



THE PASSION OF HARRY HEEGAN: SEAN O'CASEY'S THE SILVER TASSIE

Alexandra Poulain

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Alexandra Poulain

Since Yeats's infamous rejection of the *Silver Tassie* on behalf of the Abbey's board of directors in 1928, it has become common critical practice to address the play in the terms first set by Yeats, either to endorse Yeats's complaint with the play's aberrant discontinuity, or to disclaim it by pointing out elements of thematic and even formal continuity between the expressionistic second act and the (allegedly) naturalistic other three. In other words, it is implicitly assumed that structural discontinuity is a fault, of which the play is either found guilty or exonerated.¹ It is worth briefly quoting Yeats's letter of rejection:

[. . .] you are not interested in the great war; you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions. You illustrate those opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes, as you might in a leading article; there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action; and your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end. (Yeats, quoted in Ayling 86)

As Christopher Murray has remarked, '[t]his is a description of Aristotelian drama complete with Aristotelian hero' (Murray 106). It implicitly consents to Aristotle's suggestion that a tragedy should be organised as harmoniously and coherently as a 'beautiful animal' (Aristotle 15), a template which continues to frame most critical responses to the *Tassie* and to individual productions of the play. Thus both Patrick Mason's 1990 Abbey production and

Garry Hynes' 2010 *Druid* production were either acclaimed for introducing elements of continuity between the four acts (usually by stressing the expressionistic potential of acts I, III and IV) or blamed for failing to cover up entirely the play's fragmentary, discontinuous nature. In what follows, I will argue that structural and formal discontinuity is in fact essential to the play's aesthetic project, and suggest that it owes less to Aristotelian dramaturgy than to the tradition of the Passion play to which it bears an ambiguous relationship. On the one hand, the pattern of the Passion play is used ironically in the *Tassie* and exposed as an ideological fallacy. While the Passion story, relying as it does on the rhetoric and iconography of blood-sacrifice, is shown to collude with the war effort, the grand narrative of Christianity blatantly fails to make sense of the experience of war. The *Tassie* is an abortive Passion play that offers no redemption. Yet O'Casey's use of the pattern of the Passion play is not only to ironic purposes. As Elaine Scarry has shown, the activity in which war consists is injuring, but it is essential to the structure of war that this activity, and the damaged bodies which it produces, be at least partly confined to invisibility. War, Scarry writes,

requires both the reciprocal infliction of massive injury and the eventual disowning of the injury so that its attributes can be transferred elsewhere, as they cannot if they are permitted to cling to the original site of the wound, the human body. (Scarry 64)

Thus war produces a discursive corpus which aims to conceal actual injured bodies and ultimately to deny their existence. This process of denial is itself dramatized in the play, and was, according to Fintan O'Toole, the main focus of the *Druid* production: 'In a sense, Hynes' *Tassie* is not a play about war at all. It is a play about the way societies develop the capacity not to know about war.' (O'Toole) However, by resorting to the dramaturgy of the Passion play, which relies entirely on the exposure of the suffering body, O'Casey restores to

visibility the crude reality of war and forces us to contemplate the incurably injured body of Harry Heegan.

1. An ironic Passion play

Yeats's complaint that the play consists in 'almost unrelated scenes' is hardly fair, since the four acts piece together the story of a Dublin soldier during the First World War, before, during and after his experience in the trenches, a period of huge dislocation and trauma. Yet the play's dramaturgy does disregard the Aristotelian demands for organicity of plot and focuses instead on four distinct moments and locations: Act I is set in the home of Harry Heegan and his parents where Harry visits on a leave from the front, Act II in the war zone, Act III in an Irish hospital after Harry has been injured, Act IV in the dance hall of his football club after he has been released from hospital, a year after Act I. This technique is inspired by the medieval dramaturgy of the Passion play, and resurfaced in the early twentieth century in such plays as Strindberg's *Road to Damascus* or Claudel's *Christopher Columbus*, which follow the exemplary trajectory of one man step by step in a succession of self-contained episodes, from his fall to his redemption (Sarrazac 87-91). It was then taken up again and secularized in the 'station drama' of German expressionism, with which O'Casey was familiar when he started work on the *Tassie*.²

Yeats further complains that the play lacks a convincing central character, and indeed O'Casey's treatment of the football champion turned war veteran Harry Heegan departs both from Aristotelian conventions *and* from the standard practice of station drama. Act I apparently sets out to construct a conventional hero, using the comic pair of Sylvester and Simon, acting as a Greek chorus, to extol the champion's inordinate physical prowess for three quarters of the act; Harry finally enters triumphantly, followed by a 'marching crowd' of

admirers, and proceeds to make his own panegyric. This is the point at which O'Casey starts to recycle the tropes of the Passion, burlesquely displacing them into the context of football. The prize cup is first introduced by Harry's sweetheart Jessie who holds it aloft, O'Casey writes, '*as a priest would elevate a chalice*' (O'Casey 186). At the end of the act, Harry uses it to pour wine into and invites Jessie to join him in 'a drink out of the cup, out of the Silver Tassie!' (190), in a crude travesty of the Last Supper.

Act II, however, completely destabilises audience expectations, not only because of the rupture in linguistic and visual techniques, but also because the character who has been elaborately constructed as the hero is absent for the duration of the whole act, a fact that has elicited surprisingly little critical comment. In what Heinz Kosok has described as the 'Golgotha situation of Act II' (Kosok 102), the emphasis is on the dehumanising power of war that turns individual men into a communal body of featureless soldiers. This is first suggested by the pattern of echoes and repetitions in the soldiers' monotonous chants, which renders their voices impersonal, and visually impressed on us in the final sequence when the soldiers put on their gas-masks as the enemy attacks and effectively turn into faceless, inhuman monsters. There is, however, one exception to this anonymity: Barney, Harry's diffident comrade in Act I, faces the audience during the whole act, tied to a gunwheel as a punishment for stealing poultry. Standing as he does beside a life-size crucifix, he is a comic figure of the unrepentant Bad Thief at Calvary, and the only identifiable character from Act I³. Crucially, Harry himself is not present in Act II – precisely because Act II is concerned with the climactic moment of Passion, that of the suffering and death of the Christ-like figure. The actual moment of Harry's injury is not staged mimetically; instead his suffering body is metonymically substituted, and magnified, by the collective body of exhausted soldiers, while the dissolution of his former heroic identity is signified both by the allegorical figure of the deathlike 'Croucher' and by Harry's absorption into an undifferentiated group.

The second half of the play, which returns to mainly realistic modes of representation, takes the distortion of the Passion narrative one step further by rewriting the miraculous resurrection of Christ as grotesque medical debacle. Act III is set in a hospital ward where Harry, now wheelchair-bound, awaits the operation that might make him whole again. He is undeluded, however, aware that 'It's a miracle I want – not an operation.' (O'Casey 225). Indeed his fate is in the hands of Surgeon Maxwell, an uncaring, incompetent Godlike figure who has few illusions as to Harry's chances of recovery:

Susie. Will the operation tomorrow be successful?

Surgeon Maxwell. Oh, of course, very successful.

Susie. Do him any good, d'ye think?

Surgeon Maxwell. Oh, blast the good it'll do him. (229)

The sardonic deflection of the 'resurrection' motif is again suggested when Sylvester, also a patient in the ward, envisages Surgeon Maxwell as a psychopathic Frankenstein:

Sylvester. He'd gouge out your eye, saw off your arm, lift a load of vitals out of your middle, rub his hands, keep down a terrible desire to cheer lookin' at the ruin, an' say, 'twenty-six, when you're a little better, you'll feel a new man!' (231)

'A new man', of course, is just what Harry does not become. Act IV finds him out of hospital, but unlike the glorious body of Christ, he is now permanently confined to what he refers to as 'this crippled form' (261) or 'this poor crippled jest' (259), a pathetic Christ in majesty grotesquely enthroned on his wheelchair. This final act takes up the Eucharistic motifs of the beginning. Harry travesties the ritual of the Holy Communion when he invites Jessie to a

drink of ‘red wine; red like the blood that was shed for you and for many for the *commission* of sin!’ (252; my emphasis) The substitution of ‘commission’ for the traditional ‘remission’ points to the fact that the blood-sacrifice which has been performed is tragically devoid of any redemptive value. (Kosok 102) In the final moments of the play, he brandishes the cup he has hammered out of shape, in a savage parody which weaves together the text of traditional wedding vows and the Eucharistic tropology of the Last Supper:

Harry. [...] And now, before I go, I give you all the Cup, the Silver Tassie, to have and to hold forever, evermore. (*From his chair he takes the Cup with the two sides hammered close together, and holds it out to them.*) Mangled and bruised as I am bruised and mangled. Hammered free from all its comely shape. (261)

The deformed cup which once sealed the love of Harry and Jessie is now offered as a metonym of his own ‘mangled’ state (‘this is my body’) which in the eyes of all present (including himself) disqualifies him as a lover and spouse and condemns him to a life of solitude.

Thus the four acts of the play are so many ‘stations’ of Harry’s grotesque Passion. By forcing an individual story of pain and loss into the culturally familiar pattern of the Passion narrative, O’Casey shows how Christianity, rewriting hatred as love and unbearable suffering as sacrifice, affects to provide a meaning to the horror of war, and thus colludes with the war effort. By parodying its major tropes, the play of course resists the consolatory logic of the Passion narrative, and reveals its failure to make sense of the experience of the soldiers at the front. Their insistent question in Act II (‘Wy’r we ’ere, wy’r we ’ere – that’s wot we wants to know’) finds no other answer than in the derisively tautological song which Barney intones to the tune of *Aul Lang Syne*: ‘We’re here because we’re here, because we’re here, because

we're here!' (200). In the second half of the play, Harry and Teddy find themselves alienated from the rest of the characters who sustain the same petty disputes and resentments as they did in Act I. The grand narrative of Christianity, with its emphasis on the redemptive value of sacrifice, is not allowed to provide a framework of intelligibility for the suffering of the wounded and the dead.

2. Exposing the suffering body

Yet while the play rewrites the Passion narrative as grotesque fall without redemption, it uses the dramaturgy of the Passion play to restore to visibility the injured bodies which war both produces and conceals. Elaine Scarry has shown that war deploys a number of discursive strategies (such as omission or what she calls 'active redescription': the use of unrelated vocabularies and images) to render injured bodies invisible.⁴ In O'Casey's play, this effort of denial is shown to be collectively undertaken by all those who survive the war unscathed, and their strategies are rather less sophisticated than those analysed by Scarry, who takes her examples from official speeches and military treatises. Simon tries to cheer up Harry by assuring him that '[e]verybody's remarking what a great improvement has taken place in you during the last few days' (225), and Surgeon Maxwell likewise deals in clichés, proclaiming against all evidence that '[w]hile there's life there's hope' (228). Mrs Foran's slip of the tongue participates in a similar strategy of denial when she tells Harry she has brought her husband, the now blind Teddy, 'to see you' (232). Typically, only Teddy, the play's other casualty, speaks openly about Harry's sexual impotence, while his wife desperately tries to silence him. In Act IV, discursive denial becomes active concealment, as all the healthy characters unite in an effort to take Harry and Teddy away from the dance hall and get them

out of view. In the joyful atmosphere of civilian life symbolized by the ball, the sight of injured bodies would simply spoil the picture:

Simon. Jessie might try to let him down a little more gently, but it would have been better, I think, if Harry hadn't come here tonight.

Sylvester. I concur in that, Simon. What's a decoration to a hospital is an anxiety here.

Simon. To carry life and colour to where there's nothing but the sick and helpless is right; but to carry the sick and helpless to where there's nothing but life and colour is wrong. (243)

The 'anxiety' produced by the sight of hurt bodies is eventually neutralised at the end of the act when Harry and Teddy are escorted out of the dance hall, after Surgeon Maxwell has enjoined Harry's parents to 'Bring him home, woman. [...] Get him home, man' (260).

The dramaturgy of the Passion play, however, resists this collective effort of denial and concealment and magnifies the spectacle of suffering bodies. As a set of cultural practices, Christianity, revolving as it does on the endless reproduction of the icon of crucifixion and on performative identification with the crucified body of Christ (as when one performs the sign of the cross or receives the Host) entails a whole dramaturgy of the suffering body. Crucifixion is of course intrinsically theatrical: the cross is both the instrument of torture and the vertical stage on which the tortured body is exposed, and exposure itself is part of the punishment. Beyond the suffering body on the cross, the spectacle of crucifixion displays the power of the body politic, the control it exerts on the bodies and minds of its subjects, who must accept its discipline or suffer the consequences. The Christian Passion, however, reverts this mechanism to the benefice of the victim: what is displayed on the cross is the sacrifice of Christ, rather than imperial power. The suffering

body on the cross thus becomes the subject of its own dramaturgy: the Christian God testifies to His passage on earth by offering the spectacle of His suffering, and every representation of His sacrifice in liturgy and iconography reiterates this offering: 'this is my body'. The Passion play, which theatricalises the performance of a spectacular process, is thus always metatheatrical; it not only directs our gaze to the suffering body on the cross but also invites us to recognise that we are engaging in the ambiguous act of watching (just like the onstage spectators, the Roman soldiers, the jeering crowd, the mourning women). Although O'Casey's treatment of the Passion narrative in the *Tassie* is essentially parodic, as I have suggested, he uses the dramaturgy of the Passion play to counter the collective attempt at concealment of injured bodies and make sure that we are consciously involved in the act of watching.

The exposure of the suffering body starts with the experimental dramaturgy of the second act. O'Casey chooses to represent not the individual stories of Harry and Teddy and how they receive their permanently disabling injuries, but rather the collective body of a group of exhausted soldiers. It could be argued that this in fact participates in a strategy of evasion and denial; indeed, Elaine Scarry lists the tendency to describe war in terms of a contest between collective bodies, often imagined as giants 'with one foot in Italy, another in northern Africa, a head in Sweden' etc. (Scarry 70), as a characteristic strategy of concealment of individual injured bodies. However, there is nothing abstract about O'Casey's treatment of bodies in Act II. His point is precisely that the experience of the trenches (the constant pain, cold, exhaustion and fear) grinds individual bodies into anonymity, cancels individual features and leaves only the experience of shared suffering. The choral writing of the sections concerned with the soldiers (in contrast with the individual voices of those who are spared direct exposure, the Staff Wallah and the Visitor) are an attempt to translate that suffering theatrically by other means than mimetic representation:

1st Soldier. Cold and wet and tir'd.

2nd Soldier. Wet and tir'd and cold.

3rd Soldier. Tir'd and cold and wet.

4th Soldier (*very like Teddy*). Twelve blasted hours of ammunition transport fatigue!

1st Soldier. Twelve weary hours.

2nd Soldier. And weary hours.

3rd Soldier. And hot and heavy hours.

1st Soldier. Toiling and thinking to build the wall of force that blocks the way from here to home.

2nd Soldier. Lifting shells.

3rd Soldier. Carrying shells.

4th Soldier. Piling shells.

1st Soldier. In the falling, pissing rine and whistling wind.

2nd Soldier. The whistling wind and falling, drenching rain.

3rd Soldier. The God-damn rain and blasted whistling wind. (O'Casey 198-99)

The breakdown of syntax, the densely alliterative structure, the play of permutations, repetitions and variations, the percussive insistence of relentless epistrophe, all this fuses individual voices into a communal voice that heaves and pants with the exhaustion of four broken bodies. The monotonous chanting of the soldiers, the stretcher-bearers and the wounded who are being carried to 'the place of pain' (209) again relocates in voice the overwhelming physical suffering whose scale and intensity defeats mimetic representation. The passionistic implications of the set (the life-size crucifix grotesquely replicated by Barney tied to the gunwheel, the whole dominated by the skeletal figure of the Croucher) frame our

response and ensure that we receive the act for what it is – primarily the spectacle of bodies in pain, which stand metonymically for and magnify the individual suffering body of Harry.

In the first Act, Harry's body is construed as the perfect embodiment of a certain ideal of masculinity. Even before he comes on stage, he is evoked as a 'Cuchulanoid' hero who triumphs in all sports, games and less codified expressions of physical superiority, such as 'break[ing] a chain across his bisseps' (169) or stretching a Bobby 'hors dee combaa' (171) – the latter exploit combining physical strength with defiance of authority. The 'triumphant masculinity' (Philips 117) he emblemizes wins him the respect of men and the favour of women, much as it does Christy Mahon in Synge's play, a connection Chris Murray underlines by wittily calling Harry Heegan 'a veritable playboy of the western front' (Murray 106). It was no doubt also in Garry Hynes' mind when she offered the part of Harry to Aaron Monaghan, who had played Christy in the DruidSynge production of the *Playboy*. Harry, however, has none of Christy's sexual ambiguity or romantic disposition; his performance of his aggressive masculinity, which starts with the self-aggrandizing account of the football match in stereotypical macho terms ('They couldn't take their beatin' like men', 188) culminates at the end of Act I when he tropes the emptying of a bottle of wine into the cup as the rape of a virgin woman. O'Casey shows how intimate feelings are conditioned by ideology: Jessie and Susie are attracted to Harry only because he meets the requirements of a standardized ideal of masculinity. The play is without a trace of romance, and from the start it is clear that Teddy and Mrs Foran's relationship, one of domestic violence and mutual resentment, might have been the future of Harry and Jessie, had it survived the war.

Hence the extent of Harry's loss when he becomes crippled and sexually impotent. Beyond the horror of physical injury, he suffers a symbolic wound that destroys the image on which his whole life (social and personal) is predicated. The second half of the play makes it clear that Harry and Teddy have become monsters who cannot be tolerated to dwell among

the healthy. That there is no structural place for male cripples in a society conditioned by gender stereotypes is suggested by the ease with which Barney, who alone has survived the experience of the war unscathed, replaces Harry as local hero (he now sports the Victoria Cross) and as Jessie's escort. One might venture that a kind of subliminal pun runs through the play, whereby Barney, having stolen the 'Estaminay cock' in Act II, finds himself endowed with the hypersexualized aura which Harry is forced to relinquish – and consequently attempts to rape Jessie in Act IV⁵, in a literal replay of the metonymic rape scene in Act I.

The play's focus, however, is not on Barney's gain, but on the loss suffered by Harry and Teddy, whose Passion continues far beyond the experience at the front into a kind of Beckettian hell. As Ronan McDonald has pointed out, 'one could well imagine Hamm claiming, like Harry, to feel "the horrible sickness of life only from the waist up"' (O'Casey 225, McDonald 125). Like Beckett's heroes, O'Casey's veterans discover with horror that part of their bodies is dead – that death is already working its way through their flesh, turning live tissue into abject matter. Harry, in particular, dwells obsessively on the theme, as when he snaps at Simon, 'Did you never before clap your eyes on a body dead from the belly down?' (225), or tries to convince himself that 'I imagine I don't feel quite so dead in myself as I've felt these last few days back', indicating to Surgeon Maxwell that he feels a 'kind of a buzz' 'just where the line is that leaves the one part living and the other part dead' (228). As later in Beckett, the live body is the site where one experiences death; actual, definitive death would be desirable but is denied – ironically it was Barney, Harry's comrade and rival, who 'saved' him on the battlefield and condemned him to live out this endgame. Harry's crippled body is experienced as abject thing ('the shrivell'd thing I am' [237]; 'even creeping things can praise the Lord' [242]). The feeling of abjection culminates in Act IV when he lets out his frustration on finding himself excluded from the dance of life:

Harry. To the dancing, for the day cometh when no man can play. And legs were made to dance, to run, to jump, to carry you from one place to another; but mine can neither walk, nor run, nor jump, nor feel the merry motion of a dance. But stretch me on the floor fair on my belly, and I will turn over on my back, then wriggle back again on to my belly; and that's more than a dead, dead man can do! (242)

By a process of metonymic displacement, the horrible feeling of being partly dead flesh calls forth the image of the corpse-eating worm with which Harry identifies in this morbid, self-debasing fantasy.

Harry and Teddy, the emblematic pair of the cripple and the blind man that 'chimes across modern Irish drama' (McDonald 125), have in fact never quite returned from the dead. Part of them, Teddy's dead eyes, Harry's dead legs, holds them back from the world of the living from which they find themselves alienated, a condition again translated in physical terms when Harry claims he feels 'a soft, velvety sense of distance between my fingers and the things I touch' (O'Casey 226). In Act IV, this 'distance' is manifested in Harry and Teddy's language, which occasionally returns to the Biblical diction that prevails in Act II:

Harry. I can see, but I cannot dance.

Teddy. I can dance, but I cannot see.

Harry. Would that I had the strength to do the things I see.

Teddy. Would that I could see the things I've strength to do.

Harry. The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away.

Teddy. Blessed be the name of the Lord. (253-4)

In such moments it is as if they were speaking from the collective body of pain of the soldiers in the trenches, their voice a voice of the dead that is inaudible to the living. The most pathetic moment of the play is when Harry's parents and neighbours beg him to sing a Spiritual, then rush off to the dance hall where 'They're goin' to send up the balloons', leaving Harry all alone to sing 'Swing low, sweet chariot', calling out to death to come and 'carry [him] home' (256)⁶.

I have argued that the *Silver Tassie* makes ambivalent use of the tradition of the Passion play. It takes up the Passion narrative ironically and distorts it, unmasking the fallacious use of Christian rhetoric and iconography to justify massive death and injury as redemptive sacrifice. Yet it also appropriates the dramaturgy of the Passion play to expose injured bodies, restoring them to visibility against collective attempts at denial, and forcing us to acknowledge the reality of the injured soldiers' suffering as they face a lifelong season in hell, as if they could never quite return from the trenches. Thus discontinuity is essential to the play's project: its formal disharmony, with its stylistically aberrant second act, suggests that the suffering encountered in the trenches is incommensurate with anything one might experience in civilian life. That Barney, of all the play's characters, resists the war's dehumanising force and returns to play a standardised part in the 'normality' of civilian society, only signals the arbitrariness of war, in which some, not necessarily those who appeared the strongest, survive relatively unscathed. Yeats complained that the *Tassie* was not composed as harmoniously as Aristotle's 'beautiful animal'; I suggest that the form of the play instead deliberately reproduces the mangled body of the injured soldier which the dramaturgy of Passion exposes.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Bernice Schrank: 'Even more than the second act alone, judging by the weight of reviewer critique, the real challenge to conventional expectations is in the *apparent* discontinuity between the expressionist Act II and the more realistic techniques in the other three acts.' (Schrank 39, my emphasis). Schrank shows that the play has often been charged with discontinuity but nevertheless endorses the notion that discontinuity is a fault, and proceeds to highlight elements of continuity to disclaim the charge.

² Irish audiences, for whom the play was initially intended, would have been familiar with another manifestation of the form in the ritual of the Stations of the Cross, and may have found the play's structure rather less disconcerting than Yeats assumed.

³ Another soldier is said to be 'very like Teddy', but is consistently referred to as 'Fourth soldier' and is given no distinctive part in Act II.

⁴ To summarise (and inevitably oversimplify) Scarry's complex analysis: she argues that war consists in a contest whose activity is injury. The first function of injuring is to determine a winner and a loser; for the fulfilment of this function, it could be replaced with any other benign activity, a prolonged singing contest for example. The second function of injuring, however, is to confer the reality of injured bodies onto the cultural constructs of the winning side (by which the winning country or state remakes itself). In order that the reality of injured bodies may be relocated onto unrelated issues, those injured bodies must disappear 'from all spheres of language, whether strategic, historical, or conversational. [...] The eventual transfer of the attributes of injury to

a victorious national fiction requires as a prelude the severing of those attributes from their original source, an act of severing and disowning that has a wide, perhaps collective, authorship.' (Scarry 136)

⁵ Jessie provides a classic definition of rape when she tries to stop Barney by telling him that 'you shouldn't be making me do what I don't want to do.' That the incident is not taken as a serious rape attempt either by the characters themselves or by critics is a measure of the triviality of male violence in the play's world and of the fact that it is normalized as a token of masculinity.

⁶ A situation unwittingly summarized by Mrs Foran at the end of the comedic sequence in Act IV when, after Simon and Sylvester have failed to work a ringing phone, she concludes that it is 'Curious those at the other end of the telephone couldn't make themselves understood' (248).