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Language and Politics in Brian Friel's Translations

"A fundamental irony of this play is that it should have been written in Irish."
— Brian Friel (Magill, 1980)

The première of Brian Friel's Translations was a momentous occasion. Performed on 23 September 1980 in Derry's Guildhall — the same building that is the setting and symbol of Unionist domination in Friel's earlier The Freedom of the City — Translations was received by its first night audience with intermittent applause and a standing ovation. That the standing ovation was led by an Official Unionist councillor and several members of Derry City Council and that Friel's play deals with Anglo-Irish conflict and the decline of the Irish language under the impact of colonialism makes this, the first performance of Translations, an extraordinary and important event. The contrast with The Freedom of the City is unavoidable: whereas the earlier play mordantly satirizes Derry's ruling Unionist bureaucracy and provoked controversy in its London and New York productions because of its alleged attack on the British system of judicial and military authority in Northern Ireland, the production and initial reception of Translations suggests an entirely different phenomenon. Michael Sheridan in The Irish Press described it as "a watershed in Irish theatre"¹ and Irving Wardle, reviewing the London production in May 1981, argued that Friel's play was "a national classic" comparable to O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars.²

Funded by both the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaion, Translations is also important as the first venture of Field Day Theatre Company whose stated objective was a search for a solution to the Northern Ireland crisis through a cultural "fifth province" that would transcend political differences.³

3. See Friel's comment to Fintan O'Toole: "I think it [the Field Day project] should lead to a cultural state, not a political state. And I think that out of the cultural state, a possibility of a political state follows. That is always the sequence." Brian Friel, "The Man from God Knows Where: An Interview with Brian Friel." With Fintan O'Toole. In Dublin, October 1982, p.21.
initial, almost unanimous, praise for Translations — described by Seamus Deane as Field Day's "central text" — suggests one way in which this venture might be considered a success. Indeed, for many in the early nineteen eighties, the appearance of Field Day, and the production of Translations in particular, suggested the beginning of improved relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic. An editorial in The Irish Times summarized this concisely when it described the Derry première as a welcome reminder of an essential Irish unity "across time and territory."

Yet despite the praise that Translations received in its Field Day and London productions, the play has since become the subject of critical controversy because of its treatment of nineteenth-century Irish history and the supposed relevance of this to the present situation in the North. Two directly opposing views are advanced. On the one hand, Seamus Heaney,6 Seamus Deane7 and Kevin Barry8 argue that the play's achievement lies in its de-mythologizing of traditional conceptions of Irish history in a way that offers a healing potential for the violent conflict in the North. In Heaney's words, Friel diagnoses "the need we have to create enabling myths of ourselves and the danger we run if we too credulously trust to the sufficiency of these myths."9 Thus, Heaney concludes, Translations, like Friel's fourteen preceding plays, "constitutes a powerful therapy, a set of imaginative exercises that give her [Cathleen Ni Houlihan or Ireland] the chance to know and say herself properly to herself again."10

But for Edna Longley,11 Sean Connolly,12 and Brian McAvera,13 Translations is seriously flawed because it endorses, rather than questions, traditional nationalist conceptions of Irish history and in

10. Ibid.
particular the notion of Ireland as a once Gaelic-speaking utopia. For these critics, the play expresses a nationalist political perspective because it exaggerates the repressiveness of the British military and because it ignores any direct consideration of militant Irish Republicanism. Connolly and McA Vera point out, for example, that the Ordnance Survey in Translations is portrayed as an almost Cromwellian military force with fixed bayonets and powers of eviction, whereas all published historical accounts, including the account in J.H. Andrew's A Paper Landscape upon which Translations is based, indicate that the principal motive for the Ordnance Survey in Ireland was economic (land valuation) and that the soldiers involved in the Survey were strictly forbidden any involvement in evictions or putting down civil disturbances. "Translations," Longley argues, "refurbishes an old myth": "The play does not so much examine myths of dispossession and oppression as repeat them."

Indeed despite Friel's own hints that the espousal of a nostalgia for a lost Gaelic Ireland was not his intention in Translations, diary entries written at the same time that Translations was being composed record a recurrent uncertainty as to the political connotations of the play. Moreover, Friel's writing of The Communication Cord (1982), a farce that lampoons nostalgia for a lost Gaelic and Edenic Ireland, and his description of it as a conscious "antidote" to Translations, suggests a certain recognition that the earlier play may indeed have evoked a nostalgic view of history despite this being contrary to the principal elements of its design.

This essay argues that radical divisions in the critical commentary on Translations have arisen because of the existence of conflicting meanings in the play. It goes on to discuss how the internal tensions of Translations arise not because of "a confusion in the Irish psyche", as one recent study of Friel's plays proposes, but because of

15. Ibid., p.28.
16. See Friel, "The Man from God Knows Where", p.21: "Translations . . . was offered pieties that I didn't intend for it."
19. Ibid., p.21.
assumptions about language and identity that are particularly evident in the play's portrayal of the Irish language. The exclusion of the Irish vernacular in the play is not merely a convenient theatrical convention, but is crucial to the play's political effect.

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The time and place of Translations — rural Ireland on the eve of the potato famine and the introduction of English as an emerging dominant vernacular — is one that is emotionally and politically charged. For contemporary Irish audiences in particular, it suggests a nationally distinctive way of life that was about to disappear. Indeed, as Seamus Heaney has remarked, an important feature of the play is the extent to which it draws on traditional characters such as the red-coated soldier (Lancey and Yolland), the shawled girl or Cathleen Ni Houlihan figure (Sarah — a partially dumb woman whom Manus is teaching to speak), the hedge-schoolmaster (Hugh) and traditional motifs such as eviction, potato blight and poteen. The principal complication of the action occurs when Yolland falls in love first with the place and the Irish language and then with Maire, a local woman betrothed to Manus. After their first and only meeting as lovers, Yolland mysteriously disappears. The audience does not find out what has happened to Yolland, but there are several hints that he has been abducted and probably killed by the Donnelly twins (who never once appear in the play) as part of an ongoing guerilla war against the British. In the final scene Lancey retaliates by threatening to destroy the entire area if Yolland is not found. The play ends therefore with a situation very similar to the present conflict in Northern Ireland: an escalating war between the British Army and the guerilla tactics of Republican paramilitaries.

Moreover, insofar as the first act shows a confrontation between an economically impoverished but educationally superior indigenous Gaelic culture and an imperial, but philistine, English military, the play appears to confirm traditional views on nineteenth-century Irish history much more than it challenges them. Popular nationalist sentiment is appealed to, for example, when, in the middle of Lancey's patronizing lecture on the purposes of the Ordnance Survey, Jimmy Jack inquires politely, "nonne Latine loquitur" (30), and Lancey replies that he does not speak Irish. As The Sunday Times reviewer pointed out with some annoyance, Lancey — supposedly a well-educated British Army captain — is not

22. Brian Friel, Translations (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp.58-9, p.63. All future references to Translations will be to this edition and will appear in parenthesis.

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even capable of recognizing Latin.\textsuperscript{23} The Baile Beag hedge school may be set in a context of a deteriorating economy (the opening stage directions describe the school as littered with "\textit{broken and forgotten implements}" (11)) and may face the anglicizing effects of the Ordnance Survey and the new National School, but, at least in Act 1, these threats are countered by the wit and subversive ingenuity of the locals. The atmosphere at the beginning, then, is one of optimism and exuberance; of an Irish national culture surviving despite severe economic and political disadvantage.

But to consider, as some commentators do, that the nationalist appeal of the first act is an indication of the tendentiousness of \textit{Translations} as a whole is to ignore an extensive irony. Hugh's scorn for English, for example, is spoken in English which the audience, through a dramatic convention, understands as Irish. Thus, while Hugh's teaching is based on the view that Gaelic culture and the classical culture make "a happier conjugation" (25), his actual formulation of this view consists of an etymological pedagogy that demonstrates the opposite: that it is English, not Irish, that has extensive roots in Greek and Latin. It is not the etymology of Irish words that Hugh is constantly asking his pupils to conjugate and recite, but English words such as "baptise" (\textit{baptizein}), "perambulations" (\textit{perambulare}), "verecund" (\textit{verecundas}), "conjugation" (\textit{conjugo}) and "acquiesced" (\textit{acquiesce}). Hugh may declare that the English language is particularly suited "for the purposes of commerce" (25) and that it makes poetry sound "plebeian" (41), but this is contradicted by his own ostentatious delight in iambic rhythms, alliteration and words that are polysyllabic and latinate.\textsuperscript{24}

As the play proceeds, this irony becomes increasingly apparent, as does the audience's and Hugh's own awareness of it. In Act 2, Hugh pontificates extravagantly on the aristocratic closeness of the Irish and classical cultures — "I'm afraid we're not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island" (41) — but is described by the stage directions as conveying an impression of "\textit{deliberately parodying himself}" (40). When Yolland shows no signs of recognizing the self-parody in Hugh's remarks and Owen becomes embarrassed by it, Hugh responds to Yolland's enthusiastic apostrophes for Gaelic culture ("I understand it's enormously rich and ornate" (42)), not with


\textsuperscript{24} Connolly, who criticises \textit{Translations} on the grounds of historical inaccuracy, misses the irony altogether. For Connolly, Friel's depiction of the hedge school is "a somewhat dubious venture since Irish, the language he is supposedly speaking, has far fewer words of Latin origin than English, the language of Friel's text." (Connolly, p.44)
approval and agreement as some of Hugh's earlier comments might lead us to expect, but with repeated cautions and qualifications. He warns Yolland that part of the attraction of the Irish language and literature is that it has tendencies towards quixotic fantasy and self-deception:

Hugh: Indeed, Lieutenant. A rich language. A rich literature. You'll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. I suppose you would call us a spiritual people. (42)

Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception — a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to . . . inevitabilities. (42)

Remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen — to use an image you'll understand — it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact. (42)

Hugh's point, formulated in phrases that echo and in some cases quote directly from various passages in George Steiner's After Babel, is that the attractive richness of Gaelic culture exists in direct correspondence to the context of material impoverishment from which it arises.25 That Hugh's caveats are delivered with much the same self-indulgent panache as his tossing back of Anna na mBreag's poteen is an irony that the excited and semi-intoxicated Yolland is unable to detect.

An association between quixoticism and Gaelic culture is further suggested by the exchange immediately following this. Owen argues that since the name "Tobair Vree" bears an entirely arbitrary relation to its referent (a local crossroads) and since he is the only one in the area who remembers its derivation (an erosion of Tobair Bhríain), there is therefore no reason, except romantic nostalgia,

why the name should not be "standardized" as "The Cross" or "The Crossroads". Yolland, however, remains obdurate that the name would remain as it is. The irony, intended or not, is that not only is "Tobair Vree" itself an anglicization, since traditionally the letter "v" is not used in the Irish alphabet, but that "Tobair Vree" is also a phonetic impossibility since the Irish language would never lose a final nasal consonant in the manner that "Tobair Vree"/"Tobair Bhriain" implies. A similar irony is evident at the beginning of Act 3 when, in the case of "The Murren", Owen decides on aesthetic grounds ("Very unattractive name, isn't it?" (54)) to revert to the original: the "original" that he chooses is the English "Saint Muranus", rather than "Naomh Muirenn" or "Cill Muirenn" which would be its literal Irish equivalents.26

But the idea that retaining "original" names is romantic folly and a form of self-deception is countered by a persistent suggestion in the play that names also have an ontological importance that cannot be replaced. Immediately after Owen explains that the name "Tobair Vree" bears an entirely arbitrary relation to its actual referent and that to insist on its preservation is sentimental, Owen then contradicts his own theory by insisting that his own name is not "Roland" but "Owen". Names may be accidental, the play seems to imply, but they also have a private significance that cannot be so easily dismissed. One of the clearest illustrations of this is Sarah slowly articulating her name in the play's opening scene and the association of this process with the beginnings of optimism, love and self-confidence. In Act 3, when Sarah loses the ability to pronounce her name, she is described as "more waiflike than ever", (54) as if her physical identity is itself beginning to disappear. As with Martin Heidegger's Poetry, Language, Thought,27 a brief passage of which is quoted in the Field Day programme,28 there is a strong suggestion that naming and belonging or dwelling are processes that are inextricably related. As Richard Kearney points out in his analysis of the Heideggerean conception of language that dominates Translations, Friel's play "deals with the ways in which the consciousness of an entire culture is fractured by the transcription of one linguistic landscape (Gaelic and classical) into another (Anglo-

26. It is interesting to note that no such saint exists in the entire lexicon of Irish saints and that no such place-naming convention, using simply the formula Naomh + saint's name, exists in Irish topography. For these points I am indebted to Professor Anne Dooley, Celtic Studies, St Michael's College, University of Toronto.


Saxon and positivist.)"29

This ambivalence towards the Irish language (Heaney describes it as "a mixture of irony and elegy")30 is returned to in the final scene. Here, Hugh abandons completely his earlier exclusive commitment to Irish by lecturing Owen on the importance of accepting the new anglicized place-names and by volunteering to teach Maire English. Again in terms that echo Steiner's After Babel,31 Hugh draws an analogy between Owen's repudiation of the Name-Book ("A mistake, my mistake — nothing to do with us" (66)) and Jimmy Jack's proposal to marry Pallas Athene:

Owen: I know where I live.
Hugh: James thinks he knows too. I look at James and three thoughts occur to me: A—that it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that discrimination.
Owen: Don't lecture me, Father.
Hugh: B— We must never cease renewing those images; because once we do we fossilise. . . . (66)

The implication of Hugh's remarks is that Owen's apostatic commitment to the idea of an autonomous Irish-speaking culture and Jimmy Jack's pathetic fantasies have a similar basis: both fail to recognize a distinction between history as fact and history as narrative. Jimmy Jack shows this myopia in a belief that the gods and goddesses of classical mythology actually exist; Owen shows it because of his assumption that the Gaelic place-names of the area represent a cultural permanence that must not be changed. Both positions, moreover, may be considered as attempts to resolve or to compensate for an impoverished and isolated condition that results, not in an improvement of that condition, but in the sure guarantee that it will continue. So long as Jimmy Jack chooses goddesses rather than real women, then the companionship that he is longing for will never be found. So long as Irish history is thought of in terms of a loss of an original purity that may be recovered and so long as this purity is regarded as fact, then the present and future will be condemned to a series of violent repetitions. In this way the conflict between the mysterious Donnelly twins and the British Army in Act 3 is presented by Doalty as an echo of earlier situations ("When my grandfather was a boy they did the same thing" (63)) and is

29. See Kearney, p.24.
31. See Steiner, p.29.
presented by the play as a whole as a prefigurement of Northern Ireland today.

An association of Irish nationalism with an avoidance of the physical and the immediate is also suggested by Hugh's description of heroically setting out for the 1798 rebellion and then opting out of the uprising because of what he considers is the more enduring reality of the domestic unit:

Hugh: We were gods that morning, James; and I had recently married my goddess, Caitlin Dubh Nic Reactainn, may she rest in peace. And to leave her and my infant son in his cradle — that was heroic, too. By God, sir, we were magnificent. We marched as far as — where was it? — Glenties! All of twenty-three miles in one day. And it was there, in Phelan's pub, that we got homesick for Athens, just like Ulysses. The desiderium nostrorum — the need for our own. Our pietas, James, was for older, quieter things. (67)

Like Jimmy Jack's commitment to classical mythology, the militant heroics of the 1798 rebellion — an event central to Republican mythology — are presented here as a substitution of abstractions and goddesses for the quotidian actuality of the domestic or, as Hugh describes it, "the desiderium nostrorum — the need for our own" (67). One way, then, in which the play's development may be considered is in terms of the audience's gradual recognition of this substitution in the course of the action. Whereas in Act 1 Hugh brusquely dismissed Maire's request to learn English so that she might emigrate to America and earn enough money to subsidise her family at home, Hugh now volunteers his services as an English teacher as if in a realisation of the inevitability and priority of this. And whereas in Act 1 the three stalwarts of the hedge-school — Manus, Hugh and Jimmy Jack — were shown as blind or indifferent to the exigencies of the domestic, the outcome of these attitudes in Act 3 is Manus's hurt rage at Maire's relationship with Yolland, Jimmy Jack's pathetic revelation that he is lonely and, in Hugh's case, the recognition that an exclusive commitment to Gaelic culture is a mistake. The effect of Translations may be considered as the very opposite to that of W.B. Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1903): set on the eve of the 1798 rebellion, Yeats's play advocated men's abandonment of bourgeois domesticity in the name of a Republican Ireland embodied as a goddess.

32. Friel's Irish is curious at this point. "Nic" is normally reserved for surnames beginning with a vowel or lenited S, F, D.
Hugh's speeches in the final scene offer a radically different perspective on the version of nineteenth-century Irish history presented in Act 1. The earlier, nationally attractive contrast between a rich indigenous culture set against a deteriorating economy and a repressive British military now appears as a more complicated relation in which the richness of Gaelic culture can be seen as a quixotism that contributes to economic decline. In short, the ending of Translations suggests that it is precisely because of the exuberant idealism of the hedge-school that its setting is characterized by broken and forgotten implements" (11) and "no trace of a woman's hand" (11). In this context and in the context of the polarized military conflict of Act 3, Hugh's proposals that the English language be accepted suggest a corrective alternative.

Yet while an acceptance of the English language is proposed by Hugh as an alternative to what is seen as the celibate heroics of Irish Republicanism, there is also a definite impression that this will involve an ontological loss. Hugh tells Maire that he will provide her with "the available words and the available grammar" (67) but then qualifies this by adding that he has no idea whether this will allow her to interpret "between privacies" (67). It is not enough for the English place-names to be accepted, Hugh lectures Owen, they must also be made "our own . . . our new home" (66). Irish nationalism is here defined by Friel not in the traditional terms of militant Republicanism but, like Hugh's unfinished syllogisms, as an open-ended cultural project. The uncertainty and unexpectedness of the play's conclusion — the lights are brought down while Hugh is in mid-sentence trying to remember a line from Vergil's Aeneid — reinforce this sense of plangent uncertainty. Does an acceptance of the English language imply the demise of an Irish national identity or does it imply the possibility of its renewal? Does the "ancient city" loved by Juno represent Ireland or England? That Translations ends with more questions than it does answers seems to impress firmly on the audience Hugh's insistence that "confusion is not an ignoble condition" (67).

But the conclusion of Translations also raises a number of problems. If the movement of the play in general, and Hugh's final speeches in particular, are designed to call attention to the extent to which both history and fiction are "images of the past embodied in language", why then does Translations conceal the extent to which its own version of history is itself a construction? Unlike the effect of the deliberate anachronisms in other contemporary history plays, such as Edward Bond's Early Morning (1968)34 or Caryl Churchill’s Cloud

the consistent naturalistic setting and dramaturgy of *Translations*, together with the extensive historical references in the programme notes for the Field Day, London and Abbey productions all convey an impression that the version of nineteenth-century Irish history presented by the play is grounded, unproblematically, in fact. In short, the play's attempt to show history as "images of the past constructed in language" (66) conflicts with the manner in which the play is presented.

A further, but related problem, is that Hugh's proposals for adaptation seem theoretical and almost facetious when they are considered in the context of Lancey's impending attack. Indeed, Jimmy Jack and Hugh bear a disconcerting similarity to Joxer and Boyle at the end of *Junot and the Paycock;* the impression in both cases is that of drunken pontifications made in the face of disaster. Longley argues convincingly that Hugh appears more as a dreamer in this scene whereas Owen (whose ambiguous exit she interprets as a reversion to potentially violent tribal loyalties) is the practical man of action:

Owen: And C, Father — one single, unalterable 'fact': if Yolland is not found, we are all going to be evicted. Lancey has issued the order. (66)

The major weakness of Hugh's proposal for cultural recovery, then, is that it does nothing to alter Baile Beag's or Ireland's position of political and economic dependency; on the contrary, it seems to concede the inevitability of this. Even if Lancey's eviction and levelling are not carried out, the audience knows that rural Irish-speaking Donegal will continue to decline and Maire, and people like her, will still and do still have to emigrate in order to make a living. Setting *Translations* in the period immediately before what is conventionally understood as a natural disaster — the potato famine of the eighteen forties — and which was followed by emigration on the scale of a Diaspora, reinforces this sense of historical inexorability. The play's audience is left with a choice between a form of paramilitary action which is shown as a destructive "madness" (p.67) and an alternative proposal for adaptation that appears to be both quixotic and an elegaic recognition of political powerlessness.

Similar to *Translations* in terms of their formulation of a choice between a destructive politics and an apparently facetious

alternative are *The Freedom of the City* (1973) and *Volunteers* (1975). In the earlier play, Skinner responds both to Brigadier Johnson-Hansbury's ultimatum and to Michael's demand that Skinner explain his political beliefs by plunging a ceremonial sword into an official portrait.\(^{38}\) Skinner's actions seem facetious and irresponsible but, in the light of Lily's telling him earlier that she participates in Civil Rights marches out of an irrational desire to cure her mongoloid son\(^{39}\) and Skinner's recognition that political formulae are always a distortion and an approximation, facetiousness is the only form of authentic action that remains. In *Volunteers*, Keeney is asked what is to be done about the likely impending execution of the prisoners when they return to the internment camp and then responds by proposing the reburial of the skeleton Leif.\(^{40}\) Keeney's eschewal of any political course of action is consistent with this play's persistent suggestion that politics, especially the politics of Irish Republicanism, makes volunteers into victims. In contexts such as these, all that can be done in the face of apparently imminent disaster is a repudiation of the symbols of the historical situation that oppresses them: the portrait of the Unionist dignitary and the skeleton of Leif. Yet by the same token, Skinner's "fooling" and Keeney's "antic disposition" are powerless to change anything. As with *Translations*, the only alternatives to a political action that is shown as destructive are symbolic gestures without efficacy.

This has long been recognized as an important feature of Friel's plays in general with different explanations advanced for it. Fintan O'Toole, for example, argues that Friel's later plays are an exploration of "the Catholic mind — a mind with no clear grasp on a positive reality" — and implies that it is this that accounts for their tendency "to split off into competing responses, each of which is somehow incomplete."\(^{41}\) Deane, on the other hand, notes that a characteristic of Friel's plays is their concern with "a divorcing of power from eloquence"\(^{42}\) and argues that this feature exists as a comment on the tendency in Ireland to mythologize history as a way of compensating for a materially impoverished present.\(^{43}\) The most recent and most extensive study of Friel's plays to date, Ulf Dantanus's *Brian Friel: A Study*, argues that Friel's plays are an exploration of the Irish "inability or refusal to escape internal...

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39. Ibid., p.78.
43. Ibid., p.12, p.18.
division to reach strength in unity, and the reason behind this, a failure to arrive at a definition of a national identity."44 In relation to *Translations*, Dantanus states, "The confusion of the language problem [in *Translations*] is only one aspect of the identity crisis we are still witnessing today."45 Finally, Nicholas Grene argues that scepticism towards political commitment and a failure to find an alternative constitutes "a distinctive theatrical tradition"46 in modern Irish drama. Grene demonstrates how such a formulation is evident in *The Freedom of the City* and argues that the frequency of such "distancing drama" is due to the particular nature of Irish history:

In distancing us from the drama of politics, in presenting it with the obliqueness of ironic perspectives, in focusing on the victors and the survivors, they create a powerful tragicomedy out of the tragicomic history of Ireland.47

Each of these theories has in common the belief that the association of politics and tragedy in Friel's plays is a response to a condition that is deleterious and characteristically Irish. The final section of this essay considers an alternative explanation: that Friel's association of tragedy and politics arises as the result of assumptions about language and identity that are particularly clear in *Translations*.

3

These assumptions are evident in the play's treatment of the Irish language. That Irish appears in the play exclusively in terms of place-names and that spoken English represents the Irish vernacular conveys an impression that the two languages are semantically equivalent. Indeed, so successful is this technique that David Rabey's recent survey of contemporary British and Irish political drama contends that *Translations* demonstrates the reassuring existence of an "all encompassing understanding" between the two nations since it involves the audience in both Irish and English communities "by enabling them to understand the language of both, as does Owen."48 Indeed, the Irish vernacular is strikingly absent.

45. Ibid., p.160.
47. Ibid., p.69.
Whereas in *The Gentle Island* there are several Irish sentences, which would be understood without difficulty by most audiences in Ireland, no such sentences exist in *Translations*. Instead, the translation problems within the play occur not because of linguistic differences, contrary to what Dantanus repeatedly insists, but because of the differences between the individuals involved. Thus, Owen's "translation" of Lancey's lecture on the Ordnance Survey, for example, is not really a translation at all but a particular, diplomatically or propagandistically motivated, interpretation:

*Lancey:* This enormous task has been embarked on so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the Empire.  
*Owen:* The job is being done by soldiers because they are skilled in this work.  
*Lancey:* And also so that the entire basis of land valuation can be reassessed for purposes of more equitable taxation.  
*Owen:* This new map will take the place of the estate-agent's map so that from now on you will know exactly what is yours in law. (31)

Owen alters Lancey's meaning not because linguistic difficulties make it imperative for him to do so but because Owen is trying to make the official reasons for the Ordnance Survey more palatable to the locals. He does this simply by changing what Lancey says. Owen is less a translator than he is a public relations man.

The difference between languages in *Translations* is presented simply as a matter of signifiers, of the sounds or written images of words. It is the sound of Irish that is shown to have the potential both to exercise a delusive intoxication and express the privacy of individual identity. In the scene between Yolland and Maire in Act 2, for example, listing the Irish place-names of the area achieves a mesmeric aural effect that allows Yolland and Maire to move closer to each other in a way that did not happen when they attempted to communicate with each other in English. The Irish place-names, free of all signified or conceptual meaning, constitute an ideal erotic language since they allow the lovers, Maire and Yolland, an impression of both communication and self-confirmation: in the words of the stage direction, "Each now speaks almost to himself/herself" (52). Yet the sense of unity created here is delusive because it conceals radically different priorities: Yolland wants to live "here", "always" with Maire whereas Maire wants to live

49. See Dantanus, Brian Friel, pp. 183, 189, 190, 193.
with Yolland, "anywhere" "always" (52). Indeed, the romanticism of the scene as a whole is underlined by the crescendo of an Irish reel at its beginning and end and by the guitar music throughout.

Language in Translations is constituted as a system of names for a world of identities that exists clearly and unambiguously outside of language. One result of this is that just as the play's naturalistic dramaturgy conceals the extent to which the characters and action are fictional and constructed in language, so also does the idea of language as a nomenclature conceal the extent to which meaning and identity are themselves constructed in language and can thus vary from one language to another. It is therefore illuminating that Friel's one condition for the translation of Translations into Irish was that the entire text, including the speeches of the British soldiers, should be done into Irish.50 The presence of the Irish language as a vernacular in Translations, or of the English language as a vernacular in the Irish translation of the play, might have radically altered this impression. It might, for example, have revealed the way in which different languages articulate the world in different ways,51 a point that may be clearly illustrated by the impossibility of directly translating the Irish colour spectrum into English. The Irish words "glas" and "uaine", for example, cannot simply be translated as green since "uaine" is an inclusive term for green whereas "glas" refers both to green and to certain shades of grey. Consideration of such conceptual differences, entirely absent from Translations, undermines the idea that language is a transparent vehicle for a world of identities that already exist. It suggests, rather, that meaning is the effect of the difference between one term and another in language.

Instead, the theory of language in Translations derives from George Steiner's idea that language is inextricably related to an essential privacy. For Steiner this applies as much to different cultures and historical epochs as it does to individuals, so that translations between languages can be seen as a metaphor for the

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50. For this point I am indebted to Reverend Professor Brendan Ó Doibhlin of the National University of Ireland at Maynooth University College. Rev. Professor Ó Doibhlin, who translated Translations into Irish, distinguished the speech of the English soldiers from that of the locals by having the soldiers speak the stilted standard language of a modern learner of Irish and by having the rest of the play's characters speak the typical dialect of Irish as still spoken in Co. Donegal.

51. Desmond Fennell touches briefly on this point when writing about the decline of the Gaeltacht. For Fennell, the disappearance of the Irish language as a vernacular (a process which he accepts as inevitable) also entails a semantic loss and the loss of particular economic and political structures. See Desmond Fennell, "The Last Years of the Gaeltacht" in Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (editors), The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977-1981) (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982), pp.839-40.
same process that takes place between individuals, so that Steiner insists, translation and interpretation are synonymous since each involves the loss of an original plenitude and neither is ever complete:

Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuations and inference. Neither do two human beings. Each living person draws, deliberately or in immediate habit, on two sources of linguistic supply: the current vulgate corresponding to his level of literacy, and a private thesaurus. The latter is inextricably part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they may be verbalised, and of the singular, irreducibly specific ensemble of his somatic and psychological identity.52

Friel's elaboration of this point is the play's persistent suggestion that as many difficulties will be involved in interpreting between "privacies" in one language as would be involved in a translation between two. Privacy, according to these assumptions, is something which can never be fully expressed.

The portrayal of language in Translations thus reinforces the impression that authenticity resides in an essential privacy that can never be fully represented in Irish or in English, but which is realised in terms of the domestic. The sclerotic feature of Irish-speaking culture is presented as a quixoticism that undermines the domestic by ignoring the physical and the immediate and by substituting goddesses and political abstraction for the family. But if the domestic is presented by the play as the location for the realization of private identity, one problem suggested by the ending is that maintaining the family involves an acceptance of a political and economic situation that threatens it: Lancey's impending attack and Maire's emigration. A similar irony is evident in The Freedom of the City and Volunteers. In The Freedom of the City, Lily's authenticity is shown as her inability to objectify and thus change the situation of poverty that oppresses her. This is Lily's tragic perception and the "tiny truth" that she refers to in her direct address to the audience in Act 2:

52. Steiner, p.46.
Lily: I thought I glimpsed a tiny truth; that life had eluded me because never once in my forty-three years had an experience, an event, even a small unimportant happening been isolated, and assessed, and articulated. And the fact that this, my last experience, was defined by this perception, that was the culmination of sorrow. In a way I died of grief.53

For Keeney in Volunteers, fidelity to the complexity of the self involves a simultaneous recognition of political powerlessness, and thus the only authentic form of action available to him is the facetiousness of his "antic disposition." For all three plays, remaining true to the self and the possibility of political engagement are a contradiction in terms. Translations provides a valuable illumination of this conundrum insofar as it shows that the maintenance of this view of the self depends on concealing the extent to which identity is itself a construction. That the Irish language in Translations appears only as place-names is not fortuitous, but is crucial to the play's conception of identity as existing outside of language and social relations. It is this particular notion of identity, and not any innate characteristic feature of Ireland or Irishness, that sustains the play's forceful impression that the loss of the Irish language is a regrettable, but insuperable, necessity.