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STILLING ILLUSIONS: BRIAN FRIEL'S *FAITH HEALER**

Much of the charge given off by Brian Friel's plays is derived from the intersections they create, and the translations that occur when the past collides with the present, the secular with the sacred, private expectation with public disappointment, art with politics. All these oppositions meet together in language, and it is therefore not surprising that his characterisations display a deep engagement with and suspicion of language and its authority – its capacity to elude meaning, to chain and change. Born into and brought up in a fractured society and divided country, much of his working career as a writer has coincided with and been shaped by the "Troubles". Hardly surprising, his work, both as a playwright and short story writer, has been preoccupied, as Seamus Deane has pointed out,¹ with an Ireland where eloquence is intimate with, rather than the obverse of violence, an Ireland, in the words of Brendan Kennelly, occupied by "a garrulous people who cannot talk".²

One of Brian Friel's most important contributions to cultural and political debate has been his involvement in the Field Day project, which was launched in September 1980 by Friel and Stephen Rea as a theatre company to mount *Translations*, just over a month before the first phase of the hunger strikes began and two years into the "dirty protest".³ According to a retrospective statement from 1985, Field Day's directors

* Extract from *The Writers and the Troubles: Drama, Fiction and Poetry from the North of Ireland* (Macmillan, forthcoming).

¹ S. Deane, Introduction to *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 20.

² Brendan Kennelly at a poetry reading at the University of Liverpool, 17 March 1994.

³ After the I.R.A. ceasefire of 1975, violence escalated dramatically on the streets. At the same time Provisional I.R.A. prisoners embarked on a campaign of resistance after the withdrawal of "special category" in March 1976 and because of the alleged brutality of their treatment. This resistance was in three phases – the blanket protest (September 1976 – March 1981) when Republican prisoners refused to wear prison clothing; the "dirty protest" (March 1978 – March 1981) when prisoners smeared their cells with excrement as a protest against beatings by warders which they said occurred on their way to the showers and lavatory; and finally the hunger strikes of October–December 1980 and March–October 1981.

felt that the political crisis in the North and its reverberations in the Republic had made the necessity of a reappraisal of Ireland's political and cultural situation explicit and urgent... They believed that Field Day could and should contribute to the solution by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation.⁴

Both Field Day and the hunger strike campaign could be interpreted as different attempts at healing a divide, at authoring faith – the one aiming in an extended cultural project to interrogate a plural past in order to establish a “fifth province”⁵ in art, the other seeking more immediate confirmation through a narrative of ritual sacrifice to achieve a unitary political future; both faced with an “intractable” present strove to enter into negotiations with history to “negate a real world that has grown intolerable in order to transform it into an imaginery world.”⁶

Although Friel's plays are often concerned with the way political events and issues affect individuals, families and communities, he is “not an engaged writer” equipped with a set of prescriptions which will heal the national wound. As Fintan O'Toole has pointed out, “The often anguished dignity of his work comes from its demonstration of the fact that in a society where people are willing to kill for certainties and out of commitment, confusion, as Hugh puts it in *Translations*, ‘is not an ignoble condition’”.⁷ Despite the fact that within *Translations* and the texts that hunger striker, Bobby Sands, is said to have admired – the writings of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Camilo Torres – there is a shared concern with the oppressor's “destroying the self of the oppressed, with murdering his consciousness, erasing his identity, destroying his language, obliterating his traditions, emasculating his culture”, Friel's play contains alternatives to violence as a means of expurgating “the false consciousness the oppressor imbues the oppressed with”.⁸ Certainly *Translations* charts the journey from military resistance to the occupying power in the form of the 1798 rising

⁴ Preface to *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985).

⁵ Friel, according to U. Dantanus' *Brian Friel: A Study* (p. 207), is said to have agreed with the description of Field Day as “an artistic fifth province”, a concept brought back into currency by Richard Kearney in his articles for *The Crane Bag*. For the origin of this proposed cultural intersection, see B. Purcell, “In Search of Newgrange: Long Night's Journey into Day”, in R. Kearney, *The Irish Mind* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1984). “The old Irish name for Meath, *An Mhíde*, ... meant ‘the centre’ or ‘central area’ ... The provinces were known as ‘fifths’, *coiced*, as it they were a fifth province ... Possibly this fifth was less a political area than a symbol of cosmic order.” (p. 44) The quotation is reproduced in R. Pine's *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama* (Routledge, 1990), p. 36.

⁶ R. Kearney quoted in P. O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1990), p. 116.

⁷ F. O'Toole, “Keeper of the Faith”, *The Guardian*.

⁸ P. O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, p. 48.

(eloquently translated/mythologised by Hugh in one of his last major speeches) through to minor acts of sabotage and theft in the play's present and onto a future of guerrilla warfare, but equally it presents the possibility of cultural resistance in the form of Manus's hedge-school project in Inis Meadhon, and Hugh's final Joycean resolution to take on the English language, to "learn those new names ... We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home".⁹

Much more oblique in its focus on the national question, but similarly preoccupied with questions about language and fiction and their indeterminacy, is the play that precedes *Translations* and which I would like to focus upon in this essay – *Faith Healer* (1979). It is a text which achieves both distancing and intimacy through its presentation of the recollection of action, rather than action itself, and reveals Friel's willingness to experiment with dramatic form, and his ability to identify the most effective structures to generate, disperse and defer meaning. By means of four monologues, delivered by three often contradictory narrators, Frank, Grace and Teddy, Friel examines, as he does so often in his plays, the human preference for constructed "memory" over "literal happenstance";¹⁰ more significant than what actually happened is what is imagined to have happened. (Most Republican and Loyalist version of history, of course, depend on such a highly selective reading of events.) In proffering their conflicting versions of what they believed to be a common past, the characters seek a coherence and a satisfying closure that is denied in the real world where "flux is the only constant".¹¹ Each through their narratives reveals other things, the desperate human craving for a certainty and wholeness that cannot exist, and the psychological and physical violence that often attends on unfulfilment, and an addiction to stilling illusions – those fictions which sustain and distort individuals and communities, distilled over a long period of time to deadly effect.

Frank Hardy, the title character, is a richly ambiguous figure, who both "ministers" to and exploits the marginalised individuals and communities of the Celtic fringe. Like so many of those embattled figures in Thomas Hardy's novels or in Seamus Heaney's poems, he is a relic from an earlier phase of human history, trapped in a doubtful, increasingly secular age,

⁹ B. Friel, *Translations in Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, p. 444.

¹⁰ A phrase from S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–91* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 24. Rushdie discusses – like Friel in his autobiographical piece, "Self-Portrait", *Aquarius*, 5 (1972) – how the brain often clings "to the false memory, preferring it to mere literal happenstance." Earlier describing his imaginative construction of Bombay in *Midnight's Children*, he comments on the way in which fragmented memories, "shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains." (p. 12)

¹¹ B. Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair", *Everyman*, 1 (1968), p. 21.

trying to "keep/the wick of self-respect from dying out".¹² Initially, with his sadly dishevelled appearance, his mournful litanies for "All those dying Welsh villages", his nostalgia for the "relicts of abandoned rituals", and his apparent candour, he appeals to the audience – in both senses – but, as the play develops, responses towards him become increasingly complex. Touches such as the simple acts of self-deflation and self-correction during his first confession are partly stratagems to win his listeners' approval, and prefigure those of Owen in the later play.¹³ His "laying bare the device"¹⁴ is a device in itself:

When we started out – oh, years and years ago – we used to have Francis Hardy, Seventh Son across the top. But it made the poster too expensive and *Teddy persuaded me to settle for the modest "fantastic" ...* As for the Seventh Son – *that was a lie.*

How did I get involved? As a young man I chanced to flirt with it and it possessed me. *No, no, no, no – that's rhetoric.* No; let's say did it ... because I could do it. That's accurate *enough* (pp. 332–33) (my italics)

His motivation, he tells us, was not altruistic, "doing good, giving relief, spreading joy", but rather sprang from a desire to again temporary respite from the disturbing questions "that undermined my life then" – question of identity and purpose – and to achieve a brief sense of becoming "whole in myself". In many respects Frank's problems of identity and lifestyle seem to bear affinities with that of a dramatist or actor, whose "only pattern of ... existence", according to Friel, is dictated by

the persistence of the search ... the preaching of the gospel to reluctant ears: and then, when the first converts are made, the inevitable disillusion and dissatisfaction ... And then the moving on; the continuing of the search; the flux.¹⁵

When one sets Frank's posthumous attempt to live up to his Christian name and sit in judgement on his soul alongside the "evidence" of Grace and Teddy's equally partial versions of events and relationships, one senses that much of what he says is indeed rhetoric. However confident he may have been in diagnosing the spiritual and psychological malaise in others, their

longing to open themselves and at the same time fearfully herding the anguish they contained against disturbance ... They had come not to be cured but for confirmation that they were incurable; not in hope but for the elimination of hope ... to seal their anguish, for the content of finality. (pp. 336–37)

¹² S. Heaney, "The Haw Lantern", *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 7.

¹³ Owen in *Translations* deliberately tries to deceive his Irish listeners in an attempt to gain their co-operation in the re-naming process. See *T* in *SP*, pp. 406–08.

¹⁴ A Term from Russian formalism, referring to the way in which an author consciously draws the reader's attention to his/her artifice.

¹⁵ B. Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair", p. 18.

He was unable to "heal" or reconcile the contradictions in himself; like the protagonist in Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990), Philoctetes, he is both "wounded man"¹⁶ and healer. The analysis Frank offers above could be read as a projection onto others of his own psychological make-up and his struggle with his incurable disease, his "gift", "Finality" and resignation hold for him an intense attraction, as can be seen in his last act, when, according to his account, knowing what awaits him, he walks away from "the charade" (p. 341) directly to his death.

Like the deceiving, self-deceiving Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Frank Hardy "never knew who he was",¹⁷ or those closest to him. Self-obsession frequently reduces Grace and Teddy in his eyes to stereotypes, mere support acts, and only towards the end, his and the play's, does he seem capable of viewing them with a degree of compassion. The very first reference he makes to them brackets them together, leading one to assume initially that *they* were partners. In a perhaps conscious attempt to play down Grace's role and significance, Frank mentions Teddy first, placing him as a member of the *genus*, "cheeky, cheerful, Cockney con".¹⁸ When he does get round to Grace, it is to "fix" her as doubly Other; as woman and English. He defines her initially in terms of her sexual function as "my mistress", and then in relation to her role as surrogate mother, as the person who "fed me, washed and ironed for me, nursed me, humoured me. Saved me ... from drinking myself to death" (p. 335). In each of his monologues Frank blanks out her pain, making no direct reference to the still-born child at Kinlochbervie,¹⁹ the "two miscarriages in quick succession" (p. 346); instead he curtly informs us, "she was barren" (p. 372). The consistency of Grace's love, what he terms her "mulish, unquestioning" loyalty, he treats as a provocation, and responds to her endeavours to achieve identity and "wholeness"²⁰ through him, with him, in him, by distancing devices such as denying her a name and place, an origin.

Whereas in his opening monologue Frank is definite that Grace was English and that they were never married, in both Grace's and Teddy's

¹⁶ S. Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber, 1990), p. 46. Richard Haslam of Liverpool University has suggested to me that both Frank Hardy and Philoctetes are "wounded surgeon(s)" to use T. S. Eliot's phrase. (*Four Quartets*, "East Coker", IV, line 1.)

¹⁷ A. Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, in *The Portable Arthur Miller* (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 132.

¹⁸ The most obvious examples in recent years in television drama are Arthur Daley from ITV's *Minder*, and Derek Trotter from BBC's *Only Fools and Horses*.

¹⁹ See *Faith Healer* in *Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, pp. 344-45 (Grace's account) and pp. 362-65 (Teddy's account).

²⁰ Grace's account constantly emphasises his completeness because of his gift. The play itself, of course, denies the possibility of "wholeness".

accounts she is Irish and is referred to as "Mrs Hardy". He re-fashions her as a Yorkshirewoman, and even has her singing "Ilklej Moor" on their last evening together, and claims to be uncertain whether she was "Grace Dodsmith from Scarborough – or was it Knaresborough?". One of his most humiliating tricks, according to his widow, was to re-name her constantly as "Dodsmith or Elliot or O'Connell or McPherson",²¹ a translation which may suggest some knowledge about her that he wanted to suppress, and an anxiety over his own origins. The sharp class divisions and social decline operating in *Aristocrats* surface strongly in Grace's narrative, which foregrounds her wealthy, Northern Irish patrician stock at the expense of his relatively humble Southern background. His father was "a storeman in a factory in Limerick", according to her account, whereas she was derived from "a professional family with a long and worthy record of public service" (p. 348). Her representation of the social and cultural gulf between them is supported by hints and admissions in Part Four and Part One. Successful performances made Frank feel "perfect in myself, and in a manner of speaking, *an aristocrat*, if the term doesn't offend you" (p. 348).²² Towards the end of the play he recalls receiving a letter from Grace's order-obsessed father, "the judge", and speaks of his "envy of the man who could use the word 'chicanera' with such confidence" (pp. 371–72). Soon after, amidst the description of the final minutes of his life, a painful memory of his own father returns, one which caused him acute embarrassment. Although he places emphasis on the mouth "filled with rotten teeth" which his drunken boastful father exposed to him and their neighbour at the Ballinasloe horse fair one suspects that the "vulgarity" of his father's behaviour and language, "Be Jaysus, Boyle, it'll be hard for him to best his aul fella!", may have been an additional source of shame. Of course, no-one at a horse fair would dream of buying such damaged goods as a horse with bad teeth; perhaps now he sees himself as having become the image of his father.

In the self-deprecatory mood of Part One he had passed briefly over the humble ordinariness of his beginnings as "an only child of elderly parents, Jack and Mary Hardy", "born in the village of Kilmeedy in County Limerick" (p. 333), living in a *rented* house. Although he claims that the memories of home stirred by his return were arbitrary and "evoked nothing", one can clearly detect links between them, a chain of containment.

²¹ It is significant that he employs English surnames first, perhaps to maintain the pretence. We never do learn what her surname really is. During her one visit home and attempted escape from Frank, interestingly she tries to regain entry into his domain and consciousness by proffering her earlier bogus identity as "Timmikins", as Daddy's little girl. (p. 347).

²² For the importance of class as an increasingly divisive factor amongst Northern Irish Catholics, see F. O'Connor's excellent study, *In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1983), pp. 16–26, 37–43.

Whether recalling his father in proprietorial ("watching me *through the bars* of the dayroom window") or servile mood, yessing to his superiors from Dublin ("Certainly, gentlemen, by all means gentlemen"), his mother conjuring a kinder world in song ("Heaven is the prize"), or his own "innocent" play, slipping his hands in and out the handcuffs, each image points towards a constricted present, anticipates a restricted future. His wry playing with the irony of his naming, along with his reference to his father as a "sergeant of the guards",

The initials were convenient, weren't they? FH – Faith Healer ... Perhaps if my name had been Charles Potter I would have been ... Cardinal Primate; or Patsy Muldoon, the fantastic Prime Minister. (p. 333)

serve as a reminder of the authority he lacks – spiritual, political and social – and indeed his failure to best the "aul fella" (p. 373).²³ The fact, according to his account, that he never became a father himself weighs heavily upon him, and makes even the treasured clipping from the *West Glamorgan Chronicle*, a "nothing". Instead of the "something", the confirmation, the family continuity a son might have provided, Frank possesses only a "piece of paper", and the dubious immortality of a few "odd moments of awe, of gratitude", instead of the subjunctive moods and conditional perfects, only past tenses.

I *would have* liked to have had a child. But she was barren. And anyhow the life we led *wouldn't have* been suitable. And he *might have had* the gift. And he *might have handled* it better than I did. I *wouldn't have* asked anything from him – love, affection, respect – nothing like that. But I *would have* got pleasure just looking at him. (p. 372) (my italics)

In *Faith Healer*, just as in *Translations*, names function as major signifiers within the text, denoting both presence and absence, concealing as they appear to reveal. When he was alive, reciting the names of the "indistinguishable" Welsh and Scottish villages they had passed through induced a soporific calm in Frank; rather than functioning as the defined and defining locations of his wandering career, they were savoured for their music and rhythms.²⁴ Now, in retrospect, they have acquired an emblematic status, as echoes of a dying culture, and as loci for loss and guilt. Even

²³ A recurring feature of Friel's plays is the struggle with paternal authority, the conflict and contest between fathers and sons. See Friel's biting comments on his so-called teachers, "a succession of men who force-fed me with information, who cajoled me, beat me threatened me, coaxed me to swallow their puny little pies of knowledge and attitudes". (*Self-Portrait*, p. 18.)

²⁴ One recalls Heaney's delight in the "erotic mouth-music by and out of the Anglo-Saxon tongue" in poems such as "Broagh" and "Anahorish". (Seamus Heaney, interview with Seamus Deane, *The Crane Bag*, I, 1 (1977), p. 65.) Harmonies figured rarely in Frank's life.

though the characters agree on the centrality of certain key names, and voice them in order to return in spirit to them, "Kinlochbervie" and "Ballybeg" turn out to be contested sites, repositories of separate, painful, individual meanings. Both locations are associated with death and an illusory unity. In Frank's memory, it would appear, Kinlochbervie was the idyllic, picturesque place where he heard the sad news of his mother's death; for Grace and Teddy, however, it was the remote spot where the Hardy's only son was born and died. Although they concur on that fact, their accounts of the circumstances differ greatly, not only in superficial respects such as whether it was shrouded "in a heavy wet mist" or "bathed in sunshine" (p. 344, p. 362), but in important details. Grace's narrative portrays a supportive, sensitive Frank at her side, fashioning a cross and saying prayers over the infant's grave, and barely acknowledges Teddy as a presence; Teddy's longer version of events, deeply affected without doubt by his unrequited love for Grace and recent discovery of her suicide, focusses sharply on her, her courage and suffering, contrasting these qualities with what he at first sees as Frank's callous betrayal of her.

For Christ's sake to walk away deliberately when your wife's going to have your baby in the middle of nowhere ... Cause as soon as she starts having the pains, I go looking for him, and there he is heading up the hill, and I call after him, and I know he hears me, but he doesn't answer me. Oh, Christ, there really was a killer instinct deep down in that man. (p. 363)²⁵

Anger at Frank dissolves as his story turns to attend to the pathetic birth, death and funeral of "the little wet thing with the black face and black body", and how for his humble ministrations he was rewarded by Grace with a kiss "on the forehead. Just once. On the forehead". (p. 364) Perhaps this significant, limiting gesture of gratitude, of which Grace makes no mention, prompts Teddy to an alternative reading of Frank's behaviour. Loyalty to a "fantastic" client and a fellow male, along with his nervousness over exposing fully his love for Grace, enable him to check what he would regard as an "unprofessional" emotion – jealousy.²⁶ Walking away from the bloody scene, ascending the hill like some Old Testament prophet, was

²⁵ E. Andrews, in his essay, "The Fifth Province" (from *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, ed. Peacock, Colin Smythe, 1993), states that "there is the suspicion ... that Teddy and not Frank may be the father of Grace's baby?" (p. 46) I can see no evidence to justify such a suspicion, however, in Teddy's or Grace's narratives.

²⁶ "None of my business, was it? None of my concern, thank the Lord, except in so far as it might affect the performance of my client. Listen to me, dear heart, I'll give you this for nothing, the best advice you'll ever get – the *one* rule I've always lived by: friends is friends and work is work and never the twain shall meet...". He ends his monologue maintaining against all the evidence of his own "dear heart", that his relationship with Grace was purely "professional". (p. 369)

morally reprehensible, Teddy argues, but *might* represent "his own way of facing things"; or rather not facing them. There are many indications at the beginning of Part Four that something important is being suppressed; the toiling repetition of the name; the authorial directions emphasising shifting, if not shiftiness; the uncharacteristic hesitancy in Frank's speech; the producing of the clipping as an attempt to regain momentum, and as a frequently resorted to source of reassurance:

FRANK (*Eyes shut*)

Aberarder, Kinlochbervie,

Aberayron, Kinlochbervie,

Invergordon, Kinlochbervie ... in Scotland

in the north of Scotland

(*He opens his eyes. A very brief pause. Then recovering quickly.*)

But I've told you all that, haven't I? – how we were holidaying in Kinlochbervie when I got word that my mother had died? Yes, of course I have. I've told you all that. (*Begins moving*) A picturesque little place, very quiet, looking across to the Isle of Lewis ... about as far north as you can go in ... in Scotland ...

(*He keeps moving, as he does so he searches in his pockets. Produces a newspaper clipping, very tattered, very faded.*) (p. 370)

Interpretations differ similarly on the meaning of "Ballybeg", as do accounts of the events that occurred there. In Teddy's memory, it becomes the scene for recognitions, the place where he realised the depth of his love for Grace, and where, without words, Frank diagnosed his "trouble" and promised a cure. Had "those bloody Irish Apaches" not intervened – an illuminating, not untypical English "reading" of the Irish – Teddy perhaps envisioned a permanent move from "outside the circle"²⁷ into an acknowledged position within a loving triangle. In Grace's account, it is where the healer might have begun to be healed, if only he could have resisted the desire to hog the centre stage. Her version suggests that Frank imposed himself on the wedding party ("You could tell they wanted to be left alone"), volunteered to cure Donal's finger, and thus, to a certain extent, willed his own destruction. "That's the curtainraiser", she has him smugly asserting. Frank, by contrast, places squarely the responsibility for what happened at Ballybeg on his future killers, and what he terms a common "need" (p. 376), theirs to still, his to be stilled.

Though vague about so much of what transpired during his lifetime, Frank is able to evoke in exact, almost loving detail the place and manner of his demise. The brutality of the killing is repressed in his narrative, only hinted at obliquely in the references to the "four malign implements", a piece of personification which almost absolves the murderers of their

²⁷ The phrase comes from Grace's narrative (p. 352) which tends to marginalise Teddy's significance, hence my final comment to note 25.

guilt. (The phrase unites the weapons and those who wield them as agents of some larger destiny, and discloses a way of thinking about violence which would commend itself to many a military and paramilitary man.) Instead of sordid butchery, we are presented with murder as a mystical, transfiguring experience, in which the confused and culpable figure he was is translated into a serene, Christ-like, sacrificial victim, offering himself to the "death-dealers".²⁸ Death comes biblically, romantically, "just after dawn", when "everything glowed with a soft radiance", and with a confirmatory symmetry. There are *two* yards, the second "a perfect square", containing *two* mature birches, a tractor and a trailer, *four* tools and *four* wedding guests. The latter are framed under an arch, as chastely white as their carnations, fixed in a comforting pose with "Ned's hand protectively" resting on their crippled friend's shoulder. In contrast to their "white" tension – and Frank's "trembling" expectation – we witness the "infinite patience", "profound resignation" of the old/young McGarvey, who, like Sophocles' Teiresias and the disabled "saviour" brought before him, is secure in the knowledge that nothing can be done; like the seer, he waits on an inevitable outcome. The scene, like its narrator, lies somewhere between the poetic and melodramatic, the tragic and the stagey, the classical and the contemporary. The moment when the barman disappears, while the "hero" pours himself one last drink before stepping outside is pure Western; the act of passing through a wooden door, a modest proscenium, leading to the larger stage of death could be pure Greek.²⁹

Maimed by the irregular power of his making, bewildered by his own complexity as a human "text", Frank shares in the predicament of the "author"³⁰ as a flawed signifier. Both in this play and in *Translations* Friel seems to dwell in disability as a metaphor, in references which serve as a denial of the possibility of wholeness and certitude for the writer or the

²⁸ A phrase from M. Longley's poem about a sectarian killing, "The Greengrocer", from *The Echo Gate* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), p. 12.

²⁹ See also S. Heaney's comments in "For Liberation: Brian Friel and the Use of Memory", in *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, p. 237. "The conclusion of *Faith Healer* has the radiance of myth, it carries its protagonist and its audience into a realm *beyond* expectation, and it carries the drama back to that original point where it once participated in the sacred, where sacrifice was witnessed and the world renewed by that sacrifice". Some might accuse Heaney in his commentary above of aestheticising violence, a charge he levels against himself in his poem, "Station Island", VIII, when the *Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 200–1.

³⁰ Cf. S. Deane, in "Brian Friel: The Name of the Game", *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, p. 111. "Healing is not displaced to someone else; it is an action performed by the healer on the healer; just before he dies he articulates himself. He authors himself in a final act of authority."

audience.³¹ In his Introduction to the *Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, Seamus Deane speaks of the Ireland to which Frank returns as a place "of the deformed in spirit", while Richard Kearney in an essay that appeared in the very first volume of *The Crane Bag*, in 1977, the year in which Friel was at work on *Faith Healer*, cautions against unrealistic, excessive expectations of the artist as curer of society's ills:

The artist cannot provide a solution for the simple reason that he has a mandate from no-one and receives his statute from no authority. The artist is not a *salvator mundi* but the most disarmed of men. It is his renunciation of power which convinces and his vulnerability which impresses.³²

Enabled and disabled by the unnamed and inexplicable powers he possesses, which surface only at certain moments and in certain places, Frank resembles the artist to some extent. However, whereas the playwright addresses the individual and collective mind in order to bring about modest changes in consciousness, "new adjustments and new arrangements",³³ the faith healer acts directly upon the flesh in order to restore the "spirit", and seems to belong to a magical/medical order which predates Christianity; he is akin to the title character in Friel's short story, "The Diviner", a shabby, equally suspect outsider, whose ancient skills bring success in reclaiming a missing body when conventional means fail.³⁴

Like the Gospel writers, who were similarly in pursuit of a text which would incarnate definitive truth, *Faith Healer's* three narrators, deliver differing accounts of each of the key episodes in Frank's ministry, but all agree that because of his presence remarkable events occurred. According to both men, ten people were cured at Llanbethian in South Wales, and, to back up his history, Frank quotes *verbatim* from a local newspaper report of the incident. This is clearly the occasion referred to in Grace's narrative when she speaks of a £ 200 windfall from a grateful old farmer

³¹ In *Translations* Manus is crippled from birth, while Sarah has spent her lifetime unable to speak; Manus in *The Gentle Island*, one may recall, has his "left arm missing" and, like Frank, employs a certain license in his narrative art.

³² R. Kearney, "Beyond Art and Politics", *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (1977-81), p. 18.

³³ B. Friel, "Extracts from a Sporadic Diary", in *The Writers: A Sense of Ireland*, eds. Carpenter and Fallon (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1980), p. 43.

³⁴ B. Friel, *The Diviner* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1983). In the story, after the failure of the locals and expert British frogmen to locate the body of a drowned man, a diviner is called in. The parish priest, a man of little faith and less action, is dismissive of this outsider, and his "sly, knowing authority", describing him as "A fake! A quack! A charlatan!", yet finally the body is discovered "directly below the diviner's quivering twig". (p. 30) Frank Hardy, with his suspect gift, is clearly in the same mould.

near Cardiff. (pp. 342–43)³⁵ At Ballybeg, before the murder, both Frank and Grace's accounts describe how Donal's finger was made straight. In contrast to the quotidian tragic – the succession of failed dreams, bereavements, suicides – the play seems to amid the possibility of the miraculous. Its presence confers momentousness; its absence costs Frank his life.

Faith Healer has often been read as a parable about the ambivalence of Art, and the artist's redemptive and destructive potential, and many commentators³⁶ have pointed out that Frank's role as an itinerant healer is analogous to that of the writer, citing Grace's description of him:

It was some compulsion he had to adjust, to refashion, to recreate everything around him. Even the people who came to him ... yes, they were real enough, but not real as persons, real as fictions, his fictions, extensions of himself that only came into being because of him. (p. 345)

However, her comments could equally be taken to refer to the universal human tendency of using and abusing language to construct images of oneself and others. Like so many of Chekhov's or Hardy's characterisations, Friel's are "illusionists", who for a time attempt to keep at bay the consciousness of present failure by fabricating narratives of what might have been or what yet might be. Although Grace's monologue begins and ends insistently trying to establish an order and imagine a sequence – "But I *am* getting better, I *am* becoming more controlled ... I measure my progress" (pp. 341, 353) – the repetition of the tale breaks the teller:

O my God I'm in such a mess – I'm really in such a mess – how I want that door to open – how I want that man to come across that floor and put his white hands on my face and still this tumult inside me – O my God I'm one of his fictions too. (p. 353)

Her only escape from that sense of insubstantiality and dependence, for which both her parents and Frank must take a share of the blame, is through a self-authored closure.

Friel's concern with rhetoric and fiction has also and always a political dimension, I would suggest. Even when appearing to focus on "private universes"³⁷ as he does in *The Gentle Island* and *Aristocrats*, Friel keeps

³⁵ Grace does not mention the number cured, focussing rather on the all-too-brief experience of affluence, reminding us once more of the opulence she has left behind by marrying Frank.

³⁶ See, for example, U. Dantanus, *Brian Friel: A Study*, p. 174; G. O'Brien, *Brian Friel*, pp. 100–1; S. Deane in Introduction to *Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, p. 20; N. Corcoran in "The Penalties of Retrospect: Continuities in Brian Friel", in *The Achievement of Brian Friel*, p. 26, which sees Frank as "the Irish artist-in-exile-and-return."

³⁷ A phrase from S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–91*, p. 71.

coming home to larger political realities, to a divided hearth. (It is perhaps worth nothing that the year which preceded the writing of *Faith Healer*, 1976, witnessed a major upsurge in violence; there were 297 killings, making it second only to 1972 in terms of fatalities during the 1970s.) It is possible perhaps to recognise in Frank's and Grace's journeying and attempted homecoming a longing for "a cultural unison, which would overcome, by overlooking, the actual social divisions which torment modern Irish society",³⁸ and the continuing political and spiritual divisions. "Home", like "Ireland", in so much Irish literature and political thought, is a sliding signifier, yet speakers try to translate it into a transcendental signified. The fictional Ireland that accommodates the Hardys turns out to be a locus for violence, revenge, cowardice, confusion, and, like each of them, a highly unstable entity; an object for dreams of success and wholeness, it narrows down in scale into a kind of cock-pit, like the one in Friel's early story, "Ginger Hero", where creatures "spiked and speared and stabbed and savaged one another with all the concentrated fury that was in them".³⁹ Instead of the lyrical, promising "four green fields" of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Frank encounters "four malign implements", and death at the hands of his compatriots. The walled-in yard, with its cobbles worn and "smooth with use", looks forward to the closed-in-on Ireland of *Translations*, set in "a disused barn", littered with "broken and forgotten implements" – words, words, words.⁴⁰

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FAITH HEALER BRIANA FRIELA

Rozważając zagadnienie *eloquence* i przemocy we współczesnej irlandzkiej kulturze i literaturze, autor koncentruje się na antyetycznym zestawieniu tematyki w sztuce teatralnej pt. *Faith Healer* Briana Friela. Jest to sztuka, w której bohaterowie, poszukują swej tożsamości i pragną znaleźć jej potwierdzenia. Jednocześnie odchodzą od życia jako takiego i w swych marzeniach tworzą rzeczywistość iluzoryczną.

³⁸ R. Kearney, "Heaney and Homecoming", *Transitions*, p. 101.

³⁹ B. Friel, "Ginger Hero", *The Diviner*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, II ii, line 194. Like Frank, the Prince returns to a corrupted state, where eloquence masks violence.