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The 'Through-Other' Aesthetics of Counter-Nationalism in G. B. Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*

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ABSTRACT

The 'Other' in relation to the (is)land in G. B. Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* is explored with reference to an aesthetics of the 'Through-Other' in Seamus Heaney. This comparison brings out the need for an imaginative cognition of the nationhood, which comprises not just the legal and economic structure of the nation-state, though very much implicated in them. Hence the article can then move onto a consideration of the land as region, border and a wondrous site of solitude and redemption, rather than a solidarity with fixed and arbitrary structures. An attempt has been made to move beyond the common range of binaries evoked in Shavian criticism and this play, and incorporate an ethos of counter-nationalism made all the more clear with reference to Heaney's prose criticism and dramaturgy.

Keywords: Through-Other, counter-nationalism, region, land, imagination, Ireland.

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Ireland, in Shaw's 1904 play, is seen as an island of both saints and traitors. Irish missionaries have had a far-reaching religious influence in Britain and the Irish nation has become a site of modern terrorism. In this article I propose to negotiate the relation between the two in terms of a loyalty to the space and place of nationalist identification and the politicization of the same through the playwright's constant subversions to chart a counter-nationalist aesthetics of the island.

The poetics of the 'Through-Other' in Seamus Heaney relates to the concept of space and specifically to place, especially the land. In 'Frontiers of Writing' he further defines place as one "that exists as a state of resolved crisis which Ulster people don't quite admit as an immediate realistic expectation but don't quite deny as a deferred possibility" (Heaney, *The Redress* 190). George Bernard Shaw's popular comedy *John Bull's Other Island* will be analyzed in terms of the counter-nationalist dimensions of imaginative boundaries and artistic regionalisms, when the Other gives way to the 'Through-Other' in relation to the land and its environs. As a crucial site for new economic impositions, the threshold area will provide relevant metaphors of indeterminacy and intermediacy for our counter-nationalist claims.

To understand the counter-nationalist ethos, the trope of the land in Anglo-Irish drama becomes an obvious choice amidst modern European theatre. By invoking Heaney in relation to Shaw, I attempt to show that Anglo-Irish drama has reiterated and evolved a post-national consciousness which sees the land and an exile from it in terms of artistic and existential; ancient and modern displacement ethics. Moreover the Virgilian reference (from Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*) in very title of *Arms and the Man* brings to our mind a setting much greater than that of Bulgaria, a land vehemently subject to the forces of patriotic violence, and thereby displacement and exile. The latter reference is also made by Heaney in his 2003 essay. In Eclogues 'In Extremis' Heaney shoes that the literary association of the pastoral mode provides a 'vivification' for existential reality. Through poetic memory Heaney has provided a scope for agency.

Similarly in *John Bull's Other Island* the (is/ Ire) land, its powers of inspiration, re-vivification, and its economic realities are critiqued to be re-positioned in our view according to the dynamics of the 'Through-Other'. The space and place of the land may be considered an intermediate site between dwelling and displacement, and Heaney specifies it as the 'through-otherness' of one by the other in all its aspects – economic, literary, nationalist and cognitive. In Heaney's reworking of Sophocles's tragedy in *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) the land is again a contested site of nationalist devotion. When Shaw utilizes a similar contestation, it is with a greater subversive ingenuity of counter-nationalism than he has been credited with.

In Shaw's play the trope of the "Other" has been analyzed according to a series of binary oppositions – the Arnoldian polarity of the emotional Celt and practical Saxon, and then the 'Englishman [who] needs the Irish to help him determine his own identity, just as Broadbent relied heavily on Doyle for their joint business success…all nationalisms rely for their construction on outsiders and others' (Kiberd, 53). According to its production history, this play was popular during, what Dean calls, the 'Boom of the Ban'. Richard Findlater asserts that the licensed *John Bull's Other Island* by the Lord Chamberlain's own standards was ultimately far more subversive than the banned *Press Cuttings*. In fact the nationalist wing, the *Sinn Féin*, ever ready for an opportunity to annoy Yeats, chided him for not producing this play and yet proceeding with Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. This article will remain confined to the inequities and aesthetics of the land as Nature, and its attempts to negotiate boundaries and margins, both literal and figurative, in both existential and performative realities.

The fictional present opens with an encompassing but complex one-dimensionality as 'The Present' is both 'London and Ireland'. Ireland to the popular English imagination is the exotic Other island but this perception has been manufactured within London itself – in the theatres and operas. While London has to be *particularly understood*, Ireland can be *fancifully conjectured* as '*John Bull's Other Island*'. Heaney posits that this 'through-otherness', for which history is to blame, as custom, even in Britain, is bound to acknowledge henceforth an Irish as well as a British dimension. A fanciful conjecturing or creation in the performative is placed at the very beginning of *Arms and the Man*

too, as the 'chocolate-cream' soldier constitutes "a mordant indictment of antistate militancy…diagnosed in terms of misplaced or misrecognized theatricality" (Pilkington 607). Furthermore the production history of the performance invites a subversive claim as the nationalist wing cannot recognize the performativity in economic nationalism and an obsession to the land.

We must keep in mind the economics of the land issues as they are fore grounded by Broadbent: "I'm going to develop an estate there for the Land Development Syndicate…"(Shaw 118). Spivak writes that while restructuring our mind we may produce "imaginative folk who are not only going on about cultural identity, but turning around the adverse effects of the adjustment of economic structures." (*Nationalism and Imagination*, 50). Primarily Broadbent wants to start a Garden City in Ireland. Giving a concrete form to his economically based imaginative reality are ninth-century round towers and the melodious voice of Nora Reilly emanating from it. Larry Doyle presents the existential reality of this site at the very beginning: "I was romantic about her, just as I was romantic about Byron's heroines or the old Round Tower of Rosscullen; but she didn't count any more than they did" (Shaw 130). With the imagination is a desire for theories, which are deemed as "…scientific skepticism generally: also perhaps with the view that the Round Towers were phallic symbols" (Shaw 139). When we consider the literary implications of the 'through-other' relation these narrative constructions become marginal discourses. Land-as imaginative or the performative is cited by Larry: "But your wits can't thicken in that soft moist air, on those wide springy roads" (Shaw 124). From the performative and the economic the land as imagination will reveal its counter-nationalist ethos. Amidst the Irish wild countryside Broadbent wants to impose an English land pattern. Shaw then posits a series of inversions of the land as region, border, imagination and Nature.

Nicholas Greene has commented on the ground realities. "I have taken," Shaw said in the wake of the play's production, "that panacea for all the misery and unrest of Ireland – your Land Purchase Bill – as to the blessedness of which all your political parties and newspapers were for once unanimous, and I have shown its idiocy..." (37).

Small farm owner-occupiers was no nearer the end of their problems than the Ireland of persecuted and summarily evicted tenants. Doyle's father making way in the new business suffered as much as Matthew Haffigan who gained new proprietorship. "Mere nationalism, ignoring that economic growth is not automatic redistributive justice [just as]…Theatrical or philanthropic wholesale counter-globalism.." (Spivak 53). Economic structure will create zones for national and international appropriation which counter-nationalism will seek to repudiate through a 'solitude' rather than a solidarity or assimilation tactics.

From the regional specifications Shaw is moving onto the parochial and critiquing both. In Heaney's essay the relation between the two is explained with reference to the 'parochial' dimensions of Patrick Kavannagh's poetry from whom Heaney inherits his sense of place and which he subtly differentiates from that of another nationalist and regionalist poet – John Montague. Kavannagh states: 'Parochialism is universal; it deals with fundamentals'. They are both rooted to their regions, but while Montague finds in place a folkloric significance and a scope for tribal resistance through it; Kavannagh portrays the region with a deep-seated 'piety' of its own. Heaney makes clear the nature of this perception : "...Kavannagh flees the abstractions of nationalism, political or cultural. To find himself, he detaches rather than attaches himself to the communal" ('The Sense of Place' 144). Montague always seeks a historical identification before affirming his personal identity. Post-nationalist sense of place is enunciated through the poetry of Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon. Their nationalism is more of a private mythology of the place. Hence, globalization and nationalization moves in tandem from the communal to the personal over a period of a few decades. Though the sense of belonging to an 'amplified space is inconvertible, even if it does not diminish the search for one's own place. There is not a sharp division between the two as the locality of the region itself plays an important part. The rooted ness to the land remains a site for local and spatial continuity but its perception doffers in the face of post-nationalist and global identity, when being rooted is deemed as contemptuously parochial. What these poets demonstrate is the local itself opening up in different layers to contain the alterative identities within itself.

Doyle reiterates this when he says: "I want Ireland to be the brains and imagination of a big Commonwealth, not a big Robinson Crusoe island" (Shaw 127). The

Robinson Crusoe island is the site of imperialist nationalism while the Commonwealth is the postcolonial creation. In the counter-nationalism in this play the "big Commonwealth" will accommodate the idea of 'European Regionalism' as well as a cognitive affiliation with the larger structures of nationhood, and not merely the nation. Whenever the nationalist ethos is evoked through a direct opposition of the land as the 'given' primal self to the conforming Other, we forget the confluence of the borders. In this play the Survey (also an important motif in Brien Friel's *Translations*) tries to create borders of a certain kind but the Other is permeated through an aesthetics of the 'Through-Other'. Shaw may enunciate the vocational relation but his focus remains on the nature of divisiveness in relation to the land. Kearney also adds that Heaney is cognizant of the differences and gravitates towards the Joycean version of the 'post-nationalist' home celebrated by fellow poet Jacques Darras: "The concept of a birth-place, a homeland, which has nourished European nationalism…has done more evil…notions of territoriality and conquest…Joyce clearly believes there is no better birthplace than the one we are travelling *towards*" (86).

Despite similarities Shaw's comedy works more as counter-nationalist, than *The Burial at Thebes*, because Shaw reconfigures the characteristic obsessive attachment to the land. Though the kinship relations in the Sophoclean reworking has a nationalist claim in terms of an allegiance and loyalty to the State; the counter movement in Shaw questions the nature of marginal identity as understood in relation to the land:

"DOYLE: I have an instinct against going back to Ireland..

BROADBENT: What! Here you are, belonging to a nation with the strongest patriotism! The most inveterate homing instinct in the world!...You don't suppose I believe you...

DOYLE: Never mind my heart: an Irishman's hear is nothing but his imagination. How many of all those millions that have left Ireland have ever come back or wanted to come back?…Three verses of twaddle about the Irish emigrant 'sitting on the stile, Mary,' or three hours of Irish patriotism in Bermondsey or the Scotland division of Liverpool, go further with you than all the facts that stare you in the face." (Shaw 123).

In the post-national era, as Richard Kearney points out, Irish and British nationalisms cannot remain as mirror images. To claim that "…the irrational and unreasonable claimants to sovereignty, territory, power and nationhood are always others - … externalizing the crisis of national legitimation…" (19) is a lack of self-recognition. By harping on a vocational relation to the land - as Larry says that as the son of a laborer he would have struck more grit than as the son of a country land agent – Shaw presents the allegiance as marginal identity politics. As Terry Eagleton humorously points out, "It's only a marginal people who have an identity problem, and so keep examining themselves all the time" (119). Sufferings of the past are only reiterated to hide the emptiness of the future. Keegan posits the stark reality: "…only empty enthusiasms and patriotisms, and emptier memories…"(Shaw 190).

Ultimately the landscape *as* imaginative reality emphasizes a "de-transcendentalizing of nationalism, the task of training the singular imagination, always in the interest of taking the 'nation' out of the nation-state…Such a plan sounds bad right after national liberation" (Spivak 51). Keegan enunciates this as a holy union "where the State is the Church and the Church the people…It is a commonwealth in which work is play and play is life…It is a godhead in which all life is human and all humanity divine…It is, in short, the dream of a madman." Keegan's position evokes a (neo) romantic religiosity of the kind Dylan Thomas perceives in 'Fern Hill', which cannot become the Commonwealth of Nations that the European Union now demands. The wonder and the poverty will remain peculiar parts of the landscape and a counter-nationalist ethos herein evoked will give space to this singularity, which in itself may be as communal as an integration expects it to be. When Heaney explains the concept of 'through-otherness', he gives adequate respect to this evasiveness and marks it as solitude rather than solidarity. A civic and territorial structure such as the land has to be imagined into existence, wherein the aesthetics of the 'through-other' makes us realize that we cannot allow, as Shelley says, nationalism to play with our imagination as if it were knowledge. The reference to Shelley by the utilitarian Broadbent reveals the amount of subversiveness possible in radicalism, which remains one of the cornerstones of counter-nationalism. *John Bull's Other Island* is exciting because it allows that play and in its epiphanic moment sees it as "the dream of a madman".

What mainly connects Heaney's 'Through-Other' aesthetics to Shaw's dramaturgy is the relation of the Irish artist to Britain. Larry may say towards the beginning of the play that his work as a civil engineer has taught him one real political conviction: "that frontiers are hindrances and flags confounded nuisances." (Shaw 127) but these are mere idealizations rooted in spatial affiliations of globalization and internationalism. The political implications of nationalism is enunciated through the old palliative catch-phrase – "there are faults on both sides" and both Shaw and Heaney realize that it has got Ireland through embarrassing situations for years, and at the same time got them nowhere. We must ignore the silence of infinite space and concentrate instead on the infinity under our very noses. Both traitors and saints, as well as madmen have an intimate relation to the island as Other, and it has been explored in terms of the 'Through-Other'.

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