

Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* as Comedy of Redemption

Richard Rankin Russell

Tom Murphy's play *Bailegangaire* is, as Nicholas Grene has argued, "one of the strongest, deepest and most resonant plays to have come out of Ireland in this last quarter of the [twentieth] century."¹ Gene and other sensitive critics of Murphy have delineated the range of Irish dramatic influences on this important play, ranging from Yeats's and Gregory's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* to Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and Beckett's *Endgame*.² The centrality of story-telling in the play has also been much remarked, especially its debt to the Irish figure of the *shanachie*, or storyteller, and the early Abbey Theatre dramas that foregrounded narrative, but the resonance and implications of the most important and overarching narrative of the play—the grand Christian narrative—have been largely neglected. Murphy's play reinscribes that narrative in an Irish setting, showing how the sins of the central character Mommo and her husband in a postlapsarian world have resulted in a legacy of sin and guilt for herself and her granddaughters Mary and Dolly that can only be purged with the coming of a contemporary Christ-child—Dolly's illegitimate baby Tom that her aptly named sister Mary will adopt for at least a time. This Tom becomes a replacement of sorts for the sisters' baby brother Tom who died in the long-ago fire and whose death Mommo's nightly narrative about the laughing contest in the village of Bochtan conceals for most of the play. Mary and Dolly suffer greatly from the guilt engendered in them by the death of their brother along with other sins they have committed since his death, while Mommo herself is a sort of Irish Atlas, suffering under the weight of a series of sins that includes her role in the death of her husband. Their eventual triumph occurs through Murphy's reclamation of socially transformative Christianity, through which these marginalized women cooperate with Christ in achieving their coredeemption in the Catholic understanding of the term.

The stories of their individual lives intersect with the story Mommo continues trying to tell night after night and are all finally enfolded into the overarching Christian narrative. Thus does the contemporary Irish nativity story that concludes the play become a redemptive act for the history of sin and guilt visited by Mommo and her husband upon their family. The relieved laughter that marks the end of the

Richard Rankin Russell is an assistant professor of English at Baylor University. He specializes in Northern Irish literature, Anglo-Irish literature, and twentieth-century British literature. His articles have appeared in *Journal of Modern Literature*, *South Atlantic Review*, *Modern Drama*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, *Colby Quarterly*, and *English Language Notes*, among others. His edited collection of essays on the contemporary Irish playwright Martin McDonagh will appear from Routledge in 2007.

play not only signals the family's emergence from their participation in the trans-generational tragedy of their lives, but also signifies what finally becomes Murphy's extraordinary comedy of redemption. In its heavenly laughter, *Bailegangaire* recalls Ralph Wood's thesis in *The Comedy of Redemption* that there are modern, secular works of literature that suggest in their joy a triumph over sadness that echoes the good news of the Christian gospel. The contemporary ur-text for Murphy's play with such echoes is Samuel Beckett's *Fin de Partie*, later rewritten in part and translated into the English-language *Endgame*.

As a non-believer who was raised in the Catholic Church, Murphy has a vexed relationship to the Church, yet he has remained open to writing about religious themes. For example, *The Sanctuary Lamp*, written in 1975, took its inspiration from a local priest named Father Peyton. Although *The Sanctuary Lamp* was considered virulently anti-clerical by some critics, Grene has convincingly argued that "The play suggests rather the spiritual needs of the characters, and their attempts to find substitute symbols to replace the now-dead images of traditional Christianity."³ In a penetrating essay on Murphy's *oeuvre*, Richard Allen Cave has held that Murphy's distinctiveness as an Irish playwright stems from his practice of making "the idea of a search the subject of a play and particularly when the search is for grounds on which to bring one or more of his characters to make an act of faith."⁴ As Cave hastens to add,

This is not to imply that Murphy's is a religious drama in the conventional meaning of the phrase, nor that his plays are in any way doctrinaire. . . . yet what is often profoundly moving in Murphy's plays is his conviction that even in a godless world humanity retains some religious instinct which compels them for good or ill to shape their own strange rituals of belief behind which one can still sense as it were a palimpsest of Western traditions of faith and practice.⁵

Murphy's *Bailegangaire* is unusual among his dramas in its relatively orthodox reclamation of these "religious instinct[s]" adumbrated by Cave. Nonetheless, as Christopher Murray has observed, using terms borrowed from Peter Brook in his classic work on theatre, *The Empty Space*, Murphy's body of work is part of the "Holy Theatre," because it "explore[s] and reveal[s] what lies behind facades of actuality and the sureties of material being."⁶ For Murray, the holy aspect of Murphy's plays display a vision that "views man's plight as tragic, dispossessed of . . . paradisaal inheritance," among other losses.⁷ Therefore, if Murphy had given up on institutional Christianity, he was still committed to reworking its truths into something he felt would be more constructive than what he saw as its destructive heritage in Ireland.

Chris Morash has recently pointed out that Murphy's drama from the beginning to his 1984 play *Famine* "is a phase presided over by an ever-present awareness of hunger"8 Morash uses hunger to signify "the material, earthly, and quotidian" in Murphy's early to middle drama and "magic" to signify the "fanciful" and "imaginative."⁹ Yet I would suggest two qualifications to Morash's argument: first, that later plays such as *Bailegangaire* also display an "ever-present awareness of hunger," and that "hunger" itself should be expanded to include the "fanciful" and the "imaginative," to signify, for example, the deep longings of Murphy's characters for something beyond their pressing material and quotidian concerns. Hunger, with its capacity for addressing the literal and the figurative, encompasses the various yearnings of Murphy's characters, poised between this world and the next.¹⁰

Tom Murphy was a member of an international committee translating the Gospel under the auspices of the Catholic Church during the time in which he wrote *The Sanctuary Lamp*. In a recent interview with Mike Murphy, the playwright recalls this period as a new beginning in his relationship with the Church: "When I got the invitation to become involved I was sick to death of talking about what they did to us and thought of trying something constructive. I had a naïve belief that I might find some sort of salvation."¹¹ Even though he left the committee after two years, finding "I was further removed from the God of my childhood," his narrative interest in the Gospel story was piqued by a fellow committee member that Murphy remembers warmly. This man once said to him, "Don't you think, Tom, that the world would have been saved a lot of bother, if instead of 'In the beginning,' the Book of Genesis had begun, 'Once upon a time?'"¹² Twenty-five years later, Murphy still affectionately refers to this man's statement since it seems to confirm his belief that religion is a "fairytale."¹³ At the same time, he clearly is admitting the potential narrative and moral strengths of the Bible, especially in the hands of a gifted oral storyteller. His narrative interest in the Bible's orality, coupled with his lingering fascination with confession, enabled him to write a compelling narrative confession by his three female characters in *Bailegangaire*.

Because of Murphy's admitted anti-clericalism, there has been an understandable tendency to discount any religious influences except negative ones on his work, but his remarks above suggest the continuing narrative influence of the grand Christian narrative, beginning in Genesis, of the Fall, Resurrection, and Redemption upon his life and work. When it came time to write *Bailegangaire*, his greatest play, Murphy would turn back to this central narrative and tell his particular Irish story through it. Only through recognizing how this ultimate Story structures the play can we then fully apprehend its concluding narrative of a very Irish nativity that restores redemptive hope to this most hopeless of families.

Murphy's comedy, which is evoked by a series of references to tragedy and loss within the central family by Mommo and her granddaughters, is part of an Irish humorous tradition of the macabre related by a storytelling figure. The contemporary

Irish playwright Tom Kilroy has suggested that the theatricality of the play derives from a conflation of the typical oral Irish storyteller and this specific Irish comedic tradition: “the histrionic figure of the old woman herself and secondly the fact that what she is recounting is itself a deadly, grotesque piece of theatre, the laughing competition which ends in death and the re-naming of a place.”¹⁴ In his classic work, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier traces “[t]he Irish propensity for macabre humour . . . to the world-renowned Irish wakes, at which merriment alternates with or triumphs over mourning, in the very presence of the corpse.”¹⁵ The recitation of the series of misfortunes and tragedies that have occurred during the laughing contest in *Bailegangaire* constitutes a kind of oral, figurative wake for the failures of crops and deaths that both participants, the Stranger and Costello, recall, only to laugh at them. Later, when Mommo finally concludes her story of the laughing contest and incorporates the death of the Stranger (her husband) and her grandson Tom into it with the help of her granddaughters, their macabre joint tale-telling and accompanying laughter serves as a belated, trans-generational wake for these two family members that remains true to the spirit of the macabre humor common not only to the Irish wake but also to much of Irish oral and written literature through Beckett, Murphy, and down to the present in the plays of Martin McDonagh.¹⁶

More recently, David Krause has discussed the origins of modern Irish comedy—a genre neglected by Mercier in his study—in ways helpful to understanding the comic contours of Murphy’s landmark play. Krause argues that “[i]t is perhaps the main . . . comic purpose of modern Irish drama, and probably of all compensatory laughter, to undo the burden of Apollonian renunciation and retrieve the mythic sense of a denied or lost Dionysian freedom and joy.”¹⁷ Although Brian Friel’s play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) postdates Krause’s study, its central scene of dancing sisters laughing and whirling in a Dionysian manner, despite their poverty and marginalization, exemplifies Krause’s contention here. Murphy’s Mommo and her granddaughters similarly engage in compensatory laughter for the many acts of renunciation they have committed; this laughter places them firmly in the Mercierean/Krausian Irish comic tradition.

As Kilroy suggests above, Mommo’s position as a modern-day version of the early Irish *filidh* or *shanachie* creates her particularly spell-binding narration of comedy and tragedy. The prevalence of such story-telling figures was a fixture of Irish life for hundreds of years and their presence established a credulous audience for written and performed Irish literature. William Trevor has noted, for instance, that “the receptive nature of this audience—a willingness to believe rather than find instant virtues in skepticism—allowed the modern [short] story to thrive, as the old-fashioned tale had . . . The Irish delight in stories . . . because their telling and their reception are by now instinctive.”¹⁸ In this sense, perhaps only in the performance of *Bailegangaire* can audience members be fully caught up in this macabre storytelling and experience the compensatory laughter engendered in its

central characters. But Murphy's artfully rendered spell demands a tremendous amount of emotional investment from his audience: as Irish playwright Gerard Stembridge has noted, "If you can give in that way Murphy will return great riches to you with a language of colour and joy to be shouted and cried, not locked in a page."¹⁹

While Fintan O'Toole remains the only critic to have posited the connection in the play to the Christian nativity, he wrongly sees the nativity story, not the overarching Christian narrative, as lending the play its contemporary and historical structure: "The basic structure of both the contemporary action of *Bailegangaire* and of the story of the laughing contest which is intermeshed with it, and which is enacted in [the companion play] *A Thief of a Christmas* is taken from the story of the nativity." As he argues, "The Strangers on the road on a winter night forced to seek shelter in any rough place they can find are reminiscent of Mary and Joseph caught cold in Bethlehem."²⁰ And yet both *Bailegangaire* and *A Thief of a Christmas* make clear that these two strangers, who finally are identified as Mommo and her husband, Seamus O'Toole in Mommo's rambling narrative in *Bailegangaire*, are received warmly by the locals in the crowded pub and are concerned not about any child she might be expecting but about their three grandchildren they have left by themselves this cold night. Their problem lies not in finding lodging for the night but in trying to get up the icy hill outside that leads home. As the Stranger, Mommo's husband, tells John in *A Thief of a Christmas*, "We can't get up the hill," and thus "I put my horse and cart into one of your stables."²¹

This couple has no loving, intimate relationship as Mary and Joseph are portrayed as having. Instead, they no longer communicate well or feel close to each other. In the midst of the laughing contest that she has urged on, she stops and says, "I see the animals in the field look more fondly on each other than we do," and then wonderingly asks, "How long since we laughed or looked upon each other before."²² Her husband can only nod and laugh: both are described as being near tears. They have endured a litany of misfortune in their lives and are thus better thought of as descendants of Adam and Eve, a post-lapsarian couple forced to suffer hardships because of the lingering effects of original sin. That they finally are able to laugh at these misfortunes, enabling the husband to win the laughing contest, seems to augur well for a renewed intimacy between them. But the other contestant in the contest, the local named Costello, actually laughs himself to death and as he lies dying and chortling the couple are driven out of the pub and toward their cart. The husband is pulled down off the cart and beaten and they are roundly cursed.

As we find out in the sequel to this play, *Bailegangaire*, the town named *Bochtan* where the laughing contest took place has now become known as *Bailegangaire*. The story Mommo tries to tell night after night in the latter play concerns, as she says in her inimitable dialect, the origins of this name: "how the place called *Bochtan*—and its ground inhabitants—came by its new appellation,

Bailegangaire,” the place without laughter.”²³ There is a strong tradition of place lore or *dinnseanchas* in Ireland and Mommo’s narration, garbled as it is, continues that tradition. As the great Irish polymath E. Estyn Evans has remarked about this pagan tradition linking man and nature, “One genre of Gaelic writing concerned itself with the preservation of a great store of oral traditions relating to places, and especially to hills. The collected stories, the *Dindsheanas* [sic] has been called an Irish Dictionary of National Topography.”²⁴ Evans’s crucial point regarding Murphy’s dramatic meditation on this particular *dinnseanchas* concerns the abundance of such place lore about hills. The icy hill Mommo and her husband were not able to climb at first in *A Thief of a Christmas* forces them to take shelter in the pub where the laughing contest occurs. This particular Irish hill is thus closely linked to the origins of *Bailegangaire*. Mommo’s memory repetitively trudges up this hill, yet never can make it to the top until the night on which *Bailegangaire* is set. Crucially, this superficially pagan Irish *dinnseanchas* cannot be completed until Mommo recognizes herself as part of the larger Christian narrative and forms a community with her remaining grandchildren who help her complete the telling of the story of the laughing contest and its tragic aftermath.

I. The Family’s Fall

This process of recognition is hindered if we see her as a Mary figure, as O’Toole suggests, with the implicit assumption that she is sinless. Mommo is far from sinless and a careful examination of the text of both *Bailegangaire* and *A Thief of a Christmas* shows how she bears the guilt of the laughing contest and thus is responsible at least indirectly for Costello’s death by laughter; the subsequent beating of her husband, which leads to his eventual death; and the death of her grandchild Tom, who sets himself on fire by accident while Mommo and her husband are detained long after they should have arrived home. As Grene has pointed out without further suggesting the theological implications for the play, she “is both agent and victim of the curse upon the family.”²⁵ Mommo’s curse, her original sin, lingers long into the lives of her granddaughters and its power can only be broken when it is finally confessed through her story and through her plea to the Virgin Mary for forgiveness.

Significantly, when her husband tries to leave the pub in *A Thief of a Christmas*, Mommo forces the laughing contest to happen. Although her husband has already introduced the possibility of such a competition, he has decided to go outside and check the weather to see if it has thawed enough to enable them to get up the icy hill and go home. The assembled crowd and the other potential contestant, Costello, are growing angry, and he fears violence. Yet as Seamus O’Toole, Mommo’s husband, sidles to the door and tries to leave, she is shown on her knees, looking at the sweets she has bought at the market for her grandchildren that have been

trampled to dust underfoot. This act precipitates a gathering rage in her and she finally shouts, "I'll-bear-matters-no-longer! . . . He's challe'gin' yeh."²⁶ What she cannot bear anymore seems to be his long neglect of her, evidenced by the passage cited earlier when she wistfully asks him later in the play, "How long since we laughed or looked upon each other before?"²⁷

Mommo makes clear her anger at her husband's mistreatment of her in *Bailegangaire* when Mary, who is finally revealed there as her granddaughter, asks her how the laughing contest began if Costello had decreed it was over. Mommo's answer is shot through with the anguish and anger of many years in a loveless marriage:

They could have got home But what about the things had been vexin' *her* for years? No, a woman isn't stick or stone. The forty years an' more in the one bed together an' he to rise in the mornin' (and) not to give her a glance. An' so long it had been he had called her by first name, she'd near forgot it herself . . . Brigit . . . Hah? . . . An' so she thought he hated her . . . An' maybe he did, like everything else . . . An'. (Her head comes up, eyes fierce). "Yis, yis-yis, he's challe'gin' ye, he is!" She gave it to the Bochtans. And to her husband returning?—maybe he would recant, but she'd renege matters no longer . . . —she hated him too.²⁸

Mary has never heard this part of the story because Mommo has probably been too ashamed to tell it. Mommo is senile at times, lucid at others, but has definitely repressed this part of the story to avoid admitting her own guilt in the whole affair. Angered by long years of neglect, she forces her husband into a contest that she may feel he cannot win. At the least, he will be embarrassed and she will gain some measure of payback. She must never have imagined the worst: the string of deaths that would immediately follow the contest that make her life an ongoing tragedy.²⁹

Earlier in the play, she has strangely protested that she is not guilty in a moment seemingly unconnected to her narrative. As Dolly urges her to restart her story by prompting her, she and Mommo have a brief conversation set in the present. When Dolly offers her grandmother sweets, Mommo says tersely, "There's nothing wrong with me." After a confused Dolly replies, "I didn't say there was," Mommo cryptically says, "An' I never done nothin' wrong," displaying her guilty conscience about her role in the deaths that follow the laughing contest.³⁰ Although Dolly quickly switches the subject back to the sweets, she clearly states her general conviction about Mommo in Act Two: "She's guilty."³¹ Dolly elaborates her judgment on the next page, linking Mommo's guilt to her repetitive attempts

to tell the story: “An’ that’s why she goes on like a gramophone. Guilty.”³² Mary gradually gathers from Dolly that Mommo, like Dolly now, had an illegitimate child, although Mommo was forced to marry; did not cry when their grandfather was buried; and seemingly did not mourn when the sisters’ brother Tom was buried two days before their grandfather. Mommo also has been hateful to her children, noting at one point in *Bailegangaire* about her many offspring, perhaps as many as ten, that “Them (*that*) weren’t drowned or died they said she drove away.”³³ Perhaps her husband’s neglect of her led her to turn on her remaining children.

If Mommo bears the most weight of guilt in the play, Mary and Dolly bear lesser, though still heavy burdens. Grene cites a statement from Murphy about the sense of guilt Irish emigrants he met in the England of the 1960s had imposed on themselves and argues that Mary has this same mentality, which leads her to return “to the home which she feels must be the source of emotional healing.”³⁴ But this supposed motive neglects the vocational and religious reasons behind Mary’s emigration. At the end of the play, when Mommo cannot continue her narrative of that horrific, long-ago evening, Mary takes over and relates what happened on the grandparents’ return to the house. Her confession reveals that she too had an indirect role in Tom’s death. While Mommo’s anger at her husband’s neglect of her leads to the grandparents’ arriving too late to save Tom, Mary, the eldest child in the family, was actually there with him and feels great guilt because she was not paying attention to him that night and then did not treat his wounds as well as she could have now as an experienced nurse. She recounts her part in the tragedy adapting a third person narrative style that Mommo has used throughout her halting narrative, a style that serves to distance her from her involvement even as she admits it:

Mommo? My bit. Mary was the eldest. She was the clever one, and she was seven. Dolly, the second, was like a film-star and she was grandad’s favourite. And they were in and out of the road watching for the horse and cart But in the—excitation—of their waiting they forgot to pay attention to the fire. Then Mary and Dolly heard—‘twas like an explosion. Tom had got the paraffin and, not the way granddad did it, sthollid it on to the embers, and the sudden blaze came out on top of him. And when they ran in and . . . saw him, Mary got . . . hysterical. And Dolly following got the same. Then Mary sent Dolly across the fields for May Glynn. And sure May was only . . . eleven? Then Mary covered . . . the wounds . . . from the bag of flour in the corner. She’d be better now, and quicker now, at knowing what to do. And then May Glynn’s mother came and they took Tom away to Galway, where he died.³⁵

Despite being only seven at the time, Mary feels she should have kept a closer eye on Tom and she is right. Unfortunately she has tortured herself about her moment of neglect for years, but thankfully, it has led to her vocational choice of nursing.

Mary chose this career as a purposeful vocational expiation for Tom's death and her part in it. This confessional monologue clearly shows that the grown, professional nurse faults the young amateur for not acting quickly enough in treating Tom's wounds. Although she was a success at nursing in England, Mary admits to Dolly late in the play when questioned if she will go back to "the nursing" that "That wasn't me at all."³⁶ She has returned to be Mommo's primary caregiver, still haunted by a sense of misplaced responsibility. Since she could not prevent her brother whom she loved dearly from dying she valiantly keeps alive her aging grandmother, whom she has never really loved. In so doing, Mary continues her nursing "career" even as she knows she could be trapped in this situation forever. Her smoldering resentment at Mommo's attitude of non-recognition toward her causes her finally to decide to put her in the county home, until she hits upon another strategy that should result in her freedom: having Mommo finish the story about the origins of *Bailegangaire*.³⁷ With their joint retelling of this narrative, each will find forgiveness of guilt and a release from the sins of the past.

Dolly too suffers from guilt—the death of Tom, her countless affairs, and proleptically, her threatened abortion of Tom if Mary does not take him. Dolly also "forgot to pay attention to the fire."³⁸ Out of her grief and guilt, she stays home for a time, nursing Mommo and marrying a man named Stephen who sends money home and only visits at Christmas, usually beating her when he returns for the affairs she has had in his absence when he returns. Now, she is pregnant again and wants to give her baby to Mary. When Mary hesitates, Dolly threatens to abort the baby: "But I've discussed something with someone That little service of fixing someone is available—'cause it's in demand—even round here. I've discussed it with someone."³⁹ A few minutes later, in order to convince Mary—who has suggested she wants to leave again—Dolly again hints that she will abort her child in a reference to the Kerry babies atrocity of the 1980s⁴⁰: "The countryside produced a few sensations in the last couple of years, but my grand plan: I'll show them what can happen in the dark of night in a field."⁴¹ Finally, she offers her potential abortion, not the pending conclusion of Mommo's narrative, as the real end of the family's tragic history: "I'll finish another part of this family's history in grander style than any of the others."⁴² She sees all these as sins but continues to commit them. Dolly exiles herself from traditional notions of the family and motherhood yet Mary reaches out to her so that she, Dolly, and Mommo can become a family again.

While Mary and Dolly have been arguing about Mary's supposedly easy life after her emigration to England and discussing Dolly's threatened abortion, Dolly has continually jump-started Mommo's narrative about that long-ago night by

offering suggestive phrases to her from time to time. Now, Mary takes over and tells Dolly that she wants Mommo to finish her story to bring healing to the family: “And tonight I thought I’d make a last try. Live out the—story—finish it, move on to a new place where, perhaps, we could make some kind of start. I want to help you.”⁴³ As Dolly encourages Mommo one more time, Mommo fully engages in the story and soon the sisters forget their heated argument and are shown laughing at their grandmother’s re-enactment of the story: “*Mary and Dolly forget themselves and start laughing at Mommo’s dramatization of this section.*”⁴⁴ After Mommo doles out another scrap of the story, the sisters are now described as “*laughing their own laughter,*” and after another part of the narrative, now all three of them are significantly shown “*laughing.*”⁴⁵ But although Dolly successfully encourages Mary to inspire Mommo to relate other bits of her story, Mommo soon falls asleep.

She wakes up in dramatic fashion, however, because she hears the sound of her granddaughters’ laughter and briefly thinks she is back in the midst of the laughing contest. Mary and Dolly are not merely laughing, though; they are laughing despite Dolly’s pregnancy, Mary’s desire to leave, and the looming shutdown of the local plant. In short, they are doing what Mommo’s husband and finally Mommo herself do during the laughing contest: laughing at their misfortunes in the macabre Irish fashion described by Mercier in *The Irish Comic Tradition*. In *A Thief of a Christmas*, in response to repeated questions from Costello, the local man, the Stranger, Mommo’s husband, recites a litany of misfortunes that include geese eaten by a fox, a bad potato crop, and a series of other agricultural disasters. This typically Irish, macabre/comic narration gradually draws Mommo in, who shockingly laughs at the deaths of her many children and even the death of one of her daughters-in-law.⁴⁶ Mommo’s defiant laughter in the past concerning the deaths of her children is echoed in the present by her granddaughters’ laughter at their misfortune including the potential abortion of Dolly’s baby. If they did not laugh, they would probably collapse.

II. Resurrection

And yet her granddaughters’ defiant, even repellent laughter leads Mommo to awaken and tell almost all of her story. She recalls laughing at their misfortunes and their poverty and even laughs retelling the stories of the deaths of her children. As Mary encourages her, she tells how Costello dies laughing and her husband is beaten. Toward the end of her narrative, Mommo shows a glimmer of awareness concerning the identity of Mary and Dolly: “‘Twas dawn when they got home. Not without trepidation? But the three small children, like ye, their care, wor safe an’ sound fast asleep on the settle. Now, my fondlings, settle down and be sayin’ yere prayers” (168). But her choice of an ending is a consolatory fiction, one she must

tell herself since she feels responsible for the grandchildren, who were in “their care,” and cannot admit that Tom, the third grandchild, has died.⁴⁷

Significantly, however, Mommo calls on the Virgin Mary and implicitly asks her forgiveness for the neglect that led to Tom’s death: “Hail Holy Queen. Yes? Mother of Mercy. Yes? Hail our lives? Yes? Our sweetness and our hope.”⁴⁸ Mommo has told as much of her story as she is capable of doing and this confession has led her to the brink of forgiveness as she claims the life-changing power of her faith and its power over lingering sin that has gone unconfessed till now. The implications of her confession reach far beyond her family, however, and bespeak hope for an Ireland trapped in violent, morbid narratives of the past.

If Mommo is a Mother Ireland figure, then many people have died because of her in a perverse familial variation on the Irish nationalist myths of Kathleen Ni Houlihan. The litany of the dead includes some of Mommo’s sons, her husband, and her grandson—all dead because of her stubbornness. But as Grene points out, Murphy’s version of the traditional Mother Ireland figure finally “resists the misogyny of a mother-hatred which is only the reverse counterpart of the mother-idolatry in the Kathleen Ni Houlihan tradition: Mommo is not Stephen Dedalus’s old sow that eats her farrow, any more than she is the about-to-be young girl with the walk of a queen.”⁴⁹ Instead, we are “made to feel with human compassion and understanding for Mommo’s losses, her deprivations of the spirit and the destructiveness they produced.”⁵⁰ And in this deeply sensitive and nuanced sympathy for Mommo’s losses, Ireland itself comes to term with its history, as O’Toole has argued: “[Mommo’s] endless, and endlessly unfinished, story is an evocation of Ireland’s buried children and buried history, of a historical grief that must be named and recognized before a country can be free of it.”⁵¹ Mommo’s narrative, finished with the help of a new generation in Ireland represented by Mary, offers their country a hopeful trajectory that looks to a limitless future even as it remembers and rejects its cyclical, restricting past.

After Mommo’s appeal to the Virgin Mary for forgiveness, Mary takes over the narrative, confessing her guilt, as we have seen, and fully describing the horror of Tom’s death. She also mentions her grandfather’s death from his beating, and we realize that she feels some guilt for his death as well, although not as much as Mommo must: “Two mornings later, and he had only just put the kettle on the hook, didn’t granddad, the stranger, go down too, slow in a swoon . . .”⁵² Mary was unable to save not only her brother’s life, but also her grandfather’s life. Now her vocational penance of nursing has ended and its power over her is broken through her confession. She is finally able to see her grandmother as another fallen human being, not merely as a patient. Mommo now shows remorse for her husband’s death, which she has never done before, saying simply and feelingly, “Poor Seamus.”⁵³

She then makes clear her recognition that her and her granddaughters’ particular life narratives are post-lapsarian stories and that their sins have resulted

from the original sin committed in the Garden of Eden by calling them all “Poor banished children of Eve.”⁵⁴ If they are part of fallen mankind, their hope lies in the Resurrection. That hope enters into this troubled household with Mommo’s recognition of Mary as her grandchild and Mary’s subsequent decision to take Dolly’s baby, whom she and her sister have already decided to name “Tom,” as a sort of replacement for their dead brother. But before this recognition and decision, Mommo tells Mary to “[b]e sayin’ yere prayers now an’ ye’ll be goin’ to sleep. To thee do we send up our sighs. Yes? For yere Mammy an’ Daddy an’ granddad is . . . in heaven.”⁵⁵ Mommo is re-admitting family members back into the family, back from her banished memories, back into community with them. When Mary urges her to include Tom in her prayers for those family members in heaven, Mommo does so and says, wistfully, “An’ he only a ladeen was afeared of the gander.”⁵⁶ Finally, she reaches out to the granddaughter who has told the story of the laughing contest and subsequent family deaths with her and draws her into the living community of those left in the cottage. Throughout the play, Mommo has not recognized Mary, calling her “Miss” repeatedly, seemingly mistaking her for hired help. Now, she both calls her by name and admits her need for this grandchild: “And sure a tear isn’t such a bad thing, Mary, and haven’t we everything we need here, the two of us.”⁵⁷ As she settles down to sleep, tears of gratitude brim in Mary’s eyes and are “*infused with a sound like the laughter of relief.*”⁵⁸

Murphy’s comedic conclusion is made all the sweeter for the great sorrows that have preceded it. Mary now is able to speak her own conclusion for the family’s story, sketching out an open-ended narrative redolent with hope for the future in the person of Tom, Dolly’s baby she will adopt: “To conclude. It’s a strange old place, alright, in whatever wisdom He has to have made it this way. But in whatever wisdom there is, in the year 1984, it was decided to give that—famby . . . of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home.”⁵⁹ The stultifying repetition of Mommo’s nightly attempts to tell her tragic story is resolved and Mary’s decisive conclusion has the ring of Christmas hope to it as Mary accedes to and accepts God’s sovereignty over their family, perhaps even returning to her Catholic faith just as Mommo apparently has returned to hers in her prayers. As Cave has pointed out in describing the joint storytelling of Mommo and Mary, “This process of two minds working in total accord, scrupulously sensitive to each other’s needs, is a beautiful, unforced expression of love.”⁶⁰ This revived human love points finally toward the greatest love of all embedded in the Resurrection of the grand Christian narrative: the story of God who took the life of His only Son that believers might have eternal life.⁶¹

III. Redemption

This communal process of trans-generational storytelling occurs through a meta-theatrical maneuver on Murphy's part. As Grene has recently noted, "the musical relationship of the voices in the act of expressiveness which is the play itself" slowly reconfigures "that sense of locked-in, locked-out isolation of the characters from one another."⁶² As an example of this evolving musical relationship between Mommo and her granddaughters, Grene mentions phrases like "the cursed paraffin" that act as overtures of sorts early in the play "before its meaning within the story becomes clear."⁶³ More important, he argues that "after Mary determines to egg Mommo on to finish the story, we begin to get not dialogue but duologue and eventually duet between them, as they come to sing together."⁶⁴

Murphy told Grene in conversation that as he wrote *Bailegangaire* in 1984, he mused about his female characters in the play that "Orwell got it exactly wrong: these are lives that no one is watching."⁶⁵ Murphy's marginalized women surprisingly provide the partial grounds for their own redemption in their joint narrative and anticipated delivery of Dolly's baby. Anne F. Kelly argues that Mommo's trajectory in the play, for instance, depicts her movement from objective, mythic mother figure to a more confident, subjective woman: "From being the idealized woman of Irish myth [,] whether Irish Mother or Mother Ireland, imaged and defined in her various representations by men and made to be the carrier of all kinds of meanings not her own, she moves in an approach to her own subjectivity."⁶⁶ But Mommo's transformation is complemented by that of Dolly and Mary, who themselves become active agents of their change and redemption.

Part of redemption's force in Christian theology stems from Christ's public embrace of sin on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of believers. However, the Catholic theologian H. F. Davis has noted that redemption for Catholics refers not only to Christ's ransom of believers from bondage, but also to all of His ministry and "include[s] the work of those who cooperate toward their salvation or that of others, in and through Christ."⁶⁷ In this specifically Catholic understanding of coredemption, Mommo and her granddaughters "cooperate toward their salvation" by admitting their sins and offering them up for forgiveness in a dark kitchen, whose confined area recalls that of the confessional. On this night during which the stories of the laughing contest and its aftermath are finally completely told, Mommo's confessional iteration of her sins of neglecting family enables her, with the help of God and the Virgin Mary, to be forgiven of these sins after narrating them to her intimate audience. Moreover, the storytelling of all three women recognizes and claims responsibility for sin and the accompanying guilt in an inherently Christian manner that leads to their coredemption.⁶⁸

Trevor Hart has delineated three groups of metaphors in Scripture concerning redemption, each of which illuminates a different aspect of Murphy's women's

new life at the end of the play. The metaphors of release generally refer to Christ's breaking the bondage of sinners to Satan and sin, releasing captives into freedom in Christ. Metaphors of transformation signify a series of changes in the human condition, such as leading holier lives and eventually having eternal life with Christ because of Christ's redemption of believers.⁶⁹ Finally, a third group of metaphors suggest "the facilitation of a new, confident and joyful access to God for those estranged and separated from him by sin and its consequences."⁷⁰ In their particularized storytelling of the travails of their family, Murphy's women echo the main divisions of the grand Christian narrative of Fall, Resurrection, and Redemption and move into a freedom from their bondage to sin and guilt. Their human condition seems ineluctably changed and they have a joyfully direct access to God, which was unthinkable for the majority of the play.

The subversiveness of Murphy's reclamation of dynamic Christian theology in the play's conclusion has been pointed out by Shaun Richards, who, citing the Lacanian critic Slavoj Žižek, argues that "Christ's teaching suspended social order" and emphasized newly created communities of former outcasts in opposition to traditionally constructed groups.⁷¹ In their distance from any representation of the local Catholic church, Murphy's marginalized women recall the early Christian Church, officially outlawed in Rome, where the comic spirit flourished. Harvey Cox has noted that one of the depictions of Christ in the catacombs portrayed a crucified human figure with the head of a donkey, evidence that "those catacomb Christians had a deeper sense of the comic absurdity of their position than we think they did. A wretched band of slaves, derelicts, and square pegs, they must have sensed occasionally how ludicrous their claims appeared."⁷² Understanding Murphy's community of outcasts in this deeply comic, Christian sense enables us to realize his emphasis on the binding, unifying nature of the grand Christian narrative for the displaced in society. This narrative is inherently comic in its disparities and incongruities springing from the life of Jesus, as Paul H. Grawe has noted, and in its unforeseen gift of eternal life, as John Morreall suggests.⁷³ Murphy's play shares such incongruities and unexpectedness, particularly manifested in Dolly's revelation of the pending birth of her baby, who becomes the symbol of the family's new hope in a home of such squalor.

Now we see even more strongly that the original strangers in Mommo's story, herself and her husband, do not take part in any sort of nativity story; their story is haunted by deaths upon deaths, Mommo's dead children followed by the dead Costello and finally by the dead Tom and dead Seamus. In Dolly's contemporary Irish nativity narrative, however, there is another set of strangers—a "famby . . . of strangers"—who reside not in a barn but in a traditional cottage thatched with straw and surrounded by the imaginary animals Mommo "sees" periodically throughout the play. Just as sin originally entered into the world through Eve according to Christian theology, God provided redemption through her line

in the form of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection. Mommo, the Eve figure in the play who bears responsibility for much of the lingering sin in her family's lives, is finally supplanted by a contemporary Mary figure, her granddaughter Dolly, in a greatly compressed version of the Davidic line. Molly, as a nearly unrecognizable version of the Virgin Mary (no immaculate conception for her), gives a living gift of priceless value to her sister Mary: Tom, as the Christ child that is returned to them, constitutes a replacement for the baby brother that "the thief of Christmas" stole so long ago. This child will enter into a loving family composed of three women who are characterized now by laughter, not tears. Their laughter signifies the overwhelming heavenly hope in Tom Murphy's comedy of redemption. The family's escape from the nightmarish tragedy of their lives and embrace of Christian joy recalls Gabriel Syme's awakening from his anarchist nightmare in G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* and realizing that "he was in possession of some impossible good news . . ." ⁷⁴

In its heavenly laughter, Murphy's play reminds us of the salient point in Ralph Wood's study, *The Comedy of Redemption*, that there are "secular parables of the Good News," contemporary narratives that in their echoes of the Gospel display a "laughter that refuses to take the world's sadness as final." Murphy's secular parable is Good News indeed that finally allows us to "overhear something of the Gospel's own rejoicing."⁷⁵ Its joy gives the lie both to Desmond Maxwell's strange statement that the play's conclusion "is a muted triumph" and to Lynda Henderson's puzzling claim that the play "does not open to the women the third level of consciousness—of the metaphysical."⁷⁶

A final narrative must be added to the catalog of stories already discussed that ultimately anchor *Bailegangaire* in the grand Christian narrative. The most resonant contemporary secular parable with such echoes of the Gospel that reveals the Christian significance of Murphy's conclusion is Beckett's *Fin de Partie*, which was later translated into the English-language play *Endgame* with some significant changes. As I have noted earlier, Murphy's play is indebted to earlier Irish plays such as Yeats's and Gregory's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, and Beckett's *Endgame*. Yet its deepest debt is to Beckett's *Fin de Partie*. Anthony Roche's comparison of *Bailegangaire* and *Endgame* mentioned in the first endnote leaves out an important aspect of *Fin de Partie* that enables us to realize Tom's Christ-like significance and his inspiration in Beckett's French play.

The story that the character Hamm is trying to tell in both *Fin de Partie* and *Endgame* concerns a little boy, abandoned by his father, who comes to the house long ago, left by his father, a boy who turns out to be Clov, the man who now serves him. The analogy to Murphy's play is to the near-servant Mary, who waits hand and foot on Mommo. Both Mary and Clov are trying to leave the service of Mommo and Hamm respectively, but cannot. But late in both Beckett plays, another little boy appears outside on the horizon, viewed through Clov's telescope, the first human

being we have seen outside of the dark house where Hamm and Clov live. In the more optimistic and earlier *Fin De Partie*, the little boy is explicitly recognized as a Christ figure, whose appearance suggests that Clov will finally be able to leave Hamm's service and realize his full selfhood. As Martin Esslin has shown, Hamm takes a far greater interest in this little boy in *Fin De Partie* than he does in *Endgame*. After Clov tells Hamm that the little boy is "sitting on the ground, with his back against something," Hamm cryptically says, "The lifted stone No doubt he is looking at the house with the eyes of Moses dying."⁷⁷

As Esslin argues, the Christian significance of the little boy in *Fin de Partie* qualifies much of the earlier bleakness of the play and ushers in a new moment of hope:

The longer, more elaborate version of this episode clearly reveals the religious or quasi-religious symbolism of the little boy; the references to Moses and the lifted stone seem to hint that that the first human being, the first sign of life discovered in the outside world since the great calamity when the earth went dead, is not, like Moses, dying within sight of the promised land, but, like Christ the moment after the resurrection, has been newly born into a new life, leaning, a babe, against the lifted stone.⁷⁸

The sight of this little boy "convinces Hamm that the moment of parting, the final stage of the endgame, has come"⁷⁹ and that Clov will leave him, free at last from his service to him. Similarly, the double vision that Mommo receives—her recognition that her grandson Tom has died and that Mary is her granddaughter—along with Mary's eager anticipation of the forthcoming birth of Dolly's baby Tom, suggests that Mary will leave Mommo's service, whether or not she actually leaves her home. This hopeful change in Mary's relationship to her grandmother unites them in a real, sacrificial love, not a divisive obligation to each other born out of duty. The dead, then resurrected world of Beckett's *Fin De Partie* is echoed in the dead house, the funeral home of Murphy's play, which slowly awakens as new life appears on the horizon, blurry at first, then ever clearer.

As that bleak house becomes a real home through the joy that pervades it, Mary's search for home, an example of the typical Irish emigrant's relationship toward her Irish home, is made clearer. Throughout *Bailegangaire*, Mommo and her granddaughters interject Irish words and phrases into their English in a dialect typical of areas of western Ireland. Mary, however, often speaks the English for "home," and she does so repeatedly in a particularly agonized lament at the end of Act One, telling Dolly, "I wanted to come home . . . I had to come home . . . This is our home . . . This is our home."⁸⁰ What Mary wants and what she has needed as an emigrant in England and now a returned traveler, is the equivalent of a real home, signified by the Irish terms *sa mbaile* and *sa bhaile*, which suggest "that wider sense

of a place in the world, a feeling of belonging that is buried deep within the word's meaning," as O'Toole has pointed out in his study of Irish identities. O'Toole cites David Fitzpatrick's study of the letters of Irish emigrants to Australia during the latter half of the nineteenth century that found "home had much more than a literal meaning, often 'evoking an alternative world of recollection and imagination.'" ⁸¹

Murphy's Mary must have survived in England, her adopted home for a time, by viewing her home in western Ireland as "an alternative world of recollection and imagination." On her return, however, frustrated Mommo's recollection and her own lack of imagination threaten to permanently thwart her reintegration into an Irish conception of home. Only when Mary helps Mommo remember can she imagine her home as it should be—a place of belonging and true identity. The revelation of this new self that signifies her true homecoming has been retrospectively given to us through her and Mommo's narration, which conforms to Charles Taylor's notion of a recollective narrative understanding of the self: "a sense of what I have become . . . can only be given in a story." ⁸² And once this particular family's story is told, Mary realizes their story is a variant of the grand Christian narrative of Fall, Resurrection, and Redemption. Her recognition of the congruence of that story with her own leads her to express understanding through her delighted laughter. ⁸³

O'Toole has remarked that "It is hard to imagine a playwright other than Murphy who would have the nerve and the imagination to turn the Christmas story into a tragicomedy, a defiance of death as much as a celebration of birth." ⁸⁴ It is especially difficult to imagine a contemporary Irish playwright who would employ such a hopeful narrative that defies death and celebrates birth. In his discussion of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, two monumentally important Irish plays from the 1950s, Roche suggests that these works usher in a period of contemporary Irish drama that accords with the "Russian film director Andre Tarkovsky's view that 'The aim of art is to prepare a person for death.'" ⁸⁵ The aim of this particular example of Murphy's art, however, seems to prepare us for new life despite the lingering memory of a series of deeply felt and torturous deaths, as part of what might be said to be an alternate line of contemporary Irish drama from that delineated by Roche, starting with the hopeful and influential *Fin De Partie*.

Whereas *Waiting for Godot* and *The Quare Fellow* are ultimately comedies "of survival" because of the remaining characters' decision to carry on, ⁸⁶ *Bailegangaire* does not merely portray these marginalized women surviving, but triumphing and reveling in their new-found joy granted them by their joint narration and confession of their sins. Mary's relieved laughter suggests both her happiness that Mommo's story is finally told and her anticipation of receiving Dolly's baby, a human being to care for whom she can finally call her own, in contrast to the many patients from whom she has been relatively detached as a nurse over the years. Although *Bochtan*, the town that had the laughing contest, was transformed into *Bailegangaire*, "the town without laughter," something like heavenly laughter resounds throughout

Mary's and Mommo's little cottage. The central room, where Mommo lies mostly bed-bound, fills with it at the conclusion of the play. Soon that bed will hold another mother and her adopted new life.

Notes

1. Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* (Cambridge UP, 1999) 241.
2. Grene argues in *The Politics of Irish Drama* that "the configuration of characters is that of *Riders*, the one old woman who has survived all her menfolk, left with her two daughters/granddaughters" (226). He also notes how Mommo's litany of her dead sons recalls Maurya's similar litany in *Riders* (228-29). The "allegorical old woman" in *Kathleen ni Houlihan* representing Ireland anticipates Murphy's Mommo, who functions as "his savage comment on Yeats's and Gregory's image: Ireland's is a story told over and over again by a senile mind frozen in the past, a story which she seems incapable of bringing to an end" (229). Anthony Roche (*Contemporary Irish Drama from Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994)) eloquently notes how Beckett's Hamm and Murphy's Mommo "are equally obsessed with their stories, narratives which tease the audience into working out connections. . . . Both narratives are set in the dead of winter, near Christmas time, and hinge on the fate of a child" (153). Roche also shows how the master-servant relationship of Mommo and Mary echoes that of Hamm and Clov (153).
3. Grene, "Tom Murphy and the Children of Loss," *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge UP, 2004) 211.
4. Richard Allen Cave, "Tom Murphy: Acts of Faith in a Godless World," *British and Irish Drama since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1993) 88.
5. Cave 88.
6. Christopher Murray, Introduction, "The Rough and Holy Theatre of Tom Murphy," *Tom Murphy*, spec. issue of *Irish University Review*, ed. Murray 17.1 (Spring 1987) 9.
7. Murray 13.
8. Chris Morash, "Murphy, History, and Society," *Talking about Tom Murphy*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002) 18.
9. Morash 20.
10. Although I arrived at this conclusion on my own, I was pleased to find that Murphy himself, in a recent discussion of *Famine*, "Tom Murphy in Conversation with Michael Billington," *Talking about Tom Murphy*, clearly feels that hunger as a theme in his own work represents more than just literal cravings for food or even the material conditions. He notes that "the culture that I grew up in" was "repressed" and that "the natural extravagance of youth, young manhood, young womanhood, was repressed, while the people preaching messages of meekness, obedience self-control I observed had mouths that were bitter and twisted. And I began to feel that perhaps the idea of food, the absence of food, is only one element of famine: that all of those other poverties attend famine, that people become silent and secretive, intelligence becomes cunning. I felt that the hangover of the 19th century famine was still there in my time; I felt that the Irish mentality had become twisted" (101).
11. "Tom Murphy," *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, ed. Clíodhna Ní Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000) 180.
12. "Tom Murphy" 180.
13. "Tom Murphy" 177.
14. Tom Kilroy, "A Generation of Playwrights," *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eammon Jordan (Dublin: The Arts Council, 2000) 6.
15. Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (London: Souvenir Press, 1991. Rpt. of Oxford UP ed., 1962) 49.
16. See Rebecca Wilson, "Macabre Merriment in McDonagh's Melodrama, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*," *The Power of Laughter: Comedy and Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eric Weitz (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004) 129-44, for a discussion of that playwright's use of horror to engender comedy.
17. David Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 20.
18. William Trevor, Introduction, *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, ed. Trevor (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) xv.
19. Gerard Stembridge, "Murphy's Language of Theatrical Empathy," *Irish University Review*, ed. Murray 61. See Cave for a brilliant description of the application of the communal storytelling in the

play to its listening and reading audiences that suggests how the play leads us into a series of deepening engagements with it: "At first Mommo's tale is delightful entertainment, but Mary's renewed interest in its development carries our response to a deeper level of engagement; with no loss of involvement in the narrative, we listen now to what the artistry intimates through complexities of tone . . . lying behind the words of the story, to the theme, and behind that theme to the motive spurring the teller to seek an audience, even if only an imagined one. We are being shown how there are many kinds of reception to arts of performance, how engagement at its most profound is a sharing in the act of creation, which is an act of love. Mommo's storytelling demands great courage because it is at root a revelation of her past and continuing vulnerability and guilt; Mary's listening and understanding ultimately restores to Mommo her dignity, because through sharing the telling she gives her the confidence to admit her identity, her *place* in the tale, to show that the story is much more than idle fancy" (100).

20. Fintan O'Toole, Introduction, *Tom Murphy: Plays 2* (London: Methuen, 1997 reissue of 1993 ed.) xiii.

21. Tom Murphy, *A Thief of a Christmas*, *Tom Murphy: Plays 2* 199.

22. 228.

23. Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire*, *Tom Murphy: Plays 2* 92.

24. E. Estyn Evans, *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage, and History* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992) 68.

25. Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* 229.

26. Murphy, *A Thief of a Christmas* 207.

27. 228.

28. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 140.

29. See Vivian Mercier, "Noisy Desperation: Murphy and the Book of Job" (*Irish University Review*, ed. Murray), for a stimulating discussion of Mommo as a Job figure (19). Mercier notes that the actress Siobhan MacKenna's stirring performance of Mommo in the original production of the play enabled her "to portray a female Job who longs to unburden herself of all her grievances before she dies."

30. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 105.

31. 142.

32. 143.

33. 98.

34. Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* 240.

35. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 169.

36. 159.

37. 112.

38. 168.

39. 148.

40. In 1984, the year in which the play is set, two murdered babies were found in rural County Kerry, Ireland, apparently dumped by their mothers.

41. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 152.

42. 152.

43. 153.

44. 155.

45. 155.

46. Murphy, *A Thief of a Christmas* 233.

47. Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* 160, wrongly says that Mommo is able to "bring the family narrative to a conclusion," ignoring her fictitious ending and the fact that Mary actually finishes the story.

48. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 168.

49. Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* 230.

50. 230.

51. O'Toole, Introduction xiv.

52. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 169.

53. 169.

54. 169.

55. 169.

56. 169.

57. 169.

58. 170.

59. 170.

60. Cave 99.

61. The full significance of this final passage has eluded every critic writing on the play, even those like O'Toole who has shown great sensitivity to its Christian elements, but Anthony Roche seems to purposefully reject its clearly Christian conclusion. In *Contemporary Irish Drama*, Roche says of this concluding passage, "She now offers the play's final words, not of heavenly but of humanist consolation . . ." (160-161). To justify this misreading, Roche astonishingly leaves out the crucial phrase, "in whatever wisdom He has to have made it this way," that occurs immediately before his "reproduction" of Mary's final words: ". . . in whatever wisdom there is, in the year 1984, it was decided to give that—famby . . . of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home."

62. Grene, "Talking it Through: *The Gigli Concert, Bailegangaire*," *Talking about Tom Murphy* 78.

63. Grene, "Talking it Through," 78.

64. Grene, "Talking it Through," 79.

65. Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* 219.

66. Anne F. Kelly, "Bodies and Spirits in Tom Murphy's Theatre," *Theatre Stuff*, ed. Eammon Jordan 169.

67. H. F. Davis, "The Atonement," *The Theology of the Atonement: Readings in Soteriology*, ed. John R. Sheets (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 5.

68. I am aware that Murphy's play generally fits Wylie Sypher's description of comedy in "The Meanings of Comedy" (*Comedy*, ed. Sypher (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Anchor, 1956)) as "[r]etaining its double action of penance and revel . . ." (219), which conflation was derived from pagan rituals that commingled sacrifice and feast. However, the comic trajectory, specifically confessional nature, and invocation to God and the Virgin Mary of Murphy's play mark it as identifiably Christian and Catholic.

69. Trevor Hart, "Redemption and Fall," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 194-195.

70. Hart, "Redemption and Fall" 195.

71. Qtd. in Shaun Richards, "Response," *Talking about Tom Murphy* 64.

72. Qtd. in John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: SUNY P, 1999) 119.

73. Paul H. Grawe, *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983) 290, points out that Jesus' "very birth is an oddly mismatched social occasion, Eastern kings mixing freely with shepherds, a peasant family, even the beasts of the stable," and also argues that there is a comic pattern to Jesus' entire earthly ministry, from the miracle of His turning water into wine at Cana to His riding into Jerusalem as a conquering hero on a donkey (290-1). Morreall similarly argues that Jesus' opposition of "hierarchy and elitism" (104) marks Him as a comic figure, adding to this quality His "clever sayings with at least the potential for humor," His "frequent use of reversals," and His "love of enemies" (104, 105, 108). Perhaps most important for understanding the unexpected grace of the coming baby in Murphy's play, Morreall notes that the gift of eternal life in Christian belief is "by the grace of God. Like most good things in comedy, it is a gift. Read in comic terms, the story of Jesus on the cross saying to the thief, 'This day you shall be with me in Paradise' is the height of comic grace" (110).

74. G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Annotated by Martin Gardner (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999) 264.

75. Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1988) 79.

76. Desmond Maxwell, "New Lamps for Old: The Theatre of Tom Murphy," *Theatre Research International* 15.1 (1990): 64; Lynda Henderson, "Men, Women, and the Life of the Spirit in Tom Murphy's Plays," *Irish Writers and Their Creative Process*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1996) 92.

77. Qtd. in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Revised Updated Edition (Garden City, NJ: 1969) 50.

78. Esslin 50.

79. 50.

80. Murphy, *Bailegangaire* 130.

81. Fintan O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso Paperback Ed., 1999) 167.

82. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 48.

83. Properly understanding Mary's recognition of the congruity of her story with the grand Christian narrative enables us to realize that Murphy is *not* creating his own meaning in a humanist fashion, an exercise that Lynda Henderson ("Tom Murphy, The Artist as Informer," *Studies on the Contemporary*

Irish Theatre: Actes du Colloque de Caen (Caen, France: *Centre de Publications, Universite de Caen*, 1991) 44-46) argues is a distinguishing hallmark of his plays. Instead, Murphy is pointing toward an existing Meaning, despite his skepticism.

84. O'Toole, Introduction xiv.

85. Qtd. in Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* 67.

86. Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* 69.

