Memory and Identity: Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*

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Abstract: *Among the fundamental preoccupations that inform the plays of Brian Friel, memory and identity occupy a central position, recurring through the Irish playwright's entire theatrical canon. Both of them tend to elude capture and comprehension, for the plays delve especially on the role that forged or imprecise memories play in creating no less volatile perceptions of the self, hence any attempt to pin down identity, be that of the individual or the community, is similarly doomed to fail. The paper starts from these premises in order to highlight their interplay in one of Friel's early plays, Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964), which is chosen as a case study for the purpose of our subsequent analysis.*
Keywords: *theatre, Ireland, emigration, split subject, episodic memory, distortion*

Well-researched into and famous, by now, world-wide, Brian Friel's theatre embraces many different theatrical forms and looks for universal human values in the most varied settings, from past to present, from rural to urban, or from local to global. Nevertheless, at its centre there lies a recognisable constellation of obsessions, to which his plays return from different perspectives, as if to examine them from every theatrical angle. Among them one notes the importance attached to memory, in particular those memories that are forged and imprecise, but, nevertheless, have become part of the essence of an individual; the other overwhelming concern remains that with the elusive nature of identity, for the Irish playwright constantly probes into the depths of the individual self as well as that of the community to seek answers about what Irishness was, is, or might become, at the same time at which the plays demonstrate the contrary, namely that identity is nearly impossible to be pinned down through a safe definition [Corbett, 2002].

The interplay of the two informs one of Friel's early plays, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, which is often taken to mark the beginning of the Frielian critical canon, as the first of his works to

have had a major impact[1]. Staged at the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival, it went on to productions in London and New York where, as John Harrington assesses in his The Irish Play in New York, it was to achieve a record-breaking-run for an Irish play on Broadway [Harrington, 1997: 148-56].

Philadelphia, Here I Come! did not use a rural setting, but the small town one of Ballybeg, Friel's imaginative portion of Ireland located in Donegal, with the audience being invited to witness the events stretching over a period of about eight hours on the evening before young Gareth O'Donnell, sponsored by an aunt, is to depart for Philadelphia, leaving his widowed father and their run-down general shop for a hotel job in America. Nevertheless the scene was the familiar one of the Irish peasant play[2], emphasising the various constrictions of the Irish provincial scene where economic depression added to the authoritarian ethos of familism[3] and an unenlightened controlling Church to drive their young protagonists to leave. As Thomas Kilroy notes, the play is the inheritor of "that branch of naturalistic Irish drama which originated and took its inspiration from rural Catholic Ireland" [Kilroy, 1992: 93]. What marks it apart from its antecedents is, according to Christopher Murray, the fact that "while using traditional materials such as a peasant setting and décor, with familiar characters such as a parish priest and a schoolmaster, it dispensed with plot and concentrated on situation or condition" [Murray, 2000: 169], to which Anthony Roche adds "a number of innovative theatrical effects, [employed] not for their own sake, but as a means of breaking open the hidebound Abbey stage and exposing what the latter claimed to represent – the inner lives of Irish people" [Roche, 1994: 79].

Indeed, *Philadelphia* has only the most rudimentary of plots, dissecting the situation, represented by Gar's decision to emigrate, in a series of sequences alternating between present, past and an imagined future, which assemble, within the span of the three Episodes, the whole cast of Gar's family and community: the dead (like Maire, Gar's mother) and the living (like S. B., the father), the old (Madge, the housekeeper, who is in her sixties) and the young (Kate Doogan, his former sweetheart, and the local boys), the residents (like the school master, the canon, but also the successful local Senator) and the exiles (like Lizzie, Gar's aunt in Philadelphia and her husband.) The end of the play shows no progression, for Gar is, like at the beginning, about to emigrate and still unable to provide an answer for his decision:

> PRIVATE: … God, boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?
> PUBLIC: I don't know. I – I – I don't know. (99)[4]

Nevertheless, the play itself has made up the answer to Gar's final question, through its montage of present and past, outer and inner, public and private feeling and experience, which, at the technical level, was achieved through the most striking of its innovative devices, namely that of representing the main character by two different actors, standing for the two dimensions of his self:

> The two Gars, PUBLIC GAR and PRIVATE GAR, are two views of the one man. PUBLIC GAR is the Gar people see, talk to, talk about. PRIVATE GAR is the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the alter ego, the secret thoughts, the id. PRIVATE GAR, the spirit, is invisible to everybody, always. Nobody except PUBLIC GAR hears him talk. (27)

The device of splitting the protagonist into two acting parts is easily grasped and helps to psychologise the character through the interplay of the subjective and objective, and provide a running commentary on Gar's actions and the outer surfaces of his core dilemma. While Public maintains the usual mask demanded by society and is drawn into realistic interchanges with the other characters in the play, Private gives voice to all the unsaid remarks and enacts all the suppressed gestures, opening up the text to a world of play, carnival and fantasy used as a powerful and disturbing counterpoint to the restrictions and inhibitions operating at the public level [Andrews, 2005].

The disjunction between the public and the private worlds of the play is added further graphic illustration in Friel's dividing the stage area into three distinct spaces, where the kitchen, the traditional locale of the Abbey play, no longer dominates the stage but is moved upstage and adjoined to Gar's bedroom, with their two associated modes of public vs. private, or the real vs. the imaginary thus juxtaposed, while the remaining apron is conceived as a "fluid" (27) area, reserved for acting out the flashbacks that interrupt the main action of the play. This second innovation not only undermines the symbolic status of the kitchen as the archetypal site of pastoral Ireland by juxtaposing it to the unauthorised and often threatening bed space, but also brings a further challenge to the realistic staging that the peasant play typically employed. Moreover, by allowing both Public

and Private to cross over from one zone to another, Friel emphasises the impossibility of maintaining the different aspects of one's self and existence as distinct and quarantined areas.

Different aspects of the present press their claims as Public/Private confronts his "enemies within", the other selves he might become if he remained in Ballybeg [Andrews, 2005]. The first of these is S. B., and the father-son relationship dominates the first Episode. While emotional inarticulacy and the failure of communication dominate the public exchanges between the two, Private's rich verbal commentary helps spell out the pattern of Gar's fluctuating responses towards the dour S. B. For instance, the son's contempt and mockery at the daily spectacle of S. B. coming from the shop, and preparing to take his evening meal takes the form of a running accompaniment from Private Gar in the style of a mannequin parade commentator:

> And here comes your pleasure, your little ray of sunshine. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you – the one and only – the inimitable – the irrepressible – the irresistible – County Councillor – S –B – O'Donnell! … And this time Marie Celeste is wearing a cheeky little head-dress by Pamela of Park Avenue, eminently suitable for cocktail parties, morning coffee, or just casual shopping. It is of brown Viennese felt, and contrasts boldly with the attractive beach ensemble, created by Simon. The pert little apron is detachable – (S. B. removes apron) – thank you Marie Celeste – and underneath we have the tapered Italian-line slacks in ocelot. I would draw your attention to the large collar stud which is highly decorative and can be purchased separately at our boutique. We call this seductive outfit 'Indiscretion'. It can be worn six days a week, in or out of bed. (In polite tone) Have a seat, Screwballs. (S. B. sits down at the table.) Thank you. Remove the hat. (S. B. takes off the hat to say grace. He blesses himself.) On again. (Hat on.) Perfectly trained. (47-8)

The familiar nightly conversation is as dead as the father's ritualised activities, and the Private's technique of anticipatory repetition reveals the minimalist and formulaic character of their everyday exchanges:

> PRIVATE: … And now for our nightly lessons in the English language. Repeat slowly after me: another day over.
> S. B.: Another day over.
> PRIVATE: Good. Next phrase: I suppose we can't complain.
> S. B.: I suppose we can't complain.

> PRIVATE: Not bad. Now for a little free conversation. But no obscenities, Father dear; the child is only twenty-five. (S. B. eats in silence. Pause.) Well, come on, come on! Where's that old rapier wit of yours, the toast of the Ballybeg coffee houses?
> S. B.: Did you set the rat-trap in the store?
> PUBLIC: Aye. (48)

But the scorn does not, of course, summarise their relationship. In the third Episode, just as the clock strikes another hour shortening the time-span separating Gar from his departure, Private lapses into a lyrical evocation of a childhood memory of fishing with his father, a recollected moment of meaningful, intimate communion:

> … do you remember – it was an afternoon in May – oh, fifteen years ago – I don't remember every detail but some things are as vivid as can be: the boat was blue and the paint was peeling and there was an empty cigarette packet floating in the water at the bottom between two trout and the left rowlock kept slipping and you had given me your hat and you had put your jacket round my shoulders because there had been a shower of rain. And you had the rod in your left hand – I can see the cork nibbled away from the butt of the rod – and maybe we had been chatting – I don't remember – it doesn't matter – but between us at that moment there was this great happiness, this great joy – you must have felt it too – although nothing was being said – just the two of us fishing on a lake on a showery day – and young as I was I felt, I knew, that this was precious, and your hat was soft on top of my ears – I can feel it – and I shrank down into your coat – and then, then for no reason at all except that you were happy too, you began to sing … (82-3)

Brought into the open by Public, love fractures into a past where memories are never shared, for S. B. cannot recall the incident, or even the boat, missing the significance of the episode and infuriating Gar by listing the boats he could remember from the boat: "There was a brown one belonging to the doctor, and before that there was a wee flat-bottom – but it was green – or was it white? I'll tell you, you wouldn't be thinking of a punt – it could have been blue – one that the curate had down at the pier last summer …"(95).

The "boys", Gar's friends, when they call, open another of the present's confined perspectives. Like old S. B. they also refuse to admit that Gar is leaving and use a crude language and faulty camaraderie to defeat the silences which might speak for the truth. Their inarticulate emotions and frustrated sexuality find an outlet in

endless boasting of imaginary seductions of girls from Greenock to Dublin to the "English bits" staying in the local hotel. Private exposes the fiction by presenting parallel versions of the stories, which reveal that such bragging is but a means of escaping the reality of aimless street wanderings, of locked doors and of drawn blinds:

> … you know what they'll do tonight, don't you? They'll shuffle around the gable of the hotel and take an odd furtive peep into the lounge at those English women who won't even look up from their frigid knitting! Many a time you did it yourself, bucko! Aye, and but for Aunt Lizzy and the grace of God, you'd be there tonight, too, watching the lights go out over the village, and hearing the front doors being bolted, and seeing the blinds being raised; and you stamping your feet to keep the numbness from spreading, not wanting to go home, not yet for another while, wanting to hold on to the night although nothing can happen now, nothing at all … (77)

Master Boyle, the schoolmaster who wants to write for American magazines, represents for Gar another version of himself and what will happen to him if he remains in Ballybeg. A dissipated alcoholic, always on the point of losing his job, Boyle still fantasises about a future in the same way as Gar does, but his story of a prestigious position lined up for him in Boston has the same currency as the "boys" conquests. As if to provide Gar with more reasons for departure to America, Boyle sanctions the American dream with his own clichéd musings: "You're doing the right thing, of course. You'll never regret it. I gather it's a vast restless place that doesn't give a curse about the past; and that's the way things should be. Impermanence and anonymity – it offers great attractions." (52)

Yet the old master's mythic New World as a place where the only valid course is not to "keep looking back over your shoulder" (53) is at odds with Private's sardonic observation that his Public alter-ego is in fact in the process of "collecting memories and images and impressions that are going to make you bloody miserable" (58). The tattered suitcase which forms the subject of a brief colloquy between Madge and Gar Public early in the play may be taken as a visual metaphor for the "baggage" of recollection which Gar, for all the loud animosities enacted by Private, will seemingly bear with him. When he goes to pack his suitcase, he finds in it the newspaper of the day on which his parents were married, and the stage directions tell us that he "puts the newspaper carefully inside the folds of a shirt" (37). The figure of the mother he has never known, the woman who died shortly after his

birth, represents the past Gar wants to fold into his future and take with him. It is not only his attempt to remember an undiscoverable point of origin, but also another reflection of the urge to self-disclosure and self-realisation, of a life of emotion inhibited by Ballybeg's patriarchal mores. With the aid of Madge's recollections, Private Gar fictionalises a mother which is the radical antithesis to his father: "She was small, Madge says, and wild, and young, Madge says, from a place called Bailtefree beyond the mountains; and her eyes were bright, and her hair was loose, and she carried her shoes under her arm until she came to the edge of the village, Madge says, and then she put them on …"(37).

Thus, where the father is forty when they marry, the mother is nineteen; where the father comes from tame, petit-bourgeois Ballybeg, the mother comes from the wilderness of Bailtefree. The detail that obtrudes most poignantly and individuatingly is the mother's carrying of her shoes until she reaches the civility of the village. Her deeply attractive wilderness of undress contrasts radically with the father's unattractive overdressing, as S. B. memorably wears his hat at the table. This contrast turns the mother into the lost value of a fundamental alternative to the repressive patriarchy that he endures.

Moreover, where the father represents for Gar the epitome of the lack of communication, the mother seems intimately connected with Gar's frequent quotation of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "… It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles! […] And surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in – " (38, 78).

As Neil Corcoran suggests, the idealisation of Marie Antoinette, the doomed queen, represents for Burke the glory that has gone from the world and the origin of his counter-revolutionary text. Gar, a drop-out student of history at UCD, appropriates the Burkean text and weaves it into his own fantasy of maternity in order to supply for a vanished source [Corcoran, 1992: 18-9]. The passage resonates through the text and is thus counterpoised to the lines of the popular song, "California, Here I Come", which Gar adapts as "Philadelphia, here I come" (38) and is turned into the refrain of the play and the signpost of the young man's destination. The gap between source and destination (that is to say, what Gar is leaving and where he is going to) is filled out by the play's two flashbacks, which, prompted by

Private's cues, lead Gar to re-enact the scenes with the other two women associated with the opposite ends of his trajectory.

The first of these flashbacks occurs in Episode One, when Gar's thoughts of his former girl-friend, Kate Doogan, become so overwhelming that the 'present' time of kitchen and bedroom fades, and Kate appears on the apron stage, with the two lovers re-living the crisis point in their relationship, when Gar surrendered his fiancée and his buoyant proposals of marriage and family to Senator Doogan's advocacy of ambition and a more advantageous marriage for his daughter. The only way Gar can compensate for his hurt and humiliation is through Private's elaboration of a revenge fantasy, in which the Senator "travels for maternity corsets, is a double spy for the Knights and the Masons, … takes pornographic photographs" (35) and is "the grandfather of fourteen unborn illegitimate children" (53). This also furthers his drive to emigrate to a place where Gar can achieve the class and bourgeois respectability fostered by Kate's father, and Private and Public role-play the prospective interview of "the US Senator Gareth O'Donnel, Chairman of the Foreign Aid Committee!" (57).

The second flashback in the play complicates the prospect of Gar's future in America by enacting the return of his childless and tippling Aunt Lizzie and her husband, Conn, from the US with the offer that Gar has decided to accept. Lizzie represents everything that Ballybeg is not: she talks constantly about her feelings, her dwelling on the past is anecdotal rather than imprisoning, and her flitting, shallow mind constantly changes subject, unable to complete the narrative of her sister Maire's wedding day. Moreover, her parading of her childlessness on the same level as her possessions as a means of securing Gar's promise to emigrate arouses in Private dread of an oppressive motherliness as claustrophobic as Ballybeg:

> LIZZY: … 'We'll go home to Ireland,' I says, 'and Maire's boy, we'll offer him everything we have –'
> PRIVATE: (Terrified) No. No.
> LIZZY: '- everything, and maybe we could coax him – you know –' maybe it was sort of bribery – I dunno – but he would have everything we ever gathered –
> PRIVATE: Keep it! Keep it!
> LIZZY: - and all the love we had in us –
> PRIVATE: No! No! […]
> PUBLIC: (Impetuously) I want to go to America – if you'll have me
> PRIVATE: Laddy! […]

> LIZZY: If we'll have him, he says; he says if we'll have him! That's why I'm here! That's why I'm half-shot-up! (She opens her arms and approaches him.) Oh, Gar, my son –
> PRIVATE: Not yet! Don't touch me yet! (65-6)

Judging from its title, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* raises the promise of a thoroughly prospective work. But Lizzie's visit offers a more complex paradigm, which is to be related to the second line of the song that Gar sings: "Philadelphia, here I come/ […] Right back where I started from" (38). As Gar is not a native of Philadelphia, and his emigrating is not a return to origins, but a departure from them, the play raises the question: is Philadelphia the promised land of relief, or is just Ballybeg in a different cloak? This mystery is not dispelled by Gar's meditations or his probings, and, at the end of the play, the young man has not resolved his own motives for emigration, being still poised at a point of hesitation and transition.

The play through its chosen form has nevertheless provided an answer for the opposite drives embodied by Gar. On the one hand it has affirmed for the like of Gar the rightness of their decision to emigrate, by offering a social anatomy of the life-denying features of the backward world of Ballybeg. Yet, on the other hand, it has also recorded how memory can transform even a claustrophobical and loveless small town into a pastoral idyll, pandering to emigrant nostalgia. Not only Gar's absent mother or the recreation of fishing with his father, but also the coarseness and nullity of the evenings spent with the 'boys' may turn into idyllic emblems, transmuted by the imaginative power of memory:

> No one will ever know or understand the fun there was; for there *was* fun and there *was* laughing – foolish, silly fun and foolish, silly laughing; but what it was all about you cannot remember, can you? Just the memory of it – that's all you have now – just the memory; and even now, even so soon, it is being distilled of all its coarseness; and what's left is going to be precious, precious gold … (77).

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Notes

[1] This opinion is shared, among others, by Richard Pine (see his "Brian Friel and Contemporary Drama", in *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, no. 4, December 1991, p. 190) and Anthony Roche (see his *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1994, p. 76).

[2] A type of drama characterized by its peasant cottage setting and its concerns which depict contemporary Irish problems and themes such as emigration, rural marriage, habits and the ownership of lands. See Brenna Katz Clarke's *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Papers, Michigan, 1982.

[3] A series of practices and procedures used by the Irish tenant-farmers to consolidate, extend and transmit family holdings from generation to generation. These rested on adhering to strict codes of belief and behaviour, which included, inn particular, the regulation of sexuality, and unquestioned patriarchal authority. See David Cairns and Shaun Richards' study *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture*, Manchester UP, Manchester, 1988, pp. 42-3.

[4] All references are to the text of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* as published in Brian Friel, *Selected Plays*, London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, pp. 23-99. Only the page numbers are indicated within parentheses.