

“POOR BANISHED CHILDREN OF EVE”: TOM MURPHY AND THE SYNTAX OF HISTORY¹

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Abstract:

This essay engages with the work of playwright Tom Murphy and suggests that Murphy synthesizes the dialectic between past and present by representing history as a process of story-telling, where hegemonic Catholic bourgeois nationalist history is contradicted by repressed discourses of class and gender. The aim is to move beyond a reading of Irish theatre grounded in identitarian paradigms of nation and nationalism, towards an engagement with ethical issues of class and gender subordination which are as much a part of Irish cultural politics as the nation is or ever was.

Keywords: theatre, Ireland, nationalism, class, gender, identity.

In Tom Murphy's play *Bailegangaire*, the character Mommo, an elderly grandmother on the verge of senility, recites a prayer of lamentation: "Hail Holy Queen [...] Mother of Mercy [...] Hail our lives [...] Our sweetness and our hope [...] To thee do we cry [...] Poor banished children of Eve [...] To thee do we send up our sighs [...] Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears" (168-169). In dramatic terms Mommo's prayer works on several levels of signification. It is a plea for mercy

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and forgiveness, but it is also a cry for representation from working-class women in rural communities who were the victims of class and gender hierarchies during the British colonial administration of Ireland, and continue to be repressed in the postcolonial administration of Catholic *bourgeois* nationalism. I will argue that in *Bailegangaire* and *A Thief of a Christmas*, Tom Murphy brushes Irish history against the grain by representing those discourses which the modernist storm of progress has consigned to the margins of Irish history. In parallel with this analysis of Murphy's plays I will engage with the debate on Irish historiography, particularly as it is manifest in the antagonistic relationship between nationalism and revisionism. I will suggest that Murphy synthesizes the dialectic between past and present by representing history as a process of story-telling, where hegemonic Catholic *bourgeois* nationalist history is contradicted by repressed discourses of class and gender. The aim is to move beyond a reading of Irish theatre grounded in identitarian paradigms of nation and nationalism, towards an engagement with ethical issues of class and gender subordination which are as much a part of Irish cultural politics as the nation is or ever was.

The setting for *Bailegangaire* is "1984, the kitchen of a thatched house" (90) on the Mayo/Galway border in the west of Ireland. The play centres on Mommo's recollection of traumatic events which occurred some thirty years prior to the temporal setting of *Bailegangaire*: "An' no one will stop me! Tellin' my nice story [...] Yis, how the place called Bochtan—and its ground (grand) inhabitants—came by its new appellation, *Bailegangaire*, the place without laughter" (92). Indeed the subtitle to *Bailegangaire* is "The Story of *Bailegangaire* and how it came by its appellation," (89) and Mommo's story is a narrative reconstruction of the events that take place in *A Thief of a Christmas* which Murphy subtitled "The Actuality of how *Bailegangaire* came by its appellation" (171). The two plays are intertextually linked through Mommo's discourse which fractures the temporal consciousness of *Bailegangaire* in 1984 with the representation of traumatic events from

the temporal unconscious of *A Thief of a Christmas* in the 1950s. Through this intertextual link Murphy represents the syntax of history which has been fragmented by the traumatic events of *A Thief of a Christmas* which persists in *Bailegangaire* in the troubled relationships between Mommó, Mary and Dolly. In *Bailegangaire* the time is out of joint and by juxtaposing the historical past with the contemporary present, Murphy opens up a dialogue in broader cultural terms between tradition and modernity. In order to allow this dialogue to emerge and develop, Murphy critiques Eamon de Valera's² nostalgically essentialist³ vision of Ireland in the 1950s through the representation in *A Thief of a Christmas* of the harsh realities of "peasant" life in the pre-industrial era of the recently established Republic. In *Bailegangaire* Murphy effects a similar critique of the epochalistic modernizing vision of Sean Lemass's⁴ administration which instigated Ireland's economic expansion into the world markets of the 1960s and ended up in the predatorial arena of multinational capitalism in the 1980s.

In *A Thief of a Christmas*, Murphy critiques not only de Valera's essentialist vision of Ireland as an agrarian idyll, but also demythologizes J.M. Synge's representation of the west of Ireland as the last vestige of an essential Gaelic culture, embodied in the life of the peasant still living in unity with nature. As Luke Gibbons suggests "idealizations of rural existence, the longing for community and primitive simplicity, are the product of an urban sensibility, and are cultural fictions imposed on the lives of those they purport to represent [...] it was urban based writers, intellectuals and political leaders who created romantic Ireland, and perpetuated the myth that the further west you go, the more you come into contact with Ireland" *Transformations in Irish Culture* (85). While Murphy is undoubtedly an intellectual who constructs a fictional image of the west of Ireland, he is nevertheless a writer who has emerged from the locality which he represents in his plays, rather than an "urban based" writer emerging from the metropolitan centre. This is not to argue for a simplistic notion of cultural authenticity, but only to state that where Synge was a cultural tourist who spent only a relatively short amount of time in the west of

Ireland, Murphy was born in Tuam, County Galway, and spent a considerable part of his life in that region.

The setting for *A Thief of a Christmas* is a “pub-cum general store in a remote village” (172). It is all “quite primitive”, and “[w]e are dealing with a neglected, forgotten peasantry” (175). The store is located in the town of Bochtan, which literally means the “poor place,” and during the course of events poverty is revealed as the informing motif. The play centres on the “laughing competition” (*A Thief of a Christmas* 215) between the local hero Seamus Costello, and the visiting Stranger, Seamus O’Toole. The competition began as a harmless proposition which the two antagonists were prepared to ignore:

COSTELLO. But you’re challengin’ me [...]

STRANGER. No. ‘Twas only a notion.

(And he winks up at COSTELLO so that COSTELLO will understand the better and he adds his chuckle). (205-206)

Matters become deadly serious when the competition takes on economic dimensions as Costello strikes a bet with the stuttering gombeen-man [usurer] John Mahony, who is also the proprietor of the store and holds the villagers to ransom through the amount of financial credit he has given them:

COSTELLO. [...] I’m sick of being called a f-fool by you. The whole farm to you for nothing if I lose [...].

JOHN. F-f-f-if yeh don’t lose?

COSTELLO. I keep the farm and you’ll be givin’ me a hundred pounds. (212-213)

When the other villagers start to bet their property and very livelihood on Costello, the competition escalates to an almost mythical scenario where Costello is representing the impoverished peasantry in unarmed combat against Mahony, the parasitic mercantilist:

OTHERS. Man, Costello!
On, Costello!
Up Bochtan, on Bochtan!
Bochtan forever!" (233)

The Stranger, Seamus O'Toole, is as much a catalyst as he is a competitor, and his motivation for the contest is more for a triumph against constant misfortune than for economic gain. As they enter the store, it is evident that the Stranger and his wife, Brigit, are in mourning: "*The STRANGER is wearing a cap and the usual peasant dress; a black diamond stitched on his sleeve: a symbol that he is in mourning*" (196). The couple are on their way home to their three grandchildren, and Brigit is anxious about their welfare:

STRANGER'S WIFE. And sure we told them for sure we'd be home before dark.

STRANGER. (*unconsciously*). Misfortunes.

(STRANGER *stands abruptly, betraying an inner concern and a turbulence, but he controls himself again and sits.*) (198)

The couple have endured years of hardship and personal catastrophe, and are further worried by the suggestion of troubles which they will have to face in the future, as the "three sticks of rock" meant for their grandchildren are knocked out of Brigit's hand and "trampled underfoot" in the "jostling" for a better view of the laughing contest: "STRANGER'S WIFE. The sweets! [...] The children! My grandchildren! The children that death left in my care!" (207) For Brigit, this is the final insult, and she retorts against incessant misery by throwing down the gauntlet to Costello: "STRANGER'S WIFE. (*to herself*). I'll renege matters no longer [...] (*to JOHN.*) You can decree! - (*To COSTELLO.*) You can decree! - (*To her husband.*) All others can decree! but I'll-bear-matters-no-longer! (*To COSTELLO.*) Och hona-ho 'gus hah-haa! He's challengin' yeh" (207).

Brigit's explosive challenge is a manifestation of her repressed grief which sparks a psychic chain reaction of the return of repressed grief from the collective memory of the Bochtan community which in turn manifest as the guiding topic of the laughing contest:

COSTELLO. Now if we only had the topic to launch us and keep us going.

STRANGER'S WIFE. Misfortunes. (214)

The grief is itself born of material circumstances, as much of the historical trauma is the result of economic hardship. We are told that some of Mommo's children died trying to reclaim livestock:

I had nine sons [...] An' for the sake of an aul' ewe was stuck in the flood was how I lost Jimmy an' Michael [...] An' Pat who was my first born [...] Married the widdy against my wishes [...] An' when he came back for the two sheep (that) were his [...] You'll not have them, I told him, and sent him back, lame, to his strap of a widdy [...] An' he was dead within six months. (232-233)

During the contest, Mommo's story becomes one of many symptoms of repressed historical trauma, as the villagers' woes build into a chorus of catastrophes:

OTHERS. Those lost to America!
Arms lost to the thresher!
Blighted crops!
Bad harvests!
Bad markets!
How to keep the one foot in front of the other!
Per'tonitis!
An' fever, yellow, black an' scarlet!

Chicken-bones!
Briars to take out your eyes!
Or to bate the children with!
Put smacht (*manners*) on them when there's nought for their
bellies!
Miadh, misfortunes!
An' there's more to come!

STRANGERS WIFE. Send them! (*To the heavens.*) (235-236)

In *Tom Murphy: The Politics of Magic*, Fintan O'Toole suggests that this narrative "enacts the classic Nietzschean gesture of man's defiant laughter in the face of death but reverses its political and theatrical meaning. For Nietzsche, that God-defying laughter is a mark of tragedy and of the hero's division from the unworthy crowd. For Murphy, it is a theatrical move beyond tragedy into black comedy, and the moment at which the crowd, the great unwashed of history, becomes collectively heroic" (239). If this gesture is Nietzschean, I would suggest that it is also Benjaminian, in that Costello is the metonymic representation of the "forgotten and neglected peasantry" (*A Thief of a Christmas* 229) who "blasts open the continuum of history" (254), his audacious laughter demanding representation for the marginalized histories of a peasantry "shaped and formed by poverty and hardship" (*A Thief of a Christmas* 215). Costello's roaring laugh blasts open de Valera's metanarrative which marginalizes the peasant's traumatic histories in favour of an idyllic totalizing History. As a result of his supreme effort Costello expires, but in his dying breath both he and the villagers are saved from Mahony's economic tyranny as the bet is won or lost depending on who laughs last:

JOHN. [...] But huh-who laughed last? - The b-book stands.
Now d'ye know. [...]
COSTELLO. I'm goin' (*dying*). You'll give the hundred
pounds to me mother.

JOHN. 'T-'t'll be honoured. 't'll be honoured.

COSTELLO. Wo-ho-ho! An' that's the last laugh. (*A Thief of a Christmas* 241-242)

Costello's death is both cathartic and redemptive, as the villagers' historical trauma is represented and the forces of economic terror are momentarily vanquished.

In *Bailegangaire* Murphy performs a similar critique of the Lemass administration which catapulted Ireland into the world markets of the 1960s and landed the fledgling state in the predatory economic jungle of the 1980s. The temporal setting for *Bailegangaire* is also the contemporary moment of its production: "DOLLY. [...] 1984, and I read it—how long ago was it?—that by 1984 we'd all be going on our holidays to the moon in *Woman's Own*" (141). Dolly's sardonic comment is indicative of the disillusionment with the epochalist dream of progress and economic expansion which fuelled Ireland's transformation from beleaguered colony to postcolonial nation state. The dream is further undermined by harsh economic reality, as the Japanese-owned multinational company which supported the local economy is closing down: "DOLLY. [...] Did ye see the helicopter on Friday? The plant, they say is for closure" (133). The economic hierarchies of the colonial past are as prevalent as ever in the postcolonial present with the change from British imperialism to global capitalism: "DOLLY. [...] The weekend-long meeting at the computer plant place. All the men, busy, locked outside the fence" (142). Despite their protests, the workers are as powerless against the multinational company as their historical forebears were against the might of the colonial British army: "DOLLY. The funeral. The weekend-long meeting is over. Now are they travelling at the speed of sound" (161). Fintan O'Toole notes that during the 1980s, "[t]hree quarters of Irish manufactured exports are from foreign-owned multinationals which import most of their inputs and export most of their profits. The cost of components imported for assembly in Ireland is exaggerated, the extent of exports overstated and the profits invisibly exported through the Black Hole" (*Black Hole, Green Card* 11).

The economic difficulties represented in *Bailegangaire* are amplified by the ethical problems manifest in Dolly's sexual permissiveness: "DOLLY comes in. She stretches herself. (She has had her sex in ditch, doorway, old shed or whatever)" (128). And her subsequent illegitimate pregnancy when she "decides to take off her coat and see what effect flaunting her pregnancy will have" (136). Dolly's threat to illegally abort the pregnancy is a dramatic intervention in contemporary Irish cultural politics: "The countryside produced a few sensations in the last couple of years, but my grand plan: I'll show them what can happen in the dark of night in a field. I'll come to grips with my life" (152). As Fintan O'Toole notes: "In 1983, the country was rent by a fierce debate about abortion, its public language dominated for most of a year by wombs and fetuses. In 1984 and 1985, the country was riveted by an eight-month long public tribunal of inquiry into the so-called Kerry Babies case, in which a young woman whose own child out of wedlock had been buried by her in her garden had confessed to the murder of another child that could not have been hers" (*Introduction to Murphy: Plays Two* x) The contemporary ethical crisis of buried children is the echo of an earlier trauma which is represented in Mommo's story: "The unbaptised an' stillborn in shoeboxes planted, at the dead hour of night treading softly the Lisheen to make the regulation hole—not more, not less than two feet deep—too fearful of the field, haunted by infants or to pray [...] leaving their pagan parcels in isolation forever" (*Bailegangaire* 164). Ireland may have modernized, but the old social and economic dilemmas come back to haunt the new social consciousness in spite of any progression from a politically backward looking sentimentalism.

The disillusionment of the 1980s with the epochalist dream of the 1960s is also poignantly manifest in the predicament which Mommo's eldest granddaughter Mary finds herself in. Mary left her home in Ireland in the 1960s to work as a nurse in England, a fact which causes tension between herself and her sister Dolly who stayed behind to look after Mommo: "DOLLY. A Sister before you were twenty-five, Assistant

Matron at the age of thirty [...] Couldn't get away fast enough" (*Bailegangaire* 148). However, Mary's experience in England was far from that of the exile delivered into the promised land, as her story undercuts the prevailing myth of economic prosperity:

DOLLY. Aren't you great?

MARY. I failed. It all failed. I'm as big a failure as you, and that's some failure. (148-149)

Mary's homecoming is equally disappointing as the epochalist bubble has burst at home as well as abroad. Consequently Mary is left in a state of utter confusion and desperation as to who she is and what she should do, "*one who is possibly near breaking point*" (91). This problem is compounded by the fact that Mommo no longer recognizes her because she has been away such a long time:

MOMMO. Miss?. . . Do I know you? [...]

MARY (*to* MOMMO). [...] No, you don't know me. But I was here once, and I ran away to try and blot out here. I didn't have it easy. [...] So I came back, thinking I'd find - something - here, or, if I didn't I'd put everything right, Mommo? (152-153)

In an attempt to overcome her "*increasing sense of loneliness and demoralization*" (92) Mary determines to help Mommo finish her never-ending story in order to resolve the emotional crisis which plagues her family:

MARY. And tonight I thought I'd make a last try. Live out the - story - finish it, move on to a place where, perhaps, we could make some kind of new start. I want to help you.

DOLLY. And yourself.

MARY. And myself. Mommo? (153)

Mary persists in her attempt to have Mommo finish her tale: "MARY. No, Mommo. It *is* a nice story. And you've nearly told it all tonight. Except for the last piece that you never tell" (157). This persistence is fuelled by a desperate yearning to have Mommo recognize her as her grand-daughter: "MARY. Try a guess. Yes, Mommo?—Yes, Mommo?—Please —who am I?" (157). The dramatic tension parallels *A Thief of a Christmas* as the emotional climax and eventual catharsis are achieved only when grief and historical trauma are acknowledged and represented:

MARY. [...] and they took Tom away to Galway, where he died [...] Two mornings later, and he had only just put the kettle on the hook, didn't grandad, the stranger, go down too, slow in a swoon [...] Mommo?
MOMMO. It got him at last. [...] Poor Seamus. (169)

As Mommo allows her grief to surface, she acknowledges historical trauma and then contemporary joy as she eventually recognizes her grand-daughter:

MOMMO. To thee do we cry. Yes? Poor banished children of Eve. [...] To thee do we send up our sighs. . . .For yere Mammy an' Daddy an' grandad is (*who are*) in heaven. [...] Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. (*She is handing the cup back to MARY.*) And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing, Mary, and haven't we everything we need here, the two of us.
MARY (*tears of gratitude brim to her eyes; fervently*). Oh we have, Mommo. (169-170)

Thus, in *Bailegangaire* Murphy critiques the vision of modernizing Ireland, and in *A Thief of a Christmas* he critiques the nostalgic idyllicization of the Irish past. However, this critical process is not an end in itself, in as much as it is the necessary precursor to a further

project of reconstructing and re-invigorating the historical past in the service of the present and the future. In reference to Murphy's play *The Morning After Optimism*, Fintan O'Toole has suggested that when the sordid characters James and Rosie kill their mythical counterparts Edmund and Anastasia: "Having rid themselves of the past and of the mirage of the Golden Age inside themselves, there is at least the possibility that their dependence on each other will come to resemble a kind of love" (*The Politics of Magic* 109). It is important here to make a clear distinction between the demythologization of cultural myths which have become quixotic illusions, and the wholesale abandonment of images of the cultural past in the over-zealous rush to embrace images of the future which may prove to be equally quixotic and misleading. As O'Toole later clarifies, "the refusal to acknowledge the past," can lead to the "repression of traumas which blocks off the future" (151). The main thematic connection and primary intertextual link between *A Thief of a Christmas* and *Bailegangaire*, embodied in Mommo's story, is the need to acknowledge the past, to dramatically enact a return of repressed historical trauma in order to open the possibility of reconstructing the present and negotiating possible futures.

The problem of representing the historical past, and particularly traumatic historical events, is the key issue in the debate between nationalist and revisionist historians on the subject of Irish historiography. Arguing for the revisionist position, Roy Foster suggests that: "Irish cultural self-confidence should surely have reached the stage where this [political history] can be questioned. [...] The sceptical strengths of the Irish mind should be capable of taking this on, and questioning everything that needs questioning. In a country that has come of age, history need no longer be a matter of guarding sacred mysteries. And to say 'revisionist' should just be another way of saying 'historian'" (5). Similarly, Ronan Fanning argues that, "if the nation-state outgrew infancy in 1937-1938, many of its self-appointed intellectual guardians have yet to shed the insecurities of adolescence. [...] The Irish intellectual landscape, it seems to me, is littered with Linus-

like figures too busy sucking their green blankets to accept any affront to their certainties" (18).

In stark contrast, Seamus Deane argues that: "Revisionists are nationalists despite themselves; by refusing to be Irish nationalists, they simply become defenders of Ulster or British nationalism, thereby switching sides in the dispute while believing themselves to be switching the terms of it. [...] We do not only read and write history; history also reads and writes us, most especially when we persuade ourselves that we are escaping from its thrall into the never-never land of 'objectivity'" (242-244). Brendan Bradshaw also critiques the notion of objectivity in historical discourse by suggesting that the revisionist or "modern tradition actually developed in self-conscious reaction against an earlier nationalist tradition of historical interpretation and aspired to produce 'value-free' history. [...] The shortcomings of the value-free approach manifest themselves in [...] the form of a number of interpretative strategies which have the effect of filtering out the trauma" (205).

Moving beyond this antagonistic binary opposition, Declan Kiberd suggests that the "bitter debate" between nationalists and revisionists proves that in Ireland "the past is never a different country and scarcely even the past: instead it becomes just one more battleground contested by the forces of the present. [...] If nationalism was the thesis, revisionism was the antithesis: of its nature it was not so much wrong as incomplete. The dialectic needed to be carried through to a synthesis" Kiberd (644). Kevin Whelan also recommends the movement towards a post-revisionist position by focusing on the hermeneutic nature of historical analysis. In his examination of the revolutionary period of 1798, Whelan states that "[t]he very instability of the narrative of '98 since '98 is a salutary reminder that past and present are constantly imbricated and that the positivist reading of historical texts is no longer adequate to the enterprise of historical scholarship" Whelan (175). In a similar vein Fintan O'Toole suggests that "[w]e are struck between a desperate need for the facts of history, and a growing awareness that the facts

alone are insufficient and that their meaning will always be a matter of who we are and where we stand" (*Black Hole, Green Card* 90).

It can be argued that Murphy adopts a post-revisionist position in many of his plays, particularly in *Famine* which deals with the catastrophic period of the 1840s where thousands of Irish people starved to death as a result of the potato blight. As Bradshaw states, "the trauma of the nineteenth-century famine reveals, perhaps more tellingly than any other episode of Irish history, the inability of practitioners of value-free history to cope with the catastrophic dimensions of the Irish past" Bradshaw (204). In *Famine*, Murphy quite literally puts the trauma back into Irish history by dramatizing the slow, inevitable death of a village community while its leader, John Connor, can only stand by and witness the decline despite his best efforts to save the lives of his friends and family. Similarly, in *A Thief of a Christmas*, Murphy describes the play as the "actuality" of how Bailegangaire got its name, but the actuality, the events themselves, are part of a larger dramatic construction which heightens the traumatic effect of those events. The central issue in relation to both Irish historiography and particularly Tom Murphy's play *Bailegangaire* is the notion that any historical discourse is, by definition and of necessity, a narrative or story which is itself produced in specific cultural and historical circumstances. Mommo's story involves a re-telling of events from the historical moment of *A Thief of a Christmas* in the 1950s, but this re-telling, the story itself, is constructed in the contemporary moment of 1984. The dialectic between past and present which is predicated on the void of temporal distance is fractured when one accepts that events or "objective facts" from the past cannot exist outside of the narrative which reconstructs those events. As Whelan suggests, the past and present are "constantly imbricated" in any historical discourse.

In *Bailegangaire* it is only when the traumatic past is acknowledged as intimately linked to the crisis ridden present that the healing process can begin. Murphy contradicts a nostalgically essentialist vision of the past, and also contradicts the myth of modernity

by focusing in both instances on the historical trauma revealed in Mommo's story. In parallel to this thematic engagement, Murphy also deals with the issue of national identity by dramatizing Mary's desperate desire to finally return "home": "MARY. [...] What am I looking for, Mommo? I had to come home. No one inveigled me. I wanted to come home" (*Bailegangaire* 114). Mary's predicament is characteristic of the post-structuralist aporia which confounds any fixed notion of identity: "MARY (*To herself*): Give me my freedom, Mommo [...] What freedom? No freedom without structure [...] Where can I go? [...] How can I go (*Looking up and around the rafters*.) with all this? [...] And it didn't work before for me, did it? [...] I came back" (120). Just as it is impossible to return to an essentialist origin in order to achieve ontological stability, the epochalist rush to abandon all essentialist notions of national identity is equally misleading, as Mary's attempted escape to England resulted in her eventual return in order to find a "home" and re-create a sense of self: "MARY. [...] (*She has a drink: then, whimpering as MOMMO might*.) I wanta go home, I wanta go home. (*New tone, her own, frustrated*.) So do I, so do I. *Home*. (*Anger*.) Where is it, Mommo?" (121).

Mary says there is "no freedom without structure", and a clichéd post-structuralist response may be to argue that the point is not to abandon essentialist notions of cultural identity, but to unfix that identity and thereby open up the possibility of re-inventing it. If it is necessary to deconstruct a cultural fiction at a moment of crisis, then it is also necessary to subsequently reconstruct that fiction in a manner which will enact catharsis and promote renewal. What such a reading radically underestimates is the fundamental desire for structure or even for the illusion of structure in the first instance. Whether that desire is for the kind of economic structure which underpins *A Thief of a Christmas* or the ontological structure which underpins *Bailegangaire*, the desire is there before the fact of structuration and is the grounding principle on which that structuration is predicated. The processes of both construction and reconstruction are based on the same desire for structuration, which is itself radically contingent on material, historical contexts.

It is this desire for structuration which is rooted in the dialectical tension between essentialism and epochalism, between nationalism and revisionism, and manifest in *Bailegangaire* in Mary's situation which typifies the fraught tension of this dialectic in her plea for a synthesis: "There must be something, some future for me, somewhere" (160). What Murphy offers in *Bailegangaire* is not the kind of relativism which has become the hackneyed resort of late post-structuralist thought, typified perhaps in the conclusion to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (82). The problem underlying Lyotard's statement is precisely its aphoristic quality insofar as "difference" is exalted as a positive regardless of qualifying context. Whilst the positive quality of the term "difference" is laudable when situated in the context of the liberal, progressive politics of the civil rights movements of the 1960s when much post-structuralist discourse emerged (and promulgated by ex-Marxist philosophers such as Lyotard who were exasperated by imperialistic nature of the Soviet Union and conflated that imperialism with Marxist internationalism), the term becomes problematic when it is stretched to libertarian extremes and exhausted of the ethical content inherent to its historical context. The term "difference" is a politically progressive notion when applied to oppressive racial and gender hierarchies in terms of positing an ethics of mutual respect and understanding, but is not as progressive when class hierarchies are concerned or when issues of trauma and personal suffering are at stake. In these latter contexts the term "difference", when used in an ethically relativistic and politically libertarian manner, can often prove counter-productive to any progressive, emancipatory discourse by evacuating the ethical dilemma inherent to hierarchical or traumatic relationships in favour of horizontal or relativistic modalities. The shift then is one of semiotic axes, specific from hierarchical to horizontal, which is a deft manoeuvre in the field of intellectual gymnastics, but a clumsy conjuring trick in the world of social consequences. The problem then turns from a structural issue of either meta-narratives or micro-narratives,

monolithic or microlithic structures, fixed or fluid positionality, to the ethical issue of inter-personal relationships.

In terms of Murphy's play then, instead of a celebration of identitarian differences we have a continual focus on the ontological trauma of three disenfranchized women, which builds to a climactic synthesis between the past (Mommo), the present (Mary), and the future (Dolly's unborn child). The structural integrity of this synthesis or *modus vivendi*, predicated as it is on three women's variegated desires for structuration, is exemplified by what Hegel described as *Sittlichkeit* or the "ethical life,"⁵ which Terry Eagleton expands to include notions of "self-realization" and "self-fulfilment" (412-413). Eagleton argues that "[t]he fullest instance of free, reciprocal self-fulfilment is traditionally known as love; and there are many individuals who, as far as the personal life goes, have no doubt that this way of life represents the highest human value. It is just that they do not see the need, method or possibility of extending this value to a whole form of social life" (413). Eagleton contends that "[m]odern ethical thought has wreaked untold damage in its false assumption that love is first of all a personal affair rather than a political one. It has failed to take Aristotle's point that ethics is a branch of politics, of the question of what it is to live well, to attain happiness and serenity, at the level of a whole society" (413).

It is at the intersection of the personal and the political that Murphy breaks new ground in the Irish context in terms of both thematic preoccupation and dramatic execution, specifically in moving through identitarian paradigms of national identity into the ethics of interpersonal relationships. Mary's future is dependent on Mommo's recollection of the past in order that the two of them can be re-united, so that the past and the present can finally acknowledge each other:

MOMMO. [...] And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing, Mary, and haven't we everything we need here, the two of us. (*And she settles down to sleep.*)

MARY (*tears of gratitude brim to her eyes; fervently*). *Oh we have, Mommo.* (*Bailegangaire* 169-170)

As Fintan O'Toole suggests, Mary has "acquired something that no Murphy character has ever had before—a home and a refuge" (*The Politics of Magic* 248). Yet the acquisition of such a home did not involve a return to the past nor an escape into the future. Mommo and her grand-daughters, the "Poor banished children of Eve," do not return from their banishment to an essentialist Eden of the Irish past, nor do they depart for an epochalist Utopia in the future.

As the play moves towards its cathartic ending, Mommo, Mary and the pregnant Dolly, respectively representing the temporal stages of past, present and future, are shown to be intimately linked to each other through the recently renewed bond of familial affection: "MARY gets into bed beside MOMMO. DOLLY is asleep on the other side" (*Bailegangaire* 168). In the closing lines of the play Mary concludes Mommo's story, but it is not an act of closure as much as it is a new beginning: "MARY. [...] To conclude. It's a strange old place, alright, in whatever wisdom he has to have made it this way. But in whatever there is, in the year 1984, it was decided to give that fambly [...] of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home" (170). In *Bailegangaire* historical trauma from the past is first exorcised and subsequently exercised in the service of both the present and the future. Through Mommo's intertextual link with the events of *A Thief of a Christmas*, marginalized discourses are represented in a narrative which reconnects the traumatic past, and in so doing provides an historical syntax in which the traumatic present can heal and renew itself. The historical syntax is itself predicated on the interpersonal syntax or working arrangement between the three women in *Bailegangaire*, in which personal self-fulfilment quite literally depends on the self-fulfilment of the others in the group. It is the reciprocal aspect of self-fulfilment in *Bailegangaire* which exemplifies the function of love as an ethic of life-affirming desire and constitutes a timely response to post-structuralist relativism.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was first published as "'Pauvres enfants d'Eve en exil': Tom Murphy et la syntaxe de l'histoire." *L'Annuaire Théâtral*. Special issue: 'Le théâtre irlandais: au carrefour des traditions.' Trans. Sarah Migneron. 40 (2006). 72-84
2. Eamon de Valera (1882-1975): born in New York of a Spanish father and Irish mother, he was reared in County Limerick; joined the Gaelic League in 1908 and the Irish Volunteers in 1913, he was the last commanding officer to surrender in the 1916 Easter Rising; allegedly avoided execution by the British by stating his American citizenship; President of Sinn Féin from 1917-1926 and of the Irish Volunteers from 1917-1922; President of the first Dáil Éireann in April 1919; visited America to secure recognition from the US and League of Nations of the Irish Republic; elected as President of the Irish Republic in August 1921; resigned 9 January 1922 after the Anglo-Irish Treaty was ratified by the Dáil and formed the anti-Treaty party Cumann na Poblachta; resigned the presidency of Sinn Féin in March 1926 and established Fianna Fáil in November 1926; he led the first Fianna Fáil government as President of the Executive Council from 1932-1937; removed all reference to the monarch and Governor-General from his Irish constitution in 1937; became Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and Minister of External Affairs from 1937-1948 and subsequently Minister of Education from 1937-1940; defeated in the election of 1948 he returned as Taoiseach from 1951-1954 and 1957-1959; President of the Irish Republic from 1959-1973. De Valera's goal from 1916 to his death in 1975 was the establishment of a thirty-two county Irish Republic. His vision of Irish culture and society is best crystallized in his St. Patrick's Day radio broadcast of 1943 containing the famous evocation of "a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens."
3. The terms essentialist and epochalist are used in a deliberately dialectical relationship throughout this paper and are derived from Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*. According to Geertz, essentialism entails a look to 'local mores, established institutions, and the unities of common experience –to "tradition," "culture," "national character," or even "race" –for the roots of a new identity', while epochalism involves an awareness of 'the general outlines of the history of our time, and in particular to what one takes to be the overall direction and significance of that history.'

4. Sean Lemass (1899-1971): born in County Dublin, he joined the Irish Volunteers in 1915 and fought in the GPO in the Easter Rising of 1916; interned from 1920-1921 he opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and was imprisoned in 1923; TD for Dublin City from 1924-1969 he was a co-founder and organizer of Fianna Fáil in 1926; Minister for Industry and Commerce in each of Eamon de Valera's cabinets from 1932-1959; Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) from 1945-1948 and Taoiseach from 1959-1965; he is notable for re-establishing free trade with Britain in 1965 and opening the Irish economy to free market capitalism. Resigned as Taoiseach in 1966.
5. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: 142-164, 182-188, 194-195, 201-202, 205-208 and 255-258.

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