

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 258

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 258

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Commentary on Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**

Kathy D. Darrow

Project Editor



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Abbey Theatre

This entry presents criticism about Dublin's Abbey Theatre (or the Irish National Theatre Society), its major figures, and its productions.

INTRODUCTION

The Abbey Theatre is a repertory theatre in Dublin, Ireland, founded in 1904 by William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and John Millington Synge. Other members of its leadership circle included authors Edward Martyn, George Moore, and A.E. (pseudonym of William Russell), among others, as well as numerous actors, stage designers, and theatrical promoters. Yeats, the principal figure of the project, imagined the Irish National Theatre Society as one that would be fully under the artistic control of the playwrights and that would promote a distinctive Irish literary aesthetic, interest in Irish culture, and Irish nationalism. Earlier, in 1899, Yeats had founded (with Lady Gregory and Martyn) the Irish Literary Theatre. While the Irish Literary Theatre achieved critical success, it struggled for recognition and did not have a permanent venue of its own. After seeing the company perform in London, Annie Horniman, an English freethinker with some theater production experience, came to Dublin in 1903 to act as Yeats's volunteer secretary and to design costumes for the group's productions. Horniman also became the theater company's financial benefactor and in 1904 purchased the Abbey Theater building for the express purpose of becoming the home of the Irish National Theater Society. The founders of the Society also appointed William Fay theater manager for the Abbey. W. J. "Willie" Fay and his brother Frank were the originators of the Irish National Dramatic Company, a troupe devoted to the development of Irish acting talent, which they showcased in various touring productions in Scotland and Wales, and later in Dublin.

The Abbey Theatre opened in December of 1904 with performances of several one-act plays by William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory. Producing plays by such affiliated writers as Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, Padraic Colum, George Bernard Shaw, and Gerald MacNamara, the Abbey Theatre became a popular and critical success, with new productions mounted regularly. The Abbey Theatre plays were generally unified by the playwrights' interest in old Irish sagas, mythology, and folklore, by their focus on the lives of Irish peasants and other marginal groups, and by their innate national-

istic stance. Artistic differences persisted, however, notably between Yeats and the Fays, such as whether or not plays should be performed in the Gaelic language, for example. For some of the Abbey Theatre associates, the plays on offer were not nationalistic or political enough, while other members wished to steer clear of a directly political agenda. A disturbance, known as the "Playboy Riots," broke out at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 at the opening of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, fueled by nationalists who felt that the play was not sufficiently political and who asserted that the portrayal of Kitty O'Shea was an insult to Irish womanhood. Yeats and Lady Gregory continued as artistic directors of the Abbey Theatre company, continuously engaging in fundraising and publicity activities in Ireland, England, and the United States, but the group eventually lost some of its other main figures, including Horniman, the Fay brothers, and Synge. Sean O'Casey, who filled Synge's position following the latter's departure, enjoyed success with several plays such as *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), but eventually left after the Abbey refused to stage his plays following more riots at the premiere of his *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). The Abbey Theatre company continued to operate with moderate success after the death of Yeats in 1939, replacing him with other leadership from its board of directors; in the 1940s and 1950s it staged more popular productions, such as comedies set in idealized, yet fake, peasant settings. The Abbey building burned in a fire in 1951 but was rebuilt with help from the Irish government and reopened in 1966. It remains in operation today and is highly regarded internationally for its strong repertory group, new commissioned works, and touring and outreach activities.

Critical interest has remained strong in the Abbey Theatre and its playwrights since its earliest days. The formative years of the company are documented by Hugh Grant and James W. Flannery, who examine the role of the Fay brothers in the early years of the Abbey Theatre. Mary Trotter [see Further Reading] focuses on the centrality of Yeats's and Lady Gregory's leadership, while Lucy McDiarmid explores their dealings with the network of "helpers"—patrons, promoters, publicists, audiences, and other supporters—who were instrumental in keeping the Abbey Theatre afloat. Louis Dieltjens approaches the history of the Abbey Theatre from the point of view of critical theorist Raymond Williams's notion of "cultural formation," seeking to identify the factors that contributed to the cohesiveness of the fig-

ures associated with it. Individual Abbey playwrights continue to generate critical interest as well. Ben Levittas writes about Synge and the "Playboy Riots," Laura Arrington centers on Shaw's censored anti-recruitment play, *O'Flaherty*, V. C. (1915), and Karen Vandeveld and Mark Phelan examine the satiric elements in Gerald MacNamara's *The Mist That Does Be on the Bog* (1909). Lisa Fitzpatrick writes about the depiction of women in the plays produced by the Abbey Theatre, noting that its strong patriarchal ethic limited the roles women could play in Irish drama and in Irish society in the early twentieth century. Charting the shifting ideological emphases of the various periods of the Abbey Theatre, Elizabeth Mannion points out how these are mirrored in the portrayals of Irish-born satirist Jonathan Swift in several plays staged by the company.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

A.E. (pseudonym of George William Russell)
Deidre (poetry) 1907

Edward F. Barrett
The Grabber (play) 1918

William Boyle
The Building Fund (play) 1906

Padraic Colum
Broken Sail (play) 1903
The Land (play) 1905

Teresa Deevy
The King of Spain's Daughter (play) 1935

Lady Augusta Gregory
Spreading the News (play) 1904
The White Cockade (play) 1905
Hyacinth Halvey (play) 1906
The Caravans (play) 1907
Grania (play) 1910

Gerald MacNamara (pseudonym of Harry Moscow)
The Mist That Does Be on the Bog (play) 1909

Edward Martyn
The Heather Field (play) 1899

Rutherford Mayne (pseudonym of Samuel Waddel)
The Troth (play) 1909

George Moore
The Bending of the Bow (play) 1900

Sean O'Casey
The Shadow of a Gunman (play) 1923
Juno and the Paycock (play) 1924
The Plough and the Stars (play) 1926

Seamus O'Kelly
The Shuiler's Child (play) 1909

Margaret O'Leary
The Woman (play) 1929

G. Sidney Paternoster
The Dean of St. Patrick's (play) 1913

Lennox Robinson
The Far off Hills (play) 1928

George Bernard Shaw
The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet (play) 1909
O'Flaherty, V.C. (play) 1915

John Millington Synge
In the Shadow of the Glen (play) 1903
Riders to the Sea (play) 1904
The Well of the Saints (play) 1905
The Playboy of the Western World (play) 1907
The Tinker's Wedding (play) 1909

William Butler Yeats
The Countess Cathleen (play) 1899
The Shadowy Waters (play) 1901
Kathleen Ni Houlihan; with Lady Augusta Gregory (play) 1902
On Baile's Strand (play) 1904
Deidre (play) 1907
The Unicorn from the Stars; with Lady Augusta Gregory (play) 1908

OVERVIEWS AND HISTORY

James W. Flannery (essay date 1976)

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[In the following essay, Flannery traces the role of the brothers W. J. "Willie" and Frank Fay in shaping the ideological and practical framework of the Abbey Theatre, noting their ongoing artistic differences with Yeats.]

It is perhaps natural that literary historians and critics tend to devote far more attention to dramatists than to the theatre artists or theatrical conditions which may have been responsible for bringing those dramatists to light. When the dramatists themselves are among the chief historians and critics of a movement it is even more likely that a not wholly accurate impression of that movement may emerge. Such is the case with regard to the contributions of W. G. and Frank Fay to the Irish dramatic movement and, in particular, the creation of the Abbey Theatre.

From the outset it should be made clear that, quite rightly, neither of the two Fays looms large in the overall context of twentieth-century theatre. Both were limited by their intellectual capacity, their educational background, their basic talent, and their training in the theatre. Notwithstanding all this, any examination of the early Abbey Theatre would be far from complete without exploring the life and work of the Fays. Without their efforts the Abbey Theatre simply would not have come into existence. Without their individual personalities and particular talents the playwriting efforts of Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory would have taken entirely different courses.

In a wider sense, however, the Fays are of interest and importance because the theatrical ideas and traditions that they represented ultimately came into conflict with the loftier literary and theatrical ideals of W. B. Yeats. In exploring the conflicts between the Fays and Yeats one can begin to see not only some of the reasons why the Abbey Theatre developed into the kind of theatre it did, but why men of the theatre and men of letters have, by and large, had a relatively unhappy relationship throughout the twentieth century.

A COLLABORATION OF OPPOSITES

In many respects the work of the Fay brothers reflects the fruitful collaboration of opposite forces and natures that was such a marked characteristic of the *Zeitgeist* of Dublin at the turn of the century. According to the writer T. G. Keller, who was a member of the Irish National Theatre Society in its earliest days, while Willie Fay was "the incarnation of the seemingly easygoing, take-it-as-comes, nature", Frank was "cautious, careful, anxious almost to a fault".¹

Perhaps the basic difference between the two brothers is most clearly indicated by the fact that at the same time that Willie Fay was traipsing about the Irish countryside gaining practical experience in the theatre, Frank was settling into a relatively comfortable position as secretary to the director of a Dublin firm of accountants and in his spare time pursuing a more scholarly study of the history and aesthetics as well as the practical arts of the theatre.

Willie Fay (1872-1947) commenced his professional career in 1891 when, after a brief round of "do-at-home" and amateur theatricals and an even briefer period of study with an ex-professional actress named Maud Randford, he ran away from home to join one of the troupes of wandering Irish players known as "fit-ups". (The name "fit-up" is derived from the fact that these small theatrical companies were prepared to set—or "fit"—up a simple stage on short notice in any Irish country town.) Willie Fay set out to become not just an actor or stage director but a complete man of the theatre. During his theatrical apprenticeship he either studied or worked as a draughtsman, an electrician, a stage-lighting technician, an advance-man for a circus, a scene painter, and even a song-and-dance man. In six years on the road with various companies, playing four or five one-act plays per night followed by variety items and concluding with a farce, Willie Fay acquired the rudiments of theatrical know-how that he was to apply for the rest of his career.² Much of this experience was doubtless of the rough workmanlike sort, but by the time he resettled in Dublin in 1897 Fay certainly had as complete a knowledge of the technical skills of the theatre as many an M.A. in drama.

One cannot help wishing, however, that Willie Fay's intellectual development had kept pace with his mastery of theatrical skills. Following elementary school Fay entered Belvedere College, Dublin, later to be immortalized by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Fay left Belvedere College at the age of sixteen, having taken by his own admission no interest in any subject which did not pertain to the theatre. Fay's education was, in fact, based almost entirely upon his rather haphazard private reading. By the age of eighteen he claims to have read most of the great classics of the English theatre—Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Marlowe, Dekker, and Dryden—but "without the least idea that they were of great importance either as drama or literature".³ Not surprisingly, the Irish literary revival of the nineties hardly touched him except by arousing a faint hope that plays on Irish life might someday be written. "Poetry was not my strongest point," he confesses, and his brother Frank virtually had to drag him to the first performance of *The Countess Cathleen*.⁴

Although the formal education of Frank Fay (1870-1931) was even more limited than that of his brother, as early as twelve years of age he may have begun the extraordinary interest in theatre history, particularly the history of speech and acting, that was to remain his passion for a lifetime.⁵ By collecting and reading every book and article on the theatre that he could lay his hands on, Frank Fay built up an encyclopedic knowledge of productions, acting styles and techniques, and biographical miscellanea concerning theatrical personalities past and present.⁶ Yeats described Fay as some-

one who "knows more than any man I have ever known about the history of speech upon the stage".⁷ Moreover, Yeats borrowed books and articles from Fay for his *Samhain* articles on "The Reform of the Stage"⁸ and stated that he hoped to give his own "vague principles definite knowledge" through Fay's knowledge of the history of the theatre.⁹

It was mainly through his interest in the history of acting styles that Frank Fay began the serious study of speech techniques. He became convinced that all good acting and speaking depended on proper voice production, and he determined that he would produce a good speaking voice in himself by employing the techniques utilized by the great Italian singing masters.¹⁰ Through a systematic series of exercises, which he was later to employ as a teacher,¹¹ Fay succeeded in turning his basically weak voice into a beautiful instrument that was undoubtedly his chief strength as an actor.¹²

Frank Fay's practical theatre experience was relatively slight compared with his brother's. However, as a natural outgrowth of his self-training in speech he began to make public appearances as a practitioner of that quaint Victorian form of popular amusement, the dramatic recitation. When Willie Fay organized a small group of friends and relatives for "do-at-home" theatricals, Frank was drawn in, at first to provide entr'acte entertainment by contributing recitations. Later, on his brother's return to Dublin in 1897, he found himself an active member and teacher of a company of amateur Thespians who were to develop into the Irish National Theatre Society.¹³

Frank Fay's relationship with his brother Willie seems to have been unusual for a successful theatre partnership. Although in matters of literature he was Willie's acknowledged mentor—Willie credited reading and discussion of Frank's collection of old plays with having first aroused his own interest in the theatre—Frank preserved a deference to Willie's judgment in almost all theatrical matters other than acting. Then as now, apparently, professional experience in the theatre was enough to awe the humble amateur into reverence. According to the actor Dudley Digges, Willie's contact with the profession "lifted him to heights poor Frank never hoped to reach. He always spoke of Willie with bated breath, and what the brother said was gospel, for he had had experience."¹⁴ In Padraic Colum's opinion it was indeed only by Frank Fay's enhancement of Willie's prestige "continuously and voluntarily" that Willie was able to stabilize a group of individualistic Dubliners long enough to create a base for a national theatre.¹⁵

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Frank Fay was in any way backward about expressing his opinions. To T. G. Keller he was the "Napoleon" of their little theatre group. "His word was law, and, loyally

aided by his brother, he saw that it was carried out."¹⁶ On any subjects not concerned with the theatre it was the habit of Willie Fay at all times to refer final judgments to "the brother".¹⁷

From July 1899 to November 1902 Frank Fay gave public utterance to his theatrical ideas as the drama critic of *The United Irishman*. His reviews, which range from contemptuous attacks on the neo-Boucicaultian Irish melodramas of J. W. Whitebread at the Queen's Theatre to well-considered appraisals of Constantin Coquelin in Molière and Rostand, Madame Réjane in Ibsen, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell in Maeterlinck and Pinero, provide one of the best records of what the Dublin theatre was really like at the turn of the century. They also provide an indication of what the future acting style of the Abbey Theatre was to be, especially in Fay's criticism of unnecessary movement, his admiration for the economy with which Coquelin produced stage effects, and his increasing impatience with slovenly diction.¹⁸

Supremely self-confident, forthright, and arrogant as he appeared to those who worked with him,¹⁹ Frank Fay did not hesitate to clash even with Yeats, Synge, or Lady Gregory if his views differed from theirs. In an article written for *The United Irishman* in May 1901,²⁰ when all his hopes depended on drawing the attention and favour of Yeats to the little troupe of amateur players trained by himself and his brother, Frank Fay attacked Yeats head on, telling him exactly where he thought he was going wrong, not only in his conception of an Irish National Theatre, but in his own work as a dramatist.

"An Irish Theatre must, of course, express itself solely in the Irish language," Fay began; but, recognizing that "for some time to come it will be in English", he warned Yeats that as a dramatist who wished to write plays for a National Theatre he must avoid "certain pitfalls". "Firstly," said Fay,

such plays should be so written as to appeal to as large a section of his countrymen as possible; otherwise no good can result to us from their production. . . . Mr. Yeats can, undoubtedly, be an immense power for good in our Theatre (why should he not act, at any rate in his own plays? Jean Richepin did in Paris); but if he insists on sitting among the stars or living in the land of feary [*sic*] of which he and I and all our countrymen are only too fond, he can be of no use to us at present.

Fay went on to criticize Yeats's form and style as a dramatist. Highly poetic plays such as *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Land of Heart's Desire* reminded him of "exquisitely decorated corpses". Yeats was "too much the artist in words", said Fay. "His appeal would be stronger were his form less polished." What Yeats needed most was to write on "more vigorous themes.

Let him emulate Shakespeare and Molière and Ibsen whose plays, while not lacking in poetry, are living things." Far more the nationalist than his brother, Fay argued:

In Ireland we are at present only too anxious to shun reality. Our drama ought to teach us to face it. Let Mr. Yeats give us a play in verse or prose that will rouse this sleeping land. There is a herd of Saxon and other swine fattening on us. They must be swept into the sea along with the pestilent breed of West Britons with which we are troubled, or they will sweep us there.

One wonders how much influence this article had upon Yeats, whose next play, the fervently patriotic *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, was given its first production by W. G. Fay's National Dramatic Society less than a year later.

Unfortunately, Frank Fay's soaring enthusiasms had their negative counterparts in his personality. According to his erstwhile friend, Joseph Holloway, Fay was inclined to fall into deep fits of depression, "ever dissatisfied with his own work".²¹ Fay was also inordinately sensitive to criticism, and did not easily brook opposition. Too often he carried his querulous and quixotic temperament into the rehearsal room, where he was not usually amenable to coaching except by his brother. Holloway, for instance, notes a rehearsal when Lady Gregory was attempting to direct Fay in a scene from *The White Cockade*: "Mr. F. J. was in one of his moods and when with great clearness and dramatic effectiveness (for the dramatic instinct is strongly defined in her) Lady Gregory showed Fay how she would like a particular passage delivered, Fay turned crusty and sulked at it, saying it was out of the mood of the role and adding that if she wished to make Sarsfield a comedy part he would play it as such! After much talk and explanation Frank Fay went half-heartedly through the passage."²² Other instances of Fay's temperament in rehearsal sessions were noted by Synge and again by Holloway when Yeats attempted to coach him in *On Baile's Strand* for the opening production of the Abbey Theatre. Holloway writes: "Frank Fay, I thought, would explode with suppressed rage at his [Yeats's] interruptions during the first speeches he had to utter."²³

Both Fays had violent tempers, and their eruptions against each other were just as frequent and violent as against their fellow actors. At one rehearsal for A. E.'s *Deirdre*, Willie and Frank became so angry that they flew at each other with fists flying. One of the lines of the play was "I foresee that the Red Branch will go down in a sea of blood", which A. E. quickly changed to "I foresee that the National Theatre Society will go down in a sea of fists".²⁴

When working in harmony, however, the Fay brothers made a formidable team. Like many other famous theatrical partnerships—Nemirovich-Danchenko and

Stanislavsky, Granville-Barker and Vedrenne, Hilton Edwards and Michéal MacLiammoir, Yeats and Lady Gregory themselves—they were that ideal combination of the theorist and the doer. Introspective, scholarly, and abstract in his nature, Frank Fay needed the down-to-earth pragmatism of his brother to galvanize him into decisive action. In turn, Willie Fay needed the ideas, ideals, and dedication of his brother in order to create a focus and structure for his own talents to function most effectively. Stimulated by each other, as a team the Fay brothers were able to communicate their enthusiasm and ideals to a most unlikely group of amateurs and, by dint of hard work, turn them into a company of some accomplishment.

A THEATRE FOR PLAYWRIGHTS

Poets such as Padraic Colum, George Russell, and James Cousins have testified that the Fays urged them to write plays for their little company.²⁵ In addition, instead of simply taking a playwright's script off his hands, leaving him with no further theatrical involvement until the opening night, the Fays made it clear that they wanted the playwright to function as an active collaborator in their work, using rehearsals as a means of testing and developing dramaturgical conceptions. An effort was thus consciously made to bridge the gap between literature and theatre, with playwrights and actors sharing each other's problems and striving for similar artistic goals.²⁶ It is notable that even the playwright members of W. G. Fay's National Dramatic Company were required to undergo "a gruelling course of 'voice production'" at the hands of Frank Fay.²⁷

The fact that their company was composed of amateurs was seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage by the Fays. With André Antoine's Théâtre Libre as an inspiration for what might be accomplished by a troupe of trained amateur actors devoted to serving new playwrights, Frank Fay declared to Yeats: "I revel in the word amateur and have never posed as anything else. . . . I think it would be a mistake . . . for the acting portion of the Society to model themselves on the professional except doing to the best of one's ability what we have set out to do."²⁸

Yeats, in turn, upon first seeing the Fays' company, was struck above all by their respect for the playwright. This was evidenced, he said, by the fact that "the actors kept still long enough to give poetical writing its full effect upon the stage".²⁹ Upon the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, Yeats took pains to emphasize the fact that amateur actors with a devotion to their own art and the art of literature had throughout history exerted a profound influence upon the course of the drama:

The Mystery Plays and the Miracle Plays got their players at no great distance from the church door, and the classic drama of France had for a forerunner perfor-