

Questioning the Sense of Place: Images of ‘Ireland’ and ‘America’ in Declan Hughes’ *Digging for Fire*

Yoko Araki

“The US is utopia achieved” (Baudrillard 77).

The quotation from Jean Baudrillard’s “Utopia Achieved” in *America* typically shows the idealization of America in the Old World as the Promised Land of “liberty” and “wealth” (Ruland 26). “For the Europeans,” Baudrillard further states, “even today, America represents something akin to exile, a phantasy of emigration” (75).

Declan Hughes, a playwright born in Dublin in 1963, plays with this image of America in his early work *Digging for Fire*. The play was first performed in 1991 by Rough Magic, an independent theater company supported by the Arts Council of Ireland and Dublin City Council.⁽¹⁾ The company won the *Time Out* Best Play Award in 1992.

In *Digging for Fire*, the image of America dramatically shifts from the position of “there” (somewhere apart from Ireland) to that of “here” (somewhere similar to Ireland). This landslide of imagination happens when the Irish characters’ “collective fantasy” of America as the land of hope and success is crushed by the disclosure of harsh reality of Irish-born New Yorkers’ lives: Danny’s desperate life as a writer and Emily’s HIV infection. The elimination of binary opposition of “here” and “there” invites a further question: whether America has been “there” in the first place. Focusing on the characters’ pathetic efforts to keep America as “there,” conversely, their efforts to keep Ireland as “here,” this paper is going to explore the process in which the dichotomy of “here” and “there” melts down.

A reunion of friends from Dublin is the central event in *Digging for Fire*. The reunion theme is a *cheval de bataille* of Hughes which can be seen in his play, *Halloween Night* (1997). A friends’ reunion is important for his generation, according to Hughes, as a “spiritual festival” that has “in some way replaced the family reunion

and religious ceremonies” (qtd. in East par. 5). Such an occasion is also special for Brendan who organizes the party in the play. His passion for the party is so extraordinary that he arranges the party for months and gives up the next six weekends to have holidays for the reunion. The irony of *Digging for Fire* is that the reunion party, which the participants expect to be a ceremony to restore dreams and hopes, or to maintain the “friendship” of the so-called celebrity friends, ends in disaster. In fact, the party cues the collapse of marriages, friendships, dreams, and hopes.

Although Hughes hates his work’s resemblance to other works to be pointed out (East par. 4), the plot and characters of *Digging for Fire* directly remind us of some of the films and novels published in America from the 1980s to the early 1990s. The reunion plot evokes American films such as *St. Elmo’s Fire*, *The Big Chill*, and *Reality Bites*. As for the characters, they are a group of middle-class yuppies (Young Urban Professionals) who seem to come out from the pages of the works by North American Brat-Pack writers of the 1980s, such as Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Michael Shabon. The location of their house, southside Dublin, and their education level, graduates, symbolically suggest who they are: middle-class Dubliners.

Considering the playwright’s postmodern attitude toward culture, it is little wonder that Hughes’ thematic choice is similar to that of his peers in North America. In the introduction to his *Plays: 1*, Hughes stresses the commonality of the experience of his generation wherever they grew up:

The experience of growing up in Dublin in the sixties and seventies was not unlike the experience of growing up in Manchester or Glasgow, or in Seattle for that matter. The cultural influences were the same: British and American TV, films and music. You read Irish literature, but mostly for the past; to discover the present, you looked to America [. . .] You knew you would go to America one day, to work, or for a holiday, or just to get the hell away from home, or maybe you lived in California or New York already in your mind. (iv)

Among the friends who have breathed American culture while they grew up, Danny and Emily now live in New York. In this play, they are now coming home to Dublin.

In spite of the pervasive American influence, readers still find the play’s

Irishness. *Digging for Fire* surely reveals some similarities with contemporary Irish literary works, especially in its use of homecoming theme. Since “[Ireland is] now, as [Ireland has] always been a land of exiles and wanderers,” the homecoming of exiles/immigrants is a familiar theme in Irish stories (O’ Connor 15). Homecoming characters, mostly from the United States, are also central to Irish stories such as *The Quiet Man*, *Conversations in a Homecoming*, and *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. It seems natural to find more homecoming visitors from the United States, considering that it has been the biggest host of the immigrants.

In these Irish plays, homecoming persons are characterized in an analogous way. They are polemically described as either winners or losers. *Digging for Fire* follows this convention. Emily and Danny first come back to Dublin as winners, and are revealed to be losers while the story goes on. This “disclosure” process resembles that of Billy after his Hollywood experience in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Moreover, the two plays even share similar characters who surround the homecoming characters: local people who are willing to believe homecomers’ lies. Emily and Danny’s “success” as “fine artists” in New York turns up the heat on the cheerful atmosphere. Emily held her first show in New York, and it was reported in *The Irish Times*: “Irish Girl Takes Manhattan.” The celebrated artist then announces that Danny’s short story has been published in *The New Yorker* although she did not read it (11-12).

The local people also try to mask the tough reality of their lives. For example, in Scene Two, Act One of *Digging for Fire*, the host couple, who are a doctor and a teacher, struggles to preserve the cheerful mood in an apparent attempt to conceal their boring life and collapsing marriage. Other friends support it with good news about their “fashionable” jobs in areas such as radio broadcasting, advertising, and the legal service.

Importantly, the spatial/conceptual binarism of Ireland and the United States becomes clear in these artificially made happy scenes. As Rory’s remark “Only in America” (13) shows, the United States is described as the Other. Ireland is described as the realistic land of everyday life, namely, “here” while America is fantasized as “there.” Whereas the image of uncontrolled sex of America is associated with *Playboy* magazine and love affairs, Ireland is described as conservative and not exciting, but an uncorrupted place where people “can’t get a divorce or an abortion, or even a decent late-night drink,” but they “don’t have to run that nauseating gauntlet of

porno wank mag” in newsstands (8). In contrast to the romantic image of America where the successful “special” “fine artists” live (28), Ireland is imagined as a place where others pursue their realistic “commercial” or straightforward careers for their living.

New York, in particular, exemplifies a “utopia achieved.” Passionate life that is apart from a routine commercial job can exist in the city. Believing in the positive image of America, Clare tries to escape her safe and stable but impassive marriage and routine work at school in Ireland, and go to New York with Danny (42). She even talks about leaving Brendan, who mistakenly believes that his wife needs stable life and “sense of things being in their place” (28):

CLARE: [. . .] there’d be no problem, I have a job in New York any time I want one, and I got a visa last year, so *that’s* all right —

DANNY: Clare, wait a second... you’re saying you’re going to split up with Brendan, and move to New York and . . . be with me? (42)

What constructs the aforementioned dichotomy is the Dubliners’ longing for the Exile where they can escape the reality of “here.” Yet, Hughes, a postmodernist, challenges the binary opposition of “here” and “there” by unveiling the reality of the lives in New York. The psychological distance between Ireland and New York becomes shorter as their secrets are disclosed one by one. Given that Hughes is describing the confused sense of place, his employment of the setting of an on-going liquor-fueled party seems to be appropriate. Although the real distortion of the sense of place starts when Emily’s fatal disease is discussed in Act Two, in fact, it has already been hinted at in Act One. The theme of Danny’s fake postmodernist short story whose central theme is a mad father’s confused sense of place predicts the conclusion (17).

Contrary to the hopeful assumption examined earlier, in reality, Danny and Emily’s lives in New York are not easy. Danny and Emily crush the hope of their old hometown friends by telling the truth later in the play. Thus, the party participants are forced to realize there is no split between “here” and “there.”

When the sense of “here” and “there” is shaken, human relationships depending on that binary thought system collapse. In fact, Emily is HIV positive (26), and Danny “[hasn’t] written a word for years” (69). All Danny has been doing is

talking, sub editing, “sittin on [his] own in a beat-up apartment in Manhattan reading Pynchon and DeLillo and not writing a word and deluding [himself he is] in the thick of the modern Maelstrom” (74).

Furthermore, Danny’s experience in New York tells readers that, indeed, America and Ireland are not only actual places, but also omnipresent floating images. He realized that New York was just as Ireland was because “[he] brought [his] village with [him]” (74). Therefore, Danny is thinking about staying in Ireland. The author’s postmodern philosophy seems to be represented through Danny; Danny grew up with American culture in Ireland and now he lives on Irish culture in New York.

Through this conversation with Danny, Clare comes to understand that there is no escape in New York where she can find something “new” and exciting. Therefore, she stops thinking about going to New York with him:

DANNY: . . . do you know what you’re gonna do?

CLARE: [. . .] What’s it to you? Or have you still got big plans for me, high hopes, seeing as how you *believe* in me and everything?

DANNY: Always high hopes. (73-74)

Now, Clare is losing her hope both in Ireland and in New York. Clare, who has already left Brendan expecting that she could fly away with Danny from “here,” completely loses her “direction.” This is an example of often criticized outcome of a binary thought system: when one disappears, the other simultaneously does so. Clare has a future neither with Brendan nor Danny. Therefore, she tentatively makes a decision to go and stay with Emily whose status in this world is also unpredictable. Emily, who is dying of HIV, is somewhere in-between this world and the next world as Clare is suspended in the middle of two geographic locations (74). Being deprived of both geographical and psychological directions, all Clare can do now is dance to the music: New Order’s “True Faith.” The delusion of the binary oppositions of here and there, past and future, and hope and disillusion is symbolically indicated by Clare’s perplexing final remark in response to Danny, who says “you’ll be there, and I’ll be here”; “if *here* is *there* and *there* is *here* – ” (75).

When the distinction between “here” and “there” in the story becomes ambiguous, another question arises: whether America has been “there” or not for the

Dubliners who were born in Ireland in the 1960s. Long before Danny and New York stop functioning as a wellspring of hope in the mind of people left in Ireland, New York has ceased to be an exotic Other. After all, Ireland in *Digging for Fire* is not set in the 1930s in which America was recognized as the place of rare imported candies, rare films, and big events. Instead, New York has been always “here” in Dublin for the group who “grew up with the TV on [. . .] with England and America beaming in to [their] brain” (35). Danny found familiar landscape in New York when he arrived there for the first time.

DANNY: And what happens when you don’t have a sense of place? When I arrived in New York for the first time—And as the cab swung past that graveyard and around the corner, and I got my first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, I felt like I was coming home. The landscape was alive in my dreams, the streets were memories from thousand movies, the city was mine. [I]t’s as much Ireland as Dublin is [. . .] (37)

This experience of Danny is confirmed by Jean Baudrillard’s perception of America. In “Astral America,” Baudrillard points out the fictionality of American cities; the real cities look as if they were the ones in films:

“The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should begin with the screen and move outward to the city. It is there that cinema does not assume an exceptional form, but simply invests the streets and the entire town with a mythical atmosphere” (56).

In the play, the party participants are described as “wannabees and weirdoes on the airwaves, brains fried from TV and video and information overload” (37). Hughes’ characterization of the participants shows the nature of *Digging for Fire*: this story much resembles American movies. Thus, *Digging for Fire*’s literary form itself represents the situation of the contemporary Ireland in which people live in the flood of foreign culture(s). There is no reason “here” is not “there.” In the party, the participants drink exotic beer in a fancy omnipresent middle-class house, listen to foreign music, talk about their fashionable jobs, and enjoy Bob Hope jokes (7, 63). All

the music used in the play comes from foreign countries, mainly from America (Pixies, Iggy and the Stooges, REM, Tom Waits) except for New Order, a British post-punk band. For the friends who breathed in the foreign culture(s) while they grew up, foreign countries and their cultures are much closer than Ireland and its native culture. The accessibility to the foreign culture(s) in Ireland makes Danny's doubt about Irish identity plausible: "so acknowledge it, don't pretend there's some unique sense of community that Ireland's some special little enclave—things are breaking down as fast here as anywhere else" (37).

Michael Peter Smith's concept of urban space justifies Danny's idea. Smith argues that localities, which were once strongly tied to particular places, go beyond geo-political boundary of nations and co-exist in contemporary big cities such as Dublin because of the transnational development of information technology and capitalism (Smith 117). Therefore, in spite of its distinguished history as a site of many political struggles, as an urban space with broadcasting systems and an influx of people, Dublin could be like any other big city, in the case of this story, New York.

The issue of immigration that Smith points out is also important in this story. New York (there) resembles Dublin (here) because it is a city invented by many Irish immigrants. Baudrillard writes that American cities are "a form of interiorization of [immigrants'] own culture. At the same time, it corresponds to a violent extraversion and therefore to the zero degree of that same culture" (75). Danny stresses the Irishness of New York as follows:

DANNY: [M]illions of Irish went out and invented it, invented it as much, probably more than any ever invented this poxy post-colonial backwater. [. . .] [T] *here* is as much *here* as *here* is. . . and I don't believe the *here* you're describing exists *here*. To me, *here* is more like . . . *there*. (38)

It is their collective fantasy and hope for the existence of the other place that makes the distinction between Dublin and New York. America and its objective correlative for the group, Danny, had to be kept as Other because they symbolize a possible chance of success for the members. Steve's phrase just after Danny's lie of success becomes apparent shows the degree of the disappointment of people who were enjoying the fugitive fantasy:

STEVE: You come back here, oh how's Mr Advertising, Mr Crass, Mr Sell-Out, why don't you do something *important*, Steve, you owe it to yourself, you don't really want to sell your soul, to degrade yourself, for *money*, do you? And I am thinking, at least Danny is writing, at least that's something [. . .] (70, emphasis added)

Danny, who has been always special among them, was the only hope for the others to have a friend who can be something over there in the promised land, unlike Ireland where others are going to end as ordinary sullen middle-class men and women who sold their soul to commercialism.

The participants' collective support to conceal Danny and Emily's lie ends in failure. However, their perception of such a lie as something "not harmful" (69) shows their desperate need of hope elsewhere. Rory, who is one of the eleven subscribers to *The New Yorker* in Ireland (69), has known the true story. The young Dubliners could have easily found and pointed out Danny's lie even if they did not read the American magazine. In this world of globalism, to keep Danny's success story within New York is almost impossible. Danny must have been in *The Irish Times* like Emily if his success had been real. Therefore, it was their "will" to believe his success that supported the concealment. Emily's excuse of why she did not tell the truth to the group explains the necessity of such a collective fantasy to keep the foundation of their friendship and lives:

EMILY: Oh, you know. Why not? (Pause) All right, 'cause I still sort of hoped he *had* written it, and I wanted him to look well in front of everybody and . . . and fuck it just 'cause Brendan believed some bizarre late-sixties fantasy about us all being friends for ever, it doesn't destroy the whole thing, does it? It doesn't for me anyway. (71-72)

In spite of their efforts, neither the fantasy of Danny's success in America nor the fantasy of "forever friends" will be realized. Danny is a loser, Brendan and Clare have split up, Steve and Breda's relationship has become fragile, and Emily is destined to die. In the end of play, Emily painstakingly get to the core issue: "I'm tired of it all:

things standing for other things, dreams of what you might've been, what you could still be" (72).

This paper has focused on the Dubliners' desperate attempt to keep America as the Other. The characters' frantic struggle conversely shows their longing for an Irish identity that is different from that of America. Accordingly, the story's ending with the delusion of dichotomy, which denies the existence of both the dreamland and the motherland, strengthens the sense of loss which pervades the story. This sense of loss is caused by the anxiety of the generation of Hughes whose cultural identity is blurred by globalization. It is what is waiting for them after being "relieved of the burdens of nationality and of history" (iv). When the dichotomy collapses, however, they have nothing to depend on. The desolate ending has been anticipated in the very beginning of the play by Clare's search of the flipside of Iggy and the Stooges' "Pretty Vacant": "No Fun" (1, 7). Thus, Hughes achieves his postmodernist aim that questions absolute Irishness by destructing the binarism, and leaves everyone in confusion.

When *Digging for Fire* was performed in the Bush Theatre, London, in 1992, an editor of *Arena* commented that "he didn't know there were people like that in Dublin" (East par. 8). This became Hughes' favorite expression to describe the play which shows the characteristics of "the post-Vatican II generation" (Meany par. 16). The problems with which Irish who were born after 1960 are struggling in this play are not very different from those of their contemporaries in other countries. Beyond the geopolitical borders, there are post-baby boomers who are similar to the characters: for example, "New Lost Generation" and "Generation X" in North America, and "Shin Jin Rui" in Japan. *Digging for Fire*, which captures the lives of Hughes' contemporaries, reflects Hughes' loathing for the Irish literary obsession with its past, and his choice "to live in the present tense" (Meany par. 13).

His avoidance of direct references to Irish history and its older literary conventions, however, does not mean that *Digging for Fire* is not Irish at all, or it is just a vogue without any literary value. A myth of America as a promised land is a form of the biblical myth of the Exile. America is an important trope for Hughes because, to him, "America" is "New Found Land" which represents "the opportunity to put the past in its place, to stop answering the question 'Who Are We?' with 'This is who we used to be'—this is how we got here" ("Who the Hell" 9). Moreover, Hughes' frequent

reference to America, which seemingly reducing Irishness of the play at first glance, is not far apart from Irish intellectual traditions when we consider the fact that Americanophilia is the dynamo of Irish political nationalism and the Irish Literary Movement (O'Toole, "Island" 13). Paradoxically, because of Hughes' rejection of Irishness, *Digging for Fire* becomes Irish.

Thus, the dichotomy of "here" (Ireland) and "there" (America) in *Digging for Fire* is more than a simple thematic decoy created to be destroyed to represent the postmodern condition of Dublin in which culture(s) from foreign countries, especially that of America, has (have) become a part of Dublin daily life. The dichotomy is also a device to connect the story to the larger context of the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the myth of exile is widely spread, and to the Irish Americanophilia tradition, in fact. Employment of this literary device seems to be appropriate for Hughes who respects the commonalities of different cultures more than the differences, and writes, "what you had in common with others was more important than what set you apart" (iv). Such Hughes' contemporary Irish plays have a possibility of worldwide success.

Notes

- (1) According to an e-mail which I received from Rough Magic, Hughes co-founded the company as a joint artistic director in 1984, has been a writer-in-residence for several years, and is now an associate artist of the company.

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