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From Pastness to Wholeness: Stewart Parker's Reinventing Theatre

by CLAUDIA W. HARRIS

Perhaps no other playwright has exerted more effort than Stewart Parker to clarify what theatre could and should do for Northern Ireland. In his prefaces and critical writings as well as in his plays, Parker has unequivocally stated his beliefs. He has used recent as well as much earlier events as the subject of his drama in an effort to break free of the past, or to use Parker's own words: "When we come to offer the audience an image of wholeness, we can cease the task of picking over the entrails of the past, and begin to hint at a vision of the future" (*Dramatis Personae*, 19). In his "image of wholeness," Parker seems to yearn for a unified presentation of self for his culturally polarized country, a pulling together of all the many competing views of Ireland, a presentation that would both respect and delight in diversity, a future that would allow for cooperation rather than insist on extinction, a movement from pastness to wholeness. In *Dramatis Personae*, his John Malone Memorial Lecture at Queen's University in 1986, he also calls for reinventing theatre during this process of interpreting the events: "New forms are needed, forms of inclusiveness. The drama constantly demands that we reinvent it, that we transform it with new ways of showing, to cater adequately to the unique plight in which we find ourselves" (20). The *apostrophe s* in the subtitle of this essay stands for both a contraction and a possessive—meaning not only that Stewart Parker is rethinking theatre but that this discussion deals with his rethinking type of theatre.

Parker's expectation that Irish theatre might create harmony through shared experience is consistent with theatre's ritual beginnings, with its mythic, death-and-rebirth theme. Certainly, the aspiration that theatre might prove to be the means for a lasting peace must seem overstated when the warring groups are involved in such a long-term conflict as that waged in Northern Ireland, especially when the various groups in the North view even talking together as a dangerous activity. But the effect theatre has on its audience is quite subtle, and perhaps the effect is both cumulative and unquantifiable. Theatre is often viewed as threatening because it explores in any particular culture, according to Richard Schechner, what is "problematical, taboo, difficult, liminal and dangerous" (*Essays on Performance Theory*, 164). Sometimes theatre can even become a rehearsal for revolution as politics takes the stage, repeatedly confronts difficult issues, and works to change attitudes and behavior. And Ireland is virtually unique in a troubled world because theatre plays such a large part in its expression of self. Theatre in Ireland is talk of the most dangerous kind: entertaining,

seductive, insidious, subtle, powerful. Using what is an inherently appealing medium, playwrights might actually be able to effect change, regardless of how impossible quantifying that change proves to be. Theatre speaks a language that cannot be ignored; it is dangerous talk that people even pay to hear.

Even though Stewart Parker moved to Edinburgh in 1978 and, when the demands of his work required, on to London, Northern Ireland was never far from his consciousness. In the Preface to his six-part television series *Lost Belongings*, which aired during April and May 1987, he admits: "I can freely own up that the audience with which I was first and foremost concerned in everything I have ever written was my own people, the people of Northern Ireland, Ulster, the Six Counties, Lilliput, a place so fundamentally factional that it can't even agree on a name for itself" (7). In *Dramatis Personae*, Parker also discusses the difficulties of being a Northern Irish playwright, passionately emphasizing the necessity for vital theatre there in "Lilliput":

Writing about and from within this particular place and time is an enterprise full of traps and snares. The raw material of drama is over-abundant here, easy pickings. Domestic bickering, street wit, tension in the shadows, patrolling soldiers, a fight, an explosion, a shot, a tragic death: another Ulster Play written. What statement has it made? That the situation is grim, that Catholics and Protestants hate each other, that it's all shocking and terribly sad, but that the human spirit is remarkably resilient for all that.

Such a play certainly reflects aspects of life here. But it fails to reflect adequately upon them. To borrow . . . from Brecht: "If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors." Documentary journalism can reflect with accuracy real lives being lived. Art amplifies and distorts, seeking to alter perceptions to a purpose. A play which reinforces complacent assumptions, which confirms lazy preconceptions, which fails to combine emotional honesty with coherent analysis, which goes in short for the easy answer, is in my view actually harmful.

And yet if ever a time and place cried out for the solace and rigour and passionate rejoinder of great drama, it is here and now. There is a whole culture to be achieved. The politicians, visionless almost to a man, are withdrawing into their sectarian stockades. It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which the society can begin to hold up its head in the world. (18-19)

Parker was devoted to creating this model of wholeness. His work will be seen as a major contribution to that new vision of Northern Ireland which he now must trust to other artists to complete. Stewart Parker died on 2 November 1988 of a recurrence of the cancer that had claimed his leg at nineteen. Dead at forty-seven, he leaves a body of work that would make a writer twice his age seem prolific.

Opinion about theatre in Northern Ireland seems as polarized as the society itself. It is seen either as inconsequential, as the useless activity of frivolous artists, or, at the other extreme, as the one possible avenue for changing attitudes and bringing about cultural understanding. Theatre is either largely ignored or treated as a powerful, often dangerous, medium. The importance of theatre to the community in the North lies somewhere between these extremes. Drama might be trivialized in Ireland just because of its familiarity, because it is so widespread, because everyone sees himself or herself as an actor or a writer; so, therefore, how can such a commonplace activity be special? But despite a possibly skewed sense of its importance, theatre is one of the best ways to gain access to the deep concerns of Irish culture.

Although Parker's writing is filled with sacrificial images and ghosts from the past, those images are always part of an effort to create some more workable present. Despite his understanding of the power of sacrifice for the Irish, Parker calls for a type of theatre in *Dramatis Personae* that offers an alternative to martyrdom. Since he is also "a strong adherent of fun," he believes that the play impulse can mediate and offer an alternative to continual sacrifice. Theatre then can reinvent myth: "Alternate versions of the historical myths sacred to each of the communities have been staged . . . out of a desire to substitute vibrant and authentic myths for the false and destructive ones on which we have been weaned. . . . But I suspect that the useful time for history plays will draw to a close in due course. The challenge will be to find a belief in the future . . . to inspire rather than to instruct, to offer ideas and attitudes in a spirit of critical enquiry . . . and above all to assert the primacy of the play-impulse over the death-wish" (19-20). Parker's work might fulfill that hope because he creatively explores the myths in his plays, but he recasts them using his "special mirrors" to achieve a new Northern culture. His purpose is "to alter perceptions," to avoid the "easy answer," to explode "lazy preconceptions," to "combine emotional honesty with cogent analysis" (19). Again and again, Parker shows that martyrdom leads to death, not rebirth. He moves in his art from an emphasis on pastness to wholeness.

Parker's *Lost Belongings* is the best of the more than thirty literary translations of the Deirdre myth and offers a compelling commentary on present-day Northern Ireland. Filmed by Euston Films for Thames Television, the series aired from 9 to 10 p.m. on successive Tuesdays from 7 April through 12 May 1987. In his original treatment for the series, Parker gave this justification for the approach: "Although a modern audience would be unaware of the source, I'm convinced that stories as timeless as this one contain a universal resonance which lends them infinitely more value than a merely anecdotal narrative" (*Lost Belongings*, 4-5). That resonance, though perhaps subliminal, is extremely powerful for an Irish audience when confronted with this myth about the fall of Ulster. Seeing themselves poised on the brink of disaster, many in Northern Ireland are preoccupied with apocalyptic imagery anyway. The Deirdre myth then gives flesh to that fear.

Parker imbues Deirdre with sensitivity and an artistic nature beyond the requirements of the myth. Right after her uncle Roy Connell makes still another awkward sexual advance, Parker shows Deirdre crying and writing on toilet paper. But she flushes what she has written before her uncle can find it, as he did her diary. She is displaying, Parker explained to me, the "primal artistic impulse," writing because she has to but with no hope of an audience: "I keep a flower that burns in me and I keep a flame that blooms in me, and it won't be plucked and it won't be put out, not by his hands pawing me and his boozy breath smothering me and not by all their fists hammering at me and all their voices deafening me" (23-24). This lyrical sentence introduces the primary image in the series: fire. For Parker, fire represents creativity or life—the fire that blooms in Deirdre. But fire is also destructive. Deirdre is a child of the fire because as a baby

she was rescued from the blaze that consumed her parents. And then Deirdre literally sets herself ablaze when she can no longer tolerate her uncle's cruel captivity. This death-fire image fulfills the dictates of the myth: Fergus burned Emain Macha, the sacred center of Ulster, in retaliation when Conor killed the sons of Usnach. Both life-fire and death-fire permeate the series as well as much of Parker's other work.

Typical of both man and artist, Parker's first publication was a booklet in the Belfast Festival Poets' Series called *The Casualty Meditates Upon His Journey*. But then Parker used not only his cancer but all of his experiences positively. He was born in 1941 in the Sydenham area of East Belfast into an average Unionist family but which, according to Parker, was not hardline. He had links to both Harland and Woolf and the Shorts, where a brother still works. He claimed that Sydenham/Ballymacarrett was good fostering for a writer: "You had to struggle with the place because you were told you were British with an allegiance to a monarch, yet there was a feeling that you were Irish. If you managed to get through it, there was a great advantage to draw from such a background and to be able to write British as well as Irish characters. It gave me a wider canvas on which to paint."

He used his time at Queen's University well also. Starting in 1959 and studying English, he did not let his cancer deter him from his BA and then an MA in Poetic Drama. Seamus Heaney, writing for the *Sunday Independent* on 6 November 1988, recalls:

I still remember with particular affection and a pang of vicarious pride the moment when Stewart rose to read his poems at the first meeting of Philip Hobsbaum's poetry "Group". He was encumbered then by the artificial aluminum leg he had worn since his second year at Queen's. . . . In spite of this, he lurched formally and significantly to his feet, a move which in retrospect gains great symbolic power. It was a signal of personal victory, of the triumph of artistic utterance over demeaning circumstances, of the possibility of genial spirits in the face of destructive events. As such it had a meaning not only for himself but for the imaginative and spiritual life of Northern Ireland as a whole over the two decades that were to come. . . . He stood for that victory over the negative aspects of Ulster experience which everyone wants to believe is possible.

After five years in the United States, Parker decided that teaching was not what he wanted to do with his life, and he returned to Belfast in 1969 to write. Several of his radio plays were produced by the BBC in Belfast. Nonetheless, *Spokesong* was refused in 1974 both in Belfast and in Edinburgh. It was a sensation, however, at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1975 and continued to pay the bills as late as 1987 when Stewart expressed to me great affection for that particular play. Parker won the London *Evening Standard* Award as the most promising playwright in 1976. During the next twelve short years, he fulfilled the promise that the Award recognized. *Catchpenny Twist* followed in 1977, *Nightshade* in 1980, and *Pratt's Fall* in 1982.

The publication in 1989 of Parker's final three stage plays, *Three Plays for Ireland*, clearly establishes his honesty, riskiness, and excellence as a playwright. *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies*, and *Pentecost* were conceived and written between 1983 and 1987 in consecutive order and as a common enterprise.

Parker rewrote *Heavenly Bodies* just before his death. Never easy on either his audience or his culture, Parker demonstrates with these plays just how adventurous an artist and a commentator he is. He refers to these three history plays as a triptych, saying that trilogy is too strong a word for their relationship. Instead, triptych implies that one is hinged to the other, that each is dependent but also independent of the other two. In his Introduction, Parker describes the plays as “three self-contained groups of figures, from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, hinged together in a continuing comedy of errors” (9).

Parker explains the three plays’ differing styles by saying that *Northern Star* uses *pastiche* as a strategy, *Heavenly Bodies* is a *collage* of sorts, and *Pentecost* is written in *heightened realism* (10). What Parker calls pastiche is his imitation of Joyce’s technique in the “Oxen of the Sun” section of *Ulysses*. Joyce there illustrates the literary history of the English language; here, Parker traces Irish theatre history. By writing each scene of *Northern Star* in a different theatrical style, Parker doesn’t just tell the history of the 1798 uprising but shows the development of Irish playwriting as well—from Sheridan, Goldsmith, Boucicault, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O’Casey, and Behan to Beckett. Parker admitted to me that the Joycean association was self-conscious; in the kitchen of his Putney-London home hung a life-size poster of James Joyce as a young man.

Northern Star begins with the failure of the 1798 uprising, and then in a series of flashbacks tells the story of that fall. Parker’s love for Belfast comes through in the words he gives Henry Joy McCracken, one of Wolfe Tone’s compatriots in 1798:

Why would one place break your heart more than another? A place like of that? Brain-damaged and dangerous, continuously violating itself, a place of perpetual breakdown, incompatible voices screeching obscenely away through the smoky dark wet. Burnt out and still burning. Nerve-damaged, pitiable. Frightening. As maddening and tiresome as any other pain-obsessed cripple. And yet what would this poor fool not give to be able to walk freely again from Stranmillis down to Ann Street . . . cut through Pottinger’s Entry and across the road for a drink in Peggy’s . . . to dander on down Waring Street and examine the shipping along the river, and back on up to our old house. . . . We can’t love it for what it is, only for what it might have been, if we’d got it right, if we’d made it whole. If. It’s a ghost town now and always will be, angry and implacable ghosts. Me condemned to be one of their number. We never made a nation. Our brainchild. Stillborn. Our own fault. We botched the birth. (75)

Unlike others, who see only the beast, Stewart Parker sees the slouching “terrible beauty” that is Northern Ireland.

The Lyric Players Theatre in Belfast commissioned *Northern Star* and performed it in November 1984. Although aware of the limitations on what a 350-seat theatre can achieve, nearly everyone associated with the Lyric from poet John Hewitt to Ciaran McKeown told me in 1983 that they expected *Northern Star* to make a political difference in Northern Ireland because it would show a time when Catholics and Protestants worked together for reform. Parker was somewhat bemused in 1987 when I shared with him the high expectations for his play. Certainly, the redemption of Northern Ireland has not occurred yet, despite this production.

Parker's usual anti-heroic, anti-martyr tone is evident very early in the play when McCracken practices his speech for the gallows. His final words are both a reconstruction and a deconstruction of the words of other Irish martyrs:

Citizens of Belfast, the story so far. I stand here before you on the gallows tree, condemned to die for your sake.

I stand guilty of nurturing a brotherhood of affection between the Catholics of this town and my fellow Protestants.

I stand guilty of cherishing the future happiness of our country above that of my insignificant self.

I go willingly to my death in the true faith of a Presbyterian, confident in the blind belief that you will all unite together in freedom this week next week sometime never and I hope you folk at the back can hear me, then and not till then let my autograph be given, R. I. P., no flowers at the house please, notice the rope, by the way, best quality sisal, sixpence the yard, from my father's own ropeworks, orders to be taken immediately following the execution, thanks for nothing. (14-15)

Heroic sacrifice, the idea of winning through losing—these are the false and destructive myths that Parker explodes. He misses no opportunity to show that valuing the artistic failure in life or on stage is another “blind belief.”

Heavenly Bodies, the second in the triptych, begins with playwright Dion Boucicault's death and then through speeded-up flashbacks shows the story of Boucicault's fall. The play is a Faustian debate between Boucicault and his nemesis, the singer Johnnie Patterson, who uses every dodge to get him down to hell. Finally, the frustrated Patterson says to Boucicault: “God, but you're a prize turn . . . as if heaven had any interest in the likes of you and me! We're show people, Boosy. Not legitimate. Heaven is for poetasters and verse dramatists, fellows that paint in water- colours—Englishmen and such like. You wouldn't even like it there” (85). Parker's wry smile is clearly visible in lines like these; he is standing very close behind these characters. It's Boucicault's finest scene by his own assessment, the wake from *The Shaughraun*, that finally redeems him and sends him off to heaven.

Pentecost, the third and last play in the series, begins with the Ulster Workers Council strike in 1974 and the fall of the power-sharing executive. It focuses on a derelict house where four derelict, fallen people collect to escape the chaos of Belfast: Lenny Harrigan; his chum Peter, just back from England; Lenny's estranged wife, Marian; and her friend Ruth, a battered wife. Lily, the ghost of the former tenant, haunts the house as well. Each of the characters, including the house, reveals desperate stories which relate their internal exile to the riot situation outside. And each is in a way an aspect of Stewart Parker: Lily as historian; Lenny as quick wit; Peter as brittle commentator; Marian as *bricoleur*; Ruth as evangelist. Lenny and Marian's son Christopher, whom they named for Christ, died suddenly in his crib, and with him their love died also. Here at last in this battered house, they come together again. Their love and their lives are redeemed in Marian's words: “The christ in him absorbed into the christ in me. We have got to love that in ourselves. In ourselves first and then in them. That's the only future there is. I want to live now. . . . We have committed sacrilege enough on life, in this place, in these times. We don't just owe it to ourselves, we

owe it to our dead too . . . our innocent dead" (207-08).

The fall of man and his hoped-for redemption is the theme that ties these three plays together. But then this universal theme unites all of Parker's work; his art sings redemption. In *Dramatis Personae* he says: "I am much obsessed by death; and by the spiritual void from which many of us have to confront it. Images present themselves to me in this regard which are beyond rationality, dragged on to the stage from the very borders of consciousness, powerfully charged for me in a way I cannot define" (17). These words are especially poignant considering his recent death. These powerful images might explain the long parade of ghosts in Parker's plays. He calls ghosts "uncompleted souls": "Plays and ghosts have a lot in common. The energy which flows from some intense moment of conflict in a particular time and place seems to activate them both. Plays intend to achieve resolution, however, whilst ghosts appear to be stuck fast in the quest for vengeance" (*Three Plays*, 9). Ironically, Parker's own ghost has now joined the ghosts in his plays; it is nearly impossible to read his drama without feeling his presence, not a vengeful presence but not a benevolent one either. His shade cries out for resolution.

Not content to give us only his carefully reinvented brand of history, Parker also gives us himself. These three plays, along with being the story of his homeland, are also Parker's autobiography. Each play's central character shares important characteristics with his creator. *Northern Star's* Henry Joy McCracken, a minor figure in the 1798 uprising, shares Parker's culture: "Look at me. My great-grandfather Joy was a French Huguenot, my great-grandfather McCracken was a Scottish Covenanter, persecuted, the pair of them, driven here from the shores of home, their home but not my home, because I'm here to stay, a natural son of Belfast, as Irish a bastard as all other incomers, blown into this port by the storm of history" (17).

Heavenly Bodies' Dion Boucicault, a major figure in the minor Victorian theatre, shares Parker's career: "I knew in my bones the meaning of enslavement and dispossession, I carried the stigmata of a supposed child of nature, of an artist amongst the barbarians, of a licensed song-and-dance man for the British Empire. . . . I have worked every day of my life and most nights, work is the one thing that gives this life an illusion of meaning" (121).

Pentecost's Lenny, a minor figure during the 1974 workers' strike, shares Parker's personality and beliefs: "I'll tell you exactly what he [Christ] would do, he'd close down every church and chapel, temple and tabernacle in the whole island, put them to the torch, burn them into rubble, turf the congregations out, priests and pastors first, and drive them up into the mountains, up to the boniest, bleakest stretches of the Sperrins and the Mourmes, and he'd flay them into the rock, until Christianity was scourged out of the very marrow of their bones, he'd expunge religion once and for all from off the face of this country, until the people could discover no mercy except in each other, no belief except to believe in each other, no forgiveness but what the other would forgive, until they cried out in the dark for each other and embraced their own humanity . . . that's the only redemption he'd offer them. Never mind believing in Jesus Christ. That's the

point at which Jesus Christ might just begin to believe in us" (206-07).

So redemption for Parker clearly lies not in religion but in humanity; in the mercy, belief, forgiveness, and love his people can offer each other. His righteous anger at the sins perpetrated in Northern Ireland in the name of religion is clear, not only in Lenny's words but in Parker's conversation. This wonderful image of driving the priests and pastors into the mountains is like Christ clearing the temple of moneylenders or St. Patrick clearing the island of snakes. Parker cries for the innocents like Deirdre or Christopher. *Pentecost* is about healing rifts. But because *Pentecost* challenges us to give up worn-out symbols, to get past animosities, to believe that an image of wholeness is possible, audiences may not be ready for Parker's message. Parker, while seeing the faults of Northern Ireland, believes firmly in redemption.

Pentecost reflects the only possible hope: the warmth and wittiness and humanity of Northern Ireland individuals. And Parker's work will be seen as a major contribution to a new image for Northern Ireland. It seems artistically appropriate that Parker's final image is pentecostal fire, that fire of the spirit. His work glows with images of life-fire in opposition to death-fire. In *Lost Belongings* Parker recasts Deirdre, a central Irish myth, into authentic modern terms, but in *Pentecost* he presents a new model for wholeness. Here life is offered as an alternative to death. Pentecost, with the Holy Ghost resting on their heads like tongues of fire, adds a spiritual dimension to Parker's fire imagery. Marian becomes the Deirdre who can decide to live, who recognizes martyrdom as death not rebirth.

Life-fire is the choice Parker wants his Northern Irish countrymen and women to make, and he models the reconciliation. Torch, burn, turf, drive, flay, scourge, expunge every old view, every old hurt, every old story, every old way of treating each other, until they cry out in the dark and embrace humanity, until they can move from pastness to wholeness. In *Heavenly Bodies* Boucicault declares: "There is no shred of virtue in being a victim—history disables all of us, in whatever fashion, it's the use to which we put our disabilities, that's virtue—not how much we suffer them—it's how we act upon them!" (104). This refusal to endorse the victim or the Irish attempt to win through losing recalls Seamus Heaney's vision of Parker as he lurched triumphantly to his feet to share his poetry. That is all Parker asks of his native land—to stand up and act creatively on its disabilities.

In *Heavenly Bodies* Boucicault complains that the older actors wanted him to write exit lines for them; otherwise they felt stranded and could not leave the stage. In fact, that is the hell awaiting Boucicault: "All your celebrated performances . . . you'll be repeating them all, *ad infinitum*, only difference being, there's no exits anymore . . . and no audience, of course. That's the meaning of limbo in show business. On for the duration, all by yourself" (115). The image of being forever unable to leave the stage made me look for the exit lines that Parker unintentionally wrote for himself, and this discussion of his plays includes many of them. The last line in *Pentecost*, Parker's final play, comes from the second chapters of Acts: "Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my

tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell” (208). Even though unwitting, that is a wonderful exit line. Finally, Parker, like Boucicault, is redeemed by his art.

Through drama, Stewart Parker wanted to help his countrymen stop “picking over the entrails of the past, and begin to hint at a vision of the future” (*Dramatis Personae*, 19). The worst hell for him is endlessly repeating performances, but alone, without an audience and with no escape from the stage. Not being able to leave the stage may be the worst hell for the politicians in Ireland as well. Employing the image of the world as a stage emphasizes the pervasiveness of the theatrical metaphor in Ireland. In *Northern Star* Henry Joy McCracken says: “Haven’t we always been on a stage, in our own eyes? Playing to the gods. History, posterity. A rough, hard audience. Thundering out our appointed parts” (18). Parker recognizes the futility, the circularity of those roles, of how rough it is to be caught in the loneliness of that thundering self-performance, of the poses and the masks, of the endlessly repeated battles. He has tried to offer his audiences redemption from that isolation, from that particular hell, by offering a new image of wholeness, a new way to reach out to each other in mercy. His reinventing is truly dangerous talk, however. It would require forgiving rather than remembering, giving rather than withholding, loving rather than hating.

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