

# LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND: POSTDRAMATIC FEATURES IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *MOLLY SWEENEY*

**Anna Stegh Camati**

Uniandrade, Paraná

*Learning to see is not like learning a new language.  
It's like learning language for the first time.*

Denis Diderot

## **Abstract:**

The contemporary debate regarding the new languages of the stage has developed into multiple directions. In *Molly Sweeney* (1994), Brian Friel rejects dramatic progression and interpersonal dialogue to privilege direct interaction with the audience that intensifies the production of presence. He combines conventional and postdramatic features in his presentation of alternating monologues by three speakers – Molly, Frank and Mr. Rice – whose solo voices create an allegory on the unwillingness of communication in our time. The emerging landscapes of the mind force the audience to deal with the indeterminacy of meaning, extending representation beyond dramatic action in the theatre.

**Keywords:** Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney*, solo voices, production of presence, indeterminacy of meaning.

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 58	p. 113-133	jan/jun. 2010
------------------	---------------	-------	------------	---------------

Since the emergence of his first play, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), which after its première and long season at the Dublin Theatre was successfully transferred to Broadway for an extended nine months run, Brian Friel has enjoyed popular and critical acclaim in terms of both dramatic achievement and cultural importance, having been recognized as Ireland's greatest living playwright. A significant number of his plays that have been translated into many languages and performed worldwide, among them *Aristocrats* (1979), *Faith Healer* (1979), *Translations* (1980), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Molly Sweeney* (1994) and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997), have secured him an international reputation and notoriety. Guided by the Brechtian premise that each new subject requires a new form, Friel has succeeded in constantly renewing his dramatic art by seeking formal diversity to express his vision. He has attained universality by remaining true to the local, always striving to find "a theatrical form adequate to the Irish condition, a form uniquely suited to represent the themes that concern him" (Roche 3).

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*, Anthony Roche claims that Friel's plays should not be considered only in terms of success. He reports that when awarded a Tony for *Dancing at Lughnasa* as Best Play, Friel responded by quoting the late Graham Greene who used to say that success is only the postponement of failure. He further adds that the Irish playwright himself had tested the validity of this maxim with the failure of his next play entitled

[...] *Wonderful Tennessee*, which closed on Broadway after nine performances (where *Lughnasa* had run for over a year in 1993). Friel could be said to encourage the zigzag pattern of his career by reacting against what he sees as a process of simplification when his plays achieve huge success, their deep-felt emotion sentimentalized, their political and historic ironies flattened or removed. The next play he writes is invariably a reaction against this process, often a retaliatory farce where

the themes of the previous play are ruthlessly satirized – as in 1982's *The Communication Cord*, which reacted to the success of *Translations* two years earlier. (Roche 3)

*Molly Sweeney* (1994) stands out among Friel's late plays which include *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) and *The Home Place* (2005). The critic George O'Brien states that these "post-*Lughnasa* works sustain the enduring presence of Ballybeg as the *lieu-théâtrale*", and extend the playwright's "repertoire of pivotal roles for women" (91). They "continue probing the politics of private life—that is, of the distribution of power and authority within the domestic sphere—and reveal an increasingly refined formal interest in parable". He believes that what distinguishes these late plays from Friel's previous work is "a heightened sense of place and theatrical space" made evident in Ballybeg's altered condition:

Previously, Ballybeg was a site of community[...] . The late plays are largely post-communal[...] . Now Ballybeg is as much a condition as a location, a site at which inner and outer worlds collide, a name which instead of designating a place signifies a framework within which outcomes fall through, and the ground upon which Friel's late plays almost, but not quite, articulate a theatre of stasis. (O'Brien 91)

O'Brien's critical comment on the articulation of a "theatre of stasis" evokes Friel's admiration for the Russian playwrights, who challenged the dramatic conventions of their time, helping to change the anatomy of European drama. Friel translated several of the one-act and full-length plays of Turgenev and Chekhov (who also mastered the art of the fictional narrative; Turgenev called *A Month in the Country*, "a novel in dramatic form"), and expressed his affinity for them in personal pronouncements and in the introductory notes to his translations. He especially admired Turgenev's and Chekhov's fashioning of a new kind of dramatic situation where the action resides

in the internal turmoil of the characters' emotions instead of external events. He responded enthusiastically to the creation of a dramatic form whose core is conversation rather than action (Pine 104-05).

The absence of plot and dramatic climax, as well as the rejection of the Aristotelian notion of character become the main ingredients of Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), two theatre-texts that combine postdramatic traits with conventional monologue strategies. These paradigm shifts have disconcerted literary critics and theoreticians who have experienced difficulty in accommodating them under the label of "drama", since dramatic action and interpersonal dialogue disappear completely, being replaced by the shifting points of view conveyed directly to the audience in alternating, but interwoven, monologues.

The source-text which inspired *Molly Sweeney*, acknowledged by Friel himself, is Dr. Oliver Sacks' case-study entitled "To See or Not to See" (first published in *New Yorker*, in 1993), the fourth of seven tales of metamorphosis into alternative states of being, collected in the neurologist's book *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (1995). Besides Friel's theatrical recreation, Dr. Oliver Sacks' work has inspired a number of other fictional texts, among them Harold Pinter's *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), derived from *Awakenings* (1973), Peter Brook's *The Man Who* (1993), based on *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1986), and the homonymous 1990 film version of *Awakenings*, starring Robin Williams and Robert de Niro, directed by Penny Marshall.

In *Molly Sweeney*, Friel creates a new story around the central ideas of Dr. Sacks' medical report which describes the plight of a blind man who must learn to see after his eyesight has been partially restored. Both, Dr. Sachs case-history and Friel's inventive fictional recreation, show that to see is not the same as to understand, and that sight is a constructive and interpretative function of the brain and, thus, has to be learned, a concept illustrated in the epigraph, drawn from Denis Diderot, that precedes the Irish playwright's theatre-text and my essay (Friel 7)<sup>1</sup>. Like Dr. Sacks, Friel tends to emphasize the creative potential which

can be developed out of defects and disorders, letting us know how the world of the sightless can be rich and fulfilling.

Since the time of its publication and première at The Gate Theatre in Dublin, in August 1994, and its subsequent production at the Almeida Theatre in London, in November 1994, *Molly Sweeney* has enjoyed considerably more stage success in the USA and other venues than in Ireland. The play was enthusiastically received when it opened on Broadway, at the Laura Pels Theatre, in December 1995, starring Jason Robards (Dr. Rice), Catherine Byrne (Molly) and Alfred Molina (Frank).

With a subtitle added by João Bethencourt's translation, *Molly Sweeney: um rastro de luz* (a vestige of light), the play premièred in Brazil on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, at Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, in São Paulo, directed by Celso Nunes, later touring several Brazilian states with enormous critical acclaim. The title-role was taken by the Brazilian actress, Julia Lemmertz, who is known for her expressive ability of enormous precision, which is a *sine-qua-non* condition in relation to Friel's theatre-text, because the calibration of Molly's speeches sustain the delicate balance of the play as a whole.

Although it has been argued that there is little in *Molly Sweeney* to justify the use of the term "dramatic", the language of the Aristotelian poetics continues to be privileged when investigating the generic issues of the play. Karen DeVinney, for instance, rejects the label "drama" in favor of "prose poetry", but continues to describe the play in terms of "dramatic action" as the very title of her essay, "Monologue as dramatic action in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*", suggests:

Both *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994) are monologic. Their status as theater pieces demands that we respect them as performance, but their form encourages us to treat them as prose poems. Their lack of conventional stage action is, however, through a sort of logical hairpin curve, exactly what makes them so dramatic. By replacing action with narration, Friel not only critiques the Irish penchant for oratory, but he also dramatizes his contention that events are

meaningful mainly insofar as they become stories, fictions told by their participants. Their meaning resides not in what actually happens but in how they are narrated by and to the people who participated in them. (DeVinney 111)

Other theoreticians have illuminated different aspects of the play in their attempt to place *Molly Sweeney* within a “dramatic tradition”. Prepassaree T. Kramer, in spite of referring to it as a “monologue drama”, shows great insight into its formal innovations, mainly as concerns the intersecting genre boundaries that make the play stand out as a generic hybrid. She focuses her analysis on half a dozen contemporary theatre monologues, among them *Molly Sweeney*, concentrating on the ingenuous presentation of the speakers’ inner life that no longer appears at isolated moments, but constitutes the narrative framework itself. Among other issues, she discusses narrative unreliability in contemporary monologue theatre:

In canonical drama, the audience customarily do not question, even during subjective moments, the reliability or the motive of the speaker, but take the monologue at its face value. In modern plays, however, nothing can be taken for granted; sometimes the characters assume a role similar to that of the unreliable narrator in fiction or of the persona in a poetic dramatic monologue who intends to win the audience’s favor in a well-orchestrated speech [...] . The choice of this framework shows the playwright’s interest in the workings of the mind, both conscious and subconscious. In addition, rather than letting the audience empathize or sympathize with the characters on the stage, the playwrights use different distancing devices to encourage the audience instead to scrutinize them critically. (Kramer 11)

The critical views examined above, through which *Molly Sweeney* has been approached, show that although most theoreticians agree that

the inclusion of monologue theatre under the rubric of drama is problematic, they tend to continue employing the language of "drama" to describe the features of rhapsodic generic hybrids (Sarrazac), no longer dramatic theatre-texts (Poschmann), and playtexts displaying postdramatic traits (Lehmann).

While Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (27-28) argues that today the theatre-text represents one of the freest contemporary forms of textual composition, emancipated from generic constraints, Patrice Pavis problematizes the notion of "drama" when he postulates that "any kind of text is suitable for the *mise-en-scène* [...]. Any text can be made into theatre, provided it is used on stage. What was considered *dramatic* up until the twentieth century—*dialogue, conflict, dramatic situation, character*—is no longer an essential condition for a text that is to be staged" (120).

Sarrazac (156-64) believes that monologues in contemporary theatre can be considered prototypical rhapsodic forms which combine the epic, the lyrical and the dramatic modes, borrowing features from different aesthetic fields such as narrative fiction, poetry, epic theatre and other media, permitting all sorts of hybridization of languages, codes and conventions. His theoretical insights concerning the "polylogue" or "ensemble monologue" make explicit the indeterminacy of meaning arising from the orchestration of the multiple shifting perspectives conveyed by two or more speakers.

In his discussion of the new languages in contemporary theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann (125-26) offers a representative panorama of innovative stage trends and theatre-texts that display postdramatic features, articulated according to different aesthetic projects which fail, completely or in part, to meet the requirements of the Aristotelian matrix. The German critic introduces the terms "theatre solos", "monologies" and "theatre of voices" to refer to forms which offer an inside look into the minds of speakers who interact directly with the audience. Thus, presentation supersedes representation intensifying the production of presence (Gumbrecht 2004). Lehmann draws further attention to the issue:

All the different varieties of monologue or apostrophe to the audience, including solo performance, have in common that the *intra-scenic axis recedes compared to the theatron axis*. The actor's speaking is now accentuated above all as a "speaking to" the audience; his/her speech is marked as a speech of a real speaking person, its expressiveness more as the "emotive" dimension of the performer's language than as the emotional expression of the fictive character represented [...]. Theatre is emphasized as a situation, not as a fiction. (Lehmann 127-29)

Gerda Poschmann also offers an interesting contribution as concerns the formal issues of contemporary theatre-texts. She postulates that the notion of character development is exploded in monologue theatre, because not only action but dialogue and all the other hallmarks of drama disappear. She coined a new critical terminology, replacing "character" by "speaker" or "text-bearer" (*Textträger*), and "action" by "text to be spoken" (*Sprechtext*). This amounts to a significant change in emphasis, the performer is more concerned with positing the primacy of language than with interpreting the text or creating a psychological profile or characterization (Poschmann 296).

Friel's aesthetic project in *Molly Sweeney* incorporates some of the innovative features discussed above. The play can be seen as a construct of multiple "theatre solos" or "monologies" (Lehmann 125-29), as well as a "triple polylogue" or "ensemble monologue" (Sarrazac 156-164), since the textual material of the play consists of a sequence of alternating monologues,<sup>2</sup> rendered from the points of view of three different speakers who address the audience directly – Molly Sweeney, blind since the age of ten months, her husband Frank, an unemployed dreamer, and Mr. Rice, a downfallen, depressed, alcohol-addicted ophthalmologist – whose discordant voices or conflicting perspectives are equally important for the audience's difficult task of knitting together bits of information and interpreting the central issues of the play connected with Molly's regression into a different darkness, not



comparable to her former state, after partial eyesight had been surgically restored to her in the village of Ballybeg, in County Donegal.

The stage does not represent the real world but a metonymic space, which is made evident by Friel's sparse stage-directions at the beginning of Act I, where he states that each speaker "inhabits his/her own special acting area—MR. RICE stage left, MOLLY SWEENEY centre stage, FRANK SWEENEY stage right (left and right from the point of view of the audience) [...]. All three stay on stage for the entire play" (9). According to Lehmann, "we can call a scenic space metonymic if it is not primarily defined as symbolically standing for another fictive world but is instead highlighted and a part and *continuation* of the real theatre space" (151).

Among other thematic perspectives, the play deals with moral issues, concentrating mainly on the consequences of our decisions and choices. The central question is difficult to point out, but seems to be connected with the problem of human responsibility. Who is responsible for Molly's withdrawal from the company of living beings? Have the symptoms of her condition known as blindsight (47)<sup>3</sup> anything to do with the lack of acceptance, warmth, care, companionship and understanding of her husband?

The text suggests that all three speakers and, by extension, the audience suffer from the malady of blindsight. When Mr. Rice's remembers the words of Bloomstein, who had once accused him of this shortcoming for not paying attention to Maria, his beautiful wife, he understands, in retrospect, that his colleague was completely right. His blindsightedness prevented him from noticing what was going on at that time, for he was taken by surprise when Maria left him for Bloomstein.

To create an allegory of the unwillingness of communication in our time and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, Friel rejects traditional dramatic structure, prioritizing new ways of reflecting on reality and its representations in the theatre. His option for a hybrid monologue theatre that combines conventional and

postdramatic features frustrates the average spectator who is demanded to deal with the indeterminacy of meaning. Lehmann claims it is worth mentioning that

[...] when discussing postdramatic stylistic moments one can easily point out those that the new theatre shares with the traditional dramatic theatre. In the emergence of a new paradigm, the "future" structures and stylistic traits almost unavoidably appear mixed in with the conventional [...]. For instance, narrative fragmentation, heterogeneity of style, hypernaturalist, grotesque and neo-expressionist elements, which are all typical of post-dramatic theatre, can also be found in productions which nevertheless belong to the model of dramatic theatre. In the end it is only the constellation of elements that decides whether a stylistic moment is to be read in the context of a dramatic or postdramatic aesthetics. (24-25)

The Irish playwright's technique in *Molly Sweeney* displays similarities with the fictional device of the unreliable narrator, flaunting the conscious and unconscious mental processes through which reality is filtered. It becomes apparent that the speakers tend to manipulate and/or (re)negotiate reality to suit their own purposes. To make the conditions of their existence more tolerable, they constantly try to find justifications for their actions, but there are no indications in the text that they ever show or confess their feelings, aspirations or desires to one another. Gradually, when conflicts are touched upon, changes in perspective emerge which are discharged by the mechanisms of "voluntary memory" that works selectively, imaginatively and often perversely (Beckett 32-33). Although the speakers struggle to hide themselves behind words, their very attempt of concealment is revealing. Frequently, they contradict themselves and/or one another, letting escape, mostly unawares, dissonant notes and details they would rather have preferred to leave uncovered.

The performers are no longer concerned with the representation of character, but with presenting the text in its semantic plenitude. Friel's speakers, in order to accomplish the manipulation of their surfacing memories, use a series of stratagems to prevent their complete exposure or nakedness. Friel employs techniques discussed in the critical essay "Writing for the Theatre", in which Harold Pinter claims that speech is a "smoke-screen" to mask the self and keep the other in his place:

Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the words spoken, is the thing known and unspoken [...] most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said. (Pinter 122)

The British playwright also acknowledges that he does not believe in the clichéd phrase "failure of communication". On the contrary, he feels sure that

[...] we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rear guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility. (Pinter 123)

In his personal pronouncements and interviews, Pinter has asserted that his theoretical insights about language and style were inspired by Chekhov's theatre. Pinter carries Chekhov's method of cross-talk to an extreme. Like, the Russian playwright he creates characters that talk all the time, but do not care to listen to what their interlocutors are saying, thus remaining isolated in their togetherness. Friel goes a step further with his presentation of an artificial situation involving three speakers

who address the audience directly. Their discourse reveals a reluctance in sharing their feelings with one another. Molly, for instance, never lets Frank or Mr. Rice know what she feels about the project idealized by both of them, as it becomes apparent in her confession when she tells the audience about the emotions and sensations that dominated her during the party that was going on the night before her operation, when instead of communicating her anxiety verbally, she externalized it through a “wild and furious dance round and round that room [...]. Mad and wild and frenzied. But so adroit, so efficient. No timidity, no faltering [...] with complete assurance, with absolute confidence” (25-26). Only the audience is informed of what was going on in her mind:

And then with sudden anger I thought: why am I going for this operation? *None of this is my choosing. Then why is this happening to me? I am being used. Of course I trust Frank. Of course I trust Mr. Rice.* But how can they know what they are taking from me? How do they know what they are offering me? They don't. They can't. *And have I anything to gain?—anything?—anything?* (25, my emphasis)

As concerns Molly's revelation in the excerpt above, we might ask: How far is Molly herself responsible for her own plight? Did she really trust the men in her life, mainly her husband and her doctor as she so vehemently professes? Or does she desperately want to trust them? The audience is constantly forced to make reassessments on the moral issues involved, mainly on questions of human choice and responsibility.

From a different perspective, the blind woman's words quoted above seem to be an outburst of despair and anger at the lack of sensibility of her self-taught husband, who shows complete ignorance of her feelings and the universe she dwells in, an attitude illustrated in his obsessive repetition of words which echo Molly's statements in reverse: “*She has nothing to lose, has she? What has she to lose?—nothing!—nothing!*” (13, my emphasis).

Conversely, it may also occur to the spectator whether Frank would have been so much blindsighted, if she had let him know about the richness she experienced in her sightless world. This is the pleasure she derived from her work, from the radio, from walking, from music, from cycling, from swimming, when she just offered herself to sensuous experience: "every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone—sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight—experience that existed only by touch and feel" (19).

A postdramatic understanding of *Molly Sweeney* opens up issues that tend to be hidden or repressed in dramatic performance. Replacing character for text-bearer, the spectator no longer focused on whether or not the speakers are telling the truth. Rather, the several contradictions are allowed to become the centre of interest. For instance, it is worth considering whether Frank is convinced or unconvinced by his memories, however true or untrue they are. Instead of certainties, the spectator will encounter indeterminacies when confronted with language that is not marked by interpretative reduction, but by presentational richness. What the speakers say can be true or false simultaneously, depending on time, place, circumstance, gender, race, class and a multiplicity of other factors, as Pinter has aptly put it:

[...] there are at least twenty-four possible aspects of any single statement, depending on where you're standing at the time and on what the weather's like. A categorical statement, I find, will never stay where it is and be finite. It will immediately be subject to modification by the other twenty-three possibilities of it. No statement I make, therefore, should be interpreted as final and definitive [...]. I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. *A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.* (118-20, my emphasis)

Pinter also states that the desire for detecting the motivations of the speakers is understandable, but is most of the time frustrated, even more so when the speakers try to reassess their actions to come to terms with the past which is a slippery territory worth exploring:

Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can, I think, treat the present in the same way. What's happening now? We won't know until tomorrow or in six months' time, and our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth. (Pinter 120)

Friel's insight into human nature and contradictions illuminate the elusive discourse of the two male speakers who use language as means for expressing the pursuit and justification of their selfish goals. They are constantly attempting to validate their subjective version of reality by using manipulative language and strategies of self-justification and self-delusion.

Frank seems to be a loving and caring husband. However, several Freudian slips lay bare his frustration to have assumed responsibility for Molly's eye-surgery. Although his language is carefully arranged by rhetorical constructions and devices that signal his desire to eradicate the shadows that trouble his conscience, it soon becomes obvious that even before Molly's retreat into her own self, he was already tempted to abandon her to satisfy his crave for adventure, which he really does in the end when she most needs him.

At first, he is fascinated by the prospect of having Molly's eyesight restored, but later, when he is supposed to back her up during the

difficult phase when she has to learn to see, he completely loses interest in her. He does not show any sensibility, nor does he understand the intensity of Molly's behavior when she is trying to adapt herself to the condition of partial eyesight. His discourse shows his annoyance and irritation at Molly's requests, which he considers antic and strange, an attitude that demonstrates that he holds a selfish vision of the world that ignores the validity of other perspectives different from his own. The comments he makes on what he considers a behavioral anomaly show his utter unconcern for her and his attitude of self-pity:

For example – for example. One day, out of the blue, a Friday evening, in December, five o'clock. I'm about to go to the Hikers Club, and she says, "I feel like a swim, Frank. Let's go for a swim now." At this stage I'm beginning to recognize the symptoms: the defiant smile, the excessive enthusiasm; some reckless, dangerous proposal. Fine. Fine, I say. Even though it's pitch dark and raining. So we'll go to the swimming-pool? Oh, no. She wants to swim in the sea. And not only swim in the sea on a wet Friday night in December, but she wants to go out to the rocks at the far end of Tramore and she wants to climb up on top of Napoleon Rock as we call it locally – it's the highest rock there, a cliff really – and I'm to tell her if the tide is in or out and how close are the small rocks in the sea below and how deep the water is because she is going to dive – to dive for God's sake – the eighty feet from the top of Napoleon down into the Atlantic ocean. "And why not, Frank? Why not for God's sake?" [...]. Yes, she did dive into the Atlantic from the top of Napoleon Rock that Friday night in December. First time in her life. Difficult times. Oh, I can tell you. Difficult times for all of us. (43-44)

Furthermore, Frank's comments about Molly's psychotherapist, Jean O'Connor, show that he is attracted to that woman and, although

he states that her explanation helped him to understand the situation he was supposed to endure, his discourse betrays that he is unconvinced by the arguments of the importance of support that Molly needs during the period of adaptation to her new condition:

One of the most fascinating insights into the state of her mind at that time was given to me by Jean O'Connor, the psychotherapist, very interesting woman; brilliant actually; married to George, a behavioural therapist, a second-rater if you ask me; and what a bore – what a bore! [...]. Very interesting woman. Brilliant actually. And beautiful, too. Oh, yes, all the gifts. And what she said helped me to understand Molly's extraordinary behaviour – yes, goddammit very difficult behaviour over those weeks leading up to Christmas. (43)

Later, when a reporter comes to interview him in the pub, Frank reveals intimate details and provides information outside the scope of discretion. Molly is shocked when she hears about what happened. And in spite of his vehement claims he didn't do it for "the bloody money" (48), his denegation sounds like an indictment. Frank's strategies of persuasion denounce his dissimulating personality all the time. The mask of the caring, loving husband no longer prevents the spectators to spot his dysfunctional personality which is the very opposite of what he likes to think he is.

It also becomes evident that Dr. Rice agrees to perform the eye surgery as a means of self-promotion. His manipulative revelations equally demonstrate a cunning use of rhetoric as when he strives to persuade himself that Molly had nothing to lose if anything went wrong during the operation, ironically echoing Frank's view: "*What has she to lose for Christ's sake? Nothing! Nothing at all!*" (23, my emphasis). But did she have anything to gain? Of course, being a highly qualified specialist in ophthalmology, he is completely aware of the minimum benefits of the operation and of the risks of loss, as well as of the



motivations that move him, which he expresses after a lot of drinks: "Delirium...hubris...the rogue star's taken insurrection...a final, ridiculous flourish. For God's sake, a routine cataract operation?" (22).

In Molly's final monologue, the audience learns that she pretended to be asleep when Mr. Rice came to the hospital to pay her a final visit before leaving Ballybeg for good, because she feels that he had failed her too, like her husband, who now, when she needed him most, was realizing his adventurous dreams in Ethiopia. Both men, but especially Frank, had wounded her beyond measure, so much that she gradually loses her sense of reality, retreating into her own self, a world of total darkness, but not the former one when she lived in contentedness and was perfectly adapted to her condition, but a space of utter isolation where she is haunted by the ghosts of her dead father and mother. She refers to her condition as the borderline country:

I think I see nothing at all now. But I'm not absolutely sure of that. Anyhow my borderline country is where I live now. I'm at home there. Well...at ease there. It certainly doesn't worry me any more that what I think I see may be fantasy or indeed that I take to be imagined may very well be real—what's Frank's term?—external reality. Real—imagined fact—fiction—fantasy—reality—there it seems to be. And it seems to be alright. And why should I question any of it any more? (57)

Molly's final monologue makes her condition explicit; the speaker vocalizes her feverish stream of consciousness as the product of her borderland condition. Her discourse attests that the material world around her has dwindled and mingled with fiction and fantasy.

Through the accumulation of significant details, Friel constructs landscapes of the mind by showing how the conscious and unconscious phenomena of inner life can be projected on the stage through the presentation of the mind's perceptions, projections, hallucinations and distortions. The Irish playwright has brought a distinctively new approach to the use of the monologue with the introduction of several

effective strategies, among them the exploitation of the generative force of memorial reconstructions of the past, the technique of complicating the text through multiple and successive points of view, and the experimentation with literary devices pertaining to narrative fiction, such as the use of unreliable narration. In place of the psychological revelation of the Shakespearean soliloquy, Friel's alternating monologues play "tricks" on the spectator by altering, suspending, or disrupting the narrative progression in order to show the speakers' inclination for making cross-current connections simultaneously, from past to present, to (re)negotiate the meaning and impact of their actions and experiences.

In the process of reminiscing the recent past they have shared, each speaker struggles to come to terms with his/her conscience to face the traumatic reality which is the result of wrong choices and decisions. O'Brien summarizes their symbiotic relationship as follows: "each exists in his or her own space, as though blind—or perhaps blindsighted, their perceived reality a tissue of missing connections, their collective experience attaining finality through its breakdown" (95). Blindness, metaphorical and literal, defines all three speakers (and, by extension, all human beings). We never know whether they are fictionalizing or making a true confession—the borders of fact and fiction tend to merge all the time, since the speakers themselves seem not to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. In their effort to make sense of their histories and experience, and get relief from their share of guilt, they tend to confront reality colored by their illusions in their successive (re)negotiations of their relationships in an attempt to make the spectators accept their subjective points of view. The audience is requested to periodically rebuild their comprehension of what is at stake due to the speakers' constant struggle to create a tolerable reality by a process of their own making.

The creation of a new form and model allows Friel to express and stage what otherwise would have remained unvoiced, challenging the traditional assumptions of dramaturgy. He is not primarily interested

in conveying the *fabula*, the chronological ordering of the events, but has opted to convey the orchestration of the shifting points of view of the speakers. The triple polylogues force the audience to concentrate on language: we are confronted with different perspectives about the same event and left free to draw our own conclusions about what is reality, fiction or fantasy. We are confronted with the difficult task of drawing conclusions from bits and pieces of contradictory information that gradually emerge from the multiple masks they reveal and conceal to help them survive.

Friel's play is less about action, but a process of reflection and questioning on human unwillingness to communicate and the ensuing breakdown of interpersonal relationships. The use of Pinter's insightful theoretical considerations as critical tools furnish both evidence of the difficulty and danger of making moral and/or value judgments and the difficulty of preventing empathy, since in spite of the defamiliarization devices introduced by the playwright, the audience tends to sympathize with Molly, disregarding her share of responsibility in what has happened to her.

Although Friel's *Molly Sweeney* lacks the radicalisms of theatre-texts written by Heiner Müller, Samuel Beckett, Sarah Kane, Suzan-Lori Parks, among others, a close investigation into the formal innovations of his work reveals that he is attuned to the postdramatic dimensions which have extended representation beyond dramatic action in the theatre.

## Notes

1. All references from Friel's *Molly Sweeney* will be quoted from the edition listed under References, hereafter indicated only by page-numbers.
2. The play presents a sequence of 18 alternating monologues in Act I (6 by Molly, 6 by Mr. Rice and 6 by Frank), and 19 in Act II (6 by Molly, 6 by Frank and 7 by Mr. Rice).

3. "Blindsight—the ability to respond appropriately to visual inputs while lacking the feeling of having seen them—might be something which only occurs in cases of brain damage, but seems much more likely to be a significant phenomenon of intact brain function as well. Indeed, it seems likely that blindsight (and similar phenomena in other spheres) is an important ingredient of a variety of activities where one wants to move quickly and appropriately, without 'thinking about it'" (Disposable: <serendip.brinmawe.edu/bb/blindsight.html> Access: 10.04.09).

## References

- Beckett, Samuel. *Proust and three dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: Calder and Boyars, 1949.
- DeVinney, Karen. "Monologue as Dramatic Action in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 45:1 (1999): 110-19.
- Friel, Brian. *Molly Sweeney*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1996.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Kramer, Prapassaree T. "*The enclosed, subjective universe*": *Dramatizing the mind in modern British drama*. PhD.Dissertation. Indiana: Purdue University, 1999.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans.. Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge, 2006.
- O'Brien, George. "The late plays". *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Ed. Anthony Roche. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 91-103.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Trans. Christine Shantz. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Pine, Richard. "Friel's Irish Russia". *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Ed. Anthony Roche. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 104-116.
- Pinter, Harold. "Writing for the Theatre". *English Dramatic Theories: 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Ed. P. Goetsch, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1972, p. 118-124.

Poschmann, Gerda. *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext. Aktuelle Bühnentexte und ihre dramaturgische Analyse*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997.

Roche, Anthony, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Sacks, Oliver. *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. "To See and Not See". *New Yorker* 10 (1993): 59-73.

Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre. *O futuro do drama*. Trans.. Alexandra Moreira da Silva. Porto: Campo das Letras, 2002.

