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WHO IS WHO ON SHAW'S ISLANDS? REVERSALS IN *JOHN BULL'S OTHER ISLAND*

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Abstract: *The aim of this essay is to show that the use of reversals (as paradoxes concerning rhetorics, and as the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices) is the very means that makes G.B. Shaw's John Bull's Other Island a modern drama, where modern stands for fragmentation (of the world), textualization and self- referentiality. This study focuses on two kinds of reversals, though there can be detected far more in the play. These two are: reversals built in the plot and reversals of stereotypes concerning the stage-Irishman and, –Englishman figures.*

Key words: *G.B. Shaw, modern drama, stage-Irishman/Englishman figures, reversals, issues of identity.*

1. Introduction

In 1904 *John Bull's Other Island* was staged in London and three years later in Dublin as well- and was popular with both audiences. The play, dealing with the up-to-date 'Irish- Question' seemed to work like Mary Poppins's medicine (each spoonful had a different taste, according to the taste of each child); somehow the drama offered something for the British as well as the Irish, for the conservative as well as the liberal, for the radical nationalist as well as the sceptic. At that time the 'Irish –Question' largely covered the debates of different Land Acts and Home Rule.

It was Shaw's special drama- technique, generated from his Ibsen studies that made his plays similar to a kind of magic-mirror: one could see everything in it, only turned upside-down, inside-out. As Christopher Innes explains it in *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*:

"What Shaw singled out was a strategy for trapping the audience through sequentially manipulating their responses, discrediting socially conditioned reflexes …: "so that Ibsen may hunt you down from position to position until you are finally cornered." It is an accurate description of Shaw's own use of inversion to reveal the contradiction between accepted systems of belief and actual behaviour" (15).

What seems problematic in this 'hunting down from position to position' that after we have ridiculed every bias, preconception and stereotype, there may not remain anything to capture as meaning, or a new way of approaching the world, society or the members of it. One of the most problematic features of Shaw's play

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seems to be that the so eagerly criticised status quo turns out to be worth maintaining at the end.

2. Two Types of Reversals

The aim of this essay is to show that the use of reversals (as paradoxes concerning rhetorics, and as the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices) is the very means that makes this drama a modern play; where *modern* stands for: fragmentalization (of the world), textualization and self- referentiality.

This study will concentrate on two kinds of reversals; though there can be detected far more in the drama. These two are: reversals built in the plot and reversals of stereotypes concerning the stage-Irishman and, –Englishman figures. Further reversals in *John Bull are other Island* are:

~ of patriotism;

~ of idealism into pragmatism (and vice versa);

~ of realism into textuality and self-referentiality.

- Reversals built in the plot

In this drama there is not only one protagonist but two. Thomas Broadbent and Larry Doyle cannot be separated from each other, not because there would occur a main conflict between them (as we would expect of two main characters) but because they are like the two sides of an androgyne figure. (I use the term *androgyne*, instead of *doppelganger* because in the doppelganger relationship the two sides are not equal.) Being separated, their identity would be at stake. So the stories of the two protagonists are like two parallel threads, which are quivering of the same stimuli. The two stories concealing behind these figures are that of the 'smallest prince in fairy tales' (gaining half the kingdom and the princess), and the story of the 'niggard', as coloniser. Neither Doyle, nor Broadbent fulfils the expectations according to these archetypes.

Larry Doyle, who left his home and his quasi lover eighteen years before, is somewhat reluctant to return to his fatherland, when invited by Broadbent:

DOYLE. Well, your letter completely upset me, for one thing.

BROADBENT. Why

DOYLE. Your foreclosing this Roscullen mortgage and turning poor Nick Lestrange out of house and home has rather taken me aback; for I liked the old rascal when was a boy and had the run of his park to play in. I was brought up on the property.

BROADBENT. But he wouldn't pay the interest. I had to foreclose on behalf of the Syndicate. So now I'm off to Roscullen to look after the property itself. You are coming with me, of course?

DOYLE. That's it. That's what I dread. That's what has upset me.

BROADBENT. But don't you want to see your country again, after 18 years absence? to see your people? to be in the old home again?

…

DOYLE. … I have an instinct so strong that I'd rather go to the South Pole than to Roscullen (77).

Larry already shows signs of his (later becoming important) passivity and when they get to Roscullen he refuses the seat in parliament offered by his people (see interpretation of this later), and he also refuses (!) Nora's hands:

NORA (bitterly). Roscullen isn't such a lively place that I am likely to be bored by you at our first talk together after eighteen years, though you don't seem to have less.

LARRY. Eighteen years is a devilish long time. Now if it had been eighteen minutes, or even eighteen months we

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should be able to pick up the interrupted thread, and chatter like two magpies. But as it is I have simply nothing to say; and you seem to have less.

NORA. I – (her tears choke her; but she keeps up appearances desperately)

…

LARRY. I know quite well that my departure will be a relief. Rather a failure, this first meeting after eighteen years, eh? Well never mind; these great sentimental events always are failures; and now the worst of it is over anyhow (141; 145).

Nora who read Larry's story according to the fairy tales bursts out in tears when she learns that Larry had not gone out to the world to gain experience and wealth to be able to marry her. Shaw's instructions also help this interpretation, since he introduces Nora as behaving as a living fairy princess, absolutely unconscious of it.

Broadbent's case is even a bit more complicated. He would be the wealthy and powerful English imperialist, who comes to Roscullen on business. This, at first glance, would mean making many of the town paupers, taking away without real reinvestment, in one word colonisation. But from the first time he talks about business, there are signs of idealism also. Idealism is really not the feature we expect of a stingy imperialist. In the second scene of the first act he meets and invites Tim Haffigan to help him in Ireland, because he thinks him an Irishman. Although Broadbent is mocked, he certainly sees that his man is a poor old chap. Regarding the social differences, Broadbent's act of showing the plans of the city he wants to build, could seem unmotivated. But in the course of their dialogue, some kinds of transcendental features of the planned city are stressed:

BROADBENT: Have you ever heard of *Garden City*?

HAFFIGAN: D'ye mean *Heavn*?

BROADBENT: Heaven! No: it's near Hitchin. If you can spare half an hour I'll go into it with you.

…

BROADBENT… You understand that the map of the city- *a circular construction*- is only a suggestion. (71) {Emphasis added, K.L.}

Tim Haffigan misunderstands Broadbent, but this misunderstanding is not a misinterpretation by chance, and its motivatedness is even emphasised by *'a circular construction'*. 'Garden', 'Heaven', 'circle' are all catchwords of Christian symbology. Heaven/ Paradise are the Garden of the Creator. The notion of 'circle as the most perfect form' is inherited from the ancient Greeks, conveyed by Neo-Platonism to Christian culture. To go further in European culture, there are several examples of the perfect, divine city described as shaped of circle (see for example Augustine's work *De Civitate Dei, XI-XII)*. With such an 'entrée', Broadbent can only be a "mock-villain", as Declan Kiberd calls him in *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* and he follows like this:

Just how sincere were Broadbent's good intentions? Is he in short a conscious hypocrite, or a woolly minded liberal imperialist? His language in the play is couched in two tonalities, one sentimental and the other pragmatic, one idealistic and the other sinister, but both often deployed within a single sentence. (56)

In this plot Broadbent's "conscious hypocrisy" seems disputable on two grounds. First, Broadbent is not the witty guy among the characters (in this case, we could still think 'one can never know, since it is a Shaw play'). Second, throughout the play it always turns out that meaning (the judgements of one's words and acts) is highly dependent on context, and on the reaction of others. It just does

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not matter how stupidly he acts, what foolishness he says, how stage-Irish (sentimentally or boastfully) he talks, in the eyes of others he remains in the position of the wealthy English coloniser, even if "*he hasn't got much sense, God help him*" (Shaw, 122). And because of this position have we got the feeling that sometimes his words are not responding to his thoughts and will. All through the play, Broadbent consequently wriggles out of or does not fit in the figure of the coloniser. Every one of his acts diminishes the usually intended distance between the coloniser and the colonised. He is getting deeper and deeper involved with the local affairs and people. First he shows the plans of Garden City for someone from the 'lower classes', than he proposes Nora for first glance, and he opts for Parliamentary membership on the part of the Irish. Consequently it will mean that his wealth and well-being will be bounded to that of Roscullen, whatever his original intentions may be. He is far from being innocent but the idea of him being a cunning sophist does not seem plausible either.

3. Reversals of the Stage-Irishman and Stage-Englishman Figures

The most important foci of this play are the deconstruction of the stereotypes of Irish-, and Englishman and the exposure of national characters' identity as being dependent on the definition of an other's.

At this point, we leave the boundaries of reality, and enter the world of textuality, as this deconstruction is based on the five hundred year old stage- Irishman figure tradition. Shaw enters the tradition with the interpretation of Boucicault's Shaughraun. Three figures are in the centre of the deconstruction of the stage Irish- and Englishman figures: Tim Haffigan, Larry Doyle and Thomas Broadbent. Tim Haffigan's figure works as a starting point, he spells every stereotypical sentence that featured the stage Irishman of the age, at the same time it is also revealed that this stereotypical figure was highly accepted as real Irish. According to Grene in *The Politics of Irish Drama*:

"The work of the first act was to show Broadbent on home English territory thoroughly taken in by the stage Irishman Tim Haffigan. ... Haffigan is to play the part of ... Boucicault's Shaughraun, and he plays it to the life… Shaw, no doubt, intended his English audience to be as taken in by this performance as Broadbent and to be equally taken aback when it is revealed that Haffigan is 'not an Irishman at all'...." (22).

Thus Haffigan turns out to be a fake Irishman in two ways: actually he is a Scotsman, and he is not even speaking like an Irishman at all, he uses slogans picked up from the theatre:

BROADBENT. But he spoke- he behaved just like an Irishman.

DOYLE Like an Irishman!! Man alive don't you know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more power-to-your-elbow business is got up in England to fool you like Albert Hall concerts of Irish music: No Irishman ever talks like that in Ireland, or ever did, or ever will. (76)

In the world of the play the 'authentic Irishman' turns out to be a paper doll, and vanishes in the haze, as Tim Haffigan never returns in the plot. It seems important to emphasize that, with this dramatic strategy, the base relational point is thrown away or better to say split into several characters later in the play.

Larry Doyle as a main representative of the Irish figures undermines the Arnoldian stereotypes from the beginning. He is introduced as follows:

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Mr Laurence Doyle is a man of 36, with cold grey eyes, strained nose, fine fastidious lips, critical brows, clever head, refined and goodlooking on the whole, but with a suggestion of thinskinnedness and dissatisfaction that contrasts strongly with Broadbent's eupeptic jollity (73).

We may see that the description of the figure is related to inner features of the personality, and that these features can be much more related to the stereotypical English character, since they all refer in some ways to rationality and absence of emotions and/or humour. Further, Doyle is the one who provides criticism of the Celtic dreaminess and imagination by abstaining from anything considered national and Irish (people, ideals, and politics). And with each of his acts he is trying to maintain his remoteness, by deaf and blind cold-heartedness in cases of private relations, and by a kind of sophisticated rationalism in political and social ones. Just as in the scene where Roscullen men are gathered in his father's garden (act III) to ask Larry for going into parliament. What these people are waiting for is exactly not what Larry gives them: a bitter analysis of local power relations and a disappointed interpretation of the effects of land acts. This way Doyle is producing the features of a stereotypical English character. However this is the first point where reversals are reversed again and the strategy of "hunting down from position to position" leads to maintaining the original status quo. Larry walks into the trap of stereotypes. By merely rejecting them, he has not shown an alternative yet. Larry in all of his ways remains passive and artificially non-competent, just the way the Arnoldian tradition constructs the Irish.

A similar process can be detected on the side of Broadbent. Although he is an Englishman, his figure represents the features of stage-Irishry, except one, that is passivity. He can be deceived, he is sentimental and boastful even, but never passive. When he first meets Nora at the Round Tower, he is captured by a whirl of emotions (Suddenly betraying a condition of extreme sentimentality - 101) to the extent that Nora thinks him – and at last he believes himself – drunk. But it is all the same: either he is sentimental or drunk he breaks the code of the stage-Englishman, entering the code of the stage-Irishman. And what is more, he cannot judge his own act any more; he keeps asking Nora, his valet and Larry to interpret his behaviour.

BROADBENT (fearfully agitated). But this is such a horrible doubt to put into my mind – to – to For Heaven's sake, Miss Reilly, am I really drunk? …(104).

BROADBENT. Did you notice anything about me last night when I came in with that lady?
HODSON (surprised). No, sir.
BROADBENT. Not any – er-? You may speak frankly.
HODSON. I didn't notice nothing, sir. What sort of thing did you mean, sir?
BROADBENT. Well – er – er – Well, to put it plainly, was I drunk?
HODSON (amazed). No, sir.
BROADBENT. Quite sure? …(105).

LARRY. Well you are nice infant to be let loose in this country! Fancy the potcheen going to your head like that.
BROADBENT. Not to my head, I think. I have no headache; and I could speak distinctly. No, potcheen goes to the hearth, not to the head. What ought I to do? (110).

His political speech also remains within the boundaries of stage-Irishry. His speech – compared to Larry's highly logical, and thus a conveyable one – is a heap of ideological nonsense. One can only recall its vivacious promising qualities:

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BROADBENT. …I look forward to the time when an Irish legislature shall arise once more on the emerald College Green, and the Union Jack – that detestable symbol of a decadent Imperialism – be replaced by a flag as green as the island over which it waves - …

DORAN. That's the style, begob! (121).

It seems reasonable that Broadbent lays the same trick on the Roscullen men that mocked him in the case of Tim Haffigan. He is acting out the Paddy, showing himself a harmless fool. In turn Cornelius Doyle, Doran and Father Dempsey accept him as a tool for their political ambitions. This is the obstacle we have already met with Larry Doyle: although stereotypes are turned inside-out, we are still in the same relational system. We cannot step out of the historical fact that there is a coloniser-colonised relation, and in the position of the coloniser Broadbent can afford himself stage-Irishry without any loss of power. The status quo is reinforced.

4. Conclusion

Ambiguous and modern, *John Bull's Other Island* deconstructs the traditional representation of the stage-Irishman on the one hand and also deconstructs that of the stage-Englishman on the other. By reversing reversals this drama highlights modern problems of identity, without providing easily accessible answers to its readers and audience.

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