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Talking, Singing, Storytelling:  
Tom Murphy’s After Tragedy

by NICHOLAS GRENE

When you are in the last ditch, there is nothing left but to sing. (Beckett, on the reason Ireland has produced so many writers in the modern period.)

there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. (Beckett, Three Dialogues [1949])

For the figures in Beckett’s endstates the expressive is a diversion, a need, a compulsion, a doom. Pozzo offers to have Lucky “dance, or sing, or recite, or think” for Didi and Gogo and recalls how Lucky “used to think very prettily once, I could listen to him for hours.” Nagg is bribed to listen to, Clov compelled to admire, Hamm’s story, “the one,” as Clov puts it, “you’ve been telling yourself all your . . . days.” For Winnie in Happy Days, the story of Mildred and the mouse, and finally the long-postponed singing of her song, are among the last reserves in her repertoire of desperate stays against silence. Krapp’s tapes reveal a receding series of earlier selves, each sneering at the performance of an inauthentic younger self. The urn-bound personae of Play endlessly repeat their roles as a compelled action which can never become for them “just play.” The jet of words spewing from the mouth of Mouth in Not I is the ultimate evocation of the psychopathology of the expressive. Expressiveness in Beckett is the perverse human drive to fashion selves and worlds out of the void which is consciousness, a drive ineradicable and ineradicably false.

Tom Murphy has declared repeatedly a confirmed antipathy for Beckett’s drama. “Beckett is my most unfavourite playwright and to the best of my knowledge I’m not influenced by him at all . . . As a prose writer I think he is magnificent, but I can’t stand his plays. If I happen to be at one, I’m ready to applaud, clap, anything—provided it stops!” There is no reason for questioning Murphy’s sincerity here; his is a very different imagination from Beckett’s and a very different drama. Yet Beckett is such a strong presence in contemporary theatre that his principles and practice may be relevant even to a dramatist who

4. Ibid., p. 121.

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vehemently rejects them as Murphy does. For Murphy too is preoccupied with endstates, with characters at or beyond the limits of the humanly tolerable. And he too is concerned, within such states, with the urge to express, its origins, its nature, its effect as performance. This, then, is an essay on Tom Murphy with Beckett intermittently in mind: specifically on expressiveness in the three plays collected as After Tragedy: Conversations on a Homecoming, The Gigli Concert, and Bailegangaire.6

Two impulses, contrary or complementary, can be seen in Murphy’s career as a playwright. On the one hand, there is an impatience with the representational which has led to a series of experiments with non-realistic forms. He, like Beckett, has sought images freed from the dependence on a mimetic counterpart in reality, to speak for basics, essentials in the human situation. Hence the unlocated fairy-tale space somewhere between symbol and allegory of The Morning After Optimism (1971)7 or the no-person’s-land of the church in The Sanctuary Lamp (1975). Against this essentialism, however, this rejection of an art of reproduction, is an impulse equally strong in Murphy to tell it like it is, to expose truths and realities—particularly of the Irish situation. From his first full-length play, A Whistle in the Dark (1961) with its study of the culture of violence in the Irish emigrant community, through the horrors of Famine (1968) and the comic deprivations of A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant (1969), Murphy has tried to render honestly the experiences of Ireland from which others might want to flinch away. Where Beckett turned his back on Ireland’s “last ditch,” Murphy has returned again and again to the specificities of an Irish here and now. Conversations on a Homecoming is one such return and takes the return as its starting-point.8

It is a deceptive play, hard to grasp, hard to handle. On the face of it, a realistic night out with the boys, the study of a group, of the disillusioned 70s aftermath of the ideals of the 60s, an Irish dramatic equivalent of that undervalued movie The Big Chill. The setting is the dilapidated pub The White House, named at the time of the Kennedy enthusiasm of the early 60s by the proprietor JJ, who cultivated a (real or imagined) resemblance to JFK. The face-off of the play is between the returned emigrant, the failed actor Michael, bent on clinging to, reviving, the idea of the past centering on the absent and now alcoholic JJ, and Tom, the once would-be intellectual who did not leave and must justify his own paralysis by an aggressive and destructive cynicism. Many of the themes and figures are familiar enough from other modern Irish literature and drama: the psychology of the emigrant, leaving and returning; the stagnation of Irish provincial life; the inert domination of an alliance between Church and social

7. Dates are of first production.
8. The play appears third in After Tragedy, in chronological order of performance: it was produced in 1983, The Gigli Concert in 1983, Bailegangaire in 1984. But in so far as it represents a revised version of an earlier play The White House (1972), and remains set in the 1970s, it is preferable to consider it before the other two plays.
status quo; Ireland’s failure to develop any sort of adequate secular culture. The gombeen-man, the figure we have so long loved to hate in Ireland, is there in the person of Liam: “well-dressed and groomed: expensive, heavy pinstripe, double-breasted suit, a newspaper neatly folded sticking out of his pocket for effect. He is a farmer, an estate agent, a travel agent, he owns property . . . he affects a slight American accent; a bit stupid and insensitive—seemingly the requisites of success” (AT, 81). Missus, JJ’s wife who runs the pub in his practically permanent absence, and who wants to capture Liam as a son-in-law, is equally representative, equally well-observed: “in her early fifties, carelessly dressed (a dirty house-coat); a worried, slow-moving drudge of a woman, senses a bit numbed by life, but trying to keep the place together” (AT, 82).

For Irish audiences the play yields a delight in the recognition of the familiar, so vividly and precisely re-created. In this language is crucial. A dramatic shorthand allows Murphy to use the most casual phrases, ejaculations and expletives, meaningless idioms and ideolects, to bring alive the texture of a lived reality. Thus the ritual salutation of Missus, “Aa, the boys,” is heavy with meaning in its inanity. Liam’s use of “fellas”—“Good luck fellas”—which becomes more and more aggressive as he gets drunker and more resentful, hovers between demotic Irish and affected American. The real skill in this use of linguistic gesture, however, comes in the build-up of rhythmic interchange. Take, for example, the start-up of the reunion with Michael, reminiscence led off by Junior:

JUNIOR: Jasus, you weren’t home for . . .
TOM: Must be ten years.
JUNIOR: That race week. (He starts to laugh.)
TOM: Aw Jay, that Galway race week!
They start to laugh.
JUNIOR: Aw Jasus, d’yeh remember your man?
TOM: Aw God, yes, your man!
JUNIOR: Aw Jasus, Jasus! (JUNIOR’s laugh usually incorporates “Jasus”.)
TOM: The cut of him!
JUNIOR: Aw Jasus, Jasus!
LIAM: Who?
JUNIOR: D’yeh remember?
MICHAEL: I do.
JUNIOR: But do yeh?—Jasus, Jasus!
LIAM: Who was this?
JUNIOR: Do yeh, do yeh, remember him?
MICHAEL (laughing): I do, I do!
JUNIOR: Jasus, Jasus. (AT, 83-84)

Fatuous, vulgar, quite without content, the sequence is yet tellingly evocative: of Junior’s role as the jolly man of the evening—Junior who is most endearingly really there for the beer, tortured by the slowness of delivery of the pints; of the group shibboleths of memory by which the disliked Liam is kept out; of the delayed drawing back in of Michael into the mood of willed gaiety.
Conversations is a wonderfully accurate reproduction of social surfaces, of the tone and mood and atmosphere of an Irish small-town pub of the 70s. It re-creates realistically the detailed nuances of a community, its class-consciousness, its power relations, its human dynamics. And yet to display these things is hardly the play’s main purpose or effect. Something else “is taking its course” in the conversations; the social manifestations are metaphors for something beyond themselves; something is struggling, and failing, to get talked out. Murphy uses the ebb and flow of pub-talk, its structure and rhythms, as a dramatic form which partly fulfills, partly frustrates, audience expectations of climactic revelations. We are paced through an evening’s drinking only broken by periodic visits to the Gents, for the characters on stage but not the audience—it is played as one continuous act without intervals. We look for the talk to go somewhere, for moments of “epiphany” which precipitate or distill dramatic meaning. There are such moments, but they are undercut by an ironic awareness of the stages of the drinking-session. Real dramatic significance is re-located from the male to the female characters, and from talk to song.

They are conversations on a homecoming, the occasion of the night out is Michael’s return from America, and the focus is on him: how has he done? how is he doing? The signs are—not well. He has had to borrow Junior’s car; late in the evening Missus, to revenge a slight, deliberately lets slip that she has seen Michael’s mother drawing out her post office savings to fund his share of the drinks. Amid the bonhomie and the reminiscences, the jokes and story-swapping, the characters, and the audience with them, wait for revelations of what Michael’s life in America has been like and what has brought him home. Under the guise of an anecdote about the weirdo party life of Greenwich Village, he fumblingly half gives himself away:

MICHAEL: ... I was in this place the other night.
TOM: The party, is it?
MICHAEL: No. Yes. But there was a guy there anyway—
TOM: Who?
MICHAEL: No, wait’ll you hear this one, Tom. A fella, some nut, I didn’t know him.
TOM: Yeh?
LIAM: Yeh?—
JUNIOR: Yeh?—
TOM: Yeh?
MICHAEL: Well, he went a bit berserk anyway.
JUNIOR: Beresk.
TOM: Shh!
MICHAEL: Well. He took off his clothes. (He looks at them, unsure, his vulnerability showing; he is talking about himself) Well, he took off his clothes. Well, bollocks naked, jumping on tables and chairs, and then he started to shout “No! No! This isn’t it at all! This kind of—life—isn’t it at all. Listen! Listen to me! Listen! I have something to tell you all!”
TOM: Making his protest.
MICHAEL: Yeh.
TOM: Yeh?
MICHAEL: Something to tell them all.
TOM: Yeh?
MICHAEL: Whatever—message—he had, for the world. But the words wouldn’t come for him anyway. And (Moment’s pause; then, simply:) Well. Then he tried to set himself on fire. (AT, 91)

“No! No! This isn’t it at all!” The would-be revelation gutters out in incomprehension and hostility. Junior and Liam cannot understand what Michael is on about; Tom takes it in only to use it as evidence against him. The pathetic incident, shameful and wretched in memory, stands as a travesty of the Messianism of Michael and of the pseudo-Kennedy JJ, a desperate reductio ad absurdum of world-reforming rhetoric.

This story exposes the completeness of Michael’s failure, the extremity of his sense of inadequacy which has sent him home with the urgent need to believe that there was in The White House, and still could be, a life of truth and meaning. But it also takes its place in the inconsequential sequence of talk, of anecdotage and argument, of maudlin confidences and belligerent hectoring of a standard male-dominated bull-session. We can understand with compassion the mirroring dead-ends of the lives of Michael, who needs the illusion of a lost idealism to keep him from despair, and of Tom, whose rancid bitterness must be fed with the contemplation of a universal futility. Yet the idea that any form of real truth or significance could come out of their drunken talk is compromised by the very form of the drinking-session itself. We watch the ritual of the evening from its first warm-up rounds through boisterous recollection, noisy disputation, sentimentality and aggression to the last sodden disengagements, conscious that whatever is said, whatever is revealed, it is drink talking throughout.

The night out in Conversations is not a stag session from which women are excluded. There is talk at one stage of sending for Junior’s wife to join them—Junior, the only one of these aging young men to have got married. About a third of the way through the evening Peggy comes in, Tom’s fiancée of ten year’s standing, whose role is to try vainly to allay the ulcer of irritability that her very presence by now awakes in him. Peggy, however, remains almost as marginal to the conversation as Anne, the silent young daughter of the pub who serves at the bar, or as Missus herself. The masculine atmosphere of the get-together is captured in the exchanges over Josephine, the lodger in The White House, suggested as a partner for Michael by Tom:

TOM: What about our new bank clerk for him, Junie.
JUNIOR: Grrrrrah, Josephine!
TOM: We have a right one for yeh.
LIAM (to himself): Dirty aul’ thing.
JUNIOR: She stays here and all: a quick nip up the stairs on your way out tonight and “wham, bang, alikazam!”
TOM: The most ridiculous whore of all times.
JUNIOR: No bra.
LIAM: Dirty aul’ thing.
MICHAEL: Why so ridiculous?
TOM: A bank clerk, a bank clerk! A girl in her position. (AT, 86-87)
The passage typifies all too accurately an Irish male tone towards women, its peculiar combination of predatory prurience and censorious contempt, a tone fully shared by Tom, the supposedly progressive intellectual. A latent or active misogyny is one component in the social malaise of modern Ireland which the play exposes.

In that satiric expose songs are joined with talk. “We’ve had the complimenting stage,” remarks Junior, “let that be an end to the insulting stage, and we’ll get on to the singing stage” (AT, 107). One of the comic highpoints of the play is the singing by Liam, far gone in drink, of the cowboy song “There’s a bridle hanging on the wall.” Nothing better illustrates what Tom characterizes as “the country-and-western system” of modern Ireland, or his disgusted observation—“we are such a ridiculous race that even our choice of assumed images is quite arbitrary” (AT, 101). The mawkish grotesquerie of Liam’s singing goes with the flatulence of the talk. And yet the dramatic climax of the play comes in the form of a song, poignant and unironic.

From early on we are prepared for it as Junior, a confirmed singer of garbled songs to himself, puzzles over the words: “The sheep with their little lambs, passed me by on the road’—How does that begin?” (AT, 95). Other pieces of the song come back to him, before he remembers the opening line “All in the April evening” and urges Peggy to sing it. It was JJ’s song, it appears, and JJ in his crusade for cultural renewal had encouraged Peggy to have singing lessons. Peggy attempts it as a party piece but deliberately sends it up, goes off into a parody version of other songs. When at last she does sing the song, she does so standing apart at the door of the pub, driven to leave by Tom’s humiliating cruelty yet unable to go:

PEGGY: “All in the April evening, April airs were abroad/ The sheep with their little lambs passed me by on the road/ All in the April evening I thought on the lamb of God.” (AT, 113)

The stage direction here is of key importance. Peggy’s song is not a “performance” like that of the others, like that of so much of the evening’s talk; she is not trying to impress, she is “singing essentially for herself.” In doing so she achieves a genuine expressiveness, and the play achieves a moment of real significance.

Murphy here takes the theatrical chance of investing a great deal in the frail and slightly insipid lyricism of the verse of a hymn. What he is trying to do is highlighted if we contrast the effect here with Winnie at the end of Happy Days with her tinkly singing:

Though I say not
What I may not
Winnie’s song is one last sardonic twist in the prolonged satire of her genteel thankful-for-small-mercies optimism. Though Peggy as a character is as skeptically observed as the rest of the figures in Conversations, her song is made to express a genuine feeling associated with a nearly silenced femininity at the edge of the stage filled with competing voices of male egos. There is a deliberate parallel between Peggy’s position as she sings and the play’s final tableau with Anne left alone. “ANNE continues in the window as at the beginning of the play, smiling her gentle hope out at the night” (AT, 115). Anne’s “gentle hope” is paired with Peggy’s “gentle desperation.” There is no question here of an upbeat ending: Michael who has seen romantic possibilities in Anne as JJ’s daughter has been warned off the ground, and she has been left to her future proprietor Liam. Instead, through song and silence, Peggy and Anne together are made to speak for meanings which the conversations of the men can never express.

If Conversations may be taken to stand for the representational in Murphy’s drama, putting the realities of Ireland upon the stage, then The Gigli Concert is in his other idiom of dramatic images dislocated from a social context. The play is set notionally in Dublin, in fact in the dead-end space of the office/living quarters of J.P.W. King which might be anywhere. It is important that King is an Englishman living in Ireland and that the other main character is Irish; indeed he is only ever named as Irish Man in the text. Man’s background as self-made builder and property developer is sketched in deftly, his career totalling a thousand houses “built out of facts: corruption, brutality, backhanding, lump labour and a bit of technology” (AT, 6). It is an Irish life to believe in and the occasional details that emerge about his home life, house, wife, child, all support its reality. But the ordinary life of the Man is not the play’s concern, any more than his name. The Gigli Concert gives us instead the crisis of the Man in extremis, beside himself, outside his normal life. It is in this state that he confronts the quite other extremity of the charlatan psychologist/guru King. All they have in common is the desperation voiced in the line they each speak independently: “Christ, how am I going to get through today?” (AT, 3, 6).

Conversations has at its structural centre the confrontation of the two male antagonists Tom and Michael, but the significance of the play is diffused through the group talk of the night in the pub and finds its climactic expression in the deliberately off-centred song of Peggy. The Gigli Concert gives up the stage to its two men, leaving the woman character Mona an awkward third party to the drama. Most reviewers and audiences of the play in production have felt that the

part of Mona is unsatisfactory, that, given the intensity and scale of the two male roles, she is never allowed to develop an adequate theatrical presence. Murphy himself experimented with writing a radio version of the play omitting Mona altogether. And yet one can see that the part is integral to the play’s design. She is there to represent the bodily reality of love and relationship which both men in their urge towards transcendence ignore or fail to recognize. As such, the very fact that she is sidelined in the play is significant, her unanswered knocking at the door at the triumphant close of the play’s first half (AT, 26) a representative moment. The fact remains that, whereas in Conversations Murphy found a theatrical means to make his female figures on the periphery positively expressive, in The Gigli Concert Mona seems to stray by and ends up looking merely left out. For the attention-demanding men get the attention they demand, and singing, in Conversations the delicate expressiveness of the woman, here becomes their grand obsession.

Paired, opposed, doubled men recur in Murphy as they do in the first plays of Beckett. Edmund the innocent in The Morning After Optimism is younger brother to the murderous James. Harry, the circus strong man of The Sanctuary Lamp, even in his church refuge, cannot escape his virulently cynical partner Francisco. Tom and Michael in the recollected past of Conversations were the “twins,” always together, always at odds. In The Gigli Concert Murphy gives to this pairing/antithesis the surface specificity of making one man Irish, the other English (as in The Sanctuary Lamp), while associating them with the legendary figures of Faust and Mephistopheles. At both levels differences keep dissolving into affinities, opposite roles are exchanged or reversed. The Irish Man couldn’t be less like the Irishman of cultural stereotype, dreamy, impractical, fluent with words; he is brutal and inarticulate, boorishly down to earth. And yet as JPW exclaims with amazement, “this practical man is declaring that the romantic kingdom is of this world” (AT, 15). It is JPW who has the gift of the gab traditionally assigned to the Irish, JPW whose defensive defeatism is voiced in a volatile stream of words. His English version of romantic idealism, though, his fixation on the unattainable figure of Helen, is regarded with indulgent disbelief by the Man: “she was leading you a merry dance . . . I know Irishwomen” (AT, 24). “Cured” himself by the end, Man’s last words of advice to JPW are to get out: “Go home, Jimmy. Forget that—Irish colleen . . . they’ll kill you over here” (AT, 38).

The first Gigli aria which the Man plays with the expensive record-player he brings along in Scene Four is “Dai Campi, Dai Prati” from Boito’s opera Mefistofele. The Faustian aria, Gigli’s tenor role, and the opening situation of the play make it look as if the Man is casting himself as Faust to JPW’s Mephistopheles. “I’d give my life for one short sweet hour to be able to sing like

10. Monica Frawley’s set of the 1991 Abbey production, with its perspex glass doors at the back of the stage, made Mona’s appearance in this scene a theatrically strong cry for help, with JPW’s deliberate refusal to respond all the more telling.

that” (AT, 25). The “dynamatologist,” with his dubious promise of superhuman powers, is to supply the magic which will allow the Man to transcend his mortal limitations. But JPW, it emerges, has his own Faustian yearnings for the ultimate incarnated in Helen, disregarding his Mona/Gretchen. And by Scene Eight, with the Man’s final entrance “timed with [the] bass solo in the trio from Attila,” it is clear that the roles are reversed. It is JPW who is the tenor, who must take on the part of Faust and play it to the end; Man is a bass, and as he stands in his black tuxedo in that final scene having completely lost his desire to sing like Gigli, he appears like a tempter who only introduced the obsession in order to transfer it to JPW. As JPW prepares himself in his last crazy determination to sing, he quotes from Marlowe’s Faustus, “This night I’ll conjure,” with the words that follow implied—“though I die therefor.”

It is a very peculiar form of transference which takes place in the patient/analyst relationship of Man/JPW. JPW has to live through, to re-enact Man’s psychological crisis as well as adopting his Gigli monomania. Thus, when Mona makes her last exit with a parting “I love you,” JPW reacts with the appalling crossed emotions which Man has recounted as symptom of his breakdown in his relations with his wife: “I lo—! (love) I love! I—! I—! Fuck you! I love! Fu—! fuck you! I love!—I love! Fuck you—fuck you! I love . . . .” (AT, 37).

Identities are thus transferable in the play because they are seen to be constructed things like the narratives used to give them expression. JPW is bewildered when he tries to elicit a “case-history” from the obstinately nameless Man:

JPW: . . . Place, time, date of birth is always a good starting point.
MAN: I was born with a voice and little else.
JPW: Naked we came into the world.
MAN: We were very poor.
JPW: What did your father do?
MAN: A cobbler.
JPW: Making or mending them? It could be significant.
MAN: He started by making them but factory-made shoes soon put paid to that.
JPW: Where was this?
MAN: Recanati.
JPW: Recan?
MAN: Ati.
JPW: What county is that in?
MAN: Recanati is in Italy. (AT, 7-8)

It is clear to the audience already, though not to JPW until later, that Man is

12. Fintan O’Toole in The Politics of Magic (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1987), pp. 168-70, reads the analogy with Faust rather differently. He identifies Mona with the second (real) Helen of the Walpurgis Night episode and sees JPW’s “Helen” of the telephone calls as Faust’s other false Helen. However, it can be argued that Mona, though quite unlike Gretchen in character, resembles Gretchen in Faust by playing a part in the “salvation” of JPW.

“miming” the memoirs of Gigli.14 JPW is left trying to align Irish with Italian when, in Scene Five, he is given an alternate life history for Man in which the older brother Abramo becomes the tyrannical brother Mick. And this background of bullying, vicious hatred, emotional deprivation is subsequently retracted too when Man in the changed mood-swing of the next scene insists on telling it differently again: “I’d just like you to know for one thing, boy, that I had a very happy childhood. . . . Mick!—often he’d give me a penny of a Friday to go out and buy a copy-book for myself” (AT, 31).

Distinctions between truth and fiction are deliberately broken down in the autonarratives that all three characters tell. Man matches JPW’s confession of his perpetually unfulfilled romance with Helen with the tale of Ida the telephonist, borrowed once again from the pages of Gigli’s Memoirs. JPW reacts with indignant disgust: “My story is about a real live living person, your story is bullshit” (AT, 25). Gigli’s narrative of his first love, as retailed by Man, has indeed a certain stagey operatic pathos, but how believable is JPW’s promise of suicide in exchange for “one short hour and sweet” in bed with Helen? Some of the play’s fictions are instantly seen as such, like JPW’s fantasy of a wife darning his socks in a “sylvan dwelling” in the suburbs; some, like Mona’s imaginary godchild Karen Marie, are only eventually revealed as unreal. But throughout we see self-creating stories, drawn from whatever resources of real lives or false, shaped by the urgencies of emotional need:

MAN: . . . Singing, d’yeh know? The only possible way to tell people.

JPW: What?

MAN (shrugs. he does not know): . . . Who you are? (AT, 9)

Singing is not the only possible way in so far as it takes its place with other forms of expressiveness in the play. And with all of them there is the uncertainty as to what it is that the expressive expresses. But singing is central and provides the controlling metaphor of the play. So, for example, the terrible wordless crying of the Man which is one of the dramatic climaxes of the action is guessed by Murphy in the stage direction: “The ‘performance’ an atonal aria?” (AT, 29). Equally JPW’s delivery of the mock-myth of God, not “I am who am” but “I am who may be,” is as much an aria in words as the Gigli performance of “Cielo E Mar” against which it is counterpointed.15 Singing is some sort of ultimate in expressiveness because of its peculiar purity, its power, and its universality. “What’s he singing, what’s he saying now?” asks Mona as she and JPW lie in bed listening to Gigli: “You don’t have to know, whatever you like” (AT, 35), JPW replies. By losing the specificity of significance in speech, singing becomes available to be received by any who have ears to hear. It is not liable to the sort of doubt which is endemic in any form of language: “that was a way of putting it, not very satisfactory.” Music, by contrast, is eminently satisfactory. It tells its

14. Most of the details here are taken, often word for word, from The Memoirs of Beniamino Gigli, as the text itself later indicates (AT, 32). “Beninillo,” the name that MAN goes by for want of another throughout, is in fact a contraction of the (less pronounceable) Italian diminutive “Benjaminello.” See Memoirs, p. 4.
15. “Cielo E Mar” is from Ponchielli’s La Gioconda, the opera in which Gigli made his debut in 1914.
own kind of story, which is anyone’s story, without raising questions of the true or the false. “To sing,” as JPW defines it as he prepares to try—“the sound to clothe our emotion and aspiration” (AT, 37).

The desire to sing like Gigli is a madness, an absurdity, an “audacity of despair.” In JPW’s pseudoscientific patter it is from the dark area of the personality, from the “rising darkness of our despair,” that the urge to transcend must come. The desolation, the emotional extremities of the characters in The Gigli Concert are real enough, and Murphy resists the clichés of therapy through confession, the game JPW dismisses as “Slobs”:

The winner proves himself to be the most sentimental player and becomes King Slob by dealing, at the most unexpected moment, a sudden judas punch, or an emotional kick in the genitals to his opponent, thereby getting him. (AT, 19)

There was something like a game of Slos going on between Tom and Michael through Conversations. The difference in The Gigli Concert is made by the recordings of Gigli’s voice to which the characters on stage and we in the audience listen. Because this is a quite extraordinary form of human expressiveness which is undeniably there, as a torture to those who aspire hopelessly to reproduce it, as a compelling experience to the rest. This is what gives the last scene its strange impressiveness as JPW “sings” Gigli. It is a fake: we know that we are watching an actor mime an (audibly old) recording of the great Italian tenor singing an aria from Donizetti’s opera Lucia di Lammermoor. The image of the derelict JPW, spaced out on drink and drugs, mimicking Gigli is a grotesque one. And yet it has its own hypnotic magic, expressive of some sort of human capacity for self-transcendence, dynamatological or otherwise. After all, though JPW is not actually singing, Gigli is. The last theatrical gesture after the resurrection, or failure to die, of JPW leaves Gigli to sing “O Paradiso” on endless repeat to the open window: “Do not mind the pig-sty, Benimillo . . . mankind still has a delicate ear . . . that’s it . . . that’s it . . . sing on forever” (AT, 39). It is a perfectly judged final image, poised between irony and affirmation.

Much of Murphy’s work culminates in Bailegangaire, though it is quite unlike anything he wrote before. Women, strategically sidelined in Conversations, somewhat awkwardly edged out in The Gigli Concert, are here given the stage to themselves. The three characters, Mommo, Mary, and Dolly, live lives without men, and it is their feelings of loneliness, guilt, resentment, hatred, love which make up the substance of the play. The action set in contemporary Ireland fulfills Murphy’s need to speak of the realities of the here and now. Written in 1984, one of its emotional starting-points was the ironic sense of how wrong Orwell proved to be with his dystopian vision of Big Brother constantly watching: no-one, Murphy felt, was watching these people’s lives. The play’s sleazy sub-industrialized countryside of modern Ireland, the world of Japanese-owned computer plants under threat of closure, of motor-bikes and videos, is far

16. Tom Murphy pointed out that he deliberately chose the solo Gigli recording of “Tu Che A Dio Spiegasti L’Ali” for this scene, as against that with bass and chorus accompaniment used in Scene Seven. Personal conversation, 3 April 1991.
from the familiar picturesque of traditional Abbey play representations. The lives of Dolly and Mary are indeed grimly unpicturesque: Dolly, the grass widow living with her children on wired remittances from her emigrant husband who beats her up for her infidelities on his annual Christmas visit home; Mary, older, unmarried, who returned from a nursing career in England to look after the senile grandmother that refuses to recognize her. And yet in the figure of Mommo, in the country cottage kitchen set, Murphy reaches back to the archaic images embodied in the early Abbey drama, *Riders to the Sea* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Mommo’s story of how the village Bochtán [the poor man] “came by its new appellation, Bailegangaire, the place without laughter,” is a richly complex fiction with the loadedness of folklore. In *Bailegangaire* Murphy manages to marry an authentic and immediate represented reality with the refracted forms of myth.

Anthony Roche calls his study of *Bailegangaire* “Storytelling into Drama,” and the play does indeed dramatize the storytelling process, drawing its audience in to piece together the portions of the narrative which Mommo utters, to share Mary’s urge to hear its end. Yet the play is also the reverse, drama mediated through storytelling. *A Thief of a Christmas*, companion-piece to *Bailegangaire*, played out live the laughing-contest which becomes Mommo’s oft-told, never-finished tale. In *A Thief of a Christmas* a huge crowd of Bochtán villagers throng the stage to watch the two contestents, Mommo’s husband Seamus and the local champion Costello, laugh it out literally to the death on the risible subject of misfortunes. ("Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," says Nell in *Endgame*.) In *Bailegangaire* this chorus of voices is reduced to a solo performance. The story Mommo tells is her story but she will not acknowledge it. The couple who arrive in Bochtán she calls only the strangers, “the decent man and his decent wife the same” (*AT*, 45). She refuses the attempts by Mary to identify her with the woman in the story as insistently as Mouth in *Not I*: “what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she!”22 The denial of the first person is in Mommo, as in Mouth, a mark of alienation, the inability to own to her life and its anguish. But where the desperate unstoppable flow of words from Mouth is a curse visiting her, Mommo’s storytelling is a virtuoso capacity as well as a compulsive dysfunction. And where Mouth can only speak in tiny phrases punctuated by ellipses, a sort of *pointillisme* of language, Mommo’s is the highly-wrought rhetoric of the *seanchat*.

Mommo’s is a bed-time story, told to her imagined grandchildren of thirty-five years before: “Let ye be settling now, my fondlings, and I’ll be giving ye a nice story tonight. . . . An’ ye’ll be goin’ to sleep” (*AT*, 43). An audience is borne along on its rhythms, scarcely attending to its content:

18. See my “*Murphy’s Ireland: Bailegangaire,*” *Literature and Nationalism*, eds. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1991). Parts of what follows are borrowed from that essay and I am grateful to the editors and to Liverpool Univ. Press for permission to re-use it.
20. *A Thief of a Christmas* was staged at the Abbey in December 1985, nearly simultaneously with the first production of *Bailegangaire* by the Druid Theatre in Galway, though written after it. I am grateful to the Abbey Theatre for giving me access to a script of *A Thief of a Christmas* (which has not yet been published).
22. Ibid., p. 377.
It was a bad year for the crops, a good one for mushrooms, and the contrary and adverse connection between these two is always the case. So you can be sure the people were putting their store in the poultry and the bonavs (bonhams)\(^\text{23}\) and the creamery produce for the great maragadh mór (big market) that is held every year on the last Saturday before Christmas in Bailethuama (the town of Tuam) in the other county. And some sold well and some sold middlin’, and one couple was in it—strangers, ye understand—sold not at all. And at day’s business concluded there was celebration, for some, and fitting felicitations exchanged, though not of the usual protraction, for all had an eye on the cold inclement weather that boded. (\textit{AT}, 44)

It is a rich mix of language, the Irish and the Irishisms blending with an orotund vocabulary of Latinate English. Synge insisted that in a good play “every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple.”\(^\text{24}\) Mommo’s language is just that, made convincing by the stylized form of the story, set off against the more ordinary colloquial speech of Mary and Dolly. Storytelling, thus, in \textit{Bailegangaire} takes on the full expressiveness reserved in \textit{The Gigli Concert} for the operatic aria. Mommo’s story, like the singing of Gigli, plays on insistently, repetitively, hypnotically. When Momma switches off temporarily, Dolly can re-start the record with a malicious prompt; when she drops off to sleep, Mary takes up the story, mimes its performance. The story, like the Gigli record, is a magnificent obsession, both maddening and addictive for the audience in the theatre as for the characters on stage.

The singing of Gigli, though, was a completely arbitrary obsession, succeeding other quite different forms of mania in the Man’s pattern of recurrent breakdowns. It comes from nowhere in real lives outside the theatrical space. Mommo’s story, by contrast, because it is her story however folklorized, has its origins in her life, her family, her community, and its telling feeds back into that context. The specific trauma which Momma cannot face, which makes it impossible for her to end the story, is the death of her grandchild Tom, accidentally burned to death while she and her husband delayed in Bochtán at the laughing-contest. But beyond that is the memory of her frozen marriage, her tyrannical treatment of her children which drove them to fight or to emigrate, the psychic wasteland of deprivation, horror, and loss over which her imagination broods and which her story animates. It is a grotesque vision of the whole country which Mommo voices in the climactic description of the laughing-contest, where her own dead children are joined as a subject for laughter with all Ireland’s unwanted, unchristened infants:

\textit{Nothin’} was sacred an’ nothing a secret. The unbaptised an’ stillborn in shoeboxes planted, at the dead hour of night treading softly the Lisheen to make the regulation hole—not more, not less than two feet deep—too fearful of the field, haunted by infants, to speak or to pray. They were fearful of their ankles—Hih-hih-hih. An’ tryin’ not to hasten, steal away again, leaving their pagan parcels in isolation forever.

\(^{23}\) Murphy supplies explanatory glosses in his text for words in Irish, but in this case the Anglicized Hibem-English “bonham” = “piglet” may not be more comprehensible to non-Irish readers than “bonav,” the pronunciation closer to the Irish “banbh.”

And in this same speech, the audience is also incorporated, a whole community caught up in this ecstasy of black laughter:

The stories kept on comin’ an’ the volleys and cheers. All of them present, their heads thrown back abandoned in festivities of guffaws: the wretched and neglected dilapidated an’ forlorn, the forgotten an’ tormented, the lonely an’ despairing, ragged an’ dirty, impoverished, hungry, emaciated and unhealthy, eyes big as saucers ridiculing an’ defying of their lot on earth below—glintin’ their defiance—their defiance an’ rejection, inviting of what else might come or care to come!—driving bellows of refusal at the sky through the roof. Och hona ho gus hah-haa! . . . The nicest night ever. (AT, 75)

“When you are in the last ditch,” said Beckett, “there is nothing left but to sing.” Or laugh, he might have added. The frenetic laughter at misfortunes, the laughing-contest itself with its catastrophic consequences, are blasphemous rituals of exorcism for the people’s desperate human situation. The blasphemy is punished for the Bochtans by the curse of being unable to laugh ever after, for Mommo by the penitential retelling of the story. But in the telling through of the story to the end that we witness in _Bailegangaire_, exorcism of the curse does finally take place. Mary, who through the early part of the play has tried vainly to quiet her grandmother, to stop her from her maddening recital, at a certain stage in the evening determines to bring it to an end: “Live out the—story—finish it” (AT, 70). The drive toward an ending from then on becomes the compelling drive of the action. And Mommo does at length tell out the tragic last section of the laughing-contest with Mary supplying the ghastly sequel of the accident to Tom. The conclusion of the story allows release not only for Mommo, but for Mary who finally receives the recognition by Mommo that she has so craved, and for Dolly when Mary agrees to adopt the unborn child with which she is pregnant. The play ends with the image of the three women in bed together asleep and at peace.

Tom Murphy’s has always been a drama of high risk and nowhere more so than in _Bailegangaire_. He risks unintelligibility in the telling of Mommo’s story; he risks never finding a second actress to play Mommo with the extraordinary skills of Siobhán McKenna whose last stage part it was; he risks the accusation of sentimentality in the image of multiple catharsis with which the play ends. But the strong and conclusive conclusion is as essential to _Bailegangaire_ as it is to _The Gigli Concert_. Nowhere is Murphy more un-Beckettian than in this. Beckett is the great modern master of the unending, the anti-ending, frustrating the desire for closure whether with the openness of _Waiting for Godot_, the stalemate of _Endgame_, or the endless repetitions of _Play_. He polemically assaults traditional forms that in closing satisfy. Positively significant form is only available in the late drama where it reaches an abstraction purified of the randomness of the human, or where his figures inch towards the one authenticity of death. With Murphy it is quite otherwise. In calling his collection of three plays _After Tragedy_, he tacitly accepts that he works, like Beckett, in a post-tragic period of drama: _Conversations, The Gigli Concert, Bailegangaire_ are not remotely like conventional tragedies. And yet in choosing the title, there is also an acknowledgement that he is in pursuit of some equivalent of tragic form, that he
is trying for it as well as subsequent to it. He refuses to accept that the large, significant modes of expressiveness of tragic drama are denied a modern dramatist. The despair, suffering, and anguish with which his characters live can not simply be talked through to resolution. But they can be voiced in the pure gestures of singing, in the archaic mode of storytelling. In their very different ways, the three plays of After Tragedy enact the human ability through the fictive to give lives an unironic shape and meaning to which we, the audience in the theatre, can assent.

25. The choice of title was his, and he did have in mind some such play of meanings. Personal conversation, 3 April 1991.

Works Cited


