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"We Endure Around Truths Immemorially Posited": a Dramaturgical Research Analysis on Brian Friel's Linguistic-Historical Drama "Translations"

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2011 Wyndham Robertson Library Undergraduate Research Awards

Essay by Meredith Levy

“We Endure Around Truths Immemorally Posited”: A Dramaturgical Research Analysis on Brian Friel’s linguistic-historical drama Translations”

My purpose in compiling a dramaturgical research report on Brian Friel’s linguistic-historical drama TRANSLATIONS was to construct a comprehensible body of writing that would aid a hypothetical director in her/his process of staging TRANSLATIONS. When choosing what about/around the play I wanted to research, I adopted the assumption that my audience had no prior knowledge of Northern Irish politics and culture. To start, I mapped out what general areas needed to be explored: Friel’s life and writings, the historical context of the setting (1833), the historical context of the play’s genesis (1980), production history, and critical analysis of the play’s themes, characters, and production elements. These very broad topics were large enough to support individual research projects, so inevitably I faced two challenges: what to include, and what to focus my attention on. My motivation in choosing what to include was to analyze the information through the lens of TRANSLATIONS, and thereby determining if the information’s inclusion would enhance one’s appreciation for the play, or just be overwhelming. For instance, the economic landscape of the early 1800’s was pertinent to the play, but not so much as the reforms occurring within the academic system. Hence, my research went much deeper in terms of the latter, whereas for the former I focused on achieving a general but still relevant summary. Then, under the scaffolding of these broader topics were more focused examinations of events or philosophies that were significant to the play, such as the mechanics of the Ordnance Survey or the practice of linguistic imperialism. Another challenge was in choosing my source types. Due to the nature of the project, incorporating second-hand sources, such as literary criticisms or historical texts, was justified, in that I wanted to provide my hypothetical director with as many interpretations as possible. Yet I must admit, I would have liked to have more primary sources for the audience (and myself) to interact with. For example, I felt that Friel’s essays and interviews were very insightful into his process; however, such sources needed filtering, because while his writings on his philosophies regarding the play were significant, his journal entries about the writing process were not as essential, albeit extremely interesting. Perhaps the most rewarding revelation I gleaned from the development of the report was a renewed appreciation for print sources. Anthologies, reference sources, collections of essays are just some of the examples of book sources I utilized to provide historical context, literary criticism, etc. The databases were by all means helpful as well, but I utilized them mainly to find sources that were once in print, either in a journal or a newspaper. Through this research paper, I improved upon my index, key words, and speed reading skills, all of which made using print sources less daunting in the future.

“We Endure Around Truths Immemorially Posited”¹:

A Dramaturgical Research Analysis on Brian Friel’s linguistic-historical drama *Translations*

THEA 264
Todd Ristau
May 17, 2010

The Role of the Dramaturg

There is no single definition to the term “dramaturg”; such a profession has different connotations depending on the nation of origin. For simplicity’s sake, discussion will revolve around the concept of the “American” dramaturg, if for no other reason than the American dramaturg is a composite of both the German and British dramaturg models, and therefore discourse on multiple definitions can be facilitated through the examination of one.

The German and British dramaturg models lie on opposite ends of a theatrical spectrum. The German model is traditionally found to be involved with the production beyond pre-production; they may work “with the artistic director to plan the repertoire....may [also]have responsibility for aspects of casting, for writing program material and liaising with marketing departments” in addition to being available during rehearsal (Turner and Behrndt 7). The UK counterpart differs in that they are often excluded from the production process, and are more associated with the cultivation of new plays, although there is still no true national definition (Turner and Behrndt 100, 123-4).

Enter the US dramaturg, a hybrid of its European peers. According to the Turner and Behrndt, “one might speculate that a ‘true’ dramaturg is not fully immersed in the creative process, but mediates between that process and its potential public, operating as a...‘creative critic’” (101). Thus, the American model requires a relationship be fostered betwixt both the director and the playwright (if still alive), thus securing the dramaturg in both the production process and the creative process of a specific dramatic work.

Yet even still, it is impossible to define what specific duties the profession of dramaturgy demands. As revealed in *Dramaturgy and Performance*, the production dramaturg is not strictly a research source, but should be present during the rehearsal process, a symbolic “first audience”, if you will (Turner and Behrndt 156). While the extent of a production dramaturg’s involvement varies with the demands of each production, there is no question that he or she must be invested emotionally in the text so as to give valuable feedback to the director, designers, and actors. Likewise, the dramaturg should be sensitive to the playwright. Penny Gold, a practicing dramaturg, upholds that that her primary responsibility was to “try to find out what the

writer hopes for; what he or she is trying to explore; what he or she wants to say...and help them to make it what they want it to be”(Turner and Behrndt 134).

Essentially, then, one must understand that due to the wide range found within the discipline that “no two dramaturgs ...will be the same, and the dramaturgical role will always depend on the needs of the particular project” (Turner and Behrndt 147). Therefore, it’s safe to rely on the following definition, as it epitomizes the heart of the field: “One who represents the playwright and guides the production. In some cases, the dramaturg researches different aspects of the production or earlier productions of the play” (“Glossary of Dramatic Terms” 1830).

Biography of Brian Friel

Born on January 9, 1929, in Tyrone, Northern Ireland to a local primary school teacher and his wife, Friel spent the early years of his childhood in the country, often spending time in his mother’s native Donegal, which “[was] to have a formative effect on his imagination...the generic village of Ballybeg where many of his plays are set is located ‘in a remote part of County Donegal’” (O’Brian 1). At age ten, his father was made principal to a school in Derry and the family moved into the city. Friel does not, however, consider himself a city man: “Those first ten years made me solidly rural by inclination; I am never fully at ease in a city” (“Friel, Brian” par. 1). Despite “an uneven passage through [his] primary and secondary school career,” Friel was admitted at the age of seventeen (“Friel, Brian” par. 1) Saint Patrick’s College, a seminary near Dublin. Yet after close to three years, he left, citing a “very disturbing experience” as his motivation for abandoning the priesthood and achieving instead a bachelors degree (O’Brian 1). Upon realizing he “was academically equipped for nothing else” (“Friel, Brian” par. 1), Friel taught at various schools in and around Derry for ten years, starting in 1950 (“Brian Friel” par. 2). He married Anne Morrison in 1954, and together they had five children (“Friel, Brian” par. 9).

Though Friel admits he “liked the work [of teaching] very much”, he began writing short stories at the age of nineteen (“Friel, Brian” par. 2) and continued to stay committed to the form through his years as an educator, quite an accomplishment in of itself (O’Brian 2). By 1960, a fair number of his stories had been

published by *New Yorker* magazine (“Brian Friel” par. 9), and two of his radio plays had been produced by BBC Radio (“Brian Friel” par. 5), and he was able to take up writing full time (Source L par. 3). Although up until this point Friel was “preeminently a short story writer,” and he would prove to continue to have story collections published through the 1990’s, he found himself “caught up more and more” in the theatrical field (O’Brian 3). As Friel explains it, “Ireland is recklessly encouraging to the young dramatist—for the simple reason that is still relatively inexpensive to mount a fully professional production; no one is going to make or lose a fortune” (“Friel, Brian” par. 3). It was under such conditions that his first three plays were produced (“Brian Friel” par. 4). However, his career (and life) took a most definite shift when he was invited by Sir Tyrone Gurthie, a noted director (“Brian Friel” par 9) with ties to Ulster* in 1963 to observe his theatre company in Minneapolis (O’Brian 3). The “memorable experience” irrevocably influenced Friel (Source L par. 4), as he came to discover “indigenous drama was a valuable element in both national development and international understanding” (O’Brian 3).

Friel’s playwrighting career can be mapped out in three general stages. The first stage can be defined as “Theatre of Character” (O’Brian 53). His first legitimate success, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* enjoyed international attention; it was well received in both Ireland, where it premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1964, and abroad in London and New York (“Friel, Brian” par. 6). The rest of the decade saw *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), *Lovers* (1967), and *Crystal and the Fox* (1968), (“Brian Friel” par. 4) all display a “rapidly developing dramaturgical mastery” on Friel’s part (O’Brian 4), and all are primarily character driven (O’Brian 53). These plays also cemented his fictional locale of Baile Beag (Ballybeg), which serves as the setting of virtually all of his plays (O’Brian 28).

The Mundy Scheme (1969) marks a “completely new direction” in Friel’s work (“O’Brian 4), which O’Brian labels as the “theatre of fact” or “theatre of criticism” (87). Although Friel had previously said he remained objective in regards to the political and religious tensions in Northern Ireland between the Catholics/Nationalists and Protestants/Unionists, he could not remain objective for much longer: tensions exploded on January 30, 1972 in Derry with the killing of thirteen civil rights protestors by British troops;

*Ulster”, as a traditional term, refers to the original nine counties of the province: “Antrim, Down, Armagh, Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan.” Since 1921, Ulster has become an administrative term for the six of those nine counties which remained with the Crown. (Darby 1 note). Throughout this paper, “Ulster” will mean the geographic region, and Northern Ireland will be used in regards to the administrative nation.

Friel's 1973 production of *The Freedom of the City* is a dramatization of this tragedy, which became known as "Bloody Sunday", and its extensive aftermath (O'Brian 4). *Volunteers*, which followed in 1975, "delves more deeply into the condition of modern Ireland", examining connections "between violence, culture and redemptive humanism" (O'Brian 83). *Living Quarters* (1977), *The Aristocrats* (1979) return to Ballybeg but are no less critical of the world because of it (O'Brian 87-8).

Then came the advent of Friel's "theatre of language," wherein "words have become both the form and content of his dramas"(O'Brian 96); these include *the Faith Healer* (1979), *Translations* (1980), *Three Sisters* (1981-a translation of Checkov's drama *Three Sisters*), *The Communication Cord* (1982), and *Making History* (1988) (O'Brian 97-117). The last twenty years have seen another ten plays, some well received, others less so; some of the more successful include *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1999), and *Afterplay* (2002) ("Brian Friel" par. 4).

Field Day Theatre Group

With the creation of *Translations* came the beginnings of the Field Day Theatre Group, which was co-founded by Stephen Rea and Friel and was first to produce *Translations* in 1980 (Regan 25). "Organized around an ambitious, politically motivated cultural program", the company's primary concern is "with the images and myths that have shaped the national consciousness [and] helped form the prejudices that divide the country today" (McGrath 534). Over the years, however, Field Day has brought other respected Northern Irish writers, such as Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin into the fold (McGrath 534) and expanded their mission to embrace a "contemporary epistemological orientation that governs the different writers' images of Ireland, especially the way those images are created through language"(McGrath 535). Starting in 1983 and ending in 1988, Field Day published a series of pamphlets, by a wide range of authors which analyzed the language, mythology, history, nationalism, imperialism, all through the lens of Ireland's political/social state, both past and present (Regan 28-36). Despite criticism which has labeled the group as "a green activity," (meaning that it holds nationalistic sympathies), Field Day avows they have "resisted any monolithic version of nationalism", citing their efforts to examine nationalist rhetoric and mythology as a

hindrance to unification, not a remedy (Regan 26). Essentially, the company's earnest wish is to carve out "space in which it might be possible to contemplate a settled existence beyond the brutal realities of the past twenty years" (Regan 26).

Past Productions

Translations was performed first by the Field Day Theatre Group at the Guildhall in Derry, Ireland on September 23, 1980 (O'Brian 102) to extreme reverence; "no Irish play since the 1920's has been granted so quickly the status of a national classic" (O'Toole par. 3). Friel himself has said the play was "'treated much too respectfully' and that there was too much 'pious rubbish' written about it" (O'Toole par. 3). *Translations* has since been produced internationally numerous times.

Translations opened in Australia at the New Theatre on October 30, 1997 in Newtown, a suburb of Sydney. The play's director, Alan Docker interpreted the play to be very much a commentary on imperialism and colonialism that offers a positive outlook for the victim society. As he said to the Sydney Morning Herald writer Judy Adamson, "He's [Friel] expressing regret for the imposition made on one rich culture by, I suppose, a disrespectful but more powerful presence...He's optimistic rather than bitter. I think if anything [the play] is a tribute to the enduring qualities of the Irish culture" (Adamson par. 6-7). He also remarked on how the "point of the play is one of tolerance, really" (Adamson par. 17) and that Friel doesn't attempt to answer any questions; rather Friel works to establish a realistic picture in all shades of gray (Adamson par. 16). In regards of production, Docker spoke of how wonderful an experience working on the play has had so far been for the cast (Adamson par. 15-16). In particular, they had been working hard to get "a handle" on the accent, because "there's no point rendering a text in an accent if the audience can't understand it" (Adamson par. 14).

Translations has appeared at the Manhattan Theatre club two times since the 1980's. The first production opened on April 14, 1981 under the direction of Joe Dowling, the artistic director of the Abby Theatre (Rich par. 2). Frank Rich of the New York Times reviewed the show and felt the play's structure failed to support the weighty material Friel was working with; he described the play "flounder[ing]" in the first

act, and “trailing off into an underwritten apocalypse” in the third act, and the characters and relationships as “ill defined” and “only vaguely sketched in” (Rich par. 7-8). He also criticized the production elements: Rich was unimpressed with the costumes (he describes one of the costumes as being “woven of peat moss”) as he was with the less-than-convincing accents and general acting performances (Rich par. 8, 10). However, Rich did appreciate the portrayals of Yolland and Hugh, finding the former to be sweet and charismatic while the latter was rustic and funny (Rich par. 9-10). He also admits that while he wishes Friel had more “follow-through” in regards to his intentions in the play, he acknowledges there is respect in “leaving the audience hungry for more”(Rich par. 11).

More recently, a revival played at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 2007, (“Language Barrier” par. 12) under the direction of the Irish Garry Hynes (Allen 39). Unlike previous New York productions, Hynes chose to use a no-name-ensemble cast, who “function[ed] smoothly together as equals”(Allen 40). Though a commercial risk, such a choice was certainly more in tune with the style of the play (Allen 40). Brooke Allen, who reviewed the production, was disappointed with the “stagey *Irishness* of the piece”, though she could not distinguish if Friel or Hynes deserved blame for such a tone (Allen 40). She was discouraged by Hynes’ falling back on “tired theatrical conventions,” which gave the piece a severely unjustified non-realistic aura (Allen 40). However, she recommended audiences attend regardless of such drawbacks because “it is a good and important play” that is relevant to not only today, but most any “historical moment” (Allen 40).

Historical Context – 1833

1. Politics:

Ireland in 1833 was a colony of the British Empire and was experiencing a resurgence of nationalism (Foster II 263-4).

a. Ordnance Survey: Although the Ordnance Survey didn’t officially begin its work until 1824, it was established as a task to be completed by the Board of Ordnance in 1791. Officially called “The Townland Survey of Ireland”, the purpose behind the expenditure was twofold: first, it was necessary to have an accurate map should the French decide to invade; second, inequities in taxes deemed a need for an

unprecedented knowledge of place names and boundaries. The project employed some two thousand men supervised under the Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery, who were in turn under the direction of Colonel Thomas Colby. The project, which wasn't completed until 1846, and even then revisions continued due to increased value to local government, landowners and tourism (Ferguson par. 1-4).

2. Religion:

The Catholic Emancipation occurred in 1828-9 (Kingon 137). The campaign was spearheaded by the New Catholic Association, provoking "great alarm in the Irish Protestant press but no immediate anti-Catholic counter-campaign in Ulster" (Kingon 138). As tensions grew, people began to fear the Catholics would "not stop at emancipation: Catholic relief would eventually and inevitably result in Catholic hegemony"(Kingon 145). But it still was not until October of 1828 did the Ulster Protestant elite decide to take action against the movement (Kingon 141) by forming various clubs which were limited to propaganda and petitioning (Kingon 143). However, these efforts failed, as on February 5, 1829 the Catholic Emancipation was officiated by the King (Kingon 152).

Also, it should be noted that Catholicism is responsible for establishing the tradition of learning the classics, like Latin, alongside Gaelic studies (Boyle 200).

3. Economics:

Ulster was industrialized by Britain, giving them great profit (Foster II 263). The economy itself for the whole island was rather unbalanced as a result of the introduction of English within the National System of Education. More rural, remote locations where schooling was limited typically depended on the resources at hand (fish, turf, etc.) while more densely populated areas, where English was more common, depended on migratory labor and industry (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 453).

4. Ethnicity/Nationality

a. Linguistic Imperialism: In order to further the Irish from their national identities and assimilate them into the British empire, the Mother Country implemented a strategy of "linguistic imperialism". As noted by Maureen Hawkins, language defines human experiences and behavior; should one party or nation relinquish control over language to a more dominant party, they're "aboriginal language/experience/identity"

will be violently destroyed (Hawkins par. 3). Thus, translating names, (i.e.: Ordnance Survey) abstractly translated ownership from the native peoples to the colonizers (Hawkins par. 7). Although the anglicizing of Irish place names was standardized during the years of 1824-46 under the Ordnance Survey, re-naming had unofficially begun long before that with the Anglo-Norman invasion (Williams par. 7).

b. Irish Language: The National System of Education introduced English to Ireland and it quickly became the language of economics and politics. Also, the national system failed to give instruction on the Irish language, so as successive generations went through school, the Irish language influence weakened severely (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 452).

c. Stereotyping: Overall, the Irish peasant was viewed to be a vulgar being compared to the “proper Vicotrian Englishman” (Baker par. 1). In particular, “Catholic peasantry in this period [were] often presented as a humble and peaceable people misled by priests and agitators” (Kington 146).

4. Cultural Issues:

a. Education: Irish education underwent several changes between the 16th and 19th centuries. Primary, or parish schools, were established by Henry VII and secondary, or Diocesan schools were founded by his daughter, Elizabeth I. The Stuarts during their reign implemented “Royal Schools”. All these school systems shared a similar curriculum centered on the classics. But these schools only reached a small fraction of the population (McDowell 59). In the 17th century, Catholic children were dealt a severe blow “with the overthrow of Gaelic society....and the enactment of penal laws that bore particularly hard on Catholics” literally made it “illegal for them to conduct schools or to educate their children aboard” (Boyle 195).

Beginning in the 18th century and continuing on into the early 19th century a national underground school system thrived; they were called “hedge schools” or “pay schools” (McDowell 60). Weather permitting, these impromptu classrooms were set up under the shelter of a hedge (McDowell 61), although as time went on and the penal laws gradually slackened, more permanent locations, like a barn, were employed (Boyle 195). Payment varied; one could board the teacher, pay money (Milne par. 2) or barter with goods like eggs or turf (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 448). Curriculum covered the three R’s, (reading, writing and arithmetic)(Boyle 196) and, depending on the master, other subjects as well such as “history, geography, Latin

and Greek”(Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 448). Though the hedge-school system was not sanctioned by the crown, it certainly was surprisingly uniformed across the nation (McDowell 60): of the 11,000 schools that existed in Ireland in 1824, 9,000 of them were hedge schools (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 448), meaning 4 out of 5 children attended them. However, hedge schools began to decline after the Education Act of 1831 was passed, establishing an attractive, government-sanctioned National System (Dixon 136).

“Designed to support the British cultural assimilation policy for Ireland,” the National System of Education was established in 1831 to “provide literary education for the poorer classes” (Source P 450-451). The National System is noted for having “brought about a marked increase in literacy in English” and printed high quality textbooks which were used internationally (Boyle 198). This new education system called for a mix of religious backgrounds in students, faculty and staff, although religious teaching would be segregated by denomination (McDowell 67). But it also “effectively erased the Irish language, history, and culture form the curriculum” (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 451). Despite outside criticism from various churches (McDowell 67-68) (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 451), the system took root and “the number of national schools rose from 789 in 1832 to 6,520 by 1867” (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 451).

b. Land Distribution: The average Irish person did not live in a village; such a term refers to an English settlement pattern. Instead, Irish people populated townlands, “a term for which there is no English equivalent” (Boyle 200). Land was a very important facet to the Irish people’s lives. Standards of living were relatively low, as almost half of farmers in the 19th century lived off of less than five acres. Those who lived off the land maintained some sense of security, but those paying rent on a cabin with no land attached to it lived in a precarious position (McDowell 44-46). Small plots of land meant small homes: almost half of farmers in 1841 lived in a one-roomed cabin. These cabins were built with local materials like turf, stone, and wickerwork. Windows were either a cut out square in the wall or non-existent; glass was very rarely used (Raftery, McDermid, and Jones 47-49).

c. Clothing: Low quality cloth or homemade frieze were the textiles available to the lower classes in the early 19th century. Laborers typically wore “a shirt, waistcoat, trousers, boots, stockings, and a frieze body

coat,” while a woman typically wore “a cloak, dress, petticoat, shift, cap and apron”; she also tended to go without shoes, keeping one pair nice for Mass and trips to the market (McDowell 49-50).

Historical Context – 1980

1. Politics/Religion:

a. Northern Ireland and The Troubles: “When the rest of Ireland won its independence in 1921, the North with its Protestant majority chose to remain under the Crown” (Ardagh 348). Over the next forty years, Northern Ireland’s government (colloquially called “Stormont”) was predominantly Protestant/Unionist and Catholics were treated like second-class citizens in regards to education and job opportunities (Ardagh 348-349). Additionally, the local government awarded votes by property, not population, and thus the Catholics had almost no voice (Darby 21). Rising frustrations through the 1960’s led to the 1968 Catholic civil-rights movement and the beginning of sectarian riots (Ardagh 348-349), and between the years of 1969-1976, 1,800 people died due to sectarian violence (Stevenson 19).

In 1969 the British Government’s responded to the crisis by “introduce[ing] a series of reforms which, in essence, were aimed to establish a series of institutions to guarantee equality of treatment and freedom from discrimination for the Catholic community”(Hillyard 35). However, the Provisional IRA and the new Ulster Volunteer Force, both populated by the young generation, began to engage in guerilla warfare tactics against each other (Stevenson 16-17), and British troops were brought in steadily over the next three years (Ardagh 349). On January 30, 1972, tensions came to a head when thirteen unarmed civilians were killed by paratroopers in Derry; this event is known as “Bloody Sunday” (Ardagh 349). By 1974, Britain had imposed a permanent direct rule over Northern Ireland: “it set up its own administration in Stormont, creating twenty-six new local district councils with extremely limited powers...and itself took over responsibility for town planning, housing, health, education and much else “(Ardagh 349).

Though it’s true that political violence dropped drastically after 1976, averaging “only eighty-six deaths annually through ...1994,”(Stevenson 20), terrorist activities continued (Ardagh 350), especially on the loyalists side, as they felt threatened by growing Catholic equality (Ardagh 352). Eventually, the Anglo-Irish

Agreement was signed in 1985 (Ardagh 350-351) and the Loyalists issued a ceasefire in October of 1994 (Stevenson 20).

When one reads about the Troubles of Northern Ireland, the two sides are often named “Catholic” and “Protestant”, but such labels are misnomers. True, Protestant/Unionist/loyalist and Catholic/Nationalist/republican are taken as synonyms, but there are “nuances in both cases”(Ardagh 346-7). It’s also ignorant to assume the Troubles were motivated by religious differences alone. As Billy Mitchell, an ex-UUVF member explains:

“If you take Catholicism and Protestantism as spiritual entities, you should expect the Catholics would be more amenable to being subjected. I mean it’s a totalitarian church where certainly all the lines of communication come down through the Pope—you should have a subjected people, who are used to being subjected. Protestants should be more radical, more innovative, more risk-taking, and more devil-may-care. But it doesn’t work like that”(Stevenson 24).

The conflict is “less about religion than nationality, territory and political power, laced with sheer gang warfare” (Ardagh 346). However, the religions are inevitably tied up in the politics: it’s rare for a Catholic to vote for a Unionist, or a Protestant for a Nationalist. This tendency is typically accredited to the sense of loyalty that tribal families foster (Ardagh 355), but also one must consider the psychological implications Northern Ireland’s colonial state has had on her citizens. Religion acts now in a “micro-behavioral” fashion, according to Mitchell; it is “something working away at the back of the mind that molds the whole person.”(Stevenson 24). History supports this statement: The Protestant community as far back as the nineteenth-century chose to remain loyal to the British in part to set themselves opposite of the Catholic native (Foster II 264); over time, (and especially since Direct Rule) the Northern Irish Protestants has found themselves in an colonized-colonizer relationship with the British (Foster II 271), and has come to define themselves against the Catholic, cultivating a co-dependence that makes agreement difficult to impossible (Foster II 266-267).

2. Economics:

Northern Ireland, while economic stability was achieved in the 1960's took steps backwards in the next decade due to losses in agriculture and industry coupled with increases in government spending (Simpson 109).

3. Ethnicity/Nationality:

a. Irish Language: In 1923, the newly independent Irish Republic called for Irish to be taught in all schools and that it once again serve as the state's official language. Until the 1970's, examination tests were issued, regardless of the school system; these tests served as a requirement to go on to higher education and certain jobs. Naturally, the severity of these measures inadvertently dissuaded younger generations from embracing the language. Once the tests were dropped, however, Irish literature experienced resurgence (Corcoran 8-9).

In Northern Ireland, since the old Stormont government was disbanded, attitudes towards Irish have become less hostile, although it's still championed by the Catholics more so than the Protestants. The 1991 census showed 20% of Catholics spoke Irish and it is taught in Catholic schools and all-Irish primary schools. The Sinn Féin has taken to promoting the language as well, using it as a political tool against British rule. (Ardagh 430), but not all nationalist hold ownership over Irish and believe it belongs to nationalists and loyalists alike (Ardagh 430-431).

b. Stereotypes: A prominent feature of the English Victorian era was the concept of "Antithesis," which led to the creation of absolute divisions between sexes, genders, ethnicities, cultures, etc. Accordingly, the English have several stereotypes of Ireland which have survived from this era, including "barbarism...pastoral beauty, emotional spontaneity and spiritual idealism" (Foster 220).

4. Cultural Issues:

a. Historiography and Mythology: Two pamphlet writers of the Field Day Group stand out for their commentary on Irish historiography. In *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea* (aka Pamphlet No. 4), "Seamus Deane claims there are two dominant ways of reading Irish literature and history: the Romantic way and the Pluralistic way" (Foster 217). The Romantic way is championed by William Yeats, and Deane refers to it as a

form of “cultural nationalism” irrevocably dependent on an Anglo-Irish political connection and results in creating the “romantic mystique of Irishness” (Foster 218). On the other hand, James Joyce’s writing defines “separatism” or “cosmopolitan pluralism” which embodies nostalgia for “the lost vitality of community” and often centers on dislocation (Foster 218). Deane views these two styles to be the extreme ends of a rhetorical dialectic and laments the Irish’s inability to find the middle road when recording personal and national histories (Foster 218).

Furthermore, Richard Kearney in *Myth and Motherland* (aka Pamphlet No. 5) notes the “republican movement” functions in two distinctive languages: the first being that of romanticized “tribal voice of martyrdom”, which is set deeply in “Gaelic, Catholic, [and] nationalist tradition” (Regan 29), and the second being “the secular discourse of military action, political electioneering and social work” (Regan 29). Kearney vocalizes the warning that Deane only implied: “We must never cease to keep our mythological images in dialogue with history; because once we do we fossilize” (Regan 30).

Thematic Analysis

1. Existing within a shifting linguistic landscape:

Translations explores three ways in which people react when the familiar linguistic landscape shifts: the first is translation; the second is to mythicization; the third is silence.

a. Translation: The majority of the play’s action involves characters struggling to overcome language barriers through translation. An instance of literal translation can be seen in act one when Owen is called upon by Captain Lancy to translate his explanation as to what the Ordnance Survey is and what it means for the native peoples. Owen translates Lancy’s pretentious syntax into a simpler form, making his meaning more accessible to the country folk he’s addressing:

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

...

Owen: A new map is being made of the whole country.

Although Owen is not translating each word, he is translating the literal meaning of Lancy's speech.

However, later on in Act Two, Lieutenant George Yolland and Owen are working to translate geographic names and they find literal translation fails them. Consider "Bun na h'Abhann," which literally translates to mouth of the river (Friel 1434). After reviewing options passed down by jury lists and church registries, they choose a word that *sounds* like the original: "Burnfoot" (Friel 1434-5). While not a literal translation, it is a sensory translation; they are achieving to encapsulate the same spirit of the place within the sound of the words, not the roots of them.

A third form of translation demonstrated in the play can be found in the second scene of Act Two, when Yolland and Marie Chatach attempt to hold a conversation in two different languages. Their conversations are essentially monologues which overlap, as neither one can discern what the other is saying. However, what connects these monologues and makes them dialogue is the physical aspect of their speech. Each character reacts to the other's physical voice; both Yolland and Marie (at different times, of course) beg the other to continue: "Say anything at all. I love the sound of your speech" (Friel 1442). Furthermore, the couple's relationship reaches its climax in this scene due to escalating instances of physical nearness. They hold hands at the top of the scene, suggesting a foundational understanding of each other's feelings. Upon speaking, they break away, drifting to opposite ends of the space. But as they're words overlap, they close the space between them, climaxing in a kiss. Clearly, while they understood nothing of the other person's words, they achieved genuine communication through the physical reaction to them.

b. Mythicization: The second way Friel's characters choose to exist within a changing linguistic landscape is to reject the change's existence and thereby transcend to a state of mythication. That is to say, they commit themselves to their native language exclusively and effectively fossilizing themselves. Hugh recognizes that words are not immortal, and that "a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of...fact" (Friel 1438). Jimmy Jack is an illustrious example of this result: though he is trilingual, all of his languages (Latin, Greek, and Irish) are either extinct or endangered. He exists in his own reality; though he functions in the real world, as his attendance at the hedge school or trips to the pub demonstrate, he also believes wholeheartedly that he is marrying the Greek goddess

Athena (Friel 1448). He is effectively trapping himself in a dying language by refusing to attempt translation, and thus his reality resembles the fossilized culture of the classics.

Another instance which illustrates a prescription to mythicization is Owen and Yolland's argument over the translation of "Tobair Vree"(Friel 1438). Owen explains that the name originally was Tobair Bhriain, and it was named such because a man named Brian drowned in the well some century and a half ago (Friel 1438). And while Owen finds folly in remaining loyal to a name when the original intention behind it is unknown by the general populous, Yolland insists the name be preserved. Yolland's desire to stay loyal prevents evolution, which is essential for a language to remain active and alive; preservation is but a step away from fossilization.

c. Silence: Language is not the just a vehicle of communication, but also of concealment (Lojek 86). "The ultimate protection of privacy...is lapsing into total silence"(Lojek 87). The character of Sarah represents such protective silence. Burdened with the pain she's caused Manus and the inevitable mistreatment at the hands of the British, Sarah attempts to protect what identity she has left by taking refuge in silence (Lojek 87). Furthermore, Doalty remains silent regarding the Donnelly twins location or activities, even though it's strongly suggested they are engaged in guerilla warfare against the British and are the ones responsible for Yolland's disappearance. Though these two silences are motivated by different factors, they both speak volumes that mere sounds or words could never achieve, because silence exists in any language; it is the common element between all linguistic landscapes. The audience understands the tragedy of both Sarah's loss and Doalty's avoidance and connects to their implications on an instinctual, not an intellectual level.

2. Power of Naming:

A secondary theme found in *Translations* is the examination of the power which the naming process wields. Owen in a fit of ecstasy exclaims "We name a thing and—bang!—it leaps into existence!"(Friel 1440). Truer words could not be said. Act two, scene one is the clearest example of the awesome power which naming offers to whoever handles it. By renaming the various geographic places in and around Baile Baeg, Owen and Yolland are, to a degree, conquering them (Hawkins par. 7). Owen regards the process to be one

of “standardization” (Friel 1434), but his brother Manus recognizes it to be a form of eviction, as the names are being “changed”(Friel 1434). The geography no longer belongs to the Irish people if it can be discussed in another language (O’Brian 105-106).

Owen, though, is ignorant of these consequences and considers language to be independent of existence (O’Brian 105), although Friel suggests an alternative is more likely. This short-sightedness is best displayed in his allowing the British to mispronounce his name as “Roland” (Friel 1434). Manus is horrified that Owen accepts a false name, but Owen shrugs it off: “Easy, man, easy. Owen—Roland—what the hell. It’s only a name. It’s the same me, isn’t it?”(Friel 1434). And, if Owen prescribes to the philosophy that physical presence trumps linguistic labels, his father Hugh embodies the opposite. At the play’s conclusion, he admits “We must learn those new names...We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home” (Friel 1448). Hugh recognizes that language defines reality, and to continue living in it one must adapt. After all, as Hugh has already warned, “a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of...fact” (Friel 1438).

Character Analysis

1. Hugh Mor & Jimmy Jack Cassie

“Hugh and Jimmy [are] the two characters in the play who for all their verbal sensitivity and etymological interest in translation have the least active or effective contact with their immediate world” (O’Brian 107). Hugh Mor is the father of Manus and Owen as well as Baile Baeg’s hedge-school master. A perpetual drunk who exerts an obvious mastery over etymology and classical languages, he straddles “tradition and change” (O’Brian 108). He is, by all accounts, the only character fully capable of understanding the consequences of both the Ordnance Survey and the establishment of a National School. However, he is also the least capable of taking action, as his extensive knowledge is ancient and has rendered him to be nothing more than an artifact (O’Brian 107-108). Such a tragedy is symbolized in his drunken state. Friel writes that Hugh is “experienced in drunkenness: there is a portion of his mind which retains it’s

clarity”(Friel 1447). While he can think clearly, his body is intoxicated; so too can he recognize the tragic consequences that are to come but he is incapable of taking action.

Hugh’s relationship with his children also reflects this fossilization process. He has literally crippled Manus by falling on his cradle, and metaphorically crippled him by keeping him at home, paying him pittance to aid his classes and serve him soda bread and tea. Owen too, is hindered by his father as he is next in line to care for him when Manus flees to Mayo (Thorne par. 20-21). Can not this relationship be viewed to represent that which lies between the Irish language and the people who speak it? They are indebted to the language for their identity yet it renders them immobile.

Jimmy Jack Cassie, too, has a clear understanding of the classics but unlike Hugh, cannot see the consequences of the play’s events. An old man who never bathes and is constantly speaking of the Greek goddesses as if they were women in the marketplace, he is “ill-equipped to face the challenges of his own time”(Baker par. 15). He is blinded by his worshipful love of the classics which effectively “denies the validity of Irish experience” (Hawkins par. 6). His nickname, “the Infant Prodigy” is ironically fitting. He is a prodigy in scholarly terms, sure, but he is an infant in that he has no foresight and a thin grip on reality.

2. Lieutenant George Yolland & Owen Mor:

Lieutenant George Yolland and Owen Mor serve as foils against each other and reflect conflicting interpretations of Irish mythology and/or history. Yolland is a “soldier by accident” (Friel 1432): A shy, lanky, blonde man, he falls in love with Ireland and her people, and it’s implied he is murdered by the Donnelly twins between acts two and three. Yolland exists within a Yeats’s romanticism: He associates the beauty of the Irish language with Marie. He is intoxicated with his idealistic impressions, just as he is intoxicated with Anna’s poteen (Friel 1441). He describes Ireland to be an Eden of sorts, and wants nothing more than to settle in Baile Baeg. Owen, on the other hand, reflects a more Joycean view of Irish history. A young man in his twenties, he left Baile Baeg six years previous and established nine “big shops in Dublin” (Friel 1431); he self-describes his current position as a “part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter. My job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (Friel 1432). Owen’s visible enthusiasm for anglicanizing his Irish landmarks reflects his dislocated state, and it’s not until

the play's end that he gives into his nostalgia and goes out in search of the Donnelly twins, seemingly to join them in their violent efforts to preserve their culture.

Yolland and Owen also have conflicting control over themselves and their fates. Yolland is seen to be a pawn of fate: he was supposed to be in Bombay but, because he missed his boat, ended up in the army who happened to post him in his current position. He has little control over his relationship with Marie, as he cannot speak her language, so can only hope that she understands his intentions. The manner of his disappearance too, is suggested to have been beyond his control. Owen, contrastingly, has total control over his life. He left home, certainly a rare accomplishment, judging by the other characters, and made himself a wealthy man. He chose to come back with the army, he chooses the English names his homeland will be given and, through translation, chooses what each party hears from the other. Perhaps Friel is suggesting two modes of action the Irish people have; they can passively accept whatever may befall them or they can take control and make active decisions. If such is the case, then the play's finale makes it clear Friel prefers the latter.

3. Manus Mor & Marie Chatach

“[S]low Manus is partnered with hasty Marie” to illustrate divergent attitudes towards the English language. Manus, though he speaks English, is aware of the threat it poses to his livelihood, at least to some degree. His awareness is personified in his attitude towards Yolland. He refuses to speak English in front of him, and the tenuous acquaintanceship they establish at the end of act two, scene one is decimated when he learns of Marie and Yolland's kiss in the field. He flees from Baile Baeg at the play's conclusion out of fear that he will be suspected for having a hand in Yolland's disappearance. If one considers Yolland to represent the English language, then it's clear that Manus resents its authoritative presence. Marie, on the other hand, yearns to learn English because she sees it as a necessary skill for survival (Friel 1430). Her fascination with Yolland stems from the fact that he speaks the language Marie believes will solve all her problems; she speaks of his speech as being “nice sounds, like Jimmy Jack reciting his Homer” (Friel 1446). Even at the play's conclusion, with Yolland presumably dead, she continues to indulge the false hope that he will return and she waits for him with his name-book on her knee (Friel 1449). Unlike Manus, whose faith in English is broken,

Marie is blinded by her desperate need for a savior and continues to be faithful, even though English does precious little more for her than Jimmy Jack's Latin or Greek does.

4. Doalty and Bridget

Doalty is an “open-minded, open-hearted, generous and slightly thick young man”, and Bridget is a “plump, fresh young girl, ready to laugh, vain, and with a countrywoman’s instinctive cunning” (Friel 1426). Both provide much needed comic relief and add to the general banter of the dialogue but more importantly act as soothsayers regarding Ireland’s near future. Doalty, though not bright, cares deeply for his homestead and vows to not be evicted without a fight (Friel 1447). Though he keeps his lips shut regarding the Donnelly twins’ activities throughout the play, it’s clear that he is privy to their actions when he tells Owen to come find him when he leaves his post with the British army, because he “might know something then”(Friel 1447). One could interpret Doalty to embody the defensive fervor that raged through the Irish under the Britian’s overbearing hand and that led to the Easter Rising of 1916, which in turn led to the emancipation of Ireland in 1920. Or, more likely, Doalty mirrors nationalist sentiments of the Catholics during the Troubles. Bridget, likewise, is prophetic in her assumption that the “sweet smell” she detects means a potato blight is imminent (Friel1447); though she is put to ease by the exclamation that the scent is from the army’s camp burning, audience members would recognize that the play occurs some 10 years before the famous Potato Famine that to this day has crippled Ireland’s population (Ardagh 69), and would see that Friel is implying that Ireland will suffer more blows in the near future.

5. Sarah & Lancy

Sarah Johnny Sally and Captain Lancy sit at opposite ends of the communication spectrum. Lancy never has difficulty speaking, although he understands nothing that occurs around him, as his monolingualism and general insensitivity prevents him from connecting with the native folk of Baile Baeg. Sarah, silent, seems to have a complete knowledge of her town’s circumstances and the forthcoming injustices Lancy’s men will inflict on them if Yolland isn’t found. Lancy depends on Owen to be understood by the populous but Sarah can trust in her unshaped sounds and gestures to communicate her thoughts. The confidence Sarah gained at the plays opening dissipates with Manus’s lack of attention, and the growing threat

of the English; when Lancy asks her to tell him her name at the end, she finds she cannot (Friel 1446). According to Baker, Sarah's "position symbolizes victims of imperialism who lose their language, and consequently, their identity" (Baker par. 6). On the other hand, Lancy's insecurity displayed through his slow speech and over-articulation in the opening is shed by the closing when he threatens the town with animal slaughter and eviction. Even in regards to status, they are opposites: The waif-like, seventeen-to-thirty-five year old Sarah is accepted as the town's dummy, and Captain Lancy is a middle-aged, crisp, high-ranking officer.

Modern Day Relevance

Translations effectively employs the process of historicification to capture universal themes within a mythical history, and consequently sheds light onto present-day issues. Central to all Friel's writings, especially *Translations*, is the concern of "man in society, in conflict with community, government, academy, ...and essentially in conflict with himself" (Ardagh 255). With this humanitarian core, *Translations* continues to be relevant beyond its birth date, namely in the realm of politics, language, and history.

a. *Translations* as a political allegory: There are many elements of *Translations* which lend it to be interpreted as a political allegory for the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The primary evidence for such an interpretation is found at the play's conclusion, when Hugh recites a quote from book one of the Aeneid, which is the record of the city Carthage, which was annihilated by the Romans. "Carthage lives in infamy as the society that sacrificed its own children" in its revolution against Rome (Hawkins par. 25). If considered an allegory to Northern Ireland, Rome is equated to Britain and Carthage to the Irish people. Moreover, the Donnelly twins could within this context can be interpreted as the Provisional IRA (Corcoran 7). The Donnelly twins, though never seen, are endowed with an ominous presence, and react to the British presence with guerilla warfare. The audience, like Hugh, is endowed with a dual vision: though they can see that the Donnelly twin's violent acts will only beget more violence, they cannot help but sympathize with Doalty and Owen and understand why they go off and join the twins (Hawkins par. 31). Yet the audience, prompted by Hugh's tale of Carthage, realizes too that eviction is preferable to violence; "After the Romans were through

with Carthage, no Carthaginian language or culture...survived” (Hawkins par. 28). Eviction would allow a remnant of the old culture to be preserved, whereas violence completely decimates it (Hawkins par. 28). Friel is implying that gang-violence is but a temporary solution that will inevitably lead to the complete destruction of the Irish culture and language. The Irish people should cease sacrificing their children for a forsaken cause and should instead look for peaceful solutions to maintain their culture under a colonist influence.

b. *Translations* as a response to the language question: “Many Irish nationalists now seek a return to their roots...[and] the desire of some to reclaim their native language of Gaelic, as opposed to the English imposed on them ... has created what has become known as the language question” (Baker par. 2). Nationalists are distressed by the loss of Gaelic because they view language and identity to be intrinsically linked; Manus personifies such a belief when he expresses shock over Owen accepting a false name from the British Army (Baker par. 16). However, Friel proposes that the real issue is not language but communication (Baker par. 21). Yolland recognizes that while he could learn the Irish language, he could never truly be assimilated into the culture: “Even if I did speak Irish I’d always be an outsider here, wouldn’t I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won’t it? The private core will always be....hermetic, won’t it?”(Friel 1437). Yolland understands that it’s not the mechanics of a language, but the linguistic nuances, which distinguish one culture from another. Likewise, then, the Irish who have been forced to adopt English must recognize it is within their ability to make English their own (Baker par. 23). Friel demonstrates this possibility by writing his play in English! The English that the Irish characters speak is understood to be Irish, and is manipulated differently than the English spoken by the British characters. Herein lies the irony: Friel is “using the primary tool of oppression as a means of ... liberation” (Baker par. 27). He is showing that “the Irish may speak English and still be Irish,” because “culture is not dependent on language; rather, language depends on culture” (Baker 23).

c. *Translations* as a post-modern view of language and history: Friel’s belief as to what “history” is can be found in the character of Hugh, who voices that “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language” (Friel 1448). It is known that Friel prescribes to the concept of language’s primacy in shaping human experience; “nothing, physical or mental, precedes language”

(McGrath 536). Also, Friel defines a fact to be “something that happened to me or something I experienced” (McGrath 537). Friel therefore finds “reality is something we create out of our fictions” (McGrath 537). Consequently, his loyalties when writing a historical drama do not lie with the facts. As Friel articulates, it’s important to “acknowledge those facts or ideas [of history] but not to defer to them. Drama is first a fiction, with the authority of fiction. You don’t go to *Macbeth* for history” (Barry, Andrews and Friel 123-4).

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