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Samuel Beckett and the Irish Bull

A DISSERTATION

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By

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“What is that unforgettable line?” This question, asked by Winnie in Samuel Beckett’s play *Happy Days*, epitomizes an enduring tradition for a decidedly non-traditional writer—the Irish bull. As much as he tried to distance himself from it, Beckett was the product of a culture that gave birth to writers from George Farquhar to Sean O’Casey, writers who trafficked in the self-contradictory utterances known as Irish bulls. Beckett’s Irish background and his use of bulls have received scholarly scrutiny in the past, but his place in the long-running tradition of bulls in Irish literature has not been thoroughly examined. Beckett was the inheritor of a legacy that traces back to seventeenth-century joke books and eighteenth-century stage conventions, a legacy kept alive by Maria Edgeworth’s novels, Dion Boucicault’s melodramas, Oscar Wilde’s satires, and the nationalist drama of the Abbey Theatre. By abstracting his settings and characters, Beckett achieved one of the major goals of the Abbey and its Irish predecessors: to reform prejudicial stereotypes found in stage Irish buffoonery. If characters stripped of national identities can utter as many or more bulls than stage Irish characters, self-contradiction is not merely the trait of a colonial people struggling with the English language. Like his predecessors, Beckett penned bulls that transcend buffoonery and take on paradoxical meaning. And like them, he often used bulls for satirical ends, even if the targets of his satire differed. Analysis of the works of numerous Irish writers, culminating in Beckett, bears this out.
This dissertation has two main objectives: to describe a history of bulls by Irish writers; and to consider Beckett’s bulls in plays, short stories, and novels more synchronically, focusing on his era and his own writing. With Beckett’s help, the Irish bull has survived in the postmodern era as an unstable, problematic trope in an increasingly internationalized world. The chapters are as follow: Introduction; I. “Low and Pert”: Early History of the Irish Bull; II. Maria Edgeworth and Bulls in the Romantic Age; III. Boucicault and Wilde: Hiberno-Victorian Subversives; IV. “A Parrot Talks”: Bulls and the Abbey Theatre; V. Beckett’s Bulls: “A Logic in Absurdum”; and Conclusion.
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Introduction

What is that unforgettable line? (1986 Beckett 160).

This question, asked by Winnie in Samuel Beckett’s play Happy Days, epitomizes an enduring tradition for a decidedly non-traditional writer—the Irish bull. As much as he tried to distance himself from it, Beckett was the product of a culture that gave birth to writers from George Farquhar to Sean O’Casey, writers who trafficked in the self-contradictory utterances known as Irish bulls. Beckett’s Irish background and his use of bulls have received scholarly scrutiny in the past, but his place in the long-running tradition of bulls in Irish literature has not been thoroughly examined. Beckett was the inheritor of a legacy that traces back to seventeenth-century joke books and eighteenth-century stage conventions, a legacy kept alive by Maria Edgeworth’s novels, Dion Boucicault’s melodramas, Oscar Wilde’s satires, and the nationalist drama of the Abbey Theatre. By abstracting his settings and characters, Beckett achieved one of the major goals of the Abbey and its Irish predecessors: to reform prejudicial stereotypes found in stage Irish buffoonery. If characters stripped of national identities can utter as many or more bulls than stage Irish characters, self-contradiction is not merely the trait of a colonial people struggling with the English language. Like his predecessors, Beckett penned bulls that transcend buffoonery and take on paradoxical meaning. And like them, he often used bulls for satirical ends, even if the targets of his satire differed. Analysis of the works of numerous Irish writers, culminating in Beckett, will bear this out.
A Long Tradition of Self-Contradiction

Since the 1600s authors sympathetic to Ireland used absurd language as a way of endearing Irish stage characters to audiences, transcending the folly, confusion, and stupidity that might be associated with these convoluted statements. Contortions of conventional English usage could be a source of comedy and figurative invention, rather than merely satire aimed at the people speaking them. The degree of sympathy and respect for bull-speakers varied greatly over time and among audiences. By 1803 in Essay on Irish Bulls, Maria and Richard Edgeworth dramatized the hypocrisy of some English observations about Irish forms of speech. In a two-chapter play within the essay, “Bath Coach Conversation,” the authors introduce a character known as the Englishman who acknowledges a double standard often involved in English perceptions of Irish speech: what is deemed poetic when spoken by the title character of Shakespeare’s Macbeth is seen as mere confusion coming from an Irish speaker. The Englishman observes:

“To make assurance doubly sure.” Now there is an example in our great Shakspeare of what I have often observed, that we English allow our poets and ourselves a licence of speech that we deny to our Hibernian neighbours. If an Irishman, instead of Shakspeare, had talked of making ‘assurance doubly sure,’ we should have asked how that could be. The vulgur in England are too apt to catch at every slip of the tongue made by Irishmen. (Edgeworth 68)

Some 14 years after the Edgeworths’ work, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in Biographia Literaria about the speech construction known as the Irish bull after quoting the Macbeth witches’ alliterative opening observation that “fair is foul and foul is fair.” Using the Edgeworths’ Essay as a source, Coleridge, stated that bulls—whether or not spoken by the Irish—involve “bringing together two incompatible thoughts, with the sensation, but without the sense, of their connection” (75). Bulls, he notes, can make audiences feel superior for their
ability to detect them and laugh at them. Coleridge’s passage on bulls bring to mind John Keats’ brief remarks on negative capability, remarks recorded in a letter the younger poet wrote soon after Biographia Literaria was published and possibly under its influence (Wigod 384). Keats ascribed to Shakespeare this negative capability, a predisposition for “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (60). Negative capability allows for the semi-truths and self-contradictory insights that can be found in many bulls; it values sensations without immediately apparent logical sense.

The Edgeworths and the English Romantics were not the first or last to cast bulls in a positive light. In Farquhar’s The Stage-Coach, a decades-long commercial success from its first London performance in 1704, Captain Basil describes one of his travelling company as a “booby” and a “coxcomb” but also as “an Irish Wit” and “the profound Teague with his Nonsense”; while Macahone, the Irish wit, speaks bulls such as the description of his home in Tipperary, where there is “my Mansionhouse for me and my Predecessors after me” (15,16). In Robert Howard’s early-Restoration play The Committee; or the Faithful Irishman, the stage Irishman, while buffoonish, is not the most ridiculous of the characters and proves both loyal and crafty in helping the Cavalier protagonists. Casting back further still, Vivian Mercier traces Ireland’s comic tradition to the earliest Gaelic literature, a tradition with “a bent for wild humor, a delight in witty word play, and a tendency to regard satire as one of the indispensable functions of the literary man” (vii). For audiences, a bull can indicate mere stupidity, struggle with a foreign and imperial language, sarcasm, or a figurative trope that surpasses its superficial incongruities. For example, Teague in The Committee commits a bull by comically mistaking the notion of “taking the covenant,” in the sense of taking an oath of loyalty, with taking or stealing a physical document. Rather than mere buffoonery, this confusion spotlights the
injustice of requiring oaths of loyalty at all. The more negative sense of bulls and stage Irishry in general tended to emerge when political tensions flared between Ireland and England (Earls 15-16, Leerssen 108-113). They could be understood by English cultural imperialists as a linguistic emblem of the nativist corruption colonial authorities had feared for centuries of their rule (Crowley 27). Irish bulls generated more negative inferences about the Irish following the Great Famine. Bulls, which had often previously been an audience-charming stage convention, entered in the nineteenth century into a new “realist frame, asking to be taken as real-life utterances overheard on-the-fly and written down” (Moore 2). In this context bulls could be misunderstood—by those so inclined—as realistic signs of stupidity and ignorance, as fodder for racism and religious prejudice. They could become a form of stigmatization “that deserves a special place among the ideological weaponry of colonialism” (9).

Later in the nineteenth century, Irish playwrights helped counter the pejorative distortions of bulls and blunders found in music hall stereotypes. Boucicault portrayed sympathetic bull-speaking characters in lavish Irish settings. Oscar Wilde transplanted bulls to London for the purpose of comedy, satire, and paradox. In a more concerted movement, after the turn of the century, the early Abbey Theatre playwrights like Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge saved Irish bulls from being mere signs of their speakers’ stupidity, using them to satirize English colonial incompetence as well as local folly. About the same time, James Joyce would compose bulls that helped capture the color of Dublin life and local people’s playfulness with language. Living in France most of his adult life, Beckett lacked the Abbey Theatre’s nationalist impetus or Joyce’s grounding in Dublin life. While often hiding his Irish background in his plays, Beckett continued to employ bulls. Beckett appears to be something of a bull himself, leaving his birthplace and native language only to revitalize a characteristic Irish trope within the frames of
avant-garde twentieth century drama. “The Irish may be said to act, as well as to utter, bulls,” as the Edgeworths put it (36).

A History of Bulls Culminating in Beckett

This study has two main objectives: to describe a history of bulls by Irish writers; and to consider Beckett’s bulls in plays, short stories, and novels more synchronically, focusing on his era and his own writing. With Beckett’s help, the Irish bull has survived in the postmodern era as an unstable, problematic trope in an increasingly internationalized world. In a study of recent Irish linguistic trends, Robert Moore finds that the bull is best known today in Ireland by older people who are sometimes discomfited by the word “due no doubt to its probable origins in anti-Catholicism” (9). Yet Beckett and others used bulls for non-sectarian purposes.

Analysis of bulls begins in Chapter One with joke books and plays of the Restoration period, moving on to Farquhar and Charles Macklin’s comedies and the plays of Thomas, Frances, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Chapter Two closely examines the Edgeworth’s Essay on Irish Bulls, before turning to Maria Edgeworth’s Irish tales for popular fictional expressions of ideas contained in the Essay. Chapter Three considers Boucicault and Wilde as Victorian-era innovators, the former working with bulls in the stage-Irish tradition and the latter transplanting bulls to English drawing rooms. Chapter Four surveys early Abbey Theatre playwrights for their use of bulls, bearing in mind the Abbey’s formative influences on the young Beckett. Chapter Five takes a largely chronological approach to Beckett’s work, identifying and explaining his use of bulls in short fiction, novels, and plays. The analysis is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s
notions about carnivalesque satire and Jacques Derrida’s writings on aporias. Bakhtinan concepts will help in discerning the subversive potential of bulls, while Derrida’s notion of aporia will be seen as both a result of and an insight on Beckett’s work.

**Defining the Irish Bull**

Defining bulls is of primary importance, and definitions so far have often been too limiting. Categories of bulls have in common an appearance of self-contradiction, internal incongruity, or confounding of expectation. For the purpose of this study, bulls are defined as verbal, physical, or character-based self-contradictions. They involve the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible terms whether through words or actions. For example, Vladimir and Estragon act a bull in *Waiting for Godot* through their mere loitering because it contradicts their repeated resolution to leave. Bulls often are humorous, paradoxical, and satirical. Christopher Ricks describes bulls as folly with subversive potential, arguing that “at least on some occasions—notably when dramatized—such foolery may be a wise move” (156). The Oxford English Dictionary definition Ricks cited in his 1993 lecture on the Irish bull has changed somewhat. One element of the definition of “bull” remains: “a self-contradictory proposition; in modern use, an expression containing a manifest contradiction in terms or involving a ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker.” But the entry no longer says the word is currently often used in tandem with the epithet Irish. Ricks claimed the earlier definition had betrayed an anti-Irish stance: that the oxymoronic qualities of these supposedly characteristically Irish utterances are lost on their speakers (153).

Today the OED “bull” definition instead hyperlinks to “Irish bull”: “a statement which is manifestly self-contradictory or inconsistent, especially to humorous effect.” This entry allows
for intention and wit on the part of the speaker, and it includes examples of usage that support this inference. In the 1763 publication *Tom Gay’s Comical Jester*, the term is associated with intelligence: “smart repartees, witty quibbles, Irish bulls.” The dictionary also cites a 1914 explanation of the Irish bull by Charles L. Graves, who calls it the best-known form of Irish humor, a form of humor “too often set down to lax thinking and faulty logic.” Graves adds, “it is the rarest thing to encounter a genuine Irish ‘bull’ which is not picturesque and at the same time highly suggestive.” Finally, the entry cites a 1985 article in the academic journal *English Today*: “The Irish bull is an ancestor of the present-day Irish joke (usually cracked elsewhere, but often self-imposed).” According to the OED, the word’s origin is unknown, but it is compared to the French “boule,” meaning fraud, trickery, or deceit, and the Middle English noun “bull,” meaning falsehood. The Gaelic word “buile” translates as either an evil design or madness, rage, and despair; while “buille” translates as a blow or stroke (O’Reilly 87).

The Irish bull is normally associated with verbal utterances. In an extensive historical analysis of the subject, Brian Earls identifies three chief qualities of the bull: it rarely exceeds one sentence; it has a comic internal contradiction unknown to the speaker but apparent to the hearer or reader; and it has been associated with the Irish, especially Ireland’s less sophisticated population, since the late-seventeenth century (1). Analysis will show that Earls definition is helpful but not entirely adequate. Figurative, or “pregnant,” bulls have some rhetorical artistry, conveying deeper meanings than might be immediately apparent. A recurring question is whether the bull’s speaker—at least at some level—intends this meaning. This study finds such intention is often the case. For example, Mrs. Malaprop’s mistakes in *The Rivals* will be shown to have deeper meanings, and Winnie’s remark about forgetting the unforgettable may comment on the fragmented quality of memory under duress. In this sense, definitions by Earls and the
OED that require bull speakers to be entirely unaware of their contradictions are too constraining. Among figurative bulls, distinctions can be made according to rhetorical tropes: paradox, metaphor, hyperbole, antanaclasis (or puns), and oxymoron. A category may also be set aside for what might be called Freudian-slip bulls, or meaningful malapropisms. Drawing upon the Edgeworth’s claim that bulls can be acted, contradictions and incongruities of character and action will also be considered.

**Conventional Style in an Unconventional Writer**

Consideration of writers like Sheridan, Boucicault, Wilde, and others will reveal traditions, codes, and conventions that shed new light on Beckett within the Irish literary tradition. Although Beckett distanced himself from some of the literary conventions of his birthplace, he still referenced what might be called an Irish bull code. In his play *What Where*, a mechanized voice concludes “make sense who may,” an imperative that might be understood in the context of a shifting of literary significance from the author to the conventions they reference and the readers who detect these references.

Parody and satire are strains of Irish comedy this survey of bulls will encounter. As a modernist, Beckett shared the parodic tendencies of writers like Joyce and Eliot. For example, *Endgame* can be seen as a modernist parody on the tragic dissolution of royal power in *King Lear*. Beckett was rarely overtly political in his work, yet Vivian Mercier claims he shares with Swift an almost unconscious place in a Gaelic comedic tradition, a tradition that was formed in part by colonialism; both Beckett and Swift were “in the Gaelic tradition but not of it” (75-76). Generally, the Irish comic tradition was an important commonality between Gaelic- and English-language writers, even though Gaelic Ireland had no dramatic tradition. Mercier finds that
archaism and antiquarianism kept Anglo-Irish writers in touch with an ancient Gaelic “play spirit” that enabled them to engage freely with words, ideas, and taboos (10).

Satire and parody are perhaps the comedic modes most useful in making pointed political statements. Comedy—and bulls’ contribution to it—can demonstrate Irish writers’ political orientation from the perspective of a nation considered the first colony in the modern world. Postcolonial literary theory offers some perspective. In Orientalism Edward Said argues that European powers viewed Asian cultures as inferior and conquerable “others” to legitimize their imperialism, an approach that corresponds to English imperial attitudes toward Ireland. Declan Kiberd observes that for centuries Ireland served as “a zone of dark unconsciousness to England’s daylit world,” a prejudice that may have spurred Irish playwrights to gleefully demonstrate the self-contradictions that can result from such a severe and simplistic dichotomy (143). Sheridan, Wilde, and others created English characters who would often manifest these contradictions through bulls. Conversely, Irish characters sometimes utter bulls as a reflection of the dysfunctional politics of English imperialism.

While it may be difficult to discern political concerns in much of Beckett’s work, his novels and plays are a part of a comedic tradition that so often expressed postcolonial attitudes. In a pivotal essay in 1988, Said made the case for W.B. Yeats as a postcolonial writer, one who asserted a national literary imagination as a bulwark against colonial domination. Following this essay, Irish writers have increasingly been explained by postcolonial theory. For all their stylistic differences Anglo-Irish modernists Yeats and Beckett have similarities that suggest the latter could also be seen in a postcolonial light. Anthony Roche has found that both playwrights depicted their individual stage characters’ tormented, retrospective psyches—what Yeats called “dreaming back”—in the context of the Anglo-Irish class’s threatened status in the twentieth
century (532-34). Terry Eagleton has argued for Beckett as a political writer, one who shows “a distinctively Irish quality” in his deflation of clichéd Irishness from a vantage among the Parisian avant-garde: “as a marginal nonconformist marooned in an assertive new cultural orthodoxy, Beckett, rather like Wilde, found ways of translating the displacement of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy into a deeper kind of fidelity to dispossession” (71). Consistent with their sense of dispossession and nonconformity, Wilde and Beckett used bulls to demonstrate their opposition to the literalness and seriousness of conventional society, whether through Wilde’s Algernon speaking of washing one’s clean linen in public or Beckett’s Winnie forgetting the unforgettable. Puns and other bulls can function as protests against centralized authorities who tend to want words to have fixed, singular, and clearly sensible meanings.

The Edgeworths provide some support for the broad scope of this study. They assert in their Essay that figurative invention is often at the heart of Irish bulls. And they choose an example of figurative language from Shakespeare to illustrate the pejorative prejudice that the Irish figurative tendency encounters with English audiences. Shakespeare was an apt choice. Historian and linguist P.W. Joyce argues that the English language of the Elizabethan era had a particularly enduring influence in Ireland because, during the reign of Elizabeth I, English-speaking colonists and Gaelic-speaking natives rapidly increased their interactions and intermarriages: “the native Irish people learned to speak Elizabethan English—the very language used by Shakespeare; and in a very considerable degree the old Gaelic people and those of English descent retain it to this day” (6). The figurative flourishes of the English Renaissance, unconstrained by Enlightenment-era dictionaries and grammars, had an enduring influence on English spoken in Ireland, what is termed Hiberno-English. This continuity provides fertile ground for analysis of the figurative turns of English taken by Irish writers over four centuries.
For all his deliberate distancing from Hiberno-English, Beckett harnessed the figurative and comedic power of the Irish bull, a power abundant in the influential Irish writers preceding him.

Works Cited


Chapter I: “Low and Pert”: Early History of the Irish Bull

‘Tis not the Persian Gulph, or Epsoms Well,
Nor Westminster's Sweet Plum-broth (made in Hell)
Can change my Resolution, I have vow'd
To speak with silence, and to write aloud.

You ignorant brisk fops, who being internally blind, can discern no farther than you can see, whose gaping mouthes dam’d up with silent non-sense speaks loudly that ye are full of emptiness;[...]

But now though in jest let me be in earnest, when after you have read what is before, and in the middle, you meet with bulls, if they please you, as much as they are like you, then assure yourself the next time, my bull calve, you shall have more of them. [...] 
—O foul offence!
This non-sense tastes of too much truth and sense.
—Richard Head, Nugae Venales (1675)

Full oft hath honest Teague been here display’d;
And many a roar have Irish blunders made:
The bull, the brogue, are now so common grown;
That one would almost swear they were—your own.
—Francis Dobbs, The Patriot King (1774)

Richard Head’s introduction to his 1675 collection of jests and bulls serves as a proleptic defense, anticipating that some of the “humor for sale” (in Latin, nugae venales) that follows will be lost on certain readers, the ones, he says, who fail to appreciate “true wit.” From the first few pages of Nugae Venales, Head suggests defining qualities of bulls: they may involve paradoxical or metaphorical meaning, such as speaking with silence; they contain wit that may be lost on the hasty and ignorant; they reflect the contradictory qualities of those who appreciate them; and they contain “truth and sense” that may cause offense. The author’s introductory epistle suggests bulls contain wit, something with which not all observers would agree. The subtitle to this Irish author’s collection says it includes “domestic and foreign bulls,” indicating that the tendency toward self-contradiction is not exclusive to a single nationality. Head’s comedy was hardly at
the expense of the Irish. Even if readers discount the paradoxical truths that his introduction suggests can be found in these seemingly contradictory statements, they will likely notice that most of the bulls he has collected do not specify the nationality of their speakers. Of these 150 bulls, only two are attributed to Ireland or the Irish: one of them is spoken by a “vulgar” Irishman and the other by a presumably English judge presiding in a Dublin court. Far more seem to be uttered by English characters, based on geographical references and an absence of phonetic brogue.

This chapter will trace the history of Irish bulls and other stereotypical stage Irish behavior from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth century. A review of primary literature will demonstrate that national portrayals grew negative during periods of acute political tension between Ireland and England; it will also show that in their more positive forms stage Irishry and Irish bulls comprised carnivalesque activities. Carnivalesque transgressions emerge from “the down-to-earth priorities and values held by the underprivileged or plebeian ‘second world’ of commoners, or folk,” in this case the folk world of provincial Irish (Murfin, Ray 48). The contrariness, seeming illogic, and self-contradiction of bulls amount to what Mikhail Bakhtin would term the “grotesque,” a quality of “carnivalesque discourse that allows it to contrast starkly with the official discourse, the language of power and propriety” (48). By turning logic and grammar on their heads, bull-speakers diverge starkly—“grotesquely”—from the official discourse of imperial England.

The chapter will begin with a comparison of joke books by Head and an anonymous author, showing how political animosity affected national portrayals. It will consider some of the early history of England’s imperial impressions of Ireland, impressions that would color stage portrayals of the Irish from Shakespeare on. Shakespeare developed a stereotype that led
to late seventeenth century stage Irish conventions of playwrights like Head and Robert Howard who would mine the subversive, carnivalesque qualities of their characters through their distinctive use of bulls. In an observation that could apply to the bull, historian R.F. Foster has noted that “many of the usages of English that are now considered distinctively Irish go back to the late seventeenth century” (122). George Farquhar picked up where his Restoration predecessors left off, writing more fully formed stage Irishmen who spoke bulls to make satirical points. By the latter half of the eighteenth century audiences were receptive to more blatant satires such as Charles Macklin’s *The True-Born Irishman*, which included a socially striving character prone to malapropisms. About the same time Thomas Sheridan would give a stage Irishman center stage, in the process exposing cultural prejudices and using bulls and blunders to comment on English language standards. His wife Frances and son Richard Brinsley Sheridan would emulate Macklin with their own malapropism-prone characters who manage to convey hidden truths through their twisted language. These early practitioners of Irish bulls on the page and the stage set a precedent that was developed further in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Understanding them will elucidate a tradition of bulls that continued through Samuel Beckett’s career as an avant-garde artist.

**Prior Accounts of Early Irish Bulls**

The most comprehensive review of Irish bulls prior to the nineteenth century is Brian Earls’ 1988 article “Bulls, Blunders and Bloothers: An Examination of the Irish Bull.” Earls recounts a history of the bull from the early seventeenth century to the twentieth, citing numerous definitions and examples. His article emphasizes that bulls began as self-contradictory statements that were not specifically attributed to the Irish, that such a national attribution
coincided with particularly acute political animosity between England and Ireland, and that “once the stereotype of the bull making Irishman had been established it proved highly popular and assumed a momentum of its own” (65). Noting the popularity of Thomas and Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s characters with eighteenth-century Dublin audiences, Earls proposes “the possibility that the history of the bull-uttering Irishman may be somewhat more complex than a matter of mere English misrepresentation” (9). Yet he focuses in a sociological manner on the bull as an often pejorative form of joke rather than on its history as a theatrical device.¹ His references to dramatists like Farquhar are by the way; his essay does not closely analyze bulls uttered by stage characters, as this chapter will. A matter of definition makes for the most crucial difference between Earls’ treatment of the bull and that of the current dissertation: his work accepts the presumption that the contradictions inherent in bulls go unnoticed by their speakers. By contrast this chapter and those following will consider the carnivalesque intent of bulls, the ways that they may be deliberately goading their audience. They will entertain Trinity College Professor John Pentland Mahaffy’s famous claim—itself a bull—that “the Irish bull is always pregnant.”

Most of the other academic treatment of bulls prior to the nineteenth century is in the form of passing commentaries on English perceptions of the Irish, especially with reference to stage Irish conventions. Such commentaries will be considered throughout this chapter.

¹ The attention Earls gives to Teagueland Jests and Irish Hudibras suggested two important primary texts for this analysis.
Joke Books and Political Contexts

Before considering the carnivalesque dimensions of bulls, it is worth noting bulls were also used less subversively as national slurs against the Irish. Only 15 years after the publication of Head’s *Nugae Venales*, many of the same jesting bulls Head collected were revised to denigrate the Irish. The anonymously edited *Teageland Jests, or Bogg-witticisms* claimed sardonically to be “a compleat collection of the most learned bulls, elaborate quibbles, and wise sayings of some of the natives of Teagueland, till the year 1688,” and to contain “many comical stories, and famous blunders of those dear joys, since the late King James’s landing amongst them.” The cover page claimed that the jokes to follow should be kept from Teague’s sight, lest this stereotypically volatile Irishman seek revenge. The title page’s reference to 1688 is significant: it was the year of King William’s glorious revolution and just before the quelling of the Jacobite resistance in Ireland and elsewhere. While Head’s collection was published during a time of Restoration good will toward Ireland, *Teageland Jests* appeared soon after the Williamite wars, a time when ill will towards the Irish was at the forefront of public sentiment in England.² Where Head’s introduction questions the intelligence and figurative acuity of readers who do not appreciate the sometimes difficult truth of bulls, the introduction of *Jests* attributes bulls’ humor to “the natural stupidity and simplicity of the people” who speak them. Moreover, the editor of *Jests* has Teague himself, the caricature of Irish blundering in the English language, provide his own three-page introduction, dense with brogue; it includes Teague’s

² *Teageland Jests* had seven editions from 1680 to 1750 (Earls 12). Earls finds that its successor in popularity, *The Comical Sayings of Paddy from Cork*—published in nine editions from 1780 to 1850—lacks the pejorative tone of *Jests* and that it even goes so far as to attribute wit to Irish bull speakers. He sees political reasons for the change, noting that “in the century of peace which followed the defeat of James II and the Williamite settlement the need to denigrate the Irish gradually lessened while the realisation that, in addition to their bulls, they were also verbally gifted emerged to view” (70). My argument, by contrast, is that bulls comprised an important part of that verbal gift.
misunderstanding of the word “bull” itself. When the publisher of these jests offers Teague money for “current bulls,” the Irishman thinks of livestock until the publisher explains he means “a preposterous kind of speaking…when you return my meaning by mistake.”

Some of the bulls in the two publications are nearly the same except for their attribution to the Irish in Jests. For example, Nugae Venalis contains a bull spoken by a father reprimanding his son for mischief: “did you ever see me do so when I was a boy as you are?” (215). The later collection uses the same absurd statement but adds that it is spoken by an Irishman “who had not much wit to spare,” and it has him talk in heavy brogue (164). Elsewhere, Head includes a bull about an eel being the animal that “lived longest after it was dead,” with the speaker unspecified and little context (226); in Jests this self-contradiction is spoken by a glutinous Irish soldier who absentmindedly allows a cat to eat his meal, tries unsuccessfullly to kill the cat, then contrasts a cat having nine lives with an eel living “a great many hoursh after it ish dead” (177-78). In Nugae, an otherwise unidentified speaker describes the advantages of a healthy climate, claiming that in a harsher environment “if I had lived till this time, I am sure, I should have been dead seven years ago” (227). The editor of Jests attributes the same bull to Teague describing what would have happened had he remained in Edinburgh with his master: “and bee Shaint Pantrick, if I had lived dere til dish time…de Deevil tauke me, indeed, but I shou’d have bin dead now for sheaven yearsh ago, dear joy; upon me faut, it ish true, indeed” (24). Jests clearly associates thick Irish accents, culturally specific exclamations, and blundering self-contradiction. The Irish are portrayed as a superstitious, benighted people fumbling with the language of imperial power and science.
Irish Character from an English Perspective

Jokes and stage depictions, pejorative though they may have been, helped delineate Irish identity before coherent nationalist movements took hold in many parts of Europe in the nineteenth century. Since the middle ages, the English had viewed Ireland as a place of monastic scholarship, piety, and civility, but also a source of shocking pagan barbarity. As J.T. Leerssen puts it, “from very early times the representation of Ireland has been marked by ambiguity” (33). Ironically, some of the classical literature that Irish scholars saved included disparaging accounts, such as Strabo’s description of a people who were more barbaric than the English, sexually amoral, and cannibalistic (33). In 1155 Pope Adrian IV issued a papal bull authorizing King Henry II to conquer Ireland “for the purpose of enlarging the boundaries of the church, checking the descent into wickedness, correcting morals, and implanting virtues, and encouraging the growth of the faith in Christ” (qtd 35). A few decades later the historian Giraldus Cambrensis described Ireland as “a pool of blackest ignorance, barbarity, and superstition” (qtd 36). By the fourteenth century, Gaelic identity had become associated with a rebellious lifestyle; obedience to the king, by contrast, made one English (39). In the sixteenth century when Henry VIII claimed to be king of Ireland and not just its lord, he eroded the “medieval bifurcation between religious and civic duty”; mere barbarism became insubordination (40). In the newly assertive colonialism of the Tudor period, Edmund Spenser’s View of the Present State of Ireland is perhaps the best-known English pamphlet on Ireland. Queen Elizabeth’s excommunication added a sectarian dimension to tensions between English and Irish: the former came to view the latter as not only morally lax but also corrupted by Papist loyalties.
English Jesuits Edmund Campion and Richard Stanyhurst helped to fix English images of the Irish in the sixteenth century. Campion praised the Gaelic Irish for industriousness, sharp wit, love of learning, and academic capability (Campion 14). Both of the Jesuits reiterated Cambrensis’ sense of the Irish as amoral and lacking the civility to control their passions; consequently both supported expansion of the Pale as a civilizing force for the rest of Ireland (Leerssen 43). Campion and Stanyhurst would influence William Camden’s seminal description of Ireland in *Britannia*, published in 1586. Camden argued that law, clothing, and language would provide the norms to civilize the savage Gael, and he happened upon the bull-like contradictions of Irish character, noting that “by a remarkable freak of nature, [they] both love idleness and hate quietude” (qtd 48). This description seems to anticipate Maria and Richard Edgeworths’ remark in Chapter 7 of their 1802 *Essay on Irish Bulls* that the Irish both act and say bulls (Edgeworths 37-38).

These proto-anthropological observations would provide plenty of fodder for English prejudice when it served political purposes. As Leerssen puts it,

sudden periods of deterioration in the English image of Ireland can be seen to appear with dreary regularity in the wake of active hostility or warfare: after the Tyrone rebellion, the Ulster rising of 1641, the Jacobite war of 1690, the Wexford rebellion of 1798, the agitation of O’Connell, etc. Periods of comparative quiet, such as the years after 1620, the reign of Charles II, and most of the 18th century show a gradual amelioration of England’s attitude (49).

And historian Kevin Whelan has noted that “the 1640s, the 1690s, and the 1790s were interpreted as the three great traumas of Protestant Ireland” by those arguing against Catholic emancipation (Whelan 136). For a historically clannish people who had relatively little tradition of indigenous, centralized authority, a particular political importance was bestowed on language, literature, and religion as means of resisting colonialism. Thus, Spenser and others warned that
Catholic priests and Gaelic poets could arouse “the natural hot temper of the Irish,” and Spenser went so far as to call for an end to Gaelic speaking and clan-associated surnames (Leerssen 51). Even Jesuits like Stanyhurst wanted reform of Irish Catholicism. English colonial prejudices formed in the sixteenth century would largely endure in the seventeenth. Among these was the impression of an internally contradictory national character. As Dymmok, an English “gentleman officer,” wrote, the Irish could be stubbornly clannish and treacherous, with a “curious contradiction of the epithets ‘franke’ and ‘deep dissemblers’” (qtd 54).

**Shakespeare Anticipates the Stage Irishman**

Shakespeare prepared the way for seventeenth-century playwrights to treat the Irish as a distinct people under English colonial suzerainty, a people who retained particular habits of language and attitudes that set them apart from the imperial center. David Cairns and Shaun Richards have noted a watershed moment in between Henry V’s reign and Shakespeare’s writing of the play that bears his name: with the loss of Calais in 1558, the English monarchy turned away from the continental claims the ascendant Prince Hal pursued and focused on its imperial control of the British Isles (1). With this new focus, Ireland and England became more distinctly separate entities within an imperial system. The change reflects what a shift to the neo-classical *episteme*—with its emphasis on delineating differences and distinct categories—from the medieval *episteme*—one that emphasized synthesis and unity (2-3). In *Henry V*, Shakespeare provides representatives of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland within the king’s army during its campaign in France. The Welsh Fluellen berates the Irish MacMorris for his martial skills, which he says are no better than a puppy’s. MacMorris stereotypically swears repeatedly and calls for blood to be spilled—both that of the French and of Fluellen when he feels insulted by
the latter. His brogue mangles English so that the French army is “besieched” rather than “besieged,” comically substituting plaintive request for military encirclement. MacMorris also shows he is acutely aware of negative stereotypes of the Irish. When Fluellen refers to “your nation,” he interjects: “What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?” (III.iii.63-50).

Cairns and Richards also cite Stephen Greenblatt’s notion that English Renaissance identity relied on “perception of the not-self” followed by a sterilization of this other’s threatening properties (4). For Spenser, such a dichotomy made assimilation of the Irish in their current state impossible. For him, only cultural extermination and total conversion to English imperial norms would do. Among its other supposed risks, assimilation risked infecting the English with Irish barbarism, in this view. The English formed their perceptions of Irishness at a time of devotional and political crisis when unity was prized. In this regard, Henry V’s triumph in France is framed as an example of potential victory for Essex on his impending campaign in Ireland (9). Shakespeare’s example is relevant because the origins of the Irish dramatic tradition in the seventeenth century were an extension of the English stage: they were the product of English or Anglo-Irish authors writing in English and reflecting, for the most part, colonizers’ prerogatives. During the Restoration, management tastes at Dublin’s new Smock Alley Theatre ran toward Fletcher, Jonson, and French neo-classicism rather than Shakespeare, but the imperial attitudes voiced in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* would not be out of place. In the 1660s Irish playwright Roger Boyle’s *Henry the Fifth* would use the same English royal history for a tragedy in the French heroic tradition—rhyming couplets and a theme of love conflicting with honor.

**Both Folly and Wit as National Traits**
Irish folly—verbal or otherwise—was the object of ridicule from Ireland’s own poetic establishment long before English bigots turned the bull against the supposed stupidity of their unruly colonial subjects. Even after Ireland’s aristocratic patrons of the arts fled in exile, perhaps more acutely after their flight, Gaelic poets scorned the crass, poorly educated Irish arrivistes who mangled the imperial English language they would adopt. As Vivian Mercier has noted, “anyone inferior in learning and (former) social status to the bardic poets and their self-appointed successors is a bodach or an athach—that is to say, a clown, a churl, a boor, a peasant, a rent-payer…whose only pedigree is the fanciful one which traces him back to Beelzebub” (Mercier 129). This native Irish clown is a diabolical corruptor of language, the “total boor...among these stupid people” whom Dáibhí Ó Bruadair lamented so bitterly. In fact, Mercier finds an “almost complete absence of satire against the English before about 1650,” an absence understandable in light of the tendency to satirize other Irish and the relatively beneficial influence of Anglo-Norman invaders on bardic poets prior to the Elizabethan age (136-7). Mercier does not analyze the bull in Irish literature per se but does suggest the rather crude, language-based prejudice animating English satire of the Irish: “Generally speaking, the satire directed against each other by the Irish and the British in Ireland hardly rises above imbecility. The British ridicule the Irish for speaking English badly; the Irish ridicule the British for not having Gaelic names. No wonder Swift despaired of human reason—not to mention human good will” (164). Swiftian despair of reason, the nonsensical statements and follies of Teague characters, and the emerging tradition of the bull-uttering stage Irishman would provide a basis for absurd Irish comedy, satire swaddled deeply within irrationality.

Bulls preceded Swift but began to gain currency as an ethnic epithet during his lifetime. Earls notes that bulls emerged in English drama specifically in the 1630s but were not linked to
the Irish for another 50 years (4). Yet the subversive effect of the Irish language on English-speaking colonists was something Spenser and other chroniclers had observed as early as the sixteenth century (Leerssen 48-49). Elizabethan observers also had respect for the language used by Ireland’s bardic poets, from whom an attack amounted to “a curse in verse” carrying what some believed was occult power (Foster 28).

Among early seventeenth century observers, Fynes Moryson wrote in 1619 that “the Irish possess a certain astuteness, mostly employed in prevarication,” a sort of subtle temporizing (Leerssen 52). Moryson noted an Irish bull heard in pleas before the local magistrate, playing on the idea a living speaker could have been murdered (53). As Luke Gernon put it in 1620, the native of Ireland is “prompt and ingenuous, but servile crafty and inquisitive after news, the simptomes of a conquered nation” (qtd 57). The Ulster uprising of 1641 fed anti-Catholic and anti-Irish propaganda in English pamphlets, and later in the century, as a result of Irish support for James II, “the existing English bull configuration, which included both joke books and the stage, was transferred in its entirety to the Irish” (Earls 6). A new comedic stereotype in English drama emerged: the stage Irishman, a character known for speaking in a deep brogue and uttering bulls. Of course, the stage Irishmen had other characteristics, and his image would change with the times, often reflecting varying degrees of political hostility or amity between the Irish and English.

The Stage Irishman Changes Over Time

The history of this conventional type of the English and Irish stage is complex, suggesting that English audiences were both amused by and afraid of what they saw in their neighbors across the Irish Sea. J.O. Bartley’s analysis of the stage Irishman indicates the
theatrical legacy and context within which Irish playwrights worked. Bartley charts the development of the stage Irishman as a stock character—“a walking cliché”—in three phases from the English Renaissance until 1800, arguing these increasingly unrealistic phases are typical of all stock theatrical characters over time (439). From 1587 to 1659, Irishmen appear in theatre as five types that were reductive and exaggerated but basically realistic: “swaggering Irish captains”; London vendors and tradesmen; household servants; sometimes pitiable beggars; and “kerns,” that is, light foot soldiers or yokels who were considered “savage, barbarous, to be hated and feared” (440). The 1660-1759 period begins with a new element of Restoration realism regarding the Irish, a realism born in part of closer exchanges—however bloody and fraught—between the English and Irish in the interregnum (444). Relatively positive portrayals include Robert Howard’s Teague in The Committee. Other examples include pejorative priest characters, such as the comical Foigard in Farquhar’s Beaux’ Stratagem. Among newly distinctive stage characteristics in this phase were potato-eating, Catholicism, brogue speech, verbal blunders, and bulls (443). The period from 1760 to 1800 included Irish-themed theatre geared toward Irish London-based actors John Johnstone and John Moody at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, respectively (444). Here Bartley asserts that bulls became an essential part of the stage Irishman convention; as the stage Irishman became more popular and more standardized, he also lost realistic value.

Restoration dramatists established stage Irish characters who would gain wider currency in the following century. In 1663 Richard Head published Hic et Ubique, or the Humors of Dublin, a satire about fatuous colonial fortune-hunters in Ireland. The play’s most vocal native Irish character is Patrick, a servant to the Cromwellian Colonel Kiltory. Patrick is a stage Irishman, by turns gullible and guileful; though loyal in his way, he represents the Gaelic Irish as
stubborn spoilers to naïve imperial projectors. Christopher Wheatley has argued that the play is distinctly Irish because Patrick has “a real presence that stage Irishmen of the English Restoration theatre lack” (2003 26). Speaking in thick brogue, Patrick cannily detects psychological imbalance in his employer’s tormented reflections on erotic desire: “‘tis ill for dy fader’s shild, to be making speech wit dyshelf, and nobody” (93). He farcically discovers he is a cuckold and then offers his wife to Kiltory, who kicks him in exchange. When Kiltory asks him to bring a clerk to sign away property to a would-be paramour, Patrick comically misunderstands him, getting as a result another kick and the title “bog-trotting, beetle-head” (130). For all the abuse he receives, the Irish servant is loyal to a fault. In addition to offering Kiltory his wife, he commiserates with him when the English Mrs. Hopewell cons him into signing over his property: “de English vid put de sheat pon efry podyes” (140). Comically and subversively, he sympathizes with his English employer by noting they both have been abused by the English. Patrick suggests nationality is in some ways a result of situational politics. The play’s suggestion of enduring colonial identity was prophetic. As Wheatley puts it, “despite the Glorious Revolution that placed Protestants more firmly in control of Ireland than ever, the English of Ireland would ultimately become, at least in English eyes, just a subgroup of the Irish” (28). Similarly historian Thomas Bartlett notes that “the English in Ireland found themselves endowed with those very characteristics and traits—excessive drinking, ruinous hospitality, rapacity for patronage, a propensity for violence, a way with words (and with horses)—that had long been inseparable from the ‘natives’ of Ireland” (1992 37). As such, stage Irish characters and bulls would become nondenominational.
Howard’s *The Committee*: Sympathetic Stage Irishry

Audience expectations for stage Irishry would grow so strong in the early eighteenth century that older plays—such as Robert Howard’s *The Committee*, published in 1665—were revised to reflect the trend. First performed during the reinstated monarchy of Charles II, Howard’s play presents in Teague a character who has stereotypical qualities that are negative and positive: folly, confusion, and drunkenness, but also craftiness, cleverness, and loyalty. Teague’s stock qualities were enhanced over the course of the play’s performance history in the following decades. Audiences were expecting folly and humor from Irish characters, so producers gave them more of what they wanted. The amplification of Teague’s stereotypical traits demonstrated that stage convention was trumping realism in London and Dublin performances as the century passed.

With its plot involving Puritan seizure of land during the interregnum, *The Committee* might have brought to mind land confiscation in Ireland under Oliver Cromwell. Teague, the play’s only Irish character, describes the powerful pull of his homeland but puts loyalty to his English employer first. He asks that Colonel Careless no longer entrust him with delivering money lest the devil tempt him into using it to return to Ireland. Repeatedly referred to by the Cavaliers as “honest,” Teague comes across as more than a mere buffoon. He provides essential help to Colonel Careless by plying the Puritan Committee’s clerk, Obadiah, with liquor. Teague’s intervention with Obadiah not only helps to expose the Days’ scheming, it also suggests the constructed quality of stage Irishry for Obadiah in some ways becomes stage Irish under Teague’s influence. Obadiah dances, sings, and tells figurative jokes: “Then do I stand still, as fast as you go” and “…Day is broke loose from darkness” (IV.iii.222,227-29). As Colonel Blunt puts it, Obadiah has had “Irish notes upon him” (V.iv.31). As for Teague himself,
Blunt’s assessment of the play’s sole Irish character has changed from “poor simple fellow” in
the first act to “faithful and stout” in the final act.

Teague provides much of the play’s comedy through bulls and blunders. In a sort of job
interview with Colonel Careless, he responds to a question about how long he has been in
England: “Ever since I came hither, i’faith” (I.i.207). He also begins a running joke by
misunderstanding what it means to take a covenant. Howard’s portrayal of him takes some of
the pejorative punch out of cross-cultural punchlines. “In a dramatic context, [Teague’s] bulls
are, in a sense, boomerang punchlines,” Leerssen says (91). “Whereas, in earlier plays, Irish fun
would receive its capping punchline from the mouth of an English interlocutor, they are now
provided by the stooge himself—a handy elimination of the middleman in the provision of
laughs to the audience” (91). And interwoven with the humor is pathos: Teague has lost his last
employer, Colonel Danger, apparently to political intrigue of the sort that will entangle his new
boss. He describes the fatalistic bigotry of an English astrologer who claims there are “no stars
for Irishmen” (I.i.233). In this first appearance in the play, Teague exhibits qualities that
audiences will come to expect from stage Irish. He recalls howling keen-like at the death of his
former employer. He says he “scorns a trade” as other Irishmen do, but he nonetheless “will run
for thee forty miles” (I.i.244-45). This stereotypical disdain for formal industry is juxtaposed
with tremendous loyalty and ardent service when treated well by an employer. His blundering
bull about the meaning of “covenant”—assuming it is an item to possess rather than an oath to
swear—shows not only his comic unfamiliarity with English language and custom but also a
moving loyalty: “Well, what is that covenant? By my soul, I would take it for my new master. If
I could, that I would. […] Well, where is that covenant?” (I.i.276-77, 279). Later this verbal bull
will become a practical one as Teague steals a pamphlet copy of *The Solemn League and
Covenant from a bookseller in order to “take” the covenant. Carnivalesque fun is being had. For all the ignorance and confusion this running gag reflects, its energy also seems to come from the injustice of the Committee demanding that people take covenants at all. Teague’s theft from the bookseller in order to take the covenant reflects the Committee’s effective theft of land from the Cavaliers in demanding that unacceptable oaths be taken to secure land. As with blundering Mrs. Malaprop, who will take the English stage a century later, audiences can find an important meaning to Teague’s madness. These characters’ humor has a serious purpose. As Bakhtin noted, “laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté, and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality” (123). In this sense the laughter generated by Teague purifies the impure machinations of the play’s Puritan antagonists.

For his part, Careless places his new employee’s mistakes in the context of “a simple honesty” that appeals to him. Careless emphasizes situational and environmental—rather than racial—forces that have conditioned Teague. Noting that his refusal to swear allegiance to the Committee may make him poor, the English Cavalier tells the Irish servant: “It may be thee and I may be reduced together to thy country fashion” (I.i.299-300). While a tenuous sobriety separates Obadiah from some stage Irish qualities, imperiled land possession separates Careless from some of them.

Teague’s mockery in the play is both unintended and intended, and at times the distinction seems unclear. When sent by Careless to ask a legal expert for counsel, he mistakenly suggests the magistrate is the one who should receive counsel. Teague recounts: “he bid me be gone and said I was sent to mock him” (II.iii.24-25). In his exchange with Mrs. Day, the mockery is more intentional, as he is unable to stifle laughter when referring to her as
“ladyship” and “honor.” He leaves this scene much as he did his previous exchange with the Committee, that is, with a curse: “The Devil take your ladyship and honorship and kitchenship too” (III.ii.157-58). By the end of the play, Teague has exhibited many stage Irish stereotypes—blunders, bulls, drunken reverie, loyalty, hot temper, and belligerence—but he has also shown heroism of a sort. In the final lines of the play, Careless calls on all gathered to “thank honest Teague” (V.vii.228).

**Farewell’s *Irish Hudibras: A Pejorative Perspective***

Folly and stupidity of Irish characters in many seventeenth century plays were balanced by the flaws of non-Irish characters. It took political revolution and Catholic Ireland’s alliance with the deposed Catholic James II to shift English literature into a more hostile and pejorative attitude to the Irish. English satirist James Farewell wrote poetry that recalls Spenser’s vitriolic anthropology of the Irish. Written under a pseudonym as William was fighting James II and his supporters in Ireland, Farewell’s *Irish Hudibras* is a modern adaptation of Aeneas’ journey to the underworld as Nees’ adventures in Ireland, Hibernia being equated with Hades. The author prefaces his satire by noting the setting is the English-settled pale and “not Ireland,” that is, areas where mainly native Irish live. His scorn may primarily target continental and Catholic influences in Ireland, but the poem’s caustic caricatures of Irish speech and character provided literary precedent for future stage Irish buffoonery. Even the narrator is not immune to self-contradiction: “Had he but lived that Life till now,/He had been dead seven years ago” (27). In Hades, Nees finds papal bulls among a “nest of lies and forgery” (43-44). The poem implies a contradictory quality to the Irish warrior ethos, attributing to it “a sort of Desperation,/The Courage of that War-like Nation” (45). An Irish character Nees encounters is described as
speaking in brogue with “more Tongue than Brain” (47). And the narrator attributes no wit to
the contradictions of Irish banter, describing it as “such Nonsense [that] they Did blunder out the
live-long day” (74). Later he describes Irish drinking habits as a way of “draining” liquor that
“does appear,/Makes Wit so scarce in Shamrogeshire” (80). In an afterward, Farewell explains
that even the poem’s characters who were educated at the English Court did not entirely lose
their brogue, with “words and Bulls dropping out so naturally, as very often betray their country
of extraction.” As for Nees, the hero of the poem, the author attributes abuse of the English
language to the character’s contempt for the English nation. He grants Nees cunning and wit: he
“had, like Pliny’s Fish, Teeth in his Tongue; wherever it fell, he bit so hard, there was no Armour
against the artillery of his Wit; as you will find him all along in his Bogland-Witticisms, and
sharp Repartees, alias, Bulls and Blunders.”

**More Positive Accounts of the Irish Emerge**

By 1691 the historian John Shirley reformed some English prejudices about the Irish,
describing Irish “laziness as a recalcitrant refusal to co-operate with the authorities” (Leerssen
60). In 1693 George Story reported that contrary to the English pejorative use of the term “a
man of Irish understanding,” he had found in the Irish a certain prudence and a “crafty
insinuating wheedling way” (qtd 61). Leerssen finds in this and other descriptions something of
the “animal cunning” shared with the emerging stage Irishman (61). He adds that “as the
political situation was stabilized under the reign of William and Mary, the English attitude to the
Gaelic Irish seems, if not to have improved, at least to have relaxed somewhat” (61). In 1699
London publisher John Dunton wrote that “an Irishman is a living Jest” (qtd 66). In 1711 Guy
Miege observed that the native Irish “are reckoned of a quick Wit (tho’ besotted to many
follies)” (qtd 62). Also in 1711 Richard Steele wrote in the Spectator that the Irish tendency to absurdity is forgivable because it is well-intentioned (109). “In this distinction,” Leerssen says, “Steele not only announces the amelioration of the bull into a vehicle for sympathetic utterances, but also indicates the notion that opposes Irish artlessness to the foppish dissimulation current in England” (109). Earls similarly observes, “whereas [bulls and blunders] had previously been regarded as signs of confusion, folly and general backwardness, they were now, by virtue of their very transparency, seen as evidence that the speaker was artless and true of heart” (75). As the eighteenth century progressed bulls would appear in an increasingly sympathetic light.

**Farquhar’s Bulls: “Low and Pert” Dialogue**

George Farquhar, known for what Alexander Pope called “low and pert” dialogue, was fluent in bulls and stage Irishry. In his treatise “A Discourse on Comedy,” Farquhar suggested the low and pert are sometimes better for audiences and art than the stiff and traditional. He lamented that plays adhering too closely to Aristotelian precepts showed “the Scholar and the Lamp in every line, but not a syllable of the Poet” (1967 329). Excess veneration for antiquity leads to the mistaken charge “that the present age is illiterate, or their taste vitiated,” when the opposite is true—“the world was never more active and youthful, and true downright sense was never more universal than at this very day” (330). This broadly democratic approach to poetic language and contemporary ways supports a sympathetic appreciation of bulls and other rule-breaking turns of phrase from stage Irish characters. A great poet like Homer did not let rules get in the way of “free and unlimited flight of imagination,” Farquhar says (334). Farquhar holds that the successful writer of stage comedies meets the expectations of his audiences, not those of
classical scholars. Audience expectation and reception are essential, and a successful writer should not entirely dismiss stage conventions merely because they are unrealistic.

This Irish writer knew that Irish humors had their place among the “unaccountable medley of humours” constituting the English population (1967 Farquhar 337). And, so, Irish characters—stereotypical or otherwise—had their place in his drama. He was among popular writers of the long eighteenth century who worked with conventional English notions of Ireland. As historian Thomas Bartlett has observed, “there was what we may call the inherited English view of Ireland; a mixture of tales of the wild Irish and amusing anecdotes of Irish ‘bulls,’ heiress-hunters and native braggadocio, all of which were revealed in the writings of such English and Irish dramatists and novelists as Farquhar, Sheridan and Fielding” (237).

**Love and a Bottle: “Typical Comedy Types”**

Farquhar captured the ebullience of his Irish characters’ speech while drawing on the stereotypes of Restoration drama. In his first play, *Love and a Bottle* (1698), he describes Roebuck from the outset as “an Irish gentleman of wild roving temper” (1988 28). Criticized for its unoriginality, the play is filled with “typical comedy types” (Farmer 18). Eric Rothstein argues that while the play clearly deals in stage conventions, it also shows “the deftness with which Farquhar could handle those conventions” (30). Roebuck is true to stage Irish convention as a wily, belligerent, and heavy-drinking outsider in search of a wife. He is conspicuously contrarian in the London milieu and describes himself as “one of the fools of the West,” referring to his Hibernian home (1988 Farquhar 33). Audiences for the play’s initial productions knew that the playwright was “twisting his story out of the life he had lived” in Dublin and London; they also welcomed his writing for being “expressive of fun, vivacity, and freshness of phrase”
For all his wildness and folly, Roebuck manages to identify gender inequality in society’s relatively favorable treatment of prostitution’s customers compared with its providers. Yet this stage Irishman is full of contradictions: ironically he also abandons the Irish prostitute with whom he has fathered twins. And he plans to become a soldier so he can “rob honourably” (1988 Farquhar 29). This lack of scruples does not preclude him from reform by the heiress Leantne, another Irish expatriate.

The play continually finds value in “low and pert” qualities of discourse: the poet Lyrick profitably writes “smutty jests” and burlesques; Roebuck likes taverns for their “honest jolly Conversation” and “ingenuous Company”; and Roebuck later claims he is poetic as a result of his “Impudence” and folly (43, 64). Bulls help make the dialogue more pert. Roebuck utters an oxymoronic bull when he speaks of a “devilish virtuous lady”; he then claims virtue and wit are inconsistent given wit’s reliance on the forbidden fruit of knowledge (44). Later he paradoxically notes that “‘Tis safest making Peace, they say, with Sword in hand” (104).

Lovewell, an old friend, describes Roebuck’s bulls and general contrarianism as “rhetoric” that will fail in his current adventure (45). In Restoration fashion, wit is a recurring topic. In this regard, Lyrick emphasizes audience receptiveness: “the Wit lies in their hands…nothing’s well said, but what’s well taken” (82). One character remarks of the play’s stage Irishman that he is poetical because he “has Wit enough to talk like a Fool; and [is] Fool enough to talk like a Wit” (64). Roebuck is contrary and scorns conventional notions of virtue and learning, but he is not a villain. As he puts it, “you may call me a Fool, a Blockhead, or an Ass, by the Authority of Custom: But why a Villain, for God’s sake?” (69). This comedy’s intrigues end with Roebuck and Leantne joined as a couple, an Irish “Entertainment,” and the transfer of Lovewell’s Irish estate to the new couple.
The Twin Rivals: A More “Full-Blooded” Teague

In The Twin Rivals (1702), Farquhar drew upon national stereotype again and the stock character name Teague to convey stage Irishry, but in this case he went beyond audience expectations, suggesting something of his own anarchic spirit in the form of his character’s Irishisms. Though inspired by the namesake character in The Committee, Farquhar’s Teague is more “full-blooded” and “remains one of the most amusing of stage Irishmen,” according to A.J. Farmer (23). Rothstein says that as a “faithful Irish valet,” Teague is among signs that this play marks an important “movement from the Old Comedy to the New at the end of the seventeenth century” (66-67). In The Twin Rivals, Teague’s heavy brogue accent is mocked by other characters in London, but his absurd statements help to spotlight the craven maneuvering of Young Wou’dbe, who wants his elder brother out of the way of an inheritance. As William Myers says of the play, “behind Teague’s stage Irishry lurks a potential satirist” (xv). Teague informs his employer, Elder Wou’dbe, of his reported demise: “You hear that you are dead, Maishter; fere vil you please to be buried?” (1988 Farquhar 539). When the older brother vows to learn what is going on for himself, his Irish servant warns: “have a care upon your shelf; now they know you are dead, by my Shoul they may kill you” (539). This same scene emphasizes the figurative and poetic characteristics of the Irish. Subtleman sees in Teague a kindred spirit and remarks upon his sharp wit during their first meeting. In turn Teague claims his grandfather was a poet, taking his place among Irish generations reduced to poverty after the loss of artistic patronage from Ireland’s exiled aristocracy. Interrogated by Subtleman, Teague confides in the audience that he will “tell a Lee now; but it shall be a true one” (540). The truth of this lie consists of naming a patron who left Ireland along with King James II following the Williamite
wars: though no longer his employer, the exiled patron’s influence remains in Teague’s characteristic wit and figurativeness.

Later Teague comically promises his master half of a bribe if Elder Wou’dbe will permit him to testify against him. As in The Committee, an Irish servant’s guile and loyalty help turn the plot in the protagonist’s favor. In The Twin Rivals, Subtleman presumes Teague’s strange accent and unrefined ways would make him unemployable by someone like Elder Wou’dbe. Taking Subtleman by the throat after his bribe is revealed, Teague comically denies committing assault: “No, no, tish nothing but choking, nothing but choking” (554). Later searching London’s streets with Trueman, Teague explains figuratively that he is never lost because he “has been a Vanderer ever since he vas borned” (568). Thought he displays figurative wit at times, Teague also is sometimes merely confused or ignorant when making contradictory statements, such as his surmising that Aurelia’s cries for help are from “shome Daumsel in distress I believe, that has no mind to be reliev’d” (568). To make explicit his comic role, Teague even makes the nearly editorial comment “Dere ish a Joak for you” (570). That remark occurs as Teague is searching Midnight, finding on her a letter that will prove the younger Wou’dbe was bribing her to steal inheritance rights from his brother. Thus, the stage Irishman’s comedic blunders, bulls, and lack of refinement must be weighed with his pivotal role in Farquhar’s play as in Howard’s.

A Turning Point in Dramatic Portrayals

Farquhar marked a turning point in stage Irish history. After him, “the negative aspects attributed to [the Irishman’s] national character recede into the background, and a more burlesque, comic treatment (hinted at by some precursors in the seventeenth century) reasserts
itself” (Leerssen 79). As Richard Cumberland said of his reformed version of the stage Irishman, “whilst you furnish him with expressions, that excite laughter, you must graft upon them sentiments, that deserve applause” (qtd 126). Leerssen holds that “the most interesting aspect of the idealized Stage Irishman is implied in the positive approach to the brogue and to the bull,” adding that “whereas these were mere instances of Irish ridiculousness earlier on, they are now vindicated by sterling uprightness (or, in the vocabulary of the time, ‘artlessness’) that they convey” (128). Bulls and brogue became more than mere blunders; they were “clumsily phrased statements of clear-sightedness, loyalty, pathos or even wit” (129).

By the second half of the eighteenth century, a number of trends supported more positive portrayals of Ireland, including the relatively peaceful political relations between Ireland and England. Principles of human equality contributed to less hostile English and Anglo-Irish portrayals of the Gaelic Irish. In 1769 John Bush published *Hibernia Curiosa*, an account of Ireland that denounced not only irrational English prejudices towards Gaelic Irish but also the absenteeism, rack-renting, and religious intolerance Bush found to have contributed to the people’s wildness (Leerssen 77). Also helping improve national image were English concerns about the potential loss of more colonies following American independence and the move toward political union between England and Ireland in 1800. Stage Irishry remained as an important fictional image by which a people were judged, but the judgments were less severe. The century was marked by “a nearly benevolent interest, a willingness to be entertained or amused by Irish peculiarities” (73). Meanwhile, increasingly sentimental drama of the late eighteenth century allowed for a more sentimentalized and sympathetic notion of the stage Irishman (74, Earls 74).

From the Romantic perspective, Ireland’s wild and windy landscapes could be seen as places for appreciation of a sublime aesthetic, rather than merely an environmental determinant
for the supposed barbarity of Irish people. Throughout the eighteenth century emergent notions of the sublime from writers like John Dennis and Edmund Burke coincided with an appreciation for Ireland’s sublime scenery. Indeed sublime philosophy’s yoking of the terrible and the pleasurable suggests something of the Irish bull’s enduring oxymoronic tendency. Over two centuries after Dennis described crossing the Alps as both delightful and horrifying, W.B. Yeats would ascribe a “terrible beauty” to his native land.

**Macklin Turns the Satirical Tables**

In the context of increased sympathy for average Irish people, the stage Irish image did not so much disappear as become increasingly “staged,” in the sense of being non-mimetic and divergent from non-fictional accounts. Charles Macklin’s eminence as an actor in London prepared him for the staged qualities of popular image, while his Irish birth, Catholic upbringing, and native knowledge of Gaelic provided an outsider’s perspective on English linguistic and dramatic conventions. He pleased London audiences with stage Irish performances before writing *The True-Born Irishman*, a 1762 satire that addressed the affected qualities of “Englishness” for people on the imperial margins. Murrough O’Dogherty’s Irish nationality takes precedence in the play, eclipsing denominational considerations; he is presumably Protestant. Christopher Wheatley and Kevin Donovan observe of the play that “one could say that the Irish Protestants become Irish by becoming victims of stereotyping” (xxxii). In Head’s play, an example is native Irish Patrick commiserating with Kiltory about ill treatment by the English. In Macklin’s play, Mrs. O’Dogherty’s brother describes her emulation of perceived Englishness as “the London vertigo” and “a frenzy of admiration for everything in England” (4-5). Mr. O’Dogherty shares this disdain for affected identity, whether it is his wife’s Englishness
or some shows of Irish patriotism. He claims the staged puppetry of the Irish parliament is the reason he no longer has political ambitions. Having learned that the vain English land agent Mushroom has adulterous designs on his wife, O’Dogherty hatches a plan, a plot bull, to expose his deviances. In a reversal of the non-sensible comments expected from stage Irish characters, Mushroom’s embellished language is described by O’Dogherty as “cursed nonsense” (9).

Mushroom is a dilettante and cultural tourist who has affected the worst of the countries he has visited. The proud Irishman reverses Mushroom’s snobbery about Irish people’s “barbarous” tastes with an intentional malapropism: he claims the English keep their venison until it has “hot gout” rather than “haut gout” (11). With this bull, he suggests an overweening concern for fashion can become a feverish illness rather than a sign of refinement. Mushroom attempts a diplomatic assessment of the Irish by resorting to stage conventions: “you are damn’d honest, tory-rory, rantum scantum, dancing, singing, laughing, boozing, jolly, friendly, fighting, hospitable people” (11-12). Oppressed by such a stereotype, Mrs. O’Dogherty—or Diggerty as she wants to be called while under Mushroom’s spell—is a sort of cultural apostate, though easily enough won back when in her familial milieu.

Macklin employs punning bulls, both intentional and unintentional, and has his protagonist reflect on the virtues of homely language. O’Dogherty responds to the Englishman’s plans to marry a Hibernian with a pun that further stereotypes his stage Englishness: “you will find a great many relations here…for we have a large crop of the Mushrooms in this here country” (12). His wife commits unintentional malapropisms such as “jenny-see-quee” in an attempt to sound cosmopolitan. Though unwitting, such mistakes can be seen as satire on cosmopolitan conversational claptrap. Murragh O’Dogherty describes the English pursuit of sophistication as a sort of mania brought on by affluence, a running “mad after absurdities” (20).
After his wife recognizes her folly, he praises “our good, plain, old Irish English, which I insist upon is better than all the English English that ever coquets and coxcombs brought into the land” (27). By the end of the play he exposes Mushroom’s adulterous intentions with a plot bull, tricking him into dressing in drag and disclosing his philandering plans to all. Though the play was very successful in Dublin, it did not fare nearly as well in London, leading the playwright to remark philosophically, “there’s a geography in humour, as well as in morals, which I had not previously considered” (qtd Parry 145).

**Thomas Sheridan’s Carnivalesque Stage Irishry**

Where Macklin harnessed bulls and blunders to satirize Anglophile pretensions, Thomas Sheridan, his wife, and son used bulls and blunders in a carnivalesque stage atmosphere. Through characters like Captain O’Blunder, Mrs. Tryfort, and Mrs. Malaprop linguistic and logical conventions are overturned by a subversive carnivalesque discourse.

Thomas Sheridan wanted to reform the English language to help level the dangerously uneven linguistic terrain between England, Ireland, and other lands under British control. He wanted to recast English as a language of oratory and conversation. His was a reasoned agenda that might eventually lead to linguistic rationality and order like that the French Academy oversaw. Sheridan’s play *The Brave Irishman, or Captain O’Blunder* (1755) was a theatrical expression of the need for such vernacular reform. While the Captain’s unfamiliarity with London custom and language is the basis for much of the play’s farcical humor, English ignorance of his Hiberno-English patois and pronunciation are also essential to his misunderstandings, puns, and bulls. Similarly, the playwright and grammarian’s wife Frances Sheridan explored the pitfalls and paradoxes of polite discourse through her comic verbal—and
social—striver Mrs. Tryfort in the unperformed *A Journey to Bath* (1765). As has been widely noted, their son Richard Brinsley Sheridan drew inspiration and some actual language from his mother’s character for one of his most popular comic figures, Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals* (1775). What has been less analyzed is the varied yet strikingly similar ways all three playwrights suggest an underlying wisdom in their characters’ twisted diction. Though Tryfort and Malaprop are not identified as Irish, their strained attempts to use language to assimilate and ascend socially reflect a condition similar to that of the marginal and socio-economically striving Irish within an English-language empire. Even as an unwitting blunder, linguistic deviation can make cultural, philosophical, and political statements. It was fitting that Richard Sheridan, heir to his parents’ artistic interest in the paradoxical and political significance of verbal blunders, would become an ardent politician and legislator for Irish interests.

In the mid-eighteenth century, when Thomas Sheridan penned his farce, anti-Irish prejudice had not reached the intensity of the following century, but the playwright was clearly working against negative preconceptions voiced by several of his characters. He would use bulls to turn stereotypes into tropes, thereby making cultural and political statements. Interestingly, the transition from the second to third phase of the stage Irishman in J.O. Bartley’s schema coincides with an important mid-eighteenth century shift in Irish national identity. Wheatley and Donovan describe the growth at this time of the “Patriot position” among the English in Ireland and a related contemptuousness from the English in England: “the Irish Protestants accept an Irish identity at the point when the English have ceased to make distinctions between sections of the population, and regard all of the Irish as deficient in intelligence and civility” (xxxii). Against this background, Captain O’Blunder emerges as a sort of defensive stage gesture, an
implicitly Protestant Irishman who exhibits national stereotypes but also compares favorably with cosmopolitan English and French characters.

Reviewing select dramatic representations of Irish English from 1600 to 1740, Alan Bliss finds *The Brave Irishman* was the largest source for malapropisms (281). Moreover, Bliss says that while earlier writers included malapropisms as “mere blunders, characteristic of the Irish,” in Thomas Sheridan’s play “the malapropism emerges fully-fledged,” raising the question of how much Richard Sheridan owed to his father’s example (281). The elder’s play turns some of O’Blunder’s malapropisms into reflections on the general inadequacy of current spoken English to the diversity of cultures using it, an issue the author later addressed more directly in his lectures on elocution. But these language blunders have a further effect. Thomas Sheridan, like the Edgeworths, held that proper education would overcome the peculiarities of national character, even if they differed on the adequacy of current English to achieve this (Wright 446). But, as Julia Wright notes, within *Essay on Irish Bulls* the Edgeworths give voice to a counter-argument in the person of an Irishman who says his national language is especially prone to blunders and bulls, whether spoken in a brogue or not (447). Similarly, O’Blunder demonstrates more than a need for better education and linguistic reform; he suggests the figurative value of blunders and bulls. Mere mistakes would not amuse audiences as much as his malapropisms and other aberrations have.

In its exposition *The Brave Irishman* clearly expresses anti-Irish prejudice through Lucinda, who would “rather die” than comply with her father’s arrangement for her to marry O’Blunder, and Cheatwell, who does not blink at conning the captain to gain Lucinda’s favors—even though this villain reveals at the end of the play he is Irish-born. If the audience needed any more evidence of prejudice, in the captain’s first scene he is harassed by a London mob calling
him a “bog-trotter” among other things. Sheridan uses potentially negative qualities the English attribute to the Irish to render his hero more impressive. O’Blunder’s rough-hewn appearance is easily improved with new clothes. And his pugnacity emerges only when provoked; even then, it spotlights his rivals’ relatively weak constitutions and character.

As for language, O’Blunder’s Irish idioms and unfamiliarity with London word usage are the basis for his malapropisms and bulls; this is another case of an apparent fault becoming an advantage. Examples from this brief play are numerous, and several demonstrate a rhetorically figurative significance. In his first few lines, the captain threatens to have disturbers of the peace “shot stone dead and whipped through the regiment afterwards” (428). This hyperbolic statement sets the stage for later self-contradictory remarks about Monsieur Ragoo living after being slain. Hyperbole and malapropism tend to accompany emotional pique, as when the captain says he will make his harassers “leap like a dead salmon” if they do not relent (429).

Audiences find early in The Brave Irishman that the hero is prone to self-conscious exaggerations. Over the course of the play, this suggests two distinct linguistic issues: the inadequacy Sheridan found in current normative English and the potential tropic value of superficially nonsensical comments. “Ay, but what magnifies that?,” the captain asks. While a Londoner would instead say something like, “But what does that matter?,” his idiosyncratic verb choice suggests a special emphasis, a sense of dilation and relative importance that the conventional verb “matter” does not convey (429). A few lines later, Schemewell suggests the textual importance of O’Blunder’s language by observing that it is spoken without brogue; thus his sayings are not dramatically bound to a heavy Irish accent, even if words like “shauntleman” indicate otherwise. Some of the protagonist’s bulls come across as merely farcical contradictions: “I was not by when he took the measure of me” and “my hands shall go barefoot”
(432). But others come across as tropes, turnings of meaning away from conventional usage. Speaking to mental health doctors, the captain says, “he is only gone to see whether the man be alive or dead that I killed just now,” indicating metaphorically that he has “killed” Ragoo’s chances as a suitor even if he has not come close to taking his life (435). Asked how he sleeps, O’Blunder says, “upon my shoul I don’t know how, but I go to bed at night, and I find myself asleep when I wake in the morning” (435). While his words are self-contradictory on a literal level, they suggest the impossibility of “knowing” how we sleep when we only have normal consciousness of moments prior to and after sleep happens. The effect is to highlight the hubris of eighteenth-century scientists who presume the human mind can be so readily and completely examined.

The captain’s encounter with cutting-edge psychological medicine has the effect of temporarily making him “mad,” and in this fury he lets out another bull directed at Cheatwell: “I’ll make him dance like a dead dog” (437). O’Blunder commits a scatological malapropism when he translates the doctors’ recommendation of phlebotomy as “fleaining my bottom,” but in historical context this may be more than a farcical bull: medicinal bloodletting was proving to be a dangerous waste, and in this sense may have justified the captain’s description. The play’s final scene includes another malapropism or misunderstanding with a deeper significance. Hearing that Tradewell, father of his intended, is “broke,” O’Blunder asks, “what has he broke? His neck, or his arms, or what?” (441-42). The mistake emphasizes that the captain’s concerns are with the physical, the active, the earthy, and the readily discernible. He has a fortune of his own, but his main concerns are more basic: health, good humor, and marriage—even if his wealth helps to secure these.
In this sense Captain O’Blunder’s malapropisms are deeper than their name implies. In the sense of malapropism’s French roots of “inappropriate” or “irrelevant,” the captain’s malapropisms are paradoxically more appropriate than they seem at first. They are forms of folly in the Bakhtinian sense, the sense that “folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness” (Bakhtin 260). In the later theatrical works of Thomas Sheridan’s wife and son, such hidden relevance behind apparent misunderstanding will become even more apparent as it is also less associated with national identity.

**Frances Sheridan Transfers Bulls and Blunders to the English**

*A Journey to Bath* and *The Rivals* are set in England, not Ireland, and concern mainly English characters. Yet both plays are set in Bath, a west-coast resort town in England relatively far from the London metropolis. Each play was penned by an Irish-born author, and each involves characters overreaching in their use of the English language as a means to social advancement. Bath was where Thomas Sheridan established his elocution academy following his wife’s death. And he asserted in his lectures that in the English-speaking world, linguistic margins have less to do with location than with variable educational, grammatical, and elocutionary standards.

Frances Sheridan’s play remains only in an incomplete form, but the three extant acts are enough to get a general sense of plot and characters, including the main linguistic blunderer, Mrs. Tryfort. The play begins with a bull by Bath native and hotel entrepreneur Mrs. Surface: “I speak ill of nobody behind their backs; and for Mr. Champignion, he is a Fool, poor man; but take no notice that I told you so” (161). The paradoxical nature of gossip—the innate sense
people have that it is something that only others do—continued to feed bulls well into the twentieth century. In *Drama at Inish*, Lennox Robinson had another hotel employee, this time in a coastal Irish resort town, lament the local gossips and scandal-mongers, about whom she promised to tell hair-raising stories. As well as employing bulls, *A Journey to Bath* connotatively raises the issue of bulls by having three of its characters—Jeremy, Jonathan, and Edward—go by the surname Bull. As if commenting on the superficial folly and incongruity of linguistic bulls, a Bath native says of Jonathan Bull early in the play: “this man’s simplicity almost tempts me to excuse his impertinence” (165). Jonathan’s older brother Jeremy, a politician and orator, enters the play lamenting his brother’s eternal “blundering,” even if this is not specified as verbal deviance (166). The first act also involves proleptic discussion of Mrs. Tryfort, described by Lady Filmot as “the vainest poor creature, and the fondest of hard words, which without miscalling, she always takes care to misapply” (168). The first act ends with a bull-like the tension between surface and substance and a sort of role reversal when Lady Filmot labels Edward Bull a male coquet. As bulls tend to flirt between literal and figurative meanings, coquets and coquettes flirt with the opposite sex. The exchange ending the act dramatizes misunderstanding of figurative expression: Filmot says Edward does not understand how “to say a thousand things with your eyes,” a remark that draws sarcastic repetition and laughter from Edward. A tropic expression is taken for mere comical nonsense, possibly foreshadowing audience responses to Mrs. Tryfort’s blunders.

Tryfort’s first malapropism— that Lord Stewkly is helping to make her daughter “illiterate” instead of the more appropriate “literate”—can be taken as pure blunder or possibly as unwitting commentary on the questionable financial and amatory motives Stewkly has toward Lucy Tryfort (175). Similarly, her description of Stewkly as a “progeny”—when “prodigy”
would be more appropriate—could be read as a comment about his reliance on noble birth at a time when new-money citizens like Mrs. Tryfort and city businessmen like Jonathan Bull are gaining more influence (175). Ironically, Tryfort dismisses a suggestion that Stewkly has been composing verse “extempore” for her daughter by saying, “none of your nonsensical extemprys” (176). This dismissal also seems to describe her own verbal blunders, which can be read as merely comical nonsense but also as extemporaneous, unwitting insights.

In a later scene the Bull brothers discuss direct and indirect discourse. The pragmatic businessman Jonathan asks that the rhetorician and would-be politician Jeremy speak directly to him: “speak plain, and I warrant I’ll understand you” (180). Jeremy demurs, defending the value of rhetorical roundabouts: “why if I were just to tell you as you call it, ten to one if you could comprehend one word of what I should say” (180). Even if Jeremy Bull has something else in mind specifically, the hidden meanings in Mrs. Tryfort’s malapropisms are one such roundabout to truth. They convey significance beyond their surface-level silliness in a way that would be hard for someone like Mrs. Tryfort to express literally, for they undercut her sincere attempts to conform to upper-crust Bath society.

In Act III Mrs. Tryfort opens Scene ii by noting that special quality of exclusive society’s “language” in Bath. She disagrees that Stewkly’s apparent romantic interest is “only a joke,” as Lucy claims it is. This leads to another significant malapropism, as the mother says the lord’s interest “is in earnest, Miss, and to let you into a secret, ever since the agitation of your fortune, I resolved that you should marry a lord” (186). “Acquisition” is what we expect to hear in this remark instead of “agitation,” but, on second thought, wealth that compels Lucy to marry someone other than her love is an agitation. When describing Stewkly’s worldly experience, Mrs. Tryfort again blunders into truth: “But my lord Stewkly is so embellished, Mrs. Surface!
No body can be embellished that has not been abroad you must know. Oh if you were to hear him describe contagious countries as I have done, it would astonish you. He is a perfect map of geography” (187). This string of malapropisms suggests conflicted views about the motives and results of international travel. Later in the same act, Jeremy Bull commits a bull by invoking his family legacy: “If I had your ladyship at Bull-hall, I could shew you a line of Ancestry, that would convince you we are not a people of yesterday” (196). He contradicts himself by claiming family lineage will show that he is not caught up in his family past, yet this bull-ish claim for the importance of ancestry strikes at a very real tension in eighteenth-century England between noble families and businesspeople on the make. Verbal blunders again visit Mrs. Tryfort in the next scene as Jonathan Bull asks if his son is with her daughter “in some corner.” She says, “do you think Miss Tryfort doesn’t understand punctuality better than to go into corners with young fellows?” (197). The literal-minded Jonathan responds: “Heighty toity! What’s the meaning of this?” (197). We expect to hear “propriety” instead of “punctuality” in Tryfort’s rhetorical question, but her version might more profoundly suggest that Lucy and Edward’s marriage is only a matter of time, of “punctuality.” For all her efforts to arrange a noble suitor like Stewkly for her daughter, Mrs. Tryfort’s malapropisms, read at a deeper level, indicate she knows that someone like Edward would be a better marriage partner for Lucy.

**Malapropisms as Freudian Slips**

In their pithier malapropisms Mrs. Tryfort and Mrs. Malaprop commit what might be considered Freudian slips, or parapraxes. Tryfort and Malaprop betray deeper meanings that their attempts at polite society and conventional beliefs would not allow on an explicit, fully conscious level. The general idea had been explored by playwrights before the Sheridans. In
John Dryden’s *Sir Martin Mar-all* (1668) the title character tries to explain himself after committing an insulting conversational blunder, describing it as a mere *lapsus lingua* (McArthur 943-44, OED On-line). Describing some of Malaprop's blunders as "deliciously unintentional hits," Declan Kiberd says these sort of utterances are at home in art, where propositions and their opposites can be true (143). In the more humane comedy of the late-eighteenth century, "even comic butts have their moments of wisdom: and the astounding rightness of many of Mrs. Malaprop's mistakes suggests a more modern, latent, subconscious element at work" (143). Sigmund Freud held it probable that verbal slips always have unintentional meaning, and that these errors “could sometimes be quite a proper act” (39). Whether or not slips of the tongue have unintentional meaning, "poets would still be entitled to refine them by infusing sense into them for their own purposes,” the psychoanalyst said in one of his lectures, adding that “it would not be surprising if more were to be learned from poets about slips of the tongue than from philologists and psychiatrists” (40). For Freud, slips of the tongue are another area where poets preceded scientists. Kiberd associates the latent significance of blunders by Irish playwrights like the Sheridan’s with postcolonial psychology: "the fact that Ireland had functioned for well over two centuries as a zone of dark unconsciousness to England's daylit world may explain (Sheridan’s) glee in pulling away the social covers" (143). A collection of anecdotes about Sheridan the younger recounts his “love of inventing bulls,” noting that “one of Mr. Sheridan’s favourite amusements, in his hours of recreation,…was that of making blunders…and relating them…. vouching for the truth of them with the most perfect gravity” (Anon. 280).
Bulls and Blunders in R.B. Sheridan’s The Rivals

In The Rivals Richard Brinsley Sheridan achieves a sort of synthesis of characters from his parents’ plays: Sir Lucius O’Trigger can be seen as a de-romanticized Captain O’Blunder, and Mrs. Malaprop as a more fully realized Mrs. Tryfort. Surprised by the umbrage audiences and critics took to performance of O’Trigger, the author immediately revised the play after a brief run to make this character less outrageous; he also prefaced the published play with a defense of O’Trigger, if only as unintentional agitprop:

…if the condemnation of this Comedy (however misconceived the provocation) could have added one spark to the decaying flame of national attachment to the country supposed to be reflected on, I should be happy in its fate; and might with truth have boasted, that it had done more real service in its failure, than the successful morality of a thousand stage-novels will ever effect (71).

O’Trigger’s bulls were not the source of public outrage with the first version of the play for they are “far outweighed by the blunders of the famous Mrs. Malaprop, whose ‘malapropisms’ are nothing else than bulls spoken in a genteel English accent” (Leerssen 145). Rather it was Sheridan’s upsetting of the sentimental sympathy for the Irish in late eighteenth-century drama that sparked the response: “in presenting a dangerous Irishman, Sheridan indirectly hurt the fabric of accommodation and pretended harmony that was woven in the interest, and to the amusement, of the English audience” (146). Fintan O’Toole notes the irony of public disapproval of O’Trigger in as much as the character was “Sheridan’s joke on himself as an Irish adventurer” (93). In any case, audiences responded very well to the revision and recasting of O’Trigger’s character, making the play a trans-Atlantic success.

O’Trigger comes across as a less appealing version of the stage Irishman Captain O’Blunder, and unlike his forerunner he does not win the hand of the woman for whom he has travelled to England. Christopher Fitz-Simon observes that Richard Sheridan would use
O’Blunder as the basis for a very different character in *St. Patrick’s Day*, an Irishman who is more refined than his father’s theatrical creation (62). If Richard was engaged in a literary “slaying” of his father’s well-known stage character, he did so in multiple iterations that suggest the importance of O’Blunder as a benchmark.

In the revised version of *The Rivals*, Sheridan recast O’Trigger and concentrated the plays malapropisms in the non-Irish Mrs. Malaprop (Fitz-Simon 61); but the Irish character still unleashes several bulls. His advice that Acres should challenge Ensign Beverley to a duel to “prevent the confusion that might arise” from the two of them courting Lucy can seem like a bull (R.B. Sheridan 117). Modern audiences might think of duels as the result—not the prevention—of confusion. In this respect, the playwright has O’Trigger offer the specious claim that duelists should let “the lazy sons of peace settle the justice” of their violence (116). Audiences would also find no “confusion” in allowing the courted, rather than the courtiers, to choose. In soliloquy at the start of Act III, the Irishman speaks with bull-like self-assurance when he proclaims he might have married a certain Lady if a military officer had not run away with her “before she could get a sight of me!” (128). When Captain Absolute asks the reason for his challenge to duel, O’Trigger responds, “Pray, Sir, be easy—the quarrel is a very pretty quarrel as it stands—we should only spoil it, by trying to explain it” (129). This is a further reflection on the attitude that led to O’Trigger’s questionable advice to Acres about calling for the duel, and it leads to another bull, as he laments that duels tend to draw crowds in England: “I don’t know what’s the reason, but in England, if a thing of this kind gets wind, people make such a pother, that a gentleman can never fight in peace and quietness” (129). An Irishman’s idea of fighting “in peace” might call to mind G.K. Chesterton’s lines from *The Ballad of the White Horse* about the “great Gaels of Ireland” whom “God made mad/For all their wars are merry/And all their
songs are sad.” Later at the duel, O’Trigger brings forth another belligerent bull by asking Faulkland if he will be “so cantankerous as to spoil the party by sitting out” (142). This Irishman contrasts sharply with Captain O’Blunder, who generally had a genial, trusting, and moral disposition, even though he was armed and ready to fight when provoked.

The influence of Sheridan’s mother is as much or more significant to language blunders in the play than that of his father. Richard Sheridan derived not only a model for Mrs. Malaprop but also some of The Rivals’ plot from A Journey to Bath (Fitz-Simon 50); but loss of the final acts of A Journey to Bath prevents knowing how similar these works were. Fintan O’Toole claims Malaprop is both a borrowing from his mother “and a satire on his father’s obsessions” with linguistic propriety (87). For its plot The Rivals also seems to draw on Richard’s success courting the much-sought-after Bath soprano Eliza Linley, including duels he fought in pursuit of her (Fitz-Simon 59-60). Biographer Madeleine Bingham argues the two young couples of the play—Lydia and Jack Absolute, Julia and Faulkland—are each varied artistic renderings of the author’s experience in courtship (114). In this way, Jack may represent the author’s calculating and pragmatic side, while Lydia, Faulkland, and Julia taken together may reflect his stereotypically romantic and jealous tendencies. Yet the central confusions of character in the play result not from dispersal but from unknown conflation: Jack Absolute and Ensign Beverley are the same person, as Lydia and others will discover; and Lydia is both Jack’s chosen love interest and the woman his father has arranged for him to marry, as all will discover. The play’s most basic bull or paradox is that the protagonist is his own “rival.” In this the play has something in common with contemporary Oliver Goldsmith’s She Stoops to Conquer (1773). In Goldsmith’s play Marlow is between the horns of a bull: he is an impudent Londoner and a diffident lover. His challenge, as Hardcastle puts it, is to reconcile these contraries: “...if young
Mr. Brazen can find the art of reconciling contradictions, he may please us both, perhaps” (Canfield 1896).

Someone who had been through as arduous a courtship as Sheridan’s with Eliza Linley would be aware that an ardent suitor can often be his own worst rival or enemy. Yet comedy such as The Rivals was still the fittest dramatic mode for his tribulations. As Bingham puts it, “once married to Eliza, Sheridan could afford to find the whole thing funny, for it had a happy ending” (114). The play is a comedy not only in the taxonomical sense of bringing together the most energetic couples for marriage. As befits the sort of “laughing comedy” that Sheridan and Goldsmith advocated, it also has laughable humor (Durant 42). In this respect the technique of verbal blundering inherited from Frances Sheridan calls for closer consideration.

Mrs. Malaprop Blunders into the Truth

Malapropisms come mainly from an English character in The Rivals, yet that character is associated with Ireland before she takes the stage. In an early scene, Lydia declares that Mrs. Malaprop “has fallen absolutely in love with a tall Irish baronet” (81). O’Trigger and Mrs. Malaprop are not among the happy couples at the play’s conclusion, but they complement one another both in their veiled correspondences and their rhetorical tropes. As in A Journey to Bath, in some instances malapropisms in The Rivals exceed farcical nonsense and take on figurative meaning. In this way Mrs. Malaprop also surpasses literary antecedents such as Dogberry from Much Ado about Nothing and Tabby Bramble from Humphrey Clinker: “the splendid urbanity of Mrs. Malaprop’s blunders and their driving deliberateness separate her…from her forbears” (Durant 69). Her blunders can elicit more than derisive laughter. To borrow terms from Philip Sidney’s An Apology for Poetry, these malapropisms can spark delightful recognition instead of
angry laughter; they provide joyful insight “either permanent or present” instead of “scornful tickling” (117). Julia describes Malaprop in terms very similar to those Filmot uses to describe Tryfort. Julia says Malarop has “select words ingeniously misapplied, without being mispronounced” (R.B. Sheridan 83). The most important difference here, compared with the description of Tryfort’s discourse, is that some of Malaprop’s misapplications are ingenious: they show intelligence, invention, originality, and cleverness.

When Malaprop enters the play in the second scene, she chides Lydia with sexist cant about independent thought being inappropriate for a young woman, but then undercuts her own assertion by asking Lydia to “illiterate”—rather than “obliterate”—Beverley from her memory. Malaprop’s inarticulateness becomes an argument in favor of the sort of verbal fluency that Lydia’s plentiful reading can provide. This and other malapropisms reflect Malaprop’s ingeniousness and delightfully betray their speaker’s disingenuous attempts to mimic parochial and male-chauvinist attitudes. In this way, her wish that Lydia avoid being a “progeny of learning” is at first blush a mistaken substitute for “prodigy,” but it can also suggest the more general advantages of learning. While listing the sort of knowledge she thinks is dangerous for a young woman, she makes an apparent mistake by saying “paradoxes,” which editor Cecil Price suggests she might have meant as “parallax.” Yet this is another example where an aberration—whether poor vocabulary or slip of the tongue—can be taken as ingenious insight. An extensive liberal education, such as that gained from reading the better novelists in circulating libraries, might attune you to paradoxes. Malaprop then demonstrates an overemphasis on correctness in spelling and pronunciation without adequate attention to verbal meaning, as she describes proper education for a young woman: “she should be mistress of orthodoxy, that she might not mis-spell, and mis-pronounce words so shamefully as girls usually do; and likewise she might
reprehend the true meaning of what she is saying” (86). Here malapropism sounds strikingly similar to an Irish bull. While “apprehend” is clearly the more appropriate word than “reprehend” for a literal sense of the remark, gender and cultural prejudice embedded in the language and literature of the eighteenth-century English-speaking world might give “reprehend” a deeper relevance. Malaprop’s verbal blunders further undercut the ostensible sexism of her remarks in Act III, Scene iii, when she laments: “few gentlemen, now a days, know the ineffectual qualities in a woman! Few think how little knowledge becomes a gentlewoman!” (109). She uses “ineffectual” instead of “ineffable,” a comical blunder on one level but also a commentary on specious and dangerous conceptions of women as mystical creatures who would only suffer from conventional learning.

Trying to find deeper—or at least more humorous—significance in some of Malaprop’s verbal blunders can be a challenge, but it usually yields fruit. As Mark Auburn has observed, “almost all of her malapropisms are…words whose misapplication conveys with them other meanings which are amusing” (39). Offended by a letter describing her verbal awkwardness and incorrectness, she responds in outrage and, ironically, with a flurry of malapropisms that may come across as mere nonsense, albeit comical nonsense: “Sir! An attack upon my language! What do you think of that?—an aspersion upon my parts of speech! Was ever such a brute! Sure if I reprehend any thing in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs!” (110) While this can be taken as mere farce, readers could also find themselves agreeing with the idea that at least some of Malaprop’s blunders have an “oracular” quality, that they do derange the meaning of deadened, epitaph-like English usage—perhaps for the better, perhaps in a way that spotlights prejudices embedded in conventional discourse. Freud found oracular qualities in slips of the tongue and other mistakes, which he said can take
on the role of "the omens or portents of the ancients" (62). However misapplied Malaprop’s language is, her pride in it seems sincere and important. The anger at an assault on her “parts of speech” brings to mind the concurrent meaning of the word “parts” as “personal qualities” and “talents” (Canfield 1974). However fumbling she is with language, she realizes its essential role in self-worth and dignity. Her comedy may result from a hypersensitivity to the value of language that leads her to strive beyond her capacity. When praising Captain Absolute, Malaprop lauds “his good language,” associating—however blunderingly—verbal correctness with physical appearance and character: “His physiognomy so grammatical!” (121). Then she blunders through an extended misquotation of Hamlet, showing again both an acute sense that language and literature are important and a poignant inability to master them. The misquotations seem to foreshadow an Irish bull in Samuel Beckett’s Happy Days when Winnie asks, “What is that unforgettable line?” (50). Asked to forget and forgive past slights, Malaprop agrees in a bull-like blunder: “we will not anticipate the past;—so mind, young people—our retrospection will now be all to the future” (124).

For all her blunders, Malaprop helps to defuse the standoff between O’Trigger and Captain Absolute. She questions male codes of honor—“come, come lets have no Honour before ladies”—and she calls for a shedding of past grievances based on misunderstandings by issuing a malapropism-cum-bull: “no delusions to the past” (143). Malaprop’s commentary on hollow and misguided notions of honor provides the context for Captain Absolute’s genuine expression of honor regarding Lydia: “for this lady, while honored with her approbation, I will support my claim against any man whatever” (144). With its improbably neat resolution, the play is often praised for characterizations, humor, and language rather than plot and emotional realism. As John Loftis puts it, “psychological authenticity has a limited place in comedy that so
frequently employs burlesque as this one” (52). Realism aside, Malaprop, the main comedic figure, propels this play to the generic conclusion of comedy, the matching of the most appropriate lovers.

The Sheridans, a playwriting family, used bulls and blunders to highlight the role of culturally marginal characters. In *The Brave Irishman* a male protagonist’s blunders and bulls call into question prejudices behind the stage Irishman convention, as well as the adequacy of the concurrent English language to serve the geographical and cultural extent of England’s political power. In what survives of *A Journey to Bath*, Mrs. Tryfort voices comic malapropisms and bulls that sometimes contain kernels of truth. In *The Rivals*, Mrs. Malaprop provides much of the comedy, but also profound bulls and some crucial common sense for men blinkered by bogus notions of courtship and honor. The sense that these fumbling bull-speakers could have important insights reflects the gentler, sentimental comedy of the times. These plays were part of a calm before the storm of political change in the following century.

Pre-nineteenth-century dramatists surveyed in this chapter paved the way for increasingly sympathetic iterations of the Irish bull. They helped establish a convention that could be used in diverse ways by later writers. Edgeworth, Boucicault, and Wilde would carry bulls through the nineteenth century, exploiting their satirical power and continuing to mine their contradictions for paradoxical import. The Abbey Theatre would bring this cultural legacy into the twentieth century, directly influencing Samuel Beckett as a young man in Dublin. Beckett had a complicated but significant relationship with his Irish literary antecedents. To borrow a phrase from Vivian Mercier, he was *in* the centuries-old tradition of the Irish bull, even if he was not always ostensibly *of* it.
Works Cited


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Chapter II: Maria Edgeworth and Bulls in the Romantic Age

...For who can forbear to laugh at the bare idea of an Irish bull?... Nor let anyone apprehend that this subject can ever become trite and vulgar. Custom cannot stale its infinite variety. It is in the main obvious, and palpable enough for every common understanding; yet it leads to disquisitions of exquisite subtlety, it branches into innumerable ramifications, and involves consequences of surprising importance; it may exercise the ingenuity of the subtlest wit, the fancy of the oddest humourist, the imagination of the finest poet, and the judgment of the most profound metaphysician.... A laughable confusion of ideas constitutes a bull....We are sensible that, to many people, the most vulgar Irish bull would appear more laughable merely from its being Irish....We are still compelled to acknowledge that no accurate definition of a bull has yet been given.

—Maria and Richard Edgeworth, Essay on Irish Bulls, 1802

Just as Richard Head introduced his joke book in 1675, the authors of the Essay establish from the beginning that bulls have deeper value than as mere signs of foolish confusion. The Edgeworths assert that Irish bulls differ from mere blunders, yet their “ethereal nature” has made it difficult to analyze their properties (ii). This chapter will consider Irish bulls and Irish character as they appear in prominent works by Maria Edgeworth. Some of the most thorough analysis of Irish bulls was done by the Edgeworths themselves in the Essay, so consideration of primary sources will begin with close scrutiny of that work. With this grounding, analysis will follow of bulls in Edgeworth’s Irish tales—Castle Rackrent (1800), Ennui (1809), The Absentee (1812), and Ormond (1817). A thorough understanding of the Essay will provide a key of sorts for interpreting the novels; the Essay will serve as a theoretical basis for identifying and analyzing bulls in the fiction. By enumerating many specific examples of bulls—or paroles, to use the structuralist term—the Essay helped to establish a signifying system—or langue—that informs Edgeworth’s Irish novels. The paradoxical quality of bulls contributes in varying degrees to the dialogic structure of the novels while commenting on the dialogic and dynamic
nature of relations between classes and between the Irish and English nations. Analysis of the Irish novels will begin with the most dialogic, *Castle Rackrent*, followed by the most clearly national, *TheAbsentee*, then the most psychological, *Ennui*, concluding with the least Irish in subject matter of the four works, *Ormond*.

Prior Criticism of Edgeworth’s Irish Tales

Critical analysis of Maria Edgeworth’s use of bulls is somewhat scarce. Cóilín Owens addresses the topic the most squarely in his essay “Irish Bulls in *Castle Rackrent*.” Owens argues Edgeworth’s most famous novel is “a work in ironic mode,” one that suggests more guile on the part of its narrator Thady than many readers have given him credit for (70-71). Owens proposes that the Irish bull is a model for the whole novel, with Thady’s protestations of loyalty and honesty serving to veil his interest in the Rackrent family’s decline and fall (72). Owens also identifies numerous bulls from the novel and places them in the context of both *Essay on Irish Bulls* and the broad sweep of Irish history, but he does not extend his analysis to bulls in Edgeworth’s three other Irish novels.

James Newcomer argues that many readers of *Castle Rackrent* have failed to detect the many signs that Thady Quirk is guileful, shrewd, and disingenuous, rather than being simply “honest,” “true,” and “loyal” as he claims (79). Though Newcomer does not use the term “bull” in his essay, he cites examples of Thady’s self-contradiction to illustrate the complexity underlying his simple servant persona: “if he is simple, he has the native shrewdness that may sometimes be the companion of simplicity” (79). Based on a close reading of the text, he concludes that “the true Thady reflects intellect and power in the afflicted Irish peasant…He is
artful rather than artless, unsentimental rather than sentimental, shrewd rather than obtuse, clear-headed rather than confused, calculating rather than trusting” (86).

Joanne Altieri makes the case that Edgeworth’s Irish fiction demonstrates a convention inherited from eighteenth-century drama, especially sentimental comedies, namely “the separation of high and low characters by their forms of speech” (101). In this way Edgeworth could create Irish peasant characters who sound relatively realistic because she has other characters, like Lord Colambre in *The Absentee*, bear the burden of being moral exemplars (102). The Irish characters can speak in bulls and brogue, while the English absentees exude “priggishness of manner and style” (102).

More generally biographers and critics have analyzed Edgeworth’s Irish tales together. Elizabeth Harden considers the four Irish tales in the “Education of a Nation” chapter of one of her book-length studies of the author. Harden notes that all four works were written for English audiences, in part to redress the stunning ignorance that many had about Ireland at a time of increased political union (1984 94). As she puts it, “there was both a desire and a need for accurate information about Ireland, and the novel was considered the proper vehicle for providing such information” (94). Like Owens, Harden uses the *Essay* to contextualize *Castle Rackrent*, finding in Thady’s figurative use of language—including anticlimax, hyperbole, and antanaclasis—examples of speech patterns described in the *Essay* (99). She concludes that the novel’s emphasis on manners before morals allows readers to reserve judgment “about the moral and mental confusion of the lower Irish” (103). Among Edgeworth’s other Irish tales, Harden considers *Ennui* a flawed work but still remarkable for being “the first full-scale picture of Irish society in fiction and the first serious study of Anglo-Irish landlordism” (107). *The Absentee*, she says, is “a brilliant satire on universal foibles and follies, regardless of time or place, and a
serious study of the social and economic issues of a national culture” (112). Though considered by many one of Edgeworth’s finer novels, *Ormond* lacks the socioeconomic scope of *Ennui* and *The Absentee*; *Ormond*’s hero is a native of Ireland and does not need the sort of narrative orientation that the outsider absentees of the other novels go through (116).

In her biography of Maria Edgeworth, Marilyn Butler finds that the author’s “mastery of idioms and attitudes” brings to life her most famous character, Thady Quirk, and that the source of *Castle Rackrent*’s comedy “is the eccentricity and superficial inconsistency of his comments” (352). Although Butler does not name it as such, a bull is among the textual evidence she marshals for these claims (353). Edgeworth is praised for having the courage to write an entire novel’s narration in Irish dialect—“Irishisms and all”—at a time when accurate accounts of dialect were very rare (356). Butler discerns two main points from *Essay on Irish Bulls*: that many people who are not Irish speak bulls and blunders; and that many Irish bulls can be explained in the context of an Irish lower-class who are “exceptionally expressive” (360-61). The recounting of Irish bulls in the *Essay* is often in the style of “dispassionate reporting,” and these bulls serve as “forerunners of many fine passages of lower-class dialogue in the Irish tales written afterwards” (363). For all its faults as a novel, including needless repetition and an implausible plot, *Ennui* had greater historical importance than Edgeworth’s other Irish tales: “It helped inaugurate a new style of sociological realism, not just by chance but because it made subtle and valid points about society and social relationships” (365). One reason for that realism is the author’s use of her life in the 1780s and 1790s in Edgeworthstown, her father’s Irish village, as the basis for the main character’s experience as a landlord (368). As for *The Absentee*, Butler notes that it was the most influential of Edgeworth’s Irish tales for being “the first ‘national’ novel that was fully recognizable as such” (375). The fault of this novel lies, she
says, in Edgeworth’s determination to present a favorable image of Ireland, possibly to compensate for the negative national qualities gleaned from *Castle Rackrent* (380). *Ormond*, Butler finds, is a successful tale of the moral education of its title character, combining “self-discovery” with “a growth in his understanding of Ireland” (386).

So the existing critical literature relating to Edgeworth and the Irish bull either focuses narrowly on one work or lacks specific reference to bulls.

**Dialogic Qualities in the Essay and Castle Rackrent**

The *Essay* and *Castle Rackrent* have much in common. Not only were they both published at about the same time as the Acts of Union, but both also have an often sympathetically anthropological approach. In the *Essay*, this benign objectivity takes the form of the overarching authorial voice. In the novel, it is found in the extensive footnotes and glossary that explain cultural context for the language and events in estate steward Thady Quirk’s narration. The two works also share what Kathryn Kirkpatrick describes as the dialogic quality of “competing narrative voices” (xxiv, xxv). In the *Essay*, the numerous anecdotes and the play-within-an-essay of chapters 13–15 could be said to be in ironic and dialogic relationship with the more authorial, essayistic voice found most clearly in the introduction and conclusion. In the novel, of course, that dialogic tension is between Thady Quirk’s narrative and the voice of the “editor” in the preface, footnotes, and glossary—that editor being none other than Maria and Richard Edgeworth themselves. More broadly, a similar dialogic tension could be seen between the dispossessed Irish Catholics and the Anglo-Irish gentry, between native speakers of bulls and blunders and their colonial supervisors—whether those supervisors were sympathetically engaged with their tenants or negligently absent and aloof. What Mikhail Bakhtin found in
Fyodor Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels is discernible in Edgeworth’s Irish novels as well: “the consciousness is drawn into interaction with other consciousnesses…it always finds itself in an intense relationship with another consciousness” (1973 26). In this way, both the Essay and Castle Rackrent weave together the sincere and the ironic, literal anthropology and tongue-in-cheek exaggeration, earnest advocacy and playful storytelling. Both works compliment Irish bull speakers by making figurative discourse both artful medium and paradoxical message. The Essay would in turn influence the dialects found in Edgeworth’s subsequent novels about Ireland, as analysis of those tales will show. As Marilyn Butler put it, the examples of bulls that the Edgeworths recorded in the Essay “are the forerunners of many fine passages of lower-class dialogue in the Irish tales written afterwards” (1971 363).

Castle Rackrent and the Essay share a key assumption: that mutual understanding and respect will follow from the political parity promised by union. In the Essay, after providing ample evidence of bulls spoken by other nationalities, the Edgeworths conclude that the Irish have been unfairly stigmatized for their ways of speech. When they do speak bulls, the Irish are often justified by “ancient precedents” or “their habits of using figurative and witty language” (1802 Edgeworth 98). While unsure of why the Irish have this figurative and comedic propensity, the authors suggest it may be a result of their receptiveness to self-deprecating humor:

In Ireland, the countenance and heart expand at the approach of wit and humour: the poorest labourer forgets his poverty and toil, in the pleasure of enjoying a joke. Amongst all classes of people, provided no malice is obviously meant, none is apprehended. That such is the character of the majority of the nation there cannot to us be a more convincing and satisfactory proof than the manner in which a late publication was received in Ireland. The Irish were the first to laugh at the caricature of their ancient foibles, and it was generally taken merely as good-humoured raillery, not as insulting satire (98).
The Edgeworths say their defense of Ireland is based on its merits because they, as non-natives, lack patriotic fervor. Their avowedly dispassionate argument will produce “a more just and enlarged idea of the Irish than has been generally entertained” (99). In a suggestion of their imperialist leanings the authors claim that gross caricature of the Irish may have been acceptable before the Acts of Union of 1800-01, but that after political union, such negative stereotyping would be akin to a king placing the court fool’s cap and bells on his own head. “Would it not be a practical bull?” they ask (100). This rhetorical question is a fittingly figurative formulation of a similar claim that concludes the preface to Castle Rackrent. England and Ireland, Maria Edgeworth says in the preface to the novel, will be conjoined in such a way that both will be able to enjoy retrospectively the rustic folly of pre-union Irish colonial subjects.

**The Essay: A Sympathetic Anthropology**

As a non-fictional examination of the nature of Irish bulls, the Essay is worthy of study as a touchstone for Edgeworth’s Irish novels, especially their inclusion of bulls. It can also provide some basis for analysis of bulls by Irish authors who would follow Edgeworth. The Essay suggests the English have something to learn from their Hibernian neighbors, if only through a greater appreciation of the humor and figurative invention to be found in unconventional English usage. The Essay has been described as “an able defense of the language spoken by the lower classes in Ireland, as well as a criticism of English prejudice and ignorance” (1984 Harden 99). Another commentator has said it is “a heavy-handed and pedantic assault on the English prejudice towards Irish speech” but also shows its authors’ “liberality of judgment, their certain degree of familiarity with the Irish countryman, and most remarkable zeal in arguing their case” (Owens 74-75).
The early chapters of the *Essay* note the occurrence of bulls among non-Irish nationalities such as the French, English, and Spanish, while cataloguing Irish ones as well. A Dublin newspaper reports that an English general had “scoured the country…, but had not the good fortune to meet with a single rebel” (1802 Edgeworth 12). On a literal level, the statement may seem like an absurd confusion of descriptions for perilous military maneuvers and leisurely game hunting. But the authors suggest it may have been “only a figure of speech,” indicating that in Ireland such figurativeness can be found even in newspapers, which tend to be literal (12). Chapter 3 of the *Essay* takes an ironic turn as the authors describe the double standard of “criminal law” regarding bulls and blunders.

We must therefore carefully continue the laudable practice of ridiculing the blunders, whether real or imaginary, of Irishmen… Much must be allowed in England for the licence of conversation; but by no means must this conversation-licence be extended to the Irish… we must not listen to what is called reason; we must not enter into any argument, pro or con, but silence every Irish opponent, if we can, with a laugh. …What enviable privileges are annexed to the birth of an Englishman! And what a misfortune it is to be a native of Ireland! (14, 16).

The tone is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729), and the satirical objective is similarly clear. By stereotyping the Irish as laughably blundering fools, the English betray a reality-distorting racial presumption. What would be granted as poetic license in other people’s speech is mere folly from the mouths of the Irish. In this regard, Declan Kiberd interprets the *Essay* as “an accusation of something worse than colonialism: downright racism” (262).

With the same prejudiced narrator, the *Essay* tells the story of a ten-year-old Irish boy named Dominick, who is sent to a school in Wales where he is mercilessly ridiculed and mocked for his bulls and Irishisms. The narrator only grudgingly allows that boy was sometimes mocking his abusive schoolmaster’s manner of speaking. Dominick recognizes something in an
excerpt from James Harris’ *Hermes* describing the paradoxical nature of the future and the past, both only existing in the mind. Harris was an eighteenth-century English politician and grammarian, and *Hermes, A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar* (1751) was his best-known work. In that work he describes the nature of the tenses: “For all sensation is of the present only, the past being preserved not by sense but by memory, and the future being anticipated by prudence only and wise foresight” (Harris 105). Had a statement like Harris’ come from his own lips, Dominick tells the schoolmaster, it would be called an Irish bull. The schoolmaster promptly punishes the boy for his “impertinent observation” of this double standard (1802 Edgeworth 20). With the help of a friendly classmate from England, Dominick manages to thrive at the school and later succeeds as a colonial official, eventually returning to London to save his old school friend from debtors prison. While Dominick demonstrates intelligence, industry, and heartfelt loyalty, the narrator frames this success story as “an exception” to “the general law of bulls and blunders” that supposedly taints the Irish people. In Dominick’s tale, the narrator notes that when the friendly Edwards laughs at his Irish classmate, it is a good-humored and affectionate laugh.

**Wise Humor and Carnival Laughter**

In Chapter 5, the narrator leaves behind some of the heavy-handed irony of previous chapters to discuss the way that the jocularity of ignorant people differs from that of the wise: “theirs is the sly sneer, the dry joke, and the horse laugh; theirs the comprehensive range of ridicule” (1802 Edgeworth 26). These comments recall Philip Sidney’s lament over two centuries earlier that comedians were pursuing a laughter born of “scornful tickling” (136). To borrow Sidney’s terms, the Edgeworths’ *Essay* suggests that the negative stereotyping of Irish
blundering is meant to provoke scornful laughter, while the wit and figurative elegance of Irish bulls should instead provoke delightful insight. The humor of bulls is akin to the “festive” or “carnival” laughter Bakhtin described in analyzing Rabelais’ work: “the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity” (1968 11). Slipping back into ironic voice, the Essay narrator insists that Irish bulls somehow differ from the poetic paradoxes of Alexander Pope. Yet this is refuted by subsequent narration of the ample precedents for bulls—and other modes of thought—dating back to antiquity. Indeed, the figurative qualities of bulls often qualify them as tropes of classical rhetoric, including catachresis, paradox, hyperbole, and oxymoron. The authors end the chapter with a non-Irish bull: “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise (30).

In the following chapter of the Essay, the Edgeworths recount an Irish craftsman’s plea before an English magistrate, illustrating some of the observations about Irish legal appeals from Castle Rackrent. Bulls are an element of the claimant’s ingratiating—“your honour’s honour”—and roundabout tale of woe. For example, he claims, “I well remember before I was born,” and, reminiscent of Thomas Sheridan’s The Brave Irishman (1754), the claimant remarks that a blow to the head “kilt” him, as the magistrate can see (31, 32). He explains this absurdity as a figurative exaggeration with the simile: “I am as good as dead still” (32). The Essay narrator then explains somewhat redundantly that kilt has a common metaphorical meaning in Ireland, and that metaphorical hyperbole is revered elsewhere—in Shakespeare, Pope, Corneille, and Milton’s work—as a poetic effect. Where nonsense ends and poetry begins, the narrator finds difficult to say: “The bounds which separate sublimity from bombast, and absurdity from wit, are as fugitive as the boundaries of taste” (34).

Chapter 7 of the Essay describes practical bulls, those self-defeating or self-negating actions associated with the Irish and non-Irish. The Irish kind has one distinguishing
characteristic: “Its horns are tipped with brass” (37). For the narrator, this means civil courage and boldness; and Francis Bacon is quoted to illustrate the relationship of boldness and practical bulls: “If absurdity be the subject of laughter, doubt you not but great boldness is seldom without some absurdity” (qtd 38). Thus, the Essay attributes Irishmen’s reputation for dueling at the drop of a hat to their propensity for practical bulls. As the authors put it, “it is supposed in England, that an Irishman is always ready to give any gentleman satisfaction [ie., to duel], even when none is desired” (38).

The Essay then returns to language, dissecting the explanation that a Dublin shoeblack gives before a judge for a violent altercation. The line-by-line analysis of the shoeblack’s account, which is full of slang and dialect, supports the authors’ contention that the Irish speak so many bulls because they tend to use figurative language. The Dubliner’s account may be inelegant, but it clearly economizes language for audiences who understand it. The authors go so far as to say the shoeblack’s figurative language surpasses that of Alexander Pope’s Rape of the Lock (1717) for ingenuity. Moreover, the Irish peasantry possesses this ingenuity for wit and humor, while the English peasants have a “phlegmatic temper” that keeps them from speaking bulls (46). Speakers of bulls, the authors say, “are confounded by the rapidity and force with which undisciplined multitudes of ideas crowd for utterance…Passing rapidly over a long chain of thought, they sometimes forget the intermediate links, and no one but those of equally rapid habits can follow them successfully” (46). Next, the authors recount an anecdote in which an English officer’s haughty laughter at an Irishman’s bull—“I had not taken a drop that night but one glass”—provokes such angry pride that the two scuffle with rifles and accidently kill the Irish woman they are both courting (50). The same tendencies for drinking, fighting, and bull-speaking that resulted in comedy with Stage Irish characters lead to tragedy in this tale of
thwarted romance. Insensitivity about bulls, in the form of the Englishman’s scornful laugh, results in more than humor. The Edgeworths are saying cultural confusion has serious consequences. Maria Edgeworth would try to resolve some of that confusion with her Irish novels.

The Essay deals with the Irish term “cuteness,” an abbreviation of acuteness that suggests a form of wit that encompasses both verbal repartee and cunning action. This is a quality that the Irish have from childhood to old age, regardless of class: “Even the cutters of turf and drawers of whiskey are orators,” the authors say, “Even the cottiers and gossons speak in trope and figure” (55). The wit is apparent in verbal impromptus that have a “sort of humour and sophistry,” such as the well-known rhetorical question by eighteenth-century Irish parliamentarian Boyle Roche: “What has posterity done for me, that I should do so much for posterity?” (55). Hibernian bulls and blunders had become so well-known by the turn of the nineteenth century that whenever a brogue accent was heard, English audiences expected blunders (61). The stereotype was so painful for some Irish that they went too far emulating English pronunciation, thereby making greater fools of themselves. The True-Born Irishman (1762) by Charles Macklin was a dramatic case in point: Mrs. O’Dogherty’s attempts to emulate upper-crust English speech were a source of farcical humor in the play (4-5). In Maria Edgeworth’s own fiction, Lady Cronbrony in The Absentee similarly mangles language by trying to conform to English fashions. Adoption of an English accent would not stop Oscar Wilde from penning numerous bulls, nor would use of the French language prevent Samuel Beckett from doing so in the twentieth century. So bulls and blunders are not limited to Irish dialect. In fact, the Edgeworths maintain that “the Irish, in general, speak better English than is commonly spoken by the natives of England” (63). The reason, they say, is that Hibernian dialect tends to
be unified, while it also retains many of the qualities of Shakespearean English because many English migrated to Ireland during the Elizabethan period (63). By contrast, the lower classes in England have dialects that vary so greatly regionally as to be unintelligible to outsiders (63-64).

A Play Within the Essay: “Bath Coach Conversation”

In its final chapters, the Essay dramatizes a dialogue among an Irishman, an Englishman, and a Scotchman. In this “Bath Coach Conversation,” all three speakers are educated and worldly, lacking regional and national prejudice. Yet they acknowledge national character in keeping with the zeitgeist of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As Joep Leersen puts it, “in the shadow of approaching Romanticism, each Volk or nation came to be considered as a specific personality, each with its unique contribution to the variety of human culture…to the point where each Volkgeist or national character was seen as a nation’s cultural and moral DNA” (21). In many travel descriptions over the years, the Irish were portrayed as enthusiastic, warm, welcoming, impetuous, and given to absurdities of language and behavior.

In the Edgeworths’ rendering, the Irish passenger begins the coach conversation with the hope that political union will help the comprising nations better understand each other; the English and Scottish then agree that travel reports to date have led to inaccurate prejudices. The Englishman says his own travels in Ireland suggest that the stereotypes from Edmund Spenser’s time are at least outdated. Moreover, he says the Irish have retained their reputedly warm hospitality, and they mix it with wit, cheer, and good conversation (67). The Irishman hopes others from England will gain such a view, while also cautioning that there remain “little defects in the Irish government of the tongue” that are justly ridiculed and laughed at (67). Even with education and loss of brogue, Irish bulls remain, the Irishman notes. While other peoples in
Europe also speak bulls, “the Irish idiom is peculiarly unfortunate, for it leads perpetually to blunder,” he says (68). The Scot notes that Irish bulls may be a form of “lapsus linguæ” that are made by even the greatest of orators, and the ancients may have invented the figures of speech “on purpose to palliate little errors of this nature” (69, 70).

The Englishman notes that one Irish bull—“‘I am sorry to hear my honourable friend stand mute’”—recalls the Homeric figurative description of “silence that speaks, and eloquence of eyes,” though the Scot claims this figure of speech was from Alexander Pope’s version of *The Iliad* (69). The Scot further produces a list of tropes from which “we could find apologies for every species of Irish bulls.” He focuses on oxymoron, antanaclasis, hyperbole, and catachresis as particularly relevant to Irish bulls (70, 71). The Hibernian and the Scot agree that catachresis—using an expression contrary to what one means to express (“the seeds of the Gospel have been *watered* by the *blood* of martyrs”)—is especially relevant to bulls (71). The coach passengers discuss the Irish tendency to “blurt out their opinions freely,” as the Englishman puts it; the Irishman suggests that this and a propensity for bulls earned Oliver Goldsmith the label of “inspired idiot” from Samuel Johnson (74). The Irishman offers an example of a practical bull: an Irishman orders a portrait of himself standing behind a tree. The Englishman says he has heard the same bull told of an Englishman, adding, “the dealers in good jokes give them first to one nation and then to another…as it suits the demand and fashion of the day” (76). This observation was borne out by common jokes with varying national attributions in *Nugae Venales* and *Teagueland Jests*, seventeenth-century books featuring jests and bulls (Head, Anon.).

To illustrate his contention that Irish bulls outlive brogue, the Irishman in the coach tells the story of Phelim O’Mooney, an Irishman with an English accent who has bet his brother he
can go four days in England without his nationality being detected eight times. O’Mooney nearly loses the bet; he is detected seven times as a result of bulls that he cannot help uttering in fits of enthusiasm or in figurative reflection. Wilde and Beckett might be thought of as Phelim O’Mooneys incarnate: each would try to assimilate into other European cultures but would retain undeniable Irish character. Earlier in the “Bath Coach Conversation,” the question of whether Irish qualities are innate or learned produced another bull. Richard Steele, the eighteenth-century Irish writer and politician, when asked why his countrymen produced so many bulls, reportedly said, “It is the effect of the climate, sir; if an Englishman were born in Ireland, he would make as many” (qtd 75). Steele’s use of the word “climate” can be taken broadly to refer to the political and historical conditions that contribute to the Irish propensity for self-contradiction. It is a climate that leads to dialogic tension—manifest in bulls—between colonized and colonizers.

The Cultural Diplomacy of Edgeworth’s Irish Tales

Through the Essay and novels, the Edgeworths had enormous influence on English perceptions of the Irish. King George III himself, after reading Castle Rackrent, said, “I know something now of my Irish subjects” (Kiberd 243). Following Ireland’s failed rebellion of 1798 and with the onset of the Acts of Union, Maria Edgeworth’s Irish novels, starting with Castle Rackrent in 1800, served as a form of cultural diplomacy in the midst of tentatively closer political union between England and Ireland. While Castle Rackrent is the best known of her four Irish novels, The Absentee, Ennui, and Ormond provide similar imaginative articulations of observations in the Essay. Harden observes that “in her four novels of Irish life, her special task was to represent Ireland as accurately as she could and explain and interpret what was
characteristic and original about Irish society” (1984 94-95). In all four novels, bulls have their role in this authorial task.

Though Maria Edgeworth was not known as a romantic writer, her earnest explorations of native culture contributed to romanticism’s valuation of local, rural, and simple lives that are in more harmony with the natural world than cosmopolitan centers are. In her Irish fiction, would-be sophisticates getting away from London have important lessons to learn from their tenants. Maria Edgeworth shared British romantic interest in the unadorned speech habits of unsophisticated rural folk. The author’s quasi-anthropological concern for the customs and conversation of native Irish in these novels coincided with William Wordsworth’s romantic 1800 manifesto in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with its respect for the heartfelt language of country people. Explaining his preference for the “more philosophical” language of rural commoners, Wordsworth said:

> Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Wordsworth 226)

The Irish in Edgeworth’s works had on one level the simplicity Wordsworth esteemed, yet they also showed a deeper guile that belied their simple veneer.

The preface to *Castle Rackrent* blithely predicts that future Irish generations in closer union with England will be able to recall the folly of their ancestors with complacent bemusement. Yet the actions of her characters suggest otherwise. Through bulls and other roundabout tropes, Irish characters in the novel suggest something of the contrary qualities of
Ireland’s emerging literary identity in the nineteenth century. According to its original title page, *Castle Rackrent* was “taken from facts, and from the manners of the Irish Squires,” suggesting a firm inductive basis for fictive invention, even if the same title page tries to date this induction squarely in the eighteenth century rather than the nineteenth. Published just two years before the *Essay*, *Castle Rackrent* has itself been described as a bull, in as much as its narrator Thady Quirk may be spinning an ironic—or at least internally conflicted—yarn (Owens 72). Declan Kiberd notes that with this work “the form of the English novel is replaced by that of the Irish anecdote as more appropriate to a makeshift world” (244). Thady Quirk’s tale has all the unreliability of an anecdote, no matter how honest the narrator’s employers believe him to be. Thady continually claims loyalty to the Rackrent family and dismay at its decline, but this stance may be a ruse, a bull of sorts. He is “a more attractive and sympathetic version” of eighteenth-century stage Irish caricatures; this version amounts to an “alert parasite-slave or clever peasant” (Krause 174-75). Thady’s cleverness may be seen in his veiled acquiescence to his son Jason who willfully benefits from the Rackrents’ misfortunes. The novel’s plot might be summed up as the transference of wealth and power from one family to another, with Thady as a less innocent bystander than he might seem at first. This complicates his language. Of Thady’s numerous verbal bulls, Owens says,“it is difficult to mistake these knowing statements for Irish blundering, either in their own terms, or in their dramatic or narrative contexts, which demonstrate their function as a means of facilitating Jason’s advantage at the expense of the Rackrents” (77).

Like Thady, the Edgeworths themselves had divided loyalties. Richard Edgeworth supported revolutions in America and France and wanted Catholic emancipation, but he acknowledged that these positions were at odds with his status as a landowner. In the spirit of
internal contradiction, the “editor” of Castle Rackrent undermines the “narrator” from the outset, noting that the tale is told on a Monday “because no great undertaking can be auspiciously commenced in Ireland on any morning but Monday morning…and when Monday morning comes it is ten to one that the business is deferred to the next Monday morning” (99). Thus, before Thady even begins, the editor has implied that the Irish are only fitfully industrious and possibly untrustworthy. Later entries in the tale’s glossary reinforce this impression. While the story has some remarkable bulls, the editor’s superior and condescending attitude suggests they serve as evidence of native Irish people’s simple-mindedness and folly, even if the plot shows that these same people can also be engaging and guileful. The editor’s comment that “the manners depicted…are not those of the present age” seems disingenuous; it is part of an unconvincing attempt to frame the story as one deserving bemused retrospection on the part of the reader, rather than identification of contemporary relevance (4).

Thady Quirk’s Bulls as Narrative Guile

Among Thady Quirk’s most prominent quirks are his verbal bulls. He has what Kathryn Kirkpatrick describes as “the Gaelic cadences of Irish oral tradition” (vii). His bulls and other “naïve utterances frequently attain an eloquence that is all the more convincing because it is entirely consistent with his character” (1971 Harden 59-60). And that character was distinctly Irish; Owens calls Thady’s portrayal “the most acute delineation of the mental habits and speech patterns of the Irish countryman found to that point in the literature of Anglo-Ireland” (9). Edgeworth based the character on one of her family’s own servants, John Langan, whom she enjoyed imitating. While writing the novel, “she felt as though [Langan] was beside her dictating every word” (Inglis-Jones 52). Mimicry was a habit picked up from her father.
Richard Edgeworth “had a great talent for imitating the Irish, he knew just how to hit off their happy confidence, their shrewd wit and their pathos” (Newby 23). For a servant like Thady, self-contradictory bulls reflect not only naiveté but also conflicted identity and divided loyalty; they are a way of politely cushioning unflattering remarks about his employers. The reader is able to see through them because the bulls exemplify what Harden identifies as “the artistic device of ‘transparency’—the ironic presentation of external fact in such a manner that the reader may see the truth underneath the external statement and draw his own conclusions” (1971 60-61).

Early on Thady utters a bull when he says of the deceased Patrick Rackrent: “Long life to him!” (10). When Murtagh Rackrent takes over the estate, Thady comments, “it’s a long time ago, there’s no saying how it was, but this for certain, the new man did not take at all after the old gentleman,” flipping from retrospective uncertainty to certainty within one sentence (12). Of Murtagh’s wife, he offers what seems at first like a compliment of her generosity but then contradicts that claim: “She had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return” (13). With this absurd bull, Thady spotlights duty work as “the height of absurd injustice” suffered by the Irish peasantry (1971 Harden 49). About the litigious Murtagh, Thady says, “Out of forty-nine suits which he had, he never lost one but seventeen” (15). Thus, bulls serve a subversive purpose. The tale’s “editor,” which is none other than the Edgeworths themselves, calls these bulls “a specimen of rhetoric common in Ireland,” and offers this further definition: “An astonishing assertion is made in the beginning of a sentence, which ceases to be in the least surprising when you hear the qualifying explanation that follows” (105). Loyalty and praise become subversion and backhandedness. Guile is something Thady shares with Murtagh, who
refuses to pay the estate’s debts on the dubious grounds that his predecessor’s corpse was dishonored by disgruntled lenders.

Thady also uses a bull to describe the next Rackrent heir, Kit Stopgap. He recounts how Kit was a profligate absentee who brazenly married for money and confined his wife in Ireland for five years in an attempt to take her family’s wealth; then he ironically understates that his master’s “only fault” was an incurable gambling habit (32). As a negligent absentee and a philandering spouse abuser, Kit has many faults besides gambling, and he is hardly noble. As Kiberd puts it, “The intelligent sarcasm of Thady’s rhetoric seems to dismantle the notion of a feudal order that could ever have been ‘noble’” (252). Regarding the pairing of Condy Rackrent with his wife Isabelle, Thady relates local women uttering this bull: “A love match was the only thing for happiness, where the parties could any way afford it” (52). In this self-contradiction, love is so conditioned by economic necessity that it is no longer the “only” factor in happiness. Thady later observes about Condy’s career frustrations that he “was very ill used by the government about a place that was promised him and never given, after his supporting them against his conscience very honorably” (61). This is less a blunder than a caustic observation in the form of “sardonic mimicry of the self-deceiving rhetoric employed by crooked landlords” (Kiberd 255). Thady claims at the very end of his narrative that everything he said has been true, but if so, it has often been the cunning and self-contradictory truth of bulls. “The world he creates for us,” Harden notes, “emerges from strange and foreign paradoxes so that we are jolted into fitting together the pieces” (1984 102). In an end note to the novel, the Edgeworths, in the guise of the editor, describe Irish character in a way that the preceding narrative has dramatized: It is a “mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness, and blunder, which in different forms, and with various success, has been brought
upon the stage or delineated in novels” (97). This complicated mélange and its artistic personifications may reflect an existential tension, a speciously servile role playing by native Irish who considered themselves usurped by English imperialism (Kiberd 245).

While Thady is in the tradition of the stage Irishman, he is a nuanced version. He displays both guile and loyalty, although the former is disguised and the latter is divided. Stage Irishry in itself was common currency and often sympathetically portrayed on stage and page from the late-eighteenth century onwards. Maria Edgeworth and other authors employed stage Irish characters “almost as automatically and unthinkingly as they used a 26-letter alphabet” (Leersen 172). Far from being a mere buffoon, Thady is “a complex combination of parochialism, sentimentality and loquacity on the one hand, and of acuity, cynicism, and ruthlessness on the other: aspects of character analogous to the elements of wit and phrasing that distinguish an ‘Irish bull’ from a mere blunder,” Owens observes. ”Castle Rackrent,” he adds, “is [the] Essay fictionalized” (78).

The Absentee: A Novel Initially Intended as a Play

In Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth presents an extended monologue—contextualized by the dialogic voice of the editor—delivered by a stage Irishman. In The Absentee, she would continue to draw upon stage conventions to further spotlight abuses by disengaged English landowners in Ireland. Initially intended as a play, the later novel, published in 1812 as one of the author’s Tales of Fashionable Life, is dialogue-intensive. As one biographer has noted, “it was always Maria’s unfulfilled ambition to be a successful playwright,” and her father was so satisfied with The Absentee in its original rendering for the stage that he sent it to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who declined to produce it (Inglis-Jones 95). Though narrated in the third
person, *The Absentee* as novel ends with a long letter by working-class Irishman Larry Brady to his brother Paddy, who has been working in London. Thus, an Irish servant is given a sustained voice, such as Thady Quirk was given on a more extended basis in the earlier novel. And thus, the later novel, like the former one, contains a multiplicity of voices of varying classes that make it to some degree polyphonic and, in turn, dialogical. Converting the original play into a novel made it more capable of this dialogical element, according to Bakhtinan theory, which holds that drama has an innate tendency toward the monologic (1973 Bakhtin 13, 28).

Whatever the novels’ similarities, *Castle Rackrent* has a subtle yet caustic irony missing from *The Absentee* and Edgeworth’s other later fiction. Vivian Mercier argues that Edgeworth could satirize Irish Protestants so savagely in the earlier novel because she wrote it “while she was still English enough not to feel that she was betraying her own kind” (186). In *Castle Rackrent* the author regards “life—not from any utilitarian, ethical, or dogmatic standpoint—but simply and solely objectively, as it strikes, and ought to strike, an artist” (Lawless 87). Or, as Harden has put it, by contrast with Edgeworth’s later Irish fictions, *Castle Rackrent* “laid aside morals for manners” (1984 99). Among characteristically Irish manners emphasized in Thady’s narrative were bulls, which might be considered amoral in as much as they are nonsensical. Mercier suggests the novel’s humor, initially intended as it was for relatively private audiences, may have struck too close to home: “Perhaps she came to feel implicated in the guilt of Irish landlords or grew too emotionally involved in the sufferings of Irish peasantry; at any rate, a tendency to moralize replaces irony in *The Absentee*, for example” (197). Despite its moral didacticism and other shortcomings, *The Absentee* “was in its day probably the most influential” of Edgeworth’s Irish tales (1972 Butler 379).
In *The Absentee*, Lady Cronbrony displays the most distorted sense of identity, though her husband and son also have much to learn about the abuse and avarice ensuing from neglect of their Irish interests. Like Mrs. O’Dogherty’s striving in Macklin’s *The True-Born Irishman*, Lady Cronbrony’s strained attempts at conformity to London fashions lead to comical exaggerations of pronunciation, protocol, and taste—or “teeste” as she puts it. While hosting a party, she makes ill-advised efforts at fashionable orientalism in the form of Alhambra hangings and a Chinese pagoda. For all her striving, other London socialites seem to revel even more in ridiculing her taste. One of them scornfully remarks of a simulated pagoda, “How good of you, my dear Lady Clonbrony, in defiance of bulls and blunders, to allow us a comfortable English fireplace and plenty of Newcastle coal in China!” (36). The hostess is in a sense bringing coals to Newcastle: her oriental affectations ironically clash with her pained denial of her Irish homeland, the source for England of the self-serving postcolonial “otherness” that Edward Said would detect in European orientalism. Whether or not London’s smart set would be more welcoming of Irish culture, Edgeworth’s morally didactic novel argues that the Clonbronys and their tenants would have fared better had Lady Clonbrony never disavowed her Hibernian roots. Though she may recall Mrs. O’Dogherty or Ms. Malaprop with her mangled pronunciations, Lady Clonbrony is not so much a buffoon as a pathetic social striver. Though she blunders as a London hostess, the novel’s bulls belong mainly to other characters.

In the *Essay*, the Edgeworths held that nations tend to exhibit more distinct personalities among their less privileged classes. Thus in *The Absentee*, Maria Edgeworth tends to have distinguishing Irish bulls spoken by less wealthy characters like go-between Terence O’Fay and coach driver Larry Brady. It is as though self-contradiction and sarcasm are carnivalesque byproducts of the dire conditions for the less well-off Irish, while literalism is more the province
of earnest elites like Lord Colambre and Grace Nugent, with their heroically repressed romance and sentimental comedic plot turns. While trying to taint Colambre’s opinion of Irish lower classes, one English character “contrived to expose their habits of self-contradiction, their servility and flattery one moment, and their litigious and encroaching spirit the next” (1988 Edgeworth 109). Yet the novel suggests a deeper meaning than this for self-contradiction.

Bulls spoken by Irish characters reflect what W.J. McCormack describes as a paradox in the novel, one in which “language itself reveals an unnerving tendency to deprive itself of authority, by its divergent registers of tone and ambiguities of meaning, which admit the inevitability of misunderstanding either egregious or tragic” (xxii). McCormack suggests Shakespearean wordplay as a point of comparison. Edgeworth’s wordplay includes Lady Clonbrony’s objection to her son’s claim that well-informed Londoners will not discriminate against Irish names: “I big your pawdon, Colambre; surely I, that was born in England, an Henglishwoman bawn, must be well infawmed on this pint” (16). Larry Brady explains the Irish tenants’ pun for the unscrupulous agent Nicholas Garraghty; they call him “Old Nick” for his devilish ways (141). Even the narrator engages in puns. When O’Fay dubs the carriage he is having built a “suicide,” the narrator notes that the coachmaker agrees “that the suicide should be finished by the birthday” (8-9).

**Terence O’Fay: The Absentee’s Stage Irishman**

Consistent with The Absentee’s origins as a play, Terence O’Fay plays the part of stage Irishman through blarney, bluster, blunders, and bulls. Before his name and nationality are known, O’Fay is identified as “a fat, jolly, Falstaff-looking personage” with an almost incredible sense of personal familiarity in a commercial environment (8). Here, as in the Essay, the author
alludes to Shakespeare to provide English literary foundation and familiarity for stage Irish tendencies. Soon after his introduction, O’Fay’s exploits draw laughter from Colambre and others. Though Colambre is unsure what to make of this free-wheeling Irishman, his father Lord Clonbrony has no doubts about O’Fay’s good character, calling him the “most warm-hearted, generous dog upon earth—convivial—jovial—with wit and humour enough in his own way to split you…he is as much a gentleman as any of your formal prigs—not the exact Cambridge cut, may be” (21). Living in the severe London scene, Lord Clonbrony relies on O’Fay for camaraderie and reminders of home, seeking “entertainment and self-complacency in society beneath him” (22). As Falstaff did with Prince Hal, O’Fay serves as carnivalesque comic relief for the plot’s hero; and, like Falstaff, O’Fay has a comical knighthood. He is willing to embarrass himself for the amusement of others: “No one could tell a good story, or sing a good song, better than sir Terence; he exaggerated his native brogue, and his natural propensity to blunder, caring little whether the company laughed at him or with him, provided they laughed” (22). Acknowledging his follies, he is also aware of his insights, telling Colambre to “trust a fool—ye may, when he tells you the truth” (23).

Edgeworth, wary of excessive national essentialism, presents some key similarities between Irish and English in this novel. She compares the Irish absentee Clonbronys with the English absentee Berryls, indicating that one can be a negligent landowner within one’s own country. And while the English characters may not speak bulls, they are capable of irony and dissembling that can lead to apparently self-contradictory behavior. Thus, to keep Lady Clonbrony at a cool remove, Lady St. James is exceedingly polite to her; so Lady Clonbrony finds herself “entrenched in etiquette” and “mocked with marks of respect” (59). Such mandarin and disingenuous politeness seems analogous to the subtility of the Irish character in the Essay
who repeatedly piled “your honor” on top of “your honor” in what became a mocking sort of servility. The irony of the bull appears more justifiable in the disenfranchised—the Terence O’Fays and the Teagues. For such characters the bull can be a form of creditable subversion. But for Lady St. James, self-contradiction comes across as a bald-faced statement of power and privilege.

As Christopher Ricks observed, “There is something odious about the bull when it is wielded by the powerful. The self-contradictions of those in power are often a way of proclaiming their tyrannical confidence that they may, if they so choose, ride roughshod over protest” (199). Thus, when the conniving agent St. Dennis puns on the word bore, between its meanings of drilling for minerals and being tedious, readers are more likely to groan in disapproval than to be amused (160). St. Dennis then utters a bull that mainly exposes his own hypocrisy, noting that “in Ireland, nobody speaks to a gentleman about business after dinner,” even as he is conducting business after dinner—and in a very intrusive manner—on the Clonbronys’ Irish estate (161). Similarly, St. Dennis’ boss Garraghty speaks an intentional bull meant to question Colambre’s convictions, saying to him: “You will follow your own principles if it suits your convenience” (174). This bull lacks the intended sting because of its disreputable speaker and the situation. Colambre merely corrects it, replying that he will abide by his principles regardless of convenience.

More appropriate bulls and witticisms come from O’Fay who says his wits have been sharpened by frequent use. He is willing to engage in schemes and bribes if the circumstance calls for it, “‘anything to help a friend out of a present pressing difficulty’” (65). Loyalty and present need take precedence before honor and concerns for the future. “The future!” he exclaims, “leave the future to posterity…I’m counsel only for the present; and when the evil
comes, it’s time enough to think of it” (65). What begins as an allusion to a famous bull—“What has posterity ever done for me?”—turns into a Biblical allusion—“Sufficient unto the day is the evil therein” from the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, sense is mined from apparent nonsense, and Edgeworth provides another example of a bull that turns out to have deeper meaning. As for honor, O’Fay holds forth about the impracticality of it in words that echo Falstaff’s remarks on honor toward the end of 1 Henry IV. Falstaff says, “What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning!” (V.i.132-34). O’Fay says, “‘Tis a rare thing, this same family honour, but I never knew it yet, at a pinch to pay for a pair of boots even” (67). This skepticism about family honor is prescient regarding the novel’s melodramatic plot. Colambre’s misunderstanding that Grace has a dishonorable family past nearly prevents him from marrying her. Only when her name is cleared, does he abandon plans to join the military and instead seek her hand in marriage. O’Fay’s comedic outlook on life, with its skepticism about family honor, turns out to be wiser in some ways than Colambre’s earnest sense of virtue and honor. As Lady Dashfort, one of the novel’s characters, puts it, “Comedy goes through the world better than tragedy, and, take it all in all, does rather less mischief” (124).

Some degree of self-contradiction seems to be a condition of life for the Irish in an economy of absentee ownership. Asked if road-building is profitable and if road-builders have good pay, Larry Brady replies, “It is, and it is not—they have, and they have not” (141). This only seems nonsensical to the questioner because he is not Irish, Brady says, explaining that the roadbuilders are compelled to work to pay exorbitant rents charged by the absentees’ unsupervised agents. The widow O’Neil, who hosts Colambre on the Clonbrony’s Irish estate, speaks a bull that expresses the paradoxically therapeutic quality of sharing one’s troubles. “I can talk of my troubles without thinking of them,” she says before describing the dire financial
conditions that might prevent her son from marrying his intended (153). Visiting the estate incognito, Colambre is impressed and amused by the local population’s ability to outwit and trick the landlords. He has learned to appreciate such Irish guile, whereas earlier in the novel he was unsure what to make of it in his father’s friend O’Fay.

O’Fay returns toward the novel’s end to help bring the comedic plot to its happy conclusion, while sprinkling the dialogue with bulls. Hearing a dispute between Colambre and the villainous agent Garraghty, the stage Irishman says, “I hope we shall understand this misunderstanding better” (181). On the prospect of convincing Lady Clonbrony to return to Ireland, O’Fay tells Colambre, “I’m persuaded her ladyship, your mother, will prove herself a reasonable woman—when she sees she can’t help it” (186). O’Fay also contradicts remarks he made earlier in the novel about the importance of money and property. He claims he is “‘not one of those that think that money’s everything,” whereas he had stated earlier, “Some people talk of morality, and some of religion, but give me a little snug PROPERTY” (190, 25). This self-contradiction makes the earlier assertion seem like a deliberate exaggeration to spotlight the cravenness of Lady Cronbrony’s social maneuvering with the wealthy Broadhursts. Among O’Fay’s final words is an explanation of the warm-hearted temperament that leads him to bulls and blunders: “When any thing’s upon my heart, good morning to my head, it’s not worth a lemon” (252). Yet readers can make lemonade of what appear to be verbal lemons.

**Ennui: First-Person Narrator as Paradoxical Bull of Character**

Published three years before *The Absentee*, Edgeworth’s *Ennui* has been the much less influential and analyzed of the two works, but it was and remains another important fictional account of Irish life. Marilyn Butler argues *Castle Rackrent* and *Ennui* make a natural pair,
together indicating the influence of their author as pioneering social novelist of the nineteenth century (1992 1). Butler claims each of Edgeworth’s later Irish novels “is in some way a sequel to or re-working of Castle Rackrent” (26-27).

In *Ennui*, the hero Glenthorn’s description of his eponymous malady may strike the reader as a contradiction in terms, suggesting he is an example of a bull of character. He recounts some symptoms:

> I was afflicted with frequent fits of fidgeting, yawning, and stretching, with a constant restlessness of mind and body; an aversion to the place I was in, or the thing I was doing, or rather to that which was passing before my eyes, for I was never doing any thing; I had an utter abhorrence and an incapacity of voluntary exertion. (144)

Glenthorn has had so much wealth and liberty from such an early age that his privileges thoroughly bore him: “I was on the pinnacle of glory, which [my companions] were endeavouring to reach; and I had nothing to do but sit still, and enjoy the barrenness of the prospect” (148). *Ennui* lacks the dramatic vestiges of *The Absentee* with its original playscript form; instead the first-person narration of *Ennui* offers more of an interior, psychological view of a paradoxical character. That character recalls Bakhtin’s analysis of dialogic novels written by Dostoevsky: “all that was simple became complex and multistructural. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a split and a willingness to immediately turn into another, contradictory expression” (1973 Bakhtin 25). As in *Notes from Underground*, in *Ennui* readers get an inside perspective on a character whose psychology exhibits such self-contradictory complexity.

Edgeworth’s narrator hero is so well-off that he is depressed by his own ease and apparent purposelessness. His listless lethargy makes him contrary; he notes, “My companions envied me; but their envy was not enough to make me happy” (144). Suffering from what might
be called “affluenza,” he laments having “the misfortune to possess large estates” and takes a
perverse pleasure in illness—“I was always sorry to get well” (148, 165). In the early,
confessional chapters, this torpor becomes lethal. In a bull-like conflation of birth and death,
Glenthorn says, “My birthday arrived—I wished myself dead—and I resolved to shoot myself at
the close of day” (154). Making an unexpected visit, his Irish nurse nearly kills him but also
prevents the suicide, and the incident gives Glenthorn a chance to play dead. He thus acts a bull
much as Condy Rackrent did when he faked death to observe the mourning that would follow.
Like the Rackrents, the Glenthorns appear to have native Irish roots; we learn their name was
earlier O’Shaughnessy (160). Both Lord Glenthorn and his Irish nurse, Ellinor, are called fools
in England, and the novel shows eventually that they are actually son and mother. The rest of his
servants laugh at Ellinor’s blunders, “but she silences them with her shrewdness” (166).
Glenthorn shares elements of shrewdness and folly, and, like a stage Irishman, takes a special
interest in fighting, becoming an avid boxing spectator. He also shares bulls with the stage
Irishman. He notes wryly that “duties often spring up to our view at a convenient opportunity,”
an ironic yoking of duty and opportunism (169). And he reflects paradoxically that “like all
those with nothing to do any where, I was always in a prodigious hurry to get from place to
place” (170).

Over the course of the novel, Glenthorn will be shown to have other contradictions. He is
both an earl and not an earl, both an absentee landlord and a tenant, both English and Irish.
Being switched at birth has obscured his Irish identity. Contrariness is portrayed as a national
quality when Glenthorn returns to Ireland. He meets an Irish gentleman who describes a national
tendency toward grandiose intent but inadequate application: “We can project, but we can’t
calculate, we must have everything on too large a scale…we begin like princes, and we end like
beggars” (170). The description sounds similar to the explanation provided for one breed of bulls in Castle Rackrent—“an astonishing assertion” followed by a “qualifying explanation” that ends the hearer’s initial surprise. Glenthorn sees this tendency in Dublin’s architecture, where he observes “grand beginnings and lamentable want of finish, with mixture of the magnificent and the paltry; of admirable and execrable taste” (170). Yet Irish character has its advantages. Glenthorn’s Irish coach driver, Paddy, gets ridicule from the English and French servants but also has “necessity and wit” on his side, as well as “invincible comic dexterity” (172-73). On his western Irish estate, Glenthorn has difficulty understanding the pleas of his tenants, as they mix truth and fiction “in language so figurative” (182). When he inquires whether one of the tenants is Ellinor’s son, he gets a cryptically self-contradicting response—“not one but one”—made clear when it is explained the speaker is her son-in-law. Fellow Irish landlord Hardcastle makes the dubious claim that the tenants should be kept ignorant because they are “too quick and smart…naturally” for school learning to help them in their menial work. Glenthorn eventually concludes Hardcastle is absurdly mistaken.

**Ennui’s Irish Characters Show Guile and Wit**

Geraldine, one of Glenthorn’s love interests, is an example of guileful Irish wit. She is “perhaps more rhetorical” than the English women the narrator has known, and her figurations include intentional bulls (203). As one critic has put it, Geraldine is “affable, candid, and opinionated,…Irish and proud of being so” (1984 Harden 106). She playfully dubs the Glenthorn a “‘yawnée’” for his blasé and bored attitudes. Resisting attempts to arrange her with an aristocratic “somebody” for marriage, she remarks, “I think somebody is nobody” (Edgeworth 205). The narrator is charmed by her conversation, where he finds “much of the raciness of Irish
wit, and the oddity of Irish humour” (205). She enjoys practical bulls, tricking her friends into foolish behavior. Of some irritating socialites, she says, “I have no enmity to these ladies; I only despise them,” explaining it is their flaws in particular that she hates (225). The hero finds that Geraldine’s wit goes deeper than a few clever turns of phrase; he admires “a depth of reflection that seemed inconsistent with the rapidity with which she thought” (222). As if to distinguish false wit from the genuine, she proposes what seem to be Irish bulls to a pompous character, Craiglethorpe, knowing that his prejudices will make him quick to ridicule the Irish. Instead of real bulls, she offers him “the most absurd anecdotes, incredible facts, stale jests, and blunders, such as were never made by true-born Irishmen” (212). Craiglethorpe earnestly notes each of these, offering Geraldine a chance to scorn superficial and flawed accounts of Ireland by English tourists. As Harden observes of her other works, “Edgeworth had criticized the peripatetic English tourist who judges a nation by a few isolated observations” (1984 106).

Joe Kelly, the Irish servant who takes over in Glenthorn’s home when his other staff flee during the 1798 uprising, speaks bulls with guile. Playing the buffoon, Kelly ingratiates himself with his employer while secretly helping rebels who are plotting against him. The narrator says he first took note of Kelly when he spoke a bull: “I asked, ‘What noise is that I hear?’ ‘My lard,’ said he, ‘It is only the singing in my ears; I have had it these six months’” (244). The narrator finds that this is not mere folly, but rather “the knack of seeming half-witted” (255). Glenthorn also discovers that what he thought was “a practical bull”—Irish field laborers who light fires in the hottest weather—is in fact a pragmatic way to keep annoying flies away from them (253).

Moreover, he continues to record the paradoxical quality of his own problems: the more that Ireland’s political unrest worries and disrupts him, the less ennui enervates his soul. “So long as I could not sleep in my bed, I slept remarkably well,” he says, adding that it was, in this
sense, unfortunate for him that the rebellion was soon quelled (247-48). Both Kelly and Glenthorn use jesting and comedy to disguise their plots. And the hero soon discovers that he is the son of his nursemaid Ellinor, who switched him at birth with the Glenthorn child. As if to explain this plot bull, Edgeworth quotes a bull from Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s *L’art Poétique*: “Life is not always lifelike” (qtd 273). Glenthorn is not really Glenthorn; Kelly is not a loyal buffoon; and bulls are not always as absurd as they seem.

**Ormond: Bulls and Bildungsroman**

The last published of Edgeworth’s Irish tales, *Ormond* deals with the parenting and education of the eponymous Irish foster child, Harry Ormond, who is shuttled between two adoptive Irish fathers, cousins Sir Ulick O’Shane and Cornelius O’Shane. Ulick, a Protestant, is a scheming banker and serial husband with fickle affections for his foster son. Cornelius, a Catholic better known as Corny, is a warm-hearted eccentric who rules as “king” over his Black Islands off the Irish mainland. King Corny dubs Harry Ormond a prince and acts in some ways like Falstaff to Prince Hal, encouraging him to get drunk. Corny eventually backs off with a bull, recommending that Ormond, “take an oath against drinking more glasses than you please ever more”—as if stopping when you do not want more requires an oath (39). Through bulls he introduces the carnivalesque to this novel, temporarily transgressing prevailing social norms and logical standards. He continues a tradition in which, as Bakhtin put it, “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (1968 10).

Corny is often figurative in his remarks. He is described as having “inventive genius, energy, and perseverance, which might have attained the greatest objects; though from
insufficient knowledge and self-sufficient perversity, they had wasted themselves on absurd or trivial purposes” (44-45). As Marilyn Butler puts it, “he is ignorant, in spite of his quaint learning from Gaelic tradition and from the classics” (1972 382). Not surprisingly, he is also the source of bulls, such as “I always forget what I learn by heart” and “I am able, sir, possible or not” (57, 59). The narrator observes that Corny “promised impossibilities with the best faith imaginable” (76). Corny recognizes and boasts of this tendency, quoting a French adage: “If it is possible, it shall be done; and if it is impossible, it must be done” (76). He dies in a sort of practical bull, killed by the misfiring of his own hunting rifle. If, as Christopher Ricks puts it, “the bull is a form of linguistic suicide,” its practical correlate might be death by one’s own hand (153). Though he dies halfway through the novel and his brand of land ownership is shown to be severely flawed, Corny remains an influence on Ormond, keeping him rooted in his Irish upbringing during and after his education by liberal English landlords and Parisian sophisticates. As Harden puts it, “it is the spirit of Corny, even after his death, that pervades the book, that provides the story’s great moments” (1984 119). The novel shows that Ormond succeeds in balancing Corny’s warmth and figurative ingenuity with the rationality and caution that he learns from other characters: “he remains imaginative and learns prudence” (Hawthorne 89). At the end of the novel, given the choice of buying either Ulick’s land or Corny’s, the hero symbolically chooses the latter, suggesting a preference for warmer and more informal landowner-peasant relations.

In her later years, as Daniel O’Connell’s movement to repeal Ireland’s union with Britain gained steam, Edgeworth wrote little for publication and avoided especially the subject of Ireland, supposing that political conditions no longer favored her brand of realism and humor. In 1834, she remarked, “it is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction…. We
are in too perilous a case to laugh, humour would be out of season, worse than bad taste” (qtd Hurst 33). Nonetheless, Maria Edgeworth had already conveyed Irish bulls to nineteenth-century novel readers, drawing upon and significantly developing bulls’ currency in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama. Thus, self-contradictory statements remained a part of the Ireland’s national identity as portrayed in some of the most popular literature of the romantic period. Edgeworth took her place in a continuum of nineteenth-century Irish writing that would reform and refashion English perceptions of Irish character. “In this revised Irish countryman, the ‘Irish bull’ becomes revalued,” Owens notes (78). “It is a prized feature of so much writing about Irish life: an example not of the Irishman’s incapacity for clear and incisive thinking, but of his penchant for wordplay, the exposure of cliché, or logical jest,” he says, adding that “Teageland jests…evolved into respectable, treasured witticisms” (78). Thanks to seminal contributions by Maria Edgeworth, the stage was set for Victorian-era playwrights Dion Boucicault and Oscar Wilde to carry on this tradition.

**Works Cited**


Chapter III: Boucicault and Wilde: Hiberno-Victorian Subversives

It is in his creation of this distinctly Irish yet universally comic character—as Myles-na- Coppaleen, Shaun the Post, or Conn the Shaughraun—that Boucicault finally transcends the Victorian world. And it is part of his triumph that much of antic Irish comedy as we know it today has its origins in the theatre of Boucicault... Boucicault is a master of the characteristically absurd and shrewd Irish bull. (1982 Krause 184, 195)

The Irishman’s reputation for deceit, guile and wordplay is not only one result of the distrust by natives of the colonizer: it is also, more directly, the inevitable outcome of a life under martial law. (1997 Kiberd 278)

Though sometimes confined to the realm of dated nineteenth-century melodrama, Dion Boucicault’s plays have been culturally significant for much longer in Ireland, offering a new iteration of the stage Irishman who continued to be defined in part by his bulls.1 His successful Irish plays suggest something of Irish Protestants’ gradual acceptance of Gaelic culture and history, an acceptance that had gained momentum with the antiquarianism of writers like Charlotte Brooke and Samuel Ferguson. Boucicault’s plays with their stock characters—heroic, villainous, and comic—reflect “a tendency for the romantic historical imagination to veer towards a mythical view,…particularly strong in post-Union Ireland” (Leerssen 10). His romantic melodramas share with his friend Oscar Wilde’s absurd satires a tendency to favor the improbable but dramatic over the realistic or naturalistic.2 Wilde’s apparently deracinated characters and dialogue can disguise his Irish allusions and stylistics. Declan Kiberd argues that

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1 Robert Hogan writes that Boucicault deeply influenced his contemporary melodramatic playwrights who are “fortunately forgotten” (107). Yet he also influenced later writers of renown like Shaw, whose plays “were little more than nineteenth-century melodramas turned inside out,” and Synge, who acknowledged the positive legacy of Boucicault’s melodramas even as he took part in the Abbey Theatre’s project to reform some of the “absurdly farcical or sentimentally romantic” qualities of those plays (107-08). For this dissertation, Boucicault’s most significant impact—through his mixing of comedy and tragedy and his delight in “flamboyant language, in color, in dance, in music, and in spectacle”—was on O’Casey, who in turn was an important example for Beckett (109). Ironically, considering his contemporary success and his legacy to famous Irish playwrights, few playgoers had heard of Boucicault forty years after his death in 1890 (Parkin 7).

2 Richard Pine notes that the considerably older Boucicault gave “tutelage” to Wilde during the latter’s time in America and that Boucicault was among many influential Irish associates Wilde had even after he expatriated (116). Their friendship was one way that Wilde familiarized himself with melodrama (241). Their acquaintance dated from Wilde’s early childhood when his parents entertained Boucicault in their Dublin home (Coakley 116).
Wilde subtly transplanted the wisecracking Irish shaughraun—or vagabond—to English drawing rooms, upsetting the moral certainties and rigid propriety of the times (2001 328). In this frame of mind, Wilde had an ethnic impetus as well as an aesthetic agenda for his wit. Where Edgeworth and Boucicault’s stock Irish characters could leave some uncertainty about the intentionality of those characters’ humor, Wilde’s left little doubt about their deliberate wit. Wilde’s witty characters pose as dilettante dandies rather than rambunctious rustic servants, but their utterances share with stage Irishmen a sense of logical absurdity and often deeper paradox.

This chapter will consider the use of bulls, broadly defined as instances of self-contradiction or paradox, as part of the distinctive comedy of Boucicault and Wilde. These pivotal playwrights of the nineteenth century wrote for cosmopolitan audiences while borrowing from the tradition of stage Irish self-contradiction—even if the borrowing in Wilde’s case was opaquely veiled. In the case of Boucicault, analysis of deeper meanings in bulls will indicate that this writer of melodramas has inaccurately been pegged as a purveyor of Irish “buffoonery and easy sentiment” in the words of Lady Gregory. Rather than perpetuating negative national stereotypes, Boucicault can be seen as part of a continuum of writers since the seventeenth century whose stage characters positively reformed volatile popular conceptions of the Irish. His stage Irish characters come across as wily heroes whose verbal and logical contortions make up an important part of their guile. In the case of Wilde, criticism has tended to focus on cosmopolitan sophistication and wit rather than his Irish background. Generally what has been written about buried Irish influences in Wilde’s work has not specifically addressed the tradition of bulls. This chapter will examine the playwright’s famously paradoxical wit as a form of bulls transplanted to English drawing room comedy.
For both Boucicault and Wilde, bulls will emerge as central elements of carnivalesque comedy that cleverly subverts England’s imperial authority. For both, close analysis of individual texts will show the prevalence of bulls and their significance to the broader meaning of their works. The analysis will include Boucicault’s three best-known Irish plays, *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah-na-Pogue*, and *The Shaughraun*, as well as a selection from Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his plays *Vera, or the Nihilists*, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These Victorian writers prove to be important antecedents to Beckett’s drama as much as that drama differs in style.

**Boucicault’s Wise Fools**

Boucicault gained a reputation for stage Irish characters, though the criticism to date has not closely addressed these characters’ use of the bull as guileful weapon. For Boucicault, the stage Irishman was “a wise fool” whose transgressions upended over-rigid Victorian sensibilities (1965 Krause 13). The playwright could draw upon the examples of novelists like Samuel Lover and Charles Lever for artful dialogue from roguish Irish types, and he had seen Irish comedians performing stage Irishry in London (29-30).1 American and British audiences found Boucicault’s characters “charmingly and hilariously Irish” and “surprisingly, Irish audiences were no less enthusiastic, finding no harm in the parasite-slave interpretation of Hibernian character” (Fitz-Simon 102). His stage Irish portrayals would influence numerous later writers, stretching through the Abbey playwrights, George Bernard Shaw and “as far as Samuel Beckett”

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1 Lover’s comic novel *Handy Andy* introduced Andy Rooney, a descendent of the stage Irishman who is something of a ne’er-do-well but maintains a joyful philosophy. Lever’s novels were admired for their sense of conviviality and merriment but were also considered stereotypical in their treatment of Irish characters.
Andrew Parkin claims “his Irish plays alone are good enough to make him the most rewarding playwright for study and sheer amusement in Victorian theatre” (13-14). By the time Boucicault turned to Ireland for settings and themes in his plays, he had already honed his skills as a writer of melodrama and farce. Ireland’s dramatic natural environment and colorful history contributed to the melodrama, while his sense of Irish propensity for verbal wit enhanced the comedy. Though Boucicault’s priority was always theatre entertainment, his characters’ carnivalesque wit had political overtones. Bulls, blather, and blarney became “merry weapons with which the characters defend and amuse themselves” (1965 Krause 31). Readings of the plays bear out this observation.

_The Colleen Bawn’s Appealing Stage Irishman_

For _The Colleen Bawn_ (1860), Boucicault borrowed plot elements from the Irish novelist Gerald Griffin who in turn had based the novel on real events. But the playwright made substantial changes, allowing a melodramatically happy ending for the titular colleen and expanding the character of Myles na Coppaleen into a comic heroic rogue, a figure he would reiterate in his later Irish plays. Boucicault himself said this play marked a “revolution…in what may be termed the Irish drama and the representation of Irish character” (qtd Harrington 16). The importance of humor is established early in the play, when Anne Chute, the colleen ruadh (or red-haired girl), asks her beaux to go for a moonlit walk with her “and be funny” (Boucicault 53). Her companion, Kyrle Daly, has a certain Victorian stiffness, but he only needs “tapping for pure spirits to flow out spontaneously,” according to Anne (53). After making this claim, she identifies Kyrle as a Connaught native, implying his dormant wit is associated with his west Irish roots.
In Myles, the play’s stage Irishman, Boucicault offered audiences what Krause calls “vicarious release” from prevailing social standards, “a better and more natural man than the effete gentleman of urban civilization” (1965 32). Yet “for all his amiability, Myles is a lazy, lying tramp, beyond any hope of reform, a horse thief and ex-convict, a poacher and operator of an illegal whiskey still who thumbs his nose at authority—in short, an irresponsible rogue who is the complete antithesis of Victorian respectability” (32). Krause also holds that Myles and Boucicault’s later stage Irishmen have timeless comic qualities that spotlight the follies of self-righteous authorities, transcending their Irish nationality and Victorian contexts (32).

Myles enters the play singing and joking. When another character asks, “is that you, Myles?,” he responds, “No! it’s my brother” (60). And he jokes with the same character that he is not the “blackguard” people make him out to be, but “another sort of blackguard entirely” (60). His devotion to Eily, the colleen bawn, inspires Gaelic exclamations, poetic turns, and extended song. This stage Irish romantic loyalty, even to a woman married to another man, may help motivate his heroism later in the play. Thus a potentially negative stereotype—extreme loyalty—becomes a positive archetype. For her part, Eily sardonically describes her attempt to get rid of her characteristic brogue and satisfy her husband’s Victorian ideal of a wife: “I’m getting’ clane of the brogue, and learnin’ to do nothing—I’m to be changed entirely” (64).

Myles stands up to protect Hardress and Eily’s marriage vow when they are wavering about it. As he explains later, his love for her is “all crost/Like a bud in the frost” (80). But Myles’ pangs of unattainable romance do not prevent him from joking. Speaking of his illegal whiskey still, he puns: “I’ll invoke them sperrits—and what’s more they’ll come” (83).

Bulls continue to crop up as the play proceeds. Following his failed attempt to murder Eily, Danny Mann, the play’s stock villain, describes the incident: “I threw her in and then I was
kilt” (88). While on one level this “kilt” is an example of common Irish hyperbole, on another it may be prophetic considering Danny’s gunshot wound and moribund illness. Later in Act III, Myles provides a variation on the joke he entered the play with. Father Tom, asks, “Myles, are ye at home?”; he replies, “No—I’m out” (92). When Father Tom suggests going inside Myles’ hut, Myles claims that they are locked out because “I always lock the dure inside and lave [the key] there when I go out, for fear of losin’ it” (92). Myles’ figurative turns include the observation that “love makes all places look alike” and the claim after saving Eily’s life that he is now “her mother” because he “brought her into the world a second time” (94). He ironically presents Eily as the “witness” to her own supposed death (102). The play ends with Eily and Hardress accepting their marriage and Irish characters claiming pride in their distinctive ways of speaking. When Eily tries to correct her pronunciation of the word “speak,” Anne stops her by claiming “spake is the right sound” (103). It seems that bulls too are an element of Irish speaking that should be preserved.

Myles na Coppaleen Wins Over Audiences

_The Colleen Bawn_ was a resounding and sustained commercial success internationally. Queen Victoria saw the play three times, including what was her last visit to the theatre (Walsh 79). While the sensational action and melodrama of the play had their appeal, much of the play’s success came from the character of Myles na Coppaleen, played by Boucicault himself. Richard Fawkes describes the paradoxical attraction that the stage Irish Myles held for audiences:

[Myles] is a lazy, lying rogue, a horse-thief, a poacher and an operator of an illicit whiskey still—everything that was anathema to respectable Victorians. And yet it was Myles who proved irresistible to Victorian audiences… Certainly Myles is a sentimental character, full of charm, wit and cunning, and in creating him, Boucicault was concerned primarily to entertain his audience, but he is much more than a caricature: he is a rounded
character and, in the history of the stage, his appearance marked a major step forward
towards a truly indigenous Irish drama. (117)

In his chivalric heroism as well as his lying and self-contradiction, Myles reflects something of
the Celtic temperament that Matthew Arnold would famously describe in his 1867 essay “On the
Study of Celtic Literature”: “there is…a Celtic air about the extravagance of chivalry, its reaction
against the despotism of fact, its straining human nature further than it will stand” (347). Arnold
might not have been surprised by the warm reception English audiences gave Boucicault’s Irish
rogues for they reflect one dimension of English character as he described it. Arnold detected
“…a certain mixture and strife of elements in the Englishman… the clashing of a Celtic
quickness of perception with a Germanic instinct for going steadily along close to the ground”
(359-60). To some degree, English audiences were laughing at their own foibles when they
laughed at Myles.

While Boucicault was a consummate showman who catered to audience tastes, he
insisted that his version of the stage Irishman was not as derogatory as past iterations. He even
rejected the title stage Irish for his characters, referring dismissively to “the clowning character,
known as ‘the stage Irishman,’ which it has been my vocation, as an artist and as a dramatist to
abolish” (qtd Hogan 81). Rather than an abolishment of stage Irishry, what Boucicault achieved
in his Irish characters was “a broadening of the usual surface characteristics of most stage
stereotypes” (Hogan 82). With Myles in particular, “we get an Irish version of the lovable rogue
that we see also in Falstaff and Long John Silver…he becomes much fuller than the usual broth-
of-a-bhoy stage Irishman” (86). Myles proves to be more archetype than stereotype, a character
that David Krause finds in finer Irish drama, “a nimble and cunning stage Irishman,…a
resourceful clown who in his dramatic ancestry goes back to the parasite-slave of ancient Greek
and Roman comedy” (1982 173). Yet, on the whole, *The Colleen Bawn* presented such a romanticized picture of life in Ireland that it has proved to be something of a tantalizing disappointment for literary critics: “what a pity, for here was the first dramatist really to turn to Irish life for his subject, and he used that subject for mere entertainment” (Hogan 87).

**Arrah-na-Pogue: The Irish Rogue Returns**

*Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864) introduces Shaun the Post as another roguish wise fool with many figurative turns of phrase and occasional bulls. Trying to kiss the title character Arrah, Shaun describes his maneuver as “the cowards blow…I hit ye undher the nose wid my mouth” (119). He goes on to describe her face as a griddle that always has a warm cake on it “to stop your mouth wid” (120). Arrah calls him “thief of the world” and “comedtherin’ schemer” (120). Later, when another character expresses surprise Shaun isn’t elsewhere, Shaun responds sarcastically, “I don’t find it convainient to be in two places at onst” (123). Speaking to Feeney, a collaborator with colonial authorities, he utters a bull of a blessing: “well, sweet bad luck go wid ye, and that’s my blessin’ on ye” (124). To account for Arrah’s beauty and recent wealth, he says to her, “your mother was sweet Vanus herself, and your father was the Bank of Ireland” (124). Colonel O’Grady also speaks in figurations and bulls. Describing the supposed incomprehensibility of Fanny Power, O’Grady says, “you’re a book of Euclid and not a woman at all, for there’s no understanding you” (125). O’Grady speaks of contradictions in love, asserting that what makes Fanny most perfect to him is her “faults” and that “the weak points of [her] character are the most irresistible” (125). He jokes that he will attend a party “in spirit” by providing liquor for it and that he “left a number of unfavourable impressions” on Feeney by physically assaulting him (127-28).
In Act II O’Grady returns to unleash a bull with paradoxical qualities. When Major Coffin announces his firm intention to prosecute Shaun for his supposed theft of money, O’Grady notes that dutiful convictions can lead people astray.

There goes a kind-hearted gentleman, who would cut more throats on principle and firm conviction than another blackguard would sacrifice to the worst passions of his nature. If there be one thing that misleads a man more than another thing, it is having a firm conviction about anything. (140)

The remark seems to foretell Yeats’ comment in “The Second Coming” on the best lacking all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. The confusion of Shaun’s false confession to protect Beamish MacCoul leads him into another bull as he proposes reversing his stance, what he calls a confession of innocence: “well, sure, now; if I confess I’m innocent, won’t one go agin the other?” (146). While the statement may make Shaun sound foolish, Arrah’s response spotlights instead the dour pessimism of the English court system: “No. I believe they always take a man’s word that he is a thief, but it’s not worth a thrawneen to prove him an honest man” (147). Shaun continues with his humorous folly as the sergeant asks whether he can procure anything for him for his trial: “well, Sergeant dear, have ye such a thing about you as an alibi? Or would ye borry it of a friend?” (147). Shaun continues his blustering banter as Major Coffin tries to conduct a courtroom interrogation. “Will you give the Court your name, fellow?,” asks the major; “Well, I’m not ashamed of it,” he replies (150). When the major asks if he is guilty or innocent, he replies, “sure, Major, I thought that was what we’d all come here to find out” (150). To leave no doubt about Shaun’s guile, Boucicault has him speak in aside to the audience: “Never fear; I’m not such a fool as they think” (150). A few moments later, the major’s unfamiliarity with Irish use of clan names for individuals leads Shaun to comment wryly, “ah, the ignorance of thim Inglis!” (151).
The implication of bulls in this act is that the English colonial legal system is grossly inadequate to the Irish colony living under it. After Shaun rhetorically crushes the prosecution’s main witness against him (calling him a descendant of a serpent that escaped St. Patrick), O’Grady proposes letting Shaun off based on “the eloquence” of his defense. But the major says the court cannot “admit so Irish a consideration” (153). Here rhetorical elegance and reverence for it are held to be distinctively Irish. And bulls are a part of that eloquence. Even O’Grady, who is hardly a stage Irish fool, speaks a bull after Shaun’s guilty verdict, one indicating the absurdity of the decision: “whether you committed the crimes or not, you are guilty” (154). Further highlighting the inadequacy of the court system, the colonial secretary asks in Act III, “shall I ever be able to understand this extraordinary people?” (157). When Fanny explains counter-intuitively that she “became irrevocably” Beamish MacCoul’s love when she gave herself to O’Grady, the secretary is further perplexed. “What an awkward disclosure,” he says. “I don’t quite understand” (160).

Shaun the Post’s “Glib Gift for Banter”

Bulls pile up as the melodramatic spectacle continues. As Shaun’s friends plot to get him out of prison, Andy Regan utters a bull to describe the impossibility of scaling the prison tower: “not a human crature could rache that, barrin’ he was a saygull” (163). In his prison cell, Shaun speaks the absurd when describing what he claims not to be thinking about: “—Arrah. I won’t think of her for ten whole minutes…Now I’m—I’m—not thinkin’ of her” (163). O’Grady speaks another bull near the end of the play when he thinks Shaun has died before his pardon was made known. He says of the pardon, “it has just come in time to be too late” (168). Briefly Shaun allows a false wake of the sort Conn will conduct more deliberately in The Shaughraun.
Shaun soon makes his presence known, asking those present to “tell me am I dead?” (168). The devotion Arrah has shown to him leads to another bull: “I’d consint to be thried, convicted, and executed once a week to feel myself loved as I have been loved all this blessed day” (169). As Robert Hogan notes, Shaun has “a fine zest for life, a surpassing geniality, and a glib gift for banter” that leaven his traditionally loyal and courageous characteristics (88). In the final lines of the play Arrah renders a bull, playing on male-female distinctions. She says that when the man a woman loves is in danger, “her heart gets into her head, and makes a man of her entirely” (169). In this case maleness is used figuratively, a metonym for boldness and courage.

*Arrah-na-Pogue* enjoyed an audience reception comparable to *The Colleen Bawn’s*. Its success in London has been described as a nearly diplomatic phenomenon, “a sort of *entente cordiale* between John Bull and Paddy” (Walsh 103). But the play has more political overtones, set as it is during the failed rebellion of 1798. Theatre historian John Harrington finds that with his Irish plays, Boucicault provides “a useful reminder that placing audience over the artist does not prohibit political provocation” (19). Political overtones would be heightened with *The Shaughraun*, Boucicault’s best-known Irish play, which dealt with the mid-nineteenth century republican movement in Ireland.

**The Shaughraun: Blarney, Bluster, and Bulls**

In *The Shaughraun* (1874), Boucicault is thought to have achieved his greatest combination of melodrama and farce and his most compelling stage Irishman in the person of Conn. While the play is sprinkled with self-contradictory statements, its plot contains potentially contrary messages in its positive treatment of both republican Fenians and English colonial authorities. “By supporting authority and resistance to authority at the same time, an Irish play
like *The Shaughraun* could be all things to all audiences,” Christopher Morash has observed, adding that this quality led to the play’s success in “the new global entertainment culture” (109).

As part of that global culture, this Irish play debuted in New York. Initial audience reactions were mixed. The *New York Times* praised the play for its realism, for substituting previous caricatures of the Irishman with “the portrait from nature” (qtd Harrington 22). But Henry James found less realistic value, arguing in a review of *The Shaughraun* that popular playwrights trafficking in “types” often look for them “in the land of brogue and ‘bulls’” (qtd 23).

Lamenting such stereotypes, James observed that “it is…rather cruel to condemn us to find them so inveterately in that consoling glamour of the footlights” (qtd 23). He conceded, however, that Boucicault’s play as a whole is “brimming Irish bonhomie and irony” (qtd 23).

In the play Conn—the eponymous shaughraun or wanderer—uses blarney, bluster, and bulls to get himself out of difficult situations. He provides figurative or deceptive responses when danger occurs. As the Fenian character Robert Ffolliott puts it, “the minute Conn sees a bit of scarlet…the bull breaks out of him, and he might toss you over a cliff” (186). Robert explains that Conn’s mother was frightened by “a mad bull,” and it is she who speaks several bulls in the first act. Mrs. O’Kelly, Conn’s mother, explains figuratively that his father “died o’ drink” when he drowned at sea (186). She says of his father “the best of men he was, when he was sober” but adds the he was “nivir” sober (186).

The son follows his mother’s example in uttering bulls. Conn explains that he did not steal a neighbor’s horse but was instead stolen by it, as he supposedly could not control the steed from galloping off with him (187-88). Of his pledge to drink only “one thimbleful” of whiskey per day, he explains he was still able to get drunk because he used “a tailor’s thimble [namely, a bottomless one], an’ they couldn’t get it full” (191). He wryly describes his dog Tatthers
attacking someone as performing “his painful duty,” a play on the English officer claiming his painful duty is to arrest Robert Ffolliott for being a suspected Fenian rebel. And he uses nonsensical statements to try to discourage soldiers from searching for Robert in Father Dolan’s house. Robert, he says, “wint away before he came here at all” (196). The statement is true in the sense the Robert went into exile before returning to Ireland in general, but Conn uses it in a misleading way to throw the soldiers off Robert’s scent.

The play continues the Irish tradition of using death and murder hyperbolically and metaphorically. Although when the villain Harvey Duff exclaims the he is “a corpse” in both acts one and two, he seems prophetic as well as hyperbolic (183, 199). In one of his songs, Conn claims if he were dead and in the grave, he would “dig a grave both wide and deep/With a jug of punch at my head and feet” (202). Claire remarks that Conn is “so full of sport that…he would sing at his own funeral” (202). At the start of Act III, Conn’s faked death and wake give his mother the opportunity to speak a hyperbolic bull: “My darlin’ boy, it will be a grand day for you, but your poor old mother will be left alone in her cabin buried alive while yourself is going to glory” (222). For the Englishman Captain Molineux, the festive wake seems like “Bedlam,” and he comments on the way the Irish “mix up” things, the mournful and the celebratory (223). When Conn makes himself known to some of the wake attendees, they exclaim about his living presence. In reply he renders the bull: “No; I’m dead!” (224). Explaining why he has pretended to be dead, Conn asks, “would you have me spile a wake afther invitin’ all the neighbours?” (224). Molineux can only say in response: “You Irish—” (224). As the attendees who still think Conn is dead keen, Biddy laments his passing, remembering that he was “as bould as a bull-calf that runs beside of the cow” (227). The simile has an ironic twist because the entire wake is a practical bull Conn is enjoying to see how much he is missed. Robert Hogan describes the wake
as “undoubtedly among the most effective comic scenes ever penned by an Irish dramatist” (90).

The fake wake is something Conn shares with Condy Rackrent in Edgeworth’s novel. Both characters want to know how they will be missed. “It’s a mighty pleasant thing to die like this, once in a way,” Conn says in an aside as the mourning continues, “and hear all the good things said about ye after you’re dead and gone, when they can do you no good” (228). Molineux is at a loss for words as the bogus wake goes on. He calls it “this—a—melancholy—a-entertainment—I mean a—this festive solemnity” (228). When some of the arch villain Kinchela’s henchmen exclaim “murdher, alive!” upon discovering Conn, Conn describes himself with an oxymoron: “That’s what I am. Murdher, alive!” (230). When his mother discovers he is alive, Conn promises, “I’ll never be kilt again”; Moya adds, “sure, if he hadn’t have been murdhered, he couldn’t have saved us” (238). Later, with weddings planned for several of the principle characters, Molineux marvels that the Irish make little distinction between weddings and wakes.

_The Shaughraun_ ends happily, with three couples brought together and the villains routed. As Krause has observed, “Wilde’s Mrs. Prism [a prim Victorian character from _The Importance of Being Earnest_] would have been shocked by the wild antics of Conn, but she might have recovered her composure sufficiently to recognize that the poetic justice of the happy ending illustrated her reassuring concept of literature: ‘The good end happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means’” (1982 176). Melodramatic excellence veiled subversion in this play that dealt with the Fenian movement. “The potentially subversive element in _The Shaughran_ is so encompassed by pungent dialogue and drollery at all social levels, by whimsical story-telling, by comic situations, any ‘harm’ was remarkably well
concealed,” Fitz-Simon notes, adding “there is something rather ‘Irish’ about entertaining one’s enemy while excoriating him at the same time” (2011 37).

**Boucicault’s Wide Influence**

Boucicault and Wilde both had a knack of conjoining sentimental endings with raucous comedy, and the former playwright can be seen as part of a continuum of influence on the latter. “Over time, Boucicault has been increasingly a troubling presence, at once admirable and deplorable, much like Conn the Shaughraun,” Harrington notes, adding however that “in Oscar Wilde’s time, Boucicault was a desirable association” (29). And Krause observes that Boucicault “who borrowed so freely from the works of such Irish dramatists as Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith, and Sheridan…provided some direct and indirect sources of inspiration for such later Irish dramatists as Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O’Casey, and Behan” (182). Though Boucicault’s achievements were “more theatrical than literary,…his influence directly or indirectly on the work of the major figures of the Irish theatre who blossomed in the early years of the twentieth century is unquestionable” (Keogh 1,2).² His Irish plays “established Boucicault as the father of Irish theatre” (Keogh 2). It was a patrimony that Wilde would studiously hide in his works.

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² In the decade leading up to the founding of the Abbey Theatre in December 1904, Boucicault was still among the most frequently performed playwrights in Dublin, Belfast, and Cork, according to performance data collected by Christopher Fitz-Simon (2011 37). “The intense popularity of Boucicault’s misleadingly termed ‘Irish trilogy’ during his lifetime and for at least twenty years after his death [in 1890] left an impression that they were not only his most typical but also his best plays,” Fitz-Simon says (35).
Wilde Leads Bulls into English Society

If bulls—blundering or not—are characteristic of the stage Irishman, deliberately clever turns of phrase are an attribute of the dandy as portrayed by Oscar Wilde. Epigrams and paradoxes are Wildean dandies’ stock in trade. Wilde biographer Davis Coakley considers some of Boucicault’s plays “precursors of the dialogue comedies” by Wilde (117). Coakley notes however that Wilde deliberately avoided stage Irish characters; Wilde wrote once that “the Celtic element in literature is extremely valuable, but there is absolutely no excuse for shrieking ‘Shillelagh’ and ‘O-Garrah!’” (qtd 117). Abhorrence of stock Irish types may have been part of Wilde’s rebellion against his Anglo-Irish family “presided over by two eccentric parents who seemed to have stepped out of a bad stage-Irish melodrama” (1998 Kiberd 9). Despite the lack of overt national references in his plays, his artful conversation contains elements of postcolonial subversion that evoke his Irish upbringing and support for home rule. Anne Varty describes clever language as Wilde’s means of undermining England’s prevailing mores: “Witty, astonishing, shocking, but always authoritative, this linguistic style constitutes the dandy’s main weapon against the complacent or rigidly codified morality of late Victorian society” (xv).

Wilde’s paradoxical epigrams upended conventional wisdom with carnivalesque intent. While the studied eloquence of Wilde’s characters is a departure from the seemingly artless charm of stage Irish bulls, Irish wit can be seen underlying both. Thanks to Edgeworth and others, Irish Protestants had increasingly noticed and remarked upon native Irish people’s witting wit. For example, by the late nineteenth century, W.R. Le Fanu, younger brother of the novelist Sheridan Le Fanu, published his recollections of seventy years in Ireland, his experiences suggesting “that very little of Irish wit occurs by accident” (qtd Mercier 95). In Wilde’s case, the humor was often pointedly subversive, and viewers took note. As George Bernard Shaw said of
audience reaction to *An Ideal Husband*, “they laugh angrily at his epigrams” (qtd Pine 248). For Wilde the national providence of wit goes largely unsaid, though he does make a reference to Irish verbosity. In *An Ideal Husband*, he indicates that the nation’s comparative advantage is clearly on one side of conversation. The play’s principal schemer, Mrs. Cheveley proposes that “if one could only teach the English how to speak, and the Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilized” (2000 Wilde 339). In a similar vein, W.B. Yeats quoted a Wildean bull about paradoxical Irish character: “We Irish are too poetical to be poets; we are a nation of brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks” (qtd 12).

**Prior Criticism on Wilde’s Irishness and Style**

Existing criticism on Wilde has taken into account his Irish upbringing. Coakley’s *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* is the most extensive in this regard, though it focuses on biography rather than close literary analysis. Among early Irish influences on Oscar’s conversational fluency were his parents. He learned the power of oratory from his father William’s wit and garrulousness (Fryer 8-9). From his mother, he took a tendency for iconoclastic banter that upended conventional wisdom (Ellmann 9). Alan Stanford finds that “at his mother’s elbow, if not at her knee, Oscar learned the art of the barbed remark,” adding that he was first and foremost “a talker who found writing a tiresome duty” (152, 156). In a psychoanalytic study Melissa Knox posits that Wilde’s literary subversion of English authorities—and his prosecution by those same authorities—fulfilled the hopes of his ardently nationalist mother: “To be hero and victor or martyr and victim for the Irish revolution: these were the imperatives he felt his mother had thrust upon him” (90). Noting that some of Wilde’s early poetry was political, Edouard Roditi detects “anti-monarchist and republican faith which he
had inherited, it seems, partly from his Irish background and Speranza, his Byronic mother, and partly from his own readings” (1986 151). Another early Irish influence on Wilde was John Pentland Mahaffy, the Trinity College classics professor who provided a model in his love of ancient Greek culture and his tendency for spontaneous conversational brilliance (Coakley 148-49). Mahaffy—famous for coining the bull that “an Irish bull is always pregnant”—claimed Wilde as one of his brightest pupils and offered a bull of a boast on his departure for Oxford, “Go to Oxford, my dear Oscar: we are all much too clever for you over here” (qtd Stanford & McDowell 79, 39). George Bernard Shaw held that “though by culture Wilde was a citizen of all civilized capitals, he was at root a very Irish Irishman, and as such a foreigner everywhere but Ireland” (qtd Pine 11).

Critics have found postcolonial tension behind much of Wilde’s acerbic wit. “Wilde’s entire literary career constituted an ironic comment on the tendency of Victorian Englishmen to attribute to the Irish those emotions which they had repressed within themselves,” Declan Kiberd argues. “With his sharp intelligence, Wilde saw that the image of the stage Irishman tells far more about English fears than Irish realities, just as the ‘Irish joke’ revealed less about Irishmen’s innate foolishness than about Englishmen’s persistent and poignant desire to say something funny” (1998 11). Similarly, Stanford sees a distinctly national attitude in Wilde’s satire: “only an Irishman, a Dubliner from the days when Dublin still felt that it was the second city of the empire, could view England with such a cynical eye; as an Irishman, of the Anglo-Irish class, Wilde could recall 700 years of being an outsider who was also the insider; he was, if you wish, the enemy from within” (155). Richard Pine observes that after entering Oxford as a young man, “Wilde stood irreconcilably outside both worlds, the English society which, by
virtue of his difference, he was to shock, subvert and despise for the rest of his life, and the Irish world which became more a state of mind than a home” (1).

Pine is among many commentators who analyze Wildean paradoxes as a key stylistic tool. He describes Wilde’s paradox of character—simultaneously conforming and rebelling—in ethnic terms: “Paradox, so difficult a concept in English letters, is almost ubiquitous, a commonplace, in discussing the Irish mind” (6). Norbert Kohl elaborates on Wildean paradox as a weapon wielded by dandy characters veering between intellectual detachment and emotional involvement. “The paradox,” Kohl says, “is a manifest attack on tradition, whether it be state institutions or social conventions, and it stresses the role of the dandy or artist as an outsider” (229). Knox argues that Wilde seems to have considered himself a buffoon but one with paradoxical depths: “the buffoonery ultimately became heroic, just as his outrageous statements, which appear to deny all customary truths, became truths after all” (75-76). Closer to Wilde’s own lifetime, James Joyce wrote that Wilde broke “the lance of his fluent paradoxes against the body of practical conventions” (56). And, Joyce noted, “in the tradition of the Irish writers of comedy that runs from the days of Sheridan and Goldsmith to Bernard Shaw, Wilde became, like them, court jester to the English” (57-58).

Not all commentators appreciate Wilde’s style. Shaw argued that “Wilde was so in love with style that he never realized the danger of biting off more than he could chew. In other words, of putting up more style than his matter would carry” (101). This fellow Irish émigré found that Wilde’s “Irish charm, potent with the Englishmen, did not exist for me” (97). And Mary McCarthy faults him for going too far: “The trouble with Wilde’s wit is that it does not recognize when the party is over. The effect of this effrontery is provoking in both senses; the outrageous has its own monotony, and insolence can only strike once” (107-08). Prioritization
of style was something Arnold had observed in Celtic poetry, which he found throws “all its force into style, by bending language at any rate to its will, and expressing the ideas it has with unsurpassable intensity, elevation, and effect. It has all through it a sort of intoxication of style” (366). The same might be said of Wilde’s ouevre.

The most direct commentary on Wilde’s use of the Irish bull comes from Jerusha McCormack’s essay in Wilde the Irishman. McCormack argues that Wilde sometimes opted for “a native Hiberno-Irish speech form called the Irish Bull, [which]…keeps the form of logic, while outraging reason and bringing it to a violent halt” (88). He goes on to say that “if language is the agent of authority, the Irish bull is a verbal bombshell, exposing the arbitrary nature of the speech-act itself” (88). He places this observation in a post-colonial perspective. “In terms of Wilde’s own divided linguistic allegiances,” he says, “the Irish Bull might be seen as the colonist’s revenge on the imperialist father-tongue” (88). However, McCormack does not extend his commentary on bulls to close readings of Wilde’s fiction and drama, as this chapter will.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray: Dandy as Bull-Speaker*

Dandy characters who stand outside the main action of Wilde’s plots speak many of his bulls or bull-like paradoxes. For at least parts of the story, they remain acerbic observers. Thus, Lord Henry, or Harry, is the main epigrammatist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). He is a provocative mentor for Dorian but otherwise remains out of the primary plot activity. He adopts the stance of a wryly ironic observer, and his conversations play out like dramatic set pieces. Preparing the reader for what is to come from Lord Henry, the novel begins with an author’s preface in the form of a chain of epigrams about the purpose and meaning of art. The preface
ranges from sayings as plain-and-simple as “the artist is the creator of beautiful things” to weird paradoxes bordering on nonsense such as “even things that are true can be proved.”

Wilde published *Dorian Gray*, his only novel, ahead of his most successful dramatic comedies. The early chapters contain much dialogue. Analysis of Chapter III in particular can demonstrate the importance of bulls in this work. This chapter was among the material that Wilde added to an initial version of the story published by *Lippincot’s* magazine in 1890. By further explicating aesthetic themes valorizing beauty, Chapter III may have shifted the novel’s emphasis toward Dorian as an aesthetic inspiration for Basil and Lord Henry, rather than as a homoerotic sex object.

The venue for the luncheon conversation that comprises most of Chapter III is late-Victorian London’s wealthy society. The environment offered ample material for a contrarian aphorist like Lord Henry (also known as Harry). That all the conversation’s participants are well-off makes Harry’s candor more acceptable, as egalitarian settings tend to lend themselves to informal conversation. Participants in the chapter’s dialogue represent a spectrum of characters from well-to-do society. Harry is the satirical Oxford graduate who has enough wealth to devote much of his time to witty banter and social intrigue. His Uncle George is similarly a man of independent wealth and leisure, having committed himself at an early age “to the serious study of the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing” (2009 Wilde 36). However, Uncle George makes a generational and attitudinal distinction when he refers to his nephew as one of “you dandies” (37). The dandy, a key figure for the aesthetic movement, emphasized sartorial
elegance and other cosmetic refinements as a protest against the more impersonal qualities of utilitarian industrial society. 3

Harry’s philosophy ensures that acts, or individual utterances, in Chapter III are light-hearted, contrarian, and paradoxical, although other characters try to make the discussion plainer and more serious. Harry’s individual speech acts often take the form of conscious bulls. His privileged education and social sophistication suggest that these bulls have deliberate intent, in this case, to convey a philosophy at odds with prevailing Victorian mores. While other participants in the conversation are more literal in their speech acts, their very earnestness creates a more vibrant context for paradoxical barbs. They provide stock English sincerity to throw Harry’s wit into relief. The mood of this chapter is civil and sufficiently light-hearted for contrarian wit and conversational bulls to be taken humorously or tolerately, where they would more likely disturb or offend in more formal settings. The duchess expresses knowing tolerance when she says of Harry’s paradoxes and hyperbole, “you are quite delightful, and dreadfully demoralizing,” and, “that is very nice, and very wrong of you” (47). In an internal monologue while walking to the luncheon, Harry himself helps to establish the mood of the discussion to come as he describes the thrill of conversational influence:

There was something terribly entralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or strange perfume: there was a real joy in that—perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age so grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims… (41)

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3 Dandyism was associated with aestheticism, which flourished in the 1890s as “a kind of reaction against the materialism and capitalism of the later Victorian period” (Cuddon 12-13). Wilde, of course, was one of the key proponents of aestheticism in the English-speaking world. He continued the tradition of earlier French aesthetes who maintained that “art had no reference to life, and therefore nothing to do with morality” (12). Art should be made, the aesthetes argued, “for art’s sake.”
The third chapter unfolds much like a play; it is comprised mainly of dialogue and what might be taken as stage directions. Humor is difficult to write; it often works better in dramatic performance than in novels. Here Wilde astutely placed his attempts at wit where they best fit—in the thrust and parry of dialogue involving multiple participants. Harry derives some of his joy of speaking from the awareness he is flouting the norms of polite society. This deviation from normal, respectful conversation is not necessarily reckless. His behavior is calculated to the more open-minded norms of family, friends, and family friends. He knows that Uncle George and Aunt Agatha will tolerate his paradoxes and that Dorian enjoys them. The other participants become either new admirers or straight men for him to engage in conversational jousting. Harry prefers the agreeable norms found in conversation with a select aristocratic group to the broader audience of a utilitarian society. When Mr. Erskine asks why he does not write a book given his wit and verbal faculty, he replies in part: “…there is no literary public in England for anything except newspapers, primers, and encyclopedias. Of all people in the world the English have the least sense of the beauty of literature” (48). In this, as Kiberd suggests, he could be playing the Irish shaughraun disguised as a dandy, critiquing the impoverished aesthetics of imperial England.

Wilde’s Paradoxes: Reality “on the Tight-rope”

Wilde clearly delimits the setting of this conversation at Aunt Agatha’s lunch, while providing a preamble in Harry’s fact-finding visit to Uncle George’s residence. The effect in Chapter III is dramatic: the two conversations serve as scenic set pieces. The setting fosters nimble dialogue in which bulls and witticisms can flourish, revealing the soft underbelly of Victorian and utilitarian society. For example, Harry says, “’What I want is information; not
useful information, of course; useless information’,” while asking his uncle about Dorian Gray’s family history (37). While oxymoronic on its surface, the statement can be taken as a pithy expression of its speaker’s disdain for the utilitarianism of his day and his preference for the beauty and pleasure that such a society might find “useless.” Uncle George, something of a contrarian himself, appears to see the conversational implicature of Harry’s remark; he immediately adds sympathetically that current society is filled with “nonsense” and lacking in the gentlemanly values that make knowledge worth having. Even if Uncle George does not infer Harry’s meaning, the reader can. In another contrarian comment, Harry observes that “philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their defining characteristic” (40). With an approving growl, Uncle George makes his understanding of the implicature clear.

Wilde even deploys bulls to explain bulls. At the luncheon that comprises most of the chapter, Lady Agatha explains to a guest puzzled by Harry’s remarks: “Don’t mind him, my dear. He never means anything that he says” (43). As hostess, Lady Agatha tries to keep a normative calm and civility in the luncheon conversation. As Harry’s aunt she has close knowledge of his personality. Her remark indicates both that she has discerned the implicature warranted by Harry’s sarcasm and that her own words require implicature. She speaks hyperbolically in saying her nephew means nothing he says. Her underlying message is that he often puts wit and paradox before plainspoken conversation. Lady Agatha resumes in a sort of referee role in the discussion.

Harry later utters a bull about “brute reason” that sets off the most explicit discussion of paradox in the novel. Harry provides the material, and Mr. Erskine, the wise older gentleman, offers reflection on it:
“How dreadful!” cried Lord Henry. “I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable. There is something unfair about its use. It is hitting below the intellect.”

“I do not understand you,” said Sir Thomas, growing rather red.

“I do, Lord Henry,” murmured Mr. Erskine, with a smile.

“Paradoxes are all very well in their way…” rejoined the Baronet.

“Was that a paradox?” asked Mr. Erskine. “I did not think so. Perhaps it was.

Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the verities become acrobats we can judge them.” (44-45)

Many of Harry’s seemingly nonsensical pronouncements contain deeper truths upon consideration, and this is no exception. “Brute reason” here might be strictly rationalistic, pragmatic, and utilitarian attitudes that Wilde and other aesthetic artists found especially objectionable in the Victorian era. Harry extends his proclamation beyond a single sentence, layering his message into four sentences with simple syntax and pronouns. The last phrase, “hitting below the intellect,” is effectively his punch line, expressing the aesthetic worldview that a mind devoted solely to logic, without giving beauty and pleasure their due, is deficient. In character, Sir Thomas, the earnestly Radical legislator, does not understand at first, then dismisses Harry’s wit as impertinent paradox. But Mr. Erskine finds great value in the “brute reason” aphorism and defends paradoxes in general, essentially defending Harry’s comments throughout the conversation for their ability to test reality “on the tight-rope.”

Later Harry further advocates his aesthetic stance “on the tight-rope” of paradox by reversing conventional notions of sympathy. “I can sympathize with everything, except suffering,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “I cannot sympathize with that. It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain.

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4 Aesthetics, with its elevation of the autonomous beauty of art free from social and political agendas, involved a rejection of commercially oriented society and a reaction “against the Philistines who embodied what has been described as the ‘bourgeois ethos’” (Cuddon 11-12).
One should sympathize with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life’s sores the better” (45). His statement is jarring because it rejects the common meaning of sympathy as positive identification with others in pain. He prefers that sharing of emotions be in the realm of the beautiful and joyous.

Laughter suggests the luncheon audience has warmed to Harry’s wit. When he proposes to the duchess that she need only repeat youthful follies to get youth back, the duchess finds this idea delightful. Harry then comments: “Nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one’s mistakes” (46). The laugh that the guests share at Harry’s remark suggests at least some of them had gleaned a non-literal meaning. If the reader had any question about Harry’s meaning, Wilde opens the door to his internal monologue, which reflects on folly as a sort of joyful mischief that rejuvenates the soul. Following that reflection, the narrator gives a better sense of the purpose of Harry’s humorous verbal tight-rope act: he tells us that Dorian’s attention and the desire to retain it sharpens Harry’s wit and vivifies his imagination. The positive response to his last remark buoys Harry into a self-satisfied reflection on what Mr. Erskine later refers to as his “philosophy of pleasure”:

He played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her winestained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things. (46-47)

This is aestheticism bordering on decadence. The movements’ cross-purposes with many Victorian social conventions created a frisson that yields paradox. The essential conditions of Harry’s paradoxical bulls are recognized in Mr. Erskine’s comment on the value of paradox.
Language is economical when it works as a system, a smoothly performing network of speakers and listeners. Apparent inefficiency, oxymoron, and nonsense can disguise deeper meanings that are best expressed through potentially confusing tropes. The paradoxical bulls in Chapter III of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are a case in point. They are superficially obtuse statements that transform into economical language.

All this happens well before one of the best-known bulls in the novel, Harry’s remark in Chapter XIX to Dorian that “to get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable” (2005 Wilde 350). Harry utters this bull with characteristically ironic detachment, but it is a notion that Dorian takes to heart in a Faustian pact to maintain his youth. As Norbert Kohl comments, “Dorian’s fatal error is to take Lord Henry’s theories as practical guides for life; he does not realize that in reality they represent the cynicism of a rich, bored and irresponsible idler” (156). Similarly Edouard Roditi observes that “Lord Henry, Wilde’s perfect dandy, expounds to Dorian a paradoxical philosophy of dandyism which…appeals to the young narcissist,” who distorts that philosophy and becomes a fallen dandy (1969 54).

**Vera, or the Nihilists: Epigrams and Overt Politics**

Wilde’s relatively unknown early play *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880) suggests something of the paradoxical wit to come in his famous later comedies. This melodrama set in politically unstable Russia may comment on the stifled revolutionary history of Ireland. Biographer Jonathan Fryer says Wilde’s choice of topic showed he was “truly the son” of his nationalist mother (26). Boucicault was set to direct its first performance in 1881, but the production was shut down before opening (Ellmann 153). It was eventually staged two years later to
unfavorable reception. Against the background of a melodramatic plot, Wilde laces his trademark epigrams into the dialogue, several of which sound like bulls. Interrogating the title character, General Kotemkin remarks, “your answers are too honest to be true” (2000 Wilde 18). Though others share in verbal jousting, Prince Paul Maraloffski is the play’s primary epigrammatist. “Experience, the name men give to their mistakes,” Paul comments dryly. On combating a fellow prince’s ennui, he says, “you have been married twice already; suppose you try—falling in love, for once” (23). Chided for jesting too much, he replies, “life is much too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it” (23).

The czar has his own paradoxes to consider, pondering “how strange it is, the most real parts of one’s life always seem to be a dream!” and that “one can live for years sometimes without living at all, and then all of life comes crowding into a single hour” (46). On the burdens of power, he reflects that “the meanest serf in Russia who is loved is better crowned than I” (46). In turn, Vera describes the czar as a walking oxymoron: “the democrat who would make himself a king, the republican who hath worn a crown, the traitor who hath lied to us” (47). The czar has assumed the throne in the hope of becoming an enlightened ruler and giving Vera the royal prestige he thinks she wants. And Vera, returning his affections, ends the play as her own brand of oxymoron, a nihilist in love.

_Lady Windermere’s Fan: Wilde’s Wit Gains Popularity_  

_Lady Windermere’s Fan_ (1892), the first of Wilde’s successful comedies of the 1890s, borrows some of its structure from Sheridan’s _School for Scandal_ and includes a dandy figure in the person of Lord Darlington. In Act I, Darlington claims being bad is a form of modesty and that life is “too complex to be settled by…hard and fast rules” (2000 Wilde 166,168). In a witty
self-contradiction, he boasts of being able to “resist everything except temptation” (169). Accused of triviality, he responds: “life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it” (170). Whether in bull-like epigrams or surprising character portrayals, this is a play that “celebrates paradox” (Varty xvii). Mrs. Erlynne remains an enigma to her unwitting daughter and appears to others as a “virtuous adventuress” and “a defiantly unmotherly mother” (xvii). She comments on the paradoxical pain of comedy: “the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed” (198).

But these two characters are hardly the only ones who utter bulls in the china shop that is Victorian English society in this play. The Duchess of Berwick says her nieces have reported Lord Windermere frequenting Mrs. Erlynne’s address, adding that “although they never talk scandal, they—well, of course—they remark on it to everyone” (172). The misfortunately named Dumby contradicts himself to suit his audience, commenting that the social season has been both “quite delightful” and “dreadfully dull” to match the varied impressions of those speaking to him. He compliments Lady Windermere for having “that uncommon thing called common sense,” claims that “Mrs. Erlynne has a past before her,” and describes life’s only two tragedies as “not getting what one wants” and “getting it” (189, 200, 202). Cecil Graham opines that “as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don’t know anything at all,” and he worries that when people agree with him he “must be wrong” (182, 201). Lady Plymdale comments that “it takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing” (185). Plymdale’s remark reflects the complicated ethics of the play: Lady Windermere’s overweening righteousness almost leads her to make a terrible mistake, while Mrs. Erlynne’s checkered past makes her more sympathizing and ethical in some ways than other characters.
A Woman of No Importance: The Dandy Returns

Wilde’s next play, A Woman of No Importance (1893), deals similarly with concealed parentage, but this time it is the father who keeps his paternity from his son, rather than a mother concealing her maternity from her daughter. Epigrams and bulls come from numerous characters, and, as usual, the dandy character, in this case Lord Illingworth, is the source for most of them. Illingworth complains that “people go about, nowadays, saying things against one behind one’s back that are absolutely and entirely true” (226). Like a loafing dandy, he makes the case for utter indifference: “one should never take sides in anything…taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards and the human being becomes a bore” (227). As if defending comedy as a genre, Illingworth associates humor with intelligence: “the intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument one plays, that is all” (228). He identifies the “comedy of life” in his belief that “the soul is born old but grows young” (233). He plays the part of the provocateur, another Irish shaughraun disrupting conventional English society in carnivalesque fashion. Though Illingworth is not identified as Irish, another character, Kelvil, questions whether he has been “tainted with foreign ideas” that make him unable to appreciate English domesticity (229). Even death and reputation are the subjects of Illingworth’s contrarian humor. He comments dryly, “one can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down anything except a good reputation” (234).

In Act II the play’s less central characters show they can speak bulls, too. Lady Hunstanton makes the observation that “nowadays, all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors live like married men” (236). Lady Stutfield inquires whether someone got angry to the point that they would “say anything that was unkind or true?” (237). Mrs. Allonby
complains that “nothing is so aggravating as calmness. There is something positively brutal about the good temper of most modern men” (237). She later rhapsodizes about her ideal man, someone who “should invariably praise us for whatever qualities he knows we haven’t got” (239). Lady Hunstanton commends Allonby for her cleverness but adds, “you never mean a single word you say” (239). Hunstanton even worries that her American guest may have been shocked by “all this clever talk” (240). She shows both awareness of conversational irony and concern that it could be lost on some hearers. Bulls can fall on deaf or misunderstanding ears.

Towards the end of Act II, Illingworth returns with an epigram befitting his do-nothing dandyism: “duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does oneself” (249). In Act III, he issues a string of contrary epigrams and bulls. One—“if a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him”—is a lifting from Chapter III of *Dorian Gray*. In yet another borrowing from the novel, Illingworth claims in a classic bull that “to win back my youth…there is nothing I wouldn’t do—except take exercise, get up early or be a useful member of the community” (252). In dandyesque disdain for labor, he claims that if you cannot win over women, “you are quite over. You might just as well be a barrister or a stockbroker or a journalist at once” (254). He describes women’s power as “the tyranny of the weak over the strong…the only tyranny that lasts” (254). As for marriage, he says, “the happiness of a married man…depends on the people he has not married” (254). In a single swipe at English literature and aristocracy, he claims the Peerage directory is “the best thing in fiction the English have ever done” (255). Back on the subject of women, he claims they love men for their defects: “if we have enough of them, they will forgive us everything, even our giant intellects” (258). Defending himself against the charge that his contrarian epigrams are immoral, Illingworth asserts that “all thought is immoral…if you think of anything,
you kill it” (258-59). He even argues against moderation, calling it “a fatal thing” and adding that “nothing succeeds like excess” (259). As for influence, it is always bad, and “a good influence is the worst in the world” (266). Lady Hunstanton identifies the charm of his conversation: he proposes that obvious faults are actually virtues, something she calls a “most comforting view of life” (259). By the final act, when Illingworth is trying more earnestly to insinuate himself back into Mrs. Arbuthnot’s life, he speaks fewer bulls. His more active role in the melodrama makes his language more literal. As he departs the play, his wit is absent, and he gets a sobering slap. As is generally the case in his plays before Earnest, moralizing ultimately takes precedence over wit.

**An Ideal Husband’s Ideal Bulls**

In *An Ideal Husband* (1895) the dandy figure is Lord Goring, who, before even entering a scene, is identified as a “good-for-nothing” who changes clothes five times a day and dines out daily during the season. The stage directions suggest he favors obfuscation, noting “he is fond of being misunderstood” (2000 Wilde 288). Goring explains later: “I am always saying what I shouldn’t say. In fact, I usually say what I really think. A great mistake nowadays. It makes one so liable to be understood” (309). On truth, Goring says, “the truth is something I get rid of as soon as possible! Bad habit, by the way. Makes one unpopular at the club…with older members. They call it being conceited. Perhaps it is” (313). On conversation, he claims, “I love talking about nothing…it is the only thing I know anything about” (290). On logic: “a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person” (290). When someone complains that London society is full of dowdies and dandies, he replies, “the men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies, aren’t they?” (291). As these examples
indicate, the counter-intuitive epigrams of Wilde’s dandies often destabilize simple polarities such as good and evil, truth and falsity, intelligence and folly, and comedy and tragedy.

Consider one of Goring’s epigrams that takes up a theme of other plays: “I prefer a gentlemanly fool any day. There is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine” (307). Someone with Goring’s wit and apparent ethical grounding would seem unlikely to actually prefer stupidity. His bull might be interpreted as meaning a preference not for folly, but intellectual humility. It might be his way of explaining why intellectually and politically gifted people like Robert Chiltern can do stupid things through hubris or myopia.

As the play’s villain, Mrs. Cheveley also speaks some contrarian lines. Yet even if, as Goring suggests, women can be dandies, Cheveley’s epigrams come across less as wit than as jaundiced distortions of reality when spoken by such a character. For example, she says, “philanthropy seems to me to have become simply the refuge of people who wish to annoy their fellow creatures” (286-87). By contrast, when Goring remarks dryly that Chiltern’s charitable giving must have done harm, the form is similar to Cheveley’s earlier comment, but the effect seems more sardonic and witty than corrupt because of the speaker and context. Explaining her blackmailing to Robert Chiltern, Cheveley laments that “nowadays, with our modern mania for morality, everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and the other seven deadly virtues” (296). Her clever juxtaposition of “deadly” and “virtues” seems more like the rationalizing of a con artist than a profundity. Similarly, when Chiltern tries to explain his ethical lapse with a paradox—“there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage to yield to”—his assertion is unconvincing, and Goring continues to question his conscience. As Kohl observes, Goring, the most outstanding of Wilde’s dandy figures, shows
“serious moral involvement which he seeks in vain to cover up with his paradoxical language” (217).

At the opening of Act III, Goring riffs on the polarities of us and them, good and bad conduct, and truth and falsity when he remarks to his impassive servant “vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people…and falsehoods the truths of other people” (327). An exchange with his father, Lord Caversham, suggests his interlocutors understand that his contrarian remarks are meant to have a depth of meaning, even if that meaning is difficult to discern:

LORD GORING: …If there were less sympathy in the world there would be less trouble in the world.
LORD CAVESHAM (going towards the smoking-room): That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes.
LORD GORING: So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious.
LORD CAVESHAM (turning round, and looking at his son beneath bushy eyebrows): Do you always really understand what you say, sir?
LORD GORING (after some hesitation): Yes, father, if I listen attentively.
LORD CAVESHAM (indignantly): If you listen attentively!...Conceited young puppy!
(330-31).

Cavesham is flummoxed by another of his son’s remarks. Goring states that “in married life affection comes when people thoroughly dislike each other”; his father responds, “Certainly, sir. I mean certainly not, sir” (333). Goring is having fun with his father’s belief that material and practical concerns should determine whether to marry, with affection left for a later time. Yet Goring’s bull also suggests something of the complicated emotions experienced by partners in a long-term relationship like marriage. In Act IV the same father and son destabilize the dichotomy of seriousness and jest. Lord Caversham remarks, “Humph! Never know when you are serious or not”; his son replies, “neither do I, father” (346). Humor, Goring seems to say, can be as complex as marital emotions.
The Importance of Being Earnest: Wildean Absurdism

In The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), Wilde deals mainly with the polarity of seriousness and triviality. An interview he gave ahead of the play’s first London production reads like a manifesto for his brand of absurdism. He said the play “has its philosophy…that we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things with sincere and studied triviality” (qtd Varty xxii). As for the play’s plot and characters, Wilde is thought to have been influenced by Boucicault’s comedy A Lover by Proxy with its two idle gentlemen, its prudish Miss Prism-like character, and its overbearing Lady Bracknell-like character (1982 Krause 186, Fitz-Simon 98).

While Wilde’s English parlor-room parleys differed sharply from the low-Irish banter of Boucicault’s Irish plays, bulls were a common factor for these writers’ clever characters. In Wilde’s case the context for bulls is no longer stage Irishry. Rather it is an environment of “overbred boredom, of elegant desperation among a leisure class at its wits’ end,” Declan Kiberd has noted (1997 277).5 Pine argues that national differences between England and Ireland are a hidden dynamic behind the verbal comedy of Earnest: “The interplay between sense and nonsense, between an English and an Irish temperament and perspective, was the tinder on which his wit was laid” (247). And Kiberd claims that “in order to deal with Ireland, a play such as The Importance of Being Earnest had to be set in England…Wearing the mask of the English Oxonian, Wilde was paradoxically freed to become more ‘Irish’ than he ever could have been

5 Kiberd goes on to say, “it is no surprise that Wildean paradoxes and one-liners resurface so often in the works of Beckett” (277).
back in Ireland” (1998 21). Wilde’s grandiosity of style has a serious purpose in this play. “The paradoxes cannot simply be dismissed as cheap effects, for in many instances they serve to explode established conventions, thereby exposing to view those aspects of reality that had hitherto been cloaked by existing norms,” Kohl argues (268). “Such paradoxes illustrate vividly how social decorum is to be seen merely as a mask of conformity, and they also bring out the true motives that lurk behind the mask” (269). Wilde’s goal was a carnivalesque exposure of pomposity and corruption.

In *Earnest* Wilde has Algernon, his urban sophisticate, utter contrarian bulls from the outset. He expresses disapproval of his servant’s carefree attitude toward family: “really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility” (2000 Wilde 364). Here assumptions about class and morality are turned on their head. Instead of the wealthy held up as paragons of virtue, those in the working class are—and are found disappointing. A dissolute dandy turns the sort of moral opprobrium that might be directed at him back on his servant. As if explaining the dandy’s plight, Jack Worthing sets conventional morality against healthy living: “…as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest…who gets in the most dreadful scapes” (368). Here moral polarities become hypocritical duplicity which in turn becomes dual identities. Wilde seems to be asking whether the absurdly overwrought convergence of these dual identities by the end of the play is any more ridiculous than the societal attitudes that may have motivated the duplicity in the first place. Algernon holds that modern literature depends on complexity rather than crude binaries; it needs this complexity to properly reflect modern morality. “The truth,” he says, “is rarely pure and never
simple” (368). Demonstrating his unconventional views, Algernon finds it scandalous that married women flirt with their own husbands: “it looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public” (369). He believes marriages need intrigue: “in married life three is company and two is none” (369).

**All the Characters Talk Alike, “Like Wilde”**

Algernon is not the only source of bulls in the play. As Kiberd has put it, “all of the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* talk alike, which is to say like Wilde” (1997 284). Exemplifying hidebound social conventions, Lady Bracknell claims—absurdly to modern audiences—that she will decide on her daughter Gwendolen’s marriage partner: “when you do become engaged to someone, I, or your father, should his health permit him, will inform you of the fact” (374). Tied to convention, Bracknell values compliant ignorance over knowledge. “Ignorance,” she says, “is like a delicate fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone” (375). In another showing of backwardness, she reverses the terms usually associated with social status, asking if Jack’s father was “born in…the purple of commerce…[or rose] from the ranks of aristocracy” (376). She even recommends that Jack try to “acquire some relations as soon as possible,” upending the conventional wisdom that you cannot choose your family (377). Jack has adopted hypocritical social attitudes as well, claiming that Gwendolen is too sweet and refined to know the truth about his secret self.

Not all the bulls and absurdities in the play signify hypocrisy or backwardness. Some of Algernon’s musings hint at paradoxes associated with dandies. “It is awfully hard work doing nothing,” he says (380). This bull sounds like an explanation of Glenthorn’s plight in the early chapters of *Ennui* where a life of luxurious ease becomes agonizingly difficult. For her part,
Gwendolen calls her uncle Algernon immoral, adding perversely that he is “not quite old enough” to be that way. While Algernon earlier overturned conventional associations of morality and class, his niece upends normal views that morality improves with age. The working class also contributes bulls in this play. When Algernon calls his servant Lane “a perfect pessimist,” Lane replies, “I do my best to give satisfaction, sir” (381). Lane has been commenting on likelihood of inclement weather. His subsequent bull suggests a paradox of pessimism: it is satisfying in the sense that expecting the worst increases the chance of pleasant surprise. Jack tries to call out Algernon as a frivolous speaker of absurdities. But Algernon resists the label of absurdist as a distinguishing characteristic, claiming in response that everyone talks nonsense.

In Act II, Cecily, the country girl whom Jack has been trying to protect, shows she can be contrarian and paradoxical as well as urban sophisticates. She claims that memory “usually chronicles the things that never happened, and couldn’t possibly have happened,” and she finds novels with happy endings to be depressing (383). Her statements might suggest, respectively, the distortions of fallible human memory and the potentially cloying effects of tritely happy fictions and tidily resolved plots. Cecily reverses conventional notions of hypocrisy, finding it hypocritical to claim wickedness when one is really good (385). She also reverses our notions of proper affections, claiming that “the absence of old friends one can endure with equanimity. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable” (392). To further demonstrate that servants can speak bulls, Cecily’s governess Miss Prism responds absurdly when she hears Jack say his brother is dead: “What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it” (387). Though absurd on its face, it might be said that Jack learns by the end of the play, that burying his alter ego is a profitable lesson for him.
Demonstrating their compatibility, Cecily and Algernon share in a bull soon after they first meet. She asks if his hair curls naturally. He responds, “yes, darling, with a little help from others,” and she replies, “I am so glad” (394). They each indulge in absurdities on their own and welcome them in each other. Jack ends Act II with a comment similar to his remarks at the end of Act I. He tells Algernon: “you are always talking nonsense” (404). But Algy’s nonsense—which he hardly disavows—only highlights the broader absurdities of the play and society at large.

In the final act, Gwendolen and Jack show they can speak bulls individually and together. As Jack departs temporarily, Gwendolen says, “if you are not too long, I’ll wait here for you all my life” (414). As the absurd plot reaches its crescendo, Gwendolen says, “this suspense is terrible. I hope it will last” (414). Explaining her constancy, she boasts: “I never change, except in my affections” (416). And at the play’s end, they engage in absurd repartee:

     JACK: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
     GWENDOLEN: I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
     JACK: My own one! (417)

Jack concludes the play by claiming he finally realizes how important it is to be “earnest.” In addition to the obvious pun on his birth name, this final statement suggests something of the transformation he has made from the straight man for Algernon’s apparently absurd statements to a speaker of them himself. What he may have realized is that there is an element of seriousness, of earnestness, to bulls and apparent nonsense. Despite Jack’s earlier accusations, Algernon was making sense in his way all along.

Melissa Knox argues that Wilde allowed paradoxes to take over in his final play, replacing the strident moralizing of his previous work with the idea that “the whole of life is a
joke” (95). This may explain why English audiences were so receptive. “With the brilliant success of his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*…Wilde conquered the English,” Knox says. “He was an Irish hero…Only another Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, denigrated the play—and one cannot help thinking that his reaction came out of sheer envy” (93).

Wilde was himself a contradiction in terms: both Irish and English, both heterosexual and homosexual, both Protestant and tending towards Catholicism. As one observer puts it, paraphrasing Wilde’s own epigram, “of any truth advanced about Wilde, the contrary will also be equally true” (McCormack 2). The proliferation of Wilde biographies has “paradoxically [made]…Wilde’s life more contradictory and complicated than ever” (Holland 16). Put another way, Wilde’s pose in life and literature was “based on the art of elegant inversion” (1998 Kiberd 10). Among his more prominent inversions were epigrammatic bulls spoken by characters who subtly subverted Victorian English presumptions.

Between them, Boucicault and Wilde ensured that bulls would survive the nineteenth century as enduring stage conventions, conventions that surpassed the more negative music-hall stereotypes of blundering, bumbling Irish characters. They yielded a legacy that Abbey Theatre playwrights in the next century would not always readily acknowledge. Similarly, Beckett would tend to draw only obliquely upon his Irish literary inheritance.

**Works Cited**


Chapter IV: “A Parrot Talks”: Bulls and the Abbey Theatre

The bull at its best is an act of principled self-defense, of guise and guile.  
(Ricks 199)

When a thing is funny, search it for a hidden truth.  
—G.B. Shaw, Back to Methuselah

Anglo-Irish Protestant playwrights of the early twentieth century were naturally careful students of language, acutely conscious of the role that rural dialects, folklore, and characters played in the Irish literary revival. Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and J.M. Synge were trying to rescue, reform, and revive a national image they believed had been tarnished in the nineteenth century by often pejorative iterations of the stage Irishman. Among the national characteristics Gregory and other Irish playwrights saved from cultural disdain was the idiosyncratic Irish use of apparently self-contradictory bulls. They used bulls to reflect the absurdity of arrogant and incompetent colonial power, as well as to illustrate broader paradoxes of the human condition. Irish dramatists found in bulls profound tropes, rather than merely attributes of buffoonish stereotypes. In his lecture on the Irish bull, Christopher Ricks argues that “at least on some occasions—notably when dramatized—such foolery may be a wise move” (156). Knowledgeable about both the Irish language and the English-language dialect of her native Coole in the west of Ireland, Lady Gregory was well positioned to put the foolery of bulls to wise use on the stage. With an ear for authentic local speech, she helped write the dialogue to ground Yeats’ vision of Cathleen ni Houlihan and other plays. On her own, Gregory succeeded writing comedies that found humor in the Irish character without showing scorn; she found keen, politically pointed insights from conversational tendencies such as bulls.

This chapter will consider the function of bulls in the works of Abbey Theatre writers (plus Shaw) whose stated objective was to improve upon past stage depictions of Irish people.
The competing functions of bulls noted in past chapters—sometimes blatantly derogatory toward the bull-speaker and sometimes signs of cleverness, wit, and paradox—should be taken into account when considering the Abbey Theatre’s agenda. While Gregory and others wanted to correct some of the buffoonery of the nineteenth-century stage Irish stereotype, they did not entirely rid their Irish characters of humorous foibles and comedic tendencies. Analysis of several key plays will indicate how bulls survived the clean break that the Abbey’s founders claimed they were trying to make with Victorian-era stereotypes. As Christopher Morash has argued, the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre—which led to the Abbey’s opening in 1904—made a disingenuous claim in to be creating a totally new “Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature” for this claim ignored existing Irish theatre history dating back to the seventeenth century (117). “In a sense, the Irish Literary Theatre came into being by imagining an empty space where in fact there was a crowded room,” Morash says (117). Bulls were a part of that crowded room greeting the Abbey’s inception. And some of the Abbey’s most successful plays would traffic in bulls, showing they could be meaningful and profound.

Analysis will begin with Gregory’s comedy *Spreading the News*, then turn to: Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island*; J.M. Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World*; Lennox Robinson’s *The Whiteheaded Boy* and *Drama at Inish*; and close with Sean O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, *The Silver Tassie, The End of the Beginning, Red Roses for Me, Bedtime Story*, and *The Drums of Father Ned*. This selection, though hardly exhaustive, will demonstrate the national tendency toward bulls in the immediate culture that produced Beckett.

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1 Contrary to the Irish Literary Theatre founders’ generalization that national character had been misrepresented during the nineteenth century, Irish audiences had reacted warmly and ardently to Irish characters penned by Dion Boucicault, J.W. Whitbread, and Hubert O’Grady (Morash 117).
Synge and O’Casey were especially influential. Existing criticism about Abbey playwrights has not focused on their use of bulls, though it has of course taken into account vernacular language, colonial subversion, and paradox. Relevant criticism will be woven into close readings of the primary texts.

**The Revival Works Against Negative Stereotypes**

Irish Literary Revival writers believed they were working against increasingly acidic images of clownish ignorance and buffoonery in Ireland. In the first half of the nineteenth century the comical Irishman still had a genial quality in works like Irish novelist Samuel Lover’s *Handy Andy* (1831). And bulls were attributed comically to other nationalities; Charles Dickens, cofounder with Lover of *Bentley Magazine*, has Mrs. Gradgrind in *Hard Times* (1854) lament to her daughter: “I really do wish that I had never had a family, and then you would have known what it was to do without me!” (45). But by the latter half of the century more corrosive images of the Irishman reached the English stage and page, driven by economic, demographic, and political anxieties. As Edward Hirsch puts it:

Largely as a result of heavy postfamine emigration into the worst English slums, the rise of the Fenian movement in the 1860s, and the dramatic succession of violent agrarian revolts in the west of Ireland, the stage Irishman was reduced in British characterizations to a subhuman figure, a ‘white Negro’ portrayed in *Punch* as a primitive Frankenstein or a peasant Caliban. (1119)

Despite Dion Boucicault’s attempts to reform stage Irishry within melodramatic conventions, negative national stereotypes persisted. As Hugh Hunt puts it, “the gross portrayal of the Irish peasant in the music halls of the nineteenth century was an invidious form of propaganda; not only flattering British audiences with a sense of their superiority to their second-class neighbours, but blinding them to the very real suffering of Ireland’s peasants from famine and
eviction” (4). In this context Gregory, Yeats, and Edward Martyn issued in 1898 their one-paragraph “Manifesto for Irish Literary Theatre,” proclaiming that the Irish were “weary of misrepresentation” (Boland 8). They hoped to find in Ireland “an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory” and receptive to the country’s “deeper thoughts and emotions” (8). Perhaps most tellingly for consideration of bulls, the playwrights declared they would “show that Ireland is not the home to buffoonery and easy sentiment” (8). While Yeats poetically represented the nation’s rich mythological tradition for contemporary audiences, Gregory took what might be seen as a more nuanced approach, turning pejorative caricature into celebratory humor and converting the Irish bull from a sign of stupidity into a means of colonial critique.

*Spreading the News: The Bull as Political Statement*

At the Abbey Theatre’s opening performances in 1904, *Spreading the News* would dramatize the rhetorical power of an Irish bull, investing it with profundity rather than mere buffoonery. That Gregory’s initial idea for this play about misinformation in a small town suggested to her tragedy rather than comedy indicates that even the consummate comedy of her final product carries serious implications. A finely crafted one-act play, *Spreading the News* derives its comedy not only from the misunderstandings among Irish residents of the fictional town of Cloon, even though these snowballing errors take up most of the play. More pointedly, the play begins and ends with the arrogance and folly of the magistrate, who is an essential catalyst for and contributor to the town’s confusion. His role renders this comedy a subtly effective anti-colonial statement.
The magistrate arrives in Cloon with bull-headed determination to impose governing and policing techniques he has applied in a previous assignment in colonial Asia; his certainty sets the farce in motion, and this certitude grows to such an absurdity by the play’s end that an Irish bull seems right at home. “No system. What a repulsive sight!” the magistrate declares in the play’s opening lines, proceeding to tell the policeman that his system of oversight has “never failed” (17). When Mrs. Tarpey warns that Cloonians are too talkative about things that do not concern them, he says dismissively that he can learn nothing from her. The townspeople receive their share of comical treatment. Bartley Fallon, the main character, seems almost a parody of Maurya’s doomed son of the same first name in Synge’s Riders to the Sea. Gregory’s Bartley wallows in self-pity about his bad luck, rather than having a mother lament his fate. The other townspeople are gossip-prone, hyperbolic, and quick to believe the worst about their neighbors. As Mrs. Fallon puts it: “It is too much talk the whole of you have … I tell you the whole of this town is full of liars and schemers that would hang you up for half a glass of whiskey” (24). But it is what they are not willing to do that reinforces the anti-colonial tone of the play: Tim Casey, Shawn Early, and James Ryan decide that whatever Bartley has done, they had still better not inform against him to the British authorities (26).

Gregory offers linguistic preparation for the play’s climactic bull, signs that language should not be taken at face value. Mrs. Fallon’s reference to “too much talk” foreshadows the distorted gossip that will follow. Later the magistrate’s warning to Bartley that his “words are being noted” rings ironic, given the ongoing misunderstandings that result from his conversational notations (27). Eventually persuaded wrongly by other characters that her husband is a philandering murderer, Mrs. Fallon refuses to listen to what Bartley has to
say. Bartley, in turn, is left exasperated about who can still communicate rationally: “Is it your wits you have lost or is it I myself that have lost my wits?” (29).

If neighbors and spouses cannot trust each other enough for simple communication, the colonial newcomer has little chance of untangling all the crossed wires at the play’s end. Stubbornly denying Jack Smith’s presence, the magistrate reflexively cites an experience he had in Asia to suggest Smith is actually someone else impersonating Smith. He insists that the suspects be taken to the non-existent murder scene to react to the imagined dead body. Smith replies with a bull: “I’ll break the head of any man that will find my dead body!” (30). Enraged about the falsely reported infidelity of his wife, Smith blurts out this nonsensical statement. A logical impossibility, it highlights the absurdity of the magistrate’s dogged refusal to face facts. Instead of recognizing the bull’s insight into his own stupidity, the magistrate compounds the problem by resorting to more military firepower, “more help from the barracks” (30). The bull, an anti-colonial statement, elicits a strained colonial assertion of power.

The main target of satire in *Spreading the News* is colonial authority. The magistrate is unable to sense the ethos of exaggeration in Cloon despite Mrs. Tarpey’s warning at the start of the play. He reads his own prejudices into the laconic responses he gets from the policeman Jo Muldoon and then misreads much of what he hears from the other villagers. As Mary Trotter puts it: “by imposing his own system of law and order on the village, he disrupts the balance of the community … it is really the magistrate’s inflexible suspicion that leads to anarchy within the community” (27). Smith’s Irish bull is the *pièce de résistance* of ridiculousness resulting from the magistrate’s incompetence. Gregory has presented a sort of argument *ad absurdum* against heavy-handed colonial administration.
**Centuries-Long Reformation of National Image**

Lady Gregory’s knowledge of and respect for the rural Irish echoes Maria Edgeworth’s, and it is more than coincidental that both writers also wielded bulls elegantly. For them bulls were more than blunders, more than verbal awkwardness generally associated with the stage Irishmen, whether as a result of drink, ineptitude, or unfamiliarity with English. Coilin Owens argues that Irish bulls are variations on an ancient rhetorical trope, with the distinctive Irish quality being “retention of the appearance of ignorance, philistinism, or servility, as the instance demands” (74). Ricks offers another description: “the bull is the resource of a pressed, suppressed, or oppressed people, a people on occasion pretending to be self-subordinated by foolishness so as the better to keep alive a secret self-respect and to be insubordinate and even safely provocative” (193). In this way bulls were consistent with the Abbey Theatre’s nationalist agenda; they could reflect positively on those uttering them while still eliciting laughter.

The Abbey Theatre’s reform of the bull is less a break with stage tradition than part of a continuum—stretching back decades and centuries—of attempts by Anglo-Irish writers to improve public perceptions of the Irish. Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* and *An Essay on Irish Bulls* presaged “a radical shift in the sympathies of the literary elite towards the Irish countryman, his values and language” (Owens 78). But it was a shift that was slow and gradual, stretching over a century. By the time of the Abbey Theatre’s founding in 1904, Gregory was among the elite trying to reform the blind prejudices of previous decades. As she put it, nineteenth-century English audiences wanted the Irishman in theatre to be “the blunderer, the
inferior, who to them symbolize Ireland, whose mistakes would make them feel superior, over which they would comfortably laugh” (1995 Gregory 291). Rather than providing such a sense of cultural superiority, comedy, Gregory said, could positively change social attitudes: “Laughter is more shattering than resolutions, a better weapon than hate, at least when it is used without the contempt or scorn that may hurt what is eternal in us, if it does but batter down the walls built by custom and prejudice, acquiesced in by languor or convenience, that are the barriers between soul and soul” (294). That description fits the risible comedy of Gregory’s *Spreading the News*.

**Shaw Argues the Climate Yields Irish Mentality**

Though George Bernard Shaw is not closely associated with the Abbey Theatre,² he did try in one play to reform stubborn national stereotypes about Ireland and England. In Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904), Keegan, a defrocked priest, speaks many of the play’s bulls. Far from being a rustic blunderer, this well-educated and widely traveled man appears acutely conscious of his ironic, paradoxical, and self-contradictory statements. Like Jack Smith in *Spreading the News*, Keegan is in some sense a character who is burdened or marginalized by gossip. And like him, he uses language figuratively in bulls to try to overcome a stressed or compromised position in society.

In his 1906 “Preface for Politicians” to the play, Shaw suggests a realistic perspective on Ireland needs to be open to nuance and paradox. For example he claimed the Roman Catholic Church has more influence on the Irish population because of English colonialism, and he suggests Ireland has no essential race but rather a “climate” yielding people of a certain

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² Irish playwright Brinsley MacNamara argues that “Shaw’s work has never greatly excited Ireland, nor has it helped the Abbey in the least to its place in the world’s admiration” (13).
mentality (435,448). *John Bull’s Other Island*, he said, was unwelcome at the Abbey Theatre because it did not engage in the Irish Literary Revival’s project to realize a national idealism, presenting instead “the real old Ireland” (443). So who are the real Irish for Shaw? He says that by contrast with the Englishman who lacks a sense of reality, “the Irishman, with a far subtler and more fastidious imagination, has one eye always on things as they are” (448). So Irish character for Shaw is not genetically determined; it is the product of a climate and a disposition that is imaginatively attuned to paradox, as his play bears out.

**Criticizing the “Silly-Clever” Irish Mind**

The play’s first act, located in London, starts with a stage Irishman who turns out to be a non-Irish poseur; it also includes extended remarks on the construction and character of true Irish. Early in the act, we meet Tim Haffigan, who speaks with a heavy Irish brogue and cons whisky from Tom Broadbent, the play’s English straight man to Irish eccentricities. On the subject of alcohol, Haffigan lets out a bull: “Dhrink is the curse o me unhappy country. I take it meself because Ive a wake heart and a poor diges (506). Broadbent earnestly joins in this self-contradictory stance, declaring he too is a teetotaler in both principle and politics, even after having poured himself a whiskey. Glasgow-born Haffigan’s imposture makes perfect sense to the Irish-born Doyle, who explains that the English sense of “Irishness” is fabricated and inaccurate. Doyle goes on to decry the Irish dependence on imagination, alcohol, and “a horrible, senseless, mischievous laughter” (517). Doyle might

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3 Abbey directors claimed they did not want to produce the play because they lacked an actor capable of the role of the Englishman Broadbent. The Abbey would eventually produce the play in 1916 (Robinson 59, 114).

4 This echoes the sense conveyed by Francis Dobbs and others that Irish bulls were as much a product of English observers’ predispositions as of actual Irish character.
view Irish bulls as the product of “the poor silly-clever” Irish mind (522), but he has a cynical, materialist view of his homeland; he prizes his secure place in English capitalist society and does not particularly want to return to his birthplace.

Act II offers examples of the self-conscious bull and some explanation of the world view that produces it. It starts with the sort of silly-clever imagination that Doyle criticized, in this case involving the former priest Keegan’s imagined conversation with a cricket on a hillside in the rural Irish town of Roscullen. Patsy Farrell’s entrance is particularly relevant to the Irish persona that produces bulls. Shaw’s stage directions say he has “an instinctively acquired air of helplessness and silliness, indicating, not his real character, but a cunning developed by his constant dread of a hostile dominance, which he habitually tries to disarm and tempt into unmasking by pretending to be a much greater fool than he really is. Englishmen think him half-witted, which is exactly what he intends them to think” (529). Though Farrell is not the voice of the play’s more bull-like statements, his general description here is relevant to Shaw’s insights into Irish character. Keegan speaks several bull-like lines in the second act. “I didn’t know what my own house looked like because I had never been outside it,” he says to Nora (533). Later, when another character says he is facetious in claiming country girls are better than any others, he replies: “My way of joking is to tell the truth. It’s the funniest joke in the world” (533). Keegan is aware that his statements may seem nonsensical, contrary, or self-contradictory at first; he is exhibiting the subtle, fastidious imagination Shaw ascribed to the Irish.

In the next act, Shaw contrasts Irish-born Doyle and English Broadbent’s mindsets according to their comfort with paradox. When Doyle claims that he wants an established Catholic Church in Ireland, Broadbent responds: “Don’t be paradoxical, Larry. It really gives me pain in my stomach” (563). And later of Doyle’s claim the Duke of Wellington was a typical
Irishman, Broadbent says: “Of course that’s an absurd paradox; but still there’s a great deal of truth in it” (565). While Doyle has something of the paradoxical Irish outlook that Shaw contrasts with a more literal-minded English world view, it takes Keegan, a character fully enmeshed in Irish culture, albeit at its margins, to give voice to the play’s self-conscious Irish bulls.

Keegan: A Character of Self-Conscious Paradoxes

In the play’s final act Keegan uses bull-like paradoxes and ironies to express his pointed, contrary perspective on both the oppressive Irish culture that excluded him from the priesthood and the disingenuous English colonial mindset. An anecdote about Broadbent and an unruly pig that has other town residents laughing raucously leads Keegan to remark: “There is danger, destruction, torment! What more do we need to make us merry?” (577). For Keegan, the fact that the car accident the pig caused is making people laugh shows that they are living in “hell” because “nowhere else could such a scene be a burst of happiness for the people” (578). When Broadbent asserts that he would rather be inconsistent than insincere, Keegan suggests the English opportunistically compartmentalize their approach to issues: “Let not the right side of your brain know what the left side doeth. I learnt at Oxford that this is the secret of the Englishman’s strange power of making the best of both worlds” (583). Implicitly this dualistic approach explains the colonial mindset, but Broadbent takes it as a literal misquotation of the Bible. Doyle then warns him he does not understand “Keegan’s peculiar vein of humor” (583). As Frederick McDowell puts it, Keegan “is a privileged or ‘pure’ fool, a Parsifal or Hamlet figure, whose sense of the actuality causes him distress so great that he appears at times
more ‘deranged’ than he actually is” (549). Part of his derangement involves the derangement of language.

Keegan explains his sense of hell through a long series of paradoxes, among them that hell on earth is where “the hardest toil is a welcome refuge from the horror and tedium of pleasure, and where charity and good works are done only for hire, to ransom the souls of the spoiler and the sybarite” (585). Keegan cannot accept Broadbent’s melioristic views; the latter says he feels at home in the world, while the former says he does not. In an oxymoronic assessment of national character, Keegan says the Englishman is “so clever in [his] foolishness” and the Irishman “so foolish in his cleverness” (610). For Doyle, assimilated as he is in English society, Keegan’s paradoxes, ironies, and oxymorons amount to “drivel” and “fine” but “cheap” words associated with the Irish proclivity for: “dreaming! dreaming! dreaming! dreaming!” (610-11). Keegan responds with an aphorism-cum-bull: “every dream is a prophecy; every jest an earnest in the womb of Time” (611). His acerbic comments offer insight into the comic temperament of the Irish.

In *John Bull’s Other Island*, Keegan’s bulls have more of a deliberate, ironic bite than those found in *Spreading the News*. In as much as the distinctive Irish contribution to bulls is a pose of ignorance, Keegan’s bulls seem deracinated in a way similar to those of Wilde’s English dandies. If he is voicing the author’s opinions, this would make sense: Shaw was a cosmopolitan who left Ireland when young and then relatively rarely wrote about it for the stage. Yet this play also shows he had a keen sense of the anti-colonial attitudes, subversive tendencies, and guileful survival mechanisms that produce Irish bulls. Gregory used a more distinctively Irish bull, reflecting her status as an Abbey Theatre playwright, a resident and citizen of Ireland, and a writer with much personal experience among Irish people from rural and village areas. Shaw
uses bulls that are more ironic, deliberate, and self-conscious. While both writers invested these linguistic tropes with political significance, Gregory produces a more ambiguous effect. The Irish bull in her play leaves an open question for the audience about how conscious the speaking character is of self-contradiction and paradox. This ambiguity is ultimately a more artistically satisfying response to negative national stereotypes than Shaw’s more ironic and didactic approach.

**Synge Calls for “Fully Flavoured” Speech on the Stage**

In his preface to *The Tinker’s Wedding* J.M. Synge, a foundational figure in the Abbey Theatre’s history, argued for the necessity of humor in the tradition of Ben Jonson and Molière and in contrast to the continental naturalism popular in his time.\(^5\) “Of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it,” he said (123). In his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, he famously described how he learned to write Irish vernacular by interacting with real people and even eavesdropping through a hole in the floor upon the conversations of servants in the kitchen. He called for plays that reflect “the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple” (qtd 1951 Robinson 65). The dialogue of his plays is grounded in reality but also intensified for aesthetic effect. As Declan Kiberd puts it, “if Synge called, in the privacy of a notebook, for an art more beautiful than nature, then a corollary

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\(^5\) MacNamara says Abbey playwrights appreciated meaningful humor and laughter: “with us the loud laugh did not always speak the vacant mind” (14). While not preferring comedy to tragedy, the theatre recognized by the second decade of its existence that “our comedies began to be written better after a while than our tragedies” (14). And by the mid-1920s, after nearly ten years of preoccupation with war abroad and at home, the Abbey’s audience “had an overwhelming desire for laughter” (17).
of that call was the demand for a dialect more colourful than everyday speech” (214). His plays bear out Synge’s beliefs about language through the use of humorous bulls.

Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen* (1902) presents a practical bull similar to the false wakes of *Castle Rackrent* and *The Shaughraun.* Dan Burke is feigning death to test the fidelity of his younger wife Nora, who unhappily married him out of economic necessity. This situation leads Dan to speak a bull when he arises to confront the visiting tramp: “don’t be afeard, stranger; a man that’s dead can do no hurt” (7). Faced with ouster by the disgruntled Dan, Nora succumbs to the tramp’s poetic and romanticized description of their future live together.

“You’ve a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it’s with yourself I’ll go,” she says. Like Boucicault’s “shaughraun,” Synge’s tramp is a romantic glorification of a character marginalized by society. As Maurice Bourgeois put it, “tramp life…may be taken as expressive of the poetic revolt against settled existence, as the free escape into some ideal dreamworld of the artist who finds the daily fare of life unbearably insipid and wearisome” (151). Verbal fluency—whether through bulls or romanticized blarney—is given pride of place in this play. And yet Yeats had said the play was realistic, and that audiences should expect a theatre “that will reflect the life of Ireland as the Scandinavian theatre reflects the Scandinavian life” (qtd Morash 128). Bulls were not in this sense a misrepresentation.

**Playboy: A Poetic Outsider Stirs the Pot**

The attractiveness of storytelling and verbal fluency would be a theme of Synge’s best-known play, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). The play has been described as a

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6 Synge heard a similar tale from one of the Aran Islanders with whom he practiced his Irish (Corkery 123).
tragicomedy, taking its place among other famous Abbey tragicomedies such as Sean O’Casey’s (Gerstenberger 74). As the play opens, Pegeen Mike is being courted by Shawn Keogh, whose fearful deference to Catholic authorities limits his prospects as a marriage partner; Pegeen sees cowardice behind his apparent piety. She is drawn instead to Christy Mahon, the stranger in town with a wild story to tell. Christy perversely takes offence when the men in the shebeen (or pub) speculate he has done nothing illegal: “That’s an unkindly thing to be saying to a poor orphaned traveler…” (76). Equally perverse, shebeen proprietor Michael Flaherty and others praise Christy for his supposed patricide, rather than finding it abhorrent, offering him a job helping at the shebeen. They silence Shawn when he labels him “a bloody-handed murderer” (78). For her part, Pegeen associates Christy’s impetuousness with the Irish tradition of fiery and temperamental wandering poets, and she is entranced by his increasingly poetic descriptions of his life before and their potential future. As Daniel Corkery observes of the play, “it is not the deed itself that wins her, or the others, it is Christy’s telling of the tale, the fine bit of talk” (193). Yet for all his verbal finery, Christy speaks with bull-like self contradiction when his comment to Pegeen about his own “strength” and “bravery” is interrupted by knocking on the door and he then clings to her and confesses his “terror of the peelers [police], and the walking dead” (82-83). Christy comes across as a bull of character, at once bold and fearful.

The centrality of language in the play raises the question of what Synge was saying about the loquacity of Irish people and his own verbose profession. As Alan Price puts it, “in presenting this immense deal of talk (all of it much more than tolerable) to one poor ha’p’orth of

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7 The theme of patricide in the play came from a tale Synge recounted in his *Aran Islands* (Corkery 191). Maurice Bourgeois says this play “as a whole is Irish in view of its being an extremely searching study of the Celtic temperament, with its ever-possible imaginative perversion of ethical ideals” (203).
action, Synge may have intended, among other things, to have a sly grin at blather and blarney, at the Irish fondness for ‘a good crack’ and verbal virtuosity, at those who manipulate words for their own benefit and for others’ entertainment—at himself” (Price 179). Bulls take their place among all that talk.

**A Play about Great Sins and Good Stories**

In Act II, Sara, one of the local girls attracted to Christy, speaks with bull-like perversity when she laments being “ashamed of this place, going up winter and summer with nothing worth while to confess at all” (88). Great sins are associated here with good stories, and this helps explain the local people’s fascination with Christy. Later in this act, Shawn renders a bull as he laments lacking both the boldness and the family circumstances that led to the supposed patricide. He says, “oh it’s a hard case to be an orphan and not have your father that you’re used to, and you’d easy kill and make yourself a hero in the sight of all” (97). Here the orphaned Shawn absurdly regrets that he does not have a father whom he could kill and thereby make himself an orphan. Synge’s plays contain numerous implicit critiques of the Catholic church; the timidity and absurdity of the devout Shawn is the most prominent such critique in *Playboy*.

In Act III Christy’s father uses figurative language to describe his past problems with insanity: “mankind is the divil when your head’s astray” (109). Such turns of phrase suggest father and son have some poetic tendencies in common. Later Christy lavishes affection on Pegeen by figuratively and absurdly imagining her company would make him “feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in His golden chair” (110). Pegeen responds that he has “such poet’s talking” (111). Corkery criticized *Playboy* for being “stuffed with such long-winded figures…most of them…exhibiting nothing more than a disturbing mannerism;” and he may have had in mind the figurative quality of the play’s bulls (197). By the end of the play,
Christy’s father has survived two assaults by his son, leading Christy to utter several bulls: “I’m thinking Satan hasn’t many have killed their da in Kerry, and in Mayo too”; “Are you coming to be killed a third time…?”, and “They’re taking me to the police to have me hanged for slaying you” (120).

The play ends with a sort of practical bull, as Pegeen contradicts herself in an intensely dramatic fashion. She renounces Christy for lying and burns his leg as punishment. But just a few moments later, after Christy leaves the shebeen, Pegeen reverses herself completely, lamenting, “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World” (121). Pegeen’s nearly bipolar reversal of attitude toward Christy highlights her volatile personality and her inclination to be swept off her feet by a romanticized newcomer. In this reversal Seamus Deane finds a tension between Christian devotion and pagan mythmaking: “the County Mayo village which was briefly paganized by Christy Mahon loses its myth and its joy—as Pegeen too late realizes—because it clung too slavishly to Christianity and fact” (35). George Bretherton detects Bakhtinian carnivalesque in Christy’s effect on the village community: “for the people in Michael James’s pub, their carnival madness is a release from the heavy hand of English law, the magistrates and police that lurk in the background” (128). Taking their place among that “carnival madness” are the absurdities of Irish bulls.

Lennox Robinson: “This Strange Irish Thing”

Lennox Robinson was among Irish playwrights produced by the Abbey during Samuel Beckett’s youth and one whom Beckett would recollect fondly later in his life. Robinson spent many years as a board member and manager of the theatre. One of the better known comments he made about his own writing was that it reflected “this strange Irish thing, the commanding
force in my life,” what he would also describe as something “vague” and “luminous” that grew as he matured (qtd O’Neill 137). Robinson’s use of this centripetal Irish identity in his plays was nonetheless sporadic, alternating with cosmopolitan interests inspired by continental realists like Henrik Ibsen.\(^8\) He was characteristic of the Abbey in its early decades in that he discovered comedy was his forte. As Michael O’Neill put it, the “Irish thing” Robinson referred to “enabled him to find what was his best métier: gay, genial, and witty plays about the amusing aspects of small-town life in Ireland” (9). Two of his plays bear out this observation.

*The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916) was the first of Robinson’s genial satires of village life. It aims for the pride, prevarication, and familial squabbles of two Irish families, the Geoghegans and the Duffys. Denis Geoghegan, the youngest son, has failed his medical exams at Trinity College for a third time and on his return to his home town faces a reckoning with the rest of his family, which has sacrificed for his education. The eldest Geoghegan son, George, wants to halt Denis’ education and send him off to Canada, but the family’s widowed mother wants to continue financing his studies. Bulls are a part of the satire, highlighting character flaws. For example, Mrs. Geoghegan utters a bull regarding her sister-in-law’s plans for a co-operative shop: “Co-operation will be the ruin of us,” she says, while the narrator-cum-stage director comments wryly, “She’s a rock of sense, that woman” (1982 Robinson 71). Mrs. Geoghegan also contradicts herself when Aunt Ellen claims she treats Denis as her “whiteheaded boy,” or favorite. “I don’t make a pin’s point of difference between one child and another,” she says, then offers her other son George a leftover duck’s egg that she had previously said was too “coarse” for Denis (72). The mother’s affection for her youngest son elicits a bull when he arrives home.

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\(^8\) Robinson was among the “Cork realists”—along with T.C. Murray and R.J. Ray—who succeeded the founding playwrights of the Abbey (MacNamara 13).
from college. “Hold on, mother—or rather don’t hold on!” Denis says when his mother hugs him ardently (77).

Bulls proliferate in Act II. Aunt Ellen complains, “it’s one of the curses of the country, giving positions to relations,” even as she is arranging for her nephew Peter to run a new cooperative shop (87). She then remarks that Denis was “too clever to be a doctor” after he repeatedly fails his college exams (88). Duffy, the father of Denis’ intended Delia, loses his temper over the news that Denis would leave Ireland and Delia to expatriate to Canada. Comically he tries to deny being angry: “Cross? What would make me cross? I never felt in a pleasanter temper than I do this minute” (90). Aunt Ellen utters another bull when she hears the distorted town gossip about Denis’ supposed arrangement in Canada. “Don’t mind what the people are saying…There’s not a word of truth in it all,” she says, even though it was her own lies that sparked the spurious rumor (92). Another character, Donough, hits upon a paradox about the corrosive effects of false gossip: “sure, there’s nothing harder to believe than the truth” (93). Ellen then adds that “the truth’s a dangerous thing to be saying in a little place like Ballycolman” (94). The combination of family pride and small-town gossip lead to apparent absurdities.

Bulls reflect satirically on the character of various family members. George comically contradicts himself about his fortitude as Duffy arrives threatening to sue the Geoghegan family for the jilting of his daughter Delia. “I’m afraid of no man. Open the door,” George says, adding, “‘tis terrible, oh, ‘tis terrible! Why did I ever open my lips tonight about Denis?” (96). He then runs fearfully to his mother to avoid meeting with Duffy. Duffy manages to extort 300 pounds from Ellen and George. Subsequently he comically tells Mrs. Geoghegan, “I’m a generous man, mam,” leading the narrator to comment sarcastically, “You are!” (102). Later, in
Act III, after coercing financial gain and the promise of marriage with his lifelong love Ellen, Duffy says he will withdraw a threatened lawsuit because he is “a peaceable Christian man” (108). When Denis and Delia foil his plans by getting married, Duffy responds with a bull: “the Geoghegans are a mean-spirited lot; they haven’t even the courage to jilt a girl” (110). And he comically complains that others have engaged in “trickery and underhand dealing” (111). When Delia promises to run the co-operative shop as a way of earning a living for herself and Denis, she comically claims of the spoiled Denis: “he’s been straitened and denied all his life through, but I’m going to give him what he wants now” (114). Mrs. Geoghegan similarly says despite all her pampering of Denis that the marriage and fortune he has gained is “the one little bit of luck he’s had in all his life” (116). Robinson hinted at political allegory in this play by having Duffy compare the pampered Denis, with his desire for independence, to Ireland and the overbearing families to England: “isn’t he like old Ireland asking for freedom, and we’re like the fools of Englishmen offering him every bloody thing except the one thing?” (114).

**Drama at Inish: Self-Revelatory Farce**

*Drama at Inish* (1933) is a self-revelatory farce, demonstrating Robinson’s pull toward Irish subjects, his lifelong study of Irish stage trends, and a wry reflection on his attempts to achieve Ibsen-style realism. The Irish bull emerges at the fore of national characteristics he employs for comedy in the play; the bull was among many things he “culled from the substance of Irish life and character” as material for his work (O’Neill 147). He described the play—written in a week at a seaside Irish resort something like the fictional Inish—in a bull-like hyperbole as “an absurd play based on an impossible situation” (qtd 149). In his history of twentieth-century Irish drama, Christopher Murray says the play is Robinson’s comment on and
concession to “a new conservatism” and “anti-intellectualism” following the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act (117). But the play is complex and subtle enough that it is difficult to identify in it a single object of satire from among the naturalist playwrights and performers, the naïve townspeople, and the author himself. Much as the greatest object of satire in _Spreading the News_ is not the confused Irish village people but the dangerously deluded colonial administrator, the ultimate object of satire in Robinson’s plays may not be the easily led Inish but the playwright’s earlier interest in bleak, reform-minded drama.

_Drama at Inish_ gets its central irony from the incongruity of introspective, disturbing continental drama and generally pleasant, small-town Irish life based on simple virtues and rewards. Though he had a sheltered Anglo-Protestant upbringing, Robinson knew and appreciated this lifestyle from his Cork childhood and adult travels in West Cork for the Carnegie Union Trust (Owens 285). Whether from that direct experience or his reading of other Irish writers, Robinson acquired an ability to coin bulls, as this play demonstrates.

Inspired by the visiting De La Mare Repertory Co., Inish residents apply to their own lives the ideas dramatized in plays by Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and August Strindberg, adopting naturalistic philosophies “ludicrously out of keeping with their circumstances,” which are mostly comfortable (1982 Robinson 18). The playwright demonstrates the absurd ends that the socially reformative agenda of dramatic realism can reach when its audience is unprepared. Inish residents like Lizzie Twohig and her nephew Eddie begin romanticizing their pasts, others turn violent, and the local parliamentarian votes independently for the first time, only to trigger the government’s collapse. Before Seaview Hotel proprietor John Twohig sends the realist drama troupe packing, the play has satirized three distinct groups: small-town Irish, avant-garde theatre, and those like the playwright who wrote dreadfully serious naturalistic drama in their
Youths. *Drama at Inish*, among Robinson’s most popular plays at the Abbey, is in the mode of the playwright’s later, relatively mellow works. These plays are gentler in their aspirations than his earlier efforts, and they show more tolerance of and joy in quotidian Irish life.

In this small-town context, verbal tropes grow organically from character. The play begins with Lizzie Twohig, the unmarried sister of hotel proprietor and eminent town burger John Twohig. She is flummoxed by language from the outset, unsure whether to refer to the acting couple of Hector De La Mare and Constance Constantia as actors or actresses (202). In a further foreshadowing she says she “can’t complain, thank God” in response to a general inquiry about her wellbeing, setting stage for a reversal when the new acting group offers, in a sense, an opportunity to “complain” (203). In addition to these signs of what will come, Lizzie speaks what may be the first bull of the play: “Poor Helena—willing enough but no system. We’re putting you into number—number—which number at all is it?” (204). She comically juxtaposes disdain for the disorder of her servant with her own faulty memory. Lizzie also seems attuned to figures of speech, including the bull-like remark by a previous customer that the hotel was “home from home,” a description she calls “very clever and terse” (209). After seeing Chekhov performed, her sensitivity to language, subtext, and code reaches neurotic extremes; she laments that the town’s parliamentary representative, Peter Hurley, misled her romantically in their youths. Peter denies this, and John claims Lizzie is playing a practical joke: “Such codology was never known. Don’t be making an old eejut of yourself, Lizzie” (225). John Twohig’s diction is significant. “Codology” is an Irish idiom meaning hoaxing, humbugging, or leg-pulling. As travel writer H.V. Morton put it: “there is in Ireland a science unknown to us in England called codology. Nearly every true Irishman is either a graduate or a professor ... There is nothing your true Irishman likes better than putting over a tall story on an Englishman” (qtd
Quinion). Lizzie’s codology suggests that beneath the apparent nonsense of some her remarks here and elsewhere there may be irreverent humor. Even if her interlocutors in this case are not the English, they are still authority figures. The same dynamic of oblique resistance may apply.

**Townspeople’s Distinctive Brand of Humor**

The Inish residents’ brand of humor, intentional or not, emerges in Annie’s comment on *The Dance of Death*, the play her melancholy son Eddie is reading. Hearing the title of Strindberg’s stark drama about warring sexes, she says, “when I was Eddie’s age I always liked plays with a bit of dancing in them” (227). Though her response does not carry the pointed self-contradiction of other bulls in the play, she may display something of the “ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker,” which the OED once ascribed to Irish bulls. This raises again the question whether—or to what degree—speakers of bulls are conscious of their speech’s inconsistency. Considering Annie’s character throughout the play, she may be aware of her humor. She will not attend the De La Mare theatre company’s performances and eventually convinces her husband to terminate the group’s contract. She is consistently skeptical and concerned about the effect the group’s naturalist drama has on the town, especially on her son. So it may be that her pun on the title of Strindberg’s play is intentional; it may be her obliquely humorous way—her codology—to nudge Eddie out of his doldrums.

While Robinson offers several second-hand reports of the dire effects that De La Mare and company are having on Inish, the audience also gets first-hand experience through characters like Lizzie and Eddie. Before trailing off into solipsistic monologues at the end of Act II, they commiserate briefly. Noting that others criticize their solitary introspection, Lizzie says, “Foolish? That’s what they call us, Eddie, foolish. ‘Tis little they understand” (236). While this
remark may be evidence of the persecution complex and self-pity that the naturalist plays stir up in Lizzie, it might also describe the varied perceptions of Irish bulls that Lizzie and Eddie speak. Eddie has one later in this scene as he launches into a monologue. Trying to emphasize the novelty of his romantic feelings for Christine Lambert, he says, “I’d never cared about a girl in my life, only Katie Walsh and one or two others, and that was only to pass the time” (236). Eddie exaggerates then consequently contradicts himself.

The start of the next act sets stage for another bull from Lizzie. This one recalls the themes of *Spreading the News*, while also suggesting profundities about the tensions between privacy and public perception. At the hotel Lizzie welcomes a visiting reporter who has come to Inish in response to its unusual spate of crimes and anti-social incidents. The reporter, Hegarty, describes the distrust, suspicion, and innuendo he has found in talking to the town’s residents:

LIZZIE: Did you mention my name?
HEGARTY: I don’t think that I did.
LIZZIE: Well, let you try mentioning it and see what happens. You’re right, Mr. Hegarty; this town is full of gossipers and slanderers, and I could tell you things about some of them that would make your hair stand on end. (239)

This reflects an environment of small-town gossip and misinformation of the sort that Gregory used to drive her farce. But more than that, it suggests something of the paradoxical meaning that bulls can convey. In Bishop George Berkeley’s famous dictum, *esse est percipi*, “to be is to be perceived.” To be is also to perceive. It is impossible for someone to complain about gossip without, in a sense, gossiping. Here Lizzie achieves a simple profundity that more straightforward, rational thought might miss. As Ricks puts it, “the bull is an inspired act of contradiction (inspired by and to contradiction), and is alive with naïve acumen; it is therefore … naturally childlike and preternaturally poetic” (189). But whether speakers of bulls are necessarily naïve to the implications of their utterances remains questionable. In the manner of
an unwitting Irish bull, Lizzie appears to be ignorant of her incongruous remark, but is that merely appearance? Does the bemused reader or audience member make the mistake of an intellectual outsider prone to find small-town or rural inhabitants lacking in reason because their reason is coded or figured differently? These are potentially political questions, and it is significant that soon after her bull, Lizzie speculates that “politics” has caused the aberrant behavior of late in Inish.

O’Casey and the Influence of Boucicault

Sean O’Casey’s three Dublin plays parallel in some ways the trilogy of famous Irish plays by Dion Boucicault, who was a major influence on O’Casey, albeit one he did not always boast about. In one of his autobiographies (written in the third person), O’Casey recalls that in polite company he “instinctively kept firm silence about Dion Boucicault, whose works he knew as well as Shakespeare’s” (1968 O’Casey 760). For the wily urban characters in the Dublin trilogy, language serves as both shield and weapon, as it did for Boucicault’s. O’Casey biographer Garry O’Connor describes the effect that The Shaughraun in particular had: “it was not only by the speech rhythms of Boucicault’s play that the teenage O’Casey became intoxicated, learning some of the lines by heart, but also by the triumphantly irreverent attitudes behind those rhythms; he could not have failed to note that the best comedy often emerged from the most marked contradictions” (30). O’Casey was also a keen observer of city life and lingo. Dubliners “have an instinctive love of word-play,” David Krause observes, adding “their

9 O’Casey’s plays were important to the Abbey artistically and financially. Lennox Robinson notes that the first two plays of the trilogy, The Shadow of a Gunman and Juno and the Paycock, “saved the Theatre from bankruptcy” and the third, The Plough and the Stars, was also popular, though famously controversial (121, 127).
characteristically emphatic speech is coloured with archaisms, malapropisms, puns, invectives, polysyllables, circumlocutions, alliterations, repetitions, assonances and images” (1960 234). Maureen Waters argues of O’Casey’s plays that “the suppressed energies, the hostility, the obsessions of the Dubliners characteristically explode in verbal combat,” identifying a “furious comic energy” that wards off despair (150-151). Listeners and readers might be unsettled by this verbal thrust and parry, the way they might be initially nonplussed by malapropisms and bulls.

Malapropisms and bulls are part of the comedic relief that O’Casey wove into The Shadow of a Gunman (1923), a two-act tragedy that takes place during the Irish war for independence in 1920. Seamus Shields, the loafing tenant of the tenement-house room where the action occurs, ironically comments on a colleague being “too damn lazy to get up” when he himself has slept in until noon (6). His roommate Donal Davoren wryly comments, “you’re welcome to laugh as much as you like at me when both of us are dead” (7). Seamus remarks on the contrary humor of Irish people who “treat a joke as a serious thing and a serious thing as a joke” (9). One of their neighbors, Mrs. Henderson, utters a malapropism when she compliments someone’s missive as being “as good a letter as was decomposed by a scholar” (25). She also renders a paradoxical bull that leads to a pun:

MRS. HENDERSON: Them words is true, Mr. Gallicker, and they aren’t. For to be wise is to be a fool, an’ to be a fool is to be wise.
MR. GALLOagher: (with deprecating tolerance) Oh, Mrs. Henderson, that’s a parrotox.

MRS. HENDERSON: It may be what a parrot talks, or blackbird, or, for the matter of that, a lark… (29)

Colbert Kearney finds this exchange characteristic of the entire play: “The Shadow of a Gunman is a series of variations on the theme of malapropism” in as much as many characters are unable to achieve the level of language to which they aspire (67-68). Distortions of language and logic
reflect the helplessness of the play’s characters. As Bernice Schrank puts it, “more than just insulating them, their talk, idiosyncratic, incoherent and egotistical, isolates them from meaningful communication with each other and from any hope of collective action” (78).

Bulls are an important element of the banter between the would-be poet Davoren and the layabout Seamus. Davoren begins Act II of the play by quoting a paradoxical line from Percy Shelley, who described the moon as being “ever…transformed yet still the same” (qtd 33). Asked by Seamus if he is awake, he responds with a bull, “I’m neither awake nor asleep: I’m thinking,” as if being lost in poetic thought is neither to be awake nor asleep (34). Commenting on his inability to find words for the death of his colleague Maguire, Seamus utters his own oxymoronic bull when he says he’ll have to “sing dumb” (34). When Seamus advocates for politically oriented poetry that can “put passion in the common people,” Davoren disagrees, claiming a place for apolitical art and commenting ironically on the fact that poets strive to save the people while the people try to destroy the poets (35). This exchange foreshadows Davoren’s later realization that his devotion to poetry has been linked with a sort of cowardice, in light of the fate of his love interest, Minnie Powell, who dies protecting him from the Black and Tan Auxiliaries. On the topic of bravery, Seamus happens upon a bull when he comments that “it’s easy to be…[brave] when you’ve no cause for cowardice” (38). Schrank argues that Seamus uses “bloated rhetoric to work off tension that might be better vented in action” (82). For his part, Davoren utters a bull about immaturity while responding to a query about whether children resided at his last address: “Ay, ten; (viciously) and they were all over forty” (38).

As the second act proceeds, Davoren and Seamus together commit a practical bull that suggests their hypocrisy. The former claims philosophy instills him with bravery, while the latter says religious devotion does the same for him. But immediately after these avowals, an
outbreak of gunfire leads them to forget religion and philosophy as they cower “in the violent fear of a nervous equality” (40). Mr. Grigson, their drunken neighbor, uses a bull to conceal his alcohol problems. As his wife puts it, “no matter how much he may have taken, when he’s taken more he’ll always say, ‘Here’s the first today’” (43). Mr. Grigson proves this to be true when he arrives on the scene, flask in hand. And it is Mr. Grigson who comments with unwitting irony after the Black and Tans’ raid that “all women is very nervous,” after the men of the house have shown themselves to be much more afraid of authorities than the women (60). Like Seamus, Davoren, and other men in the play, Grigson “enjoys misusing language for maximum display” (Schrank 86).10 Throughout the play Davoren and Seamus have done little other than talk, and the play ends no differently as “the poltroon-poet and superstitious peddler are left alone to blather and feel sorry for themselves” (Scrimgeour 73).

Juno and the Paycock: Bulls, Puns, and Malapropisms

In Juno and the Paycock (1924), O’Casey uses the context of the Irish civil war for a tragicomedy of life in the Dublin apartment of the Boyle family. Known for the antics and clever sayings of characters “Captain” Jack Boyle and Joxer Daly, the play contains several bulls and malapropisms that enhance the comedic element. When Boyle first enters the play he tries to deny that he’s been drinking: “…for the last three weeks I haven’t tasted a dhrop of intoxicatin’ liquor. I wasn’t in ayther wan snug or dh’other—I could swear that on a prayerbook—I’m as innocent as the child unborn!” (78). But for all his avowals he immediately suggests the contrary with the pun “I’ve a little spirit left in me still!,” a statement he repeats

10 “Some of their verbal pyrotechnics are hilarious,” Schrank adds. “But a closer analysis proves them all dangerous” in as much as they distort reality and contribute to Minnie’s death (89).
three times (78). And we hear a few seconds later from another character that he was just seen in a pub—or “snug”—with his drinking buddy Joxer. Later in Act I, Boyle introduces a malapropism he will repeat later in the play: “the whole worl’s in a state o’ chassis!,” meaning to say “chaos” (83). He also contradicts himself in bull-like fashion by grumbling that his wife Juno can “keep her sassige” and then immediately taking that sausage and cooking it for himself (83). Here a practical bull complements verbal ones.

Bulls mount as the play continues, demonstrating rhetorical prowess of a sort on the part of their speakers. Kearney claims “the rhetorical powers displayed by such uneducated (and probably illiterate) characters as Juno and Boyle were as admirable in their way as anything in the line of orators from Demosthenes to Burke” (110). And James Scrimgeour finds that “Boyle, blowhard that he undoubtedly is, carries within him the torch of the poet” (77). Referring dismissively to one of his daughter Mary’s suitors, Boyle says, “I never heard him usin’ a curse; I don’t believe he was ever drunk in his life—sure he’s not like a Christian at all!,” as if cursing and drunkenness were particularly Christian qualities (86-87). Joxer offers a bull as he is recommending boldness and courage: “if you gently touch a nettle it’ll sting you for your pains; grasp it like a lad of mettle, an’ as soft as silk remains!” (90). But immediately after this paradoxical bit of wisdom, Joxer shows his own cowardice by fleeing the apartment to avoid running into the chiding Juno. When Juno then asks whether Joxer has been there, Boyle responds with an blarneying bull: “I haven’t seen Joxer since I seen him before” (90). Juno shows that she can utter bulls that demonstrate the maternal good sense she shows throughout the play. Speaking of the folly of uncompromising Irish republican extremists, she says ironically, “To be sure, to be sure—no bread’s betther than half a loaf” (93). Boyle ends Act I with a bullish reversal, initially deriding his cousin Mr. Ellison as a “prognosticator an’ procrastinator”
and then, after learning he was in the deceased Ellison’s will, saying this cousin deserves deep mourning (94-96).

Just two days later, as the second act begins, Boyle has contradicted himself again by remaining friendly with Joxer after having sworn to Juno at the end of the first act that he would stop seeing him. In a malapropism he also speaks of having an “attackey” case, rather than attaché. On the topic of knowing Irish history, Joxer offers the well-known bull, “where ignorance’s bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise” (100). Both Boyle and Joxer “contradict themselves continually, but if with Boyle this is due to lack of judgment, with Joxer it is due to calculation” (Kosok 164). In Act III, after secretly stealing Boyle’s bottle of stout, Joxer remarks disingenuously on the theft, “Oh, that’s shockin’: ah, man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!” (129). When Joxer questions whether Boyle will ever get the promised inheritance, Boyle responds by implying Joxer is a “twishter,” or dishonest person, for holding back information. Joxer fires back that Boyle has “twisted” himself: “Did you ever do anythin’ else! Sure, you can’t believe a word that comes out o’ your mouth” (132). While exaggerating the extent of his friend’s dishonesty, Joxer has hit upon a truth regarding the subject at hand: Boyle has been less than honest in keeping news to himself that the inheritance has eluded him. Responding to Mary’s lament that her expected child will not have a father, Juno replies with the bull “it’ll have what’s far betther—it’ll have two mothers” (146). Boyle, returning very drunk to his now-empty apartment, remarks ironically that “Irelan’ sober…is Irelan’…free” (147). And the play ends with Boyle’s famous malapropism “chassis.” Thus bulls and blundering pervade the play as characteristics of Dublin tenement dwellers.

Captain Boyle’s familial irresponsibility and drinking problem are elements that go beyond the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama including the stage-Irish types of
Boucicault, influential though he was to O’Casey. As Waters puts it, “the gay, improvident Celt, whom Boucicault personified as the Shaughraun, becomes a hopeless burden in Juno and the Paycock, a cantankerous drunk. He is unable or unwilling to take practical measures even to ward off starvation” (156). The verbose drunks Boyle and Joxer have something in common with Wilde’s dandy characters in as much as they stand outside the main action of the play providing comic relief.11 In this and his other Dublin plays, O’Casey uses comedy for more than audience pandering; he uses it to throw into relief and enhance the tragic elements of his plays. As Ronan McDonald observes, “if ‘comic relief’ is sometimes designated as a respite from tragic bleakness, it can also ironically serve to sharpen its impact” (41). We feel the disintegration at the play’s end all the more profoundly because of the levity that precedes it.

O’Casey’s Wise Fools and the 1916 Uprising

The Plough and the Stars (1926) has less humor than Juno. It tells the melodramatic story of a young couple, the Clitheroes, torn apart by Ireland’s Easter 1916 uprising. While hardly a comedy, the play has several examples of bulls, paradoxes, and malapropisms. Responding to a comment that Nora Clitheroe is pretty, neighbor Mrs. Gogan says, “she is, an’ she isn’t”; and in response to a comment that Nora and her husband get along well together, Gogan says, “they do, an’ they don’t” (154). Fluther Good, a stage Irish character, comments paradoxically that “we ought to have as great a regard for religion as we can, so as to keep it out of as many things as possible” (159). Fluther also utters the most frequent malapropism of the

11 Heinz Kosok remarks about Boyle and Joxer, “it is impressive evidence of O’Casey’s dramatic power that he is able to incorporate two central characters into his play who contribute nothing to the progress of the action” (164).
play, repeatedly using the word “derogatory” where other words would be more appropriate. By harping on the supposedly derogatory, he seems to be looking for a pretext for fighting.

In Act II, which takes place inside a pub, an orator addressing insurgent nationalists outside utters a bull as part of his belligerent rhetoric: “we rejoice in this terrible war” (184). Kearney argues that in this play as well as the earlier two plays of the Dublin trilogy O’Casey “implies that the illiterate or recently literate tenement dwellers were dazzled and deluded by outsiders whose ‘high’ language and literary skills they associated with power” (115). The playwright took the unseen orator’s words from the rhetoric of Patrick Pearse, a leader of the Easter 1916 uprising who was also a poet and playwright. The stirring words of the orator are juxtaposed ironically with the rough-and-tumble of the pub. As David Krause puts it, “throughout Act II these sacred and terrifying words of Pearse interrupt the action, only to be overwhelmed and desecrated by the farcical squabbling of dirty Dublin’s wise fools” (1982 244). A rhetorical bull by Pearse is undermined by the practical bulls of the pub patrons. One of the pub’s wise fools is Rosie, a prostitute. She contradicts herself to suit potential clients, at first supporting the freedom-fighters, then changing her stance when she realizes one of the pub customers opposes the movement (186). Peter, Nora’s uncle, hypocritically contradicts himself by recommending calm silence to another character when he himself is easily riled into heated exchanges (191). Fluther utters a bull in the pub, as tempers rise and another character asks him not to get excited. With increasing agitation, he responds, “(more loudly) Excited? Who’s gettin’ excited? There’s no one gettin’ excited!” (196). In the same argument, he warns that he could trounce another in a fight with an absurd hyperbole: “G’way, man, I’d beat two o’ you before breakfast” (198). As Waters has noted, Fluther provides more than just comic relief: “he also represents a type of Dublin survivor who floats to the top of the maelstrom
while others, like Jack and Nora Clitheroe, are destroyed by the powerful currents of the revolution” (152). Thus his figurative turns provide the sort of self-defense, guise, and guile that Ricks attributes to the Irish bull in general. Later in this act, one of the revolutionaries coins an oxymoron by saying “th’ time is rotten ripe for revolution” (200).

In the third act, as the Easter 1916 rebellion takes place and her husband joins the fray on the side of the insurgents, Nora claims paradoxically that the rebels are fighting not from bravery but cowardice: “they’re afraid to say they’re afraid!” (209). Later Fluther comically contradicts himself: after pledging earlier in the play to stop drinking, he exploits Dublin’s violence to loot a pub for its liquor. When Jack Clitheroe arrives on the scene, he is described oxymoronically as being in “a state of calm nervousness” (218). In Act IV, Nora is driven mad with grief about losing Jack, leading to a bull-like inversion of life and death; she thinks “that dead things are livin’, an’ livin’ things are dead,” her neighbor Bessie says (229). Remarkably, politics fails in all three of the Dublin-trilogy plays, while domestic humanity emerges as the best recourse in a hard-scrabble world (McDonald 91). “Put bluntly,” McDonald observes, “O’Casey paradoxically regards politics as anti-social,” at least in his Dublin trilogy (92). This amounts to a bull of character on the part of the playwright, who was outwardly an ardent socialist.

*The Silver Tassie: Characters Anticipate “Beckett Clowns”*

O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* (1928) was rejected by the Abbey Theatre, and it is considered a flawed play by many critics, including the playwright himself, who called it “remarkable” but not “good.” The Abbey’s refusal to produce this play led to a final rupture

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12 In conversation late in his life, Samuel Beckett would object to Lady Gregory’s decision not to produce the play at the Abbey, underlining the lifelong importance O’Casey was to him (Worth 132).
between it and O’Casey, yet O’Casey’s future work would remain relevant to the history of modern Irish drama. Set during World War I in Dublin and on a French battlefield, the play is an odd amalgam of melodrama, farce, and expressionism with a sharp anti-war message. Much of the comic relief of *The Silver Tassie* comes from old-crony Dubliners Sylvester and Simon, who, as one theatre reviewer put it, “appear to be auditioning a couple of decades early to play Beckett clowns” (Gardner). Responding to a character’s stern warnings about the need for religious salvation, Simon says counter-intuitively, “Heaven is all the better, Susie, for being a long way off” (1998 O’Casey 176). As others worry that the main character, Harry, will not return from a first-act Dublin football game in time to return to the war, Sylvester, Harry’s father, claims the worriers have a perverse tendency to expect the worst. So Sylvester says in a bull, “he’ll be back in time an’ fill you all with disappointment” (180). Sylvester hides in fear when a violent and abusive neighbor visits his apartment in a rage, then, after the neighbor leaves, he twice utters the comical bull, “he was a little cow’d, I think, when he saw me” (185). Of Simon and Sylvester, Carol Kleiman says, “these two characters, who bear a generic resemblance to Boyle and Joxer, are the comic, music-hall duo who appear at the opening curtain and slapstick their way mindlessly through what is undoubtedly O’Casey’s most savage and bitter play” (130). The bitterness reflects the futile damage of war.

Act II offers a poeticized and expressionistic take on the trench warfare that Harry and other Dublin volunteers returned to following their leave in the first act. The third act takes place in a Dublin hospital where Harry is recovering from a battle injury that has paralyzed him from the waist down. Discussing an operation planned for Harry, his doctor utters a bull to the nurse Susie:

SUSIE: Will the operation tomorrow be successful?
SURGEON MAXWELL: Oh, of course; very successful.
SUSIE: Do him any good, d’ye think?
SURGEON MAXWELL: Oh, blast the good it’ll do him. (229)

In Act IV the embittered Harry speaks of his condition with bull-like confusion: “A merry heart throbs coldly in my bosom; a merry heart in a cold bosom—or is it a cold heart in a merry bosom?” (260). *The Silver Tassie* suggests the plays to come from Beckett for a number of reasons. Wheelchair-bound Harry finds himself in “a world as senseless as the one Beckett’s Hamm in *Endgame* wishes to destroy, Harry appears grotesque and his words ridiculous as he curses…all living things” (Kleiman 149). Far from political dogmatism, *The Silver Tassie* “reflects the poignant bewilderment that we often find in Beckett’s world” (McDonald 125). It is a bewilderment that often takes the form of the confusion and self-contradiction entailed by bulls.

**Beckett Finds in O’Casey “a Master of the Knockabout”**

Beckett’s admiration for O’Casey was not reciprocated, as Ronan McDonald makes clear in his study of the writers. O’Casey was an outspoken and melioristic socialist with a view of life that was at least outwardly optimistic; Beckett was “an apolitical, pessimistic artist” whom O’Casey said he would “have nothing to do with” (McDonald 87, qtd 86).¹³ For his part, in a review of O’Casey’s shorter works, Beckett praised his elder compatriot as “a master of the knockabout in this very serious sense—that he discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent of sodalities, and activates it to their explosion” (Kilroy 167). Beckett was

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¹³ O’Casey flatly denied he had influenced Beckett: “He isn’t in me; nor I in him” (qtd O’Connor 366). Yet others see at least strong similarities between the two playwrights. As David Krause puts it, “O’Casey and Beckett share an unqualified affinity for the profane delights of the music-hall tradition, the consummate theatre of knockabout, with its decrepit comedians and anarchic routines, its slapstick disintegration of the furniture and all the respectable foundations of society” (1987 34).
referring to *The End of the Beginning*, a one-act comedy O’Casey wrote in 1931. The play is a battle of the sexes in which a husband tries to show his wife that his chores are harder by having the two of them exchange roles. Working ineptly in the kitchen, the husband, Darry Berrill, is soon visited by his friend, Barry Derrill, and the two stage Irishmen manage to nearly destroy the household, while the wife is outside efficiently doing her husband’s usual outdoor chores. Cautioning his awkward friend, Barry utters a bull: “…you’re not going to expedite matters by rushing around in a hurry” (1967 O’Casey 277). As things fall apart, he reiterates, “I knew this rushing round wouldn’t expedite matters” (280). When the near-sighted Barry cuts his finger, Darry remarks in a bull-like exaggeration, “you’d be better if all your fingers were off,” adding that the injury will “limit your capacity for breakin’ things” (283). By the end of the play, audiences have witnessed the disintegration Beckett wrote about, and Darry remarks with comic inappropriateness to his returning wife, “my God, woman, can you do nothin’ right!” (291).

O’Casey was the chief influence on Beckett from among the Abbey playwrights whose work he saw as a young man in Dublin. The plays by O’Casey, together with melodramatic and vaudevillian fare at other theatres around Dublin, became objects of intense study: “he seems to have studied the works he saw as much as or more than he enjoyed them” (Bair 48). In that study, the young Beckett would unavoidably have encountered many bulls.

For his part O’Casey would return in the 1940s to Ireland as a setting for his plays. As if commenting allegorically on English perceptions and misperceptions of Irish bull-speakers, his 1940 comedy *Purple Dust* includes a scene where English characters renovating an Irish mansion mistakenly believe that “a wild bull” has entered their home. In 1942 O’Casey published *Red Roses for Me*, his dramatization of the 1913 Dublin Lockout. He employs bulls and paradox to leaven the tragedy surrounding Ayamonn Breydon, a poetic and idealistic young
Dubliner who participates in a strike for higher wages. Brennan o’ the Moor, a landlord and musician, is the play’s main source of bulls. As Krause puts it, he is “a scheming and singing codger with a long white beard who looks and acts like a bowler-hatted Father Christmas turned wandering minstrel” (1960 Krause 164). When he finds Ayamonn and his sweetheart Sheila together, Brennan remarks oxymoronically about “the serious hilarity of a genuine courtin’ couple” (380). In Act II Brennan is accused of “mixin’ mirth with madness” when he claims St. Patrick was a Protestant (395). In Act III he sings paradoxically “I learned in that moment far more than I knew” and that “False things in th’ world turn’d out to be thrue” (412). In Act IV he ironically states “money’s the root of all evil,” even as he continually obsesses about the safety of his investments held by the Bank of Ireland (423). Brennan’s comical hypocrisy and tendency to break out in song help to offset the gloom of the final act, when Ayamonn is killed in the labor dispute.

Later in his career O’Casey would continue to employ bulls as characteristic Irish utterances. In the one-act burlesque *Bedtime Story* (1951), John Jo Mulligan, a semi-pious Catholic Dublin clerk, tries to conceal a one-night stand from his neighbors in the early hours of the morning. When his paramour Angela says he needs to face the fact he went to bed with her the night before, he responds with the bull “we’re not fit for facts now,” as if facts should ever be out of place (1968 O’Casey 514). Capitalizing on this unwillingness to face facts and what the stage directions describe as Mulligan’s “futile sense of sin,” Angela guilefully swindles him of his ring, money, coat, and umbrella. When Mulligan realizes his one-night paramour has cheated him he exclaims, “oh, Christ, she’s coddled me!” (522). The con suggests Angela is a wily bull of a character, feigning helplessness for material gain. Mulligan’s strange behavior leads Miss Mosie, his lodging house keeper, and Halibut, his fellow lodger, to believe he is mentally
deranged and sleepwalking. Mosie offers a paradoxical remark on the nature of sleepwalking: “you never know whether you’re always asleep and never awake, or always awake and never asleep” (524). The play shows O’Casey still associated comedy, self-contradiction, and paradox with his native country’s inhabitants.

**Waiting for Father Ned: Beckett’s Influence Seen on O’Casey**

O’Casey again adopted an Irish setting for his 1959 play *The Drums of Father Ned*, again employing bulls and paradoxes. In the preamble to the play, English soldiers at the time of the war for independence comment on the peculiarities of Irish temperament that lead Binnington and McGilligan, Irish neighbors who are absurdly similar, to detest each other more than the hated English. An officer senses a self-destructive paradox in these Irish characters: “these two rats will do more harm to Ireland living than they’ll ever do to Ireland dead” (539). This introductory scene foreshadows the main action of the play, taking place in the 1950s when the older Binnington and McGilligan have become successful businessmen and politicians in the fictional town of Doonavale.

Self-contradiction and paradox occur in the first act. Binnington, a commercial trader, tries to compute business accounts while his maid Bernadette sings. In bullish self-contradiction, he laments “this appalling materialism’s spreading everywhere” including the maid’s lyrics, then turns back to his own material preoccupation, calculating his gains (547). Heavily accented Mr. Murray, a church organist, speaks of the paradoxical effect of overweening piety he finds in parish priest Father Fillifogue: “Dee hymns an’ dee prayer till Ireland sinks into a deep freeze of frosty piety an’ sham. We are nod in heaven; we are nod on the earth—we’re nowhere” (560). For his part, Fillifogue uses a bull to decry the damage he sees from the Tosthal—a national
spring festival—that has preoccupied many of the townspeople of Doonavale: “Oh, this Tosthal in lifting us up is getting us down!” (561). His remark highlights tensions in the play between the older generation that nurses inter-family and sectarian animosity and the younger generation that is open to peaceful coexistence. As John O’Riordan puts it, “the young people in [this]… play turn their backs on the violence and self-immolation of the past,” in part by turning away from “the paralyzing pieties” of Father Fillifogue (376). In a letter about the play, O’Casey himself said, “Ireland, if she is to live, must create a new Ireland from the old one, and, I think, that is the spirit of the play I have tried to write” (qtd 379). Ironically Irish authorities demanded changes to what were deemed anti-clerical elements of the play, leading O’Casey to withdraw it from production in Ireland and ban all performance of his other plays in Ireland until near the time of his death in 1964.¹⁴

Although O’Casey disassociated himself from Beckett, *The Drums of Father Ned* at least recalls the atmosphere of *Waiting for Godot*. “Like Beckett’s Godot, Father Ned never appears, and like Godot, he exerts a powerful influence upon the remaining characters in the play,” O’Riordan observes. “But, unlike Beckett or Godot, he is firmly on the side of life” (376). Paradoxical explanations are offered for the lack of a physical appearance by the eponymous Father Ned. Asked where he is, Bernadette replies: “Here; but he might be anywhere, though some may think he’s nowhere; again he may be everywhere” (1968 O’Casey 568). Later another character similarly says, “Father Ned’s everywhere; he may be anywhere; he may be nowhere to a seeker who gets in his way” (576). These bulls make Skerighan, a visiting Ulsterman, remark on the madness of the locals.

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¹⁴ Beckett withdrew his play from a 1958 Irish festival in protest against the treatment of O’Casey.
As the Catholics Binnington and McGilligan heatedly debate religion with the Protestant Skerighan, Binnington’s son Michael tries to calm the argument and hits upon a paradox in the process. Asked if God is Protestant or Catholic, Michael says: “He’s neither; but He is all, and above noticin’ th’ tinkle of an opinion. He may be more than he is even claimed to be; He may be but a shout in th’ street” (591). McGilligan calls this paradoxical description of God blasphemy, highlighting the generational strains that pervade the play.

Beckett was dismissive about the Irish literary revival, and it is questionable how much direct influence Abbey Theatre playwrights—apart from O’Casey—had on him. Yet the theatre’s early decades coincided with Beckett’s formative years, and as a young man in Dublin he could not have helped but to absorb the ethos of Irish playwrights. Aside from direct influence, he was inevitably the product of a dramatic environment in which tragedy mixed with comedy and absurd-sounding bulls frequently charged from the mouths of Irish stage characters. By transplanting these Irish qualities to universal characters, Beckett achieved in some sense the goals of the Abbey’s founders. For if bulls so common on the Irish stage could translate to the French language and unspecified locals, they amounted to more than merely pejorative national stereotypes, more than mere signs of buffoonery. Like James Joyce, Beckett “belonged to those expatriate writers who, without sacrificing their Irishness, have merged their heritage with the literary heritage of Europe” (Hunt 2). By leaving the nationalities of his characters unspecified, Beckett showed that tragicomedy and bulls have international relevance. They could apply to anyone and everyone. Stage Irishmen transformed into absurdist heroes.
Works Cited


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Chapter V: Beckett’s Bulls: “A Logic in Absurdum”

Mix a powerful imagination with a logic in absurdum, and the result will be either a paradox or an Irishman. If it is an Irishman, you will get the paradox into the bargain.

—Karl Ragnar Gierow, 1969 Nobel Prize Presentation Speech

Like Gierow’s speech presenting Beckett’s 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature, the prize’s official citation suggests the author’s paradoxical qualities: “For a body of work that, in new forms of fiction and theater, has transmuted the destitution of modern man into his exaltation.” Using a photographic analogy, Gierow in his speech went on to say, “what does one get when a negative is printed? A positive, a clarification, with black proving to be the light of day, the parts in deepest shade those which reflect the light source” (Nobel). Beckett’s bleak topics serve as a sort of darkroom for these transformations. His writing yokes destitution with exaltation, tragedy with comedy, point with self-abnegating counterpoint. Bulls are a locus for the paradoxical joining of these apparent opposites. They are an example of “a form that accommodates the mess” of modern life, an accommodation Beckett believed is essential to modern art (qtd Graver 219).

This chapter proposes that Beckett’s fiction and drama provide through bulls a carnivalesque counterpoint to the totalitarian tendencies of modern rationalist thought. “For Beckett the task of creative thinking has always been to conduct the search for ‘a form that will accommodate the mess’ instead of repressing it through an excess of rationalist order,” Sylvie Henning observes in a Bakhtinian analysis of the author, adding that his “carnivalised satire comes to the fore in this context” (87). In particular his works satirize the inadequacy of language to express thought and emotion. Words fail, and one of the ways they fail is through repeated self-contradiction. Yet that failure is no reason for language to end. As Beckett put in
his late prose piece *Worstward Ho*, “Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (2006 471). He trafficked in statements that appear to fail, to self-destruct, and to self-deconstruct. In the process he effectively transposed the Irish bull, used previously by Irish writers to satirize colonial relations with England, to a broader European context where its targets include rationalism and rhetoric, both deemed incapable of expressing the human condition. Though Beckett was an iconoclastic Absurdist writer, he carried on the long tradition of Irish bulls. Bulls managed to indicate heteroglossia—or multi-voicedness—within individual characters. Through bulls Beckett was deconstructing language before deconstructive theory formally emerged. As Sigmund Freud said, “Everywhere I go I find that a poet has been there before me.” It is a statement that could apply to Beckett’s proto-deconstructive style.

**Prior Criticism on Beckett’s Bulls, Irishness, and Humor**

Among existing criticism, Christopher Ricks addresses most directly the role of Irish bulls in Beckett’s work. In *Beckett’s Dying Words*, a book that focuses on the pervading presence of death in the fiction and drama, Ricks observes, “The bull is a form of linguistic suicide, and for an Irish writer as occupied with suicide as Beckett, it had its attractions” (153). He finds something characteristic in Beckett’s frequent bulls on the topic of mortality: “Like the other ways in which Beckett’s very words embody a doing right by death as well as by life, the bull is itself an imaginative embodiment of a principled living death…the making friends with the necessity of dying” (202). As to the question of whether Irish bull speakers are aware of their self-contradiction, he claims this uncertainty is the source of their wit (159). Ricks notes something poetically figurative about the bull, which “is an inspired act of contradiction (inspired by and to contradiction), and is alive with naïve acumen; it is therefore for Coleridge—
and for all who follow him in this—naturally childlike and preternaturally poetic. Childlike, and thereby in a close affinity with poetry, at least for so great a Romantic as Coleridge” (189).

Elsewhere Peter Saccio identifies Irish bulls as a key element of Waiting for Godot, arguing that their mode of contradiction expresses Beckett’s critical stance toward Cartesian rationalism (Saccio). But Ricks and Saccio are limited in their identification and analysis of actual bulls in Beckett’s works, and they do not explore the Bakhtinian and deconstructive aspects of these utterances. They also do not place Beckett in the context of a long-running tradition of Irish writers who used bulls as nationally characteristic language, a core purpose of this dissertation.

Other critics have identified the Irish qualities of Beckett’s writing, his tendency toward self-contradictions and paradoxes, and his distinctive humor. In The Irish Beckett, John Harrington observes that “in individual cases and in all his work, Ireland—abstracted but never replaced by anyplace else—is a complex of attraction and repulsion” (5). Noting numerous comments on the Irishness of Beckett’s drama, Harrington claims Beckett’s relationship with the Irish theatre was strained but important: “a relationship of antagonism is a relationship nonetheless” (173). Biographer and literary critic James Knowlson has analyzed the influence of J.M. Synge on Beckett, finding they have a common predilection for tragicomedy and that their characters are most alike “in that they are splendid, compulsive talkers” (261).\(^1\) Knowlson also puts Beckett’s signature distrust of language in the context of his national legacy: “a critical attitude towards language that is part of the intellectual heritage of the Anglo-Irish writer and

\(^1\) Beckett told Knowlson that Synge was among the most profound influences on his dramatic writing (260). In addition to Synge, he said that plays by Sean O’Casey and Lennox Robinson were vivid in his memory (Harrington 175).
that, in its most radical form, springs from Beckett’s personal meditation on the functions and inadequacies of language” (263).

Paradoxes are prominent in the scholarship. Vivian Mercier begins his book-length study of Beckett with the Wildean paradox “a Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” and goes on to stress Beckett’s Irishness, including an Irish bull from the novel Molloy that “the best mother…is the one who has no children” (1, 205). Without citing bulls specifically, S.E. Gontarski seems to include them when he describes “accurate, pleasing, formal substitutes for the logic and causality that [Beckett] rejected by repudiating naturalism and psychological realism” (1985/b 5). Commenting on a tendency toward diminution without disappearance, Harold Bloom argues “The grand paradox is that lessness never ends in Beckett” (4). Theodor Adorno finds tension between the rational and the irrational behind Beckett’s self-contradictions (71). Regarding the tendency toward self-cancellation, Wolfgang Iser notes “the Beckett reader is continually being confronted by statements that are no longer valid” (1985 126). Fred Miller Robinson identifies in Beckett’s work an “essential paradox—the fact that man exists, simultaneously, in rational and irrational worlds” (156). Gontarski finds paradox endemic to an artist dealing with a chaotic world: “the fundamental principles of reality are chaos and flux, whereas the essence of art is form and order” (1985 238). Laura Salisbury associates Beckettian paradoxes with humor: “the bringing together of the incongruous that occurs in a paradox can also be amusing, comic, pleasurable…, as much as it is logically infuriating and troubling” (117). Yet it is a humor with serious repercussions: “never quite able to be at one with itself, laughter in Beckett never emerges without an acknowledgment that it is a serious, uncertain, even a painful business” (230). Ruby Cohn argues Beckett follows “the fool tradition” in which the fool’s “inspired idiocy borders on wisdom” (284). And Cohn finds in his works “a cruelly comic
Beckett paradox: While we live, we die; we must compose while we decompose” (285).

Observing “the paradoxical spirit of his seriocomic playfulness,” Henning finds carnivalesque resistance in Beckett’s comedic stance: “in jesting confrontation with major representatives of our cultural heritage, his work offers serious challenge to many of their basic assumptions, for example, the desire for final resolution, including every form of integral totality, closed system, the comprehensive dialectic” (6,1). In Bakhtinian terms, his Irish bulls express the unfinalizable quality of human communication; meaning is unstable and subject to change.²

**Bulls as Types of Aporias**

So while cursory attention has been given to Beckett’s bulls, prior research has not examined the extent to which these self-contradictions permeate his writing. Their proliferation reached an almost dizzying peak with the novel *The Unnamable*, after which the author turned increasingly to drama as a medium better suited to his sense of the rhetorical inadequacy of written language. Bulls would typify Beckett’s postmodern characteristics, his self-reflexivity and sense of the end of the book. This chapter will apply Bakhtinian concepts and deconstructive analysis—two approaches found in prior scholarship on Beckett in general—to the specific question of Beckett’s Irish bulls. It will probe Beckett’s fiction and drama for examples of bulls, discerning possible reasons for their use. The analysis will roughly follow the chronology of his writing, beginning with the short stories, following with the early novels

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² For a writer who has had as much scholarly analysis as Beckett, the review of criticism in David Pattie’s *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett* was a useful compendium. The guide follows criticism of Beckett from early existential, absurdist, and humanistic responses through the literary theory debates of the 1970s and 1980s and more recent analyses informed by more thorough biographical information.
written in English, and then the short fiction and novels initially written in French after World War II. After that it will shift to the plays for which Beckett became most famous. The change in medium reflected an important pivot in the author’s attitude toward his art, a realization that the theatre could convey meanings that prose fiction could not. He reached an expressive endpoint in prose fiction that could only be surpassed through dramatic performances. Drama offered a new, more appropriate venue for the heteroglossia expressed by Beckett’s numerous bulls.

The deconstructive approach to Beckett will focus on Irish bulls as types of aporias. Aporia has been translated from the Greek as “impassable path,” itself an oxymoron in the sense that a path that is impassable is not really a path (Cuddon 50). Aporia, the sense of being at a loss, of confusion or doubt, was a technique used by Socrates and Aristotle. In Plato’s Socratic dialogues, an interlocutor would be led by Socrates’ questions to a point of aporia about some important topic, causing him to reconsider previous assumptions. In Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, aporias serve as points of departure for philosophical enquiry. Richard Begam’s definition of classic aporia suggests a close affinity with Irish bulls: “an assertion that is swallowed up by its own contradiction” (179). J.A. Cuddon places aporia within the more modern theory of deconstruction: “Aporia suggests the ‘gap’ or lacuna between what a text means to say and what it is constrained to mean” and as such it is crucial to Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance* (50). Derrida’s neologism *différance* is a French pun yoking deferral of textual meaning with the difference of words that get their meaning from their places within semantic clusters; it is a term that lends itself to the continual deferral of meaning in Beckett’s self-contradictions and aporias. Totalizing truth is continually deferred and therefore unnamable. Deconstructionists seek out aporias as “blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the
tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean” (qtd 50). Throughout his career Beckett was fascinated with this productive tension between language and truth, with aporias and with *différance*.

Analysis of bulls in Beckett’s various works will be aimed at extrapolation of larger meanings from these brief, self-contradictory utterances. Graham Hough places such a technique in the tradition of New Criticism, explication, and close reading of poetry: “The idea that the nature of a whole work can be deduced from the qualities exhibited in a short passage is still widely current; and this is stylistic dogma” (5). The goal will be a sense of the whole from particular parts.

**Irish Bulls: A Trait of the Earliest Fiction**

Beckett’s earliest fiction, in the form of short stories, suggests the paradoxical nature of bulls. His first published short story, “Assumption,” begins with a bull: “He could have shouted and could not,” which expresses the feeling of wanting to vent one’s frustration when venting is impossible (1995 3). This perplexing self-contradiction starts this short story in the manner that aporias started Aristotle’s philosophical explorations. In “Dante and the Lobster,” the opening story of the 1934 short-story collection *More Pricks than Kicks*, the collection’s hero Belacqua mulls the translation of what he describes as a “superb pun.” The line in question is from Dante’s *Inferno*: “Qui vive la pieta quando è ben morta.” Literally translated this line can come across as a self-contradictory bull: “Here pity (or piety) lives when it is well dead.”

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3 For Gontarski, Beckett’s work has an innate instability that short circuits deconstructive theory: “…Beckett deconstructs his own texts so thoroughly that deconstructive analyses …often seem merely redundant” (1986 6). Similarly, Lance St. John Butler has described Beckett as “deconstructionist avant la lettre” (qtd Pattie 169).
translation attuned to the pun is “Down here piety lives only when pity is fully dead”; it comes across as a reprimand by the speaker, Virgil, to Dante for showing pity for the damned. The multiple meanings of this aporetic line suggest profundity beneath apparent absurdity. Belacqua is inspired by the line to wonder “why not piety and pity both, even down below?” (1972 21). Through this Dante quotation, he is faced with “the difficulty of reconciling divine mercy with divine justice” (Cohn 19). The short story ends with Belacqua’s surprise that the lobster he has brought his aunt is still alive as it goes into a boiling pot. This leads to contradictory statements emphasizing the disagreement between character and narrator in free indirect discourse: “Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all. It is not” (22). 4 The multi-voicedness of Bakhtinian heteroglossia comes into play.

In the following short story, “Fingal,” a character oxymoronically speaks “in earnest jest” and comments wryly about “a short ever” (25, 29). The next story, “Ding-Dong,” describes the Irish Belacqua oxymoronically as being prone to “moving pauses” and having “a strong weakness for oxymoron” (38). The collection’s penultimate story, “Yellow,” directly quotes a paradox—described as “a godsend”—from John Donne’s Juvenilia: Or Certain Paradoxes and Problems: “Now among our wise men, I doubt not but many would be found, who would laugh at Heraclitus weeping, none of which would weep at Democritus laughing” (qtd 162). The section from which Beckett quotes begins with the simple exhortation, “if thou beest wise, laugh” (Donne 37). And Beckett’s Belacqua indeed chooses laughter rather than tears in the face of his imminent death from medical malpractice. This foreshadows the gallows humor to come in much of the author’s later works, including the following novels.

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4 These sentences ending the story have been interpreted as a pun: the lobster’s demise is a “quick” one in the sense of being a living death, but it is not a “quick” or fast one (Carey 113).
Murphy: “In the Beginning Was the Pun”

In Murphy, a novel published in 1938, the narrator declares “in the beginning was the pun,” and the title character, an Irishman in London, indeed puns on the meaning of bull among other things (1957 40). He riffs on the notion of bull as both muddled meaning and papal edict when the title character describes his horoscope as “my little bull of incommunication” (20). Later, the narrator relates that what “Murphy had called his life-warrant, his bull of incommunication and corpus of deterrents, changed into the poem that he alone of the living could write” (56). Here bulls are associated with poetry, with figurative language. The plurality and potential confusion of meanings within one language found in such puns was something Derrida addressed in his book Aporias: “Babelization does not…wait for the multiplicity of languages” (10).

The novel Murphy suggests deeper meanings for apparent self-contradictions. It has been summarized as “a set of aporias carried to critical mass” (Begam 65). In an example of paradox, Wylie, a subsidiary character also from Ireland, is described as “intelligent enough to thank his stars he was not more so” (76). Wylie gestures “when words were inadequate to conceal what he felt” as if the real purpose of language were concealment (78). Another Irish character, Neary, is described as laying “on his bed repeating: ‘The syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse’” (119-20). Readers might initially chafe at the idea of life itself as a “syndrome,” but upon reflection the inevitable pains and frustrations of life can seem like symptoms. The narrator then comments that “there seems really very little hope for Neary, he seems doomed to hope unending” (120). Being “doomed to hope” might imply the anguish of dashed hopes. The narrator comments in a bull on the Irish tendency toward verbal evasion: “The skill is really extraordinary with which analphabets,
especially those of Irish education, circumvent their dread of verbal commitments” (122). The notion of an educated analphabet may seem self-contradictory, but it makes a certain sense when describing the Irish propensity for bulls as circumventions of verbal commitment. It is a tendency the author identifies as a “skill.”

**Watt: Bulls and Philosophical Humor**

*Watt*, a Beckett novel written during World War II and published in 1953, tells the story of the eponymous character, a servant in the mansion of the mysterious Mr. Knott. Bulls, paradoxes, and aporias comprise much of the philosophical humor the novel is known for. Early on a character remarks of Watt: “he would literally turn the other cheek, I honestly believe, if he had the energy” (1953 15).

The character Arsene, Watt’s predecessor as manservant to Mr. Knott, delivers a long monologue that includes numerous self-contradictory statements. Commenting on the absurd notion of the act of doing nothing, Arsene observes: “Having oscillated all his life between the torments of a superficial loitering and the horrors of disinterested endeavour, he finds himself at last in a situation where to do nothing exclusively would be an act of the highest value, and significance” (33). Arsene speaks oxymoronically of “all the forgotten horrors of joy” (34). “In Beckett’s world,” says Fred Miller Robinson, “joy and horror, hope and despair, are aspects of the same realization, that only in process of change can you realize at once the joy of what you had and the pain of losing it” (168). Paradoxically Arsene says “when you cease to seek you start to find” and comments on “that presence of what did not exist” (35, 36). Launching into a series of self-contradictions, he asks: “For what is this shadow of the going in which we come, this shadow of the coming in which we go, this shadow of the coming and the going in which we
wait, if not the shadow of purpose, of the purpose that budding withers, that withering buds, whose blooming is a budding withering?” (47).

In this novel of philosophical comedy, Arsene also articulates a philosophy of humor according to three categories:

Of all the laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs, but modes of ululation, only three I think need detain us, I mean the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless…The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh…But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh…It is the laugh of laughs, the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs…at that which is unhappy.” (38-39)

By turns the humor of bulls might fit into any of the three categories: ethical laughter, intellectual laughter, or mirthless laughter.⁵ In particular, Beckett has fun with rationalism and logic. Humor in the novel, says Linda Ben-Zvi, comes from “the exaggerated efforts at logic that quickly decline into nonsense” (70). Robinson remarks on the relationship in Beckett’s work between comedy and self-cancelling statements: “Paradox is an inescapable and pleasurable issue of human thought processes and is the essence, the very nature of ‘play’ or humor” (158). Of Watt in particular, Robinson adds, “in exposing the mechanisms of language, the comedy implies what lies beyond language” (175). What lies beyond language would become an increasing idée fixe for Becket following World War II.

Following Arsene’s monologue, Watt comments on the paradox of contemplating nothing. He recognizes “that nothing had happened, that a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen…that nothing had happened

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⁵ In Beckett’s works, Ruby Cohn observes, “Arsene’s three laughs are merged…Bitter and hollow laughter are drowned in mirthless, dianoetic laughter—the only possible reaction to the impossible human situation, in which we live” (293). Jacobson and Mueller find Beckett’s laughter to be essential to his humanity: “laughter is his testament—his legacy to that which is good, to that which is true, that which is compassionate” (qtd Pattie 120).
with all the clarity and solidity of something…the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something…” (60-61). He detects paradox in his employer’s seeming “on the one hand reluctant to change his state, and on the other impatient to do so” (69). Watt also considers the impossible possibility that “Mr. Knott was not responsible for the arrangement, but knew that he was responsible for the arrangement, but did not know that any such arrangement existed, and was content”(72). Such logically impossible statements amount to carnivalesque satire on attempts at totalizing reason, suggesting the absurd epistemological limits of the human condition. The rational world is turned upside down.

Describing the local Lynch family, the narrator commits a series of bulls comically commenting on the health of various members. May Sharpe is a widow “in full possession of all her faculties with the exception of that of vision,” while Mrs. Joe Lynch suffers “from Parkinson’s palsy but [is] otherwise very fit and well,” and Mrs. Jim Lynch who is “covered all over with running sores of an unidentified nature but otherwise fit and well” (81). If this is wellness, one wonders how to define ill health.

**Linguistic Inversions: “So Much Irish to Me”**

Watt remarks to the narrator on the contradictory nature of his descriptions of the “big house” he serves: “Watt made no secret of this, in his conversations with me, that many things described as happening, in Mr. Knott’s house, and of course grounds, perhaps never happened at all, or quite differently, and that many things described as being, or rather as not being, for these were the more important, perhaps were not, or rather were all the time” (102). Similarly, Watt experiences conflicting senses of absurdity and necessity: “But he had hardly felt the absurdity of those things, on the one hand, and the necessity of those others on the other (for it is rare that
the feeling of absurdity is not followed by the feeling of necessity), when he felt the absurdity of those things of which he had just felt the necessity (for it is rare that the feeling of necessity is not followed by the feeling of absurdity)” (108). For Watt, existence and non-existence, absurdity and necessity revolve in a continuous confusion of terms. In this context aporias abound. As Aristotle used aporias as points of philosophical departure, Beckett in this novel draws on them as “a narrative resource, using [their] incongruities and disparities as a mechanism for producing stories” (Begam 80).

The novel finds something distinctly Irish about Watt’s confused language, his tendency to reverse the normal syntax of sentences. The narrator suspects “that there was perhaps more than a reversal of discourse; that the thought was perhaps inverted” (134). And he says of Watt’s later inversion of both syntax and letters within words, “these were sounds that at first…were so much Irish to me” (138). Irish inversions of language in both form and meaning are qualities associated with the bull dating back centuries. Ireland is the target of more satire in this section of the novel—particularly Beckett’s alma mater Trinity College Dublin, where an academic manuscript is thought to “not be of the smallest value to any person other than [the author] himself and, eventually, humanity” (142). Here a bull humorously expresses the author’s skepticism about academic endeavors.

When the narrative returns to Mr. Knott’s estate, bulls and paradoxes continue. The narrator speaks of “the true true no longer, and the false true not yet” and “the longing for longing gone” (165). Paradoxically, “Mr. Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing” (166).

From Beckett’s “Addenda” to the novel come lines of paradoxical poetry: “weigh absence in a scale?/mete want with a span?/the sum assess/of the world’s woes?/nothingness/in
words enclose?” (205). It also contains paradoxical prose such as: “This dark colour was so dark that the colour could not be identified with certainty. Sometimes it seemed a dark absence of colour, a dark mixture of all colours, a dark white” (208). Moreover, there is some suggestion that the author remained characteristically Irish despite his deliberate exile from and satirical barbs against his home country: “for all the good that frequent departures out of Ireland had done him, he might just as well have stayed there” (207). Bulls were one important element of Irish life from which Beckett would not escape.

**Bulls Persist in French-Language Fiction**

Among short stories Beckett published initially in French in 1946, “First Love” includes a bull of an epitaph: “Hereunder lies the above who up below/So hourly died that he lived on till now” (1995/b 26). Later the narrator utters paradoxically that “it is painful to be no longer oneself, even more painful if possible than when one is” (31). He also contradicts himself at several points, such as when he renames a character with a name that is “more like her” then says the new name is actually “not more like her but no matter” (35). He finds trouble expressing his observations of the sky in words “for it’s always the same sky and never the same sky, what words are there for that, none I know, period” (38). “The Calmative,” published the same year as “First Love,” opens with the bull “I don’t know when I died” (61). Similarly the narrator says, “It’s not like me to come back to life, after my death” (61). The narrator comments on his tendency toward self-cancelling statements: “All I say cancels out, I’ll have said nothing” (62). And he claims he is “older than I’ll have ever been, if my calculations are correct” (62). He also contradicts himself, describing boats at anchor as “no less numerous than usual, as if I knew anything about what was usual” (65). And he coins the oxymoron “devastating hope.” Also
published that year, “The End” includes a narrator who contradicts himself, saying he was “wearing a kepi and saluting in military fashion, no, that must be wrong, I don’t know” (83).

And he remarks paradoxically: “Strictly speaking I wasn’t there. Strictly speaking I believe I’ve never been anywhere” (94). As if commenting on their tendency toward bulls, Ruby Cohn has said the narrators of these short stories “constantly interrupt themselves; their skepticism with regard to reality, truth, knowledge, becomes an epistemological adventure, comic on the surface but cruelly ironic below, because it is foredoomed to failure” (111).

Written in French in 1946 but not published until 1970, the novel Mercier and Camier marked a shift by Beckett to writing longer pieces initially in French during a phase when some of his best-known work emerged. The current analysis of bulls will be limited to English versions of the author’s work, as bulls are a quality of Irish use of the English language. There is reason to treat the English versions as distinct pieces of art. As S.E. Gontarski has argued:

Although he is listed as the translator into English or French on almost all of his work, Beckett never was strictly a translator of himself. Each shift in language produced not a literary or linguistic equivalent but a new work. Beckett’s translations have always been transformations, a continuation of the creative process. There simply are no equivalents between Beckett’s French and English texts. (Beckett 1995/195 xv)

Mercier and Camier has been seen as a sort of practice run for Waiting for Godot, both works focusing on the bantering relationship between world-weary friends trying to keep appointments (Ben-Zvi 74). The titular couple is described early on oxymoronically as “old young” (1975 8). Mercier despairingly utters a bull: “I’d throw myself out of the window if I wasn’t afraid I might sprain my ankle” (30). Later he speaks of hearing a voice “that tries to cod me I’m not yet dead” (44). Mercier, it is said, “scrutinized the inscrutable sky,” and the narrator remarks, “There is no time left and yet how it drags” (57). Mercier commits another comical bull when he says to Camier, “Speak up…I’m not deaf” (65). The narrator comments on a
paradoxical mixture of life and death: “but there is still day, day after day, afterlife all life long, the dust of all that is dead and buried rising, eddying, settling, burying again” (82). And he comments oxymoronically on “the brief interminable light” of a new day (84). The narrator later reflects on “the old joke that has ceased to amuse, the smile unsmilable smiled a thousand times” (86).

*Molloy: Aporias as Multi-Voicedness within Monologue*

Written in French in 1946, the novel *Molloy* tells the story of two characters, Molloy and Moran, through long monologues in their voices. Molloy is an educated writer searching for his mother; Moran is a private detective tasked by a mysterious employer with tracking down Molloy. The two characters’ monologues share a tendency toward self-contradiction that at times is merely contrary and at times achieves the level of bull or paradox. In both cases, they are examples of aporias.

Beckett demonstrates through aporias a tension between rhetoric and truth that entails the coexistence of opposites, Yeatsian antinomies. As Robinson puts it, “the world of Beckett’s comic fiction and drama takes place in an aporia between these poles [light/dark, universal/individual, words/silence, rational numbers/surds], in which the oppositions are not resolved but are suspended in paradox” (158). Molloy’s monologue is rife with self-contradiction, self-cancellation, and conjoined antinomies. The more intriguing examples suggest paradoxical depths. For instance, Molloy says, “They paid no attention to me and I repaid the compliment. Then how could I know they were paying no attention to me, and how could I repay the compliment, since they were paying no attention to me? I don’t know” (19). This is a prime example of aporia, an impasse brought about by the inadequacy of language to
express thought. Molloy comments on the complexities and inadequacies of language and learning, uttering bulls along the way: “Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept” (27). Later he comments on the inadequacy of language: “I made no bones about telling her I needed neither her nor anyone else, which was perhaps a slight exaggeration, for I must have needed my mother…That is one of the many reasons why I avoid speaking as much as possible. For I always say either too much or too little” (29). Similarly, he adds, “Whatever I said it was never enough and always too much” and “For to say I needed no one was not to say too much but an infinitesimal part of what I should have said, could not have said, should never have said” (30).

For Molloy and other Beckett characters, such aporias often do not lead to philosophical conclusions; they remain perplexities. His characters accept them as such and move “on,” which has been described as the quintessential word in Beckett’s work (Oppenheim 17). “We are alive,” says Wolfgang Iser, “because we cannot settle anything final, and this absence of finality is what drives us continually to go on being active” (1986 57). This is the unfinalizable world that Bakhtin found in strong literature.

Molloy comments further on the inadequacy of language as he describes running over and killing a dog that gets in the path of his bicycle: “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?” (31). As he helps the dog’s owner bury it,

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6 In a 1937 letter, Beckett wrote: “As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today” (qtd Connor 152). With their paradoxical import, bulls were among the things that seeped through such holes.
he reflects on the paradoxical interchangeability of tears and laughter, which he considers as foreign as the Irish tongue: “I thought she was going to cry, it was the thing to do, but on the contrary she laughed. It was perhaps her way of crying. Or perhaps I was mistaken and she was really crying, with the noise of laughter. Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me” (32). Language for Molloy is not only filled with self-contradictions, it is also at times superfluous. “You must choose,” he says, “between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so” (36).

Molloy’s monologue intersperses bulls with a continual sense of aporia. He speaks paradoxically of “the dying day when I always felt most alive” and asserts that “my waking was a kind of sleeping” (42, 48). He tells oxymoronically of “a young old man” and comically comments on his relationship with truth: “And I for my part will never lend myself to such a perversion (of the truth), until such time as I am compelled to or find it convenient to do so” (57, 71). And he remarks in a way on aporias as instances of perplexity that cause people to stop, reflect, and thereby make progress: “Yes, my progress reduced me to stopping more and more often, it was the only way to progress, to stop” (73). By interrupting the rhetorical flow of a narrative, aporias provide pauses for deeper thought and thereby lead to a sort of progress through stopping. As Robinson puts it, aporia, “in the suspension of its opposing terms and consequent circularity of its reasoning,…puts us in touch with a form that is closer to the life of things” (151). The circularity of bulls and aporias interrupts and undermines the linearity of the traditional novel.

Molloy continues to utter bulls as he catalogues his deteriorating health. He remarks, “and between you and me there was never anything wrong with my respiratory tracts, apart of course from the agonies intrinsic to that system” (73). Of his extremities he says, “I mean my
toes, I thought they were in excellent fettle, apart from a few corns, bunions, ingrowing nails and a tendency to cramp” (75). Despite a long list of debilities, he refers—with a bull—to possessing his mother’s “lousy unconquerable genes” (75). As his monologue, which consists of 82 pages and only two paragraphs, draws to a close, Molloy lets out more bulls. “I don’t like gloom to lighten,” he says punningly, “there’s something shady about it” (77). He speaks of his strange sense of direction: “I did my best to go in a circle, hoping in this way to go in a straight line” (79). And he describes hearing a voice “far away inside me” (82).

A Second Monologue: Differences and Différance

As Moran begins the monologue that will comprise the rest of the novel, it quickly becomes clear that he shares with Molloy a tendency toward bulls and self-contradictory aporias. Through these two characters, “Beckett creates a dichotomy in which the terms of opposition collapse into each other, in which differences resolve into différance” (Begam 110). That différance often takes the form of bulls. Using a Shakespearean bull employed by the Edgeworths in An Essay on Irish Bulls, he says, “to make assurance doubly sure” (104). He speaks paradoxically of “this atmosphere, how shall I say, of finality without end” (106). This reflects the asymptotic tendency in Beckett’s works. Like the curves of geometric asymptotes, they seem to approach something—some finality—until infinity but not to touch it. Like Molloy, Moran distrusts language: “Anger led me sometimes to slight excesses of language. I could not regret them. It seemed to me that all language was an excess of language” (111).

Continually in Molloy and other works language is inadequate, even to express its own inadequacy. Moran contemplates the satisfactions of repetition, which he contrasts with the “hellish hope” of starting anew: “and perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would
keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction” (128). And he contradicts himself in describing the story he is telling but is also unable to tell:

Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would never have believed that—yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one. (132)

As his health deteriorates, Moran’s self-contradictions seem to illustrate paradoxes of willpower, health, and happiness. “I was unable to get up,” he says, “that is to say I did get up finally to be sure, I simply had to, but by dint of what exertions! Unable, unable, it’s easy to talk about being unable, whereas in reality nothing is more difficult. Because of the will I suppose, which the least opposition seems to lash into a fury” (133). Later he remarks of another character: “He did not know I was ill. Besides I was not ill” (136). He seems to distrust action much as he distrusts language: “and I remained for several days…powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more”(155). And debility is paradoxically tied to happiness: “I grew gradually weaker and weaker and more and more content” (156).

Fittingly the novel ends with self-contradiction. Moran sits down to write, perhaps to tell the story of Molloy with whom he has had much in common: “then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (170). This contradiction seems, like the ending of “Dante and the Lobster,” to suggest a disconnect between narrator and character. Perhaps the midnight rain mentioned is the fictional creation of Moran as he begins to write—the rainy pitch darkness that symbolizes the
human condition—contrasted with actual circumstances narrated by the monologic voice. Thus the novel achieves heteroglossia both within and between its constituent monologues.

**Malone Dies: “My Old Aporetics”**

*Malone Dies*, published in French in 1951, continues to plumb the consciousness of a solitary monologist who frequently contradicts himself. Malone, the monologist, is—like Marcel Proust working on *In Search of Lost Time*—confined to his bed writing stories for himself as he waits for death. He speaks at the outset oxymoronically of his “incurious wondering” (1956 174). He invokes by name the idea of aporia to describe his perplexing contradictions and reversals: “Perhaps I shall not have time to finish. On the other hand perhaps I shall finish too soon. There I am back to my old aporetics. Is that the word? I don’t know” (175). Like Molloy and Moran, he questions the reliability of language through aporias. He also describes directly this doubting of speech: “I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing.* They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark. But I am on my guard now” (186-87). The bull at the heart of this quote is one of the most famous lines of the novel and derives from the pre-Socratic void paradox. It could be said that such bulls “pollute the whole of

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7 In a contrary perspective, Ben-Zvi holds that these final lines are an insightful self-negation: “By having Moran negate the report he has written, Beckett illustrates that any attempt to capture the past will become, of necessity, a fiction” (90).
8 The notion of aporias as perplexities suggests the impotence and ignorance that Beckett saw as the hallmark of his art: “The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance” (qtd Jewinski 164-65). This basic difference between the two writers did not mean that Joyce never penned perplexing bulls. In the “Aeolus” episode of *Ulysses* a character is described as having “a great future behind him.”
9 Ricks describes “Nothing is more real than nothing” as “the best of the large Irish bulls” (202).
10 Parmenides’ paradox held that change is illusory because something cannot come from nothing, from a void (“Democritus”).
speech” by undermining logical assumptions, such as that nothingness precludes actuality. In a further self-conscious description of his self-contradictory ways, Malone then remarks, “A very fine achievement I must say, or rather would, if I did not fear to contradict myself. Fear to contradict myself!” (188).

Several lines illustrate by example the aporetics, self-correction, and self-contradiction Malone describes in the novel’s opening pages:

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. (189)

The last word is not yet said between me and—yes the last word is said. Perhaps I simply want to hear it said again. Just once again. No, I want nothing. (193)

…straining towards the joy of ended joy. (200)

I…whose motionless too was a kind of groping, yes, I have greatly groped stock still. (218)

Some of these lines amount to comical bulls, such as his wry remark, “but let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise…” (229). Others suggest a poetic profundity, such as, “It is a dark light, if one may say so…” (231). Still others suggest religious questioning: “and without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living” (233).

Several of Beckett’s bulls in this novel deal with life-and-death issues and a persistent—and seemingly immortal—sense of mortality. They are examples of what Ricks calls “Beckett’s unending play with last things” (164). Malone comments ironically, “it sometimes seemed that he could grovel and wallow in his mortality until the end of time and not have done” (Beckett 1956 234). He reflects on what he sees as an impossibility of ending, as if suggesting an
immortality of the soul: “and when (for example) you die, it is too late, you have been waiting too long, you are no longer sufficiently alive to be able to stop” (234). Paradoxically Malone yokes endings with continuations and birth with death. He says, “to know you can do better next time, unrecognizably better, and that there is no next time, and that it is a blessing there is not, there is a thought to be going on with” (247). The elements of consciousness—dreams and thoughts—seem to be an unavoidable and unending burden: “flayed alive by memory, his mind crawling with cobras, not daring to dream or think and powerless not to…” (260). As the novel draws to a close, Malone continues to reflect upon life and death, endings and continuations. He remarks, “I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth into death, such is my impression…My story ended I’ll be living yet” (276). Begam has observed that in a novel that is nominally about its narrator’s death there is persistent imagery of nativity, creating the sense that what is taking place is “a difficult birth rather than a protracted death” (139). In a similar vein, Derrida in Aporias asks earnestly, “Is my death possible?,” and remarks paradoxically that “concerning the threshold of death, we are engaged here toward a certain possibility of the impossible” (21, 11).\textsuperscript{11} Death is impossible to imagine but also undeniable and ineluctable. For Beckett it is always just around the corner yet never quite reached.

Bulls pervaded the shorter works of this period as well. In Texts for Nothing (1950-52), the narrator begins with a bullish self-contradiction: “Suddenly, no, at last, long last” (1995/b 100). He then utters the paradox, “nothing like breathing your last to put new life in you” (103). Much later the narrator comments that “All you have to do is say you said nothing and so say

\textsuperscript{11} Later in the same book, he remarks, “the aporia is said to be impossibility, impracticability, or nonpassage: here dying would be the aporia, the impossibility of being dead, the impossibility of living or rather ‘existing’ one’s death…” (73).
nothing again” (124) and then wonders “What is it, this unnamable thing that I name and name and never wear out” (125). Later still he reflects on his own clouded logic: “What’s the matter with my head, I must have left it in Ireland” (133). In a contrary manner, he remarks, “This is awful, awful, at least there’s that to be thankful for” (142) and coins an oxymoron: “a voice of silence, the voice of my silence” (143). In this regard, Linda Ben-Zvi refers to Texts’ “pull between language that conceals and silence that reveals” (106). Later the narrator remarks on “the screaming silence of no’s knife in yes’s wound,” which Ben-Zvi describes as the “stabbing of surety with doubt” (106). Bulls and aporias are means of unsettling surety. As if to drive the point home, toward the very end of Texts, the narrator self-contradicts: “It’s not true, yes, it’s true, it’s true and it’s not true, there is silence and there is not silence, there is no one and there is someone, nothing prevents anything” (154).

The Unnamable: Invoking Aporias Again

The Unnamable, published in French in 1953, begins like Malone Dies with a direct invocation of aporia, foreshadowing the frequent aporias to come. The unnamed monologist says, “What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia plain and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?...I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means” (1958 285). The monologist seems to be referring to the Aristotelian technique of philosophical inquiries that depart from perplexities. He soon provides numerous examples of bulls, self-corrections, and aporias:

Nothing ever troubles me. And yet I am troubled. (287)

All is possible, or almost. (289)
And my surprise? I must have been expecting it. (290)

When did all this nonsense stop? And has it stopped? (292)

These indicate the central paradox of this difficult novel. As Ben-Zvi puts it, for the entirety of *The Unnamable* “the central concern is with a character who speaks an unending litany on his inability to speak” (97). Or in a deconstructive sense, with this novel, Beckett, “in effect, narrates *différance*” (Begam 154).

Several of the unnamable narrator’s bulls comment on the paradoxical coexistence of endings and continuations, the sense that something always continues “on.” He claims, for instance, that “The search for a means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue” (293). As Wolfgang Iser said of the eschatological focus of Beckett’s trilogy of novels, *Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable,* “The fiction of the end is both a necessity and a paradox, for the end is an event that one cannot avoid and yet that one cannot hope to understand in its true nature…It is this paradox that gives rise to the creation of the fiction, for fictions alone can fill in the gaps apparent in man’s knowledge” (1986 49). Further, the unnamable describes the coexistence of incapacity and necessity: “I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little…” (295). Meaningful speech is something to be avoided, yet meaning is unavoidable: “but it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something, a little yes, a little no, enough to exterminate a regiment of dragoons” (297). In the wake of the massive loss of life in World War II, the notion must have resonated that just a bit of

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12Beckett wrote an inscription on the cover of one of his drafts of this novel, “Beyond words?” (Ben-Zvi 97).
substantive speech could destroy a military regiment, not to mention civilian lives.\textsuperscript{13}

At the opening of the novel, the unnamable describes himself as “ephetic,” a term that suggests withholding judgment on an important question. He may be alluding to the ancient Greek skeptics who called for suspension of judgment as a result of human epistemic limitations. At the heart of Beckett’s narratives is a skeptical search for truth. “If one aspect of Beckett is a ‘post-structuralist’ suspicion of language,” Terry Eagleton writes, “the other is a Protestant thirst for truth, or rather for that rigorously formulated skepticism which is perhaps the nearest we moderns can approach it” (304). This notion comes across in several of the speaker’s self-conscious bulls. “I’m a big talking ball,” he says, “talking about things that don’t exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point” (299). One criticism of the ancient skeptics was that reserving judgment would make daily life impossible. And in the unnamable’s case life as most people know it—thinking, speaking, acting—is something to be avoided. “As far as thinking is concerned,” he says, “I do just enough to preserve me from going silent, you can’t call that thinking” (300). As Robinson puts it, “The aporetical style expresses a constant contradiction between a desire to cease speaking because language is absurd, and a desire to speak because language is necessary” (152). Words fail, but they can “fail better.”

\textbf{Bulls as Repetition Compulsion}

As the monologue proceeds, bulls and aporias accrue about various topics. The sheer number of them may seem tedious, but it also emphasizes the frequency and importance of repetition-cum-variation in Beckett’s work. Their proliferation as the novel ends suggests

\textsuperscript{13} Highlighting the influence of war on his mid-career writing, Maureen Waters argues that “Beckett was the first major Irish writer to respond to the inferno of World War II” (122).
Freudian repetition compulsion, the tendency to return repeatedly to a trauma. As biographer James Knowlson observed, the ideas of Freud and Carl Jung “are hardly ever referred to explicitly but are echoed in many passages” of Beckett’s work (1996 340). For two years as a young man, Beckett had undergone psychoanalytic analysis influenced by Freud at London’s Tavistock Clinic, during which time he read deeply on Freudian thought (1996 Knowlson 169-72). For an extremely sensitive practitioner of language, the discovery that words are inadequate could be traumatic. Language’s tendency to subvert itself could become unbearable and unnamable. As David Pattie puts it, “For a writer as radically mistrustful of language as Beckett, the idea of repetition could not help but exercise a powerful influence” (165).

Bulls and aporias can be found on virtually any page of this novel, and they tend to proliferate as it approaches an end. They suggest the possibility of something after death: “You’ve been sufficiently assassinated, sufficiently suicided, to be able to stand on your own feet, like a big boy” (326). They comment on the inadequacy of language in ways that anticipate Derrida: “It’s a lot to expect of one creature, it’s a lot to ask, that he should first behave as if he were not, then as if he were, before being admitted to that peace where he neither is, nor is not, and where the language dies that permits of such expressions” (328). They conflate opposites through figurative oxymorons: “I can hear him yet, faithful, begging me to still this dead tongue of the living” and “…the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence” (331, 348). They comment on place and otherness: “…Here is my only elsewhere” (395). And they entertain the

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14 Knowlson adds: “Beckett had studied both Freud and his disciples with a keenness bred of his own personal neuroses” (1996 Knowlson 169-72, 544).

15 Begam describes the final third of the novel as “a brilliant exercise in différance, conducted at a purely stylistic level, without plot and without character” (175). Bulls are a prominent feature of that stylistics. They are essential to the novel’s aesthetics, which succeeds “by submitting itself to the logical impasse rather than attempting to surmount it” (179).
différance of self and non-self, the unutterable that somehow must be uttered: “Who is I, who cannot be I, of whom I can’t speak, of whom I must speak” (397). Finally, they reach a sort of crescendo as the novel draws to a close:

…It’s the only [silence] I ever had, that’s a lie, I must have had the other, the one that lasts, but it didn’t last, I don’t understand, that is to say it did, it still lasts, I’m still in it… (407)

…The lasting one, that didn’t last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on… (407)

… I can’t go on, I’ll go on. (407)

This last bull, the final and most famous words of the novel, differs significantly from its French original, “Il faut continuer, je vais continuer.” The French, which translates literally as “it is necessary to continue, I will continue,” lacks the aporetic and self-contradictory quality of the English version. The English “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” with its seven monosyllables sounds like an Absurdist response to Hamlet’s six-monosyllable question, “to be, or not to be.” Salisbury, who argues that the Hiberno-English of the translated work enhances its comedy, quotes Beckett as saying he switched from writing initially in English because “you couldn’t help writing poetry in it” (qtd 83). Bulls are among the quasi-poetic, or at least creatively figurative, elements of English for Beckett. Cohn notes that at first blush, the self-contradictory statements that are so replete in The Unnamable may seem like mere nonsense, but, taken in the context of the trilogy and Beckett’s work in general, they “create the comedy or irony of fictions, a comedy or irony dissolving without resolving the classical questions about the quiddity of the world and that of man” (167). For Beckett the quiddity of world and man was mystified; the self-contradiction of his bulls was a way of emphasizing that mystification. His approach—via aporias—contrasts
sharply with Cartesian certainties about the stability and truth of the subjective self, calling into question the foundations of modern Western rationalism.

The Turn to Drama: Showing Instead of Telling

Beckett’s decision to start writing plays may have been a natural progression from the terminal point suggested by the increasingly frequent self-contradictions of the trilogy of novels. He reached his own “end of the book” with The Unnamable before the major postmodern theorists emerged, and it is more than a coincidence that Derrida chose the title of this novel for one of his key terms.\(^{16}\) Begam argues that in the trilogy of novels Beckett was “struggling to move beyond the ‘book’” (142). Theatre was a new venue for his art when he had done with that struggle. The plays marked a de-emphasis of the philosophical preoccupations of the novels and a new emphasis on situation and psychology. From this new perspective, meaning could be experienced in the theatre better than it could be explained in text. As Eugene Webb observed, “the plays are explorations into the meaning of human life as it is in its full reality, and this meaning is not an abstract idea of the kind that can be known objectively with the intellect, but a mystery that is lived in with the whole self” (qtd Pattie 143). Beckett’s “art…can show what it means but not say it, since to say it would be to run headlong into epistemological contradiction” (Eagleton 299). Speaking of Absurdist Theatre generally (of which he counts Beckett as an important exemplar), Martin Esslin finds that “what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters” (7). Or, as Cohn puts it, “in turning to the theater,…Beckett uses action to help him undermine language—an undermining that is therefore

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\(^{16}\) Beckett continued to write what is categorized as prose fiction after The Unnamable, but this study finds that his creative energies were more focused on drama following the premier of Waiting for Godot.
more insidious on stage than in print” (208). The theatre’s settings, situations, and actions can belie its words in a way that is hard to capture on the page. The prioritization of deeds before words is perhaps most pronounced in Beckett’s mime plays and his wordless movie *Film*.

Beckett’s first completed play was *Eleuthéria*, written in 1947 and published soon after his death. In it the protagonist Victor Krap faces societal conflict as he tries to withdraw from family and friends for a hermetic life. Frustrated with his inability to speak to the audience, Victor throws a shoe through his bedroom window. A glazier immediately appears to repair the window, leading Victor to remark paradoxically, “impossible to break anything…Neither can anything be lost” (1995/a 65). However much absurdist playwrights tried to diverge from their legacies, traditions cannot entirely be broken or lost, traditions such as that of the Irish bull. Later he says of himself, “it is perhaps time that somebody was quite simply nothing” (82). And he has a paradoxical outlook on death: “I want to squeeze pleasure out of my death. That’s where freedom lies: seeing oneself dead” (166). It is as if he is invoking the tradition of a living wake from the fiction of Maria Edgeworth and the drama of Dion Boucicault. Later, the glazier says Victor has spoken “in unforgettable terms, and nonetheless I forget them,” presaging a similar bull in *Happy Days* (177).

Bulls were one of the veiled or transmogrified traditions that the budding playwright inherited from Irish and other European dramatists. As James Knowlson puts it: “although Beckett’s theatre is startlingly original, he works within certain established traditions—even though he may modify these traditions quite radically by pushing certain elements to their limit or by deleting others” (Beckett 1978 93). Knowlson suggests Vaudeville humor as one such tradition; this type of humor is abundant in Beckett’s early plays. And comically self-contradictory statements are at home in Vaudevillian humor.
Waiting for Godot: Bulls of Inaction

Waiting for Godot, which premiered in French in 1953 and would gain its author his greatest fame, inspired literary critic Vivian Mercier to a bull in his review of the play: “nothing happens, twice” (xii). While the play contains paradoxes, bulls, and aporias in its dialogue, perhaps its most essential bull is one of action—or inaction. Repeatedly the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, say they are leaving the scene yet they remain. In the first act, Vladimir says “I’m going” or “let’s go” three times, with Estragon joining in the final time at the end of the act, but the stage directions at the end of this act read, “[They do not move.]” (1986 37). In the second act, the effect is intensified. Estragon says “I’m going” or “let’s go” ten times, and Vladimir joins in twice. Yet again the final lines of the play show their action betraying their words: “VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let’s go. [They do not move.]” (88). The “nothing” of their inactivity paradoxically becomes something, namely the heroic waiting of the title. Audiences grow to admire these loquacious loiterers for their ability to endure and their commitment to keeping appointments, no matter how frustratingly those appointments are postponed. Their continued presence on the stage despite avowals to leave underscores the visual power of drama, the way that action and environment can complement or belie words in a way that prose fiction has trouble simulating. The play begins with Estragon remarking that there is “nothing to be done,” yet he and Vladimir still do what they can on stage with the weary persistence of a Vaudevillian duo. Drama offered an escape route from the apparent terminus of Beckett’s prose. As if to emphasize the cul-de-sac Beckett had encountered in prose, Lucky’s famous ranting monologue satirizes the futility of philosophical

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17 He said in retrospect, “I began writing Godot as a relaxation to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time” (qtd Ben-Zvi 139).
prose and academia in general, or as Lucky puts it “the Acacacacademy” (42).

If, as Ed Jewinski argues, Beckett was a proponent of “anti-epiphany” whereas Joyce famously created epiphanies, *Waiting for Godot* may be a play about the continual postponement of meaning, of epiphany (Jewinski 167). Even Lucky’s fragmented speech suggests this postponement, ending as it does with the word “unfinished” (43). As Godot’s purpose is repeatedly deferred, the play brings to mind both Bakhtinian unfinalizability and Derrida’s *différence*. Deferral of meaning in Beckett’s work often takes the form of instructive and inescapable aporias. Derrida speaks of trying to accommodate and to learn from—rather than to transcend—aporia, “to move not against or out of the impasse but, in another way, according to another thinking of the aporia, one perhaps more enduring” (13).18 It is also easy to see how Beckett became associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Didi and Gogo waiting for a Godot who continually demurs is a dramatic analogy for the absurdist philosopher’s desire for ultimate meanings in a universe that apparently refuses to comply.19 “Beckett’s characters,” says Maureen Waters, “achieve a Sisyphian nobility by their willingness to confront an existence which is lonely, agonizing, and apparently bereft of meaning” (116). Eagleton finds much of Beckett’s humor in his sense of absurdity: “There is something funny about meaninglessness or

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18 Derrida adds that the experience of aporia “is not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it. (When someone suggests to you a solution for escaping an impasse, you can be almost sure that he is ceasing to understand…) (32).

19 Beckett disavowed his association with Theatre of the Absurd: “Negation is no more possible than affirmation. It is absurd to say something is absurd. That’s still a value judgment. It is impossible to protest and equally impossible to assent” (qtd Juliet 165). Still, this dissertation considers him an absurdist writer according to Martin Esslin’s definition, grounded as it is in Albert Camus’ absurdist philosophy. Esslin argues that a “sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet,” and others labeled absurdist (5). While they shared such basic premises with many other writers of their time like Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, they distinctively expressed these premises in unconventional, seemingly irrational forms (6). One of these forms for Beckett was the Irish bull.
absurdity, which Freud would no doubt explain as the pleasurable release which comes from no longer having to invest our energies in the laborious business of sense-making” (307).

**Vaudevillian Banter: Didi and Gogo Contradict Each Other**

Didi and Gogo follow the tradition of stage-Irish knockabouts found in O’Casey and Boucicault’s drama. Essential to the two characters’ Vaudevillian banter are their contrary statements. In addition to their self-contradictions, they repeatedly contradict each other, creating a continual sense of aporia through their frequent disagreements, a sense that “nothing is certain”:

> VLADIMIR: So there you are again.
> ESTRAGON: Am I? (11)

> ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.
> VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you’re mistaken
> ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?
> VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?
> ESTRAGON: Yes.
> VLADIMIR: Why…[Angrily.] Nothing is certain when you’re about. (16)

> VLADIMIR: They all speak together.
> ESTRAGON: Each one to itself. (58)

> VLADIMIR: When you seek you hear.
> ESTRAGON: You do.
> VLADIMIR: That prevents you from finding.
> ESTRAGON: It does.
> VLADIMIR: That prevents you from thinking.
> ESTRAGON: You think all the same.
> VLADIMIR: No, no, impossible.
> ESTRAGON: That’s the idea, let’s contradict each other. (59)

> ESTRAGON: You don’t have to look.
> VLADIMIR: You can’t help looking.
> ESTRAGON: True. (60)

> VLADIMIR: This is becoming really insignificant.
ESTRAGON: Not enough. (64)

VLADIMIR: We’re saved!
ESTRAGON: I’m in hell! (68-69)

ESTRAGON: I can’t go on like this.
VLADIMIR: That’s what you think. (87-88)

Cohn identifies this contrary bantering as the dramatic technique of stichomythia, involving repetition and antithesis through clipped, rhythmic dialogue (217). Martin Esslin calls this “the cross-talk of Irish music-hall comedians…miraculously transmuted into poetry” (39). It is a technique that complements the contradictory nature of bulls. It is a contrapuntal, polyphonic method that typifies what Henning calls “the carnivalizing force of Beckett’s style” (197). The status quo ante and its associated certainties are overturned through contradiction.

Pozzo, the seemingly aristocratic interloper who keeps his humble servant Lucky on a leash, issues remarks that suggest self-contradiction is not solely the province of the play’s central stage Irish duo. Pozzo makes pompous pronouncements that implode on themselves. He says grandly, “let us not speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. [Pause.] Let us not speak well of it either. [Pause.] Let us not speak of it at all. [Pause. Judiciously.] It is true the population has increased” (33). He contradicts himself further by asking Didi and Gogo to “forget all I said…I don’t remember exactly what it was, but you may be sure there wasn’t a word of truth in it” (34). This sounds like a variation on the liar’s paradox. It is one of the many puzzlements of this deeply aporetic play.

As in Beckett’s novels, the play contains contrarian statements that suggest the absurdity of doing nothing, the unfathomable qualities of human mortality, and the persistent sense of things continuing “on.” When Gogo remarks that he “wasn’t doing anything,” Didi responds, “perhaps you weren’t. But it’s the way of doing it that counts, the way of doing it, if you want to
go on living” (55). In a later exchange, they reflect on the haunting persistence of life with the oxymoronic term “dead voices”:

   ESTRAGON:  All the dead voices.
   ...  
   VLADIMIR:  To have lived is not enough for them.
   ESTRAGON:  They have to talk about it.
   VLADIMIR:  To be dead is not enough for them.
   ESTRAGON:  It is not sufficient. (58)

Pozzo comments on the absurd brevity of life: “they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (83); while Vladimir expands on this idea: “astride of a grave and a difficult birth” (84). However transient life may be, the play continually suggests continuation despite an insistent sense of ending. Towards the end of the play, Vladimir says, “I can’t go on,” but immediately seems to correct himself: “what have I said?” (85). The persistence of contradictions, self-contradictions, and aporias in this play suggests a central irony about the uncertain waiting it dramatizes: “Godot’s absence from the world may have plunged all into indeterminacy, but that means among other things that there is no assurance that he will not come” (Eagleton 298). By the end of the play, it becomes clear that the two acts have mirrored each other to a large degree; nothing has happened twice in Mercier’s words. As in several of his plays, this repetitiveness serves in Waiting for Godot as an example of mise en abyme (literally “placed into the abyss”), which according to deconstructive theory is a sort of mirroring or internal reduplication that tends to destabilize the linear meaning of the work.
The Unfinalizable Import of *Endgame*

Premiered in 1957, *Endgame* has an apocalyptic setting in which the characters move toward a terminal point that is never quite reached. Hamm, the central character, is blind and confined to a wheelchair. His wry servant Clov is unable to sit. In the background Hamm’s parents Nagg and Nell are stuck in garbage cans from which they occasionally raise their heads and speak. In an opening monologue, Hamm remarks paradoxically, “The bigger a man is the fuller he is. [Pause. Gloomily.] And the emptier” (93). His mother Nell scolds his father Nagg for laughing at his son’s maudlin musings then hits upon another paradox: “nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that” (101). In absurdist fashion, universal meaning for the characters in this play is apparently absent, and even the idea of it is laughable. “We’re not beginning to…to…mean something?,” Hamm asks. “Mean something!,” Clov replies, “you and I mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that’s a good one!” (108). As bleak as this one-act play can be, it contains some comic relief. Clov asks, “do you believe in the life to come?,” and Hamm responds with the pun, “mine was always that” (116). Katherine Worth finds characteristic comedy in this play: “the echoes we hear…are Irish, the gallows humor of Synge, O’Casey’s gusty farce with its black undertones” (248-49).

In a signature line that suggests Bakhtinian unfinalizability, Hamm declares an end to the play’s proceedings but then has to correct himself: “it’s finished, we’re finished. [Pause.] Nearly finished” (116). As Ben-Zvi has observed, these verb phrases “retreat from absolute

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20 Among numerous interpretations of names in this play, it has been noted that Clov is a homonym for clove, which is the past tense of cleave (Cohn 241). And cleave is in a sense a bull of word in that it can mean opposite things: as an intransitive verb to adhere firmly, and as a transitive verb to divide or split. Significantly Beckett leaves ambiguous whether Clov will leave Hamm at the play’s end.

21 Cohn notes that in a play replete with Biblical allusions, Hamm’s words echo Christ’s last words on the cross in the Gospel of St. John: “It is finished” (227). Hamm’s self-correcting “nearly finished” may be a bull commenting on the paradoxical nature of Jesus’ life as finished on the cross yet continuing through resurrection.
certainty to a questioning of the irrevocability of ending” (147). As in much of Beckett’s work, the dramatic arc of the play is asymptotic, approaching an end but never quite achieving it. Hamm remarks paradoxically, “the end is in the beginning and yet you go on” (126). As in the novels and *Waiting for Godot*, something always seems to remain, to go on; there is a tapering off but not a complete ending. Indeed Hamm’s final words in *Endgame* are “you…remain” (134). Begam has remarked upon the paradox that “Beckett’s moribunds are…notoriously tenacious of life” (125). Absolute endings seem impossible, as do absolute expressions of disbelief in God. When Hamm grows frustrated with his attempt at prayer, he utters a bull: “the bastard! He doesn’t exist!” (119). With this self-contradictory exclamation, a statement of disbelief is made in terms that imply belief: it is impossible to be angry at a non-existent God. He also comments paradoxically on the impossibility of being absolutely alone for he feels that through language he always has company of a sort: “…words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark” (126). With this bull he yokes the ideas of being alone yet also “together.” Like Didi and Gogo, Clov announces his intention to leave but remains on stage in the closing tableau, leaving open the question of whether this game will continue.

**Bulls in a Radio Play and Monologic Drama**

Written in English in 1956 as a radio play for the British Broadcasting Corporation, *All That Fall* is set in the Dublin suburbs and tells the story of Mrs. Rooney who is going to meet her blind husband at the railway station after his day at work. Early on she comments on her strange way of speaking: “I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very…bizarre” (173). Bulls account for some of the bizarre quality of her speech. She
tells two men trying to help her out of a car, “don’t take any notice of me. I do not exist. The fact is well known” (179). When Mr. Rooney arrives he utters bulls as well. “We have saved fivepence,” he says, “but at what cost?” (188). This contrary remark seems a variation on the notion of being penny-wise and pound-foolish. In another contrary opinion, he says, “the loss of my sight was a great fillip. If I could go deaf and dumb, I think I might pant on to be a hundred” (192). It is as if physical incapacities somehow enhance health and longevity. Mrs. Rooney later makes a comment that revisits her earlier statement that a living person could not exist. She recounts a lecture she had heard by a psychiatrist who described treating a depressed girl who later died. The psychiatrist, she recalled, described the girl’s problem with what might sound like a bull: “the trouble with her was she had never really been born!” (196). It is a comment that echoes remarks in *Waiting for Godot* about giving birth astride a grave, and it complements themes of this one-act play: the angst of childlessness and the agony of a child’s death.

Bulls would also be an attribute of Beckett’s monologic plays, which became more frequent over time. Written in English in 1958, *Krapp’s Last Tape* presents the solitary 69-year-old titular character as he listens to tape recordings of himself as a younger man. Krapp makes paradoxical remarks about himself on the tape. “With all this darkness round me,” the 39-year-old Krapp says, “I feel less alone. [Pause.] In a way” (217). This contrary comment relates to the partially unveiled paradox at the core of the play, a paradox he describes as a profound revelation, what he calls “the vision at last” (220). It is his epiphany “that the dark I have always struggled to keep under is in reality my most—” (220). Beckett does not allow his audience to hear exactly what the “dark” came to mean for Krapp; this is not an anti-epiphany but it is an obscured one. Still audiences can infer that this “dark” carried some artistic or spiritual import.
As a result of the revelation, Krapp has tried through art to reconcile the antinomies of light and dark, mind and body, spirituality and sensuality.

Elsewhere in the play, the younger Krapp makes a very Beckettian juxtaposition of birth and death when he recalls “a big black hooded perambulator, most funereal thing” (219). And the elder Krapp comments on the paradoxical quality of ruminating on memories, a process that is both sedentary and, in a way, adventurous: “lie propped up in the dark—and wander” (223). For Krapp memory has paradoxically become the future, the undiscovered country.

The play ends with what might be described as a bull of action. The 69-year-old Krapp belies the conviction of his 39-year-old self who claims “perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back” (223). Yet the older man’s very fixation on his recorded musings indicates that he does want his best—or at least earlier—years back. Contrary to the taped resolution, the only fire apparently left in Krapp is to cast back in his memory. Here self-contradiction reflects the varied attitudes of distinct selves at different periods of life. Krapp fixates on his memory of a lost love, of a failed attempt at interpersonal unity. He is left with a dialogic relationship with himself, or his past selves. He has through his internal contradictions become an artist—albeit a frustrated one. As Henning observes using Bakhtinian terminology, “where dialogic strife has…been maintained, there art and creativity are possible” (155). Krapp’s conclusion is that of the Proustian artist. He chooses the past and his representation of it over a more active life, preferring the transcendence offered by memory to the immanent present.
Happy Days: The Pathos of Fading Memory

In Happy Days, another virtually monologic play, a bull illustrates comically the pathos of the central character’s predicament. First written in English in 1961, the play dramatizes the plight of Winnie, a middle-aged woman buried for unknown reasons at first up to her waist and later up to her neck. As part of her heroic effort to keep order in an absurd environment, Winnie attempts to quote from literary classics. In this most literarily self-conscious of his plays, Beckett has her allude to Shakespeare, Milton, Omar Khayyám, Charles Wolfe, Robert Herrick, Thomas Gray, Keats, Byron, Yeats, Robert Browning, and the Bible. Sliding asymptotically into oblivion, Winnie cannot properly recall many of the writers she tries to quote in her middle-class preoccupation with canonical literature. This poignant failure is crystalized by her Irish bull: “what is that unforgettable line?” (160). The question on one level contradicts itself but on another makes sense in as much as the lines have not been forgotten entirely; they remain in fragmentary form. Faulty memory and an inability to live up to her own image of respectability contribute to her pathos. She cannot remember her classics, but they remain in fragments and they matter deeply to her. In act one, she remarks: “all comes back. [Pause.] All? [Pause.] No, not all. [Smile.] No no. [Smile off.] Not quite. [Pause.] A part” (144). In act two she adds: “one loses one’s classics. [Pause.] Oh not all. [Pause.] A part. [Pause.] A part remains. [Pause.] That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one’s classics, to help one through the day. [Pause.] Oh yes, many mercies, many mercies” (164). Audiences may not recognize the lines from literature that Winnie finds so wonderful, and in a way that lack of recognition is the point. They can share her foggy familiarity with the lines and through empathy be drawn into the drama.
Beckett’s notes on the play underscore the importance of the literary allusions, with meticulous sourcing and fuller quotations for the fragments that appear in the final version (Beckett Collection MS 1547/1). His production and draft notes make clear that he was deliberately alluding to literary classics. The quotes are relevant to the themes of *Happy Days* and Beckett’s other monologues. In particular the Shakespearean lines Winnie vaguely remembers—from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Cymbeline*—reflect situations in which characters cannot communicate with loved ones: Romeo because Juliet is unconscious; Ophelia because Hamlet appears to be mad; and Guiderius because Imogen appears to be dead. All three highlight Winnie’s compelling need for communication despite an unwilling other, the self-absorbed Willie. When pressed, Willie will occasionally respond, but almost all of Winnie’s words go unheard. Beckett advised actors to behave as if this was the case. It seems to be enough for Winnie that Willie *might* hear her, that she can imagine someone hearing her and appreciating her allusions to the classics. The allusions also show something about Beckett that is much less obvious in most of his other work: his erudition. As his friend and publisher John Calder put it, “Beckett’s reading as a young man was vast, but he seldom alluded to it” (6). In *Happy Days*, he had a specific reason for including numerous allusions: he wanted to demonstrate the poignancy of a character under such duress that she could partially forget the unforgettable.

Winnie has other self-corrects, self-contradictions, and aporias. She remarks the she feels “…no pain—*[puts on spectacles]*—hardly any” (140). She reverses herself about her memories: “…strange thing, time like this, drift up into the mind. [Pause.] Strange? [Pause.] No, here all is strange” (157). Paradoxically she notes, “…Never any change. [Pause.] And more and more strange” (158). In a self-contradiction, she says, “…oh no doubt you are dead,
like the others, no doubt you have died, or gone away and left me, like the others, it doesn’t matter, you are there” (160). This line echoes other plays and novels by Beckett where the line between life and death is blurred; the two paradoxically coexist. In another line, Winnie comments on the way that she is at once unchanged and profoundly different: “…to have been always what I am—and so changed from what I was” (161). Like the narrator of *The Unnamable*, she has at the same time a pressing sense that her story must end and a compulsion to continue: “…I can do no more. [Pause.] Say no more. [Pause.] But I must say more” (166). The play has been described as “a characteristically Beckettian form of purgatory” (Knowlson, Pilling 96). Purgatory, imagined by Dante as a mountain between the antinomies of heaven and hell, is an appropriate place for paradoxes, self-contradictions, and aporias—a place that defers the totalizing truth of heaven.

In her last spoken words, before she breaks out into the song that ends the play, Winnie utters another bull: “oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day! [Pause.] After all. [Pause.] So far” (168). Here a startling statement is qualified to the point of potential self-contradiction. It is a happy day but only “so far.” Indeed the play ends with Willie approaching both Winnie and the pistol that lies beside her. It is ambiguous whether he intends to comfort her or to use the pistol to kill her. The curtain falls before audiences can learn whether it truly was a happy day for her after all.

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22 Knowlson and Pilling add that Winnie’s “attempt to impose some meaning on a meaningless world with worn-out words appears at once pathetically inadequate and rather admirable…a muted form of brave heroism” (102).
Later Drama: More Paradox, Less Comedy

As Beckett gradually turned to briefer and sparer dramatic works, he moved away from the slapstick comedy of his early plays. In this sense bulls did not so much disappear as they became more paradoxical and less comical. Written in the late 1950s and published in English in the 1970s, *Rough for Theatre II* contains the bull, “you’d be the death of me if I were sufficiently alive!” (248). Written in English in 1965, *Eh Joe* includes a paradoxical statement about its haunted titular character: “…and look at him now…Throttling the dead in his head” (363). The voice of *Not I*, written in English in 1972, remarks in a contrary manner, “…so no love…spared that” (376). It might be said that *Not I* dramatizes a bull of action in that its sole speaker insists the narrative is not about herself, when it clearly seems to be about her. S.E. Gontarski posits that the speaker, named Mouth, is analogous in this sense to the author: “we see in both Mouth and Beckett an autobiographical ambivalence as they struggle not to talk about self…when the reality of self is all there is to talk about” (230).

Several of the later plays used bulls to entertain the absurd qualities of nothingness, the persistence of something after death, and the notion of otherness within an individual. In *...but the clouds...*, written in English in 1976, the monologic voice describes having “busied myself with something else, or with nothing, busied myself with nothing?” (420). Audiences might recognize similar comments about doing nothing by Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* and about the profound reality of nothingness by Malone in *Malone Dies*. In *A Piece of Monologue*, written in English in 1979, the speaker says—characteristically for Beckett—that “birth was the death of him” and later tells of “dying on” (425, 426). Similarly this speaker describes a “starless moonless heaven…[that] dies on to dawn and never dies” (427). As in so many of the previous works, something seems to transcend death despite a pervasive sense of mortality. Cohn notes
that “just as dying had a sexual connotation for the Elizabethans, so it seems to have a creative one for Beckett—artistically creative” (242). Life and death are essential antinomies fused in Beckett’s Irish bulls.

In *Rockaby*, written in English in 1980, a maternal voice seems to speak to the moribund, solitary character of the play as she rocks metronomically in her chair. The play’s subject has been described paradoxically as “the desire to end the ‘compulsion to repeat,’ the desire to end desiring” (McMullan 106). In it the maternal voice remarks paradoxically that it is “…time she went right down/was her own other/own other living soul” (441). “Own other” suggests oxymoron but also profundity in as much as it implies a consummation in solitude—in the embracing arms of a “mother rocker”—that appears to have failed in community (440).²³ Within Beckett’s oeuvre, *Rockaby* is a visually and aurally haunting coda for many eschatological meditations in monologue. Haunting, a motif of many of Beckett’s later plays, was something Derrida associated with aporia: “A plural logic of the aporia…takes shape. It appears to be paradoxical enough so that the partitioning among multiple figures of aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other” (20).

A sense of aporetic haunting accompanies the two characters of one of Beckett’s final plays. Written in English in 1981, *Ohio Impromptu* focuses on a reader and listener, possibly representing the young and impressionable Beckett and the older, wiser, more accomplished Joyce, who had asked the younger man to read to him because of his failing sight. Coining profound oxymorons, the reader tells of having seen “the dear face and heard the unspoken

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²³ Emphasizing the clipped rhythm and figurative invention of this play, Ben-Zvi has described it as “more poetry than prose” and “a lyrical poem of 251 lines” (160, 177). This calls to mind Gontarski’s claim that poetry is at the heart of most of Beckett’s art.
words, Stay where we were so long alone together” (446). The oxymoron, “alone together” hints at the paradoxical feeling of an insular personality in the company of an intimate friend. Later the reader speaks of being “alone together so much shared” (446). In a further oxymoron, he says, “I saw the dear face and heard the unspoken words,” as if the unspoken could be heard (447). The reader is left to self-correction and self-contradiction as his story reaches its end: “…or was it that buried in who knows what thoughts they paid no heed? To light of day. To sound of reawakening. What thoughts who knows. Thoughts, no, not thoughts. Profounds of mind. Buried in who knows what profounds of mind. Of mindlessness” (448). The very notion of profundity is contradicted here. In the manner of différance, mindfulness and mindlessness are yoked together. Audiences sense that the intimacy between listener and reader in this play is so intense that binaries conflate. The reader and listener—who the stage directions say should be “as alike in appearance as possible”—may even be haunting aspects of the same person, the mind and the heart (445).

This chapter has argued by numerous examples that Irish bulls permeate Samuel Beckett’s major works and that they are essential to understanding his art. Beckett’s relationship with Ireland was fraught but significant, and it is not surprising that an Irish stylistic tendency expressed his similarly fraught relationship with language. Synge and O’Casey had clear influences on him that he acknowledged, and of course Joyce had a deep impact on him as a young man both personally and professionally. More generally Beckett was the inheritor of an Anglo-Irish literary tradition and a product of the culture that produced the Irish literary revival. Among his inheritances were a post-colonial suspicion of the imperial English tongue, a tragicomic view of life, a propensity for poetic and figurative invention, and a tendency toward self-contradiction. Irish bulls, which had veered widely over the centuries from pratfalls to
paradoxes, gained new currency in Beckett’s abstracted and universalized settings. No longer merely verbal props for stage Irish buffoonery, bulls became expressions of the paradoxical tensions between art and chaos, reason and absurdity, life and death. They remained carnivalesque statements that challenged authorities and upset traditional order, as they had been for many previous Irish writers. They took on new theoretical significance as deconstruction began to spotlight the ways language can subvert itself. By adjusting a long-running tradition to his times, Beckett anticipated one of the most influential movements in modern literary theory.

Works Cited


-- -- -- Manuscripts and typescripts from the Beckett Collection at the University of Reading.


Conclusion

VLADIMIR: Let us not waste time in idle discourse! [Pause. Vehemently.] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate has consigned us! What do you say? (1986 Beckett 74).

Vladimir’s stirring speech in Act II of *Waiting for Godot* does not lead to the heroic action he envisions. He and Estragon comically fail to assist the blind and prostrate Pozzo—who Estragon claims represents “all humanity”—and only end up floundering on the ground themselves (78). This is another bull of inaction, a contrast between words and deeds, in a play that crucially dramatizes the inactive bull of Didi and Gogo’s continuous waiting despite declarations of departure. As so often for Beckett, words fail, and the grandiose rhetoric Didi uses in his speech only makes that failure more spectacular and more comic. Beckett took his place in the tradition of the Irish bull despite his deliberate disassociation from many elements of the literary heritage of his birthplace. He was an artist of extremities, and he carried bulls to a terminal point in prose fiction, a point from which he departed into drama. On the stage rhetorical inadequacy could be enacted through bulls of action and inaction, through spoken words and physicality.

The tradition of the Irish bull was not exclusive to the stage, but it found some of its most resonant expressions there. The “jokes for sale” by Richard Head in the seventeenth century and the comical self-contradictions of Maria Edgeworth’s characters in the early nineteenth century exemplified bulls and demonstrated their enduring appeal to readers. They showed that bulls were more than stage Irish claptrap; they could be profound in their implications. Meanwhile
playwrights like Robert Howard, George Farquhar, and Thomas Sheridan ensured that the bull-speaking Irishman remained a staple of English-language drama. Bulls might be signs of folly, but they could still be endearing and come from appealing characters. Dion Boucicault and Oscar Wilde ensured that relatively positive versions of bulls were heard on the popular stages of the Victorian era. Boucicault renovated the stage Irish character, rendering him both humorous and heroic. Wilde more subtly revised national stereotypes by showing that an Irish writer could subvert the social conventions of imperial England; and bulls were a means of that subversion. Abbey Theatre writers like Lady Gregory and Sean O’Casey used bulls to make political points at a time of cultural revival and violent conflict in Ireland. Despite the serious reformist agenda of the Abbey’s founders, the theatre’s managers realized humor was an inalienable quality of their productions, and bulls continued as self-deprecating iterations of that comic sensibility. Beckett carefully studied Abbey performances and counted J.M. Synge and O’Casey as important influences.

As a writer of tragicomedy, Beckett was carrying on a legacy from the Abbey and its precursors. Like tragicomedy, his bulls yoke seeming opposites together in thought-provoking ways. As was the case for his predecessors, Beckett penned bulls that were both comical and significant. They contain deeper meanings beneath their superficial absurdity. They signify the limits of language and the complexities of reality. They suggest paradox as an enduring quality of Irish literary tradition, even when it is distanced by the author’s exile and adoption of a foreign language. O’Casey’s pun on paradox—what a parrot talks—is instructive in Beckett’s case. Beckett was trying to avoid parroting the tendencies of his native countrymen, including their paradoxes. He was trying to “write without style” and avoid the “too easy” poetic qualities
of Hiberno-English. So it is not surprising that the English versions of his works tend to have more Irish bulls than the French ones.

Beckett strove to transcend the postcolonial parameters within which many prior Irish writers worked, with their focus on the colonial relationship with England and its aftermath. In his earliest works he engaged with Descartesian philosophy and Marcel Proust, and his early essay on James Joyce placed Joyce in the tradition of Italian intellectuals. His decision to start writing initially in French after the Second World War marked a further disassociation from Ireland in both subject and style. Yet certain stylistic tendencies, including bulls, remained in his work. As he put it wryly in the addenda to *Watt*: “for all the good that frequent departures out of Ireland had done him, he might just as well have stayed there” (1953 207). By internationalizing—and to a certain extent deracinating—bulls, Beckett contributed in his own way to the Irish literary revival’s attempts to reform perceptions of national character. If bulls can be spoken by characters as generic as the unnamable, Didi, Gogo, Winnie, and Krapp, they are not merely the sort of national foible implied by the more pejorative jokes and stage characters of the previous centuries.

Moreover, Beckett’s bulls occur in an absurdist context where they reflect the perplexities of human existence rather than the ignorance of their speakers. They become aporias, points of both logical impasse and philosophical departure, in other words, paradoxes. As Wilde, a Victorian with absurdist tendencies, has a character observe in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the verities become acrobats we can judge them” (44–45). Beckett continued the long-running tradition of Irish writers placing truth on this “tight-rope” of paradox, of compelling it be flexible and acrobatic. The social conventions that Wilde so gleefully skewered
were changed by Beckett’s time. Modernism and world wars prepared readers and audiences for seemingly absurd contexts that might be expected to yield apparently absurd statements. Bulls became reflections of absurd conditions, not slurs on their speakers.

Beckett’s plays resist singular readings, something that is perhaps most famously expressed in the author’s claim that he did not say who or what was meant by Godot in the play because he did not know himself. Certainly bulls are not the only way to approach his oeuvre, but they provide a point of access and analysis that complements his standing as both a distinctively Irish writer and a practitioner of absurdist drama. They are concise indicators of their author’s sense of wonder, bewilderment, and exasperation when faced with the human condition. And they accumulate into a carnivalesque satire of rationality and rhetoric, spotlighting the frustrating gaps between language and reality. Bulls destabilize and deconstruct language. As Didi remarks angrily to Gogo, “nothing is certain when you’re about” (16). He might as well be commenting on the uncertainty engendered by bulls’ self-contradictory perplexities. Significantly, Didi is the more practical of the two, while Gogo claims to have been a poet. Gogo provides a figurative counterpoint to his partner’s strict rationality, a sense that “nothing is certain.” The two complement each other as analogues for the way that reason and absurdity coexist in Beckett’s world.

Like other absurdist dramatists, Beckett had a fraught relationship with many of the traditions he inherited. Yet he did not abandon those traditions; he transformed them into a more modern art. Some of those traditions included Irish tragicomedy, music-hall banter and buffoonery, and Shakespearean monologues and soliloquies. Despite his desire for a less-adorned, less-figurative style than Irish writers tended to possess, he continued the tradition of the Irish bull throughout his career, something especially evident in his English-language works.
As Hamm comments in an apostrophe at the indeterminate ending of *Endgame*, “Old stancher! [Pause.] You…remain” (134). After stripping away many cultural identifiers from his works, Beckett demonstrated that one of the essential traits remaining was the Irish bull.

**Works Cited**

