

## Domestic Troubles: Tragedy and the Northern Ireland Conflict

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Domestic tragedy, conventionally associated with the sensibility of the emergent metropolitan middle classes, has never been held in very high esteem by Marxian critics. In recent times, many critics on the Left have tended to regard the whole genre of tragedy, with its supposedly elitist sensibility and leanings toward an apocalyptic conception of history, in a rather dim light. It was not always so, of course. Marx shared the enthusiasm of his age and class for classical Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, and some of the greatest Marxist cultural critics of this century, such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Raymond Williams, have written about tragedy in quite positive terms.

Here, I want to look at three dramas, all of a tragic character or design, that deal with the conflict in Northern Ireland: St. John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911), which can be considered a domestic tragedy; Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* (1960), which, although set in the more "masculine" space of the Belfast shipyards, tells a story about the way sectarianism impedes the development of class politics in Northern Ireland that is quite similar to Ervine's; and *The Riot Act: [End Page 501] A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (1984) by Tom Paulin, which adapts one of the great Greek tragedies to the Northern situation. When considered in conjunction with each other, these plays demonstrate some of the different ways in which various types of tragic drama utilize the family and the distinction between public and private spheres as well as, more generally, suggesting some of the ways in which different types of tragic narrative structure our broad perceptions of class and sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.

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Given the negative associations identified with tragedy in contemporary criticism, some commentators have suggested that a tragic conception of the Northern Ireland conflict will almost inevitably lend itself to a reactionary politics. Noting the bland facility with which the term "tragic" is applied to the Northern situation in the international media, Shaun Richards, for example, has argued that a tragic theatre will tend to construct a disabling sense of Northern Ireland as a cursed House of Atreus, fated to incessant cycles of violence, the origins of which remain incomprehensible and irrational. Such a theatre, Richards suggests, only bolsters an already entrenched conception of Northern Ireland as inexplicable, as a place doomed to play out its "luckless and predetermined fate" to some sort of grand catastrophic finale.<sup>1</sup>

The argument against any conception of the Northern conflict in fatalistic terms is indisputable, but the idea that tragic form must automatically lend itself to a reactionary conception of the North can also be somewhat reductive. While Richards cites Brecht's arguments against traditional tragedy to support his case, there is also a long Marxian tradition in which tragedy is conceived in quite positive terms as a form tending to emerge in periods when societies undergo

a wrenching process of transition from one kind of social order to another. Moreover, where some critics automatically assume a link between tragedy and a worldview disposed to resignation and despair, others insist that this is only one element of the tragic schema. In commenting on tragedy and historical drama, Lukács writes that

the dramatic collision and its tragic outcome must not be conceived in an abstract pessimistic sense. Naturally, an abstract denial of the pessimistic elements in the drama given to us by the history of class society would be senseless. The horror of the conflicts in class society, the fact [End Page 502] that for most people there is clearly no solution to them, is certainly *one* motif, and by no means an unimportant one, in the rise of drama. But it is by no means supreme. Every really great drama expresses, amid horror at the necessary downfall of the best representatives of human society, amid the apparently inescapable mutual destruction of men, an *affirmation of life*. It is a *glorification of human greatness*.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin's conception of tragedy, similarly dialectical, is of a contest between the ancient gods and the gods to come. For Benjamin, the death of the tragic hero does not represent a surrender to an ethos of despair; on the contrary, that death "offers up the hero to the unknown god as *the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity*."<sup>3</sup> In short, the emphasis here is on a tragic dialectic in which degeneration and destruction are part of a dynamic process that leads ultimately toward a new social order. Finally, and in a quite different vein, Williams's *Modern Tragedy*, by emphasizing the importance of historicizing the category of tragedy as well as its form, demonstrates the limitations of any wholesale endorsement or rejection of the genre. For Williams, the values inscribed within specific tragic genres can only be exposed by way of a close contextual analysis that would take into account the political and intellectual milieu within which those genres emerge.<sup>4</sup>

Several different kinds of "tragic" narrative have been adapted to the Northern Irish situation. Genres such as revenge, romantic, and domestic tragedy, as well as versions of classical Greek tragedy, have all in various ways and to different degrees shaped the imagination of the conflict. In the circumstances, the limitations of any a priori rejection or endorsement of tragedy and the value of Williams's more supple strategy, with its insistence on contextual analysis and the necessity of discriminating between forms, soon become apparent. Depending on their historical moment of emergence, some of these genres, for example, will clearly have much closer links with realist and naturalist modes of narrative and stage presentation than others. The difference in this respect between Greek tragedy, with its emphasis on stylized action and mythic narrative, and domestic tragedy, with its much closer links to the classic realist novel and stage melodrama, is apparent. Moreover, depending on the conventions of a particular form, the meaning ascribed to "the family," which tends to provide the social basis for all of these tragic genres, can vary significantly. In a Greek tragedy such as *Antigone*, for example, the family appears as something to which weighty duties and obligations are owed even when these come into irreconcilable [End Page 503] conflict with other obligations. In romantic tragedies of a *Romeo and Juliet* type, on the other hand, the family tends to be negatively construed as something which smothers a more positive future identified with the star-crossed lovers who defy parental will. In domestic tragedy, the stage-world is usually narrowed and limited to the space of a middle-class family milieu; this space may be either stifling or consoling, but the world beyond is almost invariably oppressive. These are broad generalizations. Nevertheless, they underline the extent to which tragic forms that share broadly similar familial narratives or plots may also inscribe social imaginaries of a quite different kind.

During the last three decades of "the Troubles," variations on romantic and domestic tragedy have arguably provided some of the more persistent aesthetic coordinates within which the Northern conflict continues to be imagined. In the Northern Irish theatre, however, as in other

modes of fiction and indeed in the popular imagination generally, the sharp edge of the political conflict tends to be associated with working-class Catholics and Protestants rather than with their middle-class counterparts. As a consequence, a variation on domestic tragedy has developed which is typically set in a working- rather than middle-class environment or milieu. The development of this kind of drama (i.e., one in which a genre historically associated with the emergent middle classes is given, as it were, a working-class coloring or content) can probably be attributed to the pervasive influence of Sean O'Casey on contemporary Irish political theatre. Set in a time of insurrection in the South during the early part of this century, O'Casey's work—or at least the early plays such as *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, and *The Plough and the Stars*, on which his reputation rests—expresses a bitterly skeptical view of political developments in the period. In these early plays, the setting is usually a working-class tenement, the social situation one of political turmoil and rebellion, and the theatrical conventions, though eclectic and drawing on a variety of dramatic genres and styles, owe more than a little to nineteenth-century melodrama and to middle-class romantic and domestic tragedy.

One of the questions that might be asked of O'Casey's early theatre, then, as indeed of the contemporary theatre of the Troubles upon which his work has exercised such influence, is what precisely happens when middle-class or domestic tragedy is adapted to working-class interests: Can the form be reworked successfully to serve such interests? Or will a genre so closely wedded, in its origins and ideals, to the middle classes operate in such a way **[End Page 504]** that, even when employed consciously against the middle class, its values and sensibility will still tend to be endorsed?

Marxian reservations about domestic tragedy have centered on two objections: first, that the genre has typically rehearsed a humanist worldview in which specifically middle-class interests are mystified as universal human values, and, second, that it almost invariably privileges the private over the public sphere as the basis of human value. In 1973, shortly after another phase of open political conflict had again convulsed Northern Ireland, Seamus Deane published an article in which a compelling critique of O'Casey's theatre was advanced more or less along these lines. Deane argued that the theatrical paradigms established by O'Casey were not equipped to meet the demands of the current situation in the North. Given O'Casey's engagement with Irish and even to some extent world politics, it was inevitable, Deane observed, that in the heat of the immediate crisis many Northern dramatists would be tempted to look to O'Casey as a model, but it was one that Deane believed would prove disabling.<sup>5</sup> The major limitation of O'Casey's work, according to Deane, is that it turns on a recurrent opposition between politics (whether nationalist or socialist, but especially when it is nationalist) conceived as a distortion or coarsening of the human and a humanism associated with "ordinary" people uninvolved in political pursuits. This separation between an Irish politics, justifiably subjected to critical pressure, and a humanism, unjustifiably subjected to none of the same critical pressure, is reinforced by the gendered axis on which it turns: in O'Casey's work humanism is recurrently associated with his female characters, while the apparently inevitable distortion of politics into egoism, fanaticism, and sterile cant is identified with his males. O'Casey's drama, Deane suggests, reiterates two constants: (1) the dehumanizing effects of visionary dreaming, especially when it takes a political form; and (2) the humanizing effects of being involved with people rather than with ideas or ideologies—best expressed in the desire for domestic security and the capacity for deep human feeling which characterize his womenfolk.

In its general outline at least, Deane's thesis about the limitations of the political vision inscribed in O'Casey's theatre anticipates some of the arguments I will develop here by way of Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* and Thompson's *Over the Bridge*. Both plays deal with tragically failed attempts to forge an alliance between working-class Catholics and Protestants within a social structure whose survival depends on the maintenance of sectarian division. **[End Page 505]** Yet despite the different perspectives and political sympathies which Ervine and

Thompson bring to bear on their topic, and despite the fact that each play registers quite a strong indictment of sectarianism in principle at least, in the end both still see the divisions that threaten to split the Protestant community if the struggle against sectarianism is pushed “too far” as the “real” source of tragedy; it is this finally, rather than the fate of the subaltern Catholic working class, the class most oppressed by sectarian social structures, that is cathected as the proper object of the audience’s sympathy and concern.

Nevertheless (and parting company here with both the standard Marxist critique of domestic tragedy and Deane’s essay on O’Casey), my argument is not that the chief weakness of these plays is their privileging the domestic over the political sphere; on the contrary, a major weakness in the actual development of labor and socialist politics generally in Northern Ireland has been a vulgar economistic assumption that alliances between working-class Catholics and Protestants could best be facilitated by concentrating on their shared economic interests and by downplaying or sidestepping more divisive “emotional” matters (e.g., gender, religious or national identity, and such issues as intermarriage or residential segregation). By way of a comparativist analysis of Ervine’s and Thompson’s works, I want to suggest that the very elements of domestic or middle-class tragedy usually deemed to be those which hinder the genre from dealing adequately with social and historical problems—namely, the fact that the genre is “wedded to the personal, the domestic, the touching and the sentimental”<sup>6</sup>—may, paradoxically, have the potential to contribute to the development of an authentically radical materialist critique of the Northern Irish social system. The idea is not to valorize domestic tragedy as a radical form; however, in a situation where the building of working-class alliances across the sectarian divide has all too often proceeded on the basis of a presumed necessity to subordinate all other matters to supposedly common economic interests, domestic tragedy, despite its inherent limitations, can at least serve as a useful corrective to vulgar economism, if only by demonstrating that attempts to separate such spheres as the public and the private or the economic and the political usually work not for but against the interests of the oppressed.

In order to widen the debate on tragedy, I turn finally to Paulin’s adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* to the contemporary Northern situation in *The Riot Act*. The proper significance of Paulin’s recourse to Sophocles’ play as [End Page 506] a vehicle to represent the North can best be appreciated, I believe, by attending to the diverse ways in which Greek and domestic tragedy work to structure our perception of that conflict. However, Paulin’s play also lends itself to a reading in which the real source of tragedy is not, as the common interpretation has it, a conflict between Catholic and Protestant (or between nationalist and unionist), but rather one within Protestant identity itself. In this respect, even if not in others, Paulin’s work displays some unexpected similarities with those by Ervine and Thompson.

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St. John Ervine’s *Mixed Marriage*, first performed in 1911 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, can be considered a seminal play in the development of modern Northern Irish drama.<sup>7</sup> Organized in terms of a love story across the political divide between Catholic and Protestant, the play also tells the story of a tentative alliance between Catholic and Protestant workers that collapses as a consequence of sectarianism. The basic plot situation, the *Romeo and Juliet* narrative device, and the working-class domestic setting which characterize Ervine’s play would all become staples of late-twentieth-century representations of the Northern Troubles.

Set in Belfast during the month of July (the climax of the Orange marching season, hence when tensions between Northern Catholics and Protestants are generally most acute), the action of *Mixed Marriage* unfolds within the Rainey family home. The play begins with John Rainey’s announcement to his wife that local Catholic and Protestant workers have gone on strike for better wages. Rainey, headstrong and authoritarian in personality, staunchly Protestant and unionist in allegiance and a member of the local Orange Lodge, supports the strike. His solidarity with Catholics ends there, though, since he is strongly opposed to any kind of social

interaction between Catholics and Protestants outside the workplace: “A don’t like Cathliks an’ Prodesans mixin’ thegither. No good ivir comes o’ the like o’ that.”<sup>8</sup> His eldest son, Hugh, on the other hand, is not only on friendly terms with Michael O’Hara, a republican socialist, but also (unknown to Rainey) in love with Nora Murray, a local Catholic girl. Despite Rainey’s distrust of Catholics, he is persuaded by Michael and Hugh’s argument that the employers will try to sow division between the striking workers by playing “the Orange card” and by insinuating that the strike is simply the work of nationalist agitators and Home Rulers. Knowing that, as a member of the Orange Order, Rainey [End Page 507] will have more influence with his coreligionists than they will, Hugh and Michael manage to convince him to urge the Protestant workers to keep solidarity with their Catholic comrades and to resist the employers’ attempts to divide them by stoking religious bigotry.

Initially, the strategy works well. Enjoying the sense of power he experiences as guarantor of working-class solidarity and relishing the fact that the Protestant workers heed him more than they do his opponent, Hand (a unionist agitator brought up from Dublin by the Belfast employers), Rainey gives himself over to his new task with some enthusiasm. The crisis of the play is precipitated, however, when he accidentally overhears that Hugh and Nora are engaged and that, at Mrs. Rainey’s prompting, they had planned to keep the engagement secret until the success of the strike was assured, lest it cause Rainey to change his mind about advocating Catholic and Protestant solidarity. Horrified at the prospect of Hugh’s marrying a Catholic and convinced that he is being used to undermine the wider interests of his own community, Rainey declares that he will denounce the strike to the Protestant workers unless Hugh and Nora agree to break off their engagement. Michael, represented as a political idealist willing to sacrifice everything to the higher cause of working-class solidarity and Irish national unity, pleads with Nora and Hugh to concede to Rainey’s demand since the wider good of society must take precedence over personal desire. When Hugh and Nora refuse, Rainey exits to tell the Protestant workers that he can no longer support the strike.

Throughout the closing act of the play, the Rainey house is besieged by an angry Orange mob protesting the marriage of Hugh and Nora. Stones are pelted against the bolted door and shuttered windows, and the surly voices of the mob keep up a constant background din. Later, when Catholic and Protestant mobs clash offstage, the sounds of their confrontation are interrupted only by Michael’s futile calls for reason and moderation. Inside, Nora, unhinged by the terrible consequences of her love for Hugh, becomes increasingly hysterical and blames the whole situation on her own selfishness. When she hears that the army is about to open fire on the mobs, she rushes out the door to proclaim her guilt, is accidentally shot, and falls dead across the threshold. Rebuked by his younger son for causing her death, Rainey, dazed and “as if in a dream,” still maintains that what he did was right. In the closing lines of the play, Mrs. Rainey, weeping a little and patting her husband gently, laments, “Aw, my poor man, my poor man.”<sup>9</sup> [End Page 508]

The subject matter of Ervine’s play is explicitly political, with the vulnerability of labor politics to sectarian division and the wider contest between Irish unionism and nationalism providing the work with its essential themes. These political issues, usually associated with the public sphere, however, are mediated exclusively through the private sphere of the domestic space, the Rainey living room in which the play is set. The action elsewhere—Rainey’s addresses to the Orange Lodge, Hugh and Michael’s meetings at the Sinn Fein hall, and Orange diatribes against Catholics and Home Rule on the Custom House steps—is merely reported. Since these public spaces are not actually staged, therefore, everything that happens in the play happens “inside.”

The narrative structure of Ervine’s play, then, is one which, in a manner typical of domestic tragedy, requires that the “hard” currency of the political subject matter be converted into the “softer,” more affective currency of an Oedipalized family narrative. Within the allegorical framework of an Oedipal family drama, however, social transformation must be imagined

primarily in terms of some sort of overthrow or relaxation of paternal authority. The curious paradox which governs Ervine's plot, though, is that it is a given of the piece that social transformation requires *not so much the overthrow as the full cooperation of the father*; after all, the starting premise in *Mixed Marriage* is that without Rainey's support the strike will inevitably fail and working-class solidarity will give way to sectarian anarchy. Since his commitment to radical social change in the "public" political sphere effectively entails, within the logic of the "private" Oedipalized framework of the play, a corresponding commitment to the diminution of his own paternal authority, the narrative is structured such that Rainey's symbolic position as authoritarian paterfamilias and his political commitment to the strike are at tragic cross-purposes from the start. The bind in which Rainey finds himself, I would suggest, can be read as a nicely compressed dramatic metaphor for a wider political one, that is, whether the Northern Protestant working class can commit itself to radical social transformation without surrendering its own paternalist privileges in the process.

For some critics, *Mixed Marriage* can be read as a liberal social critique of sectarianism.<sup>10</sup> On this reading, Rainey is the villain or moral culprit of the play. It is his inability to overcome his personal prejudice against Catholics that destroys the strike and reduces to ash the hope for a brave new world beyond sectarianism that the love between Nora and Hugh symbolically prefigures. **[End Page 509]** However, while the play can support this reading, it is ultimately more complex; Rainey's support for the strike is, after all, represented as principled and sincere. When he discovers Hugh's engagement to Nora and decides, after some irresolution, that he can no longer maintain his support for the strike, it is not simply (or at least not only), as Norman Vance puts it, that "atavistic sectarianism reasserts itself."<sup>11</sup> Although this is indeed how the other characters in the play see things, from Rainey's own perspective the proposed "mixed marriage" between Hugh and Nora is objectionable not only because it violates the social apartheid between Catholics and Protestants that he upholds, but also because it intimates a wider political alliance between Catholics and Protestants that might ultimately pave the way to a United Ireland. The crux which binds him, in other words, is that he is willing to support the working-class alliance, but only on condition that its purpose does not go beyond the improvement of their economic lot. But what the alliance between Hugh and Nora brings home to him, so to speak, is that the development of common economic interests between Catholic and Protestant workers cannot be divorced from wider social and political consequences. Hence what starts out as cross-community economic solidarity may lead sooner or later to other forms of social unity as well, eventually even undermining the commitment to Protestant separatism and British Union so dear to Rainey.

*Mixed Marriage* should be understood, then, not simply as a "thesis play" that offers an ethical or moral critique of sectarianism, but as a more complex work in which Rainey's dilemma ultimately takes on a tragic dimension since mutually compromising commitments are at issue. This tragic conception of Rainey's situation reflects, I would argue, a social and historical truth of a more significant order than any moral critique of sectarianism could do. A moral critique will conceive of sectarianism essentially in terms of personal limitation: sectarianism persists, that is, because unenlightened individuals fail to overcome their atavistic and irrational prejudices. The construction of Rainey's predicament as a tragic one stemming from irreconcilable commitments, on the other hand, works toward a more materialist diagnosis by allowing that sectarianism persists not simply because of personal weakness or moral vice but because it is imbricated in real structures of power. In the North, whether before or after Partition, the Protestant community has always enjoyed a privileged relationship to the State. For this reason, the situations of the Catholic nationalist and Protestant unionist or **[End Page 510]** Loyalist working classes have never been symmetrical (although Protestant working-class organizations have consistently failed to this day to confront that fact).<sup>12</sup> The relative advantages enjoyed by the Protestant working class because of its affiliation with the State has served as a persistent obstacle to any genuinely radical working-class politics in the North, since real solidarity with Catholic workers would require their Protestant counterparts to

commit themselves to the construction of a wholly new social order in which their own privileged relationship to the State would no longer obtain. The tragic construction of Rainey's dilemma, one in which his willingness to work to improve the shared economic interests of Catholic and Protestant workers comes into irresolvable conflict with his desire to maintain Protestant hegemony in all other social domains, reflects, then, a genuinely materialist and structural grasp of the nature of Protestant sectarianism—something which goes well beyond any conception of that sectarianism as a matter of personal prejudice.

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Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge*, another landmark text in the development of modern Northern Irish drama, and one also written by a Protestant of working-class background,<sup>13</sup> offers an instructive contrast to Ervine's *Mixed Marriage*. Thompson's play is set in the offices of the Belfast shipyards, a workplace historically dominated by a largely Protestant "labor aristocracy" and the site of recurrent pogroms against the smaller Catholic workforce also employed there. *Over the Bridge*, like *Mixed Marriage*, deals with the difficulties involved in developing any kind of trade-unionist solidarity in a context where workers are bitterly divided along sectarian lines. Davy Mitchell, a legendary and now elderly Protestant trade unionist, has given his life to the cause of working-class solidarity, but his efforts are constantly hindered by all sorts of obstacles: Orange and republican antagonisms, Protestant Fundamentalist antipathies to socialism, and the difficulty of reconciling the sometimes "illiberal" measures needed to maintain trade union discipline with the union's wider commitment to the development of a more tolerant and liberal society. When an explosion occurs in the shipyards, the Protestants accuse the Catholic workers of republican sympathies and expel them from the workplace. Initially, Mitchell, like most of the other Protestant trade union officials, believes that the best way to deal with the situation is the conventional one: the Catholic workers should remain at home, lying [End Page 511] low for a few days until Protestant tempers cool and things can return to normal. Peter O'Boyle, a stubborn Catholic with a longtime commitment to trade unionism, complicates things for everyone, however, when he breaks with this routine practice and insists on returning to work the next day. His actions press into visibility the gap between the high social-democratic ideals of the trade union movement and the realpolitik of the situation whereby the union leadership tacitly endorses Protestant supremacy. When a Protestant mob threatens O'Boyle's life unless he agrees to return home, the other trade union leaders succumb to the intimidation and are prepared to leave O'Boyle to his fate. In an act of deliberate self-sacrifice, however, Mitchell decides that he has no other option but to take a principled stand alongside O'Boyle. In the mob violence that follows (which takes place offstage to "a terrific din of hammers and voices" and is reported to the audience by an onlooker), O'Boyle is mauled and injured, and Mitchell is killed.

The plays of Ervine and Thompson share a commitment to working-class solidarity as well as a conviction that a conservative, paternalist attitude toward Catholics on the part of Protestant labor leaders represents a major obstacle to that solidarity. Even Davy Mitchell, Thompson's heroically virtuous and self-sacrificing labor veteran, is initially willing to condone the discriminatory practice whereby Catholic workers are expected to wait for Protestant consent to their returning to the shipyards. It is only when O'Boyle takes a stand against such intimidation and the Protestant supremacy it nakedly asserts that Mitchell is forced to acknowledge the shortcomings of traditional trade-unionist practice and to adopt a more principled position.

The most obvious difference between Ervine's and Thompson's protagonists is that Mitchell, when forced to choose between communal and class solidarity, opts, unlike Rainey, for the latter. Nevertheless, the whole pattern of Mitchell's tragic sacrifice in *Over the Bridge* is heavily accented in Christian terms, suggesting that while his stand is exemplary it is a uniquely heroic action on the part of an exceptional individual; it is, in other words, not an act which the other labor leaders, who are all represented as men of lesser stature, are likely to emulate. His

death, then, is depicted as a form of martyrdom or tragic sacrifice which consecrates the *ideal* of principled working-class solidarity while simultaneously acknowledging the sorry gap between that high ideal and the compromised mundane actuality. The manner in which Mitchell's death is represented suggests that Thompson had very little expectation that in the world beyond the theatre the trade-unionist [End Page 512] leadership would live up to the high principles which the play wants to endorse.<sup>14</sup> In sum, *Over the Bridge* may be read as an attempt to consecrate, at the level of tragic art, values that are patently absent from the society to which the play is addressed. The life of one good man, then, is offered up equally as an example to and an indictment against, and perhaps an act of atonement for, the rest.

The fact that Thompson's Mitchell opts for class over communal solidarity, whereas Ervine's Rainey makes the opposite choice, might seem to signal that Thompson's work offers a more radical critique of Protestant supremacy and paternalism. In Ervine's play it is Nora Murray, the Catholic whose love transgresses the sectarian divide, who is eliminated at the end, while the Protestant father is saved; in Thompson's narrative, on the other hand, it is O'Boyle, the Catholic victim, who survives, while Mitchell, the venerable Protestant father figure, makes the supreme sacrifice for his comrade. Nevertheless, the reality, I would argue, is again much more complex since, despite Thompson's more vigorous critique of Protestant working-class paternalism on a thematic level, *Over the Bridge* remains, in terms of its formal structure and ideology, perhaps even more locked into a Protestant paternalist conception of the Northern situation than Ervine's play does.

In *Mixed Marriage*, the story of the strike cannot be detached from the love story of Hugh and Nora with which it is inextricably intertwined. The implication of this narrative entwinement is that Ervine's play insists, rightly, that working-class politics (having to do with questions of exploitation and the distribution of economic resources) and national and state politics (having to do with modes of social and economic regulation as well as the institutionalization of collective communal recognition and identity) cannot simply be separated or detached from each other. The love affair between Hugh and Nora serves as a kind of "national romance" in which the erotic embrace of the lovers operates as an allegorical projection of the desire for some sort of national reconciliation between historically antagonistic communities. By intertwining the story of the strike with that of the love affair, Ervine's play implies that no genuine solidarity between Catholic and Protestant can simply be established within or restricted to the public sphere of the workplace; genuine solidarity built in the workplace must extend to the civic sphere of social and domestic space as well. The difficulty for Rainey, then, is that real nonsectarian class solidarity between Catholic and Protestant workers seems likely to lead, logically and more or less inevitably, toward the [End Page 513] establishment of a common Irish national identity, something which might ultimately undermine a separate Protestant identity on an island where the latter is the minority community. It is precisely this prospect that plagues Rainey's fantasy and that ultimately causes him to break the strike. While he accepts that "the workin' class has got t'hing thegither" (the irony requires no comment), he resolutely opposes "Catliks an' Prodesans mixin' thegither" outside the workplace.<sup>15</sup> What the play as a whole suggests, however, is the tragic inadequacy of this conception of things. Rainey's commitment to upholding Protestant and unionist interests is allowed its dignity, but the tragic denouement also indicates that such commitments can only be maintained at the cost of genuine cross-class solidarity. Protestant workers, Ervine's play seems to infer, must decide whether they want real solidarity with their Catholic counterparts and to accept the risks involved or simply to maintain their traditional privileges and separate identity. What they cannot have, however—the play seems to insist—is both at once.

The strangely ambivalent status and function of the romance between Hugh and Nora in *Mixed Marriage* requires some comment here. As I mentioned earlier, their romance seems to be operating as an allegory for some kind of national romance: in the erotic embrace of the lovers, traditionally antagonistic communities come to recognize each other as political allies. Yet



within the actual structure of the plot that same romance also serves, paradoxically, as the critical obstacle to both working-class and national unity: when Hugh and Nora refuse to give each other up, Rainey feels he has no option but to scupper the strike. In a pivotal scene, Rainey pleads with Hugh and Nora to break off their engagement in order to maintain the separation between Catholic and Protestant while, from the opposite end of the political spectrum, Michael, the socialist republican, also pleads with them to give each other up lest their union jeopardize Rainey's support for the strike and the promise of an eventual national unity that may depend on its success. Strangely, then, the romance seems to demand interpretation on one level as an allegory of national unity and on another as its immediate practical impediment. This disjunctive status is well captured in an exchange between Michael and Mrs. Rainey. When Michael pleads the need to put collective national good before private interest, Mrs. Rainey protests, "Ye're wrong til be suggestin' partin' til them. Can't ye see, they're doin' the very thing ye want Irelan' t' do. Its Cathlik an' Prodesan joinin' han's thegither. It's quare ye shoud be wantin' til separate them." To which Michael responds: "It's acause a want a bigger joinin' o' han's. It's not enough [End Page 514] fur a man an' a wumman til join han's. A want to see the whole wurl' at peace."<sup>16</sup> While Mrs. Rainey reads the proposed marriage between Hugh and Nora as an omen of a wider political marriage between Catholic and Protestant in a United Ireland, Michael reads it, in the immediate context at least, as an impediment or threat to that same ultimately desired end.

How are we to interpret this curious romance, which seems to function simultaneously as a symbol of a desired union between Catholic and Protestant and as the very thing that destroys Protestant support for the solidarity between these communities expressed in the strike? The best way to do so, I think, is to see the ambivalent status of the romance as a symptom of a genuine Protestant dilemma in Ireland during the pre-Partition period. That is, while the romance of a genuine marriage between Catholic and Protestant is attractive as an ideal, the difficulty from a Protestant perspective is how to ensure that one of the practical consequences of such a union would not be an assimilationist erosion of a distinct Protestant identity over the longer term. Unable to square the desire for authentic solidarity across the communal divide with the terror of assimilation and loss of identity, Ervine's romance of reconciliation slips irrevocably into a tragedy of doomed love. In actual historical terms, of course, the Protestant terrors that aggravate Ervine's play were to be appeased by the partitioning of the island and the establishment of Northern Ireland as a separate state in those six northern counties where Protestants constituted a safe demographic majority.

*Over the Bridge* was produced in 1960, several decades after the establishment of that state, which was then (as it remains still) aggressively and exclusively Protestant and British in its structures and symbols, despite its substantial Catholic and nationalist minority. Given that Protestants had long since monopolized political power and by 1960 represented a secure majority within Northern Ireland, one might reasonably expect the task of imagining solidarity between Catholic and Protestant workers to embrace the fact that Catholics had come to occupy a vulnerable minority position within that state which was structurally similar in some ways to the position of Protestants before Partition. Thompson's play, however, suggests that once Northern Protestants became the majority community, the preservation of minority ethnic or communal identity was no longer regarded as a serious or legitimate concern. Indeed, in *Over the Bridge* such matters are dismissed as a distraction to a genuine socialist solidarity among workers.

The whole shape of Thompson's narrative, as well as its orchestration of stage space, attests to this. In Ervine's play, the action unfolds within the [End Page 515] Rainey's living room, and, as we have seen, the narratives of the strike and the love affair are braided together so that what happens in the public and private spheres cannot be disentangled. In Thompson's play, however, except for two scenes set in Davy Mitchell's home, the action occurs within the shipyard offices and thus among an exclusively male workforce. Moreover, the only romantic interest in *Over the Bridge*, a minor element in the play as a whole, is an exclusively Protestant

affair: Warren Baxter, a young Protestant trade union official who admires Mitchell's principles but lacks the older man's moral courage, is engaged to marry Davy's daughter, Marion, although she will ultimately reject him because of his failure to live up to the standards set by her father. In Thompson's play, the development of working-class politics is what happens in the masculine workplace, and the general attitude toward the domestic sphere tends to be hostile and negative. Associated as it is with Davy's brother, George (and his unattractively bossy wife), whose concern with social climbing brings him into conflict with Davy's trade union politics, the domestic sphere tends to be associated with selfish private interests that get in the way of working-class unity. Although Thompson's play does include a minor romantic plot, it is interesting that the affair between Marion and Warren does not cut across sectarian lines, but is instead restricted to issues of succession and inheritance *within* the Protestant community. By associating domestic space with private interests and by screening out anything to do with Catholic and Protestant social relations outside of the workplace, the whole emphasis of *Over the Bridge* falls on the development of social solidarity in the economic sphere alone, while suggesting that building class alliances between Protestant and Catholic workers need not extend into the domestic or civic sphere, nor raise wider political matters of nationality and state.

In other words, the social vision that shapes Thompson's play ultimately rests on a rather crude version of socialism which clings to the notion that working-class politics can be detached from all consideration of questions of nation and state. In *Over the Bridge*, national identity or politics is conceived, in a theoretically naive manner and within the Northern Irish context a distinctly disingenuous one, as either a secondary distraction from authentic class politics or a trivial particularism. There is a telling moment in the play when O'Boyle (the Catholic who later takes a stand against Protestant supremacy) angrily protests the allegation of a Protestant rival that he might have republican sympathies. His whole tone suggests that he considers the [End Page 516] allegation a slur on his reputation as a good trade unionist: "That man has accused me of undermining the union with republicanism."<sup>17</sup> Within the terms of the play, it would seem, authentic trade-unionist Catholics like O'Boyle would automatically regard republicanism with abhorrence.

In marked contrast to *Mixed Marriage*, then, *Over the Bridge* conceives of cross-class solidarity only along the axis of a single subject position (the economic solidarity of the male worker); other subject positions (based on nationality or gender) which might mediate and complicate such solidarity are deliberately ruled out in advance as issues worthy of concern. Since one of the essential functions of the Northern Irish State system in the period when Thompson's play was produced was to regulate the local economy so as to maintain the coherence of the unionist bloc (which required that the State try to maintain the relative advantage of the Protestant working class over its Catholic counterpart), the assumption that Catholic nationalist or republican politics represented a diversion from or distortion of authentic working-class concerns is untenable. Because everything in *Over the Bridge* depends on precisely this assumption, however, it must be concluded that its thematic critique of Protestant paternalism is severely compromised by a deeper paternalism implicit in the overall structure of the narrative. By insisting on the impossibility of detaching the narrative of the strike from the story of the love affair between Hugh and Nora, Ervine's domestic tragedy insists that in the last analysis economic, domestic, and wider sociopolitical matters will not be detached from one another. By insisting that class alliances can and ought to be articulated solely within the economic sphere of the workplace, without wider reference to other sociopolitical matters, Thompson's play succumbs to the illusion that these spheres can be detached from each other. On the whole, then, Ervine's work offers the more rigorous appreciation of the nature of the obstacles to be overcome on the way to establishing genuine equality and solidarity between Catholic and Protestant.

In his classic essay on family melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser draws attention to an important distinction between that genre and more “masculine,” action-oriented cinematic genres such as the western or the adventure movie. In the latter, Elsaesser observes, the assumption of “open” spaces is axiomatic; the hero is usually defined dynamically as the center of continuous [End Page 517] movement, and suspense is generated by the linear organization of the plot and the action, together with the kind of “pressure” which the spectator brings to the film by way of prior expectations. The family melodrama, in contrast, operates in a “closed” and constricted world. Its setting is typically the middle-class home, weighed down with objects. While in action-oriented genres violence is externalized and suspense maintained through dynamic movement, in the more constricted space of family melodrama, where everything happens “inside,” there is no outside world to be acted on. Since violence cannot find a legitimate outlet, therefore, the range of “strong” actions which the genre can accommodate is very limited. Violence is consequently directed inward, or against the self, or finds an outlet only in moments of “excess” such as outbursts of anger or hysteria. For Elsaesser, then, family melodrama is a typically masochistic form. It records “the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape . . . events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling social milieu. The world is closed, and the characters are acted upon.”<sup>18</sup>

In Northern Irish dramas such as Ervine’s *Mixed Marriage* or Thompson’s *Over the Bridge*, the settings may be working- rather than middle-class, but the worlds imagined are quite consonant with the “closed” and centripetal ones which Elsaesser describes. While it is important to allow for the different patternings of social space in Ervine’s and Thompson’s plays, in one respect at least their works display a notable similarity: as the action comes to its climax in each play, the “inside” space where everything happens (the place of the stage proper) is completely besieged by a hostile “outside” space (the offstage world). In *Mixed Marriage* the opening stage directions tell us that when the action commences it is “the evening of a warm summer day at the beginning of July.” Despite the weather, however, “the living room of John Rainey’s house is intolerably heated; to counteract this, the door leading to the street is partly open, and the scullery door, leading to the open yard, is open to its widest.”<sup>19</sup> At the start of the play this suffocatingly overheated interior, clearly a metaphor for the explosive political emotions that will tear apart this domestic space later on, is ventilated, to some extent at least, with the living room remaining “open” to the world beyond it. And even if everything happens inside, during the first three acts the forward plot movement is sustained by the constant traffic which passes through those open doors between the domestic and the public space.

In the last act, everything changes. Now the stage directions stipulate [End Page 518] that “the kitchen shows signs of unusual agitation. The window-shutters are closely barred, and the street door is well fastened. Outside is heard the noise of people shouting, occasionally a stone strikes the shutters or the door.”<sup>20</sup> Literally besieged by a terrifically threatening exterior world (the rising and falling din of the mob outside is maintained offstage throughout this act), the domestic space is now hermetically sealed off from the world outside. What goes on in that sinister and nightmarish space “outside” the home exists for the audience as something that cannot be directly apprehended but only imperfectly imagined. From an upstairs window (offstage) the younger Rainey son, Tom, calls down snatched reports of the tumultuous scenes outside to those in the kitchen below (the stage area). The whole construction of things here emphasizes the distance between interior and exterior worlds and implies that what goes on outside has passed beyond the limits of realist representation, with those inside no longer real actors but now reduced to the passivity of spectators or the helplessness of victims.

The scene which brings *Over the Bridge* to its climax is very similar.<sup>21</sup> All of the principal characters are gathered inside the shipyard office, besieged by the sinister mob of Protestant workers “outside” who demand that Peter O’Boyle be sent home. As in *Mixed Marriage*, the

vulnerability of this precarious “inside” to the threatening “outside” world is highlighted in terms of a communicative crisis: when the office manager decides that it is time to telephone the police, he lifts the receiver to find that the line has already been cut. In each play, communication between inside and outside eventually becomes impossible, all access between them suspended. Again, in Thompson’s play as in Ervine’s, the mob exists primarily as a cacophonous offstage presence (that “terrifying din of hammers and voices”).<sup>22</sup> When Mitchell and O’Boyle exit the office to make their stand against intimidation, the violence inflicted on them by the mob is reported to those who remain “inside” by the young trade unionist, Warren Baxter, who witnesses their fate, helplessly and hysterically, through an office window. In each case, once sectarian conflict openly erupts into violence, the little band of people crowded into the space inside loses all effective agency and, in doing so, acquires the pathos of victims.

This Manichean construction of stage space, which pits a small and vulnerable “inside” community against a hostile and cacophonous horde “outside,” encourages a paranoid and reactionary conception of the world, one that rests on a division of humanity between the civilized few and the brute [End Page 519] multitude. The trope is most commonly found perhaps in narratives of the colonial frontier, that exemplary space where civilization and savagery meet. A “high culture” example can be found in the opening chapters of Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo*, where the reader sees the world from the perspective of the besieged household of the sympathetically drawn European family of Georgio Viola as it is attacked by a faceless mob of native “scoundrels” and “leperos” outside. The standard “mass culture” equivalent appears in the western in the image of American Indians attacking a huddled caravan of terrified White settlers. In the closing act of *Mixed Marriage*, then, Mrs. Rainey’s description of the mob, predictably enough, equates its behavior with that of savage indigenes: “Ye would think they wur wil’ savages thrum the heart of Africa, the way they’re goin’ on.”<sup>23</sup>

By any standards, the Protestant pogroms to which Ervine and Thompson refer were, of course, politically reactionary phenomena. Nevertheless, the way in which these authors depict such events is itself reactionary insofar as the behavior of those involved is construed as a kind of inexplicable savagery beyond the limits of rational comprehension or political explanation. Conversely, the audience is sutured into a point of view such that identification is inevitably with the beleaguered minority “inside”—which in each case also proves to be exclusively or mainly Protestant. In short, the audience in the theatre is willy-nilly corralled into a liberal-elitist position in which a sense of victimization at the hands of a barbarous multitude is combined with a sense of superiority that derives from belonging to the “civilized” world.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the working-class sympathies of Ervine and Thompson, then, their plays operate within a bourgeois humanist structure of feeling which conceives of sectarianism primarily in terms of the mob actions of the working classes. In reality, while working-class sectarian disputes are common, sectarian violence has never been the preserve of these classes; it has operated across all classes, and the various apparatuses of the State, civil and military, have often been utilized as instruments of sectarianism. If these climactic scenes in Ervine’s and Thompson’s works operate at the general expense of the Catholic and Protestant working classes, however, in each play it is the subaltern Catholic working class which is most severely compromised. In *Mixed Marriage* the offstage clash between Catholic and Protestant mobs establishes a false, though conventional and obdurate, symmetry in which the violence of Catholics and Protestants is constructed as two, equally reactionary faces of the same sectarianism. What this occludes, [End Page 520] though, is that within the Northern State Protestant riots against Catholics were intended to uphold sectarian social structures, whereas the object of Catholic rioting was to protest that community’s oppression by such structures. In some ways Thompson seems to come closer to acknowledging this since his Catholic characters are quite clearly the victims of Protestant violence. Nevertheless, his plot is constructed so that the whole stress of the action is not on the suffering of the Catholic O’Boyle, who is only injured by the mob, but on the death of Mitchell in the same incident. Once he has been injured by the mob, O’Boyle, never more

than a minor character, disappears from the plot altogether. In contrast, the entire final scene is set in Mitchell's home, where his death is mourned by an exclusively Protestant set of characters.

In both *Mixed Marriage* and *Over the Bridge*, then, the narrative develops toward a situation in which a Catholic is a tragic victim of mob violence (Nora is shot, O'Boyle injured), yet as the action winds to a close the audience is invited to see the "real" tragedy as a Protestant one. Ervine's play closes with Mrs. Rainey's plangent cry for her husband: "Aw, my poor man, my poor man." That cry mixes empathy with a note of rebuke perhaps, but its effect is surely to fix the audience's attention on the sorrowful case of Rainey, who must bear the bitter burden of his decision to elevate communal above class loyalty. Thompson's *Over the Bridge* manages audience sympathy such that it is more completely monopolized by the Protestant characters. Concluding with a tableau in which Protestant mourners bow in reverence before a Protestant clergyman who reads the prayers for the dead over the corpse of Mitchell, the scene ensures that it is the fallen Protestant hero who commands the empathy of the theatre audience. Catholics are acknowledged as the actual victims of sectarianism, then, but it is Protestant suffering which is nonetheless cathected as the stuff of tragedy. Whether it is Rainey bearing the bitter burden of his decisions or Mitchell taking the sins of his community on his own back, tragic destiny, however differently conceived in each case, is essentially Protestant.

Earlier, by way of Elsaesser's essay on family melodrama, I alluded to the distinction between action-oriented genres, which assume "open" spaces and dynamic heroes who can use violence legitimately, and genres like family melodrama and domestic tragedy, which operate within a more enclosed and immobilized environment where the characters tend to be acted upon and violence is directed inward. These latter genres, however, typically [End Page 521] make greater provision for female protagonists. Moreover, they cannot operate in the simple terms of a fantasy affirmation of the masculine and disavowal of the feminine, as more action-oriented genres do. Nevertheless, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith rightly remarks that, insofar as activity in these more domestic genres is still equated with masculinity and passivity with femininity, the greater scope they allow for female characters and the expression of passion inevitably creates its own problems. "Masculinity," notes Nowell-Smith, though usually impaired and rarely attainable within these genres, is at least known as an ideal. "Femininity," on the other hand, within the terms of the argument, is not only unknown but unknowable since social efficacy is recognizable only in a "masculine" form. Hence the contradictions facing the female characters are more acutely posed from the outset, and women's protests against the restrictions of their situation tend to assume various forms of hysterical excess or masochism.<sup>25</sup>

These observations throw important light on the constrictions that govern the representation not only of women but of Catholics in Ervine's and Thompson's plays and others of their kind. Indeed, Catholics in these plays are essentially "feminized" insofar as they share many of the constraints that usually apply to female characters in such genres. Since effective social agency is restricted in both plays to patriarchal Protestant males (in Ervine's the success of the strike depends totally on Rainey; in Thompson's only Mitchell has enough credibility with the workers to solve problems), the Catholic characters are implicitly aligned with women. One of the things which follows from this is that, while their oppression within the given social structure may be recognized, any strong action they themselves might undertake to undo that oppression would not be considered acceptable; Catholics are most sympathetic, in other words, when they are passive and impotent victims. When they individually protest their situation, their behavior is registered as some kind of "feminized" hysteria. Alternatively, if the protest takes a militant or collective expression, it is depicted as a kind of criminal activity which cannot be approved. In *Mixed Marriage* Nora Murray is the principal Catholic character, thus allowing the Catholic and feminine positions to be conflated. Despite her initially spirited defense of her love for Hugh, Nora's behavior becomes, in a manner characteristic of the genre, progressively more hysterical as the consequences of that transgressive love are visited upon the Raineys; and the manner of her death, running into the

street and being shot, has a patently masochistic quality.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in *Over [End Page 522] the Bridge*, O'Boyle's complaints about harassment and his stubborn insistence on returning to work, which puts everyone at risk, is, as Lionel Pilkington has noted, depicted as a mixture of "petulant and violent obduracy."<sup>27</sup> As the play reaches its climax, O'Boyle's whininess slides into an explicitly feminized excess. When the office is besieged by the mob and he panics and becomes hysterical, "Davy smacks him across the face. Peter stares back in shock and then slumps into the chair."<sup>28</sup> Mitchell's self-command here is stereotypically "masculine" while O'Boyle's lack of it is, characteristically, associated with a "womanish" loss of control.<sup>29</sup>

The crux, then, is that these plays operate in terms of conventions whereby activity and social efficacy are associated exclusively with masculinity and Protestantism, passivity and domesticity with femininity and Catholicism. Once those in the latter categories actively protest their oppression, they are caught in a double bind whereby their actions are construed as hysterical and masochistic or, if they take a more aggressive form, sliding into the kind of criminalized violence which supposedly mirrors the violence visited upon them. Essentially, then, Catholics, like women, are sympathetic so long as they remain passive—the worthy recipients of liberal Protestant benevolence. Once they step out of this role, or are foolhardy enough to venture out from the (oppressive) security of private domestic space—as Nora does when she crosses over the threshold of the living room into the street, or as O'Boyle does when he refuses to stay at home with the other Catholics—and into the dangerous and militantly masculinized public sphere, they court destruction for themselves and sow division, which brings destruction on civilized society as a whole.

Writing about eighteenth-century German middle-class tragedy in *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach comments that the world revealed to the spectator in such works is "desperately narrow, both spatially and ethically." The genre, he remarks, was

wedded to the personal, the domestic, the touching, and the sentimental, and it could not relinquish them. And this, through the tone and level of style which it implied, was unfavorable to a broadening of the social setting and the inclusion of general political and social problems. And yet it was in just this way that the breakthrough to things political and generally social was achieved: for the touching and, in essence, wholly personal love alliance now no longer clashed with the opposition [End Page 523] of ill-willed relatives and guardians, or with private moral obstacles, but instead with a public enemy, with the unnatural class structure of society.<sup>30</sup>

Something similar might be concluded about Northern Irish tragedies such as Ervine's and Thompson's. These plays are at their strongest, it seems to me, to the extent that they insist with the rigor of tragedy that the realization of desire, whether it be love across the sectarian divide or working-class unity, is ultimately impeded not by individual villainy or the machinations of small elites in power, but by the whole structure of a society which rests on a vicious interweaving of working-class exploitation and sectarian domination. At the same time, however, the limitations of the genre are such that this insight is seldom more than fleetingly grasped and almost never opens out into any radical grasp of the situation. Instead, the plays too often lapse into a kind of besieged liberal self-pity, in which the Catholic and Protestant working classes prove intractably wedded to their bigotries, or else into a kind of sentimentality that can acknowledge compassion for Catholics only at the price of representing Protestants as even more tragic victims in the vain hope of squaring accounts.

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Tom Paulin shares with Ervine and Thompson an Ulster unionist upbringing, but unlike the earlier playwrights Paulin has rejected unionism and endorsed Irish republicanism. His most

notable theatrical representation of the Northern conflict, *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone*, premiered in 1984 as a production by the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry.<sup>31</sup> Paulin was not the first to see in Sophocles' tragedy a mythic paradigm for the Northern struggle. In 1968, at a time when the Northern police were batoning civil rights demonstrators, Conor Cruise O'Brien gave a lecture in which he pondered the "non-violent civil disobedience" of Antigone, who defies Creon, resolute champion of state right. Arguing that "it was Antigone's free decision, and that alone, which precipitated the tragedy," O'Brien concluded that whatever her personal appeal, the actions of Antigone are ultimately indefensible since she brings disaster not only on herself but on everyone else as well.<sup>32</sup> As Anthony Roche remarks, O'Brien registers some initial sympathy for Antigone, but then increasingly becomes an outright apologist for Creon and his practices.<sup>33</sup> The trajectory in the lecture [End Page 524] thus anticipated that of O'Brien's own political career. Having campaigned against Partition some decades earlier, O'Brien went on (after the Troubles erupted in Northern Ireland) to become a vigorous champion of state right and to adopt an increasingly rigid pro-union line, eventually joining the U.K. Unionist Party. On one level at least, then, Paulin's version of *Antigone* can be read as part of the northerner's ongoing imaginative engagement with O'Brien, a southerner whose intellectual migration from Irish nationalism to Ulster unionism ran in an inverse direction to Paulin's own political development.

*The Riot Act* appeared just three years after the 1981 hunger strike, when ten republican inmates of the H-Blocks had starved themselves to death to protest the British government's attempts to impose a criminalization policy within the Northern prison system which would deny republicans the status of political prisoners. The contest between the hunger strikers and the British government had convulsed Northern Ireland, and the ensuing campaign for public support had also transformed republican strategy by setting in motion a shift from an exclusively military struggle with the State toward the building of a mass political movement. Coming in the wake of these events, Paulin's rewriting of Sophocles' tragedy addressed itself to a society still traumatized by a powerful collision of wills and antithetical concepts of justice, a collision so intense that it threatened at certain moments to bring the province to the verge of total war.

In Paulin's play, Creon is clearly identified with Northern unionism and Antigone with republicanism. Creon's refusing Polynices' proper burial and the severity of his response when Antigone defies this edict are justified in *The Riot Act* on the grounds that Antigone has "levelled [Eteocles] with a state traitor."<sup>34</sup> This recalls the recent hunger strike episode, since the British government's attempt, strongly supported by unionists, to deny republican prisoners political status rested on a similar insistence that a categorical distinction be maintained between the violence of the security forces who upheld the State and that of "terrorist" paramilitaries who tried to undermine it. Like the republican campaign for political-prisoner status, Antigone's actions serve to destabilize Creon's absolute distinction between Eteocles (who represents legitimate state violence) and Polynices (who rebels against state authority), as does her insistence that there are higher laws than those of the state.

Although its resonance with recent events was unmistakable, the significance [End Page 525] of Paulin's *Riot Act* is no more reducible to such correspondences than Sophocles' tragedy is to the struggle between Creon and Antigone. There is also the contest between Antigone, with her tendency to exalt what she sees as her higher calling, and her sister, Ismene, who asserts the value of compromise and the imperative of survival. There is as well the struggle between Creon and his son, Haemon, whose appeals to his father to act with greater judiciousness go unheeded until it is too late. In the circumstances, then, the Sophoclean text—or, more precisely, the complex of difficult moral choices, equally legitimate claims, and indeterminacies of feeling which it engenders—was deployed by Paulin to speak to a society recently convulsed by the traumas of the hunger strike, but which also resonated beyond any literal-minded allegorical rendition of the situation.

A skeptical critic might argue that Paulin's adaptation of *Antigone* to the Northern situation simply translated conventional constructions of the Troubles in "lowbrow" domestic tragedies such as *Mixed Marriage* into a more "highbrow" literary idiom or register. After all, many of the formulaic structural devices that shape romantic and domestic tragedies about the Troubles seem to resemble those deployed in *The Riot Act*.<sup>35</sup> For example, the opposition between Creon as paternal/"masculine" unionist and Antigone as "feminized" republican seems to repeat the same gendered patterning of the conflict that we have already noted in the Ervine and Thompson plays. Similarly, the love of Haemon for Antigone might be construed as merely a variant on the romantic *Romeo and Juliet*, or "love-across-the-divide," device of Ervine's play as well as so many other recent Troubles narratives. Don't both *Mixed Marriage* and *The Riot Act* translate the Ulster unionist predicament—the son forced to choose between a forward-looking love for the Other and filial loyalty—into the same Oedipal dilemma?

These correspondences are not without interest, but it would be reductive to see Paulin's play as simply another domestic tragedy about the Troubles masquerading in Attic attire. Some of the devices may be similar, but the overall dynamic of the narrative is nonetheless quite different. The *Romeo and Juliet*/"love-across-the-divide" device that structures such plays as *Mixed Marriage* is one in which the drive toward reconciliation represented by the lovers from hostile communities can only succeed if they first detach themselves from their respective families. In the Shakespearean prototype, the love of Romeo and Juliet develops against the background of the perpetually quarrelling Montagues and Capulets; if that love is to triumph over inherited [End Page 526] circumstance, the two young people must first rise above their own family allegiances. The conflict is essentially between extended kinship allegiances, represented by the feudal Montague and Capulet clans, and the values of the privatized bourgeois family, mythically self-contained and supposedly impervious to any social determination.<sup>36</sup> Adapted to the contemporary Northern situation, the effect of this device is to depict the Catholic and Protestant communities generally as symmetrical "feudal" entities, and the two young lovers then come to represent a more liberal-minded minority struggling heroically to overcome the entrenched sectarian attitudes associated with their respective communities. The device, in short, construes the Northern situation such that a small, enlightened liberal elect, personified by the tragic couple, is seen to be involved in a desperate struggle (doomed for now but nevertheless noble and future-oriented) to overcome the supposedly twin sectarianisms of the broad mass of their communities.

The degree to which this compositional structure expresses a deeply negative attitude toward the wider body of *both* (Protestant and Catholic) communities can best be gauged by comparing it with Lukács's account of the representation of antagonistic political communities in the "classic" historical novel. For Lukács, the "wavering" hero of the historical novel (Scott's Edward Waverley being the exemplar) sides passionately with neither of the warring camps in the great crisis of his time. Nevertheless, the hero does have strong emotional ties to both sides in the dispute and, in his meandering progress through the novel, involves himself for a time with each of the rival parties. This is essential, Lukács argues, since it ensures that readers "enter into human contact with both camps." Unless imaginative involvements of this kind are established, the historical clash between warring forces will be reduced to "a merely external picture of mutual destruction incapable of arousing the human sympathies and enthusiasms of the reader."<sup>37</sup>

The sympathetic involvement of the reader with both sides that Lukács applauds in the historical novel is quite at odds with the *Romeo and Juliet* device. By inviting the audience to empathize exclusively with the humane, enlightened lovers and to take an essentially negative attitude toward their families and wider communities, that compositional structure sponsors exactly the kind of externalized and alienated standpoint toward historical conflict that Lukács praises the historical novel for circumventing. Where the novel encourages the reader to weigh



up dialectically the wider social losses and [End Page 527] gains at stake in violent and explosive moments of societal transformation, the *Romeo and Juliet* plot empties social collision of all political significance and dismisses it as a meaningless cycle of mutual destruction. Since the wider social world represented by the warring communities is conceived so reductively, the privatized interiority of the bourgeois couple is endorsed as the only substantive value.

The significance of Paulin's use of *Antigone* is best appreciated, then, if one grasps the extent to which it unsettles the construction of the Northern situation along the lines that romantic tragedies have established as normative. Where the latter confers a lyrico-tragical halo on the romantic couple while damning their wider communities as utterly regressive, the effect of the *Antigone* narrative is to restore to the antagonistic parties in the Northern conflict some sense of their historical struggle not as a meaningless clash of rival atavisms (as it is commonly perceived) but as one which has grown out of antithetical ethical claims, each with a legitimate claim to recognition. In Sophocles' narrative, the love of Haemon and Antigone emotionally and ethically complicates the struggle between Creon and Antigone, but romantic love is not detached from all other obligations and values and enshrined as some kind of transcendent absolute. Where the *Romeo and Juliet* narrative operates in terms of a dichotomy between a small humane elite and the regressive mass of the community as a whole, *Antigone* accords the greater body of the population, which tries to steer somewhere between the polarities represented by Antigone and Creon, a far less derisory status. As embodied in the persons of Ismene and the Chorus, the general population is allowed its own worth, although the play does not extol or sentimentalize the average either. In short, what distinguishes Sophocles' *Antigone* from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is that the very different values and moral imperatives represented by Creon and Antigone are each allowed a strong claim on the audience's respect.<sup>38</sup> By adapting the *Antigone* narrative to the Northern situation, then, Paulin allows the conflicting parties in that struggle (to each of which he personally has conflicting ancestral and ideological ties) what Winston Churchill once referred to, though with a patrician British sneer, as "the integrity of their quarrel."<sup>39</sup>

That said, some caveats need to be entered here. While one can legitimately argue that Paulin's selection of the *Antigone* narrative to represent the Northern situation works to rescue that society from the condescension to which it is commonly subjected, his actual handling of the material [End Page 528] suggests all sorts of unease and misgivings on his part. One of the more obvious signs of tension is perhaps the interesting disjunction between the elevated classical style we expect of the Greek original and Paulin's heavily colloquial, slangy, often jokey language, along with his modes of characterization, which tend toward caricature at times, steering very close in the cases of Creon and the Messenger to satiric Northern stereotypes. Such a deliberate mixing of styles so as to "lower" the overall tone of a version of *Antigone* indicates, I think, a work that can never quite decide whether it really wishes to achieve a tragic-heroic or a satiric effect, so veers uncomfortably somewhere between the two. One might argue, indeed, that *The Riot Act* evinces a frustrated comic soul trapped within a tragic body. Thus, while the plot turns on an exemplary tragic situation whereby two irreconcilable imperatives trigger a collision in which something has to give way, the whole moral thrust of Paulin's version seems to insist, in a spirit nearer to comedy, that a greater capacity for compromise might have resolved everything. Compromise, after all, is what Haemon counsels: "Be firm sometimes, / then give a little—that's wise." The Messenger's verdict on Creon seems to underscore the same point: "He could neither bend nor listen. He held firm just that shade too long. There was no joy nor give in him ever." A few lines later, the Chorus reiterates the same message: "It was too late you changed your mind."<sup>40</sup>

The stylistic tensions which characterize Paulin's treatment of his material may ultimately be only surface symptoms of an even odder incongruity at the very core of this play. Although the standard allegorical interpretations of *The Riot Act* identify Creon with the Ulster unionists and

Antigone with the Northern republicans, Paulin's own republican allegiances make the extent to which his identification of Antigone with them seems to concede so much to hostile revisionist stereotypes of republicanism rather surprising. In *The Riot Act*, what Antigone reveres are the primordial values of kith and kin. Against Creon's exaltation of state right and Ismene's pragmatic acquiescence, Antigone asserts the duty owed to the dead and to blood ties. Her behavior, moreover, exhibits a certain morbid fascination with her own martyrdom. All this is a given in the Sophoclean original, of course, but it means that, as an incarnation of republican values, Antigone would seem in many ways a decidedly curious choice. After all, the identification tends only to support the notion that Irish republicanism is a form of Volkish ethnic nationalism, with its attendant instinctual or romantic obeisance [End Page 529] to the primordial call of ancestral voices. This is much closer to a Conor Cruise O'Brien caricature than it is to any version of that political ideology which republicans themselves would wish to acknowledge. For them, the very essence of republicanism is its opposition to ethnic nationalism and to the idea that the state should privilege any one sect or creed. The republican credo is, in principle at least, essentially a civic and secular nationalist one that sponsors the idea of a common citizenship which would not distinguish among Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. What has happened then? How can this Antigone, so strangely at odds in many ways with values that might be associated with nonsectarian republicanism, be reconciled with Paulin's declared republican commitments? Did the allegory backfire on its author (and the Field Day Theatre Company unwittingly produce a nicely revisionist drama), or is there some alternative explanation?

In order to answer these questions, it may be necessary to pursue a reading which looks beyond the usual allegorical one. Paulin's version of *Antigone*, it might be argued, is only an allegory on one level (and not necessarily the most compelling one at that) of the communal conflict in the North. The play's deeper subject, arguably obscured by the more immediate allegorical stratum, is some sort of unresolved Oedipal conflict within the author himself (one generated and shaped by the actual historical situation, of course). On this reading, Antigone would not represent Irish republicanism, but rather those instinctual or emotional claims to loyalty which Paulin's natal Ulster Protestant culture still continues to exert on him despite his rejection of unionism and his intellectual conversion to republicanism. Creon (a rather heavy-handed caricature in *The Riot Act*) would then incarnate all the more unappealing aspects of Ulster unionism that compel Paulin to reject the political culture within which he was raised: its intransigence, its puritanical severity, its triumphalist swagger, and its absurd, even "blasphemous," fetishism of the state. The real predicament, if we accept this reading, is not whether the ethical deadlock represented by Creon and Antigone can ever be resolved. Instead, the play is better read as a psychodrama in which Antigone acts as a figure for the compelling emotional loyalties that continue to bind Paulin to his ancestral community, while Creon stands for everything that makes it impossible to accede to those forces of attraction. Accordingly, Haemon, the tormented liberal son torn between Antigone and Creon, may well be the character whose predicament most nearly approaches that of Paulin himself. If only Haemon's father were not so bloody [End Page 530] intransigent and severe ("He could neither bend nor listen. . . . There was no joy nor give in him ever"), if only he could learn to compromise and to share power ("That's no city / where one man only / has all the power"<sup>41</sup>), then Haemon would be much less tormented by self-division and might even yield to the attractions of Antigone. Or, to put it another way, if only Ulster unionism were not so rigid and uncompromising, then Paulin's relationship to the Protestant community might be a lot less painfully self-divided and the bonds of primordial obligation and allegiance represented by Antigone more easily acknowledged.

Among the things which follow from this reading is that in one respect, at least, Paulin's play seems quite similar to those by Ervine and Thompson. I have already commented on the way in which their plays both start out as critical reflections on sectarian relations, but gradually mutate such that the real dilemma turns out to be the crisis of Protestant self-identity (collective and individual) set in motion whenever the issue of Protestant sectarianism is pressed home. In *Mixed Marriage* the failure of working-class solidarity between Catholic and Protestant gives

the play its theme. Yet as the action develops the real tragedy becomes the divisions within Rainey's family and, even more to the point, within Rainey himself. *Over the Bridge* displays a similar pattern. What begins as a tale about the obstacles that need to be overcome before genuine working-class solidarity can be achieved slides into a tragedy in which the real pathos is cathected onto the moral dilemmas that sectarianism poses for Protestants rather than onto the material ones imposed on the subaltern Catholic community. Likewise, while *The Riot Act* works on one level as a play about the ethical deadlock that keeps unionists and republicans at odds, on another level it can also be read, in a contrapuntal and less explicit allegorical vein, as an existential narrative in which the real crisis is the inner torment of Protestant self-division.

\* \* \*

Tragedy, as Raymond Williams suggests, can inhere in many shapes of the historical process, and the social situation that has long prevailed in Northern Ireland is one, it seems to me, in which several of these overlap: the failed revolution; the deep divisions and contradictions within both communities at a time of shock and loss; the deadlock or stalemate of a blocked and apparently static period; and the difficulty of reconciling equal yet antithetical rights.<sup>42</sup> In many respects, Gramsci's famous statement that "the crisis consists [End Page 531] precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born" would seem to describe precisely the situation which has prevailed in Northern Ireland for the past thirty years.<sup>43</sup> In the circumstances, the emergence of a variety of tragic forms is hardly surprising. While a tragic conception of the situation cannot be privileged over any other, it might be argued that its distinctive contribution lies in its uncompromising insistence that a new social order can only emerge after a painful period of crisis and rupture in which many old allegiances must be abandoned and many new kinds of recognition attained.

"The old is dying, the new cannot be born." When an old social order is dying, it grieves for itself, as Williams observes.<sup>44</sup> Those invested in that order will inevitably conceive of its disintegration in terms of tragic loss. To those for whom that old order was hurtful and oppressive, it will not be the disintegration of the old but the slowness with which the new emerges, if it emerges at all, that will appear to be the real calamity. In all of the tragic narratives discussed here, a certain grieving for the failure of the new to emerge *is* audible. What cannot be overlooked, however, is the contrapuntal movement in which this grief for the obstruction of the new can also modulate into a sense of mourning for the old that is perceived to be dying. The plays examined here all attribute responsibility for the crisis of community relations within Northern Ireland to Protestant sectarianism. To that extent at least, they all represent a break with the ideology of traditional unionism, since the latter has never been able to bring itself to acknowledge even this much. Nevertheless, what these plays also show, in various ways and to different degrees, to be sure, is that in the catastrophe following from the collision between the two communities, the internal divisions opened up within the Protestant community tend to be cathected as the real source of tragic suffering and the standpoint of the victims of state sectarianism steered, wittingly or not, into the background. It is here that the plays come nearest to expressing a structure of feeling which tends to characterize various shades of liberal unionism. When the plight of the oppressed Northern nationalist community is acknowledged in this structure of feeling, the emphasis usually shifts to the parity of suffering endured by both communities in the long and vicious struggle to overthrow the structures of state oppression.<sup>45</sup> But this moral shuffle occludes the fact that the weight of state oppression has never, either under the centuries of British rule or in the several decades since the foundation of the Northern State, [End Page 532] fallen on both communities equally. Until this limit of the liberal-unionist imagination is superseded, the emergence of the new will continue to be impeded.

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Contemporary Narratives of the Northern Irish Conflict” appeared in the winter 1996 issue of *SAQ. Partition and Postcolonialism: Literature and Politics in Ireland, Israel, and Palestine* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

## Notes

1. Shaun Richards, “In the Border Country: Greek Tragedy and Contemporary Irish Drama,” in *Ritual Remembering: History, Myth and Politics in Anglo-Irish Drama*, ed. C. C. Barfoot and Rias van den Doel (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 1995), 191–200. Although Richards’s critique is directed specifically at the practice of applying frameworks from Greek tragedy to the Northern Irish situation, his thesis, which draws on the writings of George Steiner and Bertolt Brecht on modern tragedy, appears to extend to tragic theatre generally. My argument, I should make clear, is not with Richards’s assessments of individual works, nor indeed with his strictures against fatalistic or catastrophic conceptions of the Northern situation; what can be questioned, however, is his tendency to equate tragic narrative per se with a resigned or reactionary political outlook.
2. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln and London, 1962 [1937]), 121–22. Lukács goes on to remark that the positive side of tragic “drama must also be specially stressed because bourgeois theories—particularly those which became dominant during the latter half of the nineteenth century—give increasing, one-sided prominence to the pessimistic aspects, while our [socialist] polemic against them often simply counters this abstract and decadent pessimism scholastically with an abstract and shallow optimism” (122). These comments would appear to be indispensable to any leftist appreciation of tragedy.
3. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York, 1985 [1928]), 107; my emphasis.
4. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, rev. ed. (London, 1979 [1966]).
5. Seamus Deane, “Irish Politics and O’Casey’s Theatre,” *Threshold* 24 (1973): 5–16. The essay later reappeared, with some interesting alterations and elisions, as a chapter, “O’Casey and Yeats: Exemplary Dramatists,” in Deane’s *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (Winston Salem, NC, 1987), 108–22.
6. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1974 [1946]), 441.
7. St. John Ervine, *Mixed Marriage*, in *Selected Plays of St. John Ervine*, ed. John Cronin (Gerrards Cross, UK, 1988). All quotations are from this edition.
8. *Ibid.*, 20.
9. *Ibid.*, 63.
10. See Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History* (Oxford, 1990), 179–80; and Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nature* (Manchester and New York, 1997), 192.
11. Vance, *Irish Literature*, 180.
12. Frank Wright’s *Two Lands on One Soil: Ulster Politics before Home Rule* (Dublin, 1996) offers a useful analysis of some of the ways in which the British State maintained Protestant supremacy in Northern Ireland during the period before Partition. For a succinct and cogent

summary of the ways in which the Northern State has privileged the interests of the Protestant over the Catholic working class since Partition, see Mark McGovern and Peter Shirlow, "Counter-Insurgency: Deindustrialisation and the Political Economy of Ulster Loyalism," in *Who Are "The People"? Unionism, Protestantism and Loyalism in Northern Ireland*, ed. Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern (London and Chicago, 1997), 176–98. As McGovern and Shirlow observe, "In terms of creating a socio-regulatory format capable of removing Protestant working-class hostility toward the State, Unionists constructed a state which served, whenever possible, the relative material interests of the Protestant working class through promoting discriminatory employment, voting and housing allocation structures. This in turn promoted the loyalty of Protestant workers toward the State and employers, and in so doing exacerbated sectarian divisions through material and political influence" (183). As they also note, Northern Irish Loyalist organizations in the contemporary moment have generally tended to see the decline in traditional manufacturing industries in Northern Ireland and the consequent loss of Protestant working-class status, which was tied to employment in such industries not as a result of any failure on the part of the unionist establishment, but as a consequence of "the rise of the Catholic community on the back of IRA violence" (196). Hence, "many Loyalists deny that anti-Catholic discrimination exists, and tend rather to 'explain' any relative disadvantages with reference to supposed defects in the character of the Catholic community itself. Similarly, the imagined relationship between the Protestant working class and the State is constructed around the concept of Loyalty, and that the faithfulness of Protestants to the State should be rewarded by the State" (197).

[13.](#) Sam Thompson, *Over the Bridge* (Dublin, 1970). All quotations are from this edition. For an extended study of Thompson's work, see Hagal Mengel, *Sam Thompson and Modern Drama in Ulster* (Frankfurt a.M., 1986).

[14.](#) The distinction between Davy Mitchell and the other Protestant trade unionists is reinforced in several ways. Mitchell belongs to an older generation than his fellow union members and he has a stature that no one else has attained. His oldest comrade, Rabbie White, is basically honest but evasive on the matter of sectarianism, and he is also a "ruleatarian" who relies, in a pedantic, bureaucratic manner, on the union rule book. Warren Baxter, who is engaged to Davy's daughter, is more willing than Rabbie to acknowledge that the trade union movement depends on a tacit acceptance of Protestant supremacy, but he is also quite cynically prepared to profit from this, accepting, for example, that the only reason he will be elected to the post of union organizer is that his opponent is a Catholic. His breakdown at the end of the play is a dramatic expression of the "bad conscience" inherent in his position.

[15.](#) Ervine, *Mixed Marriage*, 24, 20.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, 50.

[17.](#) Thompson, *Over the Bridge*, 47.

[18.](#) Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London, 1987), 43–69; quotation from 55.

[19.](#) Ervine, *Mixed Marriage*, 19.

[20.](#) *Ibid.*, 56.

[21.](#) Although in both plays these "siege" scenes are climactic, *Mixed Marriage* concludes with this scene, whereas it constitutes the penultimate scene in *Over the Bridge*. Thompson's play closes with a scene set in the Mitchell home, where Davy's family and fellow workers, all Protestant, have gathered for his funeral.

[22](#). In Thompson's play there is one brief scene in which the mob *is* actually represented onstage, when its leader enters to give O'Boyle a final warning. The stage directions read: "The Mob Leader enters and walks to the centre of the office, while his two henchmen take their stand at the door. He is smoking a cigarette; there is something very sinister about him" (*Over the Bridge*, 100). The stereotyped behavior and lack of individuation in this instance serve to reinforce rather than interrogate conventional representations of working-class "mobs" as anonymous, sinister hordes. The scene does not constitute any real break, therefore, with offstage representations of the mob in plays such as Ervine's.

[23](#). Ervine, *Mixed Marriage*, 56.

[24](#). An important qualification needs to be entered here. In the works of Ervine and Thompson the split between "inside" and "outside" is obviously much less rigid in both ethnic and moral terms than in the western, for example. In *Mixed Marriage* there is a Protestant mob outside as well as a Catholic one, while in *Over the Bridge* the mob outside is exclusively Protestant. Hence the split between civilized interior and savage exterior does not operate in terms of a simple division between Protestant and Catholic. Moreover, in neither play is the division between inside and outside absolute in moral terms: some of those "inside," such as Ervine's Rainey or Thompson's Archie Kerr, are at least partly to blame for triggering the mayhem without. Still, by the time the siege of the office is staged in *Over the Bridge*, Kerr has undergone a mysterious moral metamorphosis whereby, having stirred up sectarian tensions by harassing O'Boyle, he now suddenly becomes solicitous of the latter's safety. Similarly, in *Mixed Marriage* Rainey may be a bigot, but he lacks neither reason nor conscience. Even if the division between "inside" and "outside" is less absolute here than in the western, then, it still rests on a dichotomy between the humane few (who at least are refined enough to have a conscience with which to wrestle) and the dehumanized lumpen masses beyond (who, in their literal and metaphorical exteriority, are reduced to an abstract cacophony of sectarian fury).

[25](#). See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minelli and Melodrama," in Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 70–74, esp. 72.

[26](#). The only other Catholic in *Mixed Marriage*, Michael O'Hara, has a smaller role than Nora's. Although he is politically motivated, he has no real agency of his own since all his plans depend on Rainey's support for the strike. Once Rainey withdraws that support, Michael is reduced to complete impotence. By the closing scene he is a helpless figure, vainly appealing for reason and restraint to the ignoring mobs.

[27](#). Lionel Pilkington, "Theatre and Cultural Politics in Northern Ireland: The *Over the Bridge* Controversy, 1959," *Eire-Ireland* 30 (1996): 76–93; quotation from 83.

[28](#). Thompson, *Over the Bridge*, 99.

[29](#). In a scene included in the rehearsal copy of the play but later excised, the parallel between Catholics and women is even more explicit, since O'Boyle's hysteria anticipates Marion's "hysterical" language when she breaks off her engagement to Warren.

[30](#). Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 439, 441.

[31](#). Tom Paulin, *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (London and Boston, 1985). All quotations are from this edition.

[32](#). The lecture was printed in *The Listener* (London), 24 October 1968; then reprinted, with significant omissions, in Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972), 152–59; quotation from 157.

[33](#). See Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin, 1994), 255–65. See also George Steiner’s comments on O’Brien’s interpretation in *Antigones* (Oxford, 1984), 190–91.

[34](#). Paulin, *The Riot Act*, 29.

[35](#). Paulin’s play and Ervine’s share some interesting things in common. The most obvious is their respective uses of Ulster dialect. One also wonders whether Paulin obliquely refers to Ervine’s play, given the following lines in the last act of *Mixed Marriage*:

TOM (from the stairs): There’s a magistrate outside readin’ the Riot Act.

NORA: The Riot Act!

[36](#). For a carefully argued interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* along these lines, see Dympna Callaghan, “The Ideology of Romantic Love,” in *The Weyward Sisters*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, Lorraine Helms, and Jyotsna Singh (Oxford, 1994), 59–101.

[37](#). Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 36. This is not to endorse Lukács’s rather idealized account of Scott or of the classical historical novel as a genre, although the local point about the function of the “wavering” hero in humanizing both sides in a wider historical conflict seems to me a valid one.

[38](#). However much they differ otherwise, the most sophisticated readings of the play, from Goethe to Hegel to Hölderlin, respect this dialectical character of the drama (in a way that O’Brien’s unequivocal partisanship of Creon does not). Steiner’s *Antigones* provides valuable commentary on the different ways in which these and other European critics have read Sophocles’ tragedy.

[39](#). Quoted in Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London, 1981), 223. It has to be acknowledged, however, that if Paulin’s tragedy restores to the warring communities “the integrity of their quarrel,” it does so by translating it out of the dynamic realm of the historical altogether and into an abstract ethical metaphysic.

[40](#). Paulin, *Riot Act*, 38, 56, 60.

[41](#). *Ibid.*, 40.

[42](#). Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 218.

[43](#). Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York, 1971), 276.

[44](#). Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 209.

[45](#). The tendency within liberal unionism to which I am referring here is neatly summed up in a post-cease-fire radio interview given by Ken Maginnis, Ulster Unionist MP, in 1994. There, Maginnis, widely considered too liberal to become leader of his party, expressed the view that the Northern Irish Protestant community generally considered itself “more sinned against than sinning.” That view is undoubtedly shared widely within the unionist, Protestant community in Northern Ireland. It is usually argued on the basis that during the past three decades this political community has been under vicious attack by the IRA. The effect of the argument is to suggest that unionists have suffered so much during this period that any blame or culpability to be attributed to them as a consequence of the sectarian monopoly of power maintained for over six decades, when unionists governed Northern Ireland from Stormont, has been effectively cancelled out or nullified. This despite the fact that in many Northern Irish areas imbalances of

power between Catholics and Protestants still obtain. For the Maginnis interview, see Duncan Morrow, "Suffering for Righteousness' Sake: Fundamental Protestantism in Ulster Politics," in Shirlow and McGovern, eds., *Who Are "The People"?*, 55–71; quotation from 55.

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