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SEAN O'CASEY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

By R. Patrick Murphy

A stinging, flying wasp; a noisy, green crow; and feisty Fluther Good: these are self-characterizations of Sean O'Casey, who preferred to think of himself as a fighter, which, of course, he was. O'Casey was always a little out of step with his times, always a little ahead of his time. O'Casey was an enthusiastic, self-taught Gaelic speaker long before Gaelic became part of the required curriculum of Irish schools; by then he had come to believe that the time and resources required to make Ireland truly bilingual were an egregious waste. O'Casey was an ardent nationalist long before Irish nationalism amounted to more than the sentimental romanticism so aptly described by Larry Doyle in *John Bull's Other Island*. By the time nationalism was sweeping Ireland, he was an internationalist cautioning against insular chauvinism and the simple replacement of the unicorn and the lion by the shamrock and the harp—or the shamrock and the cross of Rome. O'Casey was an eager and active union member, but left in disgust when he realized the union leadership could not see beyond their pocketbooks. He insisted that unions should be concerned with the aesthetic and spiritual lives of their members, as well as the economic. While the members of the National Volunteers, the Irish Volunteers, and the Irish Citizen Army were marching about Dublin and bivouacing in Phoenix Park in fancy uniforms, O'Casey was counseling guerrilla warfare—long before the rural flying columns and tightly-knit urban units of the mufti-wearing I. R. A. were a gleam in Michael Collins' eye. Before a third of Dublin was destroyed in Easter Week, 1916, O'Casey was a pacifist. Socially and politically, then, we may think of O'Casey as being in advance, an avant-gardist certainly in relation to the majority of Irish leaders who were to materialize during the first third of the twentieth century.

When we think of Sean O'Casey as a dramatist, however, we do not think of him as an avant-garde writer. In common
parlance, the avant-garde playwrights are understood to be Jarry, Apollinaire, Tzara, Breton, et al., and more recently Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Pinter, and others of the tribe of Artaud. Beckett is the only Irish playwright that we usually consider avant-garde, and all of his important work is in French. In the usual sense, "avant-garde playwrights" is a convenient shorthand for the writers Martin Esslin has labeled "absurd" and their more or less direct Dada and surrealist predecessors. This is, I think, at once an unnecessarily restrictive and too loose use of the term "avant-garde." O'Casey certainly never considered himself an avant-garde dramatist. The last essay he wrote before his death, "The Bald Primaqueera," is a stringent attack on Ionesco and Pinter and on Artaud's "theater of cruelty."

I have argued elsewhere that despite his protestations to the contrary, O'Casey's plays manifest a good many of the attributes of Artaud's theater of cruelty. With avant-garde drama including more than the theater of cruelty or the theater of the absurd, I would like to suggest that the term in its most precise and profound sense may, with justice, be applied to O'Casey.

The most signal attempt to explore the avant-garde in all its manifestations is made by Renato Poggioli in his seminal work, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde.* Poggioli develops his theory, to which I cannot do justice in this short essay, by studying "avant-garde art as a historical concept, a center of tendencies and ideas" (p. 3). For Poggioli, the avant-garde spirit is a particular state of mind — "a common psychological condition, a unique ideological fact" and he uses avant-garde art as the data for a sociological and psychological investigation which reveals the "psychic seeds or roots" which lie behind the avant-garde spirit or impulse. "By psychological [he means] that part of avant-garde art which remains a fact of nature (if only his-

1 *Blasts and Benedictions,* ed. Ronald Ayling (London and New York, 1967), pp. 63-76. According to Ayling this essay was completed on August 21, 1964, and was the last article written by the playwright.

2 "Sean O'Casey and 'Thfl Bald Primaqueera,' " *James Joyce Quarterly,* VIII (1970), 96-110.

the instinctive forces and primary currents. . . . And by ideology (he means) the rationalizations of these forms, currents, or residues into formulas of logic: their translation into theory, their reduction to programs and manifestoes, their hardening into positions or even 'poses'" (p. 4). His theory, which attempts to describe or explain various avant-garde movements, embraces all the arts, and, in Poggioli's view, I am perfectly justified in applying the term to many more dramatists than the few playwrights usually grouped under the rubric "avant-garde." Poggioli himself, for example, argues convincingly that the original naturalistic writers were avant-garde, a point that, interestingly, is confirmed by Martin Esslin. 4

A key part of Poggioli's theory is his argument that a feeling of alienation on the part of the artist is a prerequisite to the avant-garde spirit. Although economic and cultural alienation and stylistic and aesthetic alienation are important aspects of a more general alienation, Poggioli believes that these aspects depend first of all on psychological alienation, which he defines, borrowing from Marx, "as the feeling of uselessness and isolation of a person who realizes that he is now totally estranged from a society which has lost its sense of the human condition and its own historical mission" (p. 109). Leonard B. Meyer, in arguing that avant-garde art is essentially anti-teleological in nature, has also noted the centrality of a sense of alienation to the avant-garde impulse. He writes that, "in spirit, practice, and general aesthetic outlook anti-teleological art has much in common with that inspired by existentialism." 5 Meyer explains that "the anti-teleological position holds that traditions, systems, and the like are evil because they limit our freedom of thought and action, deaden our sensitivity to sensation and feeling and, in the end, alienate man from nature of which he should be a part." 6

6 Meyer, p. 176.
O'Casey had every reason to feel an overwhelming sense of alienation throughout most of his life. He was a Protestant in Catholic Ireland; moreover, he was a poor Protestant at a time when most of the wealth of the country was controlled by Protestants. He was isolated not only by extreme poverty, but also by ill health. The ulcerated eyes which plagued him as a child and precluded any but a few months of formal education made blindness an ever-present possibility during his life. He was self-taught and well read, but his lack of formal education and his weak eyes permanently consigned him to the most menial forms of unskilled labor. Even after he began to write he was isolated. He had little sympathy with the Dublin literati — Yeats, AE, and the rest of what he rather contemptuously dismissed as the "Merrion Square crowd" — who tended to regard him as something of a curiosity. Like Synge, he tried to show the Irish a true picture of themselves, and like him was repudiated for his efforts. After the Silver Tassie controversy (1927) O'Casey was alienated from the Abbey and, for the most part, the remainder of his plays were published before they were produced. O'Casey felt especially isolated after the formation of the Free State and the rise of rampant clerical domination of government. Like Joyce's Simon Dedalus, O'Casey considered the Irish "an unfortunate priest-ridden race," and this feeling was probably the most critical factor in his self-imposed exile which lasted from 1926 until his death in 1964. O'Casey felt modern Ireland had betrayed its ancient heroic heritage, the kind of idealism and nobility represented by Jack O'Killion and Philib O'Dempsey in Purple Dust (published 1940). He believed the country was infected with a shallow and banal Christianity and that the newly free Irish were doing little more than slavishly aping the most useless and outworn customs of their former oppressors. My opening paragraph suggests a number of other reasons why O'Casey should feel isolated and alienated. Thus, in almost every aspect of life, we can see why O'Casey would feel a profound sense of alienation, and so be predisposed toward the avant-garde spirit.
Poggioli's central thesis is that the avant-garde spirit, "the psychic seeds or roots," manifest themselves in a series of distinct "moments," and I wish to suggest that we find manifestations of these moments in O'Casey's plays, both in his themes and in his dramaturgy. After making the important distinction between schools and movements (which, he says, conceive "of culture not as increment but as creation — or, at least, as a center of activity and energy" — p. 20), Poggioli observes, "a movement is constituted primarily to obtain a positive result, for a concrete end. . . . But often a movement takes shape and agitates for no other end than its own self, out of the sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure" (p. 25). He calls this activism or the activistic moment of an avant-garde movement, and says it is the least characteristic and least important of the moments of the avant-garde. Meyer makes a similar observation about activism: "It is the naive and primitive enjoyments of sensations and things for their own sakes that these [avant-garde] artists seek to return. We must rediscover the reality and excitement of a sound as such, a color as such, and existence itself as such." O'Casey's plays reflect a good deal of this joy in dynamism and taste for action. We find it, for example, in his slapstick routines in early plays such as "Kathleen Listens In" (1923) and "Nannie's Night Out" (1924); in plays of O'Casey's middle period, such as "The End of the Beginning" (published 1934), The Star Turns Red (1940), and Purple Dust; and in plays of his last period, such as Cock-a-Doodle Dandy (1949), "Time to Go" (published 1951), and The Drums of Father Ned (1959). O'Casey's propensity for using dancing as an element of his dramaturgy may also be a reflection of the activistic moment. In Cock-a-Doodle Dandy O'Casey uses dancing as the rich and unequivocal celebration of life typical of his last plays. Most of the Cock's appearances involve dancing, but only enchantment or intoxication can entice

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7 Meyer, p. 175.
the old fogies into a gay fling. Dancing in *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* is like the truly joyous dancing Nora attributes to Christ in *The Drums of Father Ned*: “If He didn’t dance Himself, He must have watched the people at it, and, maybe, clapped His hands when they did it well. He must have often listened to the people singin’, and been caught up with the rhythm of the gentle harp and psaltery, and His feet may have tapped the ground along with the gayer strokes of the tabor and the sound of the cymbals tinkling.” A similar sort of joyous, dynamic dance also closes *Figuro in the Night* (published 1961).

O’Casey’s non-dramatic writings support the idea that the exuberant dancing in his plays is an example of Poggioli’s activistic moment. In *Drums Under the Windows* O’Casey says children should worship God “by song and dance and magic story, in gaily coloured plays, flags, ribbons, and maypoles; in the music of their own bands, trumpet, cymbal, triangle, and drum; the louder and fiercer the better.” In his life as well as in his plays, O’Casey uses dancing as a standard for judging people or characterizing them. He attacks Eamon De Valera in *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*: “he couldn’t see De Valera abandoning himself to sweat and laughter in the dancing of a jig, nor could he see him swanking about in sober green kilt and gaudy saffron shawl; or slanting an approving eye on any pretty girl that passed him; or standing, elbow on counter in a Dublin pub, about to lower a drink, with a Where it goes, lads.” Writing about Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins in the same volume he says that “One could never conceive of Griffith dancing a reel, even in the privacy of his own home; but one could easily imagine Collins doing a wild dance in the courtyard of the Castle or of him singing a song out loud in the porch of Parliament House” (p. 126).

Gratuitous movements, manifestations of the activistic moment, are much less common, Poggioli argues, than movements

10 (New York, 1949), p. 3.
formed to agitate against something or someone. This may be
the academy, tradition, or very often, that collective individual
called the public. Poggioli says that when a permanent spirit of
hostility and opposition appear we have another characteristic
moment of avant-garde movements, antagonism or the antago-

nistic moment. O'Casey was never as antagonistic toward either
tradition or the public as the various individuals who come to
mind when we use "avant-garde" in its most common sense.
The fact remains, however, that for most of his life he was
fighting against something or someone. Early, he was against
the British presence in Ireland and against the economic ex-

ploitation of the workers of Dublin. By the time he turned to
playwriting he was against other things, and most of his major
plays carry some sort of didactic burden. His great pacifist
plays, the Dublin trilogy plus The Silver Tassie, are against
violence and the glorification of violence. The Star Turns Red
and Red Roses for Me (published 1942) are against capitalism
and the repression of labor unions. Within the Gates (published
1933), Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, The Bishop's Bonfire (1955),
The Drums of Father Ned, Behind the Green Curtains (pub-
lished 1961), and Figuro in the Night are against banal and
pietistic religions (including political and scientific substitutes
for religion), clerical interference with Irish life, the ferocious
chastity of the Irish people, and the dead hand of the past.
O'Casey's sympathetic portrayal of a Dublin prostitute and his
daring to suggest that the 1916 rebels were capable of very
human fear in The Plough and the Stars (1926) are obvious
eamples of antagonism toward the public. Figuro in the Night,
an hilarious fantasy based on O'Casey's imagined reaction of
the women of Ireland to the sudden appearance on the ould sod
of Brussel's famous statue of the little prince, is essentially
antagonistic.

Each of the major moments Poggioli identifies incorporates
a number of distinct elements. The antagonistic moment in-
cludes a strong element of antitraditionalism and a militant
sense of "down-with-the-past." Purple Dust is of particular
interest in this regard. Not only does this play prophesy the disappearance of the British Empire—the purple dust of the title is all that remains, and it will soon be washed away—it also prophesies the replacement of the old, corrupt order by a new ideal order, a new Golden Age. A sense of antitradiationalism and down-with-the-past pervade the play from start to finish, even though the new Golden Age is to be distinctively Celtic and is to look for inspiration and moral content to the ancient Irish gods and heroes. There is no contradiction between antitradiationalism and down-with-the-past and a longing for a far distant past. Poggioli reminds us that avant-garde artists embraced a rediscovery of primitivism and primitive art. “Avant-garde sculpture has attentively studied Etruscan and Egyptian statuary, as well as statues from pre-Columbian America, pre-Classical Greece, and Negro Africa” (p. 176). The traditions or conventions the avant-garde— and O’Casey—are against are those outworn and meretricious traditions which are still being observed.

O’Casey is no misty-eyed romantic and he does not confuse the realities of national freedom with the dreamy escape of Mary Bruin into the Land of Faery in Yeats’s The Land of Heart’s Desire. A blend of romantic Celticism, revolutionary realism, and intellectual toughness informs the green world of Purple Dust. The play details the doomed attempts of two Englishmen, Cyril Poges and Basil Stoke, and their Irish mistresses, Souhaun and Avril, respectively, to renovate a decrepit Tudor mansion in Clune na Geera and in so doing revive the pastoral life. Poges and Stoke, whose names are drawn from the country church of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” pervert the idea of establishing an ideal world. Their notion of the ideal is as shallow and frivolous as their understanding of poetry and philosophy. O’Casey does not attack the idea of a return to the past, but he insists that the new Golden Age be founded on principles of peace, justice, and joy rather than on outworn and ultimately repressive conventions of the more recent past.
Jack O'Killigain, a foreman stonemason and the play’s central character, embodies the ideal. O'Killigain seeks to establish a new life rather than refurbish an old one. He tells Poges that “I let the dead bury their dead,” and that “Life as it is, and will be, moves me no more” than veneration of the outworn glories of the past.\(^{11}\) Poges and Stoke are “the dead,” as Avril makes clear when she tells them that in Clune na Geera “everything’s alive but you two” (p. 296). The Second Workman tells Poges that he is a fool for “settlin’ down in a place that’s fit only for the housin’ o’ dead men” (p. 287). The new world requires a basic change in attitudes, something that cannot be bought — as Poges and Stoke try — with any amount of money. The crumbling Tudor mansion symbolizes not only the frivolous pastoralism of Poges and Stoke, but also the betrayed and flawed idealism of the British Empire. O'Killigain makes this clear when he tells the Second Workman that “it is a waste of time to try to buttress up a tumbling house” (p. 331). As he leaves with Avril, O'Killigain tells Poges and Stoke, “You have had your day, like every dog. Your Tudors have had their day, and they are gone; and th’ little heap o’ purple dust they left behind them will vanish away in th’ flow of the river” (p. 339). The river is both the real river that floods and the river of time forever flowing on.

Poggioli labels the third moment of the avant-garde nihilism or the nihilistic moment, and he describes it as the activist moment driven “beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation, scruple or limit. It finds joy not merely in the inebriation of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way. The attitude thus constituted can be defined as a kind of transcendental antagonism” (p. 26). Paul De Man confirms Poggioli’s observation with his suggestion that “modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true pres-

Poggioli claims that no avant-garde movement fails to display at least some of this nihilistic tendency, which represents the extremity of antagonism toward the public and tradition. He says that the nihilistic moment achieved its most intense and diverse expression in Dadaism, and to a lesser extent in surrealism. Antonin Artaud’s dramatic theories are essentially nihilistic in Poggioli’s terms. Not only is the fundamental concept of the theater of cruelty nihilistic, but also Artaud’s call to throw out old theatrical language (the language of words) and conventions and to establish a new concrete language of the theater. Artaud’s own plays, “The Jet of Blood” (1925) and The Conquest of Mexico (1938) for example, are manifestations of nihilism. O’Casey, as I have suggested elsewhere, is much closer to the tradition of the theater of cruelty than he dares admit. Both Artaud and O’Casey insist that the drama should invoke a sense of wonder at the magic of life, and both insist absolutely on a mixture of laughter and tears as the human condition. O’Casey’s pervasive tragi-comic juxtaposition and blending is different only in degree—not kind—from Artaud’s call for a “dangerous” mixture of seriousness and laughter in drama. “Cruelty” for Artaud signifies an existential recognition of a non-benevolent providence. The theater, he writes, should reflect the cruelty of the human condition, the “terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all.” Both Artaud and O’Casey have an anti-teleological conception of the universe, to return to Leonard B. Meyer’s terms. It is precisely this tough view of life, shared with Artaud, that underlies O’Casey’s tragi-comedy, as well as the numerous gratuitous deaths that stud his plays. The sky often falls on the heads of O’Casey’s characters: Minnie Powell (The Shadow of a Gunman — 1923), Bessie Burgess

Just as a transcendent antagonism can become nihilism, a transcendent nihilism can become the fourth moment identified by Poggioli, which he labels agonism or the agonistic moment. For Poggioli, this moment is achieved when the “movement and its constituent human entity... reach the point where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition. It even welcomes and accepts this self-ruin as an obscure or unknown sacrifice to the success of future movements” (p. 26). The idea of agonism is central to Poggioli’s contention that the avant-garde is an absolutely modern phenomenon which can be dated no earlier than the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Agonism, which involves sacrifice and consecration, transforms catastrophe and failure into miracle and success. The success is not for the agonistic artist, not even to his own “posthumous glory, but to the glory of posterity” (p. 67). The avant-garde, particularly in agonistic moments, represents the first time in the history of man when he has abandoned the illusory belief of each of the classical ages that it had achieved “the fullness of time.” Avant-garde artists are the first to embrace the idea that they are transitional figures, merely precursors of the art of the future. At this point, agonism transforms itself into futurism, and, Poggioli writes, “the futurist manifestation represents... a prophetic and utopian phase, the arena of agitation and preparation for the announced revolution, if not the revolution itself” (p. 69). The avant-garde embraces a sense of evolution rather than completion. John Weightman even suggests that “avant-garde” is scientific rather than military in origin, and is related to the evolutionary concept of science.14

O’Casey’s dramatic canon contains at least three manifestations of the agonistic moment. Two involve O’Casey’s choice of characters, the third is a particular dramaturgical motif. In

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his early plays, most especially the pacifist dramas, O'Casey derides the self-sacrificing hero, which, according to Poggioli, is the archetypal embodiment of the agonistic spirit. Johnny Boyle in Juno and the Paycock (1924) and Jack Clitheroe, Lieutenant Langon, and Captain Brennan, all in The Plough and the Stars, are deficient characters. O'Casey's attack, however, is less against the idea of self-sacrifice than against the vain, romantic delusions of self-proclaimed patriots whose immaturity and foolishness lead not to self-sacrifice, but to suffering and death of the innocent, mainly women and children. The character who is willing to sacrifice himself alone, without causing the death of others, is central in two of his plays. Jack, in The Star Turns Red, and Ayamonn Breydon, in Red Roses for Me, both manifest the agonistic if not futuristic moment (thematically, both plays are agonistic or futuristic as well). They sacrifice themselves for the glory of posterity. Moreover, Ayamonn is an artist, and Poggioli notes the prevalence of the artist as victim-hero in modern literature.

The second example of the agonistic moment in O'Casey's plays is found in his general preference of character types. In the early plays, particularly the Dublin trilogy, an informing idea is that if somehow people could be brought to their senses a better life for all could be established here and now. For the most part, the normative characters are older, people like Juno Boyle, Fluther Good, and Bessie Burgess. The young people in these plays are often foolishly romantic and naïve. This changes, however, with The Star Turns Red and Purple Dust. Beginning with these plays, and continuing through Red Roses for Me, Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, The Bishop's Bonfire, The Drums of Father Ned, and Behind the Green Curtains, the young characters are normative while the older people are at best hopeless old fogies and at worst the perpetuators of outworn and oppressive systems and traditions. It is almost as if O'Casey abandoned any hope of experiencing a greatly improved life himself, and vested his hope in youth, both in his plays and in his personal life.
Lastly, one of O'Casey's dramaturgical motifs suggests the agonistic moment of the avant-garde. Agonism revels in tearing down in order that future generations may establish an ideal art form or an ideal society. The avant-gardist of the agonistic moment will sacrifice himself to establish a tabula rasa so that future generations will be completely free of the restraints of the past. The destructive construction that occurs in several of O'Casey's plays seems to be an example of this. In Purple Dust, the harder Poges and Stoke work at restoring the crumbling Tudor mansion in which the play is set, the faster the house tumbles around them. Their efforts have an effect diametrical to their wishes. From O'Killigain's point of view, the destruction he and his co-workers wreak is completely constructive. They clear away the detritus of a corrupt and outworn civilization as the first step toward establishing the new order. This constructive destruction, which is central to Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, The Bishop's Bonfire, and The Drums of Father Ned, is usually realized in slapstick stage business. In Purple Dust, for example, random holes are poked in the ceiling, a giant runaway lawn roller knocks down a wall, ditches are dug that block the entrance to the house, a column is knocked down, and a prized quatto-centro antique is banged and battered and finally walked across by a workman in hobnailed boots.

Besides identifying the major moments of avant-garde movements, Poggioli makes numerous additional observations concerning secondary attributes of the avant-garde spirit. He observes "that one of the primary characteristics of avant-garde art is, technically and formally, experimentalism" (p. 131). Richard Chase goes even further by suggesting that cultural vitality depends on experimentalism: "the vanguard of writers and artists has been... a necessary part of the cultural economy, and the health of culture depends upon its recurring impulse to experimentation, its search for radical values, its his-

15 There is no contradiction in suggesting that O'Casey's use of slapstick stage business may be a manifestation of both the activist and the agonistic moments of the avant-garde. Not all of the slapstick routines, even in Purple Dust, are examples of constructive destruction (i.e., the agonistic moment).
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torical awareness, its flexibility and receptivity to experience, its polemical intransigence.” O’Casey, of course, was a great experimenter and the idea of experimentation was always important to him. In The Green Crow, apropos of critics who mourned the demise of the “true O’Casey,” he writes, anticipating Chase’s remarks: “Dramatists cannot go on imitating themselves, and, when they get tired of that, imitating others. They must change, must experiment, must develop their power, or try to, if the drama is to live.” Poggioli also notes the fascination of avant-garde artists with communism as a political experiment. O’Casey shared this fascination and claimed to be a communist, although it is doubtful that he was ever a card-carrying member of the party. Thus, besides manifestations of the major moments of the avant-garde, O’Casey displays some of the miscellaneous attributes of the avant-garde spirit as well.

University of Idaho
Moscow