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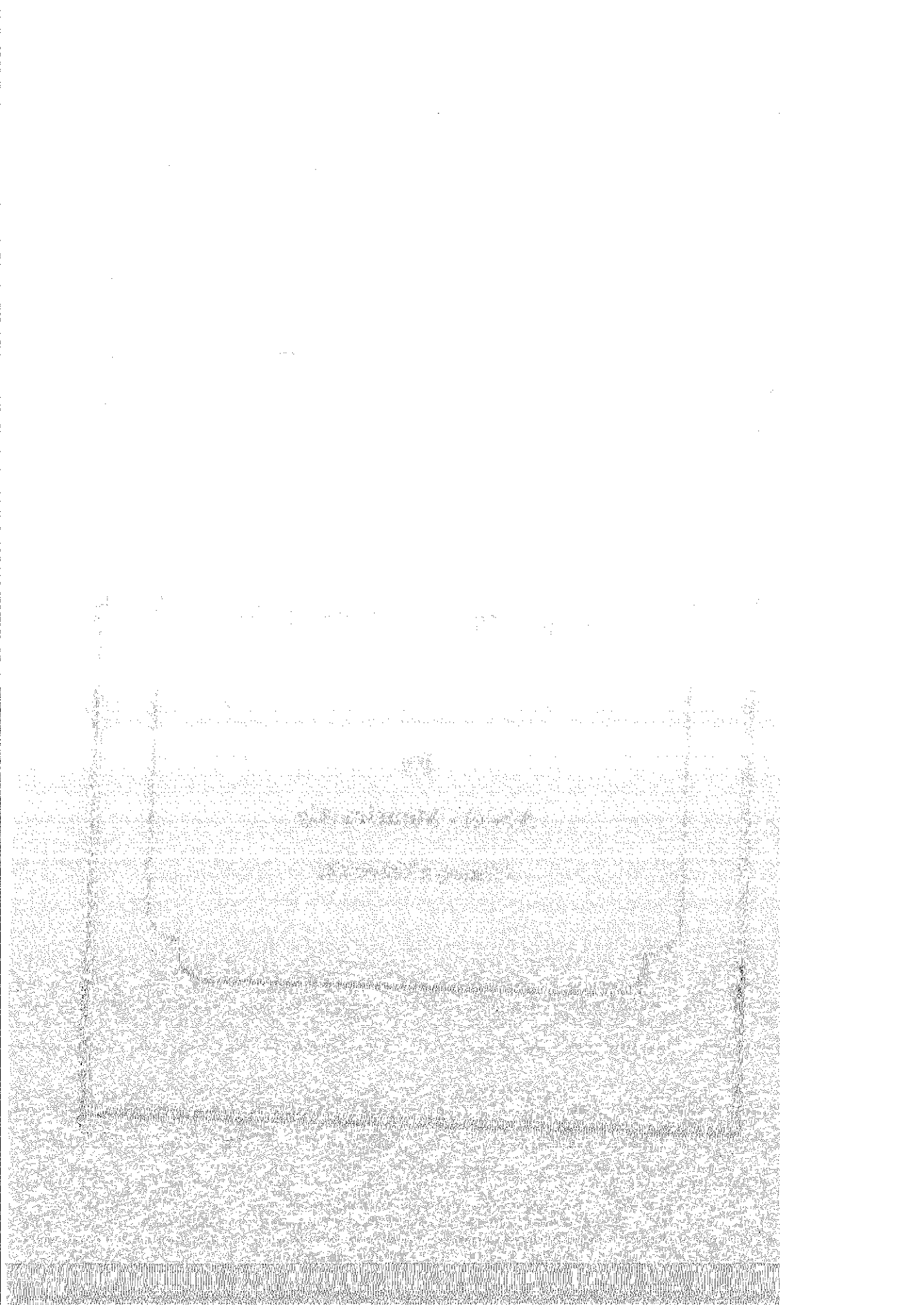
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**Irish Temperament and Irish Talk :
Desolation and Sense Of Failure in
Selected Plays Of Brian Friel**

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In his efforts to look at the reasons behind the political and social failure of a broken and decaying society, Friel has discovered as Seamus Deane puts it, the link between Irish temperament and Irish talk. The volatility which arises out of the need to compensate for this sense of failure slowly becomes a virtue. Deane contends:

Out of volatility, one can make a style; style can give off the effect of brilliance; but the brightness of the effect is very often in inverse ratio to the emptiness for which it is a consolation.

('Introduction' to Friel's *Selected Plays*, p. 12)

The idea of the eloquent outsider is a concept with a long tradition in Irish literature from the early poetry of the 'Dispossessed', with their longing for a lost age, right through the works of Yeats, Synge and O'Casey. Talk has always been a substitute for any real power. In Friel's work, this theme of impotent eloquence, always present, is most fully developed.

In *Philadelphia Here I Come*, Gar O'Donnell is an easily recognizable Frielian outsider. We also have the theme of emigration present as a vehicle by which a study of failure of society and relationships can be made. Because of Gar's sensitivity, other themes of loneliness, communication and identity can be explored. At the end of the play we have a final exchange between Public and Private:

PRIVATE:... God, boy, why do you have to leave?
Why? Why?

PUBLIC: I don't know. I- I- I don't know.¹

At this stage of the play we know why Gar has to leave. Because the play develops a more serious tone with each episode, the ultimate question which Gar asks of himself brings the reader to consider all that has gone before in a circular movement. This question is the one the reader asks himself at the start of the play.

By the use of time-shifts, mood shifts, and subtle exposures, we are presented with a complete picture of Gar's life in Ballybeg and his relationship with all the characters in the play. The action takes place in the night before Gar leaves for Philadelphia; his emotions are therefore in turmoil. The relationship between Gar and his father runs as a continual thread throughout the play, together with exposures through Private's and Public's conversations and introduction of other characters.

At the outset both Public and Private are in high spirits but it is not long before their witty exchanges are tainted with bitter feelings. We realize that Gar's relationship with his father is a strained one. And we first hear of Gar's failed love with Kate Doogan when Private taunts Gar: "By God, that was a night, boy, eh? By God you made a right bloody cow's ass of yourself". All Gar's sweet hopes are dashed by the reality of his life in Ballybeg, Kate's family look down on Gar

¹ *Philadelphia Here I Come*, p. 99. All references to the text are taken from Brian Friel. *Selected Plays*, London, Faber and Faber, 1984. Further references to Friel's plays will be given in the text and cited as *SP*.

and his own financial position could not possibly support a marriage. The 'egg money', which Gar has kept secret and eventually tells Kate about because of his love for her, epitomizes Gar's ridiculous situation. This trump card amounts to a pound a month.

The interplay of humour and pathos adds substance to the play. Private's ridiculing of Screwballs is not only funny, it also shows, with great effect, the monotony of Gar's and Screwballs' daily routine:

PRIVATE: (*In polite tone*) Have a seat Screwballs. (*S. B. sits down at the table.*) Thank you. Remove the hat. (*S. B. takes off the hat to say grace. He blesses himself.*) On again. (*Hat on*) Perfectly trained; the most obedient father ever had....

S. B. : Did you set the rat-trap in the store?

PUBLIC: Aye.

PRIVATE: (*Hysterically*) Isn't he a riot! Oh my God, that father of yours just kills me! But wait - wait - shhh - shhh -

A. B. : I didn't find as many about the year.

PRIVATE: Ooooooh God! Priceless! Beautiful! Delightful! ...

(*SP*, p. 48)

This funny yet bitter account of their daily ritual, prepares us for Gar's admission of the gap present between himself and his father:

PRIVATE: But worse, far worse than that, Screwballs, because *we embarrass one another*. If one of us were to say, 'you're looking tired' or 'That's a bad cough you have', the other would fall over with embarrassment.

(*SP*, p. 49)

Gar's realization of this total lack of communication is yet another reason for his leaving for America. Madge's astute comment at the end of the play that Screwballs was once just like Gar, "leppin', and ejjitin', about and actin' the clown; as like as two peas" (*SP*, p. 98),

suggests the true reason why Gar has to leave – to protect his own integrity. All hope of bridging the gap between father and son ends sadly in Part Two. Throughout, Gar has harboured the idea that there is more to their relationship. A happy childhood memory acts as Gar's mental support. This too eventually fails. Gar asks S. B. whether he remembers a blue boat in which they used to fish. S. B. remembers only a brown one which belonged to some doctor. Gar concedes that that fact does not matter:

PUBLIC: (*Quickly*) It doesn't matter who owned it. It doesn't even matter that it was blue. But d' you remember one afternoon in May ... - and it wasn't that we were talking or anything – but suddenly – you sang 'All Around My Hat I'll Wear a Green Ribbono' - ... - for no reason at all except that we – that you were happy. D' you remember? D' you remember?

This illusion too is shattered, S. B. does not remember: “‘All Round My Hat?’ ‘No I don't think I ever knew that one’”. Quickly, Private says: “So now you know: it never really happened”. (*SP*, p.95)

Just as Gar's relationship suffers from illusion, so too does his relationship with the 'boys'. As D. E. S. Maxwell says, when the boys arrive: “Their endless reminiscence of imaginary seductions conceal a reality of futile street wanderings, of cold, of locked doors and of drawn blinds.”(Maxwell, p. 68) As in any of the other relationships in the play, real communication can be held as a measure of success. The instant when any of the boys try to communicate genuine feeling the air is fraught with awkward embarrassment and manly bravado.

NED: (*Shyly, awkwardly*) By the way, Gar, since I'll not see you again before you go, - ... If any of them Yankee scuts try to beat you up some dark night, you can, . . . (*Now he is very confused and flings the belt across the room to Public*) . . .

you know ... there's a bloody big buckle on it ... many's a
get I scutched with it . (*SP*, p. 75)

However false these other relationships are for Gar, leaving his
homeland is still not easy. The advice Master Boyle offers is hard to
take: "But I would suggest that you strike out on your own as soon as
you find your feet out there. Don't keep looking back over your
shoulder. Be one hundred per cent American." (*SP*, p. 53) The reasons
which make Gar's departure necessary are also the reasons which
make his departure so difficult. As Ulf Danatus says, Gar, like
Michael and Mary in O'Flaherty's story *Going into Exile*, undergoes
transformation: "the poverty and sordidness of their home life
appeared to them under the aspect of comfort and plenty" (Danatus, p.
123)

Already after the boys leave we see Gar's memory shifting between
harsh reality and fond reminiscence:

PRIVATE: No one will ever understand the fun there was; for there
was fun and there was laughing - ... Just the memory of it -
that's all you have now - just the memory, and even so soon,
it is being distilled of all its coarseness.

The difficulty that Gar faces in shaking off this 'lethal form of
nostalgia' is heightened by the threat of the life which awaits him in
Philadelphia - the world of Con and Lizzy. Private shows them the
false merits of their world when he says: "'Elsie'! Dammit, Lizzy
Gallagher, but you came up in the world". Gar is faced with the
suffocating 'love' of Lizzy and Gar/Private is repulsed.

LIZZY: If we'll have him, he says; ... That's why I'm here!
(*She opens her arms and approaches him*) Oh Gar,
my son -

PRIVATE: Not yet! Don't touch me yet! (*Lizzy throws her*

arms around him and cries happily)

LIZZY: My son, Gar, Gar, Gar.....

PRIVATE: (*Softly, with happy anguish*) God ... my God...
Oh, my God.... (SP, p. 66)

At this point in the play we see for the first time the direct conflict, which Gar suffers, in an exchange between Private and Public:

PRIVATE: She'll tuck you into your air-conditioned cot every night.

(PUBLIC, *so that he won't hear begins to whistle*
'Philadelphia Here I Come!')

PRIVATE: And croon, 'Sleep well, my li'l honey child!

(PUBLIC *whistles determinedly*)

She got you soft on account of the day it was, didn't she?

(PUBLIC *whistles louder*)

And because she said you were an O'Donnell - 'cold like'.

PUBLIC: It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen
of France -

PRIVATE: But of course when she threw her arms around you - well,
well, well!

PUBLIC: - then the Dauphiness, at Versailles-

PRIVATE: Poor little orphan boy.

PUBLIC: Shut up! Shut up!

PRIVATE: (*In child's voice*) Ma- ma ... Ma- ma.

(PUBLIC *flings open the bedroom door and dashes into the*
kitchen. PRIVATE follows behind)

PUBLIC: Madge!

PRIVATE: (*Quietly deliberately*) You don't want to go, laddybuck.

Admit it. You don't want to go. (SP, p. 67)

Here we can see clearly the two forces in opposition. On one hand we have Private goading Public about the vulgar material world of the childless Aunt Lizzy and her desire to suffocate Gar. On the other hand we have Public reciting Burke's sentimental lines evoking the ancient regime. Gar has to break free of the sentimental attachments he has made to a life of failure and illusion. This is made all the harder because when he arrives in America there is the all too real danger

that he will have merely exchanged one role for another. The fear is made worse, as Seamus Deane points out, by the "intolerable suspicion, ... in leaving Ballybeg, he is forsaking the capacity to feel deeply" (Deane, p. 14) knowing the score is of no consolation to Gar. He is an easily recognizable Frielian figure; exiled by his intelligence and sensitivity and subjected to playing the eloquent clown with his own feeling, his eloquence unable to restore a sense of power.

The period between *Philadelphia Here I Come* and *The Freedom of the City* in 1973, showed an increase in Friel's popularity as a playwright. Audiences readily accepted his work, which although it had an unmistakable quality, was not in retrospect among Friel's major achievements. With plays like *The Love of Cass McGuire* (1967) Friel continued with the theme of emigration and exile.

Any sentimentality that Friel may be accused of in these early plays clearly ends with the ironically named *The Gentle Island* of 1971. Here we see that the underlying feelings of failure, disillusion and sexual frustration give rise to hatred and violence, eventually erupting with the maiming of Shane, one of the visitors to the Island. Friel shows not the gradual decaying of a small Donegal town, but an island and its people largely at odds with their fate and one another. There is division between the older and younger generation, Manus and Joe; between husband and wife, Philly and Sarah, and between the outsiders Peter and Shane and the native islanders. Ironically Peter envies Manus' constant peaceful lifestyle. Shane however, is more perceptive. He realizes that Manus wishes them to return to the Island and Christmas merely to support his own illusion. In the end it is not just the maimed Shane who is the victim; Manus' way of life, is in

reality, finished; Sarah a young woman full of love and vitality is doomed to a life on the island; and Joe escapes only to the relative freedom of a Glasgow slum.

With plays like this Friel was accommodating a ready made audience. With his depiction of characters like Gar O'Donnell – outsiders with a witty patter, Friel was following in a well known Irish tradition. It was as Seamus Deane puts it 'fine writing.' (Deane, p. 16) Friel was however, to be brave enough to turn his back on this ready made audience and growing commercial success.

Although Friel was concerned with politics and history, the past and national identity, he had refused to use the new crisis (manifest in the outbreak of 'the troubles' in 1968) as a platform for his drama. He saw himself, understandably, as being too emotionally involved. His work was influenced by a personal conception of what was happening around him like that of many Irish writers of the early 1970s, such as Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, but there was no direct reference. With the occasion of bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972 this was to change. The piece had been working on at the time about an eighteenth-century eviction in the West of Ireland which was to be reshaped into *The Freedom of the City*. Now Friel's work was to take a new direction in future if it would be dominated by "the sense of a whole history of failure concentrated into a crisis over a doomed community or group." (Deane, p. 17)

The Freedom of the City is set in Derry in 1970. Three civil rights marchers running from CS gas and rubber bullets used by the Army during the dispersal of a rally, find refuge in the City's Guildhall. During the ensuing confusion and unbeknown to the three

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inside, the Guildhall is surrounded by a ridiculously large number of army and security forces. The three intruders eventually leave the Guildhall only to be shot as terrorists.

Although Friel deliberately set the play in 1970 – two years before the incident of Bloody Sunday – because of its emotive nature and the fact that he drew from very real aspects of the troubles to produce this, his most directly political play the criticism he faced was harsh, unreasonable and narrow-minded. Because of IRA atrocities being carried out in Northern Ireland and Britain itself, people were both short of tolerance and subsequent understanding. This is clearly shown by reviews in the English Press. In Northern Ireland opinions were as ever entrenched. The Belfast Newsletter, predictably described the play as 'mawkish propaganda' (Darius, p. 157).

Where there can be no doubt that the British Authority are shown preserving their own interests – as the judge himself says, "this tribunal of inquiry, appointed by her Majesty's Government, is in no sense a court of justice" (SP, p. 109) – it is also necessary to point out that on the Irish and nationalist side, misinformation and hypocrisy are also rife. The Ballender, Priest and RTE reporter all use the events to their own advantage, perpetrating their version of the truth.

The issues involved in *The Freedom of the City* make it a very complex play. In the play, Friel attempts to show the Civil Rights movement and the background of poverty which went hand in hand with it. As always in Friel's plays he examines his themes through his characters in a realistic form. Although all the characters are from the same background; all Catholic lower class, they have different views and different desires which slowly manifest themselves throughout the

play. The contrast in their views is most obvious in the relationship between Michael and Skinner. Michael feels the marches have lost the dignity they once had when all the people marched in silence: "rich and poor, high and low, doctors, accountants, plumbers, teachers, bricklayers – all shoulder to shoulder – knowing that what they wanted was their rights and knowing that because it was their rights nothing in the world was going to stop them getting them" (*SP*, p.129). To Skinner this hushed dignity and respectability is just 'shit'. When challenged towards the end by Skinner, Michael states clearly what he wants:

MICHAEL: What I want Skinner, what the vast majority of the people out there want, is something that a bum like you wouldn't understand: a decent job, a decent place to live, a decent town to bring up our children in ... And we want fair play, too, so that no matter what our religion is, no matter what our politics is, we have the same chances and the same opportunities as the next fella. (*SP*, pp. 160-161)

The irony here is that 'a bum like Skinner' can understand even more clearly than Michael. Michael thinks by being 'responsible and respectable', 'they', the other side will see sense. Skinner knows that the matter is more complex than that. When they leave the Guildhall, Skinner's reply to Michael shows this deeper understanding:

MICHAEL: You really think they'd shoot you! You really do!

SKINNER: Yes. They're stupid enough. But as long as they've got people like you to handle, they can afford to be.

(*SP*, p. 166)

The difference between Skinner's instinctive perception (a quality which he shares with Lilly) and Michael's mistaken 'responsible'

reasoning is shown in the speeches each of the characters make after their death:

MICHAEL: ... I knew they weren't going to shoot. Shooting belonged to a totally different order of things ... My mouth kept trying to form the word mistake... And that's how I died - in disbelief, in astonishment, in shock. It was a foolish way for a man to die.

LILY: The moment we stepped outside the front door I knew I was going to die, instinctively, the way an animal knows....

SKINNER: A short time after I realized we were in the Mayor's parlour I knew that a price would be exacted.... I began to suspect what that price would be because they leave nothing to chance and because the poor are always overcharged. (*SP*, pp. 149 -150)

Skinner's perception accounts for some of his action in the Guildhall.

Skinner is an easily recognizable Frielian character. Like Gar O'Donnell, he comes out of an Irish tradition of eloquence without power. He is an outsider exiled from his own society by his wit and intelligence. On the outside there is the might of the intruders - the British brigadier and Judge, the American sociologist, the Guildhall Unionists, with their stilted terms and jargon and untruths; and on the inside the resentment of his own unfortunate society. Thus as Deane says:

Once again, in divorcing power from eloquence, Friel is indicating a traditional feature of the Irish condition. The voice of power tells one kind of fiction - the lie. It has the purpose of preserving its own interests. The voice of powerlessness tells another kind of fiction - the illusion. It has the purpose of pretending that its own interests have been preserved. (Deane, p.18)

Although Skinner is, at times, cynical, he is also sensitive. This sensitivity comes across in his relationship with Lily. Besides

entertaining Lily, Skinner takes an interest in her life. It is worth noticing Lily's grief in her 'dying speech'. The grief she feels is that of regret: "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." (*SP*, p. 150) During the time spent in the Guildhall, Skinner tries to make Lily feel more important. He gives her a drink, dresses her in Alderman's robes, talks of her life and gives meaning to her predicament. The contrast in perception between Skinner and Michael is an obvious one; the difference in perception and feeling between Skinner and Lily is less obvious yet it is still present. When Skinner is giving Lily reasons why he thinks she is marching it can be seen as a statement of his own reality. Although Lily, like Skinner, realizes the situation, "the unfair world", she is marching for Declan, her Mongol child. Skinner can understand this very personal motive but the contrast is still present.

Skinner's isolation, more than the specific theme of Civil Rights and poverty, is Friel's main concern. When Skinner puts on the Mayor's robes he says, "You're much deceived, in nothing am I changed/ But in my garments" (*SP*, p. 135), we again see the contrast inside the Guildhall. In the relationship between Skinner and Michael we see again the impotence of eloquence. For Skinner the fact that he is more aware than Michael gives him no satisfaction. For him, like Gar in *Philadelphia Here I Come*, to know the score is of little consolation. His 'defensive flippancy' ends in failure. Maxwell sees Skinner "moving towards a politically more sophisticated endorsement of violence" (Maxwell, p. 105). It is more likely however, that Friel uses Skinner as a representative of the final victim

of the 'troubles'; a man surrounded by an oppressive power and divorced from his own society. This society is in no better shape; it too is breaking up under the insurmountable pressure.

With the new direction prompted by *The Freedom of the City*, Friel was to go forward constantly with Irish psyche and question of national identity, although using what Frank O'Connor called a 'backward look'. For him like many Irish writers the past was inextricably connected with the future.

From *The Freedom of the City* onwards the idea of 'looking backwards' to reveal the truth about the present and perhaps the future, was to be developed. *Translations*, the first production of the newly formed Field Day group can in many ways be seen as the culmination of this theme. The historical occasion of the British Ordnance Survey of Ireland in the 1830s was to provide Friel with the perfect metaphor for the issues that he wished to bring to attention. Then Ireland faced the loss of linguistic autonomy when English was imposed on Gaelic speakers. The fact that the metaphor does match the subject so well gives the play neatness and richness hitherto not as strongly present. The material is the perfect vehicle for the complex issues of the play. The play dates historically from what may be seen as the start of the decline of the Irish language. The death of the Irish language is shown through one community or more precisely one family in Donegal.

The play tells of a regiment of Royal Engineers coming to Ballybeg to draw up a new Ordnance Survey of the area. With the English army comes Owen, returning to his own community after an absence of six years. One of Owen's friends, Yolland, a British

officer, falls in love with a local, Maire. Eventually, however, he goes missing, presumably killed at the hands of the locals. At the end the village is faced with retaliatory action by the British army.

Within this story we have the recurrence of familiar Frielian themes and characters, full of sensitivity and hope. Owen is an outsider but he has the knowledge of an insider. He is sensitive, caught in the middle, uncertain of his own identity. Captain Lacey is the voice of authority and Hugh and Jimmy the voices of illusion. Through these characters we have again the battle of eloquence and power. By using, on stage, the same language, with only certain people able to understand, Friel manages to present both humour and pathos at the same time and thus highlight the problems of communication.

The contrast in the language and nature between the two communities is clear from the outset. In the hedge-school, where much of the action takes place, Latin and Greek are heard almost as frequently as Irish. Jimmy Jack Cassie is "fluent in Latin and Greek but is in no way pedantic – to him it is perfectly normal to speak these tongues For Jimmy the world of the gods and ancient myths is as real and as immediate as everyday life in the townland of Baile Beag". (*SP*, pp. 383-384) When Hugh tells his class of the arrival of the British army and his meeting with Captain Lacey the differences are again brought home:

HUGH: He then explained that he does not speak Irish. Latin?
I asked. None. Greek? Not a syllable. He speaks – on his own admission – only English, and to his credit he seemed suitably verecund . . . I went on to propose that our own

culture and the classical tongues made a happier conjunction
... English I suggested, couldn't really express us.
(*SP*, pp. 398-399)

Of Captain Lacey it is said; "His skill is in needs not words".

Yet within the local community itself, there is division. Maire wants to be taught English instead of Latin and Greek. She feels that she will be able to make no progress without it. The division within the community of Ballybeg is personified in Owen who returns to the townland to aid in the Anglicizing of local place-names. To the local people he is Owen but to the soldiers he is Roland. Manus who sees the English and their language as a very real threat, sees Owen deserting his cultural heritage. Owen's reply shows the uncertainty which he feels: "Easy, man, easy. Owen - Roland - What the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? Well, isn't it?" (*SP*, p. 408) This question is the very question the play asks and tries to answer.

Yolland the outsider is also exiled from his own community and that of Ballybeg by his sensitivity, although the poignancy is not that of Owen's dilemma. He is not like Lacey, "the perfect colonial servant." (*SP*, p. 415) Yolland wants to settle down in Ballybeg, for him "it's really heavenly" (*SP*, p. 414). Yet Yolland, unlike Peter in *The Gentle Island* is sensitive enough to realize the complexities: "Even if I did speak Irish I'd always be an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it?" (*SP*, p. 416). It is Owen who, becoming more and more aware of the 'private core' himself, talks of 'decoding us'. Yet this as Owen must eventually come to realize is impossible. Both he and Yolland, sensitive as they are, cannot agree upon place names.

Yolland wishes to enter Tobair Vree into the 'name-book' in its original format and eventually the futility of the job makes Owen explode with anger.

The inevitability of Yolland's failure to cross this barrier of communication and culture is again shown in his relationship with Maire. The rich humour here is directly proportional to the serious problem of thwarted love. At the beginning of Scene Two when the couple run freely from the dance their speech, although in different languages, is in perfect co-ordination. By the end of the scene, unfortunately, there is total confusion:

YOLLAND: I would tell you how I want to be here – to live
here – always – with you – always, always.

MAIRE : 'Always'? What is that word – 'always'?
... I want to live with you – anywhere – anywhere
at all – always – always.

YOLLAND : 'Always'? What is that word – 'always'?
(*SP*, pp. 429-430)

The confusion using the word 'always' highlights the fact that Yolland wants to stay and Maire wants to leave. At the end of the play, the British place-names are as foreign to Maire as the Irish place-names were to Yolland in the beginning.

In *Translations*, as in Friel's previous plays, English is still the language of power and the lie as we have seen in the failure of the place-names to truly represent the places and Irish is still eloquently preserving the illusion. In Hugh's bombastic speech to Yolland the complexities of the Irish language are brought to the fore. It is a language to be proud of but it is also a language which restricts:

HUGH: Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the
mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception –

a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to ... inevitabilities. ... it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscapes of ... fact.
(*SP*, pp. 418-419)

The fact as Seamus Heaney points out, is the fact of National Schools, the demise of the hedge-schools with their Latin and Greek and the re-naming of the country. (Heaney, *T.L.S.*, 24 October 1980, p. 1199) As always with Friel the Irish language is represented in many ways. Hugh like many Frielian characters is powerless as Owen reveals: " 'An expedition with three purposes', the children laugh at him: he always promises three and never gets beyond A and B."

The play also exemplifies the failure of language on a number of other levels. In their book, *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins conclude that the slipperiness of language occurs particularly in its numerous translation scenes. (See Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, p. 176). As shown by Owen's overtly skewed rendition of Captain Lancey's speech to the Irish villagers, language conceals and dissembles even as it conveys certain information, not always through semantic channels alone:

LANCEY: His Majesty's government has ordered the first ever comprehensive survey of this entire country – a general triangulation which will embrace detailed hydrographic and topographic information and which will be executed to a scale of six inches to the *English* mile.

OWEN: [*translating*] A new map is being made of the whole country. (*SP*, p. 406)

The conclusion to the play is one of failure; Manus has had to leave his own village because of the failure of his plans with his 'intended'; the love of Maire and Yolland has failed and Yolland has fallen fate to the 'private core' of the tribe; Owen is left a dislocated figure, estranged now from his own people; and Hugh's days at the hedge-school are numbered with the emergence of the new National School. The play ends in failure too as Hugh will teach Maire English but she will still not be able to communicate: "I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies?" (*SP*, p. 446) Even with the language which Maire sees as being the answer she will still be unable to progress because of the "incoherence that comes from sharing a common language which is based on different presuppositions", (Deane, p. 22) Jimmy's illusion acts as a metaphor:

JIMMY: Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don't cross those borders causally – both sides get very angry. Now, the problem is this: Is Athene sufficiently mortal or am I sufficiently godlike for the marriage to be acceptable to her people and to my people? You think about that. (*SP*, p. 446)

Just as Jimmy cannot marry the illusionary Athene, for Maire to cross the 'border' and marry Yolland, is an illusion – the two tribes are too different. Hugh is left to recite (with great difficulty) the praises of a lost civilization of hope and culture, overthrown by warlike 'Trojan blood'. Seamus Deane sees the play as pointing to the "failure of language to accommodate experience, the failure of a name to fully indicate a place, the failure of lovers to find the opportunity to express

their feeling whether in words or in deed, are all products of this political confrontation". (Deane, p. 22) As he goes on to say, although the play points consistently to failure, the fact that it has been written and has gleaned truths from the past, is an indication that the sense of loss is on the way to being overcome. As Hugh said: "English I suggested couldn't really express us". The way forward, therefore, as Friel sees it quoting from the play is "'we must make them our own', we must make them (English language words) distinctive and unique to us" (Agnew, p. 60).

Using the North-West of Ireland, an area stretching from Derry across the border to Donegal, Friel has found a place that encapsulates the complexities and issues felt by the whole country. The townland of Ballybeg becomes a microcosm for the whole island, for this region has felt the pressure more acutely than elsewhere. In Friel's Ballybeg, Dublin, Britain and America have all left their mark. The problems of depopulation and emigration have broken up communities. Old lifestyles have been replaced, not merely with more modern ways of life, but with foreign ways. Communication between the society and the outside world is subject to suspicion and conflict, and communication within this decaying society has lost its virility. Friel uses the family as the cornerstone for his work. The effect of these influences and the ensuing problems are shown through the family; the subsequent drama comes from these people. The use of melodrama and the change from humour to pathos is part of his theatrical gift, and its use helps to match the form and content, highlighting his concern with the effect of brilliance coming from volatility. Throughout his plays Friel constantly brings to attention the illusions which the people of

Ballybeg/Ireland use to compensate for their lost life-style and the problems which a readiness to accept these illusions creates.

After *Freedom of the City*, Friel starts to deal directly with the problems of Ireland. *Volunteers* starts a process, similar to the work of the poet Seamus Heaney, of looking back to understand the problems of the moment. The creation of an illusion to make the present tolerable is an ancient traditional theme. The poetry of the "dispossessed" dates back to the 'Flight of the Earls' at the end of the seventeenth century. This tradition is a continuous one. Friel himself said: "In some ways the inherited images of 1916, or 1960, control the rule of our lives more profoundly than the historical truth of what happened on those two occasions. The complication of that problem is how to we come to terms with it using an English language" (Agnew, p. 61).

In *Translations*, although the play ends in failure, we are given some hope. This hope comes in the form of a possible solution to the problem — 'we must ask them our own'. Friel's own work can be seen in the light of an effort to make the English language his own — to make it 'distinctive and unique' to him. Seamus Heaney sees Sarah as a key figure in *Translations*. (Seamus Heaney, *T.L.S.*, 24 October 1980, p. 1199) In the opening scene, she is being taught, by Manus, to say: 'My name is Sarah'. Nothing can stop her now, Manus assures her. At the end when confronted by Captain Lacey she cannot now utter her name. As Heaney concludes:

It is as if something symbolic of Ireland from the Eighteenth century vision poem, the one who confidently called herself Cathleen Ni Houlihan, has been struck dumb by the shock of modernity. Friel's

work, not just here but in his fourteen preceding plays, constitutes a powerful therapy, a set of imaginative exercises that give her the chance to know and say herself properly to herself again.

(Seamus Heaney, *T.L.S.*, 24 October 1980, p. 1199)

The determination with which Friel has pursued the ideas he considers important, turning his back on critical acclaim and commercial success, is a mark of his feeling and bravery. Deane says, "No Irish writer since the early days of this century has so sternly and courageously asserted the role of art in the public world without either yielding to that world's pressures or retreating into art's narcissistic alternatives". (Deane, 22) This is high praise indeed, by a close friend but it is also, thankfully accurate.

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