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The Role of Greek and Latin in Friel’s Translations

by BRIAN ARKINS

Though tackled in a skillful and oblique way rather than head-on, the main theme of Brian Friel’s play Translations¹ is the imperialistic nature of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland conducted by military agents of the British government in the period 1824-46.² Designed to bolster the position of the 2,000–3,000 Protestant Ascendancy landlords in Ireland, this large-scale enterprise was clearly part of what the English saw as bringing civilization to the savage Irish. Field officers were instructed to look out for Irish squalor, improvidence, and superstition.³ To cloak the colonial nature of the Survey, it was claimed that one of its aims was to ensure “more equitable taxation” (31).

Of necessity, we imagine geographical space, like everything else, by means of particular representations such as maps; these do not constitute reality but are representations (Aristotle’s mimesis) of reality. The making of a new map of an area—here, the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg in County Donegal—renders obsolete an existing representation—the way the inhabitants had previously perceived their geographical space—and imposes a new representation which changes how they perceive that space. The whole process of cartography alters the way an area is represented. In the case of the Ordnance Survey, not only were several Irish mapping projects that were planned on a lesser scale abandoned, but separate small areas were sometimes amalgamated into larger units.

But the most crucial change of all is that which occurs in the most central of all human attributes: language. What happens in the naming of places is that the language of the imperial colonial power, English, replaces the language of the subject colonized country, Irish. Here we should remember that in 1824, the year the Ordnance Survey began and less than ten years before the title of translations, well over two million people in Ireland spoke Irish. The sheer extent of the change-over from previous to new place names can be seen in the fact that, in a random sample of 100 townland names of Irish derivation, 46—almost half—

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2. For the Ordnance Survey, see Mary Hamer, Textual Practice, 3 (1989), 184-201.
3. See Lieutenant Thomas Lorcom’s instruction to field officers about what features of Irish life should be noted; these are quoted in Hamer (note 2), 190-91.
were found to differ from all recorded authorities. In this replacing of Irish by
English place names what occurs is that, as Mary Hamer says, “the relationship
between the original culture and the soil is textually unpicked and a new
ownership asserted.”

The imperialistic nature of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland is grasped by some
of the characters in Translations. The schoolmaster’s son Manus characterizes
it as “a bloody military operation” (32); the English soldier Yolland calls it “an
eviction of sorts” (43); the schoolmaster Hugh finally realizes what is happening
at the end of the play when he agrees to teach Maire English and quotes Virgil
on the topic of imperialism (67-68); even Owen, the schoolmaster’s other son,
who is working on the Survey with the English, admits about the place names
“Where there’s ambiguity, they’ll be Anglicised” (32) and indicates what this
means in practice:

Lis na Muc, the Fort of the Pigs, has become Swinefort . . . . And to get to Swinefort you pass through
Greencastle and Fair Head and Strandhill and Gort and Whiteplains. And the new school isn’t at Poll
na gCaorach—it’s at Sheepsrock. (42)

The English enterprise of civilizing Ireland through the process of mapping
it is, however, deluded. Ireland is already civilized, well versed in the common
coin of civilized Europe, Greek and Latin. It is noteworthy that about five
thousand editions of Greek and Latin authors appeared in Dublin between 1700
and 1791. But even in a remote region like Donegal, hedge schools, such as the
one depicted in Translations, taught Greek and Latin and preserved Ireland’s
long and fruitful association with the Classical tradition. So the schoolmaster
Hugh, who professes ignorance of Wordsworth and English literature in general,
tells the English soldier Yolland that “We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean”
(41) and the notion of Yolland’s father that “Ancient time was at an end” (40) is
clearly wrong in regard to Ireland.

Before we examine the use of Greek and Latin in Translations, a brief look
at Irish hedge schools is in order. After the Williamite victory at the Battle of the
Boyne in 1690, Catholic schools and schoolmasters were proscribed by the Penal
Laws and the hedge schools came into existence. They taught not only the basics
of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also Latin and sometimes Greek. This
emphasis on the Classics brought fame to the hedge schools and is very often seen
as their characteristic feature. Yeats put the matter with his usual éclat, writing
of the hedge schoolmaster who, “when to educate was penal, taught for a living
in the hedges and ditches, and while the thing was forbidden seems to have
aroused among the ploughboys of whole county-sides quite a furore for Latin,
ay, and even Greek.”

What distinguished the hedge schools, which continued to flourish until the
middle of the nineteenth century, was a knowledge of Greek and Latin language

5. Hamer (note 2), 185.
and literature. These were taught in the traditional way, which strongly stressed the learning of rules of grammar and writing of sentences to illustrate them. But this rigorous approach very often instilled a love for Classical literature among the pupils. The precise extent to which Greek and Latin authors were taught is not altogether clear, but in all cases some grounding in major authors was achieved and in some cases a wider knowledge. As we see in Translations, the Latin authors most studied were Caesar, Virgil, and Ovid, while the favorite Greek author was Homer. P. J. Dowling sums up the position by saying that “classics were at the very least as well taught in the Hedge Schools as in any other school in Ireland.”

Some idea of what a hedge school was about can be had from this prospectus, which is found in William Carleton’s essay “The Hedge School”:

In Classics—Grammar (Cardery), Aesop’s Fables, Erasmus’ Colloquies, Cornelius Nepos, Phaedrus, Valerius Maximus, Justin, Ovid, Sallust, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Terence, Tully’s Offices, Cicero, Manoeverius Turgidus, Esclapius, Rogerius, Satanus Nigrus, Quinctilian, Livy, Thomas Aquinas, Cornelius Agrippa, and Cholera Morbus.

Greek grammar, Greek Testament, Lucian, Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and the Works of Alexander the Great; the manners, habits, customs, usages and meditations of the Grecians, the Greek Digamma resolved, Prosody, Composition, both in prose and verse, and Oratory, in English, Latin and Greek; together with various other branches of learning and scholastic profundity—quos enumerare longum est—along with Irish Radically, and a small taste of Hebrew upon the Masoertic text.

It is right to be skeptical about this concoction; but, as W.B. Stanford points out, “it illustrates three genuine features of this rustic scholarship: its ambitious would-be polymathism; its enthusiasm; and an element of showmanship.”

It is customary to refer to Greek and Latin as dead languages. But a significant achievement of the hedge schools was to enable its pupils to speak Greek and Latin. As late as 1868 a parish priest in County Kerry, long renowned for its speaking of Latin, could say: “I make no apology for quoting Latin, for Latin is almost our mother-tongue.” This speaking knowledge involved not only quoting Greek and Latin authors but also composing Latin for everyday use in what is sometimes called “bog-Latin”—both forms are found in Translations. This use of colloquial Latin seems to have been quite widespread in Ireland. It occurs often in William Carleton’s stories and appears as late as Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916): “Ego credo ut vita pauperum est simpliciter atrox, simpliciter sanguiniorius atrox, in Liverpoolio (I believe that the life of the poor is simply awful, simply bloody awful, in Liverpool).”

Friel’s Translations presents us with a complex linguistic situation, which is constantly adverted to in the play. The degrees of linguistic competence

8. For Caesar, see 56; for Virgil, see 19, 56, 57, 68; for Ovid, see 41, 64; for Homer, see 12-14.
9. Dowling (note 6), 69.
11. Ibid.
12. Quoted in Stanford (note 6), 27.
possessed by the characters are various. At least three of the Irish characters—Hugh, the hedge schoolmaster, and his sons Manus and Owen—enjoy almost glossolalia, since they know the four languages that the text refers to: Irish, English, Greek, and Latin. Other Irish characters such as Jimmy Jack and Maire speak not only Irish but also Greek and Latin (Hugh holds that, as opposed to English, “our own culture and the classical tongues made a happier conjugation,” 25); Owen, who speaks both Irish and English, acts as an interpreter. On the other hand, Jimmy and Maire, Doalty and Bridget do not speak English. But the most linguistically restricted people in the play are the English soldiers Lancey and Yolland who speak neither Irish nor Greek nor Latin, but only English.¹⁴

It is, of course, ironic that those engaged in what purports to be a civilizing activity are so ill-educated. Hugh not only refers to the English as barbarians—“Visigoths! Huns! Vandals!”—but also castigates them in one of the languages they do not understand, Latin: “Ignari! Stulti! Rustici!” The last term of abuse is specially telling because, while the literal sense of rusticus, “countryman,” applies to Hugh himself, its metaphorical meanings of “coarse,” “provincial,” “unsophisticated” apply to Yolland and Lancey.¹⁵

In the face of such linguistic complexity, an obvious question arises: in what language or languages is the play to be written? In dealing with the problem of what to do with Irish speakers, Friel does not follow the practice of Shakespeare. In Act III scene i of Henry IV Part One, the Englishman Mortimer wants to say farewell to his wife, daughter of Welsh chieftain Glendower, but cannot do so because she speaks only Welsh, he only English. The result is that Glendower mediates and talks to his daughter in Welsh, the stage direction reading “Glendower speaks to Lady Mortimer in Welsh, and she answers him in the same” (no dialogue is in fact provided).¹⁶ Nor does Friel follow Shakespeare in Henry V where Hiberno-English is portrayed as dialect. Instead, he represents the Irish spoken in the play (apart from a few place names) as standard English and thereby enacts one of the linguistic issues Translation deals with: the move in Ireland from speaking Irish to speaking English. At the same time, when the Irish and English characters cannot understand each other, but all nevertheless speak English, this, as Anthony Roche says, “gives a farcical tone from the audience’s point of view to the mutual incomprehension of both sides.”¹⁷

On the other hand, the Greek and Latin in Translations are given in their original languages and are not always translated. This is because they are understood by all the characters onstage, except the English soldiers, and because, as we shall see, they operate as a crucial foil to Irish and English in the play. From the very beginning the linguistic situation just outlined is to the fore. Sarah’s extreme hesitancy in speaking a simple sentence in prose contrasts with

¹⁴. It has been objected that an officer of Lancey’s rank (Captain) would know Latin; but that depends entirely on what kind of school he went to.
¹⁷. Roche (note 16), 144.
Jimmy Jack’s fluency in quoting Greek dactylic hexameters from Books 13 and 14 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the author that lies at the very beginning and heart of the whole European tradition. Her laborious efforts contrast with Homer’s reference to Telemachus experiencing “no toil” (13.423) at the court of Menelaus in Sparta. What is most striking about Jimmy’s quoting of Homer is his obvious delight with it all, a delight that derives partly from his belief that Homer is a universal paradigm—“Sure Homer knows it all, boy, Homer knows it all” (14)—and partly from a sexual appreciation of the goddess Athene (the only English word he knows is “bosom”): “By God, sir, them flashing eyes would fair keep a man jigged up constant” (14). But there is more than that to the Homeric quotations which come from that part of the story when Odysseus has finally returned home to Ithaca and receives help from Athene. Since Homer is describing how Athene engineered a disguise for Odysseus and since he is quoted in Greek, some of which is not translated, we are driven to reflect on the question of what in *Translations* constitutes reality and, in particular, linguistic reality. We have plunged, if you will excuse the language, in medias res.

Not only do these Irish characters quote the Classics, but they also speak Latin. Very soon after the quotations from Homer, Jimmy and Maire indulge in a brief exchange in bog-Latin. This highlights the fact that, while Maire has only one sentence of English, she has considerably more Latin and later speaks to Yolland, who fails to understand her, in Latin. With the entry of Doalty the linguistic complexity reaches new heights. His first words—“Vesperal salutations to you all” (17)—stress in an almost comic way the Latin element in English (cf. Latin *vespera* and *salutatio*), but are spoken in Irish. Then the English word “theodolite” meaning “a portable surveying instrument” appears to be Greek (as Jimmy perceives), but is in fact a word of unknown origin. Its linguistic indeterminacy mirrors Doalty’s trick of moving these instruments when the English put them down; and the English end up by taking the machine apart. Here, the initial theme of disguise is again to the fore and the question of what constitutes reality—both linguistic and factual—dramatically raised. No sooner, however, have we encountered radical doubts about fact and language than certainties about them intrude. Jimmy admits that he knows the first book of Homer and the Epic learning of the hedge school, where he has taught for thirty-five years. Hugh can quote Greek and Latin authors—Sophocles, Euripides, Pliny the Younger—to illustrate present events such as a baptism, Doalty’s ignorance, his own teaching. He can speak Latin with ease, interspersing it amid Irish or English, and writes poetry in Latin “after the style of Ovid” (41). He is a dab hand at etymology, at

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19. Modern research dealing with the astonishing memory of oral poets reminds us that this is by no means impossible; see, e.g., Geoffrey S. Kirk, *Homer and the Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965), 1-32.
determining the Greek and Latin roots of English words; and, like the distin-
guished teacher Patrick Lynch, he has written a book grandiloquently entitled
“The Pentaglot Preceptor or Elementary Institute of the English, Greek, Hebrew,
Latin and Irish languages; Particularly Calculated for the Instruction of Such
Ladies and Gentlemen as may Wish to Learn Without the Help of a Master”
(though he has the grace and self-awareness to admit “Nor do I, in fact, speak
Hebrew”—contrast Jimmy Jack’s proposed marriage to Athene). So Hugh the
polymath represents, for all his drinking, the best of the Irish tradition. He is one
of those that his son Owen calls “civilized” people (28). But, as always in this
play, there is another side. Maire wants to know neither her native Irish nor the
Classics, but only English: “I don’t want Greek. I don’t want Latin. I want
English” (25).

If this were effected, it would reduce Maire to the linguistic level of the
English soldiers Lancey and Yolland who speak only one language, English, and
who cannot distinguish Irish from Latin. Both men acknowledge to Hugh that
they are impoverished as a result. Lancey is, Hugh tells us, humble about his
ignorance of Irish, Greek, and Latin, and Hugh uses the Latinate word “vereund”
(from Latin vereundus) to stress this ignorance neatly. Yolland, particularly
aware of his ignorance and of his resulting isolation, sums up a major part of the
play’s linguistic theme:

I mean—I feel so cut off from the people here. And I was trying to explain a few minutes ago how
remarkable a community this is. To meet people like yourself and Jimmy Jack who actually converse
in Greek and Latin. And your place names—what was the one we came across this morning?—
Termon, from Teminus, the god of boundaries. It—it—it’s really astonishing. (42)

Furthermore, as Lancey explains to the Irish what the Ordnance Survey is
about, his ignorance of Greek and Latin is pointed up by the fact that the technical
vocabulary he uses derives from these two languages. One example will make
this clear:

His Majesty’s Government has ordered the first ever comprehensive survey of this entire country—
a general triangulation which will embrace detailed hydrographic and topographic information and
which will be executed to a scale of six inches to the English mile. (31)

Here “Majesty” derives from Latin maiestas; “government” from Latin gubernare
(which itself comes from Greek kubernan); “comprehensive” from late Latin
comprehensivus; “entire” from Latin integer; “general” from Latin generalis;
“triangulation” from Latin triangulum; “embrace” from Latin bracchium; “hy-
drographic” from Greek hudor and graphia; “topographic” from Greek topos
and graphia; “information” from Latin informatio; “execute” from mediaeval
Latin executere. To cap it all, the name given to the whole enterprise the English
are engaged upon—“Survey”—itself derives from the mediaeval Latin verb
supervidere. So Lancey is ironically forced to explain his job in English that is
almost entirely based on the Greek and Latin he does not understand, but the Irish
do; while most of the Irish, although they know Greek and Latin, ironically

20. Lynch wrote a book with almost exactly the same title; cf. Dowling (note 6), 140-41.
cannot understand Lancey because they do not know English. Hugh, however, who knows Greek, Latin, and English, replies to Lancey in appropriately Latinate English—"Excellent—excellent"—and realizes that the word comes from Latin excellens.

It remains to consider the function of Hugh’s closing address from Virgil, *Aeneid* 1, 12-22, at the end of the play. Here, the goddess Juno is concerned that her favorite city of Carthage will be conquered one day by the Romans, descendants of the Trojans against whom she had struggled when she supported the Greeks in the Trojan War. The most obvious function of this passage is to suggest that, just as the Romans defeated Carthage and made it part of their Empire, so England conquered Ireland and added it to their Empire, a process underlined by the Ordnance Survey. The two Latin phrases quoted from Virgil stress the antiquity of Carthage/Ireland (*urbs antiqua fuit*) and the bellicose power of Rome/England (*late regem belloque superbum*).21 Hugh therefore continues to make use of Latin material to comment on present realities, but the horror of the scenario envisaged causes him to lose his way in the passage so that he has to start all over again. His hesitancy and repetition emphasize that, on the one hand, empires keep springing into existence and that, on the other, Hugh’s linguistic competence is finally overcome by the brutal reality of the power such empires possess.

A final, appropriately riddling point. Is it Friel (Irish) or Faber and Faber (English) or some crafty Greek that is responsible for two linguistic errors in the Appendix entitled “Greek and Latin Used in the Text”?22 For the Greek phrase *en Atreidao domois*, which means “in the halls of the son of Atreus (i.e., Menelaus),” is mistranslated as “in the halls of the Sons of Athens” and in the quotation from Virgil, *Georgics* 2, 203-04—“crumbly soil”—the crucial word *solum* meaning “soil” is omitted from the Latin quoted.

The complex linguistic situation of 1833 depicted in *Translations* adumbrates what was later to happen in Ireland. The Irish language has continued inexorably to decline, the number of native speakers being now a mere forty thousand. On the other hand, all children in the Republic of Ireland are exposed to some Irish, and one of the last remaining Irish-speaking areas is, precisely, in Donegal. The vast majority of the Irish people now speak English as their mother tongue, and even those whose mother tongue is Irish are fluent in English, totally bilingual.

From one point of view, therefore, the language of the colonizer has triumphed over the language of the colonized, and this relinquishing of Irish must be counted as loss. From another point of view, however, the acquisition of English in the form of Hiberno-English that preserves features of both Gaelic syntax and Elizabethan pronunciation must be counted as gain. For it is Ireland’s gift to the world to have produced in its Anglo-Irish writers a literary idiom in Hiberno-English that is truly magnificent. As Seamus Heaney puts it, “English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon.”23

21. Modern Virgilian scholarship endorses Hugh’s perception that the theme of Roman imperialism and its cost is central to the *Aeneid*; see, e.g., Brian Arkins, *Latomus*, 45 (1986), 33-35.
Part of the achievement of writers like Yeats and Joyce in their use of English lies in their appropriation of the Greek and Latin that Hugh and Jimmy Jack speak so fluently. One facet of Yeats's imperial sway over the English language is to use with abandon words derived from Latin, words that tend to be long, abstract, and supposedly less expressive than their short, concrete Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Yeats, however, moulds English so that these Latinisms are strong, powerful, imperious, suggesting both the old fact that the Romans ruled England and the new fact that an Irishman, from a country never ruled by the Romans, can reimpose Roman dominion over the language of his conqueror. Consider, for example, the violent Latin verb (which is framed by initial Greek and final Old English nouns) in "News for the Delphic Oracle": "nymphs and satyrs copulate in the foam." And so it happens, time and again: "the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity"; "all that lamentation of the leaves"; "Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied"; "The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies"; "And all complexities of mire or blood." What is happening in Yeats, then, is that the Latin of the Irish hedge schools, of Hugh, Jimmy Jack, and the others, has now entered great poetry, in which guise it offers a fresh gloss on the linguistic inadequacy of the English soldier Yolland. The mills of God . . .

24. For this process in Yeats, see Hugh Kenner, A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 70-85; Brian Arkins, Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), 151-55. For the process in Joyce, see Brian Arkins, Journal of the Classical Tradition (forthcoming).