Dialogues across Theory and Practice

The Snow Is General All Over Ireland: Irish Modernism and Northern European Drama

Katie Trumpener
Yale University

I feel particularly honoured to be asked to deliver this year's Milan Dimić Memorial Lecture,* because my first Comparative Literature professors were Milan Dimić and Henry Kreisel. As an undergraduate at the University of Alberta, I majored in Honours English, not in Comparative Literature. In those days, the two units fought well-established turf wars, not least over who had the right to teach European drama. My first Comparative Literature course was Kreisel's eye-opening Modern European Drama (with a particularly memorable session on how to read Chekhov's dialogue).

The next semester, I took Dimić's course on psychoanalysis and literature—reading Freud on the uncanny, along with E.T.A. Hoffman, and Freud's essay on Wilhelm Jensen's *Gravida*, along with Ernest Jones and Marie Bonaparte. Dimić was a learned, rather formidable teacher, relatively unbending, relatively formal. Yet our class met in a small seminar room with a stupendous view of Edmonton's river valley and the Alberta Legislature building, and there was a recurrent moment in which Professor Dimić pointed out the unmistakable similarities between the architectural style of our local parliament and that of the parliament building in Belgrade.

In later years, I came to appreciate how much comparatists from Central Europe—especially the Balkans—had done, from the late nineteenth century onwards, to shape our discipline, and to appreciate, deeply, how easily, frequently and self-evidently the University of Alberta Comparative Literature department, as I then knew it, had included all of Eastern Europe in their conception of European literature. To

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that end, it was very open to reading and teaching in translation. Such openness, as I came to realize, was rather unusual, but it shaped much of my own outlook on the field and my own work.

Peculiar and random though Dimić's observation seemed at the time, I savour in retrospect his recurrent juxtaposition between his native Serbia and Edmonton, as the place he spent much of his professional life. In his 1995 prose memoir, *Two Cities: On Exile, History and the Imagination*, the Polish émigré poet Adam Zagajewski describes the oddities of his own infancy and childhood, spent from 1945 onwards in Wroclaw (formerly Breslau), whose German citizens were forcibly cleared at the end of World War II and which was then resettled with Polish expellees the Soviets had forcibly cleared from eastern Poland. Naturally, these new residents mourned their lost places of origin; Zagajewski describes how his family's lost Lvov lingered in memory underneath their lives in postwar Wroclaw, one city mentally overlaid atop another.

Those who built Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta and across North America were often exiles, expatriates, or expellees similarly haunted by World War II and by the Cold War. Along with Ernst Reinhold, Henry (originally Heinrich) Kreisel came to Canada as teenage internees, Jewish children who fled Nazi occupation only to find themselves imprisoned by the British government as enemy aliens and shipped out to Canada for further years of internment; an apparently inauspicious beginning. Yet their binocular vision of the world helped to shape Comparative Literature at Alberta as a particularly cosmopolitan discipline.

European modernism, this essay will argue, often involved a similarly stereoscopic vision: not always of two cities, but of two places, planes of action, two layers of time. The essay is itself a retrospective attempt to link the respective canons of Alberta's Comparative Literature and English departments in my day. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, every university book sale at Alberta overflowed with dozens, even hundreds of copies of the books assigned perennially in freshman English courses: the work of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, J.M. Synge's *Plays*. All three of these feature prominently in this essay. But they are put into dialogue, in various ways, with the broader range of works Kreisel used to teach as well: with Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg.

The essay returns to a key notion in Comparative Literature from its inception: that in different parts of Europe, writers avidly read each other, pondering what their peers elsewhere are doing, and trying to figure out how to apply it to their own local and national situations, or even if they are not reading one another directly, somehow reacting inchoately to a shared historical moment, shared European cultural imperatives. Comparative Literature spent its early life preoccupied with such moments and force fields of cross-cultural convergence and transfer—and these are issues we should keep thinking about.

This essay borrows some of its organizational structure from Artur Schnitzler's scandalous play *La Ronde* (*Reigen*, written 1897, printed 1900). Schnitzler's title refers

to a couple dance in which the couples are constantly shifting: A dances (and sleeps) with B, then B dances (and sleeps) with C, who then gets together with D, until the final partner meets up with and sleeps with A. Schnitzler's play consists of a long series of two-by-two conversations, in which one character tries and ultimately succeeds in seducing the other. Each brief encounter ends with a blackout indicating sexual intercourse: cumulatively, back to back, they show an ultimately closing circle dance of sexual dalliance and mésalliances, high and low, across class and ethnic lines.

My essay is about the exchange of aesthetic ideas and formal strategies rather than body fluids. And yet the idea of key European modernists dancing with one another or with each other's shadow, does capture something about the fluidity, grace and excitement of their encounters. Above all, this is an essay on death and memory, centered on James Joyce's famous 1914 story, "The Dead." The original invitation to deliver this talk suggested I present work that represented the present and the future of the field. Instead, like "The Dead" itself, and like the speech Gabriel gives at his aunts' annual holiday gathering, this might instead be seen as backward looking, perhaps even nostalgic, conjuring and evoking the recent past of this field, memorializing the founding generation of Comparative Literature at this university and the kinds of work and teaching they used to do.[1]

1. Dubliner, West Briton, or Citizen of the Cosmos: Gabriel with Sweeney and Vanya

> "O, Mr. Conroy, will you come for an excursion to the Aran Isles this summer? We're going to stay there a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic. You ought to come. Mr. Clancy is coming, and Mr. Kilkelly and Kathleen Kearney. It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?"
> "Her people are," said Gabriel shortly.
> "But you will come, won't you?" said Miss Ivors, laying her arm hand eagerly on his arm.
> "The fact is," said Gabriel, "I have just arranged to go—"
> "Go where?" asked Miss Ivors.
> —Well, you know, every year I go for a cycling tour with some fellows and so-
> —But where? asked Miss Ivors.
> —Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany, said Gabriel awkwardly.
> —And why do you go to France and Belgium, said Miss Ivors, instead of visiting your own land?
> —Well, said Gabriel, it's partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change.
> —And haven't you your own language to keep in touch with—Irish? asked Miss Ivors.
> —Well, said Gabriel, if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language. (Joyce, "The Dead" 189)

During a heated exchange in Joyce's "The Dead," Miss Ivor pointedly questions

Gabriel as to why he vacations in France or Belgium instead of the West of Ireland, why he tries to "keep in touch with" his continental languages at the expense, to her way of thinking, of cultivating his own language. Gabriel is hesitant but blunt in replying.

By the story's end, the singing of a traditional ballad, *The Lass of Aughrim*, has stirred in Gabriel's wife Gretta memories of her Galway girlhood—and her repressed romantic past implicitly opens the question of a repressed national past too. Gabriel's own inner voice has become riddled with self-hatred—the grownup instantiation of that self-castigating inner voice we first hear emerging at the end of Joyce's "Araby"; conscious of unfulfilled lust, of habitual love—although now Gabriel wonders if, because it never occurred to him to die for love of someone, he has ever really known love at all).

When the narrator, in free indirect discourse, passing in and out of Gabriel's thoughts, as he looks out into the snowy night, takes up and repeats from the aunts' party a brief snippet of the newspaper weather report, emphasizing that "snow is general all over Ireland," the phrase announces a major shift of scale, a move away from the specific struggles of the musical aunts, their friends and guests, Gabriel and Gretta towards an encompassing view of humanity and Ireland:

> A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. [...] The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. [...] His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (Joyce, "The Dead" 224-25)

What, we might wonder, is the relationship between those painfully felt and barely self-revealed inner thoughts, seldom or never spoken aloud, and the more sovereign position of the free indirect narrator? Since "The Dead" is the culminating story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, the announcement that "the snow was general all over Ireland" also serves to resituate the case of Dublin, *Dubliners*'s case studies, in a much larger frame: the snow falls on the living and the dead, on Dublin and on the Irish-speaking West of Ireland, on one man's inadequacies, on one woman's lost love, yet simultaneously on Ireland's whole population.

Perhaps the same shift is marked when Greta, belatedly telling Gabriel of her long-ago courtship by Michael Furey, exclaims "I was great with him at that time" (Joyce, "The Dead" 221). To the non-Irish reader, the phrase is strikingly unfamiliar; throughout *Dubliners*, indeed, North American readers will find speech rhythms, emphases, phrases that strike their ears as odd, off, awkward, or unfamiliar. "Irish is not my language," says Gabriel, and yet *Dubliners* everywhere (both in the speech of Joyce's characters and indeed in the cadences of the narrative voice itself) man-

ifests a commitment to the specificity of Irish English. That *is* Gabriel's language, subtly different from that spoken in other parts of Britain. Gretta, from the West of Ireland, may well know Irish too. Yet to the North American ear, at least, the phrase "great with him" already connotes not only intimacy but pregnancy, being great with child: I felt him inside my body, my feelings gestated inside of me as if I was carrying new pulsating life. It also, like the snow that is *general* throughout Ireland (again a phrase that strikes the non-Irish ear), an announcement of something bigger than the speaker. I was made larger—and more general—by his presence in me; I was made more general too; this love inside me sharpened my senses and my awareness of the world; the deep sympathy and identification he awoke in me made me more capacious emotionally and psychically, inflated me, made me take in the world more keenly.

In the aftermath of Gretta's confessional outpouring, Gabriel doubts, at least in passing, his own capacity to feel or to inspire deep love. Unlike Furey or Gretta, he has never really imagined dying for someone, or for love. And yet, as he looks out the window, into the snow, and understands it to be general across Ireland, he too takes on a greatness of perspective he previously lacked: he is great with Gretta, but full of compassionate love for, indeed in some sense pregnant with, the sufferings, hopes and losses of the whole snowy country, and what lies beyond. Earlier chastised by Miss Ivors as a West Briton, a cosmopolitan who neglects his own country and countrymen in search of a European ideal, Gabriel at this moment swoons with a vision of Ireland as a whole, the immanent death of his elderly aunts (and the customs of hospitality and music-making they embody), with his own place, placelessness, and transience in the world of the living.

Yet this is also a literary moment, recalling Thomas Grey's famous 1750 "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard": in a world left "to darkness and to me" (Gray 118, l. 6) the author feels "a solemn stillness" in the air, as he thinks of the local dead, never more to rise, as of the "short and simple annals of the poor" (Gray 123, l. 32). "Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid, Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire" (Gray 125, l. 45-46), "some mute inglorious Milton" (Gray 128, l. 59). As Gabriel ruminates on the living and the dead, lying in their beds or in their graves under the snow of Dublin, he too experiences a swooning heart, "pregnant with celestial fire," or at least with a celestial purview. The snow is general all over Ireland; everyone lives, then dies; that is the shared condition of humanity, and yet there only occasionally visionary moments in which the fact of this living and dying is apprehended fully as a shared fate, a mute humanity glimpsed, pitied, and understood in its struggles, and thus memorialized.

From an Irish Studies perspective, this move, via the national weather report, from an individual's struggles to an encompassing view of humanity, might seem highly local and deeply traditional within Irish literature, particularly in its long poetry of exile. The anonymous poem *Sweeney Astray*, for instance, was found in a seventeenth-century manuscript, but almost certainly written between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, first published in English translation in 1913 (in J.G. O'Keefe's

rendition *The Frenzy of Suibhne, being The Adventures of Suibhne Geilt. A Middle Irish romance*), and later serving as a critical source text for Flann O'Brien's 1939 experimental meta-novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and Eimar O'Duffy's 1926 modernist novel *King Goshawk and the Birds*, and beautifully retranslated by Seamus Heaney in 1983.

In the original poem King Sweeney refuses to allow Christian outposts to be established in his kingdom, angrily tossing St. Ronan's missal into the water. After Ronan curses him, Sweeney goes mad and becomes a bird, destined to circle Ireland for years until he has experienced, in his own body, an ornithological equivalent of the harrowing of Christ, and implicitly felt compassion for all of human and animal kind. Forced into endless, looping exilic flight over his former kingdom, Sweeney alternates between the lyrical celebration of the freedom of sky and branch, and bleak accounts of the difficulties of foraging and survival:

> Tonight the snow is cold.
> I was at the end of my tether
> But hunger and bother are endless.
>
> [...] Look at me now [....]
>
> wind-scourged, stripped
> like a winter tree
> clad in black frost
> and frozen snow....
>
> I wish I lived safe
> and sound in Rasharkin
> and not here, heartbroken,
> in my bare pelt, at bay in the snow. (Heaney 15-16)

Yet at the poem's end, as Sweeney's "death-swoon" (74) comes upon him, the compassionate cleric Moling, who has long fed and sheltered him in his parish church, eulogizes Sweeney as if his sufferings are now memorialized in the landscape itself, leading Sweeney "out of his swoon" (75) only to have him die fully at the church door. This move from swoon to swoon may be understood as a brief, Christ-like resurrection. Meanwhile, Moling describes his own mode of memorializing compassion, potentially encompassing the whole of Ireland, living and dead:

> I am standing beside Sweeney's tomb
> Remembering him. Wherever he
> migrated in flight from home
> will always be dear to me [....]
>
> Because Sweeney was a pilgrim
> to the stoup of every well
> and every green-frilled, cress-topped stream,
> their water's his memorial.
>
> Now, if it be the will of God,

rise, Sweeney, take this guiding hand
that has to lay you in the sod
and draw the dark blinds of the ground.

I ask a blessing, by Sweeney's grave.
His memory flutters in my breast.
His soul roosts in the tree of love.
His body sinks in its clay nest. (Heaney 74-75)

Gabriel's swooning apprehension of Dublin and of Ireland, lying under the snow, amalgamates both Sweeney's suffering, near-death apprehension of the landscape as he traverses it, and Moling's compassionate, memorializing vision of Ireland as focused through Sweeney's dying body. Gabriel, a man of letters, writer and critic, moderately successful if anxious public speaker, is capable at moments of poetic language, and loves the feel of books as well as their cultural cache. Yet Gabriel is also elitist, gauche, self-involved, and tone-deaf, and it is only in the story's final lines that he is able to take flight aesthetically, spiritually and morally, able to surmount his own sense of suffering, able to pass psychically through the windowpane to reach the outside world, to voice a more transcendent conception of the world stretched below. An Irish Studies, diachronic reading of "The Dead" might find already here (as later, in a different mode, in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) a deep homage to Irish literary tradition, and to the poet as exilic consciousness, doomed to stand apart from, so as to contemplate and memorialize, Irish culture, and a recognition of the awkwardness and insensitivities that stance can give rise to.

As the rest of this paper will argue, there is also a more synchronic, Comparative Literature, way to read early Irish modernism, if we consider Joyce, Yeats, and Synge in terms of an intellectual and aesthetic weather system "general all over northern Europe," with important connections, in particular, to the modernist drama of Scandinavia, Russia and Central Europe, to Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Polish dramatist Stanislaw Wyspianski.

Until the 1980s and then the most recent wave of Polish immigration to Britain, we might have thought of Poland and Ireland as inhabiting very different Europes, different psychic and cultural universes. Until we remember, that is, that Irish monks participated in the medieval Christianizing of Poland; that at the end of the Williamite Wars, some of Ireland's Jacobite Wild Geese ended up in Polish military service; that both countries became key Catholic strongholds, that both countries suffered long partitions, that Joyce's own brother was named Stanislaus. And in *Ulysses*, Joyce focalizes the action partly through the perspective of an Irish Jew, of Eastern European provenance, and hence takes in the realities of Irish coexistence and anti-semitism, perhaps in light of what came to be known as the Limerick Boycott, or Pogrom, of 1904 (see Ó'Grádá).

The links between Ireland and Scandinavia run deeper yet. Dublin was established originally in the ninth century as a Viking settlement, remaining largely under Viking control until the eleventh century and is still, archeologically, one of

the world's best preserved Viking settlements. Irish monks, conversely, were reportedly in Iceland even before its settlement by the Norse; and throughout the Icelandic sagas, characters repeatedly travel between Scandinavia and Ireland, whether on diplomatic or trade missions. We can see of course that Viking and Celtic art—most visibly their "knots"—become historically intertwined, as Hiberno-Norse artists and artisans working in medieval Ireland introduced the Viking late Ringerrike and Urnes styles into Irish ecclesiastical and military decoration.

The turn of the century saw a different kind of entwinement. Joyce became deeply interested in Ibsen, learning Norwegian, writing essays about Ibsenian drama, even writing to Ibsen himself.[2] As my colleague Joe Cleary has reminded me, Ibsen inspired Joyce not only because he offered a model for a new, civically engaged and formally experimental theater, but because for Joyce, Ibsen represented a model of how a culture and language previously seen as peripheral could stake a claim as one of Europe's cultural innovators.

What Ibsen represented for Joyce was not least the possibility of cultural self-renewal without the heavy burden of nationalist historicism. Heretofore Norwegian had largely been a spoken vernacular, almost completely lacking a literary tradition, just as Norway itself, yoked alternately to Sweden and to Denmark, had heretofore lacked political sovereignty. Ibsen's oeuvre includes texts (like his patriotic poem *Terye Vigen*) with nationalist overtones, but also his cosmopolitan, Faustian drama *Peer Gynt*, and above all, a long series of domestic dramas focused on the psychological interactions of husband and wife, parents and children, employer and employee. Ibsen is an innovator, not least, in his extremely detailed use of stage directions, his attention to the furnishings of the bourgeois home, to taste as an index of psychological state and moral character. Ibsen's then is often emphatically a vernacular theater, not only in its use of ordinary spoken language, but in his attention to the structuring contradictions of ordinary middle-class life, to marriage, family, work, to furniture and wallpaper as making up the doll's house within which life is lived.

Although Joyce is preeminently a fiction writer, some of *Dubliners*' early stories are written almost as plays, with huge attention to dialogue, to ordinary, even routinized language as a medium of daily self-expression, to cadence, to platitude, to the ways inner uncertainties, individual and collective, can be masked or muffled by language, and yet, to the discerning ear, remain audible in the mode of speech.

To move from the stage to the page is of course to move from the externalization of emotion in uttered language and gesture to a fictional mode that moves between the occurrences and interactions of the outer world and an inner theater of the mind. Yet turn-of-the-century symbolist and Expressionist drama was itself preoccupied with the staging of inner life, inner states. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, likewise, are concerned with the ways apparently quotidian incidents, conversations and interactions lay bare "life lies" and the ideological contradictions which hold their subjects caught. Their work, arguably, both anticipates and shapes Freudian psychoanalysis, not least in their attention to the depths of vernacular language, all that is caught,

codified and betrayed in ordinary utterances.

Joyce claimed, to Herbert Gorman, not to have read or seen any Chekhov until after *Dubliners* was published, a comment many critics have refused to take at face value, finding a range of resonances and overlaps between particular stories, as in the mode in which first Chekhov and then Joyce conceive of the short story, no longer plot centered, but attempting to sample the texture of ordinary existence and thought.[3]

There are also interesting parallels between the shift of scales at the end of "The Dead" and in Chekhov's 1897 *Uncle Vanya*. Unlike many previous Ibsen, Strindberg, and even early Chekhov plays, *Uncle Vanya* does not climax with a suicide; suicide no longer offers a way out of the play's impasses. Instead, once the agitating family visitors have returned to Moscow, the remaining provincial characters take up their old occupations. The old nurse prepares tea, Sonia and Vanya settle to the account books. Yet what mitigates against the play's proto-Beckettian evocation of circularity and futility are the clarity and compassion with which the characters see their own situation, the knowledge that they bring to the struggles of those around them, and the introduction, over the play's course, of larger time-scales.

More than Chekhov's earlier plays, *Uncle Vanya* suggests a dawning sense of historical placement and possibility. Early on, Vanya (Voynitsky) himself denounces the futility of a political culture based on manifestos and impotent political discussion:

> Act 1. MRS. VOYNITSKY. I had a letter today from Kharkov, from Paul Alekseyevich. He sent me his new pamphlet. [...] He attacks the very position he was defending seven years ago. That's dreadful.
> VOYNITSKY. There's nothing dreadful about it. Drink your tea, mother.
> MRS. VOYNITSKY. But I want to talk.
> VOYNITSKY. For fifty years we've talked and talked and read pamphlets. And it's about time we stopped. (Chekhov 125)

Vanya suggests that an epoch of would-be reform has run its course, and perhaps needs to be replaced by some other understanding of the world and time itself, some new sense of agency.

In counterpoint, Dr. Astrov, otherwise so cynical and misanthropic, in act after act articulates a second set of ecological critique that suggests, for very different reasons, that the current economy, the current mode of life is no longer sustainable. Ecological catastrophe looms—an inconvenient truth; some other dispensation is necessary.

> Act 1. ASTROV. […] But why ruin the forests? The forests of Russia are crashing down under the axe, millions upon millions of trees perish, the homes of birds and beasts are devastated, rivers grow shallow and dry up [....] Forests keep disappearing, rivers dry up, wild life's become extinct, the climate is ruined, and the land grows poorer and uglier every day. [...] But when I walk past our village woodlands which I've saved from the axe, or hear the rustle of my own saplings, planted with my own hands, I feel I too have some slight control over the climate and that if man is happy a thousand years from now I'll have done a bit towards it myself [...] (127-28)

> Act 3. The elk, swans, and wood-grouse are no more [...] The general picture is one of

> a gradual and unmistakable decline, and it obviously needs only another ten or fifteen more years to become complete. You'll tell me it's the influence of civilization, that the old life obviously had to make way for the new. [...] If roads and railways had been built in place of the ravaged woodlands, if we had factories, workshops, and schools, the peasants would have become healthier, better off and more intelligent. But you see, nothing of the sort has happened. Our district still has the same old swamps and mosquitoes, the same terrible roads, the same poverty, typhus, diphtheria [...] now pretty much everything has been destroyed, but so far nothing new has been put in its place. [*Coldly*] I can see this bores you. (148)

The pamphlets still being received and read early in Act I seem to call for immediate (if perhaps gradual) political reform. Yet over the course of the play, Astrov lays out a vision of ecological and hence also political change on a different time scale. And when Vanya expresses physical as well as psychic despair near the end of the play, Astrov tries to give him hope in a vision of futurity.

> Act 4. VOYNITSKY. Please give me something. [*Pointing to his heart.*] I've a burning feeling here.
> ASTROV. [*Shouts angrily*] Oh, shut up! [*More gently*] Those who live a century or two after us and despise us for leading lives so stupid and tasteless, perhaps they'll find a way to be happy, but as for us—. (161)

What is impending, to Astrov, is not only political impasse but ecological apocalypse. The questions of the day give way to the long-range question of earth's survival. Yet Astrov also articulates the implicit hope of a different posterity. Will those a hundred or two hundred years hence understand what we suffered and attempted to build the more secure future that they now inhabit? In the ambivalent character of Astrov (as his name suggests), Chekhov articulates a planetary and epochal vision, moving from the clearcutting of old forests to a new world order.

For Astrov, of course, taking up the cause of the trees and worrying about the future also deflects attention from his own misanthropic relations with actual present-day people. But in an apparently closed society this opening towards the planet and the future offer some means of imaging a beyond. And that enlarging of perspective is also implicitly an enlargement of spirit—to feel a kind of compassion for the animals and people across the country, not only of the present but into the future. The impact of conservation is general all over Russia, perhaps all over Europe and on the climate of the world.

Meanwhile, Chekhov's characters end Uncle Vanya with the full measure of one another; unlike in Ibsen's plays, where there is hope that revelation—the uncovering of social hypocrisy or contradiction—will lead to some higher truth, these characters instead rather quickly come to know each other's deepest fears and feelings of being stuck. In the final scene, they can thus joke their way through a moment of suicidal despair; unlike in Ibsen, Strindberg or early Chekhov, no one is actually going to commit suicide; everyone instead will have to keep living, enduring. At least they are known, transparent to each other, see each other struggling in parallel trenches, even

if some deeper intimacy, spiritual, physical, or emotional comfort and reassurance eludes them.

In Chekhov, almost no one ever gets to live with the person they want and love; the person who enables them to feel a sense of real possibility about themselves. They are left trying to keep finding that potential within themselves in the absence of the animating company that would make it all easy and self-evident. Joyce's Gabriel, in contrast, gets to live with, be married to and have children with Greta, to inhabit a joint life in which they are aware of each other's presence across a crowded room, then adjourn to a "secret life" together. What "The Dead" famously faces instead is the sense of separateness and loneliness even within that marriage; the uncanny discovery that the loved one, the desired one, has an inner life that is fundamentally unknowable, that even years of a shared past do not grant depth of understanding. That must come from something almost theological, or almost nationalist, or something in between: neither quite the sense of an individual soul living, dying and swooning under the blowing snow, nor quite its secularized nineteenth century replacement, the sense of an aggregate if not quite unified Irish nation, à la Benedict Anderson, by newspapers read all over Ireland, reporting on a weather system spread all over Ireland, joined in a shared present, of shared media and shared quotidian experience as well as a shared past.

It is the writer's calling, Joyce suggests, to try to capture, somehow, both what love might mean in its sacrificial depths and its inadequacies and blindness, what Dublin and Ireland might mean: an aggregate of souls, not quite a nation in the modern European sense, not unified by language nor custom. Something like Araby, perhaps, a mythic name covering the mercantile realities of a system of economic exchange, something like the dreams of freedom and adventure that animate the schoolboys playing hooky, the boy pondering the mysteries of the priest's life, death, and madness, the bereaved lover pondering a suicide, the would-be emigrant drawn towards a different life but too frightened to leave home. Something intangible, involving projection, loss, hope, solidarity, and sorrow.

2. Nora in the Kitchen: Synge with Strindberg (and Ibsen and Chekhov)

Strindberg's 1888 "Preface to *Miss Julie*" calls for a series of crucial theatrical reforms, many of which we take for granted today. A play's characters must be understood simultaneously in historical, sociological and psychological terms. Modern characters, subject to the fragmentation of modern life, are as if made of patchwork, an incoherent jumble of old and new impulses. Yet these contradictions also give them a frenetic life. In contrast, Strindberg argues, nineteenth-century bourgeois drama is moribund or dead. No innovation can be reasonably expected on the stages of Paris or London. They will continue to recycle ossified forms of drama. Only on the out-

skirts of Europe is true innovation currently possible; dramatists must band together to create new theatrical spaces, hewing to *their* necessities, and fostering new kinds of experience and discussion, and even where that is impossible must continue to write dramas in the hope of later staging. The stage itself needs to change. The theatre space should be darkened, to enable intense concentration on what is transpiring on stage. If a play opens in a kitchen, viewers ought to be able to see an actual stove, not just a painted backdrop. If the cook needs to turn her back to the audience to finish her preparations, so be it. She should cook in real time; the audience can watch and wait.

Miss Julie, of course, opens in a kitchen, and remains there for the play's duration. Yet its set, Strindberg is quite insistent, should consist not of a fully visible kitchen, but of a partial glimpse into the room. Seen only at an oblique angle, the kitchen remains partially unseen and hence unknown even as it is laid bare as the place where the real action, and tensions, of the house occur. Strindberg's sliced-up, only partially viewable kitchen set makes visible both its own efforts and the limitation of its ability to lay bare the contradictions of class society, of aristocratic decline, of feminism and its legacies, of the notion of the self-made man. Before *Miss Julie* is over, we will have experienced characters sparring and sleeping with one another, the trampling of and then unsuccessful attempts to resurrect class and gender barriers, moments of abject masochism and self-flagellation, the violent killing of a domestic songbird and the equally violent (if off-stage) suicide of the title character.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* likewise opens in a kitchen. And it works to solicit the rapt attention of its audience. During its 1904 premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin theatregoers apparently did listen to *Riders* in hushed, reverent silence, before going on to clamour—in a now-famous theatre riot—at the impieties and violence of the evening's second play, Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. In fact *Riders*, like *Miss Julie*, is a play obsessed with the spectre of violence—here the violence of the sea and of grief.

One man has died shortly before the play opens, killed in and by the sea, and before the play is over, only a few minutes later, another character will be dead as well. And these are only the latest, and the last, in a long series of male deaths; Niobe-like, Maurya loses to the sea the last of her many sons, and hence reaches an odd, bleak moment of content: she is at the very nadir of loss; there is nowhere further to fall; the sea is finished with her. As the corpse of her last son is laid out on the kitchen table, she declares simply that "the end is come," she prays for the souls of each and all of her lost men, and for "the soul of everyone left living in the world" (Synge, *Riders* 12). Against the keening of the women around her, she ends the play declaring her last two children will be well buried, one in the coffin soon to be assembled in the kitchen: "Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely [...] What more can we want but that? [...] No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied" (Synge, *Riders* 12).

Strindberg's play let us look into a slice of kitchen life, a slice of manor life, an episode in the ongoing decline and shift of an old class order. With her feminist mother

and her idealistic father, and her vestiges of aristocratic entitlement, Julie is simultaneously before and after her time, a stranded vestige and tragic harbinger of bigger struggles, transitions and contradictions to come. At the same time her person comes to embody the untenable state of the present social order, and so she must die.

Synge slices differently. Here the slicing is not visible, in the construction of the set, the oblique lines of vision it makes possible, but in the implied temporal structure of the play. We happen upon the characters on a moment of great intensity, in which the overlap of deaths—the one corpse just found and identified, the other corpse alive and speaking in the middle of the play but dead by its end—makes clear to us the vast and enduring cruelty of toiling lives by the sea. We are vouchsafed a representative glimpse into a life of subsistence, endurance, loss and pain, and left glad to be spared longer immersion. The tragic depth of the play lies partly in its compression, but also in its function as an almost bearable synecdoche of a life world and life experience that is unbearable in its duration and unremitting suffering.

In Chekhov's *Seagull*, the suicide of Constantin at the play's end occurs offstage, even as Constantin's mother, and other characters, as yet knowing nothing the tragedy, engage in a long game involving calling out numbers, something like a Russian bingo. Constantin's now unbearable pain, decision to end it, is counterpointed by a moment in which most of the other characters are distracting themselves with numbers.

At the end of *Uncle Vanya* too, only slightly less tragically, those left at home, those left abandoned to their rut, try to regroup partly by a turn to numbers, Sonja and Vanya working together over the estate account books, and trying to make sense of their finances. Over the course of Chekhov's play, we have gotten a detailed picture of the social world of the estate, its human ecosystem, its rhythms, its contradictions. Now there is an effort by its most stalwart but also most miserable characters to bear the present and future of their lives by shifting to a numerical way of reckoning it. Their history is obscure and will be forgotten, they will live and die unredeemed by love, but the account books, pathetically enough, will be their monument.

In *Riders to the Sea*, likewise, a lost life is reckoned in numbers: as Michael's sisters Cathleen and Nora spread out the rags of clothing found floating with his bloated, unidentifiable corpse, to work out if the body is his. We might note the significance of the sisters' names—perfectly ordinary Irish names in one way, but also a suggestion of their author's interest in melding the hieratic language and call of the past from Yeats and Lady Gregory's pathbreaking 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (premiered in 1904 on the first night of the Abbey Theatre) with the "German and French literature" Yeats describes Synge reading during his time on the Continent.

In the same essay, his patronizing 1905 "Preface to *The Well of the Saints*," Yeats recalls counseling Synge that he would never become a Racine, urging him to leave Paris and travel instead to the Aran Islands. As Yeats describes it, indeed, Synge so thoroughly internalized this advice that he later resisted Yeats's attempts to establish a place for continental drama at the Abbey (Yeats, "Preface" 36). Yet Synge's own

poetics were also shaped not only by his study of the Irish language at Trinity College Dublin but by a lecture at the Sorbonne, a year later, introducing him to Breton folklore collecting. The Breton revival itself seems influenced by the work of Ireland's Gaelic League. Nonetheless it was Synge's time in Paris that led him "back" to the Aran Islands, and French attempts to fathom their own ancient regional languages which led Synge to his pathbreaking experiments with vernacular rhythms, particularly the attempt to capture Irish-language cadences in spoken English. While on the continent, moreover, Synge saw and read a wide range of modern drama, remaining particularly preoccupied with the works of Ibsen and Maurice Maeterlink (see Levitas). And thus, the Nora constantly looking out the window in a remote coastal cottage in the West of Ireland may bear some relation to Ibsen's New Woman Nora, walking out the door of her bourgeois home in Christiania or Bergen.

Synge's women do not have the economic means to search for self-fulfillment. But by the end of Synge's play, Mauyra joins Cathleen ni Houlihan in manifesting the "walk of a queen" (Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* 140).[4] Mauyra remains upright and erect amid the sorrow of loss, after the long interlude in which Synge's Nora, like Ibsen's, has sought to shield others from the full brunt of the world's blows. Yet at a pivotal moment, Synge's Nora (like Ibsen's) is unable to avoid a more tragic knowledge herself. It is Nora, of the two sisters, forced in the end to recognize Michael's corpse, to acknowledge and herald his death. By counting the stitches of his sock, she realizes it is one she knit herself, because she can still remember the increases and decreases she made while making it:

> NORA [*who has taken up the stocking and counted the stitches, crying out*]. It's Michael, Cathleen, it's Michael; God spare his soul [...]
> CATHLEEN [*taking up the stocking*]. It's a plain stocking.
> NORA. It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three score stitches, and I dropped four of them.
> CATHLEEN [*counts the stitches*]. It's that number is in it. [*Crying out*] (*Riders* 7)

Shortly thereafter, Nora is again the one to see and report the arrival of Bartley's corpse.

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the Old Woman's arrival disrupts the rhythms of daily life. The family is preparing for a wedding, thinking about and receiving the dowry. They are simultaneously celebrating and accounting, living in the present but anticipating a happy future for the young couple, the family's reproduction into infinity. The Old Woman arrives as an unsettling embodiment of some other logic, some other world, crazy or supernatural, as one family member conjectures. By the play's end, her alternative logic—one of epic history, heroism, martyrdom, the memory and praise of future generations—has won out over the quotidian present.

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, nationalist violence may precipitate a new future, even must and will in time, over time, no matter how many generations must be lost before that happens. Synge's Nora and Cathleen, like Chekhov's characters, are mired in the ongoing, repetitive dilemmas of their own lives. Death may lurk, but not tran-

scendence; the best to be hoped is a stoical acceptance of one's own limitations, in the hope that the audience, somehow, will see, comprehend and internalize their suffering. In this way, perhaps, as Chekhov's Astrov argues, they are implicitly in communication with an as-yet unknowable future, whose denizens may look back, a century on, with pity and admiration for their struggles. These moments are crucial ones, in which the characters—and thus the audience members too—open themselves to a bigger sense of totality. The snow is general in Ireland. Gabriel watches the snow, thinks of the living and the dead. Maurya prays God to have mercy on her beloved dead, on her own soul, "and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world" (12). Nora and Cathleen can find no way forward but to keep spinning yarn, Penelopes or Norns of the Western Isles, their hand-knit socks serving as Annals of the Poor, the only surviving records of who the dead were.

3. James Joyce and Stanislaw, Dancing at the Party

This essay's final pairing might, at first glance, seem more random: Joyce's "The Dead," once again, read against Stanislaw Wyspianski's 1901 *The Wedding* (*Wesele*), still the most famous single work of Polish modernism and of Polish drama (perhaps best-known, outside Poland, through Andrej Wajda's 1972 film adaptation). Wyspianski's peasants and intellectuals gather in a village outside Kracow to celebrate a poet's marriage to a peasant girl; such *mésalliances* and weddings were fashionable in Kracow bohemian circles, as emblematic of nationalist attempts to unite two crucial sectors of an eternally-divided Polish society. As in Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, the play's action takes place against the backdrop (and to the partially off-stage music and noise) of communal dancing. During the first act, a succession of quintessential characters (peasant girls, urban journalist, Jewish innkeeper, local townspeople, Kracow poets, and so on) trade barbs or converse or flirt with one another, scene after scene, two by two. A few years earlier, in Vienna, Schnitzler's *La Ronde* deployed a similar organizational device. *Wedding* too, pair by pair, presents a cumulative, broad, sometimes satirical, sometimes thought-provoking social panorama, although here the pairs generally converse rather than fornicate. At moments, at the same time, the play problematizes its own national pageant, not least over the issue of peasant mass violence, scapegoating, and especially anti-Semitism.

Nationalist mythology both comes to life and becomes spectral in the play's last two acts, as national heroes from the past reappear among the wedding guests as ghosts. Each ghost buttonholes a particular interlocutor, and tries to return to action and agency in the world through the portal of a particular contemporary person. Amusingly, the modern-day journalist converses with the court jester of the Renaissance era, his own ancestor both in his satirical edge and his social marginality. A husband, Wojtek, becomes discomfited by the sense that his young wife, Marysia, is being commandeered somehow for another wedding to another man, and

immediately thereafter, she is indeed haunted by the ghost of her long-dead fiancé:

WOJTECH. I suddenly came over queer—
Felt like *you* were getting married—
[*Sings.*] "Mary, dear, it isn't ours—
This is not our wedding day!"
MARYSIA. Sit near the children, over there,
a snooze will put you right as rain!
WOJTECH. Things went dark before my eyes,
as I was going to'ards the band;
strange black shapes appeared to rise,
creeping up on us, I swear:
MARYSIA. Shadows on the wall, no doubt,
cast by lamplight. There, you see
how they flicker in and out….

As the two of them retire to the alcove at the back MARYSIA picks up the lamp from the table. The room is in darkness. Only the alcove is lit, apart from a strip of light through the door that leads to the dancing.

Scene 5. MARYSIA, GHOST.
GHOST. I was to have married you—
you, my bride-to-be.
MARYSIA. Betrothed the pair of us, that's true:
You were pledged to me.
GHOST. For me, you were the sun's gold shine!
My little house is chill— (Wispianski 74-75)

They quickly establish that one of them is now dead, the other still very much alive. Marysia weeps for her dead love, and begins imagining they are finally attending their long-posponed wedding to one another. But as they begin a wedding dance, Marysia becomes overwhelmed by the ghost's physical chill, and corpse-like smell. At the last minute she repels him, to seek refuge instead in the arms of her husband:

MARYSIA, WOJTECH.
WOJTECH. Mary, love—your cheeks are white—
MARYSIA. It's nothing—just the way the light
makes my face look—
WOJTECH. Shivering, too—
MARYSIA. Door was open and it blew
a gust of snow inside—no matter.
WOJTECH. Now you're flushed again—that's better.
Why?
MARYSIA. The way you look at me;
Wojtech, hug me to your chest—
You're the one I like the best! (Wispianski 78)

"The Dead," like *The Wedding*, moves from a lovingly yet satirically rendered celebratory assembly, a party mired in covert political, class, and gender tensions, to an eerie wrestling with ghosts. Gretta's lover, to be sure, does not literally rematerialize,

begging her to lie down with him, but she is gripped by the past, the memory of a lost love, just as emphatically as Marysia. Gretta cries herself to sleep, while Marysia finds her way, quite explicitly, back to her sleeping husband, comforted by his physicality, his vitality. Wojtech's sense of the uncanny, presumably, passes too; the couple is reunited, to the ongoing backdrop of the wedding music. In Act III, in contrast, when the whole assembly are roused to action, to retake their country, when the ghosts of the national past seem to summon them to battle, they fall back into paralysis and stasis, and the company as a whole fails once again to respond to their historical opportunity.

Throughout the play, the children in the next room sleep through the dancing, sleep through the aborted uprising. They perhaps sense these events indirectly, in their dreams. They will eventually have to be the ones to impart them to a distant political futurity. But they are unfortunately fast asleep and too young to understand what happened anyway, so they will have to reinvent it for themselves all over again. The fact of past attempts and past failures will not shorten their own way. Wyspianski's vision is more pointedly political and more pointedly fatalistic than Joyce's. Gabriel's vision of the living and the dead makes him, at least for a moment, a kind of Archangel Gabriel, present at the last trumpet, calling all the souls of Ireland out of the earth, for a celestial census taking. In Poland, the ghosts of martial and cultural glory quite literally rise from the tomb, ready to reclaim their country. But their latter-day descendants sleep through it, fail to awake, miss their moment.

In the early *Dubliners* story "After the Race," a young local mingles, after a car rally, with an international crowd of playboy sportsmen as they gamble and drink toasts to their countries: Ireland, England, France, Hungary, and the United States. "That night," Joyce suggests laconically, Dublin itself "wore the mask of a capital" ("After the Race" 39). Joyce's Dublin both was and was not a capital. In the eighteenth century, it had been the seat of the Irish Parliament; in 1922, it would become the official capital of the new Irish Free State. But at the turn of the century, Dublin was instead a colonial administrative center, the capital of Ascendancy rule, but not fully of the Irish nation, the urban center of a British territory, not a European capital to which diplomats and other foreigners regularly flocked. Throughout *Dubliners*, Irish efforts at cosmopolitan status thus retain a complicated relationship to the country and the culture's as yet unfulfilled political aspirations.

Writing of Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century, Carole Fabricant has memorably evoked his recurrent, often-described malaise in the Holyhead ferry, returning from England stiff with revulsion at the thought of Dublin awaiting him, and the filth of its impoverished streets. Yet Swift's most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*, is in part about the pathological character of such revulsion, and the great difficulty reconciling the discoveries of one's voyages, the insights, language worlds and scale of foreign parts back into one's domestic life, the way one remains deracinated and unassimilable, no matter how one has longed to get back home.

In the wake of Montesquieu's 1721 *Persian Letters*, conversely, Anglo-Irish novelist

Oliver Goldsmith and Scots-Irish novelist Elizabeth Hamilton imagined the perceptions and sufferings of a traveler from China or India arriving on Britain's shores. Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812), addressed both to English and Irish readers, model a voyage of homecoming from the putative centers of culture to the complexities of the periphery.

The transit between worlds, whether in reverie or in life, is swoon-inducing. For many of Ireland's early modernists, nonetheless, the launch into the world—preferably into another language world, neither English nor Irish—is a necessary step to understand anything about Irish experience, and perhaps even to survive it.[5] George Moore's 1886 *A Drama in Muslin* presents expatriate existence in the suburbs of London as the only way out of an increasingly suffocating and collapsing Anglo-Irish world. Moore's own conception of the Irish novel was shaped during his time in Paris, by his discovery of Zola.

This essay has drawn connections or parallels between Irish modernists and their continental counterparts. What it has tried to demonstrate, in the process, is that the most famous, memorable, haunting and climactic moments in early Irish modernism—in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, "The Dead," and *Riders to the Sea*—offer sustained dialogue with modernist drama being written and staged elsewhere in northern Europe. This dialogue crosses generic barriers and apparently insuperable linguistic barriers as well. Indeed, it on occasion crosses the barrier separating human language from other sign systems, the world of numbers, account books, and sock diagrams. Not coincidentally, these famous moments themselves all involve an acknowledgement of, renewed openness or address to a larger world.

This essay has traced some vestiges of continental literary experiment in key texts of Irish modernism. In the process, it tries to imagine modern Irish literature fundamentally turned outwards as well as inwards, as a literature of ricochet and boomerang. From *Sweeney* onward, indeed, this has been a literature partly written in or about exile. And at least in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, expatriate writers retained the memory of Irish voices, of Irish and Anglo-Irish cadences sharpened all the more by daily hearing French or German or Italian, or London English, around them on the street.

As an ardent language nationalist, Miss Ivors draws a stark opposition between going "away" to continental Europe and coming "home" to Galway. But Joyce's longer career suggests that the path of exile need not exclude an attempt to retrieve the otherwise lost history of one's native city and country, and to develop new literary forms for and about one's nation. In *Finnegans Wake*, most famously and experimentally, the search for the deep structures of Irish culture and speech involves an immersive near-drowning in the dream life, dream-time, and branching languages of Europe. Hence we might conclude that there was worth, after all, in Gabriel's and Joyce's repeated trips to the continent, to "keep in touch with the languages."

Notes

* For the introductory note on the Milan Dimić Lecture Series in Comparative Literature, see Amir Khadem's "Introduction," *CRCL/RCLC*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2016, pp. 263-64. [Editor's Note]

1. This paper also owes much to discussions (in my 2014 Yale seminar on Northern Modernism, co-taught with Carolyn Sinsky) with Aziza Tichavakunda, Benjamin Symons, Gabrielle Hoyt-Disick, Julian Drucker, Ruier Ma, Sophie Swanson, Toni Dorfman, and Viktoria Paranyuk; in my 2017 Yale Modernism and Domesticity seminar; with Barry McCrea and Joe Cleary, as with interlocutors at the 2014 Irish Seminar (thank you, Diarmuid Ó Giolláin).

2. In the early *Dubliners* story "An Encounter," two boys skipping school for a day of adventure see their city in a new light, including noting the Norwegian ship docked in its harbour.

3. See, for instance, Almond.

4. In the famous last line of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a character is asked if he has seen an old woman (Cathleen) passing. He answers that he has seen "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (140). Cathleen, the shape-shifter, has regained her lost youth and her regal bearing in the wake of Irish mobilization and readiness for self-sacrifice.

5. See, relatedly, Barry McCrea's *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe*, which explores how the apparent dying-out of vernaculars (including Irish) inspired or enabled modernists and late modernists to develop their own idiosyncratic literary variants of those languages. So vernacular modernism has a polyglot unconscious. Jacqueline Amati-Mehler, Simons Argentieri, and Jorge Canestri's intriguing *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*, conversely, looks closely at moments in Freudian case studies and in psychoanalytic practice where bilingualism and polyglot thinking raised fascinating questions of identity and dividedness. Two centuries previously, Richard and Maria Edgeworth's landmark 1802 *Essay on Irish Bulls* argued that the proverbial Irish "howlers" are not ignorant mistakes, but actually the complex expression of bilingual thinking, sometimes implying or masking a subversive political agenda as well, or at the least the impatience of the colonized.

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