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Brian Friel and the Politics of the Anglo-Irish Language

by F. C. McGRATH

LANGUAGE has always been used as a political and social weapon. It has been used to oppress a colonized or conquered people, and it has been used to police the borders of social class. In Ireland it has been used in both these ways. After the British had consolidated their colonization of Ireland, Gaelic was outlawed, and its use stigmatized a class of people who were conquered, oppressed, and impoverished. Before independence in 1922 Irish-accented English, including degrees of Irish accent, established social hierarchies—the closer to British English, the higher the class. George Steiner's observation about upperclass British accents applied with particular force in Ireland: "Upper-class English diction, with its sharpened vowels, elisions, and modish slurs, is both a code for mutual recognition—accent is worn like a coat of arms—and an instrument of ironic exclusion" (32).

Since the late nineteenth century, however, knowledge of the old Gaelic has been turned into an offensive political weapon and a badge of Irish nationalist affiliation; and today the status of the Anglo-Irish language, that is, English as spoken by the Irish, has become a major concern for Brian Friel and other Irish writers associated with his Field Day Theatre Group.

The language problem in Ireland has been brought into focus for many writers and critics by a passage in Joyce's *Portrait* where Stephen Dedalus ponders the feel of English on his own tongue. Stephen's misgivings form his response to the English dean of studies, who is somewhat astonished to discover that Dubliners call a funnel a *tundish*. The priest's surprise offends Stephen, who thinks,

—The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

Writing in *TLS* in 1972, Denis Donoghue extrapolates Stephen's unease to Irish writers today:

I believe that many Irish writers who write in English have a bad conscience in doing so, even though they have spent their entire lives among English words. . . . In Ireland language is a political fact. Those who do not speak Irish speak English with the intonation of guilt; they cannot be completely at ease with their acquired speech. (291)

To address this discomfort Irish writers feel with English was one of the

founding principles of the Field Day Theatre Group, which Friel organized with the actor Stephen Rea in 1980. Like the Irish National Theatre founded by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and the Fay brothers, Field Day has become a significant cultural force in Ireland today. Although originally formed as a touring company based in Derry, Field Day's broad cultural goals extend well beyond its annual theatrical productions to an ambitious critique of the competing discourses, myths, and histories that have contributed to the current crisis in Northern Ireland.

Field Day's ambitious program has attracted some of the best creative and critical minds in Ireland and elsewhere. Friel and Rea soon brought other prominent Northern Irish writers, both Catholic and Protestant, into its directorship, including Seamus Heaney, Tom Kilroy, Seamus Deane, and Tom Paulin. Other writers and critics who have associated themselves with Field Day include the Northern poet Derek Mahon, the Irish-American novelist Thomas Flanagan, and the Irish academics Terence Brown, Richard Kearney, and Declan Kiberd. More recently the leading literary theorists Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said have contributed to the Field Day pamphlet series. In short, Friel's group has become a catalyst for cultural ferment that has spread far beyond the borders of Northern Ireland.

Although Field Day's shock waves extend into the Republic of Ireland and into Europe and America, Northern Ireland remains the epicenter. All the Field Day directors come from the North, and they are passionately concerned with what role a cultural group might play in this highly charged context. Friel and his colleagues hope to alter traditional images and myths that have shaped the national consciousness, especially those that divide the country and inhibit cultural and political harmony. As they demythologize old histories and myths, they hope to supplant them with new ones that are free from the crippling colonial perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized that have marked Ireland's history for the past eight hundred years—free, that is, from the prejudices and myths of the nationalist tradition as well as from the myths of official British history. In competition with other political and cultural movements, such as republicanism, revisionism, and unionism, which are seeking to set the Irish national agenda, Field Day has been trying to forge an identity for Ireland that remains distinctly Irish within the European community at the same time that it tries to free itself from the limited horizons of the old nationalism.

In many ways Field Day's attempt to articulate a cultural consciousness for Ireland is comparable in its scope and influence to the efforts of the Irish Literary Renaissance earlier in the century. The Field Day directors envision their various projects leading, as Friel says, "to a cultural state, not a political state," but "out of that cultural state, a possibility of a political state follows" ("The Man," 23). They hope that once the Irish get used to the myth that they all share a language, a literature, and a heritage, then Protestants and Catholics North and South will realize they share a common destiny.

Methodologically Field Day's program recognizes profound relations among language, culture, history, and politics. All the Field Day writers, for example,

perceive the political crisis in Northern Ireland in terms of language. Friel believes that Ireland's political problem "is going to be solved by language," not just language across the negotiating table, but also "by the recognition of what language means for us on this island." One of Field Day's most ambitious and politically charged linguistic projects is the attempt to identify and articulate a distinct form of Irish English. Friel points out that even when the British leave Ireland "the residue of their presence will still be with us. . . . and that brings us back to the question of language for this is one of the big inheritances which we have received from the British" ("Talking to Ourselves," 60–61).

But Friel feels as uncomfortable as Stephen Dedalus does with English. He notes that all his grandparents were native Gaelic speakers and that two of them were illiterate: "To be so close to illiteracy and to a different language is a curious experience," he says. He claims that, although the Irish "flirt with the English language," they have not comfortably assimilated it, and that "the whole issue of language" remains "very problematic" for the Irish ("The Man," 21). Elsewhere he elaborates:

We have all been educated in an English system, we are brought up in school reading Wordsworth, Shelly [sic] and Keats. These are formative influences on our lives and there is no possibility of escaping from this.

We must accept this. But we must make this primary recognition and it is a recognition which we must never lose sight of: that there is a foreignness [sic] in this literature: it is the literature of a different race. If we assume that we have instant and complete access to that literature, we are unfair to it and to ourselves. And we constantly make that assumption because of the common language error. ("Talking to Ourselves," 60)

Friel has said that the English and the Irish are two cultures "which are ostensibly speaking the same language but which in fact aren't," and that "the whole cultural burden that every word in the English language carries is slightly different to our burden" ("The Man," 21, 23). Friel's solution, however, is not to propose a return to Gaelic, but to continue with a process begun by Synge and Joyce: "We must make English identifiably our own language," he insists. English words must become "distinctive and unique to us" ("Talking to Ourselves," 60–61). Except for Synge, Irish drama, according to Friel, so far has failed to create a form of English that feels at home on the Irish tongue ("Talking to Ourselves," 60).

To advance the idea of Irish English, Field Day has proposed the compilation of an Anglo-Irish dictionary. Historically one way colonial or post-colonial societies have asserted their national identity and cultural difference from a present or past hegemonic power has been to compile its own dictionary of the colonizer's language. Dictionaries exist, for example, for American, Australian, Canadian, Jamaican, Scottish, and South African versions of English. In the first of Field Day's pamphlet manifestos, entitled "A New Look at the Language Question," Tom Paulin explores the need for such a dictionary in Ireland. According to Paulin, the Anglo-Irish language or Irish English exists only as a spoken language, and, with its numerous regional and local dialects, it is "in a state of near anarchy." Because there is no *Dictionary of Irish English*, Paulin says,

... many words are literally homeless. They live in the careless richness of speech, but they rarely appear in print. When they do, many readers are unable to understand them and have no dictionary where they can discover their meaning. The language therefore lives freely and spontaneously as speech, but it lacks any institutional existence and so is impoverished as a literary medium. It is a language without a lexicon, a language without form. Like some strange creature of the open air, it exists simply as *Geist* or spirit. (11)

A dictionary of Irish English, Paulin claims, would redeem many words from the obscurity of local dialects and release them “into the shaped flow of a new public language” (15).

Richard Wall, who recently published *An Anglo-Irish Dialect Glossary for Joyce's Works*, has demonstrated the dangers of ignoring dialectal peculiarities when reading Joyce. Wall shows how critics have misread Joyce because they have been unaware of local meanings of slang and normal English words, unaware of English words obsolete outside Ireland (like *tundish*), or unaware of words derived from Gaelic and Danish. He also uncovers misreadings, especially of passages in *Finnegans Wake*, based on ignorance of pronunciation that is peculiar to a region or derived (as in many Anglo-Irish dialects) from eighteenth-century English (“Joyce's Use”).

Paulin, however, is not merely concerned with the lexical value of an Anglo-Irish dictionary; he is also concerned with its political impact. Paulin rejects the notion of a politically neutral language. For Paulin “the language question is a question about nationhood and government” (7). He notes, for example, how

attempts to refine and ascertain the language almost instinctively relate it to the houses of parliament, to those institutions where speech exercises power. In his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* H. W. Fowler frequently draws examples from parliamentary debates, and...[thus] reveals the simple patriotism which fires his concept of correct usage. (6)

This is why standard British English “must always be impossible for any Irish writer...because the platonic standard has an actual location—it isn't simply free and transcendental—and that location is the British House of Commons” (16).

Most of Paulin's essay is devoted to examining the political baggage of several famous dictionary projects—Samuel Johnson's, Noah Webster's, and the *O.E.D.* He argues that Johnson's principles were governed by his own “English patriotism” and “anarchistic conservatism” (5), whereas Webster's dictionary project was motivated by a desire to throw off British “imperial hegemony.” Paulin says, “Webster had to challenge the dominating force of Johnson's dictionary and personality” by creating a uniform American language that would achieve “linguistic and cultural independence” for America. “Webster argues for linguistic self-respect, but he does so as a separatist, not an integrationist,” says Paulin (8–9).

As Webster had to overcome Johnson, so the compilers of the *New English Dictionary* (later the *O.E.D.*) “worked in the shadow” of Noah Webster (8). But unlike Webster's impulse to overthrow an imperial hegemony, their goal was to consolidate one. According to Paulin, James Murray, editor-in-chief of the *New English Dictionary*, was motivated by his “identification with Victorian Britain and his sense of the importance of the Scottish scholarly tradition to that cultural

hegemony” (8). As “the chief lexicon” of British English, Paulin says that the *O.E.D.* became “both book and sacred natural object, one of the guardians of the nation’s soul...one of the cornerstones of the culture which created it.” Consequently it “possesses a quasi-divine authority” (7–8).

Paulin advocates a dictionary for Ireland that would become the repository of its linguistic soul. This dictionary would be based on “a concept of Irish English” governed by an “all-Ireland context.” In other words, it would be a form of modern English that draws from Irish, Ulster Scots, Elizabethan English, Hiberno-English, British English, and American English. So conceived, Irish English would become, in Paulin’s words, “the flexible written instrument of a complete cultural idea” (15). The complete cultural idea, of course, is the politically loaded ideal of a united Ireland. Paulin, however, is not naively optimistic about the possibility of achieving such an ideal in what he calls “the present climate of confused opinions and violent politics” (16–17). From his point of view neither the North nor the Republic presently fosters an ecumenical view of the Anglo-Irish language:

state education in Northern Ireland is based upon a pragmatic view of the English language and a short-sighted assumption of colonial status, while education in the Irish Republic is based on an idealistic view of Irish which aims to conserve the language and assert the cultural difference of the country. (11)

Friel’s interest in the language issue can be traced back as far as his early stories, but it began to burn with more intense energy while he was “translating” Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* into Anglo-Irish. The word translating here is both accurate and misleading. Friel doesn’t know Russian and he worked from five standard English translations of *Three Sisters* (“Talking to Ourselves,” 59). Friel’s version became the second annual production of Field Day in 1981 (*Translations* was the first in 1980), and it is obviously related to the dictionary project proposed in Paulin’s essay. Friel says he made the translation because he felt that existing translations were “redolent of either Edwardian England or the Bloomsbury set” and that “the rhythms of these versions do not match with the rhythms of” Irish speech patterns (“Talking to Ourselves,” 59).

The production of Chekhov, then, was part of Field Day’s effort to identify a uniquely Irish brand of English. In his version of *Three Sisters* Friel replaced restrained British phrasing such as,

They’ve gone in to lunch already. . . . I’m late. . . . You’ve got such a lot of visitors. . . . I feel quite shy. . . . How do you do, Baron?

with characteristically more animated Irish rhythm and phrasing such as,

Sweet mother of God, I’m late—they’re at the dinner already! . . . And look at the crowd of guests! Goodness gracious I could never face in there! Baron, how d’you do. (qtd. in Dantanus, 185)

Friel also had Irish actors in mind, who must perform most translated classics in American or British English. Friel wanted a translation that would flow easily over the tongues of his actors. “It’s all a question of music,” he says; “the

audience will hear a different music to anything they've heard in Chekhov before" (*Irish Times*, 6).

Other Field Day productions have also presented classical plays in an Irish idiom. For the 1984 season Derek Mahon's *High Time* adapted Molière's *The School for Husbands* and Tom Paulin modeled *The Riot Act* on *Antigone*. In 1990 Field Day produced Seamus Heaney's first play, *The Cure at Troy*, a version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.

Friel's play *Translations* also resulted in part from his creative ferment over the language questions raised by his work on *Three Sisters* and by his reading of Steiner's *After Babel*, which he read as part of his preparation for the translating project. Friel's preoccupations with language fused with serendipitous discoveries about an ancestor who was a hedge-school master and about the ordnance survey that created the Anglicized map of Ireland as we know it today. Friel linked his concern with language to these discoveries by setting his play in the townland of Baile Beag, County Donegal, in 1833, just as the new national schools, where lessons were to be taught exclusively in English, were about to replace the hedge schools, where instruction was often in Gaelic, particularly in the west of Ireland. Friel also focused on that part of the ordnance survey that attempted to standardize and Anglicize all the Gaelic place names.

In *Translations* Friel captures a critical passage in Irish history as a living Gaelic culture is about to become Anglicized. The schoolchildren will no longer be taught in Gaelic, and all the official place names will no longer be Gaelic. The political advantages of this for the British are obvious. The schools taught in Gaelic also taught the Gaelic version of Irish history and preserved and fanned the traditional historical prejudices against the British. In the new national schools Irish schoolchildren would learn the history of Ireland, but with documents written in English.

While many readers of *Translations* have focused on its history and politics, very few have explored its more central concern with language.¹ Friel himself has said that, while the political and historical thematics are obviously relevant to the atmosphere of the play, he had no desire "to write a play about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers," or "to write a threnody on the death of the Irish language." It's not that Friel lacks interest in Ireland's Gaelic past. On the contrary, he knew that for the play to work he had to capture "the wholeness, the integrity, of that Gaelic past." But he constantly worried about turning *Translations* into a political play, because for him "the play has to do with language and only language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by that political element," he says, "it is lost" ("Extracts," 58–59). What keeps *Translations* from being overwhelmed by politics is Friel's concern with the problem of the Anglo-Irish language.

The most articulate character in the play on the issue of language is Hugh, the erudite hedge-school master about to become obsolete; and his remarks orchestrate the thematics of language Friel has set in motion. Hugh, a proto-structuralist

1. The chief exception is Richard Kearney's excellent essay on Friel's language plays.

of sorts, tells us that words are not immortal but merely signals and counters. On the other hand, he says, “a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact” (*Selected Plays*, 419). This statement is ambiguous. A reading that emphasizes politics over language might take it to mean that Hugh is referring to the English language not matching the facts of Gaelic Ireland. But Hugh could also be referring to Daniel O’Connell’s view that the Gaelic language no longer matches the facts of an Anglicized Ireland.

Hugh eventually resigns himself to O’Connell’s view. Pointing to the book in which his son Owen and the ordnance officer Lt. Yolland have inscribed the new Anglicized place names for Baile Beag (now in the process of becoming Ballybeg), he says, “We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home” (*Selected Plays*, 444). Actually this view goes beyond O’Connell to the cultural project of Friel and Field Day: it neither accepts a futile allegiance to the old Gaelic traditions (the position of Hugh’s other son Manus and of Douglas Hyde); nor does it approve of converting to the culture of the colonial power (the position of Owen in the play and of writers like Shaw and Wilde); nor does it advocate exile or emigration (the choice of the character of Maire in *Translations* and of Joyce and Beckett). Instead it suggests that writers remain in Ireland to appropriate the English language for Irish culture.

At the end of the play Hugh leaves us with a complex and ambivalent image, although I don’t think it is inconclusive as some have found it (Murray, 440). He quotes a passage from the beginning of Virgil’s *Aeneid* that alludes to the goddess Juno’s fears that a race descended from Trojan blood (that is, Aeneas’ race of Romans) will destroy her beloved Carthage.² In the Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.) the Romans did destroy Carthage with a thoroughness rare in the history of the West. Friel clearly draws a parallel in the passage to England’s erosion of the Irish language and civilization, the terrible intimation of which makes Hugh stumble over his translation of it. But the irony is that Latin, the language Hugh is quoting and translating, the language that signifies his own erudition, is the language of the conquering Romans; and Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* not to lament the destruction of Carthage but to celebrate the triumph of Roman civilization. In Hugh’s quote and in *Translations* as a whole there is a fatalistic inevitability about the domination of the conqueror’s language, as fatalistic as the destiny of Aeneas to found Rome and of the Romans to destroy Carthage. Friel shares this fatalism. As quoted above, he has said about the Irish being educated in the English language and literature, “there is no possibility of escaping from this. We must accept this.”

2. The passage is the following:

Urbs antiqua fuit—there was an ancient city which, ’tis said, Juno loved above all the lands. And it was the goddess’s aim and cherished hope that here should be the capital of all nations—should the fates perchance allow that. Yet in truth she discovered that a race was springing from Trojan blood to overthrow some day these Tyrian towers—a people *late regem belloque superbum*—kings of broad realms and proud in war who would come forth for Lybia’s downfall—such was—such was the course—such was the course ordained—ordained by fate. . . . (*Selected Plays*, 447)

The old Irish language and culture, however, need not be plowed under and sterilized with salt, as the Romans did to the city of Carthage. Even though Friel himself has said, "Of course a fundamental irony of this play is that it should have been written in Irish" (" 'Talking to Ourselves,' " 59), the play itself suggests that Irish writers can appropriate their own past in English, as many since the Irish Literary Renaissance have done. With its experimental representation of Irish in English, *Translations* revives and renews the old Gaelic culture as it translates it into another language.

Friel's *Translations*, then, arises out of the very highly charged political and cultural context of Northern Ireland today. The thematics of the play recognize and accept the cultural and linguistic consequences of Ireland's historical colonization, but without either nostalgia for the old Gaelic traditions or continued submission to British cultural imperialism. Instead, both the play and the conception of an Anglo-Irish language that informs it aim at an aggressive appropriation of a tongue that was originally forced upon them. Such an appropriation will help remove the discomfort in speaking English that Stephen Dedalus articulates for Irish writers. In *Translations* Friel, like many of the writers associated with Field Day, calls for a culture and a language in which the Irish, after centuries of billeting an alien other, feel at home with themselves.

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