



Morse, Donald E., Csilla Bertha, and Mária Kurdi (Eds)
Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry. 'The Work Has Value.' Dublin:
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Andrea P. Balogh

Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry features essays selected from *The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, an internationally-recognised English language academic journal published by the University of Debrecen (Hungary). Of the fifteen essays included in the book, twelve originally appeared in three different Irish Studies special issues of *HJEAS* (Irish Drama Issue (1996), a Special Issue in Honour of Brian Friel at 70 (1999), Irish Issue (2002)), while the concluding interview with Richard Pine, a leading authority on Friel, originally appeared in another Hungarian academic journal, *AnaChronisT* (2003). *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* thus makes visible to an Irish as well as international reading audience the range and riches of Friel scholarship by both Hungarians and non-Hungarian scholars accumulated in *HJEAS*.

In his "Introduction: Transparent, Oblique Voices," Paulo Eduardo Carvalho similarly observes that the uniqueness of *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* lies in this Hungarian dimension, this scholarly "initiative [that] comes from a non-English-speaking country [...] where there are already sufficient grounds for a study on the reception of Friel's plays" (2). The last decade has witnessed both a growing interest in Friel's dramas by Hungarian theatre practitioners and audiences and a gradual strengthening of Irish Studies in Hungary. *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* brings together a broad spectrum of academics and theatre practitioners from Ireland, England, and the United States as well as from non-English speaking countries like "Germany, Italy, Portugal and, naturally, Hungary, thus opening up possibilities, if not for more varied, at least for more alien perspectives on the work of this deservedly celebrated playwright" (3).

Therefore, as Carvalho suggests, *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* is a unique contribution to Friel Studies not solely because the book's origin lies in Hungary but also because of being realized through an international collaboration among Friel experts from different countries. Of the twelve contributors; six are from the English speaking territories dominating Irish Studies while the other six are from non-English speaking European countries where Irish Studies has become more and more powerful in the past two decades. The variety of authors indicates the globalisation of Irish Studies and the operation of a transnational framework for a more and more inclusive international Irish Studies network coordinated by such organizations as the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL). It is enough to think of 2002 and 2003 when,

after IASIL met in Brazil, it moved to Hungary, where the conference was co-hosted by Bertha and Morse at the University of Debrecen.

The power-dynamics of the international network within Hungarian Friel scholarship, however, might also suggest an academic neo-colonization. Whereas the international character of *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* is clearly discernable, it is open to question what aspects would identify the selected essays as unique to Hungarian Friel scholarship. There is only one essay altogether, Márton Mesterházi's "The Hungarian Translator's View of *Translations* and the Problems in Translating it into Hungarian," that introduces a Hungarian dimension to Friel Studies, thus opening a new perspective on Friel's dramatic language. In his introduction, Carvalho assesses Mesterházi's contribution as "one of the less scholarly, but not less stimulating" works (4). While 'scholarly' is generally an elusive term, Mesterházi's essay should be praised for not meeting this category, if 'scholarly' is equalled by using academic jargon, obscure expressions, and a professed objective position. His English text can only indicate that which is palpable in his Hungarian works on Sean O'Casey and on Anglo-Irish dramatists (1983; 1993; 2006.). His style is personal and anecdote-like but his treatment of his subject-matters is thorough, careful and intimate, making his discourse accurate and enjoyable at the same time. In not less clear and illuminating ways, all the other authors approach Friel in accordance with the Western received understanding of Friel's work. Thus the essays featured in *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* suggest partly the hegemony of a Western point of view in *HJEAS* and partly the significance of Friel in our global culture. In this respect, the essays taken from *HJEAS* hardly differ from the ones published elsewhere in the field of Friel scholarship.

The editorial concept of *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* is in line with the recent tendencies in Friel scholarship to guide the readers through Friel's dramatic work (e.g. *A Companion to Brian Friel* edited by Richard Harp and Robert C. Evans (Locust Hill Press, 2002), *Brian Friel: Decoding the Language of the Tribe* by Tony Corbet (Liffey Press, 2002), *About Friel: The Playwright and His Work* by Tony Coult (Faber & Faber, 2003), or *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel* edited by Anthony Roche (Cambridge University Press 2006)). *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry*, however, does more than offering an overview of Friel's *oeuvre*. It also provides a portrait of Friel as an artist through the interpretations spotlighting various facets of Friel's dramatic achievements. The essays are arranged into thematic sections. The headings outline, however, not only the typical themes and structural patterns of Friel's dramas but also the issues characteristic of Friel scholarship ("Portrait of the Artist," "Ambiguities of Language," "Psychological and Spiritual Torments," "Ritual and Ceremony," "Disability and Empowerment," "Politics in and of the Theatre"). The key-concepts in the titles of the sections and the essays reflect the hermeneutic framework determining the dominant reading strategy of *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* ("artistry", "work", "value," "artist", "language", "ambiguity", "motif", "meaning", "structure", "characterization"). The majority of the contributions approach Friel by drawing on the assumptions and reading

strategies of the formalist-modernist paradigm. With the exception of Carvalho's essay, "About Some Healthy Intersections: Brian Friel and Field Day," the book's general conception of the author, the work and the relationship between the two coincides with the idea emerging from Leoš's Janaček 'theory of interpretation' in Friel's *Performances*. As Janaček puts it towards the end of the play, "but finally, [...] the work's the thing. That must be insisted on. Everything has got to be ancillary to the work" (Friel 38).

As a result of the formalist reading strategy, *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry* provides an insight into the processes of how the interpretations of the Work shape the public image of the Author. Opening the portrayal of Friel's dramatic achievements by essays exploring the figure of the artist in Friel's dramas is arguably a powerful arrangement (Bertha and Morse "Singing of Human Unsuccess': Brian Friel's Portraits of the Artist," 13-34; Giovanna Tallone, "Restless Wanderers and Great Pretenders: Brian Friel's Fox Melarkey and Frank Hardy," 35-60; Bertha, "Music and Words in Brian Friel's *Performances*, 61-72). The first two essays, on the one hand, highlight Friel's variations on the theme of the artist, and, on the other hand, outline the notion of the artist underlying *Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry*. As the essay co-authored by Bertha and Morse shows, Friel's dramatic representations of the artist rework the Romantic 'theory of the poet-genius' and the high-modernist idea of the suffering, failed artist in the everyday context of contemporary Western culture and society. Tallone's comparative reading of *Crystal and Fox* and *Faith Healer* shows Friel's earlier dramatic treatment of the figure of the artist in terms of subjectivity and identity politics while Bertha's discussion of *Performances* demonstrates how this recent play crystallizes Friel's concept of art and, at the same time, explicates the themes underlying Friel's *oeuvre* from the very beginning.

These readings of the artist enable the reader to identify and, in turn, historicize the concepts of art and artist on which the majority of the essays draw in constructing Friel's artistic identity. In "Palimpsest: Two Languages as One in *Translations*," Christopher Murray argues that Friel is a true artist, being essentially apolitical, aesthetic-centred and self-referential (94-96). In the interview conducted by Kurdi, Pine also affirms Friel's cultural value and aesthetic quality in terms of the idea of true art as the one which is detached from any kind of politics and expresses universal truth or eternal human values (314; 323). As Frederic Jameson argues in "Modernism and Imperialism," the notions of the true artist and true art as being apolitical, turning inward and away from social realities, and being committed exclusively to the ideology of the "supreme value of a now autonomous Art," is "part of the baggage of an older modernist ideology" informed by the formalist reading of the modern on "purely stylistic or linguistic" terms (Jameson 45.).

In "About Some Healthy Intersections: Brian Friel and Field Day," Carvalho takes up Jameson's critique of the formalist reading of literature in contesting the formalist construction of Friel through a re-reading of Friel's extra-dramatic discourse in terms of political and social intentions. As he points out, the "renunciation of the individual

artist's aura of detachment" is generally seen on negative terms concerning its effects on the work's aesthetic quality (252). The apolitical character of Friel's aesthetic is thus rather inherent in the "ideological position" informing the formalist reading and aiming at dehistoricizing art than in Friel's dramatic works.

Brian Friel's Dramatic Artistry manages to show that the meaning of Friel's dramatic work is inexhaustible and thought-provoking. From this perspective, the book achieves the goal to testify to Friel's artistic talent in the Irish as well as in the global context. In another respect, it demonstrates that the essays taken from the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* both individually and as a collection are informative and authoritative contributions to Friel scholarship, thus indicating the value of the work done in Hungary in the field of Irish Studies. The book is useful for anyone interested in Friel's *oeuvre* or in Friel Studies.

Works Cited

Friel, Brian. *Performances*. Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2003.

Jameson, Frederic. "Modernism and Imperialism." Seamus Deane (ed.). *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, 43-66.