Curating, cultural capital and symbolic power: representations of Irish art in London, 1950-2010

Cotter, L.Á.

Publication date
2011

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter One

William Orpen: Between Seeming and Being

*William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death*, held at the Imperial War Museum in London in 2005, was the first major exhibition of William Orpen’s (1878-1931) work in Britain since 1933. Robert Upstone, Curator of Modern British Art at Tate Britain and specialist in 19th-century British painting, was invited as guest-curator. The retrospective was intended to critically re-appraise the artist, a task made more important by the discrepancy between Orpen’s posthumous critical neglect and his fame and high artistic status in his lifetime. Orpen had been a household name and virtually a celebrity as the most sought-after and highest earning portrait painter in Britain, whom Sargent saw as his natural heir.35 He was also knighted for his efforts as a war artist in the First World War, and it is in fact his highly original and prolific war paintings that have secured the remainder of Orpen’s original reputation in the British context. The title *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death* might have befitted a blockbuster exhibition, which hinted at the potentially broad appeal of this reinstatement of Orpen’s reputation in the British context.

As the exhibition title promised, Orpen’s value might be expected to lie in the engaging subject matter of his oeuvre as well as its high artistic quality. His 600 portraits alone act as a visual memoir of many of the important figures of his day, whether political or cultural, in both Britain and Ireland, and many of them are wonderful painterly explorations of the human subject in their own right. His portraits of the Royal Family and other major figures of his day still hang in the National Portrait Gallery, the Tate and other prestigious national and private collections. Alongside this illustrious portrait practice, Orpen revitalized the conversation piece with works like *Homage to Manet* (1900); he created some of the most intriguing and potentially controversial nudes of his period and, thanks to his tendency to paint incessantly, also produced rather fine still life paintings, impressionist-style *plein air* scenes, landscapes and even some accomplished equestrian painting. Moreover, Orpen was very well placed in the British art establishment, being a member of the New English Art Club.

---

35 See Inge (1933) for an account written just after Orpen’s death that puts him in the context of his peers.
and the Royal Academy. All of this begs the reasons behind, and even prompts a reversal of, his fall from favour in British art circles.

Orpen has fared better in his native Ireland, where a Centenary Exhibition marked the 100th anniversary of his death in 1978 with an extensive display of over 200 paintings and a further hundred works on paper, including illustrated letters containing his witty and deft caricatures. Orpen had been a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy (R.H.A.) and was highly respected in Dublin art circles of his time. His contemporary reputation in Ireland stems mainly from his portraiture and his portraits of Irish sitters in particular. He has remained a highly regarded artist among Irish art collectors with, for example, a portrait of Gardenia St. George (the daughter of his lover) fetching one of the highest prices ever paid for an Irish painting in 2001.

Less visible in Irish art circles today is that Orpen was one of the only Irish artists to become involved in the Irish Cultural Revival at the turn of the century, a movement which paved the way for Irish Independence in 1921. In the two decades leading up to Independence, Orpen painted some of the first artistic expressions of a distinctive Irish cultural identity and was an influential teacher of the future protagonists of the first national school of painting. At odds with the 19th-century Punch stereotypes of the simian Irish, he depicted portraits of bright young Irish men and women, and gave them titles such as Young Ireland (Grace Gifford) (1907), The Colleen (Beatrice Elvery) (1908) and The Man from the West (Seán Keating) (1909). The sitters for these portraits were his students at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, where he had first studied himself from the age of 12. Orpen kept up this teaching position for ten years, despite the prestige and pressure of his professional demands in London. This commitment was motivated by Orpen’s vision of Dublin becoming a major centre for

36 William Orpen 1878-1931: A Centenary Exhibition took place at the National Gallery of Ireland between 1 November and 15 December 1978. Its curator was James White, then director of the gallery (1964-80), with the assistance of Orpen’s two daughters and art historian Bruce Arnold, who was in the process of compiling a biography William Orpen: Mirror to an Age (1981).

37 After Francis Bacon’s work, this was the highest price ever paid for a work by an Irish painter. Portrait of Gardenia St. George with Riding Crop sold for £1,983,500 at Sotheby’s London in June 2001. Gardenia was the daughter of Mrs Evelyn St George, an American heiress who scandalised Edwardian society by having an adulterous affair with Orpen. This portrait, one of a series, was painted around the time that Gardenia became aware of the developing relationship between her mother and the artist. The Sotheby’s auction was the picture’s first appearance at auction, having remained in the family of the sitter until 2001 (McBride 2005).

38 For more insight into Orpen’s teaching in Ireland see Turpin (1979). See also Upstone (2009) for an analysis of his highly particular methods of teaching life drawing.
art in Europe; a vision he shared with art dealer and connoisseur Hugh Lane. Being an early appreciator of Manet in particular, he advised Lane on his subsequent collection of Impressionist paintings for the world’s first museum of modern art, which opened in Dublin in 1908 (Bodkin 1956). Orpen hoped that the establishment of such a collection could provide the basis for emerging Irish artists to create a truly modern Irish art.

One of the tasks of curating is to create a balance or an interesting interplay between aesthetic concerns – a choice and hanging of works that compliments the artist’s aesthetic qualities – and the work’s art historical and wider cultural relevance. Even this short biographical note indicates that Orpen’s work might be equally appreciated for both its aesthetic quality and its importance in cultural historical discourses. However, in Orpen’s case, further choices must be made regarding the particular art histories or cultural discourses to be addressed. His work in either London or Dublin is not only relevant to two fields, but in addition, because of the conflict between the fields of power in which they are imbricated, curatorial narratives will inevitably be fraught with tensions created by the political implications of their interconnection. For a curator to address Orpen’s subjectivity, as an Irish Protestant working in Ireland and Britain at the time of transition from hegemonic British rule to Independence, is a rather delicate matter, yet the quality of his work demands such negotiation. In this chapter, I take the Orpen retrospective as a departure point from which to address the complex relationship between representation in its political and artistic senses, so often left unaddressed in identity politics discourses. We will see through Orpen’s work that political and aesthetic forms of representation can neither be conflated nor read as cause and effect, but rather that representation is both the result of and constitutive of socio-political conditions.

Two shifts in the wider conditions for the production of curatorial discourse might be said to have facilitated this opportunity to reassess Orpen. The first was the improved relationship between Britain and Ireland following peace in Northern Ireland. The decision to tour the exhibition from the Imperial War Museum in London to the National Gallery of Ireland was a sign of trust in cultural exchange over an artist who is important in both contexts. The second was the Celtic Tiger economy and the associated infrastructural developments in the Irish art world, in which the refurbishment of the National Gallery of Ireland must be included. Yet this did not necessarily equalize the
relative cultural and symbolic value of British- and Irish-related aspects of Orpen’s oeuvre. We have seen that in Britain his war works draw the highest level of symbolic capital, while his portraits of Irish sitters do so in Ireland. This placed Upstone in the position of negotiating the relative value of these differing sources of cultural and artistic value through the act of curating.

Below I examine the retrospective in London, as well as providing a comparison with the Dublin exhibition. Although a touring exhibition is usually seen as the repeated presentation of an exhibition in another location, I will demonstrate through a brief comparative analysis of the layout and wall tags of the two exhibitions that the Dublin exhibition was significantly adjusted. Both the London and Dublin exhibitions were framed in a manner that was in keeping with the social and political norms of the nation, paving the way for prestige and market success in both locations. I will consider how the curatorial framing necessary to support Orpen’s value in each location affects readings of his work. Before I can meaningfully do so, however, I feel compelled to make a preliminary analysis of a number of Orpen’s works. For this I take a critique of his work by John Rothenstein as a departure point. A number of the works will be referred to again later in the chapter in the specific context of the retrospective, while others are addressed because of the repercussion of their absence in the exhibition.

Reappraising Value
Tate director John Rothenstein’s highly critical chapter on Orpen in Modern English Painters (1952) is often said to have provided a deadly blow to the artist’s posthumous reputation in Britain. I discuss his critique here as a source of potential conflicts in reading Orpen’s work – not least, the question of how to address the relationship between the artist’s national identity and his work – which, as we will see, returns to haunt the 2005 retrospective. Rothenstein contends that Orpen failed to reach the artistic potential visible in his “masterpiece” The Play Scene in “Hamlet” (1899) (fig. 1.), painted as a student at the Slade, and that this failure was partly due to his lack of roots, as an Anglo-Irishman whose “divided loyalties … always set him a little apart from his fellow citizens, whether Irish or English” (1976: 214). Although he sees occasional glimpses of Orpen’s initial brilliance in his later works, such as his group portrait

39 Rothenstein also blames Orpen’s happy childhood, which allegedly raised few questions and challenges (1976: 215).
Homage to Manet (1909), Rothenstein condemns the artist’s portraiture at large as mere “unreflective representations,” and self-portraits like Myself and Venus (1910) and Leading the Life in the West (1910) as a mindless activity to fill time when a sitter failed to show. Rothenstein concludes that Orpen lacked all “intellectual curiosity” and showed nothing but contempt for “the life of the mind,” as if his work were a function of eye and hand without recourse to the brain, and he points to another student work The Mirror (1900) as the gateway to a further career of “aimless academism” (218).

Rothenstein refers to works with visibly Irish content, like On the Irish Shore: Fairy Ring, as “pointless whimsies” and openly criticizes Orpen’s “sentimental attachment” to Ireland (219). He emphasizes that Orpen’s practical artistic resources were offered by England.

Unfair and reductive as it might be, what I find most interesting about Rothenstein’s critique is the insight it provides into the disciplinary premises of art history. Drawing on Ernst Gombrich’s statement, “If art were only an expression of personal vision, there could be no history of art,” Donald Preziosi rightly argues that “the modern discipline of art history is built precisely on the denial of that ‘impossibility’” (1999: 137). Rothenstein’s frustration with Orpen lies partly in his recalcitrance to the expectation of a seamless relationship between subject and object – the expectation of representation as such. I will argue here that Orpen in contrast recognized the ways in which his identity put pressure on representation itself. In his self-portraiture he strove to test representation’s limits, which lead to an undoing of the norms of portraiture. His self-portraits challenge art history’s wider structural repression of the impossibility of representation. I will argue that, even now, following the art history’s discipline’s recognition of the limits of representation, the norms of curating have not shifted to accommodate this intellectual leap.

---

40 Homage to Manet was a group portrait of members of the New English Art Club, including Philip Wilson Steer, Walter Richard Sickert, Dugald Sutherland MacColl and Henry Tonks, sitting beneath Manet's portrait of Eva Gonzalès (1870).

41 Orpen is criticized more often for his lack of intellectual engagement in politics. An often-cited comment from Orpen’s book Stories of Old Ireland and Myself (1924) is seen to demonstrate the artist’s ignorance: “I was brought up on ‘The Irish Question’, but what the Irish Question was I have no idea … From my memory of those times I should think there must have been thousands and thousands of ‘Irish Questions.’” Orpen’s tone here is self-deprecating but he nevertheless states an opinion that bears out in his later self-portraiture – namely that the conflict at hand is not binary but an interweaving of several layers of different issues that cannot be summarised in linear terms.
Orpen was forced to negotiate dominant nationalist discourses in both Ireland and Britain from a minority position, as a Protestant in a transitional Ireland and as an immigrant in Britain. This generated the conditions for a highly self-reflexive artistic practice. The modernity of Orpen’s artistic trajectory has yet to be fully recognized. But I will propose that some of Orpen’s most engaging works manifest his awareness that a pure relationship between representation and identity is impossible. Through Irish Independence the immanent obsolescence of his subject position of origin – which until now could be comfortably contained within the grey areas of colonial attachment to Britain – made this analysis of identity and representation an urgent task. This task should be seen alongside Orpen’s parallel engagement in culturally nationalist works, which do not come to the same conclusions about identity for future generations.

Writing about the Cultural Revival, to which some of Orpen’s work contributes, John Hutchinson observes that members of Orpen’s class, who propelled the movement, often went through a personal identity crisis. This was made bearable only by their vision for the future of the nation as culturally distinct (1987: 253-255). Yet the interrelationship between these aspects of Orpen’s oeuvre is invisible unless the relationship between his *habitus* and the changing field of power in which he worked is taken into account. In particular, lacking the prism of Irish postcoloniality, Orpen’s engagement with his subjectivity in his self-portraiture can not be understood. I want first to revisit Rothenstein’s observations on Orpen’s student works with a view to extending and rereading his analysis in light of Orpen’s subject position. After this I consider how Orpen developed this artistic trajectory in his self-portraiture.

*The Play Scene from “Hamlet”* had made Orpen one of the most talked-of students at the Slade. This work combined quotations from a whole variety of historical paintings yet contained a personal vision that was highly individual. Orpen was awarded the annual Slade prize in recognition. For Rothenstein the painting is “organized and executed with extraordinary skill and informed with a spirit in which irrepressible wit

---

42 Writers associated with the Irish Literary Revival, such as William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), J. M. Synge (1871–1909), and Lady Gregory (1852–1932), had been prompted by the political and social changes of the times to review their situation and to search for an identity in the new Ireland that was coming into being. They found such an identity in Irish myths and legends, the ancient sagas (many made available in English in Standish Hayes O’Grady’s *Silva Gadelica*, published in 1892 and in the work of a new generation of Celtic scholars), and in folklore, which was now beginning to attract serious attention, in Ireland as in other countries. Their writings lifted Dublin from provincial obscurity to become a lively new literary centre with a theatre that attracted European critical acclaim (Hutchinson 1987).
blends harmoniously with mysterious grandeur.” It marks “a distillation of all [of Orpen’s] arduous and well memorized studies” in the art galleries of London, Paris and Dublin and does so without lacking originality:

On the contrary, it is highly original … [Its strength lies in] the exuberant but slightly sinister humour, … the vivid if not steadily focused sense of satire and, not withstanding his innumerable quotations – and long, familiar quotations they often are – from the works of the old masters – of the capacity to see life from a queer angle. (217)

For Rothenstein it marked the culmination of Orpen’s talents, after which followed a decline, visible in another student work, *The Mirror* (1900).

![Fig. 1.1 William Orpen, Play Scene from “Hamlet,” 1899, Private Collection](image)

I underwrite Rothenstein’s evaluation of *The Play Scene from “Hamlet”* but I see the relevance of both extending his analysis and addressing the premises for Orpen’s choice of subject matter and his unusual approach to it. Although the painting resembles a grand master in many respects, Orpen utilizes many of the standard elements of historic painting in a manner that sets up a disjunctive relation to those prior models.
The figures (or elements thereof) quoted from historical works are interspersed with portraits of many artists from Orpen’s social circles, who literally infiltrate the canon and reduce high art to the level of life. Although the play takes place on stage, Orpen’s formation of a continuum from stage to pit suggests a potentially subversive interplay between artifice and reality; between artistic representation as artifice and life as representation. Furthermore, the objects of interest lie in the shadows, which are uncommonly placed in the foreground of the painting. This, though perhaps informed by his interest in Rembrandt, also takes on important metaphorical connotations, namely a gaze towards the fringe position.

I would argue that *The Play Scene from “Hamlet”* is Orpen’s first major expression of what might be called “minor” painting. In contrast to the standard definition of minor art as art which has failed to reach a major position, I use “minor” in a sense that is close to Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of “minor literature” as literature which effected a deterritorialization of the norms of the field from within, through a parodic use of the language of the major canon (1986). Although Rothenstein notices Orpen’s “capacity to see life from a queer angle,” he can only imagine the development of such work in terms of major art, that is, art that asserts its disinterest, overlooking the complexity of how socio-cultural origins inform the process and conceptual paradigms of Orpen’s painting.

There is a subtle humour at play in *The Play Scene from “Hamlet,”* evident for example in the stance of the young man on the left who kisses his demure girlfriend a little too passionately, or in the voluminous curved buttocks of the lady in the middle background. His portrayal is in danger of threatening the etiquette of academic painting, yet stops short of it. Rothenstein acknowledges the immanent satire, not realizing perhaps the potential volatility of giving it more focus, which I would argue holds Orpen back from developing this line of enquiry directly. This satire develops freely within Orpen’s prolific pen and ink caricatures which don many of his letters, addressing the internal politics of the art world as well as personal and political affairs. Within his formal artistic practice, I propose that Orpen continues this line of enquiry in his self-portraits although they are not visually connected. There he draws out the subject position that informs his artistic approach in *The Play Scene from “Hamlet.”*
Despite the disciplinary disparity, I contend that thinking through the relationship between minor literature and identity helps to open up the nature of this interconnectedness in Orpen’s work. In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* Deleuze and Guattari outline the following characteristics for minor literature:

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of which is called great (or established) literature. (1986: 18)

In *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987) postcolonial scholar David Lloyd insisted on a located reading of minor literature, looking to the work of Irish poet James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) as an early example of a writer who deterritorialized the norms of major writing from within. Lloyd summarises how minor literature manifests itself in a specific political context:

The radical potential embedded in the critical stance of a minor writing is to be traced in the fact that, due to the interlocking with political and ethical domains that underlies the apparent autonomy of the aesthetic, a critique of the aesthetic opens out continually onto a critique of the assumptions that support the bourgeois state and legitimate its domestic and imperial hegemony. (23)

Drawing on this link between the apparent autonomy of the aesthetic and normative politics, I propose that Orpen inhabits dominant painting modes in *The Play Scene from “Hamlet”* in a manner that evokes not only a critique of artistic and cultural norms, but by extension, refuses to fulfill the unwritten political demands of the major artist. Lloyd outlines those demands as follows:

A major literature is established by virtue of its claim to representative status, of its claim to realize the autonomy of the individual subject to such a degree that that individual subject becomes universally valid and

---

43 Lloyd examines, among other aspects, the ways in which Mangan troubled poetic translation and the genre of autobiography in his drive against the consolidating drive of major literature towards a seamless identity. He looks at how nationalist recuperations of Mangan cannot contain his refusal to be representative of a seamless identity. Lloyd’s aim is to highlight the limits of readings based on canonical assumptions and contribute to undoing some of the symbolic violence of canon-formation in the process. He does this partly by closely examining the relationship between political and aesthetic forms of representation.
archetypal … the major work should be in some manner directed toward the production of an autonomous ethical identity for the subject (1987: 19).

It is for this reason – the immanent refusal of an autonomous ethical identity – that Deleuze and Guattari find all minor writing inherently collective and political and never individual. Their exemplary minor writer, Kafka, is not minor because of his minority identity, as a German-speaking Czech Jew. What is crucial to the definition is the perpetuation of non-identity in Kafka’s work. He produces artistic narratives that do not culminate in identifications (whether national, racial, sexual or social) that would stabilize identity; thus preventing them from becoming representative in the sense of a major writer (Lloyd 1987: 22). Lloyd suggests that for these reasons a minor literature overlaps in many respects with modernism and in most respects with postmodernism (23).

While *The Play Scene from “Hamlet”* directly illustrates Orpen’s interest in theatricality, I suggest that these interests became incorporated in his long-term engagement with portraiture – and the self-portrait in particular – as an act of staging a representation. In fact, I believe that much of his interest in self-portraiture was an exploration of what fascinated him most within portraiture: namely, the act of painting as representation in all its senses. He seems to have been intensely interested in the artist’s agency as a mediator between the sitter, as both object and subject of the painting, and the viewer, to whom the subject is represented. Orpen was even criticized on occasion for the almost imperceptible way in which his portraits carried readings that were perhaps more of a projection of the artist’s self or his ideas than a true observation of the sitter. Yet, I contend that this so-called fault was one in which the artist recognized the potential further breakdown of that interrelationship, which he developed in his self-portraiture, carried out between portrait commissions.

Orpen’s self-portraits are an early instance of a shift of artistic focus from the represented to the process of representing and to the relationship between the subject of representation and the act of representation as such. This prefigures the predominance

---

44 Robert Upstone recalls in his catalogue essay that, for example, his artist peer Augustus John criticized Orpen’s portrait of him (1900), arguing that it did not “communicate the shy, dreamy and reticent character of the model,” but instead projected Orpen’s personality onto his (2005: 10). Another example is *The Vere-Foster Family* (1907), which Vere-Foster found somehow mocking. He found it difficult to determine exactly how, except to point to similarities in the facial expressions of the family’s pet donkey and the master of the house.
of those critical interests within international cultural discourse from the 1970s onwards. This early instance of what I would call minor painting – or more specifically minor portraiture – can be better understood when we consider two aspects of the relationship between the field and the field of power in Britain and Ireland at this particular historic moment. First, minor literature “belongs intrinsically to the literature of the period in which the democratic nation states emerged, and continually marks its limits and crises” (Lloyd 1987: 25). Second, Orpen’s lifetime Ireland was the first colony to enter its hegemonic phase and gain Independence in 1921.

I want to demonstrate Orpen’s interest in processes of representation by focusing on a series of self-portraits which he painted between 1908 and 1910, in which a conflict of identity is played out. A number of the paintings I will address now were presented in the 2005 retrospective. We will see later in the chapter how they are represented to different critical ends within the London exhibition. Let me start with The Dead Ptarmigan from 1909 (Fig 1.2), a self-portrait in which the artist depicts himself as a gentleman hunter holding up his spoils. Orpen stands sideways, shotgun in one hand and a dead game bird in the other. Against the rustic tones of Orpen’s garb and the grey-blue sky behind him, the blood red of his lower lip is accented by the addition of a small scarlet ribbon on the peak of his hunting cap. The shadowed side of his face seems to be echoed in the overcast sky that surrounds him. The first impression of the portrait is one of certain respectability and accomplishment. Yet, the upright stance of his body and proud pose are undermined by Orpen’s curious facial expression. The face is painted in meticulous detail, showing the artist with a knotted brow, a down-turned mouth, staring eyes and protruding lower lip. He half turns his face towards the viewer, as if seeking approval, the rest of his face steeped in shadow. The viewer is not allowed to see his full face. We might ask what lies in the shadow-side of Orpen’s identity.

---

I come to this conclusion in part thanks to David Lloyd’s analysis of the work of 19th-century Irish writer James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) as minor, arguing that if the author’s work seems an (impossibly) early instance of minor writing its emergence lies in Ireland’s special conditions as a European colony that entered its hegemonic phase early (1987: 26).
Orpen’s gestures and attire of English respectability produce a similarity to “Englishness.” But there are two particular aspects of Orpen’s self-image that disrupt his respectability – his protruding lower lip and his uneasy and confrontational gaze. Orpen’s exaggeration of his ugliness and particularly this drooping lip (which reappeared frequently in his self-portraiture) is often commented on because in person he was an attractive man. I see this as a conscious and deliberate choice on Orpen’s part, in keeping with the association of physical characteristics (like lips) and cultural features (like clothing) with biological evolutionism at the time he painted these portraits. Consider his representations in relation to an anthropological account from the period:

The man himself as he appears in his everyday life, is the best illustration of his own place in history, for his physical aspect, the expression of his face, the care of his person, his clothes, his occupations … tell the story with much clearness. (qtd. in Coombes 1987: 162)
In fact Orpen’s characterisation of his own face faintly echoes the grotesque 19th-century caricatures of the Irish face as bestial in comparison with its English counterpart.46

Orpen would have grown up as part of a privileged class fraction in Ireland that prided itself on its adoption of English attire, taste, speech and habits. Yet his identification with caricatures of Irishness suggests the contradictory dispositions that made up his *habitus*. I want to reread his self-presentation in *The Dead Ptarmigan* in terms of colonial mimicry, following literary critic Homi Bhabha’s psychoanalytic reading of colonial relations (2004). Bhabha articulates that mimicry is not “the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification” but rather “conceals no presence or identity behind its mask” (2004: 126). It is “a form of resemblance that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (128). This display is threatening because, by “hid[ing] no essence, no ‘itself’” it raises the issue of the authorization of colonial representations (129). Bhabha aptly states that “to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English,” a proposition that seems to emerge in Orpen’s identity. He is caught between seeming and being English. The more English Orpen’s attire and pose is in *The Dead Ptarmigan*, the more the small things give away his Irishness.

According to Bhabha, colonial mimics, these “almost but not quite” individuals, betray their descent by some striking feature and are thus excluded from society. It appears that for Orpen this “striking feature” was his lower lip. By drawing attention to the discrepancy between this untoward physical characteristic and the Englishness of his attire, he reveals the trick that colonial discourse plays: the promise that the colonised can be like the coloniser, while always assuming that they cannot, the colonized remaining caught in this gap between seeming and being. Bhabha highlights that colonial mimesis had to be flawed, in order for the colonized other to never quite ascend to the status of the superior colonizer. He emphasizes that mimicry is first of all the instrument of colonial power. Only through its double vision can it also become subversive of this power, when “the look of the surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’”

---

46 This perceived bestiality was linked to the racial classification of the Irish as non-white, which served to partly justify Irish colonization. See Ignatiev (1996) for a historical analysis. I will discuss the issue of Irish blackness in more detail in chapter four.
representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (127). Orpen incorporates a similar double vision within his self-portrait through his confronting gaze. To borrow a phrase from cultural theorist Mieke Bal from another context, Orpen thus “break[s] open the unified ‘naturalness’ of self-portraiture” through this gaze, so that “instead of self-disclosure, we end up with role-playing” (2003: 25). Like Bhabha’s colonial mimic, Orpen’s self-image as mimic is “at once resemblance and menace.” I think this borderline existence accounts for the unreliable legibility or even unreadability of many of Orpen’s paintings. One can sense that they are not what they seem, but it is difficult to pinpoint why or where. Bhabha proposes that the ambivalence in mimicry can undo colonial authority in a profound and disturbing way. Orpen seems to undo the authority of both England and Ireland – in fact, of nations as such.

The tenability of Irishness as a distinctive identity was tested in a further self-portrait that same year. Orpen painted The Man from Aran (1909) (Fig. 1.3) in a similar format and composition to The Dead Ptarmigan but he depicts himself dressed in the traditional garb of the islands the playwright J.M. Synge had written about. The ochre and beige of Orpen’s clothes is entirely one with the area of island landscape, visible in the lower quarter of the painting. Orpen’s cap is pushed back from his face and he turns his head almost fully to the viewer. It no longer seems necessary to hide part of his identity in the shadows. His lips are closed, not drooping, and his expression softer than in The Dead Ptarmigan. In The Man from Aran, Orpen appears to embody Irish identity but the easy compatibility between the landscape and clothing is disturbed by the self-consciousness in his facial expression. He appears to look to the viewer, yet as the viewer turns to meet his gaze, it reveals its self-absorption. That all is not as sunny as the palette of the landscape and clothing suggest is echoed in the black clouds, whose presence against the cobalt blue sky makes the yellow tones almost lurid.

47 Orpen’s favourite Irish Literary Revival playwright J.M. Synge published a book-length journal on his life on the Aran Islands in 1907. This small chain of islands off the West coast was presented as the cultural home of Ireland. The following year, Orpen visited the West coast himself for the first time and produced such distinctly Irish images as Old John’s Cottage, Connemara (1908), a scene showing an old couple in local dress sitting by the traditional open hearth of an Irish cottage. Synge had an ambivalent relationship with Irish nationalism. His interpretation of rural Catholic Ireland in Riders of the Sea (1904) and the erotic and anti-patriarchal Playboy of the Western World (1907) provoked the anger of the puritans of the Gaelic revival. See Skelton (1977) and Hederman (1977) for elaboration on this matter. For comparative analyses of other Irish artists’ engagement with the playwright’s work, see also Bhreathnach Lynch (2006).
The blackness of Orpen’s cap dissolves into the blackness of the cloudscape, undermining any ease of presence. The painted clouds are visibly passages of paint. They break down the mimetic function of the painting, showing us that Orpen occupies a representation – a representative space, rather than a place per se. They act as what Georges Didi-Huberman has described as a “patch”: “that part of a painting which ostensibly interrupts, here or there, the continuity of the representational system of the picture” (1989: 164). Didi-Huberman differentiates between the detail and the patch by describing how a detail may be subtracted from the whole and has its place in the mimetic space, whereas in the patch the part devours the whole. The detail is localizable, like an inclusion, whereas the patch “produces a potentiality: something happens, passes, wanders around in the space of representation and resists being ‘included’ in the picture because it creates a detonation or an intrusion” (164-5). Orpen’s clouds devour the coherency of the image. They tear the representative space of the painting from the place he allegedly occupies. That place, the Aran Islands, is not only a physical space, but in the midst of the Cultural Revival, a representative space, the cultural home of
Ireland. Orpen shows us the incongruity between the two. He wishes for his subjectivity to merge with place (seen in the merging of his traditional clothes with the landscape) yet he acknowledges the incongruity between real place (Ireland) and notional place (Ireland-as-cultural-home-of-the Irish). Like the clouds, Orpen’s subjectivity is not localizable. The cultural deterritorialisation is both his own and that of the nation.

The following year Orpen undertakes a self-portrait entitled *Leading the Life in the West* (1910) (Fig. 1.5) in which he merges the culturally deterritorialised subjectivity of his Anglicized Irish self with a particular social type, an urban gentleman, in order to draw attention to this splitting apart of identity and belonging in an English context. He frames himself full-length in a mirror. The space of the picture is shallow but complex, almost fully contained within the mirror image. Orpen shows his skills as a draftsman in resolving the complexities of surface, lighting, and reflection that he has set up for himself. But Orpen had used the mirror as a device for unfaithful reflection as early as 1900 in *The Mirror* (Fig. 1.4), probably inspired by Manet’s *A Bar the Folies-Bergère* (1882). In this portrait of his fiancée, the artist-model Emily Scobel, Orpen adds a convex mirror in the background. The mirror’s reflection forms a miniature self-portrait of Orpen at the easel and depicts a woman at his side, apparently in the act of viewing the work. Her appearance greatly resembles that of the sitter, raising the question of whether she may or may not also be the woman portrayed in the foreground. Anticipating the act of the viewing within the painting in a manner similar to Manet, Orpen chose to use the unfaithful reflection in the mirror to represent the future act of viewing within the painting, thus creating a multiple temporality and intervening in the normal codes of relations between artist, subject and viewer.

---

48 The significance of the distortions in the mirror in Manet’s *Bar at the Folie Bergère* was not generally understood in his lifetime and finally came under more thorough scrutiny in T.J. Clark’s book *The Painting of Modern Life* (1984). However, Orpen was an earlier expert on Manet, having seen much of the work first-hand and having appreciated it greatly, as we know of his advice to Hugh Lane to purchase it for his collection. Orpen’s use of a convex mirror specifically is familiar from works like Jan Van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), which Orpen would have seen in the National Gallery, while the shallow pictorial depth and arrangement of objects is visibly informed by Whistler’s famous portrait of his mother from 1871. Significantly, for Rothenstein, *The Mirror* marked the rejection of all the qualities he saw in *Play Scene from “Hamlet”* in favour of mastery without any compelling purpose. Although he considers it a highly accomplished painting technically, Rothenstein sees it nevertheless as a mere “display” of painting, for it is no more than a brilliant essay in a style perfected centuries before.” He argues that the painting is a portent of what he describes as “the golden treadmill” to come, alluding to Orpen’s privileged but pointless industriousness.
While Barthes’s sketch of an “organon of representation” – that is, the triangular viewing relationship between a subject, the gaze he or she casts on the perceived object and his or her own eye – had as its telos “the sovereignty of the act of cutting out [découpage] and the unity of the subject of the action,” Orpen’s intervention blocks such autonomy. Christopher Prendergast suggests that Barthes’s interests “are directed less to objects than to relations,” and so too are Orpen’s – yet the field of representation does not correspond to the perceived structure of the represented field in Orpen’s work.49

Although the structural definition of the self-portrait (as opposed to the portrait) is the intervention of the mirror, the mirror itself is usually made invisible. Instead Orpen re-articulates the mirror, recalling the estrangement inherent in the mirror image, later brought to our attention by Lacan (1977). This estrangement is doubled up by Orpen’s inclusion of the mirror’s frame. He creates a “frame within a frame” scenario

49 I draw here on Christopher Prendergast’s discussion of Barthes’s organon of representation “designat[ing] an activity of mapping the world in terms of relations of proportionality, such that the field of representation corresponds to a perceived structure of the represented field” (2000: 10).
that invites us to contemplate the operation of representation, drawing attention to the act of image-construction. I relate this to Orpen’s position in social space because the mirror serves not so much to see oneself as one is, but rather to try to see oneself as one is seen by others (Peeren 2005: 80). Orpen reveals his self-consciousness of being looked at, rendering awareness of the contradictions in his own image. Signifiers of “English” identity – the quintessentially English bowler hat and cane – are subverted by the incongruous inclusion of whiskey bottles and calling cards, which refer to Orpen’s excessive drinking habits. Orpen’s image is left in oscillation between English gentleman and Irish drunk, between mimic and stereotype. Rather than searching for authenticity, Orpen recognizes his own mimicry and makes a statement out of it.

![Fig. 1.5 William Orpen, Leading the Life in the West, 1910, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York](image_url)

The title “Leading the Life in the West” repeats this oscillation between stereotypes by calling up such contradictory references as the fashionable West end of London and the rural West of Ireland, which had become a signifier of Irishness through the Cultural Revival movement. Yet place has no unmediated “natural” significance for Orpen. Rather, he recognizes the plural and contingent identities of place and, through
paint, examines the ways in which they are discursively constructed.\textsuperscript{50} Crucially, neither of the two West’s can fully accommodate Orpen’s self-image. \textit{Leading the Life in the West} draws attention to the artist’s awareness of his own image’s failure to represent “Englishness” and “Irishness” alike. Instead Orpen insists on the possibility of plural and contingent identifications. Orpen’s resistance to being representative of a fixed identity is most readily visible in his staring gaze in the self-portrait, which confronts and displaces the viewer. His self-portrait threatens the reforming civilising mission of English colonial culture by being an “\textit{ironic} compromise … at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 2004: 122-3). Orpen becomes a parodist of history, fulfilling the predicament outlined by Bhabha: “Despite their intentions and invocations [mimics] inscribe the colonial text erratically, eccentrically across a body politic that refuses to be representative, in a narrative that refuses to be representational” (123).

Orpen erratically inscribes his self-portraits by oscillating between conformity to and deviation from the traditions of portraiture. He presents the elevated style of fashionable portraiture yet undermines the authority of the genre by introducing a sardonic humour, reminiscent of the dynamics and visual language of the self-caricature drawings he did for his own pleasure.\textsuperscript{51} Orpen draws our attention to the precarious relationship between form and content, raising questions regarding the relationship between an artist and a work of art. In \textit{The Dead Ptarmigan}, \textit{The Man from Aran}, and \textit{Leading the Life in the West}, he undermines the portrait’s function of “consolidating the self of the portrayed,” challenging the viewer’s expectation of “essence” or unique authenticity in a move that prefigures the concerns of Modernist portrait artists (Van Alphen 1997: 239-40). Orpen simultaneously foregrounds the deceptiveness of the portrait’s representative function and refuses the prospect of the authentic (English) identity the portrait allegedly represents.

Orpen comes early to the conclusion that a pure relation between a person and a representation is impossible. His self-portraits amount to a refusal of identity, circulating around an equivalent refusal to ground the possibility of identity on the

\textsuperscript{50} In my consideration of the significance of place for Orpen, I draw on Shane Alcobia-Murphy’s observations on the role of place in the work of contemporary artists and writers in Northern Ireland (2005).

\textsuperscript{51} Orpen quickly penned self-caricatures with witty captions on whatever came to hand, many incorporated in personal letters. He once applied to \textit{Punch} as a caricaturist, but had his work returned and does not seem to have used his caricatures for professional purposes with the exception of that occasion.
recovery of (Irish) origins. This strategy is an implicit critique of the paradigms of major art and its reproduction of an original or essential identity. I would suggest that an unfinished series of works that included *Nude Pattern: The Holy Well* (1916) and *Western Wedding* (1916) marked Orpen’s attempts to make a further statement of this kind in relation to contemporary cultural developments in Ireland. These works have remained quite impervious to interpretation to date. Arguably this is because their narratives refuse to stabilize; a tendency made more frustrating and powerful due to his use of apparently legible signs of Irish culture. Consider how in *Western Wedding*, for example, Orpen incongruously places a Rolls Royce amid a traditional rural scene. The vehicle is parked not far behind a large crucifix, the site of a wedding; its presence shattering the illusion of naturalness of the apparently traditional scene. Orpen seems to allude here to the construction of tradition that underpins the naturalized identity of Irish nationalism.

A much later work *Self-Portrait: Multiple Mirrors* from 1924 (Fig. 1.6) perhaps best manifests what might be tentatively put forward as Orpen’s artistic conclusions; namely that representation is always “in a state of perpetual dependence,” always relying on a further series of representations (Lloyd 1987: 157). In Orpen’s self-portrait, the canvas acts like a mirror that refuses to re-present. It repeats rather than represents the artist’s image. This repetition is made clear through the slippages in pose and expression between the image of the artist facing us and the image on the easel depicted in the background. It also emerges in the further appearance of the image within the image, which acts like a mirror that frames a series of reflections of the artist. Each extends the act of representation in a manner similar in effect to Chinese Whispers. Every representation is a further alienation, yet in this case there is no original. Orpen finally claims his authority as an artist by undoing the authority of representation itself. The challenge in curating Orpen thus lies not only in his eclecticism or recalcitrance to standard art historical categorizations. More significantly, it lies in the way the particular points of recalcitrance in question put a strain on curatorial norms. Orpen’s work and identity challenges curators’ attempts to seek to contain and restructure

---

52 In my formulation I draw on observations made by David Lloyd on the faithlessness of the so-called translations of German poetry by Irish 19th-century poet James Clarence Mangan, which “foreground the deceptiveness of both original and translation,” refusing to offer the prospect of a recovery of origins (1987: 152).
aspects of artists’ characters and works that act as threats to the equilibrium of established discourses in the interest of increasing or maintaining the symbolic capital of the work. I will now see how these issues were addressed in the London retrospective.

Fig. 1.6 William Orpen, *Self-Portrait, Multiple Mirrors*, 1924, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

**Rereading the Retrospective**

*William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death* was to all appearances a well-curated exhibition. It was visually impressive, supported by scholarly research and it brought together 113 works from collections in Europe, the US and Australia. This opportunity to assess the quality of Orpen’s oeuvre was made more significant by the absence of a previous retrospective. The substantial catalogue accompanying the exhibition also made a considered attempt to tease out stylistic and art historical questions, particularly in relation to Orpen’s quotation of historic paintings, through allusion, device and titles. It also addressed the complexity of his identity as a Protestant Irish man of Anglo-Irish stock, who lived much of his adult life in London. The exhibition provided explanatory wall texts throughout that situated Orpen in terms of the political and cultural discourses of his time, as well as shedding light on his biography.53

Curator Robert Upstone’s essay “Love and Beauty in an Age of Extremes” offered an in-depth introduction to Orpen’s practice. Starting with his final painting, it followed Orpen’s initial interests in historical painting in his student days, his exploration of the mirror as device and subject matter and his interest in the artifice of representation in theatre. It addressed Orpen’s better-known engagement with representation in his portrait practice at large and his specific engagement with Ireland as subject matter. However, there are frequent discrepancies between Upstone’s observations in the catalogue and the wall texts and curatorial narrative at large that I would like to address. These discrepancies say something in the first place about the difference between what has been called “the two art histories,” practiced by the museum and the university. Yet, given that Upstone works as both an art historical scholar and a curator, he is an example of an art historian who either resists this division or crosses the lines as standard practice. I would argue that the discrepancies are more considered than they might first appear.

Art historical scholarship tends to be highly diluted for easy consumption before it reaches the general public in the form of wall texts. Curators usually write these texts themselves, although they are often vetted by educational and marketing departments, at least in larger museums. Patricia Mainardi reminds us that museums need to attract audiences to their exhibitions and that the predilections of these audiences influence not only the subjects of museum exhibitions and their marketing but also the metanarratives within the exhibitions themselves. While I endorse the need to present scholarship in a manner that is accessible, it seems that the rationale of addressing the public is often misused as an excuse for curators to reproduce the most conservative social and political narratives in the museum space in the name of the public good. These are frequently perspectives that are at odds with the findings of recent art historical and theoretical scholarship.

54 I borrow this term from a conference entitled The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University, held April 9-10, 1999 at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. See Haxthausen (2002).
55 See also Upstone and Weight (2009) for a further example of Upstone’s art-historical scholarship on Orpen.
56 See Ebert-Schifferer (2002) for consideration of the need to bridge gaps to communicate with the general public. See also Ingrid Schaffner’s (2008) essay on the functions and etiquette of wall texts in museums today.
57 See Mainardi (2002) for further insight into the issue of exhibition narratives and their publics.
The curator’s decisions regarding what to include and omit in the construction of his or her curatorial narrative are usually related to more fundamental exclusions that sustain discourse – namely the exclusions and inclusions of *habitus* in its broadest scope or what Antonio Gramsci called (cultural) common sense.\(^{58}\) This means that curating is more culturally located than it might acknowledge and that its role in cultural and social reproduction informs the curatorial narrative more than the recent focus on the curator as auteur has recognised. Furthermore, the cultural capital associated with the dominant narratives of this located discourse perpetuates the subordination of less prestigious (national) discourses. The discourse with the highest cultural capital varies from context to context, because of the dependence of the exchange rate of cultural and symbolic capital on the value of wider social and cultural discourses. This will come to light when I compare aspects of the London exhibition with the Dublin exhibition.

I would like to approach the London exhibition in terms of these gaps between art historical text and curatorial concept, as well as highlighting the apparent motivation behind Upstone’s framing, which is not articulated directly but often stated implicitly. The London exhibition presented Orpen’s oeuvre in seven distinct categories, which were titled as follows: “Imaging the Self,” “Imaging Society,” “Women, Nudes and Bodies,” “Ireland: Politics,” “Ireland: Allegory,” “Drawings and Letters,” and “War.” Each of these categories roughly corresponds to titled sub-sections in Upstone’s catalogue essay, facilitating almost direct comparison between the two areas of scholarship that he contributes to in this instance, art historical and curatorial. The exhibition categories progressed in this order, allowing the viewer to advance from an initial presentation of the artist’s self-portraits to a final exhibition of major war paintings. The thread of Upstone’s curatorial vision was unfolded through a series of wall texts.

The first wall text in an exhibition is perhaps the most important, because it conditions the way viewers see everything else. Rather than just being a conveyor of information, it sets the tone for the whole installation. It can provoke a receptive, questioning or associative state of mind. It can assert the authority of the curatorial position as well as point to its contingency or situatedness.\(^{59}\) It is interesting therefore

---

\(^{58}\) See Adamson (1980: 149-51) for an in-depth discussion of Gramsci’s conception of common sense.

\(^{59}\) In my formulation, I draw on the reflections of curator Robert Storr (2008) as well as Ingrid Schaffner’s aforementioned essay on wall texts (2008).
that in the first wall text of the Orpen retrospective, the artist’s place in history was posed succinctly but definitively for the viewer, giving the impression of the exhibition’s uncontested objectivity as a direct result of art historical scholarship:

Sir William Orpen (1878-1931) is revered today in his native country of Ireland, but in Britain, where he lived and worked for thirty years, he has suffered the fate of many painters of the Edwardian era, a kind of benign neglect … apart from a memorial show at the Royal Academy in 1933, there has never been a major comprehensive exhibition of his work in London since his death sixty years ago.

This text was followed by “Imaging the Self,” a section presenting self-portraits of Orpen, which gave the viewer an extension to this introduction to Orpen as a somewhat unknown figure in the English art world of today. In its matter-of-fact tone, the introductory text replicated the most standard format of art museum wall texts. Nevertheless, despite the unadorned facts this text appears to represent, its observations are potentially misleading. Of the thirty years Orpen is said to have lived and worked in Britain, ten were spent working in both London and Dublin, where he lectured at the Metropolitan School of Art with a view to stimulating a new era for Irish art. This is a significant omission, given that these ten years were central to Orpen’s contribution to cultural nationalist developments in Ireland.

Upstone’s narrow reference to Orpen as an Edwardian artist is also questionable. He proposes in his own catalogue essay that Orpen’s oeuvre does not fit into standard art historical categorizations. I personally contend that only a fraction of Orpen’s works can be safely contained under the category of Edwardian painting. When his oeuvre at large is looked at in relation to that of Sargent, Sickert or John for example, the tension underneath the surface of Orpen’s works comes to the fore. This occurs sometimes almost imperceptibly and at other times explosively. While the Edwardian tag is often used to refer to a period that is longer than the nine years of Edward’s reign, it nevertheless undermines the thirty-year duration of Orpen’s fame. Notably however, it is this Edwardian tag that gives advance justification to an otherwise questionable observation – namely that Orpen was forgotten for sixty years due to changes in stylistic taste. In fact, Upstone provided another reason for this oversight for the readers of his catalogue essay. He cites John Rothenstein’s aforementioned chapter in Modern English
Painters (1952) as the source of long-term negative public opinion towards Orpen’s work in England (2005: 47).

Framing Orpen as a forgotten Edwardian painter enables the previous curatorial neglect of his work to be presented as a matter of temporality and aesthetics, a change in taste with the onslaught of modernism. Although it appears to be a stylistic observation, it has less than obvious political repercussions. It distances Orpen from the post-Edwardian transition to Irish independence and the interim cultural nationalism that he actively supported. In fact Orpen is in fact placed in the only era in which his subjectivity as a Protestant Irish emigrant to England is politically neutral. I wonder whether this framing takes place with a view to rendering Orpen a safe subject for an exhibition at an English military museum. The introductory wall text demonstrated the departure point for the logic, as we have seen. The teleological end point for this logic became evident in a further wall text explaining the exhibition’s closure:

This exhibition concludes not with [Orpen’s] death in 1931, but with the glittering spectacle of the Paris Peace Conference, and the painter’s abstracted gaze across the city to the white domes of the Sacre Coeur.

This curatorial cut-off point was also noteworthy, given that the Paris Peace Conference took place in 1919, whereas Orpen painted right up until his death in 1931. Orpen had recurring bouts of illness following the end of the war, exacerbated by heavy drinking, and died at the young age of 53, a painting half-finished on his easel. In his essay, Upstone the art historian had attested to the significance of the later work by devoting ample attention to his final painting. It would be odd therefore for Upstone the curator not to represent the paintings of Orpen’s final ten years. In fact, in contradiction with the wall text, Upstone did include no less than seven oil paintings and a number of drawings produced after 1919. While the dates of those paintings were provided on labels in relation to the individual works, the discrepancy between those dates and the chronology presented within the wall text was made invisible by the works’ dispersal across the seven sections. The later works appeared to be earlier works because of the exhibition’s logic of concluding with the war.

This layout overwrote the chronology of Orpen’s artistic development and career – not in itself an unusual curatorial move – but, more significantly, by obscuring the date of all works created after the Paris Peace conference of 1919, the presence of
all works created after Irish independence (1921) was made invisible. It thus looked as if all of Orpen’s life’s work had been made at a time when Irish and British were not separate nationalities. This raises the question of whether there was a specific agenda behind Upstone’s peculiar chronology – perhaps to claim Orpen definitively for the British canon. I speculate here that Upstone tried to settle the problem of Orpen’s “conflicting national loyalties,” which had been a fundamental criticism made by Rothenstein and subsequently a major reason for the public disfavour of Orpen in English art circles.

The complexity of the proposition of Orpen being British is engaged with to a limited extent within the catalogue essays. I come to my speculation regarding a specific agenda on the basis of a definitive statement made on the back cover of the catalogue, where Orpen is described as “one of the great British artists of the first quarter of the twentieth century.” In fact, the presentation of Orpen’s retrospective in the context of the Imperial War Museum already suggested his Britishness, given that it is his war works that have secured remaining interest in Orpen in the British context. Moreover, this representation seems to imply patriotic identification with Britain, much as this possibility is complicated by the contradictory motivations for Irish support of the British army in the First World War, as we will see.

The near erasure of Orpen’s Irishness in the retrospective may seem a curatorially sound gesture. Given the centrality of England to the production of art historical discourse as well as the nation’s prestigious canon, Englishness secures a higher critical and economic value for an art work than Irishness. Upstone surely draws on this logic in his framing. Yet it is also a culturally hegemonic gesture that is problematic for reasons of postcolonial ethics. Here the clash between the professional norms of curating and the cultural and political functions of representation starts to become apparent. A thorough discussion of cultural hegemony and epistemic violence would be in order here. However, such critique often appears to be only of political relevance and to bear little art historical or aesthetic relevance vis-à-vis an artist’s oeuvre. I prefer to make a more specific claim and tease out the interrelationship

60 Given Orpen’s formerly prestigious career, the hosting of the retrospective at the Imperial War Museum rather than another major art museum is unusual. Nevertheless, the Imperial War Museum does have an extensive collection of art works and it has shown an ongoing commitment to inviting contemporary artists to reflect on the institution’s place in shaping the memory of modern warfare. See Moriarty and Weight (2008).
between Orpen’s work’s artistic content and its framing in terms of national identity. I will ask what repercussions the untroubled British framing has for the reading of Orpen’s paintings. Let us look to the section “Imaging the Self” and consider, for example, how questions regarding representation within Orpen’s work can be engaged with if the complexity of his (post)colonial Irish identity is overwritten by Britishness.

The very first wall text introducing the “Imaging the Self” section takes Orpen’s self-portraits at face value, foreclosing close analysis of the work’s metaphorical subtexts:

Orpen made pictures of himself throughout his life, returning again and again to the conundrum of self-image and identity. A small man, Orpen was self-conscious about his appearance, and many of his self-portraits exaggerate his drooping lower lip. He liked to dress up and would portray himself as a jockey, huntsman or soldier, as if he were an actor playing a role.

Even though the wall text refers to the artist’s “conundrum of self-image and identity,” no attempt is made to unravel this conundrum. In his curatorial essay, Upstone had suggested that “many of these pictures seemed to be formed around the act of perception itself, about interpretation, art and artifice, and the distortions of the real and the imitative,” yet he stops short of placing these strategies within a specific historic context (14). By not doing so, he is left to ask a question which he cannot answer: “How are we to read these pictures? Are they assumed personalities, like the characters in a play, or are they intended to be ironic, sardonic, self-mocking?” (14).

Although Upstone comments insightfully in his catalogue essay that “many of [Orpen’s] pictures seemed to be formed around the act of perception itself,” he does not attempt to untie the knot of relations within that act of looking in such works as Leading the Life in the West (1910). The internal complexity of the work is foreclosed through the reductive simplicity of the wall text:

[Orpen] stands assertively, dapperly dressed, with bowler hat and cane. Brushes and paints, whiskey and soda bottles and the bar bills and calling cards tucked behind the mirror frame represent another “self portrait,” that of the successful artist and man about town.

As I have already argued in relation to Leading the Life in the West, the “conundrum of self-image and identity” that Upstone talks about in theory yet fails to unravel in the
work is closely entangled with the crisis of (post)colonial Irish identity in an English context. A large number of the self-portraits in question were included in the exhibition – *The Dead Ptarmigan* (1909), *The Jockey* (1909), *Leading the Life in the West* (1910), *Self Portrait* (1912) and *Self-portrait with Sowing New Seed* (1913). Yet the portrait that makes Orpen’s self-identification with Irishness most apparent, *The Man from Aran* (1909), was not included. Furthermore, the self-portraits were separated from the “Ireland: Politics” section in which *Nude Pattern* (1916), *Western Wedding* (1914) and other works engaging directly with Irish cultural questions were contained.

Even overlooking the specific relationship to Irish subjectivity, Orpen’s anxious questions about the relationship between the self and the role of the great artist in such works as *Self Portrait as Chardin* (1908) (Fig. 1.9) is closed down by the literal nature of the wall text:

In “Self Portrait as Chardin” (1908) Orpen shows himself in the dressing gown, slippers, handkerchiefs and spectacles that he wore to the Chelsea Arts Club Ball dressed as the French painter, and for which he won a prize.

While the relationship between the lived event and the portrait makes this a tempting, if simplistic reading, it is hardly appropriate for an artist of Orpen’s ilk. *Self-portrait as Chardin* shows Orpen in the guise of a great artist. He is no longer himself but assuming a role. We might attribute this to the Edwardian love of fancy dress, and indeed Orpen did dress up as Chardin for the Covent Garden Ball in 1907. He made a head-and-shoulders self-portrait of himself that year (Fig. 1.8) after Jan-Siméon Chardin’s *Self-portrait with pince-nez* (1776) (Fig. 1.7). In the 1907 painting, Orpen’s pose and facial expression resemble Chardin’s, despite some disparity in their gazes. Chardin’s gaze is self-assured and steadfast whereas Orpen’s facial expression suggests that he is unsure how to meet the public gaze.
That Orpen returned to the subject in 1908 indicates that it was of growing importance to him. This time he included a full-length self-portrait of himself in the act of painting a self-portrait as Chardin. In the second painting Orpen continues to portray himself in the guise of the great artist, and this time visibly in the environment of the painter, but his tense upright pose and his furrowed facial expression seem to express a deep anxiety. His glasses are pushed further down his nose than in the first version and the colours in the facial portrait are much more lucid, the combined effect of which is to draw attention to his eyes.

In this work Orpen stares at the viewer, visibly perturbed, as if to ask whether he has the right to fulfill the role of great artist. In place of the almost self-congratulatory self-image as artist in earlier self-portraits, Orpen now seems to anticipate judgement. It

---

61 Given this early expression of anxiety regarding the possibility of being representative as an artist in *Self-portrait as Chardin*, it is noteworthy that Orpen portrayed himself once again as Chardin the year after “resolving” the issue of representation in *Self-Portrait, Multiple Mirrors*, 1924. In *The Man with the Paintbrush* (1925) Orpen’s attire is identical to that in the self-portrait from 1908 but now the glasses are pushed up on his forehead as if he was ready to see the world, his facial expression more steadfast and his eyes piercing rather than confrontational. The portrait was commissioned by the Uffizi Gallery in Florence for their sala dei pittori – “a distinction reserved exclusively for the most famous artists of their time and country” – and this time he paints himself as the great artist (Konody and Dark 1932: 240).

---

Fig. 1.7 and 1.8 Chardin, *Self-portrait with Pince-nez*, 1776 (left), Musée du Louvre, Paris, and William Orpen, *Self-Portrait as Chardin*, 1907 (right), Mildura Arts Centre.
is as if the emperor is forced to appear after he realizes his nudity, wondering whether he can keep up the pretence of being clothed to safeguard his authority. In “Self-portrait as Chardin” Orpen’s presence as an artist becomes a performative one, or to be more precise, he draws attention to the performance of his identity, not only as an artist, but, through the allusion to Chardin, as a potentially great artist. Orpen’s easy facility with paint, his skilled draughtsmanship and his beautiful use of colour in “Self-portrait as Chardin” raises the question of where such anxiety might come from.

Figs. 1.9 William Orpen, *Self-Portrait as Chardin*, 1908, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Orpen’s second biographer Bruce Arnold singled out 1908, the year of the painting, as a watershed for Orpen due to his first submission to the Royal Academy and commencement of an affair with the rich American socialite Lady St. Lloyd George.\(^62\) But there was a third turning point that neither Arnold nor Orpen’s earlier biographers

---

\(^62\) These two events pushed Orpen into the spotlight professionally and socially. The Royal Academy exposure validated his membership of the upper echelons of the British art establishment. The affair, during which Orpen and St. Lloyd George were frequently seen together in public, stimulated gossip.
Konody and Dark address – namely that at the very moment that his full assimilation into the British art establishment was beckoning, Orpen made his first overt public statement of his Irishness in the British context. He did so at the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 by choosing to be represented in the Ballymaclinton Art Gallery, which formed part of a model Irish colonial village, rather than in a privileged position within the British pavilion.\(^{63}\) The Ballymaclinton Art Gallery was curated by the aforementioned art dealer and collector Hugh Lane, with whom Orpen shared a vision for the future of Irish art. The aim of the 1908 exhibition was to explicitly emphasize the Irish identity of the artists on show, in support of the Irish Cultural Revival movement of which Lady Gregory (1852–1932), Lane’s aunt, was a pioneer. In the small pamphlet catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, Lane wrote:

> [I]t will, doubtless, come as a surprise to find that so many of the leaders of the various movements connected with British Art are themselves Irishmen or of Irish parentage. It is mainly with the object of demonstrating this fact that I have collected and arranged the present Exhibition.

This gesture of self-inclusion signaled the strength of Orpen’s identification with Irish cultural nationalism. In my view it also signaled a moment of intense confrontation with the stigma of what it meant to be Irish in early 20\(^{th}\)-century Britain. Like its Ceylonese and Senegalese counterparts, Ballymaclinton, the Irish colonial village, was inhabited by 150 natives, all Irish colleens (Irish girls) whose industry and beauty was being promoted by the government with a view to intermarriage. This wish reflected hopes for content political co-habitation in a period when Ireland’s insistence on Home Rule was moving dangerously close to an insistence on Independence. Yet the very adjectives being used – “spick and span,” “white and clean” and “emphatically smiling and pleasant” – only served as reminders of widespread British perception of the Irish as black, wild and untamable until a few years previously.

The ideology behind the colonial villages focused on the ideal of a national culture, which featured heavily in both Tory and Liberal rhetoric between 1902 and

---

\(^{63}\) In the end, one painting of Orpen’s was included in the British pavilion, perhaps to alleviate Orpen’s conspicuous absence. Given that the colonial village was little more than a side-show, and attracted very few members of the art establishment, contemporary writers expressed their extreme surprise that an artist of such esteem should be shown under such circumstances.
1910. Paradoxically, the success of this ideal relied on the careful construction and elaboration of a series of biological and cultural “differences.” The difference between colonizer and colonised was visible in the daily life on display in the Ceylonese, Irish and Senegalese villages. They were presented in the guidebooks as quaint survivals (anthropologically speaking) of primitive cultures (Coombes 1987). This racialized colonial encounter with Irish identity in the British context highlighted the stakes of Orpen’s Irishness for his possible destiny as a great artist. If this sounds somewhat exaggerated, let us consider it in relation to the Presidential Address of the Museums Association from 1907, which reads like a eugenics lecture, mentioning for example how “inherited traits, character, virtues, vices, capabilities, temper, diseases, play in the destinies of men” (Coombes 1987: 162). I contend that Orpen’s _Self-Portrait as Chardin_, painted the year of the Franco-British exhibition, raised the question of the relationship between identity and artistic success, or specifically between being an Irish artist and the possibility of being or becoming a great artist.

**Nationalisms**

The housing of Orpen’s retrospective at the Imperial War Museum suggests the importance of the artist’s war works. In fact paintings such as _Armistice Night, Amiens_ (1918) and _The Mad Woman of Douai_ (1918) are among some of Orpen’s most profound reflections on human life. In these works he sketches out the disjunctions between high-minded ideals about war and the senseless horde instincts and fragile strategies for (psychic) survival it initiates in reality. Given the exhibition’s ambition to be a retrospective however, Upstone’s final selection of forty-five of the 113 drawings and paintings for the London exhibition from this period of a mere three years of Orpen’s thirty-year career undermined the diversity of the artist’s oeuvre. The monumentalizing effect of the layout and presentation of the “War” section seemed to be at odds with Orpen’s critical and humanizing view of war. One might ask what the function of such a monumentalising emphasis might be.

As a discourse, curating tends to function as much by showing as by writing (on wall texts and in catalogues); not only by the choice of works but by telling complex

---

64 All but two of the exhibited war works were carried out in 1917-1919. The exceptions are a small caricature sketch of Orpen’s physical examination for entering the war from 1916, and one painting, _To the Unknown British Soldier in France_, which he painted from 1921-28.
stories spatially. As Charles W. Haxthausen has described, “a successful exhibition is not a book on the wall, but a carefully orchestrated deployment of objects, images, and texts” and the visual arguments, put in place by means of installation, are in fact a more effective means of disseminating knowledge than are articles or books (2002: xv). In this light it is noteworthy that the “War” section was placed apart from the other five sections of the London exhibition. This was made possible by the presentation of the “Drawings and Letters” section between “War” and “Ireland: Allegory,” which seems incongruent because it abruptly divided five categories of major oil paintings from a sixth category of major oil paintings with a section of minor works on paper. The war section was further separated from the rest of the exhibition by a specially constructed corridor emblazoned with the word “WAR” in large typography. The corridor appeared to serve no function, leading the visitor as it did from a normal doorway into the room behind it. However, the dramatic text and the grey tunnel-like corridor provided not so much a physical transition as a psychological transition into the world of war.65 Once inside, the viewer walked from room to room, from painting to drawing, until he walked full-circle to a small room tucked away behind his initial point of entry. On entry the viewer was confronted by a large canvas directly facing him, which depicted a single coffin. The painting’s title was To the Unknown British Soldier in France (1921-28) (Fig. 1.10).

The painting had started out as the last in a series of three paintings documenting the peace process, depicting the delegates waiting to enter the signing chamber. But Orpen, disgusted by how quickly the human cost of war was forgotten amidst the pomp of ceremony, decided to radically alter the painting. He erased the statesmen and commanders it had taken him nine months to paint and depicted instead the coffin of an unknown soldier guarded by his dead comrades. These two uncanny soldiers are Christ-like in their wounded nakedness, covered only by a garment around the waist. They were based on an earlier sketch of a soldier, whose clothes had been ripped away by a bursting shell. In the painting putti hover in the air, strewing the scene with green and

65 The interpretative significance of decisions made by an exhibition’s design team is not always taken on board by the curator. The curator’s personal level of responsibility and collaboration in these matters seems to vary considerably, despite an increasing awareness of the hermeneutic of display. However, the division of five sections of major oil paintings from a sixth category of major oil paintings, by an intermediate section of minor works on paper, is likely to have only taken place with the curator’s consent.
gold garlands, to me not coincidentally the colours of the Irish flag. I find it fitting that Orpen would include an almost imperceptible visual referent to the Irish men who fought with the British army in the First World War.

![Fig. 1.10 William Orpen, To the Unknown British Soldier in France, 1921 version (left) and 1928 version (right), Imperial War Museum, London](image)

Orpen’s submission of the painting to the Royal Academy in 1923 caused a scandal. The painting was fiercely attacked by critics and firmly rejected by the Imperial War Museum on the grounds that it did not fulfill the original commission’s portrait remit. In fact it was even questioned whether or not the painting had a mocking intent, a charge Orpen strongly denied. I argue, however, that such an accusation demonstrates the threatening displacements implied in Orpen’s “minor” perspective. Pressed for an explanation, Orpen explained that the putti represented love and the cross in the background sacrifice and salvation. The public were touched by Orpen’s tribute to the losses that affected ordinary British families and voted the painting Picture of the Year, adding more fuel to the existing debates.

Five years later, on the death of his wartime friend Field Marshal Haig, Orpen conceded to remove all offensive elements of the painting and present it to the War Museum in Haig’s memory. In the final version of the painting, all that remains is the
single coffin, surrounded by monumental architecture. The majesty of the architecture, combined with the coffin’s adornment with the British flag seems to demand respect from the viewer, even a hushed presence. The mausoleum-like experience of standing in front of a coffin as the final image of the retrospective registered as a witnessing of the death of the artist – a conclusion which resonated with the inner logic of the curatorial narrative. The final images of the Paris Peace conference referred to in the earlier wall text were hung on the side walls of the space, overshadowed by the presence of the room’s central image. Thus, the exhibition placed Orpen firmly in the position of allegiance to Britain by highlighting his role as a British war artist. In fact, by presenting a coffin draped with a British flag as the final image, Upstone visually prefigured and embodied Orpen’s death in Britain. By solving the problem of Orpen’s conflicting loyalties in this way, Upstone’s curatorial intervention thus prepared the ground for a ready reclamation of Orpen for the canon of English art.

The implication here was that Orpen was a British patriot because he served in the First World War and he should therefore be seen as British and not Irish. Yet this overshadows the complex relationship between Irish nationalism, Irish unionism and the war. It is well documented that that both sides joined in support of opposite political ends. In addition, the underlying question of whether Orpen was an Irish nationalist or a Unionist tends to drown out the likelihood that the artist’s political sympathies lay with socialism. This was evident in the artist’s active help in the soup kitchens that Countess Marciewicz set up for strikers who had lost their jobs by following the lead of Irish socialist James Larkin’s fight for workers’ rights. It is visible in his sketches thereof and also in a series of works showing the ordinary worker. These were painted in the mode of historical genres he admired in Chardin, which perhaps contributes to explaining his choice of Chardin as role model in his self-portraits. I am thinking here for example of *The Wash House* (1905) and *Resting* (1905), which were not included in the retrospective. I see this socialist perspective returning in such visually arresting war paintings as *Harvest* (1918), which depicts the French workers gathering sheaves in a field cross-hatched by barbed wire and dotted with crosses. In the foreground a young

---

66 By the mid 1880s Irish politics became polarised between Protestant Unionism and Catholic Nationalism. Home Rule had been an aspiration of Irish Nationalists for over fifty years and negotiations looked to be on the cusp of its realization when World War I broke out. Knowing that nothing would be settled until after the end of war, both Nationalists promoting and Unionists against Home Rule chose to support Britain with a view to currying favour for the decision-making after the war had ended.
mother prepares to nurse her baby. This painting acts as a testimony to the nobility of ordinary people carrying on with normal life amid the barbarity of war.

Upstone’s presentation of Orpen’s war work, and *To the Unknown British Soldier in France* in particular, as confirmation of the artist’s Britishness is, I would argue, a poor representation of how the war itself turned Orpen against all forms of nationalism. His biographer and friend Sydney Dark recalled how war showed nationalism’s role as little more than a “gaudily-decorated machine for hurting and maiming” (Konody and Dark 1932: 120). Dark insightfully argued that all of Orpen’s war output is pacifist in its drive to show the banal horror of real war. In addition, I contend that the nation’s integrity came under interrogation by Orpen in the process. His *Dead Germans in a Trench* (1918), in which the pathetic green-tinged face of an upturned corpse can be seen next to a semi-buried compatriot, gives no sense of division between enemies and heroes. Orpen’s sketches of the German prison camps, which were not included in the exhibition, further suggest that the day-to-day experiences of war led to an anti-nationalist stance. Had Orpen been allowed to leave his bomb-blasted ghosts of young soldiers flanking the coffin in *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*, his deep-seated questions about the cost of nationalism would have been more apparent.

Upstone’s aesthetic choices appear to be informed by artistic quality alone. However they are strongly weighted towards presenting Orpen’s work in terms of an overt affiliation with the British canon. This can be read in terms of a political bias but it also appears to be a professionally sound gesture because it strategically increases the cultural and symbolic capital embodied in Orpen’s work in the London field. When the exhibition toured to National Gallery of Ireland, the alternative national context offered a different exchange rate for the cultural and symbolic capital of Irish and British-related aspects of Orpen’s production. If we turn now to the Dublin exhibition, we can see Upstone attempt to recuperate some of Orpen’s cultural and political value for the Irish context in order to maximize his cultural and symbolic capital in the new context. He does so through significant adjustments of the exhibition contents, its layout and its wall texts.
The Politics of Space and Place

On first impression, the re-arrangement of the exhibition in the Dublin context might have appeared to be a question of adjustment to different architectural surrounds. Yet the particular spatial and hanging choices coincided perfectly with the shift in perceived sources of value of Orpen’s work from the London to the Dublin context. The section “Imaging Society” was both the opening section of the Dublin exhibition and the only one that was treated to a much larger and separate space. This was in keeping with the predominant Irish interest in Orpen’s portraiture. The war section was in turn considerably smaller in consideration of the lesser political and cultural value of the war works in the field of the Dublin art world. This downsizing was facilitated by the absence of a separate entrance and the significant reduction of the number of works on display. This exclusion was made possible by the somewhat erratic inclusion of a number of war-works on paper in a further exhibition devoted to Orpen’s illustrated letters, held on another floor of the gallery.67

To the Unknown British Soldier in France also occupied a rather unspectacular position on the side wall of the main exhibition corridor, when it might easily have been placed as an arresting visual end-piece, mirroring the more dramatic London presentation.

Surprisingly, for Irish viewers expecting a feast of portraiture, the enlarged Dublin space of the “Imaging Society” section was very sparsely hung. The reduced importance the genre had been given in the London exhibition meant that little justice could be done to the 600 portraits that emerged from his prolific portrait practice. Moreover, on closer inspection it appeared that there were even less portraits on show in Dublin than in London. This was due to the conspicuous absence of Orpen’s portraits of Edward, Prince of Wales and Winston Churchill. This was a particular loss for the exhibition because the latter was one of Orpen’s most compelling commissioned works. In his newspaper review of the exhibition, Orpen’s biographer Bruce Arnold highlighted the missed opportunity for Irish viewing publics created by the absence of the two portraits. In response to the ensuing public attention, the National Gallery’s press officer published a letter in The Irish Times newspaper, politely explaining that both paintings

were unavailable. The reason for their unavailability was not provided. This weak response seems designed to detract from the possibly political motivation for Upstone’s editing down of the exhibition, an act in which the National Gallery of Ireland was apparently complicit. What Arnold and the press overlooked was that the exhibition as a whole had been adjusted in a similar fashion; not least through a substantial editing of wall texts in the section of the Dublin exhibition entitled “Ireland: Politics.” I will make a comparison here between the texts provided in the London and Dublin contexts, which, as we will see, are designed to reproduce the dominant political narratives of each location.

The following wall text introduced the section “Ireland: Politics” in London:

Orpen was born into a well-to-do Irish Protestant family from Stillorgan near Dublin. The years of his youth and early career coincided with dramatic events in Irish history. They were also the years of the literary and artistic revival, led by W.B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory, J.M. Synge, George Moore and other figures well known to Orpen, many from Protestant middle-class backgrounds similar to his own.

Orpen is categorised firmly as Protestant both at the beginning and end of this short text – the association between Protestantism and loyalty to Britain foreclosing any possible nationalist inclinations. In fact, the revival that, however unintentionally, paved the way for militant nationalism, is put back into its aesthetic – meaning non-political – corner by emphasis on it being literary and artistic. Nor is there any mention of Orpen’s active support of cultural nationalist ends, whether through his paintings, his teaching or his assistance to Hugh Lane. Furthermore, under the rubric of politics, the wall text’s blanket description of the Easter Rebellion, War of Independence and Civil War as “dramatic events in Irish history” left a lot to be desired in terms of historical specificity.

When the exhibition toured to the National Gallery in Dublin, a number of alterations were made to the wall texts. The Dublin wall text of the section “Politics: Ireland” outlined Orpen’s political relationships and refrained from stressing his Protestant middle-class identity, referring instead to his identification with Irish literary revival playwright JM Synge:

68 Valerie Keogh, Press & Communications Office, National Gallery of Ireland states in a letter published on the editorial page, of The Irish Times, 7 June 2005 that the two paintings were only made available to the exhibition’s first venue, the Imperial War Museum, London. No further explanation is provided.
Orpen was born into a well-to-do Irish Protestant family from Stillorgan near Dublin. The years of his youth and early career coincided with dramatic events in Ireland, leading to the Civil War and eventual independence from British Rule. He seems to have held an ambiguous and contradictory view of nationalist politics, partly through his absorption into the British establishment and easy relationship with the social and political elite. The years of his youth and early career also coincided with the Irish literary and artistic revival. Significantly, the one literary figure of the era that Orpen admired unequivocally was J.M. Synge.

The second half of the Imperial War Museum wall text continued in a manner that undermined the significance of Irish politics, and emphasized a steady reduction in Orpen’s affiliation with Ireland:

Between 1902 and 1915 he divided his time between London and Dublin teaching at the Metropolitan School of Art where he himself had been a star pupil. Among his students was Grace Gifford whom he personified as Young Ireland, a title that was a teasing joke about her romantic nationalism. (Gifford later married Joseph Mary Plunkett, who was shot by the British for his part in the Easter Rising). Another was the painter Sean Keating, a committed nationalist who was Orpen’s studio assistant before returning to Ireland after the start of World War I. Orpen chose to stay and joined the British Army as official war artist. He returned to Ireland for one day in 1915 but never returned thereafter.

When the Easter Rising of 1916 was named in the London text, it was in connection with fatal punishment (the shooting of a republican for his participation). In contrast there was no mention made of Joseph Plunkett’s violent death in the Dublin text. The London text’s reference to Seán Keating’s return to Ireland “after the start of World War I” concealed the coincidence of this nationalist painter’s return with the approach of the Easter Rebellion. The reference to Orpen’s personification of Grace Gifford as Young Ireland as “a teasing joke about her romantic nationalism” not only detracted from the political agency of that nationalism, but also served to affirm to the viewer that these nationalist intentions were just a joke to the artist. References to this “joke” were removed in the Dublin wall text.69

The London wall text implied that Orpen made a definitive choice to leave Ireland for good, linking this decision with his joining the British army. Upstone’s

---

69 This appears to refer to Roy Foster’s description of the painting title as “a sort of teasing joke” in his catalogue essay for the retrospective (2005a: 63).
catalogue essay presented a different story – namely that the artist was prevented from returning to Ireland despite his wishes, due to a threat on his life. In fact Orpen wrote in a letter that was on display within the retrospective that he would return “when I am allowed to come to Ireland without danger – it seems to me just taking a risk – of asking for it” (emphasis in text). In _Orpen: Mirror to an Age_ Bruce Arnold elaborated that the republican group Sinn Féin possibly sought Orpen’s collaboration in the early 1920s for its terrorist activities related to vendettas against British army officers, with whom the artist had close associations as a result of his war work (1981: 412).

It is not unusual for exhibition contents to alter depending on different contexts. The curator discusses these decisions in advance with the exhibition teams at individual venues for the exhibition. However, the political exclusions of both the London and Dublin wall texts made politics in general coincide with a specific political agenda to exclude other political views and considerations. Leaving aside the specificity of this political relationship, there are two aspects of this situation that are noteworthy in terms of the current status quo of curating. The first is Upstone’s almost total denial of what Donald Preziosi has called “the knots and conundrums” in the relationship between subjects and objects within the curatorial discourse at large. This area has long been the subject of debate in other fields, art history included. The second is the way in which this disavowal supports dominant hegemonic paradigms; namely those of the former colonial culture over the ex-colonised culture. In fact what we see here is precisely the blurred terrain between “representation within the state and political economy, on the one hand, and within the theory of the Subject, on the other,” the productivity of which Gayatri Spivak has emphasized (1999: 77-80, 177, 262-3).

Mainstream curators’ loyalty to dominant conceptions of artistic quality (with their associated value), in which the norms of professional curation are invested, tends to outweigh their interest in the ethical issues that surround representation and/or in the artistic paradigms that dominant paradigms crowd out. Identity politics discourses did little to confront this situation, as I have mentioned. It typically conflated the two kinds of representation in a manner that hindered the teasing out of the complex interrelationship between the institution’s and artist’s representative functions. The result is an ambivalent awareness of such issues among curators, who often address the issue of national identity in the most contradictory ways. We can find a typical example
of this in the abstract of the conference accompanying the Orpen retrospective, held at the Tate Gallery. The text addressed the issue of identity, but did so in a manner that left the hegemonic premises of the retrospective untouched. In fact, the terms gleaned from identity politics discourses return in the conference abstract in a connective synthesis with traditional hegemonic discourses:

[The conference is intended to] examine Orpen's career within the contexts of national identity and the relationship between British regionalism and the metropolitan centre. It asks what routes successful artists from the regions have to take to establish their careers in London. What are the artistic and cultural institutions that allow this to happen? And what do these issues contribute to questions raised by current debates on Englishness and Empire?70

Based upon the assumption that Ireland was a region of Britain during Orpen’s lifetime, the abstract forecloses debates surrounding the contested postcolonial relationship. The late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century (“the time of William Orpen”) are made continuous with the present through the verb form, as if Ireland had remained a part of Britain in Orpen’s lifetime and remained so today. Drawing on the critical currency of identity politics, the conference thus legitimates the old hegemony in the new jacket of an oppositional discourse.

Bourdieu argues that the field always operates within a field of power, which greatly affects the dynamics of discourse through its range of mechanisms intended to accumulate and preserve differentiated but convertible forms of capital. The associated power relations are rarely directly visible but occasions such as the Orpen retrospective bring them to light in unusually direct ways. In fact, when the National Gallery of Ireland stated its disapproval of the description of Orpen on the back catalogue cover as “one of the great British artists of the first quarter of the 20th century,” the political and

70 The conference announcement issued by the Imperial War Museum stated: “This conference examines Orpen’s career within the contexts of national identity and the relationship between British regionalism and the metropolitan centre.” While claiming interest in identity issues, the conceptual link between “national identity” and the relationship between “British regionalism and the metropolitan centre” is not clarified. Orpen’s Irishness is not mentioned. Furthermore, Ireland is subsumed by the lack of both geographic and political specificity in the very title of the conference Art and the Islands: Centre and Periphery in British art at the time of William Orpen, as if Ireland had remained a part of Britain. Source: Imperial War Museum information leaflet on the William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death exhibition. See also the related press release: http//www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/symposia/artandtheislandswilliamorpenconference1935.htm. Accessed August 2006.
ethical domains that underlie the apparent autonomy of the aesthetic were all but fully exposed.

The National Gallery’s challenge of British cultural authority remains unusual in the Irish context. I would suggest that it reflected the increased sense of cultural authority supported by the economic capital of the Celtic Tiger economy. Nevertheless, the Irish institution’s cultural authority was little more than tentative. Rather than insisting on the withdrawal of the London catalogue and an urgent reprinting of its cover, the gallery made a request that the cover be reprinted for Dublin distribution only. Nor were the hegemonic aspects of the London exhibition at large ever publicly challenged by the National Gallery. The Irish institution appears to have been complicit in the contradictory representation of Orpen as British outside of Ireland, once it did not impinge on his domestic reception.71 This approach may be in keeping with the cultural diplomacy that underpins the norms of international curating. Yet it falls short of the ethical demands of postcolonial cultural conditions. All of this suggests the relevance of institutional engagement with the issue of how the internal dynamics and values of the norms of professional curation interweave, problematise and fundamentally clash with the cultural and political functions of representation.

In the following chapter I will explore the repercussions of changing curatorial framings for artist’s career success during their lifetime and ask what kind of implication these framings have for artists’ development of their oeuvre. But we might also consider whether Orpen offers a way forward for curators in the present. It is certainly the case that Orpen’s oeuvre still challenges the curatorial norm of seeking to contain and restructure aspects of artists’ characters and works that act as threats to the equilibrium of established discourses. Orpen “looks into the cultural mirror” in his self-portraits (Bal 1999: 210). “The mirror supposedly reflects the self back to the subject, thereby enabling the formation of a subjectivity that can exist in the cultural world” (209).72 But it does not. From student paintings like The Mirror onwards Orpen already sought ways around this predicament. Finally, in Self-Portrait, Multiple Mirrors (1924)

71 There was also a significant backlash when historian Roy Foster, who had written an essay on Orpen’s relationship with Ireland in the retrospective catalogue, published an article firmly reclaiming Orpen for the British canon. His claims were made on grounds that disavow all aspects of the postcolonial cultural complex (2005b).
72 I draw here on Mieke Bal’s analysis of a contemporary art work by artist Carrie Mae Weems. Bal’s engagement is informed by Kaja Silverman’s (1988) use of Lacan’s theorization of the mirror stage of a child’s development. Silverman proposes, however, that the mirror stage never ends.
Orpen claimed his cultural authority as an artist by precisely undoing the authority of representation itself. In order to do so, he had to develop a new kind of representation; one which would work against the “truth” and “nature” seen to be inherent in representation-as-such. He did so by deterritorializing the norms of representation from within portraiture. I wonder if it is possible to develop curatorial equivalents – to create forms of curatorial representation that refuse to fulfill the unwritten political demands of major art as culturally neutral and make space for alternative paradigms. What would it mean to explicitly approach curating as a mirror that necessarily reflects unfaithfully; as a representation of a whole series of further representations, which may or may not be faithful to the artist’s own image? I will try to tease out the possibility of how such strategies might be incorporated within curatorial narratives in chapter four.