Since Yeats’ infamous rejection of *The Silver Tassie* on behalf of the Abbey’s board of directors in 1928, it has become common critical practice to address the play in the terms first set by Yeats, either to endorse Yeats’ complaint with the play’s aberrant discontinuity, or to disclaim it by pointing out elements of thematic and even formal continuity between the expressionistic second Act and the allegedly naturalistic other three. It is implicitly assumed that structural discontinuity is a fault, of which the play is either found guilty or exonerated. It is worth briefly quoting Yeats’ letter of rejection:

... you are not interested in the great war; you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions. You illustrate those opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes, as you might in a leading article; there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action; and your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end.

As Christopher Murray has remarked, “This is a description of

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1 Cf. Bernice Schrank: “Even more than the second act alone, judging by the weight of reviewer critique, the real challenge to conventional expectations is in the apparent discontinuity between the expressionist Act 2 and the more realistic techniques in the other three acts” (my emphasis; Bernice Schrank, “Reception, Close Reading and Reproduction: The Case of Sean O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie*”, *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, XXVI/2-XXVII/1 [Fall 2000-Spring 2001], 39). Schrank shows that the play has often been charged with discontinuity but nevertheless endorses the notion that discontinuity is a fault, and proceeds to highlight elements of continuity to disclaim the charge.

Aristotelian drama complete with Aristotelian hero”. It implicitly consents to Aristotle’s suggestion that a tragedy should be organized as harmoniously and coherently as a “beautiful animal”, a template which continues to frame most critical responses to The Silver Tassie and to individual productions of the play. Thus both Patrick Mason’s 1990 Abbey production and Garry Hynes’ 2010 Druid production were either acclaimed for introducing elements of continuity between the four Acts (usually by stressing the expressionistic potential of Acts I, III and IV) or blamed for failing to cover up entirely the play’s fragmentary, discontinuous nature. In what follows, I will argue that structural and formal discontinuity is in fact essential to the play’s aesthetic project, and suggest that it owes less to Aristotelian dramaturgy than to the tradition of the Passion play to which it bears an ambiguous relationship.

The pattern of the Passion play is used ironically in The Silver Tassie and exposed as an ideological fallacy. While the Passion story, relying as it does on the rhetoric and iconography of blood-sacrifice, is shown to collude with the war effort, the grand narrative of Christianity blatantly fails to make sense of the experience of war. The Silver Tassie is an abortive Passion play that offers no redemption. Yet O’Casey’s use of the pattern of the Passion play is not only for ironic purposes. As Elaine Scarry has shown, the activity of which war consists is injuring, but it is essential to the structure of war that this activity, and the damaged bodies which it produces, should be at least partly confined to invisibility. War, Scarry writes, “requires both the reciprocal infliction of massive injury and the eventual disowning of the injury so that its attributes can be transferred elsewhere, as they cannot if they are permitted to cling to the original site of the wound, the human body”. Thus war produces a discursive corpus which aims to conceal actual injured bodies and ultimately to deny their existence. This process of denial is itself dramatized in the play, and was, according to Fintan O’Toole, the main focus of the Druid production: “In a sense, Hynes’ Tassie is not a play about war at all. It is a play

3 Christopher Murray, Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, 106.