

What Comes between Chekhov and Friel?: *Three Sisters* in Translations

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A passing remark made by Colin MacInnes in 1962 on what constitute "Irish writers" deserves a closer look even today: "by [Irish writers][...] I mean writers in English of whatever race and faith who have drawn their essential strength from Ireland" (517). Crucially, such writers do not seem to have "drawn their strength" by merely taking what "Ireland," as MacInnes calls it, had to offer; the writers on their part have given just as much to this "Ireland," and so the cycle continues. In that particular sense, the significance of Brian Friel's *Three Sisters* proves to be three-fold. For one thing, the play was put on the stage in 1981 by none other than the Field Day Theatre Company (Andrews 181), the "role" (61) of which, as Elmer Andrews reminds us, "Seamus Deane compares [...] to that of the early Abbey theatre [sic] in Dublin" (61), albeit with "a more pluralistic society" in vision (61). As for the reason why Friel and Field Day chose to work on a Russian play from the early twentieth century, we can turn to Marilyn J. Richtarik, who, while claiming matter-of-factly that "Field Day needed a new script" (112) and the Friel translation was "available" (112), does sum up what a play like Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* meant to Friel, Field Day, and a potential theatre public:

Friel also believed that the classics of world theatre were not performed often enough in Ireland, and, since a major part of the company's purpose was to create an audience for theatre in places that had no real theatrical tradition, naturally he wanted to expose this new audience to the best of world drama. (112)

Thirdly, and most importantly in our discussion, we have an intricate "translation" jigsaw: apart from the fact that the translator of *Three Sisters* also happens to be the author of a play *Translations*, which may have led at least some members of the *Three Sisters* audience to having a sense of double-exposure,¹ what we inevitably find between Chekhov and Friel are, of course, other English translations of the play. Friel's *Three Sisters* exerts its distinctiveness by way of those translations. As Christopher Murray explains, making an "Irish-English" (213) play out of the Russian "classic" was what Friel intended, but that was not all:

The gap Friel felt between the available English translations of *Three Sisters* and the language/syntax of modern Irish-English impelled him not only to search for a version more true to the English

spoken in Ireland but to reflect on the relation of translation to human communication. (213)

In practical terms, if indeed his *Three Sisters* "communicated" with the audience at the Field Day production is another matter, to which we will come back later.

Before moving on to an analysis of two English translations of *Three Sisters* vis-à-vis the Friel translation, we might briefly touch upon Thomas Kilroy's "transfer" (Murray 213) of *The Seagull*, also performed in 1981 by another company (Kilroy, *The Seagull* 7), and what Frank McGuinness has to say about working on "classics." Set on an "estate" in nineteenth-century western Ireland (*The Seagull* 7), Kilroy's Anglo-Irish *Seagull* may be described as being fairly "radical" (Murray 213). On the question of his adaptation foregrounding "gaps" between languages, societies, cultures, and so on, Kilroy reminisces in an interview what had been suggested to him by the director, Max Stafford-Clark ("Tom Kilroy in Conversation" 246): if "the typical English production of Chekhov made it sound as though it were set in the Home Counties" (246), with some "genteel polish put on top of Chekhov" (246), Stafford-Clark wanted to put more emphasis on the "much rougher" (246) Chekhov, which meant that the "characters lived in a world having its share of chaos and brutality" (246). Friel's *Three Sisters* is no less vigorous a work of translation, but only in a quintessentially Frielian way; what we recognise in any translation or adaptation by Friel of a Russian or non-Russian play or prose fiction is also something which we cannot fail to see and hear in Friel's original plays. Put simply, and to borrow Andrews' term, Friel is a writer of "New Humanism" (63); eschewing "apocalyptic tendencies of the Postmodern" (Andrews 63), Friel welcomes "new opportunities, new forms and contexts, new possibilities for reshaping the world and renegotiating identity [...] without completely abandoning traditional moral value" (63). Friel being a New Humanist will be touched upon briefly again at the end of the essay.

McGuinness, also a well-known translator of Chekhov² and other "classics," reveals a kind of "post-Field Day" sentiment in a fairly recent interview:

[W]hat is significant is that I am now being invited by companies outside Ireland to do versions. And I do them as I hear them, and they do them as they want to speak them. ("Frank McGuinness in Conversation" 305)

Included in his "versions" is the 1997 Théâtre de Com-

plicité production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* ("Frank McGuinness in Conversation" 305). The question "how 'Irish' is McGuinness or Kilroy or Friel in the twenty-first century?" will not be asked in our discussion, but we will certainly remind ourselves of the fact that Friel's *Three Sisters* is now twenty-odd years old, in a sense a semi-"classic."

In what follows, Friel's translation of *Three Sisters* will be put against two other English translations of the play. Despite, or prompted by, Nick Dear's comment, "one can pick up many Penguin Classics playscripts, most of which are translations dating from the fifties, and they look absolutely ghastly" (274), we shall first look at the early-1950s Penguin edition of *Three Sisters* with Elisaveta Fen as the translator. *Three Sisters* in the Friel translation will be discussed next. We will then take up Michael Frayn's translation of *Three Sisters*, published by Methuen; in translating Chekhov's major plays, Frayn may have "achieved as close to perfection in the translator's art as it is possible to get" (Laskowski 188). Because of the limited space given here, we will focus on act 1 of the four-act play in all the translations. Still early in the play, the first act of *Three Sisters* delineates nonetheless the major characters and their *mise en scène* in quite clear a manner, which is typically Chekhovian. The Russian text of *Three Sisters* in an edition published by Bristol Classical Press will also be consulted.

If a word of caution is required as we start discussing Fen's translation of *Three Sisters*, it has to do with the fact that, from the very beginning, a Chekhov play translated by Fen was more of a work of "literature" than a play-text. Fen's *Three Plays: "The Cherry Orchard," "Three Sisters," "Ivanov"* was published in 1951 to be included in the then Penguin Classics, whose description, "a library of new translations of the world's greatest literature," we can find on the back cover of the 1953 reprint of *Three Plays*. Crudely put, Fen's translation of *Three Sisters* has a meaning so long as the pleasure we take in reading the play is comparable to that in reading the 1950s Penguin Classics translation of, say, *War and Peace* or *The Charterhouse of Parma*.

True to its purpose, Fen's *Three Sisters* stands out as a fairly "literal"³ translation of the Chekhov play. The 1951 Penguin edition does not mention which Russian edition Fen chose to use, but a comparison between Fen's translation and the Russian text in the Bristol Classical edition will show that Fen's *Three Sisters* carefully traces not only the characters' lines but also the stage directions "as they appear" in the Russian text. Not a single "пауза" [pause]⁴ in act 1 is cut by Fen, nor do we find any "character-building" lines added to the dialogues and soliloquies. At the same time, by no means what we

might call a "word-for-word" translation, Fen's *Three Sisters* betrays by way of vocabulary and expressions some interesting choice, which, though somewhat inconsistent, is presumably intentional. Soon after act 1 begins, for example, Irina [spelt "Irena" in Fen's translation] makes a little speech:

[...] and suddenly I felt so happy, and I thought of the time when we were children, and Mother was still alive. And then such wonderful thoughts came to me, such wonderful stirring thoughts! (Fen 94-95)

If Irina sounds casually naïve, even a little immature, which is helped by her timing sentences with the help of the conjunction "and," the word also used frequently by Olga in her opening speech (Fen 92) but in a more sober manner, we find that Irina in the Russian text also beats to the word "и" [and] when she makes that particular speech:

[...] и вдруг почувствовала радость, и вспомнила детство, когда ещё была жива мама. И какие чудные мысли волновали меня, какие мысли! (Chekhov 13)

On the other hand, towards the end of act 1, Irina expresses doubts about happiness in life by using the word "да" [yes] in such a manner that Fen's translation gives it an explanatory sentence "maybe it is" rather than the literal equivalent, "yes":

You say that life is beautiful. Maybe it is—but what if it only seems to be beautiful? (Fen 112)

Вы говорите: прекрасна жизнь. Да, но если она только кажется такой! (Chekhov 27)

Fen's *Three Sisters* might also be "set," after Kilroy and Stafford-Clark, in the 1950s Home Counties. We find, for example, that some of the characters avoid using the word "God" when they make exclamatory remarks: whereas in the Russian text "God" is always "Бог" [God], hence "Боже мой" [My God] (Chekhov 15) and "Слава Богу" [Thank God] (28), in Fen's translation "God" is often replaced by other terms, hence "Good Heavens!" (Fen 96) and "Thank goodness" (113). The general undertone that suggests an Anglicised setting is easily detected when Irina, Olga, and Masha together tease their brother, Andrey (Fen 106). Irina in Fen's translation leads the hurrah with

Three cheers for Andriusha! Andriusha's in love! (106)

while in the Russian text she is supposed to say

Браво, браво [Bravo, bravo]! Бис [Bis]! Андриушка влюблён! (Chekhov 23)

which shows a distinctly Continental flair.

Friel's *Three Sisters*, first published in 1981 by Gallery Press in Loughcrew, County Meath, is quite striking in

its "performance-friendly" style, a far cry from Fen's translation,⁵ but then Friel's *Three Sisters* is not a direct translation from the Russian, which of course Fen's is; working on his *Three Sisters*, what Friel had as "source materials" (Andrews 181) were six "versions" of the Chekhov play in English (181). If Friel is a "translator" of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, it is more precisely in the sense that he wrote a text in his style based on a group of texts in other styles of English.⁶

"Critical reaction was mixed," notes Richtarik (126) on the 1981 Field Day production of *Three Sisters*. Pointed out among other things by Richtarik is that "the performance ran on far too long" (126), four hours on the opening night, which was later reduced to three (126-27) but was "still considered by many people to be too long" (127); what Richtarik calls "Friel's labour" (122) indeed helped *Three Sisters* become "wordier a play" (122). Nevertheless, it is Richtarik's overall opinion that "Friel's adjustments are obvious only in a few roles" (120). Andrews seems to share that view:

[Friel] largely contents himself with localizing some of the detail and colloquialising some of the language, and it was generally agreed that these understandings were accomplished with tact and subtlety. (182)

My argument will be that Friel's "adjustments" are altogether very much of a paradox: on the one hand, the top-up stage directions and characters' lines function in such a way that the translation as a whole looks rather like an ornamentation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*; it is not difficult, on the other hand, for us to see that the translation also gives a sharp edge to the Chekhov play.

In what kind of a manner, for example, does Irina or Olga or Masha express her longing for Moscow? It has often been suggested that Moscow in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* is like Godot in *Waiting for Godot* (Gilman xxx). The problem with that particular analogy is, whereas Vladimir and Estragon do not seem to know for certain if they should be waiting for Godot at all, the three sisters in the Chekhov play are all deadly certain, or at least they think they are, that Moscow is *the* place where they should be. Either in Fen's translation or in the Russian text, we find that the three sisters quite "self-consciously" voice their feelings, in so many words, about their *not* being in Moscow and that their gestures, including laughing and crying, match their words perfectly. Once in Friel's translation, Irina, Olga, and Masha get even more articulate, or more overtly "desperate," in expressing their longing for Moscow. When she hears that the visitor, Vershinin, is from Moscow, Irina in Fen's translation reacts simply and clearly: "[...] and you come from Moscow! Well, what a surprise!" (102). That

is more or less what Irina in the Russian text (Chekhov 19) says. Friel's translation has Irina use the word "omen" instead:

IRINA. And now Colonel Vershinin. And from Moscow. Olga, it's an omen!

VERSHININ. It's a—?

OLGA. What she means is—we're moving to Moscow. (Friel, *Three Sisters* 22-23)

Both Vershinin's bafflement and Olga's follow-up on what her sister has said are additions, which the introduction of the word "omen," and its connotations thereof, apparently necessitates. On her part, Olga in Friel's translation is no less eager to choose the "right" words to express her feelings. When she makes a speech about the arrival of spring and her renewed desire for Moscow, Olga has to take a second before coming up with the word "elated," which she crosses out immediately; she is obviously happier with the word "exalted":

And I felt—I felt elated. No, exalted! And suddenly and with all my soul I longed, I yearned to go back home again. (Friel, *Three Sisters* 12)

Olga the wordsmith has no equivalent in Fen's translation: "[...] I felt so moved and so happy! I felt such a longing to get back home to Moscow!" (94); a word-for-word translation from the Russian (Chekhov 13) would be "[...] joy stirred up in my heart[...]" [my translation], and Olga in the Russian text does not stop to search for a "better" word. Throughout the play, Masha is somewhat of a rebel in the family; in act 1, she also happens to be "in bad form" according to one of her sisters in Friel's translation (*Three Sisters* 35), or "a bit out of humour" in Fen's (111), which entitles her, as it were, to retorting against other people's comments as often as she pleases. Upon hearing Andrey mention the fact that he and the three sisters are accomplished polyglots, Masha in Fen's translation quips, "Knowing three languages in a town like this is an unnecessary luxury. In fact, not even a luxury, but just a sort of useless encumbrance" (107), which comes close to what she says in the Russian text (Chekhov 23). Masha in Friel's translation goes much further than that:

ANDREY. Oh, yes. The Prozorov children are all competent linguists.

MASHA. And you can imagine how useful it is to be able to speak three languages in a town like this! It's almost a necessity, isn't it? (Friel, *Three Sisters* 29)

By twisting her brother's lines, twice over, in quite a virulent manner, she more markedly shows her profound unhappiness in being far away from Moscow.

Indeed, we might say that all the characters in Friel's

Three Sisters have an inclination for some kind of exaggeration, that is, as long as we care to analyse them against their counterparts in translations like Fen's. By "exaggeration" we mean Friel's characters almost over-articulating what they think and feel: vivid, animated, and often extremely funny lines along with carefully conceived stage directions bring out the characters' thoughts and feelings with such an impact. Masha's upright and preachy husband, Kulygin, loves to use long words in Friel's translation; one such line, "[...] Masha, I may say is the very personification of kindness and consideration and loyalty and circumspection and—" (Friel, *Three Sisters* 35), highlights the meaningful manner in which Vershinin, who will have an affair with Masha, changes the topic of the conversation: "I'll try some of this dark vodka, I think" (35). Just as upright and preachy, Kulygin in Fen's translation talks more cryptically of Masha, hence "She's got a sweet nature, such a very sweet nature!" (111). Natasha, who will eventually become the mistress of the house, is highly conscious in Friel's *Three Sisters* of the fact that neither her speech nor her behaviour is naturally as "posh" (Friel, *Three Sisters* 36) as that of Irina's, or even as that of anyone who has come to Irina's party (40). In Fen's translation Natasha is embarrassed and upset because she has to face "a lot of people" (112, 115) who in Andrey's words "just teas[e]" her (115); unlike in Friel's *Three Sisters*, the question of her being or not being "posh" is never brought up by Natasha herself. When she and Andrey kiss at the end of act 1, they are in Fen's translation spotted by "two officers" who, speechless, "stand and stare in amazement" (115). The kissing is cheerfully commented on in Friel's translation by Roddey, who is portrayed as a homosexual: "Oh my goodness me! Just look at those two happy petals" (Friel, *Three Sisters* 41).

As for how "Irish" Friel's *Three Sisters* can be, some readers detect elements of "Irishness" even in the added lines and stage directions that have no overt "local" connections. A case in point is one of Kulygin's lines, "The most wonderful thing about the human spirit is its resilience" (Friel, *Three Sisters* 34), being referred to as a comment on Northern Ireland (Richtarik 121); there is nothing equivalent to that line in Kulygin's speech either in Fen's translation or in the Russian text. Friel's translation has Irina, Olga, Masha, and the other characters altogether "outperform" their theoretical counterparts in what could be called *Ur-Three Sisters*. It is not simply in directional style that we have come a long way from Constantin Stanislavski,⁷ to whom characters in Chekhov's plays were "almost always outwardly calm while inwardly throbbing with emotional turmoil" (Stanislavski 212).

In the school of *Three Sisters* translators, Friel and Frayn roughly belong to the same generation; Frayn's *Three Sisters* premiered in 1985 at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester (Frayn, *Three Sisters* 190), albeit the translation itself had apparently been meant for some prior production (Frayn, "A Note on the Translation" 359). By the time their *Three Sisters*'s came out, Friel had long been one of the most talented of playwrights in the English language and Frayn had some of his major successes in playwriting already behind him. Nevertheless, the parallel ceases at a certain point. In his apologia for translating Chekhov's plays, Frayn writes that, unlike most of the other Chekhov translators, he has the knowledge of the Russian language while being a practising playwright ("Note" 356-57). His assertion, "translating a play is rather like writing one" ("Note" 357), thus draws our attention in the way any similar comment made by Friel would not. Whereas playwright-translator Friel managed to pull to his side what at the time was considered the canon, namely, the "English" translations of *Three Sisters*, playwright-translator Frayn just as consciously pulled that very canon to *his* side, which happened to be very much of a world of a Russophone as well as of an Anglophone. For an actor like Ian McKellen, who has performed in a number of Chekhov's plays but is particularly aware of the fact that in English productions "we don't do Chekhov—we do *translations* of Chekhov" [original emphasis] (McKellen 122), whether or not a translator is well-groomed in the Russian language will hardly be a small issue; McKellen, for example, points out that, without knowing much Russian, "you cannot be certain about the rhythm" (122) which should be apparent in Chekhov's plays.

It is a commonly held view that Frayn exercised his prerogative as a translator ingeniously and wrote up a set of masterpieces. By his own account, the "principles" ("Note" 357) Frayn had in mind as he translated Chekhov's plays from the Russian were that "each line should be what that particular character would have said at that particular moment if he [sic] had been a native English-speaker" (357) and that such a line would be "as immediately comprehensible as it was in the original" (357). Jacek Laskowski sums up the result of Frayn's effort:

The English is exquisite, the rendering of the Chekhovian mood and temper is virtually indistinguishable from the mood of the Russian original. If Chekov [sic] had written the plays in English, they would have been Frayn's translations. (188)

Unlike Friel's or Fen's translation, *Three Sisters* in the Frayn translation does rather strongly remind us of

verse plays written in the early twentieth century.⁸ Granted that Frayn's *Three Sisters* is actually *not* a verse play, we might at least call the characters' lines in the Frayn translation "free verse" in a wider sense of the term. Olga's speech about the arrival of spring and her renewed desire for Moscow, part of which we have already seen in Friel's translation, may serve as one of the more obvious examples:

[...] Everything would be in blossom already, everything would be warm, everything would be awash, with sunshine. Eleven years have gone by, but I remember it all as if it were yesterday. Oh God, I woke up this morning, I saw the light flooding in, I saw the spring, and I felt such a great surge of joy, such a passionate longing for home. (Frayn, *Three Sisters* 194)

Here, an influence of "liturgical prose" could possibly be detected, too. On the other hand, when Chebutykin, the doctor, dismisses Masha's comment on his drinking habits, we find in his lines some playful tricks on rhyme: "Oh, pish and tush! That's all past history. It's two years since I last went on the spree" (Frayn, *Three Sisters* 211). Chebutykin's lines in the Friel translation make a great contrast, though they show the doctor's mischief just as effectively: "Me? Drink? [...] I've been dry for five hundred and ninety seven and a half days now" (Friel, *Three Sisters* 34). Irina in Friel's *Three Sisters*, as we have seen, takes the arrival of Vershinin as an "omen"; in Frayn's translation, Irina's "surprise," as Fen puts it, seems to be enhanced by the alliterative "b"s:

You're from Moscow... It's like a bolt from the blue!
(Frayn, *Three Sisters* 202)

In fact, "free verse" permeates the characters' lines in Frayn's *Three Sisters*: even what could be a most mundane remark by Kulygin seems to play on rhyme in the hands of Frayn, hence "Yesterday I worked from first thing in the morning until eleven at night, went tired to bed, and am today a happy man" (*Three Sisters* 211). Quite unlike the "outperforming" characters in Friel's translation, Irina, Olga, Masha, and all the other characters in Frayn's *Three Sisters* sound as if they were trying very hard to "double" Ur-Irina, Ur-Olga, Ur-Masha, and so on.

Has Friel's *Three Sisters*, by now a semi-"classic," fared well in the seas of Chekhov translations and adaptations? *The Seagull* adapted by Kilroy is given a whole chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, published in 2000 with Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain as the editors; the book does not at all mention the Friel translation of *Three Sisters*. Friel's play-text, while not being a full-fledged adaptation in the sense Kilroy's *The Seagull* is, on the other hand may be a bit too audacious to be

taken seriously as a translation. It could be argued that a New Humanist clearly shows in Friel's middle-of-the-road *Three Sisters*; nevertheless, if we look at his other "versions" of Chekhov, the latest of which include *The Bear* and *The Yalta Game*, it is quite apparent that "Chekhovian Friel" has changed its form and style in the past two decades; the playwright is still measuring his distance from Chekhov.

Notes

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¹For Friel's own account of how, in the course of writing, *Translations* was influenced by *Three Sisters* and vice versa, see Agnew 145-46.

²Lucid and yet fairly "literal," McGuinness' *Three Sisters* is not a direct translation from the Russian.

³The translation of *Three Sisters* by Peter Carson for the latest Penguin edition is even more strictly "literal" (Carson 201-80).

⁴"Pauses" were sometimes doggedly followed in earlier productions of Chekhov's plays (Senelick 81).

⁵For example, the stage directions tend to be extensive as well as more descriptive in Friel's translation.

⁶According to Friel, "Of course Fen is perfect for England" (Gillespie 156).

⁷For more on Stanislavski's productions and Chekhov's reaction to them, see, for example, chapter 1 of Allen.

⁸It is Frayn's translation, rather than Friel's, that more readily reminds us of W. B. Yeats.

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