Adaptation as Means of Revising Gender Relations in Brian Friel's *A Month in the Country*

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The dramatic adaptation of Russian classics has acquired something of a tradition in Ireland since 1980. One of the most active playwrights in reshaping the works of foreign authors is Brian Friel. Friel has "translated" several major plays written by Chekhov,[1] and so one seems justified in calling him the Irish Chekhov. However, when adapting Russian classics, Friel does not turn to Chekhov exclusively but to another Russian writer, Ivan Turgenev as well. After having adapted Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* to the Irish stage in 1987, in 1991 Friel turned to this author again, and adapted his play *A Month in the Country*, without making any generic alteration in the text. The attraction of Friel to Russian literature is obvious; in 1999 he voiced his love of nineteenth-century Russia in the following terms:

> Maybe because the characters in the plays behave as if their old certainties were as sustaining as ever – even though they know in their hearts that their society is in melt-down and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them. Maybe a bit like people of my own generation in Ireland today. Or maybe I find those Russians sympathetic because they have no expectations whatever from love but still invest everything in it. Or maybe they attract me because they seem to expect that their problems will disappear if they talk about them – endlessly. (qtd. in Pine 104)

Friel's *A Month in the Country* from 1992, written after Turgenev, seems to anticipate the playwright's later thoughts. The play, which, according to Friel himself, is a free version of Turgenev's original, is not simply a "translation" of a Russian text into English, but also a means of commenting on contemporary issues concerning Irish society at that time. As Helen Lojek notes, "translation" for Friel involves more than a movement from one language to another: the term also refers to interpretation within a single language, and ultimately to communication and the shaping of meaning in general (85). From this point of view, when talking about Friel and Russian plays, translation and adaptation in the Frielian terms may be regarded as interchangeable. When translating Turgenev's original, Friel not only adapts a Russian classic to the Irish stage, but gives it a potential new meaning in the Irish context as well.

1 For further reading on translating and adapting the works of Chekhov see for example Zsuzsa Csikai, "Brian Friel's Adaptations of Chekhov." *Irish Studies Review* 13.1 (2005): 79-88 or Zsuzsa Csikai, "A Complex Relationship: Chekhov's Plays and Irish Author-Translators." *The Binding Strength of Irish Studies. Festschrift in Honour of Csilla Bertha and Donald. E. Morse.* Ed. Marianna Gula, Mária Kurdi, and István D. Rácz. Debrecen: Debrecen UP, 2011. 227-36.

In discussing the plays of Friel Terence Brown notes that "Friel's imagination has repeatedly been drawn to those phases in Irish social experience that can be reckoned as transitional" (239). According to his own account, Friel thought of himself as a "socially conscious artist." In line with his social engagement he aimed at writing "a play that would capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment. This has got to be done, for me anyway, and I think it has got to be done at a local, parochial level, and hopefully this will have meaning for other people in other countries" (qtd. in Brown 240). Although *A Month in the Country* (1992) is not an original play of Friel, the changes effected by him show that the rewriting process was motivated by the transition that Irish society had been experiencing in the early 1990s.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate Friel's "free version" (7) of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, in which the Irish writer refocuses attention to enhance the psychological nature of the drama and to allow space to the female voice that is given less emphasis in the original. To reveal the differences between Turgenev's play and the adapted version of it, I will try to answer the question of to what extent the changes introduced by Friel contribute to the debates on gender relations in contemporary Irish society.

The original version of *A Month in the Country* was written by Turgenev between 1848 and 1850, while Friel's adaptation is dated 1992. Keeping the Irish audience's needs in sight when reworking Turgenev's play, Friel wanted to make the original performable in the context of the Irish theatre of the 1990s. Therefore in his version he attempted to achieve what Annie Brisset terms a "reterritorialization" of the original (qtd. in Bastin 4). The notions of "literalness and linguistic fidelity" to reproduce an accurate "translation" have been pushed to the background and the outcome can be called a free version (see Bassnett 127). Another reason why Friel does not deliver us a translation proper is that he not only does not master Russian, but he even admits "that he has no knowledge of the Russian language at all" (Csikai 229).

By abandoning literalness and linguistic fidelity, Friel, however, did by no means entirely divert the original meaning of the play. In the "Preface" to his version he explains that "in places [it] may not be reverent to the original but nowhere, I hope, is it unfaithful to its spirit" (7). On the whole, Friel did not turn away from the Russian author's intention to deliver an "ironic commentary on the absurdity of human passions" (Freeborn 19). While adjusting the work to the cultural background of the Irish audience (see Bastin 4), he even heightened the comic tone of the play and foregrounded the world of feelings and passions that had been suppressed in Ireland for so long due to the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church. In the following analysis I will discuss the ways in which Friel re-addresses the theme of love, dressed in a Russian coat yet involving unmistakably Irish problems, thereby making the audience more receptive to the new version.

It was Christopher Heaney who provided the literal translation of the original for Friel from which he composed his own play. By using the same title and stating

that the new play was written after Turgenev, moreover, by claiming in the "Preface" that "the very free version" does by no means intend to be unfaithful to the spirit of the original (7), Friel creates a marked intertextual relationship between the source text and his adapted one. His adaptation of *A Month in the Country* can be regarded as a reinterpretation of Turgenev since Friel manages to recondition the original, giving it a specific Irish flavour. For example, by introducing music—a central element of many Irish plays—namely that of John Field, and having it played by Vera, a Russian girl, Friel establishes and also reinforces a kind of Irish-Russian cultural exchange.

The main devices used by Friel in his version of *A Month* are omission, alteration, and addition (see Sanders 21). In the "Preface" Friel claims that Turgenev believed that his plays should be read, not performed, which explains the lengthy narrative character of the drama in question. Friel himself intended his adaptation for the stage, thus a cut in the length of the original, which is occasionally too wordy, is justified. Friel also drops the over-polite Russian way of addressing persons by their Christian and patronymic names, relieving the artificial atmosphere of the original. In the "Preface" he says: "I trust I will not offend the purists by tinkering with the Russian names and forms of address" (7). Adjustments like these, and "the use of twentieth-century terms in the characters' speech" (York qtd. in Kurdi 296) as well as the inclusion of puns that are not present in the original, bring the play closer to the Irish audience.

Turgenev's work is about human relationships and the destructive forces of love. Although Friel uses the same themes in his version, he focuses more sharply on the relationships between men and women. Moreover, he seems to have filled the play, especially the speech of Schaaf, with sexual references. By so doing, he attracts attention to such complexities of love as Irish society had been almost unable to deal with or to speak of with ease before the 1990s (see Inglis 9). Friel's most important departures from the source text are manifested in the depiction of the male and female characters. As stated above, Friel makes gender relations appear in a new light by laying stress on the physical contact between men and women. In the original there is only an innocent touching of hands, whereas Friel makes his characters, mainly Natalya and Rakitin, and in one scene Natalya and Aleksey, embrace one another, hold the other in their arms, or give a kiss on the cheek. The changes concerning the physicality between pairs of characters are apparent in the stage directions, the dialogues and find expression in the action as well, for instance when "MICHEL *takes* NATALYA *in his arms from behind*" in Friel's play (28) as opposed to Turgenev's, where Rakitin is only "*going up to Natalya Petrovna*" and *"she gives him her hand*" and "*he instantly presses it*" (33).

Isaiah Berlin's English translation of *A Month* imitates the German accent of the tutor, Herr Schaaf, while Friel did not follow this in his version. He rather highlights the tutor's misuse of English words, by putting in his mouth a sexually overloaded vocabulary that adds to the comic tone of the play. More importantly, by this he challenges the prudery and repression that had characterized Irish society for a long time when addressing the subject of sexuality.

SCHAAF. With Lizaveta Bogdanova I ever again refuse to couple.
. . .
SCHAAF *'s face lights up when he sees* KATYA. *He is ponderously coquettish.*
. . .
SCHAAF. Yes, yes; like last Friday we make lust again beside the lake? . . . We lust later?
KATYA. Adam, you're shameless.
SCHAAF. (*Delighted*) So my Mama say, too! Danke — Danke.
. . .
SCHAAF. Did you know, Lizaveta, at university I am prize-winning lecher?
DOCTOR. Archer, Herr Schaaf. (Friel, *A Month* 22, 38, 78)

These exchanges raise the question of whether Schaaf is using the wrong words because of his language deficiency or made to play with words intentionally? Either way, Friel manages to enhance the comic effect of Schaaf's language, whose very name means sheep in German, adding a further pun to his misuse of words. Interestingly, Friel characterizes Schaaf as "coquettish," a term which describes mainly women who tend to make sexual propositions. Moreover, by intensifying it with the word "ponderously," Friel not only manages, even if in a modest way, to "challenge the existing Catholic discourse and conventions" (Inglis 13) responsible for the long-lasting repression of issues of the body and sexual desire in the Irish psyche, but also undermines Schaaf's manliness.

Playing with physical and verbal expressions of love Friel inverses gender roles and ascribes greater power to women than to men—most importantly to Natalya. In Friel's version it is Anna who is winning in the card game, whereas Turgenev's Anna is losing and the winner is Schaaf. Other men in Friel, Aleksey, the young tutor, and Natalya's husband, are portrayed to be hesitating—especially in Natalya's presence. Friel makes Arkady, who in his obsession with his work tends to compare his wife to a winnowing machine, look confused and even silly. As opposed to Turgenev, who has Rakitin read out from *The Count of Monte Cristo,* Friel's respective character is reading from Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*. While the literary allusion in Turgenev's original displays the character's sophistication, Friel's use of the Anglo-Irish author's work may possibly function to suggest the effeminacy of the male characters, as in Sterne's work impotence is referred to several times.

The motif of lace-making, which appears in the original, recurs in Friel's version as well. While Turgenev uses it to comment on the communication difficulties between Natalya and Michel, Friel's revision "expanded [it] into an embittered comment on human self-centredness and the accompanying general lack of concern for others" as Mária Kurdi notes (286), and made it convey a gendered undertone, apparent also in other Friel dramas. Natalya says to Michel:

I get really angry when you talk like that, Michel. Because you're not talking to me at all: you're *playing a private little game* of your own. You're like those

> lace-makers in those *gloomy*, airless rooms — each one *totally isolated, totally concentrated on those minute, complex, subtle little stitches*. *As if nothing in the world mattered* but those ridiculous little stitches. (Friel, *A Month* 21, emphasis added)

The motif of self-centredness in this passage recalls Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979), in which Frank Hardy, the faith healer of the title, who possesses and is being possessed by a faith-healing talent at the same time, tends to mention his ability "with that mocking voice of his . . . as if it were a game" (343). Frank is portrayed as a split character, whose identity problems stem from the power-struggle between his two selves. The spiritual and emotional struggle between Frank and his healing talent poisons his relationship with Grace, which culminates in Frank's increasing isolation marked by his lying in the back of the van when they are travelling from one place of performance to another. The total isolation and the little stitches mentioned by Natalya in Friel's *A Month* echo Grace's lamentation in *Faith Healer* about how Frank "looks beyond you with those damn benign eyes of his, looking past you . . . out of that private power . . . that was accessible only to him . . . Many, many times I didn't exist for him . . . before a performance . . . it was an erasion – this erasion was absolute: he obliterated me" (344).

Like the lace-makers, who focus on finishing a pattern, Frank concentrates on himself, attempting to get rid of his fragmentation, to become whole again, even if only for a short hour. Turgenev's *A Month* makes a statement about human communication, while Friel's version addresses two of the most important themes that recur in many Irish dramas, including his own work: the fragmentation of the self and the failure of communication—especially between genders and family members. Also, the scene in Friel reflects on the neglected status of women in Irish society, who had been treated as useful objects, or as adjuncts of the male characters, rarely granted a subject position. Paradoxically, however, it is not only Michel, who can be identified with the lace-makers and their activity, but also Natalya herself. Her hands are like those of the lace-makers, but instead of succeeding in finishing a pattern her hands are working backwards, thus she is only playing with other people's lives and becomes both destructive and self-destructive.

Another significant change concerning gender relations, apart from portraying Anna and Natalya as seemingly stronger than men, is the physical absence of Kolya, Arkady's and Natalya's ten-year-old son, from the Frielian version. Kolya is never present on the stage in person, only referred to. By having Kolya as an off-stage character Friel ensures that in his version the emphasis on the relationship between the male and the female characters is crucial. However, Friel twists his play by assigning the role of Kolya, a playful and happy child to Vera, Natalya's seventeen year-old ward. The latter is portrayed as childish, running around in the house, asking for glue to finish the kite, playing the piano, in fact carrying out all of Kolya's activities in the original. Friel's depiction of Vera makes her look not only more naive than she is in the source text, but also gives the impression that she is younger than seventeen, which enhances her tragic fate, her being married off to the old, stupid and ugly Bolshintsov.

Both Natalya and the Doctor, who assists her in bringing Vera and Bolshintsov together, regard Vera as a child rather than as a young woman. Natalya warns her to be "careful in that sun, child" and scorns her for having mud on her clothes. The Doctor "*takes her in his arms as if she were a child and rocks her*" (28, 99). However, at one point in the play Vera tries to rise against Natalya's power and liberate herself from the ties with which her benefactress attaches her to herself, saying:

> VERA. For God's sake stop this game playing! I'm no longer a child, Natalya — nor your ward that you can manipulate —
> NATALYA. Vera, my love —
> VERA. Nor your sister that you can kiss and worm secrets out of and then betray shamelessly. *I am a woman, Natalya, and I am going to be treated like a woman.* (81, emphasis in the original)

Turgenev's Vera is similarly outraged when face-to-face with Natalya, saying "[d]on't go on talking to me as if I were a child . . . *Dropping her voice.* From today . . . I am a woman . . . a woman like you" (98), yet Friel's Vera is even more determined and assertive. Whereas Turgenev's syntax uses pauses and the lowering of the voice in the girl's statement to indicate her insecurity, in the later text further emphasis is given to Vera's declaration of her womanhood and demand to be treated accordingly, addressing the theme of female subjectivity at the same time. However, as in several other plays of Friel, women are rarely granted the wished-for subject position, which proves to be the lot of Vera as well.

Compared with Turgenev's original, the change in the syntax of Vera's declaration of (desired) independence seems to draw on the ongoing debates on the status of women in the contemporary Irish society of the early 1990s. Although Vera's verbal rebellion against Natalya's exercising of power, control and authority over her does not have its hoped-for result, it can be seen as corresponding to the strivings of second wave feminism in Ireland due to which, as Pat O'Connor notes, "the marriage bar has been lifted, inequalities based on gender have been eliminated, divorce has been introduced, yet many elements in the lives of Irish women have not changed at all" (1). The drama supports the ideas postulated by O'Connor, as Friel seems to ascribe greater power to women, but the outcome of the play restores order as required by the patriarchal status quo: Vera has to marry a suitable would-be husband and Natalya has to remain within the suffocating bonds of her marriage. The latter is showing the symptoms of a nervous breakdown, similarly to Grace in *Faith Healer*. Thus the drama ends with the female characters fixed in the socially and culturally constructed roles of wife and mother, conforming to the values advocated by the still powerful Catholic Church in Ireland.

Friel himself claims in the "Preface" that *A Month in the Country* is not a comedy, and certainly should not be looked at as a tragedy, but rather as a play in five scenes. Indeed, to call the play either a comedy or a tragedy would be restricting.

However, neither the comic, nor the tragic side of the drama can be denied. Both Turgenev's original and Friel's version suggest that the marriage between Vera and Bolshintsov is going to be tragic. Notably, the meaning of the passages in which Vera is making inquiries about the nature of Bolshintsov is almost identical in both plays. However, Turgenev's scene is ironical in tone:

> VERA. The gentleman . . . Bolshintsov, your friend – is he really a good man? . . . He's not unkind then?
> SHPIGELSKY. Oh, no, he's the soul of kindness. . . . He's not a man, he's a gentle dove.
> VERA. You vouch for him?
> SHPIGELSKY *puts one hand on his heart, raises the other:* As I would for myself. (116)

In contrast, there are thematic as well as syntactic alterations in the Frielian version, making it more tragic. By employing the stereotype of the violent Irish husband, Friel's text is touching on the problem of domestic violence, which was finally getting public attention in Ireland in the 1990s. In the Frielean version another conversation between the same characters runs as follows:

> VERA I've really one only one question . . . If I displeased him, is he the kind of man who would strike me?
> DOCTOR. Never – never – never – never – oh never. Oh my sweet sad-eyed child, what can I say to you? He's old; and fat; and stupid, so stupid he thinks my jokes are funny . . . He's bird in hand, I suppose . . . (99)

The conservative outlook of Irish society regarding gender issues is alluded to in Friel's version especially at the end, where Vera is depicted in the stereotypical role of the passive female, similarly to several other male-authored Irish dramas. The play ends as follows:

> BOLSHINTSOV. . . . Is that Miss Vera?
> MATVEY. That's Miss Vera. Terrific, isn't she?
> BOLSHINTSOV *his face raised, stands listening, smiling.*
> BOLSHINTSOV. Nice . . . nice . . .
> MATVEY *exits with tray. The music continues for a few seconds; then stops abruptly in mid-phrase.* BOLSHINTSOV *stand there, his face raised, still smiling, waiting.* (109)

In this closing scene it is suggested that Bolshintsov, granted a firm social status because of being a wealthy man, will have power over Vera and probably deny her agency in their prospective match. Vera is not regarded as a self-sufficient individual

but as an adjunct living passively on a man's side. In this light, Vera's declaration of subjectivity: *"I am a woman and I am going to be treated as a woman,"* filled with positive and hopeful connotations, gains an ambiguous meaning when read against the closing lines of the play. Vera's wish for subjectivity is realized according to the male standards of what it means to be a woman. She "gets acculturated into self-sacrifice and self-denial" as Tom Inglis (18) puts it, by finding herself in a role that demands her to endure anything passively without voicing her needs. Just like the sound of her piano-playing at the end of the drama, the flush and animation of the childlike Vera stop abruptly. The closing lines of the play have a double meaning.

Friel's version seems to comment on yet another issue that was present in the social debates when he was writing the play, namely the question of lifting the divorce ban. Although the divorce referendum was held four years after Friel's play had been written, the issue had been in the air since the previous attempt at having a referendum about the subject in 1986. The word divorce itself is not explicitly voiced in the play; it is implied nonetheless in the scene where Natalya is informed about Aleksey's departure by Vera:

> How dare he, the pup! The jumped-up baby-faced pup! Who the hell does he think he is! Well he's not walking away like that. I am not one of his college sluts! He'll go if I say he goes! He'll go when I say he goes! And who is he to decide I haven't got the courage to throw all this up and go with him. If that decision is to be made, it'll be my decision—not his! The bastard. (102)

In 1995 the constitutional ban on divorce was finally lifted. In the referendum the citizens of Ireland not only cast their ballots in order to amend the 1937 Constitution, but also to become part of the modern world. The number of those supporting divorce was, however, not considerably higher than that of those opposing it. The close win was also a sign that there still existed "a great division in the Irish community" (Price 669) as many people were against this form of secularization, largely—but not exclusively—for economic reasons (see Price 679-80). Interestingly, as Carol Coulter points out, discussions about the question of removing the prohibition on divorce failed to include the "feminist agenda." References to "the growing independence of Irish women and their need to be able to make a new life for themselves" have been left out of the discourse (Coulter 279).

Apart from alluding to the question of divorce, Natalya's outrage quoted above also expresses her wish to be able to make a decision as an individual, rather than having to observe certain prescribed rules. Ironically, she is voicing the same desire for subjectivity that Vera's lines have already articulated, as well as the need of a woman to lead an independent life—the argument Coulter is missing from the program of the pro-divorce movement. By choosing Turgenev's play from the nineteenth century and making Natalya so ambivalent, Friel not only refers to the changes affecting or soon to-be-affecting Irish society, but in a way he is also ridiculing the obsolete social practices that governed the everyday life of Irish people. Thus Friel's version of *A*

Month in the Country can be read as a critique of conventional Irish attitudes and as a contribution to supporting the overdue social changes that were yet to come. His Natalya seems to embody the tension between tradition and modernity that became apparent in the divorce campaign. On the one hand, Natalya strikes the audience as a moral guardian for Vera, by constantly warning her to behave properly, this way standing for the conservative side. On the other hand, she is portrayed as a woman of subversive values because her behaviour with the young Aleksey is governed by quite unorthodox interests in that she displays signs of growing independence and the need to have a life for herself. It may be argued that by this polarization of Natalya Friel stresses the confronting viewpoints present in the vigorous debates leading up to the 1995 divorce referendum, which set a "preoccupation with sex and its repression on the part of those opposing divorce" (Coulter 275), against a more liberal and open-minded way of addressing matters of gender relations and sexuality.

Although Friel's *A Month in the Country* is the adaptation of a Russian play, it is characterized by distinctive Irish features to the extent that the rewriting not only manages to constitute a bridge between the Russian original and the Irish version, but also to fit into the oeuvre of Brian Friel. Incorporating issues present in contemporary Irish social discourses, like the issue of the status of women, and the question of divorce, Friel did not simply recreate the source text, but produced a work which is able to address an Irish audience. In this light, the adaptation under scrutiny, which, in Elmer Andrews' words, "was undertaken as an act of love" (182), works in two directions. On the one hand, it is a tribute to one of the Russian classics, on the other hand, it demonstrates Friel's deep concern with current Irish affairs and debates.

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