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Personal Devices: Two Representative Stories by Brian Friel

by RICHARD BONACCORSO

BETWEEN 1964 AND 1967, with the productions of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* in Dublin, London, and New York, Brian Friel began to commit his talents fully to drama. This was about ten years into his public career as a writer of short stories and radio plays and following a half-year of study at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. In 1967, in an essay entitled “The Theatre of Hope and Despair,” Friel makes a distinction between the strategies of the playwright and those of the storywriter, between engaging a collective audience and a solitary reader. In doing so he reveals a determination to maintain an artistic faith with himself that he had established in the writing of short fiction. Friel considers that the playwright must employ a kind of stealth in order to evoke a fresh response from the conventional and often complacent mentality of theatre audiences. But storywriters, he states, “function privately” as in “a personal conversation. Everything they write has the implicit preface, ‘come here till I whisper in your ear’.”¹ This air of intimacy—a characteristic of the story tradition—is a condition toward which all of Friel’s art aspires and tends. Friel’s stories, however, provide a direct path to the writer’s inner ground. They approach the reader as a co-conspirator, one who is invited to discover the real story existing beneath appearances, in the undercurrent of the writer’s technique.

Mainly gathered in two collections published in the sixties, Friel’s stories introduce the small-town social world of the plays and the inner orientations of Friel’s dramatic characters; they also anticipate the subtle manner of the playwright, particularly in his well-noted reticence, sparseness of direct commentary, and reliance on dialogue to carry implications. The stories also display Friel’s special talent for the most intriguing dialogue of all, the silent interchange within the individual.

In Friel’s tales technique is ultimately embodied in subtleties of characterization. With what seems a quiet inevitability, the Friel story progresses from considerations of outer roles to those of inner identities. Beneath ordinary concerns and routines, the hidden interchanges between individuals and their communities come to be seen as crucial encounters. Without pronouncement the story gradually arrives at the threshold of a profound individual consciousness. Through a protagonist captured at a point of personal

1. *The Critic* 26.1 (Aug.-Sept. 1967): 15.

reconsideration, a moral pressure is recognized among the old debris of experience and memory. Though not usually autobiographical projections, these characters and these situations represent the patterns of Friel's personal concerns. Like a Wordsworth in prose, Friel excels at elapsed time reflections, and his stories explore the modifications of identity that aging produces. With each modification come new mysteries and responsibilities. These are the personal equations hidden beneath the common contexts of community and family life. To answer the call of self in such circumstances, to overcome the inertia of static myths, one must rely upon personal devices.

Friel's people live in an Irish village culture that is fading into obsolescence, yet one which maintains its grip upon the psyches of its citizens and demands conformity to its questionable codes. His fictional small towns, such as Ballybeg, Beannafreaghan, and Coradonna, represent, as Mel Gussow observes, "the small towns around the world," their "emotional environments" becoming adjuncts of character.² While casting a sometimes sardonic eye upon the community culture, Friel also acknowledges its significance in the lives of his people and, by implication, in the life of his own imagination. Speaking of the autobiographical aspect of his art, he has called himself "the miner and the mined."³ As in the work of Sean O'Faolain, Friel's flirtation with nostalgia becomes a creative strategy, a way of engaging the heart into what is essentially a critical assessment of the familial and cultural inheritance of his childhood in Tyrone and Donegal, where the stories are generally set.

The characteristic Friel tonality is comic-elegiac, wherein irony checks charm and bitterness underlies humor. Though humorous and nostalgic, these works seriously examine the costs of sentimentality, how it can falsify history and stall personal development. Seamus Deane has pointed out that since history has made Friel's provincial world "anachronistic," that world can also become "susceptible to sentimentality, self-pity, and, in the last stages, to a grotesque caricaturing of what it had once been."⁴ Though Friel's nostalgia genuinely evokes the charms of place and past, he also reveals how emotional passivity challenges the freedom of the character, the intellect of the writer, and the understanding of the reader. At the same time, genuine sensitivity to place and past is one measure of humanity and balanced discrimination. Feeling is part of understanding. While communal failures bear heavily upon Friel's characters, he does not define reality along deterministic lines. Deane states that Friel's "transactions" between character and community elicit "the recognition that the formal structures of social life are what we live by, not what we live for. Yet what we live for is clarified only by the insufficiency of what we live by."⁵ Place need not determine one's identity, but inevitably bears upon the self.

2. "From Ballybeg to Broadway," *New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 29, 1991): 55.

3. *Ibid.*, 30.

4. "Introduction," *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (Washington: Catholic Univ., 1986), 13.

5. "Introduction," *The Diviner* (Dublin: O'Brien, 1983), 5.

A good example of these dynamics between society and the individual is “The Flower of Kiltymore,” an ironically titled story from *The Gold in the Sea*. Friel begins this tale of a clownish, rural police sergeant named Burke with what seems a simple narrative. Nevertheless, it is a passage filled with defining nuance:

The calm and peace that the death of Lily, his wife, brought to Sergeant Burke’s life were an experience so new and so strange to him that the only explanation he could imagine was that he must be ill himself, the unnatural tranquility he had often heard about that frequently forebodes the end. And this knowledge was a vague comfort. Not that he wanted to die—he was, after all, only sixty-two, as strong as a bull, and within sight of retiring from the police force—but he felt guilty at having her lying all alone up there for the past four weeks in the new graveyard, the only grave in the cemetery, with not even a wall around it yet to keep the wandering sheep out.⁶

In this subdued manner and with a language that mimics Burke’s, Friel evokes a double view of the character’s personality. Mundane, simple-minded responses accompany hints of emotional depth and individuality. This method of characterization, probing regions of exotic sensibility under unexceptional behavioral facades, is one of Friel’s signatures. In this case, Burke himself does not understand his own feelings, and he reduces them to a kind of social problem—his dead wife’s isolation in the graveyard.

Bungling and absent-minded, the sergeant is superfluous as a social being except as an object of community laughter. Even Lily had nagged and mocked him. Since her death, however, he has grown indifferent to his clownish reputation, preoccupied as he is with his sense of alienation from himself. Lily’s lonesome resting place is hardly more removed from the community than is the sergeant’s mood, and he goes off to consult with a doctor, leaving the incompetent and slyly dishonest Guard Finlan on duty at the police station. Though a ludicrous figure himself, Finlan, like many of the younger members of the community, likes to make fun of the sergeant. The Blue Boys, a group of young hooligans, devise false alarms to keep the sergeant in a perpetual state of foolish and meaningless activity. Since the death of Lily, however, they have been quiet. Significantly, Burke misses the self-renewing stoicism that their mockery inspires in him. When an actual emergency takes place, the mockers are themselves mocked by reality itself, and, ironically, by means of another of his outward blunders, Burke ascends to a higher level of inner freedom.

Finlan ignores what he considers to be a prank call—a warning that a mine has washed up on Kiltymore’s beach. In fact the mine is real, and the Blue Boys, fooling with it as they have fooled with the sergeant, cause it to explode. Two are killed and several are maimed. The sergeant, who will be blamed for the disaster, belatedly arrives at the scene, heralded by a local madwoman: “The flower of Kiltymore!” she excitedly cries, “The flower of Kiltymore—all gone!”⁷ The mock-heroic aspect of her words anticipates the

6. *The Gold in the Sea* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 129.

7. P. 139.

absurd public hysteria that is now turned against Sergeant Burke.

But the crisis has a happy effect upon him. As he prepares to face an inquiry by his superiors and whatever public disgrace that may follow, he senses an unexpected renewal within himself:

They might dismiss him right away; or they might question him for hours, for days, and then dismiss him; or they might make a "case" of him, compile a file on him, keep him on tenter hooks for months, and then demote him, and send him to the back of beyond. It must be a terrible offence, he thought, that would bring the Commissioner all the way from Dublin tomorrow.

And yet, although he knew that his future was in the balance, he was neither afraid, nor even anxious. Because for the first time in four weeks he felt normal again. There was the fatigue, yes; but it was a healthy exhaustion. But the emptiness in his stomach had evaporated, and his head was clear, and his heart—his heart was gay, sure, vibrant.⁸

It is interesting that this simple man should reach this emotional plateau without the aid of indignation against his accusers. He does not rebel against the injustice of his situation nor does he rail against the hypocrisy of the inquiry. As the comic butt of the community he had been alienated. He is therefore now able to find refuge within himself, when the community is accusing him of failure in his societal role. He also has another humble but unique satisfaction:

But even more important, in a few days' time Lily would be alone no longer; she would have company in the new cemetery, the eternal company of the two Blue Boys, and that was a great relief to him. It might not have been the company she would have chosen, but they would have a lot in common, he felt. At last he had been instrumental in making her happy, even once.⁹

Burke is not conscious of being subversive; he does not sense the air of retribution clinging to his considerations. His personality turns bitterness into atonement, and, without a trace of vainglory or deviousness, he finds personal solace in the public disaster.

Friel effects a complex of ironies here. By means of a satire on the community, Friel elevates the sergeant, not just despite his social blundering, but because of it, and the story evokes the inviolate aspect of his heretofore underrated individuality. Yet the sergeant remains a social being in his own mind. Having considered himself a failure as a husband, he finds satisfaction in his imagined usefulness to his dead wife, thinking as he does of the growing little community of the graveyard. While Friel exposes the hypocrisies of communal life, the story also acknowledges people's imaginative need for each other.

Small-town mentalities are not necessarily small mentalities. Rich implications can exist in unexceptional lives, simple situations, and ordinary consciousness. Friel adapts himself to the mentality of his characters, and his generally inarticulate and isolated protagonists have their moments of grace and eloquence. In these moments we sense that they speak for the artist, though the message is usually indirect or disguised. "It is through his self-

8. P. 143.

9. P. 144.

effacement,” comments George O’Brien of Friel, “that we become aware of him.”¹⁰ Ultimately, as Seamus Heaney has pointed out, Friel is a writer engaged in a “quarrel with himself, between his heart and his head....”¹¹ Like Turgenev’s gentle provincials, Friel’s country folk seem alternately silly and shrewd. Though they do not act the cosmopolitan, they are often more canny than naive, and they embody a complex dynamic with their surroundings.

The protagonist of “The Saucer of Larks” is another aging police sergeant. (Curiously, his assistant is named Burke, the sergeant’s name in “The Flower of Kiltymore.”) This tale’s sergeant protagonist is also a man whose sensibility is belied by the gruff externals of looks, behavior, and speech (all typical trappings of his social status). He and Guard Burke escort two German officials of the War Graves Commission out to a lonely but beautiful Donegal valley, Glennafuiseog, a name which means “the valley of the larks.” They go there to locate the grave of a German pilot who crashed near the spot during the war. A stout man with a pipe between his teeth, the sergeant comments with self-deprecating irony as they drive out into the country: “This is my kingdom as far as you can see.”¹² But in a way he means it, for he responds to the beauty of the place so intensely that he feels compelled to speak, albeit roughly, of his emotions:

“Dammit, could you believe that there are places like this still in the world, eh? D’you know, there are men who would give fortunes for a place like this. Fortunes. And what would they do if they got it? What would they do?”

“What, Sergeant?” asked Burke dutifully.

“They would destroy it! That’s what they would do! Dig it up and flatten it out and build houses on it and ring it round with cement. Kill it. That’s what they would do. Kill it. Didn’t I see them myself when I was stationed in Dublin years ago, making an arse of places like Malahide and Skerries and Bray. That’s what I mean. Kill it! Slaughter it!”¹³

His alienation from society’s affairs deepens his private bond with this wild place. Indignant against the modern world, he is keen to escape from its obligations, some of which extend to him in his duties as a policeman. But as if to spite him, and in keeping with a questionable general policy, the German officials have come to exhume the body and take the remains to a mass grave in County Wicklow. Without fully realizing it, the sergeant has been made a grudging servant of blunt and narrow systemization. Nevertheless, his heart rebels within him as he surveys the surrounding beauty. On a moment’s impulse, he turns to the German officials and makes an appeal that surprises them and, indeed, himself:

“I’m going to ask you to do something.” His breath came in short puffs and he spoke quickly. “Leave that young lad here. Don’t dig him up.”

Herr Grass stiffened.

10. *Brian Friel* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 22.

11. “Digging Deeper,” *Times Literary Supplement* (March 21, 1975): 806.

12. *The Saucer of Larks* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 12.

13. Pp. 12-13.

"Let him lie here where he has all that's good in God's earth around about him. He has been here for the past eighteen years; he's part of the place by now. Leave him in it. Let him rest in peace."¹⁴

These words might as well be a plea for the sergeant himself, for he has been in these same regions for many years (he was called in when the pilot crashed and was buried by local fishermen eighteen years ago), and his impulse comes out of his long-formed piety for the place.

But he senses that the Germans do not understand his feeling, for he hardly understands it himself. They go about their duties, exhume the remains of the body and effectively violate the connection that time and nature had established with the human remains. The sergeant seems to sag within his uniform, and, contrasting with his exultation of a few moments before over the soaring of a flock of larks (a "confirmation of his humanity," as George O'Brien puts it), he descends into his officer's manner:

"I think that is everything," said Herr Grass. "Now we are prepared."

"Right," said the Sergeant irritably. "We'll go then. This bloody place is like an oven. My shirt's sticking to my back."¹⁵

The job is done, but it is certainly not "everything." The sergeant feels depressed in his isolation but also angry that he has been foolish enough to compromise it. When Guard Burke tries to draw him out later by criticizing the Germans, he shuns the overture and threatens Burke against speaking of the episode by the pilot's grave. The sergeant has gained a bitter wisdom. On another rare day his spirit may ascend with the larks again, but if it happens, no one else will know of it. Even as the larks fill up the untravelled valley, the sergeant, like all of us, fills his fated isolation with his own sensibility.

In Friel's stories, imposed values of social, historical, or ethical circumstance bear upon each human impulse, but not with a paralyzing inevitability. By depicting characters in situations that seem overpowering, Friel invests greater value upon those traces of autonomy that do arise, at least as a missed option. Typically, as these two stories illustrate, the Friel protagonist stops short of overtly subversive behavior, but, in a sense, Friel defines each character to the degree that the heart is not scripted and the mind is not programmed.

14. P. 14.

15. P. 16.

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