The ruined voice in Tom Murphy's Bailegangaire

Lee, Cheryl Julia

2018

Lee, C. J. (2018). The ruined voice in Tom Murphy's Bailegangaire. In D. K. Jernigan, W. Wadiak, & M. Wang (Eds.), *Narrating death : the limit of literature* (pp. 189-205). Routledge.
doi:10.4324/9780429424663-13

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/145181>

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429424663-13>

© 2018 Taylor & Francis. All rights reserved. This book chapter is made available with permission of Taylor & Francis.

Downloaded on 26 Apr 2023 18:59:58 SGT

The Ruined Voice in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*

Cheryl Julia Lee

The dead have a hold on Ireland. Her houses and her pubs, her pages and her stages are full of revenants. These 'ghosts in [the] sunlight'¹ are spectres conjured by a national imagination, the bronze and marble statues along the street come to life; they are also fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, the ones with whom we share names and seats at the table, whose eyes tell us how we will grow old, or not. They are reminders of time and time passing, love and the inevitability of love lost. Mostly, they are kept at a distance for fear of the hurting. In *Bailegangaire* (1985), however, Irish playwright Tom Murphy orchestrates an encounter with the dead, for he suggests that it is in the hurting that a space for meaning to come into being can be located.

Murphy is widely considered one of Ireland's greatest living writers, his oeuvre as being of "great significance for the development of Irish theatre" (Etherton 107), and *Bailegangaire* one of his masterpieces. Taking place on a single night in the year 1984, the play stages a drama of three women struggling to overcome their tragic past. In *Bailegangaire*, Mommo tries to tell the story of how the town Bochtán came to be known as Bailegangaire, or 'the town without laughter,' which she has hitherto never finished telling. Once a *seanchaí* (or a traditional storyteller) but now senile, Mommo struggles with the act of narration, and her telling is confused and barely coherent. Her granddaughters are her unwilling audience, forced to listen to her circumlocutory tale while dealing with their individual traumas: Mary has returned home from London after a period of absence in the hope of "put[ting] everything right" (*Bailegangaire* 153) while Dolly, trapped in a loveless

1. In "Ghosts in Sunlight," Truman Capote describes the experience of seeing the past and the present converging in a moment as akin to seeing "a ghost ... sauntered in out of the sunlight" (269).

marriage, is pregnant with a stranger's child. As Mommo persists in telling her story despite the sisters' pleas, quarrels, and confessions, it is in her ruined dying voice that the sisters find hope for "some future" (160).

Mommo's Ruined Voice

The lights go down. The curtain rises. On stage is a double bed in the middle of a kitchen and in it sits an old woman. "Scoth caoc! Shkoth!" she yells; she is "driving imagined hens from the house" (93). With this, the tone is set for *Bailegangaire*. Mommo's voice—the rambling and incoherent voice of "a half-senile crone sitting up in bed, spitting bits of food onto the floor, swinging from rambling incoherence to epic fluency" (FitzGibbon 42)—inducts the audience into the play. *Bailegangaire* belongs to Mommo. Her voice determines the atmosphere of the stage, structures the narrative action, and constitutes the meaning of the play. Yet, it is a ruined voice: it comes from a place of decline, speaks without communicating, and what it speaks is loss.

As a *seanchaí*, the elderly Mommo represents a dying oral tradition. Both a means of entertainment and a keeper of folklore, the *seanchaí* held an esteemed position in Irish society until she was displaced in the 1800s along with the general decline of Gaelic culture². Mommo tells her stories to "imagined children" (91)—her granddaughters forming her incidental and frustrated audience—while all around her are signs of time having passed: photographs (which Roland Barthes has irrevocably associated with death in *Camera Lucida*) as well as "modern conveniences" like the light bulb, which Mary keeps switched off for Mommo's sake, and the radio that Mary switches on for respite from Mommo's voice (91; 100). Moreover, because of her dementia, Mommo is not simply a *seanchaí* but a caricature of one: she speaks to an imaginary audience, her telling is fragmentary and tortured, and she

2. This was partly the result of technological developments and the mass emigration that took place in the wake of the Famine. See J. H. Delargy's "The Gaelic Story-Teller."

is endowed with an exaggerated and almost grotesque physicality, spitting and snapping her way through the play.

The audience of a *seanchaí* might have “loved to hear a familiar story again, and again, having a deep admiration for the skill with which it was told” (Kiberd 44-45), but Mommo’s telling of the “same old story” night after night while withholding “the last piece that you never tell” alternately bores and frustrates her granddaughters (*Bailegangaire* 101; 157). In addition, the tragic tale of Bailegangaire that Mommo is compelled to recite is a lore less like the “fairytales of the Celtic Twilight” than “the original folktales which are guides to survival in the hostile and harsh world of the peasant” (O’Toole, “Introduction” xiii). While the former tended to explain things away by way of supernatural entities, the latter was gritty realism, “full of widows and orphans, sudden deaths, cruel diseases that cannot be withstood, and predatory economic forces in which dispossession and starvation are constant possibilities” (xiii). What Mommo communicates is not simply the idea of passing time but rather that of *devouring time*, of *still* devouring time that has yet to complete its task and the bitterness and grief that lie in its wake.

The senile Mommo is trapped in the midst of this time, between the onward drive of the act of narration and the backward-looking origin story of Bailegangaire that is her narrative content—which also turns out to be part of her origin story. She is disoriented and disordered in time, by time, caught in the push and pull of its tides. Falling out of narrative time, Mommo also falls out of narrative space. *Bailegangaire* takes place on the familiar stage of the “single-set Irish country kitchen” (Morash and Richards 113). A commonplace in Irish theatre, it is a space that is “bounded, and ... readable at a glance,” the manifestation of what Tom Garvin refers to as “the notion of a static and unchanging order that was to be regarded as ideal” (qtd. in Morash and Richards 23). The senile Mommo represents a rupture within this readily known space. Whereas the figure of the *seanchaí* and his or her stories are

distinctly placed—“[their] time and place are the winter fireside, or the spring sowing time, or the country road at any season” (Pearse; qtd. in Kiberd 46)—Mommo takes center stage in a double bed (dis)placed in a kitchen.

Momo’s bed carves out the boundaries of her particular ontology within the communal space of the kitchen, a stage within the stage as it were, signaling “a dehiscence” (Kilroy 5). Peter Crawley describes the image of Mommo in her bed as “utterly shocking” and “a daring manoeuvre..., which gives the play an almost otherworldly focus” (*Irish Times*). ‘Otherworldly’ is precisely the patina that the play seeks to establish: for most of the play, Mommo inhabits a different reality from her grandchildren, speaking to her memory of their young selves rather than to their present grown-up selves. Meanwhile, Mary and Dolly, painfully present as they are, “don’t understand a word she’s sayin’”; to Dolly, Mommo’s rambling is “[s]eafóid, nonsense talk about forty years ago” (*Bailegangaire* 106).

In *Dramatic Theories of Voice in the Twentieth Century*, Andrew Kimbrough defines language as a “verbal system of communication ... held in common by a community” (5), which is to say the words used must be anchored in the same reality. Because Mommo inhabits a different reality from her granddaughters, there is little basis for a common language among the women, and without language to fashion the voice’s sounds into sense (6), there is little opportunity for productive, meaningful dialogue. Instead, the women talk to themselves, creating an echo chamber in which their hurt and longing are constantly reflected back at them. Otherwise, they engage in acts of mimicry that emphasize their separateness. Mommo mimics various kinds of laughter in her telling, the ‘nonsensical’ sounds of which reinforce the wall of non-meaning around her that is founded on her dementia—a wall impenetrable to Mary and Dolly, as well as the audience. Similarly, each time Mary and Dolly mimic Mommo or each other, a difference between the mimic and the mimicked emerges. For instance, when Mommo falls asleep, Mary takes over the telling of the story

with “[a] touch of mimicry of Mommo” (121). This moment tends towards empathy as Mary recognizes in Mommo the desire to “go home,” only to end in frustration as Mary questions where home is (121). That the question is motivated by feelings of rejection on Mary’s part, and that it is goes unanswered, signals an impasse between the two women.

Mimicry is never harmless in *Bailegangaire*. Even when it stems from petty derision, such as when Dolly mocks Mary’s comment that “[t]his is our home” (151), mimicry always carries with it an assertion—even an accusation—of difference. William N. West explains that “[t]he experience of the mimetic object is in fact the experience of the cleft within it between itself and the other thing [it mimics]” (144). In this case, Dolly is charging Mary with abandonment, of leaving Dolly with Mommo for ten years, of not knowing terror, hatred, and desperation like she does. There is no “our home,” as Mary claims (*Bailegangaire* 130). It is for this reason that Mary is desperate to finish the story with Mommo: finishing it together would overcome the great gulf between them and establish some sort of common ground, which in turn would bring with it the possibility of “mov[ing] on to a place where, perhaps, we could make some kind of new start” (125).

Divested of language and its purpose of communication, Mommo’s speech—a hybrid of Gaelic, English, and nonsensical utterances—approximates to sound. Mladen Dolar argues that the voice is “elusive, always changing, becoming, elapsing, with unclear contours, as opposed to the relative permanence, solidity, durability of the seen” (*A Voice and Nothing More* 79). At its heart, language is “just vibrations of the air, which are gone as soon as they are produced, a pure passing, not something that could be fixed or that one could hold on to” (Dolar, “The Object Voice” 11). The voice-as-sound emphasizes these non-physical conditions of enunciation and, in its extreme, manifests as ‘glossolalia’:

the manifestation of language at the level of its pure materiality, the realm of pure

sound, where one obtains a total disjunction of signifier and signified. As such, the relation between sound and meaning breaks down through the glossolalic utterance; it is the image of language inscribed in its excess, at the threshold of nonsense. (Weiss 19-20)

Glossolalia speaks both to the physical and figurative limits of reality. Usually situated in a religious context and interpreted as “possession by a supernatural entity, conversation with divine beings, or the channeling of a divine proclamation” (“Glossolalia”), glossolalia gestures to the existence of a God and an afterlife, and more broadly, of mysteries that cannot be explained. In striving to give form to an intention or feeling that cannot be otherwise communicated, that is, to be a “pure manifestation of expression” (Weiss 20), it speaks of our limited ability to know and represent our experience. The meaning of glossolalia or voice-as-sound lies outside of itself. It reaches for something deeper, something other, something beyond visible and recognizable reality.

Pointing to the “*tortured vacillation* between poetry and pure sound,” Chris Morash notes that where “language *collapses* into pure sound” in Murphy’s plays, “these are not points at which language breaks down, or at least not in any sense in which such a breakdown constitutes failure” (25-26; emphases added). Rather, these transitions signal an approach towards the profundity of our existence, a movement towards some kind of truth (26): a truth *within the individual*, for no one can mistake the ruined voice as coming from somewhere other than Mommo. Mommo’s speech-as-glossolalia is the precise articulation of the depths of her individual experience. In this aspect, Mommo’s speech shares some affinity with scat singing, another form of non-mimetic discourse. Unlike the controlled chaos of Mommo’s speech—wherein every syllable, each *ho* and *hih* and *ha*, is not left to chance or improvisation but detailed in Murphy’s script—scat singing is improvised in the moment.

There is, however, a similar *precision* to the sounds vocalized by each singer that we recognize as their “signature traits” (Berliner 126)³.

More than just superficial markers of personality, these subtleties in each singer’s idiosyncratic scat singing are charged with feeling and meaning. Nathaniel Mackey argues that scat’s “apparent mangling of articulate speech testifies to [the unspeakable]”—specifically the unspeakable history of racial violence in this case—and that it is a “telling ‘inarticulacy’” (qtd. in Edwards 624) which expresses “the edges of the voice: the moan, the falsetto, the shout” (Edwards 625). It hence signals a kind of truth-telling, the sincere expression of an individual’s emotional timbre. Nicholas Grene writes that in *Bailegangaire*, Murphy “deliberately risks unintelligibility to gain its effect” (*Politics* 222); this essay argues instead that its unintelligibility is a crucial part of its effect. Like scat, the ‘faults’ in Mommo’s broken utterance (for broken it is, in all senses of the word) allow for an unadulterated expression of who she is and of the sum of her lived emotional experience. Dolly is not wrong when she refers to Mommo’s ramblings as a confession, but Mary is closer to the mark when she suggests that “[m]aybe she’s crying now” (*Bailegangaire* 141; 143).

A Laughter in the Dark

Mommo’s ‘nonsense talk’ is positioned as the denouement of a process in which we as human beings learn to speak, forget to speak, and finally lapse into silence. “It is characteristic of the voice to die,” writes Barthes. “What constitutes the voice is what, within it, lacerates me by dint of having to die, as if it were at once and never could be anything but a memory” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 114). The voice works its way in time towards ruin and loss

3. “Some people sing *love* so differently—*luuv* or *lahv*. There are different ways of saying words like *cry*. You can say *cryie* or *crahy*. Also, singers may place their emphasis on different words in the same song” (Lundy; qtd. in Berliner 125-26).

is inscribed in the voice. Mommo's voice is an aged voice that is deeply ingrained with the welts of existence. In what it speaks, how it sounds, and the way it tends towards silence, it documents loss as a condition of experience. The "defiance" and "hatred" (*Bailegangaire* 93) in Mommo's voice is a reaction to a history of pain, deprivation, and desolation. It looks forward to the end of her narrative, where she makes her contribution to the laughing competition—a litany of the dead, a living record of loss:

Her Pat was her eldest, died of consumption... An' for the sake of an auld ewe was stuck in the flood was how she lost two of the others, Jimmy and Michael. ... An' the nice wife was near her time...Died tryin' to give birth to the fourth... [Then] soft Willie, aged thirty-four, in Louisaville Kentucky, died, peritonitis. (163-64)

And after all her children have passed before her, Mommo loses Tom and Séamus in quick succession. The inheritance of the "poor banished children of Eve" (169) is loss; their legacy in turn is bitterness. The received wisdom the *seanchai*'s tale imparts in this case, as the sisters put it, is that "the saga will go on" (147).

There is a perverse vitality to the heartbreaking continuities in the women's lives that is embodied in the ruined voice, which rings out in a space haunted by the "[a]ul' brown ghosts" of the dead, their faces staring out from "[f]ramed photographs on the walls" in contrasting silence (104; 91). Their silence echoes throughout the play, announcing the smaller death of indifference: it is iterated in Séamus's withholding of Mommo's first name, which leads her to think he hates her; it is in the wires Dolly's husband, Stephen, sends that is their primary means of communication; it is in Mommo's refusal to engage with Mary. *The* silence always comes again, as Murphy's stage direction goes. For the family "acquainted with grief" (127) it is a known silence, a deeply felt and familiar silence that encroaches on

the women.

Thomas Hardy's "Silences," which Mary misquotes, engages with this paradox of the voice. Silence and sound are inseparable pairs as each enables the other: the silence of copse or croft is achieved "[w]hen the wind sinks dumb," the silence of the belfry loft "[w]hen the tenor after tolling stops its hum," the silence of a lonely pond after a man and his brother have drowned (865). Of all the silences Hardy names, the "most forlorn" is "the rapt silence of an empty house/where oneself was born,/dwelt, held carouse/with friends" (865), for the memories one has of the place is both the reason for and the only response to the silence. But where "remembered songs and music-strains" fail, Hardy's poetic voice succeeds: there is after all a way of "stir[ring] a torpor like a tomb's" (865) even if only for the duration of the poem, for Hardy too must eventually fall silent. In the same way, Mommo's ruined voice stays the silence momentarily: Mary quotes the poem when Mommo falls asleep and the house is quiet, and the sound of a car passing by outside "punctuate[s]" (*Bailegangaire* 121) the silence, both interrupting and emphasizing the 'torpor' in the house.

The ruined voice emerges despite itself. It is the prerogative of the living, a reflection of an obligation to speak, to try and communicate consciousness. Yet, it is always haunted by the impending silence. In the laughing competition, Mommo and Séamus, along with the townsfolk, attempt to overcome this silence, to defy their fates by laughing at their miseries, and therefore to assert their presence in the world. The competition begins as a confrontation between two parties who are each eager to safeguard their pride: Mommo identifies Séamus and herself against the Bochtáns—people set apart by their proclivity for misfortune, whose land was "so poor... when 'twasn't bog 'twas stone," with weather "seven times worse than elsewhere in the kingdom" (92). As strangers, Mommo and Séamus' intrusion into the community creates a territorial protectiveness that is intensified by Séamus's claim that he is "a better laughier than [their] Costello" (127), who "was the one an' only boast they ever

had in that cursèd place” (102). The insult to their pride is doubled by Séamus being a small man while Costello is so physically dominating that “you’d near have to step into the verge to give him sufficient right-of-way” (101). Mommo’s goading of Costello and Séamus into competition comes similarly from a place of anger and hurt pride, the result of years of emotional detachment from her husband: “The forty years an’ more in the one bed together an’ he to rise in the mornin’ (and) not to give her a glance. An’ so long it had been he had called her by first name, she’d near forgot it herself” (140).

The collective laughter that ensues in the competition broadens the parameters of the confrontation: the conflict is now set between man and God. Counterposed to the sigh of submission that Séamus O’Toole denies himself (100), laughter—“great rumbles” rising from their chests, the “rich rolls of round sounds” out of their mouths “to explode in the air an’ echo back rev-berations” (156)—is embodied presence⁴, emerging as evidence of strength, a way of overcoming misfortune by acknowledging it and defying its dominion over one’s emotional life. Drawing from Marcel Pagnol’s *Notes sur le rire*, Susanne Langer locates the source of laughter in “the subject who laughs,” as opposed to funny things or situations, marking laughter as ““a song of triumph”” which ““expresses the laughter’s sudden discovery of his own momentary superiority over the person he laughs at”” (*Feeling and Form* 339). In gallows humor, in particular, Langer suggests that “the harsh laugh in distress” is “a flash of self-assertion” (340); Sigmund Freud similarly argues that in such instances, “[t]he ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world” (162). Vivian Mercier describes such laughter rather more emphatically as “purgation” and “comic catharsis”: the “howl of protest uttered sooner or later by every one of the tormented leading

4. The Irish word for laughter is *gáire*, which comes from the combination of the words for “noise” and “violent bodily movement” (Janus 160).

characters in Murphy's [plays]" brings forth life and goodness ("Noisy Desperation" 18)⁵.

Commiserating over their fates, the Bochtáns and the strangers form a bond: by the end of the first round, the former "couldn't do enough for that decent man an' woman, all vying with each other... to buy treats for the strangers, tumblers of whiskey an' bumpers of port wine" (*Bailegangaire* 155). The laughing competition also reignites the emotional spark between Mommo and her husband: "like a girl, [Mommo] smiled at her husband, an' his smile back so shy, like the boy he was in youth. An' the moment was for them alone. Unaware of all cares, unaware of all the others. An' how long before since their eyes had met, mar gheal dhá gréine, glowing love for each other. Not since long and long ago" (162). It seems then as if collectively, the strangers and the Bochtáns have reclaimed agency and successfully asserted their presence in a world that has hitherto only frustrated their best efforts. But if their laughter was an attempt at purgation or comic catharsis, it could only ever be a failed attempt: laughing in the face of distress, the individual is "repudiating reality and serving an illusion" (Freud 166). Accordingly, laughter occurs in bursts—Langer's laugh of self-assertion is a *flash*—and comes to a stop eventually. Laughing the longest, Costello eventually laughs himself to death.

To laugh is finally not to overcome but to *cede* to that which exceeds our reach. Georges Bataille declares that that which incites laughter may simply be *the unknowable*:

We laugh, in short, in passing very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which everything is firmly qualified, in which everything is given as stable within a

5. Mercier's engagement with *Bailegangaire* is limited and contentious. For instance, he describes Mommo as "a female Job who longs to unburden herself of all her grievances before she dies" (19); this essay argues that Mommo's task is more sophisticated. The play's mechanics of laughter are more complicated than Mercier makes them out to be, since the story does not end with Séamus having "attain[ed] comic catharsis and prolong[ing] his laughter sufficiently to defeat his jovial opponent" (20). Mercier's diminishing of Mary and Dolly's roles in the play is addressed later in this essay.

generally stable order, into a world in which our assurance is overwhelmed, in which we perceive that this assurance was deceptive. Where everything had seemed totally provided for, suddenly the unexpected arises, something unforeseeable and overwhelming, revelatory of an ultimate truth: the surface of appearances conceals a perfect absence of response to our expectation. (90)

This is especially so in the case of gallows humor, which Mercier argues, is always “concerned with forces which in the long run are uncontrollable,” such as death (*The Irish Comic Tradition* 4). In *Bailegangaire*, it is death’s minion, unreasonable and unfair misfortune—the “damnedable” potato crop for that year, the cow “that just died,” the man who “lost both arms to the thresher,” as much as the deaths in Mommo’s family (163)—that literally invites laughter, and that is incomprehensible and unknowable.

Laughter occurs at “[a] point of slippage” (Bataille 97) and brings us into a confrontation with nothing. For Bataille, this confrontation enables one to “find an experience not only as rich, but, to me, richer still, deeper if possible, because in this experience I further part with common experience” (95). But in the poverty-ridden landscape of *Bailegangaire* where “the church is slow to pay out” (126) in more ways than one, transcendent experience escapes the characters and the only ‘nothing’ that they can phantom is that of the “profane,” wherein “actions are often commanded by fear” and loneliness (Bataille 95). In sympathy with *Bailegangaire*’s emotional logic, Joachim Ritter is less optimistic in his articulation of the double bind of laughter: “What is grasped and played out in the case of laughter is the fact that nullity secretly belongs to existence... in such a way that it becomes visible and audible within the exclusionary order itself, as it were a part of the order” (qtd. in Glasgow 188). Mercier hypothesizes that laughter is a “defence mechanism against the fear of death,” which finds its end in “help[ing] us to accept death” (*The Irish*

Comic Tradition 49).

And so Mommo laughs in her telling of the story of Bailegangaire, and in laughing, she returns laughter to the town without laughter. But it is a knowing and grieving laughter that acknowledges the inescapable fact of nullity, the impossible task of reconciling loss as a condition of experience, of making meaning in a world that seems intent on taking it away: “The ‘hih-hih-hih’ that punctuates her story sounds more like tears—ingrown sobs—rather than laughter” (*Bailegangaire* 164). In Mommo’s desperate and lonely laughter echoes Costello’s dying laughter, as he tells of throwing the rabbits he could not sell at the market against Patch Curran’s door. The image Costello conjures—the truth he tells with his last words—is one of ruined innocence, pointless misfortune, and the bitterness and potential for cruelty that follows as a result. To laugh in the face of this is finally irrational, to rebel ineffectual and punishable as a sin; and so, “they don’t laugh there [in Bochtán] anymore. ... Save the childre, until they arrive at the age of reason” (167). The perversity of laughter is the perversity of the ruined voice that persists. Laughter always comes from a place of vitality: it is “a culmination of feeling—the crest of a wave of felt vitality” (Langer, *Feeling and Form* 340). Mommo’s “Och hona ho gus hah-haa” as she laughs it now is no longer the “derisory shout [she makes] on the night” (*Bailegangaire* 162), nor does it come across straightforwardly as “a cry of triumph,” which is how Murphy himself describes it (Greene, “Talking it through” 78). Instead, it is a laughter embedded with the stones of guilt and pain and sorrow, that gives form and meaning to the grief that stems from loss, and that approaches the rhythm of life.

The *seanchaí*’s voice was always already a voice reaching from the past, a voice of memory, which stands in the breach of life and death. In the past, the *seanchaí* was celebrated as a guardian of time, his voice “the channel through which the past flows to inform the future” (de Blacam 349), creating the illusion that the *seanchaí* could somehow preserve us

from devouring time or at least allow us to save something from it. In the dying light of dusk that governs Murphy's play, the tensions inherent in such a voice and the corresponding impossibility of resolution and redemption culminate in Mommo's ruined voice, which is at once both laughter and tears, life and death. Mommo's father's warning to "never step on a snail" is a warning about the painful and at times unreasonable continuities that govern existence (*Bailegangaire* 123). To know one's place like the snail "knows his place... and understands the constant parameters—and the need for parameters—in the case under consideration, God's prize piece, the earth" (123), and to know that our place is at once on both sides of those parameters—this is the 'moral' of Mommo's telling (and of Murphy's along with it), for only then are we "free" and everything we do "in innocence" (123). Just as Mary declares, "No freedom without structure" (120), there is no innocence⁶ without the knowledge of evil. Is it fair that evil is the price we pay for the possibility of goodness? Mercier argues that Murphy would answer that it is not (23), and yet, to borrow Antonin Artaud's words, Murphy is aware that "life cannot help exercising some blind rigour that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it would not be life" (113-14). To recall O'Toole's comment, Murphy's tale as much as Mommo's is a folktale, a *guide to survival* and not an escapist fantasy.

6. Murphy's use of 'innocence' here is intriguing. He certainly does not mean it in the usual sense of 'being untouched by evil'; as his plays tend to demonstrate, there is no one of us that escapes being touched by evil in one way or another. Alongside this constant presence of evil is a prevailing sense of a pursuit for innocence, an innocence that does not transcend a world governed by unreasonable misfortunes and the inevitability of death but is firmly located in it. Within the context of *Bailegangaire*, such innocence seems to constitute an acceptance of, and a rugged determination to live within, the parameters of our existence. Dolly's unborn child is the embodiment of this bittersweet, tragicomic innocence. The child, ostensibly to be named after their dead brother, is the result of unhappy and cruel circumstances, and possibly a harbinger of more of the like, but he simultaneously represents "another chance" for the family, "[sent] to gladden their home" (170). It is in association with this complex sense of 'innocence' that I refer to 'goodness' in the next line, a word that is itself not free of complications in Murphy's world.

The Condition of Music

Leslie Kane argues that twentieth-century literature is “distinguished by [a] shocking retreat from the word” and “yield[s] to the temptation and authority of silence to express the unspoken and the unspeakable” (14). *Bailegangaire* is a play that strives and rallies against silence. An encounter with silence (and along with it, death, absence, and loss) is staged in the ruined voice, conferring the urgency to create meaning in our ephemeral lives by forging forms for our experience. Through Mommo’s ruined voice, Murphy reveals a faith in the potential of human utterance—in the form of art—to perform this task.

Mommo knows only to tell one story and it is a story of loss, but she persists in her telling and her telling is lively: she laughs and she cries in her laughter, her accent varies in tone, and she employs rhetorical devices such as anaphora and alliteration. Denis Donoghue posits that such “dancing of speech” is eloquence: “the aim of a dance is not to get from one part of the village green or the stage to another, it is to create and embody yet another form of life beyond the already known forms of it” (2). To employ Grene’s distinction, Mommo’s ruined voice finds its end in expression rather than communication (“Talking it through” 67). Hence, while Mary and Dolly cannot understand her, they are able to participate in her narrative and eventually achieve reconciliation. Like Mommo, Mary and Dolly are unable to “talk straight” (*Bailegangaire* 142) and communicate their emotions. All three women dance around in their words, skirting the edges of the complex of emotional states that they all share. Lacking a common vocabulary, the women understand words like ‘home’ and ‘family’ differently, but in all their variations, the words feel the same: they feel like anger and guilt and grief. As Mary declares, “[n]o one who came out of this—house—had it easy” (148), and nowhere is this more evident than in Mommo’s voice.

Mommo’s ruined voice speaks on; it even aspires to song. In its varying rhythms, Mommo’s seafóid establishes itself as a rich interplay of sounds that captures an

emotional reality that, as suggested by the earlier association with scat singing, makes of it something akin to music. Her narrative moves between emotional states rather than ideas: guilt and remorse prompt a switch to a “child-like” tone (97) while pauses are motivated by moments of deep love, such as when she remembers Séamus’s “grey eyes [which] were growing in handsomeness as the years went by” (99). In this aspect, it resonates with Langer’s suggestion of music as a “a tonal analogue of emotive life”:

The tonal structures we call ‘music’ bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling—forms of growth and of attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution, speed, arrest, terrific excitement, calm or subtle activation and dreamy lapses ... the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt. Such is the pattern, or logical form, of sentience; and the pattern of music is that same form worked out in pure, measured sound and silence. (*Feeling and Form* 27)

Music is the ideal that Mommo’s ruined voice strives towards: it is able to maintain the tensions between sound and silence, presence and absence, between the varied emotions that each character struggles to express. These are the same tensions that everywhere threaten to tear Mommo’s voice asunder.

Langer argues, “Because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, music can *reveal* the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach” (*Philosophy* 235). Murphy appears to share a similar belief: he tends to turn to music in his desire to “write about the feeling of life. Not life as an intellectual process, or a concept, but as a feeling” (“Home to Darkness”). Echoing Walter Pater’s argument that “[a]ll art aspires to the condition of music,” Murphy suggests that the aspiration is “to get a simultaneity of things happening” without “confus[ing] the

situation or mak[ing] it over complex”: the richness of music is that “[i]n music you can be elated, deflated, happy, sad in a phrase of music” (“In Conversation with Michael Billington” 108).

Music abounds in Murphy’s play, the most important of which is Schubert’s *Notturmo in E Flat*, which introduces the play and closes both acts. Schubert’s nocturne is neither a counterpoint to Mommo’s ruined voice (White 149) nor mere accompaniment. The nocturne swells and sinks, charting the range of passions in Mommo’s ruined voice and bringing it to the depths that it cannot reach—“*music articulates forms which language cannot set forth*,” writes Langer (*Philosophy* 233)—and above all, it ties them all in harmony. The nocturne accomplishes a similar effect with the three women’s voices. Mercier suggests, “One might describe the entire play as a long solo [Mommo’s], with interruptions” (“Noisy Desperation” 19) but surely, Mary and Dolly’s parts are more than just inconvenient ‘interruptions.’ Mary and Dolly are Mommo’s companions in more ways than one: their “individual sounds” and “individual sound patterns,” which Patrick Mason suggests Murphy endows all his characters with (105), give context to Mommo’s voice and show what there is still left to be lost in life, thereby intensifying the pain cutting through it. In this way, they resemble musical phrases, which are both individual expressions with their own self-contained meaning and parts of a larger conversation in which they modify and are modified by other musical phrases.

In the following exchange, for instance, although Mommo is ostensibly ignoring and speaking over Mary, they are not ‘performing solos,’ so to speak:

MARY. Mommo?... I’m very happy here.

MOMMO. Hmmp!

MARY. I’m Mary.

MOMMO. Oh but she looked after her grandchildren.

MARY. Mommo?

MOMMO. And Tom is in Galway. He's afeared of the gander.

MARY. But I'm so... (*She leaves it unfinished, she can't find the word.*)

MOMMO. To continue.

MARY. Please stop. (*She rises slowly.*)

MOMMO. Now man and horse, though God knows they tried, could see the icy hill was not for yielding.

MARY. Because I'm so lonely. (*Bailegangaire* 98)

Mommo's 'responses' to Mary contradict the latter's words in tone and in meaning but are not entirely disconnected from them, in much the same way that Mommo is both *here* in the kitchen in 1984 and *not here*. When Mommo insists on telling her story despite Mary's protestations, the former is in fact engaging with her granddaughter in the conversation she wants to have (i.e. the one about her loneliness), albeit in a circulatory way because the way things are right now are a consequence of the way things happened then. Through this strategy of 'echo' and 'counterpoint' (Greene, "Talking it through" 79), Murphy allows motifs such as 'the cursèd paraffin,' 'misfortunes,' and the idea of 'homecoming' to repeat across each of the women's speeches and to build up to startling revelations. It is hence that Greene can speak of a "musical relationship" being established among the women (78-79).

Bailegangaire was never meant to be a solo; for if the play is a musical composition, it is in the key of loneliness. Although it is only Mary who confesses to it, all three women are struggling with feelings of abandonment and isolation—and loneliness is another name for the inability to articulate and communicate our emotions *to another*. "I need to talk to—*someone!*" insists Mary; "I need to talk to someone too," replies Dolly quietly (112). In keeping with the musical terms at play, loneliness then needs must be at the very least a duet.

At the end of *Bailegangaire*, as the three women lie in the bed together, the climax of their “symphony” (122) is reached in the moment when Mommo calls Mary by name. Murphy’s subtlety here belies the fact that surely this is the most deeply felt and anticipated moment in the play. Names signal recognition and presence; they are a stay against loss. It is what Mommo herself feels deprived of by her husband. In her litany of the dead, Mommo lays out the names of her loved ones who are dead as if the effect was cumulative, and the greatest one—the loss of Mary—still to come, the greatest for it being the most probable and the most imminent. Dolly’s own tragedy is that if and when it comes down to it, she will always be the one “left holdin’ the can” (103), who will see to it that their saga goes on “one way or the other” (147). Throughout the play, she makes to leave this house she hates (112) but always returns eventually, as if she is compelled to stay. This is not to say that Dolly is excluded from this climax, as Mommo’s recognition of Mary harkens back to the sisters’ conversation earlier in the play when Dolly suggests that Mommo’s inability to remember Mary is the result of the latter’s departure, or her abandonment of the family as Dolly sees it.

Mommo’s naming of Mary at this juncture also suggests a literal stay against loss where Dolly is concerned. This tremendous note of perfect harmony (in which one woman’s utterance brings all three together) is aptly met with Schubert’s nocturne, the strains of which come to us notably after Mary switches the radio off, as if from somewhere beyond. It is not a resolution that Murphy is trying to achieve at the end of the play. As Grene justly argues, the negative energies that dominate the play “cannot be simply exorcised by [Dolly] falling drunkenly asleep in the family bed with her sister and her grandmother” (“Talking it through” 78), or by the sisters’ brief commiseration with one another through laughter (which recalls the laughing competition). Instead what Murphy offers us in the closing scene is a truth that the audience is compelled to attend to, a recognized form of the women’s experience. And also of *our* experience, for *Notturmo in E Flat* simultaneously allows *Bailegangaire* to expand

beyond both the confines of the women's world and of the stage.

Greene suggests, "the expressiveness of [music] does not have to be located as the expression of any one identity or meaning. It can be appropriated to the mood and feeling of the listener" ("Talking it through" 73). Which is to say that music leaves the door open for any one of us to follow after. It is an invitation, and specifically, an invitation for empathy—*Notturmo in E Flat* literally welcomes the audience into the world of *Bailegangaire*—and empathy is our means of access to Murphy's play. Not able to overcome the silence of death, the playwright might at least quell the silence of indifference. Schubert's *Notturmo in E Flat* is Murphy extending a hand out to the characters and the audience in compassion.

Last Notes

In "The State of the Art," Fintan O'Toole calls for a 'theatre of evocation' to replace a 'theatre of recognition'. He argues that because a sense of shared place is no longer available to us, the vocabulary of a theatre of recognition "in which a world is signalled to us through objects and we tacitly agree to recognise it as our own" has been rendered irrelevant (57). A theatre of evocation is concerned with calling something up "to the eye of the mind" (57) rather than recreating what is before the physical eye. The 'single' world that a theatre of evocation stages for the physical eye splits into many worlds—as many worlds as there are audience members before the stage, each one of them subjective, private, and elusive. A theatre of recognition seeks to determine while a theatre of evocation intimates and is completed only beyond the confines of the stage. In calling for a theatre of evocation, O'Toole goes back to definitions of theatre in which the relationship between the characters onstage and the audience is first principle: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space *while someone else is watching him*, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 9; emphasis added).

Michael Etherton points out that Murphy's plays—along with those of Kilroy, Arden, and D'Arcy—are exemplary of the idea that “[a] written play text has no meaning until it is made in the imaginations of the audience” (4). These plays are “not ‘about Ireland’” or “‘an Irish view’” per se, but are “about other things: an opening-up of ideas about which they and their Irish audiences need to reach a greater understanding, a deeper truth” (4). *Bailegangaire* is as much a play about love and loss as it is an answer to the need for a new vocabulary in an Irish theatre fixated on the material past. Mommo's ruined voice enacts a blink in space and time in order that we might reach this truth by seeing with other than the physical eye. Its substance is what Langer refers to as ‘semblance.’ The importance of semblance lies in the way it “liberates perception—and with it, the power of conception—from all practical purposes” (*Feeling and Form* 49), which is to say that “they exist only for the sense or the imagination that perceives them” (50). Peter Brook would speak of the voice-as-sound as a ‘true symbol’—specific, “hard and clear” but indefinable (58). “We get nowhere if we expect to be told what they mean, yet each one has a relation with us we can't deny,” argues Brook. “If we accept this, the symbol opens in us a great and wondering O” (58). This ‘great and wondering O’ is the meaning of the ruined voice, of the voice-as-sound. It is also the aim of a theatre of evocation, of imaginative response, of empathy and compassion. As each night brings in a new audience, the great and wondering ‘O’ takes on new shapes and develops new relations. Meaning-making is brought into the present where it belongs, life and death commingle on stage in innocence, and theatre fulfills its role as “the living form” (Murphy, “Home to Darkness”). *Bailegangaire* becomes immortal, and these forms of experience that live in spite of death, we call *art*.

Works Cited

- Artaud, Antonin. *Theatre and Its Double*. New York: Grove, 1958.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Bataille, Georges. "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears." *Georges Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing*. October 36, 1986. 89-102.
- Berliner, Paul F. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1996.
- Capote, Truman. "Ghosts in Sunlight." *Portraits and Observations: The Essays of Truman Capote*. New York: Modern Library, 2008. 267-74.
- Crawley, Peter. Review of *Bailegangaire*, *Irish Times*, 15 Sep 2014.
- De Blacam, Aodh. *Gaelic Literature Surveyed*. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1973.
- Delargy, J. H. "The Gaelic Story-Teller, with Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-Tales." *The Sir John Rhys Lecture*. 28 Nov. 1945. *Proceedings of the British Academy (1945)*. Vol. 31. London: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006.
- . "The Object Voice." *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 7-31.
- Donoghue, Denis. *On Eloquence*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat." *Critical Inquiry* 28.3 (2002): 618-49.
- Etherton, Michael. *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- FitzGibbon, T. Gerald. "Thomas Murphy's Dramatic Vocabulary." *Thomas Murphy Issue*.

- Spec. issue of *Irish University Review* 17.1 (1987): 41-50.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Humor." *Collected Works Vol. 21*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1961. 159-166.
- Glasgow, Rupert. D. V. *Madness, Masks, and Laughter: An Essay on Comedy*. Cranbury; London; Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1995.
- "Glossolalia." *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2014): *Research Starters*. Web. 29 Jan. 2016.
- Greene, Nicholas. "Talking it through: *The Gigli Concert, Bailegangaire*." *Talking About Tom Murphy*. Ed. Nicholas Greene. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002. 67-81.
- . *The Politics of Irish Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Hardy, Thomas. "Silences." *The Complete Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1976. 865.
- Janus, Adrienne. "From 'Ha he hi ho hu. Mummum' to 'Haw! Hell! Haw!': Listening to Laughter in Joyce and Beckett." *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.3 (2009): 144-166. Print.
- Kane, Leslie. *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama*. New Jersey; London; Canada: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1984.
- Kiberd, Declan. "Storytelling: The Gaelic Tradition." *The Irish Writer and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 42-51.
- Kilroy, Thomas. "A Generation of Playwrights." *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Ed. Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000. 1-7.
- Kimbrough, Andrew M. *Dramatic Theories of Voice in the Twentieth Century*. Amherst; New York: Cambria Press, 2011.
- Langer, Susanne. *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
- . *Philosophy in a New Key*. 1942. Cambridge: Harvard, 1976.
- Mason, Patrick. "Interview with Christopher Murray." *Thomas Murphy Issue*. Spec. issue of *Irish University Review* 17.1 (1987): 100-13.

- Mercier, Vivian. "Noisy Desperation: Tom Murphy and the Book of Job." *Thomas Murphy Issue*. Spec. issue of *Irish University Review* 17.1 (1987): 18-23.
- . *The Irish Comic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Morash, Chris. "Murphy, History and Society." *Talking About Tom Murphy*. Ed. Nicholas Grene. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002. 17-30.
- Morash, Chris and Shaun Richards. *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Murphy, Tom. *Bailegangaire. Tom Murphy Plays: Two*. Great Britain: Methuen Drama, 1993. 89-170.
- . "Home to Darkness: An Interview with Playwright Tom Murphy." Int. with Belinda McKeon. *The Paris Review* (July 2012).
- . "In Conversation with Michael Billington." *Talking About Tom Murphy*. Ed. Nicholas Grene. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002. 91-112.
- . "Tom Murphy." Int. with Colm Tóibín. *Bomb Magazine* 120 (2012).
- Ó Cadhla, Stiofán. "The Gnarled and Stony Clods of Townland's Tip: Máirtín Ó Cadhain and the 'Gaelic' Storyteller." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 34.1 (2008): 40-46.
- O'Toole, Fintan. "Introduction." *Tom Murphy Plays: Two*. Great Britain: Methuen Drama, 1993. ix-xiv.
- . "Irish Theatre: The State of the Art." *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Ed. Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000. 47-58.
- Weiss, Allen S. *Phantasmic Radio*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- West, William N. "Repeating Staging Meaning between Aristotle and Freud." *SubStance* 28.2. Issue 89: Special Section: Marcel Bénabou (1999): 138-158.
- White, Harry. "Tom Murphy and the Claims of Music." *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010. 139-53.