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## “Recalled to Life”: Postmodernism in Lennox Robinson’s *The Lost Leader* (1918)

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**Abstract.** Despite playing a pivotal role in the development of Irish theatre, especially through his association with the Abbey Theatre (as writer, manager, director, and member of the Board of Directors), Lennox Robinson (1886-1958), is a largely forgotten figure, both within the public domain and within Irish scholarship. As the title, “Recalled to Life”, implies, this article constitutes a reminder of the contributions this intriguing and innovative playwright made to the Irish stage. When Robinson is sporadically name-checked by scholars, he is primarily remembered for the realist plays of his early career, perpetuating a reputation that disregards the dramatist’s later, experimental and unorthodox endeavours. Focusing on the 1918 play, *The Lost Leader* (in which the central character, may, or may not be, the “resurrected” Charles Stewart Parnell), the article explores Robinson’s subversion of dramatic protocols, highlighting the playwright’s use of techniques, primarily associated with postmodernism (intertextuality, an open form, self-reflexivity, metatheatre). In this way, Robinson self-consciously invites comparisons between the construction and function of the play-text, and the synthesis and propagation of ideological constructs, thereby, providing a much-needed intervention in an era of political upheavals.

**Key Words.** Realism, Postmodernism, Intertextuality, Ideology, Parnell.

**Resumen.** A pesar de jugar un papel importante en el desarrollo del teatro irlandés, especialmente a través de su asociación con el Abbey Theatre (como escritor, director, gestor y miembro del Consejo Directivo), Lennox Robinson (1886-1958) ha sido olvidado tanto en el dominio público como en el mundo académico irlandés. Tal y como el título “Recalled to Life” implica, este artículo trata de poner en valor las contribuciones que este dramaturgo innovador y fascinante aportó a la escena irlandesa. Aunque Robinson se menciona esporádicamente en trabajos académicos, se le recuerda principalmente por las obras realistas del inicio de su carrera, perpetuando así una reputación que ignora sus posteriores iniciativas

experimentales y heterodoxas. Centrándose en su obra de 1918, *The Lost Leader* (en la que el protagonista puede que sea, o no, el “resucitado” Charles Stewart Parnell), el artículo explora la subversión de los protocolos dramáticos, dando importancia al uso de técnicas principalmente asociadas al posmodernismo (como la intertextualidad, el estilo libre, la autorreflexión o el metateatro). De este modo, Robinson invita conscientemente a la comparación entre la construcción y la función del texto, así como de la síntesis y la propagación de constructos ideológicos, facilitando así una muy necesaria intervención en una época de agitación política.

**Palabras clave.** Realismo, posmodernismo, intertextualidad, ideología, Parnell.

[W]hat *Lucius* says is spoken from my heart, our battles *are* only symbols, and parliaments and republics are shadows of shadows (Robinson, “Preface”, *The Lost Leader* (3)).<sup>1</sup>

We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,  
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,  
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,  
Made him our pattern to live and to die! (Browning, “The Lost Leader” ll. 9-12).

The Irish dramatist, Esmé Stuart Lennox Robinson (1886-1958), “[a]uthor of twenty-two plays, director of up to five times that number” (Murray, *Twentieth-Century* 116), manager of the Abbey Theatre at the age of twenty-three, lifelong member of the Board of Directors from 1922, erstwhile secretary and “trainee” of George Bernard Shaw, one-time mentor of Sean O’Casey, and close associate of W. B. Yeats, was deservedly considered to be “a major figure in the Irish theatre” (Murray, *Twentieth-Century* 116). He was once remembered as a producer of “remarkable work in the twenties and thirties” (Vormann 10), as “Ireland’s most complete ‘Man of the Theatre’” (O’Neill 25), and as a writer whose labours had earned himself the accolade of “probably the finest stage craftsman of the Irish drama” (Malone 109). These finely crafted dramas, plays such as *Harvest* (1910), *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916), *The Lost Leader* (1918), and *Drama at Inish* (1933), were held in the highest esteem. *The Lost Leader*, the focus of this article, is a work George Moore warranted a “masterpiece, ... among modern plays” (O’Neill 85), of which the famously begrudging Yeats, described as “exceedingly remarkable” (O’Neill 85), and a play that Michael MacLiammoir labelled, “timeless”, “changeless”, and as a work which “will live” (215).

It is strange that for a man, once so lauded and acclaimed, neither his plays nor his life seem to “live” within many contemporary texts. Apart from Robinson’s own autobiography, *Curtain Up* (1941), and Michael J. O’Neill’s biography, *Lennox Robinson* (1964), few have explored his life, and save for Hartmut Vormann’s *The Art of Lennox Robinson* (2001), fewer still, have dedicated themselves to an in-depth analysis of Robinson’s works. If one considers the pivotal role Robinson played: intermittently writing for, guiding, and developing “one of the most influential centres of twentieth-century drama” (Orel 23), the Abbey Theatre, through an era which included the Easter Rising (1916), the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), and the Irish Civil War (1922-23), such an omission appears quite remarkable.

This article serves not only as a reminder of the achievements of Robinson, it evidences the originality of his later works. Centring on an analysis of the 1918 play, *The Lost Leader*, the article demonstrates that, while Robinson’s early plays fall into the bracket of

“realism”, this later play contains remarkably overlooked techniques which bear the hallmarks of what would later be termed, postmodernism. While the employment of techniques such as metatheatricity, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity are not exclusive to postmodernism, what makes Robinson’s rejection of “realism” noteworthy and postmodernist, is that these techniques reflect his desire to question ideological constructs, and incite “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 356). The article argues, therefore, that *The Lost Leader*’s subversions of dramatic protocol, are a political intervention on Robinson’s part; they communicate Robinson’s profound dissatisfaction with, and mistrust of, the socio-political metanarrative of early twentieth-century Ireland. *The Lost Leader* is a curious play. As shall be explored in more detail, the first four and half pages of the play-text consist of an extremely detailed introduction, which not only sets the scene for ensuing events, but also provides in-depth character histories. When the action finally commences, it is set in the smoking room of a hotel in Poulmore, a small Irish village, “tucked into a fold of those low mountains which stand between Ballydare and the Atlantic Ocean” (11). Staying at the hotel is Augustus Smith, a young journalist who “calls himself an Irishman, though Liverpool, Manchester, Chicago and London have seen more of him, and have contributed more to the development of his bone and brain” (14). It soon transpires that Smith works for *Piccadilly*, a London newspaper, and is in the area to report on two meetings, due to take place the next day: one “in the village – Sinn Fein [*sic*], another twenty miles away at Bally-Ballymackessy, U.I.L. [United Irish League]” (21). Already, the political theme of the play is beginning to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Also staying at the hotel is an Englishman, James Powell-Harper. He is “a sort of doctor, one of those unpleasant modern fellows who probe into your mind instead of into your intestines. ... He will ... ask you searching questions about your early life, try and make you tell things no other fellow does tell, and then he’ll hypnotise you” (22), as he is affectionately described, by his friend and fellow guest, Frank Ormsby. Frank is a keen angler, and has been frequenting the village since childhood, to fish in the surrounding waters. He first visited 24 years ago, with his father, in the days when the hotel was “just a farmer’s house, the family being William Lenihan, his daughter Mary ... and his brother Lucius” (27). Over two decades later, the establishment is run by Mary (who, it emerges, is the object of Frank’s romantic desires), while her uncle, Lucius, a once tall, but now, stooped old man, with sleepy eyes, a tired voice, and slow movement (15), is the hotel’s factotum. Frank reveals that when he and his father had first visited the farm in 1893, Lucius “had only just come home, from America” (27).

The psychoanalyst, Powell-Harper, is fascinated by Lucius, and he enquires: “What is his story?” (26). (Here lies the driving force of the play: what is Lucius’s story? And more specifically, should his story be believed?). Soon after, Smith asks Powell-Harper to demonstrate his power of hypnosis. Though Smith, himself, is the target of the hypnosis, Lucius is also in the room, and is mesmerised by Powell-Harper’s verbal suggestions. While still in a trance, Lucius is questioned by Powell-Harper and “vehemently” states: “My name, sir, is Charles Stewart Parnell” (35). While Frank is incredulous, both Powell-Harper and Smith are intrigued. A seminal figure in Irish history, Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), was the charismatic champion of Home Rule, whose political career and personal health were ruined by the scandal which unfolded, after he was cited as a co-respondent in the divorce proceedings of Captain William O’Shea and Katharine O’Shea in 1886. For many, the dream of Home Rule died in 1891, the year of Parnell’s death. Yet, crucial to the play (and to this analysis), is the persistence of another popular belief, which advocated that Parnell, had in fact, survived, and would one day return to reform Irish politics.

Returning to the plot, the hotel guests try to determine the year of Parnell’s funeral to establish the plausibility of Lucius’s claim. Powell-Harper is puzzled when he detects that

Mary, when asked, deliberately lies, stating that Parnell died in 1893. The intrigue is further enhanced when it is alleged “that no one ever saw Parnell in his coffin” (36). This intrigue continues throughout the play, as Robinson feeds his characters and audience morsels of information, which further obfuscate Lucius’s true identity. Smith, the newspaper hack, is automatically an advocate of the “Lucius is Parnell” theory: “It’s the biggest story in the world!” (39). But the most ardent adherent is introduced in Act II, the blind balladeer, Tomas Houlihan, “who has always believed Parnell to be alive” (74), and has written songs espousing the notion.

Yet, perhaps the most beguiling factor is the physical and mental transformation of Lucius. On awakening, he “turns, he is holding himself up, he is taller, his eye is flashing, he looks rather formidable. He makes a step forward towards the group at the fire, and they instinctively shrink back a little” (38). In Act II, he provides impassioned oratory, proclaiming he can lead Ireland to “peace and happiness” (56), and declaring: “I’m here because my country will be lost without me” (57). The play ends with a number of representatives of competing political parties meeting with Lucius, at the “*Standing Stones on Knockpartrick*” (79). Here, Lucius has promised to reveal a secret that will unify Ireland, and end its woes (a secret which, as we shall see, is of a spiritual, rather than political, nature). But hope turns to tragedy when Lucius is accidentally killed. Though the intended target is the bellicose “gombeen man”, Long John Flavin (101), Lucius is fatally struck by blind Houlihan’s hurling stick. Ultimately, Lucius’s true identity is unresolved.

The plot might seem fantastical, but to iterate, a myth of Parnell returning was actually popular at the time. Indeed, it is cited in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, when Mr. Power remarks that, “Some say he is not in his grave at all. That the coffin was filled with stones. That one day he will come again” (111). As D. D. Sheehan explains, in *Ireland Since Parnell* (1921):

[T]here were countless bodies of the Irish peasantry who still believed that Parnell had not died, that the sad pageant of his funeral and burial was a prearranged show to deceive his enemies, and that the time would soon come when the mighty leader would emerge from his seclusion to captain the hosts of Irish nationality in the final battle for independence. This idea lately found expression in a powerful play by Mr Lennox Robinson, entitled *The Lost Leader* (44).

Robinson undoubtedly believed in the power of theatre; that it could somehow give birth to, or tap into and invigorate strong convictions. In the 1933 play, *Drama at Inish* – in which a quiet community is brought to the brink of moral collapse when events performed upon the stage bleed into the “real” lives of the residents—Robinson includes the following exchange:

ANNIE. You take those plays too seriously; sure what are they, only a way of passing the evening?

JOHN. Maybe I do, but they’re powerful just the same. (66)

It was after viewing *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, that the fledgling playwright realized that a night in the theatre was no brief affair, soon to be forgotten once the curtains were drawn. Instead, it was an engagement which ensnared the heart and inspire the pledging and planning of futures. As Nicholas Grene observes: “Lennox Robinson was convinced that *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, along with Gregory’s popular *The Rising of the Moon*, ‘made more rebels in Ireland than a thousand political speeches or a hundred reasoned books’” (69-70). Theatre had the capacity to change its audiences; it had, to paraphrase Lucius Lenihan, the power to “catch and move men [and] appeal to their desires” (95). It was this belief which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had caused a divergence in the dramatic

representations of Irish culture and implicitly, “Irishness” itself – a symptom of “what D. P. Moran termed the ‘Battle of Two Civilizations’” (Cairnes and Richards 29) – as two opposing factions fought for the consent of a dutiful nation. While the “Anglo-Irish Ascendancy” drama of Yeats, Gregory, and J.M. Synge celebrated (or indeed, fetishized) an impassioned peasantry, unpolluted by the “filthy modern tide” (Yeats 28) of bourgeois ideals, the “Irish-Irish” Catholic writers, such as D. P. Moran, Douglas Hyde, and Arthur Griffith – all associated with the Gaelic League – espoused an Irish peasantry of purity, godliness, and strong family values.

As Robinson discovered when directing Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* on a tour of America in 1911, these dichotomous views did not coalesce. In Philadelphia the play endured a similar reception to the one it had received four years earlier on the boards of the Abbey. An audience, anticipating a work in the vein of Hyde and company (works such as *Casadh an tSúgáin*, which had helped heighten a nostalgia for a land that never was), took exception to the play. Their displeasure was such, that the “courageous young director met with violent abuse” (Everson 5). As Robinson explains, recalling the incident in his autobiography *Curtain Up*, the propagation of myths had created false memories:

[L]overs of Ireland whose forefathers had left Ireland, poor and unlettered, in the terrible famine years and who by their intelligence and industry had made for themselves in their new country a position and a name. As the years passed they looked back at the land of their birth through rosier and rosier glasses; every young woman was a beautiful dark-haired colleen, no faded middle-age for her, in a single night she became a white-haired Mother Machree. (41)

Robinson’s nationalist leanings were towards the ethos of Yeats, Gregory and Synge, as his involvement in the Abbey Theatre suggests. However, their alternative, but no less distorting, form of romanticism would no doubt have led him, for example, to concur with the description of Synge as one who “would prefer his peasants ‘starving but wonderfully attractive’” (Murphy 129). For, although Robinson applies unorthodox theatrical techniques in *The Lost Leader*, he was not always so experimental. The young playwright wanted to harness the power of theatre to demonstrate how things *really* were; to hold up a mirror, which could convey the flaws and blemishes of a nation in a stark and honest light. Naturally, he turned to realism. He described his first play *The Clancy Name* (1908) as “a play as harsh as the stones of West Cork, as realistic as the midden in front of the Irish farm house” (O’Neill 43), and characterized himself and fellow playwrights T. C. Murray and R. J. Ray as, “very young and we shrunk from nothing. We knew our Ibsen and the plays of the Lancashire school. We showed our people as robbers, and murderers, guilty of arson, steeped in trickery and jobbery” (O’Neill 61). In this way, Robinson and others brought the faults of society out into the open. They diagnosed a nation’s ills and prescribed a cure: a more humane regimen. However, in this endeavour to promote progressive change, Robinson earned himself the title of “Cork Realist”, a label that stubbornly adhered, eclipsing the experimental theatre of his later years. Consequently, despite writing an essay entitled, “Exploration in Theatre” (which includes the maxim: “We need less recipe in the theatre and more of the spirit of discovery, of experiment, of adventure” [Vormann 47]), Robinson is still remembered – if at all – for his “enthusiasm for the realistic plays” (Everson 8). Yet, it was primarily through Robinson’s endeavours, that The Dublin Drama League was established in 1918. This movement offered an expansive repertoire of drama, staged outside of the Abbey, “their first production, [being] Srgjan Tucić’s *The Liberators*, on 9 February 1919” (Morash 180). His fellow playwright, Denis Johnston recalls how Robinson’s efforts had introduced “to Dublin all the avant-garde plays of the time ... he, and the older generation that he represented, taught us and showed us

Strindberg, Pirandello, Benavente, Schnitzler, people whose plays we would never have seen—and maybe not even have read, if it hadn't been for the Drama League” (Vormann 10). Furthermore, as a member of the Board of Directors at the Abbey, Robinson indefatigably brought “his own experimental outlook to bear on the theatre's policy inasmuch as he did not tire of pointing out that the Abbey had ceased to offer young playwrights opportunity to experiment” (Vormann 10).

Therefore, it is safe to infer, that a champion of experimental theatre in 1918 might himself have been moving away from the orthodox realist methods of his early career. This seems even more plausible when one considers that by the time Robinson wrote *The Lost Leader* in that very year, it had become patently obvious that the messages conveyed through the “harsh truths” of pure realism were not making their desired impact. Sinn Féin, the political party Arthur Griffith had founded in 1905, was to enjoy an “overwhelming victory ... in the General Election of 1918” (Pilkington 235). And if, as Robinson claims, “much of what *Lucius* says is spoken from my heart” (8), then one can plausibly assume that *Lucius*'s take on contemporaneous political developments – whereby Ireland was witnessing: “merely the exchange of government by English shop-keepers for government by Irish gombeen-men” (97) – might have reflected Robinson's own sentiments.

Robinson had to adapt his methods, not only to vindicate his belief in “theatre's socially transformative powers” (Richards 4), but also to explore a new-found dissatisfaction; a dissatisfaction which, within *The Lost Leader*, manifests itself as a pervasive disillusionment with contemporaneous socio-political modes of thought, *per se*. Indeed, this latter theme is embodied in *Lucius*'s claim that “when we speak of parliaments and republics we speak of shadows of shadows” (99), and it is a theme which permeates the play. Therefore, in *The Lost Leader*, Robinson subverts the realist approach to reflect on how these “modes of thought” are produced. Or as Michael J. O'Neill discerns in his biography of Robinson, *The Lost Leader* demystifies “an air of mystery, the mystery that lies behind reality” (61).<sup>3</sup>

In *The Art of Lennox Robinson*, Hartmut Vormann takes issue with the hypothesis that Robinson uses the play to question a concept of “reality”. Vormann asserts that, “Robinson tended to respond unfavourably to themes, such as the inherently anti-illusionistic ‘question of reality’, which threatened to undermine his concept of the art of the theatre” (112). However, not all would concur. As Brian Singleton notes, “*Church Street* (1934) ... is written in a self-conscious metatheatrical form which owes much to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*” (263). It is true that Robinson possessed a “concept of the art of the theatre” which was nigh on the obsessive, especially in regards to construction. As Vormann rightly elicits: “it seems that construction was uppermost in his mind whenever he gauged the merits of a play” (60). This is a claim borne out by Robinson praising Lady Gregory for “her genius for construction. She realised, as every dramatist should, that construction is the bones of the play” (Robinson, “Lady Gregory” 61).

However, a love of construction and a questioning of “reality” are not mutually incompatible. If one is truly to question “reality”, then the simulation or framework cannot be built from straw. Within *The Lost Leader*, Robinson's superficially realist approach recognises “the primacy of plot and structure, and integration of characters, theme and language in a unified whole” (Murray, “Lennox Robinson” 130). Yet, subtle techniques are simultaneously applied, which question the veracity and integrity of this “whole”. By doing so, Robinson demonstrates that the “unified whole” of “reality”, is also an artifice, constructed via: language; the identities forged through language; a persuasive media; the oratory of politicians; literature; theatre; the many strands which entwine to form a tapestry of cultural beliefs—which in turn, form the backdrop to “reality”.

Through reminding the audience of the artifice, of not just *The Lost Leader* itself, but

of any text, Robinson engenders a reflection upon, and a rejection of, what Jean-François Lyotard terms the “‘metanarrative’ (the grand ideologies that control the individual)” (Woods 21), in favour of a more individualistic, spiritual approach to life. Robinson achieves this goal, through employing intertextuality, an open form, and “self-reference, self-reflexion, reflexivity, [and] self-consciousness” (Rosenmeyer 98). In short, Robinson employs methods associated with postmodernism. The cultural historian might argue that a play written in 1918, located firmly within the canonical era of modernism, cannot be a postmodernist work. Yet, as Tim Woods discerns, when summarising the postmodern theories of Jean-François Lyotard:

[I]t is clear that Lyotard’s concept of the postmodern is *aesthetic* rather than *historical*. His emphasis falls on the postmodern as a particular form rather than as a particular epoch, regarding postmodernism less as a period of time ... than as a set of strategies undertaken by artists to infuse a sense of the sublime. For Lyotard, postmodernity is an attitude, an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (23).<sup>4</sup>

What categorises the artistic work as *postmodern* is its peculiar relationship to the contemporaneous cultural and socio-political framework. It employs defamiliarizing techniques, specifically, to expose the mechanics of ideological modes of thought.

Bearing this in mind, there are a number of angles from which *The Lost Leader* can be analysed, in relation to postmodernism. In terms of the Lucius/Parnell conundrum, one might elaborate upon Freud’s concept of “dualism”, subjectivity, and the formation of identity (and the influence these innovations had on the emergence of postmodernist theory); indeed, Freud is referenced in the play (24). Yet, as with many postmodern works, most evident within *The Lost Leader*, are the numerous ways in which the play aims to “deflate master narratives and totalizing theories” (Reinelt and Roach 1). It is apparent that Robinson is well aware, that rather “than passively reflecting an external reality, literature is an agent in constructing a culture’s sense of reality” (Quinlan 67). As a consequence, *The Lost Leader* self-reflexively undermines its own totality, in order to reflect upon the questionable and arbitrary “truths” which are synthesised to forge a concept of “reality”. One of the ways Robinson achieves this is through intertextuality – subtly negating any “claims to authenticity, [or] originality” (Reinelt and Roach 1). For instance, in Act I, the journalist Augustus Smith, asks Mary Lenihan what book she is reading; Mary replies, “I’m reading ‘Measure for Measure’” (18). Those acquainted with the work, will be aware, in *Measure for Measure*: a character assumes the identity of another, a dead man’s head is mistaken for the head of a hero, and moreover, the play contains a character called Lucio. Either, Robinson has randomly mentioned this particular Shakespeare play, or there is an ulterior motive for specifically referencing it. This latter hypothesis gains credence when one considers the ending of Act I, and the discussion between Powell-Harper and Smith, where they each propose a title for this “Parnell Lives!” scoop:

POWELL-HARPER. What are you going to call it, Smith?

‘Recalled to Life’?

SMITH. ‘Recalled to Life’? ... H’m, that’s not bad. But I think I know a better title.

POWELL-HARPER. What is it?

SMITH. ‘The Lost Leader’ (39-40).

Again, both titles reference other writers’ works. “Recalled to Life” is the name of the first book of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel that also centres on cases of mistaken identity – with Sydney Carton voluntarily being executed in the place of Charles Darnay –

and features a main character called, Lucie (“Lucius”, “Lucio”, and “Lucie” are all derived from the Latin *lucis* meaning *light*).

Meanwhile, “The Lost Leader”, is a poem which mourns the passing of (and hints at a possible reunion with), a great luminary, written by Robert Browning—a poet who is then referenced in the following exchange from Act III, when Powell-Harper advises Frank that he should marry Mary:

FRANK. ... There always seems a good reason for putting it off till next time, and meanwhile we’re both getting old.

POWELL-HARPER. The Statue and the Bust!

FRANK. What? What statue?

POWELL-HARPER. Nothing. I was thinking of Browning. (82-83)

Thus, members of the audience have been presented with a situation in which a play is named after a poem, written by a poet, who is then referenced by a character, who can only do so by virtue of the fact that he exists within a play, named after a poem, written by a poet... *ad infinitum*.

It is a complex weave which Robinson openly unravels, picking away at the very fabric of his own work via this pointed intertextuality. Robinson deftly demonstrates to one and all that the play they are viewing is pure artifice. It is an admission that the playwright himself is surrounded by shaping influences; past voices which not only shape his work, but which shape his very existence, by contributing to a larger discourse. By teasing open this Pandora’s Box, Robinson is, of course, self-reflexively working towards the disempowerment of his own work, yet this would appear to be the very crux of his design, as he proceeds to employ techniques which further undermine the validity of the text.

For example, it is interesting the number of times the word “story” is utilised throughout the play: “What is his story” (26); “It’s patent he has a story” (26); “You see it’s quite a commonplace story, there’s no touch of romance in it” (28); “What a story, my God, what a story!” (38); “It’s the biggest story in the world! (39)”; “Your father told you his story?” (49); and so on. There is a constant reminder that this all encompassing “story” – the narrative of the play itself – has its foundations built upon the shifting sands of other “stories”, constructs which are shown to be incredibly unstable and unreliable. For instance, should the audience believe Lucius’s story that he is Parnell, or should it believe Mary, who confesses to Powell-Harper: “I’m going to break the promise I made my father, but what matter; we can’t keep it secret any longer... My uncle is mad” (48)? Or should the audience question the veracity of what Mary’s father had told her, if indeed, he ever did?

For the reader of the play-text, matters are complicated further still. The aforementioned, hyper-detailed introduction, which seems to “speak” with such authority and reliability on four generations of Lenihan’s – even informing the reader that Mary’s great-grandfather ‘*possessed a few good books*’ (12) – fails to mention anything about either Charles Stewart Parnell entering into the lives of the Lenihan’s, or about an insane brother. True, it mentions that John, Mary’s father, had a brother who emigrated to America. Yet, if one is to write in such an informative, and ostensibly candid way, then verifying the identity of this brother (*vis-à-vis* Lucius), surely takes precedence over minutiae, such as, “*on the table in the middle of the room are guide-books, pens, an ink-bottle (always full of ink) and sheets of clean blotting paper*” (13). This withholding of key information is an example of the manipulation of literature, and Robinson takes great steps to forewarn the audience of this manipulation. The plot of the play is self-reflexively likened to: “A regular three-penny novelette” (31), and Powell-Harper ponders: “I wonder how many thousands of years it will take to destroy the deep-rooted English conviction that all Irish hotels are vile – an idea which

was started by the third-rate Victorian novelist to introduce an element of humour into their stodgy stories” (19). Moreover, in the introductory text of Act II, we are informed that, “*Kate is not the slatternly Irish hotel servant of fiction*” (43). Literature is derivative and unreliable. Yet, literature is a major factor in forging cultural beliefs. Literature, according to Robinson, is thus not to be trusted, and implicitly, this rule applies to *The Lost Leader*, itself.

Other forms of text are treated with the same caution. The press is denounced as an effective brainwashing device:

- PETER. ... There’s a great power in the press these days, they say you rule us all.
- SMITH. Well I hope you’re not going to hold me personally responsible for the state of Europe at the present moment.
- PETER. Oh, no, not at all. But, without any joke, isn’t it queer the way people will believe anything they see in cold print? There’s a little weekly paper here, run by the biggest liar in the country, we all know he’s a liar, we wouldn’t trust him from here to the wall, but, bedad, when we open the *Ballymackessy Watchword* on a Saturday morning we believe every syllable we read in it. (60)

Once language becomes a written text, it gains authority. Having entered into the textual, public domain, what was once considered mere hearsay or gossip, receives an official stamp of approval. For many, it becomes indisputable fact (a pertinent point in today’s era of “fake news”). This notion becomes even more intriguing when one considers that a major strand of the play’s plot centres upon Smith’s sensationalist reportage of the very same story the play itself broadcasts, creating a tension between the concepts of fact and fiction.

Even unwritten language constructions are to be looked upon with suspicion, with Robinson offering a caveat towards the reception of the lyric. The power of the song or poem is a common trope throughout much of Irish literature (pertinently, James Joyce explores the power of poetry, through the recital of a poem about Parnell in “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” from *Dubliners* [144-165]). The lyric has its naissance in the oral tradition, an age when song was the medium through which lives were chronicled and cultural beliefs disseminated, endowing the poet with almost mystical powers. This pseudo-sorcery is alluded to in Douglas Hyde’s *Casadh an tSúgáin* (1901), in which the travelling bard, Hanrahan, is described as “a great poet, and he has a curse that would split the trees and that would burst the stones” (Hyde 7). The “songmaker” can destroy reputations, create and perpetuate foundational myths. The “songmaker” can hijack history, a theme Lady Gregory’s *Dervorgilla* so tragically explores (Gregory 120),<sup>5</sup> and one which Robinson evokes through Houlihan threatening Long John Flavin: “I’ll put a curse on you, I’ll put you in a song” (100). Of course, this power will be multiplied should a song or poem be “authorised” and made available to a wider, national audience through publication. Houlihan is well aware of this. His response to Smith’s suggestion of writing down the troubadour’s Parnell inspired song, is: “[*Eagerly*] Will you have it printed?” (88).

It could also be argued, that it is a poetic device through which Lucius is “transformed” into Parnell. The words employed by Powell-Harper are extremely lyrical. In fact, they could almost be a “mash-up” of W. B. Yeats’s “Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1890) and “When You Are Old” (1893): “I would begin by suggesting to you sleep, a deep, dreamless sleep, a sleep like black velvet, a sleep as deep and as calm as Poulmore Lake when on a still autumn evening the mountain throws across it a deep purple shadow” (31). Once more, the manipulative power of the word is evinced. However, unlike Lucius, the audience is given a choice, inasmuch as there is an openness, or at least an ambiguity, as to what the effects of

this manipulation are. Have the words awoken Lucius's true self within, or have they simply programmed him into believing he is Parnell? As Michael J. O'Neill writes: "The man lying dead before them has a strong likeness to Parnell, though they are not sure. Perhaps he is the 'Lost Leader'; perhaps he is not. The play thus ends on a questioning note" (40).

Indeed, the whole play is a symphony of questioning notes; an opus, which the audience themselves, must conduct. The play exhibits a resistance to "closure and resolution" (Orr 4), which encourages the audience to manipulate the very text, which seeks to manipulate them. For instance, by providing the detailed introductory history, which leads up to the staged events, and through initiating unresolved plotlines (such as Frank's intention to propose to Mary), Robinson initiates intrigues, which "live" outside of the staged events. Robinson, as Jean Reynolds writes of George Bernard Shaw, "steps aside, leaving the audience to discover for itself new possibilities for the characters" (131). Thus, while being consistently warned of the duplicity of narrative structures, the audience is simultaneously being offered the freedom to create their own narrative. It is a call for – paradoxically – an objective subjectivity, which is perhaps best summed up by the most self-conscious line of the play:

SMITH. But consider the situation; there's everything in it, comedy, tragedy, melodrama – everything. If you were writing this as a play, would you make it a tragedy or a roaring farce? (59)

Ultimately, as the tragi-comedic slaying of Lucius by the blind, hero-worshipping Houlihan attests (is it "a tragedy or a roaring farce?"), Smith's question can only be answered by individual subjectivity.

Through testing the integrity, and exposing the artificiality of the play, and demonstrating the loaded nature of texts (texts which meld to make up the totalising narrative of *The Lost Leader* itself), Robinson creates a postmodernist work. He invites a reflection on the pervasive ideologies: the "metanarratives", the modes of thought, the universal "truths", which too, are constructed from the same unreliable – yet controlling and imprisoning – building blocks. "[S]tructures like patriarchy, imperialism" (Woods 13), nationalism, capitalism, petit bourgeois materialism, familism, patriotism. Systems that, in *The Lost Leader*, give rise to men like James Clancy, a Secretary of the United Irish League, whose feeble utterances include, "Oh, Peter, what'll I do, will you give me any advice?" (65), or, "I don't know what to do. I'm sick, I'll go home to bed" (67). Systems that breed men like the "stupid" Major White (67), a Unionist, whose prevarications and ineptitudes have brought himself and his family to the brink of extinction. Or self-serving opportunists like Long John Flavin, a till fumbling "bribe-taker, gombeen man, seller of justice, liar, thief" (101), of whom Peter Cooney says: "there's nothing he hasn't a finger in. The County Council, the District Council, Committees for this and that, elections – he's in them all" (88). Systems that found parliaments, ostensibly to represent the voice of the people, but in reality, are nothing more than platforms for bickering, egotism, and empty rhetoric, in which one man says to another man: "We all know what you're going to say" (70). Systems that encourage a lust for power over one's neighbour, and by doing so carve up communities into arbitrary and pointless divisions: "into an O'Brienite and a Southern Unionist, and a Labour man, and a Protestant Home Ruler, and a genuine die-hard Ulsterman, and a Devolutionist, and – oh, representatives of the other twenty or thirty parties" (72).

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" posits that these modes of thought are simply "shadows". Robinson and Lucius take it one step further: these modes of thoughts are "shadows of shadows" (99). They are empty, manufactured illusions. Robinson promotes the same future offered by Lucius:

LUCIUS. Not independence, not even Home Rule, not land, not money.  
 LONG JOHN. What then? You've got nothing left to offer us.  
 LUCIUS. I offer you your souls. (94)

Both Lucius and Robinson espouse a form of spirituality. A spirituality, which, as Hartmut Vormann surmises, may be “intellectual rather than religious” (168), or perhaps, as George Moore comments, a strain of spirituality, “that means hardly anything” (O’Neill 85). The form this spirituality takes, is a matter for the individual to discern. Lucius may claim to have an answer that: “solves everything and yet it’s so simple a child could understand it. I could write it on half a sheet of paper” (97). Yet, the nature of this universal solution is never revealed. The reason being, it does not exist. There is no cure-all solution. There are only human beings, and their own individual narratives.

In conclusion, Hartmut Vormann describes *The Lost Leader* as a play, which “radiates pessimism about the political future of the Irish people” (166). If one considers the political vista of Ireland in 1918, and how it might have appeared to a playwright who promoted ideals of social equality and egalitarianism, there is some credence in Vormann’s supposition. Yet, *The Lost Leader* betrays signs of a more holistic pessimism; a pessimism, which encompasses more than just distaste for those who might occupy the seats of national government. It is a profound disillusionment, which reflects upon how the world is perceived, and upon the values, which those perceptions engender. It is a disillusionment that cannot be represented through a monochromic, realist approach. No longer is Robinson employing the power of theatre to *realistically* replicate the ills of society. Instead, he is subtly subverting the theatrical form, experimentally chiselling away at the foundational structure of the play. The playwright deliberately demonstrates how *The Lost Leader*’s power is synthesised, in order to self-reflexively compromise its potency, stability, integrity, veracity and validity. Employing pioneering *postmodern* methods, Robinson intimates how the metanarratives shaping humanity’s worldviews might also function; ultimately inferring that, in truth, they are not that dissimilar to a dramatic text, they just captivate a larger audience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> In 1918, Sinn Féin was on the rise; the United Irish League was in decline. Both parties advocated Home Rule and land distribution. The key differences between the parties were that Sinn Féin was identified with more radical agrarian policies, while in terms of demographics, the United Irish League members were older and more prosperous.

<sup>3</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory’s play is based on events which occurred in Ireland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. O’Ruark, Prince of Breffni, had returned from a pilgrimage, and discovered that his wife, Dervorgilla had absconded with Dermot McMurrrough, the King of Leinster. The affair would, allegedly, lead to Ireland’s invasion by the Normans. The play’s action takes place, some decades later. Dervorgilla has since become a nun, and now resides incognito in an abbey. She privately recalls how she had truly loved Dermot. However, her reputation is destroyed when her youthful secret is broadcast by the character of the Songmaker; his song decrying:

The rat in the larder, the fire in the thatch,  
 The guest to be fattening, the children famished;  
 If ‘twas Diarmuid’s call that brought in the Gall,  
 Let the weight of it fall upon Dervorgilla!

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