The Journal of Religion and Theatre

http://www.rtjournal.org

Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education

The Journal of Religion and Theatre is a peer-reviewed online journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

ISSN 1544-8762

Vanessa Baker

"Dancing With Eyes Half Closed": Ritual Paradox in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

In Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, "good order" is constructed as the civilizing force of British colonialism and Irish Catholic propriety, an ordering system through which hegemonic control is instilled in society. However, "good order" is unable to maintain its control over the play's characters because it is a strictly binary system, while the characters in the play exist in various states of liminality, which Victor Turner describes as the "gap between ordered worlds [in which] almost anything may happen" (13). Similarly, dance and ceremony, by working in a mode of ritual paradox, disrupt "civility" and are potently able to speak that which is forbidden by the Catholic and English systems of respectability and good order. Moreover, when it is paradoxically both-sacred-and-secular, the power of ritual to make true what is-not is explicitly dangerous to the rigidity of this ordering system.

Throughout the play, Friel reinforces the idea that liminality is subversive to established society—but he encourages this challenge. His answer, perhaps, is in the idea of "paganism": that which combines sacred and secular, allows for ritual to cross over boundaries and binaries, and functions outside of the "established norms" of hegemonic, British culture. Friel wrote that *Dancing at Lughnasa* "is about the necessity for paganism," which he defines, not "as disrupting Christianity […,but] as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that's underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict" (qtd. in Delaney 222, 214). Propriety, manners, and civility are all means of maintaining hegemony; like Catholicism, British colonization, and Kate's carefully ordered household, they do not allow for internal conflict. (My concern here, of course, is with the particular versions of Catholicism and propriety that are represented within Friel's play.) Liminality subverts this control by insisting that binaries are inadequate. Friel's

paganism is that which exists outside of civility and order, and throughout the play, it works through the similarly boundary-crossing corporeality of dance and ritual. In this way, these embodied communications are able to "speak" that which is silenced by systems of civility, respectability, and good order. Corporeal, non-binary communication circumvents such systems and sets into unsteady motion that which the controlling forces of colonization and Catholicism accept as most stable. As Friel's characters communicate through ritual, they serve as a reminder that carefully ordered binaries are subject to disruption, and that balanced lives must function within freedom as well as control.

Within *Dancing at Lughnasa*, "good order" is represented by the eldest of five sisters, Kate. Kate's world is ruled by the Irish Catholic Church, the structure of society, propriety, logic, responsibility, and the written word. Michael, the narrator, introduces his aunt Kate as "a schoolteacher and a very proper woman," an authority figure, one who decides what is and is not done in the house, and one supremely concerned with what is "sinful" and "pagan" versus what is "proper" (Friel 9–10). She quiets her sisters' discussion of the Lughnasa festival by insisting that "what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours—none whatever! It's a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home" (26). For Kate, anything outside of Catholicism is "pagan." She uses the word loosely (although in keeping with the European understandings of the time regarding heathenism and primitive religions) to describe anything that does not submit to the teachings of the Church, or to disparage anything which challenges her notions of civility, from the back-hills celebration of the Celtic Lughnasa festival to the "aul pagan songs" Maggie sings (45). Kate's world is strictly ordered, divided into right and wrong; things are either Catholic, "proper," and Christian, or they are "pagan," improper, and dangerous. In Kate's mind, there is no in-between. Her logic is largely Catholic, and the highest authority in her carefully ordered world is the Pope: "[Polygamy] may be efficient and you [Jack] might be in favour of it, but I don't think it's what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for you if you paid just a bit more attention to

our Holy Father and a bit less to the Great Goddess … Iggie" (75). Her religion is set up as a "civilizing force" and a system of order. Kate uses this religion (and, subliminally, an understanding that, priest-like, she is the only one who can appropriately interpret it for the family) as a means of strict, self-righteous control. She corrects her sisters' behaviour as "very unchristian" (35) and holds them to her own standards: "it would be on my conscience if I didn't tell you how strongly I disapprove[…]. I just want to clear my conscience" (63–64). The most controlling of the sisters, she acts as their mother and in a sense their priest.

Not surprisingly, Kate, a slave to reason and order, is the least corporeal, least physical of the women. When the sisters dance to the music on the radio, Kate is the last to dance, and even when she does, it is alone, not with the four other women. She admits that dancing is "absolutely beyond [her] comprehension" (41). She dislikes the radio, and is glad when Chris turns it off and stops Gerry's dancing: "Peace, thanks be to God! D'you know what that thing has done? Killed all Christian conversation in this country" (78). For Kate, proper, ordered communication—"Christian conversation"—evidently requires the civility of language, as "that thing" encourages the opposite, the "pagan" conversation of dance. Subversively, it allows conversations which are normally silenced by proper, "Christian" order to be spoken in the body. Dance, physicality, and ritual make room for the "deep and true emotion" which is "ominous" for Kate (31).

As Kate discovers, however, no amount of strictly held order can contain a household full of characters who, each in their own way, exist in the between-spaces of society, the cracks in that structure. Kate's civility and "good order" are disrupted by liminal figures who do not fit within her binary logic; by nonverbal communication, such as silence and dance, that express things silenced by the rules of propriety; and by rituals which embrace and embody *both* sides of a binary division at once. Kate's ordering system, based in logic and binaries (a person is either Catholic *or* pagan, Irish *or* African *or* English, married *or* not married—never anything

in-between), conflicts with the rituals which work outside of and are subversive to that system. As the hegemonic ordering system of binaries (which is limited to being either/or) comes head-to-head with rituals that work outside of it (and allow for both/and), Kate's Catholicism proves unable to reflect and systematize this world.

Derrida might have described these characters and their "both/and" ritual roles as "undecidables," marked by "*différance*." Based on his critique of Saussure's structuralism, Derrida came to see all binaries as suspect and introduced the idea of the undecidable: that which upsets the boundaries of the binary by being, instead of either/or, *both/and*. Instability, liminality, and difference allow for meaning outside of linguistic—or any other—binaries. Just as a finitely structured language system cannot stand unchallenged, the controlling binaries of nationality and religion are made unstable within Friel's play. Unlike structuralism, *ritual*, with its undecidable element, is able to accept liminal space and integrate the differences between worlds—between uninitiation and membership, winter and spring, or drought and fertility. Ritual works because it allows for transition, for a crossing between disparate roles, even between what is real and what is imagined. Both-sacred-and-secular, ritual upsets order, especially within the rigidity of "stable" systems (structuralism, Kate's Catholicism, English colonizing control, and even the expected politeness of civility) which cannot allow for indeterminacy. That is, these rituals challenge the validity and truth claims of governing systems. For this essay, two such rituals from *Dancing at Lughnasa* will illustrate this pattern.

For Kate, the most startling example of "pagan" ritual disruptively working outside of established civility is Father Jack's African ceremonies. Recently returned from decades of what began as Catholic missionary work in a leper colony in "a remote village called Ryanga in Uganda," Africa, the family's eldest brother has in fact fully embraced the Ryangan rituals and way of life (10). As he describes the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Casava, it becomes clear that these harvest-time festivals closely parallel the Irish harvest

celebration of Lughnasa: in both, the villagers gather to offer sacrifices "so that the crops will flourish" and to dance, sing, drink, and light fires (58–59). Within such ceremonies, there is, to Kate's horror and disbelief, no distinction between Catholic and what she sees as "pagan." When she asks Jack to describe his missionary work, he tells her:

> JACK. We gather in the common in the middle of the village. If it's an important ceremony, you would have up to three or four hundred people. KATE. All gathered together for Mass? JACK. Maybe. Or maybe to offer sacrifice to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth, so that the crops will flourish. Or maybe to get in touch with our departed fathers for their advice and wisdom. Or maybe to thank the spirits of our tribe if they have been good to us; or to appease them if they're angry. (58–59)

Unthinkably for Kate, the same ritual framework is both Catholic and pagan—a fact which, as Kate rightly recognizes, utterly destabilizes the controlling order of Catholicism. It is impossible for a ceremony to be both Catholic and anti-Catholic—and yet Jack's is.

Moreover, Jack notes with approval that "there is no distinction between the religious and the secular" in the Ryangan culture (59). He explains that initially, the people gather for these communal ceremonies for a religious purpose. However, following the solemn ritual sacrifice, incantation, and ceremonial dance of thanksgiving, Jack describes

> the incantation—a chant, really—that expresses our gratitude and that also acts as a rhythm or percussion for the ritual dance. And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over. And that part of the ceremony is a real spectacle. (58–59)

This incantation is representative in that, as both an expression of gratitude and the percussion for the dance, it has both a formal, sacred purpose and is also part of the wider celebration; it is performed both for the Great Goddess and for the people themselves, linking them all together in dance. The solemn ritual becomes a chaotic celebration, but the two halves are not separate.

Instead, Jack denotes the secular community festival as "part of the ceremony," just as important as the sacrifice itself (59). A Catholic priest and an African goddess, sacred prayer and sacrifice, and secular dancing, revelry, and drinking palm wine are all parts of the whole.

Kate's response to Jack's story is "*concern*" and "*alarm*" (60) mixed with sharp reproof: "But these aren't Christian ceremonies" (59). Jack's ceremonies upset Kate because, as they insist upon being worship outside of traditional Catholic ritual structures, they refuse to bend to her insistence on a sacred/secular divide. Here and throughout the play, Friel contrasts the respectability of institutional Catholicism with Irish and Ryangan "pagan" celebrations—both of which are disparaged by the British because they combine the sacred and secular into one ceremony. Kate's frustration with Jack's Ryangan dances echoes earlier English colonizers' belief that indigenous Irish dance patterns, such as the Lughnasa dances, were "barbaric precisely because they blurred the distinctions between [worship] ceremony and [secular] celebration" (Morrison 176). Because they suggest that clear, binary boundaries can (and even should) be blurred, and challenge the validity of such rigid order, these rituals are dangerous to Kate's "good order."

Jack's missionary work has also upset his superiors. After years of trying to convince Jack to speak English and conduct proper Catholic masses, as Kate realizes, "his superiors probably had no choice but send him home"; they seem to have given up on Jack as a failed missionary and a threat to order, and exiled him in disgrace (Friel 45). Jack frustrated his commissioner by insisting upon speaking Swahili among the people and refusing to accept bribes to "cooperate with the English": "The present commissioner knows Swahili but he won't speak it. He's a stubborn man. […] The Irish Outcast, he calls me. He is always inviting me to spend a weekend with him in Kampala—to keep me from 'going native,' as he calls it. […] And he gets so angry with me because I won't take his money" (50). Because Jack has become both Irish and African, he is too much of an "insider" within the community upon which he is expected to

impose order. His use of ritual to live *both/and* is dangerous to the British system of order, and so he becomes as much an outcast as the lepers he served. Therefore, instead of marking Jack's arrival with "a civic reception with bands and flags and speeches," as his sisters had hoped, the parish priest responds by firing Kate from her teaching position and further ostracizing the family (72). Because Jack's rituals embraced the liminal position of the lepers he served, worked to reflect the world as it "should be" (where even lepers with missing limbs are a full part of society), and were indeterminately sacred *and* secular, Catholic *and* Ryangan, Jack was seen by his superiors as a danger to the stability of their Catholic, colonizing systems of order.

Nearly as challenging to the rules of good order—or perhaps even more so, in its subtlety—is the marriage ceremony that does not marry. Unlike Father Jack's African ceremonies, which explicitly challenge and take the place of Christian services, no one claims that this ritual will replace or subvert the equivalent ceremony, a proper Catholic wedding. Nonetheless, even though it has no legality or authority, and does not make Kate's younger sister Chris a "proper" wife, everyone recognizes that that—subverting Chris's need for a "real" wedding—is exactly what it does. As Michael, the narrator, describes it:

> Although my mother and [my father] didn't go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters. And this time it was a dance without music; just there, in ritual circles round and round that square and then down the lane and back up again; slowly, formally, with easy deliberation. My mother with her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open. […] No singing, no melody, no words. Only the swish and whisper of their feet across the grass.
>
> I watched the ceremony from behind that bush. But this time they were conscious of only themselves and of their dancing. And when he went off to fight with the International Brigade, my mother grieved as any bride would grieve. (52–53)

This dance *is* his parents' marriage. Michael calls it both "ritual" and "ceremony"; Chris, although unmarried to Gerry, is his "bride"; Michael and his aunts act as witnesses.

As a ritual, this dance escapes the control of that which is literal, rational, and expected, and yet gives order and meaning to Chris and Gerry's relationship. Its effect is symbolic, not literal; especially because the "ceremony" has little real meaning for Gerry (at least in any way that will affect his behavior), it cannot "marry" the couple. Chris and Gerry can never be seen as a couple in the eyes of their church and society; there is no word for what they are, and so their relationship is silenced by the rules of civility. Nonetheless, this dance wordlessly "speaks" their truth. Unlike a conversation intent on defining Chris and Gerry's relationship, it does not require words, or the approval of a priest; as a ritual, it works symbolically, even paradoxically, to make Chris both "bride" and "not-bride" simultaneously. By remaining unspoken, it embraces the disorder of the relationship and, instead of needing to name it as marriage (or not), finds a way to give it meaning.

This ceremony is also meaningful for Chris, and for the observing family, because it reflects an ideal version of life, and represents this couple as they *should be*, not as they *are*. As rituals often do, it occurs "in the subjunctive mood. [Rituals] are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be. […] [T]hey are occasions for imagining the way things could be or evaluating how they ought to be" (Rothenbuhler 15). This ceremony is not a reflection of what *is* – Gerry's life as a drifter—but a momentary embodiment of "how things ought to be": a stable relationship, one that can be recognized in the eyes of Chris' sisters and her Irish Catholic society. As such, it allows Chris to acknowledge the impossibility of that ideal and gives her a way to understand her relationship and to negotiate between what *should be* and what *is*.

This ceremony, both-marriage-and-not-marriage, makes sense of an idea that is silenced by "good order," that can be understood only in this corporeal, ceremonial way—that cannot be valued, logically understood, or even named within the binary order of Church and polite society. It is not a "conventional form of marriage," but the idea of "marriage" is strikingly

present despite its literal absence; it is both real and imagined, both true and false, both private (too private even for the intrusion of Chris or Gerry's own words) and public. It creates the truth of this unconventional "marriage," but its silence also acknowledges that this "truth" is limited, that it holds no meaning that can be understood or recognized by the carefully structured society in which they live. It is, perhaps, the most representative example of ritual paradox, as it is both-true-and-not-true, both-sacred-and-secular, both-real-and-imagined. Relying on *différance*, the ceremony upsets the binaries (such as married/not married) that would ordinarily govern existence.

Because Gerry and his dancing and rituals are both actual and illusory, and privilege the body over logic or reason, they threaten to destabilize Kate's "good order." During Gerry's first visit, she expresses her distrust:

MAGGIE. *(Quietly.)* They're dancing. KATE. What! MAGGIE. They're dancing together. KATE. God forgive you! MAGGIE. He has her in his arms. KATE. He has not! The animal! *(She flings the paper aside and joins MAGGIE at the window.)* MAGGIE. They're dancing round the garden, Aggie. KATE. Oh God, what sort of fool is she? MAGGIE. He's a beautiful dancer, isn't he? KATE. He's leading her astray again, Maggie. MAGGIE. Look at her face—she's easily led […]. KATE. That's the only thing that Evans creature could ever do well—was dance. *(Pause.)* And look at her, the fool. For God's sake, would you look at that fool of a woman? *(Pause.)* Her whole face alters when she's happy, doesn't it? *(Pause.)* They dance so well together. They're such a beautiful couple. *(Pause.)* She's […] beautiful[…]. (43)

For Kate, Gerry is little more than an animal. Both as a dancer and as Michael's father, he is fully in his body (unlike Kate, who is fully in her mind) and therefore less than human. She calls him a "creature," an "animal," a worthless stray who must be fed and let to sleep in the barn and then sent away again. In Kate's mind, he is neither rational nor useful, but sinful, even dangerous: "he's leading [Chris] astray" (43). Gerry's very presence and, especially, his dancing, upsets the order of the household. It is, for Kate, a frightening reminder of the "grumbling and dangerous beast" which lurks, despite her attempts to quell it, just below their

veneer of propriety, threatening to destabilize them all (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 214). Gerry is engaged in dangerous communion with Chris, making a "fool" of her.

However, Gerry's dancing is unmistakably beautiful, and in its pure physicality, it turns the order of the household upside down. It makes Chris happy, upsets her sister Agnes and entrances her sister Maggie, and, if only for a moment, melts Kate. Within seven sentences, Kate pauses four times, and these silences speak to how hard she is having to try to maintain order. She falls back on what she has just heard herself say: that Gerry can only dance, that Chris is a fool. But her logical propriety is no stronger than Gerry's "pagan" corporeality. The two sides of the binary cannot both dominate. For a moment, Kate can allow the dance, and allow herself to be moved by its beauty. She and Maggie watch in silence, but when the dance is over and reason reasserts itself, Kate reacts angrily against her own weakness, again contrasting her righteous, superior sensibilities with Gerry's thoughtlessness: "what really infuriates me is that the creature has no sense of ordinary duty. […] Seems to me the beasts of the field have more concern for their young than that creature has" (44). The tension of this moment reveals how much Gerry's dancing has shaken the household order.

Both of these examples—Father Jack's thanksgiving rituals and Chris and Gerry's "marriage" ceremony—work in a mode of ritual paradox. By definition, paradox is the tension between two opposing ideas that, at first glance, seem to be irreconcilable—and yet coexist. More than a contradiction or irony, a paradox is an allowance of the "marvelous," unexpected, seemingly impossible.

Paradox is the opposite of binary logic: not either/or, but both/and. Thus, the very nature of ritual embraces and embodies paradoxes—the conjunctions of opposing, even clashing, ideas—that can challenge the structure of organized society, "good order," and even organized religion. Although rituals may become part of the fabric of religious practice and social

structure, they do not organize "rules for living;" instead, ritual embraces the illogic of life and does not attempt to make perfect sense of it. Thus, ritual works as the architecture of paradox: not bound by the rational, it allows for opposites to coexist, for laws of rationality to be broken, and for what *is not* to become what *is*. Although in dialogue with social and religious structure, it subversively challenges that "good order," moving seamlessly between binary polarities and simultaneously allowing for the real and the ideal, the true and the false, or the true and the impossibly also-true. Thus, "those who embrace both sides of an apparent contradiction often will be nearer the full truth than those who surrender one or the other facet in favor of an artificial consistency" (Slaatte xiv)—or, as Michael puts it at the end of the play, "everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (Friel 84). In Jack's ceremonies, all worlds—sacred and secular, Catholic and pagan, leper and priest—exist without distinction. In this way, paradox is the key to understanding and expressing the "complexities and oppositions in reality and human life" because it is not limited by rationality; in contrast, it challenges and even destabilizes those ordering systems which rely upon unreconciled binary opposites (Kainz 58).

Beyond allowing for seemingly impossible conjunctions, ritual also works to bring the ideal world into existence. As a ritual embodies both, opposing ideas at once, it is able to make the impossible true: to make the absent present, and therefore possible. Thus, as participants in a paradoxical ritual, such as Chris and Gerry's "marriage," embody that which should be, might be, or will be, they enact a paradox: because the *is* and the *is-not* are co-present in their bodies, the participants are able to move from within the constraints of what *is* to *create*, momentarily, what *is not yet, but should be*. It is in this way that "the world as lived" can coexist with "the world as imagined" (Geertz, qtd. in Bell v); through the silent, hypnotic, bewitching power of ritual and ceremony, unspeakable, "private and sacred things" can be whispered into reality (Friel 84).

Moreover, whereas Kate's "good order" requires the rigor of carefully ordered binaries in

order to maintain its control, ritual threatens order because it requires a *suspension* of that rational system in order to do the seemingly impossible. Both polarities, the real *and* the ideal, the true *and* the false (or, as often, the impossibly also-true), must coexist, before ritual can enact a union between them. Thus, ritual works *because of*, not *in spite of*, the paradox it contains. The *is-not*, when lived in the body and inscribed upon the flesh, can become the *is*.

Such possibility for transformation brings with it a hint of danger. As rituals embrace paradox and upset binaries in this way, the control of the imposed ordering system can collapse upon itself. Nonetheless, as disruptive as such moments are to Kate's "good order," they are, paradoxically, *necessary* if that order is to survive. As Derrida pointed out, when an ordering system is limited to a binary either/or, *différance* and indeterminacy set that stable system into unsteady flux—or, as Kate describes it, "cracks are appearing everywhere" (Friel 45).

When forced to acknowledge liminality—those characters who do not fit neatly into the binary divisions of "good order"—Kate's world crumbles. Its inflexibility makes it brittle. Kate asserts her control because she believes in the order of the Church and society, and therefore sees it is her duty to maintain control. Although it is too often expressed in self-righteousness, her authority is grounded in something much deeper: in fear. She distrusts dancing and "paganism," in large part, because she fears them. They exist outside of control, and they allow truths and emotions, otherwise properly silenced, to be revealed. Upset by Gerry's dancing and her sister Agnes' subsequent outburst, she allows emotion for a moment, and cries out to Maggie:

> You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can—because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse. (45)

Kate is desperate to maintain control—to keep the family together, yes, but also simply

because she believes in "good order." But the reality of her life is that it is fragile; it cannot be controlled and maintained by even the best of order. Her fear cuts to the heart of the matter: she and her family are all marked by liminality, and do not neatly fit within the binaries which govern good order and control, proper society and the Church. Each must submit to that structure; when they do not, the rigid ordering system, trying to hold them together, cracks apart. This disruption is described in violently destructive terms: the home will "collapse" and, as Michael tells us, will "break up" (52). It is telling that Kate describes her obligation in the second person. The truth is too deeply emotional to be accepted as her own fear; instead, she hears it as a command from another, from an authority that must be obeyed. It is also telling that her next thought is about the havoc wrought by the Lughnasa celebration; the two are more closely connected than she realizes. She fears that "control is slipping away," and the recent Lughnasa Festival is the most vivid example of a loss of control. It is drunken, disorderly, and destructive; it is pagan, secular, ritual; it frightens Kate because it disorders Catholic and societal control.

Tellingly, however, Friel does not stop there. *Both* extremes—too rigid and too flexible—are shown as flawed. Indeed, Friel is not suggesting that his characters, or Ireland itself, should seek or attempt a life separated from reality. As Gerry and Jack (as well as another sister, Rose) "allow themselves to live life in accordance to their urges," they end tragically (Faherty 197). Michael describes how all three die, ill-suited to their own lives and ultimately unable to transition between their imagined and actual selves. In the end, the "liberating alternatives, as symbolized by Rose, Jack, and Gerry, are shown to be every bit as problematic as is Kate's world of constraints" (Faherty 202). The two extremes, the (wayward, even irresponsible) Celtic spirit and the condemning, controlling order of colonizing Catholicism, are unstable systems because each excludes its opposite entirely. However, neither can maintain unquestioned control, and the characters who are at one extreme or the other are all on shaky ground.

For example, in contrast to Kate, Michael's father Gerry is a dancer and dreamer. With Chris, he can speak honestly in dance, but his dances are more meaningful and performative than his empty words. He promises Michael a bicycle, but will never deliver; he proposes to Chris, but she knows he could never stay. His stories are always exaggerated, full of lucky signs and ill omens. His favourite words seem to be "unbelievable" and "wow-wow-wow-wow." With Chris, he can be who he wants to be, a heroic figure worthy of myth and omens and mysterious signs. And so he mythologizes his own life, telling stories about seeing "a cow with a single horn coming straight out of the middle of its head[…]. Wasn't that a spot of good luck? […] Oh, yes, that must be a good omen" (40) and a midget, "no bigger than three feet[…]. Promise you!" (63). Words, for him, are just a way of redefining his life, making it more interesting, more viable. Gerry creates his world in this way, and believes that it is real: twice he asks Chris, quite seriously, "Would I tell you a lie?" (40, 61). The flexibility of his language reflects the instability of his life and his utter separation from reality; for him, as he sings to Agnes and Chris, "Anything Goes."

Near the end of the play, Michael tells us: "My father sailed for Spain that Saturday. The last I saw of him was dancing down the lane in imitation of Fred Astaire, swinging his walking stick[…]. When he got to the main road he stopped and turned back and with both hands blew a dozen theatrical kisses back to Mother and me" (73). Gerry is a dancer above all; for him, dancing is more real than reality. Michael describes him in the language of performance: "Fred Astaire," "theatrical," playing a "role." Gerry is dangerously subversive to order because he does not recognize the difference between reality and performance. His life does not fit into binaries; instead, he is eternally in that ritual space in which the ideal, the performed and enacted, becomes real. Yet there *is* a reality beyond this, and all the performativity of dance cannot change it. Long after leaving Chris and Michael, Gerry dies in his "family home" in Wales, nursed by "his wife and three grown children" who were almost certainly in existence even as Gerry was again proposing to Chris in the garden (73). We do not know the details of

the timeline, only that Gerry is not a man of reason, and that his dream-life in Ireland was in some way an escape from the "reality" of his ordered life in Wales (and the British Empire), an escape in which he could remake and idealize himself through dance and myth. Gerry is a wanderer, a drifter; a few weeks here, a few months here, he lives for life itself and never works too hard. He goes to Spain to fight with the International Brigade because "it's somewhere to go—isn't it?" (62). Not tied or subservient to the Church, or to the ordered expectations of society, he loves freely, comes and goes unexpectedly, sells gramophones and gives dancing lessons instead of holding down a permanent job, and goes off to war on a whim, until his life, too, reveals its "cracks." Kate cannot comprehend how it is that "that creature has no sense of ordinary duty. Does he ever wonder how [Chris] clothes and feeds Michael?" (44). She lives by the order and responsibility of the Church; Gerry's life is a dance, beautiful to watch, corporeal, and unpredictable, a ritual ideal. However, he exists outside of reality. With his self-mythologizing and blindness to reality, Gerry can't function in the world; he, too, collapses.

Within *Lughnasa*, only the characters who use ritual to live *both/and* are stable. Kate attempts to live in a world governed *only* by logic, propriety, and "good order," while Gerry lives without any connection to reality or reason. Even Jack, although able to be *both/and* amidst the lepers in Africa, cannot adjust to the reality of a properly ordered life in Ireland. By engaging in the daily rituals that are part of Kate's control, such as walks and reading the newspaper, Jack is being reincorporated into the society of the household, physically grounded back into Kate's reality. Nonetheless, he is still an outsider: he still calls Ryanga "home" and expects to return to Africa shortly, and so cannot fully be part of the society again (81).

In contrast, Chris dances "with eyes half closed," aware of *both* sides (what *is* and what *should be*) and able to find a way to negotiate within that tension. At the very end of the play, Michael describes how he remembers that summer:

> When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed

> because to open them would break the spell. 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. (84)

As he describes "Dancing with eyes half closed," the audience is reminded of his parents' "marriage," and of the way that Chris danced, silently and with eyes shut, willing the ceremony to work its hypnotic magic but aware that looking at all the harsh truths of the moment would "break the spell." Outside of literal "truth," the meaning of this ceremony cannot be said in words; it works by being understood, not known, with the participants often consciously choosing to submit to the a-rational. While Chris dances with Gerry, Kate calls her a "fool," a description she intends as pejorative; in the context that Friel has created, however, perhaps it is not such a bad thing. The word brings to mind Lear's fool, who (not unlike Chris) understands the circumstances most clearly but is forced to exist outside of the proper social order, stripped of agency. Chris is aware of her "foolishness," and as such she chooses to dance "with eyes half closed," allowing herself to participate in both versions of reality. Chris shuts her eyes to the expectations of proper society and allows dance to create an alternate reality, one carefully chosen as preferable to civility. "No more words," she tells Gerry, choosing to see and not-see at the same time, allowing the moment to be actual-and-illusory. "Just dance" (44).

As Chris dances "with eyes half closed," she is able both to acknowledge the rules of the world in which she lives, and to escape them. She seems to be aware that the presence of this "marriage ceremony" means that any "real" marriage will be forever absent. By marrying Gerry in dance, she realizes that that is the only marriage she will ever have—that Gerry is as real, but only as real, as dance. She grieves when he leaves, "as any bride would grieve," but this time it is with sorrow and loss, not with the desperate keening of a dreamer whose hopes have been once again raised and dashed (53). She weeps when he is gone, for all that is lost, but she is finally able to understand that he is gone; she has used this ceremony to negotiate between Gerry's idealism and Kate's logic, and to find a way to embrace both worlds.

Thus, the paradox of ritual is that it *disrupts* the "good order" of religious and social structures—and also *allows* people to live within those structures. Acknowledging binary instability and indeterminacy (the "cracks" in an ordering system), and using ritual to embrace paradox instead of trying to nail down just one or the other, allows for stability through paradox. Therefore, it is not the firm system that is most stable, but the embrace of *différance*.

By working ritually and paradoxically, these performances of ceremony and dance allow the characters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* to bypass the constraints which their controlled, ordered religion places upon them; by refusing such order and instead negotiating the fluctuating indeterminacy of liminal between-spaces, these characters dangerously question the very validity of this external control. For example, Father Jack, by celebrating ceremonies which are (and which mark him as) both-Catholic-and-"pagan," both-Irish-and-African, both-missionary-and-"native," brings into question what it means to be a member of these worlds. Similarly, Chris and Gerry's both-real-and-imagined "marriage" upsets the stark division between true and false required by the schoolteacher Kate's staunch Catholicism. As ceremonial embodiments of the impossibly both-and, the ritual nature of these performances subverts "good order" by existing both within *and* without that ordering system, even using religious ritual as a means to embody paradoxes which are dangerous to the structure and control of the religion itself.

Dancing at Lughnasa, Brian Friel wrote, was written about the need for "disrupting civility." By coupling rituals that literally disrupt the society's order with characters who refuse neatly structured binaries, Friel is able to accomplish this disruption vividly. Moreover, this strategy is a reminder that the "grumbling and dangerous beast" of humankind's most "pagan" nature (represented by the Lughnasa fires burning in the background of the play, and, by extension, by the Celtic half of Ireland's history and culture) must be neither lost and suppressed, nor allowed to run free. Friel, at last, calls his Irish audiences to dance between their two worlds, Kate's closely guarded, British order *and* Gerry's unchecked Celtic freedom. Both are

invaluable parts of Ireland's history, culture, and identity. But the warning against binaries stands: separating them and privileging one over the other will be necessarily inadequate, either way it is structured. Being *either/or* in a world that is *both* is ineffective at best, and even dangerous. The solution, perhaps, is to use ritual to embrace *both/and* – both Irish and British, both heritage and future. Such ritual performances (and I would include the movement to reclaim the Gaelic language among them) both subvert and challenge the "good order" of colonizing structures (by revealing the Irishness within the "cracks") *and* allow the Irish to "dance with eyes half closed," aware of both sides of their culture and identity and finding ways to negotiate between them.

Dancing at Lughnasa is "about the need for paganism"—for the disruption of "civility." An inflexible embrace of the "good order" of structures, whether religious or social, cannot withstand the threat of *différance*; it may shatter in the presence of liminality. However, an utter lack of structure is just as dangerous. Friel's solution, I suggest, is neither to "lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that's underneath the ground" nor to let it run wild (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 214). Instead, it is ritual: non-verbal, symbolic, corporeal communication which allows for *both* structure and anti-structure, or *both* sides of a binary, simultaneously, and finds a way to negotiate between them.

Works Cited

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
Delaney, Paul, ed. *Brian Friel in Conversation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.
Faherty, Patrick. *Brian Friel: Ireland's Changing Narrator*. Dissertation. Bowling Green State University, 1995.
Friel, Brian. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
Kainz, Howard P. *Five Metaphysical Paradoxes*. Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 2006.
Morrison, J'aime. "Irish Choreo-Cinema: Dancing at the Crossroads of Language and Performance." *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15:1 (2002), 173-84.

Slaatte, Howard A. *The Paradox of Existentialist Theology: The Dialectics of a Faith-Subsumed Reason-in-Existence*. Washington, D. C.: UP of America, 1971.

Rothenbuhler, Eric W. *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1998.

Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974.

