

## Displacemeants – the Theatrical Art of John Byrne

### Cairns Craig

The opening scene of John Byrne's television drama *Your Cheatin' Heart* takes place in a prison, where Cissie Crouch appears in 'dark grey and white horizontally-striped suit buttoned to the throat and with a number tag stitched to the breast pocket', a uniform the audience will recognise as that of an American penitentiary inmate. It is not Cissie who is the inmate, however, but her husband Dorwood, whose career as a Country 'n' Western singer has been cut short by incarceration in Glasgow's Barlinnie prison for drug dealing. Barlinnie itself is commonly known as the 'Bar-L', as though it is out of some Western movie, but that name has, in turn, been adopted by Glasgow's 'newest piano bar and grill' in which Cissie is an appropriately uniformed waitress. Inmates of their respective 'Bar-Ls', Dorwood and Cissie are the inhabitants of a world in which an all-too-real Glasgow of drugs and crime is insistently displaced by an imaginary America based on movies and Country 'n' Western music. Invaded by the iconic elements of American popular culture, any recognisable Scotland is concealed behind the surfaces of an apparently American society, so that in 1980s Glasgow it is possible that 'a big red Chevrolet Drophead hoves into view, and draws up outside Bruno's Late Nite Barber Shop. David Cole, ultra-cool in his belted topcoat and shades steps out. Inside, Bruno's remains unaltered since the 1950s, right down to the row of latest hairstyles, 'Olympic', 'Tony Curtis', 'Blow-wave', 'Jeff Chandler' . . .' (YCH, 571). The Americana, however, are simply simulacra which Scottish voices and Scottish meanings constantly adapt to their own purposes – as when a carpenter described as the 'Tall Cowpoke' casts aspersions on a previous joiner as 'some bloody cowboy' (YCH, 568), the 'cowboy' of the Westerns being domesticated into the Scottish vernacular for a fly-by-night tradesman. If Scottish experience in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by emigration, so that Scotland itself became a diasporic culture, its iconic forms shaped by the imaginations of Scots in the United States and Canada, in the second half of the twentieth century, in Byrne's plays, the process is reversed, and Scotland becomes a place whose local experiences are reshaped by a North American imagination.

It has long been argued that Scotland is a culture particularly conducive to schizophrenia and to doubles, but in Byrne's plays the traditional dissociations between Highland and Lowland, Gaelic and Scots, Calvinist and pagan are replaced by a double culture which is at once international and local, American and Scottish. The dynamics of his plays are driven by the misunderstandings, disjunctions and displacements that are generated by the translations between these very different cultural environments. When Dorwood, having escaped on to the roof of the prison, yells to reporters waiting outside a message intended for Cissie – 'There's my redundancy money off the rigs inside the Gene Autry wireless, tell her' – the name of the American-badged radio is heard by the reporters as 'Jean' rather than 'Gene', leading to the invention of an additional character to the play's *dramatis personae*: 'He's just after tellin' us the wife's name was Cissie, what one we supposed to bring back, the wife or the fancy wumman?' (YCH, 577). The characters of *Your Cheatin' Heart* live in a constant process of double-take as they switch between the real and metaphorical environments of Scotland and America, equally at home and equally foreign in each, inhabitants of a culture which can no longer be defined by the boundaries of its own geography or past history. As Tracey, one of the waitresses in the Bar-L, says to the Tall Cowpoke when asked for the whereabouts of her boss: 'I'm just after tellin' you, the boss isnae here, he's went for a haircut . . . (Loudly) Shirley? You talk C 'n' W, come and translate for us . . . (To Tall Cowpoke) . . . he's away gettin' scalped, yeh?' (YCH, 564). 'Translation' into the forms of a stereotypic American culture is essential if communication is to be successful. Regular failures of translation leave all the characters feeling, as Frank does, that 'I get the distinct impression I've just landed on Mars an' I've left my Baedeker in my other boilersuit' (YCH, 558).

In this Scottish environment it is the symbols of American culture that represent the most valuable of cultural assets, as Frank finds out when, retching in a gents toilet, he discovers that the pan provides an appropriate echo chamber for him to imitate Elvis Presley – ‘Well, since ma baby left me, I found a new place to dwell’ – but thereby invokes the wrath of Fraser Boyle, who kicks down the cubicle door to wreak vengeance on the desecrator of a sacred cultural icon: ‘Frank lifts his head out of the toilet bowl as Fraser Boyle’s gloved fist smashes into his face’ (*YCH*, 529). The traditional violence of Glasgow gangland is translated into an enraged defence of the perfection of American pop music, just as, in *The Slab Boys*, the deference associated with the British monarchy has been transferred to the metaphoric monarch of rock ‘n’ roll:

**Bernadette.** It’s right creepy over there, isn’t it?

**Terry.** All those crazy catafalques? Yeah. (Pause) What do you suppose they’ll do when the King cops his lot?

**Bernadette.** He has. Nineteen fifty-two . . . we got a day off school.

**Terry.** Big El, I’m talking about! Many Kings d’you think there is? (TSB, 80)

In the aftermath of the death of British King the one and only King is American, and the Scottish characters of Byrne’s plays are his imperial subjects, living in the misplaced State of a displaced Union.

#### I. Displacements

The verbal comedy of John Byrne’s plays derives in large measure from its manipulation of misplaced clauses and misattributed references. At the opening of *The Slab Boys*, Spanky says to Phil, ‘Willie Curry was in ten minutes ago looking for that lemon yellow you promised but I told him you had diarrhoea and you’d take a big dish of it down to him later on’ (TSB, 5). The dish of ‘lemon yellow’ colouring required for carpet design becomes a dish of diarrhoea, and, as in physical slapstick, this verbal humour depends on an apparently accidental conjunction producing an appropriate and intentionally executed outcome. A dish of diarrhoea is precisely what they would like to offer Curry every time they have to take him a dish of colour because spiritual diarrhoea is what they get from having to witness the ‘curry’ of his favour that is sought by the other workers in the carpet factory. A displaced clause, like a custard pie accidentally hitting an appropriate target, reveals a truth which cannot properly be spoken. Such displaced meanings – or, as we might call them, displacements – may occur within the speech of a single character or may occur in the dramatic interplay between characters whose meanings are at cross purposes with one another:

**Bernadette.** What’d he gets his books for?

**Lucille.** Giving up cheek most likely . . . he’s a cheeky swine. You want to’ve seen the birthday card he gave us.

**Bernadette.** Eh? What’s cheeky about that? Last time I got a birthday card I was in a nappy.

**Lucille.** Bet you it wasn’t filthy but.

**Bernadette.** Course not. I was a very careful baby. (TSB, 55)

The retrospective double-take on the ‘it’ is an unintended displacement which is then claimed as intentional through Bernadette’s desire to take personal credit from her interpretation, transposing the habits of her adult personality back into her childhood. Displacement thus develops its own logic, generating alternative and incompatible worlds out of the accidental crossings of language. Challenged by Cissie about his heartlessness when ‘next door’s alsatian just went under a Dodge City delivery truck’, Fraser Boyle repeatedly tries to correct her, implying (to the audience) that such

heartlessness is beyond him. When Cissie leaves, however, the nature of the correction is made clear in an accidental conversation with another waitress:

**Shirley.** Can I get you something?

**Boyle.** Stupid bitch, it was an airedale.  
(Shirley's smile evaporates)

**Shirley.** Okay, cool it cowboy. I'm not a mind-reader. (Loudly) One Airedale! (To Boyle) Do you want a slice of lemon in it? (YCH, 534)

The dead airedale, first displaced by an alsatian, is given an entirely new reference in Shirley's lexicon of cocktails, indicative of how, in the cocktail of the real and the imaginary which are Byrne's version of modern Scotland, the real is continually being displaced by the limitless logic that develops from misunderstood and misapplied references.

Such misappropriated denotations produce precisely that conflict of two alternative but equally viable meanings that Arthur Koestler, in his study of the workings of humour, described as 'bisociation', 'the perceiving of a situation or idea . . . in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference'.<sup>1</sup> In Byrne's dramas, however, verbal displacements are symptoms of a deeper confusion of signifying contexts, one produced by the invalidation of the systems of belief by which life traditionally has been given meaning. Those belief systems have become a language without any real referent in the modern world and much of the 'bisociation' of *The Slab Boys* is generated from the irrelevance of traditional languages of value when transposed into Phil and Spanky's rhetoric. They live for instance, in the immediate aftermath of a World War whose heroism – caricatured in Mr Curry's memories of 'men in my platoon fighting the Japanese with dysentery', to which Spanky retorts, 'How did they fire it . . . from chip baskets?' (TSB, 5) – no longer has any significance except as a stereotype to be mocked:

**Spanky.** That's right, Phil . . . you tell the young Turk. Don't think you can let rip with that kind of talk in the Slab Room. We fought two Worldwars for the likes of you. That lad there lost a couple of legs at Wipers so the world would be a cleaner and better place . . .

**Phil.** Where a man could walk tall . . .

**Spanky.** Legs or no legs . . . (TSB, 8)

In the Slab Room, 'Hector' is no longer the name of a hero, and Hector's memories of his uncle who died on the Royal Oak are the occasion only for a series of jokes about homosexual sailors, jokes whose displaced consequences we will only discover in *Still Life* when Hector is himself murdered in a casual homosexual encounter. Equally, the ethics of a working class traditionally committed to its own progress have become as irrelevant – 'you think twice before lurching in here and accusing the brother and me of not giving a monkey's. The designing of carpets for the hoi polloi may mean nothing to you, Hogg, but it means a damn sight less to us' (SL, 26) – as the world of domestic affection, symbolised by the sadistically mistreated Sadie, who advises Lucille that men are a waste of time: 'You can afford to sift through the dross . . . till you come to the real rubbish at the bottom' (SL, 36). In the Slab Room, traditional concepts with no modern referent are revived for momentary comic effect – 'What does Phil do anything for? Laughs, of course' (TSB, 18) – only to underline their fundamental irrelevance. Hector notes, for instance, that Phil and Spanky believe their failure to be promoted is owing to the fact that they do not belong to the masons, an assertion which produces a virtuoso of improvisatory invention on the bigotry which sustains and underpins the economics of working class experience in the West of Scotland:

**Hector.** How come if everybody's a mason you and Phil are working here . . . eh?  
Tell us that . . .

**Spanky.** I lied about my age and Phil there swore to Waldo Bathtubs he'd flush his Nine Fridays down the pan if only we could get to be Slab boys. Aw, no . . . when Mr Bathtub took me into his office, grasped my hand . . . strangely but firmly . . . and offered me one pound, two and nine a week . . . I went straight home and set fire to my scapulas . . .

**Phil.** And don't think it wasn't sore . . . I was there when he done it. Soon as Father Durkin heard we were working here . . .

**Spanky.** Phil's Auntie Fay got beat up by the Children of Mary . . .

**Phil.** Gave her a right doing . . .

**Spanky.** She had to go to Lourdes . . .

**Phil.** And the entire family were refused entry to Carfin Grotto

**Spanky.** And that really hurt. They were out there every Holiday of Obligation . . . down on their knees . . .

**Phil.** Dragging the ponds for money . . .

**Spanky.** Having a quick burst on the beads . . .

**Phil.** Heh, that's an idea. You ready? (Together) In the Name of the Father . . . and of the Son . . . (TSB, 7)

The world of dead-end labour from which there is no 'resurrection' – the boys are on 'the slab' as though they are already bodies in a morgue – is transformed into a surreal narrative in which the language of religion becomes simply an extension of the world of economic desperation and intimidatory violence in which they believe themselves to live.

In the interchanges between Phil and Spanky such bisociations do not simply exploit accidental intersections between alternative contexts of meaning: they are theatrically performed as a series of intentional misunderstandings – displaced meanings that are meant – in order to create a private language game that binds them together in solidarity against the meanings of the rest of the world. The Slab Room – symbolic of capitalism's subjection of art to economics, since Phil and Spanky are preparing colours for the designers of carpets rather than expressing their own artistic ambitions – is also a stage – a play within a play – where Phil and Spanky encourage each other to reinvent the meanings they inherit and the identities the world assigns to them. Misnaming the people around them – Mr Curry becomes Curly and Curfew, Alan Downie becomes Alec Dowdall – Phil and Spanky linguistically displace the world in which they are the lowest in the workplace hierarchy, acting to others' orders, and replace it with a world of their own creation, a world over which they have total control because it is a theatrical space for their own imaginative performances. In the Slab Room of their imaginations Phil and Spanky are the writers and directors of a theatre in which all the other characters are simply bit players in a drama they cannot understand. People enter the Slab Room to be transformed into roles assigned to them by Phil and Spanky and to find that their 'real' identities have been given alternative meanings:

**Phil.** ...And this (grabs HECTOR) is what we cry a Slab Boy.

**Spanky.** You say it ... 'Slab Boy'.

**Phil.** Note the keen eye ... the firm set of the jaw ...

**Spanky.** They're forced up under cucumber frames ...

**Phil.** Note too the arse hanging out of the trousers ... this last because the Slab Boy, for all he is a special breed ...

**Spanky.** Trained to a hair ...

**Phil.** ...is expected to put in a full eight hours sweated labour a fortnight for a few measly shillings ...

**Spanky** ... and all the gum crystal he can eat ...  
**Phil.** Hence the firm set of the jaw. (TSB, 6-7)

The Slab Boy who is simply a hired hand of the 'firm' is redesigned as a character in a private drama, the consequences of poverty and inferiority re-presented as stylistic choices. Such reinvention of reality through language leads directly into the actual restyling of Hector – with crudely cut clothes and hair – to make him a character capable of asking Lucille to the staff ball. Linguistic fantasy is translated into an enacted reality – Hector's performance as a stylish aspirant to Lucille's hand – even though it is a reality which is denied by the other characters when they encounter it. The imagination-run-riot of the Slab Room is a comedic displacement by which an unacceptable reality is made manageable: 'What me and him's done is give Hector the courage to go and ask Lucille straight for a date instead of wishing his life away. OK. So she's going to crease herself but you think twice before you start applying your stupid counterfeit Boy's Own Paper code of 'fair play' in here. You don't know you're living sweetheart!' (TSB, 33). Phil and Spanky create an 'unfair play' in which what is not meant – that Lucille should entertain a proposal from Hector – can still be believed in: the unfairness they inflict on Hector is balanced against the possible significance – however absurd – with which they dignify his actions. In the Slab Room it is as though the world that the characters actually inhabit is not merely a series of accidents but a drama with a plot in which they have been cast as characters that are truly meant: their displacement is transformed imaginatively into displacement.

## II. In Media Res

Byrne's characters are determinedly surrounded by things: clothes, shoes, furnishings, decor define their existence. They are, quite literally, in media res. In *Cuttin' a Rug* Spanky answers Lucille's query as to whether 'anybody' has been looking for her with the retort that 'there was a dinner suit walked in a second ago but it was hard to tell if there was anybody inside it' (CAR, 73). Clothes become identity in a process of reification that is symptomatic of a world in which the meanings of people's lives are constantly absorbed into the things which they use – or by which they are used. The initial scenes of the play are full of confusion between things and people:

**Alan.** Is that your bike in the car park?  
**Terry.** Oh, oh dig the get-up . . . must be one of the bosses . . .  
**Alan.** The big Five Hundred job?  
**Terry.** Mebbe it is . . . and mebbe it isn't.  
**Alan.** I think we passed you in George Street. You and your girl were going into that little pub . . . the Jolly Beggars. Heavy on the juice is she?  
**Terry.** Better watch out what I'm telling this guy. No, just the odd vodka.  
**Alan.** No . . . m.p.g.  
**Terry.** Oh. I wonder if he's 'plain clothes'? Er . . .  
**Alan.** Bet he doesn't even know what m.p.g. means.  
**Terry.** So so . . . yeh, so so.  
**Alan.** I've been trying to persuade my dad to let me get my leg over something like that for ages . . .  
**Terry.** What's he on about now . . . the bint or the bike?  
**Alan.** But he says they're very deceptive. Look as though they're fast but aren't . . . knock a great hole in your pocketbook . . . and they can be pretty painful on the crotch. (CAR, 53)

In the course of the conversation bike and woman become indistinguishable: we are in a world where people and things have become substitutes for one another, their identities defined by the

styles they choose to wear and, at the same time, reduced to the things with which they are identified.

The things – res – by which Byrne's characters are defined are not simply objects into whose being they project themselves, or to whose being they subject themselves, in that process of reification which Marx identified as crucial to the development of capitalism. Objects and identities in Byrne's plays are not so much produced as reproduced; they are not imitations of the real as conceived in Aristotelian theories of dramatic mimesis, but imitations of imitations, failed efforts to re-present in a lower environment the ultimate Platonic forms of a media-generated reality. Symbolically, the business of Eddie Clockerty – manager of the Majestics, whose Silver Jubilee Tour in Tutti Frutti (con)fuses the map of Scotland with the history of Rock 'n' Roll – is a constant war against the failure of the things of the media: advertising tee shirts with only one arm, vinyl records with no grooves. With increasing intensity as he moves from stage to television film, and to the additional range of effects which the latter makes possible, Byrne makes his characters a function of the media whose facades they copy. The Elvis Presley lookalikes of *Cuttin' a Rug* are a prophecy the way in which Spanky is transformed by pop culture from a person with a possible identity into a series of gestural and verbal clichés derived from the media:

**Phil.** What are you doing here?

**Spanky.** Huh?

**Phil.** Eh?

**Spanky.** I came to see you, man ... what is this? Hey ... come on ... it's cool ... where's it at if you don't know where fuck it's at ... right? (SL, 115)

In *Your Cheatin' Heart*, female taxi-driver Billie is transformed into a Country 'n' Western 'McPhail Sister' just as insistently as the leader of the bikers who provide the context of the drama's climax has designed himself on the 'model of the young Brando of *The Wild One* fame' (YCH, 645). People and things are no longer a function of their local context: their lives are cut cross and disrupted as, in media res, they become media replications. So the Majestics on their Jubilee Tour are not only an imitation of the archetypal rock bands of the 1960s, but an imitation of themselves, with Danny standing in for his dead brother, Big Jazza. They have become an unending reiteration of their once-upon-a-time appearance on Top-of-the-Pops. In front of a shop front full of televisions in which his own earlier incarnation as a Majestic from the era of black and white live television is being played, Vincent collapses, physically and morally, his 'identity' revealed as an endless replication of a momentary media projection. Tutti Frutti is an exploration of the world as impersonation, of a world that is not so much in media res as res in media, a world of people and things deriving such identity as they have from their repetition of pre-existing media presentations.

It is this media-dominated world that is dramatised in a scene in *Your Cheatin' Heart* in which Libo Ragazzo, an Scottish-American-Italian, in the Holiday Inn in Glasgow, is trying to phone home to Detroit. At the same time, in the room, the television is showing the Deadwood Playboys performing in their video of *Your Cheatin' Heart* while, on the radio, a conversation is taking place between the radio DJ and Frank, who has commandeered the station's radio car from their roving reporter Tamara. The dialogue which ensues involves a continual displacement of meanings between the various conversations, while the visual imagery of the television provides a meta-commentary upon the action:

**Ragazzo.**(into phone) Hullo?

**Radio DJ.** (to radio car) . . . Hullo, Tamara?

**Ragazzo.**(into phone) Is that you, Phil?

**Frank.** (into carphone, over radio) Aw naw, it's that clown off the wireless . . .  
**Ragazzo.**(into phone) Naw, it's me . . . Libo.  
**Radio** (to radio car) Is that you, Brian?  
**DJ.**  
**Frank.** (into carphone, over radio) Hullo? You're through to  
. . . (YCH, 641)

As they pass through the various media of communication involved, identities are constantly transposed and confused. Marshall McLuhan may have declared the medium to be the message, but in Byrne's plays the medium is the false messenger, disconnecting rather than connecting those who are trying to establish communication, continually distracting them by the multiplicity of media within which they have to operate. Miscommunication, in which the medium becomes a barrier to the message, is the fundamental mode of *Your Cheatin' Heart*, from Frank's accidental acquisition of Fraser Boyle's diary, with its real orders for drugs masquerading as supposed orders for fish, to Dorwood's redundancy money stashed inside a Gene Autry radio. The message is always perverted and diverted by the media in which it is entangled.

Since direct human communication has become so difficult, it is through the objects of this simulated world that exchanges between human beings are conducted, and iconic objects circulate through the plays like an alternative currency, rich in significances that are entirely accidental to their real nature. The threatening potential of such exchanges is represented in *The Slab Boys* by Jack's 'plooks', which become an ominous possible medium of exchange between the characters:

**Lucille.** I thought what Jack had wasn't infectious? He told Miss Walkinshaw he's getting treatment for it. . .  
**Phil.** He would say that, sweetheart. He's what you call a 'carrier', you see. Like some people are carriers for infantile paralysis . . . some are carriers for smallpox . . . Jack's a carrier for plooks. (TSB, 27)

The potential transmission of Jack's plooks becomes, in *Still Life*, the real transmission of Jack's values in the form of blazers which he provides to Spanky's pop group and which Spanky, in retrospect, will deny ever having worn:

**Spanky.**Your bloody arse! Maybe the other tools wore them . . . not me . . . you joking!  
**Phil.** You did so wear one. Your maw's got the photograph on top of the cocktail cabinet. Come on . . . don't act like you don't remember it. Vents up to here and four patch pockets?  
**Spanky.**No . . . I've no recollection of my maw ever having a cocktail cabinet of that description. (SL, 118)

The displacement of blazer to cocktail cabinet is an attempt to deny the medium of exchange by which, in the cocktail of identities that he has inhabited, Spanky has been 'infected' by Jack's commercialism just as surely as he would have been infected had he caught his plooks. Similarly, in *Your Cheatin' Heart*, as Frank travels from Glasgow to Aberdeen and back, he encounters character after character draped in his lost coat, like the insignia of some secret society. Frank's coat has ceased to be a simple object-in-itself and has become the unintentional medium for the exchange of meanings that Frank can never grasp and which, like the coat, always escape his control.

The ultimate medium of exchange between human beings is the exchange of genes, and just as objects become the secret bearers of relationships that the characters refuse to acknowledge, so

Byrne's plays are dominated by genetic relationships whose message has become garbled in the transmission – mad parents, shared wives, lost children, the debris of bodily communications whose meaning has been disrupted between communicant and recipient. In *Tutti Frutti* Danny considers that he 'was not to be thwarted. "Now that we've slept together," he repeated, "I can in all conscience kid myself on it's mine when it arrives." Yeah – he knew it was crazy and noble – but that was the kind of guy he was, right?' (TF, 59). Danny's 'kid' will be a 'kid on', just as Vincent's real child will challenge Bomba as being her father because of a 'fake gold pendant' inscribed with the chorus, 'I'll Never get Over You. All My Loving, Bomba', which Vincent had given to her mother. Sex, as the most potent means of communication, is the one which most pervasively confuses its meanings in Byrne's plays. At the end of *Still Life*, Spanky and Phil will both be fathers to Lucille's children, their genes linked as insistently as their life paths have diverged.

What is true of the individual characters is true, too, of Scotland, which becomes, in Byrne's work, a place of exchange, its characters in constant transit between London, New York, Glasgow and Aberdeen (not to mention, in the case of the *Majestics*, Methil and Buckie!), the meanings of their lives, like the significance of Frank's tattoo of 'The Eagle of the Apocalypse and Sidewinders of Satan', changing with each shift of context. When Frank encounters a biker with the same tattoo as himself the conversation implies a consanguinity based on the similarities of tattoo that the vocabulary of their vernaculars deny:

(*The Toad peers at Frank's tattoo, then at his own*) [. . .]

**The Toad.** . . . I didnae ken ye wur a Loon, ken?

**Frank.** Yeh, right. (To Cissie) What's a 'Loonken'? (YCH, 651)

The unrecognised, misheard word offers us a crucial key to *Your Cheatin' Heart*, since the fundamental issue for Cissie is how she could know the son who has been taken from her, how she would her 'loon ken'. In the play's final scene, on Aberdeen beach, a four-year old child who might be hers passes her by, each unrecognisable by the other, each become a message lost in the excess of meanings that is modern Scotland – a place of crossings, a passage in the middle of things whose contradictory definitions flow from and towards other places.

### III. Incongruous contiguities

The 'displacemeants' of Byrne's plays depend on the disruption of our expectations of how things in the world occur in physical proximity to one another. In the opening scene of *Cuttin' a Rug*, for instance, the audience see in alternation the ladies' and gents' cloakrooms in Paisley Town Hall and the conversations going on within each of them become conversations between them, creating contiguities of which the characters are unaware. Such spatial juxtapositions and disruptions are the vocabulary of Byrne's plays, as when Frank, in *Your Cheatin' Heart*, declares that his apartment is 'listed in at least one agent's books as a "des con enviably adj to 'Merchant City"', while Cissie, looking out of the window, takes note of an alternative 'adjacency' when she spots a 'clutch of winos huddled around burning garbage on the wasteground opposite' and enquires if 'these'll be some of the "merchants" havin' themselves an informal Round Table tête-a- tête over a glass of Buckfast "Nouveau"' (YCH, 541). Contiguity we assume to be fundamental to our experience, but alternative contiguities produce displacements as well as emplacements, and instead of the continuity we expect between adjacent aspects of experience contiguity produces disjunction: contiguity is not congruity, and it is from the incongruous conflicts of the contiguous that Byrne derives much of his comedy.

Cissie, for instance, accounts for her plight as the wife of a jailbird on the basis that, 'things were fine till he bumped into Fraser Boyle in a submersible just south of Piper Omega an' started swappin'

Country albums with a trouble-shooter called Dwane' (*YCH*, 542). The accidental contiguity of Dorwood and Boyle produces the incongruity of a 'submersible' and 'Country' culture. The incongruous accidents of contiguity form the armatures of Byrne's plots, illustrated when Frank is drawn into Cissie's problems with Dorwood as a result of the fact that both Frank – as the gastronome Rab Haw, who sentences restaurants like the Bar-L with his reviews – and Dorwood – whose sentence is seven years in the Bar-L – happen to appear contiguously in the same newspaper. 'It's one of those days, innit', says Frank, 'You ever read Koestler's *The Roots of . . .*?' To Cissie's exclamation, 'What the bloody hell has Koestler got to do with Dorwood gettin' sent to jail for seven years!' (*YCH*, 537), the play's answer has to be 'everything', since the play balances against each other a world of casual contiguity, of mere accident, and a world such as the one that Koestler envisaged, in which the coincidences of contiguity are not mere accident but are profoundly meaningful.<sup>2</sup> The 'displacemeants' that Phil and Spanky construct in the Slab Room, turning the world's accidents into a meaningful series of events, is enacted in *Your Cheatin' Heart* in the conflict between the apparently accidental structure of the plot and meaningful contiguities by which the author engineers a world full of secret meanings. The 'Roots of Coincidence' point in two directions – towards a meaningless world shaped entirely by accidental contiguities, coincidences, or towards a structured world in which coincidences are rooted in meaningful congruities. Whether the world is accident or art, absurd or redeemed, depends on whether contiguity is simply accidental juxtaposition or whether it implies some profound congruity that draws events together into a meaningful pattern. The issue posed with increasing intensity in each of Byrne's plays is whether there are roots to coincidence that turn accident from displacement into displacemeant.

In *The Slab Boys* trilogy the accidental and the coincidental is turned into pattern through the force of repetition. In *Cuttin' a Rug*, the present is haunted by the fact that it falls, like each staff dance, into the same pattern as the past; Curry will make the same jokes and the same kinds of disasters will occur to disrupt the evening's harmony. 'How the time rolls by, eh? It hardly seems a twelvemonth since I was standing at this mike gazing out over an ocean of dickie suits . . .' (*CAR*, 63). Repetition is so fundamental to this world that Sadie is approached by Mr Barton to take up the job that her mother had done: 'Oh, aye, this looks like another right mug'. Is that what you mean? 'Let's see if this wee bachle'll come and skivvy for a handful of washers like her daft mammy' eh? Listen, it was her feet she passed on, not her bloody IQ.' (*CAR*, 63). And so insistent is the sense of repetition that it could only be subverted by a refusal to allow things to come into existence at all: 'Have you ever had a mother, Philip? Take my advice, darling, they're not bloody worth it. If I'd known forty-whatever years ago what it was going to be like I'd've asked the midwife just to stuff me back up, put in a couple of stitches and tell the old cow it was wind' (*CAR*, 86). To begin is to repeat, and though repetition is meaningless in itself it is only repetition that makes meaningful the incongruities of existence in industrial Paisley.

A world of temporal repetition is a world that can never escape the power of spatial contiguity. Thus the terrace outside the hall in which the staff dance is being held is juxtaposed with the view of the cemetery that it overlooks:

**Spanky.** D'you think we'll ever get away from here, Phil?

**Phil.** Sure . . . straight after the Last Waltz.

**Spanky.** Paisley, I mean. I don't want to end up across there. (*CAR*, 79)

Contiguity in time turns inevitably into contiguity in space: everything will simply repeat itself until it is over and ends up in the cemetery next door. A life ruled by contiguity ends contiguously, and Phil and Spanky will end up, in *Still Life*, debating in the cemetery their relationship with Lucille, the girl who becomes wife to both of them because of her contiguity in the factory. The 'girl next door' leads, apparently, straight to the cemetery next door.

In this world of repetition, real processes of temporal change become an illusion. What, for one character, is a matter of contiguity – two periods of time which directly connect with one another – is, for all of the other characters, a matter of displacement, the failure of any congruence between the present and the past. So, in *The Slab Boys*, Mr Curry lives his life in the carpet factory in a continual series of conjunctions with his life in the Second World War, the reminiscence of the latter justifying his actions in the former, as though the two were not simply accidentally conjoined. For Phil and Spanky, on the other hand, the contiguity is simply an accident which Curry happens to have lived through, one whose language has no congruence with the world in which he now lives:

**Curry.** . . . How's that gum coming along, Farrell? I take it that is gum you're making?

**Spanky.** Yeh . . . there was an awful lot of straw in that last lot of crystals so . . .

**Curry.** Probably camel chips . . .

**Spanky.** Eh?

**Curry.** Dung . . . camel droppings . . . let's have a look . . . yes . . . we used to burn a lot of this stuff under our billies out East . . .

**Spanky.** Billies?

**Curry.** Billy cans. You were never in the Scouts, were you? No . . . Yes, many's the night we sat hunkered over the old camel-dung bonfire after a hard day's trek across the dunes . . .

**Spanky.** In the Scouts?

**Curry.** in the desert, Farrell. A fountain of bright sparks winging into the velvet sky . . . Some of the lads would hitch up their kilts and get their ukeleles out . . .

**Spanky.** Dirty pigs.

**Curry.** . . . and we'd have sing-song. Yes, those were days . . . (TSB, 19)

That Curry's version of his own youth is entirely illusory (he never actually fought in the war) only underscores the impossibility of linking the past to the present as congruent contiguities. For Curry, Pearl Harbour is 'Paisley Harbour' (CAR, 78), his own location defining the crucial moment of America's entry into the war, as though history is meaningfully focused on him. As with all of the characters in Byrne's plays, a past which implies an experience different from the repetitions of the present cannot be congruent with reality and must be essentially fictional – as fictional as the contiguities Curry offers to Miss Walkinshaw about American film heroes who have appeared in the streets of Paisley:

**Curry.** Oh yes . . . D'you realize that's where the first American troops to set foot on European soil landed, Elsie? (Joins Miss Walkinshaw on the balustrade.)

**Phil.** Spanky, Terry and Bernadette: (Together sing quietly) 'Oh, the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming . . . the Yanks are coming over there

. . .

. . .

**Curry.** Eh? There it goes again . . . listen.

*(The singing goes quietly on.)*

**Miss Walkinshaw.** Don't be silly, Bill . . . carry on . . . Paisley Harbour, nineteen forty-two . . .

*(The singing goes quietly on.)*

**Curry.** Yes, well, the reason I know is that an old girlfriend of mine swears she bumped into Clark Gable in that wee sweetie shop in Well Street and he let the cat out of the bag . . . (CAR, 78)

The past world of the war becomes as fictional as a Hollywood film playing in the local cinema, and as contiguous with the real world of Paisley as the hero of that film stepping out on to its streets. There is no congruence between past and present and their contiguity is possible only if one of them – like Curry's war experiences – is reduced to a fictionality which makes their conjunction a purely aesthetic rather than a real contiguity.

That relation of temporal to spatial contiguity will be reversed in *Still Life*, when Spanky – now reverted to his original name of George – returns as a rock star. Set in contiguity with the Paisley of his past, it is Spanky's contemporary life (rather than, as with Curry, a past life) which will become an illusion – his identity reduced to a series of stereotypic gestures from the book of rock stardom that have no congruence with his past existence. As mocked by Phil, Spanky's crucial moments of revelation are simply,

Romantic, kiddo . . . totally and utterly romantic. You like this picture of yourself as the working-class 'sensitive' stunned into mute but nevertheless deeply felt pair-bonding with a clown that cannae put his bloody pullover on right . . . or slumped over the wheel of an Austin A40 sobbing your dinner up over an undersized tool you didn't give a monkey's about when he was alive. 'S this how it tells you to behave in the NME? (SL, 120)

Juxtaposed against the suspended world of Paisley's unrelenting repetitions, changes in Spanky's life will come to seem merely fictional, or fraudulent, incongruently contiguous with a past he can drown in alcohol or drugs but never deny. Displaced from the dead centre of Paisley, life ceases to have any narrative coherence connecting the individual's past to his present and becomes simply a series of accidental encounters:

**Spanky.** . . . Just wait till we go back headlining . . . Jesus. Hey . . . guess who we met up with in Newport, Rhode Island?

**Phil.** Frog Crichton from up the Crescent?

**Spanky.** Kris Kris—fuckin—stofferson!

**Phil.** 'S that what he's calling himself now? (SL, 114)

And in a world shaped by coincidence one possible encounter – 'Frog Crichton from up the Crescent' – is as likely and as (in)significant as any other:

**Spanky.** . . . hey, tell you who we bumped into in Nassau . . . fuckin' Rod, man.

**Phil.** 'Rodman'?

**Spanky.** Rod Stewart, man. (SL, 114)

Beyond Paisley the world does not offer itself as escape from repetition except by being turned into a series of insignificant accidents.

Rooted only in coincidence, life in Byrne's plays is deprived of any meaningful order and all human aspiration or human suffering is equally insignificant. Byrne's comedy of contiguity is itself a 'displacemeant', concealing by laughter a bleakly tragic world in which human spiritual aspirations are nothing more than incongruous accidents. At the heart of *The Slab Boys* Trilogy is a character who never appears, Phil's mother, whose madness and death haunts the frenetic surface of the plays like the lost meaning of the universe – the missing Mother of Phil's sublunar reality matching the missing Father, the Deus Abscondus, whose abandonment of the world has made human meanings and mere accidents identical with one another. When Phil's mother goes through a shop window and is carted off again to an asylum, it is reported in the local paper:

- Curry.** There was a bit in today's Paisley Express . . . 'Ferguslie Park Woman in Store Window Accident' . . .
- Phil.** It wasn't an accident. She meant to do it.
- Curry.** Eh? But the paper said your mother was thrown through the window by a passing car . . .
- Phil.** Well, they got it wrong, didn't they? There was a car there but it wasn't passing . . . it was parked. What she done was take a header off the roof . . . straight through the Co. Window . . . simple.
- Curry.** From the roof of a car? She must've been badly injured.
- Phil.** Not a scratch. They say it was the angle she jumped off the roof of the motor.
- Curry.** Nope . . . A Ford Prefect. (TSB, 39)

In a world where God is good, miracles are possible and life is a series of meaningful events; in a world abandoned by God, there is only 'accident', even when human beings act meaningfully ('She meant to do it'). The miraculous is nothing but the contiguity of physical objects whose only significance derives from their transposable – because ultimately meaningless – trade names. A Ford Prefect and a miracle are as equal in their significance as a Co-op, once symbol of working people's co-operation to overcome exploitation, and a Co., a limited company in the capitalist marketplace. Miracle and car name, accident and intention are all equal in the banal modern world that consists of individuals whose lives are only mistaken for meaningful stories. Standing by his mother's grave in Still Life, Phil waits for a workman to deliver his mother's headstone:

- Workman.**Plot one two three!
- Phil.** Hullo!
- Workman.**You'll be (consults delivery note) 'Mrs McCunn', will you?
- Phil.** McCann . . . yeh. What kept you?
- Workman.**McCann? (Looks at sheet) Aye . . . well, keep your fingers crossed it says that on the stane, son. (SL, 121)

The plot of Phil's mother's life is an arithmetic sequence whose conclusion is an accidental misspelling. Instead of a stone that moved and a cross that redeemed, there are only 'crossed' fingers in the hope that accident has not entirely obliterated both his mother's and Phil's identity. As the workman departs he swears Phil to silence about the fact that he mistook a tin helmet in the grave for a bomb: 'Mum's the word . . . OK?'. Phil, who has just been told that Lucille is, at last, pregnant, declares 'Mum's the word, pops': the comic recommencement of fertility and renewal that is acknowledged as Lucille becomes 'mum' is balanced against the overarching silence in which the universe is 'mum' – a world deprived of the Word of the Father, and with it of the miraculous 'plot' that leaves more of each human life than just a slab.

#### IV. Displacemeants

If an accident were not simply a coincidence but was meant; if the mistranslations and displacements of language revealed not mere coincidence of sounds but a profound connections between words and world; if the diversifying media of our communication generated more meaning rather than more misunderstanding, then the world would be like a John Byrne play, in which every accident reveals an underlying intent. The power of the comedy of Byrne's dramas of accidental conjunctions and contiguities is that they are ghosted by the tragedy that only in art is displacement meant, for art is itself a tragic displacemeant – a desperate desire for a world rooted in meaning rather than in mere coincidence. Byrne's drama is sublimation of our wish for accimeants – accidents

which, however displaced, are as intended and meaningful as the apparently accidental contiguities of art:

- Jolene.** . . . I thought you knew awready . . . you sure you didnae know awready?  
(*Jolene puffs on both cigarettes*)
- Jolene.** Everybody else we know knew awready.
- Billie.** Yeh, thanks.
- Henderson.** Aw, c'mon, it could be an awful lot worse, at least you're not . . .  
(*Billie stops scuffing and looks up*)
- Jolene.** . . . aw, naw, don't tell me.
- Billie.** Don't you start, it was an accident! (*YCH*, 644)

Billie's pregnancy was an accident; if only it could have been an accimeant it would not add to the orphaned world whose unions are displacements, rooted in mere coincidence, rather than displacemeants. Scotland, in Byrne's plays, is an accidental nation and the displacement of its traditional cultures does not redeem its characters from a fake past by initiating them into the modern world but binds them to the rock ('n' Roll) of re-enacting and repeating identities from elsewhere. Scotland is therefore the displaced nation whose Unions with whatever is contiguous produce not a country, but Country ('n' Western). Byrne's joyful comedy of the accidental is shadowed by the profound tragedy of the incidental, because only in art – like his – and not in the (sur)real world of Scotland, can there be a union between the contiguous and the congruent, between the message and its medium, between displacement and displacemeant.

## University of Edinburgh

Abbreviations:

References to John Byrne's works are as follows:

*TSB, The Slab Boys, The Slab Boys Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)

*CAR, Cuttin' A Rug, The Slab Boys Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)

*SL, Still Life, The Slab Boys Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)

*TF, Tutti Frutti* (London: BBC Books:, 1987)

*YCH, Your Cheatin' Heart*, Cairns Craig and Randall Stevenson (eds), *Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001).

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## Endnotes.

<sup>1</sup>. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan, 1964), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>. Arthur Koestler, *The Roots of Coincidence* (London: 1972).

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