Edward Hirsch

The Imaginary Irish Peasant

EDWARD HIRSCH, professor of English at the University of Houston, is the author of three books of poems: For the Sleepwalkers (Knopf, 1981), Wild Gratitude (Knopf, 1986), which won the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and The Night Parade (Knopf, 1989). He has published articles on Irish literature in ELH, Genre, Modern Drama, Novel, and other journals.

A man who does not exist.
A man who is but a dream . . .

W. B. Yeats, “The Fisherman”

THROUGHOUT THE nineteenth century, but particularly in postfamine Ireland, there was an increasing interest in the rural customs and stories of the Irish country people. This interest deeply intensified during the early years of the Irish Literary Revival—indeed, it was in this period that the Irish peasant was fundamentally “created” and characterized for posterity. By placing the peasant figure at the heart of their enterprises, key Revival writers such as W. B. Yeats, John Synge, George Russell (AE), Isabella Augusta Gregory, and Douglas Hyde were participating in a complex cultural discourse motivated by crucial economic, social, and political needs, as well as by pressing cultural concerns. They also established the terms of an argument that has affected virtually all subsequent Irish literature. From James Joyce and Flann O’Brien onward, few major Irish writers have not felt compelled to demythologize the peasant figure that was first imagined by the Revivalists. One thinks of Patrick Kavanagh’s assertion that his “childhood experience was the usual barbaric life of the Irish country poor” (Self Portrait 9); of Sean O’Faolain’s vehement contention that the “Noble Peasant is as dead as the Noble Savage” (T. Brown 81); of Seamus Heaney’s “archaeological” poems and Michael Longley’s three “Mayo Monologues” that implicitly criticize idealizations of Ireland’s past and its people; or of the relentlessly bleak vision of Irish rural life and society in John McGahern’s first three novels: The Barracks (1963), The Dark (1965), and The Leavetaking (1974). One legacy of the Revivalist’s glorification of the country people has been a nearly endless intertextual regress in Irish literature.

The romantic myth of the peasant was so powerful that not until the late 1970s and early 1980s did Irish writers systematically begin
to interrogate and dismantle the terms of the Revivalist argument, the reductive centering of the country people in Irish literature. Both the Dublin periodical the Crane Bag (which started publishing in 1977) and the Field Day Theatre Company (founded in Derry in 1980) have been instrumental in this questioning. In a yearly stage production and in a succession of polemical pamphlets, the directors of Field Day (Brian Friel, Stephen Rea, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, David Hammond, and Seamus Deane), all from Northern Ireland, have set out to “contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths, and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation” (Hederman and Kearney vii). One fundamental aspect of this enterprise has been an assault on Irish essentialism, on what Seamus Deane calls “the mystique of Irishness,” especially as it has been embodied in an anachronistic Irish culture (“Heroic Styles” 57).1 In a similar vein, the shade of James Joyce advises the pilgrim in Heaney’s long poem “Station Island” to “let go, let fly, forget,” to relinquish “that subject people stuff,” and to fill the element with his own “echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements” (212). Here Heaney borrows Joyce’s voice to advise his own poetic alter ego to break the nets of a debilitating, parasitic Irish cultural discourse.

So who are these Irish country people who have had such a long and controversial history in Irish literature? And precisely what do they represent? I contend that the portraits of the peasant generated by different Irish poets, dramatists, fiction writers, and antiquarians during the Literary Revival were often radically opposed to one another; in fact, each writer undertook to rewrite or to reconceptualize the peasant characters imagined by predecessors and contemporaries. Thus Yeats and Hyde created portraits of the peasant that not only rivaled each other but aimed primarily at overturning the prevailing English colonial stereotype reflected in the stage Irishman. These portraits were in turn rewritten by Synge, even as Yeats’s, Hyde’s, and Synge’s were reworked in divergent ways by Joyce, O’Brien, and Kavanagh. The writers’ alternative conceptions, however, were usually underlined by shared assumptions and fictions about rural life. The rural figures delineated by the major Irish authors were so compelling that some readers and critics have mistakenly considered them real or historically accurate. Indeed, each figuration of peasant life claimed a special empirical status for itself, arguing for its own literal verisimilitude. But this supposed empiricism was the brilliant ruse of an elaborate cultural discourse. Beyond their real differences, most Irish writers had a common belief in a single undifferentiated entity called “the peasants.” This process of turning the peasants into a single figure of literary art (“the peasant”) may be termed the “aestheticizing” of the Irish country people. Such aestheticizing takes place whenever a complex historical group of people is necessarily simplified by being collapsed into one entity, “the folk.” Yeats’s spiritualized fishermen, Synge’s wandering tramps, and Joyce’s hard and crafty peasants are all emblems of that imaginary entity.

The Irish countryside, however, was populated by a diverse grouping of the rural poor, nearly infinite in its social and economic gradations, that comprised small farmers, laborer-landholders, landless laborers, and itinerant workers.2 The people themselves made a central distinction not only between large absentee landholders and everyone else but also between those families who owned any land at all and those who did not. The whole concept of an unchanging Irish peasantry has been called into question by F. S. L. Lyons, who suggests that “the general effect of the economic changes [in Ireland] of the second half of the nineteenth century was to substitute a rural bourgeoisie for a rural proletariat” (Ireland 41–42). Likewise, Martin J. Waters argues that few aspects of Irish life were unaffected by these massive social and economic transformations: “The notion, then, of an ‘Irish peasantry’ with a peculiar ethos somehow remaining outside the dynamics of Irish history . . . is untenable” (161). The thirty years between 1860 and 1890 saw a major reordering of the rural class structure. The countryside was permanently altered by the dominant growth of small-farmer proprietorships, the relentless decrease in population in the wake of the famine, and the virtual destruction of a viable Gaelic-speaking community paralleled
by a significant growth in English-literacy rates. These changes indicate that the countryside was going through something like the last stage of rural proletarianization (Clark 112–22). Indeed, as Malcolm Brown suggests, the agrarian changes were deep enough to transform the “human nature” of the Irish country people (294). That peasants no longer existed as such by the time they were being fiercely “discovered” and portrayed by Irish antiquarians and imaginative writers should point up that what mattered to those writers and their urban audiences was not so much what peasants were but what they represented. This gap or disjunction between the imaginary peasant (“a man who does not exist”) and the real country people illuminates the language that informed both Irish culture and, consequently, Irish literature.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Irish peasant was a figure deeply encoded with social, political, and literary meaning, and to speak or write about that central image of Irish identity in the context of the time was to participate in a special kind of cultural discourse. The country people were important to Irish cultural and political nationalists not for their own sake but because of what they signified as a concept and as a language. To speak about the “peasant” was always to speak about something beyond actual rural life. To debate the characteristics of that peasant was to share a vocabulary; simultaneously, to undermine and attack someone’s idea of the peasant was to come uncomfortably close to attacking that person’s concept of Irish social classes. So much was at stake in the debate about the people of the Irish country-

side that in essence all the major Irish writers sought to exchange their own portraits of the peasant for the larger cultural language and thus to "naturalize" or universalize their ideas about Irish life. The power of the discourse surrounding Irish country life becomes apparent when one remembers that the most common ethnic stereotype featured in the English comic weeklies and on the music-hall stage was the Irish peasant, "Paddy," a comic, quaint, drunken Irish buffoon. But between 1840 and 1890 the portrayal of the stage Irishman changed dramatically, and, as L. Perry Curtis, Jr., has documented, the stereotypes of the late Victorian and early modern era were far more dangerous than the equivalent caricatures of the mid-nineteenth century. Largely as a result of heavy postfamine emigration into the worst English slums, the rise of the Fenian movement in the 1860s, and the dramatic succession of violent agrarian revolts in the west of Ireland, the stage Irishman was reduced in British characterizations to a subhuman figure, a "white Negro" portrayed in Punch as a primitive Frankenstein or peasant Caliban. Curtis writes:

The gradual but unmistakable transformation of Paddy, the stereotypical Irish Celt of the mid-nineteenth century, from a drunken and relatively harmless peasant into a dangerous ape-man or simianized agitator reflected a significant shift in the attitudes of some Victorians about the differences between not only Englishmen and Irishmen, but also between human beings and apes.

(Apes and Angels vii)³

Nor was the likeness between Irish peasants and subhuman creatures limited to English comic weeklies. The overwhelming squalor and poverty in the West during the horrible years of the famine also led English writers to conclude that the Irish existed on a lower rung of the Darwinian ladder. After traveling through Ireland in 1860, Charles Kingsley, for example, wrote:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe there are not only more of them than of old, but that they are happier, better, more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful.  

(Lyons, Culture 12)

To the English public the peasant incarnated the barbarism and savagery of Irish rural life, becoming an emblem of the Irish national character itself. The dehumanization of the Irish in English periodicals (and on the stage) was fiercely challenged by the alternative tradition in Irish newspapers of portraying the peasant as a noble, honest, victimized farmer. No dramatization or portrayal of Irish peasant life could ever be wholly free of the looming shadow and presence of the English colonizer.

The first task of the Irish Literary Revival was to dismantle the "Paddy" image, invert the stereotype, and make the peasant a spiritual figure, the living embodiment of the "Celtic" imagina-

"An Irish Jig." Illustration by James A. Wales, from Puck (3 Nov. 1880: 150). The violent, simianized Irish Celt dances over the products—including drugs—that he has gleaned from England and America. In the background, John Bull and Uncle Sam confer on how to subdue him. Reproduced from Curtis, Apes and Angels 66, by permission of the Smithsonian Institution Press.
tion, a “natural” aristocrat. The Irish Revivalist writers set out to prove that, in Gregory’s polemical words, “Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism” (Irish Theatre 20). That “ancient idealism” was located in the notion of a traditional, unchanging, “natural” Irish populace. By idealizing peasants—and by defining them as the essence of an ancient, dignified Irish culture—the Revivalists were specifically countering the English stereotype. The supernatural folklore and imaginative wealth of the Irish peasant were also posed against the modern industrial and commercial British spirit. To “[s]ing of old Eire and the ancient ways,” as Yeats does in his early poem “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (Poems 101), was always to sing either explicitly or implicitly against the dominant middle-class English culture. In the tradition of romantic pastoralism, whose terms Raymond Williams has carefully and historically defined in The Country and the City, the Revivalists dichotomized urban and rural life, associating cities with “culture” and the countryside with “nature.” Similarly, the “naturalness” of folk life was contrasted with the mechanical, material, and industrial development of life in the metropolis (289–307). In Ireland the conjunction of pastoralism and romantic nationalism—of projecting an ancient, national, and unchanging Irish peasant culture deep into the past—went arm in arm with the project to “[c]all the Muses home” (Yeats, “Those Images,” Poems 600) by creating a contemporary Anglo-Irish literature distinct from Victorian English literature. Thus Yeats could assert that the dream of the Irish peasant “has never been entangled by reality” (“Literary Movement” 94) and that Anglo-Irish literature, in styling and rooting itself in a “tradition of life that existed before commercialism, and the vulgarity founded upon it” (“Postscript” 105), was fundamentally opposed to late Victo-

Edward Hirsch

rian and early modern English literature: “Contemporary English literature takes delight in praising England and her Empire, the masterwork and dream of the middle class” (“Literary Movement” 90). This effort was in turn part of an even larger project to create and define an Irish culture (or an Anglo-Irish culture) distinct from the dominant English culture. Yeats characteristically speaks of half-planning “a new method and a new culture” (Autobiography 102). That project required the writers of the Revival to generate their own precursors—as Jorge Luis Borges says all writers do—to “traditionalize” their work by reviving Irish literary models, consequently locating themselves within an indigenous Irish literary and historical context.

It should not be surprising, then, that as early as 1886 the chief progenitor of the movement, the twenty-one-year-old Yeats, himself newly converted to literary nationalism by John O’Leary, aggressively attacked the “West Britonism” of Edward Dowden (professor of English at Trinity College and “the most distinguished of our critics”) and praised Samuel Ferguson as the “greatest Irish poet” for the “barbarous truth” of his writings (Prose 81–104). The idea that Irish poetry—of which Ferguson was but one exemplum—was in touch with some kind of deeply savage or primary truth, as opposed to what Yeats called the “leprosy of the modern” (Prose 104), was to serve as one of the touchstones of Revival thinking. Ferguson’s poetry may in actuality have had less rootedness and savage folk primitivism than Yeats imagined (or wanted to imagine), but it could nonetheless successfully counter the uprooted “luxuriousness” and empty verbal felicities of contemporary rival English poets like Edmund Gosse, Andrew Lang, and Arthur Dobson. Similarly, Yeats discovered the myths and legends of the Irish heroic age in Standish O’Grady’s History of Ireland (1878–80) and announced that O’Grady’s “multifarious knowledge of Gaelic legend and Gaelic history and a most Celtic temperament have put him in communion with the moods that have [always] been over Irish purposes . . .” (Prose 367). The contemporary (living) folklore of the Irish countryside and the ancient Gaelic literature (revived by archaeologists and translators) served as dual sources for a new Irish literature. It was Yeats’s typical move to bring them together. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s he created Irish or “Celtic” precursors whom he proclaimed rooted in the ancient folk culture of the Irish peasantry. In this way he was mutating a traditional idea of Irish vitality that was given its key formulation in Matthew Arnold’s influential Oxford lectures, The Study of Celtic Literature (1867).

Most important for Yeats—as for every major Revival writer to follow—was the necessary linkage of homeland and song. In 1887 he praised Katherine Tynan for writing on Irish subjects, because “in the finding [of] her nationality, she has found also herself” (Prose 120). In late-nineteenth-century Ireland “finding yourself” was always tied to finding your national (i.e., non-English) self. If, as Yeats believed, the self could not be wholly circumscribed by nationality, either literary or cultural, neither could it possibly be understood without nationalist referents. What distinguished Irish from English writers was a complex national identity, and in searching for that identity Irish writers turned, as if naturally, to the people they imagined to be most distinctively and authentically Irish: the peasants. This phenomenon helps us to account for the sudden omnipresence of the Irish peasant in late-nineteenth-century Irish literature and for the centrality of folklore to the modern Irish literary imagination.

The idea that the peasant represented some pure state of the national culture was itself a romantic fiction, or an idea that ultimately derived from the philosophy of Herder and the other German Romantics, and it came to most young Irish writers through the compelling personal presence and broad cultural nationalism of John O’Leary. In two important speeches—“What Irishmen Should Know” and “How Irishmen Should Feel”—O’Leary forged the link between indigenous folk forms and the cause of nationalism, specifically arguing that literature and nationality were inseparable and interdependent. O’Leary perceived the nearly inexhaustible possibilities for a new Irish literature based on traditional Irish sources, and in directing young Irish writers to that untapped reservoir of materials, he was also pointing the way toward a new lit-
erature. But the idea that peasants embodied "true" Irish culture had both political and literary currency in the 1840s, when Thomas Davis founded the Nation and directed his readers to the folk songs and folkways of their native heritage. (And hence Yeats, who always privileged "literature" over "politics" and the personality of the individual artist over the demands of the audience, found it necessary to carry on a lifelong quarrel—the "de-Davisization" of Irish literature—with a writer whose patriotic poetry he disliked but whom he admired for trying to "speak out of a people to a people."8) Yeats, who "began in all things Pre-Raphaelite," was also turned to folklore by William Morris's wedding of social politics and Pre-Raphaelite literary forms (Essays 56-64). Since idealizing the peasantry always had nationalist political as well as cultural implications, the fiction of an original Irish culture incarnated in peasant life motivated not only the development of Anglo-Irish literature but also the emergence of the Gaelic League (1893). Douglas Hyde, its founder and first president, thought of the league as "non-political and non-sectarian," but Padraic Pearse called it, with only partial overstatement, "the most revolutionary influence that has ever come into Ireland" (Mansergh 246-48).9 The mythologized peasant also energized the Gaelic Athletic Association (founded by Michael Cusack in 1884), which banned all English games and dances as unpatriotic and "revived" hurling and other Celtic games and pastimes. These democratic movements contributed to the growing revolutionary spirit of what the nationalist editor of the Leader, D. P. Moran, dubbed "Irish Ireland." It is not surprising that a newspaper called the Irish Peasant emerged between 1903 and 1906, edited for a middle-class Catholic readership by W. P. Ryan, a Gaelic League enthusiast.10 Peasant life was always projected to the center of the attempt to regenerate and trans-figure Ireland.

While most of the important writers and creators of the Irish Literary Revival were Anglo-Irish Protestants (Yeats, Gregory, Synge, Hyde), the rural country people, "the folk" that intensely interested them, were all Catholics. These Anglo-Irish Protestant writers were also separated from a large segment of their own class by their incipient cultural nationalism. For them the Irish peasant not only represented some essential Irish identity but seemed wholly Other, an outlook not shared by urban, middle-class Catholics or by later Catholic writers like Joyce, O'Brien, and Kavanagh. Because the Protestant intellectuals did not see the peasant as a figure out of their own immediate or historical past, they had no trouble in preserving the rural archetype as pagan and primitive rather than as fundamentally Catholic. By mystifying an ancient, unchanging folk life, removed from the harsh realities of land agitation and social conflict in the countryside, they could treat the peasant as a romantic emblem of a deep, cultural, pastoral, and significantly anticommunal (or nonmaterialistic) Irish life. The Revival writers believed that cities, especially English cities like London, represented modernity and commercialism, whereas rural areas, especially the landscape of western Ireland, were free from commerce and materialism. That is, life in the countryside was "natural" and therefore exempt from the material concerns of "culture." Similarly, "individuals" lived in the cities, but the "folk" lived in the country. Thus the Revival writers projected a group of rural people who were not, to any significant degree, what Yeats called "individuated." Country life was characterized by its orality, organismism, and closeness to nature. By being paganized, the Irish peasant was also turned into a figure of origins, of vital and abundant life freed from the constraints of Christianity and the "moral law." It was a characteristic late-nineteenth-century Irish literary argument (one Yeats used, for example, at his first meeting with the young Joyce) that, to escape from solipsism and abstraction, individual artists should substantiate their work in the communal stories and mythology of the illiterate folk. Deliberate literary artists could escape their own mentality, the highly individualized and potentially sterile "world of ideas," by seeking out the abundant and unself-conscious images of the popular tradition. As Synge put it in his preface to The Playboy of the Western World:

In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender;
so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned to bricks.  

(Plays 53)

It is a corollary to this quest for "rootedness" that the individual artist, almost always a product of town life, could escape the acute self-consciousness of living too much in the mind (what Yeats saw as the fate of the Rhymers) by turning to the popular traditions of people who lived almost exclusively in their bodies and whose folklore seemed to constitute an endless succession of images without ideas. The association of the country with a spiritualized physicality underlined the Revival idea that "all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs" (Yeats, Autobiography 229). Also implicit was the belief that the natural popular tradition itself lacked discriminating intelligence and, to achieve greatness, or "culture," required the shaping hand of a literary artist. As Yeats formulated this notion to Joyce, "When the idea which comes from individual life marries the image that is born from the people one gets great art, the art of Homer, and of Shakespeare, and of Chartres Cathedral" (Ellmann 89). With this concept in mind one can understand the structure of feelings behind Yeats's celebrated stanza in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited":

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.  
We three alone in modern times had brought  
Everything down to that sole test again,  
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.  

(Poems 603)

The final three lines of this stanza emphasize the heroic isolation and shared ideology of Yeats, Synge, and Gregory ("[w]e . . . alone in modern times"), as well as the essential traditional purity of an enterprise that once more brings "[e]verything down to that sole test." At the same time, a literary ideal is translated into terms that resonate with a (nostalgic) politics of patronage. These lines specifically exclude the large group of nationalist Catholic Dubliners who also thought that everything originally Irish came from contact with the soil but whose political and economic aspirations had little to do with a "[d]ream of the noble and the beggar-man."

Although most of the Irish Literary Revival writers were Anglo-Irish Protestants, most of their home audience—the audience that frequented the Abbey Theatre, for example—was composed of middle-class Catholics. This new Catholic middle class formed a ready market for Irish literature in English and played a key role in the origins and rapid development of the Literary Revival (Costello 18). But Catholics, especially middle-class Catholics, associated the peasant with a strong and debilitating sense of cultural inferiority, and they were at least partially ashamed of their own rural background. The country people never referred to themselves as "peasants" constituting a "peasantry," terms they found derogatory and condescending. In Seamus O'Kelly's novel Wet Clay (1922), for example, a young American returns to Ireland to learn the ways of the land. In one scene he tells his cousin, an Irish farmer, and his Gaelic-speaking grandmother that he has followed his blood and become a peasant:

"A what?" the old woman asked.  
"A peasant—we're all peasants, are we not?"  
"Faith, I never knew that until you came across the ocean to tell us," the old woman said.

The Irish farmer then explains to the American:

"We never call ourselves peasants. It was always The People. Take the wording of our ritual: 'The Land for the People.' 'The People's Rights.' 'Clear the Ranches of the Cattle; Make Room for the People.' . . ."  

(qtd. in Kiely 24)

The word peasant was also in disrepute in middle-class Catholic Dublin (MacLolainn 19–20), because for middle-class Catholic Dubliners the so-called peasant was almost always a figure out of their own recent family past.11 Many Catholic Dubliners affected English manners, styles, and habits, stigmatizing the Gaelic language and peasant customs as a badge of social
inferiority and backwardness. Their insecurity suggests that as colonials they had internalized English attitudes and stereotypes. But because they were also nationalists, they liked to idealize and sentimentalize their roots, and they were especially vulnerable when attacked for their “West Britonism.” This new Anglicization left the Catholic Dubliners with the painful feeling that they had no identity, that they had lost their native culture without being subsumed by English customs and culture (Watson 20). The sense of belonging to a fragmented or broken culture is famously summed up in Stephen Dedalus’s discussion with the English dean of studies in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

One way to deal with a debilitating sense of cultural alienation was to turn a Joycean arrogance against Ireland’s native culture. Another way was to engage in a permanent conflict with that culture. Dedalus’s diary entry on the penultimate page of *Portrait* summons up the old man that Mulrennan had interviewed in the west of Ireland:

I fear him. I fear his redrimmed hairy eyes. It is with him I must struggle all through this night till day come, till he or I lie dead, gripping him by the sinewy throat till . . . Till what? Till he yield to me? No. I mean him no harm. (252)

That old man in a mountain cabin is whom (and what) Dedalus is fleeing.

A more commonly “patriotic” path was the idealization of the native culture. Because urban Catholics were sensitive about belonging to an “inferior” culture, many of them were especially susceptible to pleas, like Douglas Hyde’s, to “cultivate what they have rejected, and build up an Irish nation on Irish lines.” Hyde’s influential speech “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland” (1892) was powerful because it pinpointed—though not exclusively for Catholics—the typical ambivalence of people who had ceased “to be Irish without becoming English”:

It is a fact, and we must face it as a fact, that although they adopt English habits and copy England in every way, the great bulk of Irishmen and Irishwomen over the whole world are known to be filled with a dull, ever-aboring animosity against her, and—right or wrong—to grieve when she prospers, and joy when she is hurt. (154)

In her autobiography, the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen makes the useful observation that whereas the politicians had promised and failed to deliver Ireland for the Irish, “Irishness for the Irish was the Gaelic League’s promise, subtler and more essential” (400).

Lower-middle-class and middle-class Catholics in Dublin shared a discomfort with peasant life as all too Irish, but at the same time they idealized that life (the rise of the Gaelic League and the mass appeal of the Gaelic Athletic Association were in some ways manifestations of that idealization). They understood that the peasant could be turned into an emblem not only of Ireland’s victimization and nobility but also of its ignorance, vulgarity, and shame. As George Watson notes, many middle-class Catholics, who had a basic evolutionary idea of their own progress, “did not like being reminded that Ireland was an overwhelmingly rural or peasant society” (25). Again, the structure of urban feelings associated with peasant life is made clear in *Portrait* when Dedalus thinks of an emblematic peasant woman first as a “type of her race and his own” (thus associating himself with the woman) and then as “a batlike soul waking in consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness” (183). In Dedalus’s view the woman is a figure of the Irish unconscious associated with something dark, lonely, beckoning, shameful. The engendering of the peasant is crucial here. Whereas the colonizer is associated with invulnerable masculine strength, the colonized is associated with a guilty and dangerous female secrecy and vulnerability. “Worst of all,” as Deane says in summarizing the colonial stereotypes of the barbaric Irish peasant,
"he is sometimes a she" ("Civilians and Barbarians" 40). Edna O’Brien summons up a host of conventional associations when she characterizes Ireland as “a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the Hag of Beare" (11). This engendering was also part of Catholic Dublin’s painful ambivalence about “peasant”

For the Catholic middle class, however, the Irish country person functioned as a particularly important autochthonous myth, the source of all authentic Irish life. The peasants symbolized colonial dissent: Because they were physically rooted in Irish soil, they established irrefutable property rights and economic claims to Ireland against the English colonizer. Michael Davitt’s Land League, founded in 1879, distinctly fostered and powerfully motivated this economic myth. The Land League argued that the peasants had once owned all the land in Celtic Ireland before they were displaced by English settlers. By projecting an economic aspiration for the future into the ancient past, the league helped to politicize the country people around the idea of their historical rights to the land. The league strengthened the concept of the peasant as a victim of English imperialism. Consequently, it spurred and escalated the breakdown of the countryside from a realm of large estates to one of small plots and landholdings, in the process yoking the agrarian reform movement to the nationalist enterprise (see Davitt for a primary account of the league; two of the many secondary accounts are Palmer’s and Lee’s). The Land League’s propaganda was also effective in reversing and inverting the figure of the “primitive” peasant. This economic myth of the peasant differed from the myth of the peasant promulgated by the Anglo-Irish Protestant Revivalists, who spiritualized the peasants by dematerializing them, turning them into an emblem of natural, antieconomic people. So, too, did the paganization of the peasant depart from the middle class’s necessary view of an orthodox, unimpeachable peasant Catholicism. In this way, the peasant figure was invested with divergent interests and values.

The middle-class Catholics of Dublin formed a ready audience for the Irish theater movement because the idealization of the peasant instilled a sense of pride in a native culture and fit in well with their social and economic aspirations. The move to cultural nationalism was especially significant in the demoralized wake of Charles Parnell’s fall from power and the sudden impossibility of parliamentary reform (home rule). As Yeats often testified, the literary movement itself crystallized after the bitter controversy over the Parnell tragedy:

The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war began when Parnell fell from power. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived, and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event’s long gestation.

(Autobiography 378)

In Hugh Hunt’s words, “Ireland’s national theater was born of a short-lived marriage between political and cultural nationalism in the form of the Celtic . . . Revival” (11). Thus was a constellation of Anglo-Irish Protestant writers and middle-class Catholic nationalists brought together. However, the Catholic audience for that new modern literature could easily feel betrayed by Anglo-Irish Protestant writers who had a significantly different structure of feelings about Irish life (see C. C. O’Brien 48–79; Lyons, Culture 13, 28). Certainly this attitude helps to account for the enthusiastic creation and welcome development of the National Theatre, which was then riddled with controversies over plays like The Countess Cathleen, In the Shadow of the Glen, and The Playboy of the Western World. All these controversies centered on the dramatization of the Irish peasant. In their 1906 pamphlet Irish Plays, for example, the Abbey playwrights suggested that they had broken with previous stagings of traditional Irish life and had instead “taken their types and scenes direct from Irish life itself”:

This life is rich in dramatic materials, while the Irish peasantry of the hills and coast speak an exuberant language, and have a primitive grace and wildness, due to the wild country they live in, which gives their most ordinary life a vividness and colour unknown in more civilised places.

(qtd. in Clarke 121)
Consequently, the recurrent objection to these plays and to Synge’s work in particular was that, in Daniel Corkery’s summary charge, the “plays were not Irish plays inasmuch as they misrepresented the Irish peasant” (Hogan and Kilroy 44; see also Hirsch, “Gallous Story”). The special viciousness and bitter frequency with which this charge was leveled at Synge suggest that to “represent” or “misrepresent” the peasant was to project a “representation” or “misrepresentation” of Ireland itself and consequently to project or call into question one’s own essential Irish identity. But all representations were in some ways misrepresentations. The very idea that some nonindividuated or typical Irish peasant existed was itself a necessary urban fiction.

The complex literary, social, and political matrix of feelings about Irish rural life provides a historical perspective on the peasant’s figuration by five major Irish writers: Yeats, Synge, Joyce, O’Brien, and Kavanagh. Each of these writers created an imaginary peasant in opposition both to the idealized peasant of middle-class Catholic Dublin and to the peasant figures portrayed by previous writers. Similarly, each justified his project by satirizing earlier models of peasant life and positing his own as an empirical reality. This pretense to realism was a way of invoking “presence” and giving special authority to one’s own view of Irish country life. In effect, each writer was turning a personal mythology into a national public code and moving an otherwise marginal literary activity into the center of Irish culture. The heavy critical emphasis on Yeats’s late Romanticism and Joyce’s innovative European modernism has sometimes obscured the need to understand the national public code—the language of Irish culture—if one is to read modern Irish literature.

Yeats’s early work was a daring and major refiguration of the Irish peasant. Indeed, every Irish writer since Yeats has had to contend with his revisionary portrait. In a wide variety of songs and ballads, plays and stories, folktale collections, literary sketches, reviews, and essays, Yeats dramatically reversed the stereotype by radically spiritualizing the native country people. His prolific early work publicizes and rethinks the peasant of nineteenth-century antiquarians like Thomas Crofton Croker and fiction writers like William Carleton, revises the (reductively) political peasant of Thomas Davis and the other writers of the Young Ireland Movement, and empiricizes his occult and romantic interests in a rural community. Folklore provided Yeats with the public material for other systems of correspondence as well as for his own private symbol system. As a writer committed to imaginative nationalism, Yeats used the unmined body of Irish materials to root an idiosyncratic symbol system in a common and communal mythology, in effect tying his work to the efforts of writers and scholars all over Ireland. As an Anglo-Irish Protestant, a cultural nationalist, and a romantic occultist in search of a truer faith than Christianity, Yeats discovered in folklore a way to locate his work in a historically “real” community. And so his unique syncretism of romantic and occult ideas conjoined with a culture’s interest in national folklore. In Poundian terms, and despite his own highly personal and evolving philosophy, Yeats was working at the center of an Irish vortex.13

Synge’s ethnographic and dramatic work stands as a second major literary refiguration of the peasant. Indeed, almost all Synge’s work is dependent on his rewriting of the Irish country people. Defining the Literary Revival, Synge writes, “The intellectual movement that has taken place in Ireland for the last twenty years has been chiefly a movement towards a nearer appreciation of the country people, and their language . . . .” (Prose 367). Synge’s work begins with a Darwinian shock of recognition, and his journey to the Aran Islands represents a quest for a natural community to replace an absent center, the death of a transcendental God. Synge shared with Yeats an ideology of romantic primitivism, but his stories of the wilderness, violence, cruelty, and verbal extravagance at the heart of peasant life subtly revised the way in which the peasant had been previously spiritualized. His ethnography of the Aran Islands and his later efforts to get away from a purely “Cuchulainoid” national theater, especially in his brilliant Playboy of the Western World, were also attempts both to revise the Yeatsian spiritualization of the peasant and to undermine and attack the urban
middle class’s flattened portrait of the noble Irish farmer (an inversion of the stage stereotype). At the same time, Synge’s work continued to romanticize the naturalness, paganism, and rich linguistic plentitude of Irish peasant life. For Synge, the peasant served as a substitute or metonym for some original, authentic “human nature.” As Yeats’s poem “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” suggests, Synge believed he had come

Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place,
Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like his heart.

(Poems 325)

Similarly, Synge writes, “I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and a dignity from which we are shut for ever” (Prose 162).

Joyce’s strategic literary move—his contribution to the discourse about the peasant—was a glancing demystification of the figure. In a key argument with the nationalist Madden in Stephen Hero, Joyce’s autobiographical stand-in denies the uniqueness of the Irish peasant: “One would imagine the country was inhabited by cherubim. Damme if I see much difference in peasants: they all seem to me as like one another as a peascod is like another peascod . . . .” (54).

When Madden speaks of the “admirable type of culture” and the “simple life” of the peasant, Daedalus counterposes the “mental swamp” of that same peasant: “a life of dull routine—the calculation of coppers, the weekly debauch and the weekly piety—a life lived in cunning and fear between the shadows of the parish chapel and the asylum!” (54–55). The ways in which the peasant’s closeness to nature had been romanticized were undoubtedly hovering in the background when Joyce sent Daedalus into a railway car to encounter the “offensive” smell and “odour of debasing humanity” (238). Less convincing is the later affirmative statement that “[i]t was in the constant observance of the peasantry that Stephen chiefly delighted” (244), though the passage does show something of Joyce’s ambivalence. For Daedalus—as for Joyce himself—the peasant is distanced as a completely different physical type, someone wholly Other.

The grossness of an all too physical peasant in Stephen Hero and Portrait was a direct attack on the nationalists, but it was also a sideways revision of the Yeatsian mystifications of peasant life that encompassed Synge as well. For example, Arthur Power reports Joyce’s opinion of Synge’s work:

I do not care for it, he told me, for I think that he wrote a kind of fabricated language as unreal as his characters were unreal. Also in my experience the peasants in Ireland are a very different people from what he made them out to be, a hard, crafty and matter-of-fact lot, and I never heard any of them using the language which Synge puts in their mouths. (33–34)

Similarly, the Cyclops episode of Ulysses permanently and mercilessly set out to expose the racism and provincialism of the Citizen’s patriotic idea of a Gaelic-speaking peasantry that he knew nothing about. (The model for the Citizen, Michael Cusack, may be read as an emblem of the Irish Ireland movement itself.) But to rematerialize and re-Catholicize the overly spiritualized peasant of the Celtic twilight, Joyce flattened the peasant’s character, describing it as crassly materialistic and slavishly superstitious, totally lacking in redeeming virtues or values. Joyce himself subtly revised this view—and deepened his sense of the “primitive” life in the west of Ireland—in “The Dead.” Indeed, the dichotomy between the “overcivilized” city (the East, Dublin) and the passionate, underdeveloped country (the West, Connacht, the Aran Isles) is paramount to any reading of “The Dead.” In some fundamental way, Joyce was not primarily interested in rendering life in the countryside; rather, he was fully preoccupied with the embracing humanity and “scrupulous meanness” of a city like Dublin. But it is a sign of the power of the national cultural discourse in Ireland that he nonetheless found it necessary to project and dismantle the central figure of the Irish peasant.

O’Brien’s extravagant antipastoral comedies may be read as a fourth stage in the successive literary refigurations of the peasant. Fluent in Gaelic, O’Brien was an accomplished, idiosyncratic stylist of the language who characteristically
used his linguistic skills to parody and unmask previous portraits of peasant life. By taking Myles na Gopalean as his nom de plume—the name of the most despised of nineteenth-century music-hall buffoons, the character from Dion Bouicault’s stage Irish melodrama *The Colleen Baun*—he mockingly reversed the traditional stereotype and turned the satirized into the satirist, the comic figure into the author himself (Kiberd 463). As Myles, O’Brien witheringly parodied the various sentimentalizations of the peasant in Irish cultural discourse, including a popular spate of autobiographies by country people. 14 Especially galled by Synge’s work, he took Joyce’s distaste one step further and asserted that “nothing in the whole galaxy of fake is comparable with Synge. . . . Playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playground, pretending to be morose and obsessed and thoughtful—all that is wearing so thin that we must put it aside soon in shame as one puts aside a threadbare suit” (Myles 234). Myles’s strategy was to collapse the British music-hall Paddy and Synge’s revisionary portrait.

The enormous gap between the Gaelic League’s idealized peasant and the harsh reality of rural life is the given subject of Myles’s novel in Irish, *An Béal Bocht (The Poor Mouth)*. The author continually returns to the misery of the country people and the squalor of their living conditions, and he mercilessly sends up the sentimentalized poverty portrayed by folklorists and nationalists—“the very best poverty, hunger and distress” (88):

It had always been said that accuracy of Gaelic (as well as holiness of spirit) grew in proportion to one’s lack of worldly goods and since we had the choicest poverty and calamity, we did not understand why the scholars were interested in any half-awkward, perverse Gaelic which was audible in other parts. (49)

O’Brien’s other fiction is also obsessed with the falsifications of Irish cultural and political nationalism; indeed, his tour de force, *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, fully enacts the Irish writer’s preoccupation with rewriting Irish mythology. If O’Brien lacks an international reputation, the reason may be that his work concentrates on dismantling the literature of Ireland rather than on creating a revisionary “European” oeuvre equal to the poems of Yeats, the plays of Synge, or the fiction of Joyce. While Samuel Beckett is the post-Joycean Irish writer whose work most successfully avoids the constraints of a defining Irish literary tradition by radically denying any antiquarian referents (“not for me all these Deirdres and Maeves and Cathleens,” he says repeatedly [Bair 106]), 15 O’Brien is the writer whose fiction is most dependent for its effects on previous Irish literary tradition. He has the fate of being the most major belated prose writer to stay in Ireland.

Kavanagh’s adversarial relation to the Revival parallels O’Brien’s, for both writers felt savage indignation over the literary falsifications of Irish rural life. As the son of a shoemaker in Inniskeen, county Conaghan, as a self-educated Catholic poet who grew up in the countryside, and as a Northern Irish parish writer who was often condescended to as a “peasant” poet during his years in Dublin (especially after the false pastoralism of his first book, *Ploughman and Other Poems* [1936]), Kavanagh entered the discourse of Irish literature with a deep insecurity and a furious sense of belatedness. “My misfortune as a writer,” he once declared, “was that atrocious formula which was invented by Synge and his followers to produce an Irish literature” (Warner 28). Kavanagh particularly despised Synge’s peasants as “picturesque conventions” speaking a phony language, and he argued that the playwright provided “Irish Protestants who are worried about being ‘Irish’ with an artificial country” (Warner 81). In his autobiography, he advanced the argument by asserting that the entire “so-called Irish Literary Movement which purported to be Irish and racy of the Celtic soil was a thoroughgoing English-bred lie” (Self Portrait 9). Only by destroying the persistent Revivalist fictions about rural life could Kavanagh clear a space for his own indigenous poems.

In a major antipastoral work, “The Great Hunger” (1942), Kavanagh paints a harsh, revisionary portrait of life in the Irish countryside as economically oppressive, sexually repressed, and emotionally stunted. It simultaneously in-
dicts the brutalities of small-farm life and attacks Revivalist sentimentalizations of that life. Kavanagh's main character, Patrick Maquire, is a rural incarnation of Joyce's spiritually paralyzed characters in *Dubliners* (D. O'Brien 23). In the thirteenth section of the poem, Kavanagh satirizes the idea of a contented, illiterate peasant who has no worries and who plows and sows in "his little lyrical fields." The second stanza takes aim directly at Yeats's "Municipal Gallery Revisited":

*There is the source from which all cultures rise,*
*And all religions,*
*There is the pool in which the poet dips*
*And the musician.*

*Without the peasant base civilisation must die,*
*Unless the clay is in the mouth the singer's*
*singing is useless.*

Kavanagh's poem is a full-scale Joycean assault on the idea of the peasant as "the unspoiled child of Prophecy," as the source of all value and virtue, as a natural man "only one remove from the beasts he drives" (*Collected Poems* 52).

Kavanagh further developed his ethnographic poetics in his rural novel *Tarry Flynn* (1948) and in his two books of poems, *A Soul for Sale* (1947) and *Come Dance with Kitty Stobling* (1960). Kavanagh's famous distinction between parochialism and provincialism animates all his mature work: whereas the provincial tries to live "by other people's lines," the parochial relies on self-sufficiency and a fully grounded vision. Heaney has argued that there is a subtle sea change in Kavanagh's later work, especially in his poem "Epic" and in his Canal Bank Sonnets. Heaney's view is that in these poems Kavanagh's places exist less as "documentary geography" than as "transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force" ("Placeless Heaven" 5). It is the meditative intelligence that gives value to the places and not the other way around. Thus Kavanagh, like Heaney himself, becomes more than just a "parishioner of the local" ("Sense of Place" 148).

Kavanagh is the most important Irish poet to follow Yeats, and yet his work has often been overshadowed by Yeats's towering achievement. Because every Irish poet in the past century has been forced to come to terms with the Yeatsian figuration of the Irish peasant, Kavanagh's de-mystification of the Revivalist myths and his sustained commitment to the unromanticized particulars of rural experience have proved fruitful to subsequent Irish poets. This circumstance also helps to account for the enormous disparity between Kavanagh's reputation outside and inside Ireland.16 Seldom considered important abroad, Kavanagh's work provided a useful and necessary alternative opening for Irish poets at home, especially for the group of Northern poets who emerged in the 1960s under the tutelage of Philip Hobsbaum: Seamus Heaney, James Simmons, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and others. After Kavanagh, it fell to writers with their origins in Ulster, as Fintan O'Toole has written, "to try to show the cruelty and ignorance of the previously idealised peasantry" (21).17 Thus John Montague's statement that "The Great Hunger" is a poem whose "breathtaking honesty of vision" changed the course of Irish verse (Quinn 106) rhymes with Deane's idea that Kavanagh "deflected the Yeatsian influence by replacing the notion of the region, Ireland, with the notion of the parish" (*Celtic Revivals* 16). Deane's idea, in turn, parallels Heaney's statement that "Kavanagh's work probably touches the majority of Irish people more immediately and more intimately than most things in Yeats" ("Sense of Place" 137).18 What motivates all these affirmations of Kavanagh's importance is the sense that Kavanagh replaced the Literary Revival's romantic pastoralism with a more genuine and ethnographically accurate depiction of rural life.

Yeats, Synge, Joyce, O'Brien, and Kavanagh formulated, destroyed, and reformulated the character of Irish peasant life. Since to reconceptualize the peasant was to control and rewrite the essential Irish image, the source of all authentic Irish culture, each visionary portrait of the peasant privileged itself and tried to establish its own empirical authenticity by turning culture into nature and thus providing, in Roland Barthes's terms, a natural justification for a historical and literary intention. In other words, each of these five writers projected his own ideological complex of values, beliefs, and feelings into the character of the peasant and then defined (and
defended) the figure he had put forward as unchanging and "natural." What Barthes states about a tree (a "fact" of nature) may also be applied to the naturalness (the basic "human nature") of the Irish peasant created and re-created by Irish writers:

Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter.

The key difference between a tree and a peasant of course is that, in a thousand ways—through their stories, traditions, songs, houses, and customs—the country people can and do speak for themselves. One way to interpret the corpus of their folklore is as a collection of "stories" that they tell to themselves about themselves. The literary sketches, ballads, short stories, plays, political tracts, and romantic ethnographies of the Irish Literary Revival served an equally central but somewhat different function. (The gap between literary renditions of the country people and the country people's stories of themselves can be easily measured by comparing, say, Yeats's Mythologies and Synge's Aran Islands with memoirs like Tomás Ó Crohan's Islandman [1929], Maurice O'Sullivan's Twenty Years A-Growing [1933], Peig Sayers's Peig [1936], and Eric Cross's reminiscence The Tailor and Ansty [1942] ) The Irish writers' task was not necessarily to create faithful or accurate ethnographic descriptions of rural life, though sometimes their works posed as literary ethnographies. In The Politics of Landscape, James Turner puts the matter nicely in terms of rural literature: "Here is the central ideological fact of rural literature: it succeeds as description the more it approaches identity with the world of rural production, but it is meaningful as literature precisely because it is not that world, because it triumphs over and obliterates it" (195). So much was invested in creating the Irish peasant because to speak or write about that figure was always to speak or write about something far beyond the local realities of country life. To turn the peasant into a figure of writing was to participate in an Irish cultural discourse well removed from the world of rural production. It was also to place one's work firmly inside that central national and cultural discourse. By implication, to define an idea of the Irish peasant was to define an idea of Ireland itself.

Notes

1 See Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney's Crane Bag and Field Day Theatre Company's Ireland's Field Day, which brings together six individual pamphlets and an afterword by Thomas Flanagan. As Dillon Johnston summarizes, "It is the objective of the Field Day essays—especially those by Deane, Richard Kearney, and Declan Kiberd—to raze the monumental myths of the literary and nationalistic revival (perhaps I should say the 'so-called revival') in an appeal for revisionary politics and literature which would be 'unblemished by Irishness,' as Deane says, 'but securely Irish'" (173). See also Deane's "Literary Myths" and "Irish Poetry." Terence Brown provides a useful overview in "Yeats."

Deane writes, "The oppressiveness of the tradition we inherit has its source in our own readiness to accept the mystique of Irishness as an inalienable feature of our writing and, indeed, of much else in our culture. That mystique is itself an alienating force. To accept it is to become involved in the spiritual heroics of a Yeats or a Pearse, to believe in the incarnation of the nation in the individual. To reject it is to make a fetish of exile, alienation and dislocation in the manner of Joyce or Beckett. Between these hot and cold rhetorics there is little room for choice" ("Heroic Styles" 57–58).

2 See Samuel Clark, Social Origins, and Barbara L. Solow, Land Question, for detailed discussions of the socioeconomic discriminations and changes in the Irish countryside during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

3 Also useful are Curtis's Anglo-Saxons and Celts and Richard Ned Lebow's White Britain and Black Ireland.

4 See also Williams's discussion of the development of the terms folk culture, peasant, and tradition in Keywords.

5 Dowden, a close friend of Yeats's father, was reflecting the prevailing Anglo-Irish intellectual opinion when he wrote in 1882, "I am infinitely glad that I spent my early enthusiasm on Wordsworth and Spenser and Shakespeare and not on anything Ireland ever produced" (183–84). It was precisely this position that Yeats set himself against. For the next stage of their debate, see Yeats's Uncollected Prose 346–49.

6 In an 1895 review, Yeats also stated that O'Grady's History of Ireland, Heroic Period, published in 1878, was "the starting
point of what may prove a new influence in the literature of the world . . . " (Prose 350).

7 Yeats often cited O'Leary's idea that there was a strong interconnection between nationality and literature. See, for example, Yeats's Letters to the New Island 75–76, 103–04. For a useful discussion see Daniel Hoffman 21–22.

8 In "A General Introduction for My Work" (1937) Yeats notes that when O'Leary first gave him the poems of Thomas Davis and other writers associated with the Nation, he saw even more clearly than O'Leary that they were not good poetry; nonetheless he admired these authors because "they were not separated individual men . . . behind them stretched the generations" (510).

9 Hyde was president of the Gaelic League from 1893 to 1915, when he was defeated by the Sinn Fein wing on the issue of the league's position toward a "free Ireland." Thus his ambition to "use the language as a neutral field upon which all Irishmen might meet" finally gave way to what he called "the apotheosis of Sinn Fein." Hyde's essay "The Irish Language Movement: Some Reminiscences" suggests that he later came to recognize the major role that the league played in the struggle for Irish independence: "The movement which has resulted in the establishment of our Government is the descendant of the Gaelic League, and the Gaelic League goes back to Gaelic Ireland, to ancient Ireland for its inspiration. . . . The Gaelic League grew up and became the spiritual father of Sinn Fein, and Sinn Fein's progeny were the Volunteers, who forced the English to make the treaty. The Dail is the child of the Volunteers, and thus it descended directly from the Gaelic League, whose traditions it inherits" (qtd. in Dunleavy 30). For a discussion of Pearse's ideas about the Irish-language movement and the relation between language and nationalism, see Porter.

10 For Moran's views of Irish Irelandism ("Thou shalt be Irish: thou shalt not be English" [28]), see "The Battle of Two Civilizations." Donal McCann's discussion of the developing concept is especially useful. For Ryan's views, see The Pope's Green Island.

11 See also Conor Cruise O'Brien, States of Ireland 60, and Desmond Fennell, "The Irish Language Movement" 75. Alexander J. Humphreys's study of "new Dubliners" confirms that even in the middle of the twentieth century a full quarter of Dublin's population consisted of first-generation immigrants into the city. In Humphreys's 1949 sample, 116 parents of 58 Dubliners, only 36 of the parents had been born and raised in Dublin, whereas 61 were the children of farmers.

12 Clarke calls "peasant plays" the most popular form of drama at the Abbey and lists thirteen of them written by eight different Abbey playwrights between 1901 and 1908. She takes the dramatists at their word that these plays "arose as an attempt on the part of playwrights to show a true picture of Irish life to Ireland and the world" (1).

13 In ABC of Reading Pound asked, "What was there to the Celtic Movement? Apart from, let us say, the influence of ballad rhythms on Yeats's metric?" (80). For a fuller account of Yeats's debt to folklore, see Edward Hirsch, "'Contention Is Better Than Loneliness.'"

14 Myles particularly satirizes the novels of Máire (Seamus O Grianna) and the memoir by Tomás O Crohan, The Islandman (1929), by comically repeating their most celebrated clichés. See Poor Mouth 125–26.

15 Beckett's early novel Murphy (1938) may be the exception. Beckett uses Murphy—his eponymous, anti-Irish hero—to take special aim at the Literary Revival. Murphy's final wish is to have his ashes flushed down the WC during a performance at the Abbey. See Maureen Waters 110–22. See also Beckett's famous pseudonymous attack on antiquarian elements in Irish literature, "Recent Irish Poetry" (Belis).

16 Deane writes that Kavanagh "is so obviously a lesser poet than Yeats and yet he is also so obviously more influential in Ireland that one is hard put to define his attaction or his quality. I should say that Kavanagh marks a disappearance of two things which had marked the best literature of the Revival—the link between it and classical antiquity and its convention of the relationship between author and protagonist" ("Irish Poetry" 10).

17 O'Toole continues, "Patrick Kavanagh in The Great Hunger or Flann O'Brien in An Béal Bocht had already effectively attacked the notion of a pure and happy peasantry, but there was nothing in the literature with the same deep aversion to the peasantry per se as is found in, say, James Simmons's 'Peasant Quality' or in Michael Longley's 'Mayo Monologues' " (21).

18 Heaney once told Caroline Walsh that Kavanagh's greatest achievement was "to make our subculture—the rural outback—a cultural resource for us all; to give us images of ourselves" (Corcoran 20). In "The Sense of Place" Heaney writes, "Kavanagh's grip on our imaginations stems from our having attended the intimate hedge-school that he attended" (137). For a full account of Heaney's debt to Kavanagh, see his "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal" and "Placeless Heaven." For an extended discussion of Kavanagh's provincialism and how it has influenced subsequent writers, see Michael Allen.

19 My phrasing here is borrowed from Clifford Geertz 448.

Works Cited


———. " Civilians and Barbarians." *Field Day Theatre Company* 33–42.


