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## Friel's Dramaturgy in *Translations*\*

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### Abstract

Brian Friel, Ireland's outstanding playwright, founded the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry in 1980 with Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea. Its first production was Friel's *Translations*. The play is set in an Irish-speaking hedge-school<sup>1)</sup> run by Hugh O'Donnell in the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg, a fictional village in County Donegal in 1833, when they see the emergence of the new National Schools where English is the first language. Within a span of a few days in August, Friel successfully and dramatically epitomizes in three acts the life in a closed community shifting between the two cultures, Gaelic and English, eventually leading to mutual violence between the colonized and the colonizer. This paper attempts to discuss how Friel's stagecraft develops towards a dramatic ending.

Key words: *Gaelic, English, translation, closed community, violence*

### Introduction

Friel was born in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland in 1929. He became a full-time writer in 1960 after working as a teacher in Derry. The success of *The Enemy Within* produced by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1962 impressed his growing command as a dramatist. The founding of the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980 led to a new and distinctive turn for his career because of his involvement in all aspects of the company activities. The objective of the Field Day Theatre Company is, as mentioned in one of the Field Day Pamphlets published in 1985, to "contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation."<sup>2)</sup> Significantly, as the idiom "have a field day" implies, the name

Field Day suggests the chance to assert oneself to the fullest and most triumphant or pleasurable extent.

### I

The play begins with the scene of Hugh's hedge-school where the evening class is due to be held without the presence of the schoolmaster, as he is out at the christening of the baby of Nellie Ruadh. It closes with news of the baby's death, a fact revealed to the audience by Maire saying, "Nellie Ruadh's baby died in the middle of the night. I must go up to the wake. It didn't last long, did it?" (60). This creates a striking irony and metaphor for the fate of the Gaelic culture.

In the first act Manus, the older son of Hugh, takes over his father's job, teaching Sarah how to speak, helping the other students with their respective studies. There has been a discussion on the sweet smell associated with the catastrophic potato blight raised by Bridget. Maire seems the

mouthpiece of Friel's idea of the stereotypes of Irishness, as she sharply criticizes her fellow villagers for their self-mocking nature to look for the worst in everything, which they have acquired in the long history of suppression:

MAIRE: Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag? Well, did they ever—ever? Never! There was never blight here. Never. Never. But we're always sniffing about for it, aren't we?—looking for disaster. . . some of you people aren't happy unless you're miserable and you'll not be right content until you're dead! (21)

Ironically, Ballybeg will shortly be in danger of total destruction by the British army instead of devastation by the potato blight. Indeed, an issue of potato blight still haunts the Irish nation. Friel's contemporary, another director of the Field Day Theatre Company, Seamus Heaney writes in one of his poems entitled "At a Potato Digging" from *Death of a Naturalist*:

Stinking potatoes fouled the land,  
pits turned pus into filthy mounds:  
and where potato diggers are  
you still smell the running sore. (46-9)

Maire cannot predict the tragic fate of the townland nor her own at this stage. Being a realist, she tends to look outward beyond herself and plans to go to America, as she has ten siblings below her to raise and there is no man in her household. Although she has been promised to Manus according to the local code, she has very little interest in him, especially after he tells her that he has not applied for the job in the new national school. When Hugh comes home, drunk as usual, she protests to him that they should all be learning English at his hedge-school, referring to Daniel O'Connell's remark: "The old language is a bar-

rier to modern progress" (25). For Maire English is the language that will allow her to escape to America.

Finally Owen, the younger son of Hugh, who has migrated to Dublin, now "a city man," turns up unexpectedly after six years' absence with Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland. Owen works as "a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter" (29) to assist them while a corps of the Royal Engineers is at work in Ballybeg on the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, Anglicizing and standardizing place-names. Owen insists that his job is "to translate the quaint, archaic tongue" the people in Ballybeg "persist in speaking into the King's good English" (29). This shows that Owen despises the local people, ironically calling them "civilised" people. That is why he has left Ballybeg for Dublin, the new Ireland, searching for success. When it comes to interpreting what Lancey says in this act, however, it is clear that he is far from performing precise and literal translation, and instead he deliberately glosses over what might work to his folk's disadvantage. For example:

LANCEY: All former surveys of Ireland originated in forfeiture and violent transfer of property; the present survey has for its object the relief which can be afforded to the proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation.

OWEN: The captain hopes that the public will cooperate with the sappers and that the new map will mean that taxes are reduced. (31)

Language has power and the person in charge of interpretation is responsible for its influence. Manus finds Lancey's operation nothing but a military one and regards his brother as a traitor, while his father and the other villagers see Owen as a kind of success.

## II

The play is written in English, yet seven of the ten characters speak most of the time in their native tongue, Irish. Friel's excellent treatment causes no linguistic confusion on the part of the audience. Here are some good examples of this from the first act where Owen works as a go-between:

LANCEY: Lieutenant Yolland?

YOLLAND: I—I—I've nothing to say—really—

OWEN: The captain is the man who actually makes the new map. George's task is to see that the place-names on this map are . . . correct. (*To YOLLAND.*) Just a few words—they'd like to hear you. (*To class.*) Don't you want to hear George, too?

MAIRE: Has he anything to say?

YOLLAND: (*To MAIRE*) Sorry—sorry?

OWEN: She says she's dying to hear you.

YOLLAND: (*To MAIRE*) Very kind of you—thank you. . . (*To class.*) I can only say that I feel—I feel very foolish to—to—to be working here and not to speak your language. But I intend to rectify that—with Roland's help—indeed I do.

OWEN: He wants me to teach him Irish!

HUGH: You are doubly welcome, sir. (31-2)

The role of Jimmy Jack Cassie "known as the Infant Prodigy," is noteworthy. He is described as a bachelor in his sixties, fluent in Latin and Greek but not pedantic, for whom "the world of the gods and the ancient myths is as real and as immediate as everyday life in the townland of Baile Beag" (11). He leads a somewhat safe life, as the two worlds he lives in do not conflict with each other, unlike the case between Ireland and England. This attitude is similar to that of the defrocked priest Peter Keegan in *John Bull's Other Island* written by George Bernard Shaw in 1904:

KEEGAN: Sir: when you speak to me of English and Irish you forget that I am a Catholic. My country is not Ireland nor England, but the whole mighty realm of my Church. For me there are but two countries: heaven and hell; but two conditions of men: salvation and damnation. (emphasis added) (162)

Both Jimmy and Keegan live in their own worlds that have no borders between countries. It can be said that they are escapists. Jimmy symbolizes the irony of using knowledge of a different nation, while Keegan is totally buried in a world of religion.

## III

The second act reveals two dramatic instances of translation. The first is a translation of labor between Owen and Yolland and the second a translation of love between Yolland and Maire. The act opens with Owen and Yolland, bent over a large map, embarking on their task of transposing the Gaelic toponymy of Ballybeg into an English alternative. The translation of names also means a translation of namers, which is to say, the roles of colonizer and colonized are reversed, as they undergo an exchange of identity. The more engrossed in this task Owen becomes, the less enthusiastic Yolland is because he finds it a kind of spiritual erosion. Yolland is lost in a world of dreams, thinking of living in Ballybeg permanently, as he has almost immediately fallen in love with it to such an extent that he is described as being "already a committed Hibernophile" by Owen. From his outsider's view, Ballybeg is Eden to the Englishman Yolland. He becomes sentimental about the charm of rural Ireland and romantic enough to fall in love with Maire. On the other hand, to Owen, it is a place where he sees no bright future of success. Here Yolland is the exact mirror image of Owen. Irony rises when they come to the crossroads Tobair Vree. There is no one but Owen who has left

Ballybeg that knows how this name originated. It will distort and eventually destroy the Gaelic culture to change the existing names into totally new ones.

The translation of love between Yolland and Maire takes place in the next scene of the second act. Yolland and Maire have been admiring each other from a distance since he arrived in Ballybeg. However, their translation of love is no easy task and frustration just accumulates. Yolland is very eager to master the Irish language with the help of Owen, but he must admit:

YOLLAND: Even if I did speak Irish I'd always be an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it? The private core will always be... hermetic, won't it? (40)

Friel illustrates the impossibility of attaining an ideal system of language through which to communicate with each other to bridge the gap between the two cultures. When Yolland and Maire can manage to sneak out of the dance for their first (and last, as we later find out) rendezvous, they are successful in reciprocating their love for each other but there is no mutual language for them. Sarah accidentally catches Yolland and Maire kissing, which will in the end claim Yolland's life. In other words, he has done what he should not have done—to cross the boundaries between the local code of Ballybeg and his, as Jimmy Jack later explains to Maire in the final act:

JIMMY: Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means outside the tribe. And you don't cross those borders casually—both sides get very angry. (68)

## IV

The third act shows quick and drastic developments, and the reversals of plot, persona, and time are brought about here. The dramaturgy of Friel excels most in this act. Friel portrays the nervous collapse of a culture which has had to bear pressures beyond its capacity to sustain, causing violence. Every character in the play manages his or her life well within the closed community. Once this precarious balance is threatened by the outsiders, they can no longer sustain the pressures from the outside but will suffer a nervous collapse. When Yolland disappears, assassinated by the Donnelly twins, Captain Lancey promises retaliation on the whole community and threatens to slaughter all the livestock in Ballybeg unless he learns whereabouts of Yolland, and if that threat doesn't bear results, he will embark on a series of evictions and the levelling of every abode. After all the trouble of translation Owen has gone through on the Ordnance Survey, which originally aimed at what was said to be "civilising and advancing" Ballybeg, now ends up in vain. Nominal eviction turns into an actual one. Lancey summons Owen to give a literal translation of his intentions to destroy the whole village to the local tribe, so that Owen has to retranslate all those Anglicized names back into their original Gaelic ones. Maire also becomes a victim of this reverse role of language. Because of her involvement with Yolland, she hardly belongs anywhere. All she can do now is trace out an imaginary map on the hedge-school floor, reciting all those names related to Yolland. She recollects Yolland's parting message to her: "he tried to speak in Irish—he said, 'I'll see you yesterday'—he meant to say 'I'll see you tomorrow'" (59). This mistranslation suggests that the time was out of joint in the colonial conflict between England and Ireland and that she has only his memory remaining. Linguistic discrepancies in such a context are the inevi-

table historical consequences.

As for examples of reversals of persona, Manus will be suspected as the assassin, now that he has fled to Mayo; the fumes from the burning army tents are mistaken for the sweet smell of potato blight; Doalty is mistaken for an arsonist; a bacon-curing schoolmaster from Cork is mistaken for the village schoolmaster Hugh; and Owen takes over the responsibility that his brother has had as a faithful son to Hugh. All these cases serve to reinforce Friel's message about the mistaken substitution of Irish by English. As Hugh explains, "We like to think we endure around truths immemorially posited," (42) Friel also recognizes that this mistake is an irreversible inevitability of history. Hugh goes on to say:

HUGH: Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to...inevitable. (42)

But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of...fact. (43)

Although Hugh finds that English can't really express his deepest feelings, he determines to adjust himself to the English language. Of all the characters of this play, Hugh is aware that he has had enough of self-deception. He persuades himself that, "We must learn those new names. We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (66). Interestingly, such sentiments as Hugh's are conspicuous even in today's poet like Heaney, as he writes: "I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspective of an Englishman. I teach

English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home. I live off another hump as well."<sup>3</sup>)

### Concluding Remarks

Friel sets this play in a metaphorical village, Ballybeg, which shows a kind of his political neutrality. It provides a more bias-free perspective to reappraise the political and cultural situation in Northern Ireland as it affects the whole of Ireland. He examines the role of language as a reflection of national and individual character. He once expressed this concern for language in the statement, "We [Irish playwrights] are talking to ourselves as we must, and if we are overheard in America or England, so much the better."<sup>4</sup>) He sees contemporary Ireland as being in a state of uneasy confusion, in which it is the dramatist's overwhelming duty to clarify, elucidate, and establish agreed codes, for purposes of communication and discussion. His satire makes it clear that there is no going back, that uncritical restoration of the Irish past is no solution to the contemporary malaise.

### Notes

\*This is a revised version of my paper read at the 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, Kyushu Chapter, held at Fukuoka Women's University on October 19, 1996.

Page references for quotations from the following sources are given in parenthesis after the citation.

Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island* (London: Methuen, 1988).

1. Hedge-schools, run on a fee-paying basis by private schoolmasters, provided the main means of education for the rural Catholic

population in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The growth of the hedge-schools is attributed to the act of 1695, Penal Laws, that forbade Catholics to run or teach in schools.

2. Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1985) p. vii.
3. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) p. 34.
4. "Talking to Ourselves.' Brian Friel Talks to Paddy Agnew," *Magill*, December 1980, p. 60.

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