Faith in Permanent Translations
—Reading Brian Friel's *Translations* as a staging of John Scotus Eriugena's views on translation—

Rossa Ó MUIREARTAIGH

Abstract

This paper examines John Scotus Eriugena's views of translation as explicitly stated in his prologue to *De Caelesti Hierarchia of Pseudo-Dionysius* and as implicitly drawn from his more general philosophy and translation practice, and links them to the explorations of translation staged in Brian Friel's play *Translations*. It concludes that Eriugena viewed translation as both an act of submission and an act of creation, a view much embodied in the character of Hugh in the play. It also concludes that translation, with its dialectic nature, is very much an apt metaphor and expositor of Eriugena's unique cosmology.

Keywords: *John Scotus Eriugena, Brian Friel, translation, drama, cosmology*

Introduction

This paper aims to read Brian Friel's *Translations* as a staging of John Scotus Eriugena's theory of translation, a theory that can be worked out from remarks Eriugena made about translation, from his more general views of language, and from his wider cosmology. In writing his play, Friel explicitly drew on George Steiner's influential reflections on translation in *After Babel*[1]. However, such was the scope of Steiner's erudition on the subject and Friel's intricate inspirations from it, that the core themes of Eriugena's views on translation inevitably find a place on the stage.

Historical Background

9th Century John Scotus Eriugena was part of a tradition of peripatetic Irish scholars, who during the European Middle Ages, traveled from Ireland to Britain and Continental Europe to act as teachers and scholars for a Western Europe that sought to revive the cultural inheritance of Roman times which had survived strongest in Ireland. As well as his invigorating contributions to emerging Scholasticism, Eriugena also provided medieval western European civilization with influential translations of Greek texts. The writer Seán Ó Faoláin summarized Eriugena's context and influence as follows:

> At the other end of this great period of efflorescence was an even more striking example, perhaps the greatest individual figure that the Irish presented to mediaeval Europe, John Eriugena (Irish-born John), also to be counted heretical. He spoke Greek and Latin. He was a philosopher of considerate charm, daring and original thinker…His knowledge of neo-Platonist philosophy was so intimate, indeed unique in northern Europe, that he was the only man whom Charles the Bald could find to translate a Christian neo-Platonist manuscript sent to him from Constantinople as a present from the Emperor.[2]

Bertrand Russell, in his much cited *A History of Western Philosophy,* has also assessed and praised the importance of Eriugena, remarking that "John the Scot, or Johannes Scotus…is the most astonishing person of the ninth century" and that "John's translation of the pseudo-Dionysius had a great influence on medieval thought…"[3]

Eriugena's philosophy

Eriugena had a distinctive cosmology, which he described in his book *The Division of Nature* (*Periphyseon*), composed of four divisions. It is summarized by Anne Fremantle as follows:

In *The Division of Nature* John Scotus pointed out that to divide nature into Creator and creature is not enough. For him there are four divisions: God, Who is nature which creates and is not created; the intelligible world, which is nature, which is created and creates; the world of experience, nature which is created and does not create; and nature which neither creates nor is created—this last the return of the two that are not God to the divine unity. In the first and fourth, God is both beginning and end; He creates and is not created, and He neither creates nor is created. In the second and third John Scotus Erigena is speaking of ideas and existences, both being created, but not in the same sense. From God, via creation, back to Him, this process of exodus and return is at the heart of Erigena's philosophy.[4]

This inclusion of God as the beginning and the end, and the construction of a dynamic model fusing Creator and created together in an unfolding pattern was a unique move for it implied the existence of a God emergent in the universe and in the seemingly contingent and historical affairs of humans. Leszek Kołakowski points out the importance of this idea in the history of Western philosophy:

Eriugena's principal work, *De divisione naturae*, by its initial distinction of four natures in effect introduces the concept of a historical God, a God who comes into existence in and through the world. God as Creator (*natura naturans non naturata*) , and God as the location of the ultimate unity of creation (*natura non naturata non naturans*), is not presented under a twofold guise for didactic reasons or because the infirmity of our understanding requires it thus: the juxtaposition of the two names signifies the actual evolution of God, who is not the same at the end of all things as he was at the beginning.[5]

Kolakowski goes on to link Eriugena to Hegelianism with the notion of an agency in history beyond the will of individual humans. Such a view helps to explain how universal truths can appear contingent and partial when realized

in human affairs. It also helps overcome the problem of human agency in a world where so much determinism is apparent. If we can sustain the idea that humans are free agents along with the apparently contradictory idea that the entire Universe and its history has already happened, we can attain something of a cosmology complex and dynamic enough to account for the *aporia* of history, with its spatial and temporal features, being connected to the atemporal and eternal persona of God. Eriugena's cosmology was not proposing pantheism but instead a less crassly dualistic view of the relationship between humans and God.

Eriugena's views on translation

In his prologue to *De Caelesti Hierarchia of Pseudo-Dionysius,* Eriugena makes the following comment which, for its time, was unusually clear about the role of the translator in translation.

> If someone should find the language [of this translation] too cumbersome or unfamiliar let him bear in mind that neither he nor I can have a greater capacity for understanding than what God, who doles out each person's given powers (as He wishes), has provided. If someone should find the text of the aforesaid translation obscure or impenetrable, let him consider me the *translator* of this work, not its *expositor*. Indeed I fear that I have incurred the blame of the faithful translator.[6]

Three main points stand out from these remarks.

(1) Intelligibility in language is granted from without (from God) through the words of language. This is in keeping with Eriugena's general view of the Greek notion of *logos,* which at once implied the innate rationality of the world along with the idea of the divine Word as language, which "helped to reinforce the sense that reality is rational in being textual. Seeing as both are a production of the same intelligence, a similar logic underpins both."[7] The result seems to be a humble respect for the text as it is and a submission to

the idea that one's reading of a text is powered by a force from beyond one's individual will.

(2) The translator and the "expositor" are not the same. In contrasting the two roles, Eriugena seeks "to separate out the issue of translation from the interference of exegetical inquiry".[8] Rita Copeland argues that Eruigena's distinction is "significant" on account of its rarity in Medieval thinking about translation where "the notion of exegesis has so curious and consistent a power over the definition of interpretation even in its application to translation…"[9]

(3) The last line of the quote, "Indeed I fear that I have incurred the blame of the faithful translator" is a reference to Horace's dictum that translators should provide free (not direct) translations and not be enslaved, like "faithful" translators, to the literal meanings of the words. By implication, Eriugena is declaring his style to be literal rather than free. However, from accounts of Eriugena's actual translations, they were not simply word for word renditions, but rather driven by a quest to recover the maximum semantic potentialities in the source text. The faithfulness to the source text was manifest in Eriugena's various creative strategies to provide intelligibility whilst avoiding bland collapses into domestication of the text. For instance, Dermot Moran describes some of his translation practices as follows:

… Eriugena translated with the verbatim method of his contemporaries … All this produced an awkwardness of style and syntax, but, philosophically speaking, Eriugena was forced to develop an original Latin technical vocabulary, and his awkward sentences are often philosophically more correct. Eriugena had to develop terms like *superbonitas* and *superessentialis* to translate Dionysian superlatives, and here he had no dictionaries or glossaries to help him. He had to find terms for Dionysian' words such as *noeros* (νοέρος) and *noēsis* (νοήσις), and in this respect he was largely on his own. He frequently varies his terminology, however, and thus will translate *nous* sometimes as *mens*, sometimes as *animus*.

He translates *epistēmē* (ἐπιστήμη) as *scientia* or as *disciplina; θευεγία*he sometimes translates as *divina operatio* but sometimes he merely transliterates as *theurgia.*[10]

Overall, taking Eriugena's explicit views of translation and his actual translation strategies, we can see a vision of translation as that where translators must allow the text to speak for itself but must use creativity and genius to allow for this happen.

Brian Friel's *Translations*

Brian Friel's drama, *Translations*[11], is set in mid-19th Century Ireland. It is about the arrival of British officials and soldiers in a rural townland for the purposes of mapmaking. To make their new maps, the officials translate the local placenames from Irish into English. The play focuses on a group of Irish locals, who attend a hedge school to learn Greek and Latin, and their reaction to the arrival of these officials, one of whom (Owen) is the son of the hedge school teacher. The play becomes in turn a story about how a community deals with the hegemonic forces of a more powerful language, how adaption and resistance emerge together.

In some ways, the linguistic geography of the hedge school is the same as that which Eriugena roamed. It is a world where Greek and Latin gel in the banter of the Irish vernacular. The portrayal of a seamless trilingualism is perhaps a romanticization but it points at the complexities of language history where ostensibly disconnected times and places (such as ancient Greece and rural Ireland) can intersect, a complexity that gets smothered over with the unrelenting spread of central government imposed monolingualism.

I now consider how various characters in the drama play out in their persona and experiences the core Eruigenia ideas about translation.

[1] Translator, not expositor:

The character of Owen best exposes the distinction and, the importance

of the distinction, between translator and expositor. As Declan Kiebard points out, Owen is "the most complex character in the play"[12]. He has a deep knowledge of his locality (remembering toponymic facts that he knows others have forgotten) but feels driven to find his place in the wider world.

In one scene Owen is translating Captain Lancey's words (artfully dramatized through English to English paraphrasing) into Irish for his fellow locals. His brother Manus points out that he is distorting and sanitizing Lancey's words to make them more palatable for the receiving colonized target audience. Owen is flippant, seeming to see imprecision in translation as an act of poetic sophistication.[13]

In another scene, Owen is active in choosing the place name translations for his district, often times distorting and imposing new ones, acting not as translator but as eraser of ancient memory and oral history.

However, Owen's attempts to smooth over the tensions that arise as the map-making and toponymic translations proceed fail miserably and his community becomes endangered by the threat of military retaliation after one of the officials goes missing. Owen comes to realize his "mistake", regretting his active interventions as expositor. Owen's mistake was to stray into the role of exegete, the interventionist translator who abrogates the rights of the target audience by distorting the source text, failing to see that the power that enforces the source text (the "*Edictum imperatoris*" of Corporal Lancey) cannot be diffused through rhetorical games.

[2] The Faithful Translator:

Whilst Owen may be the most complex character, the hedge-school master, Hugh, is "the most articulate character in the play on the issue of language."[14] In contrast to Owen, the quadrilingual Hugh is a translator of careful precision where each word has its own respectfully recited history and translation does not erase but elevates old memories and archives. Instinctively, Hugh is more grammarian than rhetorician and his translations "faithful".

When Hugh appears he is often inebriated and always verbose and theatrical. His language is often "cumbersome" and "unfamiliar" (to use Eriugena's self-description). However, behind the histrionics and self-parody,

Hugh is perhaps the most level-headed character in terms of his reaction to the transformations and tensions going on around him. His own knowledge of languages and history seems to have taught him that translation cannot be stopped. He reacts to the new dominance of English and the changing place names with stoic equanimity: "We must learn those new names…We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home."[15] Like a faithful translator, he has submitted to the power of words knowing that all he can do is understand them within the powers granted to him from without.

[3] Between worlds and words:

Catherine Kavanagh has argued that Eriugena saw language as something in-between the extremes of a (Heideggerian) view that sees language as the maker of worlds and the contrary (analogist) view that language is merely a tool that we always fully control.[16] Whereas Owen displayed the latter view, another character in the play, James embodies the former. James is an elderly, largely self-taught, obsessive reader of Greek literature and seems to live in the fantasy world of ancient Greek myths. He is seen as harmless but highly eccentric by the others. At one point, though, towards the end of the play Hugh remarks about James: "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 discrimination."[17] What Hugh is suggesting is that language functions as a mediator, something in-between us and the brutal facts of the world. We are shaped by language but we also have the capacity, if we follow Hugh's logic, to see that our language with its "images" is distinct from the "facts" of history. James' problem is not that he has been trapped by language, we are all trapped by language, but that he can no longer see the trap.

In many ways, the figure of James is a parody of a world where language enslaves and failure to translate freezes us forever in the past. In contrast, Hugh is the permanent translator, living between worlds and languages, trapped eternally by none of them. He knows that language shapes us and this knowledge is his freedom. This is an Eriugena view, as Terry Eagleton

describes it:

> For Eriugena, humanity is an image of God in the boundlessness of its
> mind, free from all external authority and necessity…the human individual
> is entirely free because he or she is ruled only by the utter freedom of the
> divine will. Just as art for [Oscar] Wilde is the intervention of the mind in
> Nature, so for the idealist Eriugena knowledge is less an adequation to the
> real than an absorption of reality into thought. [My square brackets][18]

[4] All words become one:

Friel commented that "a fundamental irony of this play is that it should
have been written in Irish."[19] However, a greater irony is that his play is one
set in English about English. All four languages on the stage are represented
and made intelligible through English, reinforcing the fact of English's role as
a major language, in fact a metalanguage, through which all other languages,
both minor and dead, will be translated so as to be staged and heard in our
contemporary world. And yet the play also demonstrates how English is
just one language of many and how it has attained it dominant role purely
through the accidental contingencies of history.[20] This symbiosis between
the linguistic staging of the play and the narrative of the play itself reflects
the Eriugena idea of the particular in the universal, the Logos at work in the
world. We can only be in one language at any one point in time but from that
monolinguistic point, through the mediation of translation, the Logos of all
other languages can speak to us.

Conclusion

The monist and idealist Eurigena was one of the early major philosophers
of the dialectic in history. In many ways, then, translation serves as the perfect
metaphor for Eriugena's cosmology. Translation is about difference (between
languages) creating a sameness (between texts) and sameness (in a source
text) generating difference (as embodied in target texts). This interplay of
difference and sameness is a world unfolding towards a return to an original

in the future. As with the world, as with translation.

Notes

1   George Steiner, *After Babel: aspects of language and translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Steiner's influence on Friel is discussed in F. C. McGrath *Brian Friel's (post) colonial drama: language, illusion, and politics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999)

2   Sean O'Faolain, *The Irish* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 44.

3   Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1946/1996), 374, 379.

4   Anne Fremantle, *The Age of Belief* (New York: Mentor Books, 1954), 80.

5   Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism Vol. 1* Trans. by P.S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 24.

6   John Scotus Eriugena "Translator, Not Expositor" in*Western Translation Theory* Trans. by Rita Copeland, Edited by Douglas Robinson (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997), 37.

7   Catherine Kavanagh "The Philosophical Importance of Grammar for Eriugena" in *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and his time* Edited by James McEvoy and Michael Dunne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 61.

8   Rita Copeland *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 91.

9   Ibid., 91.

10   Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 54.

11   Friel, Brian. *Translations* London (Faber and Faber, 1981).

12   Declan Kiberd *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 619.

13   Here is the scene where Owen translates Lancey's words:

"Lancey: This enormous task has been embarked on so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every part and corner of this part of the Empire.

Owen: The job is being done by soldiers because they are skilled in this work.

Lancey: And also so that the entire basis of land valuation can be reassessed for the purposes of more equitable taxation.

Owen: This new map will take the place of the estate-agent's map so that from now on you will know exactly what is yours in law. […]

Manus: What sort of a translation was that, Owen?

Owen: Did I make a mess of it?

Manus: You weren't saying what Lancey was saying!

Owen: 'Uncertainty in meaning is incipient in poetry' — who said that?

Manus: There was nothing uncertain about what Lancey said: it's a bloody military operation, Owen! And what's Yolland's function? What's incorrect about the place-names we have here?"

Friel, *Translations*, 33–34.

14 McGrath *Brian Friel's (post) colonial drama : language, illusion, and politics*, 1999, 190.

15 Friel, *Translations*, 88.

16 Kavanagh, "The Philosophical Importance of Grammar for Eriugena", 75–76.

17 Friel, Translations, 88.

18 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (London: Verso, 1995), 334.

19 Quoted in McGrath *Brian Friel's (post) colonial drama : language, illusion, and politics*, 1999, 195.

20 The decision to keep the play monolingual is a device that is "also part of the structural and metaphorical logic of the play." Indeed, "Friel has refused to allow a bilingual production of the play for Gaelic-speaking audiences. He would allow the play to be done entirely in Gaelic, but, he insisted that a bilingual play would violate the metaphorical integrity of the [monolingualism] linguistic device." McGrath *Brian Friel's (post) colonial drama : language, illusion, and politics*, 1999, 181. [My square brackets].

Bibliography

Copeland, Rita. *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Eriugena, John Scotus. "Translator, Not Expositor." In *Western Translation Theory*. Translated by Rita Copeland. Edited by Douglas Robinson Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997.

Fremantle, Anne. *The Age of Belief* New York: Mentor Books, 1954.

Friel, Brian. *Translations* London: Faber and Faber, 1981.

Eagleton, Terry. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*. London : Verso, 1995.

Kavanagh, Catherine. "The Philosophical Importance of Grammar for Eriugena." In *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and his time*. Edited by James McEvoy and Michael Dunne. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002.

Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. London: Vintage Books, 1996.

Kołakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism Vol. 1*. Translated by P. S. Falla Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

McGrath, F. C. *Brian Friel's (post) colonial drama: language, illusion, and politics*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

Moran, Dermot. *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

O'Faolain, Sean. *The Irish*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981, 44.

Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1946/1996.

Steiner, George. *After Babel: aspects of language and translation*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1975.