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A REVIEW OF *IRISH DRAMA, MODERNITY AND THE PASSION PLAY*

Alexandra Poulain, *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), hardcover and ebook, pp. 264, ISBNs 9781349949625 (hardcover) and 9781349949632 (ebook).

Reviewed by James Moran

Monty Python's 1979 film *The Life of Brian* famously finishes with a crucifixion scene, during which the victims dangle from their crosses whilst singing the upbeat ditty, "always look on the bright side of life." The movie was banned in Ireland, and Terry Jones later commented, "I'm not sure if I have made a good film if the Irish don't ban it."¹ However three decades later, in 2011, the play *Jerry Springer: The Opera* received a rather different reaction when staged at Dublin's Grand Canal Theatre. *Jerry Springer* features the Christ figure describing his time "crying out, crying out on the cross," to which the character of Satan responds:

Always with the crucifixion. Whatever. That was 2,000 years ago, instead of banging on about it why don't you get over it, and give us all a fucking break? Enough of this shit; get on with it.²

While *Jerry Springer* triggered some comparatively low-key walk-outs at the Grand Canal Theatre, the applause was generous and the muted protests proved far less extensive than those that greeted the play in Britain, where the evangelical group Christian Voice organized large-scale demonstrations and 55,000 people wrote to the BBC to object to the play's television broadcast. The satirical passion play, imported from abroad, could obviously be used, then, as a barometer of changing religious and cultural attitudes in Ireland.

In her illuminating, original, and well-written monograph, *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play*, Alexandra Poulain now reminds us that the stories of the passion and death of Jesus Christ—and particularly parodic retellings of the story—are also a recurring feature of home-grown Irish drama. Poulain shows that the narrative of Christ's passion emerges in Irish theatre as a perennial theme, just like that of the "poor old woman," say, or the "strangers in the house."

Poulain begins her study with the description of the crucifixion as:

Intrinsically theatrical: the cross is not just an instrument of torture, but a vertical stage on which the tortured body is displayed. In the Christian narrative, the logic of crucifixion, originally intended as a display of Roman imperial

power, is reversed to the benefit of the victim. By theatricalising his willing sacrifice, the consenting, martyred body on the cross becomes the subject of his own dramaturgy, and testifies to his own sufferings and those inflicted on silenced others. (2)

Such a view of Calvary leads Poulain to see Christ's crucifixion as belonging in a comparable area of performance to that of much modern drama. She looks to Peter Szondi, whose influential study *Theory of the Modern Drama* identifies a "crisis" that happened in drama in around 1880. At this point, Szondi argues, the alienated subjects of modernity and their social ideas could not be adequately contained by the Aristotelian form, and so writers including Ibsen, Strindberg, Maeterlinck, and Hauptmann unknowingly introduced epic elements to their works. Szondi describes how: "From the dramatic point of view [...] the category 'action' is replaced by 'situation' [...] It is this distinction that lies being the rather paradoxical term *drame statique*, which Maeterlinck coined for his work."³

Poulain takes her cue from Szondi, making the broad case that the death of Christ on the cross, when viewed theatrically, coheres with something like Szondi's view of *drame statique*. She declares that a passion play can be seen "as a specifically modern, highly self-conscious form which reflects on its own optical structure" (6), and in such a drama:

Paradoxically, there is both less and more to see on the stage: less action, and the action is no longer geared towards the inevitable catastrophe which, very often, has already taken place when the drama begins; yet more, because the spectator's imaginative gaze is allowed to probe beyond the surface of the visible into the spirit-world, and to explore all the (spiritual, emotional, political) resonances of the past catastrophic event. (3)

For Poulain, then, the "emphasis on optics, and on the subjective gaze of the spectator, inscribes the genre [of the passion play] firmly within the cultural matrix of modernity" (5). Her chronological focus is therefore upon versions of the passion narrative that have appeared in Irish drama since the time of the Irish literary revival until roughly the present day.

Of course, by tethering the genre to modernity in this way, Poulain does acknowledge that she potentially restricts her range of theatrical examples. For example, *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play* largely excludes the many earlier nineteenth-century Irish melodramas that feature a hero-martyr as a refigured version of Christ. The study excludes those ritual re-enactments of the Christian passion staged in Catholic communities as part of the Easter season, and the book excludes re-mountings of plays written in earlier periods that might contain elements of the passion narrative. Occasionally this

means that some notes that Poulain may have struck are missed. For example, Shakespeare's *Richard II* has a title character who conspicuously sees his fate as paralleling that of Christ ("he in twelve, / Found truth in all but one: I in twelve thousand, none [...] you Pilates / Have here delivered me to my sour cross"), and Frank Benson's company impressed Dublin—and especially Yeats—by delivering the play between 1897 and 1901.⁴ To what degree might Yeats's characters have been influenced by Richard-as-Christ? If Poulain's publishers had allowed her more space, such theatrical interconnections could have been probed in greater depth. It is also notable that a disproportionate number of those described as giving satirical retellings of the passion (J. M. Synge, George Bernard Shaw, Seán O'Casey, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Samuel Beckett) themselves emerged from the *sola-scriptura* world of Irish Protestantism rather than the more physical Corpus-Christi realm of Irish Catholicism. A longer study might have explored how such confessional differences may have affected the kind of passion plays that her selected authors ended up producing.

Nonetheless, by keeping a tighter focus on roughly twenty plays first staged between 1907 and 2009, Poulain is able to examine the chronological development of the passion play in the work of well-known Irish dramatists, and to advance a central—and compelling—argument that these playwrights:

use the Passion narrative in order to expose the unseen violence exerted by various institutions, power structures and ideological constructs (state nationalism and Republicanism, the Catholic Church, capitalism, patriarchy, the grand narrative of modernity and its disciplinary apparatus) on marginalized individuals and communities in post-revolutionary Ireland. (11)

Here Poulain draws ably and convincingly on the work of Slavoj Žižek and David Lloyd, both of whom have emphasized that, in addition to specific instances of violence such as crime and terror, there is a continual background of violence which is not usually perceived as such, but which serves to advance the smooth operation of dominant economic and social systems. Hence, at Easter 1916, the violence initiated by Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and the other rebels was easily identified as such in the newspapers, but the ongoing situation of Dublin at the time (in which families lived in tenement poverty, children died from preventable diseases, women were widely treated as second-class citizens, and many citizens felt compelled to emigrate) was recognized as the ongoing, "normal," peaceful state of things. As Poulain sees it, a writer using the structure of the passion play might set about "changing the conditions of visibility of violence and bringing to light the normally 'unspectacular' violence of the modern state" (19).

Poulain therefore advances a notably sympathetic view of Pearse's theatrical work. In her study, Pearse is no misty-eyed and suicidal idealist, penning derivative, sexually disconcerting, or somewhat twee religious narratives. Rather, he is a political activist who set about staging "the reality of the balance of power in the colonial relationship" (46). Poulain looks in particular at the final scene of Pearse's last play *The Singer*, with its vision of the isolated rebel declaring, "One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world. I will take no pike, I will go into the battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree!"⁵ As Poulain puts it:

[...] the key phrase here is "before men." Only this act of theatrical consciousness-raising will create the conditions of future revolution carried out by the whole nation. Neither Pearse nor his idealized self-image MacDara is impractical or pathologically given over to the death-wish; on the contrary, in the final moments before the Rising, Pearse sought to find the most practical way of serving the cause of revolution. (46)

By contrast, Yeats felt far more ambivalent about the Easter Rising, and Poulain moves on to argue that his subsequent version of the passion play is an attempt to articulate his disquiet. Critics including Masaru Sekine and Christopher Murray have praised Yeats's play *Calvary* for being a spiritual rather than a political piece, and others such as A. Norman Jeffares and Charles I. Armstrong have highlighted the way that *Calvary* points backwards to Oscar Wilde's 1894 prose poem "The Doer of Good." But Poulain takes a different tack, reminding us that *Calvary* was actually written shortly after Yeats's 1916 play *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and was originally conceived as being a drama in which "a Sinn Feiner will have a conversation with Judas in the streets of Dublin" (54). With this context in mind, Poulain proposes that *Calvary* potentially "rewrites the Easter Rising as an ironic Passion play, constructing Christ as a figure of the rebel whose sacrifice fails to redeem those who ask nothing of Him, and remain unconvinced by His vision" (55). In this suggestive reading, Yeats's play therefore becomes an early example of a number of Irish dramas that retell the passion narrative in order to question the validity of Irish revolution, and to ask searchingly about what kind of Ireland such activities might be bringing about.

Poulain's book then goes on to give increasingly persuasive readings of the way that various later plays from the twentieth-century canon revisit the passion play in order to articulate a profound dissatisfaction with the injustices of Ireland after 1916. For example, *Saint Joan* is Shaw's "oblique comment on the Easter Rising, arguing for an inclusive definition of the nation against the simplistic identification of nationalism with Catholicism" (78). Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* sets about "exposing the violence of the historicist narrative of the

nation” (143), and Thomas Kilroy’s *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* and *Talbot’s Box* “make visible the concealed violence of enforced conformity in modern Irish culture” (180).

In this way, Poulain presents a revealing portrait of the evolving Irish state by drawing upon an assortment of canonical theatre texts, although as the analysis continues she does eschew some of the more obvious primary examples that one might expect to find in this study. For example, we might have expected the volume to conclude by discussing John Michael McDonagh’s 2014 film *Calvary*, or his brother Martin’s 2003 Tony- and Olivier-award winning play *The Pillowman*, which features the disturbing story of “The Little Jesus:”

*(The parents place a heavy cross on the girl’s back. She walks around with it in pain). So they made her carry a heavy wooden cross around the sitting room a hundred times until her legs buckled and her shins broke [...] (The parents nail her to the cross and stand it upright). And then they nailed her hands to the cross and bent her legs back around the right way and nailed her feet to the cross and they stood the cross up against the back wall and left her there while they watched television [...]*⁶

That section of Martin McDonagh’s play echoes Pearse’s Christological writings, and also blames “the state” for placing this murdered crucified child with the abusive foster parents who kill her—instances that could potentially have dovetailed with Poulain’s overall thesis. But, rather than mentioning such a well-known example, Poulain finishes with a far less familiar play (also set in an Orwellian dystopia), Lloyd’s 2007 play *The Press*, which has only ever been presented to the public through stage-readings and a performance at Liverpool Hope University. Poulain includes Lloyd’s (so far unpublished) text because it apparently uses the passion narrative in order to indict the repressive violence of the British state in the north of Ireland. But the discussion of Lloyd’s playwriting also serves a broader function. In Irish Studies, Lloyd is of course well known as a first-rate critic rather than as a dramatist: yet by highlighting his dramatic writing in this way, after having drawn attention to his theoretical writing earlier in the volume, Poulain quite brilliantly shows how the creative and critical enterprise might work hand-in-hand. In *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play*, then, the counter-intuitive decision to analyze Lloyd’s script shows how the process of playwriting and the process of critical analysis might still be two sides of one Irish coin, many years after Yeats.

Another point where Poulain avoids the obvious, to illuminating effect, is in her treatment of Beckett. Most readers of her book will likely already know the way images of crucifixion pervade Beckett’s best-known drama, and Poulain is keen to avoid retreading old ground here. She therefore avoids discussing

Beckett's stage plays, in favor of analyzing three relatively unfamiliar radio works (*Rough for Radio II*, *Words and Music*, and *Cascando*). This selection allows Poulain to ask how the passion play might work when outside the *theatron*, outside the place where violence can be made visible. Here, then, Poulain potentially unveils a rich vein for future researchers who might wish to say more about the visibility of the body in pain. Specifically, given that the image of Christ-on-the-cross foregrounds the suffering of the adult male body, there may be more to say about the way that, in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries (which are passed over reasonably briefly by Poulain) a form of movement-based, non-literary passion play emerged in which the suffering of other bodies became central. In the UK this included the groundbreaking performance of *Strange Fish* by DV8, with its female Christ-on-the-cross, whilst in Ireland we have seen performances such as Brokentaklers' *The Blue Boy* or ANU's *Laundry* using images of the passion in order to draw attention to abuse of women and children.

Overall, then, *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play* is a rich and absorbing study. It deserves to be read with attentiveness, and has the potential to motivate a great deal of further research. Poulain draws connections between Irish theatrical scripts, modern political injustices, and a 2,000-year-old story, in order to create a volume that is both illuminating and thoughtprovoking.

Notes

1. Quoted by Julian Doyle, *The Gospel According to Monty Python* (Sarasota: First Edition, 2014), ebook version at <https://www.lehmanns.de/shop/kunst-musik-theater/30517253-9781622876204-gospel-according-to-monty-python>.
2. *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, by Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee, Twentieth Century Fox DVD, 2005.
3. Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays (Cambridge: Polity, 1987 [1956]), 32.
4. Shakespeare, *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 904–05.
5. Pádraic Pearse, *The Singer in Plays, Stories, Poems* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1966), 1–44: 43.
6. Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (London: Faber, 2003), 70.