

Theatre as a Medium: the Idea of Transformation in Irish Theatre in Early Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Irish Theatre in the early twentieth century provided its audience with ample illustrations of the idea of transformation. In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which was first staged in 1902, W.B. Yeats dramatized the transfiguration of an old woman into “a young girl” with “the walk of a queen.” In 1906, in *Deirdre*, presented the transcendental change of a young woman into an incorporeal being. Once again, in 1916, he took on the idea of the transfiguration on a human into an immortal being in *At the Hawk's Well*. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, first performed in 1907, J.M. Synge depicted how the hero, “a slight young man” (Synge 67) “with the little, small feet” (Synge 79) is transformed into “a likely gaffer” who is robust enough to scuffle with a group of villagers and get into a violent brawl with his solidly built father.

All these plays were performed at the Abbey Theatre, which was founded as the Irish national theatre in 1903 by W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. Their goal was to secure a site dedicated to the exploration of artistic imagination at the centre of the national capital. Yeats committed himself to the management of the Abbey Theatre. He was not only a playwright who provided the theatre with his own scripts, but also a literary manager and producer who selected and evaluated plays and developed theatre productions. For Yeats, being a playwright was neither a sedentary nor a solitary occupation. He would appear in public and engage with members of the audience in order to discuss what he intended to convey with his productions and to be stimulated by their reaction to them. This paper investigates how theatre productions at the Abbey Theatre, especially the plays mentioned above, dealt with the concept of transformation or transcendental change. Further, it examines the extent to which the theatre functioned as an arena in which the aesthetic visions presented by the plays were publicly debated.

1. Transformation in an ordinary household

W.B. Yeats, a Nobel laureate poet, wrote and staged more than twenty dramas during his lifetime.⁽¹⁾ He confirmed his popularity as a playwright during the first decade of the twentieth century, when an anti-British atmosphere was growing. His plays, and especially their patriotic aspects, were well received by the Irish public. *The Countess Cathleen*, which was first presented in 1899 by the Irish Literary Theatre, a precursor of the Abbey Theatre, introduced Yeats's lifelong theme of self-sacrifice. Although the segment in which the countess disposed of her soul by selling it to the devil triggered a controversy over blasphemy (Miller 41), the play's emphasis on her altruistic devotion to her people and the sacrifice she made to rescue them from starvation was highly praised.

Yeats further developed the theme of altruistic self-sacrifice in *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, which he wrote in collaboration with Lady Augusta Gregory and submitted to the W.G. Fay's *National Dramatic Society*. In the play, an old hag roams about in a devastated land. This figure was his version of a time-tested literary motif "Shan Van Vocht" with an old woman symbolizing an impoverished nation. Yeats's Cathleen drops in at a village house and encounters a young man who, with an air of mystified abstraction, consents to serve the wandering old woman whose ardent ambition is to put "the strangers out of" her "house," namely, colonized Ireland. In the end of the play, she, now totally transformed into a young lady, is observed walking along a path with her loyal follower.

Yeats alludes to the devastation of a household after a young man abandons it along with his fiancée, who screams and implores him to stay at home. His stupefied mother, who supports her son's fiancée, is also left behind. Yet, *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* was fervently received in terms of its patriotism. One of the audience members observed how tactfully Yeats and Lady Gregory dramatized "the very spirit of a race for ever defeated and for ever insurgent against defeat," and how deeply the play stirred the audience. The inference is that the primary cause of such a profound impact consisted in the play's radical integration of a modernized symbol of nationhood into an ordinary household (Gwynn 158-9). Indeed the innovativeness of the play resides in its depiction of the unity of the concept of total transformation and Irish everyday life: a ripe opportunity of constructive transfiguration comes to the receptive mind in his/her daily life.

The contemporary version of the "Shan Van Vocht" became so influential that it could not be ignored. Even James Joyce, who detested the Yeatsian representation of the nation as an old woman who needed to be rescued, had to address the motif.² In 1922, he employed it to depict an

impoverished and colonized Ireland in the beginning of *Ulysses*: “an old woman came forward and stood by Stephen’s elbow [...] a wandering crone [...] a messenger from the secret morning.” (Joyce 15)

Cathleen Ní Houlihan was restaged for the formal opening of the new theatre on the 26th of December 1904. In 1911, only five years before the Easter Rising, *The Countess Cathleen* was reproduced on the Abbey stage. By then, Yeats had established himself as a playwright and theatre producer, who was associated with the motif of self-immolation as an act to rescue the colonized nation. In retrospect, it is clear that Yeats invented a national theatre, and reciprocally, he was invented by his audience. He became the authoritative agent of a farsighted vision on how nationhood should be achieved and what the nation and its people would become because of socio-political and structural transfiguration.

2. Anticipatory functions of arts

The concept of transformation that Yeats inaugurated at the Abbey Theatre expanded its potential for the anticipatory functions that Oscar Wilde identified as common to the arts in general. As a social reformer, Wilde believed in the prognosticative nature of aesthetic constructs. He expressed that firm conviction in *The Decay of Lying*, when Vivian remarks, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. This results not merely from Life’s imitative instinct, but from the fact that the desire of Life is simply to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realize that energy” (Wilde 102). Wilde’s observation in terms of life’s demand for aesthetic forms appropriate to its own energy holds true for the initial reception of *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*. The audience embraced the play almost entirely from the viewpoint of intense patriotic ardour, which culminated in 1916 with the Easter Rising.

J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* demonstrated the substantial potential of its anticipatory function in a rather radical way. When the play was staged at the Abbey Theatre in January 1907 and it caused a series of social disturbances. In the play, a young self-professed patricide shows up at a local pub in a village on the west coast of Ireland. The wanderer attains a sudden enormous popularity among the villagers, and he proclaims his earnest love for Pegeen Mike, the young proprietress of the pub, saying, “It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only, and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World?” (Synge 167). Candid sexual references (especially “shifts” here) triggered off a mass riot by patriotic members of the audience, who felt their pride as citizens of an emerging nation severely trampled by the vulgar character sketches in the play. Public

disturbances erupted inside and outside of the theatre and severely affected the performances of the following nights. It was as if the fierce disputes and violent rows within the play had flowed out of the theatre and into the streets.

The audience was divided in their aesthetic evaluation of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Arthur Griffith, a future president of Dáil Éireann, criticized the play: “a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform [...] the production of a moral degenerate, who has dishonoured the women of Ireland before all Europe (Foster 363).” W.B. Yeats stood up for Synge’s genius, and offered a counterargument: “We are beginning once again to ask what a man is, and to be content to wait a little before we go on to that further question: what is a good Irishman? (Foster 359).”

It seems ironic for self-appointed patriots, namely, imaginers of a future nation, not to have appreciated a production that offered an alternative to reality with its anticipatory vision of an independent man. However, it was staged on the eve of the Easter Rising, an armed insurrection against British rule. Thus, the demand of fervent patriots for clear expressions of national pride was extremely high, and the spirit of the times was being formed around a powerful myth of masculinity. The play is set in a public house. The pub is operated by a young woman named Pegeen and functions as the centre of the local community. Her father is the public house’s owner and operator in name only because he is a heavy drinker and lacks management capabilities. Other male figures are also hard drinkers, or too naïve to cope with the difficulties of the real world. The public’s negative reaction was sparked by the risqué reference to women’s undergarments (“shifts”). Nevertheless, it was the play’s subversion of both traditional values and the prevailing notion of an indomitable and bellicose Irish masculinity that provoked action. Judging from the *Zeitgeist* of those days, it is not surprising that the play caused a social disturbance.

Far from being a stereotypical masculine man, the hero of the play, Christopher Mahon (Christy), is a man of complex character. After he is hired at the pub as a potboy, he cleans a girl’s boots (Pegeen’s), sits down in front of a looking-glass, and washes his face. Later in Act II, village girls tease him about the looking glass: “I never seen to this day a man with a looking-glass held to his back” (Synge 99). He manages apt and sensitive expression full of poetic sentiment, but also beats all the village men in a local athletic meeting: “winning all in the sports below, racing, lepping, dancing” (Synge 133). It comes as no surprise that Pegeen has never seen such a man in her life (“[t]he oddest walking fellow I ever set my eyes on to this hour to-day” (Synge 111)), because Christy, feminine and masculine, and sensitive and bold, is a totally New Man (“such poet’s talking, and such bravery of heart” (Synge 149)).

The new man that Synge suggested is in one sense a precursor to the new man James Joyce proposed in *Ulysses* through his creation of Leopold Bloom. In the “Cyclops” episode, which has its setting in a local pub like Synge’s *Playboy*, Bloom is berated by narrow-mindedly patriotic and completely idle drunkards. As Declan Kiberd points out, he, who is willing to do domestic chores but also robust enough to face a violent nationalist squarely, is “neither completely masculine nor completely feminine” and is “intolerably subversive of the prevailing heroic code” (Kiberd 189).

Synge did not only suggest a new model for man in the play, but also revealed and critiqued aspects of the old model of paternity and manhood. Christy acquires sudden popularity in a village he ends up in by chance. Young village girls fall into wild rapture over the strange youth. However, why did the young patricide achieve such enormous popularity? It seems reasonable to perceive an affinity between the village girls’ great exultation in Synge’s play and a scene in Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, first staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1990. In Friel’s play, five elder sisters, living a lonely and austere life in a rural town in the northwest of Ireland, burst into a wild dance in time to the music that an unstable wireless radio suddenly picks up. The music sparked their explosive rapture. It unleashed their uncontrollable anger born of pent-up frustration as well as their long repressed sexuality often considered a sin in Christianity. It also seems reasonable to evaluate Christy’s extraordinary popularity in the historical context of the gradual disclosure of paternal domestic violence and clerical sexual abuse in Ireland. The fact that the subversive anti-hero gains high status among village girls can be regarded as indication that the play embraces a drive for carnivallike chaos. Traditional clerical paternity and secular fatherhood, and their long-standing power over women’s spiritual and daily lives, are brought into question.

The anti-hero is, however, more than a subversive medium for the replacement of an old model of man by a new one. He also involuntarily subverts himself continuously. His identity is not firmly stable, but rather in constant oscillation between his warped self-underestimation and extravagant conceit. Christy first appears at the country public house as a dejected and frightened young man. After he tells the villagers about the circumstances of murdering his own father, and wins sudden popularity, he boasts of gallantry, but only to shrink back in fear from the abrupt noise at the door:

CHRISTY. It’s time surely, and I a seemly fellow with great strength in me and bravery of... [Someone knocks.]

CHRISTY — [clinging to Pegeen.] — Oh, glory! it’s late for knocking, and this last while

I'm in terror of the peelers, and the walking dead. (Synge 85)

Immediately after he admires his own "handsome" face on the following morning, he is startled at the noises that approaching village girls make: "[s]tranger girls. God help me, where'll I hide myself away and my long neck nacked to the world?" (Synge 95). Later in the play, he recounts a grossly exaggerated version of the patricide to the girls and a widow, and draws enthusiastic cheers from them. However, the heroine enters without delay in the midst of Christy's unbridled gaiety, and she strikes him completely dumb. Soon after, when he is gaily dressed in sumptuous clothes, which Pegeen's nominal fiancé offers to him as a bribe, and congratulating himself on his exceptional valour, he is so alarmed by the sight of his father whom he believes he has slaughtered, his knees buckle:

CHRISTY. From this out I'll have no want of company when all sorts is bringing me their food and clothing (he swaggers to the door, tightening his belt), the way they'd set their eyes upon a gallant orphan cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt. (He opens door, then staggers back.) Saints of glory! Holy angels from the throne of light! (Synge 119)

Each time he is puffed up with masculine pride and vanity, comical and timely hindrances shatter his pretension.

The anti-hero's constant vacillation between pompous conceit and abject humiliation is recapitulated in his mirror images. Christy acknowledges that his father has "the devil's own mirror" at home, which will "twist a squint across an angel's brow," while the mirror at Pegeen's home reflects his "handsome" face. (Synge 95) The antipodal images of Christy also reflect the antipodal circumstances under which he finds himself. Back in his home village, Christy lives a subservient life, controlled and repressed by his heavy-handed father. Nevertheless, in marked contrast, in Pegeen's village he is regarded as a courageous rebel, eminent storyteller, and distinguished sportsman. Christy's self-images swing radically between these two poles.

The anti-hero's pendular swing between two self-images eventually provoke him to form a third one by himself. In the climax of the dramatic action, he confronts his father and he becomes the cynosure of all the eyes of the villagers. Almost all those present, including the heroin, turns against him. Even a supportive villager, the widow, who feels a strong affinity towards him, reaches the end of her resources. Suddenly he breaks away from the wretched self-image of a humiliatingly oppressed and subjugated youth, as well as from the pompous self-image of an all-

out rebel and versatile dandy. He transforms himself into a young man of self-reliance and high self-esteem. It is worthy of notice that he does not only make a spiritual transformation, but also undergoes a physical one. At the very moment of self-invention, he undergoes a metamorphosis from a slightly-built young man with small feet into a gallant man of self-help and of high self-esteem who can cope with his domineering father and belligerent villagers.

James Joyce may have been influenced by Synge's strategy for activating physical and spiritual transformation through pendular swings when he wrote the 'Circe' episode, the longest chapter of *Ulysses* in a dramatic rather than prose style. In 'Circe', the protagonist Leopold Bloom experiences humiliation and extravagant exaltation in turns. He is constantly transformed back and forth from a dishonourable figure, such as a man guilty of misdemeanors or sexual offences, into a glorified one, such as a new Messiah or Leopold the First, and vice versa. After undergoing seemingly incessant metamorphoses between two opposite poles, in the end of the episode, he gains a well-balanced sense of new manhood and fatherhood. As if receiving a token of his own achievement, he has a visual hallucination of his eleven-year-old son, who, in reality, died soon after his birth. Clearly, the structural affinity between Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Joyce's 'Circe' is more than coincidence.⁽³⁾

As we have already seen, Yeats, when defending Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, underscored that it was high time to ask what constituted a good Irishman. The play was written and staged only nine years before the armed uprising against British colonial rule. It seems reasonable to regard the play's representation of the transfiguration as Synge's deliberate self-reference to the anticipatory function of arts. The anti-hero's brave emancipation both from the oppressed self-image and from vain and implacably romantic self-image, and his re-creation of himself as an independent man of high self-esteem evokes reference to Ernst Bloch's theory on the function of aesthetic constructs in a given society. Bloch maintained that art and literature have an anticipatory function in themselves. Bloch also argued that imaginative and creative experimentations of art and literature could transform the material base of any given society, and move it toward an improved status. At the centre of Bloch's assertion was a utopian perspective. Jack Zipes points out that Bloch believed that aesthetic constructs of art and literature can "provide the impetus for individual and collective change," when they bring to light "what is missing and might still come" in the society (Bloch xxiii). Perhaps Synge intended to unleash his aesthetic constructs' potential for transformative impact on reality, and expected that this would have a drastic effect on his own community. Indeed, the first production of the play provoked a riot, a wild version of street theatre. It created an arena for the audience to engage

into a fierce debate over the concept of a new people and a new nation.

3. Pursuit for alogical way to convey aesthetic visions

It has been said that the *Playboy* riot eroded Yeats's confidence in the theatre-going public. He now thought they were incapable of interpretation and thus unable to recognize Synge's genius. Yeats's distrust of the general public was intensified to such an extreme that by the time he wrote *At the Hawk's Well* in 1916, he only wanted those who sympathized with his aesthetic values to attend the performances of his plays. As supporting evidence for this reading of the situation, two poems, 'The People' and 'The Fisherman,' among others, are often referenced. Both poems were published with *At the Hawk's Well* in 1917. In 'The People', the poet deplores that the person "who has served the most is defamed" in the midst of "[t]he daily spite of this unmannerly town" (Yeats *Poems* 199-200). Likewise, in 'The Fisherman,' the poet resents "[t]he beating down of the wise [a]nd great Art beaten down," and levels severe criticism against "[t]he living men that I hate" (Yeats *Poems* 197). Raymond Cowell suggests that Yeats was "desperate to find an alternative audience" to the real life masses while the poet preferred men of "activity of quiet concentration" like fishermen (Cowell 160). Daniel A. Harris regarded such fishermen as "Yeats's aristocrats" who were "indomitably searching for beauty and perfection" (Harris 194). It is true that Yeats first staged *At the Hawk's Well* "privately in the drawing-room of Lady Cunard's house" on the 2nd of April in 1916 with a limited number of members of the Royal Family and British aristocrats present (Miller 227). But it is also true that Yeats restaged the play in the Abbey Theatre in 1933 (Miller 233) as if he had provided a comparatively unexacting audience with a tentative tryout in order to evaluate the audience's reaction and to make modifications before he brought it to more challenging one.

Yeats elaborated alogical way to convey his aesthetic vision to his audience in *At the Hawk's Well*. One of his contrivances was to enfeeble the audience's logical inferences and to foster a sort of thought transference through representations of phantasms of the dead or spirits in his adaptation of Japanese Noh plays. Although a descendant of Protestant Ascendancy, a religious and cultural heritage that severed connections with the "community in which living and dead were not separated" (Duffy 475), Yeats tactfully dramatized supernatural encounters between the living, and ghosts or spirits. In *Dreaming of the Bones*, a young Republican rebel, who is on the run after he joins the Easter Rising, encounters the ghosts of Dermot MacMurrough and Dervorgilla. MacMurrough made an infamous pact with Henry the II of England leading to the English invasion of Ireland, and the rebel refuses to grant absolution to them. In *At the Hawk's*

Well, Cuchulain, the heroic protagonist, faces a hawk spirit that distracts the protagonist from drinking water from a wonder-working well.

In order to check the audience's rational and detached reception of the play, and foster its more sensuous involvement, Yeats placed dance sequences at the core. The demanding role of the hawk spirit called for the unusual ability of Ito Michio for the premiere in 1916. Ninette de Valois, who had worked for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and founded the Royal Ballet, danced in the 1933 production. Ito's dance performance is said to have created especially mesmerizing and disarming effects upon the audience, and he could induce "a trance-like state in both personages and audience" (Caldwell 45). The trance-like state is of critical importance, in that it functions as a basis for the audience's reception of the alogical Yeatsian aesthetic construct.

Another contrivance to further condition the audience's response to the play was Yeats' attempt to activate deep feelings of solidarity in the theatre with his poetic diction. At the opening of the play, the audience sees three musicians appear on the stage. They make a triangle with the first musician at the apex. The second and the third musicians chant a verse directed toward the first one and, as a natural consequence, toward the audience itself: "I call to the eye of the mind/ A well long choked up and dry/ And boughs long stripped by the wind [...]" (Yeats, *Plays* 136). Thus the audience is induced to listen to the two different voices chant the verse written in the first person singular, and to have feelings of solidarity with the personages and other members of the audience who are all sharing one verse. Yeats elaborated on his attempt to intensify such feelings of solidarity with the representation of verse lines of mystical significance:

First Musician [singing].

The boughs of the hazel shake,

The sun goes down in the west.

Second Musician [singing].

The heart would be always awake,

The heart would turn to its rest. (Yeats, *Plays* 137)

The presence of a rhyme scheme between the lines for the first musician and those for the second one clearly suggests that the two personages share one idea. Here the shaking boughs of the hazel is represented as an inducement to sleep, just like in a narrative poem of Yeats, 'The Wandering of Oisín,' in which everyone falls into one hundred years of sleep when a hazel branch

shakes. Likewise, the sinking sun exteriorizes irresistible sleep, which serves as a counterpoise to the awakening heart. It is also worthwhile noticing that the first musician chants a description of the landscape to which the second musician reacts and renders it a description of a human inner world. Thus, these two personages share one verse, one mind, and one idea of the suspension of consciousness. Yeats tried to lead the audience into a poetic trance between wakefulness and deep sleep, and to keep it a hypnagogic state. He does this in an attempt to induce the members of the audience to share one mind in a mesmerizingly alogical way, and to make a journey together from the external world to the inner world, to the core of a Yeatsian aesthetic construct.

In *At the Hawk's Well*, Yeats describes how Cuchulain fails in eternalizing his body, but the hero achieves subjective dignity. He had demonstrated his fascination with the concept of triumphant failure as well as with the paradoxical idea of tragic ecstasy in 'Anima Hominis.' Here Yeats underscored that one will find one's own persona and fit for the role one chooses, solely in failure: "[t]he poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat" (Yeats, *Mythologies* 337). The heroic protagonists in Yeats's plays are inseparable from their masks because it is through their masks that the heroes can overcome themselves and achieve spiritual sublimation. Yeats considered heroes' masks a form created by their passion in order to unite them with themselves, and that total unity comes from this process. In the esoteric philosophy of Yeats, 'Unity of Being' is supposed to be brought on by failure, disappointment, defeat, and unfulfilled desires. No wonder that the heroes in his plays are often doomed to suffer failure in order to attain their fullness of being.⁽⁴⁾ Yeats had also expressed a similar concept of triumphant failure in *Deirdre*, in which a self-chosen tragic destiny and a defeat in reality are conducive to the heroine's completion of her love and spiritual fullness.⁽⁵⁾ Cuchulain and Deirdre are individuals confronting their own fate, grave danger and crushing difficulties, attaining subconscious gaiety, and subsequently achieve transformation. It was this concept of triumphant failure that Yeats tried to convey to his audience in *At the Hawk's Well*.

Moreover, an anticipatory vision is embedded in *At the Hawk's Well*, and made accessible in the closing lines of the play. The playwright eagerly anticipated the transformation of the Irish society through interaction with his play, and intended to orient the eyes of the audience's mind from a trance-like state back towards their everyday life. After the hawk spirit, the guardian of the holy well, and the heroic protagonist leave the stage, the musicians chant the last verse directed towards the audience. The verse says, "Come to me, human faces" and "Among the desolate places" in the first stanza, "Among indolent meadows" in the third stanza, and "Where a

hand on the bell/ Can call the milch cows/ To the comfortable door of his house” in ‘the fourth stanza, and then “married and stays/ By an old hearth, and he/ On naught has set store/ But children and dogs on the floor” in the final stanza (Yeats, *Plays* 144-45). The chanting adroitly induces the audience’s mind’s eyes to shift focus from Cuchulain’s battlefield to domestic scenes. That is, from the spiritual quest within the play to the daily life of the audience. Thus, the playwright expected a vision of transformation to be carried forward from the theatre to the audience’s life.

4. A patron of aesthetic concepts of transformation

Just as the anticipatory potential of Synge’s *Playboy* produced its spin-off in the social riots of 1907, Yeats’s idea of glorious failure, the product of his contemplation and experience, reached its culmination in April 1916. That is when *At the Hawk’s Well* was performed in front of the British aristocrats, only three weeks before the Easter Rising broke out. The Irish republican rebels were ruthlessly crushed, yet carried out a triumphant failure that paved the way to creation of the independent nation of Ireland. The Easter Rising changed the course of Irish history and society.

The accumulated examples of physical and spiritual transformation produced through artistic exploration at the Abbey Theatre pose an important question: did anyone recognize their potential of anticipatory function and the possibility of the fulfilment of their potential in reality?

It was the Chief Secretary for Ireland who served as the practically highest official in the British colonial rule in Ireland, with the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland rather nominal as the King’s representative to form a constitutional monarchy. Only one person who occupied the office of Chief Secretary for Ireland during the period covering the early theatre movement by W.B. Yeats to the Easter Rising, which saw the production of *Deirdre*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *At the Hawk’s Well*. That person was Augustine Birrell. Birrell entered the office in January 1907 and left the post in May 1916, and has been regarded as the most “Irish-minded” of Chief Secretaries (Porter 497). Birrell was liberal in his views of Irish culture and its prospects. For example, the Gaelic League, which Douglas Hyde, a future President of Ireland founded in 1893 to promote the Irish language, received “encouragement” from Birrell, (Kiberd, *Ireland* 141).

Birrell remained considerably reticent to discuss the Easter Rising even in his reminiscences, published more than twenty years after the rebellion. But he acknowledged that, “Irish literature and the drama, Messrs. Maunsell’s list of new Irish publications, and the programme of the Abbey Theatre became to me of far more real significance than the monthly reports of the R.I.C.

[the Royal Irish Constabulary].”⁽⁶⁾ Here he included in the list “[t]he plays of John Synge and Lady Gregory, the poems of Mr. Yeats” (Birrell 214). He also admitted that he had his hopes of “being the last Chief Secretary to the Irish Lord Lieutenant,” which suggests that he expected the colonial rule of Ireland to end during his career at the post. Indeed, it has been suggested that there was a tendency among authorities to be “subconsciously willing the [Irish] natives to revolt” (Kiberd, *Classics* 418). If so, it follows that the Yeatsian theatre movement and its visions of fundamental transformation were, to considerable extent, unofficially supported by the colonial administrator of the highest rank who was also a liberal patron of the arts.

Conclusion

The Irish theatre movement to which W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, and Lady Gregory dedicated their lives, provided the audience with the concepts of physical or spiritual transformation. Furthermore, those playwrights expected the audience members to apply those concepts to their everyday lives and to fulfil their potential in reality. The anticipatory visions that the theatre productions at the Abbey Theatre encapsulated in their aesthetic constructs often provoked fierce disputes or even social disturbances. The effect of those productions illustrates how the theatre served as an arena in which the public discussed the identity of the Irish people and their nation yet to come. The public’s reaction to these productions also demonstrates the extent to which Irish theatre in early twentieth century exercised its anticipatory function. These cases support what Bloch has suggested, that is, imaginative experimentations of aesthetic constructs can affect the material base of a society.

Notes

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- (1) W.B. Yeats wrote twenty-six plays in his career as a playwright. Twenty-two plays were staged during his lifetime, and four plays (*The Death of Cuchulain*, *Calvary*, *A Full Moon in March*, and *The Hearn’s Egg*) were produced posthumously.
- (2) Just as James Joyce was under the influence of Yeats’s version of the “Shan Van Vocht,” Joyce was also affected by Yeats’s treatment of the theme of a triumphant failure. For this, see Kiberd. *Ulysses and Us*. 143, and 151ff.
- (3) For the influence of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, see Futoshi Sakauchi. “Body and Theatre in ‘Circe’ of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.” International Institute for Education and Research in Theatre and Film Arts, Global COE Programme, Theatre and Film Studies, Waseda University vol.3 (2009): 251-261.
- (4) For more detailed analyses of Yeats’s adaptation of Japanese Noh plays, see Futoshi Sakauchi. “W. B.

Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* and the Easter Rising." The Institute for Theatre Research VI, The 21st Century COE Programme, Waseda University (2006): 43-49.

- (5) For an analysis on the theme of perfection of mind and body in devine consummation in *Deirdre*, see Futoshi Sakauchi. "Vincent Woods's *A Cry from Heaven* and W.B. Yeats's *Deirdre*." The Institute for Theatre Research VI, The 21st Century COE Programme, Waseda University (2007): 9-16.
- (6) Augustine Burrell. *Things Past Redress*, 214. Quoted by Kiberd. See Kiberd, *Classics* 419.

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