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“Useless, off-beat information!”: Knowledge and Successiveness in Brian Friel’s *Molly Sweeney* (1994)

Abstract: *This article provides a close reading of Brian Friel’s Molly Sweeney. It shows that the play stages how discursive ramifications of knowledge become embedded in narrative and temporal schemes in order to establish self-fulfilling frames of meaning in the lives of the play’s male characters, all of whom are bound to a fundamental and inherently hostile form of succession. The blind Molly is objectified by three male characters, all exerting power by fatally imposing their own narrative schemes on her. However, Molly overcomes successiveness and achieves meaning and understanding of her blind world by generating a placid form of sequentiality.*

1 Knowledge, Vision, and Successiveness

Brian Friel’s play *Molly Sweeney* (1994) tells the story of a woman who has been blind since early childhood and whose vision is then temporarily restored by two succeeding, clinically successful removals of the cataracts on both of her eyes. Although this brief summary captures the gist of the play quite accurately, it does not express the often-perceived tragic dimension of the play nor the profoundly eventful quality of the operative restoration of Molly’s sight. The fate of the blind woman Molly Sweeney is a salient story of loss with the operative surgery amounting to an intrusion into her life, manifesting a transformational event, and dividing her life irreversibly into a ‘before’ and an ‘after.’ This predominant conception of eventfulness can be traced back to Brian Friel’s main source for his play, Oliver Sacks’ “To See or Not to See,” a neurological and psychological account which delineates the consequences a blind male patient of Sacks, dubbed Virgil, faces when undergoing the same surgery and similar treatment as his fictive (female) counterpart in Friel’s play. Here, one can surmise that Sacks considers a large part of the tellability of his ‘case study’ to lie in the idea that the surgery and its successful restoration of Virgil’s sight is a life-changing

event. This finds its illustrative dramatic peak when, in the aftermath of Virgil's surgery, the bandages on his eyes are removed:

[T]hen the eye was finally exposed, without cover, to the world. The moment of truth had finally come. Or had it? The truth of the matter (as I pieced it together later), if less 'miraculous' than [his wife's] journal suggested, was infinitely stranger. The dramatic moment stayed vacant, grew longer, sagged. No cry ('I can see!') burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focussing, at the surgeon, who stood before him, still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke – saying 'Well?' – did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face. (Sacks 107)

In Sacks' narration, the dramatic and eventful moment of exposure coincides with the epistemological category of truth. Yet with his hindsight assessment of the "truth of the matter," he discerns a surprising, "infinitely stranger" impact on the dramatic moment; it simply lacks eventfulness. In other words, the underlying notion that the event of removing the bandages amounts to being a transformative moment of dividing time irreversibly into a 'before' and an 'after' is simply not realized, as it "stayed vacant, grew longer and sagged."¹ As this paper attempts to show, it is exactly this startling and unexpected denial of eventfulness in close connection to the conflation of events with notions of 'truth' and 'knowledge' that forms the core aesthetic interest in Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*.

In recent scholarly readings of *Molly Sweeney*, knowledge is usually seen as closely linked to the capability of sight, and its centrality as a theme in the play is without dispute. Exemplarily, Moloney identifies issues "such as seeing versus understanding, ways of knowing, and the nature of reality" as the play's chief concerns (295). DeVinney goes as far as to say that sight "becomes a metaphor [...] for knowledge," yet she makes sure to stress that "the easy equation of sight and insight is troubled by the unreliability of perception and memory" (111). Indeed, the nexus of knowing and seeing is anything but simple, and yet always in danger of becoming a truism. Therefore, Upton is right when she warns us that the play does

1 "To See or Not to See" is one among seven tales published in Sacks' bestseller *An Anthropologist on Mars*, each of which describing "a person who is transformed by a singular neurological 'occurrence'" (Temple 141). Hence, all of them seem to mediate their scientific 'cases' relying on 'histories' that follow this simple, yet, significant pattern.

not give “credence in its ultimate discourse to casual assimilations between seeing and understanding,” and further emphasizes that “an unsentimental refutation of long-established metaphors of light and darkness, ignorance and knowledge, lies at the heart of” the work (347). Kerrigan proposes to regard the play as a whole along these lines, as its “form dramatically approximates the condition of blindness” (154). He suggests that “as the play’s narrative advances and Molly becomes more (and then less) able to see, the drama accommodates and entertains new metaphors of seeing and knowing” (154). Friel imports medical and physiological concepts directly from Sacks’ case history² and, according to Kerrigan, renders them as discernible extended metaphors incorporated into the overall structure of the play. Hence, the concepts provided Friel “with a vehicle for deepening his treatment of sight and knowledge in the play” (Kerrigan 155). Although Kerrigan’s basic analogies between the blindness among the play’s characters and the formal ‘blindness’ the drama as a whole challenges the audience to overcome are consistent, his basic scope remains limited to questions and statements about the diegetic dimension of the play.³ Hence, Kerrigan praises *Molly Sweeney* as “original and particularly compelling” because of the “particular form of narrative drama Friel chooses in order to give rise to the inner worlds of his characters” (153). And yet, what Kerrigan highlights as the “particular form of narrative drama,” its generally monologic form realized in its three protagonists’ isolated soliloquies, has recently been taken as a point of departure to account for the complexity of the nexus of knowledge and vision. DeVinney, for example, does not find fault with the

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- 2 The three concepts are “agnosis,” defined by Frank Sweeney in the play as “seeing but not knowing, not recognizing, what it is [you] see” (Friel 464); “‘blindsight,’ a physiological condition in which a person receives visual signals and responds to them subconsciously” (Kerrigan 156, see also Friel 498) and “gnosis,” a medical term “for the ability to recognize and interpret what is perceived” (Kerrigan 157, see also Friel 496).
 - 3 With “statements about the diegetic dimension” I refer to statements that imply an equation of the fictive character with a living human being. My twofold aim here is, first, to delineate specific inherent narrative phenomena and configurations of Friel’s play that find their expression, inevitably, *through* the diegetic dimension of the play and, second, to show how they contribute to the aesthetic treatment of the work’s central themes (knowledge, seeing, loss etc.). With regard to the use of the term “diegetic” in this context, see Souriau (151 and 156).

play's replacement "of action with narration." Instead, she suggests: "[It's] lack of conventional stage action is, through a sort of logical hairpin curve, exactly what makes [it] so dramatic" (111). In a similar fashion, Silverstein defends the monologic form of the play against Krause's invective account in which he disapproves of Friel's "crucial decision to *narrate* rather than *dramatize* his premise and its unfolding" (Krause 361), and suggests that instead of faulting "the play for being insufficiently dramatic, it would be more accurate" to talk of "the play's insufficient *theatricality*" (Silverstein 37). In a compelling way Silverstein shows that, in spite of reducing its own theatrical architecture to a sequence of dramatic monologues, the play elaborately investigates the infinitely subtle implications that lie in the "very act of looking" (38). Silverstein demonstrates convincingly that Friel's drama investigates "assumptions about the relationship between desire, subjectivity, knowledge and vision" (38). When Dr. Rice, the ophthalmologist, for example, begins to sense "a feeling of mastery" (Friel 490), Silverstein relates this touch of supremacy to the "'mastery' of self-certainty based on [the spectators'] conviction that [they] know what [they] see, that seeing and knowledge not only mutually reinforce each other, but amount to the same thing" (38).

The present article aims to contribute an explanation for the intricate relationship between knowledge and vision in Friel's *Molly Sweeney*. However, instead of directly approaching their correlations on a conceptual level, I intend to expose how both of these themes collide due to a more fundamental principle at work in Friel's play. Complementarily to Silverstein's examination of the theatrical and visual reflections implied in Friel's drama, I deliberately put emphasis on its narrative dimension as well as on temporal implications as they become manifest in the story of the play. Taking up the above-mentioned conflation of eventfulness and, as Sacks puts it, "moment[s] of truth" (107), I argue that knowledge, predominantly associated with the male characters in the play, becomes a prevailing source for them to establish and maintain individual narrative patterns. Whether these patterns are episodic or express any of the organizing aspects of a singular event, they are bound to a primary temporal force that manifests itself throughout the play in various ways: the notion of successiveness, i.e. a basic, ever ongoing rhythm of one thing following another. Successiveness is conceived as fundamentally affecting all characters in their temporal and

narrative disposition. It is thus ignorant of the gender gap and, as such, ineluctable. However, successive units are indistinct and hence devoid of an inherent meaning. Therefore, the characters are compelled to find narrative means in order to impose meaning on their ineluctable successive condition. The latter may be temporarily superimposed, but successiveness remains a latent and to a degree even hostile threat against any endeavors to create meaningful and lasting structures. To the characters this inimical nature may only become manifest on rare occasions (as will be shown in a few 'off-beat'-moments) or become a default mode of existence. The latter is the fate of Molly Sweeney; grown up as a blind person, she had come to terms with her own successive nature, accommodating to it by transforming the ever ongoing successive rhythm into a stable and integral mode of perceptive and narrative sequentiality. When she is persuaded by the male characters to be operated on her eyes, she is deprived of this integrity. Friel's play explores and stages these acts of imposition. The imagery of the play clarifies – in contrast to the fundamental successiveness – the resulting narrative patterns are of a secondary and thus negotiable nature. When Molly is confronted with, and eventually, afflicted by the male characters' struggles and their unrelenting efforts to establish their patterns, this level of imposition does become a site for gender and power struggles. It is knowledge and its specific discursive ramifications which constitute a specific 'blindness' that may prompt members of the audience to misperceive Molly's fate as just another simple story turning upon a life-changing event.

2 Paternal Testing: Molly's Father

Molly's opening sentence can be read as pointing at the connection of time, coercive force, and knowledge underlying the whole play: "By the time I was five years of age, my father had taught me the names of dozens of flowers and herbs and shrubs and trees" (455). Her earliest recollections as a child present her with a younger self that has *already* learned and *already* knows the names of the plants that grew in her father's garden. Molly's knowledge seems as innocent as her affection towards her father. Molly's first monologue, however, reveals how the acquisition of her botanical knowledge is a result of her father's attempt to establish a frame of meaning for his own bleak life. He is a judge and his marriage to Molly's mother is

the story of a slow and painful disintegration. Every day when he comes home from work he has a few drinks and takes his young daughter to his “walled garden” (455). There, Molly is allowed to spend precious and exclusive time with her father, but he coerces his daughter to partake in relentless quizzes. Molly is forced to seek her father’s love by repetitively naming the names of flowers and trees: forms, numbers, length measures, and color form the criteria of his array of queries: “Now, Molly. Tell me what you saw” (456), he prompts her to speak, and although he lets her smell and feel in the process, his address remains bound to the world of sight. The flowers, for example, are arranged in geometrically perfect “circle[s]” (456) and he demands that she names the correct colors. Under his paternal supervision, Molly is compelled to seek knowledge as if she could see. What is more, the father’s daily tests are not only oppressive in an epistemological sense. The repetitive nature of his interrogations is augmented by them being also formally endless (hence successive), inasmuch her father compares their daily tours with hearings in an ongoing trial: “Excellent testimony! We’ll adjourn until tomorrow” (457).

Nonetheless, the young Molly loves and trusts her father and delivers loyally what she can in this paternal frame of inculcations: she wants to “get it right for him,” because “to hear the delight in his voice” gives her “such pleasure” (456). The interrogative format is both a means to channel Molly’s love towards her father and a desperate attempt on his part to establish a medium that allows him to convey his feelings toward her. Although he remains ignorant of the fact that he imposes an oppressive scheme upon his daughter, it is not necessarily directed against her. The discrepancy between his sight and her blindness and the dual ‘true’ or ‘false’ code of his testing not only enable him to either correct her false answers or to praise her for identifying the correct botanical names; the series of pressing queries and repetitive instances of verification also become a compulsory, but the only possible, pattern to express his paternal love to his daughter.

The breakdown of Molly’s parents’ marriage is the main cause for her father’s walled garden trials, and their repetitive nature suggestively calls up the succession of prescribed treatments Molly’s mother has to undergo: “in and out of institutions all her days with nervous trouble” (458). Frequently, Molly’s mother is absent. Remarkably enough, the only passage which speaks of the mother’s presence is itself framed as an iterative situation:

“if she were at home she'd appear at the front door – always in her headscarf and wellingtons – and she'd shout, ‘Molly! Daddy! Dinner!’” (457). Appearing at the front door and interrupting her husband's garden tour with her call seems to be her only impact on his life. Yet as soon as the young Molly is taken to bed, the domestic co-presence becomes unbearable to both marital partners. In their “huge, echoing house” (457) their resounding fights and quarrels form an irresolvable overlay of sequential, repetitive, and endless patterns.

In this regard, Molly's portrayal of her father's garden trials forms the overture of her own story, in which she is to face the fatal consequences of two men imposing specific narrative structures upon her life in order to escape or avoid the effects of a distorting successive temporality. Before she meets the two men, Molly copes with these impositions despite, or even because of, her blindness. She lives her life in a placid and steady mode of sequentiality only to lose this ability with the operation on her eyes to come.

3 Sciolistic Enthusiasm: Frank Sweeney

Frank Sweeney, Molly's (future) husband, cherishes knowledge and learning. However, as a self-taught and often jobless sciolist, he lacks the professional and academically trained attitude toward knowledge of Mr. Rice. The spread of his interests is wide and his choices to become passionately absorbed in a new project seem to be made rather randomly. In his digressive monologues, he is repeatedly eager to share with the audience what he deems – to use his favorite expression – “fascinating.” Iranian goats, the blueback salmon, bees, whales, the efficient recycling of tea-leaves, speed-reading, Rudolph Valentino, Ethiopia, or the well-being of badgers – whenever he conceives a new project he feels fully committed to it. His frequent impulse to passionately pursue new plans not only affects the diegetic conception of the character, it can also be read as the manifestation of a certain narrative pattern: a pattern or model of episodic new beginnings. Whenever Frank can initiate a new beginning in his life, he is ravished with an inchoate delight as each beginning promises being part of a whole, a *holos*. Gratification does not depend upon the ending of each respective project; indeed, he remains untroubled by most of his projects ending in failure. As Kerrigan observes, “once Frank has forced the moment

to its crisis, he is paralyzed” (159). Thus, instead of completing his projects, Frank abandons them prematurely. The dynamic of Frank’s mode of existence lies in the ever repeating motion of turning his attention to something new. Therefore, the maintenance of a certain frequency of new episodes becomes compulsory and dictates his life. In fact, the character himself exhibits some awareness of this pattern; its intricacies, however, remain unknown to him. Once he says of himself: “God knows why I’ve spent my life at dozens of mad schemes” (464). According to his friend Billy, he is “haunted for God’s sake, always looking for...whatever...” (464). This dynamic of ever-to-be-realized episodes can be seen as the formula that structures the narrative pattern of his life.

When Frank meets Molly, she is “a happy, competent inhabitant of her blind world, a woman who takes genuine pleasure in her work as a massage therapist, in cycling, in dancing, in socializing with her friends and neighbors [...]” (Moloney 288). At once, Frank’s affection towards Molly is evinced: her blindness becomes stock material for a new episode of his enthusiasm. Jobless at the time, he spends a whole week in the library studying this “fascinating” new concept called ‘blindness.’ He then applies his newly acquired knowledge to successfully woo Molly by exploiting a crucial insight. As he explains with remarkable precision, Molly lives comfortably in a world of sequentiality:

She composes a world from a sequence of impressions; one after the other, in time. For example, she knows that this is a carving knife because first she can feel the handle; then she can feel this long blade; then this sharp edge. In sequence. In time. What is this object? These are ears. This is a furry body. Those are paws. That is a long tail. Ah, a cat! In sequence. Sequentially. (477)

Hence, his ‘Molly plan’ involves a subtle and seductive undermining of her sequential state. He decides to take her dancing, excitedly praising his charming, and yet, fatal idea:

Dancing. Take her dancing [...] forget about time. This is one continuous, delightful event. Nothing leads to nothing else. There is only now. There is nothing subsequent. I am yours, your eyes, your location, your sense of space. Trust me. (478)

The here-and-now of dancing enables mutual attraction between the otherwise different mindsets of Molly and Frank. With the ongoing continuity of the dancing present, Frank bridges the passing of distinct time sequences

and establishes a disarming co-presence. On the one hand, Molly is lured into cherishing an ongoing presence that frames all impressions into one singular experience. At the same time, she is not deprived of her sequentiality; in fact, her composite, sequential experience is synchronized with Frank's disposition to holistic and singular eventful information processing. In short, Molly is seduced by continuity. Frank: "She had the time of her life. Knew she would" (479).

Yet there is something else about her that inevitably appeals to Frank; in connection with her blindness, Molly asserts at one point: "He couldn't resist the different, the strange. I think he believed that some elusive off-beat truth resided in the quirky, the off-beat" (480). This rather cryptic remark is a first reference to what becomes the main subject in the aftermath of Molly's surgery; the question of how one can cope with the notion of a somewhat hostile but fundamental successiveness that underlies the lives of all characters in the play. Thus, Frank is not only attracted to Molly because she is content with and confident in her blind world. What makes Molly so irresistible to Frank is the fact that, while calmly converting successive moments into meaningful sequences, she does not attempt to deprive herself of what he conceives of as resistant "off-beat" successiveness. The male characters in the play, in contrast, exhibit exactly this tendency toward erasing their own successive nature by establishing successful, reliant, and meaningful layers of secondary narrative patterns. Along these lines, it is Frank, who, for the sake of maintaining his episodic template, undermines Molly's sequentiality by diminishing her to be just another episode in his life. Molly's best friend Rita, on the evening of their first date, puts it poignantly when she refers to his yet to be made proposal of marriage as "inevitable": "All part of the same pattern, sweetie: bees – whales – Iranian goats – 'Molly Sweeney'" (480). Molly, on the other hand, is deeply impressed by Frank's "energy," "enthusiasm," and "passion," all products of his endless drive to turn sciolist knowledge into meaningful narrative episodes (see 477). And yet it is not necessarily Molly's decision to marry Frank that determines her fate. Frank's successful pursuit resulting in marriage is just the onset of another to-be-aborted amplitude of his episodic pendulum. Thus, early into their marriage, Frank already seeks a new adventure. Molly's profound loss depicted in the play hinges on the

execution of Frank's spousal obsession of turning knowledge into a life-changing event: the operation on Molly's eyes.

4 Ignorant Expertise: Mr. Rice

Frank initiates the surgery by calling on the expertise of the eye surgeon Mr. Rice. With him, in contrast to the dilettante Frank Sweeney, knowledge obtains a voice through the discourse of medical expertise, academic life, and professionalism. In Rice's monologues, the blind Molly becomes recurrently "a case" he can lecture upon. Accordingly, his first meeting with his patient to be is referred to as a "first cursory examination" which "result[s]" in bringing her "into the clinic for tests" (467). Rice's key word is "theoretical" in all its variations. To Molly, his professional manner and way of speaking generates a certain "assurance," which Frank, on the other hand, finds repellent. Rice also represents the life and discourse of academia. The formerly brilliant and successful ophthalmologist worked "in the top eye hospitals all over the world" (465). In a brief sequence of juxtapositions, he sketches this "luminous, resplendent life":

Insatiable years. Work. Airports. Dinners. Laughter. Operating theatre. Conferences. Gossip. Publications. The professional jealousies and the necessary vigilance. The relentless, devouring excitement. But above all, above all the hunger to accomplish, the greed for achievement. (474)

Rice portrays a life in which professional expertise is consistently transferred into social prestige and male bravado. He is part of a small group of male colleagues who travel the world, meet at the same conferences, and dub each other with boastful names: "The meteors. The young turks [sic]. The four horsemen" (474). In the glorious world of these agents, the operating theatres literally become theatrical stages, where the men become "artists" (488) or "magician[s]" (489), and explicitly "perform" (488) their craft in the operation room. Rice's "hunger to accomplish" mirrors Frank's haunting formula of "always looking for...whatever." Both strategies expose knowledge as an instrument of male desire to establish narratives of success. Rice's former world ("Insatiable years. Work. Airports" etc.) hardly differs from Frank's dabbler universe; both follow an ultimately episodic structure. What is more, both patterns become legible as, at best, provisional attempts to create lasting narratives in order to substantiate their

male identity. Both men fuel their desire by investing in the same narrative foundation, that is, both are haunted by the idea of succumbing to a hostile and inalterable successiveness.

When Molly meets Rice in Ballybeg, he suffers precisely from such a condition. He lives a bleak life which harks back to a single event in his past (his wife betrays and leaves him). Befittingly conveyed with the play's basic format of the monologue, the event is recounted (see 475) as a phone call Rice receives, at the peak of his career, from his former friend and colleague:

It was Roger Bloomstein. Brilliant Roger. Treacherous Icarus. To tell me that Maria and he were at the airport and about to step on a plane for New York. They were deeply in love. They would be in touch in a few days. He was very sorry to have to tell me this. He hoped that in time I would see the situation from their point of view and come to understand it. And he hung up. The mind was instantly paralysed. All I could think was: He's confusing seeing with understanding. Come on, Bloomstein. What's the matter with you? Seeing isn't understanding. (475)

In the light of the scheme the two central male characters devise for Molly Sweeney, it is notable that at the very moment of realizing the event's profound impact on his life, Rice voices his firm conviction that 'seeing' is not to be confused with 'understanding.' And yet, what he claims in his darkest hour he is ready to ignore in the case of Molly, in which he will deliberately fuse vision with knowledge. This is due to Rice's readiness to apply simple narrative designs to life, especially during the upheaval after his wife's betrayal. The diegetic transformation of the character is profound. Rice not only loses his married life and family, he also withdraws from medicine, renounces his title "doctor," and resorts to a solitary life on the "outskirts" of a remote town drowning his sorrows in drinking. Thus, he views his life through the narrow scope of a simple narrative scheme, one he admits to "sound[ing] like a fairy tale" (489) and one composed of two plain periods, one prior and one after the anchoring event of losing his wife. Due to the logic of this self-imposed script, his former "greed for achievement" and (episodic) craving for professional accomplishments are suspended and become embedded in the period prior to the event. Rice's temporal condition afterwards is marked by his impressions that he has "subsided into terrible darkness" and that his life "no longer...cohered" (489). What Frank tries to keep at bay with his maintenance of his episodic cycles, Mr. Rice faces directly after his personal story of loss. His life in

Ballybeg is not only constrained by solitude and non-engagement, the period of non-activity is also thoroughly corrupted by successiveness, insofar as it is informed by an endless and pointless series of routines (drinking, sleepless nights, fly-fishing etc.).

However, when Frank Sweeney appears and entreats him to consider operating on Molly's eyes, he is severely tempted to review his simplifying model of life and to instantly transform his current narrative situation. During his first "cursory examination" of Molly (467), he suddenly has a tantalizing idea:

[A] a phantom desire, a fantasy in my head; absurd, bizarre thought that *perhaps, perhaps* – up here in Donegal – not in Paris or Dallas or Vienna or Milan – but *perhaps* up here in remote Ballybeg was I *about to be given* – [...] the *chance of a lifetime*, the *one-in-a-thousand opportunity* that can rescue a career – no, no, transform a career – dare I say it, *restore a reputation*? And if that *opportunity* were being offered to me and if after all these years I could pull myself together and measure up to it, and *if*, oh my God, if by some miracle *pull it off perhaps...* (460, emphasis added)

It is the sheer possibility of operating on Molly that stirs Rice to conceive that he may overcome his painfully repetitive inertia after all. Tentatively he entertains the idea that a successful surgery would establish a frame of meaning that will compensate for his loss, and thus qualify for the epithet "the chance of a lifetime." According to this idea of 'restoration,' the quantum event and its consequence of loss would be miraculously overwritten. And yet, the play makes sure to indicate that this is highly improbable and too tenuous an idea. Rice's delight is tied to a frame of modality. Neither the operation nor its implied performance of his expert knowledge and competence as such are important in this respect. However, they become a means to facilitate a narrative renewal. What Rice finds so intriguing is revealed in the language of the passage quoted above ("perhaps," "if," "chance," "opportunity" etc.). That the event is contingent and has not occurred yet promises the possibility of a narrative reframing and thus relief to Mr. Rice's strained condition of successive drinking and painful memories. Rice's relief first makes itself felt with his assessment that the clinical state of Molly's eyes may allow for a successful operation and culminates in the night before the operation, in which he imagines phoning his former colleagues to tell them "what [he] was about to do," that "Paddy Rice is on the trembling

verge, Professor" (470). In short, the grief-stricken Rice is delighted at the idea of the operation as an approaching event, not because of its actual execution. For a limited span of time, he is allowed to daydream of a 'possible restoration' of his career. That is why it makes sense that he is hesitant at first about accepting the request made by Frank Sweeney; his hesitation simply prolongs this period. As long as he has not operated on Molly's eyes, he can continue to apply this otherwise impossible 'model of restoration' (he himself asserts that he will "never [be] fully restored" [490]). For the time being, he can harbor his "phantom desire" (460).

The two male characters are not particularly fond of each other, but they both share a compulsion to impose certain patterns and models of eventfulness on their own lives as well as on others'; in Molly's case, they are cruelly complicit because they are both ignorant about the outcome of the operation. Frank is not compelled to wait for the operation to be successful. His episodic energy gains momentum when he implores Mr. Rice to consider an operation and treatment of Molly; and because for him it is all about the pleasure of this inchoative initiative, the execution of the surgery as such even becomes a problem for him, as it signifies the ultimate realization of his pre-set 'Molly episode.' This can be illustrated with a close reading of how Frank experiences Molly's first examination by Mr. Rice. When Mr. Rice is at first reluctant to perform the operation, Frank Sweeney surely conveys how much he despises this hesitancy. In contrast to Rice's restoration model, his episodic model does not rely upon a period of continuity that is eventually interrupted by a single life-changing event. He simply seeks to complete the implementation of Molly into his ever ongoing sequence of episodic adventures (the beginning of which was realized by marrying Molly). Thus, from his point of view, Mr. Rice's "first cursory examination" is unbearable (467), and he actually mocks Rice's preoccupation with 'the possible':

Well of course the moment Rice said in that uppity voice of his, 'In theory – in theory – in theory – perhaps in theory – perhaps – perhaps' – the first time Molly met him – after a few general questions, a very quick examination – ten o'clock in the morning in his house – I'll never forget it – the front room in the rented bungalow – no fire – the remains of last night's supper on a tray in the fireplace – teapot, crusts, cracked mug – well of course, goddamit, of course the head exploded! Just exploded!

Molly was going to see! I knew it! For all his perhapses! Absolutely no doubt about it! A new world – a new life! A new life for both of us! (467)

What to Rice is a slow building up to the event, is to Frank Sweeney a meaningless and even precarious gap of time. All he needs is Mr. Rice to comply with his project and to undertake the operation. Thus, his mocking parody of Mr. Rice's formula is followed by a digressive and fragmentary recounting of that situation. In Frank's rendition (Molly is not mentioned at all), the whole scene is a sheer succession of his impressions of the place that is suddenly interrupted by a strange mental explosion. The non-sequitur "well of course, goddamit, of course the head exploded" culminates in the reductive and loose phrase "Just exploded!" It is as if Frank is already experiencing the eventfulness of the operation in this scene; as if, remotely for himself, he experiences the whole event, including the knowledge of its future outcome. Finally, he praises what by default mode fascinates him the most, the idea of a new beginning. And although he aims at including Molly in his ever-new vision of a 'new life,' it becomes obvious that his narrative pattern has already come to another full circle. The adventurous episode of Molly is finalized or, more precisely, abandoned. Consequently, Frank is already beginning to sense its aftermath, which is why, as he puts it, "immediately after that moment of certainty, that explosion in the head – my mind went numb; fused" (468).

Ultimately, Molly faces the operation with the two initiators being entirely ignorant of its eventful impact. In fact, their own patterns are only temporarily connected to the event that is so fatal to Molly. Whereas Mr. Rice is preoccupied with the time 'before' the event as a tenuous period on which he can project his fantasy of restoring his life and career, Frank is already experiencing an imaginary aftermath of the surgery and begins seeking a new episode in his life even before the operation on Molly's eyes is executed. Completely detached from Molly, both men initiate the event in order to establish their respective narrative patterns and meaningful periods connected to it, and both use forms of knowledge ('professional expertise' and 'sciolism') as building material. What is more, the play exposes what would happen if the two men were not able to effectively impose such patterns on life. Mr. Rice, who is tied to a painful solitary train of successive routines, repeatedly faces the memories of his former life and finds himself

time and again “drifting in and out of sleep” in his drunkenness. Frank, by contrast, is staged to suffer from the consequences of successiveness: after the surgery he points out that, although he was “happy” (487), all he can think of “was some – some – some absurd scrap of information a Norwegian fisherman told [him] about the eyes of whales. Whales for God’s sake! Stupid information. Useless, off-beat information. Stupid, useless, quirky mind...” (487–88). Frank’s mind is afflicted by this “off-beat information.” For the time being, he cannot establish an episodic cycle, he is stuck with Molly’s “new life”; ideas or memories like the fact about the eyes of whales will inevitably be meaningless to him. Frank’s episodic motor is idling, and he suffers from successive, “useless” scraps of knowledge.

5 Gradually Increasing Successive Effects: Molly Sweeney

What the two men can moderately keep at bay by exploiting Molly’s ‘case,’ the play exhibits with all ruinous consequences with regard to her story. The operation on Molly’s first eye is successful only from a clinical point of view. From the start, her sight presents her only with blurry and thus meaningless objects. The first thing she perceives is “a body of mist; a confusion of light, colour, movement” (483). From the very moment her bandages are taken off, Molly’s new world of sight is aligned to knowledge. Assessing her new seeing capabilities amounts to her being relentlessly asked ‘what she can see,’ forcing upon her the task to correctly identify and name the respective object she is visually confronted with. The early stages at the hospital, in the aftermath of the operation, trigger a relapse to her former position as the little girl being tested in her father’s walled garden. Here, it is Mr. Rice who serves as a proxy father and voices the paternal “Splendid!” whenever his “Miracle Molly” produces the correct name of a challenged object (490). Hence, Molly finds only meagre delight in a few correct and fatherly applauded replies. She is trapped in a world between sight and sightlessness and forced to adhere to the epistemological trajectory of her ‘successful operation.’ The second operation yields identical clinical results and brings about no change. Molly is guided to “*learn to see*” (464, emphasis in the original). She is clinically examined by Mr. Rice, receives treatment from a psychotherapist and a behavioral psychologist, who also write a book-length case study on her, and every night she has to undergo the relentless

testing by her husband, who presents her any item from quotidian life in order to “build up a repertory of visual engrams to connect with” her already established “tactical engrams” (491). In short, Molly becomes an object of knowledge herself. The more the male initiators of the surgery become reluctant about its eventful impact on Molly, the more they force the idea of seeing upon the notion of knowledge.

Consequently, the play’s bitter irony puts Molly more and more in distress. The more the (predominantly) male characters scrutinize and study her new, yet only clinically defined sighted state, the less she is able to translate knowledge into a coherent and meaningful narrative pattern herself. Accordingly, this change is highlighted in the play with an increased use of images evoking the idea of sheer successiveness. What can be gradually discerned as the play’s *sine qua non*, the idea of tying its characters to the fundamental and irreducible cadence of one thing following another, in Molly’s case becomes the staging of a character completely abandoned to her own (narrative) fate. Molly is left to her own devices in a new world that consists of successive and strange pieces of information she is forced to process:

Every shape an apparition, a spectre that appeared suddenly from nowhere and challenged you. And all that movement – nothing ever still – everything in motion all the time; and every movement unexpected, somehow threatening. Even the sudden sparrows in the garden, they seemed aggressive, dangerous. (492)

Soon her resilient model of sequentiality of her former blind world, once so cleverly detected and undermined by Frank Sweeney in his pursuit of her, is irrevocably lost. She faces a “very foreign world” (492), which by its cruel nature, demands Molly to answer on the narrative plane. However, the more she is forced to do so, the less she feels capable of it. As with the sparrows in the garden, suddenness becomes a threatening, “even alarming” alternative to the monotonous succession of unintelligible apparitions. Eventually her mind and body fail to respond at all: “Just one more colour – light – movement – ghostly shape – and suddenly the head imploded and the hands shook and the heart melted with panic” (492). Molly escapes by becoming motionless herself. She retreats to her room, closes her eyes, and sits on her bed until she finds the “courage to face it all once more” (492). New beginnings amount to a painful effort.

Molly's physical and mental collapse produces only more queries and theories on the part of the male interrogators. Mr. Rice, for example, discerns and lectures upon "symptoms of a condition known as blindsight" (498), a physiological condition in which, due to a "malfunction in part of the cerebral cortex," Molly "*was* indeed receiving visual signals and she *was* indeed responding to them [but] none of this perception reached her consciousness" (498, emphasis in the original). With similar assurance and inspired by the psychological explanations of Molly's "behaviour" from the psychotherapist Jane Wallace (494), Frank declares his wife simply as undergoing a "withdrawal" (497). But the explanatory knowledge Frank is provided with by the medical and therapeutical experts not only entitles him to dismiss Molly, the play also demonstrates its ultimately makeshift and limited nature. When there is "a new development" implying sudden "spells of dizziness" on the part of Molly, even Mr. Rice has no "explanation" (495). Instead, in one of his "skirmishes" (496) with Frank he makes a quip by telling him that it is called "gnosis" (495). In lack of a repartee, Frank has Rice spell the word for him ("G-n-o-s-i-s", [496]) and thus not only parses the linguistic constituents of the word but symbolically dismantles its etymological Greek meaning, i.e. "knowledge." Impelled to seek this 'knowledge,' Frank performs his default move, goes instantly to the library, and traces its encyclopedic meaning only to revel in the thought that Molly is now "full of mystical knowledge!" (496). As soon as the male characters lose their valid hold on Molly's case, the reciprocal potency they gained through knowledge is adrift, and the application of knowledge becomes an absurd, self-referential token gesture.

Except for the scientific counselling he receives from Rice and the other scientists, Frank remains utterly clueless about Molly's, as he puts it, "very difficult behaviour" (494). From a narrative point of view, he can make no sense of Molly's increasingly long periods of silence and inertia. What is more, as if conveying her (adrift narrative) experience of her sudden shocks to him, she abruptly interrupts her apathy and requests his immediate support in bursts of strange activities, like diving into the Atlantic Ocean from a steep local cliff:

Then after about half-a-dozen attempts she stood up and came to the door – it was then I could see she was crying – and she switched off the light. Then she went

back to the dressing-table and sat down again; in the dark; for maybe an hour; sat there and gazed listlessly at the black mirror.

Yes, she did dive into the Atlantic from the top of Napoleon Rock; first time in her life. Difficult times. Oh, I can't tell you. Difficult times for all of us. (495)

Aptly juxtaposed in Frank's rendition, it becomes clear that he cannot understand Molly's extreme changes from inactivity to sudden activity. Neither state provides him (nor Molly) with a coherent narrative structure. Although the (sudden) interruption of any continuous state is fundamental in narrative – the perception of continuity profoundly depending on the idea of interruption and vice versa –, in Molly's case, these transitions don't form any meaningful patterns. 'Continuity,' 'interruption,' 'eventfulness,' the logic of 'before-and-after states,' and other fundamentally narrative aspects do not apply in Molly's alienated world. Instead, successiveness takes over, each period parsable into distinct successive units, all of which being indistinct from one another. Thus, neither knowledge nor narrative is at Molly's disposal to compensate for her loss of meaning from her former days. Her husband, for his part, is similarly confounded by her behavior; the more he tries to apply his resources of episodic knowledge seeking to Molly's 'case,' the more he drifts off, and the disintegration of their marriage comes full circle when the hiatus between knowledge of the sighted men counselling and testing her and Molly's *anarrative apathy* can no longer be bridged.

The male project to save Molly's viability by imposing male knowledge schemes of narrative progress and success on her is ultimately reduced to a futile successive treatment: "Tests – tests – tests – tests!" (496) – Molly laments, accordingly, in one of her late monologues; and when Frank comes figuratively to "the end of [his] tether" (498), he has no more narrative resources nor willingness to further engage with Molly's disturbed and off-beat narrative state. Frank eventually succumbs to the frequent offers of new adventurous episodes pitched to him by one of his drinking buddies and scheming allies. He leaves Molly in order to supervise a food convoy to Ethiopia, from where she receives a letter in which he praises his new fascination: "Never in his life has he felt so committed, so passionate, so fulfilled" (508). To realize this new 'commitment,' he commits Molly to a psychiatric hospital. Here, she takes on the maternal trauma in her family,

and her alienation receives a first extension by transgressing the boundary between reality and fiction:

In those last few months I was seeing less and less. I was living in the hospital then, Mother's old hospital. And what was strange was that there were times when I didn't know if the things I did see were real or was I imagining them. I seemed to be living on a borderline between fantasy and reality. (500)

What has been only isolatedly traceable in the men's lives as Frank's "off-beat information" or Rice's drunken "drifting in and out of sleep" (508) manifests itself in Molly's life now as a default mode. Spatially restricted to her ward, Molly's final state is "depicted as a form of matrilineal experience" (Ojrzyńska 263). It is in the psychiatric hospital when Molly recalls her first meeting with Mr. Rice and points out, very accurately, what had been at stake when she was first faced with the possibility of an operation on her eyes:

Oh my God, he's asking you profound questions about good and evil and about the source of knowledge and about big mystical issues! Careful! Don't make a fool of yourself! And of course all the poor man wanted to know was how much vision I had. (506)

What Molly realizes here is an allegedly banal wisdom – already voiced earlier in the play by Rice, who in the light of his painful realization that he had been betrayed by his wife, dismally affirms that one is not to confuse "seeing with understanding" (475). Nevertheless, the play's consistent and bitter irony comes to the fore when it has him utter it at the very moment he realizes this betrayal's full narrative impact on his life, as exactly this would be the very seed for the tempting "phantom desire" to restore his life and reputation with operating on Molly's eye. Thus, Rice finds his knowledge obscured by narrative. In contrast, when Molly finds herself hospitalized, she is finally able to leave coercive testing behind by disconnecting seeing from knowing in a permanent, yet tragic, way. What began with the intimidating feeling of having to reply to profound questions "about the source of knowledge" in her first interview with Rice, ends with him paying her a final visit at her bed, where he observes that "she was trying to compose another life that was neither sighted nor unsighted, somewhere she hoped was beyond disappointment; somewhere, she hoped, without expectation" (501). What Rice inevitably channels through the forms of

expertise knowledge, Molly pays for on the narrative plane. Yet one ‘insight’ of hers remains in her “borderline country” (509): she has aborted the idea of addressing any (knowledge seeking) questions with regard to her condition of sight(lessness):

I think I see nothing at all now. But I’m not absolutely sure of that. Anyhow my borderline country is where I live now. I’m at home there. Well...at ease there. It certainly doesn’t worry me any more that what I think I see may be fantasy or indeed what I take to be imagined may very well be real – what’s Frank’s term? – external reality. Real – imagined – fact – fiction – reality – there it seems to be. And it seems to be all right. (509)

Molly has many visitors, imaginary ones, real ones; they come and go and mix with memories of her childhood. In short, she has been completely deprived of any conceivable narrative pattern; successiveness has taken over to an absolute degree, and it not only seeks its way in endless, indiscriminate arrays of fictional and real visions, it also undermines the fundamental principle of all narrative: the idea of irreversibility. In this light, Brian Friel’s *Molly Sweeney* dramatizes the story of a woman (who happens to be blind) who, at the end of her days, remains irreversibly bound to an endless realm of reversible successions. In this realm there is no longer any need for any further inquiry nor for knowledge, which is why, with final consequence, her last line in the play is: “And why should I question any of it any more?” (509).

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