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Brian Friel and Contemporary Irish Drama

by RICHARD PINE

Even though Brian Friel might appear to be far removed from the “classic” Irish writers illuminated by the late Richard Ellman, there is a distinct context in which his work on Wilde, Yeats, and Beckett leads naturally into the field of contemporary Ireland and its drama.¹ In his finest book, *Four Dubliners*, Ellmann says that these writers dislodge and subvert everything except truth; that “displaced, witty, complex, savage, they companion each other,” that “they share with their island a tense struggle for autonomy, a disdain for occupation by outside authorities, and a good deal of inner division.”²

I shall make three claims for Brian Friel: first, that on September 28 1964 with the premiere of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* he became the father of contemporary Irish drama; second, that he occupies a central position in modern international drama, with specific regard to post-colonialism; and third, that as a thinker he has a crucial relationship to the development of modern criticism.

Let me begin to substantiate these claims by referring to the way Friel is perceived as the author of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* wherein preoccupations—family relationships, social change, the land, adolescence, emigration, the telling of secrets—continue to resonate within Irish drama and the Irish historical and political experience. His contemporary and close colleague, Thomas Kilroy, has recently said that *Philadelphia*

was the play that divided us from an Irish theatre depressingly provincial in its interests and technically very bad. It was not a question of novelty of subject matter. Here was the same kitchen, here the familiar characters and the woeful circumstances . . . What was manifestly different was the quality of mind behind the work, brimming with intelligence and enormously confident in its use of the stage.³

Kilroy goes on to identify a clarity in *Philadelphia* which was evident in “the perspective, the presence of a controlling idea, of a highly developed sense of form.” The seminal importance of *Philadelphia* lay in the way its author addressed the question of the divided personality and united it with the dichotomy between the private and public *personae*. This splitting of the one character into two is not unique; we find it in Jarry, in O’Neill, in Pirandello, and nearer home

1. This essay is based on a lecture delivered at the Special Collections University Library, Emory University, Atlanta, sponsored by the Yeats Foundation, April 1991.

2. Richard Ellmann, *Four Dubliners* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. x.

3. Thomas Kilroy in the program note for the Red Kettle production of Friel’s *Translations*, January 1991. See also Thomas Kilroy, “Friel’s Plays,” Brian Friel, *The Enemy Within* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1979), pp.8-9.

in Lennox Robinson.⁴ But Friel is qualitatively different in making much more of the disunity of the stage character than a mere technical event; we thus get direct access to the perennial Irish problem of the insider and the outsider. It is a point which remains unresolved as I have suggested in a profile of Frank McGuinness,⁵ who continues to explore the two types of relationship—self with world and self with self.

The distinguishing mark of the play, and of almost everything Friel has since written, is its mobility. Compared with other Irish playwrights working today—Friel's contemporaries Tom Murphy, John B. Keane, and Kilroy himself, and younger writers like Frank McGuinness—his allusiveness travels better, his references make more successful connections with international audiences. Those other writers would be the first to admit that the themes of their own work, which include civil rights, sexuality, forms of internal colonization, themes which have achieved currency since *Philadelphia* was written, were made speakable by Friel's advent on the national and international stage.

Friel's international significance increases when we realize how strongly he figures in a world drama which reflects the poverty of the western imagination. Here in plays like *Philadelphia*, *Aristocrats*, and *Translations* is an answer to the entropy recently identified by Vaclav Havel, the "lack of metaphysical certainties, the lack of a sense of transcendence."⁶ Friel takes this transcendent, dramatic achievement further, even in so intimate and parochial a play as his most recent *Dancing at Lughnasa*, by dealing with language in a manner achieved by only a few other playwrights: Vargas Llosa, Soyinka, Havel. They are rare exceptions to that general condition of entropy, and none of them is as extensively experienced a dramatist as Friel himself.

There are two inseparable factors in the Irish imagination: landscape and rhetoric. Landscape has its own internal music, and it has its applied language, the rhetoric or resonance of its acoustic. It is significant that, unlike Ellmann's subjects, none of the Irish playwrights I have mentioned is a Dubliner. It is not at all accidental that today Ireland's leading playwrights are from its small towns and villages. They reflect a hinterland of pre-industrial thought and language, a terrain that is none the less literary for being predominantly closer to the primal roots of a ritual drama. The Ireland of contemporary drama is neither a creature of the post-industrial society nor a reaction to it. Its strength lies in the unique ways these writers sustain a balance, a dialogue, between town and country, between government, civic authority, farm house, and hillside. In their continual probing of conscience, in attempting to elucidate this thing called "Ireland," they

4. In *Ubu Coku* (1893) Alfred Jarry provided Ubu with an unwelcome and troublesome "Conscience," while Lennox Robinson's *Church Street* (1934) splits the main character into "Hugh" and "Evoked Hugh." Eugene O'Neill also provides us with a split character in *Days Without End*: John Loving becomes "John" and "Loving." The comparison of O'Neill and Friel is discussed in Ulf Dantanus, *Brian Friel: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 89-93; and by Ruth Neil, "Non-realistic Techniques in the Plays of Brian Friel: The Debt to International Drama," Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok, eds., *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), pp. 349-59. And Maurice Valency points out that Pirandello, in *Il Piacere Dell'Onestà* (*The Pleasure of Honesty*), 1912, shows his hero distinguishing between his two selves, the public and the private. M. Valency, *The End of the World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), p. 111.

5. Richard Pine, "Frank McGuinness: A Profile," *Irish Literary Supplement*, Vol. 10, No.1 (Spring 1991), 29-30.

6. Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 10-11.

are trying to do the impossible, to draw it on a map that might allow us to ascribe value, to realize an image. In fact, Irish drama, and Friel's preeminently, could be summed up in three words: conversation in images. That this is both an aesthetic and a political adventure will become immediately obvious. This is still the theatre of Yeats, still a land in which the controlling images—whether they are visible or not—are the concepts of *Purgatory* and *The Death of Cuchulain*.

One of the characters in *Translations* says: "Words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And . . . it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact."⁷ These words are spoken by a drunken schoolmaster. But we have heard them before in the first chapter of George Steiner's treatise on the nature of translation, *After Babel*:

In certain civilisations there come epochs in which syntax stiffens. . . . Instead of acting as a living membrane, grammar and vocabulary become a barrier to new feeling. A civilisation is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the changing landscape of fact.⁸

Is Friel's *Translations* simply a dramatization of Steiner's text? In one sense it is, and in that sense it joins Irish drama to the mainstream of the European critical debate about reconciling language and fact, of interpreting myth and translating experience. In just the same way Friel uses the rhetoric of Oscar Lewis's *La Vida* in the sociological thrust of *The Freedom of the City*, Erving Goffman's *Forms of Talk* in *The Communication Cord*, and Victor Turner's *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Their rhetoric serves his landscape and, at certain points, matches it.

But the play also deepens our sense of Irishness because it concentrates on the divination of what Friel calls "concepts of Irishness"—religion, politics, money, position, marriage, revolts, affairs, love, loyalty, disaffection—which he believes can only be contained and addressed within (I use his own term again, a Chekhovian one) "a family saga."⁹ It does so by delving into the psychic subsoil. In the same way as Seamus Heaney, Friel insists that the surface landscape grows out of the deep structures of cultural experience. In *Translations*, which describes the mapping exercise carried out by the British Army in Ireland in the 1830s, new names—English names—are given to the Irish places. They are thus "translated" out of experience into this new "landscape of fact." In a pivotal moment of revelation, the schoolmaster declares: "We must learn those new names. . . . We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (*SP*, 444). And not only does the play concern itself with the successful translation of the past into the future; it is also a way of measuring what we know about that past. Ireland today is in the throes

7. *Translations* is included in *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1984). Hugh's speech is on p. 419. Future references to Friel's plays will be to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

8. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 21.

9. Brian Friel, "Extracts from a Sporadic Diary," Andrew Carpenter and Peter Fallon, eds., *The Writers: A Sense of Ireland* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1980), p. 39.

of a revisionism in inherited values that, seventy-five years ago, were assumed and promulgated by the leaders of the 1916 Rising—a rising which, however successful it may have been in ideological terms, failed to ignite popular support, and in military terms was an abject failure. Yeats called the aftermath “a terrible beauty,” and it is the lesson of looking on the face of that beauty, on the imagined face of Cathleen ni Houlihan, that continues today.

This hinterland of the Irish imagination can be explored by enlarging on Friel’s concepts of Irishness and his insistence on the fact that Ireland is a peasant society. He says that “to understand anything about the history or present health of Irish drama, one must first acknowledge the peasant mind, then recognise its two dominant elements; one is a passion for the land, the other a paranoid individualism.”¹⁰ *Para-noia*: something beyond the mind, something so emotive that it causes the sleep of reason and induces violence. The quest to reconcile what we imagine with what we know is the peculiar condition of Irishness that contemporary dramatists are confronting. In some of their work—John B. Keane’s *The Field* or Tom Murphy’s *Whistle in the Dark*, for example—the condition is explicitly violent, visceral, obscene. In Friel’s plays there is no less violence, no less obscenity, but it is contained; it meets its fate with quiet dignity, with—if I can use such an old-fashioned term—tenderness. The place of action is the parish. As Friel says: “Maybe in lieu of a nation we place our faith in the only alternative we have—the parish.” His is a thoroughly Chekhovian way of making the local, the family saga, into a history of the world—an experimental history of love, freedom, and language.

For the writer himself, however, there is great pain in describing the parish, if that description implies the denial of the nation. As I shall show, it is intimately bound up with the problem of betrayal. Steiner has said that “only genius can elaborate a vision so intense and specific that it will come across the intervening barrier of broken syntax or private meaning.”¹¹ The question is one of metaphor. A culture like Ireland’s which is predominantly visionary deals in verbal images that constantly slide out of focus. Its rite of passage is a search for possible homecomings where all the signposts are being rewritten in a new language which reason recognizes but which emotion rejects. When he was writing *Translations* Friel confided to his diary: “one aspect that keeps eluding me: the wholeness, the integrity, of the Gaelic past. Maybe because I don’t believe in it.”¹²

It was Vico who stipulated that the criterion of a truth was that one should have invented it oneself; there is nothing uniquely Irish in the proposition. But the way that Ireland has dealt with this disavowal of one truth, one way of seeing and believing and behaving, in favor of another, more remote and less definable truth, is part of its long history of (in Steiner’s image) “broken syntax and private meaning.” This access to interpretation, this peculiarly obtuse, oblique methodology for living, descends from Bishop Berkeley’s attempt to promulgate the

10. Brian Friel, “Plays Peasant and Unpeasant,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 March 1972.

11. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 47.

12. Brian Friel, “Extracts from a Sporadic Diary,” Tim Pat Coogan, ed., *Ireland and the Arts* (London: Quarter Books, n.d. [1982]), p. 58.

concept of Irishness during the aptly named “counter-Enlightenment.”¹³ He was later echoed by Wilde: “We Irish . . . are a nation of brilliant failures.”¹⁴ It is the term “nation” with which Friel and most contemporary historians would argue. When Yeats said to Wilde “I envy those men who become mythological while still living,” Wilde replied: “Every man should invent his own myth.”¹⁵ The quest is primarily individualist, and only later collective. The access to mythology as a substitute for meaning is the “intervening barrier” in the Irish imagination. It constitutes the single most problematic element in the referential culture that the Irish dramatist inherits.

In Friel’s case, writing *Translations* was the climax of a decade of prowling around the foothills of public meaning. His previous attempts at homecoming had been almost exclusively familial with sagas like the Chekhovian *Aristocrats* and the Beckettian *Faith Healer*—each in its way a vicious portrait of private, intimate bewilderment. The exception was the play *Freedom of the City*, which echoed the events of the occasion known as “Bloody Sunday,” when civilians were shot dead by British soldiers in the streets of Friel’s home city, Derry. I use the work “echoed” deliberately because Friel has insisted that the play is not “about” Bloody Sunday. To the extent that the play concerns itself with public outrage, it is equally a play that portrays private grief, and as such gives us little route into the public domain that Friel inhabits as an artist. It is no more—and no less—a public play than *Translations*, of which Friel has said that it should “concern itself only with the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls.”¹⁶

This problem of access for the dramatist is a common problem in contemporary Irish theatre because it embodies and typifies the failure of metaphor, the manifold problems of meaning. Like the cartographer looking for points of fixity, the playwright uses language for a purpose for which it is inadequate—the articulation of a vision. Map-making, for a visionary culture, is of course a compelling metaphor. It has a symbolism all its own, one that appeals naturally to the sort of culture that could envisage the heroic as a commonplace. Let me remind you that two of the most extraordinary lines in modern drama come from Yeats’s *The Death of Cuchulain*: “Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed/ He stood where they had stood.”¹⁷ They are an extraordinary symbolist achievement and bear out Denis Donoghue’s view that in dealing with Yeats we can think of a symbol as a noun, but that we must think of symbol-ism as a verb. Most of Yeats’s dramatic successors have addressed the phenomenon of his and Synge’s heroic figures. Beckett takes their tramps and makes them modern philosophers. Friel takes the Chekhovian route of making ordinary folk larger than life precisely through emphasizing their ordinariness. It is as if they are reacting to the idea that failure can only redeem when it is found in the figure of the tragic hero.

13. See David Berman, “The Irish Counter-Enlightenment,” Richard Kearney, ed., *The Irish Mind* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), pp. 119-40.

14. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 135.

15. Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 12-13.

16. Brian Friel, “Extracts from a Sporadic Diary,” *Ireland and the Arts*, p. 60.

17. W.B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1951), p. 705.

Much of the quest of contemporary Irish drama is an approach to an unanswered question, unanswered because it is so seldom asked. The last words of *Philadelphia* are “I—don’t—know” (*SP*, 99) and they have affected everything written subsequently. Knowing who you are, and where you come from, is the essential prerequisite of the journey home. Not being able to answer is as serious as not being able to name one’s condition. The opening words of Frank McGuinness’s latest play, *The Bread Man*, are: “I sometimes wonder who I am.” This, an autobiographical play set in Donegal’s Inishowen peninsula, sees McGuinness at his most local and therefore at his most rhetorical. Landscape and its acoustic. What was McGuinness’s motive? “To return to the landscape of my birth, to the language of my birth—and to listen to it. . . . The Bread Man must learn the language of his own life.”¹⁸ The dramatic experience thus continues to reflect the condition of the modern Irish state: that of failure. And here those qualities mentioned by Ellmann become relevant: subversion, complexity, savagery, struggle, division. These, together with the wit, the elasticity, the joy, the daring of the Four Dubliners—Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett—are their legacy to a generation which still finds it necessary to question the nature of heroism, of nationhood, of filiation and affiliation. The failure is one of both private love and public authority. It seems as if the more particular and intimate the Irish playwright’s personal attempt at homecoming, the more it confirms and publicizes the audience’s own dilemmas.

In order to indicate how Friel in the past decade has found it possible to approach the two themes simultaneously, to reconcile the duality in the *persona* which he first split in *Philadelphia*, I shall resort to a parable. Samuel Beckett said: “Where we have both darkness and light, there we also have the inexplicable. The key word of my work is *perhaps*.”¹⁹ That word is the fulcrum of modern Irish drama. Friel, like many an Irishman, is caught in a “perhaps” situation, the theatre of both hope and despair:

living a life which consists in both reality and fiction, from both of which he attempts to compose a satisfactory “truth”;

having, in his case, advanced towards the vocation of priesthood and then retreated from it;

having taken on another authoritarian role by following his father into the teaching profession (leaving it in 1955 to take up writing full time);

having depicted in his short stories not only the Arcadian joys of summer childhood in the fields but also the illusions, the pain, and the fears of a life at the hearth;

having described his apprenticeship in Tyrone Guthrie’s Minneapolis playhouse as “my first parole from inbred, claustrophobic Ireland”;

being conscious of the continuing relationship between the former colonizer and the still colonized, and of the untranslatable experiences of their common language;

emotionally rooted in two centres—his father’s city of Derry and his mother’s village of Glenties in Donegal;

committed to a divided city with two names, with a history of two traditions, one the culture of superior fact and emotion, the other a lived dependency, a poverty of pocket, context, and intellect.

18. Richard Pine, “Frank McGuinness: A Profile,” p. 30.

19. Quoted in Richard Kearney, Introduction, *The Irish Mind*, p. 10.

Friel finds it equally painful to pursue unfinished business in either the private, emotional level or the public, intellectual arena.

But the memory of something he had read continued to haunt him, something with a potentially liberating effect, if he could only find a way of addressing it. Here is the emergence of the artist-as-Irishman. In 1942 Sean O'Faolain published *The Great O'Neill*, a moving picture of the last great Gaelic chieftain, Hugh O'Neill (1550-1616). It evokes a world fundamentally different from our own and, let us recall, one whose integrity Friel disavows: mediaeval as opposed to renaissance, mythopoeic rather than logocentric: a world in which, O'Faolain tells us, "history is still a complete gamble," populated by men "for whom the outer world existed only as a remote and practically irrelevant detail."²⁰ In his Preface O'Faolain suggested that "a talented dramatist might write an informative, entertaining, ironical play on the theme of the living man helplessly watching his translation into a star in the face of all the facts that had reduced him to poverty, exile and defeat."²¹ The adolescent Friel read and absorbed this ambition. To portray O'Neill, whose indecision, whose refusal to make choices, succeeded in holding at bay the inexorable march of the empire of logic, in maintaining the doomed, mythopoeic culture of Gaelic Ireland, would in itself provide a deliciously vertiginous experience, an exercise in dual loyalty, in ambiguity, in double-think and ambi-valence. It would be to write about a man of destiny in purely psychological, introspective terms while yet describing the birth and death of civilizations.

We have had to wait forty years for this dramatic epiphany in *Making History*. To explain it would require a step-by-step examination of everything Friel has written in the interim. The risk involved in writing this play was enormous, and it was not undertaken without several previous attempts at the portrayal of the double agent of which *Faith Healer* is the most accessible record we have. O'Neill was two-faced. He served two masters, acknowledged two tongues. The fact that he saw the future while embracing the past did not endear him to his countrymen. O'Faolain refers to the absurd fact that history has turned his abject failure into heroism. It was still a brilliant failure. But we must remember that O'Faolain was writing just before the promulgation of the Irish Republic and only twenty years after the beginning of Irish freedom with its civil war, its repressive legislation, and its exclusionist policies. In a sense, therefore, telling O'Neill's story through O'Neill's mouth was, and perhaps remains, akin to rewriting history, to advocating betrayal.

The idea of duality, of life being at once here and elsewhere, of there being a magic home as well as the real one, of the parish as a place of the imagination as well as a reality, has been the seedbed of much contemporary Irish writing. Homecoming, as the central feature of the folk tale, is the paramount object of human longing. Once again, there is nothing peculiarly Irish about that. But there is a special reason for Friel's having become the modern master of the nostalgia

20. Sean O'Faolain, *The Great O'Neill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942), p. 23.

21. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

play as we see in his most recent works. The literal meaning of the word *nostos*, the journey homeward, and *algos*, pain, recalls the pain of the recollected, anticipated place. Tennessee Williams, in his Introduction to *The Glass Menagerie*, says of the music of his play: "between each episode it returns as a reference to the emotion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play."²² All of those words used by Williams are laden with extra meaning in the context of the Irish stage: "reference," "condition," and, especially, "music." In all of his plays Friel has explored this "first condition." The man who has said "There is no home . . . no hearth . . . I acknowledge no community" has made of his lifework a return to a place where great joys and great disasters have taken place, whether it be a simple cottage or a chieftain's castle. "Hearth" is the literal meaning of the word "focus." No hearth, no focus, no central meaning to life. Nostalgia, nothing but a memory, because the homeward journey is an impossible one. In *Aristocrats* that journey is attempted in a Chekhovian family reunion in a rundown, pretentious mansion. In *Faith Healer* it is one man's journey back to a childhood he never had, on the wings of a power he cannot harness, towards a destiny that will silence the "maddening questions" (*SP*, 376) within him. In *Translations* it is the homecoming of a community to its own truth, a history lesson through the metaphor of map-making. And then—silence.

For five years Friel hesitated in the face of the critical and popular acclaim that greeted *Translations* as a "national epic," as if dismayed by the success of the dramatic conceits he had employed in order to say something about modern Ireland. By finding a metaphor that overcame the "intervening barrier," Friel had begun to articulate a vision which, in Steiner's terms, was both intense and specific. Elsewhere Steiner tells us that "the history of western drama . . . often reads like a prolonged echo of . . . gods and men in a small number of Greek households."²³ Friel's conceit was to suggest that we can discover something about today's world through that prolonged echo, through using the Homeric eyes of a senescent culture which was finally swept away at the same time as slavery and religious discrimination. But the "prolonged echo" of that culture—here the connection between the private hearth and the public stage is explicit—continues to affect us because, while we know that we have broken with that world, it continues to run in our imaginations, representing certain focal archetypes, certain spirits of the hearth.

The Irish writer is stretched between the forward-looking notion of becoming and the backward-looking habit of belonging, caught between the two at the place where the hidden story demands to be told. He talks in broken images because he cannot otherwise describe the inner reality. The problem for the artist—and in this sense all Irishmen, all brilliant failures, are artists—consists in stepping outside a world which is already on the outside of the place one is supposed to be inhabiting. Ireland has always been in the state of entropy defined by Havel, with no metaphysical certainties except its dreams. The tragedy of modern

22. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 10.

23. George Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 454.

Ireland lies in the enigma that a society and its civilization may contain dreamers, liars, poets, cowards, but that dreamers, liars, poets, and cowards cannot contain a civilization. The outsider, the deviant, the rebel, the wanderer are central rather than peripheral to the Irish experience. A civilization on the run cannot envisage a hearth, a focus. It has no fixity. It takes the fixed referents of syntax, map, icon and devastates them with its sense of flight. When, in Yeats's powerful image, it "calls to the eye of the mind,"²⁴ it summons nothing but a dry well.

Some of Friel's contemporaries react with bewilderment or indifference. John B. Keane, whose most powerful drama *The Field* can be seen in a celluloid travesty of the same name, has abandoned playwriting because he professes himself baffled by the change he sees in the world: the transitus from a rural community to an urban society. Frank McGuinness, taking nourishment from Ibsen and Chekhov, writes plays of self-immolation, hurling himself against the moral barbed wire of his audience as he bears witness to truths they cannot, or dare not, acknowledge. Tom Murphy writes huge, apocalyptic plays in which Everyman, *homo absconditus*, becomes *deus absconditus*.

It is in locating and signposting this hidden center that Friel is so adroit. When he describes the local, parochial shopkeeper or schoolmaster he divines the frightened child in each of us. When he attests to the magnificence of failures like Hugh O'Neill, he engrosses that child into a public metaphor. When in *Translations* he directly answers Yeats's challenge by naming a dry well choked by weeds, he is successfully—even if briefly—bringing home a fugitive culture. It becomes possible for the hidden story at the center to be told, for secrets to be revealed.

The journey has been hazardous for Friel. The ugly fact is that it is only an informer who can be relied on to tell the truth; there is no hyperbole in betrayal. The artist-as-go-between is therefore especially vulnerable in attempting the sacerdotal function. Victor Turner, whose anthropology was a source of Friel's latest play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, tells us that in making his society whole the shaman or diviner fragments his own self.²⁵ Beckett's aptly titled "The Unnamable" said: "I feel an outsider and an insider and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two. . . . I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world. I don't belong to either."²⁶ But it was Yeats who said that "we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."²⁷ The trajectory of modern Irish literature has been a constant interplay between rhetoric and poetry, between the private conversation and the public address. Within each writer, the need for private space, for the chance of idiosyncrasy, for divining within one's own psyche, has had to compete with the duty of divining one's society, acknowledging and serving its dictation.

It's not surprising, therefore, that the Irish stage can so readily be viewed as

24. W.B. Yeats, *Collected Plays*, p. 208.

25. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974).

26. Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 352.

27. W.B. Yeats, "Anima Hominis," *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 331.

a confessional, a place where, by adverting to private anxieties, the writer can also affirm a public faith: a psychiatrist's couch, a kitchen, anywhere which performs the literal function of the hearth as a place for the telling of stories—travellers' tales, secrets. Ireland is not unique in this. But in its unfamiliarity, its alien nature, the telling has become difficult, the hidden story at the center of the play has become stranger than strange in the telling. Friel's *Faith Healer* and Murphy's *Bailegangaire* are the most striking accessions to this genre. To the outsider all this may often seem baffling: no apparent unities, no easy references, no obvious choices. Plays like *Faith Healer*, Murphy's *Too Late For Logic* and *The Gigli Concert*, Kilroy's *Double Cross* or McGuinness's *Carthaginians* and *The Bread Man* appear "difficult" to our orthodox critical systems because they offer references to a world that is somehow "other," elsewhere and haunting.

To audiences unacquainted with primitive society or with the birth of nationhood, the tropes and cadences of this language will be unfamiliar. But there can be no colony without both colonizer and colonized. The colony, once established, is the enduring status of both. History can create a psychological condition; it cannot unmake it. Its legacy is the opportunity of transformation. The transformative experience begins with the collision of the known and the impossible, of fact with dream. It is, as Yeats's plays show us, in taking or rejecting the transformative experience that a society and its drama demonstrate its capacity for dealing with its preoccupations, with the exceptional. In *Translations* Friel explains this difficulty in a further elaboration of Steiner: "We like to think we endure around truths immemorably posited. . . . certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. . . . it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows . . . our only method of replying to inevitabilities" (*SP*, 418). Before Steiner and Friel, we heard it from *Uncle Vanya*: "when people have no real life, they live on their illusions."²⁸

In a sense, then, Friel's characters and settings are purely accidental. Neither modern nor historical Ulster, neither Hugh O'Neill nor the citizens of Derry are actually relevant, nor are they necessary as metaphors. The play might be set in any Greek or Irish household, or in a psychiatric ward. Like Winesburg, Ohio, the place Ballybeg—*baile beag*, small town—is a place of the imagination that the eye of the mind knows to be true and that the eye of the mind can recall at will. Like a symbolist poem, the script becomes self-motivated and provides its own points of reference.

If, to adopt Vivian Mercier's classic description, *Waiting For Godot* is a play in which nothing happens twice, then in Friel's plays nothing happens all the time. Friel is not a contemporary writer—he is a modernist. The difference consists in the extent to which those referents of time and place, of allusion, of personality and propinquity are allowed to determine a local culture. If the circumstances of Hugh O'Neill and Gaelic Ireland were the determinants of

28. Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, *Plays by Anton Chekhov* (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 209.

Making History or if the background of the 1930s in which *Dancing at Lughnasa* is set were the *sine qua non* of what we witness, then Friel would be merely a contemporary writer, locked into a defining set of historical parameters. But as the backdrop to what he wants to tell us about language, love, and freedom, they enable him to be modern.

This is the essence of the post-colonial drama. Friel's plays are received in places as disparate as Alabama, Estonia, Nigeria, Catalonia, because they liberate the post-colonial mind by putting it into a new relation with the condition of history. As the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa'Thiongo says: "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history."²⁹ In underlining this, Friel's plays take the lead in a new dramatic genre that dispenses with form—indeed, with most conventions of the stage—in favor of a new content, giving place to a music of images. If necessary, language will be a casualty. In *Making History* Friel comes close to opera, providing us with three acts of *pathos*, *agon*, and *anagnorisis*. First we see Hugh O'Neill safe in the arms of hesitancy, master of inaction. Next we see him precipitated into action and, in turn, precipitating history itself. Finally, we see history appropriating the public character while the private man pleads miserably to be heard. The character is split, but powerfully so.

In the Introduction to his play *Double Cross* Thomas Kilroy sums up this dichotomy: "To surrender to a vision of doubleness is to see most human behavior (including one's own, of course) within a field of irony."³⁰ Irony is the sane man's word for paranoia, the divining of an inside/outside state of mind. And the precipitant is nostalgia. Here, then, we have the three constant elements from Steiner's world of the Greek household, translated into Ireland by Yeats, and made as powerful as those "images for the affections"³¹ with which he colonized the imagination of the Irish Literary Revival: nostalgia, irony, paranoia.

Friel's bursting of the dramatic conventions is summed up in his latest play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*. It emphasizes the fact that music can be a higher language, that it can "call to the eye of the mind," that there is a condition to which language aspires and that one can sing one's life through it. In Ireland it is accessible to audiences because the pretence, the mask of the play, is a natural pretence. Let me remind you of the extent of Friel's influence on one playwright in particular. The last word of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster* is "dance"; Solveig's final words in McGuinness's version of *Peer Gynt* are "sleep and dream"; the last sound in *Innocence* is Caravaggio's laughter in the darkness; the last sound in *Carthaginians* is Mendelssohn's "Song Without Words," its last syllable "play."³² In *Dancing at Lughnasa* Friel threatens to move out of language altogether, to move into the mode of music. We should remember that

29. Ngugi wa'Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 15.

30. Thomas Kilroy, *Double Cross* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 6.

31. W.B. Yeats, *Syngé and the Ireland of His Time* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1911), p. 3.

32. Plays by Frank McGuinness, all published by Faber and Faber (London): *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1986); *Innocence* (1987); *Carthaginians and Baglady* (1988); and *Peer Gynt* (after Ibsen) (1990).

Yeats nominated his “Plays for Dancers” as “the struggle of the dream with the world.”³³ In this play Friel ascribes value to music which he is reluctant to accord to language itself:

There is one memory of that . . . time [the narrator tells us in his nostalgia] that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory . . . a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems to be both itself and its own echo; a sound so alluring and so mesmeric that the afternoon is bewitched, maybe haunted, by it. And what is so strange about that memory is that everybody seems to be floating on those sweet sounds, moving rhythmically, languorously, in complete isolation; responding more to the mood of the music than to its beat. When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary³⁴ . . . (*Dancing at Lughnasa*, 71)

It took great courage to write words of such beauty and—let me repeat that old-fashioned word, that word of nostalgia and, perhaps, irony—tenderness. They are words of tenderness not least because the play *Dancing at Lughnasa* itself is deeply autobiographical, as all universally political writing must be.

33. Quoted in Curtis B. Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), p. 215.

34. Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).