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## Liminality in Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*

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**Abstract.** After the worldwide success of the 1990 play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel (Omagh, 1929), a playwright known for his search for new ways of dealing with his old preoccupations, created what many critics understood as a sequel to that play. *Wonderful Tennessee*, which premiered in 1993 at the Abbey Theatre, has been frequently considered *Lughnasa*'s younger and plainer sister. Whereas the seductiveness of the former cannot be denied, I intend to defend in this article the importance in Friel's oeuvre of *Wonderful Tennessee*, a play rich in meaning and original in form that presents a complete rite of passage as described in Victor Turner's anthropological studies. Friel unites elements that form part of ancient, Celtic and Christian rituals to show what has forever been humanity's aim: the attainment of the absolute.

**Key Words.** Brian Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee*, Victor Turner, ritual, theatre, liminality, rites of passage.

**Resumen.** Tras el éxito mundial de la obra de 1990 *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel (Omagh, 1929), un dramaturgo que siempre ha buscado nuevas formas de expresar sus inquietudes, creó una obra que muchos críticos calificaron de secuela de la anterior. *Wonderful Tennessee*, estrenada en 1993 en el Abbey Theatre, ha sido frecuentemente considerada la hermana fea de *Dancing at Lughnasa*. A pesar de que el atractivo de esta última es innegable, intentaremos defender aquí la importancia en la carrera de Friel de *Wonderful Tennessee*, una obra rica en significado y original en la forma utilizada para presentar en escena un rito de paso completo, tal y como los describe Victor Turner en sus estudios antropológicos. Friel une elementos de rituales de la antigüedad clásica, celtas y cristianos para mostrar lo que desde siempre ha sido la meta del ser humano: alcanzar lo absoluto.

**Palabras clave.** Brian Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee*, Victor Turner, ritual, teatro, liminalidad, ritos de paso.

Three years after the acclaimed play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Brian Friel (Omagh, 1929) wrote *Wonderful Tennessee*, which premiered at the Abbey Theatre. For many critics the latter was a failed attempt in which the author tried to exploit his previous success in the use of music and dancing on stage. Although the achievements of the former play are unquestionable, *Wonderful Tennessee* enjoys a well-deserved position in Friel's canon as the meaningful staging of the author's late reflections on ritual and ceremony. Moreover,

the play presents a complete rite of passage as described in Victor Turner's anthropological studies. Turner (1920-1983) produced a lengthy and highly influential oeuvre, in which he analyzed and discussed the structure, function and performance of rituals. Basing his work initially on his first field of research, the Ndembu tribe in Zambia, he extrapolated his discoveries to Western society in the last years of his life. In his 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner describes for the first time the liminal period in rites of passage. I will discuss

here the location of the characters of *Wonderful Tennessee* in this phase of the rite, and how they perform their own rituals that, despite their being placed in the twentieth century, mirror humanity's rituals since the beginning of time.

This play is also a tribute to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Its characters are three married couples in their late thirties or early forties who embark on a trip from Dublin to a mysterious island off the shore of the North coast of Donegal, in Ballybeg, the perennial set for Friel's plays. These three couples will wait on an abandoned pier in vain for the archetypal ferryman, Carlin (the mythological Charon), who never turns up. This cul-de-sac situation is Friel's excuse to reflect on those issues that preoccupied him at the time of writing: the power of the irrational over the human being, violence, the passage of time, and, above all, mystery, the yearning of humanity for something which is superior to us but which nonetheless mystifies us. In an interview prior to the Broadway premiere of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1991, the author already advanced the core of his new play, which was going to be called *The Imagined Place*: "If *Dancing at Lughnasa* is about the necessity for paganism', he said, then his next play [*Wonderful Tennessee*] will deal with 'the necessity for mystery. It's mystery, not religion, but mystery finds its expression in this society mostly in religious practice.' The working title is *The Imagined Place*" (Murray 1999: 148). This reflection brings to our mind another of Friel's obsessions at that moment. As I have observed in *Érase una vez Ballybeg* (Gaviña 2011), during the 1990's the author sought inspiration in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose words Friel paraphrases through the character of Frank, the writer. Following Wittgenstein's ideas about what cannot be expressed with words, Friel makes use of other forms of expression like music, dance, even staging a secular mass, with all the ingredients of a Eucharist disguised as the entertainment of a group of friends.

### 1. Oilean Draoichta (Island of Mystery)

The protagonists in this play are all related: Terry, the leader of the group, is a concert promoter; he is taking the rest of them to this pier from which they will set off to the uninhabited island for the night to celebrate his

birthday. Berna is Terry's wife, a solicitor out of practice due to her constant depressions. Angela is Berna's sister, a teacher of classical culture, married to Frank, who, thanks to Terry's patronage, is at the moment working on a book about time measure in the Middle Ages. Angela had been Terry's first love, and, although he married her sister, he is still in love with her. The last couple is composed of Trish, Terry's sister, and her husband George, an accordionist diagnosed with throat cancer, who speaks with difficulty and uses music to communicate with the others.

The first image the audience gets is that of the abandoned pier, with only the sounds of the sea and the sea birds. This nature, alien to human beings and their never-ending strife, is the main character of the play for Elmer Andrews: "the real protagonist is the timeless, elemental world of nature pre-existing and long outlasting the human story. A magical, folkloric, sacred sense of place is challenged by a process of historical colonialism and encroaching modernity" (1995: 250). The peaceful picture is interrupted by the noisy arrival of the happy trippers. They make their appearance singing and dancing to George's accordion music. They will spend the weekend in the same place, although Frank goes from time to time to speak to Carlin, a very old man, "ancient, filthy and toothless" in Frank's description, almost inhuman. And every time he comes back with the ferryman's promise to take them to the island after fulfilling some domestic task he is involved in at the moment. So they kill time by dancing, singing and telling stories. Terry tells them how his father used to take him on pilgrimages to the island when he was only seven, and how the legend goes that it could only be seen every seven years because the mist would cover it for the rest of the time. Frank speaks about his book, and the importance of the new medieval ways of measuring time that allowed for regular prayer times. That favoured mysticism, as the monks would wake up at fixed times during the night, and with their fasting and the cold they would be very susceptible to apparitions. Berna tells her story about the legend of the Loreto house, how it went flying from Jerusalem to Italy, and explains her partiality to that story because it supposes an offence to reason. She is so affected by telling it that she jumps into the sea.

In the second act we learn a new story about the island. Apart from being the site of a medieval monastery, a place for pilgrimage, and a legend in itself, it had been a crime scene in 1932. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, a group of seven boys and seven girls coming from the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, after a night of heavy drinking, had what seemed to be an orgy in which one of the boys was ritually killed and dismembered. After that the bishop exiled the other thirteen and imposed silence on their families. It was the beginning of the end for the place, the parish never recovered from the tragedy. Early the following morning, the bus driver arrives to pick the exhausted trippers up and, after carrying out their own ceremony, they leave the place.

The set remains the same in both acts of the play: the pier is centre stage, mainland is on the left and the sea takes the right and the auditorium. Whenever the characters are looking across the sea for the island, they are looking at the audience. The time is contemporary, the secular 1990s.

## 2. Rites of Passage

*Wonderful Tennessee* can be analyzed by applying Victor Turner's discoveries on rituals. Turner's ideas about social drama, theatre as a "liminoid"<sup>1</sup> activity, and rite as a process, which appeared in different publications throughout his life, would be thus seen as the theoretical substance behind this story about people who, like Father Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, carry out their own spiritual search. For Turner rituals have a transformative power due to their association with social transitions (1967: 95). Friel explains the importance he gives to ritual in words which in fact refer to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, but can be equally applied to *Wonderful Tennessee*: "Ritual (...) is how human beings impose a sense of order on the awesome disorder of life. (...) Dancing becomes a bridge to some acknowledgment of the mystical; it traps a sense of otherness" (Lahr in Delaney 2003: 215, 216).

According to Turner, "Life-crisis rituals" exemplify the transition of an individual from one state to another. He defines state as: "a

relatively fixed or stable condition" (1967: 7-15). Van Gennep defined these rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1967: 94). This transition is composed of three stages: the pre-liminal (separation), in which a person or a group is isolated from their collective or social stratum; the liminal (margin), in which the subject or subjects are part of an ambiguous phase where the laws of the previous stage or of the future one do not apply; and the post-liminal (aggregation), where the subject or the group become part of the new collective or social class, with the rights and the obligations this entails. The characters in *Wonderful Tennessee* can be located in the intermediate stage, they are going through a midlife crisis, all of them having abandoned the previous stage but not yet entering the new one: Terry is broke; Berna suffers from depression; George has three months left and his wife Trish has to confront this and the fact that they will never have children; Frank gave up his job to become a writer and he is about to publish his first book, and Angela has listlessly resumed her old job as a teacher. This pilgrimage, this weekend, will be their rite of passage, physically represented by the pier. A no-man's-land, it is neither mainland – civilization, the world they come from – nor the island –mystery, otherness, the irrational, faith. In Turner's words: "They are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (1967: 95). Moreover, they are structurally invisible, separated from the rest of the society and hidden from it, like the Ndembu tribe's hiding of the boys undergoing the puberty rite, or the seclusion of the Swazi king in the harvest rites.

Turner calls the collective in this intermediate stage "communitas", and attributes to it a number of features, the most important being that of equity. The members of this group are "brothers" in a Christian ceremony, with no hierarchy among them, and they share a feeling of solidarity: "they *have* nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows. Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty

1. Turner coined the term "liminoid" to establish a difference with liminal phenomena, which, for him, are restricted to primitive tribal societies.

(...) Each for all, and all for each” 1967: 98-101). In the above-mentioned interview on the occasion of *Dancing at Lughnasa*’s Broadway opening, the critic John Lahr already uses this terminology, acknowledging the role of dancing in the creation of such a community: “The ceremonial generates community – not division. And as the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland has long borne witness, sin is separation. Dancing expresses the will to integrate with life, not separate from it” (Lahr in Delaney 2003: 215). This “communitas” is like the one that inhabited the island in the Middle Ages, when it was occupied by Saint Conall’s community of monks, and perhaps, as Frank believes, they imagined that perfection lived on the other side. It is also similar to the group formed by the fourteen youngsters coming from the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin when they celebrated their own ritual on the island.

### 3. The Sacra

The three couples in the present time share with the other two communities the three main elements of the communication of the “sacra” that Turner described as the core of the liminal matter, present in the Greek Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries and in initiation rites all over the world: “*Sacra* may be communicated as: (1) exhibitions, ‘what is shown’; (2) actions, ‘what is done’; and (3) instructions, ‘what is said’” (Turner 1967: 102).

In *Wonderful Tennessee* we find an impressive amount of the first component: the votive offerings they leave behind on the stand described in the set as: “A listing and rotting wooden stand, cruciform in shape, on which hangs the remnant of a life-belt”;<sup>2</sup> the rainwater they collect, the flowers that Frank gives Berna, the axe-shaped stone that he gives George, the mounds of stone recalled by Terry and composed again by Angela’s game of throwing stones. Secondly the audience witness their actions: all the songs they sing

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2. All quotations from the play are taken from: Friel, B. 1993. *Wonderful Tennessee*. London: Faber and Faber. All subsequent quotes will be identified by page numbers from this edition between brackets in the text.

and the dances they perform, including hymns sung in a parodical manner; and also Angela’s game, which they will use for their last action in the farewell ceremony. Finally there are also the instructions, the “mythical history”; each of them tells a story, the first narration being Terry’s, with the legend about this mysterious and invisible island:

There is a legend that it was once a spectral, floating island that appeared out of the fog every seven years and that fishermen who sighted it saw a beautiful country of hills and valleys, with sheep browsing on the slopes, and cattle in green pastures, and clothes drying on hedges. And they say they saw leaves of apple and oak, and heard a bell and the song of coloured birds. Then, as they watched it, the fog devoured it and nothing was seen but the foam swirling on the billow and the tumbling of the dolphins (18).

Berna’s story about the flying house focuses on the magical, religious and transcendent aspect of this ritual they are performing. And we have Trish’s description of her wedding day, and Angela’s narration of Greek ceremonies: every story they tell adds to the mythological substratum.

### 4. Eleusinian Mysteries

After listening to the story of the boy’s sacrifice on the island and watching her friends almost fulfilling Terry’s sacrifice, Angela narrates how in Eleusis, in the Greek Attica, religious ceremonies were held in honour of the goddess Demeter every year at the end of summer (like in the harvest festival in *Dancing at Lughnasa*):

All we know about the ceremonies is that they began with a period of fasting; that there was a ritual purification in the sea; and that young people went through a ceremony of initiation. And there was music and dancing and drinking. And we know, too, that sacrifice was offered. And that’s about all we know. Because the people who took part in the ceremonies vowed never to speak of what happened there. So that when the civilization came to an end it took the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries with it (72).

Friel has represented human sacrifice and the violence it generates as forming part of the Irish people’s psyche on countless occasions – for instance in *The Gentle Island*, *Volunteers*,

*Faith Healer*, and *Translations*<sup>3</sup> – however now, as he juxtaposes this to Angela’s narration of the Eleusinian mysteries, he is acknowledging this behaviour as universal. Fratricidal violence seen in that light does not seem an endemic evil but the result of an atavistic instinct in human beings. Curiously enough, Turner highlights the importance of these Eleusinian Mysteries as a transformative process: “See Cicero’s comment (*De Leg.* II, 14) on the Eleusinian Mysteries: “They are rightly called initiations (beginnings) because we have thus learned the first principles of life” (1967: 108).

Nonetheless, these mysteries that celebrated the return of Demeter’s daughter Persephone from the dead, are, like the flying house story, the monks’ visions, and the legend of the island that becomes visible every seven years, demonstrations that the human being needs his or her irrational side. The author seems to be in search of some kind of faith, maybe the one he wished to find when he confessed in 1972: “and [I] hope that between now and my death I will have acquired a religion, a philosophy, a sense of life that will make the end less frightening than it appears to me at this moment” (Murray 1999: 37). He expressed in that way a yearning for completion that went beyond reason. In the interview he gave Lahr almost twenty years later he concedes this role to religion: “I think there is a value in religion (...). I think whether we want to call it religion or the acknowledgment of mystery or a salute to the otherness, it can be enriching. I think self-fulfilment is the realization of that otherness” (Delaney 2003: 215). Berna explains it thus after telling her story: “A flying house is an offence to reason, isn’t it? It marches up to reason and belts it across the gob and says to it, ‘Fuck you, reason. I’m as good as you any day. You haven’t all the fucking answers – not by any means.’ That’s what Dr Walsingham’s story says. And that’s why I like it” (46). These words seem a rephrasing of Turner’s as he develops the importance of the liminal phase in these rites:

Liminality breaks (...) the cake of custom and enfranchises speculation (...) Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence (...) We are here in the realm of what Warner (...) would call ‘nonrational or nonlogical symbols’ which (...) ‘when they come into play, such factors as data, evidence, proof, and the facts and procedures of rational thought in action are apt to be secondary or unimportant’ (Turner 1967: 106, 107).

This refers us to Turner’s later studies. In his last years, he applied neurological discoveries to his theories. He understood that the left hemisphere of the brain, the rational, logical and structured side, needed the right one for its perfection, the one that represented the liminal phase, the “*communitas*”:

The left hemisphere of the brain is concerned with structure and logic, while the right hemisphere gives a sense of the whole, of *communitas* (in Turner’s term). The human brain itself would thus encompass both free will and the genetically fixed. This led Turner to believe that his notions of *communitas* and structure, conceived as phases in the ritual process and as recurring models of society, have a neurophysiological basis (Deflem 1991: 16).

Angela has been the marginal element for most of the play because, as she explains to Terry, there is no space in her for the irrational: “TERRY: Wonderful, isn’t it? / ANGELA: (*Gesturing to the island*) I can live without all that stuff, Terry. Honestly. Housework – the kids – teaching – bills – Frank – doctors – more bills – just getting through everyday is about as much as I can handle; more than I can handle at times” (67). The two sisters seem to represent the two hemispheres of the brain. Angela does not participate in Terry’s “sacrifice”; she has not left any token on the stand, and, when all of them are performing the farewell ritual, she refuses to take part. Nonetheless, at the end, when George asks her to return after his death in memory of him, she awakes to the transformational process:

GEORGE: You’ll come back some day.

ANGELA: I don’t think –

GEORGE: Yes, you will. Some day. And when you do, do it for me. No, no, I don’t mean for me – just in memory of me.

(*She looks at him for a second. Then quickly, impetuously, she catches his head between her hands and kisses him. Then she breaks away from*

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3. For *The Gentle Island* see p. 95, for *Volunteers* see pp. 125 – 127, for *Faith Healer* see pp. 197 and 198, and for *Translations* see pp. 218-220 and 475-477 (Gaviña 2011).

him, rushes to the stand, kisses her sun hat and hangs it resolutely on the very top of the stand.)

ANGELA: (*Defiantly*) For you, George! For both of us!

(*She rushes back to him, takes his arm and begins singing 'Down By the cane-brake' loudly, joyously, happily – and he accompanies her with comparable brio....*) (78).

## 5. Russian dolls

As in a hall of mirrors, this group reproduces the rituals that other people had performed on the island before, rituals that Terry, as the master of ceremonies, explains. The island was a pilgrimage site, and Terry remembers when he was seven and his father took him there and they were awake all night, like these contemporary pilgrims: “There were three beds – you know, mounds of stone – and every time you went round a bed you said certain prayers and then picked up a stone from the bottom of the mound and placed it on the top” (19). This is the ceremony that our characters carry out when they are leaving:

*TRISH goes to the mound of stones. She walks around it once. Then she picks up a stone from the bottom of the mound and places it on the top. Then she walks around the mound a second time and again she places a stone on top. Then she goes to the lifebelt stand and lightly touches her votive offering. Then she goes to her belongings, picks them up and slowly moves off. The moment TRISH completes her first encircling BERNA joins her. First she places the flowers FRANK gave her at the foot of the stand. Then she does the ritual that TRISH is doing. And this ceremony – encircling, lifting a stone, encircling, lifting a stone, touching the votive offering – is repeated by every character* (77).

Terry also recalls a holy well: : “And I remember a holy well, and my father filling a bottle with holy water and stuffing the neck with grass – you know, to cork it” (19). Their own well is the hole with rain water they have been using to mix with the whiskey. When they are preparing to leave the place, Frank repeats Terry’s father’s action: “*he picks up a plastic cup, scoops whatever water is left in the ‘well’ and pours it into the brandy bottle. (...) He corks the bottle with paper tissues*” (67). Terry describes the votive offerings: “And there were crutches and walking sticks hanging

on the bush; and bits of cloth – *bratoga*, my father called them – a handkerchief, a piece of shawl – bleached and turning green from exposure. Votive offerings...” (20). Our characters leave their own votive offerings: first Berna leaves her scarf tied to one of the arms of the stand, Frank leaves his belt afterwards, then Trish puts her bracelet on the other arm and knots George’s handkerchief besides. Terry does not want to leave anything and the rest of them rip his shirt off him to leave it. Then Angela, who had picked her hat up from the stand, places it back, voluntarily participating for the first time in this farewell ceremony.

However, they not only perform the cult celebrated on the island when it was a pilgrimage destination – the Christian side of the ritual. The Dionysian, the pagan side that the young group in the 1930s represents, is also carried out in the play. These couples, as the young people years before them, come from Dublin and have been drinking heavily during the journey. There are three men and three women and one of them is an incredible musician who incites them to sing and dance, like the group of youngsters who had a great fiddler with them and had gone to the island to have a dance. The act of ripping Terry’s shirt off mirrors the boy’s dismemberment:

(TERRY *tries to back away from them. They encircle him. They sing with TRISH:*)

ALL: ‘We want the shirt – we want the shirt – (etc.)’

TERRY: My shoes! My shoes and socks –

BERNA: The shirt, Terry.

TRISH: The shirt – the shirt!

FRANK: The shirt – the shirt – the shirt!

(*All sing again, ‘We want the shirt – we want the shirt’ GEORGE starts playing ‘Here comes the bride’.*)

TERRY: For God’s sake, this is the only shirt I have here!

FRANK: Grab him!

TERRY: Frank!

(*And suddenly they all grab him (all except ANGELA who is by herself at the end of the pier – but watching). TERRY falls to the ground. They pull at his shirt*) (69).

The scene calls to our mind the boy burnt in the bonfire in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Terry’s sacrifice, the stand in the shape of a cross, the cake that Angela leaves as an offering, are vertexes that unite Christian and pagan rituals, like Celtic crosses, a fusion of Celtic and

Christian iconography; and, together with the story of the Eleusinian mysteries told by Angela, demonstrate that these rituals go beyond any religion, and rather respond to the ancestral human need for fulfilment, something shared by all cultures.

## 6. Hope

Friel, in celebrating the irrational, seems to be, almost for the first time in his career, celebrating hope. Turner considered liminality a “realm of pure possibility” (1967: 97) and equalled the liminal phase to the subjunctive mood of culture: “the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire” (Turner 1986: 42). The characters in *Wonderful Tennessee* spend the whole play hoping to reach the island; Terry repeats tirelessly that there is still time, that Carlin will come. Even after seven in the morning he asks Frank about the chances they have of Carlin’s arrival. The ferryman never makes it, but that no longer matters, as Trish puts it when they are leaving the pier, and they propose to repeat the trip the following year and reach the island: “And even though we don’t make it out there – (...) Well, at least now we know... it’s there” (74). Berna also clings to hope: “There are times when I feel I’m... about to be happy. (...) Maybe that’s how most people manage to carry on – ‘about to be happy’; the real thing *almost* within grasp, just a step away” (32). Her jump into the sea at the end of the first act is no more than her particular initiation; as in the Eleusinian mysteries, she begins her own ritual with her cleansing in the sea. Terry is the paradigm of hope; he takes an option on the island even though he is broke and knows he will not be able to buy it, and comforts the others when they learn about his bankruptcy: “Things will pick up. The tide will turn. I’ll rise again. Oh, yes, I’ll rise again” (75). The idea of returning the following year comes from him just after saying that he will not keep the island: “So we’ll come back again, will we? (...) Next year? What about next year?” (75).

The island is an object of desire, the embodiment of hope. This is what the legend told by Terry shows. That is why it can only be seen on occasion. Each character sees a different shape for the island: a circle, a ukulele. Trish even asks whether it is not a mirage. Angela, on the other hand, is not even

interested in seeing it, although she is the one to give it the most suitable name: “A destination of wonder” (17). The name of the island, Oilean Draoichta, means “Island of Otherness; Island of Mystery”. Trish does not fully understand what this mystery means and Berna explains it to her: “The wonderful – the sacred – the mysterious” (17, 18). According to the legend, the island ceased to be magical when some fishermen lit a fire on it, because fire is the symbol of evolution, of reason. It dissolves night, darkness and mystery.

## 7. Ritual elements

Music in this play acquires the category of a character. Although music has been a determinant feature in Friel’s dramaturgy, we are presented in this play with live music for the first time. Songs and dances fulfil a double role: helping in the achievement of the mystic ecstasy typical in rituals, and expressing what verbal language cannot express. Frank, when talking about the community of monks who lived on the island, about their acceptance of the absolute, explains to Terry that perhaps they did see something, and when answering Terry’s “see what?” he paraphrases Wittgenstein:

Whatever it is we desire but can’t express. What is beyond language. The inexpressible. The ineffable. (...) And even if they were in touch, even if they actually did see, they couldn’t have told us, could they, unless they had the speech of angels? Because there is no vocabulary for the experience. Because language stands baffled before all that and says of what it has attempted to say, ‘No, no! That’s not it all! No, not at all!’ (41).

Music is the closest thing to this wordless expression of the absolute. George, the artist, who has already undertaken his path towards the absolute, can hardly speak and when he does, he employs a very low voice. Yet he plays the accordion tirelessly, as Trish says: “As if he were afraid to stop” (15). His performance would seem an echo of what Turner described of African ladies in trance: “This is akin to what I have often seen in Africa, where thin, ill-nourished old ladies, with only occasional naps, dance, sing, and perform ritual activities for two or three days and nights on end” (1986: 43). George’s “narration” is a sonata played at very high speed. He plays, as Friel writes, “close to

parody” because his performance is “dextrous and skilful and fast” (37) like his own life has been, and to make this similarity complete, he suddenly stops in the middle of a phrase, bows and goes to sleep. He is the one who shapes the feelings and emotions developed on stage with his accordion. He even plays jokes and enhances the comic scenes with his music.

The title of the play comes from a song Trish and Terry’s mother used to sing, “Down by the Cane-Brake”: “Come, my love, come, my boat lies low, / She lies high and dry on the O-hi-o. / Come, my love, come, and come along with me / And I’ll take you back to Tennessee” (33, 77). That is why they call the island Tennessee, and they sing this as a farewell song, while celebrating their ceremony, and it is the last song in the play, happily sung by Angela and played with brio by George. In his notes for the festival which celebrated his seventieth anniversary (“Seven Notes for a Festival Programme”), Friel dedicates a section to the music in his plays, and there he explains the reasons behind this song: “I used a song called ‘Down by the Cane-Break’ in a play called *Wonderful Tennessee* because it was a song my mother sang; and because the words of the song – the promise of happiness in the Eden of Tennessee – those words echo the theme of the play” (Murray 1999: 176, 177).

As we have seen in the components of the communication of the sacra, we have another aspect of these rituals which Friel has been using in his plays ever since *The Gentle Island*, the popular Irish tradition of “storytelling”. Nonetheless, in *Wonderful Tennessee* every story fulfils a different task, although globally the narrative act is seen as a need not only to understand reality but to comfort, to alleviate the pain that reality inflicts on us. This is seen, for instance, when Frank urges Trish to tell her story to calm Berna’s anxiety: “FRANK: Any kind of fiction will do us / ANGELA: Myth – fantasy – / TERRY: A funny story – / ANGELA: A good lie – / FRANK: Even a bad lie. Look at us for God’s sake – we’ll accept anything!” (47). When Trish describes her wedding day, Terry complains because they all know that story; however Frank reminds him about the sedative power of stories: “So what? All we want of a story is to hear it again and again and again and again” (50).

Finally, I wish to highlight a constant in Friel’s plays, used to enhance their symbolic

force and magical implications: the number seven. The mysterious island was seen every seven years; Terry was that age when his father took him on pilgrimage there; Jesus Christ’s house flew all the way from Israel to Italy on the seventh day of March; they are expecting the bus to take them back to Dublin at seven past, so their ceremony ends by that time; at seven sharp the veil of mist rises and Frank sees his apparition – a dolphin that, like a satyr, dances for him for a whole minute. The group of youngsters from the Dublin Eucharistic congress was made up of seven boys and seven girls and they were seventeen. There are also seven characters: the three couples and the ferryman Carlin, the Godot in this play who, although invisible, has a determinant role in it. The number seven was also used profusely in *Faith Healer* and *The Gentle Island* because it is an archetypal number: it represents perfection, as it is composed of the number three – the Trinity – and four – the four seasons, the cycle of life, the four elements – it represents the conclusion of the circle (Guerin 1999: 163).

## 8. The Role of the Artist

Each staged ritual in the play contains former ones previously narrated, but, in addition, the play as such is also a ritual. We must not forget that Friel has always regarded theatre from that perspective, and in *Wonderful Tennessee* this is made obvious. The place chosen as its setting is, as Coult argues, a representation of what a dramatic scene means:

The pier is a special space, neither land nor sea, an essentially theatrical space, on which great personal transformations are possible because they are not tied to convention. (...) the audience is effectively looking at the characters from the island’s mysterious point of view, (...) It seems to give the audience a role as witnesses, like a Greek chorus (Coult 2003: 112).

According to Turner we can find in dramatic plays: “something of the investigative, judgemental, and even punitive character of law-in-action, and something of the sacred, mythic, numinous, even ‘supernatural’ character of religious action” (Turner 1982: 12). Turner invents the term “liminoid” to mark the difference between cultural manifestations and liminal phenomena because these liminoid activities are a product of artists or groups who are always on the margins of



society and have a very specific task: “The liminoid originates outside the boundaries of the economic, political, and structural process, and its manifestations often challenge the wider social structure by offering social critique on, or even suggestions for, a revolutionary re-ordering of the official social order” (Deflem 1991: 16). Turner’s description of the artist’s role in society matches Friel’s career as a playwright. Friel explained what theatre meant for him in the above-mentioned “Seven Notes for a Festival Programme”, making use of a tale which would inspire the legend about the island in *Wonderful Tennessee*. This object of desire, this symbol of hope and transcendence, is the play itself:

There is a Russian folk-tale about a mythical town called Kitezh.

The story goes that when Kitezh sensed that marauders were approaching, it encased itself in a mist and shrank into it and vanished from sight. But even as it disappeared, even after it had disappeared, the church bell never stopped ringing and could be heard through the mist and over the whole countryside.

I suppose like all folk-tales this story can be interpreted in whatever way your needs require. But for me the true gift of theatre, the real benediction of all art, is the ringing bell which reverberates quietly and persistently in the head long after the curtain has come down and the audience has gone home. Because until the marauders withdraw and the fog lifts, that sacred song is the only momentary stay we have against confusion (Murray 1999: 180).

Throughout his career as a playwright, Friel has usually avoided, formally speaking, taking a path already explored. Nonetheless, *Wonderful Tennessee* seems a formal and thematic continuation of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Csilla Bertha points out the role that ritual achieves in both plays as the main connection between them: “in both cases, the pagan rituals and their updated, individualised versions express defiance of the restricting reality – whether restricted by old-fashioned institutions or by modern rationality – and give temporary liberation, fulfilment and contact with the innermost selves of the character” (Bertha 1999: 122). McGrath considers this play a

minor achievement because of its obviousness in dealing with themes, ritual and myth, making both the issues and the characters irrelevant for the audience (McGrath 1999: 248-249). Notwithstanding the value of McGrath’s critique, *Wonderful Tennessee* is, for this writer, an outstanding and not yet fully appreciated experiment on stage about the realms of theatre. Friel reflects daringly on what a performance means, both for the actors and for the audience, closely following Turner’s theories about theatre. The play is composed of multiple layers, each a ritual in itself, in which humanity, as it has been depicted in Turner’s anthropological studies, is left bare for the audience to observe and recognize its universal pattern. Friel brings to stage the liminal phase of these people belonging to a liberal middle class, with its sense of *communitas* and with its elements of communication of the *sacra*: symbols, actions and mythical history; and the audience realizes that this human behaviour is not circumscribed to old civilizations or remote tribes. Moreover, by showing these intermingled elements of Christian and pagan rites on stage, as he did in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel also leads us to understand that the purpose of human beings is always one and the same: to attain the absolute, to grasp the mystery. Through music, dancing, symbols and storytelling, the play becomes a vehicle to produce in us, for the time of the performance, this sense of ecstasy, this touch of the absolute that might transform us – in Turner’s words:

When this happens in a performance, what may be produced is what d’Aquili and Laughlin call a ‘brief ecstatic state and sense of union (...) [which] may often be described as no more than a shiver running down the back at a certain point’. A sense of harmony with the universe is made evident and the whole planet is felt to be *communitas*. This shiver has to be won, though, to be a ‘consummation’, after working through a tangle of conflicts and disharmonies. Theater best of all exemplifies Thomas Hardy’s dictum: ‘If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst’. Ritual or theatrical transformation can scarcely occur otherwise (Turner 1986: 43, 44).

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