

## Recensioni / Reviews

- Mària Kurdi, *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston 2011, pp. 249. £89,95. ISBN 978-0-7734-1421-1
- Aidan O'Malley, *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities: Performing Contradictions*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 264. £55,00. ISBN 978-0-2302-2969-3
- Anthony Roche, *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 248. HB: £55,00. ISBN 978-0-2305-7647-6; PB: £18,99 ISBN 978-1-1372-7469-4
- Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 2nd edition, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 304. HB: £66,00. ISBN 978-0-2302-1978-6; PB: £18,99 ISBN 978-0-2302-1979-3
- Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2012, pp. 240. £52,50. ISBN 978-0-2302-2280-9

The editorial market centred on theatre in Ireland is still on the increase, as wave upon wave of works on the different layers of Irish drama are being published – from monographs and companions, to original looks at marginality/otherness as represented on the Irish stage, and at how Irish theatre has created impact internationally. With the sole exception of one book, the five works under review here have all been included in the commercially successful and academically respected Theatre & Performance Studies series created by editorial stronghold, Palgrave MacMillan. Palgrave undoubtedly has had their lion's share in developing and promoting these series, demonstrating the extent of an alliance academy-publishing industry that is currently being questioned by the growth of free forms of editorial production and dissemination. Readers and publishers do have a flair for grasping what it is that makes Ireland's contribution to world theatre so vital and challenging, the problems it exposes, and the solutions it tries to provide for a contemporary audience.

Following the lead of Melissa Sihra's groundbreaking edited collection, *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (published by Palgrave, in 2009), the first major contribution to Irish women playwrighting is *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women*, by Mària Kurdi. The book is a reasoned, attention-catching, and detailed analysis of plays by women over the period 1983 to 2006, bringing together several generations of women and their works – from Lady Gregory and Teresa Deevy to Anne Devlin, Marina Carr, and many others, as well as less known female artists like Patricia Burke Brogan and Miriam Gallagher.

Kurdi shows great concern in the limits of representation, since she adds to her work a flavour of the intractability of conventional theatrical forms and languages when women are on stage both as agents and as *subjects*. She offers close readings of playscripts while engaging with issues of subjectivity, nationalism, citizenship, and female resistance, at times also offering extensive treatment of some key aspects that have reconfigured Irish society – mainly the debates on abortion and divorce.

Chronologically, the book follows a linear path that begins with the plays by Gregory and Deevy up until the 1930s, when, Kurdi points out, Irish drama by women came to a standstill. It was only towards the 1980s, as is well-known by now, that it entered a totally new and extremely productive phase: «Paralleling the growth of non-traditional drama and theatre, female voices in the Irish theatre, both North and South, have also made themselves heard far more vigorously than ever before, catching up with the gender-specific developments of drama in other Western countries» (34). This unprecedented development started offering unthought-of representations of women's bodies, which were pointing at a rapidly changing society; and, in preparation to women's responses to the Celtic Tiger, which led the country to economic boom shortly afterwards. It was women who proved to be affected more than anyone else by the downfall from the rampant social progress envisaged towards the beginning of the 1990s to the return to struggling financial conditions, as if living a renewed form of marginality; this is an aspect that Kurdi addresses directly.

In one key moment in the book Kurdi compares post-colonial plays and plays by women, writing that, «while representatives of the former often reduce women to symbolic functions, the latter seeks to deploy alternative techniques of constructing and grouping female characters to undermine gender-based marginalisation» (95). And indeed, the connection of women and nationalist allegiance is a most troublesome topic to discuss in an Irish context, as much as in other postcolonial realities. Often, these connections, as she points out herself, are rendered on the Irish stage by recurring to different 'versions' of women characters, each one with her own point of view, as in the case of the plays by Anne Devlin (*Ourselves Alone*, 1985; *After Easter*, 1994). After all, this feature is also what makes for the finest play about women ever written by a male writer, Frank McGuinness' *The Factory Girls* (1982) (notably absent from Kurdi's work).

Towards the end of her work, Kurdi relates the themes and names being treated to the contexts of male writers, and then she lets her chosen artists dialogue with traces of dramas by Beckett and Friel, which is certainly innovative for a volume focused on women writing; she also makes intriguing connections to the contexts of Revivalist drama and contemporary World literature. And, in the Conclusions, the need for more critical backing to and original work by women in Ireland is further stressed. However, her comparison of plays

from the North and the South of Ireland causes some problems. She states that the former usually presents more optimistic views towards change, that they are «more positive about their protagonists' search for autonomy and agency» (211). I am not entirely sure this aspect, which is no doubt there in much playwriting by Northern Irish theatre practitioners can be stressed so much as to account for the key difference between the two. True, plays from the Republic, such as Marina Carr's much-acclaimed Midlands trilogy, *On Raftery's Hill* (2001), or the later *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006) literally are a punch of bleakness; but even the irresistibly hilarious bits of most plays by the Belfast-based Charabanc Theatre Company featured women who, in the end, knew that 'real happiness' was lying way ahead of them, even as they were challenging exploitation with fake guns in their hands and helmets on their heads, singing (*Somewhere Over the Balcony*, 1987). Yet, this detail does not affect the overall credibility of Kurdi's work. She manages never to fall into stereotyping, or light-hearted comments with her readings and views. Stylistically, the book abounds with summaries of the plays considered, and the theoretical investigations – which combine theories as varied as those by Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, to Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque – are finely interspersed in the readings of the playtexts. *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* is going to add to the critical material available on women culture in Ireland, and as such it will suit the taste of those awaiting some more new developments in the field. As she rightly puts it, women playwriting still has got so much to offer.

Aidan O'Malley's *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities: Performing Contradictions* is an in-depth study of the contexts of emergence and development of Ireland's legendary touring company, Field Day Theatre. In the Introduction, O'Malley reports Stephen Rea's comment that the company was initially taken to be an «essentially improvised occurrence» (5), as if to stress the urgency of this important theatrical experiment at that time. O'Malley posits that the work of the company was part of the creating of a cultural state of which the political was its ultimate challenge, which is a fairly original standpoint from where to begin his analysis. In his words, the cultural state «embodied the processes of translation, literature and performance, and this dynamic is fundamental to its [Field Day's] relationship to politics» (6). He also adds that the company's links with the community and interest in Irish language may be viewed in terms of an engagement with a substantially conservative perspective, as if they conceived of themselves primarily in terms of «a 'rescue' act for the good of the community» (7). Recurring also to the trope of Ireland as «fifth province», O'Malley builds his own theory of the company gaining its major strength from the fact that it could exist only as series of acts of translation. Yet, at the same time, it also acted upon the lived experience of feeling 'other', which is a characteristic feature of Irish notions of citizenship. In the company's debut, Friel's *Translations* (1980), for instance, O'Malley

states, the rendering of geographical names in their anglicized version is part and parcel of a process of negotiating with history, as the play unveils the centuries-old relationship with its former coloniser, England. Together with its companion piece, *Making History* (1988), Friel's play exposes a national past demanding to be fully addressed, yet to be treated as other to translate fully (as in, almost impossibly) into a contemporary language and culture (53).

Following these opening reflections, O'Malley goes on to discuss, in the remaining four chapters of the book, the relationship of translation to a number of aspects and themes making up the multi-faceted Irish past, and which the influential company brought to the attention of critics, academics, and audience: translation, homeliness and homelessness; translation and otherness; translation and conflict resolution; and, the translator as mask. O'Malley is very good at capturing the range of experimentation and the peculiarity of the strategies with which the company dealt with the community-oriented approach he finds at the core of their intervention into Irish drama. Furthermore, he combines this with a series of critical viewpoints that, although not always straightforward, especially in the first half of the book, still make the work a noteworthy contribution to the debate on cultural translation in twentieth-century Irish culture.

In the paragraph on Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990), O'Malley ventures into the contested relationship between Field Day's all-male grouping and representations of women in Ireland. First, he opines that «the women in Field Day plays tend to symbolise a hope that might defy the processes of history, and that is always in threat of being extinguished», seemingly taking it for granted that the troublesome issue of Irish women's past is over and done with. He then goes on to add that this pervading sense of hope is «central to its [the company's] postcolonial intervention, which privileges the processes of the always contradictory work towards fidelity in a translation over the rule of the authoritative original» (136). Now, however deep-reasoned and critically well-supported O'Malley's assertion might be, it certainly falls short of overlooking Field Day's attitude towards women (not only) on the Irish stages. For, even though the eponymous *Field Day Anthology* came to (finally) cope with this issue and published two volumes dedicated entirely to women's writing in Ireland (volumes IV and V, 2002), this strategy appeared more as a reparative measure following criticism by different strands, rather than a frank, self-conscious attempt to get to the bottom of women's physical and cultural oppression in Ireland.

O'Malley's book shows great insight into handling the different layers of the translation process, as much as it does in discussing its implication for reading history, past and present, of the Nation through Field Day's activity. Yet, there remains at least one thing that the company failed to handle with the same strength and commitment as the rest of its mission, and which appears as a blind spot in the work, too: it totally missed to relate to the roots of

masculinist culture, and in doing so, it also missed the point that responding to a problem is one thing, while dissenting from what caused it in the first place is something else. O'Malley seeks to celebrate the achievements of a company that has brought together some of the best voices in Irish culture – besides co-founders Friel and Rea, Seamus Deane, Heaney, David Hammond, and Tom Paulin. Just like *Field Day*, this book seems to rejoice for what it really should question itself upon, that is, a failure to avoid replicating the mechanism of a male-centred, dualistic dichotomy that has much to share with the power dynamics involved in the translation process. Inevitably, they are going to complicate the relationship between a translation and its original, however faulted from the very beginning this relation may be.

Anthony Roche's two volumes, *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics* and the second edition of *Contemporary Irish Drama* are partially interconnected explorations of key moments in the history of Irish theatre throughout the second half of the last century. The first book pays tribute to the extent of Friel's insight and vision, on and off the Irish stage, his abilities at playwriting, as well as the ups and downs of Ireland's longest-career artist, spanning more than four decades, and travelling from Ireland to the United States and back. «Each play, whatever its ultimate success or failure when produced, is written with a high ambition, a self-questioning perfectionism, a ceaseless experimentation and a determination to break new ground» (3) – this is Roche's own opinion on Friel in the Introduction to the volume. His early plays, according to Roche, show a tendency to escape containment, meaning, the philosophical ordainment of a clearly defined, organic entity whose inside and outside are clearly drawn (19); but it is also true that Friel's earlier success story, which includes the memorable *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1962) owes much to his apprenticeship in the United States under the mentorship of director Tyrone Guthrie. The play later fell into the hands of the Gate Theatre co-founder Hilton Edwards, who came up with a production characterized by «controlled histrionic action with a blend of the performative and the realistic» (43), itself a major strength of most productions by Micheál Mac Liammóir's longtime companion. Later on, in the production of *The Gentle Island* in 1971 (Friel's play featuring a homosexual couple) Edwards' talent, showed best, according to Roche at least. The discussion on the rapport between the playwright and the two directors, one of the most entertaining parts of the book, serves the purposes of the very interesting observation with which Roche closes Chapter Two: that Friel himself has always favoured interacting directly with actors performing his plays, and somewhat felt the director an intruder, «someone coming disruptively into the midst of an otherwise happy company of playwrights and actors» (57): sounds like genius?

As the book progresses, mingling details on the plays and productions with references to Friel's own personal events, Roche places his drama within the context of the missing link, that is, he addresses the influence played by

British playwrights John Osborne and Davis Storey on Friel's texts. This may well function as «an act of historic recovery of a necessary and missing context for Friel's theatre» (84); to readers, it looks original and insightful. *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics* becomes intriguing when it goes further into Friel's use of stage, as a place slowly growing to encompass more than just the materiality of the performance spot, as if to say that there sometimes can be so much more to theatre than theatre itself. The 1970s plays are a case in point, as, for Roche, they «do not represent the political tensions that erupted in that decade in either an overt, direct or didactic way» (106). In *The Gente Island*, for instance, «[t]he theatrical and the realistic no longer occupy separate domains ... but are fused within the same stage space», thus drawing a separation line, at least partially, with Friel's previous works (108).

Chapter Seven and Eight focus on memory and history, and on negotiating the present. Here, Roche looks at Friel's later career, again, paying particular attention to issues of non-conventional dramaturgy and experimentation with theatrical form as Friel is venturing into past memories and historical events. Chapter Seven focuses on discussion of the «dazzling theatricality» (154) of the monologue form employed for the characters of Frank Hardy, his wife, and his manager (*Faith Healer*, 1979); of a key moment in Irish history in the leading figure of Ireland's resistance to English Rule in Ireland during the Nine Years War (1594-1603), Hugh O'Neill (*Making History*); and of Friel's intimate journey into his own family tree via the five Mundy sisters – *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), for Roche, a «moving witness to both memory and history», (170). By the end of which Roche has made his point with clarity: what stands in front of readers (and viewers) is still a playwright with unprecedented strength and courage in the Ireland of today. Part of this strength lies in Friel's determination to handle an incredibly wide variety of themes, to achieve so much in the short time-span of a play on stage as well as of a few dozen written pages. And indeed, in plays like *The Communication Chord* (1983), *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) (discussed in Chapter Eight) Friel had an opportunity to bring the monologue as form to perfection (202).

The book closes with a remark by the author who claims that, whenever talking about Brian Friel, it is important to remember that «the work of the life is the life of the work» (207). He supports this statement throughout his part biography, part criticism, part celebration of a writer's life, offering a work that may easily appeal to a large number of readers, in spite of his choice, sometimes, of rather convoluted words. It is not a humble book, as one would expect by looking at Friel's reassuring image in the cover image as he is caught standing on a bare stage in an empty theatre with his back to the stalls, his face reminding you of a teacher, or mentor, a friend you can always rely on, or a relative you can remember as a little child. But it is a book that renders aptly the stamina of its subject matter, the life and work of a writer

with a career lasting more than five decades, who continues to offer some of the best images, memories, ghosts, and present worries of Ireland. In that, it should not be missed.

Like its predecessor, Roche's re-edited *Contemporary Irish Drama* explores the inventiveness and experimentation that characterizes the most critically discussed works in Irish theatre. In this revised and enlarged version of his 1994 companion, he investigates seven decades of theatre productions in Ireland beginning with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955) and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), interestingly analysed in tandem. A new chapter is added on key Irish playwrights from the younger generation – Sebastian Barry, Conor McPherson, Martin McDonough, and Marina Carr.

There remain, however, serious doubts as to the reasons behind the re-edition of a work that was most welcome when it was first published, and rightly so. At that time, it was a much needed, comprehensive reading of the history of post-War theatre in Ireland, setting up the contexts for the remarkable development that would characterise the following three decades of theatre production and criticism. This is to say that the book does not really add anything to what its forerunner either had said or accomplished, as the extent of new material included is definitely scarce. More than this, the choice of voices representing new writing in Ireland in Chapter Six is predictable as it looks incomplete, even though Roche shows a sharp understanding of the plays considered. The subject would have required more space, if not an entirely new book – maybe a follow-up instead of a replica? –, due to the vastness of the material that has been brought on the Irish stages since the early 1990s. Editorial requirements and issues of marketability seem all there is to know in situations like these, and they are unlikely to leave their mark.

Brian Singleton wants to come to terms with the crisis in masculinity that has occupied a prominent position in the representations of the Irish male. He certainly succeeds, and, what is noteworthy, he does so without losing sight of what makes a very enjoyable reading – truly exceptional for academic studies whose subject matter is so intricate as Singleton's. *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* also challenges the structure of most works concerned with issues of 'Otherness', for it takes its lead from a discussion of canonical representation being contested, adding then layer upon layer of crossing axis of identity. Singleton tours Irish theatre from the very heart of the mainstream and follows, by degrees, a slow process of denouement and falling to pieces of patriarchal cultural paradigms. A process that, as he highlights, is best exemplified in the development of the monologue as the new dramaturgy of Ireland in the 1990s. Acquiring a special status and form, in monologues men become «the new subalterns, feminized and emasculated not by a colonial other but by the centrifugal drives of a hegemonic masculinity at the very heart of the Celtic Tiger Irish economy and social order» (16).

The 1990s in Ireland were the years of Mary Robinson as the first woman to lead the country, of the relenting of the conflicts in the North, and other significant changes which would radically transform the entire outset of Ireland both north and south of the Border, as Singleton points out in the Introduction. So, when Garry Hines was appointed director of the Abbey Theatre, her innovative production (1991) of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), with which Singleton begins Chapter Two, she portrayed a rather unconventional Ireland for the time, a country no longer idealized, the pastoral allusions embedded in the play readjusted in order to expose the gendered oppression at the heart of Ireland past and present (24). The author relates this watershed moment in contemporary Irish theatre to another one, possibly even more daring restaging of an Irish twentieth-century classic: the 2007 production of John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), by Dublin-based African company Agambe productions. The lead character, Christy Mahon was played by a black actor (Bisi Adigun) faking an escape from Nigeria, with the overall effect that «[t]he new play's context of urban criminality that fuels the celebrity pop culture of Ireland stands opposed to claims of a nationalist narrative for the play» (42).

An extensive bibliography in the field, mostly by Irish authors, has by now clarified that the growth of Ireland as an independent country is a history fraught with domination and control. The Irish Free State was first an imagined construction, then a lived reality, and yet, it ended up as a nightmare, for some subjects at least. With the often quoted 1937 Irish Constitution, the road was paved for a pact between the State and the Church, which would prevent any form of dissent from being heard – «the construction of the nation was in fact an overt performance of patriarchy that recolonized the people again in terms of gender and as a lived reality, not as metaphor» (45). The closing down of the production of Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* in 1957 at the Pike Theatre revealed that there was a regime policing what was admissible and what was not in theatres in Ireland. It became clear, Singleton writes, that «the role of theatre in the fabric of Irish society could well be a contestation of dominant ideologies through performance interventions, tackling patriarchal authorities of Church and state by performing outside their structures» (50). By contrast, mainstream theatres were nurturing a renewed interest by the mainstream in peasant plays from the beginning of the century, considering them a major case for the construction of the future of the Nation (51). No wonder, then, that after such premises from offstage (the title of Singleton's paragraph) Chapter Three closes with Marina Carr's efforts at dismantling and rupturing with the patriarchy; especially in *Ariel* (2002), in which Elaine kills her mother after she has killed her husband who, in turn, had sacrificed Ariel, Elaine's little sister seemingly in return for political power as future Taisoeach. As Singleton highlights, Carr's play shows that «[t]he act of the revenge [...] is one which is performed beyond gender to expose how patriarchy is not



the preserve of patrilinearity per se, but is a performance of dominance that transgresses binaries of gender, constructed in cycles of revenge» (65).

The new monologue as genre is discussed at length in Chapter Four. Singleton's assumption, which he demonstrates and supports with clarity and insight, is that theatre-goers in the 1990s were to face plays «replete with socially subordinated male individuals who are performing their own abjection in a society in which they have lost their place» (71). This was when masculinity started revealing itself for what it really is, that is, a process of ongoing negotiations of subject positions, identity, and conflict, with hardly any resolution. In Mark O'Rowe's and Conor McPherson's plays, the latter nearly always taken as case in point as regards the image of the new Irish male, the «conflation of the hegemonic and the oppositional» (85) was calling forth a radical engagement with their audience (88), demanding they interrogate their own selves.

Chapter Five recounts the experience of coming out of the closet for Irish gays. The provocative and deeply emotional play by Geraldine Aron, *The Stanley Parkers* (1990) shows, for Singleton, that «while the young Irish prospered along with the Nation's Celtic Tiger economy, gay consumers unfettered by the economic burden of family achieved an even greater status in the eyes of those who would exploit them» (115). In exploring the settings and consequences, in society and on the Irish stage, of the relenting of the ban on homosexuality (1993), the author does not forget to discuss the role played by socialist movements, as well as the fact that discussions of queerness in Ireland cannot be easily unleashed by the impact of a market-driven economy, whose legacy is still very much there today. Acutely, Singleton extends his treatment in this chapter to new queer performers, like Neil Watkins and radical queer performance events, including drag performances by Panti, passing through some notable masterpieces like Gerard Stembridge's *The Gay Detective* (1996) and Frank McGuinness's *Dolly West's Kitchen* (1999).

Race issues are a problematic matter for Ireland, and they are the subject of Chapter Six. The productions by Agambe are unique, with a cutting-edge and decidedly radical agenda; plays by Donal O'Kelly (*Asylum! Asylum!*, 1994) and Charlie O'Neill (*Hurl*, 2003), the latter produced by Barabbas theatre company, as well as the work of actor and playwright George Seremba (to whom Singleton dedicates a paragraph) have contested the primacy of whiteness on the Irish stages. Singleton widens his scope and – at TV dramas and series that have tried to render the complex urban settings provoked by the huge in-migration to Ireland in the latter part of the 1990s, which altered radically the profile of its almost exclusively white notion of citizenship, up until then. The trouble with according racial communities a 'safe' place in Irish society is that «the racialized other in contemporary Irish theatre is a desire to the point of fetish so that it becomes an imagined source of renewal, a complex condition of modernity, namely the desire to reinvent through the agency of a wished-for other» (155).

However, this desire for renewal is further problematised by the fact that the country is now facing serious economic recession, which is certainly unlikely to entail any promise as regards the possibilities of establishing a truly equal society and life for Black Irish and migrant citizens. Singleton's book closes with a chapter on Protestantism in Northern Ireland. Inevitably, here is where the age-old masculinist legacy demanded both by militarism and paramilitarism is strongest. As Singleton summarizes, «[...] in broad terms, the traditional Ulster Unionist might be very well conform to Anglicanism and be of land-owning or the middle-classes, while other more militant shades of Unionism might belong traditionally to dissenting denominations [...]» (160). Framing such a peculiar context as Northern Ireland within the same theoretical approach he has supported throughout his book, the author explores some example of Northern Irish theatre to show that the crisis in masculinity has led to issues of adjusting to alterity, or alternative masculinities; that, when talking about the Irish male, what was once the case will be no longer: «the performance of Protestantism in the first decade of the new millennium refracted to embrace otherness, however fleetingly, exposing the hegemonic as protest, and repositioning it as (politically) subordinated» (190).

In looking at masculinity stripped back as it has been performed and rehearsed over the last two decades on the Irish stages, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* challenges conventional understandings of performing (dominant) genders. Singleton blends original and radical theoretical observations with illuminating readings of plays, which contribute to make his book a vital addition to the broadness of publication on theatre in Ireland. *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* entails the promise that the future of drama in Ireland might lie in abandoning the binary structures on which patriarchal authority and its allies – the State, and the Church – have been sustained for too long.

Samuele Grassi

Loredana Salis, *Miti antichi storie d'oggi. La tragedia greca nel teatro contemporaneo irlandese*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza 2009, pp. 200. €18. ISBN 978-88-8101-652-5

This work is based on doctoral and postdoctoral studies undertaken by Loredana Salis in Ulster and at the University of Sassari. It is a research project of real significance, and it is marked by the most careful scholarship and attention to detail. It is what one would expect in a piece of serious academic research, in that it takes pains to deal with the intellectual formations that underlie the arguments Loredana Salis has sustained; it engages with the social and political contexts that constitute the environment out of which her material emerges; and it is informed by a close and extremely knowledgeable

familiarity with the plays she subjects to scrutiny, and with the importance of those writings in relation to the rest of a given author's work.

The focus Salis brings on the currency of Greek tragedy in Irish theatrical life allows us to see how extraordinarily preoccupied Irish dramatists have been, in the last thirty years or so, with that particular legacy, and the question that hangs over her varied and accomplished discourse is why is this the case? Before she comes to her admirably cautious answer to that question, she sets the scene. She looks at various interpretations of myth and theories of its valency, drawing on authorities as various as George Steiner, Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard, and Oliver Taplin. She then moves to a socio-political analysis of the baffling and contradictory Ireland of the last few decades, when the country went from bleak impoverishment and apathy to Tigerdom and then to bust again; from a devout and pietistic community to one that has been torn apart by clerical disgrace and shame; from an unsettled and unsettling peace in pre-Troubles Ireland to bloody mayhem, and to the now reluctantly settled quietude. And then she takes her authors and their texts, and opens them up one by one. Her playwrights range from Seamus Heaney (*The Cure at Troy*, *The Burial at Thebes*), to Marina Carr (*By the Bog of Cats*, *Ariel*), Brendan Kennelly (*The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Antigone*), Aidan Carl Mathews (*Antigone*), Frank McGuinness (*Electra*), etc. A checklist at the back of this study shows the extent to which there has been a flourishing of versions of classical Greek plays in Ireland since the early 1970s, some fifty in all.

The reason for this activity is far from mere opportunistic exploitation of venerable sources: it has to do, of course, with the enduring relevance of Greek tragedy, and the mentality it embodies towards the constant problems of living and dying, to Irish society in these years. And what is the nature of that relevance? It has a great deal to do with the deepest and most occluded tensions in Irish society, north and south. These tensions have to do with governance and the nature of authority. What sort of government and what sort of representation of the will of the people properly reflects that confused and often contradictory sets of impulses that get snarled up in questions of loyalty, identity, heritage, language, culture and so on that drive a nation's attachments to certain values, certain forms of public ceremony, even the institution of the law itself and systems of civic restraint and control? And even when one uses the term 'nation' one is aware that that word is only to be used with special care in Ireland, because what a person thinks his or her nation is depends on where he or she stands on all sorts of other issues, like what place the monarchy of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has in his or her strongest attachments and convictions. What is at the heart of this and all sorts of other related dilemmas is the fact that when the modern Irish state structures were established, that is when the Free State and northern Ireland came into being, there was created a condition of disunity and fracture which would continue to open, again and again, like a fault line in a landscape, or

a not perfectly sutured wound after a major operation. It may have been that this flaw was inescapable, given the irreconcilabilities involved, but flaw there was, and it lay at the heart of Irish life, north and south, for close on a hundred years, and it is still there.

The tragedy of modern Ireland, it may be said, is that many thousands of lives have been sacrificed to this ever-opening fissure (if I may be permitted to strain the metaphor); but just as horrifying is the damage that has been done to the minds and emotions of hundreds of thousands of people who cannot rid themselves of the consciousness of this blood-drenched crevasse. When it is recalled that the population of Ireland today is no more than around five million souls it will be clear that what is involved is a terrible contamination of the spirit.

It is for this reason that the tonalities and themes of Greek classic tragedy are so relevant to Irish life and culture. For in that body of work, in the drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, there stands revealed, right at the fountainhead of western culture, the realization that a human community can very easily fall apart, releasing the most horrendous consequences for those who have no choice but to endure this break-up. Not only that: it is all too possible that a person can become a victim of events carried out in the past, for which he or she can have no responsibility, and yet will have to suffer through whatever outcome it is ordained. In Greek tragedy it is shown, over and over, that the structures we seek to put into place to govern our vilest and most rapacious instincts can be set aside in an instant whenever our savagery wishes to assert itself. And that sweeping away of civic control and law occurs all too frequently, because that is the way our nature is: man, says Sophocles, is the terrifying one.

Loredana Salis's achievement lies in her demonstration of the emotional and psychological relationship between the circumstances of contemporary and near-contemporary Irish society and the mythical structures of Greek tragedy. This is no simple matter of equivalences, nor does she do anything as jejune as argue that Greek tragic form offers a key to the Irish 'problem', or some kind of quasi-moralistic solution. What she does very effectively is show the forms of the Greek drama, and the terror that lurks in those forms, connect very readily to the shape of contemporary Irish fears and anxieties. Greek tragedy provides templates for the deeper apprehension of the nature of the dilemmas of Ireland by showing that they belong to sets of interinvolved questions and contradictions that lie at the heart of western and European experience and history.

An example, amongst many, of the subtlety Salis brings to her analysis can be found in her reading of Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), a version of Euripides's *Medea* and a play of astonishing force and energy. It would be foolhardy to try to summarize its content in a review. Suffice to say that the main character, Hester Swan, the version of *Medea*, is a creature of

fearful violence, unconstrained impulse, and frenzied sexuality and jealousy. She is a marginal person, who belongs, in some kind of primordial way, to the bog beside which she has her hovel. She is also a remnant of old Ireland, the Ireland of paganism, and in the supreme confidence of her power only has contempt for the priest, depicted as a footling ineffectual. Her ungovernability, her readiness to kill in revenge and despair what she loves, shadows forth, as Salis argues in a subtle and expert passage, the violence that lay at the heart of the founding of the Irish state, and that is still to a large extent unexorcised. But this play, like its Greek model, provides a catharsis for such unresolved emotions, passions, convictions, hatreds, longings.

This is a quite superb and timely book, revealing the contemporaneity of Greek tragedy by demonstrating its currency to Irish life and thought and writing. It is scholarly, painstaking, resolute, and steady in its sure analysis. It has the authority of firm and grounded scholarship. The catalogue of versions of Greek plays by Irish writers at the end is, even in itself, a most valuable piece of research. But this is only one small virtue in a book that displays many excellences.

*Robert Anthony Welch*

Loredana Salis, *Stage Migrants: Representations of the Migrant Other in Modern Irish Drama*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2010, pp. 71. £29,99. ISBN 978-1-4438-2382-1

A people's cultural identity is not something acquired for ever; like any other social phenomenon it keeps changing and must be renegotiated all the time. If you try and keep it unaltered for fear of contamination from anything coming from outside you make it barren and artificial, and it is bound to collapse.

Any culture change implies a crisis, of course, which is basically due to the clash between two contrasting world views: one which tries to adapt to the new challenges and is open to revision or utter rejection of what up to then was held to be beyond the reach of any criticism or mental reservation, and another which will refuse anything which may put traditional values in jeopardy.

The first perception of an incoming crisis and of what will immediately follow, both in society and the individuals, usually comes from art, which is able to show some of its phenomena well in advance without making any explicit judgment or suggestions as to their solution, as that is not its task: thus, the Elizabethan theatre anticipated the great social and political crisis of the first half of the 17th century; *fin de siècle* art prefigured the collapse of the social and cultural order which had characterised the 19th-century mindset and would finally lead to World War II and its consequences; Irish literature in

the late 20th century, particularly dramatic literature, anticipated some of the great problems Ireland would experience in the near future. In the same way, contemporary theatre is giving an accurate idea of how the present situation is likely to develop, especially as far as the definition or redefinition of the concept of identity is concerned, as this book demonstrates in seven agile chapters all focussed on different aspects of the theatre in a multiethnic Ireland, which is trying to come to terms with the recent mass immigration of asylum seekers and EU nationals. For the first time in history, Ireland has had to redefine itself, from a country of emigrants to one of steady immigration, which in a sense has taken it by surprise, as society's responses to new arrivals, often of utter refusal and rejection, have forced its politicians and intellectuals to see parallels between Irish *émigrés* of the past and today's newcomers.

The arts, in particular the theatre, have taken up the challenge and tried to establish cross-cultural contacts and provide the space for productive encounters between different communities, cultures, and languages. Loredana Salis has examined different aspects of the problem through a close account and analysis of a great number of theatrical productions – both community and professional – relating directly or indirectly to migration: from the experiments, especially in the South, of a multicultural theatre in which actors, playwrights and directors try to set up an intentional encounter between cultures, to the adaptations of classical Greek tragedies, to plays which are performed in more than one language, such as the case of Declan Gorman's *At Peace* (2007), in which the actors speak in three languages, English, Yoruba and Latvian.

An important aspect of experimentation in the new Irish theatre is that of revisitation and reworking of some canonical texts from Irish tradition: an interesting example, which is analysed extensively by Loredana Salis, is John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), adapted and directed by David Quinn and translated and performed in Mandarin with an all-Chinese cast, but also adapted to another completely different cultural background in Mustapha Matura's *The Playboy of the West Indies* (1984). In both cases the story told in Synge's original play reveals curious analogies with situations and contexts apparently removed from one another, but which at a closer examination bring to light the mental, emotional and cultural strain brought about by the challenges of the changing times and a common history of racial discrimination. Even Patrick, Ireland's patron saint, is represented as a black African, thus unsettling all the myths and convictions built up around his name through centuries.

The translation and adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy is another aspect of clear interest for the student of contemporary Irish drama. Loredana discusses it in a clear if rather short chapter, probably because she devoted a monograph to this issue in 2009. The choice goes mostly to those tragedies in which the protagonists are either outcasts, like Antigone and Medea, or

people who have been betrayed by those they trusted most, like Iphigenia and Philoctetes, and are torn between revenge and reconciliation. Both the translations and adaptations display a political intent, as they try to come to terms with a colonial past – which must be accepted and forgiven if there is to be any real development in the country, both moral and social – and the sense of alienation brought about by a multicultural society. This explains why there have been at least seven new versions of Sophocles' *Antigone* and three of Euripides' *Medea*, and their recasting in a contemporary Irish setting, as in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998).

Another chapter is devoted to a quite unexpected aspect of social life, one which we are used to considering mere recreation, unconnected with any theory of culture change: sport. Yet, as Salis points up, it «acts as a catalyst for social encounter», and yet also «social discrimination» (p. 39). Contemporary Irish drama takes into consideration some of the most familiar indigenous games, such as hurling, football and camogie, to single out some of the most frequent commonplaces which surround the idea of national identity, and at the same time to consider how they may be, and have been, the occasion to rethink and re-invent it in a multiethnic society.

Besides trying to aid integration rather than assimilation of the newcomers, these theatrical experiments have given an important contribution towards the renovation of language. Social changes have always had an influence on language and language issues, as words affect the way we see things. This is particularly visible in the arts, especially the theatre, which is based on the language of interchange communication and on a recording of the social environment in which it takes place. A backward look at the Elizabethan theatre and the Irish theatre of the early twentieth century will confirm it for us clearly. Thus the present revolution in theatrical language, recorded by Salis' accurate analysis of a great number of new plays, may be seen as an indication that a new great dramatic movement is taking place in Ireland, which could give a significant contribution to the European stage comparable to that provided by the Irish Dramatic movement at the outset of last century. One example may be found in the close collaboration set up by artists of different experience, training, and education, like Roddy Doyle and Bisi Adigun, originally from Nigeria, who set up a new version of Synge's *Playboy* within the activities of Ireland's first African theatre company, Aramba Productions, which testifies to this perspective in its very name, Arambe meaning 'work together' in the Nigerian Yoruba language. Collaboration in fact goes far beyond mere cooperation as it implies taking on the responsibility of conceiving and creating a new play as a joint undertaking.

In seven chapters and a critical introduction Loredana Salis has given an interesting and updated contribution to a better knowledge of a changing theatre in a country which is trying to reinvent itself by coming to terms with the loss of continuity with a tradition never before so seriously jeopardized

by the experience of immigration. Most of the plays discussed are relatively unknown and some of them not even published. The author has collected a great deal of information through visits to the theatres, interviews with key stakeholders and authors, unpublished direction notes and scripts. An appendix gives useful information on some of the most important authors and theatre companies, and a rich bibliography lists some one hundred titles of books and articles plus a number of Internet sources. Máiréad Nic Craith, former director of the Academy for Irish Cultural heritages, where Salis was a researcher associate for a number of years, has provided a foreword.

*Giuseppe Serpillo*

Richard Allen Cave, *Collaborations. Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats*, Dance Books, Plymouth 2011, pp. 150. £15. ISBN 9-781852-731434

*Collaborations* highlights Ninette de Valois's development as a dancer and a choreographer at two important moments of her career. First through her collaboration with Terence Gray at the Festival Theatre in Cambridge and second with W.B. Yeats at the Abbey in Dublin from 1927 to 1934. In the past, when studying these collaborations, critics have tended to focus their attention on Gray and Yeats, relegating de Valois to the shadows. The present study goes a long way to remedying this situation, by exploring this woman's amazing vitality, eclecticism, perspicacity as well as her artistic and professional skills. In the same period as she engaged in collaborations with Terence Gray, W.B. Yeats and the Old Vic company, she also ran two ballet schools in London and Dublin. Professor Cave, moreover, is in a strong position to be able to reconstruct the projects with Gray and Yeats, thanks to his previous researches into Gray's Festival theatre and Yeatsian drama as a theatre historian, and to his experience as a theatre director; he has staged several of Yeats's plays both in the professional theatre and with university students. The first part of the book deals with the theatrical and artistic contexts in which the three artists lived and worked. We learn what exactly brought Yeats and de Valois together, the significance of where and when their meeting occurred, what de Valois learnt through her work at Gray's Festival theatre, where she was involved in twenty-four productions, including Shakespeare and Yeats. In this section we watch as this young woman (she was in her late twenties at the time) learns to operate as part of a directorial team. She soon realized that her own experience in ballet had to blend and be mediated by the wishes and intentions of the practitioners she was involved with. In an illuminating passage, dealing with Gray's production of *Richard III* in 1928, Cave illustrates the way de Valois helped Gray achieve what critics defined as a 'balletised' style. The final scenes of *Richard III* – where the king is first haunted by the ghosts of the people he has murdered and later meets his death at the Battle



of Bosworth – were superbly choreographed. Cave's description allows us to see in the mind's eye how they unfolded:

The dream sequence was played on a darkened stage with only the face of the sleeping Richard caught in a spotlight until the ghosts began to appear. They were lit by Ridge with an eerie purple light from below as they arose through a rear stage trap in a seemingly endless procession. This sent monstrous purple shadows looming over the cyclorama, before they disappeared again into the prevailing darkness, descending into a second trap downstage. De Valois choreographed the ghosts so they seemed to gyrate as they appeared with their gaunt arms outstretched in an appeal for vengeance. Repetition of movement, light and the processional effect ritualized the whole sequence. Exactly the same pattern was followed in staging Richard's death so that it seemed a mirror image of the ghosts' visitation: Richard again lay vulnerable while a rising train of soldiers, their spears directed at the prostrate king now rather than the wide-reaching arms of the ghosts, threatened him in a relentless cycle; each soldier rose briefly to catch the light from the rear trap before descending again into the darkness through the downstage trap; the nightmare had become a reality, as the fate of the ghosts invoked now took its course. These were powerful theatrical images achieved with the upmost simplicity where bodies continually repeating the same sequence of movements became, with the aid of light, the prime signifier. These stagings show how a dominant gesture could carry the whole thematic significance of a scene. (37)

This innovative staging of Shakespeare's play, fruit of the combined efforts of Gray and de Valois, where the poetry of the pieces is masterfully woven with the other theatre languages, especially movement and lighting, doubtless stood de Valois in good stead when she found herself in Dublin working on Yeats's dance plays. As Cave remarks in the conclusion to this first part, «By the time she began her collaborations with Yeats, de Valois possessed a proven personal movement vocabulary that she could quite properly within the cultural and theatrical contexts of the time define as 'abstract expressionism'» (44).

In the second part of the volume, Cave carries out a meticulous reconstruction of the performance texts (distinct from the literary text) for four of Yeats's plays: *Fighting the Waves*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *At the Hawk's Well* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. This involves, as the author makes manifest, an in-depth study not just of the published play texts, but also of Yeats's many manuscripts and related materials. As the author tellingly suggests in the introduction, «Evidence survives in surprising places that can be put to use, but again it requires in the researcher and historian an awareness of context to know what are the strengths and limitations of specific kinds of extant information. It is a matter of working with traces, possibilities» (xvii-xviii).

In Chapter Four, *Fighting the Waves*, the focus moves to de Valois, in her roles as choreographer and performer, and the way her involvement in this specific stage production persuaded Yeats to make significant revisions in the play at hand. Seeing that she refused to speak on stage, he decided to turn the part of Fand, the Women from the Sidhe, into a silent role especially for her.

Subsequently in the new version the dance parts are extended and the role of Cuchulain is likewise interpreted by dancer Hedley Briggs. Here is an early instance, then, when a playwright puts himself at the disposal of his creative team, modifying the script to suit the needs of one of his fellow practitioners. The result was an exciting international collaboration, with Yeats exploiting to the full de Valois's talents in her dual role as choreographer and performer. The results were excellent: the dance sequences by de Valois and Briggs, including an initial danced prologue by Briggs and a danced epilogue by de Valois, were greeted enthusiastically by critics. Working from the few extant photographs of the production, Cave succeeds in interpreting the non-verbal languages and so conveying in evocative detail the audacious nature of Fand's dance and her relationship with the other characters onstage.

Her off-centre stance is wonderfully provocative with the forward-thrusting pelvis: beside the grandeur of Fand's deployment of her whole body, Emer's stilted, arrested movement tellingly reveals the futility of her gesture, while the cowering figure of Cuchulain beside the sea-goddess would seem no match for her triumphant power. The stage is by rights Emer's space, but she and her rival stand at its margins and it is soon to be Fand who takes possession of the area, luring into it as her partner the man who is rightfully Emer's husband. The deployment of stage space here beautifully complements the dramatic action, creating a mounting tension as the nature of Fand's threat to Emer becomes increasingly evident. [...] Fand in the text of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* longs for the distinctive completeness of being "all woman" and clearly to judge by this photograph de Valois represented that longing with a sensuous, physical abandonment. The text of *Fighting the Waves* gives no verbal indication of that motive, however: all has to be suggested by the dancer's *being*; her very freedom and joy in movement evokes her *difference*, as one who lives in and through the body. The contrast of Fand with Emer's rigidly held body and the grimly rooted posture of the two women musicians who frame the action is remarkably telling. For its time in Ireland this was a courageous, politically subversive stance for a female performer of Irish descent to adopt or, more importantly, to embody. Though de Valois' body is fully clothed, it is fearlessly displayed and open, derisive of the gaze and judgement of everyone onstage who is watching her (and by implication the audience in the theatre too). (59)

In Chapter Five we discover how de Valois contributed to what must be Yeats's most acclaimed dance play, *At the Hawk's Well*, already performed in London in private venues in 1916. Michel Ito choreographed this first production and performed the Hawk's dance. Far less documented are the innovations de Valois brought to the 1933 production. Quoting a firsthand account by de Valois, who unlike Ito shows herself capable of deep introspection concerning the role she played, we learn how she approached the role of the Hawk woman: «In the end there was a fusion: you felt your body and your emotions take part in the spirit of the general production. There was its intense simplicity; its purity, the direct appeal to feeling, and its poetry. I

gave up trying to understand many moments, instead I accepted and became absorbed» (84).

Cave's remarks regarding this passage underline once more de Valois's excellent capacity to work as part of a creative team

This was collaboration at its finest: a reworking of Yeats's vision in the terms of her own artistry and expertise; the willing suspension of herself through a kind of submission to the demands of Yeats's text, as a means of achieving a creativity that was securely based in a healthy respect for integrity of the production. (59)

Professor Cave's innovative research method, which includes a study of the play text in its various revisions together with the exploration of a wealth of materials closely connected with the text, sheds new light on Yeats's plays and on two fascinating collaborations in the history of theatre. Cave's method could usefully be adopted as a paradigm for reconstructing the performance texts of other playwrights and practitioners. The method, which requires work in archives, access to hitherto unexamined materials, a deep knowledge not just of the playwright but of the creative team with whom she or he collaborated, may, however, only be adopted when time and funding allow. In a period, like the present, these two factors cannot be taken for granted.

*Maggie Rose*

Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Shelter of Neighbours*, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast 2012, pp. 265. £12,99. ISBN 978-0-85640-886-1

Over ten years separate Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's latest collection of short stories, *The Shelter of Neighbours* (2012)<sup>1</sup>, from her previous volume, *The Pale Gold of Alaska* (2000)<sup>2</sup>. In this lapse of time Éilís Ní Dhuibhne published stories from her early collections in *Midwife to the Fairies*<sup>3</sup> in 2003, a book for young readers, *The Sparkling Rain*<sup>4</sup>, in 2004, and notably her novel on Celtic Tiger Ireland, *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*<sup>5</sup>, in 2007. She has written extensively in Irish and on the Irish language, and among her novels in Irish feature *Cailíní Beaga Ghleann na mBláth* (2003)<sup>6</sup> and *Dún an Airgid* (2008)<sup>7</sup>. She has also continued writing stories, published in miscellaneous collections and reviews over the years. Her sixth volume of stories, *The Shelter of Neighbours*, contains some of these stories as well as new ones, and displays forms of continuity and development in the variety of her production. Her awareness of the Ireland of the past interlaces with concern with contemporary Ireland, which comes openly to the fore with a Swedish immigrant's visit to Ikea in Belfast in *The Shortcut through IKEA* and with references to the country's recent economic crisis, a «rapid slide into recession» (59) in *The Yeats*, in *Red-Hot Poker* and in the title story *The Shelter of Neighbours*, where a commonplace observation

about public servants leads to misunderstanding and miscommunication between neighbours.

The title of the volume comes from an Irish proverb – ‘Ar Scáth a Chéile a Mhateireann na Daoine’, people live in one another’s shelter – yet in the fictional estate of Dunroon Crescent in South County Dublin the sense of community in the neighbourhood has deteriorated, and danger may come from your neighbours as well as from outside, as in the title story and in *Red-Hot Poker*. In *Trespases* the boredom of suburban life merges with the place’s lack of identity, as it is «miles from anywhere that makes sense. Miles from the city and miles from the river and the sea» (97). The suburban context provides a background for the gradual emotional distance in interpersonal relationships, the problematic confrontation with the past, the obsession of memories, the persecution of episodes from childhood and adolescence. The obscure menace from the adult world emerges in the charity activity of teenage memories in *The Blind*, and the pain of young love comes back to life in *Taboo*, *The Moon Shines Clear*, *the Horseman’s Here* and *Bikes I have Lost*. A variety of motifs and themes intertwines with the main plot, drug addiction in *The Shelter of Neighbours*, anorexia in *Bikes I have Lost*, the difficulty of communication between generations and sexes in *The Man who had no Story* and *It is a Miracle*. In *The Sugar Loaf* Audrey tries to reconstruct her emotional life treasuring the few happy memories of her past in the routine and disorder of her lonely existence. Characters occasionally migrate from story to story, like Audrey who returns fleetingly in *Red-Hot Poker* as someone who «suffers from the depression» (192), and Finn O’Keefe, the writer of *The Man who had no Story* who reappears also in *The Shelter of Neighbours*. Story organization is often based on Ní Dhuibhne’s usual alternation of past and present, which highlights the obsessive presence of the past with which it is not easy to come to terms.

A novelty in form may be represented by the story *Bikes I have Lost*, which is longer than the standard Ní Dhuibhne story and is similar to a novella. The story is literally a journey in the past as it recounts Helen’s life through the stories of her bikes, starting with the theft of a three-wheeler, and developing with the tragic death of her first boyfriend in a motorcycle accident. Its organization in single episodes, each bearing a different subtitle, is an interesting insight into the fragmentation of the protagonist’s memories, at the same time keeping the unity of the fictional autobiography intact.

However, a *fil rouge* develops from the stories in *The Inland Ice* (1997)<sup>8</sup> through the novel *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* to *The Shelter of Neighbours*, as Ní Dhuibhne increasingly focuses her attention on the act of storytelling, on writing and on the character of a writer. Characters in *The Inland Ice* are public relation people, teachers and librarians who occasionally are also poets. This is magnified and scanned in *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, where novelists, poets, publishers, literary agents dominate and draw attention to the life

of literary Dublin, its obsessions and contradictions. Some stories in *The Shelter of Neighbours* continue and expand the theme of writing in a variety of ways, occasionally indulging on the essence and meaning of writing, so that writing is consciously at the centre of the volume.

In the opening story *The Man who had no Story* the protagonist is a teacher who travels to Kerry to devote his whole summer to writing. His search for peace, isolation and concentration is frustrated by everyday distractions interfering with his plans, from a sick cat to a broken fridge, so that writing seems to be a nearly impossible achievement, a vain and trivial pursuit. This is exemplified by his writer's notebook «full of useless items» (2) he may never be able to use. On the other hand, the reader follows his reflection on the act of writing, which is a journey into lost tracks, as «writing is an excuse for not writing something else» (5). The setting of contemporary Ireland marked by recent road construction is interlinked with the conscious life of the past, starting with the protagonists' mythological names, Finn and Grainne (their cat is called Pangur), and attention is cast on traditional storytelling in the form of a story Finn hears on the radio. In a pattern of Chinese boxes, the story, significantly called *The Man who had no Story*, recounts Finn's own story: Finn has no story to tell, no words to write, like the protagonist of the story-within-the-story, unable to entertain his neighbours with a story until he is taken away by the fairies. In an interplay of tradition and modernity, Ní Dhuibhne juxtaposes the voice of an old *seanchai* to Finn's abortive attempt to write his work in progress.

*A Literary Lunch* has a completely contemporary setting and set of references. An expensive lunch in a fashionable bistro provides a background for a board, modelled on the Arts Council, meeting to assign funds and bursaries to writers. Patterns of authority and power contend with the bitterness of failure, as Francie Briody, «a writer whom nobody read» (19), already in his fifties, is refused financial support for the n<sup>th</sup> time. While the story has a tragic conclusion of revenge and murder, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne makes fun of the fashionable jargon of literary criticism describing Francie's latest novel as «a heteroglossial polyphonic postmodern examination of postmodern Ireland, with special insight into political corruption and globalisation, beautifully written in dark masculinist ironic prose with shadows of *l'écriture féminine*» (19). The story predates the publication of *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* and represents an interesting insight into the world of Dublin's literary life, later to be developed in the novel.

A writer is at the centre also of the story *Illumination*, where an artists' retreat provides the context to develop reflections on writing alongside motifs from folklore and fairytales. The atmosphere of a fairytale characterises also *It is a Miracle*, where Sara meets a man that might have come out of a fairytale: «He was like a woodcutter in a fairytale; he reminded her of Red Riding Hood's father» (80). Loosely based on Ní Dhuibhne's own experi-

ence in a writers' retreat in California a couple of years ago, *Illumination* provides a variation of Ní Dhuibhne's trend to rewrite traditional stories in a contemporary context and here she recalls her background in folklore to create a fairytale atmosphere. Fond of taking walks near the residence where she spends the summer, the nameless first-person narrator finds herself in the foreign territory familiar in fairytales, where gates open onto unknown tracks in the woods. And as in a fairytale she finds herself in a mysterious house in the forest whose lawn has the magic colour of «emerald silk» (32) and which is inhabited by three mysterious people, hospitable but reticent. The seductive voice and pleasant manners of the woman of the house do not hide the unusual hazel colour of her penetrating eyes, later described as «yellowish» (44). Half-way between a witch and a fairy, the woman offers delicious food that seems to appear out of nowhere and dominates the small community that lives with her, and the growing mystery and contradictory information about the different members increase the sombreness of the house and its surroundings, emphasised by an unseen mountain lion, by the bark of coyotes and the scream of bobcats, alter egos of wolves in fairytales. Focussing on the character of a writer, the story also discusses the purpose and meaning of writing, as the protagonist is looking for «some answer about writing» (43) and wonders if it is «possible to make new fiction» (38). «What is it for? Not just to entertain people with stories about other people like themselves. It must have some more profound and important purpose» (43).

Storytelling is the object of a series of stories in the collection, for example, *Taboo* opens with a child's obsessive request to her au pair to tell her the same story night after night, which introduces the au pair's first-person narration of her own story, thus creating an ideal connection with *The Man who had no Story* realizing her own fabulistic attempt. In a more complex way, in *The Moon Shines Clear, the Horseman's Here*, memory and invention provide a text for the story Polly's mother tells herself without being able to reach a conclusion. «That is what she does all day. She tells stories ... she is engaged in a long monologue ... not monotonous, but unbroken, fluent as a river» (p. 178). Telling stories is a form of therapy and reconciliation, which allows Polly and her mother to come to terms with their own past, marked by unwanted pregnancy and the tragic death of Polly's boyfriend.

*The Shelter of Neighbours* is made of two groups or sets of stories easily identifiable in the volume, stories about writing and stories about the neighbourhood of Dunroon Crescent. They frequently intermingle in cross-sections as the volume highlights the small moments in everyday life when change or crisis are on the brink of being disclosed. Following the steps of her concern with the secret of storytelling, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne gives us a precious glimpse into the mysterious patterns and paths of creativity in a new collection of stories dealing with ordinary people and ordinary days, where reality and magic often meet and interact.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *The Shelter of Neighbours*, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast 2012.  
<sup>2</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *The Pale Gold of Alaska' and Other Stories*, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast 2000.  
<sup>3</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *'Midwife to the Fairies': New and Selected Stories*, Attic Press, Cork 2003.  
<sup>4</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *The Sparkling Rain*, Poolbeg, Dublin 2003.  
<sup>5</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*, The Blackstaff Press, Belfast 2007.  
<sup>6</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *Cailíní Beaga Ghleann na mBláth*, Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath 2003.  
<sup>7</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *Dún an Airgid*, Cois Life, Baile Átha Cliath 2008.  
<sup>8</sup> É. NíDhuibhne, *The InlandIce' and Other Stories*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast 1997.

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Giovanna Tallone

Ann Saddlemeyer (ed.), *W. B. Yeats and George Yeats – The Letters*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2011, pp. 599. £30. ISBN 978-0-19-818438-6

When in 1916 the middle-aged William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) proposed to a young woman of twenty-five, nobody would have bet on the success of such an ill-sorted match. Indeed Ann Saddlemeyer's *W. B. Yeats & George Yeats: The Letters* (2011), once again testifies to the mystery of Mr. and Mrs. Yeats' union. Especially, it makes the reader reflect further upon the obscure reasons which pushed the young and sensible George Yeats (1892-1968) – born Bertha Hyde-Lees, and later renamed Georgie and hence George – to choose him as a husband in the first place, and to remain faithful to her decision later on.

The first hint of the solution of this conundrum can be found on the back cover of *The Letters*, where there is a series of still photographs of W.B. Yeats with his wife. They are walking side by side down the street, every still is a new step. Looking at the clothes George is wearing, the pictures must have been taken in winter. She is only one step ahead of her husband, facing him as if checking on him, and not looking where she is going. They are talking, and even though we cannot possibly know what is the subject of their conversation, it's hard to refrain from noticing that she looks a little like an apprehensive mother. Maybe

she is worried by the fact that, in such cold weather, he is not wearing a coat. The reason why these images strike the reader is that they portray the nature of the relationship brilliantly: he the disorderly genius, she the constant caretaker. In venturing into their correspondence we are made aware of the huge dependence that bound Yeats to his wife, a dependence that makes us marvel at how he could have reached the age of fifty-two without being married.

In their letters we can find innumerable examples of this dependence: such as when George, after having accompanied their son Michael through a surgical operation in a London hospital, writes to her husband that «unless I wire to the contrary I shall arrive at Oxford [...] on Tuesday evening for the night & can pack you for Scotland & return on Wed: I will get you a room at Club & failing that, here» (67); or when she assures him that «[t]he chemist has posted you your sleeping tables [sic] directly, you should find them waiting you at Holland Park when you get back on Monday» (483). It is thanks to her that Yeats was able to enjoy all the benefits of a smooth, well-managed life. However, the only evident truth is that she loved him wholeheartedly, probably more for having married her than for anything else, and this must have been sufficient to fuel their strong, long lasting bond.

Ann Saddlemyer is an outstanding scholar in the field of the Irish studies. Her research on the history of Irish and Canadian theatre is extensive. Indeed, the most impressive characteristic of her work is probably its precision. Especially thorough is her research on the history of the fine intellectuals that founded and supported the activity of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Saddlemyer has edited the collected works and letters of John Millington Synge (1871-1909), and the complete plays of Lady Gregory (1852-1932), assessing the uniqueness of their contribution to Irish literature in general. Thanks to the extraordinary quality of her publications, from *In defence of Lady Gregory, Playwright* (authored in 1966) to *Lady Gregory, Fifty Years After* (edited in 1987), she is considered an international authority in this field of studies.

The life of George, and consequently the life of W.B. Yeats, have been one of the main focuses of her writings. Her biography of Mrs. Yeats, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs W. B. Yeats* (2002), not only shows her scholarly talent, but also her gift for narration. Thanks to her knowledge of the family archive, *Becoming George* is an intensely detailed account (including unexpected and embarrassing circumstances) of Georgie Hyde-Lees' transformation into George Yeats, the intelligent, yet suffering wife of a genius who was almost thirty years her senior, and who, by choosing her, had settled for second best.

This latest book on the correspondence between the Yeatses is a further confirmation of the quality of her research. She has edited «149 letters from George, 436 from WBY, and 29 written to their children» (vii); more than six hundred letters exchanged over the years of their marriage from 1917 until W.B. Yeats' death in 1939. The extent of Saddlemyer's editorial work is impressive. The letters have been organized sequentially and transcribed



respecting Yeats' peculiar habit of misspelling words and friends' names. With the same philological method, every letter is classified according to the medium in which it was written, whether it was handwritten, typed, or dictated, signed or unsigned, telegram, postcard, fragment, etc. Sometimes Saddlemyer even describes the type of stationery used. Among the missives, there is also a hasty last will and testament that Yeats wrote when seriously ill with Malta fever in Rapallo. The date is 21<sup>st</sup> December 1929, the witnesses are the Pounds, and George is the sole beneficiary.

Some of the chronological sections are introduced by brief summaries describing the events that the Yeatses were experiencing. These are very helpful, for they make the bulk of letters comprehensible also to those who are not familiar with the matter. Equally useful are the informative notes about the many people who formed the extremely varied and ample social universe of the couple. Every new name mentioned is given an outline about who s/he was, and what her/his relationship to the couple was. Nothing is left unexplained and the reader is very much guided into the discovery of the life of 'Willy' and 'Dobbs', as they called each other in their intimate exchanges.

This is the first time that the private letters of the Yeatses have been published, and even though they offer more insight into their married life, they do not however reveal any undisclosed pieces of information. Nonetheless, they have the merit of contradicting the long-established prejudice of Yeats as a distant father. *The Letters* show his fatherly concern about the welfare of Anne and Michael, and the pleasure he always took in being with them. Furthermore, he concretely helped his daughter to establish herself as a successful painter and set designer, and he often wrote his straightforward opinions to her.

But probably the most interesting aspect for the scholar is the possibility to grasp further understanding of the composition of *A Vision* (1925). The correspondence establishes the importance that both George's sessions of automatic writing and her knowledge of occult astrology and its symbols had in the creation of Yeats' philosophical universe. George had entered the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1914, and she was as educated as her husband in its concepts, rituals, and magic tradition. Moreover she had a deep understanding of medieval political and religious thought, and could read Italian and Latin. Their early exchanges testify to the role that his wife had as a guide and counsellor, and to the significance of their collaboration.

On a general note, the letters are infused with a sort of motion sickness. The most evident characteristic of the life of the Yeatses is that it unfolded in a state of ongoing movement. While we read their correspondence we move from various addresses in London, to George's house in Oxford, from their house in Dublin, to their country residence in the county of Galway, from the United States to Scotland, from Italy to Switzerland, to Spain, etc. A life that required a great amount of organization mainly on the part of George, the fixed star of Yeats' universe, the indefatigable manager.

Indeed, there is hardly one letter of hers that does not mention or discuss business details. Particularly characteristic of her abnegation and sense of duty are her letters to him during his journey to Majorca over the winter of 1935-1936. One year after he had undergone his Steinach 'rejuvenation' operation to regain sexual potency, he went to Spain to work with the Hindu philosopher Shri Purohit Swami on the English translation of the *Upanishads*. Together with them travelled a certain Gwyneth Foden, apparently the partner of Swami, and probably one of Yeats' many "dalliances". After having packed his luggage and accompanied him to the port of Liverpool, George regrets to have «forgot[ten] to pack you a medicine glass» (402). And the contemporary woman can hardly refrain from shuddering when she reads that Mrs. Foden had the habit to write to Mrs. Yeats, about which she wrote to her husband: «I wish she wouldnt [sic] call you my 'belovdest' or 'your beloved', but one must endure these things!» (413). Certainly she never failed at enduring, or as Saddlemeier puts it:

[...] as always George, bound to Dublin by family, household, and WBY's publishing responsibilities, was sympathetic to his need for fresh stimulus, despite the frequency with which she was required to rush to her ailing husband's bedside and extricate him from a few embarrassing situations. From Majorca she confided to her sister-in-law that 'she feels like a child of five left in charge of a Tiger in a wire cage, and she is tired of being sent for when the Tiger escapes'. (367-368)

The 'Tiger' had not many years to live and, from 1936 on, due to George's resignation, their relationship turned more and more into a business partnership. The final part of their correspondence is almost economical, requiring a greater effort on the part of the reader.

However, for all that the letters represent a deeper view into the intimacy of W.B. Yeats, into his habits and oddities, more than anything else they confirm that George was the ultimate judge of her husband's writings. Indeed, in their conversations, there is little passion and much intellect. Even the first missives of Yeats to his yet to be wife are not exactly perfect examples of the tender love and the excitement typical of a groom (we know it was not – at least on his part – a union 'made in heaven'). Evidence of this is Yeats' letter to Miss Lees on her birthday in 1917. It is four days before their marriage and he writes in a somewhat patronizing tone that: «I wanted to tell you that I did not mean to chaff you last night about Maccheavele [sic]. I got up all that discussion about books in youth to get you to explain your liking. But you were too modest—you had not our gay self-assertion. You are only confident I think in the service of others» (12).

Whatever the extent of Yeats' underestimation of his wife, very soon – probably when, during their despairing honeymoon, she started her experiments with automatic writing – George became the indispensable sounding-board of her husband's thoughts. Judging from his words, he confided in her intel-

ligence, and took into great consideration her opinions and perceptiveness. And this must have been one of the secrets of their long marriage: he tended to confide only in her judgment, whether the matter was gossip, friendship, astrology, or philosophy. The letters represent a kind of ongoing conversation between the two of them. They wrote as a means to confirm the likeness of their convictions, or to share ideas and views on Yeats' work – his wife was his first and foremost critic. This kept them together despite his open infidelity and her bouts of depression, or her plunges into alcoholism.

Considering the amount of letters, it seems that George was not an enthusiastic correspondent, «[m]y dear you are a worst [sic] correspondent than I am» (WBY, 364). It is a pity that she did not write as often as her husband – he actually abused the medium – for her prose is very rarely boring. Frequently Yeats complained about her lack of responsiveness, and undoubtedly this book highlights her figure *in absentia*. George stands out as an independent, brave woman who was often left alone to face hardships in a foreign country. Not only did she stay in Dublin, far from her family, at a time when her Englishness singled her out as the enemy (facing various direct and indirect threats to her family with steadfastness and light-heartedness), but she was also audacious enough to try to get her head around the haphazard management of Cuala Press, run by her husband's quarrelsome sisters, Elizabeth Corbet Yeats (1868-1940), known as Lolly, and Susan Mary Yeats (1866-1949), known as Lily. It was a task which required a great deal of humour, a feature that George seemed not to lack. And this brings us to another aspect of Mrs. Yeats' missives: her playfulness. With her words, George was trying to entertain her reader. Only in the last years of their marriage did she abandon the willingness to surprise and impress her husband, although she did sometimes tease him: «Glad to get your letter dated 'July 21' & so beautifully spelt and written that I think you must be feeling very well!» (541).

In conclusion, for the many Yeats scholars around the world, there is no doubt that *The Letters* is another achievement in the history of Yeatsian studies. This fastidiously noted work is able to cast a light on the nature of the feelings that bound W.B. Yeats to his wife. Very early in their correspondence we can notice a tendency towards the rationalization of his feelings. It was only one year into their marriage that he changed his signature, replacing "Yours with Love" with a brisker "Yrs affly". Mostly he wrote to be reassured, to be consoled, or to be looked after. Whether previous speculations on the life of the Yeatses might have left some ends loose, this recent work by Saddlemyer lays everything bare. All judgement must be restrained, because there is nothing more to be known. Simply Yeats found a perfect, dutiful wife.

*Arianna Gremigni*