I. Introduction

In Brian Friel’s writing, the characters’ understanding of the terms public and private is largely determined by the (post)colonial background against which the plays are set and by the positions which the characters occupy within their own families or tribal communities. As far as the public realm in Friel’s oeuvre is concerned, its representation is mostly consistent with other Anglo-Irish literary texts. For centuries, the public sphere in Anglo-Irish literature has, at least implicitly, been associated with not only the presence of the occupying power but also its dominant discourse. Prime examples of authoritative figures are, for instance, the estranged landlords in Maria Edgeworth’s novels Castle Rackrent and The Absentee as well as political or religious leaders who are shown to govern their communities with uncontested power in texts such as Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark or Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood. The Irish inhabitants who were deprived of their land and unable to define themselves or to express their personal points of view publicly, therefore, regularly withdrew from the public to the private realm. In order to protect themselves and their families, they refrained from articulating their personal opinions in public. Hence, the local population’s silence or absence have become notable features of the public domain. However, I want to suggest that Pine’s remark on the inarticulateness of the main protagonist Gar O’Donnell in Friel’s play Philadelphia, Here I Come! is true for many texts in Anglo-Irish literature: “Silence offers security, but it is also an open prison” (Diviner 76). As the Irish were considered the uncivilised other within their native land and were faced with the stereotypical rendering of their characters in the public sphere, they have shown a strong tendency to challenge the oppressors’ denigrating view of them in private. Presenting the private space in Anglo-Irish literature as the space of true Irishness, they turned this space into a domain where their individual versions of truth are publicised in order to avoid complete disempowerment, linguistic imprisonment or cultural loss.

The frequent deprivation of land not only meant that the local inhabitants felt they had better retreat from public space but it also had a psychological effect on them because it shattered their belief in a stable relationship between place and self. In her essay “Brian Friel’s Sense of Place,” Lojek argues that, as a result of these historical and cultural developments, “[i]n Ireland place always

---

1 Boehmer states that “[t]he concept of the Other, which is built on the thought of, inter alia, Hegel and Sartre, signifies that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined” (21, original emphasis).
matters” and “[u]nsurprisingly, place also matters in the plays of Brian Friel” (177). In fact, in Friel’s oeuvre, the characters’ sense of place and self is even further undermined. Lojek describes County Derry, where Friel has spent most of his life and which normally functions as the larger setting of his plays, as “a community of balanced factions: unionist/republican, Protestant/Catholic, English/Irish, colonizers/colonized, urban/rural, haves/have-nots, past/present” (177). She then concludes that the “factions and boundaries” in Friel’s plays, where “[c]ommunities are divided, opinions clash, memories vary, individuals struggle with internal splits,” serve as strong indications for “Ireland’s divided self” (177–178). Due to the dysfunctionality of the communities and families depicted in Friel’s plays, the characters do not inhabit a realm that could be described as an atmosphere of ease, solicitude or mutual understanding. Consequently, the private space in Friel’s writing is often as unsatisfying and frustrating as the public sphere is. Finding themselves in circumstances that highlight their powerlessness, Friel’s main protagonists fail to define or shape the public and the private realm according to their personal ideas or desires. Feeling uprooted, displaced and alienated within their own homes, families or communities, these characters, therefore, frequently perceive both the public and the private sphere as heteronomous and hostile.

As a result of the firm link between space, self and the power of language, the terms public and private are not restricted to the spatial dimension in this study, but are closely related to the characters’ notions of and experiences with home, family, identity and truth. In many plays, Friel’s main protagonists are engaged in a life-long struggle for the private space of their home and family to be defined by happiness, understanding, autonomy and a secure sense of their self. According to Woodward, “[i]dentity gives us a sense of who [we] are and to some extent satisfies a demand for some degree of stability and of security” (xi). In the endeavour of securing one’s identity, narratives, and the necessary language to produce these narratives, play a vital role as telling “stories about ourselves” helps us “to make sense of who we are” (25). Additionally, in a postcolonial context, the language used to express one’s identity provides a character with the opportunity to, at least partly, reduce the disempowerment formerly suffered, to move beyond the state of paralysis caused by heteronomy or displacement and to undo the sense of alienation with one’s home and self. However, in Friel’s plays, the characters’ struggles often prove futile as their disclosures of private knowledge, in which they publicise their viewpoints or stories and try to express exactly who they are, are often witnessed by the

---

2 The dysfunctionality of the family is a phenomenon which can also be observed in texts by Sean O’Casey or James Joyce. A discussion of public and private space in their writing can be found in Chapter III (p. 48–55 and 70–83).
audience only and do not lead to another character’s empathy or a deeper understanding of the protagonist’s inner self.

Referring to the effects which “dislocation” and “cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model” have on a character’s “valid and active sense of self,” Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin identify “a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity” as a key characteristic in “all post-colonial literatures in english [sic]” (The Empire 9, original emphasis). In Friel’s play Translations, the fate of the mute character Sarah Johnny Sally echoes “the special post-colonial crisis of identity” which occurs when “an effective identifying relationship between self and place” has been lost or, as in Sarah’s case, when a character is entirely defined from the outside by the dominant discourse and is thus deprived of her own myth of identity (The Empire 8). In the first scene of Translations, Manus, the older son of the main protagonist Hugh O’Donnell, in whose hedge school the play is set, is trying to teach Sarah to speak a few words in order to enable her to express her inner self and cross the deep gulf of silence that has dictated her life up to this point. Encouraged by Manus, whom she holds in great affection, Sarah tentatively names herself for the first time:

MANUS. Come on, Sarah. This is our secret. [...] Nobody’s listening. Nobody hears you. [...] SARAH. My… MANUS. Good. SARAH. My… MANUS. Great. SARAH. My name… MANUS. Yes? SARAH. My name is… MANUS. Yes? (Sarah pauses. Then in a rush.) SARAH. My name is Sarah. MANUS. Marvellous! Bloody marvellous! (Manus hugs Sarab. She smiles in shy, embarrassed pleasure.) [...] Now we’re really started! Nothing’ll stop us now! Nothing in the wide world! [...] Soon you’ll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years. (Translations 12)

As Catholic children were banned from attending classes in schools, “the masters taught their pupils […] in makeshift classrooms, sometimes consisting of little more than the shelter of a hedge or barn” (Milne 238). These Hedge Schools, which were established during the 18th and 19th century, “had thus to be hidden away and run on an ad hoc basis. Pupils of all ages were in the same class, and their parents paid the master a small fee in coin or in kind. Despite the disadvantages under which they operated, hedge schools had varied curricula, including Latin and Greek, and some schoolmasters were reputed to be very learned” (“Hedge Schools” 365). “The masters, usually self-taught or former hedge scholars themselves […], were often itinerant, setting up a school in a cottage or lodging with a family in return for teaching the children” (Milne 238).
Indirectly, the act of naming allows Sarah to forge her self and her identity, unfettered from the complete heteronomy she was exposed to in the past. Trying to overcome her inarticulateness, Sarah, therefore, becomes an impressive example of a character who makes an active effort to establish a linguistic link “between the personal and the social,” between her self and the space or the people that surround her (Woodward, vii). In a wider context, however, I want to argue that Sarah’s “act of personal identification,” her disclosure and the denial of total heteronomy can be interpreted as emblematic of the Anglo-Irish writers’ struggle to regain their voice, control or power in the literature of their country (Jones 70).

Having endured the solitude caused by her silence, or rather her inarticulateness, up to this point, Sarah’s attempt at self-definition represents the first step towards reclaiming her identity and recalls Steiner’s proposition that “[l]anguage is the main instrument of man’s refusal to accept the world as it is” (228, original emphasis). Sarah’s deliberate action, therefore, brings a close to, what Deane refers to as, “[t]he voice of power” which “tells one kind of fiction – the lie,” and what he identified as “a traditional feature of the Irish condition” in Friel’s writing (Introduction 18). Hence, the utterance “My name is Sarah” allows the female protagonist to linguistically create an alternative world in which the space she inhabits is no longer shaped by other characters’ discourse but is a space where power, language and self coincide for the first time (Translations 12).

Sarah’s achievement notwithstanding, Manus’ triumphant claim that “[n]othing’ll stop us now […] [n]othing in the wide world” and that “[s]oon you’ll be telling me all the secrets that have been in that head of yours all these years” is a misconception of Sarah’s prospects (12). When Sarah discovers Manus’ girlfriend Maire kissing Lieutenant Yolland, one of the soldiers representing the British occupying power in the village, the stage directions reveal that, at first “[s]he stands shocked, staring at them. Her mouth works. Then almost to herself” she mutters the name of the man who taught her to articulate her thoughts: “Manus ... Manus” (52–53). Soon after her gasp has shattered her own and Manus’ hopes and dreams for the future, she loses the ability to express herself again. She relapses into muteness and loses the self-confidence that she had gained in the process of mastering speech. Thus, Sarah’s personal development underlines Welch’s assertion that, in Friel’s theatre, language “is held up for scrutiny” because “it reveals the power it has

---

4 In Friel’s texts, all stage directions are conventionally set in italics. To conform to the original texts, references to stage directions will always be in italics without being specially indicated.
over people as individuals” (147). I agree with Welch’s conclusion that Friel’s writing, therefore, displays a profound “distrust of language” and “a preference for silence” on a textual level (148). However, a number of dramaturgical techniques, such as the introduction of commentators or the retrospective presentation of the plot, which the playwright uses in order to make private knowledge public on a theatrical level, link Friel with other Anglo-Irish writers, such as Seamus Deane, Frank McCourt, James Joyce or Samuel Beckett, whose characters invariably break the silence that epitomizes their existence. In this context, Manus’ announcement that Sarah will now be able to disclose all the private secrets “that have been in that head [...] all these years” is as symbolic of postcolonial Anglo-Irish literature as Sarah’s act of self-representation was (Translations 12).

The characters’ continual disclosure further draws attention to Woodward’s conviction that, from a psychological point of view, “the subject desires a unitary self” (18). Sensing that they have been misunderstood by the occupying power throughout history, Anglo-Irish authors have repeatedly made their characters share secret or intimate knowledge with the reader or the audience and publicise their alternative viewpoints. Addressing the Irish population’s tendency to recall past events and, thus, seize their opportunity to present these events from their own points of view in his essay Anglo-Irish Attitudes, Kiberd claims that “[t]he Irish are accused of never forgetting, but that is because the English never remember. The Irish are accused of endlessly repeating their past, but they are forced to do so precisely because the English have failed to learn from theirs” (15). Thus, the Irish keep recalling certain instances of their history because their specific viewpoint has regularly failed to be taken into serious consideration by the English. Drawing an analogy between Kiberd’s statement about Irish history and the representation of the Irish inhabitants in literature, I want to suggest that Anglo-Irish authors have persisted in making their characters’ personal versions of truths known as they felt that their specific Irish point of view was still not adequately represented in the public sphere. Constantly disclosing their perspectives, the characters attempt to reclaim power and control by bridging the discrepancy between self, other, and place, which derived from their marginal roles and the considerable loss of linguistic power in society. However, despite the writers’ presentation of what they regarded as a more truthful or authentic view of Ireland and its inhabitants, they regularly had to acknowledge that their efforts had been in vain. Although they had tried to rectify what they saw as typical tribal or national characteristic traits, those in power of dominant discourse continued propagating the same deceptive and derogatory stereotypes and the same misleading stories of the Irish population. For many centuries, this phenom-
ennon kept alive and active the Irish need to ‘write back’ – or “[strike] back” as Rushdie expressed it – from the periphery to the centre (218).5

The aim of this study is to focus on Anglo-Irish writers who have felt that the Irish population has continually been misunderstood and, therefore, misrepresented by those who shape the public sphere. Although aspects of public and private spaces and the representation of the Irish characters by the voice of power in Anglo-Irish literature have been discussed by a number of critics of Anglo-Irish literature, the distinction between public and private realms has never been the sole focus of attention of a scholarly work. Nowhere have public and private spaces been considered to have a strong philosophical dimension. Whereas place has, predominantly, been understood as a spatial entity, the two realms will repeatedly be regarded as mental concepts in this study and it will be explored to what extent the exact understanding of the two spheres shapes the behaviour and outlook on the world of Friel’s characters. Unlike Pine, who counts as private those plays in Friel’s oeuvre which are set in the home of a family and as public those which address political or historical events, I believe that the use of the two spheres is much more complex. As a result of the characters’ frequent narrativisation of their personal points of view in Anglo-Irish literature in general and in Brian Friel’s writing in particular, the publicising of private knowledge in the public sphere means that the two realms are often blurred and at times they even merge.

Anglo-Irish writers have chosen a number of different approaches to share their characters’ private and often intimate knowledge in public in order to reveal in their texts what they regarded as true Irishness. The earliest examples of Anglo-Irish writers who disapproved of the stage-Irishmen – the stereotypical representation of the Irish as idle, stupid or vainglorious – and who felt a strong urge to oppose dominant discourse date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This study will begin by exploring some of these approaches of revealing private truth since this period of time, before Friel’s usage of public and private space is examined in detail. As the concepts of public and private are much more complex and multifaceted in Friel’s oeuvre than in most other texts in Anglo-Irish literature, the playwright’s unveiling of his characters’ hidden truths serves a number of additional functions. Concentrating on the nexus between public and private space and the divergent

5 In their introductory comments to Rushdie’s article “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance,” Korff and Ringel-Eichinger indicate that Rushdie’s “title is a reference to the film The Empire Strikes Back (1980) from the Star Wars series” (216). Moreover, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s book The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989) underlines that, soon after its first uses, “the phrase ‘the Empire writes back’ became a sort of slogan to cover post-colonial literature” in general (Korff and Ringel-Eichinger 216).
knowledge that is produced by these realms, Friel focuses on the inner tribal or familial frictions that different levels of awareness generate. The question of what is discussed in public or what is discussed in private, therefore, results in the playwright’s meticulous examination of his characters’ psychology and their philosophical outlook on the world. Thus, the distinction between the terms public and private has an ontological dimension in Friel’s writing, and his treatment of the public sphere moves far beyond the national or tribal concerns of many of his predecessors in Anglo-Irish literature. More concerned with striving for fulfilment, happiness and wisdom than for authenticity and autochthony, his characters are not primarily concerned with rewriting the story of the tribe, but they are driven by their quest for meaning in life. Against this background, Friel’s exploration of the public and the private realm in his characters’ homes and families not only provides the reader with a model of human communication and of social coexistence but it also offers insight into how the two spheres fundamentally shape his characters’ basic assumptions on the condition of their individual Dasein in the world.

To be able to situate Brian Friel in Anglo-Irish literature by comparing and contrasting his use of the public and the private realm and his characters’ disclosure of private or intimate knowledge with those of other Anglo-Irish writers in my conclusion in Chapter V, I will first trace the theoretical debate of the public and the private realm in history in Chapter II and indicate how, according to Lehnert, psychological and sociological insights influenced the understanding and the perception of these spheres at the beginning of the twentieth century. The basic assumptions of what constitutes the public and private realms today will then serve as a scaffold for my analysis of the meaning ascribed to these domains in postcolonial Anglo-Irish literature in Chapter III and Brian Friel’s oeuvre in Chapter IV. Whereas the private pieces of truth revealed in The Poems of the Dispossessed, stemming from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, illustrate the colonisers’ brutality and the sheer misery endured by the local inhabitants, Maria Edgeworth’s novels and essays shift the emphasis from a specific event to the overall impact that the colonial demeanour had on the Irish. As Edgeworth debunks the British representation of the Irish population as an invention and, therefore, a pure myth which, according to Oscar Wilde, “attribute[s] to the Irish all those traits of poetry, emotion and soft charm which a stern Victorian code had forced [an Englishman] to deny in himself,” her writing functions as a catalyst for authors – such as John Millington Synge or Sean O’Casey – who strive for authenticity (as quoted by Kiberd, Anglo-Irish Attitudes 7–8). Synge’s hope to preserve what he considered to be true Irishness in his encounter of the Aran Islands or O’Casey’s disgust with the political changes in Ireland and the far-reaching
consequences for Irish families and their private realm will then be compared to texts by William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Whereas Yeats aimed at restoring the country’s past, Joyce believed that both the public and private spheres in Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century were defined by paralysis, which the city would have to overcome in order to undergo a development. Beckett’s plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* where space is used in a much more arbitrary manner as his settings are more defined by the characters’ notion of their existential state of being than by their actual location on earth, will lead to my reading of Friel’s plays. I will begin my interpretation of how power structures chiefly influence what is private and public in Friel’s plays with a few introductory comments on the impact ‘place’ has in Friel’s work. After first analysing various (meta-)theatrical techniques to illustrate the numerous ways Friel has found to disclose private knowledge despite his characters’ lack of communication, I will then examine how Friel’s characters react when they are exposed to public pressure or manifestations of power, before turning to those characters who use their power to diminish the opportunities of those that surround them. The last two sections in Chapter IV will explore to what extent the protagonists’ public and private utterances and their understanding of the two spheres are shaped by their notions of language and their inarticulateness when trying to share their most intimate sensations, feelings and thoughts with those who form their ‘home’ or their inner circle of friends and family.