

## Fantasy Ireland: The Figure of the Returnee in Irish Culture

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*Young people are to Ireland what champagne is to France! Our finest crop, the cream of our youth, nurtured from birth, raised with tender love by our young state, brought to ripeness and then plucked!*

Dermot Bolger, *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*

*Like oil lamps we put them out the back, of our houses, of our minds.*

Eavan Boland, 'The Emigrant Irish'

*No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home.*

Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*

In 1903, Lady Gregory substantially modified her play *A Losing Game* under pressure from the Abbey Theatre's actor-producers, the Fay Brothers. The play depicts Christie, an emigrant returning from America with £100 in his pocket. Christie had hoped to marry his childhood sweetheart Kate but upon his return he finds her already married to a bankrupt man and preparing to depart for Manchester. Knowing that his money would enable her to stay in Ireland, Christie is patriotically and manfully determined that Kate should have the money anyway and he contrives to lose the money to her husband in a card game. As the 'old woman' in the scene says, 'it must be a grand thing to be so rich'. 'It's grand, indeed,' replies Christie:

It's a grand thing to be free in the world, and not to be tied to your little bit of ground, in dread of the drought in the spring-time and the rain in harvest. It's a grand thing not to be shut up in a narrow little house ... It's a grand thing to be able to take up your money in your hand and to think no more of it when it slips away than you would of a trout that would slip back into the stream!

The Fay brothers' objection to the play, apart from its depiction of the immoral, un-Irish practice of gambling, was that it 'might incite to emigration.'<sup>2</sup> Despite nationalist notions of Ireland as an essentially unmaterialistic nation, it was deemed that Christie's return of £100 for three years' work in America made departure from Ireland just too attractive amidst contemporary economic realities. So Lady Gregory agreed to reduce this startling amount by half, to scrap Christie's speech celebrating the freedom of migrancy, and also to change the play's title to *Twenty-Five* – the name of the card game.<sup>3</sup>

Emigration has always been a difficulty for Ireland. But, as this controversy suggests, the emigrant's return is perhaps still more problematic and even unwelcome. Ireland, of course, often trades on a reputation for hospitality. In James Joyce's 'The Dead' (1914), Gabriel Conroy invokes just such a tradition during his Christmas toast to his aunts: 'I feel more strongly with every recurring year,' pronounces Gabriel, 'that our country has no tradition which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality. It is a tradition that is unique as far as my experience goes ... among the modern nations.'<sup>4</sup> Gabriel's image of guarding hospitality 'jealously' suggests that his experience of Irish hospitality is not quite as advertised, is indeed more of a stifling entrapment. Furthermore, he sees little that is hospitable in the revivalist nationalism which

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Gregory, *A Losing Game* in A. Saddlemyer (ed.) *The Comedies of Lady Gregory, Being the First Volume of The Collected Plays* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971), p.288.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Anne Saddlemyer, 'Foreward' to A. Saddlemyer (ed.) *The Comedies of Lady Gregory*, p.vii.

<sup>3</sup> see Lady Gregory, *Twenty-Five*, in A. Saddlemyer (ed.) *The Comedies of Lady Gregory*, pp.1-11.

<sup>4</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992), p.236.

is earlier given expression by Miss Ivors, who, on learning of Gabriel's preference for a cycling holiday in Europe over a trip to the Aran Islands, labels him a 'West Briton'.

More recently, Mary Robinson's Presidency featured an eternal flame of welcome burning outside her official residence to express both Irish hospitality generally and a specific hope that the Irish diaspora, the 'greater Ireland overseas', might one day return 'home'. Declan Kiberd sees an echo of Miss Ivors's traditionalist, revivalist nationalism in Robinson's rhetoric of hospitality: the ravaged nation will once more be united.<sup>5</sup> However, Robinson's 'nationalism' clearly and deliberately distances itself from earlier forms of revivalism in which the returnee is, typically, less than welcome. This essay will focus upon this inhospitality as shown in twentieth century representations of the returnee in order to argue that this figure exposes tensions and contradictions within both nationalist and 'post-nationalist' discourses in Ireland.

## 1.

Ireland has always been what Homi Bhabha might term a 'dissemiNation' – from an ancient tradition of travelling scholars, through the mass exodus of the Great Famine, to the economic emigrations of the twentieth century. Furthermore, 'all nationalisms,' as Edward Said points out, 'develop from a condition of estrangement.'<sup>6</sup> This certainly relates to nationalist Ireland's putative alienation from an 'authentic' past of 'ancient idealism,'<sup>7</sup> a fantasy of an Irish past in which the heroic figures of Irish mythology were united with the noble peasantry of the wild and rural west coast. By the same token, it is also

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<sup>5</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995) p.579

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, 'Reflections on Exile', in *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2000) p.176.

<sup>7</sup> For Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, the role of the Abbey Theatre was to show that 'Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.' Lady Gregory & W. B. Yeats, in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1913) (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), p.20.

remarkable the extent to which estrangement as physical emigration has been central to Ireland's construction as a nation. Exile, for Said, 'is a jealous state,'<sup>8</sup> and figures such as Michael Collins, Michael Davitt and W. B. Yeats made London, in Kiberd's words, the 'crucible in which the elements to make a modern Ireland were distilled.'<sup>9</sup> Here, driven by the 'fierce and traumatized intensity of longing'<sup>10</sup> which for Jacqueline Rose is a characteristic of those lacking statehood, the very 'idea of Ireland' was formed. For Rose, it is fantasies of the nation such as these which lie at the foundation of the modern nation-state – which play a 'central, constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations.'<sup>11</sup>

The emigrant's 'backward look' might, as Salman Rushdie argues, be a universal phenomenon, a fantasy driven by a lack of connectedness and belonging:

exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. ... [W]e will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; ... we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands.<sup>12</sup>

Ireland is often seen to be particularly prone to such a 'migrant imaginary', and cultural artefacts displaying the nostalgic 'backwards look' towards Ireland are very familiar:- John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), for example, David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) and, more recently, the Caffreys beer advertisement on British television in which a taste of this putatively authentic Irish ale (itself a mythical concept) transports the young man from the New York bar to a fantasy or 'false memory' of rural Ireland complete with red-haired colleens

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<sup>8</sup> Said, 'Reflections on Exile', p.178.

<sup>9</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p.99.

<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.4.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, *States of Fantasy*, p.4.

<sup>12</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, (London: Granta, 1992) p.10.

and wild horses. All give expression to a fantasy of Ireland and weight to a common notion of the Irish as particularly prone to nostalgia. The poet Eavan Boland's experience of migration to England from Ireland results in a similar kind of fantasy-generation:

Because I was distant from my country, I spent much of my childhood imagining it. This would never have happened if I had stayed in Ireland. Then I would have taken it for granted, lived into it, and, in an important sense, stayed out of it. As it was I tried to read myself back into it. I attached to it fragments of history and rumour. I found out about its fractured narrative of heroes, the ballads, the sacrifices, the songs; and I never questioned it. What I could not discover, I invented. Ironically, freedom to do so was greater than if I had remained in my own country, bound by the actuality and truth of its place, its people, its food, its place-names.<sup>13</sup>

W. B. Yeats's 1891 novella *John Sherman* represents a key moment in the construction of fantasy Ireland – the Literary Revival – and works through a series of the classic tropes of the Irish nationalist migrant imaginary. Sherman, the eponymous Anglo-Irishman in London, contrasts the River Thames against the river-of-life which flows through his home town of Ballah:- whilst the former symbolises (cultural) pollution and the threat of his life being swept off course (the 'filthy modern tide' of modernity), the latter conjures the nourishment and security of his idealised home: 'The source of the river that passed his garden at home ... a certain wood-bordered and islanded lake, whither in childhood he had often gone blackberry-gathering. ... it had seemed good to dream of going away to that islet and building a wooden hut there.'<sup>14</sup> Typically, these national oppositions come to be personified in female form. The Edenic home of Ballah

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<sup>13</sup> Eavan Boland, 'Imagining Ireland', in Paul Brennan & Catherine de Saint Phalle, *Arguing at the Crossroads: Essays on a Changing Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), p.15.

<sup>14</sup> W. B. Yeats, *John Sherman* (1891) in *John Sherman and Dhoya* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1990), p.58.

is inextricably linked in Sherman's mind with Mary: thus representing Ireland and origins for Sherman, Mary is, he believes, 'the root of my life.' Yeats's fantasies of Ireland as 'rural innocence' versus England's capitalist brutality spring from the context of the aristocratic, Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. And yet the tropes seem universal, as shown in texts from as contrasting a class and cultural background as Pádraic Ó Conaire's novel *Deoraíocht*, translated as *Exile* (1910). This text is genuinely of the Gaelic-speaking Catholic peasantry, is indeed seen to be the first Gaelic language novel. But Michael's home in Galway is, once again, a Garden of Eden:

If only I could fill my lungs once again with the fresh clean air of Ireland. If I could only feel one tiny breeze from Galway Bay ... or that city on its shore, or the lake, with its leafy islands, or those mountains I used to see in the distance when I was a child, to marvel at them once more.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.

Despite Ireland's reputation for nostalgia, however, the literature of migration and return throughout the twentieth century invariably shows the return 'home' in less than ideal terms. In 1996, Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, shows 'home' for Pato to be every bit as limiting and claustrophobic as it was for Gabriel in 'The Dead':

it's beautiful here, a fool can see. The mountains and the green, and people speak. ... hopping across to that bastarding oul place every couple of months ... when I'm over there in London and working in rain and it's more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all pee-stained mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock ... when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of

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<sup>15</sup> Pádraic Ó Conaire, *Deoraíocht*, (1910) trans. as *Exile* by Gearailt Mac Eoin (Conamara, Éire: Cló Iar-Chonnachta Teo., 1994), p.120.

course. Who wouldn't? But when it's here I am ... it isn't *there* I want to be, of course not. But I know it isn't here I want to be either.<sup>16</sup>

Return clearly destroys the fantasy, and this is almost literally figured in Brian Moore's 1979 novel *The Mangan Inheritance*, in which the absence of identity felt by the Irish-Canadian Jamie drives a fate-fuelled journey into fantasy Ireland. Beset by both professional and personal failure, the poet Jamie happens upon an old dagguerreotype which appears to depict his own face. In fact, it is an image of James Clarence Mangan and, fascinated by this apparent blood-link back one hundred years to an authentic Irish nationalist and *poet maudit*, Jamie sets out to discover his roots in south-west Ireland. What he actually discovers in Drishane is a fantasy Ireland straight out of classic emigrant nostalgia trips such as *The Quiet Man*. Thus finding what he desires, he becomes part of the fantasy and therefore complicit in reproducing it: as the inheritor of James Clarence Mangan's identity, he finds himself reciting and reinforcing the words out of which the fantasy is woven – most notably Jamie finds himself uncannily able to recite Mangan's famous ballad 'My Dark Rosaleen'. Jamie's complicity in (re)producing the nationalist poetic fantasy of Ireland, then, inevitably involves him in the idealisation of Irish femininity, personified here in the stereotypical form of Kathleen: 'Her long white cotton dress swirled round her ankles, and again he thought of some Madonna statue in a poor village church, the hair painted red, the white gown, the alabaster purity of the features.'<sup>17</sup> Feeling 'an overwhelming attraction toward'<sup>18</sup> her, Jamie idealises and objectifies this fantasy figure, and thereby constructs a secure sense of masculine identity over-against her. But his sense of feeling 'at home as he had never been at home'<sup>19</sup> does not last. Jamie's excitement at belonging within a tradition soon becomes horror when the reality repressed beneath the fantasy is finally revealed, releasing a set of terrible family secrets

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<sup>16</sup> Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (London: Methuen, 1996), pp.21-2.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Moore, *The Mangan Inheritance* (1979) (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p.190.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, *The Mangan Inheritance*, p.122.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, *The Mangan Inheritance*, p.144.

within which Jamie's various *doppelgängers* have been central figures.<sup>20</sup> That which is repressed beneath the fantasy (of the nation) always returns to haunt.

### 3.

Moreover, the returnee's experience 'back home' is often shown to be one of deliberate rejection. Even in the more nostalgic texts of Revivalist nationalism, Ireland is shown as an exclusive place for the returnee. Yeats's Sherman, for example, feels himself to be 'a man at a crossroads' upon his return 'home', and experiences 'a confused sense of having lost his way. It was just the same feeling he had known as a child, when one dark night he had taken a wrong turning, and instead of arriving at his own house, found himself at a landmark he knew was miles from home.'<sup>21</sup> Significantly, this landmark is a deserted and decaying Great House, clearly symbolic of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's decline and marginalisation in the increasingly Catholic nationalist Ireland of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: 'The sight intensified, by some strange sympathy, his sorrow, and he hurried away as from a thing accursed of God.'<sup>22</sup> Within the hegemonic, Catholic nationalist fantasy of Ireland, Sherman's Anglo-Irishness is clearly a problematic presence.

But a similar experience of returnee alienation is recounted from the 'more authentic' perspective of Ó Conaire's novel *Exile*. Here, the returnee is of western, Catholic, peasant background yet is once again cast as no-longer authentically Irish. Paradoxically, although this essentialist discourse would hark back to notions of an unchanging essence of the Irish race, the once-authentic Michael is here seen as fundamentally altered, contaminated by his time in England. In *Exile*, therefore, Michael finds himself unrecognised by his family and friends upon his return to Galway, and realises that now 'I should never again be able to set foot in my own country. I, who had taken a handful of Irish sand in my fist ... and crushed it until the blood seeped through the

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<sup>20</sup> James Clarence Mangan is not the only 'character' in the novel who looks identical to Jamie.

<sup>21</sup> Yeats, *John Sherman*, pp.45-6.

<sup>22</sup> Yeats, *John Sherman*, p.78.



skin, I should now have to remain forever away from the land I loved best in the world.'<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.**

For Padraig Pearse, emigrants such as Michael were traitors to the nationalist cause. The baseline requirement for the success of the nationalist fantasy of Ireland was the retention of its people, and emigration to England clearly stands in contradiction to cultural nationalist projects of self-sufficiency and 'deanglicization'. The continuing fact of emigration, therefore, merely exposes the emptiness of the rhetoric behind constructions of fantasy Ireland – the 'pure', authentic nation-state – both pre-independence and, as Kiberd says, for decades afterwards:

In brutal statistical terms the figures [for Irish emigration] are an indictment of successive Irish governments and of their failure to achieve the Sinn Féin ideal of self-sufficiency. Since 1921 one out of every two persons born in the twenty-six county state failed to secure permanent employment there: the rest either emigrated or endured chronic idleness at home.<sup>24</sup>

In truth, and in further indictment of the Irish economy, emigration has actually served as what Luke Gibbons calls 'a safety valve' for such a weak economy, enabling food and money to be more thickly spread amongst a smaller population, and staving off unrest by 'dissipating the energies and frustrations of the rural poor.'<sup>25</sup> A typical nationalist denial-reaction, however, is to take further refuge in exclusivism and essentialism. Crossing the sea, in this discourse, equalled a crossing of cultures or even races, and the emigrant – and especially the returnee – is conjured as a spectre of miscegenation, threatening the 'pure' nation with dilution and pollution. Thus Pearse, having

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<sup>23</sup> Ó Conaire, *Deoraíocht*, pp.135-6.

<sup>24</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp.474-5. See also Raymond Crotty, *Ireland in Crisis: A Study in Capitalist Colonial Underdevelopment* (Dingle, 1986)

<sup>25</sup> Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p.98.

castigated these people as ‘deserters who had left their posts. ... Let us plainly tell the emigrant that he is a traitor to the Irish State, and ... a fool into the bargain,’<sup>26</sup> goes on implicitly to deny that these emigrants are authentically Irish, and states his wish that they ‘would let us alone.’<sup>27</sup> The drawbridge of belonging within the exclusive ‘us’ of authentic Irishness is thus firmly pulled up behind these deserters. Michael’s diasporic condition is, as Ien Ang puts it, ‘a condition that has been hegemonically constructed as a lack, a sign of loss of “authenticity.”’<sup>28</sup>

This aspect of nationalist ideology is certainly commonplace throughout literary representations of the returnee experience. John B. Keane’s play *The Field* (1965), set in a rural Ireland of the 1950s, shows suspicion and rejection of the returnee remaining long after independence. After twelve years in England, William Dee returns to his native west, but once again a ‘foreignness’ is seen to have polluted him.<sup>29</sup> Pearsean notions of both authenticity and desertion might well be in play here, and Dee’s emigration is viewed as a forfeit of any rights upon the ‘authentic Irishness’ symbolised by (or contained in) the land. With capitalism so inherently un-Irish, the attempt of this now wealthy returnee to buy the land is seen as a new kind of colonialism and brings anger and violence. The Bull McCabe, having stayed in Ireland and worked the land, wields his phallic ashplant as a deadly instrument of masculine power and asserts his ‘natural-born’ right to that land by patrilinear descent:

BIRD: There’s bound to be outsiders bidding. There’s a craze for land everywhere.

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<sup>26</sup> Patrick Pearse, quoted in Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London: Faber, 1979), pp.78—9

<sup>27</sup> Pearse, quoted in Edwards, *Patrick Pearse*, p.79.

<sup>28</sup> Ien Ang, ‘On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora,’ *New Formations*, No.24, Winter 1994, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> In Jim Sheridan’s 1990 film of the play, the returnee has significantly become an Irish-American (played by Tom Berenger), and the setting has shifted back to the 1930s. On this film, see Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.124—6.

[*Bull seizes his ashplant and strikes the floor with force ...*]

BULL: That's what I care about outsiders. Accursed friggers with nothing in their heads only to own the ground we're walking on. We had their likes long enough, hadn't we? ... No foreign cock ... is goin' to do me out of my rights. ... I won't be wronged ... in my own country by an imported landgrabber. ... He don't belong here.<sup>30</sup>

## 6.

It is the socio-economic, however, which emerges here as the key factor driving resentment. Underlying Bull's bitterness and anger is an economic need indicative of the poverty of an entire class. As Lance Pettitt points out, 'Bull represents a generation of small-tenant farmers that typified a class who did not fully benefit from the shift in land ownership between 1879-1903 (the Land War to the Wyndham Act).'<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Irish 'revolution' of 1921 – famously likened to a wheel by David Fitzpatrick<sup>32</sup> – resulted in a new state which merely reinforced existing social inequalities.<sup>33</sup> This was a situation tackled persistently by Seán O'Faoláin, particularly in his journal *The Bell*, as Terence Brown explains:

[for O'Faoláin, Ireland] was not a great restored nation, but a "country at the beginning of its creative history, and at the end of its revolutionary history". He believed that the period since independence had seen a kind of *putsch* which had brought an intellectually and culturally impoverished middle class into power. This ruling élite had inured itself against an awareness of the dismal facts of Ireland's social reality as a nation ... in

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<sup>30</sup> John B. Keane, *The Field*, (Dublin: Mercier, 1991), pp.18, 39, 49, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.125.

<sup>32</sup> Fitzpatrick writes: '[If] revolutions are what happen to wheels, then Ireland underwent a revolution between 1916 and 1922 ... social and political institutions were turned upside down, only to revert to full circle upon the establishment of the Irish Free State.' David Fitzpatrick, *Politics & Irish Life 1913-21: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), p.232. Quoted by Cairns & Richards, p.114.

<sup>33</sup> This is seen by recent post-colonial critics such as Colin Graham to be a logical outcome of any discourse centred upon 'the nation'. See Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), particularly Ch.4.

dreams of the Gaelic past, the noble peasant, the seamless garment of Irish history and culture.<sup>34</sup>

This idealism, associated particularly with Eamon De Valera, could only be maintained, O'Faoláin argued, 'by ignoring the dismal facts of emigration, economic stagnation, individual inhibition and lack of fulfilling opportunity,'<sup>35</sup> which characterised mid-twentieth century Irish society. For Edward Said, the exclusivism of nationalism is generated out of the colonial condition of alienation, and alienation is precisely the quality which Seamus Deane sees registered by Ireland's mid-century literature – including that of O'Faoláin himself.<sup>36</sup> Hospitality, as Jacques Derrida has written, is incompatible with such an experience of alienation, depending instead on a sense of security: 'no hospitality, in the classic sense,' he writes, 'without sovereignty of oneself over one's home.'<sup>37</sup> To adapt Gabriel Conroy, perhaps Bull's state of alienation results in 'home', and not hospitality, becoming that which is jealously guarded.

As in *A Losing Game*, then, it is emigrant wealth in Keane's play which serves to highlight the poverty, hardship and injustice that is the reality beneath nationalist fantasies of Irish society. However, in O'Faoláin's novel of 1940, *Come Back to Erin*, aim is taken at the fantasy Ireland constructed by the economically powerful returnee – the typical romantic desire to maintain Ireland's quaintness and rural innocence (for which read: 'primitiveness' and 'underdevelopment'). Declan Kiberd has argued that 'Irish people no longer live in a country of their own making, but in a kind of tourist's filmset. ... Once a rude imposition, the pastoral Ireland of Yeats and de Valera has now become

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<sup>34</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: HarperCollins, 1985), pp.200-01.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *Ireland*, p.154.

<sup>36</sup> See Seamus Deane, 'Mary Lavin', in P.Rafroidi & T.Brown (eds), *The Irish Short Story* (Lille: Publications de l'Université de Lille III, 1979), p.244. Cited by Brown, *Ireland*, p.159.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, tr. R. Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.55.

a downright oppression.’<sup>38</sup> Implicitly, for Kiberd, this resort to what Marx called ‘the idiocy of rural life’ has much to do with the economic power, especially the tourist dollar, of Irish-America. Thus in O’Faoláin’s novel, the influence of such ‘sentimentalist’ Irish exiles is figured in the Irish-American St. John’s images of Ireland’s natural and maternal paradise, its gendered and infantilised innocence: ‘its images as sweet as honey ... a cottage lit up at night; or a church all brightly coloured glass. ... [S]he’s my own country — she bore me — she’s my mother.’<sup>39</sup> Upon visiting the shed in which he was apparently born, St. John’s delight with its ‘authentic’ Irishness is comically rendered:

“I have come home,” said St. John solemnly, and he took off his hat. ... [W]e talk, in America, about rising from log-cabin to White House. But here it is — from cow-shed ... to H. H. Shoes. ... So this is my paternal origin? The rock from which I was hewn. ... Before I leave this spot I’m going to stand right inside in that — in that — I may call it a manger, and I’m going to commune with my ancestors. ... St. John, swaying a little, paused as a priest might pause before entry to the Altar.<sup>40</sup>

The voice of opposition to such nostalgic and powerful conservatism comes from St. John’s brother, the revolutionary (stay-at-home) Frankie, who responds to this ‘sentimentalism’ with charged mockery: ‘you’re at the stage when you’d say Judas Iscariot was wronged if you heard his grandmother was Irish.’<sup>41</sup> Frankie’s socialist objection is clear: the influence of the wealthy, nostalgic returnee is to trap Ireland as a fantasy rural idyll, an underdeveloped status quo of social inequality and injustice.

The impact of such social inequalities and class injustices upon the emigrant and returnee during the 1950s and 60s has been a consistent focus

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<sup>38</sup> Declan Kiberd, ‘Inventing Irelands’, *The Crane Bag*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (1984), pp.11-13.

<sup>39</sup> Seán O’Faoláin, *Come Back to Erin* (1940) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), pp.41, 64.

<sup>40</sup> O’Faoláin, *Come Back to Erin* (1940), pp.69, 74. This nostalgia is also satirised in the character of the Senator in Brian Friel’s play *The Communication Cord* (1982).

<sup>41</sup> O’Faoláin, *Come Back to Erin* (1940), p.111.

in the drama of Tom Murphy. In *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), Murphy shows Ireland struggling towards the 'post-nationalist' capitalist modernity recommended by the 1958 Whitaker Report on economic development. There, Whitaker pointed out that,

After thirty-five years of native government people are asking whether we can achieve an acceptable degree of economic progress. The common talk among parents in the towns, as well as in rural Ireland, is of their children having to emigrate as soon as their education is completed in order to secure a reasonable standard of living.<sup>42</sup>

In the wake of this report, a new definition of Ireland and fantasy of Irishness was emerging. As Brown states,

An Ireland that had espoused nationalism for a quarter of a century ..., an Ireland that had sought to define its identity since independence principally in terms of social patterns rooted in the country's past was to seek to adapt itself to the prevailing capitalist values of the developed world. ... Economic growth was to become the new national imperative, in place of the language and the protection of native values and traditions.<sup>43</sup>

Murphy represents the new aspirations in the figure of Michael Carney: Michael wants an education and to become a teacher and a homeowner. Ireland, in the shape of Michael, wants to be bourgeois.

For the once-idealised western peasantry/working class, however, the real options appear still to be limited to poverty or migrancy: de Valeran protectionism is coming to an end and, as Mush says in the play, 'the

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<sup>42</sup> T. K. Whitaker, *Economic Development* (1958), quoted by Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: HarperCollins, 1985), p.213.

<sup>43</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: HarperCollins, 1985), p.214.

economy's destroyed since the demand for St. Patrick's day badges fell.'<sup>44</sup> The Carney men move, en masse, to Coventry in the English midlands. Their failure to escape the problems of class which they carry with them is indicative, as Fintan O'Toole says, that 'emigration is not a solution to Irish problems but merely the sharpest indicator of how profound those problems are.'<sup>45</sup> Murphy shows an Ireland in which the 'post-nationalist' capitalist modernity which grew from Whitaker brings a further exclusivism. In *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), this is once again shown through the figure of the returning emigrant. Upon his return 'home', Michael is quickly disabused of any romantic, 'rose-coloured lights' that might have been kindled from a distance. Instead of the remembered social harmony, he now finds divisions everywhere: 'who put up that partition? This was all one room. Remember, Tom, one of your socialist ideas to JJ? We were all very impressed: that there should be no public bar, no divisions, no class distinctions. ... This was our roots, Liam. This was to be our continuing cultural cradle.'<sup>46</sup> Behind the various fantasies – of nationalism and now of post-nationalist modernity – Murphy sees the reality as an exclusive, socially divided nation. This continuation of the oppressive structures of nationalist Ireland, as Colin Graham argues in relation to the later 'postmodern post-nationalism' espoused by Richard Kearney and John Hume, is central to the logic of 'post-nationalism' which merely continues its reliance upon the notion of 'nation':

Post-nationalism evolves from rather than rejects the nation [and] refuses the ability to conceptually reject and comprehend the ideological constructions and restrictions of the nation, and hopes instead to be able to preserve and move beyond them simultaneously.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Tom Murphy, *A Whistle in the Dark and other plays* (1961) (London: Methuen, 1989), p.36.

<sup>45</sup> Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), p.172.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Murphy, *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1995), p.38.

<sup>47</sup> Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p.98. See Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Where de Valeran nationalism had idealised the primitive and frozen itself as a rural themepark for tourists, the post-nationalist capitalist modernity of the post-Whitaker era has merely compounded social inequality and injustice, and class snobbery. In Murphy's first play of the new century, *The House* (2000), Christy, the (once authentic) western peasant, is seen merely as a 'scruff – back from England.'<sup>48</sup> This is an officially-sanctioned suspicion of the returnee, represented in the standardised prayers at mass (here recited by the pub landlord) 'that they may be fit one day to return to the bosom of thy heavenly mansions.'<sup>49</sup> It is also present in drunken taunts from the stay-at-homes such as Jimmy: 'So where's your anchor, where d'you belong? Lads, ye belong nowhere, ye belong to nobody.'<sup>50</sup> However, in each case, the marginalisation felt by Christy and his fellow returnees is clearly a class bigotry which is bound up with notions of cultural inauthenticity, as articulated in Goldfish's characteristically Irish-American-English: 'they hate us. But with cunning. We is varmint, man, outcasts, white trash.'<sup>51</sup>

Christy's response is a violent display of his loyalty and authenticity:

*it's very sudden and very violent ...: Christy has Jimmy by the face, has him swept back against the wall... – and is banging the back of Jimmy's head against the wall...*

JIMMY: For fuck's –

CHRISTY: Na-na-na-na-na! Jimmy? Where d'you belong? I'd kill for here! Would you kill for here? I'd kill! Know what I mean?<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, he is as good as his word. Christy is now wealthy and his fantasy of return and belonging, as in *The Field*, is to purchase the land and hope thereby to transcend both his emigrant status and his class. Christy's

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<sup>48</sup> Tom Murphy, *The House* (London: Methuen, 2000), p.111.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, *The House*, p.36

<sup>50</sup> Murphy, *The House*, p.20

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, *The House*, p.37

<sup>52</sup> Murphy, *The House*, p.43



object is the de Burca family's Big House, where his mother had served. But his dream turns into a nightmare. His desperation to overcome the social and cultural exclusions of this society drive the play to a denouement which echoes that of *A Whistle in the Dark* in its violence and murder within the (extended) family. Proper Irishness, evidently, now exists as an impossibly complex tangle of fantasies of identity. And, as in *A Losing Game*, it is the uncomfortable presence of the returnee who functions to expose the social realities of both nationalist and post-nationalist Ireland, subjecting these fantasies of identity to the pressure of the repressed tensions which they seek to disguise.

## 6.

For Jacqueline Rose, the fantasy of the nation is designed to fill the lack at the heart of things: it is 'that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – *the many as one*.'<sup>53</sup> However, as Ernst Gellner has said, nationalism – and, we might add, 'post-nationalism' – 'is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself.'<sup>54</sup> The nation can achieve 'unity' only by denying and excluding its own contradictions.

Emigration is the great contradiction of the Irish nation. But even more than the absence of the emigrant, it is the presence of the Irish returnee that undermines the fantasy of nation in both Irish nationalism and the post-nationalism of capitalist modernity. As Homi Bhabha argues:

migrants, minorities – wandering peoples ... are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation. They are Marx's reserve army of migrant labour who by speaking the foreignness of language split the patriotic voice of unisonance ... They articulate the death-in-life of the idea of the "imagined community" of the nation.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative & the Margins of the Modern Nation', *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.142.

<sup>54</sup> Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.56.

<sup>55</sup> Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p.164.

For Bhabha, such Others are phantoms who return to haunt the imaginary community of the nation, and must be denied: 'the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space.'<sup>56</sup> The returnee's experience of alienation is just such an anxiety displacement, a projection of the nation's inner turmoil and uncertainty, as s/he appears as an excess-over both nationalist and post-nationalist constructions of 'Ireland', as the *supplément* which was always already (a denied) part of the myth of the nation. This appearance exposes the fantasy as fiction, reveals the faultlines within nationalist and post-nationalist discourses of belonging – the contradictions, denials and anxieties upon which the nation is built – and thus begins to unravel the logic of Irish identity. Thus Pearse's denunciation of the 'treacherous' returnee can be seen to reveal the same anxiety expressed by the Fay brothers – that the tempting wealth available abroad might expose Ireland as less than pure, as materialistic, as always-already contaminated by 'English' values of modernity. And yet, neither in the period of Christie in *A Losing Game* nor Christy in *The House* can the attractiveness of wealth-through-emigration be explained away as need-driven rather than greed-driven. To do so would expose the reality underneath the fantasy of Ireland as one of social division and economic poverty. The final irony is that, beneath these denials and projections, the post-Whitaker state is now identified precisely with that denied capitalist modernity. Christie and Christy are suddenly much too close to home.

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<sup>56</sup> Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p.149.

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