

—But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.

—Yes, says Bloom.

—What is it? says John Wyse.

—A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.

—By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.

So of course everyone had the laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:

—Or also living in different places.

—That covers my case, says Joe.

—What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen.

—Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.

JAMES JOYCE, *ULYSSES*, 12.1419–31

ANY U.S. CITIZEN who has traveled for any length of time in Europe has had the experience of enduring at least once, and usually with greater frequency, unsolicited civics, history, diplomatic, or cultural lessons that always begin in the same fashion: “You Americans. . . .” Customs agents, cabdrivers, hotel concierges, waiters, and a vast array of other sundry acquaintances all feel qualified to tell us what is wrong with our country, our national character, and our general demeanor, because each feels confident that he or she knows exactly not only what an American is but what an American should be. The frustration that comes from enduring one of these lectures stems at least in part from an acute awareness of the complex features that make up the nature of any individual American and from a sure sense of the heterogeneity that characterizes the United States.

Despite the optimistic view held by our nation’s forebears of our ability to coalesce—summed up in the motto “e pluribus unum”—the diverse elements of the American identity do not readily blend into a seamless whole. Indeed, heterogeneity stands as the element that best captures our national character. From this perspective, it seems a reasonable extrapolation to admit a measure of multiplicity inherent in any society, and thus remaining attentive to the contradictory features of the American psyche may facilitate comprehension of the subjective representations of national identity in the works of authors from any country. The methods for discerning meaning advanced in this study may serve as a means for negotiating that subjectivity.

In readings that pay attention to nationality as part of the interpretive process, the usefulness of an approach that accommodates narrative contradiction and multiplicity quickly becomes apparent. The epigraph from *Ulysses* quoted above illustrates the difficulties that quickly accrue in attempting to pinpoint the features of a national identity, in this case Irishness. While humorously underscoring the slipperiness of language, the exchange in Barney Kiernan’s pub more precisely highlights an all-too-human tendency

to mistake a personal concept for a generally accepted condition and to frame observations from that misprision. Bloom's ineffectual response to shifting interpretations of the term comes from his attempt to accommodate all possible contingencies by creating a sprawling definition of nationhood. Because he persists in applying an either/or system of thought that cannot sustain the multiplicities of his topic, he succeeds only in looking foolish.

Bloom's experiences have recently taken on a new pertinence, with the literature of cultural identity becoming an increasingly important topic for many contemporary critics. Given the difficulties that arise from applying conventional methods to examinations of national character, it seems appropriate for this study to use that subgenre as a final example of the efficacy of nonlinear interpretive methods. With postcolonial studies offering lively debates over the fundamental sense of terms like *race* and *ethnicity*, numerous readers are feeling a growing unease over how to integrate an understanding of cultural context into a literary interpretation.¹

Of course, ethnic studies can be pursued in any number of directions, and a pronounced interest over the last two decades of the twentieth century in the impact of postcolonialism, imperialism, and nationalism has created an abundance of examples upon which to draw.² From this interest a number of critics have devoted attention to the impact of postcolonialism. The conflicted nature of this approach has been especially apparent in studies of Irish writers—inhabitants of Europe, the predominant society of early modern colonizers, yet victims of an imperial regime. A great deal of attention has been given to the works of James Joyce, but other figures have also garnered a share of this interest.³ Whomever we might choose to examine, the salient point is that through concepts of postcolonialism we see a work from heretofore ignored perspectives. At the same time, as with other Cartesian-grounded analyses, prescriptiveness circumscribes the most popular approaches.

Among a number of interesting studies, Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* remains perhaps the most useful, and certainly the most popular, of the recent books on manifestations of Irish identity in literature. Reflective of the postcolonial temperament, Kiberd constructs his perspective of Irishness with a very vocal awareness of the influence of England, the country's colonizer for nearly a millennium. The assessment that results certainly illustrates Kiberd's skills as a close reader and a social critic, but it also highlights the problems that arise from a linear approach to national identity.

Kiberd employs a straightforward, Cartesian assessment of the impact of nearly 1,000 years of British mores on the Celtic imagination. Kiberd asserts that English occupation has led to the deracination of Irish identity. He goes on to privilege the twentieth century, beginning with the Easter Rising of 1916, as a period for the reinvention of the Irish character. Of interest, espe-

cially in terms of this study, is Kiberd's emphasis on the self-creation—through the nation's writers—of Irishness.

While Kiberd dutifully employs reference to both/and modes of perception, he stops well short of embracing subjectivity. Instead, he achieves both a measure of diversity and a reassuring equilibrium by privileging the dualities of self and other. By highlighting the importance of authenticity—in the sense advocated by Lionel Trilling—he foregrounds the validation of self-dramatization by the other. This leads, as Peter Kuch has already noted, to wavering “between a constructivist and an essentialist view of Irish identity.”⁴ That is to say, he oscillates between an objective and a subjective view. Ultimately, this becomes an effort to secure closure by imposing new limitations on an approach that has distinguished itself by overturning old restrictions. (In this fashion, Kiberd runs up against problems similar to those faced by Derrida and outlined in Mary Poovey's essay “Feminism and Deconstruction.”)

Looking back at this chapter's epigraph, the reader can understand Kiberd's dilemma. Removing either aspect of the perspective undermines the sense of complexity and contradiction that animates postcolonial thinking. Denying subjectivity within the Irish nature threatens the very individuality that postcolonial writers seek to recover from the imperial experience. Asserting that an objective Irishness does not exist would mean that the term changes from individual to individual, and so for conventional literary criticism it would have at best highly limited applicability. In a world of subjective readings, however, the term *Irishness* has no greater or lesser specificity than does any other word. What becomes significant is how the individual reads and understands that concept, for one's comprehension of it alone will inform its interpretive impact.

Such a view would impede critical discussions informed by Cartesian logic. This chapter, however, with its recourse to non-Newtonian thinking, offers an alternative method for understanding for Leopold Bloom, Declan Kiberd, and anyone else concerned with the way Irish, and by extension any national, identity is manifest in literature. Like a drop of water moving in a turbulent stream, identity in literature encompasses individual features that remain unpredictable while existing within very clearly defined borders. I am seeking to apply to the issue of ethnicity in literature those methods brought forward in the preceding chapters' analyses of the efficacy of other contemporary methodologies. To begin, I wish to assert the assumptions in this approach to ethnicity in literature that differentiate it from preceding examinations.

As I have throughout this study, I advocate here an inversion of Cartesian logic. I foreground a method privileging flux rather than closure. The title of this chapter plays off that preference for mutability by introducing a term,

fabrication, that simultaneously evokes concepts of genuine and counterfeit and suggests a plurality similar to that characterizing notions of Irish identity. Joyce uses the same punning approach in the famous lines at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which capture both the uncertainty and the enduring attraction of national identity: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."⁵ Stephen Dedalus highlights the incipient, unstable condition of Irish identity, and he articulates my own view that the construction of national character stands open to any individual willing to replicate his gesture.

As Joyce's protagonist suggests, Irish identity comes into being or remains absent as a reader's choice, part of the process of comprehending a work. This means that I can see W. B. Yeats' 1899 collection of poems, *The Wind among the Reeds*, as growing out of a general interest in mysticism or as coming from an Anglo-Irish folk culture. Similarly, I could view James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a novel typifying European angst or just as readily take it as a portrait of Irish-Catholic trauma. Or, as I will explore in this chapter, I could label *The Importance of Being Earnest* an English farce or just as easily call it an Irish satire. Further, no two readers will have exactly the same understanding of the elements that constitute any designation, a condition that has implications for the nature of Irish identity.

At the same time, invoking Irishness in an interpretation of any work—novel, poem, or play—signals what has become a fairly familiar strategy for reading. It acknowledges certain cultural forces shaping the composition of the work, and it suggests that attentiveness to those forces will inform one's interpretations. What remains an open question is how most effectively to apply that feature to an overall conception of what is there on the printed page.

While the reader occupies a central role in the fabrication of meaning, no one attentive to the impact of the composition process upon how we understand literature would advocate ignoring the background of the writer. As many contemporary critics have argued, a writer's cultural heritage inevitably exerts a shaping force upon the art that he or she produces and by extension upon what we try to comprehend. Indeed, if we relied upon the content of a work as the sole criterion for Irishness, then we could make a convincing argument that the novels of J. P. Donleavy and Thomas Flanagan would fall within that category, while the writings of Samuel Beckett and John Banville would not.

Engaging the writer's cultural heritage remains an important part of the interpretive process, but discerning its features becomes as complicated for us as defining a nation is for Bloom. My position when reading someone like Oscar Wilde necessarily embraces interpretive multiplicity. I assume that

Irishness informs his writing, but I also understand that term as fraught with indeterminacy. What I recognize as an Irish identity will come from the sense of the term that I bring to Wilde's work, and it very likely will change with each encounter. Further, the author's own views can have no interest for me. I can read Graham Greene as a Catholic writer, for instance, without feeling that I must discern his notion of Catholicism before proceeding. Indeed, given my views on subjectivity, I inevitably will apply my own conception of Catholicism to my interpretations of his work. Similarly, it is not important, for instance, whether Wilde thought of himself as Irish or as someone writing from an Irish perspective, but my impression of his Irish background has a profound effect upon the way I see his writing.

Thus, I welcome the recognition that characterizing Irishness in literature remains both a contingent and an unstable project. As Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle dictates, applying the process entails giving primacy to selected elements in a work of literature that characterize what the reader loosely conceives of as Irishness, while shifting attention away from other elements. These factors necessarily vary from individual to individual, and they reflect the impressionistic nature of any effort to discern identity. Irishness always emerges from personal conceptions, and so to understand the Irish aspects of Wilde, I need to understand how I construct it. Grasping its composition in turn helps me comprehend the assumptions that I bring to any reading. This is not an exercise in circularity. Rather, it reflects efforts to delineate the necessary ambiguity inherent in any critical inquiry. (Understanding this disparity becomes crucial when I discuss Wilde's Irishness with another reader, given the inevitable divergence between my concept of identity and his or hers.)

Whether Irishness originates within the nature of the author, emerges from a totalizing view summing up an entire culture, or manifests itself in selected cultural artifacts, the voice identifying this Irishness inevitably originates in a single imagination—that of the person who classifies it. The individual consciousness overturns rather than enforces stability. Despite the common reference point in the body of cultural artifacts that shape one's sense of Irishness, perspectives coming from the minds of diverse readers or critics, and presumably changing to greater or lesser degrees from person to person, cause every project in search of identity to emerge as a subjective endeavor. At the same time, acknowledging subjectivity does not resolve how a particular conception of Irishness informs interpretive options and in effect privileges certain meanings that I derive from the writings of Wilde. More often than not, it merely highlights the ambiguities that come into play.

Consequently, despite the centrality of Irishness to my discussion of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I will not attempt to define the term. Because

I see Irish identity as residing within the individual consciousness, its distinguishing features will vary greatly from individual to individual. (Certainly, some impressions may overlap, but, as with any highly charged subject, even the overlapping will be subject to highly individualistic interpretations. Imagine a dozen people of any nationality being asked to define the predominant characteristics that distinguish that nationality. Their general answers might very well reflect a commonality. Then, ask each what personal traits define him or her as a member of that national group. The responses would be as varied as the number queried.) The elements that an individual recognizes as characteristic of an Irish nature become evident through the interpretive process, so stepping out of specific readings to offer a broadly applicable version of Irishness would give a false impression of stability. Everyone reads a different Irish identity into a work. This does not mean that the term itself has no application in critical discourse, but understanding its usefulness requires the adoption of a new way of thinking about identity that resists the imposed closure of Cartesian logic.

Post-Einsteinian physics—an interpretive system that freely embraces subjectivity and yet enjoys high credibility as a rigorous method of inquiry—offers effective metaphors for managing the levels of uncertainty inherent in discussions of perceptions of Irish identity. The systematized subjectivity of twentieth-century physics accommodates ambiguity without the lack of an either/or resolution undermining the validity of its conclusions. (Of course, by this I do not mean to imply unanimity among physicists regarding the findings of the Copenhagen group.) Indeed, its intellectual strength rests upon the recognition that multiple and even contradictory points of view can exist simultaneously. I would like to use aspects of post-Einsteinian science to show how similar perspectives can inform views of Irish identity.

As part of the process of interpretation, I have the choice of setting the parameters of an Irish identity, imposing it or not upon various writings, and generating readings based upon my ability to dictate this identity. This function stands as the counterpart of the observer in Schrödinger's thought experiment about the cat, an illustration of the determinism exerted by the observer in quantum physics, elaborated upon in the appendix. Bringing cultural identity into existence in *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not hinge on the recognition of ethnic features or national sympathies inherent in the consciousness of Oscar Wilde or in the language of the play. Nor does it hinge upon whether Wilde's writing demonstrates that he thought of himself as Irish. Nor does the recognition of traits called "Irish" in any reading of the play produce a stable reading. Rather, Irishness comes from and continually evolves within the imagination of the individual who perceives it, and, whenever invoked, fundamentally changes the view of the work to which it is being applied.

In Schrödinger's experiment, the observer who determines the cat's viability does not worry whether the animal in question believes itself alive or dead. Nor in the case of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle does the physicist who measures an electron express nostalgia for the makeup of the unobserved particle before measurement changed its speed or direction. Likewise, despite my concern with Irish identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, I have no interest in what Wilde believed. (Indeed, turning to Wilde for direction on reading identity in the play constitutes an affinity for methodologies I do not endorse.) Nor do I care about the constitution of the text before I encountered it. Rather, I approach the play seeking ways of forming a unified, though transitory and subjective, aesthetic experience that engages my imagination in a coherent fashion.

This interpretative method does not make my awareness of Irishness in *The Importance of Being Earnest* any less authentic—just as Schrödinger's cat is no less alive for having its continuing vitality confirmed only upon being perceived and Heisenberg's electrons are not less real for changing speed or position whenever they are measured. It does, however, treat Irish identity as a force that disrupts rather than stabilizes interpretative positions about the work of Wilde or anyone else. This sense of the subjectivity of Irish identity can help us all construct texts of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Throughout this study, I have asserted my belief in the view that a work of art has no existence save in the mind of a reader. Each act of imagining grows out of concepts slightly or greatly different from those informing previous imaginings. Consequently, when I think of *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a drama informed by an Irish identity, I am configuring its fundamental composition. We already detect this sort of variation in the different descriptions of the play found in received readings. Contemporary critics have opinions of it ranging from a farcical evocation of the mores and manners of late-nineteenth-century England, to a work profoundly shaped by the tradition of British melodrama from which it emerges, to a powerful philosophical inquisition of the conventional values of Victorian literature and society.⁶ None of these studies questions the stability of the English milieu as the foundation of the play. Each simply makes a decision about its viability—like that of Schrödinger's cat—without apparently being aware of it. If, on the other hand, someone facing the same choice gives the play an Irish identity, whatever that might be, then a different work or works emerge. The gentle or not so gentle satire on the foibles of the manners, institutions, and ambitions of the English upper-middle-class presumed by the works cited above takes on an alternate form.

The approach taken here challenges the dominant objectification of Irish identity practiced by many readers. Unconsciously mimicking Bloom's sense of nationhood, critics who succumb to generalizations founded upon

their own points of view set up readings that employ the term *Irishness* as if it were a universally accepted proposition, yet they do not trouble themselves to articulate clearly what they believe the term to mean. Jerusha McCormack, for example, has published *Wilde the Irishman*, a collection of essays by various Irish critics who offer their opinions on a variety of topics related to Wilde's Irishness. Despite some fine pieces, such as Deirdre Toomey's comparison of elements of Wilde's creative process with generalizations about Irishness, assumptions that underlie the volume's structure cloud rather than clarify the issue. McCormack as editor never defines what she means by *Irishness*, especially as it relates to Wilde. This choice would certainly be acceptable if its inherent subjectivity were acknowledged. However, although various essayists offer wide-ranging comments on aspects of Wilde's Irish identity, the volume makes no effort either to reconcile or to distinguish between diverse views. Instead, McCormack leaves the reader with the impression that she believes that all her contributors are talking about the same thing, an essential Irishness that everyone understands and so never needs defining.

Critics have already noted that reading *The Importance of Being Earnest* as an Irish play allows the marginalized figures of Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff to appear as manifestations of the alienation that shaped the creative process of Wilde the Irishman writing for English audiences. Declan Kiberd has nicely extended that line of thought to suggest that nearly all of the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* occupy a position on the periphery of English society, reflecting Wilde's sense of where he had been relegated because of his Irish nature. In my approach, seeing Irishness in the play goes well beyond reconfiguring familiar characterizations or repositioning traditional roles to accommodate nationalist sentiments. An Irish point of view alters perceptions of diverse issues—ethics, sensuality, and class—that mark the play's parameters, and in doing so it reconfigures the elemental features of the text.

Of course, merely using the terms *English* and *Irish* in a reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest* may seem to reimpose the essentialist views that I have already argued against. However, my assumption of the inherent subjectivity of the process prevents this, for my sense of Englishness or Irishness reconfigures the play in a fashion different from anyone else's. To this end, the integrity of the image of the gentle comedy cherished by the critics cited above crumbles when I choose to make Irish identity a condition central to the formation of my readings, and I replace that view with a reading no less transitory. Foregrounding the Irish cultural context from which the creative process of Oscar Wilde emerged rebuffs inclinations to label the work as a tolerant lampoon of British foibles and instead invites an emphasis on alternative features.

Consequently, Irishness becomes the starting point for any number of different constructions of the play. The following examples do not offer a reading to counter those of the critics already cited. Rather, they present a series of alternative manifestations of the play, each brought into being by a different concept of Irish identity and each part of its complete comprehension.

When I think about elective affinities within *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the radical differences imposed by identity become clear. Many critics, for example, labeling the play as British in nature, invite the characterization of Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax as ingénues typical of nineteenth-century melodrama, chafing against whimsical strictures imposed upon them by English society. A fairly typical piece of dialogue midway through the play may at first seem to enforce that view:

GWENDOLEN. Mr Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends upon your reply.

CECILY. Gwendolen, our common sense is invaluable. Mr Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following questions. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?

ALGERNON. In order that I might have the opportunity of meeting you.

CECILY. [To Gwendolen.] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

GWENDOLEN. Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

CECILY. I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

GWENDOLEN. True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr Worthing, what explanation can you offer me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?

JACK. Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism.⁷

In fact, a persistent relativism charges these lines with a direct appeal to the reader's subjectivity. While the wit of this exchange remains constant, its humor varies inversely to its national affiliation. In the received interpretations that characterize the scene as informed by an English consciousness, Gwendolen and Cecily reflect the attitudes of women who have learned to manipulate the institutions of the dominant culture, playing upon conventions to direct the conduct of Jack and Algy, and then setting aside those conditions as it suits them. Their complete integration into society makes their manipulation of its forms charming.

However, seeing the play from an Irish point of view, in this case one that pays special attention to the politics of hegemony, makes it difficult to accept

the apparent inconsistencies in the natures of the two women as little more than innocuous flightiness. Instead, a number of alternative, subversive implications present themselves: I may view Gwendolen and Cecily as typifying the hypocrisy of English society; or I can find, in their reversal of conventional gender roles, a reflection of how British institutions actually function; or I might discern them offering a blueprint to outsiders seeking models for resisting the colonizing mentality of a dominant group. In any case, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies, for through my act of reading—that is, the recognition of key elements of individuals' personalities—I have changed the structure of their roles in the play.

Identity derived from national character has an impact on the way that a reader constructs even minor figures like Miss Prism and the Reverend Chasuble. When that identity takes on a subjective character, it challenges any presumption of interpretive stability. Contextualizing the following exchange on sexual appetites, for example, will ineluctably shape what I see as the nature of these individuals:

CHASUBLE. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [*Miss Prism glares.*] I spoke metaphorically—My metaphor was drawn from bees.

* * *

MISS PRISM. [*Sententiously.*] And you do not seem to realize, dear Doctor, that by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.

CHASUBLE. But is a man not equally attractive when married?

MISS PRISM. No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHASUBLE. And often, I've been told, not even to her.

MISS PRISM. That depends on the intellectual sympathies of the woman. Maturity can always be depended upon. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green. [*Dr. Chasuble starts.*] I spoke horticulturally. My metaphor was drawn from fruits. (502, 505)

Viewing these conversations as expressions of sentiments by characters of the dominant culture secure in their positions in society may dispose me to put them in a benevolent context, making their repressed sexuality a winsome trait. The shy innocence of their awkward articulations gives the exchange an engaging and harmless allure.

If, however, my reading instead recognizes an Irish point of view, synonymous with the role of the outsider deprived of the right of ordinary expression, as contextualizing the sexuality of these individuals, then enchantment disappears. Instead, the scene turns on their vulnerability, and it leads me to consider the power of their appetites and the perverse effects of repression,

rather than the quaintness of their embarrassment. This in turn emphasizes the corrosive influence of dominant English culture as it inhibits the open articulation of normal human feelings. In consequence, equivocation, no matter how banal or transparent, seems the only way to proceed in such a society. Individuals in the play take on multiple roles because to survive they must acquire the ability to blend into English society.

Indeed, once I acknowledge the possibility of constructing any number of different plays by being attentive to Irish associations, then subversion rather than melioration comes to dominate the work I am interpreting, reflected even in the seemingly quintessentially benign English character Lane, Algernon's butler:

ALGERNON. Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON. Good Heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE. I believe it is [*Wilde's emphasis*] a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON. [*Languidly.*] I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE. No sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself. (480–81)

Anglophilic P. G. Wodehouse enthusiasts may be quick to see Lane as merely a charming avatar of Jeeves. That sentimental English context leads to the assumption that Lane's tact protects Algernon from having to admit to drinking too much champagne.

When I consider the characters as operating out of an Irish identity defined by power relationships, I become attentive to the implications of Lane's dismissive gesture of marriage and of the "young person" who had been his wife. His motives or acts hardly seem benevolent, for Lane's callousness replicates the harshest aspects of the power relationship already established between himself and Algernon, while excluding all of its meliorating features. Indeed, his behavior reflects just the sort of exploitive, colonizing impulse that critics like Kiberd see operating at a microcosmic level in consequence of the macrocosmic influence of imperialism. By emphasizing a vulnerability that comes out of one sense of the Irishness of the play, I

become attentive to the social ramifications of Lane's attitude toward marriage. His brutal dismissal of his married life—"I never think of it myself"—evokes images of abandonment, poverty, and degradation. That in turn changes the status of the marriage plot that informs the central action of Wilde's drama from lighthearted burlesque to bitter satire.

In the most damning construction of national identity in the play, characters stand as self-indicted, mock-Irish figures whose desire to ape the English has only corrupted them. This is particularly evident in Lady Bracknell. From the perspective of the Irish as a marginalized group sensitive to the exclusionary inclinations of English society, it is easy to recognize Lady Bracknell as a *nouveau riche* parvenue of the worst sort, very much outside the class with which she attempts to associate herself.⁸ Her position in society becomes eminently clear in the exchange that she has with Jack when he seeks permission to marry Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell's outline of the desirable characteristics of a prospective son-in-law sketches a view of the world as far outside the mainstream as that of the most eccentric of Wilde's creations:

Mr Worthing, I confess that I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion—has probably, indeed been used for that purpose before now—but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

* * *

You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloak-room and form an alliance with a parcel. Good morning, Mr Worthing. (495)

In language no less blunt than the contemptuous dismissal of the English by Joyce's Prof. McHugh—"I speak the tongue of a race the acme of whose mentality is the maxim: time is money" (*U*, 7.555–56)—Lady Bracknell unconsciously indicts herself as guilty of the same provincial mendacity.

Joyce's summation of the English mentality enforces the usefulness of structuring the scene from a particular Irish perspective. In the *Aeolus* chapter of *Ulysses*, where McHugh's comments appear, the discourse has focused attention on the debased mercantilism of the English through frequent invocations of the Irish-Greek/English-Roman analogue. Just as the English language has usurped Prof. McHugh's access to Irish, the English mentality endeavors to circumscribe his nation's imaginative freedom. In *The Impor-*

tance of Being Earnest a similar association has emerged that goes beyond the quaint snobbery of an English view of Lady Bracknell. Instead it offers a glimpse of the soul-deadening influence of the materialist world of the colonizers, one that unflinchingly pollutes the culture that it has come to dominate. In this light, Lady Bracknell and her values represent more than simply the usurpation of Jack's life as a bachelor. They stand ready to corrupt his very humanity.

The final lines of *The Importance of Being Earnest* aptly illustrate how different plays emerge from my decision to read an Irish identity into it:

JACK. Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN. I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

* * *

LADY BRACKNELL. My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

JACK. On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest. (537–38)

Once again, critics, like those cited above, who have contextualized the play within the secure attitudes of an English perspective have removed all menace from this conclusion. The contradictions in Jack's behavior underscore his nonchalance, and Lady Bracknell's criticism merely echoes the play's subtitle: *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The double entendre of *Earnest* and *Ernest* in the last line allows Jack to give an answer that will satisfy the contradictory needs of Lady Bracknell and of Gwendolen. It thus calls to mind the wit at the center of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and gives the pleasure of hearing the play end upon a pun that extends its harmless ambiguity.

When I adopt an Irish point of view that emphasizes the significance of using language to avoid closure, however, the homophonic mutability of Jack's response must lead to a far harsher reading. Jack's reply in fact subverts what it ostensibly establishes. He attests to the impotence of being earnest by using wordplay to drain his remarks of all sincerity. With this dexterous articulation, Jack shows that he has overcome the repercussions of the uncomfortable revelation "that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" by becoming adept at manipulating the way others comprehend a situation. Now, he no longer finds himself constrained to adopt one pose in the country and another in the city. Rather, he has learned how language allows him to sustain both simultaneously. This makes *The Importance of Being Earnest* for me the very embodiment of its subtitle—a trivial play for serious (though not principled) people—for it has shown how even the most apparently flippant rhetorical stance can produce highly effective control.

While the directness of being earnest robs Jack's language of its power, the ambiguity of being earnest/Ernest gives him mastery of the situation.

The very slipperiness of language, highlighted in the opening pages of this study and reiterated in these examples, serves to sustain the approach that I am advocating. I have claimed that every interpretive effort changes the text under examination so that every reading is literally of a different work. The concepts of Schrödinger's Cat and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle are crucial to this claim. They demonstrate the volatility of any act of observation and exemplify how no two readings ever talk about the same piece of writing. Any effort to give meaning to *The Importance of Being Earnest* always refers to a play that exists only in a single, highly subjective experience.

At the same time, calling a reading subjective is not the same as saying it is irrelevant. Indeed, subjectivity stands as an important concept for understanding the evolving reading process that an aesthetically satisfying work like *The Importance of Being Earnest* will stimulate. One critic publishes subjective views for the same reason that another publishes putatively objective ones: not because any reach a definitive interpretation, but rather because watching the interpretive process unfold remains valuable not only to the critic who instigates it but to any interested reader who observes it.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, a nationalist disposition within individual readings of *The Importance of Being Earnest* radically reforms the work under consideration yet does so from an overtly personalized point of view. Indeed, the Irish character remains an unstable, changeable condition that calls into question its efficacy as a secure measure of any aspect of writing. The subjectivity of the concept makes it useless for critics to presume to exchange ideas about a fixed Irish identity or to imagine the possibility of regularizing its impact upon any work that they all have read. Rather, an individual interacts with literature to produce a text unique to each engagement, and interpretations stand out as a form of creation, self-contained and transient. In short, our critical writings do not explain any piece of literature, but rather dramatize our creation of it. In consequence, the best of these demonstrations provoke readers to make further explorations of their own responses, while the worst remain self-centered performances.

If a person is able to accept the paradigm of post-Einsteinian thought, exemplified by the story of Schrödinger's cat and the tenets of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the aims and values of literary criticism change radically. With these concepts as a guide, certitude and closure no longer dominate our interpretive impulses. Instead, it becomes possible to exchange with other readers aesthetic impressions based upon common interests, such as the impact of nationality, without falling into a reductive articulation of a concept such as Irish identity.