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STAGED IRELAND IN FILMIC TRANSLATION: JOHN FORD'S *THE QUIET MAN* AND THE IRISH THEATRICAL TRADITION

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Introduction: John Ford's *The Quiet Man*

Since the time of its release in 1952 and up to the present John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara, has remained one of the most popular movies in America, as well as elsewhere. The film, set in the 1920s, tells the story of an American prizefighter, Sean Thornton, who, having killed an opponent in a boxing match, decides to return to Ireland, his ancestral homeland in hopes of finding peace. Once in Inisfree (Ford's imaginary village, whose name bears Yeatsian and poetic overtones) Thornton enters a pre-modern, pre-industrial world, whose idyllic landscape and archaic and traditional community, with its rituals and jokes, loyalties and feuds set it at complete odds with the world of the twentieth-century America that the hero left behind.

The Quiet Man's story will then revolve around the deep underlying tension between the opposing views of Ireland (as represented by Inisfree) and America (doubly distanced in space and time). As Sean falls in love with Mary Kate Danaher, the red-haired and fiery-tempered local girl, the conflict revolves around Sean's notion of love as the free choice of two people and the marriage traditions of Inisfree, which force him to fight Kate's bullying brother Red Will Danaher in order to reclaim her dowry and birthright. Supervised by the entire community led by Michaeleen (the local matchmaker) and the benevolent priest figures of Father Lonergan and the Reverend Mr. Fairplay, the scene of the fighting becomes a cathartic ritual aimed to restore not only the rules governing life in Inisfree, but also Thornton's own psyche, which had been traumatised by his personal tragedy of having killed a man in a professional boxing match (Dowling 2001). Moreover, its redemptive quality is able to reverberate to the last scenes of the movie, whereby any fissures in the fabric of Irish society — be they cast along religious, class or ethnic lines — disappear in the harmonious picture of a community in which Catholics cheer a visiting Protestant bishop to allow the reverent remain in the village, and Danaher courts the rich Anglo-Irish widow Tillane (Martin Renes 2007: 97).

Ford's filmic translation of staged Ireland: For a new cultural paradigm

While regarded as a classic of cinematography, the prevailing contemporary Irish critical assessment of Ford's film has mainly questioned its portrayal of the realities of Irish life, considering it an exemplar of "the predominantly commercial designs of American and British film companies" that have dominated the images of Ireland on screen, fostering "a set of cinematic representations which have tended to sustain a sense of cultural inferiority" (Rockett, Gibbons & Hill 1988: xi-xii). In this order of ideas, Luke Gibbons, for example, has drawn attention to the film's representation of Ireland in terms of "a primitive Eden, a rural

idyll free from the pressures and constraints of the modern world," which is mystifying "the realities of Irish life" (1988: 196; 195). In accordance to Kathryn Hume's characterization of pastoral fantasy as focusing on the simple life and communal traditions in an overt celebration of "the freedom from responsibility" (1984: 62), Harlan Kennedy considers Ford's image of Ireland to be "a never-never Golden Age and a time of simple pastoral integrity," criticizing the film as an expression of a mode of cultural imperialism, with Hollywood perpetuating various Irish stereotypes whose origins lay in long centuries of English colonization and prove "not less patronising and oppressive than the collar-and-lead colonialism long exercised by Britain (Kennedy 1999: 2). In a similar vein, James MacKillop considers that *The Quiet Man* makes use of "sentimentalism, condescension, cliché and gimcrackery" (1999: 169), to reinforce stereotypes of Irishness as a people who are odd, inefficient and with a fondness of drink and music, reinforcing a similar idea linked to Ford's recycling Irish colonial representations.

Nevertheless, the images of Ireland and Irishness that Ford's film project, which make the object of the critique of the above-mentioned authorities do in fact originate within the theatrical realm and are closely related to the political and social upheavals characterizing the Irish experience.

On the one hand, the blarney-speaking and whiskey-swilling Michaeleen as well as the pugnacious Danaher are Ford's approximations of the stage-Irishman, a dramatic cliché, initially popularised by English authors and eventually adopted by Irish-born dramatists looking for careers in England which was popular on the English and Irish stages prior to the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre in the 1890s. In this order of ideas it is worth reminding that, at least since Elizabethan times, within the realm of public discourse the Anglophone view had evolved a nexus of negative representations of Irishness clustered around the image of the uncivilized and violent Irish barbarian, to which, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the processes of negricization and simianisation were added and translated by the Victorian press into the cruel stereotype of the ape-like Paddy, the simian brute threatening the English law and civilization. A similar perception had informed the theatrical representations of Irish characters, that, tended, according to Christopher Fitz-simon to fall into two main categories: "one, the lazy, crafty, and (in all probability) inebriated buffoon who nonetheless has the gift of good humour and a nimble way with words; the other the braggart (also partial to a 'dhrop of the besht') who is likely to be the soldier or ex-soldier, boasting of having seen a great deal of the world when he has probably been no further from his own country than some English barracks and camp" (1983: 94).

While this "codification" of the stage Irishman had continued unabated on English stages throughout the Victorian period (Bourgeois 1965: 109-10), the nineteenth-century popular theatre had attempted a revision of this stereotype. As the playbill to the first production of Dion Boucicault's *The Coleen Bawn* publicly announced: "Ireland, so rich in scenery, so full of romance and the warm touch of nature, has never until now been opened by the dramatist. Irish dramas have hitherto been exaggerated farces, representing low life or scenes of abject servitude and suffering. Such is not a true picture of Irish society" [playbill for the first production of Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, New York, 1860, in Grene 2002: 5]**.**

Widely acknowledged as Britain's leading melodramatist of the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish-born Dionysius Lardner Boucicault wrote some 150 plays, of which only 9 are "Irish plays" - containing largely Irish characters and being set in Ireland. Among them, *The Colleen Bawn, or The Brides of Garryowen* (1860), *Arrah na Pogue, or The Wicklow Wedding* (1865) and *The Shaughraun* (1875), which are collectively referred to as Boucicault's "Irish trilogy", were to achieve lasting popularity, being still present in modern repertory.

All three plays are comic melodramas, full of romance and acts of daring, constructed along oppositions such as those established between Englishness and Irishness, upper-class and peasant class, or ownership and dispossession, which are, nevertheless, overcome in the end by the 'law of the heart,'[1] their main code of values. Hardress Cregan, the Anglo-Irish landlord, is chastened and reunited with Eily O'Connor, the beautiful Irish peasant girl. Beamish MacCoul, a United Irishman rebel, is exonerated of guilt by a benevolent Secretary of State, retrieves his estate and his sweetheart, Fanny Price. Robert Ffolliott, a Fenian convict escaped from Australia, receives a Royal pardon which allows him to remain in Ireland and befriend the English Captain Molineaux, his future brother-in-law. But in each of these plays pivotal to the achievement of the happy endings demanded by the genre are the interventions of Boucicault's Stage Irishmen, Myles na Copaleen, Shaun the Post, and Conn the Shaughraun [2]. Though they still wear some of the traditional traits of the dramatic type, being cast as comic rustics who display a propensity for banter and blarney and still 'put their lips to the jug' with some regularity, these characters are far removed from the extreme silhouette of the figure of ridicule, emerging as more than stereotypical drunken sots to take an active, at times courageous part in the social, economic and political conflicts of their world. It is Myles's daring diving into water that rescues the heroine from drowning, while his altruism and innate good-heartedness turn him into an agent of the play's "law of the heart" which overcomes all obstacles and unites all divisions between Eily and her husband. In a similar manner, it is the loyalty and bravery of characters like Shaun the Post and Conn which prompt them substitute for the nationalist heroes whom they attempt to save. At the same time, the cleverness and wit with which Boucicault endows his Stage Irishmen make them prevail over their adversaries and ultimately secure the reconciliation of the opposing parties. After having facilitated the two politically and socially correct marriages of Arte with Robert, Molineaux with Claire, Conn appeals to the public, inviting applause not only for his performance, but for the reconciliatory happy ending he has brought about: "You are the only friend I have. Long life t'ye! Many a time you have looked over my faults. Will you be blind to them now, and hould out your hands once more to a poor Shaughraun?" (Boucicault 1984: 219).

In what Stephen Watt calls Boucicault "myth of reconciliation" (1991: 163), the emphasis is placed on social cohesion, which "dissipates" historical and political tensions. Moreoever, Ireland becomes a bucolic land where men and landscape are likely to harmoniously coexist. If Ford's film reiterates such a perception, one should not forget that in the 19th century this was the image which seemed to embody the authentic Ireland for the audiences crowding Dublin's popular theatres, where Boucicault's melodramas were being staged. Employing the conventions of the classical romantic comedy, Ford's film follows a similar pattern with those of Boucicault's melodramas, "whereby a young couple must overcome a series of individual and social obstacles before they can finally get married and achieve individual and social reconciliation" (Gonzáles Casademont 2002: 77). But Ford's stage Irishmen are not offered centre stage positions, but cast peripheral to the general thrust of the plot. Moreover, the characteristic traits of this dramatic stereotype are dispersed across a range of quaint, but whimsical characters, starting from the railroad crew at the Castletown Station, who spend more time arguing than driving the train, village elders like Dan Tobin and Michaeleen Oge, the matchmaker whose favourite pastime is to meet "comrades" in Pat Cohan's Public House for a drink and to "talk a little treason", to the jovial Father Peter Lonergan, who plots with the villagers to "yell like a bunch of Protestants" whenever they meet his opponent, reverend Playfair, an Anglican bishop who owns a church but, obviously, no parishioners in the Catholic village. An exception to these benign embodiments of the stage Irishman is Red Will Danaher, the thick-headed bellicose brother of Kate, who threats and bullies the community and is thus drawn more along the cruder lines of the stereotype. But in the fabric of Ford's comedy, though violence is threatened, it

must be ultimately averted because "no genuine catastrophes, no villains and no real suspense" (Gonzáles Casademont 2002: 77) may be accommodated by its 'law of the heart'. Though reluctantly, Sean has to face Will Danaher, in an inevitable confrontation which should unleash the rivals' violence. Instead, the audience witnesses a mock-heroic fight, which ends hilariously with the two stumbling together, arm-in-arm, in drunken male bonding. Like in Boucicault's melodramas, the donnybrook, which marks the climax of the play, dispels the tensions, in accordance with the same "myth of reconciliation". Not only rivals fraternise, but the villagers make peace with Danaher, and even the dying Dan Tobin resurrects, jumping out of his bed on hearing about the fight. But, unlike in Boucicault's plays, the catalyst of change is Thornton himself, the 'hyphenated' protagonist, whose very ambivalence empowers him to make the transition from margin to centre in a community and a culture "at once strange and familiar" (Gibbons 2002: 103), but ultimately self-restoring, for Sean comes to repossess both manhood and place as he "becomes a(n Irish)man again, symbolically assimilating the country by marrying Mary Kate" (Martin 2007: 97).

On the other hand, by focusing on a rural Ireland where the peasant is conceived as a figure of quintessential Irishness, *The Quiet Man* aligns itself to the tradition of the Irish peasant play, a dramatic translation of the nationalist political and cultural view expressing Ireland and the Irish national identity in terms of what distanced it from the coloniser's hold: the Gaelic way of life, the rural tradition and the Catholic morality of the small farm life epitomized by familism — a distinct set of cultural practices based on "the regulation of sexuality and unquestioned patriarchal authority" (Cairns and Richards 1988: 60) evolved during the latter half of the nineteenth-century by Irish tenant farmers to ensure proper transmittal of family holdings.

As "a play with Irish peasant characters, depicting their lives, habits and customs in a manner true to life [and, accordingly,] takes place in a peasant cottage setting and concerns contemporary Irish problems and themes such as emigration, rural marriage, habits and the ownership of lands" (Clarke 1982: 122), the "peasant play" came to dominate the Abbey stage with its claims at projecting authentic images of the nation and, concomitantly, rebutting colonial travesties or deprecations of the Irish character, such as "buffoonery and […] easy sentiment" (Gregory 1972: 20) endorsed by the stage Irishman.

A comedy like *Twenty-Five* (1903), the first of Lady Gregory's to be performed, may stand as illustrative for an early stage in the developing of the peasant play. Set in a peasant couple's kitchen, *Twenty-Five* employs not only the standard setting but also some of the major concerns of the genre. In accordance with the codes of rural Ireland, the play focuses on a patriarchal community in which sexuality is subordinated to economic necessity: Kate married an older man, Michael Ford for the security of a house, renouncing Christie, the man she loved, who was forced to emigrate to America in order to earn money. But unlike Synge's subversive treatment of the theme in his *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) where Nora Burke defied both community's laws and her old and jealous husband by forsaking domesticity and marriage in return for the freedom of the open road promised by a Tramp, *Twenty-Five* does not depart from the codes of familism. Though the lover returns unexpectedly with a fortune won abroad at the very moment when the couple have lost all the material means to keep their home, the action validates the status quo: Christie manoeuvres a game of cards at which he deliberately lets Michael win a large sum of money that will enable him to save both his house and his marriage. Though the reality portrayed is far from being "rosy-eyed" about the outcome of Christie's act which "merely leaves her [Kate] more fully aware of what she has lost" (Pethica 2004: 71), the play's tone remains light-hearted and its conflict foregrounds "hopeful Christian humanism" embodied by the lover's self-sacrifice as both ideal and "a provocative inspiration" (Pethica 2004: 71).

A sombre tone and gloomier contours characterise Padraic Colum's representations of rural Ireland. *The Land* (1905), set at the end of the Land Wars, deals with the generational conflicts between Murtagh Cosgar and his son, Mat, over the value of the old rural way of life. Pressed by the ambitious school-teacher Ellen Douras to seek his fortune by emigrating to America (such as all of his elder brothers did), Mat will eventually leave behind the land for which his father fought so hard to keep intact. In accordance to the conventions of the genre, Colum's play embodied a theme of intimate and recognisable social significance in its real setting, and though love was presented as a disruptive force, it was not improper. Moreover, it raised the question of the worth of the fields won after the Land War in the changing conditions of the countryside where the fittest chose emigration, while the relatively dull and unenterprising Sally Cosgar and Cornelius Duras remained behind to marry and succeed their parents. Lennox Robison's *The Harvest* (1910) went further into dispelling idealising myths about the life of rural Ireland. Set on the farm of the Hurley family, the play juxtaposed two modes of existence represented through a generational conflict between a father and his children: the traditional rural mores and customs epitomised by those on the farm set against the new, urban values of those who had chosen emigration to Dublin, London, or America. Like in Colum's *The Field*, the play gradually drew to its bleak closure which questioned the worth of both: while the country ideal was shattered by having old Hurley (faced with the bankruptcy of the farm) commit arson in order to cheat the insurance company, the emigrant's myth of success was also cast in doubt by revealing the unpleasant truths in the lives of the Hurley children.

In the hands of subsequent playwrights like George Shiels, John Murphy, or John B Keane the peasant play continued to bear witness to further changes undergone in rural Ireland, often pondering on the loss of its traditions through exposure to the modern world, which propagates urban standards of living and commercialises the peasant culture as folklore. Nevertheless, as Hans Georg Stalder has argued in his study of the genre, a cluster of themes provides the link between early and later plays: "violent defence or acquisition of the land, resigned or hopeful flight into a different kind of life, and nostalgic return" (978: 149). It is this last aspect that most obviously aligns *The Quiet Man* to the tradition of the Abbey peasant play.

Since "emigration is at the centre of the Irish experience of being modern"[3] (Pettitt 2000: 64), the figure of the returned emigrant has often made its appearance within the fabric of the peasant play, to the extent that it has been turned into a stage convention. As Stalder remarks: "The homecomer, who had left his parents' farm and established himself in a non-farming society, was used in contrast to the peasants. As an outsider, he could make their idiosyncrasies and attitudes visible, he could be used as a commentator on the stage or as an example of an emigrant's prosperity or misfortune" (1978: 145). Like Jack Hurley, the homecomer in Robinson's *The Harvest*, Sean Thornton has left his peasant background to establish himself in a non-farming society as represented by the industrial and urban American world. While for Jack the new environment has functioned in a positive way, enabling his education and opening up possibilities of advancement on the social scale, Sean's American experience has anticlimactically triggered "dehumanising toil in the steel mills of industrial Pittsburgh […] and the emotionally devastating experience of having killed a man in a prize fight" (Renes 2007: 96). For both Jack and Sean the return home is at first conceived as an escape necessary for economic (Jack) or emotional (Sean) survival. Nevertheless, in Jack's case, his idealised view of the countryside, inflated by romantic memories of place as well as nationalist rhetoric, collides with the reality of the farm life in which he strangely finds himself now cast as outsider. Far from being a journey in self-discovery, the return home becomes an alienating experience pressing Jack's second departure from the country as the only healing measure. *The Quiet Man* reverses this pattern. Equally idealised as a fairy-tale illusion of beauty and childhood innocence, Sean will have

to test his dream against the reality of home to be allowed the transition from outsider to insider. And beneath the dream-like and playful surface of Ford's film which is considered to have fostered "the idealised Ireland of the expatriate myth" (Gonzáles Casademont 2002: 76) the themes of familism resurface in scenes portraying "women veiled and half-cloistered", "Inisfree's ubiquitous stone walls, the masochism of courting rules, the statuesque crowds that gather and gawk at their every step" and the floor-level shot of the nave, "the strongest image in the film [indicating] the curious power of an institution that has integrated itself with local custom" (Gallagher 2007: 342, 343). Christie, in Gregory's *Twenty-Five,* is another idealist who tests his aspirations against the reality of home. But his self-sacrifice, which alleviates the material condition of home, fails to disrupt its rituals and customs, as Kate remains trapped in the sterility of a loveless marriage. In order to be accepted into the community, Sean has to accept its reality and also attend to its customs, at the expense of cultural or personal norms inherited from his American experience. But by undergoing the rituals of the dowry, Sean also manages to change them "and the throwing away of 'the stick to beat the lovely lady' gestures towards the end of the social order which brought Kieran O'Day to his doom" (Gibbons 2002: 103).

Gerry Smyth has referred to the dual pattern of approaches operating throughout the history of modern Irish decolonisation in terms of the liberal versus the radical modes of discourse (in Gauthier 2000: 340). Thus, if in the first one, like Boucicault partially attempted in his comic melodramas, the colonised demands to be recognised as an equal striving to achieve "a non-ideological realm in which coloniser and colonised can converse in an innocent language" (Gauthier 2000: 340), the radical one, which may be exemplified by familism and the peasant play, focuses on difference and on characteristics which seek to negate inferiority by reversing the negativity of colonial discourse. Nevertheless, while the liberal approach strives for the impossible, because "there is no 'outside' or 'beyond' [ideology] to which the colonial subject can escape" (Gauthier 2000: 341), the radical one is also undermined by its oppositional strategy, which once again stresses the difference separating coloniser from colonised and confirming the position of the former. What is advocated is a third mode of approach that, while accepting "the necessity of working within … the dualistic terms of colonialism" (Gauthier 2000: 341) subverts and destabilises them by locating "moments of transience, instability and in-authenticity" (Gauthier 2000: 366) which question the ways in which identity is framed.

Ford's *The Quiet Man* may be seen to conform to this last direction. In its representational range, the filmic text recycles in order to amalgamate cultural paradigms of Irishness inherited through a native theatrical tradition with a strong claim to authenticity. For the late 19th-century audiences, Boucicault's stage populated by beautiful colleens and clever, resourceful stage Irishmen was supposed to represent the 'real' Ireland. For the early 20th-century (and beyond) ones, rural Ireland with its Gaelic traditions blended with the familism's Catholic mores was the legitimate core of Irishness. But once coalesced into *The Quiet Man's* 'motley crew', such images expose their artificial nature and call into question the very mechanics by which they have acquired truth value.

Conclusion or on *The Quiet Man*'s quiet demystification

It is this reading of Ford's film as a potential post-colonial text that subverts the very images it seems to project which seems to dominate the more recent critical debate. Paul Gilroy has drawn attention to the fact that "*The Quiet Man* is not so much a sentimental film as a film about how such sentimentality operates … Mystification in Ford tends to be accompanied by demystification" (2002: 91). Likewise, in his full-length study dedicated to the film, Luke Gibbons has adhered to a similar stance, considering that the film undertakes the challenge of combating stereotypes not by "showing the reality behind the myth, but the reality of the myth and its construction" (2002: 96). And, as Rosa Gonzálves (2002) has demonstrated in

her critical reassessment of Ford's stage Irishry, the film contests its alleged myth of sentimentalising and trivialising the realities of 1950s Ireland by foregrounding its own artificiality not only by placing its action in the West of Ireland, already a 'country of the imagination' via the Revivalists' myth of "a pastoral, mystical, admirably primitive" (Kiberd 1986: 92), but also through a series of metafictional devices like the voice over narrator who frames Sean's story and thus shifts the emphasis from actual myth to the myth-making process, or characters who suddenly face or gesture at the camera and beyond it, the audience directly, and thus call attention to the obvious artificiality of the screen illusion.

But the most ironic reminder of the artificiality of the film's representational tactics remains its visual backdrop, that lavishly-painted and exotic scenery which is supposed to depict an authentic Irish landscape. And yet, as Eamon Slater's analysis of the landscape aesthetic of *The Quiet Man* proves, by shooting the film in the parklands of Ashford Castle, Co. Mayo — an 18th-century Anglo-Irish picturesque garden aimed as a replica of English informal gardens of the same period — Ford "engaged in the ultimate act of a post-colonialist, making an English garden the most globally recognised representation of Irish landscape" (2009: 17).

Notes

[1] Althusser considers that melodrama constitutes a law of the heart which finally deludes itself and its audience as to the way of the world. (see Watt 1991: 163).

[2] Seachráin (Irish): a wanderer or a vagabond.

[3] Since the time of the Great Famine of the 1840s when approximately 1,000,000 people left Ireland for America or Britain, emigration continued to depopulate (especially) rural areas well into the 1960, becoming thus a key characteristic of both Irish demography and culture.

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