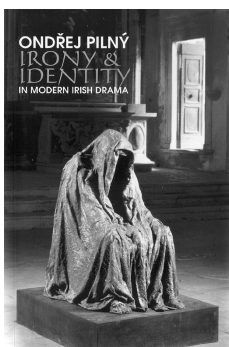


Ondřej Pilný. *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama*. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006. pp. 186.



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This intelligently, lucidly written volume offers analyses of some major writers and works in modern Irish drama from a particular angle and the perspective of a scholar living in another small European country, the Czech Republic, which ensures a unique position for the author. Pilný's focus is the interaction between the representations of collective and personal identity, a never-fading theme of drama in Ireland until our time, and the operations of the mode of irony, which is considered here in terms of its Romantic concept "as a philosophical and aesthetic stance that serves to comment on the apparent incongruities and paradoxes of the world" (3). Both identity and irony are complex enough territories to complicate the focus, challenging the author with their subtleties and transformations across time, geographical as well as socio-cultural spaces. Not many books undertake spanning over the three stages of the evolution of Irish drama in the last one hundred and ten years, therefore doing so, which happens in this volume, is definitely to the credit of Pilný's venture. Together with that, the book, however, purports to be neither a history of modern Irish theatre (in spite of its historical references) nor a survey of the most outstanding playwrights; rather, it maps important phases and influential directions in this narrative through selected examples.

Structurally, the book is divided into three parts, the subtitles of which mark out the above phases and directions with an eye for continuity, clarity as well as nuance. Under the heading "Visions" we find a chapter discussing Yeats's and Synge's ideas about and practices of writing a new kind of drama for decolonising Ireland. "Rejections" as the second subtitle introduces the part on plays whose lack of acceptance was connected with what can be estimated as unwelcome changes in the history of Ireland's national theatre. Finally, the part called "Revisions" visits the contemporary scene centering on the activities of Field Day and a couple of playwrights to interrogate recent dramatic depictions of Irishness and, importantly, also of conventional notions about it. In the following my aim is to highlight some of Pilný's insights, contentious as they may prove to be at times, to give the prospective reader a taste of the particular offerings and values of *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama*.

In the first part, Pilný is right to find the precarious relation between realism and the authentic portrayal of Irishness which the founders of the modern Irish theatre implicitly promised, a crucial issue of the Revival period. Discussing Yeats, he points to the paradox of the poet-playwright's didactic purposes with the foundation of the modern Irish theatre while he tended to write plays decidedly unpopular because of their lack of

“mimetic accuracy” (23) in favour of poetic visions and an intricate symbolism. In the relatively long subchapter on Synge, Pilný underscores the multiplicity of ironies, often double edged, in the plays, thoroughly complicating the issue of identity. By way of an example, the blind couple in *The Well of the Saints* can be perceived, he says, as “mock-heroic, for the farcical and grotesque elements are ubiquitous in the play and prevent a straightforward reading of Mary and Martin as Romantic, unconforming selves” (57). The same nuanced approach could have been applied to the remarks on Nora in *The Shadow of the Glen*, whose departure for good with the “romanticized tramp” is described as a “path for liberation” (49), although her acceptance of this situation seems to be just another form of dependence on patriarchy, persuasively disguised by patronizing gestures. Closing the discussion of Synge, Pilný attributes “an ironic counterrevolutionary impulse” (66) to the writer, which sounds exaggerated or even politicized, therefore limiting in view of the complexities and visionary nature of Synge’s work.

“Rejections,” the middle part of the book hinges on the analysis of Sean O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* and Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says “No”!*, plays which the Abbey Theatre, represented by Yeats and Lady Gregory, did not accept for its programme in the 1920s. Admittedly, both were counterdiscursive and inclined to dismantle “the prevailing narratives of nationhood” in the author’s opinion, by deploying irony and adopting a set of “pioneering avant-garde techniques” (71). Their downright rejection, Pilný concludes the chapter, marked the end of the early, experimentalist era of the Abbey and testified to its increasing conservatism, which endured for decades. This, however, simplifies the picture a bit, disregarding the greater variety of factors that had a role in changing theatre practices at that time. One also feels tempted to reconsider the actual dramaturgical merits of the two plays among the factors.

In the part called “Revisions” Pilný’s arguments, again, have a more carefully provided grounding. Similarly to his interrogation of what became of the original aims of the Abbey, here the author follows the route of the Field Day enterprise in relation to its initially declared attempt to go against hegemonic metanarratives of both identity and representation. As revisionary playwrights, Pilný looks at the work of Friel, Parker and McDonagh, which is a strange combination at first sight. Nevertheless, the link between them, found in their persistent use of irony, offers the reader further insights. Friel’s plays, Pilný opines, “do not allow for any metanarrative to arise. Ambiguities frequently abound, while mythical and counter-mythical moments tend to stand in more or less equal balance. ... when it appears that a metanarrative may be emerging from beyond the text, textual or dramatic irony eventually qualifies it” (119). Which, at the same time, underscores that Friel’s art has surpassed the practices of the theatrical project he acted as one of the founders of. Next, the comments on Parker’s work, among others, suggest parallels between his woman-as-Ireland figure in *Northern Star* with that in Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says “No”!*, which would have deserved more elaboration perhaps at the expense of the not really productive consideration of another Parker play, *Heavenly Bodies*. Regarding McDonagh, Pilný’s addition to the already well established

view that the playwright's work caricatures myths is notable: McDonagh, for him, is a satirist in a more subtle sense as well, because "his plays in fact ironise the very notion of Irish dramatic realism" (166). This appears to be a welcome claim for the writer to be considered as a postmodernist, although Pilný's book itself remains laudably frugal with the assignment of labels and categories.

All in all, Pilný manages to demonstrate how the metanarrative of the Irish Dramatic Movement became deconstructed by its best representatives and later inheritors through their ironical treatment of essentializing notions of identity and subversion of nationalist or postnationalist audience expectations. What some readers may justifiably miss here is not the good number of names and works left out or just barely mentioned, but the fact that the three main chapters are not followed by a summary or conclusion, which were to assess and interpret the author's insights and observations on a more general level. Nevertheless, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* recommends itself as a thoughtfully argued and, at certain points, benignly provocative contribution to the field, beneficial to study, to agree or disagree with. It claims a recognized place in the scholarly library of those interested in fresh, comprehensive approaches to the protean ways of representation which make modern Irish drama so varied and challenging across more than a century. While undoubtedly an individual achievement, Ondřej Pilný's recent book is also a hallmark of the development of Irish Studies at Charles University, Prague, which has become a known and respected centre of the field outside Ireland, demonstrated to the wider public by the expanding publication activities of Litteraria Pragensia.