V. Conclusion

In Brian Friel’s play *The Home Place*, the open display of imperial power by the anthropometrist Richard Gore and his condescending treatment of the local inhabitants when he plans to decipher their Irishness provoke as strong a reaction from members of the Ballybeg community as the invention of the stage-Irishman in literature has caused among Anglo-Irish writers for centuries. In fact, both responses underline how serious it is to lose power over language in Ireland’s (post)colonial context as the local community runs the risk of being forced to live in a society in which the public sphere and aspects of public knowledge, reality and tribal characteristics are completely defined by the dominant discourse of the occupying power.

Unlike Christopher, who describes his cousin’s study of measuring the physique of the Irish population in order to decode and categorise the different tribes in Ireland as “a perfectly innocuous survey,” Con, a representative of the local Irish people, fiercely resists Richard’s ‘imperial gaze’ (55). In fact, Con deplores the anthropometric approach of defining true Irishness as he considers Richard’s undertaking an inappropriate manifestation of power that reinforces the power distribution between the colonisers and the colonised, jeopardises the local community’s autonomy and silences the Irish inhabitants’ personal points of view. Although Con argues that he and his friends are “[t]emperate men in normal times,” he declares that they demand Richard’s immediate dismissal from Christopher’s home because they “find this measuring business offensive” (57). As Richard’s experiment means that the local community will be deprived of the linguistic power to shape the public sphere from inside the tribe, Con is convinced that the final outcome of Richard’s categorisation, this act of active surveillance and linguistic domination, will resemble the stereotypical representation of the Irish as an inferior, garrulous and uneducated people which, as this study has shown, Anglo-Irish writers have opposed in their texts for centuries. Worried that Richard’s dominant, public discourse will, therefore, present the Irish as the uncivilised other in Ballybeg, Con senses that, as in the case of the actual occupation of Ireland, the local community’s personal “myths of identity” will be shattered and the Irish inhabitants’ search for a stable and “effective identifying relationship between self and place” will not be achieved if Richard is allowed to conduct his survey (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire* 9 and 8).

Since stereotypes of the Irish inhabitants in literature have usually been based on simple binary oppositions, Con’s reservations are not without foundation. As indicated in the introduction of this study, Oscar Wilde
once mentioned that the prototypical attributes ascribed to the Irish population were primarily those that the (Victorian) Englishman repudiated in himself (as quoted by Kiberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes* 7–8). Thus, “the idea of Ireland” in Friel’s *The Home Place*, as in many other colonial texts about Ireland produced by the colonisers’ dominant discourse, is a mere invention or “largely a fiction created by the rulers of England in response to specific needs at a precise moment in British history” (Kiberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes* 5).

In Friel’s play, this point is illustrated, shortly before Richard’s encounter with Con, when he indeed admits to Christopher’s son that the deeper reason for conducting this study is to “reveal […] how a man thinks, what his character traits are, his loyalties, his vices, his entire intellectual architecture” and that his research is, therefore, thought to provide colonial Britain with a key to “control[ling] [not] just an empire” but to “rul[ing] the entire universe” (*Home* 36). Thus, Richard’s statement demonstrates that his anthropometric approach is intended as a form of controlling and disempowering of the community in Ballybeg. Hence, the local inhabitants’ concerns about being misunderstood and misrepresented by Richard’s private interests are justified by the experiences that the Irish repeatedly had throughout their history.

Against this historical and cultural background, Con is presented as a young man who is unwilling to accept Richard’s colonial demeanour. Similar to characters such as Lord Colambre in Maria Edgeworth’s novel *The Absentee*, the first-person narrator in Synge’s *The Aran Islands* or Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s novels *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, Con attempts to undo the development of displacement and alienation that the local population has undergone as a colonised country. In contrast to many other characters in Anglo-Irish literature, Con is not prepared to simply withdraw to a space which the colonisers have no access to while the colonised population’s private points of view or their alternative versions of truth are silenced. On the contrary, he is someone who wants to voice his convictions openly and who rejects the kind of surveillance and control the occupying power is seeking.

Regardless of the fact that Con’s outspoken criticism of the occupying power, his fervent disapproval of Richard’s experiment, differs from other characters’ less aggressive forms of resistance, the stereotypical representations of the Irish people in literature invariably evoked a response from the local community and caused a counter-movement. In their literary texts, Anglo-Irish authors regularly introduced characters who, like Con, are anxious to reclaim space, power and language and who attempt to reduce the sense of displacement, the lack of homeliness within their private realm as well as the alienation from land and culture by disclosing their private thoughts and revealing their hidden versions of truth. Striving to present a more
authentic picture of Irish inhabitants and of their country, for example, these writers have found numerous ways of allowing their characters to oppose the kind of heteronomy and disempowerment which the colonised have experienced for centuries and which Richard hopes to intensify by conducting his survey in *The Home Place*. The characters introduced by Anglo-Irish writers over the last three centuries are thus shown to physically and linguistically regain control over cultural and actual spaces which was lost when the Irish were colonised.

In summary, heteronomous representations of the local Irish community led to a preoccupation with space and to an obsessive *omphaloskepsis* in Anglo-Irish literature. Whereas James Joyce uses the term *omphalos* to present Dublin as the centre of the universe in his novel *Ulysses*, I want to argue that, as a response to what Anglo-Irish writers perceived as a recurrent misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the Irish population, *omphaloskepsis*, a complacent absorption with the self, aptly describes those characters in Anglo-Irish literature who indulge in detailed representations of themselves, offer minute descriptions of their private realms and alternative viewpoints to the reader and define the tribal characteristics of the Irish population in order to distinguish themselves from the images the British occupying power drew of the local community. As the imperial gaze of those in control of the dominant discourse threatened the local inhabitants’ sense of self and autonomy by presenting them as the uncivilised other within their homeland, the Irish population’s concepts of self and other were blurred. Consequently, as a means of self-preservation, a strong tendency arose among the Anglo-Irish writers to explain the true self to the local community. This pervasive trend reveals the Irish inhabitants’ deep desire, or perhaps their ontological need, to possess the power to define their personal *omphalos*, their centre of the universe, regardless of whether it is comprised of their home, their private realm, their truth or their inner selves.

In order to be able to reveal their characters’ alternative points of view and disseminate their private knowledge, Anglo-Irish writers have been forced to abandon their characters’ privacy or secrecy to a certain degree. While Habermas argues in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* that, due to historical, political and economic changes, in the eighteenth century a semi-public space, a “[p]ublic sphere in the political realm,” was established in the private realm which was distinguished from a “[c]onjugal family’s internal space” of privacy and intimacy, it is precisely this most private space that has gradually been made available to the reader or the audience in Anglo-Irish literature (30).1

1 The detailed description of Habermas’ argument is found in Chapter II (p. 14–15).
For example, in the preface to Maria Edgeworth’s novel *Castle Rackrent*, the implied editor beholds that “love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes” (1). In Anglo-Irish literature, the preoccupation with disclosing the private realm in order to satisfy the need of the reader or the audience who, in the words of Edgeworth’s implied editor, “anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes” meant that no sphere remained debarred or hidden (2). Narratological choices such as James Joyce’s use of interior monologues or the characters’ retrospective representation of their experiences in Brian Friel’s writing allowed these two authors to make the innermost dreams, sensations and thoughts of their characters known to the reader and the audience. This indicates that the message from Anglo-Irish literature is that, in a (post-) colonial country such as Ireland, nothing is private – in the sense of being permanently withheld or concealed from the eyes of the reader or the audience – because the danger of one’s truth being perceived as non-existent is considered greater than the loss of one’s privacy. Hence, in order to prevent the characters’ point of view from being silenced or from remaining unarticulated, privateness was sacrificed on a narratological level.

However, the manifold ways in which Friel’s characters disclose their private truths only mark the end of a long development in Anglo-Irish literature. Although in Friel’s plays the unveiling of private truth often has a more complex function than in most of the other texts examined in this study, the playwright adopted and adjusted practices and approaches used by other Anglo-Irish writers to make them serve his own needs. Seán Cláraig Mac Dónaill or Aogán Ó Rathaille, for instance, who tried to preserve their private experiences and their alternative knowledge, addressed their poems, collected in *The Poems of the Dispossessed*, to the inner circle of the Irish community – to those in the know – who had linguistic access to the realm of their truths and who, therefore, possessed the key to the poets’ embitterment. Thus, the message of these poems is that the predominant themes of dispossession and grief are shown to be the result of the local community’s loss of culture and sense of belonging when the Irish people were expelled from their homes and, consequently, deprived of their near-physical connection between land and self. However, withdrawing to the hidden space of their private truths offered some remedy to the situation as it provided the poets with an opportunity to resist being completely disempowered by the colonisers and it allowed the Irish to point to the occupants’ distortion of reality in the public sphere. Despite the fact that the difficulties which Friel’s characters are faced with are subtler and of a deeper psychological quality than the injustices and miseries encountered by the characters described by Seán Cláraig Mac Dónaill or Aogán Ó Rathaille, in his plays Friel also makes frequent use of spaces that only
the main protagonist or the inner circle of the protagonist’s friends have access to. Similar to the situation in The Poems of the Dispossessed, the knowledge of Greek, Latin and Irish enables the local community in Translations, for instance, to preserve a realm where the Ballybeg inhabitants can communicate their ideas and impressions openly as the British soldiers, who do not know any foreign languages, are excluded from their conversations. Moreover, Friel's plays The Freedom of the City, Faith Healer and Molly Sweeney are three extreme examples of texts where private spaces are invented to which access is restricted. In all of these plays, there are passages where characters utter their personal thoughts or describe memories that no other character on stage has access to. Due to these techniques of disclosure, a kind of proximity is created between the particular characters on stage and the audience which is greater than the understanding or empathy between the different characters on stage.

Unlike The Poems of the Dispossessed, which are addressed to the poets’ friends or the local community, Maria Edgeworth’s novels Castle Rackrent and The Absentee deliver a message to the novelist’s former homeland, England, as they unmask the typical clichés about the Irish invented by the English. Explaining the hidden truth about the situation in Ireland around the time of the Act of Union between the two countries, Edgeworth primarily concentrates on the relationships between masters and their servants or landlords and their tenants. Taking into consideration that, according to Lehnert, Freud's psychoanalysis first provided people with the vocabulary that is necessary to articulate their sensations and innermost thoughts, it is not surprising, from a psychological point of view, that the interiorisation of the individual only reached the form in which a character meticulously describes the internal processes of his psyche at the beginning of the twentieth century (13). Hence, the relationships between the different characters in Edgeworth’s novels are less complex or multifaceted than those presented in Friel’s plays. Thus, whereas bonds between family members do not play a pivotal role in Edgeworth’s texts, Friel’s characters desperately long for strong family bonds. However, their dreams or needs invariably fail to be fulfilled either because the various members of the family have different memories of the past or because their inarticulateness in the public sphere prevents them from achieving their concepts of home, family and happiness.

Of those texts examined whose authors strived to offer an authentic account of Irish life and tried to represent the Irish population in their writing, Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark or Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood and Sean O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy show the most similarities to Friel’s plays as public and private issues are of great importance in all of these works. Disclosing their characters’ private and
intimate knowledge, all of these authors engage in a process of challenging the myth-making by those in power and they participate in forming a new cultural identity by rewriting the myth of Ireland. Friel’s writing stresses the implausibility of truth as an absolute concept and repeatedly questions the characters’ understanding of Dasein, home, family or self. Therefore, some of the themes discussed in Friel’s oeuvre coincide with the focus of Deane’s and McCourt’s texts. After all, autobiographical texts are typically concerned with identity-forming processes and with the first-person narrator’s roots, sense of belonging and family. Moreover, as in Friel’s plays, the attempt at self-definition or self-explanation is closely related to subjectivity. However, whereas the first-person narrators in Deane’s and McCourt’s texts criticise the political and religious leaders for failing to reduce the misery the narrators experienced during their childhoods, Friel’s writing emphasises the psychological effects that the power structures within the communities, families or homes have on the characters. Disclosure in Friel’s plays, therefore, centres primarily round the family or the character’s self and is ultimately an ontological rather than a social or political question.

In contrast to O’Casey’s plays, where the public realm is also predominantly equated with the political sphere, the distinction between what is public or private in Friel’s plays is more multi-layered than in the other Anglo-Irish texts examined in this study. In fact, Friel’s plays present a world that is more private and intimate than O’Casey’s tenements. Although Friel and O’Casey both address poverty in their plays, there is a disparity in their approach to the problem. While O’Casey’s plays suggest that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, social rather than political change is needed to improve life in the Irish capital, the main concerns of Friel’s characters are quintessentially of a psychological nature and they are not primarily caused by political events or social class as in O’Casey’s plays. Nonetheless, public and private spheres also occasionally mingle in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy as the playwright sheds light on the life of Dublin slum-dwellers, where numerous members of a community inhabit the same tenement. Hence, privacy – signifying a character’s desire to find a space which no one else has access to and where one’s dreams and wishes can be fulfilled – is a luxury that is hardly ever granted in O’Casey’s plays. In Friel’s oeuvre, on the other hand, the protagonists long for a sense of privateness that they can share with other characters. However, due to the characters’ utter inability to communicate or to express themselves, their desire regularly fails to be satisfied. As fulfilment and happiness, which Friel’s characters are striving for, are seldom found, privateness comes to represent a sense of emptiness and desolate loneliness, which the protagonists cannot overcome to form the closely-knit families or communities they desperately yearn for. Consequently, the characters’ struggle with their
privateness is experienced as a form of isolation. As privacy and intimacy are concepts that are related to the characters’ hope of sharing a set of feelings with friends or other members of their family, their understanding of privateness has a deep psychological, philosophical and ontological dimension. Thus, in contrast to O’Casey’s plays, it is not poverty that causes the characters’ great pain in Friel’s writing, but their failure to disclose their needs or emotions to those around them. Incapable of sharing intimacy and privateness or establishing an emotional connection with their friends and family, Friel’s characters do not feel securely embedded in their home, family or community and they do not experience their Being-in-the-world as defined by “Being-with Others” (Heidegger, Time and Being 155, original emphasis).

Although deficient communication and intimacy between the characters aptly describe the worlds portrayed in James Joyce’s and Friel’s writing, Friel’s characters try more actively to overcome the separation from those around them. Although Eveline and Chandler in Dubliners yearn for love or recognition, Joyce’s characters appear to be too paralysed to cross the threshold that confines their lives or to engage in a confidential discourse with other characters where their sensations, dreams or agonies can be articulated. Although intimacy is achieved on a textual level, these two characters’ thoughts are kept as secret as Molly’s desires and fantasies in Ulysses. In contrast, Friel’s characters display a great awareness of their communicative deficiencies in their monologues or short disclosures. Whereas Gar O’Donnell in Philadelphia, Here I Come! condemns “strong silent men” (98), Eamon in Aristocrats mentions that his father-in-law’s home “was always a house of reticence, of things unspoken” (279). Contemplating and even regretting their difficulties talking about their feelings with other members of the family, Friel’s characters regularly hint at their deep distrust of language, and they are aware that even in situations in which the same words or grammar are available to two characters, communication always remains a form of “interpre[ting] between privacies” (Translations 67).

At the same time, however, I believe that Friel’s protagonists hope to be able to overcome their inarticulateness and to bridge the silence that exists between them much more strongly than Joyce’s characters. Constantly trying to express their ideas or beliefs or to provide extra information to justify their actions and thus to explain themselves to their beloved ones, Friel’s characters appear to secretly wish that their disclosures and private versions of truth lead to a thorough decoding of their identity. Friel’s characters seem convinced that if another character managed to fully grasp or understand them, their own feeling of insecurity and uncertainty would lessen and “the maddening questions,” which Frank Hardy in Faith Healer argues define his life, would eventually be silenced (376). Tragically, however, the characters’ attempts to
disclose their inner selves are normally addressed to themselves or the audience rather than to the other characters. Thus, their articulations do not offer the solace that they secretly hope for, as they – unlike Friel on a theatrical level – do not succeed in communicating the incommunicable.

In Beckett’s plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the atmosphere of bleakness and despair derives from the fact that the characters experience their life as if they were staring into a baseless abyss. Petrified at the thought of inhabiting a world with no apparent coherence or meaning, Beckett’s characters cannot bear listening to each other’s private nightmares. The tragedy of these characters is heightened by the failure to develop “[r]eleasement toward things and openness to the mystery,” as Heidegger expressed it (*Discourse* 55). Hence, they are unable to accept the contingency of life or grasp its meaning. Although Friel’s main protagonists also lack the inner strength and composure Heidegger proposed, they show an immense need for disclosure, hoping to discover some unity with their friends or family or to evoke some empathy in them. As in Beckett’s plays, the desires of Friel’s characters are rarely fulfilled; however, they remain unfulfilled for different reasons.

Yearning for human understanding and strong family bonds, Friel’s characters do not share the general belief that Beckett’s characters do: that they are “thrown” into a world that has been abandoned from the beginning. In fact, Friel’s characters are preoccupied with their ideals, memories and dreams. Characters like Cass McGuire in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* or Gar O’Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* recall moments in the past when they were happy and felt at home in their *Dasein*. Thus, from a philosophical standpoint, the outlook that Friel’s characters have on the world links them more closely with Bachelard’s than with Heidegger’s understanding of Being. Bachelard’s idea of being born into a home or “a nest in the world” in which comfort and “well-being” precede “the experience of the hostility of the world,” the sense of isolation a human being is exposed to when it loses its primeval “confidence in the world” is represented in Friel’s oeuvre by his characters’ recollections of past happiness (103). These are so powerful that the characters cling to their fond memories of happier times in order to survive the gloom and desolation of their current Being-in-the-world. Hence, these memories function as an impetus for Friel’s characters to try to resolve the tensions in their homes and families and to seek reconciliation with their inner selves. However, unable to move beyond the “existential isolation” that defines the reality of their present *Dasein* and incapable of communicating their sensations and desires for recognition, understanding or homeliness, the characters’ most secret wishes are normally not fulfilled (FitzGibbon 79).

Whereas Beckett’s characters do not feel at home in this world as they perceive the space they inhabit as fundamentally unhomely, Friel’s characters,
due to their experiences, believe in their conceptions of home and family. As the actualisation of these concepts in their homes is problematic, however, it stands in stark contrast to their memories of brief moments in the past when their misery temporarily dissolved because their ideals of home and family fleetingly corresponded with reality. Nevertheless, at rare moments in their lives when Friel’s characters are overwhelmed by emotions, when their attempts to overcome their inarticulateness are suspended or when the doubts that define their Dasein are repressed, for the length of a dance or a song, or at the moment of their death, the characters become oblivious of the conditions of their Being-in-the-world. For this short period of time, the life-long struggle of Friel’s characters for happiness, homeliness and fulfilment ends in a form of homecoming in which the prevailing atmosphere of ease and lightness that defines their vivid memories is translated into reality and in which self and space finally merge.