

Non-Modern Culture in Brian Friel's Plays

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Abstract: *This article argues that Friel's concern with paganism goes beyond his well-known play *Dancing at Lughnasa*: it actually extends to *Faith Healer* and *Wonderful Tennessee*. Like *Lughnasa* festival, shamanic healing and the mythological Otherworld are also parts of Irish pagan traditions. By depicting the Irish people's spiritual world of supernatural power, gods, and realms, Friel shows that pagan cultures are not mummified in the museums or memoirs but alive in their corrupted, erratic forms and interwoven with Christian beliefs and modern rationalities, whose connection with the past and engagement with the present challenge the mutually excluded category of tradition and modernity, and exemplify what David Lloyd calls "non-modern culture."*

Keywords: *Non-modern culture; pagan traditions; shaman; the Otherworld; modernity; hybridity.*

As Friel himself admitted in an interview, "*Dancing at Lughnasa* is about the necessity for paganism" (Friel *Essays* 148). If this play has long been the focus of critical attention, what is less obvious and eludes most critics is that Friel's concern with paganism is far more lasting: it actually extends to *Faith Healer* and *Wonderful Tennessee*. Like *Lughnasa* festival, shamanic healing and the mythological Otherworld are also parts of Irish pagan traditions. Although Ireland has been Christianized since the early fifth century, many pre-Christian folk beliefs and practices still hang on. By depicting the Irish people's spiritual world of supernatural power, gods, and realms, Friel shows that pagan cultures are not mummified in the museums or memoirs but alive in their corrupted, erratic forms and interwoven with Christian beliefs and modern rationalities, whose connection with the past and engagement with the present testify to their limbo state and challenge the mutually excluded category of tradition and modernity. By applying David Lloyd's concept of non-modern culture to Friel's plays, I will argue that, those pagan cultures are non-modern cultures, since "[t]he *non-modern* is a name for such a set of spaces that emerge out of kilter with modernity but none the less in a dynamic relation to it... it is a space where the alternative survives...not as a preserve, or an outside, but as an incommensurable set of cultural formations historically occluded from, yet never actually disengaged with, modernity"(Lloyd *History* 2). Friel's pagan cultures are not relics of

the past, for they still play an essential and active role in Irish people's current lives, but at the same time, they are also discordant with modern society, for their existence is actually an adulterated, fragmentary reflection of old traditions lost over time. Their contemporaneity breaks down binary dichotomies and shows the interaction between past and present, tradition and modernity, paganism and Christianity, supernaturalism and rationality, etc., though not without conflicts, which to some extent helps restore the Irish folk tradition to modern Irish society.

Ireland's specific historical and political situation – its colonization and decolonization – necessitates the marriage of folk culture and nationalist politics. To combat colonial prejudice, to recover a native history and civilization, and to invent a national identity, Irish cultural nationalists embraced Celticism and celebrated their glorious past and noble traditions through a variety of Celtic Revival movements in the late 19th and early 20th century. The post-independent Republic, in a similar way, exalted the native traditions as “a living fossil of older times...before the contamination of the English presence in Ireland” (qtd. Ó Giollain 29) to authenticate its new sovereignty and secure its Irishness. That is why the Irish Folklore Commission was established to preserve “[the] ‘authentic’ West of Ireland” through “[its] preoccupation with pastness, with the countryside, with Irish-speaking districts” (Ó Giollain 141). Consequently, those folk practices and customs that were recalcitrant or unabsorbed into the national myth of an idyllic, self-reliant, holy nation-state were dismissed as heresy or atavism and expunged from national representation. As a result, “the spaces and processes of colonized cultures...were always already outside of, or marginal to, dominant representations” even in postcolonial Ireland. By museumizing the so-called pristine, genuine folk culture and “relegat[ing] incompatible cultural forms to its own pre-history,” the Republic constructed a hegemonic, state-sponsored version of Irishness (Lloyd *Anomalous* 10).

The limitations of such political use of folk culture are obvious: not only the so-called authentic, pure, and heroic past and people do not exist in pre-colonial Ireland, but the Celticism only enacts a simple inversion of the colonial stereotype, which does not abolish but perpetuates colonial binarism. What's more, the ossification of folk traditions in the new Republic also shows the myopia of the nation builders who fail to “see culture as a perpetual becoming and the past as necessarily flawed rather than uniformly admirable: something neither to be fetishised nor erased, but sifted for those vital elements that might be adapted in the future”(Kiberd 143). In Friel's plays, pagan culture is by no means pure, intact, or authentic but adulterated, corrupted, and sporadic; it is not dying relic but makes up an indispensable part of the Irish people's current lives; it is not always noble or admirable either but contains elements that are inscrutable or even destructive. Instead of being a static, finished product for preservation, Friel's pagan culture is a living organ, pulsating with people's daily lives, growing with social changes, and transforming into new ways of existence, whose penetration into Christianity and modernity testifies to such vitality. In this way, Friel's plays write back

to the misrepresentations of folk culture in Irish history and offer an overdue review of Irish pagan tradition.

Juxtaposing *Faith Healer* and *Wonderful Tennessee*, we can see the repeated motifs of healing, sacrificing, ritualized chanting, etc. as well as the ongoing struggle between traditional pagan beliefs and modern rationality, but if we examine them chronologically, we actually see Friel's own involvement in his portrayal of pagan culture, which moves from outlandish countryside in Scotland and Welsh to Irish town and city, from itinerant practitioner to city-dwellers, from deadly opposition to hybridity and co-existence, and from pessimistic self-doubt to articulated affirmation. Such trajectory itself shows that Friel does not dismiss pagan culture as vestiges; instead, he acknowledges its necessity in Irish people's lives and secures a proper place for it in modern Ireland.

Written in 1979, *Faith Healer* has long been viewed as a metaphorical work about artistic creation. Many critics and even Friel himself have talked about how Frank is like the artist who is at the mercy of his creative power and tortured by self-doubt. However, few critics notice that Frank the faith healer could also be a shaman because "[t]he principal function of the shaman...is magical healing"(Eliade 215). Marilyn Throne is among the few who propose a shamanic reading of Frank: insightfully pointing out the ineffectiveness of both men's law and women's faith, Throne nevertheless sees shamanism as a desperate, quack substitute for ineffectual laws and tattered religion. However, shamanism is far more than a poor makeshift and it provides crucial function for the society. In Mircea Eliade's ground-breaking work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, healing is defined as an "exclusive province of the shaman" because "illness is regarded as a corruption or alienation of the soul...[and thus] the recovery of physical health is closely dependent on restoring the balance of spiritual forces"(Eliade 216). More specifically, Ward Rutherford explains that, such spiritual healing is carried out by travelling between two worlds: "our own and the Other World," for the shaman has "[a] gift of inducing trances in which he can leave his mortal body [and make] repeated Other World visits"(Rutherford 100-3) to "ask advice from the spirits...in order to cure an illness"(Eliade 219). In this sense, the shaman is not only a mediator between his people and the Otherworld but also a guardian of his community. Frank's faith-healing, as a spiritual treatment of disease, thus belongs to shamanism. Incantation and music enable Frank to enter a shamanic trance in which he cures people just by watching and touching them. However, unlike the traditional shaman who "can travel freely to and from otherworlds" at will (Jones 70), Frank practices his spiritual healing "without any real comprehension himself of what his gift is, and without any control over his gift"(Throne 24). In this sense, Frank is only a dysfunctional shaman, who is a pale reflection of the old shamanic tradition. The decline of shamanism is inevitable, for "since the Scientific Revolution around 1600, the dominant culture in the West has repudiated the visionary and mystical traditions of perceiving reality, on which shamanism is based"(Cowan 12). Frank's existence in the

modern world is thus afflicted by the tension between the magical, shamanic outlook and the rational, scientific worldview.

Like many shamans, Frank is “called” to his vocation, for “his art responds to a profound human need for healing and transformation”(Andrews 159). Made responsible for the wellbeing of the whole community, Frank realizes that his obligation is not to cure individuals but the society, for his patients “weren’t there on their own behalf at all but as delegates” (Friel FH 337) of the multitude outside. Since physical diseases result from spiritual illness, all the disabled people – the crippled, the blind, the disfigured, the deaf, and the barren – actually represent a sick society permeated with despair: a modern spiritual wasteland, which Frank can hardly redeem with his unsteady gift. As a dysfunctional shaman in a less receptive society, Frank needs his healing power to establish his identity just as his patients need it to cure their ailments. Only healing could make Frank feel “whole in [himself], and perfect in [himself]”(Friel FH 333). That is why wherever Frank goes he carries the newspaper clipping that records the miracle he performs one night in a Welsh village, curing ten people in a few minutes: it proves himself although ironically “it got [his] name wrong”(Friel FH 371). Such identity crisis actually haunts Frank throughout his life.

It is clear from the very beginning that the time for the traditional practice of faith healing has passed, for Frank, the Irish faith healer, has to roam about dying villages in Scotland and Wales, to seek “[the] last refuge of the irrational among disbelievers”(Greene 61). Reciting the place names of those remote, occluded villages, Frank is either “blessing them or consecrating himself”(Friel FH 343) for his mesmeric incantation enables him to enter a timeless, tranquil state so that his gift is away from the menacing modern world where rationality and logic rule on the “relics of abandoned rituals”(Friel FH 332). Like Frank’s shabby, tattered overcoat and his soiled, abused banner, Frank’s career is impoverished and his life suffers forever destitution: he has to battle with despair and surrender constantly. His major adversary, undoubtedly, is the logo-centric order. Since “man’s law [is] the diametrical opposite of Frank’s gift and his essence: he heals by faith, and such healing must occur outside what man can measure and codify and enforce”(Throne 19), Frank’s faith healing is mocked as fraud and he himself is rejected as a mountebank. Grace’s Judge father, the representative of logic and reason, condemns Frank’s practice as a “career of chicanery”(Friel FH 371). This sentence is devastating to Frank because it makes him realize that it is almost impossible for him and his gift to be properly acknowledged in a society where people “could use the word ‘chicanery’ with such confidence” (Friel FH 372) that their self-righteousness excludes all the other possibilities, a confidence he can never have. Such an arbitrary, arrogant denial deepens Frank’s self-doubt, which has started since the decline of his career. He begins to project others’ disbelief and censure onto himself with “those nagging, tormenting, maddening questions... Am I a con man?... Was it all chance? – or skill? – or illusion? – or delusion?... You’re beginning to masquerade, aren’t you? You’re becoming a husk, aren’t you?”(Friel FH 333-4).

While outside hostility intensifies Frank's inside insecurity, he becomes overly defensive and tends to guard against anyone, even his own wife Grace, for she, nevertheless, has been a lawyer and a daughter of a Judge. Therefore, although Grace has rejected her law career and her father's values, "Frank continues to be threatened by them and to attribute them to Grace"(McGrath 175). Deemed by Frank as the symbol of order: "a Yorkshire woman. Controlled, correct, methodical, orderly"(Friel FH 335), Grace becomes the rational modern world incarnate, which Frank keeps measuring himself against self-consciously. Loyal as she is, Grace does not really understand Frank either, for she secretly resents his faith healing for taking him away from her: "if by some miracle Frank could have been the same Frank without it, I would happily have robbed him of it"(Friel FH 349). Such thought is seized by Frank as her ultimate treachery against him. Picturing Grace as the outside world that tries to deny and reject him, Frank flaunts his victory when he cures someone: "'And what does the legal mind make of all that? Just a con, isn't it? Just an illusion, isn't it?'" When he cannot perform, Frank blames Grace: "'You were at you very best tonight...A great night for the law, wasn't it?'" As Frank brings all his struggles with the orderly, methodical world into his family life, his tense relationship with Grace actually reflects the agony modern society inflicts on him. What Grace calls the "feud between himself and his talent"(Friel FH 350) is indeed the feud between Frank's faith healing and the unaccommodating modern world.

Such a feud reaches its summit when Frank returns to Ireland. Although his straightening the wedding guest's twisted finger seems to suggest that this is the right place for him to restore his lost gift, this illusion soon dissipates, for those wedding guests not only mock traditions through their relentless debauchery of August festival but also behave aggressively towards him: a face-to-face confrontation between rationality and faith becomes inevitable. Challenged to cure the cripple McGarvey, the embodiment of a diseased modern Ireland, Frank foresees his failure and his consequent death at the hands of those non-believers, but he accepts his fate all the same. Many critics regard Frank's death as a tragic defeat, a deliberate elimination of hope, a relief from the unbearable uncertainty and self-doubt, or a final resignation. Even Throne, who admits Frank finally "achieves the revelation of the rightness of spiritual truth," still views it as the death of a washout (Throne 22-4). To me, however, Frank's death is actually a willing sacrifice for others' sufferings, an "ultimate act of faith"(Pine 148), which shows the final triumph of shamanic spirit over the secular world.

By offering himself to help others and even sacrificing himself to redeem the faithless, hopeless modern world, Frank articulates true shamanic spirit in his last act. Like Christ, Frank is "prepared to lay down his life for his faith"(Andrews 161), which accounts for the religious piety and reverence with which he approaches his death: "he takes off his hat as if he were entering a church and holds it at his chest"(Friel FH 376). In Celtic tradition, "death is not the end, but a doorway into another kind of life...At the moment of physical death, human consciousness begins a journey into a new and more radiant form of existence"(Cowan 200, 181). Frank's death fully represents such a belief. The fatal meeting between him and the wedding guests takes place in the early dawn,

symbolic of a new beginning, in a walled yard made sacred by “an arched entrance” and “two mature birch trees”(Friel FH 375). The arch, as a common cemetery symbol, signifies a victory over death and a gateway to heaven, while the birch is a holy tree of rebirth. According to the Celtic Tree Calendar, the birch is “the first letter of the druidic alphabet and sacred to Cerridwen,” the Celtic goddess of rebirth and transformation (Ravenfox 3). Moreover, given the ready images of Tree of Life or the World Tree in the Celtic mythology, the birch trees may also imply a doorway to the Otherworld and a continuance of life in another time and space. All the sacred and regenerative images show Frank’s death as a noble, life-giving sacrifice rather than a pathetic abandonment.

Likewise, Frank’s death is also a victory over the empirical reality he has battled throughout his life. During his dying moment, the spirit finally surmounts the matter, and the menacing, secular world gradually gives way to a spiritual world: “the whole corporeal world – the cobbles, the trees, the sky, those four malign implements – somehow they had shed their physical reality and had become mere imaginings.” With the disappearance of the physical reality, enmity ceases to exist too, which enables Frank to establish a genuine, spiritual connection with his adversaries: “we had ceased to be physical and existed only in spirit, only in the need we had for each other”(Friel FH 376). Frank finally transcends the physical antagonism between him and the wedding guests in the light of the shamanic truth that “it is spiritual reality that matters, not physical”(Throne 24). Through his ritualistic death, Frank not only defeats the hostile, material world but also conquers his own fear and uncertainty: “for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent.” Interestingly enough, it is through his physical destruction that Frank is restored spiritually and has a genuine “home-coming.” In this way, Frank’s final “renouncing chance”(Friel FH 376) is not a resignation or failure but “an affirmation of the sacred and the salvific”(Strain 81). By choosing to die, Frank proves himself to be a real shaman in life as well as in death. Like Throne puts it, “[u]ltimately, then, *Faith Healer* is a somber and ecstatic statement of faith”(Throne 24).

To some extent, Frank’s faith healing, as a lingering pagan tradition, speaks for all that is dismissed as irrational and superstitious in modern Ireland and reflects their predicament in a logo-centric world. The clash between Frank the shaman and the world of reason is also a struggle for the acknowledgement of those existent, non-modern cultures. Frank’s death thus shows that although modern society may eliminate the physical existence of those cultural practices, it cannot extinguish the non-modern spirit, which will continue to challenge the confine of modern rationality. Friel’s revisit of the pagan culture eleven years later in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and fourteen years later in *Wonderful Tennessee* testifies to the strong life of such a spirit.

Wonderful Tennessee, as Friel’s last play of paganism, pays tribute to its two predecessors. Many critics have noticed that all the plays are set in August, a harvest season for pagan rituals and festivals. What is less obvious to them is that both shamanism and Lughnasa festival actually return to *Wonderful Tennessee*. Although lacking a definitive shamanic figure, *Wonderful Tennessee* gives a more substantial description of a

trip to the Otherworld and reiterates the theme of healing among those diseased modern people. Likewise, Lughnasa festival is also vaguely recalled from memory and imitated awkwardly by the characters. The absence of shaman practice and Lughnasa festival celebration reflect the reality of the 1990s Ireland. Although pagan practice seems to disappear physically, it continues in a more implicit yet profound way, for *Wonderful Tennessee* shows that it is the Irish city-dwellers rather than dying Welsh/Scottish villages that hold up such a tradition: in spite of (or maybe because of) the modern civilization those city-dwellers immerse in, their longing to transcend the secular, rational world and their pursuit of an alternative existence never cease. In *Wonderful Tennessee* not only paganism shifts its presence from physical practice to spiritual adherence but the antagonism between pagan tradition and modern rationality also gives way to an eclectic conglomeration: the deadly opposition between shamanism and reason in *Faith Healer* is replaced by their co-existence, for the city-dwellers in *Wonderful Tennessee* are both rational and shamanic, indiscriminately mingling “at once pagan, classical, Celtic, Christian, and post-Christian”(Corbett 101) music and songs on the Donegal pier.

Like those disabled people who seek out Frank to treat their diseases, the three city couples travel to a remote pier in Donegal to search for a physical and mental cure. The opening cry “Help! We’re lost!”(Friel WT 347) gives full voice to their agony and desperation in their modern ailments: Terry is broke financially and emotionally, Berna is barren and suffering from nervous breakdown, Frank is stuck in his writer’s block and unhappy marriage, and George only has three months to live due to his throat cancer. The mysterious island, where Terry remembers “years ago people went...to be cured” as he sees “crutches and walking sticks hanging on the bush,” suggests a sacred place related to the Otherworld from which supernatural healing power comes. In this sense, although there is no more shaman because people have “stopped believing”(Friel WT 371-2), the characters’ trip to the island acquires shamanic quality: like the shaman who walks between the mortal world and the Otherworld to bring back immortal wisdom to heal people, the characters also leave their secular world and enter the disused, distant pier as derelict as Frank’s dying Scottish and Welsh villages to embark on a similar journey to the Otherworld in the hope of finding a cure.

The analogy between the island and the Otherworld is explicit. In Celtic tradition, the Otherworld “is either beyond or beneath the sea, and the travellers commonly set off in a ship to reach it”(Davidson 187) while the island Oilean Draiochta is accessible only through sailing. According to “the *Immrama*, accounts of voyages to strange and fantastic islands”(Davidson 182), a fairy maiden always guides the mortal to the Otherworld, just like the characters need the boatman Carlin to ferry them over to the island, who is no less legendary, for nobody could get a hold of him and he is only remembered and talked about but never showing up in the play. The thatched cottage, where he is supposed to live, is deserted with “grass growing out of [it]”(Friel WT 376) but smoke still comes out of its chimney at unusual hours. If we don’t know whether Carlin is a real person or a mythological figure, we are not sure whether the island exists or not either. Just

as its name “Oilean Draiochta – Island of Otherness, Island of Mystery” suggests, the island remains mysterious throughout the play. On the one hand, its physical existence seems beyond question, for Terry not only buys it from the market but also remembers his visit to it with his father when he was seven, but on the other hand, nobody can see the island clearly, which is more like “a mirage” (Friel WT 369) and Friel’s working title “The Imagined Place” (Friel *Essays* 148) further indicates its illusory presence. As an island heard but not seen, dangling between reality and imagination, Oilean Draiochta follows the tradition of Otherworldly islands in Irish mythology: “Tir-fa-Tonn (Under-Wave Land), Tir Tairngire (Land of Promise), Mag Mell (Plains of Honey), Tir-na-mBeo (Land of Living), Tir-na-Nog (Land of the Young)” (Spaan 185). Like those Otherworldly islands, Oilean Draiochta is also a place of “happiness and beauty where sickness, death and decay are unknown” (Davidson 181). This blessed, idyllic island, true spiritual home to the Irish people, however, is surrounded by hostility: the devouring fog and swirling foam, like the debasing, modernizing forces, have degraded the salmon of wisdom in the Otherworld to a manic, leering-faced, dancing dolphin (Friel WT 420). Read in this light, Angela’s story about the pirates who are turned into dolphins because they capture the Greek god Dionysus speaks to the Irish society where the Dionysiac, pagan traditions have been arrested by the secular, vulgar modern life.

The juxtaposition of the Otherworld and the threatening modern reality also leads to the characters’ two-sidedness. Unlike Frank, the staunch shaman fighting against all the scientific forces, the three couples are hybrids of irrationality and reason. Their challenge to rationality and pursuit of transcendence are palpable throughout the play. Along with their shamanic, healing journey are their fantastic stories, which deny reason as “the key to ‘truth’, [or] the ‘big verities.’” By turning the Holy House of Loreto into a flying house, Berna delivers a deliberate “offence to reason”: “[the flying house] marches up to reason and belts it across the gob and says to it, ‘fuck you, reason. I’m as good as you any day. You haven’t all the fucking answers – not by any means’” (Friel WT 404). By evoking and seeking a mystic, alternative world through their stories and trip, the characters go beyond “the material world and rational thinking” (Bertha 128) and get in touch with their pagan culture. However, unlike the pious believers in the past who “embraced it all – everything. Yes, yes, yes” (Friel WT 398), the modern couples remain critical and suspicious, for they cannot sanctify the tradition with the same piety and devotion: they are reliving it yet cannot get over its otherness, which accounts for their paradoxical attitude. Angela condemns their shamanic journey and makes fun of the island but at the same time admits its value as “an island remembered, however vaguely” (Friel WT 380). Likewise, Frank admires the island but questions his own admiration all the same: “maybe we’ve got it all wrong as usual... Maybe Saint Conall stood on the shores of the island there and gazed across here at Ballybeg and said to his monks, ‘Oh, lads, lads, *there* is the end of desire. Whoever lives there lives at the still core of it all. Happy, happy, lucky people’” (Friel WT 398). Such skepticism and self-mockery testify to their mixed cultural holdings.

This hybrid strain is also seen in the characters' parodic imitation of Lughnasa celebration. As Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* shows, August the First is La Lughnasa, the feast day of the old Celtic God of the Harvest, Lugh, and the days and weeks of harvesting that follow are called the Festival of Lughnasa, which is celebrated through picking of bilberries, communal feast, social gatherings, singing, dancing, etc. According to Maire MacNeill, many Lughnasa celebrations "survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without having been taken over by Christianity. Of course they had shed all obvious connexions with pagan rite and lived on as festive outings" while a minority "were converted to Christian devotion and changed to pilgrimages" on the hilltop followed by festive gatherings at the foot of the hill (MacNeill 68). Terry remembers that decades ago on the island people used to walk barefoot, fast, go round mounds of stones, say prayers, drink from a holly well, and give votive offerings, which is actually a survival of the patron-pilgrimage version of the old Lughnasa festival: those pilgrims "ascend the mountain barefoot," have "their fast on the peak," go round "cairns of stone...seven times saying the customary prayers," "left a token offering, such as a rag or a nail, in the stone crevices," and take "a drink from the [holy] well." After their pilgrimage, they have a patron of "feasting, dance and song"(MacNeill 81-2, 104). In the play, the characters spontaneously observe their pagan tradition by taking off their shoes, fasting a whole night, filling a bottle with "holy water," leaving votive offerings on the lifebelt, going around the mound of stones, and singing and dancing. However, such an imitation is also a parody. What has been done solemnly and reverently on the island is reproduced in a reductive, corrupted way on the Donegal pier: the characters' fasting is a pure accident: "I order two hampers of good food and they fill them with stuff nobody can eat"; their holy well pathetically comes from "a shallow hollow on the floor of the pier where water has gathered"(Friel WT 394); their votive offerings are merely secular gifts for the ferryman Carlin; their singing and dancing are exaggerated or even mocking. While other critics see this as degenerated faith and debased ritual (Andrews 257), I see it as an inevitable adulteration of paganism in modern times.

What's more, the patron-pilgrimage also testifies to the mingling of Christianity and paganism. While the pilgrimage itself seems to indicate that religious devotion to Christian Saints or chapels has taken over ancient festival of Lughnasa, it is by no means a sweeping victory given the on-going pagan practices within Christianity: people still observe the Celtic year and celebrate their solar festival Lughnasa, still pay tribute to pagan wells of wisdom, and still hold profane, fun-seeking gatherings. All these illustrate the undying pagan spirit in the apparent conversion to Christianity. Viewed in this light, paganism and Christianity actually live through each other as if in a symbiosis. The characters' Lughnasa trip is thus also a religious pilgrimage. With the "listing and rotting wooden stand, cruciform in shape, on which hangs the remnant of a life-belt"(Friel WT 344), the pier deliberately evokes crucifix and resurrection and seems to promise the characters a hope of rebirth. Likewise, the island is not only the Otherworld or the Lughnasa festive site but also a sanctuary with "the ruins of a Middle

Age church dedicated to Saint Conall” (Friel WT 372). The hymns permeated in the play reinforce the sacred atmosphere, which, like everything else, are adulterated, for George switches music “at times quite inappropriately...so the sacred intrudes on the secular, and the secular encroaches on the sacred”(Corbett 98). As a result, any sustained religious piety is lost. If the indiscriminate blend of holy psalms and popular songs corrupts the religious pilgrimage, the sacrifice and dismemberment of Sean O’Boyle, done by the intoxicated Christians back from the Eucharistic Congress and covered up by the bishop afterward, further undercuts the Christian order. Apparently, violent and savage behaviors are not exclusive to pagans. The widening gap between modern civilization and non-modern culture ironically results in an increasingly heterogeneous medley as shown in the mongrel nature of the characters’ trip to the island: shamanic, festive, and religious.

Just like Frank’s dysfunctional shamanism, the three couples’ journey to the island also fails, for there is no pristine, authentic tradition to go back to. The similar names of the minibus driver Charlin and the boatman Carlin give away the interchangeability of their home and the island: the island is shown to be the characters’ alienated home. That is why Frank exclaims that “this is no mystery tour he’s taking us on – he’s taking us home!”(Friel WT 378). The characters’ trip to the island is thus a return to their spiritual home, “to remember again...to be in touch again...to acknowledge...[and] to attest to the mystery”(Friel WT 372-3) exiled from modern society. As an embodiment of the pagan past, Oilean Draiochta is also an island of the dead. The ferryman Carlin thus resembles Charon in Greek mythology, who ferries the dead to the underworld Hades. Like those souls who cannot afford the ferry fee and are thus doomed to wander on the shore of the river Styx for 100 years, the characters are also condemned to an eternal waiting as Carlin never turns up: stranded on the pier, they can neither reach the island nor return home. Their dangling state shows their homeless condition between their modern present and their traditional past, for, in spite of their yearnings, they are inevitably estranged and distanced from their cultural heritage.

The unavailability of the island makes many critics read the play negatively. Corbett claims that “the characters do not find some kind of spiritual renewal, nor even a spiritual experience”(Corbett 101), and Pine sees the play as a denial “to refer back to a ‘hidden Ireland’”(Pine 284). Different from them, I find *Wonderful Tennessee* not only continues but also confirms what *Faith Healer* has said about Irish paganism in a louder, surer voice. The characters’ performance of the old ceremonies and their affirmative attitude towards the island have established a spiritual connection with their pagan tradition. Their self-conscious, reductive imitation of the patron-pilgrimage is indeed a modern expression of their paganism, which testifies to the living and adaptive non-modern culture. Therefore, although “these six modern-day, secularized pilgrims – approach the ancient mysteries in a half-hearted, uncertain, skeptical manner”(Andrews 257), their ritual gestures have put them as close to their pagan tradition as “you [can] get without touching it”(Friel WT 415). That is why the characters declare that “even though we don’t make it out there...at least now we know...it’s there”(Friel WT 440) and

another trip is guaranteed: “Yes, we will! Next year – and the year after – and the year after that! Because we want to! Not out of need – out of desire! Not in expectation – but to attest, to affirm, to acknowledge – to shout Yes, Yes, Yes!”(Friel WT 442). In this way, the characters voice an ultimate, resolute affirmation of their non-modern culture. If the characters’ attitude towards the island changes from initially dismissive and doubtful to finally enthusiastic and confirmative, positive changes and signs of renewal are also discernable towards the end of the play. Act Two begins with a new day: “a pristine and brilliant morning sunlight that...renovates everything it touches” and “exhilarated” characters. Wild flowers are also found on the deserted pier (Friel WT 414, 417, 427) as if under the influence of characters’ life-giving journey. Opposite to its bleak, helpless beginning, the play ends with a strong, confirming note.

Taken as a whole, both *Faith Healer* and *Wonderful Tennessee* tackle the misrepresentation of pagan culture – it is neither idolized and preserved as a dying, authentic heirloom nor dismissed as an atavistic, backward relic; rather, it carries on to the present in renewed, adulterated, and fragmentary forms and is indeed an important component of modern Irish people’s lives, interwoven with their rational and Christian practices, and providing them with an alternative spiritual outlet. In this way, Friel secures a place for the non-modern culture in the modern Ireland.

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