“[T]o be in touch with some otherness”:
Memory, History, and Ethics in Brian Friel’s

_Dancing at Lughnasa*_

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Abstract
The hybrid form of storytelling and drama in Brian Friel’s _Dancing at Lughnasa_ (1990) has been associated with the play’s escape from history. By contrast, this essay suggests that the play’s eccentric use of narrative in conjunction with representation is shot through with history in that it registers Friel’s poetics in writing a chapter of Ireland’s moral history against the official grain. This counter-history rests on the disparity between the Mundys and the state in terms of ethics. At a time when the Free State aspired to an untenable economy to sustain the nationalist ideal of self-sufficiency, the Mundys suffer tremendously not only from economic stagnancy consequent upon state policies, but also from their estrangement from the state which defines them as the superfluous other. Dispossessed as they are, they still practice a gift economy which verges on the impossible not so much because they can barely afford giving as because, in its generosity to the other, this economy goes beyond the state’s self-other divide. This impossible gift is reconfigured, albeit problematically, by the narrator who makes sense of his past shared with his maternal family. Set in the 1960s, his memory narrative is ultimately framed by the playwright’s tribute to his maternal aunts as well as innumerable diasporans at home and abroad from the hindsight of 1990, a tribute coinciding with Mary Robinson’s extension of hospitality to her audience on behalf of the new Ireland in her inaugural speech.

Keywords
memory, history, ethics, gift economy, Brian Friel, _Dancing at Lughnasa_

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Dancing at Lughnasa (1990), one of Brian Friel’s “memory plays,” is notable for its defamiliarization of literary conventions. Adopting the hybrid form of storytelling and drama, this play is framed by Michael Mundy’s account, without specifying the site and time of his articulation, of his childhood days spent with his maternal family in 1936 Ballybeg, a fictional place name recurring in Friel’s plays. What is more, Michael’s narrative gives the impression of being coherent and objective, but it is also interrogated by the Mundy women’s representation as well as by its concluding retraction of his memory (“what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact”)¹ which privileges music and dancing over language. This eccentric use of narrative in conjunction with representation has been associated with the play’s escape from history. Targeting the play’s “marked time,” or nominal references to historical events, Fintan O’Toole suggests that this strategy helps Friel surrender history to personal memory in his celebration of the theatre’s inability to reflect anything truly and accurately (212). O’Toole’s critique of the play’s ahistoricity strikes a sympathetic chord with Scott Boltwood. For all Michael’s narrative authority over the past, suggests Boltwood, he falls short at illuminating the present by lapsing into sentimentality toward the end of the play. The narrator’s refrain parallels the playwright’s, Boltwood goes on, in that Friel chose not to make Michael embody himself despite the play’s autobiographical dimension; rather, he set the play in Eamon de Valera’s Irish Free State instead of his own time. This temporal gap, Boltwood concludes, signals Friel’s “reluctance to confront history fully” (174).

I am greatly indebted to O’Toole and Boltwood regarding the problems surrounding history and aesthetics in Lughnasa, but also feel that a consideration of the ethical dimension of the play may lend a new light to these concerns. Rather than signaling the “failures of theatre” by privileging memory over history as O’Toole suggests (212), I will contend, the eccentricity of the play is shot through with history in that it registers Friel’s poetics of familiar strangeness in writing a chapter of Ireland’s moral history against the official grain of the familial self as the cornerstone of national identity in the Free State. This counter-history rests on the disparity between the Mundys and the state in terms of ethics. At a time when the Free State aspired to an untenable economy to sustain the nationalist ideal of self-sufficiency, the Mundys suffer tremendously not only from economic stagnancy consequent upon state policies, but also from their estrangement from a state which regards them as the superfluous other for their singlehood. Dispossessed

¹ See Friel Plays Two, 108. Subsequent citations from this work are identified in-text as P2.
as they are, they still practice a gift economy which verges on the impossible not so much because they can barely afford giving as because, in its generosity to the other, this economy goes beyond the state’s self-other divide. This impossible gift is reconfigured, albeit problematically, by the narrator who makes sense of the past shared with his maternal family. Set in the 1960s, this memory narrative is ultimately framed by the playwright’s tribute to his maternal aunts as well as innumerable exiles at home and in diaspora from the hindsight of 1990, a tribute coinciding with Mary Robinson’s extension of hospitality to her audience on behalf of the new Ireland in her inaugural speech. To delineate Friel’s alternative history I will begin with a theoretical preliminary on the ethical and poetical dimensions of the gift, followed by an analysis of the economy in 1930’s Ireland, which is informed with an obsession with the family. With this frame of reference I will explore the Mundys’ alienation from a nation which, quick in excluding the other in its narrow definition of a familial self, positions them in its spectrum of strangers. Then I will inspect the sisters’ response to their marginalization in the light of their gift to other strangers, a remarkably impossible act to be duplicated by the adult Michael and commemorated in his narrative. By way of conclusion, I attribute Michael’s seemingly problematic presence and ethical action to the playwright by arguing that Michael is an embodiment of familiar strangeness, the stuff Friel’s poetics is made on.

**The Gift: Economy, Ethics, Poetics**

The gift, as a category of cultural analysis, is highly elusive. Indeed, it cannot congeal into a homogenous concept because its definition varies with different disciplines: anthropology, sociology, economics, religion, philosophical ethics, to name but a few. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the way it is conceived in each discipline. For the present purpose, I would narrow my focus to the ethical and poetical import of gift economy pertaining to Lughnasa.

Of all definitions of the gift, Marcel Mauss’s in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1950) is probably the most far-reaching (Osteen 2). In this study on the economic and legal systems in primitive societies, Mauss suggests that economic services and legal ties in these communities almost always adopt the form of the gift exchange, which is at once disinterested and self-interested, voluntary and obligatory (Mauss 3). Although ambivalence characterizes the course of the gift practice, in the final analysis this exchange is “strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare” (5). With this
observation he delineates three essential features of gift transactions: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (39). What is more, he suggests that the object involved in gift practices is one between souls, thus to make a gift is to “make a present of some part of oneself” (12). By likening inter-tribal economic and legal transactions to gifting, Mauss constructs a theory of “human solidarity” out of a theory of the gift (Douglas x). Although the object of study in this monograph is primitive societies, Mauss attempts in the last chapter to use his gift theory to underpin social insurance legislation in contemporary societies (66-68), but to no avail as Mary Douglas sees it because his interpretive frame fails to account for other factors, such as election and taxes, which contribute to social democracy (xv).

Mauss’s unsuccessful attempt at demonstrating corporate solidarity in modern societies notwithstanding, his insight into the relation between morality and economy in modern life (69) inspires David Cheal’s formulation of institutionalized communities in the modern world. In contrast to Mauss, who builds his theory of communal solidarity on individual gift practices, Cheal proposes that gift transactions between individuals be understood as a feature of social ties within a “moral economy”—a system of transactions which are considered moral, or socially desirable, in that social ties are recognized and balanced social relations are maintained through these transactions (91). This economy consists of normative obligations to assist other members so that they can “carry out their projects” (92). In other words, social order in a moral economy is expressed in “gift transactions” (92). As the gift in a moral economy is prescribed, so is selfhood, which is a constituent of the gift (“to make a gift of something . . . is to make a present of some part of oneself”) (Mauss 12), formulated. Indeed, gift transactions are practiced by members whose identity is institutionalized in three modes: forms of relationships are standardized, the presence of members is continuous, and members are available to others as a routine. This institutionalized identity enables a “progressive, and pervasive, ritualization of interaction” (Cheal 92) among members who give out of “friendship, love, and gratitude”—three sentiments which involve an identification with others to erase “the boundaries between self and other.” Out of this denial of self-other divide emerges a collective identity defined “vis-à-vis outsiders” (93).

It is notable that Cheal’s moral economy is more spiritual than material, more ethical than economic, and more intra-communal than inter-communal. But what if norms that sustain a moral economy collapse? Cheal does not dwell on this possibility except to imply that it should be conceived as a breach in gift practices (92). The consequences of this breach, however, are often far more hurtful than
Cheal indicates, especially when his moral economy is predicated on a coherent, institutionalized selfhood which entails self-other differentiation. Indeed, when pushed to extreme, his notion of a collective identity would lead to marginalization of individuals who fail to conform to the norms, and hostility to outsiders from other communities. In this case, social transactions at best tip toward “negative reciprocity”—suspicion and exploitation among strangers (Sahlins 195)—and toward discrimination and racism at worst. Exclusion and racial hatred, in turn, are often negatively reciprocated with retributions or revolts, thereby undermining the kind of social order moral economies aspire to. An alternative gift economy is thus called for to steer away from this vicious circle of negative reciprocity. If a moral economy maintains its social order through “rational transfers” (Cheal 91), then an alternative solution to injustice consequent upon its failure probably lies in unconditional forgiveness, a form of the “pure gift” (Malinowski 177-80) which requires no reciprocity.

This “irrational” gift is the precondition of gifting for Jacques Derrida. Targeting Mauss’s gift economy of obligatory reciprocity, Derrida suggests in Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money (1991) that a coherent discourse on the gift is impossible (Given Time 24) because there is no gift without the intention of giving, but intentional giving also threatens the gift with self-serving (Given Time 123). In view of the gift’s structural paradox, Derrida understands the gift as “the impossible” in that it must keep a relation of “familiar foreignness” to its circulation (Given Time 7). Indeed, the gift is by necessity the pure gift: “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt” (Given Time 12). Rather, it is given in such a way that “it forgets itself” (Given Time 17; emphasis in original), that is, it is “forgetful expenditures” without an expectation of a return gift (Given Time 47). Operating on the mode of unreason, the gift is “obviously madness” in its desire “to think the impossible . . . [and] to give the impossible” (Given Time 35). Forgiveness is such an impossible gift. In contrast to conditional forgiveness, which aims at restoring a “normality”—be it social, national, political, or psychological—through public rituals, amnesties, psychotherapy, etc. (Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism 31), unconditional forgiveness, as a pure gift, is “a madness of the impossible” (On Cosmopolitanism 45) since it forgives “only the unforgivable” (On Cosmopolitanism 32). Without seeking to reconstitute justice in its normality, which endows the victim with sovereign power over the victimizer, pure forgiveness is “a forgiveness without power” (On Cosmopolitanism 59).

Pursuing Derrida’s unconditional forgiveness, Paul Ricoeur in Memory, History, Forgetting (2004) suggests that forgiveness is “an unequal exchange”
(Memory 459) involving memory, history and forgetting (Memory 457), three categories which give title to the book. Like Derrida, who disapproves of “finalized” forgiveness (On Cosmopolitanism 50), Ricoeur argues that institutionalized pardon, such as amnesties, often amounts to amnesia since it tends to exclude the relation to the past from the problematic of forgetting (Memory 452-53)—forgiveness of the offense. To step away from this pitfall, amnesties should be carried out through memory, which is completed by “the work of mourning” (Memory 499) and guided by “the spirit of forgiveness” (Memory 493). This does not mean, however, that forgetting should never be invoked. Rather, forgetting is not intended to silence evil but to state it “in a pacified mode, without anger,” an enunciation which carries the power of a speech act (Memory 478), “a wish in the optative mood” rather than a commandment (Memory 459). This form of forgetting generates unconditional forgiveness which separates the culprit from his act by forgiving the guilty person but condemning his action, thereby releasing the offender from his offense (Memory 490). From this perspective, the trajectory of unconditional forgiveness does not stop at the donor-victim who “forgets” his or her gift as Derrida suggests; rather, it leads to selfhood (Memory 459) which is capable of moral act, as is revealed in the victim’s wish for the culprit, which can be translated into an enunciation: “You are better than your actions” (Memory 493). By holding the self to the past through memory, forgiveness culminates in “a happy memory” (Memory 503)—a memory at peace (Memory 496) which is embedded in faithfulness to the past (Memory 285). Separating the past (the victim’s suffering inflicted by the culprit’s wrongdoing) from the present (the “unequal exchange” between victim and culprit) to make way for the future (the forgiven culprit’s possible moral act), this happy memory enables history to fulfill its responsibility for the dead (Memory 499).

In positing “wish” as the moving force toward “a happy memory” in the economy of pure forgiveness, Ricoeur is not unaware of the problem surrounding these categories. For faithfulness to the past, as a wish, can be betrayed like all wishes; carrying the power of a speech act, this wish can fail like all speech acts (Memory 494). Still, Ricoeur believes that favorable circumstances exist to activate successful recollection which checks mourning along “the fatal slope of melancholy,” the attraction to sorrow (Memory 496). These circumstances include assistance from another to help the victim to remember or to share his or her memories (Memory 495). In other words, the work of mourning entails a narrative partaken by an empathetic audience. Unlike other narratives, however, Ricoeur’s narrative imagination is subject to the ethical limit of responsible action. It rests on
a narrative identity of selfhood (*ipse*) distinct from the sameness of self-identity (*idem*). In contrast to self-identity, which remains permanent in time, selfhood involves a dialectic of self and “the other than self.” In other words, selfhood implies otherness (Ricoeur, *Oneself* 2-3). Narrative identity, in turn, negotiates different forms of self-identity through time (*Oneself* 123). By synthesizing past, present, and future (Kearney, “Narrative” 181), the self explores its familiar strangeness through time in the course of constructing its life narrative. This process is carried out with narrative will to remain constant in its commitment to its audience (Ricoeur, *Oneself* 123). Thinking the impossible and giving the impossible, such narrative imagination proposes a “poetic resolution” to the ethical consequences of its reception (Kearney, “Narrative” 183) and, by extension, of injustice consequent upon the failure of moral economies, which triggers this imagination. This poetics of narrative imagination is also ethical since it provides a base for a responsible self to come to terms with the traumatic past in order to delineate a future where familiar foreignness of selfhood is respected.

**Strangers at Home: the Irish Free State’s Other**

Repudiating Fintan O’Toole’s critique of *Lughnasa*’s references to historical events as the “marked time” of Michael’s remembrances (214), Catriona Clutterbuck suggests that these events direct toward Friel’s charge of the church, industrialization, and state politics with responsibility for curtailing the Mundy sisters’ livelihood (111). This does not mean, however, that these women are merely passive victims of circumstances. They do articulate their resistance to these constricting forces through their songs about Mussolini and de Valera, but their effort is undermined by their internalization of these constrictions (Clutterbuck 112). This reading is insightful about the Mundy women’s contribution to their own oppression, but it also runs the risk of underestimating the power inequality between the state and individuals in general, and their disempowerment caused by the state’s gender ideology in particular, given that they are defined as the other by a new nation which is anxious to assert itself as an autonomous, self-sufficient rural republic (Brown 118). Grounded on a desire for a secure, self-confident national identity, this autonomy was expected to manifest itself in social stability predicted on a moral economy which consisted of an “institutionalization of identity” (Cheal 92). The basic unit of this economy was family comprising strong patriarch and nourishing woman, a standardized form of relation (Cheal 92) epitomized in the 1935 draft constitution to be enacted in 1937. Article 41 of the new constitution
characterized the family as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society,” where woman makes her contribution to the nation “by her life within the home” (Constitution of Ireland 162). As the social order in moral economies is often expressed in “gift transactions,” so does the draft constitution commit the state to provide assistance to the people so that “they can carry out their projects” (Cheal 92). In recognition of her contribution, the state shall “endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Constitution of Ireland 162). The state’s “gift” to the mother is ultimately given to the family, as subsection 3.1 asserts that the state shall “guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the Family is founded” (Constitution of Ireland 162). Envisioned in this article is a family exclusively based on marriage in compliance with Catholic doctrines, as the Preamble of the constitution refers to the Holy Trinity as its final authority (Constitution of Ireland 2). What is more, it prescribes family responsibilities by distinct gender roles: man financial, and woman domestic. Emerging from this stable social structure is a new nation delineated in Eamon de Valera’s 1943 “dream speech” broadcast to the Irish people on St. Patrick’s Day. Translating pre-independence nationalist ideals of Gaelicism and Catholicism into the Catholic family in the Gael’s sphere of operation, this speech projects the familial into a rural landscape inhabited by people at ease in their home to enjoy the state’s gift of moral economy:

The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who . . . were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live. (“St. Patrick Day’s Speech” 1)

Ideal as this vision is, it is highly unrealistic in that there is a missing link between home and the vision of a homely landscape inhabited by Irish people due to the state’s failure to fulfill its “normative obligations” (Cheal 92) to “guard . . . the institution of marriage” so that man and woman can make contributions to the moral economy the state aspires to. As John Joseph Lee astutely puts it, the state’s
prescription was “to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance” (206-07). This breach stems from the ineffectiveness of de Valera’s economic policies which failed to substantiate his moral economy. They aimed at establishing national self-sufficiency through high tariffs in order to protect native agriculture and industries against free trade with other countries (Brown 110-11; Lee 185-90). Underlying these policies was a desire for setting apart the national way of life, which presumably represented decency and purity, from that of “the more commercial societies that surrounded [Ireland]” (Brown 112). The other side of this “economic nationalism” was that the people were expected to privilege the spiritual over the material, a pragmatic expectation indeed since the state could provide them with “frugal comfort” at best, aiming as it was at “frugal self-sufficiency” (Lee 192 sic passim). Although de Valera’s protectionist policies did make modest success between 1932 and 1936, this success barely lived up to their initial expectations (Brown 111-12; Lee 201). Instead, they led to the economic abyss in the next decade, with agriculture remaining depressed, unemployment rising to an unforeseeable high (Lee 201), and emigration increasing from 22,000 in 1936 to 26,000 in 1937 (Lee 187) leading to the dispersion of family. Besides the disruption of “the continuity of members over time” in a functional moral economy (Cheal 92), marriage also became unaffordable to most Irish people given this economic condition. Indeed, the marriage rate in the Free State was lower than 5 per 1,000 (Meenan 20; Kennedy 28), the lowest in European countries (Meenan 19; Lee 207). This low rate came side by side with a large number of marriageable women who failed to enter into a marriage. In 1926 more than half of the female population aged between 25 and 35 was unmarried (Meenan 22). Although no such figure is readily available for 1936, it is reasonable to presume that the percentage of single women was close to, if not higher than, the one in 1926, considering the slight increase in marriage rate, from 4.74 in 1921-30 to 4.90 in 1931-40 (Meenan 20; Kennedy 28), an increase attributable to population loss caused by the rise in the number of emigration.

In view of the gap between ideal and reality, the State’s prescription for family can be understood as an empty gift intended to secure the Irish people’s gratuitous consent to partake of its moral economy, if not a useful albeit inadvertent excuse for the state’s evasion from responsibility for catering to the vast majority of the

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2 Cf. note 4.
3 Repudiating the presumption that the low marriage rate was caused by the emigration of marriageable people, Meenan suggests that the Irish people emigrated because there were no marriage prospects at home (22).
population. Instead, most people remained single because of “an unhealthy economic position” (Meenan 22) in the first place. De Valera’s urge toward self-sufficiency thus reflects an ungrounded belief in the plenitude of Irish life, a presumption maintained only by repressing dismal facts, including emigration and sexual repression consequent upon economic stagnation (Brown 118-19). This complacency expressed itself in a disregard for people whose identity could not be institutionalized in the State’s moral economy. It also implied that the State was repressing the otherness of national identity by subjecting the pre-independence ideals of Gaelicism to the surveillance of the Catholic church, an issue to be addressed later. To adopt Sigmund Freud’s terms, beneath the façade of de Valera’s dream nation was the repressed uncanny (das Unheimliche; “unhomely”), which, once familiar (das Heimliche; “homely”) in the Free State’s rural utopia, was tinged with unhomely otherness (241). As a result, what was expected to be a homely community grounded upon the familial turned into a landscape inhabited by strangers who did not fit the norms established by the State; as for the forced emigrants, they were not even given a place in this landscape of the people, but consigned to oblivion altogether. This familiar strangeness was most profoundly felt by single women since Article 41 of the draft constitution implied that motherhood within wedlock was the norm of Irish womanhood; other forms of womanhood were relegated to anomaly. It followed that female singlehood was deplorable, and woman’s sexual transgressions were stigmatized even though her male partner’s contribution to her stigma was often countenanced.

**Gifts of Strangers**

The Mundy sisters are among these familiar strangers in 1936 Ballybeg, a parody of de Valera’s self-sufficient utopia. They are perceived as superfluous failures since they remain unmarried despite their desire for love and marriage. Kate, Maggie and Agnes are way beyond nubile age. Kate, in particular, is highly interested in Austin Morgan, a store-owner, but proves to be no match for the young girl Morgan is courting (P2 19-20). As if to aggravate their failure, the younger sisters are “fallen” or about to fall by Catholic standards. Chris has a “love child,” Michael, by Gerry Evans, a Welsh travelling salesman, and Rose slips away to the “back hills” unmonitored by police and priests with Danny Bradley, a married man.

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4 The average age at marriage for Irish women in 1921-30 is 29.1. No such information is available for 1931-40. See Kennedy 28. This lack arises from the fact that it was not required to state age upon the marriage certificate in the Free State (Meenan 24).
she is seeing, during Lughnasa, a Celtic\(^5\) festival which gives the play its title. Without a marriage to fall back on, they manage a sororal family economy through Kate’s salary as a parish school teacher, an income supplemented by Agnes’s and Rose’s precarious and meager wages as glove hand-knitters. Shoudering full responsibility for sustaining themselves, they barely enjoy the kind of frugal comfort delineated by de Valera; rather, they are struggling to survive the devastating consequences of a protectionist economy further destabilized by the effects of industrialization.

In the trying struggle for survival during the Famine, Tom Murphy suggests, “[l]ove, tenderness, loyalty, generosity” may well “go out of the door” (xi). Even though the dire condition in subsequent eras was in no way comparable to the trauma of the Great Hunger, poverty and generosity barely go together in Irish history. As Andrew Gibson observes, social relations in colonial Ireland involve “little calculations of or tussles for advantage, however small, or . . . claims to status, however trivial” (88). It followed that gift-giving, one of the most common ways to establish and maintain social ties, was most likely motivated by self-interest under such circumstances; the pure gift out of altruistic love and generosity became almost impossible. It would be all too human if this calculating tendency of gift-giving was also adopted by post-independence Irish people whose social and material conditions made it difficult for them to give to others. Danny Bradley’s gifts of a charm and a medal to Rose testify to such a tendency: they are intended to secure her sexual favors more than her love, an intent that does not escape her sisters (P2 13-15) who are protective of their “simple” sibling. What is more, by delineating a barely sustainable moral economy, the Free State’s lip service to the gift transactions required of its moral economy exemplifies such a tendency. The Mundy sisters, however, unsettle this time-honored convention of humanity by forming an alternative economy which, in its own way, embraces the spirit of the moral economy the State aspires to. Despite their plight, they are generous toward their “fallen siblings.” They not only take in both Chris and Michael but remain available to them in terms of emotional support (Cf. Lojek 86); they also accommodate Rose even though they have been discouraging her from seeing her married lover without success. In view of the social disapproval of sexual

\(^5\) While using this term after Friel, I am not unaware that “Celtic” is the broader term for “Gaelic” which characterizes the pagan culture of the Gael, or the Goidelic Celt, who predominated Ireland \textit{circa} 500 BC to 1169. See Boyce 15-76. As these two terms are used interchangeably by the scholars I consulted, I will concur with this tradition to avoid awkward differentiation.
transgressions, their generosity amounts to gift-giving which they can ill afford in
that it jeopardizes their already shaky social standing as well as chances of survival.
Their socio-economic predicament is further aggravated when they extend their
hospitality to their brother Jack, a returned migrant priest, a situation triggering
Michael’s remembrances.

Falling ill with malaria which seems to have confused his mind, Jack comes
home from Africa to be nursed by his sisters, thereby turning himself into a weak
patriarch in the “anomalous” family that is the Mundy household. As a priest he
used to be the pride of the village, but his social prestige was gradually eroded after
he was dispatched to Africa. This is because during the twenty-five years’ service
away from home he not only served as chaplain to the English army but went native
to become pagan. From the church’s view, he was no longer fit for his post; his
superiors thus sent him home “not because his mind was confused” (P2 64), but
because his unruly conduct had to be stopped. Paradoxically, there is no place for
such a stigmatized priest at home either because of his grave offense to Irish
sensibilities. As a consequence, he not only falls out of favor with the home
community, but implicates his sister Kate, a onetime revolutionary for Irish
independence, in his betrayal of Catholic Ireland. Indeed, Kate notices that the
parish priest can never look her in the eye ever since Jack’s homecoming (P2 28);
she even loses her job a few months later. As Jack returns to Ballybeg almost as a
stranger, so does he lose a sense of homecoming in terms of language use: he
cannot find the English words for what he wants to say, and constantly calls Chris
“Okawa,” the name of his houseboy in Uganda (P2 22). In other words, in contrast
to the typical diasporic experience, which is characterized by a sense of rejection by
the host land and a desire for an eventual return to the homeland (Safran 83-84),
Jack’s diaspora begins precisely when he comes home as a stranger.

Although the Mundy sisters are hospitable to Jack, they feel ill at ease with
signs of his strangeness, especially when these signs gradually unfold themselves as
signals of apostasy more than symptoms of illness. In other words, Jack, who used
to be familiar to them as a family member, has now assumed an unhomely quality
beyond their recognition. By so doing they fail to discern their shared position in
the spectrum of Ireland’s familiar strangeness. As they accommodate Jack out of
familial sentiments, so do they extend such a gift to Gerry Evans, Michael’s
biological father, albeit with some constraint because Kate scorns him for making
Chris an unmarried mother instead of providing her with a home, a strong opinion
shared by “simple” Rose. Maggie and Agnes are excited about his visit upon seeing
him approach their house; Maggie even proposes to offer him tea, but ends up
watching him from the window with Agnes instead of going outside with Chris to greet him. Kate pretends to snub him by ignoring his imminent presence and by referring to him as “the creature,” an appellation gravely offending Agnes (P2 51), but cannot help planning to give him tea, and put him up for the night. By withholding their impulse to extend hospitality to Gerry, they are unaware that they are kindred souls in many ways. Indeed, in finding a home away from home Gerry is akin to Jack. More importantly, he is all too Irish in temperament. A Welsh commercial traveler who commands an English accent and who sports dandyish attire, he is identifiably a foreigner in Ballybeg. For all his pretension to being an English businessman, however, he turns out to be compatible with the backcountry Irish village. Working at a trade which is soon to become extinct, he is a failure since he does not seem to have sold a single gramophone, but fares better as a dancing master (P2 45-49). In this way he renders himself more congenial to Irish folk culture than might have been expected. He turns out to be all too Irish in more than one way, however: he fits the imperial stereotype of the Irish people in his inability to manage his life effectively. Even though he has probably established a family in Wales when he courts Chris, he always proposes to her during his occasional visits but to no avail. In other words, he leaves his Welsh family behind to gratify his lust for experience, but ends up leaving behind an Irish family out of wedlock in a quest for more experience in a foreign land. This quest culminates in his decision to fight in the Spanish Civil War along with the International Brigade. The reason for enlisting for this “Great Cause,” as he puts it, is a chance to try “something worthy for a change,” since he is not good at “everyday stuff” (P2 51). Ironically, the only change his great cause brings about is in his lifestyle: he has to settle down with his Welsh family because he is wounded shortly after he goes to Spain. Gerry’s self-comment reminds one of Matthew Arnold’s formula for Celtic temperament—an inability to deal with “despotism of fact” (91). As a foreigner who is at home in Ireland, he can be said to be the unacknowledged component of Irish identity.

**Dancing and the Self’s Otherness**

The Mundy sisters are quick in withholding their hospitality to Gerry Evans when the familiar foreigner comes over to visit, but slow in reckoning with their own strangeness, a part of which overlaps with his in terms of dancing, an aspect of pagan culture which would be repressed one year later. In other words, their unawareness of their own strangeness coincides with the Free State’s blindness to
its otherness in its haste to consolidate national identity by institutionalizing Gaelicism along with Catholicism. This blindness harks back to the 1920s when the new nation set out to officialize the Irish language and dancing, which were promoted by the Gaelic League during the pre-independence era as benchmarks of Irishness. The first dancing school was established at that time, offering dancing lessons to young children. As for the League’s agenda for reviving the Irish language, the new nation gradually took it over by giving the language an official status. In the early 1930s a pass in the Irish language was required for secondary school Leaving Certificate as well as the Civil Service (Foster 518). Irish was further elevated to the first official language of Ireland in the draft constitution (Constitution of Ireland 8). Meanwhile, the League was restructured as the Irish Dancing Commission in 1929 to focus on directing the course of Irish dance. To this end the Commission regulated the dance by publishing a series of guidelines on dance steps included in its repertoires, and by imposing the requirement of a license for dancing masters, who were expected to be Gaelic speakers. By lowering the age group of targeted students and institutionalizing Irish dance, the Commission invested dance with the function of offering “a good education in Irishness” (Wulff 50). This training was often more athletic than aesthetic, more disciplinary than enjoyable (Moroney); any association with sexuality in dancing was to be purged in compliance with the purity of national identity. Under the church’s influence, this “historic resistance to physical touching” (Theodores 204) culminated in the Public Dance Hall Act in 1935, which stipulated that dancing be allowed at licensed halls only. Although the rationale of this act was the prevention of unruly behavior associated with Irish dancing, it inadvertently suppressed the folk nature of Irish dances, which were often held in kitchens and at rural crossroads. Indeed, “the comely maidens” in de Valera’s “dream speech” might well nigh be dancing with “the athletic youths” at crossroads, but were not presented as such in his vision of the Irish people, forbidden to do so as they were several years before he delivered his speech. Under the official surveillance of Irish dancing, the social dynamic of Gaelicism was to become the repressed other of Catholic Ireland.

The Mundy women’s response to Lughnasa, an annual festival in honor of Lugh, Celtic god of fertility, is a microcosm of this repression through the agency of Kate. As the matriarch of the household, Kate is the secular minister of the church in the family. She sides with the church’s reservations about paganism, and censors Maggie’s playful proposal that their radio set be christened as Lugh. Maggie makes this proposal probably because by broadcasting Irish dance music the radio introduces festivity into the sisters’ drab life, not unlike the Celtic God in whose
honor merriment of dancing is tolerated annually. Echoing the Public Dance Hall Act, Kate strongly objects to Lughnasa because the participants of the festive dance are primarily “cheeky young brats” she has taught (P2 22), irresponsible young people (P2 24) who are “savages” (P2 29). With this strong opinion she forbids any reference to this ritual at their “Christian . . . Catholic home” (P2 29), now that Jack is back. By repressing her sisters’ potential resistance to Catholic doctrines, Kate unwittingly contributes to their subjugation as well as her own and, by extension, helps subdue their otherness in its affinity with Celticism.

Kate’s judgment on the Celtic ritual notwithstanding, she cannot erase its presence from the sisters’ quotidian life. Although the radio is finally named Marconi at Kate’s insistence to neutralize the evocation of frivolity in Maggie’s version, its programs constantly do justice to Maggie’s proposal for its name by reminding the sisters that Celticism is still very much alive. Indeed, despite Kate’s injunctions against Lughnasa, dancing used to be part of the sisters’ life, and has left an indelible imprint on their selfhood. As Maggie recalls, she used to slip out of town to dance along with Bernie O’Donnell, a childhood pal from another town. She even won the second prize in the competition on “the Best Military Two-step,” to the chagrin of Bernie, who was the cynosure of the competition (P2 34). Quite symptomatically, this memory is triggered by Kate’s account of her encounter with Bernie, who comes home as a “successful” emigrant, armed as she is with a Swedish husband and twin daughters. For Bernie’s homecoming touches on Maggie’s repressed otherness, which, once familiar, now returns in a strange form—dancing in a homemade festival that bears an uncanny resemblance to Lughnasa. Indeed, she becomes defiant upon hearing “The Mason’s Apron” broadcast on Marconi shortly after she recounts her excursion into the dancing competition with Bernie. As if to vindicate her unfulfilled womanhood, she smears her face with floured hands to dance, thereby making an abandoned other out of her proper self, not unlike the frivolous participant of a pagan ritual.

It turns out that Maggie’s uncanny rendition of her otherness strikes a sympathetic chord with her sisters, who partake of her frustrations as a superfluous woman. Soon the sisters join this impromptu festivity. Indeed, so strong is the call of her repressed otherness that not even Kate can resist it even though it challenges her religious convictions. This struggle between self and otherness explains why she has been watching her sisters “with unease, with alarm” for some time as her proper self is trying to hold fast, but only to yield to her forceful otherness, making her leap up suddenly to execute a solo dance that is both “controlled and frantic” (P2 36)—a strange mixture of her controlled self and unrestrained otherness.
Although Kate dances alone outside the house, she partakes of the spirit of her sisters’ “parodic reel,” which is more of desperate abandonment than of merriment. As the stage directions indicate, the music transmitted from the mechanical pagan God is too loud, and the dancing women “consciously and crudely caricatur[e] themselves” to verge on “near-hysteria” (P2 37). This subversion of order comes to a rude stop when the radio music goes off suddenly, leaving the sisters embarrassed, even ashamed of their loss of self-control. Their desperate attempt to fulfill their unfulfilled womanhood through dancing thus remains truncated since their repressed otherness is aroused but only to be subdued again, thereby restituting their old self of the willingly oppressed (Cf. Rollins 83), with Rose as the only exception. Despite Kate’s admonitions against Lughnasa, she ventures with Danny Bradley into the “dangerous” back hills frequented by the frivolous participants of the festival, and comes home apathetic and famished—to her panicky sisters’ distress.

Dancing and the Gift: Self as the Other

If dancing promises to reconcile the Mundy sisters to their otherness, Jack enjoys a mixed blessing since in his illness he is oblivious to his strangeness in Ballybeg. Rather, his mind still dwells in the adopted homeland he has left behind, where he was perfectly at home with his foreignness. Thus Kate’s objection, in respect of his presence, to her sisters’ proposal that they attend the harvest dance (P2 25) is superfluous. Given his longing for Uganda, he might join their homemade Lughnasa dancing if he were present, for Maggie’s smeared face would remind him of the painted face of the Ryangan at a harvest festival comparable to the Celtic ritual (P2 74) (Cf. McMullan 94). Indeed, dancing functions as a ritual to recuperate the distant “home” for Jack. After his talk on African culture with the sisters, he performs Africa by dancing an African ritual dance to a song he sings, in rhythm to the “music” he creates with the sticks for Michael’s kite. Unlike his sisters’ almost hysterical execution of a dance which, once familiar, has become strange, his dance is spontaneous and free from restraints, comparable to the Irish dance at the earliest stage—an egalitarian occasion often held after the celebration of a local patron saint’s day (Brennan 18-19). His facility with a presumably foreign and primitive dance is in step with his worldview, which is marked by an absence of power relations and the attendant native/self-foreign/other divide. This unconditional accommodation of the foreign as the self explains why he served African lepers as well as English soldiers during the Great War, availed himself of funding from the English government to facilitate his service to the Ryangans, and
befriended African natives and English officers alike. It also explains why he felt totally at home in Africa since his Celtic temperament was most compatible there, even though his ease with Ireland’s otherness as well as his own made him “the Irish Outcast” (P2 62) of Catholic Ireland. As he informs Kate, the Ryangans are “a remarkable people” (P2 76) who are open-hearted, capable of fun and laughing because they do not distinguish between the secular and the religious. Put it differently, they are able to enjoy life in a community which celebrates an ethical equilibrium between self and other, free from power hierarchy established by religion and its attendant familiar-familiar norms. In some respects, he goes on, the Ryangans are “not unlike us” (P2 76), making an analogy between Africa and Celtic Ireland. It is with his African-Celtic open heart that he admires Chris’s motherhood out of wedlock, for in Ryanga love-children are embraced as luck (P2 64). He also proposes that he take his sisters to polygamous Africa, where they can easily find a husband to share among themselves, thereby solving their predicament as surplus women in the Free State.

Jack’s absolute respect for the other allows him to receive Gerry as his kindred rather than an irresponsible foreigner whose occasional visits are ambivalently welcomed by the Mundy sisters. Indeed, if Kate cannot forgive Gerry for offending her moral convictions and for adding insult to Chris’s injury with his visits, Jack is alien to her notion of morality and justice. Rather, he operates in a sphere which, anticipating the gift economy of unconditional forgiveness without power (Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism 59), is devoid of self-other division characteristic of Kate’s and the Free State’s economies. As was mentioned, the nation’s moral economy entails an exclusion of outsiders that verges on xenophobia. The Mundy sisters’ gift economy, to a lesser degree, is tinged with an unease with familiar strangeness. More than his sisters’ unreserved accommodation of fallen siblings, Jack practices a gift economy in which the donor is also the recipient. This fusion of self and other is expressed through a gift, a precious reminder of his “golden” days in Africa, in which pure good will supersedes power relations attendant upon the self-other divide: it is the previous English governor’s ceremonial tricorn hat presented to him as a gift by a colonial officer (P2 62). Taking Gerry as a friend instead of an untrustworthy foreign libertine, he offers to swap his treasured hat with Gerry’s straw hat in the Ryangan fashion—a formal procedure which requires both parties to distance the self from the object once possessed before they adopt the position of the other to claim the gift (P2 104). In other words, through gift-giving the self recognizes the mutual implication of self and other. By performing the self as the other Jack readily establishes his bonding
with Gerry, and unwittingly inaugurates a ceremony of gift-giving which promises to exorcise the uncanny foreignness that has plagued the Mundy sisters through forgiveness.

The gift economy of pure forgiveness, suggests Ricoeur, belongs to the realm of spiritual economy which celebrates “a poetics of moral life” akin to that of literature, music, and art (“Reflections” 10). This poetical dimension of ethics sheds light on the way the Mundy women’s uncanny strangeness is exorcized. Just when Jack is preparing the rite of gift-exchange with Gerry, Gerry himself performs a similar ritual to the Mundy sisters in the form of dancing. It is notable that this dance-ritual registers a delightful interaction between self and other, totally distinct from the Mundy sisters’ frantic impromptu dance, in which they are parodying their otherness instead of reconciling themselves to it. Indeed, by dancing with Chris before he goes to Spain, Gerry makes his apology by performing a rite of marriage in his own way, and thus gratifies her longing for such a tie (P2 65-66) even though she has consistently declined his marriage proposal (P2 54). He also alleviates Agnes’s frustrations by inviting her to dance and by praising her dancing skills (P2 97-98). This gesture of friendliness does not escape Maggie, who in her turn offers to dance with him (P2 99), an offer Gerry readily accepts. In dancing with the sisters, he inadvertently performs the role of their polygamous husband that Jack envisions (McMullan 94), thereby ushering them into a community where they are no longer judged as unmarried failures. It is not surprising, therefore, that this proliferation of ritual dancing infuriates Chris, since she has invested this dance ritual with a privilege exclusively her own. She thus undercuts this dance series by turning off the radio which is playing the dance music. However, she cannot stop the chain of reconciliation and gift-giving already set in motion, as Maggie invites Gerry to dance with her some other day, and Jack ritualistically exchanges hats with him before the sisters invite him to share their inadequate meal—three scrambled “Eggs Ballybeg” for seven people, served on bread (P2 88). By dancing (or offering to dance) with an erstwhile outsider, the three sisters not only engage Kate to forgive him by extending hospitality to him, but also acknowledge their own otherness. In other words, in this configuration of dancing as a ritual which generates the pure gift of unconditional forgiveness, the Mundys are reconciled to themselves in a home which celebrates familiar strangeness, however tentatively.

The Residue of the Gift

Indeed, this utopian community cannot be sustained in Catholic Ireland on the
threshold of socio-economic changes, leading to the ultimate disintegration of the Mundy family. The collapse of this utopian plenitude is anticipated by Jack’s recognition of himself as an incompatible stranger in Ballybeg after he recovers from illness. He refuses to say mass, to his sisters’ dismay; instead, he wants to go back to Uganda (P2 91-92). In view of Jack’s awareness of his foreignness at home, it is perhaps not a coincidence that he dies suddenly of a heart attack in the summer of 1937, an incident coinciding with the enactment of the draft constitution. Indeed, even though his presence heralds the possibility of a reconciliation with uncanny foreignness which promises to regenerate the cultural stagnancy of the Free State, this possibility is undercut as he remains the excluded other in Catholic Ireland up to his final days. If Jack’s death on the eve of Lughnasa signals the disappearance from the austere republic of the spiritual gift economy associated with the Celtic ritual, this indicator is reiterated in the severance of Gerry’s connection with the Mundy sisters. It begins with his foot injury sustained in Spain, a wound “putting an end to his dancing days” (P2 92) as well as the chance to resume his dance-ritual with the sisters. He ceases his sporadic visits altogether sometime after World War II, thereby erasing his presence in Ballybeg as the unacknowledged kin to the Mundys. He dies in his Wales home in the mid-1950s.

Meanwhile, the sisters are struggling to survive financial hardships at home, where they become even more estranged by the inroads of industrialization and the state sanction of Catholicism. Their ordeal begins when the parish priest does not renew Kate’s contract with the local school subsequent to Jack’s homecoming (P2 64). Rose and Agnes also lose their job to knitting machines afterwards. Instead of commuting to another town to work at a factory at their supervisor’s suggestion, Rose and Agnes choose to leave home for England in search of better opportunities for survival for themselves as well as the whole family. In other words, if becoming strangers is the only option for them, they prefer to do so in a foreign land rather than at home—as 26,000 Irish people did in 1937, a dramatic increase of 4,000 from the previous year (Lee 183, 201). Unlike Jack and Gerry, however, they never feel at home in diaspora. Indeed, their decision to leave home not only fails to fulfill their expectations but plunges them into despair: they can barely survive on their meager wages as cleaning women in London, and turn to alcohol when their struggle proves futile. By the time Michael tracks them down twenty-five years later, Agnes is dead, and Rose is dying in a hospice for the poor (P2 91). Although Kate, Maggie and Chris stay put, they do not fare any better since they are trying very hard to cope with their plight: they have to make both ends meet, and at the same time deal with the loss of their family spirit consequent upon the dispersion of
their family (P2 92). Instead of surrendering to debilitating despair as their self-exiled sisters do, however, they prove to be remarkably resilient, sustained as they are by the gift economy circulating in the household.

I have suggested that Jack’s ceremonious gift-giving ushers in a gift economy which enables the Mundy sisters to forgive Gerry and at the same time acknowledge their own foreignness. This exceptional moment also occurs to Chris. Although she always declines Gerry’s proposal, she does so probably not so much because she is able to “balance the interests of Irishness with the attractions of Englishness” (Boltwood 212). Rather, she cannot bring herself to marry an irresponsible man despite her melancholic response to his unexcused (and unexcusable) absence and despite cultural imperatives for marriage (Cf. Lojek 86). Not until Gerry offers her his apology in the form of dance does she begin to forgive him by separating his person from his deeds (Ricoeur, Memory 490) and at the same time acknowledge her otherness as a “fallen” woman. Shallow as Gerry’s offer to Chris may seem, its effect is not insignificant. As Ricoeur suggests, unconditional forgiveness is in disproportion to the offense (Memory 457). Chris’s relinquishment of resentment toward Gerry perfectly exemplifies Ricoeur’s observation. Indeed, her act is incommensurable with the gravity of his offense, which leads to her stigmatization as an unmarried mother in a society preoccupied with the sanctity of family. The interaction between the two lovers further reveals that this spiritual gift is asymmetrical to the culprit’s offering. Indeed, Gerry’s good will is so profoundly felt by Chris that she engages the Boy Michael’s interest in Gerry, probably for the first time, by informing him of his biological father’s promise to bring him a bicycle for a gift (P2 57-58). In other words, having released Gerry from his offense, she is holding him as an agent capable of moral act. Armed with her dancing with Gerry as a marriage ritual, she is also capable of grieving over his absence “as any bride would grieve” when he goes to fight the Spanish war, instead of lapsing into recurring depression as she used to (P2 66). In other words, having let go of Gerry’s wrongdoing, she has formulated a happy memory, and can now look to a future where her “unfulfilled future of the past” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 8) as a surplus woman is fulfilled. This good wish for Gerry enables her to reciprocate her sisters’ generosity by sustaining the family’s jeopardized gift economy: she becomes the breadwinner during the years when Kate is unemployed by working at a knitting factory—a job Agnes and Rose have resisted—even though she “hate[s] every day of it” (P2 107). To put it another way, even though she cannot reverse the deleterious effects of industrialization and state ideology which turn her into a stranger at home, her spiritual gift of forgiveness ultimately returns
to herself, empowering her to take up the responsibility for consequences for which she should not be held responsible.

**Memory, Story, History**

Tellingly, not much information is available regarding Michael’s whereabouts during these years, except that he leaves Ballybeg “when [his] time came” (P2 107) sometime after the Mundy family falls apart. There are several possibilities for his absence. He may have been staying in Ireland all the time; he may have followed the example of Rose and Agnes to seek his chance of survival elsewhere. In either case, he has probably grown up to become another weak patriarch who cannot shield his mother and aunts from financial privation, as he characterizes his departure as “in the selfish way of young men” (P2 107). What is more, in keeping a safe distance from the family disaster, he seems to be repeating an old pattern: as a child he was always absent when his aunts or mother wanted him (P2 38, 102-03, 106). Indeed, as Prapassaree Kramer argues, the Boy Michael’s absence anticipates the narrator’s evasion of his responsibility by re-creating a past in his favor in order to rationalize his guilt of abandoning his aunts and mother, and to legitimize himself (178-79). Resting on the permanency of Michael’s self-identity (the Boy Michael) in time to the negligence of its different forms through time negotiated by his narrative identity (the adult Michael) (Cf. Ricoeur, Oneself 2-3), this reading implies that the narrator operates in an economy of conditional forgiveness from which he tries to flee since it requires the kind of justice and retribution he cannot afford.

However, a more positive possibility arises when one re-examines ruptures of this continuity revealed in the narrator’s equally palpable exits from the stage. At first glance, this device seems to be representational as Kramer suggests, but a closer inspection reveals that the narrator’s absence does not always coincide with the Boy Michael’s. His first exit occurs when the Mundy sisters are criticizing Rose’s dating with a married man (P2 9-15), followed by Rose’s counter-attack on Kate’s relation with Austin Morgan and the sisters’ plea to go to Lughnasa (P2 19-24). During this stage absence, however, he still “plays” offstage the invisible the Boy Michael, who is supposed to be on stage, by responding to Maggie (P2 25-26), before he enters to speak for his younger self when Chris tries to engage the child’s interest in Gerry (P2 57-58). He leaves the stage again at the onslaught of the family’s catastrophe—the sisters’ growing unease with Jack, the news surrounding Agnes’s and Rose’s imminent job loss, and Rose’s return after her
transgressive trip with her married lover (P2 71-90). He enters just when Kate is articulating her distress over Rose’s transgression, and takes over to narrate the family’s disintegration. He then exits again when the gift-exchanges of dancing, hat-swapping and dinner take place with a brief disruption by Rose’s grief over the death of her pet rooster (P2 66).

The irregular pattern of Michael’s stage absence suggests that he is not the unitary authority of his memory narrative. Rather, his narrative is framed by that of the playwright, who arranges the interplay between Michael’s absence along with his “absent presence” in such a way that it punctuates the Mundy sisters’ frustrations and their contribution to the chain of gift-exchange. The deep structure of his stage absence is thus more than Michael’s shame about his illegitimacy and irresponsibility as Kramer suggests. Instead, it can be said to be the sisters’ distress induced by the loss—actual or possible—of significant objects in the context of their sexual and financial deprivations—a loved one, a pet rooster, a job—and the act of taking responsibility enabled by the spiritual gift of unconditional forgiveness. This deep structure goes along some way toward explaining his ethical actions in the “postscript,” where he shoulders responsibility in a trustworthy way unexpected of a selfish young man as he calls himself: he shields his mother from cruel reality by withholding his half-brother’s letter about Gerry’s death in the Welsh home (P2 93), and extends ultimate care to his self-exiled aunt (P2 91). Like the eccentric design for Michael’s exits, this glaring coincidence between Michael’s ethical acts and the Mundys’ gift-giving is attributable to the playwright, who is inserting yet another layer of the memory script when he makes a responsible self out of the narrator-cum-character.

Indeed, although Michael is reticent about his motivation for not telling his mother about Gerry’s death and his Welsh family, it can be argued that he wants her to retain a happy memory about Gerry as his prospective bride rather than relapse into the unsettling pain of fixating on his wrongdoing. Anticipated by Chris’s wooing him on Gerry’s behalf by informing him of the Welshman’s promise to bring him a gift, Michael’s omission suggests that he is Chris’s true son in that he has himself forgiven Gerry though not the offense, as his mother did. Just as Chris’s unconditional forgiveness enables her to acknowledge her loss and reciprocate her sisters’ generosity, so does Michael’s release of Gerry’s wrongdoing allow him to partake of the Mundys’ gift economy. Therefore, it might not be coincidental that Michael’s remembrances chronologically conclude with his visit to Rose during her last days at a hospice in Southwark. Instead of eluding the originary place of uncanny strangeness as his self-exiled aunts did, he confronts this trauma by
tracking them to a city where they are truly foreigners. This brave act suggests that Michael not only proves himself one of the Mundys in his resilience and loyalty to his maternal family, but has been reconciled to his own strangeness so that he is not disheartened by the emotional stress of this onerous task. He has, in other words, transformed himself or been transformed from an irresponsible child into a responsible man. Even though no alternative frame of reference within the play is available for Michael’s rendition of this “postscript,” his ethical act is not merely his own fantasy (Cf. Kramer 174), nor a monologic product amounting to “narrative fetishism” which undoes the need to mourn (Santner 144). Rather, framed by the playwright’s memory script, Michael’s coda demonstrates a narrative plurality in that it infuses Michael’s small narrative with the hindsight of history in its sideward glance at the trajectory of Ireland’s negotiation with its otherness from the 1960s to 1990 and the attendant emergence of a gift economy, informed as this coda is with the general ethos of the adult Michael’s time as well as the spirit of the era when Friel wrote this play.

Among other things, the 1960s saw an Ireland coming to terms with its otherness. In lieu of nationalist discourses on self-sufficiency based on the sanctity of family, Ireland began to divert its attention from the domestic sphere toward its place in the international community, a shift of vision engineered by Sean Lemass’s Programmes for Economic Expansion (1958-63). This revision of de Valera’s familial ideal led to an increase in the number of families and marriages (Brown 199; Lee 360), and a decline in emigration (Lee 360). Along with the economic progress was a relaxation of constrictions imposed by Catholic Irish ideology to allow the emergence of an interest in Ireland’s otherness, most notably the Irish diaspora and dancing. Instead of relegating emigration to oblivion and Irish dancing to frivolity, there was an unprecedented pride in Irish emigrants in the wake of President Kennedy’s visit to Ireland in 1963, and a revived interest in Irish music (Brown 211-12) and dancing, leading to the first World Championship in Irish Dancing in 1969. In this context, Michael’s ethical act registers the dawning of self-confidence in an Ireland which “began to come to life” (Brown 185), a confidence attendant upon an awakening of its otherness. This confidence becomes full-fledged in 1990 when Ireland was ready to let go of historical traumas as it moved toward the world stage, a spirit culminating in Mary Robinson’s inaugural speech.6 In contrast to de Valera’s dream speech, which turns out to be a false

6 Helen Lojek relates Robinson’s election to debates on constitutional restrictions on women, which Friel’s play contributed to. She also mentions other late twentieth-century issues which illuminate the play, including unwed mothers, scandals surrounding Catholicism, emigration, and
promissory note for a moral economy in its repression of Ireland’s otherness, Robinson’s discourse is informed with a keen awareness of the other. She considered her presidency a symbol of “the Fifth Province,” a place of “healing and reconciling . . . a place within us open to the other” beyond the geographical confines of Ireland’s four provinces, and the presidential hall the site “where people can tell diverse stories . . . of conscience and of social justice” in the knowledge that “there is someone there to listen”—a favorable circumstance for successful memory narrative in the spirit of forgiveness delineated by Ricoeur (Memory 495). This respect for the other was made possible by an acknowledgement of the otherness within Irish identity. If the “comely maiden” was conjured as the Catholic familial self totally divorced from her Gaelic inclination to dancing at the crossroads in de Valera’s vision of the nation, Robinson envisioned a new Ireland where dancing was evoked as a gesture of friendliness to the other, as her speech concluded with a quote from a fourteenth-century poet: “I am of Ireland . . . come dance with me in Ireland” (“Inaugural Speech”; emphasis added).

Given this double time frame, the play is a double narrative—Friel’s moral history of Ireland through the adult Michael’s story—which entails an eccentric site of articulation. To create this space Friel erases the boundaries between author and narrator-character, and between imagination and reality to verge on the uncanny (Kristeva 188). In this light, as Friel’s storyteller Michael is speaking from the no-place of “poetical ethics of memory” (Kearney, “Memory” 173) which, evoking the Fifth Province that Mary Robinson aspired to, enables a reconciliation of self with other as well as with its own otherness and ethical actions consequent upon this reconciliation. In this view, his problematic presence is arguably an embodiment of the play’s uncanny foreignness. As an (un)real character, Michael’s performance is ritualistic rather than representational: it is a ritual to recuperate his maternal family in order to re-experience their foreignness in Ballybeg; it is also a rite to re-enact their ceremony of gift-giving which has promised to lift them out of debilitating familiar strangeness. In step with Michael’s rite, which “owes nothing to fact” as he confesses (P2 107), Friel is performing the moral act of commemorating “those five brave Glenties women” (P2 1) to whom this play is dedicated. This double commemoration explains why for all the presence of frustrations and pain, Michael’s memory narrative culminates in a happy memory about dancing and music, the stuff the Mundys’ familiar strangeness as well as their impossible gift is made on: “When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. . . .
Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness” (P2 107-08).

Evoking the signature of the Mundys’ otherness, Michael is commemorating a lost home along with its strangers at home as well as naturalized diasporans who practiced a gift economy which triumphs over power, be it state, religion, or industrialization. Michael’s happy memory of the Mundys, ultimately, points to Friel’s tribute to his maternal family (Kavanagh 222-23) and the innumerable Irish diasporans to fulfill the kind of future they deserved. Viewed from this perspective, the play is an exercise of poetical ethics which, heralding the kind of stories Mary Robinson delighted in, amounts to a counter-history to fulfill its responsibility for the dead.

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### About the Author

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