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Maria Laura Barberan Reinares

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Reinares, Maria Laura Barberan
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Remapping and Renaming Ireland:

A Postcolonial Look at the Problem of Language and Identity in Brian Friel's *Translations*

Brian Friel's acclaimed *Translations*, suggestively written in English, captures the moment in the history of Ireland when the British, in a clear sign of imperial dominance, initiated the remapping and renaming of the Irish territory, generating a linguistic uncertainty that eventually led to the capitulation of the Gaelic language and placed the colonizing tongue – English -- on central stage. The fact that this contemporary Irish playwright in 1980 wrote *Translations* in English and not in Gaelic speaks for itself.

But Friel's choice of English as the vehicle for his play is far from trivial, and to assume that this decision owes to a question of attracting a larger audience would certainly undermine his purpose. In this work, then, I will analyze the effects of the British remapping and renaming of Ireland from a postcolonial theoretical angle, focusing on its most invasive and lasting consequence: the replacement of the native language and its cultural repercussions. I will therefore explore Friel's *Translations* within the context of postcolonial theories developed by such critics as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (usually referred to as Ngugi), Salman Rushdie, and Declan Kiberd. Because these writers have addressed the language/identity question for the writing of native literature from seemingly divergent angles, their analyses can shed light on understanding Friel's portrayal of the different --and often ambivalent-- feelings toward the language question in Ireland.[1] Thus in *Translations*, the playwright leaves it up to the audience to decide, while he

[1] In an interview, talking about the themes developed in *Translations*, Friel explained to Carty: "Of course, it's also concerned with the English presence here. No matter how benign they may think it has been, finally the presence of

presents the whole spectrum of attitudes towards a problem that has clearly not reached one definite conclusion yet. Indeed, that is precisely the question Friel articulates here.[2]

Translations is set in Ireland in the rural village of Baile Beag /BOLL-ya-bYUG/, County Donegal in 1833, about thirty years after the Act of Union with Great Britain. Although Friel's play has some historical inaccuracies, which he justifies from an aesthetic point of view, this particular period in which he contextualizes his work set a landmark in Irish history. In 1824 the British Parliament produced the first Ordnance Survey of Ireland intended to map and replace every Gaelic name by a translated English equivalent, or a comparable-sounding one in English. At the same time, the educational system in Ireland began a significant transformation. Gradually, all local Irish-speaking schools (the hedge schools) were supplanted by national schools where English became the only language of instruction. Through this reform, the British clearly aimed at Anglicizing – or "properly civilizing"—the Irish population. They also had more practical purposes, of course: taxation, penetration, and ultimately, domination.

Interestingly, Friel writes his play in English compelling the audience to assume that all the characters, except for two British officers, are actually speaking in Gaelic[3] (this device is extremely effective, and most of the humor of the play arises from it). The audience learns about the impending changes through the action of a group of Irish speakers at a hedge school, each of

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any foreigner in your land is malign. Even if the people who were instrumental in bringing it in have the best motives – as some of them had" (140).

[2] Throughout his literary career, Csilla Bertha explains in "Brian Friel as a Postcolonial Writer," Friel has been concerned "with the nuances of both personal and cultural-national identity and its relation to colonial dispossession and confusion, issues of home, language, tradition, the workings of private and public memory – all issues that inform postcolonial consciousness" (154).

[3] At the same time, Friel's choice of English here could reveal his own attitude toward the language problem -- as he confesses to Ciaran Carty in "Finding Voice in a Language Not Our Own": in *Translations*, "I am talking about the language that we have now and what use we make of it and about the problems that having it gives us. The assumption, for instance, is that we speak the same language as England. And we don't. The sad irony, of course, is that the whole play is written in English. It ought to be written in Irish" (140).

them hinting the varied attitudes of the Irish toward their own language and the alien one. For the sake of this analysis, I will only focus on the most obvious extremes, embodied in the Irish schoolmasters Hugh and Manus, the two British officers in charge of redesigning Ireland's topography, and Owen, the Irish translator who comfortably moves across the boundaries between Gaelic and English. Manus is the idealist schoolteacher who strives to educate his fellow country people. He knows English, but he refuses to use it (even less teach it), so he imparts his lessons in Gaelic, Greek and Latin. The British officials, who can speak only English, have employed Owen to translate and interpret for them, and it is through their often comical exchanges that audience understands the magnitude of the imperial undertaking. Owen is then required to translate the place names from his acknowledged "quaint, archaic tongue" into "the King's good English"; thus, the Gaelic town Baile Beag becomes "Ballybeg," or Lis Na Muc, which means "The Fort of Pigs," becomes "Swinefort" (Friel 2503, 2493). In this way, the remapping and renaming begins.

While this is happening, Hugh, who has initially made stereotypical comments about English -- a language he sees especially suitable "for the purposes of commerce"-- has applied for a job at the new national schools, where "from the very first day you go, you'll not hear one word of Irish" (2487). Unlike Manus, who refuses to give up his role at the hedge schools, and will probably end up teaching the "classics to the cows," Hugh accepts the looming situation and tries to adjust (2493). By the end of the play, in one of the strongest lines, Hugh tells Owen: "We must learn those new names. [. . .] We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own" since "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" (2521). Such final statement has encouraged a number of interpretations, and

although Friel succeeds in giving a voice to the different standpoints through all his characters, several critics agree that these words seem to echo the author's feelings toward the language question in Ireland.

Given that the loss of the native tongues as a result of imperial intrusions has become a frequently targeted postcolonial theme, situating *Translations* within this broader critical context can grant some fruitful answers. Hence, just as Friel in *Translations* plays with the most strikingly opposite attitudes toward the language question, I now want to draw the attention to contrasting critical perspectives that have tried to respond to the language/identiy dilemma. At one end of the spectrum, we can place Kenyan writer and critic Ngugi --perhaps one of the most vocal denouncers of the adoption of the English language, which he considers a regrettable colonial remnant. In an argument that can be easily extrapolated to the Ireland of *Translations*, Ngugi describes the intimate relation between language and culture:

> Language as communication and as culture are […] products of each other […] Language carries culture, and culture carries […] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world […]. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (153)[4]

By replacing the native languages, Ngugi points out, the British ultimately aimed at controlling "the people's wealth," but the "most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves," because "[t]o control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (153). Just as they did to the Irish --whose "religion was abhorred, their music proscribed, [and] their possessions reduced"-- the British forced the colonized African countries to adopt English

[4] From *Decolonising the Mind* (1986).

(Deane 21). What native children studied at school, Ngugi explains, had little bearing with the language and culture of their community. A similar phenomenon occurred in Ireland: the textbooks utilized by the National Schools "were so devoid of national content or sentiment that they were successfully exported without change to schools in Australia, Canada, the West Indies and New Zealand" (Richtarik 42).

Ngugi further claims that African writers still writing in English – and he names Achebe and Soyinka, among others, but the same could apply to Friel as well – is the ultimate triumph of British imperialism. What began with "the night of the sword and the bullet," Ngugi argues, "was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard"; at the time of the initial conquest, "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation," but after that, language became the most powerful "means of the spiritual subjugation" (147-8). Ironically, the "psychological violence of the classroom" proved more pervasive because the colonized adopted and even began to *value* the language of the colonizer (147). Following Ngugi's argument, one can assert that the colonizer has indeed succeeded when the colonized unquestionably accepts the new culture/language as the "common" one because, in internalizing the alien language, the subaltern group becomes complicit in its own oppression. Objecting to this "imperial rape," Ngugi advocates "decolonizing the mind" and embracing the aboriginal languages --what Manus stands for in Friel's *Translations*. According to Ngugi, then, native writers like Brian Friel should write back to empire in the language of the tribe.[5]

Ngugi's position is certainly polemical, but whereas he urges for complete rejection of the colonizer's language, other postcolonial critics address the use of English in a more favorable light; among them, Indian-born Salman Rushdie, whom we could locate at the opposite extreme

[5] I am alluding here to Bill Ashcroft's landmark in postcolonial theory *The Empire Writes Back*: *Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989).

of the pendulum. In "English is an Indian Literary Language" (1983), Rushdie argues that English is a world language now, not only because of the British colonial past, but also because of the current globalized influence of the United States as a world power (2540). The author openly confesses:

> I don't think it is always necessary to take up the colonial – or is it post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it [. . .] carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers. (2540)

The English language, according to Rushdie, has long "ceased to be the sole possession of the English"; therefore, to speak of English literature in India is to speak of Indian literature as well. In Rushdie's own words, now "English literature has its Indian branch" (2541).

Nowadays, Rushdie further explains, "English is an essential language in India, not only because of its technical vocabularies and international communication which makes it possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates" (2540). English has now become the neutral language among the Indians, a kind of convenient *lingua franca* shared by the majority. Of course, one can understand this situation within the context of Rushdie's native country, extremely diverse in languages and religions; yet, at the same time, Rushdie's attitude shows a conciliatory revision of the past, since one could assume that much of the present sectarian hatred in that former British colony emerged as a direct consequence of the alien assault. In Ireland, the situation is even more intricate given that English still represents one side of the dispute, placing the "language dilemma" at the heart of the violently charged arena of Irish politics.

To conclude, I want to bring the attention to Friels's compatriot Declan Kiberd, who also explores the problem of language, culture, and identity, reaching what I believe is a productive compromise in his monumental *Inventing Ireland* (1996). In this work, he revisits the context of the Irish cultural evolution, from its colonial past to the present, through the works of some of the most influential Irish writers, Friel among them. When addressing the inevitable language question, Kiberd refers to Rushdie, arguing that he "clung defiantly to the hope that something was gained rather than lost in the act of translation, one result of which might be 'radically new types of human beings'" (163). Kiberd notices that Rushdie sees these "hybrid" human beings -- Owen, for example, in Friel's play-- as a positive development because from them a potential newness can grow. At the same time, Kiberd does not ignore the negative cultural consequences of imposing an alien language; by the end of the first decade of independence, Kiberd explains, the dilemma "was that such system produced in most cases neither an English nor an Irish sensibility, nor any [commendable] hybrid [. . .]. It led instead to confusion," a pantomime of an alien culture --and here once again we can think of Owen and his dubious translations (555). Still, Kiberd does not assume Ngugi's extreme attitude but takes instead a more accepting and yet not unquestioning position --one more reminiscent of Hugh's in *Translations*.

With mordant frankness, Kiberd then admits that there have been frequent initiatives to revive the Irish language, but he suggests that their success (or lack thereof) has remained up to the conscious efforts of the speakers, more than up to regulations of the government. Kiberd objects that, ironically, by 1975, "The public at large wished the [Gaelic] language well, but remained unwilling to make concrete sacrifices to protect it," and, with a touch of sarcasm, he describes the general attitude of the Irish towards their language: "make us pure, Lord, but not quite yet (and certainly not if such purity entails financial or intellectual sacrifice)" (569, 575).

Hence Kiberd's analysis, instead of completely blaming England's policies for the loss of the native languages, gives more agency to the speakers of Ireland who continued to use English: "[t]he cultural violence which underlay this change of languages," Kiberd confesses, "remained largely invisible, since it presupposed the consent of the Irish to that change" (625). In this way, Ireland's "cultural dependency" prolonged itself long after the formal withdrawal of the British military because "it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory" (6). From the pages of his *Inventing Ireland*, then, readers sense that Kiberd does not blame Irish writers who, like Brian Friel, write in English, but Kiberd hints instead that the Irish society at large has given up on its language for understandable practical reasons (i.e., economic and technological survival).[6] Writers, of course, become the most obvious targets of the language question given that their material is exclusively language. And this point brings us back to Friel's *Translations*.

Indeed, Friel's characters make it clear for the audiences that the attitudes at that period of transition were varied and ambivalent: some, like Manus, clung to a past and traditions which in such context may have seemed out of touch with the unavoidable reality; others, like Hugh saw the change as inevitable and, despite the hurt pride, decided to act accordingly. At this point one may question, who took the right decision? the Manuses of Ireland, or the Hughs? Apparently, this ambivalence has never left the deeper layers of the Irish conscience. The fact that audiences have enthusiastically praised *Translations* in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic, England, and many other countries all over the world, speaks of its relevance today.[7] In this

[6] Seamus Deane in *A Short History of Irish Literature* explains that "Of the seven million Irish people who emigrated to the United States between 1740 and 1922, something close to one and a half million emigrated in the disastrous decade of 1841-51. Almost a million died of starvation and disease. With the disappearance of these people, the Irish language went into an irrecoverable decline" (72). Deane further comments that the Gaelic culture was "well and truly dead by the end of the eighteenth century," but "as an idea or as an ideal, it continued to live" (28).

[7] Richtarik explains that the play was acclaimed in Ireland (by both the nationalists and the unionists) and in England, but, of course, critics in both countries found it successful for different reasons: where in Ireland it was

respect, Kiberd comments that Friel "is well aware that his play is a post-colonial text" because, even though *Translations* represents "a powerful diagnosis of a traumatized Irish consciousness," it "nonetheless adds to the glories of the English language" (625). Friel himself admits to this divided consciousness when he confesses that the Irish "flirt with the English language," but at the same time they "haven't absorbed it and [. . .] regurgitated it in some kind of way" (170).

Of course, none of the "troubles" depicted in *Translations* would have occurred if the Irish language, and with it the culture, had never been jeopardized by the alien intruder. Ngugi's claims lead one in that direction. By the colonial penetration, the English disrupted the cultural balance of Ireland, just as it happened in India, Kenya, or any of the former colonies. But if one could find a shred of hope in Ngugi's criticism, it would probably rest in the fact that the English spoken in the former colonies has changed and evolved to absorb much of the native cultures as well, and that the speakers of the colonies have actually played a crucial role in this hybridization of the language.

With English, in particular, the question becomes more complex given that nowadays the status of this language is clearly one of privilege: English is the "lingua franca," shared by countless speakers all over the world as a means of communication. Undoubtedly, the weight it has acquired is tightly connected to the influence of the culture/s behind it. What started in the period of British imperial dominance, and declined after 1945 with the withdrawal from the colonies, continues today with the economic and cultural ascendancy of the United States as a superpower in a globalized world. One should consider this stance because any argument dismissing such premise could end up fighting a Quixotic battle. From Kiberd's account, readers understand that a big part of the Irish population decided to *adapt* and *adopt* English in order to

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mainly due to its attention to the past and the imperial influence, in England people applauded its conciliatory nature (59- 60).

keep up with the pace of change, mainly for what they felt would help their economic progress. From a purely linguistic standpoint, we know today that "speakers abandon their native tongue in adaptation to an environment where the use of that language is no longer advantageous to them" (Mufwene 327).[8] Is it fair, then, to blame the Irish for speaking and writing in English?

When we ask ourselves this question, we may also focus on the interplay between Gaelic and English Friel highlights in his play. Undoubtedly, *Translations* displays Irish overtones throughout. Thus Friel imbues his work with Irishisms, letting the language of the tribe find a way through the language of the former colonizer. That Hugh tells that his fellow Irish should make the English language their "own" can then be read as what Rushdie would call "English literature with an *Irish* branch."[9] In fact, nowadays a number of recognized dialects of English coexist in Ireland, such as Anglo-Irish, Hiberno-English, Northern Hiberno-English, Southern Hiberno-English, and Northern Ireland English.[10]

For better of worse, the Ireland of Friel faces this reality today. And that was the brilliance of Friel in *Translations*. In this play, Friel articulates the "confusion" – to borrow Kiberd's term -- and makes sense of it in a way that Irish and British audiences could empathize with, and reflect upon. With poignant subtlety, the author manages to unsettle the colonial

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[8] In "Language Endangerment: What Have Pride and Prestige Got to Do with It?", Salikoko S. Mufwene explains that "there is much more to language endangerment than pride and prestige, and than literacy and education" (343). According to him, "the gradual shift of the Irish from Gaelic [. . .] to English" has to do with "economic pressures [. . .] rather than loss of pride in their heritage" (330).

[9] The development of Standard English has been highly controversial, and even to this day linguists find it difficult to agree on what exactly is standard, and what not. Throughout history there have been several attempts at regularizing the language. Yet, since "change is the normal state of language," variation was never completely eliminated (Pyles 13). Dick Leith explains in *A Social History of English* that even today the variation in English is so great that "it is often difficult to say whether a certain variety in one place or another should be called English or not" (1). This lack of a definite standard makes English an extremely receptive and flexible language, one which can be adapted and "re invented" to embrace new cultural identities.

[10] In Africa, for example, many speakers continued to use their native language, and refused to adopt English. Ireland was a different case. The majority of the speakers saw the benefit of learning the new language, and consciously decided to incorporate it.

imposition of the new alien language, and through ambivalent "interplay between regret and irony," he seems to finally hint a conciliatory attitude that feels in keeping with the pace of inevitable change (Gleitman 236). Friel's choice of English as his medium of expression, nonetheless, should not imply that he has forgotten his Irish roots.[11] On the contrary, the "Irishness" of the play is one of its most prevalent features, one that critics in Ireland have frequently praised. In the end, Friel leaves his play open ended: nothing is resolved on stage, because nothing is resolved out of it. Still, Friel knows that the maps have been drawn and the language, for the most part, replaced. Yet *Translations* proves that not everything was lost, since the English of the Empire continues today to be filtered and reinvented, and it is thanks to writers like Brian Friel that the Irish have found a way to keep the language of the tribe still alive in their consciousness.

[11] As Kiberd suggests, "it may not be a question of a writer choosing a language, so much as a case of the language choosing to work out its characteristic genius through a writer" (588).

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