

## Friel, McGuinness, and Translation(s)

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If “translation” to writers of Irish origin has always and necessarily meant what Michael Cronin calls “encounters” (1), there was a time when writers in and from Ireland had to suffer as much as they benefited from such “encounters.” John Millington Synge, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett among others immediately spring to mind; in their respective manners the three writers did in fact turn the question of “translation” upside-down, which nonetheless proved to be their answer, or answers, to that very question. “Anglo-Irish” was a passion for Synge, the “language” which Declan Kiberd describes as “the particular brand of English spoken in rural Ireland, under the historic influence of the Irish language” (xxxii). As for Beckett writing in French, it is quite possible that he “[had] in mind [...] a full-scale assault not only against English but also against *his own* language” (Devenney 141) [original emphasis]. We are not merely talking about translation from one language to another or from one dialect to another; by our definition, writers are *de facto* translators whenever they write in, write about, or even create what we might call an idiolect or some kind of personal meta-language, obvious examples of which may easily be found in *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce, the author of this novel, is also a *de facto* translator in the sense that Jacques Derrida, the creator of the term *différance*, which “speaks [...] of what Derrida would call the possibility-impossibility of translation” (Niranjana 144), may also be regarded as a *de facto* translator. As far as their creative resources were concerned, Joyce, Beckett, and Synge clearly benefited from their “encounters”; on the other hand, it was precisely for being such *good* translators that the three had to take the consequences:

[Synge’s] work, so deeply rooted in the Gaelic tradition, was rejected by the strident professional Gaels of his own time because it was written in the English language. If Joyce and Beckett had to endure the hardships of exile in order to write their masterpieces, then the kind of inner exile endured by Synge in his own country can have been scarcely less severe. (Kiberd 6-7)<sup>1</sup>

Works of translation, in other words, could not possibly stand alone; whether they liked it or not, the three writers in effect made a highly contentious statement by producing translations—“masterpieces,” which resulted in, or was the result of, their going into “exile.”

Coming down the generations, we find a playwright like Frank McGuinness, whose *The Factory Girls* may be regarded as yet another example of translation, especially

in the sense that the playwright in this particular piece of work pays homage, as it were, to Synge. If part of McGuinness’ intention in working on *The Factory Girls* was to “record the culture in which his mother and aunts had worked” (Mikami 135), the play certainly had to have a bunch of female characters whose “spiky, quick [verbal] exchanges” (136) would be their “only weapon” (136). Nevertheless, McGuinness is also quite unpretentiously a writer of a post-“exile” generation. The entire collection of his plays turns out to be a somewhat casual reminder of the fact that, for writers in and from Ireland, the very concept of “translation” went through a change in roughly the last two decades of the twentieth century. While the change did not seem to diminish the power of “encounters” in Cronin’s sense, it did affect writers of Irish origin in such a way that they were now free *not* to make the kind of statement which, as mentioned above, had unmistakably shaped writers like Beckett, Joyce, and Synge. Writers of McGuinness’ generation were no longer obliged to translate anything for a cause related to Ireland and its language, or its languages, which does not mean that those writers stopped thinking about such a cause. Indeed, cut to the bare bones, what the change meant to a writer of Irish origin was that she or he could now pursue whatever cause she or he thought was worth pursuing, which may or may not have much to do with Ireland or its language(s). This is quite apparent in the range of themes as well as styles of writing taken up by the latest-generation playwrights of Irish origin, that is, from Sebastian Barry to Conor McPherson and even to Martin McDonagh, who, rather tellingly, is a Londoner.

In an interview, McGuinness talks about his “unapologetically” (McGuinness, “In Conversation” 305) pragmatic attitude towards translating non-English plays into English, or, more precisely, translating other people’s literal translations of plays into *his* English:

[T]he private ambition is there, too, which is to learn more about writing plays, really. Because these authors, Ibsen more than anybody, and Lorca, Strindberg, Chekhov, they teach you more about your craft. We are dealing with an art form, unapologetically dealing with an art form, and we need to know more about it. A painter has to go and look at other traditions, you have to go and look at other theatres and know at least what you’re rejecting. (305)

If the playwright has a choice, so have readers and mem-

bers of the audience. We find, for example, an interesting variety in the manners in which critics and scholars interpret the McGuinness translation of Sophocles' *Electra*; on the one hand, according to J. Michael Walton,

neither translation nor production made any attempt directly to invoke an Irish context. Nevertheless, the writer's patterns of speech do give resonance to particular lines [...]. His fluency with dialogue is exemplary and, if the plays take on a wider resonance, then that is because the original makes it possible rather than that the writer has intervened with a personal agenda. (14)

To put it another way, if in reading the David Hare translation of Anton Chekhov's *Ivanov* or a translation by Alan Ayckbourn of Alexander Ostrovsky's *The Forest* we are mainly interested in how exactly either Hare or Ayckbourn "deals with an art form," then why should McGuinness' translation of *Electra* or *Miss Julie* or *Three Sisters* be treated any differently? McGuinness did not translate *Three Sisters* directly from the Russian, but neither did Hare and Ayckbourn. On the other hand, equally valid is Marianne McDonald's interpretation of the McGuinness version of *Electra*:

There are specifically Irish turns of phrase, and the one-woman Chorus could well be giving advice in some Irish village. [...] (McDonald 77)

[...] It seems McGuinness wants us to see the violence in a more ambivalent light than Sophocles saw it, namely as a means of enforcing justice. This brings us again to Ireland and to the fact that he is a writer from the North and has himself seen so much violence that he abhors it. Sophocles' clarity ends with McGuinness's question mark. (78)

All is "unapologetically" in the eyes of a beholder.

Brian Friel, who is a generation older than McGuinness but was just as prolific a playwright during the last two decades of the twentieth century, has occupied a somewhat precarious position in the line of Irish "translators," which nonetheless has served him well. Compared to Beckett or Joyce, and coming a long way from Synge, Friel seems to believe much more in the transparency of language. His seminal *Translations*, in which a character's "scorn for English is spoken in English" (Pilkington 213), could hardly be more striking in its assertion that "the difference between languages" is "a matter of signifiers" (Pilkington 218), that "a world of identities [...] exists clearly and unambiguously outside of language" (218). We might say that Friel in *Translations* answers the very question of "translation" by claiming, as it were, that a language can and will be changed fairly and squarely into any other language whenever required; otherwise, this particular play would not have been written in the manner which

in fact leads the audience to *assume* that "the characters are speaking both English and Irish" (Richtarik 196). Indeed, Friel was vindicated when *Translations* proved popular "in many countries where the play itself required translation" (Lojek 186). We might also regard his translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, once again not a direct translation from the Russian, as an attempt on Friel's part to verbalise something that he seems to believe is "outside" the constraints of what differentiates one language from another. The characters in Friel's *Three Sisters* are more inclined to speak out and elaborate on their thoughts and sentiments when their equivalents in Chekhov's Russian find themselves keeping to their steady, stiff-upper-lip attitudes, which, crucially, does not mean that the latter shy away from expressing themselves. In other words, the issue is not if the characters of *Three Sisters* speak either in Chekhovian Russian or in Frielian English or if they have either more lines or fewer lines to utter on stage; the gist of the Friel version lies in the fact that its characters take up where their equivalents in the Russian original left off, which is almost as if the Friel characters have been assigned to "annotate" Chekhov's lines as they "live" the play through.<sup>2</sup> Whereas McGuinness' version of *Three Sisters* would lose its meaning if it were translated into yet another language, in which sense McGuinness is a translator's translator, in Friel's version whether or not the "annotation" is done in English ceases to matter; it just so happens that Friel's *Three Sisters* is written in English.

On a practical note, that of course is not the case. If we still talk about the Friel translation of *Three Sisters* twenty-odd years after its first performance, we more often mention the play having been put on the stage by the Field Day Theatre Company than discuss what Friel the translator seems to have achieved in this particular play; with "an emphasis on the classics of world drama" Field Day sought to "put Northern Ireland's problems into a comparative context" (Richtarik 202), and *Three Sisters* was the first of the classics which the company laid their hands on (196). As for *Translations*, we know that it was simply and plainly "Field Day's flagship production" (Richtarik 196). Irrespective of the manners in which we interpret either *Three Sisters* or *Translations* it seems inevitable that Ireland and its language(s) will be part of the picture. And yet, here, we are coming back to McGuinness and his "art form." Apart from McGuinness' and Friel's translations of *Three Sisters* with the latter having been produced by Field Day, what we have is Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* in both McGuinness' and Friel's versions, neither of which being a direct translation from the Russian, only with reversed circumstances: it was the McGuinness translation that Field Day put on the stage (Deane 148). If Field Day "[spoke] the unspeakable and [made] visible the invisible"

(McDonald 38) as it “[gave] a Northern voice to a number of divisive issues” (38), Seamus Deane in an essay on the company’s productions of translations is quick to point out that we do not see a “particular Field Day ‘take’ on Chekhov” (150); or rather, we can see quite clearly that *Three Sisters* translated by Friel and *Uncle Vanya* translated by McGuinness do *not*, to borrow Deane’s words again, “have much in common” (150).

Field Day or not, McGuinness in his *Uncle Vanya* went for what Brian Arkins would call a “straight translation” (209); like his *Three Sisters*, the result is still a quintessential McGuinness in the sense that the characters all speak colloquial English with elegance, in a kind of cadence<sup>3</sup> which nonetheless is kept under control and never exaggerated. We can, for example, look at act 2 of *Uncle Vanya*, in which Astrov “criticises” Sonya’s stepmother, Yelena; Peter Carson’s translation, one of the most literal translations of the play available to the general reader, has Astrov answer Sonya’s question, “What about my stepmother?” (Carson 166), as follows:

ASTROV. A human being should be beautiful all through: face and clothes and spirit and thoughts. She is beautiful, no question about that, but ... she just eats, sleeps, walks, enchants us all with her beauty—and that’s all. She has no responsibilities, others work for her ... It’s true, isn’t it? And an idle life can’t be a virtuous one. (166)

whereas in McGuinness’ translation Astrov sounds very much like a character who, rather than appearing on the pages of the play-text, would be more comfortable on stage together with the character of Sonya [spelt Sonia by McGuinness]:

SONIA. What about my stepmother?

ASTROV. In a human being, everything should be beautiful. Face, clothes, soul and mind. She is beautiful—brook no argument. And yet—she just eats, sleeps, walks about, dazzles us all, she walks with beauty, and that’s it. That’s all. She hasn’t a care in the world. Others do the work for her. Isn’t that so? She’s got an easy life, but is it a good life? Could it be? (McGuinness, *Uncle Vanya* 34)

McGuinness’ highly theatrical English, by which here we simply mean the lines he has written for the Chekhov characters are altogether quite “pleasing” to the ear, certainly reminds us of the kind of English spoken by so many of the characters in his original plays, for example, in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*; still, the fact remains that McGuinness’ *Uncle Vanya* is nothing if not an exercise in “dealing with an art form.” Friel, on his part, worked on *Uncle Vanya* for a non-Field-

Day production in such a manner that his translation ended up having strong affinities with his version of *Three Sisters*. If we look again at act 2 of *Uncle Vanya*, we find that Chekhov’s Russian characters are “annotated” to a great extent in the Friel translation; Astrov, for example, resorts in Friel’s version to a series of what Vanya also only in the Friel version calls “over-stepping” (Friel, *Uncle Vanya* 37) remarks regarding Serebryakov and Yelena; in that respect, Astrov hitting upon a “bee” analogy in his “criticism” of Yelena [spelt Elena by Friel] may be one of the most Frielian moments in the entire act 2:

SONYA. What were you going to say about Elena?

[...]

ASTROV. In bee-keeping language she’s a drone. She has no responsibilities. She does no work. So that finally she accomplishes, she achieves, nothing.

[...] (41)

The analogy acquires a further dimension a few play-text pages later, when Frielian Astrov makes a highly ostentatious exit; being graced with a melodramatic twist, Astrov has now become a fully vulgarised version of a Chekhov character:

ASTROV. [...] The interesting thing about drones is—

SONYA. Sorry?

ASTROV. Bees! You’ve heard of bees? When their normal services aren’t needed anymore, when the honey-flow comes to an end, the worker bees kill them off.

*He goes.* (44)

If McGuinness the translator did not flinch as he “dealt with an art form” in working on *Uncle Vanya*, it turns out that Friel the translator just as “unapologetically” wrote up a heavily “annotated” version of the play. Friel, like McGuinness, has unassumingly followed the path of his choice, in which sense he has also been a writer of a post-“exile” generation.

The word “translation” in this essay has been used in the widest possible sense, and now we will turn to Friel’s *Fathers and Sons* and *The Yalta Game*, which we shall again call “translations”; granted that the two plays, based on a novel by Ivan Turgenev and a short story by Chekhov, would in more conventional circumstances be regarded as “adaptations” rather than as translations, here we will discuss both plays on the assumption that a prose-to-stage adaptation is *yet another kind of* translation. While the Friel version of *Fathers and Sons* is “a most adept transformation,” according to Christopher Murray (x), of the novel by the same title, his *Yalta Game* happens to be a sketch-length piece of a highly meta-theatrical kind, dissolving and reconstructing Chekhov’s *The Lady with the Little Dog*. So long as Friel the translator tends to “annotate” other people’s works, we might be tempted to say that a

piece of prose as a source material has more potential for him than a play as a source material: whereas in Friel's translation of either *Three Sisters* or *Uncle Vanya* new lines, phrases, and words are tacked on to the original Chekhov in such a manner that the resultant "text" never looks as if it were in one piece, his *Fathers and Sons* and *The Yalta Game* prove to be, each in its own way, structurally cohesive within themselves and yet at the same time textually cross-referential to the novel and the short story. It could be argued on the one hand that cohesiveness<sup>4</sup> in itself is not necessarily a key element with which a play-text would become a work of art well worth our perusal; indeed, as indicated by Lawrence Venuti, it might even be the case that we are always on the lookout for a translator who, instead of being doggedly "cooperative" and "communicative" in a Gricean manner (Venuti 23), is quite ready and also willing to be "challenging" and "provocative" (23) as she or he sets out to work. If on the other hand we persist in our assertion that Friel's translations from prose to stage are critically more tenable than his translations of what are already in play-form, that is precisely because the latter, even with heavy "annotations," do not strike us as works of a translator who is particularly challenging and provocative; there hardly seems to be a strong reason behind the fact that Friel's translation of either *Three Sisters* or *Uncle Vanya* does not go after structural cohesiveness, by which we mean readers of the Friel translation are constantly made aware of where Chekhov is interrupted by Friel and where Friel steps aside for Chekhov.

At the same time, it has to be pointed out that the problem we find in Friel's translation of either *Three Sisters* or *Uncle Vanya* may possibly have to do with the nature of the original Chekhov, namely, a Chekhov play might not be so suitable for the kind of "annotated" translation that Friel seems to prefer to a much more literal translation à la McGuinness or a much more "wayward" translation, as it were, like Howard Barker's highly meta-theatrical *Uncle Vanya*. That Friel's *A Month in the Country*, again a heavily "annotated" translation of Turgenev's play by the same title, fares better in terms of structural cohesiveness than his translation of either *Three Sisters* or *Uncle Vanya* partly indicates the kind of problem inherent in any "annotated" translation of a Chekhov play. Conversely, if indeed "Turgenev's 'play' was merely a short story in dialogue" as David Magarshack claims it was in his preface to *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage* (4), which apparently suggests that "Turgenev was not a born playwright, while Chekhov was" (Magarshack 85), we might say that in his version of *A Month in the Country* Friel the translator takes full advantage of the fatal weakness in Turgenev's play. While we cannot conclude too hastily that a flair we detect in Friel's translations of *Fathers and Sons* and *The Lady*

*with the Little Dog* is considerably dampened when the playwright takes on the job of translating what are already in play-form, it seems fairly obvious to us that Friel the translator is most at ease when a source material allows him to cut deep into its structure while more or less keeping to its narrative-line. *The Yalta Game*, one of the latest among his translations of Chekhov's works, is reminiscent of his original plays *Faith Healer* and *Molly Sweeney* in that the characters of Anna and Dmitry live and relive their "affair" in lengthy monologues; nevertheless, the play conveys the narrative of *The Lady with the Little Dog* in such a manner that as it begins Anna and Dmitry still meet each other in Yalta (Chekhov 223-26; Friel, *The Yalta Game* 7-16) and as it ends the two characters still come to terms with their destiny, namely, they are stepping into the "beginning" of the "end" (Chekhov 240; Friel, *The Yalta Game* 32).

Making a version of *Fathers and Sons* "liberated Friel from writer's block" (Murray ix); this particular exercise in prose-to-stage translation apparently "refuelled Friel's imagination" (x). If a playwright "reworking or adapting another writer's work" (Murray x) ideally means that "he/she [...] gather[s] nuts for a lean period" (x), and if, as Murray asserts, Friel in *Fathers and Sons* has done exactly that (ix-xi), we might then point to a parallel between what McGuinness calls "dealing with an art form" and what there is to be found in Friel's translation of the Turgenev novel. At first glance, original *Fathers and Sons* does not necessarily look like a novel on which a playwright-translator can thrive easily. Discussing Turgenev's prose fiction, Frank Friedeberg Seeley states that Turgenev has no rival in his "generation" of authors in Russia (329) when it comes to "the concentration of interest, the economy and subtlety of detail, the instinct for structure and balance in his writings" (329); we might possibly be led to think of a Turgenev novel as something that is too perfectly crafted for a playwright to attempt a translation in any meaningful way. It is almost exclusively from a Bakhtinian point of view that Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* can be regarded as a prominent candidate for a prose-to-stage translation: the novel scores high in its "dialogic quality" (Terras 194), which is to say that the *siuzhet* seems to outdo the *fabula* (Belknap 234), and we would expect a playwright-translator to pick "dialogic" elements that will work properly on stage; in other words, "dialogic" elements that will not fit the stage she or he should not be afraid to discard. Having gone through this very process, Friel's translation of *Fathers and Sons* has little to remind us of the fabric of the Turgenev novel. On the other hand, looking at what the translation has retained and how the playwright-translator elaborates on that which has been retained, we can at least say this much: it is by turning the characters

of the novel *Fathers and Sons* into his characters that Friel “deals with an art form.” A case in point is when Arkady, by way of describing his friend Bazarov, introduces the term “nihilist” to his father, Nikolai, and his uncle, Pavel; in Rosemary Edmonds’ translation of the novel:

“He is a nihilist,” repeated Arkady.

“A nihilist,” said Nikolai Petrovich. “That comes from the Latin *nihil*—*nothing*, I imagine; the term must signify a man who ... who recognizes nothing?”

“Say—who respects nothing,” put in Pavel Petrovich, and set to work with the butter again.

“Who looks at everything critically,” observed Arkady.

“Isn’t that exactly the same thing?” asked Pavel Petrovich.

“No, it’s not the same thing. A nihilist is a person who does not take any principle for granted [...].” (Turgenev 94)

As he translates the passage into a pure dialogue, Friel gives the word “precious” to the character of Pavel Petrovich; a small addition, and yet it is quite effective in making both Arkady, the first utterer of the word, and Pavel, who repeats the word, more and more like Frielian characters:

ARKADY. [...] Bazarov is a Nihilist. So am I.

NIKOLAI. Interesting word that. I imagine it comes from the Latin—*nihil*—nothing. Does it mean somebody who respects nothing? No, it doesn’t.

ARKADY. Someone who looks at everything critically.

PAVEL. If there’s a difference.

ARKADY. There’s a significant difference, Pavel.

Don’t be so precious.

PAVEL. Me?—precious? Good Lord.

ARKADY. Nihilism begins by questioning all received ideas and principles [...].

(Friel, *Fathers and Sons* 128)

Pavel’s deceptively Wildean surprise meets Arkady’s “overstepping” remark, which together strike a chord of Astroff bringing up a “bee” analogy in the Friel version of *Uncle Vanya*.

If these and other characters in Friel’s translations of Chekhov, Turgenev, and Greek tragedy, the last of which has not been taken up in this essay, eventually coalesce into what we may call the “ultimate Frielian character in translation,” nothing of the kind would we expect from McGuinness’ translations of works ranging from Greek tragedy to Ibsen to twentieth-century European plays; and that, as we have seen, is quite intentional on McGuinness’ part. Two of the leading post-“exile”-generation playwrights, Friel and McGuinness have also proved to be outstanding translators not merely in the sense that they have taken the question of “translation” seriously but

more to the point in terms of their quietly self-asserting attitudes towards “translating” plays and pieces of prose.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Synge had left the Continent, having been “recalled to Aran by Yeats” (Worth 122).

<sup>2</sup> For further analysis of the Friel version of *Three Sisters*, see Naoko Yagi, “What Comes between Chekhov and Friel?: *Three Sisters* in Translations,” *The Institute for Theatre Research: Bulletin 2* (2004): 17-22.

<sup>3</sup> The word “cadence” here refers to the overall rhythm intrinsic to lines uttered by McGuinness’ characters rather than actual or would-be tone changes in the lines.

<sup>4</sup> Hence not the same as what in stylistics is called “cohesion.”

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