

2015

Beyond Imagination: Landscapes of the Western Front in Four Irish Writers

Terry Phillips
Liverpool Hope University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Phillips, Terry (2015) "Beyond Imagination: Landscapes of the Western Front in Four Irish Writers," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2.

doi:10.21427/D7KB19

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol4/iss1/2>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

Terry Phillips

Beyond Imagination: Landscapes of the Western Front in Four Irish Writers

Historians differ in their estimation of the value of literary evidence as a contribution to an understanding of the First World War. It is assumed in what follows that the writing of those who took part in, or observed the conflict at close quarters, in one of the arenas in which it was fought, have something of value to tell later generations about the experience. Ironically, in view of this claim, one of the most commonly recurring themes of all those writers from a variety of countries and backgrounds who have attempted to write about the First World War is the difficulty of describing what they see - of describing the indescribable. The central character in R.H. Mottram's *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* can only say when asked to describe the Western Front, "It's like – like - [...] It's like the end of the world."¹ The most obvious reason for this lies in the nature of the act of communication which requires a common reference point, either directly experienced or acquired through familiarity with representations, to endow the otherwise empty signification of language with meaning. The challenge confronting the visual artist may, on first consideration, appear to be simpler but the absence of a recognisable common experience between painter and observer plays its role here too. In their efforts to describe what was beyond the imagination of readers and observers, writers and painters drew on the aesthetic resources available to them, through a variety of traditions and genres. Recent writing on literature of the First World War by Santanu Das and others has sought to move away from the dominant focus on English, and to a lesser extent American literature about the war.² This article will examine four very different creative artists from Ireland: the painter William Orpen, the writers Patrick MacGill and Edward Dunsany, and the dramatist, Sean O'Casey, focusing particularly on their representations of the landscape of the Western Front. In doing so, it will examine the cultural traditions and genres at their disposal, some of which are specifically Irish.

The most obvious Irish influence at this period comes from the Literary Revival, itself a rather too convenient label which encompasses writers as diverse as W.B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Augusta Gregory, George Moore and Padraig Pearse to name only a few. Revival

¹ R.H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy, 1914-18* (London: MacMillan, 1927), p. 339.

² See *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

influences extended beyond writers and an interesting example of an artist loosely associated with the Revival, but also strongly influenced by European cultural developments: the Spanish painters, Velasquez and Goya, and to some extent impressionism, is the painter, Sir William Orpen, the son of a Dublin solicitor, who taught at the Metropolitan School of Art in the city. Roy Foster describes him as “tentatively identified with the Irish cultural renaissance,”³ and he was well acquainted with influential Revival figures, being a friend of Augusta Gregory’s nephew Hugh Lane, as well as an admirer of Synge and George Moore. He was supportive of Lane’s efforts to found a gallery of modern art and according to Foster effectively introduced Lane to Manet on a visit to Paris in 1904.⁴ He was concerned to draw on the influence of new artistic movements such as impressionism, in order to provide a new visual language for Ireland, to counter the stereotypical portrayals of the rogue Irishman which appeared in *Punch* and elsewhere.

Orpen was sent to the Front in 1917 as a war artist. His memoir, *An Onlooker in France* provides an account of the war, seen from the perspective of a rather privileged non-combatant, employed primarily to paint portraits of eminent people. However, although his own position was privileged, he showed awareness of, and great feeling for, the plight of the ordinary Tommy, and was fully acquainted with the horrors of the battlefield. His paintings can be seen at the Art Gallery in the Imperial War Museum in London and encompass a range of portraits, figures, scenes and landscapes.

In *An Onlooker in France* there is plenty of evidence of the painter’s eye at work, although he is aware too of the limits of that eye. “I remember an officer saying to me, ‘Paint the Somme? I could do it from memory - just a flat horizon-line and mud-holes and water, with the stumps of a few battered trees,’” but Orpen adds, “one could not paint the smell.”⁵ His own initial description of the Somme echoes this vision of desolation:

I shall never forget my first sight of the Somme battlefields. It was snowing fast, but the ground was not covered, and there was this endless waste of mud, holes and water. Nothing but mud, water, crosses and broken Tanks; miles and miles of it, horrible and terrible, but with a noble dignity of its own, (211)

³ Roy Foster, “‘Old Ireland and Himself’: William Orpen and the Conflicts of Irish Identity’, *Estudios Irlandeses*, 0 (2005), 39–50 (p. 43).

⁴ Foster, “‘Old Ireland and Himself’: William Orpen and the Conflicts of Irish Identity’, p. 43.

⁵ William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France*, Kindle (London: Williams and Norgate, 1921), loc. 237-249. Further quotations are referenced by a location number in the text.

His artist's eye conveys the sense of space; the overwhelming desolation of the scene. The description focuses on the detail of what is to be seen but suggests a way of reading it by the implied metaphor of desert and by the judgement that it is "horrible and terrible". The modern reader is surprised only by the reference to "noble dignity". Used to the overwhelming sense of loss, destruction and futility conveyed by poets and artists, comments such as this open the reader's mind to the possibility that these men (and occasionally women) saw something else there too.

Similar desolation is conveyed in Orpen's description of Flanders, more precisely Zonnebeke (also the subject of a famous poem by the English poet Edmund Blunden, "The Zonnebeke Road"⁶):

Was there ever a more ghastly place? Even the Somme was outdone. Mud, water, battered tanks, hundreds of them, battered pillboxes, everything battered and torn, with Ypres like a skeleton. The Menin road, the Zonnebeke Road, what sights were there- mangled remains of superhuman effort! (1060)

The ingredients, the objects of desolation, are identical, with only rhetorical expressions and the simile of the skeleton to convey the deep horror induced by the accumulation of these objects. Orpen's Zonnebeke is possibly his most famous battlefield painting, and it is one of the very few which conveys that traditional dreariness and gloom which has come to be associated with the landscapes of the Western Front. The picture, however, has nothing of the battered tanks and pillboxes and, painted with a hill in the background, is not quite the characterless landscape of which he writes. It would seem that, once he paints, he sees something of perhaps an eerie beauty even in landscapes of destruction. The painting shows dramatic storm clouds illuminated by a small chink of blue sky. Significantly, however, the body of a soldier lies at the front of the picture.

As I indicated previously, Orpen never lost sight of the human cost. One of his most grotesque accounts takes us back to the Somme:

⁶ Edmund Blunden, *Poems of Many Years* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 139.

A hand lying on the duckboards; a boche and a Highlander locked in a deadly embrace at the edge of Highwood; the “Cough-drop” with the stench coming from its watery bottom; the shell-holes with the shapes of bodies faintly showing through the putrid water. (236)

Here is the reference to the smell which one cannot paint. The verbal description evokes a grotesque and almost a surrealist scene, although in his painting there is often a curious beauty. At one point in *Onlooker* he comments:

There is a beautiful valley on the left, as one goes from Amiens to Albert: one looked down into it from the road, a patchwork of greens, browns, greys and yellows. I remember John Masefield said one day it looked to him like a post-impressionist table-cloth; later, white zigzagging lines were cut all through it – trenches. (465)

This comment is unsurprising to anyone who has seen Orpen’s paintings of battlefield landscapes, most of which give an indication of the influence of impressionism.

However, the reader of *Onlooker* is taken by surprise by this description from the opening of Chapter Five, entitled “The Somme in Summer Time (August 1917)”:

White daisies, red poppies and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles. The sky a pure dark blue, and the whole air up to a height of about forty feet, thick with white butterflies: your clothes were covered with butterflies. It was like an enchanted land; but in the place of fairies there were thousands of little white crosses, marked “Unknown British Soldier”, for the most part. (410)

The modern visitor to the Somme battlefields, or at least the visitor who has undertaken the journey in summer time, will recognize something of his/her own experience of this ironically beautiful landscape, but as ever the note is tempered, this time by another reference to colour, the colour of the crosses.

Orpen's paintings are subtler than his prose - reflecting a beauty distinguished above all by colour. Some of this colour can be seen in "A Grave and a Mine Crater at La Boisselle" where the predominant colours are the green of the grass and the white of the chalk, while the foreground shows a preponderance of lilac flowers and a few red ones. There is however, in the centre of the foreground, a single white cross and three single leafless stalks, significant reminders of the destruction which has taken place.

Orpen went on to court controversy in the aftermath of the war, when he was commissioned to paint the politicians, whom he contemptuously described as "Frocks" when they gathered at Versailles. In spite of his own privileged background he never lost sight of the suffering of the ordinary soldier. *An Onlooker in France* succeeds in conveying this suffering in a number of ways, one of which is the descriptions of the battlefield which express something of his horror at the desolation but also, influenced strongly by his painter's eye, an awareness of the beauty of nature even within man-made destruction.

A writer whose background was even more privileged than that of Orpen, Edward Plunkett, Lord Dunsany, was also associated with the Literary Revival, rather more closely than Orpen. However, politically, while he was a patron of the Irish soldier poet and nationalist Francis Ledwidge, he was himself strongly unionist, Irish being an important regional rather than national identity for him. Like others associated with the Revival, whose privileged position allowed easy physical and intellectual travel between Ireland and England, Dunsany was influenced by wider and related traditions including fantasy, and was influenced by writers of fantasy, such as Edgar Allan Poe.⁷ Ernest Boyd, writing in 1917, observes the connection between Dunsany's interest in the fantastic and "that imaginative revival that lies behind Ireland's literary renaissance."⁸

Dunsany joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1914, and was posted to France with the 16th Irish Division in January 1917. His wartime experience is conveyed in a collection of short stories entitled *Tales of War*, in which the evocation of the landscape of the trenches is

⁷ This seems the best and certainly most generally accepted description of his writing in spite of the claims to the contrary of Jared C. Lobdell. Jared C. Lobdell, "The Man Who Didn't Write Fantasy: Lord Dunsany and the Self-Deprecatory Tradition in English Light Fiction", *Extrapolation*, 35 (1994), pp. 33-42.

⁸ Ernest A. Boyd, 'Lord Dunsany: An Impression', *The Dial*, LXII (1917), pp. 170-171.

almost irredeemably bleak, partaking of an enormity which goes beyond realism.⁹ In “The Nightmare Countries” he opens his story with references to the “darker dreams of poetry” citing Poe, Coleridge and Swinburne, whose stories are pleasant because “you can banish them by the closing of a book”:

But in France they are there always...In France the nightmare countries stand all night in the starlight; dawn comes and they are still there. [...] the lost lands lie unburied, gazing up at the winds; and the lost woods stand like skeletons all grotesque in the solitude; the very seasons have fled from them [...] (75)

Phrases such as “nightmare countries” and “lost lands” which are “unburied” have overtones of the horror tales of H.P. Lovecraft, and suggest a world whose destruction has taken it into a supernatural realm. The description, in spite of its evocation of horror is, apart from the comparison of the trees to skeletons, generalised, and it is a feature of Dunsany’s writing that it largely lacks the detail present in Orpen’s descriptions.

One of the predominant descriptive motifs is that of the desert, as can be seen from this extract from “A Walk in the Trenches”, which again begins with a reference to dead trees, this time “sepulchral”:

[...] you come perhaps to a wood in an agony of contortions - black, branchless, sepulchral trees, and then no more trees at all... there stretches for miles instead one of the world’s great deserts, a thing to take its place no longer with smiling lands but with Sahara, Gobi, Kalahari, and the Karoo. (30)

The extract serves to remind us of the Britishness of this Irish writer who, like others of his class, played his role within the Empire, having served in the Boer War from 1899 until he left the army in 1901. It suggests both a wide-ranging imagination and the experience of his own travels, both within in the Empire and beyond, including several visits to Egypt, a visit to Algeria in 1913, and another to East Africa in the same year.¹⁰

One of Dunsany’s most curious tales is entitled “The Homing Plane”:

⁹ Edward Dunsany, *Tales of War* (Dublin and London: Talbot Press and Fisher Unwin, 1918). Further quotations are referenced by a page number in the text.

¹⁰ Patrick Maume, ‘Dreams of Empire, Empire of Dreams: Lord Dunsany Plays the Game’, *New Hibernia Review*, 13.4 (2009), 14–33 (p. 22).

A traveller threw his cloak over his shoulder and came down slopes of gold in El Dorado. From incredible heights he came. He came from where the peaks of the pure gold mountain shone a little red with the sunset; from crag to crag of gold he stepped down slowly. [...] a battalion's bugles were playing "Retreat", when this knightly stranger, a British aeroplane, dipped and went homeward over the infantry. (46)

This is an imaginative excursion quite different from anything we find in Orpen's descriptions, a passage which owes far more to fancy than to actuality. Like the references to the desert in the earlier passages, it suggests a grandiose landscape far away from Western Europe, and shares with the writing of Irishmen as varied as C.S. Lewis and W.B. Yeats something of a yearning for past grandeur. Such yearning is suggested by the concluding words of the tale: "For the wars we fight today are not like other wars, and the wonders of them are unlike other wonders. If we do not see in them the saga and epic, how shall we tell of them?" It reflects one of the impulses behind the Revival which links it with some aspects of Modernism, the desire to be reconnected with the literature and traditions of the past. However, what is most interesting about this portrayal of the aeroplane as a mythic hero is that, to most proponents of this aspect of modernism and certainly to Lewis and Yeats, the First World War was a betrayal of such traditions. Moreover, there is a way in which the heroic treatment of the plane sits ill with Dunsany's own perspective. Patrick Maume comments that "He came to believe that modern warfare was the end product of a machine civilization, which he thought most fully developed in Germany".¹¹ It suggests, in spite of his support for the war effort, a profound uneasiness when confronted with conditions on the Western Front, which, according to Maume, haunted him for the rest of his life.

The longing for a grander world, peopled by the heroes of mythology, emerges again in "Shells", a curious and non-technical account of the variety of weaponry to be observed, which describes the scene at nightfall:

It is then as though a herd of giants, things of enormous height, came out from lairs in the earth and began to play with the hills. It is as though they picked up

¹¹ Maume, p. 16.

the tops of the hills in their hands, and then let them drop rather slowly [...]
(54)

Like the description of the plane, quoted above, this takes the reader away from any sense of the reality of the battlefield landscapes into a world of fantasy. What follows has more basis in reality, although a reality far away from the Western Front in the evocation of the reaches of the Empire, as the noises of the shells are described: “Another of the voices of the night is the whine the shell makes in coming; it is not unlike the cry the hyena utters as soon as it’s dark in Africa” (55). Later and with the unabashed and unconscious racism typical of the era he describes the gas shell:

It is the liquid inside that gurgles before it is turned to gas by the mild explosion, that is the explanation of it; yet that does not prevent one picturing a tribe of cannibals who have winded some nice juicy men and are smacking their chops and dribbling in anticipation. (56)

It is a description which the modern reader finds so utterly shocking as to make any analysis seem inappropriate. Although superficially suggesting some basis in reality, in contrast to the “herd of giants” quoted above, it too belongs to the realm of fancy very different from the “cry of the hyena” which the writer may well be evoking from memory.

The clue to the descriptions of the Western Front which occur in *Tales of War*, is to be found in this extract from “A Walk in the Trenches”, which repeats one of the most common formulations of writing the war by those who have witnessed it, the impossibility of description:

No one who has not seen it can imagine the country in which the trenches lie, unless he bear a desert clearly in mind - a desert that has moved from its place on the map, by some enchantment of wizardry, and come down on a smiling country. (31)

Unlike the descriptions of Orpen, who makes some suggestion of indescribability in his comment about painting the smell, Dunsany’s descriptions more strongly suggest impossibility, largely lacking detail and often drawing on the fantastic. Like Orpen, he draws

on the desert as a point of reference based in reality, a reality of which he had direct experience, although most of his readers would know it only through the mediation of the traveller's description. His other points of reference, however, take him altogether beyond reality, sometimes directly suggesting a supernatural other world, and sometimes drawing on figures of myth and fantasy. In spite of his approval of the cause for which the allies fought, the reader suspects a largely unspoken unease with this war of the machine age, reflected in his comment at the end of "Homing Plane".

A very different Irishman from the two members of the Ascendancy class discussed above, was serving first as a private and then as a stretcher bearer with the London Irish Rifles: the Donegal writer, Patrick MacGill – "the navy poet". MacGill came from an extremely poor family in Glenmoran, a rural district of west Donegal. The extreme poverty of his early life and his career as a navy in Scotland is charted in his best-known work, *Children of the Dead End*.¹² MacGill was a self-educated man, who went on to publish sixteen novels, including several about the war, and several books of poetry. His origins and lack of formal education meant that he had no contact with any aspects of the Celtic Revival or with the political debates surrounding Irish nationalism. As Erin Sheley comments, "the crippling poverty in which the vast majority of the Irish Catholic peasantry subsisted [...] arguably precluded them from inclusion in whatever 'Celtic' subjectivity the literary elite attempted to translate back to the metropole."¹³ It is somewhat ironic, but typical of the period, that this representative of the ordinary rural Irishman, who saw himself as Irish - hence his choice of regiment, was, understandably enough, influenced mainly by English writers who wrote in the language he spoke.

MacGill is fully able to describe the horrors of the trenches, but his trench descriptions, like Orpen's accounts - reflected in his paintings, offer something else besides unremitting horror, best described as imaginative sensibility. In his second war novel *The Red Horizon*, published in 1916, he comments: "[...] but there was something in the night, in the ghostly moonshine, in the bushes... that filled me with infinite pathos and a feeling of being alone in a shelterless world."¹⁴ He is clearly describing something more than the scene before his

¹² Patrick MacGill, *Children of the Dead End* (London: Caliban Books, 1995).

¹³ Erin Sheley, 'Reciprocal Colonization in the Irish Fairy Tales of Lord Dunsany', 31 (1-2) (2012), 105–14 (p. 106).

¹⁴ Patrick MacGill, *The Red Horizon* (London: Caliban Books, 1916), pp. 214–215.

eyes, as he struggles to come to terms with a landscape even more hostile than those he had encountered while working as a navvy in Kinlochleven.

This kind of writing is developed even more effectively in his third war novel, *The Great Push*, also published in 1916, which gives an account of the battle of Loos and in which the central character, based on MacGill himself, has become a stretcher bearer:

[...] there was a sense of eternal loneliness and sadness. The grey calm night toned the moods of my soul into one of voiceless sorrow, containing no element of unrest. My mood was well in keeping with my surroundings. In the distance I could see the broken chimney of Maroc coal-mine standing forlorn in the air. Behind, the twin towers of Loos quivered, grimly spectral.¹⁵

The reflective mood has a quality of the Romantic sublime, with the narrator's voice attuned to surroundings more real and more tragic than the ruins of Romantic poetry. It might be argued that such imaginative portrayal of the battlefield landscape ennobles conflict, although James Anderson Winn has argued powerfully against the idea that any writing which sees beauty in the midst of conflict necessarily has this effect.¹⁶ MacGill shares with Dunsany a perception of the unearthly, which leads his narrator in *The Great Push* to sometimes give expression to flights of fancy, induced by the extraordinarily surreal surroundings in which he finds himself, as in this description of a spinney in which the smoke, from the encounter which has just taken, place hangs over the surroundings:

Strange contrasts were evoked on the crest, monstrous heads rose over the spinney, elephants bearing ships, Vikings bearded and savage, beings grotesque and gigantic took shape in the smoke and lyddite fumes. (83)

Here the tone is undoubtedly gothic, recalling at times some of Dickens's industrial landscapes, and it is worth remembering the popularity of gothic literature in the pre-war era, some of which MacGill would have undoubtedly read. Traces of popular gothic, reminiscent sometimes of the Welsh writer Arthur Machen, whose story "The Bowmen" originated the

¹⁵ Patrick MacGill, *The Great Push* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2000), p. 103. Further quotations are referenced by a page number in the text.

¹⁶ James Anderson Winn, *The Poetry of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 6.

legend of the Angels of Mons, are readily detectable in the writing of MacGill who was a self-taught but omnivorous reader.

Another example of the evocation of this strange transforming beauty, suggestive again of the romantic sublime but with less of the monstrous gothic, is to be found in this description of Loos at night:

White as a winding sheet, it [white glow] looked like a fire of frost, vast and wide diffused. Every object in Loos seemed to lose its reality, a spectral glimmer hung over the ruins, and the walls were no more than outlines. The Twin Towers was a tracery of silver and enchanted fairy construction that the sun at dawn might melt away, the barbed-wire entanglements [...] were fancies in gossamer. The world was an enchanted poem. (65)

The reference to white is reminiscent of the surprising lightness that has been observed in some of Orpen's descriptive writing, and which is reflected in his paintings, although, with the possible exception of *Thiepval*, there is nothing spectral about the paintings, whereas here there is that insistent gothic suggestion of an unreal world. Nevertheless there is a contrast with the utter bleakness of Dunsany's descriptions. While, as has been observed, MacGill was largely uninfluenced by the literary revival, there are references in his writing to the arguably more authentic traditions of fairy and folk tales, which he learned in his native Donegal, and this is reflected in his reference points when he chooses to evoke a world beyond the real. There is plenty in MacGill's writing to suggest that such imaginative scene painting did not delude him about the horrors of war. Gothic influences, more monstrous than sublime, are apparent in a description of a half-eaten corpse from *The Great Push*, redolent with a sense of the abject:

For the thing there was not the quietude of death and the privacy of the tomb, it was outcast from its kind. Buffeted by the breeze, battered by the rains it rotted in the open. Worms feasted on its entrails, slugs trailed silverly over its face, and lean rats gnawed at its flesh. The air was full of the thing, the night stank with its decay.

This is, for all its horror, all too real, although gothic in its use of excess, which in turn creates a strong sense of abjection in the final words of the description:

Life revolted at that from which life was gone, the quick cast it away for it was not one of them. The corpse was one with the mystery of the night, the darkness and the void. (113)

Passages such as this provide a powerful antidote to notions of the glorious and heroic, and in its focus on the all-pervading reality of death it is reminiscent of the writing of MacGill's fellow countryman Liam O'Flaherty whose gothic representation of the trenches, *Return of the Brute*, has never received the acclaim it deserves.¹⁷

MacGill's descriptions share with Orpen's and Dunsany's the sense of something beyond previous experience, but the literary resources his imagination is able to draw upon enable him to produce more powerful descriptions. He is strongly influenced by both gothic and romantic literature, both of which take the reader beyond the limits of realism, a realism which proves an inadequate medium through which to describe the horrors of the front. Nevertheless he remains more strongly rooted in reality than Dunsany, with descriptions which partake of excess rather more than fantasy, although the latter element is not completely absent.

The writing considered so far is the work of men with direct experience of the Western Front, as serving soldiers, or in Orpen's case, a war artist with close first-hand acquaintance with the battlefield. I wish to conclude by considering one example of the way in which first-hand experience of the front, mediated by the stories of others, became part of the imaginative experience of those who did not witness it directly. One of the best known Irish representations of such experience is to be found in Act II of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*,¹⁸ a drama famously challenged by Yeats on the grounds that, "you are not interested in the great war, you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals".¹⁹ O'Casey, however, did have access to the direct accounts of others. The director of the first performance of the play at the London Apollo theatre argued that O'Casey "had a knowledge of the war and the

¹⁷ Liam O'Flaherty, *Return of the Brute* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Sean O'Casey, *Collected Plays* (London: MacMillan, 1959). Further quotations are referenced by a page number in the text.

¹⁹ Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. II. 367.

soldier that few civilians have had”,²⁰ while he himself pointed out that he was one “whose elder brother had worn the khaki in the first World War; who had walked with the Tommies, had chatted with them, had sung songs with them in the hospitals of St Vincent and of Richmond.”²¹

Nevertheless, without subscribing to the now outmoded view that the only authentic writing about the war must come from those who fought in it, it has to be conceded that in terms of representation of landscape it does have significance. O’Casey’s landscape is, like all the landscapes discussed a “re-presentation”, but is drawn not from personal memory but from the accounts of others. The evidence quoted above suggests that the accounts on which O’Casey depended were predominately verbal rather than literary, although the latter would not be altogether excluded. In keeping with the focus of this article on descriptive writing, I want to turn now to the visual representation specified in dramatic stage direction, focusing on Act II of *The Silver Tassie*, the only act which directly represents the frontline experience. It is visually encapsulated by the evocative stage set:

Between these two lacerated fingers of stone can be seen the country stretching to the horizon where the front trenches are. Here and there heaps of rubbish mark where houses once stood. From some of these, lean dead hands are protruding. Further on spiky stumps of trees which were once a small wood. The ground is dotted with rayed and shattered shell-holes. (35)

The strongly visual representation suggests the possible influence of war artists such as Orpen. However O’Casey’s long stage set for this act (it occupies over a page in the MacMillan edition of his collected works) has a pointed emphasis, and the general description quoted above is seen through the ruins of a monastery. There follows a detailed description of the figure of the Virgin Mary in a stained glass window, significantly wearing a black robe and then:

Further up from this window is a life-size crucifix. A shell has released an arm from the cross, which has caused the upper part of the figure to lean forward with the released arm outstretched towards the figure of the Virgin. Underneath

²⁰ Raymond Massey, *A Hundred Different Lives* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1979), p. 86, quoted in Christopher Murray, *Sean O’Casey* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2004), p. 205.

²¹ Sean O’Casey, *Rose and Crown*, Autobiographies vols. (London: Pan books Ltd, 1980), p. 275.

the crucifix on a pedestal, in red letters, are the words: PRINCEPS PACIS.

Almost opposite the crucifix is the gunwheel to which Barney is tied. (35)

The very obvious irony needs no comment, except perhaps to note that Barney has been tied to the gun wheel as a punishment, extending the denial of peace beyond the enemy and to one's own troops. Further, the reference to the figure of the virgin, combined with the dislodged figure on the crucifix, recall the well-known phenomenon of the partially dislodged figure of the virgin on a basilica at Albert and the superstitious beliefs surrounding it, suggesting that for most people Christianity has become a matter of superstitious observance, rather than real engagement with the teaching of its founder.²² This is further developed in the ensuing act, which includes a scene where the soldiers worship the gun with the chant "We believe in God and we believe in thee" (54-55). O'Casey's representation of the visual draws on the techniques of expressionist drama which is employed to convey a specific and strongly anti-war viewpoint.

Of all the writers considered here, O'Casey alone, the only non-combatant, was opposed to the war. While Orpen and Dunsany were undoubtedly in favour of it, there are many passages in MacGill's work which suggest an ambivalence which in his post-war work became outright hostility.²³ In spite of these differences, all three writers who directly witnessed the conflict bear testimony to the utter desolation they witnessed, although only in the writing of Dunsany is the desolation unmodified. MacGill's writing is the most powerful and the work of this powerful witness to life on the Western Front has never been sufficiently valued. Specifically Irish cultural influences are not strong, but are present in MacGill's occasional allusions to folk and fairy tales. While Dunsany does not draw directly on Celtic traditions, the broader influences of the Revival are present in his writing. However all four writers are also strongly influenced by cultural traditions beyond Ireland, both English (an inevitable consequence of the shared language) and European. The traditions on which they drew are

²² For a discussion of such superstitious beliefs including those connected with the statue at Albert, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 131–5.

²³ David Taylor in his comprehensive study of MacGill's war writing argues that his work during the war is never explicitly anti-war but there are some passages which can only be interpreted as anti-war. David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and The Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

important in providing the means to describe the almost indescribable. O'Casey is included in this account because he did have access to the verbal accounts of those who had experienced life at the front, at the point at which it was a very recent experience. What followed, and what continues into the present, is what may be termed a re-re-presentation, expressed in a tradition of war writing which owes its origins to the First World War.