

The Doing of Telling on the Irish Stage: An Introduction and two Samples of Modern and Contemporary Story-Telling Performativity

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Abstract

Delivered on stage, featuring a protagonist role on stage, language feels in its natural element of performance and transfiguration, which are the very elements of theatre at its best. The fundamental idea of performance (change dealing to surmounting) symbiotically embraces in fact both the theatrical and the narrative process. Conflict and the overcoming of conflict constitute the ebb and flow of all drama, as well as of story-telling. The blending of both modes, doing and telling, resulting in the doing of telling on stage, characterises much of the Irish modern and contemporary theatre. This is not theatre propelled by action on stage, but theatre of language in performance, in which central dramatic tension stems from the multiple imbalance between life, story and self (Morrison, 1983: 1), “a drama between body and speech” (Puchner, 2002: 169). This paper approaches two examples of narrative performativity on twentieth-century Irish stage: Yeats’s seminal piece *Purgatory* (1938) and Tom Murphy’s unique *Bailegangaire* (1985).

It is the study of the staged word within theatrical performance, and not of the written word within the dramatic text, that occupies the central focus of this paper. Such preliminary clarification is not only meant to serve as basic coordinate within the vast theoretical spectrum, but seems indispensable to be here observed since it hits right into the paper’s interpretative core: the idea of language surpassing its traditionally ascribed representational function, being actually contemplated as fundamental source of mediation within the processes of individual and collective identity, desire and imagination – all three courses indeed of major anxiety in relation to reality.

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Anti-mimetic resistance within Irish modern and contemporary theatre is part, in fact, of a wider modernist “constitutive suspicion” (Puchner, 2002: 1) of any irrefutable mode of representation. Accordingly, the profuse mediating and “diegetic”¹ use of language in modern theatre signals not only an acute distrust for the mimetic conception of theatre (confined to the conventional unities of time, space and action), but also the beginning of a far-reaching shift within the stage centre, from representation to diegesis, or narrative mediation, as main agent of mimetic interruption, re-adjustment and transformation.

The twentieth-century crisis of language as representation gave rise, nevertheless, to the sustained poststructuralist acknowledgement and celebration of language as performance, that is, the conviction that “the great mass of common speech-events, of words spoken and heard, does not fall under the rubric of ‘factuality’ and truth [...] We speak less

¹ Martin Puchner understands *diegesis* as the narrative alternative to mimesis on the modernist stage, namely, “the descriptive and narrative strategies through which modern drama tries to channel, frame, control, and even interrupt what it perceives to be unmediated theatricality of the stage and its actors. [...] The diegetic is an extra space added to the mimetic space. In the modernist theatre, diegetic space becomes the stage itself” (2002: 22, 25).

than the truth, we fragment in order to reconstruct desired alternatives, we select and elide” (Steiner, 1992: 232).

The language philosopher J. L. Austin, together with his disciple, J. P. Searle, formulated in his “speech-acts” theory this very “performative” function of language which occupies us, *i.e.* language’s capability of conjuring up new states of being. Interestingly enough, Austin does contemplate at some point the perlocutionary effect of the storytelling speech act –*i.e.* a ghost story may have the effect of frightening a child, whereas a pleasant bed-time story may send him/her to peaceful sleep. Still Austin does not fully expand on the far-reaching possibilities of his own consideration, namely, the analysis of narrative discourse as a thoroughly performative speech act.

Irish modern and contemporary stage, however, offers the perfect opportunity to expand on the performative function of language, in that by self-consciously assimilating theatrical intrinsic performativity (*i.e.* the capacity to be “the thing which is not” –Steiner, 1992: 232– to contrive, to conceal, to transform, to enact reality), language has featured a protagonist role within twentieth-century Irish stage. It is not a coincidence that language widely supersedes action on Contemporary Irish stage. In fact, the tradition of story-telling and oral remembrance of the past as the central *doing* on stage is deeply rooted all throughout the history of twentieth-century Irish Theatre. The reasons and motivations propelling language’s *prima donna* role on the Irish stage basically emerge from a state of collective linguistic awareness-on-edge in Ireland as the direct result of the progressive annihilation of the vernacular Gaelic language on the part of the English language after centuries of British domination in Ireland.

Indigenous institutional theatrical tradition in Ireland before the first performance of the Irish Literary Theatre in May 1899 has been traditionally dismissed by Irish theatre historiography on grounds of its mongrel colonial status. Still for hundreds, even thousands of years prior to the turn-of-the-century Revival there was in Ireland an entire tradition of folk performative manifestations –Wrenboys, Mummers, Strawboys, the Bardic tradition, Wake and Wedding Games, among the foremost– in which story-telling, chanting, incantatory and narrative formulas would play a central role, constituting in my opinion, a fundamental substratum to Ireland’s idiosyncratic twentieth-century theatrical culture still deserving much more critical attention. These

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ritual, variational and carnivalesque nature of the word within folk dramatic manifestations in Ireland may well be contemplated as the invisible common substratum to the foregrounded performativity of language on twentieth-century institutionalised Irish stage.

Language's pre-eminence on stage was first emphasised by W. B. Yeats in his vision of Ireland's National Theatre, whereby the poet was to stand centre-stage, "to make speech even more important than gesture" (Yeats, 1962: 108). As far as this paper's thematic focus is concerned, Yeats's legacy within modern and contemporary Irish theatre bears far-reaching impact, and may be acknowledged in a twofold significance, embracing Yeats's "powerful alternative to realism", together with the "Yeatsian dedication to language, to a theatre of the word" (Murray, 1997: 36).

His later play *Purgatory* (1938) –a most sinister drama of consciousness, featuring merely a ruined house, a bare tree in the background, an old man and a boy– is the crucible where various elements of Yeats's outlook on theatre and language intensely fuse and is the foundation stone to the distinct tradition of the doing of telling on the Irish stage:

- *Purgatory* features a central narrative impulse to narrate the past, which actually propels dramatic intensity and conflict on stage, as well as within the audience's imagination. The audience attends the Old Man's most gripping and terrible tale of the fall of his family's respectable house on account of the socially ill-matched marriage between his well-bred mother and a stable boy, which would bring about a series of misfortunes: the wife's death in child-birth, the father's squandering her estates through dissolute and profligate living, his setting of the house on fire and the son's eventual murder of his father.
- The past is rendered as an otherworldly narrative proposal which propitiates a pervasive atmosphere of alienated and deluded perception, resulting in an ever conflictive grasp of the past's truth. The ghostly presence of the past takes over the dramatic action in the form of narrative invocation, with the disputable purpose, on the part of the narrator, of cleansing the past's supposed evil drive polluting the present

- and the future generations to come. The Old Man's contention that his mother's soul must be liberated from the excruciating awareness of the fatal consequences of her passion for a riff-raff who engendered her a murderer instigates his narrative purgative zeal, while it claims authoritative exclusiveness in its appraisal of the past.
- The play dramatises the ritual nature of the narrative purgation of the past as a necessary expiation of past sins.² Nevertheless, Yeats' dramatic intention lies in investing the narrative purgation act with contention and failure, in that the narrative act is displayed in its ambiguous, interested, darker sides, and as a result, it is received with much hostility and mistrust on the part of its addressee, the boy. For this purpose, Yeats saw the narrative act with a trail of discordant elements (interlocutor's confrontation of the narrator's monolithic and totalitarian discursive claim of the past, the narrative zeal and exasperation which occasionally takes possession of his otherwise controlled and detached account, and the perceptual mismatch suggested between the psychological torment featuring the Old Man's narration on the one hand and the suggestion of joyful anticipation offered by both ghostly silhouettes at the house's window) that will have "the effect of making the audience concentrate as much on the manner of telling the story as on the narrative itself" (Cave, 1997: 375). The sole tangible action on stage, namely the Old Man's eventual murdering of his son, as a poor means to keeping the spreading of evil in check for good, may be seen in narrative terms as the killing of the narratee on the part of the narrator, and is certainly the crucial evidence of the Old Man's narrative bigotry.
 - Yeats would introduce the modernist notion of what Puchner has labelled the "diegetic space" onto the Irish modern and contemporary theatre, whereby central stage was to undergo a

² This narrative concept of purgation goes back in its origins to an ancient understanding of insufferable penance in death resulting from past sinful deeds in life, which maybe eventually counteracted through the indulgent interaction of a living narratee – be it God's, Buddha's or, as in the case of Duirmuid and Dervorgilla in Yeats's play *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1916), any Irish living person's mercy.

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relevant shift from the representation to the narration of conflict. Two Yeatsian diegetic techniques particularly recur in Irish narrative-oriented theatre to come afterwards. One would be the significant shift of the actor's role from conventional impersonator to the more complex role of narrator, which shifts in turn the core of dramatic conflict from plain represented action to the multilayered anxieties between the narrator and the story. The second diegetic strategy, namely, the third-person narrative technique, provides displaced mediation and fictional concealment, and is the foremost discursive signal of the characteristic imbalance between life, story and self featuring prominently in most Irish twentieth-century theatre. Furthermore, it will be a prototypical, even unrelinquishable, discursive feature of Beckett's "dying-on" stage narrators (such as the disembodied Mouth in *Not I*, the symbiotic listener and reader figures in *Ohio Impromptu*, or Hamm's disbelieved chronicle of God's providential fatherhood in *Endgame*).

In this sense, the Old Man's psyche is diseased to the extent of taking the liberty of bestowing the legitimacy of ritual upon his words and actions, however hideous, while the safe third-person detachment of his supposedly narrative purgation act actually hides the perverse unwillingness to relinquish first-person culpability and blame. Racked with the return of the hoof-beats –signalling the comeback of remorse– the Old Man utters a final prayer to God, in which he still shields his own need of expiation before his mother's ghost:

Her mind cannot hold up that dream.
Twice a murderer and all for nothing,
And she must animate that dead night
Not once but many times!

O God,
Release my mother's soul from its dream!
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead
(Yeats, 1997: 261-262).

With *Bailegangaire* (1985) Tom Murphy remarkably contributed to the Irish contemporary repertoire of story-telling on stage.

Common ground in both *Purgatory* and *Bailegangaire* is the gravitation on the part of their characters towards the telling and re-telling of their past selves. Such narrative drive entails a conflicting double process by which the teller is, on the one hand, impelled to recompose the bits and pieces of his/her life into a coherent narrative sequence that may provide a much yearned pattern of order, meaning and identity. Still the release of entrenched “unspoken fears and resentments” (Roche, 1995: 145) is no easy task, but the origin of a highly intricate and problematic bond between the teller and the told, as well as the source of genuine dramatic conflict on stage. In order to counteract psychological anxiety inflicted by the recollection of the past, language provides the teller with mediation mechanisms –such as third-person narrative displacement and fictional concealment– which not only propel dramatic suspense, but also propitiate a therapeutic re-invention of the past self, that may allow narrator and narratee to live out the story of the past in order to proceed ghost-free into the future.

In *Bailegangaire* both old and modern Ireland coalesce under the guise of an obsessive and unfinished folk tale –a displaced narrative account of a family past trauma, which is the root of much of its present dysfunctionality. *Bailegangaire* is set in 1984, inside “a country kitchen in the old style” (stage direction, Murphy, 1993: 91) –equipped, nonetheless, according to its times with some modern conveniences, such as a radio, a bottle-gas cooker, electric light– situated very close to a Japanese electronic plant. The play features two adult women, Mary and Dolly, and their senile grandmother, Momo, whose clapped-out and deranged mind is stranded in a past world of market-days, ruined harvests and other great many miseries, not to speak of a remote *pub-cum-general* store where a surreal and fatal laughing competition takes place.

The play’s central dramatic thread takes the narrative form of a bedtime folk-story senile old matriarch Mommo produces every night for an imaginary audience of children –seemingly her once infant grandchildren: Mary, Dolly and Tom– at the foot of her centre-stage bed. *Bailegangaire*’s subtitle –*The Story of Bailegangaire and how it came by its appellation*– situates the play within one of the most emblematic categories of folk-stories, naming narratives, those dealing with the

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origin of people's and place names. In fact, the process of name assignment, together with name acknowledgement, is a central motif within the play/story, operating not only in the toponym shift from Bochtán (Gaelic *bocht* for "poor") into Bailegangaire (Gaelic for "the place without laughter"), but also in the eventual shift of the protagonists' displaced names –from Brigit and Seamus, to the uncovering of their true first-person identities –Mommo and her husband– together with Mommo's spiteful negation of her granddaughter Mary's name and selfless presence and attendance to her.

According to her granddaughter Mary, Mommo is a highly qualified and experienced *seanchaí* (Gaelic for "storyteller") whose once wide ranging narrative repertoire is now reduced to one single, obsessive, mantra, the story of Bailegangaire. Mommo's language and narrative technique constitutes the backbone of the play's general structure. Her language is conspicuously baroque and stylised, featuring lexical and syntactic archaisms, remnants of the hybrid Anglo-Gaelic cosmology that holds sway over her and which she is determined to relate against silence and oblivion:

[...] An' no one will stop me! Tellin' my nice story
[...] (*Reverts to herself*.) Yis, how the place called
Bochtán – and its *graund* (*grand*) inhabitants – came
by its new appellation, Bailegangaire, the place
without laughter. Now! Jolter-headed gobshites [...] (*Grandly*.)
Ooh! and to be sure, and I often heard it
said, it had one time its portion of jollification and
mirth. But, I'm thinkin', the breed they wor (*vere*)
'twas venom, and the dent of it, was ever the more
customary manifestation. The land there so poor –
Och hona go gus hah-haa, land!– when 'twasn't bog
'twas stone, and as for the weather? 'twas credited
with bein' seven times worse than elsewhere in the
kingdom. And so hard they had it, to keep life itself
in them, whenever Bochtán was mentioned the old
people in their wisdom would add in precaution, go
bhfóire Dia orainn, may God protect us [...].
(Murphy, 1993: 92)

Together with its rhetorical and emotional exuberance, Mommo's archaic discourse also features certain strategic narrative devices, such as the use of third person narrative perspective, which allows her to keep a controlled and guarded narrative distance between story and reality, as well as to insulate private pain. Mommo makes also use of other narrative techniques, such as painstaking recreation of places (Bochtán's pub-*cum*-general store) moments (the laughing contest) and local people (Costello), together with ambience suspense, which serve to put off, to an indefinite deadline, an unbearable, tragic, ending. Furthermore, such sublimating discursive mechanisms are tremendously effective in theatrical terms, in that drama successfully conveys –and impersonates– the conflict contours of the thematic message proposed. In this sense, we here encounter a play dealing with the postponement of grief which is actually enacted in Mommo's irrepressible postponement of her story's end until the final moments of the play, when both history and present action coalesce into an intense stage catharsis.

Eventually Mary takes over the final bit within the narration of Mommo's story, by way of narrative "collaboration" (Roche, 1995: 156). On behalf of Mommo, resuming her third-person perspective, even mimicking her discursive idiosyncrasies, Mary takes on the Bailegangaire narration at its most difficult point, namely the account of the events following the laughing competition, and featuring the double tragedy of the strangers' home-journey: during their absence, a sudden blaze from the fireplace came out on top of little Tom, who had put the paraffin on to the embers, "not the way grandad did it" (Murphy, 1993: 168). He would die shortly afterwards at the hospital in Galway "[...] 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 [...]" (Murphy, 1993: 169).

Unlike the Old Man's final exasperate prayer, Mommo's bedtime story takes the final form of a bedtime prayer of acceptance and resilience featuring the eventual acknowledging of her granddaughter Mary, the death of her grandson Tom, her past and her present. According to Fintan O'Toole, Mommo's final prayer is a significant instant of Murphy's distinct performative use of the language of Catholic magic, which embraces "the notion that the

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uttering of words in prayer and supplication can in itself bring about change for the better" (O'Toole, 1994: 246):

MOMMO. [...] Now, my fondlings, settle down an' be sayin' yere prayers [...] Hail Holy Queen. Yes? Mother of Mercy. Yes? Hail our lives? Yes? Our sweetness and our hope [...] Be sayin' yere prayers now an' ye'll be goin' to sleep. To thee do we send up our sighs. Yes? For yere Mammy an' Daddy an' grandad is (*who are*) in heaven.

MARY. And Tom.

MOMMO. Yes. An' he only a ladeen was afeared of the gander. An' tell them ye're all good. 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. (*And she settles down to sleep.*)

MARY. (*tears of gratitude brim to her eyes; fervently*). Oh we have, Mommo. (Murphy, 1993: 168-170)

The performative, desired, effect of Mommo's bedtime story-telling undertaking is finally achieved: to nurse, to lull, to alleviate scars from the past and enable the pleasant and peaceful sleep of all three women on Mommo's bed as the play's closing *tableau*.

In this paper we have seen to which extent are staged stories symbiotically restored to their primordial performative element of transfigurative potential. Furthermore, in the two examples of Irish diegetic theatre here discussed story-telling assumes a central dramatic role by bringing the conflicts between the teller and the told to the centre-stage of the dramatic conflict.

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