Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 2, 1 (2010) 26-42

Interart Representation in the *Künstlerdrama*. Word, Image, and Music in Contemporary Irish Plays

Csilla BERTHA

University of Debrecen
Institute of English and American Studies
csillabertha@gmail.com

Abstract. Theater as a "hidden magnet" (Kandinsky) and a "hypermedium that incorporates all arts and media" (Chapple), proves to be a most natural space where conventionally distinct medial forms of articulation can exist and operate together. It is particularly true of different forms of art in the *Künstlerdrama*. The paper interrogates, through three contemporary Irish plays—Frank McGuinness' *Innocence* (1987), Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal* (2003), and Brian Friel's *Performances* (2003), which foreground a painter, a sculptor and a composer protagonist, respectively—how one form of art can interact with another without annihilating it, how borders between separate art forms are crossed, how each form of art, present in their own materiality, amplifies the voice of the other, and how meaning and signification is formed as the accumulative effect of word, image, and music.

Keywords: Irish drama, *Künstlerdrama*, interart, intermediality

Leonardo da Vinci in his *Paragone* (debate about the competition between painting and poetry) calls upon the Hungarian King Mathias to judge whether poetry or painting is the superior form of art. With a little cheating, he gets a poet and a painter to bring birthday presents to the king; the poet his poem that glorifies the day of the king's birth, the painter the portrait of the king's beloved. Little wonder that Mathias chooses the painting and then justifies his choice by maintaining that painting is superior to literature because it affects our "nobler" senses, the eyes whereas poetry penetrates our minds through the ears. The

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

argument continues by pointing out that arts appeal to "the harmony of the soul" which is born in moments when the proportions of objects become visible or audible, and since they can be perceived in painting all at once, while in poetry can be made manifest only stretched out in time, the latter cannot impress the soul in the same way (86).[1] In this argument there lies one of the chief distinctions between literature and the fine arts, one being a temporal, the other a spatial form; whereas pictorial time is a condensed time, poetry operates, by necessity, in succession as it unfolds line by line. This distinction is elaborated on by Lessing in his famous *Laokoon* essay (1764), then further developed by Hegel, Heidegger and others. The contest between different forms of art recurs from time to time in philosophers' and artists' contemplations, thus, for instance, Kant and Schlegel believed that poetry was the superior art form, later Schopenhauer, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, George Steiner that music was superior to all other arts, to the perfection of which every other form aspires. But already in the mid-nineteenth century composite arts, opera and theater became regarded as the highest form of representation by Wagner and Hegel, respectively. In modern, and even more in postmodern arts, when various forms of representation are combined and mingled in a wide variety of intermediality and multimodality, the contest has lost its validity. Today it is a commonplace that all media are mixed. The question most usually arises *how* the art forms are mingled in the various degrees of combination, referencing, and intermediality, how far the distinct forms of art can still remain themselves, and how meaning is created within and in-between those forms.

Theater has always been especially suitable to combine and integrate several forms of art, in interaction with each other without extinguishing any of them but rather allowing them to amplify the voice of one another. Theater offers simultaneously visible and audial, spatial and temporal experience, both condensing and stretching out in time, relying on the accumulative effect of word, image, music (and often other art forms as well). It does not translate one form of art into another, nor does it root the interpretation of one in the structure of the other, but allows them to live together. This is why Wassily Kandinsky suggested that the stage operates as a "hidden magnet" in which the different arts affect one another (qtd. in Chapple 31) and Chiel Kattenbelt calls theater a "hybermedium that incorporates all arts and media" (29).

This is especially true for the *Künstlerdrama*, which, similarly to the *Künstlerroman*, thanks to an artist protagonist, naturally leads to the thematization of essential questions and dilemmas of the existence of art and the artist, the nature of artistic creation, the relations between art and life, the subject and "objective" reality, the individual and the community, the differences between artistic and non-

[1] My translation into English from the Hungarian translation.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

artistic value systems, and the role and function of the artist in the contemporary world. But the *Künstlerroman*, however graphically it presents art work through verbal evocation, still remains within the confines of verbal expression, whereas theater, in its physical medium is able to make artifacts visibly and audibly present on the stage. Visual art or music onstage conveys an immediate impact never entirely expressible in words or action. A work of art might reinforce or contradict the words of the artist with a direct effect on the audience, making them immediately feel art's power as well as contemplate its significance within and without the play. The genre itself, but more particularly the work of the artist-protagonist onstage then raises intriguing questions of (re)presentation and further layers of self-reflexivity.

In Irish culture the ancient role of the artist as healer, prophet, and spiritual leader of the community, survived longer than elsewhere in Western Europe. Hence Yeats, preoccupied with the artist and his function in society at the time of the Irish Renaissance, could still evoke the life-forming power of art in his poetry, drama, and essays as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. In *The King's Threshold* (1904), for instance, the artist very directly influences creation:

> the poets hung
> Images of the life that was in Eden
> About the childbed of the world, that it,
> Looking upon those images, might bear
> Triumphant children.[2] (111-12)

Yet Yeats continually juxtaposes the omnipotence of the artist with the insensitivity, lack of understanding and even hostility of the world towards it. The 1921 revised version of *On The King's Threshold* does not close with the glorification of the martyrdom of the poet who died in a hunger strike protesting against the artist being deprived of his ancient rights and prestige but rather with the disillusioned words of his disciples:

> nor song nor trumpet-blast
> Can call up races from the worsening world
> To mend the wrong and mar the solitude
> Of the great shade we follow to the tomb. (143)

[2] Yeats's idea of art's such direct, reality-shaping function has ancient and medieval antecedents, such as, for example, in the Greek Heliodorus' third-century novel, "The Ethiopian Story," in which the Ethiopian queen looked at the Andromeda picture on the wall when she conceived her child and the child looked like the figure in the picture, or in Soranus, the doctor-writer's story quoted by St. Augustin, the tyrant and crippled Dionysios put a beautiful picture in front of his wife to conceive a beautiful child (Freeberg 217).

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

Although Yeats's disillusionment in the possibility of creating Unity of Culture and the strengthening of his irony through the years is obvious, his faith in the might of art survived, as for instance, his late play, *A Full Moon in March* (1935), demonstrates in which the Swineherd-poet-suitor's severed head sings in the royal court and impregnates the Queen. In contemporary Irish drama the power of the artist has become much more problematic, his/her role as shaping, serving, influencing the community and humankind became doubtful even for the artist him/herself, nevertheless in the "second Renaissance" of the Irish drama *Künstler-drama* gained frequency, especially in the plays of Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy and Frank McGuinness. Perhaps the necessity of reflecting on Ireland's postcolonial identity-problems and uncertainties and on the social, moral, spiritual transformations offers a special role to the artist even as late as the 1960s, -70s, and -80s, who still can work as a diviner, having, in Seamus Heaney's words, the gift of "being in touch with what is there, hidden and real, a gift for mediating between the latent source and the community" (qtd. in Kiberd 109).

Here I will take a look at three contemporary Irish plays, Frank McGuinness' *Innocence* (1986), Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal* (2003), and Brian Friel's *Performances* (2003), which foreground a painter, a sculptor and a composer protagonist, respectively. All three are set at the meeting point or on both sides of life and death, deploy works of art visually or audibly present onstage, and offer different consequences of the co-existence of art forms. But instead of the somewhat misleading (and clichéd) statement of intermedial theories that meaning is created in the interstitial spaces, in-between the distinct art forms, I would suggest that meaning is rather formed as the accumulative effect of the art forms, mutually influencing, enhancing and reinterpreting one another, in the combined space of the different arts.

1. Frank McGuinness: *Innocence*

Frank McGuinness' *Innocence* focuses on Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio (1573-1610) as its protagonist. Caravaggio, belonging to the tradition that tends to condense whole narratives into pictures, is an eminently suitable artist to exemplify the relationship between image and word and theater. His paintings are most dramatic, partly due to their extreme physicality, partly to the sharp contrasts between light and darkness often without transitory shades in-between—his characteristic *chiaroscuro* effect—with which, replacing the dominance of the line, he renewed contemporary (late-Renaissance) painting and introduced Baroque techniques. His eventful and scandalous life also offers a good ground to dramatize tensions between ordinary life and the artist's existence and value-system.

The protagonist of *Innocence* also embodies in his personality and lifestyle the sharpest contrasts: a self-exiled artist, hiding in the hovel of his prostitute-lover,

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

Lena, a homosexual who, moreover, acts as a pimp to the Cardinal, bringing him young men—his own models—while he himself also seduces or buys them, thus doubly offending the Church's teachings on morality, yet always seeking spiritual light and believing "with a depth that is frightening" (27). His awareness of his own sinfulness and his desire for redemption manifests itself in every field of his life: in the duality of innocence and sin, gentleness and wildness, love and hatred, beauty and repulsion, haughtiness and humbleness and these dualities appear in his oeuvre in contrapuntal structure, contrastive light and darkness, and intense colors. McGuinness, in his turn, dramatizes those contrasts not only through the plot and characterization but also through the play's structural features, which, together with the thoughts, ideas, and feelings juxtaposed, all correspond to the painterly *chiaroscuro* effect.

McGuinness makes the paintings visible without ever setting a single picture onstage, without ever showing the protagonist with canvas and brush in hand. Yet the stage becomes the site for both the painting process and the exhibition of the pictures with the help of words, composition, colors, gestures, human bodies, and movements—in a combination of verbal and visual effects within the kinetic possibilities of theater. The dramatic quality innate in the Caravaggio paintings increases through the embodiments of the painted figures by human actors—the two-dimensional pictures become three-dimensional. The author's strategies for their revival range from verbal evocation, ekphrasis to emblematic presentation and *tableau vivant*.

Hiroko Mikami (*Frank McGuinness*) and Eamonn Jordan ("The Masquerade") identify in detail the paintings called to mind in the play. Mikami suggests that "If Caravaggio's theater is constructed from two-dimensional paintings, McGuinness, in contrast, would seem to 'paint' his three-dimensional pictures on stage through language" (54). Indeed, sometimes a painting is brought to mind through the simplest form of picture transfer, verbal evocation, for instance, when Lucius, one of Caravaggio's models, relates how the painter dressed him up as a tree, with leaves around his head, covered with grapes, which of course, reminds audience and readers of *Bacchus*. In other instances language withdraws into the background and the audience can witness the picture's genesis, for example, when Caravaggio is feasting with his young models, one of them, Antonio offers him a bowl of fruit and the painter "*watches him holding the bowl, rearranging his hand and pulling Antonio's shirt from his shoulder to expose the flesh*" (17). Here the artist arranges his model for his painting *Boy with a Bowl of Fruit* and then immediately the picture itself becomes visible in a *tableau vivant* while at the same time all of it operates as part of the stage action. A more elaborate *tableau vivant* comes in the closing scene when Lena orders Antonio to strip, then arranges the red cloak around him and puts the cross into his hand so he becomes the image of Caravaggio's *John the Baptist*. The border-crossing between word and image

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

through movement results in the transparency of the figure: the model of the original picture is substituted by this lowest of the low, a "rent-boy," a male prostitute, who transforms, even transsubstantiates into John the Baptist, the herald of the Savior in front of the audience's eyes. The classical division between arts according to spatiality and temporality gets suspended again in the scenic totality of stage performance in an *ekphrastic gesture*, which, similarly to ekphrastic narration, lends a sort of stillness, silence, stasis to the scene. The desire of ekphrasis, of the "verbal representation of visual representation," as its best-known theoretician, W.J.T. Mitchell, puts it is to "still the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array" (154).

A complex example of verbal and gestural counterpointing of light and dark, gentleness and rudeness, beauty and ugliness with the help of ekphrasis, is the scene when Caravaggio, after a quarrel, promises Lena to paint her "beautiful and angry," then he "paints" her face in a poetic monologue, planting in it "the earth's fruit and the tree's leaf" so it becomes "a bowl full of life, full of Lena" (10). The multiple-layered ekphrasis evokes Yeats's golden bird in "Sailing to Byzantium" and connects it with the chestnut tree in its wholeness of "the leaf, the blossom or the bole" as a metaphor of unity of art and artist ("Among School Children"): "A bird moves through the forest and the bird is golden because it carries the sun. The bird . . . feeds the tree with the sun. The tree feeds the leaf, and the leaf loves the tree, and the tree cradles the bird and Lena is the bird who is the sun and the tree and the leaf" (10). He caresses Lena's face, then looks admiringly at his own hands as if carrying the print of her face, and in the next moment blows his nose into his hands. After the elevating words lifting the aging prostitute to the eternity of art he pulls the "portrait" down to the dirt with a single rude gesture. With this pictorial intertextuality and medial interaction the protagonist of the *play*, the *painter* Caravaggio *verbally* evokes the *poet* Yeats's *poetic images* inspired by *mosaics* and *paints* them further in *words*—through verbally referencing the "verbal representation of the visual representation"—and fills Yeats's motionless golden bird with life and movement before destroying in a physical gesture all that he has built up in words.

Caravaggio's continual collating and uniting the lofty and the lowly, the human and the spiritual runs through the whole play, beginning with the opening sequence, which brings to the stage Caravaggio's pictorial world spread in time. In the painter's surrealist dream/nightmare vision the emblematic figures and objects of his paintings show up, among others the ubiquitous red cloak, the horse, the skull, and go through various transformations, haunting the artist, making visible his demons. The cloak first appears as a shape to be caressed in Lena's lap like a child, which image evokes the *Penitent Magdalena*, who rocks something invisible in her lap (Mikami 59). Lena then tears the cloak from herself for it to become a mad horse, running wildly around amidst animal sounds, then "*wraps itself*

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

violently around CARAVAGGIO. *Hands start to beat him. . . . Darkness*" (1). But the next moment the cloak appears again as an ordinary piece of worn clothing in need of repair, exemplifying art's transforming force that can make ordinary objects or phenomena extraordinary. The red cloak anticipates the contrasts surrounding and filling the painter's life: wildness, violence, blood, death, betrayal but also gentleness, the Passion and transcendence and the combination of all these. Since the red cloak often appears around a Christ-figure, this scene alludes to the artist's self-aggrandizement, comparing himself to Jesus Christ. Thus in the opening scene several paintings are referred to through emblematic objects transforming into each other, the painter himself being among them first as an outsider, as a witness (as in several of Caravaggio's paintings) then as a participant, a fallible human being, and a victor and victim simultaneously (again, as in paintings, for instance, *David with the Head of Goliath*), a sinner and savior in one person.

Lena posing as the *Penitent Magdalena*—which will recur at the end of Act II where she more definitely cradles a non-existent dead child—introduces one of the central layers of meaning that goes through the whole play: the redeemability of the sinner. One of the greatest innovations in religious painting of the historical Caravaggio was exactly the fact that he modeled Biblical figures and saints on miserable beggars and prostitutes. Evidently, he did this not only for practical reasons (the availability of cheap models), nor only from painterly considerations (preferring naturalism to classical, idealizing painting) but also as a protest against the institution of the church and in the spirit of the original Christian teaching that the poor and lowly are most in need of salvation. He elevates them with a creating power imitating the Creator. Or, in Eamonn Jordan's succint phrasing, "[b]y using the lowly, Caravaggio was in fact painting their potential salvation" (58).

The references to Caravaggio's paintings then evoke both their painterly qualities and through them their reaching out to spiritual light and dark. "I take ordinary flesh and blood and bone and with my hands transform it into eternal light, eternal dark . . . For my art balances the beautiful and the ugly, the saved and the sinning" (3). His art's dramatic illumination brings together the external and the internal, the visible and the invisible, the earthbound and the divine. As Caravaggio announces: "I paint as I see in light and as I imagine in darkness, for in the light I see the flesh and blood and bone but in the dark I imagine the soul of man for the soul and the soul alone is the sighting of God in man and it is I who reveal God and it is God who reveals my painting to the world" (4). His seeing himself as a co-creator with God is at one and the same time arrogantly self-confident and full of humility.

Yet McGuinness's artist-protagonist cannot influence reality as his ancestors were able to, which, however, does not exempt him from responsibility (Jordan 64). If nothing more, he can subvert accepted values, can transform reality into art

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

and his art can be purgative. A beautifully composed stage manifestation of this latter is a dream-scene, in which, in a combination of verbal, pictorial and theatrical effect, Caravaggio's dead or suffering models, his "victims" haunt him and he, raising a knife, says:

> CARAVAGGIO . . . This is how I die. How I kill myself. This is how I paint. Living things. In their life I see my death. I can't stop my hand. I can't stop my dying. But I can bring peace to what I'm painting.
> SISTER Then raise your hand in peace. Paint.
> (SISTER *takes the knife from* CARAVAGGIO. *He raises his hands. Light rises from his raised hands, drawing* WHORE, ANTONIO *and* LUCIO [his models] *from the darkness.*) (55)

The light rising from Caravaggio's raised hands—the creative and healing power emanating from the artist—also reflects on the phenomenon that in Caravaggio's paintings light often seems to radiate from the figures themselves rather than coming from some external source. The painter in this moment is able to give love, life, and health, as he dries the hands of the drowned one, wipes off the disease from the face of the sick, kisses the abandoned in a series of ritual gestures, even though only in a dream. As Helen Lojek sums up: "Caravaggio's Christ-like ritualized cleansing of his models . . . embodies the effect of his art" (111).

McGuinness' painter-protagonist dies in the play but revives in his paintings. In Lena's dream, as she stands amidst his pictures in a bright room, he looks down from above, happily and at peace. She starts laughing because she suddenly realizes that looking from above, he "must see them all upside-down, and I knew then somehow we'd won, we turned the world upside-down" (59). The closing scene is the parallel counterpoint of this one, in which Lena proudly "shows" her composition of Antonio dressed as John the Baptist to the absent and dead Caravaggio and her laughter is echoed by the laughter of the painter, accompanied by music and light (62). The artist's task is to "turn the world upside-down" in order to reveal the deeper truths, the invisible values, to subvert the power of anomalous reality. This is represented in McGuinness' play through all the elements of drama and theater—plot, characterization, movement, stage images, and so forth, and a huge part is played by the various evocations of the artist's paintings. The last word and image belong to the artist: his revived painting and subversive laughter, through transgressing the boundaries between loftiness and ordinariness, life and death, proclaim the apotheosis of art in the eternal present tense of the theater.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

2. Thomas Kilroy: *The Shape of Metal*

The sculptor protagonist in Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal*—the entirely fictitious, elderly Nell Jeffrey—shares Caravaggio's arrogance as artist in having allowed herself to live all her life as she wanted but without the earlier artist's certainty of his God-given talent and the divine power of art. A modernist artist, she is no longer tormented by sin in any religious sense yet she has plenty to feel guilty about especially as a mother. As transpires from the plot, she is responsible for her daughter, Grace's destroyed life (who disappeared and most probably died some thirty years prior to the play).

Artist as mother illuminates the closeness of biological and artistic creation. Ironically, here the dilemma of artist and family is not caused by the predictable pattern of artist neglecting parenthood in the service of his/her vocation. On the contrary, Nell's motherly love and over-protectiveness, complemented by the artist's "monstrous ego" (48) and impulse to act God-like, makes her insist on shaping her daughter's personality and life—with disastrous results. Her monstrosity derives from her irrepressible creative energy that strives to impose her will on both matter (art) and people (life).

The boundaries between art and life become blurred in a *coup de theatre* immediately at the beginning of the play when Grace's head appears as a "mounted head" haunting her mother. Grace's words: "Mummy kneading the head. . . . head on pedestal, absolutely still. Grace inside the silence" (11) could be heard in the theater as Mummy "in need of" Grace's head for her creation as well as "kneading," massaging it as a healing act and molding it into a sculpture, eternalizing her daughter through art which metaphorically kills her when putting her head "inside the silence." The speaking head thus puts the Keatsean ("Ode on a Grecian Urn") and Yeatsean ("Sailing to Byzantium") dilemmas concerning the relationship between art and life into palpable stage reality, while at the same time evoke the speaking head and severed head myths for Irish audiences and the Kőmíves Kelemen ("Kelemen the bricklayer") ballad for Hungarian readers.

The artist's work and the artist at work, do appear on stage in Kilroy's play, unlike in *Innocence*, and participate in the dialogue between life and death. Among Nell's sculptures two gain prominence. One is the speaking bronze head of Grace, which, at its first appearance, is a "*mounted head, speaking*" (11), but the second time the same bronze sculpture becomes "*a bronze death head on a plinth, a bronze head which speaks, the mouth moving but the eyes closed over, metallic*" (51). Even though the head itself speaks about its own transformation, the dominant sense it carries is that of finality and lifelessness. The Beckettian words evoke visions of death and desolation:

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

> Cold. Cold metal. Peace. Silence. All finished. Nothingness. No feel, no fear, no sight, no sound, no touch, no taste. All finished. Nothing-nowhere-no when. Grace's head. Not Grace's head. All finished. (51)

The other sculpture, Nell's masterpiece, *Woman Rising from Water* carved in white marble, draws on entirely different associations. Stone, by its very nature, does not suggest the kind of lifeless finality that metal, especially bronze, this artificially created substance does. *Woman Rising from Water* is described in the stage directions as part of it being "*beautifully carved and polished to a high finish*" with one side looking "*as if it had been attacked and out of the rubble the woman's face emerges*" (27). Thus the sculpture is a metaphor for life, personality, and art, all in the making, alive with birth, change, and movement incorporating time in a modernist way, expresses a process rather than a fixed state. An allegory both of the modernist artist and the woman-artist in the act of inventing herself. The image itself reinforces the parallel between biological and artistic creation and their mutual reflection of each other since it is also another portrait of Grace—a sculpture that especially appealed to her and one with which she identified. Nell herself liberated the rising woman from the prison of polished, finished form, uniting mother and daughter in one image—all that she failed to do in life. But in contrast with one of her inspirations, Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* with its male idealization of the female muse, a beautifully smooth, polished oval face, Nell's woman has an unidealized, "*far less benign, more witchlike*" (27) face, arising out of the traditionally feminine element, water, as an image of the new woman who wants to tell her own story.

The artist being female, moreover a female sculptor (of which there are so few), necessarily draws attention to gender problems in terms of social acceptance and artistic evaluation in comparison with male sculptors. Judith, Nell's surviving daughter—herself a feminist and a lesbian—while admiring her mother as an artist and praising her for her independence, falls into the trap of over-gendering art when reproaches her for "bowing the knee before two great male artists," "[k]owtowing to male greatness" when Nell expresses her admiration for Beckett and Giacometti (56).[3] Being a passionate mother yet at odds with that role, Nell of course could easily be seen as the embodiment of the female and feminist artist struggling with social hierarchies. Yet Kilroy's sculptor does not suffer from lack of fame or any discrimination in the artistic world (her work has been given a whole room in the permanent collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham). Nor does she need to use her daughter's sculpted "head as a prop to allow her to fulfill the role" of "a phallocentric artist" as Emmaleene O'Brien's

[3] For more detailed discussion of the presence and influence of other artists on Nell's work see my essay "Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal*: 'Metal ... Transformed into Grace'—Grace into Metal."

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

extreme feminist interpretation suggests according to which her daughter's bust "becomes for Nell the phallus allowing her to take on a masculine role," since "a woman's desire for a baby is the desire for a penis" (O'Brien 141). I much rather agree with Thierry Dubost who contends that Nell "refuses to acknowledge the relevance of gender limits which her daughter traces" since "her vision of art takes her beyond gender issues," her quest goes deeper, to "earnest introspection" which then leads "to forms of artistic expression to which socially-constructed gender images may relate" (105). Nell's deepest, tormenting questions concerning art and artistic creation, her metaphysical quest for the "perfect form" that the artist, in her belief, should achieve but because of its impossibility, necessarily fails to achieve, transcend gender boundaries. Kilroy, when choosing a woman artist, "challenge[s] global stereotypical views of creation in a [way] different" from feminism and "expose[s]—beyond sexual questions—the falsely reassuring images that society conveys of artists" (105).

Nell's marble sculpture *Woman Rising from Water* polarizes this broader artistic dilemma, too. Whereas Nell keeps saying that all her life she wanted to create polished, finished forms, she finds Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*—identified as the other inspiration of her statue—extremely moving just because of its unfinished, therefore deeply human quality.[4] Articulated on the verbal level, the Yeatsean desire for perfection to be achieved in art and life counterbalances the overriding Beckettian notion of failure as the very condition and state of art. Just as completion, the finished quality of work becomes juxtaposed to unfinishedness, which is deemed more human. The presence of the sculpture, *Woman Rising from Water,* enriches and directly, visually mediates those dilemmas of the artist as it contains the tension between, and thus manifests *both,* the polished form and the lifelike unfinishedness.

Kilroy's belief that "form is discovered within the material" (Kurdi 261) becomes dramatized through the images of the two sculptures. Metal is shaped as the artist wants it whereas the beautiful white marble itself seems to have dictated the shape to Nell's sculpture as she freed the form innate in it. The bronze head, both in its medium and in its naturalism, suggests finality and motionlessness, so when it speaks as a mythical severed head, it comes to life through extra-sculptural means. The life of the stone statue, on the other hand, is created entirely within its medium as it carries movement within its more abstracted form. The one copying and through that killing reality, the other transforming and thus preserving it. All

[4] This statue has been a puzzle to artists and art historians because of the different proportions of the upper and lower sections, and the existence of a third, detached arm of Christ left in the stone. Arthur C. Danto offers this sculpture as an example of the ambiguities in interpreting art works: of whether to simply ignore the extra arm because one tends to see what falls into the perception of reality or to accept it as intentional, figuring that "Michelangelo could have cut it out, had he wished to" (115).

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

this is not verbalized in the play's text but emerges as additional dimensions present through the pieces of art radiating meanings onstage.

The Shape of Metal's focal issues of giving "shape" to matter, giving form to life and life to art, self-reflexively comment on the playwright's art and on any art's form, including theater's nature and possibilities. The titular "shape of metal" does not change once the statue is created and the shape of stone, the marble sculpture becomes shattered by its creator herself yet they participate in shaping the intellectual center and the theatricality of the playwright's play. The paradox of artwork being finished, polished and yet remaining forever unfinished, changing, transpires also through the co-existence of the tangible objects onstage and the uniqueness and changeability of each theatrical performance.

3. Brian Friel: *Performances*

Brian Friel thematizes the word-music dichotomy in *Performances* through the protagonist, Leoš Janáček, the Czech composer. The playwright makes Janaček proudly declare that music is a "much more demanding language" than words, a more perfect medium for expressing feelings because music is "the language of feeling itself; a unique vocabulary of sounds created by feeling itself" (31). He continues by asserting that "people who huckster in words merely report on feeling" while "we"—that is, musicians, composers, singers—"speak feeling" (31). This echoes, among others, Kierkegaard's famous assertion that "Music always expresses the immediate in its immediacy; . . . Language involves reflection, . . . Reflection destroys the immediate, and hence it is impossible to express the musical in language" (qtd. in Scher). But is it possible to express in music what language says? Can music have meaning, content, plot, can it narrate? Musicians and music philosophers often maintain that "Music is all too transparent, a language so fine that no content can penetrate it" (Terada 92) and criticize the view that music can express something for deriving from the "compulsion to see music as another example of literary or painterly values" (Peter Kivy, qtd. in Terada 96-7). Yet recently it seems possible to bring together words and music in theory as, for instance, John Neubauer suggests that "all good listening is a 'collaboration' with the composer and that listening inevitably mobilizes our talent to emplot, making thereby use of stories supplied by our culture and its history" (qtd. Scher 16). In Friel's play Anezka, the contemporary PhD student who is writing her dissertation on Janáček, endeavors to read content into the musical piece, to enhance the importance of the literary within the musical medium. She does not even have to emplot the instrumental music since the emplotment is supplied by the composer's letters. The survival of these 700 love letters written to a young woman in Janáček's last years, at the time of composing his Second String Quartet called *Intimate Letters*, gives Friel a splendid opportunity to raise questions about

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

the importance of the inspiring life experience in the formation of works of art and whether the awareness of it illuminates the work itself. Or whether art elevates life or simply feeds on it? Such and similar issues inform the play-long debate between Janáček, dead for 70 years, and the student-scholar.

Anezka insists that Janáček's *Second String Quartet* is the expression of the composer's great passion for the young woman, Kamila, to whom he wrote the letters. Janáček, on the other hand, throughout the play keeps "performing" when trying to explain away the mystery of his great, stimulating passion for Kamila (more than thirty years his junior and married, having two children) and dismisses its significance as merely the embodiment of his desire for the perfect music. Anezka, the scholar dealing in words, knows all the facts, recognizes all the pieces of music when put to the test. But she hardly listens to the music, and refuses to stay to hear the string quartet play. She continually confronts Janáček's own memory and interpretation of the quartet's composition with the evidence of his own words in those letters that reflect on the creative process itself as well as the inspiration and the emotions leading to creation. But if Janáček in the present distrusts his own words in his letters, then how much truth and value do his present words of dismissal carry? Among the *words* opposed to *words*, which should be trusted? Even if the beloved young woman was actually an ordinary woman clothed into the dream-figure of the desired imaginative perfection that at last took form in the music, as Janáček insists, even then the work would never have been created without that personal experience—as evidenced in the imperfect and sentimental but honest words of the letters. Just as music transcends words, so the image of the desired young woman transcends the real Kamila, thus the object of Janáček's adoration was not so much a Muse as the catalyst of all those feelings and desires that are needed for creation and that make it possible for listeners to relate to the work and allow it to evoke their own feelings. The relationship between the individual, subjective feeling expressed in music and its effect on other people, that is, on the particularity and universality of the work and the emotions carried by it, also pertains to one of the dilemmas in the philosophy of music.

Friel is greatly indebted to George Steiner[5] in answering this question. Steiner maintains that "It is in music that the poet hopes to find the paradox resolved of an act of creation singular to the creator, bearing the shape of his own spirit, yet definitely renewed in each listener" (62). As opposed to the impoverishment of language, the "exhaustion of verbal resources," the brutalization and devaluation of the word in modern civilization, "[m]usic alone can fulfill the two requirements of a truly rigorous communicative or semiological system: to be unique to itself

[5] Friel duly acknowledges his indebtedness to Steiner's observations in the printed script.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

(untranslatable) yet immediately comprehensible" (65). These statements recur almost *verbatim* when Janáček in Friel's play recalls his feelings when alive:

> I remember when I finished it [*the Quartet*] I really thought that—yes!—this time I had solved the great paradox: had created something that was singular to me, uniquely mine, bearing the imprint of my spirit only; and at the same time was made new again in every listener who was attentive and assented to its strange individuality and to its arrogance and indeed to its hesitancies. (31)

But then, since he is not a philosopher but a true artist, he dismisses it all, with self-mocking laughter as "Vanity".

Friel's self-reflexive juxtaposition of music and words at his own, the writer's expense, proves somewhat disingenuous. If music as it appears in the polished composition of *Intimate Letters* proves superior to language as manifested in the love letters and in Anezka's comments, then the comparison itself already puts words into a disadvantageous position since neither the love letters nor, obviously, the PhD student's speeches are meant to be artifacts. So what really compares with the String Quartet should be the whole play itself which is able to incorporate music in an inventive and meaningful way.

All this plays out in a liminal space, between life and death, life and art. Only the PhD student belongs undoubtedly to the matter-of-fact, real world. Does that suggest that all the other characters—the musicians and Janáček himself—are conjured up out of her imagination? If so, what does that say about the work itself? This representative of posterity still, 70 years after Janáček's death, finds his life and love affair more interesting than his music? Her resistance to engaging with the music itself, its musical effect, might question its value. But again, if the whole scene, composer, musicians and music are evoked in her imagination, does it not attest to the music's power to fill the space and to live on, whether she wants to listen to it or not?

In the final scene Friel's play dissolves the contrast and contest between music and words when the music is played onstage, in the live performance of a string quartet, in Janáček's (and the audience's) presence and present, and the composer, now alone with his art, without the necessity to "perform," turns back to his life and memories, reads into his own letters and becomes emotionally affected by them. In this richly ambiguous scene, with the last two movements of his *Intimate Letters* playing, Janáček listens and slowly leafs through his letters, "pausing now and then to read a line or two. Now he leans his head back and closes his eyes" as the stage directions instruct (39). In the Dublin Gate Theater performance, the actor (the Romanian Ion Caramitru), in addition, uttered a heavy sigh before the blackout, further emphasizing the full circle he has traveled back to re-live his one-time passion. Ironically enough, with the help of the only half-

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

understanding but enthusiastic scholar, the created work itself makes Janáček's unghostly ghost re-immerse in that passion. This scene confirms the "equilibrium" (38) of the two possible readings of his letters—as expressions of love and as metaphors for his musical creation—as he suggests a few minutes earlier. It also balances between the two truths, one of which holds that experienced passion becomes a significant part of the created work while the other claims that nothing matters only the work, everything else is "ancillary". The music-word contest thus covers a different dichotomy: that of experience, personal emotion *versus* the created work. In other words: life and art. By the end, when only Janáček's music can be heard, the re-evoked joy and pain of life seems to overwhelm him—for which he finds no words.

As a daring theatrical solution, Friel allows the musicians to play the last two movements of *Intimate Letters* onstage, for the last 12-13 minutes of the performance. As the music triumphantly moves on, it carries its own effect and lets the audience decide whether it "speaks feeling" or not. But, with another twist, since this scene comes *after* all the passionate appeal of Anezka to Janáček to admit that the music *is* the expression of his love for the young woman, the audience (and the composer himself onstage) cannot help listening to the music with that knowledge. Thus, the excavation of the important inspiring experience in life described in words, influences and colors the way the audience hear the music, which then, totally differs from listening to the same piece without any such information. Janáček's minimal stage gesture, his deep sigh clutching the folder of his love letters in the last moment indicates that personal passion distilled into the non-subjective emotion conveyed by music, evokes the very personal passion of love within the artist himself. And although I share Nicholas Grene's conviction that Friel, "in spite of his reverence for the superior expressiveness of music, in spite of his awareness of the deficiencies of the word, . . . creates a theater dependent on the persuasive powers of language" in which "at key moments . . . language . . . is sovereign" (39), in this case words and music no longer contradict or compete, but rather complement each other. It is their accumulative effect that produces the meanings in the "hidden magnet" of the theatrical space—as also in the other examples of the artist-protagonist's work present on the stage. Because, for the audience all that becomes manifest through the playwright's work, the beautiful, elegant play itself, which, created out of *words* on paper, highly polished *language* and strict structure, including *music* played by musicians and brought to life in the *performances* in the complex (heterotopic) space and composite art of the *theater* which can summon together past and present, the living and the dead, life and art.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

Works cited

Bertha, Csilla. "Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal*: 'Metal … Transformed into Grace' – Grace into Metal." ABEI Journal 9 (June 2007): 85-98.

Chapple, Freda and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds. *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.

Danto, Arthur C. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.

Dubost, Thierry. *The Plays of Thomas Kilroy*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2007.

Freedberg, David. "Az ábrázolás hatalma: válasz és elfojtás." ["The Power of Images: Response and Repression."] Trans. Magdolna Módos. *ATHENÆU*M 1.4 (1993): 216-42.

Friel, Brian, *Performances*. Dublin: Gallery, 2003.

Grene, Nicholas. "Brian Friel and the Sovereignty of Language." *Irish Theatre International*. Dublin: Carysfort, 2009. 38-47.

Jordan, Eamonn. "The Masquerade of the Damned and the Deprivileging of Innocence: Frank McGuinness's *Innocence*." *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness. Stages of Mutability*. Ed. Helen Lojek. Dublin: Carysfort, 2002. 50-78.

Kattenbelt, Chiel. "Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality." *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*. Eds. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 29-40.

Kiberd, Declan. "Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*." *Irish Writers and Society at Large*. Ed. Masaru Sekine. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985. 106-21.

Kilroy, Thomas. *The Shape of Metal*. Loughcrew: Gallery, 2003.

Kurdi, Mária. "'The Whole Idea of Writing Historical Fiction is Paradoxical.' Talk with Irish Playwright Thomas Kilroy." Interview. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 8,1 (Spring 2002): 259-67.

Lojek, Helen Heusner. *Contexts for McGuinness's Drama*. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America, 2004.

McGuinness, Frank. *Innocence*. London: Faber, 1987.

Mikami, Hiroko. *Frank McGuinness and his Theatre of Paradox*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994.

O'Brien, Emmaleene. "The Birthing Process in Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal*." *New Voices in Irish Literary Criticism. Ireland in Theory*. Eds. Cathy McGlynn and Paula Murphy. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2007. 137-49.

Scher, Steven Paul. "Melopoetics Revisited." *Word and Music Studies. Defining the Field*. Eds. Bernhart, Walter, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf. Graz, 1997.

Shuttleworth, Ian. "The Shape of Metal. Abbey Theatre, Dublin." *The Financial Times*, 10/01/2003. <http:www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-24544929_ITM> 30 Jan 2007.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)

Steiner, George. *Language and Silence*. London: Faber, 1967.
Terada, Rei. *Feeling in Theory. Emotion after the* "*Death of the Subject*." Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 2001.
Vinci, da, Leonardo. *Tudomány és művészet*. [*Science and Art*.] Ed. and trans. into Hungarian by Tibor Kardos. Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1960.
Yeats, William Butler. *Collected Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1952.

BDD-A7447 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:54:00 UTC)