

'The sneering, lofty conception of what they call culture': O'Casey, popular culture and the Literary Revival

PATRICK LONERGAN

In *Strange Country*, Seamus Deane writes that one of the difficulties faced by writers of the Revival was that they maintained 'the position that a traditional culture had been destroyed while still making the integrity of that culture the basis of a claim for political independence'. This difficulty was overcome, Deane states, by 'the remarkable feat of ignoring the famine and rerouting the claim for cultural exceptionalism through legend rather than through history'¹.

Deane's statement illustrates the ways in which Sean O'Casey differs from many other writers of the Revival. Famously anti-heroic, O'Casey's plays ignore legend; most of them are set in the immediate environment of the Abbey Theatre itself, and they are for the most part comprised of a language and subjects taken directly from O'Casey's own experience of life in Dublin. Moreover, rather than making a case for cultural exceptionalism, O'Casey was careful to present the literary revival as only one part of a much richer Irish cultural environment, which included not only the work of Synge and Yeats, but also such varied elements as Shakespearean drama, the Bible, popular theatre and music, and cinema.

The purpose of this essay is to present a reappraisal of the Revival in two senses. I want to articulate some of O'Casey's reservations about the Revival, on the basis that they had an important effect on the development of his work, and are also worth considering in their own right. I also want to reappraise the Revival myself, by suggesting that, although he is widely regarded as one of the canonical figures of the movement, O'Casey might better be understood as one of the revival's earliest critics.

Shortly before *Juno and the Paycock* premiered at the Abbey, Lennox Robinson provoked controversy in Ireland by asserting that most Dubliners did not consider the Abbey to be worth attending. Questioned at a meeting of the Oxford Union, Robinson was, according to a report in the *Irish Statesman*, 'compelled to give the lamentable answer that the patrons of the theatre consisted almost entirely of visitors to the city.'²

¹ Seamus Deane, *Strange country: modernity and nationhood in Irish writing since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 51. ² 'Mr Lennox Robinson in Oxford' in *Irish Statesman*, 1 Mar. 1924, p.106, cited in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The years of O'Casey* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 188.

This difficulty in attracting Dubliners to the Abbey may seem surprising: in the early years of the twentieth century, drama was so popular a source of entertainment in the city that one commentator claims that working class Dublin was 'addicted to the theatre'.³ Melodrama was the most popular form of entertainment on the Dublin stage in the decades before the production of *Juno and the Paycock*. As Chris Morash points out: 'The vibrancy of Irish melodrama in the decade and a half after 1910 was only partly due to the over-heated political climate of the time; it was equally the first fruits of a Faustian pact with the cinema.'⁴ Pantomimes and adaptations of popular novels such as *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *The Three Musketeers* were also common, and Shakespeare was very popular too, as we know from *Ulysses*. As is the case today, star-actors guaranteed to draw an audience were cast in plays like *King Lear*, which were often the main feature in triple bills that could run for up to five hours, starting at seven and ending at midnight.⁵ This explains O'Casey's inclusion in *The Shadow of a Gunman* of an exchange between Davoren and Seamus that audiences today find surprising. When Davoren quotes, 'The village cock hath thrice done salutation to the morn', Seamus is able to identify the source of that quote instantly: 'Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act Five, Scene III. It was Ratcliffe said that to Richard just before the battle of Bosworth.'⁶

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, people in Ireland engaged with many forms of culture that existed beyond the confines of the revival. These included many different forms of popular entertainment, but also included recognizably Irish literary work. For example, writing about Emily Lawless's 1904 biography of Maria Edgeworth, Colin Graham points out that:

Through Lawless as an Irish woman author writing about another Irish woman Author ... Through the shamrocks and harps which decorate the covers of Blackburne, and through Edgeworth's novels (kitschily) republished by Dent in 1893, it is clear that Irish literature had, between 1890 and 1910, a definable and marketable existence beyond and at a remove from the Revival's rhetoric.⁷

Lennox Robinson made his comment at a time when the Dublin theatre was thriving and when the Irish public showed themselves to have an enthusiasm for many different forms of recognizably Irish culture. The Abbey's difficulty in attracting an audience is therefore not easy to understand. One expla-

³ C. Desmond Greaves, *Sean O'Casey: politics and art* (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1979), p. 27. ⁴ Chris Morash, *A history of Irish theatre, 1601–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 154. ⁵ This is treated in detail in Stephen Watt, *Joyce, O'Casey and the Irish popular theatre* (New York: Syracuse UP, 1991). ⁶ Sean O'Casey, *The Shadow of the Gunman in Plays 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 38. ⁷ Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2001), p. 36.

nation for it may be that, after the turn of the century, cultural life in Ireland became increasingly stratified according to social class. Lance Pettitt illustrates this with his discussion of early Irish cinema:

Within a short time of its introduction into Ireland, watching films quickly became a popular activity. By 1916, there were some 150 cinemas and halls showing films, about 30 each in Belfast and Dublin. This produced socio-political tensions that were as much about class differences as nationalist politics. While cinemas in the USA and Britain were consciously gentrified by owner-managers to make them more acceptable to middle-classes, in Ireland the reverse happened. Apart from certain select audiences, like the Metropole in Dublin, cinemas developed large working class audiences, which were viewed with suspicion by an emergent Irish middle class.⁸

The existence of social class as a determinant of access to culture may partially explain the Abbey's difficulty in attracting a Dublin audience. It certainly had an impact on O'Casey's dealings with the theatre. He states in his autobiography *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* that he was uncomfortable with what he perceived to be an elitist ethos at the theatre. He was criticized for not having read such writers as Andreiev, Giacosa, Maeterlinck, or Pirandello. Instead, he:

Whispered the names of Shaw and Strindberg, which [the staff at the Abbey] didn't seem to catch, though he instinctively kept firm silence about Dion Boucicault, whose works he knew as well as Shakespeare's; afterwards provoking an agonised *My Gaud!* from Mr [Lennox] Robinson when he stammered the names of Webster, Ford and Massinger.⁹

From a very early stage in his association with the Abbey, O'Casey felt that many people at the theatre had a very narrow view of what was culturally valuable. By the time he came to write *Juno and the Paycock*, O'Casey was also becoming uncomfortable with what he saw as a tendency among certain writers of the Revival to dismiss some forms of culture as inferior. Although at that time he still had a high level of respect for Yeats and Gregory, and thought well of James Stephens and some others, he tells us that he saw in many of the writers of the Revival a: 'Sneering, lofty conception of what they called culture ... The mighty semblance of self-assurance in the most of them was but a vain conceit in themselves which they used for their own encouragement in the pitiable welter of a small achievement.'¹⁰

⁸ Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), p. 32 ⁹ *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* in *Autobiographies 2* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 105. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Whereas it is common for the autobiographical statements of such writers as Yeats to be taken as accurate, there is a tendency to assume that O'Casey's writings about the Revival reveal far more about the resentment and bitterness of the writer living in self-imposed exile in 1949, than they do about his experience of the early 1920s. Nevertheless, there is evidence in his early work that the dominance of this 'sneering lofty conception' of Irish cultural life presented a number of difficulties to O'Casey. This is particularly apparent in the determination with which he includes popular culture in that work.

As Captain Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* puts it, people in Dublin knew 'more about Charlie Chaplin an' Tommy Mix than they do about SS. Peter and Paul',¹¹ and the same could have been said about their knowledge of popular theatre and music. O'Casey therefore could not have excluded popular culture from his work, even if he did feel too ashamed to admit his knowledge of it to Robinson and others. However, his use of melodrama, music and cinema was not entirely for the purposes of verisimilitude, but may be seen as an attempt to come to terms with that 'sneering, lofty conception of culture'. To illustrate how this affected O'Casey's work, I want to examine briefly his use of music and melodrama in *Juno and the Paycock*.

O'Casey uses music of the kind found on the stage of the popular Dublin theatre throughout *Juno*, not only as a device to authenticate the play's action, but also to serve many important dramatic functions. Firstly, music acts as a means of revealing character. It's not a coincidence that Captain Boyle, who spends the play's first act trying to deceive his wife, will at that act's conclusion choose to sing 'Oh Me Darlin' Juno, I Will Be True to Thee'¹² – a song intended to emphasize his honesty, which therefore reveals his duplicitous and hypocritical nature. Another example of this is Mrs. Madigan's choice of the song 'If I Were a Blackbird' to sing in the play's second act:

If I were a blackbird I'd whistle and sing;
I'd follow the ship that my true love was in;
An' on the top riggin', I'd there build me a nest,
An' at night I would sleep on me Whillie's white breast!¹³

This seems quite an innocent choice, but given that her audience includes Captain Boyle – a former sailor who is supposed to have inherited a large amount of money – her choice of a love song with a maritime setting reveals a great deal about her motives.

Most importantly, O'Casey uses music to facilitate the movement of his action from comedy to tragedy. The play's turning point occurs when we hear Juno

¹¹ Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock* in *Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp 43–4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35. ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

and Mary singing 'Home to Our Mountains' from Verdi's *Il Travotore*. O'Casey does not transcribe the words of this piece; he does not change them to reflect the accent or social status of the singers, but states that they must sing the song well.¹⁴ By showing that the two characters can express themselves perfectly well in this art form, O'Casey hints that they are capable of transcending their circumstances—and indeed makes the case that they must do so.

Music and song appear on twelve occasions in the play, thereby making it seem to its audience like a typical melodrama. O'Casey's use of music was therefore part of a wider attempt to manipulate that audience's familiarity with melodrama for dramatic purposes. It is quite difficult to appreciate now the extent to which the first audiences at *Juno* felt that they were on familiar territory in the play's first two acts. With the possible exception of Johnny, all of the characters in the play are recognizable melodramatic stereotypes. We have Juno, the put-upon mother who is well intentioned, if bad-tempered. We have Mary, the innocent but intelligent young woman, who is prey to the seducer, Bentham (whose name, in melodramatic fashion, reveals his character: 'bent' referring to his dishonesty, and 'ham' to his sycophantic insincerity). We have Boyle and Joxer, the two likeable rogues who always deny that they have been drinking. The audience would therefore have complacently assumed a great deal about the play's conclusion: that the Boyles would eventually receive their inheritance, that Mary would marry Jerry Devine, that Bentham would be exposed as a fraud, and that the loveable Boyle and Joxer would end the play humbled but essentially unchanged. In fact, the play's first two acts are an almost perfect imitation of Boucicault, whose plays were:

Drama as a mixed or impure form, a combination of comedy and melodrama, farce and sentiment, song and burlesque, sensational and gothic elements ... His hero is a wise fool, the master of the mischievous revels who is the inevitable occasion of hilarity in others as well as natural humour in himself. To be sure he is a blithering rogue, a cheerful liar with a powerful thirst.¹⁵

O'Casey's characters were therefore so stereotypical and predictable to a Dublin audience that the tragedy of the play's ending came as a complete surprise to them,¹⁶ thereby making its impact very powerful. O'Casey emphasizes to his audience that they have been fooled into accepting tragedy as melodrama by having Joxer refer drunkenly to *The Colleen Bawn* in the play's final shocking moments.

¹⁴ This part of the play is the subject of further analysis in: David Krause (ed.), *O'Casey annual number 4* (London: Macmillan, 1984). ¹⁵ David Krause, *The Dolmen Boucicault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964), pp 9–13. ¹⁶ As documented in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The years of O'Casey* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1992), pp 190–200.

By drawing attention in this way to his manipulation of his audiences' familiarity with melodrama, O'Casey is showing them that the play should be understood as an attempt to blend the literature of the Revival with the popular forms of culture with which he himself was so familiar. This synthesis of high and low art was, however, an imperfect one, since both elements are quite clearly distinguishable from each other in *Juno* – and indeed the play succeeds on that basis. The impact of the tragedy of the final act is entirely dependent on the audiences' acceptance of the action that preceded it as melodrama. Furthermore, as Tony Roche points out, although *Juno and the Paycock* saved the Abbey from financial ruin, its politics meant that it had little impact on its artistic policy:

The potent theatrical fusion of music-hall and politics in O'Casey's plays of the 1920s did not succeed in taking over from or displacing the kitchen comedies which had become the Abbey's stock-in-trade. The mixture of high and low art which the socialist playwrights O'Casey and Behan favour along with Beckett has always offended equally the caretakers of high culture, the bourgeois middle-class audience, and the cultural nationalists, whose view of an Irish theatre always insists that it come emblazoned with certain insignia.¹⁷

Nevertheless, it seems fair to state that O'Casey intentionally wrote in a way that was different to what he perceived to be the literature of the Revival. Can it therefore be said that his work represents any form of criticism of the Revival?

It would appear from O'Casey's later work that we might regard these features of his early works as part of an attempt to critically evaluate the Revival. In order to illustrate this, I want to consider O'Casey's 1940 play *Purple Dust*, which presents one of his most important critiques of the Revival.

Written in 1937–8, *Purple Dust* presents Stoke and Poges, two Englishmen who, accompanied by their Irish mistresses Souhan and Avril, have arrived in a remote part of rural Ireland to renovate a Tudor mansion – and to avoid the Second World War. Described by O'Casey as a wayward comedy, the play is best understood as a mock pastoral and as a 'full-length cartoon in which caricatured Englishmen are gulled by their witty Irish rivals'.¹⁸

One of the most interesting aspects of the play is its use of a number of literary sources to illustrate O'Casey's themes and to develop his characters. The play closely resembles Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, and it borrows from the work of Somerville and Ross, Jonathan Swift, George Moore and Joyce – and from Wordsworth, Andrew Marvell, Shakespeare, Thomas Gray and many other writers. The purpose of literary quotation and allusion in the play is principal-

¹⁷ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish drama: from Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p. 108. ¹⁸ John O'Riordan, *A guide to O'Casey's plays* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 205.

ly to reveal O'Casey ideological concerns. An interesting example of this occurs in the exchange between Souhan and O'Killigain, a workman recently returned from fighting in Spain, and (arguably) the play's hero. Souhan asks O'Killigain his familiar name, 'the name your girl would call you by'. When told that his name is Jack, she responds rapturously: '[Lingering over it] Jack. What a dear name, Jack! What a dear name – [she suddenly stands on tiptoes and kisses him] Jack!'¹⁹ This is a reversal of the famous exchange between Gwendolen and Jack in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, in which Gwendolen explains that her 'ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest': 'There is something in the name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon told me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.' When asked if she wouldn't prefer a man named 'Jack', Gwendolen replies with conviction: 'No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It does not thrill. It produces absolutely no vibrations. I have known several Jacks, and they all without exception, were more than usually plain.'²⁰ O'Casey reverses Gwendolen's desire for a man named 'Ernest' by having his own character respond in a similar way to the name 'Jack'. There is a suggestion here that characters such as Stoke and Poges – and Gwendolen and Ernest – must give way to people like Jack O'Killigain, a workman who is prepared to fight for his (and O'Casey's) beliefs.

Another example of this is his choice of the names Poges and Stoke for his two English characters. Stoke Poges is of course the setting for Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. By relating his English characters to that poem's lament for the passing of a way of life, O'Casey makes explicit his thesis that the British empire – as represented by the two characters – is in decline²¹ or that 'in a generation or so the English Empire will be half-remembered only as a half-forgotten nursery rhyme'.²²

Literary quotation is also used as a means of revealing character. The workmen in the play draw their cultural references from popular works, such as Moore's ballads, Greek and Irish mythology, and the Bible; whereas the English characters attempt to reinforce their sense of superiority over the Irish by using their knowledge of what they consider to be high culture. Stoke declares himself worthy of being listened to because he has 'read every word written by Hume, Spinoza, Aristotle, Locke, Bacon, Plato, Socrates, and Kant, among others'.²³ Despite this declaration, O'Casey makes clear throughout the play that Stoke is incapable of any form of original or rational thought – and indeed, we must be skeptical about anyone who claims to have read 'every word written'

¹⁹ Sean O'Casey, *Purple Dust in Plays 2* (London, Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 344. ²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *Complete works* (Glasgow, Harper Collins 1994), p. 366. ²¹ Indeed, the characters' futile attempts at the beginning of the play's second act to light a fire could be seen as a direct allusion to Gray's 'For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn'. ²² *Purple Dust*, p. 343. ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

by Socrates, since, as O'Casey must have been aware, that philosopher never wrote anything.

In similar fashion, Poges deploys a number of half-remembered quotations from romantic poets. He incorrectly quotes Wordsworth to O'Killigain: 'Life is too much with us, O'Killigain; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. But you've never read good old Wordsworth, I suppose?'²⁴ This misquotation²⁵ is intended to expose the pomposity of Poges, while also showing the superiority of O'Killigain, who refrains from correcting him, and from pointing out that the next line of the poem – 'Little we see in Nature that is ours' – applies very clearly to Poges. Poges repeatedly patronizes the Irish characters by quoting from literature – yet he does not once do so correctly. Hence, Wordsworth's 'Peter Bell' and Poe's 'To Helen' are both misquoted before being attributed to Shakespeare, and Browning's 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad' takes place not in April, but in winter. For the purposes of the present discussion, the most important literary references in *Purple Dust* are to works of the revival, specifically to those of Synge and Yeats.

O'Dempsey, the second workman, seems to be modeled on Synge's tramp from *The Shadow of the Glen*. Attempting to convince Souhan to leave Poges, O'Dempsey tells her that: 'Your shinin' eyes can always say you are; an' soon you'll tire o' nestin' in a dusty nook with the hills outside for walkin'. Souhan skeptically asks, 'I will, will I?' to which O'Dempsey replies:

Ay will you, an' dance away from a smoky bragger who thinks th' world spins round on the rim of a coin; you'll hurry away from him, I'm sayin', an' it's a glad heart'll lighten the journey to a one'll find a place for your little hand in the white clouds, an' a place for your saucy head in th' blue sky.²⁶

This is very similar to the speech made by the tramp to Nora at the end of Synge's play, in which he asks her to leave Dan and come away with him:

Come along with me now, lady of the house, and it's not my blather you'll be hearing only, but you'll be haring the herons crying out over the black lakes ... And it's not from the like of them you'll be hearing a tale of getting old like Peggy Cavanagh, and losing the hair off you, and the light of your eyes, but it's fine songs you'll be hearing when the sun goes up, and there'll be no fellow wheezing the like of a sick sheep close to your ear.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., p. 293. ²⁵ It could be argued that Friel was referring to this part of *Purple Dust* when in *Translations* he presents an exchange between Yolland and Hugh in which Hugh asks regarding Wordsworth: 'Did he speak to you of me?' before saying patronisingly that, 'We're not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant'. Brian Friel, *Translations in Selected plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 417. ²⁶ *Purple Dust*, p. 362. ²⁷ JM Synge, *The Playboy of the Western*

Interestingly, whereas Synge presents his tramp in a positive fashion, O'Casey seems very uncomfortable with his character. O'Dempsey's romanticism is consistently balanced out by the pragmatism of O'Killigain, so that, as Christopher Murray puts it, we 'are given, as it were, two tramps for the price of one.'²⁸ O'Casey explains that: 'It is true that while O'Killigain is a realist, O'Dempsey is a romanticist, but as the play shows, O'Killigain can understand, and further, the romanticism of his friend, and O'Dempsey can understand, and aid, the realism of O'Killigain.'²⁹ O'Casey is by no means negative about O'Dempsey, but he makes it clear that his character cannot exist anywhere other than on the stage, by stating throughout the play that the Irish are generally neither eloquent nor poetic. When Avril asks if there is 'an Irishman goin' who hasn't a dint o' wondher in his talkin'?'³⁰ O'Killigain rather curtly replies that if such people exist, he has not met many of them. Similarly, the first workman praises a chicken because it does not 'set about the business o' layin' [an egg] like a member o' Doyle Eireann makin' his maiden speech'.³¹ Perhaps the best example of O'Casey's opinion of Irish eloquence is a speech made by Poges's Irish servant Barney, who warns his companion Cloyne that: 'We'll be worse than we were before we're as bad as we are now, an' in a week's time we'll be lookin' back with a sigh to a time, bad as it could be then, that was betther than the worst that was on top of us now.'³² This statement certainly cannot be regarded as an example of eloquence. In fact, romanticized Irish eloquence is shown to be a form of rhetoric that may be used by anyone. Poges attempts to ingratiate himself to O'Dempsey by imitating his manner of speaking: 'Looka that, now. Arra, whisht, an' amn't I told it's strange stories you do be tellin' of the noble things done by your fathers in their days, and in the old time before them.'³³ Stage-Irish speech is shown by Poges to be a mode of communication between two people who are attempting to exploit each other. The romanticized eloquence of Synge's tramp is thereby shown to be a fabrication, a theatrical device that may be exploited by people like Poges. This implies that, if O'Dempsey is a rendition of Synge's tramp, he also owes something to Shaw's Matthew Haffigan.³⁴

This critique is also developed in O'Casey's references to Yeats. Poges's attempts to restore a ruin are of course very similar to those made by the Yeats of *The*

World and other plays (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p. 25. ²⁸ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth century Irish drama: mirror up to nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), p. 108. ²⁹ Sean O'Casey, 'Purple dust in their eyes' in *Under a colored cap* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 265. ³⁰ *Purple Dust*, pp 286–7. ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 303. ³² *Ibid.* p. 322. ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 337. ³⁴ Cf. G.B. Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island*. (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 78. 'Don't you know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more power to your elbow stuff is got up in England to fool you? No Irishman ever talks like that in Ireland, or ever did, or ever will. But when a thoroughly worthless Irishman comes to England and finds the place full of romantic duffers like you, who will let him loaf and drink and sponge and brag as long as he flatters your sense of moral superiority by playing the fool and degrading himself and his country, he soon learns the antics that take you in.'

Winding Stair and *The Tower* to restore Thoor Ballylee. This connection between Poges and Yeats is made clear in many ways. As Richard Ellman tells us, Yeats 'is said to have declared to George Russell that if he had his rights he would be Duke of Ormonde'³⁵ and O'Casey would have been aware of this from his reading of Yeats's poem 'Demon and Beast'.³⁶ It is therefore surely no coincidence that Yeats's belief is shared by O'Casey's character Souhan, whose supposed relationship to the Ormondes is used by Stoke and Poges to justify their aristocratic pretensions. There are many other similarities between Poges and Yeats. Directed to 'lean on a stick as if it were a sword' Poges sorrowfully asks:

'Where are the kings and queens and warriors now? Gone with all their glory! The present day and present men? Paltry, mean, tight, and tedious. [disgustedly] Bah!'³⁷ This is a wonderful send-up of Yeats, resembling very closely 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd' in particular:

Where are now the warring kings,
Word be-mockers? – by the Rood.
Where are now the warring kings?
An idle word is all their glory.³⁸

Similarly, when Poges criticizes the impact of priests on Ireland, he declares that:

If the misguided people would only go back to the veneration of the old Celtic gods, what a stir we'd have here! To the delightful, if legendary, loveliness of – er – er – er – what's his name, what's her name, what's their name? ... The chief god of the ancient Celts?

SOUHAN: Was it Gog or Magog, dear?

POGES [with fierce scorn]: Can't you remember that Gog and Magog were two Philistinian giants killed by David or Jonathan or Joshua or Joan or Samson or someone? It's the old Celtic god I have in mind, the one – what was his name?

SOUHAN: Gulliver?

POGES: Oh no, not Gulliver

SOUHAN: Well, I don't know who the hell it was

POGES [slapping his thigh exultingly]: Brobdingnag! That was the fellow.³⁹

³⁵ Richard Ellman, *Yeats: the man and the masks* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 180. ³⁶ 'The glittering eyes in an death's head/ Of old Luke Wadding's portrait said/ Welcome, and the Ormondes all/ Nodded upon the Wall'. W.B. Yeats, 'Demon and beast' in *Michael Robartes and the dancer*, in Daniel Albright (ed.), *The poems* (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 234. ³⁷ *Purple Dust*, p. 332. ³⁸ W.B. Yeats, 'The song of the happy shepherd', *Crossways* in *The poems*, p. 34. ³⁹ *Purple Dust*, p. 311.

Again, this passage shows that Poges uses his half-remembered readings – in this case of Swift, of whom Yeats wrote so much in *The Winding Stair* – to reinforce his sense of superiority over his Irish companions.

The manner in which the Irish characters are irritated by this talk of ancient Celtic Gods is very similar to a passage O'Casey later wrote about Yeats in *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*. When, in the early 1920s, O'Casey visits Yeats to discuss his work, the detective guarding Yeats's house warns O'Casey that Yeats's company can be tedious:

I don't envy yeh, Sean, for I wouldn't like to be around him long. His oul' mind's full of th' notion of oul' kings and queens the half of us never heard of; an' when he's talkin', a fella has to look wise, pretendin' he's well acquainted with them dead an' gone ghosts.⁴⁰

Both Poges and Yeats use Irish legend to portray themselves as aristocrats but in doing so, only alienate themselves from the Irish people around them, who are generally more interested in the present than in a fabricated past. Furthermore, the use of high culture by Poges to aid him in his attempt to present himself as being noble does not make him superior to the Irish characters but makes him incapable of adapting to change. O'Casey explains that, unlike Poges and Stoke: 'The Irish peasants of the play, less comic, less picturesque, less lovable maybe ... survive the winds and the rising flood because they are more adaptable, and so of the two contraries, the fitter to survive: life – not O'Casey – chooses these and destroys the others.'⁴¹

Purple Dust expresses very clearly O'Casey's discomfort with his perception that the Revival tended to ignore the lived reality of Irish people, while valuing antiquity for its own sake. This is futile, since, as the play makes clear:

The winds of change come, and no one feels them till they become strong enough to sweep things away, carrying men and women ... bearing off their old customs, manners and morals with them ... There are those who clutch at things departing, and try to hold them back. So do Stoke and Poges, digging up old bones, and trying to glue them together again. They try to shelter from the winds of change but Time wears away the roof, and Time's river eventually sweeps the purple dust away.⁴²

O'Casey is therefore not attacking Synge but is suggesting that a romanticism rooted in legend must not be used as a distraction from the present. The militaristic past of Irish history and legend constantly referred to in *Purple Dust* need not be forgotten, but O'Casey points out that this past does not, for example, excuse Irish neutrality and isolation in the face of approaching war.

⁴⁰ *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*, p. 160. ⁴¹ *Under a colored cap*, p. 265. ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

The play also attempts to blend the literature of the Revival with popular culture. Accordingly, O'Casey mixes the pseudo-Yeatsian pomposity of Poges with high farce. As David Krause states: 'He used the stage as if it were a combination music hall and circus ring, whirling through a profusion of burlesque turns and clowning acts, and bringing the whole performance to a spectacular conclusion with a supernatural extravaganza.'⁴³ While we listen to poor imitations of Yeats we are also watching a circus. It is possible therefore for the audience of *Purple Dust* to admire O'Casey's artistry in his use of literary quotation, while also being entertained by the slapstick farce taking place on stage. As Jack Lindsay puts it, O'Casey 'achieves the very things Yeats long wanted to do—to vivify the mythic images [of the Revival] by linking them effectively with modern life and its issues'.⁴⁴ *Purple Dust*, therefore, represents the synthesis of high and low art forms that O'Casey first attempted with *Juno and the Paycock*, a synthesis achieved by his putting under close scrutiny those aspects of the revival he found most troubling.

Many of O'Casey's criticisms of the Revival were explicit in his later work, but they also appear in his earliest plays. His love of Shakespeare as a writer of and for the people is an important theme of *Red Roses for Me* (1942), but it also appears in *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923). His love of the language of the bible and of the Irish tradition of protestant oratory is evident in his autobiographical *Rose and Crown* (1952) – yet it may also be found in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and *The Silver Tassie* (1928). Similarly, many of the criticisms of the Revival evident in *Purple Dust* are discernible in more subtle form in O'Casey's earlier work. His primary difficulty with the Revival seems to have been that it ignored a great deal of Irish culture, but he also appeared troubled by the fact that its celebration of legend could be used as a means of ignoring the needs and duties of people in the present. *Juno and the Paycock* and O'Casey's other Abbey plays ought therefore to be seen as early attempts to come to terms with issues that O'Casey would not fully resolve until *Purple Dust*.

This shows that there is a great deal more in common between O'Casey's early and later work than is often recognized, and also that the factors that led to the collapse of O'Casey's relationship with the Abbey were discernible even in *The Shadow of a Gunman*. I would conclude therefore that we ought to consider in more detail the extent to which O'Casey's later works may help us to understand the canonical work of the Revival and the society in which the Revival took place. I would also suggest that the status of plays like *Juno and the Paycock* as canonical works of the Revival ought to be re-considered, and that instead we should consider the work of O'Casey as being in its entirety one of the earliest examples of a post-Revival literature.

⁴³ David Krause, *Sean O'Casey: the man and his work* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1960), p. 187. ⁴⁴ Jack Lindsay, 'Sean O'Casey as a socialist artist', in: Ronald Ayling (ed.), *Sean O'Casey: modern judgements* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 201.