LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM, THE EARLY ABBEY THEATRE, AND THE TRANSLATIONS OF BRIAN FRIEL

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The history of English and Irish relations in the last two centuries might well present itself as a straightforward picture of England as oppressor, “rewriting” Ireland into cultural submission not only through political control, but also through the imposition of English as the language of high culture. But the project of reading cultural imperialism through language is much more complicated than it at first appears. In particular, the nineteenth-century movement to find a “lingua communis” for Ireland reveals that such an ideal is less of a God-given state of natural language than an unstable construct to which people give value and meaning. Nowhere is this problem more clear than in the history of the Abbey Theatre’s search for a stage language. Linguistic issues that arise for the early Abbey also come back to haunt a much later play, Brian Friel’s Translations. Both reveal the lasting ideological and political controversies surrounding language, and complicate our sense of how we can read the legacy of imperialism as inscribed within theatrical discourse.

Irish politicians and intellectuals have long recognized the importance of language; that, as Thomas Davis declared decades earlier, “A nation should guard its language more than its territories” (Nation, 1 April 1843; quoted in Brown 58). In the late nineteenth century, the speaking of Gaelic took on even greater symbolic weight, as various groups lobbied for the de-Anglicization of Irish culture. Douglas Hyde’s inaugural address as President of the National Literary Society in November of 1892 urged “The Necessity of De-Anglicising the Irish People,” and looked forward to the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. Inghinidhe na hÉireann adopted as its goals “to discourage the reading and circulation of low English literature, the singing of English songs, the attending of vulgar English entertainments at the theatre and music-hall, and to combat in every way English influence, which is doing so much injury to the artistic taste and refinement of the Irish people” (Foster 450).

As David Cairns and Shaun Richards have suggested, the movement to cast off what was identified as English, to discard those “English” forms which had dominated Irish culture, was strongly supported by Anglo-Irish Protestant intellectuals who might otherwise have found themselves excluded as outsiders (63–5). To repudiate what was “English” as low and vulgar was also to embrace an ideal of “Irishness” as distinguished by noble and spiritualized character, a race
unified by temperament rather than by actual historical origins. The notion of an essential Irish identity could unite highly contentious factions against the English colonizer as cultural “Other.” Such constructs of national identity could ostensibly erase long-standing divisions along class, economic, religious, and political lines; yet it still preserved the power of the ruling class Ascendancy families. It was through promoting these ideals that Protestant Anglo-Irish writers such as Yeats found their place as nationalists, and as creators of a national art: “A country which has no national institutions must show its young men images for the affections” (Synge 3).

Those involved in forming the Abbey Theatre were highly conscious of their nationalist enterprise, as actor James Cousins describes:

We talked in terms of “the movement”, discussed dramatic theory and cognate subjects “off”, and walked home with shining eyes and heightened colour to dream dreams of great plays in which the world should see something of the glory of Ireland, which was within and in front of all our desires.¹

Understandably, Gaelic held the most promise as the language of a national theatre, “a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature” (Gregory 8–9). It offered a sense of authentic Irishness, and at the same time could be acquired by Anglo-Irish speakers, such as Hyde and Lady Gregory, as evidence of their loyalties. Lady Gregory wrote that “in the beginning we dreamed of a national drama arising in Gaelic,” and Yeats voiced strong support for plays that “would be an important help to that movement for the revival of the Irish language on which the life of the nation may depend”.²

But for a number of reasons Gaelic could not serve as the primary stage language for the Abbey. The Gaelic language had no formal history of association with theatrical presentation. There were “no Gaelic plays, no Gaelic actors, and no Gaelic audiences” (O’Leary 4). Throughout most of Ireland less than one-quarter of the population were still native speakers of Gaelic by the end of the nineteenth century (Foster 517). Various dramatic experiments made it all the more clear that simply writing in Gaelic could not magically produce a theatre closer to nationalist goals. There was no tradition of dramatic production, no indigenous form of drama originally written in Gaelic. The plays produced in Gaelic often imitated non-native forms such as farce or melodrama; some of the more successful pieces were even translated from English or other languages. Arguably, such drama was “Irish in language only” (O’Leary 10).

Importantly, many of those who held influence in the Abbey were themselves not native speakers of Gaelic, sharing Yeats’s problem that “Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue” (Essays 520). English, the language of the colonizer and oppressor, nonetheless remained the dominant language of the Abbey, an audible reminder that its leading playwrights such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge were also marked by their Ascendancy backgrounds. The
playwrights of the early Abbey were challenged to construct a stage language that would not exclude them as ruling class, as Protestants, and importantly, as English speaking.

The plans for the Abbey Theatre called on a specific ideal of national identity.

We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of the Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.

(Gregory 8–9)

Ideally, the theatre would reveal to the audience their own essentially “Celtic and Irish” nature as “uncorrupted and imaginative,” united by “deeper thoughts and emotions,” not by historical allegiances. Performers and audiences would be allied against the stages of the English “Other” that were guilty not only of censoring artistic freedom, but worse, of misrepresenting Ireland as “the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment” instead of “ancient idealism.” The plans for the Abbey Theatre promoted a particular vision of nationhood furthered through art; in a sense, the Abbey would be “carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us” by erasing the very real history of divisions within Ireland along lines of ethnic origin, class, and religion. George Russell (Æ) would later recall that “It was our literature more than our political activities which created outside Ireland a true image of our nationality, and brought about the recognition of a spiritual entity which should have a political body to act through.” Art could not only form but also disseminate images of an essential unity, smoothing over internal conflicts.

The success of the Abbey would have all to do with the need for a “true image” and a coherent rather than fragmented “spiritual entity.” Thus in its crucial formative years, the Abbey’s search for a new language, one that would promote an idealized cultural unity, became an aesthetic and a political concern. Assuming a natural love of verbal performance, an “audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory,” the early Abbey playwrights needed to find a language that in practice could reinforce a sense of national identity. Unable to claim Gaelic, the early Abbey play-wrights instead needed to construct an English which would bear Irishness as its trademark.

Synge calls for a language that has both poetic and realistic value, a goal echoed by others: “On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy…rich joy
found only in what is superb and wild in reality” (Plays ii). Lady Gregory also makes both realism and poetic “fancy” requirements for her stage speech:

I myself consciously lift my comedies out of common life by some extravagance of idea or of language, that the imagination might play more freely and the bubble catch some radiance from fancy’s prism before it breaks. Yet before that breaking one must have given the illusion of reality as the old juggler gave it at O’Ceallach’s house, sending hare after hound up a silk thread.4

Even Yeats describes a balance between poetic diction and a naturalistic speech, asserting

I love all the arts that can still remind me of their origin among the common people, and my ears are only comfortable when the singer sings as if mere speech had taken fire, when he appears to have passed into song almost imperceptibly.

(Essays 223)

Claiming both “reality” and poetic “joy” as goals for dramatic language reveals a very particular strategy for constructing nationalism. Theatrical realism is less of a representation of actual events than a negotiation of a shared sense of reality; as Catherine Belsey suggests, it is “reassuring... because it largely conforms to the patterns of the world we know” (50–1). Thus a call for “reality” as part of a nationalist agenda can be thought of as a demand for the performance of agreed-upon truths. The theatre mirrored an idealized verisimilitude rather than any actual reality, tailoring its presentation and its language to an ideal of Irish nationhood. Any “naturalness” for the Abbey’s stage language was produced through this accord. Frank Fay’s comparison between the Abbey plays and English plays of the time makes such a motive clear; he distinguishes between “natural” and “poetic,” “artificial” and “uninteresting,” on the basis of what is “Irish” and what is “English.”

Again, the plays which are now being written in Ireland have a dialogue so lifelike that it would be ruined if made in the least theatrical in its delivery. In ordinary English plays, at any rate, people do not talk on the stage as they do in the street or in a room, whereas our dialogue allows us to talk exactly as Irish peasants talk in a cottage or on the road or in the fields. On the regular English stage, dialogue has to be made interesting; the talk of the Irish peasant is as a rule wonderfully interesting, and often even unconsciously poetic. Of course education, by making the younger generation talk “good English” would soon put an end to this gift of vivid speech, but it will take some time to accomplish that excellent object.5
The linguistic realism of plays written for the early Abbey, like any so-called “ordinary” speech written for the stage, sprang more out of particular ideals of community than from the faithful mimesis of real language. To call stage realism a construct, however, is not to deny its potency. Claims to authentic Irishness were measured by how successfully the play created a sense of familiarity and recognition, and convinced the audience of the playwright’s first-hand knowledge of the Irish people. It is not surprising then that success for the Abbey’s Anglo-Irish writers was measured in part by how audiences praised the “naturalness” of their language. Lady Gregory is mentioned as carefully transcribing “over 200,000 words of peasant speech before she wrote a line of her dialogue,” and her plays were thought to have “the appearance of containing large pieces of real conversation.”

William Boyle was likewise complimented: “The language of William Boyle’s comedies is as flat as the land of Louth and Meath, from which his people were drawn,” and “there is a smack of reality about every word that everybody utters.”

Actor Dudley Digges declared that the Abbey may have been founded in part because in the earlier Irish Literary Theatre, English actors had great difficulty with accents and dialects. But his assertion that “English voices were impossible for Irish plays” was more than a practical suggestion for vocal training. It made clear that finding a particular language, and using it in the theatre, could be in many ways the ultimate act of resistance against English culture. The “Irish English” of the Abbey was no more natural for Irish actors; its unique artificiality is evident in Abbey rehearsals. Joseph Holloway describes the painstaking care Willie Fay took with the diction of his actors, “making the actors repeat over and over again those lines which did not sound quite right on the ear, until he was thoroughly satisfied with every little intonation and shade of inflection.” Various actors sometimes found these presumably realistic rhythms and syntax in fact quite difficult to speak. Frank Fay wryly commented of Lady Gregory that “Her dialogue used to make my teeth ache by a sort of bread and milk quality in it.”

Synge’s dialogue in particular caused difficulties; Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh remembered that

It was neither verse nor prose. The speeches had a musical lilt, absolutely different to anything I had heard before. Every passage brought some new difficulty and we would all stumble through the speeches until the tempo in which they were written was finally discovered. I found I had to break the sentences—into sections, chanting them, slowly at first, then quickly as I became more familiar with the words.

Calling for a newly “realistic” stage language was advantageous particularly for Anglo-Irish writers who needed to make claims for the essential Irishness of their plays. But careful mimesis could not in itself be enough of a goal, for a too-faithful claim for realism might in fact undo the ideal, as Synge was to discover with Playboy. Thus any claims for realism had to be tempered with the “poetry”
marking the essentially Irish temperament. English could now be “Irish” not only because it sounded like the real speech of real peasants, but also because it reflected the spiritual, sensitive temperament that such a discourse itself marked as being truly “Irish” in nature. Thus “reality” and “joy” are not opposite qualities happily wed together, but rather manifestations of the same strategy. Paul Vincent Carroll describes the “Anglo-Irish genius” of “men who love the Irish nation passionately but who write superbly in a form of English that they have moulded to Irish requirements in beauty and art.” To meet these “Irish requirements” is to mold this “form of English” to echo some essential, unified, and coherent ideal of Irish character. Poetry could give the English language its own connection to an ideal of Irishness uncomplicated by actual politics; thus the language of origins, of Edenic wholeness, could become available to English as well as Gaelic writers.

In 1902 Synge predicts that the revival of Gaelic will end in “disappointment,” but remains optimistic about the work of Anglo-Irish writers such as himself:

> With the present generation the linguistic atmosphere of Ireland has become definitely English enough for the first time, to allow work to be done in English that is perfectly Irish in its essence, yet has sureness and purity of form…. English is likely to remain the language of Ireland, and no one, I think need regret the likelihood.

(Aran Islands 382–3)

But the success of such writers, at least in terms of nationalistic aims, was mixed. The most immediate critics of the Anglo-Irish playwrights of the Abbey were those who consistently opposed reclaiming the language of the oppressor for the oppressed. There was still strong support for a strictly Gaelic-speaking theatre, along the lines of Frank Fay’s declaration that “an Irish Theatre must, of course, express itself solely in the Irish language; otherwise it would have no raison d’être” (quoted in O’Leary 3). Not surprisingly, members of the Gaelic League constantly reminded the public of the inadequacies of “Irish English” for nationalistic purposes, warning of the dangers that any commercially successful Anglo-Irish theatre must pose: “Beautifully staged and performed plays in English are a danger to our hopes for self-expression in Irish—our language” (quoted in O’Leary 111). The debate over whether to use English or Gaelic haunted the history of the Abbey, even after it had long broken ties with the Gaelic League. The success of the Gaelic League and its championing of Gaelic could be measured in the guilt aroused within the hearts of even successful Anglo-Irish writers such as Yeats:

> though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spencer and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.
Even the most Irish-sounding English betrays the goals of a “language of the tribe,” not because members of the tribe cannot understand it, but because it necessarily exposes itself as adopted rather than natural. Writing in English must necessarily be fraught with a kind of irony that ruins any sense of naturalness. The terms of A.B. Walkley’s praise, after a performance of the Irish National Theatre Society in London, are particularly telling. In the ears of the English critic, the English language is foreign to the Irish tongue.

We had never realized the musical possibilities of our language until we had heard this Irish people speak it… We are listening to English spoken with watchful care and slightly timorous hesitation, as though it were a learned language. That at once ennobles our mother-tongue, brings it into relief, gives it a daintiness and distinction of which, in our rough workaday use of it, we had never dreamed. But the charm does not stop there. These Irish people sing our language—and always in a minor key. It becomes in very fact “most musical, most melancholy”. Rarely, very rarely, the chant degenerates into a whine. But, for the most part, the English ear is mildly surprised and entirely charmed. Talk of _lingua Toscana in bocca Romana!_ The English tongue on Irish lips is every whit as melodious.

(Walkley 146)

The impossibility of finding an original language, or even an agreed-upon substitute, shows how fragile nationalist and linguistic ideals were. In looking at the early Abbey, it becomes increasingly obvious that any formula for an essentially “Irish” English, whether sought after by play-wrights or praised by reviewers, was a political myth. The violent riots following the first performances of Synge’s _Playboy of the Western World_ were in part a testimony to this growing frustration. Criticism was aimed at Synge’s “profane and foul-mouthed dialogue” as well as his characters as “immoral monstrosities” (Kilroy 19, 70). The anger felt was not just a matter of a few shocking expressions, but a linguistic essentialism shaken to its foundations. Members of the press, critics, and other audience members were well aware of, and in fact exploited, inflammatory issues of language, for which the word “shifts” acted as a catalyst. Attacks focused in particular on the “foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform” (Kilroy, 66) emphasized a betrayal of the illusion of common values, both of Irish nationalism and of “good taste.”

It was not, as has sometimes been suggested, that Synge was simply too “real” for his audience, too apt a mimic of the actual vices of Irish men and women. Synge in fact used “realness” as his defense: “I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers” (Hogan and Kilroy, _The Abbey Theatre_ 124). He reportedly even turned the issue back to the double standard of Gaelic and
English: “It [the word “shifts”] was used without any objection in Douglas Hyde’s ‘Songs of Connaught’, in the Irish, but what could be published in Irish perhaps could not be published in English?” (Kilroy, 34) But verisimilitude was not in fact the issue. What had to be censored was rather Synge’s violation of the linguistic conventions necessary to sustain the ideal of Irish national character. Those involved on both sides were aware that “Truthfulness is not to be interpreted as meaning a stenographic accuracy of speech, or a mere reflection of obvious and common characteristics; but truthfulness to the tendencies, qualities, and impulses that lie hidden in the heart of the race” (Hogan and Kilroy, The Abbey Theatre 154). Synge’s language was naturally a key target, for in its parodic tendencies as well as its profanities it denied the audience the ideals of Ireland formerly articulated by the Abbey. Synge’s violation of this linguistic and political agenda damns him in the eyes of his critics: “We condemn Synge because his is not like the Ireland we know.”

The limited success of the Abbey playwrights at creating a “language of the tribe” does not reflect their lack of skill as dramatists; it shows rather the propensity of theatrical language itself to play out social dynamics which could not be controlled by the playwright. There could be no “pure” or “natural” Irish language, and political agendas could only ruin any attempt to create one. Any essentialist ideal of national identity demands a language which allows transparent, unmediated, immediate understanding; such an ideal all too easily must give way to doubts, and an awareness of the irony, ambiguity, and opacity inevitably present in language.

Critics have noted that in Translations Brian Friel responds strongly to both political questions in modern-day Northern Ireland, and to the representations of language in George Steiner’s After Babel. But Friel is also responding to the unique ways in which earlier dramatists, including the Abbey playwrights, had to negotiate the politics of creating a stage language. Like earlier Anglo-Irish playwrights, Friel is forced to create his “Irish” out of English. But although Friel has said that this play “should have been written in Irish” (Dantanus 201), it is the careful crafting of verbal action in English that makes the dynamics of the play come alive, and brings its political questions into true focus. Friel renders his stage “Irish” convincing, not so much by constructing an implicitly essentialist notion of “Irish” rhythms, syntax, and idiom, as by forcing what is behind such essentialism into sharp relief. Though Friel is firmly aware of the desire to find a “language of the tribe,” he also sees that such a position cannot hold in the complex and painful political history of Ireland. His generation instead of finding words with natural and transparent meanings, find them to be tortured and problematic.

The generation of writers immediately before mine never allowed this burden [of faith] to weigh them down. They learned to speak Irish, took their genetic purity for granted, and soldiered on. For us today the situation is more complex. We are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the
word foreign means. We want to know have the words any meaning at all. And persistent considerations like these erode old certainties and help clear the building site.

(Aquarius (1972) 5; Dantanus 18)

Translations, in questioning how language can express “Irishness,” makes the history of the early Abbey and its idealistic aims newly relevant. The play presents a nostalgic, essentialist idea of language, but at the same time constantly undercuts this view, portraying words as complex instruments of conflicted political and social impulses. The play is not only a tragedy of cultural imperialism, where the idealized language of origins is lost through the contamination of English names. It is also a hard look at “Irish” as an idealized Edenic language, and a glimpse of ironic and parodic uses which subvert language used as symbol. Still, in the closing moments of the play, Friel comes as close as any of his dramatic predecessors to rendering English quintessentially “Irish,” in ways that speak powerfully to those who are most immediately aware of this linguistic paradox.

Translations opens with a glimpse of a linguistic Eden, an Irish-speaking Ireland before the Ordnance Survey. The play opens in the hedge-school of Baile Beag, where the schoolmaster’s son Manus is teaching the speech-impaired Sarah how to say her name and place of origin. Sarah’s success, and the baptism of Nellie Ruadh’s baby, open the play on a note of hope. The emphasis on caerimonia nominations, the ritual of naming, foregrounds the stability and power of a society, and its power to give identity. In a more symbolic sense, it evokes the naming which takes place in Eden, where words are given magical and divine connections to things. The play thus begins with an affirmation of this culture as both natural and divinely blessed. In the hedge-school, Irish is not only an original language, but also in the intimate company of other classic languages, all in vigorous use. For Jimmy Jack Cassie in particular, the world of the hedge-school is one in which mythology—Greek and Latin as well as Gaelic—is not just language, but reality; in his Homer, the substance of words is gloriously real and present.

JIMMY. “Knozpsen de oi osse” “She dimmed his two eyes that were so beautiful and clothed him in a vile ragged cloak begrimed with filthy smoke…”! D’you see! Smoke! Smoke! D’you see? Sure look at what the same turf-smoke has done to myself! (He rapidly removes his hat to display his bald head.) Would you call that flaxen hair? (385)

The security and order of this world are furthermore reflected in the language lessons of Hugh, the schoolmaster. Hugh’s teaching style emphasizes a confident link of words to meanings that even the effects of alcohol cannot blur. Thus in the first part of the play, the hedge-school suggests a kind of linguistic paradise, in which words affirm the importance and permanence of a society, and society maintains a clear and unmediated relationship between words and truth.

In comparison to the seeming solidity of this language, and the culture it sustains, English seems like a poor challenger. Doalty’s “imitation of two very
agitated and confused sappers in rapid conversation” (391) enacts English as foolish gibberish. His parody, Maire’s wooden recitation of her childhood English sentence, “In Norfolk we besport ourselves around the maypoll” and Jimmy’s single word “bo-som” are the stuff of comedy. English seems hardly a threat to the coherent and rich connections between the ancient language demonstrated in the hedge-school. But the stability of this linguistic Golden Age is quickly put in doubt. The mention of the “sweet smell” which foreshadows the potato blight and the Great Famine, the absence of the Donnelly twins who are presumably engaged in acts of guerrilla warfare, all signal imminent changes, internally as well as externally motivated. The new National school, where, as Bridget says, “you’ll not hear one word of Irish spoken,” and Maire’s intentions to emigrate to America, reinforce our sense that linguistic change too is inevitable. But Hugh refuses to acknowledge these impending dangers. He ignores Maire’s request to learn English, and the “Great Liberator” Dan O’Connell’s political stand that “The old language is a barrier to progress,” and assumes that he will be in charge of running the new National school as he has run the hedge-school. Locked into his linguistic world, Hugh disregards his own awareness that words are not fixed entities, but “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” (419). But Hugh in fact has some recognition of his own blindness to the fragility of his linguistic Eden; Irish is “a rich language,” he tells Yolland, one that is “full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows” (418). The saving grace of Hugh’s linguistic idealism is its tragic self-consciousness, its ability to assess, even parody itself.18

Hugh’s awareness is important, for the play is full of moments which destabilize the meanings and authority of words, and force us to be self-conscious about language. In the first scenes, Hugh’s students mimic his confident language lessons. Upon his entrance, Owen also parodies his father, and his playing of “the game” takes on a more ominous tone. Although he joyfully greets the class, his expressions are touched with a somewhat patronizing irony: “Honest to God, it’s such a delight to be back with you all again—’civilized’ people” (403). Owen’s attitudes towards language are indeed different from the reverential, precise lessons of his father; he has been hired “to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (404). His conflicted attitudes are even more evident when he translates Lancey’s official declarations into Irish. Captain Lancey is indeed “a kind of military stage-Englishman” (Dantanus 197) in his linguistic inflexibility. Not only does he express himself as “the perfect colonial servant,” as Yolland calls him, but he does not recognize the ridiculousness of his own bureaucratic speech, underscored by the simplicity of Owen’s translation.
LANCEY. “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.” My sentiments, too.

OWEN. This survey demonstrates the government’s interest in Ireland and the captain thanks you for listening so attentively to him. (407)

But what is perhaps more disturbing than Lancey’s clear demonstration of linguistic imperialism is Owen’s translation. As a contrast, Owen’s version exposes the hypocrisy of Lancey’s prepared speech; however, as a translation, his words simplify and soften the apparent authority of the original, leaving out allusions to “His Majesty’s government” and “this part of the Empire,” and substituting a more personal style of address. Owen tones down Lancey’s inflammatory rhetoric, and masks its imperialistic intentions. The very “naturalness” of Owen’s translation does not allow others to hear the threats implicit in Lancey’s words. Both the hypocrisy of Lancey’s formal declarations, and the distortions of Owen’s translations, can only be evident to those who can speak both languages. As Manus recognizes, the Ordnance Survey is a “bloody military operation” in which Owen is a willing participant. The “incorrect” names and “ambiguity” will be “Anglicized”; English will now serve as the standard, the language of authority and power which will supplant Irish. The mapping will be a way of making Ireland readable to the English, and unreadable to the Irish.

OWEN. Do you know where the priest lives?

HUGH. At Lis na Muc, over near…

OWEN. No he doesn’t. Lis na Muc, the Fort of the Pigs, has become Swinefort. (Now turning the pages of the Name-Book—a page per name) 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 ma gCaorach—it’s at Sheepsrock. Will you be able to find your way? (418)

With the discovery that Eden has become troubled by Babel, the problems of translation consume the play. The possibility of translation promises a fragile bridge across cultures, or a link to a past sense of origins. But the dramatic world moves progressively away from confidence in the clear connections between words and meanings, and into a fallen linguistic world of unstable and arbitrary conventions, ambiguities, and misreadings.

Ironically, the work that Owen and Yolland perform as part of the Ordnance Survey is also rooted in a kind of linguistic idealism. Although militaristic imperialism lurks behind their project, there is also the possibility for linguistic preservation as record and text.19 Their task is to rename, to eliminate the ambiguity, opacity, and confusion of Irish place-names for English colonizers. But it is also a much more altruistic task: to find the English expression through distilling a kind of essential Irish reality, linking words to an “original” sound or meaning. Unhappily, the impossibilities of fully translating such Irishness into English become even more apparent. In the translation of Bun na hAbbann to a
rather disappointing “Burnfoot,” they reject any number of possibilities: Owenmore, Binhone, Bunowen. But though Owen insists that “we’re standardizing those names as accurately and as sensitively as we can” (420), meaning is inevitably lost. What emerges is that not even the most careful translator can capture meaning, because meaning is inherent in the often minute and obscure differences structured within a language. The “first principles” cannot be translated, because they were conventionally rather than naturally defined. For instance, the convoluted link between “Tobair Vree” and its original significance can only be captured within that limited cultural understanding.

OWEN. I know the story because my grandfather told it to me. But ask Doalty—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 piety with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name “eroded” beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?

YOLLAND. Except you. (420)

But that there can be some “original” significance remains as the taste of Eden, the ideal for which Yolland and, albeit reluctantly, Owen yearn. It is the English Yolland who articulates the romantic ideal of an essential Irishness, “a consciousness…at its ease with its own conviction and assurance,” and who, worried that “something is being eroded,” insists on the integrity of the name “Tobair Vree.” Just the moment when his argument for this integrity has become most compelling, however, Owen explodes with another incongruity: the announcement that Yolland has been calling him the wrong name all along.

The characters work towards careful and precise translation, the hope of communication between tongues, such as Owen’s reassuring Yolland that “you’ll decode us yet.” But Friel’s play does not let us rest on any confident linking of word to meaning. Rather it emphasizes a negotiation through words which are difficult, mediated, even tortured. Characters experience only momentarily the optimistic belief that linguistic differences can be bridged. Owen and Yolland, drunk with “lying Anna’s poteen,” celebrate a brief illusion of Eden, where they are the ultimate and absolute givers of names.

YOLLAND. A thousand baptisms! Welcome to Eden!

OWEN. Eden’s right! We name a thing and—bang!—it leaps into existence!

YOLLAND. Each name a perfect equation with its roots.

OWEN. A perfect congruence with reality. (422)

Their drunken fellowship is, however, only a momentary absolution from the all-too-pervasive sense of words as problematic. Similarly the love scene between Maire and Yolland, while building the momentary illusion of relationship, at the
same time emphasizes the opacity and difficulty of words. Their only common sounds are those of the place-names Yolland has learned, which Maire echoes. Through this “dialogue,” they establish a sense of union, of shared world.

MAIRE. Loch an Iubhair. Machaire Buidhe.
YOLLAND. Machaire Mor. Cnoc na Mona.
MAIRE. Cnoc na nGabhar.
YOLLAND. Mullach.
MAIRE. Port.
YOLLAND. Tor.
MAIRE. Lag.

(She holds out her hands to YOLLAND. He takes them)

But the same words which echo their love also emphasize its difficulty. At other points of the dialogue, they also repeat one another’s words and phrases; at these moments, however, they are only aware of how far apart they are in language, and unaware of how close they are in thought.

MAIRE: The grass must be wet. My feet are soaking.
YOLLAND. Your feet must be wet. The grass is soaking. (426)
YOLLAND. I would tell you how I want to be here—to live here—always—with you—always, always.
MAIRE. “Always”? What is that word—“always”? (429)
MAIRE. I want to live with you—anywhere—anywhere at all—always, always.
YOLLAND. “Always”? What is that word—“always”? (430)

In the echoing of their thoughts we hear the possibility of communication that transcends differences, a love that is transparently felt, even through the barrier of words. But what is reinforced is that language is not in fact transcendent and universal; the repetition sounds to our English ears alone, and the “Irish” and “English” do not in fact affirm one another but intensify the incongruous distance between them. Thus each character’s sudden realization, “Don’t stop—I know what you’re saying,” is ironic as well as transcendental, coincidental as well as romantic. Their love in fact cannot escape the borders of the “tribe” created through language.

Maire and Yolland escape the social circle of the dance into a Paradise where, momentarily, only their desire for union seems to matter; similarly Yolland’s wholehearted embrace of Irish suggests a desire to escape the social and political implications of language, into the realm of the aesthetic. It is Yolland who has seen Wordsworth, “out walking—in the distance,” and like Wordsworth, Yolland finds his own poetry in the “common life” of Irish peasantry, experiencing “a sense of recognition, of confirmation of something I half knew instinctively” (416). But Yolland can read his newly adopted language only selectively; he misses not only the irony and complexity of words, but the danger inherent within them. For example, he cannot feel Manus’s rage, as Manus recounts with disgust:
“I just shouted something stupid—something like, ‘You’re a bastard, Yolland.’ If I’d even said it in English…’cos he kept saying ‘Sorry-sorry?’ The wrong gesture in the wrong language” (432). But Yolland’s lack of knowledge can shield him only temporarily. No one in the play can escape into an aesthetic, apolitical space. Yolland must be read as political; as an Englishman and a gentleman, he can exist in no other capacity other than as imperialist, either in Bombay or in Ireland. Although sympathetic, he is also culpable; it is his sudden absence which precipitates the final tragic events of the play.

The last act of the play seems to destroy all hopes for shared understanding or translation; the situation deteriorates into misunderstanding and confusion, and English and Irish abandon the project of translation for non-verbal acts of aggression. Each of the earlier events is now given its dire consequence. The careful collaboration between Yolland and Owen is parodically distorted, as Lancey and Owen name the official list of towns that will be evicted and destroyed if the missing Yolland is not found. Sarah’s symbolic failure to respond to Lancey’s interrogation, and the death of the newly-named baby, grimly answers the play’s opening hopes of perfect congruence between speech and social identification. A horrified Owen recognizes, too late, the impact of the collision between English and Irish that he has helped to bring about, and must suffer the guilt of his own consciousness, that as his father tells him, “To remember everything is a form of madness” (445). Make learns from Hugh that the “always” she prizes so dearly “is a silly word.” Jimmy Jack alone remains in the world of perfect “images” and myths that characterized the Eden of the hedge-school, but he too speculates on the potential problems of marrying Athen, the impossibility of a union “outside the tribe.” The final moments of the play focus on Hugh’s realization that he is witnessing the fall of his own Eden. Lacking a post in the new school, his only job may be to teach the despised “plebeian” English to Maire.

The play’s last act not only forecasts the troubles for Ireland ahead, but it also seems to destroy any hope of shared language. Yet in the final moments of the play, Friel sets up Hugh’s poignant speech to be a transcendent moment, one which commands an emotional rather than ironic reading. Hugh’s closing speeches appeal again to a desire for linguistic unity, not from his empty classroom or from a sleeping Jimmy, but from an English-speaking audience waiting for some resolution. Hugh recalls his own moments of nationalist feeling, a moment from the 1798 Uprising where political ideal and practical hope fused together in an ordered vision of the world and its words: “Everything seemed to find definition that spring—congruence, a miraculous matching of hope and past and present and possibility.” When the first flush of youthful patriotism faded, he recalls, there is a desire for return: “And it was there, in Phelan’s pub, that we got homesick for Athens, just like Ulysses. The desiderium nostrorum—the need for our own. Our pietas, James, was for older, quieter things” (445). Hugh’s words articulate in English—clearly, unambiguously, and powerfully—the desire for national unity which does not die with Irish as a language. The play ends with Hugh’s final translating of Ovid; though stumbling, he persists, linking the decline of the Gaelic
culture with the fall of ancient empires, “kings of broad realms and proud in war.” The ending both mourns the death of great civilizations and great languages, but at the same time reminds the audience in the present that the “images of the past embodied in language” can be renewed and translated. Here it is English words that can express ancient history, and modern Irish hope and desire for a link with the past, transparently. In his speeches—to the sleeping Jimmy and to an audience on a gradually darkening stage—Friel’s English becomes a language of Irish unity, which reminds that audience of every great country’s “desiderium nostrorum—the need for our own.”

In modern Ireland, language embodies the conflict that is the end result of imperialism: a country torn within itself, seeking to unify against the Other that is also itself. Neither the Gaelic League nor the early Abbey Theatre could find a language that would suit their political purposes; what they created instead were memorable performances of their own desires which, with time, come to replace historical truth. Friel’s final image also begins to erase Ireland’s all-too-real political divisions with a poetic ideal of unity, the “reality” and the “joy” of a uniquely Irish endeavor. *Translations* ultimately still works as nostalgic tribute to the necessity of ideals of essential Irishness, prompting its audience to believe that, as Hugh says, “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, we fossilize” (445).

**NOTES**

1 James H. and Margaret E. Cousins, *We Two Together* (Madras: Ganesh, 1951) 67; qtd. in Hogan and Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations* 11.
5 Frank Fay, “Some Account of the Early Days of the INTS,” manuscript lecture; Mikhail 74.
9 Joseph Holloway, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer, manuscript diary; quoted in Clarke 54–6.
10 Frank Fay, Letter to Maire Garvey, 3 June 1909; quoted in Clarke 154.
12 Paul Vincent Carroll, “Can the Abbey Theatre be Restored?” Theatre Arts (New York), 36 (January 1952); Mikhail 189.
13 One such playwright is Paul Vincent Carroll, who describes “the deplorable policy” of the later Abbey “to submerge criminally the Anglo-Irish achievements on which the Abbey was built, and replace them by an insane policy of purely Gaelic culture, expressed through the medium of the native language, of which the majority of the Irish people know little and care less.” Mikhail 189.
14 Walter Starkie, Scholars and Gypsies: An Autobiography (London: John Murray, 1963); Mikhail 111.
15 See especially Dantanus and Pine.
16 Seamus Heaney comments that the figure of Sarah, and her troubled loss of language at the end of the play is particularly significant:
   "The tone of Heaney’s review contrasts strongly with the favorable but more guarded remarks of British and American critics, who found the play “a vigorous example of corrective propaganda: immensely enjoyable as theatre if, like much else in Ireland, gleamingly tendentious” (Sunday Times, 28 September 1980), or unduly “obsessed” with language (New York Daily News, 15 April 1981), or “a manifestly uneven piece of theater” (New York Times, 15 April 1981)."
17 The Ordnance Surveys of Ireland, begun in 1824, were set up as civilian organizations, to formalize the boundaries of land and properties for tax purposes. However, as Friel suggests in his play, such operations also had a military basis. For further information, see W.A. Seymour, History of the Ordnance Survey (Folkstone: Dawson, 1980).
18 Friel’s stage direction is that “as the scene progresses, one has the sense that he is deliberately parodying himself” (416).

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