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BRIAN FRIEL'S *FAITH HEALER* AS POST-CHRISTIAN, CHRISTIAN DRAMA

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Abstract

Using terms and concepts which the late Swiss humanist and theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar develops in his *Theodrama*, this essay argues that Irish playwright Brian Friel's controversial 1980 drama, *Faith Healer*, can be read as a complex postmodern reaction to religious experience. Acknowledging the challenge of postmodernism, Balthasar's thought helps see *Faith Healer* as a post-Christian Christian response to the mysteries of call, mission, dispossession, and absence, human experiences which in part define the postmodern problematic. Making reference to such other Friel dramas as *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Molly Sweeney*, the essay also shows that even when read as putative artist parable, *Faith Healer* benefits from the approach which Balthasar's thinking encourages.

FROM ITS first production in 1979 up to its 'incandescent' 1994 revival in New Haven, Connecticut (where it was directed by Joe Dowling), critics have puzzled over Irish playwright Brian Friel's controversial drama, *Faith Healer*. It was initially dismissed for being 'unsatisfyingly static' and for a 'lack of dramatic interaction'. More recently it has been praised for its ability to evoke a 'deeply personal experience' which provokes audiences 'to sort out the different visions of reality offered ... long after the play is over'.[1] Walter Kerr's early claim that the play 'is all risks, a risk of structure, of language, of performance, of meaning'[2] is still perhaps the most formidable criticism. For Kerr the play is a 'near-hubristic challenge'.[3] Of the many risks Friel takes, the unusual structure and the unconventional use of time are both prominent but rather easily addressed. The provocative religious imagery and allusions, on the other hand, are more complex issues with which to deal. These latter features have prompted the questions: is the play mocking religion? Or do unconventional structure and use of time, along with a plethora of religious references, evoke a dimension of existence lost or no longer readily available to the postmodern audience? This paper proposes to address those questions.

To respond to Kerr's claim that the play succumbs to the risks it takes, it will first be useful to consider the overall shape of *Faith Healer*. The play consists

of four monologues, spoken by three characters, Frank Hardy—the 'faith healer'—his wife Grace, and Frank's promoter, Teddy. This monologic structure involves considerable risk. There is no interaction between the characters, and each character presents his or her monologue without real reference to the other characters' words. Hence, there is a minimum of real drama, and the audience must supply what connections it thinks it can among the three characters' different versions of what turn out to be a surprisingly disparate group of events.

Hardy begins by incantatorily naming places in Scotland and Wales. Known as 'The Fantastic Francis Hardy, Faith Healer',[4] Hardy is in voluntary exile from his Irish homeland, performing his faith healing in various small towns. In time we learn that the three cross to Ireland and drive to Donegal, outside the town of Ballybeg, where Hardy performs a cure and then confronts a small band of Irishmen outside a lounge bar. Grace's monologue presents the trio's wanderings from her own perspective, deepening our understanding of Hardy's obsession with his 'gift' for faith healing, his self-doubt, his alcoholism, and his violence. We learn that Grace married Hardy against her parents' wishes, and that Hardy denies the stillbirth of his and Grace's child along a road in rural Scotland. Intimating that she returned to England after Donegal, the conclusion of Grace's monologue also implies that Frank Hardy died in Ireland.

Teddy's monologue provides a third perspective on the events leading from Scotland to Donegal. He adds to our knowledge of the relationship between Hardy and Grace. His recollection of the final events in Donegal, however, appears coloured by his own desire to see himself, Grace, and Hardy in a romantic, nostalgic light. Teddy's monologue, too, further suggests that Hardy met his death at the hands of a group of Irish wedding guests with whom Hardy, Grace, and Teddy had spent the previous evening.

The audience almost necessarily experiences Hardy's final monologue as a speech from beyond the grave. Hardy ponders his powers of healing, his failures, and a few, seemingly miraculous, successes. He describes his final cure in Donegal—the healing of a young man's misshapen, injured hand—and he describes his own state of mind as he accepts the challenge to heal a paralytic.

Critics have pondered the unusual structure. They see in it an adaptation of James Joyce's or William Faulkner's fictional technique;[5] they cite precedent for the ghostly monologues in W.B. Yeats's stage ghosts 'dreaming back'.[6] They also allude to the tradition of Irish eloquence in which the play's language participates.[7] Derived from the Irish legend of Deirdre of the sorrows, probably via J.M. Synge's play, *Faith Healer* throws into the background the events of that story[8] and deliberately foregoes many of the usual theatrical techniques which encourage the audience's conventional response. From one perspective, the structure has much to do with the stated purpose of the Field Day Theatre Company, a group of Irish poets and playwrights which Friel helped to found shortly after *Faith Healer* was written and produced.

From its beginnings the company's purpose was 'a reappraisal of Ireland's political and cultural situation', and 'analyses of established opinions, myths, and stereotypes'.[9] Some earlier Friel plays dealt with the oppressive circumstances which forced the youth of Ireland to abandon their homeland (*Philadelphia Here I Come*). In structure *and* language still other plays (like *Translations* and *The Communication Cord*)[10] challenged the audience to rethink not only its understanding of Irish social, cultural, and political life, but the very presuppositions that drama makes. Friel's own purpose in writing plays, stated relatively early in his career, adds a further dimension to our understanding. 'I would like to write a play,' he said, 'that would capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment.'[11] The structure and the language of *Faith Healer* seek both to 'capture' and to challenge established opinions, myths and stereotypes. From his early experience writing radio drama, Friel brought a unique sensitivity to the dramatic power of the word, even where action was limited to the most minimal and subtle. In an interview Friel observed: 'I think that the political problem of this island is going to be solved by language ... Not only the language of negotiation across the table, but the recognition of what language means for us on this island.'[12] Friel acknowledges that *Faith Healer* itself is 'some kind of metaphor for the art, the craft of writing'.[13]

It is a tribute to Friel's skill that while creating a drama that recapitulates numerous favourite themes in his plays and in the criticism of Irish culture, *Faith Healer* also makes a strong claim on a wider audience. That may be, in part, because Frank Hardy is driven by the desire or the dream for a fuller life. Though *Faith Healer* appears less political—or even apolitical—compared to some of Friel's other dramas,[14] the play and its self-exiled Irish anti-hero (recalling the self-exile, Columba, in *The Enemy Within*), continue to question the values, stereotypes, and myths to which the protagonist (and Ireland) clings. Like the sometimes likeable liars in *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, or even the ne'er do well husband in *Molly Sweeney*, Frank Hardy desires a greater fullness of life than has been granted him. So, when a cure works, Hardy says: 'I knew that for those few hours I had become whole in myself, and perfect in myself, and in a manner of speaking, an aristocrat.'[15] This passage describes the reason not only for his obsession with faith healing but also for his lying and other fabrications. A greater fullness of life is also the illusion lived by the O'Donnells in Friel's *Aristocrats*. Glorying in the memory of great visitors of the past, they imagine themselves still the centre of a community, revered by the peasants. It is the desperate and largely frustrated desire for a greater fullness of life which may also account for the appeal which the play has for the postmodern audience. Craving fullness, they find—like Hardy, Grace, and Teddy—only incompleteness, absence, and boredom.

To respond more fully to Kerr's criticism, and at the same time to include the issues of structure, political motive, and the postmodern audience's desire

for a fuller sense of life, I shall argue that despite its often parodic allusions to religious belief, *Faith Healer* is, in fact, a play with deep religious roots and implications. To help me prove this I propose to apply to the play some insights of the late Swiss humanist and theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar's *Theodrama*[16] presents an account of drama and theatrical experience which meets the multiple challenges of Friel's work. Reading *Faith Healer* in the light of Balthasar's work, I intend to illuminate both works, showing that Balthasar's approach offers a productive new perspective on drama and its effects. But Friel's work also helps make sense of Balthasar's sometimes difficult ideas. In the process of analysing *Faith Healer* it will also be possible to shed light on such other more recent Friel plays as *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Molly Sweeney*.

Balthasar's work is particularly appropriate for analysing Friel's play because in the face of the postmodern emphasis on surface and distance, Balthasar reasserts the intimate and intense engagement which has been the life blood of both religious and aesthetic experience. It is this intimate and intense engagement to which Freil's critics, and audiences, attest. It is to the postmodern audience's sense of incompleteness, absence, and boredom that the play responds. Balthasar acknowledges the significance of postmodernism's wrestling with absence. It is precisely because of the acute sense of boredom and alienation that characterises the postmodern perspective that Balthasar makes it his project to reassert the undeniable power of aesthetic and religious experience. To do this he adverts to the intimate relation of beauty, truth, and goodness, arguing that Being first reveals itself as beauty.[17]

Balthasar's theological aesthetics is founded on a perception of and response to God's radiant glory. Locating the origin of that perception and response in the Greeks' mythological response to beauty, Balthasar then traces it through Jewish ideas of God's *kabod* and then, in subsequent ages, to analogous responses to beauty and the experience of love. As Balthasar conceives of them, both aesthetic and religious experience partake of the contradictory impulses of terror and ecstasy, *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*,[18] which characterised the response of classical antiquity to both phenomena. For Balthasar, Faith is not so much a question of assenting to a truth as being grasped and transformed by the beautiful.[19] Aesthetic experience, too, is about being grasped and transformed. The glory of God can be seen, fragmentarily, in all the forms of beauty which the world manifests. And in that way human beings experience, by analogy, the Being who is love. In music, painting, and literature—especially drama—Balthasar says we glimpse not only something of God's glory but an intimation of the way that the infinite involves itself in our world, appealing for our participation.[20] 'Where a thing of beauty is really and radically beheld,' he says, 'freedom too is radically opened up, and decision can take place' (TD II, 31). Even the experience of one's own mortality can provide

an austere yet hopeful response to the fear of absence, the nothingness that might wait beyond what—without God—would be otherwise meaningless death.[21] 'Everything, in the end,' Balthasar says, 'must be regarded as a Christian fragment—perhaps hardly recognisable—that calls for the transformation of the hearts of individuals and of society and its conditions and structures.'[22]

Among Friel's other works one might choose a different play to illustrate Balthasar's ideas, but *Faith Healer* is particularly instructive in the way it foregrounds the main character's role and identity. Viewed from the perspective of *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Molly Sweeney*, for instance, *Faith Healer* stands out as a particularly significant treatment of the gifted individual, with a personal calling and mission, who exerts a potent influence on all who come in contact with him or her. Whatever the source and nature of the gift, Friel shows that for the space of the faith healer's (or the promoter's, the dancer's, the ophthalmologist's, or the blind girl's) 'magic', the world is transformed. Unable to forget or outlive the influence, the characters who have been affected lapse into dejection (Teddy, Molly, or Agnes Mundy in *Dancing at Lughnasa*), despair, or even suicide (Grace). Even from a secular perspective, seeing Friel's extraordinary individuals as haunted and obsessed by their gifts provides a new understanding of the intense reaction which audiences give his plays. Viewed from Balthasar's perspective—as will be done shortly—the fate of the gifted individual contributes to the play's religious dimension.

Balthasar argues that drama, originating in religious ritual, still reflects in its structure and effects something of that arresting power that derived from the primitive theatre's relation to religion. It is perhaps to regain something of that primitive power that playwrights like Friel have reintroduced not only religious themes and allusions, but ritual actions, incantations, and a sense of the mystery which accompanied the presentation of classical drama. Balthasar's insights also remind us that all human beings share a need for rituals—even secular rituals—and that dramatists like Friel are appealing to this fundamental need. Balthasar's wide-ranging knowledge of drama further aids the understanding of this ritual aspect in Friel's work.[23]

Balthasar's capacious view of western drama enables him to trace the waxing and waning of the theological dimension in drama through the ages. Not only in Greek religious ritual and medieval parodies, but in the Renaissance dramas of England and the *auto sacramentales* of Spain he finds religion, mystery, and providence struggling with ideas of fate and meaninglessness. In the puppet-drama of the eighteenth century, the Promethean drama of the Romantics, the self-conscious plays of Pirandello and Wilder, and the Marxist drama of Brecht, Balthasar discerns the effect that drama's confrontation with mystery and the infinite has on dramatists and their audiences. Central to *Theodrama*, as

it is to his theology as a whole, is Balthasar's notion of Christ's kenotic, or self-sacrificing obedience to his Father's will. Plumbing the depths of Christ's sense of fear and abandonment as he faces and endures crucifixion, Balthasar's thought responds to the postmodern condition.[24]

Balthasar argues that in theatre human beings 'invite revelation' about themselves and, having been 'grasped' by the experience, respond to that revelation. 'Drama,' he says, 'with its horizontal-temporal restriction that calls for the action to be meaningfully brought to a conclusion within it, provides a metaphor of the dimension of meaning in all human finitude, and hence it also allows us to discern a (vertical) aspect of infinity' (TD I, 345). Balthasar thus accounts for the puzzling effects to which critics of *Faith Healer* refer by showing that the theatre has a power to overcome past and future, to relate the horizontal dimension of individual and collective human history to a vertical dimension which transcends human conceptualisation and control.

The space of drama, Balthasar says, is 'the dangerous borderline where magic and revelation cannot be told apart'.[25] In classical drama the words are a kind of conjuring which allows the gods to appear. It is this conjuring of the gods, if you will, that Balthasar calls part of the mystery—and, recalling Kerr's comments, the hubris—of the theatre.

> There is a certain hubris involved in showing the point of encounter between the human question and the divine answer in an event performed by human beings. This hubris will always be there in the background in all theatrical performance, awakening in the spectator a tense expectation that he will learn something revealing about the mystery of life.[26]

Yet, since no gods, strictly speaking, appear, what accounts for this mysterious quality in *Faith Healer*? One answer lies in the changed relation of actions to words. What action takes place is reported rather than dramatised, reminding some critics of Friel's attraction to ancient Greek drama.[27] By limiting other kinds of action, Friel enables the words, as revelations of character, to become the action. The audience's task becomes an active confrontation, seeking to comprehend if not reconcile disparities.

To Richard Pine, the emphasis on oral as opposed to visual form further suggests Friel's work in radio drama.[28] Friel transforms the characters' sometimes stark, sometimes 'incantatory' words[29] into a genuine event and a multi-layered revelation. In Balthasar's and Pine's views, then, Hardy *is* a kind of conjurer, and the play which brings him to life is a texture of words which, like a conjurer's spell, works its magic by the force of its language. Friel's 'Verbal Theatre' emphasises the word at the same time it emphasises the provisional way in which words construct the reality within which we dwell.[30] In its defiance of dramatic conventions, *Faith Healer* holds in tension the contraries of past and future, now

and never, allowing us to experience a questioning that goes to the heart of what we believe to be reality. As Balthasar observes:

> In the theatre man attempts to a kind of transcendence, endeavouring both to observe and to judge his own truth, in virtue of a transformation—through the dialectic of the concealing-revealing mask—by which he tries to gain clarity about himself. Man himself beckons, invites the approach of a revelation about himself.[31]

Late in his monologue Teddy drops a reference to the trial of 'those bloody Irish Apaches' as he tries to tell the story of Grace's suicide.[32] In theatrical terms this reference foreshadows Hardy's death, which we begin to suspect as early as the initial monologue. But Teddy's reference also functions as another striking reminder of how, in the play, the temporal sequence of events has lost its significance; how specific details of the story lose significance in comparison to a central event like death. For all three characters, memories of events are like fragments shored against their ruin. Except that these fragments are not even shored. They are like the debris that time washes down on both the characters and the audience. In a postmodern world which increasingly denies, distorts, or ignores the past, the experience of time is at best a reminder of the increasing disorientation which we face and out of which we try to recall the meaning of our lives.

Despite its refusals to provide any certainty, however, *Faith Healer* does offer its audiences an opportunity to gain clarity about the human condition. As critics have pointed out, the play leaves unresolved the *truth* about Grace's stillborn child, about whose decision it is to return to Ireland, and about the real nature of the relationships among Hardy, Grace, and Teddy. Yet about the human condition as represented by the characters' destinies the audience learns more. Late in the play Grace complains that Hardy 'had to adjust, to refashion, to re-create everything around him',[33] including the sick people whom he cured. In the end, however, Grace recognises that, though he may have fictionalised her too, she needed him. 'O my God I'm one of his fictions too, but I need him to sustain me in that existence—O my God I don't know if I can go on without his sustenance.'[34]

As the characters on stage talk of their destinies, they open up the horizon of mystery and unpredictable meaning. What Balthasar's phenomenological conception of the audience's response adds to the experience of drama is a more integrative understanding of how 'being grasped' by the play entails the audience responding on not only an emotional but an intellectual and an existential level to what they see happening before them. Such a participatory mode of knowing differs radically from the cooler, postmodern irony that has flattened and distanced aesthetic experience.

Balthasar identifies two contradictory aspects of being grasped by the work. They are call and mission[35] on the one hand, and dispossession on the other. Responding to the enrapturement of a call, an individual may experience a sense of mission but may also suffer a sense of dispossession. Recalling the scripture passage that speaks paradoxically of losing one's life in order to save it (e.g. John 12:25), such dispossession may involve a sense of desolation at God's apparent absence. Balthasar's theology comprehends this aspect of religious experience, explicating it in terms of the premonitory sense of godforsakenness which Jesus experiences in Gethsemane and of which he feels the full force on the cross.[36]

Balthasar's work helps explain Hardy's ambivalent gift as a faith healer, an occasionally successful 'miracle worker' who wonders whether he is not after all 'a *con man*'.[37] Early in his life Hardy had experienced a call—ambiguous at best—and his subsequent life has been obsessed with it. As Balthasar notes, the sense of call is a response to mystery in one's life: 'When a person is struck by something truly significant, he is not simply placed in a universal perspective from which he can survey the totality: an arrow pierces his heart at his most personal level. The issue is one that concerns *him*. "You must change your life", you must henceforth live in response to this unique and genuine revelation.'[38] Hardy asks: '*How did I get involved? As a young man I chanced to flirt with* it and it possessed me. No, no, no, no, no—that's rhetoric. No; let's say I did it... because I could do it.'[39] A bit later, characterising the onset of doubts and questionings as 'the pompous struttings of a young man', he asks himself ironically: '*Am I endowed with a unique and awesome gift?*—my God, yes, I'm afraid so.'[40] Even in ridiculing the idea of a call, however, Hardy confirms its mysterious power to shape his life.

Hardy's gift resembles that of other Friel characters, not the least of them Gerry Evans in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Frank and Mr Rice in *Molly Sweeney*.[41] Each possesses a special gift. Besides the 'gift of gab', Gerry Evans and Frank have the gift for discovering—often eccentric—possibilities all around them. Gerry is a dancer who literally swept Chris Mundy off her feet. Yet even after he has betrayed her, he can—on his infrequent returns—make her unaccountably happy. As he dances her down the lane, her sister notes: 'Her whole face alters when she's happy' (33). Frank, in *Molly Sweeney*, has lived a life of plans and schemes, and his passion to enable his wife, Molly, to see after forty years of blindness, is one more of those passionate plans. The ophthalmologist Mr Rice, however, is most like Frank Hardy, even to the fact that he has the gift of healing. And like Hardy's, that gift is of intermittent effect. A brilliant surgeon who once performed 'miracles', Rice now lives an out-of-the way life. Like Hardy, he drinks to forget what he did not achieve. But when asked to help Molly, he responds to the call: 'Suddenly and passionately and with utter selflessness I wanted nothing more in the world than ... that I could give them

their miracle.'[42] He performs the operation that restores Molly's sight and 'suddenly, miraculously all the gifts, all the gifts were mine again' (48).

Balthasar helps make sense of such characters' paradoxical relation to their gifts.[43] Like the ophthalmologist's, the faith healer's identity is one with his gift and mission. The gift can be both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing for those few whom Hardy is able to heal. It is a curse because it drives Hardy to test it. The drive to test his gift becomes self-destructive. Hardy's gift sometimes makes him aloof, incomprehensible, but also cruel. Grace describes him before one of his 'performances':

> in complete mastery—yes, that's close to it—in such complete mastery that everything is harmonised for him, in such mastery that anything is possible.[44]

But then the cruelty, like his doubts and questions,[45] is a consequence of the strain upon a person who is—if only inarticulately—aware of a dimension of human life over which he has no control and which may only be understood as 'mystery'. When his gift fails, Hardy suffers something like the postmodern experience of absence.

A sharpened sense of absence—of God, of meaning—distinguishes the postmodern from the Victorian and modern sense of such absence. It resembles the experience of absence analysed by such theorists and philosophers as Mark Taylor[46] and Emmanuel Levinas. Richard Kearney cites a pertinent passage from Levinas:

> God ... reveals himself as a trace, not as an ontological presence ... The God of the Bible cannot be defined or proved by means of logical predictions and attributions. Even the superlatives of wisdom, power and causality advanced by medieval ontology are inadequate to the absolute otherness of God. It is not by superlatives that we can think of God, but by trying to identify the particular interhuman events which open towards transcendence and reveal the traces where God has passed.[47]

In its emphasis on the absolute otherness of God, this passage implies not only the priority of the divine or transcendent but the impossibility of ever comprehending it. The barrier, the lack of reciprocity (between finite and infinite freedom implied by Levinas) 'is broken down in Jesus Christ, who "penetrates all things" making it possible for infinite freedom to "be itself" even in the finitude that "loses itself" '.[48] *Theodrama* is informed by this comprehensive theological perspective which acknowledges the distance between the finite and the infinite, yet also makes place for the infinite which 'loses itself'—that is, becomes incarnate—in the finite.[49] Balthasar's rethinking of dramatic categories shows how the theatre offers us insights which are, in fact, a revelation of existence. Balthasar's thought helps us to see amid the tatters of culture

as well as in the lacerated flesh of our body politic, body social, and body religious, an intimation of that infinity which 'loses itself' in finitude. A pertinent example from the play demonstrates this. In the nine out of ten times that Frank Hardy's cure does not take,[50] he experiences—though he would not likely call it that—an emptiness or absence, like the absence of God, as 'a felt, indeed overwhelming weight'.[51] His response: self-doubt, drink, and violence, reflects as in a mirror the response of many in society today when what little control or meaning they have in their lives is lost or taken away.

When Hardy describes what the people coming to him for a cure experience, he is describing not only their response, but his own as well.

> They defied me to endow them with hopelessness. But I couldn't do even that for them. And they knew I couldn't. A peculiar situation, wasn't it? No, not peculiar—eerie. Because occasionally, just occasionally, the miracle would happen. And then—panic—panic—panic! Their ripping apart! The explosion of their careful calculations! The sudden flooding of dreadful, hopeless hope![52]

Like Hardy, they are experiencing the desolation which the 'revelation' of their paradoxical situation makes possible. And both the sense of revelation and the sense of desolation are what the play imparts to the audience as well.

Critics of *Faith Healer* are perhaps most puzzled and challenged by the play's apparent mockery, parody, and caricature of religion. A common critical view of the play seeks to show that the very number of religious references implies a fragmented, postmodern view of religion and religious experience. George Hughes points to the numerous references to pagan Irish rituals. Hughes says that the influence of Tyrone Guthrie on Friel 'is good justification for bringing together (as Friel does) Septembers, harvests, reapers, Bacchanalia, Dionysian rites, Irish ritual homecomings, movements in church, incantations, rituals of faith healing—and then tying them into one drama'.[53] For Hughes, however, such use of religious images and rituals is only part of Friel's technique. It has little to do with the thematic heart of his work. 'Friel like Guthrie has assumed that a plum-pudding of available rites, ancient and modern, can be mixed into a new drama.'[54]

Despite Hughes' criticism, the religious allusions do convey a fragmented sense of religion in a postmodern world. Furthermore, they function as a kind of impersonal 'memory' of a religious dimension now virtually lost in everyday life. Parodied, caricatured, or merely 'mixed' indiscriminately together, the allusions, prayerful ejaculations, and thoughtless invocations of 'God' and 'Jesus' are more fragments which imply either a demolition of the sacred or an effort to salvage it. Critics agree that there is an almost raw, irreverent, freewheeling play with Christian motifs and themes: the healer, the wedding guests, the prodigal son, the doubters, even a possible raising from the dead.[55]

But the depth and complexity of this strange intertextuality is not plumbed by merely noting the number and kinds of allusions. A single example will suffice. In his final monologue Frank describes one of his triumphs. He cures ten people in Glamorganshire, but only one returns to thank him. 'I remember saying to Gracie the next day, "Where are the other nine?"—in fun, of course; of course in fun. But she chose to misunderstand me and that led to another row' (41). Even Frank's apparent irony does not completely undermine the effect which the transparent allusion to Luke 17:11–19 has on our understanding of the play and its religious references.

The pervasiveness of religious experience—however unconventional, distorted, or undercut by doubt and disclaimer—is a central part of the dramatic experience as Friel conceives it. His plays persist in taking seriously the human need for mystery or, at the least, reflect a sense of loss and longing after religious traditions of the past. That can be made apparent with just the briefest of looks at two recent plays, *Wonderful Tennessee* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Yet it is precisely because such references may be interpreted as postmodern parody and irreverence that all the plays, even from a purely secular perspective, continue to fascinate their audiences.

Ostensibly about an all-night party among old friends, *Wonderful Tennessee* turns out to be really about 'Whatever it is we desire but can't express. What is beyond language. The inexpressible. The ineffable.'[56] Gathered on a remote jetty on the Irish coast, waiting to cross to an island full of ambiguous associations, the friends talk about their lives and beliefs. In Act II of the play a character—whose name, coincidentally, is Frank—describes seeing a dolphin dance. Frank ironically refers to it as 'another apparition' and 'my Ballybeg epiphany'. But, amid references to the monks who once inhabited the island, and the apparently pagan rituals performed there in the more recent past, Frank admits that the dolphin dance 'upset me, that damn thing, for some reason' (70). In a way almost as contradictory as Frank Hardy, Frank in *Wonderful Tennessee* seems both to affirm and deny the power of mystery.

Dancing at Lughnasa presents the Mundy sisters, Irish peasants and traditional Christian believers, each of whom is affected to a different degree by non-Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. The sisters' Uncle Jack, a missionary priest returned from Uganda, manifests his inculturation by Ugandan tribal religion, claiming that 'there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture'.[57] Meanwhile, in the back hills of Ireland, the harvest festival of *Là Lughnasa* awakens in the rural people an impulse to re-enact ancient rituals, as they lead animals through purifying fires, and dance into the night. The narrator's final speech resonates with some of the same themes found in *Wonderful Tennessee* and *Faith Healer*. Michael Mundy evokes the image of his sisters dancing: 'Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony,

was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness' (71).

Balthasar's *Theodrama* helps explain not only the derivation but the parodic development of such religious references. Just as ancient drama had sought in both serious and comic ways to explore the divine-human relation, so in the Christian era the 'cultic drama' of the Christian year became 'the dramatic source of all Christian life'.[58] As the medieval dramas of salvation history evolved, parodic forms arose: 'Everywhere there was an admixture of the comic-grotesque, the cruelly satirical, that substratum of insanity which always comes to the surface where learning, scholasticism and incontrovertible authority pretend to truth.'[59] In this way Balthasar also sees *The Feast of Fools* of the Middle Ages, no less than the anti-religious drama of the Marxists and the Absurdists,[60] as a confirmation of the continuing tension between the immanent and the transcendent which is evident in Friel's plays. Balthasar also notes that the dispersion and fragmentation of the Christian story assures its perennial reappearance—often in unusual circumstances.[61] Throughout *Faith Healer* are scattered seeds of the Christian myth, distorted or refracted by the postmodern world and *its* fragmentation.[62] Just as Frank Hardy is haunted by his gift, postmodern drama itself—and perhaps the playwright—is haunted by the simultaneous appearance and paradoxical hiddenness of religious figuration.

To understand how Hardy sees the culmination of his life, it is necessary to begin with Teddy's evocation of that last night in Donegal. In recalling it Teddy tries to express the sense of mystery he felt while watching Grace and Frank together. Compared to the earlier squalor of their lives, he says, 'Life away from all that, all that stuff cut out, this is what they could be' (38). A bit later he remembers Frank looking at him. 'He held me in that look for—what?—thirty seconds. And then he turned away from me and looked at her—sort of directed his look towards her so that I had to look at her too. And suddenly she is this terrific woman that of course I love very much, married to this man that I love very much—love maybe even more.'[63] From these 'revelatory' moments Teddy derives a sense of contentment and love. Teddy's memories intimate a desire for something 'away from all that', an oblique reference to what may be the nearest thing that postmodern human beings can experience of the transcendent.

Despite what Teddy believes he experienced that evening in Ballybeg, Frank denies achieving any good with his healing: 'When I stood before a man and placed my hands on him and watched him become whole in my presence, those were nights of exultation, of consummation—no, not that I was doing good, giving relief, spreading joy—good God, no, nothing at all to do with that.'[64] Yet when he describes his last successful cure, Hardy's words cannot minimise the sense of mystery.

> I caught the finger between the palms of my hands and held it there and looked into his face. Already he was uneasy—he wanted to withdraw the challenge. He began to stammer how the accident happened—something about a tractor, a gearbox, a faulty setting. And as he spoke I massaged the finger. And when he stopped talking I opened my hands and released him. The finger was whole ... [65]

But even apparent successes lead to doubts of the gift and further failures or—as in this case—to a final challenge and a final failure. The sense of mystery seems unsustainable.

Inability to sustain the mystery is one way of describing the experience of dispossession. One critical interpretation of the play—which appears not to assume a religious perspective—emphasises precisely this inability to sustain the sense of mystery. A brief look at this reading will show that even an apparently secular reading can imply a transcendent perspective. Accepting Friel's comment that the play is 'some kind of metaphor for the art, the craft of writing',[66] numerous critics see the play as a parable of the artist's call.[67] *Faith Healer*, in their view, depicts a man with a gift like that of the playwright himself, travelling about, hoping to find an audience that responds.[68] Declan Kiberd, who also reads the play in this way, argues that 'Friel takes up where Beckett leaves off and in *Faith Healer* he depicts that lust for certainty as the last infirmity of the bourgeois mind'.[69] Kiberd is right in asserting on Beckett's authority that certainty is 'the last infirmity of the bourgeois mind'. But interpreting Hardy's acceptance of death as a choice for that kind of certainty is, itself, limited by Kiberd's own presuppositions. Balthasar would agree with Kiberd's denunciation of 'the bourgeois mind'. In his early book of aphorisms, *The Grain of Wheat*, Balthasar contrasts a bourgeois with what he calls a nobler attitude toward life. '[B]ourgeois is the drive to plan and establish everything once and for all ... Noble is an unexamined and naive self-assurance: one knows one contains a mystery; bourgeois is the wavering between fear and self-conceit: one's worth must continually be affirmed by others.'[70] At the conclusion of the play Hardy is, at first, torn between accepting or not accepting the challenge to cure McGarvey. But which of the two alternative interpretations does his acceptance of the challenge reflect? Kiberd says that Hardy 'decides to cash in his chips in return for a racing certainty'.[71] Viewed from the perspective of Balthasar's observations, Hardy's choice acknowledges a deeper mystery. Because Hardy accepts his fate, he becomes an 'aristocrat'.[72]

The decision to which Kiberd refers and the consequences of that decision are what the audience comes to understand as the central event of this drama, the one which—as in classical drama—occurs off-stage. It is simultaneously what has happened before the play begins and what is about to happen as the play ends. It is the event which gives not only meaning and significance, but dramatic dynamism to the play. That event is Frank Hardy's death.[73] Here, too,

Balthasar's thought increases our understanding of that meaning and that significance. As he says:

> What is seldom achieved by love is offered as a possibility to everyone at the moment of one's own death when one comes to understand oneself not merely as a transitory individual in the everflowing stream of life ... but as a unique person who must carry out his own unique commission against a finite, and not even controlled, future horizon, and who in the end cannot do so.[74]

This assessment offers another explanation of Frank Hardy's acceptance of his impending death. Willing self-dispossession, as Balthasar reminds us, is a hallmark of a Christian salvific act.[75]

In offering to help McGarvey,[76] Frank Hardy in some sense sacrifices himself. Without question, his act is ambiguous. It may be an escape from the gift which hounds him. It may be submission to those whom he seeks to serve but who will then turn on him. Here, too, Hardy dramatises the complex nature of sacrifice. Balthasar's insight into the Christological mystery permits us to see more than Hardy's being 'at some level a parodic version of Christ on his healing mission'.[77] Balthasar's explication of Christ's total desolation and dispossession, his 'Godforsakenness', allows us to plumb the depth of Hardy's contradictory spirit and find there the 'recedings' from a sense of transcendence to which both George Steiner[78] and Levinas refer.

Hardy's offering himself to the Donegal wedding guests, and his acknowledging their need for each other is also a grim commentary on the symbiotic, even fatally antagonistic relationship which Friel posits between the ordinary Irish consciousness and its critical élite. Hardy, the Irish artist, accepts the inevitability of death. Given the antagonism of the artist to his nation, the illusionist to the materialists, the aristocrat to the peasants, destruction is inevitable. Hardy's acceptance of death has the aristocratic nobility about it to which Balthasar refers.[79]

In one sense it does not matter whether or not Hardy's choice is deliberate. His final moments on stage hold ready an image of the self-dispossession which liberates and resolves contradictions. It may require greater receptivity than some audiences or critics are capable of to say with Marilyn Throne, that 'ultimately, then, *Faith Healer* is a sombre and ecstatic statement of faith'.[80] Even the most convinced post-Christian reader must, however, find eerily compelling—if not scandalous—the anatomy of human motivation which the play explores. *Faith Healer* presents a frightening picture of what happens to the world when post-Christian humanity recapitulates, fragmentarily and without comprehension, the rituals of identity, community, and sacrifice of which the Incarnation, for some, still makes sense.

In *The Heart of the World* Balthasar tries to imagine how Jesus would have seen his fellow human beings. 'The emptiness like dull hunger gaped in their souls: no expansive emptiness this, but rather a narrow, restricting hollowness that deprived them of head and senses.'[81] This passage resembles the description of the ill and dejected as Frank Hardy saw them:

> Abject, abased. Tight. Longing to open themselves and at the same time fearfully herding the anguish they contained against disturbance. And they hated me—oh, yes, yes, yes, they hated me. Because by coming to me they exposed, publicly acknowledged, their desperation.[82]

They came 'not to be cured but for the elimination of hope; for the removal of that final, impossible chance—that's why they came—to seal their anguish, for the content of a finality'.[83]

Hardy recognises their despair because it is the despair which accompanies and often drives him. In the passage quoted above Hardy refers to chance in the same way that he refers it to himself in the final monologue. Does Hardy in fact give in to despair; does he 'sacrifice' himself in order to end the round of hopeless 'ventures'? Balthasar's conception of Jesus' self-sacrifice—as a total self-dispossession—comprehends this problematised look at the faith healer *in extremis*. Again, in *The Heart of the World*, Balthasar tries to imagine the experience.

> Hard the task, but harder still the failure. Harder the experience of impotence and the certitude of the end ... It is foolish to die for a lost cause. It is foolish to hope when everything has long been played out. Foolish did God's love become, and wholly without dignity.[84]

Except for the fact that Francis Hardy does not address God in this fashion, he does seem to accept death with a sense of godforsakenness. One can wonder whether Hardy is experiencing what he had earlier called 'the flooding of hopeless hope'.[85]

Friel leaves us with an image of the apparently godforsaken faith healer. That image is ambiguous if not wholly enigmatic because the playwright refuses to mitigate the emptiness with which a postmodern world looks upon death, and the nearly impossible hope of transcendence, grace, and salvation. If Hardy can be seen as a type of the godforsaken Christ, his being flawed in the same way that all human beings are flawed also makes him the type of the godforsaken human being in a meaningless world. Hardy's deep understanding of the marginalised and the desperate—even with the violent and savage desperation of his own countrymen—makes him no less an ambiguous emblem of Incarnation.

Despite such final ambiguity, *Faith Healer* allows us to draw some tentative conclusions. The postmodern world is more used to the absence of God than God's presence. Religious experience is nearly non-existent or often exists in exaggerated, parodied, or superstitious forms. To find meaning and intensity in life, we look to the strange, the aberrant, and the forbidden. Beginning in the modern and reaching into the postmodern period, drama has sought to respond to this state of affairs. Balthasar and Friel respond, each in his own fashion. Balthasar's response recalls the primitive magic of theatre and its often obscure promise of a transcendent perspective. Friel responds by employing images, events, and situations which recall former, religious ways of encountering the divine. But he also responds to God's 'presence in absence' by constructing a theatrical space which suggests a perspective which Balthasar argues is the essence of theatre, and which is arguably a postmodern equivalent of the transcendent.

In the end, those works of literature are most fundamentally Christian which present the human being and his or her destiny as mystery. Like many of his other plays, Friel's *Faith Healer* portrays the human mystery as it shadows forth fragments of the Christian mystery. The play embodies them in Frank Hardy's growing self-knowledge of gift, and of the tension *in* himself and between himself and society. That mystery manifests itself in Hardy's growing realisation that a gift may mean dispossession and becoming a victim. Frank Hardy is seized with this revelation, and the play's four monologues permit the audience—in Balthasar's words—to 'observe and judge' its own meaning and its own relation to the mystery which Hardy's growing revelation enacts.

Balthasar warns against seeking to interpret human being too narrowly, urging that we:

> refrain at the same time from interpreting man according to a consistent idea, however sublime. For man is the image of God, of whom it is absolutely certain that he cannot be defined by any finite formula. If you understand him, he is not God. This much philosophy is able to state. But the unknown God comes alive for man by revealing himself, and so the unknown creature, man, also becomes important and fascinating in his incomprehensibility.[86]

Today a variety of 'anthropologies' vie for the chance to explain—if not explain away—the human into various cultural constructions. In such an age, plays like *Faith Healer* become more and more necessary, to challenge that narrow and reductive tendency, holding open the question of the human being's relation to mystery.

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[1] B. Brantley, 'From Three Versions of a Shared Past', *New York Times* (26.4.94) p. 143, C17; and B. Brantley, 'A Tale Told by a Dead Man', *New York Times* , 144 (25.12.95) p. 144, H5.

[2] W. Kerr, '"Faith Healer"—A Play That Reveals All', *New York Times*, (15.4.79), D3.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] This is the inscription on the banner which hangs above the stage at Hardy's performances. B. Friel, *Faith Healer* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 12.

[5] F.C. McGrath, 'Language, Myth and History in the Later Plays of Brian Friel', 30 *Contemporary Literature* 535–7 (Winter 1989); and D. Kiberd, 'Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*' in M. Sekine (ed), *Irish Writers and Society at Large* (Gerard Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1985) pp. 106–21.

[6] G. Hughes, 'Ghosts and Ritual in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', 24 *Irish University Review* 175–85 (Autumn/Winter 1994) p. 176.

[7] S. Deane, *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (Washington DC: Catholic UP, 1984) pp. 12–13.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 107, succinctly summarises that story: 'the idea of a well-brought-up girl, destined for a noble calling in the north of Ireland, but spirited away to Scotland by an attractive but feckless man, to the great dismay of an elderly guardian—that, in a nutshell, is the plot of both Friel's and Synge's plays.'

[9] G. O'Brien, *Brian Friel* (London: Gill and Macmillan, 1989), pp. 4–5.

[10] R. Kearney, 'Language Play: Brian Friel and Ireland's Verbal Theatre' in W. Kerwin (ed), *Brian Friel: A Case Book* (New York: Garland, 1997) pp. 77–117, esp. pp. 83–90 cites the influence of George Steiner's *After Babel* on what Kearney calls Friel's 'language plays'. These include both *Translations* and *The Communication Cord* and *Faith Healer*.

[11] F. Linehan, H. Leonard, J.B. Keane and B. Friel, 'The Future of Irish Drama', *Irish Times* (12.2.70).

[12] *The Man from God Knows Where*. Interview with Brian Friel by F. O'Toole, *In Dublin*, 165, (October 1982) p. 23.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[14] In his 'Introduction' to *Brian Friel: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 19, Seamus Deane says '*Faith Healer* has no political background' but other critics, like Richard Kearney, argue that the play nevertheless has a political message.

[15] *Faith Healer*, p. 12.

[16] The central piece in what Balthasar calls a 'triptych' of theological studies including *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theodrama*, and *Theologic*.

[17] 'A résumé of my thought', 15 *Communio* 468–73 (Winter, 1988) p. 472.

[18] H.U. von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989) p. 105.

[19] H.U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992), p. 44 and *Theodrama II*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990) p. 3.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[21] Balthasar, 'Why I am still a Christian' in *Two Say Why* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971) pp. 23–4.

[22] Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, p. 322.

[23] The wide-ranging references which critics invoke—from Chinese No plays to primitive ritual—imply the need for such comprehensiveness.

[24] Among numerous other references, see H.U. von Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) pp. 133, 167.

[25] Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, p. 260.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] U. Dantanus, *Brian Friel: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) pp. 88–9.

[28] R. Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama* (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 71–2.

[29] Hughes, 'Ghosts and Ritual in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', p. 178; and Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 11.

[30] McGrath, 'Language, Myth and History in the Later Plays of Brian Friel', pp. 537–8.

[31] Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, p. 12.

[32] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 38.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[35] Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, pp. 638–9.
[36] Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, p. 133.
[37] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 12.
[38] Balthasar, *Theodrama II*, pp. 30–1.
[39] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 12.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] K. Ferris, 'Brian Friel's Uses of Laughter' in W. Kerwin (ed), *Brian Friel: A Case Book* (New York: Garland, 1997) pp. 117–34 esp. p. 127 suggests that in some ways *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* might be considered as 'paired plays'.
[42] B. Friel, *Molly Sweeney* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994) p. 38.
[43] Balthasar, *Theodrama II*, pp. 31–3.
[44] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 20.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[46] M. Taylor, *Nots* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993) pp. 38–40.
[47] R. Kearney, 'Emmanuel Lévinas' in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) pp. 47–70, esp. p. 67.
[48] Balthasar, *Theodrama II*, pp. 244–5.
[49] E. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption* (New York: Continuum, 1994) p. 220.
[50] *Faith Healer*, p. 12.
[51] G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989) p. 229, argues that this sense of overwhelming weight *is* the postmodern equivalent of religious feeling.
[52] *Faith Healer*, p. 15.
[53] Hughes, 'Ghosts and Ritual in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', pp. 180–1.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[55] It is a raising of Frank's mother, which never takes place because Frank arrives home an hour late and decides there is nothing to be done.
[56] B. Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1993) p. 52.
[57] B. Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) p. 48.
[58] Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, p. 105.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 107.
[60] *Ibid.*, pp. 324–38.
[61] H.U. von Balthasar, *Science, Religion and Christianity* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1958) p. 63.
[62] It is in such dispersed images and issues, too, that we might locate what critics like Deane point to as the historical and political context of Friel's work. Even where a work does not deal consciously with Ireland's political and cultural oppression (as a play like *Translations* does), one can find dispersed and fragmented reference to that oppression.
[63] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 39.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 39. One might see in this scene another—perhaps far-fetched—Biblical echo; Christ entrusting Mary to his beloved disciple (Jn 19:26–7).
[66] *The Man from God Knows Where*, p. 22.
[67] Deane, *Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, p. 19.
[68] See also Friel's short story, 'The Illusionist', for another version of the 'artist parable' (*The Diviner*, pp. 91–105).
[69] Kiberd, 'Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', p. 111.
[70] H.U. von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, trans. E. Leiva-Marikasis, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995) p. 107.
[71] Kiberd, 'Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', p. 112.
[72] See Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama*, p. 143.
[73] German dramatic theorist Peter Szondi (*Theory of the Modern Drama* : Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987) p. 12, helps explain Friel's bold appropriation of an ancient formula. Szondi quotes a letter from Schiller to Goethe on *Oedipus the King*: 'The most compound of actions, though it militates against the tragic form, can nonetheless be its basis if the action has already taken place and so falls entirely outside the tragedy. In addition, that which has happened, because it is inalterable, is by its very nature much more terrible.'
[74] Balthasar, 'Why Am I Still a Christian?', pp. 23–4.
[75] Balthasar articulates this position in *In Gottes Einsatz Leben* (Einsiedeln: Verlag, 1971) p. 94: 'Election and choosing is a personalising and at the same time a dispossessing of the person for the benefit of others.'
[76] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 42.
[77] Hughes, 'Ghosts and Ritual in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*', p. 185.
[78] Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 229.
[79] His acceptance may also be seen as an at least partially ironic commentary on such

'gestures' as Yeats's Major Gregory, 'sacrificing' himself in the First World War.

[80] M. Throne, 'Brian Friel's Faith Healer: A Portrait of a Shaman', XVI *Journal of Irish Literature* 3 (1987) pp. 18–24, esp. p. 24.

[81] H.U. von Balthasar, *The Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1980) pp. 60–1.

[82] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 15.

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] Balthasar, *The Heart of the World*, pp. 71–2.

[85] Friel, *Faith Healer*, p. 15.

[86] Balthasar, *Science, Religion and Christianity*, p. 90.