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## Brian Friel as Linguist, Brian Friel as Drama Translator

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*Abstract:*


The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how linguistic and translation issues have always been Brian Friel's main concerns. The language question in Ireland is investigated in its multi-faceted implications in the light of Tom Paulin's pamphlet, *A New Look at the Language Question* (1985). Friel first dramatises this question in *Translations* (1980) and then uses translation as a powerful means of intercultural exchange in his Russian play, *Three Sisters* (1981). According to drama translation theorist Aaltonen, the translation of a foreign dramatic text, as well as its entire production, unavoidably represents a "reaction to the Other" when it is chosen for a performance in another culture. Therefore, Friel's *Three Sisters* is seen as an 'Irish reaction' to Chekhov's *Russia*.

*Keywords:* drama translation, Friel, Ireland, language, Russia

### 1. *Friel as Linguist*

It is quite interesting to note that there are two competing misrepresentations of the Field Day board, which was composed of Brian Friel, Stephen Rea, Seamus Heaney, David Hammond, Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin, who were formally announced as the 'Boards of Directors' of the Field Day Theatre Company in September 1981. The first is the naïve view that the members of the board were chosen as representative of the larger political and cultural configurations in Northern Ireland in order to balance evenly Protestant and Catholic concerns. The second is that Field Day has a covert political programme for Northern Ireland and that every activity of the company must necessarily have a definite political aim. In rejecting both misrepresentations, Marylynn J. Richtarik underlines not only that none of the board members is particularly representative of the community from which he comes, but also that "Field Day is a process, a practice, defined by what it does and, to a lesser extent, by what it says it is doing" (Richtarik 1994, 75). It seems, therefore, that the activity of the Field Day was mainly pragmatic and characterised by a great deal of disagreement because, as Heaney asserts, each of the directors "has a different version or vision of the thing" (75).

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However, even if the purposes of the Field Day appear at first sight as those of “a loose coalition more than a disciplined party cell” (75), the activities of its members have undoubtedly ‘a common core’, as shown in many pamphlets produced at that time. In fact, the first three titles, written by three of the directors themselves, touch, more or less directly, upon the crucial issue of language in Ireland.

Seamus Heaney in *An Open Letter* (1983), thirty-three stanzas in the form of a humorous verse letter, expresses his objection to the adjective ‘British’, used by *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, to describe his poetry. He attempts to explain the importance for a Northern Irish person whether he/she is called ‘British’ or ‘Irish’ and the significance of proper naming:

You’ll understand I draw the line  
 At being robbed of what is mine,  
*My patria*, my deep design  
 To be at home  
 In my own place and dwell within  
 Its proper name. (Heaney 1985 [1983], 25-26)

Seamus Deane in *Civilians and Barbarians* (1983) uses a less conciliatory tone than that employed by Heaney. He starts from the common identification of the English with those who live under the law – the civilians –, and the Irish with those who live beyond it – the barbarians – and shows how this view has remained a constant feature of the English mindset. According to him, this belief has become common currency in the language of politics: “The language of politics in Ireland and England, especially when the subject is Northern Ireland, is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilization” (Deane 1985 [1983], 39).

A more definite linguistic approach to the ‘language question’ is certainly that taken by Paulin in *A New Look at the Language Question* (1983). Paulin starts with the observation that there is strong link between language and nationality: “The history of language is often a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture. Arguments about the ‘evolution’ or the ‘purity’ of a language can be based on a simplistic notion of progress and doctrine of racial stereotypes” (Paulin 1985 [1983], 3). Through the story of Noah Webster, he explores the identity crisis of a nation without its own language and shows how Webster’s *Dictionary of American English* helped to create the concept of American English, which then appeared as native. In Ireland, as in America, even though English has become naturalised, the situation is more complicated because that language was regarded as an imposed colonial tongue. However, Paulin observes that Irish, which was not completely suppressed or rejected under the colonial rule, became central to the new national consciousness after the independence and it was restored as

the national language of the country. It has also played an important part in the school syllabus in the Republic and in Catholic schools in the North. According to Paulin, the attitude toward Irish language reflects social divisions in Ireland:

State education in Northern Ireland is based upon a pragmatic view of the English language and a short-sighted assumption of colonial status, while education in the Irish Republic is based on an idealistic view of Irish which aims to conserve the language and assert the cultural difference of the country. (Paulin 1985 [1983], 10-11)

Paulin does not indulge in the old opposition between the Irish and the English languages, but prefers to analyse English as it is actually spoken in Ireland today, variously referred as Hiberno English, Ulster English and Irish English, in order to make a relevant point. In fact, he considers that

[s]poken Irish English exists in a number of provincial and local forms, but because no scholar has as yet compiled a *Dictionary of Irish English* many words are literally homeless [...] The language therefore lives freely and spontaneously as speech, but it lacks any institutional existence and so is impoverished as a literary medium. (11)

In rejecting both Swift's "ideal, international English" and the "stateless" (12) language of Samuel Beckett, Paulin then shows his fascination with Ian Adamson's ideas expressed in *The Identity of Ulster*. Adamson argues that the people of Northern Ireland must recognise their common identity as Ulster men and women in order to transcend the political and religious divide – Great Britain/Ireland and Protestant/Catholic – and build a new, independent Northern Ireland together. In particular, he is impressed with the chapter on "The Language of Ulster", in which Adamson describes how the original language of the area, Old British, was displaced by the Irish language. The Irish was then wiped out by the English later in history. Thus, in Paulin's opinion, "[Adamson] denies an absolute territorial claim to either community in Northern Ireland and this allows him to argue for a concept of 'our homeland' which includes both communities" (1985 [1983], 13). From a linguistic point of view, Paulin wishes that "a confident concept of Irish English would substantially increase the vocabulary and this would invigorate the written language". Finally, he concludes that "a language that lives lithely on the tongue ought to be capable of becoming the flexible written instrument of a complete cultural idea" (Paulin 1985 [1983], 15).

Although Paulin is aware that his wish appears conciliatory and, in some respect, consolatory, the language he hopes for is, in fact, almost unattainable. By his own admission, he would welcome a literary English, which includes words that are typical of Irish speech in order to start from "a concept of civil duty and a definite cultural affiliation" (Paulin 1985 [1983], 16). At the same time, however, he knows that his linguistic and political purpose is "impossible in the present climate of confused opinions and violent politics". His

purpose, in fact, is hindered by the cultural impoverishment of the country, which reduces the language to “a fragmented speech”, to “an untold numbers of homeless words” (Paulin 1985 [1983], 16-17).

Among the various issues raised by Paulin in *A New Look at the Language Question*, there is also the controversial status which language acquires for the Irish writer as a trope of both alienation and belonging. The decline of the Irish, the loss and suppression of Gaelic culture and the uneasy relationship between the English and the Irish languages make the theme of writing in a language not one's own a peculiarity of Irish literature. To quote some examples that have become almost proverbial, in *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, after the encounter with the dean of studies of his college, Joyce makes Stephan Dedalus think, “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine [...] His language so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech” (Joyce 1976 [1916], 189). Similarly, the poet John Montague uses the metaphor of the “grafted tongue” to show the Irish writers' dilemma to express themselves in English: “To grow / a second tongue, as / harsh humiliation / as twice to be born” (Montague 1982, 110-111).

The trope of language as alienation and belonging, metaphorically seen in Paulin's essay, in Joyce's narrative and in Montague's poem, is also one of Friel's central concerns. As Friel states, a solution to the English colonisation in Ireland will be found only when the language question is brought to the fore: “the question of language [...] is one of the big inheritances which we have received from the British [...] We must make English identifiably our own language” (Agnew 1980, 60-61).

Some years later, Friel goes back to discuss this alienation that, from a purely linguistic viewpoint, acquires the overtones of a spiritual exile. The spiritual exile was that of the participants to the ‘Field Day enterprise’, who felt distant from both the Republic and the United Kingdom. In an interview with O'Toole, he stated his purpose:

We are trying to make a home [...] one of the problems for us is that we are constantly being offered the English home, we have been educated by the English home and we have been pigmented by an English home [...] And the rejection of all that, and the rejection into what, is the big problem. (Friel 1982, 22)

Friel's idea of making a home represents his personal response to the trope of language as alienation and belonging and the creation of a ‘metaphorical home of language’ becomes the theme of the playwright's *Translations*. Moreover, *Translations*, which was the Field Day Theatre Company's first production and was premiered on 23 September 1980 in Derry's Guildhall, seems to dramatise some of the issues raised by Paulin on the language question. Thus, the central events in *Translations* do not put in opposition the Irish and the English languages, but give, through the play's characters, a detailed analysis of the various attitudes toward English. They also highlight the importance of

dialects and their profound implications in order to articulate the “complete cultural idea” wished for by Paulin.

The plot of *Translations* revolves around two main events. First, the arrival of a platoon of Royal Engineers in Baile Beag, a rural, Irish speaking community in county Donegal, to map the country and translate Irish place-names into English. Second, the imminent abolition of the local hedge school, run by the schoolmaster Hugh, and its substitution with the new state-run national school and, consequently, the substitution of Irish with English as the teaching language of the Irish speaking community. Although *Translations* has proved a controversial play and much ink has been spilled over its sometime contradictory interpretations<sup>1</sup>, my brief analysis of the play will mainly focus on language and linguistic concerns.

Richard Kearney has been among those critics who highlighted the importance of language in *Translations* (Kearney 1987, 123-171). He notes how Friel's plays in the 1980s “have become increasingly concerned with the problem of language” (123) and that his theatre is not “just a theatre *of* language but a theatre *about* language” (123). Although it would be too naïve to think that *Translations* deals only with theoretical linguistic questions because any Irish playwright who talks about language almost certainly has a political overtone, none the less Friel himself claims that “the play has to do with language and only language” (1983 [1979], 60). According to Kearney, Friel's plays operate within two basic linguistic models – one ontological and the other positivistic. The former is, philosophically speaking, a kin to Heidegger's approach to language as “the house of Being” (Kearney 1987, 155), a language which “tells us the truth by virtue of its capacity to unlock the secret privacies of our historical Being” (155-156). The latter, which is associated with the philosophy of British Empiricism, uses words as instrumental to pragmatic progress and reduces language to a utilitarian weapon for the colonization of Being (156). In particular, Kearney claims that in *Translations*:

Friel identifies the ontological vocation of the Word with the Gaelic and Classical languages. It manifests itself in the local community's use of naming to release the secret of their psychic and historical landscape or in Hugh's excavations of Latin and Greek etymologies. Friel's play illustrates Heidegger's claim that language is the house of Being not only in so far as it permits to dwell poetically in our world but also that it grants us the power to recollect our past, our forgotten origins. (156)

The ontological and positivistic function of language is illustrated in two important moments of the play. When Owen, Hugh's son and Yolland's translator, recounts the story of a place called Tobair Vree, which is going to be renamed Brian's Well, he acknowledges, in the fate of this place-name, that language not only embodies the value of old names, but also a culture threatened by an imminent loss. Language used as ‘utilitarian weapon’ of colonisation is instead shown later in the play in the naïve and simplistic attitude held by Owen and Yolland, who believe in a one-to-one correspondence between places and their new names translated in English for the maps of the Ordnance Survey:

YOLLAND: A thousand baptisms!

OWEN: Eden's right! We name a thing and – bang – it leaps into existence!

YOLLAND: Each name a perfect equation with its roots.

OWEN: A perfect congruence with its reality. (Friel 1996, 422)

Language is also an essential feature of the play from a structural point of view. First, the audience is asked to believe that the characters on stage are speaking both Irish and English when in fact everyone is speaking English. Second, in the love scene between Maire, a Gaelic-speaking peasant girl, and Lieutenant Yolland, one of the English officers, the two young lovers manage to communicate their affection without a common language. In fact, Yolland recites the place names he has been learning during his stay in Maire's village, Baile Beag, which is the only Gaelic he knows. Thus, the play appears to be built between two extremes, the presence of language and its absence. In fact, there is a language that should be there, and is not – the Irish –, whereas a language that does not exist, is more than real – the personal language Maire and Yolland speak to each other to express their intimacy.

Furthermore, language has a crucial role in relation to the main question posed by the play, namely, what attitude Irish people should have towards English. The possible answers are epitomised by the characters of Manus, Owen and Hugh. Manus, Hugh's son, who is in love with Maire and is a schoolmaster himself, decides to leave Baile Beag at the end of the play and take up a job in another hedge school on Inis Meadhon, one of the Aran islands, where the Gaelic culture still survives. He represents the uncompromising nationalist position of those who believe that English language must be refused at all costs. However, his allegiance to Irish language and its cultural traditions, proves unviable and futile. Owen, Hugh's son and the British soldiers' pragmatic helper who wishes to bring Baile Beag into the modern world, moves from the self-assured joker of the first act to the rejection of his role in the mapping project. For him, as for his brother Manus, a mediation between Irish and English languages proves "impossible in the present climate of confused opinions and violent politics", of *Translations*, to use Paulin's quotation (1985 [1983], 16-17). Hugh, however, is the only one who demonstrates an unsuspected ability to adapt and he finally agrees to teach Maire English, as she is anxious to learn it in preparation for her impending emigration to America. When Owen apologises to his father for understanding too late that the translation of place-names was actually hiding "a bloody military operation", he announces:

HUGH: We must learn these new names... We must learn make them our own. We must make them our new home... It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language... we must never cease renewing these images; because once we do, we fossilise... to remember everything is a form of madness. (Friel 1996, 444-445)

Hugh appears to be the most accomplished interpreter of Paulin's and Friel's ideal vision of language policy in Ireland. In fact, for Hugh, as for Paulin, the language must be the "flexible instrument of a complete cultural idea" (Paulin 1985 [1983], 15) capable of renewing the legacy of the past in the light of unavoidable historical changes. Similarly, Friel (1982), in an interview, echoed almost word for word in Hugh's final lines, shows that *Translations* stands for the metaphorical journey of the language from 'the Irish home' to 'the English home'. In the attempt to find a compromise between the two languages, which is a reflection of cultural hybridity, the character of Hugh thus provides a more general response to the trope of language as alienation and belonging.

The importance of cultural hybridity<sup>2</sup> in relation to language and, in particular, to the use of dialects is also the topic of Maria Elena Doyle's article, "A Gesture to Indicate a Presence: Translation, Dialect and Field Day Theatre Company's Quest for an Irish Identity" (2000). She starts from the assumption that a dialect, which is by definition a linguistic hybrid, is a powerful tool for postcolonial writing because, as in Friel's *Translations*, it disrupts the enduring myths of a unitary Irish culture. As William B. Worthen states, the Field Day company sees Irish identity inextricably bound to the languages of Ireland rather than to the ancient native tongue alone (1995, 24). Thus, for "a company wishing to broaden the Irish theatre audience by bringing plays to smaller communities around Northern Ireland and the Republic, which rarely saw professional theatre, dialect has functioned as a significant means of connectivity" (Doyle 2000, 168). One of Doyle's observations has a particularly deep resonance. For her, the manipulation of dialect, by allowing Friel's multilingual characters to switch back and forth between Standard English and Hiberno-English, permits them to demonstrate the fluctuation in their cultural consciousness, rather than simply indicating which languages they are speaking. The representation of speech in the play, therefore, "alerts an audience not only to the slipperiness of language but also to individual characters' need to reconcile their disparate poles of identity" (170). This linguistic device suggests that to a change in language corresponds a change in self-understanding:

The community that speaks Hiberno-English is by its very nature unlike the community that speaks Gaelic, and thus the two languages must be employed differently. Particularly, through his multilingual characters, Friel reveals that both their speech and their identities are irrevocably hybrid. (170)

In conclusion, I would argue that Friel in *Translations* mainly focuses on language issues. Although he makes continuous references to George Steiner's theory of translation presented in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, as many critics have widely emphasised (Smith 1991, 392-409; Richtarik 1994, 33-35; Pine 1999, 209, 359-363), Friel seems more interested in Steiner's model

of communication than in his theory of translation. From Steiner, he derives that translation is only a special case of communication in general, and that Steiner's radical suggestion is that "communication outward is only a secondary, socially stimulated phase in the acquisition of a language. Speaking to oneself would be primary function" (Richtarik 1994, 33). Friel seems to suggest that, only once we have learnt to talk to ourselves, can translation take place. Steiner, who defined translation as a fourfold motion of a hermeneutic activity consisting of various phases – trust, aggression, embodiment and restitution – had already prioritized interlingual communication. In the chapter titled "Understanding as Translation", Steiner sums up the difficulties of communicating within the same language: "No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same thing, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings" (1998 [1975], 47). He then moves from communication in general to more specific translation questions and shows that it is only in the final phase of his hermeneutic motion, restitution, that the translator gives the energy back to the original and restores the balance between original and translation. The restoration of this balance is the aim of Friel's *Three Sisters*, which will be analysed in the light of drama translation's theoretical framework.

## 2. *Friel as Drama Translator*

To put it simply, my contention is that Friel becomes critically aware of the importance of translation and, in particular, of drama translation, when he finds himself in the position of a translator. As indicated before, I am certainly not denying the philosophical and cultural import of Friel's considerations on the 'act of translating' as shown in *Translations*. However, a thorough and systematic reflection on translation from an intercultural perspective and with specific reference to translation for the stage is shown in some of Friel's Russian plays and, in particular, in *Three Sisters*. As Sirkku Aaltonen, the translation scholar who has given a rather comprehensive analysis of drama translation states: "the choice of a translation strategy [...] is linked with the spatially and temporally confined code switch through these strategies become represented in the discourse of the completed translations" (Aaltonen 2000, 45). She then clarifies, using the metaphor of translation as "a territory inhabited by many tenants", that the relationship between the source text and its translation does not result from an independent choice because this choice is always tied up to "the time and place of the occupancy" (47). As any theatre production is tied to the time and place of its audience, Aaltonen's conviction is that the translation of a foreign dramatic text, as well as its entire production, unavoidably represents a "reaction to the Other" when it is chosen for a performance in another culture (58)<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, she exploits Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of "productive reception" (Fischer-Lichte 1990, 287) to investigate how the foreign elements of



the source culture undergo cultural transformation through the process of theatre production in order to make the target culture productive again (Aaltonen 2000, 49). She then identifies clear-cut categorisations - compatibility, alterity and integration - to account for the relationship that exists between source and target theatre texts. Theatre, in fact, is an art form based on society and communal experience and grows directly from a society, its collective imagination, its symbolic representations and its system of ideas and values (Brisset 1996, 5). As Aaltonen clarifies, a foreign theatre text is made "compatible" when this text is chosen and the adjustments carried out are made "in the interests of the integration of the foreign text into the aesthetics of the receiving culture as well as the social discourse of the target society" (Aaltonen 2000, 53). Compatibility, therefore, occurs when foreign works are selected "on the basis of some discursive [sic?] structures [...] in line with those in the target society" (53).

Thus, Friel attempts to make some Russian works, especially those of Chekhov and Turgenev, 'compatible' with Ireland and the Irish audience, with its social, cultural and political situation, as many critics have observed (York 1993, 164-177; Andrews 1995, 181-191; Pine 1999, 334-343; Randaccio 2001, 215-220)<sup>4</sup>. This is particularly true of his translation of *Three Sisters* (1981) and, to a lesser degree, of *Fathers and Sons* (1987) and of *A Month in the Country* (1992), which are adaptations from Turgenev's homonymous novels<sup>5</sup>.

*Three Sister*, first performed in the Guildhall, Derry, in 1981, was considered a "translation in the deepest sense of the word" capable of illuminating "the complexities and confusions of life in Ireland today" (Richtarik 1994, 112). Beside the pragmatic reasons that Friel's treatment of Chekhov's text was already available since the previous year, and that doing a classic might reduce the pressure of expectations on the Field Day Company after the unprecedented success of *Translations*, there are more profound motivations which pushed Friel towards the Russian playwright. For Friel, these motivations lie both in the Chekhov's artistic figure and in the similarities between Russia and Ireland. Chekhov, as a writer, was capable of giving an accurate representation of life in his art and, at the same time, was capable of bringing medical assistance to the villages he used to work for as a doctor. Similarly, "with Field Day, [Friel] was trying, like Chekhov, to accomplish something in the world outside the theatre, and the example of the Russian was proof that a writer could be socially committed without losing his artistic integrity" (Richtarik 1994, 114). However, parallels between Russia and Ireland definitely are what triggered Friel's imagination. In fact, both countries had largely peasant economies and a restricted gentry class whose power was imposed on the vast majority of society. Both were on the edge of Western Europe, industrially underdeveloped and conscious of their backwardness. The closeness between provincial Russia of the nineteenth century and provincial Ireland in Friel, however, dates back to those non-Russian plays such as *Living Quarters* (1977) and *Aristocrats* (1979). As in Chekhov, there is the "same emotional primacy of the family" and its sense of apartness,

the distinctive sensibility of its components, their capacity to dissipate their emotional energy in the activities of every day (York 1993, 164). According to Richard York, “there is in both Chekhov and Friel, a dramaturgy of loss, of the wasted opportunity, of a confronting of inertia” (164). Richard Pine states that the striking similarities between Russia and Ireland is instead that Chekhov’s and Friel’s characters “appear in a state of limbo, people to whom things happen and who initiate nothing, who surrender to fate and live for tomorrow because to do so is less demanding than to try and live in the present” (Pine 1999, 334). Thus, the melancholy pervading most nineteenth century Russian literature, from Turgenev to Goncharov, from Pushkin to Dostoyevsky, disguises a sense of an “intolerable waiting”, which acquires Beckettian overtones (335). In similar vein, Elmer Andrews notes that Friel’s Russian characters, like Gar O’Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* or Cass McGuire in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, have “a nostalgic yearning for a lost past or the dream of a Utopian future [...] an inability to live in the present” because they “keep looking back or looking forward” (Andrews 1995, 185).

Seamus Deane draws a more specific parallel between Chekhov’s Russia and Northern Ireland political situation, and equates the three sisters’ frustrated ambitions and thwarted lives with those of the Northern Ireland minority. For this minority, “neither acceptance [of the State] nor reunification are remote possibilities [...] so the present is determined by the promise of an unrealisable future” (Deane 1984, 83-84).

From a drama translation perspective, it is important to note that the various critical opinions expressed by York, Pine, Andrews and Deane on the *Three Sisters*’ translation, more or less overtly, account for Friel’s ‘reaction to the Other’ and they seem to describe the playwright’s attempt to make the original text productive again.

Friel himself described the operation he set out to accomplish and gave a detailed explanation of the translation strategy adopted toward his source text. He pointed out that his own translation was undertaken primarily as an act of love, that he had not adapted the play, changed it into an Irish setting or tried to give specifically Irish meanings. Moreover, his work was not even a translation in the usual sense, because he did not know a word of Russian. As he admitted, “what I did was simply to put six texts in front of me and tackle each line at a time, to see first of all what was the meaning of it, then what was the tone and then eventually what was the sound. It took me nine months in all” (O’Donnell 1981). Friel was aware that his version of the *Three Sisters* represented a profound cultural and political statement for the target audience, especially in the Field Day ‘enterprise’. In fact, Friel’s reason for a new rewrite of Chekhov’s play was that

[...] the versions of *Three Sisters* that we see and read in this country always seem redolent of either Edwardian England or the Bloomsbury set. Somehow the rhythms of these versions do not match with the rhythms of our own speech patterns, and I think that they ought to, in some way. (Friel 1980, 59)

What Friel emphasises in this comment is a tendency peculiar to the British stage to domesticate foreign drama texts as, more than often, the original texts are given to an anonymous translator to be translated literally and then reworked by a well-known playwright<sup>6</sup>. In the case of Chekhov's translations, this tendency has gone so far as to alter "the ideological basis of Chekhov's thinking" and create "not a Russian, but an English Chekhov invented through the translation process" (Bassnett 1998, 94). As Gunilla Anderman has caustically observed, "Today's Chekhov on the English stage has become so Anglicised that 'English Chekhov' has even been turned into an export product" (Anderman 2005, 129).

Some interesting questions arise when Friel's 'Irish Chekhov' is thoroughly analysed as drama translation, especially when compared with Chekhov's other English translations. What exactly is Friel's attitude towards the chekhovian original – Friel's "reaction to the Other", according to Aaltonen's definition (58)? And, more importantly, what is the most profound meaning, from a theatrical perspective, of making the Russian play compatible with its Irish translation?

There are four main aspects which can be singled out to answer these questions. First of all, there is what Friel's himself defines 'a decolonising process' in tune with the broader postcolonial agenda of the Field Day Theatre Company. As Rea, another co-founder of the company, said about the climate of the 1980s in Ireland, they were beginning "to try and throw off the old colonial thing" so that they could "get on with it themselves" (Richtarik 1994, 86). The process Friel specifically refers to in *Three Sisters* is the decolonisation of the Irish stage from all those chekhovian plays in which the Irish actors had to pretend "first of all, that they are English, and then that they're Russians" (O'Connor 1981 in Delaney 2000, 160). In fact, similarly to Rea's thought, Friel was convinced that a specific translation of Chekhov for an Irish audience would start "the decolonisation process of the imagination [which] is very important if a new Irish personality is to emerge" (160).

Second, there is the practical need of using a language easier to speak for the actors: "I wrote this play in an Irish idiom because with English translations Irish actors become more and more remote" (160). Richtarik reports that Friel's adjustments are particularly evident for some roles such as Natasha's, whose lower social status is portrayed in her language richer in colloquialism and local expressions. For example, she exclaims: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph! You put the heart across me!" (Friel 1992a, 120) and "Sweet mother of God" (36), and she refers to herself as "an eejit" (40). Her speech is also full of specific Irish constructions, as in "sure aren't we all" (76). However, other characters also use occasional Irish expressions or constructions. Kulygin announces that Chebutykin "has to pick a night like this to go on the hammer. Footless!" (78) and Doctor Chebutykin repeats at the end of the play "Matters sweet damn all... sweet damn all it matters" (123). The Irish aspects of Friel's translation does not only consist of a

large deployment of localisms, but also concern the creation of distinctively Irish references. When Natasha threatens to throw the elderly servant, Anfisa, out of the house, the reference to “bogs” cannot pass unnoticed. In fact, she shouts:

NATASHA: She is no use any more! She’s a peasant and that’s where she belongs – out in the bogs! You have her spoiled! If this house is ever to be run properly, we cannot carry old baggage like that. (Friel 1992a, 79)

Similarly, when Andrej complains about the lack of great personalities in their town, his reference to the ‘Island of Saints and Scholars’ is evident:

ANDREJ: Look at this town. One hundred thousand people – all indistinguishable. In the two hundred years this town has been in existence, it hasn’t produced one person of any distinction – not one saint, not one scholar, not one artist. (Friel 1992a, 111)

The third reason which makes Friel’s translation important in relation to the Russian Other is that *Three Sisters* on the Irish stage becomes the expression of the exchange of dramatic texts in intercultural theatre. In discussing the relationship between Chekhov and Turgenev in another Russian rewrite, *A Month in the Country*, Friel adopts the term “metabiosis” to describe how Chekhov metaphorically feeds on his Russian predecessor:

The term metabiosis in chemistry denotes a mode of living in which one organism is dependent on another for the preparation of an environment in which it can live. The relationship between Chekhov and Turgenev was richly metabiotic. (Friel 1992b, 10)

The term “metabiosis” which refers to the intracultural movement of texts, can be taken a step further when the exchanges of texts in translation move beyond the national borders<sup>7</sup>. Significantly, from “metabiosis” we move to Patrice Pavis’s metaphor of the “hourglass”, one of the most powerful tropes employed to describe drama translation in the 1990s from an intercultural point of view:

[An hourglass] is a strange object reminiscent of a funnel and a mill. In the upper bowl is the foreign culture, which is more or less codified and solidified in diverse anthropological, sociocultural modelizations. In order to reach us, this culture must pass through a narrow neck. If the grains of culture or their conglomerate are sufficiently fine, they will flow through without any trouble, however slowly, into the lower bowl, that of the target culture, from which point we observe this slow flow. The grains will rearrange themselves in a way which appears random, but which is partly regulated by their passage through some dozen filters put in place by the target culture and the observer (Pavis 1992, 4). As ‘metabiosis’ keeps alive the dialogue the tension between past and present, the metaphor of the “hourglass” illustrates the intercultural amalgamation of cultures in translated drama text. This metaphor thus not only embodies the “fusion of a mid-nineteenth-century Russian story and late twentieth-century feelings and responses in a vibrant and disturbing way”, but also “carries a special force for the contemporary Irish and also non-Irish audience”. (Kurdi 1995, 296)

The final aspect which renders the chekhovian original compatible with Friel, and best exemplifies the Irish playwright's 'reaction to the Russian Other', is Friel's display of his stylistic dramaturgical hallmark. In fact, that the more Friel distances from the Russian *Three Sisters* in his translation, the more he comes to the fore as dramatist. As many critics have highlighted, the ending of his *Three Sisters* bears witness to perhaps the greatest modifications of the whole play and, whereas Chekhov ends as it begins, Friel includes the possibility of change. He incorporates two new interludes of his own devising, two moments of potential escape from the characters' frustrating and stagnant lives, in which music and dance can become a means of transformation. One is the scene in which Fedotik, Roddy and Irina sing together and there is "the expectancy that suddenly everybody might join the chorus - and dance - and that the room might be quickened with music and laughter" (Friel 1992a, 55). The other is when Olga delivers her final lines and restates the importance of music:

OLGA: Just listen to the music. It's so assured, so courageous. It makes you want to go on, doesn't it?...But our life isn't over yet. By no means! We are going to go on living! And that music is so confident, so courageous, it almost seems that as if it is about to be revealed very soon why we are alive and what our suffering is for. If only we knew that. If only we knew that. (Friel 1992a, 23)

Leaving aside the controversial reading of these two moments, which have been seen either as optimistically bringing a future-oriented view of life or as a failed attempt of breaking out of the futility and boredom of provincialism, music and dance later acquire a healing and subversive power in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), a distinctive trait of Friel's drama.

### 3. Conclusions

This paper has tried to articulate Friel's position toward new language insights in Ireland, which emerged from the critical reflection proposed in the 1980s by Field Day and was shown in its practical realisation in *Translations*. The debate on drama translation instead, which started to develop in the late 1970s in the English-speaking countries and gained momentum at the turn of twenty-first century, has provided the theoretical framework according to which Friel can be considered as a drama translator from an intercultural perspective in his version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Far from being an exhaustive treatment of very complex topics, which would require much more investigation, this paper starts with the assumption that language and translation have always been crucial in Ireland. They have assumed various guises throughout the centuries, becoming in turn weapons of political propaganda, agents of linguistic reform or catalysts for cultural renaissance. Friel as linguist and translator has contrib-

uted to shake off the stereotypical vision of the Irish as those who have ‘a rich language’ and ‘a rich literature’, showing how often “words are signals, counters, which imprison a civilisation in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of facts” (Friel 1996, 419), as Hugh admonishes in *Translations*. At the same time, he has also taught us to make those very same words both productive and valuable again.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Grene sees *Translations* as one of the three plays, together with Dion Baucault’s *The Shaughraun* (1874), George Bernard Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904) as the most representative examples of the process of stage interpretation of Ireland (1999, 6). Most interpretations of *Translations* have been in postcolonial terms from the 1990s on: McGrath (1999); Morales Ladrón in Gonzales (2003, 193-202); Bertha in Roche (2006, 154-165); Boltwood (2009 [2007]); De Pilar Roya Grasa (2011, 205-215).

<sup>2</sup> The importance of the notion of hybridity has been recently underlined in Chu He (2010, 117-129).

<sup>3</sup> The translation theorists who have given poignant examples of representations of the ‘Other’ in translation are Lefevere (1992) and Venuti (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Chekhov and Turgenev have had a constant influence on Friel’s dramatic production as *Three Sisters* (1981), *Fathers and Sons* (1987), *A Month in the Country* (1992), *Uncle Vanya* (1998), *The Yalta Game* (2001) and *Afierplay* (2002) demonstrate.

<sup>5</sup> For reference to adaptation and the investigation of its relationship to translation see Marta Minier (2014).

<sup>6</sup> This topic has been dealt with in the 1990s especially by Bassnett (1991, 101) and, more recently, by Marinetti (2013, 29-32).

<sup>7</sup> According to Pavis, *intracultural* which is “the correlative of the intercultural” refers to the search for national traditions in order to define one’s theatre in relation to external influences and understand more deeply the origins and transformation of one’s own culture (Pavis 1996, 5-6).

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