

Instead of an Obituary. Brian Friel's Silent Voices. Memory and Celebration

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On the occasion of Brian Friel's eightieth birthday in 2009, Seamus Heaney published a slender volume called *Spelling It Out*, whose aim was to honour and celebrate the playwright and to mark a long-standing friendship.

Taking the letters of Friel's name and surname in a game with words and language, Heaney created a sort of microcosm of Friel's world. Starting with B, for Ballybeg, "the invented domain where so many of Brian's plays are set, the hub of his imagined world" (Heaney 2009, [3]), the poet moves on to I "for integrity", but also for "Ireland" and for "intimacy", thus mixing the public and the personal, "the inner self, the mysterious source and living of being" ([5]). At the same time this is a reminder of the stage directions in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), where Gar O'Donnell is split between Public Gar and Private Gar, the latter being "the unseen man, the man within, the *alter ego*, the secret thoughts, the id" (Friel 1984, 27). Words like "no", "fiction", "experiment", "love" and "language" are likewise entered in what Heaney defines "not so much an abecedary as a befrieleri" ([1]), in an interplay of public and private levels.

The death of Brian Friel on October 2nd 2015 followed Heaney's death about two years earlier, which meant the loss of two of the deepest, most eminent and most provocative voices in Irish literature and culture, whose echoes resound in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Both of them meant to go beyond the surface to dig deep into the soil of Ireland and the soul of man. The water-diviner that features in Friel's short story "The Diviner", first published in *The New Yorker* in 1962, is an image of the artist shared also by Heaney in a poem of the same title from his 1966 collection *Death of a Naturalist*. The diviner's "forked hazel stick" (Heaney 1980, 24) is a co-referent of the spade used in his celebrated poem "Digging", and the juxtaposition of digging and writing, of digging with a pen, highlights the role of the artist as archaeologist (De Petris 1996, 41). Friel dedicated his 1975 play *Volunteers* to Seamus Heaney, a play of public address that "seeks to dig deep through the rubble, to excavate pieces of the Irish past and examine how they fit with the Irish present" (Lojek 2004, 183).

Looking back in retrospect Brian Friel was probably the most renowned and celebrated Irish playwright, whose reticence to give himself away in inter-

views and public events seems to be in sharp contrast with his open involvement in the life of his country. He participated in civil rights demonstrations in Derry in 1968, he served in the Seanad Éireann, the Irish Senate, from 1987 to 1989 and in 2006 he was elected Saoi, literally 'the wise one', in the Aosdána. Yet, he preferred privacy and discretion. For example, in the 2000 volume *Reading the Future. Irish Writers in Conversation*, Brian Friel's voice is absent and is replaced by critic Fintan O'Toole, theatre director Peter Mason and University College Dublin Professor Declan Kiberd who speak for him.

The conflict and/or reconciliation of private or inner voices with public speaking are evident in his 1973 play *The Freedom of the City*. Occasioned by the events remembered as Bloody Sunday, the play commemorates a tragic public event, intertwining it with very private and intimate features. The three characters on stage – who are actually dead – belong to the poor Catholic population of Derry, and each of them takes part in the public domain of a civil right march also for intimate and private reasons. When they take shelter in the Guildhall, Lily, in particular, the housewife living “with eleven children and a sick husband in two rooms that aren't fit for animals” (Friel 1984, 154), expresses the double level of her private reasons. On one hand she marches for her disabled son Declan: “He's a mongol ... And it's for him I go on all the civil rights marches. Isn't that stupid?” (155). On the other hand, at the beginning of Act Two, recalling the moment of her death, Lily manages to put into words the most intimate and private feelings of inadequacy and disappointment, an epiphany of some sorts: “And in the silence before my body disintegrated in a purple convulsion, I thought I glimpsed a tiny truth: that *life had eluded me* because never once in my forty-three years had an experience, an event, even a small unimportant happening been isolated, and assessed, and *articulated*. And the fact that this, my last experience, was defined by this perception, this was the culmination of sorrow. In a way I died of grief” (150, emphasis added). The lack of “articulation” and the need to “articulate” highlight Friel's use of drama to give voice to what remains unexpressed. In the convention of the play the three characters are dead when the play opens, so Friel carries the voice of ghosts and the voice of those who have no voice onto the stage. Such expressionistic device recurs in *Living Quarters* (1977), a play bearing the format of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), in that it is the “rehearsal in a theatre in which the characters play themselves in a play of their own lives” (Dantanus 1988, 142). Also in this case dead characters come alive on stage, and in one of his last plays, *Performances* (2003), “the long-dead Jánáček ... recalls his feelings when alive” (Bertha 2006, 66) while the living character of Anezka interacts with the dead musician in a total disruption of realistic efficacy.

One of Friel's most memorable plays, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), intertwines the presence of the narrating voice of Michael with the voices of dead characters on stage, who come alive through his words. In this memory

play, Brian Friel sheds light on the private past that is reenacted on the stage, in which the public, historical context of the deprivation and economic restrictions merges with the private memories of the summer of 1936: "When I cast my mind to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me" (Friel 1990, 1).

Ghosts are also the vital force of one of his most controversial, most experimental and most successful plays, *Faith Healer* (1979). In an innovative and provocative stage enactment, two of the three characters on stage are already dead when the play opens, and the voices from beyond the boundaries of space and time tell contrasting and contradictory stories whose details often clash with one another's version. Truth about facts is elusive and maybe unimportant – is Grace Frank's mistress or wife? Is she "a Yorkshire woman" (Friel 1984, 335) or is she from Scarborough, Knaresborough, Kerry, London, or Belfast? Was her surname "Dodsmith or Elliot or O'Connell or McPherson"? (345). Was Frank there when her child was born or did he run away? (363). Only the magic of narration remains, counteracted by the mesmerism of the list of placenames opening the play and repeatedly interspersed in the three acts: "Aberarder, Aberayron, / Llangranog, Llangurig, / Abergorlech, Abergynolwyn, / Llandefeilog, Llanerchymedd, / Aberhosan, Aberporth ..." (331-332). Brian Friel's choice of having a play made entirely of monologues of characters that are never on stage at the same time disrupts traditional and conventional issues of dramaturgy, merging playacting with straightforward narration. The legacy of traditional storytelling returns in the later play *Molly Sweeney* (1996), once again featuring three monologists on stage, each recounting his own story while never meeting.

Drama and storytelling are constantly present in Friel's production. Having started his career with short-story writing, which led to a contract with the *New Yorker* in the 1950s and the publication of two collections, *The Saucer of Larks* and *The Gold in the Sea* in 1962 and 1966 respectively, Friel never abandoned his voice as a storyteller, a twentieth-century century *seanachie*. Rather than being statements, his plays turn into questions, focusing on fiction as fact, a way of making the harshness and disappointments an acceptable fiction. Several characters are in fact fabulists and storytellers who can survive only transforming fact into fiction. In *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1967), the protagonist changes the fifty-two years of her precarious life as an *émigré* in New York into a golden dream. Following the example of Trilbe and Ingram, her fellows residents at Eden House, in Act Three Cass learns to "rhapsodize", providing herself with a private, imaginative and alternative version of her story.

Truth is thus elusive. In *Crystal and Fox* (1968) the protagonist admits he has used words as a creative matter of invention: "It's a lie, Crystal, all a lie ... I made it all up" (Friel 1970, 73). His lies have a destructive and a creative power, as his attempt to restore the dream of past happiness will lead to the utter destruction of the world of his travelling show.

In *The Gentle Island* (1970), the controversial and ambiguous patriarch Manus Sweeney introduces himself as a storyteller, the depository of links between places, place-names, and stories: “There’s a name for every stone about here ... and a story too” (Friel 1993 [1973], 32). He is, however, an unreliable narrator: “There’s ways and ways of telling every story. Every story has seven faces” (57).

None of his stories is to be believed, in the same way as Casimir’s impossible tales of family lore in *Aristocrats* (1979) are just “phoney fiction” (Friel 1984, 278). In a similar way telling stories and making History underlies Friel’s play of the Great O’Neill in *Making History* (1988), where the authoritative written word of the book set centre stage draws the attention to the difficulty or impossibility of writing History without writing stories: “Isn’t that what history is, a kind of story-telling? ... Imposing a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting” (Friel 1989, 8), says Bishop Lombard entrusted with writing the biography of the Great O’Neill.

Several of Friel’s plays feature characters of writers and artists, from *Faith Healer* and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1999), to *Performances* (2003). In others, such as *Aristocrats*, a historian as an allomorph for an artist, is entangled in the labyrinths of truths and stories, and therefore of playing with language. As a playwright and artist Friel himself plays with language, in particular he addresses the issue of language from different perspectives in the first play produced for Field Day in 1980, *Translations*.

In the “Sporadic Diary” Friel kept while working on *Translations*, the playwright wrote that “the play has to do with language and only language” (Friel 1983, 58) and in this way it gives voice to a language that is going to be silenced. In the assumption that two languages are spoken, Irish Gaelic and English, *Translations* is maybe the climax of Friel’s plays of language. The ritual of naming, of translating Gaelic names into English ones is an act of creation or re-creation that also tells a story of dispossession and conquest: “We name a thing and – bang – it leaps into existence!” (Friel 1984, 422). Place names themselves are storytellers, the story of Brian’s well remains in Tobair Vree; the voice of a story nearly forgotten is kept alive on a map: “... there used to be a well here ... And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it ... And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree” (429). The play is a milestone not only in twentieth century Irish drama, but also a significant step in Brian Friel’s development. It is both a public and a private play, mingling public History and private stories and highlighting some of the major themes in the development of Irish drama at large: the centrality of the house, History, identity, the ambiguity of language.

His plays are based on careful research and on a knowing intertextuality (Kiberd 1996, 618), having made use of written texts as diverse as John

Andrew's *A Paper Landscape* (1975) and George Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) in *Translations*, Ervin Goffman's *Forms of Talk* (1981) in *The Communication Cord* (1982), Sean O'Faolain's *The Great O'Neill* (1942) in *Making History*, Oliver Sacks's case history *To See and Not See* (1993) in *Molly Sweeney* (Pine 1999, 9). The juxtaposition of public voices, because published books, and intimate and private articulation of silent voices recurs throughout his writing career as Friel continuously pursues his digging into soil and soul.

If Brian Friel should have wanted to identify himself with a Shakespearian play and a few Shakespearean quotations, probably he might have chosen *Hamlet*, Act Two, Scene Two. Here Hamlet's exchange with Polonius: "What do you read my lord? / Words, words, words" (*Hamlet* II, ii, vv. 191-192) is a catalyst for Friel's playwriting, whose raw material is words and whose engagement with language is in theory and practice at the core of his plays. Later on in the same scene Hamlet explains: "The play's the thing / wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (vv. 605-606). The play-within-the play, *The Murder of Gonzalo*, meant to elicit visible truth of his uncle's guilt of his father's murder, highlights Friel's engagement with similar metadramatic experiments, in *Lovers*, in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, in *Living Quarters*, in *Performances*, in the innovative format of *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*. If Hamlet mixed a public show with a private insight, thus becoming in a way a playwright, Friel used words to provide insight into privacies in the public context of the Ireland of his time.

Brian Friel's position and significance was celebrated worldwide during his lifetime in the numberless articles and scholarly essays, in books – both monographs and essay collections – and in official occasions and festivals, and it is somehow a paradox that such a private man should have had such public recognition. The Lughnasa International Friel Festival was held at the end of August 2015, not long before the playwright's death a few months later.

These few pages are meant to remember and pay homage to Brian Friel, who helped *Studi irlandesi* to find its voice. He strenuously supported *Studi irlandesi* since its first tentative steps with enthusiasm, respect and appreciation. His presence in the advisory board has meant a lot for all those involved in the Journal, for whom he was a true fellow traveller in the adventure of promoting Irish studies in Italy. In his silent voice that had so much to say, Brian Friel possessed the quintessential quality of the faith healer that features in his play, described in the play as: "this gift, this craft, this talent, this art, this magic" (Friel 1984, 349).

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