

The Politics of Poetry

by Conor Cruise O'Brien

Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?

W. B. Yeats, when near to death, asked himself that question about his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, first performed in 1902 with Maud Gonne in the title role. The "certain men" were those who took part in the Rising of Easter, 1916, in Dublin.

In that Rising, a woman took a leading part; the metaphor is here not a dead one as you will see. The woman was Constance Countess Markiewicz, born Constance Gore-Booth. Constance was sentenced to death for her part in the Rising; later reprieved. We know that she recalled, out of that experience, Yeats' play, with its summons to totality of sacrifice and its promise of remembrance. His words of 14 years before were imprinted in her mind as "a sort of gospel."

We know that she was not the only one of her generation to be affected in this way by *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Another revolutionary who saw it, P. S. O'Hegarty, called it "a sort of sacrament." And a spectator who disapproved came away from a performance asking himself "if such plays should be produced unless one was

prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot."

To the question of the dying poet,

Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot?

it seems that the probable answer is "Yes, it did."

What is the difference between the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and the Rising of 1916? If participants in the "real life" action have taken in the "fiction" as a "gospel" or "sacrament," can we say flatly that one is "fiction" and the other "real life"?

If a participant, *remembering* the play, and remembering its conditional promise to be remembered forever, enacts the sacrifice demanded in the play, is she not in fact continuing the action of the play, in terms which are different, not in the sense that real life is different from fiction, but in the sense that the new action crosses a social and conventional threshold into illegality and violence?

It was legal for Maud Gonne to step onto a raised platform in a concert hall in Dublin, pretend that she was Ireland, and utter words which were a summons to violent action.

It was illegal for Constance Markiewicz to step into a park in Dublin,

announce in effect that she was one of Ireland's children summoned by her to her flag—which was the language of the Easter Week Proclamation—and use firearms to defend the park and the flag against the same forces which Maud Gonne had symbolically defied.

The essential differences between the two transactions remain in the legal and technical orders. In terms of “reality” they are on the same footing, both real and symbolic. For of course the Dublin Rising of 1916, which presented no hope at all of military victory, was a symbolic sacrifice, deliberately designed so that its actors, like the men 1798 evoked in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, should be “remembered forever,” and so that their memory, like the play itself, should be an incitement to further sacrifices.

I have talked in Northern Ireland with certain men whose sole ambition it is to play such a role—in Constance's terms, not Maud's—and be among those who are remembered in this way. For these men, though they use political language, what is important is not a political objective; the idea that their professed political objective is almost certainly unattainable not only does not deter them, but does not even interest them much.

What interests them is the identification with the role of the patriot rebel, and a need to be remembered in this role; the posthumous audience is important.

This is what gives meaning to their lives; it is their honor. And nothing can make their performance in the role memorable except the dimension of risk, up to the supreme sacrifice. Without this element it would all, as they think, be “play-acting”; with this element, it becomes “real.”

Yet it is real, and it is also play-acting, at one and the same time—in that resembling also an action on the stage.

It would be a mistake, I think, to regard these phenomena as purely or especially “Irish,” although it is true that subject peoples have somewhat more incentive than others to explore the possibilities of symbolic action, certain other forms of action being usually closed to them. In Sicily, the puppet theater helped to establish the conventions of the Mafia. But peoples can be “subject” in other ways than by nationality, and the history of dispossessed elements among dominant peoples shows elements comparable to the relation of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* to Constance Markiewicz. The first night of Beaumarchais' *Mar-*

riage of Figaro was an episode—a real episode—in the French Revolution, and the dialogue of Bazarov in Turgenyev's *Fathers and Sons* set the tone for more than one generation of Russian proto-revolutionaries. The plebeians are always, in some sense, rehearsing the uprising.

But it is not only in the revolutionary tradition that the stage and reality mingle. The play—including plays of so-called “real life”—can incite to violence, but it can also be a substitute for violence, a form of redirected activity. The United Nations is a theater for and of activity of this kind. Again and again, the stages of the Security Council and General Assembly have been used for symbolic representations, once or twice to legitimize the use of force, but much more often to sanctify its avoidance. In all cases the basic political decisions were taken elsewhere, but the United Nations was the scene for a spectacle making these decisions acceptable and, in a secular way, holy.

In the case of Korea, the Security Council chamber was the scene for a rite of sanctification, accompanying the American decisions to intervene. This rite was not, of course, strictly speaking, a Security Council decision at all; Article 27 of the Charter requires “the concurring votes of the permanent members” and one of these, the Soviet Union, was absent and did not concur. Legalities were, however, in practice unimportant; the spectacle mounted in the Security Council chamber was adequate for its purpose: symbolic drama of legitimation, propitiation, and reassurance, comparable to the pouring of a libation. This ceremony surely helped the American public to feel that Korea was a just war. A part of the uneasiness felt about Vietnam is that it has gone unblest, since it is not possible, in contemporary conditions at the United Nations, to stage a ceremony analagous to that performed just after—not before—President Truman's decision to intervene in Korea.

Lady Macbeth at the UN

In the case of Hungary, the United States used the United Nations stage for a ritual drama with the reverse significance to the Korean one. The Eisenhower government, pledged though it was to “roll back the Iron Curtain,” decided in fact not to come to the aid of the Hungarian rebels, but instead to present a cleansing and compensatory ritual drama at the United Nations. This depended, for much of its effect, on imprecise public recollections of the Korean performance. *Then* the Security Council had *acted*, in a real or literal sense, so the public thought. *Now*, in the case of Hungary, the Security Council “was powerless to act,” because of the Soviet veto and because the Soviet representative was present this time. The spectacle of “the Security Council powerless to act,” because paralyzed by the Russian veto, was in fact the *cleansing* scene in the ritual drama. It was cleansing by means of a scapegoat stricken with paralysis. Eisenhower and Dulles were freed of the guilt of allowing the Hungarians to be crushed; the United Nations bore that guilt. The *compensatory* scenes of the same drama were staged in the General Assembly: speeches and resolutions condemning the Soviet Union for its action in Hungary. The representatives of the United States could be seen and heard by huge television audiences, playing active and virtuous parts in these scenes. There can be no doubt that the availability of these dramatic resources made it easier for the Eisenhower government to resist, or rather to deflect, the pressure they heavily felt towards some form of intervention.

The men who planned the Anglo-French intervention at Suez, which coincided with the Hungarian Rising, had a scenario of their own. Selwyn Lloyd, Foreign Secretary in the Eden government, directed that the United Nations be used to set the stage for the intervention—the metaphor here is

his own. Those who dramatize a version of politics are often quite conscious of what they are doing.

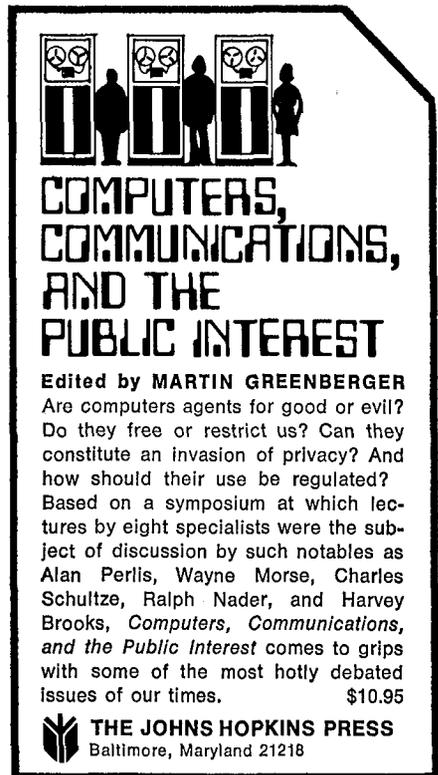
The British and French presented a resolution to the Security Council which they knew the Soviet Union would veto, and which the Soviet Union did in fact veto. The versatility of this form of drama is shown by the fact that the very same situation—"Security Council Paralyzed by the Veto"—which served Eisenhower and Dulles as a pretext for *not* intervening in Hungary, served Eden and Mollet as a preparation for *intervention* in Egypt on the theory that, having exhausted the recourse to the procedures of the Charter and having been denied peaceful redress, they had recovered their freedom of action. It was most unfortunate for them that their scenario clashed with the scenario selected by a greater power. The United States, which would certainly have used some equivalent of the Anglo-French scenario if it had decided on intervention in Hungary, necessarily found that scenario altogether unacceptable when, having decided on non-intervention, it found it convenient to claim that its hands were tied by its commitment to the Charter, and by the Soviet veto. Whatever Eisenhower and Dulles might in other circumstances have decided to do, or not to do, about the invasion of Egypt, their own self-scripted Hungarian role, in the autumn of 1956, made it mandatory on them to discredit the Anglo-French scenario since, if its credibility could be sustained, it would discredit their own. In my belief, this competition of scenarios and roles, within the same theater, accounts in a considerable degree for the vigor and promptitude with which the United States government brought the Anglo-French performance to its inglorious end.

The Western powers and in particular the United States have made the most use of the theatrical possibilities of the United Nations; no doubt because they have the greatest say in the management of the theater in

question. But others have used it also. The Soviet Union used it, for example, in the Six-Day War crisis in a manner closely analogous to the compensatory scenes of the American scenario over Hungary. Their rhetoric committed them to some kind of support for the Arabs, and they convened the General Assembly in order to provide that support in theatrical rather than physical form. Again, in the Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev used the United Nations in much the same way as that in which Eden had had to use it over Suez: he presented what was in fact a climb-down before America's power, as law-abiding acquiescence with a United Nations request, and he was seen by his own audience playing out a virtuous part.

Bad Acting is Better Than Truth

None of these performances was wholly satisfactory, but each of them was greatly preferable, from the point of view of those involved, to the



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ignominy of the naked truth. And in most cases the protection given to those involved was also a form of protection for those who watched, and whose danger might have been greater, if a stage and suitable roles had not been available for acting out a version of history different from that of the cabinet rooms and chanceries. Nor was it entirely a case of deceiving the public. If the public was deceived, it was often that it wished to be deceived. A wide public, which included perhaps most of us, wished to be honorably indignant about the Russian suppression of Hungary, but without running the risk of nuclear war. The minima of collective paralysis at the UN met the needs of this dilemma, in much the same way as somewhat similar symptoms in individuals are a way of responding to more directly personal emotional dilemmas. In both cases, we can plausibly infer the coming into play of a kind of survival mechanism. Yet mechanism is an inadequate word to convey the resourcefulness and spontaneity and versatility with which human beings—including such apparently relatively unimaginative human beings as Dulles and Eden—can respond to a simultaneous forked threat to survival and to dignity, by improvising in so many different ways a choreography of dignified retreat and evasion. The metaphor of art form fits more closely than the metaphor of mechanism. Art, as Edmund Burke said, is man's nature.

When Sancho Mocks Quixote

The boundary between what we call "art" and what we call "real life" is an illusion. Man's instinct for self-preservation, and his need for dignity, force him to be a theatrical animal. Since he could not survive without expedients which are often in fact undignified, he feels, and satisfies, the need for further expedients, dignifying the undignified. These expedients can be found in historiography, sermons, journalism, and popular bal-

ladry, but best of all in the dramatic form of the heroic theater, the most vivid of all ways of changing history with dignity. Man's dignity is his own invention, and life constantly forces him to reinvent it. The exaltation of Irish history in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* brought a death sentence to Constance Markiewicz—as a corresponding exaltation among black people in this country, expressed in the drama of Le Roi Jones and others, may well have sent out "certain men the white man shot."

Tragedy may purge of pity and terror, perhaps. It certainly does not purge away, but rather strengthens, man's sense of dignity, if necessary, before survival. Comedy, on the other hand, mostly prefers survival to dignity. Laughter is an acceptance of the idea that life, even with loss of dignity, remains worth living. The curious dramatic forms of "real life" politics are often intermediate between comedy and tragedy. In conditions where peace is saved, the plot is near tragedy; that is, it had to come as near to tragedy as is felt to be compatible with survival. The demeanor of the participants is in the tragic mode, solemn and heroic; any injection of overt comedy would wreck the whole scenario. Yet the spirit at work is the comic spirit, preferring survival to dignity, but offering the public a simulation of dignity, which it knows will be gratefully accepted as the real thing. Sancho Panza plays Quixote, and tragedy is averted.

Truth is said to be the first casualty in time of war. But it is just as true to say that truth is a casualty whenever the peace is saved. In fact, literal truth is inadequate to human needs, either in peace or war. Man cannot live on ascertained facts alone; he has to make something up: a poem, a religion, a country, an ideology, something you can live with and live for. Curiosity, the need to find out the truth, is part of man's nature, but the truth may be too much to take, and the need to invent, to make up a

story, is part of his nature, too. As man's capacity for self-destruction enormously increases, and as the vast increase in his numbers presents new and pressing threats to his individual dignity, so there are proportionate new demands on his ingenuity to find new ways both of surviving and of preserving dignity. The peace protest movements, from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to the present anti-war demonstrations, were one set of responses to this dual need. These movements proceeded of course by essentially dramatic methods: acting out, confrontation, demonstration. The history of some participants in these movements reveals the tension in the interior of the dual demand for human dignity and for survival. Some who joined the peace movement out of a passion for human dignity moved away from pacifism to a cult of violence. Some workers for civil rights, for blacks in America or Catholics in Northern Ireland, having won considerable support and successes by the use of nonviolent methods in the teeth of violence by their adversaries, then swung round and adopted some variant of their adversaries' methods, thereby losing much of their original support.

A Sympathetic Audience

Dramatic politics, the politics of stylized confrontations, requires an audience that is itself split, or capable of being split—or actually more than one audience. Thus the activities of the civil rights movement in Dixie, and the spectacle of the reprisals which they endured, worked by appealing to an audience in the North. Similar activities in South Africa were a total failure because there was no equivalent of the American Northern audience. Similarly, the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland scored successes by appealing in effect to a *British* public, over the heads of the local Protestant rulers of Northern Ireland. But the renewed use of physical force of the Catholic Republicans

in Northern Ireland, and of, say, the Black Panthers, now repels many of those through whose support the civil rights movement won its successes.

Theatrical metaphor pervades journalistic and general discussion of all public activities, including politics and especially high international politics. The expression "to play a part" is so common that we have ceased to be conscious of it as a theatrical metaphor. Expressions like "the chief actors," "the leading role," "the world stage" have lost significance by their sheer triteness. The word "role" has passed into a more specialized and relatively precise vocabulary, that of the social scientists, but again, I think, without retaining much metaphorical life or much feeling of its theatrical origin. The significance of the violence and persistence of theatrical metaphor, as a system of referring to public activities of all kinds, has been largely overlooked.

No Room for Doubt

One reason for not studying dramatized politics is political. Politically committed people will readily discern political dramatization as being among the resources with which adversaries deceive the public; they will often—not always—be reluctant to think of the theatrical as one of the dimensions of all politics, including their own. Governments and establishments have strong reasons for not favoring investigation into the political show business from which they have, by definition, profited. The Left, on the other hand, which one might think had an equivalent interest in dismantling at least establishment show business, has not shown anything like as much interest in this area as its importance seems to require. This lack of interest may perhaps be traced to two type-figures which have always existed on the Left: the puritan and the pedant. The puritan dislikes theater in itself and is unwilling to look at it, even critically; he finds it repulsively frivolous to see political life itself as theatrical, since

politics is important, and the theater is not. The pedant, on the other hand, disdains all the surfaces of life; these are for the vulgar. Deep underlying causes are the thing for him. He is like a man who is so preoccupied with what he thinks may be going on behind the scenes, that he fails to notice what is actually happening on the stage and how it affects the audience.

But apart from political considerations, I suspect there may be more fundamental human reasons for not looking too seriously into this question. Our dignity is involved, not just the dignity of a few, but the dignity of all of us. There is a strong religious side to political drama, and dramatized politics. It was not for nothing that one spectator called *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* "a sort of gospel," and another "a sort of sacrament." This is not a frame of mind conducive or receptive to analysis or criticism. In the case of dramatized politics there is also, especially in moments of great danger, a strong wish to believe in the spectacle as real: identification with a national leader or spokesman represses any intimation that he may be playing a part in the theatrical sense. Even when it was proved—as it was for example in the case of Adlai Stevenson on the Bay of Pigs crisis—that an actor's lines belonged strictly to the world of fiction, a wide public wished to forget this and resented, and still resents, any reference to the fact, very much as a religious public may resent any reference to the exposure of a bogus miracle. It is not that the public any longer argues for the reality of the miracle; it is just that references to it wound the public in its essential piety, in its will to believe, and in its dignity.

Survival As an Art Form

It is also true that the working of such scenarios as I have described, not only in the United Nations but in the theater of domestic politics and in a wide variety of public transactions, depends on agreement to accept the

scenario literally and on its own terms. Illusion—some degree of illusion at least—is a necessary part of how the thing really works; both the preservation of dignity and even survival may at times depend on illusion. Yet it would be wrong, I think, to conclude that because of this we should refrain from analysis of such scenarios, from trying to find the limits of literalness, the social functions of metaphor, and the versatile ambiguous feats of man the dramatist. It is in man's nature to pretend, but it is also in his nature to find out. There are gray areas too: sometimes he pretends to find out, sometimes he finds out more than he pretends. The acquiescence in certain political spectacles may perhaps fall short of literal credence—it may not be so very different from that suspension of disbelief which we are thought to accord in the theater. It may even be that, as against all the resistances I have mentioned, there is now developing, for survival's sake, a greater wish to understand how these matters work. The politics of confrontation, sketchy though they usually are, have forced the dramatic element in politics into the public consciousness. If we are to succeed in living together, in what will for a long time be increasingly and frighteningly crowded conditions, we shall need to develop gestures that require no great elbowroom. It is not so much that there will be a greater need for the symbolic element in politics, but that this element will need to become more economic and more refined. This will require, I believe, in the public generally, a more conscious *general* recognition of the symbolic element, certainly a readiness to take it seriously but no longer quite so literally—a development analogous to the Reformation. There are some signs that this may already be happening in Japan.

More narrowly, among students of human behavior there should, I think, be a growing recognition that art, as well as science, has light to throw on these matters and that the practice of

forms of art, and of the dramatic form in particular, is by no means confined to the small category of those whom we usually classify as artist. Yeats suspected that even political passion was "no more than the desire to be an artist." There is a certain artistic arrogance in that formulation, but it contains a sound intuition, analogous to Burke's about art's being man's nature. Burke meant that it was in man's nature to be ingeniously creative, flowering in scientific achievement and in political institutions but also in art in our modern sense. The fact that I have had to use 20 words to say what Burke said in four—and not merely through my own ineptitude or prolixity but because Burke's saying is no longer readily intelligible—this small fact is a clue to what has been lost in a process of specialization, over a period of less than two centuries. Because, if what Burke says about man is true and if we have lost the ability to say it briefly, pithily, and intelligibly, then we are further from a sense of our identity than we were in his time. He foresaw that we might be.

The challenges of the period we are now entering are making man devote more of his dangerous "art" to the study of his dangerous nature. It may be, of course, that, because of the very identity which Burke asserted, our nature is what our art sees fit to discover; that is, it may be in our nature to deceive ourselves. The artist, as Nietzsche said, is a liar. We do not need, however, to understand ourselves *fully*; perhaps we need, rather, not to do so. We just need to understand ourselves well enough to make possible survival, with a certain minimum of dignity for the survivors. Such a condition seems within reach, although how much pain and destruction will be incurred on the path to its attainment we cannot know. But it seems possible that by a fuller understanding of the odd devices by which we act out in public a version of our problems and our natural woes, we might be able to make that path a little less difficult and dangerous. ■

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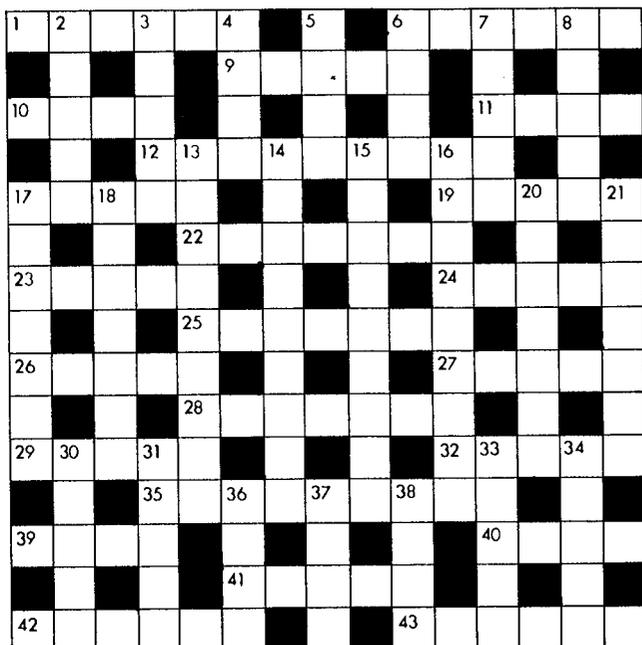
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The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



Across

1. These are armed with a hundred in links' cries. (6)
6. Familiar with the West Indies. (6)
9. Turnover results in coup ending one day later. (5)
10. Magazine costs more than a mite. (4)
11. In the same place as my bridge action. (4)
12. John, Dick, and Harry are three of the last five to be this. (9)
17. Use pen in France a little. (2, 3)
19. Travelers see a hero in Chicago. (5)
22. Nobody likes manna to eat these days. (3, 1, 3)
23. Kinds of right in danger. (5)
24. Weariness shows in nineteen nuisances. (5)
25. Destroyer of slang caught in act. (1, 3, 3)
26. It's no use to eye lava. (5)
27. Sample at set times. (5)
28. Axe into smallest possible cab force. (3, 4)
29. This is not, or should not be, an aim in life. (2, 3)
32. Sounds like more than one letter would vex. (5)
35. Martin's family. (9)
37. He wasn't caught short by Teddy. (4)
40. This can be Scotch or red. (4)
41. A look in Nixon's mirror finds him ageless. (5)
42. Consolidated, then what? (6)
43. The sight of these too often repels. (6)

Down

2. Tear-jerker goes on and on with me in the middle. (5)
3. Delicacy served by Nez Percé indians. (5)
4. Tries a ruse to make certain. (4)
5. Partly found in wise mixture. (4)
6. He lied, but it's useless to complain. (4)
7. Muskie's senior. (5)
8. This rider stays out of 36 down. (5)
13. Ellen nags our mother and leaves. (4, 5)
14. Newcomer got things going at trio's fete. (3, 4, 2)
15. They produce endless star comedy upside down. (9)
16. Dull newcomer hangs on ten tiny fingers. (9)
17. Brash newcomer put rats in desk drawer. (7)
18. Maybe newcomer can shape P.R. program. (7)
20. Forgetting you have the same in a tan shade. (7)
21. Sexless film from good direction following epic. (7)
30. Double zero lays an egg. (5)
31. Villains go as I did. (5)
33. Poets may legally block the way. (5)
34. Kind of bowl or highway. (5)
36. It should not be so dry in Iran. (4)
37. How a ten-whisky man likes his. (4)
38. Ship bottom down is 2 down up. (4)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 16.