

J. M. Synge and Cultural Trauma

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What constitutes the “after” of terror? Is not terror precisely that which shatters any sense of chronology and linearity? If one takes terror¹ as a traumatic experience which stupefies the subject and plunges him or her in a state of mental numbness, leaving his or her psyche fixated indefinitely on the traumatic event, the very possibility of an after is indeed put into question. Terror as trauma requires a rethinking of temporal categories such as precedence or posteriority. This article will strive to demonstrate how the terror of the Irish Famine resonates in the writings of J. M. Synge (1871-1909) and how Synge found in the theatre a medium fit to give an aesthetic expression to collective and cultural trauma. I will argue that what made theatre especially appropriate for his purpose is the possibility it allows to treat time in a radically unconventional manner.

Trauma, Modernity and the Break-up of Time

First used to refer to a physical injury, the term “trauma” (from the Greek, meaning “wound”) came in the late nineteenth century to designate almost exclusively a mental or psychological wound (Luckhurst 2-3). In his genealogy of the concept, Roger Luckhurst calls attention to the inextricable link which exists between trauma and modernity and underlines the general scholarly consensus which sees “the origin of the idea of trauma [as inseparable from] the expansion of the railways in the 1860s” (2-3). As the icon of British modernity, the railway was met with ambivalent feelings – admiration on the one hand as it exemplified engineering genius, fear and anxiety on the other as it radically changed one’s experience of space and time and could also prove quite dangerous. As Luckhurst reminds us, drawing on the work of Wolfgang Schivelbush, the industrialisation of transportation “alter[ed] the consciousness of passengers [who] developed a new set of perceptions” (21). Speed also meant that when accidents occurred they were particularly gruesome. Medical inquiry was made into the effects of these accidents as “even those who survived without apparent physical injury began to report strange effects on their nerves” (Luckhurst 21; Shivelbush 14, 24, 136). Sigmund

¹ There are other accepted meanings of the word. Edmund Burke’s, for one, springs to mind. Here is his well-known definition of the sublime as terror, for example: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature... is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other.” Even in Burke’s definition of sublime as terror one cannot help noticing his foregrounding a sense of arrested time, of suspension of all motions (Burke 130).

Freud spent his entire career re-defining the concept of trauma, which he first conceived of as linked to sexual abuse during childhood and which he then, i.e. during and after the First World War, saw as connected to an experience of violent shock. In 1916, Freud described trauma as “an event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization” (Freud in Laplanche & Pontalis 465-9).²

Amongst the most common symptoms of trauma, one may mention the will-to-forget or amnesia of the victim, the consequent dissociation or dislocation of the person and his or her incapacity to speak about the traumatic experience. As David Lloyd aptly remarks the “unspeakableness” of trauma results partly from the terrorization of the person as “the deliberate infliction of pain demands not just an amnesiac response but actually denies the very existence of a subject that could remember” (Lloyd 24). Trauma, whatever its nature, whether deliberately inflicted, as in cases of rape or abuse for example, or circumstantial, as in cases of war, induces a dysfunctioning of memory and alters the being-in-time of the person. One of the long-lasting effects observed in traumatised individuals is their compulsion to repeat, repetition substituting itself for memory, as Freud demonstrated in “Remembering, Repeating, Working Through.” The state of sideration in which traumatised subjects find themselves means that time, in the affective, emotional sense of the Greek *kairos* (as opposed to *chronos*) has stopped and that part of the psyche is stuck at a past-present-future time: the frozen moment of traumatic impact.

Contrary to the shocks which modernity brought with it and which are thought to be inseparable from the origins of trauma, the Irish Famine of the 1840s took place over a protracted period of time and had nothing of the suddenness of a railway collision or a shell explosion, to use two instances of modern shocks. Moreover, it has been construed as a traditional (not to say medieval) catastrophe, albeit one which precipitated Ireland's entry into modernity. The Famine has indeed long been seen as an “old world” calamity - the polarity commonly accepted in Victorian thought between the age of steam and the old world dies hard (Stocking).

Unlike the types of trauma already referred to, the Famine was experienced at mass level. This raises a number of questions, the most fundamental of which being the possibility of thinking a collective, cultural trauma using a methodology derived from psychoanalysis. Understanding at the psychological level only does not allow one to properly take into account the cultural level. And as David Lloyd puts it in *Irish Times* in relation to the

² See also Freud's definition: “The traumatic experience is one which, in a very short space of time, is able to increase the strength of a given stimulus so enormously that its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means.” (Freud 236).

traumatic effects of colonisation, “the relation to the past is strictly not a relation to one’s own past but to a social history and its material and institutional effects and in no simple way a matter of internal psychic dynamics.” Lloyd continues by articulating the risk one takes when attempting to theorise the “transition from the level of the individual to that of the social:” a blindness to the ideology always already present in “the relation between the psychological and the social” (25-26). To this one may add a further risk: that of apprehending the traumatised culture as a coherent unity, lacking political, economic and experiential divisions. If a traumatic experience such as the Famine was bound to affect the whole Irish population in one way or another, it did not affect its individual members in the same fashion, depending on their age, gender or class.

The Famine in Irish Culture

In the second half of the 19th century, the Famine was viewed by some as a mere natural disaster (the potato blight) or as God’s way of punishing the Irish for their fecklessness, laziness, rampant fertility and all sorts of other sins. Some historians have since seen it as a form of genocidal intent. Most historians today reject both views and attribute the Famine to a combination of factors whose relative importance is still debated (Ó Gráda 1). For cultural historians in particular the importance one ought to give to the larger context of colonisation in which the Famine took place remains a bone of contention. However, it is agreed that the Great Famine constitutes a pivotal event in the history of Ireland. It is *the* trauma or “terror”, with which every Irish generation has had to deal ever since. As the then Prime Minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair, declared in 1997, when the 150th anniversary of the Famine was commemorated: “That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today” (Blair in Ó Gráda 1). The figure of one million given by Blair, and by most Famine historians, is just an estimate however, since excess mortality could not be calculated directly in the absence of any civil registration. If, as Irish historian Cormac Ó Gráda reminds us,

the record of deaths in the workhouses and other public institutions is nearly complete, [...] the recording of other deaths depended on the memory of survivors in households where deaths had taken place. In many homes, of course, death and emigration meant that there were no survivors. (16)

The exact nature, causes and consequences of the Famine are far from easy to define and comprehend. The dates marking its beginning and its end, for example, remain open to discussion and the multiplicity of phrases used to refer to it (e.g. the Great Hunger, the Irish

Famine, the Great Calamity, to quote examples in English only and not to mention any of the numerous phrases in Irish), testifies to the impossibility of adequately naming the event. The Famine borders on the limits of the articulate and threatens, to borrow Terry Eagleton's words, "to burst through the bounds of representation as surely as Auschwitz did for Theodor Adorno" (12). It left the Irish people speechless for a while—literally and metaphorically. Literally, because the Irish language suffered a devastating effect. Indeed, most of the people who died or emigrated during the Famine were Irish speakers and after the Famine, some of the people who could speak Irish refused to do so as it was considered bad luck (Eagleton 12). Metaphorically, the Famine left the Irish speechless because it is a collective trauma that has possibly not been worked through yet and that certainly had not been worked through at the time when J. M. Synge wrote. Ever since the 1850s, the question that writers have faced is akin to that that Theodor Adorno was to articulate almost a century later: how can one write after such catastrophe?

In the pre-independence period during which Synge wrote, the Irish strove to re-define their Irishness. If what has now become one of the most common allegories of the Famine – the figure of a poor old woman eternally enduring great pains – was used by nationalists to define Irish identity, they more often turned to a past pre-dating colonisation and the Famine. The heroes of this mythological past provided them with templates for the image of the brave, strong, virile Gael which they came up with in response to the image of the romantic, irrational and feminine Celt fashioned by Matthew Arnold and other "Celticists". As for the British government, they saw the Famine as evidence of the backwardness of Ireland, which called for urgent modernisation. The Famine was construed as a watershed marking the end of pre-history and the wished-for advent of modernity. Representing Ireland as the land of eternal suffering amounted to perpetuating the trauma of both colonisation and the Famine. Turning to a mythological past to define the present and shape the future of the country meant that the Famine and its consequences were overlooked. Perceiving the Famine as the turning point between pre-history and modernity allowed one to think of it as irremediably past and thus as having no bearing on the present or the future whatsoever. None of these three views offered a way of coming to terms with Ireland's traumatic past.

J. M. Synge and the Famine

When it comes to the Famine, Synge wrote from a very special vantage point, that of a descendant of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and therefore not from the class or religious group that suffered most from it. If mostly known for its religiosity, Synge's family

was also known for its belonging to a land-owning elite.³ As such, the family came to be associated with the infamous reputation that landlordism acquired in the 19th century, during the Famine years especially. However, the Famine took its toll on Synge's family. Synge's maternal grandfather, Rev. Robert Traill, died in 1847 of famine fever, which he had contracted while ministering to his parishioners (Mc Cormack 49-50). In W. J. Mc Cormack's biography of Synge, suffering and bereavement are presented as defining features of the character of Synge's mother and of the education she gave to her children. *Fool of the Family* opens with these lines:

There were few smiles around the late-Victorian Irish dining-table when children took biblical instruction. Hell outshone heaven. [...] Plagues of locusts, plagues of boils—the Lord inflicted much on his enemies; the Chosen people suffered also, and it was with them that Kathleen Synge identified. She had lost a father in the Great Irish Famine of 1845-7, a husband in the smallpox alarms of 1872. (XI)

Another biographical element that further highlights Synge's personal connection to the Famine is the presence of his uncle, Rev. Alexander Hamilton Synge, on the Aran Islands at the end of the Famine (1851-5). He was there as rector of the Established Church. He is remembered for being an active proselytiser who despised the islands' "Papist" inhabitants: "Here I am Lord of all I survey—surrounded by dirt and ignorance." When, forty odd years after his uncle, Synge set foot on the Aran Islands, the place that was to be a major source of inspiration for his prose work (*The Aran Islands* (1907)) and for several of his plays (*Riders to the Sea* (1902), for example), he was identified as indelibly physically related to his uncle:

This evening an old man came to see me, and said he had known a relative of mine who passed some time in this island forty-three years ago. "I was standing under the pier-wall mending nets," he said, "when you came off the steamer, and I said to myself in that moment, if there is a man the name of Synge left walking the world, it is that man yonder will he be." (Synge 53)

The insertion of this remark at the beginning of *The Aran Islands* highlights Synge's personal connection to the place and sheds a different light on W. B. Yeats's well-known, self-mythologizing explanation for Synge's decision to spend time on the Aran Islands:

I said: "Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur

³ Synge's father had inherited property laying mostly in county Galway (for further details see Mc Cormack 49-50).

Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression." I had just come from Aran, and my imagination was full of those grey islands where men must reap with knives because of the stone. (216-217)

Synge's connection to the Aran Islands was far deeper than Yeats's words suggest. Travelling west was for him more than a *fin-de-siècle*, aesthetic posture or a quest for inspiration. Synge was retracing the steps of his ancestors and revisiting a personal history. He was also revisiting the history of places and communities which had been strongly affected by the Famine and whose cultural practises the ongoing modernisation of Ireland gradually condemned to disappearance or consigned to folklore. A profound sense of guilt mixed with no less profound a sense of empathy surfaces in many places of the modernist, travelogue-like, prose work aforementioned, *The Aran Islands*.⁴ Synge's writing manifests a deep interest in and a strong awareness of the multiple temporal strata constitutive of a given place. Embedded temporalities are made to co-exist rather than succeed one another in his writing. At the end of the first part of *The Aran Islands*, Synge recounts a dream he had while staying on Inish Meán, which set him in a trance-like state. He ends his description of the dream by this reflection: "Some dreams I have had in this cottage seem to give strength to the opinion that there is a psychic memory attached to certain neighbourhoods" (Synge 99). In endowing some places with a "psychic memory," Synge's words confer agency to space. They also indicate the simultaneous presence of multiple temporalities and highlight the haunted quality of certain Irish spaces. There is a suggestion that the geography of the Irish landscape could be read as a history of the Irish people.

In a lecture she gave in 1892 at the Catholic University of Cercle du Luxembourg, Maud Gonne stressed the traces history left on the Irish landscape in these terms: "If you come to my country, every stone will repeat with this tragic history. It was only fifty years ago. It lives in a thousand memories" (Gonne in Kelleher 112). Maud Gonne's words resonate with Synge's, stressing as they do the contemporaneity of the past, its presence in people's memories but also in every stone of the Irish landscape, which counts millions of them. The stones are presented not just as the guardians of the history of the Famine but as its narrators or "repetitors." The metaphor of these mineral, silent storytellers very aptly renders the traumatic essence of the "tragic history" alluded to, a history which is impossible to put into

⁴ Synge also travelled to the poverty-stricken, congested districts of Galway and Mayo in the company of the painter Jack B. Yeats. He had been commissioned by the *Manchester Guardian* to write a series of articles so as to raise funds to alleviate the dreadful living conditions of the people in these counties. The articles were published from 10 June 1905 to 26 July 1906 in the *Manchester Guardian*. The drawings which Jack B. Yeats produced accompanied Synge's articles in an edition entitled *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (Dublin Maunsel and Co., 1911).

words properly and can only be repeated over and over again. A history also which refuses to recede into the past but remains very much present, as testifies the use of the present tense in Maud Gonne's last sentence. In the context of the Famine, which Maud Gonne's words conjure, stones bring to mind a myriad of images, the most potent of which being possibly that of emaciated men breaking stones to build roads or walls as part of Famine relief.⁵

Trauma and Performance

Despite, or maybe because of, the quasi impossibility of appropriately naming and comprehending this catastrophe, the Famine has left its imprints on most Irish artistic and literary productions, albeit in an indirect or implicit way. In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Terry Eagleton raises the question of the impact of the Famine on the literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in these terms:

Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce? There is a question here, when it comes to the Revival, of the politics of form: much of that writing is programmatically non-representational, and thus no fit medium for historical realism, if indeed any fit medium for such subject matter is conceivable. (13)

Eagleton conceives here implicitly of Famine literature as necessarily representational and his focus is on the Famine as subject matter only.⁶ He does not seem to envisage that traces and literary or theatrical translations of the Famine are precisely to be looked for in the "politics of form." The question he raises in the last sentence has been debated by theoreticians of trauma literature, who have demonstrated that when it comes to trauma form matters immensely. Direct, frontal representation and explicit verbalisation of something that is by essence inexpressible is bound to be untrue to its subject matter. In fairness to Eagleton, he does concede further on that "there would seem something trivializing or dangerously familiarizing about the very act of representation itself" (13). That the Famine is never named, explicitly referred to or thematized in J. M. Synge's plays is relevant to the unspeakable nature of trauma.

His plays do not propose to speak in the name of the voiceless victims of the Famine. None

⁵ See, for instance, Emily Lawless, 'Famine Roads and Famine Memories' (1898) in *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings, 1891-1922*, Declan Kiberd and P. J. Mathews, eds., (Dublin: Abbey theatre Press, 2015), 37-39.

⁶ The literary works he refers to after his rant against Revival literature all overtly and explicitly treat of famine: Liam O'Flaherty's novel, *Famine* (1937), Tom Murphy's play, *Famine* (1968), to name but two.

are set at the time of the Famine and none refer even indirectly to the Famine. They were written and performed roughly fifty years after the event, and the narratives are set either in a mythological past (*Deirdre of the Sorrows*) or in a late 19th century setting (*The Playboy of the Western World*, for instance). What they all have in common, though, is that they express a profound sense of loss. It is my contention that they register a cultural memory or unconscious marked by trauma and that the performance of this memory suggests or opens up ways of coming to terms with the traumatic past.

The universe of Synge's plays reflects the omnipresence of death in Irish history and culture. The central image of the third act of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is an open grave; most of the action of *The Shadow of the Glen* revolves around the rituals of an Irish funeral (even though in a French farce-like way the jealous husband only pretends to be dead, his supposedly dead body is the focus of his wife's and a tramp's attention); *The Playboy of the Western World* opens with the mention of a wake and the source of Christy's heroism is his supposed parricide; *Riders to the Sea* is entirely preoccupied with the impending death of Maurya's last surviving son and ends on the potent image of a keening woman, joined in her lamentation by a chorus of village women. The action of the plays takes place in a dark, desolate landscape whose silence is insisted upon and female characters, such as Nora or Pegeen, often complain about their loneliness and isolation. The emptiness and silence of the landscape materialise the presence-absence of the dead. The silence is sometimes, as in the opening of *The Playboy*, broken by an animal-like cry, which conjures up all the stereotypical representations of Famine Ireland:

Shawn: [...] I'm after feeling a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog, the way it's good cause you have, maybe, to be fearing now.

Pegeen: [*turning on him sharply*] What's that? Is it a man you seen?

Shawn: [*retreating*] I couldn't see him at all, but I heard him groaning out and breaking his heart. It should have been a young man from his words speaking. (Synge 62)

As George Cusak reminds us in his reading of *The Playboy* as a Famine play,

the image should be a familiar one to modern readers, and would be no less so to Synge's audience; a lone figure lying in a ditch in the Irish countryside, moaning to the point of being subhuman is one of the most commonly used symbols of the Great Famine. (133)

The cry piercing the silence of the death-marked post-Famine Irish landscape is also the wail

of the Irish mourner, the *bean chaointe* or keener. The typical keener was an elderly woman who had witnessed many deaths and had time to assimilate all the conventions of the lament tradition (Bourke 2000: 69). In “The Memory of Hunger” David Lloyd argues that keening, which, in pre-Famine Ireland, was associated with mourning for the dead, came to be associated with the uncanny wail that was said to be frequently heard in post-Famine Ireland. After the Famine, the keen was thus not just a cry of mourning but also a way of emphasising a deadly silence. Here is how Lloyd describes keening in the post-Famine landscape: “It is [...] the representation of a vanishing population regarded as inhabiting the borderlines of nature and culture, as giving vent to an inarticulate and animal cry against a catastrophe” (Lloyd 1997: 45). The keen has commonly been apprehended as inarticulate, its very inarticulateness being perceived as in Lloyd’s analysis as symptomatic of trauma.

In the context of colonisation, the inarticulate and animalistic nature of the cry was often highlighted in descriptions of keening rituals. Most of these descriptions, dating from the 19th century, were fashioned by non-Irish speakers to whom the keen sounded exotic and incomprehensible. It is a commonplace of colonisation to apprehend the language of the colonised people as noise. The supposed inarticulate nature of the keen was thus perceived as a sign of the barbarian and fundamentally backward nature of Irish customs and used to justify the civilizing mission of the colonial power. In the context of another hegemonic narrative imposed on Ireland, that of Catholicism, the barbarian nature of the keen was pointed out as early as the 17th century. The Roman Catholic clergy strove to suppress the Irish lamentation ritual, which was perceived as mere pagan superstition and whose performance represented a challenge to the male-centred hegemony of the priest (Bourke 1988: 287-291). The energy which was put into denigrating and suppressing keening testifies to the strength of the ritual, to its ability to epitomize the essence of a culture and its potential for resisting imperialist forces or working through traumatic events.

If parts of the keen were indeed inarticulate and composed of shrieks and cries, others were not. Musicologists, poetry specialists and cultural historians have shown that the keen followed strict rules of oral poetic composition. It was made up of three parts: the salutation, the dirge and the cry. The last part was taken up by all the mourners. Traditional motifs were combined according to traditional metre: short lines with two or three stresses linked by end-rhymes and arranged in stanzas of uneven length (Bourke 2000: 75; Partridge, 25-37). It was a direct address to the dead: each woman of the village would in turn cry out to the dead, asking him or her why he or she died, reproaching him or her for dying, praising his or her beauty, generosity but also painting in vivid terms the desolation that would follow the person’s death (Bourke 2000: 72).

Angela Bourke argues that Synge found a theatre in the rituals of death on the Aran Islands:

“A whole technique of setting a period of time aside from time, and of articulating space, gesture, words, voice and even costume, in a way that would cause people to view the world differently” (Bourke 2000: 68). In Synge’s plays the rite is transformed into artistic performance and loses its sacred and transcendent character. It retains however what Angela Bourke sees as the power to make people “view the world differently.” The stage keens which Synge devises are invitations for stage directors and actors to experiment with time. Time on stage may be very elastic, indefinitely contracted or expanded—all the more so during the performance of a keen, which calls for a “time out of time” in sync with the emotional and psychological time of trauma. Time then is no longer linear, future-oriented and measurable by the mechanical clock. With its highly repetitive and rhythmical form, the keen potentially induces a trance-like state and sets a “period of time aside from time,” to borrow Angela Bourke’s phrase. Synge strategically places his stage keens at the end of his plays: *The Playboy of the Western World* ends with Pegeen putting her shawl over her head and breaking into “wild lamentations” (173) before articulating her grief and loss; most of the third and last act of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* is taken up by Deirdre’s keening for Naisi; and *Riders to the Sea* ends with a very powerful theatrical rendering of a lamentation ritual, with Maurya as the main keener. She kneels at the head of the table where the body of her son Bartley has been laid whereas her daughters, Cathleen and Nora, join the community of the female mourners, kneeling on the other side of the table and rocking their bodies to and fro. The liminal position which Synge chooses for his stage keens by locating them at the end of his plays translates into theatrical terms the function of the keen, which was fundamentally to allow for and ease the transition from one world to another, from one temporality to another. For the deceased, the transition was from time to eternity. For the bereaved, from the arrested time of grief, loss or trauma back to the flowing time of life. If keening arrested time for a while to permit a public, intense expression of grief, it ultimately aimed at setting time back into motion by endorsing the start of the mourning process. After the wake and the funeral rituals, the bereaved and the rest of the community were able to get on with their lives. More than endings *per se* then, the endings of *Playboy*, *Deirdre* and *Riders to the Sea* are openings onto something else. The plays offer no closure. They do not provide the audience with solutions or ready-made answers to the questions that the grief and loss which they expose raise. No catharsis as such is achieved. The potentiality of a cathartic effect is merely hinted at.

Conclusion

As a genre whose origins are thought to be linked to rituals aiming at giving the dead their voices back, theatre was the medium that allowed Synge to translate his vision of Ireland into

aesthetic terms. Theatre indeed engages with the past in a very different way from historiography or any type of archival work. It allows for the co-presence of different temporal strata and as such does not posit the “disenchantment” of the world that modernity entails (McLean 4). Just as keening, which in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000* David Lloyd links to the Irish recalcitrance to modernisation and reads as a sign of the survival of ancient “archaic” practices of mourning and of dealing with the past (Lloyd 2011: 7), theatre proposes new possibilities of coming to terms with the past. Keening in Synge’s plays registers loss but also persistence and, may be apprehended, just as theatre, as a mode of memory. By giving his audience the stage image of the keener, Synge encouraged it to relate to its traumatic past in a different way and opened up new vistas for the future of what was then the emerging Irish nation.

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