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Re-*Translations*, or, Can the Postcolonial Construct a Home?

means unproblematic. Within the economy of a presentation such as this, one recent

excerpt from the debate around these terms will suffice. In his recent, wide-ranging

study *Ireland and Empire*, Stephen Howe argues against what he sees as the

homogenising effect of the use of these terms. For him,

> Ireland under the Union was… a strange constitutional hybrid: quite unlike
> any part of the subject Empire in that it was represented—on the whole,
> fairly represented, proportional to popul

Chile, if you want to know what happened in Vietnam, read *Translations*,' that's nonsense. And I just can't accept that sort of pious rubbish.[4]

Thus, it could be argued that Friel wrote *The Communication Cord* as his translation of *Translations* in response to other critical translations of the play that made him uncomfortable. *Translations*, it should be noted, inspired an immediate and intense critical reaction. This reaction might provisionally be divided into three overlapping categories. In the first place, there were a few more romantically inclined nationalist

the play which will be explored here later, a dramatic performance of the tensions

between two different modes of translation—between what he has termed

"ontological" and "positivist" attitudes to language.[9] Thus, while James Simmons has

rather elegantly described *The Communication Cord* as a case of Friel "pissing on his

own monument,"[10] this paper will propose that Friel's relationship with his monument

was of a different order: as a translation, *The Communication Cord*, to adapt

Benjamin's metaphor, uncovers anew the "always already" fragmented nature of the

monument.[11] This fragmentation was, of course, performed in *Translations* itself, as it

had evoked the impossibility of a return to a whole "original."[12] Thought of in this

fashion, *The Communication Cord* might indeed be framed as a form of retranslation.

This, if one follows Benjamin, is a risky procedure. Translations are untranslatable,

according to him, "because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them."[13]

This looseness is the result of the travesty inherent in translation. Benjamin had earlier

described the relationship between what he called the untranslatable nucleus and the

translatable words of the original in this manner:

> the relationship between content and language is quite different in the
> original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity
> in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation
> envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a
> more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content,
> overpowering and alien.[14]

Thus, *The Communication Cord* might be read as a travesty of a travesty: an attempt

to loosen the robes that had been draped on *Translations* by farcically broadening the

gap between signifier and signified, in order to re-clothe it, perhaps, in the Emperor's

new clothes.

Of course, travesty is also a suitable *genre* for a play that satirises elements of

postcolonial Irish society, by showing how in paying homage to nationalist pieties,

they have assumed mock-imperial clothing. Seamus Deane, in his General

Senator Donovan in *The Communication Cord* also participates in the naming

process. This is his reaction to Tim's invention of a character called "Jack the Cod:"

"I love that. Call a man Jack the Cod and you tell me his name and his profession and

that he's not very good at his profession. Concise, accurate and nicely malicious.

Beautiful!"[20] Donovan's style of reading this name can be explored by returning to

Kearney's reading of the competing attitudes to language in *Translations*: between

what he has termed a "positivist" attitude to language, which he identifies with the

colonial effort, and a Heideggerian, "ontological" disposition, which finds expression

in the etymological excavations in which the hedge school participates. In order to

amplify these distinctions, Kearney will be quoted at some length here. He holds that

the "ontological" approach celebrates language,

> as a way to truth in the Greek sense of the term, *A-lethia*, meaning un-
> forgetfulness, un-concealing, dis-closure. Language tells us truth by virtue
> of its capacity to unlock the secret privacies of our historical Being (the
> 'interiority of the heart's space').… Language houses Being by recalling
> things from their past oblivion, thus attuning us once again to our lost
> identities, enabling us to re-member (*an-denken*) our alienated, dis-
> membered selves.…
>
> Friel opposes this *ontological* model of language to the *positivist* use
> of words as agents of pragmatic progress. This alternative positivist model
> is perhaps most closely associated with the philosophy of the British
> Empiricism, which served in recent centuries as the ideological mainstay of
> British colonialism.... Positivism maintains that words are mechanically
> given (*positum*)—objects in a world of similar objects. They are eminently
> unmysterious entities to be used as instruments for the representation,
> mapping or classification(that worus entit3)]TJ -3.5(c)s entit3

itself in an "ontological" light is what Donovan would see as necessary deference to a supposedly purer past. In short, it is an act of piety, the absurdity of which is reinforced by the fact that it is in any case an invented name. Indeed, the play, as a farce, is weighed down by a plethora of invented names and mistaken identities; names that set out to mislead and misrepresent, to gain short-term advantages. Donovan is Teddy to his French mistress, Evette, and Dr. Bollocks for the German, who is, at various stages, called Barney the Banks, Barney Munich and Willie Hausenbach. In this manner, *The Communication Cord* re-enacts, in excess, *Translations'* portrayal of the limits of a "positivist" translation of names. However, it could also be re-posing a question about the possible nature of an "ontological" approach. In *Translations* this question was inevitably obscured by the fact that the "positivist" style of translation was a colonial imposition, and so the "ontological" resistance to this tended to be equated with an attitude that would posit the untranslatability of proper names, as a way of preserving their inner meaning.[22] Here though, the farcical foregrounding of naming and role-playing places under question the notion that there might be a pure and secret proper name to be found underneath these various aliases. Indeed, perhaps even the desire that Derrida submits is "at work in every proper name" — "translate me, don't translate me" —is being suggested.[23] This, in other words, would caution against any temptation to view the "ontological" as an entirely pure alternative to "positivism." If language contains a call for translation, contamination is inevitable; thus, perhaps the optimum translation strategy must be one in which the unresolvable strife of the "bizarre hendiadys," "necessary and impossible,"[24] is expressly felt.

Thus, it is with no little irony that we learn from Donovan's daughter Susan, towards the end of a play in which identities and names are entirely malleable, that

Donovan's name is "Patrick Mary Pious."[25] As was mentioned earlier, Donovan is the embodiment of piety, and as such initially finds himself very much at home in the house that is the setting for this play. It is located in the "present" in a restored thatched cottage in Ballybeg, the fictional townland in Donegal in which many of Friel's plays are set including *Translations*, which bore witness to the change of its name from Baile Beag to Ballybeg. The opening stage directions, in their description of the interior, also set the stage for the reading here:

> *The action takes place in a 'traditional' Irish cottage. ... Every detail of the kitchen and its furnishings is accurate of its time (from 1900 to 1930). But one quickly senses something false about the place. It is too pat, too 'authentic'. It is in fact a restored house, a reproduction, an artefact of today making obeisance to a home of yesterday.*[26]

As the play opens, this unlived-in holiday home is being set up as a trap. It belongs to the family of Jack McNeilis, a barrister, and he has hatched a plan to loan it for a couple of hours to his friend Tim Gallagher, a lecturer in linguistics, notably without tenure, who is struggling with a thesis on "Discourse Analysis with Particular Reference to Response Cries."[27] By playing the role of host in such a cottage, Tim can impress Donovan—his girlfriend Susan's father—who is noted for his appreciation of such Irish antiquities. Indeed, he is immediately enchanted by the place, agreeing with Jack's deliberately parodic description of it: "This is where we all come from. This is our first cathedral. This shaped all our souls. This determined our first pieties."[28]

Moreover, Donovan finds himself in communication with the place; it is the reification of a style of translation that speaks to him:

> This speaks to me, Tim. This whispers to me. Does that make sense to you?
> …
> This is the touchstone. That landscape, that sea, this house—this is the apotheosis.
> …
> I suppose what I'm really saying is that for me this is the absolute verity.[29]

This paper proposes that this house, as an artefact of today making obeisance to the past, represents a piously translated construction, one which, in producing an effect of authenticity, would seek to deny its status as a translation. This edifice will now be partially deconstructed in order to locate the correspondences between a pious and "positivist" translation in their flawed relationships with the past. In short, if one takes Heidegger's notion of "imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sign of the familiar"[30] as a possible definition of an "ontological" disposition, the pious and "positivist" attitudes would tend to ignore the otherness of the past.

This is most vividly revealed in Donovan's misadventure with the post and chains that were used to tether the cattle in the house. He is at first overjoyed to see them, tellingly noting that they have been "incorporated…into the kitchen as of course it should be because that it is exactly as it was!"[30]

to interrogate, in a deliberately speculative fashion, the notion of piety and its relationship with the past once more.

As we know, in order to continue his eccentric journey from Circe's island, Odysseus had to descend to the House of Death and consult with Tiresias and crucially confront his dead ancestors and friends. He is specifically enjoined to practise appropriate rites of piety before encountering the dead. In effect, this piety involves the difficult coming to terms with the fact that his loved ones are no more than shades; indeed, he tries and fails three times to embrace his mother's shade.[33] Thus, not only is there no joy to be gained for Odysseus by encountering the past, but he also literally cannot grasp his past; it is, once more, an "impossible and necessary" task. Donovan, on the other hand, assumed a full comprehension of his past, until he found himself ensnared in its grip. Hence, tentatively, it is suggested here that the difference between necessary piety and its false reflection can be witnessed in Odysseus' need to mourn, and so endure the experience of the lack of presence, as opposed to Donovan's celebratory recreation of the past, which produces nothing more than a pantomime. As de Man has hinted, mourning exists on the other side of intelligibility; it is the figure *par excellence* for non-comprehension, based as it is on the lack of acceptance or comprehension of the absence of the other.[34] Thus, to use a vocabulary relevant to the processes of translation, mourning might be thought of as a decisive recognition of the fissure between the sign and the signified. In other words, and to push this once more in a direction suggested by de Man's reading of Rousseau, it underscores the inherent metaphorical nature of language.[35]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this would appear to return us to what might be called the thesis at the heart of *The Communication Cord*; as might be recalled, Tim is struggling with a PhD on discourse analysis and response cries. The nature of his

problems might be guessed at from his description of his work to Jack early in the play. He proposes a rather strict, indeed, one might say positivist-style, codification of the functions and processes of discourse: "Language. An agreed code. I encode my message; I transmit it to you; you receive the message and decode it."[36]

Strangely, it would appear that his focus on the role of "response cries" within this code is what is deconstructing this system. When, in the midst of Tim's lengthy descriptions, Jack interjects an exclamatory "God," Tim seizes on this:

> A response cry! And that's really the kernel of my thesis. A response cry blurted out as an involuntary reaction to what you've just heard. And what does it tell me? Does your 'God' say: I never knew that before? Does it say: This is fascinating—please continue? Does it say: Yes, I do desire to share your experience? Does it say: Tim you're boring me? Or is your expletive really involuntary? Maybe—because we're both playing roles, if we're both playing roles—maybe your 'God' is a *pretence* at surprise, at interest, at boredom. And if this is a pretence, why is it a pretence?[37]

Thus, Tim would appear to be caught between the desire to codify and the knowledge that this is not sufficient: insufficient precisely because even a seemingly involuntary, perhaps one might even say, originary, cry needs to be interpreted. Inscribed within it, in short, is the possibility of metaphor[38] —a possibility that cannot be accommodated in a purely "positivist" translation.[39]

The play ends with another possible travesty, this time with the house collapsing in a Babel-like fashion. As Derrida has reminded us, Babel itself was collapsed by an angry god who resented the Shems' attempt to make a name for themselves, and so create a linguistic hegemony:

> What happens in the Babel episode, in the tribe of the Shems? Notice that the word "shem" already means *name*: Shem equals name. The Shems decide to raise a tower—not just to reach up to the heavens but also, it says in the text, to make a name for themselves. They want to make a name for themselves, and they bear the name of name... how will they do it? By imposing their tongue on the entire universe on the basis of this sublime edification.... Had their enterprise succeeded, the universal tongue would have been a particular language imposed by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world. It would not have been a universal

TIM: Maybe. Maybe silence is the perfect discourse.[41]

Hence, some level of meaning might even be uncovered in phrases which had apparently been completely hollowed out in the course of this play. But, in a seeming paradox, in order for these phrases to have meaning, they must resist comprehension. Thus, this house—a reification of a "positivist" travesty, if you will—is brought down by a confirmation of the Heideggerian notion of language as the "house of being," and this perhaps becomes the necessary and impossible blueprint for the construction of a postcolonial home. Language, in this view, does not say everything explicitly, as something is apparently being withheld as it is spoken.[42] Echoes of one of Hugh's final speeches in *Translations*, in which he states that "confusion is not an ignoble

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[22] Derrida has posed the question thus: "we have a series of names throughout our lives. We are constantly being named by different names which add up, disappear, accumulate, and so on. But what one may well ask oneself is whether, beneath the proper name or names that are in one way or another public knowledge, there does not exist a proper name that is unconscious and secret, a name we are in search of or that the reader or analyst must seek out.… Is it possible not to know one's own name?… Is it possible for the unconscious proper name—that to which the other addresses him/herself in us, that

we will have established the beginnings of a dialogue. All social behaviour, the entire social order, depends on words mutually agreed on and mutually understood. Without that agreement, without that shared code, you have chaos." Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 18-19.

[37] Ibid., 19-20.

[38] Of course, as has been cited above, Rousseau's allegory of man's first encounter with another man, and his naming of him as "giant" is just such an originary scene.

[39] Indeed, even the limits of a form of interlinear translation are uncovered in *The Communication Cord*. When Donovan first meets Tim and questions him about the reconstruction of the cottage, Tim obviously knows nothing about the subject and, in response to Donovan's queries about the style of thatching he had employed, he merely repeats the questions to create a false impression: "DONOVAN: It's warmer than bent but not as enduring. Do you find that? TIM: It's not as enduring but it's warmer. … DONOVAN: Not as resilient but they last longer. Is that your experience? TIM: They last longer but they're not as resilient." Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 33.

[40] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 100-101.

[41] Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 92.

[42] Gentzler's reading of Heidegger is particularly apposite here, as it might be thought to describe the foundations of an "ontological" approach: "Heidegger argues that we do not hear everything, for there is something essential which cannot be heard or read. Something is withheld as language speaks. Words not only reveal what is there— "language is the house of Being" —but language also holds back. If we let language speak for itself, what is revealed is something about the nature of language: words not only show what is there, but also show what is there and at the same time is not." Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 1993), 156.

[43] Indeed, as Schlegel ironically put it, non-understanding provides the ground for "the welfare of families and of nations," as full comprehension would be intolerable. Quoted in Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 163-84), 183.

[44] This can be embedded in an alternative translation: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. When this relation of dominance gets inverted, man hits upon strange maneuvers. … For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first