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Brian Friel's Modern Irish Drama: Writing the Past, Present, & Future

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Two Epigraphs

“All profound changes of consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.”

-Benedict Anderson,
Imagined Communities

“Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time, and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.”

-Homi K. Bhabha,
Nation & Narration

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire writes, “A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization” (Césaire np). Postcolonial and historicized readings of Irish literatures describe the evils of colonialism, and the ways it has distorted nationhood and nation-building to serve the ends of greedy empires. But, what happens to a nation or nations in the vacuum *after* a major colonial power abandons the colony or is driven out? Obviously, there is much hard work involved, sacrifice on all sides, and recognition of past wrongs inflicted. In the epigraphs above, Anderson and Bhabha remind us that more than simply politics, there is also a cultural element involved, indeed, essential to such work. For the Irish, whose civilization and lands have been ravaged by colonization and internal struggles for centuries, this cultural element often finds voice in the theater. Dramatic theater allows artists to create socio-reflective spaces in which audiences can participate in the postcolonial experience to some extent, and certainly find their preconceived ideas challenged. In the space of theater, a mirror is held up to the nation, vital questions are proposed, and a community emerges to collectively search for answers. The cultural artistry of Ireland allows these nations to reconceive of themselves and their pasts in

terms of their present and future. The liminal space which postcolonial drama occupies presents audiences and participants with questions of hybridity, as a potential solution to cultural and national essentialism.

As one contemplates theater in light of the concept of hybridity, it is worth considering that, “One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (*Post-Colonial Studies* 118). Many explorations of hybridity, including the preceding view hybridity as either a neutral or negative consequence of interaction in the colonial contact zone. Unlike theorists such as Claude Blankaert, who writes about hybridity as birthing the “monstrous *métis*,” or Homi Bhabha, for whom hybridity exists as a negative of the colonial process, “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority –its rule of recognition,” this paper explores hybridity as positive (Blankaert np; Bhabha 114-115). This paper will thus, alternatively use “positive hybridity” or “hybridity” to explore the potential beneficial aspects where cultural elements in the contact zone embrace and come to respect one another’s difference as post-colonially extant elements of a whole society. This paper anticipates positive hybridity as the post-colonial solution to the ravages worked by the colonial project, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the globe; only when the members of such colonially injured cultures seek acceptance of one another’s uniqueness as part of a shared social story can true consolation and peace be achieved. Playwright Brian Friel has written dramas which deal with the necessary cultural questions of postcolonial societies, but perhaps none more apt than his work of genius, *Translations*. The reflective space presented in Irish theater and occupied by an array of characters presents portrayals of people in post-colonial spaces with the acceptance of positive hybridity as an answer to the long-held sectarian and nationalist binaries which have plagued colonial nations including Ireland.

The Nation, Nationalism, & Theories of Hybridity

Cultural and political theorists including Homi Bhabha, Ernest Renan, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson suggest that in order for literature to effectively engage in cultural discussions dramatic authors must carefully craft theatrical spaces in which characters and identities are both fluid and positively transformative. Briefly, the best starting place for such a discussion lies perhaps in an understanding of what is meant by “nation.” The term is multifaceted and can easily be misinterpreted. Nation can be understood as state, territory, ethnicity, migrant or extended family, or as culture – the modern identity of Ireland embodies, it seems, all of these definitions. Interestingly, the further one’s definition stretches from a conception of nation as a merely political or physical space, the more encompassing it becomes – this is to say that understandings of nation as culture, ethnicity, or family allow for fuller participation and greater space for human difference. Cultural theorists argue that pluralism and hybridity stand at one end of human cultural possibility, while nationalism, colonialism, and post-colonialism represent the opposite end and markers along such a spectrum. The origins of

nationhood, however, can prove vexing, as Ernest Renan's famous essay "What is a Nation?" reveals:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. (*Nation & Narration* 11)

In his introduction to *Inventing Ireland*, Seamus Deane attempts an answer, writing, "Almost all nationalist movements have been derided as provincial, actually racist, given to exclusivist and doctrinaire positions and rhetoric" (Deane qtd. in Kiberd 7-8). These two ideas might well be true of the colonial endeavor, but they do not have to be the truth of the post-colonial moment. Most nationalistic endeavors' major flaws lie in the desire to copy and then turn on its head, the style and actions of the colonizing force. Deane explains this in an Irish colonial context, writing:

It is not, in the Irish context, an exclusively Irish phenomenon, for the island has now, particularly in the North, and has had for at least two hundred years, British nationalism as predominant political and cultural influence. In fact, Irish nationalism is, in its foundational moments, a derivative of its British counterpart. (7)

The desire to understand one's identity in terms of nation and participation in a community is not, in and of itself, a flawed endeavor, writes Deane. Such an understanding of participation in community, as well as of personal and collective identity stands as over-against hybridity.

***Go Bearla [Into English]:
The Hybrid Possibilities Implicit in
Writing "Hugh" in Translations***

The plethora of cultural possibility within Brian Friel's *Translations* allowed it to serve as a fitting starting point for the project envisioned by the Field Day Theatre Company. Friel crafted a work centered around the British Ordnance Survey, in which many of the place names across Ireland were reworked to be more palatable for the British Empire, in terms of either meaning or pronunciation. Friel's conception of the issues involved, however, delves much more deeply than simply the historical-political reality of the survey. The history, as Friel has discussed in interviews, is not entirely factually accurate, but neither is it meant to be. Friel uses the space of the play, in which historical truth is sacrificed in order to present both characters and the audience with situations engaging questions of hybridity on stage. This particular style of dramatic writing allows an exploration of crucial questions regarding national identity, through the conceit of the language question. As Seamus Deane explains, "The naming or renaming

of a place is, like all acts of primordial nomination, an act of possession” (Deane 18). In this light, then, Friel’s play becomes one about acts of possession and dispossession, as well as one about the space in which native social groups are offered choices. Further proof that Friel’s play exists in a broader context than that of the language question is the anticolonial metaphor traced through it by Elizabeth Butler Cullingford. In her article “British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness” Cullingford explains:

“The myth of Carthaginian descent was originally invoked to counteract the degrading English insistence that Irish ethnic characteristics derived from the savage Scythians. [...] In contemporary Irish literature the Rome-Carthage motif functions in complex and variable ways: as origin myth, colonial parable, and site of intersection between nationalism and sexuality. (Cullingford 222)

The importance of this “history,” creatively crafted or not, is that it connects the Irish to a much larger cultural space, which Friel and other authors draw upon in order to offer up hybrid definitions of Irishness.

A brief synopsis of the play’s action may be helpful, here. In Friel’s play, the small village of Ballybeg in Donnegal, Ireland faces the impact of British Imperial attention in direct and personal ways. The play is set during the summer of 1833, one of the years when the British Imperial army has come to conduct the Ordnance Survey in Ireland, an endeavor primarily concerned with mapping the colony. However, the action also involves re-naming places from Irish into English, or into some transliteration of Irish sounds in English. The inhabitants of the village fear the eradication of their own culture in the face of Imperial action; while some actively resist the efforts of the survey, other characters strive to live in such a way that they will not attract notice, others, like Hugh, the main character of the play, seek to learn what the English language and interaction with the English, as people, might bring to Ireland. The spectrum along which the characters of the play sit with regard to hybridity runs from resistance (the O’Donnell twins), to an angry sense of loss (Manus), to facilitation (Owen), to understanding and acceptance (Hugh). The acts of the characters often suggest that they do not understand the possibility implicit in acquiring and using yet another language. Doalty Dan Doalty, for example, plays at resistance: “Anyway, every time they’d stick one of those poles into the ground and move across the bog, I’d creep up and shift it twenty or thirty paces to the side” (Friel 11). His actions seem innocuous, but present real difficulties for the realization of healthy hybridity in Friel’s play. His rationale that “it was a gesture [...] to indicate a presence” demonstrates a sense akin to Owen’s question in act two about the making of maps being sinister or not (12). Doalty Dan Doalty finds himself engaged in the art of boundary-making. Benedict Anderson, quoting Richard Muir, writes that “boundaries have a special significance in determining the limits of sovereign authority and defining the spatial form of the contained political regions” (Muir qtd. in Anderson). Resistance though it is, Doalty’s actions are powerful in that they help him (and other characters in the play) draw lines around what is sovereign Ireland and what is imperial “Britain.” However, Friel’s play suggests that

distrust and fear of these sorts can thwart the positive aspects of the hybrid process. Additionally, as Murray points out in his text on drama, “Friel, while not denying the imperialist content of the educational and mapping projects of the 1830s, does not fall into the artistic trap of opposing villains and heroes (for where would such a strategy leave the ambidexterous Owen?)” (Murray 212). While the characters of *Translations* can be read in a colonial/post-colonial context, it is their openness and, paradoxically, sometimes their lack of openness to hybridity which is most important. For this reason, one character, hedge schoolmaster Hugh, resonates more strongly than his stage counterparts.

While characters in the play may seem to lay themselves out along nationally striated lines, that is not Friel's major point in the play. His play, he has claimed, is about language and nothing more –the means by which people make their inner world a reality, and understand their outer world, collectively. What, then, is the language question in *Translations* seeks to elucidate? It would seem to be a lesson about the nature of language in the colonial space; Seamus Deane writes in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* that “At its most powerful, colonialism is a process of radical dispossession. A colonized people is without a specific history and even, as in Ireland and other cases, without a specific language” (Deane 10). Declan Kiberd's chapter from *Inventing Ireland* proposes a reading of *Translations* as a play about a colonial experiment in modernization, about collaborators and, in turn, “true” Irish people. It is about the associations which have confounded and plagued the Irish language since early colonial moments, turning it into a “question / *ceisteanna*,” rather than the vital language of a people. Set against one another as they are in the play, and with Latin confused by the colonizing force (in the person of Lancey) for Gaelic-Irish, they have dual function. First, as Cullingford points out, “The study of classical tongues proves that the Irish are, as the interpreter Owen says, ‘civilised’” (Cullingford 231). However, a secondary function of the language-play in the drama yields a less promising view of things to come: two of the three are already “dead” languages. The fear for some of the characters is cut along national lines: that in a hybrid society, Irish and the Irish language might go the same route. The language situation in the play leaves one major question in the mind of the audience: how does Friel want them to feel about English (or *bearla*, as it is known in the Irish tongue)? Cullingford argues that Friel's intent in writing in English, but asking his audience to imagine the play as taking place in Irish is this:

Friel cannot repudiate English without losing his audience. The symbolic connection between Virgil's poetic Latin and Friel's dramatic English is underlined by Hugh's acceptance of loss and his tentative assertion of linguistic possibility, which also reflect current debates about the place of Irish in the modern world. (231)

The use of the language question and the Ordnance Survey provides the audience with powerful images of cultural memory about which they can make judgments and decisions. The benefit of this type of model is that it engages participants in a dialogue, with a common language provided; in short, it gives them something to talk about.

What the audience ends up talking about, however, is undoubtedly not what they entered the play thinking was the topic at hand; hedge schoolmaster Hugh, bastion of classical culture and ideology becomes Friel's chosen topic for discussion. Declan Kiberd notes Hugh's reticence with regard to the modern, recognizing the character's turning back from the 1798 rebellion not as cowardice, but as "a timidity in the face of revolutionary French modernity, a collective decision by the Irish to keep the modern world at bay" (Kiberd 621). The great struggle of the play for Hugh becomes the coming of modernization and lingual, if not actual hybridity to Ireland, via the British Ordnance Survey. While Hugh has "opted for a world of regressive nostalgias" as Kiberd puts it, he also opts for participation in the new national school, which will be conducted entirely in English, a seeming contradiction of that for which he stands. Friel voices through Hugh, however, the primary concern of the play when he says, "And it can happen – to use an image you'll understand – it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of... fact" (Friel 51-52). The way in which Friel casts Hugh as able to grow and change with his hybrid society suggest a countering of Deane's fears about a colonized people being with language: in essence, Friel implies they can do more than survive, that with people like Hugh at work, they can flourish. Hugh, like Renan, believes that, "This exclusive concern with language, like an excessive preoccupation with race, has its dangers and its drawbacks. Such exaggerations enclose one within a specific culture, considered as national; one limits oneself, one hems oneself in" (*Nation & Narration* 17). Hugh finds a means of cooperation with the British that accepts the hybrid, or at least the possibility thereof, while characters like Doalty Dan Doalty and the never seen, yet ever present O'Donnell Twins lose themselves in a fruitless war.

In a dazzling move of theatricality, Friel transforms Hugh into his own private, liminal space, in which understanding and cultural hybridity thrive. As Murray explains in his chapter on "Playing the North", "to use Hugh's own style, (a) native culture is a fine and noble thing but one must also welcome what is new [...] One must be prepared to change and grow, as replacing Irish with English placenames implies. A (b) culture does not necessarily lead to an ennoblement of the individual or to national greatness" (Murray 211). Hugh's ability to interpret the current cultural landscape of Ireland in the play reveals the positive hybridity which the play endorses. In his final conversation with Owen, his collaborator-*cum*-loyalist son, it falls to Hugh to state what is, by Act 3 of the play, the obvious, the hybrid:

Hugh (indicating the Name-Book) We must learn those new names.

Owen (searching around) Did you see a sack lying about?

Hugh We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home.

Owen I know where I live.

Hugh James thinks he knows, too. I look at James and three thoughts occur to me: A –that it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that distinction. [...] B –we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise. Is there no soda bread?

Owen And C, Father one single, unalterable ‘fact’: if Yolland is not found, we are all going to be evicted. Lancey has issued the order. [...]

Hugh Take care, Owen. To remember that everything is a form of madness.

(Friel 88)

Friel allows Hugh a privileged position in the play as the only character who truly understands the realities of the situation at hand. Through Hugh's acknowledgment of the entry of English into Ballybeg, and of the necessity that the people learn it and accept it, Friel presents the positive possibilities of the hybrid: acceptance, rather than rejection of new and blended cultural elements. The final scene of the play sees Jimmy Jack, Máire, and Hugh on stage, each confused in a separate manner as they attempt to cope with the shifting of their world. However, much as the Good Friday Agreement and even more recent events in the politics of Northern Ireland, there is something to be gained via the arduous road to the acceptance of cultural hybridity journeyed by Friel's characters. Recalling that Friel considers the play one about language, it is worth noting that Seamus Deane writes, “The recovery of the lost Irish language has taken the form of an almost vengeful virtuosity in the English language, an attempt to make Irish English a language in its own right rather than an adjunct to English itself” (Deane 10). Hugh knows, and the audience hopefully comes to realize, that the appropriation of English by the Irish presents only possibilities. The implicit language question around English which Friel writes into *Translations* poses its own questions about how the Irish can live in a post-colonial world. For both Friel and Hugh, then, this lies in transformation and an openness to the translation of the Irish culture into something more, something hybrid.

Conclusions

In the unique space presented in West Indian and Irish drama audiences find realistic characters in post-colonial vacuums, exploring the implications of cultural hybridity as potential ways to move forward in nations like Ireland, once ravaged by the brutal fist of colonialism. *Translations*, Brian Friel's play which opened the Field Day Theatre Company, assisted Ireland in its own process of coming to hybridity by asking essential questions and demanding an engaged audience, looking towards its future. The deployment of characters who both can and cannot compromise, adapt, and change speaks directly to the challenges and benefits present in hybrid societies, that is, in the vacuum after colonialism. The lessons of such literature must not be ignored, or other sites of cultural and national turmoil risk never being able to ask what Edward Said calls the “persistent questions” of global postcolonialism: “When did we become a ‘people’?”

When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?" (Said 34). In theater such as we have seen from Friel, these persistent questions find both voice and answers, replying to the harsh tenors of both colonialism and nationalism.

–Boston College & Claremont Graduate University, 2012

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