

Space, Place and Identity in Bernard Shaw's
The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman

Espaço, lugar e identidade em The Tragedy of an Elderly
Gentleman *de Bernard Shaw*

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Abstract: *The last of Bernard Shaw's "Irish" plays, The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman (1921), raises the same concerns over colonialism, nationalism, and identity explored in John Bull's Other Island (1904) and O'Flaherty V.C.: A Recruiting Pamphlet (1915) but does so from outside his preferred dramatic style, theatrical Realism. In this proto-Absurdist experiment, Shaw invents an Ireland in which differences of religion, class, and politics are moot; in 3000 A.D., age is the only category of social distinction. Experimenting with dramaturgical form and eschewing mimetic scenic design, Shaw utilizes Ireland's mythic wildness and the transformational effect of its climate as an affective element of the play's argument. Through Shaw's treatment of space, this future Ireland with its inherently Irish inhabitants becomes the utopic home to a superior race that portends a life beyond the oppressive British/Irish and later intra-national binary partisan reality of post-WWI and pre-Free State Ireland.*

Keywords: *Bernard Shaw; Absurdism; Space; Ireland; Identity; Back to Methuselah; The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman.*

Resumo: *A última das peças "irlandesas" de Bernard Shaw, The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman (1921) levanta as mesmas preocupações sobre colonialismo, nacionalismo e identidade exploradas em John Bull's Other Island (1904) e O'Flaherty V.C.: A Recruiting Pamphlet (1915), mas o faz fora de seu estilo dramático preferido, o realismo teatral.*

Nesse experimento proto-absurdista, Shaw inventa uma Irlanda em que as diferenças de religião, classe e política são discutíveis; em 3000 d.C., a idade é a única categoria de distinção social. Experimentando a forma dramaturgical e evitando o design cênico mimético, Shaw utiliza a selvageria mítica da Irlanda e o efeito transformador de seu clima como um elemento afetivo do argumento da peça. Por meio do tratamento dado por Shaw ao espaço, essa Irlanda do futuro, com seus habitantes inerentemente irlandeses, torna-se o lar utópico de uma raça superior que pressagia uma vida além da opressiva realidade binária partidária britânica/irlandesa e, mais tarde, intransigente, da Irlanda pós-Primeira Guerra Mundial e pré-Estado Livre.

Palavras-chave: *Bernard Shaw; Absurdismo; Espaço; Irlanda; Identidade; Back to Methuselah; The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman.*

Galway Bay, 3000 A.D.:

Space, Place, and Identity in Bernard Shaw's
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The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman (1921), the penultimate play of George Bernard Shaw's five-part play-cycle *Back to Methuselah* (1921), is set in and around Galway Bay in the year 3000 A.D.. Written between 1918-1920 and dubbed his "Metabiological Pentateuch," *Back to Methuselah* is a reflection on Europe after the Great War. In the fourth play, *The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, Shaw turns his focus to his native Ireland and questions the rationale of their militant strategy in pursuit of independence. The last of his "Irish" plays, *Tragedy* raises the same concerns over colonialism, nationalism, and identity explored in *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and *O'Flaherty V.C.: A Recruiting Pamphlet* (1915) but does so from beyond the bounds of the dramaturgical form for which he was best known.

Shaw began *Back to Methuselah* seven months before the Treaty of Versailles and completed it two years later. The tone and tenor of the larger piece reflects the shock and disillusionment of post-WWI Europe. The play cycle traverses millennia, starting in prelapsarian Eden with Adam and Eve in 4004 B.C., and ending in 31,920 A.D. – the date Shaw decides is *As Far as Thought can Reach*.¹ At its centre, Shaw's epic argues for his version of "Creative Evolution" – a concept developed by Henri Bergson in 1907 – which by way of accessing the "Life Force" (Shaw's name for the nineteenth century concept of

the will) humankind could reach a utopic state. In living three centuries or more, fully mature humans would acquire a “well instructed conscience” with which they would finally become “. . . capable of solving the social problems raised by his own aggregation, or, as he calls it, his civilization” (*Complete Prefaces* 375). Shaw’s assessment of post-war Europe in *Back to Methuselah* is incredibly harsh but, at the very least, offers a strategy for moving forward. Shaw is adamant throughout the preface and the five-play cycle that he is in earnest; he truly believes that Creative Evolution is not only possible but necessary. But the complete narrativized picture of his solution, despite its inherently hopeful didacticism, is bleak, listless, and devastating.

In *Tragedy*, Shaw turns from a global apprehension about the fate of human progress to the more immediate concern about Ireland’s future. While writing *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw’s exasperation with the hyper-nationalism of Sinn Féin and other Irish patriots (save his support for Roger Casement), and frustration with the “derisive doggerel”² espoused by a divided Ulster, was at an all-time high; it was, as Peter Gahan notes, “during the years 1918-21 . . . [that] Bernard Shaw’s attention to his native country’s politics was at its most persistent” (209). Shaw’s private correspondence and public writings reveal near constant warnings against enmity and the Irish adopting nationalism as their defining characteristic – flaws he felt were necessarily crippling the progress of a people with unyielding potential.³ In this proto-Absurdist theatrical experiment, Shaw looks to Ireland in the year 3000 A.D.. An evolved race of “longlivers” are thriving in their remote enclave on Galway Bay; the rugged landscape and temperate climate enrich their quality of life and of their thought. Concerns over nationality, class, gender, and religion are irrelevant in their society, though to the non-evolved “shortlivers” outside of Ireland these markers of identity are still of paramount importance. Experimenting with theatrical form and eschewing mimetic scenic design, Shaw utilizes Ireland’s mythic wildness and the transformational effect of its climate as an affective element of the play’s argument. Through Shaw’s treatment of space, this future Ireland with its inherently *Irish* inhabitants becomes the utopic home to a superior race that portends a life beyond the oppressive British/Irish and later intra-national binary partisan reality of post-WWI and pre-Free State Ireland.

The Burren,⁴ at nearly 350 million years old, and Galway Bay, with its long reaching port history, are places that convey longevity. As the setting of Shaw’s future play, these prehistoric locations, rich with cultural memory, provide a temporal aesthetic that is both familiar and estranging. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi Fu Tuan considers the ways in which humans experience, constitute, and form attachments to place

and how those feelings are influenced by and affect our concepts of time. “Permanence,” Tuan notes, “is an important element in the idea of place...things and objects endure and are dependable in ways that human beings, with their biological weaknesses and shifting moods, do not endure and are not dependable” (140). Tuan goes on to note that “attachment to homeland is a common human emotion” that can be quite intense (149). A native Irishman, Shaw chose of the natural setting of the Burren and Galway Bay to directly affect his audience.

The play follows a group of shortliving humans wandering in the Burren, all but one of whom are too self-absorbed to appreciate the beauty and timelessness of their surroundings. In 3000 A.D., the higher forms of humanity foretold in *Methuselah's* second play, *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*, have manifested themselves into existence (the main action of the third play, *The Thing Happens*). In *Tragedy*, the select psychologically advanced beings have taken up residence in what was formerly Ireland. Secluded on Galway Bay, caught between the rocky Burren landscape and the sea, the longlivers are shrouded in mystery, and revered by the shortlivers. Residing all over the world, the shortlivers are still suffering from the same petty concerns they did in 1920 A.D.. Shaw's narrative releases this race of “shortlivers” – consumed by the concept of identity and culture – on the enduring western Irish landscape to illustrate the futility of their flag-waving preoccupations.

With the juxtaposition of the constant and the fleeting, Shaw emphasizes how conflating nation and land was a fool's errand; land will always outlast nation. Additionally, Shaw understands how the image of the West of Ireland is especially evocative of traumatic cultural memories. Shaw's landscape setting recalls numerous invasions, wars, epidemics, drownings and, of course, the Great Famine (1845-52). In “All the Dead Voices,” Joseph Roach notes how “the landscape of [Ireland], particularly...the west country, was created by the actions or inactions of historical persons as well as by the workings of God or Nature” (87). Though Roach is speaking more of the depiction of Irish landscape in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) the reading also holds true of Shaw's scenography. Tuan confirms Roach's analysis, noting how “landscape is personal and tribal history made visible” (140). In *Tragedy*, Shaw's Irish landscape is remarkably poignant. Despite the play's futurity, in choosing a setting in which colonial trauma is so ineluctably bound, Shaw ensures that his contemporary views of Britain and Ireland are sufficiently masked but immediately felt.

Unlike in his Realist plays, where the mimetic representations of place are presented to a passive audience, Shaw's creation of place in *Tragedy* is actively rendered by the playwright, his performers, and the audience during the performance. In *The*

Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre argues that space exists and is produced in three distinct ways: physically, mentally, and socially. Known as his ‘spatial triad,’ Lefebvre defines three understandings of space: spatial practice or perceived space, representations of space or conceived space, and representational space or lived space. Perceived space is a straightforward concept; it is the everyday space in which we live. Conceived space is related to the production of space and the order in which that relationship imposes (involving signs, codes, and knowledge itself). This space is best understood and forwarded by cartographers, planners, and theorists of space themselves. Lived or representational space, Lefebvre’s says, “embodies complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, and also to art” (40). Lived space is subjective to cultural experience and knowledge. It is a specific socio-cultural milieu made manifest in the subconscious participation and adherence rules and histories inherently known. Theatrical space, Lefebvre believes, is understood through all three conceptions of space: “Theatrical space certainly implies a representation of space (that of the classical drama, say – or the Elizabethan, or the Italian) ... [t]he representational space, mediated yet directly experienced, which infuses the work and the moment, is established as such through the dramatic action itself” (188). The theatrical space in *Tragedy* does not need to be wholly imitative to be affective, but in its referents establishes a world in which shared experiences – past and present – can turn space into place.

While Lefebvre’s writing on theatre is practically limited to the above sentiment, in *Mapping Irish Theatre*, Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards argue that in these passing references “we get a sense of the potential complexity that [his] model brings to the theatrical event” (8). Morash and Richards see the dynamism of Lefebvre’s model, calling the moment-to-moment interaction between his three modes of spatial production “profoundly theatrical” (8). Drawing a connection between Lefebvre’s assertion that space is continually produced in the present and the simultaneity of what happens in the theatre, Morash and Richards contend that “the production of lived space is [a] participative process...involv[ing] not only the performers but also the audience” (8). While they concede that there are strict social boundaries in the theatre that ties the participative production of space to the duration of performance itself, Morash and Richards see an anomaly in Irish Theatre specifically. In Irish theatre, they argue, the two-way flow between performer and audience will not remain confined to the stage in productions that reference key moments in Irish history:

the concentrated, intensified production of space in performance is reliant upon spaces produced outside of the theatre; however, in a particular society or historical moment, those socially produced spaces may have already been the subject of intense, non-theatrical condensational spatial production. (8-9)

As the Irish landscape appears politically theatricalized before Shaw even stages it, the participative exchange between performer and audience that engenders place from space has the potential to carry on after the performance has ended. Therefore, as the Ireland in *Tragedy* is mutually produced by Shaw's dialogue, the actors' performances, and the audience themselves, and as that conception of Irish space can outlast the theatrical event in which it was created, *Tragedy's* setting becomes an essential affective piece of the argument itself.

Coupled with Shaw's experimentation with dramatic form during the post-WWI/pre-Irish Free-State period, this participative transmutation of abstract space to specific place allowed Shaw to redefine what it meant to be Irish. Within this non-Realist spatial theatrical intervention, Shaw portrays a utopic vision of Ireland in which the defining characteristic of the Irish people was not all-encompassing Nationalist fervor, but an identity informed by the enduring quality of the Irish land itself. Moreover, as the process implicates the audience in the construction of place and identity, Shaw ensures his audience align themselves with Ireland and the Irish in the struggle against colonial oppression.

Tragedy is set on “*Burrin pier on the south shore of Galway Bay in Ireland, a region of stone-capped hills and granite fields...[on] a fine summer day in the year 3000 A.D*” (Collected Works 910). Shaw continues in the stage directions, describing “*an ancient stone stump, about three feet thick and three feet high, used for securing ships by ropes to the shore*” on which the Elderly Gentleman sits “*facing the land with his head bowed and his face in his hands, sobbing*” (910). To his right, “*three or four full sacks*” that Shaw insists, “*suggest the pier, unlike many remote Irish piers, is occasionally useful as well as romantic*” (911). Beyond the Elderly Gentleman is the sea (unseen by the audience), and behind and to his left is a flight of stone steps descending to the beach. Without the benefit of reading the stage directions, with the rise of the curtain in performance, the audience would not be able to immediately discern the location beyond recognizing it as a (perhaps *useful*) pier, nor would they be able to imbue that pier with any of the romanticism Shaw implies in his written text that they should. The geographical features that might disclose it as Irish place (the stone-capped hills and granite fields) are only for the Elderly Gentleman to look out

upon. While Shaw's dialogue introduces this space as the West coast of Ireland early on, setting the action a thousand years in the future, and the peculiar dress and general affect of its inhabitants, initially distantiates the audience and inhibits any true recognition. This inchoate space, and the longlivers themselves, are made more meaningfully Irish to the audience through the experience of watching the play.

As Tuan notes in *Space and Place*, "space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning" (136). Shaw's stage space acquires meaning through direct references to places, and several indirect or general references, locating the playing space as Ireland or and its inhabitants as Irish. The first marker of place is the identification of the Elderly Gentleman as alien to the space in which he is occupies The centenarian woman offends the Elderly Gentleman by calling him "a foreigner," prompting his proud rebuttal: "I am a Briton." The Elderly Gentleman concedes that while the British Commonwealth has now relocated to the Middle East, "these islands" were once the center of the empire, and he is "on a pious pilgrimage to one of the numerous lands of [his] fathers"⁵ (*Collected Plays* 911). The centenarian woman refuses his intimation that they are "of the same stock" and dismisses him as being unwell (*Collected Plays* 911).

This first interaction reveals both parties as struggling to locate themselves spatially and within a social context. She later positions herself, her location, and her elevated status distinctly: "[Y]ou are on the west coast of Ireland, and that it is the practice among natives of the Eastern Island to spend some years here to acquire mental flexibility...The climate has that effect" (*Collected Plays* 912). These comments, this attitude, and the inability to freely converse calls to mind the stereotypically suspicious and insular Aran Island's Gaeilgeoiri, and firmly locates and identifies her within a distinctly Irish context. Her inherent Irishness and his Englishness is further reinforced with the following exchange in which the centenarian woman indirectly insults Anglo landlords/landlordism and in which the Elderly Gentleman insists he is speaking "the plainest English":

THE WOMAN. Then why are you here?

THE ELDDERLY GENTLEMAN. Am I trespassing? I was not aware of it.

THE WOMAN. Trespassing? I do not understand the word.

THE ELDDERLY GENTLEMAN. Is this land private property? If so, I make no claim. I proffer a shilling in satisfaction of damage (if any) and am ready to withdraw if you will be good enough to shew me the nearest way. [*He offers her a shilling*].

THE WOMAN [*taking it and examining it without much interest*] I do not

understand a single word of what you have just said.

THE ELDDERLY GENTLEMAN. I am speaking the plainest English. Are you the landlord?

THE WOMAN [*shaking her head*] There is a tradition in this part of the country of an animal with a name like that. It used to be hunted and shot in the barbarous ages. It is quite extinct now.

(*Collected Plays* 912)

Shaw uses place to distinguish peoples and peoples to distinguish place. Tuan notes how fixed boundaries and land ownership in both agrarian and industrialized societies provide important markers of identity (156). For Shaw, on the coast of Western Ireland in the year 3000 A.D., the land is inhabited but not owned. Tuan explains that when no ownership or fixed boundaries exist, the territory in question is distinguished in one of two ways, as “the estate” and/or as “the range”: “Estate is the traditionally recognized home...of a patrilineal descent group and its adherents [whereas] [r]ange is the tract or orbit over which the group ordinarily hunts or forages” (157). Estate, Tuan argues, is more important in the ceremonial and social life where range is more important for survival. The Elderly Gentleman, so consumed with his agnates, primogeniture, and (as we discover later) a slavish adherence to pomp and circumstance, is the first to initiate this type of distinction in the conversation. He views the land as an estate, as something he could take ownership of; in doing so, the man defines himself. The woman, in comparison, reinforces her understanding of the land as range; this is a place where animals roam and are hunted and where – as her long life suggests – perennality is of paramount importance. In this way, she is distinguishing herself from her short-living counterpart through her experience of space, but is also suggesting that the agricultural mores and mythic wildness of Western Ireland persists in 3000 A.D.

It is important to note, however, that while the Elderly Gentleman wears his Englishness as a badge of honor, the longlivers insist their only distinguishing “class” or social identity is that of the long-living. Zoo, a longliver brought in to care for the Elderly Gentleman, scoffs at the shortliver’s insistence on maintaining national identities: “what a ridiculous thing to call people Irish because they live in Ireland! you might as well call them Airish because they live in air” (*Collected Plays* 918). The longlivers’ identity is formed from their ability to sustain, to live many centuries and embrace the wisdom and ability their long-life grants them. It is only in the audience’s perception of character, reinforced by the spoken markers of place, that the longlivers become “Irish.” Shaw’s longlivers reveal

how one can necessarily be shaped by place without being defined by it.

In acts two and three, Shaw moves the action to “[a] *courtyard before the columned portico of a temple*” and inside the temple in “*a gallery overhanging an abyss*” in “Galway city,” respectively (*Collected Plays* 926, 934). No ruins of Galway city survive in 3000 A.D., instead the place is home to a large temple built for the sole purpose of humoring shortlivers. Though not depicted on the stage, the “city” is also home to a great statue of Sir John Falstaff. In a bizarre (and scarily accurate predictive) digression, the longliving Zoo recounts how ten years after the war to end all wars there was another war, where “hardly any soldiers were killed; but seven of the capital cities of Europe were wiped out of existence.” She continues:

It seems to have been a great joke: for the statesmen who thought they had sent ten million common men to their deaths were themselves blown into fragments with their houses and families, while the ten million men lay snugly in the caves they had dug for themselves. Later on even the houses escaped; but their inhabitants were poisoned by gas that spared no living soul. Of course the soldiers starved and ran wild; and that was the end of pseudo-Christian civilization. The last civilized thing that happened was that the statesmen discovered that cowardice was a great patriotic virtue; and a public monument was erected to its first preacher, an ancient and very fat sage called Sir John Falstaff. (*Collected Plays* 930)

The future this story portends, and the irony that what remains is that statue of Falstaff, is so ludicrous that the very place in which this is “happening” is beyond comprehension. The ensuing action in the final two acts further confounds reason so, while the scenic elements are more numerous in acts two and three than the sparsely decorated pier in act one, the space in the second and third acts appears unstable. Shaw’s design and didascalia distantiates the audience from making meaning of the dramatic action and interrupts a clear production of space.

In *Tragedy*’s first act, the playwright, the performers, and the audience join in producing a familiar and historically dense space that facilitates the audience’s allegiance to those who reside in that produced environment (the perceived “Irish” longlivers). In the second and third acts of *Tragedy*, the audience is kept from emotionally identifying with any of the characters. When that distance is maintained, the audience plays less of a role in the production of space than the playwright and the performers. As such, to the audience the space feels fractured, disjointed, or ephemeral. In applying what Brecht would later

call the *Verfremdungseffekt* (or alienation effect), Shaw ensures his audience brings greater scrutiny to the events onstage.

In “The Theatre of the Absurd,” Martin Esslin agrees that when the alienation effect is produced successfully, “emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention” (5). Shaw’s distancing techniques come to head in the second and third acts, when there is a completely break-down of language between the Elderly Gentleman’s party of shortlivers and the residents of Galway Bay. Act two begins in a

courtyard before the columned portico of a temple [where a] . . . veiled and robed woman of majestic carriage passes along behind the columns towards the entrance . . . [f]rom the opposite direction a man of compact figure, clean-shaven, saturnine, and self-centred: in short, very like Napoleon I, and wearing a military uniform of Napoleonic cut, marches with measured steps; places his hand in his lapel in the traditional manner; and fixes the woman with his eye. She stops, her attitude expressing haughty amazement at his audacity (Collected Plays 926).

In the opening dialogue, the Napoleonic figure introduces himself as “The Man of Destiny,” though he is revealed to be the Emperor of Turania, whom we know from act one has been travelling in the Elderly Gentleman’s party under the alias “General Aufsteig.” The veiled woman is revealed to be not *the* oracle but *an* oracle as the longlivers who have lived past 100 (called secondaries) take turns filling that role. As if this juxtaposition of countenance and costume isn’t enough, the ensuing conversation in which the veiled woman utterly refuses to acknowledge his point of view, to see value in the identity he has cultivated for himself, and to regard him with any of the respect he feels he deserves is enough for communication itself to seem to be a feckless endeavor.

In a moment of extreme frustration, and in what is clearly an attempt to locate himself in both an unfamiliar place as well as in an uncomfortable social space, the emperor reveals his full name as Cain Adamson Charles Napoleon, the “powerful, popular, famous [and] historically immortal” (*Collected Plays* 929). He is trying to position himself on a chronological timeline he believes will incorporate him into communion with the race of longlivers. He is so flustered that he repeatedly uses military jargon to communicate, even once using the German “Kamerad” to address her but cannot make himself understood.

They both fail to communicate because their functional value systems exist on

different planes. The shortlivers cannot conceive of anything more important than of the domination and subordination of others. They desire glory and fear death. The longlivers differ from the shortlivers not just in that they have more time in which to become wise, but in that the extended time gives them a new attitude on life itself. As Zoo explains to the Elderly Gentleman in act one, “it is not the number of years we have behind us, but the number we have before us that makes us careful and responsible and determined to find out the truth about everything...we are made wise not by the recollections of our past, but by the responsibilities of our future” (*Collected Plays* 921). Their evolutionary superiority is maintained not by “looking down at” the shortlivers but “up to something higher than [them]selves” (921). The longlivers “true destiny” is not to “advise or govern” the shortlivers, but to “supplant and supersede” them. Language fails, and understanding is rendered impossible, because the short-lived are concerned with trivialities and the long-lived only realities.

The audience, who face the same biological weakness of the shortlivers, have been given the key with which they can access the higher plane of the longlivers. Through the experience of watching the play, they are confronted with the uncomfortable realization that unless they burden themselves with the responsibility of the future, they will be doomed to a futile existence. Further driving this message is Shaw’s use of meta-theatricality. The longliver Zoo openly admits that any pomp on their behalf is only for the benefit of the shortlivers: “[Zozim] has to dress-up in a Druid’s robe, and put on a wig and a long false beard, to impress you silly people. I have to put on a purple mantle. I have no patience with such mummery; but you expect it from us; so I suppose it must be kept up” (*Collected Plays* 930). Shaw instructs these actors in the stage directions to put on and take off their ridiculous costumes onstage and to alternately “*feign geniality*” and severity in their speech, which repeatedly draws the audience’s attention to the nature of the play’s theatricality. Despite Zoo’s warning that “all th[e] business with colored lights and chords on that old organ is only tomfoolery,” the appearance of those same-colored lights, smoke, and music still astounds the shortlivers, and they stoop and stumble in awe and reverence. Most appalling for the audience is watching the shortlivers who, at the end of this highly manufactured and obviously perfidious display, acknowledge its falsity but agree to continue perpetuating the “lie” as it means of maintaining their political status quo. As a function of the play’s meta-theatricality, the Elderly Gentleman and the audience come to realize the inconsequence of an existence in which its value system is predicated on cupidity, egoism, and bombast.

Upon leaving the theatre, the audience can choose to follow in the way of the

shortlivers, with their “put on” British mannerisms and petty identity politics or *will* themselves to evolve into a race not unlike the longlivers. Though the longlivers’ detachment is off-putting, the highly rational “society” in which they live – where competition and hostility have been eliminated, social, political, and economic problems have been solved, and where life is experienced on an infinitely higher level intellectually and aesthetically – is not unappealing. And while in the wake of the Great War the world seemed an irredeemable place, the audience has effectively contributed to producing that utopia in an *Irish* space.

Martin Esslin describes the Absurdist genre as one in which “[i]t is impossible to identify oneself with characters one does not understand or whose motives remain a closed book” (5). “While the happenings on the stage are absurd,” Esslin continues, “they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to life with *its* absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence” (5). Whereas the place created in act one was familiar, the space in acts two and three is – at first – very nearly incomprehensible. While the shortlivers that appear in the second and third acts are in manner, custom, and costumed similarly to the audience, they seem far more alien in this “Galway city” than the Elderly Gentleman had on Burren pier. The shortlivers respond erratically and disproportionately to stimuli, but the tactlessness with which the longlivers treat them fails to engender any intimacy between the audience and the longlivers, as had been done in the first act. *Tragedy* is not a futuristic *Ubu Roi*, but the Falstaffian buffoonery of the shortlivers and the disdain and disconnectedness of the longlivers does confront the audience with a tragic picture of humanity’s selfish and callow charlatanism. Nor is *Tragedy* an earlier *Waiting for Godot*, though in Shaw’s location specific but minimalist set, the audience is forced to look for more in the conceptual aesthetic he invites them to create. Often read as a bi-partisan tract, in choosing to settle his creatively evolved longlivers on Galway Bay and imbuing them with Irish characteristics, Shaw reveals his support for Ireland and the Irish in the crucial pre-independence period. Further, it is through *Tragedy*’s proto-Absurdist dramatic form that Shaw can actively draw on the constitutive presence of the audience to construct a utopic Ireland in which challenges their conception of Ireland and of Irish identity.

Notes

- 1 The first play of *Back to Methuselah*, *In the Beginning*, reveals Adam and Eve’s choosing to leave Eden, “inventing” marriage, embracing death as a means of renewal and of progress. Jumping forward to the years just following WWI with *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*,

two brothers have discovered that a higher form of humanity may be possible for those who can learn to live with full vitality for three centuries. In the third play, set in 2170 A.D., and as the title suggests, *The Thing Happens*. Two of the characters from *The Gospel* have succeeded in increasing their lives span. Interestingly, the two characters who have achieved this fate – Reverend Haslam and the parlormaid – were those who, because of class prejudice, had been deemed unworthy of Creative Evolution in the previous section. In *Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, set in 3000 A.D., “shortlivers” are becoming a thing of the past, A new race of “longlivers” have taken up residence in the west of Ireland, and their two main political parties are considering the eradication of the whole lot of ineffectual shortlivers for their own good. In the last play, *As Far as Thought can Reach*, reveals a fully evolved society. The end of the play reinforces what the longliver tried to impart to the shortliver in the preceding play: living life for the is the of future is the only way to secure the present.

- 2 From “How to Settle the Irish Question”: “All the rest of Ireland could not coerce a united Ulster; and to repeat the original sin that delivered Ireland into England’s hands by calling in English soldiers to coerce Irishmen would be morally impossible. There is quite as much fight in Ulster as in Sinn Féin. Ulster may not love the Dark Rosaleen, but it hates the Virgin Mary. It does not want to die for Ireland. On the contrary it believes that all the people who die for Ireland go straight to hell; but it wants to send them there and have the island to itself...Ulster children still repeat the derisive doggerel “Sleether slaughther, holy wather”; and the adults are as determined as ever that ‘the Protestant boys shall carry the drum’” (145).
- 3 Typical of his writing of the time, this letter to his former secretary and mother to future Taoiseach Garret, Mabel Fitzgerald, explores Shaw’s concern over where Sinn Féin’s short-sighted brutal nationalism would lead. The description of the effects of Ireland’s climate on the “base” and the “noble” seems to serve as a model for how the Irish climate in *Tragedy* affects the shortlivers and longlivers differently:

The days of small nations is past, indeed, except for nations still denied self-government, nationalism is a dead horse; and even subject nations like Ireland must never forget that the moment they gain home rule, the horse will drop down under them and reveal by a sudden and horrible decomposition, that he has been dead for many years. Only as a member of a great commonwealth is there any future for us. We are a wretched little clod, broken off a bigger clod, broken off the west end of Europe, full of extraordinary beautiful but damnably barren places, with a strange climate that degrades base people hideously and clears the souls of noble people wonderfully. We are capable of taking a very high degree of training; in fact we are rather dangerous without it. We have an enormous advantage of exceptional literary power and a language which puts us in communication with a fifth of the human race. We are not rich enough to become fatheaded and demoralised like our biggest neighbours. In short, we shall be either a very highly civilised people or nothing; and this means that we should carefully preserve our relations with the large countries....Now if Sinn Féin means that we are to decide and arrange all this ourselves instead of having

it arranged for us by others, then more power to Sinn Féin’s elbow. But if S.F. means that we are to turn back and shrink into a little village community...and do nothing but wonder how much longer the turf will last in Donegal, then the proper place for Sinn Féin is the ash-pit (qtd. in Mulhall).

- 4 The Burren (Irish: *Boirinn* meaning “rocky district”) is a garst/glaciakarst landscape in County Clare, on the West Coast of Ireland.
- 5 The first act of *Tragedy* covers much of this exposition through a series of discussions between the Elderly Gentleman and three separate longlivers, each of whom grow exceedingly tired from the shortliver’s stubborn self-importance. Frustrated and often misunderstood, the Elderly Gentleman tries to justify his interest in visiting the longlivers in the former Ireland. The Elderly Gentleman considers himself a historian of sorts, and in reciting the “history” of the British Isles reveals the grave mistake that led to the effacement of the Irish people. When the British first considered a move to the Middle East, the Elderly Gentleman explains, they asked their “oppressed but never conquered” Irish neighbors to join them. Horrified at the prospect of abandonment and desperate without an oppressive force to define them, the Irish travel around the globe, searching for other battles of national independence and offering aid and encouragement to resistance groups as far as India and Korea:

Hardly two hundred years had elapsed when the claims of nationality were so universally conceded that there was no longer a single country on the face of the earth with a national grievance or a national movement. Think of the position of the Irish, who had lost all their political faculties by disuse except that of nationalist agitation, and who owed their position as the most interesting race on earth solely to their sufferings! The very countries they had helped to set free boycotted them as intolerable bores. The communities which had once idolized them as the incarnation of all that is adorable in the warm heart and witty brain, fled from them as from a pestilence. (*Collected Plays* 917)

Disheartened and displaced, the “devoted Irishmen, not one of whom had ever seen Ireland” were counselled to return to home. “This had never once occurred to them, because there was nothing to prevent them and nobody to forbid them.” Jumping at the suggestion, they returned, landing in Galway Bay. The elders “flung themselves down and passionately kissed the soil of Ireland, calling on the young to embrace the earth that had borne their ancestors”, but the young “looked gloomily on, and said ‘There is no earth, only stone.’” They turned around and returned to England, never confessing to being Irish ever again – not even to their own children. Within a generation, the Elderly Gentleman reflects, “the Irish race vanished from human knowledge” (*Collected Plays* 918).

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