder*. The slow twist of Solness’s ambitions in the play and the gradual diffusion of his vocabulary are both closely connected to discourses about art and theater Ibsen had spent his career dismantling. Solness’s return to building carries the charge of his own return to glory, but it also captures a number of hints throughout the play that meaningful artistic production has to be transformed in a fully secular society. However, once Solness is able to put words to his vision, it becomes subject to young Hilda’s dreamy abstractions, detached from a concern for other people and even from a concern over the objects whose destruction causes pain—in this case, his wife’s dolls. The play allows that certain objects might be invested with emotional significance and might provide models for how artworks are produced and received. Even if these investments are childish (or adolescent – this is one of the play’s more unnerving ambiguities) or artificial, they keep a person from wandering or floating through language. They provide anchors for memory or, leaning into Wittgenstein’s terminology, perspicuous representations of our relationship to the world (as opposed to obscurer pictures which hold us captive).

Ibsen’s analysis of language is reflected in the form of the play itself: the most elaborate structures of subtextual meaning rise to the surface of the dialogue, emerging in “ordinary” conversations but never seeming to match the complexity or intensity of the
conversations themselves. This is, in a way, the reverse of the cliché about the pistol in the first act that must go off before the last act. Once the pistol has gone off, the ‘meaning’ it had generated is over, passed into text. In Ibsen’s late work, the continuous production of ‘sub-text’ never matches the idea or ideal the dialogue ends up articulating. Whereas in melodrama the ideal can be perfectly (or at least passionately) captured by a final exclamation or climactic expression, in *The Master Builder* the ideal (castles in air) can only be articulated through the most uncanny contortions of the ordinary uses of words. This is not to say that those contortions are inherently invalid or powerless—on the contrary, they seem to be peculiarly mesmerizing in Solness’s case—but language so contorted unworks the dominant idealist criteria for art as goodness and truth emerging in beauty. Ideals here are unnervingly contingent and singular, not universal. The ideal becomes a product of language rather than an eternal truth that shines through it.

Stanley Cavell’s philosophical readings of what he calls the stakes of theatricality bring the uncanniness of the *ordinary* into focus in a way which shows the family resemblances between romantic, idealist pictures of various redemptive metaphysical languages and modernist attempts to escape corroded everyday language. The ordinary, in a wide and expansive sense, has been the territory of Cavell’s work for thirty years, guided by a more or less continuous engagement with Kant’s Third Critique, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, the lectures of J.L. Austin, Emerson’s essays, and Heidegger’s late work on language and poetry. Linked with what Cavell is acutely aware seems like an idiosyncratic range of plays (Shakespeare, Beckett), music (Wagner, Schoenberg), and film (Hollywood ‘screwball’ comedies and melodramas), his
philosophical work insists on foregrounding its own conditions or criteria.\textsuperscript{16} For Cavell, the most important or dangerous of these criteria for philosophical work are its claims to speak on behalf of, instead of, or with the authority of a community when it uses the second-person plural.\textsuperscript{17} One way of describing Cavell’s \textit{The Claim of Reason} is as an attempt to explore how the “we” of philosophy can be differentiated from the “we” of fiction, if at all.\textsuperscript{18} In his characteristically tense style, Cavell has recently argued that Austin and Wittgenstein are central to his project because

Their sense of returning words from their metaphysical to their everyday use is driven by a sense of a human dissatisfaction with words (not as it were solely philosophical dissatisfaction) in which an effort to transcend or purify speech ends by depriving the human speaker of a voice in what becomes his (or, differently, her) fantasy of knowledge, a characterization I have given of what happens in skepticism.\textsuperscript{19}

Cavell treats many of the modernist texts he takes up as exactly “effort[s] to transcend or purify speech”; certainly, the programmatic statements made by Jarry, Marinetti, Yeats, Kandinsky, and others support this approach. Although Cavell’s language (about the human, the voice) has sometimes been understood as a nostalgic or anthropocentric humanism, his broad sketch (of how attempts to purify language become tragic fantasies and how their painful cost is exactly a loss of what we ordinarily call voice) offers a powerful connection between the logic of aesthetic idealism and the logic of modernist absolutes.

Aesthetic idealism values invisible, inexpressible worlds over the various levels of ordinary experience, most often those levels associated with women and the domestic sphere. Although modernist aesthetics refuse dramatic icons and symbols as access-points to the ineffable, they also denigrate everyday experience insofar as it cannot be crystallized into singular objects against which the modern consciousness can test itself.
Without denying (how could he?) our capacity to create idiosyncratic or specialized languages (following the model of such singular objects), Cavell suggests that in so doing speakers abstract their words from their circle of ordinary uses. In controlling theatricality—especially forms associated with the mimesis of the actor—or by removing it altogether, modernists are attempting to control the public sphere by regulating the spectator’s judgment of the actor. A whole horizon of responses associated with the perception of theatricality—usually irritating, awkward, disconcerting feelings of distance or excessive consciousness—are ruled out as not properly aesthetic.

Cavell’s attempts to recall us to the ordinary while putting our understanding of it at stake (risking the arrogance and alienation of philosophy) also reframe Gilles Deleuze’s various uses of modernist literature in a way that makes clear Deleuze’s explicitly metaphysical project. Deleuze highlights modernist experiments with stuttering, hobbling, hesitating speakers of suspended, distorted, and exhausting languages. The process of making voices “minor” (excluded from or out of tune with majority grammars, dialects, and accents) produces new, hybrid differences which are themselves more productive of art than attempts to reassert the stasis of a prior grammar or form of life. Translating Deleuze into Wittgensteinian terms (by way of Cavell rather than the strawman picture of Wittgenstein’s Anglo-American reception which Deleuze treats) we can see how Deleuze reads modernist writers as exactly attempting to invent new language but only by means of repetition (risking the apparent fecklessness and fabulous excess of the literary, that is, its disconnect from the world it claims to continue). Deleuze’s reading of nonsense is more unambiguously “substantial” than Wittgenstein’s: in one the value of a theater of pure gestures is the release of impersonal
difference-in-itself; in the other, its value is closer to mindfulness about the labyrinth of senses at work in every use of language.

Deleuze’s concept of the image, reconceived for the theater, opens up a picture of early modernism’s repetition of certain values of theatricality while showing how they could be bent, distorted, and simulated in productive ways. According to Deleuze, “The relation, sensory-motor situation → indirect image of time is replaced by a non-localizable relation, pure optical and sound situation → direct time-image.”\(^{22}\) Whereas previously images and even montages depended on sensory-motor schemes through which we extracted narratable actions, modern cinema no longer provokes the question of “how images are linked, but ‘What does the image show?’” (42). The representations extracted by association and generalization no longer do justice to the feel of time determined by these modern shots and montages. Could there be a corollary concept for theater-images? Or are our sensations in the theater always complicit with the sensory-motor schemes we extract from the staged space before us? Many of Deleuze’s central philosophical concepts emerge from the theater. At a key moment in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze notes that Artaud’s problem was not to orientate his thought, or to perfect the expression of what he thought, or to acquire application and method or to perfect his poems, but simply to manage to think something [...] He knows that difficulty as such, along with its cortège of problems and questions, is not a *de facto* state of affairs but a *de jure* structure of thought; that there is an acephalism in thought just as there is an amnesia in memory, an aphasia in language and an agnosia in sensibility.\(^{23}\)

This problem—to think anything at all—has not usually been theater’s problem; usually, theater is centrally concerned with orienting figures, events, and times in a specific space and trying to do so in a way that would “perfect the expression” of a thought. But what
about theater that foregrounds the most disorienting—Cavell might say “unhandsome”—features of theater’s conditions, for example, the fact that its continuous demands for sympathy exactly theatricalize behavior that might invite sympathy?

The fact that Cavell’s sense of the stakes and costs of these simulations still haunts this account can itself be theorized as a partial description of our own interest in Victorian melodramas and moralizing nostalgia genres, as found in postmodern theater’s unsettlingly eager return to these frameworks. Hopefully, this philosophical detour has helped evoke the significance of ‘inking out’ the disorienting gestures, affects, and moments of ambivalent or displayed theatricality. By attending to the finely woven pull and push of sympathy and theatricality, to the tension between theatrical gestures and audiences’ various attempts to interpret them or fit them into epistemic schemes, we can start to explore the outlines of a contemporary realist theater, better understanding ambiguous techniques whose failure so infuriated the modernists and drove them out of the theater entirely.

The chapters of this dissertation examine the different configurations of theatricality in the work of George Moore, J.M. Synge, and James Joyce. All three challenged conventional forms of literary regulation, producing famous and influential deconstructions of the travel journal (Synge’s *The Aran Islands*), the bildungsroman (Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and the memoir (Moore’s *Hail and Farewell*), but their simultaneous work in the mode of realist theater—arguably the most regulated form of literary production, since its words seem to be determined by furniture and ordinary discourse—offers a surprising perspective on the function of linguistic autonomy in those texts. Rather than gesturing toward a transcendent aesthetic
experience that offers insight into “primitive” cultures, the conditions of art, or the nature of a historical self, all three become powerful critiques of such gestures. These open-ended critiques are responses to what each writer took to be the most problematic condition of theatrical expression. For Moore, the decline of public space since eighteenth-century salons means that only explicitly literary and artistically mediated discourses can support genuine emotional expression or social discussion. For Synge, the revelation of human embodiment as evolved from the expression of animal instincts means that every word in a play, especially its most lyrical instances, must be as much a function of a social niche’s natural history as it is a private expression. For Joyce, the attempt to create the conditions for an autonomous artistic style within conventional domestic relationships means crafting a private language out of the experience of an absolute doubt—without allowing the language to become melodramatic or the doubt to become cruel and unjustified.

Chapter One, “Theatrical Interiors” shows how Moore’s use of Impressionist images to critique literary naturalism depended on a contradictory array of aesthetic criteria, sometimes appropriated from the theater and sometimes surprisingly hostile to theatricality as a value. Moore’s dramatic criticism shows how he was sensitive to the multi-medial nature of theater, as well as to the fragile economy of prestige which underpinned the status of actors as intellectuals and artists. Moore’s critiques of Emile Zola depend on his awareness of the goals of the impressionists and his criticisms of contemporary playwrights depends on their unwillingness to look clearly at certain topics and objects. His critique of actors in particular reveals his attentiveness to prestige, defining art by its rarity, but also the contradictions in his theorization of impressionist
epiphanies. He loathed the suspenseful gestures of Irving because they distracted from the text written by the playwright. Although he included images of impressionism in his novels which estranged the status of the narrative as a whole, appropriating this and that to make a more beautiful arrangement, he in his drama he never fully confronted the unmoored subjective position for the audience, i.e. what they might take as beautiful or moving or ordinary, instead staging difficult social positions or mythic appropriations, but never allowing audiences the same deference he insisted on for readers. The contradictions of Moore’s early play, *The Strike at Arlingford* (1893) offer a useful model for redescribing Ibsen’s late work. Rather than treating his work as a series of paradigmatic “problem plays,” Ibsen could be seen as critiquing different modes of language *becoming* theatrical. As in Moore, Ibsen’s late plays show how idealist language is eviscerated by comparison to social realities, but Ibsen is most interested in the moments when language that had previously seemed ordinary and adequate to those realities suddenly seems gratuitous and ungrounded. Moore’s play shows little interest in the linguistic dimensions of social problems, but Ibsen’s late work only becomes more and more invested in how idealist and metaphysical language does violence to ordinary ways of speaking.

Chapter Two, “Metropolitan Performance,” follows Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s production of *An Enemy of the People* from London to Dublin in 1894, showing how the performance practices of a major touring company neutralized Ibsen’s sustained critique of the powers of theater. Tree’s decision to produce *Enemy* is a key moment because it moves Ibsen’s work out of small, independent theaters and into a major touring company’s repertoire. By following Tree’s production, this chapter examines the major
shaping conditions for writers and entrepreneurs dissatisfied with both drawing-room society drama and the burgeoning London commercial theater industry. Especially while on tour in Ireland and the U.S., Tree’s production eliminated almost all of the qualities in Ibsen’s work that had inspired the independent theaters in the first place. Ibsen’s play demonstrates that a commitment to a scientific, medical truth may also involve a deafness to the shifting intentions and emotional states signaled by shifts in vocabulary and rhetoric, interpreting the whole world visually. By transforming Ibsen’s strident doctor into an individualist hero amid parochial interests, metropolitan performances such as Tree’s erase the contradictions and conflicts Stockmann creates by gradually isolating himself from the community. While these tensions are legible today by locating Ibsen alongside Hamsun, Munch, and Strindberg, his reception in Ireland was largely controlled by his association with Zola and Hauptmann, that is, as working against the conventions of commercial theaters, but perhaps too drastically. Ibsen’s work was a dangerous commodity for companies like Tree’s, and the most haunting turns of his dialogue were usually untwisted by earnest performances as much as by inadequate translations.

Chapter Three, “Echo Sign,” argues that Synge found a similarly devastating picture of language and expression in his reading of Darwin. Not only might language be inherently imitative, but the desire and perception of even the most lyrical poetry might be nothing more than the product of sexual selection and instincts shared with animals. Complementing recent scholarship that follows Synge’s relationship to nationalist movements and rural culture, I suggest that Darwin’s *Expression of the Emotions* offers an important model for reading Synge’s work, especially in light of the resurgent
postmodern interest—on stage and in theory—in the problems naturalist staging presents. Synge’s plays force audiences to confront their own failure to acknowledge the material conditions that theater shares with everyday life. The audience’s experience of failed interpretation or of the implicit violence of interpretation replays what Michael Valdez Moses has called the “psychological vertigo and emotional disorientation” characteristic of the experience of empire.

Chapter Four, “Hollow Language” compares Synge’s reliance on naturalist conventions with the more direct rejections of those conventions by Shaw and Yeats. Shaw’s “realism” belies a long-standing revulsion for the image of the mechanized or petrified body, and I argue that short works like *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction, or The Fatal Gazogene* (1905) illustrate the surprisingly high stakes for Shaw in working through all the “low-brow” forms of theatricality and redeeming them with political resonance. As a direct contrast, Yeats’s attempts to discipline theatricality, channeling it into specific literary forms available only to readers, offer another way of rejecting the conventions of Beerbohm Tree and the touring companies. In his revisions of his drama *The Golden Helmet* into the long poem *The Green Helmet*, Yeats anticipates the anti-theatrical performances of later modernist and avant-garde writers. Shaw’s melodramatic pictures of petrifaction and Yeats’s use of color-effects on stage offer two competing ways of imagining the threat of the actor’s body, locating it primarily in the way it introduces the possibility of fraudulence into otherwise autonomous literary language.

Chapter Five, “The Impress of Theater: James Joyce and Late Naturalism,” traces Joyce’s interest in Ibsen, naturalism, and theatrical expression in order to account for *Exiles* (1918), which most critics have treated as a kind of belated oddity in Joyce’s
oeuvre. I argue that Joyce was, like Synge, acutely aware of the way Ibsen traced theatrical language back to actual distortions in ordinary conversation. Where Synge mapped this sense of theatricality back to the disappearance of a language’s authorizing conditions (the transformation of life on the Aran Islands and the rural West), Joyce mapped this theatricality as a form of deliberate abstraction from present conditions (post-Parnell, pre-Rising suburban Dublin). The play as a whole invites comparisons between different varieties of the peculiar language-game of confession. These confessions ultimately depend on theatrical coordinates—gestures, pauses, and pointing—which define the limits of the newly autonomous text and suggest the scope of modernism’s repressed relation to theatrical naturalism. Taken together, the works of these Irish playwrights offer a sophisticated alternative to modernism’s more absolute rejections of the stage and create a startling new perspective for postmodern theater’s heterogeneous realisms.
CHAPTER 1
THEATRICAL INTERIORS

I watched, even as a child watches the fly that chance has thrown in a spider’s web.

-George Moore, on first seeing a staged reading of Ghosts

George Moore, Counterfeit Modernist

George Moore’s work provokes hostile responses from readers whose tastes run to nineteenth-century Victorian realism and from those whose tastes run toward what Vicki Mahaffey calls the “challenging fictions” of twentieth-century modernist literature.¹ For both sorts of reader, Moore feels like a fake. His blatant apprenticeship to European writers and his diligent appropriation of sophisticated narrative techniques, apparently for their own sake, goes against the grain of the English tradition of social realism—not against the complexity of its techniques (Eliot and Hardy consistently force readers to think about how fiction and reality intermingle and interfere with each other), but against the rough conviction that a representation’s connection to, rather than its freedom from, reality is a part of its moral worth and ultimate purpose. Moore’s utter disinterest in that conviction aligns him with later avant-gardes, but at the same time his supposed lack of “seriousness,” evidenced by his lack of a single “style,” has invited scorn and disregard. After all, how can a writer like Moore be working toward aesthetic autonomy when his work—naturalist novels, naturalist and symbolist plays, fictionalized autobiographies, novels of interior monologue and involuntary memory, all interwoven with descriptions
of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings—seems aimed at every new literary fad, tailor-made to seem fashionable? Moore’s proximity to the fashionable (understood as a function of his status as an Irish landlord or as a dilettante pandering his friendships with Manet or Turgenev) makes him unspeakable for the doctrines and ideology that grow up around modernism.

As the art critic for *The Speaker* in London from 1891 to 1895, Moore championed Manet, Monet, Renoir, Degas, and Pissaro, and, as many critics have noted, the impressionists’ series paintings provide one of the most important models for the lengthy descriptive passages in Moore’s fiction. Mary Pierce notes that in “Mildred Lawson,” Moore gives “a succession of descriptions bearing an uncanny relationship to Monet’s series of poplar paintings”: each provides repeated pictures of a line of trees down an avenue leading out of town. These passages are almost never explicitly marked: Moore simply recruits an impressionist image for his own narrative purposes. The total output of the impressionists effectively becomes a backdrop for all of Moore’s works—curiously, allowing Moore to proceed *without* creating a formal structure analogous to impressionist techniques. Moore invents something different: a description that calls attention to its own fictionality and which must be regarded as true only within the context of the story. Moore’s use of actual images from Impressionist paintings differs from the mode of literary impressionism in the work of Henry James, and even more so from the modes later developed and theorized by Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad. Moore does not try to recreate the mode of perception in which the relations of color values rise to the surface: instead, he steals some of the attention which that mode of perception had *already* drawn to certain phenomena elsewhere and uses it as a
backdrop for his stories, using references to those phenomena (for example, dappled light through silk) to suggest the aesthetic awareness and particular psychology of certain characters. For Conrad the mode of perception is a tool through which ideas or aspects of language can be explored; for Moore this mode is an object in itself. Moore treats impressionist images on terms more comparable to the way earlier Victorian novelists treated ideas in their characters’ minds—only now, oddly, the ideas are outside their minds, presented by an author.

Moore largely imports these fictional images for their resistance to narrativity. Languid, painterly descriptions of landscapes suspend the action and invite the reader to imagine that the observer’s mind is operating in the same way as does a viewer’s faced with an impressionist painting. Monologues of narrated thought become “streams of consciousness” when they are no longer picking out recognizable objects and features, but experiencing surfaces, depths, and colors—mirrored greens and blues rather than water-lilies floating in a represented space. Moore simulates the effect by directly describing fictional images. This is a short-cut insofar as he does not break narrative down into its “components” to foreground it as a medium. In fact, one of the strange qualities of Moore’s long sentences is how they require the reader to forget they are sentences, that is, forget that there is any predicate in the near future to anticipate.

Nevertheless, the long descriptions are clearly designed to function without reference to actual landscapes, except as those landscapes exist as occasions for a character’s memory or reverie. When Moore tries to translate similar images into his dramatic works, returning them full circle and putting them back as it were in clear view on the stage, he eliminates all the qualities of the image that had suggested direct experience and absolute
absorption for the reader of his novels. It is as if the greens and blues of impressionist canvasses really had been the blurred vision of a near-sighted spectator who, putting on spectacles, no longer saw the distortions.

Moore’s account of seeing Ibsen’s *Ghosts* shows all the contradictions of Moore’s attempts to translate theatrical effects into prose. To emphasize both Ibsen’s importance and the quality of the circles he is running in, Moore points out that “once the doors are opened” at the Théâtre Libre in Paris, “a thousand pounds a year would fail to procure you a seat” (162). This affords Moore the opportunity to name-drop (Antoine, the controversial director himself, would squeeze Moore in) and condescend to his peers about art (*this* is a theater for aesthetic appreciation, not after-dinner digestion). After complaining about late-comers and acoustics (he admits, “I did not hear every single word” [163]), and after insisting on his superiority as a reader of plays compared to the often deficient judgment of actors, Moore finally praises the production. However, he mainly does so through two kinds of indirect testimony of another audience member and Antoine himself. The other audience member’s conversion to the play’s virtues is given as testimony to its good structure, and Moore says that Antoine’s portrayal of Osvalt “by voice and gesture, casts upon the scene so terrible a light, so strange an air of truth, that the drama seemed to be passing not before our eyes, but deep down in our hearts in a way we had never felt before” (164). In addition to being playfully self-conscious, Moore’s articulation is hobbled by its paradoxical appeal to naturalist criteria (“so strange an air of truth”), romantic criteria (“not before our eyes, but deep down in our hearts”), and what we can see in retrospect as emergent modernist criteria (“in a way we had never felt before”). Moore recognizes the tension: “…what shall I say, what praise shall we bestow
upon a situation so supremely awful, so shockingly true?” (164). However, unlike many of his contemporaries, breathless in praise and blame, Moore’s admission of failure here seems strikingly genuine. The man who could talk shamelessly and at length about Manet and Degas admits he has no terms for Ibsen.

At the time he was writing about Ibsen, Moore was beginning to have doubts about French literary naturalism: he wanted to continue to use its justifications to attack censorship and defend his own work, but his essay on Zola shows how he was also attempting to position himself as naturalism’s foremost critic. While lavishing praise on Zola at the beginning of the essay, a brief description of a hallway in Zola’s house foreshadows the way Moore will eventually turn on “the master”: “On the wall of the last little flight [going up to Zola's study] there were Japanese prints depicting furious fornications; a rather blatant announcement, I thought of naturalism…” (67). A few years later, Moore would similarly object to the more “blatant” aspects of Aubrey Beardsley’s cover art for The Savoy. In both cases, Moore is willing to treat sexuality and bodily functions frankly, but only through the mediating distance of clearly aestheticizing techniques. Moore admires Zola’s iconoclasm, but condescends to his aesthetic taste, here evidenced by his home décor. Moore deftly connects Zola’s prolific output (“Five hundred pages in seven months!” [80]) with the increasing amount of tacky bric-à-brac accumulating in Zola’s home (“…tapestries, portraits of archbishops and wrought-iron railings [...] a plaster cast of the Venus de Milo” [75]). To Moore, Zola collapses into mere journalism, becoming a machine for documentation that produces big books undiscerningly filled with too much stuff. Likewise, Zola’s “house seems to reveal a large course mind, a sort of coarsely woven net through whose meshes all live things
escape, and that brings to shore only a quantity of débris” (75). Without a more tightly woven net, all sorts of “blatant” representations of sexuality and “course” ideas pile up and the novel becomes indistinguishable from the newspaper. Again, Moore turns to the stage to make his point: “…Zola’s reports on the Franco-German war are better done than the reports of the war correspondent of the Daily Telegraph. It is also true that the scenery at the “Lyceum” is better painted than the scenery at the “Surrey,” but that is hardly a reason for confusing a set taken from Much Ado about Nothing with the pictures of Turner, Constable, and Wilson…” (79). Moore manages to capture one aspect of Zola’s aesthetic (Zola had declared that “the work becomes a report, nothing more” and that “the novelist is a recorder who is forbidden to judge and to conclude”6), but in attacking the stage-images such an aesthetic seems destined to produce in prose (literalizing the cliché of journalistic ‘set-pieces’), Moore ignores Zola’s warnings about the differences between the functions of images and language in novels and in the theater.

Moore creatively conflates the distinction Zola tries to lay down between the forms: “The novel,” Zola says, “analyzes at great length and with a minuteness of detail which overlooks nothing; the stage can analyze as briefly as it wishes by actions and words.”7 Moore insists that their artistic economy is the same: “…no one who has written great plays has written foolishly when he wrote sonnets, poems, or novels” (140). The only difference—and the sense of this difference shapes all Moore’s own attempts at playwrighting—is that the “poet and the novelist may sacrifice the present, but in the case of the dramatist such sacrifice is not possible, for his work hardly exists off the stage, and depends upon the temper of the public mind” (143). Successful plays must
contain “in a state of essence the sentiments and feelings agitating the multitude during the period of its stage life” (143). Sentiments and feelings, then, but not passions and drives? Or can the latter only be “indicated”?

Moore’s critique of Zola suggested that a kind of theatricality, some manifestation of both physical and emotional intentions, was what modern writing needed, but Moore was deeply suspicious of using actors as a model for anything. Two of Moore’s novels—A Mummer’s Wife (1886) and Evelyn Innes (1896)—present accounts of a woman rejecting the temptations of the stage, and though both go out of their way to evacuate the usual prejudices against theatrical representation per se, both present actors’ work as a vulgar version of higher forms of literary and artistic life. Moore’s two essays, “Mummer-Worship” and “Our Dramatists and Their Literature,” make clear how strongly Moore rejects the performance aspects of theater even while trying to demolish old ‘literary’ moral conventions. For Moore, there is more than enough mimesis, play, and invention in writing: an actor, Moore says, is merely “one who repeats a portion of a story invented by another” (120). The written story, Moore implies, is incomparably richer and has the advantage of being original. The second sentence of Moore’s “Mummer-Worship” is worth quoting in full because it captures the key tensions in Moore’s thinking about art, modernity, and theater:

You can teach a child to act, but you can teach no child to paint pictures, to model statues, or to write prose, poetry, or music; acting is therefore the lowest of the arts, if it is an art at all, and makes slender demands on the intelligence of the individual exercising it; but this age, being one mainly concerned with facile amusement and parade, reverences the actor above all other beings, and has, by some prodigy that cannot be explained by us succeeded, or almost succeeded in abstracting him from the playwright, upon whom he should feed in the manner of a parasite, and endowing him with a separate existence—of necessity ephemeral, but which by dint of
gaudy upholstery and various millinery has been prolonged beyond due limits and still continues (120).

As in Moore’s convoluted response to *Ghosts*, here he joins a contradictory assemblage of criteria for artistic achievement. Moore tries to mark acting as a childish game rather than an art, despite the fact that the target of his critique is exactly the autonomization of acting as a profession. He regards it as positive proof of acting’s non-art status that a famous actress can speak of taking a successful role “rashly.” For Moore, the intuitive and emotional aspects of art must be distilled through formal training, high intelligence, and rigorously clear intention. He links the dangerous “abstraction” of acting to the modern age “mainly concerned with facile amusement and parade,” suggesting that the professionalization of actors is merely a joke—the aristocrats have humored the actors and the actors, in their egoism, have taken it seriously. Moore goes on to bend this into a critique of theatergoers’ expectations about actors, meshing with Bernard Shaw’s longstanding denunciations of the way audiences mistake stage life for reality. However, where Shaw repeatedly uses this as an opportunity to disabuse his readers of *their* illusions, Moore sniffs about “the state of our drawing-rooms” having declined since the eighteenth century: “We should have looked in vain for mummers in the *salon* of Madame Récamier” (124). Acting, charismatic performance, and theatricality in general must be confined to a delimited space, under the control of a genuine artist.

Actors like Henry Irving, despite but probably because of their fame, were not, in Moore’s opinion, genuine artists. Bram Stoker, Irving’s longtime manager, described Irving’s Hamlet as “a mystic” shown in “the high-strung nerves of the man; in the natural impulse of spiritual susceptibility; in his concentrated action spasmodic [...] and in the divine delirium of his perfected passion.”

Stoker recalls that Irving had been particularly
pleased with Stoker’s argument (in praise of this Hamlet) that “To give strong grounds for belief, where the instinct can judge more truly than the intellect, is the perfection of suggestive acting” (27). Irving’s art, to Stoker, was the transformation of complex textual commentary into silent, instinctually comprehensible gesture. Irving “studied every phrase and application and the relative importance of every word of his part that he was well able to defend his suggested position” (28), but his real gift was distilling this study into the immediacy of performance. Although they both try to blend the material and the ideal, Irving’s studied “passions” and Moore’s painterly “indications” depend on radically different images of interiority, observed, roughly, from within and from without.

Moore mocked the idea of actors undertaking any sort of study and he recoiled from the idea that a playtext needed any distillation or mediation. Appealing to instinct over intellect was exactly the problem with the modern stage. In “Our Dramatists and Their Literature,” Moore complained about the “reprehensible [...] entertainment provided by Mr Irving at the Lyceum,” singling out Irving’s performance in the popular play *The Dead Heart*. Irving’s character, after being liberated from the Bastille, is brought out, and, in such crazed and dilapidated condition as seventeen years in a dungeon would produce, he lies down in front of the audience, moaning from time to time. Inconceivable as it may seem, he elects to lie there for several minutes, holding the attention of the audience by the help of occasional moans or grunts and furtive grimacing (*Impressions and Opinions*, 155).

Moore regards this “several minutes” as an intrusion on the time that should be devoted to the playwright’s text. By inserting such business along with “irrelevant remarks,” “mumbling,” and “elaborate dance” Irving is showing how he “secretly chafes against the author, who he believes robs him of a part of his triumph, but I did not think the press
would have allowed such a childish manifestation of vanity to pass in silence” (155). As usual, Moore is quick to isolate the economy of prestige at work among theater artists. Irving’s pantomime is a product of his vanity, but this vanity turns out to be his most sensitive instrument since it allows him to pinpoint what Moore calls his audience’s “animal instinct” (156). Irving, Moore says, “understands better than any one the baseness of modern taste, and he appeals to it more flagrantly than any other manager”; Irving’s “stage realism corrupts our intelligence by easy satisfactions instead of stimulating the imagination, which should create all from the words of the poet” (156). This is a complex definition of “stage realism.” Does Moore want actors to employ some of Irving’s pantomime as long as it is in the service of the playwright’s ideas? Or does he want to eliminate actors altogether and leave only the text to speak for itself? Moore sees the danger in a strictly “literary” theater, deadly and dull, but he cannot fully overcome his distaste for low-class entertainment and sensationalism. This contradiction drives him to redefine literary theater, exploding taboos of content while abiding by taboos of form (following traditional norms for the ob-scene). In short, he evades the vulgar appeal to audiences by redefining them as readers.

Moore also tried to aestheticize audiences by transforming them into discriminating beholders, as of modern art. One of the ways Moore praised Turgenev’s prose and attempted to differentiate him from naturalists like Zola was by highlighting the way Turgenev was able to isolate expressive gestures. This picture of expression would seem to fit Irving’s method, and yet Moore despised what he actually saw on stage. When Moore and Turgenev met, Turgenev admitted to Moore that, with l’Assommoir, “[f]or the first time Zola has created a human being,” but the old Russian
novelist rejected Zola’s “specious method” of describing “what she felt rather than what she thought.” Zola, Turgenev said, provides an account of the sweat on a character’s back rather than relating her actions to the way she thinks. Moore wholeheartedly agrees and uses Turgenev’s comments to make a theoretical distinction between a “thought school” and a “fact school” of modern prose: “the narration of any fact is useless unless it has been tempered and purified in thought with a specific value” (46). Moore’s critique of the “fact school” often shades into a rejection of details he personally finds vulgar, leading him to lump Zola in with Rider Haggard as pruriently concerned with physical actions. Moore is much more precise with his account of the “thought school,” differentiating it from more conventional criteria (what Moore might call here the “moral school”). “Painters,” Moore says, “speak of indications; some are peculiarly happy in indications, and an object skillfully indicated has a charm that the complete painting cannot have” (51). These “indications” can be given in prose narratives through telling physical details, but only those which have been carefully selected to reveal the way a character thinks. As an example, Moore notes that in *Torrents of Spring* a character’s “vicious, animal-like sensuality is indicated by the frequent dilation of the thin nostril and the clenching of the little teeth” (53). It is crucial that “a physical and mental impression is given equally; [...] contrasted that each enforces the other, and both blend and are but one picture” (55). Such painted images and his arguments about a “thought school” draw on his experiences with Manet and Degas in Paris: like the early French impressionists, Turgenev is able to integrate what seem to be discrete sense perceptions into a wider mode of perceiving—without, Moore emphasizes, being too obvious about it. (Flaubert’s devices, Moore says, “are too apparent; they are forced down our throats as if with a steel
fork” [56].) Moore asks, “Who among the many who have thought of turning the troubles of Ireland to literary account has not thought of an Irish Bazaroff?” (57). For Moore, this would mean using a character to “crystallize” a way of thinking: “Bazaroff is the concrete image of a section of human thought” (57).

But how concrete is the image? All the examples Moore cites show physical details revealing underlying mental states, but he rarely focuses much, if any, attention on dialogue. At one point, Moore hints that his whole analysis depends on a theatrical metaphor: “These are things that the artist sees better than the public, des questions de métier, but very interesting to those who would look behind the scenes [...]” (55). The blended physical and mental impression is modeled on the visual, as part of a setting, of what can be set up and looked behind. Moore rejected narratives that minimized the sense of artistry or craft involved, whose construction could not be shown or pointed to. In many ways, the implicit resistance in Moore to qualities as opposed to solid objects becomes explicit in the doctrines of later modernisms.10

The production of Moore’s naturalist play The Strike at Arlingford in 1893 brought many of the contradictions in Moore’s criticism and theorizing to the surface. According to William Archer, “the most unfortunate acting conceivable [...] ruined, defaced, massacred” the performance, but there are a number of clues that suggest that the play itself is hostile to certain conventional modes of theatrical expression—yet without any clear alternatives to offer. Moore had written the play on a dare, cutting down an unproduced five-act version he had begun a few years before. Despite his hopes that the play would draw attention to important moral problems, Moore managed to draw the most criticism for his scattershot handling of the intricacies of labor negotiations.
Moore had campaigned for more intellectual and literary theater and complained endlessly of the pantomime that had crept onto the London stage, but *The Strike at Arlingford* struck audiences as so dead set against amusement that it was difficult to see the point. Nevertheless, Moore described his protagonist, John Reid, as “a weak man in a position too strong for him—a kind of modern Hamlet, so to speak, whose mind and resolution were overborn by circumstance”¹¹ For Moore, a “modern” Hamlet meant not only a character responsive to, say, late Victorian as opposed to Elizabethan problems, but also a figure whose weakness and inability to express himself could be set in contrast to Irving’s famous interpretation. Moore wanted to construct a play that could dramatize modern problems and resist the stagey or melodramatic performances that he thought drove those problems off the stage.

*The Strike at Arlingford* presents a blunt version of the politics of land and labors disputes of the previous decade, focalized by the dithering Reid. Reid speaks on behalf of the workers, but finds his rekindled love for Lady Anne compels him to betray his cause and the earnest daughter of the factory owner who had pinned her hopes to his courage. Adrian Frazier observes that Moore had been “astonished” by Ibsen’s “Nora” (Eleanor Marx’s translation of *A Doll’s House*), but that “the feminist rejection of sex did not sit well with him.”¹² Moore ruefully admitted that Ibsen had to show that “a woman is more than a domestic animal,” but when he turned to writing his own drama, he would make sure that sexual desire functioned at least equally with hopes for self-realization to determine the actions of his protagonist.¹³ Yet in *Strike* both sexual desire and self-realization are expressed in dialogue that alternates between dull straightforwardness and conventional melodramatic exclamation. When Reid is finally forced to admit he still
loves Lady Anne, his clinical manner is designed to be a sign of his modernity, but its opposition to his former fiancée Ellen’s sudden outburst makes it seem equally clichéd (even though the attitudes he is meant to represent are still fairly recent).

ELLEN. You’ve ceased to love me?
REID. I’ll waste no time in excuses.
ELLEN. That’s right—the mere fact.
REID. I have.
ELLEN. Ah, you love her, and will never care for me again. (She sits down, buries her face in her hands, struggling with her emotion.) An over-mastering passion, the plea of every libertine. Oh, that you should have lied to me so—the utter vileness of it.
REID. I didn’t lie to you. When I told you last week that I loved you, and that you could trust me, I thought I was speaking the truth. I was mistaken. (44)

Ellen’s hard-nosed, New Woman demeanor turns out to conceal a more emotional inner self; Reid’s similarly pragmatic attitude turns out to be cold and inadequate. Although Moore could both present naturalist attitudes and avoid most of the conventional melodramatic set speeches he ridiculed on the London stage, he still structured his plays around the notion that the dramatic conflict entailed a true revelation of the characters. Reid is determined by his environment—by class ties in particular—but the audience is still able to respond to his inability to overcome that environment as a moral or ethical failing. In fact, the audience is able to achieve the same perspective on Reid’s situation as Reid claims to have of the workers, when they trundle into Lady Anne’s luxurious parlor to confront her. Overwhelmed by the sense that they are imposing on the formidable lady, the workers are about to cave when Reid speak on their behalf:

Look round you, mates; this is a nice place to be ruined in. Never were you in such a place before; feast your eyes upon it, and feel the tread of the carpet under your feet, and breathe the soft scented air. All your homes taken together would not suffice to purchase this room. [...] Have you brought me here to tell her that you’d starve like brutes rather than she should want for anything? (17)
As in the most sophisticated realist theater Moore had seen in Paris, Reid draws attention to the physical objects on the stage and to the effect of the space itself. However, this attention is then immediately stapled to Reid’s polemical point, with the entire room becoming a fairly straightforward symbol of wealth. When, near the end of the play, Reid’s personal affections have cancelled out his earlier speeches, none of those affections are linked back to the room itself; the powerful focus Moore had placed on furniture as a sign of injustice blurs and disappears entirely. Such talk was, apparently, mere rhetoric. Reid prepares himself, awkwardly, for suicide:

Thank you for those words. Now listen. I have lost all. I have betrayed the woman I loved, and I have been betrayed by her. I’ve betrayed the woman who loved me. I have lost not only her love but her respect. Worse than all, I’ve lost honour; never again can I look the world in the face. Belief in the cause is gone too—everything is gone—I stand a moral bankrupt. In such a juncture of circumstances man must escape from self, I ask you is this not so? (51)

Like Shaw and William Archer, Moore championed Ibsen as the perfect foil for complacent English audiences because Ibsen completely demolished the picture of life current in the criteria of idealist aesthetics—yet here, in this passage, Moore’s Hamlet-figure falls into the most predictable formulations of honor and self-sacrifice that Moore himself had made fun of.

Moore’s The Strike at Arlingford is nonetheless a close approximation of the aesthetic program suggested by Shaw in The Quintessence of Ibsenism, especially of what Shaw later calls Ibsen’s “objective anti-idealist plays,” the plays which made Ibsen’s singularly controversial name in London and established his reputation in England and Ireland as a naturalist or realist. Various forms of idealism lead to tragedy, even when those forms outwardly resemble the modern, prosy talk of labor leaders and
striking workers. Unfortunately, Moore’s play—like Shaw’s original analysis—leaves out the ways aesthetic idealism took shape within ordinary discourse. Moore treats certain notions and problems as if they were “in the air,” not produced by certain ways of talking.

Moore’s play suggests how a number of late nineteenth-century realist dramas—particularly Ibsen’s—might usefully be redescribed as critiquing different modes of language becoming theatrical. Moore attacks certain poses and gestures as theatrical, but this seems to be a general condition of modernity, not the product of specific vocabularies or social conflicts. In Moore’s collaborative dramas—with Yeats, Edward Martyn, Pearl Craigie, and Barrett Clark—Moore experiments with different ways of tweaking current ideas, but, unlike his prose fictions, never establishes consistent procedures for confronting an audience with words both meaningful and empty, serious and playful, real and counterfeit.

_Naturalist Language-Games_

Moore never connects his rejection of certain abstract visions inside a fiction with his parallel rejection of concrete performance practices. In many cases, it is just these practices which had made the fictional visions appealing in the first place: rejecting them outright is refusing to acknowledge their role in the process of valuation. Moore wants the moral and philosophical problems he poses to appeal on a purely intellectual level, to appeal to audiences as art, or, if Moore would admit to any sensory aspect at all, as a form of aestheticized consumption.¹⁴ This is especially true of Moore’s attempts at dramatic dialogue, which are clunky, candenceless, blocks without any of the anxieties or ironies Moore builds into his prose. His dialogue abides by rules of characterization even
more stringently in its transgressions: their dialogue marks the “interior” or “true” nature of their character, fitting the traditional performance paradigm which had led to the classifications of affects and faces that Moore elsewhere criticizes. In contrast, the “drifts” and heavy, pregnant “significations” of Ibsen’s dialogue, when they are not too tightly stapled to static allegories or symbolic objects, can rarely be classified and rarely signal clear ideological content or inner essences. They seem to operate on their own, according to an oddly superficial logic. They constantly suggest to the audience that if only a statement had been worded otherwise, the characters would have had a different fate. Ibsen, despite working within all the confines of representational theater later attacked by modernists, pioneers many of the dramatic techniques which later playwrights use to make that attack. Ibsen’s late work, in particular his last play, When We Dead Awaken (1899), dismantles the assumptions underlying the pictures of language and expression found in Moore’s plays (if not his prose).

When Zola made the case for naturalism’s literary precedents, he cited Homer and Aristotle, Rousseau and the Encyclopedists, but pointed particularly to Diderot who “upheld the same ideas as I.” Rousseau, in his Lettre à M. d’Alembert, denies the whole idea of catharsis, arguing that “the constant outbursts of different emotions to which we are subjected in the theatre disturb and weaken us, making us even less able to control our passions, and the sterile interest which we take in virtue serves only to satisfy our self-love, instead of forcing us to act in a virtuous way” (quoted in Fischer-Lichte, History 1). Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that, for Rousseau, “identity is understood as something which is given by Nature or dictated by society for now and ever more,” thus leading Rousseau to believe “the actor to be ‘inauthentic’,” with “no clear-cut,
unchanging, unchangeable identity” (2). If Geneva were to have a theater, Rousseau thought it should be one without actors—preferably, in Marvin Carlson’s words, “still close to nature and natural virtue—open air spectacles with dancing, gymnastics, and innocent celebration by the entire population.” Zola appeals to Rousseau’s insistence that theater was a public event with intimate links to the social order in which and through which it was produced, but he argues that art must “build on experiment [...] proceed by analysis” (Sources 171). Jürgen Habermas glosses Rousseau’s idea of the general will as “the guarantee of a reconstituted state of nature under the conditions of the social state as a kind of saving instinct of humanity.” Zola rejected what he saw as romanticism’s attempts to ‘reconstitute’ a purer natural order because they created a series of abstract “formulas” which were obviously not the formulas, not the appropriate logic for “the new social condition” (Sources 172).

In contrast, Diderot’s concept of the natural in theater was linked to the pleasure we take in the simulation of reality. This pleasure was much closer to Zola’s idea of the dizzying and liberating effect of naturalist analysis, and, like Diderot, Zola connects this effect to precisely rendered gestures. Zola uses the rhetoric of scientific observation, but he echoes Diderot’s earlier critique of the “exaggerations of actors, their bizarre dress, the extravagence of their gestures, their peculiar rhymed and rhythmic speech and a thousand other dissonances” (quoted in Theories of Theatre 153). In order to represent passions, Diderot argued, playwrights should make use of pantomime, stilted utterances, and naturally occurring movements and groupings on stage. At the same time, Zola struggled to update Diderot’s arguments that theater could use painting as a model: instead of creating live *tableaux*, playwrights should arrange naturalistic scenes by means of
precise, perhaps even microscopic, attention to detail. Zola recognized that Diderot’s suggestions about *tableaux* were designed to widen and deepen the repertoire of gestures and movements in the theater, pushing performers to create moving pictures rather than artificial friezes. Michael Fried quotes Diderot theorizing an aesthetic of total absorption or immersion: “One can, one must sacrifice something to technique. How much? I do not know. But I do not want that sacrifice to cost anything as regards the expression, the effect of the subject. First touch me, astonish me, tear me apart; startle me, make me cry, shudder, arouse my indignation; you will please my eyes afterward, if you can”\(^{19}\) (*Absorption and Theatricality* 80). Zola argued that the new naturalist movement could and should generate this powerful effect by taking up “our rôle as intelligent beings to penetrate to the wherefore of things, to become superior to things, and to reduce them to a condition of subservient machinery” (*Sources* 170).

Roughly, Zola wants the social purposiveness of Rousseau to restrain the excesses encouraged by Diderot’s ideas: “Naturalism alone corresponds to our social needs; it alone has deep roots in the spirit of our times; and it alone can provide a living, durable formula for our art, because this formula will express the nature of our contemporary intelligence” […] “the tragic framework is excellent; one deed unwinds in all its reality, and moves the characters to passions and feelings, the exact analysis of which constitutes the whole interest of the play—and in a contemporary environment, with the people who surround us.”\(^{20}\) Like Diderot, Zola attacks “theatre language” (“the clichés, the resounding platitudes, the hollow words that roll about like empty barrels”) and argues that it should be possible that a great performer “holds the public because he speaks on stage as he does at home” (371). Yet how can an actor speaking “as if” at home also
follow Rousseau’s imperative to be authentic, to remain honestly oriented toward an audience gathered in a public space? Zola solves the problem by means of the artist’s temperment and the greater authenticity of clothes, gestures, and milieu. A performer acting “as if” at home, observed in greater detail than any person ordinarily is at public events, will display a greater, or deeper truth than one who acknowledges the audience. This implies a particular mode of attention (how we look at people “in private”) and a particular value in the artist’s function as mediating between representation and reality (where we locate the impress of an artist’s style or perspective).

Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, argues that the naturalist mode of attention to the subject and its idea of the function of the artist are both closely connected to the sense that “unrefined nature, basic desire, doesn’t have to be seen as a dead weight holding us back from spiritual ascent, but is to be wholeheartedly embraced, perhaps even rejoiced in.” Taylor points toward the apparently contradictory instance of the “naturalist epiphany,” as when Zola describes Pissaro’s *Jallais Hill, Pontoise* (1867):

> This is the modern countryside. One feels the passage of man, who digs up the earth, cuts it up, saddens the horizon. This valley, this hillside manifest a simplicity and an heroic frankness. Nothing could be more banal, were nothing greater. The painter’s temperament has drawn a rare poem of life and force from ordinary reality (quoted in *Sources* 433).

Crucially, Zola’s sense of the banal’s transfiguration here implies a mediating “temperament” and a process of drawing out which later modernists would emphasize. Unlike the public sphere imagined by Diderot and Rousseau, in which “living rooms and *salon* were under the same roof; and [...] the privacy of the one was oriented toward the public nature of the other [...] so both were conjoined in literature that had become ‘fiction’,” Zola’s public sphere—and his image of theatergoing audiences—could not
revolve around “a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity original[ed] in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself” (Structural Transformation 50, 51). Zola’s public sphere, his “rational-critical debate,” was located within the object itself, in its material makeup, in its logic. In the passage quoted above, it is the representations of hillside and valley which manifest simplicity and heroism. The temperament and function of the artist here requires “penetrating into the wherefor of things”–and presumes that that wherefor is not immediately accessible to the public.

Zola is optimistic that this access could be granted by a few rudimentary and vague aesthetic principles like “simplicity and heroic frankness.” An astute, scientific observer could, by exemplifying these qualities, bring them out in the objects under examination. Very few of the writers or playwrights following Zola shared this optimism: to Moore, the salons of the eighteenth century were a glowing haven of intellectual discourse in stark contrast to modern parlors where finery and false eloquence dominated. Rather than allowing the inner self to dissolve into the higher discourses of the salon, the modern equivalents forced people to wear heavy masks of social propriety. For Moore, the nadir of this masking was the rank hypocrisy of actors: they claimed to be paragons of virtue, but they were only putting on a “burlesque the moral tone that came from Wellington Street” (Impressions and Opinions 122). Moore’s selective turn back to the eighteenth-century salon is characteristic of the way modernists treated Zola and naturalism generally: Zola properly realized that the artist could analyze objects better experimentally, isolated from the necessity of communicating with a general public, but he dangerously opened up that field of experimentation to the riff-raff. If the mode of
attention or seeing necessary for great art was available to just anyone, how could artists justify the time and expense of their work? Who would decide if a painting or play had become a “rare poem” or if it was simply a vulgar repetition of daily life, of what Moore calls “the refuse of society” (136)?

Critiques of literary and visual naturalism often note how the strained uses of concepts like epiphany and temperment suggest how seeing was becoming an object of scrutiny. How could the “banal” landscape of Pissaro’s painting be seen as a “rare poem of life and force”? How could the detailed presentation of authentic furniture provide the audience with the view of “intelligent beings [...] superior to things”? J.L. Austin, discussing philosophical expressions of skepticism about ordinary uses of the word “seeing” and “seeing as,” suggests that

different ways of saying what is seen will quite often be due, not just to differences in knowledge, in fineness of discrimination, in readiness to stick the neck out, or in interest in this aspect or that of the total situation; they may be due to the fact that what is seen is seen differently, seen in a different way, seen as this rather than that.²²

Austin offers the examples of a soldier looking at drills on a parade-ground and a painter looking at a pictorial representation to suggest how different perceptions can be gleaned from the same sights—not only in diagrams like Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit which are specially “devised as to be capable of being seen in different ways” but also “naturally” (101). Austin inserts one of his characteristic qualifications (“as one might say”) before the word “naturally,” hinting that there is something disturbing, or at least deflating, about the ordinariness of “seeing-as.” What had seemed to promise (threaten?) a transcendent perceptual category turns out to be more regular or continuous with everyday life than it had seemed.
Furthermore, Austin extends this sense of deflation back over earlier examples of the “argument from illusion,” strongly implying that this whole vein of argument—looking for distinctions between “sense” and “sense-data”—depends on melodramatic or excessive interpretations.

Instead of saying that, to the naked eye, a distant star looks like a tiny speck, we could say that it is seen as a tiny speck; instead of saying that, from the auditorium, the woman with her head in a black bag appears to be headless, or looks like a headless woman, we could say that she is seen as a headless woman (101-102).

Austin classes the Headless Woman, along with the ventriloquist’s dummy, with the professional illusions of magicians (in contradistinction to mirages and delusions) because they have a sense of being “conjured up” (22-23, the emphasis is Austin’s). The philosophers Austin is criticizing tend to mistake one for the other, erasing the fact that the uncanniness of skeptical questions like “is the chair really there?” is largely produced by a kind of stagecraft. Austin is concerned with the way this stagecraft distorts (or even generates) philosophical arguments, but his distinctions between illusions and delusions have important links to the ways modernists rejected literary naturalism.

[...] when I see an optical illusion, however well it comes off, there is nothing wrong with me personally, the illusion is not a little (or a large) peculiarity or idiosyncracy of my own; it is quite public, anyone can see it, and in many cases standard procedures can be laid down for producing it. Furthermore, if we are not actually to be taken in, we need to be on our guard; but it is no use to tell the sufferer of delusions to be on his guard. He needs to be cured (24).

Zola argued that it was possible, through the mediation of “temperment,” for an artist to create an illusion in Austin’s sense: a perspective on a landscape or scene which is both public and generally accessible. An audience could view the same objects or situations outside the theater and “see-as” in the same way. The apparatus of the theater was
hidden because it was ultimately unnecessary. For later modernists, much more interested in what Austin calls delusions, the connection between conventional theatricality and the “standard procedures” for creating its effects was exactly what needed to be explored and exploded.

Unlike Zola, Ibsen became suspicious of the artist’s ability to produce a generally accessible perspective. The pursuit on one truth might obscure another—or might damage the daily fictions needed for certain realms of ordinary existence. *When We Dead Awaken* begins with the same sort of ambiguously loaded conversation between husband and wife that forms the long final act of *A Doll’s House*, only here there is no emblematic door onstage to serve as an explanation and focal point for the scene’s tension and suspense. In both plays, the conversation allows the audience and, in part, the characters to understand how the couple have been talking at cross-purposes and misinterpreting each other. This mutual alienation is the climax of Ibsen’s earlier play, but his last play *begins* in this situation and follows its catastrophic effects through the figure of an artist who tries to turn it into a source of art. Instead of radically forcing a relationship to the surface-level of conversation (as in Nora and Torvald’s), *When We Dead Awaken* shows how searching for unspoken, unspeakable bonds hidden in the ‘depths’ of relationships is a deadly, reifying process in itself. This aesthetics of conversation further undermines concepts of idealist representation (and sketches out the limits and dangers of the view of language embodied in Hegelian dialectic	extsuperscript{23}). The play’s opening conversation sets out themes that later linguistic and scenic repetitions magnify: a captivating but deadly picture of interiority, a suggestion that the process of learning is
more various than meets the eye, a warning that surfaces can be slippery, and a glimpse of a playful aesthetics that acknowledges its own tragic possibilities.

The play opens with a long silence, giving the audience time to absorb the liminal setting and interpret the two characters, parallel in their common engagement with a newspaper (and not the other). The first lines spoken offer a microcosm of the misunderstandings to follow:

RUBEK *(looking up from his paper)*. Well, Maja? What’s the matter?  
MAJA. Just listen, how silent it is here.  
RUBEK *(smiling indulgently)*. Can you hear that?  
MAJA. What?  
RUBEK. The silence?  
MAJA. Yes. Definitely.  
RUBEK. Well, *mein Kind*, maybe you’re right. Undoubtedly, one can hear silence. (1031)

Maja’s waiting in silence had failed to attract Rubek’s attention, so she is forced to sigh, putting the weight of significance on breathing as a gesture. In and of itself, the gesture could be one of a hundred melodramatic sighs designed to garner attention, but here it marks the central concern of the play—the possibility or impossibility of expression. Maja subsequently pinpoints a certain quality of silence as being inhospitable to expression. She denies that country or climate have anything to do with it. *This* silence, she says, ought to be noticeable—especially by her husband. Rubek’s first line, implicitly asking his wife about her concern, picks up on the fact that she has expressed *something*, but nothing in particular that he could possibly know. Maja responds with a command, phrased to suggest that he has *already* missed something. Rubek reads Maja as expressing something indecipherable and Maja reads Rubek as insensible to present conditions. These two moments of interpretation foreshadow the play’s later carnivalesque vision of expression within a seemingly ordinary context. The tensions in
a morning conversation between spouses attempting to reconcile something amiss in their relationship must be played out through extravagant games of denial, creation, destruction, and death. If investing these opening lines with the full weight of what follows appears to overburden this language, this is in part because this is the dominant tone of the play—the constant threat of language being overinterpreted.

Once other characters enter the scene, the tone and language become increasingly dreamlike. Rubek and Maja’s misinterpretations grow more severe: not only do they doubt their connectedness to each other, they also begin to doubt the world. When Rubek inquires about the night-time vision of a figure in black (as it is breathlessly recounted to him), Maja loses her patience:

MAJA (losing her patience). Good Lord, Rubek—it’s what I told you this morning. You were dreaming.
RUBEK (drily). Oh? Was I? Thank you! (1039)

The stakes of interpretation have already been raised: Rubek’s sarcastic gratitude responds to the implication of control in Maja’s claim to be able to tell him if he was dreaming. In other contexts, Rubek might be saying this in a good-natured way or in such a way that nothing comes of it. But here, in this conversation, the sarcasm extends the thread of their earlier banter. The question of his dreaming, like the meaning behind Maja’s sigh, and in her saying she can “hear” silence, is a question of interiority. Who can know what Maja means by her sighs? Who is in the best position to know if he is (was) dreaming? The opening exchange suggests that Rubek’s answers to these kinds of questions will increasingly rely on a picture of interiority, of an inner self, which becomes more and more difficult to maintain. (His initial response to his wife’s certainty about hearing that silence—“here,” “this”—is to generalize: one can hear silence.)
In the next scene, Irene and Rubek, left alone, recreate the irritated tension of the opening conversation. Their dialogue obsesses over the past and replays their relationship spatially: Irene notices that Rubek has kept his distance, saying, “A little apart from each other. Also just like old times” (1050). According to the stage directions, Rubek moves closer, but insists, “It had to be that way then” (1050). Ibsen’s deft stagecraft sets up the miniature re-enactment of their affair within a repetition of the opening conversation, which began with Maja’s need to over-express.

What was an appropriate projection of emphasis in the first lines (there are many cases imaginable where sighing is called for) in this scene becomes uncanny and grotesque. Irene, ostentatiously exuding a silence like death, demands that Rubek sense something which only he should be able to sense:

RUBEK (sadly and somberly). There’s something hidden behind this whole story of yours.
IRENE. I can’t help that. Every word I say is being whispered in my ear.
RUBEK. I suppose I’m the only one who can decipher the meaning.
IRENE. You should be the only one. (1049)

Rubek pursues this picture of hiddenness, of an inexpressible core in Irene and in himself, until forced to confront what this picture leads him to: the idea that Irene, no matter how outwardly strange or mad, can trump his claims to have treated her well. After all, if Irene has an “innermost self” to which he has no access (a kind of core he desperately desires for himself), then she can assert that he damaged it without his being able to argue. The two conversations highlight the extremes of Rubek’s behavior. In the first, all his failures to address Maja’s (and his own) obvious dissatisfactions come to light. In the second, he attempts to address only Irene’s (and his own) “inner” essence, the problems of which they cannot speak. Rubek’s tendency to think and move in binaries
betrays him. From refusing to admit that anyone, even Maja, could know his mind, he moves suddenly toward imagining that he has a secret, perfect access to Irene’s.

Demanding room for an inner life which Maja cannot possibly share means he has to admit that Irene is in the best position to assess how much havoc he wreaked in her inner life (even—or especially—when her ability to make such assessments appears completely impaired). In the first scene, Rubek uses the half-questioning utterance, “I—?” to evade Maja’s seemingly innocuous “Are you happy?” (1032). With Irene, “I—?” becomes a full body gesture (“recoiling”), as he attempts to avoid the crushing guilt which accompanies Irene’s accusation, that he “mistreated the innermost source of [her] being” (1051). Rubek becomes progressively more ensnared by the picture of an inner essence, even as he begins to fathom its threatening repercussions later in the play. Rubek even connects the way he is captivated by this picture of essences with the way he was “completely under the spell of [his] artistic mission” (1052). In trying to re-enact a spell which he knows has faded, he creates the maximum difference between his artistic productions: the image of his artistic life and the mechanism of his death. As a meditation on theatrical art, this is an intriguing image at a time when Stanislavky was beginning to develop a system of performance in which inner essences could be fully and scientifically mapped by physical gestures—in ways that would infuriate Chekhov, for whom the tone of his plays should emphasize not the suffering of the main characters in ingeniously visual ways, but rather their constantly irritating (to themselves and to the audience) responsibility for their world.

Wittgenstein’s critiques are directed toward a similar picture of interiority, loosening its hold on people who might become “captivated” by it—but what makes the
remarks so effective is Wittgenstein’s acceptance of the picture’s unflinching grip to
begin with. (One of the reasons Wittgenstein may have been forced to write in a
recursively aphoristic style which remains, as Cavell argues, “internal to what it teaches,”
could be that to write otherwise would deceive the reader into thinking that the
ungripped had been gotten a hold of.) Compare Wittgenstein’s tone, evocative of
hypotheticals and reflexivity, with Rubek’s, melodramatic and decisive, in their
descriptions of remarkably similar pictures of an “innermost self”:

...Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a ‘beetle’. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in these people’s language? If so, it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something: for the box might even be empty. No one can ‘divide through’ by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

RUBEK. [...] I’ve something to confess to you, Maja.
MAJA. Well?
RUBEK (tapping his chest). In here, you see—here I carry a little, tiny casket with a cunning lock that can never be forced. And in that casket all my visions lie stored away. But when she went off without a trace, the lock on the casket clicked shut. And she had the key—and she took it with her. You, my dear little Maja—you had no key. So everything inside there lies unused. And the years pass! And I can’t get at that treasure. (1065)

Rubek’s account, starting with his identification of it as a confession, implies by irony what Wittgenstein’s provokes by implication. The casket and key metaphor adopts
Irene’s fraying, frazzled picture of language: if words can express anything, and Rubek
can call his inner life a casket, then there must be a key. Maja is by this point bored with
her husband’s cryptic caskets. She is in the perfect position to hear how strange his use
of language has become, but she is no longer in a position to make him aware of it (even
if she wanted to). At the same time, the way Rubek taps his chest, insisting that there is a casket here, makes the whole image lurid. The audience’s ironic distance from Rubek makes it possible to wonder, “Why is this man so convinced, so captivated by the idea of an inner self? We would not deny that his relationship with Irene is special, even in secret ways, so why does he insist?”

Ibsen’s image of Rubek, caught by the possibility of repeating or re-presenting an ideal (recreating “Resurrection Day”), traces the way an artist cuts himself off from various resources of language and communities of meaning. The rigorousness of Rubek’s attempts to grasp and recreate the (past) picture of an inner essence shockingly leads him out of an ordinary conversation and into a deadly metaphor. The only way for him to keep hold of this picture of language is to abandon the touchstones of everyday speech and treat Irene’s games and fantasies as utterly real. In the scene where Irene and Rubek imagine swans and castles together by the stream, Rubek shows how aware he is of the dangers of Irene’s world (“You take everything too much to heart, Irene”), and yet acquiesces in the end to her interpretations of the world.

Rubek’s condition—finding himself captivated (again?) by the picture of an inner essence—matches the form of philosophical difficulty Wittgenstein describes as follows: “We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk.” Cavell calls this “a counter-interpretation of our present condition [against the myth of Eden], meant at once to recognize the repetitive force of our temptations to leave it (as if our ordinary lives and language are limitations or compromises of the human) and at the same time to indicate how following the temptation will lead to grief.” The force of Rubek’s
temptation to leave language expresses itself in his inclination toward sculpture, toward silence, and toward realizing or making concrete the inner essence of a woman who, with all her melodramatic accoutrements, makes plain the fact that what captivates Rubek is a picture. The picture of interiority Rubek offers and Wittgenstein’s beetle are highly melodramatic articulations of an inner essence, disconcertingly juxtaposed with (modernist) methods supposedly immune to or refusing exactly such melodramatic excess. They both dissolve metaphysical ways of talking by showing how they dangerously isolate their speakers (even as they simultaneously make those speakers’ pictures of art or language clear, perspicuous).

Wittgenstein’s remarks help describe Ibsen’s critique of the idealist image of interiority, but they also suggest how Ibsen’s methods also led to serious critiques of images later associated with modernism. In Ibsen’s late plays, there is a family resemblance between idealist pictures of expression and modernist refusals of subjectivity. In Ibsen’s version of these pictures, an overwhelming attention to surfaces uncannily thwarts the redemptive or transcendent qualities artists want to attribute to their work. Ibsen criticizes the shape of such redemption, contextualizing it by showing how it is taken up for what it produces (health, beauty, etc.) rather than for what it expresses. If Ibsen’s work ultimately seems less compelling today than Wittgenstein’s, we might be able to attribute this to the wide range of modernist productions Wittgenstein saw to have utterly failed in their attempt to refuse the logics of expression or consumption—Ibsen could still hold out hope that the work of a Rodin would not wholly be absorbed by a commercial economy, and that his death might still might strike some as a pointless deluge, an absolute encounter with the other unassimilable to categories of taste.
Theatrical naturalism can be understood as a response to two senses of modernity: Enlightenment theories of the modern and the felt experience of economic modernization. Emile Zola’s writings on theater evoke the crisis in the image of the public sphere created by the Enlightenment: its representations no longer seemed to be guaranteed; it required more accurate and more precise instruments. Zola’s reading of the eighteenth century depends on a picture of theatrical interiority becoming visible in theatrical interiors. Authentic subjectivity, under the pressure of modern scientific discourses and popular demands for the spectacular, can only be represented by furnished drawing-rooms and passionate bodies capable of representing those forces which exceed the rational and visual. Derided as both determinist and melodramatic, Zola nevertheless holds onto the belief that a transcendent artistic perspective is achievable in fiction, even if this perspective is largely constructed as an absence, as facts or realities conflicting without being authored. In the theater, purportedly unmodified discourses and authentic objects begin to fill the stage, drawing attention to both the mechanization of human bodies and the necessity for more intense seeing, since other responses to the action on stage would further obscure the fragile image of relations between objects. Modernity’s other sense—the extension of capitalism—can be more easily mapped onto the development of the theater industry. Here, modernization threatens to dismantle the revolutionary utopianism of feminism and socialism by converting them into so many ‘problem’ plays for what Shaw astutely called “Pinerotic” consumption. It also neutralizes the subtle critiques of theaters’ industrialization that had emerged in late naturalist works, especially those whose metatheatricality questioned the basic constituents of European theatrical space.
Moore’s awkward dialogue in *The Strike at Arlingford* and blunt symbolism in *The Bending of the Bough* are produced by Moore’s continuing commitment to an eighteenth-century picture of public space, a rational sphere in which all discourse could be confronted by its contradictory, difficult, embodied manifestations. For Moore, the untangling of an intellectual problem by means of dramatization had everything to do with giving form to the trickiest aspects of the problem and nothing to do with the form’s adequacy to reality. The present existence of the problem was enough. Unfortunately for Moore, the way the theater imagined problems was itself subject to economic and commercial logics which he despised. He could partly avoid these economies in his prose, but on the stage, productions and performances made his avoidance painfully obvious. Moore had no interest in making dialogue entertaining—as long as he created a modern equivalent to Hamlet’s dilemma, entertainment was superfluous. Likewise, Moore had no interest in satire’s direct relation to an audience—as long as the difficulty of a modern choice between politics and love is evident, the resemblance between the subject and object of the satire is immaterial. Literally, for Moore, such resemblances and entertainments have no weight, having neither gravity nor attractive force.

The particular ways Moore avoided engaging with contemporary configurations of theatricality—in suspenseful dialogue or compelling symbols—draw attention to how radically and how deliberately Ibsen criticized those configurations. Ibsen’s prose plays examine how the bourgeois theater’s concept of interiority is itself unstable, never absolutely satisfactory, and always vulnerable to being called theatrical. Since this by-then conventional theater space configures dialogue as an expression of an interior state, actually wording that expression can always be perceived as excessive. Likewise, in a
theater space that configures symbolic images on stage as perfect manifestations of ideas, the physical appearance of those images or the mere description of them can always seem melodramatic. The metatheatricality of Ibsen’s late prose plays questions these basic conditions of European theater. In particular, *The Master Builder* and *When We Dead Awaken* demolish fantasies about architecture and sculpture that overlap with fantasies about theatrical performance. Extending his earlier examinations of the discourse of aesthetic idealism, these plays confront audiences with the dire consequences of exactly the modes of sympathy and theatricality they otherwise enjoyed. (Descriptions of performances of Ibsen’s work as painful, difficult, and exceptionally prolonged experiences suggest that his characteristic way of foregrounding theater’s conditions was to put them in slow motion.) Ibsen’s late work isolates the ways we invest images with interest and the ways different vocabularies abstract or theorize images. They are a naturalism of thinking as a discursive process of sympathizing and theatricalizing. This gossamer naturalism depends on subtle deferrals and disorientations of audience expectations, provoking continuous dissatisfaction with the implacable surfaces of the dialogue, yet disallowing any deep interpretive narrative which would “explain” the irritating slipperiness of its conversations.
CHAPTER 2
METROPOLITAN PERFORMANCE

I have known actors who frequently arrive at many of their best effects through patient study; indeed, I believe, great actors have been known to study each gesture before a looking-glass. This seems to me, nevertheless, a mistaken system, and one certainly which would be destructive to the effects of those who prefer to rely on the mood of the moment. That genius is best which may be described as an infinite capacity for not having to take pains.

-Herbert Beerbohm Tree, “The Imaginative Faculty”¹

The outstanding similarity between Rhodes’s rule in South Africa and Cromer’s domination of Egypt was that both regarded the countries not as desirable ends in themselves but merely as means for some supposedly higher purpose.

-Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism²

Why [is it that] the conductors of the Irish Literary Theatre who pooh-pooh the ordinary commercial theatre cannot entrust the performance of their plays dealing with Irish subjects to a company of Irish actors?

-Frank Fay, “The Irish Literary Theatre,” United Irishman (May 1901), 8.³

Ibsen’s Currency

Ibsen’s webs, though they panicked and provoked a generation of playwrights and artists, can and were swept away by their own performances, especially within touring productions competing with a burgeoning field of entertainment technologies. In part because of their sophistication, Ibsen’s plays are susceptible to performances that flatten out or eliminate their critiques of the conditions of theater. In the main circuits of the metropolitan theater industry (including commercial work produced in the metropole itself and imitations of that work on the colonial peripheries), Ibsen’s structural
innovations were rapidly converted into vehicles for exactly the kinds of purely intellectual thrill Ibsen’s plays made problematic. In England, playwrights like Henry Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero de-fanged Ibsen in obvious ways, but early performances like Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s had an equal share in the dull “problem play” reception of Ibsen in both England and Ireland. Ireland’s position within the wider circulation of English, European, and U.S. touring companies ensured that, for playwrights and aspiring producers, the matter of deciding what texts to produce meant entering a tumultuous field of competing aesthetics and economies of prestige. Beerbohm Tree’s theories of the actor’s “imaginative faculty” offer a map of this field and a model of the performance values so many later modernists resisted.

In 1891, Beerbohm Tree, recent founder of the Haymarket Theatre and famous actor of countless Shakespearean and melodramatic roles, delivered a lecture to the London Playgoer’s Club. Tree’s topic was ostensibly the arrival of the Modern Drama, but, according to Tree’s wife, the lecture was “so punctuated with fun and pungent humor…that one hardly knows whether he was admiring or condemning Maeterlinck and Ibsen.” Although Tree’s “passionate admiration for *A Doll’s House, The Enemy of the People* (Dr. Stockmann almost his favorite part) and *The Master Builder* [was] well-known,” moments like this suggest that Tree’s admiration was difficult to distinguish from his love of publicity. In this chapter, I want to connect the faces Tree became famous for, on stage and off, with the reception of Ibsen’s work in Ireland. Tree certainly regarded the attention-grabbing make-up, stage-business, and gestures he employed as deeply authentic products of most intense powers of visualization and imagination.
Nevertheless, the performance aesthetic that results from Tree’s conviction cancels out the meditations on theatricality and melodramatic language in Ibsen’s plays.

A sketch of Tree addressing the club is reprinted in his cousin Max Beerbohm’s collection of tributes published after Tree’s death. It shows an immaculately tuxedoed Tree leaning over the podium, hand on hip, demonstrating the “unconquerable whimsicality of his wit” to a rapt, well-dressed audience whose bonnets and monocles were well in place. In his memoirs, Tree strains to present himself as a figure who could appeal to such high-toned audiences: he could be, he insisted, an intellectual as well as an actor. At every opportunity, Tree turns anecdotes from his life in the theater into broader claims about the prestige and cultural value of theater per se, but, as ever with Tree, it is hard to pin down exactly how serious he is. One thing Tree’s speech to the Player’s Club made abundantly clear was that Tree felt the most important traditions of the theater were under attack. He had witnessed in his years on stage nothing less than a “holy crusade against the Actor-Manager,” waged by modern criticism. Tree obviously relished the way this crusade afforded him the opportunity to deploy his most purple prose: although the critics’ “pangs of vivisection palliated by the chloroform of courtesy” might attack his performances, the moderate controversies they created only helped contribute to his economic success. Yet the crusade—in many ways associated with the work of Ibsen—did mean that the type of acting Tree embodied was losing a certain prestige. As if sensing that he had to tackle the threat directly, Tree soon decided to stage Ibsen’s _An Enemy of the People_.

Choices about whether or not to stage Ibsen and other controversial European playwrights—choices which were at the heart of both Martyn’s and Joyce’s eventual
rejections of the Abbey Theatre—were largely shaped by two factors: Ibsen’s tumultuous reception in London and his being adopted and adapted by the most famous performers of the day. Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s decision to produce Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* is a key moment because it moves Ibsen’s work out of small, independent theaters and into a major touring company’s repertoire. Especially while on tour in Ireland and the U.S., Tree’s production eliminated almost all of the qualities of Ibsen’s work that had inspired the independent theaters in the first place. By following Tree’s production and the way it distorted or elided the form of Ibsen’s work, we can highlight some of the major shaping conditions for writers and entrepreneurs dissatisfied with both drawing-room society drama and the burgeoning London commercial theater industry. In other words, we can sketch out some of the expectations W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory may have had in mind when their talk famously turned to forming a theater in 1899.

Three years before Tree’s lecture, Camelot Classics had published a shilling volume of Ibsen’s plays, with translations by William Archer, Henrietta Frances Lord, and Eleanor Marx-Aveling. Earlier translations had circulated mainly in small, if influential, intellectual circles: at William Morris’s evening meetings at Kelmscott House, in early discussions of the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society, and on the pages of *To-Day* and Annie Besant’s *Our Corner*. In 1884, Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman had produced their infamously bowdlerized adaptation of *Et Dukkehjem*, called *Breaking a Butterfly*, in which a ditzy “Flora” collapses under the strain of arguing with her righteous husband and remains happily encased in her dollhouse marriage. Not only was the production unsuccessful, but it infuriated the socialist and literary groups in England that had been following Ibsen’s career and led to
the translations in the Camelot Classics edition. The shilling volume sold fourteen thousand copies over the next five years, rare for novels and unheard-of for contemporary plays. For twelve pence, the edition made Ibsen’s *Samfundets Støtter, Gengangere, and En Folkefiende* available as *The Pillars of Society, Ghosts*, and *An Enemy of Society*, and soon after, the Novelty Theatre staged the first major commercial production of Ibsen in English: *A Doll’s House* in 1889. Ibsen’s popularity in England was closely associated with the various radical organizations that championed his work, and his controversial reputation was cemented by the famous outrages of the first English production of *Ghosts* in 1891. In part, the wide circulation of Ibsen’s name was considered the most vulgar thing about him: his work was too easily reproduced and too much talked-about. If, as Benedict Anderson has suggested, the rapid spread of niche newspapers, little magazines, and “print capitalism” created the conditions for the imagining of the nation-state, these also, through the sped-up economies of mechanical reproduction, reduced the value and aura surrounding any given famous “name.” All sorts of new publications and periodicals were suddenly able to weigh in on cultural events, and, especially for theatrical reporting, newspaper deadlines loomed large in the composition of reviews. These two phenomena—latent anxieties surrounding the creation of a public sphere and outright fear expressed toward technologies of replication—emerged most clearly in the controversies over the name “Ibsen.”

Ibsen’s name became currency for the excesses of European literary and cultural movements from naturalism to impressionism. On the one hand, these movements were distrusted for their unseemly attention to the realm of the domestic. On the other, the unfiltered lens they used to reproduce or represent that realm struck many commentators
as equally offensive. According to the hyperbolic attacks on Ibsen, his plays were the first step toward allowing vulgar naturalism and eventually all the basest (monetary) motivations to the stage. According to his most ardent defenders, Ibsen’s works were the last defense of the autonomy of art against the depredations of commercialism. These attitudes form a rough outline of “idealistic” and “modernist” positions on Ibsen, and both were vulnerable to the still-potent logic of the “last refuge,” the romantic figure for all sorts of value in a commodified world. Whatever Ibsen himself was up to, the critics presumed, his fame was false and his name was spreading far too quickly. “Ibsenism” and the appearance of “Ibsenites” were clear symptoms of the fact that public spaces and aesthetic values were being debased—not only because of what Ibsen stood for (this was only sneeringly alluded to), but because the very fact that such art was becoming popular and entering intellectual discourse so quickly. 14

“Ibsenism” first appeared as a term for cultish enthusiasts, denoting dogmatism and fanaticism, but the label was quickly embraced by the “cult” itself, immediately polarizing the word with deeply negative or rapturously positive connotations depending on the context. A few European intellectuals, such as Georg Brandes, interpreted the creation of the term as a simple measure of Ibsen’s profound impact on European culture [quote]. For most theatergoers, “Ibsenism” was a loaded term, used to imply a specific array of positive or negative traits. We can see a useful snapshot of Ibsenism in the 1890s in an unsigned review of the 1891 production of Ghosts in the Licensed Victuallers’ Mirror. The notice catalogues the various prurient and overcurious factions colluding with “Ibsenmongers” to fill the theatre: socialists, atheists, iconoclasts, and anarchists, along with “ordinary commonplace women and girls…mixed up with
spectacled, green-complexioned, oddly-dressed females of unhealthy aspect, seemingly as diseased as their minds, who were obviously priestesses of the cult. This cult supposedly dominated the audience “ten to one at least,” but the notice carefully distinguishes the merely deluded from the true believers. It focuses on the faces of the “socialist atheist school,” which became “positively ecstatic” at the performance:

…the heavier lump of dirt than usual was shied at the audience, [this group] would look round with a triumphant glance, as much to say—‘What do you say to that, ye unemancipated? Where now are your babyish Shakespeares and Sheridans, and all the other weak-kneed dramatists, past and present? This is real art; this is the new revelation, the new Scriptures.’

The language of the “triumphant” atheist, who wants to invent a new religion based on ugliness, presents one dimension of the anxiety about “Ibsenism”: the new realist criteria for theater were seen as fiendishly arrogant, ignoring conventional pieties about the connection between beauty and goodness. Ibsenism is linked to a particular affect—scorn—and it is worth noting that this rhetorical move also tries to associate the vulgar content of Ibsen’s plays with a sense of excessive display, whether deliberate (“positively ecstatic”) or unconscious (“green-complexioned”).

The notice goes on to say that others in the audience “looked a little embarrassed,” that some “treated the whole thing as funny, much as they would a bad story, or a packet of French pictures,” and outbursts of applause were “intermingled with some good, honest downright hissing.” The fact that the audience was broken up into conflicting fragments, each responding differently to the play, supposedly signaled its utter failure: unlike successful playwrights, the notice suggests, Ibsen had no idea how to win over an audience as a whole. The tone of the notice itself fluctuates between hyperbolic disgust (for “the most loathsome play that was ever put upon any stage”) and
knowing derision for clubby, self-important “worshippers.” Ibsen’s play provoked anxiety, but the fact that people were taking it seriously presented another level of threat. The positive ecstasy of Ibsen’s followers demanded equally powerful and visible effects from his critics. “Can anyone but a crazy Ibsenite,” the notice asks, “really take these things as an average picture of humanity?”

This seems to me to be one of the most crucial aspects of Ibsen’s reception in English: no matter how “loathsome” or “filthy” the content of Ibsen’s plays were said to be, the most threatening thing about his work was how intelligent people seemed to genuinely admire and appreciate it. Early reviews almost unanimously question the authenticity of this response (suggesting that Ibsenites are faking their own enthusiasm for effect) and the humanity of anyone who could respond that way (suggesting that genuine Ibsenites were insane, diseased, and gendered in ways that made them less than human). The reviewer descends from sarcasm into a moment of genuine revulsion: “…many a man’s face was expressive of disgust; but, I regret to say, that I did not remark such an expression upon any woman’s countenance.” Women, already marked out in the notice as especially vulnerable to Ibsen’s corruption, are here pictured as completely lost. Something about Ibsen and Ibsenites makes women lose their sense of propriety. Finally, the notice answers its own rhetorical question about who could take the events of Ghosts as “an average picture of humanity” by huffily observing that “it may be true of Norwegian humanity, but certainly not of English.”

By the time Tree’s An Enemy of the People opened in London in June of 1893, the tide was beginning to turn in the Ibsen campaign. A few months before the production opened, an unsigned review in the Spectator admitted:
That [Ibsen’s] critics should abhor both his matter and his method, is more than possible; but that they should fail to discover any meaning in the man at all, and can really look upon his plays as sheer drizzling rubbish, is hardly credible.  

On one level, Ibsen was being accepted as an important modern artist, but on another, the process of neutralizing parts of his aesthetic and eliding others was only starting. If, around the time of Tree’s production, outrage began to fade from the newspapers, journals, and reviews, the question of Ibsen’s legacy for actors—the performances Ibsen’s plays seemed to demand of them—remained deeply contested.

To early reviewers, Tree’s Ibsen was something completely shocking because it wasn’t shocking at all: rather than presenting the audience with “allegorical references to aerial harps” or “allusions to symbolical vine-leaves,” one review notes “a sensation of surprise” that, astonishingly, “the motives of the characters are clear and their actions are those of sane people.”

Clement Scott wasted no time in using Tree’s “interesting and convincing” production as a weapon to attack J.T. Grein and the Independent Theatre Society. Scott suggested that the Society deliberately overlooked the play “through their failure to discover in it a sufficiency of those unpleasing qualities which they deem it their mission to thrust before their supporters.”

Furthermore, having lost the battle over the naturalistic content of Ibsen’s plays (and many critics and supporters did consciously employ the rhetoric of “wars” and “campaigns”), conservative and idealist critics attempted to distinguish between “lucid” and “murky” performances. If a performance like Tree’s could be praised highly enough, than it might be possible to censor Ibsen from within, using a tradition of melodramatic acting to neutralize the stinging confrontations enabled by more ‘realistic’ acting styles. Whereas in Ireland, melodrama had long been used to give form to radical political critiques from Boucicault to O’Grady, the London
stage had become a bundle of recontainment strategies, deploying theatrical and melodramatic affects as cues to the audience that certain conventions (such as the fourth wall) were in place and that more radical connections between audience and performers were comfortably foreclosed.

To step back for a moment: this critical strategy is a fascinating development in itself, showing how the idealist aesthetics of critics (even beyond the logics of censorship laid out recently by Tracy Davis and Celia Marshik\textsuperscript{24}) can shape the reception of a playwright as deeply hostile to all forms of idealization as Ibsen. Unlike textual censorship, where the material effects of repression can be marked and become part of the image of the “final” object, theatrical censorship can shape performance in momentous ways without leaving textual traces.\textsuperscript{25} In the reception of Tree’s production, we can see how a tactical enthusiasm, operating within the same logic as revulsion, can equally warp the text. This becomes a crucial aspect of later playwrights’ anxieties about actual theater practices, especially in Ireland, where oratory and vocal performance were already strongly associated with certain idealist pictures. Tree was praised for exactly those elocutionary qualities which R.F. Foster has shown were ideologically loaded in the field of Anglo-Irish etiquette, manners, and self-help.\textsuperscript{26}

In Tree’s hands, \textit{An Enemy of the People} became “an ‘acting play’ “ with a distinct “histrionic aspect,” which gave Tree the opportunity to receive “a loud call…before the curtain at the close.”\textsuperscript{27} Tree’s interpretation of Thomas Stockmann seems to have been dominated by three qualities: “firm will”, “undeveloping conscientiousness”, and an “appearance [which] shows that the persecuted doctor is quite able, as well as willing, to fight.”\textsuperscript{28} When the production arrived in New York, a notice
in the *New York Times* described a protagonist transformed from a naïve simpleton into an action hero:

> He develops from a somewhat irrational and flighty individual into a strong, purposeful man, with a clear vision. It is his idea, in the end, that man is strongest who stands most alone. He is, at that moment, deserted, despised, and rejected […] Yet it is a ‘happy ending’.“29

Though there is some justification in a performance that makes the end of the play ‘happy’ (Ibsen wrote that he was unsure if it should be called a comedy or not30), Tree’s history of playing for the most overt and visible effects suggests that his interpretation of Stockmann missed many of Ibsen’s nuances. The notice for the performance was titled, “A Fine Impersonation of Eccentric Character Cordially Applauded.”31

For Tree, the art of acting meant the inventiveness to become invisible. His performances—of Hamlet, Svengali, Falstaff, and, later, Henry Higgins—were masterful compilations, producing a character by the assemblage of ‘characteristic’ traits, gestures, and quirks so that their actions and intentions could be read in their every move.32 Two of his most reliable crowd-pleasers (which he would bring with him on tour to Ireland and the United States) were *The Ballad-Monger* and *The Red Lamp*, which allowed Tree to show off “the contrast of the starvling poet Gringoire and the cat-footed dropsical Demetrius, and the impossibility of finding the man Tree in either part.”33 A playwright suspicious of this sort of magical imitation or a playwright interested in questioning whether a series of “characteristic” gestures truly capture the inner essence of a person—a playwright like Ibsen—would not find a happy match in Tree’s style of acting. Shaw (in a *tribute*) called Tree “the despair of authors” because his “attitude towards a play was one of whole-hearted anxiety to solve the problem of how to make it please and interest the audience.”34
In “The Imaginative Faculty,” Tree argues that acting cannot be taught; it is “purely an affair of the imagination” (*Thoughts and After-Thoughts*, 95). Like children, actors have “the blessed gift of receptive sensibility” and their art requires “a more delicate poise, a subtler instinct” than most ordinary people can achieve (96). Tree says that little or no academic training should be required for the truly gifted performer, only stage experience. The “pernicious habit of reading books” may “fetter” the imagination and “laborious unimaginative study” is less useful than an actor’s ability “by a look at a picture, or by the scanning of an old manuscript, to project himself into any period of history” (98). In making the strongest possible case for this capacity for imaginative projection, Tree appeals repeatedly to the imagination as the source of genius common to actors and writers: actors are able to intuit the higher, emotional meanings that the playwright intended, sometimes (Tree’s critics would say often) to the neglect of the script.

Tree’s account is particularly useful because it articulates this imaginative projection and its most dangerous “cramp,” self-consciousness, in racial terms and situates the discourse of theatricality within the experience of empire. “[S]elf-consciousness,” says Tree,

> which will often hinder rather than stimulate the nervous energy, is, I think, a curiously English characteristic, and is due in many instances as much to early training as to an inborn tendency. Our Irish brothers—or should I say cousins?—owing to the possession of a more untrammelled imagination, are not nearly so subject to its influence. It is this happy superiority to public opinion that renders the average Irishman such a fluent orator (102).

Adapting Declan Kiberd’s formulation, we could say that Tree invents a quality of English “nervousness” by asserting an Irish “imagination” such that Ireland becomes an
idiom for unconscious creativity and repressed emotional states in an otherwise English body. Tree’s joking hesitation tellingly adds distance to the familial model of relating England and Ireland (brothers–or cousins?), further estranging the Irish “possession.” What Tree calls a “happy superiority to public opinion” indicates a separation from the sphere of civic responsibility and governance. Like Arnold’s descriptions of the Celt, Tree’s account of an Irish “inborn” gift for oration is a positive trait but matches imperialist narratives about people naturally fit or unfit to govern themselves. It also highlights a paradoxical skepticism about public speaking (often used to discredit colonial demagogues) in which oratorical fluency is a sign of the speaker’s isolation from a crowd and nervous, awkward, and perhaps bureaucratic or scripted utterances are more closely aligned with the people. Tree goes on to connect this inborn fluency with a particular literary genre and a concrete role within the Empire:

Most good actors have either Irish or Jewish blood. To the average Irishman is given the faculty of seeing the incidents of life with a dramatic eye, and he has an infinitely greater facility in clothing them in picturesque language. In him the journalistic instinct is strongly developed. A somewhat bloodless battle was fought during the Egyptian war—the battle of Tel-el-Kebir. A newspaper discussion arose as to the pronunciation of this word. The question was whether it should be pronounced according to the frenzied patriotism of the Irish war correspondent: “There they plied the bloody sabre / On thy plains, oh Tel-el-Kebir!” or whether, as the less impassioned and less imaginative Saxon might put it: “The fighting was not too severe / Upon thy plains, Tel-el-Kebir!” (102)

The Irish capacity for the “dramatic” and “picturesque” thus leads to an “instinct” which is visible, for Tree, in concrete stylistic and syntactical choices. Tree takes qualities of spoken utterance (the different metrical stress and pronunciation of final vowel sounds as long or short) and links them to two opposite interpretations of a battle. The “frenzied” and, by implication, “impassioned,” Irish correspondent describes the weapons in the
battle as “bloody” and adds an exclamatory “oh,” heightening the force of the apostrophe. The “less imaginative Saxon” correspondent turns out to be a less effective tool for the imperial project, describing the battle in a drolly understated or awkwardly uninspiring way, but in a way closer to expectations about “neutral” reportage. A furious, primal form of imperialist nationalism, apparently impacting the representations sent back to the metropolis from the colonial margins, is here connected with the trochaic meter increasingly associated with translations of ancient Greek dramas in the 1890s. The blend of anapestic and iambic meters more associated with Shakespeare is coded as stolid and stoic, its very syntax signaling its affective suitability for government.

Despite the clear ideological functions the capacity for “imagination” and “passion” serves in imperial narratives, these same “inborn tendencies” become more ambiguous in an account of theatrical practices like Tree’s. Discussing the plausibility of realistic painted backdrops, Tree drops all pretenses of theater’s illusions being essential or natural. Instead, they are clearly responding to the demands of a historically specific audience.

[...] would it be disturbing an audience’s imagination to see that castle [referenced in stage directions] painted on the cloth? If it did so disturb an audience, then the castle would be out of place. That is to say, if the audience turned to one another and whispered, “That is a castle—how extraordinary!” that would be breaking the illusion. Even more disturbing, however, would be for the audience to turn to one another and to whisper, “But there ain’t no castle!” It is quite conceivable that in former times a finely painted scene would have distracted the attention of the audience, because it was unexpected—but now appropriate illustration is the normal condition of the theatre (58).

Castles on backdrops are expected by modern audiences, so removing them would be more of a “distraction” than leaving them in place. The underlying assumption behind this logic is that audiences’ attention must be focused and that the aim of the theater is to
create an unbroken illusion. Tree subtly concedes that the modern expectation of a backdrop might be slightly philistine by ventriloquizing their confusion with the colloquial “ain’t.” Tree elsewhere uses dialect and colloquialism as a foil for purple expressions, usually as a way of positioning his own arguments as “common sense,” despite an ostentatiously rhetorical flourish now and again.

*The Art of Making Up*

Tree arrived in Dublin in September, following the traditional touring company routes established as far back as the eighteenth century, heading north from London to Manchester and Liverpool, then crossing to Belfast. The draw of major touring companies and repertory productions like Tree’s led to the refurbishment of the Grand Opera House in Belfast in 1895 and the rebuilding of the Theatre Royal in Dublin in 1897. Christopher Morash notes that in the 1890s “the time lag narrowed steadily between London and Dublin openings,” and that touring productions originating in England had to compete with Italian operas, popular productions of Wagner, appearances by French and Italian theater stars, and imported American melodramas like the play version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Additionally, theatergoers could expect regular performances of Goldsmith, Sheridan, revivals of Boucicault, and a torrent of nationalist melodramas like J. W. Whitbread’s *Wolfe Tone* and P.J. Bourke’s *When Wexford Rose*. Despite the popularity and power of these melodramas, Dublin audiences were becoming accustomed to passionate and melodramatic affects as part of “appropriate illustration” rather than signals for participation. Joseph Holloway, inveterate theatergoer and later architect for the Abbey Theatre, adored the Haymarket productions in particular for their professionalism and their mastery of conventional stage illusions, but the sheer variety of
amateur theatricals, dramatic readings, melodramatic extravaganzas, and the number of visiting touring companies recorded in Holloway’s journal shows that Tree’s prestige was no longer assured—in part because the abundance of similar visual effects was habituating audiences to his characteristic techniques. Tree’s turn to Ibsen can be read as evidence of a sense that the Norwegian playwright was resistant to the overproduction of affects and theatricality, both at a local level which could serve to distinguish Tree from competing performers and at a global level where Ibsen’s critiques aligned with other “minor” forms of resistance to imperial modes of over-replication.

On Sept. 28th, 1894, Tree’s production opened at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. One of the three big patent theaters in the city, the Gaiety had been a dedicated touring house since its opening in 1871, hosting productions of Goldsmith, Sheridan, and Shakespeare, American shows, the comedian Edward Royce, Pinero, Jones, Robertson, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Wilde (briefly), and German opera.40 That day, the newspapers announced the completion of Cecil Rhodes’ transcontinental telegraph, and, that night, some of Tree’s audience may have been stolen away by a popular lecture, delivered by a member of the Photographic Society of Ireland, “Pictorial Ramble Over the Hill of Howth,” which had the added attraction of being “illustrated with lime-light views.”41 The Irish Times ran a notice that headlined the curtain-raiser The Balladmonger, starring Tree as Gringoire, with the performance of An Enemy of the People to follow listed in smaller print below.42 The fact that Tree is the only cast member listed, and that the notice makes a point of listing him as starring in both the curtain-raiser and the main show Friday night, suggests that Tree’s spectacular “invisibility” was the main drawing
attraction. Tree’s *Hamlet*, played in rep with the melodrama, *A Bunch of Violets*, had already been successful the previous few nights.

Holloway did not attend a performance of Tree’s production that year, but he joyfully noted Tree’s return to the city. Holloway had made it a point to attend Haymarket productions whenever they were in town because of Tree’s “special interest to elocutionists”, his “extraordinary talent for the portrayal of characters…with a minuteness of detail, simply *marvelous,*” and for the fact that Tree “brings the Art of Making up to a perfection […] it totally sinks his identity in each part.” Given the common goals of contemporaneous elocution classes in Dublin—advertising the elimination of accent and the creation of distinguishing characteristics—Tree’s ability to sink his identity into a part was not only a draw as pure spectacle, but was also a marketable commodity. Holloway’s only complaint was “the detestable fiddling during acts”; he growled that “it is too absurd to imagine that every pathetic character should be provided with his own particular band to accompany them in every situation like Mary’s little lamb.” Nevertheless, Holloway dutifully notes Tree’s annual stops in Dublin, repeatedly calling them “the great event of our theatrical season.”

Two features of Tree’s performance demonstrate the extent to which Ibsen could be assimilated to older performance traditions and suggest how his texts’ resistance to these sorts of performances could have been especially attractive to playwrights in Ireland. First, Tree’s production emphasized the strangeness and exoticism of “Norwegianness.” His performance of Dr. Stockmann relied heavily on Stockmann’s ethnicity as a set of stereotypical features. Emphasizing Stockmann’s “simplicity,” Tree played to his audience’s national and urban prejudices about parochial and isolated
Norwegian life. A later review of the same production glowingly observes that Tree was “splendidly Scandinavian. His large, genial blonde head, his shabby clothes, his spontaneous manner were exactly in keeping.” Such a performance mitigates any connection Ibsen’s play might make between the corruption of the community on stage and the community of the audience. The audience can maintain a condescending distance from the town’s rejection of Stockmann and Stockmann’s naivety in thinking he will be praised for telling the truth. Tree’s performance is the reverse of what Edward Said and Declan Kiberd have called the “cartographic” impulse of postcolonial cultures: rather than attempt to engage with the presentness of corruption or deprivation by mapping its effects, Tree’s *Enemy* transforms such corruption into a mark of distance from the (metropolitan, imperial) center of culture.

By transforming Ibsen’s analysis (of how a small town creates enemies) into an instance of “local color,” Tree’s performance disables the play’s provocative claims on its audience and transforms it into a spectacle, professionally executed but little different from the “pictorial ramble” around Howth.

Tree’s performances anticipate another key image for understanding the relationship between theatricality and the emergence of modernism: the Prince of Wales’s infamous “Grand Tour” in 1922, in which he donned the “native” costumes of each realm of the empire he visited. A gallery of portraits of Tree’s most famous roles presents a neat catalogue of rigid stereotypes and a preternatural confidence that national and ethnic difference is completely exhausted in “the art of Making up” and the details of costume. Tree’s later successes as a producer and actor of “modern” Shakespeare depended on demonstrating that Shakespeare could be performed with a “pictorial” attention to small, “characteristic” gestures as well as the more rhetorical, stylized
performance of the previous generation. These performances occasionally gave new life to Elizabethan work and Tree was famous for improvising parts anew, adding new gestures and movements instinctively in response to an audience, but Tree’s whole technique separated the world of the play from the world of the audience. The differences Tree worked so hard to make mesmerizing effectively undermined the play at decisive moments because the audience was constantly aware of the fact that they were watching a virtuoso performance. ⁵⁰

A second feature of Tree’s performance shows the risk Ibsen’s work represented for the whole theatrical dynamic and how that risk could be recontained. Tree’s overuse of “stage business”—the unscripted nervous twitches and funny walks of comedy and the excessive or obsessive gestures of tragedy—suggests how much the actor-manager had to add to Ibsen’s text to “solve the problem of how to make it please and interest the audience.” A New York review complained that “the climaxes of the acts [were] made either ultra-theatrical or broadly farcical; one of the comedians exhibited a burlesque ‘wheeze,’ and another entered and departed from rooms in the good old low-comedy fashion.” ⁵¹ The presence of so many other broad and “interesting” characters likely means that Tree, in order to dominate the stage, exaggerated Stockmann’s comical exuberance, played him as comfortably separate from the audience by dint of his ‘Norwegian-ness’ and his being unluckily caught up in the “gloomy” situation of one of Ibsen’s plays. It is plausible that Tree made these elements more extreme in response to a New York audience—Tree was nothing if not sensitive to what attracted that night’s crowd—but it still suggests that Ibsen’s detailed attention to ordinary language was distorted.
Lecturing on “Fallacies of the Modern Stage,” Tree criticized those plays which insist that it is “the function of art to give us nature in all its crudeness.” Taking Thérèse Raquin as an example, he argues that such crude forms of realism are the work of “an impassioned photographer rather than that of an imaginative artist.” Their “sphere of influence” would have been much wider “if with the woof of realism the golden thread of poetic imagination had been entwined!” Although the difference between Zola’s realism and Ibsen’s is immense, this is not, judging from the confused reaction of the Playgoer’s Club, a distinction Tree made in his lecture or in his performances. Both, in Tree’s opinion, required the “interesting” additions of theatrical art. As with Tree’s marketable image as a master of “the art of Making up,” his introduction of new stage business under the guise of “imagination” is a sly way for Tree to distinguish his product (entertaining affects) from the competing images of photography.

Willie and Frank Fay, who created the amateur acting company which would later perform the first productions of the Irish Literary Theatre, attended Tree’s first week of performances in Dublin. Willie Fay regarded seeing An Enemy of the People as his “first personal experience” with the “latest developments and experiments” in modern drama. For him, Ibsen’s play represented a bracing introduction to the new currents in theater on the continent:

It was an exciting first night. The theatre was full, and I have never seen, before or since, an intelligent audience so completely flabbergasted. They could make neither head nor tail of it. “There were no love-scenes.” “There was no hero or heroine.” “A play about baths and sewerage.” “The ridiculous suggestion that a corporation would act against its own interests or that of the town.” “It wasn’t a play at all.” These were some of the criticisms.
Despite Tree’s additions, the structural modernity of Ibsen’s play was apparently strange enough to affect the audience, although here in Fay’s account they seem to be repeating many of the criticisms it had been popular to make a few years before in London. “But Frank and I,” says Willie, were delighted, for our knowledge of plays from the Restoration to our own times enabled us to recognize that this great dramatic genius had broken new ground and blazed a trail that has been followed by every dramatist since his time. We saw that Ibsen had discerned the dramatic possibilities of the lives of every class in the community. In addition, he had invented a new method of construction and had done away with asides and soliloquies. Obviously this kind of play demanded from the actor an entirely new technique. The rhetorical method suited to the old comedies, Shakespeare or The Lady of Lyons, but would be of as little use in Pillars of Society as it would be in Maeterlinck’s Intruder.55

Tree’s performance was neither the old “rhetorical method” nor the “new technique” Fay saw as necessary for modern drama: Tree’s additional stage business and showy make-up were exactly the elements the Fay brothers eliminated from their early productions at the Abbey. This was partly driven by the necessity of short rehearsal schedules, amateur performers, and low budgets, but the Fays clearly recognized the potential of pared-down performances to complement an aesthetic like Ibsen’s, in which theatricality itself was put on trial.

If not Tree’s sort of performance, what was the “entirely new technique” the Fays thought would be suitable for Ibsen’s work? The “staring ahead” effect which became associated with the Abbey Theater was a stark innovation not only because it rejected the melodramatic gesticulations popular in the Queens’ and in music-halls, but because it forced audiences to attend to vocal inflections and to gestures much smaller and more nuanced than Tree’s. Holloway complained that the amateur actors directed by the Fays spoke directly out to the audience:
What could be more inartistic or unnatural than the way the four [actors] got into a line about a yard and a half behind the footlights, and about two paces apart, and, staring out at the audience all the time, commenced to converse to each other for all the world like mechanical figures with their “buttons” pressed.\textsuperscript{56}

Holloway attended enough amateur theatricals to know that Frank Fay’s direction here was partly practical: the size of the stage and the acoustics of many of the rehearsal spaces the ILT used required straightforward blocking. Yet the performance Holloway is complaining about, George Moore’s \textit{The Bending of the Bough}, took place at the Gaiety Theatre six years after Tree’s production of Ibsen. Holloway recognizes that the Fays are making a deliberate choice to reject the performance values of Tree and the other English touring companies that made up the program at the Gaiety.

In what follows, I explore what in Ibsen’s play might have influenced this choice. As we saw, the structural innovations of Ibsen’s work were, according to Willie Fay, still apparent and still confusing to audiences expecting asides and soliloquies. Tree’s performance depended on the magnetism of a star ‘disappearing’ into a role and had strained to interest audiences with novel ‘business’ and unusual or exotic ways of speaking. In contrast, Ibsen’s play is exactly concerned with usual business and ordinary ways of speaking.

The text of \textit{An Enemy of the People} sets the play in “a coastal town in southern Norway,” but very few of the play’s effects depend on the characters’ being marked as “Norwegian” or “Scandinavian”—in fact, a range of voices and registers in the play differentiate various classes and sub-groups in the town. The mayor has a marked dislike for “these people of peasant stock” and the vocabularies of characters are more marked by occupation and social position than by nationality.\textsuperscript{57} Rhetorical differences are
constantly foregrounded—especially when they lead to misunderstandings that provoke skepticism about the ability of the other person to communicate their thoughts at all.

Early in the play, the mayor suspects that his brother, Dr. Stockmann, has written a dangerous report about the town baths, which the mayor calls “the very life principle of the town”—a phrase which seems overheated from the start (285). When Stockmann refuses to say what he intends to do with the report, the mayor begins making indirect threats by “insisting” on the value of “legally constituted authorities” (290-291). These are exactly the sort of verbal cues Stockmann misses or will never acknowledge. No actual threat has been made, but the mayor’s tone has shifted from straightforward discomfort to the anxious assertion of power. Rather than adjust to this shift, Stockmann’s immediate reaction is to doubt the sincerity and, in a good-humored way, the sanity of his brother: “Are you stark, raving mad? You’re completely on the wrong track…” (291). To Stockmann, the mayor’s recourse to abstract talk about the role of the “individual” and the “whole” society indicates a deep misunderstanding. Stockmann responds to his brother as if he is unable to address the question in any but the most general terms. However, rather than respond to Stockmann’s statements at the same rhetorical level (“let’s not fly at each other like this”), the mayor changes registers—and pointedly notes the change: “I’m not in the habit of flying at people, as you put it” (291). From the start, Ibsen links Stockmann’s fate to the way he is insensible to the subtle shifts and differences in the ways people use language. As sympathetic as Ibsen was to beliefs in scientific integrity and the freedom of the individual, he makes it clear that these are linked to specific modes of speaking and of interpreting the speech of others.
When early reviews of Tree’s *An Enemy of the People* praised its ‘surprisingly’ lucid philosophical arguments, they missed the more complex tension between ways of talking in the play. The two brothers not only speak from different positions (loosely linked to their vocations), but they go about interpreting each other differently. The mayor weighs everything his brother says against a clear, already-established set of communicative goals: to give information quickly and to delete or minimize information harmful to the greater good (as interpreted by the mayor). In contrast, Stockmann is constantly using language to register things and events as they strike him, as present impressions—and he is always trying to respond at the level at which they are received. Unlike his brother, Stockmann has no inkling that language can be used to modulate or fake the registration of impressions—the idea that language could be anything but a medical machine or camera strikes him as immoral. When Stockmann thinks he is getting good-natured chiding from his brother, he responds accordingly, not thinking that anyone’s words could have underlying meanings, or, at least, not underlying meanings so systematic that they control what someone can and cannot say. The “lucid” picture of the “greater-good” ideology the mayor articulates is actually the projection of a much more complicated set of drives and motivations, but it nevertheless controls his words in a way Stockmann’s never seem to be. Abstract talk like the mayor’s (“the life principle of the town”) serves as a mask for a dense network of jealousies, but so does Stockmann’s eventual denunciation of the “compact majority”: Stockmann’s inability to see other points of view becomes a source of moral courage, but Ibsen shows how it is a built-in feature of his language from the beginning.
Stockmann obstinately organizes his language around the truth of the present moment and believes his sympathetic responsiveness to the world and to others guarantees his righteousness. Although it can easily be overplayed as mere eccentricity, Stockmann’s honesty to the present moment often emerges where he interrupts the conversation to point something out or demand that something be noticed. Earlier in the same scene with his brother, Stockmann is showing off some of the new luxuries of his household and seems to be taking his cues to speak from the objects around him, even the furniture. He excitedly shows his brother the new tablecloth and the new lampshade:

> it makes the room so cozy, don’t you think? Just stand right here—no, no, no, not there. Just—so! Look, how the light concentrates there where it falls. Really, I find that quite elegant. Don’t you? (289)

Stockmann thinks the light can only be experienced correctly from just the right position, but, once it has been, he cannot imagine how anyone could disagree with his assessment. Even in this brief moment of banter, Stockmann’s quietly insistent phrasing (caught in Fjelde’s “really” and “quite”) anticipates the way he frames his own absolute conviction in his hold on the truth. It is also worth noting that Stockmann is first introduced to the audience through a series of increasingly insistent judgments about hospitality (dragging Capt. Horster to dinner: “Imagine, Katherine […] he almost didn’t want to come up”), appetite (“…isn’t it wonderful to watch young people eat?”), knowledge (after having “hardly ever seeing a stranger with a fresh idea to share—to me, it’s as if I’d been plunked down in the middle of a swarming metropolis”), and finally what could be called a test case of aesthetic judgment, about a lampshade (287-89).

The conflict between the two brothers can be diagrammed as an opposition between two pictures of language’s relationship to the world. One derives sense from
socially recognized (if egoistically interpreted) principles about the “greater good.” The other derives sense from facts established away from the influence of party programs and community interests. Although in letters Ibsen confessed to the attraction of Stockmann’s vision that the minority is always right, he also implied that his play was a critique of this view, not a full-throated endorsement. The notion that great truths must be antisocial, that language must remain immanent and can thus remain non-ideological and non-theoretical, would become a central problem of Ibsen’s last plays. Early productions of Enemy and the playwright’s adoption by various radical causes caused Ibsen to rethink the limitations of imagining art as a complete escape from the majority. There are many similar moments of recoil and recalibration in the early texts of modernist theater from Schnitzler to Strindberg, gradually moving from critiques of theatricality to visions of replacing or transcending its practices completely.

Erich Auerbach lists three characteristics of modernist writing which may help describe the complex relationship Ibsen manages to establish between the various modes of language on stage and the claims those modes make on an audience, claims which seem both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. In a modernist representation there is

a chance occasion releasing process of consciousness; a natural and even, if you will, a naturalist rendering of those processes in their peculiar freedom, which is neither restrained by a purpose nor directed by a specific purpose of thought; elaboration of the contrast between ‘exterior’ and ‘interior’ time [...]”.

This is a useful way of describing the subtle limitations in Stockmann’s vision of language: chance occasions with objects and people look as if they release his process of consciousness in utterly purposeless ways—that is, it seems not to advance the plot—but
Stockmann’s discourse does come to be dominated by a specific purpose, increasingly the thought of clarifying and enunciating his own separation from the majority and the consequent purity of his position. At first, his enunciations of such freedom mark exactly the kind of purposeless (i.e. eccentric) talk the mayor is incapable of. The mayor even thinks of his own processes of consciousness as (uniquely!) restrained by a larger purpose. Gradually, Stockmann’s speeches are dominated by his own truthfulness rather than the world to which he is claiming to be most attentively and accurately responsive.

Tree returned to Dublin in 1896 and 1897, but An Enemy of the People disappeared from his repertoire (The Red Lamp and The Ballad-Monger remained favorites). Critics and reviewers otherwise disposed to praise Tree were forced to admit that this play in no way suited his talents. Despite its lucidity, it was not what was expected. This points to one of the most important resemblances between Ibsen’s texts and the plays associated with the Irish dramatic revival: the talents which Ibsen’s texts did call for were “amateur” or “ordinary” ones, in contrast with the oversophisticated acting traditions of Tree and Irving. An “entirely new technique” was called for, one that somehow blended the directness of “staring out at the audience the whole time” and the sense that what was being staged was somehow “ordinary,” or at least made some claim on the way the audience’s world worked. Intellectuals in Dublin and London often felt Ibsen’s plays deserved a “serious” rather than “theatrical” reading, but, at the same time, the domesticity and ordinariness of Ibsen’s language (despite and because of problems in translation) encouraged a widespread reaction in audiences to say, “I could do that.”

Paradoxically, Tree’s performance made some aspects of Ibsen’s art newly accessible: in making the play seem parochial. Tree implied that parochial material could
have an international cachet, while, at the same time, his overreliance on stage-business highlighted the limits of his performance aesthetic for a serious Irish theater. Willie and Frank Fay’s later directing and performance practices show that their clearest imperative is to avoid Tree’s kind of idiosyncratic, mesmeric gesticulation. As Ibsen was translated into the English commercial stage, the limits of its theatrical conventions became clearer to Irish audiences. Unlike the radical energy of more overtly political melodramas, the theatricality of the touring companies demonstrated how politics could be reduced to autonomous displays of innate character. Even when plays such as Ibsen’s foreground the embeddedness of such displays in wider patterns of expression and articulation—and even when a play’s force depends on the audience’s sense of complicity with one or another of these wider patterns of expression—performances such as Tree’s make these displays into a distinct commodity. Without some claim on the phenomenological world shared with the audience, the analysis of rhetorical types becomes the circulation of stereotypes. Tree’s impersonations struck many audiences as decidedly unreal by dint of their outright virtuosity—they had value as performances, but not as performances of anything in particular. Ironically, this figure of the artist as an actor, damned to expression and caught up in the logic or script being spoken, is the image Ibsen analyzes in his late work and the image that, inflected through questions of anthropological origins and national identities, becomes a central problem for the Irish Revival and the modernisms that emerge out of it.
CHAPTER 3

ECHO SIGN

The world is an orchestra where every living thing plays one entry and then gives his place to another. We must be careful to play all the notes; it is for that we are created. If we play well we are not exorbitantly wretched.

-Synge, “Vita Vecchia”

After his first visit to Inis Meáin in 1898, John M. Synge wrote that “[o]n an island in the Atlantic, within a day’s journey from Dublin, there is still a people who live in conditions older than the Middle Ages, and have preserved in an extraordinary degree the charm of primitive man.” Synge’s subsequent writing career depends on unravelling all the compact assumptions twisted into this sentence: the “charm” of the primitive, the possibility of “preserving” the past, and the value of forms of life “older than the Middle Ages.” None of these assumptions persist into Synge’s plays with the romantic cast given them here, and nine years later his approach to another island was conspicuously more anxious. Synge feels an “indescribable enjoyment” rowing out to the Great Blasket Island, but he is careful to distinguish the voyages in time (“I had not been in [a long canoe] for two or three years”) and topography (“the height of the mountains round the bay, and the sharpness of the rocks, making the place singularly different from the sounds about Aran, where I had last travelled in a curragh”) (TI 138). The subtle drift in Synge’s description from measurable to felt qualities (height, sharpness, sound, time) carries into his first impressions of the island itself:
As we came nearer the island, which seemed to rise like a mountain out of the sea, we could distinguish a crowd of people in their holiday clothes, standing or sitting along the brow of the cliff watching our approach; and in one place only a patch of cottages with tarred roofs of felt, on the face of the hill several hundred feet about the line of surf. A little later we doubled into a cove among the rocks, and I landed at a boatslip [...] At the head of a steep zig-zag path we came out among the people, who crowded round us, and shook hands with the men who had come with me (TI 138-9).

After the sublime experience of an island, mingled with memories of Aran, rising up amidst new sounds like a mountain out of the water, Synge finds he is being watched. A crowd on holiday, watching them as they arrive. Only after they have been observed, after they have become part of a more modern economy consuming the Blasket Islands in a different way, do they see “a patch” of cottages, still indistinct. The fact that they then “doubled into” a cove and took a “zig-zag” path before coming out “among the people” offers one way of reading the relationship between Synge’s aesthetic/ethnographic perspective and the view of the “crowd of people in their holiday clothes, standing or sitting” (TI 139).

The phrase omitted from the passage above, which did not appear in revised versions of the essay, makes explicit what I am suggesting Synge’s imagery implies, that is, that his representations of rural culture are accompanied by the ambiguous sensation he says he experienced arriving on Blasket Island: “a sharp qualm of excitement I always feel on one of these little islands where I am to stay for weeks” (TI 139). Synge is possessive, yet aware that this possessiveness is both experientially disorienting and the product of a concrete displacement: it excites and panics him in ways not easily separated from the charge of seeing something new (like the crowd) or the time he will spend “away” (weeks). Where does this “qualm of excitement” come from? The first two
phrases of Synge’s earlier essay, “[o]n an island in the Atlantic, within a day’s journey from Dublin,” create a similar tension: how is it that something so close (spatially) can be so far away (temporally)? Where does the experience of modernity start to feel uneven?

According to Fredric Jameson’s influential if still controversial account, the distance of the metropolis from productive forces in the colonies passes over into a felt absence at the heart of modernist writing. In particular, modernist style can be coordinated with the experience of space: representations of infinity in E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* signal the globe-spanning but somehow unmappable spaces of empire. However, the literature of the metropolis, through various recontainment strategies, places “a systematic block on any adequate consciousness of the structure of the imperial system”; this block creates “obvious consequences in the aesthetic realm, where the mapping of the new imperial world system becomes impossible, since the colonized other who is its essential other component or opposite number has become invisible” (MI 50).

As Jed Esty has recently argued, the usefulness of Jameson’s interpretation is that it reads “narrative form not just as a self-conscious device for criticizing British imperialism but also as a politically unconscious mode of writing that registers its place within the horizons of empire.” Esty admirably synthesizes Jameson and Benedict Anderson’s equally influential thesis about nations as imagined communities: “[…] while the culture of imperial modernism represented itself as an expanding and synthesizing universalism *at the periphery* (where it encountered the putatively whole structures of tribal premodernity), it registered an attenuated or absent totality *at the core*, where knowledge of the inside was mystified into the atomized but dazzling unreality of metropolitan perception.” Modernism is thus a name for the incommensurability between the
privileged epistemological position of the imperial observer and the actuality of objects and people on the periphery. For Jameson, this incommensurability results in necessary ideological foreclosures; modernist texts ultimately obscure rather than critique colonial realities.

Gregory Castle and Michael Valdez Moses have recently elaborated on similar models of modernism emerging from the experience of empire, but both have tried to make room for particular formal techniques which are both critical and conscious (although both, as in Jameson, connect contradictions in these forms to wider discursive imperatives). Starting from a critique of Edward Said’s reading of imperialist and modernist writing as “subjugating the pliable native environment to the scientific and epistemological categories of its omnipotent and omniscient European intelligence,” Moses argues instead that the characteristic modernist “experiences of darkness, of radical alienation, of psychological vertigo and emotional disorientation” are moments when a mind “finds itself at a loss, overthrown, confused, panicked, frustrated, and turned back upon itself.”

Joseph Conrad’s narratives expose the violence of colonialism directly, and they try “to generate in the reader a cognitive and emotional dissonance that is the experiential ‘aesthetic’ correlative of the shock felt by Conrad’s characters when confronted with the unsavory realities of Western imperialism.” Furthermore, these “aesthetic correlatives” are a response to the uneven systems of transportation and communication throughout the empire, the anachronous and elliptical information produced by spotty telegraphy, misdirected letters, late ships, and unreliable or distant witnesses. The concrete experience of receiving or attempting to construct narratives...
across the disrupted, disorienting time of empire is expressed in modernist representational techniques.

If Conrad’s prose reenacts the gaps in inter-continental communications, Joyce’s prose, according to Castle, critically reenacts the contradictions in inter-cultural communication. Castle compares nascent evolutionist and functionalist theories in anthropology with the representation of Irish “peasants” and folk culture in the Celtic Revival.11 The ambiguous position of Anglo-Irish Revivalists shared many of the contradictions of ethnographers’ ideal ‘participant-observers,’ with the important difference that Revivalists like Yeats, Synge, and Joyce could “explore the critical potential of inauthentic representations in the ongoing struggle for national self-determination and self-identification”12 Whereas ethnographers had to “repress the desire for subjective response and ‘counter-narratives’ in the production of a primary, authoritative ethnographic text (relegating the expression of such desires, when they arise, to unofficial or private texts),” the Irish Revivalists were “free to incorporate such desires into a primary text, having no disciplinary pressures to suppress subjective responses or the fragmentation and multiplication of narrative perspective”13 The Revivalists produce texts that defer or disorient the discursive authority over native subjects early anthropology sought to maintain, especially when the Irish texts focus on “the liberatory power of the inauthentic and inessential”14

The theater is the paradigmatic space in which liberatory powers of inauthenticity are supposed to emerge, but it is also a patented and regulated space where liberation is only one simulation among other entertainments. Complementing the studies of spatial (non)perception, representational disorientation, and ethnographic imagination, this
chapter analyzes a series of Synge’s experiments in theatrical realism, finding that they articulate similarly ambiguous relations between metropolitan literary forms and colonial modes of production, and that they arrive at responses to this ambiguity strikingly different than those found in his prose narratives. As in Ibsen’s late work, Synge’s plays develop “internal” critiques of theater and theatricality, i.e. plays that disturb the conditions of theatricality but do not fully reject the theaters in which they are performed. Like his anxious account of the doubled primitivism and modernity of the Aran and Blasket islands, Synge’s drama focuses on the ways language and gestures can come to seem artificial or excessive. I hope to show that this sense of theatricality cuts both ways. At times, particular speech acts and gestures seem liberated from their contexts, as when Christy Mahon’s lyrical turns of phrase become the kind of autonomously magnificent constructions Yeats praised early and often. But at other times, speech acts and gestures in Synge’s plays seem abstract or alienating, formally admirable but empty. These are the moments when Yeats’s native “rooted man” becomes the critical “evil genius” of the Abbey. Both these labels have been peeled off as Synge’s thoughtful travel essays, intense language study, and complex relation to Irish nationalist groups have been more carefully examined. Yet the complex aesthetic created by Synge and other “realist” dramatists is still often interpreted by means of political resonance or as a precursor to later modernist experiments, i.e. as either politically radical uses of dessicated forms or flawed proto-modernist effects.

Theatrical Bodies

A year after The Descent of Man, Charles Darwin published some of his most speculative and controversial ideas in a small follow-up volume, The Expression of the Emotions in
Man and Animals. Darwin shows that human emotional responses could only be differentiated in degree and not kind from the responses of higher animals: we share various capacities of intelligence and emotional life, including certain forms of language and social behaviors. In making his case, Darwin includes not only observational data, but also anecdotes, reports from colonial informants, and photographs of people supposedly displaying the emotions he attempts to catalogue. Darwin gradually creates a compelling image of animal affectivity infusing what had previously seemed to be learned or “civilized” behavior. Quotations from Shakespeare appear several times in Darwin’s text as examples of human emotional complexity, but his argument as a whole makes mimetic representation in general, and theatrical expression in particular, uncomfortably “natural.” Even the minute gestures which conventional theater relied on to signal “innate” or moral character might be the outcome of generations of natural selection. Far from being automatic signs of clearly defined interior states, emotional expressions were now much more ambiguous. They might now be symptoms of ancient biological inheritances or uncomfortably primal drives: gestures which had previously been dismissed as “theatrical” could now make entirely different and dangerously definitive claims on an audience’s attention.

After reading both Darwin’s Origin of Species and Descent of Man alongside a wide range of social philosophy in the 1890s, J.M. Synge presented his own, equally disorienting, picture of the conditions of expression in a series of plays produced at the Abbey Theatre from 1903 to his death in 1909. Even Synge’s first published play, the short one-act comedy, In the Shadow of the Glen—creates an uncanny sense of the relationship between human language, animal instincts, and adapted environments. In
Synge’s work, theatricality—the sense that an utterance or gesture is excessively mimetic or draws an uncomfortable attention to the process of spectatorship—becomes an occasion for disturbing audiences’ expectations about the nature of human expressive action. Whether those expectations are shaped by the criteria of aesthetic idealism, making beauty the outcome of goodness and truth, or of emergent modernist aesthetics, making lyrical language autonomous from its social and economic conditions, early audiences found Synge’s work disorienting. As I hope to show, the still-startling aspect of Synge’s work for contemporary audiences is his focus on where expression ends: in various forms of speechlessness that have nothing to do with inexpressible content and everything to do with the material forms speech has been forced to take.

For both Darwin and Synge, the gestures and affects which were most vulnerable to being called theatrical were nevertheless deeply rooted in patterns of response and behavior which had evolved over generations. At one point, Darwin uses a quotation from Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* to describe the surprising range and power of non-linguistic expressive behavior: “They seemed almost, with staring on one another, to tear the cases of their eyes; there was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture…” (quoted in *Expression* 219). The idea that the intensity of a gesture like tearing the cases of one’s eyes or a body’s speaking without words was susceptible to being faked was a pointed criticism made time and again by later modernists—Jarry, Yeats, Pound, Artaud—against the naturalist stage. How could theatrical conventions, without elaborate literary intervention, possibly get at the actual forces and intensities at play here? A number of the most influential transformations of theater and performance in the twentieth century originate in a resistance to the naturalist stage, but Synge’s
wide reading in the comparative sciences and Darwin in particular allowed him to borrow from it more liberally: filling the stage with “authentic” furniture and objects because, shockingly, their authenticity was on the same fragile continuum as that of customs, language, and individual expressions of emotion.

Although speculative, Darwin’s *Expression of Emotions* was a clear extension of his argument in *Descent of Man* and a partial response to Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology*, both of which Synge had read in 1895. Synge’s diaries and letters show that Darwinian concepts, especially as found in *Descent of Man*, deeply influenced the entire range of his intellectual interests. Criss-crossing from philology to sociology to comparative linguistics and literature, Synge deliberately used evolutionism and scientific models of inquiry to ground his understanding of imaginative work. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar has persuasively argued that “the greatest ‘shock of new material’ to occur in his life was not (as Yeats contended) his visit to Aran, but his introduction to evolutionary theory.” Synge famously invoked reading Darwin as the terrible and defining experience of his childhood, casting his recognition of the truth of evolution as the primary trauma of his life:

> When I was about fourteen I obtained a book of Darwin’s. It opened in my hands at a passage where he asks how we can explain the similarity between a man’s hands and a bird’s or bat’s wings except by evolution. I flung the book aside and rushed out into the open air—it was summer and we were in the country—the sky seemed to lost its blue and the grass its green. I lay down and writhed in an agony of doubt (Synge, *Collected Works* 10-11).

Synge’s conversion was probably not as dramatic (or early) as he here suggests, but the problems emerging in the juxtaposition of bats’ wings and human hands shape all his work for the theater. The sensation Synge describes of color draining out of the world
can be found at the edges of all the bright, passionate dialogue of his plays. This is a sensation he wanted his audiences to share.

Synge’s reading in the comparative sciences suggests how he struggled to balance what Gregory Castle and others have called the modernist primitivism in *The Aran Islands*: he wanted to record “primitive” life, but a gradually dawning consciousness of his differences from native Irish speakers forces him to rethink the frameworks he has brought to interpret that life. The narrator’s attempts to impose an impressionist or symbolist meanings on his story begin to seem forced and inappropriate: he begins to realize that Maeterlinck’s *Le Trésor des Humbles*, which he brought with him to the islands, cannot provide a key to understanding the islanders. Linking the surprising aspects of Aran life to sophisticated European literary movements is the beginning of understanding that they have value, but it is not, for Synge, a connection that comes without a clear cost. There is a deepening sense in *The Aran Islands* that the poetry of its images are as much a product of his own isolation and strangeness.

Synge’s earliest experiments with writing dramatic dialogue were intimately involved with the Wicklow dialect he heard in long walks in the hills around Dublin and, famously, the phrases he heard through “a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant-girls in the kitchen” (*Collected Works* 34). This much-analyzed construction from the preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* captures Synge’s self-presentation as an artist. Yet it also shows the vulnerability of Synge’s work to Yeats’s influential reimagining. Yeats easily recasts such moments as examples of Synge as the naturally noble artist, ‘unfitted for politics,’ separate from the world, and only seeking beauty in things harsh and strange.
But Synge’s interest in the harsh and the strange, like his relationship with “serving-girls” and rural Ireland more generally, was less straightforward than this passage suggests. It is almost too easy to read the scene as one in which a voyeuristic Anglo-Irish landlord spies on the help, and then takes the everyday language of Wicklow peasants as available for symbolic appropriation—as raw material for transformation into an ‘aesthetic’ language. Declan Kiberd has argued against this picture of Synge, noting his fluency and conscientiousness in translating subtle syntactic constructions and poetic tropes from the Irish. More recently, Kiberd has argued that Synge’s work is part of a tradition of bilingualism and cultural hybridity embedded in the history of Ireland and England: Hiberno-Irish transformations are a “minor” form in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the various “lines of flight” of minorities in language and literature.

Synge’s first full play, *When the Moon Has Set* (which Yeats and Lady Gregory rejected), and his first attempts at lyrical language in dialect both make use of the sounds of Wicklow and its people—but both were probably begun during Synge’s sojourn in Germany in 1893-4. Ostensibly a music student in Oberworth and Würzburg, Synge’s interest in languages gradually overtook his interest in composition. As this happened, he was reading an English translation of Richard Wagner’s essay on Beethoven, which, as Synge’s biographer has noted, appended important passages from Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*. How did Wagner’s ideas about theater—evident even in his essays on music—fit with the picture of expression Synge had found in Darwin? Wagner’s aesthetic program elevates the total theatrical work of art into a value in itself: Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* incorporates music, dance, and even literature into its awe-inducing gestures, which act as both culmination and total expression. At a time when
*Tannhäuser* was popular in Dublin and especially as performed in Belfast’s lush, well-regarded new opera house, Wagner’s theories not only erase doubt about the nature of human expression, they mark the point of its culminating, and eerily final, manifestation.\(^{28}\) Arthur Symons describes Wagner’s book as “show[ing] us how the action of music is to shut us off from the outer world, where we can dream, as it were, awake, redeemed from the strivings of the individual will, and at one with nature, with our inmost selves.”\(^{29}\) Though appended as an elaboration of Wagner’s concept of total theater, the fragments of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in Synge’s edition also suggest the ultimate impossibility of such a form: “Our capacity for representation whilst dreaming is immeasurably superior to our imaginative faculty.”\(^{30}\) For Schopenhauer, even our imaginations—and by extension the grand gestural theater of Wagner—pale in comparison to the unconscious. (Symons significantly argues that Wagner was “led by” but is “going beyond” Schopenhauer.) At the time Synge began thinking seriously through the forms of dramatic dialogue and representation, he was also reading about how these forms were entwined with larger (or at least more abstract) questions about the very possibility of human expression—and the centrality of the human body in understanding its failures.

*In the Shadow of the Glen* opened on October 8\(^{th}\), 1903 in Molesworth Hall in Dublin. In one act set entirely inside the rural cottage interior that would eventually become an Abbey Theatre staple, the play offers a seemingly straightforward comic scenario: Nora invites a tramp into her house and asks him to watch over the body of her dead husband, Dan. After Nora leaves, Dan jumps up and reveals he was faking his death to catch his young wife cheating on him. Nora returns with her young lover,
Michael, and Dan pretends to be dead again to overhear their conversation. Eventually, he jumps up and kicks Nora out of the house. Michael hesitates to go with a “disgraced” woman and Nora leaves with the nameless Tramp, who eloquently conjures up a vision of the romantic, if destitute, life on the road.

The play’s cottage interior first appears naturalistic, but each of the characters discusses the strange, disorienting space surrounding it: a misty glen associated with madness and death. Nora’s much-debated choice to leave with the Tramp turns on exactly the questions of theatricality and expression which Darwin’s book and Wagner’s essay address. Excessive expression and theatricality are associated with romantic idealism, but the play puts its audience in the uncomfortable position of trying to validate idealism at its most extreme. Dan’s melancholy paranoia is the dark side of the conventional arguments he makes about marriage, but the Tramp’s alternate vision of a happy escape is wholly disconnected from reality (a fact which does not escape Nora).

The play makes comic use of the way the slightest expressions can be over-read. Trivial snatches of talk, gesture, affect, or sound become definitive signs of the presence or absence of love—especially in minds of a melancholy or romantic cast. It also presents a series of unnerving images along the way: the voice of a farmer gone mad with loneliness wandering around the hills; the disembodied parts of an old woman—teeth, hair—haunting a younger woman in a loveless marriage; and a prophecy of a jealous husband’s faked death becoming real. These images turn Darwin’s theory of expression into a meditation on theatricality: when does human language and gesture become excessive? When do parts of the body signify without an intention? What are the consequences of the fact that expression can be hidden or faked? The answers Shadow
provides are in one sense the staples of conventional comedy. People tend to idealize when faced with loneliness, aging, and death. Love becomes a mode of farce when its discourse is seen as artificial or theatrical. In another sense, Synge’s play raises the stakes for such questions by linking them to the formal conditions of theater and theater-making and by focusing on how often those forms turns out to depend on material bodies.

By all accounts, the acting on the first night was excellent. Willie Fay, who played the Tramp, would go on to create a number of famous roles in Synge’s work, and, as a director, would establish the effective playing style which the Abbey Theatre would become known for. In the weeks leading up to the performance, tensions within the Irish National Theatre Society had been roiling, but the group’s new season was highly anticipated. Even people unimpressed by its first productions were optimistic: The Irish Times noted that “[t]his society has a peculiar value in the eyes of those who believe the drama should have an intellectual tradition behind it, and that [theater] is susceptible to reform.” Not everyone agreed about the content of the “intellectual tradition”—and variety shows and patriotic melodramas remained extremely popular—but the tone and direction of the hoped-for “reform” is captured in a review by Frank Fay, four years earlier. Reviewing a production of Boucicault’s Arrah-na-Pogue, Fay turns his focus to the audience at the Theatre Royal (which largely featured English touring companies and light opera):

the majority of them seemed to be of the intensely uncritical and ignorant type, only too common in Dublin, the class who will madly applaud a singer or an instrumentalist, no matter how much out of tune the former may sing of how wretchedly the latter may play, provided they finish with the conventional bluster.
For both Fays, the “conventional bluster” of the dominant performance style inexcusably let these boorish audiences off the hook. Nothing about such performances challenged audiences’ “uncritical and ignorant” attitudes. If Frank Fay’s condescension toward “such people” seethes throughout his review, his attack is mainly focused on the overall theatrical aesthetic that makes such ignorance possible. While Yeats and the INTS aimed at like-minded groups interested in the creation of an “intellectual tradition,” Shadow’s main performers had a vested interest in the simple production of a “serious” theater, which could somehow provoke thought without ham acting.

According to Holloway, Fay and company at least succeeding in getting the audience to take the play seriously, if not on the terms Fay had hoped for. After attending rehearsals and a performance in the opening week, Holloway writes:

Mr. J.M. Synge’s play in one act, In the Shadow of the Glen, purporting to be a true transcript from the peasant life in County Wicklow, met with a mixed reception. The nature of the plot would warrant this result despite the cleverness of the dialogue and the conciseness of the construction … Now this subject, no matter how literary-clad, could never pass with an Irish audience as a ‘bit of real Irish life,’ and, though most present applauded the clever interpreters of the literary and dramatic merits of the play, they had little to say in favour of the matter of the story therein. The author got a call at the end. […] According to Holloway, the play was a failure as a “true transcript” but managed to draw applause because of its literary qualities. The play’s central conceit—that a husband pretends to be dead in order to catch his wife in adultery—seemed to be a literary or theatrical device imposed on the image of life in a lonely Irish cottage. What Holloway calls “the nature of the plot” is its depiction of the forthright and unsentimental way Nora leaves her husband and lover for the itinerant tramp. Holloway had been attending plays and performances in Dublin and London regularly since 1895 and most of his criteria for
a good playgoing experience revolve around the clarity and intensity of actors’ elocution. Holloway’s huffy comment that such a plot warrants a mixed reception captures the ambivalent feeling Synge engendered in many of his early audiences (especially before the controversy of Playboy hardened attitudes for and against him). This feeling might be summed up by the sense one gets in reading Holloway’s accounts of the first plays of the Irish Revival that many audience members felt obligated to applaud for certain representations and ways of representing Irish life. Needless to say, Synge’s later plays would give his critics plenty of reasons to feel conflicted about this obligation.

The debates surrounding the reception of Synge are themselves well-documented and have provoked their own critical discourse as Synge’s work has become canonical. Two seemingly antithetical narratives have emerged. The first story says that puritanical nationalists blanched at Synge’s bold representations of reality. This story stresses how Synge’s plays are accurate pictures of Irish experience and fault critics for deluding themselves about their own virtue. The second story says that committed nationalist intellectuals rightly critiqued Synge’s harsh distortions of reality. This version stresses colonial conditions in which negative representations are quickly appropriated by English audiences and undercut the development of a nationalist or separatist consensus. Recent work in Irish and modernist studies has acknowledged the uses and drawbacks of both stories: nationalist critique of Synge’s work (as of Yeats, Moore, and other prominent artists) was neither monolithic nor naïve, but they did often impose aesthetic categories from ill-fitting religious or romantic sources. Rather than follow the well-worn path of debating the accuracy of Synge’s plays, I want to suggest that they one of their more
underappreciated functions is to draw out and examine the conditions for experiencing something as inaccurate or fraudulent.

Nothing could be further from idealist visions of the origins and purpose of art than Darwin’s accounts of the evolution and development of complex human expressions and of the human predilection for imitation. If Arthur Griffith and others called *Shadow* a crude distortion of national moral life, their analysis only chipped at the surface of Synge’s concept of emotional life as a whole. In Darwin, Synge had found a deeply unsettling picture of human moral behavior in which chastity, fidelity, and the sorts of social cooperation that nationalism assumes all develop in the most contingent way from biological constraints and environmental imperatives. Whereas Griffith describes sexuality as a constellation of ideal moral relations which art should be in the business of making clear, Darwin presents an almost antithetical picture:

> When we treat of sexual selection we shall see that primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing, as do some of the gibbon-apes of the present day; and we may conclude from a wide-spread analogy, that this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes—would have expressed various emotions, such as love, jealousy, triumph—and would have served as a challenge to rivals.\(^{37}\)

Like Moore’s “indications,” Darwin’s “wide-spread analogy” can either be foreclosed, as we have seen, by appeal to essential or sublimating texts, i.e. *Hamlet*, or radicalized by emphasis on the sudden, almost accidental becoming of language. If Synge’s critics found the “nature of the plot” of *In the Shadow of the Glen* a distortion—much as the early criticism of *Descent of Man* focused on Darwin’s theory of sexual selection—then the theory of human expression which follows from it may have been simply incomprehensible. For Darwin, emotional expressions, imitative practices, and language
are all part of a richly layered continuum of modification by descent. If, after reading Darwin, Art could still be considered Truth, it would have to contain a kind of dynamism and history that Griffith’s idealism rules out.

On the surface, the plot of Synge’s play seems to recapitulate Darwin’s account of the emergence of language via sexual selection, and in exactly the form that most terrified conservative critics of evolution: a woman acting on her sexual desire in talking to, and possibly having affairs with, “a power of men,” ultimately abandoning her home, husband, and lover based on a seemingly arbitrary preference for a stranger’s superior talk. The appeal Synge gives here to such talk fits with Darwin’s repeated argument that music, song, and verbal cadences are part of a continuous spectrum of sound-oriented behavior directly tied to sexual selection.

…when vivid emotions are felt and expressed by the orator, or even in common speech, musical cadences and rhythm are instinctively used. […] Even monkeys express strong feelings in different tones—anger and impatience by low—fear and pain by high notes. The sensations thus excited in us by music, or expressed by the cadences of oratory, appear from their vagueness, yet depth, like mental reversions to the emotions and thoughts of a long-past age.38

If Darwin’s casual comparisons between various “savage” peoples and animals can, out of context, look like stark racial prejudice, his conviction that he and Victorian civilization were better than “savages” and animals was still shockingly only a matter of degree, not kind. If Darwin is, for example, wholly unable to conceive of African tribal music as “anything we would call music,” and places European civilization at the top of a developmental hierarchy, he also emphasizes the process over the status of the development. Within “common speech,” rudiments of previous uses remain, constantly subjected to the pressure of present need, and, for Darwin, these needs are simply well-
adapted versions of the motives of animals. “All these facts...become intelligible,” Darwin says, “if we may assume that musical tones and rhythm were used by our half-human ancestors, during the season of courtship, when animals of all kinds are excited not only by love, but by the strong passions of jealousy, rivalry, and triumph.” The lyricism of human speech descends from instinctual drives.

Critics like Griffith who insisted that a true Irish woman “does not go away with the Tramp,” interpreted Nora’s choice at the end of the play as essentially sexual—and as melodramatically final. In this view, Nora is strictly evil for betraying her husband. Dan’s coldness, age, paranoia, and general deafness to Nora’s unhappiness mean nothing. In this view, Nora will die almost as soon as she walks outside the house, and Synge’s only mistake was to suggest that Irish women ever choose ignominious death over honorable, if unhappy, marriage. The all-or-nothing quality to this logic echoes early fears about Darwin’s theory of natural selection, as if the mere theorization or representation of humans with “animal” qualities instantly doomed civilization and rendered all laws meaningless. Synge occasionally harbored such apocalyptic visions—the description Synge gave of his first experience reading Darwin ends by saying “incest and parricide were but a consequence...”—but usually in the service of showing how conventional morality could be uncannily unstable, rather than in showing why conventional morality had to be defended and made absolute.

*Shadow* disrupts Griffith’s idealist vision of moral life and his reading of the play (which was shared in different degrees by many of Synge’s early readers and audiences), but it also offers a genealogy of its own, accounting for how idealist language develops, particularly in Ireland. Nora’s choice to go with the Tramp is based on a surprisingly
shrewd assessment of the uselessness of his lyricism. The Tramp’s eloquence might be a comfort, but Nora holds no illusions about how rough life will be sleeping and going hungry on the side of the road. She sees that life with Michael would quickly become a worse version of her marriage to Dan, but she also sees that the Tramp can only offer her talk. Furthermore, the premise of the stage-trick around which the play revolves—Dan’s pretending to be dead—disrupts Griffith’s emphasis on melodramatic finality because it exposes such an interpretation to criticism as being itself theatrical. The faked death becomes, by the end of the play, a figure for Dan’s real death (as predicted by Nora) and for all the jealousy, bitterness, and aversion to talk that drove Nora away in the first place. Dan’s decision to fake his own death turns out to be the culmination of a much wider pattern of erratic, melancholy, and particularly melodramatic behavior. Dan’s performance ultimately reveals more about Dan than Nora, and the audience is forced to question the logic of absolute fidelity that motivates Dan’s theatricality.

Synge dexterously blends a theatrical convention (the audience presumes a body on stage is dead if it is claimed to be) with the perceptions of the fictional characters on stage (Nora and the Tramp both think Dan really is dead). Holloway’s remarks on the staging of the play show the fragility of this illusion:

No footlights were used, but two limelights—one at either side of the stage—and one from the back of the hall, were substituted. […] the illumination of the stage before the curtains were drawn aside has a funny effect, as the curtains become transparent under the strong light, and the preparations for the coming scene become visible to those in front. Great laughter was caused when Mr. Roberts as “Dan Burke,” the supposed dead man in The Shadow of the Glen, was seen getting into bed and arranging his clothes about ere the play commenced.

Seeing the live actor getting ready to play dead changes a number of the opening lines—making Nora’s and the Tramp’s fear of the dead body funnier, but also making it harder
for the audience to accept that Dan really is dead. Once Dan jumps up and clearly establishes that his character is only faking, one question becomes more insistent as the play goes on: why would Dan pretend to be dead? As a comic premise, Dan’s motive needs no explanation, but Synge goes out of his way to connect the theatrical trick—faking death—with Dan’s whole way of seeing the world.

Despite his cynical tone and aversion to “talk,” Dan is associated with certain romantic images and saddled with a particularly melodramatic way of seeing the world. This is attributed to his age, his isolation out in the glen, and his natural disposition. “It’s too much talk you have surely,” Dan says to the Tramp, “Go out of that door and do your blathering below in the glen”(116-17). At this point in the play, the glen has already been associated with Patch Darcy’s madness and the maddening rhythms of loneliness: people who go out into the glen and the surrounding hills seem to absorb its mysteriousness and incoherence by osmosis. Nora’s first description of Dan suggests that he had spent too much time out in the murk himself: “He was an old man, and an odd man, stranger, and it’s always up on the hills he was thinking thoughts in the dark mist”(102). In performance, the seriousness with which Nora and the Tramp treat such a diagnosis makes a difference: does the audience first hear of Dan as a kooky eccentric or as someone more seriously melancholic? If this line is played as Nora dismissing Dan, the later images of the glen and the hills still function in more serious terms. The other character who had been wandering the hills is found actually dead, not, as is Dan, only playing dead. The finding of Patch’s body reassures the Tramp—since it suggests the voices he heard were at least human—but it gives a retrospective weight to the fact that Dan had wandered the mists too.
These doubts about Dan’s way of seeing the world bleed into the motivations for Dan’s decision to pretend to be dead. We hear less about Dan’s raging jealousy or any previous attempts to interrogate his wife’s fidelity than we do about his all-or-nothing way of interpreting events. In Dan’s imagination, he is faced with his wife’s complete fidelity or her equally complete disregard for him. The possibility that his death is not a fair test for his wife’s virtue never occurs to him. Something about the certainty that the stage-trick offers appeals strongly to Dan. Dan’s general distrust of “talk” hooks up with various strands of romanticism in that it denigrates or worries about the separation of speech from moral value: any action, even if highly theatrical, would be preferable. Even though it seems like Dan resents the Tramp’s romantic language in the same way as Patch’s, his own way of framing his death suggests that his rejection of the paradoxically more prosaic romanticism of Patch and the Tramp leads him ultimately to adopt a more dangerous and extreme form of theatricality.

If Nora finally decides that the domestic world inside the cottage is not worth the loneliness and heartache and ventures out into the maddening world outside, it is a choice between the lesser of two evils—madness and starvation over expressive constraint. Since expressive constraint is exactly what Dan threatens to impose, his complaints about talk and blather imply that the home is a place for quiet, a place apart from the voices and dangers out on the hills. Whether or not his suspicions of Nora’s talk with passing men began before or after she started to feel desperately lonely, Dan’s insistence on affectlessness (in others and himself) is one of his few defining characteristics. Again, one of Nora’s early jokes becomes an important clue later for understanding Dan’s motivations: “Maybe cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was
always cold, every day since I knew him,--and every night, stranger…” (102). Audiences early and late justifiably focus on the loaded significance of the last phrase, since it introduces the possibility of sexual frustration as a major element of Dan and Nora’s marriage. Whether Dan was always physically or emotionally cold to her, the implication remains. It also creates sexual tension on stage, since Nora’s willingness to share the fact with the Tramp suggests an ambiguous intimacy. Synge’s accounts from Aran show that he was fascinated with rural wives’ surprising combination of frankness and naïveté—and his willingness to translate that ambiguity onto the stage provoked much of the early critique of his plays.

Stepping back from the note of sexual frustration the end of the line implies, we can focus on the image it begins with, Dan’s similarity in life with a dead body. This works as an ironic joke—since he actually is alive at this point and only pretending to be dead—but it also becomes another one of the images that lingers through the rest of the play. The audience is given two important facts about Dan and Nora’s life together before the beginning of the play: Nora felt a strong desire to talk and Dan was cold and talked very little. At first, Dan’s cold, rough demeanor would seem to be at odds with the other image we are given, of Dan spending a little too much time wandering the maddening hills alone, but Synge deftly shows how the emotional logic of each fits neatly with the other. The extreme theatricality of pretending to be dead becomes an extension of the emotional economy that demands no blathering, no warmth, and no commiseration. Wandering the hills simply convinced Dan that Nora’s silence and coldness toward him could be doubted—after all, couldn’t her commitment to him be just as illusory as the shadows and voices in the glen?
Theater, in other words, is closely aligned with the romantic vision Dan seems to have contracted like a disease. Faking death becomes the logical extension of Dan’s romantic, idealist disposition: a complete illusion is the only way for him to achieve the certainty about his wife’s chastity that he wants. The surprising force of Synge’s suggestion here comes from the fact that the audience so readily accepts the premise. The audience is already invested in the comic conventions that make Dan’s status as a cuckolded husband a joke. By linking those conventions to images of the Irish landscape which Revivalists in the 1890s had strongly associated with magic and authentic Irishness, Synge puts theater on the same continuum with the romantic images of Standish O’Grady. The temptation to transfigure Nora, Dan, and Tramp into heroic archetypes—or to criticize them for their failure as such—is itself a theatrical impulse. In making a comic premise naturalistically plausible, Synge generates an effect more generally associated with modernism: unsettling the audience with the possibility that the natural world is absurd or that the absurd laws of comedy are actually natural. The audience is confronted with the conditions of its own spectatorship, with its own version of “echo sign”: a live body becomes theatrical, whether it means to or not, and the excessive promises of a sweet-talking tramp are only passing illusions of human life to distract from the brutalities of aging and dying.

*Mourning the Living*

At the climactic moment of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904), the old woman Maurya is telling the story of the death of one of her sons and conjuring up a vision of the exact moment she learned of his death.
MAURYA. [...] I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were two men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it—it was a dry day, Nora—and leaving a track to the door.

*She pauses again with her hand stretched out towards the door. It opens and old women begin to come in... (94)*

If this moment from *Riders to the Sea* were translated into the idiom or dialect of modern poetry, there would have to be a line break or a significant change in meter between Maurya’s pause and “It opens”—for an uncanny moment, the tableau Maurya has evoked begins to come to life. Maurya had just been telling the story of the death of her sons, her daughters in rapt attention, when the scene she had been describing repeats itself: as in her story, another body of another loved son is carried in, dripping and wrapped in a red sail. The old women file into the room just as Maurya had described. The shock of this moment comes from the way it recasts Maurya’s previous narration in prophetic tones and creates a new series of anxious expectations in the audience: will the scene now playing out follow Maurya’s script exactly? For a moment, the audience is unsure about what is being represented on stage. Are these actors supposed to be a manifestation of Maurya’s dream, or are they “real” in terms of the fictional world on stage? The rituals of grief and mourning repeat themselves, but now with the doubled consciousness of their being a kind of theater.

Maurya’s narration has more force than mere reminiscence; her cadences and syntax have the sound of a repeated performance, either because this is a story she has told herself many times or because the story itself, and hence its structure, is older or more deeply embedded in her way of life than she is. This is a crucial ambiguity in Synge’s play: is the sound of Maurya’s utterance obsessive and singular or is it
disinterested and communal? From the start, Maurya’s daughters fear that she might take the loss of another son too intensely and the plot emerges from their attempts to hide a death from her. At the same time, this death is one of a long series, clearly linked to the nature of work and the hardship of life on the Aran Islands. The final revelation of Bartley’s death is both a personal and a social catastrophe: unlike the long line of nameless fishermen before him, Bartley is killed by falling off a horse, making his death more singular and excessive, yet Maurya’s stunning final speech, which repeats and continues the earlier lament, returns its singularity to the wider pattern of deaths on the island. With the technical and theoretical ingenuity that awed his admirers, Synge gives resonance to various senses of catastrophe: this death is the end of Maurya’s agitation, literally resolving her anxiety about her son (and in the shocking way Aristotle recommended); the reversal of fortune (peripeteia) it presents is intimately linked with Maurya’s intellectual recognition (anagnorisis) of certain signs (the entering women, the red sail) and the role of her own actions (refusing her blessing) in the intensified pain of her situation.

Holloway went to see Riders to the Sea on a Thursday night, duly noting some of his own initial reactions to the play, but the next day the play still haunted him: “I have come to the conclusion that a more gruesome and harrowing play than Riders to the Sea has seldom, if ever, been staged before”(35). Holloway isn’t sure how to classify the play, noting that it is “intensely sad—almost weirdly so” (35). He also has trouble describing the performance that contributed to that effect: the “rare naturalness and sincerity” of the actors was “a triumph of art,” but it was a triumph that could only be greeted with stunned silence:
The thoroughly in-earnest playing of the company made the terribly depressingly wake episode so realistic and weirdly doleful that some of the audience could not stand the painful horror of the scene, and had to leave the hall during its progress. […] The audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud. (35)

The whole performance stood on a razor’s edge between a representation that seemed unacceptably artificial and desperately, religiously real. The actor’s paradoxical combination of sincerity and artistry was crucial because

the subject was one that the slightest error of judgment would have set the audience a titter. But as the illusion was complete, no titter came, and a profound impression was created instead. The entrance of the keeners just a few moments too early was nearly fatal to the solemnity of the situation, but luckily [was] not (35)

What Holloway calls “solemnity” demands a particular, and particularly complete, *illusion*, otherwise the entire event would be disrupted. The experience of the wake scene and Maurya’s speech as having claims on the audience beyond theatrical illusion—that silence and sadness are more appropriate than applause—runs up against what the audience knows is pure theatricality.

I want to suggest that the sense of solemnity and ritual that the play generates includes its audience, but foregrounds conditions for its most affecting speech acts and gestures in such a way that it is clear to the audience that they can no longer fully participate in those same acts and gestures.

Although James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was an important source for aspects of the structure of *The Aran Islands*, Holloway’s testimony points to some of the pertinent differences between Synge’s theater and Frazer’s approach to language: Frazer’s method comprehensively reduces expression to its referential functions. While Frazer’s detailed accounts of disturbing materials (cannibalism, incest, torture) dismantle
romantic tropes of the noble savage, *The Golden Bough* provides ‘savage’ rituals and beliefs with an essentially noble purpose. In Frazer’s teleology, the goals of modern science to control and understand the world can be read backwards into religion and superstition. Working with less empirical data and less effective methods, ‘primitive’ cultures deployed magic and religion to achieve roughly scientific goals. The value placed on irrationalism is characteristically modernist, but doesn’t fit Synge: the islanders seem to be doing something exactly inexplicable. The difference that marks an ancient system of beliefs for Frazer is simply a gap for Synge. Where Frazer rushes in with an explanation or a parallel to other practices continents away, Synge is content with, even insistent upon, pausing and allowing both the experience of sympathy (“sadness”) and theatricality (“—almost weirdly so”) to settle in.

The dual experience of being attracted and repulsed by the scene on stage emanates from both the “authentic” material objects Synge insisted occupy the stage and the raw speech acts Synge wrote as both an approximation and an interpretation of the Irish spoken on the Aran Islands. As in Frazer, the objects staged in Synge’s plays are heavily invested with symbolic meaning but, in contrast to Frazer, these objects seem absolutely inexchangeable. In Frazer, a myth of spinning looms is often functionally identical to a myth in another culture of carpet-weaving, but Synge emphasizes the singularity of oil-skins, curraghs, and pampooties. In the opening stage directions, Synge specifies that the cottage kitchen has “nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall” (83). There are hints throughout the play that each of these objects should be read in a mythological register, i.e. the fisherman’s net; the loom of fate. Even the plain boards become a path to allegory: “It’s on a nail by the white boards.
I hung it up this morning, for the pig with the black feet was eating it” (85). Every spare adjective seems to invite ominous interpretation: “the string’s perished with salt water, and there’s a black knot on it you wouldn’t loosen in a week” (89). While putting the authentic objects on stage is characteristically naturalist, by continuously drawing attention to the those objects, Synge makes them authentic—but “weirdly so.” There are so many potential symbolic readings of these objects that no single reading can dominate the rest. The audience’s attention is only focused on the objects—the dropped stitch, the red sail—in ways attention would ordinarily be drawn, that is, by direct transformation from its normal use. The dropped stitch no longer functions as an allegory, it barely even functions as a symbol—it simply does identify a body. The red sail simply is a wrapping for a body. Whatever the dimensions of this significance are that we could call symbolic or metaphorical seem to evaporate.

Performative utterances in the play perform a corresponding function, not only working as actions inside the fiction, but also making their authorizing conditions manifest and available.

CATHLEEN (cutting the string). It is surely. There was a man in here a while ago—the man sold us that knife—and he said if you set off walking from the rocks beyond, it would be seven days you’d be in Donegal. (90)

Language is so closely associated with physical action throughout the play that narration itself comes to seem excessive and theatrical. The “uncanny literalness” of the play’s language (like Beckett’s later work) disorients romantic primitivism by showing the everyday materiality of mythic images, which contribute to a sense of ominousness for the audience, but in now way affect the economically enforced disaster of the play.

Synge shares with Gilbert Murray and the later Cambridge Ritualists a sense of drama as
rooted in deeply embedded social practices, although his readings of Darwin push him
toward a less essentialist vision of how those practices can be recovered or should be
interpreted. (In contrast, Yeats’s encounters with Murray—of which Yeats’s proposed
Masquer’s Society is emblematic—were shaped by his interests in theosophist rituals for
enchanting the world combined with his theoretical readings of Blake). For example,
blessings must be given under certain conditions—but Synge turns the problem on its
head and asks what happens if the conditions which had always previously authorized
blessing were no longer effective or no longer existed? Maurya misses her opportunity to
bless her son, but it seems to be because the words could no longer be the action
intended: conditions had become so bleak and Maurya had lost so many sons that no
blessing could actually provide the comfort it intended to, and Maurya feels the
emptiness of the words. Interpreted through classic tragic theory, Maurya’s refusal or
deferral of the blessing is the act she must recognize and accept, but Synge offer a
number of hints that Maurya’s plight is not individual—she does not feel unable to say
the words herself (although the play has certainly been read that way), rather, the words
themselves can no longer function the way they once did. They are the only words
available, yet they seem unauthorized.

Wittgenstein’s critique of Frazer revolves around many of the same problems
with narrating and explaining significant gestures. Wittgenstein concentrated on the way
Frazer seems to misuse language, imposing a scheme of strict causal explanations on
behaviors that defy that kind of interpretation: “The very idea of wanting to explain a
practice—for example, the killing of the priest-king—seems wrong to me.”41
Explanations fit some practices, but others simply cannot be treated on the model of
scientific experimentation—or at least not on the restricting concept of science Frazer is working with. “I believe that the characteristic feature of primitive man is that he does not act from opinions (contrary to Frazer)” (RF 71). Wittgenstein shows that the pictures in Frazer’s language set up a framework in which he interprets spiritual and ritual behavior only as errant science. Surely, Wittgenstein says, the fact that rain dances take place in rainy seasons “means that they do not really believe that [they] can make it rain, otherwise they would make it rain in dry periods of the year in which the land is ‘a parched and arid desert’” (RF 72). Like Synge, Wittgenstein is caught between a sense that he shares with “primitive” cultures something much different than what Frazer tries to “explain,” even though the access to that similarity is produced by accounting for felt differences.

I should like to say: nothing shows our kinship with those savages better than the fact that Frazer has on hand a word as familiar to himself and to us as ‘ghost’ or ‘shade’ in order to describe the views of the people. …Indeed, the peculiarity relates not only to the expressions ‘ghost’ and ‘shade,’ and much too little is made of the fact that we count the words ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ as part of our educated vocabulary. Compared with this, the fact that we do not believe our soul eats and drinks is a trifling matter.

An entire mythology is stored within our language.
(emphasis added, RF 70)

For Wittgenstein, the availability of this mythology—with its stockpile of images, allusions, and expressions—shows more ‘family resemblances’ than it does differences, although, crucially, those differences are made perspicuous by contextualizing the language in its “home,” not by grafting it onto an entirely different scene of action. This is not to say that such transcoding cannot be useful (it provokes all of Wittgenstein’s remarks), but that it has to go on to point out, or at least acknowledge, a different level of explanation. The translation is not complete until the whole language is “stored within”
the other language. Of course this requires the death of the one language, cutting off its ability to generate further meaning, so that coding language will eventually catch up.

In “From Galway to Gorumna,” Synge’s account of the “external features” of a culture—which he closely connects to their economic conditions—quickly slides into a description of gestures, affects, and language. As Synge approaches the village of Spiddal, which he calls a “borderland between the fairly prosperous districts in Galway and the barren country further to the west,” he describes the houses and small ships coming into view as if he were looking for signs of life: “…none of the crews were to be seen, but threads of turf smoke […] showed that men were probably on board (Complete Works, 190). Having seen these signs, Synge describes the apparition of an old man and a young man with his characteristic blend of precise detail and mythological resonance: old man peered at them with “the inflamed eyes that are so common here from the continual itching of the turf-smoke,” while the young man had just “come down from a field of black earth” (190). Unlike Moore’s “indications,” which clearly define a character’s inner state from the perspective of the narrator (or viewer), the images of people Synge provides seem to make them less accessible. Itching eyes and black earth differentiate the figures from the narrator even as they offer competing ways for the narrator or reader to interpret them, i.e. as products of their environment or eternal folk of the soil. These details also provide the context for the gesture Synge makes the focus of the paragraph. The young man asks the old man, “in Gaelic, to throw him a spark for his pipe” (190). The old man “disappeared for a moment, then came up again with a smouldering end of a turf sod in his hand and threw it up on the pier, where the young man caught it with a quick downward grab without burning himself, blew it into a blaze,
lit his pipe with it and went back to work” (190-191). Synge then explains the practice as a function of their poverty (they cannot afford matches), but also hints at the way it fits into a wider pattern of complex and interesting behavior: “the spark of lighting turf is kept alive day and night on the hearth, and when a man goes out fishing or to work in the fields he usually carries a lighted sod with him and keeps it all day buried in ashes or any dry rubbish, so that he can use it when he needs it” (191). These are practices Synge feels he needs to explain to his readers in the Manchester Guardian since they are material differences which generate the mythologies urban readers (and often Synge himself) want to impose.

Yet if the “quick downward grab” of the young man suggests a natural way of being in harmony with the environment, of being at home in a world of turf-sod sparks and black earth, Synge immediately shows how these picturesque gestures can be absorbed into a nascent tourist economy. Still within the same paragraph which had begun with the faint signs of inhabitation, Synge relates how an old woman begged from him in English and, when Synge replied in Irish “to show I knew her own language if she chose to use it,” gave him an even more “extraordinary profusion” of thanks and blessings (191). “That the blessing of God may be on you,” she said, “on road and on ridgeway, on sea and on land, on flood and on mountain, in all the kingdoms of the world”—and so on, till I was too far off to hear what she was saying” (191). Synge doesn’t say if these blessings were in Irish or English, but the image of him moving away from a profusion of language—after having approached in the quiet evening—offers a subtle clue about the sorts of language he is interested in documenting. Aspects of
language connected to concrete gestures and a differentiated mode of life? Yes.

Linguistic turns of phrase offered as an exchange, poetry for halfpence? No.

In his concluding remarks, Darwin pauses to consider “whether movements at first used only by one or a few individuals to express a certain state of mind may not sometimes have spread to others, and ultimately have become universal, through the power of conscious and unconscious imitation” (356). Darwin had argued in *The Descent of Man* that human mental capacities had, like languages, been “slowly and unconsciously developed by many steps” from “the instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of young children” (*Descent* 108). Crucially, Darwin argued that “the habitual use of articulate language is peculiar to man; but he uses, in common with the lower animals, inarticulate cries to express his meaning, aided by gestures and the movements of the muscles of the face” (107). As in his other accounts of human “mental powers,” Darwin shows that the human capacity for language bears at least a family resemblance to various animal forms of expression. What is striking is that his argument in the section on language-use relies on his arguments in the section on imitation, which he had discussed earlier and would now presumably lose some of their force as Darwin rhetorically moves up the chain of being to higher and higher human capacities, from the emotions to curiosity, imitation, attention, memory, imagination, and reason, before turning to the powers of abstraction, consciousness, language, and the sense of beauty. How can language be a power of abstraction when it derives from “our cries of pain, fear, surprise, anger, together with their appropriate actions, and the murmur of a mother to her beloved child,” all of which are “more expressive than any words” (107)?
Throughout the book, Darwin traces the repertoire of accompanying or “appropriate actions,” analyzing various frowns, smiles, shrugs, nods, and postures shared by animals and humans. Although the structure of Darwin’s argument anticipates what Jonathan Crary calls the early twentieth century’s continuous “articulation of a subject in terms of attentive capacities,” both Descent and Expression turn at key moments to the human tendency to imitate. According to Darwin, this tendency is exhibited in the most extra-ordinary manner in certain brain diseases, especially at the commencement of inflammatory softening of the brain, and has been called the “echo sign.” Patients thus affected imitate, without understanding, every absurd gesture which is made, and every word which is uttered near them, even in a foreign language (Expression 357).

Not only is the capacity for imitation innate, but it can threaten to become unavoidable, completely overwhelming a person’s ability to control it. At this point, a strange tension emerges in Darwin’s account: imitation is the condition by which other human capacities emerge, but it is also implicitly the cause of disorders and uncanny or even unnatural transformations. Darwin immediately turns from “echo sign” in human patients to what he implies is a parallel phenomenon in animals:

[... the jackal and the wolf have learnt under confinement to imitate the barking of the dog. How the barking of the dog, which serves to express various emotions and desires, and which is so remarkable from having been acquired since the animal was domesticated, and from being inherited in different degrees by different breeds, was first learnt, we do not know; but may we not suspect that imitation has had something to do with its acquisition, owing to dogs having long lived in strict association with so loquacious an animal as man? (Expression 357)

The tendency toward imitation can be the sign of our humanity, as in our infectious loquaciousness, or of the way it verges on an uncannily inhuman sort of automatic replication, as in our sometimes suffering from “echo sign.” Darwin’s recognition that
many emotional tones and physical gestures are “more expressive than words”–literally they express some meaning across lines of culture and even species–leads him to feel “difficulty about the application of the terms will, consciousness, and intention” (Expression 357).

Unlike many later writers, Darwin remained confident that facial and bodily expressions are “in themselves of much importance for our welfare”; they can convey encouragement and sympathy at important moments in a child’s development, strengthen “mutual good feeling” through sympathy, and give “vividness and energy to our spoken words” (Expression 366). Nietzsche later ridicules the English genealogies of morals that trace the development of some purportedly instinctual compassion, but Darwin neatly sidesteps both the concept of original human “compassion” and the pandora’s box of modernist anxieties by asserting simply that affects and gestures “reveal the thoughts and intentions of others more truly than do words, which may be falsified” (Expression 366).

However, Darwin’s elaboration of how gestures work seems to suggest a problem.

The free expression by outward signs of an emotion intensifies it. On the other hand, the repression, as far as this is possible, of all outward signs softens our emotions. He who gives way to violent gestures will increase his rage; he who does not will fear in a greater degree; and he who remains passive when overwhelmed with grief loses his best chance of recovering elasticity of mind. These results follow partly from the intimate relation which exists between almost all the emotions and their outward manifestations; and partly from the direct influence of exertion on the heart, and consequently on the brain. Even the simulation of an emotion tends to arouse it in our minds (Expression 366).

Darwin’s brief gloss on the impact of emotional expression here opens up the frightening realm of theatricality and faked affects, which the naturalist can only foreclose by a lengthy quotation from Hamlet, as if to ward off the evil power of simulated emotions with the knowledge that it had already been diagnosed and transmuted into dialogue,
restored to the economy of “mutual good feeling” and “sympathy” supposedly inherent in the drama. Darwin’s appeal to Shakespeare conjures up anxieties about performance, but it also suggests that these are somehow resolved or, translating into the terminology Freud used to develop concepts from his own reading of Darwin, cathected in literary, and particularly in dramatic, forms. In Darwin’s account, Hamlet’s question about actors (“Is it not monstrous?”) thus offers a transcendent perspective on otherwise disturbing meditations.

Synge is able to use a Darwinian picture of emotional expression to complicate and explore images of naturalist determination and modernist escape, ultimately showing how both are embedded in local existential or economic conditions. When Darwin’s description of “basic” emotions seems most certain—as in his description of “echo sign,” the symptoms of aphasia—the gestures and affects he describes become disorienting, drawing the reader’s attention to the expectations and social economies in which such signs might be taken as “proof” of some basic condition. Such moments are intimately connected with the threat of gestures becoming theatrical and, as recent work on Synge’s anthropological and ethnographic reading has suggested, Synge’s drama focuses intently on the problems that emerge when the individual repetition of collective or ritual gestures is placed under skepticism. “Modernist primitivism” is one name critics have given to those moments in Synge’s travel writing when an observer’s subjectivity is radically disoriented, with images of existential dissolution standing in for material experiential discontinuities. When translated onto the stage, these disorientations are equally radical in the way they reconfigure theatrical space. Observers—in this case, an audience in a theater—are faced with surprisingly literal images of their own unresponsiveness. In
Cavell’s terms, rather than foregrounding epistemological and experiential conditions as failures of knowing (as in Synge’s ethnographic prose), Synge’s plays present those experiences as failures of acknowledgment.

Characters who fail to keep promises, speak tactfully, or who constrain the talk of others become uncanny doubles of the audience’s willingness to function as a set of distanced spectators. In the Shadow of the Glen (1903), in addition to being a farce of sexual jealousy, traces the way romantic melancholy slides into an idealist demand for silence and certainty. Threatened by the unknownness of his wife’s body, Dan makes himself theatrical in the extreme—not only playing, but playing dead. Although the effect of this theatricality is comic and can be attributed to a husband’s individual eccentricity, the fact that the stage-trick itself is thematically and literally obvious draws attention to the way theatrical satisfactions are only made possible by the complicity of the audience. When Synge connects the avoidance of this complicity to a collective form—a whole culture dying—in Riders to the Sea, avoidance itself becomes a historical act. The audience’s sense of the play’s aesthetic force becomes linked to its historical separateness, its loss as a living culture. With this in mind, we can return to Holloway’s description how the play’s first audiences responded to the “gruesome and harrowing” drama:

The thoroughly in-earnest playing of the company made the terribly depressing wake episode so realistic and weirdly doleful that some of the audience could not stand the painful horror of the scene, and had to leave the hall during its progress […] The audience was so deeply moved by the tragic gloom of the terrible scene on which the curtains close in, that it could not applaud (35).

Holloway distinguishes the “in-earnest” performance of the actors from the range of more deliberate styles he had seen at the Theatre Royal, the Gaiety, and the Queen’s, and he
suggests that the usual response to a strong performance seemed not only inappropriate, but impossible. How could anyone clap at a wake? Two possibilities that apply for a “real” wake—that one might be participating in the wake, joining in its music and dancing, or that one might be rudely cheering someone’s demise—are somehow also felt to be impossible for this performance of a wake.

One of Holloway’s words for the play, “harrowing,” catches an aspect of the audience’s experience that seems to be at odds with Holloway’s interpretation: saying that the scene’s “tragic gloom” moved the audience puts the short one-act too quickly into the domain of high tragedy and tragic theories of noble self-sacrifice or sublime recognition. On the other hand, the unimportance of an emotional quality like gloom offers a useful foil to the associations tragedy has accumulated. If Synge’s play draws on the structures of tragedy, it also draws them down into a lower register, into a field of more neutral or contradictory affects like the “weirdly doleful.” “[T]hanks be to God,” Joyce said, “Synge isn’t an Aristotelian.” (For his part, Synge told Joyce that “You have a mind like Spinoza’s”). The audience’s ambiguous, yet strongly felt, response and the inadequacy of a genre label like tragedy both point back to Synge’s way of turning theater back on itself and making its conditions available.

The sophistication of Synge’s critique can be seen in the way things on stage—objects, gestures, bodies—are all altered and disoriented by a sense that perceiving them aesthetically is equivalent to distancing them experientially. Spinning-wheels, turns of phrase, cultural habits, and fleeting gestures are all doubled—on one side mythic, theatricalized, and allusive, on the other brutally ordinary, practical, and material. The entrance of the mourners—subject to the same risks in performance as the stage-trick in
Shadow—is a harrowing ritual within the fiction, but Maurya’s narration of it momentarily abstracts the audience from its cultural function. In that moment, the collective mourning practice is perceived as both illocutionary force and, in its disturbance of the audience, perlocutionary effect. Synge’s essays on the Congested Districts continue to present ordinary gestures with a doubled awareness of their performative and passionate aspects. These gestures are the most easily mythologized—vulnerable to collection by ethnographers and anthologists—because they are the most easily “staged” and their “stageability” requires a material economy of poverty and deprivation. Narration makes illocutionary force appear, but it also separates it from its motives in perlocutionary effects. In Raymond Williams’s terms, picking out the conventions of rural gestures calcifies the structure of feeling that animates them. Synge’s attempt to present both the beautiful and the brutal aspects at once, however one judges his success (and today, performances have struggled to recover the brutal), can be seen as a continuation of Ibsen’s modernism insofar as he tries to demolish particular images of the ideal, beautiful gestures without fantasizing about a complete escape from representation or theatrical space.
CHAPTER 4
HOLLOW LANGUAGE

Suppose I say of a friend: “He isn’t an automaton”. — What information is conveyed by this, and to whom would it be information? To a human being who meets him in ordinary circumstances? What information could it give him? (At the very most that this man always behaves like a human being, and not occasionally like a machine.)

-Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations, 152

But why is it we laugh at this mechanical arrangement? It is doubtless strange that the history of a person or of a group should sometimes appear like a game worked by strings, or gearings, or springs; but from what source does the special character of this strangeness arise? What is it that makes it laughable? To this question, which we have already propounded in various forms, our answer must always be the same. The rigid mechanism which we occasionally detect, as a foreign body, in the living continuity of human affairs is of peculiar interest to us as being a kind of absentmindedness on the part of life.

-Bergson, Laughter, 43.

J.L. Austin’s distinctions between various modes of performative utterance offer a different, if complimentary, way of reading Synge’s investigations of theatricality. In his fourth lecture critiquing notions about “statements” (later collected as How To Do Things with Words), Austin turns to the second form of “infelicity” that can befall cases of utterance where the saying is also doing (later classified as performative utterances having illocutionary force).\(^1\) After having discussed misfires, in which the procedure for a performative utterance becomes void, Austin argues that there are a parallel set of conditions, called abuses, in which the procedure becomes hollow. As examples, Austin cites insincere acts of congratulating and condoling, advising and acquitting, and finally promising, betting, and declaring war (Words 40-41).
Austin suggests that these acts have different ways of being hollow (by not having the requisite feelings, thoughts, or intentions), but admits that there is overlap and that the various forms of hollowness are “not necessarily easily distinguishable” (41). Before comparing Austin’s remarks to peculiarly theatrical forms of hollowness, there are a few aspects of this account worth noting. First, Austin often uses the diagrammatic structure of his argument to highlight parallel or analogous aspects of very different sorts of utterance. When he explains how thought can become hollow, he makes a point of distinguishing the thought’s not fitting the act from its not fitting the world (being insincere rather than mistaken). Thus, each of the aspects he discusses becomes a model for the others. Second, as has been observed by many of his critics, Austin spends most of his time thinking about institutional or ritual actions with established procedures, even though at key points his argument depends on more ambiguous, subtle, or divisive feelings and sensations. Austin works through some of these problems more thoroughly in the essays collected as Sense and Sensibilia (71-77; 99-100), where he takes up philosophers’ games and theatrical illusions rather than the words of umpires and judges.² Significantly, problems in Sense and Sensibilia tend to take the form of hallucinations, compulsions, and confusions rather than “not having a requisite” property: possession is a more phantasmatic quality in Austin’s other essays.

Synge’s Shadow presents a comic version of what happens, in Austin’s terminology, when a performative becomes void or empty. The play is full of ‘misfires,’ utterances not fully performative because the authorizing conditions have been misapplied or inappropriately invoked—beginning with the comedy of the Tramp’s fear and prayers over the ‘dead’ body, but moving quickly into the relatively more serious
conventions for marriage. *Riders to the Sea* presents a tragic version of what *Shadow* hints at: a broad, Darwinian view of language in which performatives begin to lose their effect when their cultural contexts begin to lose their ability to produce meaning. The radically transformed economies of the Aran Islands no longer seem to support the conventional procedures in which the islanders’ ritual language makes sense. In fact, the shocking distance between their sincere performance of that language and the audience’s knowledge of its utter inadequacy drives the effect of the play.

In this chapter, I want to pivot from Synge’s ambiguous use of speech acts as both authentic and unauthorized, turning one way to explore an aesthetic in which all speech is unauthorized and under the threat of theatricality, then turning the other way to explore an aesthetic in which the spoken voice is the only authentic source of authority there is. Although the dramatic works of Shaw and Yeats are usually held up as examples of theatrical realism and modernism respectively, this excludes large portions of their theatrical output. By emphasizing Shaw’s early social critique and Yeats’s late experiments with barren stages and poetic voices, many of the narratives of early twentieth-century theater obscure their shared revulsion of hollow-sounding language. For Shaw, the emptiness of language indicated our fearful modernity and haunted all the genres of speech and action: the revelation of theatricality and inauthenticity happened everyday for Shaw, hence his commitment to writing, writing, writing polemics, discourses, sermons, melodramas, prefaces, letters, addresses, disquisitions, tragedies, farces, plays unpleasant and pleasant, amusements, entertainments, and manifestos. The basic pessimism underlying Shaw’s deluge of written words turns darkest when he thinks
about how this emptiness might also evacuate gestures, as when he turns to puppets and actors.

For Yeats, hollow language is that which is made for the eye rather than the ear. It is the false shell of modern entertainments beneath which the real rags and bones that make up authentic human voices must be excavated. I want to turn to a narrow band of Yeats’s theater experiments, focusing on his use of colors, in order to show how all the other aspects of his dramaturgy and drama theory depended on extraordinarily fine—and often shifting—distinctions between rhetoric and oratory, exchange and dialogue, affects and masks, and ultimately reference and expression. I hope that by bringing Shaw’s and Yeats’s responses to theatricality closer together, their proximity will invite more mixed readings in the future, promiscuously or even haphazardly associating the objects Shaw brought on stage (automobiles, airplanes, paintings) with those Yeats brought (walking sticks, lanterns, knives, songs), or making Yeats’s “theater business” look minor by comparison with the successes Shaw enjoyed in London at the Court Theatre, or even confusing the different modernities Shaw’s philosophies of creative evolution and Yeat’s visions were designed to address.

*Mechanism and Melodrama*

Shaw’s *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction, or the Fatal Gazogene* delivers all the absurd comedy its title promises, and, as usual with Shaw’s overwhelming paratextual apparatus, it is easy to overlook the play’s subtitle: “A brief tragedy for barns and booths.” The play was first performed in Regent’s Park to raise money for charitable causes in 1905 and Shaw emphasizes that it was an occasional piece designed to be adaptable. At several points in the play, a choir of angels sings the ditty “Oh won’t you come home,
Bill Bailey,” but Shaw drily notes that “as the Bill Bailey song has not proved immortal, any equally appropriate ditty of the moment may be substituted” (220). Likewise, the loud landlord can be replaced by a landlady and “as it is extremely difficult to find an actor capable of eating a real ceiling, it will be found convenient in performance to substitute the tops of old wedding cakes” (220). The opening description of the scene pokes more and more fun at stage conventions. The drawers of one of the chests in the room must be “of that disastrous kind which, recalcitrant to the opener until she is provoked to violence, then suddenly come wholly out and defy all her efforts to fit them in again” (221). Since this never actually occurs in the play, we can imagine that this direction is provided more for a reader of collections like Shaw’s *Translations and Tomfooleries*. Similarly, a row of men’s shoes beside the chest “proclaims that the lady is married” (221). It might also “proclaim” other kinds of relationship, especially to an audience not given these stage directions (and only coming into the theater with knowledge of the play’s sensational preposterous title). Shaw is wryly introducing readers to the tone of the parody that follows, especially when he notes that “a certain air of theatricality is produced by the fact that though the room is rectangular it has only three walls” (221-22).

Shaw also drew attention to theater conventions in the plays he wrote for venues larger than makeshift booths in the park, but, when he does, there is no correspondingly larger sense of liberation. When the audience recognizes that characters are behaving like romantic novels or paintings in *Arms and the Man* or like stereotypical cartoons in *John Bull’s Other Island*, there is always an accompanying sense of the absurd. Once a convention is perceived to be theatrical, it becomes ridiculous. Shaw had a sharp sense
of how far and in what ways English and Irish people would carry the ridiculous, but the position of the audience toward these characters is always a mechanical (Shaw would say dialectical) progression from belief in a fiction to absolute incredulity. Shaw’s minor works like *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction* manifest the extreme version of this logic, showing how easily it converts to farce. The enjoyment of the “brief tragedy” and the satisfactions of Shaw’s more philosophical tragedies both depend on the differences between characters’ and audiences’ perception of the situation on stage as theatrical. Lady Magnesia notices the strangeness of angels singing “Bill Bailey,” but for the wrong reasons (“Why should angels call me Bill Bailey?”). Audiences laugh at the character’s ability to perceive something absurd in the fictional frame, but they laugh even more at the character’s further misinterpretation of it back within the terms of the fiction.

The lightness and absurdity of a playlet like *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction* would normally limit it as a useful template for reading a writer’s other work, but Shaw so often wrote in light and absurd genres that a certain quality of haphazardness or happenstance becomes an important part of his method. The profusion of genres that Shaw’s plays assert in their subtitles is a performance in itself: comedy, tragedy, history, farce, melodrama, sermon, “novel done into a play,” tragedietta, topical sketch, adventure, polemic, apology, romance, interlude, “true-to-life farce,” chronicle, fable, political extravaganza, and, in the case of *Man and Superman*, “A Comedy and a Philosophy.” The general condition that all these forms of writing share is a total theatricality, a kind of inverse of Wagner’s total theater insofar as it places *no* weight on leitmotifs and actor’s gestures. The appearance of repetition in writing is a signal of its absurdity and its collapse into the most contingent arrangement of forces and powers.  

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The jokes are plenty in *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction*—a character delighting in the prospect of being the first "clothes-martyr," a servant taking title more seriously than the aristocrat, having to eat a ceiling to be saved from poison, being turned into a statue by said ceiling-eating—but they all revolve around themes Shaw also pursued in his more serious work.

As far back as the mid-1890s and in as inauspicious a forum as *The Savoy*, Shaw could be deadly serious about the ways habitual behavior could petrify human beings. The first item listed under the “literary contents” of the first volume of *The Savoy* published in 1896 is Shaw’s quirky essay “On Going to Church,” followed by translations of Verlaine, a review of Zola, poetry by Yeats and Symons, and criticism of English art, all provocatively illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. Shaw’s essay hardly seems to set the tone for the later work: it begins in a puritanical register, asserting that “if from the fine art of to-day we set aside feelingness and prosaic art, which is, properly, not fine art at all, we may safely refer most of the rest to feeling produced by the teapot, the bottle, or the hypodermic syringe” (13). The sensuality and symbolism usually associated with *The Savoy* might easily be accused of prioritizing “feelingness,” so Shaw’s opening salvo against merely sensational or entertaining art provides important guidelines for reading the subsequent contributions. As Symons emphasizes in his editorial note, the magazine hoped to “appeal to the tastes of the intelligent by not being original for originality’s sake, or audacious for the sake of advertisement” (5). Not only was *The Savoy* anti-commercial, but it also resisted a particular logic of sensation that cut off feeling from higher, often explicitly spiritual, values. (In the same issue, Yeat’s “The Travail of Passion” blends Blakean roses with perfumed hair out of *Axël*, creating a voice
that might be described as biblical Beardsley.) Shaw recoils from the “maudlin and nightmarish literature and art [...] which must accordingly be classed industrially with the unhealthy trades, and morally with the manufacture of unwholesome sweets for children or the distilling of gin” (15). Apart from enabling Shaw’s assertions about the superior capacities of “the unstimulated artist,” this critique fits into Shaw’s wider view of art as dangerously susceptible to the intertwined logic of sensation and commerce.

Characteristically, Shaw goes on to subvert expectations, telling how his search for genuine art led him back to churches, though not to organized religion. Unlike churches in which the pulpit is “like the Albert Memorial canopy” or the “petrified christening-cake of a cathedral” in Milan (18, 19), churches built on older Gothic models provide something serene and genuine which is absent in modern society. If Shaw borrows the gist of his moral tone and historical analysis from Ruskin, his sense of the significance of this absence is much more anxious and pessimistic. It is important that Shaw’s narrative is structured as a re-discovery rather than, as in earlier accounts, sage-like exhortation. Late in the essay, Shaw tells us about one of his most terrifying and instructive experiences of modernity: seeing a crowd of people in a church pretending to be pious. Recalling the “genteel suburban Protestant church” of his youth, Shaw breaks into an exclamation that, for once, does not seem to be exaggerated for effect:

Every separate stone, every pane of glass, every fillet of ornamental ironwork–half-dog-collar, half-coronet–in that building must have sowed a separate evil passion in my young heart. Yes; all the vulgarity, savagery, and bad blood which has marred my literary work, was certainly laid upon me in that house of Satan! (24)

More than the space itself, the people inhabiting it, the people who had accommodated themselves to those surroundings, horrified Shaw:
The mere nullity of the building could make no positive impression on me; but what could, and did, were the unnaturally motionless figures of the congregation in their Sunday clothes and bonnets, and their set faces, pale with the malignant rigidity produced by the suppression of all expression (24).

Shaw continues, and I want to quote this passage fully because his horror of this hypocritical congregation and the nightmare it produces shapes all his future writing.

And yet these people were always moving and watching one another by stealth, as convicts communicate with each other. So was I. I had been told to keep my restless little limbs still all through those interminable hours; not to talk; and, above all, to be happy and holy there and be glad that I was not a wicked little boy playing in the fields instead of worshipping God. I hypocritically acquiesced; but the state of my conscience may be imagined, especially as I implicitly believed that all the rest of the congregation were perfectly sincere and good (24).

Shaw glosses his own dream by saying it showed he himself was susceptible to religious sentiment, but was lucky enough not to “have been turned loose in a real church,” where he might have been seduced into becoming a believer (25). When he later studied “the economic basis of the respectability of that and similar congregations,” Shaw found that he was “inexpressibly relieved to find that it represented a mere passing phase of industrial confusion” (25). Shaw may have been relieved in one sense, but the way he so rapidly associates respectability with its economic constraints is—beyond being part of the joke of Shaw’s ongoing pose as a casually vulgar Marxist—also a source of intense anxiety. One phase of industrial confusion may pass on to another, or into more pernicious forms than easily satirized respectability.

Reviewing a revival of Ibsen’s Ghosts in 1897 gave Shaw the chance to apply this picture of excessive, unthinking theatricality to the British Empire. The Empire was embodied, in Shaw’s view, by exactly the same process of theatricalization, in the image of Queen Victoria, who attended the 1897 performance with the Archbishop of
Canterbury. Shaw’s mock-incredulous description of the event describes a direct parallel between the image of the ideal Queen and the idealist picture of sexuality the play devastates:

Think of the young lady of seventy years ago, systematically and piously lied to by parents, governesses, clergymen, servants, everybody; and slapped, sent to bed, or locked up in the bedevilled and beghosted dark at every rebellion of her common sense and natural instinct against sham religion, sham propriety, sham decency, sham knowledge, and sham ignorance.⁶

This “list of lies,” Shaw guesses, is what makes up the “shop-window picture of the girl Queen,” and gives Shaw the opportunity to let loose his critique of ‘shamming’ on the whole passing century: “…nineteenth-century life, however it may stage-manage itself tragically and sensationally here, or settle itself happily and domestically there, is yet all of one piece.”⁷ In an age when, according to Shaw, “everybody is provided with the means of substituting reading and romancing for real living,” Ibsen’s plays provide a means of carefully marking and reversing those substitutions. Shaw felt that the theater had a crucial function in limiting the spread of dangerous idealism.

Bad theatres are as mischievous as bad schools or bad churches; for modern civilization is rapidly multiplying the class to which the theatre is both school and church. Public and private life become daily more theatrical: the modern Emperor is the ‘leading man’ on the stage of his country; all great newspapers are now edited dramatically; the records of our law courts shew that the spread of dramatic consciousness is affecting personal conduct to an unprecedented extent, and affecting it by no means for the worse, except in so far as the dramatic education of the persons concerned has been romantic: that is, spurious, cheap, and vulgar. The truth is dramatic invention is the first effort of man to become intellectually conscious.⁸

Shaw connects theatre and theory on two levels—in the dramatic text, as providing a space to practice interpretive strategies that can be applied to a much wider spectrum of political and social life (prefiguring in many senses contemporary performance theory)
and in the theater as an institution which reproduces the rhetorical strategies and
conventions of the society surrounding it (anticipating the connections between dramatic
texts and a range of cultural materials made by the new historicists). For Shaw, the
susceptibility of a society to theatrical “suspensions,” the poses he associated with
pretended worship and inhuman mechanism, could only be lampooned by amplifying or
exaggerating exactly those qualities—but he had to do so in such a way that some part of
their claim on the audience was not lost.

For Shaw, what generated all of most important effects in Ibsen’s work—at the
level of performance, text, and theater as an institution—began with the tension between
the audience and the gradual, inevitable revelation of things “unpleasant” on stage.
While later playwrights radicalized points Shaw (and Moore) had made about
melodramatic theater in the 1880s and 1890s, arguing that Ibsen’s sort of work was only
a retrograde refinement of the same psychologistic sensationalism as earlier melodramas,
Shaw took seriously the possibility that these sensations, though still within the logic of
mimetic representation, were inevitable, necessary contradictions of human thought.
From the beginning of his response to Ibsen, Shaw anxiously pointed out the “pain” and
“torture” Ibsen inflicted on audiences. Shaw consistently attempts to show how Ibsen
gets beyond “the obvious conflicts of unmistakable good with unmistakable evil [that]
can only supply the crude drama of hero and villain” and how Ibsen creates “experiments
in audience torture.” In his review of *Ghosts*, Shaw’s reference to torture is ambiguous:
his rhetoric suggests both his approval (he is offering “guidance” for “future
experiments”) and his criticism (in this production Shaw felt “the limit of the victim’s
susceptibility was reached before the end of the second act, at which exhaustion produced
callousness”¹¹. That Shaw’s sarcasm comes close to participating in the same language of sadistic victimization that was used by Ibsen’s most reactionary critics is symptomatic of an anxiety on Shaw’s part about the most savagely effective aspect of Ibsen’s aesthetic. In casting his “plays pleasant” as a second evolutionary step after his “plays unpleasant,” Shaw pictured his own use of comic forms as a subtle revision of his own pain-inducing (and implicitly more Ibsen-like) early plays. At the same time, “unpleasantness” and its ability to provoke thought was always a badge of honor for Shaw—exactly the sort of thing he wanted to smuggle, covertly, out in front of an unsuspecting audience attending a “pleasant” play.

In the guise of a careful exegesis of An Enemy of the People, Shaw smuggles in his version of the materialist dialectic, hiding it snugly between a snarky aside on literary critics (“fainéants as far as political life is concerned”) and an assertion that, after Enemy, Ibsen “left the vulgar ideals for dead” and started attacking more subtle forms of idealism [Quintessence, 97, 100]. Shaw presents Ibsen as simply more clear-eyed and “iron-mouthed” than other writers, as more willing to call the distortions of idealism lies. After all, Shaw tells us, “it is a scientific fact that the majority, however eager it may be for the reform of old abuses, is always wrong in its opinion of new developments, or rather is always unfit for them (for it can hardly be said to be wrong in opposing developments for which it is not yet fit)” (98). Shaw here makes political reform sound like a matter of applying the observations of natural science to human beings. The lofty tone of Shaw’s attitude toward the “not yet fit” has more in common with Dr. Stockmann than with Ibsen. Although Shaw wanted to make his lecture and subsequent book on Ibsen as polemical as possible, his identification with Stockmann here leads to a vivid formulation
of the dangers of abstract thought: “All abstractions invested with collective consciousness or collective authority, set above the individual, and exacting duty from him on pretence of acting or thinking with greater validity than he, are man-eating idols red with human sacrifices” (99). This is a crucial statement of Shaw’s philosophy: emphasizing the individual (in contrast to the way the Webbs praised the technical expert) and personifying abstractions as violent idols. This vision of an idea becoming manifest in a false face appears again and again in Shaw’s work, and I think it underwrites his life-long concern with unliterary or minor forms. If all creative work might be subject to a horrible process of ‘becoming-idol,’ then a conscientious writer should foreground those occasional, limiting aspects of the work, emphasizing its place and time—perhaps by writing and re-writing prefaces.

In works like *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction*, Shaw oscillates between entertainment and amusing provocation: he wants to tap into the forms of spectacle that disable thought by linking into habitual responses, but he also wants to present his audience with new, surprising content fitted into those forms. Even *Passion, Poison, and Petrifaction* smuggles in a subversive flash of polemic when the cuckolded husband, hearing how his wife is prepared to give up cutting his hair, arranging his papers, and doing domestic chores for him in order to be, as he thought he wanted, his one true love again, mumbles that perhaps, after all, the old arrangement was what he wanted. Shaw had disliked Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but his criticism of Wilde has often been applied to his own work:

"It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theater to be moved to laughter, not to be tickled or hustled into it; and that is why, though I laugh as much as anybody at a farcical comedy, I am out..."
of spirits before the end of the second act, and out of temper before the end of the third, my miserable mechanical laughter intensifying these symptoms at every outburst.\textsuperscript{12}

Shaw wanted to avoid this mechanical laughter, but he also wanted to use it. It was terrifying, but the automatic, unavoidable quality in laughing at something that had been presented as absurd was exactly the quality Shaw wanted to maximize in his plays. Shaw hoped that amusement could be raised to an aesthetic, redeemed not by connection to moral ideals or sloppy sentimentalism but by the effect of distance that it produced. The fact that Shaw had a clear picture of the difference between these, and was tormented by how quickly one became the other, only motivates him further to use both to his advantage.

For Shaw, if even minor forms of theatricality could be turned to a useful purpose, the sting might be taken out of revelations of the artificiality of more existential variations—the insincerity of religious belief or even language as a whole. The possibility that these minor forms could create a sense of community around the edges of major controversies gave Shaw hope that some future community would be able to laugh the same way at the false pictures of essential issues Shaw felt were intolerably widespread. In these minor works, problems of theatrical form can be read more easily as theoretical explorations of affects and gestures because they were explicit attempts to get “closer” to their audiences. \textit{John Bull’s Other Island} also treats aspects of how gestures and verbal tics can become theatrical commodities: Doyle’s most perspicuous critique comes when he demolishes Haffigan’s performance of Irishness by pointing out how it is clearly and solely designed to appeal to sentimental Englishmen like Broadbent. Broadbent’s ultimate success shows how, for Shaw, linguistic difference is a nearly
irrelevant cultural emanation to the underlying structures of capitalism: Doyle’s intense self-loathing derives from his recognition of this irrelevance while still feeling the force of that difference’s appeal in himself. Like Shaw’s church-goers, the effect is mechanical—he’ll even end up voting for Broadbent.

Distinguishing between the entertainment industry Shaw helped institutionalize in England and a more subtle politics of amusement (which turns affective states against broader emotional narratives and which has a long history in Irish theater), helps us make the case for a more complex relationship between modernism and various forms of realist theater. Despite the modern ‘content’ of Shaw’s drama—New Women, class conflicts, anti-idealism, advancing technology—his work seems defiantly set against certain formal aesthetics associated with modernist theater and performance. In fact, the popularity and long shelf life of Shaw’s “Edwardian” work remains an embarrassment to narratives of literary modernism which dismiss popular entertainment and mass culture: at the very least, a striking number of modernists defined their own work as antithetical to the celebrity and spectacle of GBS.

Shaw’s preface to Max von Boehn’s history of dolls and puppets functions as a critique of theatricality on a scale somewhere between Arthur Symons’ A Theory of the Stage (1897) and Edward Gordon Craig’s “The Actor and the über-marionnette.” Von Boehn had previously written detailed studies of miniatures (1917, trans. 1928) and ornaments (including laces, fans, gloves, walking-sticks, parasols, and jewelery, trans. 1929), before turning to the nineteenth century’s interest in marionettes. In his preface, Shaw says that he always uses puppets “as instructive object-lessons” for human actors since “they move you as only the most experienced living actors can do.” Like
Symons, Shaw argues that automata provide a more direct form of expression for the playwright, but, despite all his complaints about egomaniacal performers and the delusions of theater, Shaw never reaches the point where, like Craig or Yeats, he argues that actors should be done away with altogether. Shaw says that

[what really affects us in the theater is not the muscular activities of the performers, but the feelings they awaken in us by their aspect; for the imagination of the spectator plays a far greater part there than the exertions of the actors. The puppet is the actor in his primitive form. Its symbolic costume, from which all realistic and historically correct details are banished, its [...] grimace expressive to the highest degree attainable by the carver’s art, the mimicry by which it suggests human gesture in unearthly caricature–these give to its performance an intensity which few actors can pretend, an intensity which imposes on our imagination like those images in immovable hieratic attitudes on the stained glass of Chartres Cathedral, in which the gaping tourists seem like little lifeless dolls moving jerkily in the draughts from the doors, reduced to sawdusty insignificance by the contrast with the gigantic vitality in the windows overhead. (quoted in Ritter, 183).

Few actors, Shaw says, can hope to achieve this effect, but he seems to allow that it might be possible. He diminishes both puppets and actors by comparison to the high windows of Chartres, suggesting, as insistently as ever, that humans are themselves determined by much larger historical and biological forces. His praise of the puppet’s symbolic costume denigrates attempts to be “historically correct,” but here at the end of the passage, we see how a symbolic costume might be, for Shaw, true to a much wider dimension of history. Naomi Ritter notes the “remarkable inversion” in Shaw’s image gives puppets “a god-like monumentality” (183). Since they are products of a creative imagination, these works—stained glass windows, puppets in performance—gave evidence of a vitality beyond mechanism.

This is where Shaw follows Lamarck, Bergson, and Samuel Butler against Darwin and Huxley. Eric Bentley quotes Shaw: “Natural Selection must have played an
immense part in adapting life to our planet; but it is Creative Evolution that adapts the planet to our continual aspiration to greater knowledge and greater power.”

Bentley argues that Shaw is not so much against natural selection as he is against the way scientism forces people to wait, perpetually suspending judgment, leaving humanity “as moral agents [...] immobilized” (62). All of Shaw’s major plays include scenes in which an aspect of this state of suspension and immobilization is intensified and examined.

Ethical dilemmas in *Major Barbara* and *John Bull’s Other Island* freeze main characters into frustrated inaction. Bentley, making a related point about Shaw’s “discussion plays,” points out how *Pygmalion* seems to reach a climax in Act III “when Eliza appears in upper-class company behaving like an imperfectly functioning mechanical doll” (119). “Readers of Bergson,” Bentley says, “will understand why this scene gets more laughs than all the others put together, so that to the groundlings the rest of the play seems a prolonged anti-climax [...] But there are two more acts!” (119). What Bentley frames as an innovation in theatrical form can also be connected to Shaw’s wider views of evolution and social action. The function of this state of suspension, or, in Bentley’s terms, of the discussion form, is that it allows Shaw to translate a romance (the subtitular genre of *Pygmalion*) into “the language of ‘natural history,’ just as, according to Bentley, Shaw did with melodrama (*A Devil’s Disciple*) and “domestic drama” (*Candida*).

These acts of translation also replay one of the key moments in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* which, blended with Bergson’s ideas about comedy originating in the perception of mechanism in human figures, deeply impressed Shaw. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson argues that the facility for language is a power of generalization, part of the abstract intelligence or knowledge of form, “an external and empty knowledge.”
This capacity for generalization allows people to pick out features of objects that they might want to act on, and it allows them to communicate those action-related features to others. Intelligence, with its facility for language, is “life looking outward, putting itself outside itself,” and therefore “is not made to think evolution, in the proper sense of the word—that is to say, the continuity of a change that is pure mobility” (quoted in Grosz 231, 232). For Bergson and Shaw, evolution is a series of differences from or relations to other species which can only be felt or intuited, not experimentally learned. When Shaw takes up older genres—romance, melodrama, sermon, farce—and translates their problems into modern states of suspended ethical judgment, he is subjecting their experimental discussions (the terms in which characters analyze their own situations) to what he sees as the conditions of evolution. Shaw is testing whether and how those discussions fall out of sync with the vital, intuited forces of life. Do these arguments, as voiced by Shaw’s indefatigably articulate protagonists, sting us with “an intensity which imposes on our imagination like those images in immovable hieratic attitudes” at Chartres, or are they too “reduced to sawdusty insignificance” like the “gaping tourists”? Do they become powerful Wagnerian gestures, or merely the murmuring of inactive spectators?

Shaw once complained that the problem with Beerbohm Tree’s performances was that Tree was secretly a playwright, which fitted him for Shaw’s plays since Shaw was secretly an actor. Shaw’s peculiar fear of reification and automatons in essays like “On Going to Church” gives a new poignancy to this half-joking admission: Shaw’s ultimate pessimism about his own masks shines through, showing how he eventually differed from the labor theorists he otherwise inspired. Where Webb and company thought certain kinds of theorization indicated progress, Shaw distrusted all forms of imposed
professionalization and relied on the movement of biological evolution. Consequently, Shaw’s “popular” works often reflect his most intense struggle with the stakes of theatricality: the perception of uncanny mechanism in the human form was Bergson’s definition of comedy, but for Shaw, it was also a terrifying philosophy.

Motley Shadows
Yeats never settled into a straightforward scriptwriting relation to the stage; in fact, his experiments with theatricality might best be described as a series of refusals to offer the kinds of text actors could alter. Yeats claimed in his Nobel speech that he may not have won the prize “if I had written no plays, no dramatic criticism, if my lyric poetry had not a quality of speech practised upon the stage,” but critics have disagreed about what quality exactly Yeats was referring to. As stage productions, Yeats’s plays are said to be philosophical, speculative abstractions, even though in terms of their influence on his writing, they are just as often said to ‘flesh out’ or ‘breathe life into’ his verse. Yeats certainly recoiled from a whole spectrum of behaviors he associated with crowds, theaters, and actors, but he famously devoted many of his most productive years to “theatre business”—writing plays, writing commentary on others’ plays, organizing productions and performances, politicizing and depoliticizing productions, giving lectures wanted and unwanted, writing opinions, rebuttals, complaints, and essays for newspapers and journals from Dublin to New York, and composing poems about all of it all the while.

Yeats’s withdrawal from writing for the conventional theater is at least as famous as his involvement with the Abbey, but I want to focus on the years he was most enmeshed in theater business because, unlike Shaw, all his writing associated with the
theater carries a sense of being *about* the theater rather than *being* theater. If Yeats’s lectures and essays on theater are themselves performances, he did not intend for them to be interpreted as theater in the same sense as what he wrote for the stage. To catch the sense of the paradox in Yeats’s interest in theatrical gestures while attempting to extract them from the theater, I want to look closely at the revisions Yeats made to his prose play *The Golden Helmet* after it was first performed in 1908. By the time it had become *The Green Helmet* in 1910, Synge had died, Lady Gregory had confronted Dublin Castle over the censorship of Shaw’s *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, Annie Horniman had severed ties with the Abbey Theatre, and Yeats had been granted a Civil List pension by the British government. Terence Brown notes that the inclusion of *The Green Helmet* in his 1910 book of poems “adds a note of unrestrained, rollicking vitality to the prevailing retrospection of the poems.”

However, before turning to the revisions, a matched set of poems published a few years later will help situate the problems Yeats was working with. Yeats regarded his two poems “The Magi” and “The Dolls” as “complimentary forms,” perhaps because both presented figures at the edges of humanity. “The Dolls” bluntly raises the problem of how we can treat artworks like children, and it suggests that dolls might be an even more tenuous case since they may not be art. Likewise, can we treat the painted Magi on flat canvasses as if they had a human aura? Is that any more justifiable? Where is the line between the way families and religions create things on which they bestow affection? “The Magi” evokes the works of the old masters in ritual syntax Yeats later used to great effect in his adaptations of Greek tragedy. “The Dolls” evokes a scene of horror and melodrama through the cadence of childlike sing-song. Both create strikingly
theatrical visual images: it is difficult to read these poems without imagining the tableau of posed wise men or the hunched form of the husband. Against these frozen or slowly moving images, Yeats sets unnervingly dissonant meters. The archaism or ritual sound of “The Magi” suggests something older and more savage than Christianity being born; the melody of “The Dolls” emphasizes the way non-human figures have adopted children’s voices.

In “A Play of Modern Manners” (1908), Yeats complains that the play “about modern educated people […] cannot become impassioned, that is to say, vital, without making somebody gushing and sentimental” (279). When educated people are deeply moved, Yeats says, “they look silently into the fireplace.” This image of melodramatic theater being the only real option for treating modern educated people is worth keeping in mind when we turn to “The Dolls” and its almost textbook example of melodrama (sex and women are necessarily vulgar and must be idealized, crafted into dolls; the reproductive function is secondary to the aesthetic; a woman ought to sacrifice herself, her body, or her child for the man’s honor, or, in this case, aesthetic integrity). In to “The Dolls,” we can see how Yeats explores exactly the attitudes he considers Ibsen-like: the tone of the poem manages to treat its subjects in almost faery-tale form, making them “a little provincial” and thus capable of genuine sentiment, and establishing in metaphor a “leading article sort of poetry”—the dolls are children—but the striking thing here is how Yeats does not turn to the “power of psychological description” he grants the modern novel, but rather to a theatrical resource, giving dialogue to the dolls. Here is a scene bordering on fantasy and melodrama, dependent on exactly naturalist and realist conventions in order to make the voice of dolls ambiguous and uncanny. The poem gains
force the more "naturalist" the image becomes: do the dolls speak, or only in the husband’s 'mind’s eye'? Does the wife see that her husband "heard" them literally, or is this an enormously compressed reading of his silent, mournful expression? The rhythm of the poem is so forceful and uncanny in direct relation to the reader (or audience’s) ability to picture the physical, theatrical scene.

“Ibsen,” Yeats says, “understood the difficulty and made all his characters a little provincial […] and made a leading article sort of poetry, phrases about vine leaves and harps in the air it was possible to believe them using in their moments of excitement, and if the play needed more than that, they could always do something stupid” (280).

Clearly—as we see in these two poems—Yeats finds this procedure formally faulty: if the object of poetry is to extract or foreground as far as possible some pure rhythm or force from ordinary conditions, then this demonstration that such extractions are the product of provincialism or stupidity must be galling. This may be an amusing and accurate picture of most people’s attempts at art, Yeats almost says, but it never rises to true poetry or captures the motives of the true poet. To his credit, Yeats observes that Ibsen’s late manner was “deliberately adopted,” but he nevertheless concludes, sadly, that “he could no longer create a man of genius” (280). Still, Yeats’s critique of Ibsen has left him in the uncomfortable position of yearning for modes of expression he denounced a few sentences before: melodrama, but without vulgar gestures and expressions; passion, but only signified on “the surface.” Yeats is now forced to explain how he would smuggle “the deeper sorts of passion” into the theater, which, as I will argue, Yeats sees as operating under modern conditions effectively demonstrated by Ibsen. But Yeats even implicitly rejects the French “play with a thesis”—which here strike me as sounding
more like Shaw’s discussion plays than anything else—because it only presents the limited form of passion linked intimately to the argument itself. For Yeats, arguments about Land Reform make for better drama than sentimental romances because the passion in the language is genuine, but they are nevertheless distant from the deep, primal, vital forces underlying all action and daily life, but never emerging in the vulgar thoughtlessness of ordinary talk.

Combined with his long-standing reluctance to accept the modernity of Manet over the old masters, Yeats’s 1908 essay “A Tower on the Apennines” offers an oblique way of reading “The Magi.” For Yeats, the old masters had captured something of the utter absorption of the Magi in their fixed and absolute attention to their quest. Their attention was more eternal and eternally haunting than modern painters’ fixation on exact visual impressions, but not (necessarily) because of their role in Christian ideology. It is their fidelity to the form of absorption itself that has, for Yeats, the permanence of true art. When Yeats writes about his experience of the “visionary fantastic impossible scenery” while touring in Italy, he uses it as a backdrop for imagining the complex figure of Ludovico Ariosto, old, gaunt, and infused with the poetic word: “Though he had but sought it for the word’s sake, or for a woman’s praise, it had come at last into his body and his mind” (Poetry, Drama, and Prose, 281). Ariosto’s long cultivation of a particular kind of attention has allowed him to speak in prophetic terms, “as this were Delphi or Eleusis” (281). Yeats imagines Ariosto’s affect and posture in a way that characteristically overloads the image with Yeats’s theories about history, imagery, and folklore:

Certainly as he stood there he knew how from behind that laborious mood, that pose, that genius, no flower of himself but all himself, looked out as
from behind a mask that other Who alone of all men, the country people say, is not a hair’s-breadth more nor less than six feet high (281).

The mood and pose that create the mask are the products of a particular kind of discipline, one that suggests a Platonic aesthetic (remembering prior, eternal Ideal forms) but emphasizes present attentiveness:

He has in his ears well instructed voices and seeming solid sights are before his eyes, and not, as we say of many a one, speaking in metaphor, but as this were Delphi or Eleusis, and the substance and the voice come to him among his memories which are of women’s faces [...] (281).

Yeats here focuses on the way a memory or seemingly solid experience becomes substantial in the moment of poetic attention. Eventually, Yeats differentiates between the series “character”/comedy/Manet and the series “passion”/tragedy/Titian (in “The Tragic Theatre” [1909]), but this differentiation is the product of his long struggle to connect aesthetic absorbtion with something other than what he saw as the merely visual data of the Impressionists (see Foster, 429).

Jonathan Crary has argued that “visual modernism took shape within an already reconfigured field of techniques and discourses about visuality and the observing subject,” not only in transformed ideas of aesthetic absorption or contemplation, but in a wide range of what Crary calls changing “attentive practices.”

Yeats tries to discipline the attentive practices he wants to glorify (the voices in Ariosto’s ear are “well-instructed”), but he also wants to reject more modern forms of isolating attention. In the process, he imagines a number of figures oscillating between theatrical and religious absorption, i.e. the overly ironic or horrifyingly comic response of the dolls to a human child and the “eyes still fixed” of the Magi.
If the intensity of attention is one of the key characteristics of affects—both feeling and emotions—then Yeats’s critique of theater can be said to circle around the way the modern “theatre of commerce” ignores and even disables change in that intensity. As backdrops become more naturalistic, presenting a more effective illusions, actors work to flatten out the heights and abysses of poetic language in Shakespeare and others, neutralizing the violent emotional economies attached to shifts in rhetorical register. The careful attention to visible details of an actor’s gestures constricts the capacity of the actor’s voice to express entirely different ranges of feeling. That is, the measure of good actor becomes the fit between “characteristic” gestures and “characteristic” vocal inflections. This sort of closed “character” becomes a kind of self-contained curiosity, sometimes beautiful in its intricacy, but completely mute and utterly susceptible of being put in a windowed cabinet to gather dust on display.

Yeats is interested in slow seeing, a process more like visualization and imagination than simple sensory intake. “[I]t needs no imagination,” he writes, “to admire a painting of one of the more obvious effects of nature painted by somebody who understands how to show everything to the most hurried glance” (184). Yeats is well aware of how the fully narrativized emotions—the melodramatic self-sacrifices and overwrought mourning—can provide vulgar entertainment by giving the most schematic social narratives ends in basic sensory satisfactions. Rather than try to recover the force (and, in some sense, the historicity) of old stories and explore how they come to seem so compelling (to have such constitutional stakes in our lives), the theater of commence uses them to bluntly assert the senses and feelings the majority agrees we ought to have in response to such events. According to all the advertising schemes, underlying narratives
in newspapers, and political rhetoric, people ought to display a particular affect in response to certain content. If the affect desired is polite bemusement or sentimental benevolence, then the theatre will simply present, with stupefying repetitiveness, a series of events and images that are associated with that affective disposition. The stage becomes a well-dusted and impressively stocked curio shop. Detailed landscapes, half-ruined castle-sets, carefully “characterized” language (something different from individuated): these make up the aurally empty world Yeats rejects.

Holloway saw Yeats give a lecture on “Speaking to Musical Notes” in 1902. With Florence Farr providing examples from a psaltery, Yeats argued that poetry required a particular discipline which Holloway tries to describe as “lilting […] chanting or intoning or what you will, but not speaking” (Holloway, Impressions, 19). Holloway agrees, “in a sense,” with Yeats’s idea “that if in the speaking or reading of a poem the verbal music were destroyed, it ceased to be a poem and became instead bad, florid prose” (19). Holloway says that Yeats’s idea is that “Poetry being a thing apart from nature must have a law of interpretation all its own” (Impressions, 19), but Yeats probably put it even more strongly: in “The Symbolism of Poetry” published two years before, Yeats had argued that “sincere poetry, unlike the form of popular poetry, may indeed be sometimes obscure […] but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day” (Poetry, Drama, and Prose, 275).

Poetry not only has its own forms of interpretation, but it also requires its own separate art, which Yeats is at pains to distinguish from mere oration or actorly posturing. In this and in previous lectures, Yeats was particularly dismissive of the stiltled articulations produced by popular elocution manuals. Holloway, a consistent partisan throughout his
journal for the social and artistic benefits of elocution lessons, makes it clear that Yeats’s
distinctions could seem overly fine:

    hence all this pother about speaking [poetry] to musical notes which the
lecturer endeavored to instill into the minds of his hearers in his own
enthusiastic, excitable, impressionable way, with continuous hand action
(though he sneered at the over-gesticulation of trained elocutionists in
reciting verse, he himself in speaking is the most extravagant, wind-mill
[...] I ever saw!) and fidgety movements [...] (Impressions, 19).

Whether or not Yeats saw the irony in his own exaggerated gestures (and his cultivation
of his mask as Poet suggests that he did), they raise the question of how exactly a
performer was supposed to draw the line between efficient affects and excessive
“business.” Did the performer simply lose all imput because the words were someone
else’s? Or could the actor craft affects and gestures as long as they aimed at the intellect,
rather than the emotion—a distinction crucial to Yeats’s earlier essay on poetry? And
what about fidgeting? Could it lend authenticity to a performance, or should it too be
stylized?

    “The drama,” Yeats says, “has need of cities that it may find men in sufficient
numbers, and cities destroy the emotions to which it appeals” (182). Yeats connects
drama with the old feel of spears and earthenware vessels “before the coming of
machinery” and “when thought and scholarship discover their desire” (182). His
emphasis on the emotions associated with these old practices already differentiates him
from many of the earlier romantics: desire and the natural world are not valuable in
themselves, but for the way they provide a ground or root for the artifices of poets.

The emotion that comes with the music of words is exhausting, like all the
intellectual emotions, and few people like exhausting emotions; and
therefore actors begin to speak as if they were reading something out of
the newspapers. They forgot the noble art of oratory, and gave all their
thought to the poor art of acting, that is content with the sympathy of our
nerves; until at last those who love poetry found it better to read alone in their rooms what they had once delighted to hear sitting friend by friend, lover by beloved (182,3).

Yeats contrasts the emotions generated by spectacle and by oratory, privileging oratory because it forces the imagination to do more work. Yeats associates acting, at least modern acting, with spectacle. Irving and Tree staked their reputations exactly on the visibility of their gestures as appropriate expressions of the internal states necessary for the play. Vocal modulations were a large, but often subsidiary, part of their repertoire.

In critiquing this economy of spectacle, Yeats is also emphasizing the most recognizable difference between the skill-sets of Irish amateurs and the English touring companies. The amateurs supplemented their income with recitations and elocution lessons, but the professionals could fully incorporate characteristic gestures with particular lines and voice inflections through the constant repetitions of their repertory.

Yeats attributes a moral degeneracy to settings and costumes that distract from the language of the play. Plays are not an imitation of the world we see, Yeats insists: they are an imitation of complete actions or ideals.

As audiences and actors changed, managers learned to substitute meretricious landscapes, painted upon wood and canvas, for the descriptions of poetry, until the painted scenery, which had in Greece been a charming explanation of what was least important in the story, became as important as the story (183).

By imitating the “world of the eye” so closely, these elements allow the lazy audience to interpret the entire play as designed as a spectacle and evaluate it accordingly. Taken literally, Yeats’s comments on staging demand that the theater become more like the imagination, able to focus attention in certain places while other fade away. Unlike the
static images of painting, Yeats’s theatrical images have their own rhythm, their own affiliated constellation of affective dispositions, and their own movement.

In 1908, the National Theatre Society, Ltd. presented Yeats’s *The Golden Helmet* at the Abbey for the first time. The newly formed Independent Dramatic Company of Casimir and Constance Markiewicz had just put on its first production (Casimir’s *Seymour’s Redemption*) at the Abbey on March 9. The NTS, having lost the Fay brothers and still struggling with Annie Horniman over control of the program, staged *The Golden Helmet* in rep with George Fitzmaurice’s *The Pie-Dish* and Gregory’s translation of Sudermann’s *Teja*. According to Holloway, Yeats’s “heroic farce” was “effectively played,” but in terms of overall effect, fell somewhere in between the “haven of success” of the “beautiful” *Teja* and the “dead failure” of Fitzmaurice’s “so-called comedy.”

Fitzmaurice’s play “seemed false and, what is more, was false to the life it depicted”—apparently presenting peasant life “smothered in blather” (107). Holloway understood Fitzmaurice’s work as a failed attempt to be “a disciple of Synge,” which helps distinguish the very different criteria he applied to Yeats’s work.

Holloway calls Yeats’s work “fantastic” and “strange,” but the idea of being “false to the life it depicted” drops out. Instead, Holloway notices how one actor “spoke his lines with excellent effect” and how “a talkative group of chattering men and women who filled the stage was confused and unpicturesquely disposed” (107). Drawing on his own preference for distinct elocution and the established tradition of English touring companies (especially Irving and Tree) to give their stage images a painterly or picturesque effect, Holloway tries to make sense of the “strange ‘Red Man’ who came out of the sea,” but the old criteria seem not to fit: Holloway can only complain vaguely
that the “dressing of the stage was sadly needed again” (107). Reviews in Sinn Fein also
called for “more competent stage management” and criticized the “bad making-up and
‘unnatural’ movement and speech.” As for himself, Holloway thinks that Yeats’s own
efforts at stage management were “worse than useless” and would result in “a bad
imitation of what he sees on the regular stage” (110).

Yet problems in the stage management of that first production of The Golden
Helmet helped crystallize the images and effects Yeats was aiming for. Yeats writes that

In performance we left the black hands to the imagination, and probably when there is so much noise and movement on the stage they would always fail to produce any effect. Our stage is too small to try the experiment, for they would be hidden by the figures of the players. We staged the play with a very pronounced colour-scheme, and I have noticed that the more obviously decorative is the scene and costuming of any play, the more it is lifted out of time and place, and the nearer to faeryland do we carry it (quoted in Jeffares and Knowland, A Commentary, 96).

Yeats wants to use color to amplify the sense of a clear, guiding intention behind the stage design, making it more “obvious” and “pronounced.” This also extends to the actors’ gestures and movements:

One also gets much more effect out of concerted movements—above all, if there are many players—when all the clothes are the same colour. No breadth of treatment gives monotony when there is movement and change of lighting. It concentrates attention on every new effect and makes every change of outline or of light and shadow surprising and delightful (97).

It’s worth noticing how different Holloway’s criteria are from Yeats’s emerging emphasis: rather than stressing clarity by relying on established and recognizable cadences and affects, Yeats stresses what is new and what changes.

Because of this one can use contrasts of colour, between clothes and background or in the background itself, the complementary colours for instance, which would be too obvious to keep the attention in a painting. One wishes to make the movement of the action as important as possible, and the simplicity which gives depth of colour does this, just as, for
precisely similar reasons, the lack of colour in a statue fixes the attention upon form (97).

In arguing that colors on stage ought to be more obvious than in paintings, Yeats suggests that the pictorial logic of Irving and Tree doesn’t go far enough, limiting itself to aspects of a scene external to the real force of a drama. Rather than be absorbed by balance and harmony, the audience ought to be absorbed by present movement. Yeats already conceives of this as requiring a deliberate restriction or disabling of what theater can do: in order to fix attention on movement or force, color (and many other components of ‘decoration’) must be radically simplified.

Writing to Sturge Moore in 1903, Yeats complained that the color scheme Moore had suggested for *The Shadowy Waters* was far too bland. The “black, brown and white effect is just one of those effects which we like in London because we have begun to grow weary with the more obvious and beautiful effects. But it is precisely those obvious and beautiful effects that we want here [in Dublin]” (*Correspondence*, 5). Yeats is clearly aware of the praise the INTS had earlier received in London for being refreshingly straightforward in terms of production values: the simple sets combined with the Fays’ spare acting style offered a marked contrast with the lavish designs and ornate elocution of the major commercial theaters. Yeats is glad the group could distance itself from the “theatre of commerce,” but he rejects the idea that the everydayness or drab directness of those early productions could be a coherent or important aesthetic. The principles Yeats lays out for stage design in his letter to Moore show all the signs of his struggle with the new INTS:

1. A background which does not insist on itself and which is so homogenous in colour that it is always a good background to an actor
wherever he stand. Your background [Moore had suggested undyed materials] is contrary to all this.

2. Two predominant colours in remote fanciful plays. One colour predominant in actors, one on the backcloth. This principle for the present at any rate until we have got our people to understand simplicity. *The Hour-Glass* as you remember was staged in this way and delighted everybody. (Yeats, *Correspondence*, 5-6).

Yeats earlier had complained that “the brown back of a chair during the performance of *The Hour-Glass* annoyed me beyond words,” which, for Yeats, is an impressive level of irritation. Yeats goes on to sketch out his understanding of Moore’s suggestion about a “continued” backdrop, worrying that if it isn’t somehow rounded “a man at A will see into the machinery” (6). Turning back to the color scheme, Yeats insists that the play is “dreamy and dim and the colours should be the same—(say) a blue-green sail against an indigo-blue backcloth, and the mast and bulwark indigo blue. The persons in blue and green with some copper ornaments” (7). The proportions of these colors should be exact, creating an effect Yeats seems to think is clearly achievable: “by making one colour predominate only slightly in backcloth and one only slightly in persons the whole will be kept dim and mysterious, like the waters themselves” (7).

When Yeats began revising the text of “The Helmet” (the title color was one of the first things to change), we can see how he tried to incorporate his developing theories of the function of color and movement on the stage. In the recently published edition of the manuscript materials for the plays, William Hogan rightly emphasizes how major changes in Emer’s song and several of Cuchulain’s speeches amplify the central themes of the poetry collection, but I would also suggest that the process of re-working the play into verse drew on principles that Yeats ultimately associated with color-schemes and theatrical expression. Yeats changes the descriptions of the way the Red Man and the
cat-headed men are dressed from “tints” of green to “various shades of green,” but he keeps the specific tinge of purple in the black objects inside the house (chairs, tables, and flagons) as well as the touches of green on the black rocks outside. Cuchulain’s cloaks is specifically named as green and the Red Man’s red cloak, hair, and clothes accumulate a number of new adjectives likening him to a fox. In both versions, Yeats wanted the effect of the Red Man’s appearance to be “violent and startling.” Although the first staged version apparently was not as startling as Yeats would have liked, the conflict of colors—their interaction rather than their contribution to a picture—on stage had been an important part of the mise en scène.

Finding the impersonal forms that bodies on stage can or cannot express, oscillating between the sudden appearance of the ideal and its being drawn back to the ground of everyday life: these are characteristic problems in Yeats’s drama and they lead him to practices which radically devalue the body of the actor while hyperbolizing the value of a narrated or fictional body. In 1929, Yeats wrote to Sturge Moore to clarify an earlier letter in which he had praised Moore’s definition of beauty:

> Your definition of beauty was ‘the body as it can be imagined as existing in ideal conditions’ or some such phrase. I understand it as including all the natural expressions of such a body, its instincts, emotions, etc. Its value is in part that it excludes all that larger modern use of the word and compels us to find another word for the beauty of a mathematical problem or a Cubist picture or of Mr. Prufrock. It does not define ideal conditions nor should it do so, and so it remains a starting point for meditation (144).

Yeats and Moore were debating the merits of speculative and dialectical philosophical systems, partly after Yeats suggests the following substitutions in lines of Swift’s:

“[Percept] as wise logicians say / Cannot without an [intellect] subsist; / And [intellect], say I as well as they, / Must fail, if [percept] brings no grist” (147). Moore disagrees that
what Swift calls “form” is what he calls “intellect”: “Inte
llect in my view deals with the abstract relations between forms by which appearances are perceived; therefore forms can have aesthetic value which intellects cannot have” (148). Yeats defends his translation, saying it works

in the sense that, if our analysis goes far enough, we cannot imagine even the vaguest film of tint and shade without such mental ‘concepts’ as ‘space’ and ‘before and after’ and so on, or the ‘concepts’ without the film. Your ‘forms’ come much later, when mind and sense seem to change places, and sense, not intellect, to give objectivity (150).

Yeats is much more interested in the way Ideas shape perception than in the way an aggregate of perceptions is collated by the intellect. In the same letter, Yeats also defends his admiration for Spengler (“magnificent as a work of imagination”), despite “errors of historical detail” (150). Yeats chides Moore for calling Platonic Ideals “phantoms” and then treating them like argumentative propositions: the phantasmatic, like Moore’s earlier definition of beauty, has its own logic and its own value.

Yeats’s plays invite responses that read them as a series of what W.J.T. Mitchell calls an “imagetexts,” a concept that brackets periodicity in order to think “the heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of the visible and readable.”24 They actively invite audiences to respond to them not as the usual theatrical conjunctions of space, time, and bodies, but as a carefully crafted composite. The stage scene is made to look like a distinct image (differentiating itself from the usual mimetic practices) and the language is made to have particularly textual qualities (differentiate their rhythms and cadences from the usual appeals of mimetic performance). In Picture Theory, Mitchell argues that “the whole ensemble of relations between media” ought to be the focus, not simply finding reductive comparisons (i.e. pointing to similarities in Donne and
Rembrandt, Pound and the Cubists): “Difference,” Mitchell says, “is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor as interesting as harmony and blending of function” (88-9). Pointing out identities between media tends to leave unspoken and unthought the different ways each configures lexis and opsis, the verbal and the visual, the theatrical and the cinematic. Yet this is precisely the site of multimedial art’s most intense conflicts: “Artaud’s emphasis on mute spectacle and Brecht’s deployment of textual projections are not merely ‘aesthetic’ innovations, but precisely motivated by interventions in the semio-politics of the stage” (91). The literal demands of Artaud’s and Brecht’s theories on the materials of the theater—the ways both interrupt or avoid illusionist scenes, props, and gestures—turn our attention back to the theater as a space overrun with political, institutional, and social regulations.

Mitchell’s concept of “imagetext”—traced back to the speeches in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* and projected forward to narrations in *Sunset Boulevard*—opens two new perspectives on Yeats’s drama. First, the concept of imagetexts makes the modernity of Yeats’s drama a key problem. The rich history of imagetexts suggests that like that “the real aberration” is modernism’s strange insistence on the purification of media, especially considering how “the heterogenous character of media was understood in premodern cultures” (107). Why was it that the conjunction of images in, say, *Purgatory* (1938), seemed purer than those caught up with “mere” mimesis? How does the language of *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916) generate the effect of seeming more purely literary, but also more purely verbal or textual, than the “mere” poetic oratory of Romantic theater? Second, the concept of imagetext draws our attention back to Yeats’s long apprenticeship to the work of William Blake. As early as 1889,
Yeats had been “trying to unravel [Blake’s] symbolic way of using colour” in the Book of Thel and Blake’s prophetic writings. Blake’s work folded Yeats’s pursuits of theosophy, alchemy, zodiacal divisions, neo-Platonism, archetypal emotions, and folklore, “crystallize[ing] lofty ideas about the dangers of fashionability, the role of an audience, and the public’s hatred of the unusual.”

Gilles Deleuze, like Yeats citing Goethe as an authority, has argued that color is capable of relations of value (“based on the contrast of black and white, saturated or rarefied”) or relations of tonality (“based on the spectrum, on the opposition of yellow and blue, or green and red, in which this or that pure tone is defined as warm or cool”), these two “scales of color” mixing and combining in various acts of painting. Seventeenth-century painting, pursuing the “optical space of luminous apparition,” used colors as revelations or emanations from tangible forms, although not in quite as liberating a fashion as Byzantine art; Gothic art uses colors in the manual aggregation of nonorganic vitalities.

When relations of tonality tend to eliminate relations of value, as in Turner, Monet, or Cézanne, we will speak of a haptic space and a haptic function of the eye, in which the planar character of the surface creates volumes only through the different colors that are arranged on it. Are there not two very different kinds of gray, the optical gray of black-white and the haptic gray of green red? It is no longer a manual space that is opposed to the optical space of sight, nor is it a tactile space that is connected to the optical. Now, within sight itself, there is a haptic space that competes with optic space. (107)

Optic space is defined by light/dark saturations or dissolutions, what Deleuze calls “luminous disaggregations.” Haptic space is defined by senses of warmth and expansion or coldness and contraction. Luminism “escapes from storytelling” by turning its “inner” spaces into abstractions of black and white. Colorism is less threatened by narration
because “if there is still molding by color, it is no longer even an interior mold, but a
temporal, variable, and continuous mold […] a continuous creation of space” (108).
Yeats also wants his theater to consist of “exterior” molds, colors no longer embedded in
the props and bodies on stage but moving as it were on their own. The new “surprising
and delightful” aspects of color Yeats wants to stage are, despite his own qualms, similar
to post-impressionist paintings because they operate by a theatrical equivalent of
relations of tonality rather than relations of value. Significantly, Yeats regards these
effects as “too obvious” for painting, but in the theater, they can be set into movement
and given what Deleuze calls “haptic” or felt space.

Early critics had their doubts. Even Lady Gregory and Synge were convinced that
Yeats’s poetic dramas could only fill out one part of the program at the Abbey. Others
were perfectly happy to take what Yeats said about the mob and the masses at face value
and see his poetic dramas as a further withdrawal from public life. George Moore once
described Yeats’s method in terms of how his friend, the British Impressionist painter
Walter Sickert, approached colors:

[Yeats] seems to me to have devised literary formulae not unlike the
pictorial formulae that Walter Sickert invented and that have enabled
countless ladies to paint gable and barely distinguishable from the
“master’s.” Walter Sickert teaches how “values” may be dispensed
with—how vermilion worked into ultra-marine will produce a symbolic
sky that harmonises with the brown roofs in which Indian red is used
largely. Ultramarine broken with vermilion is not a sky but stands for a
sky. The drawing can also be dispensed with by means of a photograph
which is enlarged and squared out upon the canvas. “Quality” is
necessary in oil painting, and it cannot be dispensed with, but a sort of
wholesale “quality” is arrived at by a series of little dabs; and these dabs
protect the artist from linoleum. The London County Council pays for all
this teaching and every year a tribe of little female Sickerts go forth all
over Europe bringing back endless gable ends. It seems to me that Yeats
can do very much the same in literature as Sickert does in painting.”28
Moore’s backhanded compliment begs two questions: What exactly does he see as similar in Yeats’s work to Sickert’s *Noetes Ambrosianas* or *Baccarat at Dieppe*? Moore later praised his Sickert as “one whose painting will always delight those who like painting,” but what about that delight seemed so threateningly reproducible?²⁹

Moore’s resistance to this effect is related to his resistance to actor’s bodies and actual performances discussed in chapter two: it draws unnecessary attention to how significance can be separated from the body. For Yeats, this is an achievement of pure form in color. For Moore, such techniques, at least in “literature” (which was a category to which Moore wanted drama to aspire), were dangerously susceptible to mechanical kinds of reproduction, whole schools or tribes of “little Sickerts” devaluing the work by disseminating it too widely. That this reproduction is so blatantly gendered in Moore’s account points back to the way that, in Yeats’s poems “The Dolls” and “The Magi,” the reification, abstraction, or reproduction of human bodies makes the original fact of embodiment as uncanny as the emerging forms themselves. Moore’s critique exemplifies the wider cultural conditions of the reception of these disturbances, showing the strong ideological imperatives to return them to stable categories of gender and reference. Shaw’s plays were also criticized (or ignored) by later modernists as being far too complicit in the logic of the entertainment industry. As we saw, appropriating the mechanical or habitual aspects of amusement was an important part of Shaw’s wider program, but since he was convinced that every aspect of everyday life had already become hopelessly theatrical, very few of his works provide the shock of absolute experience or radical aporia that later avant-garde dramatists wanted to deliver. Yeats
transformed images of theatrical gestures into occasions for sensing distance or the movement of forces beyond what could be seen by the eye.
CHAPTER 5
THE IMPRESS OF THEATER

Theater in Suspension

In 1912, a few years after Yeats had complaining that Augustus John’s sketch of him made him look “like a gipsy, grown old in wickedness and hardship,” Joyce was writing about the Spanish and Italian aspects of Galway for Il Piccolo della Sera.¹ These features are more hidden now, Joyce writes, and “a Titian hue of red dominates,” but these “shadows of history” are “enough to close one’s eyes against this unsettling modernity just for a moment.”² Joyce’s summer stay in Galway in 1912 would turn out to be his last visit to Ireland, and his emphasis on the European roots of “the city of the tribes” locates it within a complex map of blended cultures that also included the Oriental side of Trieste. Many of Joyce’s descriptions emerge from the tradition of Irish Orientalism going back to Mangan and Thomas Moore, but John McCourt notes that Joyce just as often came “face to face with real people who challenged, contradicted and confirmed […] many of the stereotypes about the Orient with which he had been brought up.”³ Rather than use these people as a means to create an artificial topos beyond “normal” experience, Joyce was particularly attentive to how they inhabited places which seemed to exist within overlapping or even contradictory histories. McCourt describes the port city as a space with the “rare capacity to absorb and preserve ‘the other,’ to allow space for ethnic and linguistic diversity”:
On Piazza Ponterosso and Piazza della Legna the air was scented with the spices being sold in the markets and under the awnings, while many of the city’s buildings (for example the 1850 Serb Palazzo Gopcevich, whose outer murals recount the epic battle between the Serbs and the Ottomans in 1389; the Palazzo Romano, with its famous ‘camera Ottomana’; or the Casa Bartoli, a sensitive combination of Art Nouveau and architectural methods borrowed from Japan), and places of worship (the Serb Orthodox Church, for example, was built in the traditional ‘Byzantine Oriental’ style with five cupolas in the shape of a Greek Cross), contributed to creating an exotic atmosphere. Many other buildings revealed an eclectic mix of Oriental-style decoration on their façades and several bars were decked out in furnishings and decorations evoking the East (McCourt 42, 43).

McCourt’s description emphasizes the way three-dimensional built spaces seemed to be filled, not only with “scents” and “atmosphere,” but with competing ways of using space—for commercial enterprise, historical remembrance, worship, or pure aesthetic contemplation. For the people Joyce’s essay on Galway targeted (the “lazy Dubliner who does not travel much and knows his country only by hearsay”), Trieste would be a literally stunning experience.

For as many times as the word “paralysis” has been used to describe the various modes of inhibition, confusion, irritation, anxiety, and awkward anger in Dubliners, the spurs to an awareness of those stunned or paralyzed states have often been omitted. Moments of excess or inappropriate sensation, ambiguously charged with sexual and aesthetic meanings are decisive in drawing out a corresponding feeling of inadequacy or stasis. Joyce’s account of the death of Walter Lynch, adapted (as was much of the rest of the essay) from James Hardiman’s The History of the Town and Country of Galway, has the same implacable melodramatic logic as any of Bram Stoker’s tales of horror (Dracula’s Guest and Other Weird Stories was published in 1914) or Freud’s contributions to Studies in Hysteria. Hardison ends his version of the story (of a father’s being forced to execute his own son) with an exclamation that invites the reader to
sympathize with the father: “He embraced his unfortunate son and launched him into eternity!” Joyce’s version does not invite sympathy in the same way. It uses an image of the witnesses to the execution to signal a different response: “They kissed and bade one another farewell, then, before the eyes of the appalled crowd, the father himself hanged his son from the window beam” (Occasional, 200). Hardison also relates that the townspeople were against the execution, but Joyce uses the image of their affective response to delay, if only for a moment, narrating the hanging itself, the fact that the father actually went through with it. The image of the crowd made pale and static by this act of violence ends the paragraph and provides a transition tone for the next paragraph’s jump back to the present and the present tense: “The old Spanish houses are in ruins. The castles of the tribes have been demolished. Tufts of weeds grow in the windows and wide courtyards” (200). The sense of quiet, mournful contemplation Joyce establishes in contrast to a more vibrant past is a conventional trope, but connected to the “appalled crowd,” it also becomes part of a problematic absence or blockage of emotion in the present. The syntax of the final sentence of the same paragraph makes present emotional possibilities ambiguous: “In the city of Galway, writes an ancient chronicler, reign the passions of pride and lust” (200). Do they still? Or is the reader now in the position of the chronicler, narrating rather than acting?

In this chapter, I want to look at narration and action as they are suspended in Joyce’s play Exiles. Not only does the play pick up the difficult relationship between an “appalled,” silent audience and an apparently excessive display of emotion, but it continues Joyce’s early critiques of the theatricality by exploring those moments where even necessary or sincere expressions of emotion become inauthentic. Along the way, I
hope to show that Joyce’s other texts are much more responsive to forms of theatrical realism—especially Ibsen’s—than other “high” modernist writers. To begin with *Ulysses*, after Stephen and Bloom dust themselves off from the wild stage directions of the “Circe” episode, a slow period of sobering up appears as follows:

They passed the main entrance of the Great Northern railway station, the starting point for Belfast, where of course all traffic was suspended at that late hour, and, passing the back door of the morgue (a not very enticing locality, not to say gruesome to a degree, more especially at night), ultimately gained the Dock Tavern and in due course turned into Store street, famous for its C division police station. Between this point and the high, at present unlit, warehouses of Beresford Place Stephen thought to think of Ibsen, associated with Baird’s, the stone-cutter’s, in his mind somehow in Talbot Place, first turning on the right, while the other, who was acting as his *fidus Achates*, inhaled with internal satisfaction the smell of James Rourke’s city bakery, situated quite close to where they were, the very palatable odour indeed of our daily bread, of all commodities of the public the primary and most indispensable.

-(*Ulysses* 614).

One way of reading this passage would be that while Stephen starts making intellectualized and literary associations like references to Ibsen, Bloom is all fluid sensory perceptions, taking in the “primary” experiences that Stephen abstracts himself from. Certainly the ironic turn of Stephen’s having “thought to think” of Ibsen—making it questionable whether he did or not—and the subtle way attention is drawn to an unconventional organ for taste by the phrase “palatable odour” both support this reading. Recently, however, Stanton Garner has drawn attention to the way Ibsen used different senses—particularly smell—to create effects that amplified or even deliberately contradicted the images on stage. In *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen directs that the stage is “covered with flowers,” which, combined with the thick textures, dark colors, and heavy furniture (specifically moved in from a larger house), creates “a density of sensory stimulation [which] underlies the play’s atmosphere of oppressiveness and
The passage above creates a dynamic Garner argues exists in realist theater: “even as realism attempts severely to limit the spectator’s sensory participation, the actuality of its material field threatens to reclaim the spectator as physiological/sensory agent.” Stephen thinks to think of Ibsen, beginning to make a sharp literary recognition, while Bloom’s more rudimentary (but perhaps more unusual) sensory experience threatens to reclaim the reader skimming for allusions, emphasizing an experience reading can only transmit by proxy.

Before the riotous premier of *Ubu Roi* in 1896, Alfred Jarry had announced the “The Futility of the ‘Theatrical’ in the Theatre,” since such theatricality offers its audiences nothing but “relaxation, a bit of a lesson perhaps, […] but a lesson of false sentimentality and false aesthetics…” A few years later a young Joyce wrote that “Drama will be for the future at war with convention” and will “draw all hearts from the spectacular and the theatrical.” For Joyce as for Jarry, “theatricality” was a symptom of all the lifelessness of the bourgeoisie, the sterility of modern dramatic genres, and the intellectual dishonesty of their countries’ predominant theater institutions. Yet Joyce’s initial interest in the Irish Literary Theatre and his abiding engagement with the forms of theatrical realism at least until *Exiles* helps differentiate his critique from Jarry’s. Although Joyce famously denounced what he saw as the Abbey’s populist and nationalist turn in “The Day of the Rabblement,” his attack is driven by a sense of theater’s enormous potential, not its futility. In Dublin, a rapidly changing field of open competition was emerging where various nationalist aesthetics articulated themselves against both peculiarly English and continental performance traditions. In Paris, Jarry is assaulting a deeply entrenched set of performance traditions in Paris which were
strongly associated with nationalist claims about “universal” French literature.

Competition for cultural attention was fierce in Dublin: several studies have detailed how the ILT navigated already-existing theater patents and won state funding for what was, in theory, an “independent” theater. The fact that Joyce complains about the ILT being too timid to stage Ibsen or Hauptmann shows how crucial he thought it was for Ireland to participate in a wider European culture, but it also shows how in Ireland the debate was still operating on the level of content, whereas what struck Jarry as absolutely futile about theater in Paris was its institutionalized performances, which could effectively domesticate and make pointless even Ibsen and Hauptmann.

Joyce rejects the aesthetic idealism still dominant in Europe, but his earliest essays also show how his attention to Ibsen’s focus on the ordinary and everyday. Drama is “animal instinct applied to the mind,” and Joyce energetically argues that this instinct suffers under pernicious demands to illustrate moral precepts, reproduce hackneyed beauties. These conventions conceal the fact that, on the contrary, “drama is strife, evolution, movement in whatever way unfolded” (Occasional 26, 24). Joyce repeatedly links the collapse of various forms of idealism to the ways its language becomes theatrical. Precepts and beauties begin to feel artificial when an audience becomes aware of the excess in such a way that they are provoked into a counter-performance. Rather than drawing people into a higher contemplation of the ideal, various forms of aesthetic idealism actually make such contemplation impossible. Joyce remarks in the Paris Notebook that

[t]here are three conditions of art: the lyrical, the epical, and the dramatic. That art is lyrical whereby the artist sets forth the image in immediate relation to himself; that art is epical whereby the artist sets forth the image in mediate [sic] relation to himself and to others; that art is dramatic
whereby the artist sets forth the image in immediate relation to others (Occasional 103).

How could an image be set “in immediate relation to others”? Joyce’s notes seem to agree with other contemporaneous formulations in arguing that the quality of direct presentation is the most important thing. George Santayana, whose arguments about objective beauty influenced Eliot’s “objective correlative,” strongly emphasized the literary qualities of drama (at the expense of mere gestures or vocal inflections) because he felt true literary form was not an attempt to replicate or fake emotions—it was a concrete affective structure itself. Joyce’s characterization of drama as “strife” and his concept of “immediacy” certainly share Santayana’s concern with drama’s formal directness, but Joyce differentiates between literary and theatrical reception. Joyce’s diagram here of three conditions of art suggests that the image itself is partly constituted by those gestures and vocal inflections that Santayana and Eliot reject. In Joyce’s scheme, gestures and vocal modulations are not, at least implicitly, mediations of a literary image. The materiality of everyday expression did not get in the way of dramatic art—it comprised it, at least insofar as it made the claim of immediacy an audience had to acknowledge.

Comparing Joyce’s early aesthetics to Jarry’s attack on the theatrical helps specify their different contexts and explain why Joyce was so much more intrigued by Ibsen. To Jarry, the fundamental concerns with everyday speech and gesture found in Ibsen seem utterly regressive—or at best part of an unhelpfully sophisticated critique of an art-form in need of a complete overhaul. Jarry’s critique of theatricality consists of attacking idealizations in habitual perceptions, especially those leading to overfamiliarity and depersonalization. He attacks the way the theater appeals to the already-digested, pre-
prepared interpretations of bourgeois audiences. The smallest nuances of gesture, carriage, and lighting convey clichéd notions about characters directly imported from everyday bourgeois life. Jarry’s startlingly counter-intuitive claim is that the realist theater is futile because it is far too effective. It allows too many unthought stereotypes of gesture and persona to creep back in, rather than intensify the creative, fictional aspects of its work. Jarry dismisses nearly all possible audience members and argues that modern theater should appeal only to the five hundred who are already bored with the theatricality of the present stage.

Joyce’s assault on the theatrical clearly relies more heavily on idealist terminology than Jarry, but is no less anti-idealist. Joyce carefully demolishes each corner of the idealist trinity, but he attacks the idealizations imposed on daily life and which thus make up its most intimate frustrations. He praises Ibsen because his entire career had been dedicated to the revelation of verbal and gestural idealization as deadly and destructive. This is a subtly different critique of aesthetic idealism than Zola’s version of naturalism, but it is also different from what becomes the canonical critique of international Modernism: it allows for the possibility that theatricality is not always the structural opposite to absorption or attention in artistic forms, and suggests that the critique—the sense that something is theatrical—might itself be a parallel passive or negative form of response, a different way of registering a world. The mere registration of theatricality may be more irritating and anxious and less obviously (if at all) constructive than absorption, but it outlines a different experience for just that reason, provoking displeasure. Jarry wanted to emphasize the continuity and complicity of Antonin’s independent theater with earlier idealism (thereby underscoring the importance
of his own work). Joyce wanted to discredit the parochial elements in Irish theater and show Ibsen’s method as a powerful path toward a theater that could be both thoroughly Irish and thoroughly modern and cosmopolitan. Finally, Jarry’s critique intervenes in the context of the nearly simultaneous realist and symbolist receptions of Ibsen in France, whereas Joyce’s critique is shaped by Celtic twilight appropriations of Irish mythology (which were for Joyce too easily bowdlerized) and the developing comparative, anthropological treatments of myth found in contemporaneous anthropology.

A resistance to theatricality marks Joyce’s earliest formulations of aesthetic distance: “A poet’s job is to write tragedies, not be an actor in one.”

Joyce turned to Ibsen for just those reasons—Ibsen’s devastating critiques of the theatricality of everyday life, his continuing disturbance of illusionist conventions with attention to sensual, affective details which threatened to break the fourth wall, and his status within a modern, international, movement in modern theater. Joyce’s hostility to the theater of James Cousins and others stemmed partly from its failure to adopt an effective Ibsen-like aesthetic: its unflinching use of localized language, its literary quality, its internationalism, and its continual willingness to undermine its own conditions of production. As noted above, Toril Moi argues that Ibsen’s anti-idealism led to various critiques of theatricality and of the way people make themselves theatrical, all the while refusing to accept an absolute anti-theatrical aesthetic. Ibsen’s late work—like Jarry’s Ubu Roi—is filled with pictures of everyday language no longer operating in any real relation between the people on stage, but, unlike Jarry, Ibsen never sees how exacerbating this gap, even if it is accepted as unavoidable in our modern condition, could be redemptive. That is, formal austerity never provides the absolute negative freedom its
proponents claim; they simply situate themselves in a different theater. Against the “thwarted sight and smug commercialism” of philistines, Joyce asserts that “out of the dreary sameness of existence, a measure of dramatic life may be drawn” (26). Joyce agrees with Jarry that “Life indeed nowadays is often a sad bore,” but nevertheless insists that this very ordinariness might be transfigured: “Even the most commonplace, the deadest among the living, may play a part in a great drama” (27). For Joyce, the sheer vertiginous profusion of life endures even in modern daily existence, which effective drama could and should transform into a creative, vibrant theater of and for the “folk” (28). The most crucial of theater’s material necessities was a strong connection to the driving forces of everyday life rather than its idealizations.

Unauthorized Absolution

In an introduction for Joyce’s lone play written long after it had been sidelined by Joyce’s other work, Padraic Colum says that Exiles “is not a play about adultery, actual or suspected” (Exiles, 7). Colum is clearly worried that readers will only page through Joyce’s play in order to map its dialogue onto biographical information, trolling for what John McCourt has called Robert Prezione’s “overzealous interest in Nora” and the consequent fallout, which “provided Joyce with crucial first-hand experience that would enable him to write on the themes of attraction and betrayal, marriage and infidelity and the often ambiguous nature of sexual attraction” (The Years of Bloom, 192-3). Despite the parallels between Prezioso and Robert Hand, as well as between Joyce and Richard Rowan, Colum insists that the play “is not a duel [...] for the possession of Bertha” (7). “The title of the play is no misnomer,” Colum writes, since Exiles is an important meditation on the rejection of “accepted moralities” and “the order one has been brought
up in” (7). Any “actual or suspected” adultery is thus metaphorized in the play and by the playwright, becoming a dramatization (in the weak sense of staging without culpable embodiment) of more important issues of genuine freedom, friendship, and love.

This reading allows Colum to make a strong argument that Joyce’s play “has never been given a fair show” and, even though some of Joyce’s notes for the play betray “a strain of youthfulness,” that the play itself presents two aspects of Joyce’s abilities not available or immediately accessible in his other work (8). First, Colum says, the play shows the “drama” (in the sense of motivating conflict) “implicit in Stephen Daedalus’s resolve to forge the uncreated conscience of his race” (9). The implication is that without Exiles Stephen’s declaration might seem cold or airy, and, as we will see, Colum’s reading of Joyce depends on an ultimate wholesomeness and sophisticated morality against which Stephen’s art can be measured, so any “dramatization” (in the sense of marking limits or conflicts) of the motives of a character like Stephen becomes even more significant. Second, for Colum, the play shows that “Joyce was able to give an appealing presentation of a young woman” (9). Bertha’s emotional complexity and shrewdly maintained equipose turn out to be the final meaning of the play for Colum, and taking into account how he resists a reading of the play as “about adultery,” we might speculate that Colum is projecting his own interpretation of the role Nora Joyce played in her husband’s intellectual pursuits. While Colum’s reading usefully highlights the centrality of Bertha’s affective responses, his assertions about the naturalness and innateness of these responses hardly capture the pain and anxiety they are designed to conceal. When Colum writes that “[b]eing a woman, she has in herself an immemorial and universal order” and that “the order Bertha maintained in herself is shown to be more
fundamental than the order Richard would destroy or the order he would create,” Colum is resorting to pictures of womanhood even less sophisticated than those images of “a Celtic heroine” and of parallels to Isolde that he criticizes for “youthfulness” in Joyce’s notes (9, 10). These pictures of womanhood as participating in a more primal, more compassionate order of being allow Colum to relocate any hints of immorality in the play within in a higher scheme of values, even though those values turn out to be more banal than “adultery, actual or suspected”: “It is Richard Rowan’s sense of fatherhood and Bertha’s tenderness for her man,” Colum says, “that are left as means by which the transvaluer of accepted values will be healed of his self-inflicted wound” (10).

With this set-up, Colum’s last sentence allows each of the ideological horizons he surveyed (stifling “accepted moralities”; Catholic and Protestant senses of conscience; enlightened and “family” values) to click into place as constituents of the play’s material form: “In its structure, Exiles is a series of confessions; the dialogue has the dryness of recitals in the confession; its end is an act of contrition” (10). With all the brutal lucidity of a sentence from Dubliners, Colum subjects Exiles to the syntax of a profession of faith, a form in which inner character is manifested through rote language, likewise transforming that language into a singular statement rather than an empty procedure. Catholic confession becomes the conventional language-game which three qualities of Joyce’s work transform or transvalue: seriality, dryness, and contrition. The first two qualities have been decisive in interpretations of the play by literary scholars and performers respectively, with the several confessions in the play magnifying each others’ formal effects and the affectless of most lines’ delivery surprisingly enabling more interesting productions. The third quality, contrition, which is key to Colum’s
interpretation of the centrality of Bertha’s “tenderness” as a “universal order,” has dropped out lately, perhaps because it requires an unduly melodramatic reading or performance of the play’s final scene. Can Richard’s claim to have inflicted on himself “a deep wound of doubt” really be understood as an act of contrition? Can Bertha’s call for her “strange wild lover” to come back to her again be translated in terms of a spiritual reunion? Finally, if either of these readings make sense, how does an interpretation of the final lines as an act of contrition position an audience? Who is witness to these confessions?

Exiles links moral and aesthetic claims as closely as possible so as to find the exact lines in which and through which they become theatrical, that is, when they apparently exceed their authorizing conditions. Vicki Mahaffey argues that Joyce’s shorter works lack the “humour, complexity, and a self-consciousness that is acutely philosophical rather than painfully self-dramatizing” (175). I agree that Exiles is a serious rather than ironic treatment of Richard—the play takes his revelations of the self-interest in conventions of love and friendship in earnest—but this overlooks Joyce’s appreciation for Ibsen’s oeuvre as a whole, which hinges on Ibsen’s ability to take up certain idealist points of view and rhetoric with such deadly seriousness that their eventual collapse seems driven by a logic internal to their language. Joyce knew how this seriousness made the plays vulnerable to poor performances and parody, but he also knew how successfully they analyzed aesthetic theories by contextualizing them in a network of ordinary language and recognizable social scenarios. When hidden or repressed, banal expectations generate more compact, even metaphysical, forms in the shape of demands placed on other people. Joyce, like Ibsen, is most interested in how
these moments emerge from certain situations; but also, how a formula might be derived to create them.

This leads us to the dynamic in Richard’s continual attempts to confess or be confessed to: in confessing a past wrong, the action is transformed into text. The author of that text, the confession, can then ignore whatever invisible or inarticulable feelings might have surrounded the action and consider that their relation to it is exactly the same as their relation to the text of the confession itself—either forgiven and absolved or rejected and outcast, but in either case the relation is justly captured in words. We get the sense that Richard believes that if he can withstand a complete textualization of his most intimate relationships, then he will be able to become a true writer, able to give words to his culture because he has fully accepted the rules his culture or, better, his form of life imposes on him about what can and cannot be worded (which is closely linked to what can and cannot be doubted). Mahaffey argues that Exiles is the exterior, clinical equivalent to Giacomo Joyce’s fantasy (175). More specifically, we can also say that it explores a specific mode (confession) of using loss as a model for the production of art, but it does so with the “image in immediate relation to others” as opposed to being set into “immediate relation to himself” (103). If Giacomo Joyce is an exploration of the limits of performativity—how the self serves as an authorizing context for fantasy—then Exiles is an exploration of theatricality—how unauthorized, alienating language nevertheless has (perlocutionary) effects and alters relationships. Exiles can thus be read as extending Ibsen’s critique of aesthetic idealism by clinically analyzing how talk about ideals becomes theatrical.
Richard works to achieve something similar to the picture captivating Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken*: he creates a distance from his artistic model and a suspended life, but in a nod to Ibsen’s earlier vision of everyday language, the corruption of everyday existence has to do more with a historically specific form of modernity than with the violence of Richard’s self-alienations. In a generous reading of the play—and Pound insisted it could only be *read*—*Exiles* shows how the corruption of everyday existence has to do with a historically specific modernity—the imprecations of colonialism and urbanization in Dublin—and how the abstraction that modernity encourages are variously egoistic and violent, but perhaps still valuable. In Ibsen, abstracted verbal images are always intimately and interminably involved in the corruption and collapse of everyday and domestic attachments, but Joyce puts them on separate but related tracks, multiplying them. Richard’s fate is much more ambiguous than any of Ibsen’s figures, and this could be viewed as a refusal to grant Richard exactly the ‘dramatic’ death or exile which caused so many socialist and liberal groups to view Ibsen as wholly endorsing the idealism he critiqued. It also suggests that Joyce was deeply attracted to the model of textualization-by-confession. However, in dramatizing the process, Joyce automatically involves the distance of the proscenium arch stage and the fourth wall, opening up the possibility that sympathy for Richard will not quite connect. Looking at how often sympathy is directly thwarted in the play, we can see that Joyce was experimenting with textualization-by-confession in a new dimension, not only subjecting emotions and concepts to his culture’s linguistic syntax (as in the epiphanies), but also further subjecting them to the conditions of theatricality.
“We all confess to one another here,” says Robert, and confession becomes not only the dominant theme of the play, but the mechanism of Joyce’s exploration of theatrical aesthetics. Richard attempts to free his own artistic capacities by carefully arranging his relationship to his wife in a series of strikingly formal confessions. Richard consistently frames his art as a kind of confession, intimately linking the way he expressed himself “in those chapters and letters, and in my character and life as well” (E 22). Wolfgang Streit has argued that characters in Exiles are constantly “flee[ing] from sex to language precisely when the stage situation presages physical activity.”

Richard’s will to confess and his urging others to confess emphasizes the problematic transition from embodied desires to verbal or textual expression. Furthermore, Richard’s orchestration of the ambiguity in his own marriage through these confessions allows him to strike a pose of indifference—over against all the possible passionate expressions of idealist outrage an Irishman stereotypically ought to manifest.

Richard’s attempts to textualize his life are only one segment of a whole series of confessional modes: Richard’s various admissions of disingenuousness, Robert’s melodramatic delight in his own transgressions, and Bertha’s careful unfolding of her feeling according to Richard’s apparent rules. Richard’s disclosures seem to be the most rigorous and the least self-deceiving, but the play as a whole invites comparisons between different varieties of this peculiar language-game. Confessions are sometimes presented as self-indulgent exercises, as when Robert wants Richard to be impressed by the ugliness or depth of his confession. At other times, they are important performances of intimacy, as when Richard insists to his wife that “you, too, must know me as I am, now”
Are confessions an excessive mode of language, gesturing toward an endlessly deep interior essence, or are they a practical articulation of identity?

Robert’s picture of a “battle for our souls” mystifies the more plainly psychological problems Richard had been trying to lay out between them, couching the problems in highly wrought symbolic terms. Robert is continuously using language to glorify his whims and calculations, but Richard generally uses symbolic terms to scourge his own impulses, emptying them and refining them into pure forces. Robert conjures of a “spectre of fidelity” and a “spectre of friendship” from which he and Richard must free themselves (89)—thereby avoiding entirely his actual relation to Richard or Bertha. Robert’s facile claim that “All life is a conquest, the victory of human passion over the commandments of cowardice” makes a mockery of Joyce’s own earlier anti-idealism and his attempts to connect drama with life. Robert’s imagery is the outcome of exactly the idealist mentalities Ibsen had dismantled. Like Ibsen, Joyce pays attention to how phrasing that sounds too clever by half (i.e. Robert’s reference to the “commandments of cowardice”) actually abstracts those words from their ordinary, meaningful contexts and conceals the abstraction with an aura of heroism. Richard is more sensitive to this process of abstraction, fully recognizing that simply extracting idealist language has not changed its meaning for most ordinary situations. New situations have to be created in which those words can have the meaning they seem to want to give them.

Richard is constantly trying to make his language enact what it says. Robert values the purely unauthorized fiction in and of itself. Richard attempts to hone his language so it has the effect of a confession but this is constantly threatened by the hypocrisy of Robert’s more operatic versions of the same technique. Richard’s forms of
confession seem to open out for the criticism of an audience that shares the world out of which those confessions are being abstracted. Robert’s close off or focus his intentions. “Lying,” Wittgenstein says, “is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one” (§249): Robert seems to have learned how to play the game already; the main redeeming feature of Richard’s confessions is that he still seem to be learning how to make them. In the course of the play, Richard’s completely self-abnegating egotism attempts to overcome two models of overly idealized, ultimately theatrical expression: Wagner’s Isolde and Dante’s Beatrice. He attempts to remove all idealization from his relationship with Bertha by confessing it, textualizing it, but this process is constantly threatened by the possibility that it is only a repetition of the original idealization. This would make Richard’s ego or authorial control over the scene complete, as it were created by him, but also leave it open to the same hypocrisy Richard sees in Robert. Or, to add one final possibility, does it diffuse the fantasy of an ideal love, pulling Richard back to some sort of actual relationship with Bertha? The contrast with Robert makes it clear that attempting to live out a “free” relationship is still working within highly melodramatic images of love, freedom, and the self. Both Robert and Richard speak formally, in elaborate but precise syntax, but only Robert builds sentences to their own suspenseful conclusions: “Every chain but one he has broken and that one we are to break, Bertha—you and I”(112). Robert here conceives the freedom Richard talks about in wholly negative terms, i.e. the freedom from all the ghosts and laws of society and conventional morality, but, significantly, he presents these as achievable through a specific action. If Richard’s concept of freedom is more sophisticated, it is because it can be achieved by doubt and open-mindedness, a sensitive passivity, rather than any specific
transcendent act (although the idea of wounding himself spiritually re-mystifies much of this passivity), and also because it seems to have a positive dimension also: the freedom to create new art in the future. ¹⁹

Later in the play, Richard reads Robert’s article about him aloud in “a rather loud harsh voice” and acts out the part of the radical, liberated, sophisticated journalist “distinguishing” a kind of meaningful nationalism he can dissociate from economic or political questions (128). Robert’s article argues that cultural nationalism is the catalyst for the “longawaited victory” (128). Richard has little or no sympathy with this sort of argument since it does end up explicitly connecting art to a political goal. Yet what drives Richard to become theatrical himself is the disingenuousness of its argument—which is disturbingly similar to the ones he would make himself. In Robert’s article, spiritual culture, properly separated from political and economic concerns, will somehow then generate a spontaneously perfect new nation. As in their doubled attempts to confess, Robert’s more rhetorical—more public—articulation painfully reminds Richard of his own attempts to refine and hone his fiction. Richard is struck all at once with his involvement in inevitably political and social contexts, his own failed attempts to extricate himself from those involvements, and his own all-too-similar attempts to justify his neglect of those involvements through his art.

Viewed as a species of performative utterance, confession has well-defined conditions of felicity, but Richard has so arranged events that his wife’s words could never have the force of an effective confession. His art is possible because he has proven he can live in a realm of autonomy (exile) away from the habitual, automatic meaning structures at work in Ireland—the habits that would either take his wife’s hints
puritanically and treat her as ‘fallen,’ and away from the habits which would pretend his wife’s hints have nothing significant in them, making his wife into a complete monad.

Cavell’s analysis of “passionate” as opposed to performative dimensions of utterance suggests that the contingent and irregular uses of language Austin avoids in his account are exactly a part of the unconventional aspects of language modernists become so interested in and want to treat as performative. The genre of the manifesto, as Puchner has pointed out, participates in both the performative (it clearly wants to enact what it says) and the theatrical (it clearly does not have the authority, usually political, to enact what it says). What Cavell calls passionate or passional utterance bears the same stigma of hysterical ineffectuality, of excessive, unauthorized, or unjustified speech, but, rising to a defense, Cavell suggests that

Perlocutionary acts make room for, and reward, imagination and virtuosity, unequally distributed capacities among the species. Illocutionary acts do not in general make such room—I do not, except in special circumstances, wonder how I might make a promise or a gift, or apologize, or render a verdict. But to persuade you may well take considerable thought, to insinuate as much as to console may require tact, to seduce or confuse you may take talent. Further, that perlocutionary-like effects—for example, stopping you in your tracks, embarrassing or humiliating you—are readily, sometimes more effectively, achievable without saying anything, indicates that the urgency of passion is expressed before and after words. Passionate expression makes demands upon the singular body in a way illocutionary force (if all goes well) forgoes. (173)

“I confess” is an easily recognized performative utterance with various equally recognizable authorizing contexts: in a courtroom, in a confessional, in the midst of an argument about infidelity. Exiles works through several different ways the usual contexts are deployed outside formal institutions: in turn, Richard cues Beatrice, Robert, and Bertha to confess by taking on the role of interrogator or confessor. Richard talks explicitly about wanted to apply the concept of confession to his entire being, confessing
everything, be entirely honest. In this way, Richard exhausts the possibilities of performative utterance. Like Austin, he regards the things we do with language beyond the performative somehow unimportant, since they depend on capacities “unequally distributed […] among the species.” Richard turns all his energies on perfecting a confession of his soul that will not be unauthorized or theatrical because it will be the seed of his future art.

Yet from the outset, the play introduces a number of clues about deeply problematic forms of theatricality—especially how vulnerable the moment of death is to idealization and melodrama. The key early scene between Richard and Beatrice, establishing Richard’s cold and critical eye, depends on a problematic rejection of theatricality. Richard is criticizing his parents when Beatrice interrupts:

BEATRICE: They both loved you, believe me. Their last thoughts were of you.

RICHARD [Approaching, touches her lightly on the shoulder and points to a crayon drawing on the wall.] Do you see him there, smiling and handsome? His last thoughts! I remember the night he died. [He pauses for an instant and then goes on calmly.] I was a boy of fourteen. He called me to his bedside. He knew I wanted to go to the theatre to hear Carmen. He told my mother to give me a shilling. I kissed him and went. When I came home he was dead. Those were his last thoughts as far as I know. (25)

Richard rejects the emotional claims Beatrice is making on behalf of his parents by taking “last thoughts” literally, rather than in the vague, superstitious, but seemingly harmless way Beatrice uses the phrase. By narrating the story precisely, he is able to dispel the sense of obligation or duty to his parents Beatrice is trying to evoke. At the same time, he can only generate the story by pointing to another work of art, as if needing to orient or focus the narrative, and, in the telling, he links himself to deliberately excessive utterances of opera.
Despite its austerity, Richard’s logic of confession is also linked to the melodramatic moment of overwhelming intensity he imagines he will suffer standing over the body of his dead wife. Coldly chiding Robert about Duns Scotus’s “death of the spirit” (inverting what he knows is Robert’s idea of vitality in sex), Richard worries “I will reproach myself then [after Bertha’s death] for having taken all for myself because I would not suffer her to give to another what was hers and not mine to give […] That I stand between her and any moments in life that should be hers […] (86-7). In attempting to formulate a completely honest accounting of his feelings about Bertha and Robert, Richard cannot help but project himself into a future state of regret at her death. Rather than consulting his present feelings, he has to imagine a space in which he can ‘disinterestedly’ assess his situation. This moment echoes an earlier attempt by Robert to articulate his own ironic detachment: “If my best friend lay in his coffin and his face had a comic expression I should smile. [\textit{With a little gesture of despair.}] I am like that. But I should suffer too, deeply” (80-81). Robert’s version clearly draws on what we might call a fuller realization of the scene: he creates more of an image and frames the anecdote with a gesture to signal the tone in which it should be taken. Richard’s version only gives the most minimal coordinates for a picture to form, but operates in the same way to establish a present identity.

Of course, in both their terms, Bertha’s mind is irrelevant; she is the subject of her passionate desires. Bertha responds to Richard’s confessions, interrogations, and solicitations of confession with a casual equanimity that suggests she has grown accustomed to his insistence on every aspect of their relationship being worded. When
she finally begins to push back against his behavior, she pin-points the way his confessional logic actually drains her of all power and freedom in the relationship.

BERTHA [Bitterly.] Ideas and ideas! But the people in this world have other ideas or pretend to. They have to put up with him in spite of his ideas because he is able to do something. Me, no. I am nothing. [...] I am only a thing he got entangled with and my son is—the nice name they give those children. Do you think I am a stone? Do you think I don’t see it in their eyes and in their manner when they have to meet me?

Bertha cannily believes Richard left her alone with Robert so he could hold it over her head permanently that he had allowed her “freedom.” In fact, his goal was even more self-involved and egoistic than that, wanting to free himself from the desire to know her every secret, as if such knowledge were possible. In one sense, he cannot be convicted of the kind of self-interested behavior Bertha suspects him of, accumulating debts of gratitude and guilt he can use to “humble” everyone, killing their spirit or dignity in relation to his own. Bertha ultimately tests this judgment the same way the audience expects to judge Bertha—by grounding it on Richard’s interest in Beatrice. When Richard denies this interest, he disables the judgment about his motives that Bertha had come to anxious, frustrated terms with through the course of the last act.

Joyce carefully denies the audience certainty about what happened with Robert, so Bertha’s self-defense not only fends off the explicit judgment of a certain strata of Dublin society, but also the judgment of the audience—holding off the audience’s ability to judge that her speech is disingenuous (pitying her own suffering when she has in fact been ‘unfaithful’) or noble (expressing a defiant self-sacrifice linked to the fact that she has remained ‘faithful’). Although the movement is awkward and the consequences are not fully explored, this suspension of judgment forced on the audience places it in the position Richard calls the conditions of his art in the end—the radical doubt that changes
who he is. Joyce does not follow out the consequences here: he does not, as in Ibsen’s late plays, provide long final conversations in which important judgments are not only suspended, but interrogated and eventually felt to dissolve as rational options, even if the stakes of one or the other in the conventional social world are felt acutely. However, the way *Exiles* suspends the audience’s judgment does momentarily anticipate the ways later playwrights will throw the responsibility for judgment back on the audience, literally foregrounding the theatrical situation so as to make the audience’s role in the consequences that unfold unavoidable.

Joyce’s reading through 1913-14, as reflected in his library and book purchases, shows his preparation to lecture on Shakespeare, but it also shows his interest in Spinoza, Aristotle, and “the difficult good” which emerges in his discussions of *Exiles* in his notes.20 As many commentators have emphasized, the philosophical picture of expression which Joyce gleans from Aristotle owes much to his (mis)readings of Aquinas, translating theological concepts into aesthetic theories in which art is the incarnation of the beautiful in things.21 Melded with Aristotle’s definitions of tragedy in the *Poetics*, Joyce’s Thomistic meditations provided him with justification for finding epiphanies in the entelechy of everyday life as transubstantiated in text and language. Even remaining within Aristotelian concepts of action and eudaimonist ethics, the concept of incarnate beauty in Aquinas could be applied to objects, persons, and values wholly outside the normal range approved by conventional London and Dublin publishers. Though he was working within a definition of the form of forms as the sense of delight in the mind of the viewer at the interplay of forms in an object, Joyce’s insistence on Aristotelian categories (which was apparently how he differentiated his own
work from Synge’s) at least implicitly allowed for an ethical dimension in the
emergences of an autonomous form. Crucially, he includes the reader’s or audience’s
response to a dramatic work is by acknowledging the linking function of ordinary
language, how it functions in basely sensational ways but still serves to ground dramatic
art in a shared phenomenological space.

Richard wants to textualize even “sensations” which he says cannot be articulated
by ordinary language, rendering them by forcing a ‘wound’ of doubt upon himself
(effectively an attempt to gesture beyond language within language, attributing a wound
to something not usually spoken of as wounded)—and reveling in his success when he
simply isolates himself from what we would ordinarily call language or marriage. This
can be seen by how much of what Austin slyly calls “the part where we take it back” is
accounted for by the idea of a formal or specialized language or marriage: calling Richard
and Bertha’s relationship a new or special case of marriage accomplishes what Richard
wants to accomplish without the suggestion that it bears any special literary or
metaphysical meaning. Even though Joyce found this picture of the artistic process
powerfully attractive, or perhaps compulsive, he provides a number of hints that this final
picture, the “wound” of doubt, cannot provide the kind of artistic certainty Richard thinks
it will, that it is not a final performative utterance enacting the self-confession that will
create the conditions for Richard to write, but is instead simply another perlocutionary
utterance, like so many of Robert’s, relying on a singular talent or urgency to have its
effect.

First, the uncomfortably numerous pauses and shared silences in the play suggest
that Richard’s plan to confess or textualize everything only seems as urgent and forceful
as it does in certain historically and culturally embedded conditions: the criteria of
utterance, of repression and concomitant ‘rebellion,’ in suburban Dublin drawing-rooms.
The uncomfortable room for over-interpretation inherent in long pauses is an integral part
of the play, but they are not signs of the universal impossibility of expression or
interpretation. Instead, they are intimately related to early twentieth-century suburban
Irish social conventions such as bourgeois domesticity, marriage, and aesthetic idealism.
For Joyce, these conventions are intimately tied to illusionist theatrical conventions, but
this doesn’t mean they can simply be abandoned. The framework of the conventional
melodrama—in which the secret or essence of a character gradually comes to light and
governs the plot—gets reversed: Richard’s plot is to arrange or textualize everyone’s
utterances so that he can construct a secret, an essence, or, put a different way, an artistic
style.

Second, the play’s emphasis on pointing and its association of pointing with the
language-learning games Richard plays with his son Archie suggest that, at the edges of
that drawing-room, a much wider and more fluid range of criteria for meaning exist.
Beyond textualization understood in Richard’s aesthetic terms as the opposition to the
repressed silences of the drawing-room, there might be forms of life in which multiple
languages are learned and are only incompletely mapped onto each other. There might
be forms of life in which gestures and even rituals are left to their own logics, without
attempting to bring them into a single, comprehensive language.

ROBERT [Pointing.] Yes, down; straight down. How do you say that
over in Italy?
ARCHIE: That? Giù. [Pointing down and up.] That is giù and this is sù.
(29)
One of the things that makes that last scene with Bertha and Beatrice so interesting is that it is so hard to guess where their relationship will go—from moment to moment, they might become friends or enemies, until, finally, it becomes obvious that their relationship will never really settle into conventional molds. At the level of gestures (to say nothing of his careful and thorough use of adverbial modifications for almost every utterance to shape the affects of the characters as they respond to one another), Joyce carefully arranges hands to touch and withdraw at times slightly out of sync with the directions the characters’ language seemed to be moving. A hand on a knee or a quick withdrawal from a handshake usually adds a dimension to the otherwise polite surface of a stretch of dialogue.

Yet the effect of a fourth wall is so strong in _Exiles_ that audiences have had trouble caring about the play at all. Productions since the 1950s relied on Joyce’s fame as a controversial writer to generate modest ticket sales, and the first successful performances were directed by Harold Pinter in 1970. Long, awkward silences, stilted or stuttered dialogue, and overly pregnant pauses—all trademarks of Pinter’s own work—generated a constant tone of ominous “significance” throughout the performance. In part, Pinter amplified expectations related to Joyce’s prestige: each carefully enunciated or repressively garbled utterance became a clue not only to the plot, but to Joyce-the-genius’s interest in the whole scene. In the context of the changing state of the Joyce industry’s theorizations about the relation of Joyce’s biography to his work, Pinter’s productions offered an especially powerful hermeneutic tool for psychoanalytic readings. Reviewers still tended to treat the playscript as flawed, as if two hours of heavily performed “overtone” could salvage any poorly constructed play, but they
acknowledged the odd experience of having seen “something” or feeling somehow that
the play was valuable without being able to pinpoint exactly why. I want to argue that
this sense of disorienting interest, or undirected attention, is not only a function of
Pinter’s directing, but a theme of the play and a key aspect of Joyce’s experiments in
dramatic form.

Unlike Ibsen, Joyce never establishes a fully ironic distance between what
characters’ bodies are doing and what they are saying—their language never seems to
become wholly abstracted from the conventions of ordinary life. This may be because
Joyce presents those conventions as already partly abstracted: Richard’s polite bows and
formality seem to put everyone else on guard somehow and suggests that all such
conventions are, in fact, constructions rather than natural, learnt behavior—therefore
making the complete flight into metaphor unnecessary. Joyce’s characters never seem
possessed or pathological, never verging on madness. They are more often melancholy,
weary, irritated, frustrated, anxious, or worried. Ibsen’s reliance on more extreme
dissociations between language and ordinary life, while crucial for delineating the stakes
of the artistic process through which concepts are abstracted from the materials of the
everyday, also misses the registers of more common daily affective states and
dispositions. In Ibsen’s middle work, the ordinary had value for grounding the
metaphysical flights of the thinker, forcing the writer to be more responsive to their
situation, even if their response was another abstraction. Ibsen’s later work confronted a
corroded everyday which no longer grounded illicit language, but instead exacerbated its
tendencies toward abstraction. What Joyce discovered in writing *Exiles* was that the
failure of the latter was not in the everyday itself. Certainly, its materials changed and
technology provided access to a bewildering new diversity of voices which disoriented the usual means by which a speaker grounded their utterances in recognizable language-games (maintaining a conversation entirely from quotations was recognizably elitist until film, when the reenactment of dialogue could become a different dimension of communication without the connotation of separation from ordinary life). However, the failure of artist-figures like Richard and Stephen was clearer: although their vision of art abstracted from a particular social world appealed to Joyce, he eventually left behind the idea that this process was singular, rather than multiple and exponential.

*Exiles* was in a sense Joyce’s last effort to articulate a single picture of aesthetic experience and production, preferring in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* to show the process of aesthetic abstraction happened in multiple directions and in multiple temporalities. If, as has been argued, Joyce’s late work is coming to seem more and more legible as “realist” to postmodern readers, it is because the claims of the modernists for a single vector of abstraction, or even multiple vectors in linear time, as a model of experience and production are becoming more and more inaccessible. What Douglas Mao calls the test of production has become indistinguishable from the overlapping awareness of marketability, prestige, status as leisure or work time in consumption, readerships, and the accumulation of interpretations, each of which has a different sense of time accompanying it and a different way of chipping away at the very idea of an object.  

Joyce’s play was a last attempt to work through Ibsen’s program one idealist framework at a time. Modernist genres of the manifesto and the correlated development of art and literary market niches created idealist languages faster than they could be analyzed in Ibsen’s way, within a shifting and multiple but still theatrical space. Those
languages in which the claim to authority comes from somewhere other than the ordinary, shared and present phenomenological world became less and less plausible. Puchner argues that the shift from past to future-tense authorization which emerges as a series of performative genres came to dominate the modernist movements, but he leaves out, necessarily, the explosion in genres and readerships as such, many of which drew on exactly the plain sense of ordinary agreement with their readers and audiences—so much so that we can now study them, as with newspapers and journals, with an assumption that they shared mutual structures of feeling about ways of talking.

Unlike the forms of idealized and metaphysical language Ibsen presents in his plays, the abstractions of modernist literature were not only obvious, but increasingly declared. Joyce’s solution was to gather as many directions of abstraction (imagination, advertising, literariness, isolated reveries, unconscious stagecraft) into a narrative which attempted to allow them each their own temporalities, unfolding at the pace of dreams, commercials, romances, walking thoughts, seated thoughts, and whole-cloth inventions or transformations. All these directions must have been made clear by the rigorously linear way time works in Exiles: its overwhelming and almost continuous stops, starts, pauses, breaks, and awkward silences constantly remind the audience that there are other dimensions of experience beyond the dialogue, but Joyce foregrounds the fact that this is simply not available to an audience: this unavailability, like the suspension of judgment, forces the audience into the time experienced by the characters (they cannot look forward or backward with any confident knowledge of how the plot has or must unfold; their destinies are left disorientingly open). If the audience is not as confident about the use and power of this state of doubt as Richard at the end of the play (opening Richard up to
view as, in Ibsen’s way, dangerously abstracting vitalist language), they nonetheless share his condition. (Wittgenstein asks about why we so often figure shared conditions like this as a question of knowing, of sharing some particular secret or picture, rather than as a question of family resemblances.)

Near the end of the play, Robert asks Bertha to tell him what happened between them, leaving it ambiguous as to whether he actually isn’t sure or whether he will tell Richard (and himself) that whatever she says is the truth. Once again, the play narrowly avoids confirming or denying for the audience Robert and Bertha’s level of intimacy, because, at least according to the criteria all the characters are now using (for their different reasons), it doesn’t matter. “What is the truth that I am to tell? [...] Were you mine on that sacred night of love? Or have I dreamed it?” (137) Normally, this phrasing would imply a stronger intimacy than it does in here, but Robert had so often in previous scenes used highly idealized language to talk about love that there is no way of assigning a definite action, and hence a definite judgment, to Bertha. This is the moment in the play I most agree with Pound’s assessment: reading this scene is crucially different than watching it on stage. In performance, the audience has little time to process the fact that they are being denied information about the previous night—it assumes that the key revelation is immanent, then, suddenly, Richard announces his doubt like a triumph. My own reading experience with the last half of the play involves a constant shifting back and forth to see if I had missed anything, roving over lines to see if they connote anything stronger than I had first been impressed with. This makes me exceptionally aware of the fact that I am the one looking for an answer, stopping my reading to go back and try to interpret gestures and hints of words all over again. As a reader, I have been put in
exactly the position that Richard renounces, and, coming after I have spent so much time reassuring myself that I haven’t missed the smallest nuance or texture, Richard’s acceptance of doubt strikes me with the force of an odd shame. Or, if not shame, at least a surprising complicity in all the baser, interested egoism Bertha had suspected in Richard.

*Language in Private*

Richard’s ability to stand back from his own life and arrange it aesthetically depends on a picture of his own private (authorial) language: when Richard says he is in pain, ‘wounded in the soul,’ he is attempting to mark himself in a way that cannot be translated into any other language. Wittgenstein asks: “…how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?” (§245). Richard’s whole aesthetic is predicated on the idea that he can somehow use language to separate his ‘soul-pain’ from the usual expressive and gestural behavior associated with such pains. Joyce refers more explicitly in his notes to Robert’s sadism and Richard’s masochism, but Richard’s pathology cannot be displayed in gesture: “Had not Robert give Bertha a little bite when they kiss? Richard’s masochism needs no example” (157). Even though Joyce clearly likens Richard’s attempts to textualize or aestheticize his own life to a pathology (and Joyce notes their likeness to the maddened idealists of Ibsen’s plays), he wants to divest that pathology of all its theatrical excess. The suggestion is that Richard’s masochism is redeemed by being purely internal, more intensely controlled, and thus completely transfigured into the kind of intensity that will produce great art.

Nevertheless, Richard’s confession/textualization suffers the same fate as Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken*: it becomes theatrical in the sense that it creates an excess of
imagery exactly when it seems to have done with imagery. Like Woolf and later modernists, Joyce turns away from the consumption model of aesthetic experience championed by Wilde and the decadents, but Stephen is not the last nor the most complex attempt to work through such a model.²⁸ Richard not only attempts to include painful experience in the range of his aestheticization, but he also emphasizes how the experiential process produces new, more open—one is tempted to say more rational—relationships. Richard does not yet emphasize only the performative dimension of speech acts, neither by claiming a future context which will authorize his words (as in Marinetti), nor by claiming actual and instant materialization of what is being said (as in “Circe”), but Joyce does allow us to see the theatricality of Richard’s claims: the fact that his “soul-wound” and his masochism are not authorized by the ordinary context of his conversations means that their authority must rest on some interior sense or, more vaguely, some future art Richard will produce.

Wittgenstein’s late meditations on private language have a similar ambiguity: we get the sense that Wittgenstein is denying an important quality of our interior life, but it turns out our attempts to articulate that importance all end up creating a false picture. Wittgenstein’s meditations (themselves framed as a response to the picture of language in Augustine’s Confessions) help show how and why Richard’s confessional aesthetic ultimately fails. For all the elegance of Richard’s formulas (many borrowed from Wagnerian or symbolist conceits), his claim to be “wounded” is ultimately vulnerable to Bertha’s acknowledgment (his spiritual pain is not spiritual, or not only spiritual, if the person in the best position to have given it cannot see it as such). By means of confession as a formal aesthetic system, Richard transforms dialogue, objects, and other
people into texts whose underlying structures he can then manipulate or stand apart from. Even Richard’s final statement about his “wounded soul” gives him a measure of control over his relationship with his wife, planting a doubt so that it can be an aesthetic rather than a conventional marriage.

Joyce wanted to keep the theatricality of this rhetoric in check, but also explore how it might create beautiful work without destroying everyone who came into contact with them. In local (or minor) cases, Joyce suggests, these abstractions do not always lead to Ibsen’s absolute destructions. *Exiles* elaborates Ibsen’s critiques of theatricalization—but in the structure of a comedy. Throwing the discussion into Frye’s categories for a moment, we could say that Ibsen showed the process of theatricalization to be a mode of tragedy—that avoiding the ordinary meant eviscerating the hope of ordinary human relationships. Joyce tried to show the process of theatricalization to be damaging only to what was commonly mistaken for ordinary or natural relationships, that the damage such abstractions of language caused could be directed—if carefully managed—exclusively toward the most stifling, conventional, and clichéd parts of everyday life. *Exiles* explores how the forms of time and space necessary for theater—and, significantly, for ordinary conversation—were nearly impervious to the kinds of damage Joyce wanted to inflict early in his career. As forcefully as Joyce wanted to redirect that damage onto the audience’s ideas of what made a successful marriage, performances usually end up showing Richard to be a cold, callous victim of his own self-theatricalizations. As Pound noted early on, the only way to hold the conclusion as a triumph and not a tragedy—even on a small scale—would be to read, rather than hear or see the play. This validates the idea that Joyce’s real struggle was with an idea of Ibsen’s
figures he cultivated while predominantly reading the plays. Joyce’s post-Exiles writing can be read as a turn to the productive anti-theatricality of literary closet dramas, texts that make the reader—not the institution of the theater or the playwright—responsible for the exaggerations and affective stances which made conventional social ideas seem absurd.

Richard’s involution or inversion of idealist confessional practices can be read as a sophisticated attempt to create what Wittgenstein calls “metaphysical” or nonsensical language, especially the species Wittgenstein explores as “private.” Jameson characterizes Joyce’s work as an attempt to make the author invisible (in contrast with Proust—and importantly modifying Jameson’s earlier picture of cognitive mapping), and this process could be recoded in Wittgenstein’s terms as attempting to create an absolutely private language by wholly accepting (with a key supplement or difference) the terms and language and narratives imposed all at once and simply adding a kind of parenthetical “not.” As Mulhall makes clear, there are two ways of responding to this sort of language: either to try to call it back to its ground in common language, thus showing its impulses to be substantial even if it holds onto a violation of our grammar; or to try to imagine ways such language might be meant, inviting the other to admit that such language does not provide the meaning or satisfaction they seem to desire. I think we can provisionally call these responses modernist and postmodernist, or, better, symptomatically anti-theatrical and symptomatically highly (or jadedly) theatrical.

Richard’s failure is the failure of Wittgenstein’s diarist in the philosopher’s meditations on the notion of a private language. Like the diarist, Richard wants to textualize even “sensations” which he says cannot be articulated by ordinary language,
rendering them by forcing a ‘wound’ of doubt upon himself (effectively an attempt to
gesture beyond language within language, attributing a wound to something not usually
spoken of as wounded)—and reveling in his success when he simply isolates himself
from what we would ordinarily call language or marriage. This can be seen by how
much of what Austin slyly calls “the part where we take it back” is accounted for by the
idea of a formal or *specialized* language or marriage: calling Richard and Bertha’s
relationship a new or special case of marriage accomplishes what Richard wants to
accomplish without the suggestion that it bears any special literary or metaphysical
meaning. Even though Joyce found this picture of the artistic process powerfully
attractive, or perhaps compulsive, he provides a number of hints that this final picture, the
“wound” of doubt, cannot provide the kind of artistic certainty Richard thinks it will, that
it is not a final performative utterance enacting the self-confession that will create the
conditions for Richard to write, but is instead simply another perlocutionary utterance,
like so many of Robert’s, relying on a singular talent or urgency to have its effect.

One of the long-running debates about Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), and consequently about how it frames his later work, turns on the
question of what one philosopher calls “resolute” and “substantial” readings of nonsense:
in short, whether the production of nonsense results only in gibberish or whether it can
gesture towards something beyond language or expression. On the resolute reading, the
gibberish may be provocative or symptomatic, but it cannot prove or provide any escape
from this world. Wittgenstein’s late work can thus be read as a series of meditations on
the impulses toward the absolute which nonsense-production reveals or as a series of
invitations for readers to imagine the costs of such nonsense, i.e. the stakes of
withdrawing parts of language from circulation. Recent work on the development of specialized economies for modernist work (Bourdieu, Rainey, Bornstein) has begun to yield material examples of Wittgenstein’s theorization.

In order to make his approach to Wittgenstein’s remarks on the idea of a private language clear, Stephen Mulhall distinguishes between “resolute” and “substantial” readings of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Roughly, “substantial” readings suggest that Wittgenstein means to point to (or “whistle”) the ineffable truths which propositional logic renders as nonsense. “Resolute” readings suggest that Wittgenstein is showing how those ineffable truths are simply nonsense, echoes or afterimages of sensical meaning which tempt us into reaching beyond the limits of language and thought. Mulhall astutely notes that for the resolute reading […], the substantial reading of it embodies the last and most important illusion that the book aims in reality to identify and extirpate. But that means the *Tractatus* has to traffic in the very illusion that is its target: it must deliberately construct examples of the kinds of nonsense that we will be tempted to regard as substantial…(5).

Furthermore, for resolute readers, the *Tractatus* advances no general theory of meaning—usually taken as a “picture theory,” as in how the logic of our language pictures the world—but offering a series of ways of clarifying meaning, simply “deploy[ing] that everyday understanding in a philosophical context”(7). Resolute readings have been subject to enormous criticism, in no small part because of their hospitality to the kinds of literary readings Perloff and Hagberg engage in, readings often deaf to the main stream of commentary on Wittgenstein’s work (which can seem like so many substantialist mistakes). These readings of the *Tractatus* also lead on quickly to the tasks of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, especially of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which,
while rarely historicized in relation to literary modernism, has been used as a starting point for explaining its complexity and strangeness. Mulhall’s account is especially pertinent because he is more interested in how resolute arguments “have identified a possible misreading of the *Tractatus*—an inherently tempting way of missing its fundamental point whilst remaining deeply convinced that one has grasped it”(8).

Resolute readings offer a model for a certain characteristic response to Wittgenstein’s work, but also, I would argue, to modernist texts more broadly: the sense of missing something and being convinced (or convicted) at the same time.31

Versions of the resolute reading have appealed to contemporary scholars of modernism because it offers so many analogies to the theories of symbolism and language developed by modernists over the period between Wittgenstein’s first reading Frege around 1911 to his last remarks in 1951. In these versions, Wittgenstein’s important work is a series of declarations that the tempting metaphysical images it presents are therapeutic, ultimately dissolving them. Critics favorable to the projects of postmodernism thus read modernist projects as statements about inexpressiveness and the disjunctions inherent in certain media, rather than as failed attempts to capture the ineffable. In this light, the resolute/substantialist debate about the *Tractatus* can be read as itself a symptom of our ambivalent relationship to the various modernisms:

In the light cast by resolute readings, one might characterize this fundamental point as that of identifying and aiming to overcome our attraction to the idea that there is something we cannot do in philosophy. The notion of substantial nonsense is that of pseudo-propositions that are unintelligible, but determinately so; they therefore seem to specify a thought that we cannot think—an identifiable place in the region that lies beyond the limits of sense, something specific that exceeds our mental grasp. But of course, if the limits of sense are the limits of intelligibility, then nothing whatever lies beyond them; they are not boundaries fencing us off from a further determinate or determinable region, and so not
limitations upon our capacity to think or speak. To recognize that the only species of nonsense is gibberish us, accordingly, to recognize that the limits of sense are not limitations; to acknowledge them as limits rather than limitations is precisely a matter of acknowledging that there is nothing (no specifiable thing, no conceivable task or activity) that we cannot do. (8)

These are the terms in which I have tried to re-think Joyce’s *Exiles*. At first, this may seem like a perverse choice. After all, many still see *Finnegans Wake* as exactly substantial nonsense, as determining some limit beyond which we cannot speak. *Ulysses* is even more available to these terms: Stephen insistently dwells on what he cannot think, trying to understand how English colonialism may have shaped and stunted his consciousness, but he comes up against too many material and physical limitations for it to be simply a matter of consciousness—surely he can think and incisively distinguish between the constraints his education, his friends, and his circumstances impose. Furthermore, Bloom’s permeable, passive example seems to be a rejoinder to Stephen in just these terms: that we can think about or respond to anything, despite our deep attraction to the idea that we cannot.

Nonetheless, *Exiles* proves to be the most interesting case because Richard so deliberately attempts to construct something he cannot think (his wife’s fidelity/infidelity) as a way of crafting an artistic identity for himself. By arranging events so that he could not believe his wife even if she confessed, Richard believes he has created a limit-point for their relationship which could serve as the grounds for a new, modern form of marriage—and as a condition of possibility for his artistic work. This dynamic is a crucial component of all Joyce’s early aesthetics and provides one explanation for his enduring engagement with Ibsen and certain problems in dramatic form: only by relocating the discursive structures of making something sacred
(unapproachable, unthinkable, obscene because untouchable) onto something profane (waste, matter, sexuality) can those structures be seen as autonomous, and thus beautiful, human constructions. Richard’s confession of doubt can only be art if it emerges out of a material nexus of sensations. Ibsen’s plays provided an archive of artist-figures who abstracted their language and seized on ambiguities to link themselves or their work to the ineffable—and thus damaged their ability to relate to or acknowledge the realm of ordinary life. Ibsen’s plays made these configurations visible, but they refused to valorize theatricality as a value in itself.
CONCLUSION

When Yeats conjured up the memory of Synge, he always did his best to encircle him with shades of Maeterlinck. In a 1917 essay, “Anima Hominis,” Yeats declares that the famous *Playboy* riots confused the “gentle and silent” Synge and “indeed the strain of that week may perhaps have hastened his death” (337). Having established that Synge’s antagonism with his audience was “perhaps” a catalyst for his early death, Yeats goes on to characterize Synge’s œuvre as in complete resistance to or escape from material and physical life:

> In his art he made, to delight his ear and his mind’s eye, voluble daredevils who go ‘romancing through a romping lifetime… to the dawning of the Judgment Day.’ At other moments this man, condemned to the life of a monk by bad health, takes an amused pleasure in ‘great queens…making themselves matches from the start to the end.’ Indeed, in all his imagination he delights in fine physical life, in life when the moon pulls up the tide. (337)

Yeats catches the vitality and ebullient poetry of many of Synge’s tramps and wanderers, but completely elides Synge’s commitment to naturalist elements of staging—elements which, as we have seen, create on stage exactly the tension Yeats wants to locate in the person of the artist. Yeats needs to relocate the dynamism and interest of Synge’s plays back in the author because if poetic drama is going to be a legitimately autonomous craft, it cannot rely on the material of its scene or its relation to the knowledge and beliefs of its audience for meaning. Writing about French symbolism, Yeats says *all* forms must “evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or as I prefer to think, call down among us
certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions” (137). Like Synge, Yeats sees drama as having the power to create new forms in and through constellations of emotional nuances and subtly changing affects. These constellations may or may not refer back to things we have prior concepts for, especially in the discourses of ethics and morals, which Synge and Yeats agree is overrun with stale images and calcified vocabularies. However, unlike Synge, Yeats wants to wrest that creative power away from any connection to the concrete social world, only “call[ing] down among us certain disembodied powers” when the poet so commands. Yeats’ sly description of this purple but memorable formulation as a mere preference, as opposed to some more technical relation, is as characteristic as his attempt to remake Synge’s work in the image of his own.

Yeats goes on to imagine a deeply romantic figure, dying but driven to create images of “life when the moon pulls up the tide.” In the same essay, Yeats had drawn out the productive contrasts in the lives of two women, “a close friend” and “a famous actress,” who both sublimate more active, critical lives into idealist kinds of beauty. Though at odds with her private, domineering demeanor, the actress particularly excels, Yeats says, at playing “one of those young queens imagined by Maeterlinck who have so little will, so little self, that they are like shadows sighing at the edge of the world” (337). With this image lingering, Yeats turns to the sickly, dying Synge:

The last act of Deirdre of the Sorrow, where his art is the noblest, was written upon his death-bed. He was not sure of any world to come, he was leaving his betrothed and his unwritten play—‘O, what a waste of time,’ he said to me; he hated to die, and in the last speeches of Deirdre and in the middle act he accepted death and dismissed life with a gracious gesture. He gave Deirdre the emotion that seemed to him most desirable, most difficult, most fitting, and maybe saw in those delighted seven years, now dwindling from her, the fulfillment of his own life (337-8).
If only the servants could die for us, Yeats’ Synge almost says, and leave us more precious time to craft these heightened emotions into elegant, articulate forms. Yeats’ account ingeniously doubles biography and interpretation, again overwriting Synge’s play with the figure of Synge himself.

In Dierdre as in his other plays, Synge carefully works against the expectations established by the visual scene to show how the effect of poetic or autonomous language develops. This is the pitch of Synge’s realism. In contrast, Yeats wants to create a visual scene which corresponds with poetic language so that both are amplified, and he went on to use Gordon Craig’s screens as if according to a color wheel along the same lines as the correspondences he later maps out in A Vision. Yeats’s poetic and dramatic uses of color illuminate each other: both set precise contrasts and conflicts into motion, especially once Yeats learns to combine narrated action (which creates a ritualistic doubling effect) with this strangely performative use of color (where its manifestation amplifies the effect far beyond doubling, suggesting the world-creating power of poetry itself). Before he died, Synge had been moving in a different direction. However, in performance, the “tragedies” of bodies in rural Ireland so quickly become theatrical, that is, are so quickly interpreted as poignant literary images despite their often obvious economic causes, that it can be hard to discern how Synge’s images of these events as “natural” make claims that are completely reverse of what we usually mean. For Synge, the fact that the emptying out of affect was caused by culture-death was “natural” meant that it was historical, something audiences could perceive with a sense of guilt at their being spectators rather than witnesses. Their relation to the dying of this culture was decidedly not (only) “social,” not a representation for polite meditation—it was something brutal.
Synge’s concept of modernity is caught in the same field of forces as his ambivalent view of his own quasi-ethnographic writing, caught between sympathy and theatricality. On the one hand there are values in the past Synge wants to evoke as still present and appealing, alive and undisturbed by artificial abstractions of consciousness or bad-faith antiquarian or symbolist translations of that past into aesthetic objects. On the other hand Synge wants to show the separation between that past and the present—usually urban—audiences he writes for, indicating their spatial and temporal distance from particular emotional economies. We can appreciate the force of this separation by turning back to Moore’s dramas, which are connected to a very different image of modernity. In Moore’s essays and plays, the past is exactly open to a rational translation: it can be made over into a set of aesthetic objects produced by ‘modern’ idioms. This is why his dramas succumb to the structural form of ‘problem’ plays and the bad faith of symbolist translations without any of the standard accompanying pleasures: Moore recognizes—and loathes—the basely sensory and clichéd pleasures the theater industry provides but refuses to give up an eighteenth-century hope that theater space can be the perfect manifestation of a rational public sphere. It makes a kind of paradoxical sense that this hope also produced a skepticism about prose texts, allowing Moore to experiment wildly in forms of inauthenticity and blatant fabulation that he never conceived for the stage.

What is still stunning in Synge’s work is how rapidly Synge moves beyond an internal critique of theatricality—for example, Nora’s clear-eyed rejection of Dan’s melodrama and acceptance of the Tramp’s illusions—which already involves the audience in a process of disenchantment and acknowledgement. Once Synge begins
writing full-length dramas, he further multiplies the number of competing forms of theatricality (doubled story-telling, doubled scenes of representation, doubled physical objects) which confront the audience with the “home” games of their own melodramatic, excessive interpretations of the action. Even in Synge’s earliest works, it turns out that the audiences’ interpretations, even their feel, of the events on stage are excessive, theatrical, full of noise and tone, because the conditions of their being an audience (at the Abbey, in Dublin) in part re-enact the economic conditions of the dying of rural Irish culture. This “echo sign,” mimicking after the fact, is a haunting image of the fate of realist theater in the twentieth century, though it also marks the beginning of an open-ended confrontation between the different dimensions of theater, with some artists taking up the physical space peopled with bodies, some taking up the problematic semiotic array of the stage, and some emphasizing the theater as the product of a peculiarly collective human activity.

In his remarks on Frazer’s _The Golden Bough_, Wittgenstein criticized Frazer’s “explanations” of “primitive” cultures: the satisfactions of reading Frazer’s accounts have more to do with the tone of the narrative than the content of Frazer’s explanations.\(^1\) Wittgenstein’s remarks, combined with the invocations of Frazer by later modernists, help clarify Synge’s uncomfortable position with respect to the performance theories and practices of the avant-gardes. What Puchner has called the “manifesto art” of the futurists, imagists, and surrealists sought to use the contrast between diegetic and mimetic forms to point toward the absolute.\(^2\) A purified or metaphysical language of gestures or forces, as textuality as such or as a future utopian space, might overcome the flaws of mere representation. This art operates according to a parallel version of the logic
Wittgenstein examines in Frazer’s explanations: through a performative assertion, it creates a tone which is the only authorization of the utterance’s (projected) illocutionary force. The manifesto declares itself an act which only future conditions can authorize; the explanation of a “dreadful” cultural practice as an error only has force for people who already agree but sense the tone in the description as indicating something “dreadful” is happening—that is, who use language-games which resonate with the same motives as those practices but who also yearn for a future in which those practices have no family resemblance to modern science.

Synge, like Wittgenstein, is hesitant to deny those resemblances even while he champions (how could he not?) the professionalism and theoretical rigor of comparatist sciences. The later avant- and rear-guard modernisms were appalled with the limits of representational theater and its proximity to commercial entertainment industries, and they rejected or avoided work like Synge’s which refused to allow an autonomous realm of “explanation” or “poetry” which might indicate or even point toward ahistorical, essential progress. I don’t mean to suggest that modernists like Eliot or Woolf didn’t have devastating things to say about Victorian images of “progress”—only that their claims about aesthetic autonomy depended on a perceptual progress internal to the work that consequently devalued works in which perceptual progress was treated as dangerously separated from ordinary life. Austin’s concept of “hollow” performatives allowed us to distinguish between the way Synge confronted audiences and the ways Shaw and Yeats transformed that confrontation into an aesthetic form, i.e. the estrangement of modernist dialogue. In Synge, audiences are faced with their own
complicity in the forms of theater that trade on and exist for hollowed-out cultures without presuming that the author’s complicity was any less than the audience’s.

Shaw insists that everything, even the most ‘innocent’ fun language, is equally hollowed out and thus available for the petrifaction of its integration into consumer culture. Only by making this process polemical and didactic can the playwright hope to make it unpalatable and unpleasant, thereby provoking thought. Shaw’s paratextual substitutes evacuate ‘content’ from staged bodies even while insisting on the prototypical (or proleptic) power of their overall (perlocutionary) effects: energetic dialogue apparently exists for its own sake, whirring like a sewing-machine of argumentation, but ultimately in order to suggest a future secular society in which such dialogue will fade into silence (something like the world of Beckett’s *Play*, only, unnervingly, as an image of *happiness*). Yeats attempts to redeem voices from their banality and ordinariness through the experience of emotional tone and rhythm—an experience which is for Yeats itself patterned by a shift in the experience of color from relations of value to relations of tone. In his theater work, Yeats gradually works out a process of likening the voice—through oratorical discipline—to tonal color relations. Textual rhythms are the purer forms in language which can be discovered by modeling voices on the vibrations and movements of colors on stage. In movement, relations of tone as opposed to value stand out, presenting color-meaning autonomous from individual bodies and thus free to manifest what Yeats increasingly thought of as the historical order.3

Yet the most disturbing qualities of Synge’s thinking about theater and theatricality can be brought out by comparison with Darwin’s theory of human and animal expression. Darwin’s early readers—and Synge in particular—sensed the
subversiveness of the naturalist’s picture of expression: that we are endlessly theatrical, constantly simulating through actions and gestures overrun with sexual desire and indistinguishable from the cries of animals. Darwin foreclosed this threat by invoking Shakespeare, implying that theater could sublimate rather than avoid power relations implicit in the accounts of Darwin’s native and colonial informants. In contrast, Synge uses the theater to create haunting doubles of its own procedures. As he moved on from *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Riders to the Sea*, Synge continued to intensify the parallels between the forces and conflicts on stage and what the audience was imagining it did in the theater. *The Well of the Saints* (1905) offers an image of catharsis or ritual healing, as well as a literal embodiment of giving vision (realism’s illusions) in the story of an old blind couple being healed by a mystic and not liking the results. More famously, *The Playboy of the Western World* (whose last act Joyce claimed Synge took from *The Master Builder*) stages the process of communal scapegoating and associates the dynamics of sexual maturation with different forms of lying, or representation as such.

Whereas Synge follows the lead of Ibsen’s late plays and increasingly confronts audiences with questions about how fragmentary aspects of theater come together (if they must), Joyce might be said to intensify and translate the work of Ibsen’s prose plays into English (or Hiberno-English), rigorously mapping the grammar of a form of expression like confession to *see* if its way of abstracting language from ordinary conditions—making it a once-and-for-all (epic) utterance—can in fact absolve the artist. Can such a gesture provide the conditions for the artist’s arrogation of voice? For, say, claiming to forge the conscience of the race? Joyce makes a persuasive case, but by attending to the physical conditions of this arrogation, juxtaposed as it is with other forms of theatricality,
settled into English, and fitted into a particular set of relations to deictic space and noise rather than silence, *Exiles* ultimately strikes us as an image of the failure or tragedy of this way of voicing. Like Yeats, Joyce would turn to the seemingly more complete semiotic control of diegetic and closet drama, but the extravagant unstageability of the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses* does not, as in Yeats, offer the fantasy of a final future production which might become wholly absorptive, in Michael Fried’s terms. Nor does “Circe,” like Shaw’s plays and paratexts, offer the fantasy of a transformed social world—not even a distant new biological future whose fantastical adaptations might enable meaning entirely within language as it stands (as it Shaw’s late “metabiological Pentateuch,” *Back to Methuselah*), nor, as in Shaw’s bleaker moments, in a fantasy of the future’s silence.

Instead, “Circe” stages the expanded associative consciousneses of Stephen and Bloom intersecting at the points in time the pair shared throughout the day, but also, more surprisingly, in a nexus of high and low literary and cultural allusions. Stephen’s series (Goethe, Flaubert, Latin liturgy, Aristotle, Wagner, Shakespeare, Thomas Moore, nursery rhymes) joins up with Bloom’s (Tit-bits, pantomime, freemasonry, *The Sweets of Sin*, advertisements, tall tales, mind reading games, practical jokes, puns, Shakespeare) by means of an overwhelming field of shared coordinates (statues, landmarks, and the soundscape of a night street). Depending on what coordinates serve as a starting-point, different lines of interest and intersection emerge, but throughout the chapter, “high” and “low” allusions blend together in a synthesis that recalls classic German Idealist definitions of drama. Near the end of his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel argues that
dramatic poetry is the highest stage of art, culminating in the blend of form and content found in the spoken drama:

For in contrast to the other perceptible materials, stone, wood, colour, and notes, speech is alone the element worthy of the expression of spirit; and of the particular kinds of the art of speech dramatic poetry is the one which unites the objectivity of epic with the subjective character of lyric. It displays a complete action as actually taking place before our eyes… (1158).

Yet Joyce continuously calls attention to the textuality of speech throughout “Circe” by showing its indebtedness to the stage directions. As in a stage play, the rubrics establish tone, denote accompanying gestures, and link speech to a linear temporal progression, but in Joyce’s chapter, these functions begin to come apart, establishing contradictory tones, turning descriptions of gestures into long narrations of actions, and disorienting the relationship between speech and any “on stage” conjunction of space and time. Furthermore, the chapter links this sense of disorientation to specific historical discourses in which theatrical display becomes a sign of commodification, from the Irving Bishop mind-reading game to Sandow’s exercises. “Circe” explores all the basic constituents of the theater, from the rhythm of nursery rhymes and the argot of practical jokes to the performative qualities of ritual utterance and the expressive dimensions of passionate arias.

Joyce’s texts show theatricality as an impress, a set of felt internal constraints, unspoken aspects of the self that threatened to express a person’s character falsely, excessively, or too quickly. Exiles explores an artist’s rigorous attempt to eliminate all theatricality from his life by the procedure of continuous confession. By textualizing everything, Richard hopes to avoid Robert’s vulgar artificiality (a dangerous simulacrum to Richard’s art) and create the doubt or ambiguity (about his wife’s fidelity) which will
be the grounding condition of his future writing. In both Synge and Joyce, the breakdown or failure of speech acts dissolves the medium specificity that later modernists hold out as a kind of redemption, a soul for objects and objectified humans. In Synge, the hollowness of a culture can no longer fully authorize utterances, and in Joyce, the claim to make future authorizing conditions manifest in the present verges on violent arrogance. In many ways, the goal of medium specificity offers a much narrower picture of self-other relations, one in which the ‘gap’ is bridged by the existence of the produced object. The trouble is, as Moore points out of Yeats’s work—perhaps jealously—is that this specificity or style is so easily re-produced.

In large part, this dissertation has aimed at reassembling some of the aspects of theatrical realism, after modernism and in a postmodern scene. Hopefully, even those unsympathetic to such a project will have been able to glean, first, a critique of the view of theatrical realism inherited from the ideologies of modernism, and, second, an account of the problems or aporias inherent in postmodern spaces for the production and performance of realist theater works. Our memory of theatrical naturalism—faulty as it is, even when we distinguish its affective approach from technical representational accuracy—may still be stageable. I’m not sure what that would feel like. Who would its audience be? One final image from a later playwright might re-set the stage, already apparently so broken.

Samuel Beckett’s *Catastrophe* (1982), dedicated to Vaclav Havel, is at once his most directly political work and his most scathing critique of political uses of theater. During a final rehearsal, a bureaucratic director commands his assistant to add various last-minute touches to the scene on stage: a single “protagonist,” head bowed, “age and
physique unimportant” is adjusted for maximum effect (297). The alterations are calculated to produce the maximum humiliation, rendering the protagonist a broken figure of abject capitulation to the state. Gradually, his clothes are stripped away (“more nudity”), his hands are adjusted (“Clawlike?”), and the lighting is focused (“Just the head”) until the director is satisfied: “Good. There’s our catastrophe. In the bag” (300). Each of these modifications undoubtedly make the image more striking, but they also unnervingly display theater’s proximity to torture. The protagonist’s unmoving body allows the audience to think that his self-possession and basic dignity have been completely annihilated. Even the position of his feet is under complete control: the fiction of the theater’s (and the State’s) power is absolute.

That is, it seems absolute until the last moment of the play—when the lights come up again and a “distant storm of applause” may be silenced by the merest gesture: “P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies” (301). Whether a particular performance suggests that this moment is a vindication or a final, horrible end for the protagonist, the audience is left in the awkward position of applauding the very techniques of theater and theatricality which had just been shown to be complicit in repressive domination and control. Catastrophe thus presents a precise critique of theater (the play shows how theater’s visual logic and physical manipulation are extensions of political repression), but it also presents a striking valorization of the disruptive power of authentic presence, even if that presence is ultimately only a ghostly after-image of the theatrical subject produced by the institutional need for a victim. Theatricality here is the sense that there is too much being displayed, but it is, paradoxically, also what makes that
excess appear: moments of theatricality bring not only the actor, but the spectator’s judgment of the actor, into view.
NOTES

Introduction


4 For nationalist tropes located among competing visions of community, nation, and empire, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, eds., Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), P.J. Mathews, Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, The Gaelic League, and the Co-operative Movement (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), and Donal P.


8 Erika Fischer-Lichte examines these three options in “Quo Vadis? Theatre Studies at a Crossroads,” in Knowles, et al., 48-65, ultimately suggesting that theater studies, like theater itself, will have to continuously re-invent itself in order to “generate relevant answers to the relevant questions” (65). Three such re-inventions of thinking about theater have been Martin Puchner’s “The Theater in Modernist Thought,” *New Literary History* 33.3 (Summer 2002), 521-32; David Wiles’s *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Tracy C. Davis

9 These three modes of analyzing the theater as an industry are taken from Tracy C. Davis’s massive and ambitious *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 5-13 and “Theatre as cultural capital,” 334-62. Mary Poovey, in *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), summarizes the “marginalist revolution”: "According to this theory [Jevons and Marshall], the modern economy was no longer organized by the problem of scarcity, with its auxiliary dynamics of production, distribution, and needs; instead, in an economy of abundance, the dynamics that mattered were consumption and desire, for, when individuals were able to choose among an almost infinite variety of consumable goods, the way that they developed and articulated their tastes was more important than labor and the accumulation of capital” (276). Poovey argues that this transformation of economic writing “helped widen the gap between a mode of explanation that was obviously (if not always perfectly) related to the phenomena it sought to describe and another mode whose referential capacity was arguably less important than its formal coherence” (277). See also Catherine Gallagher’s comparison of the notions of sensation implicit in theories of marginal utility with George Eliot’s work in “Daniel Deronda and Too Much Literature,” *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. 121-30. Of course, the crucial question is how these models saturated discourse in Ireland differently, or conflicted with alternative models of experience.


11 Wiles, *A Brief History of Western Performance Space*, chapters 2 and 8.

12 My definition of theatricality, as I hope will become clear below, combines the accounts in Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait’s excellent recent collection *Theatricality*, with the more stringent definitions by Michael Fried and the—surprisingly—more political dimensions evoked by Stanley Cavell.


14 *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, esp. 254-60.

Cavell’s recent *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* offers a considerable—and succinct—rehearsal of his approaches to many of these life-long pursuits.

This is one of the guiding themes of the recent collection, *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

*The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*.

*Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 18.


1/ *Theatrical Interiors*


3 Pierce, 177.

4 Compare, for example, Proust’s use of paintings as integral parts of memories: even when Proust invents works without real life parallels, the evoke painted canvases—they are not sly winks at the reader, inserting painted scenes where, presumably, “true” descriptions would be expected.


6 “Naturalism on the Stage," rpt. in Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents, 172.

7 Ibid. 173.

8 Stoker, Personal Reminiscences, 27.

9 Moore, Impressions & Opinions, 45. Subsequent citations in text


11 Pall Mall Gazette, 21 Feb., 1893, quoted in Eakin and Case, eds., Selected Plays, ix.

12 Frazier 127.


14 Moore was in this sense particularly attuned to what Tracy Davis describes as theaters’ determination of sensations in tandem with economic theories of marginal utility. See especially, “Marginal economics, national interest, and the half-naked woman” and “Theatre as cultural capital” in The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914, 115-157; 334-363.

15 Quoted in Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, 275.

16 Quoted in Fischer-Lichte, History, 1.
I am not arguing that Ibsen was responding directly to Hegel. It is quite possible that Ibsen never read a word of Hegel, but he was certainly familiar with Kierkegaard and Kierkegaard’s’s particular criticisms of the Hegelian system. Later in life, Ibsen denied Kierkegaard’s influence, saying he “read little and understood less,” but he elsewhere acknowledged the debt and Kierkegaardian themes suffuse most of his plays. Cf. Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography, 119-120.

24 Quotations from When We Dead Awaken are taken from Rolf Fjelde’s translation of The Complete Major Prose Plays, New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1978.

25 Cf. Wittgenstein, p. 223: “‘What is internal is hidden from us.’—... ‘I cannot know what is going on in him’ is above all a picture. It is the convincing expression of a conviction.”

26 Cf. Cavell’s notorious opening sentence of The Claim of Reason, p. 3; and “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” in Must We....

27 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §293.

28 Cf. §253: “I have see a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: ‘But surely another person can’t have THIS pain!’—The answer to this is that one does not find a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word ‘this.’ Rather, what the emphasis does is to suggest the case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but we have to be reminded of it.”


30 Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow, 196.
2/ Metropolitan Performance

1 Thoughts and After-Thoughts (London: Cassell, 1913), 205.

2 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 216; quoted in Daniel Bivona, British Imperial Literature, 1870-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25. See also Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1979), 36-49. Ann Ardis describes the transformation in middle-class attitudes about literature by analyzing the work of Netta Syett, arguing that artist’s ability to negotiate within the literary marketplace is circumscribed by new imperatives to “seriousness,” Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 114-139. What Douglas Mao speculates is a repressed version of the Victorian “test of production” [Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)] may have made its way into the literary field of production through (slightly) earlier imperial discourses: Bivona argues that middle-class attitudes toward the exercise of bureaucratic power changed drastically in the 1880s and 1890s: “As Victoria’s reign gave way to Edward VII’s, it had become clear to many in Britain, especially in the professional middle class, that the direction of the future lay largely in the hands of efficient, large-scale organizations; that Standard Oil and German General Staff foretold the coming age […] that the future would increasingly be shaped less by the individual efforts of the Napoleonic or Carlylean hero than by the much more impressive corporate power of well-organized agglomerations, well-oiled machines. If the 1850s marked the high point in the liberal celebration of the ideology of laissez-faire individualism and its related critique of bureaucratic bungling, the 1880s and 90s ushered in an atmosphere more favorable to bureaucracy as a mode of social organization and a means for accomplishing large tasks—at least among the professional classes […] popular discourse of this period—and especially popular art dedicated to celebrating the achievements of Empire […] remained hostile” (17). Bivona argues that “one of the chief signs that the British social order was becoming more ‘bureaucratic’ was the intensity with which its popular culture celebrated an anti-bureaucratic ethos of individual heroism” (18).

3 See also Anne Oakman, “Theatricality and The Irish R.M.: comic country house dramas versus Abbey Theatre ideology,” New Voices in Irish Criticism 5, Ruth Connelly and Ann Coughlan, eds. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 154-165. Oakman argues that Somerville and Ross present critiques of English foibles within narrative versions of the conventions of London theatricality, like Boucicault reversing representations but leaving the structure for generating theatrical/sensation effects intact. They were, at the same time, deeply critical of the Abbey Theatre’s “peasants,” especially in Yeats’ and Moore’s Diarmuid and Grania.

4 Max Beerbohm, Herbert Beerbohm Tree: some memories of him and his art (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1920), 72.

5 Ibid.
Beerbohm, 73. The picture shows “Dr. & Mrs. Alving” in the crowd and the club’s other speaker, J.T. Grein.


Despite Archer’s campaign and later modernists’ anti-theatrical attacks, the mainstays of Tree’s repertoire would remain enormously successful for decades. Actors and West End theaters would also increase in a certain kind of prestige—the number of actors knighted only increased after 1900—but in inverse proportion to their relation to literary and intellectual capital. See Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225-240.


Ibid. 24.


Shaw and Archer among early commentators were quick to point out the sheer bile and vehemence of the critics of “Ibsenism,” but their own sometimes polemical purposes led them to overlook (probably quite deliberately) the sarcastic hyperbole present in many of these denunciations. In many cases, the critics were having quite a good time making a spectacle out of their own denunciations.

16 Egan 203.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. 298.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid. 299.


27 Egan 300.
28 Ibid. 301.


31 *New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1895.

32 Gretchen Ackerman provides a broad description of Tree’s engagement with Ibsen in "Beerbohm Tree and *An Enemy of the People*," *Ibsen and the English Stage, 1889-1903*

33 Beerbohm, 92.

34 Shaw, quoted in Beerbohm, 240.


36 Ibid. 104.

37 Ibid.


40 Morash 106-7.

41 Irish Times, 28 Sept., 1894.

42 Irish Times, 28 Sept., 1894.

43 Holloway, “Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer” MS


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 New York Times, Apr. 9, 1895.

48 Kib Bermuda, Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) ; Said, “Yeats and Decolonization,” in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and
Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, Intro. Seamus Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 69-99. See also Jameson’s seminal “Modernism and Imperialism” for one of the most influential versions “cognitive mapping,” esp. 59-64. For a critique of the underlying argument behind the cognitive mapping strategy, see Culler, “The Novel and the Nation,” cited above.

49 For an account of the Prince of Wales’s 1922 “World Tour” which analyzes the implications of such a “visual demonstration of imperial unity,” see Michael North, “Tourists in the Age of the World Picture,” *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 107-139.


51 *New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1895.


53 Ibid.


58 See, for example, Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 222.


60 For a brief account of how early Abbey productions were emblematic of a whole generation of Irish playwrights, amateur and professional, by their use of and struggle with colloquial Hiberno-English, see Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, passim. For an account of the competing pictures of theatricality and nationalism in other theater groups

### 3/ Echo Sign


3. The omitted phrase, which, as Grene notes, did not appear in revised versions of the essay, makes explicit what I argue below Synge’s imagery implies, that is, that his representations of rural culture are accompanied by the ambiguous sensation he says he experienced arriving on Blasket Island: “a sharp qualm of excitement I always feel on one of these little islands where I am to stay for weeks” (TI 139).


5. Ibid. 52-4.


9. Ibid. 47.

10. Ibid 62.

Ibid. 24.

Ibid. 30.

Ibid. 97.


The play was first produced in 1903 and published in 1904 as *In the Shadow of the Glen.* The play was published as *The Shadow of the Glen* in 1905, but the “In” returned in the posthumous 1910 Dublin edition of Synge’s works.

For an overview of the concepts and practices associated with theatricality, see Davis and Postlewait 1-39. For the significance of defining the theatrical in the various modernist avant-gardes, see Fischer-Lichte 284-298.

For an account of the development of modernist anti-theatricality, see Puchner, especially chapter one, as well as the introduction to Ackerman and Puchner.

Mc Cormack 42-43.

Mattar 133.

Castle compares Synge’s “ethnographic imagination” with frameworks found in the comparative sciences in “Staging Ethnography; Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World,*” *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* 134-172. See also Crawford for an analysis of evolutionary and eugenic discourses in *Playboy.*

See Yeats’s “Synge and the Ireland of His Time” in *The Cutting of an Agate,* 146-196.

See especially, Kiberd, *Synge* 26-44.

For Kiberd (again subtly echoing Deleuze), the history of colonization in Ireland, of various declarations by the English that there ‘have never been a (real) people here’, has generated a constant sense of becoming in Irish writers who constantly work to invent themselves and their language. See *Irish Classics* 442. For a succinct exposition of the concept of “minor” literature, see Smith’s introduction to Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical,* especially xli-xlv. For a critique of Kiberd’s specific reading of *Playboy* (as a deliberately provocative and politically energized examination of the psychic violence within colonized communities), see Grene, “Shifts in Perspective,” *The Politics of Irish Drama,* especially 77-96.
McCormack places both works in the context of Synge’s relationship to Home Rule, landlordism, and a deepening sense of intellectual guilt, 104-120, 122. Although McCormack only mentions it in passing, the fact that the intense religious beliefs of Synge’s close family often manifested as “interpreting the Land War and the campaign for Home Rule in terms of a racial/theological struggle” also provides an important context for Synge’s readings of Darwin, as well as his subsequent drama (108).

McCormack 111-113.

See Puchner, “Richard Wagner: The Theatocracy of Mime,” in Stage Fright, 31-59. Puchner points out the power and the danger of Wagner’s theater-as-value: “In his relentless illusionism Wagner was the precursor of those magicians of the stage, from Max Reinhardt to Robert Wilson, whose spectacular successes never cease to raise questions about the price extracted by an art that overwhelms the audience’s rationality by unleashing a theatricality that collapses critical distances and disables analytic responses” (45).


Schopenhauer, quoted in McCormack 112.

Morash, A History of Irish Theatre, 122-123.

Irish Times, 7 Oct. 1903.

Frank J. Fay, “Irish Drama at the Theatre Royal,” The United Irishman, 8 July 1899. Reprinted in Hogan, 18, and quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, 12.

For an overview of Frank Fay’s beliefs about acting, especially his preference for the relatively abstract style of Constant Coquelin over the ‘individualistic’ style of Henry Irving, see Ritchel, 74-79.

Holloway 26. Holloway continues in that same entry to note that “Mr. W.B. Yeats was called after both his plays, and held forth at the end of Cathleen ni Houlihan in his usual thumpy-thump, monotonous, affected, preachy style, and ended by making a fool of himself in ‘going’ for an article that appeared in this morning’s Independent. He generally makes a mess of it when he orates. Kind friends ought to advise him to hold his tongue” (27).
For detailed accounts of the reception and criticism of Synge’s plays in Ireland, stressing the role of gender and nationalist politics respectively, Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 69-123.


*Descent* 638.

*Descent* 638.

Holloway 26.


*Suspensions of Perception* 14.


**4/ Hollow Language**


4 Peter Gahan draws out the surprising and surprisingly broad affiliations between Shaw and Derrida in *Shaw Shadows: Rereading the Texts of George Bernard Shaw* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2004). Shaw’s endless scorn for the metaphysical implications in scientistic writing turns out to rival Derrida’s, and, more disconcertingly, leads to a similar commitment to writtenness as a point of dissolution for all more abstract genres.

5 A parenthetical aside in the middle of Shaw’s essay helps clarify the difference:

[Standing in the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence] You understand the deep and serious respect which Michel Angelo had for Brunelleschi–why he said “I can do different work, but not better.” But a few minutes walk to Santa Maria Novella or Santa Croce, or a turn in the steam-tram to San Miniato, will bring you to churches built a century or two earlier; and you have only to cross their thresholds to feel, almost before you have smelt the incense, the difference between a church built to the pride and glory of God (not to mention the Medici)
and one built as a sanctuary shielded by God’s presence from pride and glory and all the other burdens of life (20).

Shaw distinguishes between architecture that exudes hypocrisy and architecture that might be a model for a modern, secular spirituality, but his aside, “not to mention the Medici,” indicates how a voice capable of making that distinction has to use sarcasm to make its point. If Ruskin’s critiques and ironies are vulnerable to misunderstanding; Shaw’s are vulnerable to sounding superfluous or crankish. In one, the fading availability of integrated, inspiring Gothic organizations of space needs to be pointed out. In the other, the desperate need for such spaces should be blindingly obvious, but, horrifyingly, is not to most people.

6 Egan 378.

7 Egan 379.

8 Shaw, Preface to Volume II of Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant.

9 For a discussion of the uses and limits of the theatre as a metaphor for a wider range of social behaviors, see Puchner, “Kenneth Burke: Theatre, Philosophy, and the Limits of Performance”

10 Egan 383.

11 Egan 384.


13 Published in The Mask 1, no. 2 [April 1908]: 3-15.

14 Quoted in Ritter, Art as Spectacle, 183.

15 Bernard Shaw: A Reconsideration, 83.


17 Quoted in Howes and Kelly, 106.

18 For an account of the effect of Synge’s death on Yeats, see Foster. For the controversy over Blanco Posnet, see Lucy MacDiarmuid, “The Shewing-Up of Dublin Castle,” in The Irish Art of Controversy. For the politics of Anne Horniman’s withdrawal of funds from the Abbey, see Frazier, Behind the Scenes.
The Life of W.B. Yeats, 187.

Suspensions of Perception, 6, 7.

Holloway, Impressions, 107.

Quoted in Holloway, Impressions, 110.


Picture Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 88. Mitchell defines his own usage as follows: “I will employ the typographic convention of the slash to designate ‘image/text’ as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term ‘imagetext’ designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. ‘Image-text,’ with a hyphen, designates relations of the visual and verbal” (n.9, 89).

Quoted in Foster 99.

Ibid 99-100.


Moore to Boyd, 17 August 1914, George Moore on Parnassus, 291.

Moore to Henry Tonks, 26 March 1928, George Moore on Parnassus, 762.

5/ The Impress of Theater


McCourt, The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste, 1904-1920 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 42

Hardison, quoted in Joyce, Occasional, 342, n. 15.


Ibid. 119.

Ibid. 119-20.
8 Mercure de France, Sept. 1896. The title has also been translated as “On the uselessness of theater in the theater.”


10 See Kristen Shepherd-Barr, *Ibsen and Early Modernist Theatre, 1890-1900* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

11 See Welch, Frazier, Levitas, and Morash.

12 For an account of how audiences’ vehement and deliberate counter-performances, ranging from grumbling to rioting, shaped naturalist and modernist aesthetics, see Neil Blackadder, *Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003).


14 Joyce’s emphasis on the everyday suggests that the quasi-Kantian model put forward by Ellmann and Kenner, useful as it is to distinguish Joyce from earlier idealists, obscures one of the major affinities of his work with other Irish playwrights, i.e. his willingness to acknowledge mimetic, theatrical activity, especially in certain extravagant, absurdist ways.

15 Quoted in Ellmann 62.


19 Reading the play as biographical is one way of emphasizing this positive dimension, and of downplaying the starkly limiting idealist/symbolist categories Richard articulates at the end of the play—categories which dissolve the positive production of doubt into a narrative of overcoming conventional pieties.

Joyce indicates at least the following pauses, often built into the structure of the scene in such a way that they cannot be eliminated without seriously changing the tone of an entire act: “a short pause” (15) “she does not answer” (16) “After a pause […]” (18) “Is silent for a moment” (19) “He pauses for an instant […]” (25) “After a short silence” (27) “a short silence” (30) “A short pause” (34) “She looks at him for a moment” (36) “After a few instants […]” (42) “a short pause” (68) “After a pause” (74) “A short silence” (74) “He stares at him for some moments in silence, as if dazed.” (76) “They look at each other for some minutes in silence.” (78) “After a pause […]” (78) “He stops for an instant” (80) “He rises and paces to and fro some moments in silence.” (82) “He looks at Richard for some moments in silence.” (85) “She does not answer. In the silence the rain is heard falling.” (114) “Is silent for a moment” (117) “They both look at each other coldly for some moments.” (125) “A short pause” (126) “[...] observing her for some moments” (127) “A long silence” (129) “after a pause” (137) “There is a long silence” (138).

Although many other playwright working after Ibsen wove pauses and silences into their explicit stage directions, Joyce’s use of pointing seem to be unique (although I am still looking): “points” (14); “pointing down” “pointing” “pointing down and up” (29) “he points” “he points again” (48) “points” (51) “points at him” (94) “points at her” (107) “points toward the porch” (113) “he points out toward the strand” (127) “pointing towards the garden” (133) “pointing toward the study” (142) “points to the door on the right” (142).


Hélène Cixous, The Exile of James Joyce, tran. Sally Purcell (New York: Riverrun, 1982).


See Mao, Solid Objects, 1-20.


31 See Steven Kern’s argument about simultaneity being a dominant trope in modernist work; though here simultaneity in space and time might be translated into the overlap of images or logic and life; *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

**Conclusion**

1 *Philosophical Occasions*, 121.

2 *Poetry of the Revolution*, 1-5.

3 Yeats’s and Beckett’s words about Swift’s mistress in *Dublin Magazine* [1931] demonstrate that this dynamic could be contested through ekphrastic color: the “white plane of music” in Beckett’s “Alba” against “white as a gambler’s dice” spoken by a medium in Yeats’s *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*; cf. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 150.
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