

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

282

Volume 282

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter

PROJECT EDITOR



GALE
CENGAGE Learning

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 282

Project Editor: Jeffrey W. Hunter

Editorial: Dana Ramel Barnes, Lindsey J. Bryant, Maria Carter-Ewald, Kathy D. Darrow, Kristen Dorsch, Jelena O. Krstović, Michelle Lee, Thomas J. Schoenberg, Lawrence J. Trudeau

Content Conversion: Katrina Coach, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions: Jennifer Altschul, Beth Beaufore, Kelly Quin

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary Oudersluys

Manufacturing: Cynde Lentz

Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

© 2010 Gale, Cengage Learning

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced, transmitted, stored, or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including but not limited to photocopying, recording, scanning, digitizing, taping, Web distribution, information networks, or information storage and retrieval systems, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

For product information and technology assistance, contact us at
Gale Customer Support, 1-800-877-4253.

For permission to use material from this text or product,
submit all requests online at www.cengage.com/permissions.

Further permissions questions can be emailed to
permissionrequest@cengage.com

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3978-5
ISBN-10: 1-4144-3978-4

ISSN 0091-3421

Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- 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

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- 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.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 5th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature* 29.1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 188-95.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series
Gale
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)
Fax: 248-699-8983

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 282, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

Amerasia Journal, v. 27, 2001. Copyright © 2001 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*America*, v. 187, December 23, 2002. Copyright 2002 www.americamagazine.org. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of America Press. For subscription information, visit www.americamagazine.org.—*Atenea*, v. 27, June, 2007. © 1999 Universidad de Puerto Rico-Mayaguez. Reproduced by permission.—*The Atlantic Monthly*, v. 291, March, 2003 for “From Ingénu to Omnivore” by Thomas Mallon. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Book*, September-October, 2003. Copyright © 2003 West Egg Communications, LLC. Reproduced by permission.—*Bookforum*, v. 15, April/May, 2008. © Bookforum 2008. Reproduced by permission.—*Callaloo*, v. 28, 2005. Copyright © 2005 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*Colby Quarterly*, v. 27, December, 1991; v. 34, December, 1998. Both reproduced by permission.—*College Literature*, v. 35, spring, 2008. Copyright © 2008 by West Chester University. Reproduced by permission.—*Commonweal*, v. 130, December 19, 2003. Copyright © 2003 Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc. Reproduced by permission of Commonweal Foundation.—*Comparative Drama*, v. 40, spring, 2006. Copyright © 2006, by the Editors of *Comparative Drama*. Reproduced by permission.—*Critical Survey*, v. 8, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by Critical Survey. Republished with permission of Berghahn Books, Inc., conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.—*English Studies in Canada*, v. 31, March, 2005. Copyright © Association of Canadian University Teachers of English 2005. Reproduced by permission.—*Financial Times*, March 7, 1998. Copyright © 1998 Financial Times Information Ltd. Information may not be copied or redistributed. Reproduced by permission.—*Genus: Gender in Modern Culture*, v. 9, 2007. Copyright © Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam 2007. Reproduced by permission.—*Irish America*, v. 17, July 31, 2000. Copyright Irish Voice, Inc. 2000. Reproduced by permission.—*Irish Literary Supplement*, v. 25, spring, 2006. Reproduced by permission.—*Lambda Book Report*, v. 11, January, 2003 for “’80s Oscar” by Kevin Killian. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*London Review of Books*, v. 15, October 7, 1993; v. 19, June 19, 1997. Both appear here by permission of the *London Review of Books*.—*MELUS*, v. 29, fall/winter, 2004; v. 32, winter, 2007. Copyright *MELUS: The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 2004, 2007. Both reproduced by permission.—*Modern Drama*, v. 38, winter, 1995; v. 46, fall, 2003; v. 47, fall, 2004. Copyright © 1995, 2003, 2004 by the University of Toronto, Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. All reproduced by permission.—*The Nation*, v. 277, October 27, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by The Nation Magazine/The Nation Company, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—*New Hibernia Review*, v. 8, spring, 2004. Copyright © 2004 The University of St. Thomas. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*New Literary History*, v. 33, summer, 2002. Copyright © 2002 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*The New Republic*, v. 216, April 7, 1997. Copyright © 1997 by The New Republic, Inc. Reproduced by permission of *The New Republic*.—*New Statesman*, v. 26, June 13, 1997; v. 11, February 27, 1998; v. 129, March 13, 2000; v. 129, December 18, 2000; v. 16, January 19, 2004; v. 135, June 19, 2006; May 26, 2008; September 8, 2008. Copyright © 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 *New Statesman, Ltd.* All reproduced by permission.—*New Statesman & Society*, v. 5, October 30, 1992. Copyright © 1992 New Statesman, Ltd. Reproduced by permission.—*The North American Review*, v. 283, November, 1998. Copyright © 1998 by the University of Northern Iowa. Reproduced by permission from *The North American Review*.—*North Dakota Quarterly*, v. 70, winter, 2003 for “Beyond Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’” by Judith Caesar. Copyright 2003 by the University of North Dakota. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Publishers Weekly*, v. 244, September 8, 1997. Copyright © 1997 by Reed Publishing USA. Reproduced from *Publishers Weekly*, published by the Bowker Magazine Group of Cahners Publishing Co., a division of Reed Publishing USA, by permission.—*Research in African Literatures*, v. 33, spring, 2002. Copyright © 2002 Indiana University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, v. 15, summer, 1995; v. 16, fall, 1996; v. 18, spring, 1998. Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998 *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Reproduced by permission.—*The Sewanee Review*, v. 114, no. 3, summer, 2006. Copyright 2006 by The University of the South. Reprinted with the permission of the editor and the author.—*Small Axe*, v. 6, March, 2002; v. 10, June, 2006. Copyright 2002, 2006 Small Axe, Inc. All rights reserved. Both used by permission of the publisher, Duke University Press.—*The Spectator*, v. 273, November 19, 1994; v. 275, September 16, 1995; v. 278, May 10, 1997; v.

280, May 2, 1998; v. 288, March 9, 2002; v. 290, September 28, 2002. Copyright © 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2002 by *The Spectator*. All reproduced by permission of *The Spectator*.—*Studies in Short Fiction*, v. 31, summer, 1994; v. 34, winter, 1997. Copyright © 1994, 1997 by *Studies in Short Fiction*. Both reproduced by permission.—*Theatre Journal*, v. 49, May, 1997; v. 57, May, 2005. Copyright © 1997, 2005 University and College Theatre Association of the American Theatre Association. Both reproduced by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.—*Times Literary Supplement*, April 21, 1995; June 6, 1997; May 1, 1998; April 6, 2001; March 22, 2002; May 10, 2002. Copyright © 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002 by The Times Supplements Limited. All reproduced from *The Times Literary Supplement* by permission.—*Twentieth Century Literature*, v. 53, spring, 2007. Copyright © 2007, Hofstra University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*Women: A Cultural Review*, v. 7, spring, 1996 for “Performing Parts: Gender and Sexuality in Recent Fiction and Theory” by Janet Harbord. Copyright © 1996 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals> and the author.—*Women’s Review of Books*, v. 25, November-December, 2008. Copyright © 2008 Old City Publishing, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—*World Literature Today*, v. 83, January-February, 2009. Copyright © 2009 by *World Literature Today*. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN CLC, VOLUME 282, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Baer, William. From *Fourteen on Form: Conversations with Poets*. University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by University Press of Mississippi. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Cumings, Scott T. From “The End of History: The Millennial Urge in the Plays of Sebastian Barry,” in *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*. Edited by Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, and Shakir Mustafa. Indiana University Press, 2000. Copyright © 2000 Indiana University Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission of Indiana University Press.—Eastley, Aaron C. From “‘Lifting The Yoke of the Wrong Name’: How Walcott Uses Character Names to Negotiate a Positive Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Identity in *Omeros*,” in *African Diasporas: Ancestors, Migrations and Borders*. Edited by Robert Cancel and Winifred Woodhull. Africa World Press, 2008. Copyright © 2008 African Literature Association. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Golomb, Liorah Anne. From “The Fiction of Will Self: Motif, Method and Madness,” in *Contemporary British Fiction*. Edited by Richard Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew. Polity Press, 2003. Copyright © Polity Press, 2003. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Gregson, Ian. From *Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction*. Continuum, 2006. Copyright © 2006 by Ian Gregson. All rights reserved. Republished with permission of The Continuum International Publishing Company, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.—Kirsch, Adam. From *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. Copyright © 2008 by Adam Kirsch. All rights reserved. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.—Kuortti, Joel. From “Problematic Hybrid Identity in the Diasporic Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri,” in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition*. Edited by Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman. Rodopi, 2007. Copyright © Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam 2007. Reproduced by permission.—O’Reilly, Anne F. From *Sacred Play: Soul-journeys in Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Carysfort Press, 2004. © 2004 Copyright remains with the author. Reproduced by permission.—Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. From *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. Copyright © 2002 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reproduced by permission.—Tynan, Maeve. From “‘Where else to row but Backward?’: Walcott’s Voyage through History,” in *This Watery World: Humans and the Sea*. Edited by Vartan P. Messier and Nandita Batra. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. Copyright © 2008 Vartan P. Messier and Nandita Batra. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel

Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows

Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel

Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant

Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry

Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin

Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula

Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon

Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis
Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher

Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller

Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

| | |
|---|-----|
| Sebastian Barry 1955- | 1 |
| <i>Irish dramatist, novelist, short story writer, and poet</i> | |
| Jhumpa Lahiri 1967- | 69 |
| <i>English-born American novelist, critic, and short story writer</i> | |
| Will Self 1961- | 128 |
| <i>English novelist, essayist, and short story writer</i> | |
| Derek Walcott 1930- | 194 |
| <i>St. Lucian poet, playwright, essayist, journalist, and critic</i> | |

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 371

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 485

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 501

CLC-282 Title Index 517

Sebastian Barry

1955-

Irish dramatist, novelist, short story writer, and poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Barry's career through 2008.

INTRODUCTION

A prolific author who has written novels, short stories, and poetry, Barry is noted for his lyrical style. Exploring the Irish past through characters obscure and ordinary, Barry's works offer unique examinations of Irish conflict and culture, including several stories inspired by his own family's history. Additionally, the award-winning author has used events from American history in many of his works, including *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990) and *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995). Barry's most highly praised works are the complex and poetic plays and novels dealing with Irish history, such as the drama *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998) and the novels *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008). His unique approach to writing and history is regarded as a transformative force in contemporary Irish drama. Both *The Secret Scripture* and an earlier novel, *A Long Long Way* (2005), were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the former in 2008 and the latter in 2005. *The Secret Scripture* was also the 2008 winner of the Costa Award.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barry was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 5, 1955. His mother was an actress and his father a poet-turned-architect. Barry graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from Trinity College in 1977. Following graduation, he traveled extensively, living for a time in France, Switzerland, England, Greece, and Italy. In 1984 he moved to Iowa, serving as an honorary writing fellow at the University of Iowa. The following year he returned to Ireland, living first in Dublin and then moving to County Wicklow. In the early 1980s, Barry wrote poetry, a novel, and short stories—the poetry was collected and published in 1982, titled *The Water-Colourist*, to favorable reviews. Barry's first staged play appeared in 1986 but was never published. In 1992 he married actress Alison Deegan, with whom

he has three children. Although he continued to write, it wasn't until 1995, with the production of *The Steward of Christendom*, that Barry began to attract widespread attention from critics and audiences. Since then, his works have garnered consistent critical praise and acclaim, and he continues to write dramas and novel-length fiction.

MAJOR WORKS

Barry's first full-length stage production, *Boss Grady's Boys*, was staged in 1988 and published in 1989. The play features the relationship between two poor, elderly brothers struggling to keep the family farm operational and is noteworthy for its nonlinear, impressionistic narrative style. *Prayers of Sherkin*, first staged in 1990 and published in 1991, features a character based on Barry's great-grandmother, who has also appeared in Barry's earlier poems. Set in 1890, the work explores the relationships, loyalties, and conflicts inherent in a small, close-knit community. Barry's first play to debut in London was *White Woman Street*, in 1992. The play, which was not published until 1997, is set in Ohio in 1916. In this work Barry explores the impact of the news of the violent uprising of the Irish against the occupying British forces in Ireland on the small American town and its Irish immigrants. One of Barry's most well-known plays is *The Steward of Christendom*. In this play, which includes a character (Thomas Dunne) based on one of his own ancestors, Barry examines the intersection of personal, political, and cultural history in Ireland. Barry's next major work, *Our Lady of Sligo*, is a drama with many thematic similarities to *The Steward of Christendom*, and is similarly inspired by Barry's own family history.

In 1998 Barry published his first novel, *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, to extensive critical attention. The book traces the life and wanderings of the title character who is shunned by his people for fighting in the British Army during the first World War. Barry's next novel, *Annie Dunne* (2002), is the story of a young rural Irish girl in the 1950s, who, along with her cousin, is attempting to keep afloat the family farm while raising the niece and nephew entrusted to her care. In *A Long Long Way*, Barry offers an accounting of the grim realities of World War I. The

story features Annie Dunne's brother, a character from Barry's earlier work. In *The Secret Scripture*, Barry employs two opposing narrative voices to tell the story of an elderly mental patient.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Barry has received significant critical attention for both his fiction and drama. His plays are consistently regarded as a vital component in the development of contemporary Irish literature. One of Barry's strongest innovations is the way he treats Irish history through individual, unknown, misfit characters, rather than focusing on more obvious historical personages. Barry's poetic language in his drama and fiction is regularly applauded as stylistically unique, lyrical, and elegiac. Christopher Murray, has studied the recurrent theme of community in Barry's dramatic works, while Robert Brustein notes that Barry's plays, *The Steward of Christendom* in particular, are characterized by colorful, energetic language. Other critics, such as Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, focus on the manner in which Barry merges the political and personal past in his works. Similarly, Jim Haughey explores the uniqueness of Barry's historical point of view, especially his focus on how historical events impact individuals. And Haughey has suggested that Barry's work transcends binary approaches in which Irish history is depicted only in terms of the conflict between nationalists and loyalists.

Jochen Achilles has explored the shift in tone of contemporary Irish drama from a focus on nationalism to cultural identity, a change that is reflected in Barry's *Prayers of Sherkin*. In Maggie Gee's assessment, this play supplies rich, lyrical prose but is hampered by its lack of realism of any type. Anne F. O'Reilly likewise comments on the poetic nature of Barry's writing, lauding his positive vision of the future. Jude R. Meche contends that Barry's approach to Irish history, particularly in *The Steward of Christendom*, is singular in its consistently vigorous portrayals of individuals on the periphery of historical events. C. L. Dallat makes a similar observation, praising the skillful way Barry uses this play to give voice to a group often overlooked in Irish literature, the southern Catholic loyalists. Two other works that have received critical attention are *Our Lady of Sligo* and *Hinterland* (2001). Reviews of the former are mixed. Lindsay Duguid's assessment emphasizes the poetic beauty of the play's language and commends Barry's skillful plotting. Taking the opposing view, Robert L. King finds that the language is a hindrance to character development. Similarly, critical response to *Hinterland* was also mixed, with several critics remarking on the dif-

ficulty of staging a production full of extensive monologues. Furthermore, Dallat finds Barry's use of a contemporary figure, rather than an obscure person from Ireland's past, as a source of disappointment in this work.

The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty has been praised by Maggie O'Farrell for its vivid characterization, although the critic finds the plot to be weak. In an interview with Barry, Nicholas Wroe reveals that Barry had originally intended the work to be a play. In its treatment of the conflict and loss surrounding the period of World War I, *A Long Long Way* has been compared by such critics as Christina Hunt Mahony to Barry's earlier dramas and novels. Mahony also lavishes praise on Barry's poetic language in the novel. Ben Howard finds Barry's use of multiple character perspectives in the work to be highly effective, and, like Mahony, applauds Barry's lyrical prose. This trademark poetic style, however, is faulted by Robert Hanks in his assessment of *The Secret Scripture*. Hanks finds the language to be a literary contrivance and an impediment to the progression of the narration. Art Winslow, in his examination of the same novel, focuses rather on the work's thematic structure, observing the broad, spiritual manner in which Barry treats the religious elements in the book. Whether or not Barry's poetic prose is viewed as effective, it distinctively marks his style. At the same time, his dramatic and fictional works repeatedly touch on themes of family, community, and the role Irish culture and history play in the development of personal identity.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Macker's Garden* (novel) 1982
- The Water-Colourist* (poetry) 1982
- Time Out of Mind; And, Strappado Square* (short stories) 1983
- The Rhetorical Town: Poems* (poetry) 1985
- The Engine of Owl-Light* (novel) 1987
- Boss Grady's Boys* (play) 1988
- Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* (poetry) 1988
- Prayers of Sherkin* (play) 1990
- White Woman Street* (play) 1992
- The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (play) 1995
- The Steward of Christendom* (play) 1995
- Our Lady of Sligo* (play) 1998
- The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (novel) 1998
- Hinterland* (play) 2001
- Annie Dunne* (novel) 2002

A Long Long Way (novel) 2005
The Pride of Parnell Street (monologues) 2007
The Secret Scripture (novel) 2008

CRITICISM

Christopher Murray (essay date December 1991)

SOURCE: Murray, Christopher. "Such a Sense of Home": The Poetic Drama of Sebastian Barry." *Colby Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (December 1991): 242-48.

[In the following essay, Murray provides an overview of Barry's plays and explores the playwright's treatment of the theme of community in his works.]

Sebastian Barry, born in Dublin in 1955, is a new voice in the Irish theatre. His first play of any consequence, *Boss Grady's Boys*, was staged at the Peacock Theatre in August 1988 and quickly established his reputation as poet in the theatre, an adversarial voice to the postmodernism of Tom MacIntyre and others. Prior to 1988 Barry had established himself as a poet of Mahon-like elegance. The title of his first volume, *The Water-Colourist* (1983), declares his avocation. His sensibility responds to place, to figures in a landscape, to sensuous experience. But behind the lyric grace there is, to cite Eliot on Marvell, a tough reasonableness, an ability to confront with intelligence the ebb and flow of history. "Poetry is history's companion," he remarks; "we are all defined / and half-created by poetry." That "half-created" betrays Barry's romantic, Wordsworthian roots; one must speculate how the other half is created. Blake is also important for Barry, who is something of a visionary. Indeed, Blake lies behind Barry's second play, *Prayers of Sherkin* (1990), as we shall see. But it is with Eliot we must begin.

In "The Room of Rhetoric," from which the above quotation derives, Barry declares his belief in a particular operation of time. Poetry "by its nature always manages / . . . to be of the present/and of Eliot's trinity of time too" (181). Barry is interested in bringing together past and present, the contemporary and the universal. What is imagined, consequently, and what is remembered can coexist, just as the "familiar compound ghost" can march alongside Eliot through the war-torn streets of London in *Four Quartets* (140). Indeed, ghosts pervade Barry's drama without the least embarrassment, and serve to represent a characteristic angle of vision whereby "Time present

and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past" (*Four Quartets*, 117). When "time present" is on the stage the whole idea becomes suddenly dynamic.

Barry's development from lyric poet to playwright is reminiscent of Eliot's account of the "third voice." The first voice is that of the lyricist, the poet talking to himself; the second is that of the poet talking to an audience; the third is the voice of a created character no longer to be identified with the poet. Barry has commented on his own entry into the theatre: "When you get older it's a relief to lose yourself and celebrate the private glories and sufferings of others by giving them a dramatic voice."² At the same time Barry's plays are not in verse. His idea of drama must not, therefore, be narrowly identified with that movement in twentieth-century poetry, from Yeats to Eliot and beyond, which attempted to restore poetic drama as such. Barry writes in prose. So, too, did Synge. Eliot's idea of poetic drama in *The Sacred Wood* (68) is helpful once again: "The essential is not . . . that drama should be written in verse. . . . The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world—a world which the author's mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification." As if in agreement, Barry has said, "The god of the theatre is clarity."³ What we find in his two plays is a simplicity which encapsulates a world startling, strange, and prophetic.

Eliot may serve as one parameter for a consideration of Barry's work. But there are others, equally if not more significant. As well as poet, Barry is novelist and anthologist. Each of these avocations supplies information on his artistic purposes. His novel *The Engine of Owl-Light* is an ambitious attempt to move Irish fiction past Joyce and Beckett towards magic realism and the inventions of Salman Rushdie. It is a very sophisticated endeavor indeed, offering a clue to Barry's use of fantasy, memory, and the supernatural in his drama. He plays variations on a set of acute relationships, mother-son and son-father in particular, and mobilizes form to encounter and define experience as process, as a coming to terms with loss, horror, time; "history is unliveable" (48). The general motive is an anxiety to define: "because I want to get this old piece mapped, and not go back there again" (12).

In 1986 Barry edited an anthology of younger Irish poets (including himself) under the significant title *The Inherited Boundaries*. He called his Introduction "The History and Topography of Nowhere." Here he tilted against the prominent profile generally accorded contemporary Northern Irish poets. Barry wishes to mark out a space for a different kind of sensibility with different interests and commitments:

"They [Northern poets] are a fine part of the story of an island, but they are no part of the story of the Republic" (14). The anthology was being presented as "the latest report on . . . the poetic of a separate, little-understood place" (14). It was necessary to "map" such a territory, if you were a native, "mapping and talking about the visible and invisible country" (15), because "A country without definition is nowhere at all" (16). From Barry's perspective, as a poet born in the 1950s, Ireland was still without definition, simply because "it was a new place" (18). The seven poets whose work he gathered together had this for their theme: and here Barry obviously detects a common voice among his contemporaries:

They are talking about a new country that is often hard to make out at all in the thick rain of its history and the sullen, dangerous roll of the land—but they are talking about it with the courage of an inherited, doubted freedom.

(29)

It is at this point one can address *Boss Grady's Boys*. It is a play about two old men, brothers, living in loneliness and poverty on the Cork-Kerry border. One of the brothers, Josey, is simple-minded; the other, Mick, a tailor, has spent his life minding him. We are and are not in the familiar tradition of Irish peasant drama. We may and may not think of the plays of M. J. Molloy and John B. Keane. Certainly, Barry lays down a basis in realism from which the sociological plight of these two forgotten, anachronistic brothers may be viewed. Certainly, there is the pastoral ideal in the background: a farm, a horse, a dog. But where realism looks for reasons and arrives at accusations Barry's work is content to present. We are given images of country life, evocations of *The Great Hunger*, Kavanagh-style, an appraising version of pastoral. Moreover, the farm, the horse, the dog are all dead. Yet they live for Josey as truly as if they were palpably off stage. He cannot distinguish the real from the hallucinatory. Mick, too, has his dreams and recollections, which bring before him and us his dead father and mother. Neither brother has a monopoly on hallucination. We see two versions, however, since Josey's ghostly encounters are charged with wonder and confession while Mick's are suffused with disappointment. It is the father figure who serves to explain what befell these two brothers. Somehow, married to a mute woman, he divided himself into his two sons, pinning his hopes on Mick and denying, repudiating, the inspired idiocy of Josey (who time and again identifies with Charlie Chaplin's boy and the Marx brothers). As a returned spirit, however, the father admits to Josey, "You were the half of me I preferred, you'd no brain to mar you. I wish I had been born like you, without a real thought in my head. You were the best half of me,

the half of me I killed in myself always" (29). Boss Grady, then, is the key to modern Ireland.

His legacy is plain to be seen; the nature of his error less so. A girl whom Josey seems in real life to have assaulted returns as another spirit or *genius loci*. "It is not a world" is her cryptic comment on the community (59). Mick puts the same point more clearly. "The people in this valley are as far away from each other as old ships in a fog in an old sea-story. There's a fog of rain that keeps them apart" (42). Here is the "thick rain of [Ireland's] history" which Barry alluded to in his Introduction to *The Inherited Boundaries* (29). That there was a time when the dream of freedom and community might have been realized, the play considers and laments. Mick recalls an encounter as a young man with Michael Collins, whose vision inspired him to destroy what was "beating me down" and to build for the good of others (31). In a long speech Mick articulates the indignities which Collins's inspiration served to identify and promised to alleviate. The peasantry would cease to be mere images, stereotypes:

That we wouldn't be fodder for books again, that we wouldn't be called peasants in a rural district, and be slipped into the role of joker by the foreigners from the cities. That we wouldn't have to stand on the roadside and watch the cars go by with creatures in them from outer space, plastic and cushions and clothes, another Ireland altogether, not people who would mock our talk, and not see us, not talk to us except by way of favour.

(30)

"Another Ireland altogether." An Ireland that never was born. "I was to make everything watertight for Collins," Mick recalls (31). Now the landscape is sodden; the rain pervades and occludes all. Mick's choice was the same as his father's: the rational, hard-working, soul-destroying allegiance to an ideal which proved too narrow, too rigid, and which crumbled under the pressures of isolation, repression, and loneliness.

Yet Barry's is not a bleak vision. The play is shot through with fun and inventive business. A card-game, whether real or remembered, introduces local characters who amuse by their determination to be futile. We might be in the countryside of Beckett's *All That Fall*: a lingering dissolution. Josey's idiotic talk is rich in humor also; even his ritualistic nightly prayers are diverting. The play ends on a similar comic note. Mick imagines that they are surrounded by Indians: "I think I'm done for. I don't think I can wait for those cavalry horses." He touches Josey: "You hold out without me. You take my bullets. Don't waste your water on me. Don't let the Indians creep up on you" (61). At the end of this speech he takes Josey's hand and asks, "Is

there no sign of them bloody horses?" They remain silent and together until Josey utters the final line of the play. "There is. There is every sign." (61) One must not sentimentalize such a magnificent final semi-otic image of community and endurance. Like Didi and Gogo, Boss Grady's boys achieve a victory over entrapment.

Prayers of Sherkin (1990) is set on a small island off the south-west coast of Ireland in 1890. It establishes with extraordinary vividness the life of a Quaker community who make candles for sale on the mainland. One hundred years earlier three families had left Manchester and journeyed west, in search of a place where they might "abide" the new city, the millenium. In time the numbers dwindled until there is but one family left faced with crisis. It is a dilemma, in fact. Unless the children, Fanny and Jesse, can marry and raise families the whole Quaker enterprise will evaporate, but by edict of the founder William Purdy they may not marry outside the sect. Unless fresh migrants arrive the outlook is hopeless. Barry takes this situation and transforms it into a scenario of hope and fulfilment. He does this through a concentration on the future, whereby the present exists in happy parenthesis and the past (i.e., the dark, Satanic mills of Manchester) is revolutionary.

The father, John Hawke, is a careful craftsman whose role as creator of light is symbolic. He has a special admiration for the nuns on the mainland, whose bees supply him with the wax needful for the candles the nuns, in turn, purchase. The nuns suggest a shared ideal. They too are "waiting," at the back of "the lighted town"; they are happy and eligible for "any New Jerusalem."⁴ With this praise Fanny concurs: "They have a stronger world" than that surrounding them. Here the contrast with *Boss Grady's Boys* may be glimpsed: there the revenant Girl remarks about the community, "It is not a world." In *Prayers of Sherkin* there is a world, fruitful if doomed. Through the dwindling Quaker family, ecumenically at one with the religious sisters equally at odds with contemporary values. Barry is reinventing history, creating a Utopia ignorant of coercion.

Barry completely realizes on stage the lives and faith of the Hawke family. They live simply. They converse cheerfully, using a quaint diction. They turn everything into ritual: meals, work, conversation, trips to the mainland. They respond to everything in a positive way: an encounter is always reported as "a most pleasant talk"; the boatman is "a man of excellence"; even the sunlight "is a prayer in itself." Yet these people face inevitable dissolution.

On one level Barry is imagining Beulah in Blake's sense, the pastoral ideal. John Hawke hums "Nor shall

my sword sleep in my hand" while he works. This is from the well-known poem preceding Blake's *Milton* (514):

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.

This vision is compromised in the play. John Hawke is not radical; this community is passive in the face of history. Very early on Fanny says to her brother, "Oh, Jesse, we are not from here and I have such a sense of home. . . . I think it is the site of our New Jerusalem" (11). The vision that dominates the play is optimistic. We are made to believe that all manner of things will be well, without any sword-play whatsoever.

How this is contrived is a matter of plot. On the mainland one day, during a family trip to Baltimore, Fanny meets Patrick, a lithographer who has fled Cork city and set up his craft in less violent surroundings. In short, they fall for each other. The dilemma defines itself: how can this Romeo and Juliet come together without tragic consequences? One might say the answer lies in historical determinism; more properly, it lies in faith. The plot derives from fact, or history itself. Fanny Hawke was Barry's ancestor, whose tribal betrayal fructified in his existence.⁵ Her act was Eve-like, a primal, radical, act, destroying the Quaker home and yet enabling the new generation to appear: a *felix culpa*, indeed. But Barry avoids conflict between Fanny and her family. They accept her going as something she must do. She herself couldn't go, however, unless she had sanction. This is granted when the founder of the community, Matthew Purdy, appears to her and makes it seem his doing, in Blakean, quasi-Biblical terms:

For I would give thee a lithographer out of Baltimore,
a gentle man of little account who has borne his trouble.
Moreover, I have given him a dream of thee, that he
may come to fetch thee. For that he is a gentle
heart. . . .

(65)

He tells her she is being called by the voices of her children: "They wait for you up the years, and you must go. All about them lies a century of disasters and wars that I did not foresee. I steer you back into the mess of life because I was blinder than I knew." Fanny tells nobody about this vision. When Patrick comes to the island to propose she simply accepts: "Yes. I will go from my family like a dreamer, and wake in the new world" (71). Her leaving is ritualized like every other action. She crosses at night, and as her father's light fades and goes out on the pier. Patrick's light on the mainland increases. Fanny crosses to meet her destiny.

As outlined the play probably seems naive to an absurd degree. It was not so in performance. The direction, by Caroline FitzGerald (who had previously directed *Boss Grady's Boys*), presented the play with utter conviction. The ensemble work was such that an atmosphere of simple content was created on stage. A world estranged and yet warm and attractive was fashioned in all sorts of detail. It was a world of innocence, prelapsarian and loving. It was a self-contained and whole world, generating its own spiritual energy.

Undoubtedly, *Prayers of Sherkin* lacks conventional dramatic conflict. It is unified, indeed, by this very evasion. No characters are admitted who do not in some way share the transcendental outlook of the Quakers. This is idealization; no island is without its Caliban. Barry is excluding evil: to that extent his drama is simplistic. But it is also beautiful.

Barry's insistence on "inherited boundaries" implies an impatience with republicanism. He wants to imagine an Ireland where sectarianism has no place. John Hawke is beleaguered, "since all around are the darknesses of the Catholics and the strangenesses of the higher Protestants" (4). But the man Fanny finds is a compound, the son of a Jewish woman from Lisbon who married a Cork Catholic. Patrick is an unconventional Catholic, who will not put pressure on Fanny to obey the bishops: "What are bishops only government? And I don't care for that either" (46). His independence is just that: he has liberated himself from sectarianism and (in the idiom of the play) from darkness. He and Fanny will, in a way, extend the Quaker ideal in new directions. Perhaps Friel's analysis in *Translations* is more realistic: it is a dangerous thing to marry outside the tribe. But Barry seems to be insisting that this danger is man-made and can be overcome. He is not advocating pluralism so much as New Ageism, a breaking away from old categories and a search for community, a spiritual world elsewhere. In that respect the old boatman Moore may have the last word as he muses over the lives of sailors, passing the south-west of Ireland *en route* for the Americas:

Dear sailors, simple, leaving aft the prayers of Cape Clear. Ah, human men. I know the words myself. (*Mouths a silent prayer, with a gesture of good-bye.*) I suppose in their time a few prayers have missed Cape Clear and washed against Sherkin. The prayers of Sherkin would be firewood of that sort . . .

(35)

All is connected, past and present, the human voyage and the flotsam of history. All is fuelled by a common concern which has its goal in spiritual destiny. Out of such unlikely material Sebastian Barry creates a drama, his dream of a new Ireland.

Notes

1. Sebastian Barry, "The Room of Rhetoric," *The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland* (Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986), p. 184.
2. Cited by Katie Donovan, "Why Many Irish Poets are Taking to the Stage," *Irish Times*, 22 January 1991, p. 10.
3. In interview with Arminta Wallace, "The Prodigious Sebastian Barry," *Irish Times*, 17 November 1990, Weekend: Arts, p. 5. This remark follows upon a mention of Barry's first play, *The Pentagonal Dream*, a highly experimental one-woman play of undisguised obscurity, staged at the Damer Hall in February 1986.
4. Sebastian Barry, "Prayers of Sherkin: A Play in Two Acts," p. 37. The text is unpublished as this essay is being written, and all quotations are from the typescript kindly loaned by the Abbey Theatre. *Boss Grady's Boys* and *Prayers of Sherkin* will be published in a single volume by Methuen (London).
5. See the title poem in *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989), pp. 54-55. See also "The Prodigious Sebastian Barry," above n. 3.

Works Cited

- Barry, Sebastian. *Boss Grady's Boys*. Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989.
- . *The Engine of Owl-Light*. Manchester and New York: Carcanet, 1987.
- . *Fanny Hawke Goes to the Mainland Forever*. Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1989.
- . "Prayers of Sherkin: A Play in Two Acts." Unpublished.
- . "The Room of Rhetoric." *The Inherited Boundaries*, pp. 180-87.
- . *The Water-Colourist*. Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1983.
- Beckett, Samuel. *All That Fall: A Play for Radio*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.
- Blake, William. "And did those feet in ancient time." *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, p. 514.
- Donovan, Katie. "Why Many Irish Poets are Taking to the Stage." *Irish Times*, 22 January 1991, p. 10.
- Eliot, T. S. "Andrew Marvell." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode. London: Faber and Faber, 1975, pp. 161-71.
- . *Four Quartets. The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952, pp. 117-45.

———. "Poetry and Drama." *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 72-88.

———. "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama." *The Sacred Wood: Essays in Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960, pp. 60-70.

———. "The Three Voices of Poetry." *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 89-102.

The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland. Ed. Sebastian Barry. Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986.

Wallace, Arminta. "The Prodigious Sebastian Barry." *Irish Times*, 17 November 1990, Weekend: Arts, p. 5.

Jochen Achilles (essay date winter 1995)

SOURCE: Achilles, Jochen. "'Homesick for Abroad': The Transition from National to Cultural Identity in Contemporary Irish Drama." *Modern Drama* 38, no. 4 (winter 1995): 435-49.

[In the following essay, Achilles maintains that Barry's *Prayers of Sherkin* is reflective of the transition in Irish theatre's focus from national identity to cultural identity.]

I

In Irish plays of the last thirty years, the supranational orientation, only occasionally noticeable in plays of earlier periods, is becoming more conspicuous. The question of cultural stasis versus progress is reformulated in terms of the related specificity and rootedness of Irish culture versus its cosmopolitan leanings and its willingness to change its identity without losing it. Whereas their predecessors either shaped or disfigured the Holy Grail of Irish nationhood, living Irish playwrights are more interested in using the stage to test such multicultural notions of identity as the one suggested by the sociologist Stuart Hall who defines it "as contradictory, as composed of more than one discourse, as composed always across the silences of the other, as written in and through ambivalence and desire."¹

In colonial times a uniform national identity was habitually and for obvious reasons associated with progress in the Irish context. In the postcolonial period, such self-sufficiency is increasingly viewed as hampering progress, as indicative of the perpetuation of an outdated impasse. Cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, formerly considered as detracting from the national cause, are more and more viewed as the only direction in which cultural progress may be sought. The culturalist paradigm—that is, a new perspective

of progress which calls for a mediation between the familiar and the unfamiliar and a reconciliation of the particular and the general—is beginning to replace the nationalist paradigm.

Up to the sixties, plays with a political perspective were predominantly concerned with the promises, realities, and disappointments of national independence. These plays function largely as a cultural self-reflection of a preexisting notion of Irish nationhood which is defined in both mythical and political terms and which is often represented allegorically by a woman (as in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*) or as a house (as in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and *Cock-a-doodle Dandy* as well as Behan's *The Hostage*).²

The achievement of national independence by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 is a watershed with regard to the attitude taken to the nationalist paradigm. Henceforth, it is no longer ardently embraced but criticized, satirized, and dismantled. It comes more and more under fire in plays, ranging from O'Casey's so-called Dublin-Trilogy (1923-26) to Johnston's *The Old Lady Says: No!* (1929), Behan's *The Hostage* (1958), and Murphy's *The Blue Macushla* (1980). The political or nationalist paradigm of Irish selfhood—the "metaphysics . . . of the entry into full self-realisation of a unitary subject known as the people," as Terry Eagleton describes it in one of the Field Day pamphlets³—dissolves in the more or less acidic irony of these works. A more liberal culturalist paradigm takes its place in recent drama, which functions as a discourse in which a specifically Irish identity is positioned within a larger intercultural framework.

The aim of the culturalist paradigm is not uniformity but the coexistence of particularities. In other words, a specifically Irish identity is no longer viewed as a primordial and unitary given but as a distinct element among others which is tied to a multifaceted culture by communicative processes. Contrary to a unitary national identity, a cultural identity which is capable of tolerating ambivalence is not primarily established through political action but through changes in the collective unconscious and in public opinion.⁴ Contemporary Irish playwrights are among the agents of such changes.

The impact of a considerable number of these playwrights and their work on the Irish public has been substantially strengthened by Field Day, a theatre company and publishing house established in Derry in 1980 by Brian Friel, the actor Stephen Rea, and the poet Seamus Heaney. Field Day has emerged as the most important platform for both the intellectual