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In a tiny stone church  
On the desolate headland  
A lost tribe is singing "Abide With Me."<sup>1</sup>

PYPER: Again. As always, again. Why does this persist? What more have we to tell each other? I remember nothing today. Absolutely nothing. (*Silence.*)<sup>2</sup>

PROVOKED INTO SPEECH AGAIN, impelled to remember again, an old man begins again. Darkness gives way to a spot-lit bed in which Pyper wakes, in which an actor playing Pyper acts out awakening. He has been here before. He is, and always will be, here at the opening of the play. What becomes of him between performances? What becomes of him, for that matter, during performances? The opening scene of the play marks only a new circuit of repetition for Pyper who once again returns to some nightmare ground and the moment of annihilation of his companions: "Those I belonged to, those I have not forgotten, the irreplaceable ones" (9). He dwells in, to borrow from Walter Benjamin, "homogeneous, empty time," returning at the beginning of the play to

1. Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 68.
2. Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (London: Faber, 1986), 9. All further references to the text are indicated parenthetically.

the site of catastrophe itself and also to countless repetitions enacted ever since. And this condition of past-present, in equal parts monotonous and urgent, is projected onto a future that has as much to do with time past as with time to come: “There would be, and there will be no surrender. The sons of Ulster will rise and lay their enemy low, as they did at the Boyne, as they did at the Somme” (10). This could be a scene out of Samuel Beckett: an old man disjointedly in, outside, across time—soliloquizing into the dark—unwillingly but ineluctably in speech—bound to repeat the same old story—up against it—amongst the ruins—alone. Not entirely alone as we shall see. He is being watched, observed, and not only by us, the audience. We too are being watched, and not only by him. But where exactly is he? When is or was he? Who is he? He is one who returns: a revenant!

We discover soon enough that the nightmare ground is the Battle of the Somme; that his lost comrades are the men of the 36th (Ulster) Division; that his time and his place are, to keep things straightforward for the moment, present-day “Ulster”: “We discourage visitors. Security. Men my age have been burned in their beds. Fenian cowards” (11). And to be sure, McGuinness’s play is “about” the condition of present-day Ulster, “about” the unloved and unwanted community called loyalist or unionist, and “about” the sense of betrayal voiced most eloquently by Ian Paisley and Frank McCusker.<sup>3</sup> It is “about” all these, and more. But this “about”—if we take the word as a sign of semantic plenitude—should not for a moment distract us from the play’s devastating staging of insubstantiality, of meagerness. *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is—as much as anything produced by Beckett, almost—a theater of attenuation: it is “about” what happens when (you think) everything is taken away from you, when (you think) everything is destroyed. The parentheses indicate caution, because in fact the sky hasn’t fallen in yet. Pyper, the last of the sons of Ulster, doesn’t realize that. He sees no further than the ruins. And because of this inability to imagine a future anything other than incarcerated by the past, his predicament and that of the community he stands (in) for are in fact much closer to minor farce than

3. See Tom Paulin’s “Northern Protestant Oratory and Writing 1791–1985,” in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 371–77.

the tragic conditions he imagines both himself and that community to be enduring.

And just to complicate matters, *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is a theater of ghosts. From the opening to the closing moments we are in the company of ghosts, and it is with the implications of this that my essay is chiefly concerned. In various ways I ask the question: what happens when a community is figured as spectral, when even the most substantial elements of a culture are rendered phantasmagoric? It is an obvious question, but yet it has not been asked before—at least not by the many critics of a play that has come to assume a central place in Irish theater. Like the political entity of Ulster itself, the play is a kind of impossibility; it is a performance that hardly exists at all. The stage is peopled by ghosts. The world is a barracks, a trench, a ruined temple. In ways analogous to the uncanny realization when watching or reading Brian Friel's *Translations* that what is *there* on stage or on the page is in fact the carcass of a language and a culture (so dead is the "indigenous" language that it requires translation into English in order to communicate anxiety about the threat to it from English),<sup>4</sup> *Observe the Sons* carries out a similarly uncanny *coup de théâtre*. Everything we see—the men of the 36th, their cause, their spirit, their identity as men and as Protestants—exists now only as abandoned remains—"Ulster lies in rubble at our feet. The temple of the Lord is in darkness. He has ransacked his dwelling" (12)—only as ghosts, neither finally dead nor fully alive. What *Observe the Sons* rehearses is the realization that what McGuinness calls "the spirit of identity that there is in the Ulster Protestant community"<sup>5</sup> has led that community as a political entity to the edge of extinction. That "spirit" which provided sustenance and cohesion in times of emergency was in fact a desperate, phantasmatic performance: the rituals, the parades, the commemorations, the bonfires and the burning of effigies, all that maintained the trappings of power produced for that community what were no more than the sub-

4. This is, I stress, the reality-effect of the play and not necessarily reality itself. In "Born to Die . . . and Live On: Terminal Metaphors in the Life of Irish" Sarah E. McKibben shows how Irish has been characterized, from as early as the sixteenth century, as a dying language. "Moreover," she argues, "Irish did not die at that time—and has thus far defied advance reports of its death." *Irish Review* 26 (Spring 2000), 96.

5. Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Programme notes, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (August 1995).

stantializing effects of “spirit,” “superiority,” “destiny,” and “community” itself. The whole show took place over an abyss. As Tom Paulin puts it in “The Defenestration of Hillsborough”: “All our victories / were defeats really.”<sup>6</sup> And the ultimate threat to that community, which over the years was forced to live itself out in a grotesque performance of stereotype, comes not so much from the hated Fenians as from those other even more intractable enemies: the impossibilities embedded within its own sense of history and destiny. The soldiers’ sense of themselves as members of the elect, as true sons of Ulster—“It is we the Protestant people who have always stood alone . . . and triumphed, for we are God’s chosen” (10)—provides no defense against military and subsequent political defeat. In the final moments of the play, in an astounding anachrony, the Protestant community is dealt two calamitous and near-simultaneous blows: annihilation at the Somme and defeat by the political enemies of Ulster. It seems there is no way back from the darkness that descends on the ruins of Ulster at the close. But as the ending, which is not an ending, folds back into the play’s beginning we realize that the drama will inevitably be repeated again . . . and again. In this way the demand embodied in the play’s title is, to an extent, enacted: we observe the men marching to the Somme and to their death, and then we see it again, and then again. This is the vision of the play: men marching toward the Somme in homogeneous, empty time: they marched, they are marching, they will march.

While Beckett’s specter haunts *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, McGuinness parts company with the Master insofar as his play is intimately concerned with a particular imagined community—the Protestant people of Ulster—in a particular, painful predicament. At the time he was writing the play (1984–85) Northern Ireland was, through the increasing involvement of the Dublin government in the province’s day-to-day affairs, beginning its slow disintegration as a coherent or sustainable polity. It is tempting to read it as a parable of the betrayal felt by many unionists and loyalists at the signing of the Hillsborough Agreement (15 Nov. 1985) behind their backs. McGuinness, however, ultimately refuses to endorse the language of victimhood. The seeds of Ulster’s political and social collapse, the play seems to suggest, were not carried by some foreign body onto “the sacred soil of

6. Tom Paulin, *Fivemiletown* (London: Faber, 1987), 54.

Ulster.”<sup>77</sup> Rather, they were, and are, to be found within the body-politic of Protestant Ulster itself. There was no betrayal, no sell-out (or if there was, the failure of the Northern Irish statelet was not predicated upon it). The men of the 36th, almost all of them “Carson’s men” (members of Edward Carson and James Craig’s Ulster Volunteers), go into battle with their eyes wide open. In this sense, the question Pyper asks at the play’s opening, “Answer me why we did it. Why we let ourselves be led to extermination?” (12) is knowingly redundant. The rhetoric of victimhood is displaced seconds later by the resonance of the answer to his own question: “In the end we were not led, we led ourselves.” (12)

With a few exceptions *Observe the Sons of Ulster* has not been well served by its critics, almost all of whom decline to recognize, let alone engage with, its deathly politics. Let me repeat: *Observe the Sons* sees death at work in the very spirit of Ulster Protestantism, the contemporary expression of which is presented as a dance of death, a place and culture haunted. Latching on to McGuinness’s upbringing in County Donegal, the critics tend to see the play as an imaginative act of reaching out across various kinds of borderlines, as an attempt to understand the sectarian and political Other. “The play,” argues Joe McMinn, “was greeted with delight and relief—as if, finally, a tradition not associated with imagination or poetry was getting a chance to be heard with respect.”<sup>78</sup> Robert Welsh’s discussion of the play’s glowingly humane treatment of Ulster Protestants is exemplary of an over-

7. The phrase (which would not be out of place in *Observe the Sons*) comes from Ian Paisley’s response to Gilbert & George’s *Human Spits and Shitheads*, on display during the autumn of 1999 in Belfast. “They have tainted,” he said, “the sacred soil of Ulster with their filth.” Reported in *The Guardian* (London and Manchester), 4 Nov. 1999, 13.

8. Joe McMinn, “Language, Literature and Cultural Identity: Irish and Anglo-Irish,” in Jean Lundy and Aodán Mac Póilin, eds., *Styles of Belonging: the Cultural Identities of Ulster* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1992), 48. Fran Brearton has voiced an interesting objection to “this reaction” by suggesting that it conceals the following assumption: “McGuinness has done for the Ulster Protestants what they could not (cannot) do for themselves—critique their own historical myths. Such an assumption is misleading—unless MacNeice, Mahon, Rodgers, Longley, and others are seen as self-expelled from their Protestant background, entailing a view of ‘Protestant’ culture as less than the sum of its parts—and might explain why the *Irish Times*’ reviewer of the play called it ‘one of the most comprehensive attacks made in the theatre on Ulster Protestantism.’” See Fran Brearton’s *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford:

whelmingly “generous and respectful” reaction which having begun with the early reviewers continued more or less unabated into academic criticism of the play:

What is remarkable and decisive about this play . . . is the effort of its moral realization: McGuinness’s dramatic art crosses over, not merely from a Catholic mind-set to Protestant ones, but into a world where the difference is fully valued. The heroism of the Protestant achievement, its fierce bravery, its courage devoid of the comfort of “good works” is given fully human voice; but it achieves this latitude and generosity while not neglecting the fissures and discontents that disrupt what, from the outside, would seem settled convictions. . . . The man from Bunrana speaks to the men of Ulster through the Ulster voices he creates on stage. . . . [A] line is well and truly crossed; it is a transgression, but a positive one, to observe, in admiration, the lines of men marching to a different set of drums.<sup>9</sup>

Critics also tend to regard the play’s action as prompted by an act of prosopopoeia: an old man remembers and his memories somehow conjure the images or the spirits of the dead. See how even the most innocuous of critical introductions to the play serve to render its vertiginous spectrality into manageable performative strategies: “*Observe the Sons of Ulster* uses a flashback structure with the protagonist as an old man remembering the past”<sup>10</sup> (it doesn’t); “[t]his history play is narrated altogether from the unionist point of view”<sup>11</sup> (it isn’t); “[t]he

Oxford University Press, 2000), 172–73. This attack slightly misses the mark, however, in that the tradition to which McMinn refers is not Ulster Protestantism but loyalism: indeed, McMinn’s assertion that “loyalism has so rarely found imaginative expression—it is not an ideology attractive to the artist, mainly because it deals in the language of denial and because its cultural identity is imprecise and forbidding” is hard to deny. Even the editors of, and contributors to, what remains the most comprehensive collection of opinions on ‘the Protestant imagination in Modern Ireland’, fail to make a case for loyalism as an inspiration for imaginative work. See Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley, eds., *Across a Roaring Hill: the Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland* (Belfast & Dover, N.H.: The Blackstaff Press, 1985).

9. Robert Welsh, *The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211.

10. Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Bouicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246.

play is set during the First World War”<sup>12</sup> (again, it isn’t). And, at times, misunderstanding is compounded by apparently straight-faced stereotype:

In detailing these seventy-year-old events . . . McGuinness shows a typically Irish concern for the influence of the past, but *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is no[t] . . . about just World War I. The tensions that tear these World War I soldiers are the same as those now tearing Northern Ireland. McGuinness structures his play so that we join Kenneth Pyper, the only survivor, in retrospection. With him we re-create the past and again evaluate events, motives, and meanings. An old man recalling events of his youth, Pyper has, like the audience the perspective afforded by distance in time.<sup>13</sup>

Critics’ refusal to take seriously the play’s spectrality, allied to a shared preference for the “as if” or “as it were” of prosopopoeia, reduces almost entirely the impact of McGuinness’s dramatic *tour de force*, neutralizes to mere contrivance that which the play—from title to closing moments—insists upon so forcefully. And what is it that is insisted upon? In occupying the same imaginative dimension as Paul Celan’s “Memory of France” with its miraculous line, “We were dead and were able to breathe,”<sup>14</sup> *Observe the Sons* requires us to attend to the presence of the dead, demands that we learn to live with ghosts and the ghostly, even if it is only for the duration of the play’s performance. But because everything within us recoils from the recognition of death subtending that which we think of as life, this is difficult to fulfill. The animation of bodies on the stage gives only an effect of vitality: these men are already, presently, and always dead. And yet, there they are: in front of our very eyes. This scandalous inconceivability—dead men talking?—is perhaps the reason why the critics find it just so difficult to take

11. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 204.

12. Riana O’Dwyer, “Dancing in the Borderlands: the Plays of Frank McGuinness,” in Geert Lernout, ed., *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1991), 105.

13. Helen Lojek, “Myth and Bonding in Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*,” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14:1 (1990), 57.

14. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 52–53. This is Hamburger’s translation of Celan’s original line from “Erinerung an Frankreich”: “Wir waren tot und konnten atmen.”



Pyper at his word: when he declares, for example, “I survived. No, survival was not my lot. Darkness, for eternity, is not survival” (9–10). And again: “I died that day with you” (11). And again: “Answer me why we did it? Why we let ourselves be led to extermination?” (12). And yet again: “we marched into the battle that killed us all” (12). Even Craig’s corroboration—“Whoever comes back alive, if any of us do, will have died as well” (74)—seems not to sway the critics that what confronts us when we watch or read this play is a contemporary version of one of the great cultural phenomena of medieval Europe: the dance of death.

Once the dead are admitted into the realm of the “living,” once the presence of the absent—“[t]he one who has disappeared appears still to be there, and his apparition is not nothing. It does not do nothing”<sup>15</sup>—is permitted, then the discursive categories hitherto allowed in relation to this play—and the dominant themes have tended to be sexuality, reconciliation and performativity—become suddenly, if not exactly untenable, then at the very least unstable. How should ghosts be expected to come to terms with their identity as a series of performativities? How is it possible for ghosts to realize that their masculinity is constructed on the basis of sectarian and imperial stereotypes? Can ghosts change? Can they become better ghosts? And what does it mean for a community, a people to be allegorized as ghosts? The play’s spectrality is more or less ignored by the critics: and this is, perhaps unsurprisingly, very much a matter of politics. The preferred reading—in sympathy, no doubt, with the color of the times—is to see *Observe the Sons* as an act of reconciliation, of allo-identification: “the man from Buncrana speaks to the men of Ulster.” Indeed, the playwright himself has encouraged this view:

Coming from a republican background, this play is my attempt to comprehend the diversity and the spirit of identity that there is in the Ulster Protestant community and to celebrate its genuine past heroism and courage.<sup>16</sup>

15. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 97.

16. Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Programme notes, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (August 1995).

*Observe the Sons* is, however, far more than a recognition of the proud cultural traditions of Ulster Protestant loyalism, its “*past heroism and courage*” (my italics). It is, more dangerously in this period of “cease-fire,” “agreement,” “peace and reconciliation,” a death notice for a community in thrall to hatred of others and of themselves, a community caught up in Carson’s dance of death. It is, if we take at all seriously the play’s closing moments, an epitaph for that community.

Several critics do in fact recognize the importance of the spectral in McGuinness’s play:

The play begins with a monologue by Pyper, the only survivor in his platoon, in which his dead comrades come back to life . . .<sup>17</sup>

The play’s action comprises the remembrance of one man, Pyper . . . whose recollections of his seven comrades who fell at the Somme come to life . . .<sup>18</sup>

But only two critics, Michael Etherton and George Boyce, are bold enough to tell it as it is. Etherton describes how “Kenneth Pyper . . . now an old man in the North, calls up the ghosts of his slaughtered companions”<sup>19</sup> while Boyce considers how “Pyper, now an old man, still sees the ghosts of the soldiers with whom he went to war . . . the past returns to haunt, to disturb—it will not go away.”<sup>20</sup> Even Susan Cannon Harris, in her unsurpassed reading of the play’s performances of sexual and political orientation, ignores (perhaps out of necessity) its insistence on ghostly double or multiple time, place and identity. By beginning her discussion with the play’s second part, “Initiation,” in which the men assemble in the barracks, Harris passes over Part I’s strange meeting of specters (“PYPER see the ghosts appear,” “PYPER sees more ghost rise,” “PYPER holds his arms to the ghosts,” “PYPER sees

17. Ulrich Schneider, “Staging History in Contemporary Anglo-Irish Drama: Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness,” in *The Crows Behind the Plough*, 93.

18. Welsh, *The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999*, 211.

19. Michael Etherton, *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 48.

20. D.G. Boyce, “‘That Party Politics Should Divide our Tents’: Nationalism, Unionism and the First World War,” in Adrian Gregory and Senia Pasetta, eds., *Ireland and The Great War: ‘A War to Unite Us All?’* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 209–10.

the ghost of the Younger PYPER”). In a bizarre occlusion, Harris discusses the revenants’ identity performativities as if they were unproblematically in either the here and now, or the there and then. Not a word is devoted to the fact that these men are dead, that they have, somehow or other (through memory? through apparition? who knows? just what *is* a ghost?) come back (again) for the duration of the play. Hence, a judgment such as the following:

By the final scene of *Observe* all the characters know what is rotten about their identities, have learned like Anderson that “Pyper the bastard was right . . . We’re going to die for nothing. It’s all lies.”<sup>21</sup>

can only be sustained if the disjunctions (anachrony and anatopia) of spectrality are suppressed. For what *Observe the Sons* denies is the notion of progress itself. The play’s staging of “homogenous, empty time” results less in a messianic moment of revelatory potential, than a series of repeated performances, acquisitions, and disavowals of knowledge by the men/ghosts. In this sense there is no “final scene,” there is no knowledge securely gained, only an endlessly repeated movement toward what was already “known” in the beginning, the repetition of which begins the process anew.

So far I have been assuming an understanding of ghosts and ghostliness, blithely employing these terms as if they were commonly understood, let alone accepted. It is time to pause, to consider Jacques Derrida’s question, “*What is a ghost?*” and, after that, to begin to elaborate on what are, I believe, the major implications of McGuinness’s theater of specters, this “dance unto death.” It is not of course easy to talk about ghosts:

A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts—nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living,

21. Susan Cannon Harris, “‘Watch Yourself’: Performance, Sexual Difference and National Identity in the Irish Plays of Frank McGuinness,” *Genders* 28 (1998), [http://www.genders.org/g28/g28\\_watchyourself.txt](http://www.genders.org/g28/g28_watchyourself.txt).

being and not-being (“to be or not to be,” in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not . . .<sup>22</sup>

And so, according to Derrida, ghosts and “everything that [is] neither life nor death” are “conjured away,” “fended off with a burst of laughter,” translated through critical analysis into something substantial, something comfortably manageable. Theater, in contrast, has few qualms about ghosts; indeed it introduces them into the company of the “living” without the slightest hesitation or need to *explain*:

*Enter the Ghost, clad in complete armour, with its visor raised, and a truncheon in its hand*

*The Ghost spreads its arms*

*The Ghost beckons*

*Enter the Ghost and Hamlet*

GHOST (*crying from under the stage*): Swear.

(*Hamlet*, Act I, scenes i–v)

*Thunder. [Enter] FIRST APPARITION, an armed Head*

*Thunder. [Enter] SECOND APPARITION, a bloody Child*

*Thunder. [Enter] THIRD APPARITION, a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand.*

*[Enter] a show of eight kings, and [the] last with a glass in his hand  
[BANQUO's Ghost following]*

(*Macbeth*, Act 4, scene 1)

(*Silence. As the light increases, PYPER sees the ghosts appear . . .*)

(*PYPER sees more ghosts rise . . .*)

(*PYPER holds his arms to the ghosts.*)

(*PYPER sees the ghost of his YOUNGER PYPER. As if introducing that younger self to the other ghosts, he beckons towards them, invitingly.*)

(*Observe the Sons of Ulster, Part 1*)

22. Derrida, *Specters*, 11.

That which theater with only minimal awkwardness can achieve (the apparition of phantoms) poses severe problems of reading for the critic: how to maintain the spectrality of ghosts when their existence is so open to question; how to avoid the temptation of metaphorizing them into something other than spectral, into something “real”? One response for the scholar is disavowal, to interpret the ghosts as figments of memory, as dramatized recall, even, as Pyper himself suggests, as visions or delusions of madness. This is, in fact, the sensible route to take. Once the ghosts are snuffed out, once they are put in their place, existing, that is, between 1915 and 1916, once they are normalized into characters, then it is rather easy to read the play as moving jauntily along from past to present, from myth to reality, from hope to betrayal, and so on. Another response—altogether more messy, but the one I am nevertheless attempting to carry through in this essay—is to remain faithful to the reality-effect as presented on the stage or in the script: in other words, to maintain the integrity of the work and to recognize its most crucial command or request or instruction or enjoinder: to observe. No more and no less than that. To *observe* the sons of Ulster. To observe them for what they are—not as men of flesh, as real-live subjects—but as figures, things, neither here (in time present) nor there (time past), neither entirely “spirit” (we can see them) nor “flesh” (they appear, they rise). The task may be impossible, but we are, nonetheless, instructed to fulfill it. Here is Derrida again, considering the question: “what is a ghost?” It is, he speculates,

some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the specter. . . . It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. . . . One does not know if it is living or it is dead.<sup>23</sup>

In the face of this self-admittedly bewildered attempt to figure the specter, the act of observation begins to look futile. We simply do not

23. Ibid., 6.

know—and this for Derrida is not a matter of stupidity—what the specter is, “because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge.”<sup>24</sup>

And yet *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is an elaboration of a command—to *observe*—even the most preliminary senses of which (to watch, look at, attend to, perceive, take notice of) appear difficult to fulfill for the spectator or the reader, in that we are not at all sure what it is we are witnessing on stage or reading on the page. The further we advance through the word’s range of significations, and the further we move from the specular to what might be thought of as the ethical, then the more problematic the task of observing becomes. *Observe* requires more of us than simply an act of perception: it indicates (when it signifies to guard, to keep, to watch, to watch over, to look after) a duty of care, or a need for vigilance or, even, surveillance. And then, when the word’s significances begin to proliferate, when *observe* signifies, for example, to adhere, to follow (a rule, a principle, a practice), to hold, to keep to, to celebrate, to solemnize in a prescribed way, to perceive or learn by inspection—then the act of observing becomes thoroughly exorbitant. And even the above do not exhaust the meanings of *observe*. The word denotes much more: to treat with ceremonious respect or reverence, to worship, to honor, to court, to humor, to gratify, to inspect for purposes of divination, to watch or take note of presages or omens.

How, then, should we observe? Which of the definitions of *observe* set out above are we expected to fulfill? What is there *there* to observe? How does one, as a spectator, observe the unobservable, if what we are being asked to observe are ghosts (the script insists they are ghosts, not shadows, figments, images, simulacra, memories, depictions, imaginings)? Setting aside for a moment the question of spectrality, how do we access, let alone observe what really happened at the Somme? How do we gauge the extent and depth of the personal and communal trauma of the Somme—and not simply for the Protestant community of Ulster? It was not just, after all, the sons of Ulster who fought and died there. How is it possible to conceive the full distribution of anachronicités and anatópias contained within the demand to observe the sons of Ulster? At what point do we observe them? Where are these ghosts located so that we may observe them? The

24. Ibid.

stage has little, if nothing, to do with dating, with calendrical time. And even if we were to observe them, then what language do we use to communicate what we had seen? The conventional vocabulary of criticism has few problems with images, simulacra, desires, and so forth, but for ghosts no such lexicon exists. To condense all of these questions: just how is it possible to observe the sons of Ulster marching toward the Somme?

The scene immediately leading up to the “death” of the men (they are, don’t let us forget, already dead) illustrates the difficulties involved in the act of “observing”: we are seeing or reading (about) something, but just what that something *is* is hard to define. Moments before going over the top and desperately needing something to occupy them for a while before the whistles sound, McIlwaine, the Belfast shipyard worker, suggests they “do” the Battle of the Boyne:

ANDERSON: How the hell can two men do the Battle of the Boyne?

MCILWAINE: They do it without much more at Scarva.

ANDERSON: Very thing, Battle of Scarva.

MCILWAINE: They have horses at Scarva.

ANDERSON: We’ll get the horses. To your feet, Millen. You’re a horse.  
(69)

What follows is a performance orchestrated by McIlwaine and Anderson in which seven of the eight men act out not so much the Battle of the Boyne itself, but its simulation in the Mock Battle of Scarva, that annual re-enactment held on 13 July when thousands of members and supporters of the Black Institution parade to the Field at Scarva in County Down for the Sham Fight between James and William at the Boyne. The performance in the trench is, therefore, an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy. Mimicking the highly ritualized performance of the Sham Fight, Anderson lints a commentary on the mime:

ANDERSON: King William, Prince of Orange, on his fine white charger eyes the Traitor James, James who will destroy our glorious religion should he win the battle. William moves defiantly towards the bitter enemy. His white steed sniffs the dangers but continues to carry his master to glory. James swaggers forward –

MILLEN: On his trusty steed –

ANDERSON: Will his trusty steed shut his mouth when I'm in the middle of the story? Where was I? (70)

This interruption is minor in comparison to what is about to happen. Nearing the climatic moment in the struggle between James and William everything goes wrong. Pyper, playing the part of King Billy's horse, trips, causing the half-Catholic Crawford (King Billy) to fall to the ground. The performance comes to an end, Anderson's instruction to Crawford / King James—"And remember, King James, we know the result, you know the result, keep to the result" (70)—has had little effect. Millen comments that this is "[n]ot the best of signs"; McIlwaine that "[i]t was only a game" (71). Game though it may be, the implications of this "accident" are clear, as yet another element of the men's shared identity is shattered. Earlier, another ritualized performance has ended similarly in disappointment. Anderson and McIlwaine's march to the Field on the wrong day (they have been fighting in France for five months and so have missed the Twelfth celebrations) has unraveled into drunken farce and self-doubt:

MCILWAINE: See this, this is holy ground.

ANDERSON: The Field?

MCILWAINE: The Field. Holiest spot in Ulster. I'm glad we come here, laughed at or not.

ANDERSON: Who was laughing at us?

MCILWAINE: They all were. . . .

MCILWAINE: It's no good. . . . It's no good here on your own. No good without the speakers. No good without the bands, no good without the banners. Without the chaps. No good on your own. Why did we come here to be jeered at? Why did we come here, Anderson?

ANDERSON: To beat a drum.

*(Lights fade on the Field.)* (43–44)

This disappointment reverberates far beyond the particular circumstances of McIlwaine and Anderson's attempt to conjure the spirit(s) of the Twelfth. Their failure lays bare, at the very center, "the



Holiest spot” of Protestant Ulster, not only the conditions required for success—a properly contextualized and theatricalized assembly of political power—but the fragility of any such performance, even when its success is normally assured. The stakes of such performances are very high indeed. Writing of the annual marching season, Neil Jarman identifies both the material effects and the inherent risks of this carefully choreographed act of mimesis:

The Protestant Ascendancy . . . is reaffirmed across the north each Twelfth of July, as the past struggles are recalled through a performative re-enactment. Each year the events of July 1690 are replayed, the march to battle and back now condensed into a single day. For that day the Orangemen constitute themselves as a replica army, and their parade mimics the departure to, and return from, war. The Order displays itself as a mirror of the military structure of regiments and companies; each group of men headed by their officers and their standardized, and almost identical, ceremonial regalia, accompanied by the martial music of the young bandsmen in their brilliant costumes. As the contemporary community relives the events of the past they become contemporary events: the performance is no longer restricted to a symbolic meaning, the enactment has real effects in real time. The somber mood of the morning, with the ardours of the march in front of them, contrasts with the joyful, drunken exuberance of the return to the city in the evening, elated by the success of the (battle)field. The tension and expectation of the departure is resolved and released with the safe arrival home. The victory is confirmed for another year, and the Ascendancy confirmed. For the performance to be disrupted or cancelled would be to transform history, to rupture the simultaneity of past and present and make the future uncertain.<sup>25</sup>

This is precisely what happens when the two performances—McIlwaine and Anderson’s re-enactment of the Williamite army’s journey to the battlefield, and the men’s mimicry of the Battle of the Boyne—fail to supply the required theatrical, imaginary, and specular effects of power. Had the performances in fact reached successful conclusions—had Pyper not tripped, had the crowds come out to cheer the march to the Field—their fortifying functions may still have proved equally negligible. The reason for this rests in, as Jarman’s final sen-

25. Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 106–7.

tence suggests, the sheer insubstantiality of the act of performance itself, especially when the performance's success is so finely in the balance that any disruption or cancellation would constitute a rupture; and perhaps even more crucially when the performance attempts to conjure through mimicry some event, some originary moment that was itself always already mythical. Let us not forget—as I concentrate on the major performative set piece of the play—that *Observe the Sons* stages a whole series of individual performances (of straightness and queerness, of sectarian affiliation, of regional and class identity, and so on) as well as the spectacle of the fight and the parade, each of which are shown in their sustaining and retarding dimensions.

Judith Butler's concept of performativities takes us some way toward viewing the re-enactments in *Observe the Sons* as a series of *mises-en-abyme*. "Although," according to Butler, "miming suggests that there is a prior model which is being copied, it can have the effect of exposing that prior model as purely phantasmatic."<sup>26</sup> "Mime," in other words, "does not imitate or copy some prior phenomenon, idea, or figure, but constitutes—some might say *performatively*—the phantasm of the original in and through the mime."<sup>27</sup> One of the clearest elaborations of this is to be found in Derrida's discussion of Mallarmé's "Mimique," which she quotes at length:

We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple [sic], a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. There is no simple reference. It is in this that the mime's operation does allude, but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking glass. . . . The speculum reflects no reality: it produces mere "reality-effects". . . . In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without reference, or rather reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any birth, death, or presence.<sup>28</sup>

26. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (Routledge: New York and London, 1991), 16.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid. The original passage can be found in Derrida's *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 206.

Taken together with Jarman's more situated appreciation of what is at stake in the annual re-enactments in Northern Ireland, Butler's and Derrida's analyses of mime/mimicry accord with the desires mobilized, but only ever partially fulfilled, by these parades of supremacy. They go some way toward extending our understanding of the absolute need for these carefully choreographed displays, and some way toward seeing more clearly both the logic and the barely hidden anxiety in a statement such as that made by Ian Paisley outside Drumcree Chapel on 9 July 1995:

If we cannot go to our place of worship and we cannot walk back from that place of worship, then all that the Reformation brought to us, and all that the martyrs died for, and all that our forefathers gave their lives for is lost to us forever. So there can be no turning back.<sup>29</sup>

The importance of ritual, of retracing exactly the footsteps of fathers and forefathers—those who fought at the Somme, at the Boyne, and, indeed, those who year-in-year-out re-enacted those events—becomes especially pronounced at a moment (and here we return both to *Observe the Sons* and to recent developments in Northern Ireland) when that supremacy, rotten as it always was, is now in its final stages of decomposition. For what is at the root of the anxiety of these performances is not perhaps their failure to signify “once-and-for-all” to the enemy-within (northern Catholics/ nationalists/republicans) the victory of the Protestant people and Protestant faith, but the phantasmal nature both of what they mimic (it was the Battle of Aughrim in July 1691, not the Boyne, that marked the consolidating moment of the Williamite Revolution;<sup>30</sup> the Somme was not a glorious achieve-

29. Quoted in Dominic Byran's “Drumcree and ‘The right to March’: Orangeism, Ritual and Politics in Northern Ireland,” in T.G. Fraser, ed., *The Irish Parading Tradition* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 191.

30. Jarman, *Material Conflicts*, 32–33:

The two forces met at the River Boyne on 1 July (Old Style). Militarily the battle was inconclusive; it was not until 12 July (Old Style) the following year that the decisive victory was won at the Battle of Aughrim, that consolidated the Glorious Revolution and cemented the position of the Protestant faith in the two kingdoms. However, the symbolic importance of the two monarchs leading their armies into battle, and James's defeat and subsequent flight from Ireland that the Battle of the Boyne would be remembered as the key event.

ment and does not belong exclusively to Protestant Ulster) and the phantasmatic construction of the people for whom the performances are orchestrated. The Ulster of these rituals does not exist in any meaningfully substantive way. For example, almost half the population of the nine counties of Ulster in 1916 was Catholic. The men's imagined Ulster, in other words, bore little resemblance to the complex and contradictory realities of how things were on the ground. There was an Ulster stripped bare of unruly elements, of difference: it was an Ulster purely of the mind.

Earlier I compared the apparition of specters in *Observe the Sons of Ulster* to sequences of revenance in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. And of course, I need not have limited myself to Shakespeare, or to theater more generally. From its origins, the novel has frequently maintained commerce with ghosts: *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *The Woman in White* (1860), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), *Beloved* (1987), and *Reading in the Dark* (1996) are all well known examples. In film the intrusion by ghosts into the quotidian is commonplace: one has only to think of recent mainstream films such as *Ghost* (1990), *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1992), *City of Angels* (1998), or *The Sixth Sense* (2000) to appreciate the ease with which audiences can in certain circumstances deal with the presence of the dead in contemporary culture. *Observe the Sons*, however, moves far beyond an incorporation of the spectral into reasonably secure notions of "real-life" in its depiction of an entire cultural formation—Ulster Protestant loyalism—as ghosted, as ghostly. And so while the play undoubtedly gestures toward theatrical and literary traditions of the ghostly and the uncanny, it is in fact far more indebted to a much older tradition that provides a precedent for its terminal and total vision.

The medieval dance of death, or the *danse macabre*, or the *totentanz*, which is now almost lost to us as a cultural form (Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) is a notable exception), was a literary, pictorial, or dramatic representation of a procession or dance of both living and dead figures. Artistic representations of the dance of death seem to

See also J.G. Simms, "The War of the Two Kings, 1685–91," in T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, F.J. Byrne, eds., *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 497–501.

have their origins in both the earlier tradition of images of apocalypse that often adorned medieval churches and in quite separate communal practices (often in the form of dance) designed to ward off the Black Death of the 1340s. The key to visual and dramatic representations of the dance (which begin to emerge from as early as 1376), and that which prompts the analogies I am drawing here, was their strictly allegorical function. One of the most celebrated examples, Hans Holbein's series of fifty-eight woodcuts of the *Dance of Death* (c. 1526), depicts death, mainly in the form of skeletons, surprising a series of victims in the midst of their daily lives. Holbein's woodcuts articulate the key features of the dance of death as allegory: death as all-powerful, death as impartial, death as a leveler of rank, death as imminent, death as impervious to humans' fears of mortality.

Among the earliest pictorial instances of the dance of death is a series of murals dating from 1425 and formerly (until their destruction in 1699) in the *Cimetiere des Innocents* in Paris. The paintings depicted figures of church and state being led to their final destination by corpses and skeletons. While the dance of death in its classical form did not feature specters as such, the figure of the animated skeleton or the temporarily re-vivified corpse has a strongly spectral dimension: they are not entirely dead, they are not fully alive. The power of the representations, especially when the pictorial images were supplemented by captions of Biblical verses concerned with death—common examples included “Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.” *Isaiah* 38: 1; “I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” *Mark* 14: 27; “Death is better than life.” *Sirach* (*Ecclesiasticus*) 30: 17; “My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves are ready for me.” *Job* 17: 1; “What takest away life? Death.” *Sirach* (*Ecclesiasticus* 31: 34)—resided no doubt in the shocking personification of death as a grinning corpse or skeleton leading the living-dead out of the bosom of their families or from their daily work.<sup>31</sup>

31. This discussion is indebted to the following texts: John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York & London: Routledge, 2000); Edward Chaney, ed., *La Danse Macabre des Charniers des Saints Innocents à Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1945); Philip Hofer, ed., *The Dance of Death: les Simulachres et Historiées Faces de la Mort* (Boston: The Cygnet Press, 1974); Alfred Kubin, *Kubin's Dance of Death & Other Drawings* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973).

*Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* has many of the qualities of dance. The men spend much of their time in pairs that merge into the larger group from time to time. In Part 3 of the play these pairings become especially pronounced as the actors perform a series of highly choreographed movements taking place in and between particularly resonant Ulster locations—Boa Island, a suspended ropebridge (Carrick-a-Rede), the Field (Finaghy), and a Protestant church. At the Field, Anderson and McIlwaine attempt to retrace the footsteps of the Twelfth paraders, and on Boa Pyper tells Craig how he is the “eldest son of a respectable family whose greatest boast is that in their house Sir Edward Carson, savior of their tribe, danced in the finest gathering Armagh had ever seen” (56). Although Pyper “escaped Carson’s dance” (the phrase is repeated in the space of a few lines) he found himself irrecoverably “contaminated” by it (56–57). Still on Boa, Pyper and Craig seem on the verge of dispensing with language in a passage that has the fluidity and understanding of dance:

PYPER: Talk straight from now on.

CRAIG: Why?

PYPER: Quicker.

CRAIG: Dance.

PYPER: The gods are watching.

CRAIG: The gods.

PYPER: Protestant gods.

CRAIG: Carson.

PYPER: King.

CRAIG: Ulster.

PYPER: Ulster.

CRAIG: Stone.

PYPER: Flesh.

CRAIG: Carson is asking you to dance in the temple of the Lord.

PYPER: Dance. (57–58)

This exchange finds a distorted echo at two other key moments of the play, which are in fact of the same moment—as the closing sequence returns or folds back into the opening scene. The “final” exchange between the Younger and Elder Pyper repeats the imperative to “dance” but now the house and temple are empty: the Lord as well as the pantheon of Protestant gods have departed:

*(PYPER reaches towards himself.)*

YOUNGER PYPER: Dance in this deserted temple of the Lord.

ELDER PYPER: Dance. (80)

These lines, shockingly incongruous, in view of what has just occurred (the appeal to the Lord for mercy) are repetitions of the closing moments of Elder Pyper’s opening monologue:

*(PYPER holds his arms to the ghosts)*

Dance in the deserted temple of the Lord. Dance unto death before the Lord.

*(PYPER see the ghost of the YOUNGER PYPER. As if introducing that younger self to the other ghosts, he beckons it towards them, invitingly.)*

Dance. Dance. (12)

The invitation or instruction to “dance” takes place alongside other repetitions (notably that of “Ulster,” which is repeated at least twenty times on the final page of the script) but then finally it comes to replace them, as the play’s final word, its final gesture. Marching has been replaced by dancing: the two activities are not, of course, entirely dissimilar. But just as we never see the men marching toward the Somme, we also fail to see them dancing. Pyper’s final invitation to the dance recalls and gathers together all the earlier invitations to dance and yet it engenders nothing; it is met by silence, darkness, the end of the drama; it provokes none of the vitality and sensuality that dance normally implies; it seems to be a gesture without content, a verbal, non-bodily performance. So what is this dance without movement, without music? What can be said about the call to dance “unto death before the Lord”?

In important ways the dance of *Observe the Sons of Ulster* does not conform in any simple manner to the classical figure of the dance of death in which it is the dead who usher away the living from their daily rounds. Here it seems to be the other way round. It is Pyper the survivor, the one who still lives, who enjoins the ghosts of his companions to dance. But have we forgotten? Pyper is dead. Or at least he is only as alive as his fellow specters. If not fully dead, he has nonetheless embarked on the journey to death: he suspects he is “leaving earth for air” (11). And it seems that he may have set out on that journey long before his dead companions. He has always seemed closer to death than any of them. More than that, at times he actually seems to be death. For example, as the men assemble in the barracks in the opening scene, Pyper wastes no opportunity to remind them of their probable fate, and of his affiliation with, and his knowledge of, death:

CRAIG: It’s only a cut man. You’re not in your grave.

PYPER: You’re making yours. (13)

PYPER: Did you not join up to die for me? (15)

PYPER: I enlisted because I’m dying anyway. I want it over quickly. (19)

MILLEN: . . . no more chat about dying. It’ll be looking at us straight in the face soon enough.

PYPER: I’m looking at you straight in the face. (19)

PYPER: Lambs to the slaughter. Baaaa. (20)

PYPER: You’re not going to survive.

MILLEN: We’ll all survive. This is the best army on God’s good earth.

PYPER: But we’re the scum of it. We go first. (35–36)

PYPER: I’ll die willingly. Will you? Yes. You can feel that. Death. You fear that. Death. And I know death. I’ll let you know it. (36–37)

Pyper’s familiarity with death is acknowledged even by his most skeptical antagonist:

ANDERSON: Pyper the bastard was right. It’s all lies. We’re going to die. It’s all lies. We’re going to die for nothing. (59)



Anderson is, of course, correct. Pyper has seen their death many times before, whereas the ghost-men are facing death for the first time. Pyper haunts the men in more ways than one. Not only does he prepare them for death, but once dead, he continues to conjure them, to summon them, to demand that they be “observed.” He will not let them go. Pyper haunts the ghosts. He is always there before them. He has already seen the horror. Have the ghosts already seen? What is the memory of ghosts? When he speaks to the men at their first meeting he has already been there—he has known death, has taken on its knowledge (“I know death,” “I’m looking at you straight in the face”). Having led the Sons of Ulster into battle, with his prayer for God to “Save us. Save our country. Destroy our enemies at home and on this field of battle” (79–80), he now, from his bed, continues to invoke/convoke the dead. Here the affinities with the dance of death are most deeply encoded. Like his namesake, the mythical figure who leads the town’s children into oblivion, Pyper leads the men to their death, repeatedly. It is he who leads the dance, who (once again) beckons the ghosts to enter (again) into their death.

The medieval dance of death operated as total allegory. The dancing figures on the walls of the charnel house or the church were there to remind their audience that death was to be found everywhere. So too with *Observe the Sons of Ulster* as a dance of death. In an extraordinary closing sequence “Ulster”—as signifier, as imagined territory, as spirit, as a Protestant state for a Protestant people—mutates from the transcendental into a sign unable to denote anything other than a desperate desire for meaning. Ulster’s impossibility is finally and devastatingly exposed. This is the final scene:

PYPER: . . . Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme. I love their lives. I love my own life. I love my home. I love my Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster. Ulster.

*(As the chant of “Ulster” commences rifles and bayonets are raised. The chant turns into a battle cry, reaching frenzy. The ELDER PYPER appears. His YOUNGER SELF sees him. The chant ceases.)*

YOUNGER PYPER: Ulster.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: I have seen the horror.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: They kept their nerve and they died.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: There would be, and there will be, no surrender.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: The house has grown cold, the province has grown lonely.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: You'll always guard Ulster.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: Save it.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

YOUNGER PYPER: The temple of the Lord is ransacked.

ELDER PYPER: Ulster.

*(PYPER reaches towards himself.)*

YOUNGER PYPER: Dance in this deserted temple of the Lord.

ELDER PYPER: Dance.

*(Darkness.) (80)*

The Younger Pyper reiterates the words spoken earlier by the Elder Pyper, who himself takes up the chant begun years before by his younger self. And it is not just time that collapses at this moment. The cause that animates the men—"Ulster"—empties out into substancelessness, into a performance of pure iteration, relating to nothing other than itself. For what is signified by "Ulster"? Surely not what its loyal sons imagine as they prepare to die for it: not an Ulster in ruins, not an Ulster peopled substantially by its enemies, not as Ulster as anachronism, as impossibility. The pathos of this moment in the theater is overwhelming, and not for the first time we are reminded of Judith Butler's anatomy of identity as performed repetition:

For if the "I" is a site of repetition, that is, if the "I" only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the "I"

is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. In other words, does or can the “I” ever repeat itself, cite itself, faithfully, or is there always a displacement from its former moment that establishes the permanently non-self-identical status of that “I”? . . . [I]f the performance is “repeated”, there is always the question of what differentiates from each other the moments of identity that are repeated. And if the “I” is an effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence, then there is no “I” that precedes the [identity] that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that “I”.<sup>32</sup>

The more emphatic the repetition (the “*chant turns into a battle cry, reaching frenzy*”) the more unstable its referent becomes. What mobilizes the heroic solidarity necessary to face the enemy turns, in a matter of seconds, into a haunting deconstruction. By the end of the play are we and the men/ghosts at all sure what is signified by “Ulster”? What we can be sure about is that the final “Ulster” has moved far away from that which the sign appeared earlier to designate: that which it must designate if its performance is to be successful. The end of the performance coincides with what appears to be the exhaustion of “Ulster,” with the evacuation of anything of substance attaching to the name and to the concept. The sense of exhaustion is almost absolute until it dawns on us that the entire performance will be repeated again, will be repeated endlessly.

This paper began with a dissatisfaction with existing readings of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*. Critics’ emphasis on the play’s ameliorative dimensions at the expense of its terminal vision of Ulster Protestant loyalism promotes, it seems to me, a serious misreading of a piece of theater that, according to Robert Welsh, “marked a profound shift in Irish theatrical thought, practice, and intent.”<sup>33</sup> It is time to cease regarding McGuinness’s play as some sort of blueprint for reconciliation and mutual cultural respect, and instead see it in its troubling, even dangerous dimensions. This is not to endorse the thinly concealed glee of the *Irish Times* reviewer who pro-

32. Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 18.

33. Welsh, *The Abbey Theatre*, 209.

claimed the play “one of the most comprehensive attacks made in the theater on Ulster Protestantism,”<sup>34</sup> but it is time to attend to the political and artistic demands of a play that in present circumstances have considerable urgency. *Observe the Sons of Ulster* painfully enacts the conditions of incarceration over which the sons and daughters of Ulster (of all parties and creeds) must struggle in order to imagine and secure a workable future. Seamus Deane poses the fundamental challenge that McGuinness’s masterpiece so spiritedly takes up: “We stand in servitude to history if we insist upon it as an explanation for the future we might have had but won’t have. Freeing ourselves from that, we can begin to anticipate, not remember our future.”<sup>35</sup>

34. David Nowlan, Review of *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, *The Irish Times*, 20 Feb. 1985, 10.

35. Seamus Deane, “Remembering the Irish future,” *The Crane Bag* 8:1 (1984), 92.