

Paper Knowledge. Books, Maps, Letters: the Written Word in Brian Friel's Plays

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Abstract: *Brian Friel's plays often exploit the techniques of the short story writer, so that the presence of a character narrator, the use of extended monologues and direct address to the audience shed light on powerful acts of narration. The "narrative" strategy is recurring and often dominating, as in the case of Faith Healer, whose intergeneric or intermodal character is a challenge to dramatic action. However, the aural/oral dimension is counterbalanced by the presence of the written word on stage in the form of books, maps, letters, banners, newspapers, which remind the spectator/reader of the accomplishment of Friel's plays as both literary and theatrical texts.*

The article investigates the use and the significance of the written word in Brian Friel's oeuvre as a constant and obsessive presence. Books, maps, newspapers, letters, items that may seem negligible in isolation provide a recurring motif and turn out to be structurally relevant when pursued from play to play.

There's three rocks [...], two big ones and a wee one. We call them the Monks. There's a name for every stone about here, sir, and a story too (*The Gentle Island*: 32).

In Brian Friel's *The Gentle Island* (1970), Manus Sweeney, the ambiguous patriarch of the depopulated island of Inishkeen, introduces himself as a storyteller, the depository of links between places, placenames, and stories. The "conservative" nature of placenames is highlighted in *Translations* (1980), where the story of Brian's well remains in Tobair Vree (*Selected Plays*: 420). A story nearly forgotten is kept alive on a map.

Written placenames tell unwritten stories. In Brian Friel's plays where real and invented places recur, placenames are narrators, so that the litany of "those dying Welsh villages" in *Faith Healer* (1979) has the "incantation" of stories (*Selected Plays*: 332).

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The storytelling mode in Friel's plays reminds the act of oral storytelling behind Irish drama (Roche 1994, 115) so that the presence of a character narrator, as in *Lovers* (1967) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), the use of extended monologues and direct address to the audience, as in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), make each play a powerful act of narration.

Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* tells the audience the story of the Mundy family at the same time participating in it. So does Andy in *Lovers*, who acknowledges the audience's presence in the stage directions:

[...] when he becomes aware of the audience, he lowers the glasses slowly, looks at the audience, glances cautiously over his shoulder [...] and then speaks directly and confidentially down to the auditorium (*Lovers*: 51).

Likewise in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, the eponymous protagonist addresses the audience directly, because "they are her friends, her intimates" (*Loves of Cass McGuire*: 15), her only reality before being caught up in the make-believe of Eden House. The narrative strategy dominates in *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*, whose "intergeneric" character between novel and drama (Kiberd 1985, 106), between stream of consciousness and straightforward narration represents a challenge to dramatic action.

A playwright who started his career as a writer of short stories (Worth 1993, 75), Friel "has remained fond of narrators and narration in the theatre" (Greene 1999, 207) and is a great creator of storytellers (Kilroy 1993, 98), from Casimir in *Aristocrats* (1979), Frank Hardy in *Faith Healer*, Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, to Frank in *Molly Sweeney*, and Berna, Frank, Terry and their companions in *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993). "All we want of a story – says Frank – is to hear it again and again and again" (*Wonderful Tennessee*: 61).

Yet some of these narrators are also writers, or rather, are in different ways involved in the act of writing: they are "chroniclers, analysts" (O'Toole 1993, 205), "map-makers, translators, historians, [...] politicians, schoolteachers" (Pine 1999, 310). They are variations of the writer, anticipating the professional writer in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997). These are all – as Richard Pine describes them – characters who "live by the book and are lived by the book" (310).

This draws attention to the presence of the written word on stage in Friel's plays – books, maps, letters – which questions the nature itself of drama and reminds the spectator/reader of the accomplishment of Friel's plays as both literary and theatrical texts (Kilroy 1993, 91).

As a performing art, theatre exists as "a process rather than a product" (Kiberd 2000, 147), it is "written on the wind [...]. It's created out of air, and vanishes into it" (Hughes 2000, 11). However, in his attitude to playwriting Brian Friel is one of those who live by the book. "My belief – he said in 1968 – is absolutely and totally in the printed word" (Funke 2000, 55), a peculiar statement for a man for whom the written

word is a source of ambiguity, since he possesses two names and two birth certificates (Pine 1999, 41).

The written word is a major referent in Friel's production, as he has employed a variety of texts "implicitly or explicitly" (9). His plays are based on a knowing intertextuality (Kiberd 1996, 618), having made use of written texts as diverse as John Andrew's *A Paper Landscape* and George Steiner's *After Babel in Translations*, Ervin Goffman's *Forms of Talk* in *The Communication Cord* (1982), Sean O'Faolain's *The Great O'Neill* in *Making History* (1988), Oliver Sack's case history *To See and Not See* in *Molly Sweeney* (Pine 1999, 9).

The written word is a recurring presence inside his plays too, which – as Friel himself said of *Translations* – have to do "with language and only language" ("Sporadic Diary": 58). Books and their allomorphs, maps, letters, newspapers, items that may seem negligible in isolation, become a motif and turn out to be thematically and structurally relevant when pursued from play to play. The physical presence of books and maps as stage props or as protagonists in Friel's plays is consistent with his "Weltanschauung", where definable or verifiable truth is elusive, as in the conflicting monologues in *Faith Healer*, and exists only in the "reality" of words. "There's ways and ways of telling every story – says Manus in *The Gentle Island*– Every story has seven faces" (*The Gentle Island*: 57).

Frank in *Molly Sweeney* is obsessed by the written words of books, magazines, articles, which he has been gathering for years in his "'essential' folder" (*Molly Sweeney*: 17). Molly's blindness is an object of study which materializes in "a brilliant article" he read once (20) and in the time he spends in the library:

I spent a week in the library [...] one full week immersing myself in books and encyclopedias and magazines and articles – anything, everything I could find about eyes and vision and eye-diseases and blindness (35).

Thus books and their variants can be justified by the protagonists – students or scholars in *Winners*, *Translations*, *The Communication Cord*, *Wonderful Tennessee*, historians in *Aristocrats* and *Making History*, professional writers in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* – and as such they are significant as stage props and as part of the action development, working at different levels and with different degrees of significance.

Friel's first successful play, *The Enemy Within* (1962), opens with "the monk Caorman [...] a scribe [...] working at the large wooden table" (*The Enemy Within*: 11), a typical activity in a seventh-century monastery. Occasional references to the accomplishments of a scribe's work (19, 20, 56) are consistent with the set described in the stage directions: "On the wall above the table hangs a collection of scrolls – the equivalent of a library" (8). The written word on stage reminds of the permanence of Columba's story told to a twentieth-century audience, but it also acts as a reminder of the conflicting words that bind Columba, loyalty to his family and to the Church, mutually exclusive words.

Similar occasional references to writing appear in both *The Communication Cord* and *Wonderful Tennessee*, whose characters are involved in a writing activity that is not carried out on stage, or is not particularly relevant for the action of the play. Tim in *The Communication Cord* is writing a PhD thesis on “Response Cries” which informs the background of a play where language provides “chaos” (*The Communication Cord*: 19). Frank in *Wonderful Tennessee* is writing a “long overdue book” (Jent 1995, 33) on “The Measurement of Time and Its Effect on European Civilization” (*Wonderful Tennessee*: 50), an activity that has involved him for over three years. Writing and its results are mistrusted and illusory. At the end of *The Communication Cord* Tim admits he will have to rewrite most of his thesis, and Frank in *Wonderful Tennessee* jokes on Terry’s question: “When is it going to appear?” replying: “Another apparition” (51), maybe implying the vacuity of his enterprise.

This leads to considering the “insufficiency” of Friel’s writers (O’Toole 1993, 205). Writing itself often takes place in paradoxical or absurd conditions: Owen and Yolland writing in their Name-Book while getting drunk; Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa* writing at the wrong time of the year to a Santa Claus who doesn’t exist, asking for a bell for the bike he doesn’t have; Peter Lombard writing his distorting history of O’Neill (205).

Doubt, uncertainty, confusion underlie *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, where books are written, read, studied, quoted, but also bought and sold. They are commodities, entering the world of trade to provide self-esteem as well as financial stability. All this is anticipated early in Act One, where the stage directions shed light on the physical presence of books and papers as catalysts for apparent order:

On the floor along the back wall we can see Tom’s papers very neatly laid out in a line, one beside the other, mostly manila folders, but also a few box-files and shoe boxes. Perhaps about thirty items in all.

There are books in a bookcase and in small piles on the floor. (*Give Me Your Answer, Do!*: 16)

David Knight, the outsider in charge with assessing Tom Connolly’s work, recalls the character of the historian Tom Hoffnung in *Aristocrats*. As his name suggests, Tom is “<hopeful> of finding the complete truth” (Murray, in *Plays Two* 1999, xii) about the O’Donnells’ big house out of Casimir’s “phoney fiction” (*Selected Plays*: 278). The book he is writing will probably never materialize in spite of his checking, rechecking, double checking, cross-checking (312), as he encounters a standard of truth, as Eamonn says, “beyond” his “scrutiny” (310), where invention and information overlap. What Tom is writing down in his notebooks is lies. “All you’re hearing is lies, my friend – lies, lies, lies” (284), says Alice, implicitly admitting that all these lies are a necessary fiction to face everyday life.

If Tom Hoffnung the historian is likely to be driven by and to drive others to disorder, the written word of chronicle is often conducive to personal confusion or

misinformation. The copy of *The Clarion* Gar O'Donnell finds in the old suitcase he is packing in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) is the objective-correlative of the "burden of the past" (Jones 2000, 28) he is carrying away into exile, together with master Boyle's book of poems as a talisman (Mahony 1998, 127). Gar is thus bringing the written word of Ballybeg to Philadelphia.

In *Living Quarters* (1977) the *Donegal Enquirer* provides information about the Butler family mixing up names and occupations of each member in turn. This lighter detail does not relieve the pattern of impossible escape from the past, but increases the sense of ambiguity and confusion characterizing the play.

And in *Faith Healer*, in particular, Frank Hardy has kept a clipping from the *West Glamorgan Chronicle* recording the miraculous healing of ten people, but also distorting his name:

<A truly remarkable event took place in Llambethian on the night of December 21st last when an itinerant Irish faith healer called Francis Harding [...] cured ten local people of a variety of complaints ranging from blindness to polio> (*Selected Plays*, 370-1).

The written word belongs to the realm of "verifiable, historical, public" truth (Roche 1994, 113), it bridges the gap between the stories variously recounted in the play and their public acknowledgment. Frank's paradoxical reason for keeping the newspaper clipping for so long is the need to be identified: "It identified me – even though it got my name wrong" (*Selected Plays*: 371). The spoken word out of which the play is made in the structure of subsequent and contradictory monologues is juxtaposed to the improbable fixity of the written word. In a play in which the spoken word is everything, it is the written word that identifies the faith healer and his art. Likewise, at the opening of the play Frank introduces himself and identifies himself with the large poster that dominates the stage:

I beg your pardon – *The Fantastic Frank Hardy, Faith Healer, One Night Only* [...]. The man on the tatty banner (332).

Frank thus IS a written word in the same way as he is the spoken words of his story. As Anthony Roche suggests, he is "the textual word made flesh" (Roche 1994, 113). The poster that remains on stage throughout the monologues but the last one is "the fiction that has stuck" (113). It is a crucial presence in terms of identity in performance and identity as fiction. It has been rewritten – we are informed – and a lie ("Seventh Son of a Seventh Son", *Selected Plays*: 332) has been omitted. The written word is subject to change, and the faith healer's shifting identity is marked by the few written words that contrast with the flood of spoken words he involves himself and the audience in. The written word is a survivor to the dead voices reciting their monologues, a testimonial of a story where truth is – unlike the *West Glamorgan Chronicle* – unverifiable.

In Grace's monologue, however, the written word is an act of creation, confirming an unspoken or unspeakable reality:

The first day I went to the doctor, he was taking down all the particulars and he said to me, "and what was your late husband's occupation, Mrs Hardy?" "He was an artist", I said – quickly – casually – but with complete conviction – just the way he might have said it. Wasn't that curious? Because the thought had never occurred to me before. And then because I said it and the doctor *wrote* it down, I knew it was true [...] (346, emphasis added).

Writing thus provides existence, which is what takes place in the painful, controversial and contradictory acts of translation in *Translations*. As Owen says, "We name a thing and – bang! – it leaps into existence!" (422). Writing codifies the process of naming giving it stability and fixity. The setting of Act Two, Scene One of *Translations* is dominated by written texts:

A large map– one of the new blank maps – is spread out on the floor. Owen is on his hands and knees consulting it [...]. One of the reference books – a church registry – lies open on his [Yolland's] lap. Around them [Yolland and Owen] are various reference books, the Name-Book, a bottle of poteen, some cups etc. (409).

Maps and books have taken over the theatrical space of the barn to mark the invasion of alien words onto the everyday-life stage of Baile Beg. The "mammoth task" of mapping and renaming (Jones 2000, 61) is physically evidenced by the presence of written words, or of words in the process of being written. Maps control the uncontrollable, fixing space into parameters. The dispossession, the "bloody military operation" (*Selected Plays*: 408) behind the act of writing or rewriting, transforms Baile Beg and the surrounding localities into prescribed texts. The "mapping exercise" (Meissner 1992, 166) in 1833 Ireland is an attempt– to use Hugh's words– to "imprison" a civilization "in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the language of [...] fact" (*Selected Plays*: 419). Writing new names is a way to assert power, the "occupier's response to what he perceives as unchartable wilderness" (Kiberd 1996, 620). If mapmaking belongs to the kind of "progress" the colonizer brings to the colonized (Garratt 1996, 77), it also changes landscape into text (Pine 1999, 39), prescribing it according to new and alien formulas. In writing the map, filling in the Name-Book, the written word physically invades the stage, which too becomes a text, to be written, read, acted out, performed, interpreted.

The overpowering presence of maps and books at the opening of Act Two does not cancel the other texts/written words that belong to the play. If the Name Book has a function of control, in *Translations* other texts suggest authority (211). The classical texts of Homer and Virgil that are read, translated, quoted and applied to everyday life are juxtaposed to Hugh's pompous *Pentaglot Preceptor or Elementary Institute of the*

English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Irish Languages; Particularly Calculated for the Instruction of Such Ladies and Getlemen as may Wish to Learn without the Help of a Master (*Selected Plays*: 419), whose long title echoes and counterbalances the formality and detachment of Captain Lancey's speech introducing the mapmaking plan to the people of Baile Beg.

The Book of Names as a controlling agent in *Translations* with its biblical overtones has a counterpart or other self in *Making History*. The play is dramatically dominated by a book strategically posited at the centre of the stage. The stage directions deliberately focus on a variety of written texts, starting from "various papers on the table" (*Making History*: 1) Harry Hoveden is reading from at the opening of the play. Other written texts are elicited and mentioned, letters and reminders, Lombard's *Commentarius*, "the book with the blue cover" (11), recent correspondence with Spain (7), O'Neill's submission to the Queen, each of them anticipating the setting of Scene Two, Act Two:

When the scene opens the only light on stage is a candle on a large desk. This is Lombard's desk; littered with papers; and in the centre is a large book – the history (54).

All the documents mentioned previously are written within a context of diplomatic or political trafficking. But the Book, the history, is a catalyst, it responds to Lombard's need to write "the best possible narrative" (8). Rather than made, history is remade on a selective basis, the "overall thing" (39), as Mabel Bagenal, O'Neill's English wife calls it, will always escape. Lombard's history is a text that refuses fixity (Hohenleitner 2000, 241), whose "unstable stability" (Pine 1999, 22) is implied in the "distortions to which truth is subject when it is implicated in language" (Andrews 1995, 202).

To Hugh's insistence and obsession that the truth be told, Lombard ambiguously replies:

I'm no historian, Hugh. I'm not even sure I know what the historian's function is. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn't that what history is, a kind of storytelling? [...] *Imposing a pattern* on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and *shaping* them into a narrative that is logical and interesting (*Making History*: 8, emphasis added).

As a pattern-maker, Lombard provides in retrospect a pre-text, a script for O'Neill where he is to be "the powerful historical actor" (O'Brian 1988, 117). Expressions such as "imposing a pattern" and "shaping" highlight Lombard's "command" (Pine 1999, 233) of the material, of the written words in which he, as an editor rather than a writer, tries to fix and establish a role for what Ireland now needs, a national hero. "You're going to embalm me in a florid lie" objects O'Neill (*Making History*: 63). The potentialities of his multiple

roles are the actual truth of his life, so that what he sees in the great book gaining ground is “a story hardly recognizable as his own” (Worth 1993, 74). To this written word O’Neill has to submit, aware of the “role-playing that political involvement demands” (Murray, in *Plays Two* 1999, xi). As the large book takes possession of the stage, it prescribes O’Neill’s action and his role in history as well as in the play’s action.

The deliberately conscious metatheatrical design implied between the lines of *Making History* recalls the artifice of storytelling and play-within-a-play that characterizes the structure of *Winners* and *Living Quarters*. Both plays are constructed around inside-outside characters that are masters of the written word, because responsible for a script, physically present on stage.

In *Winners*, the first part of the dyptic *Lovers*, a framing narrative contains the actions of teenagers Mag and Joe meeting on a hill outside Ballymore to revise for their school exams. A turning point is to take place in their lives as they are about to get married since the girl is pregnant. The realistic construction is dispelled by the presence of the Commentators, Man and Woman, who, posited at each end of the stage, control the action and watch it dispassionately at the same time. Schoolbooks are scattered on stage and are part of the setting in the same way as they belong to the protagonists’ life. Yet, while Joe usually refers to and quotes from schoolbooks to test his knowledge, Mag’s references go beyond schoolbooks and take into account the broader perspectives of adult life:

I read in a book that asthma is purely psychosomatic (*Lovers*: 19)

I’ve read about them [sadicists] in books! (23)

I don’t know what things I take seriously [...]. Never books or school or things like that (27)

In her naïve and instinctive approach to studying and to exams (“In all exams the smart thing to do is to write down everything you know – no matter what the question is”; 27) Mag does not seem to trust the written word, even the written words of her own story. In fact, all the various references to books cast a glimpse at the other “book” held by the Commentators, the prescribed words of Mag and Joe’s story. In the stage directions:

They are the Commentators. They are in their late fifties and carefully dressed in good dark clothes. Each has a book on his knees – not a volume, preferably a bound manuscript – and they read from this every so often. Their reading is impersonal, completely without emotion: their function is to give information. At no time must they reveal an attitude to their material (11).

Not by chance is a manuscript to be preferred to a volume: this implies the immutability of fate, but also a casual and overpowering, superior authority Man and Woman are not responsible for. The information is journalistic, giving accurate details

related to action, time, names, places. Man and Woman, too, are pattern-makers. As such they go through the same routine to introduce Mag and Joe respectively, and while they read the two boys come alive on stage. They are unaware of their presence as objective outsiders. Their “formal arrangement” (Dantanus 1988, 109) corresponds to the formal language they use to convey “dry information” (111) such as temperature and weather, and the number of inhabitants of Ballymore. This emphasizes the distance implied in the juxtaposition of the private language of future expectations in Mag and Joe’s discourse and the public language of fact (Andrews 1995, 114). It is their dry reading to announce the death by drowning of the two students, so that as in later plays such as *The Freedom of the City* (1973), *Living Quarters*, *Faith Healer*, *Molly Sweeney*, dead characters on stage speak from beyond the grave. Man and Woman reiterate a Greek impersonal chorus (Dantanus 1988, 111) and their constant presence on stage throughout the action keeps alive the attention on the written words they are bearing. Their manuscript is a pre-text, or an Ur-text, arbitrary and eternal, and since it is constantly visible on stage it is a metonymic script, a form of knowledge or preknowledge in paper linking text and performance, and highlighting the written word as a container for all possible performances. In this metadramatic dimension, Man and Woman are custodians of the facts of history (Andrews 1995, 115), but also mediators between action and script, a script which is nothing but a textual prison, not unlike the one that prescribes O’Neill’s role in Lombard’s history.

Their manuscript/script is probably “the same copy” (Dantanus 1988, 115) with which Sir is entrusted in *Living Quarters*. Like Man and Woman, Sir is the “dramatic mediator in the reconstruction of the past” (Corcoran 1993, 15), but unlike them he is no detached bystander. He is involved in the action directing the rehearsal the characters reenact in the play-within-a-play of their recollections. Theatre itself is a controlling metaphor (Kilroy 1993, 96) and the self-conscious theatricality of the play is a metaphor for the writer or playwright at work (Dantanus 1988, 143), so that Sir has a multiple role, “destiny, prologue, chorus, director, stage-manager” (O’Hanlon 2000, 110). He is the “ultimate arbiter” (*Selected Plays*: 177), a recording force (Worth 1993, 74), the servant or guardian of a script (Pine 1999, 233) who controls the past and predicts the future (Dantanus 1988, 146). The script in this case is not a book or manuscript or volume, but a “Ledger”, “a balance sheet” or “list of entries” (Pine 1999, 149), where everything is to be registered and whose transparency is necessary. A “deep psychic necessity” (*Selected Plays*: 177) has caused the protagonists to “invent” Sir to reenact the events that led to Frank Butler’s suicide. Anticipating Mabel Bagenal in *Making History*, Sir points out he has been invented “to reach an understanding of *all* that happened” (177). Both maker and made, he allows the protagonists of his rehearsal to read between the lines possible alternatives to inevitabilities.

The play is indebted to Euripides’ *Hyppolitus* and to Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, pre-texts of the pre-text contained in the ledger. The protagonists negotiate their role with Sir, yet submit to the authority of the ledger, which contains all

possible variations and all possible apocryphal texts (Pine 1999, 319), an infinite number of predetermined possibilities (320) and infinite rehearsals. Yet the Ledger imprisons the protagonists in their roles, which turn into traps from which they cannot escape. When Father Tom reacts to the dictates of the ledger, Sir's dry reply is: "it is your role" (*Selected Plays*: 180), because so is written in the ledger.

Like Hugh O'Neill in *Making History*, unable to escape from Lombard's book, the protagonists in *Living Quarters* spend their time "attempting to escape from the lines laid down" for them (Pine 1999, 29). Between the lines they look for alternative readings, alternative performances and alternative truths. Yet, "The ledger's the ledger" says Frank echoing Sir, "Nothing can be changed now" (*Selected Plays*: 240). As Grace said in *Faith Healer*, because it is written down, all the protagonists know it is true. And like Lombard, Sir the pattern-maker wants to impose an order and a shape to the narrative/script or possible narratives/scripts the ledger contains:

on this occasion – with your cooperation, of course– what I would like to do is *organize* those recollections for you, *impose a structure* on them, just to *give them a form of sorts* (178, emphasis added)

Anna's attempt to escape from the text is of no consequence:

Anna – Did I mess it all up?

Sir – You shuffled the pages a bit – that's all. But nothing's changed (203).

And yet what remains at the end of the nth performance is nothing but "blank pages", where however nothing is missing, "not a single thing" (246). The ambiguously uncompleted script is a textual prison, whose authority both fixes and gives life and from which escape is impossible.

Like Sir, also Cass's brother Harry in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* insists on a chronological recounting of events. A hidden text prescribes the story, whose author Cass openly attacks: "*The Loves of Cass McGuire* – huh! Where did he get that title from anyway?" (*The Loves of Cass McGuire*: 26), and whose control she contends with Harry. But the text of her story contains also other written words, the letters she has written over the years, Trilbe's Christmas cards and adjudication speech, and especially Ingram's volumes, visible on stage, which he carries all around Eden House – "his Wagner" (*The Loves of Cass McGuire*: 27). He too reads from it every so often, like the Commentators, repeating over and over again the story of Tristan and Isolde. Imprisoned in the text of their story, Tristan and Isolde represent for Ingram, Trilbe, Cass, and Eden House at large, the prototype of escape; the text provides and fuels imaginative freedom. It is an illusion, but because it is written down, we know it is true.

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