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'Och sure open the aul' mouth there sure. Just for the crack you know': Language and Existential Unrest in Modern Irish Tragicomedy

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Abstract

Though they may be the source of considerable amusement to audiences, tragicomic characters do not tend to use the word 'comic' to describe the fraught realities of their own lives. Indeed, the very task of finding an appropriate vocabulary to define their angst is one that poses substantial difficulties. There is an inner fragility behind a superficially comic veneer; the challenge for the playwright is to articulate this anxiety. This essay examines characters who are attempting to assess their place in a world with which they are fundamentally out of sync and, in doing so, tracks the difficulties they encounter in communicating this turmoil. In exploring how Ireland has grappled with its own fluctuating sense of identity throughout history, the essay begins by identifying some comparisons between a national mood of existential unrest and the characteristic traits of the tragicomic genre. While tragicomedy is not exclusive to Irish theatre, it resonates time and again in the works of the nation's dramatists. Its significance will be investigated in three plays by three Irish playwrights: David Ireland's Cyprus Avenue, Martin McDonagh's The Beauty Queen of Leenane, and Enda Walsh's The Walworth Farce. This essay makes a case for the plays' similarities in their use – and abuse – of language as a constituent part of the tragicomic genre and argues that the violence inflicted upon language is an extension of the violence witnessed onstage. Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, and the form's theories on the limitations of language, will be invoked as a point of reference for the plays. The resentment that results from the characters' common experiences as outsiders in their respective communities demonstrates how internalised feelings of inferiority pave the way for a specific kind of restlessness – unmoored and volatile – that acts as a catalyst for the savagery that ensues. The essay concludes with an assessment of the role of laughter in circumstances wherein responses expressed through language alone are ultimately inadequate.

Keywords: Irish drama; Tragicomedy; Existentialism; Comedy; Theatre; Drama

An investigation into the notion of Irishness and how its appellation has evolved over the last few decades may be prismatically broken down by analysing several of the factors contributing to its modern conception. Contemporary interpretations of Irish identity are indebted to the swift succession of developments precipitated by an unstable political climate, economic

growth, recession, and the Northern Irish peace process, with these vicissitudes necessitating both a re-assessment of what Irish drama scholar Patrick Lonergan identifies as the 'many contradictory versions of Irish identity that are now available', and an acknowledgement of the difficulty of distilling from this complexity a 'single narrative to explain an identity that has become diffuse'.[1] Diagnosing this condition of flux, Nicholas Grene writes, 'As the partitioned island has continued to manifest symptoms of its fractured state, so the dramatists have returned repeatedly to probe and examine, to attempt therapies of self-analysis'.[2] In determining what it is that defines Irish identity, it has become a duty of the playwright to use the stage as a platform to work through existential themes of belonging and selfhood. As notable contributors to this dramaturgical movement of state introspection, the playwrights David Ireland, Martin McDonagh, and Enda Walsh challenge the myth of a homogeneous Irish identity by collectively representing a triadic intersection of cross-cultural perspectives. A diversity in their respective theatrical visions is validated on the basis of their own eclectic biographical circumstances and, as a result, qualifies their interrogative approach towards the subject. David Ireland's Belfast upbringing and subsequent involvement with theatre companies in England and Scotland correspond to Martin McDonagh's dual nationality as an Anglo-Irishman and Enda Walsh's successive relocations from Dublin to Cork to London – his arrival at the British capital guaranteeing access to the perspectives unique to those of an Irish émigré – and unite the three contemporary dramatists under a category of cultural hybridity in relation to modern configurations of Irishness.

In his recognition of some of the characteristics shared between early incarnations of tragicomedy during the Renaissance period and its presence in modern theatre, Richard Dutton interprets the tragicomic form as a mode of

> ritual drama trying to come to terms with the perplexing forces (both within and without) that direct our existence; characters are notoriously unable or unwilling to communicate, often seeming less than full individuals; the language becomes incoherent, inanely repetitive or self-reflective.[3]

Drawing on this interpretation of the genre, and with a primary focus on Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) alongside supporting analyses of McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) and Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (2006), this essay will examine the dilemma of what is, in the experience of the featured characters, the profoundly difficult task of consolidating a sense of self within a climate that has, to some extent, left them behind. By doing so, it will argue that the tragicomic form is the genre most suited to the challenge of representing this existential unease, therefore substantiating the claim that the dramatisation of modern Ireland's restless national psyche is most faithfully realised in tragicomedy. Language and the means of articulating this inner turmoil are central to the exploration. Marked by a distinctive vulnerability, the verbal impediments that afflict tragicomic characters show how emotional torment plays a pivotal role in shaping their characteristically brittle identities. In the case of each of these three plays, the tragicomic form reflects an underlying crisis of selfhood, frequently manifested as a prevailing linguistic anxiety, which highlights the absurdity of speech while simultaneously providing plentiful opportunity for comic relief amidst comparatively sombre themes.

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[1] Patrick Lonergan, 'The Laughter Will Come of Itself. The Tears are Inevitable', *Modern Drama* 47, no. 4 (2004): 652.
[2] Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 267.
[3] Richard Dutton, *Modern Tragicomedy and the British Tradition: Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, Albee and Storey* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), 15.

All three plays are topographically marked with careful precision. Whether it is Cyprus Avenue in Belfast, Leenane in North County Galway, or Walworth Road in London, the deliberate incorporation of real place names into the titles situate them instantly. However, by delineating a distinct locale, the 'unreal' elements of the plays and the characters themselves are disproportionately heightened. The establishment of a recognisable environment probes a variety of realism that grants the audience access to an identifiable location while utilising the tragicomic form as an internal means of disorientation once they have been convinced of the setting's authenticity. In her comprehensive study of tragicomedy's history, Verna A. Foster writes that

> Realism enables the audience to identify with the characters, feel empathy with their suffering, and recognize what is tragic in their experience. Comedy creates distance, blocks a fully tragic response, and elicits laughter that at once complicates and protects the audience's experience of the tragic.[4]

This apparent disjunction between the realm of the real and that of the illusory is a dichotomy that permeates the three plays and exemplifies Foster's observation that characters in tragicomedy are often 'comic in their fantasies, tragic in the realities of their lives'.[5]

In *Cyprus Avenue*, comedy is predicated on the use, or indeed misuse, of language. This linguistic manipulation may be tied to a regional tradition of semantic scepticism. As Anthony Roche notes, 'Structurally, Northern Irish drama moves in opposition to the well-made play, emphasising instead discontinuity, fragmentation and juxtaposition. It is extremely sceptical with regard to language and language's implicit claim to validate reality'.[6] Eric's outright articulation of generally unspeakable words dislocates audience expectation and compromises what might otherwise be depicted as innocent exchanges with those around him. Evidence of malicious intent behind this unrestrained use of explicit language is not entirely clear, however. When questioned by his therapist, Bridget, as to why he feels compelled to include a racial slur in his inquiry into the nature of her ancestral identity, he cannot provide a coherent answer:

> **Bridget** Do you think that word is appropriate? In this situation?
> **Eric** Yes. No. Yes. No. [7]

His inability to detect wrongdoing after this utterance reflects both a fundamental dissonance of communication and a loosening hold on the standard mores of conversation.

Eric's use of a misogynistic smear against his own daughter is another example of his penchant for insult, and the response to it is one of perplexed frustration:

> **Bernie** He's not joking!
> **Eric** I'm really not.
> **Julie** Well you're sort of joking.
> **Eric** No. I'm not.[8]

His repeated assurances of sincerity undermine the acknowledgement of misconduct that follows shortly afterwards:

> **Eric** You're right, love. I don't know why I said that word. I'm sorry Julie. [9]

[4] Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 119.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 217.
[7] David Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 7.
[8] Ibid., 12.
[9] Ibid., 14.

Though partially recognising the harmful capacity of these words, Eric ultimately reveals a distorted perception of the modern world, with an innocence that elicits comedic effect:

> **Eric** Everything is upside down. Nothing is what it claims to be. It's like you just said a minute ago. Chaos is majesty. Love is degradation. And the world has become a travesty.
> **Bridget** That's not what I said.
> **Eric** Was it wrong for me to say that word?
> **Bridget** I think you know it was wrong.
> **Eric** I don't know anything anymore.[10]

Accompanying this linguistic anxiety is a desire to channel a suppressed internal voice, whose existence Eric discloses to the eccentric, self-titled UVF terrorist, Slim. In his countenancing of infanticide, Eric launches into a defence of the planned murder of his granddaughter by addressing Slim's patriotic duty to Ulster:

> Will we be damned for this action? Perhaps. Yes perhaps, Slim. What are our sins? Murder? Infanticide? Placing love of country before obedience to God's commandments? We say 'For God and Ulster'… I have devoted my life to God. Or tried to, to the best of my abilities. But I love Ulster more. It shames me to say it but if I have to choose between God and Ulster, I choose Ulster. And if I am damned for love of Ulster, then I accept my damnation with pride. There's a voice in my head, Slim. Is there a voice in your head?[11]

Vocal constriction ironically results from Eric's attempts at mediating a voice to which he is desperately trying to supply volume. His uncensored verbal barrage of patriotic platitudes represents an effort to mask the absence of meaningful expression, and consequently highlights the futility of language as it is presented to him.

Such an approach to language has curious parallels with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. In his essay, 'Things That No One Can Say: The Unspeakable Act in Artaud's *Les Cenci*', Robert Vork analyses how Artaud's play faithfully showcases elements of the theatrical form from which it derives. In examining the role of language as a medium for illustrating the play's tragic themes, largely pertaining to the Cenci family downfall, Vork argues that 'By saying "everything that they think" – that is, by saying literally everything that can possibly be said – Artaud's characters reveal the absolute limits of what their language is capable of expressing'.[12] Similarly, Eric's reckless invocation of obscenities starkly juxtaposes his inability to explain the personal crisis he experiences:

> **Julie** Dad. Are you ok?
> **Eric** Yeah. I'm fine. No. I'm not.[13]

While this inconsistency of expression might be outwardly amusing, further inspection has the potential to reveal evidence of underlying trauma. Eric's verbal difficulties are intertextually supported by the lyrics of Van Morrison's 'Cyprus Avenue', a song whose title was assumedly a source of inspiration for the playwright. Heard twice during the play, the song's lyrics provide a counterpart to the recurring motif of Eric's inarticulation:

> Yeah, my t-tongue gets tied
> Every, every, every time I try to speak
> My tongue gets tied

[10] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 7.
[11] Ibid., 67–68.
[12] Robert Vork, 'Things That No One Can Say: The Unspeakable Act in Artaud's Les Cenci', *Modern Drama* 56, no. 3 (2013): 311.
[13] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 54.

Every time I try to speak[14]

As the lyrics foreshadow Eric's descent into chaos, 'I may go crazy / Before that mansion on the hill',[15] Ireland's play becomes thematically bound to a song described by Peter Crawley as 'a study in dark flirtations, obsession, perhaps madness'.[16]

Silence has a spatial resonance, infusing throughout the play in a manner that is textured and lurking. During Eric's first appearance on stage, he is mute:

> **Eric***'s living room in Cyprus Avenue, East Belfast. A Muzak version of Van Morrison's 'Cyprus Avenue' plays in the background.*
> **Eric** *sits on a chair. He looks lost.*
> **Bernie** *enters, well-dressed, putting on earrings, ready to go out.*
> **Bernie** What are you doing?
> **Eric** *looks at her.*
> **Bernie** What are you doing sitting there doing nothing?
>
> *He looks at her dumbfounded.*[17]

Roche observes that

> Northern Irish plays remain acutely conscious of the fact that theatre is not an exclusively verbal medium but the space of carnal immediacy, where the word is tested by its ability to be made flesh. On its stage the living are confronted by the dead; speech is challenged by silence.[18]

Eric's initial paralysis and silence vigorously oppose his later violence and extremity of speech. The weight of the Unionist tradition is palpably felt, and it is in his reflection on the sacrifice of his forefathers for this cause that Eric feels obliged to carry the narrative forward to its viscerally rendered conclusion.

A communicative malaise also underscores the action of McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Pato's letter to Maureen reads as an intimate insight into the psyche because it represents a departure from the cyclical currents of communication that characterise daily interactions in rural Leenane. Unmitigated by the restraints of small-town dialogical decorum, the letter format provides Pato with the opportunity to compose writing that is, to a degree, more honest:

> **Pato** Dear Maureen, it is Pato Dooley and I'm writing from London, and I'm sorry it's taken so long to write to you but to be honest I didn't know whether you wanted me to one way or the other, so I have taken it upon myself to try and see. There are a lot of things I want to say but I am no letter-writer but I will try to say them if I can.[19]

Pato's awkwardly accumulating prose and expressions of affection are superficially comical, but ultimately the stuttering attempts at explaining his impotence on the night of their brief tryst reveal a somewhat tragic undertone of vulnerability:

> And I *did* think you were a beauty queen and I *do* think, and it wasn't anything to do with that at all or with you at all, I think you thought it was. All it was, it has happened to me a couple of times before when I've had a drink taken and was nothing to do with did I want to. I would have

[14] Van Morrison, 'Cyprus Avenue', *Astral Weeks*, 1968, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8jPDdHd9y8 (accessed 26 March 2018).
[15] Morrison, 'Cyprus Avenue'.
[16] Peter Crawley, 'Stephen Rea: "I can't imagine teams of loyalists rolling up to watch it"', *The Irish Times*, 6 February 2016, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/stephen-rea-i-can-t-imagine-teams-of-loyalists-rolling-up-to-watch-it-1.2522706 (accessed 18 March 2018).
[17] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 5.
[18] Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 217.
[19] Martin McDonagh, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 1999), 34.

been honoured to be the first one you chose, and flattered, and the thing that I'm saying, I was honoured then and I am still honoured, and just because it was not to be that night, does it mean it is not to be ever?[20]

Lonergan notes the tendency of McDonagh's language to play 'into the contradictory stereotypes: his characters' dialogue is engaging but inarticulate, which means that people can simultaneously believe that the Irish are a nation of poets while also believing we are a nation of "feckin eejits"', which facilitates the dual evocation of audience sympathy and ridicule.[21]

Unlike Eric, McDonagh's characters occasionally exercise restraint when it comes to articulating feelings of hostility against others:

Ray And what I thought of saying, I thought of saying, 'Up your oul hole, Mrs,' but I didn't say it, I just thought of saying it, but thinking back on it I should've gone ahead and said it and skitter on the bitch!'[22]

In this case, speech is withheld for fear of offence. In *Cyprus Avenue*, however, enunciation predominates over vocal suppression, and is at one point violently encouraged:

He presses the gun to **Eric***'s lips.*
Open your mouth. Open your fucking mouth! Open the aul' mouth. Och sure open the aul' mouth there sure. Just for the crack you know. Just for the aul' Fenian fucking crack begorrah. OPEN YOUR MOUTH! OPEN YOUR FUCKING MOUTH NOW!
Eric *doesn't open his mouth.*
Slim Well fuck.
He puts the gun in his own mouth.[23]

Accompanied by a sardonic parody of the Irish lilt, Slim's demands that Eric open his mouth equate the physical act of speech with the silencing finality of death. When Eric does open his mouth, the content is often ludicrously inconsistent:

Bridget Have you always hated Catholics?
Eric I've never hated Catholics. When have I said I hated Catholics?[24]

The answer to the question presumably posed as rhetorical is supplied soon afterwards: 'And because of where I came from, I had no choice but to hate Catholics. Because they're so easy to hate'.[25] In David Ireland's radio drama, *Not Now* (2015), this discriminatory mindset is also evident, but is likewise ambiguously articulated. On a day marking the funeral of their brother and father respectively, Vic and his nephew, Kyle, muse over themes of religion and place. Though Vic's prejudice against Catholics is blatant, he struggles to outline the reasons that substantiate it. Rather, his arguments are grounded in sweeping criticisms of their habits as a collective community: 'When one of us leaves, we consider it a great victory. But with Catholics, they leave and dream of coming back', elaborating with the view that 'They mourn this place with song and stories. We leave and assimilate'.[26] While Vic insists that the ability to move on is an exclusively Protestant trait, his unwillingness to renounce personal grudges suggests otherwise.

Christopher Murray contends that due to its history of sectarian conflict, tragedy is woven into the texture of Northern identity: 'A sense of difference, translated on one side into

[20] McDonagh, *Plays: 1*, 35.
[21] Lonergan, 'The Laughter Will Come of Itself', 651–52.
[22] McDonagh, *Plays: 1*, 39.
[23] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 72.
[24] Ibid., 26.
[25] Ibid., 34.
[26] David Ireland, 'Not Now', *BBC Radio Drama*, 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06pd8rv (accessed 26 March 2018).

a sense of superiority and on the other into a sense of grievance, created what appeared to be insoluble conflict, which is the essence of tragedy'.[27] The 'Now' present in the title of Ireland's radio drama implies a fixation on the present and reflects the tension between Kyle's desire to move beyond old resentments and his uncle's perpetuation of them. Furthermore, the preceding 'Not' may indicate a postponed bereavement. As two individuals contemplate mortality in each other's company, the drama unfolds as a lingual navigation of trauma. With its implicit emphasis on the spoken word and in the visual comparison between titles, *Not Now* arguably bears some similarities to Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972). The mouth's denial of the self-referential nature of her speech, in Beckett's play, echoes the reluctance of Ireland's characters to take advantage of the 'Now' to either address their grief, or to confront a troubled rectitude. In negotiating tragedy, oration serves its function as a purgative tool. This theme of vocal articulation might also be reminiscent of Tom Murphy's mediation of tragedy through laughter. In commenting on the presence of black comedy in Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985), Grene writes that 'The subject of the laughing-contest is also suggestive of Irish traditions of black comedy as a means of exorcising the memories of deprivation'.[28] Laughter fulfils its role as a vocalised form of catharsis.

Eric's response to Julie's probing concern results in a plea of 'Don't, don't, don't talk about the Troubles'.[29] Prior to his suicide, Slim adopts the role of counsellor and urges Eric to articulate his anxieties and, by extension, resurface buried trauma:

> **Eric** I can't say it.
> **Slim** Say it!
> **Eric** I might be Irish. I'm worried that I might be Irish.[30]

An anxiety regarding the label of Irishness manifests itself as a fervent defence of British identity:

> **Eric** The last thing I am is Irish. My grandfather was killed in the Battle of the Somme. My father died at Dunkirk. And I too would die for my right to be British … I am exclusively and non-negotiably British. I am not nor never have been nor never will be Irish.[31]

Eric actively attempts to discard traces of Irishness. After murdering his daughter, Eric's exit coincides with Ruby Murray's pertinent lyricism:

> *He steps over* **Julie***'s dead body and exits. Ruby Murray sings 'If You're Irish, Come in to the Parlour'.*[32]

He demonstrates a symbolic renunciation of Irish identity here. By ignoring the call to enter, Eric relinquishes all association, and thus the expectant parlour of Murray's song is left unentered as the scene fittingly concludes with a departure from his own.

Eric's infant granddaughter represents a physical manifestation of his dread of Irish affiliation. He confides in Slim a fear 'That my descendants will be Irish' and 'That the inevitability of a united Ireland will eradicate Ulster loyalist culture'.[33] His unfounded detection of a resemblance between Mary-May and Gerry Adams legitimises his irrational suspicion of an internally wrought invasion and stands as emblematic of a more widespread assault:

[27] Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 187.
[28] Nicholas Grene, 'Tom Murphy and the Children of Loss', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[29] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 59.
[30] Ibid., 44.
[31] Ibid., 8–9.
[32] Ibid., 63.
[33] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 44.

'Perhaps other notable Republicans are disguising themselves as babies and infiltrating Protestant homes through the province as part of a long-term strategy to destabilise the Union'.[34] This supposedly sectarian form of infiltration may also be construed as an infiltration of the largely homosocial community of a male-dominated Unionist tradition. Eric exhibits a covert mistrust of the female, as evidenced by his dissatisfaction in a female lineage:

> **Julie** Mum told me you wanted me to be a boy. Is that it? After all these years are you angry I'm a girl?[35]

The absence of a male heir ignites anxieties surrounding the future of the Unionist stronghold. Expounding on the traditional alliance between ideals of masculine heroism and patriotic zeal in his article, 'Unionism's Obsession with Masculinity Hurts its Cause', Alexander Coupe writes that 'Both nationalism and unionism tend to imagine sovereignty through images of masculine stoicism and self-discipline: the heroic dead men who risked life and limb to ensure the endurance of the symbolic social body'.[36] Preservation of this social body is contingent upon what Liam de Paor outlines as one of the central conditions of a stable Union: 'Partition gave home rule to Northern Ireland (six of Ulster's nine counties), but this could be sustained only so long as the Protestants presented themselves as a monolith'.[37] Eric fears the disintegration of this monolithic force and the potential consequences of its fall, and so his subsequent actions may be deemed representative of his bid to safeguard Unionist dominance. In resolving to murder Mary-May at the behest of an imagined call of duty, Eric justifies the act by convincing himself of the necessity of her death. By considering it a mandatory step in the continuation of a tradition of family sacrifice, he vindicates himself by arguing that the murder may be forgiven as an act of loyalty in the name of 'God and Ulster': 'What did this baby's life matter, if its death saved Ulster?'.[38] A prevailing sense of patriotic allegiance dictates the urgency of his actions:

> **Eric** I considered suicide.
> **Bridget** So what prevented you from killing yourself?
> **Eric** Well then the angel came.
> **Bridget** An angel?
> **Eric** Yes.
> **Bridget** What kind of angel?
> **Eric** A normal angel. An angel sent from above. An angel from the UVF.[39]

In a comic twist on the trope of divine intervention, the tragedy of Mary-May's fate is implicated in an atavistic assertion of identity.

With its two-part construction and shared first component, the name Mary-May vaguely resembles that belonging to Mary Lou McDonald, a figure who has since succeeded Gerry Adams as leader of Sinn Féin, and the only female leader of the party since Margaret Buckley held the position from 1937 to 1950. Though not yet leader by 2016, acknowledging her status as presumed successor in the political zeitgeist at the time of Ireland's writing may assist in contextualising Eric's incendiary paranoia. Doubly malicious as a female and a 'Fenian', Mary-May becomes the defenceless target of Eric's suspicions. The beard he draws on her represents

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[34] Ibid., 52.
[35] Ibid., 58.
[36] Alexander Coupe, 2018. 'Ulster's Obsession with Masculinity Hurts its Cause', *The Irish Times*, 3 April 2018, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/unionism-s-obsession-with-masculinity-hurts-its-cause-1.3445769 (accessed 4 April 2018).
[37] Liam de Paor, 'The Rebel Mind: Republican and Loyalist', In *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), 184.
[38] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 81.
[39] Ibid., 34.

an attempt to fix a tangible means of identification onto an idea that is inherently inchoate. To Eric, outward labels and symbols of identity are preferable to the abyss of nameless nothingness. Categorisation yields a peculiar form of buoyancy with which to keep a sense of self afloat amidst the tumultuous waters of linguistic uncertainty:

> **Eric** Is she a Unionist or a Republican?
> **Julie** She's neither! She's a little baby!
> **Eric** Will you raise her as a Unionist or a Republican?
> **Julie** I'll raise her as nothing. I'll raise her to respect all people and not judge a person on their religion or their race.
> **Eric** You'll raise her as nothing! She'll be nothing?![40]

Enda Walsh investigates a similar phenomenon in *The Walworth Farce*. The words recited during the rehearsed dialogues of Dinny, Blake and Sean are divorced from the images they intend to represent, revealing a deficit in their sense of cultural belonging and isolating what are essentially signifiers without referents:

> BLAKE. Dad all talk of Ireland, Sean. Everything's Ireland … This story we play is everything. (*A pause.*) Once upon a time my head was full of pictures of Granny's coffin and Mr and Mrs Cotter and Paddy and Vera and Bouncer the dog and all those busy pictures on our last day … But all them pictures have stopped. I say his words and all I can see is the word.[41]

Blake's detection of this loss exposes the recycled retellings of a bizarre story as feeble fronts for a family in crisis. Their dependence on the story is their only means of cultural sustenance, substituting endless recapitulations for authentic memory. Similarly, Fintan O'Toole comments in the introduction to McDonagh's play that 'Pictures and images of the landscape have replaced the thing itself', referencing the example of a Trinidadian woman who shows Maureen photos from her home – a gesture to which Maureen responds by producing a calendar picture of Connemara that 'evokes a warmth that Connemara itself cannot'.[42] The utilisation of cultural signifiers as upholders of identity emphasises how a dependency on exteriority may compensate for an underdeveloped interiority.

Hayley's assimilation into the farce, in Walsh's play, is an explicit dramatisation of the unhealthy reliance that characters in tragicomedy tend to have on the external. Her entanglement in the bizarre ritual is the result of two key developments that consolidate her role as participant in the farce, the first being her reluctant engagement with the script of the men's performance, and the second relating directly to her relationship with the moisturiser:

> DINNY *takes his moisturiser and whitens* HAYLEY*'s face.*
> That's more like it. Lovely Maureen![43]

Not only do the racial dynamics at play here add a further layer of complexity to the drama's already intricate representation of masquerade, they also convey strong allusions to the concepts put forth by postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Hayley's forced coercion into substituting for an absent Maureen signals an obfuscation of her own identity by instead imitating another's; her blackness, in Dinny's view, is remedied by the whiteness of the moisturiser. Central to Fanon's argument is the idea that language is inextricably bound to constructions of identity, as he asserts that 'mastery of language' is an integral step in the acclimation to unfamiliar environments.[44] In such settings, indulging in

[40] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 61.
[41] Enda Walsh, *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), 22.
[42] McDonagh, *Plays: 1*, xiii.
[43] Walsh, *Plays: Two*, 79.
[44] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 9.

what Lewis R. Gordon refers to as 'semiotic play' is customary.[45] In the case of *The Walworth Farce*, mastery of language may refer to Hayley's adoption of the idiosyncratic speech of the three men, thus exemplifying Fanon's claim that language itself can be used as a 'white linguistic mask'.[46]

Chris Wallace states that Walsh's plays focus on 'states of obsessive interiority, linguistic hyperawareness, and spaces of dark fantasy'.[47] This dangerous form of entrapment compromises direct engagement with reality. However, in a style mirroring Dinny's ritualistic application of moisturiser to his own skin, it may also be interpreted as self-preservation. Linda Fitzpatrick maintains that

> Walsh's characters often opt to avoid the rest of the world, burying themselves in fictions to hide from the grief and pain of life, which is expressed through the metaphors of words as methods of social control and limitation, and of stories as rigid expressions of identity and barriers to possibility. Family relationships are strongly implicated in this process.[48]

Walsh's continued fascination with the macabre qualities of the domestic demi-monde can be seen in his 2018 stage adaptation of *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, a production based on a novel of the same name by Max Porter. Cillian Murphy's character, a Ted Hughes scholar named simply as 'Dad', prowls the stage with birdlike swagger imitating the very crow that will dominate his soon-to-be published memoir on Hughes. In an adrenaline-fuelled extravaganza of nightmarish proportions, interspliced with the sonorous groan of Teho Teardo's musical score, the stagecraft ultimately plays out as a moving portrait of a widower negotiating the uncertain terrain of grief with his two small sons. Unlike those in *The Walworth Farce*, the characters in *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* succeed in escaping their self-imposed confinement.

The uncertainty arising from the indecision of whether to stay or leave is one that strongly resonates with the characters in the plays. Given the moral insouciance that plagues these individuals – each play depicts some variation of family murder – it is somewhat ironic that it is the external environment that is presented as predatory when in fact the internal space is one of marked toxicity:

> SEAN. You don't have to be scared of what's out there any more.
> BLAKE. WE BELONG IN HERE![49]

Both Grene and Lonergan comment on the affinity between Delia Murphy's 'The Spinning Wheel' and the circumstances of Mag and Maureen in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Lonergan notes that 'As the song develops, we learn that Eileen longs to escape from her grandmother's influence so that she can be with her lover'.[50] However, when the song is heard again in the final scene, it highlights how the central love story of the play is wholly eclipsed by subjects of matricide and mental illness. During its 'ironic reprise' in the aftermath of Mag's murder, Grene observes how 'The cult of Connemara and the culture of weepy Irish nostalgia are treated to a savagely sardonic iconoclasm'.[51]

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[45] Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 26.
[46] Ibid., 27.
[47] Clare Wallace, 'Irish Drama Since the 1990s: Disruptions', In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Christopher Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 542.
[48] Lisa Fitzpatrick, 'Enda Walsh', In *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*, ed. Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 443.
[49] Walsh, *Plays: Two*, 57.
[50] Patrick Lonergan, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 10.
[51] Nicholas Grene, 'Ireland in Two Minds: Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35, Irish Writing Since 1950 (2005): 301.

Characters are out of step with their contemporary realities. Slim's political vehemence typifies this, with his opportunistic entry into terrorism seen as a skewing of efforts aimed at resolve:

Slim I joined the UVF after the peace process started.[52]

Exercising recalcitrance, these characters see themselves as lone defenders of a world under threat. Eric's comically unwavering adamance of his granddaughter's Fenian identity translates into an absurd criticism of current politics:

> Now look! Don't make the mistake of mistaking this baby for a baby. I almost made that mistake. I know it looks like a baby but it's not a baby. It's the President of Sinn Fein. It's the member for Belfast West. It's the elected representative of a place called 'Louth', I don't know where that is, Bernie, somewhere in the Free State, no doubt very Fenian, if they're willing to return him to their pseudo-Parliament again and again … What kind of democratic assembly gives a baby such responsibilities anyway? What kind of ill-informed electorate do they have in that country to allow such things? They must be mad down there.[53]

He voices a scabrous, scathing contempt for what he considers the outlandish configurations of the democratic process in the 'Free State', his use of this anachronism itself a pointed expression of residual post-partition bitterness.

His transference of the label of 'mad' is illustrative of a wider pattern of misplaced designations of insanity: 'I couldn't stand the idea of losing my anal virginity so brutally. And to a man so fat and repulsive and Irish. English. Irish. English. English-Irish. Irish-English. I didn't say any of this out loud of course. He'd have thought I was insane'.[54] Indeed, much of his internal conflict arises out of the uneasy oscillation between what he perceives as fixed classifications of nationality. The understanding that identity is anything but singular is one that Bridget attempts to relay, without avail, to Eric during their session:

Bridget Identity is complex. Isn't it?[55]

In assessing the impact that the Good Friday Agreement had on national identity on its 20th anniversary and in the wake of Brexit, O'Toole claims that 'The genius of the agreement was that it took an unanswerable question and changed it. The unanswerable question was: what are you prepared to die for? A United Kingdom or a United Ireland? They were mutually exclusive concepts. The new question was not what are you prepared to die for, but what are you willing to live with'.[56] Eric is defiantly unwilling to adapt to this mentality. Eamonn Jordan writes that 'in a region where folk memories run to hundreds of years, forgetfulness can be construed as an act of treachery'.[57] Refusing to forget, Eric considers active intervention a moral obligation: a duty to defend an identity against a cultural amnesia that threatens its legacy.

As O'Toole argues that the concepts of a United Kingdom and a United Ireland are not mutually exclusive, the same might be said of tragedy and comedy. The conclusion to *Cyprus Avenue* features a troubling co-existence of the two. The violence of the finale uncomfortably juxtaposes Eric's release of stifled laughter:

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[52] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 46.
[53] Ibid., 79.
[54] Ibid., 38.
[55] Ibid., 32.
[56] Fintan O'Toole, 2018. 'The Good Friday Agreement is So Much More than a "Shibboleth"', *The Guardian*, 10 April 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/10/good-friday-agreement-brexit-identity (accessed 10 April 2018).
[57] Eamonn Jordan, *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000) 68.

Bridget Is there anything else you need to say?
Eric No. No. No.
Eric *releases a short giddy laugh. He suppresses it.*
Bridget Why do you laugh?
Eric I'd forgotten how much I enjoy saying no.
He laughs, briefly.
Blackout.
END[58]

In Vork's analysis of *Les Cenci*, he observes how the action 'is charged with crimes of such horrifying scale and violence that they cannot be assimilated fully by speech and thought. Filicide, patricide, incest, torture – all of these occur along an impossible boundary'.[59] If language is an insufficient response to Eric's abhorrent crimes, then perhaps laughter is the only appropriate vocal reply. In borrowing from Grene's analysis of McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, when confronted with tragedy of such inconceivable brutality, 'what can you do but laugh?'.[60]

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[58] Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue*, 83.
[59] Vork, 'Things That No One Can Say', 312.
[60] Grene, 'Ireland in Two Minds', 320.

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