

MONIKA KOZUB (KRAKÓW)

“AND THIS WAS ALWAYS A HOUSE OF RETICENCE,  
OF THINGS UNSPOKEN, WASN'T IT?”:  
BRIAN FRIEL'S *ARISTOCRATS*

*Aristocrats* (1979), one of Friel's most Chekhovian plays, is a revealing family drama which takes place during an explosion of political violence in Northern Ireland in the mid-1970s. The play depicts the dissolution of the “Catholic Aristocracy”, the once influential O'Donnells, who have gathered at a family reunion in their crumbling home, Ballybeg Hall. The play centres on the gap between the O'Donnells' view of themselves and the bleak reality of their lives. Despite the fact that the O'Donnell family find themselves on the verge of bankruptcy, they keep dwelling in the past remembering the times when the Big House was in its heyday. Moreover, the protagonists are leading a life of seclusion, as they have totally isolated themselves from their surroundings. The play ends on a note of indeterminacy and the playwright seems to ask how much of the O'Donnells' plight is inevitable, and whether alternative solutions are possible.

KEYWORDS: Brian Friel, Northern Irish Drama, the demise of the Catholic Big House, the issue of social class, the death of a patriarch as indicator for a new dispensation

My paper deals with the work of Brian Friel (1929–2015), who is believed to be Ireland's leading contemporary playwright.<sup>1</sup> Through his main works Friel has made a major contribution to and impact on world theatre, yet he still remains a typically Irish playwright in the sense that he writes primarily for an Irish audience and the themes of his plays centre almost exclusively on local, that is, Irish and Anglo-Irish matters. Among the most recurrent themes in Friel's work one should enumerate: the decline of Irish identity, the disappearance of the Irish language, history and the past, myth and fantasy, the workings of memory, language and its ability to validate reality as well as the descent of the “Big House”. A number of Friel's plays take place in large, old, decaying houses known as the “Big Houses”, and it is exactly the theme of the “Big House” as presented in *Aristocrats* (1979) that I am going to focus on in the present analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> A shortened version of the paper: “The Final Gasps of the Catholic Big House in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats*” has been published in: Martynuska, M./ Rokosz-Piejko, E. (eds.) (2017) *Revolution, Evolution and Endurance in Anglophone Literature and Culture. Studies in Linguistics, Anglophone Literatures and Cultures 3*.

From *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) to *Translations* (1980) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Friel's plays have delighted generations of theatre audiences in Ireland and abroad. *Aristocrats* is a revealing family drama, which occurs at a difficult time in Ireland: the civil rights upheavals of the mid-1970s. First premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1979, *Aristocrats* returned to the Abbey stage again in the summer of 2014. This time the play was directed by Patrick Mason<sup>2</sup>, an acclaimed freelance director of theatre and opera, who has had a long association with the Abbey Theatre.

One way of looking at Friel's *Aristocrats* would be to say that it is an elegiac play in the sense that it chronicles the demise of the "Catholic Aristocracy" in Ireland. The play depicts the story of the once influential O'Donnells, who have convened for the wedding of the youngest daughter, Claire, in their crumbling home, Ballybeg Hall, and end up facing the death of their patriarch, the Father, also known as District Justice O'Donnell. The family find themselves on the brink of dissolution and dispersal, Murray (1997: 170) in his book entitled *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation* has rightly commented on *Aristocrats* by saying that in the play "[o]nce again the centre cannot hold, a condition Friel sees running like a faultline through Irish society".

*Aristocrats* centres on the gap between the O'Donnells' view of themselves and the bleak reality of their lives. The protagonists have totally isolated themselves from their surroundings, that is, from the peasants of the village of Ballybeg, but also from the Protestant landowner class, so, in a sense, they are caught between two social and political worlds of the 1970s. The play also shows how the O'Donnells have lost touch with their history and how they have replaced it with a personal mythology that helps them inflate their sense of significance. Being one of Friel's finest achievements, *Aristocrats*, is, at the same time, one of Friel's least didactic plays and it ends on a note of indeterminacy. The playwright seems to ask how much of the O'Donnells' plight is inevitable and whether alternative solutions are possible. These upper-class Irish Catholics have survived wars and famine, but the old order is collapsing. The question is: can they forge a new future for themselves?

Before I analyse the play, I would like to explain the term the "Big House", as it is a key concept in the play. In fact, Friel himself defines the term and makes the visiting American academic, Tom, articulate it (Friel 1996: 281), however, for the purposes of this paper I am going to familiarise the reader with a more detailed definition provided by Corbett. The critic, in his book entitled *Brian Friel: Decoding the Language of the Tribe*, defines the "Big Houses" as being the houses and mansions that belonged to the Anglo-Irish class, a privileged social class in Ireland whose members were the descendants and successors of the Protestant

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Mason (born 1951 in London) was Abbey's Artistic Director from 1993 to 1999, and he has directed the plays of such Anglo-Irish playwrights as Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard, Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy, Tom Kilroy, and Tom MacIntyre. Mason's production of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* won him an Olivier nomination in 1991 and a Tony Award for Best Director in 1992.

Ascendancy. The houses stood for the Anglo-Irish political dominance of Ireland from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and many were destroyed or attacked during the Irish Revolutionary Period (the 1910s and early 1920s). Corbett underlines the importance of the “Big Houses” in Irish literature and says that they have become a popular theme among Anglo-Irish authors:

The “Big House” was the symbol of the English Protestant ascendancy and has its own place in Irish literature, chronicled by Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Jennifer Johnston, and others. Squiredom was a factor of life in Britain also, but in Ireland there was the added factor that the Big House tended to be emblematic of a dominant alien presence. They were largely Protestant, gentrified, and separated from locals by class and wealth. After independence, the decline of the Big House was seen as an index of the rise of the ordinary citizen. In many cases the land surrounding the houses was acquired by the Land Commission and distributed to local farmers. Those members of the ascendancy who were able to maintain their lifestyle in the new regime watched their influence dwindle in the Republic. (Corbett 2002: 74–75)

The critic adds as well that in *Aristocrats*, Friel depicts the last generation of Big House inhabitants, and intentionally chooses his characters to be the representatives of the Catholic gentry. The choice of Catholic over Protestant seems obvious, as it frees Friel from the charges that he is attacking upper-class Protestants or writing a politically charged text on the consequences of British rule in Ireland (75).

*Aristocrats* has often been described as being one of Friel’s most Chekhovian plays and indeed one can draw many parallels between Friel’s *Aristocrats* and Chekhov’s last play, *The Cherry Orchard*. Both plays concern aristocratic families who on their return to their crumbling country “Edens” find out that they will soon have to sell them, as they do not have sufficient funds to keep them running. The families teeter on the brink of insolvency, but, at the same time, they do nothing to save their estates and maintain their status; in both plays the theme of cultural futility dominates over other themes.

*Aristocrats* was in fact based on and developed from Friel’s earlier short story called *Foundry House*<sup>3</sup>. The play repeats much of the story’s situation, yet compared with its prototype, it changes the thematic considerations by moving the aristocratic family from background (the Hogans of *Foundry House*) to foreground (the O’Donnells of *Aristocrats*). The play also examines the historical changes from within the Big House and it seems that in the play Friel attempts a more private statement on political and social issues.

The demise of the O’Donnells is foreshadowed by the description of their decaying house. On the first pages of the play we learn from the subtext that the lawn on which most of the action takes place has not been cared for in years and has seen little activity recently: “[b]efore that it was a grass tennis court and

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<sup>3</sup> *Foundry House* was collected in Friel’s collection of short stories known as *A Saucer of Larks* (1962).

before that a croquet lawn – but no trace of these activities remains” (Friel 250). Upstage left there is a gazebo which is “about to collapse” (250) and it contains a “rusty iron seat” (250). Upstage right there is the study whose amenities suggest an aristocratic origin of the O’Donnell family (an early Victorian writing desk, a huge marble fireplace, a chaise-longue) yet their condition is a clear indication that the period of prosperity is a bygone era: “[i]n the centre of this study a small table, etc., etc., sufficient furnishings to indicate when the Hall flourished and to suggest its present decline” (251).

It could be said that the rapid descent of the O’Donnell family is caused by two factors. The first one is the gradual degradation of several generations of the O’Donnells who, by allowing this to happen, have caused their own downfall. The second one is external and historical circumstances, that is, the Irish Revolutionary Period, the period of political and social change on the island in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first reason is summed up by Eamon, Alice’s husband, in a conversation which he has with Tom in Act 2. Eamon is being very ironic when he is talking about the O’Donnell’s legal tradition; he calls their story a “gripping saga” (294), a “great big block-buster” (294) which could sell well under the following title “Ballybeg Hall – From Supreme Court to Sausage Factory” (294). Eamon also shows how the family’s lawyers have degraded themselves over the years: Casimir’s Great Grandfather was Lord Chief Justice and Casimir himself is a failed lawyer – he did not even manage to complete his studies. Perhaps I should add here as well that Eamon is an interesting character, as he functions as a kind of bridge between the peasants of Ballybeg and the Big House. When marrying Alice, he moved from the village up to the Hall, so in a sense he personifies the levelling forces of modern democratization, and as the play develops, he is witnessing the final breakdown of the class he married into:

Eamon: And of course you’ll have chapters on each of the O’Donnell forebears: Great Grandfather – Lord Chief Justice; Grandfather – Circuit Court Judge; Father – simple District Justice; Casimir – failed solicitor. A fairly rapid descent; but no matter, no matter; good for the book; failure’s more lovable than success. D’you know, Professor, I’ve often wondered: if we had had children and they wanted to be part of the family legal tradition, the only option open to them would have been as criminals, wouldn’t it? (295)

As far as the structure of the play is concerned, the play consists of three acts, all the acts are one-scene acts. As far as the characters are concerned, there is the visiting American academic, Tom Hoffnung (in his mid-fifties), there are the members of the O’Donnell family, and there are the villagers, Eamon (in his thirties) and Willie Diver (in his mid-thirties). From the O’Donnell family probably the most important characters are the Father and his son Casimir (in his thirties), who also happens to be the only son of the house. But apart from his son, Justice O’Donnell also has four daughters; three of the daughters, Judith (almost forty), Alice (in her mid-thirties) and Claire (in her twenties) appear onstage,

and Anna (in her late thirties) is the one offstage daughter whose voice can only be heard.

The American academic, Tom Hoffnung, has come to Ireland to conduct research into the Big House gentry, and his very presence there is a clear sign that their time is already gone. To Hoffnung, the Irish gentry are merely a subject of study, he treats them as if they were an endangered species, and in a way they are. Also the title of Hoffnung's study: "Recurring cultural, political and social modes in the upper strata of Roman Catholic society in rural Ireland since the act of Catholic Emancipation" (265) links the family more with the past and the countryside than with the present (Corbett 75).

When talking about Hoffnung one should also say that he is a useful character as far as plot development is concerned although in the play plot is of secondary interest to the interplay between the various cultures. Hoffnung does not control the plot in the way, for example, the artificial narrator, Sir, does in Friel's *Living Quarters*, but through his skilful questioning he guides the responses of the other characters and elicits details about their lives. Below there are three different examples of the academic's interrogation: in the first exchange, Tom tries to work out the family's secrets, one of them being Uncle George's mutism, in the second one, he tries to assess the family's financial situation, and in the third one, he attempts to discover the family's political views.

Tom [of Uncle George]: Does he never speak?

Willie: They say he does. I never heard him.

Tom: And he's a brother of the District Justice – is that correct?

Willie: That's it. Fierce man for the booze when he was only a young fella – drunk himself half-crazy. Then all of a sudden packed it in. And stopped speaking.

Tom: I wonder why. (Friel 253–254)

Tom: That expression – you've taken the land from Judith – what does it mean?

Willie: She has nobody to work it so she lets it out every year.

Tom: How many acres are there?

Willie: I could hardly tell you. It's all hill and bog.

Tom: So you lease it?

Willie: I sort of take it off her hands – you know.

Tom: And you till it?

Willie: I footer about. I'm no farmer.

Tom: But it's profitable land? (260)

Tom: What was your father's attitude?

Alice: To Eamon?

Tom: To the civil rights campaign.

Alice: He opposed it. No, that's not accurate. He was indifferent: that was across the Border – away in the North.

Tom: Only twenty miles away.

Alice: Politics never interested him. Politics are vulgar.

Tom: And Judith? What was her attitude? Was she engaged?

Alice: She took part in the Battle of the Bogside. Left Father and Uncle George and Claire alone here and joined the people in the streets fighting the police. That's an attitude, isn't it? That's when Father had his first stroke. And seven months later she had a baby by a Dutch reporter. Does that constitute sufficient engagement? (272)

The character of the Father, a former judge, is the figure of patriarchal authority in the play. He is a bedridden, incontinent victim of a stroke, who does not recognise the people around him and mumbles incoherently. He is one of the unseen characters in the play, confined to an offstage space and reduced to his voice. Murray (2014: 127) has aptly described the protagonist by saying that “[h]e resembles a dying king, but one more feared than loved”. Because the Father’s voice is broadcast through a sound system on to the stage, one gets the impression that the voice comes, as it were, from the fabric of the building, which automatically links the figure of the Father with the house itself, a symbol of authority in the play. It is only at the end of Act 2 that the Father appears on stage and that happens only seconds before he dies; he basically staggers onstage to die. In the light of the above, it would probably be the right thing to say that Justice O’Donnell can be perceived as yet another indication of impending extinction. It is only after his death that we are told of the state of despair into which the family has fallen – the loss of the Father’s pension has made the difference between getting by and having to leave Ballybeg Hall forever: “[w]e can’t afford it. You’ve forgotten – no, you’ve never known – the finances of this place. For the past seven years we’ve lived on Father’s pension. That was modest enough. And now that’s gone” (Friel 317).

The Father’s highly authoritarian manners are illustrated not only by his interest in the court (he pronounces loudly on past cases as if he were still in the courtroom), but also through the way he addresses his family. In his first speech, the Father demands to know where everyone is and he accuses his daughter, Judith, who has had a child out of wedlock, of betraying the family:

Father: Judith?

[...]

Father: Where’s Judith?

[...]

Father: Where’s Judith?

[...]

Father: Where’s Claire?

[...]

Father: Where’s Claire?

[...]

Father: Where’s Alice?

[...]

Father: Where’s Casimir?

[...]

Father: Where’s Anna?

[...]

Father: Where's Judith? Where's Claire? Where's Casimir? Where's Alice? Where's – (256)

[...]

Father: Let me tell you something in confidence: Judith betrayed the family.

Judith: Did she?

Father: I don't wish to make an issue of it. But I can tell you confidentially – Judith betrayed us. [...]

Father: Great betrayal; enormous betrayal. (257)

It should be pointed out at this stage as well that the figure of the Father is similar to that of Uncle George in the sense that they are both the voices of past authority, they exist as vestiges of an earlier way of life. The Father is a voice without a body and Uncle George, who wanders silently in and out, is a body without a voice.

The Father's daughters are affected in varying degrees by his authoritarian manner. Judith is the strongest of the four daughters and she is also the strongest character in the play. Judith is the Father's only carer and she does her job to the best of her ability despite the fact that he has disowned her for having had a child out of wedlock. Anna is the daughter who managed to cut off ties with her family; being a nun in Zambia, her knowledge of how things are in Ballybeg Hall is very limited. Claire is childlike, fragile and incapable of functioning on her own despite the fact that she is an accomplished classical pianist. She is soon to be married for financial reasons to a much older, widowed, local greengrocer. In doing so she becomes part of a prevailing pattern of Irish life, but one which her class had previously been exempt from. When Clare talks about her would-be husband, one can see that she has no true feelings for him and that she has no confidence in her marriage:

Claire: But if you really loved someone the way you're supposed to love someone you're about to marry, you shouldn't be confused, should you? Everything should be absorbed in that love, shouldn't it? There'd be no reservations, would there? I'd love his children and his sister and his lorry and his vegetables and his carpets and everything, wouldn't I? And I'd love all of him, too, wouldn't I? (291)

The grotesque nature of the relationship manifests itself by the fact that Claire's successful fiancé drives around in a delivery truck whose roof has been decorated with a giant plastic banana: “[a]nd her young man, Jerry, runs a very successful greengrocer's business and he has a great white lorry with an enormous plastic banana on top of the cab” (269). Perhaps I should mention here as well that despite her childishness, Claire herself is also well aware of the slow slide down the scale:

Claire: Did you know that on the morning Grandmother O'Donnell got married the whole village was covered with bunting and she gave a gold sovereign to every child under

twelve? And the morning Mother got married she distributed roses to everyone in the chapel. I was wondering what I could do – what about a plastic bag of vegetables to every old-age pensioner? (274)

Alice is an alcoholic and her marriage to Eamon has not worked out. She does not openly blame her Father for her lot, yet she seems to be as emotionally damaged as her mother was. Although it is not said directly in the play, one can infer it from the exchanges between the characters that Alice's mother committed suicide and that happened when she was still a young woman, only about forty-six or forty-seven years of age. In Act 1, Casimir mentions his mother's "down periods" (262), in Act 2, Claire is talking about the incidents that "finally drove [her] mother to despair" (291) and in Act 3, Casimir recalls his mother's funeral and adds that they did not know till the very last moment whether she would be allowed a church funeral, or not: "You remember Mother's funeral, don't you? – all that furtiveness, all that whispering, all those half-truths. We didn't know until the very last minute would they allow her a Christian burial at all because of the circumstances" (309).

Alice's comments on seeing her father in illness as greatly 'altered' indicate her emotional detachment: "[w]hen I went up to see him last night just after I arrived, I got such a shock – he's so altered. Isn't he altered? I mean he was always such a big strong man with such power, such authority; and then to see him lying there, so flat under the clothes, with his mouth open" (289). Alice goes on to say that she did not *touch* her father's face, she only *caught* it between her hands and *held* it, and it was "such a strange sensation" (289).

More than any other character, Casimir is the embodiment of the Catholic ascendancy although we are told in the play that he has moved to live and work in Germany (271–272). Perhaps it will be interesting for the Polish reader to learn as well that when Casimir explains the reason why he was given such a peculiar first name (Casimir is an English form of the Polish name Kazimierz), he says that it was his mother who favoured it and pressed for it: "Father wanted me to be christened Gilbert Keith but Mother insisted on Casimir – he was a Polish prince – Mother liked that" (266).

The stage directions give Casimir a number of strange physical mannerisms, in particular his ungainly walk and his facial tics: "[o]ne immediately gets a sense that there is something different about him – as he says himself, 'peculiar'. But what it is, is elusive: partly his shyness, partly his physical movements, particularly the way he walks [...] partly his erratic enthusiasm, partly his habit of suddenly grinning and giving a mirthless 'ha-ha' at unlikely times, usually when he is distressed" (255). Yet, Friel insists that Casimir is not 'disturbed', he is simply 'peculiar', and his reactions and mannerisms do not belong to the modern world. Even as a child, Willie tells the reader, Casimir would walk down the main street of Ballybeg with a group of children following him, imitating his mannerisms: "[w]hen he'd



come home on holidays from the boarding school, sometimes he'd walk down the village street, and we'd all walk in a line behind him, acting the maggot, you know, imitating him. And by Jaysus he never thought of looking round" (260).

The thing that I would like to draw the reader's attention to is the fact that Casimir perceives himself as nothing but a member of the upper classes. What he does is in fact in line with the approach represented by his family who, as Eamon rightly put it, seemed to "[exist] only in its own concept of itself" (294). The family used to live a life of total isolation and they showed no interest in maintaining contact with either their "Protestant counterparts" (294) or with the local Irish community. They revealed no loyalties, no commitments, and it seems that the only thing they cared about was survival – *semper permanemus* was their motto. Tom's meticulous interrogation showed as well that the O'Donnells ignored the Irish Rebellion and that they were even less concerned with the Troubles which went on only 20 miles away in Ulster. And indeed the O'Donnells were unregenerate conformists; to be on the safe side, they would "[administer] the law for anyone who happened to be in power" (294) at a given time.

It would probably not come as a surprise now that in Casimir's memories of his childhood there is no room for the boys from the village or the peasants. When meeting Willie for the first time in Act I, he does not remember him, and when guessing who Willie might be, he automatically places him in the category "servant", or, at least, "underclass", just because he knows that Willie is one of the local lads:

Casimir: Don't – don't tell me – let me guess. I have it - it's Deegan, the jarvey<sup>4</sup>! Am I right?

Willie: Jackie Deegan.

Casimir: There you are!

Willie: Deegan, the car-man; that's right; he's dead; I'm Diver. (259)

When Casimir reminisces about Ballybeg, his thoughts tend to focus on his family's house: "[w]hen I think of Ballybeg Hall it's always like this: the sun shining; the doors and windows all open" (256), and on the music that pervaded it as well as his sister, Claire, playing Chopin: "[a]lways Chopin – the great love of her life. She could play all the nocturnes and all the waltzes before she was ten. We thought we had a little Mozart on our hands. And on her sixteenth birthday she got a scholarship to go to Paris" (258).

It is really interesting that Friel makes Chopin Claire's favourite composer and through Casimir's narrative he reveals a few details about his life, for example, the fact that he was Polish and that he died in Paris: "Chopin died in Paris, you know, and when they were burying him they sprinkled Polish soil on his grave. [...] Because he was Polish" (307). Altogether, there are two Polish references in the play: firstly, we are told that Casimir owes his name to the fact that there was

<sup>4</sup> A "jarvey" in Irish English means a man employed to drive a coach or carriage.

a Polish king called Casimir, and secondly, Chopin is mentioned a few times in the course of the play. On page 251 we learn that the musical background in the play is “all works by Chopin” and Casimir mentions the Polish composer when he talks about Claire’s musical preferences (258) and when he describes Balzac’s birthday party in Vienna (306).

Also, in his interview with Hoffnung, Casimir’s memories are strictly connected with the house. He shows Tom the items in the study that were associated with the period of prosperity in Ireland and with the time when the house itself was in its heyday. According to Casimir, “everything has some association” (266) in his grandiose dwelling. On the long list of the important people who have visited the house, there are: Cardinal John Henry Newman, an important figure in the religious history of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish political leader, Daniel O’Connell, and a number of renowned European writers, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, George Moore, Tom Moore (Byron’s friend), Hilaire Belloc and William Butler Yeats. Among other things, Casimir claims that Cardinal Newman married his grandfather and grandmother in their house in Ballybeg (263). He also contends that one can still see a stain on one of the chairs which was left by the teacups which Hopkins used to hold in his hand (264–265), and apparently there is also a mark of Daniel O’Connell’s riding-boots on the chaise-longue (266).

Roche in his book entitled *Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics* describes Casimir as being “[t]he supreme fantasist in Friel’s dramatic oeuvre” (Roche 2012: 58), and it is Alice who for the first time in the play undermines the validity of Casimir’s memories by pointing it out to him that she does not remember Cardinal O’Donnell because he had died before she was born – we learn from the subtext that Alice is in her mid-thirties (Friel 264) and Cardinal O’Donnell has been dead for about seventy years now:

Casimir: [...] Remember him, Alice?

Alice: Who?

Casimir: Cardinal O’Donnell.

Alice: Do I remember him? He must be dead seventy years.

Casimir: He’s not.

Alice: At least.

Casimir: Is he? Ah. Good heavens. I suppose you’re right. (265–266)

Following Casimir’s exchange with Alice about Cardinal O’Donnell, the reader begins to perceive Casimir’s memories as being less reliable. Accordingly, the protagonist’s claim to remember Yeats raises doubts. Friel allows just enough leeway in the dates to make it possible, yet highly unlikely. The play takes place in the mid-1970s, Casimir is in his thirties and Yeats died in 1939, which basically means that Casimir was a very young boy when he met Yeats if he ever did. In the play, Friel makes a direct reference to Yeats’ self-penned epitaph: “Cast a cold eye/On life, on death./Horseman, pass by!”, which was later inscribed on his gravestone in

the cemetery of Drumcliffe Parish Church, Drumcliffe, County Sligo. Friel plays on the wording “a cold eye”, which is a key phrase in Yeats’ epitaph, and the reader may well treat it as a joke that Casimir remembers Yeats’ cold eyes: “[o]h, he was – he was just tremendous, Yeats, with those cold, cold eyes of his. Oh, yes, I remember Yeats vividly” (267). Perhaps I should mention here as well that Yeats’ epitaph was taken from the last lines of *Under Ben Bulbin* (date of publication: 1939), one of his final poems, and it is not very clear what it really means. A possible interpretation would be that if one asked the poet what lies behind life and death, he would not be able to explain it. One would have to look for the answers to one’s questions somewhere else.

Likewise, John McCormack (1884–1945), a world-famous Irish tenor, might have danced with Casimir’s mother in Casimir’s lifetime, but it is impossible that Claire, who is in her twenties (273), should have played for them (a simple calculation proves it that John McCormack had died before Claire was born):

Casimir: Anyhow, this night Claire played that waltz, the G flat major, and McCormack asked Mother to dance and she refused but he insisted, he insisted, and finally he got her to the middle of the floor and he put his arm around her and then she began to laugh and he danced her up and down the hall and then in here and then out to the tennis-court and you could hear their laughing over the whole house and finally the pair of them collapsed in the gazebo out there. Yes – marvellous! The McCormack Waltz! (262)

Similarly, Casimir does not claim to have known Gilbert Keith Chesterton personally (he died in 1936), but he speaks of him in the present tense: “[a]nd you know the weight of Chesterton – he must be twenty stone!” (266).

Another point that I would like to bring up with regard to Casimir’s narrations is his unique ability to avoid giving any concrete details about the people that he mentions. Below there are four short quotations in which Tom is trying to jot down some dates and the peculiar flow of Casimir’s speech makes it impossible for him to do it; the first exchange refers to McCormack’s visit, the second one to Hopkins’ visit, the third one to Chesterton’s visit, and the final one to Yeats’ visit:

Tom: Approximately what year was –

Casimir: A great big heavy man – oh, yes, I remember McCormack [...]. (262)

Tom: That would have been about – ?

Casimir: Shhhh. Yes, Mrs Moore? Sorry, sorry? (265)

Tom: That could have been when? – doesn’t matter – I’ll check it out. How often did he visit Ballybeg Hall?

Casimir: Oh, I’ve no idea – often, often, often – oh, yes. (266)

Tom: That would have been when you were? –

Casimir: On one occasion sat up three nights in succession, just there, on Daniel O’Connell, with his head on that cushion and his feet on Chesterton, just because someone had told him we were haunted. (267)

At the beginning of Act 3, Tom confronts Casimir on the subject of his story about Honoré de Balzac’s birthday party in Vienna. In Casimir’s memory, the party was gate-crashed by his grandfather. When Tom points out that Casimir’s grandfather could not have been a contemporary of Balzac (1799–1850), Casimir adjusts the story back a generation to his great-grandfather, and continues:

Casimir: Oh, yes. At a party in Vienna – a birthday party for Balzac. [...] God knows why Grandfather was there – probably gate-crashed. Anyhow that’s what Chopin played.

Tom: Your grandfather, Casimir?

Casimir: Grandfather O’Donnell; a great traveller; Europe every year.

Tom: But he wouldn’t have been a contemporary of these people, would he?

Casimir: Would he not?

Tom: You must mean your great-grandfather, don’t you?

Casimir: Do I? Great-grandfather O’Donnell then. (306)

In the middle of Act 3, Tom makes Casimir confront his lies in a more blatant manner, he proves it to him that Yeats and he cannot have met, because the poet died two months prior to Casimir’s birth (Yeats died on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1939 and Casimir was born on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1939):

Tom: Well, you were born on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939.

Casimir: Good heavens – don’t I know! All Fools Day! Yes?

Tom: And Yeats died the same year. Two months earlier. I’ve double checked it. (309)

Now, it would be wrong to assume that Casimir was deliberately trying to misinform Tom and, at least at some level, he means what he says (Corbett 78). The critic goes one step further and puts forward a suggestion that Casimir suffers from what has become known as false memory syndrome, a psychological condition in which a person believes that he or she remembers events that have not actually occurred. And indeed Casimir might have simply convinced himself that he took part in the stories that constitute his fantasies. Yet another way of looking at Casimir would be to say that he performs the role of the spokesperson for Ballybeg Hall, or perhaps even for the Catholic Big House itself, and as his narratives develop, he familiarises the reader with the past of these places, real and imagined.

A similar attachment to the past can be observed at the very beginning of Act 2 where one can see Casimir on his hands and knees looking in the grass of “the vanished tennis-court” (Friel 283) for the holes left by croquet hoops. Having found them, Casimir and Claire play an imaginary game of croquet in which they

use neither balls nor mallets. Later on, when Casimir is called to the telephone, Willie joins the game, as he is asked to play for Casimir until he comes back:

Claire: Come on – who's for a game?

....

Eamon: 'Terrific'. (*He gives one of Casimir's grins.*) A real insider now, Willie. (292–300)

Corbett comments on this scene by saying that “[t]here is a kind of desperate archaeology at work here” and that “Casimir is driving his fingers into the ground in an attempt to find the past” (Corbett 78). Another interesting thing about the game is Willie's entry into it. It is common knowledge that croquet is an aristocratic game and no one would ever expect a peasant to play it. At first, Willie is reluctant to join in, as he is afraid of ridicule and he chooses Eamon as his confidant to express his doubts: “[a]ll the same you feel a bit of an eejit<sup>5</sup> – (To Eamon) They have me playing croquet now, Eamon! Without balls nor nothin'! Jaysus!” (Friel 297). Obviously, the choice of the confidant is not accidental, as Eamon himself is an outsider, too. It should be added here as well that Willie enters the game in a rather grotesque manner, he “flings off his jacket, spits on his hands and rubs them together” (297), yet he is very quick to learn the rules and eventually ignores them to declare himself a winner: “[o]ver! Finished! You're bet! Pack it in! I won, Eamon!” (300). A few lines later Eamon comments on Willie's victory by saying that he has become “[a] real insider now” (300). According to Corbett (79), Willie's transformation from outsider to insider through learning the rules and changing them to suit his needs is reminiscent in many ways of the political development of the Republic of Ireland: “(w)hen the Republic was originally declared, those who did so had been elected to the parliament at Westminster. Rather than take their seats, they sat in Dublin, with de Valera as president”.

In conclusions, *Aristocrats* depicts the gradual demise of the Catholic Big House in Ireland using the example of the once-prosperous O'Donnell family. It is highly doubtful that the O'Donnells will ever be able to get over the crisis they are going through unless, as Alice says, they make “a new start” (Friel 324). And indeed one way of looking at the play would be to say that it calls for the debunking of the myth of the Big House and a rethinking in society. I would also like to draw the reader's attention to one important detail, namely, that the play ends with the death of the family's patriarch, the tyrannical Justice O'Donnell, a living reminder of the oppressive past. It seems that his death is assigned a symbolic meaning in the sense that it puts an end to the old order and paves the way for a new beginning, a new dispensation.

Another important aspect of the play is that it addresses more fully than other Friel's plays the issue of class. Note that Ballybeg Hall takes its name from the village that it “overlooks” (251), yet in no way is it a part of it. The choice of

<sup>5</sup> “An Eejit” is Irish slang for an idiot.

the word “overlook” is noteworthy, as it implies that the house surveys the village from a height. Moreover, in the play there are two peasants from the village who manage to enter the Big House of the O’Donnells; they are called Willie Diver and Eamon. While Willie remains on the outside, Eamon has married into the family. The interesting thing about Eamon is that despite the snide remarks that he makes about the inhabitants of Ballybeg Hall, he is most emotional about abandoning it. On the last pages of the play he admits openly that it is very difficult for him to leave the estate, as “in a sense it has always been [his] home” (324).

All in all, in the play, Friel is not making any kind of moral judgement as far as the respective social classes are concerned. Rather, he gives vent to his continuing obsession with the decline of Irish identity and the complicated nature of Irish history, note that these themes also pervade *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

The title of the play is obviously ironic, as the O’Donnell family, just like the estate that they occupied, is on its last legs, and the occasion that they all gathered for begins as a wedding celebration and ends as a wake. And it seems as well that Casimir’s tall tales of the hall’s glory days are nothing more than a figment of his imagination, nothing more than a fantasy, which is no more real than the croquet game he plays with imaginary mallets, balls and wickets.

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