Between:
The Politics of Culture in Friel’s Translations
Kevin Whelan

Curae leves loquuntur ingentes stupent.¹

[This is the second of two essays saluting Brian Friel on his 80th birthday and acknowledging the 30th anniversary of his play Translations. The first essay, ‘Brian Friel’s Translations: The Origins of a Cultural Experiment’, by Ciarán Deane, appeared in Field Day Review 5.]

Brian Friel was born in 1929 at Kilclogher, near Omagh in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, the son of a Derry schoolmaster and a Donegal postmistress, a child of partitioned Ireland. He later moved just across the border into County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland.² He belonged to the generation of northern nationalists famously described by the Derry MP Eddie McAteer (1914–86) as ‘the bastard children of the Republic’.³ After the trauma of partition,⁴ and the brutal suppression of initial

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¹ ‘Light troubles speak: the weighty strike you dumb’. Seneca, Phaedra or Hippolytus.
² Ironically, Friel moved ‘south’ by moving north geographically: although belonging to the South (i.e. the Republic of Ireland), the Inishowen peninsula in Donegal, to which he moved and in which his play is set, is actually further north than any point in Northern Ireland. He has lived for many years in Greencastle, opposite Magilligan in Derry, where the base camp of the Ordnance Survey was located, and where its triangulation began.
³ Frank Curran, Derry: Countdown to Disaster (Dublin, 1986), 37.
⁴ Partition created marooned minorities on both sides of the border: substantial poor Protestant communities were exiled in Monaghan, Cavan, and especially Donegal. They too were silenced post-partition. The favoured trope in fiction and drama for the plight of the Protestant landed class was the Big House as doomed remnant of culture and civility; the plight of poorer Protestants found no comparable representation. Friel has written ‘Big House’ plays, Aristocrats (1979), with the twist that the proprietors are Catholics, and The Home Place (2005).
opposition to it in the 1920s, Northern Irish Catholics were cowed into silence. Abandoned by both the British and Irish states, they became a subdued, silent, watchful generation, internalizing their sense of historic betrayal. Friel taught for many years in Derry, and he has described ‘the personal, traditional and acquired knowledge that cocooned me: an Irish Catholic teacher with a nationalist background, living in a schizophrenic community’. He diagnosed the Catholic population there as ‘a dispossessed people living in a state they never subscribed to, with Donegal lying just across the bay. Janus-like, they had one head looking to the north and one looking to the south.’ Friel considered northern nationalists as being ‘at home but in exile’, and talked of them (and himself) feeling like ‘an exile in your home’, their birthright more a disinheritance than an inheritance. And yet lurking somewhere in the Northern Catholic imagination at this time was what Friel has called ‘the secret notion we nurtured that in some ridiculous way we were the true keepers of some true notion of what being Irish meant. The Free State squandered and abused that idea. We guarded it in suffering silence.’

Translations was the foundational play of the Field Day Theatre Company, established in 1980 by Friel and Stephen Rea. Friel finished writing it at the height of the northern conflict on 5 November 1979, and it was first produced on 23 September 1980 in the Guildhall, Derry. The play can be read as both a parable about, and a diagnosis of, the conditions of the post-partition Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Field Day sought to deploy the communal effects of theatre to release Northern Ireland in particular from its numbing violence and stasis. Friel identified his involvement in the enterprise as stemming from dúchas/pietas—‘a sense of loyalty and dutifulness towards one’s own home’.

The play is set in a Donegal hedge-school in 1833, before the devastating Famine of the 1840s, at a time when two controversial state projects were being introduced: the standardized mapping of the country by the Ordnance Survey, and the national system of education to replace the existing informal system of hedge-schools. Both had implications for the Irish language; the national schools were to be rigorously English-speaking, while the new maps would render the old place names in English orthography. Friel combines both of these anglicizing projects in the setting for his play.

Colonialism is never just a political and economic condition but also a psychic one. Translations probes the psychodynamic effects of colonialism as they play out in the linguistic realm, where the private and the public spheres meet. Masquerading as a version of universalism, colonialism presented the acquisition of English as a liberation, the golden bridge that carried the native beyond localism into the world at large, rescuing him from provincialism by awarding full participation in British civic life. The toll required was the relinquishment of the native language, disavowal of native history, severance from native culture. Edward Said’s memoir Out of Place probes the meaning of a displaced linguistic identity:

The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other — to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other — has been a complicated task.

The master text for Translations is George Steiner’s After Babel. Steiner emphasized that a language constitutes a community of shared history and aspirations, and that, accordingly, each language remains incommensurable and opaque to translation:
They are the instruments of storage and transmission of legacies of experience and imaginative construction particular to a given community ... Languages communicate inwards to the native speaker with a density and pressure of shared intimation which are only partly, grudgingly yielded to the outsider. A major portion of language is enclosure and willed opaqueness.\textsuperscript{14}

Frièl’s borrowings from Steiner include some of the best-known lines in the play: ‘Uncertainty of meaning is incipient poetry’; ‘a syntax opulent with tomorrows’; ‘Often cultures seem to expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives’; ‘All communication “interprets” between privacies’; ‘Confusion is not an ignoble condition’; ‘It is not the lived past, the
“facts” of history that shape us but images of the past embodied in language”; ‘The fixity of a linguistic contour ... which matches only at certain, ritual, arbitrary points the changing landscape of fact’.15 Friel’s adroit manipulation of quotation and of intertextual echo is a rhetorical strategy, enhancing the central action of the play in its rehearsal of the oscillation between the historical and the interpretative. Deliberate anachronisms, like the use of the word ‘cartographer’ (first used in 1839) or ‘contour’ (from c.1860), extend this strategy and allow for the interpolation of the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. The military aspects of the survey are emphasized: weapons-carrying sappers, army searches, ‘prodding every inch of the ground with bayonets’ and (in a significant pun) ‘levelling the whole land’. The stolen theodolite16 is wielded as if it were a weapon. Similarly, the ominous Donnelly twins carry the resonance and threat of the modern Provos. Friel therefore has argued that questions of historical accuracy are fundamentally beside the point. Translations is ultimately a language play not a history play, an emphasis that Friel himself constantly stressed: ‘The play has to do and only to do with language.’ 17 He wished to understand what it means to become a

15 These were first carefully tracked by F. C. McGrath, ‘Irish Babel: Brian Friel’s Translations and George Steiner’s After Babel’, Comparative Drama, 23, 1 (1989), 31–49.
16 Friel is drawn to visually striking instruments and the technical vocabularies that identify them and their functions. The Home Place (2005) makes extensive use of the exotic instrumentation of ethnographic calibration.
people having to use a language ‘that isn’t our own’ and how Irish people today respond to ‘having to handle a language that is not native to them’. Consider Friel’s own mastery of the language as in a deceptively simple phrase like ‘English cannot express us’: this has at least three mutually enriching meanings in this context — to hurry us up, to squeeze us out, to describe us.

The Language of Landscape

Friel’s programme notes list other sources that he used — John O’Donovan’s *Ordnance Survey Letters: Donegal*; Thomas Colby’s *Memoir*; J. H. Andrews’s, *A Paper Landscape*; Patrick J. Dowling’s *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*; and William Carleton’s vivid treatment in *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*. A *Paper Landscape* provided Friel with ‘a perfect metaphor’ for the trauma of the linguistic lesion in nineteenth-century Ireland, although his expansive treatment moves far beyond that of the austerely scholarly cartographic historian.

The mapping of Ireland had been a long-standing colonial ambition. The native Irish tradition of dind seanchas (place lore) relied on a narrative rather than a technical mode of surveying the landscape. It produced a cultural landscape that coded a reciprocal, vernacular relationship between a community and its environment, not imposed from outside or above but developed cumulatively, spontaneously, organically. The material practices and associated symbolic forms that comprised this cultural landscape had a dual function. The first was secular, pragmatic, social; the second was symbolic, cultural, associational. The lived landscape provided a locus for human affection, imprinted as remembered forms, ways of being, ways of living, ways of seeing, ways of knowing. This version of landscape connected its outer contours with an inner vision: in place names the landscape and the imagination meet. Place names are an accumulated repertoire of historical knowing, a narrative sediment deposited by the continuous flow of history. The sense of place fuses a material environment, a historical experience and a lived reality, and is encapsulated in the Irish word dúchas. This version of landscape is embedded in the Irish tradition — the place lore of the dind seanchas, a liber locorum, lieux de mémoire, in which each place name bears a specific density of meaning. In *Translations*, Friel draws on this tradition. As the phrase la France profonde is widely used to indicate, even evoke, deeply enduring (or still surviving) aspects of French culture,
so a ‘Deep Ireland’ is evoked by place names, a pre-colonial history still legible in them. Friel’s contemporary, the poet John Montague, makes the point:

The Irish landscape is a kind of primal Gaeilge ... anyone brought up in it has already absorbed a great deal of the language. And to return to my Knockmany poem; when I wrote those lines about the hills burning with ‘golden light’, did I realize that I was crossing the
23 In historical geography, the term ‘cultural landscape’ denotes the landscape as it is altered by human occupation: fields, farms, roads, towns, houses, place names; see F. H. A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan and Matthew Stout, eds., Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape (Cork, 1997).

24 See the pioneering treatment of the concept of *dúchas* by Peter McQuillan in his *Key Words of the Irish Language: Essays in the Irish Ideas of Identity and Freedom* (Cork, 2002).

25 John Montague, ‘A Primal Gaeltacht’, in his *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays* (Dublin, 1989), 42–44, 44. Montague was born in 1929, the same year as Friel, in Brooklyn. In 1933 he was sent to live with his aunts at Garvaghey, County Tyrone, the same county where Friel was born. His *The Rough Field* (Dublin, 1972) is structured around an extended meditation on the meaning of Garvaghey/Garbh Achaidh/the Rough Field, as a metaphor for understanding the modern conflict.


Bealtaine, the ridge of the god of fire? The racial aspect of a poet’s inheritance should be unconscious as breathing. Where I was brought up, Irish is no longer a spoken language, but it is still very much alive in the place-names and the local idiom ... I must tap tradition where I find it, in my part of the landscape.25

The Ordnance Survey project became for Friel a dramatic metaphor of both colonialism and the linguistic issue in Ireland. The 1830s mapping sought to give definitive shape to a long-standing project that went back to the seventeenth century. This cartographic transition from the Irish *dind seanchas* to the new colonial language and landscape of fact reached an early culmination in the pioneering work of William Petty (1623–87). Petty’s ‘political arithmetic’ (the origin of the discipline of economics) was itself a response to the upheavals consequent on the Reformation: he sought to rescue ‘facts’ from the murderous anarchy of theological disputation, which threatened to tear Britain apart in the mid-seventeenth century. By rescuing ‘facts’ (generated by mathematical and technical protocols) from the partisan wrangling of theologians and politicians, Petty sought a common ground of reason.26 Rhetorically, he promoted the ‘plain’ style, shorn of baroque excess, inviting the consent of common experience and of a rationality based on observation and measurement. Facts in such a discursive regime were as far as possible divested of historical memory; indeed, their claim to obdurate, scientific reality depended on their repudiation of cultural ramification as a significant dimension of knowledge. Petty’s Down Survey (so-called because the results for the first time were systematically set down on paper) was based on innovations in mathematical mensuration, precise instrumentation and bureaucratic efficiency. It should also be regarded as an effort to strip the inherited Irish landscape of meaning and narrative. This great humanist scientist, like his predecessor, the great poet Edmund Spenser, advocated genocide as a necessary prelude to a new beginning in Ireland. Maps did not only record, they also obliterated.

The Hedge-School Setting

The patriot Henry Grattan brusquely observed in 1811:

One great object of national education should be to unite the inhabitants of the island and such an event cannot be well accomplished except they are taught one common language. I think that the diversity of language, and not the diversity of religion, constitutes a diversity of people. I should be very sorry that the Irish language should be forgotten but glad that the English language would be generally understood ... A real political division is founded on the diversity of language.27

His utilitarian-Benthamite stance was matched by Daniel O’Connell in 1833:

I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its [the Irish language’s] gradual abandonment. A diversity of tongues is no benefit; it was first imposed on mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be a vast advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants of the earth spoke the same language. Therefore, although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish.28

The determined effort by state and Church to regain control of popular education via a national system stemmed from the conviction that the 1790s had exposed the
political danger of allowing an informal education sector (the ‘hedge-schools’) to flourish with minimal supervision by Church and state. For conservatives, the dominant role of schoolmasters in the United Irish organization at local level had been one of the most disturbing aspects of that decade. Masterless men, hedge-schoolteachers were to be feared as agents of sedition. Outside the reach of Church and state, they had a foot — and a tongue — in both worlds: ‘From this it follows then that education is your only resource; tis this alone can open to you all channels of instruction, and this will enable you to meet the enemy, who has secretly got possession, not only on equal terms, but with superior advantage.’

Richard Lovell Edgeworth (father of the novelist Maria) observed: ‘It is fresh in our memories that in the progress of the last rebellion in this country, those who could read or write were at first failures, of the hedge-schools. The 1798 rebellion had shocked both Church and state that these schoolmasters be demonized as a prelude to gaining control over them, hence the post-rebellion surge of polemical writing that emphasized the luridly inappropriate school texts, their anomalous emphasis on Latin and Greek and, ultimately, the character defects of the pedagogues themselves.

But this is all part of a propaganda campaign that successfully obscured the reality that the national school project was in essence a response to the success, not the failure, of the hedge-schools. The 1798 rebellion had shocked both Church and state by demonstrating their lack of control in this crucial area; part of the response in the post-Union period was a campaign of increasingly vituperative attacks on the hedge-schools’ allegedly baneful influence. Here the Catholic Church and the British state shared a moral and political aim, to control education. Their co-operation was necessary for the success of the new national school system. Control rather than reform was the central issue; after all, 85 per cent of hedge-schoolmasters were quietly absorbed into the national system.

But the curriculum and the organization of the schools themselves came under sustained attack. Opponents of the hedge-schools regularly assembled lists of the texts (primarily chapbooks) they used, to demonstrate how dissolute and archaic these establishments were. The Catholic bishop, James Doyle (known as JKL), for example, disapproved of the mixed education of the informal schools: ‘the children are piled on each other and the sexes promiscuously jumble together’. Educational historians have been hasty in endorsing these partisan attacks. Yet the most striking feature of the hedge-schools was their pragmatism and success. How, for instance, was the astonishing language transition in Ireland in the hedge-school period achieved or how did Ireland become English-speaking, if not through the medium of the hedge-school? The most effective anglicizing influence in eighteenth-century Ireland, the hedge-schools were not an archaizing, but a modernizing force. Their wholesale absorption into the new system shows that what occurred was a takeover, not a radical reform, by the state.

The very term ‘hedge-school’ was a semantic deformation. It originated in the common English usage of ‘hedge’ as ‘an attribute expressing contempt’ (OED), for example, hedge-doctor, hedge-lawyer, hedge-alehouse, etc. Because of the informal nature of popular, especially Catholic, education and the lack of accredited training for schoolteachers under the Penal Laws, the term ‘hedge-school’ was increasingly applied in this pejorative sense as the education debate intensified in the early nineteenth century when the word was popularized. The application of the term to mean schools held in the open air, or in the side of a ditch, is adventitious: the original derivation has simply been occluded. The English traveller Arthur Young was one of the first to use the term ‘hedge school’.

The first literary use occurs in John O’Keefe’s play The Wicklow
Flanagan’s close friend Seamus Heaney was the model for the poet/teacher Cormac McCarthy.

Goldmines (1796). Matt Frayne, the hedge-schoolmaster in Carleton’s popular Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry (1830–33), became the model for future literary versions, in which the ‘master’ was regularly represented as the epitome of Gaelic Ireland, and his school as a site for a picturesque ‘Gaelic’ cultural dilapidation. Thomas Flanagan’s novel The Year of the French (1979) offers a modern example. The overblown romanticization of this figure conceals the English-speaking mundanity.
of the actual Irish popular education system that worked so effectively.

The *locus classicus* of the description of a hedge-schoolmaster is Lady Morgan’s (Sydney Owenson’s) chapter on Thady Connellan in her *Patriotic Sketches* of 1807.37 Although Friel never refers to it, his hedge-schoolmaster Hugh seems closely modelled on it. He was later drawn to the reminiscences of Charles

37 Thaddaeus [Thady] Connellan (1780–1854), a native of Skreen in County Sligo, received a ‘fair classical education’, started his own small school and became ‘a thorough Irish scholar’. He converted to Protestantism c.1808, and like many other ‘manuscript men’, he ran an evangelical Bible school dedicated to converting the native Irish through the medium of the Irish language. His *An Irish and English Spelling Book* reached a nineteenth edition by 1848, and he also produced *An English–Irish dictionary, Intended for the Use of Schools* (1814) and *The Proverbs of Solomon* (1823), containing English, Irish, and Hebrew versions. He died in great poverty in Sligo, and his funeral provoked bitter sectarian scenes. All previous accounts are superseded by the magisterial treatment in Pádraig de Brún, *Scriptural Instruction in the Vernacular: The Irish Society and Its Teachers 1818–1827* (Dublin, 2009), 14–39.

McGlinchey (1861–1954), a weaver and tailor of Meentiagh glen in the Inishowen peninsula of County Donegal (the setting of translations). Friel edited and introduced the book The Last of the Name. He presents the old man, as he does Hugh in the play, as a Janus figure, inhabiting both ‘a rural community in the process of shedding the last vestiges of a Gaelic past and of an old Christianity that still cohabited with an older paganism’, and an emerging community coming to an uneasy accommodation with the modern world, ‘the buses, the cars, the silk stockings’. In forming this figure, Friel also had in mind his Irish-speaking and illiterate grandparents, and a great-great-grandfather McCabe, a hedge-schoolmaster from Mayo who settled in Donegal and who was remembered as being ‘fond of a drop’. This world was not at all remote in any sense — ‘It’s very close, you know’.42

John O’Donovan

Friel has confirmed that the character Owen in the play is a version of John O’Donovan. O’Donovan, the indispensable Irish-language adviser to the Ordnance Survey, was appointed ‘orthographer and etymologist’ to the survey in 1830.44 He quickly acquired a pivotal role in the new topographical department, investigating the derivation of Irish place names.45 In 1834, he commenced on his heroic fieldwork, travelling on foot across Ireland to study the vast array of place names, sending back an inexhaustible flow of correspondence, at once witty, irascible and erudite (the justly celebrated ‘Ordnance Survey Letters’46 from 1834 to 1841. He personally sourced 140,000 Irish place names in the field, and established the authorized versions in anglicized orthography, chosen to mimic the sound of the Irish-language names, which were subsequently inscribed on the Ordnance Survey maps, and which are still the legally binding versions of place names in the modern Republic of Ireland.

This little man (five feet, two inches) was a giant of nineteenth-century scholarship, the greatest-ever scholar of the Irish language. His exemplary edition, including text, translation and notes, of Annála Ríoghachta Éireann/Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, appearing in six volumes from 1848 to 1851, established new and formidable scholarly standards for Irish-language material.47 His translations opened to English speakers the hitherto sealed casket of the Irish literary tradition. In that sense, O’Donovan was an indispensable precursor of the Literary Revival, which sought, in the aftermath of the linguistic shift from an Irish-speaking to an English-speaking Ireland, to establish a version of English sufficiently distinctive to anchor an Irish aesthetic. The Revival could be regarded as an extravagant discourse in the English language about dumbness in the Irish language.49 It craved access to the world of a vanished or vanishing Gaelic civilization, whose ambiguous absence must be brought to renewed presence in English-language forms. Hence the Revival featured strenuous efforts to invent a new English-based but distinctive language capable of that task. The experiments include W. B. Yeats’s occult dialect in A Vision, James Joyce’s molten English in Finnegans Wake, Lady Gregory’s Kiltartanese, heavily influenced by the sounds and grammatical forms of Hiberno-English, J. M. Synge’s variations on folk-dialect, and Samuel Beckett’s experiments in escaping ‘the Anglo-Irish exuberance and automatisms’ by writing in French and then back- translating into an almost comically austere English.

Yet despite O’Donovan’s eminence as an Irish-language scholar, none of his six surviving sons was an Irish speaker. He himself believed that the language did not merit a future role in the public sphere:

I respect it as a great influence that has...
been and no longer is or can be. It fed the poetic flame within the people’s mind, and was the parent of true poetry in the more cultivated: it nourished the latent, instinctive aspirations of the Irish race, gave them aliment, and directed their movements, and rescued their ancestors from the dominion of brutish ignorance, stirred them with insatiable thirst for true knowledge, which, when established on a right basis, will raise this ancient

and imaginative people to a truly noble standard among the civilised nations of modern Europe: but its office has been fulfilled: it is no longer necessary to the exigencies of modern society, with which the Irish race must either amalgamate or perish. The only interest it can have is a historical or poetical one. 51

Owen in Translations is ‘a city man’, ‘wealthy’, who ‘got out in time’: he shrugs

Mick Lally and Ann Hasson in rehearsal for Brian Friel’s Translations at the Guildhall, Derry, 1980. Photo: Rod Tuach. © Field Day
to the Antiquities of the County of Donegal Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1835, edited and with an introduction by Michael Herity, Preface by Brian Friel (Dublin, 2000).


50 Four of them joined the Irish revolutionary group the Fenians, including the flamboyant Edmund, a pioneering ‘war correspondent’ in Spain, Bosnia and Afghanistan, whose final fatal posting was to cover the Mahdi revolt in the Sudan in 1883.


52 See Delaney, ed., Brian Friel in Conversation, 118; in another revealing comment, Friel agreed that the Owen/O’Donovan character could be regarded as ‘a typical SDLP man’ (86). ‘The

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off his dual identity as Owen/Roland — ‘it’s the same me’, ‘a mistake’. He works for the benefit of the colonists, he is on their payroll, he is a go-between, and he is faintly soiled by the taint of being an informer. In the context of Northern Ireland in 1980, at the height of its dirty war, the long-standing Irish paranoia about informers had reached another culmination, driven to it by the new British tactic of employing ‘supergrassers’ — informers whose uncorroborated testimony jailed large numbers of their former colleagues. Friel’s own comments are that O’Donovan could be seen both to have performed ‘the actions and the perfidy of a quisling’ but also to have embarked on a ‘task of honour’.52 (We are reminded of the long-standing joke among translators: traduttore/traditore, translator/traitor, as in the mocking nickname ‘the Translator’ given by Barcelona fans to José Mourinho.)53 William Hazlitt claimed in 1814 that ‘He who speaks two languages has no country’ — but adds: ‘The French, when they made their language the common language of the courts of Europe, gained more than by all their other conquests put together.’54 Here again in Translations a question is posed but not resolved: should we admire or condemn Owen/O’Donovan? And here, too, we can see a recurrent pattern in Friel’s work; his plays often feature an outsider figure whose comments on the action of the drama constitute a translation that is both a rational account of it and yet is suspect in virtue of its detachment, a distance that seems scandalous, as, for example, Tom Hoffnung in Aristocrats or Mabel Bagenal in Making History. Their ancestry ultimately extends to Thornton Wilder’s play Our Town (1938), whose Groover’s Corner is an obvious antecedent of Friel’s Ballybeg.

The Irish Language: ‘The Modern Babel’

We cannot properly weigh the language issue in Friel’s play unless we understand the contempt in which the Irish language was held at the end of the nineteenth century. Consider the contribution of John Pentland Mahaffy (1839–1919),55 provost of Trinity College, prolific, if erratic, classical scholar, leading Anglo-Irishman, and brilliant conversationalist.56 Mahaffy, a quintessential Trinity man, gave six decades of service as student, tutor, professor, senior fellow, vice-provost and provost: he was accordingly taken to speak as the official voice of Anglo-Ireland. He dismissed cultural nationalism as a diseased version of provincialism, and vigorously resisted efforts to have Irish taught as a subject at any level in the Irish education system. He disparaged Gaelic literature on the grounds that it was impossible to find a text in the language that was not ‘either religious, silly or indecent’.57 In his 1896 essay ‘A Modern Babel’, directed at a British audience, Mahaffy distinguished between advancing and receding civilizations: one spoke a universal imperial language; the other a local ‘tongue’. A common language like Latin or its modern successor English was ‘a lever of civilisation’: ‘The British tongue, like British gold, will probably pervade the world’ — ‘the great object which every promoter of imperial Britain interests should have in view’. He dismissed Irish as a ‘miserable remnant of barbarism’, ‘a most difficult and useless tongue, not only useless, but a mischievous obstacle to civilisation’ and sneered that Irish-language enthusiasts ‘might also turn their attention to the dying language of the Maories [sic] and the natives of Australia’.58 Thus the entire Revival project was a retrograde step, a retreat to the Dark Ages, a futile scrabbling in the ruins of Babel.

The Hidden Ireland

The most considered riposte to such dismissals came from Daniel Corkery.59 His cultural criticism was established on a Ruskinian basis of contempt for neoclassical ‘egotism’. From John Ruskin, he learned to value the integration of art and
Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) repudiated the use of violence as a political weapon and pursued moderate constitutional nationalist goals. Hard-line republicans regarded the party as too craven (the ‘Stoop Down Low Party’) in its response to the British presence. Its leader, and later Nobel Peace Prize winner, John Hume, was a Derry man, so an overtly political reading of the play would have resonated with the play’s first audience in the Guildhall in Derry, including Hume himself.

53 Mourinho worked at the Camp Nou, the Barcelona football stadium, in the 1990s translating for the English manager Bobby Robson—thus earning him the taunting nickname from Barcelona fans.


56 Mahaffy was a sparkling if malicious conversationalist and epigrammatist: ‘An Irish bull, Madam, is always pregnant.’ His The Principles of the Art of Conversation (1887) was reviewed by his pupil Oscar Wilde,
who was influenced and
fascinated by it.

57 Final report of the
Commissioners
on Intermediate
Education(Ireland)
(Palles), 1899 C 9511,
XXII, 129. Douglas
Hyde's carefully argued
rebuttal is reprinted in
Aine Hyland and
Kenneth Milne,
Irish Educational
Documents. Volume
One (Dublin, 1987),
214–17.

58 J. P. Mahaffy, 'The
Modern Babel',
Nineteenth Century, xl,
782–84.

59 Daniel Corkery
(1878–1964) was born
in Cork, the son of a
carpenter and active
trade unionist. As a
child, he did not know
that the Irish language
existed, and he initially
regarded the Gaelic
League as misguided;
later he combined Gaelic
League philosophy with
Ruskinian cultural
criticism. The Hidden
Ireland (Dublin,
1924) earned him an
honorary doctorate
from University College,
Cork; he persistently
argued that the choice
was either 'to express
Ireland or to exploit
her'. He taught Sean
O’Faolain and Frank
O’Connor, but later
berated them as being
part of 'the literature of
collapse'. Synge
and Anglo-Irish
Literature (1931)
vigorously contested
the Irishness of Yeats
and other 'tribeless'
writers of the Literary
Revival, offering only
a partial exemption
to Synge. See Patrick
Maume, 'Life that is
Exile': Daniel Corkery
and the Search for
Irish Ireland (Belfast,
Yeatsian version into a Gaelic setting. The
surviving Gaelic poetry was not a 'folk'
but a displaced 'high' medieval poetry; the
Gaelic tradition had successfully avoided
the negative effects of the Renaissance,
neo-classicism and the Enlightenment.
Corkery is accordingly scathing about
Mahaffy, and the leading late nineteenth-
century historians William Hartpole Lecky
(1838–1903) and James Anthony Froude
(1818–94), for their scandalous neglect of
Irish-language sources, most particularly
of the poetry that Corkery believed most
accurately mirrored the inner life of the
ordinary people. Literature was the key
cultural expression; when all else was
denied the Irish-speaking Catholics, they
still retained their poetry, which introduces
us to what Edmund Burke had in a similar
context called the 'interior history of
Ireland'.

The first modern scholarly editor of
these poets was Pádraig Ó Dúinnín (P.
S. Dinneen). Corkery emphasized the
cultural 'inwardness' of their poems:

The poems in question, though barren
as regards formal fact, tell us the history
of the inner life of the people as no
other documents can. State papers,
photographs, paintings, wills, deeds,
private letters of public personages,
such records as these have their value
in interpreting for us the character of a
people at a given period of their historical
development, but they have not the power
of introducing us to the inner sanctum of
the people's life where their emotions well
forth in all their native vigour.

Outwardly, the eighteenth-century Gaelic
world was ruined — economically, socially,
culturally:

Such, then, was in general the face of
Ireland, such, more particularly, the
face of Irish Ireland — that hidden land
whose story has never been told. Poverty
was its only wear — poverty in the
town, the cabin, the person, the gear,
the landscape. Civic life was not only
broken, but wiped away. Institutions,
and the public edifices, ceremonies, arts
into which the institutional blossoms in
home-centred countries, had ceased to
exist. Life did no more than just crawl
along, without enough to eat, unclothed,
fever-stricken, slow.

This essentially literary-cultural concept
of outer ruin and inner resource has been
transposed into the historical domain
and also given a geographical location
among the bogs, hills and mountains of the
Atlantic coast, the territory of 'the Gaels,
whose only portion was rock and bog
and wind'. Translations is set precisely in
this 'Hidden Ireland'. Friel identifies Urris
in Inishowen as 'the setting of the hedge
school in the play'. In a sense, the play
is set in the 'once upon a time' timeless
space of the fairytale and folklore, 'a dense
and fragrant time, like honey', a Gaelic
chronotope, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's
term. At the play's beginning, place and
time merge in a prelapsarian world: a brutal
eruption from the external world disrupts
the ancient peace. In his classic Time and
the Other, the anthropologist Johannes
Fabian demonstrated how anthropological
discourse constructed a different time for
its objects, framed around the binary of
tradition and modernity, which suppressed
the possibility of cultural coevality.

From the onset of modern colonialism in
the sixteenth century, the Irish language
has been relegated to this realm of
the outmoded, archaic, primitive, traditional.
Denying simultaneity, this discourse
regarded each society as trapped in its own
time zone, demonstrated by recourse to
taxonomic binaries (civilized/savage, here/
there, now/then, text/orality, subject/object,
mechanical/organic, rational/irrational).
These taxonomies, arrayed hierarchically
between categories, always functioned
as instruments of power. The capacity to
impose and act upon these constructions
constituted power, a power principally vested in the state. In this sense, power had a temporal, as well as a spatial, inscription. Time was crucial to the construction of the cultural other, and its deployment in making the other was always a form of making itself. Cultures with a long literary tradition in the vernacular, like Irish and Russian, have resisted that conception of cultural time. Osip Mandelstam refuted the idea that ‘Russia has no history, that is, that Russian belongs to the unorganized, unhistorical world’ by stressing the role of the Russian language itself in history:

So highly organized, so organic a language is not merely a door into history, but is history itself. For Russia,
Friel also encourages the audience, through other deliberate anachronisms, to think about the impending Great Irish Famine (1845–52) that was to visit such devastation on the Irish-speaking communities of the Atlantic coast. ‘The sweet smell’ (the sickly sweet stench of potatoes suffering from the potato blight, which first struck in 1845) is one example, but the entire play is shadowed by the dramatic irony of binary collision merely generating more defection from history, excommunication from the kingdom of historical necessity and continuity, from freedom and teleology, would have been defection from its language. Reduction to a state of ‘dumbness’ for two or three generations could have brought Russia to historical death. Excommunication from language is the equivalent for us to excommunication from history. For that reason, it is certainly true that Russian history travels along the brink, along a ledge, over an abyss, and is on the verge of falling into nihilism at any moment, that is, of being excommunicated from the world.70

Forgetting in language terms is never about the end of things but rather about their mutability. The common capacity of languages is to change — or more accurately to be changed by us — while bearing the traces of its earlier incarnations. The changed language secretes traces of the old, the remnant that always remembers the loss.71

The Language Question

Translations also addresses the hoary linguistic question: how does the sound of a word relate to its meaning? In 1911, Ferdinand de Saussure had demonstrated that there was no inevitable or natural relationship between the sound of a word and the thing that it represents: ‘The connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.’72 Language is effective because its sound system becomes a habitual structure. Languages therefore are brilliantly artificial structures. Authenticity and intrinsic meaning are illusions.73 Has ‘Bun na hAbhann’ an intrinsic meaning, some secret essence, that ‘Burnfoot’ lacks? Is there an autonomous spiritual integrity, from which we are being educated — led forth? Translations sets about attuning the audience’s ear to the altered acoustic when a language changes, querying if everything suffers a seismic shift during the sonic transition. Does the spirit, the genius loci, wither as the translation migrates? Or does the living spirit die, to be replaced by the letter — the formal, administrative dead letter — of the law?

While the play exploits the pathos of that fate, it also leaves open the conclusion that that which is lost is well lost — the sense that a minority or antiquated language can stifle, rather than facilitate, communication, as revealed, for instance, by the fact that Baile Beag/Ballybeg is a cul-de-sac for young women, and by the diseased life it offers to the sexually and socially isolated Jimmy Jack. Translations circles around the question of whether the culture is fatally flawed internally and therefore vulnerable to outside pressure or assault. The play is full of damaged characters — dumb Sarah, alcoholic Hugh, lame Manus (damaged when his drunken father fell asleep across him).74 The laming,75 according to Friel, was ‘a physical maiming which is a public representation of their spiritual deprivation’.76 It ends with the displaced Manus ‘limping along the coast’ — a prolepsis of the precarious state of the Irish language itself? Sarah in the play is childlike—infans, literally unspeaking; only when she is taught to speak—‘My name is Sarah’—does she enter adult identity. The pathetic figure of Jimmy Jack suggests yet another form of incommunication — the world of fantasy.

So the ethical question becomes this: must the local genuflect before what it knows will render it at best provincial, at worst recessive, irrelevant, inaudible, invisible? The shadow of that anxiety lies athwart the threshold of translation, and that ambiguous troubled moment of transition is the space and time that this play inhabits. Translations simultaneously accepts and refuses the idea of an authentic language. Friel situates his play at the seemingly tragic moment of linguistic displacement, and yet discovers that all forms of apparent authenticity are equally fictitious. Every effort to escape one form of binary collision merely generates more
found yet another theatrical possibility of going beyond language:

Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement — as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary.81

The limits of communication were also political: the Friel space is also that of the northern Catholic population whence he originated; the warp in communication is a constitutive feature of that space; it can only disappear with the dissolution of that contrived space.82 The strident assertion of difference that it provokes will never permit re-entry into a lost world — itself an illusion, but inescapably part of the whole apparatus. It is equally an illusion to believe that it is possible to evade a defining political and cultural force field by burrowing deep into the past or the local. A process of introversion offers no mode of separation, except the nihilistic one of rendering oneself and one’s culture invisible, or of seeking to obliterate the oppressive through terror — the speech act of the politically inarticulate: in the words of Nadine Gordimer in 1969: ‘They [ANC activists] felt useless as they were and so became what they were not.’83

A further illusion is the escape into domesticity, much coveted, despite Theodor Adorno’s weary warning: ‘The illusionary importance and autonomy of private life conceals the fact that private life drags on only as an appendage of the social process.’84 No domain of privacy, immune and insulated from the political process, can exist. This is the contaminated space of Friel, of the play, of Field Day Theatre by which the audience knows, as the characters cannot, that the Famine is looming.

73 Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York, 1998). For the neurobiologist Pinker, the language instinct is a language of thought that precedes words: ‘People do not think in English or Chinese or Apache: they think in a language of thought’ (82). He assails Edward Sapir’s culturalist thesis that different languages encoded different phenomenologies, like Hopi tenses for time, or Inuit words for snow: ‘There is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers’ way of thinking’ (58).
74 Friel has been justifiably cross with careless critics, usually historians, who claim that the play represents ‘a Gaelic idyll’: he stresses that the play’s setting is ‘not idyllic’,
and that of its principal characters, ‘one is dumb, one lame, one alcoholic’ (Delaney, ed., Brian Friel in Conversation, 148).

75 The Philoctetes figure since the eighteenth century has become a symbol of Catholic Ireland, amputated from the body politic by the Penal Laws, which deprived them of political participation from the Glorious Revolution (1688) until Catholic emancipation (1829). The most sustained recent treatment is Seamus Heaney’s Cure at Troy — an adaptation of Sophocles’ Philoctetes, produced by Field Day in 1991. As with Friel, Heaney explores the appropriate ‘ethical balance of the private and the public life’ (a quotation from Edmund Wilson, The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature (Oxford, 1941), cited in the programme notes for the Field Day production).

76 Murray, ed., Brian Friel, 87.


78 Murray, ed., Brian Friel, 177. Thomas Moore’s melody ‘Oft in the Stilly Night’ features in three of Friel’s plays. His father taught it to his school choir, including the young Brian, and it has always remained a haunting and haunted ‘distant music’ for him. The presence of Moore’s Company, of Northern Ireland, of Ireland, of any colonized country. Friel’s play at its best does not just reproduce the conventional either/or; it explores the more fundamental issue of why the question is formulated as an either/or, and in so doing, it poses the political question of whether and how it is possible to move beyond it. The terms of the question ultimately betray the anxiety of the questioner. Translations seeks a paradigm that does not collapse into the drearily reductive zero-sum game of existing Northern Ireland politics. The aspiration is honourable, the anxiety is palpable, the resolution is displaced. That would also be a reasonable description of the ethics of Field Day, founded in the grim days of the early 1980s as it sought to ‘find some kind of generosity that can embrace the whole island’. For Friel, his Field Day plays were imaginative cultural experiments that would provide ‘stepping stones to the other side’: ‘out of the cultural state, a possibility of a political state follows’. Culture should be transformative, not something inert and effete.

Language shift may be understood and/or felt as a breach of memory, a breach of temporal continuity and spatial connectedness, a rift from the estranged past. Is there any viable space between assimilation and otherness? Is it a spectrum? Translations
ultimately leaves fluid the question of hybridity: can a shared space be opened by translation, a space within which hybridized artistic, cultural and political forms might incubate? Famously, Homi Bhabha has refigured hybridity, not as a contamination of purer essences, but as a sly staging ground for resistance: could we then regard translation as duplication with a difference — is that difference an enhancement of our cultural repertoire or merely a damaged form of duplicity through which we deceive ourselves as much as others? This was classic Field Day territory — in the form of its anthology,


92 Irish writers who have offered translations or adaptations from the Greek and Latin classics include Marina Carr, Peter Fallon, Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, Michael Longley, Frank McGuinness, Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin.


its adaptations of world literature from the Russian and the classics into specifically Irish versions, its proposed dictionary of Anglo-Irish speech. English-language forms required vigorous rereading. In the words of Hugh in Translations, ‘we must make them our own’.

The problem of Irish theatre was to make the English language definitively Irish: ‘We must make English identifiably our own language.’

88 Friel has often quoted as a cautionary tale comments on Brendan Behan by Kenneth Tynan, the London theatre critic: ‘The English hoard words like misers: the Irish spend them like sailors.’

89 The prevalence and the power of this apparently benign stereotype of theatre-reviewing and commentary encouraged Friel to become, almost as a reaction, a highly disciplined and restrained writer with a consummate technical mastery of stagecraft. It also contextualizes his Russian translations/adaptations, and Field Day’s productions of Greek and Roman dramas, with their emphasis on bringing these classics into the Irish theatre free of such ready-made English assumptions.

90 In that sense, Friel has worked the productive seam opened by ‘the disquiet between two aesthetics’, while retaining the ambition of generating ‘an independent Irish aesthetic structured by difference but not grounded in divisions’.

**Conclusion**

Ontologically, language necessarily presupposes itself: language cannot be explained without recourse to language. So if there is no pure event of language, how can we ever escape out of language? Are we doomed to be the Wittgensteinian fly imprisoned in the glass, gloomily aware of the inevitability of its imprisoning glass? While the fly can never leave the glass, it must begin by seeing the glass in which it is enclosed; for the fly, the glass is not an object but, rather, that through which it sees objects. Language for human beings mediates all things and all knowledge. Human beings are condemned to understand one another in language. And while it is immediate, language is also mediated and conditioned by history. Through the force of historical transmission, history and language acquire their terrible intimacy. There is no Adamic language, no speech that conveys nothing but itself, in which spiritual essence and linguistic essence coincide. No language can be perfectly transparent to itself — the fly cannot become the glass. Original sin entails the fall into language, into signifying speech as external communication. The fall into history is also a fall into the plurality of languages, the Babelian fall, but it can also be regarded as the fortunate fall (felix culpa) that permitted human cultures to proliferate and individuate themselves.

The historical fate of Irish as a minority language has, if anything, become more generally emblematic in an era of intensifying globalization. Of 6,800 known distinct languages, 400 are close to extinction, while 3,000 are endangered, as defined by the fact that children no longer learn them. A language dies somewhere in the world every fortnight. Six languages account for half of global use and the top ten languages accounted for 85 per cent of Internet use in 2009. In the Republic of Ireland, recent immigration has carried with it a linguistic cornucopia: 167 languages are now used in the state, ranging from Acholi and Amharic, to Zaghawa and Zulu. Alongside English and Irish, there are now significant linguistic communities of Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Russian, French and Spanish users. These changes have the potential to release the capacity of Irish as a minority language to be the exemplary case for the new languages of Ireland, rather than being the perennially junior partner in the binary of English and Irish. Is Translations the same play in 2010 that it was 1980?