

FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND (PART 2)

“AT A LOSS FOR WORDS”: THEATRE, PERFORMANCE AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PRISON PROTESTS

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Abstract

In plays as diverse as Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*, Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* and Vincent Woods's *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, there is evidence of an intemperate opposition to the idea of republicans performing protest against the state in Northern Ireland. Using Augusto Boal's conception of theatre as a cultural weapon with a powerful emancipatory and utopian potential (“theatre as a rehearsal for revolution”) and drawing on Joseph Roach and Nicholas Argenti's ideas of the kinesthetic imagination, this essay considers the republican prison protests that took place in Ireland in the period 1978-81. “At a Loss for Words” argues that the cultural logic, not to mention the disconcerting effectiveness of these protests in mobilizing mass opposition to the state, is best understood in terms of theatrical performance.

Keywords

prison protests, theatrical embodiment

About the author

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When people ask me, I find myself at a loss for words, to find words to portray what I really felt. I remember telling people who were always talking about the “protest” we were in.... This was a way of life for us! It was no longer a protest with a visible end to it.

(Provisional Irish Republican Army volunteer,
qtd. in Feldman 164-65)

Prisons and theatres have a lot in common. Set apart from ordinary social life and concealed from public view, prisons are designed nevertheless as places where a society

imagines incarceration as a theatre of punishment and abjection. Prisoners are expelled from participation in the public sphere because they are considered to have transgressed the norms of agency that the rulers of that society legislate to be acceptable. Theatres may be regarded as sharing similar functions to prisons in that they too are places that enunciate the limits that a society puts on how social action is performed. Although theatre deals with the subjunctive, and at its best tends to stretch the spectator's conception of what is possible through and by human action, it is often the idea of theatre—or, more precisely, what we think of when we think of theatre—that functions to enforce the terms by which social and political action is imagined. Within the context of the modern, western institutional theatre, for example, the distinction between actor and spectator mirrors and reinforces the distinction between political representative and citizen, and also carries an additional ideological power. What is considered as the *sine qua non* of the institutional theatre—a spectator's recognition that theatrical action is necessarily fictional and illusory—serves as a common-sense demonstration of political maturity. Confusing these categories in the sense of not properly distinguishing between theatre and ordinary life, on the other hand, tends to be presented as a mark of political naivety and pre-modern recalcitrance, and, at least in the case of postcolonial Ireland, is associated persistently with acts of insurgency, violent actions against the state and militant resistance in general.¹

In addition to the work of enforcing norms of political agency, prisons and theatres have in common an extreme focus on the body. In prison, as in a theatre, the space for action is confined and the movements of the body restricted to this institutionally defined space. In both cases, and arising precisely from this confinement, there develops an intense awareness of the body and of its mimetic potential. For both prisons and theatres maintaining limits on the ways in which we believe that we can act socially and politically is achieved by means of an intense somatic attention. Prisons achieve this effect by performing the power of the state to enforce obedience on the individual. Isolated and physically alone in a cell, the institution of the prison is designed to modernize the prisoner by compelling individuation.² What prisons seek to achieve through routines of coercion and repression, theatres attempt to achieve ideologically. Despite the close political connection between prisons and theatres, these two institutions tend to be considered quite separately. This is especially so in the case of Ireland where, at several moments in recent Irish history, the meaning and function of theatres and of prisons are challenged by competing ideas of performance and of justice. It is for this reason that opening up Irish theatre studies to include other kinds of performance (as is demonstrated so brilliantly in

this issue by Mark Phelan's essay on faction fighting) is a political as well as an intellectual imperative.

H-BLOCK PRISON PROTESTS

One of the most sensational images for me as a writer ... was somebody sitting in a shit-smear cell, starving himself to death. That image has got to speak sometime...

(Frank McGuinness, qtd. in Fitzgerald 64)

This remark by the playwright Frank McGuinness concerning the republican prison protests of the late 1970s illustrates two important aspects of how these events tend still to be remembered and represented. In the first place, they are viewed as lying beyond representation—in McGuinness's terms, as raw images waiting for expression ("that image has got to speak sometime")—and as belonging to an entirely separate sphere of activity to writing and the theatre. Second, the variety and 5-year duration (1976-81) of the blanket, "no-wash" and hunger strike protests tends to be collapsed into the hunger strikes with which the protests concluded. What characterized the hunger strike protests of 1980 and 1981 were the purified and clinically clean nature of the hunger strikers and their surroundings—exactly the absence of the shit and the dirt that characterized the preceding dirty or no-wash protests. To characterize the H-Block protests in the manner of McGuinness's remark is to drain out their historical specificity, as well as their imaginative or volitional interest.

Viewed from this dominant perspective, the Northern Ireland prison protests are taken as an object lesson in futility. Even when the hunger strikes are considered as of pivotal importance to republicanism, this is a way of telling history that portrays the protests as part of a long war of attrition fought by Irish republican prisoners against an intransigent British government pursuing a policy of "criminalization." Books as politically and intellectually diverse as Begoña Arextaga's *Shattering Silence* (1997), Padraig O'Malley's *Biting at the Grave* (1991), Tim Pat Coogan's *On the Blanket* (1980), Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence* (1992) and even some of the prisoners' own accounts, such as *Nor Meekly Serve my Time* (1994), all portray the blanket, no-wash and hunger strike protests in this relentlessly teleological manner. Like the stand-off at the end of Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1980)—between Captain Lancey's policy of military repression and the obdurate anti-colonial militancy of Doalty, Owen and the Donnelly twins—it appears that

the only possible political lesson to be drawn is the need for a positive engagement with the constitutional politics of the state. The story of the protests is that of the futility of armed conflict and the inevitability of what was to emerge in the 1990s as the "Northern Ireland Peace Process."

Apart from underlining the superiority of the state as the apogee of political practice and of the correlative inevitability of representational democracy, this narrative takes little account, either of the rich expressive resources of the prisoners themselves, or of the ways in which any performance can gesture towards a range of memories and of meanings that are often only partly conscious to the performer herself. Instead of improvisational inventiveness and resistance, what we tend to be presented with in relation to the prisoners is the primacy of contingency and of reaction. In this narrative, the blanket protest begins in March 1976 when the British government began a policy of criminalization by announcing the ending of "special category" status for political prisoners in Northern Ireland. Instead of being held in the Nissen hut prisoner-of-war-like conditions at Long Kesh, republican prisoners now found themselves consigned to purpose-built cellular accommodation arranged like a letter "H." These were the H-Blocks: two parallel wings joined by a right-angle block for the prison warders. Thus, republican prisoners responded to criminalization by refusing to wear prison uniform, and adopted the wearing of a blanket because that was all there was available to cover them. A similar scenario of contingency is outlined in descriptions of the no-wash or dirty protest. Prisoners resorted to smearing their cell walls with faeces (and, in the case of Armagh women's prison, menstrual blood) because leaving their cells to slop out or to visit the washing area had led to unendurable beatings from the prison warders. This, for example, is the narrative adopted in the prisoner accounts featured in *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*:

As harassment and brutality increased, the protest gradually escalated. Beginning with a refusal to slop out, the prisoners then stopped washing, and finally they started to smear excrement on the cell walls.... Utterly determined to win recognition as political prisoners, they used their bodies as weapons. (31)

By this logic of escalation the hunger strikes are presented as arising as a final and deadly strategic response. Against this way of telling the history of the H-Block prison protests, I want to argue that the apparent inevitability of the hunger strikes may be better understood in terms of the more abstruse logic of theatrical embodiment. This is to say

that the prisoners' use of protest strategies in this period should be construed as a highly performative means of defying the prison regime and also, and most crucially, of gesturing towards alternative possibilities of performing subjectivity and of political and social organization. In brief, I want to argue that the blanket and no-wash protests are not just *reactions* to the worsening circumstances of incarceration in the H Blocks (and thus to be considered merely as forms of expediency) but rather are kinds of theatrical performance that exhibit what theatre historian and performance theorist Joseph Roach describes as "the kinaesthetic imagination": "this [kinaesthetic] faculty flourishes in that mental space where imagination and memory converge, [it] is a way of thinking through movements—at once remembered and reinvented—the otherwise unthinkable" (27).

Although the blanket protest did begin with expediency, it soon developed a strikingly mimetic dimension. Refusing then to wash or shave, hirsute bearded prisoners covered only in a blanket very quickly became the blanket men. Like actors, the prisoners' bodies developed into mimetic instruments that were soon imitated by the many relatives and supporters—both men and women—who led the huge anti H-Block protest marches across the country between the late 1970s and early 1980s. Naked prisoners wearing blankets provided a way of performing the sense of grievance and political exclusion experienced by Northern Ireland's nationalist population. Like Bobby Sands's reputed panache as a storyteller, the blanket protest was a form of performance that gave access to forms of knowing and remembering that—like theatrical performance itself—seemed to slow down and arrest time so as to imagine new ways of existence. What the blanket men dramatized therefore was something more than the vulnerability and oppression of the Northern Ireland nationalist minority, but a deeper, anti-colonial project of refusing the prison authorities' project of civilizing modernity. Instead of the performance of abjection and despair which the prison regime had sought to impose on the prisoners, the blanket protest had prisoners realizing that their own bodies could function as a performative resource. It opened up a world associated with the body and also with a tradition of anti-colonial resistance that, outside of such circumstances, might have been regarded with awkwardness and embarrassment. Crucially, the blanket protests operated as performances that invested spectatorship with an ethical imperative and was designed to elicit from the spectator acts of intervention. Instead of the affirmations presented to the detached spectators of the institutional theatre, the blanket men conceived of themselves as a spectacle designed to evoke a reaction of ethical outrage.

Working in conjunction with a network of Relatives Action Committees as well as by means of smuggled "prisoner diary" articles in the republican weekly newspaper,

An Phoblacht/ Republican News, the blanket men performed a spectacle of injustice and vulnerability that had representational implications for the wider nationalist population in Northern Ireland. The British government's public stance of cold detachment from the visible plight of the prisoners indicted the state's policy as cruel and inhuman, and demanded from supporters and relatives expressions of mass protest and demonstration.

Imagine being entombed naked and alone for a whole day. What would it be like for twenty seven torturous months? Now again with this in mind, try and imagine what it is like to be in this situation in surroundings that resemble a pig-sty and you are crouched naked upon the floor in a corner, freezing cold, amid the lingering stench of putrifying rubbish, crawling, wriggling white maggots all around you. Fat, bloating flies pestering your naked body, the silence is nerve-wrecking, your mind is in turmoil.... My mind is scarred deep. It is equally a worrying thought that we may end up unable to even think at all. With that in "your" mind, I will leave off. Think about it, but don't just leave it at that. (*An Phoblacht 2*)

The anthropologist Allen Feldman describes the logic at work in the blanket protest as a kind of ironic or "deflating mimesis" (236) which, he argues, is further extended in the case of the no-wash or dirty protests that began in March 1978. Here, the excreta-covered cell walls become a *mise-en-scene* that further condemns the incarceratory tactics of the state as brutal and unjust. The prisoners' refusal of clothing is now compounded by their refusal of the shame of bodily function. Daubing the prison walls with urine, faeces and menstrual blood was an insurgent act of reflecting shame backwards onto the prison system. The modern cellular structure of the H-Block prison system of Long Kesh structured the performance of highly formalized routines of punishment and abnegation organized to the goal of individuation. This was explicitly designed to signal the end of prisoner-of-war like conditions that had prevailed prior to the British government policy of criminalization. As discussed, the state's insistence on the restriction and curtailment of the prisoners' physical movements was designed to achieve a crude social lesson in ideological conformity – what David Lloyd describes as "modernization under duress" ("The Myth" 233). The prison cell aims "to induce the dissolution and forgetting of other, derogated forms of association [and] to forestall the emergence of new kinds of counter-modern association that the congregation of inmates from widely dispersed locations in the penal system might suggest and enable" (Lloyd, *A History* 26).

One of the most regular performance activities in the H-Blocks was storytelling, described to me in interview by former Blanketman, Eoghain MacCormaic, as facilitating a kind of critical history of the republican movement or "loose talk" (qtd. in Pilkington, "Irish Theatre" 25). But if storytelling in the prisons allowed loose talk, the dirty protest involved a loose way of thinking about the body. The body becomes available not as something bound inevitably and for all time to particular modes of socialization but as radically malleable, and as a tool of oppositional action. As well as throwing shame back on the modernising authority of the state embodied in the prison, the excreta-covered walls performed the body in a manner repugnant to conventional ideas of individual autonomy and gender stability. What visitors to the H-Blocks commented on most frequently—the odour and stench of the cell blocks—conveyed a sense of bodies all over the place and of the ordinary boundaries of the body having broken down. In addition, while the orifices of the prisoners functioned for them as a primary means of communication and refusal, their performative deployment in the dirty protest exposed the protocols of privacy and socialization as constructed. Social categories like gender, and the idea of a singular, bounded identity, were exposed as factitious in a way that was radically transgressive and that—precisely because of this—seemed to curtail the power of the blanket protest to develop a mass political movement. What the dirty protest did assert, however, was a radical, destabilizing experience of the body as the locus of refusal of public protocols associated with privacy. As Michael Warner argues in *Publics and Counterpublics*, to contravene the social protocols associated with privacy is a visceral act that, when used politically, can also have a transformative power in establishing the basis of a counterpublic. "Visceral private meaning is not easy to alter by oneself," Warner writes, "It can only be altered through exchanges that go beyond self-expression to the making of a collective scene of disclosure" (62-63). By this means, one of the effects of the dirty protest was to create an impression of a community of anti-colonial resistance, and of alliances that far exceeded both the representational politics and stable identities of nationalist discourse, and troubled orthodox assumptions of individuality (Lloyd, *A History* 52-53). For one of the protestors, the blanket protest

was full of crises, which were mainly personal: Putting the shit on the wall was one such personal crisis.... While we worried about our health, we worried too about how people would see our going against everything we had been taught and if they'd understand it.

(Peadar Whelan, qtd. in Campbell 41)

Key aspects of the dirty protests (such as the opening up of orifices, and the development of levels of connection between the prisoners that went beyond normative logic) were reversed by the way in which the hunger strikes closed up the body, returned the prison cell to its purified state, emphasized the priority of time over space and gave priority to the representational politics of the state with hunger strikers chosen on the basis of the regions that they represented. Moreover, in Arextaga's words, the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 pulled the prison protests back to "a gendered model of historical action in which men figured as the hero-martyrs and women as the supporters" (80). In this light—and notwithstanding the heroic levels of commitment and self-abnegation involved—the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 entailed a pulling back from the transformative and radical potential of the dirty protests.

NOTES

- 1 For more on this distinction in the context of Ireland, see Pilkington *Theatre & Ireland* 53-60.
- 2 Many of the ideas in this essay are indebted to the chapter on the H-Blocks in David Lloyd's forthcoming *A History of the Irish Orifice*. I am very grateful to David for his exceptional kindness and generosity in allowing me to read the manuscript prior to publication.

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