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Words Between Worlds:
The Irish Language, the English Army, and the Violence of Translation in Brian Friel's Translations ¹

by COLLIN MEISSNER

If poetry were to be extinguished, my people,
If we were without history and ancient lays
Forever . . .
Everyone will pass unheralded.
Giolla Brighde Mac Con Mighde²

Sirrah, your Tongue betrays your Guilt. You are an Irishman, and that is always sufficient Evidence with me.

Justice Jonathan Thrasher, Fielding’s Amelia³

Let us begin by acknowledging that language is often employed as a political, military, and economic resource in cultural, particularly colonial, encounters. Call it a weapon. Henry VIII’s 1536 Act of Union decree is as good an example as any: “Be it enacted by authoritie aforesaid that all Justices Commissioners Shireves Coroners Eschetours Stewardes and their Lieuten’ntes, and all other Officers and Ministers of the Lawe, shall pplayme and kepe the Sessions Courtes . . . and all other Courtes, in the Englisshe Tongue and all others of Officers Juries and Enquetes and all other affidavithes verdictes and wagers of

1. I’d like to mark a general debt to Henri Mitterand’s “Colonial Discourse in the Journey to the End of the Night.” Much of my understanding of the power relationship expressed in the colonial encounter in Translations is a result of my reading of Mitterand’s study of Céline’s novel.


3. Henry Fielding, Amelia, p. 23. The circumstances surrounding Justice Thrasher’s pronouncement are of some interest to my argument. Fielding’s sympathy for the poverty-stricken Irish in London was well known in light of the general anti-Irish hostilities which were the norm. As magistrate he often found before him cases which called more for compassion than punishment, especially since the charges were often the product of anti-Irish sentiment rather than any real wrongdoing. Justice Thrasher is a type whose “Imperfections in his magistratical Capacity” include having “never read one Syllable of the Matter” of the law contained in the “great Variety of Books; the Statutes which relate to the Office of a Justice of Peace” (21). As Fielding notes, Thrasher’s ignorance was made particularly dangerous when coupled with his greed. Thus, when an Irishman, as beaten and “bloody a Spectre as ever Imagination of a Murderer or a Tragic Poet conceived,” appears before Thrasher charged with “a Battery by a much stouter Man than himself” who has not a mark upon him, Thrasher rules accordingly. The Irishman’s defense proves his guilt: “Upon my Shoul I do love the King very well, and I have not been after breaking any Thing of his that i do know; but upon my Shoul this man hath brake my Head, and my Head did brake his Stick; that is all, Gra” (22). Thrasher’s ruling follows.
Lawe to be given and don in the English Tongue."

The repressive and controlling impetus of this decree was already in place in Ireland by the middle of the fourteenth century, notably the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny which "ordained and established that every Englishman use the English Language" and follow English customs or risk forfeiture of land and property. That said, let me tell you a brief but germane story. In Ireland, Louth and Armagh to be specific, the year 1814, a magistrate proudly professed himself "totally ignorant of the Irish language" and showed no disposition to learn it, but judged cases brought before him nevertheless. An interpreter filled in the testimonial gaps. Unfortunate history? Tommy Quigley comes to trial on a murder charge. "Nobody can understand a word Quigley says. The defense counsel has tried unobtrusively to translate, repeating all the answers to his questions. He manages it without sounding too patronizing, but the judge is impatient and keeps rolling his eyes in despair and asking the witness to slow down. It doesn't do a bit of good. The words come out just the same, only now with gaps in between. 'He-kim-tilla-hahs-bahnt-nahr-Iehter,' repeats Tommy painstakingly. But after a half a day of this, much of the court seems to have given up even trying to make sense of it."

The place, Ireland, Belfast to be specific, the year, 1986. Unfortunate history? Cromwell's curse? However you call it, between England and Ireland language has been a most powerful colonizing weapon. Call Tommy Quigley a victim. The Irish language question has been at the center of the Irish/English conflict from the start. In the English version, spoken Irish was associated with "drunkenness, idleness and improvidence, as a force inimical to the prosperity of the country." Not surprisingly, some of the most damning vilifications of Irish came from the reluctant Irishman Jonathan Swift who once announced "I am deceived, if anything has more contributed to prevent the Irish from being tamed, than this encouragement of their language, which might be easily abolished and become

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4. See The Act of Union of England and Wales, 1536, 27 Henry VIII, ch. 26, clause XVIII, quoted in R. D. Grillo's Dominant Languages: Language and Hierarchy in Britain and France, p. 84. G. A. Hayes-McCoy in "The Royal Supremacy and Ecclesiastical Revolution, 1534-47" notes how English parliament found the "diversity of language, dress, and manners caused the population of the island to appear" a merily mot. Hayes-McCoy goes on to quote The statutes at large passed in the parliament held in Ireland (1301-1761, 8 vols., Dublin, 1765; 1310-1800, 20 vols., Dublin, 1786-1801), 28 Hen. VIII, c. 15 (1765), which ruled against linguistic and cultural diversity because it made the island appear "as a were of sundry sorts, or rather sundry countries, where indeed they be wholly together one body", and required both the Gaelic Irish and Old English to speak English and wear "thing of the English fashion."


7. See Sally Belfrage, The Crack: A Belfast Year, p. 139.

8. O'Briain notes that it was "the Cromwellians, even more than the Elizabethans, who realised the incompleteness of any conquest that failed to take account of day-to-day verbal communication," "Strange Death," p. 154.

9. O'Briain, "Strange Death," p. 163. Seamus Deane notes the more organized and systematic emergence of this hostile and demeaning attitude followed the Reformation and the influx of the New English, "settlers whose religion was Protestant and whose aim was dominance over the whole country." "The New English," Deane explains, "put forward proposals for a complete military subjugation of the country as a necessary precondition of its conversion to the reformed faith" (17). Deane continues and shows how Edmund Spenser's eighteen years of service for the English Crown in Ireland produced his A View of the Present State of Ireland (1596) "in which he defended the severity of the measures taken in Munster against the native population and advocated the complete extirpation of the Irish kinship and legal systems as a prelude to the civilizing of the degenerate and barbarous Irish" (17).
a dead one in half an age, with little expense, and less trouble.”10 Given Swift’s long-standing attitude to his native country one can’t pass his judgments off as just another modest proposal. Swift’s interest in Ireland was not that of a patriot, but of one intent on making the best of his bad luck at having been born there rather than in England. As J. C. Beckett has noted, Swift’s “assertion of Irish rights was based less on patriotism than pride. He could not bear the thought of being treated as an inferior: if he was condemned to live in Ireland, then he must make it clear to the world that Ireland was the equal of England.”11 In Swift’s mind, changing the language was one sure way to parity. But Swift seems to have conflated parity with identity. Identity is something rather different. Muting of Irish could only put the Irish in the uncomfortable position of having to ape the English. That is, putative parity could be achieved only by total resignation of character, by relinquishing all that one was and adopting something altogether other. Parity in this sense was no parity at all. For how is it one can only be himself by not being himself? How can one be Irish, that is, by being English? Understandably, the Irish were resistant.

Nevertheless, Swift’s attitude proved more powerful, especially since the English welcomed the opportunity to eliminate the Irish tongue—figuratively and literally. But. as the case of Tommy Quigley shows, that battle is ongoing. In fact, Tommy Quigley is part of history’s chorus. And when history tries to speak, when we catch hold of lost and repressed phrases amidst the din of accepted historical facts, we begin to hear a fantastic tale—a battle, not of books, but between words and worlds, between English and Irish. I’d like to retell a particular part of this conflict through an analysis of Brian Friel’s 1980 play Translations, which itself attempts to say the story of how the English army made an ordnance map of Ireland in 1833. Translations represents an historical moment when a tradition is erased, when the “quaint, archaic tongue” of the Irish is translated into “the King’s good English.”12 What Friel’s play captures so well is what disappears with the translation (elimination) of a language. The English army’s 1833 mapping exercise, in Friel’s story, was an attempt to “imprison” a civilization “in a linguistic contour which no longer match[ed] the landscape of . . . fact” (T, 43). Translations reveals the inherent danger in translation, particularly between cultures, and especially when there is a political agenda. For word and world are intertwined; and when the English mapped Ireland in 1833, they came away with a larger, better known England, not an Ireland which no longer was speakable by only “an Irishman of the savage kind.”13

10. Jonathan Swift, “On Barbarous Denominations in Ireland” (1728), p. 246. And in case anyone misunderstood him, Swift further suggested that abolition of Irish “would in Time abolish that Part of Barbarity and Ignorance, for which our Natives are so despised by all Foreigners; this would bring them to think and act according to the Rules of Reason, by which a Spirit of Industry, and Thrift, and Honesty, would be introduced among them,” “Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland,” in Jonathan Swift: Irish Tracts, 1720-1723 and Sermons, p. 202. Through the course of the complaint Swift comes to conclude that a major step toward remedying the “wretched Condition” rests in the “Power of the Lawgivers” who must “found a School in every Parish of the Kingdom, for teaching the meaner and poorer Sort of Children to speak and read the English Tongue” (202).


Translations is based loosely on the topological surveys of Thomas Frederick Colby and the Royal Engineers which took place in Ireland over the first half of the nineteenth century. Friel conflates the entire project to one enterprise in 1833 and allows it to coincide with the establishment of the National Education System which intended to eliminate, once and for all, the presence of hedge schools and Gaelic as an educative tool. The play’s action, Friel explains in the introduction, “takes place in a hedge-school in the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg, an Irish-speaking community in County Donegal” (10). Thus the conjunction of English military, the National Education System, and Irish hedge school under the rubric of a mapping enterprise which seeks to translate one linguistic community to another allows Friel to place before the playgoing audience what is ostensibly at the root of the contemporary Irish/English conflict. In so doing Friel places the viewer in the position of United Nations judge overseeing a border dispute whose facts have become clouded by history but whose presence is still real. That is, the ordnance survey, as represented by Friel, is not at all the neighborly enterprise Captain Lancey explains: “so that the entire basis of land valuation can be reassessed for purposes of more equitable taxation”; or that Ireland is privileged. No such survey is being undertaken in England. So this survey cannot but be received as proof of the disposition of this government to advance the interests of Ireland. (31)

On the contrary, what the play reveals is the ordnance map’s earmarks of colonial aggression, the intention of stamping out an entire culture and linguistic tradition by the most successful means available, rendering the conquered mute, and allowing them to express themselves only in a language which has no traditional signification. In other words, as the hedge-school master’s son Manus translates, “it’s a bloody military operation” (32).

Commentaries on Translations have all pointed out how the Irish/English encounter which centers itself about the translation to English of Gaelic place names involves the erasure of tradition, or, to quote one of the play’s critics, Richard Kearney, Translations questions “the socio-cultural role of language in the historical evolution of a community.” Most of these commentaries seem to take their cue from Friel himself, who says he never intended to write a “threnody on the death of the Irish language.” Most probably not. And, as though Stephen Dedalus fretting “in the shadow of [the English Dean’s] language,” Friel admits the language question to be “very problematic... for all of us on this island.” He

14. For the exact details of the Colbys’ and the Royal Engineers’ role in the mapping of Ireland see J. H. Andrews, A Paper Landscape: The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-Century Ireland. A glance at Andrews’ work reveals the extent to which Friel plays fast and loose with the facts of history.
16. Brian Friel, “Extracts from a Sporadic Diary” in Ireland and the Arts.
17. James Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p. 189.
goes on to note how the Irish have yet to resolve the language question for themselves:

We flirt with the English language, but we haven’t absorbed [it]... the use of the English language, the understanding of words, the whole cultural burden that every word in the English language carries is slightly different to our burden.18

But the fact remains that in the play language comes under the rubric of “a bloody military operation,” and is important as a political weapon, despite Friel’s comment that Translations need “concern itself only with the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls.”19 It’s strange, then, the way both Friel and critical commentary repeatedly want to get away from the overtly political theme of the confrontation and into abstract questions of Heideggerian ontology and being.20 On stage the presence of English Red Coats would quickly shuffle any notions of Heidegger to the back of one’s mind.21

The play’s opening act revolves around the introduction of Hugh O’Donnell’s hedge school and the presence of the Royal Engineers. To the viewing audience two things quickly come to mind: the ongoing history of British military occupation in Ireland, and the role the military played in reducing Irish education and instruction to hidden nooks in barns and behind hedges. But just as Friel conflated the actual history of the English mapping enterprises, so he conflates the consequences of the colonial encounter on the level of the individual. He thus presents two assimilationists: Maire, a young woman who parrots Dan O’Connell, the radical lawyer and repealist politician, and agrees “the sooner we allieanl to speak English the better” (25); and Owen, whose ability to move flawlessly

19. Friel, “Extracts,” p. 60. Friel states in the entry his desire that the play dismiss politics altogether and explore “the dark places of individual souls.” That the play turned out so manifestly political suggests that questions of being and ontology were superseded by pure politics.
20. See Richard Kearney, Transitions. Kearney’s examination of Friel’s language plays in light of what I’ve reduced to Heideggerian ontology and being are provocative, insightful, and quite helpful. In fact, I agree with much of his argument; but I can’t help noting that the argument dismisses the more brute and disturbing political actualities Translations addresses, despite Friel’s attempts to say otherwise. I think Kearney is correct to move the play beyond the level of propaganda or soapboxing reviewers have accused it of, but the more material and political elements of politics and violence are still central and should remain so. I find Seamus Deane’s argument more compelling and closer to the play’s reality given its locale—County Donegal—and Friel’s own contemporary history—a “Northern crisis crystallized” in a “spectacle of a broken community living in the twilight zone of a war” (Deane, 246). As Deane poignantly summarizes: Translations is a play “in which the linguistic crisis which saw the disappearance of Gaelic and its replacement by English becomes the focus through which questions of authority and failure, love and treachery, culture and its disintegration are examined” (246).
21. I agree with Ulf Dantanus who states the play’s “political content defines its action and meaning. It must come first in any consideration of Translations,” Brian Friel: A Study, p. 199. See also Wolfgang Zach, “Brian Friel’s Translations,” pp. 76-78. Strangely, during the creation of the play Friel found himself pulled back and forth between the political and psychological dimensions of the play. Two excerpts from his “Sporadic Diary” highlight the creative antagonisms:

22 May: The thought occurred to me that what I was circling around was a political play and that thought panicked me. But it is a political play—how can that be avoided? If it is not political, what is it? Inaccurate history? Social drama? (58, emphasis added)

1 June: What worries me about the play—if there is a play—are the necessary peculiarities, especially the political elements. Because the play has to do with language and only language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by that political element, it is lost. (58-59, emphasis added)
between both cultures renders his actual identity questionable at best. Both Maire and Owen dramatize the consequences of any colonial encounter, particularly the “heirarchization” and forced assimilation Frantz Fanon speaks of as representative of all colonial confrontations. (Owen has left Ballybeg in search of work and found doing the English military’s bidding his only opportunity; Maire recognizes in Lieutenant Yolland the escape from Ballybeg Manus can’t offer.) In his account Fanon notes how colonial encounters traditionally follow a pattern of initial domination, deculturation, cultural and individual mummification, and inferiorization. In other words, Fanon’s account matches nicely Henry VIII’s 1536 Act of Union decree and the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny. Translations is a medium in which this process is registered.

I’ll concentrate for a moment on Owen. One of Friel’s most potent ironies in the play is the English characters’ mispronunciation of Owen’s name as Roland. When Owen’s brother Manus asks if Owen intends to correct his employers, the latter responds: “Owen—Roland—what the hell. It’s only a name. It’s the same me, isn’t it?” (33). In the political arena, the arena of colonial encounter, however, the Owen/Roland dilemma isn’t much different than Crusoe labeling Friday “Friday” because that happened to be the day they met. Friday’s actual name would surely have been as unpronounceable to the English tongue as is Owen’s. And where Crusoe teaches Friday everything “that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful,” Owen is brought back to his home as “go-between” and servant to the colonist’s mapping enterprise. It is Owen who has fled his homeland, calls Irish “the quaint, archaic tongue,” and has attempted to make himself successful by making himself English. Thus the profound irony when Captain Lancey orders Owen to translate his orders of threatened eviction and razing as a reprisal for Lieutenant Yolland’s disappearance. Owen turns out really to be “the same me,” in the eyes of Captain Lancey. For all his attempts to be something else, he remains the Irish servant. More bluntly, Owen remains Friday. To borrow Fanon’s language, Owen’s attempted assimilation ends in his exclusion from both worlds and reduces him to an “object man, without means of existing, without a raison d’être” (385). In the world of English/Irish commerce, Friel seems to be suggesting, the borders are drawn; one is either one or the other, as Owen’s experience ultimately demonstrates, and as the violent culmination of the budding love between Yolland and Maire makes real. As Friel’s character Jimmy Jack, called the Infant Prodigy because of his gift for Greek and Latin, notes with chilling clarity at the play’s conclusion: “Do you know the Greek word endogamein? It means to marry within the tribe. And the

22. Richard Kearney rightly notes the unavoidable ambiguity of Owen’s role as translator: “Owen plays a double language-game, commuting with apparent ease between the two parties,” but, nevertheless, caught by the “linguistic duality” which “entails a fundamental duplicity.” His attempts to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap, as Kearney notes, place Owen in the position of “mistranslator and a misnomer... a traducer who trades in one linguistic currency for another.” Transitions, pp. 136-37.

23. Frantz Fanon, “Racism and Culture.” All colonial encounters, claims Fanon, begin when a “new system of values is imposed. . . by the heavy weight of cannons and sabers.” This initial demonstration of superiority is followed by a general condemnation of the conquered’s culture, and forced assimilation (384).

word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And, you don’t cross those borders casually—both sides get very angry” (68).

The larger cultural encounter in the play must be examined along this paradigm if one is to get the full measure of the politics of language in *Translations*. In any border situation, particularly those which have been militarily transgressed, language becomes an exclusionary tool, a method of identification. In Alasdair MacIntyre’s words “a language may be so used. . . . that to share in its use is to presuppose one cosmology rather than another, one relationship of local law and custom to cosmic order rather than another, one justification of particular relationships of individual to community and of both to land and to landscape rather than another. In such a language even the use of proper names may on occasion have such presuppositions.” 25 Contemporary Northern Ireland bears this out to its full ramifications. In *Translations* part of the conflict involves the relationship of “individual to community and of both to land and landscape.” For what transpires through the mapping enterprise is the wholesale revaluation of community, revaluation in two distinctly repressive and political ways. Firstly, the discourse of map-making presupposes ownership. In remapping Ireland, the Royal Engineers, acting on behalf of the British Crown, make Ireland England and, in the authoritative position of colonizer, offer the colonized a place to live. But the place is necessarily different. The act of mapping and naming, the act of erasing the old and making the new, is equivalent to an ideologizing act of plunder: in other words, a redramatization of the colonial encounter. 26

How fully *Translations* bears out this stage of communal revaluation is made evident when the hedge-school master Hugh remarks to Lieutenant Yolland:

But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen—to use an image you’ll understand—it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . . fact. (43) 27

The degree of English success comes to mind as the play closes. Deprived of adequate means for resistance, some members of the muted Ballybeg community have engaged in the only act of rebellion possible—the abduction and murder of Lieutenant Yolland. Captain Lancey barks out his reprisal in English:


26. George O’Brien makes a similar point in his *Brian Friel*. The nature of the colonial question I am bringing up leads to the fore in the play because translation is taking place. O’Brien suggests “the fact that it has been deemed necessary by the powers that be to change place-names defines the arbitrary but incontrovertible character of those powers.” The language in the play, notes O’Brien, is shown to exist “as a network of cultural encodings . . . , and cognitive assumptions made on the basis of acquaintance with those names” which are about to be changed. “The cultural expropriation codifies and ratifies these earlier forms of expropriation, one of whose effects was to bring hedge schools into being” (105-06).

27. Friel’s language here is a close paraphrase of George Steiner’s in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Steiner says “A civilization is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the changing landscape of fact” (21). Numerous critics have noted Steiner as the source and Friel has also admitted his debt.
Commencing twenty-four hours from now we will shoot all livestock in Ballybeg. . . . If that doesn’t bear results, commencing forty-eight hours from now we will embark on a series of evictions and levelling of every abode in the following selected areas— (61)

A list of newly anglicized place names follows, making manifest the need not only to recognize the communal change, but to accept the new system as the new reality. Again, Hugh marks the shift. Picking up the Name-book he accepts the need to “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. (66)

It’s not stretching to see Hugh’s understanding of the new communal order as a conforming to the powers that be and a recognition that place is now something given. In other words, Hugh’s recognition of the Name-book’s reality is a recognition of change and his status within the newly instituted paradigm. 28 If the Name-book is a transcript of the “act of spoliation,”29 Hugh’s acquiescence is an understanding that the only way he can continue to be is to be something else, to assimilate.

But assimilation is not so easy as the second level of communal revaluation makes apparent. In addition to presupposing ownership, the act of translation, of removing Gaelic and enforcing English as the only accepted verbal commerce, not only reenacts the master/slave relationship, but brings the hierarchical relationship to mind every time the newly instituted place name is articulated. This level of linguistic colonialism is what Cromwell had in mind, and it follows Fanon’s notion of deculturation. What more complete domination of an individual, a community, a country can there be than to remove the language in which the conquered’s identity is articulated and strengthened anew with every utterance? In the relationship between the English and Irish, the revaluation introduced by the translational mapping ratifies, in the eyes of the English at least, a justified position of authority and superiority in all relationships in which language is the medium of commerce. 30 Thus Captain Lancey’s marked authoritative tone with Owen: “I’m in a hurry, O’Donnell.” “Do your job. Translate” (61). The formerly familiar “Owen,” or “Roland” to Lancey, is now reductively objectified as “O’Donnell,” a translating tool, of value only for the job it can do.

Herein lies the crucial drama of Translations. Given the power structures in confrontation, the Royal Engineers and British Crown and the community of Baile Beag and Ireland, what are the consequences of the ordnance map?

28. In a way, Hugh’s recognition of the change and the need to leave the past in the past and move ahead seems to have been part of Friel’s objective in the play. In the introduction to his “Sporadic Diary” he notes the force of change coming over Ballybeg: the people “have to acquire a new language (English), and because their townland is being renamed everything that was familiar is becoming strange” (57).

29. The phrase is Mitterand’s, p. 23.

30. In presenting his argument about Céline’s Journey to the End of the Night, Mitterand makes a point very similar to what I am saying transpires between the English and Irish characters in Translations, and individuals on the larger world stage. Mitterand claims the “use of the word implies an objective situation of enslaving of one by the other, the absolute domination of the harvester by the merchant. In the conscience of the colonizer this presupposes the conviction of his superiority over the colonized in the course of social relationships, of which language is an instrument” (24).
Everything. Friel makes the subsequent loss poignant and represents how identity and tradition are manifested and transferred through constant linguistic reproduction. To say is to make and be, a lesson that goes back to Adam, and is redramatized as the drunken Owen and Yolland humorously bemuse themselves by seeing their naming role as:

O: A christening!
Y: A baptism!
O: A hundred christenings!
Y: A thousand baptisms! Welcome to Eden!
O: Eden’s right! We name a thing and—bang!—it leaps into existence!
Y: Each name a perfect equation with its roots.
O: A perfect congruence with its reality. (45)

The irony, of course, is that Owen and Yolland are simultaneously enacting a ritual of Eden and a counter-Eden. In Eden, story has it, things really did leap into existence. In *Translations* the world is certainly a fallen one. For each new name, a former place leaps out of existence. What then is the “perfect equation with its roots”? the “perfect congruence with its reality”? Friel has Owen answer the question by simultaneously explaining the origins of tradition and its dependence on continual linguistic reaffirmation:

And we call that crossroads Tobair Vree. And why do we call it Tobair Vree? I’ll tell you why. Tobair means a well. But what does Vree mean? It’s a corruption of Brian—Brian—an erosion of Tobair Buairin. Because a hundred-and-fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you—that would be too simple—but in a field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in that well was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn’t go away; and one morning Brian was found drowned in that well. And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree—even though that well has long since dried up. I know that story because my grandfather told it to me. But ask Duality—or Maire—or Bridget—even my father—even Manus—why it’s called Tobair Vree; and do you think they’ll know? I know they don’t know. So the question I put to you, Lieutenant, is this: What do we do with a name like that? Do we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it—what?—The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep pietie with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’ beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers? (43-44)

The Hibemophile Yolland demands Tobair Vree. He disappears shortly thereafter. History shows Captain Lancey’s map was completed. What is the congruence with reality? I quote MacIntyre: “If, for example, I speak in Irish, even today, let alone three hundred years ago, of Doire Colmcille—of Doire In modern Irish—the presuppositions and implications of my utterance are quite other than if I speak in English of Londonderry” (185).31 Following his role as instructor, Hugh marks the poignancy of the linguistic change: “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. . . . we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do.

31. Anthony Roche rightly suggests “the location of *Translations* bears on a twentieth-century exercise in cartographic division and a city which still mobilizes its loyalties around naming itself ‘Derry’ or prefixing ‘London’ first,” “A Bit Off the Map,” p. 148.
we fossilise” (66). The question is, how does one renew those images when the
language in which they are embodied no longer exists? How do you renew
through history what history has erased? How can Swinefort represent Lis na
Muc?32

In Translations, then, Friel addresses the past in an attempt to redress the
present. In his mind, contemporary Ireland is caught between an old, eroded Irish
past which no longer signifies and English words which can’t. A distinctly and
accepted Irish culture and identity is what continues to get lost in the translation
between the competing words.33 No one needs to be reminded of the contempo­
rary consequences.

Misunderstanding is the general mode of discourse. MacIntyre outlines the
dilemma nicely: “when two such communities confront each other,” each the
product of its own linguistic tradition, and each “lacking a knowledge of, let
alone linguistic capacities informed by, the tradition of the other community,
each will represent the beliefs of the other within its own discourse in abstraction
from the relevant tradition and so in a way that ensures misunderstanding” (188).
The playgoing audience I characterized as United Nations judge when viewing
Translations is being asked by Friel to recognize a number of polarities. We get
a testament of the past in order to contextualize what has become a much
maligned and decontextualized present. In this newly contextualized present,
Friel points out through the play, we can’t so readily align ourselves with
preexisting definitions, sidle up to “our side” of the border dispute. Rather, Friel
asks us to look again. In his words:

I think that is how the political problem of this island is going to be solved. . . . It’s going to be solved
by the recognition of what language means for us on this island. . . . Because we are in fact talking
about accommodation or marrying of two cultures here, which are ostensibly speaking the same
language but which in fact aren’t.34

That difference is measured every day: Tommy Quigley, unable to get himself
understood, was sentenced to five consecutive life sentences. As Sally Belfrage
noted at the time, he’ll be free in 2020, aged 64. “What will Belfast be like then?”
(152).

32. Kearney notes: “It is the stored heritage of local history which each Gaelic name recollects and secretes. The
translation of these place names closes off rather than discloses their mnemonic secrets, distorts their former
meaning.” Transitions, pp. 137-38.
33. For proof of the difference one need only recall Tommy Quigley’s trial or read Friel’s surprising translation
(from a collection of English translations) of Chekhov’s Three Sisters.
34. Brian Friel, interview with O’Toole, “The Man from God Knows Where,” p. 23.
Works Cited


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