Guests, Hosts, and Ghosts: Variations of *Hostipitality* (Hospitality/Hostility) on the Irish and the Continental Stage

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"The land is mine and you reside in my land
as foreigners and strangers."
(Moses: Leviticus 25:23)

Different languages have preserved different memories in their vocabulary of various aspects of human experience. Ancient connections between words and experiences are often neglected, and we rarely think of tracing our current vocabulary back to its original roots. However, a thorough investigation can reveal essential links between words used frequently in everyday life. For instance, the underlying connections between such words as foreigner, stranger, guest, host, etc. refer to age-old experiences which have been overshadowed throughout the historical changes of the particular language. In Hungarian, for instance, the words guest (*vendég*) and stranger (*idegen*) go back etymologically to the same root (VeNDéG / iDeGeN). They are, in fact, two versions of the same term. This forgotten connection stems from the experience that the guest is always a stranger, and the stranger should always be handled as a guest. In English the words "host" and "guest" are related to each other originating from the same etymological root, as is demonstrated in the classic essay of J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host" (2005). As it is clarified in that essay, the host is always a guest, and the guest is always a host at the same time. There is a similarly strong bond between the terms "hospitality" and "hostility," which is analyzed by Jacques Derrida in his series of seminars dedicated to the subject of hospitality and the issue of guests (2000). Awareness of the ambivalence between the guest and the host inspired Derrida to create the term *hostipitality* (*hostipitalité*) which unites the positive aspect of hospitality and its opposite, hostility into one word, expressing the essential ambivalence of the guest / host situation. *Hostipitality* expresses not only the essential ambivalence of the host towards the guest, but a permanent oscillation between acceptance and rejection, the constant presence of the possibility of conflict between guest and host, and the dynamics of their changing place with each other.

The guest/host relationship and situation already imply dramatic potentials therefore it is not by coincidence that in the history of drama the arrival of a visitor, guest or stranger is a frequently constructed situation and dramaturgical device. This visitor can be a well-known guest or an unknown stranger whose arrival or presence creates the dramatic situation, maintains and increases the tension until explosion. The guest always brings a different world with herself/himself. S/he is the *other* who represents alternative values, customs, cultural practices and aspects of behaviour

opposite to the characteristics of the place and community into which s/he has arrived. Two worlds collide, the hosting/expelling native (domestic, homely, provincial, or national) world, and the other one, which is the world of the exile, i.e. the newcomer/vagrant, guest/stranger, or occupier/liberator.

In drama history there are cases when the guest throws the lives of the hosts into disarray, and finally becomes imprisoned, for instance Tartuffe, or killed, as the Major in István Örkény's *The Tot Family*. There are guests who are not invited, and who either come to take revenge (as the Old Lady in Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*), or, in contrast, want to say thanks for a one-time good deed to the host (like the Guest returning from the US to present-day Hungary in Spiró's *Quartet*, whose life was saved after the 1956 revolution by the host, the Old Man). There are situations when a fraud is initiated as a guest, as in Gogol's *The Inspector General*, and it can also happen that the guest comes to betray his host, as in *Sojourner* by Géza Páskándi. The arriving person can be an innocent overnight guest who is murdered for his money (which happens in Albert Camus' *Misunderstanding*), or a hotel guest who is kidnapped by strangers (as in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*). These dramatic examples often demonstrate that the awaited or unexpected guest finally can haunt his hosts and become their ghost, changing their lives not only significantly but sometimes totally.

The present article focuses on Irish plays in which the guest/host motif is central, as in J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, Brian Friel's *Translations* and *The Communication Cord*, Declan Hughes' *Halloween Night*, and his new version of Molière's *Tartuffe*, or Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*. By way of comparison I will mention some continental plays, for instance István Örkény's *The Tot Family* and Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* in which similar situations unfold. In these (and several other) plays the individual drama of the guest/stranger demonstrates a considerable variety of forms that offer examples of the emotionally and culturally loaded, heterogeneous experience of *hostipitality*.

As mentioned above, in his essay "The Critic as Host," J. Hillis Miller describes that the two terms, guest and host are etymologically linked together and derive from the same root. Originally they were one word, meaning

> *ghos-ti*, stranger, guest, host, properly 'someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality'. The modern English word, 'host' in this alternative sense comes from the Middle English *(h)oste*, from Old French, host, guest, from Latin *hospes* (stem *hospit-*), guest, host, stranger. The 'pes' or 'pit' in the Latin words and in such modern English words as 'hospital' and 'hospitality' is from another root, *pot*, meaning 'master'. The compound or bifurcated root *ghos-pot* meant 'master of guests', 'one who symbolizes the relationship of reciprocal hospitality', as in the Slavic *gospodi*, Lord, sir, master. 'Guest' on the other hand, is from Middle English *gest*, from Old Norse *gestre*, from *ghos-ti*, the same root as for 'host.' (19)

Therefore the host is at the same time the guest, and the guest is also the host. Such a strong etymological bond can be detected between the term hospitality, and its opposite, hostility, articulating the essential ambivalence of those situations for which these words are used. There are different types of dramatic situations handling the issue of the guest/host motif, which is why it is not chronology that will be the principle to be followed here, but, rather, a loose kind of typology.

I start with an adaptation which goes back to a seventeenth century original. In 2000 Declan Hughes created a new version of Molière's *Tartuffe* for the Irish National Theatre. The play premiered at the Abbey directed by Lynn Parker. Hughes has changed the plot time from Molière's seventeenth century to the 1970s, and the scene from Orgon's house in Paris into a large South County Dublin house. He has changed the French names into English, i.e. Pernelle became Purcell, Orgon became Oscar, etc., while Tartuffe alone kept his name. Cleante, the *raisonneur* became Christian, who has become the representative of the new church, the liberal theology opposed to the old, authoritarian church, and the different sects. Although there have been other changes made in the dialogues and the characters, the fundamental situation of the guest/host problem in Hughes' version has remained very similar to that of Molière's original comedy from 1664. Impressed by Tartuffe's piety, Oscar (Orgon) invites him to stay in his house, and gradually grants him more and more control over his home. What Oscar (Orgon) and his mother Mrs. Purcell (Pernelle) take as piety, however, is shown as imposture, a mere manifestation of hypocrisy by the rest of the family and its servants.

The starting situation of the play from the guest/host aspect is very similar to a Hungarian play written in the mid 1960s. In István Örkény's *The Tot Family* (1967) a major gets a two-week holiday from the Soviet frontlines of World War II, which he spends with the family of one of his subordinate soldiers in a small mountain village in Hungary. The parents of the soldier think their son will gain advancement (maybe be transferred into the office) if they do their utmost to serve their guest's needs. The hosts in *Tartuffe* and *The Tot Family* are ready to do everything for their guest. Their behaviour and attitude is very much the same as what is described by Jacques Derrida in his seminar dedicated to the issue of hospitality. Derrida depicts this paradoxical situation as follows,

> The master of the house 'waits anxiously on the threshold of his home' for the stranger he will see arising into view on the horizon as liberator. . . . the master will hasten to call out to him: 'Enter quickly, as I am afraid of my happiness'. . . . The stranger, here the awaited guest is not only someone to whom you say 'come', but 'enter', enter without waiting, make a pause in our home without waiting, hurry up and come in, 'come inside', 'come within me', not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me, which means, by the same token, also take my place, don't content yourself with coming to meet me or into my home. Strange logic, but so enlightening for us, that of an impatient

> master awaiting his guest as a liberator, his emancipator. It is as if the stranger or foreigner held the keys. (121-23)

And, indeed, the keys are transferred literally and symbolically to the guest. Tartuffe and the Major not only stay at the house of their hosts, but occupy it completely. They get hold of almost everything that previously belonged to the host. The plot requires the occupation to take place gradually, not too quickly, but the result is the same. Oscar (Orgon) does not care that his daughter, Marianne is in love with Laurence (Valér), who is her fiancé; the father assigns Tartuffe as her husband. When his son reveals that Tartuffe has tried to seduce the wife of Oscar (Orgon), the father instead of turning against the guest, disinherits his son. Later he signs over his whole property to the guest.

The head of the family in *The Tot Family* does not give everything to the guest in the same way as Oscar (Orgon), but the process of involuntary submission is comparable to what happens in Molière's or Hughes' version. Tot has no allies in rebelling against the rule of the guest as his wife and daughter stand on the Major's side. They try to convince the now dethroned head of the family to change his bodily appearance (by bending his knee to look shorter than the Major), to put a pocket lamp into his mouth (with which to prevent his yawns so as not to irritate their guest), and to stay up at night and sleep during the daytime (in this way adopting the Major's life rhythm which is the total opposite of the previous rhythm of Tot's life).

Tartuffe and the Major introduce another value system, another way of life, another kind of authority to the hosting families. Their presence results in the landlords, their hosts becoming their hostages, meaning that guest and host change place with each other. As Derrida puts it,

> So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who become the hostage – and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host. … These substitutions make everyone into everyone else's hostage. Such are the laws of hospitality. (125)

In these plays of Molière/Hughes and Örkény the guest tries to occupy the house hosting him, to make it his own home by introducing his own value system and way of life. In the above cases the guest is an invited person who gradually turns out to be quite different from the general expectations towards a guest.

Another type is the uninvited guest, the one who appears on the scene unexpectedly and, confused with someone else, is consequently treated under a mistaken persona. The classical Irish play based on the misidentified guest is J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), which from this point of view can be compared to Gogol's *The Inspector General* (1836/1851). If the previous examples of Hughes and Örkény demonstrate the threatening presence of the guest who forces

the family or community to behave cautiously or even defensively, then a contrary image of the guest is demonstrated in Synge's and Gogol's plays. The situations are not the same, but there are significant similarities in the two plays based on farcical misunderstanding and misperception regarding the sudden appearance of a stranger.

In *The Playboy* Christy Mahon first appears through the words of Shawn who gives a description of someone like an animal: "I'm after feeling a kind of fellow above in the fuzzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog . . . I couldn't see him at all, but I heard him groaning out and breaking his heart" (Synge 100-01). The image of the "queer fellow" soon changes as Christy enters the stage and comes forward with his extraordinary deed, saying "But I'm not calling to mind any person, gentle, simple, judge or jury, did the like of me" (104). Once he has told his story of patricide, from a stranger he transforms into a special guest in the eyes of the hosts, and Pegeen and the Widow Quinn begin to rival with each other over who should lodge the young man. "Two fine women fighting for the likes of me," Christy says with great self-satisfaction at the end of act 1. The people of the village come to greet him with presents and look upon him as a hero. In return for the presents they are eager to listen to Christy's story about how he killed his father.

When old Mahon, who was believed to be dead, re-appears, the whole community turns against Christy and makes him a scapegoat. From unique, adored, pampered guest he transforms into a stranger and a criminal whom the villagers tie up, whose leg they burn, but whom they finally allow to leave with his father. The whole process depicted by Synge revolves around the issue of the misjudged visitor who is misidentified and therefore mistreated by a community. In the outcome of the plot members of the hosting community turn against Christy and punish him to a large part for their own mistake, which was glorifying and praising the boy undeservedly.

Gogol's *The Inspector General* depicts the hosts, the settlers of a small Russian town with much more antipathy than the civil servant from Petersburg, called Khlestakov. However, the man thought to be the inspector is not described particularly positively by Gogol either. In the description of characters the author writes that Khlestakov is quite uneducated and has the reputation of a swindler. The fake inspector, like Christy Mahon, merely recognizes and accepts an opportunity, and takes advantage of the unfolding situation. Gogol stresses the community's voluntary submission, its servility, while Synge depicts the process of hero-creation by the community.

The Inspector General shows that type of hospitality in which the hosts' fear makes them ingratiate themselves toward the guest. Their behaviour is motivated not by a moral standard, but by an infantile fear of the official power personified by the guest. This makes them carry their role as hosts to the extreme, turning themselves into hostages of their guest. But there is a significant difference between the points of view from which Synge and Gogol depict the guest's situation. In Synge it is based on misunderstanding, while in Gogol on the imposture of the visitor. In Gogol's play the reader/spectator knows that Khlestakov is not the person the authorities had been

waiting for. The comic effect results from the fact that there is a clash between the views of the rest of the characters and the readers/spectators. But we can have no doubt that the characters of the play would have behaved in the very same way towards the real inspector general as they did towards the swindler.

A further variant of the *hostipitality* situation is when the stranger is not invited, but s/he enters the land or the house with the purpose of occupying it. This is not the situation of a guest and a host, but follows the pattern of colonization. Not surprisingly, in Ireland several plays have been written which can be categorized as works on different aspects of colonization rather than plays about the guest/host ambivalence. In Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), for instance, on the level of the plot the process of colonization stands in the centre, but the playwright stresses in his diary that "[t]he play has to do with language and only language" (Friel qtd. in Pine 146). Regardless of Friel's intention and the structure of the plot in which the process of colonization is executed in two ways—first, the introduction of the national education system by the English government, and second, the Anglicizing and standardizing of the old Irish place-names—there is a point at which the inversion of two roles can be detected. Similarly to the guest/host replacement studied above, it can be noticed, as Richard Kearney points out, that "[t]he translation of names also involves a translation of namers—the roles of colonizer and colonized are reversed, as Yolland and Owen undergo an exchange of identity" (559). Owen, who returns to his homeland with the English soldiers, and translates for them, is seen by his brother Manus as a betrayer. For the natives he remained Owen, but he answers to the name Roland as he is called by the English. He not only loses his name but he becomes one of the oppressors. At the end of the play he has to translate back to the locals the place-names which he had Anglicized previously. Captain Lancey reads out the new versions, and as Seamus Heaney stresses, "Owen must translate them back into Irish for the benefit of his neighbours. It is a list of places that the army is now intent on devastating in retaliation for the presumed killing of Lieutenant Yolland. The betrayer is betrayed" (1199). On the other hand, Yolland describes his encounter with the Gaelic language as a revelation through which he discovers a new dimension of feelings that belong to "a totally different order. I had moved into a consciousness that wasn't striving or agitated, but at its ease and with its own conviction and assurance. . . . perhaps I could live here" (348). Due to Friel's subversion of colonial stereotypes Yolland, defying the position of the colonizer, turns into a possible immigrant, a settler who is eager to identify with the local language, values and customs.

In another of his plays Friel depicts a farcical situation similar to *The Playboy of the Western World* and *The Inspector General*. This work, *The Communication Cord* (1982), can also be interpreted from the aspect of the guest/host issue. The play takes place in a rebuilt old village house in Ballybeg. The old house/museum is visited by the owner's son, Jack and his friend, Tim, for a weekend. Jack wants to meet a girlfriend there, but before that Tim will host Senator Donovan and his daughter Susan, trying to promote his professional career and love relationship. Tim pretends to be the owner

of the house, and therefore behaves as a host, and in this role he subordinates himself to the invited guests. Because the house itself is a fake replica of an authentic old building, Tim qualifies as a false host. Kearney draws a comparison between Owen in *Translations* and Jack, saying that both characters mediate between two worlds and two groups, the old and the new, the locals and the newcomers (see 146). Friel's satire confuses the original roles of host and guest, through which it presents the problem of the loss of identity as well. Similarly to *Translations*, *The Communication Cord* is as much about language as it is about the guest/host theme. The comic twists of the situation finally lead to the collapse of the house, by which the very place disappears where the roles and functions of guest and host could be justified.

A further kind of guest can be the one who haunts the hosts in mystical, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, and can therefore be considered as a haunting ghost in the real or symbolic sense. This type of character is also present on the Irish stage, for instance in Declan Hughes' *Halloween Night* (1997) and Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer* (2006), where guests appear in ghostly roles. In Hughes' play a company gathers for a Halloween party in an "old holiday house on the west coast of Ireland" (125). The characters appear in pairs who split up and rejoin during the night. In the first scene we see Melanie and Eamonn preparing the house for the party with Halloween decorations. Soon it turns out that the company was invited here by George, who is to arrive home from the United States this night. "George made up the invite list," Melanie says later (154). Suddenly Todd, an American enters with the news that George, who was his partner, has died the week before of AIDS. In act 2 scene 1 a miracle takes place through light and sound, which the guests interpret as George's influence. "George's death has *released* something . . . a spirit . . . in the house, and in us . . . . George's spirit . . . his *ghost*, if you want . . . has shown us a sign," runs Melanie's comment (179). Later they think that Todd's appearance was a common hallucination, that the Devil had put a spell on them, and that George must still be alive. However, Caroline raises the issue that maybe "George and Todd are playing some really sick Halloween joke" (190). The company does not come to an understanding with regard to the situation. In their confusion they symbolically re-enact Géricault's painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, and finally, surrounded by the sea, they become trapped in the house since the doors and windows do not open. There is a phone call at the very end of the play from Todd. He speaks as if he had not appeared earlier in the house. He says that George had died the previous night, and wanted his friends to "have a monumental party in his memory" (203-04). George, the possible host haunts his friends as a ghost. He visits them as a guest while his place is taken by his guests who become hosts in his own house.

In *The Seafarer*, James "Sharky" Harkin lives together with his alcoholic brother, Richard, in an apartment. On Christmas Eve their friends arrive to play poker. One of them brings a guest, Mr. Lockhart. When Sharky and the guest are left alone it turns out that twenty-five years previously Sharky had made a contract with Mr. Lockhart. At that time Sharky was in prison where the two of them played poker. The bet was

Sharky's freedom, he won and next morning the guards let him free. But Sharky made an agreement that he would play poker with Mr. Lockhart once again. This is why Mr. Lockhart comes to the apartment now, to win the game and take Sharky's soul with him as he is the Devil. This knowledge is shared only with the reader/spectator and Sharky, as the rest of the characters do not know the real identity of the guest. The whole second act is a series of poker games. When Sharky and Mr. Lockhart remain by themselves for a few minutes, the host asks where he will be taken to by his guest. To Hell, Mr. Lockhardt answers. In the last poker game Sharky and Mr. Lockhart remain the final gamblers. The host has an eights poker and Mr. Lockhart has a poker of tens. They are getting ready to leave. Ivan, who throughout the play has been short sighted as he has been unable to find his glasses, finally finds them and puts them on. Sitting back at the gaming table he realizes that he had a poker ace, and so it is he who has won and not Mr. Lockhart. So by this unexpected twist, Sharky is saved and the Devil has to leave without him.

The guest, Mr. Lockhart, possibly coming for the soul of the host is the representative of a hostile attitude. In return for Sharky's hospitality he would take him to Hell. He symbolizes that "a host in the sense of a guest, moreover, is . . . an alien presence," as Hillis Miller puts it (19). This alien feature is impersonated by the ghostly figure, who on Christmas Eve tries to capture a soul, but Sharky is saved by other spiritual forces like fortune, brotherly love, and friendship. This is a different model with a contrasting outcome from Molière's *Don Juan or The Feast of the Statue* (1665) and Pushkin's play written after Molière, *The Stone Guest* (1830, Каменный гость, *Kamenny gost*). In *The Seafarer* both the guest and the host survive this hazardous situation of *hostipitality*.

The above examples of Irish and continental dramas show that the guest/host issue, the experience of *hostipitality* are vivid thematic components of significant plays which present a broad spectrum of this basic human situation. Beyond the above outlined typology there are further variations and possibilities in which the paradox and ambivalence of the guest/host motif stands in focus, for instance in such cases when the guest takes on the features of a parasite. As Hillis Miller describes in his etymological analysis, the word "host" implies in its spectrum of meanings the body that feeds its parasite. It is known that "there is no parasite without a host. The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. On the other hand, the host is himself the food, his substance consumed without recompense, as when one says, 'He is eating me out of house and home'" (Miller 19). This parasite guest appears, to give an example from Hungarian drama, in Géza Páskándi's *Sojourner* (1973) where the guest (Socino), the betrayer of the host describes himself as a parasite and tick, living from the body and spirit of his host (Bishop David). Socino is an informer for the authorities, spying on his host.

There are further types and examples of the guest/host theme not only in modern drama, but in previous centuries, in ancient dramatic literature too. Jacques Derrida dedicates long passages in his series of seminars on hospitality in the Oedipus plays

and the haunting memory of the dead. Near the end in Sophocles' *Oedipus in Colonus* (406 B.C.) the protagonist turns to Theseus demanding not to be forgotten. In his final speech, in which he says farewell to the living people, Oedipus

> addresses this threatening plea and this calculated injunction to the *xenos*, the dearest foreigner or host, the host as friend but a host who is friend and ally who thereby becomes a sort of hostage, the hostage of a dead man, the possible prisoner of a potential absent person. The host thus becomes a retained hostage, a detained addressee, responsible for and victim of the gift that Oedipus, a bit like Christ, makes of his dwelling-dying: this is my body, keep it in memory of me . . . Everyone is hostage to the dead men. (107)

In our culture the reappearing dead character is presented as a ghost, observable in *Hamlet* and elsewhere. However, the whole of civilization is based on remembering the past and those who have passed away. In fact, the human condition can be seen as being a temporary guest in the realm of existence as is stated in the motto to the present paper cited from the Bible. Therefore those alternating between the roles of guest and host in the present might become ghosts in the future, returning from a bygone past. This unbreakable bond between guest, host, and ghost, which has been preserved in the linguistic unconscious is brought to the surface in its whole complexity in a number of significant plays on the modern Irish and continental stage.

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