

*Thomas Kilroy's The Shape of Metal:
"Metal ... Transformed into Grace"
– Grace into Metal*

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Abstract: *Thomas Kilroy in The Shape of Metal, probes into the age-old problems of the relationship between art and life, artist and human being, physical reality and its transcendence, throwing new light on the many ambiguities involved. The essay examines some of the ways Kilroy dramatizes the experience of human and artistic failure through the protagonist, an old female sculptor, and the evocation of giant artists, from Michelangelo through Giacometti to Beckett and argues that the achievements and artistic principles of these artists highlight some of Kilroy's own drama-forming principles as well as aspects of his theatricality.*

Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal* (2003), focusing on an old female artist poised at the far end of life somewhere between life and death, interrogates the nature of artist-as-parent, or, more exactly, artist-as-mother, art and motherhood, the art of motherhood. Set in the liminal place between lifeless matter and living human suffering, the play addresses questions concerning the relationship between art and life, the power of art and the artist, moral responsibility towards one's creations whether living human being or stone. The Beckettian notion of failure as the condition of art and the almost inevitability of failure in art and life resonates throughout and counterbalances the Yeatsian desire for perfection to be achieved in art and/or life just as incompleteness and unfinishedness – which is deemed more human – becomes juxtaposed to completion, the finished quality of work. The play probes into such philosophical, artistic, and human-psychological areas as these ideas become shaped in the theatrical space.

Heidegger defines the relation between artist and art as "The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. ... In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work are each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names – art" (17). But artist as human being, particularly as mother, is also the origin of life as life itself is the origin of the human being. Therefore artist as mother extends Heidegger's equation to include life;

artist-mother creating both art and life. *The Shape of Metal* centres on an old woman sculptor and mother of two daughters and keeps these interrelationships richly ambiguous.

The protagonist as a modernist artist, brings the age-old intricacies between art and life, artist and family relations into the limelight of the contemporary time. Nell Jeffrey's story, as it unfolds in conversations with one of her daughters Judith, as well as in flashbacks, dreams and visions, raises as many questions about art and artist as it does about life and human relationships, including the possibility of being a loving mother while devoting one's life to creation, the limits of a mother's interfering with her child's life, the artist's powers to create and destroy pieces of art and human lives.

The complexity of the relationship between art and life appears on the level of plot, action, imagery, and the form of dramatization and stage technique. The naturalism of the opening stage image with the protagonist, the 82-year-old Nell Jeffrey, sleeping in her studio, is disrupted immediately when her daughter's, Grace's head, appears "through the back wall ... illuminated The effect is of a mounted head, speaking" (11). The image of Grace, sculpture-like and yet speaking life-like, introduces a theatricality that destabilises the borderlines between art and life. Her monologue then verbally reinforces the ambiguity:

Are you going to sculpt my head, Mummy, as promised? ... Busy fingers pressing and shaping, lump of stuff, stone or metal to be transformed into Grace finally at peace, head still and quiet, no terrible dread anymore... Mummy kneading the head. ... Mummy stop everything, head on pedestal, absolutely still. Grace inside the silence. Safe. (11)

The process of sculpting sounds reversible: Grace's head turns into sculpture while matter (stone or metal) turns into Grace. In performance the audience first cannot hear how the word "kneading" is spelled in the sentence "Mummy 'kneading' the head" so it works both ways: Mummy "needing" Grace's head for her creation just as she is "kneading," that is, massaging the head to heal her in life while turning that head into something else – a work of art. What is more, as Ian Shuttleworth noted, the audience cannot hear "the capital letter of [Grace's] personal name" in the opening dream-monologue so the sentence "Stone or metal to be transformed into Grace" can be "interpret[ed] metaphysically" (accessmylibrary). The double-entendre is certainly deliberate since in transforming lifeless matter into a statue, the sculptor breathes life into it and thus reaches beyond the material, into the state of grace. The other side of the process, however, is that life – Grace's life in this case – becomes silenced, turned into stone or metal according to the artist's will. The artist-mother thus, while eternalizing her daughter, metaphorically kills her by shaping her and putting her "head on pedestal ... inside the silence". By doing so, Kilroy puts the Keatsean ("Ode to a Grecian Urn") and Yeatsean ("Sailing to Byzantium") dilemmas concerning the relationship between art and life into palpable stage reality. He also adds to them the aspect of moral responsibility not just for one's artistic creation but also for life in one's immediate

environment as Kilroy's artist-mother is not an innocent creator of art-work but is actually – as the plot gradually reveals – personally responsible for Grace's mysterious disappearance and probable death. Ironically, the reason for the split between mother and daughter is not, however, the predictable one; that is, Nell does not neglect motherhood because of the demands of the artist's vocation. On the contrary, her motherly love and over-protectiveness, complemented by the artist's impulse to act God-like, makes her insist on shaping her daughter's personality and life. As Nell herself admits, "I know I'm a bit of a beast. Sometimes. Go at things with a hatchet, I do" (22). She treats feelings as she treats her raw material – as seen in her drastic interference in Grace's life and love affair that emotionally crushed the daughter.

When a young artist, Nell "stood in one of the centres of the modern world" as she reminisces about Beckett introducing her to Giacometti in 1938 (23). These two giants of modernist art, together with the two sculptors, Michelangelo and Brancusi, who inspired Nell's chief work *Woman Rising from Water*, appear to set the co-ordinates of her art. An examination of what artistic aspects the evocation of these artists highlight, what attitudes to art they share with Kilroy, and how he defines the artist-protagonist Nell against them, illuminates Kilroy's drama-forming principles and some aspects of his theatricality.

Kilroy as a "late modernist writer" (Murray, "Kilroy: the Artist" 90), shares with modernist artists the attribution of special significance to form. He has been known for his incessant experimenting in search of the form that best suits his subject: "I believe form is discovered within the material, not imposed from without, and, therefore, each work finds its own form and style. ... For me the style is determined by the nature of the material" ("Whole Idea" 261). Writing about Synge as a modernist, for example, Kilroy maintains that "[m]odernism ... is not just a preference for one form above another, it is, in its fullest meaning, a mode of perception of knowledge with a very definite idea of how art should express such knowledge" ("Synge and Modernism" 176). *The Shape of Metal's* central issues of giving "shape" to matter, giving form to life and life to art, are therefore self-reflexive, commenting on the playwright's art and of any art's form, including theatre's nature and possibilities.

Speaking about his adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* in a 2002 interview, Kilroy says that what interests him "in Wedekind as a writer is that he's filled with failure, that the work fails consistently to achieve anything like a coherent finish. This to me is wonderfully challenging" ("Thomas Kilroy" with Roche, 155). Failure, the necessary failure of art and life, seems to become more and more central to Kilroy's plays, always attached to the artist figures and those close to them. Not just their lives or art fail in important ways but they circle around failure as a basic experience of life and the struggle with themselves. As Douglas says in *My Scandalous Life* (2004), Kilroy's short play on Lord Alfred Douglas written soon after *The Shape of Metal*, failure is "an essential truth about human existence. ... at the heart of existence is this well of failure and ... to look into this black pool is to cleanse oneself, forever, of all illusion, about

others, about oneself” (26). In this sense Kilroy moves closer than perhaps any Irish playwright to Beckett’s view that failure is the central human experience, and that the artist’s courage lies in daring to fail: “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion” (“Three Dialogues” 21). In Kilroy’s plays about artists, from the early farce *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare* (1976) through *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991), to the two plays on those closest to Oscar Wilde, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1997) and *My Scandalous Life* (2004), each depicts artists struggling with failure and daring to fail and daring to “cleans” themselves “of all illusion”. He keeps probing into the human – particularly the artistic – experience of failure to see if this cleansing brings any illumination and redemption or only highlights the blackness of the pool into which the artists look. Or, as Christopher Murray observes,

Like most of Kilroy’s plays this latest one [*The Shape of Metal*] has as its protagonist an artist in crisis (the exceptions to this generalisation turn out at the least to be visionaries like O’Neill, Matt Talbot and, in a less obvious way, Mr. Roche, while a play yet to be staged is about William Blake). The key to *The Shape of Metal* may be said to be in some lines from the actress in *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre*: “Can it be that the very source of our art is also the source of our decline? Can one destroy a talent by grossly overusing it?” (“Thomas Kilroy” 181)

Murray sees Nell as a female King Lear “but one who has destroyed her daughters rather than they her. It is a fearsome portrait of the artist as an old woman, who put her art before all else in life” (181). True, she is formed as a monstrous character with a “monstrous ego” (49) and it is also true that she destroys both her daughters as she brings out the worst and most arrogant side of Judith who keeps fighting with her onstage whenever they are together while she forced Grace, who was too delicate to fight, to escape into the unknown. Nevertheless, although she is portrayed as a rather impulsive mother, her monstrosity does not derive from her putting her art before everything else. Her failure as mother arises from her overwhelming personality, her dominating character, her irrepressible creative energy that strives to impose her will on both matter (art) and people (life). It is in that sense that “the source of art” in her becomes “the source of her decline” both as artist and as mother.

Failure, like a leitmotif, goes through *The Shape of Metal*, and so it is no surprise that its presiding spirit is Beckett. His presence above all others, deepens the sense of the constant spiritual quest, the inevitability of human failure and the necessity of expressing in art the testimony to human incompleteness. One aspect of Nell’s failure derives from her attempts to avoid or “evade” failure and only now, at the end of her life does she admit that “[a]ll my life I have resisted that word. Failure. ... Failure because I evaded failure. You see, to be human you have to live with failure” (52). Saying that,

she admits indirectly that she became inhuman in aspiring to transcend the human condition of imperfection. But then she continues, in the Beckettian vein: “I have spent a lifetime trying to create perfect form. The finished, rounded, perfect form. Mistake. ... And, I knew it. Knew it was an illusion. And still persisted” (53).

Michelangelo and Giacometti are also evoked not for their exceptional achievement but either through their “failed,” unfinished pieces of art or because they were acutely aware of failure. While Beckett’s many words affirming his “fidelity to failure” are well known, Giacometti’s expressions of very similar feelings might be less familiar but also more hopeful, such as, for instance, that “[t]he more you fail, the more successful you are. When everything is lost and when you keep going instead of giving up, then you experience the one moment when there’s a chance you will get a little bit farther” (qtd. in Hohl, 209). The work by Michelangelo that is mentioned with admiration in *The Shape of Metal*, is characteristically his unfinished *Rondanini Pieta*, the evocation of which deepens the tension between “finished,” perfectly shaped pieces of art and the unfinished / unfinishable, necessarily incomplete human life and experience. Nell, who as sculptor believed that “there is no meaning if [a piece of art] isn’t finished” (15), at the same time admires Michelangelo’s *Rondanini Pieta* just because it is “only half there ... That’s what makes the piece so unbearably – human, the failed touch, the unfinished carving, something which could never, ever be completed successfully” (16). This statue puzzles many artists, to a great extent because, with its extra arm detached from the body of Christ and its differing proportions between the upper and the lower halves, it challenges the consensus that a completed work of art needs to have a unified style. Henry Moore accounts for its singularly moving quality by the very fact that it is left unfinished probably after a previous version had been partly destroyed and the upper part, in different proportions, redone. He claims that

the position of the heads, the whole tenderness of the top part of the sculpture [...is] more what it is by being in contrast with the rather finished, tough, leathery, typical Michelangelo legs. ... So it’s a work of art that for me means more because it doesn’t fit in with all the theories of critics and aestheticians who say that one of the great things about a work of art must be its unity of style (13).

The *Rondanini Pieta* inspires Nell’s own statue, *Woman Rising from Water* while her other source is identified only in the stage directions as Brancusi’s *Sleep* (27) – most likely his *Sleeping Muse (La Muse Endormie)* from 1906, a beautifully carved and polished female face which is only partly emerging from unsmoothed, “unfinished” marble. One of Brancusi’s maxims appears embodied here, “High polish [...] is not always appropriate” (qtd. in Giedion-Welcker 219).

Another artistic problem that Kilroy engages with in *The Shape of Metal* is the relationship between physical reality and its transcendence. In an early essay on Yeats and Beckett, Kilroy expresses his admiration for Yeats’s creation of characters who are

agents “of an action that transcends the physical world while remaining rooted in it” (“Two Playwrights” 193). He seems to have found the same quality in Giacometti’s work and artistic principles, one of which is especially revealing: “an artwork should reach its highest perfection at the point at which its materiality dissolves” (qtd. in Hohl 133). According to his monographer, Reinhold Hohl, Giacometti comes closest to accomplishing this highest perfection “in the figures which owe their effect of a living totality to the very fact that they are but fragments” (133). In Kilroy’s play Nell gives a comic description of a quarrel between Beckett and Giacometti about walking and shoes when Giacometti praised the human ability to walk – one of the most mundane and literally earth-bound experiences – and insisted on the importance of the foot, which touches the ground and is “frequently embedded there.” He demonstrated this so effectively that Nell saw that “his two feet, splayed, did seem to sink into the floor” (55). Giacometti’s performance evidently draws attention to the necessity of keeping in touch with the earthly, ordinary experience, of remaining rooted in reality but then transforming and transcending that reality in the surreality of art. In the period that Nell refers to, the late 1930s, Giacometti actually experimented with taking away as much clay or plaster as possible from his figures to help the observer overlook the material existence of the art work and his efforts were “directed almost exclusively toward expressing the very opposite of material existence – the immaterial presence of another person’s being-in-the-world” (Hohl 134). This objective actually reflects Giacometti’s place between surrealism and existentialism, as he moves towards what Edward Lucie-Smith describes as an “acting out, through the medium of sculpture, some of the leading ideas of existentialist doctrine”. Lucie-Smith goes on to clarify that existentialism in sculpture, while placing emphasis on subjectivity, also “puts stress upon the notion not only of reality, but of responsibility to reality, however ungraspable this may prove to be” (194). It comes as no surprise then that the figure of the sculptor offered Kilroy a potent model in the visual arts of the individual’s quest for a personal vision starting from tangible material reality but one that leads beyond. In an interview Kilroy confesses:

I write a great deal about spiritual quest, the efforts of the individual to find a personal vision beyond material reality. This is one reason why I am drawn to theatricality. It is a way of rising above factuality.... I love the lift of imagination, the way it transcends the ordinary, and I ... believe that this is one of the ways that we achieve transcendence in this life (“Whole Idea” 259).

Giacometti, the sculptor who “introduced the depiction of physical distance into the three-thousand-year old art of sculpture” (Hohl 107), in Kilroy’s play teaches Nell how to see things whole “from a distance, a remove” (28). The lack of keeping a distance may have contributed to Nell’s failure, both in life and in art: she stayed far too close to Grace for her own and her daughter’s good, interfered in her life when she brutally and disgustingly tore Grace away from the young man that she as mother found undesirable.

Also, when she created the bronze statue of Grace's head and modelled *Woman Rising from Water* on Grace, Nell did not hold her at a distance but rather kept too much emotional involvement with her. That may be one reason why the bronze head keeps coming to life to haunt her and why she destroys her much acclaimed marble statue. Thus the expected sources for conflict in an artist's life, the collision between the demands of family and art, appear inverted in Kilroy's play: Nell's art did not distance her from her daughters, on the contrary, she let herself interfere too closely with Grace's love and life, and, as a consequence, she damaged both her daughter and, later, the statue identified with her.

Giacometti's principle of distance must have appealed to Kilroy who is frequently described as keeping a distance from his own characters in his plays. This distance is quite obvious in *The Shape of Metal* where the family quarrels, heated arguments, disturbed relationships, and tragic events are dramatized in a way that keeps the audience constantly engaged intellectually but does not ask it to get emotionally involved. This distance becomes all the more apparent when compared to Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, which *The Shape of Metal* deliberately echoes in its three-women cast with the old woman-protagonist being filled with guilt and remorse and the two daughters (granddaughters) struggling with her and their own frustrations. Murphy's characters, with all their sins, frailties and often irritating behaviour, still evoke warm responses from the audience whereas Kilroy's similarly suffering and struggling women, while attracting compassion, remain emotionally distanced both from author and audience, somewhere half-way between individualized human beings and Beckett's images of the human condition. Christopher Murray identifies Kilroy's drama in general as satisfying one of the American drama critic, George Jean Nathan's criteria of "the first-rate playwright": that "the attitude towards dramatic themes is 'platonic'", that is, "crucially detached and at a distance" ("Kilroy: The Artist" 87). This detachment both results from, and creates the feeling, that Kilroy's theatre attempts "to understand but not to judge" (Greene 79).

The stage in *The Shape of Metal*, dominated by the old artist throughout the play even when she is weak and nodding off, places her unfinished-looking sculpture in the very centre; covered in most scenes, revealed in a flash-back scene in the middle, and then destroyed at the end. This statue itself, expressing a process rather than a fixed state, becomes a metaphor for life, personality and art, all being in the making, never reaching perfection. As Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pieta* embodies process and change, so Nell's statue is alive with birth, change, and movement incorporating time in a modernist way. Nell's *Woman Rising from Water*, described in the stage directions as emerging from "rubble" (27), could be regarded as a portrait of the modernist artist – one trying to bring order and harmony into the chaos of the modern world, her art being born out of the (Yeatsian) "mire and blood." The woman arises out of the feminine element, water, to take her place in the world. In contrast with Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* with its male idealization of the female muse, Nell's statue is an image of the new

woman who wants to tell her own story and so has an unidealized, “far less benign, more witchlike” face (27). This image reinforces the parallel between biological and artistic creation and their mutual reflection of each other. As self-portrait, it reflects on the difficulties of a female artist to come to her own in a male-dominated world that is probably more true in sculpture (which, by its nature and media, was long considered physically too difficult for women to handle) than any other field of art. Both her daughters strongly identified with that statue – with the unfinished, therefore human creation. Judith is upset and miserable when her mother destroys it partly because she laments the disappearance of a great work of art, partly because she remembers how Grace had read her own nightmares, her monsters into it that, in turn, she put into her poem on the statue:

Oh, Egg-woman, Egg-woman, what have you seen?
I've seen all the monsters
That are there to be seen.
But now I've come back to Judy and Grace.
Feel my old forehead,
Feel my cold face – (34)

The image, in the centre of the stage, carries the creative and destructive powers of the overwhelming personality of an artist who positions art and life, family and work too close to each other and keeps hammering on the lives of her children as she does on metal and stone, and who, in her recognition of her failure, can do nothing else but smash her work into pieces. In a sense, her frustration derives from what Declan Kiberd succinctly identified as Beckett's constant fear:

For Beckett, as for the Old Testament God, every act of creation is a ... deliberate courting of failure. Since God was a perfect being, the creation of a flawed universe could only be a sacrifice of his perfection. ... For Beckett every created text is a “stain upon the silence”, a silence which might have been the more admirable without it. (455)

Nell also made “stains upon the silence” with her creations – human and artistic – when she took away the purity of stone: “Stone is pure before we touch it. Marks, daubs, cuts, scratches. I think we're trying to blend into that purity” (23). She committed further sacrifice when she locked the living into lifeless metal. While the Rising Woman is carved out of, or rather into, marble – a material that dictates the form, and also being a more natural, more living material than metal – metaphorically, she locks Grace, another Woman Rising from Water, her beautiful creation of movement, transformation, process, the unfinished shape, into the finished form, the metal cage of silence, the bronze head on a pedestal. This is how metal achieves its shape. Grace's last, quite Beckettian dream-

monologue when she appears to Nell, “this time a bronze death head on a plinth, a bronze head which speaks,” repeats her earlier words but now with no mention of stone only of metal – all with the finality of transformation:

Mummy shaped Grace’s head into metal. Mummy’s fingers moulding eyes, ears, nose, mouth, head. 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)

This speech, both in its content and in its fragmented, skeletal style, echoes Constance Wilde’s words in the emptied-out house after Oscar has left: “Nothing there. Empty house. Skeletal. No sound. Nothing. Safe. Constance safe. No-one-to-harm-her. See! Empty!” (35) The connection between safety and emptiness in the Constance Wilde play and again, in *The Shape of Metal*, is striking, as if safety could be achieved only through giving up everything, every hope, in death. Life, as long as lived, is full of risks, as is art full of failure. Creating perfection and wholeness for the artist, achieving love and beauty in the world for the sensitive, close-to-the-artist person is fatal. The Yeatsian echo reverberates of life itself ceasing in the vicinity of complete beauty, the 15th phase of the Moon. Yet only those dancing at this edge of danger are able to discard all illusion, even the illusion of some kind of moral or spiritual redemption, and then may find some truth. That truth may be the truth of failure itself, for, as Oscar says in *The Secret Fall*, “there is so much truth in failure and destruction” (14). That truth may be admitting one’s inability to arrive at perfection, wholeness in art and life. But that truth may also lead to peace. Nell in *The Shape of Metal* goes through her restless struggle with herself, with her failure to create important meaning in art because she simultaneously destroyed life, and only after she confesses her sins to her surviving daughter, Judith and smashes her masterpiece, does she find peace in going to join Grace “in the garden”.

The speaking head of Grace, however, becomes further complicated in the play through its possible association with the old Irish, Celtic cult of the severed head, which held such heads to be prophetic, poetic, or even healing. This speaking severed head emerges in old tales and in Irish literature in many forms, most recently and, perhaps, most famously in Yeats’s poetry and drama and John Montague’s poetry.

The Celts believed that the human head was the seat of the soul, the essence of being. It symbolised divinity itself, and was the possessor of every desirable quality. It could remain alive after the death of the body; it could avert evil and convey prophetic information; it could move and act and speak and sing. (qtd. in Ó Dochartaigh 199)

Grace’s head, which comes back to haunt the mother, while being the embodiment of Nell’s crime and failure, transforms into a creation of supernatural power, a bronze

statue that becomes the essence of Grace, Grace herself – grace itself. The interconnection between art and life further strengthened by this association, makes the dismal references to the tragedies and failures in life more ambiguous. If the ancient power to “avert evil” remains alive in the speaking head, then Grace, in this shape, will eventually save her mother from the evil of total despair.

The Beckettian echoes of “finished”, both thematical and structural, especially from *Endgame*, run through the play. *Endgame*’s opening words, “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (1), gain multiple and quite contradictory meanings in the course of Kilroy’s play. The most direct echo relates to Grace’s life as the mother reminiscences without illusion: “All finished. That’s what Gracie said. All finished” (53). In the context of art, “finished” means the completed, polished piece, Nell’s (and other modernist artists’) desire for “the finished, rounded, perfect form” (53). But a “finished” work of art may also mean the end of everything else, the end of life and possibilities, as it does in Grace’s life. The finished, perfected form of art is no longer living, moving, changing if it does not embody human imperfection. The family’s unfinished story approaches its conclusion after the revelations about Nell’s part in the causes and circumstances of Grace’s despair. These finishing touches finalise Grace’s loss as well as bring Nell’s life closer to its finish. Nell’s frustration and sense of failure culminates in her destroying her *Woman Rising from Water* statue, following Grace’s last dream-vision appearance. Giacometti’s words quoted earlier by Nell: “The piece of sculpture must embody its own particular failure” (44), thus gain additional meaning in the parallel established throughout the play between art and life. Nell’s piece of art, her cajoling the woman to rise from water, does embody its own particular failure, as does her child-rearing. Both of her daughters were emotionally attached to that sculpture, so Nell’s attempt to annihilate it amplifies the question if the artist has the right to destroy his/her work or a parent to destroy the life of his/her child. Smashing *Woman Rising from Water* also brings home once more the feeling of the approaching end of the artist’s lifetime. If any “work of art ... embodies its own dynamic process of coming into being ... an artwork exhibits the temporality of its making” (Deutsch 38), then this statue in particular bears its temporality not only in its form and shape but it also thematizes it in its title and subject-matter. By annihilating it the artist reverses the process of her creating the sculpture, unwinding the time that is encoded in it.

The question of who is to judge if a work is a failure or a masterpiece, remains unanswered. Not necessarily its creator. Judith, the younger daughter, who usually is quite hostile to her mother, expresses her and many others’ admiration for her work as artist. Nell, indeed, must have been judged by peer critics a powerful artist already in her lifetime since her work has been given a whole room in the permanent collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Kilmainham. Perfection in art, as the theoretician Stephen David Ross maintains, is “not a superlative. The value is one of completeness. It reflects the ways in which a work is sovereign, incomparable” (37). But Ross also emphasizes that “[p]erfection in art is not flawlessness but *accomplishment*, fulfilment

by means of and through a resistance of materials” (104, original emphasis). Flaws in a work of art do not equate with failure, therefore if Nell feels that her work is a failure, it may have more to do with her overall experience which includes both art and life. So, if in Ross’s words, “[p]erfection is ... a dominance, prevalence, of the work within and for, relevant to the integrities of, characteristic traits of human experience” (103), then Nell’s frustration derives not so much from any failure of the artistic form itself that she has created but from the lack of its relevance to the human experience. The Rising Woman in her art work contrasts with her experience in life since Grace had fallen back into non-existence and Nell herself is fading out of life. In order to restore the integrity, she has to destroy the sculpture.

But Nell’s sense of failure as artist is also aggravated by her living in what she perceives as an age of “rubbish artists... artistic mediocrity” (53). Her idols were the great modernist artists and her own art, as much as the play allows us to see and understand of it, shares the ideals of modernism. When she laments the death of modernism, the lack of respect for form, for artistry in the postmodern age, she also reflects on the diminishing significance of art itself: “human futility, human failure. ... Scientists are the ones making great imaginative leaps nowadays. Not artists” (53).

The play concludes inconclusively, with Nell approaching death, the fragments of *Woman Rising from Water* littering the stage. The last scene shows Nell still defiant, having accepted her failure as artist and as parent, having “said all [she has] to say in here” (57), turning to her last illusion, that Grace is in the garden and she can find her. To Judith’s sober disillusioning her, Nell admits that she still needs “to dream” (58) and she concludes the play with her words “I am going into the garden” (58). The enigmatic ending suggests to Christopher Murray “a kind of ‘Welcome, o life’ in a new guise”, as the old woman, after having destroyed her statue recognises the primacy of life over art and “decides to go outside her studio for the first time in the play” (“Thomas Kilroy” 182). I, however, see it more as – if not “welcome, o death”, but at least – an acceptance of her failure and her approaching death (that at the beginning of the play she admitted she abhorred and feared) with a brave gesture of going to face it. The last stage direction seems to confirm this, referring to “the gathering darkness” into which she walks (58). From the studio described as a “tomb” in the opening stage direction (1), she now begins to move towards the air of the garden, to join Grace in death, but in the state of death that is beyond the tomb. Obviously the garden image evokes Biblical associations of perfection and wholeness which now may come within reach, and now the giving up of life is not too high a price for it. Completeness, fulfilment thus becomes possible to attain, but only at the cost of life, not through and within the achievements in art and in life.

For Nell meeting Grace is no longer a haunting, nor is it an illusion but rather a poetic, dreamy rendering of the frightening but now accepted reality. Grace’s name once again brings in the possibility of gaining grace, after all and despite all; the possibility of transcendence. Thus a glimmer of the moral and spiritual redemption counterbalances

the bleakness of the “black pool” of failure. Nell, by the close of the play, has become capable of facing herself, her weaknesses, her failures, her guilt, and of embarking on a long journey down into her conscience, a “journey towards transformation [that] needs the sustenance of vision, ways of seeing and dreaming that break open old ways of behaving and suggest new ways of being” (O’Reilly 319). What Anne F. O’Reilly maintains about contemporary “sacred plays” in which such transformation takes place, holds true also for *The Shape of Metal*: “Even when being has been interrupted by destructive patterns of behaviour, whether personal, familial, historical or cultural, new ways of seeing can offer new starting points or horizons, that enable one to move beyond hurt and anger into relationship” (319). This relationship for Nell consists in a reconciliation with her living daughter, Judith, with her (most probably) dead daughter Grace, with the memory of her most important lover, and beyond all that with herself, her conscience, her deeply hidden self. Through becoming more human she seems to have become more in touch with the sacred. The artist, becoming more attached to the earth, becomes able to soar more freely from its grasp.

In the magic world of the theatre Nell’s destroyed statue is made whole again every evening. Similarly, the entire play offers highly polished and finished images which, however, remain forever unfinished, changing in each performance, no matter how many statues are smashed, how many curtains fall. The woman, the artist’s creation and her metaphorical self-portrait, rises from the rubble again and again, to give hope and healing and to be destroyed again. The art of failure, in the last analysis, does not become the failure of art. Although the modern artist cannot perform the healing of the community as the ancient shaman-artists could, nevertheless, the artist can still show images of wholeness in the theatre, paradoxically even in their incompleteness. Theatre, providing the playwright with an empty stage, a sacred space which he, in his turn, can fill with his imagination, may afford the artist the means, as Kilroy believes, to “achieve transcendence in this life.”

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