

Translations: *a Movement Towards Reconciliation*

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Abstract: *This article proposes a postcolonial reading of Brian Friel's Translations, understanding it as piece of work that presents a way out for Ireland to reconcile with England, its colonizer. It has taken the major theoreticians in postcolonial studies as premise to read the play as a place of hybridity.*

Keywords: *Brian Friel; Translations; hybridity.*

Brian Friel was part of a group of six Northern artists¹ who responded to the unsettled political situation in the country after the partition of Ireland in two states. This group was the Field Day Theatre Company, which set out “to contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation.”²

Their most significant proposition was the idea of an Irish “fifth province,” one that would be added to the four geographical provinces of Ireland (Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster). This “fifth province” would not be a physical place, but would be a province of the mind: one capable of transcending the oppositions of Irish politics, a place where all conflicts are resolved. In order to constitute such a location each person is required to discover it for himself and within himself. According to Friel the fifth province is “a place for dissenters, traitors to the prevailing mythologies in the other four provinces” “through which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland” (qtd. in Gray 7).

For the Field Day Company the reinvention of Ireland should be the moment when everything from politics to literature should be re-written. Elmer Andrews writes that,

if the individual and the world are substantially (though not entirely) constituted through language and if, therefore, ‘identity’ and ‘reality’ are fictional constructs which continually elude full representation, then there is always the possibility that both the individual and the social reality in which he is inscribed can be reinvented. To effect such a re-creation was precisely the challenge taken up by the Field Day Theatre Company. (Andrews 164)

The plays produced by the Field Day Company asked its audience to “unlearn” the Ireland they knew, “the received ways of thinking about it and to learn new ones” (Ibid). And it is precisely on this issue of unlearning and learning that *Translations* rests, a play considered by Seamus Deane to be Field Day’s central text. It is also relevant to add that it was the company’s first production, being performed in Derry in September 1980. Coming on stage in the most troubled times of Northern Ireland’s modern history, *Translations* immediately became a huge success because it explores a moment of cultural transition and social reinvention; the re-generation epoch that the Irish population had been longing for.

The plot develops in the imaginary townland of Baile Beag (located in County Donegal) where an Irish-speaking community lives. The time is late August, 1833, “a setting that symbolizes a major transition in Irish culture” (McGrath 180).

Hugh, Manus, Sarah, Jimmy Jack, Maire, Doalty and Bridget experience the moment of transition from a strictly Gaelic culture into the English ethnocentric praxis – culminated by the arrival of Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland. These two officers, accompanied by Owen (Hugh’s son and Manus’s brother), are supposed to map and re-name Ireland, standardizing it, Anglicizing the Irish places so they become recognizable to the other countries of the commonwealth.³

The most relevant historical event identifiable in the play is the Ordnance Survey. It began in 1824 and was to be carried out by the British Army Engineer Corps. Their task consisted in mapping and renaming all the Irish country, in order to produce a six-inch map (an assignment that was completed by 1846).

Mary Hamer explains that:

In one sense, the famous Ordnance Survey project in Britain could make no intervention in the cognitive mapping processes of the Irish, for the Survey officers were not themselves creating a new environment, only recording a given one. But the very process of their record involved some modification on that environment: ancient boundaries were not always left undisturbed; place-names were anglicized, either directly or more subtly by the attempt to arrive at spellings that looked acceptable to an English eye. So an official Ireland was produced, an English-speaking one, with its own ideology of Irish space (188).

The intrinsic relation between language and land is one of the strongest aspects of *Translations*, in which the re-naming of places represent not only a new way of reading their home, but a new way of living in Ireland and of being Irish.

Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of translation as a “place of hybridity”, where the final source of meaning “is neither the one nor the other” (2010, 2362), illustrates the central idea of the play. However, before deepening this analysis, it is important to understand the context in which *Translations* is inserted: one of the most critical moments of Irish History. The 1833 setting was not only the time when the island was being re-named, but was also the years that followed the implementation of the National School System

in Ireland (1830): when the Hedge-schools were being substituted by institutions that taught only in English.

By adding real political, social and economic events to its plot, *Translations* becomes a re-writing of history, an alter-native perspective of the cultural adjustments that were being imposed on the Irish society. But to read the play from a historical point of view is to admit that Friel did distort some truths when composing it. Many critics have claimed that he has exaggerated when describing the repressiveness of the British military. The dramatist was even accused of “transposing Cromwellian notions into a nineteenth century framework” (McAvera qtd. in Gray 8).

J.H. Andrews (1983), however, was one of the few who defended Friel’s handling of reality. The historian does agree that Friel was not always historically accurate, but believes that the dramatist was interested in a different kind of truth apart from the facts. Andrews writes that *Translations* is “an extremely subtle blend of historical truth and some other kind of truth” and is constituted by “a set of images that might have been painted on screen, each depicting some passage from Irish history” (122).

We must consider that a possible synonym for the word “translation” is the word “version”. Hence, by entitling the play *Translations* Brian Friel may be saying that he is providing us with ‘versions’ of Irish history. By placing the plot in 1833, he provides to his audience a pre-partition ambience, a time when Ireland was still united. At the same time, the setting epitomizes the precise moment when the living Gaelic culture is about to be Anglicized, a moment of transition and translation, of inexorable movement from Irish towards English; or, as we will see in the following pages, from Irish to Anglo-Irish.

In this analysis, it is fundamental to consider the social upheavals that Northern Ireland had been experiencing since it seceded from the Irish Free State. The nationalism that can be found in *Translations* can be understood by the peoples of both countries, which undeniably share a wretched past. But although the play seems, inevitably, to contain political elements – “it has to do with language and only language.” Brian Friel (1982) believed that “if it [*Translations*] becomes overwhelmed by the political element, it is lost” (58).

The moment reflected in *Translations* is one of a crisis, a moment of transition from Gaelic to English. Still, the play’s greatest irony is that it was written in English intended to be understood as Irish. This inventive device not only requires the audience to understand that the characters are performing acts of translation but also impels the spectators to perform acts of translations themselves. In other words, the beholders of a *Translations* performance are not allowed to be passive.

According to Michael Cronin (1996), Brian Friel transmits to his audience that translation is their contemporary condition. He writes that “time and change have meant that it is no longer possible for a painless, unproblematic shift back to the originary Eden of Irish” (199). And this is the reason why Friel’s intentions are directed into turning *Translations* in a play that deals only with the matter of language, refusing to write simply about “a group of Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers” (*ibid.*). The Irish dramatist’s main concern is with the difficulties of “interpreting between privacies”

(Friel 2001, 446) – for the play must concern itself only with “the confrontation of the dark and private places of the individual soul” (Friel 1982, 60).

In Friel’s own words, his plays are concerned with “man in society, in conflict with community government, academy, church, family – and essentially in conflict with himself” (Ardagh 255). The plays were not intended to be political, although politics inundates almost all of them. However, he is aware of the many failures of the political imagination of Ireland and thus seeks to find some sort of consolation in an alternative imagination, which he does not achieve.

Seamus Deane explains that the search for such an alternative was what brought Friel to understand the role of art in a broken society. The idea starts at the assumption that in Irish drama, brilliance has always been achieved linguistically. Friel’s uniqueness comes from his comprehension of Irish temperament and talk as being highly related to desolation and to the sense of failure. This understanding, combined with historical circumstances, dictates the individual behavior of the characters. Therefore, his art becomes political to the degree that it is caught dazzled by its own linguistic medium.

The man in Friel’s plays is a private man with a public message. He is “exploring the condition of Ireland, and the themes that re-emerge are those of emigration, loneliness, the breakdown of authority, the individual dislocated from family or society, generally in the setting of remote rural communities – the imaginary Donegal village of Ballybeg” (*op. cit.* 256).

Maire is the strongest voice of modernity in the play. She desires by all means to learn English in order to evade from Ireland by emigrating to America. It is very interesting to notice that her attitude towards the people of Ballybeg. Maire complains that the Irish have “connived in their own victimization” and are a people who are ‘always complaining, always expecting the worst’ (Andrews 1995, 173).

It must not be forgotten that *Translations* also makes reference to another extremely critical moment of Irish history: the Great Famine. It was a period of mass starvation caused by the potato blight, reducing Irish population by ¼, either by disease or emigration. The play alludes to the potato blight by the ‘sweet smell’, which, whenever brought up, caused profound disquiet in the characters. Maire, on the other hand, does not share their evident preoccupation. In fact, she is very critical on this issue:

Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag? Well, did they ever – ever? Never! There was never blight here. Never. Never. But we’re always sniffing about for it, aren’t we? – looking for disaster. The rents are going to go up again – the harvest’s going to be lost – the herring have gone away for ever – there’s going to be evictions. Honest to God, some of you people aren’t happy unless you’re miserable and you’ll not be right content until you’re dead! (Friel 2001, 395).

As we all know, history contradicts Maire. The potato blights of 1845 – 1848 stoke Ireland with immense force and got it unprepared, unable to defend itself.

Emigration was the only possible solution for Irish people to escape death. By denying any concern with the possibility of blight in Baile Baeg, by accusing her classmates of making themselves as victims, saying that “some of you people” seek happiness in a miserable reality, she puts herself out of their group. Maire establishes a clear distance between herself and the inhabitants of Baile Baeg, she is not one of them anymore. Her strong desire to learn English and to leave Ireland place her on the side of the “colonizers”, who believe English must be learnt because it is the language of progress and modernity. In Elmer Andrews’s words, “the serpent has already entered the Gaelic Eden before the arrival of Lancey and his men” (Andrews 1995, 171).

This arrival is a turning point in the plot, because Lancey not only brings his troops to translate the place-names and compose the Anglicized map, but also brings Owen back to his birthplace. “I can’t believe it,” he says, “I come back after six years and everything’s just as it was! Nothing’s changed! Not a thing!” (Friel, 2001: 402).

Owen is a key figure in the play, because he is an Irishman who has had considerable contact with English language and culture before going back home. He re-encounters his so long forgotten culture by returning to Baile Baeg as a translator for the British Army. His translations, as the play allows us to perceive, induce him to re-discover his own “Irishness.”

Owen is one of the few characters who “change sides” during the play. In the beginning he strongly defends the Anglicization of Baile Baeg (which becomes Ballybeg in the map), claiming that his “job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (Friel 2001, 404).

The reader immediately realizes how poorly Owen performs this job, though. When requested to translate Lancey’s first announcements to the native population, Owen distorts and oversimplifies what the Englishman is saying. Apparently, only Manus is aware of what is happening at that moment, that Owen is concealing the truth through acts of translation, omitting that the British Army’s presence in their town was an actual military operation. The dialogue between the two brothers, which closes the first act of the play, clearly illustrates the tension between the two languages:

MANUS: What sort of translation was that, Owen?

OWEN: Did I make a mess of it?

MANUS: You weren’t saying what Lancey was saying!

OWEN: ‘Uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry’ – who said that?

MANUS: There was nothing uncertain about what Lancey said: it’s a bloody military operation, Owen! And what’s Yolland’s function? What’s ‘incorrect’ about the place-names we have here?

OWEN: Nothing at all. They’re just going to be standardized.

MANUS: You mean changed into English?

OWEN: Where there’s ambiguity, they’ll be Anglicized.

MANUS: And they call you Roland! They both call you Roland!

OWEN: Shhhhhh. Isn't it ridiculous? They seemed to get it wrong from the very beginning – or else they can't pronounce Owen. I was afraid some of you bastards would laugh.

MANUS: Aren't you going to tell them?

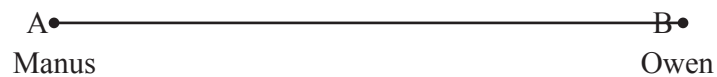
OWEN: Yes – yes – soon – soon.

MANUS: But they...

OWEN: Easy, man, easy. Owen – Roland – what the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? Well, isn't it?

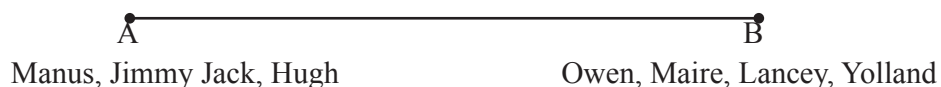
MANUS: Indeed it is. It's the same Owen.

If the plot could be transported into a geometric shape, a line for instance, the two brothers represent the two vertices, the two extremes: **(A)** the Gaelic and **(B)** the English culture. Illustrating the idea we have:



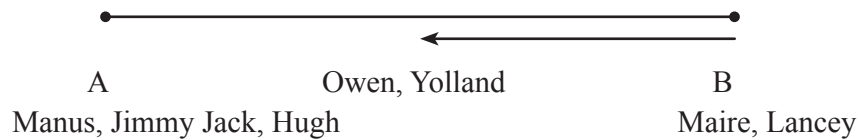
But to assume that there are two vertices is to understand that there are two distinct groups in the play. It is from this apparent division that the analysis of *Translations* will be based on from this point onwards, depicted in geometry and elucidated by the idea of constant movement.

Placing the characters of the play in the same line that denominates the two brothers as antithetical figures, it is possible to notice that there are more “pro-English” people than “pro-Irish”:



The developments of *Translations* present a movement, from one culture to the other, mainly from **B** to **A**. Owen and Maire, the two Irish who defend the language of progress, are placed in **B** even before the play starts. In other words, their first meeting with the audience already shows that they have a different opinion from the other Irish characters: they are already in **B** when the curtain goes up and there is no movement from **A** to **B** during the play.

The movement from **B** to **A** is represented by Yolland (who falls in love with the Irish language, who wants to learn Irish and live in Baile Baeg for the rest of his life) and by Owen (who re-discovers his identity in the end of the play, renouncing the name of Roland and returning to his name of baptism).



But this movement is not legitimate, for even though Yolland manages to learn Irish, he will never know “the language of the tribe.” His love for Ireland did not save him from being assassinated: a symbolical death, one that shows the impossibility of total transformation from one culture to another. If Yolland had survived and successfully learnt the Irish habits and language, he would still be an Englishman to the eyes of the local population.

The same idea works for Owen, who could not return to his pure-Irish essence. After living so many years outside Baile Baeg and being in constant contact with the English language and culture, he was almost transformed into a King’s faithful subject (as his own statements illustrate). What Owen has experienced is a process of hybridity: his ingrained acquisitions of English culture do not allow him to return to his strictly Irish origins, whereas his innate Irish essence will never allow him to be totally English.

The only character who realized this necessity of hybridity is Hugh. “We must learn where we live,” he says, “we must learn to make them [the Anglicized place-names] our own; We must make them our new home” (Friel 2001, 444). He is aware that to fight this linguistic/cultural change is to stay stuck in the past, incapable of moving forward: the fossilization represented in the figure of Jimmy Jack.

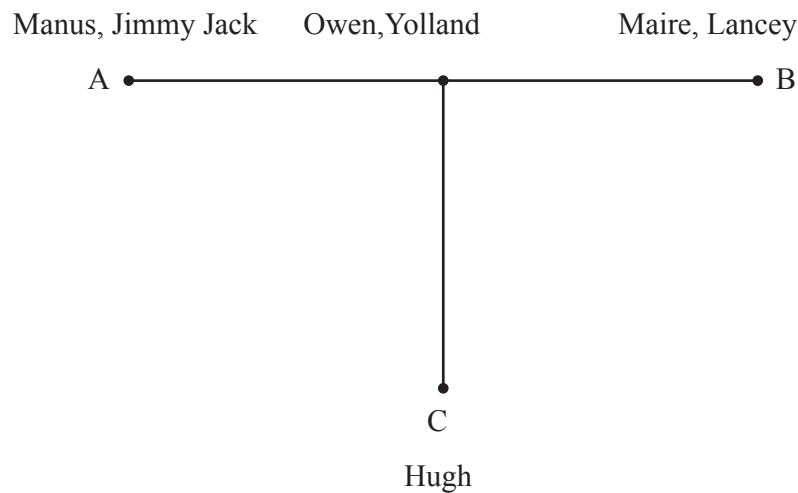
In accordance with Michael Mays,

nationalism ‘presupposes’ a past, imagining the nation as temporally continuous, a bridge linking a present-day “we” both to our ancestors in the past and to our heirs in the future. Mediating past and future through its responses to contemporary circumstance, national identity exists under the sign of peril: perpetually at risk of the cultural catastrophe – engendered from beyond or within its borders, or through historical calamity – that will sever that fragile bond for good. Always to one degree or another in a state of crisis, national identities must, therefore, be regularly revised and modified, reconstituted and renewed: the more dire the perceived crisis, the more urgent the need for renewal (*op. cit.* 25).

Hugh’s attitude towards the renewal of his Irish identity, towards the acceptance of an Anglo-Irish praxis illustrates Mays’s analysis on the necessity of a constant possibility to change, which pretty much summarizes the whole idea of the play.

It is a correct interpretation to say that *Translations* provides a considerable amount of stimulus for movement. We have already seen how the movement from **B** to **A** is incoherent, which by extension makes a dislocation from **A** to **B** impossible. Yet, there must be movement. And Hugh does move, but not from **A** to **B**, which could be seen as the only possible way for him to follow.

By assuming the necessity of adaptation and that “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history” that shape them, “but images of the past embodied in language” (*op. cit.*, 445), Hugh creates a new vertex, a place for hybridity and reconciliation. The creation of a C is necessary in order to avoid fossilization. The liquefaction can only be achieved through a new understanding of the Other,⁴ the acceptance of a re-made home and the necessary adaptation to live in it. ‘The fifth province’ is located precisely in this place of reconciliation: an imaginary home which is transported to the physical world by the Field Day Company’s art. Thus said, the diagram must suffer the proper alterations:



Vertex C represents the point where the two cultures converge in the generation of a hybrid Anglo-Irish culture. Owen and Yolland failed to achieve the hybridization because they have trespassed the limit, going too backwards. None of them would be accepted in a strictly Irish society, neither in a strictly English one. There is the need to create a new home for these people, one that is neither purely Gaelic nor purely English, where acceptance is possible for both groups, because their cultures have been melted together.

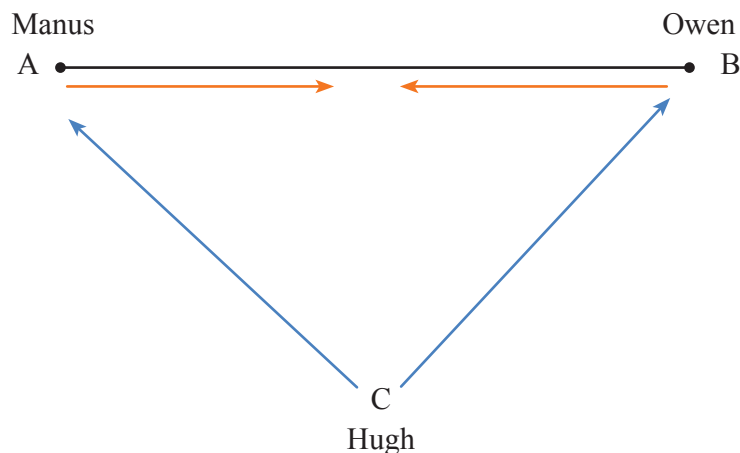
In postcolonial studies, the theme of formation of stable cultures in former colonies is very recurrent. Regarding the genesis of hybrid cultures in a postcolonial reality, the most famous figure is Homi K. Bhabha. For him, translation is “the staging of cultural difference” (McGrath 184) through which the borderlands of culture are transformed in sites where new, alter-native histories are allowed to be written by the colonized.

Cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation *within* minority positions. (*op. cit.* 185)

At this point, if we look back at the last dialogue of act one, it will be possible to interpret – as McGrath astutely discerns – that both translations (the one Owen made to the people of Baile Baeg and the one that Manus performed to himself) are acts of

subversion: “one subverting his own culture and the other subverting the culture of the Other. In the process, both cultures are being rewritten and neither survives intact” (McGrath 185).

It is significant to consider Frantz Fanon’s opinion regarding the cultural effects of colonization. He defends that colonization changes not only a country’s present and future, but also alters its past. Edward Said, another key figure in postcolonial studies, defends that colonization transforms not only the culture of the colonized, but also the culture of the colonizer; and, finally, McGrath claims that neither cultures (Gaelic and English) survive intact the process of creation of a hybrid (Anglo-Irish) culture. These three axioms combined provide the synthesis of the first diagram – the one which antithesized Manus and Owen. Keeping inside the family circle, which somehow represents all the characters of the play, it is possible to understand that the movements taking place in this moment of transition and translation go both ways. There is a non-stopping flow between cultures, where there are no collisions of any sort, but a melting together. The Anglo-Irish combination also changes its independent parts, as Irish and English will never be the same after the colonization process.



Thus, the only solution to the survival of the Gaelic culture of Baile Baeg is found in the constant movement between cultures, through an everlasting interaction between Irish, English and Anglo-Irish. McGrath interprets Hugh as the character who ‘voices Friel’s acceptance of the English language, of the need for change and adaptability, while his regard for the archaic Latin and Greek languages and cultures demonstrates an equal concern with preserving continuity, the sense of the past, even in the midst of change’ (McGrath, 1999: 177).

The evidence is found in the closing scene of *Translations*, when Hugh ascends the stairs to recite a passage from the *Aeneid*. By declaiming Virgil’s verses, which exalt the Roman’s victory over the city of Carthage during the third Punic War (149-146 B.C), Hugh corroborates the fatalistic inevitability of the domination of the conqueror’s tongue. Latin, the very language that signifies Hugh’s erudition, is a language of conquerors.

This last scene shows Hugh using the past “to enlighten present dilemmas and obtain a perspective on them.” He recommends a “selective remembrance,” capable of allowing the emergence of new versions of the past (Andrews 1995, 178). And here it is possible to find another justification for the title of the play and the historical discussion that has been taking place around the upheavals in Baile Baeg. In *Translations*, Brian Friel rewrites history, or, putting it in the Field Day vernacular, reinvents it.

“To remember everything is a kind of madness” (Friel 2001, 445), therefore a selection must be made in order to remain sane. When *Translations* is read contextualized in the reality of the political disputes that Northern Ireland was facing in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s; it is possible to acknowledge many aspects that pass unnoticed to an uninformed appreciator. Such a production made it possible for the Irish people to look back in history in order to find their own center, which, ironically, is only discovered in the present, inside an Anglo-Irish reality. *Translations* shows how, in a time of violent clashes between Irish nationalists and British unionists, it is senseless to attempt at returning to the origins, for the origins are no longer there. And if they are still there, they would be altered, somehow modified.

The best way out in such a situation is to follow Hugh’s steps. Postcolonial peoples must move forward, looking back now and then and maybe collecting a beautiful stone they find in the way. But these peoples must not allow themselves to collect all the stones they see. If they cram every single rock inside their pockets, they won’t be able to move any further.⁵

The stones to be collected should be the most precious ones, which define the most beautiful aspects of their cultures. These selected gems shall then be placed in a foreign pendant and still would not lose any of their beauty.

Notes

- 1 The six artists were: Brian Friel, Stephen Rea, Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, David Hammond and Tom Paulin.
- 2 Blurb on dustjacket of *Ireland’s Field Day*.
- 3 In 1801, Ireland was integrated into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which resulted in the Ordnance Survey and in the implementation of the National School System.
- 4 I have chosen to keep “Other” in capital letter, following Edward Said’s denomination presented in his book *Orientalism*.

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