

Indian publishers for the most prestigious houses in Paris and adopted a creolized French that all Francophone readers could understand.

None of this, however, alters the fact that the desire to establish oneself through the assertion of a linguistic difference within a great literary language is one of the major ways to subvert the literary order, which is to say to challenge all at once the aesthetic, grammatical, political, and social legacies of a colonial past.

## 10 | *The Irish Paradigm*

During the building of the wall and ever since to this very day I have occupied myself almost exclusively with the comparative history of races—there are certain questions which one can probe to the marrow, as it were, only by this method.

—Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China"

The period 1900–1914 was that of the Dublin School—Yeats, Moore, Joyce, Synge, and Stephens. The sentiment of these writers was anti-English . . . For them England was the Philistine and since they could not use Gaelic, their aim was to discover what blend of Anglo-Irish and French would give them an explosive that would knock the pundits of London off their padded chairs.

—Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*

IT CAN HARDLY be claimed that the general pattern of the great families of cases that we have just examined, a set of infinitely diversified strategies employed by writers from outlying countries in world literary space, captures reality in all its complexity. What I have hoped to do instead is to give a glimpse of the misfortunes, the contradictions, and the difficulties faced by writers on the periphery in relation to those in the center who, blinded by the obviousness of their centrality, cannot even imagine these things; but also to show the global structure of dependence in which they are caught up in relation to those who, as captives of the shadows of the periphery, have only a partial view of it.

Ideally it would have been possible to analyze carefully each of the

legends that revivalist writers adapted to a variety of theatrical and narrative purposes:<sup>4</sup> the version of the legend of Cuchulain was often reworked, thus making this character into a model of national heroism.

Yeats began by bringing together popular narratives that collectively restored a sort of Gaelic golden age. *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) did much to disseminate and lend distinction to the genre of the popular tale in Ireland. It was immediately followed by *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) and, several years later, still in the same vein, by *The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892) and the celebrated *Celtic Twilight* (1893), a collection of essays, narratives, and descriptive accounts. These volumes serve to verify the hypothesis advanced here that in spaces deprived of all literary resources the first impulse of writers influenced by Herder's ideas was to embrace a popular definition of literature and to collect specimens of the popular cultural practice of their countries in order to convert them into national capital. Literature was first defined, then, as an archive of popular legends, tales, and traditions.

Yeats, like all intellectuals determined to found a national literature and repertoire, very quickly turned his attention toward the theater: from 1899 to 1911 he worked to create a distinctively Irish theater, conceived both as the privileged instrument for communicating a national literature and as a pedagogical tool for educating the Irish people. Together with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899. In 1902, now called the Irish National Theatre, it presented Yeats's famous *Cathleen ni Houlihan*,<sup>5</sup> and next his adaptation for the stage, with George Moore, of a story from the Ossianic cycle, *Diarmuid and Gráinne*. From 1904, having in the meantime found a permanent home at the Abbey Theatre, the company put on plays by Synge, Lady Gregory, and Padraic Colum, all of whom deliberately sought to elaborate a native idiom: thus Synge used the language of the Aran Islands, and Lady Gregory—with whom Yeats was to collaborate for a time—wrote plays in the Kiltartan dialect.<sup>6</sup> The explicit intention of this enterprise, at least at first, was to found a new Irish national literature that could speak to the people. "Our movement," Yeats wrote in 1902, "is a return to the people, like the Russian movement of the early seventies"; a decade earlier, in *The Celtic Twilight*, he had claimed: "Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought . . . it is the soil where all great art is rooted."<sup>7</sup>

After this first, largely collective phase of elaborating a national literary corpus, Yeats—the promoter and the leader of the Irish Revival and the founder of the Abbey Theatre—came to be regarded in Dublin as in a sense embodying Irish poetry. The Abbey quickly established itself as a national institution: thanks to its initial accumulation of capital, Ireland was able at last to claim its own literary existence. Later, in 1923, as though his own newly official status in the world of letters had been confirmed through the recognition of Ireland's literary "difference," Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

At the same time his political moderation and growing hesitancy, at least after the 1916 uprising, made him an ambiguous figure, the founding father of a new Irish literature and at the same time a writer associated with London literary circles, where his work had long been admired. The performance in London, in 1903, by the infant Irish National Theatre of five plays it had just put on in Dublin won the unanimous approval of the critics. This, together with the aid of an English patron, enabled Yeats to acquire a fame that the Dublin critics alone could not have given him. But it was this very fame that signaled his dependence in relation to a center from which he nonetheless professed to keep his distance.

#### THE GAELIC LEAGUE: RECREATION OF A NATIONAL LANGUAGE

At the same time as the Protestant architects of the Irish renaissance were imparting literary value to the nation's literary "heritage" and supplying, in English, the foundations for a new national literature, an influential group of scholars and writers sought to promote a national language in order to put an end to the linguistic and cultural ascendancy of the English colonizer. The Gaelic League (*Connradh na Gaeilge*), founded in 1893 under the leadership of the Protestant linguist Douglas Hyde and the Catholic historian Eoin Mac Néill, had as its stated purpose the elimination of English in Ireland, once British soldiers had been expelled from the country, and the reintroduction of the Gaelic language, whose use had greatly declined since the late eighteenth century. Generally speaking, the proponents of Gaelic were Catholic intellectuals, men such as Patrick Pearse (later the leader of the 1916 rebellion) and Padraic O'Conaire, who were much more committed to political and nationalist action than their Protestant counterparts.

The revival of Gaelic was an entirely new idea. No nationalist political leader, neither O'Connell nor Parnell, had ever made it a political theme. And yet, although the literary movement had been born of political despair, the embrace of the native tongue represented a politicization of the larger movement of cultural emancipation. Even though Irish had ceased to be a language of intellectual creation and communication, at least since the early seventeenth century, it was still spoken by more than half of the population until 1840. With the great famine of 1847 Gaelic was further marginalized, so that by the second half of the nineteenth century its use was limited to some 250,000 rural speakers, among them the poorest in the land. Indeed, as Declan Kiberd has argued, the Irish language was now "the language of the poor and, in truth, a decisive mark of their poverty."<sup>8</sup> From then on the demands for linguistic and national independence amounted to a sort of reversal of values portending a genuine cultural upheaval—all the more as the country's political leaders had undertaken a campaign to promote the learning of English, the language of business and modernity, which was to encourage emigration to America.

The success of the Gaelic League was so immediate that Yeats had to make a diplomatic alliance with it. Very shortly thereafter, in October 1901, he put on the first play performed in Gaelic, Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSúgáin* (The Twisting of the Rope), taken from a Connacht folktale. Joyce himself, despite his reservations, acknowledged the League's success in a lecture titled "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages," delivered in Trieste in 1907:

Now the Gaelic League has revived [the] use [of this language]. Every Irish newspaper, with the exception of the Unionist organs, has at least one special headline printed in Irish. The correspondence of the principal cities is written in Irish, the Irish language is taught in most of the primary and secondary schools, and, in the universities, it has been set on a level with the other modern languages, such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish. In Dublin, the names of the streets are printed in both languages. The league organizes concerts, debates, and socials at which the speaker of *beurla* (that is, English) feels like a fish out of water, confused in the midst of a crowd that chatters in a harsh and guttural tongue.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the publication of a few works written during this period in Gaelic, among them the first novel in Irish, by Padraic O'Conaire, and

the texts of Patrick Pearse, the literary status of the language was long to remain equivocal. The fact that it was not really used in daily life, together with the absence of both a genuine literary tradition (interrupted for almost three centuries) and a popular audience, meant that the proponents of Gaelic had first to carry out the technical task of establishing grammatical and orthographic norms, and then to lobby for the introduction of the language in the educational system. The marginality and artificiality of the literary use of Gaelic made translation necessary, with the result that writers who chose it found themselves in a paradoxical position from the first: either to write in the Irish language and remain unknown, without a real audience; or to be translated into English and so repudiate the linguistic and cultural rupture with the authority of London that writing in Gaelic represented. The situation in which Douglas Hyde found himself was more paradoxical still: although he campaigned on behalf of an Irish national literature in Gaelic, he was also "a founder of the Anglo-Irish literary revival," which is to say of Irish literature in English.<sup>10</sup> His works—including a *Literary History of Ireland* (1899), which described and analyzed the great epic cycles and reproduced long translated extracts from them; and a bilingual collection, *The Love Songs of Connacht* (1893)—were to serve as a catalogue of legends and folktales for writers of the renaissance who did not know Irish. The predicament faced by the partisans of Gaelic is common to all national writers who choose a language distinct from the colonial language, since the struggle to establish a small language is inevitably linked from the start with issues of national politics—a proposition that is borne out by the experience of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Norway at the end of the nineteenth century, Kenya in the 1970s, Brazil in the 1930s, and Algeria in the 1960s, among other countries. Because the linguistic battle involves the creation of a literature that itself is subject to political criteria and the judgment of political authorities, it is at once an essential moment in the affirmation of a national difference and the starting point for the constitution of an independent heritage.

In Ireland, the desire to bring about the de-Anglicization of the country, explicitly advocated by the Gaelic League, and to restore the native language to its former position of preeminence also represented a challenge to the influence of Protestant intellectuals and their aesthetic preferences upon the nascent national literature. The defense and promotion of Gaelic by itself changed the nature of cultural and political debate, making it possible at last to inquire into the nature of the cultural

bonds uniting Ireland and England, the definition of an independent national culture, and the relation between national culture and language. The break with the English language amounted to a declaration of cultural independence, a refusal to go on seeing the success of Irish books (and plays) depend on the verdict of London; or, more precisely, the independent existence claimed for a neglected language peculiar to Ireland, which was now championed in the name of a national culture and literature, permitted Catholic writers to reappropriate literary nationalism and to challenge the hegemony of Yeats and the revivalists of the first generation—Protestants for the most part—over Irish literary production and aesthetics. The linguistic gambit was a bold attempt, then, in the name of the nation and the people, to deny Protestant intellectuals a monopoly over national cultural property.

Debate over the comparative merits of the two cultural options continued for a very long time and profoundly marked the whole founding phase of modern Irish literature by perpetuating the division and rivalries between the proponents of Gaelic and the partisans of English.<sup>11</sup> The former were recognized only in Ireland for literary activity connected with politics; the latter very quickly achieved broad recognition in London literary circles and beyond.

#### SYNGE: THE WRITTEN ORAL LANGUAGE

Rejecting the cut-and-dried political (and politicized) alternative between Gaelic and English that presented Irish writers with an undecidable choice, John Millington Synge (1871–1909) introduced in his plays the spoken language of Irish peasants, beggars, and vagabonds—something without precedent in the history of European drama. This language, Anglo-Irish (“extracted from dialects forbidden to writing,” as his French translator Françoise Morvan has put it), a sort of creole mixing the two tongues, was “neither good English nor good Irish but creation at the confluence of two languages.”<sup>12</sup> Like all defenders of a true literary autonomy conceived in terms of a language within a language, as it were—a new, free, modern idiom, impertinent in its rejection of the usages of a written language that was fixed, dead, rigidified—Synge worked out the writing of Anglo-Irish for the theater. In so doing he refused to cut himself off completely from the formal possibilities offered by English, without, however, thereby submitting to the norms and canons of “English” literature. Yeats had emphasized how subversive and

courageous the use of rural speech as the language of theater and poetry could be. But the question of the literary and national status of the popular language, recreated for the stage by Synge, was ambiguously posed. Indeed, the scandal caused by the first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 is partly explained by this ambiguity: the play was condemned on the ground either that it was “false,” and therefore insufficiently realistic; or that it was too realistic, indeed prosaic, and therefore contrary to the aesthetic conventions of the theater.

Moreover, Synge clearly aligned himself with a moderate realism, rejecting both the aestheticism and abstraction associated with Mallarmé and the style of drama represented by Ibsen, understood in England as a form of social criticism:

In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy . . . the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.<sup>13</sup>

#### O'CASEY: THE REALIST OPPOSITION

Yeats's aesthetic principles were not only criticized by the Gaelicizers. They were also challenged by a younger generation of English-language Catholic writers who upheld the claims of realism against those of poetic drama. From the moment the Irish Literary Theatre was founded in 1899 Yeats found himself opposed from this quarter by men such as George Moore and Edward Martyn, who had begun as an Ibsenite and whose departure hastened the birth of the Irish National Theatre in 1902. And despite the strong imprint and great influence of the Symbolism advocated by Yeats at the Abbey Theatre, aesthetic ambivalence remained the rule: at the same time as Yeats's works were being produced, Padraic Colum and Lady Gregory were staging farces, comedies of manners, and peasant dramas.

After 1912–13, but especially following the sudden rupture of 1916—when Yeats distanced himself from his colleagues and took refuge behind a hieratic, formalized drama, inspired by the Japanese Noh, and in his poetry celebrated solitude and the past—the realist aesthetic became

established at the Abbey Theatre. The new generation of Catholic writers tried at first to contradict the legendary and rural world of Yeats and his friends by adopting the “peasant realism” later associated with the work of the Cork realists, notably T. C. Murray and Lennox Robinson, for many years the director of the Abbey Theatre. Then, chiefly under the influence of Sean O’Casey, they turned toward an urban, more political realism—this at a pivotal moment in the political transformation of the term “people,” whose evolution can be monitored in an almost empirical way. In the 1920s the old Herderian sense of the word, tied to national and rural values, was still current, but its new proclaimed equivalence with the proletariat, a consequence of the Russian Revolution and the increasing power of Communist parties in Europe, now began to be established and to transform the aesthetic assumptions of popular drama inherited from Herder and his followers.

It was the work of Sean O’Casey (1880–1964) that established this new type of popular realism in Ireland. By birth a Protestant, but from a very poor family, O’Casey was closer, socially and aesthetically, to Irish Catholics than to the Protestant bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup> Self-taught, and a union activist, he was briefly in 1914 a member of a socialist paramilitary group, the Irish Citizen Army, which he quit the same year and shortly thereafter began writing plays that celebrated nationalism while pointing out the ambiguity and danger of heroic national mythologies. He was also one of the first Irish writers openly to affirm his Communist loyalties.<sup>15</sup> His first plays, *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Cathleen Listens In*, were produced in 1923; *Juno and the Paycock*, performed the following year, was an immense success. It was praised by Yeats, who believed that it “contained the promise of a new idea . . . [and] foreshadowed a new direction in Irish drama.”<sup>16</sup> *The Plough and the Stars*, staged in 1926, scarcely three years after Ireland had won its independence, was a high-spirited and implacable attack on the false heroes of the resistance to English rule. Taking as his subject the famous Easter 1916 uprising, an event erected into a foundational myth of national legend during the years since, O’Casey lambasted the improvisational character of the revolutionary struggle and, above all, the influence wielded by the Catholic church in its eagerness to take over from the English oppressor. The play provoked riots, forcing its author to go into exile in England.

Despite the huge scandals that his work aroused, the urban and political realism of O’Casey and his followers was adopted in turn by the vast

majority of Irish dramatists. The passage from neoromanticism—the idealization and aestheticization of the peasantry, seen as incarnating the essence of the popular “soul”—to realism—at first rural, then associated with urban life and literary and political modernity—summarizes the history and succession of popular aesthetics.

O’Casey’s example, together with those of Yeats and Synge, illustrates precisely the importance of the theater in all emergent literatures. But here, as elsewhere, the aesthetics, language, form, and content involved in each of his works were the object of struggles and conflicts that helped unify the space by diversifying the range of positions within it. Just as Jorge Amado in Brazil during the 1930s chose to devote himself to the proletarian political novel and privileged the social notion of the “people,” Sean O’Casey opted for a style of theater that was political, popular, and realistic.

#### SHAW: ASSIMILATION IN LONDON

Like all nascent literary worlds on the periphery, the Irish space spread beyond the nation’s borders. Thus George Bernard Shaw, born in Dublin in 1856, became a great figure of the London theater. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature two years after Yeats, in 1925, he incarnated the canonical and obligatory career of Irish writers before the emergence of a peculiarly Irish space: exile to London—a move that by the end of the nineteenth century had come to be considered a betrayal of the Irish national cause.

Shaw belonged so completely to the same literary space as the revivalists that he felt it necessary to state his opposition plainly, in the name of reason, both to Yeats’s folkloristic and spiritualist irrationalism and to Joyce’s iconoclastic ambitions in fiction. Placing himself at an equal distance from his two countrymen, he, too, sought to subvert English norms, only by rejecting Irish national (and nationalist) values. Thus *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904) was a deliberately anti-Yeatsian play. But Shaw was every bit as much opposed, and symmetrically so, to Joyce’s literary purposes. In 1921 he delivered an ambiguous tribute (to say the least) to *Ulysses* in a letter addressed to Sylvia Beach, who had sent him serialized extracts of the text in the hope that he might agree to join in a subscription aimed at covering the costs of the book’s publication: “Dear Madam, I have read several fragments of *Ulysses* in serial form. It is a revolting record of a disgusting phase of civilization; but it is a truth-

ful one . . . To you, possibly, it may appeal as art . . . But to me it is all hideously real.”<sup>17</sup> Not only did Shaw thus refuse to elevate to the rank of art a realistic portrait that seemed to him contrary to the requirements of literature, but moreover he challenged the assumption that, as an Irishman, he should have felt obliged to ascribe a special artistic interest to it.

Shaw nonetheless recognized the necessity and the legitimacy of Irish nationalist demands and constantly called attention to the poverty and backwardness of Ireland, which were as much economic as intellectual, in relation to Europe as a whole. He defended his dual rejection of English imperialism and Irish nationalism by imputing to England the evils of Ireland and, refusing to make a cause of Irish exceptionalism, converted it into a subversive socialist conviction instead. The social and political criticism at work in his drama reflected a determination to go beyond the opposition between imperialism and nationalism. Shaw had a horror of entrapment by and within national (or nationalist) issues, which he saw as provincializing literary production. Taken together, all the things that he regarded as contributing to the historical backwardness of Ireland, including the intellectual underdevelopment of a country singlemindedly bent upon winning its independence, trace the exact boundaries of what he considered the sole homeland of literature in English: London.

Integration with the center seemed to Shaw to assure the certainty of a degree of aesthetic freedom and critical tolerance that a small national capital such as Dublin, torn between the centrifugal pull of British literary space and internal self-affirmation, could not guarantee. Paradoxically, then, some writers are prepared to leave their country and take up residence abroad in a literary capital in the name of denationalizing literature, of rejecting the systematic appropriation of literature for national purposes—a characteristic strategy of small nations in the process of defining themselves or in danger of intellectual absorption by a larger nation. In response to the accusations of national betrayal that were brought against him, Shaw maintained that he had not “chosen” London over Dublin. London for him was a neutral place to which he had sworn no oaths of loyalty or attachment, a place that assured him of literary success and liberty while also granting him the leisure of fully exercising his critical faculty.

Shaw’s career encapsulates the experience of all those writers whom I

have called “assimilated”—those who, in the absence of any other alternative, or out of a refusal to yield to the aesthetic injunctions of small literatures, integrate themselves, as Michaux, Cioran, and Naipaul were to do in the twentieth century, with one of the literary centers.

#### JOYCE AND BECKETT: AUTONOMY

The rupture provoked by James Joyce was the final step in the constitution of Irish literary space. Exploiting all the literary projects, experiments, and debates of the late nineteenth century, which is to say the literary capital accumulated by all those who came before him, Joyce invented and proclaimed an almost absolute autonomy. In this highly politicized space, and in opposition to the movement of the Irish renaissance, which, as he said in *Ulysses*, threatened to become “all too Irish,”<sup>18</sup> he managed to establish an autonomous, purely literary pole, thus helping to obtain recognition for the whole of Irish literature by liberating it to some extent from political domination. As a young man, in 1903, he had mocked Lady Gregory’s excursions into folklore: “In fine, her book, wherever it treats of the ‘folk,’ sets forth in the fullness of its senility a class of mind which Mr. Yeats has set forth with such delicate skepticism in his happiest book, ‘The Celtic Twilight.’”<sup>19</sup> Two years earlier, in fact, he had already strongly criticized the theatrical undertaking of Yeats, Martyn, and Moore on the ground that it represented a loss of literary autonomy and signaled the submission of writers to what he considered the dictates of the public: “But an aesthete has a floating will, and Mr. Yeats’s treacherous instinct of adaptability must be blamed for his recent association with a platform from which even self-respect should have urged him to refrain. Mr. Martyn and Mr. Moore are not writers of much originality.”<sup>20</sup>

The question of literary autonomy in Ireland was played out through a subversive use of language and of the national and social codes connected with it. Joyce condensed and, in his own fashion, settled the debate—inseparably literary, linguistic, and political—that pitted the proponents of Gaelic against those of English. His whole literary work can be seen as a very subtle Irish reappropriation of the English language. Joyce dislocated English, the language of colonization, not only by incorporating in it elements of every European language but also by subverting the norms of English propriety and, in keeping with Irish practice, using obscene and scatological vernaculars to make a laughingstock



of English literary tradition—to the point, in *Finnegans Wake*, of making this subverted language of domination a quasi-foreign tongue. A main part of his purpose, then, was to disrupt the hierarchical relation between London and Dublin so that Ireland would be able to assume its rightful place in the literary world. “The Irish,” as Joyce was fond of saying already in Trieste, “condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilised nations.”<sup>21</sup>

Although he belonged to the next generation, Joyce in a sense pursued the same end as the revivalists. First in *Dubliners*—the majority of whose stories were written in 1904–05, which is to say at the very time when the Abbey Theatre was founded—and then in *Ulysses*, he sought to confer literary status upon Dublin by transforming it into a literary place par excellence, ennobling it through literary description. But already in the early collection of stories the stylistic methods employed, and the aesthetic perspective they represented, were wholly at odds with the underlying assumptions of both Yeats’s Symbolism and the rural realism that was opposed to it. From the very beginning, Joyce’s exclusive concern with Dublin and urban life signaled his rejection of the peasant folklore tradition and his determination to bring Irish literature into European modernity. *Dubliners* proclaimed Joyce’s refusal to take up the cause of the revivalists. Through the urban realism of these stories he sought to imbue Irish life with a certain mundaneness, to abandon the grandiloquence of the literature of legendary heroism in order to embrace the novel trivialities of modern Dublin. “I have written [the book] for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness,” Joyce said in a letter to his publisher.<sup>22</sup> He dismissed the project of the founders of the Revival as a piece of aesthetic archaism that reflected the “backward” character of the country,<sup>23</sup> emphasized earlier by Shaw, which was as much political as intellectual and artistic. It was this total rupture with the dominant literary aesthetic of the day in Ireland that explains the immense difficulties Joyce encountered in trying to get his first collection of stories published.

These difficulties were therefore the product of a double rejection, not only of English literary norms but also of the aesthetic tenets of the nationalist literature then being created. Determined to get past the oversimplified alternative presented by colonial dependence—literary emancipation or submission to the London authorities—Joyce attacked

“the national temper” in an effort to defend “the region of literature . . . assailed so fiercely by the enthusiast and the doctrinaire,”<sup>24</sup> on the one hand, and, on the other, denounced those who “surrender to the trolls,” allowing the Irish theater to become “the property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, he opposed both Catholic writers who transformed literature into an instrument of nationalist propaganda and Protestant intellectuals who reduced it to the transcription of popular myths.

Joyce’s dual opposition was spatial as well as literary: refusing to obey either the law of London or that of Dublin, he chose exile on the continent in order to produce an Irish literature. Ultimately it was in Paris, a politically neutral ground and an international literary capital, that he was to try to achieve this apparently contradictory result—thus placing himself in a position that was eccentric in the fullest sense of the word. Joyce settled in Paris, not in order to draw upon any models he might have found there, but to subvert the language of oppression itself. His purpose was therefore both literary and political.<sup>26</sup> In the passage quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, the Irish Protestant Cyril Connolly, who left his native land and became a celebrated writer and critic in London, expressed the British view of the detour taken by Joyce. Arguing that the aim of Joyce and other Irish writers of his generation was to discover “a blend of Anglo-Irish and French” that would shock the London critics, Connolly noted that “all [of them] had lived in Paris, and all had absorbed French culture.” He went on to indicate the place of Paris and Dublin in the literary war unleashed against London: “The second quarter was Paris which held in the attack on the new Mandarins the line taken by Dublin against their predecessors thirty years before. It was here that conspirators met in Sylvia Beach’s little bookshop where *Ulysses* lay stacked up like dynamite in a revolutionary cellar and then scattered down the Rue de l’Odéon on the missions assigned to them.”<sup>27</sup>

The history of Irish literature was not finished with James Joyce. Through his claim to literary extraterritoriality he not only gave Irish literary space its contemporary form; he opened up a connection to Paris, thus providing a solution for all those who rejected the colonial alternative of retreat to Dublin or treasonous emigration to London. With Joyce, Irish literature was constituted in terms of a triangle of capitals formed by London, Dublin, Paris—a triangle that was less geographic than aesthetic and that had been imagined and created in the space of

some thirty or forty years: Yeats staked out the first national literary position in Dublin; in London, Shaw occupied the canonical position of the Irishman adapted to suit English requirements; Joyce, refusing to choose between these cities, succeeded in reconciling contraries by establishing Paris as a new stronghold for the Irish, ruling out both conformity to the standards of national poetry and submission to English literary norms.

The design of the literary structure constituted by these three cities distilled the entire history of Irish literature, insofar as it had been “invented” between 1890 and 1930, and held out to every aspiring Irish author a range of aesthetic possibilities, engagements, positions, and choices. This polycentric configuration became so much a part of the mental habits of Irish writers, and of their view of the world, that still today a writer such as Seamus Heaney, undoubtedly the greatest contemporary Irish poet—born in 1939 in County Derry, Northern Ireland, professor from 1966 to 1972 at Queen’s University of Belfast, where he had been a student, and winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature, whose decision to settle in the Republic of Ireland a few years earlier caused a scandal in his own country—can describe the choices available to him in exactly the same terms. In an interview with the French press he remarked: “If, like Joyce and Beckett, I had gone to live in Paris, I would only have conformed to a cliché. If I had gone off to London, this would have been considered an ambitious but normal course of action. But to go to [County] Wicklow was an act charged with meaning . . . When I crossed the border, my private life fell into the public domain and the newspapers wrote editorials about my decision. A queer paradox!”<sup>28</sup> To this foundational and historic triangle must now be added New York, which, owing to the presence there of a sizable Irish-American community, represents at once an alternative to London within the English-speaking world and a powerful pole of consecration in its own right.

After Joyce, Samuel Beckett represented a sort of end point in the constitution of Irish literary space and its process of emancipation. The whole history of this national literary world is at once present and denied in his career; but it can be grasped only by recognizing exactly what he had to do to rescue himself from the danger of national, linguistic, political, and aesthetic rootedness. In other words, to understand the

very “purity” of Beckett’s work, his progressive detachment from all external definition, his almost absolute autonomy, it is necessary to retrace the route by which he achieved formal and stylistic freedom—a route that is indissociable from the apparently more contingent and external one that brought him from Dublin to Paris.

As a young writer in Dublin in the late 1920s, Beckett was heir to the tripolar configuration of Irish space I have just described. One cannot fail to be struck by the importance it conferred upon these three capital cities. Beckett’s displacements between Dublin, London, and Paris were so many aesthetic attempts to find his place in a literary space that was at once national and international. Because he found himself in the same situation that Joyce had twenty years earlier,<sup>29</sup> Beckett took exactly the same path—relying on Joyce to guide and justify his tastes, admiring the writers Joyce admired and dismissing the ones he did not, following Joyce in his exaltation of Dante and his sarcastic suspicions of the Celtic prophets, and so on.

Paralyzed by his boundless admiration for an author who then represented for him the highest imaginable degree of freedom from the norms imposed by nationalism, and, more than this, dumbfounded by the power of the position Joyce had created in Paris, Beckett had great difficulties until the war years finding his own way. Joyce’s manner of fictional invention was the only one he could conceive of. Seemingly condemned to imitation or, worse, blind conformity, and driven to despair at not being able to settle upon a literary project to which he could commit himself, or even to choose a city where he could live (hesitating between retreat to Dublin and exile—another form of imitation—in Paris), Beckett searched for more than a decade for a way out from the aesthetic and existential impasse in which he found himself.

Though he was determined to use the autonomy that Joyce had achieved to his own advantage, he sought to follow in the footsteps of the older writer by other means. This meant relying upon the entire Irish literary heritage, in addition to Joyce’s own innovations, in order to create a new and still more independent position. He therefore first had to find a way around the literary alternative—realism or Symbolism—imposed by the internal struggles of the Irish field, then to overcome what he called, in a letter in German addressed to Axel Kaun in 1937, speaking of Joyce’s enterprise, “the apotheosis of the word”—that is, the willful belief in the power of words;<sup>30</sup> and, finally, to take his place,



beyond Joyce, in an artistic genealogy that would inaugurate a new formal modernity. Beckett's invention of the most absolute literary autonomy, the highest degree of literary subversion and emancipation ever achieved, was therefore the paradoxical product of Irish literary history. Accordingly, it can be perceived and understood only on the basis of the whole of the history of Irish literary space.

#### GENESIS AND STRUCTURE OF A LITERARY SPACE

As against the commonly held view that each national particularism, each literary event, each work of literature is reducible to nothing other than itself, and remains incomparable to any other event in the world, the Irish case furnishes a paradigm that covers virtually the entire range of literary solutions to the problem of domination—and these in almost perfectly distilled form.

I have wished to examine the case of Ireland in order to show that the model proposed here is not an a priori construction of abstract elements, but rather one that may be directly applied to the historical formation of individual literatures. It has several essential aspects. First, it demonstrates that no literary project, not even the most formalistic, can be explained in a monadic fashion: every project must be put in relation to the totality of rival projects within the same literary space. Second, the Irish example makes it possible to explain how and why at any given moment of its history a particular literary field can be described in its entirety with reference to the set of competing contemporary positions. Finally, the Irish case is a way of showing that each new path of invention that is opened up, along with all those that have been blazed before, helps to form and unify the literary space in which it appears and asserts itself.<sup>31</sup>

Contrary to what the individual case studies of the previous chapters, considered in isolation from one another, may seem to suggest, the solutions devised by deprived writers take on their full meaning only once they have been put back into the context of the specific history of their respective literary spaces, which itself is part of an almost universal chronology. Thus Beckett's relationship to Joyce, for example, conceived as something absolutely unique (a notion that itself derives from belief in a literature that produces "pure" ideas in a sort of Platonic heaven), is typically taken to demonstrate the artistic independence of the disciple.<sup>32</sup> But even if it is true that Joyce was absent from Beckett's mature work (from the 1950s on), he nonetheless remained central to Beckett's aes-

thetic position and choices: Beckett was a descendant—a paradoxical one, to be sure, unacknowledged but nonetheless real—of Joycean invention.

Some theorists, such as Edward Said, have tried to incorporate Ireland in a general model of the postcolonial world. For Said, taking issue with the fundamental assumptions of "pure" criticism, literature was one of the main instruments by which colonialism and cultural domination are justified. In order to break with these assumptions, which he saw as having been reinforced, first by the "New Criticism" of the 1940s and 1950s, and then by deconstructivist criticism, Said sought in works such as *Orientalism* (1978), and still more so in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), to give a new definition of literature and of literary reality by describing the political unconscious that is at work in the French and English novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once the insistent but always unnoticed presence of colonial empire and colonized peoples is recognized, through a method of interpretation that he calls "contrapuntal," since it inverts the ordinary position of the reader in the structure and purpose of these novels (whether by Flaubert, Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, or Camus), it is no longer possible to sustain the view of a radical disjunction between literature and the (political) events of the world. The presence in these works of a colonial conception of the world calls attention to the reality of relations of cultural domination and thereby reveals the political truth of literature, hitherto obscured. Said's work had the great merit of internationalizing literary debate, showing that what he called the historical experience of empire is common to everyone, colonizers and colonized alike, and of rejecting the exclusive claims of linguistic and national criteria in favor of a literary history whose groupings and classifications are informed by the historical experience of colonization and, later, imperialism.

Said therefore took an interest in the figure of W. B. Yeats, whom he described as "the indisputably great national poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power."<sup>33</sup> Fredric Jameson, for his part, has tried to show that literary modernism—and notably Joyce's formal investigations in *Ulysses*—were directly associated with the historical phenomenon of imperialism, contending that the end of modernism "coincide[s] with the restructuration of the classical imperialist world system."<sup>34</sup> Said and Jameson were among the first critics, in other words,

to make the connection between the political history of countries that have long suffered foreign domination and the emergence of new national literatures. In doing this they promoted a new type of comparativism, using imperialism as a model to relate to one another works that appeared in very different countries and historical contexts. Thus Said was able, for example, to link Yeats's early poems with those of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, both Said and Jameson have explicitly rejected what Said in *Culture and Imperialism* called "the comfortable autonomies"—the unquestioned assumptions of pure, dehistoricized interpretations of poetry and, more generally, literature. Each one in his own way has called for the rehistoricization—which is to say, the repoliticization—of literary practices, even the most formalistic, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the same sense, and on the basis of the same critical assumptions, Enda Duffy has proposed a national reading of Joyce's novel, which she holds is a postcolonial work of literature that portrays a simple "national allegory" and gives a narrative form to the ideological and political conflicts of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

The "connection between imperial politics and culture," Said maintained, "is astonishingly direct."<sup>37</sup> Although his readings of literary texts were extremely shrewd, he regarded the aesthetic nature of a given work, and its singularity, as matters for internal criticism to decide. As against this view, however, a plausible case can be made that the link between literary form and political history requires that texts be considered in relation to the national and international literary space that mediates political, ideological, national, and literary stakes. The analysis I have developed here tends to cast doubt upon the possibility and validity of a political reading of *Ulysses*, for example, on the basis of the factual chronology of Irish politics alone. With the emergence of a literary space that becomes progressively more autonomous, that acquires its own distinctive tempo and its own chronology, so that it is partially independent of the political world, it becomes difficult to insist upon a strict correspondence between the political events that unfolded in Ireland between 1914 and 1921—the period during which *Ulysses* was composed—and Joyce's text; to push the parallelism, as Enda Duffy does, to the point of seeing homologies, or structural similarities, between the narrative strategies of the novel and the political forces at work during the Irish conflict of these years is even harder to justify. Nor can one

wholly endorse the claims of Declan Kiberd, though he does recognize that "it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory" and acknowledges that the effects of dependence in Irish literature extended far beyond the official dates of national independence. Kiberd's novel and passionate approach to postcolonialism in Ireland, which he tries to relate to the literatures of Africa and India, likewise interprets literary events in terms of political structures and events ("the Irish were the first modern people to decolonize in the twentieth century") without taking into account, in its full historical complexity, the structure of the world republic of letters as a whole and the position occupied in it by Irish literary space.<sup>38</sup>

The Irish, condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilised nations.

—James Joyce, lectures, 1905–06

For centuries correct national languages did not yet exist . . . On the one hand there had been Latin, which is to say the learned tongue, and on the other national languages, which is to say vulgar tongues . . . The end was [finally] reached, *evreetheeng*, *absolootleeevreetheeng* wuz expresst in the formerly vulgur langwedge . . . and this is *preesycelee* where mattersstandtoday withlitrachoor . . . since there is not, in a global way, any separation or demarcation between the literary language and the correct national language . . . the goal is to create pleasure and not linguistic purity . . . As a result writers can employ any method, achieve everything that is achievable, *evreetheeng*, *absolootlee evreetheenggoze!* There is therefore no obligation to respect linguistic norms . . . You stop thinking that you must defend the correct national language.

—Katalin Molnár, *On Language*

WHEN THE FIRST effects of revolt, which is to say of literary differentiation, make themselves felt, and the first literary resources are able to be claimed and appropriated for both political and literary purposes, the conditions for the formation and unification of a new national literary space are brought together: a national literary heritage, if only a minimal one, has now been accumulated. It is at this stage that second-generation writers such as James Joyce appear. Exploiting national literary resources

that for the first time are regarded as such, they break away from the national and nationalist model of literature and, in inventing the conditions of their autonomy, achieve freedom. In other words, whereas the first national intellectuals refer to a political idea of literature in order to create a particular national identity, the newcomers refer to autonomous international literary laws in order to bring into existence, still on a national level, another type of literature and literary capital.

The case of Latin America is exemplary in this regard. The period known as the “boom,” when writers from Central and South America achieved international recognition following the award of the Nobel Prize to Asturias in 1967, represents the beginning of a proclamation of autonomy. The consecration of these novelists and the recognition of a distinctive aesthetic permitted them collectively to detach themselves from what Alfonso Reyes (1889–1959) called the “ancillary” vocation of Hispano-American literature and to reject pure political functionalism. “The literature of Spanish America,” Carlos Fuentes has written, “had to overcome, in order to exist, the obstacles of flat realism, commemorative nationalism, and dogmatic commitment. With Borges, Asturias, Carpentier, Rulfo, and Onetti, the Hispano-American novel developed in violation of realism and its codes.”<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the “boom,” a debate developed within this transnational literary space between the upholders of literature in the service of national and political causes (at the time usually associated with the Cuban regime) and advocates of literary autonomy. The very emergence of this debate is a significant indication that the process of autonomization was then under way. In 1967 the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), committed to the cause of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionaries, and a member of the Russell tribunal on the Vietnam War, nonetheless defended a position of literary autonomy. In a letter written in the aftermath of two trips to Cuba, he told the editor of the Havana review *Casa de las Américas*:

When I came back to France after these two trips, there were two things that I understood better. On the one hand, my personal and intellectual involvement in the struggle for socialism . . . On the other, my work as a writer followed the orientation that my way of being impressed upon it, and even if at a given moment my work reflected this involvement, I did it for the same reasons of aesthetic freedom that currently lead me to write a novel that takes place virtually outside of