

Darkness Visible. Insight and Visual Impairment in Brian Friel's *The Enemy Within*

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All I know is a door into the dark.
(Seamus Heaney, *The Forge*)

Abstract: *Considering the development of Brian Friel's plays since the mid-60s, one looks back at his first successful play The Enemy Within (1962) with fascination. In retrospection the play is seminal work as it develops the themes of exile, quest, displacement, nostalgia and memory that mark his later production. The Enemy Within is Friel's first investigation into darkness, as it deals with the prototype of a split character, St. Columba, and the obscurities and shades of a psychic division later expressed in Public/Private Gar in Philadelphia.*

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to elements of darkness in Friel's oeuvre and to the unifying motifs of darkness and blindness in The Enemy Within, which characterize the play and make it interesting per se. In fact, in spite of a certain naiveté in structure, The Enemy Within is built around a compact imagery based on polarities and parallelisms, in which darkness, disease and decay are counterbalanced by maybe too overt hints to light, resurrection and rebirth, thus highlighting a variety of "enemies within" to be fathomed and faced.

In the "sporadic diary" Brian Friel kept while working on *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, a Russian folktale is briefly mentioned, in which the small town of Kitezh "vanishes from sight when marauders approach" (Murray 167). The fascination of the story lies in the faculties of seeing and hearing. Kitezh "encased itself in a mist and shrank into it and vanished from sight", but "the church bell never stopped ringing" (180). Friel exploits the auditory quality of the plot as a powerful metaphor for the resonance of the theatre, a bell that "reverberates quietly and persistently in the head long after the curtain has

come down and the audience has gone home” (180). The visual dimension, however, the town that disappears making itself invisible, also has a significantly vivid impact, drawing attention to the long-established and powerful metaphors of blindness and insight, darkness and light, which recur in Friel’s plays.

The motif of darkness is a conscious presence in Friel as a catalyst for the mystery of self and identity and the privacy of souls. In a famous interview he expressed his views on the art of writing with imagery of darkness:

You don’t have anything to say about anything. You delve into a particular corner of yourself that’s *dark and uneasy*, and you articulate the confusions and the unease of that particular period. (O’Toole 22, my emphasis)

Likewise, he said of *Translations*: “The play must concern itself only with *the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls*” (Murray 77, my emphasis).

Friel exploits darkness in different forms of technical experimentation to disclose interiority (Szondi 1987, 16). When *Philadelphia, Here I come!* opens, “The only part that is lit is the kitchen [...] Stage right, now in darkness, is Gar’s bedroom” (Friel 1984, 26-27). This is the location for “the unseen man, the man within, the conscience, the ALTER EGO, the secret thought, the id” (27). Frank Hardy’s litany of placenames in *Faith Healer* (1979) begins in darkness and each monologue concludes with a rapid fading to black. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) the dark stage is broken by a “pool of light” (*Dancing at Lughnasa*: 1) cast on the narrator, Michael, so that the interplay of light and darkness allows fluidity between past and present. Likewise, Gerry Evan’s arrival is highlighted by “Dancing in the Dark” played “softly from the radio” (32), a “subtle metaphor” (Corbett 136) for Chris and Gerry’s mutual ignorance of each other’s lives.

In the opening scene of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997) Tom Connolly’s soliloquy addressed to his mentally disabled and unresponsive daughter, Bridget, is interrupted by the remark “It’s dark in this basement” (13). The protagonist repeats the same words at the end of the play in a parallel scene, where he pours down on his daughter a similar river of words (83) and makes the physical darkness of the ambience a catalyst and a metaphor for Bridget’s mental darkness.

If *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* is in a way Friel’s personal revisiting or rewriting of his previous work (Pine 1999, 177), his choice of framing the play in two parallel scenes set in the dark also draws attention to the use of darkness in his plays and its interweaving with related themes of blindness and insight. This also belongs to the leit-motif of disability in Friel’s plays, featuring “people who are lame, deaf, colour-blind, blind or dumb” or “have suffered nervous breakdowns” (Niel 1999, 144)

Deteriorating eyesight plagues Daniel Stone in the early play *To This Hard House*. In *The Freedom of the City* the protagonists are blinded by CSgas. *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993) revolves around blurred vision. Oilead Driachta, the island of mystery,

is impossible to be seen, because “it keeps shimmering” (*Wonderful Tennessee*: 28). Its shape is in turn “like a ukulele”, “a perfect circle”, “a rectangle” (27). The island is a sight unseen, the physical and metaphorical response to the protagonists’ uncertain vision.

In *Molly Sweeney* (1994) Friel openly deals with seeing and not seeing, and with finding a different way of seeing (Upton 1997, 348). When restored eyesight after a lifetime spent in blindness, Molly gets lost in an alien world. The only form of survival, “the only escape was [...] to [...] immerse yourself in darkness” (50). Dr. Rice, the ophthalmologist, the giver of sight, recounts the failures of a lifetime saying: “for seven years and seven months [...] I subsided into a terrible darkness” (47). And Ballybeg is the place where “the terrible darkness lifted. Where the shaft of light glanced off me again” (48).

In *The Yalta Game* Anna is worried by her husband’s Nikolai’s “serious eye infection” (Friel 2002, 21, 24). Her obsession with blindness is enhanced by the practical need for light: “we need paraffin for the bedroom lamp” (28).

In his early play *The Enemy Within* (1962) Brian Friel already exploits the motif of darkness in what can be considered his first investigation and exploration of the “dark and private places” of an “individual soul” remote in time, Saint Colum Cille/ Columba of Iona, the third great patron Saint of Ireland with St. Patrick and St. Brigid. His status derives mostly from tradition and local folklore (Lacey 7), he was “the most renowned missionary, scribe, scholar, poet, statesman, anchorite, and school-founder of the sixth century” (Hyde 1967, 166), the founder of the city of Derry – Daire Colum Cille – and the performer of miracles as described in Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* (Anderson, passim). The multiple facets of his identity are reduced to a minimum in Friel’s play, which is built around two “contending versions” of the main character (O’Brien 42), his public persona as a nobleman of the Uí Néill clan and his private self striving for transcendence and sanctity.

Therefore the history and hagiography provided by texts in Irish and Latin (Hyde 1967, Herbert 1988, passim) do not play a relevant part in Friel’s reading of the Columban story. Friel describes *The Enemy Within* as “an *imaginative account, told in dramatic form*” of a short period in St. Columba’s exile in which to shed light on “the *private man*” (*The Enemy Within*: Preface, my emphasis). Columba is in turn “a priest or a politician” (34), “Columba of Iona” and “Columba of Kilmacrenan” (62), an actor cast into different and contending roles, ranging from the military leader his family expects to the saint he represents for the novice Oswald. Such polarities enhance the mutually exclusive loyalties of his love for Ireland and his religious vocation.

The eponymous “enemy within” is surreptitious and polymorphic, it is both seen and unseen. It is given visual perception by two visitors to Iona. The messenger Brian asks for Columba’s help in a battle between clans. After hesitating, he gives in. The second visit, from Columba’s brother Eoghan, and nephew, Aedh, requests the abbot’s help in a family dispute. When he refuses, he is cursed by his family. *The Enemy Within* thus focuses on the ambiguity of loyalties and of commitments (Corbett 2), on

the confusion and self-doubt engendered by the impossible reconciliation between different sides of self wrestling with each other.

Considering the development of Brian Friel's plays since the mid-1960s, one looks back at *The Enemy Within* with fascination. It was his first successful play, and "the earliest play he is still prepared to acknowledge" (Maxwell 200), "a solid play", "a commendable sort of play" (Murray 1999, 8). In different respects it is seminal work, as all the themes Friel will later develop appear in the play – exile, self-discovery, displacement, nostalgia, memory. In its "conventional three-act format" (O'Brien 1989, 45) and chronological development it shows variety and consistency in characterization, even though too overt visual impact suggests a certain naïveté in structure. For example, at the end of Act One, Columba's inner debate is given the form of a medieval allegory of good and evil, a psychomachia (Murray 1999, xiii). His position between Grillaan and Brian (Friel 1979, 33) makes him subject to the ever present elements of tribalism (Corbett 3). However, a net of crossreferences and unifying motifs provides the play with a structural cohesion and coherence of its own. The activity of fieldwork is a metaphor for Columba's debate: "Out at the corn there, Cormac was cutting, and I was behind him tying" (Friel 1979, 22). Cutting and tying are significant on the denotative and connotative level as they stand for the family bonds from which Columba cannot get free. In the crucial moment of choice, Grillaan says to him: "The last tie, Columba. Cut it now. Cut it. Cut it" (34). A similar pattern of unity is provided by the recurring references to food. Caornan's fall early in Act One foreshadows his death, but also Columba's "fall" out of the Iona community into the community of his family and their expectations. And the circular movement of the play is expressed in Columba's way to salvation. In Grillaan's words:

In some men [...] sanctity is a progression [...] In other men, it is the will and determination to start, and then to start again, and then to start again, so that their life is a series of beginnings. (49)

New beginnings are suggested at different stages by putting fresh straw on the stone bed, and in spite of his sixty-six years, Columba feels "as fresh as a novice" (39). The play closes on the triple repetition "to begin again" (77). And among the various meanings of the name Iona, besides yew-tree, is also the source due to a misspelling of Jonah (Room 1988, 185), the symbol of death and resurrection, of a new beginning.

The Enemy Within resounds with the familiar echoes of later plays and is a storehouse for themes, expressions and phrases that are easily identifiable. *Translations* is potentially present in the play and *The Enemy Within* is called back in Hugh's explanation of the words "*endogamein*" and "*exogamein*" (Friel 1984, 446). *The Enemy Within* deals with a marriage outside the tribe, *exogamein*, as Columba's nephew Aedh married a Pict convert, and with the consequences of crossing borders (Pine 1990, 172). In Act Two, Scene Two, "Columba and Grillaan are seated at the table looking at a map" (Friel 1979, 47), anticipating the close map-reading by Yolland and Owen in *Translations*.

Here light is shed on the ambiguity of the double role played by Columba, the saint and the military strategist, and the “war-room atmosphere” (Boltwood 2002, 55) is relieved only by Columba’s lack of interest in the survey of territory. The role of memory – both a friend and a fiend – sheds light on the painful power of retrospection. “I remember everything” (Friel 1979, 17) says Columba, which is contradicted eighteen years later by Hugh in *Translations*: “To remember everything is a form of madness” (Friel 1984, 445).

In *The Enemy Within* plot and structure are built around the division and interaction between the world of visible reality, political power, secular love for Ireland, and invisible reality, the “quest for spiritual perfection” (Robbins 76). The tension between the visible and the invisible and their mutual exclusion are supported by a network of references and imagery related to the unifying motif of darkness, with its variations of blindness and visual impairment that sustain the protagonist’s confusion.

The stage directions set the atmosphere and the mood of the play. Act One takes place on an “autumn afternoon” (Friel 1979, 11) so that impending darkness informs the subtext of the play. It is the time of prayer, the time when twilight announces both the end of the day and the cyclical return of the sun – to begin again. It is the liminal time between day and night, in the same way as Columba lurks between the visible and the invisible. When the play opens, old Caornan the scribe is busily working in Columba’s cell. The stage directions are informative: “*His eyesight is weak*. He stops occasionally *to rub his eyes* (11, my emphasis). The dialogue between Caornan and Dochonna points out the intertwining of light and darkness which underlies the tension between the visible and the invisible:

Dochonna – When did you start working in his room?

Caornan – The day before yesterday. My own room faces north. *Too dark*.

Dochonna – *More light* here?

Caornan – (Nodding in agreement) That’s it. Yes.

Dochonna – How are *the eyes*?

(11, my emphasis)

Disease – blindness, short-sightedness, deafness – contrasts with the impression of strength and energy created around the character of Columba off stage, who – we are told – is “out giving a hand with the corn” (11), and who brings “vitality, verve, almost youthfulness” (15) when he comes in. His first words to the novice Oswald anticipate darkness: “we had to get the field stooked *before the light fails*” (15, my emphasis). His casual remark works on a double axis, underlying the stability of the natural world of daily cycle and the uncertainty of impending night, the world of the visible and of the invisible. The physical darkness gaining ground on stage – Caornan’s room facing north, Columba’s room getting dark – is a coreference to Columba’s inner darkness, the “enemy within”.

The subtext of hagiography is present in the continuous references to sight and visual impairment early in Act One. In fact, the three parts of St. Adomnán’s *Life of*

Columba concern respectively the Saint's prophecies, miracles, and visions (Anderson, *passim*). In hagiographical tradition Columba is endowed with the power of divination, "his faithful followers most often credited the saint's visions of distant events" (Herbert 16). Columba's power of divination, of second sight, is contradicted in the action of the play, so that hagiography undergoes a process of compression. Significantly Columba does not foresee Caornan's death or the arrival of guests, he does not recognize Brian, and so has to rely on his sense of sight. He thinks he knows him from "his bones and his eyes and his neck and his shoulders and his walk" (Friel 1979, 25), in other words from the outward appearance of things, from visible reality.

The arrival of Brian is preceded by a moment of peace and prayer, when "It is getting dark" (24). The storm, which closes Act One, is an objective correlative for the explosion of Columba's inner struggle that has darkened his senses. By choosing to stand by the visible world, Ireland, his family, war, Columba deliberately turns blind to the invisible world, the transcendence of Iona. Act Two opens with Columba's return from battle, as a leader and a conqueror, laden with gifts for his community that resemble booty. His language has the concrete flavour of the objects he is displaying before the monks' eyes. His words "And wait until you *see* what I've got for you here" (39, my emphasis) emphasize visual perception as the substance of visible reality (42-43). When told about Caornan's death, Columba's darkened senses come back to light. Because of his incursion into the visible world he has turned blind to the blind man's death. Scene One in Act Two closes on an invocation that borders with a confession: "Merciful Christ, give me the *sight* of Caornan your scribe" (46). Columba's prayer to be given the sight of a blind man's eyes contains the paradox of sight in blindness and has a reference in Grillaan's words: "How *blind* can you be" (61). And what he had said about Caornan could be said about himself too: "*His sight is going* and his health is poor" (23, my emphasis).

Caornan's physical blindness is accompanied by the insistence on Brendan the farmer's colour blindness. The polarity between life and death, beginning and end, light and darkness is given substance by the birth of calves, one of which is dead-born (22). Brendan wants to call the surviving calf Rufus, a red one, yet it is "Black as a raven" (22). Confusion increases when Columba brings Brendan a curry comb for the calf, "With a black handle to match his coat":

Brendan – The calf is red – but that doesn't matter.

Columba – Stupid me! It was the black one that died, wasn't it?

Brendan – It was white, Columba. (43)

This confusion in sight and perception enhances Columba's mixed feelings and divided loyalties. In Act Two and Three blindness and darkness leave room to invisible enemies being made visible.

The disorder of colour blindness has a parallel in Columba's contradiction: he is sixty-six "but *looks* a man sixteen years younger" (15, my emphasis). Perception by sight is thus deceiving. His "strong, active body" (48) is the body of a conqueror, which

belongs to the visible world and so betrays him. The awareness of old age recurs and is intensified in the development of the plot. “I am old” (20) Columba says to Caornan in Act One; he repeats the same words to Brian (27-28) and to his brother Eoghan in Act Three (73). In the autumn of his life, when cursed by his brother, for the first time ever Columba is capable of identifying the protean quality of his enemy within, the “damned” but “soft, green Ireland – beautiful, green Ireland” (75) of his past.

The violent words Columba addresses to his brother in a triple repetition – “Get out of my monastery! Get out of my island! Get out of my life” (75) – reveal the ambivalence of his feelings, but draw attention in particular to the “spatial temptation” of Ireland that is also a “temporal seduction” (Pine 1990, 18). In Act One the obsessive repetition of phrases such as “do you remember”, “I remember that”, “So well you remember”, “I remember too”, culminating in “I remember everything” (Friel 1979, 16-17) anticipates Columba’s alluring memory of Ireland, nearly personified in lushness and beauty. And it is this Ireland that represents the most evident, most dangerous and most demanding “enemy within”:

Out at the corn there, Cormac was cutting, and I was behind him tying [...] and I was stooped over, so that this bare, black exile was shrunk to a circle around my feet. And I was back in Tirconail; and Cormac was Eoghan, my brother [...] and there were trees at the bottom of the field *as long as I did not look*; and the blue sky was quick with larks *as long as I did not lift my head*; and the white point of Errigal mountain was behind my shoulder *as long as I kept my eyes on the ground*. And when we got to the bottom of the field, Cormac called me [...] But *I did not look up* because he was still Eoghan, my brother, and the earth was still Gartan earth; and the sound of the sea was the water of Gartan Lough [...] And when Cormac spoke I did not answer him because I could not leave them. (20, my emphasis)

In this waking vision Columba is “assaulted by his past” (Corbett 2002, 5). Time is suspended in the confusion memory generates and in the impossibility to distinguish between here and there, now and then. It is a confusion of sight, in which what is seen is not what it is, and a coreferent to Columba’s inner confusion. The past is brought back to the present by the insistence on seeing, or rather not seeing, or the choice of not looking at the real world, so that the boundaries Columba imposes on his visual perception provide a sort of blindness to the rest of the world that fosters the insight of memory.

Columba’s recollection could go on forever, as the iterative use of the conjunction “and” provides a connection between the different parts of the mosaic and is suggestive of a natural development and growth. Columba brings back to his present the sound of invisible larks, real and imagined, in the same way as in the story *The Saucer of Larks* their music acts as a pleasantly disturbing catalyst: “they heard the larks, not a couple or a dozen, or a score, but hundreds of them, *all invisible* against the blue heat of the sky” (Friel 1983, 140, my emphasis). The evocation of invisible larks, invisible places, invisible family magnifies Columba’s memory, in which past and present overlap. The whole retelling

is highly marked by the presence of visual perception. A triple repetition focuses on sight: “as long as I did not look”, “as long as I did not lift my head”, “as long as I kept my eyes on the ground”, which reaches an act of choice: “I did not look up”. It is this choice of not looking, of deliberate blindness, which sheds light on the complications of memory, on the eponymous unseen “enemy within”. The ambivalence of memory allows Columba total freedom, but it also imprisons him: “I could not leave them”.

The temptation of memory is enhanced by the repetition of personal names and placenames, whose mesmeric effect evokes past moments emerging out of darkness. Brian’s discourse is full of such obsession: O’Neill, Colman Beg, the Cumines, Hugh, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Sligo, Cúl-Dreibhne. Each of them opens a box of darkness in memory, stirring involuntary emotions and tensions between Columba’s visible and invisible worlds.

The imagery of darkness and blindness provides a unifying motif in such an early Friel play. The darkness and half-light in stage directions is the visual counterpart to darkness and blindness as a sustaining motif in the play. The insistence on visual imagery provides *The Enemy Within* with a metaphor for disclosing interiority, scanning private darkness and shedding light on the inner man. In his next play, *Philadelphia, Here I come!*, Friel will experiment with different techniques to disclose the man within, the man you cannot see, the secret thought, the id.

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