

# *Death and the Playwright: Chris Lee's The Electrocution of Children (1998) and The Map Maker's Sorrow (1999)\**

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**Abstract:** *The award-winning Irish playwright Chris Lee's The Electrocution of Children (1998) was produced at the Peacock Theatre in 1998 while The Map Maker's Sorrow became the Abbey entry in the 1999 Dublin Theatre Festival. The Electrocution of Children, an intellectually ambitious play depicts a world in which people have forgotten how precious the gift of life is, and how fragile human beings are. Characters in the play squander opportunities to be creative, turn their backs on relationships, fail in their attempts to communicate, and prey upon one another. Like the characters in Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi (1896), those in Lee's play often appear to be wayward children who fail utterly to follow any rules of logic or propriety. The play itself moves sequentially through a series of scenes drawn from the debris of lives and the isolation of relationships. In contrast, The Map Maker's Sorrow begins abruptly and confusingly with the suicide of a character the audience has not met and, therefore, does not know and then proceeds through no clear development to a harmonious end. (The play's structure reflects Lee's use of a map's "simultaneous spatial logic" [40]). At the very beginning of the play, the audience finds itself in a position similar to that of the bereaved family in the play or that of any survivors who find a member of their family dead by his or her own hand. Suicide, like Lee's opening scene, declares the strangeness of the other that the play then explores.*

"There is [...] in this humour the very seeds of fire." Robert Burton, *An Anatomy of Melancholy* (1:431)

The Irish playwright Chris Lee, the Abbey Theatre Writer in Association for the 1999-2000 season, had an auspicious Abbey Theatre debut with his brilliant *The Execution of Children* that shared the annual Stewart Parker Trust New Playwright Bursary for 1998.<sup>1</sup> *The Electrocution of Children*, an intellectually ambitious play superbly directed by Brian Brady with an outstanding cast, depicts a world in which people have forgotten how precious is the gift of life and how fragile are human beings.

“Humans [...] here by the luck of the draw” (Gould 175) and as “glorious accidents of an unpredictable process” (Gould 216),<sup>2</sup> in the play squander opportunities to be creative, turn their backs on relationships, fail in their attempts to communicate, and prey upon one another.

Underlying *The Electrocutation of Children* – as underlying all contemporary Irish drama – is Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Lee successfully builds upon Beckett and those other contemporary Irish playwrights who depict “an imposed situation in which the characters find themselves and which they either disguise or subvert through rituals of language, gesture and play” (Roche 6). Yet, one of *The Electrocutation of Children*’s distinguishing marks remains that none of these rituals “of language, gesture and play” leads away from the imposed situation but, rather, leads directly back to it. At the end of the play, an audience must view the ultimate “imposed situation,” that which is found in the very order of existence/creation and which the play defines as “change through catastrophe.” What Anthony Roche concludes when discussing other contemporary Irish plays from *Waiting for Godot* to *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, aptly applies as well to *The Electrocutation of Children*: “There is no solution to be found within the stage space and the dramatic fiction. Instead, the appeal is directed to the audience and to the creation of a possible community out of the bonds that briefly unite those on and off the stage” (12). The community created by *The Electrocutation of Children* must confront and then accept the accidental and unpredictable nature of human existence. “[T]he great protector, your ally in the solar system” becomes not a beneficent God but a planet, Jupiter. “Jupiter is your shield against calamity. Your friend. Remember, love thy neighbor” (*The Electrocutation of Children*). Like Jean-Paul Sartre’s audience for *Huis Clos* (1943), Lee’s audience, rather than identifying with one or all of the interdependent but isolated characters on stage is invited, instead, to share in the playwright’s distanced view of all humans, God, and the very order of existence/creation. While this conception builds clearly upon contemporary Irish drama, it is as old as the King of Brobdingnag’s incisive view of Lemuel Gulliver, in particular, and humanity, in general, and as distinct as the book of Job’s confrontation with unmerited suffering in human experience.

Like the characters in Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* (1896) a century earlier, the characters in *The Electrocutation of Children* often appear to be wayward children for whom “the rules of logic and propriety simply do not (or do not yet) exist” (Beaumont 118). Such unbridled action results in the ubiquitous death and excrement in *Ubu Roi*, while a similar series of corpses – the immolated Gordon and his murdered father, the still warm body of Gary, and the Killer’s last victim, anonymous Man – litter the stage. Although no one blatantly boasts, like Père Ubu, of killing everyone and anyone, life in *The Electrocutation of Children* has almost as little value as it does in *Ubu Roi*. Moreover, in Lee’s play, death often leaves the strongest impression when at the furthest remove from people and immediate events. The electrocution of children in the play’s title, for instance, does not occur on stage but is merely an event anonymously reported as part

of a radio news program. This electrocution involves neither an individual nor a relative of any individual in the play, but occurred quite coincidentally to “another child, also called Angela [who] was electrocuted when an overhead cable fell down during a storm. She’d been out playing with her friends.” When Margot, alarmed at hearing the name of her daughter in the news report, rushed frantically to investigate, she found her own Angela unharmed, and was so relieved she embraced her wildly. The imagined hurt and fanaticized peril to the daughter, provoke a stronger reaction in her as mother than does Angela’s later real hurt and actual danger when she finds Gary murdered. Then, Margot ignores her, telling her to go away so she can love her at long distance. In retrospect, the story of the child’s death describes an unreal situation leading to excessive, equally unreal emotions.

Lee’s play concludes with a third appearance by God on a small television set lowered from the flies echoing his two previous such appearances at the beginning and in the middle of the play. This symmetry, along with the episodic structure of the play, is typical of contemporary Irish drama in general. As Roche contends: “Contemporary Irish drama does not so much rely on a plot as on a central situation, whose implications are explored and unfolded in a process which is likelier to be circular and repetitious than straightforward” (6). The central situation in this play – the randomness of violent events or “change through catastrophe” in God’s quotable phrase – appears mirrored in each individual scene, culminating in God’s third and last speech. His appropriately ironic final word about earth and its human inhabitants. “A slight error,” he confesses. “A minor, but none the less significant oversight on my part which has grave consequences for you. [...] in the year 2003, a giant asteroid [...] will crash into central Europe and knock the Earth off its orbit. [...] it will result in, well frankly, the end of everything. I’m terribly sorry.” God may be somewhat apologetic for this coming event, but it will nevertheless happen exactly as all the play’s human incidents have occurred, inexorably, inevitably. This macrocosmic central catastrophic situation of God’s world with its built-in mistake becomes repeated in the microcosm of the killer’s arbitrary choice of which victim to spare and which to kill and in several other equally arbitrary actions such as Gordon’s immolation, Gary’s death, and Margot’s killing.

At the end of the twentieth century, humans discovered anew the precariousness of life on Earth in the realization of the important role that random, extra-terrestrial events have had in determining its fate. “Every few million years a comet or asteroid hits Earth with enough force to cause global devastation. [...] It is becoming increasingly clear that cosmic impacts have had a major influence in shaping the evolution of life by triggering mass extinctions” (Davies, *Fifth Miracle* 125). One reputable theory declared that humans most probably owed their origin to an asteroid that crashed into Earth wiping out the dinosaurs and thus creating an opportunity for mammals to develop.<sup>3</sup> (In much the same way, life itself plausibly arose thanks to a passing comet’s gift of water to the planet.) What happened to the dinosaurs could well happen to humanity, as God Himself testifies in the opening scene of Lee’s play. “One chance encounter with a

comet, and for humans at least, it's goodnight." That "chance encounter" or an equally chance encounter with a careening asteroid is not only plausible but now has also become recognized as highly probable. In one of those odd coincidents that are a publicist's dream, as *The Electrocutation of Children* neared its opening night, newspaper headlines in March 1998 proclaimed that an asteroid was hurtling towards Earth to destroy all human life early in the new millennium. More complete calculations released a few days later indicated, however, it would miss Earth by a fair margin.<sup>4</sup> Much like Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* – that most prescient play at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century where "[e]verything depends on what you can get away with" (Shattuck 10) – *The Electrocutation of Children* on the cusp of the new millennium in its disquieting and often unnerving portrait of an atomized humanity in a catastrophe-prone universe yields a new disquieting way of seeing our selves and our world.

A year later, the 1999 Peacock entry in the Dublin Theatre Festival, *The Mapmaker's Sorrow* reunited Lee with director Brian Brady, the imaginative designer, Paul McCauley, and several key actors from *The Execution of Children*, including Chris McHalle (as Henry the freelance polysomnographic technician, feckless husband, and father) and Catherine Mack (as an alluring and very self-assured Death). Ingrid Craigie played the title role of Morag the map-maker of the play's title, reluctant teacher, and mother experiences a mid-life crisis involving fundamental questions about her profession and marriage. Her professional life appears stagnating. She and her husband, Henry, have split-up leaving unsettled his considerable gambling debts. Jason, their son often assumes the guise of an unfathomable alien who refuses to share her cherished assumptions – ones that she has based her life upon. A workaholic, she does, however, take time for her son but most of their encounters end in temper, frustration, and his abrupt departure. An expert on cartography, she now faces an ultimate act that lies beyond any rational or public map-making. The central and inexplicable event in *The Map Maker's Sorrow* occurs when Jason, son of Morag and Henry, decides coldly and quite deliberately to kill himself. "At the moment I'm attempting to decide on the best method [...]. [...] Hanging is most likely the best way" (42), he tells an acquaintance the week before his death. This is no random accidental death, nor is it one caused by some inexplicable "act of God," as in *The Execution of Children* but one that occurs precisely because of his inability to believe he is "worth saving" (44).

Although Lee deals with the important, but often unacknowledged, social problem of young adult suicide, he uses this occasion – somewhat in the manner of Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* (1938) and Jean-Paul Sartre in *Huis Clos* – to discuss larger issues, such as the place of death in contemporary society and the ultimate relation of death to life. There is, for example, an observable paradox that people are living longer yet there is also a great increase in numbers and rates of suicides (Lee 22).<sup>5</sup> The play exfoliates out to include "Death the nightmare" (6) of contemporary society and "Death the mystery" (6) – the ultimate mystery of life and death in the cosmos of space-time. Lee deliberately abandons the traditional image of life as an arrow coming from

the past and going into the future, moving from birth through life to death. Instead, at the end of act one, Death modifies the image by using quantum mechanics:

It might be said that a life is fixed like a line on a map of space-time. Science says there is fate. Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, celebrates the chaos of unpredictability. [...] a life is like a sub-atomic particle. You can never know where it will be if you also want to know how fast it's moving. (54)

So the most anyone can hope for is partial knowledge.

Lee's insistent look at contemporary society's inability to face death in *The Map Maker's Sorrow* focuses on contemporary western society's current practice of hiding death. To do this, he uses suicide as an unavoidable means of revealing death to the living. Only in hindsight do the pieces fall into place in the puzzle that is Jason's suicide but even then those left behind have mostly unanswered questions. For his parents, Morag and Henry there is a life to grieve and "No one tells you how to grieve" (88). When Morag prompts Henry "Let's cry. Let's start from there" (90), she suggests that their tears will slowly wash grief away leaving memory and love (90). Her admonition becomes strengthened in the play's last scene where Death urges humans generally to accept their own and others' death as the natural end of all life including that of a suicide. Death warns her audience: "You are more terrified of death now than at any time in history. [...] Death and dying have become strange events that take place in strange surroundings watched over by strangers" (91). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most people will face death in isolation and with terror – two of the characteristics of the suicide's death.

As God was the guiding, highly ironic presence in *The Electrocution of Children*, so death – much like Whitman's "lovely and soothing death" (l. 135) – governs all life in *The Map Maker's Sorrow*. Rather than the stock figure of bones, hourglass, and scythe, Lee's death appears as a beautiful, purposeful, and composed woman offering the last kiss of forgetfulness to those who embrace her "the best kisser in the universe" (23). Within this human as well as cosmic context, Morag and Henry confront the inexplicable to wrestle themselves with Albert Camus' question of life's purpose or lack of it.<sup>6</sup> For the essential nature of suicide remains non-rational and intensely private, unknowable and terrible – even to the person committing suicide. Several of Sylvia Plath's poems, for instance, appear to verge on the hysterical in her attempt to bring coherence to what has no coherence – her embrace of self-destruction. To maintain the verbal coherence necessary to communicate thought and emotion, the poet used poetic form as the control rather than logical reasoning, sequencing of events, or symmetry in details. All of which are absent in suicide. "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well," but this is Plath, the poet speaking and not Plath, the silent suicide (245). Suicide rarely if ever becomes "an art." Instead, it usually produces a chaotic unformed mess that others are left to clean up. Lee makes that point clear in *The Map Maker's Sorrow*

by placing Jason's death by hanging at the very beginning of the play rather than elsewhere. (The end of the first act was surely another possibility, if he wanted to emphasize logical or progressive development.) In doing so, he announces his subject while at the same time negating or at least forgoing logical development, clear sequencing of events, and symmetry of scenes.<sup>7</sup>

The play's structure itself reflects Lee's use of a map's "simultaneous spatial logic" (40) rather than his heeding the mapmaker's imperative to "reduce complexity in order to be useful" (6). While the division into scenes in *The Map Maker's Sorrow* superficially resembles that of *The Electrocution of Children* here it serves a quite different dramatic purpose. *The Electrocution of Children* progressed serially from a clear ironic beginning through a development of action and character to a bleak but still ironic conclusion. *The Map Maker's Sorrow* begins abruptly and confusingly with the suicide of a character the audience has not met and, therefore, does not know and then proceeds through no clear development to an harmonious end. At the very beginning of the play, the audience finds itself in a position similar to that of the bereaved family in the play or that of any survivors who find a member of their family dead by his or her own hand. Suicide, like Lee's opening scene, declares the strangeness of the other. In contrast, *The Electrocution of Children* moves sequentially through a series of scenes drawn from the debris of lives and the isolation of relationships to the seemingly more remote but all-too probable collision of the earth with an asteroid. In *The Map Maker's Sorrow's* non-linear spatial form, rather than one scene logically following another, scenes are grouped by contiguity. "Maps are not mirrors of reality," warns Morag (5). But maps still do relate to reality however approximately, as the scenes in this play relate to but do not attempt to reproduce bereavement or elucidate what remains inexplicable. Lee's subject by definition resists conventional knowledge – there are no forms, no shapes that fit this act. "Suicide will have seemed to its perpetrator the last and best of bad possibilities, and any attempt by the living to chart this final terrain of a life can be only a sketch, maddeningly incomplete" (Jamison 73). Kay Redfield Jamison in her authoritative study of suicide, *Night Falls Fast* contends:

Suicide is a particularly awful way to die: the mental suffering leading up to it is usually prolonged, intense, and unpalliated. There is no morphine equivalent to ease the acute pain, and death not uncommonly is violent and grisly. The suffering of the suicidal is private and inexpressible, leaving family members, friends, and colleagues to deal with an almost unfathomable kind of loss, as well as guilt. Suicide carries in its aftermath a level of confusion and devastation that is, for the most part, beyond description.(24)

It is this level of confusion that *The Map Maker's Sorrow* dramatizes.

One reviewer ignoring Lee's mapping of this harsh, confused reality, erroneously described as a negative dramatic effect what proves to be a positive one. "Although

every scene has its point, like a sound-bite, few last long enough to develop into something probing or revealing, and many end with punch lines that effectively abort what might otherwise have moved into more complicated terrain” (Louise 21). But this objection confuses dramatization with characterization. To take the reviewer’s own example of Jason and Jess’s conversation about his approaching suicide in the scene “Fuck” (41-45), their dialogue ends with two hard-hitting “punch lines” but both emanate from deep within the character’s experience and personality.

JASON I’ll fix us something to eat.

JESS You know I don’t have any money.

JASON It’s not a problem.

JESS Are you asking me to fuck for my rent?

*Pause.*

JASON Look, I’ll be dead before you learn to hate me. (45)

Given Jess’s profession as a young prostitute, her suspicion of a sexual trade-off for food is clearly warranted and it might appear strange if she did not confront the issue. Jason, on the other hand, has worked hard at disengaging feelings and avoiding confrontation as well as nursing his low self-esteem. His line is doubly in character first in reiterating his preoccupation with suicide and second in devaluing himself. Moreover, Jason’s “I’ll be dead” within either the context of his announced plans to commit suicide or of his having killed himself appears neither boastful nor pretentious but purposely consistent. In a landmark study of one hundred and thirty-four suicides, Eli Robbins and his colleagues at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis conclude that “The high rate of communication of suicidal ideas indicates that in the majority of instances it is a premeditated act of which the person gives ample warning” (qtd. in Jamison 237). Jamison agrees: “Most who commit suicide explicitly and *often repeatedly* [italics added], communicate their intentions to kill themselves to others [...] before doing so” (236). Such communication “is fortunate it allows at least the possibility of treatment and prevention” (236). True it does – unless that suicidal person communicates to someone, such as Jess in Lee’s play, who remains aloof, uninvolved, and indifferent (42, 45).

Throughout the play, such short scenes (such as those between Jess and Jason) become those last bits “of confusion and devastation” that give form, although not a linear one, to *The Map Maker’s Sorrow*. Since suicide produces fragmentation, a work of art focusing on it may well be fragmented itself. Further, Lee’s series of vignettes, fragmented scenes that are themselves in turn only fragments – those post-modern fragments shored against our ruin – prevent an audience from a too-easy sympathy with any of the characters. As Morag says – “Fragmentation defeats empathy” (89). Those relatively short scenes of varying length continually interrupt any emotional engagement

by the audience thus avoiding even a semblance of sentimentality. “We ache for more of the relationship between parents and son,” perceptively wrote Dorothy Louise, “hints at first tantalize, then irritate, as we realize that we will never get closer to any insights on why these relationships have developed as they have” (22). For Louise, this irritation over the course of the play proves negative. But surely Lee’s point remains valid that there is no real insight to be had – these relationships simply happened. There is no why. In this particular mind-body problem there can be no answers to questions about human motivation and relationships. (The key informant cannot be interviewed or testify being dead.) We are meant to face the insoluble nature of this ultimate act.

Lee does give voice to the suicide, however, through retrospective exposition where all the seemingly innocuous remarks, frustrations, inexplicable temper tantrums acquire significance when seen in hindsight. As we follow Jason’s scenes sporadically inserted in the action, we can see the potential suicide’s “slippage into futility [...] first gradual, then utter” (Jamison 104). This progress into futility mirrored in the play is far truer to the experience of suicides than if Jason had “report[ed] the causes of his feelings” as one reviewer naively wished (Louise 21). This same reviewer apparently would have liked to see a different play – one that tidied up all the emotions to show logically and clearly exactly why Jason felt the way he did and how that led him inevitably to his hanging himself (Louise 21-22). But such wishes, as understandable as they are and as frequent as they are, cannot be granted.

When [...] Morag asks Jess [Jason’s recent acquaintance] if Jason hated her, Jess replies: “He didn’t hate you. He was hurt by you. He couldn’t bear the weight of expectation. That’s why he cut himself off.” But this is feeble because we never see Morag pressuring Jason, so we have to wonder about Jason’s accuracy in reporting the causes of his feelings. And why could he not just as well have been spurred to accomplishment by his mother’s ambition for him, assuming she harbored such a prospect? (Louise 21)

But an audience might equally wonder about Jess’s accuracy in reporting what she did or did not hear Jason say. She certainly wants to wound Morag and lower her self-esteem since she sees the older woman as behaving as if she was her superior. As for why Jason “could [...] not just as well have been spurred to accomplishment by his mother’s ambition for him,” there can be no answer. Morag is a good mother – ambitious for herself and one could presume for her son as well. We see her and Jason together in scenes where neither one understands the other. For instance, Jason has mastered various arcane statistics about the solar system at his mother’s request but fails to find any meaning in them. Finally, as the scene builds he rattles off a complicated recipe in all its detail only to run off in frustration shouting, “Who cares? Who cares about anything?” (17). Each of the living Jason’s scenes ends abruptly either with his physically leaving or his clearly ending the conversation (17, 45, 63, 78).<sup>8</sup> The visual image of Jason fleeing not just



from his parents but also from any true confrontation with them or with his own feelings typifies not only his actions in the play (compare 48) but those of virtually all suicides. Suicide is an escape from what has become intolerable. Why life should become intolerable is rarely known. What the reviewer noted as negative – “we remain in the dark about what his [Jason’s] parents have done” (22) – is positive dramatically and true psychologically. Not only do “we [in the audience] remain in the dark,” but so also do Henry and Morag and everyone else Jason left behind to clean up his mess. Jason’s bleak closed-in view of his diminished life does not include or permit his lending anyone a hand. This critic objects, however, to Jason’s inactivity. “[...] Jason describes watching an old woman pulling a shopping trolley against the wind for an hour to prove his point [that “life is shit”]. “Then I had to look away. That’s how hard life is.” Can we help wondering why it apparently never occurs to him, over the course of that hour, to offer the woman a hand?” (Louise 22). But surely the point of his story is that as with all of Beckett’s characters there is “Nothing to be done” (*Godot* 7). Jason identifies with the old woman only in her helplessness for it reflects his own. “I understood that that woman was the future. The future for all of us,” he concludes (43). By which he means that in his experience it is impossible to “achieve [...] something in the course of [...] time” (43). So there would be no point in going to her aid. Instead, her plight reinforces his determination to commit suicide.

“Death is the mother of beauty” declared Wallace Stevens (l. 63). The psychiatrist Rollo May went further suggesting that

This awareness of death is the source of zest for life and of our impulse to create not only works of art, but civilizations as well. [...] awareness of death also brings benefits. One of these is the freedom to speak the truth: the more aware we are of death, the more vividly we experience the fact that it is not only beneath our dignity to tell a lie but useless as well. (103)

Jason, all too aware of death, still has no zest for life nor does he wish to help create a civilization but he does feel free to speak the truth as he knows it – often shockingly so.

Nietzsche suggested that “The possibility of suicide has saved many lives” (qtd. in May 103). But Nietzsche must have been describing a person intellectually engaged with the question of suicide rather than one prone psychologically or emotionally to commit suicide. One of the great strengths of Lee’s play lies in his refusal to either intellectualize or rationalize suicide but instead to tightly focus on the pathology of suicide framed by other non-suicidal lives, since the mind-set and emotional state of the suicide is fundamentally at variance with those of others. Jamison wisely cautions:

Although it is tempting to imagine suicide as obituary writers often do – as an “understandable” response to a problem of life, such as economic reversal, romantic failure, or shame – it is clear that these or similar setbacks hit everyone at some point in their lives. [...] For every grief or strain that appears to trigger

a suicide, thousands of other people have experienced situations as bad or worse and do *not* kill themselves. The normal mind, although strongly affected by a loss or damaging event, is well cloaked against the possibility of suicide. (199)

In *The Map Maker's Sorrow*, for instance, Jason's parents find themselves individually and together in almost impossible positions economically, emotionally, and professionally yet neither contemplates suicide. Henry has gambled himself into huge debt to underworld figures that threaten to maim and/or kill him if he fails to repay the loan within a very short time. He has also wrecked his marriage, alienated his son, and lost his job. Still, he perseveres creating a freelance consulting business based on his profession as a polysomnographic technician and meeting adversity and danger armed with an ironic sense of humor, verbal agility, and a baseball bat. Morag has had the very foundations of her research and lifework destroyed. What she took for a bright new wave of the future in the building of the Rajasthan Canal in India (45-50) turns out to be a tatsumi that drowns and destroys people, their lives, work, and culture (88-89) – a “savage waste of progress,” as Henry calls it (89). Her only son, in whom she believed and for whom she had such high hopes, killed himself, yet she, like Henry, never thinks of killing herself. Like Henry and millions of others she may drown her sorrows in alcohol to the point of endangering her health but this is a short-term non-remedy that she appears capable of jettisoning. Both parents feel understandably shattered by Jason's suicide coupled with their own failures, yet unlike Jason and those who are genuinely suicidal they do not feel total paralysis of “all the otherwise vital forces that make us human” (Jamison 104). They are not confined to the suicide's world that A. Alvarez described so fittingly as “airless and without exits” (293). They appear baffled but not buffaloed. There is no “slippage into futility” so typical of suicides (Jamison 104). By contrast, Jason experienced continually the utter futility of his life.

Unlike Willy Loman, one of the most famous suicides in modern drama, Jason's death is not motivated by a desire to solve any problem either of his own or his family. In *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Willy decided to kill himself because he believed his death would actually solve all of his and his family's problems through the proceeds from his life insurance. In his mind, the insurance becomes “a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition [...] like a diamond shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand” (442-43). But Jason has no prospect of diamonds. Moreover, through his death, Jason attempts to deny the very premise of lived life itself. By denying the future, suicides like Jason attempt to negate the past carried in memory. The suicide emphasizes instead that memories are too much to live with, bring not consolation but pain, provide no enjoyment through recall, and are to be destroyed rather than built upon. The twin goals of the suicide thus become to lessen the hold of the living and the compulsion of memory. Thornton Wilder put the promise of death well for such people: “the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long” (76).

Jason's life and death form part of the acute, painful mystery of young adult suicide that in many countries has reached almost epidemic proportions. "One percent of all suicides occur in the first fifteen years of life, but 25 percent occur in the second" (Jamison 202). "Suicide in the young, which has tripled over the past forty-five years, is, without argument, one of our most serious public health problems. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in young people in the United States and the second for college students" (Jamison 21 see also 22-24).<sup>9</sup> "[F]inding no comfort, no remedy in this wretched life, [. . . Jason is] eased of all by death," as Richard Burton so memorably put it several centuries ago (1.431-32).<sup>10</sup> "I want you to live and to live beautifully," concludes Death in *The Map Maker's Sorrow*. "Live, but remember also to die" (91). The last word in the play is not verbal, however, but visual and given, not to Death, but to Nature that rains "upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 173) as the curtain falls.

Having put humanity in its rightful place quite a bit lower than the bacteria in *The Electrocutation of Children*,<sup>11</sup> Chris Lee in *The Map Maker's Sorrow* negotiates human relationships at the very edge of unrefined experience. *The Electrocutation of Children* presents a disconcerting and often unnerving portrait of an atomized humanity in a catastrophe-prone universe. *The Mapmaker's Sorrow*, in contrast, portrays an estranged couple who despite their talents, intellect, energy, and good will are, nevertheless, fundamentally unequipped to deal with a teenager who wants nothing to do with them and appears hell-bent on killing himself. Whatever their limitations, the death of their son forces them in the end to deal with one another and the reality of loss. "Being a parent means watching a beautiful energy slowly spiral out of your control. You can't mark the boundary where your failure meets his pain," says Morag to Henry at the play's conclusion (90). Mourning their loss becomes yet another beginning as they attempt to accept the death of their son along with their own mortality. Confronting one of the most difficult of all human situations in the loss of their child compounded by that child's suicide, Morag and Henry struggle to accept their loss and to accept their son's choice of death over life as the means of ending his torment (89).

W. H. Auden once distinguished between two kinds of necessary art: "There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love" (341-42). *The Map Maker's Sorrow* belongs in Auden's second category of parable-art – art that teaches people "to unlearn hatred and learn love." Poignant, playful, comic, and desperate by turns Lee once again demonstrates an impressive mastery of his craft.

## Note

- \* I wish once again to thank Ms Judy Friel and the Peacock Theatre, Dublin for graciously supplying me with the unpublished script of *The Electrocutation of Children* and to thank Chris Lee for permission to reproduce its text.
- 1 Chris Lee was born in Dublin and now lives and works in London. He has written fourteen full-length plays over the past dozen years. Productions in London include *Hummingbird* (1996),

*The Optimist's Daughters* (1997), and *Eat the Enemy* (1999). RTE recorded his radio play *The Parallax of Jan Van Eyck*. His most recent production is *Vermilion Dream* (2004). For an in-depth analysis of *The Electrocution of Children* see Morse, ““The Simple Magnificence of Bacteria.””

- 2 Lee here enters into the debate over evolution, psychology, and the brain raging in biology by having God take the side of paleobiologist Stephen Jay Gould in opposing various sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists whose work is perhaps best exemplified by that of Steven Pinker. (See Alden M. Hayashi's interview with Pinker for a spirited defense of evolutionary biology.) Lee recalls reading Gould's *Life's Grandeur* and *Eight Little Piggies* and declares that “God is certainly a fan [of Gould's writing]” (Letter to author). Because of the repetition and overlapping of ideas among Gould's various essays and books, I have felt at liberty to quote from *Full House* although that was not Lee's immediate source of ideas or vocabulary.
- 3 See Davies, *Three Minutes* 1-7 and especially 1-2 for a description of this disastrous eventuality of an asteroid striking the earth.
- 4 Those new predictions about Asteroid XF11 failed to create front-page headlines. For a full discussion of the possible role of comets and asteroids in seeding life on earth, see Bernstein, et al.
- 5 Suicide does remain an option for many elderly people, however. Although Jamison's “focus is on suicide in those younger than forty,” she emphasizes that “this in no way means to downplay the terrible problem of suicide in those who are older. Study after study has shown that the elderly are inadequately treated for depression—the major cause of suicide in all age groups—and that suicide rates in the elderly are alarmingly high” (21). For an extensive discussion of *The Mapmaker's Sorrow* see Morse, ““To Cry with Terror.””
- 6 Albert Camus famously asserted in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* that “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (3).
- 7 The Peacock production created confusion by inserting a scene before the action of the play began in which all the characters walked somewhat somnambulistically around the stage. This intrusive scene was followed by a blackout then followed by the first scene “Hanging” (compare with the published text 5). That unnecessary intrusion of the characters before the first scene muddled the issue of the incomprehensibility of suicide for those left behind by violating the play's structure.
- 8 “Look, I'll be dead before you learn to hate me” is, of course, verbally abrupt. It is not, however, a solid ending for a “sound-bite” as Louise contends (21) but a viciously effective, narcissistic termination of a discussion.
- 9 “In England and Wales suicide rates per 100,000 among 20-24 year old males more than doubled between 1960 and 1981” (National Center for Health Statistics 1984 qtd. in Hawton 22). “In 1975 [. . .] suicide was the second or third leading cause of death in 15-24 year olds in several European countries, with the rates for males generally higher than those for females” (Hawton 25). “[I]n the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a very serious increase in deaths by suicide among older teenagers and those in their early twenties, this being more marked among males than females, and among whites as compared with nonwhites” (Hawton 21). “Between 1960 and 1975, rates among 20-24 year olds rose by 130%. Since 1975, the rates in this age group have remained relatively stable” (19).
- 10 Suicide was vividly described by Robert Burton in his monumental *An Anatomy of Melancholy* close to four hundred years ago. “There is [. . .] in this humour the very seeds of fire. [. . .] In the midst of these squalid, ugly, and such irksome days, they seek at last, finding no comfort, no remedy in this wretched life, to be eased of all by death [. . .] to be their own butchers, and execute themselves” (1:431-32).

- 11 Gould in several books maintains that “We live now in the ‘Age of Bacteria.’ Our planet has always been in the ‘Age of Bacteria,’ ever since the first fossils – bacteria of course – were entombed in rocks more than three and a half billion years ago.”
- “On any possible, reasonable, fair criterion, bacteria are – and always have been – the dominant forms of life on earth. Our failure to grasp this most evident of biological facts arises in part from the blindness of our arrogance, but also, in large measure, as an effect of scale” (Gould, *Full House* [176]).

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