ABSTRACT

Liturgy, Ritual, and Community in Four Plays by Brian Friel

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This thesis considers the function of ritual and liturgy within four plays by Irish playwright Brian Friel—*Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964); *Faith Healer* (1979); *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990); and *Molly Sweeney* (1994)—while paying special attention to how these more spiritual traits elegize not only the Irish experience, but also the theatre experience. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I argue that Friel advocates a household vision of spirituality, wherein the institutionalized forms of Catholicism find deeper significance once transposed to the confines of the home. My second chapter examines *Molly Sweeney* and *Faith Healer* in light of documentary theatre and how Friel uses the disparate communities in these two plays to ritualistically illustrate a representation of community that dramatizes the theatre itself.

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: A Framework for *Liturgy, Ritual, and Community in Four Plays by Brian Friel*

Irish playwright Brian Friel stresses the dramatist's necessary preoccupation with the "collective mind" in "The Theatre of Hope and Despair" (1967), noting how the communal experience required for theatre might contribute to the "redemption of the human spirit," and, subsequently, to a renewal of the afflicted community itself (Friel 18, 24).[1] Friel witnessed the fruits of his optimism with the 1980 founding of The Field Day Theatre Company, a theatre group which Marilynn Richtarik claims boasted a "self-confident localism" and tightly positioned itself in the late twentieth-century Northern Irish experience (Richtarik 12). Field Day appropriately turns its back on the two dramatic extremes Friel rebuffs in "The Theatre of Hope and Despair": that of commercialism and a "commitment to revolt and rejection," characteristics which Friel attributes to some mid-twentieth century dramatists (22).[2] For Friel, the ethos of Field Day privileged the theory that "[f]lux is [the] only constant" for dramatists, "the crossroads their only home; impermanence their only yardstick" (16).[3] This "flux," characterized by Friel as dependent upon the "patterns" we ascribe to artistic movements, manifests itself in the portrait of the community that willingly embraces those patterns, and therefore alerts the dramatist to the "collective mind" on which his dramas so fervently rely (15).

Although production dates span thirty years, the four plays addressed in this thesis—*Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Faith Healer*

(1979), and *Molly Sweeney* (1994)—are curiously detached from Friel's involvement with Field Day, and yet they reveal his persistent desire to foster this "collective mind" first as a playwright and second as an arts administrator. The plays, in fact, antedate and postdate his participation in Field Day, with the play *Making History* (1988) signaling his final production with the company in 1988. Friel would not officially resign until 1994 (the same year *Molly Sweeney* would premier at the Gate Theatre in Dublin), but his slow removal from Field Day reveals itself much earlier, particularly in light of his decision not to produce *Dancing at Lughnasa* with Field Day in 1990. Classifying these four plays within a pre- and post- Field Day split proves to be unstable, however, since the majority of his work stresses, as previously mentioned, a "self-confident localism" that exists outside the life of Field Day (Richtarik 12).

Like many of the plays produced by Field Day, Friel's work consciously moves towards a distinctly Irish theatre, and his plays' inherent themes of exile and homecoming point back to the sense of confusion inherent in Irishness. In a 1982 interview with Fintan O'Toole, Friel explains this confusion in light of Northern Ireland's sectarian debate:

> There is certainly a sense of rootlessness and impermanence. It may well be the inheritance of being a member of the Northern minority. That could be one of the reasons, where you are certainly at home but in some sense exile is imposed on you. […] In some kind of way I think Field Day has grown out of that sense of impermanence, of people who feel themselves native to a province or certainly to an island but in some way feel that a disinheritance is offered to them. (169)[4]

While Friel's plays produced during the height of Field Day's tenure certainly exhibit a desire to combat Northern Irish "rootlessness," the four plays addressed in this thesis offer relief for a "sense of impermanence" through means separate from distinctly Irish

appeals. These four plays are preoccupied with a kind of theatricality that transcends nationalistic concerns and turns inward to the ritual nature of theatre itself.

Friel's ambitions for Field Day were certainly linked to a desire for the "collective mind" to flourish, a point corroborated by Richtarik in her in-depth study of Field Day's involvement with cultural politics in Ireland: "They wished to bring professional theatre to people who might otherwise never see it" (11). Thus, the theatre promoted by Field Day was meant to not only unite moneyed theatre patrons, but also to reach the residents who perhaps more closely resembled the everyday, often poverty-stricken characters in Friel's own plays. As we will see, though, the means by which Friel's plays attract not only this marginalized audience, but also the vast majority of audiences who enjoy the breadth and depth of these dramas rely heavily on artistic and spiritual patterns that are not exclusive to the life of Field Day. The tendency of Friel's plays to engage audiences by privileging both ritual and liturgy—two practices that primarily rely upon the "collective mind" for confirmation—rests at the center of this thesis.

Instances of ritualized behavior and liturgical speech appear throughout Friel's body of work. These two characteristics suggest a spiritual nature to Friel's plays, wherein the actions and words of the characters on stage point to something larger than the theatre space alone. Friel's spiritual use of ritual and liturgy contributes to what I believe is his widespread appeal. This thesis, then, considers the function of ritual and liturgy within these four plays while paying special attention to how these more spiritual traits elegize not only the Irish experience, but also the theatre experience. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I argue that Friel advocates a household vision of spirituality, wherein the institutionalized forms of Catholicism find

deeper significance once transposed to the confines of the home. My second chapter examines *Molly Sweeney* and *Faith Healer* in light of documentary theatre and how Friel uses the disparate communities in these two plays to ritualistically illustrate a representation of community that dramatizes the theatre itself.

First produced in 1964, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* details Gareth O'Donnell's final night in the fictional Irish village of Ballybeg before his transatlantic journey to a new life in Philadelphia. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the play is its use of two actors for the character of Gar—called "Private Gar" and "Public Gar" respectively. Although the other characters in the play are unaware of the onstage presence of Private Gar, the play displays Public Gar's interactions with his family and friends as persistently censored when viewed alongside Private's *un*censored commentary. Gar's connection with his father, S.B. O'Donnell, proves to be the central concern of the play, and the lack of communication between the pair simultaneously propels Gar forward into the modern world of Philadelphia and pulls him back to the agrarian landscape of Ballybeg.

One of the first characters we meet in this early play is the homely housekeeper, Madge Mulhern. She initially appears as the comical housekeeper of the typical Irish cottage kitchen play. Quickly, however, Friel reveals that Madge is more of a surrogate mother figure for Gar, whose own mother, Maire Gallagher (referred to only by her maiden name in the play), died in childbirth. It is Madge who facilitates not only the daily housekeeping rituals of the O'Donnell home, but also the household's engagement with Catholic devotional practices. Thus, it is Madge who serves as the family's spiritual facilitator, attempting to heal the broken bond between father and son, as well as preserving the memory of the family's "Blessed Virgin," Maire Gallagher, through her

own litany that she passes along to Gar. This unusual reconfiguration of Catholicism to a more localized, household vision of spirituality rests at the center of my treatment of *Philadelphia*; as we will see, it is Madge who carefully resurrects an older, Irish strain of Catholicism that, in the latter twentieth-century, would quickly be categorized as mere paganism.

Dancing at Lughnasa is set nearly thirty years prior to *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, and yet the play, like *Philadelphia*, acknowledges the kitchen as one of the primary spaces in which the drama's stage business takes place. (*Dancing at Lughnasa*, of course, takes place entirely in the Mundy kitchen.) This play, produced in 1990, explores the marginalized life of five middle-aged, unmarried sisters who support themselves financially by doing odd jobs on the outskirts of Ballybeg. The return of their uncle, Father Jack, from his missionary work in a remote African village promises to reincorporate the sisters in the overtly patriarchal Catholicism practiced in Ballybeg, but Father Jack's attraction to the more pagan rituals of the Ryangan people quickly renders him worthless within a Catholic paradigm. The sisters, then, are left unsupported in their community, and their mournful and erratic dance (from which the play gets its name) in the family kitchen is perhaps indicative of their desire for a localized, empathetic vision of the harsh Catholic moral imperative that overwhelms them.

Narrated by Michael Mundy, the illegitimate son of one of the sisters, the play is told in flashback form, focusing on the final summer the sisters lived together in Ballybeg. As Helen Lojek has described, the reappearance of men in these women's lives proves to be the central conflict of the play, wherein the hope of a spiritual father figure in Father Jack is lost and the return of an old lover (Michael's father, Gerry Evans)

similarly goes sour (78). Kate Mundy (the oldest sister) desperately tries to impose the Catholic moral and behavioral imperative onto her younger sisters, but this intense religiosity only highlights their own collective sense of spiritual deprivation, a kind of deprivation that is spurred on by their marginalization in a patriarchal community and manifested physically in their disabled sister, Rose. The artistic way Michael recalls that summer, however, memorializes the women insofar that they might come to life each time their story is retold on stage.

These two plays privilege a localized, household-specific view of spirituality, one that relies upon a family liturgy that is perhaps preferred by Friel over an invasive, institutional religious presence that struggles to truly empathize with its congregants. Often considered to contain candid critiques of Catholicism, these plays perhaps move beyond mere criticism and offer an overlooked alternative to strictly institutional spirituality. There are many moments in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, where the secular-religious divide seems blurry, and the space between this divide is where the more pagan, household religion finds its bearings.

While *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I believe, demonstrate a more overt relationship with faith and spirituality, *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* are mostly devoid of religious references. What the two plays lack in direct discourse with Catholicism, however, they make up for in their deep attention to ritualistic behavior, much of which points back to the peculiar structure of the plays themselves. Comprised entirely of monologues, with only three onstage characters, *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* recreate an experience more akin to storytelling than straightforward drama. The form of the two plays is similarly reminiscent of

contemporary documentary theatre, another dramatic genre that likewise relies heavily on the monologic form.

The parallel of *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* to documentary drama not only finds its roots in the plays' structure, but also in the ritualistic, community-driven goals of docudrama generally. Both *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* call into question the reliability of first person narration, particularly since the same story is retold through different eyewitnesses. Such is the case for docudrama as well, in which entire communities reconstruct traumatic events through the vehicle of theatre.

Faith Healer, often distinguished as Friel's greatest masterpiece, abstractly depicts the work of the artist through the medium of "faith healing." Led by purported healer, Frank Hardy, who is accompanied by his wife, Grace, and his manager, Teddy, the play follows the trio's travels across England, Scotland, and finally their return to Ireland. Perhaps Friel's finest example of the intersection of form and content, *Faith Healer* gracefully depicts its storytelling characters in a static manner, and yet the subject of the drama follows each character's eventual confrontations with vagrancy, exile, and homecoming. Deeply tied to the play's overarching themes of storytelling and art, *Faith Healer* relates the disparate narratives of the three travelers, narratives which ultimately revolve around Frank's own brutal death in the midst of a failed, final attempt at healing.

Molly Sweeney adopts a form similar to that of *Faith Healer*, using only monologues to tell the story of blind Molly's journey toward sight and her tragic recourse to a kind of voluntary blindness. Encouraged by her husband, Frank Sweeney, to pursue surgery that would "cure" her blindness, Molly must learn the language of the sighted world—a task that proves to deconstruct much of the identity she has already cultivated

for herself within the purely tactile world. The results of the surgery leave Molly marginalized and alone in what she refers to as her "borderline country," a confused, liminal space which might readily point to the landscape of cultural politics in late twentieth-century Ireland; conversely, the fact that Molly describes her sense of contentment within this liminal space complicates that perspective. In this particular section, however, I argue that Molly's "borderline country" is perhaps more akin to the theatre space in light of anthropologist Victor Turner's notion of communitas, a component of Turner's ritual process which ultimately speaks to the equalizing power of drama.

Certainly there are many other Friel dramas that readily engage with instances of liturgy and ritual. These four plays, however, reveal that his multifaceted vision for theatre is enormously consistent, particularly since they span such a substantial period of his dramatic career. The works addressed in this thesis, in my opinion, demonstrate a trajectory for Friel's career that scarcely ignores the foundational human desire for spiritual nourishment, regardless of whether that nourishment comes from the remnants of an institutionalized religious presence or from the often overlooked voice of the playwright or performer.

CHAPTER TWO

Friel's Household Vision of Spirituality in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*

In his 1972 essay, "Plays Peasant and Unpeasant," Friel describes the conflicted state of the artistic "Irish imagination":

> I do not believe that art is a servant of any movement. But during the period of unrest I can foresee that the two allegiances that have bound the Irish imagination—loyalty to the most authoritarian church in the world and devotion to the romantic ideal we call Kathleen—will be radically altered. (Friel 56)

He then describes the Irish imagination as "vivid, slovenly, anarchic, petulant, alert to the eternal, [and] impatient with the here and now instrument," and claims that this new reconciliation between "the two allegiances" will manifest itself in an art form that reflects this diverse "Irish imagination" (56). In his first stage success, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), these allegiances are often lost amidst the discussion of public and private discourse that so readily represents itself in Public and Private Gar O'Donnell. As Anthony Roche has explained, Gar's dual character implicates further divisions in the play—specifically, the communication gap between a disparate father and son, and finally the loss of local identity in exchange for the onset of modernity (Roche 72-78). Although public-private discourse is certainly an invaluable component of *Philadelphia*'s theatricality and message, the way Friel allows the rustic Madge Mulhern, the unlikeliest of characters, to partially heal the disparate ties between father and son warrants attention in light of the drama's spirituality.

At first, Madge appears onstage as the stock "housekeeper" of the cliché Irish cottage kitchen play, but she later facilitates much of *Philadelphia*'s engagement with Catholic devotional practices, attempting to mediate the broken communication of father and son, as well as preserving the memory (through her own litany) of the family's Blessed Virgin, the deceased Maire Gallagher. This vision of Madge as a spiritual character likewise aligns itself with a localized view of the play insofar that Madge's spiritual "work" is built upon her own awareness of local identity and ritual. However, Madge steps outside the bounds of the Irish Catholic spiritual hierarchy endemic to Ballybeg. By moving away from the Irish Cathlic, male-centered spiritual administration, Friel places Madge in a more pagan tradition, tied to the community in a spiritual medium appropriate for the localism that the play advocates. As we will see, though, the paganism from which Madge evidently draws is more accurately reminiscent of (to use the words of Friel's "two allegiances") an intermingling of both "the most authoritarian church in the world" and "the romantic ideal we call Kathleen" (Friel 56).

Madge occupies an even more significant role when read alongside that of the Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). Madge's childless, unmarried status and the extemporaneous dance she shares with Gar at the start of the *Philadelphia* may even allow us to conceive of her as a "lost" Mundy sister, living the life we might expect of one of the sisters following the dissolution of the Mundy family. *Dancing at Lughnasa*, however, differs from *Philadelphia* insofar that religious discourse frequently arises in the Mundy household, whereas it is merely alluded to in the O'Donnell home outside of the daily recitation of the rosary. Kate Mundy's rigorous attempt to impose the Catholic moral and behavioral imperative onto her younger sisters only highlights their own

collective sense of spiritual deprivation, spurred on by their marginalization in a patriarchal community and manifested physically in the disabled character of Rose. These two complementary dramas perhaps indicate Friel's own sense of authentic spirituality—one that privileges a localized vision of ritual and blurs the line between the secular-religious divide.

This chapter attempts to recover the conflicted allegiances that Friel describes in "Plays Peasant and Unpeasant" in light of household visions of spirituality in both *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. I hope to answer three primary questions that I feel highlight the nuanced relationship between the plays' engagement with spirituality and the formation of communal and familial identity that so often depends upon Friel's purported allegiances: How does Madge Mulhern engage with a liturgy of preservation, whereby she creates her own vision of the family's Blessed Virgin, Maire Gallagher? How might we define "liturgy" (and, subsequently, "litany") in the context of Friel's dramas and how is that definition facilitated by a deeper understanding of both the pagan roots substrate below traditional Irish Catholicism and Friel's own sense of memory? And finally, in what ways do *Philadelphia* and *Lughnasa* attempts to reconcile the more pronounced delineation between not only the secular and the religious, but also twentieth-century Irish Catholicism and remnants of a more localized, regional spirituality?

Friel depicts the trappings of Irish Catholicism as disappointing throughout *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, revealing the emptiness of the church through the character of the flat, insensitive town Canon. The Canon—who should (ideally) represent a dynamic oral tradition in its most spiritual form—recites the play's emptiest and most

repetitive speech. His iteration of Madge's comment, "You wait till the rosary's over and the kettle's on," not only emphasizes his inability to move on from an ironic joke, but it also numbs the audience to the thought of the Canon as a dynamic, substantial character (Friel 84).[1] He repeats the comment two more times in the course of his conversation with S.B. O'Donnell, and each time S.B. replies with a short, "A sharp one, Madge" (84, 85, 90). Madge's comment, although told in jest, is ironically truthful; the Canon, who is frustratingly unspiritual, *does* appear to "wait till the rosary's over" before interacting with his parishioners. Private Gar's monologue directed toward the Canon reveals his own frustration with the Canon's failed spiritual leadership: "you could translate all this loneliness, this groping, this dreadful bloody buffoonery into Christian terms that will make life bearable for us all. And yet you don't say a word. Why, Canon? Why, arid Canon? Isn't this your job?—to translate?" (88). Gar's question, "Why, *arid* Canon?," points to the futility of the Canon's spiritual authority in Ballybeg. Gar considers him a sterile, stagnant vision of religious institutionalism, and the Canon's repetitions reveal that he is not meant to "translate" as Gar would like; instead, he can only mimic the empty phrases of his evening routine of tea and checkers. The Canon's flat, apathetic presence in *Philadelphia* is perhaps indicative of Friel's own sentiments concerning Catholicism, but it also makes apparent the family's need to compensate for spiritual deprivation prompted by this insubstantial, albeit traditional, Catholic presence.

Contrasted with Madge Mulhern, the Canon appears as just another character who frequents the O'Donnell home, leaving Madge to occupy a more nuanced position as "high priestess," compensating for the void left by the Canon's spiritual futility. Regardless of whether one reads her as a spiritual character, Madge occupies a unique

position in the O'Donnell home, one that permits her to remain an outsider while still orchestrating the daily rituals of the household. Her presence as an "outsider" (or non-family member) allows her to maintain her role as spiritual facilitator by way of the distance inherent in her housekeeping job, and this outsider status likewise distances her from the O'Donnell family's spiritual and emotional baggage so that she might reconstruct their broken bond through a more omniscient awareness. Similar to this theme of "reconstruction," Madge acts as the connective tissue between characters and scenes. Fully positioned in the present, she frequently does not appear in any of the more obvious flashbacks of the play. Instead, she moves in and out of the play's transitions, holding the scenes together with her household chores, brief advice, orchestration of events, and also—in one instance—her call for the men to complete the recitation of the rosary, led by Madge herself. Madge, who bears a name that feels about as careless as the attention paid to her by those she loves, is truly the high priestess of the O'Donnell home insofar that she strives to maintain relationships in a family that has suffered the loss of its mother, the physical connective tissue between father and son. Her traditional tendencies contrast to Gar's modern inclinations, and yet his lines, "Madge, I think I love you more than any of them. Give me a piece of your courage, Madge" speak to his deep respect for her as a surrogate parent (47). Her own repetitions aim to preserve beauty and youthfulness (as in her rehearsed description of Maire Gallagher that is repeated by Gar) as well as question the authenticity of those around her. She recognizes Gar's desire for "translation" between father and son, but she thinks that a translation still falls short of the familial communion both men crave: "And any other nosing about you want to do, ask the Boss. For you're not going to pump me" (87). My questions in this section on

Philadelphia revolve around how Madge's presence as the family's subtle spiritual facilitator manifests itself in the oral tradition she passes along to Gar, a tradition that verbally connects Gar to the community he is supposedly so eager to exchange for American modernity in Philadelphia.

As I hope I have illustrated above, Friel sets Madge somewhat apart from the other characters in *Philadelphia*, entrusting her with a peculiar form of authority in the O'Donnell home that perhaps ameliorates the spiritual distance among father, son, and the deceased mother. In this next section, I define what it is I mean by "liturgy" in light of Friel's sense of memory that he describes in his essays; these two voices (Friel and the language of liturgy) can inform one another in such a way that advocates the embodiment of words and speech as a means toward embodying truth. As Anthony Roche—paraphrasing Yeats—explains, "man can embody truth, but he cannot know it. And the embodiment of the truth of Gar's predicament is not to be found in any formula of words but in the shape of the play itself, in all the dramatic elements which go to form it" (102). My sense is that Roche is overlooking the role of language as a "dramatic element" in itself, and Madge Mulhern's litany of Maire Gallagher is an exemplar of the way in which language can poetically participate in and produce the theatricality of a work.

Madge's litany is performed by both Public and Private Gar in Episode One. Spurred by the discovery of the "Precious medieval manuscript" (an old newspaper) in the suitcase—unopened since Gar's parents' honeymoon—Gar recites the rehearsed memory of his mother in tandem with the Catholic prayer for the deceased (Friel 37):

> PUBLIC: O God, the creator and Redeemer of all the faithful, give to the soul of Maire, my mother, the remission of all her sins, that she may obtain…

> PRIVATE: She was small, *Madge says*, and wild, and young, *Madge says*, from a place called Bailtefree beyond the mountains; and her eyes were bright, and her hair was loose, and she carried her shoes under her arm until she came to the ends of the village, *Madge says*, and then she put them on…
>
> PUBLIC: Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine…
>
> PRIVATE: She was nineteen and he was forty, and he owned a shop, and he wore a soft hat, and she thought he was the grandest gentleman that ever lived, *Madge says*; and he—he couldn't take his eyes off her, *Madge says*…
>
> PUBLIC: O God, O God the Creator and Redeemer…
>
> PRIVATE: And sometimes in that first year, when she was pregnant with you, laddybuck, the other young girls from Bailtefree would call in here to dress up on their way to a dance, *Madge says*, and her face would light up too, *Madge says*… (37; my emphasis)

I have included this passage in its entirety because I want to stress the rehearsed, liturgical style of Friel's call-and-response dialogue here. The inclusion of the Catholic prayer for the deceased allows for this moment to capture both corporate and private visions of worship and meditation, and the repetitive nature of "Madge says" at each cadence in Gar Private's speech indicates his own reliance upon Madge's oral tradition. In the same way the rosary reflects on the different miracles of the Virgin Mary's own life, Madge's litany of Maire Gallagher reflects on her youth, her marriage, and also her pregnancy. The tragic difference, of course, is Maire's death during the birth of Gar, which subsequently leaves the family groping for the beauty and vivacity that was embodied in their own Blessed Virgin.

The word "liturgy," in general, references a distinct order of praise, one that is repeatable and appropriate for both public and private worship; "litany" can mean the language itself used to create that worship experience, although it is often simply defined

as a rehearsed prayer. Thus, litany is an aspect of liturgy, the textual component of the worship experience. When I use the word "litany" here, I am making the distinction between normal, conversational speech and the rehearsed, mesmerizing, and spiritual language that so often arises in Friel's dramas. Madge's litany fits this particular definition well: hers is capable of propagating an oral tradition that ameliorates the spiritual deprivation of its practitioners, a spoken ritual used in moments of worship and longing. And so the momentary recitation of Madge's litany of Maire Gallagher occurs within a larger liturgical framework that is endemic to the O'Donnell household. Unlike Master Boyle's call for "impermanence and anonymity," liturgy, according to the monk Aiden Kavanagh, "is an *artistic* enterprise" (Friel 52; Kavanagh 139). It inherently resists "impermanence and anonymity" since it is the product of an individualized experience that memorializes itself in creative speech and behavior. Kavanagh explains, "Liturgy happens only in the rough and tumbled landscape of spaces and times which people discover and quarry for meaning in their lives" (Kavanagh 139). Liturgy must also be repetitive, recognizable; Kavanagh points to the "splendor of the sameness" liturgy provides to its practitioners, allowing them to "avoid the toil of getting their facts straight and to avoid the hazard of being discovered to have been wrong" (Kavanagh 79).

This avoidance of "getting their facts straight" and "the hazard of being discovered to have been wrong" recalls Brian Friel's own sense of memories. As Friel references one of his own memories of his father—a father-son memory similar to Gar's in *Philadelphia*—he concludes that the "fact" is actually "a fiction," something that probably never happened but is nonetheless valuable in the "truth" that it composes: he explains, "What matters is that for some reason…this vivid memory is there in the

storehouse of the mind. For some reason the mind has shuffled the pieces of verifiable truth and composed a truth of its own" (Friel 101).[2] This formulation of memory is certainly applicable to Madge's own engagement with liturgical speech, especially since it seems to "shuffle the pieces of verifiable truth" into a poetic, memorializing act that Gar deeply takes to heart. This litany, supposedly, is all Gar seems to have as a means toward connecting to his mother's past; a connection via "Screwballs" has proved ineffective. As a substitute, Madge provides him with a verbal memory, one that may or may not be "verifiably true," but still captures "a truth of its own."

Friel often gives his characters—and likewise the audience—the chance to participate in and witness mesmerizing language. Frank Hardy's repeated recitation of the dying Welsh villages in *Faith Healer* (1979) and Maire and Yolland's own call-and-response love scene in *Translations* (1980) are both examples of this. Even in *Dancing at Lughnasa,* the calming, repetitive language of Michael's final monologue draws the audience into a kind of artistic reverie, perhaps only accomplishable within the walls of the theatre. In the case of Gar's repetition of Madge's oral tradition, the words not only mesmerize Gar, but they also memorialize his deceased mother in much the same way as the Catholic rosary memorializes the mysteries of the Virgin Mary. Madge's litany brings Maire Gallagher to life once more through a passed-down description of her youth, marriage, and pregnancy; this rhythmic prayer acts as a placeholder for something that the O'Donnell home dearly misses—a mother.

Themes of surrogacy in the play inevitably point to the void which stands at the heart of Madge's litany, and as readers and audience members we see that the characters are attempting to compensate for a presence that is no longer accessible. Dick G. Lange,

in *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology*, explains that liturgy "points continually to something absent" (40). Lange also describes how "[i]t is the discovery not of a content or substance or meaning but of something that cannot be possessed, the discovery of *res absens*, the discovery of something absent within event, word, thing" (40). Lange, in this passage, is primarily concerned with how one might construct liturgy, not a way of evaluating a liturgical text; in this essay, though, I am interested in what prompts the phenomenological response of the characters and the readers/audience to Madge's "liturgical text," and Lange's sense of absence seems to be crucial to Friel's representation of memory since it allows for a new truth to be composed within the void.

Perhaps the best example of this "absence" appears in Aunt Lizzy's attempt to recreate Gar's mother's wedding day:

> LIZZY: Anyhow, there we are, all sitting like stuffed ducks in the front seat—Una and Agnes and Rose and Mother and me—*you know*—and mother dickied up in her good black shawl and everything—and up at the altar rails there's Mair all by herself and her shoulders are sorta working—*you know*—and you couldn't tell whether she was crying or giggling—she was a helluva one for giggling—but maybe she was crying that morning—*I don't know*—
>
> CON: Get on with the story, honey.
>
> LIZZY: (*With dignity*) Would you please desist from bustin' in on me? (60-61; my emphases)

Lizzy never fully completes the story of the wedding; instead, her iterations of "you know" leave much to be desired because, essentially, we *don't* know. Her language gropes for certainty, and yet it is also indifferent to the details (How much meaning is altered between "crying" and "giggling"?). In the end, she cannot finish the story because she is distracted by whether or not the Bailtefree chapel is still there; seconds later, our sense of Lizzy as a reliable storyteller comes into question when Con reminds

her they passed it that morning. Lizzy's story is extemporaneous and unapproachable; on the page, her dialogue is aesthetically jumbled, interrupted with dashes and empty phrases. Her desire to chronicle the small, irrelevant details of the day overshadows any attempt to recapture the truth of the memory, not necessarily its factual accuracy. We learn much more of Maire Gallagher through Madge's poetic, call-and-response liturgy (which is probably more "fiction" than "fact") than we do through Lizzy's inchoate and distracted rambling.

In order to compare Madge's spoken liturgy of Maire Gallagher to a broader vision of the Blessed Virgin, then we must take into account the traditional implications of the Virgin Mary for Irish Catholics as she is presented in the country's medieval Catholic literature, a starting place which Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha suggests is invaluable for understanding "Mary" in the Irish sense. Robert Welch asserts that the Catholic Irish are "deeply sacramental people" and that "this trait tends to make them *artists*, because a sacrament is all about setting aside, for special and deliberate attention, something which in the ordinary course of events does not signify" (Welch 113; my emphasis). Madge Mulhern's liturgical representation of the family's own Blessed Virgin—that is repeated by Gar—is reminiscent of this sense of artistry, and it is clear in the text that this repetition, much more poignant than Gar's iterations of Edmund Burke, means to step outside the "ordinary course of events" in order for the memory to be "set aside, for special and deliberate attention" (113). I want to use Welch's understanding of sacramental "artistry" to frame my discussion of one of the primary fifteenth-century apocryphal texts which paints a portrait of Mary herself, and, more specifically, describes the unique female storyteller who witnesses Christ's birth. Here I should qualify that

although we do not know exactly what Friel had in mind for Madge as a spiritual character, this particular text is an interesting lens through which we might view Madge within the larger history of Irish Catholicism; in particular, it is a means toward placing the liturgy she propagates within an oral tradition.

Dhonnchadha explains that "[t]he most important collection of stories about Mary's birth, upbringing and adulthood was the work known as the Gospel (or Protoevangelium) of Saint James," which eventually appeared in the fifteenth-century manuscript *Liber Flanus Fergusiorum* (89). The extracts included in *The Field Day Anthology* chronicle the birth of Christ and are titled "The Infancy Gospel." Perhaps the most striking aspect of this birth narrative is its storyteller—the midwife who assists Mary during labor. As Joseph nervously awaits the birth of his son, he sees "a tall venerable woman at the summit, vigorously traversing the hill with swift steps" (89); this "venerable" woman is the midwife who has gained intelligence from the Holy Spirit of the fast-approaching birth of a Savior. The midwife's poetic descriptions of Mary's labor attach the birth of the child to global stillness as all creation awaits Mary's relief, and the prayer-like quality of her speech is especially reminiscent of litany:

> Then all of creation stood still, the wind ceased its storms, the ocean its roar. The sea was quiet, the wave soundless, the land untraversed, swift-flowing rivers became like pools, streams reposed as if in sleep, fish remained still…Assuredly the four elements recognized their creator. (90)

The midwife is apparently attuned to this natural stillness even as she sits with Mary in the birth chamber, and there is an understanding that her visions are privileged over others; additionally, her own secret knowledge of the mysteries of childbirth parallel the mystery of Mary's consciousness at the birth of a God-man. She is blessed with Christ's first smile—"as I looked in his face, he smiled at me, and no worldly delight was ever as

pleasing"—and the men who wait for Mary call the midwife "blessed and ever-fortunate," a "devout and astute woman" (90). What is important here is not so much this picture of Mary herself, but rather the woman who witnesses and artistically conveys the story of the birth. As storyteller, this unnamed midwife gains exclusive access to the birth of God incarnate, and her poetic description of the mother and child transforms her words into a kind of *holy writ*. The story itself suggests a feminine predilection toward divine mystery, and only a woman well versed in the physical demands of labor may have access to the fleshy transformation of God into a human child. This feminine predilection seems to reveal itself in Madge as well; since she is the family's housekeeper—and an older, unmarried woman—we might assume that she was present at the birth of Gar and perhaps attended to Maire as midwife. Even if she was *not* present at Gar's birth, though, her verbal iteration of Maire's life that Gar has so keenly taken to heart still resembles the naturalistic litany of Mary's own "tall, venerable" midwife from the apocryphal text.

While the midwife in "The Infancy Gospel" was a stranger to both Mary and Joseph just moments before Christ's birth, she was initiated into the family circle by way of her skill and divine prescience; similarly, Madge Mulhern lives in the O'Donnell home, and her work is ultimately attached to the daily rhythms and quibbles of the family's lifestyle, but she is not a distinct member of the family itself. She remains an outsider, but deeply sympathizes with the communicative gap between father and son. It is appropriate that she gives Gar, through an intimate form of oral tradition, this liturgy of his deceased mother which seems to offer what Robert Welch claims is the "potential" inherent in Mary's womb: "This potential is, in Catholic sacramental thought, […] that

Mary becomes the figure, the sign, through which the potential of nature and matter for becoming other is affirmed" (108). And so Madge's liturgy stands in stark contrast to Gar's numerous iterations of "It has been sixteen or seventeen years…" since hers evokes an individualistic and localized representation of the deceased Maire that is hopeful, not an empty allusion to the more global Marie Antoinette (Friel 56).

I want to end this section on *Philadelphia* by pointing to one final moment that appears indicative of Madge's own spiritual consciousness: a consciousness that is aware of the blurred lines between pagan and Catholic, local and global. Madge withholds from Gar the news that her new grandniece will not be named "Madge," as she hoped. Instead, she privately muses over the favored name, Brigid Mulhern (Friel 97). Following a discussion of Maire as the family's substitute for the Virgin Mary, the christening of a child as "Brigid" opens up a new discourse in *Philadelphia* that recognizes older, localized traditions that, in the twentieth-century, have been dismissed as merely pagan. Brigid is a derivation of "Brigit," who, according to Dhonnchadha, served as Ireland's own placeholder for the Virgin Mary in the early Christian period (Dhonnchadha 45). Dhonnchadha explains, "the identity of Mary as Virgin Mother of God and of the whole human race was given a *local* projection in Saint Brigit, who thus became another Virgin Mother of God and 'Mary of the Gael'" (45; my emphasis). Dhonnchadha claims that this projection of the Virgin Mary onto Saint Brigit has been diminished since

> what was written about Brigit over the last century, by scholars and others, evinces little or no awareness of the fact that her life was constructed and interpreted in the preceding centuries as *imitatio Mariae*, thus reflecting the belief that the *real* Brigit was a saint who actually fitted this mould. (49)

When we pair Madge's remark to herself that the Brigit's name "like Madge Mulhern doesn't sound right—(*Trying it out*)—Madge Mulhern—Madge Mulhern—I don't know—It's too aul'-fashioned or something," with our new understanding of Saint Brigit's holy-to-pagan history, then we see (as Madge sees) that Brigid Mulhern's true namesake is obfuscated amidst a history that has lost sight of the *imitatio Mariae*, as Dhonnchadha suggests (Friel 97). For my purposes here, the Irish regional vision of the Blessed Virgin in Saint Brigit establishes precedence for the O'Donnell family's own incarnation. With this in mind, Madge's spoken liturgy which calls forth a meditation of the mysteries of the family's absent mother acts in much the same way as the Catholic rosary; it substantiates a memory in a tangible, emotional form through a performative speech act which seeks to renew and correct the spiritual deprivation of Friel's disparate characters. A resistance to modernization, then, finds its representation in *Philadelphia* through the deeply localized spiritual focus of Madge's liturgy; however, like in most of Friel's plays, that localized spirit is slowly becoming victim to the force of modernization and the demands of a new world.

Dancing at Lughnasa engages with a spiritual dialectic strikingly different from *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* since the Catholic moral imperative which represses the Mundy sisters is somewhat absent in the O'Donnell home outside of the nightly recitation of the rosary and the presence of the Canon. In this section, I want to parallel *Lughnasa*'s awareness of Catholic authority with the Mundy sisters own craving for a more localized representation of spirituality, concentrating on Rose Mundy's disability as a means toward illustrating this feeling of spiritual deprivation and repression so prevalent in the play. Friel's claim that "*Dancing at Lughnasa* is about the necessity for paganism" and

Father Jack's own unique vision of paganism—a state of being which blurs the lines between religious and secular—are both restorative forces which, if fully realized in *Lughnasa*, might have prevented Rose's sexual assault, the play's tragic climax (148).

Since the Irish Catholicism of *Dancing at Lughnasa* relies so heavily on patriarchal influence to illustrate a negative representation of institutionalized faith, Helen Lojek's essay, "*Dancing at Lughnasa*: The Unfinished Revolution," is a particularly helpful lens for understanding the spiritual condition of women in 1930s Ireland. Lojek's essay explores how *Lughnasa* revises the "romantic vision of Irish woman" into a subversive text that rebels against the "patriarchal, claustrophobic society" of the 1930s in rural Ireland (78). Additionally, she classifies the play as "a sympathetic story of women, emphasizing its significance for both public and private life" (81). This "sympathetic" and "domestic" story benefits from the setting of the play itself, which allows the Irish country kitchen to dominate the stage. This visual choice permits the women to be "fully recognizable in the realistic kitchen setting," whereas the "men are visitors from some other, exotic world" (82). Although (contrary to Lojek's thesis) I find the Mundy sisters to be fundamentally limited in their own subversive powers because of their social ambiguity, her emphasis on the kitchen as an empowering space is reminiscent of Madge Mulhern's presence in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!,* insofar that the setting of *Philadelphia* allows Madge's "element" to remain eternally present within the boundaries of the stage. Similarly, this focus on the kitchen privileges a space that is defined by daily household ritual, and—specifically—household rituals that are enacted exclusively by women. What lurks in the background of this ritualistic setting, though, is the ominous, marginalizing presence of the Catholic Church in 1930s Ireland, a force

which not only relegates the Mundy sisters' ritual space to a position of inferiority, but also leaves them unprotected in the midst of destructive members of the "visitors from some other, exotic world" (82).

In order to highlight a sense of spiritual deprivation in his dramas, Friel often integrates characters with marked disabilities, both physical and mental. In the case of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Rose's ambiguous disability suggests the sisters' own ambiguous social status, and there is a sense that this indistinct social placement likewise limits them spiritually. Whereas *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* reveals an instance where a woman attempts to reinstate spiritual structure and authority into a broken household, *Lughnasa* illustrates the breakdown of that authority and the destructive trespasses into the community that follow. *The Freedom of the City* (1973) features Declan, Lily's son whose mental disability serves as her primary reason for marching in the Derry protests and who stands as a representation for the disabled community of oppressed Irish Catholics during the Troubles. Similarly, Frank Hardy's faith healing can heal physical disability, and yet his supernatural channeling has little influence on Grace and Teddy, a desperate pair that clings to him despite their own mental disparity. Both Manus and Sarah in *Translations* (1980) reveal internal (Sarah's speech impediment) and external (Manus's physical deformity) manifestations of disability, and these individual disabilities appear to reflect the struggling state of Baile Beag's community under modernizing pressures. In all of these cases, each instance of disability is nameable and distinct, but Rose Mundy's condition contrasts with these examples insofar that we have no name for her "simplicity"; instead, we only see the outcome of her vague mental impediment.

Rose's disability is particularly unclear in *Dancing at Lughnasa* since Friel gives very little explanation of her exact condition, and the revelation of her disability proves to be a slow process over the course of the play. In the initial stage directions, he merely describes her as "'*simple*,'" noting, "*All of her sisters are kind to her and protective of her. But Agnes has taken on the role of special protector*" (4). Only through her constantly worn wellingtons and the occasional airy comment do we see glimpses of Rose's "simpleness." Act One presents a Rose who is perhaps reminiscent of the chaste, simple, and quiet Mother Ireland that Lojek describes, but Act Two points to a Rose who is much more inclined to leave the confines of the Mundy sisters' community. Just as Declan's mental ambiguity in *The Freedom of the City* enables him to transcend sectarian debates, Rose's disability enables her to escape the closeted circumstances of the Mundy kitchen, and yet she is unprotected once she transgresses those boundaries.

Rose's "escape" to the back hills with Danny Bradley is the climactic transgression of the play, but her return is indicative of the unsettled air which surrounds disability, especially when that disability wanders off unguarded. Friel's stage directions in this moment indicate that "*had we not seen the Rose of Act One, we might not now be immediately aware of her disability. At first look this might be any youngish country woman, carefully dressed, not unattractive, returning from a long walk on a summer day*" (86). Rose's new appearance in this moment forces us as audience members/readers to reconsider Rose's disability in light of her healthy, perhaps even beautiful appearance. Her visage is momentarily restored to a time where she might have been one of the younger women at the harvest dance, but the series of actions that precedes her entrance

to the kitchen indicates that her airy innocence is particularly susceptible to forces that not only harm to her own body, but could also harm the Mundy sisters as a collective.

Deeply involved with the play's dialectic between paganism and the Catholic moral imperative, the semiotics of this scene indicate Danny Bradley's assault which precedes Rose's return. Friel's stage directions read, "*Then she puts her hand into one of the cans, takes a fistful of berries and thrusts the fistful into her mouth. Then she wipes her mouth with her sleeve and the back of her hand. As she chews she looks at her stained fingers. She wipes them on her skirt*" (87). Friel then explains that "*these movements—stopping, eating, wiping—are done not dreamily, abstractedly, but calmly, naturally*" (87). As Richard Rankin Russell indicates in *The Climate of the Times: Brian Friel's Drama of Environment*, this act of thrusting the fistful of berries into her mouth (with little reserve) and the casual staining of her Sunday dress is clearly reminiscent of a kind of physical consummation—a consummation that the other Mundy sisters (excluding Chris) have yet to experience. Although Russell reads Rose's absent-minded behavior as a result of shock, I would add that the casual, natural staining of her Sunday clothes indicates how her ambiguous disability might allow her to transgress the Catholic moral imperative that suffocates the Mundys' existence; furthermore, despite the fact that her dismissal of Catholic strictures is perhaps liberating for the sisters, she still has no other transcendent, spiritual attachment to protect her from Danny Bradley's bodily intrusion. Her disability—or, her "simpleness"—is the reason she can so easily step outside of the moral imperatives of her social environment, and yet this otherwise transcendent ability is diminished in light of her sexual assault. This scene, then, demonstrates Rose's evident awareness of the social imperatives that exist within the

home and also her sense of their dissolution beyond the Mundy's front gate. When she returns inside, Rose asks where her "overall" is—she recognizes the trappings of the chaste, productive household, and she does not complain about adapting to those expectations when she returns (89). Still, Rose's entrance and return illustrates this dichotomy of the rigid, socially influenced home and the unconstrained outside world, and Rose's own disability indicates the sisters' crippled existence within a constrained social environment propagated by the Irish Catholic Church.

It seems that Rose's disability symbolizes the Mundy sisters' contorted view of themselves as a family, and, subsequently, to their collective spiritual deprivation. The sisters (especially Kate) believe themselves to be unworthy of attending the harvest dance since their own "crop" is nearly past its window for a proper yield. Kate asks, "Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us?—women of our years?—mature women, *dancing*?" (Friel 25).[3] Kate seems to categorize the family as an aberration, a group of unmarried sisters who support one another in their secluded home—"*two miles outside the village of Ballybeg*" (Friel 1). Their lifestyle—even with the presence of Father Jack—is entirely matriarchal, whether or not they choose to admit it. Kate attempts to fight this inclination with her own subtle support of the period's patriarchy, but there is a sense that this support is wholly artificial in light of their own female-centered routines: "And this is Father Jack's home—we must never forget that—ever" (25). Perhaps Kate passively admonishes their lifestyle since its inherent paganism stands in striking contrast to the overpowering Catholicism of the time. When I use the word "pagan" here, I should stress that I am using it as a label for Father Jack's blending

of the spiritual and the secular, whereas Catholicism during this period in Ireland seeks to delineate between the two. Referencing his experience in Uganda, Father Jack explains,

> And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over […] there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. (74)

He also points out that "[i]n some respects they're not unlike us," a particularly bothersome comment for Kate since her sense of the family as "disabled" arises from its simple contrast to the wider Catholic society in which they live (74).

In *Climate of the Times*, Russell is primarily concerned with how "the decline of local culture" coincides with the Mundy sisters' continuous separation from their own bodies and sense of place (310). Russell notes that *Dancing at Lughnasa* engages with a distinct drama of atmosphere, a drama that emphasizes the importance of emplacement. This emplacement allows for the audience/reader to see more clearly the dismemberment of spiritual wholeness that threatens the Mundy sisters, sparked by a rigid Catholic presence and the onset of modernization (Russell 311). In one section, Russell considers the famous Lughnasa dance that the sisters perform in their kitchen. He does not argue that the dance is a moment of joyful relief (which is how most early audiences perceived it); instead, he equates the act with keening, claiming that "they perform this famous dance to finally mourn their marginalization and the disappearing pagan, rural culture around them" (318).[4] Similarly, he asserts that "[t]he entire ritual thus signifies their recognition of their outcast status in a Catholic society that valued women in direct proportion to their relationships with men" (326); the dance might also show a rejection

of "British empiricism and rationalism," which has proven to be a continually negative force within Friel's body of work (327).

I would add here that the dance not only mourns their marginalization, but also demonstrates their need for a spiritual framework that is not ambivalent in its relation to their gendered community. When Marconi's music dies out in the midst of the dance, the sisters bitterly resume their chores, and the dance is dismissed as an abnormal, erratic moment (Friel 35-37). There is no supportive framework to sanction their dance as something purposeful, perhaps even necessary. Instead of the Father Jack's "paganism," which blurs the lines between religious and secular, the sisters suffer under the inflexibility of rigid delineations spurred by the overbearing Catholic presence in their community—the disjuncture between their emotions during and after the dance are certainly indicative of this strict demarcation.

The dance itself connects Rose's ambiguous disability and the Mundy sisters' vague social status: just as we cannot quite define Rose's disability, we likewise cannot exactly situate the dance within either a religious or secular tradition. It mingles exuberance with mourning, and because it cannot be classified within the larger framework of the Catholic community, then it is dismissed as aberrant, ineffectual. They cannot mourn their marginalization, as Russell asserts, within the general Catholic tradition. In order to substantiate their actions as meaningful, they require a new lens through which they might view their spirituality, and that the lens must be localized and family-specific.

Madge Mulhern's localized projection of the Virgin Mary, with a precedence set by the "Mary of the Gael," Saint Brigit, allows for Gar to reconnect to the memory of his

mother, and likewise to the feeling of spiritual transcendence that so quickly slips away from his reach, yet the Mundy sisters have no local, family-specific projection of their Catholic faith. They struggle to see the necessity of their outlandish dance within the broader tenants of the community's Catholicism, and their ambiguous social status leaves them susceptible to negative intrusion, illustrated by Rose's possible rape. A global, institutional faith cannot relate to the microcosmic world of the Mundys, and they are fundamentally limited in their resources for conceiving of liturgical space—in this instance, perhaps, a spiritual sanction for their energetic, mournful dance. They lack the household liturgy which might allow for them to revel in a creative representation of worship and spiritual longing, as in Aiden Kavanagh's sense of liturgy as an "artistic," productive venture. It is clear that they desire an intermingling of "the most authoritarian church in the world" and "the romantic ideal we call Kathleen" since they crave both the ideal of Irish Catholicism as a sacramental connection to God and community and the re-humanizing power of the more pagan, nondiscriminatory vision of "Kathleen," but this intermingling, as Madge illustrates in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, must be carried out by the family itself since the local representatives of Catholicism (like the Canon in *Philadelphia*) have proved distant and ultimately indifferent.

The wide-reaching, distant representation of the Irish Catholic church proves ineffective in protecting its parishioners in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and their lack of a more localized, household-specific vision of divinity and spirituality denies them the protection their gendered community requires. Madge's construction of the family's own Blessed Virgin amidst the broader tenants of Catholicism in general momentarily ameliorates the O'Donnell family's sense of spiritual deprivation, but the Mundy sisters have no

household vision of their faith; they rely upon an institution which cares little, if at all, for their collective welfare. After all, it is the local Catholic priest who fires Kate Mundy, pushing the sisters even further into poverty (Friel 106-107). Perhaps Friel expands Madge's litany of the lost Virgin Mary of the O'Donnell home into a larger liturgical framework in *Dancing at Lughnasa*: the "artistic enterprise" (to quote Aiden Kavanagh) required for liturgy moves to the theatre, whereby Friel crafts his own, more extensive, litany for the Mundy sisters, elegizing their marginalized community in such a way that goes beyond the means of a religious institution. Michael's monologue at the close of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, liturgically repeating the participle "dancing," puts it this way:

> When I remember [that summer], 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 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. (107-108)

As Russell indicates as well, the theatrical medium re-humanizes these women who have been rendered "voiceless, bodiless" within the communal framework of drama, a medium which inherently relies on a localized, tangible projection of art as opposed to cinema's more globalized, virtual projection (329). Theatre is a flexible, pagan (and sacred) realm, and yet it illustrates more poetically and effectively the characters' desire for a community-specific vision of faith than the institutional church to which these characters so desperately cling.

CHAPTER THREE

Occupying the "Borderline Country": Community, Ritual, and Documentary Drama in *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*

Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* (1994) chronicles the literal and spiritual disjuncture between the sighted and the tactile world, following the monologic accounts of Molly Sweeney, her husband Frank Sweeney, and Molly's ophthalmologist, Mr. Rice. The drama gracefully recounts character Molly Sweeney's transition from blindness to sight within the framework of an onstage community that grows more and more disconnected as the play progresses; subsequently, these interweaving stories that compose *Molly Sweeney* develop a theatrical aura similar to contemporary documentary drama. This documentary style, also evident in Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979), revolves around a singular, often traumatic event and emphasizes the narrative embodiment of memory as a means toward embodying truth. *Molly Sweeney* is, of course, structurally akin to the earlier *Faith Healer* and considers similar themes of exile and community through the monologic form; both works also engage with a sense of self-conscious theatricality peculiar to Friel's own vision of the theatre space, a vision that is perhaps enhanced after considering the plays' inherent documentary styles. This chapter considers *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* in light of developing perspectives of documentary theatre, paying particular attention to how Friel uses the disparate communities in these two plays to ritualistically illustrate a representation of community that dramatizes the theatre itself.

With respect to plot, both *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* are narrative retellings of past events which have proved climactic for the storytellers themselves, and their

shared form reinforces their theatricality simply by allowing the plays to appear as "dramatised novels" (Kiberd 211). Karen DeVinney illustrates the formal connections between the two dramas, as well as the thematic implications of their form, in her 1999 study, noting

> Their status as theatre pieces demands that we respect them as performance, but their form encourages us to treat them as *prose poems*. Their lack of conventional stage action is, however, through a sort of logical hairpin curve, exactly what makes them so dramatic. By replacing action with narration, Friel not only critiques the Irish penchant for oratory, but he also dramatizes his contention that events are meaningful mainly insofar as they become stories, fictions told by their participants. (102; my emphasis)

DeVinney's emphasis here privileges dramatic structure over what Richard Tillinghast calls the Irish "national pastime" of "talk" (35; qtd. in DeVinney 110). Although Friel's plays consistently portray the oratorical nature of Irish theatre, DeVinney is correct in stressing the peculiar form of these two plays; they chronicle the creation of "fictions"—stories that are the starting place for plays generally.

This transition from "event" to "story" is often a theoretical paradigm unique to contemporary documentary theatre, and yet it feels particularly applicable to these two works. There is no question that *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* are "fictions," revolving around a singular event, and Friel's artfulness belies much of the serendipitous associations that arise within the characters' respective monologues. The thematic patterns that pure documentary drama produces arise from the uncensored accounts of witnesses and are merely illuminated by the conscientious compiler. It is this uncensored and unabridged quality, however, that appears so vibrantly in these two works. Friel appears not necessarily as the playwright, but as the faithful compiler.

Despite *Molly Sweeney*'s and *Faith Healer*'s emphasis on fiction, the theoretical framework of documentary theatre lends itself to a reading of these two plays insofar that "docudrama" calls into question the reliability of memory as an adequate purveyor of factual truth. Past attempts at theorizing documentary drama are, however, somewhat divided between German notions of pure documentary through historical and legal documents and the American documentary tradition which privileges the extemporaneous narrative of the layperson. Characteristic of the shift from 1950s Germany's theatre of the absurd to the overtly political theatre of the 1960s, Peter Weiss stresses the German preoccupation with "der Berichterstattung" (factual reports) in his "Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater" (Notes on Documentary Theatre):

> The documentary theatre is a theatre of factual reports. Minutes of proceedings, files, letters, statistical tables, stock-exchange communiqués, presentations of balance sheets of banks and industrial undertakings, official commentaries, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, press, radio, photo, of film reporting of events and all the other media bear witness to the present and form the basis of the production. The documentary theatre shuns all inventions. (67-68)[1]

Weiss's final assertion that "documentary theatre shuns all inventions" certainly alludes to the earnest compilation of documentary through objective sources, but the inherent lack of stability in the "interview" form recalls the destabilized narratives of Friel's own "dramatised novels"; facts are conveyed assuredly, but promptly recontextualized or contradicted when they are paired with the accounts of others. This dramatic recontextualization is especially prominent in more contemporary American docudrama, particularly that of Anna Deavere Smith. Smith's 1992 documentary play, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, considers the aftermath of the 1991 Crown Heights riots through the words of the community members themselves:

housewives, scholars, the Rev. Al Sharpton, a rapper, and Lubavitcher Jews included. The "invention" with which Weiss might take issue is Smith's physical portrayal of these voices. As the single actor in *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith plays over sixty roles, male and female, white and black, with an ear toward rhythmically recreating the voices she compiles. The "invention," then, is Smith's own *verfremdung*, where she allows herself to be the vehicle by which the audience is defamiliarized from the realism of her content. Very much self-consciously a dramatic piece, *Fires in the Mirror* draws its strength from its overt theatricality, a strength it shares with Friel's own monologic plays.

The narrative focus of American docudrama, as opposed to the historical thrust of German documentary theatre, often considers itself a form of community-centered art as opposed to pure "documentation." Joan Wylie Hall notes that "[Anna Deavere] Smith is reluctant to claim membership in any particular dramatic tradition," citing an interview with Barbara Lewis where Smith acknowledges that "[h]er work is theatre," but that "it's also community work in some ways. It's a kind of low anthropology, low journalism; it's a bit documentary" (Hall 51; Lewis 56). The ambivalence with which Smith categorizes her work speaks to the fluidity of how we might describe dramatic works typically categorized as "documentary"; deciphering the nuances of this ambivalence, though, may be a starting place for establishing a more prescriptive theory of docudrama as it applies to the patterns and themes present in Friel's work. Similarly, Smith's emphasis on her dramas' "community work" echoes Friel's own concern for the communal nature of theatre.

In his 1967 essay, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair," Friel stresses theatre's reliance upon the "collective mind":

> [T]heatre can be experienced only in community with other people […] one cannot sit by himself in the stalls and be moved by a dramatic performance – and for this reason: that the dramatist does not write for one man; he writes for an audience, a collection of people. (18)

Pointing ever more fervently to the invaluable role of the playwright in developing the spirit of a community, he explains,

> They have this function: they are vitally, persistently, and determinedly concerned with one man's insignificant place in the here and now world. They have the function to portray one man's frustrations and hopes and anguishes and joys and miseries and pleasures with all the precision and accuracy and truth that they know; and by so doing help to make a community of individuals. (24)

Comparing a theory of docudrama with the spiritualized theatre so often explored in Friel's work (a work which Friel claims participates in "the redemption of the human spirit") requires attention to the various manifestations of "community" that these two dramatic genres privilege (24). In the case of documentary theatre, the "community of individuals" makes up the work's narrative and thematic content, allowing the community members themselves to contribute to a fuller, self-reflective vision of their own collective mind. And yet, Friel's *Molly Sweeney* and *Faith Healer* seem to elegize the collective mind from the opposite direction; the community that gathers in the theatrical space validates the characters' groping desire for true communion simply by their presence, and the characters themselves draw attention to the power of that communal arena by the self-consciously theatrical recitation of their "prose poems" (DeVinney 111).

Heralded as Friel's masterpiece, *Faith Healer* (1979) anticipates the monologic form of *Molly Sweeney*, but engages with thematic material peculiar to the plight of the artist—in particular, the playwright; additionally, the characters' contradictory narratives

understandably create a disorienting effect for both readers and audience members. In reference to these interweaving, conflicting narratives of Frank, Grace, and Teddy, Nicholas Grene explains, "The play puts up to an audience the puzzle of who is telling the truth, or what the individual distortions of the story may reveal about the characters" (53). These "individual distortions," especially in light of a discussion of Victor Turner's communitas, perhaps reveal how "individual distinctiveness" is preserved in the liminal state despite the abolishment of status, and, in the case of *Faith Healer*, the theatrical abolishment of mortality (Turner 45).

As Grene indicates, their narrative discrepancies occur "in the retelling of some of the principal events of their life together," a notion that points to one of the primary conditions of documentary drama (53).[2] Frank, Grace, and Teddy's monologic accounts of their travels together finally descend upon Frank's death at the hands of the Ballybeg wedding guests, a brutalized homecoming scene that marries Faith Healer to themes of ritual and sacrifice. This narrative focus on a centralized, past event is a trope similarly explored in the majority of documentary dramatic pieces, and Friel's artistic documentation of the playwright's work in Faith Healer provides a new lens for interpreting this documentary style. I believe that *Molly Sweeney* more explicitly demonstrates this documentary style (particularly since the exigence of *Molly Sweeney* comes from real life events); *Faith Healer*, however, anticipates this style chronologically, and thus serves as an appropriate introduction to a more thorough reading of *Molly Sweeney*.

Docudrama's reliance upon a single, traumatic event within a given community is readily demonstrated by works such as *The Laramie Project* (1999), written and

produced by Moisés Kaufman and The Tectonic Theater Project. *The Laramie Project*, a documentary drama which portraits the town of Laramie, Wyoming, generates content from the community's response to the brutal murder of college student Matthew Shepherd. As much a harrowing account of homophobic violence as it is a hopeful tribute to a community in the midst of rebuilding, *The Laramie Project* stands as an exemplary piece of documentary drama with the self-proclaimed designation as "one of the most performed plays in America today."[3]

Similar to *The Laramie Project*, *Faith Healer*'s disparate narratives revolve around Frank Hardy's final, ritualized "performance." Because of *Faith Healer'*s complexity, I agree with Grene's assessment that "[o]ne of the measures of a great work of the imagination is not just its openness to several different interpretations, but the unexplained residuum that it leaves after any and every interpretation" (53). This "residuum" is especially substantial in the case of *Faith Healer*, where, as Grene notes, we might read the play not only in terms of its conflicting narratives, but also in its deep engagement with themes of exile, homecoming, artistry, and sacrificial closure. Thus, choosing a thematic framework for a reading of *Faith Healer* requires an element of sacrifice in itself.

As with *Molly Sweeney* in the larger, latter section of this chapter, I do not purport to read Faith Healer as a "disguised" work of docudrama; such a reading neglects Friel's own preoccupation with the imaginative "fifth province" of theatre and, in many ways, diminishes Friel's stated creative process. I am, however, concerned with the intersection of performance, monologic structure, and the imaginative draw of ritualistic violence in *Faith Healer*; these structural and thematic elements are shared, interestingly, with works

like Tectonic Theater's *Laramie Project*, and the strange attractions of violence, community, and individual narratives perhaps compose the appeal that these plays hold for audiences. In this short section, then, I am interested in reading the documentary style of *Faith Healer* in light the characters' (in Grene's words) "contested narratives" and their self-conscious theatricality within the play. As with documentary theatre generally, *Faith Healer*'s unusual attention to itself as "a play" bespeaks a kind of drama that ritualizes not only the theatrical space, but also the artists who generate the ritual itself.

In a 1982 interview with Fintan O'Toole, Friel refers to *Faith Healer* from an interpretive stance:

> It was some kind of metaphor for the art, the craft of writing [...]. And the great confusion we all have about it, those of us who are involved in it. How honourable and how dishonourable it can be. And it's also a pursuit that, of necessity, has to be very introspective, and as a consequence it leads to great selfishness. (111)[4]

In response to this particular statement, Grene—whose definitive essay, "Five Ways of Looking at *Faith Healer*," provides a comprehensive starting place for investigating this complex play—writes, "*Faith Healer* dramatizes both the psychology of the writer and the emotional consequences for those around him" (56). Although, as Grene states, *Faith Healer* convincingly "dramatizes" the plight of the creative writer, there is a sense that the play not only elegizes the artistic process from the playwright's perspective, but also from the performer's, the one who must channel the art itself. In a strange juxtaposition of playwright and performer, we see Friel documenting a mystifying process whereby the playwright shares the vulnerability of the actor in the midst of performance.

Of the few stage directions included in *Faith Healer*, Friel briefly describes Frank Hardy's pre-performance physical posture, a stance that perhaps anticipates a

supernatural process of channeling: "*Throughout this opening incantation he is standing down stage left, feet together, his face tilted upwards, his eyes shut tight, his hands in his overcoat pockets, his shoulders hunched*" (331).[5] This anticipatory posture appropriately precedes Frank's remarks about his "profession," where receptive knowledge comes not from an "apprenticeship," but from something unnamable:

> Faith healer – faith healing. A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry. How did I get involved? As a young man I chanced to flirt with it and it possessed me. No, no, no, no, no – that's rhetoric. No; let's say I did it…because I could do it. That's accurate enough. And occasionally it worked – oh yes, occasionally it did work. (333)

Casually and ambiguously documenting his entry into the "ministry," Frank's dry descriptions are indicative of Friel's own chance entry into the work of the playwright. Later, Frank's words point to the event-driven format of the faith healer's vocation, another moment where Friel highlights the link between playwright and healer:

> And when it did, when I stood before a man and placed my hands on him and watched him become whole in my presence, those were nights of exultation, of consummation—no, not that I was doing good, giving relief, spreading joy—good God, no, nothing at all to do with that; but because the questions that undermined my life then became meaningless and because I knew that for those few hours I had become whole in myself, and perfect in myself… (333)

Although this passage is reminiscent of the "great selfishness" Friel associates with the work of the artist, it likewise illustrates the ritualized format of the work itself. Frank emphasizes the fact that his faith healing is event-based, where his own moments of life-giving artistry are contained within "nights of exultation" (333). Like the playwright, the work boils down to the moment where the ritual is enacted, not the production of the dramatic text. Tyrone Guthrie, Friel's nearest mentor, notes that the theatre "is the direct descendant of fertility rites, war dances, and all the corporate, ritual expressions by means

of which our primitive ancestors, often wiser than we, sought to relate themselves to God, or the gods" (313-314). Thus, the sacramental nature of Guthrie's theatre, where the ritual acts as a format for relating "to God, or the gods," is true for Friel's as well. Frank's monologic account of his own artistic process perhaps channels that of Friel, and, through this comparison of faith healing and dramatic performance, we understand the playwright's nightly anxiety.

Contrary to Karen DeVinney, Declan Kiberd considers whether or not the monologic form of *Faith Healer* is more akin to narrative as opposed to a "fully dramatic work," since it consists of four soliloquies delivered by characters that do not interact with one another (211). Kiberd is likewise interested in *Faith Healer* as a derivative work and lists, as influences, *The Sound and the Fury*, the legend of Deirdre of the Sorrows (which, as Kiberd notes, appears in the work of other Irish authors such a George Russell, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and James Stephens), and also the work of Samuel Beckett. This overflow of influences contributes to Kiberd's claim that the influences themselves raise questions about the position of the artist as "creator." As with *Molly Sweeney*, *Faith Healer*'s monologic structure and its textual inspirations initiate conversations about how the playwright straddles the gap between "creator" and "compiler," and, with respect to documentary theatre, we see a moment where the playwright, like the ideal audience he entertains, must sometimes become a participant in the community he dramatizes.

Faith Healer, with its portrait of the artist and its brutal account of ritualized homecoming, follows Victor Turner's transition rites, a point Richard Rankin Russell demonstrates in *The Climate of the Times: Brian Friel's Drama of Environment*. This

structure of separation, margin, and reaggregation contributes to the play's underlying metaphor of healing through the vehicle of drama, a view Russell claims evidences "the playwright's role in creating spiritual hope" (220). Moving from the spiritualized role of theatre to its physical enactment, Frank Hardy's final monologue, where he rhythmically describes his entry into the yard, convincingly describes the physical stage itself: "The yard was a perfect square enclosed by the back of the building and three high walls. And the wall facing me as I walked out was breached by an arched entrance" (Friel 375). This proscenium stage, an image Russell considers in depth, constitutes a moment where *Faith Healer* deeply recognizes its own "play-ness"; similarly, Frank's attention to the strange communion he feels with the wedding guests elegizes Turner's communitas not in terms of documentary's ability to equalize marginalized narratives (which is the case in *Molly Sweeney*), but rather in light of the ritualized relationship between the artist and those who observe and participate in his work.

Although the final moments of *Faith Healer* allude to a savage instance of reaggregation, the fact that the violence remains unseen would appear to stress the play's preoccupation with suspended communitas, a state where the artist, his companions, and those who denounce him exist within a single, ritualized unit of performance. Their roles as creators, observers, and participants are leveled, leaving the audience to understand Frank's words, "we had ceased to be physical and existed only in spirit, only in the need we had for each other," as an allusion to the playwright's need for an audience and a theatrical audience's need for the playwright (376). Thus, *Faith Healer*'s apparent awareness of "the need we had for each other" with respect to the theatre space initiates

an artistic stance that, perhaps, leads to his creation of *Molly Sweeney*—a play that, as we will see, relies on a similar sense of sense of communitas.

Friel's use of Emily Dickinson's "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" as the headnote for *Molly Sweeney* initiates the play's ongoing discourse with memory and verifiable truth in the midst of a disparate community (a theme that is similarly applicable to *Faith Healer*); additionally, Dickinson's verses are reminiscent of Friel's own conception of memory, which he explains in a 1971 BBC broadcast titled "Self Portrait": "What matters is that for some reason…this vivid memory is there in the storehouse of the mind. For some reason the mind has shuffled the pieces of verifiable truth and composed a truth of its own" (101).[6] Thus, for Friel, memory is often "slanted," but nonetheless valuable in its apparent representation of the "truth." Reading these plays in light of documentary theatre may seem counterintuitive, especially since they are clearly fictional, but Friel's remarks here about the nature of truth seem particularly applicable to the notion that docudrama attempts to reconstruct the "truth" of an event via the fluctuating narratives of the community. *Molly Sweeney* and *Faith Healer* both participate in this sense of reconstruction, and their own fluctuating narratives remind us of the "slant" that so often arises in discussions of verifiable truth.[7] Considering these two plays in the shadow of the ever-developing arena of docudrama, then, allows us to view these works with new purpose: whereas docudrama gives dramatic life to the average person, Friel's monologic elegies give life to an otherwise textual being. For *Molly Sweeney*, the textual beings we encounter remind us of the theatre itself, encouraging us to observe its transient liminality and to draw our attention back to the audience-community that fills the seats; *Faith Healer*, conversely, draws us to the life of

the playwright and of the performer, allowing us to see both sides of the vibrant theatrical community.

Molly Sweeney's recitation of memories surrounding Molly's sight-giving surgery consistently redirects the audience to themes of community and exile, often redefining more prominent concepts such as disability within the bounds of these two binaries. With respect to theories of docudrama—particularly the assumption that a piece of documentary theatre often revolves around a single, prominent event—*Molly Sweeney* allows for us to see how Molly's surgery and her subsequent mental decline initiates an undergirding discourse of failed integration into the community at-large. Whereas docudrama often reinstates the community itself through its new life on the stage, *Molly Sweeney* reveals how a singular event can catalyze the slow deterioration of a community, even when that community is dramatically contrived.

Victor Turner's interpretations of Arnold Van Gennep's theory of transition rites (explored to a lesser degree in the previous section) is especially helpful for understanding Molly's failed post-liminal phase, where she attempts to assimilate to the sighted world. In his seminal work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Turner describes the nature of liminality (Van Gennep's "transition" stage):

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is often likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (95)

Molly's reference to her "borderline country" at the close of the play, of course, speaks most directly to Turner's theory, but Friel provides multiple echoes of being "betwixt and

between" throughout *Molly Sweeney* (Friel 509). Perhaps the earliest reference to an interminable stage of transition appears in Frank Sweeney's lively account of his Iranian goats. In an effort to capitalize off the goats' exotic milk and pelts, Frank imports two goats to his "small goat farm on the island of Inis Beag off the Mayo coast," goats from "Iran which, as you know, is an ancient civilization in South West … Asia…" (461).[8] Frank bemoans the goats' "internal clock," and how they "never adjusted to Irish time […] They lived in a kind of perpetual jet lag" (461). Comically recounting their three a.m. feedings and their inability to be milked past eight, Frank regrets that "[s]ome imprint in the genes remained indelible and immutable" (464). This humorous interlude briefly lifts spirits in an otherwise tragic play, and yet the goats' "immutable" condition bespeaks Molly's own dislocation from the sighted world post-surgery. Just as Frank's goat venture fails, Molly's reincorporation into the community she loves falls short insofar that "[s]ome imprint in the genes" never fully transforms, and, in fact, cannot transform.

Richard Pine considers liminality one of the primary themes that pervades Friel's work, particularly since the enactment of the "play" itself operates within a sphere of ritualized liminality. Pine explains, "The play, or the social situation in which ritual is transacted, is liminal (Latin, *limen*: a threshold) in that a dramatic scene or a ritual act represents a *transitus* from one situation, one state of affairs, one condition, to another" (10). *Molly Sweeney* allows us to see the gravity of Molly's *transitus* through her descriptions of her own community of friends; what is fascinating, of course, is that we only encounter this larger community through Molly's words. Within these descriptions, which occur most densely in her account of the party before the surgery (470-74), we also

perceive a moment where Molly attempts to reach beyond the bounds of her established community and welcome Mr. Rice into her family of friends. Molly explains,

> And at some point in the night – it must have been about two – I'm afraid I had a brainwave. Here we are, all friends together, having a great time; so shouldn't I phone Mr Rice and ask him to join us? Wasn't he a friend, too? And I made for the phone and dialed up the number. But Frank, thank God, Frank pulled the phone out of my hand before he answered. Imagine the embarrassment that would have been! (472)

The irony of this moment, if we experience *Molly Sweeney* as an audience member, is that we initially perceive Frank, Molly, and Mr. Rice as a distinct communal group in itself, despite the fact that their community is contrived dramatically. It is strange, then, to see how quickly Molly is corrected for her "brain wave," which could very well have been a meaningful moment of connection between the three characters (472). The strength of this "brain wave" is re-emphasized when Mr. Rice narrates the phone call as well: "Then the phone rang; an anxious sound at two in the morning. By the time I had pulled myself together and got to it, it had stopped. Wrong number probably" (475). This episode appropriately precedes Mr. Rice's account of another failed community; through this memory, we come to understand one of the greatest tensions within the play, and, more significantly, the primary tension of participating in the ritual of theatre:

> It was Roger Bloomstein. Brilliant Roger. Treacherous Icarus. To tell me that Maria and he were at the airport and about to step on a plane for New York. They were deeply in love ... He hoped that in time I would see the situation from their point of view and come to understand it ... He's *confusing seeing with understanding ... Seeing isn't understanding*. (475; my emphasis)

Mr. Rice's reference to the disjuncture between "seeing and understanding" rests at the center of *Molly Sweeney*; in particular, this tension describes what may be one of the greatest dilemmas of the dramatic experience, perhaps even the most substantial stressor

for the playwright, director, or actor: does the audience merely *see*, or do they genuinely *understand*? This understanding, according to Richard Pine, is part of the burden Friel's dramas place upon the audience, a burden that encourages them to fully participate in the ritual of the theatre. Pine writes, "All drama is pretence, and all ritual is pretence, moving towards that point where the observers become participants and their credulity becomes acceptance and belief" (317). Thus, Pine aligns "seeing" and "understanding" with "observers" and "participants" respectively. This transition from observer to participant is, of course, indicative of Turner's *transitus* within the theatrical space, and Mr. Rice's admonition of his old colleague resonates not only in the world of the play, but also in the space between the stage and the seats.

Molly Sweeney's climactic moment of Molly's extemporaneous pre-sugery dance is especially reminiscent of the ritualistic, Dionysian dance of the Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), which was staged only four years prior to *Molly Sweeney*. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the dance perhaps elegizes what Friel terms "the necessity for paganism" in the midst of the strict Catholic moral imperative that suppresses "those five brave women of Glenties" (222).[9] More recently, however, Richard Rankin Russell has characterized the dance as a moment of "keening," whereby the women mourn their marginalization within an ever-changing social landscape (318). In light of Molly's sporadic dancing at the close of Act I, keening appears to be the appropriate terminology for her "utterly desolate" feelings prior to the dance (Friel 472). She describes her fears with respect to the loss of her community, explaining,

> I was afraid that I would never again know these people as I knew them now, with my own special knowledge of each of them, the distinctive sense each of them exuded for me; and knowing them differently, experiencing them differently, I wondered – I wondered would I ever be

> as close to them as I was now...And then I knew, suddenly I knew why I was so desolate. It was the dread of exile, of being sent away. It was the desolation of homesickness. (475)

This rumination initiates her "furious dance" of "anger and defiance," in which she bounds through the rooms of the house, "[w]eaving between all those people, darting between chairs and stools and cushions and bottles and glasses with complete assurance, with absolute confidence" (473). Like the Mundy sisters in *Lughnasa*, Molly's dance is stopped short by the music's abrupt end, and an air of awkwardness follows: "God knows how I didn't kill myself or injure somebody. Or indeed how long it lasted. But it must have been terrifying to watch because, when I stopped, the room was hushed" (473-4). Molly's use of "terrifying" here stands in striking similarity to the "grotesque" and "erratic" dance of the Mundy sisters, whose dance is similarly characterized by a "look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness" (Friel 35-6). With respect to *Lughnasa,* Claudia W. Harris describes this "heightened moment" as the "*raison d'être* underlying the writing of the play itself," pointing to its significance as a moment of "pure theatre" (44). *Molly Sweeney*'s defiant dance, it would seem, falls into the same category of physical, artistic aggression as the Mundys' dance, and yet the verbal component of Molly's dance prevents it from fully existing "on the stage" as opposed to "on the page" (44). Molly, whose representation on stage is foundationally directed by her primary existence as a textual being in a monologic play, narrates each moment of the dance, detailing her twists and turns throughout the invisible house. Unlike *Lughnasa*, Friel provides no stage directions for this moment, instead entrusting the physical representation of the scene to the text and its respective interpreters.

This moment in *Molly Sweeney* gains reasonable strength when read in light of documentary theatre, a genre that relies almost entirely upon the textual component of drama to recreate Harris's "*raison d'être*" (44). By employing an overtly narrative, documentary style in *Molly Sweeney*—a play which, as Christopher Murray has indicated, does not read with the allegorical assurance of *Faith Healer*—Friel allows us to see how narrative can provide instances of "pure theatre" perhaps as powerfully as its physical, non-narrative counterpart.[10] The strongest indicator of this desire to intermingle instances of textual and non-textual elements of drama appears in the play's concern with "sensation," a consideration that links Molly's erratic dance with her emotionally charged description of swimming.

Molly's description of her experience with swimming has earned considerable attention recently, particularly in the field of disability studies; however, the metatheatrical characteristics of her monologue bespeak an underlying concern related to Richard Pine's ritualistic view of Friel's body of work. David Feeney—whose study examines *Molly Sweeney*'s representation of disability in order to develop what he terms "an aesthetic of blindness"—notes, "[h]er appreciation of swimming is derived from her exceptional sense of continuity with her world" (91). He adds that, within this moment of sensational awareness, "[s]he is fleetingly afforded the opportunity to function as a participant rather than as a vicarious observer" (91). This delineation between "participant" and "vicarious observer," of course, echoes Pine's description of the theatre ritual, whereby "observers become participants and their credulity becomes acceptance and belief" (317). This *transitus*, outlined here by both Feeney and Pine but finally represented by Molly herself, again directs the audience's attention to the threshold-space

of the theatre. Molly's words, though, portrait what is perhaps the ideal vision of the audience member, a state of "participation" that actively engages with the "observed" experience:

> 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… (466; my emphasis)

Molly's description here of "pure sensation" seems essential to Harris's "pure theatre," a dramatic moment which, according to Harris, "encapsulates a play, exposing both the theme and the emotion fundamental to the writing" (44). Molly, however, reverses Harris's claim, allowing the writing itself to expose "the theme and the emotion" of sensation, a sensation that might be equated with the Mundy sisters' exuberant, defiant dance. "[O]ffering yourself to the experience" becomes the means by which the transitus from "observer" to "participant" is initiated, a transition necessary for the fully involved audience member (Friel 466).

Although Molly Sweeney's discussion of "offering yourself to the experience" appears to be a vital component of the play's conception of the audience's communion with the work, the primary source for Molly Sweeney foregrounds a larger conversation about the playwright's inspiration and its relationship to theories of documentary theatre. As Christopher Murray has noted, Friel credits Oliver Sacks's case history, "To See and Not See," as the primary text which prompted him to craft Molly Sweeney. Sack's essay informs much of the dialogue of Mr. Rice and Frank Sweeney, including some verbatim phraseology. Murray notes that "the whole input of expert knowledge" in Molly

Sweeney is "borrowed from Oliver Sacks," a point of significance that allows us to see the play's sole source of ophthalmological authority, and, at times, philosophy (243).

Sacks's case history describes a middle-aged man named Virgil, whose fiancée encourages him to pursue "a simple operation for removal of cataracts" in order to "restore sight" (232). The ophthalmologist describes the couple in this way: "There was nothing to lose – and there might be much to gain. Amy and Virgil would be getting married soon –wouldn't it be fantastic if he could see?" (Sacks 102). In citing this passage, Murray notes that Friel, like any artist, "adapts it to his own purposes," and yet this borrowing is still indicative of a larger discussion of authorial inspiration and how the lives of real, living "characters" might transpose to the imagined reality of theatre (232). With respect to docudrama, this textual borrowing is especially reminiscent of Peter Weiss's requirements for documentary theatre, whereby case studies, interviews, and narratives of real-life events constitute the source material for a documentary piece. Friel's use of his source material, however, employs much of the "invention" that Weiss disapproves, particularly since Friel picks and chooses which bits of the case history he includes, even changing the gender of the blind subject; there is certainly no comprehensive representation of Sacks's case history in Molly Sweeney, only slight reflections and momentary lapses of déjà vu.

In outlining these facts and observations, I am not proposing a reading of *Molly Sweeney* that categorizes the play as documentary drama. I would argue, however, that the documentary style of the play itself allows us to conceive of the ritualized theatre space—particularly in light of Victor Turner's own theories of liminality and communitas—with the same interpretive tools we might use for a reading of actual

documentary drama. Communitas, which Turner describes as the state of shared community for those who exist concurrently within the liminal space, carries particular weight in discussions of the subsequent effects of documentary generally. For example, the individual voices of Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* place each community member on equal footing in the liminal theatre space, thereby allowing each voice, opinion, and perspective to gain equality in an aesthetic sense. Thus, documentary drama inherently allows for this communitas since the equalized presentation of these voices keeps the audience from distinguishing between their narrative worth. In *Molly Sweeney*, then, Molly's marginalization by both Frank and Mr. Rice is somewhat overshadowed by her monologic presence; her voice bears equal weight in the world of the play simply because of Friel's purposed structure. Friel's implementation of a documentary style via this monologic structure constitutes a peculiar form of dramatic communitas, where, as Turner notes in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), "individual distinctiveness" is preserved while barriers of gender, status, and vocation are dashed (45).

Molly's final description of her post-surgery world characterizes communitas in its most tragic form:

> Anyhow my borderline country is where I live now. I'm at home there. Well…at ease there. It certainly doesn't worry me any more 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 – there it seems to be. And it seems to be all right. (509)

In her final state of interminable liminality (her "borderline country"), Molly cannot distinguish between fact and fiction, and she rests in the idea that "it seems to be all right." Somewhat complicit in her marginalization, she perhaps sees the nature of this "external reality" in a way that elegizes the theatre space itself. If the "borderline

country" is the threshold space of a dramatic community, then Molly's monologues are not alone; they are complimented by the narratives of those who, by factual standards, have apparently left her behind. A more tragic form of communitas, then, is demonstrated by these three characters; similarly, the documentary style of Friel's structure reveals how presentation alone allows an audience to aesthetically perceive narrative equality—an equality that continually points back to the persistent liminality of the theatre space.

CODA

Molly Sweeney and *Faith Healer*, then, function uniquely within Brian Friel's immense body of work. Although both works are fictional, Friel's uncharacteristic attention to a documentary style throughout these "dramatised novels" evinces a new juxtaposition with the genre of actual documentary theatre. Read together, *Molly Sweeney* and *Faith Healer* reveal how a particular form—in this case, a monologic form shared between the two plays and docudrama generally—can elegize the ritual nature of theatre itself, a ritual which, from Friel's perspective, might even engage with "the redemption of the human spirit" (24). The communitas of the "borderline country" not only places the voices of the community on equal footing, but the theatre space also establishes this same communitas between playwright, performer, and audience. This uncommon link between Friel and the seemingly unrelated genre of documentary theatre highlights Friel's own concerns about the "collective mind" and theatre: in docudrama, it is the community itself which composes a self-reflective vision of this collective, whereby themes and images arise from the voices themselves; *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney,* as mentioned earlier, elegize the collective mind from the opposite direction,

self-consciously dramatizing the communal power of the theatre space through their distinct demonstration of Turner's poetic communitas.

In light of the four plays addressed in this thesis, this final point on communitas seems to most eloquently stress the essential value of ritual and liturgy within the larger scope of Friel's dramas. Both elements are reliant upon the "collective mind" since they are nearly always enacted within community. As Turner has indicated, the elimination of "individual distinctiveness" in the liminal theatre space diminishes not only marginalization (as with the Mundy sisters or Molly Sweeney), but also rootlessness (as with Gar O'Donnell and the band of travelers in *Faith Healer*) (45). And so the theatre, with its necessary reliance upon the community for confirmation, is perhaps an appropriate space for both liturgy and ritual to manifest. From the careful recitation of Madge's litany of Maire Gallagher to Molly's ritualistic vision of her "borderline country," these spiritual elements leave a distinctive mark on Friel's body of work. The enactment of liturgy and ritual, then, feels at home during, as Frank Hardy calls them, "nights of exultation"—or, the nights when the curtain opens wide and the play begins (333).

Notes

Chapter One

[1] The essay, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair," appears in the collection *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] From "The Man from God Knows Where," *Brian Friel in Conversation.*

Chapter Two

[1] All quotations from *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* are from *Selected Plays: Brian Friel.*

[2] From "Self-Portrait: Brian Friel Talks about His Life and Work," *Brian Friel in Conversation.*

[3] All quotations from *Dancing at Lughnasa* are from *Brian Friel: Plays 2*.

[4] The term "keening" refers to a public form of Irish mourning carried out primarily by women.

Chapter Three

[1] German translations by Thomas Irmer in "A Search for New Realities: Documentary Theatre in Germany."

[2] Namely, Grene notes, "the time when Grace and Frank were living in a converted byre in Norfolk, the miraculous cure of ten disabled people in Llanbethian in Wales, the baby stillborn in Kinlochbervie, Scotland, and the terminal encounter with the wedding guests in Ballybeg, County Donegal" (53).

[3] Statistic from The Tectonic Theater Project's official website: www.tectonictheaterproject.org

[4] From *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, and Interviews*.

[5] All quotations from *Faith Healer* from *Selected Plays: Brian Friel*.

[6] From *Brian Friel in Conversation*.

[7] A point of additional significance is Friel's stated inspiration for *Molly Sweeney*, which is included in Friel's introduction to the 1994 Gallery Press edition of the play: "I am particularly indebted to Oliver Sacks's case history 'To See and Not See' and the long strange tradition of such case histories" (9).

[8] Quotations from *Molly Sweeney* from *Brian Friel: Plays 2*.

[9] From "Friel at Last," *Brian Friel in Conversation.*

[10] In the Introduction to *Brian Friel: Plays 2*, Murray writes, "*Molly Sweeney* is an indirect play, where the drama occurs in the form of narrative, not of action, rather as in the earlier *Faith Healer* (which is undoubtedly allegorical)" (xxi).

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