

Aidan O'Malley, *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities. Performing Contradictions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 264 pp. £55.00. ISBN 978-0-230-22969-3

Aidan O'Malley's *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities* offers a comprehensive analysis of Field Day's ambitious project to reinterpret the histories of Irish identities through acts of cultural translation. Founded by Stephen Rea and Brian Friel, this touring theatre company included other well-known figures such as Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin. In the face of the sectarian violence of the Northern Irish "Troubles", Field Day produced dramas which, as the author contends, perform "the contradictions that had been resolved into pillars that upheld the different constructions of identity that informed the politics on the island" (4). Making use of a broad concept of translation, O'Malley claims that Field Day staged "the dynamics of translation in a variety of metaphorical guises" (5). In this respect, the author appropriately illustrates how these plays tend to be structured on the notion of the *traduttore traditore*, which foregrounds issues related to fidelity, treason, (in)authenticity and power relations. "These are key themes in Irish cultural history", O'Malley convincingly argues, "precisely because of the translated nature of Irish cultural identity" (17).

In his introduction, O'Malley sets out to describe the potential of translation as a means to not only overcome cultural isolation, but also establish bonds of tolerance and mutual trust with the other. As the author explains, attention to otherness is necessary in order to preserve what Berman defined as an "ethic of translation" which would welcome difference and foster hospitality. Here, O'Malley also benefits from Venuti's notion of "domestication", reminding readers of the myriad forms in which translations may render the other as familiar, foreign, exotic or even menacing. Granting translation a status as a powerful cultural mediator, O'Malley echoes Bhabha's argument that translations enact "the performative nature of cultural communication" (21). Closely linked to identity claims, history is presented in this book as another form of translation, since it often serves the purpose of interpreting past events into their significance in the present. At this point, the author discusses how both unionism and Catholic nationalism offer disabling versions of history that dwell on colonial stereotypes, fixed conceptions of identity and hostility to the other. Thus, O'Malley maintains that Field Day's cultural intervention intended to subvert the legitimacy of those two approaches to Irish history, thus providing a site of alternative politics: "by performing aspects of the construction of Irish identities, the Field Day dramas undermine the notion that an essential Irishness exists" (21).

O'Malley devotes chapter 1, significantly entitled "Translating the Irish Past", to Friel's *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1989), two plays that rearticulate Ireland's colonial history in terms of conflicts of interpretation. In his analysis, the author takes pains to demonstrate how both plays, while portraying the dispossession involved in the language shift and decline of Gaelic culture, perform the contradictions and ambivalences in the relationship between colonized Ireland and the British Empire. According to O'Malley, Friel attempted to "dislodge these pasts from the essentially repetitive roles they have held in Irish histories" (53). Drawing attention to the need to apprehend historical events through an alternative discourse, O'Malley points out that

“the past assumes the role of the other that calls for yet another translation: this is entirely the political message of both plays” (53).

Under the title “Translation, Home and Hospitality”, chapter 2 deals with the allegorical significance of the domestic space in three Field Day dramas which, as expressed by the author, “problematise the notion of home, and try to disentangle it from unquestioned ideas of origin and belonging” (55). This chapter brings forward the question of hospitality, which connects with the translational notions of trust, fidelity and the possibility of betrayal. In Friel’s farce, *The Communication Cord* (1982), the action is located in a restored Irish cottage, which O’Malley identifies as a pious translation of an idealized past. The eventual collapse of the house, he comments, illustrates the inaccuracy of this translation. The other two plays considered in this chapter, the author remarks, provide spatial metaphors which translate into the Northern Irish experience of “shared homelessness” (55). Set in a 19th century Russian province, Friel’s version of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1981) stages the conflict of being displaced in one’s own house. Athol Furgard’s *Boesman and Lena* (1969) takes its audience to apartheid South Africa. Here, O’Malley underlines the importance of extending hospitality to the other in order to start one’s process of healing and overcome social barriers.

In chapter 3, “Loyal Translations: The Spirit and the Letter”, O’Malley discusses two Field Day plays which “translate the conflict between authority and individual conscience” (91) within the Ulster Protestant community. A translation of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, Tom Paulin’s *The Riot Act* (1984) focuses on the troubled relation between state control and civil disobedience. In his analysis, O’Malley explains how “translation signifies moving the dead body” of the traitor, Polycites, and how, in this respect, Creon and Antigone’s “attitudes to translation articulate aspects of the unionist conception of fidelity” (100). The other play considered by O’Malley in this chapter, Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost* (1987), features the ghost of Lily, whose personal life, as is progressively unfolded, went “beyond her role of a representative of hard-line unionism” (113). In chapter 4, “Reciprocation and Solution”, the author examines two dramas that, as he notes, call for future re-translations of the reciprocations of trust. Regarding Seamus Heaney’s version of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy* (1990), O’Malley reflects on how Neoptolemus, sent to deceive Philoctetes, is however forced to confront “the fidelity due to the other and to language (...) and this sets in train an ethical conflict” (123). Derek Mahon’s farce *High Time* (1985), an adaptation of Molière’s *L’Ecole des Maris*, is also discussed by O’Malley as dramatization of how one can gain the other’s affection precisely by trusting what the other stands for.

In chapter 5, “Masks: Men and History”, O’Malley presents readers with three Field Day plays which explore how the relationship between Ireland and Britain has formed and reshaped identities. Drawing on the translational concepts of fidelity and negotiation of otherness, O’Malley elucidates that “because identity is always performative, any construction of the self incorporates an element of treason” (142). Whereas Thomas Kilroy’s *Double Cross* (1986) exposes the mutable nature of identity, as its protagonists try to conceal their Irish identity through performance, their eventual failure, O’Malley notes, reveals the gaps and inconsistencies of these self-translations. Another play by Kilroy, *The Madame MacAdam Traveling Theatre* (1991), depicts, according to O’Malley, the persistence of colonial stereotypes in a liminal Irish Free State which acts as host of an English touring company. O’Malley discusses also Terry Eagleton’s *Saint Oscar* (1989), a play that pays homage to Oscar Wilde’s irreverence

towards established codes of behaviour. O'Malley claims that, through acts of self-evident and 'parodic' translations, Eagleton's characterization of Wilde easily alternates between roles of stage Irishman and stage Englishman just to reveal the hollowness of both conventions. "Such a mode of translation", O'Malley contends, "fractures the relationship between nature and representation" (163).

O'Malley's study closes with an epilogue in which the author enlarges upon his thesis of how Field Day sought to reinterpret the Irish colonial heritage – thus dismantling the unionism/nationalism and civilian/barbarian dichotomies – while performing the contradictions inherent in all essentialist and closed interpretations of historical events. Field Day's cultural intervention, O'Malley concludes, addresses "the need to re-imagine and re-translate the past without eliding it", hence promoting "a recognition and registering of difference as a starting point rather than a dead end" (188).

Among the many merits of this book, I would highlight the wide range of references to the work of translation scholars and cultural critics such as Derrida, Said, Bhabha, Berman, Venuti, Gadamer, Casanova, Niranjana, Cheyfitz, Ricoeur and, more specifically in the Irish context, Cronin. The author's critical discourse juxtaposes a variety of theoretical approaches which include historical revisionism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and translation studies. Such a dense body of theoretical references may occasionally prove discouraging for the non-specialist reader yet O'Malley is coherent in his use of theory and appropriately substantiates his more abstract claims in his textual analysis. Following a recent scholarly trend in Irish Studies, translation emerges in this work as a concept which aptly helps explain the construction of Irish cultural identities, mediated by both the processes of colonialism and the pressures of nationalism. As the author notes, since no translation is final, Field Day dramas may well serve as re-translations that reshape the older narratives of cultural affiliation in Ireland. In this respect, although *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities* might not be considered a book on translation studies per se, it makes nonetheless a remarkable contribution to our understanding of the politics of representation explored here, in the Northern Irish context, from the point of view of cultural translation. O'Malley's book provides an illuminating and incisive study of the intersections between literature, history and cultural translation which, beyond its relevance for Field Day and Northern Ireland, interestingly highlights the complexities underlying the representation of places and cultures.

References

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