GENDER RELATIONS IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *TRANSLATIONS*: RE-MAPPING THE POSTCOLONIAL AGENDA[1]

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Since its premiere in Derry in 1980, Brian Friel's play *Translations* has been successfully staged in most cities in Ireland, Britain and the United States, becoming both popular and controversial. The exploration of British colonial rule over Ireland, in the Gaelic-speaking village of Baile Beag during the early 19th century, at a time when two major upheavals –the first British Ordnance Survey of Ireland and the introduction of a new National school system–[2] emerged, favoured the awaking of memories that went back to a romanticised pre-colonial time. Its early critical reception, as a play that nostalgically re-enacted the loss of a pastoral past, largely misinterpreted the complex and ambivalent nature of the ironies that permeated the text. *Translations* launched The Field Day Theatre Company, a small theatre group founded by Friel himself and Stephen Rea,[3] whose main aims were, on the one hand, to empower the discourses and myths that fed the constructions of the Northern Irish cultural identities in order to reach a solution to the conflict[4] and, on the other, to create a "fifth province of the mind" from where to explore alternative identities for Ireland, away from the limitations of existing clichés and stereotypes. According to Elmer Andrews, the fifth province thus would stand as a "secret centre … where all oppositions are resolved [...] The Fifth Province may well be a province of the mind through which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland" (1993:164).[5] Under the auspices of the Field Day, then, *Translations* would not offer a manichaean portrayal of the historical clash between Britain and Ireland, that is, between the oppressive invaders and the weak victims, rather, it succeeded at subverting and deconstructing notions of identity, language and culture.[6]

Further criticism subsequently focused on thorough analyses of the play from the most diverse angles, including that of postcolonial theory, which seemed more adequate to explore matters concerning Anglo-Irish relations.[7] Gender studies, however, have aroused less interest,[8] although it is precisely the point at which questions of gender intersect with postcolonial stratagems regarding the binomial equations of masculinity-coloniser vs. femininity-colonised –with its subsequent process of hyper-masculinisation of the nationalist cause in detriment of the feminisation of the land– that triggers off my argument. In this line, I contend that although Friel apparently introduces traditional nationalist icons, such as the silent woman and Mother Ireland –here, the dumb Sarah and Maire, the eldest daughter in charge of her household– he does so only to subvert them. At the same time, male characters do not conform to the topical masculinist Irish cause and in fact reverse the Cathleen Ni Houlihan trope. The object of my study is, therefore, to analyse how gender roles and relations are employed in *Translations* to dismantle those ideologies that supported the foundation of a romantic past in order to create an ambivalent place to locate the clash between tradition and modernity.

Dichotomies and binomial pairs are the basic pillars on which the postcolonial agenda is sustained. In this vein, *Translations* revolves around conflicting and confronting pairs of characters, who are (inter)-grouped in the most varied positions. On the Irish side we have the schoolmaster Hugh, his sons Manus and Owen, and the students Maire, Sarah, Doalty, Bridget, Jimmy Jack and the Donnelly twins. Opposed to them are the British soldiers Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland. Far from offering a restrictive and too predictable division of the coloniser vs. the colonised relationship, each of these two groups is sub-divided into different ideological positions. While Manus, Sarah, Doalty, Bridget, Jimmy Jack and the Donnelly twins will do their best to resist the colonial threat, Maire manifests her intention to learn the English language and emigrate to America,[9] and Owen announces that he will be helping the surveyors "to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King's good English" (Friel 1991:338). At the same time, Hugh's suspicion, in the initial stages, of this process of linguistic colonialism will be eventually transformed into an acceptance of the new language and order. This ambivalence is shared, ironically, with his youngest son Owen, who will have a similar experience but in the opposite direction. The second group, formed by Lancey and Yolland, offers two sides of British colonialism. While the first fulfils the stereotype of the oppressive coloniser, the latter is a misfit in the British Army, who happens to be in Ireland only by chance and falls in love with the place, the language and the people of Ballybeg –epitomised in his love for Maire, an extension of Ireland.

The plot of *Translations* focuses precisely on the interaction of the two groups while the process of Anglicisation of place-names and of mapping the area is simultaneously taking place. Thus, the following contrasting pairs emerge: the pragmatic Owen and the idealist Yolland represent the reversal of the stereotypes traditionally associated with the coloniser and the colonised; Hugh's two sons, Owen and Manus oppose each other in their stances towards a period of transition in Ireland; and the couple formed by Maire and Manus is finally exchanged for that formed by Maire –the only character open to change and willing to learn English and leave the country– and Yolland –"a committed Hibernophile" (Friel 1991:34) who wants to learn the Irish language and wishes to stay in the village forever. Although these two characters complement each other in their desire to learn the other's language, they are also miles away from each other since, ironically, neither of them is what the other perceives them to be. Neither is Maire a true representative of the Irish peasants of this community whom Yolland feels so attracted to, nor can Yolland satisfy Maire's need to escape from the traditions that have shaped her identity. The relationship between these two members of distinct cultures will only help to widen the gap between the two communities to a point of impossible reconciliation.

In the Irish literary tradition, gender and national identity have always gone hand in hand.[10] The concept of Irishness was based on the construction of a masculinity that subordinated the female subject, both politically and in the domestic sphere. In the nationalist iconography the nation was gendered female and took the image of the "Poor Old Woman", the "Shan Van Vocht" or the Catheleen Ni Houlihan revived by Yeats in his homonymous patriotic play, in which a young woman becomes a Queen after granting the blood sacrifice of her sons who, as a reward, would become immortal heroes.[11] Conversely, in *Translations* neither do male characters conform to traditional stereotypes associated with the revolutionary Irish cause nor do female characters stand as symbols of the nation in need of protection. This patriarchal structure, embodied by Hugh and Jimmy, is further deconstructed in the scene when they remember fighting in the Revolution of 1798 without any hint of nostalgia. Their desire to return home shows their unwillingness to die for Ireland, finding nothing heroic in it. In fact, the failure of the rebellion brought about the passing of the Act of Union of 1800, through which Ireland was ruled from Britain. As Hugh states, "it was there, in Phelan's pub, that we got homesick for Athens, just like Ulysses. The *desiderium nostrorum* – the need for our own. Our *pietas*, James, was for older, quieter things." (Friel 1991:373). The subversion of the Cathleen trope of the revivalists does not pass unnoticed in *Translations*, especially as they point out that blood sacrifice would bring them nothing in return. The rejection of male heroism is part of Friel's process of demythologising an ancient past, and Neil Corcoran has interpreted Hugh's evocation of the Revolution of 1798 as a "mock-heroic story", which functions as "the pre-condition of Hugh's wisdom" (1993:28).

As regards female characters, there are noticeably few of them, only Bridget, Sara and Maire. Besides, most characters are either motherless –like Owen and Manus– or "functional" mothers –like Maire, the eldest daughter of ten brothers and sisters– who cannot live up to the traditional mother figure or, least of all, to the Cathleen who demanded a blood sacrifice from her sons. Of the three female figures, Sarah and Maire deserve special attention. To start with, the two names have biblical resonances. According to the Bible, the Hebrew Sarah, Abraham's wife, was a barren woman who suggested that her husband marry her slave-maid Hagar with whom he had a son –Ishmael. However, destined by God to become the first of the biblical matriarchs, God announced to Abraham that Sarah would bear a son –Isaac– in spite of her old age and would become the mother of all nations (*Genesis* 18:12). Besides, her original name was not Sarah but Sarai; the change only came after God appeared before Abraham. In this light, the opening scene of *Translations*, when Manus is trying to help Sarah regain her speech and pronounce her own name, acquires new significance. As the play evolves she will, in fact, learn how to voice her name and it is Sarah who will tell Manus about the relationship between Maire and Yolland, while the audience cannot figure out how she has managed to do so. Nevertheless, her progress cannot continue after the process of Anglicising place-names is almost complete, since this appropriation means that the members of the community will become outsiders in their own land, unprepared to decode their own identity marks. Her return to silence at the end of the play is provoked by Capitan Lancey's threats of eviction and the destruction of crop and livestock after Yolland has disappeared and his murder has been suggested.

Sarah's final muteness could be thus interpreted in two ways: as an act of resistance to colonialism and to the new language that will be imposed on the villagers; and as a symbol of the death of the Irish language, of their own identity, considering her muteness as an echo of the silence that will reverberate throughout the whole Gaelic-speaking community.[12] Even a practical character like Owen, who seemed to think that there was nothing behind the standardisation of names is eventually made aware of the act of possession that lies beneath language. While at the beginning he does not seem to bother about the fact that Lancey and Yolland call him Roland –an Anglicised version of his name– on the grounds that: "It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it?" (Friel 1999:342), he later reclaims his identity realising that, as he tells Yolland: "We name a thing and –bang!– it leaps into existence!" (353). Not gratuitously, Friel has repeated on several occasions that *Translations* "has to do with language and only language" (qtd. in Pine 1990:146).

In a similar vein, the name of Maire, which is the Gaelic form of the biblical Mary, has also traditionally represented the emblem of the mother of us all. Subverting her role as a mother figure that will preserve the honour and virtue of her

nation, Maire, like Sarah before, will also reverse her function as Mother Ireland. For a start, rather than conforming to a life attached to a rural past, which will turn her into a passive woman waiting for Manus to marry her, she breaks the rules of the community and falls in love with the colonial enemy, Yolland. Like Owen, she is a pragmatic character who longs for emigration from such a small place, which is what the name "Baile Beag" means in the Gaelic language. As she tells Doalty, Ireland cannot offer anything to her, except pessimism and old stories about fears of potato blight, and unhappiness:

> Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag? Well, did they ever–ever? Never! There was never blight here. Never. Never. But we're always sniffing about for it, aren't we?–looking for disaster. The rents are going to go up again–the harvest's going to be lost–he herring have gone away for ever–there's going to be evictions. Honest to God, some of you people aren't happy unless you're miserable and you'll not be right content until you're dead! (Friel 1991:330)[13]

Maire is no Cathleen Ni Houlihan, quite the opposite; she cannot conform to this reductive role and emerges as the most open-minded character in the play. Also, for that very reason, she feels alienated. She wishes to learn English because, echoing the words pronounced by the Kerry politician Daniel O'Connell,[14] she believes that "the old language is a barrier to modern progress" (Friel 1991:335). As Baker suggests: "Far from passively accepting the language of her oppressors, Maire actively acquires English for her own benefit" (2000:266). Her adventurous infatuation with Yolland provokes the anger of her people, and the subsequent death of the soldier at the hands of the Donnelly twins, the rebels of the community. As Jimmy explains almost at the end of the play, there is a line that cannot be trespassed: "Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don't cross those borders casually–both sides get very angry" (Friel 1991:374). Maire and, with her, the myth of the woman as nation, is thence clearly subverted.

With all this, Friel seems to be precisely attacking the myths that have traditionally articulated Irish identity. A demythologising anti-Yeatsian move regarding both male and female characters becomes central in *Translations*. When the Field Day Theatre Company was founded, it sought to establish a theatrical centre in Derry, free from the constraining influence of both Dublin and London. This involved a process of challenging myths and existing beliefs concerning not only the representation of Northern Ireland but also the nostalgic revival of a Celtic past. In *Translations*, this process of demystification is epitomised in the comic character of Jimmy, a bachelor in his sixties, also known as "the infant prodigy", who nourishes his imagination with ancient tales and myths and inhabits this world

of dreams in which he truly believes. He is fluent in Latin, Greek and Irish but speaks no English. In a powerful first scene of the play, for instance, he reads aloud some passages from the *Odyssey* in Greek, while Sara is having serious difficulties trying to pronounce her name. Not surprisingly, he explains to Hugh at the end that he is about to marry Pallas Athene, the daughter of Zeus. But it is not only Jimmy, for Yolland also, in his attempt to learn the Gaelic language and to value all things Irish, gets involved in a cultural, linguistic and mythic revival that will be frustrated by his death. As Hugh tells Yolland when he feels cut off from the community, "it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape …of fact" (1991:351).

Translations is a play that tries to negotiate the space between borders; the point at which both the nationalist and rebellious spirit intersect with the inevitable move to progress. For this reason, it is Maire and finally Hugh who can embrace the new language and the new system. Set at a time of transition in all respects, the play examines the impact of linguistic, cultural and political change on the lives of its people. Echoing the title, the main theme of the play is the very act of translation, which here becomes an act of treason, since Friel's underlying message is that "once Anglicisation is achieved, the Irish and English, instead of speaking a truly identical tongue, will be divided most treacherously by a common language" (Kiberd 1996:622). This point is made clear throughout the play in different ways. For instance, when Yolland realises that no matter how hard he tries to learn Irish, he will always have difficulties communicating with the people in the community and he will never be one of them. As he tells Owen: "Even if I did speak Irish I'd always be an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it?" (Friel 1991:348-49). Furthermore, all characters interact in English while they pretend to be doing it in Irish. This creates sometimes the paradoxical situation in which two characters are conversing in English but cannot understand each other. For this reason, it comes as a surprise that Hugh, who early in the play had affirmed English was particularly suited "for the purposes of commerce" because that language "couldn't really express us" (334), finally manifests his desire to accept the new language: "We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (372). When Hugh decides that they must renew their culture, he wisely adds that "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 those images; because once we do, we fossilize" (373).

The final message of the play, exposed by Hugh, directs our attention to a use of the English language in an Irish way, that is, to preserve the Irish cadences, tones and idiosyncrasies while one adapts to a new order. Friel's suggestion then seems to echo and offer a solution to Stephen Dedalus' linguistic alienation in *A Portrait*,

when he referred to the way the English Dean of his school spoke the language differently: "His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech [...] My soul frets in the shadow of his language" (Joyce 1968:189). Friel's position can also be equated to that of the poet Tom Paulin, who has advocated the use of Hiberno-English as a literary language (1985:15).[15] For this reason, being no romantic revivalist, Baker affirms that Friel "avoids a nostalgic return to better days; instead, he looks squarely into the future and offers a thoughtful solution to a complicated question–the language question" (2000:273). To sum up, and to bring this discussion to an end, I would like to recall the words pronounced by Seamus Heaney, who, on the occasion of his investiture as "Doctor Honoris Causa" by the University of La Coruña (2000), delivered a lecture on centres and peripheries, and discussed the importance of language and translation:

> Recently [...] I translated the Old English epic *Beowulf* [...]. Many of the words that I used in the translation came from the country speech I used when I was a boy growing up on a farm in Northern Ireland. What we spoke there was not the Irish language, but an Irish form of English, what might be called Ulster English or Hiberno-English, an idiom distinct from the official, educated *lingua franca* of the English middle classes. As an Irish writer, I greatly enjoyed this bit of appropriation. It was like taking the Crown Jewels from the Tower of London and displaying them in the National Museum of Ireland. In a minimal way I was following the path originally cleared by Stephen Dedalus, the path that leads in and through [...] the intimate reality of one one's own experience, named in one's own language, and then through to an understanding that this repossessed experience does not make one unique or especially distinguished, but rather only makes one freer to be human, to belong more fully and knowledgeably to whole human community. (2000:38)

Endnotes

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education –research project BFF2000-0756– and by the University of Alcalá –Vicerrectorado de Investigación, research project UAH2002/05.

2. Both events were part of the British colonisation. In fact, Declan Kiberd maintains that the introduction of a new state-sponsored school was "one of a number of modernising experiments conducted in the colonial laboratory that was Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century before being applied in England" (1996:610).

3. The board was expanded later to include Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane, David Hammond and Thomas Kilroy.

4. Phrased by the directors of the Field Day, they believed the company "could and should contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the

established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation. The collapse of constitutional and political arrangements and the recrudescence of the violence which they had been designed to repress or contain, made this a more urgent requirement in the North than in the Republic, even though the improbability of either surviving in its present form seemed clear in 1980 and is clearer still in 1985" (Deane et al. 1985:vii).

5. Originally, the term "Fifth province" referred to Meath, the fifth region of Ireland that had been absorbed by Leinster. Nowadays, according to the *Diccionario cultural e histórico de Irlanda*, the concept is used as a symbol of reunification (Hurtley, Hughes, González, Praga and Aliaga 1996:109).

6. Baker holds the same opinion, although he stresses the significance of the language question: "It would have been easy for Friel to portray the soldiers as unsympathetic invaders and the peasants as gullible victims, but Friel's vision is much more complex, forcing his audience to reevaluate his characters while continually reconsidering the language question" (2000:265).

7. The approach of some of these studies is very varied and it goes from the historical relationship between Britain and Ireland as regards the initiation of a new school system (Kiberd 1996) and the First Ordnance Survey of Ireland (Bullock 2000), to the language question (Baker 2000), Friel's influence of George Steiner's theories on language and translation (Pine 1990), Chekhov's presence in his work (Dantanus 1988) and the historical accuracy of the play (Andrews 1992/93), to name only a few and to include a handful selection of references.

8. For further discussions on nation, gender and the Irish landscape, see Nash's article (1994) that analyses in depth feminist and postcolonial relationships to place, as applied to the work of the Irish artist Kathy Pendergast.

9. Emigration to America is a theme that keeps reappearing in Friel's plays, especially in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) and in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966). Michael Etherton has interpreted the pursue of the American Dream as the means "for the realisation of one's potential. But this potential Self is separated from his or her Irish engendering. This new, public self is divorced from the ambiguous reality of emotional ties which were both broken and not broken" (1989:151-52).

10. This is the result of male/female dichotomies of the coloniser/colonised, which Seamus Heaney has phrased in the following terms: "To some extent the enmity can be viewed as a struggle between the cults and devotees of a god and a goddess. There is an indigenous territorial numen, a tutelar of the whole island, call her Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the poor old woman, the Shan Van Vocht, whatever; and her sovereignty has been temporarily usurped or infringed by a new male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power". (1980:57).

11. See Patrick J. Keane's study *Yeats, Joyce, Ireland and the Myth of the Devouring Female* (1988) for a deconstruction of some of these female icons.

12. Heaney has also interpreted Sarah in allegorical terms, as the symbolic figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan, who "has been struck dumb by the shock of modernity" (qtd. by Baker 2000:265-66).

13. However, when potato harvest was bad for some years in succession the Great Famine came and, in fact, lasted form 1945 to 1949.

14. He had fought in the rebellion of 1798 and was the founder of the Catholic Association. He believed progress and modernisation would only come to Ireland if people started learning the English language.

15. In his own words: "A confident concept of Irish English would substantially increase the vocabulary and this would invigorate the written language. A language that lives lithely on the tongue ought to be capable of becoming the flexible written instrument of a complete cultural idea".

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