

Frank McGuinness

## A Voice from the Trees: Thomas Kilroy's Version of Chekhov's *The Seagull*

### I

Thomas Kilroy's version of Chekhov's *The Seagull* was first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre on 8 April 1981, directed by its then artistic director, Max Stafford-Clark, and with an illuminating programme note by the literary manager, Rob Ritchie, pinpointing specific comparisons between Russia and Ireland, both societies verging on radical change at the turn of the nineteenth century. At the instigation of an English theatre, an Irish playwright is given an opportunity to use a major European play as a metaphor for his own country's intellectual history. In doing so, Kilroy made a significant turning point in Irish theatre. We could begin to claim international contact, translating key texts into our own speech. But the claim would, initially, stand or fall on Kilroy's appropriation of Chekhov. He succeeded.

### II

*The Seagull* is a play obsessed by success and failure. Those who fail do so in a spectacular fashion. It could be argued that these failures are rooted in fate, but it might be more accurate to state that their roots lie in frustrated desire. Almost everyone in the play shares one of two desires, to be a writer or a performer. Their motivations are consequently theatrical in the extreme. Even at the most intimate, revealing moments, rarely does anyone cease to perform. Such performances usually end in melodrama, poor melodrama, for no one in this decaying house transplanted from Russia to the West of Ireland is up to much at their chosen art. Ostensibly the play is centred around ill-fated love affairs, desperate attempts at escape and doomed resignations to sorrow, to all embracing sadness — at the play's opening Mary tells us she always wears black because she is sad, accompanying her confession with a heavy sigh. The conventional sound of sadness intensifies the conventional costume of sadness, and Mary wears them as the vestments of victimisation. Mary victimises herself in pointless pursuit of Constantine's love, and James, the school teacher, falls victim to his love for Mary. Such

is the common love ritual in *The Seagull*. Constantine humbles himself before Lily, Lily before Aston, Pauline before Doctor Hickey, Hickey before the great actress Isabel, Isabel, again, before Aston, or so it seems, and Aston before nobody but himself, since it is clearly only himself he loves. Yet there is an honesty in Aston's self-love remarkably absent in the other professions of desire on the play. If Chebutykin's drunken monologue in Act 3 of *Three Sisters* is Chekhov's sly homage to *King Lear* — the telling reference to Shakespeare and his dismissive critic Voltaire at the beginning of Chebutykin's disgust — then the sexual shenanigans of *The Seagull* bear a more than passing resemblance to the self-admiring posturings of *Twelfth Night*. In the Chekhovian context, however, it is not music but theatre which is the food of love. And so in Act 1 a stage is, literally, being built upon the stage, another mirror to distort those who thrive on reflective distortions of themselves. It is for Constantine's play the stage is being built, and he himself is another mirror, a particularly dangerous one, for he, the playwright, is to his mother, Isabel, the actress, her mirror. "At the age of twenty-five I remind her of ... I don't know.: When I'm around she's forty-three and looks fifty. That is why she ... cannot love me." To win that love Constantine will display an Oedipal jealousy, but it is not a father he will regard as the key rival. It is Isabel's art he will wish to obliterate from the face of the stage. The moral war waged between competing generations in this house is histrionic in character. Constantine does not want to rewrite Isabel's true Bible, her rehearsal script. He wishes to burn it. His weapon in this war is Lily, the aspiring actress, and Isabel's is Aston, the successful writer. To Constantine Lily stands as the positive opposite to all that Isabel's art means to him, "Everything unreal, unreal costumes, unreal complexions, unreal feelings. All served up in that polite, dead language. No roots. No contact with nature, with people." Yet Isabel's art is precisely what Lily openly desires. It is the compulsion to act, to play a part and thereby win fame, that draws her to this house, irresistibly. Even as an apprentice she is sufficiently skilled to flatter Constantine away from such suspicions by her powerfully simple flirtations with him, explaining her reason for being here as, "It's the lake. It draws me over just as if I were a ... seagull. I feel for you." The feeling has its intended effect. As surely as Isabel can win over a sophisticated audience in London or Dublin, so Lily draws from Constantine uncritical, unthinking admiration. He is her first author, first director and first audience. To his judgement she is playing the part of the innocent to unblemished perfection. His response is rapturous. Rapture is, indeed, the remembered response to all performances discussed in Act 1 of *The*

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*Seagull*. Isabel feeds on a diet of triumphs. Cousin Gregory, the estate manager, recalls only the ancient greats, failing to distinguish between beauty and banality. In such a tradition, there is a stark choice of audience reaction. To cheer or to boo. Constantine's play is greeted with arrogant contempt. In keeping with *The Seagull*'s play of theatre as life, just as love meets with disaster so must the actual piece of drama meet with similar frustration. Kilroy translates Constantine's Russian mysticism and symbols into a brilliantly realized Yeatsian mythic drama, dismissed by Isabel with the cry of, "Good Lord, it's one of those Celtic things." Cousin Gregory also interrupts with the prosaic observation, "It's odd, isn't it, that it'll soon be nineteen hundred and something." Discreetly, dangerously Kilroy places a time bomb. A prophetic theatre of war makes its presence felt. Lily recites from the play, "I see now the desolate place without any living thing, neither flower nor branch, neither bird nor insect but in the air the spirits of the inner world are gathered for the contest, hushed and motionless. It is the beginning of the world, it is the end of the world, cold, cold, cold." The landscape of World War One fills the stage within the stage. The war that truly connects Russia and Ireland, the war that will sweep this class from power in both countries, makes its presence felt, and here the author Kilroy hears the author Chekhov's cry of warning. The bad art of Constantine's theatre is turned into shocking politics. The fate of Europe takes shape on a bare stage at the edges of the continent, western in Kilroy, eastern in Chekhov. Fragmented, unfulfilled, foolish lives take on enormous significance, representing, as they can, the loves and losses of men and women, the pull of passions of parent and child, land taken and then torn away again. For the first time in English Kilroy gives to Chekhov's text its subtle, precise yet epic sweep. Gods of light, Lugh, and of dark, Balor, stalk through Lily's monologue. Balor casts his evil eye on all present. "Is that sulphur?" Isabel asks when the evil red eye is lit, to which the answer is, "yes, yes." It will indeed soon be nineteen hundred and something. They will disappear. What will remain after them? It is again left to Cousin Gregory to speak the unwitting truth, the one blessing that survives the oncoming curse, and again Kilroy slyly uses his historical knowledge to advantage, underlining Chekhov's own sense of hope, "I will never forget Mario's *Come Gentil*. Well they had this basso, chap called Susini and he hit a low C. You will scarcely credit this but a voice from the trees followed him: Bravo Susini! Just like that but a whole octave lower. Bravo Susini! Well, everyone on the lawn was struck dumb. Do you know who it was? A groom. One of Carrick's stable-boys. Absolutely amazing. Bravo Susini!" The memory of surprising pleasure can give

way in the future to the onslaught of threatening pain. Gregory reminds the dying Peter that "every house must have its guard dog." The security of the guard dog's warnings can turn in changed times into the savagery of its attack, and who can truly guard under threat as this one is, at the end of its world, at the beginning of another. They themselves meet the threat with fantasies. To Mary's direct admission she loves only Constantine, Hickey replies, "Everyone's upset. It seems the whole house is the same. What's come over us? Everyone in love with everyone else ... And what can I do, Mary? What can I do for anyone?" The doctor in Chekhov's plays can always be trusted, his diagnoses are invariably wrong. No one in this play is in love with anyone else. They are in love with pain, with deception, with flattery, with their art or their inheritance. And it is Mary who holds the surest key to open the secrets of this society. Therefore, as in Act 1, she opens Act 2, as she opens every act of the *The Seagull*.

## III

Mary hints that her pain will drive her to suicide. Isabel meets these threats with protestations of her own eternal youth, her sweet lightness of mind, and her ability "to play Juliet if I so wish tomorrow". The obvious nonsense of these statements paradoxically underline their obvious sincerity, and this note of sincerity gives to Mary's dramatic threats a dangerous quality, a danger that starts to spread through the whole play when it becomes manifestly clear that Mary's suicide will not be sharp and short but the slow ending of the alcoholic. Mary's words of pain are let pass like air, their double meaning is ignored, for the semantic game that Isabel and Hickey indulge in is the play of meanings around the word 'woman' and the word 'actress'. Are they synonymous with 'angel' or 'devil'? Isabel displays her intelligence by using her powers of linguistic analysis to let rhetoric decide that 'angel' is the correct term, thereby flattering herself and also, ironically, boring herself. Boredom is the attendant experience to all triumphs. Once one winning moment has been gained it is time for another challenge. Hers is a nature that must fly or fidget from subject to subject, her occasional moments of piercingly clear strategies blinded by her determined refusal to apply such saving strategies to the way she leads her whole life. Isabel possesses an unenviable capacity to turn clarity into cant. That lack of insight deprives her of a centre, and while she may act brilliantly, she is incapable of acting on her own initiative when she is offstage. Her advice to both Mary and Lily — be independent, beware of praise — turns in her mouth into stock, useless parroting, seeing as how she steadfastly cannot do the same thing herself. She

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is a Gertrude with more than a touch of Polonius, and like both these characters from *Hamlet*, she is seriously ignorant of her child's troubled mind, "Where is Constantine? Will somebody explain that boy to me? I am his mother. I never see him ... It is extremely worrying. My son." The worries pile upon each other. Mary is now drinking heavily. The Land League is spreading its influence. Rents are not being paid. This swopping of historical terminology from Russia to Ireland localizes the action firmly, establishing as it does that the estate is past facing bankruptcy. It is economically bankrupt already. And yet strangely this doomed economy does not encourage social inertia. Languidity is *not* Chekhov's forte. As in *Three Sisters* there is constant sense of work, even of overworking. Gregory persists in his doomed efforts to improve the farm by pointless experiments. Isabel does more than pine for her art, she practises it throughout Act 2. Lily busies herself with socially or sexually ingratiating herself with all in the house, and Aston begins to busy himself with Lily. Hickey is constantly diagnosing their various ills, and Pauline keeps up her pursuit of the doctor. Kilroy rightly shatters the illusion that Chekhov's people are leisurely. Work is the norm of Chekhovian behaviour. The work may be self-defeating, self-deluding, even self-destructive, but it is still work. But these comings and goings all lead to one end, failure of communication. One failure leads to another until it seems that these people speak and see into a void, saved from falling headfirst down there solely by reason of the fact that they are still speaking and seeking. In this environment it is not a luxury but a necessity to act, to dramatise the self, for without the drama it is as if there would be no self. There is one major disadvantage in such a histrionic society. Where everyone is acting, there can be no audience, unless it is an audience of fellow actors. This is what makes the extended duologue between Aston and Lily such an accurate microscope focussed upon the theatrical metalanguage of the play. Just prior to this scene Lily has effectively dismissed Constantine as the creative controller of her life. Having torn up his play, he now presents her with a seagull he has just shot. She debases the dead bird as just "another of your symbols". With a rival's deadly accuracy he smells her attraction to Aston, and makes his exit in customary fashion. He rushes away. Aston enters, making notes in his book about Mary's behaviour, already transforming her into one of his fictions, savouring the very ordinariness of her unhappy narrative. He is on the verge of tuning into an extraordinary narrative — his own life. It is extraordinary only in his own eyes, and in Lily he finds for this fiction a perfect audience, sympathetic, all ears, an audience he can mould into an ideal image, even envying its perfection, longing to be her, "I'd give

anything, just now, to be you, to step into your life, to see what it would be really like." Now being given ultimate authority, Lily returns the desire, listening attentively, unquestioningly, to Aston, so that she might learn to be like him, an artist, successful, famous, and, above all, changed, "to be famous. To live in London. To have people talk about me, write about me ... Well, what was it like? To be famous? How are you changed by it?" To Lily, Aston's life is 'beautiful'. He is one of those who know what they are doing with their lives, "chosen as if a light had picked out their faces in the darkness. You're such a person. You are one of those who has given a meaning to life." Aston thrives on this 'dangerous Irish air'. Thereby intoxicated, he articulates his aesthetic credo, or, more precisely, his aesthetic doubt. He describes writing as a mechanical, obsessive, reductive operation. People come to exist only for his observation. His art is not beautiful, but pathological. The disarming starkness of this confession to Lily, "obviously an intelligent, sensitive young woman", gives Aston sufficient space to dominate this discourse. Before this utterly believing audience, he creates his character, exercising his authority to such an omnipotent degree that in winning her he is also warning her, simultaneously charging and absolving his conscience. Words become the writer's weapon to shoot the soul of the *Seagull* as surely as Constantine's gun shot its body. In the midst of his self-laceration he offers one small hope, "I do try to change. I go to the theatre." This professed desire for change connects him firmly with Lily whose desired means of change is through theatre also. Aston plays, of course, an old, effective trick. He looks for the love of a good woman to save him. Now in full flight, he pleads inarticulacy, and with gorgeous fluency speaks of how he must destroy in order to create. "You think I am insane?" he asks, and at this most public moment of his private terrors, having most strongly impressed upon Lily the seriousness of his literary intent, the singlemindedness of his devotion to it, he now classifies himself as 'second-rate'. He has just given an unquestionably brilliant performance, sufficiently secure to reveal convincing moments of profound self-doubt, a performance superbly orchestrated in its rhythmic patterns of self-perception, beautifully constructed in its flattering manipulation of its listener, and so the time is right for him to play his trump card. He claims not to have been acting at all, "I detest public exposure of any kind. Certainly I would never write a play and actually attend an opening night. How demeaning!" This is what truly wins him the game. He has used actorial devices to dismiss himself as an actor. The subterfuge that lies at the very centre of human behaviour in *The Seagull* stands most concealed, most revealed here. Lily naturally falls for it. The more he finds to

criticise in himself, the more she finds to praise. Aston has hit on an audience that will annihilate herself at his word, his will. He can therefore openly relate to Lily the plot of his next story. It concerns "a girl like you. A girl living in a place like this, quite apart from the ugliness and strife of the world. A lake. She moves about the lake, free, in communion with the stillness, the elements. Like a seagull... A man comes by, travelling from the great world without. Tired, perhaps, bored, perhaps. He sees her. And, then out of his boredom, he casually destroys her. As one would a seagull." He is telling her the story of her life as he foresees it. She listens, her faith in him restoring his faith. It is a faith which will lead to savage betrayal, casual betrayal. She will come to her sad senses, even if, for now, to Lily, "It's just like a dream."

## IV

Act 3 moves the play indoors to a shabby dining room after breakfast, littered with dirty crockery. Already drunk, Mary scrutinises Aston as he writes, formalising her own downfall into his fiction, desiring that he "put all this into your book". Her progressive suicide stands in contrast to Constantine's failed suicide, but their mutual destructiveness she has come to regard as typical of sensitive behaviour, "The world is full of women who drink. Whiskey and brandy usually. I'm only exceptional in that I don't bother to hide it. I can't abide secrecy, can you?" The secret she can abide is that she confuses her love for Constantine for her love of death, revelling in failure, deliberately choosing sorrow in her marriage to James, repeating the mistake of her parents' mismatch. Her life now has all the predictability of a well-made play, the relentless logic of Aston as material for his next book. And in keeping with his behaviour, immediately tries to deny what her actual behaviour confirms about her, "I can't pretend to be interested in your books. But I'd love if you'd send me copies of them from time to time with my name inscribed. Don't writing something flowery and poetic, though. That wouldn't be right, would it, for someone like me." In making an utter mess of her life, Mary tries pointlessly to put a shape on the mess, a shape to be recognised, and romanticised, she hopes, by the writer. It is Aston, not Constantine, she regards as a writer. It is as if in literature there is some form of salvation, some transcendent memory. In this literary world the artist is invested with mighty powers of redemption, as Lily underlines when she tells Aston that the meaning of her life may be found in one of his books, *Days and Nights*, the first sentence, second paragraph, page 112, which reads, "My life is yours. Take it, if you wish." He is in the process of doing

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so, but there are other lives for the taking here, as is evidenced in the climactic showdown between mother and son which is about to occur. Isabel's meanness with money is well established and reinforced by her refusal to Uncle Peter even to buy clothes for Constantine, who is dressed "like a tinker". Yet whatever else may be said of this woman, she has beyond doubt worked for her money. Unlike Peter, she will not be easily separated from it. Yet the meanness with money has about it a certain madness. She uses money neither to buy affection nor to make enemies, but her hoarding nature reveals a deep instability, an inability to equate love with giving. It is as if she can prove ultimate love by withholding it, as she does first with Constantine, when threatened, and later with Aston, who threatens her in a different manner. Yet her power is centred in her capacity to love. Her touch Constantine believes is healing, divine, changing his bloodied bandages, "When you touch me, nothing is painful, dearest Mamma.... Your hands, such beautiful shapes. They heal like the hands of a saint." He tries to return solely to childhood memory, she resists, and the attempted intimacy between mother and son descends eventually to a form of blackmail as the child Constantine begins to demand total attention from the mother, identifying his rival as Aston. He makes no confusion between the role of father and lover. It is his mother's lover he openly resents for being such, taking from him as Aston does, his mother Isabel's healing touch. Constantine identifies their love as corruption manifested in Aston's writing, which he accuses Isabel of being infected by, "You have sold yourself to the most decadent theatre in the world, aping the boring lives of boring people before boring audiences." Her counter-attack is revealing, "You ignorant little Irish wretch.... My God but you are your father's son, the same low, common mind. How dare you comment upon my art! How dare you! You are nothing but the son of a Galway pedlar! ... Tinker!" He blasts back with the accusation she is a 'miser'. The miser and the pedlar have bred a tinker, the Anglo and the Irish have created Constantine, and he is emperor of nothing, for now he repudiates all his work, "all turned to ashes, dust. All gone. I cannot live. I cannot breathe." Only Isabel can give him the hope to continue living, writing. She insists on being brave, which is to believe. She wins his promise to be civil to Aston, to stop any silly business with guns, and in saving his sanity, she still finds time to worry that she "must look an absolute wreck". It is another magnificent performance. Within the space of a single scene Isabel has played the roles of financier, nurse, mother, lover, shrew, sycophant and confessor. Even by her own high standards it is a bravura performance, and the rapid transitions have come quite naturally to her. Through the brilliant

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control of her art she has quelled her rebellious son, and now she seeks to subdue another type of rebellion from Aston. Her assertion of power tames Constantine. Against Aston she shall exercise the full influence of her apparent powerlessness. His praise for Lily cuts Isabel to the quick, but she remedies that cut through the employment of her survivor's instincts. She applies the full ferocity of those instincts with the intelligent cunning, the sharp timing, the sheer sound and fury of the great actor. She overwhelms him with the intensity of her infatuation. With Lily Aston may have written for himself a great part, but Isabel is playing for herself a great part. If Lily learned to listen through Aston, Isabel neatly turns the tables on him here. He is hauled mercilessly back to her through the violence of her acting. But the violence is simply a sustained dramatic device, for she remains in magnificent control. Having broken her heart for him, even thrown herself on her knees before him, she suddenly reminds him of his bad reviews and how he rises above them, with her support. The first stage of his humiliation subtly conveyed, she then issues the direct threat that she will leave him in this place, alone. In panic, he agrees to go with her. But the panic is as quickly dispelled as is her passion. He calmly produces his notebook to make relevant details about this scene, "I am writing down my impressions. Of what has happened. Might use it sometime. One never knows. So, we are on the move again." Isabel has risen to the challenge of Lily's rivalry by freely giving to Aston an equally excellent piece of raw material which he may fashion into fiction. She will exit, triumphant, with the pathetic plea, "Do, please, think well of me." Her triumph is, however, qualified by the act's closing intrigue. The actress may have outgunned the author, but he has one trick left up his sleeve. Lily will follow them to London and lodge, at Aston's recommendation, with a Mrs Pickett. He assures Lily this landlady "is very kind. Discreet ... I will call upon you." The seagull is taking flight to another country.

## V

Two years pass between Acts 3 and 4. The setting remains indoors, now a drawing room converted into a study for Constantine, packed with his books, his papers, and as a centrepiece his desk. This literary play will end then in a makeshift library. There is also a day-bed made up for Peter, who is now truly on the verge of breathing his last. Death and art are foregrounded. Mary again begins the action in her customary pursuit of Constantine and is still denied access to him. The house has grown gloomier, "How do they put up with the dark in here?" Mary asks, raising a light, and

revealing her dark rejection of the child she and James have brought into the world. Her treatment of James is a study of cold contempt, rejection which attracts James to his new wife, conferring on her confirming his status in the moral masochism of this society. The *real* love. Pauline defines this perversity exactly when she remarks to her daughter Mary, "I see what's wrong, dear, in your life. I know. I've been through the same hell. No one can be expected to go on living without ever knowing true love." With sublime irony, Mary accuses her mother, "You sound like someone out of a novel." She then proceeds to prophesise her future life in terms that could be lifted from the most banal romantic fiction. Without Constantine, she will go away somewhere else, with James, and "when we settle there I will forget — this place. I'm going to tear out my love for him from my heart." Time has dealt these people an unkind blow. It has not changed them, it has not freed them. In their lack of change lies their coarseness, their ignorance. Mary can argue that Constantine needs this room because it offers him easy access to the garden, "It's just perfect for someone who wishes to write, to think beautiful thoughts." In *The Seagull*, as Acts 1 and 2 prove, the garden is a place of deceit, despair and defeat, as is the whole house. Defeat and despair echo through Peter's summary of his life as a servant to the Crown, and yet despite his life's waste, he fears death, asking who doesn't? Hickey tries complacently to dismiss such 'animal fear', but he has no cure to relieve the truth of Peter's situation, "I might never have existed, all those years." At this point Constantine enters the company to tell them about Lily. She has had a child by Aston. The child has died. He has followed her on her career as an actress. It has been an abject failure, except in one respect, "Only in the death scenes did she communicate something moving. It was as if she only understood death." Now she has returned, alone, to Ireland, as have Aston and Isabel, still together. The whole company of the play is gathering for the final act. The exiles are ready to make their entrances. Isabel and Aston enter noisily. Aston now greets Constantine as a fellow writer, admiring the sense of mystery his distance from London gives him, undercutting the admiration by observing that from what Constantine has written, everyone thinks he is an old man. A card game begins, played with a beautiful, ancestral deck of cards. Aston wins the game, because, "he's terribly lucky. Wins all the time," as Isabel taunts the company. There is also something else waiting for him here, the seagull, stuffed, at his request, but he claims to have forgotten it. Food is about to be served, and Constantine declines to eat. He is left

child she and James have brought James is a study of cold contempt, nature it is the very violence of her his new wife, conferring on and I masochism of this society. The an it is looked on as being proof of ersify exactly when she remarks wrong, dear, in your life. I know. do one can be expected to go on love." With sublime irony, Mary someone out of a novel." She then life in terms that could be lifted n. Without Constantine, she will es, and "when we settle there I o tear out my love for him from pple an unkind blow. It has not m. In their lack of change lies ary can argue that Constantine a easy access to the garden, "It's es to write, to think beautiful 1 and 2 prove, the garden is a as is the whole house. Defeat mmary of his life as a servant to waste, he fears death, asking ntly to dismiss such 'animal e truth of Peter's situation, "I ears." At this point Constan- bout Lily. She has had a child followed her on her career as , except in one respect, "Only e something moving. It was as she has returned, alone, to still together. The whole the final act. The exiles are nd Aston enter noisily. Aston rriter, admiring the sense of ives him, undercutting the at Constantine has written, d game begins, played with a on wins the game, because, me," as Isabel taunts the e waiting for him here, the claims to have forgotten it. ine declines to eat. He is left

alone, to make his soliloquy. The purpose of any soliloquy is to analyse the state of loneliness, and in so analysing, to escape the solitary state, by dividing the single person into many parts. Constantine is no exception to this rule. He, the writer, becomes his critic. But it is a very specific form of writer, and an equally specific form of critic. In this solitary speech, Kilroy speaks to Chekhov. The comparison between them is a killing one, for the solution to ending the play is "no problem". Having struggled with the original text's difficulty sudden solutions start to present themselves. Superficial correspondences present themselves. Throughout this play Kilroy has accurately traced parallels between Ireland and Russia. On the surface of the play, its startling juxtapositions are rapidly apparent. The deeply felt search may result in the conviction that there is authenticity in the simplistic lie, "What does any of it matter so long as it is true to what one feels?" The danger of subterfuge tempts Kilroy. He resists it, as Chekhov resisted, both saved by the reappearance of the source from which the desire for new forms stemmed. Lily returns. She is in a state of collapse and Constantine half-carries her onstage. They exchange sympathies for what they have lost. Artist and actor share the secrets of their past. They realise they have gone beyond hatred, and so, beyond love. Lily decides to embrace the warmth of the living. The other, Constantine, falls in love with death. He makes the fatal identification between creator and created. If the created has failed at everything and only understands death, then this cursed gift is what he has been given and he must pay the price for his life as a writer. She rejects the food he offers, "No, no, no, no," and the rejection is as absolute in its repetition as Lear's acceptance of Cordelia's death. The created gives to the creator his ultimate death, while she chooses freedom, the capacity to change. Lear dies because Cordelia dies, Constantine chooses not to live because Lily changes. There is a world of difference. If in *Peer Gynt* Ibsen at long last creates a new hero, then Chekhov in *The Seagull* at long last creates a new play. Kilroy answers the challenge Chekhov presents, and in the reiteration of a whole speech from Constantine's play, he allies himself with the speaker, with Lily, sharing with her a new maturity. Neither Chekhov nor Kilroy nor Lily are "like ... children playing together". They are "no longer afraid of being alive, any more". Each enters the light of their own creation. Lily becomes an actress, her own woman, and leaves her authors behind her, making the choice of grappling with the "Spirit of Darkness", going forward into new light, new darkness. It is the end, the beginning of her life. Choosing Aston as the beginning and end of love, she defies love, leaves it, giving life only to a dead child, "I was so dreadfully

worried about my baby before it — a seagull." Lily enters the stage as a wise child, and leaves it as a mature adult. Constantine is left fatally suspended in his defining state of anxiety, hoping only that "Mother doesn't see her. I hope no one sees her. It would upset mother frightfully if she were to know." Being made of sterner stuff, the created abandons the creator, for in Chekhov the work of art has no sympathy for its artist. Between life and work there is no correlation. "Masha, sister," haunts *Three Sisters* to no avail. Chekhov will die, his sister will live. The cry will go unheard. The secret will remain untold. The card game begins again at the conclusion of *The Seagull*. The stuffed seagull is produced. The play is performed again. Candles are lit. There is a muffled sound. Doctor Hickey explains it away as a bottle of ether exploding in his bag. Doctor Chekhov reminds us that in the middle of this anaesthetic, in this makeshift library, something moves. It is the doctor drawing the writer to him, Hickey whispering to Aston, the information that "Constantine has shot himself."

## VI

Chekhov's last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, begins with the motivation of a dead child. Like Kilroy's *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare*, *The Seagull* ends with a dead child. All is leading to that lost pulse. Kilroy finds it. The surface text of the version will itself reveal the brilliance of the transposition of Chekhov's Russia into Ireland. The most cursory reading of any of his plays gives one the security that Kilroy's research goes without saying. It is not the purpose of this essay to verify that research. Rather it is to acknowledge that Kilroy's model in undertaking this version of *The Seagull* is neither Aston nor Constantine but Chekhov himself. He has produced a work of art worthy of its title. He reminds us that the seagull is a scavenger, thriving on what humans discard, pecking through its sordid, sad remains of experience, finding there sustenance to soar, to see, to hear a voice from the trees, changing us indelibly. On 8 April 1981 Irish theatre came of an age. It made Chekhov its own. Thomas Kilroy's is the achievement.

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