

Philosophy and Literature: Brian Friel's Three Language Plays

Mariana Lessa de Oliveira

Abstract: *Language is an essential aspect of human experience, both in the constitution of an individual and of a nation. It is a medium of reflection and creation, and as such has been subjected to many inquiries by Philosophy and Literature into the nature of (re)presentation language is able to cast: some philosophical works may produce texts of a literary quality, and vice-versa. Brian Friel's oeuvre is an example of a literary work that has a philosophical quality, especially in plays that focus on language and its enclosures and disclosures. It is this project's goal to analyze the linguistic debate within three plays by Friel, namely *Volunteers* (1975), *Translations* (1980), and *The Communication Chord* (1982) according to the works on language by philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur. This article outlines the framework of this research and its intended objectives.*

Keywords: *Philosophy of Language; Brian Friel;*

War is what happens when language fails.

Margaret Atwood

Philosophy and literature have shared a productive, yet problematic, relationship for centuries. In Western culture, the starting point of this old quarrel can be traced back to Plato who believed that Poetry (literature) was inferior to Philosophy. Poetry, for Plato and Socrates as well, belonged to a branch of rhetoric, which was not well seen at that time in Greece. We cannot ignore the paradox that this represents because, although Plato was a philosopher and held many criticisms towards Poetry, his own dialogues feature a literary flair commonly found in drama. Indeed, Plato employed many artifacts that are not common in philosophical texts, such as the use of fictional characters, writing of settings and other literary devices to engage his readers. His texts' form differs, not all of them are dialogues (*Timaeus* and *Laws*, for instance, are in form of a treatise).

There is a difference, however, in writing a treatise and a dialogue to expose a philosophical reflection or discussion. Treatises can be thought of as a form of text that requires less interaction from its reader. It's the exposition of a thought from point A to

point B, and the reader is solely following the path already laid. A dialogue (which can also be perceived as a debate or discussion), on the other hand, is way more engaging. It's like watching a ping pong match in which the conclusion, the path from point A to point B is not already laid, but being construed with the reader. By engaging the readers through this form of textual strategy, it is also possible to embrace them in a form of puzzlement in order to create a discomfort that will lead the reader to reflect about what is being debated.

Furthermore, the relationship between literature and philosophy has yielded remarkable offspring, for certain philosophical contents can be transformed in literature and vice-versa. For instance, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was used as an inspiration for David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a literary example of how it would be like to live in the world thought up by Wittgenstein in his groundbreaking *TLP*. Likewise, certain literary works present a philosophical quality in the sense that they stir in us questions that lead to reflections about our condition as human beings. There are many literary works that fall into this category, but we might as well just illustrate this point with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. And, then, there are literary works that produce a mix of both aspects: they both use philosophy in their literary content and feature characteristics and strategies (like the ones Plato adopted) from Philosophy, creating a work that is part of a broader dialogue – this is the niche to which Brian Friel's work belongs.

Friel produced a drama that was not very popular (or modern?) at the time. After the treaty in 1921, Dublin stages wanted something fresh, something that told the story of the new Ireland. Friel, on the other hand, believed that Ireland was still about its rural roots. His plays are about this tension and conflict: the rural meets the urban; the old meets the new; the collective meets the individual; the soldier meets the poet – through this fusion, Friel tries to provide an experience in theater through discourse and language, that could potentially make his audience reflect about what they are, what they have become, and what Ireland and Irishness is¹.

Friel's plays are often confusing. There is usually a character that banter and teases his fellow characters and the audience; this character, however, is the one that will normally throw the curveball at the audience, puzzling them and leaving on the table an invitation to reflect on whatever the topic is. Friel's theater is heavily intellectual with echoes from the Elizabethan theater, especially Shakespeare, and even from thinkers in philosophy of language and hermeneutics; however, his plays are still highly enjoyable even if those aspects are not acknowledged. In an interview, Friel said that his hope was to hold the audience's intelligent interest until the final curtain and maybe move one dozen people, "that the course of their lives may be enriched or altered by a very fine degree" (1999. 32) after a night's experience in the theater.

There is a certain belief (since Plato) that literature is ornamental, superficial and superfluous whereas philosophy deals with the truth or the search for it, it's difficult, incomprehensible at times and profound. These established clichés perpetuate knowledge

“territories” in many fields of knowledge, establishing a hierarchy of importance that does not match the “landscape of reality”, as Hugh would say in *Translations*. Through a renewal of some stigmatizations, such as important things must be solemn and light-hearted things can’t be serious (Friel 1999. 23), Friel attempts to move his audience not intellectually, but through their hearts with plays that display the traditional Irish wit and tragic spirit, all in one go, hoping that the audience will leave the theater and reflect about what they experienced once the play ends.

Friel’s work is both literary and philosophical, especially in the platonic sense of the philosophical experience, which is the restless movement of thinking through rational language and beyond it. Indeed, if we were to categorize Friel’s plays according to philosophical terms, we could say that Friel belongs to a type of *Weltphilosophie*, as developed by Kant, because through reflection and meditation, Friel explores the fundamental problems of human existence in and through language, how our lives and personal/national histories are construed through language and based on it.

Nonetheless, Friel’s oeuvre has received very little attention when it comes to looking at it under the light of philosophy. Most analyses carried out of Friel’s work use postcolonial theories to approach his plays. *Translations*, from 1980, perhaps is the play that has been subjected the most to scholars’ attentive eyes and through various layers: postcolonial studies, rewriting history, language as resistance, and others. In it, Friel has his characters paraphrase ideas taken out of George Steiner’s *After Babel*, and is a play where characters are most actively thinking about language and its consequences in their lives. However, this debate about language did not start in 1980, and, if we look closely, we will notice that Friel’s fascination or obsession with language has been in his work all along. For instance, in 1962, Friel’s first stage play, *This Doubtful Paradise*, was performed by the Group Theatre in Belfast, but only the radio version survives. However, the radio version presents a minor change in the title of the play for *A Doubtful Paradise*, which, as Christopher Murray rightly states, shows the precision and the importance of language in Friel’s work. (Friel 1999. xii)

As early as our first years as human beings, we are expected to come into the world of language. In fact, the milestones of the development of babies, amongst other things, are measured by how well they are doing linguistically: can they communicate their desires? Can they call for mama and papa? Our ability, as babies, to communicate within the timeframe expected is what assures our ability to connect with the world, to kindle with the things and people that live in it on a referential level. Children who often present a speech delay may sometimes be diagnosed with empathy disorders, such as autism. These children also tend to have a difficulty in understanding metaphors or symbolic language in general. Language, therefore, has an important role in defining, from the very early stages of our lives, where we stand in society and where we stand on the line of *normal*.

When I was about 10 years old, I welcomed my second niece into the world. As I held her for the first time at the hospital, I thought if she would ever remember that

moment, since I most certainly would, the experience of holding a baby in our arms for the first time is one to be remembered – I reached the conclusion that she probably wouldn't because I myself had no recollection of my life at that young age. In fact, I determined I had no mental record of my life before I was four years old, and was that because I hadn't yet properly mastered language? Were my memories then formed by what words I could use to describe them instead of the proper memory of experience? Scientists from various areas debate why we don't have recollections from our early childhood; Freud labeled this as "infantile amnesia".

The reasons vary – the hippocampus, the area of the brain responsible for storing new information, is not yet fully developed in babies and young children; another possibility is that although we develop "semantic memory" which would correspond to our capacity to look at our mom and recognize her as mama, we don't yet have "episodic memory", which would be the capacity to recall long and complex events. Basically, at an early age, we are capable of referencing single objects in the world – papa, teddy, bottle – but we are not yet capable of creating narratives about the experiences we have. Our memories from these years, according to many researches in the field, are either implanted on us through someone else – a brother who told us how our first birthday party was like, or pictures that showed that family trip in the summer – or are a result of a cultural practice.

A research conducted by psychologist Qi Wang at Cornell University showed the difference in childhood memories of American and Chinese college students. Her findings showed that American college students memories were more vivid, complex and long, besides self-referenced, than Chinese college students' memories, which were more factual and objective. For Wang, the difference between "The zoo was full of animals" and "I went to the zoo and saw a lot of different animals and, although some scared me, that was really fun" is culturally defined. If you are taught that holding on to memories is important, you will most likely enrich them with details. At a later stage in the research, Wang interviewed the subjects' mothers and had basically the same findings.

Bearing this in mind, we may consider that our memories and their richness were most likely passed on to us from our parents or other relatives. This leaves us with the question of how much of them is true. Is it all fact or fiction? Most likely, as Norman Mailer would put it, our memories are all *factions*. This is also valid for our collective memory. None of us were present when Cabral reached Brazil, yet we do have a mental recollection of the scene either through a movie or a picture or description in a history book. This is a legacy, something that surpasses space and time and forms our collective memory – I am Brazilian because Cabral discovered this land which was called Land of Brazil by European sailors and merchants. However, this historical attribute is not enough to define what being Brazilian means. Other attempts of defining it rest on general assumptions such as The Land of Football, or The Land of Samba, which may be fallacious if not excluder of a portion of the population altogether.

These are practical examples of how language prevails in our lives, both as an individual and as an individual who is part of a nation. Perhaps, more than ever, the

world is undergoing a linguistic revolution when it comes to accepting or rejecting the signifiers we use to reference objects and people in the world. For instance, the bipolar signifier for the third person singular, *he* or *she*, does not account for the multiplicity of signifieds that have surfaced in the last few years. Indeed, LGBT Resource Center lists over 5 different personal pronouns and recommends the best practice of asking a person by which pronoun one would like to be addressed. In Congress, there is still much discussion and resistance over the concept of *family*, amongst other words which have had their reference in the world either shaken or broken and are gaining thinner signified lines every day. This is symptomatic of our times, but the discussion of our relationship to language has been on the table for over decades in several fields of knowledge: philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and literature, amongst others.

In his plays, Friel provides a debate about language that covers many layers of its importance in the lives of individuals and nations. This research focuses on three plays that carry out debates on language: *Volunteers* (1975), *Translations* (1980), and *The Communication Chord* (1982). Each of these plays display a unique preoccupation with language through its characters. Not always this theme will be on the plot level; in some cases, it is visible only on the discourse level of the characters. On the level of characters, each one is conducting its own ontological pursuit through language, by creating what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of the self”. It is noticeable that the least remarkable of Friel’s characters are the ones who are not “bothered” by language. They are as one dimensional as an object on stage or a part of the setting, which brings forth a concept that differentiates the “being” from the inanimate in his work. This feature of Friel’s plays borders the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*. For Heidegger, to truly approach *Dasein*, one must pursue the true essence of language. Another aspect that is truly remarkable about Friel’s characters is the mute characters or foreigners who do not speak the language; they are usually viewed as mentally challenged or even simpletons, but they offer another kind of the hermeneutics of the self.

The aim of this research is to analyze Friel’s language plays and bring forth their philosophical quality and contribution to the debate of the importance of language for human existence, moreover to the definition of *Irishness* in Friel’s work. For that, three main philosophers will be studied: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Ricoeur.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is known for his reflections on language and his work is usually divided between an early stage, led by an analytical look at language, and a later stage, in which language is defined by the use of its speakers. Wittgenstein, nonetheless, never presented a study on literature. For him, literature was a type of “language-game”. Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, went even further and established language as a basic characteristic of *Dasein*, something that has the power of making us human. For him, it is something so divine that a man is far from being at home in his own essence when he thinks he is the one who invented and could have invented language and understanding, building and poetry: “How is humanity ever supposed to have invented

that which pervades it in its sway, due to which humanity itself can *be* humanity in the first place?” (Heidegger 2000. 167). Paul Ricoeur was taken to language through his philosophical ventures and the result of his journey is a philosophical approach to language, interpretation and literary texts, mainly narratives, that have the power, through the hermeneutic exercise in which we engage when reading a book, of giving us insight into the human life – of others and our own. Ricoeur establishes what is known as “narrative identity” and works with the concept on the individual and national level. With the aid of these philosophers, this research aims at providing another way of looking at Friel’s rich work, highlighting the important philosophical discussion Friel is carrying out through his characters and evolve within each play.

Like the Hamletian concept of drama as a mirror up to nature, we may wonder what Irish drama reflects to its audience. We may look in the mirror and see our image, and it would still not be enough to look at the reflection and believe that sums us up as human beings or as a nation. Instead, we reach through the looking glass, trying to catch whatever substance we can and end up returning empty-handed. Whatever struggles presented by a book will be solved within those pages, but we get to carry something home with us and that something is the result of the hermeneutic exercise – we may call it “meaning”, but it could also be “experience”, “feeling”, “insight”, etc. At last, our hands hold something, even if unseen, as Heidegger would put it, or unsayable, as Wittgenstein would put it. Either way, this something has helped define our identity, or question it. When it comes to Friel, upon analyzing those three plays that surround this linguistic debate, we may see if Friel was presenting yet another reference to Irish history, defining it or questioning it.

Notes

- 1 Although Friel’s theme around language may seem local, it is actually very universal. Besides being an essential milestone for humanity as a whole, we are defined by language and language can, yet, define us. This cycle is not local, it is human.

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