IN THE BEGINNING WAS SILENCE: BRIAN FRIEL'S REVISITATION OF THE ARTIST

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Give Me Your Answer, Do! is Friel's last play in the 20th century, and also the last one he wrote before receiving his country's homage on his seventieth birthday in 1999. It appeared after the much-praised *Molly Sweeney*, and it quickly came to be considered one of Friel's minor works. The fact that he himself directed it on its opening in the Abbey Theatre, in March 1997, with what reviewers considered a failed and amateurish direction of the actors, did not help the play to fly as high and as beautifully in the academic world as others have done in Friel's very long and prolific career. Bearing this in mind, we can appreciate the paradox of the main topic here: a writer on the verge of his sixties is suffering from a very long writer's block, and is in need of some kind of assessment, or so he believes, to recover his inspiration. Nonetheless, Friel had to wait for the abovementioned Friel Festival to obtain that assessment, considering how poorly *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* had done.

Mc Grath, one of the most severe among the academics, deplored its lack of appeal:

> *Give Me your Answer, Do!* is a theme play too–about the necessity for uncertainty in life–but whereas the characterization is improved over *Wonderful Tennessee*, plot, theme, and characterization in this recent play are not well integrated. A number of possibilities are raised but most are left hanging and the tendentious speech toward the end about the necessity of uncertainty in life falls flat and fails to provide any resonance for the plot [...] As with *Wonderful Tennessee* in *Give Me your Answer, Do!* Friel fails to make us care about either the issues or the characters (McGrath 1999, 248- 249).

David Nowlan, in his review on the premiere at the Abbey, signalled the overly literary quality of the play: "In all, it is an interesting evening, bursting with questions and ideas, but lacking in theatrical surprise or narrative thrust. It could be that the text may read better than was evident in last night's production or performance" (Nowlan 1997, 14).

As for Fintan O'Toole, he conceded a brilliant start, however, his criticism of the play is devastating, especially as he could not help but compare it with Friel's previous masterpiece *Faith Healer(*1979):

> Too much of what happens seems arbitrary. [...] Besides, the drama hinges on an issue that is hard to get excited about. [...] It has to be said that Brian Friel's own direction does little to make up in performance what the play lacks as a text. [...] In *Faith Healer* the self-analysis is woven into both a mythic pattern and a vividly evoked social reality. *Give Me Your Answer*, on the other hand, reaches for both myth and reality but gets a grip on neither (O'Toole, 1997: 12).

While we might agree with the widespread opinion among critics and scholars that the play suffers from certain weaknesses, it is no less true that it summarizes the old Frielian preoccupations about language, adding to them his most recent meditations on Wittgenstein's philosophy and the inexpressible, resuming his analysis of the artist in yet another quite autobiographical play.

The plot is a quite simple one: Tom Connolly, a writer in his sixties, and his wife Daisy, a former piano player in her forties, are celebrating an evening party in which there are other two couples and a single man. We find Daisy's parents: Maggie, a retired doctor, and Jack, a cocktail pianist suffering from kleptomania; Tom's friend and colleague Garret Fitzmaurice and his wife Gráinne; and the outsider element: the American, David Knight, almost a carbon copy of the character of Tom in *Aristocrats*, someone sent by a Texan university to assess Tom's archive and perhaps buy it. They gather in the Connolly's decaying house, an old manse which seems to be the same mansion as the one from the 1979 play *Aristocrats*.

However, before we witness this reunion, another very important character without voice introduces the audience into the play: Bridget, Tom and Daisy's daughter. She is committed to a mental hospital, and this is where the action starts. She has been there since she was twelve, some ten years by now, and remains in a catatonic state, showing no hint of an improvement or any kind of change. Tom accomplishes his weekly duty of visiting her and bringing her clean clothes and food, and performs a comical monologue for her, although the audience is aware of her total isolation and the absolute lack of communication between them. His visits open and close the play.

“To the Necessary Uncertainty”

Give Me Your Answer, Do! is one of Friel’s more introspective and less socially concerned plays–although in David’s report of having to “deliver Ireland” to his Texan masters, the farce *The Mundy Scheme* is recalled[1]. We might even feel a certain embarrassment to be present at this stripping of his soul, almost eavesdropping on his intimate reflections on the doubts and complexes that tormented him as a writer. The title of the play, taken from a Harry Dacre’s 1892 song (*Daisy Bell*), makes explicit reference to this uncertainty about one’s own value that the main character, Tom Connolly, shares with Frank Hardy, the main character in *Faith Healer*.

Still, we suspect that the main conflict in this play is simply a reduction of the torturing doubts which infected the faith healer: Frank’s never-ending self-questioning was about the origin of his talent, his ability to summon it, its reality, its duration, its effect on people, its real value. His constant self-analysis leads him to self-destruction. Tom’s dilemma is simpler: What is his real value as a writer? The only thing he needs to know is his price, how much he is valued by this rather mediocre god, David Knight, who, with the power conferred by the academic world represented in the Texan university, will be able to declare Tom’s life-long creation worthy or unworthy. As in *Faith Healer*, the suspicion that the spring of his creativity has dried up leads him to this search for some certainty, for any kind of assurance. He has not been able to write more than twenty pages of his last novel for over five years, and he wonders whether this might be the end. Those were Friel’s own fears, as he reflected in his “sporadic diary”, the diary he was writing at the time of the play: “Panic sets in when nothing stirs, when even the wish to sit at the desk has gone. A conviction that it is finally over. And of course that condition *will* come. And why not now?” (Murray 1999, 166). Tom, in his monologue with Bridget at the beginning of the play, speaks of this drought that has lasted five years, and jokes about its ending:

> My new novel? Yes, yes, yes, I was waiting for that question. We’ve had a surfeit of your cheeky jokes on that subject over the year, haven’t we? (*He picks up the briefcase and turns it upside-down*) Empty. The novel is finished, Miss Connolly. “I don’t believe you!” Finished. “After how long?” Five years. “Difficult years?” Oh, yes, five very difficult years, my darling; five years of –desperation? (14)[2].

Garret, on seeing David and learning about his possible purchase of Tom’s archive, explains the terrible barren years the man is going through: “What a desolate time that man has had this past number of years: lost his agent; fought with his publisher; antagonised all those people who might throw him a bit of work. And all because–goddammit!–all because he just could not write! I’ve been through it–utter desolation” (47). Nonetheless, Gráinne believes that her husband, Garret, should also give up writing, as, for her, writers should know when to retire: “Why do they keep stumbling on long after they’re dead creatively?” (46). Friel, two years before his seventieth birthday, seems to be seriously considering this question; more than a year after beginning the play he wrote: “This morning I gathered together the notes and notebooks and pieces of paper and the first ten pages and put them into a cardboard box. The act requires some courage. A formal acknowledgement of failure has to be made” (Murray 1999, 171).

Therefore, Tom writes for David to be judged by him, assessed, confirmed in his value: “I gave him absolute freedom to examine every private detail of my entire career: every stumbling first draft, every final proof copy, every letter, every invitation, every rejection [...] My entire goddamn life for Christ’s sake! Touch it, feel it, sniff it, *weigh* it! And then, Mister God, please tell me it’s not altogether worthless” (23). Daisy shows her understanding at first. She acknowledges his need for self-confidence, and his belief that by deserving David’s praise, he would recover his long-lost wholeness: “So my hope would be that he makes you a worthy offer–just for your sake, only for your sake. Because that acknowledgement, that affirmation might give you–whatever it is–the courage?–the equilibrium?–the necessary self-esteem? just to hold on. Isn’t that what everybody needs?” (24).

However, David’s verdict does not quench Tom’s doubts, which is why he is unimpressed by the answer when the archivist states that he would buy if the writer included his two unpublished novels. The outcome does not convince him of his real worth. It is futile because, as Daisy notes, David is only an agent, he is of no importance. Moreover, he cannot assuage the anxiety that eats away those who are never fully satisfied with their creation, the dissatisfaction which pushes the creator towards perfection, but carries with it the bitterness of self-criticism.

In my opinion, Friel’s use of this character–mediocre like his last academic–to resolve Tom’s existential anguish seems somewhat disconcerting. In *Faith Healer*, Frank surrenders himself to death as the only way to extinguish his doubts, whereas in this play the artist expects from a man who cannot guess the name of the musicians that Daisy plays properly, nor the authors of the literary quotations Tom pesters him with–a man who is described as terribly boring by his own friends, who suffered a nervous breakdown and lost his job, fiancé and social status–to represent the voice of the audience and the critics. Thus, Tom’s perplexity when he realizes that David’s desire to acquire his archive has not meant the definite answer he was waiting for, the one that would refrain him from inflicting this torture of endless self-questioning, is the only natural reaction. Besides, there is no real cause-and-effect relation between the fact of buying the archive and Tom’s loss of drive of permanent dissatisfaction. Although Daisy poses the dilemma in this light, it does not seem a logical conclusion: whether the university takes his archive or not, cannot in any way dispel his doubts, therefore, why should he refuse to sell? We are led to believe that only by this rejection can Tom make a show of his integrity, in opposition to his colleague, the popular writer Garret, who has sold his archive. Daisy, as an answer to her parents’ pressure on Tom to make him accept and sell, voices the author in his toast to uncertainty:

> Oh, no, he mustn't sell. Of course he mustn't sell. There are reasons why he wants to sell and those are valid reasons and understandable and very persuasive. [...] And if David's offer is as large as he suggests, then of course the most persuasive reason of all: the work has value–yes, yes, yes! Here is the substantial confirmation, the tangible evidence! The work *must* be good! [...] But to sell for an affirmation, for an answer, to be free of that grinding uncertainty, that would be so wrong for him and so wrong for his work. Because the uncertainty is necessary. He must live with that uncertainty, that necessary uncertainty. Because there can be no verdicts, no answers. Indeed there *must* be no verdicts. Because being alive is the postponement of verdicts, isn't it? (79, 80)

The whole play revolves around the praise for the uncertainty that life brings forth. Daisy does not know whether she will ever leave Tom; Maggie suffers from an arthritis that is developing fast, but instead of being visited by a competent professional, she prefers a rather mediocre one because he is unable to give her a definite answer. She is also tormented by the fear that Jack may commit a really important theft and not be able to pay for it. When, at the end of the first act he steals Garret's wallet, Maggie expresses the doubts that have corroded her entire life: "I used to ask God: how do I live with that? Give me your answer, God. But he never told me. And it's past the time for an answer now. And now what I want to know is: what will happen to him when I'm gone, what will become of that petty little thief?" (67).

Gráinne feels exhausted by the performance both she and Garret put on in front of people. The moment they are alone, she expresses her belief that he would have been a better writer without her, and insinuates that she might leave him, although, as with everything else, there is no answer to this question.

Nonetheless, what makes Tom change is precisely the relief of knowing that there will be no answer. After Daisy's appraisal of the need for uncertainty, when the audience suspects that Tom is not going to sell, that he has renounced being considered one of Ireland's greatest writers, his monologue to Bridget undergoes a significant alteration. When he speaks of his new novel, his discourse differs in his recently recovered hope, he senses there is something in it:

> Took it out again yesterday morning. Went back over all the notes. Looked at all the bits I'd written and tossed aside over the past five years. Read very carefully the twenty-three pages I'd already written. And I can tell you, Madam, let me tell you there just may be something there. I don't want to say any more at this stage. But I did get a little–a little quiver–a whiff–a stirring of a sense that perhaps–maybe–(83).

Autobiographical echoes reverberate again in this passage, as Friel expressed himself likewise when, after a fruitless year, he resumed the abandoned play: "A signal–weak, distant, but with some assurance–from the play this a.m. that perhaps I should return to it. What can I do but respond? I won't drop everything and plunge obediently in. But tomorrow I will call back, 'Yes?'" (Murray 1999, 83).

Friel makes use here of a linguistic artifice to embody this topic of uncertainty: as all the characters are plagued with doubts, the most repeated structure is the question tag. Never before had the playwright made such an extensive use of this sign of insecurity.

Popularity versus Quality?

The author is haunted by yet another doubt: Is popularity acceptable? Is it at odds with talent? Is a best-seller undoubtedly a writer of less quality? Should an artist make allowances for the sake of selling or must his integrity lead to his starvation? Friel employs a device already used in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* to think aloud. He splits his persona into two seemingly antithetic writers: Garret and Tom. In a letter to Pine, Friel alludes to this duality: "In this fiction one aspect of that older writer (Garret) gets that public assessment [...] The other aspect of that old writer (Tom), although he desperately wants the assessment [...] finally turns his back on it" (Pine 1999, 308). Both take some elements from the author, although neither of them represents him completely.

Daisy is the first one to make the distinction between being a popular writer and one of integrity, when explaining to Tom her belief that Garret would be better paid than him by the Texan university: "he's more prolific than you; and he has a big audience; and his work is much more immediate, much more–of today than yours" (24). She even defends Tom from her mother's criticism by claiming that their financial trouble comes from his being an artist committed to his art, in opposition to being a popular one: "Writers are always in difficulty, especially writers of 'integrity'. And Tom's a writer of integrity, isn't he? Literary probity. High minded" (34).

Garret toys with Tom's categorisation as a writer for the minority, with much more bitter irony than Daisy does:

> You can't put a price on a man like Tom, can you? And if books sales are to be a guideline, that gives Tom no leverage at all. [...] What he'll have to do is figure out some sort of category for Tom and that might give him a yardstick. But what category? Minor writer? Minority taste? Significant minority writer? Major minor writer? For God's sake never minor major writer? (48).

Regarding Garret, it is his wife, Gráinne, who best understands the key to his popularity, and shows her stinging contempt for his work: "You aren't at all the writer you might have been–you know that yourself. Too anxious to please. Too fearful of offending. And that has made you very popular: people love your–amiability. But I thought once

you were more than that. I think you did, too” (49, 50). Out of his sense of guilt, Garret tries to justify his function in art, expressing how his role as an entertainer is also needed: “Garret–Guilty, Tom–Innocent. [...] The difference between Tom and me is that he *occasionally* entertains but I am always and only an entertainer. I cater for the rehearsed response. But that is an honest function, too. And maybe necessary, love” (60).

However, the dialectic between being a popular writer or one of integrity seems to be one of Friel’s innermost conflicts. A playwright capable of devising such anti-theatrical plays as *Faith Healer* or *Molly Sweeney* does not miss an opportunity to make allowances for the American audience, like changing the actors, as Mark Lambert, one of the actors who played the Abbey Theatre version, explained (Coult 2003, 164). His plays and his characters are never too far removed from the audience, they are not extremely experimental, nor cruel or inhuman as many of his contemporaries’ works are. Despite the bitterness of his conclusions, the audience does not leave the theatre devastated; on the contrary, there is always a mixed feeling of hope and nostalgia which can be quite exhilarating.

Splitting his artistic self into these two characters allows Friel to deal with an aspect already seen in *Molly Sweeney*, the ruthless competition between colleagues, in spite of friendship. In the aforementioned play, Dr Rice’s only remaining active colleague cannot help but make evident his distrust of Dr Rice’s success in Molly’s case: “Girder asked about Molly. [...] The inquiry sounded casual but the smiling eyes couldn’t conceal the vigilance. So the vigilance was still necessary despite the success, maybe more necessary because of the success” (Friel 1995, 63).

Daisy, alert, uncovers Tom’s real motivation in calling David: apart from his need for affirmation as a good writer, he secretly hopes to be valued over Garret. Nonetheless, the observation and the fear are mutual. Garret is panic-stricken when he finds David in the house, and wants to know who showed interest first: “GARRET: I told you Tom was worth looking at, didn’t I? So you got in touch with him? / DAVID: Actually he wrote to me. / GARRET: Good old Tom” (46). But this is not enough, so he also asks Tom, who, out of mere vanity, inverts the story:

> GARRET: And David Knight’s here!
> TOM: David Knight’s here.
> GARRET: How was that set up?
> TOM: He wrote and asked could he come.
> GARRET: He made the first move? Good! (51)

Gráinne is ready to incite Garret’s insecurity about Tom’s big archive when she realises how worried he is. Garret’s reaction to this is to destroy his colleague’s reputation while pretending to help him, giving a detailed account of how he fought his agent, publisher and everyone who tried to help him. However, when they are on their own he rushes to see Tom’s manuscripts while showing his restlessness: “What a load of stuff! There must be a dozen books there he couldn’t get published. David’s never going to buy all that, is he? No, he’s not! What d’you think? [...] You can’t put a price on a man like Tom, can you?” (48).

Jack summarizes this competition between them, making evident that it belongs not only to the literary world: “JACK: Is he a good novelist? / TOM: He’s a good novelist. / JACK: Like musicians, you people: totally loyal to each other before outsiders. But among yourselves– !” (73).

However, despite Garret’s picture as a popular writer, and Tom’s as a writer of integrity, there are aspects of both that allude to the actual author. As has been mentioned, at this stage Friel is deeply influenced by the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein, which permeates *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Wonderful Tennessee*. Towards the end of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, when Garret and Tom are saying goodbye, Garret is the one who comments on his interest in the philosopher and his intention to write something about him:

> “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”. Wittgenstein, the philosopher. Obsessed with him at the moment. Thinking of doing something on him–a fiction–a faction maybe–maybe a bloody play! [...] Fascinating complex man. Came to this country three times back in the Thirties and Forties. Some amazing stuff about him when he was here. That’s what I’d concentrate on–his life in Connemara (70, 71).

This was Friel’s idea at the time, as can be seen in what he wrote on the fourth of April, 1995: “I look at the row of Wittgenstein books on the shelf. Nothing. In the past I had notebooks, etc. etc. Now–nothing” (Murray 1999, 166). And then again, on the seventeenth:

> Dipping the toe into Wittgenstein again. Especially his belief that the job of the philosopher is to represent the relationship between language and the world. (a) Philosophy cannot answer its traditional questions in meaningful language, i.e. descriptive, scientific language. (b) In imposing the self-discipline of *saying only what can be said* and thus enjoining silence in the realm of metaphysics, genuine metaphysical impulses are released (Murray 1999, 167).

Moreover, Roche’s hint about the documentary which was filmed in 1999 on the occasion of Friel’s seventieth birthday evidences more self-quotations; Garret, who is afraid that Wittgenstein may be too intellectual for him, asks Tom: “Not the familiar Fitzmaurice territory but nothing wrong with aspiring, is there? [...] The ‘final collapse’ could be postponed, couldn’t it?” (71). Roche quotes Friel in that documentary when, after having heard what his fellow writers had to say about him, he expresses how these comments gave him “‘the confidence to start trying again. Even in my old age, I would hope to try again’ [...] he describes this hope as ‘joyous aspiration’” (Roche 2012, 203). Tom’s

piece of advice to Garret is also what Friel tells himself when he writes about his inability to write: “Get down to it. Be faithful to the routine gestures and the bigger thing will come to you. Discipline yourself” (71).

Therefore, we find the author dialoguing with himself, split into two sides of his own life. We can easily identify Friel the playwright in the character of Tom if we recall Friel as the artist who tries new paths in each play, daring and often bitter, who does not yield to Broadway, does not give interviews because he cannot permit himself to be misunderstood or misquoted, and does not leave his home in a small village on the Inishowen peninsula. Nonetheless, Friel can also be remembered as the one who went touring the media giving interviews to promote the Field Day company and many of his plays during the seventies and eighties; the one who travelled to Broadway and London to look after his interests and sold the film-rights to some of his plays. However, Garret especially resembles Friel the short story writer, so traditional and realistic in style, and so in line with the taste of the American-Irish audience who devoured his stories. Garret describes thus the trap of having created a taste among his readers from which he cannot now escape: “my covenant with the great warm public–that’s the problem. We’ve woven into each other. I created the taste by which they now assess me” (71). And again, what Tom suggests Garret echoes a decision taken by Friel years before: “Remake yourself. Create a new taste” (71).

Family: never-ending strife

Family is in this play, as in most of Friel’s works, a place of repression. The long cohabitation of these three couples has turned them into their partners’ primary source of pain. The reason for this is not that they do not love each other, on the contrary, the tragedy lies, as in all couples, in their loving themselves more than they love their partner, and as a result their expectations are never fulfilled. Pine sees love here as a force simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal: “The theme of love both binds the play together and lurks within it as a destructive force which can tear its constituents apart. [...] Thomas Kilroy has said that Friel’s work illustrates ‘the, at times, dreadful cost of love’” (Pine 1999, 304-305).

At first we might believe that those marriages in which one of the members of the couple is an artist are doomed to failure due to the artist’s selfish nature. Friel wants us to see the artists as mean people, who do not know how to or, because of art’s demanding nature, are unable to attend the needs of those who live with them. Actually, the author despised the characters in this play: “What mean, introverted, narrow, narcissistic people–especially the writer–am I dealing with in this play?” (Murray 1999, 169). Daisy’s description of the moral quality of writers may express Friel’s opinion on them: “Writers don’t have to be saints. For God’s sake, look at the writers we know–most of them are shits” (25). Maggie has never liked Tom because she thinks that he has never cared for her daughter: “I always thought him difficult. [...] Because I thought he never considered you–appreciated you. Like all artists he’s icy and self-centred and always outside” (35). After David’s proposal, she presses Tom to accept on Daisy’s behalf: “It would mean you could move house. [...] Perhaps something less–spartan?” (78). When Tom answers that the house has its own appeal, she retorts in a rage: “I wouldn’t have thought Daisy’s life up here was entirely–fulfilling. [...] But perhaps mere domestic matters don’t concern creative people, do they?” (79).

Jack, and all the examples he mentions, makes it evident that artists are, morally speaking, criminals. He is a presumptuous petty thief, not even a dangerous criminal, although a talented musician. All the musicians he speaks about have been through jail:

> JACK: Huddie Ledbetter [...] Twelve-string guitar man. Musical aristocrat. [...] And a saint. What a life that man had! Jailed for thirty years when he was still in his twenties. Chain-gang, beatings, starvation–unspeakable stuff.
> DAISY: Jailed for what?
> JACK: Murder. [...] And eleven years later what did they do? Flung him back in again.
> DAISY: Why?
> JACK: Attempted murder (39).

However, we would be misled in our appreciation if we inferred that Friel puts the blame only on the artists for the deteriorated cohabitation of the couple. Notwithstanding his interest in exposing the meanness of the creative genius, he does not excuse their partners. They do not seem to have their own intellectual life. Daisy describes the wives and lovers of the writers they know in this way: “it just seemed to me that their thoughts and their vocabularies were lifted out of the books of their husbands or lovers. They hadn’t even a language of their own” (53).

The Fitzmaurices are always hurting each other in front of people in the hope that, as Gráinne says, this unwilling audience acts as a restraint to their invectives. What seemed to be a game to entertain their friends in the beginning, has turned into the perfect excuse for them to attack each other openly, and they are taking it too far now. Maggie can be remarkably cruel with Jack’s weakness. When Jack’s theft is discovered, she calls him “shabby little swindler”, “little coxcomb piano-player” and “petty little thief” in front of all of them. She would not let Jack give an opinion on anything related to literature and books, always reminding him that he knows nothing about those matters. Jack opens up with Tom, explaining how Maggie has humiliated him all their life together: “She does it to humiliate me. Always did. Always before people. From the very beginning. I think because she felt in her heart that by marrying the jobbing piano-player she had humiliated herself” (74). He has found his way of surviving in his dandyism: “So I sing, I dance, keep it bubbly, act out the fake affectations–Only way I can cope, Tom” (74).

Tom, on the other hand, has to be the stronger of the couple, the one who can face the facts and has the spirit needed to keep this awkward family together. Despite Maggie's opinion that he does not care for Daisy, she does not acknowledge that he is the one who carries the burden of Bridget's care. Daisy has no discipline: neither for her art, nor to deal with her own family's problems. The weekly visit to the hospital to bring her clean clothes and learn about her evolution is performed by Tom. Maggie asks out of courtesy but, like her daughter Daisy, she does not seem to keep a large reserve of interest for Bridget.

Daisy refuses to suffer, and, literally, closes her eyes not to accept responsibilities for others. When Tom tries to explain what a terrible week Bridget has had, Daisy's reaction is: "Don't tell me, Tom. (*Brief pause*) Yes, do, please. (*She closes her eyes and stands absolutely still*)" (22). Then Tom informs her that Bridget has been refusing to eat and her screams have led the nurses to isolate her; moreover, they were going to administer her six new electric shock treatments. Daisy, horrified, wants to withdraw; Tom's answer makes it evident who is always in charge: "Oh, please, Tom, please, please, please; she's only a–/ TOM: For God's sake, Daisy, one of us has to face up to it!" (22). When her father's theft is discovered, she reacts likewise, closing her eyes and isolating herself:

> *And now they all know that JACK stole it and hid it. DAISY moves down quickly towards JACK but stops abruptly and stands absolutely still with her eyes shut tight [...] As he passes DAISY he puts out a tentative, apologetic hand. But her eyes are still closed–she does not see him. And MAGGIE leads him off right. Silence. Then DAISY runs quickly after them* (67).

Disappointments

All the characters have seen their expectations for what their future had in store for them frustrated. Jack enlightens us with the main source of despair in adult life: Maggie's feeling of having humiliated herself by marrying him comes from the shared belief in the brilliant future she had ahead of her, a future that he presumably thwarted. Nonetheless, had it not been for him, the disappointment would have come up for some other reason: "headed for a brilliant career in medicine. At least that was the expectation. But there's always an expectation, isn't there? And they don't always work out, do they? So maybe all I did was provide her with a different set of disappointments" (74).

Daisy was going to be a great pianist. She practised for hours on end and she even sang in a made-up German of her own. Her parents had big hopes placed on her, nonetheless, she has given up music, in her mother's opinion, because of Tom: "Practised four hours every day; and with such dedication. Oh, you were a very determined young lady. [...] Oh, yes, you were more than promising once. [...] Threw it all up for bigger things, didn't she?" (28).

David was a famous expert in his own field when he was living in London, had a German girlfriend and was about to marry, and then, with no previous warning, he suffered a nervous breakdown and lost everything. His position is so weak that he depends on Tom's decision to gain consideration by his bosses in Texas. Regarding the Fitzmaurices, Garret has not become the great writer he, and Gráinne, expected him to become; and she has been left childless because of his decision, so they adopt uncountable pet animals as substitutes.

As Jack points out, nobody fulfils their expectations, therefore fiction is needed to fight disappointment. This is the reason for Tom's humorous monologues addressed to Bridget. As I have argued elsewhere (Gaviña 2011, 468), Friel's defining feature as a playwright is his treatment of fiction. Throughout his work he has described the way human beings create our life as a fiction, both socially–this would be the case of history–and individually. The writers in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* earn their living with fiction, nonetheless, all the characters have created a fiction to help them live through their disappointments: Maggie can manage despite her arthritis, Jack is a glamorous dandy, the Fitzmaurices provide real entertainment, David is an influential agent. Tom enacts his fiction for Bridget, he pretends she can hear him, and his narration of the prowess of the family members counterbalances their real deficiencies: hence, Maggie is an incredible athlete, Jack is a dangerous international criminal, and Daisy conducts an orchestra in her garden and gives piano master classes for students from all over the world. Bertha and Morse consider this flight into a fantastic world as the positive side of the power of creativity:

> [H]e escapes into fantasies and the fantastic to bring colour and light into the life of his daughter who does not seem to have any light around her. The figure of Tom, as father, persistently trying, against all odds, to awaken the human within his daughter, becomes one of Friel's most arresting images of the true artist who must employ his talent even when he knows there is no rational possibility of change (Morse, Bertha & Kurdi 2006, 28).

Bridget is the most powerful symbol in the play. This character exemplifies truncated hopes, as she cannot hold, or generate, any expectation. Lanters explains her dual function: "this autistic girl in whose condition there is never any change is simultaneously a source of despair to her parents and the potential source of artistic renewal. Uncertainty (chaos) is necessary for the artistic process to happen, even if that condition makes life desperately unhappy" (Lanters 1999, 173). She can be described as a bridge to *Molly Sweeney.* Molly ends her life committed to a place like the one Bridget occupies, and is identically mute. At the end of the previous play, Molly addresses the audience from a hospital bed, with no hopes about a life outside the hospital and without communicating with any real person, although she receives many visits from dead acquaintances and relatives. Through her monologue we witness her current location in a world of fiction:

> I think I see nothing at all now. But I'm not absolutely sure of that. Anyhow my borderline country is where I live now. I'm at home there. Well... at ease there. It certainly doesn't worry me anymore that what I think I see may be fantasy or indeed what I take to be imagined may very well be real–what's Frank term?–external reality. Real–imagined–fact–fiction–fantasy–reality–there it seems to be. And it seems to be all right. And why should I question any of it anymore? (Friel, 1995, 69-70).

Bridget would be Molly seen by the sighted people, by the inhabitants of the "external reality". Bridget is permanently isolated from the external world, although, for all we know, she might have a rich interior life like Molly's. Tom realizes that his daughter's detachment has antecedents in Daisy's seclusion in herself to avoid the external world when it becomes too painful, and describes Daisy like this when narrating how she conducts the fictitious orchestra: "conducting with such assurance, with her eyes closed, and her whole body swaying, and away off in some private world of her own, just as you go off into your own world sometimes, too, don't you?" (13).

And then... Silence

Bridget is much more than a symbol of frustrated hopes. This figure collects all the inarticulate characters that populate Friel's plays. In most of his works we find, as a compensation for a character gifted with linguistic prowess, another almost completely mute[3]. One of Friel's most recurrent preoccupations is language: as a mean to communicate, and, more often than not, to produce a failure in communication. Those who are, as Garret says, more than "scrupulous with language", "fastidious" in fact (44), cannot use language to communicate the important things of the world, simply because, as Wittgenstein had written, the metaphysical, the spiritual, would not lend itself to words, it can only be shown. Velten-Mrowka exposes this contradiction: "literary art must be self-deceptive, unable to recognize its inevitable dilemma: compelled to speak of the secret, it is simultaneously unable to speak of it" (Velten-Mrowka 2006, 163). This is why both masters of language - Tom and Garret - lie and, as Gráinne complains of Garret, and Grace had complained of Frank Hardy in *Faith Healer*, "invent compulsively" (44).They are always on the look-out for words which are in fact misleading, and do not recognize when the moment for silence is needed, even though Garret, talking about writers' retirement, expects to be able to identify such occasions: "I hope we have the good sense to know when silence is appropriate" (46); and considers himself a better judge than Gráinne, as, for him, she is not "alert" to "The unsaid, the silent counterpoint" (69).

As an opposition to this blather, Bridget rocks endlessly in silence, embodying the mystery of a life not spoken, not told, of the spiritualism that Friel had been seeking to express with music and dance in previous plays but that now, perhaps, had to be felt in this never-ending silent movement. Bridget is described as Tom's "silent love", "beautiful and mysterious" (82, 84). We are made aware of the playwright's embrace of silence, of mystery, with Tom's embrace of Bridget. This character represents the god of silence as discovered by Friel at the time he was devising this play:

> Exciting discovery today–a God of Silence! Harpocrates.
> Lemprière: "He is represented as holding one of his fingers on his mouth, and hence he is called the god of silence and intimates that the mysteries of philosophy and religion ought never to be revealed to the people ... placed by the Romans at the entrance to their temples".
> Maybe at the entrance to the theatres?
> Should I build a shrine to him here? He is represented as a small boy–the child with his finger across his mouth. Imagine those eyes (Murray 1999, 170).

Friel sets Bridget at the beginning and at the end of the play as the figure of that god, to remind the audience of the sacred nature of what they are about to take part in, and, as in the Eleusinian Mysteries described in *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), of the need to keep silent after the ritual, of not profaning the secret beheld.

The ending of the play, that shows Tom's new confidence in his creative power after accepting the need for uncertainty, makes explicit the writer's embrace of silence in the fantasy he develops for Bridget, in which both of them, and no one else, will go on a balloon ride and fly away forever. We may believe that Friel is thus renouncing further speech, the same way that he has renounced being assessed while still alive. However, this silence implies treason, for Daisy will be left behind:

> *The moment TOM says "just the two of us–only the two of us" DAISY gets suddenly to her feet as if she had been wakened abruptly from sleep. She seems confused and her face is anxious with incipient grief.*
> *Then, as soon as TOM finishes his speech she calls out softly, urgently:*
> DAISY: Oh, Tom!–Tom!–Tom, please? –
> *Pause. Quick black* (84).

Friel is seemingly closing, with this play, an artistic stage which we could call "Wittgensteinian", and a life stage. Two years later, in 1999, the Friel Festival was held all over Ireland on his seventieth anniversary. The author received the answer that Tom was looking for, and that, perhaps, left him fallow for a few years. The next plays were adaptations from Chekhov–*Uncle Vania* and *Three Plays After*. We would have to wait until 2003 for Friel to write an original play, *Performances*, which seems to make Daisy right in her comment that if Tom obtained recognition when alive, he might lose his creativity. Friel certainly puts an end to a life cycle with a rather autobiographical play which helps him effect a

self-analysis and, perhaps, assuage his own turmoil. He describes his feelings when finishing the play like this: "Strange feeling of emptiness and disappointment and *tristesse*. But after *this* play surely I should be able to cope with the Necessary Uncertainty?" (Murray 1999, 172).

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[1] The character of the archivist is also autobiographical, as Pine refers to a visit from a man from Emory University (in Georgia): "Friel himself was visited by the representative of an American university with an offer to purchase his personal archive" (1999: 305). Although this university holds archives as important as Ted Hugh's and Seamus Heaney's, among others, Friel's response was to donate his own to the National Library of Ireland in 2003.

[2] All quotations for the play are taken from: Friel, B. *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* London, 1997. All subsequent quotes will be identified by page numbers from this edition between brackets in the text.

[3] We could mention as examples: Sarah in *Translations*, George in *Aristocrats*, Ben in *Living Quarters* and Smiler in *Volunteers.*