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Images Of Transcendence In The Plays of Brian Friel

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Naming transcendence has been the primary task of theatre in the western world since its beginnings over two and one-half millennia ago. The theatre of Dionysus in Athens was built on sacred ground; the plays themselves probed the nature of the gods and their relationship to mortal humans. The audiences that assembled for the dramatic festivals did so in order to glimpse what is not visible in day-to-day existence--the transcendent action underlying their entrances and exits on the stage of life. The myths that were enacted awakened them to the mysterious ways of the cosmos. They framed the fundamental questions of human nature and confronted the cold silence of the grave. For the Greeks, the theatrical experience and the religious experience were the same.

Early in the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill challenged the theatre of the modern world to re-discover a theatre rooted in transcendence. He insisted that the most daunting reality to be faced by the playwrights of his day was the death of God and the failure of science to provide a viable alternative. His entire career was dedicated to the struggle of naming, like the Greeks did, that reality which he calls (borrowing Strindberg's term) "behind life."

In the final act of O'Neill's autobiographical *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the young poet, Edmund, refers to this reality as "something greater than my own life, or the life of Man . . . Life itself! . . . God, if you want to put it that way."¹ To perceive this reality is to be charged to give it a shape, a name:

"Like a saint's vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see--and seeing the secret, are the secret.

¹ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1956) 153.

For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone,
lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason!"²

It is the thesis of this paper that the unseen reality that haunts the plays of Eugene O'Neill is to be discerned, as well, in the plays of Irish playwright Brian Friel. Like O'Neill, Friel has struggled to image-forth that reality which lies behind, shapes, and drives human action. In his plays, with very few exceptions, he treads on to that slippery territory where the human and transcendent "otherness" intersect.

In other words, both Friel and O'Neill take seriously the plight of the modern; both of them leave behind the Catholic institutional framework in which they were raised. Yet, each of their souls has been wounded by the experience of something beyond, alive and active within them, demanding that they reject the world-view of their cultures and set out on an unknown path. Their calling is relentless, religious. It demands a surrender of their lives, promising nothing in return except the fleeting assurance that they have been spared a life of death-doling conformity.

Matt Wolff, in the April, 1994 issue of *American Theatre*, has detected Friel's preoccupation with transcendence. He points out that the "ineffable" is a constant theme in Friel's plays:

More than any dramatist since Beckett, Friel has made a career out of expressing the inexpressible-giving voice via words, music, and most critically, silence, to those vast reaches which language cannot fill. . . . This dramatist writes metaphysical mood pieces, not showstoppers, and his most haunting passages lie in his characters' inevitable reacquaintance with this world as they acknowledge, even silently, the next.³

While Wolff finds similarities between Friel and his compatriot Samuel Beckett, I am suggesting that Friel is aligned, as well, with the dramatic vision of O'Neill. The protagonists of

² O'Neill, 153.

³ Matt Wolff, "Epiphany's Threshold," *American Theatre* (April 1994) 14-15.

Friel's plays bear within their souls "a touch of the poet." Wounded by the perception of transcendent otherness, of mystery, they can no longer find solace in the homeland of family, country or religion. For a second they "see" the secret which escapes the sight of those around them; they set out to give it a shape, a form. Like O'Neill's Edmund, they confess to being strangers who never feel at home, who do not really want and are not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death. Finally, they perceive the futility of their enterprise: each of them echoes Edmund's plaintive cry: "I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered . . . Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people."⁴

Friel is a prolific writer. In addition to over fifty short stories, many of which were published in the *New Yorker* during the late fifties and early sixties, he has written over twenty plays since *The Enemy Within* was performed in 1962. In the United States, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *Lovers*, *Faith Healer*, *Translations*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Wonderful Tennessee*, and *Molly Sweeney* have been the most frequently performed. The Friel cannon is filled with images of the quest for and dim perception of transcendence. In almost all of his plays, the protagonist is under the charge of an unseen force to leave the familiar in order to take up life on the boundary between two worlds.

In *The Enemy Within*, the playwright's first play to be produced, Saint Columba leaves Ireland with his companions to begin life anew at Iona, off the coast of northern Scotland. The journey is not from one geographical place to another: it is from the homeland of his birth to the mysterious kingdom of his soul. The play recounts the cost of surrendering to the call of transcendence. In the final scene, Columba curses Ireland for having seductively robbed him of his Christ, of sucking his blood, of stealing his manhood: "What more do you demand of me, damned Ireland? My soul? My immortal soul? Damned, damned, damned Ireland!" But his voice breaks; he is suddenly aware of what he is leaving behind: "Soft, green Ireland-beautiful, green Ireland-my lovely green Ireland. O my Ireland." He then musters the courage to confront his destiny on the boundary: "We were. . .asleep. . .But we are awake now and ready to begin again--to begin again--to begin again."⁵

⁴ O'Neill, 154.

In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, transcendence is imaged by splitting the personality of the protagonist into the "public" Gar and the "private" Gar. The former wears the shackles of Irish enculturation, whereas Private Gar is "the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the *alter ego*, the secret thoughts, the id. . . the spirit."⁶ The play recounts Gar's growing awareness of life in a world other than the one in which he lives. However, as in *The Enemy Within*, life on the boundary is paralyzing. In the course of the play, Gar says goodbye to the girl he has loved (and lost), his mates, his school teacher, the parish canon. In the final scene, he anticipates the separation from Madge, the housekeeper who helped raise him and, like Columba, experiences the pain of the border: Private Gar taunts Public: "God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?" He can only stammer: "I don't know. I-I-I don't know."⁷

In *Crystal and Fox*, Fox Melarkey and his wife Crystal roam the countryside seeking audiences for their traveling carnival show. They have no permanent home. Malarkey's description of what drives him is reminiscent of O'Neill's reflection in *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*:

Once, maybe twice in your life. The fog lifts, and you get a glimpse, an intuition; and suddenly you know that this can't be all there is to it--there has to be something better than this. . . . And afterwards all you're left with is a vague memory of what you thought you saw; and that's what you hold on to--the good thing you thought you saw.⁸

In *Faith Healer* Friel's protagonist Frank Hardy is an itinerant showman who lives a life uprooted from his homeland cursed with the gift of healing. In no other play does Friel describe with such poignancy the experience of being grasped by transcendence:

⁵ Brian Friel, *The Enemy Within* (Newark, Delaware: Proscenium Press, 1975) 63.

⁶ Brian Friel, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1965) 11-12.

⁷ Friel, *Philadelphia*, 110.

⁸ Brian Friel, *Crystal and Fox and The Mundy Scheme* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) 102-103.

The questionings, the questionings. . . They began modestly enough with the pompous struttings of a young man: *Am I endowed with a unique and awesome gift?*--my God, yes, I'm afraid so. And I suppose the other extreme was *Am I a con man?*--which of course was nonsense I think. And between those absurd exaggerations the possibilities were legion. . . . (T)hey persisted right to the end, those nagging, tormenting, maddening questions that rotted my life. When I refused to confront them, they ambushed me. And when they threatened to submerge me, I silenced them with whiskey.⁹

The unknown force that sends the gift, Hardy knows can also withdraw it. He describes himself as "balanced somewhere between the absurd and the momentous."¹⁰ The frustration and anxiety of life on the edge prompts him to confront head-on the force that has wreaked havoc with his life. In the last scene of the play, Hardy walks slowly toward a small group of toughs from the pub, knowing they will kill him for failing to heal their crippled friend. It becomes the moment of illumination:

(A)s I walked I became possessed of a strange and trembling intimation: that the whole corporeal world--the cobbles, the trees, the sky, those four malign implements--somehow they had shed their physical reality and had become mere imaginings there was only myself and the wedding guests. And that intimation in turn gave way to a stronger sense: that even we had ceased to be physical and existed only in spirit, only in the need we had for each other. . . . And as I moved across the yard towards them and offered myself to them, then for the first time I had a simple and genuine sense of homecoming. Then for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent. At long last I was renouncing chance.¹¹

⁹ Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, in *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1984) 334.

¹⁰ Friel, *Faith Healer*, 336.

¹¹ Friel, *Faith Healer*, 375-376.

Dancing at Lughnasa, *Wonderful Tennessee*, and *Molly Sweeney* are, to use Matt Wolff's description, "metaphysical mood pieces." Friel leads his characters, and his audiences, to a profound encounter with that "otherness" which haunts our lives.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the narrator Michael remembers the summer of 1936 when the world of his childhood in Ireland was destroyed. Each of Michael's five aunts--the Munday Sisters--their brother Father Jack, and his father Gerry confront the darkness of the physical, spiritual and cultural poverty that imprisons them. Memory is the vehicle of transcendence:

But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time 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. In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the 30's. It drifts in from somewhere far away--a mirage of sound--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 the 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 necessary.¹²

In *Wonderful Tennessee*, three couples whose marriages are time-worn if not on the verge of break-up, gather on a dock to await the coming of a boat to carry them to an unseen island

(called *Oilean Draoichta*, "the wonderful, the sacred, the mysterious") far in the distance. The nouns "wonderful," "otherness," and "mystery" abound in the characters' description of the reality that, though unseen, beckons them. One member of the group defends the primal experience of mystery that somehow vanished from contemporary life:

FRANK

(T)here must be some explanation, mustn't there? The mystery offends--so the mystery has to be extracted. (*Points to the island.*) They had their own way of dealing with it: they embraced it all--everything. Yes, yes, yes, they said; why bloody not? A rage for the absolute, Terry--that's what they had. And because their acceptance was so comprehensive, so open, so generous, maybe they *were* put in touch--what do you think--so intimately in touch that maybe, maybe they actually did see.

TERRY

In touch with what? See what?

FRANK

Whatever it is we desire but can't express. What is beyond language. The inexpressible. The ineffable. . . . And even if they were in touch, even if they actually did see, they couldn't have told us, could them, unless they had the speech of angels? Because there is no vocabulary for the experience. Because language stands baffled before all that and says of what it has attempted to say, 'No, no! That's not it at all! Not at all! Or maybe they did write it all down--without the benefit of words! That's the only way it could be written, isn't it? A book without words! . . . And if they accomplished that, they'd have written the last book ever written-and the most wonderful! And then, Terry, maybe life would cease.¹³

¹² Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990) 71.

¹³ Brian Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993) 40-41.

Toward the play's end, Frank, like many other Friel protagonists, "sees" transcendence face to face:

Just as the last wisp of the veil was melting away, suddenly a dolphin rose up out of the sea. And for thirty seconds, maybe a minute, it danced for me. Like a fawn, a satyr; with its manic, leering face. Danced with a deliberate, controlled, exquisite abandon. Leaping, twisting tumbling, gyrating in wild and intricate contortions. And for that thirty seconds, maybe a minute, I could swear it never once touched the water--was free of it--had nothing to do with the water. A performance--that's what it was. A performance so considered, so aware, that you knew it knew it was being witnessed, wanted to be witnessed. Thrilling; and wonderful; and at the same time--I don't know why--at the same time. . . with that manic, leering face. . . somehow very disturbing.¹⁴

Finally, in *Molly Sweeney* Friel creates a character who, though functionally blind from birth (only able to glimpse "a little"), experiences a oneness with creation.

MOLLY

Oh, I can't tell you the joy I got from swimming. I used to think--and I know this sounds silly--but I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience--every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone-sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight--experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through that enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it. . .¹⁵

¹⁴ Brian Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee*, 59.

¹⁵ Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney* (New York: Penguin Books (Plume), 1994) 15.

Through the miracle of science, her sight is restored. But the vision she acquires robs her of her grounding in mystery. Sight blinds. She slowly removes herself from the new world that has been opened up to her, seeking refuge-light-in darkness.

MOLLY

I think I see nothing at all now. But I'm not absolutely sore of that. Anyhow my borderline country is where I live now. I'm at home there. Well . . . at ease there. It certainly doesn't worry me anymore that what I think I see may be fantasy, or indeed what I take to be imagined may very well be real-what's Frank's term?-external reality. Real-imagined-fact-fiction-fantasy-reality-there it seems to be. And it seems to be all right. And why should I question any of it anymore?¹⁶

¹⁶ Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney*, 69-70.

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