

The Fame of Sean O'Casey: A Reconsideration of the Dublin Plays

ANN BLAKE

Sean O'Casey's reputation as a dramatist seems to derive from his life almost as much as from his plays. Writers on O'Casey transfer to the plays their admiration for what he did and what he believed in. O'Casey's compassion for the sufferings of the poor and lifelong devotion to their cause is certainly admirable. In his plays and other writings he upholds the values of youth, beauty, joy and freedom, and attacks war, hypocrisy, and sexual repression. He extols human love and the family in the face of fanatical, violent nationalism. His support for these noble causes goes along with his belief in the value of art and his commitment to the ideal of the independence of the artist. The O'Casey we come to know from his own writings and from biographical and critical studies is a heart-warming, humane and energetic figure, and it is not surprising that he earns tributes such as this:

His profound and urgent belief in the sacredness and beauty of human life is the motivating force behind all his work; it is a belief he has defended more valiantly than any other writer of his time. It is upon the validity of his personal beliefs and his fierce integrity in expressing them that O'Casey's claim to greatness rests.¹

What is striking here is the assumption that a man of passionate concerns, whose heart is so firmly in the right place, will inevitably be a good writer. On top of this, it seems at times that a measure of pity for his suffering, especially his terrible poverty, contributes to O'Casey's reputation as a dramatist. And we have to take into account too the broad effect of the guilt feelings of O'Casey's readers, particularly his English readers, about the long sufferings of Ireland. It is no easy matter to arrive at a fair judgment of an Irish writer who has heroic ideals.

O'Casey started writing plays because, as Armstrong says, he had become disillusioned with politics, to which he had hitherto devoted himself and his writing.² He wrote three plays, submitted them to

1 Maureen Malone, *The Plays of Sean O'Casey* (Carbondale: University of South Illinois Press, 1969), p. 160.

2 W. A. Armstrong, *Sean O'Casey*, British Council Series Writers and their Work (London: Longman's Green and Co., 1967), p. 10.

the Abbey theatre and had them all rejected before he was finally launched with the acceptance and production of *The Shadow of a Gunman* in 1923. O'Casey was then forty-three years old. Then followed *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) and two one-act plays. The three full-length plays deal with contemporary Irish events, and are fired by O'Casey's loathing of the violence and fanaticism of the Republicans. O'Casey always put the fight for improved living and working conditions before what he saw as the vain heroics of the struggle for Irish independence. His later plays, written, with the exception of *The Silver Tassie*, after his departure from Ireland, are, even more emphatically than the Dublin plays, vehicles for his ideas. In these twenty-odd later plays O'Casey abandoned the naturalistic theatre and developed an expressionist style; he used symbolic characters and moved away from the presentation of his passionate convictions through dramatized human situations. O'Casey's later career as a dramatist met with only mixed success with audiences and critics—and fell foul of the censors: as recently as 1958 the Bishop of Dublin disapproved of *The Drums of Father Ned* and the play was withdrawn from the Dublin Festival. The later plays' uncertain artistic quality arises in part from O'Casey's over-ambitious experiments in mingling dramatic modes, and in part from his propagandist zeal.

It is significant that between 1939 and 1954, that is for twenty-five years of his play-writing career, O'Casey was also working on his remarkable six-volume autobiography. This huge unconventional work tells in the third person the story of "Sean". It is not a chronological record, but a collection of highlights and anecdotes, all recounted in O'Casey's idiosyncratic, often playful style. Events in his life become short stories or episodes of fantasy. The focus is on not what he did but on what he thought and felt. Given O'Casey's strong opinions, which he upheld and defended uncompromisingly, it seems appropriate, in fact almost inevitable, that he should develop this eccentric version of the autobiography. Here O'Casey and his opinions are openly and fittingly housed by the literary form. The drama, which invites the expression of multiple viewpoints, cannot take sides so passionately without becoming unconvincing, or boring.

O'Casey's reputation as a dramatist rests on the three full-length Dublin plays. Their strength springs above all from their portrayal of life in the Dublin tenements. O'Casey puts on the stage a dramatic version of the people whose life he had shared in the slums for forty years. Yeats and Lady Gregory admired especially the characters in the first plays he submitted to them, and encouraged him to keep

close to these familiar subjects. When his third play, *The Crimson and the Tricolour*, was rejected, Yeats told Lady Gregory: "Casey was bad in writing about the vices of the rich, which he knows nothing about, but he thoroughly understands the vices of the poor".³ It was precisely O'Casey's graphic rendering of these vices that made other contemporary critics attack his plays as being low. This was "sewage school drama". O'Casey was "the guttersnipe of the slums". In an essay on his career as dramatist, "Tender tears for poor O'Casey", O'Casey himself quoted a critic who accused him of being merely "a photographic artist", and asked: "Is O'Casey a dramatist? Is he but a combination of the cinema and the dictaphone?"⁴ O'Casey was accused of simply reproducing life, rather than shaping it as an artist. In *Sean O'Casey the Man behind the Plays*, Saros Cowasjee reveals that O'Casey was in fact a writer who worked, like a naturalistic painter, from the life. Some of his characters at least were based closely on real people, and O'Casey, like his fellow dramatist Synge, would sit listening to conversations with a notebook in hand.⁵ But O'Casey, like Synge, is of course more than a recorder of what he heard. He creates his own version of low-life inconsequential speech, blending Irish idioms with his own invention to make a humorous dramatic language, fit for the purpose of defining character. In *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (1939) Una Ellis-Fermor wrote enthusiastically of O'Casey, and particularly of the way the mode of speech of his characters reflected the trapped life of the slums:

... he reveals, almost as though unconscious of the novelty of his picture, the easy, vigorous, expressive speech and action of people in continual and inescapable contact with their fellows; the mixture of good-fellowship and protective, selfish indifference. His people reveal now the distracted, unstable habits of mind that spring from continual stimulus and a procession of minor excitements, now the seemingly callous detachment, the bleak and lonely obstinacy that is a stronger personality's resistance to this bombardment directed upon its attention and emotion.⁶

In retrospect this praise seems too generous. When O'Casey moves away from the day-to-day pub chat or the gossip on the stairs and

3 Quoted from Lady Gregory's journal in David Krause, *Sean O'Casey The Man and his Work* (1960, repr. New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 55.

4 In *The Green Crow* (New York: George Brazillier, Inc., 1956), p. 183.

5 Saros Cowasjee, *Sean O'Casey The Man behind the Plays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963, paperback 1965), pp. 43-4.

6 Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen, 1939, 2nd edn 1954), pp. 197-8).

landings of the tenement houses, the dialogue of the Dublin plays frequently lapses into sentimentality. And the speech patterns which reflect the habits of mind so sympathetically described by Una Ellis-Fermor, emerge, on closer inspection, as banal repetitions designed to elicit an easy comic response. The Dublin plays do break new ground but they read, and act, unevenly.

Apart from the simple interest of their portrayal of the life of the tenement poor, what gives these plays force in the theatre is the dreadful nature of their events. The impact is immediate as O'Casey confronts the audience with "casual slaughters"; but often his next move is to dwell on the grief of the survivors, and the final effect is not satisfying but sensational and sentimental. Yeats and Lady Gregory noticed in their first reading of *The Plough and the Stars* that O'Casey could drift into sentimentality. Writing of Act I to George O'Brien, Yeats said:

We agree with you about Clitheroe and his wife. That love scene in the first act is most objectionable and, as you said, does not ring true. What is wrong is that O'Casey is there writing about people whom he does not know, whom he has only read about. We had both decided when we first read the play that he should be asked to modify these characters, bringing them within the range of his knowledge. When that is done the objectionable elements will lose their sentimentality and thereby their artistic offence.⁷

How far this dialogue was modified before or after rehearsal is not known. But the passage, which relies heavily on Jack's song and the repetition of "pretty little red-lipped Nora", still seems sentimental. The shooting of Minnie Powell at the end of *The Shadow of a Gunman* is one of several violent incidents which combine sensationalism and sentimentality. Minnie hero-worships Donal Davoren, a poet whom she mistakenly believes to be a gunman on the run. "She'd give the world an' all to be gaddin' about with a gunman", Seumas Shields says of her (p. 109).⁸ When the Black and Tans raid the houses she heroically hides a bag of explosives which she wrongly believes belong to Davoren. The bag is discovered, Minnie is taken away in the lorry and shot while trying to escape. This happens off-stage and is reported by Mrs Grigson, the work-worn, long-suffering wife, who up till now has been primarily a comic figure. But now, the sentimental

7 Quoted in Robert Hogan, *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960), p. 42.

8 Quotations follow the St. Martin's Library paperback ed *Three Plays* by Sean O'Casey (London: Macmillan, 1967), and are followed by the page reference.

stage direction says: "*She is excited and semi-hysterical, and sincerely affected by the tragic occurrence*" (p. 129). The speech O'Casey gives her is typical of others to come in its raw pathetic appeal, its close to life banal repetitions:

What's going to happen next! Oh, Mr Davoren, isn't it terrible, isn't it terrible! Minnie Powell, poor little Minnie Powell's been shot dead! They were raidin' a house a few doors down, an' had just got up in their lorrys to go away, when they was ambushed. You never heard such shootin'! An' in the thick of it, poor Minnie went to jump off the lorry she was a on, an' she was shot through the buzzom. Oh, it was horrible to see the blood pourin' out, an' Minnie moanin'. They found some paper in her breast, with 'Minnie' written on it, an' some other name they couldn't make out with the blood; the officer kep' it. The ambulance is bringin' her to the hospital, but what good's that when she's dead! Poor little Minnie Powell, poor little Minnie Powell, to think of you full of life a few minutes ago, an' now she's dead. (p. 130)

In *Juno and the Paycock* O'Casey takes us through the agonies of a mother's bereavement twice. In act II Mrs Tancred appears, "*a very old woman, obviously shaken by the death of her son*" (p. 54). Her Diehard son has been shot when laying an ambush in a country lane. O'Casey makes his point first by telling us that Mrs Tancred's neighbour lost a son in the same raid, fighting on the other side; then by Mrs Tancred's grief at the loss of the child she bore; and finally by her prayer:

Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts of stone . . . an' give us hearts o' flesh! Take away this murdherin' hate . . . an' give us Thine own eternal love. (p. 46)

Then at the end of the play Juno's own son Johnny turns out to be the one who betrayed the Tancred boy, and the Diehards come and take him out to be shot. Juno fears the worst when Johnny is missing, and when the news is brought that the police have a body the identification is quickly confirmed because of Johnny's lost arm—shot off in the fight in O'Connell Street — a final twist of horror. Juno and her daughter Mary grieve, and Juno echoes in sentimental repetition Mrs Tancred's prayer and protest:

What was the pain I suffered, Johnny, bringin' you into the world to carry you to your cradle, to the pains I'll suffer carryin' you out o' the world to bring you to your grave! Mother o' god, Mother o' God, have pity on us all! Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets? (p. 46)

In *The Plough and the Stars* it is a wife whose husband is killed. Nora Clitheroe looks for her husband, a commandant in the Irish Citizen Army, in the thick of the fighting during the Easter Rising.

She tries to persuade him to go home and not risk his life. But he refuses and is killed; their baby is born prematurely and dies, and Nora goes mad with grief. Agony is piled very obviously on agony. Then in the play's last moments Bessie Burgess, "the 'oul Orange bitch" who has been trying to help Nora, is shot by a Tommy's bullet when she goes to the window and is taken for a sniper. In all three plays these deaths, accidental and deliberate, are O'Casey's means of attacking the glorification of violence, the heroics of the fighters and their commitment to promoting Irish independence by war and the gun. He confronts his audience with the senseless loss of innocent lives in episodes which have all the raw journalistic sensationalism of a television report of a fatal accident: "How does it feel, Mrs Jones . . . ?"

These episodes occur in the context of that farcical comedy which constitutes a large proportion of all three plays, and which accounts for much of their immediate appeal as entertainment. How the elements of farce and pathos work together is a difficult question, and the mixture of the two has often disconcerted reviewers and critics. In the farcical comedy O'Casey demonstrates above all his ability for inventing one-line jokes, nonsensical boasts and flamboyant insults: "I hit a man last week, Rosie, an' he's fallin' yet" (p. 177). The scenes between Captain Boyle and his boozing companion Joxer Daly in *Juno and the Paycock* give a good idea of the music-hall flavour of O'Casey's comedy. The two men are a double act, with Joxer flattering the Captain and feeding him lines. This exchange in act I, as they wait for Boyle's wife to return, is typical:

Boyle: She has her rights—there's no denying it, but haven't I me rights too?

Joxer: Of course you have—the sacred rights of man.

Boyle: Today, Joxer, there's goin' to be issued a proclamation by me, establishin' an independent Republic, an' Juno'll have to take an oath of allegiance.

Joxer: Be firm, be firm, Captain; the first few minutes'll be the worst: 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!

Voice of Juno outside: Can't stop, Mrs Madigan—I haven't a minute!

Joxer (Flying out of the window): Holy God, here she is. (p. 24)

O'Casey's early critics who found his plays "low" also accused him of descending to the level of music-hall comedy; and the description is apt. O'Casey himself rejoiced in the comment, and took it as a compliment. The jokes, comic characters and stock farcical situations keep the audience entertained; but in all three plays the comedy is also made to comment ironically on the Irish people's understanding

of, and support for, the Republican movement. O'Casey learnt how to direct his comedy to this end as he wrote: *The Shadow of a Gunman* is inferior to the later plays in this respect. An example of that play's unpointed comedy is the rather long episode of Mrs Henderson's consultation with Davoren about Mr Gallogher's letter of protest to the Irish Republican Army about the "abominable and shocking" Dwyers in "the back drawing-room". Mrs Henderson's malapropisms, "as good a letter as was decomposed by a scholar" (p. 98) and Mr Gallogher's own ridiculous pomposity in his letter provide the jokes:

. . . the defendant, that is to say, James Gallogher of fifty-five St. Teresa Street, ventures to say that he thinks he has made out a Primmy Fashy Case against Mrs. Dwyer and all her heirs, male and female as aforesaid mentioned in the above written schedule.

N.B.—If you send up any of your men, please tell them to bring their guns. (p. 100)

Gallogher's faith in the IRA and the Republican courts in a roundabout way bring ridicule on the ordinary people's limited sense of Republicanism. The same is done more powerfully in the much admired pub scene in act II of *The Plough and the Stars*. There the tenement dwellers, Mrs Gogan and Mrs Burgess, quarrel and come to blows to prove their respectability. They argue over no particular issue, but simply, O'Casey makes us feel, as a result of the personal tensions of living so close to each other. As the voice of the orator outside is heard uttering his call to arms and bloody sacrifice for Ireland, the women from the slums are too caught up in their endless battle for personal respectability to give him their attention. Compared with the earlier play the comic writing here is less predictable and, more important, the use of comic episodes for satire is more sharply managed. The women's slanging match indirectly ridicules the violence of the Republican movement, and points to its irrelevance to the ordinary people. The effect is strengthened by the men's using the Republican meeting as a good excuse for a night's patriotic drinking. And finally the comic complaints of Rosie the prostitute about the lack of custom make the point once more that the Republicans have no real interest in the plight of the Dublin poor.

Yet the very relentlessness of the comedy's attack on Republican heroics suggests that O'Casey is simplifying his targets. His passionate indignation discourages any complexity in his understanding of the political situation, and provokes distorting simplification. Armstrong has shown how O'Casey's heavy editing of Pearse's actual speeches for the part of the Orator in act II of *The Plough and the Stars*

simplifies what Pearse said.⁹ O'Casey's patriotic leader is a fanatic bent on self-destruction. The soldiers in this play are made very obvious targets, Clitheroe with his vanity, and Langon with his rhetorical flourishes: "Ireland is greater than a mother" (p. 178). The polemical thrust of the plays directs the comedy at targets which seem too easy.

The comedy's immediate appeal is undeniable, but, on closer inspection, it seems disappointingly thin and, far from leaving us with a sense of human vitality, it generates a mood of hopelessness. The comic characters are themselves narrow, schematic, built as if from a kit of parts. Raymond Williams pointed out long ago how dependent the comic characterization is on catch phrases.¹⁰ Examples abound: Seumas Shields has a trick of repetition; for Fluther everything is either "derogatory" or "vice-versa"; and, most famous, Captain Boyle's tag: "the whole country's in a state of chassis". Mrs Gogan in *The Plough and the Stars* has no catch phrase, but she exemplifies O'Casey's method of comic characterization. She has two aspects: first, she is a great talker and, second, she takes delight in contemplating fantasies of death-beds and funerals. She runs true to form even when her own daughter, Mollser, dies of consumption:

I'll never forget what you done for me, Fluther, goin' around at th' risk of your life settlin' everything with th' undhertaker an' th' cemetery people. When all me own were afraid to put their noses out, you plunged like a good one through hummin' bullets, an' they knockin' fire out o' th' road, tinklin' through th' frightened windows, an' splashin' themselves to pieces on th' walls. An' you'll find, that Mollser, in th' happy place she's gone to, won't forget to whisper, now an' again, th' name o' Fluther. (p. 209)

Here she is most interested in chattering about what the bullets were doing. At the end of the play she is still the same under the shock of Bessie Burgess' death:

Oh, God help her, th' poor woman, she's stiffenin' out as hard as she can! Her face has written on it th' shock o' sudden agony, an' her hands is whitenin' into th' smooth shininess of wax. (p. 217)

- 9 W. A. Armstrong, "The Sources and Themes of *The Plough and the Stars*", *Modern Drama*, IV (1961), 134-42.
- 10 Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p. 169. In the later *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1971) Williams pays more attention, and respect, to O'Casey, seeing these empty comic tricks as signs of an evasion of experience by the characters. The evasion is covered by inflated language, which O'Casey at once creates and criticizes (p. 150).

O'Casey's Mrs Gogan cannot be anything but a silly old woman. Her morbid preoccupations made her funny; now they make her seem an appalling, hopeless character.

It comes as a surprise to realize how insistently critical, how "derogatory", O'Casey's comedy is. Its sharp edge is most obvious in the ridicule poured on a whole series of characters, the self-centred enthusiasts for half-baked ideas. In *The Shadow of a Gunman* there is Tommy, a wind-bag Republican, "blowin' about dyin' for the people" (p. 111) and Davoren himself, the would-be poet who believes that "The poet ever strives to save the people" (p. 107), but who does nothing. In *Juno and the Paycock* the upholders of unionism, Jerry Devine, and of theosophy, the schoolteacher Charles Bentham, turn out to be, in spite of their beliefs, lacking in humanity. In *The Plough and the Stars* O'Casey ridicules the Covey's know-all socialism and the patriotism of Uncle Peter, whose nationalist feeling is a matter of dressing up in his old-fashioned uniform and thinking sentimentally about the glories of Ireland's past. These are O'Casey's stooges—a series of over-obvious targets. But it is not only those characters who spout ideals they don't live up to whom O'Casey despises; he seems to look down on all of his comic characters. Their colourful misuse of language gives their speech some comic appeal, but in the end even this seems to suggest stupidity and ignorance, in their weak comprehension of language and of life itself.

O'Casey may have felt great compassion for his fellow slum-dwellers, but in the plays he seems to be driven to despair by them. While Brecht, in *Mother Courage* for instance, likes to demonstrate that the poor can't afford to be virtuous, he never suggests that they are incapacitated by ignorance and stupidity. O'Casey's Dublin poor can find little place for selflessness in their struggle for existence, but O'Casey does not arouse the same sympathy for them as Brecht does for his characters. In *Juno and the Paycock* Captain Boyle, the lazy, work-shy boozier, practises the art of selfishness so thoroughly that we might be tempted to delight in a Falstaffian irresponsibility. But the effect of the play, especially because of the character of his wife, Juno, is to make us hate him, not enjoy him. His outrageousness is not exhilarating in the way Falstaff's is. Fluther in *The Plough and the Stars* is the one male character who shows concern for others. He has a collection of appealing human weaknesses, a fondness for drink, for women, for boasting of his own exploits, and he can be a brave man, risking his life to fetch help for Nora and Mrs Gogan. But his good heart does not give him true comic vitality, as Krause claims: "In his vitality and humour there is a hope that man may

endure".¹¹ Fluther remains stupidly and unpredictably good: he won't help the woman in act III, and in the last scene we laugh at him as he argues away his scruples about playing cards in church: "Ah, I don't think we'd be doin' anything derogatory be playin' cards in a Protestan' church" (p. 212). To compare him, as Krause does, with Falstaff underlines the differences rather than the similarities. He enjoys life, like Falstaff, but he lacks the intelligence that gives Falstaff insight into the motives which drive men to fight, though the play as a whole has insight into these motives.

In general the comedy of the Dublin plays depends too heavily on the characters' ignorance and linguistic solecisms: as a result the plays lack the traditional comic values that arise from the human spirit's irrepressible will to survive. Even the fantasies and self-delusions of the characters which might give a sense of the capacities of the imagination, as is the case with Ben Jonson's fantasists, fail to blossom. Instead the characters' delusions remain rooted in their ignorance and folly; they remain shut up in their little worlds. There is no one to match Epicure Mammon, or Volpone, no one with the stature of Mother Courage. O'Casey seems to look down on his characters.

But O'Casey does make an exception in the case of some of his women. They devote themselves not to a political cause but to the survival of their families. Nora is typical here, but Juno is perhaps the more impressive dramatic creation. These women constitute a criticism of the sloth, pusillanimity and empty heroics of the men around them. However, they lose their battle, and at the end of the plays they are bereaved, abandoned or, in Nora's case, dead. O'Casey makes them figures of pathos in a final bid for sympathy for them and for the values they uphold. The problem is that when O'Casey tries to dramatize such values his writing is weak and predictable. He relies on hymns and love songs to suggest the inarticulate women's faith and devotion to love and the family. Some of the worst writing in *The Plough and the Stars* clusters around the deranged Nora, as her snatches of memories of country walks with Jack make a heavily sentimental gesture to youth, love and beauty. Juno is O'Casey's most memorable defender of and fighter for the values of human life and love; but often her speeches make too obvious an appeal. This is especially true at the end of the play as she leads her daughter Mary away from grieving for her dead son, Mary's brother, and vows that

11 Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 112; earlier he compares at length Falstaff and Captain Boyle, v.p. 106 ff.

the two of them will devote themselves to the rearing of Mary's illegitimate baby:

- Mrs Boyle:* We'll go, Mary, we'll go; you to see your poor dead brother, an' me to see me poor dead son!
Mary: I dhread it, mother, I dhread it!
Mrs Boyle: I forgot, Mary, I forgot; your poor oul' selfish mother was only thinkin' of herself. No, no, you mustn't come—it wouldn't be good for you. You go on to me sither's an' I'll face th' ordeal meself. (p. 71)

The heavy-handed attempts to draw attention to Juno's great maternal qualities make the passage unreal and unconvincing.

The overall effect of the Dublin plays is a jarring amalgamation of farce and horror, or in J. W. Krutch's phrase "the clash between the preposterous and the terrible".¹² For Krutch, O'Casey is the dramatist who moves the Irish drama into the realm of modern literature with its despairing outlook and preoccupation with irreconcilable conflicts. Critics defending O'Casey as a dramatic artist chose often to describe his plays as revealing "the impure art of tragi-comedy", as Krause calls it.¹³ Yet O'Casey himself called all three Dublin plays tragedies. The comic or rather farcical elements in them hardly have the effect of reassuring the audience that, in spite of deaths and disasters, all will end well. What we are left with is the juxtaposition of naked human suffering and farcical humanity, as in the famous ending of *Juno and the Paycock* where Juno leaves the stage with Mary to see her dead son, and her husband and Joxer Daly come on drunkenly chattering about the terrible state of the world. Krause argues that the plays' humour saves the characters from despair and the plays from pessimism.¹⁴ But instead, I think, the comedy serves to suggest not human resources and vitality but rather the hopeless incompetence, "the error and inadequacy"¹⁵ of these people.

I see no ray of comfort, no sense of tragic consolation or even of human dignity in these plays, though O'Casey certainly did want to make some of the women a source of strength. Wilson Knight feels that he succeeded, and identifies an underlying poetic contrast in the

12 J. W. Krutch, "Modernism" in *Modern Drama* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1953), p. 100.

13 For O'Casey as a writer of tragi-comedy, see Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 71 ff. and Hogan, *op. cit.*, p. 29 ff.

14 Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

15 R. Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 149.

plays between the feminine and masculine forces.¹⁶ But it is, I believe, the intention that is apparent, rather than the achievement: the pattern is sketched out rather than realized in dramatic terms. And there is certainly no point in trying to find some kind of human affirmation in the soldiers who give their lives for Ireland, whether Diehards, or men of the Irish Citizen Army. This is because O'Casey is writing his plays from a conviction that all the fighters were misguided. He wants to remind us how the vain fanaticism of the men of the gun led to hundreds of casualties among the non-combatants. When *The Plough and the Stars* was first acted in Dublin the audience rioted, provoked largely by this very issue: O'Casey was felt to have insulted the Republican movement. His supporters may cite passages from the autobiographical works to affirm his admiration for the men who believed, and died, but there is no such admiration in the plays.

Gassner, defending O'Casey against Krutch's complaint that it is not clear in the plays where the author's sympathies lie, affirms that O'Casey recognizes the "nobility and courage of the rebels, but he resents their intoxication with romantic and superficial objectives".¹⁷ But he cites no passages from the plays to support this sense of nobility and courage, and would be hard pressed to find any. Referring to the men of the Irish Citizen Army in *The Plough and the Stars*, Maureen Malone writes: "For all their faults, they had in abundance the saving grace of courage; theirs, [O'Casey] says, 'was a vanity that none could challenge, for it came from a group that was willing to sprinkle itself into oblivion that a change might be born in the long settled thought of the people'."¹⁸ But this sense of achievement of change by sacrifice is not in the play. There the men of the IRA are motivated by vanity and pride, by the fear of being seen to be afraid, and they die horribly, and to no point. The idea of change recalls Yeats's "Easter 1916":

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That poem offers a profoundly satisfying account of the men who died for Ireland. It wisely and precisely balances the fanaticism, the destruction, and the tensed will, against the natural processes of change and flux, and weighs the loss against the achievement. The poem

- 16 G. Wilson Knight, *The Golden Labyrinth* (London: Phoenix House, 1962), p. 374.
- 17 John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 3rd edn 1954), p. 569.
- 18 Malone, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

stands in stark contrast to O'Casey's single-minded indignation about innocent dead and the betrayed workers.

When we ask how it is that these three plays, which are so unevenly written and so gloomy, continue to be valued and praised, the reasons which offer themselves spring not from literary values but from the history of Ireland and O'Casey's life. For instance, his plays will, one fears, always find favour with English audiences because the mingled despairing and farcical mood in the plays offers the audience the experience of, even the enjoyment of, feelings of despair about the insoluble problems of Ireland. The savagery in the ironic attack of an Irishman on his own countrymen offers an elevated version of the effect of an "Irish joke". Ivor Brown's comment on a production of *Juno and the Paycock* in the *London Observer* in 1937 is relevant here:

Mr. O'Casey has set down once and for all the weakness of a nation which has been cossetted with the idea that its members are all saints and martyrs. So Captain Boyle can stop in his tipling to boom away about the glories of Irish history . . . while his fellow-soak 'Joxer' is never able to pay for a drink but always able to fetch up a quotation from the poets. His English parallel would find his pence for his pint but would be totally incapable of citing verses.¹⁹

The play actually encourages the audience to feel that the Irish are "hopeless". This aspect of the plays' appeal is best summed up by Desmond MacCarthy's remark in *The New Statesman* on the first London production of *Juno* in 1925: "This play, thank God, is not about us."²⁰ This is perhaps the least worthy reason for the plays' popularity, but it is a real one. And another is perhaps the way a sense of inherited guilt for the sufferings of Ireland colours critical attitudes. There is a wish to expiate guilt by meeting enthusiastically and generously the work of an Irishman who has himself suffered. In the Dublin plays O'Casey put before his audiences a reminder of the squalid living conditions of the Dublin poor, and writers on O'Casey have investigated and presented the facts and figures which show that Dublin had the highest death-rate of any city in 1880, higher even than Liverpool, or Calcutta, or Alexandria.²¹ These writers invite us to see O'Casey in this appalling historical setting, and arouse sympathy for a writer who has experienced at first hand poverty, hunger, disease and lack of doctors, and who was never self-pitying.

19 Quoted by Gassner, *loc. cit.*

20 Quoted by Saros Cowasjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

21 See Krause, *op. cit.*, p. 19, and Cowasjee, *op. cit.*

Readers transform pity for the Irish and for O'Casey the man into admiration for O'Casey the writer. George Orwell, in a comment quoted by David Krause in his picture book about O'Casey, showed a hostile reaction to the effect (on literary judgments) of this burden of guilt and pity.²² Orwell complained about the special status enjoyed by Irishmen in England. Why, he wanted to know, was nationalism to be approved of just because it was Irish nationalism? The answer, he suggests, derives from English shame at the harm it had inflicted on Ireland, actively and by neglect.

What is finally most striking about O'Casey's reputation as a dramatist is the strong partisan flavour in so much critical writing about him. This seems to go far beyond the usual kind of enthusiasm aroused for an author in anyone who has devoted time to studying him. The man O'Casey and his ideas inspire such devotion that critics go out to battle on his behalf. Adverse critical judgments are sought out and taken to pieces. Authors who survey the drama and who neglect O'Casey are taken to task. David Krause spends several paragraphs explaining why Ronald Peacock was wrong to omit O'Casey from his book *The Poet in the Theatre*.²³ Because O'Casey lived to be eighty-four there was plenty of time for people writing about him to seek him out and ply him with questions. He seems to have been unfailingly cooperative and courteous in dealing with these requests, and clearly won the hearts of those for whom he was, in the first place, a literary interest. Several recent critical studies of O'Casey are prefaced by personal anecdotes about him, and inscribed photographs and personal letters are lovingly reproduced. O'Casey's personal qualities and his ideas combine to win heartfelt admiration, which then becomes an aptitude to discover in the plays convincing dramatic realization of his worthy ideas and sentiments. But in the end the plays must be judged, as far as possible, in their own right. A devotion to art, noble ideas, and a saintly character do not suffice to make a good play. And in the end we are disappointed that O'Casey's plays of Dublin life are not better.

22 David Krause, *Sean O'Casey and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 79.

23 David Krause, *Sean O'Casey The Man and his Work*, p. 118.